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DESIRE AND IDENTITY: AN ANALYSIS OF
JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *WRITTEN ON THE
BODY* AS A WORK OF EROTIC LITERATURE

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Abstract

Among the various paradoxes of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* erotic tale is that the narrator - one of the two protagonists of the central relationship - is ungendered, eliciting a distinctive ambivalence. Despite using a language that remains mostly oblique about amorous exchanges, Winterson's novel can indeed be read as an erotic story, because the body gains central importance in the storytelling, because the metaphors used to describe it largely call into question the kingdom of the senses and because part of the story is not realistic but makes extensive use of erotic fantasy.

Keywords: Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*, eroticism, desire, Queer Studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

A fascinating and alluring reading, Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) is anything but a straightforward text when it comes to interpreting it. The narrative is in fact fraught with ellipses, ambiguities, omissions and contradictions that totally dominate the scene and pervade large sections of the plot with a sense of evasiveness. The narrator, for instance, criticises the use of clichés in storytelling while at the same time making significant use of them. The metafictional slant of the tale contributes to a blurring of fiction and reality throughout the storyline: this is never so evident as in the conclusion, where the

return of Louise – the woman with whom the mysterious narrator is desperately in love – leaves the readers undecided about whether the story proceeds towards a happy ending or is the fruit of a delusional fantasy. Predictably enough, not even an analysis of the narratological techniques employed guides us toward a safer port: the narrator’s voice shifts from an autodiegetic first person to an omniscient third person and, in addition, addresses a shifting identity “as the narratee changes roles” (Kauer, 1998: 42) for the whole duration of the plot. Kauer also queries the nature of the tale itself, pointing out that while the narrator “establishes a quasi-oral relationship to the implied reader [...] metanarrative comments are interwoven that clearly and explicitly indicate the non-oral character of the situation.” (Kauer, 1998: 42) Onega instead unearths the inconsistencies inherent in the narrator’s role, who “could be the victimiser and the victim, the butch and the femme, the rakish Don Juan/Lothario/Casanova and the masochistic sexual toy of middle-aged married women.” (Onega, 2006: 118-19) Of course, the modernity of the account, (presumably?) dealing with a lesbian affair, is counteracted by what Giddens calls “the Romantic love complex.” (Giddens, 1992: 62) The ambiguity of the text of course affects the way in which critics have approached it: in this sense, the case of Stowers, who chooses to discuss *Written on the Body* from the angle of a lesbian story but claims that “this novel is also open to a *bisexual* reading”, (Stowers, 1998: 90) is worthy of attention.

All of these contradictions are however thwarted by – or result from – a major indistinct trait that governs the whole narrative: not only is the narrator’s identity enigmatic, but also any sign marking her/his gender remains carefully omitted for the whole course of the narration, creating what, to borrow from Butler, we may refer to as the typically ‘gender trouble’ that suffuses the entire story. This is far from insignificant, considering also that the focus of the story is the narrator’s affair with “a flame-haired temptress”, (Winterson, 1992: 34) the stunning Louise, married to the cancer specialist Elgin: in this ambiguous circumstance the only fixed element is the narrator’s bisexuality, which however intensifies the blurring around what

Rubinson aptly defines a “rapturous affair”. (Rubinson, 2001: 220) This is exactly the main point of my paper, since I will drive my attention on how passion works in the central love story of *Written on the Body* and how the body – significantly one of the two keywords in the title – becomes the palimpsest on which the romance is faithfully recorded. Gilmore points to the major puzzle around which much of the narrative revolves when she underscores that the “[t]he unnamed and ungendered narrator is taken as an interesting conceit in a love story focused so centrally upon the body and its materiality”. (Gilmore, 2001: 127) Clearly enough, the centrality and the implications of bodiness have not escaped the critics who have examined this novel, so that many have dealt with the erotic power that the text sparks at various levels. Among them, some meaningful examples may include Nunn, who claims that “[t]he force and challenge of Jeanette Winterson’s fiction is in its offering up of an erotic experience that contests the conventional fixity of identity”, (Nunn, 1996: 16) Farwell, who writes about the “plot which highlights narrative tension and seems to intensify an erotic triangle” (Farwell, 1996: 193) and Finney who, in focussing his attention on the palpable elusiveness in the text, argues that “[t]he indirectness of these allusions to the lovers’ bodies only adds to the erotic charge and demand on the reader’s imagination”. (Finney, 2006: 186) Below, I will discuss the paradox of how a gender-free narrator dwells on her/his personal involvement with a *femme fatale* and creates a work of erotic literature.

2. *WRITTEN ON THE BODY* AS A WORK OF EROTIC LITERATURE

[T]he themes of erotic writing are the familiar themes of mainstream writing, among them innocence and its loss; degradation and redemption; freedom and enslavement; desire and its consequences; and the transcendence of the ego. (Perkins, 1977: 17)

This is how Perkins maps the field of the possible cases in which erotic writing may emerge, and it seems appropriate for me to stress that many of the situations enlisted in this brief

passage also appear in *Written on the Body*, although it is evident that some of them display a conspicuous presence, whereas others have little to no impact on the story.

The plot of this novel can be summarised in a number of ways, but I propose a reading that presents the unnamed narrator struggling to define her/his own sexual identity which, for some reason, is not revealed to the reader. The first part of the storyline documents the bliss the narrating voice experiences at establishing a truly rewarding relationship with Louise, following a long series of affairs, all of which have too easily evaporated. The strong attachment to Louise, an Australian woman, is not only the result of a passionate sentimental bond – which is, however, manifest and cannot in any way be denied – but it also attests to the ways in which she/he manages to express her/his own sense of identity through her/his affair. The second part of the plot deals with her/his rather too hasty decision to leave Louise on the grounds of a self-sacrificing cause, driving the narrator to fall into desperate sorrow and depression. What the narrator seems to be unaware of at the time she/he takes the fateful resolve to drop her/his lover for good, is that the affair with Louise was not simply sentimentally but also ontologically gratifying, since it has contributed to shaping her/his identity and, whether the narrative voice may possibly accept to stay away from her/his lover for her sake, she/he cannot live without a proper sense of self-orientation. Hence, I agree with the joined views of Haines-Wright and Kyle when they claim that “[a]t the end of *Written on the Body*, the narrator affirms a speaking identity by commitment to Louise”. (Haines-Wright and Kyle, 1996: 181) Now, all this is instrumental in leading me to examine the role of desire in this story, since this appears to be the main spark that creates the ardent relationship that bonds the narrator to Louise. My feeling is that the narrator remains unaware that it is actually the thrust of desire which drives her/him to acquire a sense of self-acknowledgment: in her/his case, her/his story validates the philosophy ‘I desire, therefore I am’, or *cupio ergo sum*.

After setting the context within which to read *Written on the Body* as an erotic novel, I will here move to the analysis of the components that inscribe this work of fiction inside the canvas

of erotica. In his thorough-going study on this wide approach to literature, Perkins distinguishes among three possible models of erotic writing, and calls them assaultive, seductive and philosophical modes. Excluding from my examination the assaultive mode that has a totally different scope, *Written on the Body* seems rather designed in keeping with the philosophical mode, although suffused elements of the seductive mode also creep into the text:

The seductive mode must stimulate a sexual response, which is not necessarily true of the philosophical mode; here the object is to arouse a more complex set of responses that are as much intellectual as erotic. In the philosophical mode erotic feelings are stimulated in order to illustrate ideas about the nature of eroticism. Most of the masterpieces of erotic writing have been written in the philosophical mode, perhaps because the subject of eroticism lends itself to speculation about the nature of existence. (Perkins, 1977: 266)

What strongly characterises Winterson's text with regard to erotic writing in general is her avoidance of an explicitness and bluntness that we, as readers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, seem to have grown accustomed to. Indeed, *Written on the Body*, instead of choosing direct modes of expression, largely privileges poetic, metaphorical, allusive, evocative codes: instead of adopting a realistic approach, Winterson primarily drifts toward a purely imaginary dimension. Curiously enough, her seductive ways in writing are the very same that Louise also adopts in the course of the plot. This is how the gender-free narrator describes her:

Louise's tastes had no place in the late twentieth century where sex is about revealing not concealing. She enjoyed the titillation of suggestion. Her pleasure was in slow certain arousal, a game between equals who might not always choose to be equals. She was not a D.H. Lawrence type. (Winterson, 1992: 67)

Many critics have already discussed the use of images in the language employed to describe Louise in the story and a number of valuable examples are available to those interested to further

this research; on my part, I will orientate my discourse towards a specific semantic field that has direct connection with the evocation of sensuality: the kingdom of the senses. In fact, the narrative voice in *Written on the Body* makes extensive use of images that relate to the various senses and, if hearing is scarcely represented in this list – save for a brief passage when the narrator says “I wish I could hear your voice again”, (Winterson, 1992: 135) hearing is rarely found – the remaining four are often evoked, with a light preference for smell, touch and taste over sight, which is, however, implicitly called upon each time that Louise’s red hair – possibly her most distinctive trait – is described. The following passage does exemplify how tastes – touch in this specific case – are evocatively used to refer to the magnetic power that the lover’s body exerts on the narrator, the body that is both the abstract representation of Louise’s identity and the source of physical pleasure for the two protagonists. In this case, the act of lovemaking is imagined in terms of a journey or an exploration, another recurrent trope in the text: “I needed no more light than was in her touch, her fingers brushing my skin, bringing up the nerve ends. Eyes closed I began a voyage down her spine, the cobbled road of hers that brought me to a cleft and a damp valley then a deep pit to drown in.” (Winterson, 1992: 82) Nor are the senses always referred to separately from one another, as in this case. In another situation, the combined action of what are, for Winterson at least, the four most relevant senses results in an intensification of the sensual description of a game in which the two bodies are called to fuse with one another. Not surprisingly, this appears to be one of those rare cases in the novel where language does not only represent the body as “the site on which to explore the psychological affects of love, betrayal, melancholy and the complex amalgam of attraction and repulsion that lovers experience”, (Makinen, 2005: 117) but also the object where the explicit reference to erogenous zones is used to accomplish arousal:

She arches her body like a cat on a stretch. She nuzzles her cunt into my face like a filly at the gate. She smells of the sea. She smells of rockpools when I was a child. She

keeps a starfish in there. I crouch down to taste the salt, to run my fingers around the rim. She opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She's refilled each day with fresh tides of longing. (Winterson, 1992: 73)

It is worth noting here that in order to intensify the impact of the images, the visionary power of desire repeatedly associates Louise's body to natural elements, most of which (four) are animal species. Actually, less than four lines of the description of lust suffice for it to project the amorous scene on a raw, wild and animal dimension.

Contingent to the sense of taste, the rhetoric of desire repeatedly hints at the metaphor of appetite, which always infuses the text with an atmosphere densely charged with sensuality and/or eroticism. The narrator seems to be particularly careful about associating the idea of the compulsion to eat with sexual intercourse with Louise: for instance, this becomes evident when we read: "I used to meet you here before you left Elgin. We used to come here together after sex. You were always hungry after we had made love. You said it was me you wanted to eat so it was decent of you to settle for a toasted sandwich." (Winterson, 1992: 179) Statistically speaking, when it comes to eating it is always Louise who eats the narrator, who drinks her in turn: "You were milk-white and fresh to drink". (Winterson, 1992: 125)

Yet, there is also another side to the picture to which we need to give its true weight as we read this work of fiction according to the canon of erotic literature, since particular attention should be apportioned to the role of imagination and its strategies of use. *Written on the Body* clearly displays its fictional nature to the reader and, while claiming so, I am not even thinking about the pervasive lack of realistic approach manifest in the portrayal of so many characters, most of them who seem to have been conscripted at a freak gathering – the love story between the narrator and the Dutch Inge going astray because of the girl's insistence on communicating with the narrator through homing pigeons after her return to Holland, is but a case in point. My focus instead is on Louise, whose characterisation indeed sounds more realistic than all the other figures (put together),

but whose existence within the framework of the story itself remains confined to a hazy and borderline site located between pure imagination and reality. “It’s as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?”, (Winterson, 1992: 189) wonders the narrator at the end of the plot, instilling more than a simple doubt in the reader’s mind about her role and agency. The idea that Louise’s seemingly realistic depiction ultimately undermines itself is also identified by Gilmore who, in a completely different situation, maintains: “The excessivity of Louise’s gendering in the context of the narrator’s self-representation casts Louise’s ‘reality’ into doubt. She is a gendered object in a hyperreal sense: she is almost a phantasm.” (Gilmore, 2001: 132) Therefore, the chance that Louise need not always be a real character on the stage, but a ghostly figure behind which the narrator shields her/his uncertainties or vulnerabilities is a theory that other critics have chartered, too. In this context, I wholly agree with Head when he claims that “[t]he problem for the narrator of *Written on the Body* is that the overwhelming negativity of lost love can be overcome only by a kind of dubious fantasy projection”. (Head, 2002: 103) Again, according to my interpretation of the story, the genesis of the plot lies in the narrator’s painstaking assertion of her/his identity – what Kauer means when she argues that “[t]his is no longer self-discovery, but rather self-construction”. (Kauer, 1998: 41) The blissful relationship with Louise allows her/him to reach her/his goal, but her/his decision to leave her, although for her sake, compromises all previous gains. Her/his consequent resilience not to surrender to the idea of the conclusion of the (finished) romance can surely find a sentimental explanation, but it can also – and mainly – be explained in terms of a defence of her/his acquired sense of identity. It is at this time that Louise becomes a “spectral” (Gilmore, 2001: 140) entity, a mere figuration that enables the narrator to keep a hope alive. Rubinson’s comment sounds most appropriate in this regard: “In the end, we know very little about Louise: that she has red hair, that she’s Australian. Nearly everything else is the narrator’s subjective construction of her as an erotic object”. (Rubinson, 2001: 226) It is right at this juncture that the circle closes, because a crucial premise of erotic literature is to remain centred

on unattainable goals. Of course, this is only possible on the condition that the realm of reality is abandoned and the narrative switches towards an imaginary dimension. In their psychoanalytic-bent introduction to erotic literature, the Kronhausens remark that “[i]t is in the nature of sex fantasies that they are, to a large extent, so unrealizable that they are seldom acted upon. And that is exactly their therapeutic function”. (Kronhausen and Kronhausen, 1969: xii) This is what I ultimately find intriguing in an analysis of *Written on the Body* as an erotic story: its curative and beneficial intent for the narrator’s anguished mind. At a later stage in the novel, in truth, we may imagine that Louise’s erotic projection for the narrator serves the purpose of safeguarding the assumptions of the sex/gender identity that the affair with (the real) Louise had created.

3. TOWARDS AN IDEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION

No erotogenics follows from conventionally sex-marked sites, body parts, zones — no penis, labia, clitoris, breasts, but also no anus, no nipples. No ‘source’ sites or parts from which substitutes are drawn — the site of pleasure and pain is, more comprehensively, the body. (Gilmore, 2001: 135)

Gilmore’s summary highlights how language works to describe the bodily interaction of the lovers: now, although – as I have already shown – it is not always true that a mention of the erogenous zones is disdained, this statement certainly resonates when generally casting an eye over the text. Instead, the lack of directness and explicitness ought to be contextualised in a wider set of norms that create meaning out of textual forms such as ellipses, erasures and omissions in such a way that they markedly characterise the fictional work. Silence pervades most of *Written on the Body* in various ways, on different levels, with diverse outcomes. Of course, the most remarkable feature of this fictional work concerns the manner in which the narrator’s identity and gender are permanently elided from the text. However, “[t]he book’s “secretive” structure” (Guess, 1995: 32) has far wider implications than this. Absence, the result of

elision, can be said to extend possibly to all domains of this romantic tale, since the plot deals with an affair between an unnamed narrator of unidentified gender with a woman who gradually vanishes. In other words, the plot records the sad evolution of a love story between a protagonist of lost identity with a woman who is gradually lost as the story unfolds, reinforcing the impact of “the repetition of loss as a central motif”. (Gilmore, 2001: 133) In addition, Gilmore also comments on the brief central section of the novel inspired by medical language as “the four lessons on the anatomy of absence”, (Gilmore, 2001: 140) whereas Guess identifies Louise’s cancer as a further reference to absence and loss: “The narrator’s discovery of Louise’s illness functions as a stand-in for her/his discovery of Louise’s “lack””. (Guess, 1995: 33)

As is evident, Winterson’s decision to carve a story from emptiness is eminently ideological in purpose and shows her as a militant deconstructivist feminist literally intent in the dismantling of the sex and gender categories. A long radical tradition criticising gender (first) and sex (at a later stage) as cultural artefacts harks back to the studies on Freud and his theory on castration complex, that have eventually driven Butler to argue that “[t]he female sex is thus also *the subject* that is not one”. (Butler, 1990: 15) Just a little anterior to the publication of *Written on the Body*, Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is in fact the text that has over time become the flagship of Queer Studies. Their nearly coeval publication – as well as their parallel and subversive message – has created an invisible thread associating the theoretical discourse engaged in Butler’s text (although this text by Butler and Butler herself as a feminist cannot be said to be the only ones that originated this parallel) to the creative elaboration by Winterson, as many works of critical analysis to *Written on the Body* testify. The lesbian orientation of both Butler and Winterson, and their consequent agenda which placed the lesbian subject at the heart of gender discourse has proved immensely constructive and decisive for the interpretation of Winterson’s novel. Hence, when Butler, by calling into question Wittig, claims in favour of a fresh recognition of the lesbian subject and asserts that “one can, if one chooses, become neither

female nor male, woman nor man. Indeed, the lesbian appears to be a third gender or, as I shall show, a category that radically problematizes both sex and gender as stable political categories of description”, (Butler, 1990: 144) the core issue of absence, denial or elision gains a subversive tone that any reader of *Written on the Body* can easily recognise. Although the critical interpretations to the novel do fluctuate – in some case even significantly – there is a wide consensus among critics now about establishing that “her narrator is neither male nor female”, (Finney, 2006: 178) therefore showing the weight of Butler’s approach in the analysis of Winterson’s novel. Indeed, “*Written on the Body*, whatever the sex of its narrator, is a queer novel with a queer plot”. (Lanser, 1995: 255) It is in this context that the trope of absence and lack finds an appropriate collocation and ideological feedback, since it has become one among the most recognisable metaphors for a representation of the lesbian identity, segregated by heteronormative culture into an invisible niche. In her analysis of the social recognition dispensed to lesbians in Western civilisation and culture, Castle has extensively referred to the allegorical figure of the phantom to focus her point on the stigma that has historically been reserved for them: “Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian — even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been “ghosted”— or made to seem invisible — by culture itself”. (Castle, 1995: 4) Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, with her spectral narrator “whose sex is forever a mystery”, (Lanser, 1995: 260) and Butler with her militant feminism have offered a large contribution to the subversion of heterosexist discourse in two completely different cultural contexts by using a subversive gender parody technique that has proved successfully queer.

It would be wrong however to consider the ideological and erotic discourses as separate paths in *Written on the Body*, since they create a solid – albeit not always apparent – connection, mostly because it is evident that for Winterson their alliance may help reach their distinct targets. The subversive agenda that Queer Studies endorse can capitalize from the transgressive programme supported by erotic literature and vice versa; both aim at upsetting ethical, normative, prescriptive standards, both make wide use of provocation in order to reach their goals. As

for erotic literature, Perkins correctly underscores that “erotic writing is a threat to the conventional moral order — Dionysus calling to the demons of the unconscious — and general literature is seldom so directly threatening.” (Perkins, 1977: 14) In this sense we should not be sidetracked by the ‘silenced’ message that erotic writing in the case of *Written on the Body* sustains, because it constantly undermines the heterosexual and patriarchal matrix of normative discourses. In view of this, I fully subscribe to Makinen’s contention that Winterson’s novel displays “a transgressive, specifically lesbian sexuality”. (Makinen, 2005: 117) Nor should we, for the same reason, suppose that the ideology of loss and absence – so relevant in the deconstructive agenda of Queer Studies – cannot equally hold for erotic writing. In his analysis of *Written on the Body*, Finney claims that “[I]ack is what produces desire. Similarly in Winterson’s novel desire is consistently linked to a sense of lack, absence or unobtainability.” (Finney, 2006: 182)

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