

Exposing Ambiguity

The Literary Expression of Jeanette Winterson's Anti-Essentialist Philosophy

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Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d'aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d'avoir d'autres yeux, de voir l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre, de cent autres, de voir les cent univers que chacun d'eux voit, que chacun d'eux est.

Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière*

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Introduction

The function of literature in our world has been and is a subject of discussion. While an average passer-by might only acknowledge the entertainment value of literature and fiction, avid readers generally claim that literature has more to offer. However, defining the functions of literature proves to be quite difficult: there is no clear consensus on the definition of its role. It is often suggested that good fiction can influence the way we look at life, that it changes our thinking, or perhaps even the way we think. It is not my objective to provide a single definition of fiction's role in society, since the lack of a dogmatic answer to the question I pose suggests that no single answer can be given. Literature is widespread, diverse and often ambiguous. Logically, defining the purpose of such a phenomenon will result in a myriad of definitions.

This study is meant instead as an examination of one of the potentially many functions of literature: its function within philosophical thinking. Scholars have long tried to specify the inner workings of the philosophical value of literature: the relation between fiction and thinking. As early as the 4th century BC, literature and philosophy were linked. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that "poetry [...] is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (chapter IX). The form of poetry is not important to Aristotle in this respect; writing in verse or prose is not the true difference between history and poetry: "the work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it" (chapter IX). Because of this we can apply Aristotle's claim that poetry has a philosophical character not just to poetry but to literature in general: the fictional aspect of literary poetry or prose is able to relay the universal: "what may happen", instead of the particulars of "what happened" (chapter IX). In the following thesis I will explore contemporary literature's role in articulating philosophical positions, specifically how Jeanette Winterson's fiction conveys a philosophy.

I will start this study by exploring more contemporary ideas on where philosophy and literature meet. I shall examine the scholarly debate on literature's philosophical function by discussing a few authors who have written on the topic of literature's relation to thinking: Nancy Armstrong, Rita Felski, Jacques Rancière, Birgit Kaiser and Jeanette Winterson herself. Then I will go on to my main issue and consider what philosophy Winterson's fiction conveys

to readers, and what the added value is of delivering this 'message' through literature. After conducting a pilot study – reading Winterson (her works of fiction), and about Winterson – I chose to discuss four themes that are prevalent throughout the author's work. Earlier studies on Winterson have pointed out the importance of these themes for her oeuvre (see for example Estor, Grice and Woods, Seaboyer, Lindenmeyer). I will mainly focus on one novel per theme since this gives me the opportunity to thoroughly analyse that work, taking its composition as a whole into account, instead of giving a scattered report of the many thematically relevant fragments in Winterson's work. I will discuss the following themes and novels:

1. The relation between reality and the imaginary in *The Passion* (1987)
2. The role of language and storytelling in *Lighthousekeeping* (2004)
3. The position of the natural sciences in *Gut Symmetries* (1997)
4. The fluidity of gender in *Written on the Body* (1993)

Since each of these themes plays a role in many of Winterson's novels and short story collections, examining them will give us an overview of the workings of her oeuvre as a whole. Winterson's oeuvre is a tightly-knit interplay of stories in which not only themes overlap, but characters and storylines as well. The themes mentioned before, and the way in which these themes surface in Winterson's texts, comprise what I have called a philosophy of anti-essentialism. The worlds to which we are transported in Winterson's books are packed with inconsistencies and ambiguity: life is consistently portrayed as multidimensional and changeable. This is an element of many postmodern works of fiction, but it plays a pivotal role in Winterson's work: other recurring topics in her texts are all related to the idea that life – both the external world we live in and our inner life – does not consist of certainties and stability but of ambiguity. In this thesis I examine this philosophy: how an anti-essentialistic worldview is demonstrated in Winterson's work, how that works proposes we deal with this anti-essentialism, and what the added value of its articulation through literature is. Could this vision also have been expressed in other ways, or is it necessarily connected to its literary form?

It would be contradictory to bring the philosophical ideas that Winterson addresses in her fiction to the public through the manifestos and treatises that are usually associated

with philosophy. The topic of instability cannot be accurately expressed through such stable texts. Philosophical discourses can very well be nuanced, and they can argue for an ambiguous world view, but they are not themselves the ambiguity they preach, they use a more factual language as opposed to the imaginative language that characterizes much literature. In Winterson's work facts are constantly questioned: ambiguity is central to the message of her books. In her works of fiction Winterson is able to play with the concept of truth so that readers never know what they should expect, and that game is at the heart of her philosophy of anti-essentialism. Non-fictional forms of writing are not able to transport readers to another reality or a different dimension of life, and the philosophical ideas that this thesis revolves around address exactly that multidimensional quality.

In fiction, furthermore, life is experienced and lived as opposed to the more abstract description of life in philosophical non-fictional writing. From a tract readers are made to think abstractly, but a piece of fiction offers us experiences because of its narrative character; it offers another form of knowledge. Instead of handing us a text that explains a way of seeing the world, fiction can show us a world in which that world view is a reality, and consequently characters show us how we can live with and in that reality.

The debate

Opinions on the philosophical value of literature vary a great deal. To give an idea of this debate I will discuss some publications which consider how literature and the way we look at life are linked.

The starting point of Rita Felski's book *Uses of Literature* is the state of literary criticism. Felski claims that the field of literary studies is preoccupied with the role the reader plays in the interpretation of literature. Since Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author scholars have ascribed too little value to texts themselves. Felski (paraphrasing Eve Sedgwick) observes a "paranoid style of critical engagement, it calls for constant vigilance, reading against the grain, assuming the worst case scenario and then rediscovering its own gloomy prognosis in every text" (3). Ideological approaches to literature, such as Marxist and feminist ones, exemplify this tendency, as do theological approaches. The latter is defined by Felski as "literature [that] is prized for its qualities of otherness", in other words this form of criticism assigns value to literature on the basis of its uniqueness (4). On the other hand, ideological criticism does not recognize the value of that uniqueness: the text is

treated like “a depleted resource deficient in insights that must be supplied by the critic”, it only confirms what its critic already knows (6).

Felski proposes an alternative to these ideological and theological forms of critique and wants to analyze the worldly aspects of literature, without reverting to the reductive and high-handed approach of ideologically inclined critics and believing that this more pragmatic way of looking at fiction does not undermine its unique poetic quality. She observes the difference between an academic reading of fiction and that of a lay reader, and writes: “My argument is not a populist defence of folk reading over scholarly interpretation, but an elucidation of how, in spite of their patent differences, they share certain affective and cognitive parameters” (14). She argues that recognition, enchantment, social knowledge, and shock are “modes of textual engagement: they are neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-levelled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts” (14).

Thus, according to Felski, there is no such thing as one static meaning of a text; she suggests that different meanings arise when different people read a piece of fiction. Felski stresses that texts are only able to act “via the intercession of those who read them”, and since their reading public is very heterogeneous “the effects of literature are neither as transfigurative as aesthetes like to claim nor as ruthlessly authoritarian as some radicals want to insist” (18). Instead she chooses to look at the act of reading itself which “enacts an ethics and a politics in its own right, rather than being a displacement of something more essential that is taking place elsewhere” (20). The interaction between individual readers and literary texts differs greatly since “individuals can be moved by different texts for very different reasons”, and Felski feels that this is often overlooked in scholarly endeavours (21). The function of a text can thus only be discovered in relation to a specific reader. Recognition, enchantment, gaining social knowledge, and being shocked are the main functions of literature that Felski recognizes, but whether these uses apply depends on the combination of particular readers and texts.

Like Felski, Armstrong concerns herself with literature’s worldliness; its effects. However, where Felski explores this on the level of individual readers – how texts interact with individuals – Armstrong examines the social-cultural function of literature, namely the use of fiction for society as a whole. In her book *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from*

1719-1900, Nancy Armstrong sees the novel as an active social agent: “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, the same” (3). She takes the British novel as an illustration of her theory: according to Armstrong it was born “as writers sought to formulate a kind of subject that had not yet existed in writing” (3). Novels do not merely describe what is present in reality; only after the modern subject was introduced in fiction did it “reproduce itself not only in authors but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture” (3). Armstrong illustrates the interaction between novels’ thinking and their social-cultural contexts: she signals that in eighteenth-century novels protagonists harboured dissatisfaction with their social position, and felt the urge to change that position: the modern individual was born. Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist of Daniel Defoe’s famous novel, is an example of such a character. Armstrong refers to Louis Althusser’s idea of an “ideological state apparatus”, upon which the modern secular state is based (29). Robinson Crusoe represents Althusser’s ‘bad subject’: instead of free subjects, that willingly subject themselves to society’s class restrictions, the bad subject “does not fit any available social category” and is “by nature incapable of being ‘hailed’” (31). Crusoe does not feel he is born to follow a pre-ordained path; he exemplifies the modern individual. Armstrong goes on to say that in Victorian novels the modern individual kept this freedom, but learned that this individuality should be used in a way that benefited society as a whole.

Armstrong “prefer[s] to look at the novel as a way of thinking in its own right, the culture’s way of maintaining, upgrading, and perpetuating its most basic categories in the face of pressures that changing social conditions bring to bear on them” (83). She portrays literature as a social force that expresses potentialities and matters of which society is not yet completely aware. In fiction ideas are rephrased, and thereby changed, as is the world in which fiction functions. Armstrong does not explicitly compare the role of fiction to that of non-fiction, but does imply that the literary language of fiction is important in this rephrasing.

Central to Armstrong’s argument is the idea of literature as a social agent. According to Felski literature has a different kind of power that is not concerned with social change, but with influencing individuals. However, Felski’s rejection of the tendency to see fiction as a symptom of an ideology, a source of hidden meaning, does resonate in Armstrong’s theory. Fiction is at the very forefront of a society’s social change according to Armstrong,

not by emanating an ideology and thereby effectuating change, but by reflecting and rephrasing society's budding characteristics.

Birgit Kaiser in *Figures of Simplicity* (2010) focuses on another aspect of literature's functionality in conveying ideas: the distinctive quality of literature to produce a kind of thinking that is based on experiencing something as opposed to the intellectual act of knowing. While Armstrong speaks of a tentative rephrasing of the social change that fiction observes, Kaiser argues that literature in itself can produce a way of thinking. She observes that both Heinrich von Kleist's and Herman Melville's figures "circle around questions of thinking in a similar fashion, and make similar propositions in regard to the forms thinking can take" (xiii). According to Kaiser, both writers ask their readers to think about the relation between affectivity and thinking. Usually affectivity is associated with the body and separated from thinking, which is linked to the mind. Kaiser believes the simplicity of characters that figure in Kleist's and Melville's writing can be used to relate thinking and affectivity. Literature reveals – or at least makes its readers consider – a different sort of thinking altogether:

What these two writers, therefore, ask us to think are two things: Are there other forms of thinking than rational thinking, particularly in view of complex situations, in which the stability and clarity of a reflective distance is illusory or detrimental? And what are the stakes of literature in exposing or elaborating such nonrational thinking? (xviii)

Kaiser follows "the principle of approaching literature by way of the problems it addresses, the thinking it produces, and the food for thought it provides" (xix). Here she builds on Deleuze and Guattari who look at literature from a similar perspective. Their statement that "art thinks no less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts" is the basis of Kaiser's analysis of Kleist and Melville (Kaiser quoting Deleuze and Guattari, xix). Kaiser argues that these literary figures of simplicity are able to demonstrate a new way of thinking: "realizing knowledge to be open-ended, experimentally gathered, procedural, and always re-evaluated, [Kleist and Melville] stand at the threshold of modernity, and their figures of simplicity are the response to this insight: [...] they do not strive for objective truth, but rather for a perspective, for a pragmatic positioning within the web of circumstances" (28). Kaiser explains that the literature of these two authors does not think

like philosophical manifestos think, analysing and judging life from a supposedly objective distance. The thinking of literature distinguishes itself by remaining “immersed and find[ing] an answer to the pressing questions [such as:] how to ‘understand’ things in the forward-rushing state of affairs?” (28-29).

Like Nancy Armstrong, Kaiser is interested in the effect of literature on the thinking that comprises society. According to Kaiser “the point is, thus, not to show that literary texts do *the same as* philosophic-aesthetic debates on the relation between sensibility and reason, but much rather to show the potential of the literary to expose, and thereby also pose, a question, or, to say it differently: to think” (118). This (ex)posing quality of literature is central to Kaiser’s argument: fiction is able to show and let readers experience matters and questions as opposed to the description that non-fiction offers.

The experiential quality of literature that Kaiser points out is also central to the work of philosopher Jacques Rancière who wrote on the connection between literature and thinking in a chapter of his book *Dissensus* (2010) called ‘The Politics of Literature’. Rancière claims that the politics of literature does not comprise the politics of its author, but that literature in itself practices politics: “there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing” (152). The political function of literature lies in the portrayal and framing of a common world according to Rancière. He argues that “politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear” (152). Thus, writing does not impose a will on its readers but “display[s] and decipher[s] the symptoms of a state of things”: it examines the history and background that form what is visible and sayable (161). Rancière stresses that words and sentences are “mute pebbles” – a term coined by Plato – and that “mute things speak better than any orator”: they portray an atmosphere of experience that is the foundation of any political opinion (162).

Rancière thus posits that the value of literature is not in any specific opinion that is formulated: the ‘distribution of the sensible’ applies to the text as a whole, not to the particulars of political thinking but to the everyday basis that is able to produce, or to not produce, specific subjects. Literature is able to create a sphere of the sensible since it portrays a world, a reality, instead of the particulars that a piece of non-fiction addresses.

Rancière does not stress that fiction is an *active* social agent like Armstrong does, but gives a convincing portrayal of literature's importance, since he ascribes to fiction the ability to depict the fabric that is the basis of the thinking of a whole era. Kaiser's thoughts on the exposing quality of literature intersect with Rancière's ideas: this exposing characteristic of fiction is the basis of literature's ability to distribute the sensible. However, Kaiser speaks of literature as creating a new form of thinking, whereas Rancière's text only focuses on the exposing characteristics of literature rather than its ability to create: life can only be explored and 'deciphered' in literature. The portraying and deciphering of an era's social atmosphere recalls Armstrong's theory. However, Rancière's ideas focus more on the possibilities – the visible and sayable – that comprise a society, while Armstrong focuses on actual happenings, literature's ability to pick up on and play a part in the very beginning of a social revolution. Rancière explains how literature portrays society; literature has the – presumably exclusive – power to represent not only opinions, but the underlying principles of opinions.

Jeanette Winterson herself has taken part as well in the scholarly debate on literature's philosophical function. Her collection of essays, *Art Objects* (1995), discusses among other things the art of writing. Winterson repeatedly expresses her belief that art adds something to life that nothing else can. Echoing the title of Nancy Armstrong's book, Winterson portrays literature (and all art) as a thinking entity: "Art is conscious and its effect on its audience is to stimulate consciousness" (26). Unlike any other phenomenon, art is not an extract from life according to the author. Winterson echoes Oscar Wilde's credo "Life imitates art" when she writes that "art does not imitate life. Art anticipates life" (39-40). For Winterson art, literature specifically, fulfils its function by creating alternate realities. In the following fragment she argues that the reality of a piece of art is not merely a variation on life as we know it:

Falling for a book is not the nymph Echo falling for the sound of her own voice nor is it the boy Narcissus falling for his own reflection. Those Greek myths warn us of the dangers of recognising no reality but our own. Art is a way into other realities, other personalities. The book does not reproduce me, it re-defines me pushes at my boundaries, shatters the palings that guard my heart. Strong texts work along the

borders of our minds and alter what already exists. They could not do this if they merely reflected what already exists. (26)

Thus art does more than change the way you look at the life that surrounds you. By saying that “art is cellular. The emotions it draws upon are fundamental and not always available to the ducts around the eyes” Winterson suggests that art changes not only the way we see, but our senses as well: it not only changes the way we use our eyes, but our eyes themselves (58).

In advancing these ideas, Winterson upholds a Romantic idea of the artist: “The original role of the artist as visionary is the correct one.” (133) This interpretation of the artist’s function entails for example that writers do not merely give readers insight into their own experience: they pass on a vision that surpasses them:

The reader is not being offered a chunk of the writer or a direct insight into the writer’s mind, the reader is being offered a separate reality. A reality separate from the actual world of the reader, and just as importantly, separate from the actual world of the writer. [...] The fiction, the poem, is not a version of the facts, it is an entirely different way of seeing. (27-28)

Winterson stresses that in order to bring across this vision of another reality, a writer must use language, not plot: “A book cannot be judged by its subject matter any more than a picture can. We need to look at the experiment of the piece. The riskiness of art, the reason why it affects us, is not the riskiness of its subject matter, it is the risk of creating a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking” (52). With language, style, a writer creates, while plot is merely the vehicle of the aberrant reality that a piece of poetry or prose expresses. The value of literature is in the language of the art, because it is precisely language that is able to create different realities.

Winterson’s ideas intersect with those of the scholars I discussed previously. The exposing quality of literature that Kaiser and Rancière point out plays an enormous role in Winterson’s idea of fiction: creating new realities and new ways of seeing is at the very heart of her writing. Furthermore, Armstrong’s idea of literature picking up on the potentialities of a social era reminds one of Winterson’s claim that art anticipates life. Felski stresses that each individual reader reads something else in the same text: literature’s meaning is relative. Relativity and creating personal instead of universal truths are very important concepts in

Winterson's fiction as well. This idea is not so much discussed in *Art Objects* but in the following chapters I will show you that it is a central theme in her works of fiction.

These ideas on literature and thinking, especially the notion that literature can expose things instead of describing them, are important in the following chapters. I will show you that Winterson's fiction exploits the potential of literature I have just outlined, and is able to convey philosophical ideas of anti-essentialism that could not have been expressed in a manifesto or treatise.

Chapter 1: Defining reality in *The Passion*

In *The Passion* (1987), one of Winterson's early novels, the boundaries between what is real and what is not are constantly questioned. The novel is set in the time of the Napoleonic wars, and describes the wanderings of French soldier Henri, and Venetian boatman's daughter Villanelle. Venice, officially ruled by Napoleon but propelled and defined by the rule of mythical ways and creatures, becomes the stage of different definitions of reality. Winterson deconstructs binaries like real/imaginary, true/false and female/male throughout the story to portray a world in which things are changeable instead of set. This is the basis of the world view that I have called 'anti-essentialistic'. In order to reveal and examine the anti-essentialistic philosophy that emerges from this novel and Winterson's work in general, I will discuss Winterson's focus on the binary reality/imagination in *The Passion*, the role the historical setting plays in this text, how chaos and order within the setting of Winterson's novel relates to anti-essentialism, and the role of the ambiguity of identity and the inner life of characters in the novel.

§1: Real versus imaginary

Throughout *The Passion* the relation between the real and the imaginary is complicated. Winterson tells us many fantastical stories, that in our realm would generally be put aside as figments of the imagination. What is of interest is the question whether or not these situations are real in the world which is created in the novel. Winterson makes the question 'Is this true?' important by letting her characters ask it, and most importantly by denying them an answer.

In the beginning of *The Passion* we learn that Patrick, one of Henri's fellow soldiers, is a "disgraced priest whose right eye was just like yours or mine, but whose left eye could put the best telescope to shame" (21). It seems as if this mindboggling fact is true in the realm of *The Passion*, but still Henri warns us, we should not believe everything: "Patrick said he could see the weevils in the bread. Don't believe that one" (23). When the same Patrick tells the story of how he met some Irish goblins who shrunk his pair of boots to the size of a thumbnail, Henri is no longer an authority on truth when he is beset by doubt:

He searched his pockets and handed me a tiny pair of boots, perfectly made, the heels worn down and the laces frayed. 'An' I swear they fitted me once.' I didn't know whether to believe him or not. (39)

Henri is sceptical of this story, as he is of the unusual things Villanelle tells him about Venice, and because of his scepticism we, readers of the novel, become sceptics as well. In Winterson's Venice everything seems possible. When Henri asks for a map of the town Villanelle answers: 'It won't help. This is a living city. Things change.' 'Villanelle, cities don't.' 'Henri, they do.'" (113). And when he assumes Villanelle was talking figuratively when she spoke about losing her heart: "It's a way of putting it, you know that.' 'I know that, but I've told you already. This is an unusual city, we do things differently here" (116). Every time a fairytal-esque situation comes up we as readers wonder whether it is a reality in the world of *The Passion*, or if we are being fooled. There are plenty of novels that describe unbelievable things which readers accept, since to enjoy a novel we have to, for the time being, accept the laws of the novel as a reality. The willing suspension of disbelief Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it: readers suspend the realisation that the fiction they read is not possible when a writer "transfer[s] from [his or her] nature a human interest and a semblance of truth" (Chapter XIV, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)). In *The Passion*, such surrender to the text is not possible: when a character finds it hard to believe that unbelievable things happen a reader will certainly not be captured by such illusions.

Furthermore, Winterson draws attention to the question of what is real and what is not by explicitly referring to what the reader should believe: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" is a frequently recurring sentence in the text, uttered by Henri, Patrick and Villanelle (5, 13, 40, 69, 160). This motif is used in very different situations. We read it for the first time after Henri's description of the horrors of war, which seems to be in earnest. Here the phrase incites readers to take the horrors of the war seriously even though they might be hard to understand for anyone who did not live through them, and consequently to actually trust Henri when he tells us that "it was a mess. Words like devastation, rape, slaughter, carnage, starvation, are lock and key words to keep the pain at bay. Words about war that are easy on the eye" (5). The second time the phrase is preceded by a statement about Napoleon: "He was the most powerful man in the world and he couldn't beat Joséphine at billiards" (13). Here Henri tells us a detail about the war that is less close to him: something he might or might not have seen with his own eyes; something less easy to believe than his

previous statement. The use of “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” anticipates doubt, and urges you to believe what you are being told. This is also the case when Patrick uses the phrase after he tells Henri his goblin-story, a story Henri explicitly distrusts. After that Villanelle uses the phrase after she tells us she can walk on water with her boatman’s feet, which turns out to be ‘true’. Also Henri writes it after he says he will “have red roses next year. A forest of red roses. On this rock? In this climate?”: we do not know whether this prediction will come true; neither does Henri (160).

Thus the phrase “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” follows sentences we believe to be true, statements that are hard to believe but turn out to be possible in the realm of this novel, and statements of which we do not know whether they are true or false. Judith Seaboyer suggests that “what we are to trust is not the tale, but the constructive and reconstructive act of telling, the creative force of narrative” (495). The often-used phrase encourages us to trust the storyteller, not specifically the stories of the storyteller: “I’m telling you stories. Trust me”. Also the variation in the situations in which the phrase is used suggests that it does not matter so much whether the event is true or false: we ought to trust the storyteller. The dichotomy of reality and imagination, therefore, is too rigid to come to an understanding of the complex world of *The Passion*. In the short preface to the 1996 edition Winterson writes: “I wanted to write a separate world, not as an escape, as a mirror, a secret looking glass that would sharpen and multiply the possibilities of the actual world”. Fiction is used as a way to magnify aspects of reality. In *The Passion* we look at our own world through Winterson’s magnifying glass, which focuses on the multifacetedness of life. Through fiction we are better able to interpret reality. The constant back and forth between what is real and what is not is a game that exemplifies the changeability, ambiguity and treacherousness of life. And that game is played in fiction.

§2: History: certain versus uncertain

The historical setting of *The Passion* contributes to its anti-essentialistic discourse. The novel is set in the time of the Napoleonic wars, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to Amy Elias the “traditional historical novel form [...] was predicated on epistemological and historiographical assumptions of the Age of Reason” (ix). The past is seen as a static phenomenon in such novels: writers try to capture the atmosphere of an age and use facts about that past, if possible. This traditional idea of the historical novel is based

on the idea that the only problem in representing the past is that we have to retrieve information about it: but in principle it is possible to discover stable information. *The Passion* corresponds to a more postmodern idea of history. Amy Elias claims that in postmodern writing “history is not knowledge we learn and ‘own’ once we learn it; rather, postmodern arts and sciences posit that history is something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire” (xviii). History is important in postmodern thinking according to Elias: it gives expression to desire, the desire for absolute truth. Linda Hutcheon stresses the importance of history in postmodern thinking as well: postmodernism does not deny or evade history but shows that “both history and fiction are discourses, [...] both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past, [...] the meaning and shape are not in the events but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’” (89).

In *The Passion* history is represented as a far from stationary phenomenon. Precisely by using canonized historical information, Winterson demonstrates that such a way of considering history is a human construct. In an interview published on her own website, Winterson tells us that all of her work “manipulates history. The past is not sacred. The past is not static. There are a few facts we can rely on - dates, places, people, but the rest is interpretation and imagination” (www.jeanettewinterson.com). In this particular novel, Winterson uses the historical figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, and some historical events that surround his reign. The details of Napoleon’s person and surroundings are filled in by Winterson, as would be the case in any historical novel, but here that information disrupts traditional ideas of history. In *The Passion* Napoleon is portrayed as a comical figure: he does not exude power but is guided by whims. In the very first sentence of the novel it is made clear that Napoleon is obsessed with chicken, and our narrator notes that it is “Odd to be so governed by an appetite” (3). Furthermore Napoleon is depicted as a petty man who hates people who are taller than he is. Also he has a limited understanding of love: “he liked no one except Joséphine and he liked her the way he liked chicken”, thus he liked to consume her, like the chickens that are described as “birds in every state of undress” (3). José Francisco Fernández Sánchez points out that such a description of Napoleon does not match our expectations of the emperor, a famous historical figure. As a historiographical metafiction – a term coined by Hutcheon – the novel shows us that the historical figure Napoleon is a “discursive construct[...] with two levels of reference, with both real and unreal characteristics” (Sánchez 98). Because of the introduction of Napoleon in an

ambiguous context the reader's knowledge of the character of Napoleon, as well as our knowledge of history and reality in general, is questioned (Sánchez 98). Thus throughout the novel it remains unclear what is real and what is not. Readers cannot trust the things that *The Passion's* protagonists tell them, like I discussed in §1. The historical setting of the novel does not give a reader a sense of stability either. The historical setting of *The Passion* adds to the anti-essentialistic world view it conveys.

§3: Chaos versus order

A large part of *The Passion* is set in Venice, home of Villanelle and the place to which she takes Henri once they have deserted Napoleon's army. It is a city that always changes, a city of masks and shifting meanings. There is no such thing as a map of Winterson's Venice: "You may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route. If you do so, it will be by mistake. [...] Although wherever you're going is always in front of you, there is no such thing as straight ahead" (49). The hidden city within the city that Villanelle discovered when she "learned the secret ways of boatmen, by watching and by instinct" also contradicts the idea that there is one static city (53). This inner city is known by few, it is populated by "thieves and Jews and children with slant eyes who come from the eastern wastelands without father or mother, [...] exiles, [...] men and women who are officially dead according to the registers of Paris" (53). Judith Seaboyer calls this town the "resistant other" of the city (485). It seems to be the dark side of the mysterious city of pleasure. However, the standard associations one has with the darkness/light dichotomy do not apply in Winterson's Venice. The dark is also important in the Venice that is visible for everyone, the city even depends on it: "What use was the sun to us when our trade and our secrets and our diplomacy depended on darkness? In the dark you are in disguise and this is the city of disguises" (56). Darkness is very much part of the city, as is the inner city in the depth of the labyrinth that is Venice. The first and second city are connected: one is just as much part of Venice as the other. One is not more real than the other.

The ambiguity that Venice represents stands in shrill contrast to the structure that Napoleon tries to create in the whole of Europe. Henri joins Napoleon's army in search of an all-encompassing passion. In his article "Fractured Bodies" Thomas Fahy points out that Henri does not find passion in his life, and his fellow Frenchmen seem to be the same way; Henri repeatedly calls them a "lukewarm people" (*The Passion*, 7). Napoleon does incite

passion: “We are in love with him” (8). Henri and his fellow Frenchmen long for a certain greatness and wholeness that Napoleon quite literally tries to provide by trying to rule everything he comes across: “Napoleon's cause – a cause motivated by an insatiable desire for power and control through territorial expansion – gives them something concrete to believe in” (Fahy). As Henri puts it: “Where Bonaparte goes, straight roads follow, buildings are rationalized, street signs may change to celebrate a battle but they are always clearly marked” (112). However “not even Bonaparte could rationalize Venice”: the Venetians are not influenced by the structure Napoleon attempts to impose upon the city, they “more or less abandoned [themselves] to pleasure” (112, 52). Even the four churches that Bonaparte breaks down to let Joséphine create a public garden “filled [...] with hundreds of pines laid out in regimental rows” come back to haunt the park: “on a foggy night, four sepulchral churches rise up and swamp the regimental pines” (53,112). The chaotic ambiguity of Venice thus outlives Napoleon’s imposed order, and Napoleon’s rule in general – after all he loses power. Thomas Fahy reads *The Passion* as an argument for the value of postmodern art: by telling Henri that Venice is a living city in which things change “Villanelle sets up an explicit contrast between the constructed and the organic, and the city of Venice can thus be read as a symbol for postmodern art with the continual (natural) changes it gives to meaning and life” (Fahy). In his insightful analysis of the works of art that we come across in *The Passion*, Fahy mentions the tapestry that Henri sees when he is retrieving Villanelle’s heart from the house of the Queen of Spades: “The sixth room was a sewing room, a tapestry some three-quarters done lay in its frame. The picture was of a young woman cross-legged in front of a pack of cards. It was Villanelle” (119). When Henri tells Villanelle about this her face whitens because, as she explains, “if the tapestry had been finished and the woman had woven in her heart, she would have been a prisoner forever (121). Once again, the static represents death – at least inner death.

The settings of *The Passion* demonstrate that reality, life’s setting, is ambiguous and multi-dimensional. The chaotic and ambiguous aspects of the chaos/order binary that is explored in the novel are preferred to the imposed order of Napoleon. Bonaparte cannot control the ambiguity of Venice, order is associated with constructed unnaturalness while Venice’ chaos is linked to the natural, and static art signals death. The people who embrace ambiguity, the Venetians, are far better off than Napoleon and his followers. Rancière’s idea of the distribution of the sensible is applicable to *The Passion*: in the novel everything that is

thinkable actually influences the text's reality. Literature deciphers what is possible, thinkable and sayable: *The Passion* exemplifies the exposing quality that both Kaiser and Rancière value in literature. Winterson shows her readers that the chaos of life's multiplicity should be embraced.

§4: Stable versus instable identities

Ambiguity is not only part of the city of Venice: it is also inherent to the Venetians, and to people in general. Winterson shows us the many sides of the world we live in: the external, represented through her depiction of Venice, but also the internal, the ambiguities within people. Both protagonists wonder how to identify themselves: neither sees the self as static. Judith Seaboyer notes that "Henri and Villanelle both see themselves reflected in the world around them": this literally happens in scenes which feature mirrors (501). After a brutal battle Henri recalls a childhood memory:

This morning I smell the oats and I see a little boy watching his reflection in a copper pot he's polished. His father comes in and laughs and offers him his shaving mirror instead. But in the shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces and so he sees what he might become. (26)

Henri prefers the many distortions of his face to the illusion the mirror gives him: that he can be portrayed through one steady and unchanging image. Villanelle ponders her reflection as well: "On the lagoon [...] I see the future glittering on the water. I catch sight of myself in the water and see in the distortions of my face what I might become" (62). She acknowledges that she has many possible selves: one is not more real than the other.

Throughout the novel, Villanelle's identity is never clear cut: you cannot capture her in terminology that depends upon binaries. A clear example of her ambiguous identity is the confusion about her gender. She has androgynous characteristics; most clearly she has webbed feet, a feature which 'normally' is only inherited by sons of Venetian boatmen. When the midwife present at her birth tries to "cut off the offending parts straight away" the knife springs from the skin between Villanelle's toes, upon which the woman concludes "It's the Virgin's will" (52). This typically male body part is an integral part of the girl and therefore the midwife concludes Villanelle was purposefully created this way. Furthermore

Villanelle cross-dresses in the casino where she works. She tells us she does this because guests like it, since “it was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste...”, but she reveals that “the moustache I added was for my own amusement” (54-55). When she receives an invitation to visit a woman she passionately fell in love with when she was working while dressed as a man, Villanelle doubts whether she should reveal she is a woman: “what was myself? Was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters?” (66). She accepts both the male and female sides of herself, and refuses to limit herself by abandoning one side: she embraces the different distortions of her reflection.

Not only is her gender hard to pinpoint; Villanelle’s general thoughts on inner life and identity focus on ambiguity and change. Musing over falling in love she thinks:

Travellers at least have a choice. Those who set sail know that things will not be the same as at home. Explorers are prepared. But for us, who travel along the blood vessels, who come to the cities of the interior by chance, there is no preparation. We who were fluent find life is a foreign language. (68)

The labyrinthine inner city of Venice mimics Villanelle’s idea of inner life: unpredictable and agile. When she tells Henri “the cities of the interior do not lie on any map” she could be referring to either Venice’s hidden labyrinth or her own mind (114). The spirit is ambivalent and fragmented in *The Passion*, which is often demonstrated by exposing the duplex nature of identities, or of identity traits. In her description of Venetians Villanelle describes their souls as “Siamese”: a term that efficiently describes the entanglement of two mirroring sides of an identity (57). Judith Seaboyer points out that the idea of the Other is important in *The Passion*. At the beginning of the text, when Henri is about to go off to war, a little girl from his town asks him “Will you kill people, Henri?” upon which he replies: “‘Not people, Louise, just the enemy.’ ‘What is enemy?’ ‘Someone who’s not on your side’” (8). Henri realises that the definition of ‘enemy’ is not so straightforward as it seemed to him before the war, and he can no longer ‘other’ that enemy:

Henri discovers that that the ‘monsters and devils’ the French army has been sent to kill in Russia are no different from the people he has grown up among, like Henri’s family ‘a hearth people,’ whose need for the Czar as ‘a little father’ is ‘a mirror of [the] longing’ that drew him to follow Napoleon (81). (Seaboyer 492)

This realisation heralds the falling apart of Henri's illusion of unity and wholeness: he comes to understand that the structure Napoleon promised is unachievable. Especially in Venice, uncharted city, he feels lost. Seaboyer argues that Henri's mental breakdown occurs when he recognises that the cook, Villanelle's monstrous husband, is his Other, his double so to say. Henri realises "that the cook's cruel jealousy and his desire to control Villanelle resemble Henri's Romantic all or nothing passion for her. It is this collapse of the border between himself and his Other that is the horror Henri tries to repress" (Seaboyer 503). Napoleon serves as a second double who haunts Henri: both are short and "end imprisoned on an isolated, rocky island" (Seaboyer 504). So both Henri and Villanelle have 'Siamese souls'; however, Villanelle accepts this ambiguity and functions in an environment that embraces life's grey areas while Henri struggles with coming to terms with it since he never imagined the world and himself to be in flux.

Both Villanelle and Henri choose not to give in to passion at the end of the novel. Henri refuses to escape from San Servolo with Villanelle, since he now knows that his passion for her resembles the possessiveness of her cook husband: the fragmented ambiguity of life is preferred to all-encompassing passion. Villanelle leaves the Queen of Spades: "If I give in to this passion, my real life, the most solid, the best known, will disappear and I will feed on shadows again like those sad spirits whom Orpheus fled" (146). Here Villanelle explicitly refers to a life of possibilities and uncertainties as "my real life, the most solid". It is precisely ambivalence and possibility that make up reality.

As I have shown, the difficulty of defining reality and learning to live with that ambiguity is a main focus of *The Passion*. Winterson takes away one certainty after another so that the reader experiences that there is no such thing as a stable reality. First of all the characters, specifically Henri, are constantly doubting and distrusting what happens around them: they ask questions about truth and reality. These questions are not always answered, suggesting the binary reality/imagination is not clear cut. Furthermore, Winterson draws attention to the theme by repeating the phrase "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" in varying situations which make it again impossible to pinpoint what is true and false (5, 13, 40, 69, 160). Reality therefore becomes an ambiguous concept. Secondly the historical setting of the novel adds to this idea of reality's ambivalence: history's reality is no static phenomenon either. Third, ambiguity is even further explored and favoured above the static idea that life is

unambiguously comprehensible when we compare the way the Venetians deal with their environment to how Napoleon treats it. Napoleon attempts to bring structure to his territory, but his influence fails, especially in the labyrinthine and ambivalent city that is Venice. The changeable and ambiguous world is presented as the natural world, which outlives Bonaparte's imposed ideas of order. Last of all inner life and identity are also changeable and ambivalent in *The Passion*. Both Henri and Villanelle have multiple faces, and in that all-at-onceness lays truth and reality. Villanelle's androgyny and her ideas on the unfixed character of the soul exemplify this, and Henri's eventual recognition of his doubles does so as well. Henri cannot accept and embrace the disorder that he finds out is the DNA of life until he is imprisoned, and seems to be going mad. Villanelle can. In *The Passion* we not only discover the ambiguity of life, but we find out how to deal with such a reality as well: by accepting it. The novel exposes a lack of certainty by letting the reader do without stable information.

Rancière's and Kaiser's notion of literature's exposing ability is exemplified in this novel. For Kaiser this exposing quality depends on literature's ability to ask a question/depict a problem. Such a question or problem cannot be asked/depicted through a text genre in which language is based purely on rationality and logic, such as a philosophical pamphlet. Kleist and Melville depict an alternative way of thinking in which affectivity plays a role. In *The Passion* another way of thinking that is not derivative of Enlightenment rationale is exposed: the ambiguous text in fact depicts reality as far from logical. Rancière also argues that literatures exposes, however it does not address a specific problem or question according to him; it exposes that which is visible and sayable. *The Passion* exposes concepts that are thus recognized in the world in which the novel is created: late twentieth century Britain. By portraying the ambiguity of reality Winterson reveals that such a concept is present in the reality of her life.

Chapter 2: Storytelling in *Lighthousekeeping*

The focus on defining reality – or actually refraining from defining reality in its particularities – that I pointed out in *The Passion* is a constant in Winterson’s works of fiction. The novel is a very suitable medium in which to address such a theme, since a piece of fiction is inevitably linked to ideas of reality. Storytelling is a theme in itself in Winterson’s works. In *The Passion* the recurrence of the phrase “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” among other things tells us as much. But the importance of storytelling is addressed even more frequently and clearly in *Lighthousekeeping* (2004). Two stories are central to this novel: that of Silver, an orphaned girl who is put into the care of the town Salts’ lighthouse keeper Pew, and the story of Victorian reverend Dark, which Pew initially tells to Silver. He teaches Silver that storytelling is essential to lighthousekeeping:

‘I can teach you – yes, anybody – what the instruments are for, and the light will flash once every four seconds as it always does, but I must teach you how to keep the light. Do you know what that means?’ I didn’t. ‘The stories. That’s what you must learn. The ones I know and the ones I don’t know.’ ‘How can I learn the ones you don’t know?’ ‘Tell them yourself.’ (41)

For Pew, and later on for Silver as well, lighthousekeeping and storytelling become interchangeable: the light of the lighthouse that gives sailors a point of direction is a metaphor for stories that serve as life anchors.

§1: Non-linear narrative

The theme of storytelling is central to *Lighthousekeeping* and Winterson uses it to once again demonstrate the multiplicity of reality. As I wrote in chapter one, the historical setting of *The Passion* is used to demonstrate that the past is just as changeable and ambiguous as the present. In *Lighthousekeeping* that same ambiguity is revealed through a focus on telling stories; only in this novel not only is the content challenged but also the form in which we tell the stories that are presented as history.

The supposed linearity of (hi)story is defied in *Lighthousekeeping*. Silver learns that “the continuous narrative of existence is a lie. There is no continuous narrative, there are lit-up moments, and the rest is dark” (134). The flashes of light which the lighthouse she grew up in emits illuminate only short moments of reality. Winterson points out that the narrative

of a linear history is a human construct: the world around us does not emit (all) meaning, but we ourselves, knowing very little, only seeing a few lit-up moments, assign meaning to the world. History is a story as much as a piece of fiction is:

When you look closely, the twenty-four hour day is framed into a moment; the still-life of the jerky amphetamine world. That woman – a *pietà*. Those men, rough angels with an unknown message. The children holding hands, spanning time. And in every still-life, there is a story, the story that tells you everything you need to know. (134)

Thus through stories we make sense of the world around us, only through storytelling can we create meaning in a world full of chaos. The novel's overarching metaphor disseminates this idea: the light of the lighthouse is equated to the stories that Pew tells. The light provides seamen with a known point in the midst of chaos, and stories do the same. In the tale of a seaman whose ship goes down and survives out on the sea for seven days, the idea of stories as guiding lights is portrayed very literally. The man tells himself stories, and begins to tell himself as if he were a story – narrating his own life story – to prevent himself from going mad. When he eventually sees the light of the lighthouse he realizes that “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” (41).

This non-linear approach to storytelling, the idea that there is no continuing narrative, is naturally closely linked to the concept of time. Winterson portrays time as a fluid phenomenon, an idea that Pew for example embodies. He is a timeless character: he tells Silver stories from centuries ago, as if they are his own stories. Silver notes that Pew cannot have lived through all of the events he narrates: “‘You weren’t there. You weren’t born.’ ‘There’s always been a Pew in the lighthouse at Cape Wrath.’ ‘But not the same Pew.’ Pew said nothing” (46). Pew’s ability to not only relate to but to experience events that happened very long ago is explained: he says he has ‘the gift of Second Sight, given to me on the day I went blind’ (47). He can see the past and the future, but the present remains dark. Being blind might normally not be very practical when one is a lighthousekeeper, but in Pew’s case his blindness in the present enables him to experience the past and the future. Blindness even makes him a better lighthousekeeper since the primary task for a man with his occupation is storytelling, and Pew is better able to tell stories and see the connections between stories that are essential to storytelling precisely

because time is not a sequential phenomenon for him. When Silver asks where the present is, he replies: “For you, child, all around, like the sea. For me, the sea is never still, she’s always changing. I’ve never lived on land and I can’t say what’s this or that. I can only say what’s ebbing and what’s becoming” (48). Thus for Pew the present is the combination of what is ebbing and becoming; it is a place in time that is defined by both past and future. Pew has a non-linear sense of time: although he knows in which period a story he tells takes place, he experiences all the stories he tells as his own reality, as if they happen in his present.

The way stories themselves are represented corresponds to this non-sequential perception of time. Throughout *Lighthousekeeping* Winterson draws attention to the artifice of traditional narratives. “A beginning, a middle and an end is the proper way to tell a story. But I have difficulty with that method”, Silver points out at the beginning of the novel (23). The notion of finding a beginning to start telling your story is problematized. Silver finds it difficult to choose a beginning for her own story: “I suppose the story starts in 1814, when the Northern Lighthouse Board was given authority [...] to ‘erect and maintain [...] lighthouses [on the coast of] Scotland” (11). “The story begins now, or perhaps it begins in 1802”, the date of a terrible shipwreck (11). “So, the story begins in 1802, or does it really begin in 1789”, when a man smuggled muskets across The Channel to support the French revolution (13). “Or I could choose the year of the lighthouse at Cape Wrath, and the birth of Babel Dark – 1828 [as a beginning]” (23). So many events influence Silver’s life that she cannot decide where to begin her story. The same goes for ending a story, for example Silver poses that Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) is a never-ending story: “it was a long story, and like most of the stories of the world, never finished. There was an ending – there always is – but the story went on past the ending – it always does” (11). Even though a narration has ended, the story that is narrated continues to influence and be influenced by the world at large. When Silver asks Pew to tell her a story with a happy ending he replies:

There’s no such thing in all the world.

As a happy ending?

As an ending. (49)

Thus stories are continuing entities in *Lighthousekeeping* since they do not exist in a vacuum: every story, every event, influences and is influenced by other forces. In a chapter of *British Fiction Today* (2006) Sonya Andermahr writes about Silver’s difficulty in beginning to tell her

story, and points out that “this device of false starts, characteristic of metafiction, emphasizes the arbitrariness of narrative and the potentially limitless interconnections between stories” (142). Here Andermahr points to the intertextuality that is apparent throughout Winterson’s oeuvre – as it is in the work of many postmodern authors. By linking *Lighthousekeeping* to numerous other stories – for example *The Origin of Species* by Darwin, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Stevenson and *To the Lighthouse* by Woolf – Winterson exemplifies that all stories are part of a web of interconnected events and narratives. By connecting events, and by connecting the stories that are in themselves created through connections, meaning arises. *Lighthousekeeping* is itself an example of the meaning stories have according to Winterson. It is full of false starts and different storylines that occasionally meet: a non-linear narrative which makes readers experience the connections that are central to storytelling.

It seems as though Pew’s ability to experience the past and the future is based on such interconnectedness as well. While talking about his Second Sight, Pew tells Silver he received his gift “‘long before you were born, though I saw you coming by sea.’ ‘Did you know it would be me, me myself as I am me?’ Pew laughed. ‘As sure as I knew Babel Dark – or someone very like me knew someone very like him’” (48). Pew suggests that it is not only stories that are connected, but that through the stories he tells he connects with “someone very like [himself]” (48). He might not have been present at the events he relates, but he has experienced the events through the stories that link him in a very profound way to the person who witnessed them. Silver says: “Pew taught me that nothing is gone, that everything can be recovered, not as it was, but in its changing form. ‘Nothing keeps the same form forever, child, not even Pew’” (150). Everything changes in the reality of *Lighthousekeeping*, but this does not mean things are lost: chains of events are not sequential per se. The evolving of spirits, ideas and stories is not linear. Through storytelling events are relived, re-experienced. Pew experiences things he has not lived through. “He was and he wasn’t – that was Pew” (95).

Even though stories are represented as continuing entities, telling a story requires the storyteller to pick a beginning and an ending. The storyteller links points together, events that gain meaning once they are put into a narrative. Stories are beacons of light that guide people through the chaos of life; they are the rocks of the lighthouse that stand firm against the chaotic violence of the sea. Paradoxically in *Lighthousekeeping*, stories both

represent ambiguity and a steady point in that chaos. They reveal that most of the world's facts are actually interpretations and human constructs; they reveal disorder. However, to navigate the sea of chaos we can use the same stories: they are a way of dealing with the ambiguity of life. We need chaos to deal with chaos.

§2: Telling your own story

The general power of storytelling is explored in this novel, but above all *Lighthousekeeping* is a coming-of-age story. In Silver's life storytelling comes to play an important role.

From its very beginning, Silver's life is characterized by instability: she has never known her father, and lives with her mother "in a house cut steep into the bank. The chairs had to be nailed to the floor" (3). She and her mother only eat food stuffs that stick to the plate, and have to use safety harnesses and ropes to reach their own front door. Silver says: "I came at life from an angle, and that's how I've lived ever since", and indeed we read about and experience Silver's struggle to find solid ground throughout this novel (4). She feels lost: first after her mother dies, then when the lighthouse is automated and she is separated from the second parental figure in her life, Pew. She then wanders through the world, looking for a stable point, searching for meaning. When she cannot join the library because she has no place of residence to fill in on its membership form, she becomes so desperate to read *Death in Venice* that she ends up stealing the book. On her travels she stumbles upon a Greek talking bird, and again desperate to find meaning, she attempts to steal it.

In her quest for stability, making sense of the chaos that is life, stories help Silver. Pew teaches her above all that she should tell her own stories. When Silver mourns her parents' absence Pew tells her: "'that's another story yet,' he said, 'and if you tell yourself like a story, it doesn't seem so bad'" (27). It takes a while before Silver takes this advice. Later on she realizes that instead of looking for external solid ground she should find and create her own story. After Silver and Pew are evicted from the lighthouse, Silver longs for continuity and stability: "I wanted everything to continue as it had. I wanted something solid and trustworthy. Twice flung – first from my mother, and then Pew – I looked for a safe landing and soon made the mistake of finding one. But the only thing to do was to tell the story again" (150-151). Silver here eventually realizes that she can find peace in accepting the chaos of her life: like all stories her story constantly changes, so she should tell it again

and again. In her review of *Lighthousekeeping* Anita Sethi notes that reverend Dark unfortunately is too late in embracing the idea that life is changing and uncontrollable. She argues that Dark “professes his love [for Molly] too late [and therefore finds tragedy]. Silver survives because she accepts the miracle of the timeless Pew and tells him of her love” (Sethi). As in *The Passion*, the characters that embrace change and fluidity flourish. The realization that the meaning of your life is not a set thing, but something which is constructed by yourself, proves to be very important. By connecting moving and ambiguous points of reference in a way you yourself choose, you set out to find your own truth. As Pew puts it: “You can’t be another person’s honesty, child, but you can be your own” (85).

Thus in this novel stories are the medium through which we can make sense of the world around us. By connecting stories we can create narratives that give us some sense of stability. Like the light of a lighthouse these stories offer a buoy to hold on to. The author does not represent history and stories in general as linear narratives. In fact, time is not a linear phenomenon in *Lighthousekeeping*. Connections are central to this novel: connections through time and space create meaning in our lives. One’s life journey, telling one’s own story is important. The stories Silver connects make up the story of her life, which is the only way to come to terms with her own truths: the ever-changing meaning that comes out of Silver’s own story.

Lighthousekeeping not only describes the value of stories: readers join Silver in constructing her own truths. Winterson not only tells us through her characters’ voices that life and time are non-sequential, but also offers readers the experience of such non-linearity: the novel is made up out of storylines that are not told chronologically and are connected to a myriad of other stories in both this novel and in literature in general. The novel exemplifies what it ‘preaches’: while reading it we ourselves form connections and thereby create a meaningful story for which Winterson provides the building blocks. The metaphorical images that Winterson uses such as an untamable sea, a steady lighthouse and a blind lighthousekeeper, are important in this respect as well since they contribute to the network of connections which *Lighthousekeeping* reveals: a network that comprises life.

Nancy Armstrong’s idea of literature as a mechanism that upgrades and rephrases what is at work in society can be linked to *Lighthousekeeping*’s musings on the function of storytelling. In the novel stories are used to make sense of life; by phrasing a story and by

linking stories together Silver finds you can create a narrative that gives you something to hold onto. By rephrasing your story constantly you keep up with chaos and ambiguity as it were. Armstrong recognizes stories' pioneering role in making sense of life as well, only she applies this idea on the level of society as a whole whereas *Lighthousekeeping* stresses the importance of individually rephrasing personal stories.

In *The Passion* Winterson does not provide readers with certainties, by for example questioning the reliability of history and the idea that there is such a thing as a stable history. In *Lighthousekeeping* she takes it a step further by suggesting that time is not a stable, linear phenomenon. History then is not only unstable, it is not even history: not a definite past. In both novels the ambiguity of reality is explored. In *The Passion* this happens through destabilizing the narrative in numerous ways, suggesting there are no stable truths. In *Lighthousekeeping* the idea that truth is a human construct is of great importance, the work emphasises the personal nature of truth and reality, which readers experience as they follow Silver on her journey.

Chapter 3: Science in *Gut Symmetries*

In *Gut Symmetries* (1997) Winterson examines how science fits into the anti-essentialistic world view she expresses throughout her work. In this novel, physicist Alice is travelling to America in order to take up a research position at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University. On the cruise that takes her to the U.S. she meets and falls in love with Jove, a physicist who also works at Princeton. When in America Alice meets Jove's wife Stella and falls in love with her as well. Winterson uses principles such as relativity and quantum physics to connect the personal lives of the characters – which are being redefined by their love triangle – to the universality that science seems to offer. I will discuss what place science has in *Gut Symmetries*, and how the novel challenges the idea that science has a monopoly on truth. Furthermore, I shall explore the meaning of connections in the text, which are of great importance in this novel, as they are, as I have shown, in *Lighthousekeeping*. Central to *Gut Symmetries* is a merging of postmodern fragmentation with the importance of seeing the whole of life as a unified phenomenon, which I will discuss in §3.

§1: Undermining science' monopoly on truth

Like many of Winterson's novels, *Gut Symmetries* prominently features a quest for certainty. Alice, the narrator for a large part of the text, has been looking for an explanation for life from a very young age. As a physicist, she attempts to find stable truths about the world, but in her personal life she only finds the opposite of such stability: "As a scientist I try to work towards certainties. As a human being I seem to be moving away from them. If I needed any proof of the provisional nature of what is called the world I was beginning to find it" (27). Alice not only comes to this conclusion on the basis of her personal life, she also uses scientific theories to illustrate her general life observations. Through Alice, Winterson refers to quantum theory and Einstein's theory of relativity: theories that explain matter as ambiguous and thus fit perfectly into the project of Winterson's oeuvre.

Winterson challenges ideas of the natural sciences as having a monopoly on truth in contemporary society. She does this by interweaving ideas from different disciplines that examine the world around us. Not only is physics represented in *Gut Symmetries* but also

literature – Stella is a poet – and mysticism – Stella’s father studies Kaballah, and Winterson refers to matters like Tarot and astrology. In an introductory chapter of *Jeanette Winterson’s Enchanted Science* Annemarie Estor discusses science and literature in general. She notes that various deconstructivist thinkers, Foucault and Kuhn for example, work from the notion that

science is not a special, privileged culture, but just one among many contending narratives, representing reality largely in the same way as literature does. All domains in which knowledge is construed produce fictions, the fiction of the one domain not necessarily being any better than that produced by another. (18)

Winterson exemplifies exactly this in *Gut Symmetries* by showing us how these different disciplines coincide: they all recognize the ambiguity and change that characterizes life. In the novel these different domains of knowledge are not hierarchically organized: physics is a way of thinking about life and constructing ideas like any other discipline is.

By connecting scientific ideas to her personal life quest, Alice shows us the similarities between quantum physics and personal lives, as well as showing that they operate on the same level: they are equals. Take her reaction to her father’s death: at such a time many people think about afterlife and the possibility of the existence of God. Alice thinks about whether her father somehow lives on as well, but recalls scientific principles to guide her in this quest. She elaborates on the Schrödinger Cat Experiment which explains how things both are and are not until they are measured.

An imaginary cat is put in a box with a gun at its head. The gun is connected to a Geiger counter, [which] is triggered to a piece of uranium. Uranium molecules are unstable. If the uranium decays, the process will alert the Geiger counter, which in turn will cause the gun to fire. [...] To observe the cat’s fate we will have to open the box, but what is the state of the cat before we open the box? According to the mathematics of its wave function, it is neither alive nor dead. (207)

The idea of a universe in which Alice’ father lives on becomes a possibility when a cat can be both dead and alive. As Alice says “the truth is, we don’t know. As yet, the cat has outwitted us. Open the box? Not me. I will see what I expect to see, the cat either dead or alive. I cannot see past my three-dimensional concept of reality” (208). Thus Alice’ scientific view is not so different from her grandmother’s religious beliefs. We do not know what happens

when we die. Since there is no way to measure it, all possible scenarios are potentialities, and have value. Different ways to deal with existential questions have value as well.

§2: Connections

Again, Winterson looks for meaning in the connections that human beings make instead of in stable matter. Meaning becomes a human construct. In *Gut Symmetries* she uses terms from the field of physics to demonstrate that everything is relative, is interconnected in a postmodern web of meaning. Everything refers to something else, so no concept or word or thing is just that, it is made up of and refers to many other ideas or words or objects. Physicist Alice notes that “any measurement must take into account the positions of the observer. There is no such thing as measurement absolute, there is only measurement relative. Relative to what is an important part of the question” (9). Through Alice, Winterson quotes several real-life physicists on relativity as well. Naturally Einstein, the theorist behind the Special and General Theory of Relativity, is cited – “It appears unavoidable that physical reality must be described in terms of continuous functions in space. The material point can hardly be conceived anymore” (82). Another example of the spirit of relativity: “Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature because we ourselves are part of nature and therefore part of the mystery we are trying to solve”, by Max Planck (82). In a web of interconnections there is no such thing as a point of origin, a clear starting point.

In her article “Science fictions: British Women Scientists and Jeanette Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries*” Ann McClellan notes that this relativity – Einstein’s idea of only being able to “determine the ‘truth’ about space [by analyzing] it in relation to time and/or matter” – extends to language as well: “Alice (and Winterson) recognizes the self-referentiality of the terminology we use to define our existence” (1073, 1074). The way quantum physics describes the universe is thus comparable to the postmodern idea of language’s self-referentiality: no story is just one story, as Winterson shows in *Lighthousekeeping*.

The connections we make between different points in the web, the connections we choose to make, those are central to our lives. These connections are not predictable, stable, or ordinary. In the following, Alice talks about the love triangle between her, Jove and Stella in geometrical terms:

If you want to know how a mistress marriage works, ask a triangle. In Euclidian geometry the angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees and parallel lines never meet. Everyone knows the score, and the women are held in tension, away from one another. [...] Unfortunately, Euclidean theorems work only if space is flat. In curved space, the angles over-add themselves and parallel lines always meet. His wife, his mistress, met. (17)

Jove's preset idea of having an affair does not include his wife and his mistress falling in love with each other; still in quantum physics' 'curved space' this is what happens: life is not predictable and the parallel lines that represent Alice and Stella come together. There is no such thing as a general stable truth that applies to a love triangle; the only truth to be found is in the connections that people create. All the while Alice recognizes this ambiguity of life: in the science she studies and in the life she lives.

Jove is interested in quantum physics as well. In fact in his work he is concerned with finding a GUT: Grand Unifying Theory, a theory that seeks a unifying principle of physics to describe the whole of life. Quantum physics plays a large part in the research he conducts. He thus recognizes the changeable and ambiguous quality of the physical universe, yet he does not connect this to life in general, or to his views on things like identity and human relationships. Especially at the end of the novel, when he and Stella are starving on a ship adrift on a desolate part of the ocean, Jove wants to grab on to something solid. In his monologue, he stresses that Stella is, and in a way always was, crazy. He calls her unhealthy: "unhealthy individuals understand their dreams and fantasies as something solid. An alternative world. They do not know how to subordinate their disruptive elements to a regulated order" (191). Jove wants to do just that: he labels the fluidity of quantum physics 'work', but chooses not to accept the ambiguity of the mystical and fairytalesque stories that his wife calls truth. "Matter is energy. Of course. But for all practical purposes matter is matter" (191). Jove recalls Stella's reaction to this kind of statement:

SHE: Why not join the Flat Earth Club?

HE: The earth is not flat

SHE: For all practical purposes it is. (192)

Jove recognizes that Stella has a good point there: "Stella, wide awake in a sleeping world, never understood that it is better to let sleeping dogs lie. The world is not ready to wake up yet. The world is still sleeping in its coverlet of stars" (192). Jove is not ready for such an all-

encompassing idea of life in flux, he needs something to hold on to and assumes that he shares his fears with the whole of humankind.

§3: Unification

That brings us to what I believe is most prominently present in *Gut Symmetries*: right beside the postmodern fragmentation that characterizes Winterson's work, a belief in the wholeness of the universe emerges. Winterson shows us how different aspects of the world, and different ways to look at it, work together in recognizing change and ambiguity: the principle upon which everybody stumbles no matter what method they use to make sense of life. Alice describes this idea clearly:

[GUTs] is more than a scientist's credo. The separateness of our lives is a sham. Physics, mathematics, music, painting, my politics, my love for you, my work, the star-dust of my body, the spirit that impels it, clocks diurnal, time perpetual, the roll, rough, tender, swamping, liberating, breathing, moving, thinking nature, human nature and the cosmos are patterned together. (98)

Paradoxically, the enduring uncertainty and multiplicity of truth in Winterson's fiction does not mean that the world is shattered into a myriad of pieces that do not fit together. Since everything is and can be linked to something else, all of life's aspects communicate, and are thus part of the same discourse. Links between all possible events and stories are portrayed as natural, while separating life's elements "is a sham", and unnatural. Alice narrates a short history of separateness, which starts with two Greek thinkers who lived in the 6th century BC: "Heraclitus was teaching his doctrine of eternal Becoming, flux not fix. [...] His rival, Parmenides, a man for whom nothing changed, taught instead the supremacy of godhead and the certainty of matter" (10). Since these two world views could not be reconciled, the Greeks decided to divide spirit and matter: matter is seen as fixed, and the spirit as something which develops – Becoming. Alice argues that this division was the basis of the history of human thinking: it was taken up by Aristotle, Christianity and Newton as the basis of mechanics, and this view was not challenged until Einstein came up with relativity in the beginning of the twentieth century. Alice presents this division as a random occurrence which had an incredible influence on Western world views, instead of as an idea that had a strong basis and thus naturally influenced human thinking. Enlightenment ideas, here

represented by Newton's mechanics, have not always been the primary ideas that controlled human thinking. The rule of logic is revealed as artificial.

As in *The Passion*, the static is associated with death in *Gut Symmetries*. Closing an event or story off from the rest of the world, separating it from the universal denominator 'life', is equated to killing it off. As I showed in chapter 1, in *The Passion* Villanelle fears that her image will be captured in a work of art and that she will die because of it. In *Gut Symmetries* Alice has the insight that every time she leaves behind a part of her identity to move on, to evolve, she is killing part of herself. She realizes she should involve all parts of herself, all she has lived through and all she has learned about life, to understand it.

I've lived my life like a serial killer; finish with one part, strangle it and move on to the next. Life in neat little boxes is life in neat little coffins, the dead bodies of the past laid out side by side. I am discovering, now, in the late afternoon of the day, that the dead still speak. Past? Present? Future? The language of the dead. Totality of time.
(49)

This insight not only relates to Alice' personal life, but also to her scientific insights about the universe. Everything we experience and every idea we develop should be valued in order to get close to the truths this universe has to offer.

The fragmented look on life that is often associated with postmodernism does not apply to Winterson's work. Yes, her worlds are fragmented in a way: there is no stable truth about life that Winterson portrays in her novels, and her texts do not present the notion that stable truth is at all reachable: it is simply not there. However, her work does plea that all the fragments that make up life are made of the same material, and are not hierarchically ordered. There is only one world and everything that happens in that world, be it externally or in our minds, can be connected. Events and stories do not have inherent meaning, but by connecting them people can create meaning. Fragmentation and all-at-onceness work together in Winterson's texts.

Literature proves to be an ideal medium to portray this connectivity. In the novel Winterson interweaves personal, religious, literary and scientific discourses; presents all of them as valuable and focuses on the similarities between them. In such interweaving the sort of language used becomes important: Winterson's poetic style already links quantum physics to a literary discourse. Take for example the following sentence: "Newton visualised time as an arrow flying towards its target. Einstein understood time as a river, moving

forward, forceful, directed, but also bowed, curved, sometimes subterranean, not ending but pouring itself into a greater sea” (104). Here Winterson uses language in a very precise and imaginative way while she is talking about a very scientific concept. This novel, as opposed to a non-literary text, is able to give readers not only an idea but also a sense of the all-at-onceness that Winterson addresses. The author’s style of writing creates an atmosphere that can be felt, connections that can be felt as opposed to only understood. Such affectivity is reminiscent of Kaiser’s text that focuses on the relation between affectivity and thinking. She discusses that simple figures in the works of Melville and Kleist “depict a problem – the paradoxical implication of the sensate in thinking” (119). In *Gut Symmetries* not specifically the characters expose a problem or question, but the language Winterson uses does: it problematizes the separating of different ways of making sense of life, it asks whether simultaneity is a better concept to describe life.

In *Gut Symmetries* Winterson presents us with a science that is not set upon a pedestal and claims absolute truths. The author puts science on the same level as other disciplines that explore our reality, such as religion and poetry/literature. She uses scientific principles, especially relativity and quantum physics, to demonstrate that human life is characterized by multiplicity and ambiguity. These same characteristics of life are mirrored in religious or literary ideas. Steady and universal truths do not exist. However, the connections that people create, the way in which they make sense of life, provide truth. Truth can be found in relativity instead of stability. Even though no truth is universal in this novel, Winterson does show us a universal trait of life. Different aspects of life and different ways of examining that life are in a way equal: they should all be seen as valuable. Everything refers to something else, and because of that everything is connected and evidently part of the same universe, the same discourse.

The added value of the literary form in which Winterson discusses these anti-essentialist ideas is above all in the language she uses, which makes it possible to interweave various discourses that are concerned with making sense of reality in a way that they are not only intellectually linked in readers’ minds, but linked through the atmosphere that Winterson’s style evokes as well. Like Winterson poses in *Art Objects* the reason why literature “affects us, is not the riskiness of its subject matter, it is the risk of creating a new

way of seeing, a new way of thinking”: the language of literature creates a new reality and becomes the exposing factor that is so important in literature’s thinking (52).

The literary technique that characterizes *Gut Symmetries*’ expression of anti-essentialism is perhaps not as outstanding as those that I discussed in previous chapters: creating an atmosphere with an imaginative writing style is the basis of many works of literature, especially those written by Winterson. However, the unifying character of this work is a remarkable example of that perhaps most basic and most important literary technique: how form reinforces content. The storylines and writing style are in constant connection, in unity, with the concepts that are being explored in the novel. In *The Passion* Winterson shows readers that there are no certainties, only ambiguities, through a narrative that embodies this idea. *Lighthousekeeping* nuances this idea by revealing that any sort of stability is a human construct. *Gut Symmetries* explores this idea further and recognizes the connectivity and unity that is hidden within the flux and ambiguity that characterizes life.

Chapter 4: Gender in *Written on the Body*

In *Written on the Body* (1993) a nameless, genderless narrator, also the protagonist of the book, has an affair with a married woman called Louise. When Louise decides to leave her husband Elgin for our narrator, Elgin reveals to him/her that Louise has leukaemia and has the best chance of surviving this disease if she were to remain with him, a cancer specialist. The narrator flees to the middle of nowhere, leaving only a note, and expects Louise to stay with Elgin. What follows is his/her attempt to get close to Louise, by writing a sort of elegy for her body.

The ambiguous gender of the narrator is central to the novel, Winterson plays to the human tendency to categorise: readers are confronted with their constant urge to label the narrator either male or female. By keeping his/her sex hidden, Winterson deconstructs gender. I will discuss this deconstruction: what its exact consequences are, and how, besides keeping the sex of the novel's narrator hidden, Winterson achieves this effect. Furthermore I will examine how Winterson portrays the gendered human body in the novel.

§1: Narrator m/v

The most prominent feature of *Written on the Body* is the fact that the gender of the narrator is kept hidden throughout the novel. Precisely because it remains unknown, the gender identity of the narrator takes up a very central position in the text: it confronts readers with their need to categorize. The constant doubt about the gender of the narrator becomes unnerving. The ambiguity that characterizes the narrator has consequences that attribute to Winterson's philosophy of anti-essentialism.

First of all the meaning that the novel produces changes, depending on the gender a reader attributes to the narrator. The narrator is the epitome of ambiguity, and influences the interpretation of the whole text. Winterson does not present the sex of the narrator as a background issue, it becomes a pivotal matter in the novel since she constantly draws attention to it. Ute Kauer points out that Winterson "uses gender-specific clichés to keep the reader in uncertainty about his/her gender" (46). Winterson plays with the stereotypes that her readers are – presumably – familiar with. Our narrator compares her/himself to both men and women, and displays stereotypical behaviour of both men and women. Take the sexualized way s/he watches female bodies, which is stereotypically male: "Look at those

nudes,” she said, although I needed no urging” and “My gypsy sisters I called [her breasts], though not to her. I had idolised them unequivocally, not as a mother substitute nor a womb trauma, but for themselves” (21, 24). The narrator also has many affairs with married women, and pours a drink in a situation of emotional crisis which is “reminiscent of the typical chauvinist behaviour of the Hemingway hero” according to Kauer (46). On the other hand, the narrator completely immerses him/herself in the suffering that a lost love causes, a surrender to emotion that is stereotypically female.

Furthermore the sexuality of the narrator makes matters even more ambiguous: s/he has dated both men and women, and could thus be interpreted as a bisexual man or woman. However, the ex-boyfriends s/he tells us of are quite comical characters, according to Kauer “the relationship with both [men] can only appear as a folly”, which opens up the possibility that we are dealing with a heterosexual man or gay woman (49). For every interpretation an argument can be made, thus the gender and sexuality of the narrator remain ultimately ambiguous. The stereotypes the reader attempts to use to navigate the text, to find out the narrator’s gender in order to ascribe steady meaning to the novel, turn out to be misleading. We should not trust these stereotypical descriptions. Antje Lindenmeyer sees the narrator as “not one seamless character but constructed by the stories s/he tells, with different identities evoked by various memory flashbacks” (50). These different identities all come together in the narrator, who does not have a sort of split personality but represents the all-at-onceness Winterson loves. Just as Schrödinger’s cat is both dead and alive, so too the narrator is both male and female, and at the same time gay, straight, bisexual, and every other possible sexual identity.

Keeping the gender of the narrator unknown in *Written on the Body* is a narrative technique which not only keeps the meaning of the text fluid. In the novel our genderless protagonist constantly searches for the definition of love, the language to describe love. The narrator is aware of language’s inadequacy, a prominent attribute of postmodernism. S/he points out at the very start of the novel that “‘I love you’ is always a quotation”, and repeats throughout the novel that “it’s the clichés that cause the trouble” (9, 10). The preset stereotypes that Winterson uses but also defies by creating a narrator whose gender is ambiguous, not only apply to gender, but to language as well. Clichés cannot be trusted according to the protagonist; since “a precise emotion seeks a precise expression” we should not rely on preset generalisations to describe such a thing as love (10). Ute Kauer mentions

that all which is described has a metaphorical character: “the self creates his or her own biography by finding metaphors for experiences because those metaphors are a more precise expression of emotion than facts” (43). Winterson is concerned with exactly that: finding new metaphors, a new sort of language if you will, in order to describe her protagonist’s feelings. By writing down her/his story, her/his longing and love for Louise, the narrator attempts to get as close to her as language makes possible. Going back to our narrator’s wish to avoid clichés: his/her ambiguous gender helps her/him avoid telling a standardized and generalized story. Jennifer L. Hansen argues that since “we cannot make [the genderless narrator] into an object with clear boundaries, [...] we are invited to occupy the space of the protagonist ourselves” (367). Consequently reading *Written on the Body* becomes a personal experience, which on the other hand nevertheless remains universal since it taps into so many different identities and realities. Hansen notes that the first few pages of the novel can be read as the philosophical tendency to separate a general idea of love from the particular experience of loving. Winterson’s genderless narrator “welds together [...] the abstraction of philosophy and the particularity of poetry” (Hansen 370). Thus clichés are avoided in *Written on the Body*, even though the sense that all language is inadequate and in a way a cliché dominates the novel. As though there is no way of completely describing reality, Winterson keeps attempting to celebrate its many dimensions, while making her readers aware that ultimate failure to describe the whole truth is unavoidable. After all “love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no” (9).

§2: The body

The way the human body is represented in *Written on the Body* helps to deconstruct binaries as well, especially the male/female binary. Like with identities, Winterson does not portray bodies as stable. Lindenmeyer points out that “the notion of stable bodies with complementary sexual organs is being destroyed by making sexuality dependent on various fittings and connections between different parts of bodies” (53). When the narrator describes how Louise’s and his/her body connect, this displacing of bodily difference occurs:

You have a dress with a décolletage to emphasise your breasts. I suppose the cleavage is the proper focus, but what I wanted to do was to fasten my index finger and thumb at the bolts of your collar bone, push out, spreading the web of my hand

until it caught against your throat. [...] I wanted to fit you, not just in the obvious ways but in so many indentations. (129)

The bodily connection that the narrator longs for does not depend on the body parts that are marked 'sexual' such as breasts and genitalia. Here sexuality does not depend on the fitting of sexual organs, which is often portrayed as the only, or certainly primary, sexual act in contemporary Western society. The importance that is attached to that one sort of fitting is revealed as one of the clichés that cause the trouble according to Winterson. When our narrator and Louise are just starting to date, she tells him/her: "I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you've learned, forget them. Forget that you've been here before in other bedrooms in other places. Come to me new" (54). With this request Louise urges the narrator to leave the clichés, the learned lines, like the idea of sexual organs' primacy, behind. Bodily interaction is not defined by standardized ideas in *Written on the Body*. The gender of Louise's lover is not as important in this novel as gender is usually made out to be, since bodies are not defined by their male or female characteristics.

Besides displacing the body's sexual markers, the novel challenges the way modern medicine deals with the human body. The narrator surrenders Louise' body to science: s/he decides that Louise has the best chance of surviving leukaemia when she stays with Elgin, thus s/he retreats to the middle of nowhere and takes him-/herself out of the equation. The narrator recognizes medicine's authority on the body by trusting Elgin in his capacity as a doctor with Louise's. However, this complete surrender to modern medicine does not sit well with the him/her. His/her elegy to Louise's body is an attempt at getting close to her, but also functions as a counter-narrative to modern medicine's idea of the human body.

Winterson rewrites the objective, static language used to describe the body in medical textbooks. She does this by showing her readers the contrast between said language and her own rewriting of the human body: the matter of fact description that the narrator takes from a medical textbook is followed by sentences that describe Louise's medical condition in a personal way: "In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself" (115). Gregory J. Rubinson points out that the narrator also uses "politicized terms" such as "passports" and "security forces" to describe Louise's cancer as her body attacking itself: "mixing political and medical language genres is a poetic strategy that challenges the authority of medical discourses over the body by refusing to abandon its representation to a depersonalized, exclusive vocabulary" (Rubinson 224). The narrator of

Written on the Body objects to the idea that science has a monopoly on representing Louise's body: medical discourse should not be seen as the natural, objective and therefore most true representation of the human body but as one of the many ways in which that body can be described. Like I discussed in the first section of this chapter, Winterson makes her readers very much aware of the inadequacy of language. Subsequently there is no one language genre that can be used to precisely capture reality, or that can completely describe the human body. In chapter three I discussed that Winterson levels scientific and literary discourses in *Gut Symmetries* as well, both these novels portray the natural sciences as one of many discourses.

The focus on the separateness of life being a sham is also present in both *Gut Symmetries* and *Written on the Body*. The language that Winterson creates to produce Louise's body for her readers is a literal counter-narrative to the authority of medical science over the human body, but another aspect of this counter-movement is medicine's focus on dividing the body and treating different body parts separately versus looking at the human body as a whole. Our narrator objects to the medical profession's tendency to try and categorize body parts and look at them separately. The narrator sees doctors' tendency to focus on separate body parts as very limited:

It is usually metastasis which kills the patient and the biology of metastasis is what doctors don't understand. They are not conditioned to understand it. In doctor-think the body is a series of bits to be isolated and treated as necessary, that the body in its very disease may act as a whole is an upsetting concept. Holistic medicine is for faith healers and crackpots, isn't it? (*Written on the Body* 175)

The wholeness that Winterson addresses is "not brought on by a stable surface, [but] by an understanding [of] how bodyparts interact (for example in metastasis)" (Lindenmeyer 55). Once again the realization that reality is made up out of connections proves to be important in Winterson's work.

As I have shown, the genderless narrator of *Written on the Body* makes the meaning of the whole text ambiguous. Winterson plays with gender stereotypes so that the reader's perspective constantly changes. The unclear sexuality of the narrator adds to this ambiguity. Winterson explicitly objects to clichés in this novel: language clichés, but also the gender stereotypes I just mentioned. The narrator avoids telling a universal story precisely because

his/her gender is never revealed: the clichés of gender can be evaded. Bodily connections are not dominated by clichés either in *Written on the Body*: sexuality depends not on the sexual organs that are at the centre of contemporary society's view of sexuality, but on a myriad of different ways that two bodies can 'fit'. Moreover, the narrator does not accept the static image that the medical profession has of the human body, and creates his/her own rephrasing of Louise's body in order to object to the one-dimensional way the natural sciences approach that body.

The personal and specific are valued in this novel, instead of a universal and generalized way of perceiving life. *Written on the Body* encourages its readers to occupy the protagonist's place, and as Hansen notes this "lead[s] the reader to reflect his or her own experiences of love" (368). The novel is made to be interpreted differently by different people who all take their own experiences into account while reading fiction. *Written on the Body* is the embodiment of Rita Felski's theory on the multiplicity of meaning that a book can produce: the novel is set up to be interpreted differently by every reader since it invites readers to inhabit the protagonist's role. When we look at the different modes of textual engagement Felski mentions, we see that many can apply to *Written on the Body*. The mesmerising and poetic elegy will have an 'enchanted' effect on some readers. Others might be 'shocked', perhaps by the sexual content of the novel, or more likely by the unconventional literary mechanism of a genderless narrator. Yet others might value the 'social knowledge' they gain through reading about the social situations that Winterson brings her readers. Obviously 'recognition' also applies in a text that involves readers this much: every reader will recognize something different in the text depending on their background.

Of the four novels I discussed *Written on the Body* is the one that stands out because it most clearly links the world of the novel to the world of the reader: the text demands a high level of interaction between reader and novel. As I have shown, the other three texts do engage with readers; these readers are drawn into the text by various literary mechanisms. However, when reading *Written on the Body*, readers draw the text into their lives as well. As I have shown, the text is universal as well as very specific, thus it speaks to practically everyone without being too general to interest anyone. The instability of this novel is not only in the narrative, like *The Passion* demonstrates, but also in the narrating.

Conclusion

In the last four chapters I demonstrated that Winterson's work is characterized by reoccurring themes that can all be seen as part of anti-essentialism. Every one of the four novels I analyzed had different main subjects and themes, but nevertheless all could be seen as a symptom of an anti-essentialistic world view. Every book only added to what I think we may call a philosophy – a way of looking at the world, trying to answer existential questions – by offering information on the anti-essentialist character of a particular aspect of life. Besides discussing the anti-essentialism of Winterson's work, the body of this thesis illustrates the necessity of conveying this philosophy through fiction. In her article 'Written on the Body, Written by the Senses' Jennifer L. Hansen lists "reasons for philosophy's traditional contempt for literature as a reliable means to truth" (365). Whether such contempt is actually traditional is doubtful – it calls to mind for example Aristotle's claim for literature's philosophical value, which I mentioned in my introduction – but fiction's philosophical use is certainly questioned. Among other things, Hansen mentions the fact that "literature is too open-ended and ambiguous in its meaning" as a reason for fiction's unsuitability to express philosophical ideas. Exactly that open-endedness and ambiguity are central to Winterson's philosophy of anti-essentialism, and the medium of fiction proves to be perfectly suitable to express it.

We started out with Winterson's early novel, *The Passion*, which explores the theme that is the basis of the philosophy of anti-essentialism: the difficulty of defining what is real and what is not. By creating a world in which reality and the imaginary cannot be distinguished from each other Winterson leaves her readers without any stable ground: the characters of the novel search for stable truths but never find them, history is revealed as a fiction, and both interior and exterior life is constantly portrayed as ambiguous. By creating such a story Winterson confronts readers with a lack of stability so that they too experience the ambiguity that the novel's characters are subjected to. Thus in this case, literature does not merely give readers a description of intellectual knowledge; it provides them with an experience.

In *Lighthousekeeping* the role of storytelling itself is explored. Winterson portrays stories as the tools with which we construct our own personal truth, thus any truth on reality is a human construct. Stories are a way of dealing with life's chaos. The importance of

storytelling – connecting events and stories – fits into the main idea of anti-essentialism: *Lighthousekeeping* explores the role of narrative in a world in flux. Winterson does not merely describe this flux but exemplifies the themes she addresses through the style of fiction she writes: the non-linearity of time that is an important ambiguous concept throughout the novel is illustrated through the fragmented character of the novel. The imagery, intertextuality and metaphoric use of language mimic the importance of connections in the narrative. Ambiguity is at the core of the plot and narrative of *The Passion*. Having nowhere to turn away from ambivalence in that story, readers are constantly confronted with it. In *Lighthousekeeping* the narrative is less focused on constant confrontation with ambiguity; the form in which the story is told is the main literary technique used.

Gut Symmetries explores yet another aspect of the ambiguous world: science, physics in particular. Winterson shows us how even the natural sciences, often perceived as the discipline that finds stable truths, is ruled by ambiguity: you can think of the theory of relativity and quantum physics. Science is put on the same hierarchic level as the humanities, religion, and the arts. By using literary language to talk about the natural sciences, Winterson connects the two disciplines atmospherically as well as intellectually. Winterson's style is a defining factor in creating a connection between different ways of viewing reality and thus in exposing that there are no natural categorizations and separations; everything is connected.

I ended the discussion of Winterson's work with *Written on the Body* since the literary mechanisms that are used in that novel are even more far reaching than those in the three previously discussed texts. The novel portrays gender as an ambiguous concept by letting a genderless narrator deconstruct the notion of gender. Winterson uses gender clichés in the text, but never reveals whether these clichés actually apply since we do not know the sex of her narrator. She uses clichés to avoid clichés. The questions and assumptions that arise while reading the novel draw attention to readers' tendency and need to categorize; this literary mechanism questions whether gender is as important and as black and white as it is often portrayed. Also, because very little of the narrator's identity is known, readers are encouraged to take up the narrator's place in the story. The reader does not only engage the text, the text engages readers as well.

All these mechanisms that characterize Winterson's literature provide readers with something more than logical knowledge of a specific issue: in all these novels Winterson engages readers in other ways. She shares multidimensional knowledge that gives her readers more than rational information. The idea of literature's exposing quality is applicable to all these literary mechanisms; these novels guide readers through an experience instead of a mere description. Through both experiences and descriptions one can gain knowledge, but experience has an extra dimension: it concerns feelings as well as knowledge. Rancière and Kaiser both recognize that added value of the literary. In *Gut Symmetries* Winterson creates an atmosphere through a poetic style of writing that reveals a certain connectivity: Rancière's visible is expressed through literature. Kaiser's concept of affective thinking is closely related to the feeling that belongs to experience. The atmosphere that *Gut Symmetries'* literary style of writing can evoke exposes something beyond the limits of intellectual knowledge: a feeling that plays a large part in the interpretation of the novel. And all the literary mechanisms that I discussed create the anti-essentialist meaning that arises from Winterson's work: literature is able to express such ambiguous and sometimes illogical ideas.

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