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D'un début de siècle à l'autre : les littératures du début des XX<sup>e</sup> et XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles dans leur rapport au siècle précédent

# “Tightrope walking the twenty-first century”: Jeanette Winterson’s vital connections with Modernism

« *Le funambulisme du xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle* » : les liens vitaux de Jeanette Winterson avec le modernisme

Article publié le 01 décembre 2012.

**Marie Laniel**

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# “Tightrope walking the twenty-first century”: Jeanette Winterson’s vital connections with Modernism

« *Le funambulisme du xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle* » : les liens vitaux de Jeanette Winterson avec le modernisme

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1 In *Art Objects* (1995), her aesthetic manifesto, Jeanette Winterson calls for a new literature for the new millennium, and new forms of writing that could “answer to twenty-first-century needs” (1995: 191). Far from repudiating the past, Winterson urges the twenty-first-century artist to turn to previous generations for inspiration, and to draw poetic power from the “lineage of art” (1995: 12). Since “every new beginning prompts a return” (2004: 209), before he can fully experiment with language, the true artist must first experience his vital connections with the past, not in the spirit of ancestor worship, but to reclaim past literature, “[re-state] and [re-instate] [it] in its original vigour” (1995: 12). Among the great names of the past, it is towards Modernist writers – T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf – that Winterson turns for inspiration, presenting their experiments

with language, time, genre and poetic form as a vital impulse for the literature of the future. As well as a meditation on art and tradition, *Art Objects* is a defence and vindication of Modernism, which “too many academics, critics and reviewers” tend to present as “a kind of cul-de-sac, a literary bywater which produced a few brilliant names but which was errant to the true current of literature, deemed to flow, fiction-wise, from George Eliot to Anita Brookner” (1995: 176).

- 2 Winterson argues that the need to retrieve the Modernist impulse to experiment with language is all the more crucial since our society, still steeped in Victorian values, is marked by the same “money culture”, “materialism”, “lack of spirituality”, “grossness”, “mockery of art”, and “utilitarian attitude to education” as the Victorian Age – “We are the Victorian legacy” (1995: 137-8) –, while contemporary fiction, “with one or two surprising exceptions”, is the realm of writers who use the same narrative techniques as their Victorian ancestors. Drawing a parallel between two early literary centuries, Winterson compares the first part of the twentieth century, which saw the rise of Modernism as a reaction against Victorianism, with the early twenty-first century, which needs to turn to Modernism to restore its creative impulse. If twenty-first-century artists hope to avoid “a dingy Victorian twilight” (1995: 176), they need to cast off the constricting mould of Victorian fiction, understand the role of Modernism within tradition, and “be committed to a fresh development of language and to new forms of writing” (1995: 177). If they hope to restore their imaginative faculties, they need to retrieve the intensity, the powers of vision, the “intenser moments” of Modernism. Again and again, for Winterson, it is the word “vital” that best defines the connection between the twenty-first century and Modernism.
- 3 Recent criticism has emphasized Winterson’s vital connections with Modernism, as well as the influence of Modernism on her writings. As early as 1998, in “A New Way with Words?”, Lyn Pykett situated Winterson’s work firmly in the wake of Modernism: “I shall argue that Winterson’s postmodernism is post-Modernist not in the sense of constituting a break with Modernism or superseding it, but rather as a collaborative dialogue with Modernism which continues what Winterson sees as the modernist project” (Pykett 1998: 53). In *Jeanette Winterson, le miracle ordinaire* (2004), Christine Reynier has shown Winterson’s debt towards Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. More re-

cently, in her 2006 study of Winterson, Susana Onega also discussed the influences of modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot on her work. In her 2009 study, Sonya Andermahr analysed Winterson’s resistance to Postmodernism, which she associates with the mass media and the loss of aesthetic values, and pointed out that her “claims to Modernism” are now taken more and more seriously by critics and academics (Andermahr 2009: 17).

- 4 The Modernist legacy takes many forms in Winterson’s writings, but the most pressing question that needs to be addressed at the turn of the century is that of the artist’s relation to the past, and his position within tradition. As well as their experiments with language and genre, Winterson tends to foreground the Modernists’ definition of tradition, their capacity to breathe new life into the works of the past, and weave them into their writings. Because they were able to master a difficult art – breaking new ground, but writing with “generations at [their] back[s]” (1995: 92) – Modernist writers are a crucial source of inspiration for the literature of the future. Like his prestigious forebears, the new millennium artist must strike a delicate balance between continuity and emancipation, responsibility and freedom. Vitally connected to the past, but in search of his own voice, he must practice the difficult art of the tightrope walker, uniting two worlds on the “taut line” of language. Present in Winterson’s essays, and dramatized in her works of fiction, the image of the “tightrope of language” uniting past and present best represents the fruitful tensions between two early literary centuries, as the connection with Modernism provides the impulse to move forward towards the future.
- 5 Although Winterson draws a list of “Modernists whose work [she thinks] vital” – HD, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Sitwell, Mansfield, Barney, Radclyffe Hall, Eliot, Graves, Pound and Yeats (1995: 126) – she singles out Woolf as the key influence on her writings: “Here she is and here she was, of private ancestors, the most complete” (1995: 131). Though *Art Objects* also gives pride of place to T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein, the most distinctive voice to emerge from Winterson’s essays is that of Virginia Woolf, particularly in “A Gift of Wings (with reference to *Orlando*)”, “A Veil of Words (with reference to *The Waves*)”, and “A Work of My Own”. Written in the spirit of *A Room of One’s Own*, *Art Objects* pays tribute to Woolf’s experiments with the infinite possibilities of language, with time and

the art of biography. In an attempt to highlight the fruitful tensions between early-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century literature, we will look at Winterson’s “cover versions” of key Woolfian subtexts about reading, tradition and the connections between past and present, by focusing more specifically on Winterson’s works published in the new millennium – *The Powerbook* (2000), *Lighthouse-keeping* (2004), *The Stone Gods* (2007), and her recently published memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011).

## 1. Reading alphabetically: English Literature A-Z

- 6 In Winterson’s writings, the process of self-definition through the act of reading, as a way to connect with past writers, is strongly indebted to Virginia Woolf’s essays on the subject, and to her depiction of scenes of reading in her novels. In Woolf’s essays, reading is defined as an utterly individual process, “pure and disinterested”, conducted freely, inspired by pleasure and not by the quest for knowledge or authority. The “common reader”, celebrated in Woolf’s essays, is an “outsider”, who does not belong to the academic world or the closed circles of eminent literary critics. He is not a “sedentary, concentrated solitary enthusiast, who searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth”, but “a man of intense curiosity; of ideas; open-minded and communicative, to whom reading is more of the nature of brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study [...]” (1916: 55). This ideal reader is a “truant reader”, following his instincts out of the well-trodden paths of the literary Canon, without any guidance from eminent critics: “To be able to read books without reading them, to skip and saunter, to suspend judgment, to lounge and loaf down the alleys and bye-streets of letters is the best way of rejuvenating one’s own creative power” (1926: 393). The “truant reader” as “outsider” is not afraid to trespass on the hallowed ground of English literature, and to make the most of her marginal status to breathe new life into the canonical works of the past: “Are we not commoners, outsiders? [...] Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves” (1940: 125).

- 7 Jeanette Winterson’s writings, and more particularly her recently published memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, bear the mark of Woolf’s politics of “common reading”. Raised in an evangelical home by an adoptive mother who saw literature as “evil”, young Jeanette was strictly forbidden access to literature, to the point where she had to smuggle books into the house, and hide them under her mattress. Since she had no privacy, let alone “a room of her own”, she had to read in the most unlikely places, in the coal hole, where she was regularly locked in, after violent arguments with her mother, or in the outside toilet, which she humorously describes in *Art Objects* as a working-class version of Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own”: “I cannot claim too much for the provision of an outside toilet when there is no room of one’s own” (1995: 153). Either locked out on the doormat, where she spent the night, or locked in, forced to open up a rebellious marginal space within the evangelical home, Jeanette experienced a situation similar to that of Woolf’s persona in *A Room of One’s Own*, representing the paradoxical predicament of generations of women who were simultaneously “locked in” their drawing-room and “locked out” of academia.
- 8 Winterson later dramatized such topography of exclusion in some of her novels, such as *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), in which her young protagonist Silver is depicted as a Woolfian “common reader” and “outsider”. After leaving her home in the Cape Wrath lighthouse, Silver tries to start again in Bristol, but fails to get a position in the local public library. Having no permanent address, she is also denied membership of the library, and, as she cannot borrow books, she has to read them on the spot. Unable to finish *Death in Venice*, she has to follow the librarian into a Starbucks café to read behind her back, and eventually breaks into her house, thus turning the Woolfian reader as “outsider” into an unwitting “intruder”. By revisiting such a Woolfian *topos* as the public library, Winterson appropriates Woolf’s topography of exclusion, but gives it a more subversive edge by conveying a much stronger sense of social alienation.
- 9 In *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson explains that she was saved from the wreckage of a meaningless life in Ac-crington by the discovery of English literature from A to Z, when she started trespassing on the forbidden ground of the local public library. Challenging her mother’s rules, young Jeanette set about ex-

ploring literature on her own. Having no idea how to proceed, or where to start, she decided to make her way through the whole of English literature alphabetically: “Thank God, her last name was Austen” (2011: 37). From the *Hyde Park Gate News* to *A Room of One’s Own*, the alphabet has strong associations with the writings of Virginia Woolf, in which alphabetical reading or the alphabetical ordering of knowledge is one of the main attributes of the academic mind. The connections between alphabetical order and eminent Victorians can be traced as far back as the *Hyde Park Gate News*, which contains the Victorian alphabet used by Virginia Stephen and her siblings to learn how to read: “A is for Prince Albert/So good and so kind”, “C for Carlyle/A great author was he” (Woolf 2005: 10). In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr Ramsay uses the letters of the alphabet to mark the significant stages in his philosophical demonstration. The movement from P to Q, and the later unsuccessful attempt to reach R, represent the teleological impetus of the Utilitarian mind at work. In the second section of *A Room of One’s Own*, the female reader sitting under the dome of the British Museum Reading Room, is unable to organize her thoughts alphabetically, like the male reader sitting next to her, “making the neatest abstracts, headed often with an A or a B or a C”, “while [her] own notebook rioted with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings” (1929: 30). In Woolf’s essays and fiction, “alphabetical reading” is the attribute of the mind “trained in research at Oxbridge” (1929: 28).

- 10 In a slightly tongue-in-cheek tribute to Woolf, Winterson turns alphabetical reading into an image for the “untrained mind”. For young Jeanette, who has no idea where to begin and how to proceed, reading alphabetically becomes the equivalent of reading at random, without any guidance from a professor or a librarian. But paradoxically, this random criterion to determine the course of her reading proves more relevant than any formal approach to literature. In the chapter devoted to her discovery of “English Literature A-Z”, Jeanette does not fail to point out the irrelevance of the library’s classification system. Though the Accrington Library, running on the Dewey decimal system, is “meticulously catalogued”, the strict barriers between genres prevent the cross-fertilization that is part of the pleasure of reading: “Romance was just given a pink strip and all Romance was simply chucked unalphabetically onto the Romance

shelves. Sea stories were treated the same way, but with a green strip. Horror had a black strip. [...]” (2011: 118). The misguided attempts to classify books into clear-cut categories only reveal the irrelevance of the system, and lead to some unfortunate mistakes: “Humour had a section too... with a wavy orange giggle strip. On the Humour shelves, I will never know why or how, was Gertrude Stein, presumably because she wrote what looked like nonsense...” (2011: 118). As young Jeanette soon realises, the most interesting books – Robinson Crusoe, Jane Eyre, Moby-Dick, Orlando, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas – belong to more than just one category, cross the limits between fixed genres, and show the irrelevance of such boundaries.

- 11 By exposing the limitations of any strict ordering of literature, and the ambiguities of the notion of genre, “random reading” leads young Jeanette to disrupt the order, and question the Canon. Driven by her thirst for literature, Jeanette does not always stick to her alphabetical method. Since she hasn’t got any taste for Nabokov, she leaps from N to S, from prose to poetry, and starts reading Gertrude Stein. She also makes a significant discovery by accident, when she is asked to borrow T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* for her mother, who has mistaken it for a thriller. Ironically, the generic confusion proves fortunate, since it leads Jeanette to make this groundbreaking read. The emotion proves so overwhelming that she has to leave the reading room, and read Eliot’s play outside, “sitting on the steps in the usual northern gale” (2011: 39), later finding solace in the thought that, like herself, “writers are often exiles, outsiders, runaways and castaways” (2011: 116).
- 12 Though her method is arbitrary, the “untrained” reader, who is aware that generic categories often overlap, proves more sensitive to the cross-fertilization of genres. By choosing alphabetical reading rather than a historical approach to English literature, Winterson rejects any sense of hierarchy between literary works, and any teleological vision of literature. Though she was denied any formal access to books, Winterson still resorts to a quintessentially Woolfian image, that of the alphabet, to represent the experience of the “common reader”. By revisiting a major motif from Woolf’s essays and novels, Winterson emphasizes her knowledge of key Modernist subtexts, and proves



that, though self-educated, the “untrained mind” is more vitally connected to the past than more “academic” readers.

## 2. “The tightrope of language”

- 13 As well as her resistance to any hierarchical approach to past literature, Winterson celebrates Woolf’s irreverent and playful experiments with literary history. Among Woolf’s novels, it is *Orlando* which best illustrates Woolf’s capacity to inhabit the past, and to convey the timelessness of past voices, from Shakespeare to Alexander Pope. In the chapter devoted to *Orlando*, in *Art Objects*, Winterson celebrates Woolf’s exploration of the infinite possibilities of language, her capacity to push language to its poetic limits, to stretch the poetic capacities of words, and thus achieve the “maximum tautness” between words and ideas. Though written in prose, *Orlando* is the work of a poet, whose virtuosity, audacity and sense of fun constantly dazzle the reader. Under a spell, which never breaks, the reader is made to follow Woolf’s hero(ine) on the “taut line of Otherness” (1995: 72), which never snaps: “The art of *Orlando* is its language. Woolf never lets her words tire and slip. It is the taut line, the tightrope of language, that makes possible passages at once delicate and audacious” (1995: 70). Against the dreariness of realist fiction, Winterson celebrates the artist as “tightrope walker”, and art as enchantment, rapture and ecstasy.
- 14 Behind Woolf’s mastery of language lies her capacity to establish these dazzling connections between different periods and literary styles: “Woolf’s connections across time and space, through the inner and outer worlds of imagination and experience, are made brilliantly, vertiginously, with not a glance over the edge” (1995: 73). According to Winterson, Woolf’s “associative method”, which is poetic in nature, does not merely arise from her ability to revisit the past, but from the poetic depths of her voice, which echoes with the polyphony of past voices:

A writer is a raider and whatever has been made possible in the past must be gathered up by her, melted down, and re-formed differently. As she does that, she makes out of her own body a connection to what has gone before and her skull becomes a stepping stone to what will follow. (1995: 53–4)

- 15 While Virginia Woolf used the metaphor of the long gallery, or the pool, to represent the unconscious collective mind, Winterson resorts to the image of the tightrope to suggest the connections established between past and present through the art of writing.
- 16 Filled with reverence for the *gravitas* of the past – “When Woolf writes she writes with generations at her back” (1995: 92) –, Virginia Woolf is also endowed with “a gift of wings” (1995: 77), and never allows her own voice to be stifled by the voices of her predecessors: “The poet is connected, vitally so, but when we close the book there is only one voice we can hear; the writer’s own” (1995: 92). Woolf’s virtuosity in *Orlando* lies precisely in her ability to “restate and reinstate” the works of the past “in their original vigour”, from Metaphysical poems to Victorian fiction, and still allow the singularity of her own voice to emerge from the polyphony of the past. Firmly rooted in tradition, the taut line of language is also stretched towards the future, and it is precisely this tension that can provide the impulse to move forward.
- 17 Like modern-day versions of *Orlando*, many Wintersonian heroines experience these vital tensions with the past. As orphans, they have to reinvent themselves through fiction by drawing on age-old stories, and their process of self-definition can only be achieved by balancing the pull of the past and the impulse towards the future. Floating through cyberspace, freed from the constraints of fixed identity or gender, Ali, the narrator of *The Powerbook*, keeps reinventing herself anew by telling stories without an ending, “endless beginnings”. As an e-writer, who also goes by the name of “Orlando” in one of her stories, Ali seems to be a cyberspace version of Virginia Woolf’s hero(ine), travelling through space and time, challenging gravity, and only prevented from falling through (cyber)space by the narrative thread of age-old stories, “tightrope[s] between two worlds” (2000: 119). Though works from the past provide the substance of Ali’s own life story, only the act of retelling these stories makes her process of self-discovery possible.
- 18 When she visits the island of Capri in search of her lover, Ali experiences the double bind of these tensions between past and future. Torn between her desire to start a new relationship and the fear of commitment, Ali feels the contrary pulls of freedom and responsibil-

ity. Like the funicular railway of the island – “If the tension between the upward car and the downward car were to relax, both cars would crash through the red pantile roofs of the side-by-side houses” (2000: 89) –, like the island of Capri itself, “a tension between land and sea, height and depth” (2000: 91), Ali feels that the vital tensions between gravity and weightlessness are part of her own identity: “Maybe it’s the tension between longing and aloneness that I need. My own funicular railway, holding in balance the two things most likely to destroy me” (2000: 134). As Ali follows the thread of yet another story, it is the pull of the past that makes her movement towards the future possible.

- 19 Whereas, in *Orlando*, the weight of the past seems cumulative, as the heroine reaches a form of emotional maturity at the end of the novel, Ali can wipe the slate clean each time she opens a new window on the screen of her computer. With each new window opening onto different temporalities and narrative possibilities, Ali’s “hypertextual” mode of writing offers her countless disguises, as well as the freedom to constantly reinvent herself, as a woman or as a man. By fully exploring the possibilities of cyberspace, Ali feels that she can escape the pull of “gravity”, and cut herself loose from any demanding sentimental bonds. However, as she creates an elaborate, ever increasing web of connections across time and space, Ali is trapped in her own net, and ends up writing herself into her stories:

It has not been proved, but it might be so, that Ali is not telling stories, but that the stories are telling him. As he knots himself into a history that never happened and a future that cannot have happened, he is like a cross-legged Turk who knots a fine carpet and finds himself in the pattern. (2000: 215)

- 20 As she tries to find the right balance between gravity and weightlessness, the narrator of *The Powerbook* realises that the paradox of her “hypertextual” writing is precisely that her own identity is defined by her connections with the past, which are made all the more significant amidst the streets of London:

Here I am, tightrope walking the twenty-first century, slim as a year, and the old tall houses are two hundred years old and set on streets that wind back four hundred years, set on cart tracks that served

medieval monks. Or Shakespeare. Or Dr Johnson and his friend Boswell the Scot. They all walked here. Put any of them here now and they would still recognise the place. Put me here now and that single year’s rope, stretched towards the future, is all I have to balance me from the drop on either side. (2000: 166)

- 21 The paradox here is that voices from the past do not stifle Ali’s words, but that her power of association only increases the distinctiveness of her voice.

### 3. “Performing the Indian Rope Trick”

- 22 T. S. Eliot accounted for this paradox in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), when he explained that the depth and singularity of the poet’s voice comes from the way he can relate to “dead poets and artists” (1919: 15). In *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Literature*, Christine Reynier has shown that, while being strongly indebted to Eliot’s meditation on impersonality in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Winterson reworks Eliot’s concept into a new concept of “transpersonality” (Reynier 2005: 301-3). The centrality of Eliot’s thoughts on tradition is made manifest in many of Winterson’s writings, particularly in *Art Objects*, where she discusses Eliot’s conception of tradition and impersonality. In his famous essay, Eliot undermines the definition of a poet’s “individual talent”, “the peculiar essence of the man”, as that “in which he least resembles anyone else”, as that which most distinguishes him from his predecessors (1919: 14). “Individual talent” does not imply a break with tradition, but finds its true meaning in the sense of continuity with the past: “We shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (1919: 14). Tradition thus defined is “an absorption of previous works of art, neither in blind adherence to tradition nor in repetition of works of the past but in a dynamic relation” (Reynier 2005: 300). Such connections with the past can free the poet from the constrictions of his own personality and contribute to the “process of depersonalization”, which, according to Eliot, is integral to the creative experience: “The progress of an artist

is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (1919: 17).

- 23 In *Art Objects*, Winterson encapsulates the paradox developed by Eliot in one recurring metaphor, that of the “Indian Rope Trick”: “To perform the Indian Rope Trick is what Eliot meant by impersonality” (1995: 186). In the traditional “Indian Rope Trick”, a rope slowly uncoils from a basket into the air, and stretches vertically, allowing the conjurer to pull himself up and disappear. Like an Indian conjurer, the true artist must climb the rope of language, stretched vertically between the past and the future, to magically disappear. According to Winterson, it is the depth of a writer’s connections with the past – “A writer’s style has in it many voices, many connections” (1995: 180) –, that can enable her to escape the weight of her own personality, and achieve true impersonal emotion:

How does the writer do this? Through development of style. Style; sensibility and technique distinctively brought together, frees the writer from the weight of her own personality, gives to her an incandescence of personality, so that what she can express is more than, other than, what she is. (1995: 186-7)

- 24 In an article about T. S. Eliot, “Shafts of Sunlight”, published in *The Guardian* and later posted on her website, Winterson defines the “style” of a writer, what makes her voice distinct, as the repository of past voices: “The paradox of the best writing is that while the writer’s voice is unmistakable, the writer has somehow performed the Indian Rope Trick and disappeared” (2008). Firmly rooted in the past but slung across empty space, the rope of language can free the writer from the laws of gravity and the weight of her personality.
- 25 All Winterson’s heroines try to perform the Indian Rope Trick, using the depths of past voices to escape the constrictions of personality: “The space she found would be outer space. Space without gravity or weight, where bit by bit the self disintegrates” (2000: 39). In *The Powerbook*, Ali escapes any fixed identity thanks to her many disguises borrowed from the past, and challenges gravity by experiencing these connections with other worlds of narrative possibilities:

Here’s my life, steel-hitched at one end into my mother’s belly, then thrown out across nothing, like an Indian rope trick. Continually I cut and retie the rope. I haul myself up, slither down. What keeps the tension is the tension itself – the pull between what I am and what I can become. The tug of war between the world I inherit and the world I invent. (2000: 210)

- 26 Slung into space, towards the yet unwritten possibilities of the future, the rope that Ali uses to pull herself up is made of time past:

I keep pulling at the rope. I keep pulling at life as hard as I can. If the rope starts to fray in places, it doesn’t matter. I am so tightly folded, like a fern or an ammonite, that as I unravel, the actual and the imagined unloose together, just as they are spliced together – life’s fibres knotted into time. (2000: 210)

- 27 According to Eliot, to experience these connections with the past, the true artist must be endowed with “the historical sense”, which “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”:

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (1919: 14)

- 28 In cyberspace, Ali can experience the simultaneous existence of many levels of reality, and therefore she can use time vertically, not horizontally: “I wonder, maybe, if time stacks vertically, and there is no past, present, future, only simultaneous layers of reality. We experience our own reality at ground level. At a different level, time would be elsewhere. We would be elsewhere in time” (2000: 186). Through storytelling, Ali lives many vicarious lives – “To use time fully I use it vertically. One life is not enough” (2000: 209) – and experiences the timelessness of a narrative world of infinite possibilities: “This is true of the stories. They have no date. We can say when they were written or told, but they have no date. Stories are simultaneous with time” (2000: 216).

- 29 The key to Ali’s “hypertextual” writing is that “the tug of war” between inheritance and invention works both ways. As Eliot explained in his essay, if the new work of art is influenced by its connections with the past, the past is also transformed by the works of the future: “The necessity that [the poet] shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it” (1919: 15). Each new work of art modifies, slightly alters, the existing order, and the relations between the different works of art that belong to the existing order: “The past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (1919: 15). The constant adjustment of each work to the new order implies that a work of art is not “time-bound”. In some of her essays, Virginia Woolf also explained that, if a reader is changed by the works of the past, the works of the past are transformed by the act of reading: “The poet is always our contemporary” (1932: 265). While Ali is changed by the act of writing, slowly becoming woven into the fabric of her own stories, the works she retells and rewrites are also transformed, read anew, and take on a new life of their own. More than an easy climb on the rope, what Winterson describes is a “tug of war” between inheritance and invention.
- 30 One of the heroes from Ali’s stories, who is also one of her many *personae* and disguises, is George Mallory, the mountaineer who died during the ascent of Mount Everest in 1924, and whose body was only discovered later in 1999. Determined to challenge the verticality of the mountain, Mallory convinces his partner, Irvine, to make a final attempt for the summit. At once rooted in the materiality of the rock, turning into “an evolving part of the mountain itself” (2000: 150), and free from the laws of gravity, Mallory adapts his pace to the rhythm of the mountain, as though he were reciting a poem, or singing the mountain like a song, “[scaling] impossible flats, vertical sharps” (2000: 150). As Mallory makes for the final peak, pulling Irvine on the rope behind him, he feels that he is entering into a new dimension of time. As he is about to reach the summit, he breaks his watch: “Time had stopped long since and there was no time. Not here. They were outside time, he knew that” (2000: 152). When Mallory falls to his death, time stops still. Like other Wintersonian heroes bound for a one-way journey only, a “journey out” which is “neither ascent nor

decline”, Mallory disappears “at the still point of the turning world” (Eliot 1935: 173).

## 4. Voyages out: the artist as time traveller

- 31 The metaphor of writing as a journey of exploration, a “voyage out” into new narrative forms and possibilities, which is at the heart of Winterson’s writings, is also a legacy of Modernism, and more particularly of Woolf’s essays on reading and writing. What Winterson finds so thrilling about Woolf’s writings is the sense of adventure, the will to “experiment wildly” with language, and the constant attempt to cross boundaries. In Woolf’s essays, this sense of excitement, thrill and adventure is often conveyed by seafaring metaphors, or by portraits of the writer as an adventurer bound on journeys of exploration, breaking new ground into uncharted territory. The subtext of adventure stories, which is present in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and in Woolf’s essays on writing, is also woven into the fabric of *Lighthouse-keeping* (2004) and *The Stone Gods* (2007).
- 32 As Melba Cuddy-Keane has pointed out, in Woolf’s essays, the journey is a frequent trope for reading, with an emphasis on movement rather than destination. In “Reading” (1919), the narrator embarks on a metaphorical sea-journey, leaving the library of the Elizabethan manor house where she is reading to discover unknown land, as if she were a privateer on board an Elizabethan ship bound for America. The seafaring metaphor is also at the heart of “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1927). In this essay, the narrator turned “flâneuse” in the streets of London experiences the thrill of adventure “in these thwarting currents of being”, until she finds anchorage in second-hand bookshops: “Books are everywhere; and always the same sense of adventure fills us. Second-hand books are wild books, homeless books; they have come together in vast flocks of variegated feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack” (1927: 486-7). For Woolf, reading and writing are closely connected, and reading as a journey of exploration is often depicted as a preliminary to writing. By visiting second-hand bookshops, the narrator can tap into the collective mind, and gather copy for her own writings, as second-hand books, “wild books”, provide the writer with



the material and inspiration to cross the boundaries of style and genre.

33 In *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Jeanette Winterson uses similar imagery to describe her expedition to the “second-hand rummage and junk shop” in Accrington, in search of “buried treasure” (2011: 90). To reach this treasure trove of second-hand books, young Jeanette has to make a perilous journey underground: after finding her way to the junk shop, “under the viaduct in Accrington”, she has to go through “a slam-door of prison-grade steel”, “down a mummified passage hung with half-dead horsehair mattresses”, “into a small chamber that wheezed fumes in your face”, in which she has to fight her way, to the sound of Gluck’s *Orfeo*, before laying hands on “complete sets of Dickens, the Brontës, Sir Walter Scott” (2011: 92). The quest for buried treasure, as a trope for reading, is a recurrent motif in Winterson’s essays and fiction, as well as the portrait of the reader as Orpheus, bound on a perilous journey underground, to retrieve past literature from the jaws of Hell. For Winterson, reading provides the same source of excitement as for Woolf: “It is not only a wild nature that we need as human beings; it is the untamed open space of our imaginations. Reading is where the wild things are” (2011: 144). In a review of *AfterWord: Conjuring the Literary Dead*, posted on her website, Jeanette Winterson celebrates writing as an adventure which is not compatible with the post-modernist vision of authorship: “The writer as an adventurer who takes risks, whether dropping down to the Underworld to bring back knowledge or treasure, or speeding across time to rescue a friend, is not the post-modern view of the writer as cynic or celebrity”. Adding another dimension to the depiction of the reader/writer as an explorer, she urges the twenty-first-century artist to turn into a “time bandit”.

34 In *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), Winterson gives the seafaring metaphor its full play, and draws on the subtext of the Victorian adventure novel. The heroine, Silver, who lost her bearings when she lost her mother at the age of ten, cannot go back to a fixed beginning, but needs to constantly “begin again”, or “begin again – again”, by telling herself like a story. After the death of her mother, Silver is taken in by Pew, the blind lighthousekeeper of Cape Wrath, “an old man with a bag of stories under his arm, [...] a bright bridge that you could walk across, and look back and find it vanished” (2004: 95). Like many Win-

tersonian heroines, Silver learns to map out her life through fiction, first by listening to stories told by Pew, and then by becoming a storyteller herself. Since “there’s no story that’s the start of itself” (2004: 27), Silver turns to past literature for inspiration. Like *The Powerbook*, *Lighthousekeeping* is a “hypertextual” novel, which weaves the literature of the past into its own fabric, from Victorian novels, such as *Treasure Island*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Oliver Twist* or *North and South*, to Modernist fiction, such as *To the Lighthouse*.

35 Born and raised in a house built on the side of a steep hill, Silver has learnt to fight gravity from her earliest days, and keeps aspiring to go back to the “weightless world” before her birth (2004: 24). To awake her to the role of fiction, Pew tells her the story of a sailor, lost at sea on a spar of wood after a shipwreck, who survived by “telling himself stories like a madman, so that as one ended another began”, and then by “tell[ing] himself as if he were a story”. Choking his way out of the waves, he finally sees the light of the Cape Wrath lighthouse, “a shining rope, pulling him in” (2004: 40). As well as a metaphorical “rescue rope”, fiction becomes a known point in the dark, a coordinate on the map of life: “every light had a story – no, every light *was* a story, and the flashes themselves were the stories going out over the waves, as markers and guides and comfort and warning” (2004: 41). Among the literature of the past, Silver draws on the works of Virginia Woolf, which form “a string of guiding lights” (2004: 21) uniting the “lit-up moments” of her life (2004: 134). Looking towards the future by going back to Woolf, Silver is taken in a paradoxical movement, both a departure from and a return *To the Lighthouse*: “I couldn’t go back. There was only forward, northwards into the sea. To the lighthouse” (2004: 19).

36 The stories told by Silver are part remembered and part invented, part fact and part fiction. The main story is that of Babel Dark, a fictitious character, living in the small Scottish town of Salts, in the nineteenth century. A friend of Charles Darwin and R. L. Stevenson, Babel Dark takes part in real historical events, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851, but some of the events of his life are inspired by works of fiction. His love affair with Molly O’Rourke seems to be inspired by an episode from *North and South*, in which John Thornton mistakes the brother of the young woman he loves for her lover. Babel Dark’s dis-

covery of fossils on the side of a cliff is also reminiscent of a famous scene from Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. As she rewrites, adapts and transforms these well-known subtexts, Winterson does more than simply question the boundaries between fact and fiction. She also enables the reader to experience the “historical sense”, as defined by T. S. Eliot, “which involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”, and conveys the sense that in the narrative world she depicts, these subtexts have “a simultaneous existence and compose a simultaneous order” (Eliot 1919: 14). Like Ali’s stories, the stories told by Silver “have no date”: they “are simultaneous with time” (2000: 216).

37 As Silver invents herself anew through fiction, she also transforms the stories she retells and adapts. In Silver’s story, Babel Dark has to take on a false identity and become Mr Lux to visit his lover, Molly O’Rourke, in Bristol. The strange events of his double life inspire his friend R. L. Stevenson to write a similar tale, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. True to Eliot’s paradox in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Winterson implies that the works of the future also affect the works of the past, and that “the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (Eliot 1919: 15). Silver’s paradoxical movement “forward” *To the Lighthouse* is also part of the same process, and illustrates the ambivalent tensions between remembrance and invention. Told from the point of view of a character from *To the Lighthouse*, the lighthousekeeper’s child, for whom Mrs Ramsay knits stockings in the first part of the novel, *Lighthouse-keeping* also leads to read anew Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*: “Pew taught me that nothing is gone, that everything can be recovered, not as it was, but in its changing form” (2004: 150).

38 In *The Stone Gods* (2007), Jeanette Winterson moves her meditation on art and time to outer space. She tells the story of Billie Crusoe, who travels across space and time, guided by the love she feels for Spike, a Robo *sapiens*, made in (wo)man’s image. The story starts on Orbus, a planet whose natural resources have been exhausted by the human race, and which is now doomed to destruction. A small group of pioneers is sent to explore a new planet, Planet Blue, which is still uninhabited and pristine. Billie, Spike and a few members of crew set sail in a spaceship under the lead of Captain Handsome, “space privateer” and keen reader of James Cook’s *Journals*. Their mission is to

land on Planet Blue, survey its resources, and annihilate the primeval creatures living on the planet to make it hospitable. During a previous voyage out into space, Captain Handsome’s crew weathered a book-storm: “We were flying in a strange part of the sky, [...] and we thought we’d hit a meteorite shower, [...] and I saw that what we were flying through was a bookstorm – encyclopedias, dictionaries, a Uniform Edition of the Romantic poets, the complete works of Shakespeare”, “Scott, Defoe. We netted as much as we could” (2007: 49).

- 39 Lost in outer space, the literature of the past is floating in the cosmos free from gravity and from the boundaries of time. The works of Shakespeare are at large in space even before the colonization of Planet Blue – the Earth – by mankind. Captain Handsome suggests the only possible explanation: the existence of a repeating world, in which past and future can no longer be told apart. At the end of chapter one, Handsome decides to divert the course of an asteroid to destroy the dinosaurs living on Planet Blue, but a miscalculation leads the asteroid to hit the planet too soon, and the mission must abort. Before they die, stranded on Planet Blue, Billie and Spike send a radio signal to the future. The second chapter of the book is set on Easter Island at the time of James Cook’s expedition in the South Pacific Ocean. The last chapters, “Post-3 War” and “Wreck City”, are set in the future, on Planet Blue, which has been colonized by the human race, exploited and destroyed like Orbus, in chapter one. The story has gone full circle, with Billie and Spike evolving from the first humans on Planet Blue, now turned into Orbus. In this “repeating world”, Billie finds a copy of *The Stone Gods* in the metro, and reads excerpts from chapter one telling the story of her love for Spike. When the two lovers are briefly reunited, they catch the radio signal left by their former selves at the end of chapter one, a signal distant in time but not in space, before the death of Billie, and the final destruction of the planet.
- 40 In this science-fiction story, Jeanette Winterson illustrates the complexity of the interactions between the literature of the past and the literature of the future. By imagining a repeating world, in which mankind makes the same mistakes not twice, but many times, she also precludes the possibility of any definite ending and any sense of closure. Her world can only begin anew, holding in store all the mas-

terpieces of the past. The leitmotif of *The Stone Gods* is “everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was” (2007: 119). In this repeating world, the past and the future are one, all the books have already been written, and it is impossible to distinguish between memory and invention. As Winterson already wrote in *Art and Lies* (1994), “if what can exist does exist, is memory invention or is invention memory?” (1994: 199). If the past affects the future, the future affects the past, as shown by the radical transformation of key subtexts in *The Stone Gods*, from the poems of John Donne, such as “The Sun Rising”, to *Robinson Crusoe*.

- 41 From *The Powerbook* to *The Stone Gods*, Jeanette Winterson makes her allegiance to Modernism explicit while allowing her own voice to emerge very distinctly from the polyphony of the past. Though she experiments with the Modernist conception of time, genre and tradition, she also develops some powerful imagery of her own to depict the condition of the twenty-first-century artist. Reworking the Woolfian image of the “voyage out”, the journey into outer space as a metaphor for twenty-first-century writing allows Winterson to disrupt the linearity of time, and illustrate the paradox that was already at the heart of *Art and Lies* (1994):

All art belongs to the same period. The Grecian drinking horn sits beside Picasso’s bulls, Giotto is a friend of Cézanne. Who calls whom? Sappho to Mrs Woolf – Mrs Woolf to Sappho. The Over-and-Out across time, the two-way radio on a secret frequency. Art defeats time. (1994: 67)

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## English

In *Art Objects* (1995), her aesthetic manifesto, Jeanette Winterson calls for a new literature for the new millennium, and new forms of writing that could “answer to twenty-first-century needs”. Far from repudiating the past, Winterson urges the twenty-first-century artist to turn to previous generations for inspiration, and to draw poetic power from the “lineage of art”. Since “every new beginning prompts a return”, before he/she can fully experiment with language, the true artist must first experience his/her vital connections with the past, not in the spirit of ancestor worship, but to reclaim past literature, “(re-state) and (re-instate) (it) in its original vigour”. Striking a delicate balance between continuity and emancipation, responsibility and freedom, the new millennium artist, vitally connected to the past, but in search of his/her own voice, must practice the difficult art of the tightrope walker, uniting two worlds on the “taut line” of language. Because they were able to master this difficult art – breaking new ground, but writing with “generations at (their) back(s)” – it is towards Modernist writers that the new generation must turn for inspiration, and more particularly towards the works of Virginia Woolf. In an attempt to highlight the fruitful tensions between early-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century literature, this paper looks at Winterson’s “cover versions” of key Woolfian subtexts, in her works published in the new millennium – *The Powerbook* (2000), *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), *The Stone Gods* (2007), and her recently published memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011).

## Français

Dans *Art Objects* (1995), son manifeste esthétique, Jeanette Winterson appelle de ses vœux une nouvelle littérature pour le nouveau millénaire, et de nouvelles formes d’écriture répondant aux attentes du vingt-et-unième siècle. Loin de renier le passé, Winterson encourage les artistes contemporains à s’inscrire dans la lignée des grandes figures qui les ont précédés. Puisque « chaque nouveau départ implique un retour », avant toute innovation formelle, le véritable artiste doit faire l’expérience des liens vitaux qui l’unissent aux œuvres produites par les générations antérieures, non pas pour les sacraliser, mais pour « réaffirmer l’actualité de la littérature du passé, et lui rendre sa vigueur originelle ». Maintenant un équilibre délicat entre continuité et émancipation, engagement et liberté, l’artiste contemporain, lié au passé, mais à la recherche de sa propre voix, doit pratiquer l’art délicat du funambule, unissant deux mondes sur la « corde raide » du langage. Parce qu’ils étaient passés maîtres dans cet art difficile, consistant à explorer de nouveaux territoires tout en faisant entendre les voix du passé, c’est vers les modernistes que la nouvelle génération doit se tourner, et plus particulièrement vers l’œuvre toujours actuelle de Virginia Woolf. Pour mettre en évidence les tensions productives qui existent entre les débuts des vingtième et vingt-et-unième siècles, cet article examine les réécritures de l’intertexte woolfien dans l’œuvre de Jeanette Winterson, plus particulièrement dans ses écrits des années 2000, comme *The Powerbook* (2000), *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), *The Stone Gods* (2007), et son autobiographie récente, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011).

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