

Ileana Botescu-Sireteanu

Transilvania University

NEGOTIATING LANGUAGES, TRANSLATING THE SELF: THE EMERGING SELF IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S ART AND LIES

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Abstract: *The present paper focuses on Jeanette Winterson's 1995 novel Art and Lies as it aims at identifying the sources of the Self in the continuous negotiation among the various languages and narrative voices that Winterson's novel foregrounds. Winterson's purposeful resistance to establishing any hierarchy as concerns narrators, narratives and languages as well as her marked intention to discard the very idea of centre are investigated as translating a problematic and fragmented self which only emerges as a negotiation among the various linguistic codes and the various narrative instances in the novel. The paper also concentrates on the concept of difference which is crucial to Winterson's entire body of fiction and whose understanding is in her case essentially different from the one it had in the traditional Western thought. As a determining factor in identity construction, difference transgresses the classical binary opposition and emerges as a constructive negotiation. Winterson's understanding of difference challenges the traditional dialectic definition of the concept and proposes a positive, liberating and rewarding vision instead. Consequently, the Self emerges as a collection of liberating and very constructive differences that stem from a very much welcomed diversity and pluralism.*

The close study of Jeanette Winterson's body of fiction reveals her intense preoccupation with disclosing suitable ways of coping with a problematic identity. In fact, following a biographical coordinate, Winterson's own identity is twice problematic: on the one hand she is a woman writer and this situates her within the framework of the feminine discourse and its ongoing struggle for legitimacy, on the other she is a lesbian writer, which undoubtedly adds to her marginal status. As being twice outside norms and canons, Jeanette Winterson creates a body of fiction that paradoxically denies the reactionary stance so common to feminist writers. Instead, she opts for generating narratives that I have called therapeutic, narratives which transcend binaries at all levels and challenge the classical concept of difference by introducing a difference within sameness, and consequently by dissolving binary oppositions.

The importance of difference as a concept and the debates that have accompanied it are actually a result of the fact that, as Mark Currie suggests in a very recent study, difference has always been

a central part of one of the fundamental problems in philosophy, and its full genealogy really lies in the emergence of the problem of identity in philosophy over several centuries (Currie 5).

Consequently, the great importance of the concept of difference to women in general and women-writers/women with a voice in particular becomes explicit, as it is through this concept and especially through the transformation its semantic field has suffered in the past few years that women are now able to express themselves. Women writers find themselves in the position of creating their own body of criticism and texts, foregrounding difference as their key-statement. At this point, the crucial aspect that one has to bear in mind in the analysis of contemporary feminine fiction is that difference is perceived as liberated from the conceptual restrictions it was bound to obey in the traditional essentialist binary thought and acquires the positive features of diversity. To quote Ben Agger's statement in *Gender, Culture and Power: Towards a Feminist Postmodern Critical Theory*, "to identify men as the enemy is already to decide in favour of a certain theory of male supremacy that is fatally flawed.... I identify the enemy differently...in the hierarchization of value..."(Agger 103).

The narratological enquiry into Jeanette Winterson's fiction reveals the fact that by making use of several narrative strategies, she formally supports her ideological claims to an identity that would render binaries redundant. In many ways, her fictional efforts parallel Jacques Derrida's understanding of difference and his subsequent critique of Saussure's binary definition of the sign. Derrida's revolutionary concept of *differance* moves away from the traditional Saussurian logic, as it incorporates both difference and deferral, allowing for a free play of signifiers and centers thus opening an infinity of semantic possibilities instead of operating a closure.

Similarly, Jeanette Winterson's fiction refuses to operate a radical closure in matters related to gender identity, so familiar to feminist writers whose literary efforts strengthen the essential binary and irreconcilable difference between genders. Winterson performs a de-gendering of the narrative at all levels, refusing to conceive of difference as a two-pole concept. Her narratives go beyond oppositions and emphasize the importance of transcending binaries in order to obtain a more refined understanding of the world and of experience.

At this point, it is helpful to consider Linda Hutcheon's already famous theoretical study on the *Poetics of Postmodernism* and particularly the emphasis she lays on the indissoluble relationship that brings together language, discourse and subjectivity. Moreover, Hutcheon claims that in literature, postmodernism represents the revenge of parole as it highlights the language in action, in use (Hutcheon 28).

In a similar vein, linguist Emile Benveniste agrees that "language is only possible because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as I in his discourse; this polarity of persons (I versus you) is the fundamental condition in language" (Benveniste 41), which proves to be of particular relevance to the present study, as it emphasizes the utmost importance of identity and of the Self as opposed to the Other in the production and use of language.

Within the framework of feminine attitudes to language, a large number of feminist theorists have tried to emphasize the role that gender identity plays in producing discourses, culminating with Helene Cixous's injunction of recognizing the necessity of a language of women (*écriture féminine*). Consequently, many contemporary women writers have sought to move away from the silence in which women have been traditionally confined by Western history while redefining themselves through language and discourse.

This move away from silence would certainly correspond to the process that feminist critic Alice Jardine calls *gynesis*, "the transformation of woman and the feminine into verbs...the putting into discourse of women" (Jardine 27).

In her study on the configurations of women and modernity, Jardine critically refers to the Western epistemological legacy, claiming that gynesis as defined above, as well as a proper discussion of sexual difference cannot be initiated from within the context of this legacy. Jardine's critical study insists on the discursive component of identity and is paralleled by Stuart Hall's statement according to which "identification is a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption; there is always too much or too little, an over-determination or a lack, it entails a discursive work" (Hall 17).

Unlike feminist writers who challenge patriarchy by placing their narratives in a male-dominated environment that they could later deconstruct, thus constructing a parasitic female identity whose essential attribute is being opposite to but still dependent on the male one, writer Jeanette Winterson most certainly justifies the necessity for a difference within sameness. Her fiction creates worlds without a center, worlds where there is no need to destroy one meaning in order to create another. Attributes such as male and female no longer polarize the characters' experiences and discourses as there is a radical shift in conceiving gender and gender-related issues and just as the narrative ceases to be one, gender ceases to be a unitary concept.

For its most part, Jeanette Winterson's fiction foregrounds and investigates the intimate connections between language in its representation as discourse and narrative on the one hand, and identity as a discursive process of ongoing self-determination on the other. As a lesbian writer, Winterson is chiefly concerned with textual and metatextual mechanisms of representing the queer identity which no

longer falls under the tyranny of the male versus female opposition, but allows for a reconsideration of the traditional concept of difference.

Both the narrative and the female identity undergo the same explosive process in Jeanette Winterson's fiction. Moreover, language is seen as a negotiation, a struggle among competing codes and a continuous reconstruction of meaning. Drawing on Bakhtin, one may claim that Winterson's use of the language and her subsequent construction of narratives can be labeled as essentially *polyphonic*, foregrounding at different times various registers and various narratives which equally contribute to the production of meaning.

Jeanette Winterson's novels call for readers who have the competence and the expertise of recognizing not only similarities with the external shattered realities of the postmodern condition, but also numberless intertextual references which web through her texts and construct a maze of metatextual connections. Her novels display an extreme polyphonic feature in that they encapsulate numerous and very different types of narratives, languages and codes. At times this polyphony is so extreme that it seriously endangers the logical coherence of the novel, yet it is firmly grounded in Winterson's ideological adherence to the queer identity. Winterson's novels are queer narratives where binaries are transcended and opposites reconciled and where readers are forced to abandon the search for meaning in favour of the aesthetic pleasure.

In this sense, Winterson's novel *Art and Lies* is illustrative, as it features three very different narratives which defy common knowledge and sense because none of the narrators is who they are supposed to be. *Art and Lies* is a wonderful artistic meditation on the nature of reality and art, each with its degree of deceit. The novel constantly oscillates between raw reality and art, as it features a doctor, Handel, a female painter, Picasso and the ancient lesbian poetess, Sappho and their metafictional comments on the process of artistic creation on the one hand and the violence of everyday experience on the other. As readers find themselves before what the author warns them is *A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd*, they are actually contemplating the core issues of the novel, its major concerns: discourse, narrative and identity as negotiation.

As mentioned above, the narrators in *Art and Lies* are called Sappho, Picasso and Handel, yet all of them are cases of mistaken identities as they are not who readers expected them to be. Their narratives are heterogeneous and illustrate various epistemological fields, as Handel is a doctor, Picasso a woman painter and Sappho a poet. The three narrative voices that disrupt and fragment the novel but at the same time enhance its textual ambition perfectly illustrate Bakhtin already classical concept of *heteroglossia*, which critic Laurie Finke contextualizes in the framework of feminist theory, claiming that

if patriarchy has created the illusion of monologic utterances monopolized by men, then feminists can dispel that illusion by appropriating the notion of heteroglossia, highlighting the dialogic nature of all discourse, insisting that those contested voices be heard (Finke 14).

And Jeanette Winterson, although not a feminist, can certainly be viewed as a contested voice, given her lesbian orientation and her subsequent queer narrative discourse.

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As a surgeon, Handel is confronted with the cruel reality of disease and death on a daily basis and in his attempt to counterbalance it he develops a very rich and intimate relationship with books and reading. His narrative discourse emerges as a delicate, poetic account of otherwise raw medical procedures:

She began to give birth. It was a gift, a gift of life in that cold dead room, on the cold dead streets. The baby was ready. The baby was skimming down the birth canal and into the windy world. Gently, gently,

I brought her forth as is she were my own. I felt that she was my own. I cut the cord and moored her and she was free, her own, laid on her mother's belly in the little coat of blood (Winterson 19).

Sappho, on the other hand, although a poetess, seems to be more concerned with the reality of her intense and very controversial sexual life, thus echoing Winterson's own revolt against those who narrowly identify her as a lesbian rather than an artist.

For Sappho, language emerges as an interface between reality and art, reality and fiction as well as the only possibility of making identity intelligible:

The Word terrifies. The seducing Word, the insinuating word, the word that leads the trembling hand to the forbidden key...the Word that does not bring peace but a sword... The word shaped out of the substance as the sculpture is shaped from the stone. The word imposed upon the substance as the wind reforms the rock...the Word out of flux and into form (Winterson 55).

On the other hand, for Handel, language acquires Biblical dimensions and the capacity to materialize and transform reality:

The Book. The handwritten word. The printed word. The word illuminated. The word carved in stone and set above the sea. The warning word in flashes that appeared and vanished and vanished and appeared, cutting the air with a bright sword. ...The word in red and gold. The Word in human form, Divine (Winterson 202).

Thus, according to Winterson, language and story-telling remain the only possible means through which reality can be accessed, translated and processed and identity can be constructed or translated. Whether we choose to adopt Husserl's phenomenological perspective according to which the subject is the source of all meaning and meaning at its turn pre-dates language, or we favour the Heideggerian hermeneutical approach which sees language as prior to the existence of the individual subject, it is clear that language is essential and indispensable to making the Self/identity intelligible.

In this respect, critic Alison Lee insists that

story-telling provides the link between public and private history since, while all historical events are direct experience to someone, to everyone else they are simply stories [...] meaning and structure are imposed on history by narrative devices (Lee 45).

This is, they are imposed by language, essentially.

Winterson's language is non-referential and thus highly non-mimetic, yet it does reflect the need of putting an internal struggle into words. The intense preoccupation with investigating the possibilities of language to represent a fragmented female, lesbian identity permeates through Winterson's novels and leads to the abandonment of everyday referential language in favour of a poetic language. Winterson's language is one that transcends binaries, one that goes beyond dichotomies, one that abandons the male/female rivalry, as it is not concerned primarily with reflecting a female identity. As the gay/lesbian identity transcends the male/female binary, Winterson's poetic language goes beyond feminist claims to a feminine language that would recuperate meaning from the male tyranny. Referring back to Walker's statement, Winterson is not at all concerned with issues of power or with challenging male domination; her fiction represents a therapeutic attempt to cope with an uncharted identity, where either/or is not the appropriate syntagm to use. Using a rhetoric of both/and, Winterson's language both reflects and produces an identity which reconciles binaries but which, quite ironically, finds it impossible to be reconciled with the others.

Language remains a major concern for Winterson, who tries to explore its possibilities of representing a fragmented identity and a plural reality. It becomes closely connected to female identity but most importantly to the queer identity that Winterson's fiction foregrounds, illustrating Nancy Walker's statement according to which

women's fascination with language proves the author's distrust of the power of words to define and confine women's experience; moving from silence to language, women reformulate the concept of power' (Walker 187).

In this sense, narrator Handel exposes identity's intimate connections to language when he meaningfully attempts to define himself:

I, Handel, doctor, Catholic, admirer of women, lover of music, virgin, thinker, fool, am about to quit my city, never to return (Winterson 26).

Myself. The accumulation of parts: menus, concert programmes, blood-pressure charts, books read, conversations overheard, irrational fears, recurring dreams, love lost and found, childhood miseries, adult compensations, ..., that day with you, the white rose, La Mortola, I keep pressed between the pages of a book (Winterson 187).

In this fragmented kaleidoscope of hectic images that concur to define somebody, language appears as the only possible means to create a narrative/story of the Self and contribute to the emergence of the Self, whereas identity seems to be impossible outside language. As critic Alison Lee suggests in her investigation of Realism and the postmodern British fiction, 'reality is a purely linguistic construct and if any mirroring takes place, it is of linguistic structures' (Lee 25).

Identity and language emerge as an ongoing negotiation among various competing codes, narratives and identities that are eventually reconciled through a metaphorical and highly expressive textual ruse, an illegible musical piece that concludes the novel and levels all differences. The reader contemplates a riddle that one finds it difficult but at the same time completely pointless to solve, since its meaning consists precisely in its being what it is, a riddle. Metatextually, this translates Winterson's idea of the ongoing negotiation and construction of the Self and the pointlessness of defining one's identity, as identity is in permanent transition, evolution and change and one finds it impossible to confine it within the rigid limits of a definition. This final passage that only a few can and will decode, transcends language in an attempt to do away with difference and dichotomies; the Self emerges as a symphony of discourses whose very difference contributes to its existence: "They sat together, the three, Handel, Picasso Sappho, sat together under the yellow rain. ... They talked the three, Handel, Picasso, Sappho, talked together under the shelter of the rain" (Winterson 204).

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