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THE MERCURIAL TIME OF JEANETTE WINTERSON'S PROSE

An ardent admirer of literary Modernism, Jeanette Winterson makes the Modernist preoccupation with time her central concern, too, as she explores both the concept of time and its possibilities as a literary device. All of the twentieth century is said to have been obsessed with time in its many aspects. The passing of the past and the flow of the present into the future have never been more questioned. At the turn of the twenty-first century we are sometimes worried that with the speed, the acceleration of everything, we are losing a sense of history and context. Winterson's prose is testing this wide ground, battling with the awareness that time still remains a very complex issue. She shifts the Modernist time circle towards a spiral and much in agreement with the post-modern, which favours synchrony over diachrony, blurs the distinction between the internal stream of consciousness and the external time measured by the clock. Similarly, as postmodernism obliterates the difference between original and copy, where Modernism upheld the idea of originality, part of Winterson's experimentation rests in the permeability of her writing, which barely recognises borderlines between fact and fiction or history and the present.

In the following I shall trace how Winterson's treatment of time evolves across her novels, often as a theme and particularly as a major tool of her increasingly artful prose.

The notions of time are slippery, as their paths move and slide between scientific time, biological time, traditional time, the arbitrariness of various calendars and mechanical time-keeping by inexorably ticking clocks or now, more often, the jumping figures of the luminous electronic face. Literary time has all of this and more to grapple with: dream time, fantasy time, the reversal of time, the end of time.

In her volume of essays *Art Objects* (1995), Jeanette Winterson debates the various aspects of time with respect to art. In her view it is the essence of art to be made new although she does not mean that new work repudiates the past. On the contrary, in new work the past is re-stated and thereby reclaimed (p. 12).¹

¹ *Art Objects*. London: Jonathan Cape 1995; London: Vintage 1996.

Winterson believes that “art is a way into other realities” (p. 26), which also means other temporal realities. As she rejects realism as an art mode, her literary time is never a realistic time: it is story time, it is the time of dream, the time of fantasy, not quite the nightmare of chaos, but the kind of time that splits and scatters and runs together again like drops of mercury. In this way, as Winterson puts it, art traces “the possibilities of past and future in the whorl of now” (p. 117). In another way, art is indifferent to time as it lives through time: “In your hands a book that was in their hands, passed to you across the negligible years of time” (p. 132). Winterson, however, makes demands on the reader’s time and asks for reading to be paced carefully with the rhythm of the written page. The reader can then win two victories: begin to unravel the text and for a moment stop the clock no matter how much our “modern world is Time’s fool” (p. 90).

But again, in Winterson’s prose “now” is not the “real” here and now, which she questions and discards in favour of imagination. For her, it is imagination that “offers new universes, primary worlds, that substantially confront the pretences of notional life”, by which she understands the restricted and thereby impoverished kind of life encouraged by governments, mass education and the mass media and offered by them as real life (pp. 134-35). For art Winterson claims “a reality beyond now” and that is why she wants to save Shakespeare, and even Dickens, from the clutches of the supporters of realism. Her conviction tells her that Shakespeare “is not a chronicler of experience” (p. 148-49). In Winterson’s understanding of reality as “continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible” (p. 151), literary realism must fail. The imagination of art, which she thinks of as incompatible with realism, is needed to reveal some of this reality to us. The notion of layered, fragmented and simultaneously continuous time seems to play a significant role in the process.

In Winterson’s scheme of things, the external time of a book appears to be no less significant than its internal time. She points out that literature, like all art, works across time and in this way keeps the past present. In literature this is mainly so because its medium—language—is in constant motion. Besides, a fully realised work has an identity of its own which makes it alive. Then, in Winterson’s words, “a reader can fall in love with what is alive through time” (p. 170).

In Winterson’s conception the permeability of time and space applies to both prose fiction and the reader’s relationship with it. Her style of writing endorses this view and aids its realisation. Hers is a style that does not recognise conventional boundaries between fact and fiction and makes the reader aware that, far from being a documentary, “history is as much in the reconstruction as in the moment” (p. 187). Also, history in fiction may be put to merely formal uses. Winterson admits to having used the device of history “to create an imaginative reality sufficiently at odds with our daily reality to startle us out of it” (p. 188). What she wants to achieve is to bring the present up for closer scrutiny, because in her opinion we are chronically far from understanding our own time.

Jeanette Winterson’s much acclaimed, still popular first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) is already decidedly experimental in form, and the

form is antilinear. Nevertheless, although the literariness of the text was recognised and appreciated, its formal aspects have always battled for attention with the lesbian theme and despite some attempts to play it down by interpreting it as an adolescent exploration of sexuality and giving the novel a liberal humanist reading², thematics seems to have won out over style and structure. The time paradigm of the novel evolves in a spiral³, its coils made up not only of flashbacks and lingering but also of fantasy worlds and allusion. Winterson, true to the postmodern predilection for pastiche, resorts to fairy-tale motifs, the Arthurian legend and The Bible. By re-writing old texts and discourses, she challenges the reader to do some re-thinking as well. At the same time the old stories comment on the central plot of the novel. The eight books of the Old Testament that name the eight chapters of the novel serve the same purpose, but in a variety of manners. While, predictably, "Exodus" describes Jeanette's first 'leaving home', "Deuteronomy", containing three pages in all, does not move the story of the novel forward, in fact does not even refer to it, but re-states Winterson's view that story telling is a way of fighting time—the "great deadener". By telling stories and making them what we will, which is what inevitably happens (and that includes history too), we have "a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time" (p. 91)⁴. In "Deuteronomy" she also outlines her preference for keeping history in untidy knots interwoven with stories, because clearly stated facts are easily discarded when they become uncomfortable. And besides, says Winterson in tune with Gertrude Stein, "how dreary it is when a fact is a fact is a fact" (*Art Objects*, p. 128).

The narrative strategy of combining historical fact with a rather fantastic fictional story is employed by Winterson in two of her following novels, *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), both award winning fictions. In *The Passion*, set in France, Russia and Venice after 1805, Winterson ventures out of Englishness into a truly universal world of emotions, passion and anti-war humanism. The two narrators—Henri, who has a passion for Napoleon, and later for Villanelle, the second narrator, who has webbed feet like Venetian gondolieri of local lore and a passion for an older woman—are related through another passion contained in the book's and their joint refrain: "I'm telling you stories, trust me." The refrain, which has the magic of a charm, is a leitmotif of the novel and, more than that, a passionately followed reason for a passionately executed piece of writing.

The notion of time in *The Passion* is threefold: there is chronological story time, there is historical time and there is fabular time, but they merge seamlessly into a sense of timelessness. The chronological time of the story more or

² Hilary Hinds, "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit Reaching Audiences Other Lesbian Texts Cannot Reach", in Sally Munt, ed., *New Lesbian Criticism*. London: Harvester 1992, 153-172, 157.

³ The author prompts this to the reader in the Introduction to the 1991 Vintage edition of the novel, p. xiii.

⁴ *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. London: Pandora Press 1985; London: Vintage 1991.

less observes the rules of linearity, broken by occasional, clearly discernible flashbacks or anticipation and only temporal ambiguity. The historical time is marked both by dates ("July 20th, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today", p. 24⁵) and well known events from Napoleon's rule in France. And although the figure of Henri as Napoleon's chicken chef cannot be but fictional, the way it is anchored in a historical setting gives it a certain reality and substance. This makes it harder to tell fact from fiction and underlines the futility of trying to do so. Not so much in contrast as parallel to that there is fabular time, mostly connected with Venice, time unstated, only related to Napoleon's time through the figures of the narrators. Venice, probably more fabulous than ever in its role as the "city of disguises", serves as a metaphor of the human psyche: "the cities of the interior [which] are vast" (p. 150). In Venice, not only has Villanelle webbed feet, but she has also her heart imprisoned in a jar in her former lover's wardrobe and later restored to her for a monstrous price. In some respects, Winterson's Venice feels uncannily contemporary, partly no doubt due to some very contemporary discourses being foregrounded: gender, sexuality. Nevertheless, Winterson's Venetian time is also the condensed time of eternity:

There is a certainty that comes with the oars, with the sense of generation after generation standing up like this and rowing like this with rhythm and ease. This city is littered with ghosts seeing to their own. No family would be complete without its ancestors.

Our ancestors. Our belonging. The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial. All time is eternally present and so all time is ours... Thus the present is made whole. (pp. 61-62)

The overall sense of the timelessness of Winterson's story seems to be also enhanced by the spiral narrative multiplied by the two narrative voices. If we want to think of Winterson's spiral structure in terms of the two narrative voices, we can imagine a double helix of their stories, interwoven yet separate. Inasmuch the double helix can be understood as symbolising DNA and consequently our time, we have yet another temporal connection with the present, this time at the structural level.

Sexing the Cherry (1989) possesses the same mercurial quality as *The Passion*, only more emphatically so. It displays rather than just shows the mutability of things. The uncertain sexuality of many of the characters and the cross-dressing, set against a wide and varied seventeenth century backdrop, verge on the carnivalesque. In this postmodern rendering of the Renaissance, Winterson pursues her argument whether a clear-cut division and definition of the sexes

⁵ *The Passion*. London: Bloomsbury 1987; London: Vintage 1996.

(we even want to “sex the cherry”, p. 85⁶) really matters. The unreliable narrative voice of the story fits well with this milieu and adds to the sense of uncertainty as it is often unclear who is speaking: it is sometimes Jordan, once a foundling child, now an explorer of newly discovered parts of the world; more often it is the voice of Jordan's mother, the woman who found him and brought him up – an extraordinary, nameless, poor Dog Woman from a hut by the Thames with a rather self-righteous voice. Besides the two protagonists we encounter fairy-tale voices of twelve princesses, which irrevocably upset the balance between reality and fantasy.

The fluidity of time in *Sexing the Cherry* is complete. It has no rules or boundaries, it flows back and forth, between reality and dream, (mis)interpretation and fantasy, sometimes in the manner of stream of consciousness, sometimes in the manner of story-telling, or it may be a fairy tale or a historical event. Winterson explains her thesis succinctly in the chapter called “The Nature of Time”, where she says that “our outward lives are governed by something much less regular ... leaving us free to ignore the boundaries of here and now.” As “time moves through us ... we are multiple not single ... countless existences ... stacked together like plates on a waiter's hand” (pp. 98-102). The last image, namely that we are multiple existences stacked together like plates, describes the pattern of the novel's time scheme faultlessly. It is also reinforced by the dream/fairy tale image of a silver city where everybody lives in a state of weightlessness, the houses have no floors or ceilings and the inhabitants float through them freely.

The period, and with it particularly Jordan's time, is also the time of discovery. As a child, he sees the first banana brought to England. He then wants to be a hero and begins to weave fantasies about the voyages of discovery, which become his fate. But beyond geographical discovery lies his dream of Fortunata, the twelfth princess, and personifies the reality that “there is no end to even the simplest journey of the mind” (p. 115). The history time of the novel also turns around the Stuart king Charles I. The king's trial and execution in 1649 are described from the point of view of a royalist supporter and shown as unjust, mean and hateful. The Dog Woman—distressed and appalled—sits cowering among the hostile audience. Later, a sudden time switch turns the text into a feminist and ecological tract of our present time with the characters, in Peter Ackroyd fashion, being some kind of reincarnations of the seventeenth century ones. Thus, although the historical story ends with the Great Fire of London in 1666, we are left with an inspired yet chilling illustration of the above claim that we are multiple, countless existences free to ignore the boundaries of here and now.

While the clue to *Written on the Body* (1992) may be found in the narrator's recurring sigh “It's the clichés that cause the trouble”, the responsibility for decoding meanings is eventually left with the reader. The process is not made easier by the unreliable androgynous narrator or the fact that, among many others,

⁶ *Sexing the Cherry*. London: Bloomsbury 1989; New York: Vintage 1991.

the text challenges the cliché of romance by verging on melodrama contrasted with cynicism, but remains a painful love story written in a dazzlingly poetic language. The riot of feeling of the sexual self could have been put into words according to Hélène Cixous's recipe in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). The time pattern however falls short of the importance accorded to it in the previous two novels. The historical dimension is missing here, although Winterson does not dispense with it entirely. The pattern of time switching back and forward, which she uses here, recalls nineteenth century models and resonates with the narrator's frequent references to nineteenth century novels. The revisiting of all the earlier sites of the story in its final part also reminds us of the nineteenth century pattern. Nevertheless, the description of the passage of time imprinted on the body has an audacity unmistakably of our time:

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands She has translated me into her own book.⁷

The time play that *Art and Lies* (1994) has to offer renders it the most experimental among Winterson's novels to date. So much so that James Wood in the *London Review of Books*⁸ rather scathingly described it as ghostly. But a degree of ghostliness seems to fit the mood of the book, just as Wood's verdict that "it plays itself again and again" actually fits the incantatory nature of the text. Furthermore, Wood's attack on Winterson for writing a Modernist novel of uncontrollable lyricism floating into abstraction without "this cognitive hunger, this drive to know", is hardly justified in view of the many questions, both literary and social, that her novel raises. The time factor plays a role in most of them.

The unsettling effect of Winterson's narrative time commences here with the reader's expectations being not just unfulfilled but shattered by the deception of the protagonists' names: Handel is not the eighteenth century German composer but an English Catholic priest cum gynecologist and cancer specialist; Picasso is not the French painter but a young English girl whose real name is Sophia, as we learn much later in the book; Sappho is and is not the Greek woman poet of Lesbos as the voice is gradually appropriated by a female English voice of our time. Therefore, with the exception of Doll Sneerpiece the Bawd, who does not have a voice of her own and appears on the scene as a character from an old book, we only encounter contemporary figures with Winterson's critical comment on today's social ills attached to the fragments of their life stories. And yet a sense of the past permeates and defines the whole narrative. How the past, both more and less distant, has created the present materialises in the Book

⁷ *Written on the Body*. London: Jonathan Cape 1992; London: Vintage 1993, 89.

⁸ "Beware of Shallowness", *London Review of Books*, 7 July 1994, 9.

which Handel inherited from his childhood friend, mentor and seducer, Cardinal Rosso. It is described as containing pages from old manuscripts, some forged or invented, printed stanzas and scribbled lines by famous writers—man's literary history, "a talisman against time, an inventing and remembrance ... the word spinning a thread through time" (p. 202).⁹

This also evokes Winterson's earlier questioning whether memory is invention or whether invention is memory (pp. 183, 199) and echoes her Barthesian debate: "How much of your thinking has been thought for you by someone else?" (p. 184) "We are all stuffed, stuffed with other people's ideas parading as our own" (p. 185). Nevertheless, for an individual, time is an enemy: "A man caught on Time's hook" (p. 30). Sappho's image of the clock betrays human fear of mortality: "One full turn clockwise and the rusted bolts seal the lid. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the tick, tick ticking, and the ghastly fingers creeping round the smug enamel face ... Time, whose thing I am, writes on me" (p. 63). Winterson decides to reverse this truth and makes her Sappho defy time: "The future could be just as yesterday, she could tame the future by ignoring it, by letting it become the past" (p. 76). The author then allows the Sappho of Lesbos to slip into our time.

The postmodern jigsaw puzzle of Winterson's narrative can only slowly be completed from short fragments of stream-of-consciousness passages interspersed with external invention of an uncertain, quasi metafictional source. Thus episodes from Handel's and Picasso's life stories may gradually be pieced together, while Sappho remains elusive to the very ending, when all three characters meet. The final encounter, however, sheds comparatively little light on the previous events, preserving some mystery of the past for the no less mysterious present and future. Although *Art and Lies* has the least coherent time pattern of Winterson's writing, if there is any pattern at all, the Winterson spiral eventually does emerge. It encircles the alternating internal monologues of the three voices, the recurring glimpses of some scenes and snatches of thoughts and conversations. As is confirmed by Handel: "His past, his life, not fragments or fragmented now, but a long curve of movement that he began to recognise" (p. 206). The reader, too, is then treated to a rare, coherent and chronological narrative of Handel's formative years which, despite being abruptly cut off, have never really left him. And what is more, he is now ready to accept them.

With *Gut Symmetries* (1997) Jeanette Winterson returns to a more intelligible story line and time scheme, which is not to say that we have here a straightforward contemporary story of a marital triangle, because the opposite is true. When the novel first appeared, the critical reaction was almost unanimous in deploring its scientific bent and what Amanda Craig calls Winterson's "appetite for intellectual posturing"¹⁰. Katy Emck thinks the novel very New Age with its

⁹ *Art and Lies*. London: Jonathan Cape 1994; London: Vintage 1995.

¹⁰ "Passion and Physics", *New Statesman*, 10 January 1997, 47.

“mystical mélange of astrology, alchemy, Euclid and Einstein”¹¹. It may seem strange that in our science-and-technology-mad times this should be objectionable when, after all, H. G. Wells, among others, could get away with and be admired for long lectures in physics as far back as *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Nevertheless, Francis Gilbert ranks Winterson among “fusionists”, together with Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, William Boyd and all those who “inject their fiction with lots of pseudo-scientific guff”¹². Somewhat more kindly, Michèle Roberts, while she concedes that Winterson has over-egged the cake a little in terms of quantum physics, is willing to ascribe it to her desire to produce something new¹³.

In the novel’s scientific and theoretical exploration, theories of time play as crucial a role as ever. Winterson’s time—and the time of the novel—is multi-dimensional, designed to be freeing rather than constricting. It is shown to be passing through the characters in their twentieth century setting and connecting them with eternity. This sense of endless time also pervades a tale, told halfway through the novel by nobody in particular, about “That which cannot be found” (p. 140-41)¹⁴, which metaphorically summarises the whole novel. It is about time, death, the living and their love(s), about correspondences imagined as binary oppositions or, somewhat mystically, as stars and starfish.

What is it that you contain?

The Dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia. The expanding universe opening in your gut. Are your twenty-three feet of intestines loaded with stars? (p. 2)

These motifs set the scene at the beginning of the novel and keep recurring as Winterson’s idea of ‘gut symmetries’ modelled on Paracelsus’s correspondences: “As above, so below” (p. 2).

The love story takes the same pattern, the characters seeming to dissolve into each other like Winterson’s time or atoms. The heroines Stella and Alice curiously merge in many respects: against all odds they fall in love with each other and have a lesbian relationship although both are also in love with Stella’s husband Jove; they tend to merge through their separate first person narratives, and the sense of fatal correspondences and the mystery of life is reinforced by the disclosure that Alice’s father and Stella’s mother were once lovers. A mysterious HE-figure, Ishmael who rescues Jove and Stella adrift at sea, answers Alice’s insistent “Who are you?”:

A temporary imprint in a temporary place ... Since the beginning of time you and I have been sitting here, talking, listening, sliding the bottle

¹¹ “On the high seas of romance”, *TLS*, 3 January 1997, 21.

¹² “Invasion of the fusionists”, *New Statesman*, 18 September 1998, 57.

¹³ *Independent on Sunday*, 5 January 1997, 31.

¹⁴ *Gut Symmetries*. London: Granta Books 1997; 1998.

between us, but it was not us, or it was some other us, marked out, firm for a moment, fading, disappearing, replacing ourselves. (p. 2)

This constant flow of life in time should however not be perceived as linear. In the final chapter, called "Judgement", Alice elaborates on the initial answer to what we contain, adding:

Memory past and memory future. If the universe is movement it will not be in one direction only. We think of our lives as linear but it is the spin of the earth that allows us to observe time. (p. 218)

The image of "the universe curving in your gut" ends the novel, thus becoming somewhat more significant than the ending of the love story itself and thereby putting the importance of Winterson's theses once again firmly before the plot.

Kathleen Wheeler describes Winterson's prose as picaresque realism, a variety of Angela Carter's magic realism.¹⁵ Considering Winterson's questing, outspoken heroines with their sharp comic streak, we may be inclined to agree. On the other hand, if Winterson, in contrast to Carter, resolutely refutes realism in the arts and, it seems to me, has succeeded in this respect in her own writing, it is more profitable to look at her work in terms of lack of realism in it. The mysterious indeterminacy that increasingly characterises her novels coincides with Winterson's thoughtful experimentation with time, much of which can be viewed as postmodern. She has joined the many contemporary writers, among them Ian McEwan, Penelope Lively, Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd and others, who explore the various postmodern notions of history in its interplay with the past of individuals as well as literary history and its new lease of life in present-day literary production. Postmodern, too, is Winterson's deferral of meanings which she however does not allow to slip into boundless relativism and nihilism. On the contrary, Winterson's indeterminacy is interspersed with very determined arguments on art and the paths of mankind.

¹⁵ *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Oxford: Blackwell 1997.

