

13th TRANSYLVANIAN STUDENTS' SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE

Cluj Napoca, 14–16 May, 2010

**Time interrelations and metamorphosed
realities in Jeanette Winterson's
*Sexing the Cherry***

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Cluj Napoca

2010

What are “fiction’s particular possibilities to shed light on time, that most inescapable of human concerns?” (Morrison 26)

In the “postmodern universe” of textuality (Cunningham 5), of deconstruction and reconstruction, immanence and indeterminacy¹, time – the conception, the interpretation of time – is also fragmented, divided into “pieces”. Meaning time is not a straight line which has a calculated flow: rather, it is complex, untraceable² – that is why it is viewed (and can be narrated) in its pieces, for it seems impossible to be seen in its complexity, entirety. For this reason one tries to build up, to rebuild, actually to be able to perceive the sum of the pieces. The dimensions of time coexist and they are interrelated. One dimension could be the subjective time, the time we feel; another one the objective time, which is measured by clocks, being independent of us: “our outward lives are governed by the seasons and the clock; our inward lives are governed by something much less regular” (Sexing the Cherry 89). Furthermore, these time spheres cover different realities (unlike in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, where the two dimensions are bound more or less to the division of the up and down), and the characters in Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, have the possibility to travel between such “times and places”.

Time in this novel is multidimensional, and the characters live in both the same and in *different* times. Because of the (inner-narrative) objective time it is possible to see the characters together in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the subjective time offers the dispersion of time-tunnels. While travelling on the sea, Jordan visits fantasy worlds, and appears even in the twentieth century. The Dog Woman resembles the twentieth-century chemist. In this case, we can affirm that the chemist has the illusion of having an alter ego equivalent with someone like the Dog Woman. Ergo, “the inward life tells us that we are multiple not single, and that our one existence is really countless existences holding hands like those cut-paper dolls, but unlike the dolls never coming to an end” (SC 90). John Tradescant also appears in at least two worlds. So the travels are reciprocal, therefore the realities are parallel with each other. Accordingly, the journeys are interrelated; moreover, most journeys take place without moving. This is similar with the Proustian vision: “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new

¹ Important “constituencies” of the postmodern according to Ihab Hassan. In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* he defines indeterminacy as a “complex referent which these diverse concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation. The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation—let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence.” (Hassan 1982, 69)

² “The conventional ideas of time, place, character, plot are shattered; reality is re-created. [...] the re-creation of reality requires us to abandon the distinction between objective and subjective categories within the pervasive fantasy of work. Fact and fiction acquire the same aspect.” (Hassan 1987, 108-109)

eyes.” Nevertheless, the pieces of the time-conceptions glow through the characters’ individual convictions. In the narrative, time embraces cultures, oppositions, lines of thought – the world itself. Maybe these “fragments” try to build up the sense of the time-complexity. Coming to cultures, the novel begins with the vision of time of the Hopi, an Indian tribe: time is not divided into periods, there is only one absolute time. Probably everything happens in a so-called anytime, which is yet every time³. This epigraph echoes “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that time is an effect of language and that, consequently, [...] the real world is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group” (Onega 78). The definition of matter also dazzles traditional conceptions. Both questions (“What does this say about time?”; “What does this say about the reality of the world?”) point out the nature of the world/worlds, and direct the interpretation toward the finding of possible answers in the fiction itself. In addition to this, they generate even more questions.

The whole structure of the story is linked by time-perceptions. Two voices penetrate and mirror each other. Sometimes one’s last words are repeated by the other voice, and so they are the starting point of the next wave of thought (“The shining water and the size of the world.”). However, in this time-wrapped world, one can easily imagine that the last and first utterances concomitantly influence each other. Therefore, this is another level of interrelation.

Jordan is interested in space-time. Likewise, The Dog Woman is in close relation with the historical present of the novel, but she also remembers; the fluxes of remembrance take her in a kind of time, which we should not call “past”, for past cannot hold on anymore to its once “well-defined place”⁴. *Sexing the Cherry* is considered to be a “‘historiographic metafiction’, a paradoxical type of postmodernist novel that combines self-reflexivity with history” (Onega 76). In narratological terms:

The speed with which events are consigned to the past could more convincingly be analyzed as a flight from the present, as an impatience to narrate current events, to hurry everything into the past even while it is still happening. This makes it a way of remembering, of achieving, that actually displaces the experiential present tense with a historical self-consciousness. (Currie 97)

³ Which resembles, but somehow surpasses *the perpetual present* or *the flight from the present* (Currie 101), because the movement in time-space is possible both backwards and forwards, and by calling it ‘present’, the complexity of time is somehow simplified. That is, “a moment can be only present when it is not yet in the past and no longer in the future. But any definition of what a moment is, any attempt to cleanse the moment of the trace of past and future and see it as pure presence, will be forced to impose arbitrary boundaries which mark off the present from the past and future.” (Currie 81)

⁴ Because: “Everyone remembers things which never happened. And it is common knowledge that people often forget things which did. Either we are all fantasists and liars or the past has nothing definite in it.” (SC 92)

Consequently, not just that narrative reflects the organizing, the understanding of time, but it can allow or deny “the events themselves to create the order of time” (Abbott 3). A much more significant re-creational, re-ordering “apparatus” is the historical self-consciousness or –as Currie affirms– the narrative consciousness, the deliberate device of remembering. It would be interesting to compare these flows of remembrance with the memories in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where “the individual does not ‘have’ memory but ‘is’ memory” (Wallace 26). In this case, memory becomes a challenge from the angle of possible realities. The diffusion of ‘worlds’ builds up a fine tissue, a net of movements, where different realities, different space-times are attracted into the present. In such a way, the place of the present is metamorphosed into the space of “nows-in-the-past” (Banfield 57). At first glance, it seems that the same happens in *Sexing the Cherry*. Nevertheless, in Winterson’s novel, the eventuality, the probability, the “space”, the number and even the concept of memories becomes destabilized. It would be likely to say that clearly, the orientation is less bound to points of reference, the movement is highly “irregular” and multileveled. The remembrance interweaves with dimensions which can be placed even in the future.

Memory 1: The scene I have just described to you may lie in the future or the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her. I cannot be sure. Either I am remembering her or I am still imagining her. But she is somewhere in the grid of time, a co-ordinate, as I am. (SC 93)

Decisively, the story completely gives up the mimetic approach to reality, because “all journeys exist simultaneously” and “we do not move in time, time moves through us.” (SC 90) Thus, this “multiple movement characterizes and links the mythic, parabolic and allegorical strands of contemporary fiction” (Tew 121).

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“Everything you can imagine is real.” (Picasso)

Let us approach Jordan’s experience of time. The cause of his journey is “to escape from the weight of the world” (SC 17), the aim is to find “the dancer” or “the dancing part of himself” (SC 40). There is an interesting opposition between the “weight of the world” and the matter, which is “empty space and points of light.” In fact, the whole text “bears the weight” of connected contrasts.

Time is interrelated with motion, which becomes infinity. The spiraling of time is mythical and it literally appears in the text with the spiraling of the dancers. The mythical air suggests atemporality, and the metamorphoses can be captured at multiple levels. Firstly, the ten points of

light are the metamorphosed dancers, whose transformation resembles, somehow even visually represents the theory of the matter. Secondly, there are particular references to ancient myths: the woman who turns into a lotus tree; Actaeon, who is turned into a stag by Artemis; Sappho, who turned her body into a bird. Thirdly, the whole existence of the Dog Woman and (/or) of the chemist is metamorphic. The Dog Woman weighs nothing at all in the water and in the dark (she is even invisible there); she supposedly weighs no more than an angel, though she can “force an elephant into the sky”; his father’s legs broke under her, but her mother could carry her for miles. How relative is then matter? The ecologist is a good-looking woman, who feels the huge, monstrous “patrol saint” inside her. Indeed, time crosses all boundaries of matter and of illusion⁵ – it can transform realities.

The name of Jordan symbolically represents the continuous movement of time and the instability of matter. “The fact that Jordan can cross the boundary separating the world of common day from the world of fantasy, suggests the complementarity and reversibility of the real and the unreal, of the imagined and the actually lived.” (Onega 77) Even the coexistent *truths* of the flat and round earth theory point out the interrelated realities, where it is not necessary to distinguish the real from the unreal. Maybe there is rather an alternation between palpable reality and the truth, because this reality could never cover *the truth*. In addition to this, the “traditional” map-making⁶ changes shape (another metamorphoses), becoming rather an imaginary one: “maps are magic”; “does it matter, if the place cannot be mapped as long as I can still describe it?” Actually, imaginary maps are engraved in time experiences; they are drawn “invisibly”. Here “time has no meaning, space and place have no meaning.”

Tracing Jordan’s journey, it is noticeable that almost all the places he visits are the representations of the time and space theories, and carry a hint of an allegory of love. Likewise, this new level opens up many time-gates. The story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses may be the sum of these textual references. It holds together the “explanation” of the points of light and one of the first affirmations of Jordan (“I discovered that my life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me like the Twelve Dancing Princesses”(SC 10)); it consists of love stories as well. However, the re-invented story of the princesses underlines that effect of the general non-mimetic approach to reality. Fiction can conceal inner-text fictions and it can dazzle the observer, even though, the “elder” fiction was imaginary itself. Probably, sometimes we have the tendency to consider a traditional story as accepted, as textual *truth*. Therefore, when that is denied,

⁵ Mathematically represented: if: matter = points of light and (living in) light = (living in) time => matter consists of time.

⁶ It would be interesting to explore the world of the Middle Ages, where the maps could represent the space-time continuum, where even time “was mapped”. (Conference of Mr. Alessandro Scafi: *Mapping Paradise in the Western Tradition*, may 19, 2009, Cluj Napoca)

or transformed, it similarly transforms the meaning-field of suggestions. But what are the main purposes of re-telling the familiar story⁷ of the princesses? This fairytale is employed to facilitate new modes of perception; as a means of clarification, to lay bare habitual receptional patterns (Imhof 146,147); to “complete” the original story, and especially, to offer a key for interpretation – as the author herself affirmed: “they tell us something we need to know to interpret the book.” Furthermore, because of the reciprocal references, it is possible to assess the text in both ways from the metatextual middle or simply backwards – thus exemplifying at another level the “openness” of time-space. The metatextual middle could be the “Hallucinations and diseases of the mind” with the seven lies, which deconstruct the conventional approach to reality:

Lies 1: There is only one present and nothing to remember.

Lies 2: Time is a straight line.

Lies 3: The difference between the past and the future is that one has happened while the other has not.

Lies 4: We can only be at one place at a time.

Lies 5: Any proposition that contains the word ‘finite’ (the world, the universe, experience, ourselves ...)

Lies 6: Reality as something which can be agreed upon.

Lies 7: Reality as truth. (SC 83)

These ‘lies’⁸ could be strong conclusions of the voyages or starting points which need to be demonstrated, presuppositions which need to be experimented –depending on the orientation of the reading process. They give an interpretational pattern for the fictional world of the novel, and also for time and reality in general. Nonetheless, they are ‘complemented’ with an eighth lie, a lie having metatextual value. But the more interesting is the double-coded nature of the textual worlds: at this point, the realities/times of the seventeenth century and of the twentieth century converge / interflow. Moreover, this is in close relation with the starting and the ending motif of the meeting with the self: “I traced the lineaments of my own face opposite me.” (SC 9) The two new-narrators (new evidences of multi-leveled interrelations) “are strikingly similar to the Dog Woman and Jordan, sharing with them vital attitudes, thoughts and even turns of phrase.” (Onega 77) So the ‘times’ and ‘objects’ in the metatextual middle are (re-)narrated from different perspectives in the ‘second half’ of the novel. Into this symmetrical structure ekphrasis-kind parts are imbedded, contributing to the apprehension of the points of light: “Paintings are light caught and held like a

⁷ Let us not forget the story of Zillah neither, which “parodies the fairytale of Rapunzel.” (Onega 90)

⁸ Even the term is slightly ironic, for it presupposes a ‘liar’ and a ‘believer’. It also parallels with (or even contradicts) the flat and round earth theory, where both subjective and objective interpretations are possible.

genie in the jar. The energy is trapped for ever, concentrated, unable to disperse.” (SC 91) Analogical is the scope of the ekphrasis: to stop/pause/halt the flow of narration by highlighting the atemporality of the artefact. The accent falls on the medium, on the mediator, and one can follow the eye-movement/glance of the viewer. In *Sexing the Cherry*, paintings have a re-shaping power upon reality (both on what has happened and what is going to happen), they serve as reflections of the self, just as the play of the naming, of denominations, and the identifications by the ‘My name is...’ structures. Sight has a special function: it embraces inner visions, the imaginative and the historic ‘review.’

The fruits: the banana, the pineapple, the cherry, while inducing a fresh vigour to the ‘first’ part, the feeling of discovery, the reshaping power of reality upon language and vice versa; their novelty is lost in a retrospective vision.

Continuing with the Dog Woman’s time experience, although she never went beyond London, her alter ego is “situated” in a faraway dimension, but in the same environment: the bank of the Thames (another playful recurrence of time). As we mentioned above, the metamorphic power of time and of thoughts influences and reshapes the Dog Woman. In addition to this, love is a reshaping power also (it can destroy cities; it can bear heavy things as considering them weightless). In Jordan’s eyes, his mother is huge and powerful but not at all ugly. In the ecologist’s father’s eyes, her daughter is a pretty woman; but she feels her inner self hideous – but also protective. Her remembrance is caught in a parallel “historical” dimension, and the Dog Woman lives in the world of her memories too. Most bizarre of all, these memories flow “back and forth in time”; remembering is not attached to the past.

Coming back to reshaping, Fortunata embodies the most incredible shapes; having the air of infinity, she lives in atemporality. She is a kind of impersonation of ‘wise and enlightened’ thinking – literally bringing her pupils to light. With her, the two meanings of the homonymy ‘light’ are equally true. The glowing of the snow near her “house” intensifies the reflections of light. Metaphorically, this mirroring effect continues, and it is equivalent with the presumption that Fortunata is Jordan’s “own anima, the projection of his soul and spirit” (Onega 92): “the dancing part of myself” (SC 40) This quote echoes a passage from Becket’s *Molloy*: “but within, all that inner space one never sees, the brain and the heart and the caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath...” Dance, as a ritual, acquires re-creating, mythical dimensions throughout the whole novel: princesses, time-spaces (“the city itself danced” (SC 95)), ‘realities’ and ‘fictions’ pursue/follow their never-ending motion.

To conclude, the light–matter–time interrelations reshape formal axioms, mimetic approaches both to reality and to textual worlds and words. The theoretical frame of the novel’s structure justifies “the coexistence of ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ worlds and characters in what can be described as an ever-changing and fluid post-Newtonian multiverse existing in the space-time continuum, whose shape can only be provisionally and partially determined by each narrator’s act of retelling.” (Onega 80) Time spheres break down solid experiences and make possible the connections between cultures, thoughts and textual reflections; between characters, bodies, phrases; between paintings (visualizations and “insubstantial dreams”), heaviness and lightness, *truths* and *lies*; between matter, dance and points of light.

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