

## *Toutes les époques sont dégueulasses* \*

Laure Murat  
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PAUL-ALEXIS MELLET  
Institut d'Histoire de la Réformation, Université de Genève

This short book by Laure Murat, Professor of Literature at UCLA, bears a deliberately provocative title: *Toutes les époques sont dégueulasses* (*All Eras are Disgusting*). In reality, it is less a bitter, disillusioned observation on historical times than a repurposed quotation from Antonin Artaud (23), used to alert readers to the many current projects seeking to modify or adapt works from the past. How, indeed, are we to accommodate the sexism of James Bond, the racism of Agatha Christie, or the antisemitism of Roald Dahl (9)? And what should be said of the misogyny of Homer, the antisemitism of Voltaire, the obscenity of Sade, or the homophobia of Marguerite Duras or Simone de Beauvoir (32)? Such questions now confront all lovers of culture, whether literature, music, painting, or more broadly history. One observation imposes itself at the outset: the list of authors who stand in contradiction with contemporary social norms is long, especially after ‘the advent of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter’ (60).

Faced with this situation, Laure Murat distinguishes between two attitudes: *réécriture* and *réécriture*. The first denotes the reinvention, from an existing text, of a new form and vision: translation and adaptation fall under this category (12). The second corresponds to the reworking of a text for the purpose of normalisation (typographical, moral, etc.), without aesthetic intent: this is the case with the corrections introduced by ‘sensitivity readers’ (13 and 33). *Réécriture* belongs to the realm of art and creative activity: such is the meaning of Pénélope Bagieu’s work in the graphic novel *Sacrées sorcières* (Gallimard, 2019), a reinterpretation of Roald Dahl’s novel; or of Percival Everett’s novel *James* (Doubleday, 2024), a version of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), but told from the perspective of a literate and ironic enslaved man (66). *Réécriture*, by contrast, pertains to alteration and correction: for instance, when French publishers modified in 2020 the title of Agatha Christie’s novel *Dix petits nègres* to *Ils étaient dix* (16); or when Puffin Books removed terms such as ‘mad’, ‘fat’, and ‘ugly’, deemed insulting (24).

Yet for Laure Murat, to bowdlerise a text is to distort it profoundly (25). In seeking not to cause offence, we prefer to deform the past in order to render it more present—or rather more ‘presentable’. But the result is a form of ‘historical lie’, even

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\* This review was translated from the French by Emanuele Giusti.

‘falsification’, that leads to misreadings and paradoxes, ultimately depriving the oppressed of ‘the history of their oppression’ (28–29). As she forcefully remarks, ‘Turn James Bond into a feminist or even simply a man respectful of women, and in fifty years no one will understand anything about the history of ordinary misogyny in the 1950s’ (28). Similarly, erasing the racism or antisemitism of fictional characters such as Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot is to remove important information about their personalities and their conception of society (20). More generally, intervening in a text to combat stereotypes raises questions of limits: how far should one go in updating? (16 and 32). For Laure Murat, every *réécriture* is by definition doomed to failure, since it can never perfectly fulfil the programme it sets for itself (22 and 31). The desire to ‘pasteurise’ books is above all a misunderstanding of texts, even a kind of ‘hatred of literature’ (33).

In response to such reservations, proponents of *réécriture* put forward numerous arguments. First are those who claim to ‘protect children’. Thus, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the repeated use of the ‘N-word’ (219 times) has ultimately led to the book being banned in schools (58). But for Laure Murat, these ‘virtuous publishers’ would do better to combat ‘the mind-numbing awfulness of television’ or the violent images circulating on Facebook (23 and 39). What often lies behind an ostensibly moral *réécriture*, she argues, is the question of copyright: without *réécriture*, ‘best-sellers would risk no longer meeting the expectations of new generations’. Is it a coincidence that Roald Dahl’s works were rewritten ‘just before the massive sale of the rights to Netflix’ (27)? Indeed, in Murat’s view, adapting works has become the heir to a supposed ‘thought police’, characteristic of an era of ‘pitiless censorship due to wokism’, which Donald Trump calls a form of ‘far-left fascism’ (27 and 60). Yet *réécriture* is less a form of censorship than a proposal that does not erase the original work. True censorship is that exercised by the state, backed by American puritanism: never have demands for bans in public libraries reached such heights (4,240 titles in 2023). Unsurprisingly, heading this blacklist are works relating to ‘communities of people of colour’ and ‘LGBTQI+ issues’, such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Juno Dawson’s *This Book Is Gay* (61).

How, then, can we escape this impasse? For Laure Murat, the priority must be to combat the ‘de-historicisation’ of texts (36), by warning and guiding readers through appropriate paratextual tools that do not intervene in the text itself: prefaces, afterwords, and footnotes (39 and 50). But here, too, simplification must be avoided. The preface to *Tintin au Congo* (2023), written by Philippe Goddin, secretary-general of the Hergé Foundation from 1989 to 1999, does not fully achieve its aim: it presents Hergé as a man of his time (the first edition dates from 1931), who knew of the country only ‘what people said about it at the time (42). But why not recall more clearly that the book was commissioned by Abbé Norbert Wallez to extol the virtues of colonisation and evangelisation, and that after the Liberation Wallez was condemned for collaboration with Nazi Germany (41)? Why not point out that information about the Congo was indeed available at the time, such as the writings of André Gide (*Voyage*

*au Congo*, 1927) and Albert Londres (*Terre d'ébène*, 1929) (46)? Why not specify that the 'petit nègre speech' was an invention of the colonial administration to allow European officers to make themselves understood by their men (48)? The preface is the ideal tool, but it must, in Laure Murat's view, be written 'critically' (45 and 49); otherwise, it leads to dead ends comparable to those produced by *réécriture*.