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**A KYNICAL VIEW ON CORPOREALITY: JEANETTE WINTERSON'S  
NON-PHILOSOPHY IN *WRITTEN ON THE BODY***

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**Abstract:** Science-fiction writers tend to side either with the flesh, holding that "all is body/matter," or with the machine, believing that "all is mind," and these two divergent perspectives translate into either a protectionist or an accelerationist attitude. They can, however, be seen as interpenetrating *agencements* (Charles T. Wolfe), as is the case of Donna Haraway's "cyborg" as an emerging political form, especially in feminist science-fiction works. Jeanette Winterson's novels may seem to slowly turn away from the flesh since *Written on the Body*, from *Gut Symmetries* to *The PowerBook* and *The Stone Gods*. The present paper aims to suggest that what *Written on the Body* expresses is the heightening of *kynicism* (Peter Sloterdijk) towards both the flesh and the machine, all while rejecting cynical reason. The novel offers the reader an ec-static understanding of desire and loss, as well as the possibility of spiritual rather than spiritualist *sans-philosophie* (François Laruelle).

**Keywords:** cyborg, kynicism, indecent theology, neomaterialism, non-philosophy

"[T]o present a thesis on the body, implies, inevitably, another thesis concerning the soul."

—Federico Andahazi, *The Anatomist* (1999)

The question of the body and the soul is translated in its secular form into one of the body and of the mind or of matter and discourse competing in the world. Postmodern figures that proliferate on the threshold, such as Donna Haraway's cyborg, have a materially-constructed body fused with the discursive one. Such a luminal status is made conceivable by post-Lacanian Deleuzian materialism of the body, quite similar to Spinoza's *conatus* in that it is defined as "a pre-reflexive re-collection of embodied matter" (Braidotti 72). Contemporary monism rejects the transcendentalism of old in favour of radical immanence and relational ontology.

According to François Laruelle, immanence is best conceptualised by non-philosophy as, unlike philosophy, it is not structured around a decision that pre-dates the system and splits its world into two while allowing one to remain blissfully unaware of its initial split. Non-philosophers do not deal with examples but with symptoms and hail from the ranks of psychoanalysts, Gnostics, revolutionaries, and science-fiction writers. Gilles Deleuze can be said to be a non-philosopher when his *Difference and Repetition* advocates that philosophy ought to be seen in part as "a kind of science fiction" (Deleuze xx) because it can "make present the approach of a coherence that is no longer ours" (Deleuze xxi). They all aim to be *spiritual* rather than *spiritualist*, that is, Laruelle explains, to haunt the margins of institutions as the voice of the world that calls the subject to change, as well. Their primary concern is not an abstract question regarding immutable essences but the very possibility and desirability of human salvation.

Reading Jeanette Winterson before she openly committed to the genre of science fiction in *The Stone Gods*, one can see that she already showed a deep commitment to a poetics of the body as a fluid marker of both desire and loss challenging and even unravelling the subject. Her novels paradoxically equally invite the queer and the evangelical in her own version of non-philosophy. This is perhaps nowhere as evident as in *Written on the Body* (from here on abbreviated as *WB*), centred around the ungendered narrator's obsessive question of "Why is the measure of love loss?" (*WB* 9). Carolyn Allen identifies in it, as well as in the writings of Bertha Harris, Djuna Barnes, and Rebecca Brown, an erotics of loss where the focus is shifted from "walk[ing] unproblematically into the sunset to situations of obsession, loss, and inequalities of power" (Allen 3). Such fictions do not set out to eroticise danger. Instead, the insistence

on images of desired self-melting into the other leaves no space for fantasy and so transforms the text into “a fiction of theory- a narrative that produces theory as well as a story” (Allen 24).

The narrator, what Arthur Frank would call a “wounded storyteller,” is carrying a wound that is not their own alone but arises in and out of contact with the loved one. Louise’s leukemia determines the narrator to accept her husband’s request to never see her again on condition that he treats her. However, Louise escapes them both, refusing the clinic as one would the prison. Consequently, the narrator is plagued by the thought that they have failed Louise by handing her over back to Elgin and so lost her forever. Is the narrator’s wound Louise’s imminent (or recent) death or losing her? The answer is both as the two are in no clean-cut cause-effect relation but in interaction. The wound, Arthur Frank indicates, can inspire the need for restitution or can be experienced as chaos that throws everything out of joint. In this case, however, it motivates a quest through different timelines crisscrossing each other. Once again, the narrator has a choice in how they deal with the wound. The quest can unfold as a memoir, detailing both the illness and the minutiae of everyday life or it can also be a form of (auto)mythology with an author that does not survive but is reborn in a new form, being exemplar of change. The latter could be Louise’s side of the story that the readers never receive, where she could see herself not as a detested lacking double but as an entirely new person. While the novel can be seen as a memoir spliced with a witness account, it is so much more than that. The wounded storyteller makes it into a manifesto, no longer idealising a prior state. Indeed, the signs are rewritten into the early beginnings as Louise is seen as an overripe fruit on the brink of spoiling. Prevention strikes one as futile if not impossible. The suffering, if not to be avoided, is to be endured so as to move closer to the other. If science insists on intruding upon the poetic, dating what was once fresh and meaningful, it too can be transformed into art and reabsorbed into its matter and this is just what the narrator does by rewriting biology textbooks juxtaposing the beloved’s body over them. We have read a similar manifesto in Winterson’s *Art Objects* where she holds that “[w]hereas science outdates the past art keeps it present” (Winterson *Art* 66). While Susan Sontag shows in *Illness as Metaphor* that disease metaphors are a common way of describing political events (Sontag 72-88), Winterson takes the opposite route and has the narrator speak of Louise’s diseased body as if it

were a fortress, challenging the authority of a depersonalised language that reduces her to fragments and privileges form over substance, mechanism over person. Deftly switching from one type of discourse to another to level them, the speaker indulges in the rights afforded by their status as an unreliable narrator, correcting themselves with an elfish grin after claiming to have broken ripe plums over the lover's body and adding that "[t]here are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? (...) I don't know" (*WB* 17) to later reveal that "the power of memory is such that it can lift reality for a time. Or is memory the more real place?" (*WB* 61).

The narrator's occasional elfish grin as they parody multiple registers needs not be confused with satire. While Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau see Jeanette Winterson as following in the footsteps of John Fowles or Anthony Burgess by writing against a violent world order, we have to keep in mind that satire is connected to morals, not to ethics. The former is (neo)humanist and deontic, positing the stability of character and the possibility to discern between categories, while (post-)Levinasian ethics is non-deontic and non-ontological, open to speaking on affects and spectrality. As different as the two may seem, Onega and Ganteau are quick to add that "there is no reason why a text should be either prescriptive and deontic *or* tentative, liminal and restless in its indications of openness. One has only to think of the way in which Jeanette Winterson proclaims the imperative of openness and sensibility to the other to be convinced of this point" (Onag and Ganteau 6). This is made possible precisely by rejecting cynicism in favour of what Peter Sloterdijk terms "kynicism." Like Laruelle, Sloterdijk prefers the thinkers that challenge rather than construct the system and so, of the pre-Socratics, he claims Diogenes as his precursor. Kynicism, siding with dialectical materialism, refuses to engage with idealism by being a living, "embodied" subversive alternative to it. Cynicism, serving those in power to act as if they held none, understands the difference between discourse and reality but does not acknowledge it. Haughty and supposedly detached as it would fashion itself, it sides with morals rather than ethics.

Indeed, even as the narrator scathingly inventories "the clichés that cause the trouble" (*WB* 10), they do not do it from the safety of the cynic that is above hurt. The sarcasm is that of the frenzied kynic who can still admit, after raging against the trinkets that say "Congratulations on your Engagement", that "I am not engaged I am deeply

distracted. I am desperately looking the other way so that love won't see me" (*WB* 10). The "saggy armchair of clichés" with "the fabric smelly and familiar" (*WB* 10) seems alluringly familiar for a moment but the farce may not continue. Such familiar shapes are dwarfed by Louise's fabulous body as "a genie [sprung] to ten times [her] natural size" (*WB* 18), a volcano, "dormant but not dead" (*WB* 49), a gun "cocked and ready to fire" (*WB* 136), a flood that "beats upon . . . doors and threatens [the narrator's] innermost safety" (*WB* 162). This fabulous beast is half-machine, as she is also said to have a "dangerously electrical quality" (*WB* 49) and shoulder blades sharp enough to cut (*WB* 131). Indeed, she is almost transhumanist in her unblinking hope for the happily ever after, contrasted in the following imaginary exchange with the narrator's all too human doubts:

You said, "Why do I frighten you?"

Frighten me? Yes you do frighten me. You act as though we will be together [sic] for ever. You act as though there is infinite pleasure and time without end. How can I know that? My experience has always been that time always ends. In theory you are right, the quantum physicists are right, the romantics and the religious are right. Time without end. In practice we both wear a watch. If I rush at this relationship it's because I fear for it. I fear you have a door I cannot see and that any minute now the door will open and you'll be gone. Then what? Then what as I bang the walls like the Inquisition searching for a saint? Where will I find the secret passage? For me it'll just be the same four walls. (*WB* 18)

The narrator's instability runs deeper. Their very identity and body is recognised to not be fixed and so all the better prepared to appreciate the fabulous other. The speaker is only described as "a pool of clear water where the light plays" (*WB* 84-85), a collection of effects and affects, all the better suited to appreciate Louise's face, "mirror-smooth and mirror-clear" (*WB* 132). The *mise-en-abîme* is inevitable. Quite tellingly, the subject/object distinction is cancelled in their relationship by absolute reciprocity. Messages are instantaneously received since they are mediated by the flesh, as suggested by the very title of the novel. Reading the body is a blended experience as one cannot touch without being touched. Elizabeth Grosz sees this contact sense as a useful tool to

conceive new images of the body as it eliminates hierarchy and distance in the shared space of the partially coinciding surface. Unlike sight, which creates a subject in a privileged position dividing the world into here and there, touch only exists in interaction and the third space inhabited by two. The skin, once the marker of the boundary, here facilitates immersion. Reading the body of the other is done not in the Foucauldian sense of socially-inscribed corporeality. Indeed, Louise demands that the narrator come to her virtually “without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them” (*WB* 54). Her reading hands favour Braille over scars, especially since Braille allows the narrator to remain genderless. Rather than looking back in anger or regret, they ecstatically look forward, as if to exclaim “Let’s hurry and invent our own phrases. So that everywhere and always we can continue to embrace (...) we shall pass imperceptibly through every barrier, unharmed, to find each other” (Irigaray 89).

As the presence/absence and sender/receiver divides are rejected, pattern/randomness emerges in its stead, allowing the nimble narrator to slip between shifting discourses. Words are not stable but change their meaning within the same paragraph such as when remembering “June. The wettest June on record. We made love every day” (*WB* 21). The lover that once threatened to overflow their defences is next seen as potential shelter of no less fabulous proportions as

[i]n the heat of her hands I thought, this is the campfire that mocks the sun. This place will warm me, feed me and care for me. I will hold on to this pulse against other rhythms. The world will come and go in the tide of a day but here is her hand with my future in its palm (*WB* 51).

The unwelcome touch, now desired, is soon insufficient. The narrator desires the other contact sense: taste. Louise is now seen in terms of nourishment with “creamy” skin (*WB* 11), “milk white and fresh to drink” (*WB* 125) in health and the “livid purple of burst figs” (*WB* 124) in sickness, her hair the colour of a pomegranate (*WB* 91). With closeness, sight gives way to smell and taste: her crotch smells of bread and wine and her breasts are “beehives pouring honey” (*WB* 123). The image of shelter and nourishment collide in visions of her body as the “forest where I can rest and feed in’ (*WB* 117), a “gamey low-roofed den [from which to] feed” (*WB* 136). As Nandi Weder

suggests, the prevalence of images of consumption is tied to the implication of oral sex in phrases such as “[e]at of me and let me be sweet” (*WB* 20) and when they “consume each other and [go] hungry again” (*WB* 20) or “fall like ripe fruit and roll down the grass together” (*WB* 89). The insistence on the image of the insatiable mouth highlights the reciprocity that marks their relationship, as well as the blending of discourse and flesh, mind and body.

Sexuality is demanded the same serious treatment discourse is afforded. The narrator that only earlier waxed poetic about the virtues of Hallmark romance later calls out those who said “With my body I thee worship” only to commit adultery, kynically demanding “How can you say that to one person and gladly fuck another? Shouldn’t you take that vow and break it the way you made it, in the open air?” (*WB* 16). Argentinean theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that ideology is mediated through the body so that “belief systems are organized around people’s bodies and people’s bodies in relationships, and in sexual relationships” (Althaus-Reid 43). To counter this, the experiences of abject bodies usually rejected by theology can be spoken about within an “indecent theology” centred on lower income women, sex workers, the LGBT, drag queens, BDSM practitioners, and so on. The possibly non-binary or gender fluid narrator who has affairs with both men and women is not the only one included in such a discourse. There is also Elgin, who “lay on his single bed, legs apart, and begged her to scaffold his penis with bulldog clips” (*WB* 34) and loves porridge baths in Scotland, Crazy Frank, carrying his midget adoptive parents on his shoulders and wearing “great gold hoops through his nipples” that “he had joined together with a chain of heavy gold links,” so that his chest looked as if it had “the handle of a Chanel shopping bag” (*WB* 93), and the former girlfriend “who could only achieve orgasm between the hours of two and five o’clock” (*WB* 75). The non-normative body is factored in by an equally non-normative theology. Not only is it indecent but it is also negative as it relies on apophatic descriptions. What is sacred for the narrator cannot be adequately represented so it needs to be isolated through a series of exclusionary processes, by showing all that it is not, lest it becomes idolatry. Louise is, once again, a surprisingly well-suited companion as her sever nose and sensual mouth produced together “an odd effect of ascetic sexuality. There was discernment as well as desire in the picture,” looking all “chaste, but for the perfect choirboy” (*WB* 67) and

Louise's tastes had no place in the late twentieth century where sex is about revealing not concealing. She enjoyed the titillation of suggestion. Her pleasure was in slow certain arousal, a game between equals who might not always choose to be equals. She was not a D.H. Lawrence type; no-one could take Louise with animal inevitability. (*WB* 67)

What the narrator needs to learn is how to relinquish control through this indecent theology. The passionate declarations of love spoken much too soon do not impress Louise. Instead, she calls out her lover for resorting to another ready-made as "you try and regain control by telling me you love me. That's a territory you know, isn't it? That's romance and courtship and whirlwind" (*WB* 53). There is once again the question of missed opportunities. Just as the skin can be both a barrier and a contact surface, the stories about the narrator's former girlfriends mean that "[s]he couldn't trust me. As a friend I had been amusing. As a lover I was lethal" (*WB* 53). The past must be scraped off their bodies like Batsheba the dentist did, leaving the narrator out of sight and out of mind on her way home to her husband, as "she was checking her hair and her face" in a car's window, "dusting me from coat and loins" (*WB* 41). Taking the body of the other in one's mouth is no longer indecent theology if spat out.

For a novel so concerned with corporeality, it is interesting to see the lengths to which the narrator goes to keep their gender undisclosed. No description of their anatomy is offered and the clothes are no more of an indicator either while the mannerisms seem to be parodical performances of femininity and masculinity alike. Such willing undecidedness can be described as a "utopian writing of gender" (Gibson 193) in that it is "deconstructive rather than reconstructive, and as such, it is utopian" (Gibson 194). Once again, the apophatic mode is preferred. Em McAvan suggests that the mixed and inconclusive standards do not serve to permit the reader's self-insertion into the narrative but to signal to "the transcendent because the narrator is outside culture, outside the compulsory regimes of sex and gender – and yet, is still very clearly embodied" (McAvan 439). Drawing on Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking", she sees this deferral of a final self-description as a negative theology conducive to the creation of a "hyperessentiality" and a paradoxical being-not being, namely an obscured processual being that is beyond an idealised Being.



If the non-philosophy of the novel is that of an indecent theology, hyperessentiality also characterizes the affair with Louise that dominates the narrative. Their love, befitting the mode favourable to the hysteric Gothic heroine to be kept alive by artificial means, is that of an almost painful all-consuming obsession:

We were arguing. You want love to be like this every day don't you? 92 degrees even in the shade. This intensity, this heat, sun like a disc-saw through your body. Is it because you come from Australia? (*WB* 12)

Obsession soon determines a ritualistic loop of memory whose ontological mode is that of Derridean hauntology. The being-not-being at its centre is a deferred non-origin, the ghost of Louise as neither present nor truly absent. The mourning narrator recuperates her figure as a revenant monster while being acutely aware that there is a death continuum marked by different degrees. Much like her lover, she also illustrates a case of "met(r)amorphosis" or "the becoming-thresholds of borderlines" (Lichtenberg qtd. in Braidotti 142) as she recognizes herself to be subjected to ongoing transformation. However, the beloved is also representative of meta(l)morphosis or becoming-machine. The narrator, tense with anticipation, is surprised by her unsentimental no nonsense attitude:

Already my hand was creeping over the tablecloth like something out of Poe. She touched me and I yelped.

"Did I scratch you?" she said, all concern and remorse.

"No, you electrocuted me."

She got up and put on the coffee. The English are very good at those gestures.

"Are we going to have an affair?" she said.

She's not English, she's Australian.

"No, we're not," I said. "You're married and I'm with Jaqueline. We're going to be friends."

She said, "We're friends already" (*WB* 37)

The woman-machine is soon revealed to be a typewriter with all the ambiguities of the word as “[t]he pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body” (WB 89). Friedrich Kittler points out the obscuring of the border between the typing machine and the female typist in Bruce Bliven’s 1954 “The Wonderful Writing Machine” where a bankrupt businessman’s letter to his wife mentions that he is writing to her with his typewriter in his lap. This “convergence of a profession, a machine and a sex speaks the truth” (Kittler 28) much like Katherine Hayles’s provocative title *My Mother was a Computer*. The hands are said to brand the narrator’s body, being situated halfway between a tool and a weapon, as well as to read it. In return, she is also cartographed and read as “in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt” (WB 20) and she is asked to “[b]e patient and go with nimble feet dropping your body like a scroll” (WB 178), the very gesture that the narrator avoids in a futile attempt at self-preservation since “I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book” (WB 89). Reading is no longer a passive endeavour: the sender/receiver divide is no longer rigid and “[y]our hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read” (WB 106). The absolute reciprocity of this process, as if they read each other, pencil in hand, reveals them both to be typewriters. As Deleuzian desiring machines, they open one another to the possibility of undoing themselves. Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” helps us identify the posthuman implications of the novel since “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway 237) and, what is more,

the machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they. (Haraway 245).

Baudrillard contradicts McLuhan, claiming that in postmodernity it is not media that is the extension of man; instead, man becomes the extension of media. Correspondingly,

the mind and the word is not as extension of the body but the body becomes their optional extension. If it is not naturally inevitable, it would seem that it is plastic, both meaning editable and foreign to itself and to the mind. This is all the more dramatic as Louise's body begins to gradually shut down as

[h]er faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit. (...) The security forces have rebelled. (...) Here they come, hurtling through the bloodstream trying to pick a fight. There's no-one to fight but you Louise. You're the foreign body now. (WB 115-116)

The narrator's changing mannerisms were inspired by the changing body of Virginia Woolf's bisexual and bigendered *Orlando*. It is decidedly a step further from *The Passion*, where the weak Henri loves both Napoleon and Villanelle, herself a cross-dressing bisexual whose abject webbed feet are like her father's and grandfather's before her. Winterson's unequivocal admiration for Orlando could lend credence to the hypothesis that the narrator is gender fluid without changing their body but only their performance of it. Riki Anne Wilchins's *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* traces the history of the word "transgender" as the space in between transsexuals and cross dressers, to indicate those who changed their gender without modifying their genitals, later encompassing any number of non-normative gender identities and expressions such as stone butches, non-binary people, drag queens and kings. This has made critics and activists like Kate Bornstein demand that the word be reclaimed with the wider understanding of "transgressively gendered" (Bornstein 134), starting from the excluded particular to reclaim a new universality predicated on the becoming-minoritarian. There is a passage in Woolf's *Orlando* where the female character writes on flowers, snakes, and Egyptian girls only to be interrupted by a voice of authority demanding whether it is necessary to add girls to a list of otherwise acceptable imagery. There is no such institutionalised universality challenging the narrator's provisional state in Winterson's manifesto. Louise herself, even when complimenting them, allows for the indeterminacy of met(r)amorphoses as "[y]ou were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen," adding, only moments later, that "[y]ou are a pool of clear water where the light plays" (WB 84–85). If, as Jay

Prosser shows in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, fluidity is at the core of queer inquiry, it is also tied to the idea of the posthuman. His definition echoes closely Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston speaking on “[p]osthuman bodies” which “are not slaves to master discourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context” (Halberstam and Livingston 2). The body is no longer the work of either God or nature but a never-ending story oozing meaning. Consequently, as Christy Burns notes in “Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word,” *Written on the Body* goes to show that it is not the body that is “the wrong size”. It is language that does not fit it. What is to be done is “to reclaim both the flattened word and the desensitized body” (Burns 294).

As the affair is ceremoniously recounted, the reader is walked into it in mind and in body. The very act of leading the reader (on) comes with an unusual claim to physicality as “[y]our shoes will have charcoal patches and flakes of white ash but it's better than mud on a rainy night” (*WB* 184). The reader is not seen as a disembodied consciousness or receptacle. There is a degree of careful gentleness in how the narrator warns “[b]e careful to keep on the right, there's a ditch” (*WB* 184). Later on, in *Gut Symmetries*, there is a similar moment as Alice struggles to articulate her story: “Walk with me. Hand in hand through the nightmare of narrative, the neat sentences secret-nailed over meaning” (Winterson *Gut* 24). As the story refuses strict temporality, it is not strictly circular either. It goes on like a ritualic spiral, deepening, from the initial confession full of false bravado and spice with occasional interjections of vulnerability such as “I had no dreams to possess you but I wanted you to possess me” (*WB* 52). Confession is followed by the wish for communion, as the narrator, mentally abstracting the flavours in the soup one by one, muses that

[s]he had been here, there must be something of her left. I would find her in the oil and onions, detect her through the garlic. I knew that she spat in the frying pan to determine the readiness of oil. It's an old trick, every chef does it, or did. And so I knew when I asked her what was in the soup that she had deleted the essential ingredient. I will taste you if only through your cooking. (*WB* 37)

The indecent theology allows one to consume the body of the other with no loss to their being, establishing a symbiotic interdependence and making the other readily available within oneself. Now “[y]our body is twice (...) [o]nce you and once me” (*WB* 99), “your flesh is my flesh” (*WB* 110), blurring the line between possession and identification to the point where “I (...) recognise myself (...) in your skin, myself lodged in your bones” (*WB* 120) so much so that “[i]f you are broken then so am I” (*WB* 125) and “[b]one of my bone (...) [f]lesh of my flesh (...) [t]o remember you it’s my own body I touch” (*WB* 130). The next step in the ritual is the confirmation that creates an ec-static community of two. If earlier “I thought difference was rated to be the largest part of sexual attraction (...) there are so many things about us that are the same” (*WB* 129). Becoming one is not felt as a loss but as self-replenishing abundance. This is the love of a jealous and proud god:

But you are gazing at me the way God gazed at Adam and I am embarrassed by your look of love and possession and pride. I want to go now and cover myself with fig leaves. It’s a sin this not being ready, this not being up to it.

You said, “I love you and my love for you makes any other life a lie.” (*WB* 19)

The final vision in the fields, be it real or not, is a vision of Paradise lost or regained. As the referent of the text keeps changing from the self to the reader and to Louise, there is a certain spectrality that characterises any letter that fails to reach the address. The impossibility to reach out to Louise anymore in anything but memory recalls Kafka’s hungry ghosts that reduce the very physical existence of the other to words in the wind:

How on earth did anyone get the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter! Of a distant person one can think, and of a person who is near one can catch hold – all else goes beyond human strength. Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don’t reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts (...); after the postal office it has invented the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph. The ghosts won’t starve, but we will perish. (Kafka 229)

Indeed, precisely when the material body seems to be have been made superfluous it is all the more radical to choose it precisely out of desire. As the narrator sneers at “teledildonics,” “[f]or myself, unreconstructed as I am, (...) I’d rather travel across the world to have you with me than lie at home dialling your telepresence” (*WB* 97).

For a novel dealing with erotic desire and the politics of grief, it never ceases to seep with irony at every turn. As a means of establishing critical distance from the past, the question is whose past is this that one looks at with cynicism? Is it the narrator’s past, especially with other lovers such as the anarchist feminist blowing up urinals, is it the reader’s, and a continuously shifting one at that, or is it both? The constantly readjusted distance between narrator and narratee makes for the emotionally charged language to feel like an assault upon one’s serene reading. One cannot and should not be a passive witness. At times, the narrator asks for reassurance and directly requests that the reader take a stand, such as when asking “[y]ou think I’m trying to wriggle out of my responsibilities?” (*WB* 16) after confessing a preference for married women, wondering out loud “[i]s it odd to say that your lover reminds you of a tree?” (*WB* 29), or feeling “[n]ot sorry but ashamed, does that sound strange?” (*WB* 174) after assaulting Elgin. This strategy is made explicit in *Gut Symmetries*, where Alice remarks on the relative relation between narrator and narratee as “[i]f I were not telling this story to you but to someone else, would it be the same story? (...) It is just as likely that as I invent what I want to say, you will invent what you want to hear?” (Winterson *Gut* 24–25).

To conclude, *Written on the Body* shows signs of neither the detached preference for the mind nor for an animal-like sexuality. The narrator and Louise share an indecent theology as the wettest June was a time of “brief days and briefer hours [that] were small offerings to a god who would not be appeased by burning flesh. We consumed each other and went hungry again” (*WB* 21). It is not a novel of mind over matter but of word made flesh, as Elgin’s name is chosen because of his mother’s unexplained feverish crying out the name during labour. The line between thought and deed cannot be confidently traced as

I used to think that Christ was wrong, impossibly hard, when he said that to imagine

committing adultery was just as bad as doing it. But now, standing here in the familiar unviolated space, I have already altered my world and Jacqueline's world for ever. She doesn't know this yet. She doesn't know that there is today a revision of the map. That the territory she thought was hers has been annexed. (WB 38)

The omission through speech does not erase the mark of desire from one's body. When speech lies, the body is eager to tell the truth and so "my lips were sealed and my cheeks must have been swelling out like a gerbil's because my mouth was full of Louise" (WB 41). Body and mind are not in competition but in concert and, of the long list of lovers, Louise is singled out because "[i]t was necessary to engage her whole person. Her mind, her heart, her soul and her body could only be present as two sets of twins. She would not be divided from herself. She preferred celibacy to tugging" (WB 68). The fabulous *monstre-arrivant* returns to haunt and taunt the narrator's body and mind. Pushing one to wish to deny and yet make a spectacle of the pain, mourning is an impossible process. While trying to mitigate one's losses with a touch of sarcasm and parody, the position is not the comfortable one of the cynic above all attachment but of the kynic that has gambled it all away. The very unanswered questions that punctuate the narrative unsettle more than they reassure as "[b]igger questions, questions with more than one answer, questions without an answer are harder to cope with in silence" (WB 13), prompting a multiplication of narratees. Discourse itself assumes materiality since "[o]nce asked they gain dimension and texture, trip you on the stairs, wake you at night-time" (WB 13). Despite pondering out loud whether it is "[b]etter then to be a contented pig than an unhappy Socrates" (WB 13), the narrator seems to have chosen neither and both at the same time: the one who speaks to us is a pig-like Socrates or a Socrates-like pig.

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