The Cyborg and the Garden: Aspects of Jeanette Winterson’s Techno-Curiosity

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Abstract

Between Written on the Body (1992) and The Powerbook (2000), Jeanette Winterson ‘got on board’ with computers. Both novels comment in various ways on the impact of computer technology in social contexts. Written on the Body contains references to and depictions of computer usage that cast the technology in a decidedly negative light. Within the novel Winterson makes several strong statements that indicate a significant level of anxiety towards new information technologies. She employs images of computers and their usage to evoke enslavement to mechanical and social machines that are averse to the human spirit.

This is almost antithetical to the later novel in which Winterson embraces new technologies, adopting the catchword ‘freedom’, and highlights the story telling and gender disguising advantages offered by Information Technology. Here, Winterson uses the computer technology to indicate opportunities for freedom and escapism from the body and its confines and, by extrapolation, social confines, especially relating to gender and sexuality. This shift in attitude can be seen as a ‘journey’ that Winterson makes within and between her texts as her attitude, prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, of New Romanticism, cautious to the ways that new technologies can overwhelm her trademarked sense of passion, idealisation of nature and privileging of the unchecked human imagination, towards a ‘techno-curiosity’ and experimentalism that celebrates the perceived freedoms of gender and identity, among other traits, associated with new technologies. This paper investigates that journey, noting and characterising the shift in Winterson’s work from Romantic to TechnoEnthusiast culminating in a unification of flesh and technology – a murky coexistence I call ‘TechnoRomantic’.

In using the term ‘TechnoRomantic’, I am suggesting that, rather than continuing to use the traditionally Romantic idea of technology as a negative force, as soul-destroying, Winterson incorporates new media technology positively into her use of Romanticism. That is, into her privileging of passion, emotion, nature, unfettered imagination and so on.

Despite the myriad of themes Winterson explores within the novel, The Powerbook is a much less successful novel than anything she has written previously. “This is art, not telephone sex” (p. 27), the narrator tells us, but if so, one must ask why it is not particularly successful art; especially considering the success of her previous texts, and her continued occupation of theoretical hot spots.

Jeanette Winterson’s body of work indicates a willingness to exploit fashionable themes, styles and theories as well as a habit, or compulsion, to rehash the same plots over and over. Winterson’s ‘millennium novel’, The Powerbook, exposes her ever-increasing desire to carefully orchestrate her role as the zeitgeist, the writer of the times, structurally and thematically. While publishing The Powerbook in the Year 2000 is obviously aimed at celebrating, or exploiting, a unique moment in time, Winterson’s larger body of work indicates a more long-term interest in the issues and themes leading up to the millennium. It is hard to ignore Winterson’s religious background and her use of Christian language and symbolism in many of her novels.
Crucial to Winterson’s larger ‘millennium project’ is her theoretical exploration of society’s changing relationships to technology. The development of feminist theories of the body and cultural/postcolonial theories of hybridity are clearly visible and responded to in Winterson’s work and in her depictions of technology. Winterson’s shift in attitude from *Written on the Body* to *The Powerbook* can be located, in part, in the way feminist theories of the body moved from gendered confines of the physical body to the transgender freedom of cyberspace; a freedom that Winterson was eager to explore.

**Technologies of Gender Performance**

Judith Butler brought the idea of gender as a performance to the fore of Feminist, and subsequently, Queer theory debates in the early 1990s. Butler argues that gender roles are ‘performed’ in a highly self-conscious, utilitarian way as a means of establishing negotiated social and sexual relations. The gender roles are only meaningful if perceived or experienced within their cultural contexts. They are learned and articulated from within the larger cultural production of meaning.

For Winterson, gender roles are performed in and around technology. Most obviously this occurs in *The Powerbook* where gender roles are deconstructed through online chatting and storytelling. The performing of gender roles through technology certainly occurs in the earlier *Written on the Body* where the use of the computer (and medical) technology is firmly in the hands of the white male.

Winterson makes creative use of these ideas, writing at the intersection of critical investigations of the social, cultural and psychological implications of the contemporary postmodern body. Computer technologies are rapidly altering our bodies in a multitude of ways. Namely, metaphorically in our stories and narratives, conceptually by changing the way we think and, most shockingly, by changing our bodies physically through the medical use of technologies inside our bodies. Body modifications, from immunisation to pacemakers, according to theorists Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles, are evidence that humans are not entirely human anymore but are turning into another species. Haraway calls this the ‘cyborg’. Hayles talks, instead, about the ‘posthuman.’ Haraway’s extreme hypothesis raises questions that redraft the map of the human body within social metaphor. By contrast, Hayles wants to redefine, spring clean and update our conceptions of subjectivity.

The image of the cyborg first crossed over from popular science fiction novels and movies into the arsenal of critical theorists in the 1980s. Donna Haraway, the radical feminist historian of science who argues that we are all cyborgs because our bodies are mediated by technology, perpetrated this infiltration initially. Winterson’s novels display engagement with these contemporary cultural theories.

Theories of gender performance, feminist body debate and the cyborg image took off in the mid nineties when new media gained cultural currency. *Written on the Body* can be seen as an attempt to put this theory into literary practice, or perhaps more accurately, literary experiment. Using the theoretical concept of gender as performance being developed in the late eighties and early nineties, Winterson interrogates the notions behind the construction of gender and sexual identity and the assumptions readers make regarding those identities. This is achieved through the lack of any gender signifiers for the narrator of her novel. The gender of Winterson’s protagonist is not identified through the use of gendered pronouns. We do not know for certain whether this character is a heterosexual man or a homosexual woman.
Although most critics argue that there was little doubt in their minds that the narrator was a female engaging in lesbian affairs – and indeed this was my assumption and experience of reading the novel as well – there is no way to ascertain to what extent this assumption was coloured by Winterson’s vibrant media identity.

It is certainly possible, and perhaps even likely, that a heterosexual person unaware of the accoutrements of the Winterson identity, itself a media construction, would identify the narrator’s gender, and therefore sexual orientation, accordingly. The success of Winterson’s experiment, then, is something that cannot be judged on the terms that some critics employ. Winterson has certainly succeeded in highlighting just how transitory our perceptions can be, and how much gender identity is a socially constructed and performed event.

The use of computer technology in *Written on the Body* is also socially constructed. Winterson zealously portrays Elgin, the husband of the narrator’s lover Louise, as a frequent user of computer technology. He is a medical doctor researching carcinoma. His wife, Louise, tells her lover, the novel’s narrator, that Elgin works with computers in a lab simulating cancer cells and that he “hasn’t been in a terminal care ward for ten years. He sits in a multi-million pound laboratory in Switzerland and stares at a computer” (p. 67). This is presented as negative information and is used to justify their continued affair. They dehumanise him based upon his use of computer technology. This usage is set up in opposition (binary opposition) to the passionate and naturalistic (R/romantic) activities in which the lovers engage such as taking walks, holding hands, in the rain. Among other, unspecified, computing tasks, Elgin plays computer games – including one called ‘Hospital.’ Is Winterson alluding to the stereotype of the God-complex of doctors arguing that technology facilitates that God-complex? In using science and technology in this way, Elgin denies himself passion in any of its forms. The presence of the computers in his life is used to represent, and provide a locus for, the lack of passion in Elgin’s life. He is caught in the trap of cultural consumerism that has poisoned his marriage. Their marriage bed, for example, has not been used for some time until the adulterous lovers breathe new life into it. Elgin’s ‘consumerism’, so evinced by his computer usage, is presented as related in some way to his spiritual derailment. Winterson spends a lot of authorial energy depicting Elgin’s disconnection from his devout Jewish parents. “When Louise encouraged him to get in touch with his parents he sent them a Christmas card” (p. 35).

Winterson uses computers in Elgin’s life, at home and at work, to indicate his state of being disconnected from his life, his wife and his marriage. It is used to provide justification for the lovers’ affair and to dilute the sticky moral ground in which they find themselves. Elgin’s computer-filled existence is presented in opposition to the Romantic and romantic passions of the lovers, who take walks in the rain, notice and enjoy the changing of seasons, and engage in sexual activity. They are presented as being rich in spirit, compared to Elgin’s spiritual emptiness.

In terms of religious discussion, while *Written on the Body* appears to contain less than her other novels, particularly *The Passion* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Elgin is related as being the only child of devoutly Jewish émigrés. He is shown to be completely antithetical to them. Elgin’s father is adamant that “God’s children [have] no need of progress” (p. 65). Elgin has replaced God with medical and computer technology. The character of Elgin serves to fulfil one line of Winterson’s enquiry into the body and technology.

Lisa Moore explores the idea of the ‘virtual lesbian’ in and around *Written on the Body*. She uses the term to describe “a designation for both characters and structures in Winterson’s fiction” (p. 105). Moore locates Winterson’s romantic love obsessions as true to and representative of the canon of lesbian literature, as “a narrative space” (p. 106) and perceives
Winterson’s device, the “narrator’s undeclared gender, as constructing the space of narration into a ‘virtual’ space, a technical construction” (p. 108). Moore identifies a number of other technologies referred to in Winterson’s novels, such as “the colonial technologies” (p. 106) that produce “the Cartesian subject” in Winterson’s fiction.

Published in 1992, Written on the Body is essentially a pre-Internet text. It was certainly written and published before the Internet established much cultural significance outside of computing labs. It was, however, written after social and critical theory started questioning and testing the links between the human body and computer (eg Haraway). In Written on the Body, Winterson seems to use this collection of thought to launch into one of her now familiar soapbox statements displaying the depth of her concern, or anxiety, about the approaching technological crescendo. She writes:

You may live in a computer-created world all
day and all night. You will be able to try out a
Virtual life with a Virtual lover. You can get
into your Virtual house and do Virtual housework,
add a baby or two, even find out if you’d rather
be gay.

Or single. Or straight. Why hesitate when you
could simulate?

And sex? Certainly. Teledildonics is the word (p. 97).

And then:

My life is not my own, shortly I shall have to haggle over my reality. Luddite? No,
I don’t want to smash the machines but neither do I want the machines to smash me
(p. 98).

Winterson here reveals that her own, as well as her narrator’s (and the extent to which they are separable remains unclear) relationship to technology is a difficult one fraught with contradiction. These passages reveal the extent to which Winterson’s relationship to technology changes between the writing of Written on the Body and of The Powerbook. Indeed, by the latter novel, Winterson has altered her attitude significantly leading her to embrace the new technology as a positive force in society and in the lives of individuals. By, or perhaps for, the Year 2000, Winterson seems ready to trade her reality for “freedom just for one night” (p. 3) – as long as she can guarantee the safety and survival of the matters of the heart in a technologically driven society. In the latter novel, Winterson is asking questions about the role of the heart, of romance, of passion and of the flesh in the new world order, but she is excited about the prospects for language and story construction, and indeed, identity construction, through a conceptual freedom from the body.

The very title of the novel The Powerbook indicates the author’s interest in issues of technological change in contemporary society. It also signifies Winterson’s attempt to engage in a creative and stylistically innovative way with themes associated with this technology and
its impact on our lives, our physical bodies, our human relationships and our artistic and creative output. The novel also establishes a tension between technology and religion regarding those themes.

*The Powerbook* shares elements in common with Winterson’s first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Both novels use fragments of stories, myths and history interspersed throughout the main narrative to enrich the storytelling. In *The Powerbook*, Winterson has named her chapters with computer terminology. Her table of contents is displayed under the heading ‘Menu’; her chapter titles, interspersed among other non-computer related titles, include ‘Open Hard Drive’, ‘New Document’, ‘Search’, ‘Empty Trash’ ‘Restart’ and ‘Save’. Winterson organised *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* in a similar way, titling her eight chapters from books of The Bible. Namely, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and Ruth. This lends more evidence to indicate that Winterson has replaced a fanatical devotion to The Bible with a devotion, not devoid of fanaticism, to new technologies of communication. Winterson is placing under a spotlight the tension that exists between the word in its literary form and the Word in its sacred form and entering the concept of the technologised word into the fray. Perhaps, Winterson is also satirising to some extent the idea of the replacement of ‘The Book’ with *The PowerBook*.

From the beginning of *The Powerbook* Winterson explores the issue of gender in a virtual environment. This is achieved in a number of ways throughout the text. One opportunity to explore this idea occurs through the opening ‘story’, presented as a virtual story typed by the narrator into a computer during an internet chat session. The story posits a seventeenth century cross-dressing tulip smuggler with precious bulbs sewn into ‘his’ trousers in a way that makes ‘him’, I argue, a cyborg. The second occurrence takes place within the chat between the narrator and her object of desire in an online chat immediately following the story of the tulip smuggler. The ‘language costumier’, that is, the professional storyteller who narrates the action, is asked about her gender and argues that it does not matter, that gender is inconsequential in a virtual environment (p. 26). Winterson shows that new information technologies provide not only a new site for the performing of gender but also new metaphors, associations and ways of understanding gender and its performative aspects. Winterson establishes this stage and then withdraws from the explorations, back into the familiar territory of historical romance narratives. This is, of course, a virtual reality of its own. In *Written on the Body* Winterson established and retreated from a similar stage, a full retreat into the intricate details of the body. Within the historical narrative of Ali, the sixteenth century tulip smuggler, Winterson incorporates technologies of gender.

Winterson’s metaphorical cyborg, Ali, narrowly escaped being drowned at birth, her father lamented supporting another girl but her mother persuaded her father to let Ali live “in disguise” (p. 10) as a man. Ali’s transformation is made more intricate when she needs to smuggle tulip bulbs “strapped” (p. 10) beneath her clothes. The two bulbs and an embalmed bit of stem are sewn to a belt and arranged “on the left” (p. 11) inside her (now his) trousers.

There are many legends of men being turned
into beasts and women into trees, but none, I think,
till now, of a woman who becomes a man by
means of a little horticultural grafting (p. 12).

When Ali is called upon to perform sexually with this prosthetic, the tulip rises to the occasion and performs the task of physical love complete with the dribbling of postcoital sap. This technology (horticultural hybridisation and the extension of the body by non-human
means) joins the lovers. This hybridisation of cyborg metaphor and magic realism makes it even harder to pin down the elements of Winterson’s story. The tulip (especially the embalmed stem) is a device for the disguising of gender. It is not a mechanical or computer device but it is still a device, such as a wooden leg is still a prosthetic leg. This makes Ali a pre-cyborg in the way that Frankenstein’s monster is frequently seen as pre-cyborg.

Haraway, however, argues that Frankenstein’s monster is definitely not a cyborg. She says “the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden” (p. 151) and that the “cyborg would not recognise the Garden of Eden, it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (p. 151). Like Winterson’s tulip wearing Ali, Frankenstein’s monster operates in the same way as a cyborg and fulfils the same functions within the Postmodern Romantic landscape, as opposed to the urban/futuristic landscape of the cyborg metaphor.

Unlike Frankenstein’s monster, Ali does not expect her father to save her. It is made clear that Ali’s father had tried to drown her (p. 10). Ali’s mother assists in the physical gender reassignment with the grafting, sewing and strapping of the floral prosthetic. As to the question of whether, by assisting with the gender reassignment, Ali’s mother becomes her ‘father’ in the creationist/Frankensteinian sense, then it must be made clear that there is no further references to the mother (or the father for that matter) in the rest of the story. Unlike Frankenstein’s monster, Ali goes off to make her/his way in the world.

Frankenstein subverts woman and God in reproduction by birthing his ‘monster’ in a laboratory (Halberstam). Haraway states that “Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction” (p. 150) and “we require regeneration, not rebirth” (p. 181). Ali’s strapped on tulip bulbs subvert male/female reproduction by alluding to the self-replication of bulbs, though still maintaining an organic structure. The organic element here plays an important part in the distinction between Ali and a cyborg. However, it is important to keep in mind that grafting is itself a technology. Winterson reminds us in *Sexing the Cherry* that it was considered heretical (pp. 73-80).

Besides the gender and erotic issues involved in the story, the very naturalistic tale of bulbs, stem and sap establishes images that are at odds with the little grey laptop on which Winterson says she was writing (pp. 92 and 93), and to which she refers throughout the novel as “laptop DNA” (p.4). In the scene in which Winterson/the narrator of the larger story is sitting in the Italian Piazza with her hands on her laptop keyboard, the laptop is a technological tool that is an extension of her self. However, this scene is enacted in an outdoor environment, in a Piazza in a beautiful, quiet part of Capri, where communities are engaging together in important social activities (p. 100). The computer does not overwhelm. The balance between technological tools and the natural world is maintained. Winterson makes the point clearer by suggesting:

> The paradox of innocence and knowingness is in the faces of the young boys and the laughter of the girls. For Capri, the secret of success has been found in maintaining these tensions (p. 91).

Winterson is fond of paradoxes. The tulip smuggling Ali is a post-mechanical presentation of a pre-mechanical cyborg. Forced to cross-dress from birth, her subjectivity within the cultural context is tinkered with by her mother, using cutting edge horticultural sciences, cutting edge for the sixteenth century in which this story within a story is set. Ali’s mother is involved in the sewing of the bulbs to the leather belt and the embalming of the stem (pp. 11-12).

Winterson does not subvert the gender monopoly of woman as womb, as Shelley does, for
example, but reinforces it by having Ali’s mother save her daughter from drowning and
rebirth her as a horticulturally enhanced being.

The story of the tulip smuggler is used, among its other purposes, to establish conflict
regarding the natural home of the imagination and its offerings on the one hand, and the
mechanical nature of the means of reproduction/dissemination of the imagination and its
outcomes on the other. This is a frequent theme throughout the work of Jeanette Winterson.
She is firmly placing the home of the imagination in the natural world but often using
dramatic tensions to redraw this debate. There is an abundance of natural world imagery in
Winterson’s work.¹

Despite Winterson’s enthusiasm for the liberating qualities of this new technology, she is not
quite ready to cast the body off completely, indeed “meatspace still has some advantages for a
carbon-based girl” (p. 174) – of course, the advantages to which Winterson is alluding are all
sexual. On the next page Winterson outlines the extent to which her ‘Utopia’ is the inner
psychological space of person-to-person intimacy (p. 175).

Winterson’s concerns about the technology and its invading nature are not fulfilled or
concluded in any way in the text of Written on the Body. Indeed, after Louise, the lover of the
narrator, is revealed by her dull doctor husband to have a rare form of cancer, the issues of
technology disappear from the novel and the work to establish interest in the theme, through
her soapbox statements of virtuality and her invention of the term ‘teledildonics’, fades away
to nowhere. The device is no longer needed to highlight the split between work and passion,
between life and machines, between Louise’s lover, our narrator who is full of life and vitality
and Louise’s husband, the computer user cut off from the wellspring of passion. The novel
then develops a new device.

Winterson uses the idea of cancer to explore notions of bodies in illness, bodies as texts and
texts about bodies. Winterson’s headlong slide into the minutiae of the body, and in particular
a body in illness, is a decided attempt to turn ones’ back on technology (as cancer causing)
and focus on the body itself, and on the natural world to which the narrator flees (the English
countryside) as a means of escaping technologically driven London. These issues of
technology versus nature are followed up more thoroughly in The Powerbook.

Despite the different attitudes in the books, the intellectual and creative project of The
Powerbook is in many ways a continuation of the project that Winterson began in Written on the
Body. The project can be understood as the incorporation of lesbian feminist body debate
in fictional contexts. The Powerbook can be seen as an attempt to update the themes of the
earlier novel given the extent of the radical changes in media and body theory, and in the
technology of every day Western existence, since 1992. From a theoretical perspective, the
cultural and social research into ‘body theory’ that essentially began in the mid 1980s has
come a long way since the 1992 publication of Written on the Body. One of the major
developments in the theory during the nineties has been in the area of the connections
between humans and their Information Technology. The rise of these technologies has altered

¹ See for example The Passion – Venice and the water, the ice travelling from Russia back to
Italy. Sexing the Cherry – the sunsets experienced on a boat on the Thames, the exploration of
17th century reactions to fruits brought back from the new world. Written on the Body – the
flight from London to the countryside as well as the intense detail of the body, cells, tissues
organs etc.
our concept of the body and our understanding of its role in society at the present, which is
informed by our ideas of where the body is heading in the future.

In this paper I have shown the way that Jeanette Winterson uses technology in two of her
novels. The technology is at odds with history and with nature and yet informs them, or at
least our reception of them. Winterson’s romance with Romanticism and with Modernism
lands in a cyborg garden of hybridity. Computer technology is cast in Winterson’s latter novel
as an exciting and experimental means of achieving social communication and artistic
endeavours, but not at the expense of the body where the true heart of passion will, for
Winterson, always reside. Winterson wants “Freedom just for one night”, not forever. (p. 3)
The cyborg that Winterson paints with tulip bulbs and historical gender oppression fulfils a
similar purpose to Haraway’s more technologically advanced cyborgs in her metaphor. The
religious metaphors that Winterson brings to her novels infuse them with the triangular
intersection of spirituality, technology and humanity. I have demonstrated that Winterson’s
use of hybridity is structural, stylistic and thematic. Winterson’s debate regarding the
influence of technology upon humans is ongoing but in The Powerbook she enthusiastically
promotes the idea that one can be both technologically active and Romantic. Don’t forget the
prophylactics!

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