TELL US A STORY, JEANETTE…

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Abstract

Gender and time should not matter for a true story teller. In this respect Jeanette Winterson can be called a true story teller. She has a remarkable power to surprise the reader as her writing is poetic, funny and queer. Grafting is not to be reduced to Sexing the Cherry. "Language grafting" is what Winterson has invented… the new language is "gender proof". What do gender, time and space depend on in Winterson's writing? Everything depends on how we "read" it.

"Tell me a story, Silver.
What story?
The story of what happened next.
That depends.
On what?
On how I tell it." (Winterson 2005: 129)

Mercury….Jeanette Winterson's language – words one must run after, solid matter that scatters into different meanings. How is one, how am I supposed to use language, shadowed like this? My first handicap in expressing some opinions about the work of the author I admire (Jeanette Winterson) was translated in my inability to be original, in my resorting to the back cover of *Sexing the Cherry*, where one can read: "*It simply needs to be read and re-read.*" (*The Times*) This "integral" sentence can only be digested by those who actually read Jeanette Winterson, because indeed her books, her language is seducing, vivid and tangible; the connection is total. In *Art Objects,* Winterson confesses as if she were a woman of pleasure: "*…my love-affair was with language, and only incidentally with narrative*" (…) "*I wake and sleep language.*" "*What differentiates one page from another is language. I do not mean meaning.*"(Winterson 1996: 155-156-177) She compared Dickens with Trollope and remarked that: "*Trollope does not love language, he uses it as a vehicle for story-telling, he does not understand the energy of words. He does not understand art as energetic space.*" (Winterson 1996: 178) Art as energetic space, books, Duchamp's *Fountain*, if you want, everything understood as e*mpty space and points of light...* I cannot say, I can only presume that this is how one should read *Sexing the Cherry* or *Gut Symmetries.*

What is *Sexing the Cherry* about? It is about itself … this is the answer that Winterson would suggest, as she actually did on a different occasion. After several hours of pondering, and while eating a bowl of Mexican vegetables as garnish, I reached the childish conclusion

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that this book somehow resembles my Mexican salad: one can enjoy it as a whole, but one can also choose just the bites of carrots or corn, depending on one's preferences. How else am I to describe a book that mixes historical details with magical and folkloric elements, slices of quantum physics with bits of feminism and satire? Winterson – the cook – adds the spices from the very beginning, as the flavor, the essence of *Sexing the Cherry* lies in the first two pages and before that in the paragraphs she chose to set as "guideline." "*The Hopi, an Indian tribe, have a language as sophisticated as ours, but no tenses for past, present and future (…) what does this say about time?*" (…) *Matter, that thing the most solid and the well-known, which you are holding in your hands and which makes up your body, is now known to be mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light. What does this say about the reality of the world? (*Winterson 1990*: 8)*

This is the spring that will later on develop as Jordan. The character himself had to correspond to the principle of movement and had to be a conductor in the same way water is conductor for electricity - the human Jordan is a superconductor for time.

"*My name is Jordan. This is the first thing I saw.*" (Winterson 1990: 9) And this is the first line we read. Because of the "bully like" full stop, the reader may forget for a moment what it is all about. The descriptive paragraphs that interrupt what Jordan had seen are more puzzling than they might seem at first sight. Of course, I will be honest and underline that it is I who sees this as puzzling, and by the way, whether the author herself really intended things like this or not is not important; what matters is the relation between the reader and the book itself. Going on with my idea, one might think, mainly because one page later we learn that the Dog-Woman found a boy in the stinky Thames and named him Jordan, that this is the very moment Jordan was fished from the water, but how sure of this can we be? The adult Jordan may simply recall this and recreate his identity. Again, later on, when speaking about Fortunata, Jordan says: "*The scene I have just described to you may lie in the future or the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her. I cannot be sure. (…) But she is somewhere in the grid of time, a co-ordinate, as I am."* (Winterson 1990: 93)

Or should we assume that in this headache causing sentence: "*This is the first thing I saw"(9)* the marrow is represented by seeing as understanding, as meaning? The other things seen, perceived, no longer matter, as in this case seeing happens in the inside, it is a "*running towards*" (80). "*I began to walk with my hands stretched out in front of me (…) and in this way, for the first time, I traced the lineaments of my own face opposite me*" (9) The ability to detach oneself, to meet the other "one" is not just a mere whim of imagination, but a deep

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philosophical concern. "*For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink.*" (10) And Jordan wants to discover this other world, pregnant with meaning. The first time Jordan "overflows", that is the first time he sets sail happens when he is a boy. We know this from the Dog-Woman's story: "*He was standing with both his arms upraised and staring at the banana above Johnson's head. I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore (….). This was the first time Jordan set sail.*" (13) Even if the scene is extremely important, as it represents the second time rupture (the second as the reader encounters it), it is rendered in a peculiar comic and realistic way. The reader is able to feel and understand people's amazement at seeing the first banana ever, thing which the Dog Woman connected to the private parts of an Oriental. This perpetual shifting from the jocular to the real, from Jordan's voice to the Dog Woman's gives the book an unmistakable flavor. The reader may even choose to have two separate readings …. ignore one story and then return to it. The voices are easily recognizable, especially that Winterson chose to associate Jordan's voice with the sketch of a pineapple, and the Dog Woman's with that of a banana. We are somehow warned from beforehand, whenever the shifting occurs. The existence of these separate stories makes the reader an accomplice… he learns things that neither the Dog-Woman, nor Jordan will ever know. It is in this manner that the strange relationship between the two characters is presented and there are moments when we feel like shouting to one or the other that things aren't like they seem. The same technique when the reader knows everything about the characters while they themselves only know the half and never what the other thinks is to be met in Julian Barnes's novels as well. I would call this technique the "sleep-kiss" technique, which has proven to be a hallmark of the new writing. What Jordan fails to understand is that his mother knows what love is, as she truly loves him, while what the Dog-Woman does not understand is that she should have expressed her feelings more often: "*I think she loves me but I don't know. She wouldn't say so, perhaps she doesn't know herself.*" (101)

Analyzing this relationship is another path the reader may follow, path which will mainly focus on the universe of the Dog-Woman. Despite her grotesque image, her filth (which, by the way, is rather a stigmata of the society she lives in, and not necessarily a mark of her personality), and of course, her size, she is a character somehow pure due to her naivety, as most of the times she does what others tell her to. Her cruelty (when she killed pastor Scroggs, or when she gathered 119 eyeballs belonging to the Puritans she had killed) stems from her desire to do the right things, to help the people that deserve to be helped. Or, in other words, she only kills the "bad people". And we must also consider that she acted in

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accordance with the biblical principles, which are contradictory most of the times. The preacher artfully indicated the path the believers in God must follow: "*He said 'Thou shalt not kill' is a tenet of our faith, but we should too be aware of another part of the Law of Moses: 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*'" (84) The decision to kill Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace was taken after she had been exposed to their show of carnal pleasure. It seemed right that she should act as she had. To conclude this idea, it can be said in simple words that the Dog-Woman's function is that of underlying that things are never what they seem. "*A balloon looks big and weighs nothing.*" (25)

What path of this book should we follow? Thinking of his journeys, Jordan noticed: "*I have set off and found that there is no end to even the simplest journey of the mind. I begin, and straight away a hundred alternative routes present themselves.*" (102). It so happens with the voyage into Winterson's book. The sure path does not exist here, all of them are sure as all of them open new journeys. It so happened that I chose the path of Jordan's self-discovery, which opened those of love and time that passes through us, especially through the people that are superconductors for time. Jordan's voyage was not triggered by the appearance of Fortunata, even if, at first sight, things look like this. Being the twelfth Princess, Fortunata allowed Winterson to insert and modify from a feminist angle the story of The Twelve Dancing Princesses. Yet, Fortunata escapes from the feminist approach as: " …*she did it (*dancing*) because any other life would have been a lie. She didn't burn in secret with a passion she could not express; she shone.*" (60) The meeting between the two does not represent an end of the voyage; each person has to continue his voyage on his own, as we are born alone and we die alone. "*We are alone in this quest.*" (102). But discovering oneself is not something easy: "*I'm not looking for God, only for myself, and that is far more complicated. God has a great deal written about Him; nothing has been written about me.*" (102), Jordan complains. Fortunata discovered herself through dancing ; she, just like the Dog-Woman self suffices …she advised Jordan to think about the habits of the starfish. It is pretty notorious that a new star fish may develop from its arm, in case this is cut. We are once again told, symbolically, of course, that one exists only for oneself, that even love is just a means of discovering oneself. Jordan asks himself: "*Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know, or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?*" (40) Later on, pondering about the past loves, he suddenly realizes that: *"…I loved myself through them.*" (74) Jordan travels both inside and outside, and it can be supposed that the outside voyage triggers the inside one. Unlike him, the Dog-Woman dives in herself without any springboard. She, too, is an artist, as she discovers herself through singing: "*So I sing inside the mountain*

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of my flesh, and my voice is as slender as a reed (…) And I sing of other times, when I was happy, though I know that these are figments of my mind and nowhere I have ever been. But does it matter if the place cannot be mapped as long as I can still describe it? " (14 -15)

The last part of the book, *Some Years Later,* comes as a surprise, as the reader will wonder himself what kind of a present or past he stepped into. After all, the title lured the reader into believing that this "time game" was to come to an end. But why end? Time is not something that ends. Why should we speak about what we've just read as belonging to a past moment? "*Everyone remembers things which never happened. And it is common knowledge that people often forget things which did. Either we are all fantasists or liars or the past has nothing definite in it.*" (92)

In the last chapter we learn about Nicolas Jordan, a young man who decides to join the Navy and "*a woman going mad*" (121). We might think that everything that happened in the previous pages is just a matter of imagination of those living in present, but once again what is present? "*I have a memory of a time wwhen I was a schoolgirl and getting fatter by the day. (…) I had to get on to Blackfriars, there was someone waiting for me. Who? Who?*"(128)

The very end of this intriguing book restores symmetry, time: past, present and future, becomes a whole entity that self-sufices: just time. When seeing the woman's picture in the newspaper, Nicolas confesses: "…*I felt I knew her, though this was not possible.*" (138) The contemporary Dog-Woman, the one campaigning against pollution decides to burn down the factory, deed that coincides with the Great Fire of London in the Other universe. Jordan confesses: "*We speak of it with longing and with love. The future. But the city is a fake. The future and the present and the past exist only in our minds (…) Empty space and points of light.*" (144)

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