# *"CYBERSPACE" AND "MEATSPACE": THE CONSTRUCTION OF VIRTUAL GENDER IDENTITY IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S "THE POWERBOOK"*

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***Abstract:*** *The aim of this paper is to analyse the reconfiguration of gender identities in Winterson's The Powerbook, a novel which highlights the inherent positive values of cyberspace and the importance of the fusion between bodies and technology. The novel is powered by the belief that cyberspace is essentially a transcendental domain, where the body becomes irrelevant and creativity takes over. I will argue that Winterson's interest in wiping off gender categories follows in the line of Haraway's (1991) concept of the cyborg and Hayles's (1999) notion of the posthuman; both theorize the human body as a hybrid between flesh and computer technology. Also, by creating multiple narrative layers and undermining narrative voice, Winterson disintegrates the body, fragments it, creating an opening where the writing subject is constantly elusive.*

***Keywords: cyberspace, cyborg, the posthuman***

*The Powerbook* comes across as a complex meditation on the role of cyberreality in the imaginative reshaping of gender identities, the reconsideration of time and space and the relationship between bodies and technology. The narrator offers an uncanny, Houdini-like display of metamorphosis, starting with the uncertainty of his/her gender. Delving into virtual reality allows Winterson to explore a territory rife with cloaking possibilities: "one of the exciting – and dangerous – things about email is that we have no way of discerning gender, and that upsets a lot of our notions about innate masculine or feminine traits"(Winterson, www.jeanettewinterson.com). In this realm, gender is ambiguous, because it is unnecessary, and the body itself has to volatilize in order to give way to the reign of imagination and transgender mutability: "Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door. Tonight we can go deeper than disguise."********** In this paper, I will argue that the novel is powered by what Don Ihde called "the technofantasy of cyberspace": the belief that cyber technologies will make possible the escape from the body, and will thus allow transcendence (Ihde in Brians, 2011: 122). I will also apply Hayles's notion of the posthuman and Haraway's concept of the cyborg in an analysis of bodily mutability: through her characters, Winterson gestures towards an incorporation of technology into the body, which would imply the erasure of boundaries between the virtual and the material.

In Winterson's case, the virtual world has replaced the gates of Paradise: the analogies between the Christian redemption of the soul after death and the promise of freedom offered by cyberspace cannot be ignored. In *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, the narrator is struggling to thwart the austere denial of flesh which would ensure her access to Paradise. Jeanette wants to celebrate her budding sexuality and implicitly, her body, but she is reminded that bodies are only transient vessels, burdens in achieving

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********** Jeanette Winterson, *The Powerbook* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 4. All further references will point to this edition and will be abbreviated as P:, followed by page numbers.



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spiritual redemption. She rebels against the idea that life is merely a preparation for death and for the marvels that await beyond it. It is thus quite puzzling to find a new vision of bodily transcendence in *The Powerbook*: having abandoned the belief that religion can control the body so that the soul is salvaged in the afterlife, she has succumbed instead to the lure of cyberreality, which promises anonymity, freedom, imagination, and most importantly, the possibility of breaking from the limitations of the body.

The sexed body is one of these limitations and virtual reality can do away with what is culturally established as male or female: "This is where the story starts. Here in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an invented world. You can be free for one night" (P: 4). In abandoning the confines of gender, Winterson technologizes the body, turning it into what Donna Haraway called a "cyborg". A cross between machine and organism, a cyborg belongs to social reality as well as to fiction, being a creature which has "no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity"(Haraway, 1991: 150). A cyborg lacks origin and does not expect a restoration of the Garden of Eden, which is to say, it does not need wholeness and completion through a heterosexual partner. Thus, the cyborg, "wary of holism, but needy for connection" (Haraway 1991: 15), is the perfect creation to erode the foundations of dual gender and linear history, as it shows irreverence towards myths of origin and unity. *The Powerbook* is, at its core, a "cyborg manifesto": it goes to show that bodies are mediated by technology, and the boundaries between genders liquefy. The word "meatspace", which appears in a conversation between the two virtual lovers, bears down on the structure the conflict: bouncing between flesh and disembodied cyber reality, the narrator chooses this antagonism between cyberspace and meatspace to show that they do incorporate each other. Asked about his/her address, Ali/x retorts: "You've got my Website./Meatspace not cyberspace"(P:161).

The main love affair, conducted through cyberspace, is woven into a pattern of myth, fairy tale and history. However, there is a constant reminder that every fragment of fiction, regardless of its spatial and temporal settings, obeys computer terminology. The table of contents is renamed "Menu" and many chapters have computer-related names such as "Open Hard Drive", "New document," "Search", "View", "View as icon", "Empty trash" etc. A "language costumier", the narrator embarks on an e-project of "yarn-spinning", of re-inventing himself/herself through a multitude of love tales, a project which is supposed to serve his/her lover's longing: "Freedom, just for one night"(P:3). The various stories which make up the fictional "arsenal" of the virtual narrator emphasize the duality of mind and body, reinforcing Cartesian metaphysics; I analyse the novel's reworking of this fundamental philosophical principle through the representation of the body as a mixture between biology and technology. This also entails a consideration of the status of gender within the parameters of virtual interaction and online narrativization.

The first story is set in seventeenth-century Turkey, and it focuses on Ali, a girl who smuggles tulips into Holland by concealing them in her pants: she uses the stem and the bulbs as a male sexual organ and she passes herself off as male-gendered. From the moment of her birth, Ali is an encumbrance to her father simply because of her female sex. The inequality between genders forces Ali's mother to disguise her daughter in order to save her life: "When I was born, my mother dressed me as a boy because she could not afford to feed any more daughters. By the mystic laws of gender and



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economics, it ruins a peasant to place half a bowl of figs in front of his daughter, while his son may gorge on the whole tree, burn it for firewood and piss on the stump, and still be reckoned a blessing to his father" (P:10). The attachment of tulip bulbs and a stem to her sexual organs causes a change in her demeanor, as she must now "play" masculinity. Sold to an Italian envoy, Ali is to teach a princess the art of love before she gets married. Fooled that Ali is indeed a man, the virgin princess wonders at the unusual anatomico-botanical build, having previously heard repugnant stories about "the fleshliness, the swelling" (P: 21). The embalmed tulip eventually acts like a functional male organ, becoming an extension of her body as she feels her "disguise come to life" (P: 22). At this point, her body merges with the alien object that is the tulip, erasing the boundary between human and animal, and between disguise and reality. This is the point where she becomes a variant of a cyborg, even if the attachment to her body is not a machine, but a plant. The episode is also reminiscent of Hayles's ample definition of this new "species": "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals"(Hayles, 1999: 3). However, Hayles's approach is more nuanced than Haraway's to the extent that it defines the posthuman as a continuation, rather than a disruption of liberal humanism, advocating a version of the posthuman who can benefit from the opportunities of computer technology without viewing the body as an accessory or an immortal, powerful machine (Hayles, 1999: 5).

Unlike the couple who is interacting in cyberspace in the framing narrative, Ali and the Princess are drawn as material beings, governed by tactile, olfactory or visual sensations. Ali ponders on the advantages and setbacks of her embodiment, wondering whether disguise is more than just clothes or ruses: "But what if my body is the disguise? What if skin, bone, liver, veins, are the things I use to hide myself? I have put them on and can't take them off. Does that trap me or free me?" (P:15). The flesh always returns as a reminder that reality and cyberspace are divorced; in Paris, Ali and his/her lover experience the setbacks of "downloading imagination into real life": "The trouble is that in imagination anything can be perfect. Downloaded into real life, it was messy. She was messy. I was messy"(P: 46). Winterson's Cartesian proclivities are more than obvious. She proposes a detachment from the confines of the culturally inscribed surface of the body, because after all, "the world is a mirror of the mind's abundance" (P: 223). Descartes distinguished between mind, as the thinking substance, and body, as the extended substance, where the body is mechanical, functioning according to the laws of nature, and the mind has no place in nature (Grosz, 1994: 6). However, the divorce between the soul and nature can no longer be a standing, viable viewpoint. The elimination of the body in this schema represented "a paradigmatic part of the oppression not only of women, but of a range of other others" (Shildrick, 2001: 1). The word "disguise" is bandied about in the virtual, matrix plane, as the narrator jumps from one identity to the other, trying to elude a unified self and consequently, a coherent body. What Ali is searching for is meaning: "I'm looking for the meaning inside the data. That's why I trawl my screen like a beachcomber – looking for you, looking for me, trying to see through the disguise. I guess I've been looking for us both all my life" (P: 64). The body of the Turkish Ali, as all the other characters in the fictive e-stories, cannot escape the limitations of gender like the virtual narrator does. Ali must comply with his acquired male gender and avoid danger: when caught by the pirates, he escapes by uttering a sentence which confirms his integration in the male community. He motivates clutching his intimate parts as a form of "protecting his treasure"(P: 18). In



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the story of Francesca and Paolo, Francesca is a commodity traded by her father and forced to marry a man she does not love. In the love stories set in Paris and Capri, the two women are still tributary to their female gender. Hence, the body is not entirely seen as a fiction or a form of discourse, as there is still a part of it that affects the "carbon-based" world. Butler controversially asks, "is it right to claim that "sex" vanishes altogether, that it is a fiction over and against what is true, that it is a fantasy over and against what is reality? Or do these very oppositions need to be rethought such that if "sex" is a fiction, it is one within whose necessities we live, without which life itself would be unthinkable?" (Butler, 1993: 6).

The relevance of gender loses importance in cyberspace, where there is no need for labelling: "Who are you?/ Call me Ali./ Is that you real name?/ Real enough./Male or female?/Does it matter?/ It's a coordinate./This is a virtual world"(P: 26). The refusal to situate his/her body in a norm confirms "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (Butler, 1993: 2). The virtual characters are thus applying a basic principle of queer theory. The narrator is trying to elude the "heterosexual matrix" which Butler criticizes and which is summarized in the table below:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| You have a fixed sex (male or female)… | …upon which culture builds a stable gender (masculinity or femininity)… | …which determines your desire (towards the "opposite" sex). |

In this paradigm, one idea follows from the other; a better understanding of gender should instead obliterate the imaginary connections between these assumptions and follow a model which stresses independence:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| You have a body. | You may perform an identity. | You may have desires. |

Since the body is no longer moored to categorizations, it does not define gender identity, therefore, the orientation of desire is not conditioned in any way (Gauntlett, 2008: 148-149).

The narrator of *The Powerbook* avoids gender markers in discourse because, as Butler claimed, discourse is performative, in the sense that speaking can produce an effect in the body, and thus change it. Language can transform the body through speech acts. Butler provides the example of the naming of sex at birth, which situates a person as a sexed body: "the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an "it" to a "she" or a "he," and in that naming, the girl is "girled," brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender" (Butler, 1993: 7). The critic sees language and the material differences of sex in an interdependent relationship, where one cannot be separated from the other:

> Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependence but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different (Butler, 1993: 69).



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It is now the appropriate time to return to the two keywords of this paper: cyberspace and meatspace. The narrator grants that the two are synergic to the point of merger: " I was typing on my laptop, trying to move this story on, trying to avoid endings, trying to collide the real and the imaginary worlds, trying to be sure which is which"(P: 93). The two lovers communicating by e-mail are aware of the fusion between their bodies and the fictional world they have entered willingly. "That was just a story./ This is just a story./I call this a true story./ How do you know? / I know because I'm in it./We're in it together now" (P: 27). The Turk Ali is also trapped in the web of his own narrative. He has written his body in discourse through the transsexual grafting mutation which enabled his love affair with the Princess: "Ali tells stories. He puts himself in the stories. Once there, he cannot easily get out again[...]"(P: 216). As Colebrook duly observed: "to write or speak is to imagine oneself as a subject, but that imagined subject is always embodied, and the body is always constituted through tropes"(13). In the novel, technological metaphors blend with traditional forms of writing, drawing attention to the status of the literary text on the web and to the split between the physical and verbal. *The Powerbook* itself encodes a paradox: it is a printed text problematizing the position of virtual literature. We might ask ourselves: what is the relationship between printed text and electronic text? Are they comparable in terms of depth? And what is the place of the body in these interactions? These questions are debatable, but some useful insights can be found in an article by Hayles, called "Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis". Calling for a media-specific analysis, the critic rejects the idea that hypertext can only be instantiated electronically, in digital media. She upholds her claims with the postulates of the actual inventor of the term hypertext, Vannevar Bush, who imagined the hypertextual system as a mechanical, and not an electronic one. She advocates that the term hypertext should be used in a variety of ways and that texts must always be embodied, dependent on their medium: "Understanding literature as the interplay between form and medium, MSA insists that "texts" must always be embodied to exist in the world. The materiality of those embodiments interacts dynamically with linguistic, rhetorical, and literary practices to create the effects we call literature"(Hayles,2004: 69-70). Hayles admits that many literary texts, such as DeLillo's *Underworld* or Grusin's *Remediation* imitate hypertexts.

Such is the case with Winterson's *The Powerbook*. The name of the novel is a reference to a line of Macintosh laptop computers sold by the Apple Company between 1991 and 2006. The chapters are all reminiscent of a computer Menu. However, several critics suggest that *The Powerbook* is only an attempt at a hypertext without actually being one. Boddy, for instance, deplores the fact that the novel's computational metaphors are not developed in depth and that many of the observations regarding virtual space are just truisms. The narrator juxtaposes postmodernist thoughts on the fluidity of time, space, truth and identity with the eternal belief in the power of love, elements which, as Boddy suggests, are quite incompatible (Boddy, 2000: 9). Cronquist also contends that Winterson's novel thwarts the initial (visual) expectations that we are dealing with a hypertext. He points out that the novel's major flaw is its mimetism, its failure to challenge the fracture between the printed and the electronic text:

> …if one begins to read the novel expecting to find new and innovative writing that utilizes or problematizes electronic hypertext one might be disappointed. The chapters read like chapters in any Modernist or Postmodernist fragmented text. It is only the frame of narration that asserts that the characters in the novel live in an electronic age. The Powerbook turns out to be a printed text that mimes hypertext – the novel never



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> radically questions its ontological status as a printed text that mimetically represents reality (Cronquist, 2005: 50).

The narrator does his/her best to simulate the dawn of printed literature, while still preaching about the immortality of such love stories as Romeo and Juliet, Lancelot and Guinevere, Paolo and Francesca, Abelard and Heloise. In cyberspace, printed literature appears to be condensed, reduced to a mere derogatory sentence and no longer relevant: "Was it romance you wanted?/ Doesn't everyone? /Download Romeo and Juliet. /Teenage sex. /Wuthering Heights. The weather's awful and I hate the clothes. / Heat and Dust./I'm allergic to dust. /The Passion. /Never heard of it"(P: 25-26). Apparently, the very notion of classical literature is dismantled, and the intertextual reference to *The Passion*, "never heard of" by the interlocutor, playfully undermines Winterson's own literary recognition. Yet appearances are deceiving. By including her own novel in the list of classics, she is indirectly acknowledging her heritage, but also pointing to her status as an outsider. Her literary undertaking involves drawing on the writers of the past in order to construct an original story. As she claims in an interview, "a writer can't ever read too much or know too much about the literature of the past. Those writers are your teachers and private ancestors. Their work informs your work, which is why, out of respect, you should never copy them, but try to honour their experiments with some of your own" (Winterson, www.jeanettewinteron.com). It would seem that the computer interface of the novel is merely ornamental: Winterson isn't making a statement about the death of printed literature through the evolution of hypertext, she is reinforcing the fact that computers pave the way towards a revival of literacy. Kellaway points out that "Winterson has no future as a boffin"(Kellaway www.theguardian.com). She believes computers are just a conceit which allow Winterson to plant her heels deeper in the past and experiment with jargon-free, lightweight language that verges on witches' spells. Similarly, Barnett calls her a "TechnoRomantic", because, instead of using "the traditionally Romantic idea of technology as a negative force, as soul-destroying, Winterson incorporates new media technology positively into her use of Romanticism." (Barnett, 2003: 43). She identifies cyber writing, through e-mails, with old-fashion writing, by means of letters, when she describes opening an e-mail as the unwrapping of a letter: "I'm sitting at my screen. There's an e-mail for me. I unwrap it"(P: 3).

Winterson's text problematizes writing in the era of computerization and interrogates the meaning of simulation, paranoia, hyperreality, literacy, inviting such troubling questions as: Is the literary canon obsolete? Is printed text still relevant? Is everything really connected? Can we privilege a text over the other? Addressing McLuhan's question, "What does hypertext render obsolete?", Stuart Moulthrop points out that "the best answer is not literacy but rather post-literacy.[…] Hypertext means the end of the death of literature"(Moulthrop in Leitch, 2001: 2515). While also emphasizing the "end of the death of literature" through the reworking of iconic love stories, the narrator obliterates axiological hierarchies, equalizing the literary value of Dante and Boccaccio with the value of the text on hand: "This is the story of Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo. You can find it in Boccaccio. You can find it in Dante. You can find it here"(P: 123). There is no hint of Boccaccio or Dante's version being more truthful or authentic than Winterson's, because every text proliferates endlessly, because even the most celebrated works of literature need reworking: "We are people who trace with our finger a marvelous book, but when we turn to read it again, the letters have vanished. Always the book must be rewritten (P: 78). Winterson suggests in *The Powerbook* that there is never an ending to the story of love : "Love's script has no



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end or beginnings" (P: 77). Closure is not an option, Winterson avers time and again, because the text resists control:

> There is always the danger of automatic writing. The danger of writing yourself towards an end that need never be told. At a certain point the story gathers momentum. It convinces itself, and does its best to convince you, that the end in sight is the only possible outcome. There is a fatefulness and a loss of control that are somehow comforting. This was your script, but now it writes itself. Stop. (Powerbook 53)

While discussing the possible ending of their online relationship, the narrator and the lover "I don't know how to give you up', I said./ You could rewrite the story./I've tried, haven't you noticed?/ Isn't there a better ending than either/or?/ I can't write it" (P: 133).

Through her cover versions of Mallory, Dante and Boccaccio, she makes a pertinent point: one might be inspired from the past, one might change the story, but the experiments go on forever, as there is no single "truth": "Break the narrative. Refuse all the stories that have been told so far (because that is what the momentum really is), and try to tell the story differently – in a different style, with different weights – and allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use, and give some substance to the floating world"(P: 53). In *The Archeology of Knowledge* , Foucault points out that the "frontiers of a book are never clear-cut," because "it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network . . . [a] network of references" (Foucault, 1972: 23). This is a recurrent idea throughout the novel: the narrator seems subjugated by a Bloomian "anxiety of influence", by a desire to mould the narrative in such a way that it is at once indebted to the literary past and cut off from it. On her official website, she declares that "we can't go on writing traditional nineteenth century fiction, we have to recognise that Modernism and Post Modernism have changed the map, and any writer worth their weight in floppy discs will want to go on changing that map. I don't want to be a curator in the Museum of Literature, I want to be part of what happens next" (Winterson,www.jeanettewinterson.com).

The last chapter is suggestively entitled "Save", as it foreshadows the ending of Ali's stories, and it is the most challenging one in what concerns the chronotope and the narrative voice. The offline and online personas converge as the narrator is instituted both as bodily presence and as immaterial voice. It begins as most of the cyberspace narratives begin, with the word which sets the time: Night. However, unlike the other introductions, this is followed by a physical co-ordinate, instead of a reference to computers, indicating that virtual reality is no longer a viable option. Throughout the chapter, Ali is pictured exploring the city of London, living his/her life outside the screen of a computer. The last story he/she tells metaphorically highlights the illusory nature of living in a virtual, imagined world. However, the story is not separated from Ali's narrative plane by means of a different chapter, as usual. The character is called Orlando, probably an intertextual connection with Virginia Woolf's novel, which traces the adventures of a man turned into a woman. Orlando arrives at a castle which initially appears real and where many people come in search for their dreams. However, the castle disappears and Orlando must now face the reality of loss.

Ultimately, with this last piece of fiction, I consider that Winterson makes a moralistic allusion to the impersonal nature of cyberspace: to inhabit virtual reality implies ignoring the materiality of bodies, but it also means living in an illusion.



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