

Embattled Subjects: the Role of Textual Masculinity in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

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In theorizing lesbian fiction, there is frequently an emphasis on heterosexuality as the social norm and on external heterosexual structures battled by and battering the lesbian protagonist (or protagonist couple), usually in an antagonistic relationship so that rewriting heteronormativity is stressed at the content level. A reading of Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* that is congruent with lesbian politics is hard to achieve if the emphasis is on looking for an overt critique and opposition to a heterosexual society. It is, however, easier to achieve if the emphasis is on looking at the evidence for a resistance to a *patriarchal* heterosexual gender matrix, but it is still not clear-cut. It is not about a failure to choose sides. Winterson's text chooses a side, but it is a side that says relationships and sexuality are complicated, and intrinsically both fraught with a struggle for power and engendered. The dividing line between masculine and feminine, however, is not sex. Gender vacillates within sex in Winterson's writing. Dominance, passivity and resistance can all exist within the same subject.

There is consensus in reviews and critical readings of *Written* that its "genderless" narrator though promising lacks originality in practice. Behind this evaluation there is often a political motivation (Pearce 1994; Wingfield 1998; Duncker 1998). Patricia Duncker, for example, is concerned explicitly about the novel's politics, or rather what she sees as its lack in relation to lesbian sexual identity politics. She calls it "a clever, duplicitous text," and states that it is "full of lost opportunities" (1998: 81, 85). She views it as complicit with heteronormativity. Lisa Moore explains what lies behind this critical view when she observes that after achieving success and a strong lesbian following after *Oranges, Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson evades the rules of lesbian fiction in *Written* through its "unsexed" narrator (1995: 106-107). The rule that is broken is that lesbian sexuality should be represented openly. Moore cites Judith Roof: "By implicitly challenging the habitual paradigm, representing sexuality conspicuously unmasks the ways gender and sexuality normally coalesce to reassert the complementary

duality of sexual difference” (107). If the goal is to be “conspicuous” in lesbian content and as a political lesbian text, *Written* fails and Winterson is, in this case, not a lesbian poet even if she is a lesbian.

Linda Hutcheon expresses the limitations for feminists of a postmodernist view on identity as a socially constructed subjectivity rather than a stable Self when she writes, “Feminism and its critique of patriarchal hegemony, it would seem, has been very good for postmodernism by focusing its attention on sexual difference and the body, but postmodernism is inherently limited in what it might offer feminists who have “distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance” (cited in Dorn, 1994: 140). Laura Dorn seeks to overcome the political limitations of postmodernism through her focus on the complexity of sexual identities in lesbian feminist representations. Dorn thus argues for the perspective that it is possible to both deregulate heteronormativity and to demand gender reconfigurations through the strategy of generating pluralistic rather than singular sexual identities. Andrea Harris similarly opens up for the possibility of “other sexes” but her argument is weakened by her insistence that the narrator is female in *Written* and the drive to equate politics with lesbian content rather than lesbian writing and representation vis-à-vis gender per se.¹

Insistence on explicit lesbian content ironically delimits the theorizing of lesbian fiction and its readership by narrowing it to sameness and lesbian sexuality. Males and masculinity disrupt the

¹ In her dual focus on materiality and ethics, Harris describes the narrator as “featureless” yet as implicitly female (2000: 130). However, she adds in her concluding paragraph that the fact that the gender is not given is itself an aesthetic and political choice that must be interpreted (146). She argues that what is achieved is a universalizing of the subject position of the narrator. The universal position is traditionally assumed to be masculine, thus for Harris, the narrator is “feminine under the guise of the universal/masculine”, and reading this strategy through Monique Wittig, it is a move towards liberation for the narrator’s persona (146). At first, Harris interprets the narrator as moving from the masculine (a braggart Lothario) to the feminine (a vulnerable lover full of self-doubt). Both positions are classic to use Harris’s terms, or traditionally masculine or patriarchal to use mine. Harris, however, does not end there. Rather, she concludes on a question, which undermines her own argument for a lesbian narrator, whether a linear metaphor can “begin to suggest the complexity of ‘other sexes’” (147).

lesbian text unless they are marginalized to either support or antagonistic positions to be overcome. This perspective on lesbian fiction is essentialist and implicitly humanist as it favors the lesbian Self over lesbian subjectivity and its connection to and dependence on sociality and signs for its identity. This is not just semantics. Modern identity is anxious and mutable by default. The lesbian subject cannot escape the anxiety of any subject or its potential to shift and change. The lesbian Self, on the other hand, claims its innateness and not only difference but stability. This is evident in such phrases as “I am a lesbian” and the trope of discovering one’s “true sexuality,” what was there all the time waiting to come out. The basic premise of postmodernist gender is that it is not fixed, and gay/lesbian studies both benefit from this idea in its extension to sexuality and its disconnect from the sexed body. But we cannot have it both ways. Either sexuality is innate or it’s socially constructed. The recognition of its construction is an acknowledgement of sexuality’s inherent instability and anxiety.

From this perspective, it is ironic that much of the postmodern critique of *Written* is aimed at the unfixing of its narrator. A valid objection to queer studies from lesbian critics, however, is that queer critics do not take lesbian concerns seriously and tend to focus on masculine imagery in same sex preference and thus implicitly on homosexuality rather than gynophilia and lesbian motifs, topoi and tropes. The complication, of course, is that there is a great deal of masculine imagery in lesbian fiction. Implicitly this is part of the problem in Duncker’s rejection of the unsexed narrator. Because the narrator is not an avowed lesbian, for Duncker there is no critique of the “structures of heterosexual marriage,” it is “not the issue at stake in the relationship between Elgin and Louise” because a male reader, in his identification with the narrator, “can imagine that Louise has chosen a better man” (82). This presupposes that heterosexual marriages are a threat and that men are a threat. In my view, Duncker overextends the object of critique to heterosexuality as such and thus misses the subversiveness of the exposure of internal disruptions within normativity, i.e. that it is perfectly possible to critique a conventional institutional structure that encourages a passivity in women and the patriarchal dominance of men without implicitly essentializing it as applicable to all heterosexual relationships by default. In literary terms, the unequal and emotionally poor marriage between Elgin and Louise is

a combined motif: the bad marriage and the dominant insensitive husband. Both of these motifs are common in lesbian fiction but also in the feminist heterosexual fiction of e.g. Margaret Atwood, and both are based on conventional masculine motifs: the patriarchal marriage and the patriarchal husband. There is not less critique of either in *Written* because the narrator's sex is not fixed.

What this amounts to in creating a theory of lesbian fiction is that a broader recognition is needed of the role of textual masculinity – of motifs, tropes, topoi and even genres typically associated with patriarchal masculinity – and their use in lesbian fiction.² This article focuses on Winterson's use and rewriting of textual masculinity in *Written*. I argue that gender is treated in the novel as transgressive of sexual boundaries and as vacillating within the subject. Winterson's text critiques the heterosexual gender matrix but the narrative as story does not escape it.

The romance genre and the trope of the rescuer

One aspect of traditional patriarchal masculinity is the genre of romance, where in the modern tradition women can be rescued from bad marriages by better men. The rewriting of a genre is a complex issue. At its most basic, the question is whether the trope of a woman in need of rescuing by a man is fulfilled in the novel or rewritten. The argument that we don't know if the narrator is a man is irrelevant because the masculinity of the trope remains if Louise is portrayed as a woman, who needs to be rescued. Since Elgin is never redeemed in the novel, and Louise leaves him while the narrator is gone, it can be argued that Louise is no longer in need of rescuing from her marriage. Yet, it can also be argued that the masculine or patriarchal structure remains if she has left Elgin to go to the narrator, who has, in fact, abandoned her and their relationship. Returning to a controlling man, who makes unilateral decisions regarding a relationship, is not much better than staying with an abusive one. So, regardless of the sex of the narrator, is s/he represented as having the

² For a discussion of how Winterson depicts men, see Philip Tew's "Wintersonian Masculinities" (2007). Tew discusses different forms of male identity as different masculinities.

capacity to rescue Louise? And is Louise a traditional feminine character that believes she is in need of rescuing by a masculine one?

The narrator imagines that he/she fulfills the masculine role of taking care of and thus rescuing Louise from a poor choice by leaving to ensure that Louise will get the treatment she needs. The story, however, never reveals for certain whether she does or not, or at least not if it is in the final analysis enough. There is also a telling metaphor. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator is without hope and feels as a result of a sense of loss insubstantial, but “can’t let go because Louise might still be on the other end of the rope” (184). What is interesting about this image is that it is masculine in terms of portraying a human desire to rescue and need to be rescued, but the traditionally gendered trope of the rescuer is rewritten as ambivalent. The text does not finally say which end of the rope the narrator is holding, i.e. who ultimately needs to be rescued, the narrator or Louise.

If the ending is read as a return by Louise and thus as a happy ending, the trope of the rescuer is still rewritten by the narrator’s weakened state. The physical deterioration of the masculine undermines the trope of the rescuer even as the narrator’s connection to the world and sense of blissful immediacy returns in her touch, her skin and her warmth. Louise as the returnee is the active part in the face of the narrator’s disconnectedness, and becomes the mediator of the return of the narrator’s social hope and happiness. Of course, from a feminist point of view, this is the double-bind of the patriarchal feminine, because the ending can be read as a transformation not of the trope of the rescuer into a gender equitable state of affairs, but rather as a changed configuration that shifts from the trope of rescuer into the patriarchal motif of woman as nurse, as handmaid.

Despite the ambivalence of the ending, which ensures that the novel as a whole vacillates between assigning the narrator a masculine and a feminine position rather than simply dismantling the masculine, the trope of the rescuer is successfully rewritten. As the trope of the male rescuer is at the core of the traditional genre of romance, its ambiguity in *Written* transforms the genre, rewriting or appropriating it for a postmodernist feminism.

Rewriting sex through gender

One of the strong conventions and indeed strengths of lesbian writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, is the ability to rewrite the dominant, the normative, the common and not just critique it. This is important because binary critiques are a double edged sword. In setting up an Other as normal to the struggling Self, the Self becomes abnormal. It is a double-bind. Even a negative investment in heterosexuality is complicit with its naturalization and the marginalization of its binary Others, i.e. the lesbian Self. Rewriting can evade this pitfall by recognizing that subjectivity is socially constructed and that identity is dependent on perspective. It can also be and often is politically radical, because it naturalizes and anticipates the presence of e.g. lesbian or homosexual attraction in heterosexual texts. The controversiality of this move within the academic community and outside it attests to the political nature of rewriting as a strategy for approaching texts.

Rewriting is integral to Winterson's theory of poetry, but she uses the word: *transformation*. In her collection of essays *Art Objects*, she writes that a "poet will not be satisfied with recording, the poet will have to transform" (1996: 76). However, this is the last step or rule in a theory that includes "association" or making links, which is "a poet's method" of writing (74); "to delight and disturb the reader when the habitual pieces are put together in a new way" (75); to not strain credulity (75), and finally transformation.

This theory is expounded in Winterson's eulogistic essay on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and she stresses that the links must also be made "in daylight," i.e. "happen to the conscious mind" and that it is this effect that should delight and disturb the reader (75). As far as connecting the narrator to a lesbian identity, this link does not happen finally, positively in *Written*. Again, one way of interpreting this is that Winterson fails to live up to her own theory of poetry.

Yet, if we take her admiration of Woolf seriously and accept its precursor status to *Written*, then the irreducibility of the sex of the narrator in *Written* is itself a motif she takes from *Orlando*:

It's central character, Orlando, is brave, funny, vulnerable and proud, and has the unusual advantage of being both a man and a woman, a new advantage in fiction, and one previously enjoyed in drama and opera by means of costume change only. Orlando changes her skin.

For Orlando, transformation is sex and sexuality. (67)

Orlando is a fantastical human, who can embody both male and female physical characteristics. Her ability to transform herself is expressed through her sex and sexuality, but it is not stable. In this lack of stability and variability in sex and sexuality, Orlando and the narrator of *Written* are alike. However, instead of repeating Woolf's experiment, Winterson gives it a new twist thus effectively rewriting or transforming what she has admired in Woolf. Winterson's narrator does not change her skin, s/he has no skin. In a text and novel that is arguably obsessed with skin, the body and sexuality, this creates dissonance. Yet, as an imaginative idea, it conforms to Winterson's own idea of poetry and its capacity to escape the "literalness of life" (1996: 66).³

Is it possible that Winterson's use of a character with a materially featureless and thus unspecified sex in mundane situations that are readily associated with gender is an attempt to liberate not only the body but thought, attachments, likes, and dislikes from gender? To, in a sense, capture the psychological reality of personality without the skewing of material sex? Can the title *Written on the Body* be interpreted not only in its positive aspects but in its culturally and socially delimiting ones? Is the featureless narrator an attempt to separate what is normally taken as written on the gendered body, and to say: Look, the associations are there without the body and thus the writing is superimposed, imprisoning the body?

I would argue that it is more than possible, that it is an inescapable effect of reading *Written* closely against the backdrop of Gayle Rubin's distinction between sex and gender. If we are to take Winterson seriously as a writer, her own writing on literature belies the possibility that she did not deliberately choose the clichés and to juxtapose so many traditional gender characteristics in the same character.⁴ The language of

³ In Webster's online dictionary *fantasy* is defined as the "the free play of creative imagination" and more specifically as "imaginative fiction featuring especially strange settings and grotesque characters" (Merriam-Webster Online. 16 May 2008 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fantasy>>). Fantasy is a common feature of lesbian fiction and more specifically the element that frequently recurs is excess, often in the form of the grotesque, e.g. the grotesque woman in *Sexing the Cherry*.

⁴ See in particular the essay "A Work of My Own" in *Art Objects* (1995: 165-192).

the clichés is integral to the story she wanted to tell, but perhaps their profusion in the narrator is a weakness as it can obscure their use in the relationship between the narrator and Louise, where the clichés are also present in the use of so many traditional masculine tropes and feminine positions.

For instance, in terms of the masculine, the insistence on certainty of sex, the importance of it, and the drive to distinguish the sexes are all common motifs in traditional heterosexual narratives and thus in what can arguably be classed textually as masculine patriarchal fiction. These traditional motifs are not present in *Written*, yet their absence is marked and a point of concern and indeed anxiety for readers. Winterson's unsexed narrator transgresses the boundaries of the absent masculine motifs and fills their spaces with a trope associated with the feminine, to be precise with threatening femininity in masculine or patriarchal writing: excess in the subject. It is somewhat ironic that the narrator is so frequently called "genderless" or "gender-neutral" when it is the plurality of gender markers that makes determining the sex impossible. Excess, which is otherwise celebrated in lesbian fiction, is the source of anxiety since in this case its relation to gender denies a fixed female identity and enmeshes it with the masculine.⁵

It is somewhat less a source of anxiety though of some confusion to my undergraduate students. Every semester that I teach *Written*, I ask my students if they think the narrator is a man or a woman and to explain why. About sixty percent think it is a man though invariably a feminine man, thirty that it is a woman, and the remaining students are undecided or convinced that the narrator is meant to be both simultaneously.⁶ All of

⁵ Marilyn Farwell is one of the few lesbian critics to engage with the narrator as seriously genderless. She argues that while *Written on the Body* is problematic for lesbian critic, the re-conceptualizing of the cancer-ridden body as excessive and grotesque in *Written* is identifiable with the Dog Woman, and that these characteristics extend to the lover in the "attempts to share in the body's experience of cancer" and thus to the relationship as markers of a specifically lesbian textuality (Makinen 2005: 115-116). She does not extend the excess to the narrator's gender identity,

⁶ A female student, who prefers to see the narrator in *Written* as a man, writes, "Since the novel is about a bisexual, androgynous person and the author has been very careful in not giving away the sex of this person it is impossible to establish if the story is about a woman or a man. I can only make a guess on the

them think of the narrator as a bisexual. Some of the contrastive things they mention in terms of gender are that the narrator is likened to for example Adam, Don Juan, a boy scout, Mercutio, and “a private dick” (95); but also that she compares ‘herself’ with a convent virgin, Alice in *Wonderland*, and the girl in Rumpelstiltskin who is supposed to be able to spin straw into gold but can’t. S/he reads playboy and women’s magazines; pees standing up and sitting down. S/he draws hunting analogies and war analogies but also eats when depressed, grows flowers and buys them for ‘herself’. The narrator engages in physical violence with women (Inge) and men (Elgin), actions that my students interpret as masculine. They classify as feminine that the narrator talks about emotions a lot, notices details in furnishings and appearance, and is an anarchy feminist (blowing up the urinal).⁷ There is a strong image of castration (the mailbox scene) and the narrator wears stockings to work. The two lists are almost endless, though my students remark that the traditional masculine markers of sex are more common in the first half of the novel and the feminine markers increase in frequency as the story progresses.

Though the students I teach may decide on a sex for the narrator, they generally remain open to being wrong and to being heteronormative in their judgment or swayed by Winterson’s own sexuality. They generally conform to Winterson’s own theory of art in associating markers with the sex that to them, in their experience, is most credible. In this sense, Duncker is right in her concern that a male reader will most likely identify with the narrator as a man, but this is equally true of heterosexual women readers among my students. One of the things to strongly influence the perceptions of those who prefer to think the narrator is a lesbian woman is the fact that the narrator has affairs with married women. They find it unlikely that lesbian single women would

basis of my own values and prejudices. I choose to see the person as a man; a feminine, bisexual man who attracts both sexes” (Emilia Dahlstedt, HH, spr 2007).

⁷ A male student expresses it this way, “As I said at the beginning, the narrator acts like a male at the start. Having a different woman every month, feeling restless and bored. These are all typical ‘male’ qualities. Or that’s what the author wants us to think. But as the story continued I noticed that the narrator describes everything very delicately and carefully, every touch and gesture. These are all typical ‘female’ qualities” (Philip Littorin, HH, spr 2007).

seek partners among women who are married to men. They also find it likely that Elgin's lack of reaction at the breakfast table is more indicative of it being a woman than a man.

In the excess of gender, the presence of both feminine and masculine markers contributes to a rewriting of traditional gender that enmeshes masculinity and femininity in ways that are unsettling if the narrator is taken as one individual, neither completely masculine or feminine. As far as femininity can be said to be traditionally connected with excess, masculinity is feminized in *Written* as the boundaries of the narrator's masculine self are invaded. Though it can be read also as the masculine markers invading feminine space, there is no way in which the reverse action is excludable. At most – or best – it becomes a mutual or equitable invasion.

The trope of love as invasion

The topos of excess thus has a connection to another recurring set of masculine motifs in the novel: maps and discovery, and the trope of love as an invasion of space. When the tropes of maps and invasion are introduced, there is a passage that expresses the good intentions of modern love: mutuality. The unsexed narrator initially takes the active masculine position only to imagine 'himself' also in the passive feminine position:

Louise, in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another's boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop of me in your hands for I am good soil. Eat of me and let me be sweet. (Winterson 2001: 20).

The language shifts from a focus on the self as explorer and the *discoverer* of Louise – a term that in itself implies passivity in Louise and is condescending as it denies her knowledge of herself – to the narrator's own subject status under the will of Louise. It is an expression of cognitive awareness of a mutuality in violation and assimilation. Yet, it ends from a masculine position of command, as the narrator tells her to "Scoop" and "Eat" and "to let me be sweet," i.e. to enjoy.

The dominance inherent in the masculine trope of invasion is also expressed in such love declarations as “I want to roll on to you and push myself into you” (110). The sexual position the narrator wants is dominant and its relation to space is invasive. Louise holds the most traditional of feminine positions. Winterson plays on this in the reveries on the body and reinforces it as part of the narrator’s own position vis-à-vis Louise despite initial intentions and professions of mutuality.

In the section on the cells in Louise’s body, the narrator uses the now common military metaphor of civil war for cancer cells as the body turning against itself. Giving Louise the position of “the victim of a coup,” the narrator offers to come inside her body and protect her, “let me crawl inside you, stand guard over you, trap them as they come at you” (115). Being a victim is to be in need of help, of protection, and this is a repetition of the trope of the damsel in distress. The rescuer and guards are traditionally masculine, and in accordance with masculinist/patriarchal notions of femininity blame Louise for “making too much of herself,” i.e. for giving way to excess (115).

Similarly, in the section on the brain, a traditional controlling masculinist metaphor is in evidence as the language is one of devotion, yet the imagery itself is invasive. The narrator thinks of Louise’s most important cognitive and personal body part, her head, as a tomb; the body is skeletal space to be explored. Louise is not only dying but dead: “Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways...” (119). It is not the career choice that makes this masculine as a trope, it is the desire to control, to be the one who marks her passageways. This extends even in death, “As I embalm you in my memory, the first thing I shall do is to hook out your brain through your accommodation orifices. Now that I lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem” (119). This ‘love’ speech is a strong echo of the violent masculine motif that wants to delimit the feminine object to a bounded space of his choosing; if I cannot have you, no one will, not even you.

The metaphorical language of the photograph in opposition to the poem is a vivid image of the desire to limit uncontrollable excess. This violent impulse to delimit feminine space is a masculine motif common in anti-romances and it is usually preceded by a repetition of the more classical romance motif of masculine devotion that expresses itself ironically in the trope of desire that objectifies and distances even as it

admires: the adulation of feminine mysteries. The feminine human is the mystery waiting for masculine discovery, and in Louise's case gender and sex coincide. She is a mystery, a space waiting to be explored, and the narrator has the masculine position of the archaeologist who wants to devote 'his' life to exploring her spaces.

At first blush, the tropes reinforce the activity of the masculine and passivity of the feminine, yet, in each case, Winterson rewrites the traditional masculine tropes as the narrator discovers that s/he is caught or in danger of being destroyed.⁸ In the section on the cells, the narrator imagines 'himself' inside Louise but in a reduced position with the capacity only to observe. The guard is someone else; "the keeper is asleep and there's murder going on inside" (115). The narrator can only "hold up my lantern" and watch. The observer's status is by definition passive and thus a traditionally feminine or subordinate one.

In the section on the brain, the narrator emphasizes Louise's invitation and the illlustrory nature of 'his' own independence:

'Explore me,' you said and I collected my ropes, flasks and maps, expecting to be back home soon. I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find the way out. Sometimes I think I'm free, coughed up like Jonah from the whale, but then I turn a corner and recognize myself again. Myself in your skin . . . That is how I know you. You are what I know. (120)

⁸ There are other clear instances of this fear as gendered in the novel. A vivid image of this is when the narrator imagines that Louise is "a volcano dormant but not dead. It did occur to me that if Louise were a volcano then I might be Pompei" (49). Louise is also a Victorian heroine, but the Gothic variety, i.e. capable of murder and flight. These images of woman as possessing a threatening quality belong to the masculine tradition of Amazons, and Greek and Roman goddesses and sirens. In Winterson, their historical use – since the Renaissance – are maybe rewritten if Louise can be presumed to be alive at the end of the novel. As geographic space, the volcano and thus Louise are volatile and dangerous to the narrator's image of himself as a stable but also a vulnerable city that cannot flee. Masculine stability is juxtaposed to feminine mutability and excess, but its very stability is shown to be its downfall and to hide the negative flipside of masculine constancy: a hamstrung passivity in the face of excess. The boundaries between feminine passivity and masculine constancy are blurred.

The expectation initially is one of separateness for the self and permeability of the other. The masculine self can enter and withdraw and remain intact. This is shown to be an illusion. The use of the adjective “free” indicates that the sensation of being lost inside Louise is not pleasant. The narrator resists it, resists losing independence and the freedom to come and go, to be separate. This fear of being swallowed up is a trope common in feminist fiction and is a trope of gender resistance.

There is, however, further ambiguity and complications in this passage as it seems to state that the narrator knows ‘herself’ through Louise but also paradoxically, Louise through being inside her. This is interpreted by lesbian critics as a recognition of the self brought on by sameness, i.e. same sex mirroring. The preceding resistance and struggle to find a way out, however, prevents this from being an easily divisible relationship in terms of gender (though not from it being two women). There is both the arrogant presumption of independence and separateness and the resistance to passively accepting being swallowed up by the other, i.e. there are traditionally masculine and feminine positions taken up, assigned, and resisted in the relationship.

The shift from active to passive does create a semblance of mutuality, but the presence of resistance creates an image of vacillation rather than balance. Balance suggests calm and equity. Using the narrator’s choice of traditionally masculine tropes and conventional feminine passive positions and feminist tropes of suffocation and loss of self, Winterson stresses a negative type of mutuality maintained through struggle and against inner resistance.

Writing and reading – masculine tropes

The masculine tropes of maps and invasion are juxtaposed against a feminist reinterpretation of the reading trope, which is intertwined with a postmodern writing trope. Traditionally reading is a domesticated feminine activity. As a trope it can be argued that it is historically associated with the circumscribed activity of women and is the expression of an attempt to control feminine discovery. In *Written*, it is a masculine relational trope, where reading is the active component and being read the passive. The narrator is the object rather than the subject of reading: “I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands” (89).

Reading the narrator's body gives Louise knowledge and the possession of that knowledge is power.

What is read is "a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime" (89). What is written on the body is the story of our lives, what has happened to us and what we have done (89). This is what Louise learns even as she "translates" the narrator "into her own book" (89). The narrator no longer feels sole ownership of his/her body or experiences. Later s/he notes of Louise that, "Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read" (106). That plainness extends to "the dark places as well as the light" inside the narrator (174). The intent to discover the other has led to being discovered. Contextually, "Your flesh is my flesh" is not a claim on the other's or Louise's body in this passage but rather a surrendering of the narrator's body. It tips the balance scales especially as the narrator wants but cannot achieve this power over Louise (119-120).

In relation to the narrator, Winterson dismantles the masculine ideal and protective armour of knowledge and logic as the narrator resigns to the fact that reason becomes "a Piranesi nightmare. The logical paths the proper steps led nowhere" (92). Yet, the fact that it is a resignation rather than a celebration or alternative renders it less a question of gender balance than gender usurpation, this time of the masculine by the traditional feminine. Usurpation is itself a masculine trope and can at best produce a shift in power, and thus be part of a vacillation rather than the creation of a balance of power.

Conclusion

In Meredith Børch's article "Love's Ontology and the Problem of Cliché" (1999), she sees at the core of the love story in *Written* "an epistemological problem: love is virtual, or invisible, not because it is illegitimate, but because it belongs to a different order of experience than the material order" (50). She uses what is itself a cliché about love, that words cannot do love justice; that they trivialize love. As any writer or critic discovers it is remarkably hard not to speak in clichés in discussing the topos of love. Børch's argument is that as love is expressed in clichés it becomes a "near-tragedy" but escapes this fate in *Written* through a

process of transformation, where the clichés themselves are the impetus to change. The experience of love is redeemed as it is transformed through the creation of a new language from the old: “love rewrites language ‘in the mode of Louise’, i.e. infusing the common discourse of clichés (trope, idiom, genre, tradition) with personal experience. Where the misprised social code needs inverted commas, renewed discourse has its own word: poetry” (52). Børch gives several examples of this including the expansion of the trope of love-sickness, the disruption of the trope of heroic self-sacrifice, and the transformation of the Petrarchan oxymoron of fire and ice for depicting the experience of loving someone. Poetic language and its insistence on speaking the old with “a redeeming difference” thus becomes the medium of redemption for love in Winterson’s novel (52).

Though sometimes fragmented and occasionally disjointed, Børch succeeds in presenting a compelling argument that Winterson, in fact, rewrites or transforms patriarchal tropes associated with love into something new and less traditionally masculine. She cites the narrator’s exclamation (155) that “clichés, they *are* the problem; and yet as outbursts they harbour the motivational grain from which, ... new poetry sprouts in tradition’s old fields” (54). Yet, her focus on the redemptive power of love infuses the renewal of the heterosexual gender language in *Written* with a hope that is perhaps greater in the mind of the reader than in the story as narrative.

I would argue that reading *Written* in terms of redemption erases the beginning, when the narrator is clear that the experience of love is also the experience of loss. In Winterson story of the narrator and Louise, loss is connected to separation and possible death, but it is also connected to the sense of control the narrator loses over his/her life. Love in *Written* is an obsession that invades everything one does and in which the loved one becomes part of everything. One abdicates power to the object of desire and at the very basic level of emotion one submits. The narrator writes a story that s/he sees repeat itself where a naked woman tells her lover, “When I try to read it’s you I’m reading. When I sit down to eat it’s you I’m eating” (15). This is loss of self as well as love of another.

This invasiveness of the other is repeated later in the novel in the use of the trope of reading as a metaphor for Louise’s knowledge of the narrator when the narrator is the object rather than the subject of reading. Yet, the narrative is a recounting by the narrator so the experience of

being read as a desired position is an act of surrender. Yet the narrator also claims access to Louise's thoughts, desires and knowledge. The narrator assumes a traditional masculine position by speaking for Louise in the very act of claiming to place the self in subordination to the other. It is a structuring of power that asserts a submission that is undermined by its own authority.

It can be argued that the narrator grows as a person in the novel as s/he becomes aware of 'his' own masculine drives and feminine characteristics. Yet, patriarchal masculinity is never eradicated and interpreting the ending as happy in the traditional sense of an actual reunion between the narrator and Louise requires transcending the materiality of their relationship. This materiality is present both in the reality of her cancer and the socio-psychological reality of the narrator's depression, insulation and isolation. The latter's condition makes her/him unreliable as a narrator and this disrupts the possibility of a happy ending. Such an ending would be discontinuous with the narrator's condition rather than a dream, which is more credible. It would also resurrect the trope of the rescuer and the heterosexual gender matrix as Louise's reappearance would rescue the narrator from a desperate loneliness and from finally dealing with the loss as a real rather than imagined reality. The fact that even as a dream, the narrator remains caught in the desire for the heterosexual gender scheme to be played out even as the text is not necessarily trapped – because the ending allows for a dual and divided reading – is a sign of the radical nature of Winterson's art.

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