

University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy –  
Department of English Studies, Novi Sad

DOI 10.5937/kultura1650115K  
UDK 821.111.09-31 Винтерсон Џ.  
originalan naučni rad

# WHAT APPEARS IS NOT WHAT IS: JEANETTE WINTERSON'S ART & LIES AND THE PASSION

---

**Abstract:** *It would be no mistake to state that among the commonest routes contemporary literature in English takes is one of asserting history's and reality's fictionality and dissolving the boundary between real and imaginary. The route is certainly common enough in the work of the controversial British author Jeanette Winterson, whose prose is a never-ending interplay between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. Winterson's critically neglected *Art & Lies* (1995) epitomises the disintegration of clear-cut lines between (auto)biography, history and fiction through a set of binaries like art/life, art/lie, or fact/fiction, transforming our ideas of truth and lie. Similar concerns inform *The Passion* (1987), which is more universally praised. The parallels between the two works suggest a continuum in Winterson's literary explorations of the nature of truth and reality, the status of fiction and historical record, and the usefulness of binaries and labels. This paper aims at exploring how these polyphonic prose pieces rebel against single points of view, redefine the notions of history as fact and storytelling as fabrication, and exhibit a preference for the truth of the imagination and unofficial perspectives.*

**Key words:** *Art & Lies, fiction, history, Jeanette Winterson, The Passion.*

For decades now, literature has been indulging in an “assault on the dividing line of fiction and non-fiction”<sup>1</sup>, resulting in a host of non-fiction novels or faction narratives, autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiographies, as well as other hybrid texts combining fictional and non-fictional resources. This tendency

---

1 Cobley, P. (2001) *Narrative*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 182.

---

goes hand in hand with the decline of grand narratives as self-perpetuating phenomena advertising their own truths, partly prompted by an increased interest in identity politics.<sup>2</sup> Although Jeanette Winterson does not wish to be aligned with any particular political agenda, her writing is imbued with open critique of metanarratives from a variety of standpoints, of which the feminist and the lesbian are by far the most frequently discussed. The stridence of her criticism justifies the wide-spread view that Jeanette Winterson is arguably one of the most provocative British authors today, well-known for her “metanarrative, self-reflexive texts that deconstruct the divisions between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, and masculinity and femininity, and rewrite intertextual references from the Bible to fairy tales”.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true of her writing since *The Passion* (1987), a work which marks a shift toward “a much more openly fantastic and lyrical kind of fiction”.<sup>4</sup> Both *The Passion*, an imaginative dance between history and storytelling, and *Art & Lies* (1995), a fragmented, scattered treatise on art, history, fiction and lies, to name but a handful of themes, move in this direction. The one critically praised, the other unjustly discredited, they freely combine fiction and non-fiction to undermine the metanarratives of history, science, religion, progress and patriarchy, sometimes making it impossible to distinguish between fact and fabrication, truth and lie.

Despite the richness of Winterson’s oeuvre only hinted at in the above quote, her career serves as testimony to the sometimes taxing “cultural trend towards treating writers as celebrities”.<sup>5</sup> Like Martin Amis’s *The Information* (1995), her prose work *Art & Lies* suffers the fate of books by authors involved in media scandals, and is disregarded by critics primarily for reasons outside literature, but also for its seemingly “pretentious and arty”<sup>6</sup> nature. *Art & Lies* is a complex and sombre piece, introduced by an excerpt on the nature of art from the Oxford lectures on poetry by A. C. Bradley. A work of art is not intended to be a part or a copy of the real world. It is an independent, complete and autonomous world in itself which passes its own laws. Entrance is granted only to those who abide by these laws, leaving behind the beliefs and conditions of the other

---

2 Ibid., pp. 183-189.

3 Makinen, M. (2005) *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 3.

4 Omega, S. (2006) *Jeanette Winterson*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 54.

5 Andermahr, S. (2009) *Jeanette Winterson*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 40.

6 Omega, S. op. cit., p. 131.

world of reality. Winterson's narratives at the intersection of modern, postmodern, feminist and lesbian writing, yet eluding each and one of these labels, favouring aesthetics over politics, historiographic metafiction over history, fantasy over realism, write their own rules and expose truths inherent to them. *Art & Lies* is part of this Blakean effort to disintegrate the world we live in and create new ones, "connected to the reality of our desires"<sup>7</sup> and organised around the principle "[w]hat appears is not what is".<sup>8</sup> As Handel, the single male narrator in *Art & Lies*, discloses early on, "[i]t could be that this record set before you now is a fiction".<sup>9</sup> The record is offered up as a truth in itself – "I try to tell the truth,"<sup>10</sup> says Handel – which is why it only *could* pose as fiction. Such statements reveal Handel's attempt to be a contribution to the subversion typically found in Winterson's work, "of the liberal humanist grand narratives of Knowledge, Truth, Meaning and History".<sup>11</sup>

To question them, *Art & Lies*, Winterson's most difficult, hermetic and inaccessible work, employs fantasy as "a social imaginary that does not offer a singular metadiscourse" and as a powerful "critique of contemporary desensitization and alienation".<sup>12</sup> The fact that it is also one of her most poetic works adds to this critique by fighting desensitisation with an abundance of poetic images, as well as words and phrases whose sound contributes to the meaning.

"The note bells the beauty of the stretching train that pulls the light in a long gold thread. It catches in the wheels, it flashes on the doors, that open and close, that open and close, in commuter rhythm."<sup>13</sup>

We shall see that such sentences speak of a style which creates a strong bond between body and word, emphasising "the 'body' of the word [...] through repetition of sounds and an elaborate incorporation of rhythm".<sup>14</sup> The heightened lyricism of *Art & Lies* represents a verbal counterpart of the composition which inspired the structure of this virtually plotless piece of fiction, Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, and its poetic flavour is

---

7 Burns, C. L. (1996) Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word, *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 37, No. 2, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 302.

8 Winterson, J. (1995) *Art & Lies*, London: Vintage, p. 52.

9 Ibid., p. 30.

10 Ibid., p. 32.

11 Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 19.

12 Burns, C. L. op. cit., pp. 286, 292.

13 Winterson, op. cit., p. 3.

14 Burns, C. L. op. cit., p. 280.

---

only part of the reason why this work is denied the status of a novel. Namely, Winterson avoids using the term to refer to her works, preferring “fiction”, as she believes the novel belongs to nineteenth-century realism. In that sense, the novel is now dead and replaced by works so diverse in form and content that they lose a common character.<sup>15</sup> Hence, this highly intertextual and self-referential work is defined by its subtitle as “A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd”, with alternating and overlapping voices of characters who represent transpersonal minds switching from first-person narration to third and back.

*Art & Lies* therefore partakes in questioning the status of fiction, or more specifically, of the novel as form and genre, through the now familiar, yet original, slipping across the border between literature and (auto)biography. Handel is and is not the famous composer, Picasso is and is not the artistic genius, and Sappho is and is not the legendary poet, which “effectively erases the difference between recollection and invention”,<sup>16</sup> with the many transformations of gender, voice and identity complicating the matter. Winterson’s treatment of history as a fiction illustrates her lack of belief in the truth of history<sup>17</sup> and prompts her to rewrite it through fictional symbols of arts – music, painting, and literature – modelled on historical figures. Literature is no stranger to rearranging and remoulding facts, public or personal, and in an interview for *The Guardian*, Winterson comments on the need to “sacrifice a fair bit of fact” if you can “tell a good story”,<sup>18</sup> which equally applies to historical and autobiographical facts. Like the rest of her fiction, *Art & Lies* is certainly but unmeasurably seasoned with numerous details from Winterson’s life, from her sexual orientation to her interest in the life stories of books. However, the endeavour to retrace them is rendered futile as “[o]nly a fool tries to reconstruct a bunch of grapes from a bottle of wine”,<sup>19</sup> and no chapters relate this better than those of Sappho, whose relationships were reconstructed from her verse. The kaleidoscopic change of Handel’s, Picasso’s and Sappho’s narratives creates an intricate web of fiction, reality, art, lie and truth, mutually entangled beyond recognition. Fiction is declared not the truth of the reader’s reality but the truth of

---

15 Bilger, A. (1999) Jeanette Winterson, *The Art of Fiction* No. 150, *The Paris Review*, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1188/the-art-of-fiction-no-150-jeanette-winterson>

16 Onega, S. op. cit., p. 139.

17 Childs, P. (2005) *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 264.

18 Brooks, L. (2 September, 2000) Power Surge, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/02/fiction.jeanettewinterson>

19 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 56.

the newly born fictional world, and its siren's call is the author/narrators luring us to trust this truth. "I'm telling you stories. Trust me." from *The Passion* is the reverberating mantra of Winterson's entire opus.

The first to take you around the shifting sands of fact and fiction in non-linear, "fragmentary, repetitive and even sometimes contradictory"<sup>20</sup> narration is Handel, former priest and surgeon specialising in breast cancer. He describes himself as "doctor, Catholic, admirer of women, lover of music, virgin, thinker, fool",<sup>21</sup> deeply contemplative, strict, yet highly sensitive. His asceticism verges on masochism: "I prefer to be slightly cold, slightly hungry, to spend less on myself than I could, [...] to hold my desires just out of reach of appetite, to keep myself honed and sharp".<sup>22</sup> It might or might not be related to his being a castrato with a restrained libido – not a eunuch, as reviews and criticism assert all too often – easily coerced into the operation by a much older Cardinal, his one-time mentor and lover. Having as a child experienced what he even now does not understand as molestation and mutilation, then having thrown away his one chance of love, Handel approaches the crude, violent and unhappy world around him with brittle and sophisticated irony, aimed particularly at human nature and progress. As such, he is a perfect vehicle for Winterson's exposure of the grand narratives of religion and science, dependent on human perception and subjectivity, and reliant on the metanarrative of progression, as purveyors of lies.<sup>23</sup>

Another exposé of lies the society spins about itself is Picasso, a woman painter in a world which holds the opinion that a woman who paints is like a man who cries – "Both do it badly."<sup>24</sup> She is born of an act of rape and grows up in a closed-minded patriarchal home presided by an arrogant and egocentric father. It is a home which admits of no other roles for women, or men, but the traditional ones, and knows no alternative paths in life. This is why in a house with two staircases, the private and the public, only Picasso sees the private one, expectedly her own. She is a "difficult child" because she refuses to choose the "easy public route" and is now "way out past good behaviour and common sense" to fit in.<sup>25</sup> In the eyes of her family, she would

---

20 Onega, S. op. cit., p. 134.

21 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 26.

22 Ibid., p. 7.

23 Ginette Carpenter qtd. in Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 91; Cobley, P. op. cit., p. 187.

24 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 38.

25 Ibid., pp. 41, 43.

---

be acceptable only if she conformed to the authorised images of women since the patriarchal system her family represents allows for no women who paint, wear their hair short or nourish lesbian sentiments. Despite the society's disparaging attitude to her, she becomes an artist little interested in "notions of fine art or popular art, second-rate art or decorative art. There was just art and not-art."<sup>26</sup> Paintings, which she sees as "extraordinary events [...] not objects fixed by time", save her from the "genteel sadism" of her parents' home where women's voices cannot be heard.<sup>27</sup> Picasso's stepmother utters few sentences of her own and merely parrots those of her husband: "'She lives in Paradise,' said Sir Jack, whenever he thought of his daughter. 'You live in Paradise,' said her mother".<sup>28</sup> Society's denial of facts, as well as women's voices, and its fictionalisation of reality is exemplified by Picasso's family. The truth of her abuse by her half-brother lies buried under sentimental stories the family tells during holidays, so instead of sexual abuse, the stepmother, for instance, remembers her children sleeping in the same bed like puppies, and wonders why Picasso never visits her brother. "Lies are comforting, so long as they can be believed", and the entire family is involved in a "conspiracy to lie", using the past like a "set of rooms to be washed and decorated according to the latest fashion".<sup>29</sup>

The narrative of the third main protagonist, Sappho, provides an example of just such washing and decoration at the hands of history. Her chapters paint a portrait of her as a woman whose mythical persona has eclipsed the real woman. From the opening paragraphs she goes straight for the heart of the matter by telling the reader about the gap between Sappho as the archetype of sexuality – history narrates "a proliferation of strikingly bizarre and contradictory legends" but very few facts about her life – and Sappho as the neglected poet, pointing to the "falsity of the views on herself and her work passed on as historically accurate and truthful".<sup>30</sup>

"I am a sexualist. [...] Say my name and you say sex. [...] *What have you done with my poems?* [...] It isn't surprising that so many of you have chosen to read between the lines when the lines themselves have become more mutilated than a Saturday night whore."<sup>31</sup>

---

26 Ibid., p. 38.

27 Ibid., pp. 39, 41.

28 Ibid., p. 40.

29 Ibid., p. 43.

30 Onega, S. op. cit., p. 140.

31 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 51.

---

The style of her sections is an act of reclaiming poetry and uniting Sappho the archetype and Sappho the poet. For this reason, when she speaks to us “the word and sex are one [...] Language and sex are brought together through an eroticization of speaking [...] and playing on the sensate properties of language – the rhythm, sound, and effect of mouthing such words linked together by overlapping consonants”.<sup>32</sup> The content of her story builds upon Picasso’s life in exemplifying yet again the uneasy destiny of the female artist. Addressing the claim of Dr Johnson, a lexicographer, that a woman cannot be a poet, Sappho poses a crucial question: “What then shall I give up? My poetry or my womanhood? [...] In the end the choice has not been mine to make. Others have made it for me.”<sup>33</sup> From her difficult position, Sappho “invokes the imaginary as a ‘truth’”,<sup>34</sup> revealing to us that facts and givens of the real world do not hold the truth – if marriage is a piece of paper, church approval, or the facts of a roof or bed, then she is not married<sup>35</sup> – and her very life serves to prove it.

“Her body is an apocrypha. She has become a book of tall stories, none of them written by herself. Her name has passed into history. Her work has not. Her island is known to millions now, her work is not.”<sup>36</sup>

This is precisely why her voice is the most persuasive in exposing “the objective as relative and history as at best partial”.<sup>37</sup>

The subplot contained in the eighteenth-century manuscript entitled *The Entire and Honest Recollections of a Bawd*, part memoir, part erotic fiction which “parades itself as autobiography”, highlights the notion of the objective as relative and confirms Sappho’s often quoted view that “[t]here’s no such thing as autobiography, there’s only art and lies”.<sup>38</sup> The subplot, which compares to the main plot like *opera buffa* to *opera seria*,<sup>39</sup> complements the theme of art’s sublimeness and timelessness by focusing on a low character, a bawd, Doll Sneerpiece, who is nevertheless an artist in her own right. Doll’s art is sexuality and her muse the young, uninterested Ruggiero, a character much like Handle, chaste, bookish, noble and scholarly. The

---

32 Burns, C. L. op. cit., pp. 293-294.

33 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 52.

34 Burns, C. L. op. cit., 293.

35 Winterson, op. cit., p. 58.

36 Ibid., p. 69.

37 Childs, P. op. cit., p. 265.

38 Winterson, J. op. cit., pp. 29, 69.

39 Onega, S. op. cit., p. 139.

main plot's great regard for art, particularly the written word, is counterbalanced by Doll's attitude to the book as "nothing [...] but a box of dainty handkerchiefs to wipe myself against once off the pot",<sup>40</sup> which she then contradicts when she reads Sappho's poetry, ludicrously, in the original. She is almost a "prostitute-cum-scholar" and "shares key traits with Sappho, the Greek poet whose love poems were condemned as indecent and pornographic",<sup>41</sup> if somewhat parodically. Doll also shows genuine admiration for a different kind of reading, calling the reader's attention to the often praised symbiosis of text and body found throughout Winterson's lofty prose.

"And if I were to say that I would care to turn the pages of that gentleman one by one, and to run my fingers down his margins, and to decipher his smooth spine, and to go on my knees to enjoy his lower titles, and to upturn that one long volume that he keeps so secret to himself, what would you say?"<sup>42</sup>

This supposedly factual erotic memoir is treated as a fiction whose completeness and honesty is to be doubted due to its reliance on memory and, inevitably, selection. The one who points to its unavoidable flaws as fact is, interestingly enough, Handel, who himself admits that he feels "more comfortable with the seeming than the real",<sup>43</sup> and whose chapters, like those of Picasso, represent an effort to remember, "spinning around the same crucial events [...] each time yielding more revealing information".<sup>44</sup> The effort is doomed to resort to fictionalisation due to the fallibility of memory in accurately recalling the past, so Sappho articulates it for all three of them: "I shall not manage to remember."<sup>45</sup>

The play between appearances and reality is refracted through the stories of all these characters, "traumatized by abuse – [...] mutilated poetry, castration, rape", while "each discloses deep feelings of alienation in the modern world".<sup>46</sup> Winterson explores the idea through the binaries of art and life, fiction and fact, truth and lie, and the inability to tell the one from the other seems accentuated by character doubles (castrated Handel/Cardinal's former lover, scholarly and queer Handel/

---

40 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 6.

41 Onega, S. op. cit. 140.

42 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 6.

43 Ibid., p. 122.

44 Onega, S. op. cit., p. 134.

45 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 138.

46 Childs, P. op. cit., pp. 258-259.



Ruggiero, pornographic and scholarly Doll/Sappho, lies-mending, self-reclaiming, lesbian and suicidal Picasso/Sappho<sup>47</sup>), and two of the characters' double names (Handel/Frederick, Picasso/Sophia). In other words, Winterson sets out to "collide the real and the imaginary worlds", and prove that "the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel".<sup>48</sup> Within such a framework, the author examines sexuality, imposed and self-chosen identities, as well as gender. Like Winterson's other works, *Art & Lies* represents gender as performance, "masquerade" as a "queer device" according to Sonya Andermahr,<sup>49</sup> or play – as Winterson herself commented in *The Guardian's* Live chats, she is interested in gender play rather than gender roles.<sup>50</sup> Unlike *The Passion* or *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Art & Lies* depends less on cross-dressing than on gender change, and is more focused on its relation to voice, its absence or transformation. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Winterson explains how this theme in *Art & Lies* relates to *Der Rosenkavalier*.

"In opera in the eighteenth century, the composer—say Handel or Mozart—would simply write for a particular voice. He wouldn't think, Is this a man or a woman? He liked that voice and would write a part. So when the person got on stage, sometimes they'd have to be a man and sometimes a woman. This does *not* happen in the nineteenth century. You don't see it again until Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* in 1911, which is extraordinary. It does tell us so much about the nineteenth-century sensibility about gender, a huge fear of anything crossing over."<sup>51</sup>

Winterson's exploration of voice and gender, their overlapping and crossing over, again plays on the idea of appearances vs. reality, truth vs. lie, which brings to light the rigidity of patriarchal relations and roles. It potentially "caricatures the male characters as either incestuous predators, misogynistic murderers, or breast surgeons with an over-eager knife", so

---

47 Herein lie some of the many uncertainties defying factual representation in *Art & Lies*. Does Picasso survive the attempted suicide? Does she commit suicide at all, or does her father push her? Or rather, is the murder she hints at literal or metaphorical? These questions mirror the mystery surrounding Sappho's suicide – does she kill herself over a ferryman or over her lover Sophia? "I know from my own experience," says Sappho "that suicide is not what it seems." Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 134.

48 Winterson, J. (2001a) *The PowerBook*, London: Vintage, p. 93.

49 Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 23.

50 Winterson, J. (7 September, 2000) Live chats, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/sep/07/livechats>

51 Bilger, A. op. cit.

---

Winterson's treatment of men is pronounced "just as sexistly offensive as the abuse she depicts against women".<sup>52</sup> While the roles she assigns to most of her male characters are undoubtedly insignificant or negative, Handel is an exception, perhaps because he is a celibate castrato. Instead of the latent or overt sexism in Winterson's characterisation, though, it might be more to the point to focus on the characters' queerness. Together with the cross-dressing and possibly homosexual Ruggiero and one-time cross-dressing Doll, Handel, Picasso and Sappho "fit the notion of queer characters, the two women as lesbians and Handel as a castrato, [...] so in themselves they all problematise gender roles and expectations".<sup>53</sup> They question all monolithic views of reality, not only those concerning gender and sexuality, so their being queer is accompanied by an ability to see multiple layers of reality and understand the blurred borders between truth and lie. Handel presents London as three cities in one, the ceremonial, the political, and of course, the invisible, and Picasso knows that the public staircase in her family home, the "right" staircase, "a broad certain sweep, that moves in confident curves upwards" is not "the only way up through the house".<sup>54</sup>

Alternative realities, paths, personae, identities, narratives and truths, coupled with Winterson's approach to form, structure and language in fiction, mark *Art & Lies* as one of the most striking examples of her experimental prose which shows no respect for spatial or temporal boundaries. Fictional protagonists/historical figures from different periods and geographies are brought to the same spatiotemporal point of contemporary London – they are and are not contemporaries – by art as a contrast to the brutal world of the city, a world of violence, disease, illegal immigrants, squatters, fear, dejection, frivolousness, vapidness, spiritual poverty and, most importantly, death – "All art belongs to the same period. [...] Art defeats Time."<sup>55</sup> Their interconnected narratives<sup>56</sup> rewrite official or authorised truths and breathe an air of fantasy which "attaches to the 'real' of emotions or passions that need be drawn back into focus through [...] fantastic disruptions of the static, deadening acceptance of

---

52 Makinen, M. op. cit., p. 132.

53 Ibid., p. 139.

54 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 41.

55 Ibid., p. 67.

56 To name only a few connections, both Picasso and Sappho witness the building of Handel's new cancer clinic, Sappho lives in the invisible city Handel informs us of, Picasso was brought to this world with the help of Handel's peculiar medicinal technique, cunnilingus, and the main protagonists read Doll's memoir while Doll reads Sappho's poetry.

‘reality’ as status quo”.<sup>57</sup> The endlessly transforming piece for three voices, the narrative trio inspired by *Der Rosenkavalier*, reflects the spatiotemporal context of *Art & Lies*, with change (of place, time, gender, voice, person) and repetition (of sounds, phrases, chapters<sup>58</sup>) as the only constants. The three narrative threads of this extraordinary polyphony are finally woven into one when the characters meet on the same train, with the underlying sense that theirs is perhaps “an afterlife journey through the world of art and the imagination”.<sup>59</sup> Picasso embarks on the train after her suicide and, years ago, Handel experienced a car accident on his way to the train station. Sappho, who is, curiously enough, from the invisible city where “[p]eople vanish every day”,<sup>60</sup> and from 600 BC, witnesses Picasso’s fall and follows her. Her task is to guide them on a journey from “the city 2000 After Death”<sup>61</sup> to their final destination in the underworld. This unifying move provides no sense of resolution though. Through its denial, resolution is presented as a lie. If their quest is also for truth, it too is denied a sense of resolution as “[t]he search for truth is tainted with willing falsehoods”.<sup>62</sup> The world is obsessed with (re)solutions but all are temporary since “[t]hings are continually beginning again; they’re never really resolved”.<sup>63</sup> “How long had they been on the train? Days? Hours? Months? Weeks? Years? Always? Never?”<sup>64</sup>

Described as “a metacommentary on the relationship between art and life”<sup>65</sup> or “a Babel Tower of self-multiplying mirrors”,<sup>66</sup> *Art & Lies* is a fiction which confirms that certainty is a lie. In its questioning and careful evasion of certainty, the work falls in line with the rest of Winterson’s oeuvre – an excellent and frequently discussed example is the unknown gender identity of the narrator in *Written on the Body* (1992), which frees the text from straightforward interpretations, turning it into an unsolvable enigma. In *Art & Lies*, as in *The Passion* or *The PowerBook* (2000), the only certainty is “the constancy of

---

57 Burns, C. L. op. cit., p. 301.

58 Omega duly takes notice of the repetitions and inversions in the rotating structure of *Art & Lies* that suggest “both temporal circularity and the complementarity of the characters’ life stories”. Omega, S. op. cit., p. 134.

59 Andermahr, S. op. cit., pp. 94-95.

60 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 68.

61 Ibid., p. 67.

62 Ibid., p. 140.

63 Bilger, A. op. cit.

64 Winterson, J., p. 153.

65 Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 44.

66 Omega, S. op. cit., p. 137.

---

change”.”<sup>67</sup> The motto of Winterson’s literary worlds is that “not all facts are known and what is known is not necessarily a fact”, to which she adds the rule of subjectivity that applies even to scientific truth: “A great deal of scientific truth has later turned out to be its observer’s fiction.”<sup>68</sup> Truth as a fact is unsustainable when reality and identity are in constant flux. With art as a transtemporal, absolute value, and love as a transcendent value, this idea is among the three key themes in Winterson’s fiction.<sup>69</sup> Unaccepting of the concept of historical truth, Jeanette Winterson erases the line between history as fact and storytelling as non-fact.<sup>70</sup> Her fiction rewrites history, the Bible, myths, fairy tales, legends, and innumerable literary works, including itself, presenting history and science as stories and permitting no one “correct” version of any story. In an interview for *The Guardian* after the publication of *The PowerBook*, Winterson said: “I believe in art as the true means of not telling the truth. You’re not setting out to deceive. You’re setting out to find an ultimate reality”.”<sup>71</sup>

Similar thematic and formal concerns inform Winterson’s third prose work *The Passion*, which suggests that the interplay of fiction and reality, art and lies, constitutes the central focus of her oeuvre and can be traced back to her earlier writing. As mentioned above, *The Passion* marks a shift from Winterson’s autobiographical debut novel *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and her comic retelling of the story of Genesis in *Boating for Beginners* (1985), veering towards the fantastic and the magical, and reflecting her understanding of art as a “daily rebellion against the state of living death routinely called real life”.”<sup>72</sup> *The Passion* exemplifies Winterson’s interest in the creative employment of history, myth and legend in equal measure and on equal footing. The text is typically perceived as an example of historiographic metafiction, a mode which “foregrounds the role of storytelling and narrative in historical discourse and challenges the notion of history as a series of acts”.”<sup>73</sup> It privileges marginal perspectives, fantasy over realism, plurality of stories over single authoritative History. The narrative is set in the period of Napoleonic conquests in the early nineteenth century, and it is against this historical backdrop that

---

67 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 57.

68 Ibid., pp. 29-30.

69 Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 25.

70 Ibid., pp. 20, 28.

71 Brooks, L. op. cit.

72 Bilger, A. op. cit.

73 Andermahr, S. op. cit., pp. 60-61.

the narrative foregrounds characters and perspectives normally omitted in official historical records. Through alternate narratives of the two protagonists, Henri and Villanelle, Winterson brings together the perspective of the conqueror and the conquered, male and female, in an attempt to show that a single perspective is myopic and unreliable, and that an inclusive approach to history and reality is “the most trustworthy way of seeing the world, because truth is not singular but multiple and relative”.<sup>74</sup>

The story is narrated in four sections, the first focusing on Henri’s experiences in the French army. This section is titled “The Emperor”, pointing to the first of several passions the narrative dwells on. Henri is a soldier-cum-cook, hardly fit for warfare, slender, gentle and reluctant to kill even a mole, let alone an enemy soldier, yet he admires the emperor with a passion which remains undiluted even after a series of disastrous decisions. Henri likens the obsession with Bonaparte with love: “We are in love with him”.<sup>75</sup> It is also suggested that Henri’s obsession is a shared national one: “He was in love with himself and France joined in. It was a romance. Perhaps all romance is like that; not a contract between equal parties but an explosion of dreams and desires that can find no outlet in everyday life”.<sup>76</sup> Henri’s feelings towards Napoleon are described in contradictory terms: “He is repulsive and fascinating by turns”<sup>77</sup>, suggesting that a more complete understanding of such complex phenomena may be achieved only by turning to paradox, but also exposing such worship as part of a grand narrative that reveals itself as a lie. The British enemy, on the other hand, is reviled and demonised: “We *knew* about the English; how they ate their children and ignored the Blessed Virgin. How they committed suicide with unseemly cheerfulness”.<sup>78</sup> Such “knowledge”, as exaggerated and unfounded as the worship of Bonaparte, is mocked and dismissed, in favour of the precarious truth offered by storytelling.

The name of the other protagonist, Villanelle, suggests the obsessive need to repeat, reiterate and rework past motifs. Villanelle refers to a highly structured poetic form which centres on the repetition of certain lines and is for this reason frequently associated with the exploration of obsession.<sup>79</sup>

---

74 Makinen, M. op. cit., p. 77.

75 Winterson, J. (2001b) *The Passion*, London: Vintage, p. 8.

76 Ibid, p. 13.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., p. 8, emphasis mine.

79 Jason, P. K. (1980) Modern Versions of the Villanelle, *College Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 136-145.

---

Similarly, Winterson's "questing protagonists enact cyclical courses striving for passions to reinvent, transform and refresh themselves".<sup>80</sup> Repetition of key themes and motifs across Winterson's fiction is in itself reminiscent of a villanelle. Villanelle's name could also be read as an echo of Villeneuve, the French admiral leading the Franco-Spanish fleet against Nelson in the Battle of Trafalgar, one of the crucial naval battles of the Napoleonic wars. This reminder of Napoleon's defeat at the hands of the British is contrasted with the fantastical preparations for invading Britain Henri recounts in the first section. The plans involve digging a tunnel to England and landing in a balloon,<sup>81</sup> and are immediately exposed as mere flights of fancy: "All folly, but I think if Bonaparte had asked us to strap on wings and fly to St James's Palace we would have set off as confidently as a child lets loose a kite".<sup>82</sup> In this way, Winterson illustrates the seductive power of illusion and the readiness to believe in the fantastic, however misplaced it may be: "We believed him. We always did."<sup>83</sup>

The outrageous stratagems are placed firmly within the historical framework of the narrative, as another reminder that "the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel". The plans, deemed "absurdly easy" at first,<sup>84</sup> are contrasted with the disastrous attempt at crossing the Channel, which ends in the death of two thousand men. Patrick, one of Henri's brothers in arms, explains the mass drowning as the work of mermaids in the Channel waters. The allure of Bonaparte is equally bewitching: the drowned infantry is easily replaced within a single day. However, the glory of his army will be countered by intimations that its horses are lame and its men disposable.<sup>85</sup> In the third section, titled "The Zero Winter", Henri love turns to hate, which is defined as its counterpart, as love disappointed. The charm of Napoleon's persona will be exposed as fiction, which is signalled through images of performance and theatricals: "like a circus dog he thought every audience would marvel at his tricks, but the audience was getting used to him".<sup>86</sup> However, in exposing the artifice of the Napoleonic myth,

---

80 Cox, K. (2008) 'I was in the red forest and she was leading me home': Representations of the Maze and the Labyrinth in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer), p. 123.

81 Winterson, J. (2001b) op. cit., p. 20.

82 Ibid., p. 21.

83 Ibid., p. 79.

84 Ibid., p. 20.

85 Ibid., p. 64.

86 Ibid., p. 80.

Winterson exposes the complicity of those who are deceived by its splendour. As Henri realises, “I invented Bonaparte as much as he invented himself”.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to the myth of the Emperor, Henri’s wartime experiences abound with rumours and hearsay, instances where fact and fiction, the rationalist and the fantastic, are blended and blurred. Henri tells stories about his military life to prospective soldiers, which he “embroiders and invents” because “it made them happy”.<sup>88</sup> Patrick tells Henri stories of fantasy and magic, like the one about his boots magically downsized by “the little people”;<sup>89</sup> his is a “world of goblins and treasure”.<sup>90</sup> Patrick is also said to possess miraculous vision which enables him to see further and more clearly than others. Although reports of his superior vision are laughed at and dismissed as “old wives’ tales” in the camp, they are also associated with privileged insight and deeper wisdom, as is Patrick’s magical eye. Patrick’s ability to see more clearly than others is coupled with his belief in the magical. In this way, the narrative privileges the irrational and the fantastic over the objective and the factual. Paulina Palmer also notes that the usual subject matter of official historical record – military campaigns, warfare and conquest – is contrasted with stories that focus on the emotional and the subjective.<sup>91</sup> In addition to his proclaimed love for Napoleon, Henri’s memories of the war are intertwined with memories of his childhood, particularly his fond memories of his mother. These are provoked by sensory details, such as the smell of porridge, recollected in contradictory terms as “sweet but with an edge of salt”.<sup>92</sup> In Winterson’s fiction, such contradiction is a prerequisite to the discovery of truth.

After the mass drowning, Henri starts keeping a diary, as a bulwark against the eroding force of memory: “I started so that I wouldn’t forget. So that in later life when I was prone to sit by the fire and look back, I’d have something clear and sure to set against my memory tricks”.<sup>93</sup> This provokes a discussion on the nature of truth and memory between Henri and Domino, another fellow soldier. As a textual document that aspires to facticity,

---

87 Ibid., p. 158.

88 Ibid., p. 30.

89 Ibid., p. 39.

90 Ibid., p. 45.

91 Palmer, P. (1998) *The Passion: Storytelling, Fantasy, Desire*. In: Grice, H. and Woods, T. (eds.), *I’m Telling You Stories*: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading, Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, p. 108.

92 Winterson, J. op. cit., p. 25.

93 Ibid., p. 28.

---

the diary is dismissed as misleading and false, as Domino warns Henri about its ultimate unreliability: “‘The way you see it now is no more real than the way you’ll see it then.’ [...] ‘What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we’re still alive, and say you’ve got the truth?’”<sup>94</sup> The purpose of Henri’s diary, however, is not to record the objective truth: “I don’t care about the facts, Domino. I care about how I feel. How I feel will change, I want to remember that.”<sup>95</sup> In this way, Winterson transforms a historical narrative about the Napoleonic wars into a deeply personal narrative about passion and disappointment, illusion and disillusionment. The refrain that echoes through Henri’s section, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me”, acts as a constant reminder of the higher validity of fiction, but also as a warning about the impossibility of distinguishing between what is real and what is invented. Palmer also notes the ambiguity of the demand for trust, which insists on the veracity of the narrative, and the use of the word “stories”, suggesting the artificial nature of the text before the reader.<sup>96</sup>

The second section, titled “The Queen of Spades”, is narrated by Villanelle and reiterates some of the main motifs of Henri’s section. His passion for Napoleon is paralleled by Villanelle’s passion for the mysterious and seductive Queen of Spades, and both sections lead up to the same point in the chronology of the narrative: New Year’s Day, 1805. Such structural similarities foreshadow the characters’ meeting in the third section, where they flee the horrors of Napoleon’s campaign in Russia. The polyphony of the narrative intensifies, with their two narrative voices alternating within a single section, so that the story of Villanelle’s marriage is embedded in Henri’s narrative in the third section, and Henri’s self-imposed exile to the asylum on San Servolo is narrated by both narrative voices in the final section, “The Rock”. Villanelle’s narrative is set in Venice, which is represented as a labyrinthine space that exposes and underscores the unreliable nature of reading and maps – be it the compass or the storyline the reader navigates. The importance of the maze motif in Winterson’s fiction has already been noted.<sup>97</sup> Katharine Cox reads Winterson’s use of the maze as a meditation on the act of reading itself, stating that “Henri’s confused wanderings reflect our own within the text”.<sup>98</sup> The Venetian setting therefore embodies the fluidity and unreliability of physical pathways, precarious and frequently submerged, but also of textual cues,

---

94 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

96 Palmer, P. *op. cit.*, p. 109.

97 See Cox 2008.

98 Cox, K. *op. cit.*, p. 114.



which fail to provide definitive answers and revel in ambiguity and equivocation. Furthermore, the repetition of motifs and phrases is reminiscent of the experience of wandering around a maze and ending up at the same junction.

Frequent references to mirrors further underscore the repetitive nature of the narrative. As Susan Onega has observed, the presence of mirrors also suggests an alternative reality, a Wonderland-like world beyond the limits of the ordinary.<sup>99</sup> This is precisely what the protagonists find in Venice, “the enchanted city” where “the laws of the real world are suspended” and “all things seem possible”,<sup>100</sup> where “you may lose your soul or find it”.<sup>101</sup> In choosing to include “the mercurial city”<sup>102</sup> as the setting of her narrative, Winterson again points to the impossibility of a stable, unequivocal knowledge and truth. Instead, in favouring fiction, disguise, and ultimately lies, the text suggests that they may also be sources of understanding and knowledge. Palmer also notes that Venice itself is portrayed as a city of contradictions, a place of lush excess epitomised by the carnival, but also of death and darkness.<sup>103</sup> Accordingly, Henri’s journey ends on the Venetian island of San Servolo, in an asylum, echoing Bonaparte’s exile on St Helena. After the murder of Villanelle’s husband, Henri loses touch with reality – or is perhaps transported to an alternative one. The ghostly visitations he reports may be dismissed as the delusions of a madman, or given credence as alternative versions of the truth.

Villanelle’s narrative further questions the stability of fixed categories, by foregrounding the theme of disguise and duplicity. Indeed, in her section what appears never is what is, as even seemingly solid concepts are questioned and redefined from a different perspective. As Palmer notes, Villanelle is associated with mermaids,<sup>104</sup> by virtue of her webbed feet, but rather than being the temptress, she is the one who falls prey to the fatal lure of the Queen of Spades. Bridges “join but they also separate”<sup>105</sup> and “although wherever you are going is always in front of you, there is no such thing as straight ahead”.<sup>106</sup> Not merely epigrammatic, these examples point to the need in Winterson’s writing to resist fixity and remain wary of definitive statements

---

99 Onega, S. op. cit., p. 73.

100 Winterson, J. (2001b) op. cit., p. 76.

101 Ibid., p. 57.

102 Ibid., p. 49.

103 Palmer, P. op. cit., p. 114.

104 Ibid., p. 110.

105 Winterson, J. (2001b) op. cit., p. 61.

106 Ibid., p. 49.

---

of truth or fact. The unreliability of appearances and fluidity of identity is perhaps most readily illustrated by the motif of cross-dressing and the unstable nature of Villanelle's gender which destabilises binaries and, in recalling Butlerian definitions that transcend the binary model of gender, questions the necessity of gender as a category. Cox also points to the dual gendering of the city of Venice, which is simultaneously referred to as the "Bride of the Ocean" and represented by a masculine lion.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, Villanelle has the body of a woman, but possesses a host of masculine features. She is unusually tall for a woman and androgynous in appearance. She has webbed feet, along with the ability to navigate the city's labyrinthine streets and walk on water, features typically associated with male boatmen. She dresses as a boy while working in the Venetian casino and sometimes outside of it. Such ambiguities point to the impossibility of confining Villanelle within a single category of gender, but also to the impossibility of a single signifier to encompass the totality of truth. The truth of Villanelle's gender identity is to be discerned only in the rejection of the binary, as she muses: "Was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters?"<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the truth of Winterson's narrative, which reveals the intricacies of human passion, is to be found only at the intersection of reality and fantasy.

The theme of disguise, the question of appearances and what lies beneath them, is further explored in the third section, when Henri, Villanelle and Patrick adopt a series of guises in order to escape the war and reach safety, changing their nationality to suit the allegiance of their hosts. National identity is therefore reduced to a category entrenched in politics, rather than praised as an essential feature of one's identity. The absurdity of their disguise is not lost on Henri:

"And if I had thrown off my disguise? What then, would I have turned into a devil before their eyes? (...) it seems we are as we appear. What a nonsense we make of our hatreds when we can only recognise them in the most obvious circumstances."<sup>109</sup>

The question is echoed when Henri kills Villanelle's husband, the villainous cook: "Can saints and devils be so alike?"<sup>110</sup> The narrative insists that the truth is inevitably somewhere in between the polarities of representation. Another example may be found in Winterson's portrayal of masculinity, which in *The*

---

107 Cox, K. op. cit., p. 127.

108 Winterson, J. (2001b) op. cit., p. 66.

109 Ibid., p. 105.

110 Ibid., p. 127.

---

*Passion* takes either the form of the feminised, mostly celibate Henri, and the savage, abusive masculinity of the cook. Both of these models are exposed as simultaneously authentic and exaggerated, truthful and fictional. The aggressive masculinity of the cook is undercut by his homosexuality, and Henri's fragility is contrasted not only with the savage murder he commits but also with the added mutilation of the body.

Stories told in the narrative are those of passion and obsession. Rooted in historical events, they make no claims to greater veracity as a result. On the contrary, the carnage of the Napoleonic wars at times seems more surreal and unbelievable than Villanelle's webbed feet. "There are stranger things", as her father notes.<sup>111</sup> Palmer also suggests that the pairing of a historical figure with fictional characters contributes to the blurring of the two categories and to the interplay between life and art:

"The interplay she creates between historical personages and fictional characters has the effect of problematizing the distinction between history and literature by blurring the difference between the two. The interplay also, of course, alerts attention to the difficulty we encounter in gaining access to figures and events from earlier periods. Since no objective knowledge of them is available, they become known to us only from their textualized traces."<sup>112</sup>

Spatiotemporal experimentation, discussed with regard to *Art & Lies*, can be observed in *The Passion* as well, where it reflects the narrative's concern with the nature of history. Its historical setting is juxtaposed with Domino's assertion that "there is only now", "*there is only the present*".<sup>113</sup> *The Passion* does not observe temporal chronologies, and its insistence on repetition lends it a cyclical structure, perfectly suited to the exploration of obsessive desire. Coupled with its labyrinthine spatiality, this produces a work that resists the idea of linear progression or straightforward paths to the truth.

For Sonya Andermahr, the central theme of *The Passion* is subsumed in the following: "in impossible conditions, where life barely sustains itself, people tell stories to survive. As throughout [Winterson's] work, storytelling here performs a crucial human function: that of compensating for the deficiencies of reality and of making life endurable".<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Onega

---

111 Ibid., p. 61.

112 Palmer, P. op. cit., p. 109.

113 Winterson, J. (2001b) op. cit., pp. 29, 86.

114 Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 63.

---

stresses the therapeutic quality of storytelling inherent to Winterson's writing.<sup>115</sup> Such pronouncements may be applied to all of Winterson's fiction. Storytelling, Andermahr contends, is instrumental in "mediating, indeed sustaining, human life",<sup>116</sup> a point Winterson seems to support wholeheartedly. *Art & Lies* and *The Passion* both testify to Winterson's preoccupation with the recuperative power of fiction, the dual nature of reality and truth, the value of art and storytelling, and the thin line between truth and lie. Historical record, lauded as the purveyor of truth and meaning, is exposed as that which it berates – a grand *narrative* itself, a fabrication governed by the principles of selection, exclusion and arbitrariness, much like any other fiction. Ultimately, Winterson's fiction as imagined truth and art is irreducible to any single politics, and echoes Keats's famously cryptic line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty".

#### REFERENCES:

- Andermahr, S. (2009) *Jeanette Winterson*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bilger, A. (1999) Jeanette Winterson, The Art of Fiction No. 150, *The Paris Review*, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1188/the-art-of-fiction-no-150-jeanette-winterson>
- Brooks, L. (2 September, 2000) Power Surge, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/02/fiction.jeanettewinterson>
- Burns, C. L. (1996) Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word, *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 37, No. 2, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 278-306.
- Childs, P. (2005) *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cobley, P. (2001) *Narrative*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Cox, K. (2008) 'I was in the red forest and she was leading me home': Representations of the Maze and the Labyrinth in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*. UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer), pp. 111-136.
- Jason, P. K. (1980) Modern Versions of the Villanelle, *College Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 136-145.
- Makinen, M. (2005) *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Onega, S. (2006) *Jeanette Winterson*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Palmer, P. (1998) *The Passion: Storytelling, Fantasy, Desire*. In: Grice, H. and Woods, T. (eds.), *I'm Telling You Stories': Jeanette Winterson*

---

115 Onega, S. op. cit., pp. 74-75.

116 Andermahr, S. op. cit., p. 62.

---

and the Politics of Reading, Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, pp. 103-116

Winterson, J. (7 September, 2000) Live chats, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/sep/07/livechats>

Winterson, J. (1995) *Art & Lies*, London: Vintage.

Winterson, J. (2001a) *The PowerBook*, London: Vintage.

Winterson, J. (2001b) *The Passion*. London: Vintage.

Викторија Кромбхолц и Аријана Лубурић Цвијановић  
Универзитет у Новом Саду, Филозофски факултет – Одсек за англистику,  
Нови Сад

НИШТА НИЈЕ КАО ШТО ИЗГЛЕДА:  
РОМАНИ ЦАНЕТ ВИНТЕРСОН  
УМЕТНОСТ И ЛАЖИ И СТРАСТ

Сажетак

Слободно се може рећи да је један од путева којим се најчешће иде у савременој енглеској књижевности онај којим се прихвата фиктивност историје и стварности и растачу границе између стварног и имагинарног. Овај пут је неспорно и често присутан у радовима контроверзне британске ауторке, Цанет Винтерсон, чија проза представља вечито поигравање чињеницама и фикцијом, реалношћу и фантазијом. Њен роман *Art and Lies* (1995), запостављен од критичара, епитомизација је дезинтеграције јасног разграничења између (ауто)биографије, историје и фикције путем низа бинарних концепата као што су уметност/живот, уметност/лаж или чињеница/фикција, који трансформишу наше поимање истине и лажи. Сличне теме прожимају и њен роман *The Passion* (1987), који је доживео ширу афирмацију. Паралеле између ова два дела сугеришу да постоји континуитет у литерарном бављењу Винтерсонове темама као што су природа истине и реалности, статус фикције и историјских записа, као и корисност бинарног концепта и етикета. Циљ рада је да се истражи колико ови полифони прозни комади представљају побуну против једнозначних ставова, како редифинишу историјске концепте као чињенице и литерарни наратив као фабрикацију и показују склоност ка истиности имагинације и незваничним перспективама.

**Кључне речи:** *Art and Lies*, *Цанет Винтерсон*, проза, историја, *Страст*