

Power and the canon, or: How to rewrite an author into a classic

André Lefevere

Summary

The article sets out to describe various modes of rewriting such as interpretation, commentary and anthologizing as instruments serving the stability of the literary system. Traditionally, interpretation and commentary were to remain true to the 'Book' and to prescribed hermeneutic procedures. Since the authority of the text is being discarded in modern pluralistic interpretative practices, it has become clear that authority of interpretation rests in the power, vested in the various literary corporations, which in their turn are dependent on institutionalized educational bodies protecting cultural interests. It is argued that systems theory allows for the description of the constraints determining rewriting. Defining the subordinate position of the literary expert to the powers regulating the system and drawing upon the tendency to self-maintenance which characterizes systems, it is made clear why rewriting tends to censure and reduce the original text to the norms of a given time and audience. This is illustrated with reference to the English rewriting of Heine, the reception of Blake as well as other examples from various literatures. Rewriting is seen as a powerful force in introducing, evaluating and establishing literary identities. The rewritten text tends to become the canon even as it freezes the original in terms of its own dominant values. The rewritten rather than the original text establishes and maintains literature as a system.

Opsomming

Verskeie literêre praktyke soos interpretasie, kommentariëring en bundeling word in hierdie artikel herdefinieer as herskryfwerke wat die stabiliteit van die literêre sisteem waarborg. Uit die geskiedenis van interpretasie blyk dat getrouheid aan die teks en aan hermeneutiese voorskrifte 'n konvensionele vereiste was. Die eietydse pluralisme het die eintlike basis van die outoriteitsaansprake van interpretasie ontbloot as mag. Hierdie mag is in die hande van literêre groepe wat op hul beurt afhanklik is van opvoedkundige institusies wat kulturele belange verteenwoordig. Die artikel wil aandui waarom sisteemteorie die bepalende faktore van herskrywing kan beskryf. Uit 'n sistemiese beskrywing blyk die ondergeskikte posisie van die literêre deskundige ten opsigte van die magte wat die sisteem beheer. Hieruit, asook uit die feit dat selfbehoud 'n kenmerkende tendens van sisteme is, word dit duidelik waarom herskrywing neig tot sensurering en reduksie van tekste in die lig van die norme van 'n bepaalde gehoor en tyd. Dit word geïllustreer met verwysing na die herskrywing van Heine in Engeland, die resepsie van Blake en ander voorbeelde uit verskeie literature. Herskrywing word beskou as magsmiddel by die bekendstelling en evaluering van tekste en by die vaslegging van literêre identiteite. Die herskrewe, geïnterpreteerde of becommentarieerde teks neig om die kanon te word, terwyl dit die teks volgens sy eie norme verander. Die herskrewe teks lê die grondslag vir die literêre sisteem en sy instandhouding.

1

There was a time when there was a canon before there were books. Think of the Homeric epics, or the tales that are the basis of much of African literature. Then there was a time when the canon was a book, the Bible, or the

Quran, but also the Shih Ching and the Manyoshu, not to mention the same Homeric epics. There was, in other words, a time when books, certain books, a very limited number of books epitomized the values of a society, a culture. The values were (are) not eternal, of course, and books were displaced by other books: the Homeric epics by the Bible, e.g., or at least books had to learn to coexist with other books. But always, in the center was the book. And because the book, or small corpus of books – the Canon – was so central, it was absolutely vital, indeed literally a matter of life and death (as many a Renaissance Bible translator was to learn to his detriment), that these books would be explicated, interpreted in the ‘right’ way, in fact the only possible way. Hence the rise of a class, caste, corporation of professional interpreters and hence, too, their power.

There is a time, and it is now, when a culture is not primarily epitomized by a canon of books. Indeed, we seem to find ourselves at the end of a process which must have started with the European Renaissance and has brought about a situation in which not only many books claim to epitomize a culture, but quite a few canons of books as well. And each canon has, of course, generated its own corporation of professional interpreters, who are now not only interpreting ‘their’ books, but also defending both the books and their interpretations against all attacks from all competitors. This spectacle may lead to some confusion in the minds of those who are not professional interpreters of books, the more so since the books which are being so tirelessly interpreted and explicated have lost their central position as epitome(s) of a culture or cultures. In fact, many of them are scarcely read outside the corporation of professional interpreters. Think, e.g., of a fair percentage of any graduate reading list at any institution of higher education.

The two factors mentioned above have led to what is currently known as ‘the crisis in literary scholarship’. The crisis exists mainly because corporate interpreters insist on making large claims for books, or canons, which appear to have lost much of their influence outside the corporation. If these large claims are not made, interpretation itself is in trouble, and with it the very foundations of the corporation under discussion. Where, indeed, are the ‘humanities in the university?’

To complicate matters even more, that corporation, like all corporations in all fields, has evolved its own rules, which need to be followed (or at least not subverted too openly) by those who aspire to become its members and to rise through its ranks. In the field of literary studies, they can do so mainly by producing more interpretations. In short, two impulses lead to a proliferation of interpreters and interpretations: the claim that needs to be made for the benefit of the outside world and the rules promulgated for internal use are jointly responsible for opening the floodgates of interpretation to an extent unprecedented before our day and age – the day and age in which fewer and fewer people outside the corporation of critics and other professionals of literary studies seem to be interested in these interpretations.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that – in our day and age – the proverbial ‘man or woman in the street’ gets his or her ‘values’ (whatever they may be) to a much greater extent from the visual image than from the written

word. Indeed, many get to know the written word mainly through the 'rewriting' of it in visual images. Omar Sharif is Dr. Zhivago. Nor would it be an exaggeration to say that the triumph of pluralism or, if you prefer, the proliferation of sets of values in our time tends to point more than ever to the fact that these values are man-made, and disseminated by men – not God-given or dictated by the somewhat rusty iron laws of history.

What further contributes, then, to the increasing irrelevance of literary studies in our time, is the dogged persistence with which corporate critics beholden to a certain set of values epitomized by a certain canon tend to insist on the 'absolute' nature of their canon vis a vis the outside world, as well as on the 'right' or, at any rate, 'acceptable' interpretation of that canon within their (nook of the) corporation. It might be argued that deconstruction should have dealt the death-blow to this kind of situation. Indeed, in the light of corporate value-maintenance, deconstruction could be seen as the translation (rewriting?) of value-pluralism into the field of interpretation. Interpretations, too, are man-made, and, finally, one interpretation, one reading of a text has as much right to exist as any other. It is not too hard to imagine, of course, what this should have done to the corporation: if any reading does, indeed, have as much right to exist as any other, then on what grounds will candidates who produce reading A be admitted to the corporation, while candidates who produce reading B will not be? The answer is relatively simple, but may not be spoken too loudly inside the corporation: power. If, as a candidate, you produce reading A at an institution of reading dominated by those who advocate the production of readings of the A type, your chances of being admitted to the corporation are, to put it mildly, a lot better than if you produced reading A at an institution of higher learning dominated by those who favour the production of readings of the B type, and vice versa.

This simple answer may not be spoken too loudly because it rather painfully reveals the extent to which the power of the corporation is dependent on other, more real power(s): the institution of higher education itself and, beyond that, the system of higher education and, beyond that, eventually, the very powers that be. When faced with this question, and threatened by this answer, the corporation does what all corporations do: it closes ranks through the simple expedient of exercising repressive tolerance – the body of thought that advocates the right of all readings to exist on a more or less equal level is subtly robbed of its radicalism by being awarded the 'right' to produce interpretations of its own. In other words, the corporation survives more or less intact by simply allowing another subcorporation to develop inside it. Whether this in any way increases the relevance of what the corporation is doing to the man or woman in the street, however, is an entirely different matter.

What if, as several voices have suggested, we tried to stop the potentially endless generation of interpretations and canons which call forth a potentially endless number of interpretations? The corporation will, triumphantly, tell us that 'in that case, what would there be left to study?' The answer should be clear by now: power, and its manifestations in literature. That is, we can study the corporate mechanism itself: the way in which values are not only pro-

duced, but disseminated to the point where they achieve a near-Gramscian hegemony in the consciousness of many of those who have elected to live by them. The production of literature, or rather, the constraints under which literature is produced, is a case study in, if not the production, at least the dissemination and manipulation of values. This type of study might well be relevant in a day and age when manipulation, both of values and of consciousness, occurs on so many levels.

This manipulation, it is argued here, most often takes the form of what will be called 'rewriting' in the pages that follow. 'Rewriting' will be used as a convenient 'umbrella-term' to refer to most of the activities traditionally connected with literary studies: criticism, first and foremost, but also translation, anthologization, the writing of literary history and the editing of texts – in fact, all those aspects of literary studies which establish and validate the value-structures of canons.

2

Rewritings, in the widest sense of the term, adapt works of literature to a given audience and/or influence the ways in which readers read a work of literature. A rewriting of *Gulliver's Travels* for children, is a case in point. In many rewritings of his adventures for their benefit, Gulliver will not put out the fire in the Imperial Palace in Liliput the way Swift has him do it: by urinating on the flames. This course of action does most effectively put out the fire, but it also manages to create quite a stink in the palace, which turns the empress into Gulliver's implacable enemy from then on. In most rewritings for children, though, the following two expedients appear. The first, a bucket of water, conveniently, though somewhat mysteriously (not to say improbably), manufactured on Gulliver's scale instead of that of the Liliputians (since its effect would then be severely limited) is found in the immediate vicinity of the palace. A second choice of substitution has Gulliver quickly run to the ocean (being a giant helps), fill his hat with water, run back and empty his hat all over the palace. Yet in both these rewritings, the empress still becomes angry with Gulliver, for reasons now clearly no longer fathomable.

Rewriters take texts and adapt them to a certain audience, but they obviously do so under certain constraints. The most coherent and succinct way to list these constraints is, in my opinion, still the way shown by systems thinking. Think, then, of a system, not as something Sinister with a capital S, but rather as 'a portion of the world that is perceived as a unit and that is able to maintain its "identity" in spite of changes going on in it' (Rapoport, 1975: 45). What lies outside a system is that system's environment, which is often made up of other systems. A culture, a society can also be conceived in terms of system, and more particularly as a macrosystem which encompasses other systems, such as physics, law, literature, and many more. Each social system also includes a double control element, which sees to it that the system survives and that it remains relatively stable while doing so, which means that not too many subsystems can be allowed to fall too far out of step with the

macrosystem. The control element consists of two kinds of people: those who are responsible for the system as a whole and therefore have power over the system as a whole, and those who are responsible for the various subsystems, the 'experts' in various fields, whose power reaches only as far as their expertise. Those in power assume responsibility for the expert's livelihood and for his or her social status. In return, the expert works within the parameters set out by those in power and those parameters are, of course, the parameters of the culture which underlies all subsystems. In other words, the experts, in our case the critics, teachers, historiographers, anthologists, translators and other rewriters, stand in a client/patron relationship to those in power. In systems with undifferentiated patronage, the ideological, economic and status components of patronage are united in one person (the absolute ruler) or institution (the totalitarian party). In those systems the power of patronage itself is therefore greater than in systems with differentiated patronage, in which the three components mentioned are not necessarily united in the way described above.

In other words, which can be more directly applied to the system of literature, patronage, whether differentiated or undifferentiated, assumes responsibility for the ideological parameters within which literary production takes place, or is allowed to take place, even if the ideology in question turns out to be merely that of profit. The experts, on the other hand, assume responsibility for the actual ways in which literature is produced, the code that regulates literary communication, the poetics of a given literary system at a certain time, in a certain place. It should further be stressed that both 'ideology' and 'poetics' are systemic categories, just as 'patronage' and 'experts'. In practice there are always individual patrons and experts, writers and rewriters who do not abide by the ideology and/or the poetics of a system at a certain time in a certain place. Systemic categories, in other words, are not categorical imperatives, but rather 'constraints'. It is possible to go around them, but you may have to take certain risks if you do so, and it is generally easier to stay inside them.

Once a system is established, it will try to reach a steady state, as all systems do, a state in which the different components of the system are in equilibrium with each other and with the environment. Yet there are two factors within each system which tend to counteract this development. Systems evolve according to the principle of polarity, which holds that every system eventually evolves its own countersystem, and the principle of periodicity, which holds that all systems are liable to change. The evolution of a system is therefore the complex interplay of the tendency towards a steady state, the two factors just mentioned, and the way(s) in which patrons and experts try to handle these opposing tendencies. 'Once a structure is developed, it tends to "entrain" individuals and groups within its constraints and its benefits. Once developed, if it is of any size and complexity, such a structure takes on a life of its own and resists change' (Backley, 1977: 65).

Literary systems are no exception: they tend to gravitate towards some kind of steady state, in which constraints are not only known to all, but actually exercise some kind of stabilizing influence, the more so since the

literary system is a contrived system in that it consists not just of books, but also of the people who write, read and rewrite those books. It is my contention in what follows that the evolution of a literary system and the concomitant stabilizing effect of the canonization of authors within it are at least as much the work of these rewriters as of the writers themselves. Think of Blake as an example: his writings most probably possessed the same 'intrinsic value' when he printed them himself and they did not reach any sizeable audience at all, as they do now when they are on the reading list of English departments throughout the world. What has made the difference, I would venture to say, is not so much the intrinsic quality of the work, not so much the writer himself, but the activities of such rewriters as Swinburne, Gilchrist, Yeats and Ellis.

3

The most obvious forms of rewriting are translation and criticism. Both try to influence the way in which readers will read a work of literature and come to understand it. Both do so on the basis of a certain poetics, the dominant poetics in both differentiated and undifferentiated systems. Such a dominant poetics achieves its dominant status, somewhat paradoxically, through the help of criticism generated on the basis of that poetics and disseminated in its corporate structure. Socialist Realism can be said to have been rather assiduously disseminated in many a critical article, as have New Criticism and Deconstruction. The criticism itself, on the other hand, derives both prestige and authority from the poetics it sets out to defend and propagate. A department or institution becomes the 'shrine' for the particular value structures its poetics supports. Criticism thus amounts to the rationalization of a poetics, not, as is traditionally assumed, to the verification of the presence of a value system.

Rewritings not only stabilize systems, they can also destabilize them. Translation and criticism as forms of rewriting can be seen at work most clearly in attempts to introduce a writer from one literary system into another or, if you prefer, either to use a writer from one system in order to subvert the poetics and/or ideology dominant in another, or simply to make that writer acceptable in another literature. The example of the vicissitudes of Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo* in English is most instructive in this respect (Heine, 1981).

If you want to introduce a foreign writer into your own literature, you are most likely to run into two obstacles. One is that the foreign writer's ideology, or world view, might not be too compatible with that of the culture you belong to, and the other is that the way the author writes, his or her poetics, is too extraneous to the receiving literature to make much of an impact.

People who want to introduce foreign writers into their own literature usually fall into two categories. First, there are the radical admirers, who want to introduce the foreign author on his or her terms, as much as possible, in order to force a confrontation of the one system with the other. E. A. Bowring, the translator of the first reasonably complete Heine, states in his

introduction that ‘a translator no more assumes the responsibility of his author’s words than a faithful editor does, and he goes beyond his province if he omits whatever does not happen to agree with his own notions’ (Bowring, 1878: 9). Similarly, Louis Untermeyer writes: ‘I have included many poems usually glossed over by translators; poems that are trivial enough in themselves, but necessary to the series that contains them, and necessary also to a complete appreciation of Heine’s development’ (Untermeyer, 1917: xx). Others choose what might be closer to a middle path, among them Theodore Martin, whose Heine translations were famous in his day or, to put it in such a way that the power of this kind of rewriting becomes immediately apparent: whose text *was* Heine to the English reader with no German. Martin writes in his introduction:

The present volume contains translations of all the songs and ballads in the ‘Book of Songs’ which the translator ventures to think are likely to be acceptable to an English reader. Perhaps a severe criticism would even say that the principle of exclusion should have been carried further. Heine, like most poets, wrote too much; and his name would rank higher in the world of letters if many of his pieces, which are either steeped in grossness or deformed by a revolting cynicism, had never seen the light. (Martin, 1878: viii)

Among the poems excluded from the ‘Lyrical Intermezzo’ section are poem 11, in which Heine equates his beloved with the statue of the Virgin in Cologne Cathedral, poem 14, which contains the lines: ‘and if my sweetheart had a heart/ I would write a pretty sonnet on it’, poem 15 (‘The world is stupid, the world is blind’), poem 27, poem 28, which contains the line: ‘Human beings bore me’ and poems 36 (the famous ‘Out of my great pain I make these little songs’), and 50 with lines like: ‘Love should not be too rough/it might be bad for your health’. The same poems, and more, are also left out in other translations, such as Frances Hellman’s *Lyrics and Ballads of Heine and Other German Poets* (New York, 1895) and Philip G.L. Webb’s *Poems from Heine* (London, 1927).

Martin’s attitude towards Heine was also that of the *Athenaeum*, one of the important literary magazines of the time, which ‘did not want to see Heine translated, since he was not wholesome fare for general readers’ (Liptzin, 1954: 23). The *Athenaeum* also refused to print Heine’s articles on Europe, which it had commissioned, and which were to appear instead in the *Revue des deux mondes*.

If Martin’s attitude is ‘middle of the road’, Louis Untermeyer launches an ideological counterattack by calling Heine the ‘unusually emotional and quick-tempered Oriental, the true Semite, never so sensitive as when he covers his hurt with a cynical shrug or a coarse witticism; his rudest jests being often the twisted laugh of a man in agony’ (Untermeyer, 1917: 8). Small wonder, then, that he tries to make Heine a little less cynical in his translation.

In the 1840’s, Heine not only had to deal with people who wanted to introduce him into English literature, but also with people who wanted to keep him out of it, foremost among them Carlyle. Critics like Fane and

Milnes did, therefore, have to tread somewhat warily, and were forced to support the 'sanitized' Heines of the time. Only gradually did Heine emerge from the first stereotype he had been cast in by his detractors. "The first article of Milnes on Heine appeared only a few months after that of Julian Fane, yet whereas the latter had to make a concession to Victorian public opinion by mentioning Heine's moral turpitude, the former dared to speak of Heine's moral greatness and to plead for a juster appreciation" (Liptzin, 1954: 48).

The ideological battle for the acceptance of Heine seems to have been clinched by Matthew Arnold's well-known essay, which hails Heine as 'the continuator of that which, in Goethe's varied activity, is the most powerful and vital' (Arnold, 1921: 158). In other words Heine – like Arnold – is 'a soldier in the war of liberation of humanity' (Arnold, 1921: 158). But what endears Heine most of all to Arnold is, of course, the fact that the Englishman sees the German as an ally in 'a life and death battle with Philistinism' (Arnold, 1921: 162).

I have just described a prime example of the power politics of cultural systems. In order for a foreign writer to be accepted in a native system, translations of his or her work need to be supplemented by critical appreciation from the pen of a major literary figure within the potentially receiving system. In Heine's case an important critic in the English literary establishment sided with him because he found similarities between his own work and that of the foreign poet, thereby conferring the kind of respectability on Heine which would not have been conferred otherwise, and also enlisting Heine in his own battles against other figures in the establishment, both literary and political. Yet all this does most emphatically not mean that Arnold is willing to accept Heine without reservations: 'he was profoundly disrespectful; and not even the merit of not being a Philistine can make up for a man's being that' (Arnold, 1921: 192).

What Arnold did for Heine in the field of ideology, George Eliot, in her essay 'German Wit: Heinrich Heine', did for him in the field of poetics. After lamenting the fact that

German humour generally shows no sense of measure, no instinctive tact; it is either floundering and clumsy as the antics of a leviathan, or laborious and interminable as a Lapland day, in which one loses all hope that the stars and quiet will ever come (Eliot, 1884: 85-86)

she goes on to say that 'Heine has proved . . . that it is possible to be witty in German; indeed, in reading him, you might imagine that German was pre-eminently the language of wit' (*ibid.*: 138-9). Yet she, too, cautions that

before his volumes are put within the reach of immature minds, there is need of a friendly penknife to exercise a strict censorship. Yet, when all coarseness, all scurrility, all Mephistophelean contempt for the reverent feelings of other men, is removed, there will be a plenteous remainder of exquisite poetry, of wit, humour and just thought. (*Ibid.*: 191)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century another form of rewriting, literary history, gives Heine his due: 'we must regard him as a genius coordinate with Aristophanes, Cervantes and Montaigne' (Hosmer, 1891: 525). And again: 'no lyric poet has been so widely read in all lands as Heine, no German book of the century has exerted so enduring an influence as the *Buch der Lieder*. The fact is that Heine, as none of his predecessors, made the German lyric European; he stripped it of many of its exclusively national qualities' (Robertson, 1902: 507).

The point of it all is, of course, 'that Heine could not possibly have done this on his own.' The 'intrinsic quality' of his work presumably remains the same whether that work is translated or written about or not. Yet without these two forms of rewriting it does not get a reputation at all, neither in its own literature (criticism), nor in another (translation and criticism). Rewriters are, therefore, responsible for the reputation of a writer at least to the same extent as the writer him- or herself. In a foreign literature especially, rewritings quite simply function as original writings or, to put it in Draper's words: 'I first became acquainted with Heine in Untermeyer's translation, and for a dozen years Untermeyer's version was Heine' (Draper, 1982: x).

4

This short sketch of a case study of the beginnings of Heine's reception in England serves to demonstrate that a poetics, any poetics, is an historically variable factor: it is not absolute. In a literary system the poetics dominant today is quite different from the poetics dominant at the inception of the system. Yet each poetics tends to posit itself as absolute, to dismiss its predecessors (which amounts, in practice, to integrating them into itself) and to deny its own transience, or rather, to see itself as the necessary outcome of a process of growth of which it happens to be the best, and therefore also the final state. Thus for any social system and era, a dominant poetics tends to freeze, or certainly to control the dynamics of the system. To retain its 'absolute' position as long as possible, a dominant poetics must deny, or at least rewrite the history of the literature it dominates and the corporate criticism associated with it can generate readings to validate itself.

The most notoriously obvious examples of this process can be plucked at random from that period in German literature in which a poetics closely linked with the Nazi ideology occupied the dominant position. 'Julius Petersen's reclaiming of Goethe for the Hitler Youth' is one such example, as is the description of Schiller as 'Hitler's comrade in arms' (Eibl, 1976: 134). In another, wider context, this process can be seen at work in the struggle which took place in nearly all non-Western systems in the nineteenth century, between the traditional poetics intent on keeping their systems closed to Western influence, and a new poetics trying to strike a balance between the traditional and the imported, which is perceived as either potentially liberating or potentially subversive, depending on the ideological stand (stance?) you take.

To retain its dominant position a given poetics must also, of necessity, be

reductionistic: it must deny or ignore certain features in works of literature that run counter to its own tenets. Criticism will, therefore, tailor works of literature written to the specifications of a different poetics to the specifications of its own. The various 'Blakes' who have come down to us from the nineteenth century are most instructive in this respect, the more so since they demonstrate to what extent rewriting also tends to touch the most unsuspectedly philological, scholarly activity of all, the actual editing of texts. Blake's first editor, Alexander Gilchrist, realized that 'Blake should be fitted recognisably into the category of the "personality of genius" that had been naturalized in England from German thought (largely through the efforts of Crabb 1850/Robinson and Coleridge) and was subsequently elaborated by Carlyle' (Dorfman, 1969: 36). Gilchrist approached Blake's 'disciples', who owned some of the Blake manuscripts, but

Linnell like Palmer scrupled both about Blake and about Christian decency so that together they abetted Gilchrist in suppressing sides of Blake which might be unacceptable to a Victorian public. *The Four Zoas*, which Linnell or some member of his family personally censored with an eraser, *An Island in the Moon* owned by Palmer, and several sets of Blake's always vigorous annotations, all available to Gilchrist, were not taken into account. Similarly, Palmer advised Mrs. Gilchrist in 1862 that she ought to remove passages from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. (Dorfman, 1969: 171)

Swinburne, who opposed the dominant poetics and the dominant ideology of his time, consequently rewrote himself another Blake: 'it is mainly in the definition of "Experience" that Swinburne imposes upon Blake's thought the aura of masochism and fleshly self-mortification with which his own sexual libertarianism is often associated' (*ibid.*: 131). Finally, Yeats, who was beginning to establish something of a Celtic tradition for himself, gave Blake a grandfather, 'an Irish aristocrat named John O'Neil who took the name of his wife, "an unknown woman" and became "Blake" to escape imprisonment for debt' (*ibid.*: 205).

Commentary, as opposed to criticism, is probably the type of rewriting which is the oldest and most universally used in all literary systems which rely on writing. That it also has its poetological and ideological constraints to contend with, may be shown by the following example. In his edition of Catullus, Kenneth Quinn explains two words in the last two lines of the 32nd poem, a facetious *billet doux* addressed to a courtesan, asking whether or not the poet is likely to receive her favours after breakfast. The lines 'nam pransus iaceo et satur supinus/pertundo tunicamque palliumque', may be translated as something like: 'for I have eaten and I am lying down on my back, replete/and I am sticking through my tunic and my blanket'. They thus describe an erection which is meant to convey the urgency of the speaker's request. For *pransus*, Quinn's commentary has: 'the word apparently has overtones which may be translated as "ready for business" as a result of the practice of giving soldiers a meal before an engagement' (Quinn, 1973: 189). For *pertundo*, the same commentary gives: 'apparently the *mot juste* – there was even a Dea Pertunda' (*ibid.*: 131). The commentary does not inform the

reader that this 'Dea Pertunda' was a minor Roman deity presiding over the successful perforation of hymens on wedding nights, a factor which adds irony in terms of the overall construction of the poem, and certainly of its addressee. Quinn devotes about three pages to poem 32 in his commentary. A number of other commentators leave it out altogether, arguing that it is obscene and therefore not worthy of attention, while one commentary dismisses it in the most lapidary terms possible: 'Contents, execrable. Date, indeterminable. Metre, Phalaecean' (Merrill, 1893: 103).

Another form of rewriting, the anthology, has, historically, proved to be very influential in maintaining the system on a solidly conservative course. Since it is used in teaching situations in all systems which rely on writing, it often provides beginning students of a literature with their first impressions of what that literature is like, offering extracts from the works of canonized writers for study and emulation by generations of learners. Both its poetological and its ideological biases are usually quite clear, though not necessarily always as clear as in the case of one of the first school anthologies of English verse and prose, Knox's *Elegant Extracts*, which

justified its existence in these terms: there is no good reason to be given why the mercantile classes, at least of the higher order, should not amuse their leisure with any pleasures of polite literature. Nothing perhaps contributes more to liberalize their minds and prevent that narrowness which is too often attached, from the earliest age, to the pursuits of lucre. (Quoted in Baldick, 1983: 59)

More recent forms of rewriting would be the book review, which has gradually gained more and more importance in the Euramerican system as its patronage appears to be motivated more and more by economic profit, and especially that mini-review known as the 'blurb', at which T.S. Eliot excelled, even though the texts he produced in his capacity of blurb writer cannot 'be considered part of the Eliot canon under a critical orthodoxy in which advertising is considered untouchable' (Baldick, 1983: 59). Other recent varieties of rewriting involve adapting the work of literature to different media, such as the movie, the comic strip and the TV serial.

Rewriting also occurs in connection with activities traditionally associated with the production, rather than the criticism of literature: one type of original literary work, the drama, has, of course, always had to rely on rewriting in a different medium to reach its audience in optimal conditions, sometimes with far-reaching consequences. In the 1963 production of Brecht's *Mother Courage* on Broadway, several songs, which are of great significance to the play as a whole, had to be cut, not for ideological or even poetological reasons, but 'probably because, if they were retained, the time allowed to sing and play them might exceed twenty four minutes and the Musicians' Union would list the production as a "musical". According to regulations, this classification would entail the employment of twenty four musicians at heavy cost' (Clurman, 1966: 62). And yet for the Broadway theatregoer who has no German, this rewriting is, to all extents and purposes, Brecht's play.

5

Once they have come into being, rewritings tend to lead a life of their own, in various degrees of independence from the original to which they remain linked by a number of features. Some rewritings keep nearly all components of their originals, as would be the case with a translation of, say, *Don Quixote* intended for an adult audience, whereas others would keep only the title and the outline of the plot, as would be the case with a children's version of *Don Quixote* written, paradoxically, in Spanish. Rewritings do exist side by side with the original, but they also function as the original for their target audience, especially in the case of translations and extracts from anthologies. Since man's capacity for learning languages is limited, everybody will have to read at least some of the works belonging to (some of) the canon(s) of world literature in a rewritten form. Since not every member of a culture is physically able to read all the works of literature canonized in that culture, some of these works will, quite simply, remain extracts in anthologies for him or her, and he or she will supplement these extracts with rewritings offered by film and television.

Rewriting not only exerts systemic pressure on the reading of literature, but also in the writing of it. It often happens that the foreign writer who, as is so glibly stated in many a history of literature, 'influenced' a given native writer, was available to that writer not in the original, but in translation and, certainly in previous centuries, often in an abbreviated translation. Byron, to take an example, 'made it clear' in his *Don Juan* that '*De l'Allemagne* was the obvious source for the average *litterateur's* knowledge of Goethe' (Martin, 1982: 125). In other words, the 'average *litterateur*' of Byron's time would know *Faust* mainly through the mediation of the 45 pages Mme de Stael devoted to the play in her book on German life and letters, not from the original text. Those 45 pages consist of translated extracts and paraphrases. If the average *litterateur* did not have French, in addition to not having German, he or she would have to make do with a severely truncated paraphrase of *Faust*, including a few translated passages, published in Retzsch's *Outlines*. The first complete translation of *Faust* appeared in 1835, three years after the death of Byron who, as all his biographers agree, was 'of course heavily influenced by Goethe's masterpiece'.

Literature which is not rewritten does, quite simply, not survive in a literary system much beyond its original publication. It does not occupy a canonized position, nor is it likely to be built up as a candidate for one of those positions. There certainly existed a literature written by and for women before the sixties of this century, but it has been acknowledged as such mainly from then onwards, not primarily on the basis of its intrinsic merit which, presumably, must have remained fairly constant, but rather as the result of a powerful drive in one field of rewriting, namely criticism, combined with the publication of new editions of what could, as a result of the critical drive, now be hailed as 'forgotten masterpieces'.

Rewritings also occur in texts accepted as literary by the system. Themes and motifs are rewritten over and over again, as are certain prototypical

characters, symbols and generic rules. Many a play has been written on Medea, and the motif of the orphan who suddenly turns out to be rich and powerful, the beloved son or daughter of somebody of great consequence (and therefore eminently marriageable) surfaced for the first time in the Hellenistic novel, is parodied without mercy by Jane Austen in *Love and Friendship*, and is still with us at this moment. The prototypical character known as Lysistrata, who is often given different names, goes back at least as far as Aristophanes and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* have their Chinese counterparts in Yuan Kuei-fei and the *Shining Emperor*. Seagulls tend to mean more than just the animal responding to that description since Chekhov's play of the same name, and when John Berryman writes poems which do not conform to the generic description of the sonnet, but insists on calling them that, he is obviously telling the reader something about the background against which he wishes these poems to be read.

To take the argument even further: many a 'minor' work accepted as belonging to the class of texts treated as 'literary' is, quite obviously, written to measure in our day and age, and the authors of these works

can only be viewed as technicians who are elements of vast and intricate administrative organizations, geared to satisfying existing market demands. They are assisted by market researchers, whether formally defined as such or not, by promoters, publicity men, agents, financial and other analysts, impressarios, critics and agency representatives. The content of the artist's work is often supplied to him by others and he must execute the design within the limits of the mass formulae. (Binsman & Gerver, 1970: 664)

Once again, this phenomenon is not nearly as recent as it may appear. Many a Victorian novelist of minor stature, e.g., was forced to produce novels in three volumes, and, in doing so, to resort to all kinds of padding, only to be damned for his or her pains in the name of high literature: 'Messieurs and mesdames the critics are wont to point out the weakness of second volumes', George Gissing observes, and goes on to say 'they are generally right, simply because a story which would have made a tolerable book (the common run of stories) refuses to fill three books' (Gissing, 1976: 161).

The final step, at least for the time being, along the path described above is that of the 'spontaneous generation of literary property'. 'This generation does not have to take place within the mind of a writer: it can occur around a conference table in the office of a producer or an agent, who may then add to it "elements", including the writer, who is "acquired" sooner or later in the packaging process' (Whiteside, 1980: 81). It might be added that this spontaneous generation taking place within the Western literary system at the present moment, appears to exhibit major analogies with the time-honored usage in the African literary system in which a rich man would (and politicians to this day still do) hire an artist to sing his praises, an assignment the artist would fulfill by using a number of devices perfected (rewritten?) over the centuries. And would these 'working conditions' be all that different from those under which Pindar succeeded in producing many of his odes?

6

Let me state unequivocally, at the end of this article, that the description of the state of affairs given here is exactly that: a description. It does most emphatically not imply any kind of value judgment of the kind so glibly delivered by those intent on defending 'humanist values' (as epitomized by a certain canon, of course). It is merely intended to draw attention to the fact, which is quite obvious to all, but which cannot be acknowledged as long as the paradigm of interpretation remains dominant in literary studies: that all readers of literature, 'professionals' or not, rely for their knowledge of literature at least as much on rewritings as on originals. It could indeed be argued that rewritings, rather than originals, keep the system of literature going as a system, especially by means of the use of anthologies, translations, criticism, commentary and historiography. Rewritings are, in other words, among the most important features in any literary system, because they have the power to shape the image not only of the system as a whole, but also of individual writers and works within any system. Such power, I submit, should not be wielded unanalyzed, even though the corporation, which continues to analyze texts within parameters set for it by greater powers, can, of course, be expected to disagree in the most vigorous terms.

References

- Arnold, M. 1921. *Essays in criticism*. London.
- Backley, W. 1977. Towards a systems methodology of social control processes. In: Hartnett, W.E. (ed.). *Systems approaches, theories, applications*. Dordrecht/Boston.
- Baldick, C. (ed.). 1983. *The social mission of English criticism*. Oxford.
- Binsman, J.; Gerver, J. 1970. Art and the mass society. In: Albrecht, M.C., et al. (eds.). *The sociology of art and literature*. New York/Washington.
- Bowring, E.A. 1978. *The poems of Heine*. London.
- Clurman, H. 1966. *The naked image*. New York.
- Dorfman, D. 1969. *Blake in the nineteenth century*. New Haven and London.
- Draper, H. 1982. *The complete poems of Heinrich Heine*. Boston.
- Eibl, K. 1976. *Kritisch-rationale Literaturwissenschaft*. Munich.
- Eliot, G. 1884. *Essays*. Edinburgh and London.
- Gissing, G. 1976. *New Grub Street*. Harmondsworth.
- Heine, H. 1981. *Werke und Briefe in zehn Bänden*, vol. 2. Kaufmann, H. (ed.). Berlin.
- Hosmer, J.K. 1891. *A short history of German literature*. St. Louis.
- Liptzin, S. 1954. *The English legend of Heinrich Heine*. New York.
- Martin, M. 1878. *Poems and ballads by Heinrich Heine*. Edinburgh and London.
- Martin, P.W. 1982. *Byron*. Cambridge.
- Merrill, E.T. (ed.). 1893. *Catullus*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Quinn, K. (ed.). 1973. *Catullus. The poems*. London.
- Rapoport, A. 1975. Modern Systems Theory – an outlook for coping with change. In: Ruben, D.B.; Kim, J.Y. (eds.). *General Systems Theory and human communication*. Rochelle Park.
- Robertson, J.G. 1902. *A history of German literature*. Edinburgh and London.
- Untermeyer, L. 1917. *Poems of Heinrich Heine*. New York.
- Whiteside, T. 1980. Onward and upward with the arts. *The New Yorker*, October 6.