

## HISTORY AS DISCOURSE IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE PASSION*: THE POLITICS OF ALTERITY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Set in the historical context of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, Jeanette Winterson's The Passion is an outstanding example of the kind of fiction that Elizabeth Wesseling (1991: vii) calls postmodernist historical novels, that is, "novelistic adaptations of historical material". Besides, being profoundly self-reflexive, the novel also falls under Linda Hutcheon's (1988) category of historiographic metafiction. The present paper focuses on Winterson's political choice of two representatives of historically silenced groups, a soldier and a woman, who use two apparently opposed narrative modes, the historical and the fantastic, to tell a story that both exposes history as a discursive construct and provides an alternative fantastic discourse for the representation of feminine desire.*

The materiality of language is always in view in a postmodern text, and any putative "neutrality" that language might once have appeared to possess remains conspicuously absent. Language is not neutral and not single. In postmodernism, language means residence in a particular discourse, and alternative semantic systems or discourses are not just alternate views or versions of "a reality" that remains beyond them (Ermarth 1992: 3-4).

*Historiographic metafiction* and *postmodernist historical novels* are two different terms, coined by Linda Hutcheon (1988) and Elizabeth Wesseling (1991) respectively, which nevertheless allude to a literary phenomenon that is characteristic of contemporary fiction: the merging of historical material with the fantastic as a means to point out the contradictory nature of postmodernism. Like historiographic metafiction,

postmodernist historical novels become overtly self-reflexive by turning “epistemological questions concerning the nature and intelligibility of history into a literary theme” (Wesseling 1991: vii). They emphasize the notion that, if history is discourse, it is constructed in and through language and that, consequently, it is open to revision and recontextualization. Hence postmodernist historical novels, Wesseling (1991: 13) argues, may “turn to the past in order to look for unrealized possibilities that inhered in historical situations”. By exploring their linguistic and literary conventions, these novels allow for the representation of alternative versions of history and alternative personages that have been systematically excluded from historical texts.

Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* is an overtly metafictional novel that rewrites the story of the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte from the point of view of two representatives of traditionally inarticulate classes and equally silenced groups: a French soldier-cook, Henri, and a Venetian bisexual woman, Villanelle, who gambles away her freedom and is sold to the army as a prostitute. This paper focuses on Winterson’s dialogic use in *The Passion* of two apparently opposed narrative modes, historiography and fantasy. As this paper intends to demonstrate, Winterson chooses a very precise and utterly meaningful historical period as a contextualizing frame for the development of the story her characters tell in *The Passion*, but only to problematize established notions from within: firstly, through Henri’s exposure of history as a totalizing discourse and, secondly, through the creation of a peculiarly fantastic realm that guarantees the fulfilment of Villanelle’s *unnatural* desires.

The action referred to in the fabula (Bal 1985) of the novel expands for about half a century and deals with a highly emotionally intense historical moment. It begins in approximately 1769 and ends at some indefinite time well after 1821. This is a very important period in the history of France, first, and of the whole of Europe, later, not only in social and political terms but also in terms of cultural manifestations. I am obviously talking about the painful transition from the French Revolution to the forthcoming rise and fall of Napoleon’s Empire. It had been hoped that the French Revolution would give birth to a new social order. However, when in 1793 France declares war on Britain, bliss is followed by disillusion. Suddenly the same tyranny, the same ambition and desire for expansion and conquest that had been fought by the three principles of the French Revolution –Freedom, Equality and Fraternity– reappear in harshness in the guise of an intemperate conqueror, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Traditionally the Napoleonic wars have been portrayed as the story of the military success of a great man whose deeds expanded the French Empire in the last decades of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Jeanette Winterson offers a different version of the same events in *The Passion*, by resorting to the perspective of a disillusioned young man, who initially shares in the general climate of passionate

enthusiasm, and decides to become a soldier, but who is physically and spiritually destroyed by Napoleon's unquenchable thirst for power. The rise of Napoleon paradoxically installs the *naturalization* of a repressive political discourse which does not differ much from the monarchical one and which equally silences any claim to plurality. In the novel, two patriarchal figures, the French emperor and the Russian czar, become the symbols of power and oppression, the butts of Winterson's criticism. Behind this subversive move, lurks Winterson's politics: patriarchy has to be exposed as a socio-historical construct before giving way to the representation of an alternative feminine discourse.

Winterson chooses Henri, the male hero of the novel, to undermine patriarchy and its claims to universal history. He not only rejects the drab future that awaits him, if he sides with the patriarchal standards established by Napoleon, but is also capable of showing in practice that history is but a narrative of past events that is subject to political and ideological manipulation. Henri is a homodiegetic narrator (Bal 1985). He first takes notes of his experiences in the army in a war journal and then rewrites his story from a retrospective point of view. This means that his narrated memoirs no longer correspond to the events he focuses on as a direct witness. *The Passion* presents the reader with two distinct voices, that of the optimistic young man who believes in the promising career of his Emperor and the subsequent flourishing of his country, and that of the grown-up man who has experienced all the abominations of war and becomes profoundly disappointed with Napoleon and history. His memoirs are narrated from a distance by an adult Henri, who is already *imprisoned* in the madhouse of San Servelo and who can review his experience in Napoleon's service from a critical perspective. The ironic distance that the adult narrator-author maintains concerning his past adventures as a young character, as he rewrites them, is one of the keys to success in his reduction to mere discourse of the monolithic categories of religion, masculinity and nationalism.

Henri's undermining process implies the rejection of a set of principles he had been taught to take for granted. His memories of childhood and early youth present the reader with a Henri who not only inhabits and defends his patriarchal world but also learns to be in close spiritual contact with its two representative Father figures: Napoleon and God. Henri grows up surrounded by nature and partaking in its innocence. He invariably associates his memories of childhood with the natural space of his village and with the memory of his mother. When the nostalgia of a happier past assaults him in the army, he always resorts to strikingly poetic descriptions of the natural environment that surrounded him as a child: "I was homesick from the start. I missed my mother. I missed the hill where the sun slants across the valley. I missed all the everyday things I had hated. In spring at home the dandelions streak the fields and the river runs idle again

after months of rain” (6). Nevertheless, he gets in touch with religion and politics very early, through the odd influence of a rather unorthodox priest, who is in charge of his *education*:

Thanks to my mother’s efforts and the rusty scholarliness of our priest I learned to read in my own language, Latin and English and I learned arithmetic, the rudiments of first aid and because the priest also supplemented his meagre income by betting and gambling I learned every card game and a few tricks. (12)

The priest sacrilegiously talks about Bonaparte as if he were a new Messiah sent by God and impiously affirms that his choice of the priesthood amounts to: “if you have to work for anybody an absentee boss is best” (12). His manifest scepticism concerning his job contrasts with the romanticized version of the world he feeds Henri with. When Henri arrives at the camp at Boulogne, he cannot help comparing what the priest had told him with what he actually sees. Two examples could be mentioned in this respect. The first would be Henri’s forced visit to the brothel, an explicit critique of what certain theories of masculinity understand as a necessary rite of passage from childhood and innocence to adulthood and experience for boys:

I had expected red velvet the way the priest had described these seats of temporary pleasure, but there was no softness here, nothing to disguise our business. When the women came in they were older than I had imagined, not at all like the pictures in the priest’s book of sinful things. Not snake-like, Eve-like with breasts like apples, but round and resigned, hair thrown into hasty bundles or draped around their shoulders. (14)

The second example exposes the harshness of military life. Henri has been taught that “soldiering is a fine life for a boy” (8) but his very first impression appears to be otherwise when he visits Napoleon’s storeroom for the first time:

The space from the ground to the dome of the canvas was racked with rough wooden cages about a foot square with tiny corridors running in between, hardly the width of a man. In each cage there were two or three birds, beaks and claws cut off, staring through the slats with dumb identical eyes. I am no coward and I’ve seen plenty of convenient mutilation on our farms but I was not prepared for the silence. Not even a rustle. They could have been dead, should have been dead, but for the eyes. (5-6)

Silence, mutilation, dumbness, and the choking sensation of being a prisoner in a wooden cage are metaphorical images for the way in which Napoleon, as Henri will soon learn, will treat his soldiers. Like his chickens, soldiers become objects in the hands of

the Emperor, military toys with dumb identical eyes.<sup>1</sup> “July 20th, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today” (24) Henri sadly notes in his war journal: “In the morning, 2,000 new recruits marched into Boulogne” (25).

More important still for the argument, Henri eventually realizes that the romanticized image of Napoleon that the priest had drawn for him is but a construct, when he says: “I invented Bonaparte as much as he invented himself” (158). Only when Henri is deprived of his imbued idealistic frame of mind –the logical outcome of a human longing for greatness that explains and perpetuates patriarchy and its values– does he see his own mistake: “They [the Russians] called the Czar ‘the Little Father’, and they worshipped him as they worshipped God. In their simplicity I saw a mirror of my own longing and understood for the first time my own need for a little father that had led me this far” (81).

It is this radical rejection of the three holding values of patriarchy –the czar, as the representative of political power, God, as the supreme religious authority, and the father, as the sole arbiter in the family– that marks Henri’s decisive turn of mind. He suddenly confesses in his memoirs: “If the love was passion, the hate will be obsession. [...] The hate is not only for the once loved, it’s for yourself too; how could you ever have loved this?” (84). Unable to escape from this “hate for oneself”, Henri refuses any further contact with his patriarchal world. Instead he consciously retreats to the realm of the mind and sticks to language and literature in order to try to explain and give unity to an otherwise painfully chaotic past. By presenting the reader with a story made up of the dialogic interplay between his war journal and his more elaborate memoirs, Henri destroys the constructed boundaries between history and fiction and clears the ground for the inscription of a third, much more subversive and innovative discourse in the novel: Villanelle’s story.<sup>2</sup>

Villanelle believes in “the truth-revealing power of storytelling” (Onega 1995: 143). She relies on fantasy and the fairy tale to offer an alternative space to the historical background of the novel: a feminine fantastic that has its origins at the margins of patriarchy and heterosexuality. Her task as a woman, in Judith Butler’s (1990: 115) words, “is to assume the position of the authoritative, speaking subject –which is, in some sense, [women’s] ontologically grounded ‘right’– and to overthrow both the category of sex, and the system of compulsory heterosexuality that is its origin.” Her

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1. The fact that Winterson has chosen chicken as Napoleon’s favourite food is by no means gratuitous. *Le coq gaulois* is the emblem of the French nation, so choosing chicken as Napoleon’s favourite and only food amounts to implying that he is eating his own children. For a further explanation of this issue, see Onega 1996.

2. For a detailed analysis of the hierarchical structure of Henri’s and Villanelle’s narratives implied in this statement and its political impact, see the article “Written Narration Versus Oral Storytelling in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion*” (Asensio Aróstegui 1994).

discourse is anchored in the fantastic and constitutes a revision of the traditional values of the fairy tale. The fantastic as an alternative discourse allows Villanelle to openly express her alterity, not as man's *Other*, but as a bisexual woman and consequently "as a powerful destabilizing agent of political culture and discourse" (Doan 1994: xi). On the other hand, this fantastic space enables Villanelle to openly acknowledge feminine desire and to choose motherhood while remaining an independent *femme seule*.

Kathryn Hume (1984: xii) defines fantasy not as a secondary mode but as "an impulse as significant as the mimetic impulse."<sup>3</sup> Hume, like Jeanette Winterson in *The Passion*, proposes the subversion of essentialist notions of *either* fantasy *or* mimesis and defines fantasy as "the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal". This definition perfectly suits Villanelle's narrative in *The Passion* in so far as it proposes a deliberately political departure from the limits of a patriarchal world that presents woman as man's *Other*, and lesbianism and bisexuality as heterosexuality's *Other*. In this line, Rosemary Jackson (1981: 3) states that "fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss." A bisexual woman, Villanelle takes sides with that huge group of *ex-centrics* marginalized by society and made invisible and silent by the standards of patriarchy and heterosexuality. Since patriarchy has already been exposed as a linguistic construct by Henri's narrative, Villanelle is allowed to explore a different narrative mode, the fairy tale, as an alternative for the textual representation of feminine desire. Her discourse masquerades as conventional fairy tale, but both the language and the ideology that she inscribes behind such an apparently complying gesture manage to rewrite the fairy tale as a mechanism for the exposure of patriarchy rather than exclusively using it as a surrogate literary form of the dominant order. In this respect, *The Passion* succeeds in overcoming one of the limitations of the fantastic pointed out by Jackson's (1981: 4) words: "Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, re-covering its dark areas."

Villanelle is no conventional fairy-tale heroine. Physically, she is born with webbed feet, a genetic mistake of the utmost socio-political significance, because only men, and

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3. In doing so, Hume prefigures the paradoxical move from margins to centre that the fantastic in literature seems to be in the process of undergoing in contemporary fiction. Neil Cornwell (1990: 211) explains this situation in the following terms:

In the twentieth century, in the age of modernism and postmodernism and under progressive impact from the ideas generated by (or encapsulated in) psychoanalysis, existentialism and dialogism (Freud and dreams, Sartre and being, Bakhtin and carnival) the fantastic has, arguably, reached a position in which it is increasingly itself becoming 'the dominant', as it continues to develop not only its dialogical, interrogative, open and unfinished styles of discourse but also a strong social, political and ethical thrust.

more precisely boatmen, have webbed feet in Villanelle's patriarchal society. Webbed feet are therefore the symbol of the phallus. In spite of her being a woman, Villanelle is also in possession of the distinctively masculine trait in the novel: "My feet were webbed. There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (51). She becomes thereby an androgynous character, an outsider in her phallocratic society that cross-dresses as a boy and proves that sex categories are not essences but positions:<sup>4</sup> "My flabby friend, who has *decided* I'm a woman, has asked me to marry him" (63; emphasis added).

Ideologically, Villanelle is a rebel inside the established system both as character and as narrator. Traditional fairy tales "glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues" and "suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity" (Rowe 1979: 239). Villanelle is not used to complying with the authority of Father figures. Unlike Henri, Villanelle is not a religious person and she criticizes Napoleon's politics of rationality from the very beginning. She even gets rid of her biological father by alluding to his *fantastic* disappearance, a story which is characterized both by a gloomy and a comic atmosphere and which is framed by the conventions of the fairy tale:

There was once a weak and foolish man whose wife cleaned the boat and sold the fish and brought up their children and went to the terrible island as she should when her yearly time was due. [...] This boatman, ferrying a tourist from one church to another, happened to fall into conversation with the man and the man brought up the question of the webbed feet. At the same time he drew a purse of gold from his pocket and let it lie quietly in the bottom of the boat. [...] The next morning, the boat was picked up by a couple of priests on their way to Mass. The tourist was babbling incoherently and pulling at his toes with his fingers. There was no boatman. [...]

He was my father.

I never knew him because I wasn't born when he disappeared. (50)

The fantastic nature of the events described transports the reader to a realm of enchantment and magical spells. Villanelle's father seems to have been punished with disappearance for contravening one of the golden rules established by the hermetic guild to which he belongs by profession: "no boatman will take off his boots, no matter how you bribe him" (50). A second, more rational reading of this passage is also possible. Villanelle's father is tired of an excess of responsibility, hard-work and economic penury. As Villanelle remarks: "Their house was hot in summer and cold in winter and

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4. This exposure of categorization according to sex is also present in Villanelle's description of the ritual performed by boatmen's wives when they are pregnant, as analyzed in Asensio Aróstegui 1996: 268-270.

there was too little food and too many mouths. [...] Winter was approaching, the boatman was thin and he thought what harm could it do to unlace just one boot and let this visitor see what there was” (50). Having fulfilled his part of the treaty, Villanelle’s father takes the money and runs, leaving the maddening tourist and his pregnant wife behind.

The second reading proves especially significant for our purposes because it allows Villanelle to subvert one of the structuring elements of the fairy tale: the nuclear family and the figure of the *pater familias*, traditionally in charge of the well-being of his wife and children. Villanelle’s biological father disappears before her birth, but her mother is already living with another man when she is born. No mention of her having got married is made in the novel. What Villanelle does tell is that her mother is not looking for protection in her new partner; she is neither looking for a father to her newly born baby. Villanelle’s mother chooses her partner out of a need to satisfy her sexual desire, an attitude that her society sees as unnatural and as a possible cause of her daughter’s *deformity*: “Or perhaps it was her carefree pleasure with the baker she should blame herself for?” (51). Villanelle’s mother chooses an open-minded, liberal man who does not belong to the hermetic guild of the boatmen and is also an outsider in this ritualized society with arbitrary rules based on sexual differentiation. Villanelle’s stepfather always adopts a marginal position in the family and never shows any sign of intolerance or prejudice: “a shrug of the shoulders and a wink and that’s him. He’s never thought it odd that his daughter cross-dresses for a living and sells second-hand purses on the side. But then, he’s never thought it odd that his daughter was born with webbed feet” (61).

Villanelle’s discourse also rewrites the romantic notions of love, sex, marriage and motherhood as sustained by fairy tales and their traditional happy endings. Villanelle falls passionately in love when she is eighteen years old, as any fairy-tale heroine would be expected to do. The object of her passion is, however, not a man, but a woman “of grey-green eyes with flecks of gold. Her cheekbones were high and rouged. Her hair, darker and redder than mine” (59). Although this is not Villanelle’s first romance –“I am pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women, but I have never needed a guard for my heart” (59-60)–, this mysterious lady becomes the unique owner of Villanelle’s heart by literally stealing it and keeping it in an indigo jar wrapped in silk. However, Winterson refuses to indulge in a successful lesbian love story –like the one she recounted in her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*– and makes a married woman of the mysterious lady who turns out to be in love not only with Villanelle but also with her husband. Hurt by this revelation, Villanelle decides to comply with heterosexuality and accepts its ultimate manifestation, marriage to a male-chauvinistic French cook who promises her that “we could travel the world” (96). Marriage is for Villanelle a means of escape, a running away from her consuming



passion. As she explains: “We were married without ceremony and set off straight away to France, to Spain, to Constantinople even. He was as good as his word in that respect and I drank my coffee in a different place each month” (97).

Such a confession may sound like a variation of the happy ending of fairy tales, “and they lived happily ever after”. It is not so, though. An independent woman, Villanelle abandons her husband after two years of marriage, but her refusal to comply with the requirements of heterosexuality is severely punished in the narrative. The cook, who is still her husband and who subsequently possesses all authority upon her, decides to make her into an object of male pleasure, a commodity in the economy of exchange, by selling her to the French army, where she is exposed as an oddity for the pleasure of the male gaze because of her ability to masquerade as a boy:

This officer looked me up and down in my woman’s clothes then asked me to change into my easy disguise. He was all admiration and, turning from me, withdrew a large bag from within his effects and placed it on the table between himself and my husband.

‘This is the price we agreed then,’ he said.

And my husband, his fingers trembling, counted it out. (99)

It is in the army that Villanelle meets Henri, with whom she will desert three years later. While they are travelling back to Venice, Henri falls in love with Villanelle, but she is unable to return his passion, because the Venetian lady still has her heart. Nevertheless, Villanelle confirms her pragmatism about sex by considering Henri an object of her pleasure, thus reversing sexual roles and textualizing feminine desire. Henri himself remembers how “one night she turned over suddenly and told me to make love to her” (103). Villanelle overtly explains that:

He had a thin boy’s body that covered mine as light as a sheet and, because I had taught him to love me, he loved me well. He had no notion of what men do, he had no notion of what his own body did until I showed him. He gave me pleasure, but when I watched his face I knew it was more than that for him. If it disturbed me I put it aside. I have learnt to take pleasure without always questioning the source. (148)

Sex, desire, and pleasure have never appeared to be a proper province of women in fairy tales.<sup>5</sup> This would explain why feminine desire and feminine pleasure are never explicitly mentioned in the writings of this genre.

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5. This is not so in the tradition of the picaresque and of medieval fabliaux, for example, elements of which can also be traced in this novel.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 70) assumes that “there are, in my understanding, three irresolvable problems associated with the notions of desire we have generally inherited in the West”. First, Plato’s description of desire as “a lack in man’s being, an imperfection or flaw in human existence” which “can function only if it remains unfilled” (Grosz 1994: 70-1). Secondly, as a result of its being defined “in negative terms, in terms of an absence”, psychoanalytic theory has produced desire as inherently masculine.<sup>6</sup> A third related problem is what “could be described as the implicit ‘homosexuality’ of desire” (Grosz 1994: 73). Villanelle problematizes traditional notions of desire and proposes instead a space in which feminine desire is made visible and can therefore be both experienced and expressed freely.

Once she is back in Venice after an absence of eight years, Villanelle resolutely goes to the house of her lady lover to face her past. The Queen of Spades proposes to her to continue their love affair, but Villanelle refuses this second chance. Maintaining the love affair with the Queen of Spades would immediately transform Villanelle into the *queer* element in an otherwise stable heterosexual relationship. Instead of a subversive element of heterosexuality, by entering this love triangle Villanelle would become a marginal figure, “a pose instead of a position, the lesser version of the same instead of a difference” (Roof 1994: 51).

Villanelle, who is still having sexual intercourse with Henri, gets pregnant. This gesture leads Henri, and the reader, to assume that they will finally get married and that romantic love will eventually be triumphant, but Villanelle subverts once more traditional happy endings. She has already experienced that, far from constituting a reward for the heroine, marriage actually “require[s] that the heroine’s transference of dependency [from father to lover] be not only sexual but also material. Beneath romantic justifications of ‘love’ lurk actual historical practices which reduce women to marketable commodities” (Rowe 1979: 245). Villanelle, who has never complied with the authority of a father, will never accept the authority of a husband. Thus her revision of the fairy tale ends in a completely unexpected manner. Villanelle gives birth to her daughter, but refuses the basic structure of patriarchal societies: the nuclear family. She favours rather the mother-daughter bonding defended by feminist writers and guarantees that no masculine presence will ever constitute a threat for the special relationship held among women. Villanelle does not reject sexual pleasure nor does she renounce the experience of motherhood, but manages to maintain her independence.

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6. Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 72) further explains that for Freud “there is only male or rather masculine libido; there is only desire as an activity (activity being, for Freud, correlated with masculinity); in this case, the notion of female desire is oxymoronic.”

*The Passion* reveals a polyphonic narrative structure that merges two apparently opposed narrative modes, the historical and the fantastic. Henri, a narrator and author of a war journal that he rewrites into his memoirs, illegitimizes history as a grand narrative and shows instead that history, like the past, is always subject to manipulation. Henri's historical discourse propounds the collapse of the holding values of patriarchy and provides the necessary space for the development of Villanelle's alternative discourse. Villanelle, a feminine narrator, exposes the fairy tale as an ideologically laden literary genre based on sexual categories and patriarchal structures. Villanelle's alternative fantastic discourse revises romantic notions of love, sex, marriage, motherhood and the family and creates a narrative space in which feminine desire can be successfully represented, a narrative space in which women can be mothers without having to renounce either their freedom or their sexuality. As a postmodern text, *The Passion* emphasizes the discursive and plural nature of all narratives and insists on the fact that *reality* may be endlessly rewritten because it is nothing but a linguistic construct.

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