

## JEANETTE WINTERSON: LE MIRACLE ORDINAIRE

Christine Reynier

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There have been a number of recent book-length studies of Jeanette Winterson's fiction, including good work by Merja Makinen (2005), Susana Onega (2006) and Sonya Andermahr (2007 and 2009). It is noteworthy that Christine Reynier's fine study appeared as the first in this sequence, in France in 2004; the English texts are cited here in French translation, making this an accessible introduction to a major contemporary writer for French readers (and those who read French). The book is an enthusiastic endorsement of Winterson's work, covering the first decade of her writing, from her celebrated debut novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1990) to *The PowerBook* (2000). Christine Reynier leaves us in no doubt that she regards Winterson as a major talent, and gives no house room to those critics who have found her more recent work full of grandiose involution, or showings signs of a writer in decline. (*The Guardian's* reviewer James Wood suggested as early as 1997 that "Winterson's novels have become increasingly conservative" and that she had begun to adopt a form of "sentimental exoticism" [Wood 1997]). For Reynier, on the contrary, Winterson creates "un monde merveilleux, féérique ou fantastique" which leaves readers "à bout de souffle et enchantés" (11).

Rather than deal with each novel in turn, the book blends discussion of the various texts under a series of headings. Winterson is seen first as a satirist, who condemns and mocks all forms of oppression and repression to the point of questioning the very nature of authority. It is easy to see how this satirical approach operates in *Oranges*

*Are Not the Only Fruit*, in terms of the heroine Jeanette's struggles against the strictures of her family and the Elim Pentecostal Church. Reynier shows how this early satirical impulse is to be found in different forms in all the books of the 1990s, from Henri's gaze "neuf, innocent et naïf", in *The Passion* (1987) to the treatment of the Puritans in *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). In support of this view, she cites Winterson's interesting "Introduction" to the 1999 Oxford University Press edition of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, to show how she connects satire with questions about identity. From here, Reynier's study goes on to highlight the range of Winterson's parodies, whether biblical, historical or generic. To some extent, this section covers familiar ground, citing Hayden White's *Metahistory* on the textuality of historical writing, and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* on parody as central to the postmodern novelist's armory. From this follows an emphasis on other familiar aspects of the postmodern repertoire: Winterson's use of decentred narrative authority, reflexivity, experimentation and use of the *scriptible*: "le texte est flottant dans ses structures, son agencement et ses limites; les trajets de lecture sont multiples" (43). It is to Reynier's credit, however, that her study modulates this set of routine postmodern desiderata into a discussion of Winterson as heir to the experiments of the great modernists, such as Virginia Woolf (about whom Reynier has also written with distinction) and to powerful traditional beliefs in the power and importance of art.

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In a key part of the discussion, Reynier reminds us of the character Jeanette's reaction (in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*) to loss of faith, and her sense of the Nietzschean "death of God". This resolves itself, for her, into the loss "d'un modèle émotionnel, d'un modèle fort, d'un amour à toute épreuve, l'amour avec un A" (68). As Reynier points out, this is a key moment, which illuminates "l'oeuvre de l'auteur dans son ensemble" (68). For *love* becomes the principal theme of Winterson's work; her treatment of it is both metaphysical and concrete, evoking all its pain and ecstasy, the precarious "miracle ordinaire" of Reynier's title (96). Reynier discusses the illness of Louise in *Written on the Body*, and the "histoires de passions brûlantes racontées avec l'intensité de la poésie" (13) in *The PowerBook*, which connects the figures of Ali in the sixteenth century, Mallory in 1924, Paolo and Francesca and Guinevere. It is the importance of this theme that leads Reynier to characterise Winterson's work as a revitalisation of the genre of Romance, as defined by Northrop Frye (69). Citing on page 108 a heady conjunction of Roland Barthes, Kant, Levinas, Deleuze and Guattari and Virginia Woolf, Reynier reaches back also to Edmund Burke's concept of the Sublime, to place Winterson's concept of love within a longer literary and intellectual tradition: "Comme le sublime chez Burke, l'amour chez Jeanette Winterson est un moment de dépassement de soi, de sublimation, et il est l'enjeu suprême de l'art qui 'met en évidence le caractère fondamentalement agonistique de l'expérience esthétique'" (108).

Reynier is alert to the paradox that Winterson's work presents. On the one hand it is full of metafictional play, intertexts, shifts in time —the whole “jeu de miroirs” (65) that one associates with reflexive fiction. However, she says, to present it as *just* that is to betray it and suggest that it is theoretical and disembodied. “[...] bien au contraire. Le moment où Haëndel [in *Art and Lies* (1994)] retrouve sa capacité d'aimer coïncide avec celui où il se met à chanter: l'amour apparaît comme la condition première de la création artistique en même temps que l'autre visage de l'art” (89-90). Perhaps the strongest part of *Jeanette Winterson: Le Miracle Ordinaire* is in Chapter 4, where Christine Reynier traces these connections between love and art, and the wholeheartedness of Winterson's writing with respect to both: “un amour synonyme de littérature ou de l'art authentique, un art qui retrouve le désir des poètes romantiques anglais de combiner l'intellect et le corps, la pensée et le sentiment ou plutôt, le *feeling*, ce terme intraduisible [...]” (95). Reynier's sensitivity to the nuances of English registers that there is no exact equivalent for *feeling* in French, since the English word conveys, for Winterson and others familiar with the language, both emotional intensity and bodily sensation, as well as being a useful term in aesthetics from the eighteenth century onwards.

I started by saying that *Jeanette Winterson: Le Miracle Ordinaire* is “an enthusiastic endorsement of Winterson's work” —a work designed to transmit that enthusiasm to students and other readers as part of the admirable series *Couleurs Anglaises* from the Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, which also includes studies of Graham Swift, David Lodge and Julian Barnes. The book's thematic structure, with chapters including “An Impertinent Art”, “A Floating Universe”, “A Love Song” and the culminating “Ordinary Miracle”, is well suited to drawing together the themes and passions that animate the work of this extraordinary writer, and to examining the books in the light of each other. What it does less successfully is to confront the questions that preoccupy many readers of Winterson —even some who count themselves among her admirers. First, are all the books of the 1980s and 1990s of the same high quality, or uneven? One reviewer, usually very sympathetic to Winterson's work, saw *The PowerBook* as “terribly inconsequential. A few stories intertwined here and there, which in earlier books like *Sexing the Cherry* or *Art and Lies* she has put to the service of a bigger story, but here they just seem to say the same things (literally) over and over again. Only the impossible is worth the effort. There is no love that does not pierce the hands and feet. And so on” (Self, n.p.). Second, did the satirical impulse in Winterson (“profondément critique de notre monde mercantile, superficiel et factice, où les lois de la rentabilité érodent la sensibilité et dénigrent les vertus de l'imagination” [113]) turn for a period in the late 1990s into a jeremiad of bitterness and ranting? *Jeanette Winterson: Le Miracle Ordinaire* is so complimentary to Jeanette Winterson that Reynier does not fully

deal with these questions, she does not even bother to refute suggestions that the author's books might be uneven. Moreover, while so much of the pleasure of reading Winterson comes from the extended, inspired lyrical prose of which she is so capable, here there is relatively little sustained analysis of her style.

Nevertheless, this is a seductive study that makes one want to return to the books and re-read them. If there is relatively little reference to other contemporary British novelists, that is in a way appropriate, since Winterson's work is to some extent *sui generis*. Reynier more than makes up for their absence with a range of illuminating scholarly references to Alain Badiou, Antoine Compagnon, Maurice Coutourier and Jacques Derrida. Nor are such references limited to French critics; the book makes good use of Northrop Frye's anatomy of irony in *Anatomy of Criticism*, of Virginia Woolf's reflections on writing and Umberto Eco's comments on science and art (66). In this way, as in others, it allows us to read Winterson's achievements in a European and even North American frame of reference.

## Works cited

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