

9 “I felt like a tree lost in a storm”— The Process of Entangled Knowing, Becoming, and Doing in Beatrice Alemagna’s Picturebook *Un grande giorno di niente* (2016)

Nina Goga

Although critical plant studies is a fairly new discipline within the humanities, trees and forests have been a long-standing, crucial, and significant component of humans’ existence in the world, be it as a resource for nutrition, a source of heat or tools, as shelter from enemies or harsh weather conditions, or as a companion one may seek comfort in, or with whom one may share existential, religious, or philosophical worries, doubts, and dilemmas. Consequently, there is a vast and long oral, as well as written, folkloristic, as well as scientific, tradition of expressing humans’ ideas about trees and forests.¹

In this chapter I will examine how the child character in the picturebook *Un grande giorno di niente* (2016a, *On a magical do-nothing day*) intertwines with trees and other nature materials.² The book was created by the academically unexplored Italian–French artist Beatrice Alemagna, and may be perceived as a boy’s report on one specific day when he, after playing for a long time at his game, is urged by his mother to go outdoors in the rain.³ Although he brings along his game, he must soon manage without it when he loses it in a pond. The rest of the day he roams the woods experiencing new qualities of both himself and the various life forms that he encounters and engages with. Safely home again, he seems to re-connect with his mother and himself as a child inevitably interwoven with the neighbouring nature.

Alemagna’s picturebook was selected for this investigation of a tree–child relationship for at least two reasons. The first is because of the artist’s original blending of “a rare depth of visual literacy with gentle, poetic humanity and a fearless approach to experimenting with media and materials” (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 66).⁴ Secondly, but not less importantly, I have chosen the picturebook because of the plot and the particular double-spread which initiated my curiosity, that is, the doublespread where the I narrator declares that he “felt like a tree lost in the storm” (Alemagna, 2016a, doublespread 8, see Figure 9.1).⁵ Not only the connective act reflected in the narrator’s thought, but also the way this entanglement is represented in the illustration absorbed me.

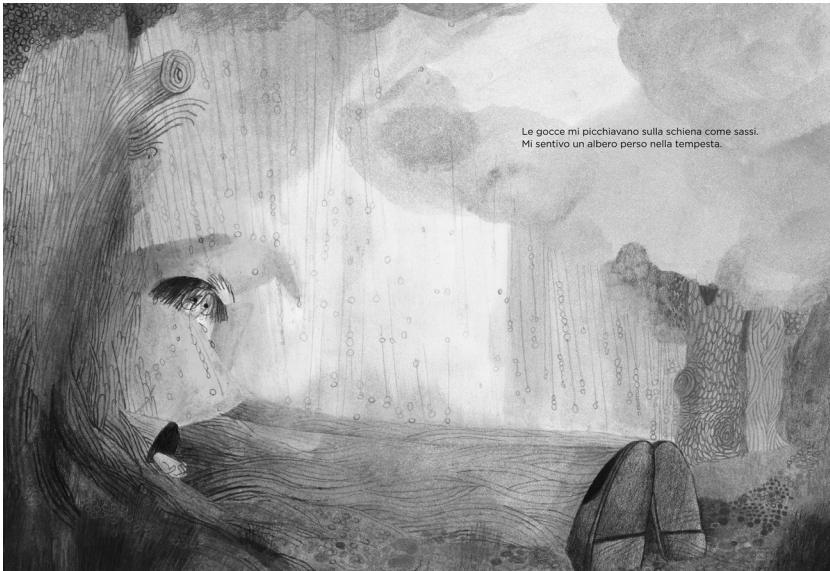


Figure 9.1 *Un grande giorno di niente* (2016) by Beatrice Alemagna, Milano: Topipittori. Reprinted with the artist's permission.

Drawing on theoretical perspectives on the tree–human relationship in children’s literature, posthuman child-oriented theory, and ecocritical studies of children’s literature, the aim of the chapter is to map out how various forms of nature/culture binaries are depicted and blurred in the book and how the boy intra-acts together with trees and other life forms, in both the verbal and the visual text. An overall hypothesis is that through these various intra-actions the boy restores his conception of outdoor life, and of his relationship or kinship with it.

In line with current studies concerning posthumanism and the child, such as *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks* (Murriss, 2016) and *Posthumanism and Literacy Education* (Kuby, Spector & Thiel, 2019), the analysis of Alemagna’s picturebook will be conducted as a *diffractive reading*, that is, a reading aiming to shift the focus away from questions of human knowing “toward questions of entangled knowing/becoming/doing in relation with other lively matters and meanings” (Kuby et al., 2019, 10). Hopefully, this way of reading will lead to an increased awareness of how children imagining themselves as plants in children’s literature destabilize the traditional tree–human relationship where the human/the child is placed “in a position of mastery, as husband to the forest” (Jaques, 2015, p. 118).

The Tree–Human Relationship in Children’s Literature

Child characters in children’s literature connect with woods and trees in many ways and in previous studies woods and trees have often been treated together without much clarification of the symbolic, mythological, or ontological nuances between them. More often studies tend to start with discussions of woods and move to occasional readings of eventually significant trees (Borg & Ullström, 2017; Winters, 2018; Christensen, 2019; Jönsson, 2019). In a recent study, I (Goga, 2020) identified some characteristic ways of representing the interplay between child characters and woods and trees, that is, woods and trees as a place of excursion, of refuge or freedom, as a homeplace, and as a place of knowledge and of reflection. I also noted that the child characters were depicted in rather conventional ways both verbally and visually, in accordance with the various characteristics. For instance, when woods or trees were depicted as a place of knowledge and/or reflection, the child character was often sitting on a branch leaning towards the trunk with her/his legs curled up. Or if woods and/or trees were linked to freedom, and perhaps also to some sort of rebellion, the child was hanging upside down from a branch.

According to Zoe Jaques (2015), who is one of the children’s literature researchers who has investigated tree–human relationships the most thoroughly,

trees have long held a kind of nascent posthuman potential. They point to the ways that environment is of superior importance to the individual life of man, while also, as a source of heat and shelter, sustaining that very life. Trees can, therefore, be said to have the most symbiotic of relationships with humans, and they can also generate as much affection as pets, thereby deconstructing a humanistic hierarchy of being which traditionally places fauna above flora.

(Jaques, 2015, p. 115)

While Jaques has studied how sexual danger, attraction, and devotion are inscribed in myth-inspired arboreal metamorphosis or girl-to-tree transformations (Jaques, 2013), and how sentient trees⁶ are in service to humanity in children’s literature (Jaques, 2015), I shall examine a representation of a tree–child entanglement where the tree is not anthropomorphized or in the service of anyone, but lends and blends, without being at risk, its vegetal characteristics with the child.

Diffraction Reading and Agential Cuts

Carrying out a diffractive reading implies paying attention to a text’s agential cuts, that is, diffractions where established or unquestioned binaries or hierarchies are destabilized or challenged. The term “diffractive” derives

from physics and describes "the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction" (Barad, 2007, p. 74). Building on Donna Haraway's notion of diffraction, the diffractive methodology has been developed by Karen Barad. While Haraway introduced the notion as a metaphor to help re-think difference/s beyond binary oppositions, Barad insists on the descriptive meaning when stating that diffraction means "to break apart in different directions" (Barad, 2014, p. 168). What is crucial to Barad is that it is where the waves interfere or overlap that they change in themselves and intra-act, hence waves are forever becoming. A diffractive reading, then, might be understood as

an iterative practice of intra-actively reworking and being reworked by patterns of mattering. A diffractive methodology seeks to work constructively and deconstructively (not destructively) in making new patterns of understanding-becoming.

(Barad, 2014, p. 187, endnote 63)

The concept of diffractive reading has been applied to work with and analyses of children's literature by several scholars within the field of children's literature research and posthuman theory (e.g. Murriss, 2016; Kuby, Spector & Thiel, 2019; Burton, 2019). My research builds on the work by Karin Murriss (2016) and Candace R. Kuby, Karen Spector and Jaye Johnson Thiel (2019). Murriss's main objective is to disrupt the mind/body dualism, which she identifies as the core dichotomy, "and with it the engrained belief that humans' unique ability to reason' place[s] them 'above' and 'give[s] them control' over animals, plants, and their physical environment" (p. 5). She considers picturebooks "as creative opportunities to destabilise discriminatory binaries" (p. 200) such as mind/body but also nature/culture and human/non-human. In line with Barad, Murriss explains how intra-action is different from interaction "in that 'nature' and 'culture' are never 'pure', are never unaffected by each other, but are always in relation" (p. 12). Hence, it is impossible to detect or decide where the boundaries are, including, in our case, the boundaries between tree and child.

Other binaries that are often at work in picturebook analyses are those related to word/image and linear/spatial. Instead of ascribing different qualities and affordances to words and images, a diffractive reading seeks to focus on the materiality of the book, e.g. format, paper quality, typography, layout, colours, and artistic style (visual as well as verbal). According to Murriss (2016, p. 213), aspects of materiality, such as colours and metaphors, can be performative agents that create or open new cuts that do not privilege, for instance, humans above plants or words above images.

As stated above, a diffractive reading aims to shift the focus away from questions of human knowing "toward questions of entangled knowing/becoming/doing in relation with other lively matters and meanings" (Kuby

et al., 2019, 10). This shift of focus should “start with what is *not* familiar” (Murriss, 2016, p. 208) or with cuts that are not too small as Kuby et al. (2019, pp. 1–17) phrase it. An example in Alemagna’s *Un grande giorno di niente* of something that is not familiar and that may create an agential cut is exposed to the reader in the doublespread where the I narrator, after losing his video game in the pond, leans his back towards a trunk and concludes that “[t]he drops hit me on my back like stones. I felt like a tree lost in the storm” (Alemagna, 2016a, doublespread 8, see Figure 9.1). Both the verbal metaphor and the illustration blur the plant/human or tree/boy binary. The tree and the boy are infused with one another. Their fibres intertwine.

I will compare the unfolding of this doublespread with the moment when waves break apart in different directions. Hence, the doublespreads to follow direct the narrator and the reader to multiple encounters, overlappings and intra-actions with various life forms before they (the boy and the reader) return home and are able to intra-act with his mother and the book as a whole, that is, to re-read it in overlapping and new ways. In my reading, which is also an ongoing re-reading, I will depart from this disruptive doublespread and try to detect the potential binaries hinted at on previous doublespreads and pursued on subsequent doublespreads.

Like a Tree Lost in the Storm

Un grande giorno di niente is characterized by a particular blending of dark, earthy colours (crayons and grease pencils) on thick and rough paper and the strong and signalling colour of the narrator’s raincoat (see, e.g. Figure 9.1). This signal orange also covers the endpapers of the book. Another characteristic of the book is Alemagna’s extended use of overview, and illustrations where the protagonist is placed in a broader environment, mainly outdoors. Finally, in contrast to so many tree–child representations in children’s books where the child character talks to trees, climbs trees, or is embraced and comforted by trees, Alemagna’s child protagonist leans into the tree and undergoes, so to speak, a sort of vegetal morphing. Instead of violating, usurping or demanding something from the tree, the boy metaphorically borrows the vegetal qualities of the tree’s veins, fibres, bark, and roots (see Figure 9.1).

The above-mentioned justifications for the choice of book and the characterizations of it could be summed up in a recognition of the book as an example of what Lawrence Buell (1995) terms ‘environmental literature’. Following his checklist (pp. 7–8), one may claim that the picturebook presents the non-human environment in a way that suggests that human history is implicated in natural history (1), that the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest (2), that human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation (3), and that it is implicit in the picturebook that the environment is a process rather than

something constant or given (4). Although it is not my aim to follow this recognition in detail, the environmental qualities of the picturebook will accompany my reading.

Before carrying out what I call a diffractive reading of the book, I would like to point out that others may suggest alternative readings, depending on whether they emphasize the child–mother relationship instead of the child–nature or the child–tree relationship. Such readings do not have to contrast with the one I will suggest, they could rather support or broaden it. A reading emphasizing the child–mother relationship will necessarily also have to question the underlying reasons why they seem to have nothing to tell or share with each other at the outset of the story. The first doublespread depicts the two of them when they, on a dark and rainy day, arrive at a large house surrounded by fields and woods. The text reads “We were there for the hundredth time. Me and my mother in the usual holiday house. The usual forest. And the usual rain” (doublespread 1).⁷ On the next spread they are depicted indoors in a setting that seems to be the regular one for their stay: the mother at her desk working on her computer, and the boy laying on the sofa killing Martians in his game.

According to the narrator, this is how the days pass. Nevertheless, the living room is somehow cosy, with warm colours, sofa cushions, firewood under a bench, a guitar in the corner, and traces of nature such as small stones, branches of a bush, and a flower in a small vase.⁸ In addition to his comments on their doings, the boy reports that he is thinking of his father and of “everything he would have shown me outside. A lot of wonders” (Alemagna, 2016a, doublespread 2).⁹ Together with the last two doublespreads of the book concerned with the boy’s return home, these two doublespreads frame the story. While the framing story stresses the process of *inter*–action between the child and the mother, the rest of the story is set outdoors and focuses on the process of *intra*–action between the child and the many unfamiliar curiosities or forms of life to be re-discovered there. There is no need to keep these stories apart; instead, I think it is enriching to read them as overlapping and entangled in each other. Hence, one may suggest that by engaging with the many life forms or earthlings outdoors, the boy is able to remember and mourn the loss (or absence) of his father and subsequently manage, together with his mother, to overcome the human/nature breaches, fractures or binaries.

I have already mentioned that the second doublespread, depicting mother and child in the living room, hints at the existence of an outdoor nature: the many remnants of trees, plants, and stones and the outdoor wonders that the boy imagines that his father could have shown him. This blending of indoors and outdoors, of culture and nature, is already suggested to the reader before the main story starts. Or perhaps, according to established picturebook theory, the story may start at the very cover of the book (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 241). In accordance with the objective of this chapter, I will limit my comments on the picturebook’s paratexts to the two

doublespreads that follow the front endpaper. The first one displays a full-page illustration of a rusty-red armchair placed under a tree in a meadow. A child, looking at the reader-viewer, lays across the armchair with his head and feet placed on the armrests. He is dressed in a signal orange coat and holds a game in his hands. He is in the company of three snails, one of them on the hood of his coat. At the foot of the chair there are four mushrooms (*amanitas*) and a dozen stones. In the upper left corner of the doublespread the author has placed her dedications to Francesca “who sees the world shine through the stones”, to her “big Mimosa” and “to Tiberio, who inspired this book and to Veronica, Manu, Pata, John B., Claudia, Béatrice and Sandro”. Hence, this spread communicates both visually and verbally from the very beginning the environmental ambiguity of the story. Turning to the title page of the picturebook, the reader-viewer encounters another curious blending of nature/culture: both the artist’s name and the title of the book are typed in a sort of matrix font, alluding to the game the boy is holding in his hand on the previous page and foreshadowing the Martians that will be mentioned and depicted two pages later. In addition to the artist’s name and the title, the page also displays a vignette representing a pair of boots in the grass surrounded by mushrooms in shades of red and orange. Again, the visual and verbal interplay draw the reader-viewer’s attention to an entangled natureculture, that is, “a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed” (Malone & Ovenden, 2017, p. 1).

Despite the inclusion of nature or various life forms in his indoor environment, the boy seems unsusceptible to engaging with others besides the Martians in his game, which he sneaks with him in the pocket of his raincoat when he is urged to go outside. In his first attempt to interact with or step into the outdoor environment he is occupied with keeping his game safe and dry. He is depicted in a succession of images in the same double-spread with his face and body turned towards the previous doublespread, like he longs for home. On the next page he is depicted jumping from stone to stone in a pond while comparing the stones to the heads of the Martians. It is only when he loses his game and starts feeling like a tree that he becomes more sensitive to details in nature as they appear in themselves.

By morphing and metamorphizing with the tree, the boy’s agency takes new directions and his awareness of the matters around him starts diffracting. The following doublespreads support this coming closer to nature by zooming in on the boy and the snails (doublespread 9) and mushrooms (doublespread 10), and finally by depicting only the boy’s hands engaging with the mud: “I felt grains, stones, clumps, roots, and berries swarming under my fingers. An underground world full of unknown micro-matter ... which I could touch” (doublespread 11).¹⁰ This intra-action with mud and matter seems to bring the boy to some revelation; sunrays hit him (double-spread 12), he runs and stumbles down a hillside (doublespread 13), and at the foot of the hill he experiences the world as upside down, “[e]verything

was as if it were new" (doublespread 14).¹¹ The materiality of this double-spread is also worthy of some attention. The reader-viewer is invited to investigate this upside down sensation. The boy is laying at the bottom of the doublespread staring at the woods above him. At first one may conventionally think that the boy is laying on the ground looking up at the trees, but by paying attention to the way the trees are depicted one must re-think this conception. One may turn the book upside down and find the boy lifted up in the sky looking down at the trees or one may think of the distorted positions of trees and child as an expression of the boy's impression that the world "could have been re-made from the beginning" (doublespread 14).¹² This upside down positioning may also have something in common with the rebellious child hanging upside down from a branch as is often found in other tree-child relationships.

Up till now both the story and the reading of it have fluctuated between moving forward, doing, and becoming aware of. On the subsequent double-spread the process of knowing seems to spread out. Instead of an overview, Alemagna presents the reader-viewer with an almost nonfictional chart with several nature-child intra-actions and entanglements, most of them including part of a tree: sitting on a branch and looking into the distance, breathing in air while turned towards the trunk, drinking raindrops from pine needles, hanging from a bough and looking at a row of marching insects, and talking with a bird that is sitting on a leafy branch. This manifold *intraspecies* contact is not the finale, but, in the now of the story, the culmination of the boy's 'process of entangled knowing'. The initial becoming one with the tree and the following doing and intra-acting with various matter seem to have brought him to an ethical state of thinking where humans' accountability to the environment can't be overlooked or hidden away. Thinking, as Murriss puts it, "is *part* of 'the' world; an intra-active engagement with specific configurations of the world" (Murriss, 2016, p. 17). I will add that this state of thinking shares the characteristics of a posthuman ethics, that is, an ethics which "is mutually entangled with place, culture, multispecies, and matter. As well as all the social and political implications that are born out of the liveliness and energy produced through these entanglements" (Kuby et al., 2019, p. 13). Consequently, it is only by experiencing the world as new and re-constructed from the beginning, by entangling with the trees' fibres and by disrupting the binaries between nature/culture and inside/outside that the boy manages to disrupt the distancing silence between him and his mother and establish a tacit, but appreciating connection between them when they, in the final doublespread, are able to look into each other's eyes and faces while drinking hot chocolate at the kitchen table in a kitchen where warm red colours are scattered across the page.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have studied how a specific tree-child relationship, expressed metaphorically by the narrator of Beatrice Alemagna's picturebook *Un*

grande giorno di niente, disperses its metaphorical agency and influence and infuses the reading of both previous and subsequent parts of the book. By carrying out a diffractive reading aimed at focusing on questions of entangled knowing/becoming/doing in relation with other lively matters and meanings, I found that the metaphorical and visual fibrous entanglement of boy and tree redirected the boy to engage with his surroundings in unfamiliar and unexpected ways, which in turn opened up an ecological engagement with all other life forms, including his engagement with his mother and the domestic environment they share. Following the woods-roaming boy on his environmental awareness adventure, the reader-viewer is invited to partake and engage in the becoming/doing/knowing and to re-think or re-do his/her own natureculture practices.

Notes

- 1 For an introductory overview of mythical and religious texts and thoughts dealing with trees, see for instance Manuel Lima and Ben Shneiderman's *Book of Trees. Visualizing Branches of Knowledge* (2014), and for scientific and historical perspectives on trees, see for instance Peter Thomas's *Trees: Their Natural History* (2000).
- 2 A few words about translation: The book was first published in French in 2016 and shortly after, also in 2016, in Italian. Since the French and the Italian versions of the text were written by the artist, I will consider both versions as original picturebooks. There are some critical differences between the French and Italian versions which I consider to be an expression of the artist's amendment of the picturebook. Although the book has been translated into English from the French version, I will refer to the Italian edition, which I consider the most complete version due to a more appropriate use of for instance "the drama of the turning page" (see endnote 5 for an example). Additionally, the English translation deviates and differs from the French in many passages. All translations of the text from Italian into English are mine. When I quote from the text further on in this chapter, I will render the text both in Italian and in French and, when relevant, I will comment on the differences between the various versions, including the English translation. Although it is worth a study of its own of how something like environmental awareness gets lost in translation, this chapter does not intend to be a complete translation study. Many of the differences between the English translation and the French or Italian originals seem to be affected by the prevailing ideologies and values in the target culture. As indicated by Riitta Oittinen, Anna Ketola, and Melissa Garavini (2018) in their study on picturebook translations, the translators are always affected by how they understand the needs of the receiver of the translation.
- 3 I refer to the I narrator as a boy due to a few adjectives and verbal tenses in the text that indicate that the character is of the male gender. For example, on double-page three where the narrator tells that he went out, "sono uscito", the 'o' in 'uscito' indicates that the narrator is male. In the English translation or in translations to, for instance, Scandinavian languages the gender of the character would not be possible to trace linguistically. Although I do not comment any further on the gender aspect, it may be worth analytical attention. As pointed out by one of the peer reviewers the boy's ways of acting outdoors may be a way to renegotiate hegemonic masculinity.

- 4 Alemagna's picturebooks have won several awards. The selected picturebook has received the Huckepack Prize (Germany) in 2019, the English Association Book Award in 2018, the Gold Medal of The Original Art Exhibition of the Society of Illustrators (USA) in 2017, the Grand Prix de l'illustration (France) in 2017, and the Landerneau Prize (France) in 2017.
- 5 "Le gocce mi picchiavano sulle schiena come sassi. Mi sentivo un albero perso nella tempesta" (Alemagna, 2016a). In the Italian version this is the complete text on this doublespread. The full text on this doublespread is somewhat different in the French version and the English translation, which read respectively, "Et maintenant, qu'al-lais-je-faire sans mon jeu? Les gouttes cognaient comme des pierres sur mon dos. J'étais un arbre perdu dans la tempête" (Alemagna, 2016b) and "Without my game, I had nothing to do. The rain was so hard it felt like rocks hitting me. I was a small tree caught in a hurricane" (Alemagna, 2017). Instead of stating that he *is* a small tree, as in the French and English texts, the narrator in the Italian version describes a feeling: "I felt like a tree lost in the storm". The confirmative use of 'I was' makes the experience static and misses the process of becoming. In addition, the first sentence in the French text appears in the Italian version on the previous doublespread, which seems more in line with established picturebook theory and the idea of "the drama of the turning page".
- 6 Examples of sentient trees in Jaques's study are found in *The Song of Hiawatha* (1885), *The Giving Tree* (1964), and in the Harry Potter series (1997–2007).
- 7 "Eravamo lì per la centesima volta. Io e mia madre nella solita casa di vacanza. Con la solita foresta. E la solita pioggia" (Alemagna, 2016a) / "Nous y étions. Pour la deuxième fois. Ma mère et moi dans la même maison de vacances. La même forêt. Et la même pluie" (Alemagna, 2016b). To this passage the English translation has added the following sentence: "Dad back in the city" (Alemagna, 2017). This is critical to the interpretation of the book, since it is never spelt out why the father is not there. By claiming that the father is back in town, the English translation limits the reader's interpretative space. There are no safe traces in the original versions confirming whether the father is only absent, like being back in the city, or separated from the boy, for instance because the parents are divorced, or finally, whether the father is dead.
- 8 According to Marnie Campagnaro (2019), Alemagna's domestic geographies are often emotional maps of parent-child relationships.
- 9 "a tutto quello che mi avrebbe mostrato fuori di qui. Un sacco di meraviglie" (Alemagna, 2016a) / "à tout ce qu'il m'aurait montré dehors, avec son sourire émerveillé" (Alemagna, 2016b). Once again, the English translation differs from the French and Italian versions: the whole passage about him thinking of his father is left out. Instead, the following sentence is added: "I wished Dad were here" (Alemagna, 2017).
- 10 "ho sentito grani, granelli, grumi, radici e bacche brulicare sotto le dita. Un mondo sotterraneo pieno di micro-cose sconosciute... potevo toccarlo!" / "graines et granules, noyaux, grumeaux, racines et baies fourmillaient sous mes mains. Un monde souterrain plein de microchoses inconnues [...] Je pouvais le toucher!"
- 11 "Ogni cosa era come nuova" / "Chaque chose me semblait inconnue".
- 12 "Sembrava che tutto fosse stato rifatto da capo" / "On aurait dit que tout avait été refait à neuf".

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