

## **“Desiring,” or Simply Human: Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body***

Jeanette Winterson is a novelist who has conspicuously defied traditional literary standards in her work in the past twenty years and yet critics are constantly tempted to define her against such standards<sup>1</sup>. A white male conservative or a lesbian, a mid-stream or a feminist critic, each one tries to see a program in what she writes or, most often, the glaring lack of it. The obvious infatuation with language and stylistics is what makes Winterson a demanding author and, equally, a difficult one to stomach in critical terms, especially if one is on the look out for programs and manifestos. Such misplaced criticism could be read in the words of a book critic in the *Sunday Times*, for example, who sees in Winterson “a propensity for scrawling the graffiti of gender-spite across her pages.” (Kemp 1994: 1) The blame here is on the direct, honest depiction of lesbian relationships where the males are dispensable or non-existent. Conversely, a criticism that Winterson somehow fails to promote well enough the gay cause could be found in the comments of a critic like Patricia Duncker who writes about *Written on the Body* in particular that it is “a text full of lost opportunities. Winterson refuses to write an ‘out’ lesbian novel.” (1998: 85)

If today, in the context of modern British literature, the author of *Harry Potter* has blown out of proportion our common understanding of the concept of celebrity, Winterson undoubtedly follows in the steps of writers like D. H. Lawrence, Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf who have embodied the notion of notoriety among writers. Outspokenly gay, yet never capitalizing on the fact, she simply *is*. As Winterson claims, “I am a writer who happens to love women. I am not a lesbian who happens to write,” and this is something one has to accept before approaching her novels and essays in order to appreciate them in their own right. (1995: 04) The emphasis that Winterson places here could be read from the point of view of what the novelist considers her first duty: this is the duty to language, style and expression, not the duty to produce easily consumable philosophy, be it feminist, lesbian or any other. In response to the numerous attacks that her books are merely monuments to man-hatred or to lesbian love, that sex and gender function as props rather than as corner stones of narration, Winterson replies straightforwardly that nowadays the issue of gender is actually playing a lesser role in her life as a writer and an individual. That is why in an interview she answers honestly, “I see it as less important as I get older. I no longer care whether somebody’s male or female. I just don’t care.” (qtd in Bilger 1997: 102)

---

<sup>1</sup> I refer here to standards of narration and experimentation with the point of view and characters, for example, as understood by narrative theory. Surely, much of what we consider “postmodern fiction” relies exactly on such breaking up with tradition, but many examples can be found also in earlier literature, from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759) to William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

Since the publication of her novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), which won the prestigious Whitbread Award for a first novel, Winterson has embarked on a journey of exploration, not of exploitation, of the resources of fiction. Although most critics have readily acclaimed the new sexual politics at work in this particular book, very few have dwelt on “the way that language plays a constitutive role in the construction of the narrator’s sexual subjectivity,” as Finney points out. (2000: 1) This, however, is a serious drawback, since every subsequent novel of Winterson shows a deeper and more sophisticated engagement with language rather than with narration or gender politics.

Her next three novels, *Boating for Beginners* (1985), *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) already re-define the relationship between writer, narrator, and language. Her next novel, *Written on the Body* (1992), straightforwardly engages the reader in a dialogue on the value of language and the issue of identity, as well as leads us towards a meditation on the vicissitudes of love and their most often clichéd representations in literature. Here Winterson openly breaks up with one of the sacred words in the craft of fiction, “plot,” to denounce what she sees as its self-serving purpose. She writes, therefore, “I realized that [...] plot was meaningless to me. [...] I had to accept that my love-affair was with language, and only incidentally with narrative.” (1995: 155) In this sense, *Written on the Body* reads more like a stylized exploration of language which only partially employs plot as an element of the story and binds narration to the service of language rather than vice versa.

Winterson chooses purposefully to play with narrative instability: in *Written on the Body* this is the instability of using an ungendered narrator and, therefore, refusing the reader the comfort of “knowing” the character. As she says about the book,

All my work is experimental in that it plays with form, refuses a traditional narrative line, and includes the reader as a player. By that I mean that the reader has to work with the book. In the case of *Written on the Body*, the narrator has no name, is assigned no gender, is age unspecified, and highly unreliable. I wanted to see how much information I could leave out – especially the kind of character information that is routine – and still hold a story together. (<http://jeanettewinterson.com...>)

Left without any secure directions from the author and thus accepting the role of a “player,” the reader is forced to acknowledge that what drives the novel is not the male/female identity of the characters, but rather language itself: language which demands precision of expression in what seems an intimate research on a well-known subject, the subject of love. As a player, then, the reader can only collaborate in deciphering the nature of love through language which at the same time bends the boundaries of clichés and invents a new expression for this perennial subject.

The issue of the lesbian relationship, as attractive as it might be for analysis, appears only as a background in the novel rather than as its center. In this sense, I would agree with Finney who argues that *Written on the Body*

[...] focuses on the power of language to create both subjectivity and sexuality, and that to concentrate exclusively on the politics of the lesbian subject blinds reviewer and critic alike to the preoccupations and very real distinction of this novel. (2000: 1)

The interesting question, in my view, is how the Unconscious and language create subjectivity and sexuality through the workings of drive, symptom, and love, not simply what gender roles the characters in the novel choose to perform. I will very briefly touch upon the issue of sex and gender, then, not because there is no point to engage in a feminist reading of the novel, but because, personally, I also find the sex and gender issues to be supplementary to the analysis of *Written on the Body*. In other words, while critics readily analyze the novel as “lesbian” and, therefore, as yet another off-spring of gender politics, the shift of attention to language and the Unconscious can lead us to focus on the individual psyche and the construction of subjectivity. A psychoanalytic reading can help in the interpretation of the forces that shape the subjectivity of the undeniably complex narrator in the book, and these forces, first of all, are psychic, and “gay” or “lesbian,” or “heterosexual” only in the second place.

We can hardly deny, of course, that gendering, or gender-choice, is normative and subject-formative, and as Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, that it allows for the “appropriation of the speaking ‘I.’” (1993: 3) The ‘I,’ though, is a linguistic shifter which evades gendering *per se*. Gendering for the subject, however, is only possible through the initiation into the Symbolic order<sup>2</sup> which is done in language and through the agency of already gendered subjects (a “father” and a “mother” in the traditional case). The dissolution of the Oedipus complex and the advent into language is what initially sparks for the subject the process of gendering proper so that a position, or a role, is chosen. Butler further describes how the gendering of the subject produces at the same time “a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject.” (1993: 3) She argues also that such a domain is one of necessary exclusion: that it is a “site of dreaded identification against which, and by virtue of which, the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claims to autonomy and life.” (1993: 3)

Read from this perspective, the narrator in *Written on the Body* belongs to the “abject domain” because of its ungendered identity. In this case Stevens’ argument, for example, is that, even for communicative purposes, the possibility of an ungendered person is problematic, for she claims in an article,

I am forced to use “s/he” or “him/her” since calling the narrator “it,” reinforces the idea that such a person could not exist as a subject, but only as an abject, unlivable body. However, using “s/he” and “him/her” also seems to be inappropriate since they too reinforce, through language, the binary understanding of gender. The narrator is not part “she,” part “he,” but rather is something other, which perhaps could be described as the slash

---

<sup>2</sup> “Symbolic order” here refers to the famous Lacanian concept.

between “she” and “he” rather than as the words on either side.  
([www.ags.uci.edu](http://www.ags.uci.edu))

While I acknowledge the obvious difficulty in choosing an appropriate pronoun for a correct reference, I cannot agree that using a slash to convey the “otherness” of the narrator will be a way out of the situation. Just on the contrary: in my mind, if one accepts like Stevens that the narrator stands for “otherness,” and hence belongs to the abject domain, it will mean that to accept that choice of gender – in this case the narrator choosing a gay identity – is an act of self-abjection. It seems to me that what Butler refers to has to do with the subject’s *perception* of an other as “abject,” not that the “abject” exists and, therefore, needs a name to be found between the slash in he/she. For the purpose of naming, I will choose to refer to the narrator in *Written on the Body* singularly as “she” and “her” for two reasons. First, I consider that there is no quality of “otherness” that *a priori* positions the narrator outside of some ideal world of heterosexual subjects, and second, that the pronoun “she” already bears in itself the idea of differentiation compared to the generalized use of “man” and “he” to stand for mankind. In this sense, using a “she” does not aim at emphasizing the lesbian nature of the relationships: as a matter of fact, there are at least two examples in the novel of the narrator’s choosing men (Crazy Frank and Carlo) as sexual partners, while still mostly interested in women. Even if we choose the term “bisexual” to describe the narrator, it will only refer to the actual practice of sex without reference to her complex relationship with language or to her self-realization as a subject.

It seems to me that one of the premises from which Winterson writes can be connected to what Derrida once playfully called “sexual otherwise,” namely the position that, “[...] there would be no more sexes, there would be one sex for each time.” (1987: 199) If we agree with Derrida, then, it means that what Winterson achieves in *Written on the Body* is not simply to dispense altogether with the notion of a gendered narrator, but to displace gender from the idea of stability and sexual identity, and to create a picture of sexuality as fluid and multiple, as something which “literally breaks in from the outside... reaches the subject from *the other*.” (Laplanche, Pontalis 1968: 10) The sexual choices of the narrator is not what makes ultimately *Written on the Body* an intriguing novel, but the ways in which she tells the story of these choices and makes the language of love as if almost tangible.

“Love found, love lost, love found again – maybe.”

If in his work Freud constantly revisits the problems of the Unconscious, human sexuality, and love being aware of the intricate relations between them, *Written on the Body* fictionally dramatizes these relations through the search for love and the fear of losing the love object. In this novel anxiety functions as a point of frustration for a narrator who has to solve one too many riddles: the riddles of love and individual desire, of life and death, and of mourning the ultimate loss of a love object. Winterson very successfully balances the representation of the search for love

with the meditation on the nature of love. The language to express this search makes the novel a philosophic contemplation rather than a picaresque novel of exploration and love conquest. The search for love in *Written on the Body* is not the quest that romantic literature exploits, yet Winterson, on the other hand, is not interested in a strictly realistic narration either: she remains in the middle of a discourse on love that problematizes the way one perceives, thinks, and speaks about it in a world of dreams and in reality.

How is the search for love managed, then, in the novel and in Freudian theory? As Freud writes in his paper “The Dynamics of Transference” (1912),

If someone’s need for love is not entirely satisfied by reality, he is bound to approach every new person whom he meets with libidinal anticipatory ideas; and it is highly probable that both portions of his libido, the portion that is capable of becoming conscious as well as the unconscious one, have a share in forming that attitude. (1912: 100)

Here Freud makes an observation that once again undeniably connects the Unconscious to the need for love: what the subject does not know is that the search for a loved one is only partially an act of will and that there is something unknowable that drives her along. Despite the effort of the conscious to channel the search for love into what is reasonable and advisable, the unconscious portion of the libido responds to something that irresponsibly leads the subject to find love in most unlikely objects. Thus, as Freud points out, “Originally we knew only sexual objects; and psychoanalysis shows us that people who in our real life are merely admired or respected may still be sexual objects for our unconscious.” (1912: 105) So, it could be a man, it could be a woman, it could be anyone that stirs the phantasy-world of the subject and responds to the need dictated by the libido.

Since the overall meaning will hardly be obscured, I will continue using the term “drive” in the analysis of *Written on the Body*, although the obvious reference will be to the specific “drive derivatives” of the characters in the novel. What Freud was arguing over and over again in his papers, namely that the sexual drive is one of the keys in deciphering human behavior, Winterson manages to convey the same idea in a novel about the precariousness of love and the need of the subject to confront this fact. The sexual drive that dictates the search for satisfaction for the narrator is only one side of her greater quest for self-realization through love. In her own descriptions the narrator in *Written on the Body* is a searching spirit who is not afraid of experimentations with lovers and love, or... of getting burned in the process. As she says, “I had been an emotional nomad for too long,”<sup>3</sup> so that after an array of women (and men), the narrator finally finds the beloved one which is not just a sexual partner, but someone who responds to her psychic needs to possess and be possessed by the love object.

---

<sup>3</sup> Winterson, J. *Written on the Body*. London: Vintage, 1993, p. 38. Further references in the text will be to this edition and will be given only with page number in parenthesis.

The quest for the beloved one passes through a series of relationships of questionable success. The narrator honestly tells the stories of the many failed relationships that hardly teach her a lesson – for what is there to learn but that one needs to carry on the quest for love? Those relationships definitely leave a deep mark in her memory and also reinvent for the reader the notion of a romantic setting cherished by the traditional understanding of love: for example, the relationship with Inge, the Dutch anarchy-feminist whose strategy is to blow up urinals in Paris as the symbols of patriarchy. Or with the Botanical Gardens keeper, Judith, who locks her out of the greenhouse in the middle of winter, naked after a sexual escapade, and then burns her clothes. Or having sex with the unnamed girlfriend always in the open, until one day “back at the doctor’s for the fifth time having a thistle removed,” he tells her, “You know, love is a beautiful thing but there are clinics for people like you.” (20)

The humorous tone that the narrator uses at times and the somewhat self-deprecating stand are merely a cover up for the more complex attitude towards the psychic need for self-exploration through love. For example, very early in the novel, she even acknowledges, “I can tell by now you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator.” (24) First, there is an obvious narcissistic indulgence for her in the possession of what she has wrongfully considered a “love object” in the different relationships before Louise, the one and only true beloved. Thus, in Freudian terms, love has a purely narcissistic origin since

Love is derived from the capacity of the ego to satisfy some of its instinctual impulses auto-erotically by obtaining organ-pleasure. It is originally narcissistic, then passes over on to objects, which have been incorporated into the extended ego, and expresses the motor efforts of the ego towards these objects as sources of pleasure. It becomes intimately linked with the activity of the later sexual instincts and, when these have been completely synthesized, coincides with the sexual impulsion as a whole. (1915a: 138)

For the narrator in *Written on the Body* every one of these failed relationships is marked by covert narcissism, even if she is an altogether generous lover. The issue for her has to do with the reality of taking and to a lesser extent with giving, so that a sort of parasitic *status quo* is established between her and every temporary partner she gets for a while. So she admits,

I’m addicted to the first six months. It’s the midnight calls, the bursts of energy, the beloved as battery for all those fading cells. I told myself after the last whipping with Bathsheba that I wouldn’t do any of it again. I did suspect that I might like being whipped, if so, I had at least to learn to wear an extra overcoat. (76)

Temporally set, the stretch of happiness seems to be about six months long or so. Maybe only the heart-breaking fallout with Bathsheba, her happily-married dentist and lover, breaks the rule, although she feels throughout this three-year “after work, five to seven” relationship that “We sank lower and lower in our love-lined lead-lined coffin.” (16) Unable to share with Bathsheba anything but the bed in a few stolen

hours, arguing with her about what is reasonable and what is not, and feeling guilty for hiding the truth from friends, the narrator is forced to accept Bathsheba's position that, "Telling the truth, she said, was a luxury we could not afford and so lying became a virtue, an economy we had to practise." (16) And thus the story painfully goes on until the moment when the narrator gives the ultimatum to be expected in such situation: Bathsheba has to choose between her lover and her husband, which she does by going on a six-week trip to South Africa with the husband. After their return Bathsheba admits that she might have contracted a venereal disease from her husband who has contracted it during one of his business trips, but she has just forgotten to tell her lover about it. For the narrator the betrayal is not simply commensurate with the danger of contracting a disease, but also with Bathsheba's choice to pretend even more and keep what has been "the perfect public marriage" for ten-twelve years, despite the fact that the marriage is a total sham. (45)

The chronic inability of the narrator to nurture and keep relationships, in my view, cannot be simply dismissed as a problem of difficult lesbian or bisexual relationships. It seems to me that in this case she is caught in the ultimate net of repression and production of neurotic symptoms as interpreted in psychoanalytic terms. As Freud writes in his paper "Repression" on the connection between repression and symptom,

Further, we know that repression leaves *symptoms* behind it. May we then suppose that the forming of substitutes and the forming of symptoms coincide, and, if this is so on the whole, is the mechanism of forming symptoms the same as that of repression? The general probability would seem to be that the two are widely different, and that it is not the repression itself which produces substitutive formations and symptoms, but that these latter are indications of a *return of the repressed*... (1915b: 154)

The interesting point in this statement comes, no doubt, in the end of this passage and it is connected to an analysis of repression. To go a step back before discussing the symptom formation, repression in the Unconscious is understood by Freud as "primal," i.e. the repression of the "psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious,"<sup>4</sup> and "secondary," where it affects "mental derivatives of the repressed representative, or such trains of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with it." (1915c: 148) The symptom, as it becomes clear from the extended passage quoted above, is not a product of repression, but an indicator that there is a "return of the repressed" at work. The symptom, in other words, denies the logic of the conscious and is considered something alien to it, yet it cannot be contained in the Unconscious either. What Miller aphoristically claims, then, relates to the "accidental" format of the symptom, that "There can be no symptom without reference to some symphony itself disturbed by a dissonance, by an unexpected accident." (<http://www.lacan.com...>)

---

<sup>4</sup> Here again the term "instinct" stands for the German *Trieb* which, it has been argued, is better translated in English as "drive."

For Freud in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), the failure of repression results in a signal that danger is threatening the conscious. A number of inhibitions which the ego imposes on itself result in an attempt to move away from the danger, “in order not to have to undertake fresh measures of repression – *in order to avoid a conflict with the id.*” (1926: 240) One vicissitude of the drive, “the transformation into affect,” can lead to the appearance of anxiety which serves as a necessary prerequisite for a symptom formation and is a catalyst for its intensive production. Thus, the ego seems to generate anxiety in order to create the power necessary to combat the threatening impulses from the Unconscious or to flee from an imminent danger. The symptom formation relieves the situation at least temporarily by removing the ego from the immediate danger through a substitutive formation in the place of threatening instinctual process. For the narrator in *Written on the Body*, then, the repression – of whatever initial psychic material there might be – is never completely exercised and the production of anxiety and symptoms is fully at work. The numerous relationships with men and women turn out to be fruitless escapades that fuel merely a few months of passion that soon afterwards grow into a burden and source of frustration. As she admits,

I had done to death the candles and champagne, the roses, the dawn breakfasts, the transatlantic telephone calls and the impulsive plane rides. I had done all of that to escape the cocoa and hot water bottles. And I had done all of that because I thought the fiery furnace must be better than central heating. I suppose I couldn't admit that I was trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as my parents' roses round the door. (21)

Every next lover turns to be a “symptom” of the narrator, a symptom of returned repressed which could not be overcome by merely changing the setting. Psychoanalytically defined, she is an obsessive neurotic at war with her own ego which demands unconditional narcissistic love; when unsatisfied and threatened with an inevitable loss of what has seemed temporarily to be a loved object, it produces more and more anxiety and symptoms. As Samuels reads the difference between the hysteric and the obsessive from a Lacanian perspective,

The neurotic symptom represents a compromise solution between the two extremes of amoral sexuality and the morality of the self. What serves to differentiate the hysterical symptom from the obsessional symptom is that the hysterical symptom or resolution occurs most often on the surface of the body, while the obsessional symptom is most often an internal thought. (1993: 87)

For the narrator in *Written on the Body* the obsessional symptom is exercised internally as a thought, as an obsessive return to the search for love in contemplation and to a redefinition of the language of love. The fear that the next lover Jacqueline, the one that she takes as a “last ditch” and a return to the world of the “simple and ordinary,” is so overwhelming so that the “love” lasts just a few months. Despite the illusions that “Its worth lies in the neatness. No more sprawling life for me. This is container gardening,” this relationship also turns into a failure. (27) “Container

gardening,” though, seems to be completely disastrous because it is not fulfilling enough the demand of the ego to find a cherished beloved. Even the numerous scenarios of the “normal life” of other people she creates in her mind, while secretively observing their windows in an attempt to achieve a kind of voyeuristic pleasure, fail to bring the desired satisfaction. The symptomatic failure and the flight from the relationship with Jacqueline, as it turns, is yet another attempt to salvage her ego from a potential danger of losing oneself in a pointless relationship. To use again Lacanian vocabulary, the Other has threatened with a surplus of desire but has proven inadequate to the demand for love of the subject.

Although after the fact the narrator in the novel asks herself, “Is there no other way? Is happiness always a compromise?” she cannot compromise and continue the suffocating relationship with Jacqueline. (74) The symptom in this case seems to limit the sexual excitation onto an unexpected organ – the mind – and on one polyvalent signifier “love.”

The first encounter with Louise is the moment when the narrator realizes that a fulfilling love is possible with this person and only with her. There is a very thin line between romance and reality in the depiction of this relationship, and Winterson purposefully plays with this distinction. By crisscrossing between the domain of clichés about love nurtured by romance literature for centuries and the domain of neologisms that make the language of the narrator so fascinating, the writer manages to convey a sense of odd novelty. For example, unlike the typical romance heroine who is usually seduced or involved into a relationship, Louise uses a trick to get to know the narrator after seeing her earlier, and even following her to her apartment. So, on a rainy evening, simulating a car problem that happens in front of the narrator’s apartment, and using the “old trick” of Lady Hamilton who knew well how to provoke Admiral Nelson’s interest, Louise meets officially the narrator. Later Louise admits, “When I saw you two years ago I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen. [...] You are a pool of clear water where the light plays.” (84-85)

The narrator, on the other hand, constantly mixes registers and discourses – biology, anatomy, meteorology, physics, the bible – in order to express most precisely her complex relationship with Louise. Once it is a rather traditional description of the beloved as a dark Gothic character, but then she has an extremely poetic comparison, “She opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She’s refilled each day with fresh tides of longing.” (73) Or another ingenious way of describing the beloved which rather breaks up with the idealization typical of the romance tradition when the narrator admits,

If I were painting Louise I’d paint her hair as swarm of butterflies. A million Red Admirals in a halo of movement and light. There are plenty of legends about women turning into trees but are there any about trees turning into women? Is it odd to say that your lover reminds you of a tree? Well she does,

it's the way her hair fills with wind and sweeps out around her head. Very often I expect her to rustle. (28-29)

These examples once again point to the fact that the obsessional symptom of the narrator is manifested as an internal thought: one aiming at a perfect grasp of the beloved object through the language of love, at any rate, as perfectly as possible. In other words, the thought and the thinking process itself are sexualized, not just the body of the subject. Hence her search for novelty and the despair that she expresses over the necessary cliché "I love you,"

Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? 'I love you' is always a quotation. You didn't say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them. (9)

The same concern expresses Louise also by saying that "It's the clichés that cause the trouble," and the same is repeated by the narrator several times. (189) It seems as if it is not just the sexualization of thought but the overall sexualization of language that drives the narrator into the search for the true love expression in a time when postmodern citationality and commodification has made the language of love "dispersed among banalities, poetry, the sacred, tragedy." (Belsey 1994: 693)

If falling in love, as Salecl argues, is "the recognition of the narcissistic image that forms the substance of the ideal ego," it means that the ego searches for an ideal and a model on the basis of which it could be seen in a different light. (1996: 187) In other words what Salecl claims is that,

When we fall in love, we position the person who is the object of our love in the place of the ideal ego. We love this object because of the perfection that we have striven to reach for our own ego. (1996: 187)

Once that a love object, Louise, is found and gets in the place of the ideal ego, what is at work in the case of the narrator in *Written on the Body* is a search for the language that describes that ideal ego, for the same process turns also into a source of authentication for the own ego. This is what she thinks about the numerous times in previous relationships when she has used, blasphemously, the most precious cliché, "I love you,"

You were careful not to say those words that soon became our private altar. I had said them many times before, dropping them like coins into a wishing well, hoping they would make me come true. [...] I had given them as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better. I have used them as bullets and barter. (11)

It seems that this time, in the relationship with Louise, the narrator has reached the point of saturating language with sexuality and sexuality with language. This point, however, is not of satisfaction but still of continuous anxiety. For every moment of reassurance and bliss is doubled into a moment of pain and frustration. The least source of frustration seems to be the fact that Louise is also married, not happily but

comfortably, to a successful medical researcher. In contrast to Bathsheba who chooses the comforts of a sham marriage, Louise is ready to leave her husband for her lover because she also does not believe in compromises. From this point of union the narrator tells a blissful story of happiness, and yet there is something ominous lurking in the background of their idyllic love.

The fact that Louise has leukemia, and may have a few months to live, breaks the momentum of the narrator's quest for total happiness and forces her to face the possibility of losing the love object to a force bigger than love itself. Although such a situation is a stock material in the typical romance story, Winterson is very careful not to breach the line and trivialize the novel by fabricating a sentimental retreat of the narrator who cannot cope with the loss. Quite on the contrary, while the narrator really escapes from London into "dirty, depressing, and ideal" Yorkshire, thus giving no chance to Louise to reconsider following her husband for a treatment in Switzerland, she gets whole-heartedly into the exploration of another equally powerful discourse – the discourse of death. (106) She displays the same infatuation with this new language as she displays with the language of love, this time though contemplating the impossible force that robs both her vocabulary of meaningful signifiers and her life of a love object. In the face of a loss or a potential loss of the love object, psychoanalysis teaches, the ego has no recourse but to fall into mourning or melancholia.

The striking difference between mourning and melancholia, according to Freud, is that in mourning there is no loss of self-regard while melancholia completely dispenses with it. In a Lacanian sense, then, the melancholic is a pathological mourner since she misunderstands the lack of the object for the loss of the object, and this is a false premise since what is a lack cannot be lost. In other words, in mourning the ego is still functioning albeit some "departures" from the normal, while in melancholia the ego is locked onto an impossible task. For the narrator in *Written on the Body* the departure from the normal is clearly one of an obsessive search for meaning in death while death *a priori* defies common meaning. This is how she first becomes an obsessive reader of books about cancer, and then compulsively visits the cancer ward of the local hospital in search of "something" that can restore meaning,

I continued my training as a cancer specialist. They got to call me the Hospital Ghoul down at the Terminal Ward. I didn't care. [...]

'What do you want?' one of the junior doctors finally asked me.

'I want to know what it's like. I want to know what it is.' (149)

Learning the jargon of death and accepting its language, however, is not simply an act of defeat, for the narrator. Unless this language of death is internalized and reworked in the psyche, she sees a similar danger of giving in to the recurrent banalities that supposedly cure us from a loss of a loved one,

'You'll get over it...' It's the clichés that cause the trouble. To lose someone you love is to alter your life for ever. You don't get over it because 'it' is the

person you loved. The pain stops, there are new people, but the gap never closes. How could it? The particularness of someone who mattered enough to grieve over is not made anodyne by death. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no- one else can fit in. (155)

The point which the narrator makes here has an extended reference to the basic Freudian notion of identification. What he considers is that identification is a “preliminary stage of object-choice [...] in which the ego picks out an object,” and consequently the ego wants to incorporate this object into itself. (1915c: 249) It means that once the love object is selected, the ego cherishes it as its own part. In this sense the narrator in the novel is correct that no other object can take exactly the same place if the love object is lost. What remains possible for her, though, is again to change the discourse and to meditate on the elements that make the love object what it is, singular and precious. The narrator engages into a complex discourse that combines the language of anatomy and poetry in order to express simultaneously the transience of the flesh and the eternity of the beloved object, so she says,

I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away. (111)

The narrator dwells poetically, point by point, on the body of the beloved, not eulogizing the usual poetic sources like the hair and eyes, but focusing surprisingly on the clavicle bone or the body cavities for example. This part of the novel uses the confessional tone of religious writing, yet the text is extremely loaded with poetic tropes and sexual notes. In the final outcome, as the narrator confesses, it is a book written *on* the body of the beloved, not *about* her body, which makes it a text of almost religious magnitude,

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain light; the accumulation 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. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book. (89)

Ultimately, the recurrent question that the narrator has is “Why is the measure of love loss?” and, no doubt, there is no answer that she achieves at the end of the novel. The book ends as a semi-dream, or a semi-reality, in an open way, as if inviting the reader to comply with the role of a player and go on beyond the last sentence on the page. So, “love found, love lost, love found again – maybe,” as Winterson will unobtrusively suggest and will let us choose our own “better” ending. The writer also has only the question but not the answer to the enigma that entwines love and loss,

and there is no pretense that *Written on the Body* will ever offer such an answer to the reader. However, the book conveys a special sense that the way to the answer is inevitably connected to the very experience of love.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Belsey**, Catherine. "Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire." *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 683-705.
- Butler**, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Derrida**, Jacques. "Women in the Beehive: a Seminar with Jacques Derrida." *Men in Feminism*. Ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. New York: Methuen, 1987. 189-203.
- Duncker**, Patricia. "Jeanette Winterson and the Aftermath of Feminism." *I'm Telling You Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*. Ed. Helena Grice and Tim Woods. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1998. 77-88.
- Finney**, Bruce. "Bounded by Language: Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*." 26 January 2005 <<http://www.csulb.edu/~bhfinney/Winterson.html>>.
- Freud**, Sigmund. "The Dynamics of Transference," 1912, *SE* XII. 99-108.
- . "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," 1915a, *SE* XIV. 109-140.
- . "Repression," 1915b, *SE* XIV. 146-58
- . "Mourning and Melancholia," 1915c, *SE* XIV. 237-260.
- . *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, 1926, *SE* XX.
- Kemp**, Peter. "Writing for a Fall." *Sunday Times*, 26 June 1994, Section 7: 1-2.
- Laplanche**, J. and J.-B. Pontalis. "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 49 (1968). 12 June 2003  
<<http://www.essex.ac.uk/lt/lt204/phantasm.htm>>.
- Salecl**, Renata. "I Can't Love You Unless I Give You Up." *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek. Durham: Duke U Press, 1996. 178-205.
- Samuels**, Robert. *Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Stevens**, Charles R. "Imagining Deregulated Desire: *Written on the Body*'s Revolutionary Reconstruction of Gender and Sexuality." 23 June 2003  
<<http://www.ags.uci.edu/%7Eclwega/revolutions>>.
- Winterson**, J. Interview with A. Bilger. *The Paris Review* 145 (1997-98): 68-112.
- . *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995.
- . *Written on the Body*. London: Vintage Books, 1993.
- . Interview with M. Marvel. *Interview* 20.10 (October 1990): 165-168.

