

Wreaders: On the Practice of Rewriting at the End of the Twentieth Century

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Wreaders.

On the Practice of "Rewriting"

at the End of the Twentieth Century

On the Shoulders of Giants

People today know more than their predecessors but maybe not through their natural ability. Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to puny dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. Matei Calinescu in *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987) takes up de Chartres's metaphor: "we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature" (Calinescu 15). Likewise, even if the page may seem blank at first sight, no one writes in a vacuum. The writer may be said to draw from a vast storehouse of previous images and texts that have been seething in the cauldron of "tradition" or, if you will, some sort of *spiritus mundi* fashioned by giants. In that sense, the writer is always a re-writer, a re-teller of monumental stories.

From our position on the shoulders of giants at the end of this millennium, we can see that the twentieth century has singled out an interpellative dream-text for each century it purports to rewrite: *The Tempest* for the seventeenth century; *Robinson Crusoe* for the eighteenth century; *Jane Eyre* for the nineteenth century; *Heart of Darkness* for the turn of the twentieth century. Such texts serve as pre-texts to others; they underwrite them. These "others" are rewritings whose "recursive structure" (McHale 113) serves to explore and dismantle narrative authority and priorities in the

circulation of knowledge. Such rewritings are especially instrumental in shaping three contemporaneous movements: post-coloniality, postmodernism and postpatriarchy.[1] As a genuine category of textual transformation that is different from but possesses the ability to encompass sources, imitation, sequels, parody, pastiche, satire, duplication, repetition (both as debasement and challenging recurrence), allusion, revision, and inversion, end-of-century rewriting is the subversive appropriation of a text that it simultaneously authorizes and critiques for its own particular ideological uses.

Rewritings are inherently violent in that they attempt to break into history and rework texts whose centrality and historical persistence have been great in defining Western cultures and, in particular, English-speaking cultures. As Steven Connor has argued in *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (1996),

> by reaching back imaginatively to the points of origin of these texts, all themselves myths of a certain point of origin, these rewritings both interrupt history and restore something of its suppressed fullness. They show how every myth of origin is itself a kind of violence, in what it narrows, excludes or denies (198).

Since rewriting aims at redressing certain wrongs, it may be equated with its homophonic counterpart and be read as a *re-righting* gesture. Such rewritings demand readers or rather what I would call *wreaders*. Beyond Paul de Man's theorization in favor of reading-as-disfiguration of the interpreted text (de Man: 1984 123). The reader or *wreader*'s intervention in reading rewritings is inevitably jolting. Uncomfortably perched on the shoulders of giants at this particular point in time, being called upon to rewrite, *wread* and revise points of origin(ality) is not without anxieties.

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[1] In my book, *Tempests after Shakespeare*, on contemporary *Tempest*-rewrites, forthcoming with St Martin's Press (Palgrave), I present these three movements—postmodernism, postcoloniality and postfeminism or postpatriarchy—via the Tempest characters of Prospero, Caliban and Miranda (or Sycorax), as they vie for the ownership of meaning at the end of the twentieth century. The *Tempest* thus serves as an interpretive grid through which to read not only the history of postcolonial countries but also of Britain and the United States as producers of Caliban-, Miranda-, and Prospero-centered texts.

SOURCES, SEQUEL SYNDROMES AND OTHER ANXIETIES

Let alone the fact that the scruple around originality is a relatively recent phenomenon,[2] postmodern authors like Jorge Luis Borges have long considered originality as an impoverishing myth. In "On Originality," Edward Said has observed that "the writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting, the image of writing changes from *original inscription* to parallel script, from tumbled-out confidence to deliberate *fathering-forth*..." (Said 135). Largely speaking, any writer is a writer-in-progress. Rewriting thus involves a form of *pre-writing*, which in turn entails writing palimpsestically, sedimentarily, in draft form but also writing towards an *original*, both an aboriginal, which harks back to origins, and an unusually creative form.

If I take the example of Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* the usual "sources" for that play are the Jacobean literature of voyaging as a result of Western European overseas expansion and colonization; Montaigne's *Essays*, particularly "Of the Cannibals;" bits and pieces from the *commedia dell' arte* improvisations as well as Italian and Spanish fiction involving usurpations, flights, islands, forceful exiles and returns; *The Aeneid;* Ovid's *Metamorphoses, etc.* Like Seneca's bee that collected pollen and then processed it into its own honey, Shakespeare (and Montaigne, for that matter, as well as countless others) was a flagrant borrower. Scholars have rivalled in tracing atavistically the deep, ancestral sources of the work as if to ascertain that it does come from a point of origin.

The scholarly tracing of sources can also be theorized as an ideological enterprise. So, for instance, Frank Kermode has been taken to task for being very vague in the Arden edition about sources such as the Bermuda Pamphlets, when in fact such sources connect the play's characters to the colonists aboard the Sea-Adventure off the coast of Bermuda in 1609. Peter Hulme and Francis Barker, in particular, have reproached Kermode with not contesting Prospero's (and the colonizer's) version of "true

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[2] See Hector Biancotti who considers Petrarch in the fourteenth century as one of the first major writers to confess his indebtedness to the Ancients. In "Ecriture, réécriture," *Le Monde* (édition électronique), 26 October 1999.

beginnings" and occluding Caliban's (and the colonized's) version, and failing to notice that Prospero's play (the colonizer's script; official history) and *The Tempest* are not necessarily the same thing (Barker & Hulme 199). However important the source may be, the source never is to a text like *The Tempest* what that same text is to its rewriting. *The Tempest* is not a source that is contained *in* the rewrite; the rewrite comments on *The Tempest*, most of the time to question it. Rewriting changes what the text intends to tell us, wreaders.

The idea of imitation of a source brings us to the sequel. In 1797, a reputedly bad dramatist, Francis Godolphin Waldron cast his *The Virgin Queen* as "A *Sequel* to Shakespeare's *Tempest*," in which Caliban, Antonio and Sebastian betray Prospero on the return voyage to Milan. The sequel here has connotations of a poor imitation. The sequel is generally understood as "coming after" an original (in time), "coming second" in quality.

Sequels, however, need not necessarily be imitations. If one considers some 1990s sequels to master-texts, one is struck by the recurrence of the word "sequel," at times substituted for "retelling." The sequel syndrome is very much present in one form or another in postmodern texts: Lin Haire-Sargeant's *H: the Story of Heathcliff's Journey Back to Wuthering Heights* (1992); Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett: The Sequel to Margaret Mitchell's* Gone With the Wind (1991); Susan Hill's *Mrs de Winter: The Sequel to Daphne du Maurier's* Rebecca (1993); Emma Tennant's *Pemberley: A Sequel* to Pride and Prejudice (1993) and her *Tess* (1993); Christopher Bigsby's *Hester: A Romance* (1994); and Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly: a Dramatic Retelling of the Classic Horror Story,* Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1990). One notes that in these sequels, one name alone such as *Tess* or *Hester* helps conjure up Thomas Hardy's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's work without mentioning the prequel. In the case of *Mary Reilly*, it purportedly "retells" a "story," which makes this particular sequel come close to a rewriting since it foregrounds the subtextual issues and the narrative perspectives of characters other than the famous double, *i.e.* Dr. Jekyll's fictitious maid.

There are, of course, degrees of *wrighting*, *i.e.* craft, in these sequels with, possibly, Lin Haire-Sargeant being at the lower end

of the scale and Christopher Bigsby at the upper end. The logic of postmodernism is such that it "ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts" (Jameson: 1991 95-96). The sequel, however, does not always fit into that logic and differs from rewriting in that it seems primarily constrained by the time factor—the above sequels take place at, at least, a one-century remove—and they overall engage with the original text in the latter's own terms with the aim of complementing or continuing the story beyond the ending. So, in that sense, Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) could be a crafty sequel to Miranda's or to Sycorax's story. Yet, in my opinion, the term "increment" (from the Latin *incrementum*, *i.e.* "to grow") best describes such Caribbean-centered, postpatriarchal rewrites of *The Tempest* as Warner's text but also Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and, on the African-American side, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). These are incremental texts outlining change by degrees while simultaneously adding on to the fixed scale of *The Tempest* and questioning its innate order of priorities.

Writing beyond the ending or resurrecting the simulacra of the past finds a cinematic corollary in what you might call "screening beyond the ending." If one considers, for instance, three filmic adaptations of *Jane Eyre*[3] spanning five decades—the 1933 English one, the 1944 Orson Welles adaptation with a script by Aldous Huxley, and the 1996 Zeffirelli adaptation—, the words of William Hurt as Rochester to Charlotte Gainsbourg—"necessity compels me to make use of you"—seem apt here. Indeed, films-as-rewritings are always compelled by a *necessity* such as the necessity to actualize. In that respect, the spunky Jane of 1933 claiming equality with Rochester gives way to the post-War loyal Jane serving the community and assuming responsibility for Rochester's accident and, ultimately, to the 1996 liberated Jane.

Such film adaptations are close to rewritings in that they *adapt* and recreate from "selective interpretation" rather than *adopt*. Yet, they remain "[freely] adapted from" or "based on" the

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[3] I am here indebted to Janet Swasser from the University of Texas at Austin who introduced me to these screenings at a Conference held in honour of André Lefevere at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, on May 28, 1998.

original text. In the case of novels adapted into films, references are constantly made to what is "left out" or "changed."[4] Jack J. Jorgens sternly concludes his book *Shakespeare on Film* with this statement that, with the exception of Welles' "variations on [Shakespeare's] themes," many adaptations "are so distant from the scope and intent of the originals, or so slight, that they do not merit critical attention" (Jorgens 12-14). This is precisely that distance which signals rewriting, for that distance allows for the possibility of *intervention* rather than the *reproduction* of the existing order. Such is the case with Derek Jarman's *Tempest* (1978), Paul Mazursky's *Tempest* (1982), or even Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991). However, the degree of intervention can be so high that, when complicated by the transfer to another genre, the result can be pure pastiche, as in British Posy Simmonds's comic strip *Gemma Bovery* (2000), which builds on Flaubert's mistress-piece. The art of experimental video as the newest, most heightened form of anachronistic bricolage further complexifies the random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism.

Writing or screening beyond the ending does assume that one has grasped the ending, however elusive and indeterminate it may be. In his seminal book, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode writes of apocalyptic literature, reflecting on the need for intelligible Ends: "we project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (Kermode 8). Although Kermode does not use the medieval *topos* of the dwarf on the giant's shoulders, he does intimate that temporal distance is instrumental in rewriting the end(ing). Here the idea of "beyond the Ending" of a book is transferred to apocalyptic thought and is rendered in terms of projection "past the End." This is particularly relevant to contemporary science-fiction rewrites of *The Tempest*, *i.e.* Fred McLeod Wilcox's film *Forbidden Planet* (1956); and sci-fi novels or fantasy like Phyllis Gotlieb's *O Master Caliban!* (1976), Rachel Ingalls' *Mrs. Caliban* (1983), and Paul Voermans'

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[4] See *e.g.* McFarlane, 7; Wagner, 222-231; Luhr & Lehman, 192; Dudley Andrew, 98-104; and Rentschler, 3.

And Disregards the Rest (1992), which outline steps in the return of Prospero who, in his postmodern guise, has definitely not abjured his magic and continues to act as the transcendental guarantor of interpretation, although his claims to lordship have been largely deconstructed.

Rewriting is also compounded by rereading or "misreading" texts, as Harold Bloom would have it. In his *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom outlines six revisionary ratios. He offers a "theory of poetry by way of a description of poetic influence, or the story of intra-poetic relationships." Bloom imagines a chain of anxieties due to the greatness of the precursor or "giant" in, among others, Wordsworth–Milton–Spenser, but excludes Shakespeare from his argument on the grounds that "Shakespeare's prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet very much smaller than his inheritor" (Bloom 5, 11). Although Bloom confines his argument to poetic influence, one can easily see how influence outside the bounds of poetry can also be a variation on the "anxiety principle," sprinkled with Proust's "toxins of admiration."

The *topos* of the dwarf on the giant's shoulders can be read as a myth of filiation, embodying the paradox of patriarchy. The paradox entails that the son owes everything to the father, to whom he pays homage for precisely those qualities—his strength, knowledge, power, productive capacity—that are weakening in the father as they increase in the son. Eventually the son *is* the father; the dwarf becomes the giant. Paul de Man had anticipated Bloom's theory of revisionism in his essay "Lyric and Modernity," where he contends, in some sort of spermatic engendering, that "the son understands the father and takes his work a step further, becoming in turn the father, the source of future offspring" (de Man: 1983 182-183). The "forecasting" by de Man of Bloom's theory was performed four years before Bloom published *The Anxiety of Influence*. This not only makes de Man Bloom's precursor but his father, along the same lines of father-son filiation, which both de Man and Bloom use to explain modernism.

This story of quirky filiation has nonetheless the merit of casting the "anxiety of influence" in terms of "anxiety of anteriority" and of presenting the reader and critic as a rewriter of sorts, since the act of reading crosses the given text with a fresh

inscription (Barthes: 1977, 142). Barthes had already argued in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) that "the text needs its shadow: this shadow is a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiraoscuro" (Barthes: 1975 32). More generally, "we will assume," Fredric Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), "that a criticism which asks the question 'what does it mean?' constitutes something like an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically *rewritten* in terms of some fundamental master code" (Jameson: 1981 16). Criticism, therefore, becomes what André Lefevere has termed "one form of rewriting among others which insures the continuity of a literature and makes possible its further development...." (Lefevere 19). Thus, for these critics, the rewriting of literature through criticism, *i.e.* critical-interpretive writing, is at least as important as the actual writing, i.e. creative-original writing, for the critic is ultimately "a writer who seeks writing in writing" (Said 132, 138). The critic, like the rewriter, is a *wreader*, a subversive scribe.[5]

Rewriting can also be seen as a kind of "Freudian sublimation" which extols "the second chance above the first" (qtd. in Painter 100), the second text above the original. In that sense, the rewrite is, at least, as important, if not more, than the master-text. Along these lines, the combined concepts of Lyotard's *métarécit* and of Bloom's grand precursor come close to Pierre Macherey's notion of the "thematic ancestor" (Macherey 267). Although Macherey has in mind *Robinson Crusoe* by Defoe whom he casts as "an author of anticipation," one could see most *Tempest*-rewrites as harking back to a distant thematic ancestor. *The Tempest* itself could be considered as the thematic ancestor to *Robinson Crusoe* in that they are both myths of origin and colonization and feature quite prominently the shipwreck and the island. However, both myths are markedly different in that *Robinson Crusoe* leads to the establishment of the colony; *The Tempest* to its dissolution.

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[5] I could further propose *wreadder*, which has the orthographic pun on the reader as one who re-adds, or adds to an existing addition, the rewrite.

Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin have made use of the Machereyan concept of the "thematic ancestor" in their *Decolonising Fictions* (1993) to trace a continuum between Joseph Conrad, Patrick White and Margaret Atwood, positing Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a thematic ancestor. This seems easier to deal with than Bloom's anxiety-producing precursor, possibly because the ancestor is safely distant and from another continent (note that if Joseph Conrad is Polish/ British, Margaret Atwood is Canadian and Patrick White Australian). However, as Brydon and Tiffin note, "the relation of the postcolonial text to its thematic ancestors is often parodic." They take their definition of parody from Linda Hutcheon,—as repetition with difference—, a definition which marks critical distance rather than similarity: "A critical distance is implied between the back-grounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony" (Hutcheon 32).

Significantly, the works Hutcheon discusses are postmodern texts and art forms. In that sense, postmodern rewrites of *e.g. The Tempest* like John Fowles's *The Magus* (1968) or *The Collector* (1963) best embody the Bakhtinian "two-voiced" discourse of parody. Overall, rewrites do share with parodies a form of exorcism, the "excorcizing of personal ghosts," in that they aim at freeing themselves from that which they rewrite, and they share the same paradox—the simultaneous ability to authorize and critique the texts and traditions to which they allude.[6]

Conjuring Ghosts, Zombies, Spectres, and Other Visions

To steady myself, let me catch hold of the first idea
that passes... Shakespeare.
Virginia Woolf, *"The Mark on the Wall" (1921)*

Ghosts do haunt the rewriting process. The French term *hantise* designates both haunting and the idea of an obsession, a constant fear, a fixed idea, or a nagging memory. *Hantise* is central

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[6] See Hutcheon, 69-83. On satire *versus* parody, see 78-79. On pastiche, see Hutcheon, 1989, 94-98.

to Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), which Peggy Kamuf translated as "haunting," with the above cautionary tale. "Specter" is actually the first noun of *The Manifesto* (1848)—"A specter is haunting Europe" and, to Derrida, *das gespenst des Kommunismus* conjures up the apparition of another specter, the *revenant* in *Hamlet.* Derrida comments: "In the shadow of filial memory, Shakespeare will have often inspired this Marxian theatricalization" (Derrida 4). *Shakespeare qui genuit Marx.* In that respect, Angus's reference in *Macbeth*, Act V, scene ii, to "a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief" shows us that our governing *topos* can be turned upside down and deconstructed.

The spectre here is, like the ghost of parody, the simulacrum of the original that keeps coming back. Derrida's delightful coinage—"hauntology"—echoes the rumbling sound of ghosts chained to ghosts, of ancestors and spectral precursors in bondage to reluctant descendants. Just as the simulacrum of Hamlet the King is virtually more actual than the King himself, the rewrite is, to the contemporary reader, more of a living presence than, say, the original *Tempest,* which has been maintained alive somewhat artificially, through the "performance" of the text. More to our purpose, however, the spectre in *Hamlet* and in *The Manifesto* is, Derrida notes, "this first paternal character" in this "interminable theatricalization of ghosts," which is a succession of stories of filiation. But we note that the filiation is between fathers and sons. The writers discussed by Bloom, Macherey, Derrida *et al.* are male precursors who have engendered, albeit not spermatically, male progenies. In this essentially male virtual space of spectrality, women have had little room or opportunity to claim their own ghosts. Time is definitely out of joint, especially for the Hamlettes of this world.

Faced with the spectral mark on the wall, Woolf seeks reassurance from the first paternal, steadying presence of Shakespeare, as the epigraph indicates. But she quickly adds: "But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn't interest me at all" (Woolf 46). Rachel Blau du Plessis unwittingly gives the lie to Said's idea of *fathering-forth* a text, by arguing about twentieth-century women writers that "they invent a complex of narrative acts with psychosocial meanings, which will be studied here as

'writing beyond the endings'" (du Plessis 4). More recently, Lidia Curti in *Female Stories, Female Bodies* (1998) has identified female writing as "oscillation between repetition and change, loyalty and betrayal, reassurance and elusion, movement between the heart of the narrative and its borders..." and the results of such an oscillation, *i.e.* "palimpsests that are continually rewritten . . . [as] one of the ways to avoid assimilation" (Curti 53).

Going back to our medieval *topos* of the dwarf on the giant's shoulders, it is worthwhile to note that the dwarf or the giant is understood to be male. Do women see farther afield than their male counterparts or do they see different things because the giants on whose shoulders they stand are female? Virginia Woolf felt uncomfortable, precariously poised on gigantic, Shakespearean shoulders and conjured up Judith, Shakespeare's sister.

Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman* (1975) have used the haunting vignette of woman-as-zombie coming back from the dead to disrupt sediments of male civilizations:

> We are living in an age where the conceptual foundation of an ancient culture is in the process of being undermined by millions of species of mole (Topoi, ground mines) never known before. When they wake up from among the dead, from among words, from among laws. (Cixous & Clément 65)

The invasion of these cadaverous, blind moles from underground is animated by the same spirit as that which imbues Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." The title echoes her 1971 poem, which is itself lifted from Henrik Ibsen's Play, *When We Dead Awaken* (*Naar Vidde Vaagner*) (1899). Rich's main contribution in that essay is the hyphenated term "re-vision," which inadvertently signals its distance from *e.g.* Harold Bloom's theory of revisionism and, more generally, from the essentially male *topos* of the dwarf's perspective from his position on the shoulders of giants. Women both look ahead and look back.

Rich defines all writing as a process of re-vision, which adds a visionary nuance to the act of rewriting:

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . is for us more than a chapter in our cultural history: it is an act of survival . . . we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it (Rich 18-25).

The 'us' here are lesbians. Ann Douglas concludes her chapter on Margaret Fuller with the words: "she [Fuller] found what Adrienne Rich has since termed 'the treasure of the wreck'" (Douglas 8), alluding to Fuller's tragic drowning in 1950 and to Rich's poem "Diving in the Wreck" (1972-73), thereby implicitly drawing a continuum of watery retrieval from Fuller to Rich, from accidentally drowning to wilfully diving. Cixous and Clément's metaphor of earthly burial is therefore shifted to a more liquid realm where moles grow webs and fins.

Whereas with Ibsen, we were "down amongst dead men," with Rich, we are down amongst dead women. The ghost, the zombie, the spectre, the revenant mole has not only to be raised from the dead but to be made to survive; the female text has to outlive, to outgun the primal, often male, text. Although it involves an element of excavation and retrieval, female re-vision, like postcolonial "writing back," is future-oriented whereas *e.g.* Bloom's filial revisionism, which is obsessed with securing a grand ancestry, is past-oriented. In *Impertinent Voices*, Liz Yorke uses Rich's "re-vision" and Mary Daly's revisionary stance to call on women-poets to perform "the re-visionary task":

> The re-visionary task of reminiscence and retrieval also involves *re-inscription*, a process in which the old narratives, stories, scripts, mythologies become transvalued, re-presented in different terms. (Yorke 1)

Yorke calls for "a tactical strategy for intervention within hostile cultural forms, re-visionary mythmaking is especially relevant to lesbian women" (Yorke 15).[7]

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[7] See also Yorke, 1997, 78-93; and Liedeke Plate's Ph.D. dissertation, *Visions and Re-Visions: Female Authorship and the Act of Rewriting*, Indiana University 1995. DAIN: DA9614560.

Lesbian re-vision has been renamed "Inversion," as in Betsy Warland's titling *InVersions: Writings by Dykes, Queers, and Lesbians* (1991), which entails a playful appropriation of Freud's construction of homosexuality, and is a far cry from Bakhtin's carnivalesque inversions of norms or Hutcheon's assessment of, say, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as "total subversion" or even "permanent *perversion*—which aims at *conversion*" (Hutcheon 83). Female rewriting forces us to look back and, not necessarily with anger. It is the *dangerous supplement* to male rewriting, whether postmodern or postcolonial.

Contemporary rewrites of all hues and ideological persuasions help us deconstruct the innate gigantism of our predecessors and help us, rewriters and wreaders, dwarf them through a critique of their alleged authoritativeness. For we are not so puny after all and we might have, if not greater height or keener vision than before, a clearer sense that, at this end of century, dwarfs can in turn become giants.

Chantal ZABUS[8]



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