

## JEANETTE WINTERSON

Susana Onega

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(by Christine Reynier, Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III)

christine.reynier@wanadoo.fr

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125

In the series *Contemporary British Novelists* published by Manchester University Press, Susana Onega offers a full-length study of Jeanette Winterson's work, the first to be published in English. A bibliography of Winterson's works and a substantial general one is appended to the book as well as an index of authors and concepts quoted.

After evoking Jeanette Winterson's life and career and situating her within the landscape of contemporary writers, Susana Onega launches into a detailed and chronological analysis of the author's novels. Each chapter opens with an overall assessment of the reception of the novel examined and a few quotations from reviewers which are contrasted with the author's own appreciation of her book. Then follows a close scrutiny of the novel itself, of each of its chapters or sections, narratological comments on its structure and voices, and —the main part— an intertextual analysis of the text. Onega thus scrupulously traces the main sources of *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* from the Bible to Blake and D. H. Lawrence. She does justice to *Boating for Beginners*, too often ignored by critics, and examines its Swiftian, Shelleyan, Eliotian or Beckettian intertext. This enables her to give a thorough account of the narrative, to follow the intricate developments of the plot and the way it feeds on former texts, thus highlighting the satiric and parodic effects.

Likewise, she is attentive to the mechanisms of intertextuality in *The Passion* whose mythical intertext she chooses to explore while reading the characters' selves in

terms of fragmentation in the light of Jung and Lacan's theories and scrutinising all the symbols Winterson uses. The narratological analysis of *Sexing the Cherry* and the way in which the four voices enter into a dialogue across the centuries is similarly complemented by a Lacanian reading which also borrows from Kristeva's concept of the abject and shows what Winterson owes to Cixous's "écriture feminine". This is followed in the chapter about *Written on the Body* by a discussion, in relation to the sexual indeterminacy of the narrator, of the myth of the androgyne and its development from Plato to Cixous, which leads to a reading of the characters informed by Cixous's theory of bi-sexuality; Jacqueline or Inge are thus seen as "a parodic example of Cixous's 'excessive woman' [...], as 'a butch' in the invert tradition of the butch/femme couple of early lesbian fiction" (116). *Gut Symmetries* is examined at length. Resorting to the arcane of the Tarot, to Jewish cabbala, Hermetic alchemy, and New Physics, Onega threads her way through each chapter, accounting for their intricacies. *The Powerbook*, whose narration adopts the interactive logic of the internet, is analysed as a rewriting of Woolf's *Orlando* while *Lighthousekeeping* is shown to be based on Victorian novels such as *Treasure Island*.

126

On the whole, like many critics before her, Onega places subjectivity at the centre of Winterson's work and reads her characters as following an archetypal quest pattern and shifting from fragmentation to unification. She also manages to show that Winterson's novels blend real and unreal worlds, history and story-telling, fantasy and scientific discourse, fiction and metafiction —embedded stories abounding and reflecting on the main story-line— while hinting at a criss-crossing between her novels and her short stories that produces a baroque effect of repetition and excess. Excess also stems from the overflowing intertextual echoes which Onega undertakes to analyse at length, in a pedagogical impulse that students of Winterson will undoubtedly appreciate. She thus offers an erudite reading of the author's work revealing its wealth, yet often tending, through the use of an assertive tone, to close interpretation and leave little room to the reader's own personal reading. The choice of a running commentary of the novels, in the chronological order of publication, certainly has its virtues even if it tends to blur the recurring themes and topoi of Winterson's fiction, conceived, as the author herself pointed out, to be "a cycle", and thus fails to come to terms with a fundamental structure. The political dimension and its contradictions are toned down, the critic choosing to focus on a psycho-analytical analysis of *Sexing the Cherry*, for example, rather than bring out the rage of the author against all forms of fanaticism and coercion, which is itself at odds with her own overwhelming and directive presence in the narrative. Similarly, the ethical dimension of the work, linked with Winterson's concept of love, is broached only in the last lines of the book. One also wishes that the stimulating analysis of *Art and Lies* as a Babel

## Reviews

Tower and a self-reflexive book highlighting the mechanisms of writing and art at large, had been used to illuminate the reading of the other novels, such as the essays *Art Objects*. Most of all, one wishes Onega had explored what Winterson owes to the modernists who, as she mentions in her introduction, believed that language is “a self-sufficient and autonomous sign-system without meaning or referent” (12) and had conveyed the writer's enjoyment in couching words on the page and making language stutter, for the reader's own pleasure.

As it stands, Onega's book provides a most valuable mass of information, a detailed running commentary of the whole of Winterson's work and constitutes a welcome guidebook to the intricacies of Winterson's fiction. It comes as a rich complement to my *Jeanette Winterson. Le miracle ordinaire*, published two years before in France, and which deliberately adopts a synthetic approach to the author's work. They both open the path to future full-length studies of Winterson's novels.

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127