TOWARDS A NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: JEANETTE WINTERSON AND THE *DESPERADO PROJECT*

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Abstract: Starting from the Desperado project*, a theoretical framework designed by Lidia Vianu to replace the overused term* Postmodern literature*, this paper aims to demonstrate that Jeanette Winterson and her work, as well as her readership and critics, could be accommodated under this newly developed felicitous concept. The systematic analysis performed on the fundamental features viewed by Vianu as characteristic of* Desperado writing *clearly shows that Winterson is a* Desperado writer *and that her work consists of* Desperado texts *fully enjoyed by an international* Desperado readership.

Keywords: Desperado writing, Wintersonian style, fiction, readership, literary criticism

We live in the Desperado Age, argues Lidia Vianu, the initiator of the Desperado project, which started in 1999 with her work entitled *British Literary Desperadoes at the Turn of the Millennium*, continued in 2003 with a monograph of Alan Brownjohn, the British poet, critic and novelist, followed in 2004 not only by an impressive anthology of contemporary British verse, *Desperado Poetry*, but also by *The Desperado Age: British Literature at the Start of the Third Millennium*, a comprehensive book of literary criticism, and, in 2006, by the collection *Desperado Interviews*. Vianu offers a detailed description of the fundamental features displayed by writers, texts, readers and critics in the Desperado age, description skillfully divided into nine sections: plot, character, style, relationship with the critic, relationship with the reader, the author and his/her work, displacement, dystopia and the hybridization of literary genres. Then she presents a choice of writers, employing an exquisitely worded title for each individual novelist:

Brave New Novel – Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)
A Handbook of Despair – George Orwell (1903-1950)
The Self-Indulgent Novelist – Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966)
The Rescuer of the Story – Graham Greene (1904-1991)
The Clockwork Novel – Anthony Burgess (1917-1993)
The Uncomfortable Novelist – Doris Lessing (born 1919)
Fowles Outbids Fowles – John Fowles (1926-2005)
At the Gates of Commonsense – Malcolm Bradbury (1932-2000)
The Self-Consuming Dystopia of Age – Alasdair Gray (born 1934)
A Desperado of Simplicity – David Lodge (born 1935)
The Down Syndrome of Emotional Fiction – Julian Barnes (born 1946)
The Desperado of Sensibility Laid Bare – Peter Ackroyd (born 1949)
The Novel to Rent – Martin Amis (born 1949)
The Disappointed and Disappointing Memory-Land Reclaimer – Graham Swift (born 1949)
Irony and the Compulsion of Reading Morally – Kazuo Ishiguro (born 1954)

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Apart from the authors mentioned above, there are, of course, others that might deserve the Desperado title. Therefore, in an attempt to add one more name to the list, here is a systematic analysis of Jeanette Winterson's literary writing as mirrored in this writer's interviews about her work, analysis which covers issues pertaining not only to *the author*, but also to *the author's relationship with her work, her readers* and *her critics*. A synthesis of Vianu's rather lengthy presentation of the Desperado literary age, combined with the analysis of an extensive array of carefully chosen Wintersonian quotations, shall, in what follows, be used to ascertain if, and to what extent, Jeanette Winterson and her work, as well as her readership and critics, could be accommodated under this felicitous newly developed concept.

According to Vianu (8), the Desperado age is a period of "utmost literary solitude and bravery", so it is not surprising that Desperado authors aim to establish and follow their very own trend. This kind of "auctorial individualism" often results in a rebelliousness mirrored *by the use of four-letter words* and *by the rendering of aspects until then viewed as taboo* in a manner so direct as to border on vulgarity. This "shameless style", concludes Vianu (13), clearly shows that Desperado writers are "in love with inciting, intriguing abnormality". Whereas any definition of abnormality is, in my opinion, bound to be highly subjective, one thing is, indeed, obvious: namely that the Desperado author, endowed with vivid imagination, is endlessly in search of new tricks to use in the creation of an ever more challenging text. The challenge, however, is meant not only to lure the reader into entering the realm of active reading, but also to "make the intelligent critic surrender, exhaust his attack strategies" (Vianu 15). The characteristic features of the Desperado author will be discussed on the basis of the relationship that the writer under analysis, namely Jeanette Winterson, has established with her work, her readers and her critics.

Several quotations from Jeanette Winterson's interviews will clearly show that this author displays most of the features which, according to Vianu, define the Desperado author (7-22, 78-95). Thus, Jeanette Winterson *manifests auctorial individualism, displays an aesthetically motivated shamelessness, exhibits a denial of group psychology, dislikes being found at fault, proclaims herself her own trend, feels oppressed by the constant struggle for survival, tries to find herself by escaping all preconceived patterns, favours the hybridization of literary genres, wishes to differ from others and even from herself, uses innovative textual structures, aims at writing the perfect work, refuses to conform to old canons, is desperate to complicate, is rebellious, and breaks all interdictions.*

When Mark Hogarth set up a website after buying a number of extremely well-known literary authors' names, among which Jeannette Winterson's name, she stated that she became angry because

> I […] felt that one has a right to one's own name. And I do in particular. I have made my name, from nothing at all, and it belongs to me. Very little in this life belongs to you. But your name should. Especially if that's what you're known by throughout the world, and for your work. (Reynolds and Noakes 29)

And this is only one of the many instances when Winterson manifested **auctorial individualism.** Often referred to as "England's Literary Outlaw" (Miller), Jeanette Winterson seems to be a rather eccentric character on the usually reserved English literary stage; a

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controversial author admired by some and criticised by many, not only for her alternative lifestyle that she neither keeps secret, nor advertises openly, but also for her frankness and lack of modesty often perceived as blatant arrogance. Displaying **an aesthetically motivated shamelessness**, Jeanette Winterson, while acting as the chair of a literary award committee, dared nominate one of her own novels, namely *Written on the Body*, as "Best of the Year". Moreover, when she was invited by the *Sunday Times*, as part of a newspaper questionnaire, to name her favourite prose stylist in English, Winterson selected herself: "No one working in the English language now comes close to my exuberance, my passion, my fidelity to words" (Aldrich and Wotherspoon 145).

Winterson **exhibits a denial of group psychology**, arguing that she is not bothered by people who disagree with her because "any public figure is going to be controversial in some way". When they resent her views, people sometimes say: "Well, now we know you think like this, we'll never read your books again". But, Winterson points out, if people actually thought the way that she does *before* reading her books, there would be absolutely no point in reading them anymore (Reynolds and Noakes 27).

That Winterson **dislikes being found at fault** is obvious not only when one analyses her reactions to negative criticism, but also upon consideration of other writers' reactions to publicly discussing her work. At a London literary dinner in the summer of 1995, Salman Rushdie, for instance, called her an "ayatollah", and, when asked by a journalist from *The Sunday Times* to comment on *Art and Lies*, almost unanimously considered her least inspired novel, Rushdie is rumoured to have replied: "I've got enough trouble. I don't need any more. What do you think? That I want another fatwa?" (Pressler).

Deeply conscious of the special public responsibility that well-known thinkers and authors inevitably have to bear, Winterson **proclaims herself her own trend** and explains why she feels compelled to express herself in writing:

> Being brought up by Pentecostal Evangelists meant that there was tremendous drive to go out there and make a difference, and […] for me it's a natural progression which seems bizarre perhaps – from those days of preaching the Word to these days of trying to make people see things imaginatively, transformatively. (Reynolds and Noakes 11)

Winterson **feels oppressed by the constant struggle for survival** and **tries to find herself by escaping all preconceived patterns.** Here is how Winterson explains the creative endeavour behind her first novel: "I was trying to make sense of a bizarre childhood and an unusual personal history". Reinventing herself in her fiction is, for Winterson, part and parcel of the self-discovery process, so she openly makes use of her own biography, but claims to completely deface it in the process of finishing a novel: "Being able to write a story around the chaos of your own narrative allows you to see yourself as a fiction" which is, the author points out, quite "comforting" due to the fact that "fictions can change" (Reynolds and Noakes 12). For Winterson the act of writing has a double functionality, as it not only discloses the truth about her inner self, but also reveals the real image of the outer world: "I write […] so that I can explain the world to myself, because writing […] explains you to yourself and it explains the world" (Reynolds and Noakes 11-12).

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When Margaret Reynolds described her as "a writer of poetry who happens to work in prose", Winterson, showing that she **favours the hybridization of literary genres**, was quick to reply: "Well, I don't think of myself as a poet. I think of myself as somebody who tries to use poetic disciplines and align them in a narrative stretch" (Reynolds and Noakes 22). **Wishing to differ from others and even from herself**, Winterson is constantly searching for variation, even when it comes to choosing names for her characters. Asked by Reynolds to explain why naming constitutes so important a topic for her, Winterson said that "names are places where you pause. They are places where you recognise, […] They're not accidental". Winterson admits that playing with names is something she truly enjoys: "Sometimes I don't use any names at all. Or the names change for the character". For instance, in *Written on the Body*, she wanted the narrator to be "a kind of Everyman", so that narrator has no name, while in *Oranges*, where she meant to reinvent herself as a fictional character, the narrator has her own name (Reynolds and Noakes 16-18). Winterson always **uses innovative textual structures**:

> I […] wanted to play with a double narrative. Having had a single voice in *Oranges*, I wanted to use two voices – again both in the first person – but contrasting and playing one off against the other. So it was a formal challenge for me, […] because I wanted to have two people in there who were of very different sensibilities whom we could get to know through their, initially separate, journeys which would then come together. (Reynolds and Noakes 18)

Winterson **aims at writing the perfect work**, not only in as far as the structure of her novels is concerned, but especially with respect to the choice of words:

> I'm not happy for words simply to convey meaning […] because fiction itself demands a vividness and a transparency which is only possible through an exactness of language. […] It has to be muscular. It has to be agile and quick, it can't be sloppy. […] Fiction isn't approximate, it's precise. (Reynolds and Noakes 22-23)

And, indeed, in all of her novels Winterson displays an utterly surprising combination of elegance and clarity of exposition that allows her to swiftly move from lyrical description to witty dialogue, thus avoiding the dangers of monolithic narrative.

Winterson's **refusal to conform to old cannons** makes her seem, at times, **desperate to complicate**; but she has got her reasons, as she clearly explains: "I continually break my narratives. Nothing depresses me more than seeing a page with no breaks in it". According to Winterson, contemporary authors should avoid writing nineteenth century fiction, even if they love reading it:

> The third person to me always seems rather omnipotent and remote and better left in the nineteenth century where it was done rather well. Some writers use it, but I prefer not to. And if I do use it I usually do so for the purposes of distance, to get away from the kind of intimacy I'm usually aiming for. (Reynolds and Noakes 15)

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Winterson **is rebellious**; she attempts **to break all interdictions**, refuses to conform to society's norms regarding the ban placed on certain topics, and embarks on the challenging endeavour of investigating taboo issues pertaining to gender and sexuality. She disregards censorship both in her life and in her work, be it fictional or not: "you have to be able to speak carefully and honestly and well about the issues of your own time, however controversial […]" (Reynolds and Noakes 26).

Jeanette Winterson's works clearly point to some other features that Vianu assigns to Desperado authors and to their creations: thus, Winterson is an *extremely resourceful* writer, who *believes that truth is just another convention, claims to be creating not merely literature, but the very essence of life* and *takes shelter behind a strong imagination*; she *hunts the unusual* and *rejects formal conventions, uses life as a pretext, views fiction as a game, creates a puzzle from bits of reality* and *constantly leaves one space for another*; Winterson *defamiliarises the familiar, uses exasperating narrative patterns to avoid closure, imagines a wealth of details* and *employs a merry-go-round of techniques*; she *writes with both her soul and her memory, especially her literary memory, rewriting all literature* and *freely employing intertextuality* (Vianu 20, 29-35, 42).

Thus, when asked to comment on the leitmotif used in *The Passion* (5, 13, 69, 160), "I'm telling you stories. Trust me", Winterson declared that the readers give their trust to writers because, although they make no claim to absolute certainty and thorough knowledge, they do claim "to have a map, passed down from hand to hand, redrawn, uncertain", a map whose existence guarantees, however, that "the buried treasure is really there" (Reynolds and Noakes 21). Winterson pertinently argues that **imagination is the first and foremost requirement when writing fiction**:

> You can't do it well if you're trying to lock yourself slavishly into your notion of the past – which will not be true anyway. Or if you're making the past into the present, but in a silly wig and a different costume. (Reynolds and Noakes 22)

That Winterson **hunts the unusual** is clearly proven, for instance, by her **rejection of the formal conventions** employed by most writers of historical fiction. Thus, in order to recreate the 17th century atmosphere in *Sexing the Cherry*, she makes up a language which is neither the real language of seventeenth-century England nor the language of today:

> It's very annoying when you read what we might call a conventional historical novel and either everybody's going around saying "Zounds!" and "Aye, sir", and their cloaks are fluttering in the wind … or – which is the American way – they sound exactly like we do. Which is irritating, because neither will do. (Reynolds and Noakes 21-22)

Given that she views history as nothing more than "a collection of found objects washed up through time", some of which, at certain moments, we pay attention to, while at other times we fail to take into consideration at all, Winterson argues that "as the pattern changes, the meaning changes", so the past can only be understood by continually reinterpreting it, and "fiction does that very well" (Reynolds and Noakes 22). Thus, Winterson **uses life as the pretext**, **views fiction as a game** and **creates a puzzle from bits**

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of reality: in an attempt to explain why she labelled *Sexing the Cherry* as a reading of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Winterson stated that

> [i]t's about the nature of time, and time is one of the things that I'm obsessed with … What it is, how it affects us, how it moves through us, how we move through it. And so I took that poem as a starting point to explore. (Reynolds and Noakes 23)

Despite the fact that Winterson continually plays with the same set of themes, namely the issues of time, identity, boundaries and desire, **she constantly leaves one space for another** because, she argues, even when patterns seem to be emerging, it is essential not to get stuck into them: "those themes are there, and possibly I will go on exploring them, but I wouldn't want to be a slave to them, any more than I want to be a slave to anything else" (Reynolds and Noakes 25). Consequently, she aims at **defamiliarising the familiar**, **uses exasperating narrative patterns** and **avoids closure**: "I think it's always a mistake to try and lock yourself into any one place or time, because it's simply not how the mind works" (Reynolds and Noakes 20).

As Reynolds and Noakes (6) point out, Winterson's "quirky humour", the intermingling of embedded fairy tales and inserted seemingly secondary stories that "increasingly take over the 'real' story", along with the "extreme swervings back and forth between a banal everyday and a surreal vision", all endow Winterson's works with the "conviction of a prose that is poetic in its intensity". In her novels, she **imagines a wealth of details** and **employs a merry-go-round of techniques**:

> So I think it's a great privilege for a writer because you have a freedom that few people ever experience. You really are in the place, at the moment, but that moment itself is fully expanded because you are travelling in time and in imagination to all sorts of other moments. (Reynolds and Noakes 24)

Winterson **writes with both her soul and her memory, especially her literary memory**, so she **rewrites all literature**, **freely employing intertextuality:**

> All texts work off other texts. It's a continual rewriting and rereading of what has gone before, and you hope that you can add something new. There's interpretation as well as creation in everything that happens with books. (Reynolds and Noakes 18-19)

Cover-versions and re-workings of well-known stories and myths intermingle to form multiple narrative strands. The springs of words grow into rivers of stories that gather into the readers' delta of imagination before flowing into an ocean of meaning. Winterson's novels feature a medley of literary and historical references, as well as a collection of quotes from other Wintersonian novels. The author explains that she often quotes herself due to the fact that "all the books speak to each other" because "it's the journey of my imagination, it's the journey of my soul in those books. So continually they must address one another" (Reynolds and Noakes 25).

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Awarded the Whitbread Best-First-Novel Prize in 1985 for *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for *The Passion* in 1987, winner of the E. M. Forster Award in 1989 with *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson was later cast away by literary critics and journalists alike following the release of the much depreciated *Art and Lies*, only to restore her high-profile with the more recent *Lighthousekeeping* and *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*. Compared, as Shepard notes, to "an unlikely pantheon of literary figures, from Flannery O'Connor through Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera and Virginia Woolf", Winterson enjoys a privileged though controversial position on the Desperado literary stage, swaying between the margins and the centre, but always being at the heart of the dispute, and in the hearts of her many readers. As Reynolds and Noakes (5) point out,

> Jeanette Winterson is not an acquired taste. If you like her work, you love it passionately, without reserve. […] If you don't like her work, you hate it. But there aren't any "don't knows". Even the people who've never read a line of her work have an opinion on Jeanette Winterson.

It is in the poetry of Winterson's language that the power of her writing rests: not in the plot but in the *many interwoven stories*, not in the story but in the telling. In all of her novels Jeanette Winterson shows ***a surprising capacity to defamiliarise the literary language***. In Winterson's works "time seems to be folded and stretched, allowing for the linking of events ostensibly separated in both space and time" (Preda 255). The *elliptical storytelling*, the *ambiguous endings* and the *intentional structural lacunas* break the linearity of the narrative, thus fostering the *spatial simultaneity* of Winterson's discourse. The aim is to discourage reductionist reading, promoting, instead, ***active reading***, a process that requires ***permanent evolutionary adaptations on the part of the reader*** (Preda 254).

Starting with her very first novel, Winterson has been shaping her **Desperado readership**: she is an author determined **to challenge those accustomed to peaceful, gratifying reading and to erase soap opera expectations** (Vianu 33-44). In the exclusive interview conducted by Margaret Reynolds in September 2002 Winterson explains her choice of *double-* or *multiple-strand narrative*, and her preference for *fragmentary discourse* and *seemingly plotless fiction* by pointing out that pauses, spaces, and breaks in the narrative are necessary "forceful interruptions" which **prevent readers from becoming fascinated by the story line and allow them to notice the beauty of the language**. Language should not be perceived as merely a meaning-conveying medium, but as "something in its own right", which "needs to be concentrated on, just in the way that poetry does", without looking for "the next bit of excitement", because reading is not supposed to be a "faintly pornographic" experience. Therefore, Winterson tries to **make the readers aware of the reading process**, demands their concentration, as reading is not like watching television: "It's a dialogue, and it's not a passive act". Winterson knows, of course, that there are people who "find this vastly irritating and simply want to skip along and read a monolithic narrative", and her advice to those who keep whining about how much they need the comforts of closure is to watch television, or choose one of the many books that are, in fact, "just printed television":

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> It seems to me that TV and cinema have taken over the narrative function of the novel, in much the same way that the novel once took over the narrative function of poetry. That frees me up for story, for poetry and for language that does more than convey meaning. (Reynolds and Noakes 15-16)

Thus, Winterson addresses an initiated readership, being, of course, aware that, whether readers or critics, those who are wondering how to put the pieces of her narrative puzzles together experience a sense of frustration at the lack of closure and, not surprisingly, blame it on the writer, known to be resistant to notions such as "what […] the Americans call closure" and to the "old-fashioned plot line" which, she believes, had better be "left to crime writers of the old school" (Reynolds and Noakes 15-16).

The structure of Winterson's novels offers a non-linear alternative to chronological linear plot: "a spiral structure that unfolds to reveal the self-organising dynamics of a story-line shaped by the language" (Preda 254). Winterson's novels have been deemed inconsistent and pulpy not only because they always seem to be subject to frequent intrusions from the author's self-reflexive commentary, but also due to the fragmentary nature of her discourse. Although for Winterson fragmentation is "a technique meant to engender complexity", the critics seem reluctant to acknowledge its beneficial implications and unable to perceive its instrumental role in the development of the novel (Preda 254). It is not surprising, therefore, that, like all Desperado writers, Winterson **utterly resents misguided critical attempts at categorization**. She defends the fragmentariness of her narrative by pointing out that the mind "travels dimensionally" and those who claim that this is "unrealistic are themselves missing the point". She further explains that

> [r]ealism isn't simply about this day in the twenty-first century where we're alive. Realism is about all of those lives, all of those histories, all of those moments which can be collected and shaped by us. It's the whole picture that I'm interested in, not a part of it. Which is why I get rather cross when people say, 'Yes, but you don't write realist narrative.' I do. But it's the whole picture. (Reynolds and Noakes 20)

Although she **aims to exhaust the critics' attack strategies, to disarm their critical spirit**, Winterson **is determined to be understood** by her readers. Thus, when asked about her website, Winterson explained that despite the enormous amount of time and money required in order to keep it going, she believes it is a kind of public service she ought to offer:

> I'm one of the few writers anywhere who runs a website like that […] but I do it because I know that there are people all over the world who see the Internet as a genuine resource, and who want to know more about my work and who can't always get my work. (Reynolds and Noakes 28)

Jeanette Winterson **aspires at being international** and **is aware that advertisement is the soul of communication**. She is a well-known author who has been awarded prizes not only in Britain, but also in other European countries and in the United States as well, her work having been translated into twenty-three languages, the latest of which is the Chinese language. Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, in Chinese translation,

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was launched during the author's visit to the Shanghai Book Fair (August 17– 23, 2011). Knowing how crucial the title of a book can be, Winterson states that a title in not merely "a way of labelling or tagging what you're writing", but rather an element "integral to it", so she strives to come up with "evocative and memorable" word combinations from the start, always aiming for a title that people will easily remember and "use as a talisman for what they've read, so that they associate the title with the content". Speaking about her first novel, Winterson admits that *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is "definitely not a selling title" though, she points out, "it's become part of the language. Which just shows you can persuade anybody of anything if you do it for long enough" (Reynolds and Noakes 13-14).

As Makinen (153-154) pertinently argued, "the critical debates on Winterson's novels emerge, on the whole, a surprisingly long time after the text's publication", and the fact that "Winterson criticism appears to have a longer gestation period than that for many other writers" may indicate that Winterson's novels may well be ahead of their times. One thing is sure, her works defy easy categorisation, being extremely difficult to conceptualise, define and label. Any critical appraisal of Winterson's work should, therefore, be grounded not merely on a single analytical perspective, but on a wide array of formal issues and thematic analyses, from narrative structure and point of view to recurrent themes and intertextual references. Consequently, Winterson's work might fully benefit from the critical opportunities offered by Vianu's newly designed framework of analysis known as the Desperado project.

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