



HAL
open science

Writing and Re-writing. Re-inventing the Wheel: Compulsion or Curse?

Denis Gauer

► **To cite this version:**

Denis Gauer. Writing and Re-writing. Re-inventing the Wheel : Compulsion or Curse?. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2001, Writing as Re-Vision, 20, pp.49-65. hal-02346472

HAL Id: hal-02346472

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02346472>

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Writing and Re-writing.

Re-inventing the Wheel: Compulsion or Curse?

Dire c'est inventer. Faux comme de juste. On n'invente rien, on croit inventer, s'échapper, on ne fait que balbutier sa leçon, des bribes d'un pensum appris et oublié, la vie sans larmes, telle qu'on la pleure. Et puis merde.¹
(Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*)

It is rather strange that our so-called "postmodernism" (yet one more in the long list of profound "-isms," this one originally coined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, and his modest claim to universal fame) should wonder about the question of "re-writing." Is it a matter of naivety, or merely a question of coquetterie? Of gravely re-inventing the wheel, or of simply, pathetically rather, trying to define a dubious label and, therefore, assert a fragile territory? Is this the last gimmick of Anglo-Saxon academe, and one that sadly exhausted and bloodless faculties are desperately clinging to, as a last resort to "revivify" themselves in the field of research, according to the mandatory (American here again) slogan, "Publish or perish"? Still, Wellington, Napoleon's victor at Waterloo, had already and manfully answered that one in his own time: "Publish, and be damned!"

¹ "To say is to invent. Falsely, and rightly so. One invents nothing, one thinks one invents, breaking away, and all one does is stammer out one's lesson, scraps of a pensum learnt then forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it all" (Beckett, *Molloy* 40, translation mine).

For such a notion (re-writing) can hardly be deemed new. The literary criticism of yore used to mainly consist, apart from the “psychology” of the characters (round or flat), in relentlessly tracing the sources of a work of literature: which surely may involve some degree of a more or less discreet “re-writing” process. What has changed is simply that now we speak of “intertextuality,” and that the sources have become explicit within a certain number of works, nay, they have been elevated to a prominent, if not crucial, part of the literary phenomenon.

It may just be that modern writers have attempted to turn vice into virtue, by cunningly ennobling a certain lack of imagination, an appalling (postmodern?) inability to come up with new themes and forms—after all, there is always an ominous sterility looming behind these “post” terms: post-coital, post-nuclear, and so on. Yet, take Homer’s *Iliad*, that cornerstone of Western literature. What he did was to re-write parts of the old legends of Troy, themselves a (poetic) re-writing of very mundane Greek expeditions of long ago against Troy, in an economic warfare (already!) for the control of that part of the Mediterranean, like the subsequent one between Rome and Carthage. Also, it is known that the written version of the poem was a comparatively late affair: how much “re-writing,” then, went into the orally transmitted poem since Homer’s own “original”? From this it may already be inferred that the Greek tradition as well as Homer were postmodern—albeit without being aware of it. Rest assured that they would have been impressed.

Then take the four Gospels—in which Christ sets out to re-write partly the Law. Actually, if you look closely, there are only really two: saint Matthew’s, which stands apart, since much closer, with its abrupt fierceness, to the Old Testament, and the three others, which are successive rehashes of the same “mellowed” brand—in other words, as in pornography or technology, one “hard,” three “soft” samples: marketing adjustment strategy may be suspected. Here again, their compounders attempted to re-write the Old Testament, not very successfully however: the whole affair is basically dull and crude propaganda, not even particularly coherent, pathetic stuff really. Jean Genet once remarked that the ancient

Greeks were great fellows because they possessed a unique ability to laugh at their own gods, and therefore at themselves. A close reading of the Old Testament ("Genesis," "Book of Job" for instance) will suggest that the ancient Hebrews were not without a certain wryness regarding their Yahweh and themselves. Only Christianity (rhyming nicely with inanity—not even to mention Islam) took its dull God and its dreary Christ dead seriously. And Nietzsche was quite perceptive, indeed utterly right, in calling it a religion of slaves (except that slaves always suppose a master—Hegel is not far off).

Also, regarding the Old Testament, because of the golden calf episode the Decalogue had to be re-written by Moses, while God had to repeat Himself. Is it of any symbolic (or possibly epistemological) value that the original version of the Law was lost right from the start? Strangely enough, Kafka never wrote on that subject, which should have inspired him most. But what he did do in his works was to re-use and re-combine about every aspect of the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions—that is, of course and inevitably, texts (see Blanchot). And so Kafka was postmodern, and yet he knew it not. Previous to that, Geoffrey Chaucer re-writes folk-tales and gets credited with founding English literature. Subsequently Giovanni Boccaccio does the same in Italy with home-grown material, with the same result for modern literature. While Miguel de Cervantes in Spain re-writes old novels of chivalry and, *hey presto*, modern literature comes of age.

Then there is William Shakespeare, who in the course of his ten-year or so career as the Bard never produced a single original plot, but always re-wrote Hall, Holinshed, Homer, More, Plutarch, Thucydides, Titus Livius and various others, as well as plays of his own days.

Jean de La Fontaine caustically re-writes Aesop's fables, while Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine joyously (and fashionably) plunder ancient mythology and history or Spanish folklore, and re-write them for (or against) Louis XIII and the Sun-King. But the latter has just disgracefully let Molière (aka Jean-Baptiste Poquelin) down, thus forcing him to hastily re-write a play based on a play by

Tirso de Molina, itself a (dubious) re-writing of Don Juan de Tenorio's life. Much later German-speaking Swiss playwright Max Frisch will still re-write it into his *Don Juan, oder die Liebe zu der Geometrie*.

Meanwhile Denis Diderot, having possibly hit a dry patch, or down with a bout of laziness, slyly re-writes Laurence Sterne (and others too, for that matter). While in fair England snide Henry Fielding re-writes stern Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* into his *Shamela*.

Stendhal (aka Henri Beyle) in *La Chartreuse de Parme* rather flippantly re-writes the battle of Waterloo, while Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace* re-writes a larger slice of History, recruiting Napoleon himself for his blockbuster.

In his *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Gustave Flaubert, the pioneer of *déconstruction*, sets out to re-write practically all of the (alleged) knowledge of his days. His two improbable and disillusioned heroes finally decide to... copy, and equably record everything, grain and chaff. More modestly, Emile Zola in his *Rougon-Macquart* saga re-writes Professor Cesare Ambroso's theory of the "born criminal."

Alfred Jarry, with his *Ubu* cycle, starts with a re-writing of Shakespeare and Guignol (the "Punch and Judy" tradition of Lyons), then goes on to attempt re-writing (badly) Lautréamont (aka Isidore Ducasse). The latter (with real genius he) had re-written the "pop" literature of his time (Sue, Ponson du Terrail, etc.) with a spot of Baudelaire thrown in.

Then came James Joyce, who re-wrote Homer, along with many other texts and forms of discourses. Then there is Samuel Beckett, that most revolutionary writer and playwright who founded his entire undertaking on the loud assumption that, everything (and therefore nothing) having been profusely said and written and repeated and re-written before, modern literature cannot be but more or less vain re-writing / rehashing / re-combining of ancient forms and stale discourses.

More recently Philip K. Dick re-wrote contemporary history in his *Man in the High Castle*, which imagines a German-Japanese victory over the Allies.

And all of them were postmodern, and yet they knew it not.
They might have been impressed.

The previous list, of course, does not claim any exhaustiveness. Merely a few random samples.

Let us be serious for a change, and hence not postmodern. And so let us face it: re-writing is as old as the world itself, or at least as writing—older even, considering Homer's case. Why then this sudden postmodernistic rediscovery of the wheel? At first sight, we may suggest one possible reason. Copyright laws are fairly recent in Western society (late 18th century). Before that, the notion of authorship was (sometimes deliberately) hazy: indeed, many books would appear (for censorship motives) without any mention of an author. Literary property (and therefore what we now call plagiarism) was no great fuss. As a result, re-writing was taken for granted. While nowadays it is a most serious affair (royalties may be involved): indeed, it has apparently been elevated to the prestige of a fashion. *O tempora...*

Yet the question somehow remains: why all this re-writing? Of course, this is a finite world and, as far as literature is concerned, the Russian formalists have been able to show, among other things, that only a small number of plots is available, while Borges mused that the whole history of literature may just be that of a few metaphors: so that repetition may be the inexorable rule, after all, in books as in everything else. But then, this surely means that basically everything has been expressed and written already. Nothing new under the sun, as the Ecclesiastes stated so long ago. And yet it seems in fact to be quite the reverse. Thus E. M. Cioran was able to remark that, since nothing true has yet been said, the number of books therefore is infinite. This is no paradox, but simply pertains to the very nature of language.

Granted that language is not of divine origin (as the Bible would have it) but a historical phenomenon (actually the two notions are not incompatible), therefore it is basically contingent. Worse, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure has been able to show it is

arbitrary: which means, the link between words and things is not warranted outside a necessity (and a capacity, of course) to name the world and its contents. Language—the Word—is truly (Saint John here was right) that which “creates” and orders the Creation, but its power is at once excessive and risible: for, on what authority is it founded? How can it be so sure that /man/ is indeed “man”? Even God’s authority, after all, might be challenged: for how could He prove that His Word *really* is the one? His holy Will, with all due respect of course, is just another facet of arbitrariness. Besides, this Word of His has been seriously undermined, damaged even, by the Babel episode, which split and fractured it by turning language into languages and hence creating confusion and misunderstanding amongst men.

Thus Beckett may claim that to say is to invent, and falsely at that. But, equally, by acquiring the mother tongue, one is inevitably stuck with the words of the tribe, and therefore prisoner to a certain vision of the world, nay, of a certain world—learning another language simply means adding a second cell to the initial one. Thus German linguist Mauthner (a Beckettian favourite) was able to demonstrate that the Greeks’ philosophical concepts are essentially rooted in the specificities of ancient Greek² (Heidegger here is not far off). So that speaking (or writing), indeed, ultimately comes down to repeating the basic “lesson” of the tribe, a kind of verbal Pavlovian drooling, while relentlessly pacing the common cell, rebounding off its walls and bumping into one’s fellow inmates (what some variously call “communication,” “dialogue,” “agreement” and “disagreement”).

What is more, language is far from innocent. Thus, it tends to blur or veil as much as possible the crude and scandalous aspects of life, its basically preposterous and hopeless nature (just compare the

² The same might possibly have occurred with Descartes’ *Cogito*. Latin does not boast a separate subject form. French, on the other hand, does: “*Je pense donc je suis*”—hence, perhaps, the subsequent, naive belief in a full, autonomous “subject.” Actually Descartes’ hasty reasoning in his “Fourth Meditation” suggests that he never seriously doubted the existence of this so-called “subject.”

number and quality of French and English “four-letter words,” for instance): language, all in all, has been politically correct long before that ineffable expression was ever concocted. No wonder, if one remembers T. S. Eliot’s remark that humanity cannot bear much reality. Life without tears indeed, as it is wept. Or, to put it bluntly: language basically is just a pack of lies, used to disguise, distort or even conceal unsavoury “reality”—to “re-write” it in other words, in order to make it more “palatable”—so that storytelling (and therefore literature, which encompasses fields such as history and philosophy) after all may just be, for the greatest part, telling stories. Ultimately, the written word’s function (the Bible syndrome, as it were) may simply be to re-assure the crowd that whatever concerns humanity is *meaningful*.³ In short, it may be deemed to be deeply narcissistic: a very ancient and effective form of ego massaging.

All this points to the sly (or not so sly), but inevitable ideological slant within language, which involves meaning and values,⁴ and therefore censorship (yet, on the other hand, language may appear to be full of unsavoury, albeit uncontrolled, connotations, especially since Freud). But there is still more to it. Roland Barthes, once asked to sum up the contribution of the now late “*nouvelle critique*,” thoughtfully replied that it had established that language does exist (in its far-from-innocent dimension). Which was pertinent enough. Yet it would have been more accurate to say that the “*nouvelle critique*” was a reminder of that fact—some wheels, apparently, do have to be periodically re-invented. For

³ Thus a library, before it is a Temple of Knowledge, is primarily an emblem of Meaning: just as a Church is meant to affirm the presence of God, a library stands for the presence of Meaning. In both cases the aim is identical, that is: to proclaim that the human enterprise is meaningful. Nowadays, however, both tend to be superseded by the supermarket. Which is also supposed to be meaningful in its own way.

⁴ So that reading is ultimately—outside questions of hermeneutics, knowledge or aesthetics—a ritualistic consumption, as it were, of meaning and values. Conversely, writing consists in encoding and touting some of these, to whatever extent. In this respect, a library is not so different from either a church or a supermarket. Indeed it might be deemed a combination of both.

already the Renaissance had come upon the polysemy of words, therefore proclaiming the basic ambiguity of discourses. An aspect that Shakespeare's plays, for instance, ceaselessly explore. So that his drama is equally full of intratextual re-writing: the witches' prophecies to Macbeth, Calphurnia's dream re-interpreted by Decius Brutus (in which passage the Bard eerily anticipates Freud), Iago's poisoning of Othello's mind (by "re-writing" certain innocent occurrences into dark misdeeds) which stems from Don John's earlier and more or less similar manoeuvres in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Hamlet's re-writing of his sire's murder for Claudius's benefit (and his own convincing) are but a few instances. More basically, is not lying itself a form of "re-writing" (of reality)? Also, it was precisely one of the grounds of Luther's Reform: to challenge Rome's imposed "politically" (or "religiously") correct reading / interpretation of the Bible. Indeed, the Renaissance is a milestone: for it is no mere chance that it was then man took his first stand against God, and for one thing reclaimed language as his own. A gesture God would not survive for long. But man too would have to pay the price.

For, at the same time, it is only fitting that one of the Elizabethan age's main themes is "confusion": as a consequence of the inlaid ambiguity of discourse, Babel had spread *intra muros*, as it were. No doubt many benefited from that renewed gap between the letter and the spirit—or, should one say postmodernistically, the signifier and the signified. Lawyers (those perfidious skunks) and politicians (those depraved crooks and pathological liars), philosophers (those perorating, mumbo-jumboing hairsplitters) and academics (those pedantic asses) being just a few. Literary exegesis too was born out of it. Freud (the Viennese quack according to Nabokov) and his (self-appointed) high priest / mountebank Lacan (along with all the other, albeit less flamboyant, disciples, of course) largely traded on it, indeed adding to the general confusion in the process. Kafka based his investigation of language (according to Marthe Robert) on it—though the finer points of textual exegesis had long been part and parcel of the Judaic tradition.

History as well took a hand in the matter: language, being a historical process, is not static, it evolves, and meaning along with it. Some, like Mallarmé, Heidegger or Beckett, would even say it slowly decays, like worn-out coins having been circulated for too long, or some fossilized organism gradually drained of its vital force—of being. It has to be redeemed (Mallarmé) or is sardonically left to die out (Beckett), while Heidegger attempts to turn this twilight of Meaning into a rediscovery of the glorious Greek dawn. Since then Derrida has come up with the principle of *différance*, i.e., the perpetual shift of meaning, its parousia always postponed into the future—but Borges had already announced *différance* with his “Pierre Ménard,” yet another story about re-writing. All of this, however, definitely points to a deep crisis: a want, if not more radically a basic absence in (or even of) Meaning. And so Cioran was right: nothing true has ever been said (or written), hence the number of books that can be written indeed is infinite.

For Beckett, in his *Unnamable*, has shown the extent of the problem. Indeed, I may say (or write) something true—but then how do I know it is true, since knowing is more accurately knowing that one knows? Socrates was comparatively more fortunate than Beckettian man: for he knew that he knew nothing, whereas the latter can no longer even be so certain. Admittedly Descartes, the champion of Doubt, had been aware of the hurdle, and accordingly had attempted to brush it aside with his *notions premières*. But even he had to admit to the possibility of error, through the Evil One’s doings—the antithesis, so to speak, of Socrates’s private *daemon*. We now know (or do we?) that Einstein’s theory of relativity applies not only to the universe, to societies or cultures or civilizations (Pascal had already remarked on that point), but to truth itself. Thus (in *Molloy* too) a disgruntled Beckettian narrator can note that his parish priest is right, because ultimately everybody is. Still, as Orwell so well showed, some may be more right than others—totalitarianism, then, as the ultimate answer to epistemological doubt? Indeed it has been tried out, not least by monotheisms.

Admittedly, there has been one brave attempt to stanch the flow and cut short the confusion: yet Hegel, with his “Science,”

“end of History” and “universal State,” was (with all due respect) ultimately a fool—or was he an intellectual crook? After all, a craving for honours (Shakespeare repeatedly tells us) is seldom compatible with a craving for truth. For, supposing humanity could reach a (highly hypothetical) state of “absolute Knowledge” (but then who would know for sure?), the result would simply be a mass of heterogeneous, even contradictory, beliefs and discourses (which is indeed what postmodernity is about according to Lyotard). Hegel would object that all-powerful Reason would then do the right sorting out. But then his “universal State” and gloriously full-fledged “Spirit” would rest solely on the dictatorship of Reason—indeed Hegel has been accused (most vehemently by Sir Karl Popper, the bard of technological liberalism) of propounding totalitarianism, in cahoots with Plato and his *Republic*. Sir Popper’s ghost may rest in peace: Reason has never been so all powerful, indeed not even so reasonable, as all that, and noble Hegel was just one more idealist gone astray. And so re-writing still has a few field days ahead, before the end of History is even remotely in sight. All the more since it can indefinitely be postponed by fresh great leaps forwards such as “postmodernism.” For candid souls there will always be something new under the sun, and just anything will do.

So that re-writing, after all, may just be a matter of harsh necessity, if not a curse—not unlike good old Original Sin (yet another piece of re-writing, by the way).⁵ But what are its aims and ambitions, or at least its results? Let us turn again to Homer, that time-honoured re-writer. The *Iliad* takes the Trojan war at a turning point. It has been going on for nine years, and is now in the

⁵ The theory of Original Sin in “Genesis” claims man’s responsibility for the rottenness of the world (as Golding so aptly put it), and of life at large. Yet it is perfectly obvious to anyone with a relatively sane mind that the world and life have been a sorry mess from the outset—so that the real Original Sin is actually the Creation itself, with God as the Original Sinner. All “Genesis” did, therefore, was exonerate God at man’s expense. Typically, humanity chose the slavery of guilt against reason and freedom. How right Nietzsche was. More generally, the Christian myth of the man-God was probably the most monstrous aberration in the entire history of religions. Although, here again, some profited by it. Religion is first and foremost a racket.

doldrums of routine. Agamemnon's theft of fair-cheeked Briseis from Achilles (a *mise en abyme* of Pâris's theft of Helen from Menelas) introduces a crisis that will eventually turn the tables. Achilles, champion of the Hellenes, retires to his tent and sulks, enabling the Trojans to take the upper hand and threaten the Greek encampment, and even their ships. So that Patrocles, Achilles's catamite, under the latter's armour defies Hector and gets killed. Achilles blows his top, vulgarly speaking, and, swearing murderous revenge, asks his mother Thetis to intercede with the gods for new weapons. So far the events have occurred on a purely human, but admirably logical, plane. The poem now switches to the divine.

The gods are annoyed at Thetis's request because, here again, their decision will trigger off a fatal chain of events: with the new weapons Achilles will kill Hector, champion of Troy (and incidentally die soon after). Subsequently Troy, deprived of its champion, will fall. All this is unavoidable, since decreed by Fate (and the *Fatum* for the ancient Greeks was above the gods themselves). And the gods like it not: they much prefer the *status quo*. Yet they cannot go against Fate. Achilles is granted his new weapons and at the close of the poem kills Hector in an epic duel: Troy is doomed. So, what the *Iliad* does, simply and beautifully, is to show the close intricacies between the human and the divine or, in other words, the microcosm and the macrocosm. Ultimately, the poem not only encapsulates the whole of the Trojan legend, but the whole of Greek culture as well. Most amazing of all, this monument manages to combine the epic with the snide.⁶ Which may explain

⁶ This dimension of Homer's irony may have been overlooked. Yet Achilles' furious charge, once equipped with his new weapons, is a masterpiece of the comic-cum-epic, as is part of his duel with Hector. Even more hilarious is, in the *Odyssey*, Telemachus's visit to Menelas. The old veteran cuckold is trying to impress his young guest with his feats at Troy. Suddenly Helen bursts in, spewing forth a hysterical speech to the effect that it was demons lured her into following Paris. The text ever so discreetly suggests Menelas's discomfiture and Telemachus's amazement at the crazy virago who launched a thousand ships, that the anticlimax is all the more a treat. Here again, Shakespeare was well aware of Homer's irony, and his *Troilus and Cressida* is a (sardonically explicit) re-writing of the *Iliad*.

why Plato wanted to keep Homer out of his Republic: irony is subversive, and therefore dangerously anti-totalitarian. So are, more generally, humour and laughter (as Umberto Eco has pointed out in his *Name of the Rose*). Hitler did not often laugh. Neither did Christ, for that matter.⁷

Of course, Homer's masterpiece cannot be taken as the archetype for the re-writing enterprise: not all of them are as ambitious nor, alas, as successful.⁸ Even though it inspired a few

⁷ May I be allowed to explain this very, very unpolitically correct comparison. Hitler, as far as one knows, had no sense of humour—meaning, no sense of transcendence, nor of despair (or was it too much of it?), and no manners either—all the which humour, that *politesse du désespoir*, is supposed to manifest. Christ, *on the other hand* (the Christ of the Gospels, who is the only one we can ever objectively hope to approach, and discuss), had, it has regrettably to be said, no humour either. Surely, he was dealing with transcendence (of a rather vague sort), but being the Messiah, despair was certainly not his line (the Gethsemani episode is there to prove it, if need were), nor, if what one reads is true, were manners. But then, when you have a mission, and precious little time for it, manners are surely not called for, being a sheer waste of time. Of course, such a Christ is only a fiction—both a lure and a scarecrow, not even a mystery (the Mystery will come later, with the Trinity, not invented by the Church Fathers, but shamelessly lifted from Hinduism). So that the (rather dull) figure (myth) discussed here has nothing to do with any “real” Christ, but with a fiction, first elaborated in the Gospels, then taken over by the Church. That figure is just as real as Sherlock Holmes, who received the homage of a heated debate in Parliament, after his “father,” Sir Conan Doyle, having got tired of the tyranny of his audience clamouring for ever more of its hero, decided to “do away” with him, with Doctor Moriarty's kind help. Indeed, Conan Doyle had, willy nilly, to resuscitate Holmes (the third case in history, therefore, after Lazarus and Christ). God “the father,” thank Him, did not have that kind of problem. He could leave it all to men, knowing His audience. Otherwise, it may be remembered that monotheism is (inevitably) totalitarian, and that antisemitism owes a lot to the Church. Also, Hitler was fond of equating himself with Christ.

⁸ Thus one cannot but wonder at the amazing publicity stunt devised by Ayatollah Khomeiny for the promotion of *The Satanic Verses*. The book is so dull and pretentious that the author of this article, albeit a voracious reader, gave up before the end. The whole affair does not say much for Khomeiny's literary tastes. Or perhaps it does. If so, the Ayatollah's move backfired. Indifference would have been far more to the point.

subsequent great works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Beckett's *Molloy*. But it does provide a few suggestions. Firstly (and as the term "re-writing" already implies), there are at least two discourses involved, more or less explicitly: as in translation, one (or more) source(s) and one target. But the aim here is drastically different: the relationship between the two is of a dialectical order. A confrontation, if not a challenge, is at stake—in any case, the distance it implies gives it its dialectical tension. Above all, the target-text becomes a palimpsest, thus "doubling" its contents as it were, and inviting comparison with the source-text. In Homer's *tour de force* there is (among many other things of course) a radicalization of the old material (encompassing the whole legend within a few episodes while stressing the strong unity of the Greek world, dominated by Fate) as well as a metaphysical questioning, if not a wry debunking (what are heroes' glorious feats and men's arrogant cities if everything is preordained by Fate? Given the strong imperative towards honour and fame, was Achilles really free in his existential choice?), thus achieving a delicate balance between irony and tragedy.

But Homer here may be the exception rather than the rule. Besides, at such distance we cannot precisely know to what extent he altered his original material. Yet if re-writing implies a challenge or a questioning, it more generally entails a dissatisfaction and a quest for new meaning. It implicitly admits, then, that Meaning is lacking, or at least fragile and transient. Marx said that when History repeats itself, it goes from tragedy to farce. A questionable statement (why not from farce to farce?), but which suggests either a loss (of magnitude, ultimately of being) or a shift in perception (that is to say in values). It might be suggested that each period feels a compulsion to assert its own identity, therefore its own vision, values and meanings in the face of History, that is of the past—new is beautiful, as it were. Which is why, for instance, Pierre Ménard's version of the *Quixote* can be at once perfectly identical with and utterly different from the original. But at the same time each period, while foolishly claiming to appropriate Meaning for itself (thus each period slyly strives to bury the previous one, not under earth but

under discourses—killing the Father, Freud would have said), runs the risk of becoming more or less incomprehensible to the subsequent ones, and otherwise of being disparaged by them. In this respect, texts are basically vicious mirrors. Which may also be why Hegel's Science is ultimately an illusion.⁹

So that, far from being a leap of faith, re-writing rather betrays a lack of faith in the Word (in Meaning). It cannot help but subscribe to Derrida's *différance*. For to re-write inevitably entails accepting the possibility of being re-written (if not more simply being written off). In such perspective, the production of new myths becomes a rather dubious proposition: myths are precisely those discourses which have come to stay, and are not subject to revision, which would inevitably degrade them. At most they can be transposed or modernized, to variable results. Unless of course one talks of modern "myths" as Barthes described them in his *Mythologies*: punctual, short-lived, throwaway products with mainly ideological purposes. As such they would possibly draw from the past, but then mostly (if inadvertently) to degrade, scorn or gainsay it (thus Freud with his shameless exploitation of the Oedipus myth). Also, they would hardly project into the future,

⁹ Hegel may simply be yet another victim of that syndrome denounced by Eliot's remark, mentioned above. Indeed humanity, in order to avoid reality, has always practiced escapism, under every available form: religion, power, war, Pascalian "divertissement," sports, drugs, TV, work, art even (so-called literature is a prominent form of escapism). For Hegel it was abstract thought. Indeed he proved a master at it. But as soon as he turned to more mundane things (that is, to forms of reality such as History), he erred pathetically. The result was that "philosophies of systems" subsequently more or less went to ground because of his gigantic enterprise—which was all for the better after all. But there is perhaps a crucial lesson here. The inherent fault in the arbitrariness of language (the chasm between the sign and the thing) may be dangerously multiplied, as it were, by discourses. The most perilous of them being, of course, ideologies, in their hysterical and uncompromising divorce from reality. It is no coincidence they have always proved the most destructive, and ultimately caused the most appalling butcheries and disasters. Descartes indeed was already perfectly aware of that danger—yet, ironically enough, in order to circumvent it he fell back on the worst of ideologies: God and the Devil.

(“individual right to happiness”) actually masking glorified greed and relentless lucre on the one hand, puny pseudo-intellectual games on the other. The Loto draw has replaced mass, and thanks to unemployment, higher education is becoming compulsory, not even a right any more but a chore. The Temple has been turned into a supermarket, pain into mandatory pleasure, the golden calf has won by KO, but there won't be a slice for everyone—as the prophet spake it, the rich shall have food and the poor, appetite. Oh yes, and there is “communication,” the latest triumph of which is the portable phone, a new-fangled variety of pollution that is rapidly turning postmodern man into a technologized ape, thus confirming McLuhan's famous and dire prediction: in the global Village the medium is the message. But it may work too as a substitute to the Sacred: whenever their little gadget beeps, all the lucky portable phoners act as if God Himself were calling them. General salvation may be round the corner. Exit Saint Augustine. The Net reigns supreme, and virtual reality is soon to alleviate the intolerable boredom (or worse, unreality) of the existing one. However, as Sartre pointed out at the close of *L'Être et le néant*, all values are equal in the perspective of Being, and Beckett once remarked that sinking is just as true as swimming. Our postmodernity seems to confirm this too—minus Being perhaps. Sartre also said, very aptly for once, that man is a pointless passion. Exit Hegel too. We want everything, and we want it NOW.¹³

Where does all this lead to? Barring Hegel's teleology, there ultimately seem to be two options left to re-writing, this compulsion-cum-curse: either dull repetition / punctual and candid rediscovery of the wheel, or endless games and variations—the grim earnest or the frivolous playful. Round and round Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and

¹³ Or, as another poet put it, epitomizing these troubled times: “Give me Christ or give me Hiroshima” (L. Cohen, “The Future”). In other words, Parousia or Armageddon—Meaning at last and salvation, or Negation and nothingness. No more re-writing then—just a complete write-off. An expression of latent fear—or of an incipient longing? A bang, or a whimper? English has this expression, with no equivalent in French: long-drawn out.

Poetics, à la "politically correct" sauce. No doubt this will help refine the dualisms and rationalisms of Western ontological conceptualisms. Otherwise, one suggestion for a way out of this vicious circle might possibly be Hamlet's "The rest is silence," another Molloy's "*Et puis merde.*" But both, after all, might amount to the same thing—the latter a re-writing of the former. Yet it all looks as if Hegel's incipient universal State might irrevocably lead to the deafening triumph of Babel and its cacophony—provided self-destruction does not intervene. So, human history, at the end of the day, and at best: Babel revisited? Or, more nobly, if one will rather have it so: palimpsest and intertextuality? Or, less nobly: layer upon layer of pious and reassuring, albeit incoherent, lies? But, as the present article has briefly tried to show, it has always more or less been so. All the more since writing itself is, after all, already a form of "re-writing." Here again, nothing new under the sun. So much for postmodernist literature.

Denis GAUER¹⁴



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bataille, Georges. *Théorie de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. TEL, 1973).
- Beckett, Samuel. *Molloy* (Paris: coll. 10/18, 1951).
- Blanchot, Maurice. *De Kafka à Kafka* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1981).

¹⁴ Université de la Réunion, 15, Avenue René Cassin, B.P. 7151, 97715 Saint-Denis Messag. Cedex 9.