Remembering the Future; or, Whatever Happened to Re-Vision?

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Remembering the Future; or, Whatever Happened to Re-Vision?

Perhaps it is time to remember the future, rather than simply to worry about the future of memory.

—Andreas Huyssen, 2003, 29

In her essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich famously wrote, “Re-Vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich 1972, 18). Rich’s words are well known. They have been quoted many times throughout the past three and a half decades, usually to underscore the need for women to revisit the past and get to know it differently in order to change the future.¹ Rich’s call for re-vision, in the sense of retelling the stories that make up our common cultural heritage from the perspective of postcolonialism, feminism, and gender and queer studies, has transformed not only our understanding of the past but also our understanding of how we come to such an understanding. Literary history, historiography, and history *tout court* will never be the same again. The bell has tolled for the *grands récits*, the grand narratives that served to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling social institutions (Lyotard 1984). According to the French historian Pierre Nora, this fragmentation of History into histories is one of the reasons for the current obsession with

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¹ See Fetterley 1978; Gilbert and Gubar 1979; DuPlessis 1985; Greene 1991a; Ostriker 1993; Plate 1995, 2000; Howe and Aguiar 2001; Komar 2003; White 2004; Widdowson 2006.

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memory. “The ‘democratization’ of history,” he argues, “takes the form of a marked emancipatory trend among peoples, ethnic groups, and even certain classes of individuals in the world today; in short, the emergence, over a very short period of time, of all those forms of memory bound up with minority groups for whom rehabilitating their past is part and parcel of reaffirming their identity” (Nora 2002). Paradoxically, it would appear that it is precisely the re-vision impulse that has led to what Andreas Huyssen has identified as “a fundamental crisis in our imagination of alternative futures” (2003, 2). Today, indeed, it is generally understood that history is a story that is told in the interest of a particular group of people and that there is always another side to every story. As a result, the past is no longer this distant “foreign” country but a space open to multiple revisits from the perspective of the present.² “Historical memory today is not what it used to be,” Huyssen writes, adding, “untold recent and not so recent pasts impinge upon the present. . . . The past has become part of the present in ways simply unimaginable in earlier centuries” (2003, 1).

The profound change that has taken place in our relation to the past also has far-reaching consequences for the way we envision the future: “In effect, it was the way in which a society, nation, group or family envisaged its future that traditionally determined what it needed to remember of the past to prepare that future; and this in turn gave meaning to the present, which was merely a link between the two” (Nora 2002).³ As I wish to argue here, the fact that the past has become so much a part of the present may well explain why re-vision no longer serves to envision new futures. In *The Production of Presence* (2004), the German new philologist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht characterizes contemporary historical culture as a “broad present” (121) that leaves the future for all practical purposes “inaccessible” (120), outside the reach of our collective imagination. As the question in the title of this article indicates, my concern is with re-vision as something we seem to have lost: “whatever happened

² “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there,” is the well-known opening sentence of Leslie P. Hartley’s 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*, famously alluded to in David Lowenthal’s analysis of cultural uses of the past, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985).

³ As Mary Eagleton and Susan Watkins write in their introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Gender Studies* on “The Future of Fiction: The Future of Feminism,” “To speculate about the future necessarily involves thinking about the past and, for both fiction and feminism, anticipation about the future demands reflection on what has gone before. . . . While as a political movement the origin and the end-point are less clear, the backward glance and the forward-looking, sometimes utopian, aspiration are essential to the politics” (2006, 115).

to re-vision” expresses my surprise and confusion as I discover that something has gone missing. As I will argue, what seems to have disappeared is a clear sense of where we want to be in the future, the sense of rewriting or revisiting the past in order to change the future. More than anything, perhaps, it is the future as a collective project that seems to be forgotten, relegating visions of a better world or a just society to the discourses of a particular (nineteenth-century) ideological formation, a “chapter in cultural history,” as Rich already suspected.⁴ It is this sense of futures past that concerns me here, and I hear it resounding in Huyssen’s phrase used as an epigraph above. For, as he does, I believe “it is time to remember the future, rather than simply to worry about the future of memory” (Huyssen 2003, 29).

What was re-vision?

The recurrence of Rich’s re-vision “with its crucial inserted hyphen” (Sanders 2006, 7) as a critical term throughout the last decades of the twentieth century establishes it as a key concept for feminist literature. In the 1970s and 1980s, Rich’s notion of re-vision became the rallying cry for a broad variety of women rewriting the classics of Western literature, “galvaniz[ing] a generation of feminist authors to reply with texts of their own” (Howe and Aguiar 2001, 9). Arguably, this happened for two related reasons. First, it fit into the political agenda of the so-called second wave of feminism. Second, Rich’s re-vision articulated a lesbian imperative that also formulated a feminist practice of reading and writing: to change the future, to create new scenarios for life. Opening the past to alternative stories meant opening the future to new possibilities, and realizing that things could be different was to change the course of history. As Rich put it:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we have been drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped

⁴ Huyssen writes, “the main concern of the nineteenth-century nation-states was to mobilize and monumentalize national and universal pasts so as to legitimize and give meaning to the present and to envision the future: culturally, politically, socially. This model no longer works” (2003, 2).

us as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (1972, 18–19)

As Rich defines it, “re-vision . . . is an act of survival” because it leads to autonomy and self-determination. By identifying sources of oppression and charting their mechanics of reproduction, re-vision was meant to retrieve an authentic sense of self that was not defined by patriarchal society. To reveal that there is nothing natural about the stories that sustain social organization and its gendered division of labor was to rescue women from the confines of domesticity. Indeed, revealing that they are stories to begin with, myths that are passed off as timeless truths but that can be told differently, was considered the first step in the process of emancipation that was to lead, through the stages of consciousness-raising and political action, to the radical transformation of the public sphere. French feminist Hélène Cixous voices views similar to Rich’s when she asks what would happen if the myths that sustain the patriarchal order were to be demystified and claims, “Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society” (1981, 93). Gesturing toward all those women re-writers re-visioning the great narratives of the West while resonating intertextually with Rich’s words, Cixous adds:

Well, we are living through this very period when the conceptual foundation of a millennial culture is in process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole as yet not recognized.

When they awaken from among the dead, from among the words, from among the laws. . . . (Cixous 1981, 93)

Writers obviously had a key role to play in this historical transformation of culture. Their business is the writing of stories, and more so perhaps than most of their contemporaries, they are people who are astutely aware of the power of language to frame experience. Besides, although re-vision is political in its implications, it is also and quite simply a narrative strategy. It is a tool for generating stories, a rewriting machine, as it were. To rewrite the classics of world literature, to retell the biblical narratives, the myths of Greek and Roman antiquity, or the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales,

is to tap into the huge reservoir of stories that is our cultural imaginary and to release their inherent capacity for yielding new narratives. Brushing criticisms of parasitism aside, critics confidently assert that there is much creativity involved in the telling of “the other side of the story” (Hite 1989; see also DuPlessis 1985; Greene 1991a).⁵ Of course, the originality of a rewriting lies not in its being sprung “spontaneously from the vital root of genius,” as Edward Young defined creativity a long time ago in his “Conjectures on Original Composition” ([1759] 1971, 339).⁶ Rather, what makes a rewriting significant is its play with another work (and, arguably, with the limits of cultural and literary property).⁷ It is precisely its being both faithful and unfaithful to it, its writing both within and against the tradition, that makes a rewriting interesting and rewarding.⁸

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the rewritings of Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Sara Maitland, Michele Roberts, Emma Tennant, Jeanette Winterson, and Christa Wolf, to name just a few, feminist revision took off as (almost) a literary genre in its own right.⁹ While feminist scholars of literature such as Judith Fetterley called for a “resisting reader”

⁵ For allegations of parasitism, see, e.g., Jorge Luis Borges, who writes of “those parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebière or Don Quixote on Wall Street” (1964, 39). Borges obviously had in mind the kind of works U.S. copyright law calls “derivative.” As defined in Circular 14 of the U.S. Copyright Office, “Copyright Registration for Derivative Works” (revised July 2006), a “derivative work” is “a work based upon one or more pre-existing works, . . . in which a work may be recast, transformed, or adapted” (<http://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ14.pdf>).

⁶ In fact, Paul Saint-Amour argues in *The Copywrights* (2003), rewritings understand “the Romantic mythology of creation ex nihilo as a form of conquest-narrative, one that ought not to be blithely embraced by the subjects of conquest, occupation, enslavement, and other multigenerational historical traumas. In their constitutive gestures of recirculation, [they] recognize that this notion of a vacuum into which radically new things may come is a less tenable fantasy to those whose lives and works are violently and conspicuously pre-determined by anterior structures of domination” (216).

⁷ Compare Saint-Amour, who argues that the rewriting “always achieves a part of its meaning in relation to intellectual property law” (2003, 215).

⁸ See Plate 1995; Genette 1997; Sanders 2001, 2006; Widdowson 2006.

⁹ The question of genre is a vexed and much disputed one, too complex to be fully addressed here (see, e.g., Derrida 1981 and Marcus 1994). My point is that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, increasing critical attention was given to feminist intertextuality and metafiction (see, e.g., Greene 1991a; Barr 1993; and Boehm 1995), identified as forms, movements, or genres of their own. The rewritings and re-visions I am concerned with here can be identified as belonging to what Gayle Greene terms “a movement in contemporary . . . women’s fiction” that she defines as “a form of feminist fiction—feminist metafiction—that concerns women writers’ relation to ‘the tradition’” (1991a, 1). Compare also Peter Widdowson, who speaks of a “sub-genre of contemporary fiction” (2006, 496).

(1978, xx)—a reader who would resist what she termed “the *immasculation* of women by men” (xx)—published writers took Rich’s words to heart and actually produced such resisting readings in new and creative texts. There seemed to be no doubt: what were needed were new stories, or at least other stories, and one way to produce those alternative stories was through wide-scale and multiple retellings of mythic narratives. For, as critics agreed, the retelling of the classics from a new point of view constituted a radical critique of the literary tradition and of the culture it served to legitimate (e.g., Ostriker 1982, 1986; DuPlessis 1985). This, in turn, would “provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects” (Fetterley 1978, xx). In fact, this idea still has currency. In her recently published book, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders writes, “what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text” (2006, 2). “There is frequently heartfelt political commitment standing behind acts of literary appropriation or ‘re-vision’” (7). Likewise, Peter Widdowson maintains, “re-visionary novels almost invariably have a clear cultural-political thrust. That is why the majority of them align themselves with feminist and/or postcolonial criticism in demanding that past texts’ complicity in oppression . . . be revised and re-visioned as part of the process of restoring a voice, a history and an identity to those hitherto exploited, marginalized and silenced by dominant interests and ideologies” (2006, 505–6).¹⁰

Motives for re-vision

The prime motives for feminist rewritings in the 1970s and 1980s were political and cultural. Re-vision was motivated by a desire to counter a tradition of silence and alleged misrepresentation. Enabling authorship, it aimed at re-presentation, both in the literary sense of a (new) depiction in words and in the political sense of the term. It was formulated as a challenge to the existing literary canon that was activated by profound

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, this “clear cultural-political thrust,” while the most important characteristic of re-visionary fiction in Widdowson’s analysis, is also the one least developed. In this article, I am precisely challenging the taken-for-grantedness of the political thrust of rewritings. It might be worth noting that Widdowson’s article was published while this one was under review.

disagreement with or disbelief in the texts of the past.¹¹ Thus Cixous's manifesto for women's writing, "The Laugh of the Medusa," first published in English translation within the pages of this journal thirty years ago, refutes the classical versions of the myth of Medusa and claims: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous 1976, 885).

Equally central to re-vision is its being grounded in a notion of a shared female experience. Beyond all the differences that separated women across class, color, and culture, there was a sense of "recognizing a problem shared" (Whelehan 2005, 10). For instance, in her account of the emergence of her novel *Cassandra* (1984), Wolf recounts how, as she was reading Aeschylus's play about the battle of Troy and its aftermath, she located "a 'mistake' on Aeschylus's part. Never would she [Cassandra] have said this," she writes. Never would Cassandra mourn for Agamemnon. "Not if I knew her as well as I thought" (Wolf 1984, 150). Similarly, Maitland justifies the rewriting of old stories by having one of her characters, caught in a fairy-tale scenario neither of her choosing nor of her liking, explain how fairy tales do not match women's actual experiences:

The old stories do not lie; that is their rule. . . . But although they do not lie, they omit. They tell us about the frog turned into a Prince, but they never tell us about the Prince turned into a frog; though the divorce statistics uphold the frequency of this version. They do not tell us about the women who prefer dragons to knights; nor about the ones who prefer cottages to palaces, honest independent work to silk gowns. . . . And they never, never let on that there are those of us who prefer jam doughnuts to orgasms, an interesting day's work to grand passion, a Sainsbury's supermarket trolley to a pumpkin coach. (Maitland 1993, 72–73)

The success of feminist re-vision as a narrative strategy to re-present female experience and bring about cultural change undoubtedly contributed to its booming in the 1990s. Writers who formulated alternative pasts

¹¹ Widdowson lists the following essential characteristics of the genre: re-visionary novels "write back" to canonic texts (2006, 501), represent a challenge to the views they claim, and do so explicitly, in order to "denaturalise the original" (503); they "exemplify the more general historicising tendency of contemporary fiction to oscillate dialectically between past and present" (504), show how "past fiction *writes* its view of things into history" (505), and thus "almost invariably have a clear cultural-political thrust" (505).

through rewritten stories were critically supported by scholars such as Susan Suleiman, whose desire for narrative—and hence, for past and future, for stories that involve, as Mary Eagleton and Susan Watkins remind us, “a beginning and an end” (2006, 115)—explicitly takes the form of a desire for rewritings. “Not the same old story, to be sure, or if the same old story, then rewritten, rewritten,” Suleiman writes in a chapter on feminist intertextuality in *Subversive Intent* (1990, 169). In the fictions of Valerie Martin, Sena Jeter Naslund, Pia Pera, Alice Randall, Jacqueline Rose, and Marina Warner, among many others, classics of Western literature are retold from the point of view of female characters, yielding fascinating stories while delegitimizing the familiar ones. These rewritings of canonical works from the standpoint of the margins are not limited to voicing women’s differences from men. Equally important are the intersections of gender with sexuality, social class, and ethnicity. Thus the stories of Jekyll and Hyde’s maid (Martin 1990) and of Captain Ahab’s wife (Naslund 1999), for instance, give us more complex pictures of life in London at the turn of the nineteenth century or of early nineteenth-century America, while Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) presents us with the perspective of the enslaved on Southern plantation life and on Reconstruction. We find out what moved Job’s wife finally to cry out to him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9; Chedid 1993), and we learn of Jane Fairfax’s thoughts in Joan Aiken’s “companion volume to *Emma*” (1990). We hear Lolita’s side of the story in *Lo’s Diary* (Pera 1999) and Albertine’s account of her affair with Marcel, the narrator of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, in Rose’s novel *Albertine* (2001). Of course, women are not the only ones to avail themselves of this productive narrative strategy: Theodor Roszak wrote *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995), John Updike gave us the story of Hamlet’s mother in *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), and, most recently, the Dutch author Arthur Japin published his portrayal of Lucia, Casanova’s first love (2005).

Ever since Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Jean Rhys’s “hugely influential” re-vision of *Jane Eyre* has served as the exemplary case of how “we may never view that novel . . . in the same light once we have had access to the critique implicit in [the re-vision]” (Sanders 2006, 98). This is because, as Steven Connor points out, in engaging with the literary past, rewritings “engage with the history of beliefs and attitudes to which those originals have belonged and which they have helped to shape” (1996, 167). But the success of feminist revision in the literary marketplace is not only to be put on the account of its critical effectiveness. The mutual dependency of canonical work and rewriting is a complex relationship that operates on several levels. Surely

it is because the canon embodies some of the fundamental values of a culture or a nation that feminist writers target its key texts as in need of re-vision. Canons, however, continue to exist precisely by virtue of their texts being challenged and reinterpreted. Regardless of how critical they may be, rewritings paradoxically contribute to sustaining the very same canon they are challenging. Connor's concept of "fidelity-in-betrayal" (1996, 167), emphasizing that however much a rewriting may compromise the authority of a text that is culturally central, it can never simply deny it, for "the rewritten text must always submit to the authority of an imperative that is at once ethical and historical" (167), hints at the ways in which rewriting may well be "an inherently conservative genre" (Sanders 2006, 9). Derek Attridge confirms: novels that rewrite well-known texts "offer themselves not as challenges to the canon, but as canonic—as already canonized, one might say. They appear to locate themselves within an established literary culture, rather than presenting themselves as an assault on that culture" (1996, 169).

Seen in the light of canon formation, then, re-vision is a necessary and integral part of canonicity, adding to a canon's cultural capital rather than transforming or overturning it.¹² Seen from the perspective of the publishers, however, it may well be the interdependency of canonical text and rewrite—its being, as Attridge says, "already canonized"—that makes rewritings particularly interesting. Whereas rewritings have long been known to be a form of productive reception that contributes to the canonicity of texts while deriving critical attention and authority from them, the success of feminist re-vision in the literary marketplace is equally linked to changes in the book-publishing industry that are due to the globalization of capital. In the 1970s, the financial success of a publishing house depended on a large publishing list, which was achieved through economies of scale and a high gross margin due to printing a large number of copies in one print run. In the 1980s, capitalism shifted to a model of short-turnover cycles of capital: short lead times with a small number of copies, low stocks, and regular reprints (Harvey 1989). One of the most visible effects of this global shift is that publishers rely increasingly on front lists, generating more and more of their overall sales from fewer

¹² Attempts to stop the publication of rewritings such as *The Wind Done Gone* and *Lo's Diary* on account of their taking a free ride on the back of their precursor's success can be seen to ignore the publicity resulting from rewritings. Indeed, one of the effects of rewriting is that it makes readers grab for the original—witness, for instance, the success of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* in the wake of Michael Cunningham's rewriting of it in *The Hours*. For a detailed account of these copyright cases, see Saint-Amour's *The Copywrights* (2003, 207–20).

books and fewer authors. “Given a choice, publishers would rather release a new title from a bestselling author with a proven customer base than take a chance on a title written by an unknown author,” the executive summary of Simba Information’s *Business of Consumer Book Publishing 2005* report states, adding wryly, “The reasons are pure economics” (Simba Information 2005, 2). It is in this post-Fordist economic context that rewriting emerges as a literary genre that allows for feminist literary and political aims to be realized in a commercially viable form. Indeed, capitalizing on the way in which the canonical work or author functions as a brand name, publishers of rewritings happily exploit the canonical name’s wide recognition and its function as guarantee of a standard of quality and of certain aesthetic or narrative pleasures. Because the rewriting has an existing readership to whom it can be sold as part and parcel of that which it rewrites, it requires the launching not of a new and unknown author (which often entails costly publicity and marketing expenses) but of a product that belongs to the prestigious predecessor.

Rewritings of texts that are still under copyright illuminate this process. First published in Italian in 1995 and subsequently issued in a Dutch translation in 1996, Pera’s rewriting of *Lolita* from the eponymous character’s perspective was blocked from publication in the United States by Vladimir Nabokov’s son, Dmitri, who claimed copyright infringement. The case was settled with Dmitri Nabokov writing a preface to the novel and half of Pera’s royalties going to PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, and Novelists).¹³ According to Nabokov, Pera is trading on the celebrity of *Lolita*, “seek[ing] inspiration, fortune and fame” from his father’s world-famous novel. Taking Pera’s lawyer up on his argument that *Lo’s Diary* is a “transformative” work, Nabokov observes: “*My Fair Lady*, *West Side Story*, Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, Updike’s *S*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* . . . all had been safely tucked into the public domain when the ‘transformations’ were penned. *Lolita* isn’t in the public domain, and won’t be until well into the next millennium when its copyright expires” (Nabokov 1999, viii). The distinction, no doubt, is important; texts under copyright require dues to be paid, and their authors or estates can file suit to see their rights honored. Yet in their attempts

¹³ A similar case occurred just a few years later, with Randall’s rewriting of *Gone with the Wind* from the perspective of Scarlett’s half-sister, a mulatto slave on Scarlett’s plantation. The case was settled with the novel continuing in distribution with the label “An Unauthorized Parody” and a financial contribution being made by Randall’s publishers to Morehouse College, a historically black liberal arts college in Atlanta (see Saint-Amour [2003, 207–17]; see also <http://www.thewinddonegone.com>).

to keep unauthorized rewritings at bay, they reveal a mechanism that is inherent to all rewriting, the effects of which are of the order of brand recognition.

What I am contending, then, is that as books become commodities, marketability plays an important role in the emergence of re-vision as a popular literary genre. Whereas for feminist writers, rewriting is a literary form that combines narrative strategy with feminist praxis, for publishers, re-vision is a means of selling books with low risks and low marketing costs. Rewritings can be marketed according to the mechanics of branding. This we see clearly in the strategies devised to sell re-visions on the basis of the prestige that is to be gained from their being associated with canonical names, as when Aiken's *Jane Fairfax* is dubbed "a companion volume to *Emma*." In the bookstores, text and rewrite are juxtaposed or presented in boxed sets—*Gone with the Wind* and its sequel, *Scarlett*, by Alexandra Ripley; or Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Susan Hill's *Mrs. de Winter*.¹⁴ Book covers and flaps explicitly refer to the precursor text, while layout and lettering reinforce the connection established between text and rewrite. For instance, the mass-market paperback edition of *Rebecca* published, like Hill's *Mrs. de Winter* (1994), by Avon Books, states on its back cover:

REBECCA
ONE OF THE BESTSELLING
NOVELS OF ALL TIMES
and don't miss the exciting and long-awaited conclusion
MRS. DE WINTER

Similarly, the November 1994 Avon Books edition of *Mrs. de Winter* states on its back cover:

MRS.
deWINTER
The breathtaking, long-awaited sequel to
Daphne du Maurier's classic tale of romantic suspense
REBECCA

On the former book cover, no reference is made to the author of this "exciting and long-awaited conclusion," nor is there any indication it might not be the same as *Rebecca's*. In contrast, on the latter, the name of the author of *Rebecca* is not only given but also emphasized, while

¹⁴ It is worth noting that both *Scarlett* and *Mrs. de Winter* are authorized sequels to texts that are still under copyright.

leaving out the name of the author of the book at hand altogether. Clearly, the name of the author of *Mrs. de Winter* is secondary to what we might call the *Rebecca* brand. Although Hill is a respected writer, the name Susan Hill is not what is taken to sell the book; rather, it is *Rebecca* with its slightly gothic lettering, its aura of romantic mystery, its best-sellerdom.

The anxiety of affluence?

As I chart whatever happened to re-vision and explore what remains of what Christian Moraru terms its “saliently political and cultural agenda” (2001, 143), I cannot ignore the logic of consumer society that turns the publishing of feminist re-visions of classic texts into the apparent happy marriage of feminism and commercialism, commercialism that increasingly rules the entire contemporary Western world.¹⁵ My point is not that money has become the norm (cf. Eagleton 2003, 16). Rather, I wish to argue that in a culture in which, as Zygmunt Bauman has it, “whatever we do . . . is a kind of shopping, an activity shaped in the likeness of shopping” or “is derived from the pragmatics of shopping” (Bauman 2000, 73–74), our understanding of re-vision itself similarly becomes assimilated to the logic of shopping. Let me explain. According to Bauman (2000, 2005), our present condition is characterized by fluidity. Life is liquid, our jobs impermanent, and our relations volatile. With everything a matter of choice, shopping around becomes our prime activity (and “continuous partial attention,” as Linda Stone [2006] phrases it, our condition): scanning, surveying, comparing, and remaining ever on the alert for new possibilities, other opportunities, better offers.

What I wish to argue, then, is that just as in Bauman’s perspective, “the world becomes an infinite collection of possibilities[,] a container filled to the brim with a countless multitude of opportunities” (Bauman 2000, 61), so does the past. Rather than singular and subject to interpretation, the past is something we conjure up for its own sake, for the pleasure of imagining “how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects . . . if we had encountered them in their

¹⁵ I owe my heading “the anxiety of affluence” to Imelda Whelehan, who looks back on thirty-five years of feminist fiction in *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005). Her argument intersects with mine at points, as when she argues that “the problems which beset the heroines of the 1970s classics were never resolved” (Whelehan 2005, 6). “Nowhere is this more apparent,” she writes, “than in the open endings of the novels where the central character may find herself alone, or on the threshold of decisions, always looking back” (5). She might as well be talking about re-vision.

own historical everyday worlds” (Gumbrecht 2004, 124). And as we do so, “we reject the question of what benefits we might expect from engaging the past,” for, as Gumbrecht points out, “any possible answer to the question of practical benefits will limit the range of modalities through which we can indulge in the past—and simply enjoy our contact with it” (125). In this light, re-vision is no longer a matter of revisiting the past in order to project new futures, as Rich and Cixous had it, or of thinking that rewriting would have a demythologizing effect, as Carter thought it would (1983, 71). Rather, the retelling of well-known stories from alternative points of view becomes part of the shopping, of “scanning the assortment of possibilities, examining, touching, feeling, handling the goods on display . . . putting some of them in the trolley and others back on the shelf” (Bauman 2000, 73). For instance, Disney does not just issue the film *Aladdin*. Among the merchandising paraphernalia there is also *Disney’s Aladdin: The Genie’s Tale* (Kreider 1993) and *Disney’s Aladdin: Jasmine’s Story* (Elder 1997). These two books exemplify the way in which re-vision has become an integral part of product marketing and a matter of personal choice. As bedtime approaches, parents turn to their offspring and ask: whose story do you want to hear tonight? Jasmine’s? The Genie’s? Aladdin’s? In fact, the manipulating of consumer goods Bauman speaks of happens quite literally in the *Upside Down Tales* series for children where, after reading the classic tales of Snow White, of Hansel and Gretel, or of Little Red Riding Hood, the reader is invited to flip over the book and read the story again as told from the point of view of the stepmother, the witch, or the wolf (Black 1991; Rowland 1991; Heller 1995). “I know you’ve heard the story of Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf who eats her and her granny,” *The Wolf’s Tale* begins. “Well, I’m the wolf. William is my name, and I’m going to tell you the real story” (Rowland 1991, 1). Taking the old adage that “there is another side to every story” to the letter, the upside-down book combines the technique of re-vision with its spatial phenomenological manifestation, producing its new critical direction as tangible materiality and consumer product.

Consuming memories

Obviously, the vogue for shopping for alternative pasts has direct consequences for the ways in which rewriting affects cultural memory. Transforming our relationship to the past, to tradition, and to the founding myths of culture, it equally undermines the possibility of projecting the

future—of representing the future as project.¹⁶ Whereas rewriting has long been a powerful political and ideological tool in the shaping and reshaping of collective memory, its critical effectiveness in a literary marketplace that increasingly works according to the logics of consumption is transformed. Today, memory and shopping are linked, not only because consumerism is an integral part of contemporary commemorative practices but also because memories and memorability are central to a society of consumption that has embraced experience as its key marketing concept. In their handbook of business strategy and innovation, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (1999), Joseph Pine and James Gilmore argue that “Experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated *genre of economic output*” (ix). Attempting to convince companies that they ought to “script and stage compelling experiences,” as the blurb on the book’s front flap reads, they write: “In the emerging Experience Economy, companies must realize that they make memories, not goods” (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 100). An economy that is geared toward producing memories should certainly make us wary of the kind of memory into which we are buying. Producing competing memories as consumer goods, it is also an economy that puts re-vision at the heart of economic culture and consumerism at the center of rewriting as a memory-practice.

The much advertised launch of Canongate’s series the Myths at the 2005 Frankfurter Buchmesse exemplifies how rewriting has not only reached center stage within culture but become big business as well. The series, which was touted as “the most ambitious simultaneous world-wide publication ever undertaken” (Byng 2005), is a joint enterprise involving some twenty-five international publishing houses worldwide, with plans for the publication, over the next three decades, of myths retold “in a contemporary and memorable way” by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe, A. S. Byatt, and Donna Tartt. One of the first books issued in the series is Winterson’s *Weight*, a retelling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles that can be read as a programmatic statement for the series. In the introduction Winterson explains the choice of subject as one that imposed itself on her: “When I was asked to choose a myth to write about, I realized I had chosen already. The story of Atlas holding up the world . . . was waiting to be written. Re-written. The recurring language motif of *Weight* is ‘I want to tell the story again’” (Winterson 2005, xiv). The-matizing rewriting, Winterson’s leitmotif not only bolsters her endorse-

¹⁶ Memory and project are two sides of the same coin, Jean-Claude Guillebaud writes in “Entre mémoire et projet” (2006, 47).

ment of the Myths as “a marvelous way of telling stories—re-telling stories for their own sakes, finding in them permanent truths about human nature” (Winterson 2005, xvi) but also of rewriting and retelling as freed of teleological (historical) time. Mixing autobiography with myth—“I wrote it directly out of my own situation” (xiv); “My girlfriend says I have an Atlas complex” (97)—Winterson follows the traditional distinction between historical (linear) time and mythical (cyclical) time, linking the desire to tell the story again with the inability to break free from “the gravitational pull of past and future” (99): “The pull of past and future is so strong that the present is crushed by it. We lie helpless in the force of patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behaviour” (99).

Drawing in particular on the analogy between the demigod carrying the world on his shoulders and the storyteller holding up her fictional world, Winterson’s self-mythologizing as Atlas—her retelling of the mythical adventures of the Titan in the first person—extends the relevance of *Weight* beyond authorial metafiction. The storyteller, indeed, is not just the writer of fictions; she is also the teller of the story of her own life, and in this sense, rewriting retains its existential drive to project human existence narratively. Winterson’s narrative rests upon the simile of the book of nature. “The strata of sedimentary rock are like the pages of a book, each with a record of contemporary life written on it,” she writes, using black and red lettering and varying letter size to highlight the materiality and mediality of writing (Winterson 2005, ix; cf. Hayles 2002). Proceeding to retell the beginning of the world—“In the beginning there was nothing” (Winterson 2005, 3), we read in a reformulation of Genesis 1:1–2, which might be Winterson’s or Atlas’s—the narrator, rejecting the notion that all “the rest is history” (5), explains: “All the stories are here, silt-packed and fossil-stored. The book of the world opens anywhere, chronology is one method only and not the best” (6).

In contrast to the teleology and chronology of history, myth is a singular time-space, a chronotope fusing present, past, and future. As Atlas recounts his story, he tells how he can “hear the world beginning. Time plays itself back for me. . . . I realise I am carrying not only this world, but all possible worlds. I am carrying the world in time as well as in space. . . . I am carrying its potential as well as what has so far been realised” (Winterson 2005, 25). While the world embodies the myth as “a narrative whose beginning and ending continually inform the middle” (Coupe 1997, 97), Atlas represents myth as eternal return and, with that, myth as tragic destiny (see Eliade 1991, especially 34–46). Indeed, when Atlas, relieved from his burden by Heracles so that he can carry out one of the latter’s labors, comes to the Garden of the Hesperides to fetch the three

golden apples, Hera tells him the rules of the mythical game. Reminding him that “Mother Earth’s greatest gift” is “knowledge of past and future,” she explains, “The apples you have taken are your own past and future. . . . The third apple is the present . . . made from your past, pointing toward the future. Which is it, Atlas? Only you can decide” (Winterson 2005, 72–73). Hera speaks of choice; in contrast, Atlas speaks of fate: “There is no choice,” he says. “There is Fate. No man escapes his fate” (75). The goddess disagrees: “There was no enchantment, Atlas. You could not see the tree as it is. You could not see the changefulness of the world. All these pasts are yours, all these futures, all these presents. You could have chosen differently. You did not” (75).

In the clash of perspectives, Winterson seems on the side of Atlas, defending the mythical rather than the historical view of things. Whereas in Hera’s view, destiny is a matter of choice, in theirs, “life reads like fate” (2005, 97). “We are in the gravitational pull of past and future. It takes huge energy—speed-of-light power—to break that gravitational pull. How many of us ever get free of our orbit?” Winterson asks (99). Dismissing notions of free will along with self-help courses as “fancy” (99) and delusional, Winterson looks for a different end in the telling itself: “I thought that if I could only keep on telling the story, if the story would not end, I could invent my way out of the world” (139).

“I chose this story above all others because it’s a story I’m struggling to end. . . . That’s why I write fiction—so that I can keep telling the story. . . . Always a new beginning, a different end,” Winterson writes toward the close of her narrative (2005, 137). Linking the desire for retelling with the inability to formulate a conclusion and the necessity for an open ending, Winterson has Atlas walk away, yet presents this “very particular end not found elsewhere” (xiv) as but one possibility among several, the choice of which is ultimately left to the individual reader’s personal preference: “no one knows its composition,” Winterson observes. “Dark matter could be conventional matter, . . . or it could even be black holes. Or it could be Atlas holding up the universe. But I think it is Atlas and Laika walking away” (2005, 151). *Weight*’s multiperspectival ending underscores its status as inaugural retelling of myth for a twenty-first century that can only assimilate more pasts into its ever broadening present. In this sense, the *Myths* seems typical for the contemporary take on re-vision. Whereas the names of the authors hold the promise of retellings with a critical edge—Achebe having given us *Things Fall Apart* as a reply to and a thorough undermining of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (see Moyers 1989; Achebe 1990), and neither Atwood nor Winterson is a stranger to rewriting as cultural critique—Winterson’s phrase and its

appropriation by the series' editor make us suspect differently. "We want to tell the story again," as the series' editor Jamie Byng puts it on Canongate's Web site, speaks of the storyteller's desire for and delight in language; of the pleasure of telling stories, of keeping the stories alive by retelling them. Inevitably also meaning "we want to *sell* the story again," retelling becomes a retailing strategy, promising ever new and improved reading experiences that are as ephemeral as any other consumer experience. Speaking neither of learning from the past nor of projecting a new future, mythical retellings accord perfectly with the logic of the times and an economy of perpetual innovation to which they immediately become assimilated. Containing the seeds of its renewal and transformation in permanence, mythical retelling is not only the actualization of one of the possibilities already inscribed in the (mythical) book of the world. It is also the emblem of re-vision as inescapably part of consumer culture.

Conclusion

In the past decades two related trends converge in the emergence of re-vision as a privileged literary genre. On the one hand, the logic of post-Fordist marketing accounts for the increase in published re-visions. Simply put, re-visions are interesting to publishers because they are cultural products that entail low marketing costs. On the other hand, the logic of consumer society that turns shopping into the archetype of our activities in the world extends to our relationship with the past. We turn to the past for myriad possibilities. These possibilities are to enrich our present, not to imagine alternatives to it. This is because the present is no longer "a short moment of transition" between "the past as a 'space of experience' and the future as an open 'horizon of expectations'" (Gumbrecht 2004, 120).¹⁷ Rather, in a world of consumers, the present is all there is, and this present is "becoming broader," for it includes the many recent and not so recent pasts we do not wish to leave behind (Gumbrecht 2004, 121; cf. Huyssen 2003, 1–2).

Characteristic of this new attitude toward the past are the closing words of Sanders's recently published volume, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), in the Routledge Critical Idiom series. Opening her final paragraph with the claim that "We need then to restore to the subgenres or practices of adaptation and appropriation a genuinely celebratory comprehension of their capacity for creativity, and for comment and critique,"

¹⁷ Gumbrecht developed this argument earlier in his chapter titled "After Learning from History" in *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (1997, 411–36; see especially 420–21).

she concludes: “Adaptation and appropriation . . . are all about multiple interactions and a matrix of possibilities. They are, endlessly and wonderfully, about seeing things come back to us in as many forms as possible” (Sanders 2006, 160). This is the rhetoric of hedonistic liberalism, celebrating multiplicity and pluralism for its own sake, for the choices it allows; it is Fredric Jameson’s postmodernity whose “relationship to the past is that of a consumer adding another rare object to the collection, or another flavour to the international banquet” (1998, 129). Typically, there is no word about the future re-vision might help to envision, no sense of “memory as a means to liberation” (Greene 1991b, 291), of the interlocking of memory and the feminist project, of looking back in order to move forward. On the left, concerns about the disappearance of the future and capitalism’s increasing monopoly on it are growing, as are laments about the loss of a sense of historical time as a teleology moving away from a past from which we could learn and into a future that would be different (see Gumbrecht 2004, 120; see also Jameson 2005). There are those who are bitter about it, complaining, as does Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (2003), that “Over the dreary decades of post-1970s conservatism, the historical sense had grown increasingly blunted, as it suited those in power that we should be able to imagine no alternative to the present” (Eagleton 2003, 6–7). Yet few of us have been willing to acknowledge that if today, “the past is selling better than the future” (Huyssen 2003, 20), this is because re-vision has taught us that the past holds infinite possibilities and has sold us on the idea that “for the possibilities to remain infinite, none may be allowed to petrify into everlasting reality” (Bauman 2000, 62).

Postscript

How, then, are we to get out of the impasse and return a sense of vision to re-vision? If rewriting is indeed change (see Moraru 2001, 144), is change a positive value in itself? In his discussion of what he terms “radical typology,” Laurence Coupe emphasizes what he sees as myth’s “permanent possibility,” its “dynamic tension between the already and the not yet” (Coupe 1997, 106). As Coupe argues, “all myths presuppose a previous narrative, and in turn form the model for future narratives” (108). In consequence, it is not toward demythologization (which is, after all, oriented toward the past and works, as Coupe points out, “in terms of closure” [108]) but toward remythologization that rewriting as re-vision ought to aspire: to work toward disclosure, opening narratives to ever new re-visions, and thus to “evade the stasis of doctrine” (110). “Permanent possibility,” “narrative dynamism”—Coupe’s terms echo distinctly

with Bauman's liquidity and should therefore be regarded with similar suspicion. More crucially, Coupe's understanding of myth (derived from Paul Ricoeur) relies on a sense of utopia that is external to the rewriting it informs. As he explains, myth "is synonymous with a 'social imagination' which functions by virtue of a dialectic between 'ideology' and 'utopia.' . . . Without [ideology], we would have no sense of society or tradition; without [utopia], we would simply equate the given society and tradition with eternal truth" (1997, 96). The question remains: in the absence of utopia, what role for re-vision?

An alternative end to my account of the fate of re-vision and its place in feminism today presented itself when, recently, a student came to me to discuss a possible subject for her bachelor's thesis. She wanted to write something that would contribute to the current debate: a feminist topic, she said, but not, as she put it, "women on the barricades." One idea she had was to write about Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997). This novel tells the story of the biblical Dinah, daughter of Leah and Jacob. My student had picked up the book while on holiday in Spain and had been deeply moved by it. It had transformed her views on the Bible and made her rethink the relation of women to the biblical narratives.

My encounter with this student suggests another way of thinking about the political value of rewriting. Countering all the more blasé signals my students were giving me that it was most naive to think the retelling of stories from another point of view could have any political impact, it is evidence that women's rewritings of classic texts can still affect young women, still make them think and make them want to contribute to the discussions, the debates that shape the public sphere. Although we need, of course, to factor in serendipity—the student was on holiday and thought she had discovered a little-known book when in fact it was a *New York Times* best seller—there is definitely a sense in which her discovery marked a moment in her life and signals the development of a feminist consciousness (broadly defined as a certain awareness of gender identity combined with a critical position in respect to misogyny and patriarchy and a conviction that things can be changed). There is no denying that increasing individualization at all levels of society has caused the loss of a sense of collective action and political projects. This is equally true for ideas of improvement, emancipation, and modernization, the responsibility of which has largely been shifted to the individual, whose "human rights," as Bauman argues, are redefined as "the right of individuals to stay different and to pick and choose at will their own models of happiness and fitting life-style" (2000; 2005, 29). In this deregulated and privatized sociopolitical context that knows no common cause, re-vision can only

fail to formulate enabling fictions for a better future for all. Yet in its capacity to speak to individuals, it can still draw them into visions of community and collectivity. Re-vision may thus not be the lifeline that is to haul us out of patriarchy any more, but as a structure of address that engages readers into contemplating differences, it remains one of the ways in which we keep sane and critical and thinking, moved by the stories of long-forgotten lives into participating in an open public sphere.

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