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Passions of a New Eve (a contextual reading of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*)

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Jeanette Winterson is one of the most interesting contemporary British writers. Her novel *The Passion* (1987) is probably the best illustration of her poetics. However, not only does this novel reveal her authorial idiosyncrasies, often anchored in radical feminism, but is also a brilliant dialogue with all the prominent tendencies of contemporary British fiction.

The aim of the author is to analyze the relationship between Winterson's textual strategies – characteristic of the literature of the Nineties – and more than two decades of the overall postmodernist background behind her fiction (neohistoricism, magic realism, women's writing). A contextual reading of *The Passion* can thus be seen as an outline of the changes that the British literary scene has undergone since the appearance of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (as the first British postmodernist success) in 1969.

»British Eighties fiction, especially that from younger writers, generally... felt like a *fin-de-siècle* fiction, and it was in fact filled with strong, self-conscious echoes from the previous *fin de siècle*, when the clock seemed to stop on the edge of danger... In Eighties fiction, apocalyptic visions, corrupted Utopias and threatened cities were everywhere. Gothic violence, the uncanny, the fantastic and the grotesque, were back; here innocence is generally corrupted, violence erupts suddenly, psychic extremities are explored, danger stalks the dead world, and there is an unstable relation between »real life« and art. Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, Jekyll and Hyde, Jack the Ripper – now in the changed guise of the 'serial killer', the marauding mobile man who represents the dangerous urban darkness – were all dusted down from their role in popular myth, and popular movies, and recycled for the service of modern narrative. Freaks and monsters, incest and sexual violence, all

the devices of the uncanny, estranging and deceptive on offer in the rich stock of Gothic reappeared in profusion... In fact – just as happened in the 1890s – all these destabilizing notes of Gothic gloom, outsider vision, historical dismay, psychic disturbance and general victimization were accompanied by a spirit of literary replenishment, and an avaricious reaching out to all the genres, all the forms, the international panoply of styles. In addition to Gothic mannerism, there was a strong influence from Latin American ‘magic realism’, and the related styles of fantastic realism that had developed in Eastern Europe in reaction against the official norms of fiction and ‘progressive’« notions of history.«

These are the words that Malcolm Bradbury has chosen to describe the present tense of the British novel (Bradbury 1993:411–412). It is not difficult to find evidence for his thesis, since many novels fit into the above-described mould. However, few novels fit into this mould as perfectly as the novels of Jeanette Winterson.

Looking at things from this point of view, it is small wonder that I have chosen Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* as the topic of my paper **not** because of its stylistic, poetic or any other idiosyncrasies. On the contrary, I have decided to discuss this novel precisely because it is a paradigm of the British novel of the late Eighties and early Nineties, reflecting the changes that the contemporary British novel has undergone since establishing its late modern or postmodern mould in the late Sixties.

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The novelistic prototype that Winterson has inherited from her more or less immediate predecessors, such as John Fowles or Jean Rhys, is defined by the predominance of three codes.

The first code in this sense is by all means a revival of the interest in a rewriting of the historical canon. Rhys's and Fowles's novels from 1966 and 1969 were the first to be based primarily on the intertextual dialogue between contemporary culture and the generally accepted picture of the Victorians and the 19th century in general. Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is thus a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is a highly self-reflexive dialogue between a postmodern narrator and his characters who live and love in 1867. The author closest to Jeanette Winterson in terms of neohistoricist de-coding and re-coding in this sense, however, is Peter Ackroyd. His novels are deeply rooted in the heritage of the British eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with strong emphasis placed on mysterious, occult and grotesque elements of history, and their contemporary echoes and reverberations. His novel *Chatterton*, for instance, blending

the obscure episodes in the lives of Thomas Chatterton, the eighteenth century poet, and George Meredith, the famous Victorian writer, was published in 1987, the same year as *The Passion*, which deals with obscurities of the Napoleonic era. Some years later, however, Winterson, too, switched to the themes from the eighteenth century: her novel *Art & Lies* tells us the story of Händel.

The second code very noticeable in Winterson's works is a combination of categories that one could refer to as women's writing or simply as the feminist ideology. Apart from Jean Rhys, whose short stories and novels mix gender politics and wayward sexuality in a manner very similar to that of Jeanette Winterson, the author who most profoundly influenced British women's writing is Angela Carter. Her *New Eve* and her version of *Venus* paved the way for our understanding of all new Tesses, Sycoraxes, Faustines and Robinas who crowd the works of contemporary British women writers¹, and is a necessary guide to Winterson's use of gender as well. Just like Rhys's madwoman in the attic, Carter's black *Venus* – Jeanne Duval – Baudelaire's infamous lover, comes from the New World, into the Old, only to be exploited, but eventually manages to execute a bloody vendetta. Female characters, the female voice, female history and perception of the world, the eventual female upper hand (be it in arts, love or self-destruction) ... – all these have set up a fairly distinctive stylistic and ideological framework, to be filled with more texts and still more women writers.

The third prevalent code is the one connecting Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* with mostly foreign mannerisms usually grouped under the common denominator of magic realism. Magic realism, if we consider it from this point of view, is then closely related to another fashionable term, that of postcolonial literature(s), since it is usually connected with Latin American authors. Winterson's usage of magic realist techniques primarily resembles the narration of Gabriel García Márquez: once more the literary world on display is full of funny physical abnormalities and totally bizarre passions and addictions that seem to attract no special attention on the part of their narrators. Very often Márquez's (Colombian) Macondo and Winterson's (European) Venice operate in a strikingly similar manner. This structural strategy, however, is far from a mere literary device, reduced to a specific literary landmark: it is related to the very essence of postmodernist poetics. According to Brian McHale, postmodernism as poetics is based on scrutinising and questioning the ontological layer of a literary text (McHale 1987), so that magic realist works, which are founded on such a probing, represent a postmodernist paradigm.

¹ I am referring to the names of the characters in the novels by Emma Tennant and Marina Warner, both of whom managed to accomplish a fine balance between neohistoricism and feminist writing – again much along the lines of Angela Carter. After all, one could argue that there is a highly provoking intertextual link between the titles of Carter's novel – *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) – and Winterson's *The Passion*. It was precisely this intertextual game that prompted me to adopt the title of Carter's novel as the title of my essay on Winterson.

As indicated above, the inheritance of these codes does not automatically mean their careful preservation and conservation. On the contrary – they too are liable to change and reinterpretation, depending on the decade in which they are reincarnated. Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* shows these codes as perceived and transmuted in the late Eighties and even the early Nineties. It is precisely the changes **within** the codes of new history, feminist writing and magic realism that help us mark the changes in British postmodernism, rather than the structuring of any individual works. The structure, the subject matter or style of narration are in this respect only a background for a dialogue of the above-mentioned codes.

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The Passion is a story of an unusual love triangle, set in Napoleon's Venice. The reader is a witness of two points of view and consequently of two stories: one narrator is Henri, a young French soldier, who worships Napoleon and becomes his chicken chef, and the other is Villanelle, a poor Venetian girl who seduces Henri but is in fact in love with a home-town noblewoman. Henri and Villanelle meet during Napoleon's siege of Moscow, while Henri is trying to survive on his leader's food preserves and Villanelle is a prostitute for Napoleon's soldiers, trying to flee from her unhappy lesbian love-affair. However, once they escape the harsh Russian winter and manage to reach Venice, Henri is so deeply in love with Villanelle that he kills for her and, being arrested, ends up as a mad gardener in the prison/madhouse on a nearby island. (Of course, Winterson's madhouse garden is a bitter travesty of the ending of Voltaire's *Candide*.) Villanelle, now a rich woman, visits Henri from time to time, still dreaming about her own unrequited relationship.

Although both the narrative backbone and various details of the story of Henri and Villanelle provide us with plenty of clues for a dialogue with the three codes of postmodernist fiction, it is the title of the novel that holds both the text and the dialogue together. *The Passion* here indicates not only the sexual and emotional intensity of Henri's and Villanelle's love, but also other relationships in the novel: Henri worships Napoleon, Napoleon worships power (and chicken), his soldiers adore Josephine, Henri's Irish friend Patrick is addicted to alcohol, Villanelle's friends are all compulsive gamblers, Henri is possessed by his passion for historiography and story-telling... As a proof, the text is so filled with the very word *passion*, that one might easily surmise *passion* as the most frequent lexeme in Winterson's novel².

² For example, the novel opens with a sentence including *passion*: »It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chefs working around the clock« (Winterson 1988:3).

Needless to say, *passion* is also the crucial concept in Winterson's understanding of the notions working **behind** the narrative backbone – the notions of history, feminism and novelistic realism.

One might say that the postmodernist revision of history in British literature developed in three stages. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* marked the first stage, aiming at a revival of suppressed ideologies of Victorian times. The second stage is best represented by Julian Barnes and his *Flaubert's Parrot*, who, instead of reviving, aimed at deconstructing history and all its ideologies. The third stage is marked by the prevalence of women writers, such as A.S. Byatt or Isabel Colegate, who choose to disregard history as a series of ideologies, opting instead for historical fantasy.

Winterson's novel in this sense belongs to the third group of authors. With one huge difference: while Byatt or Colegate choose fantasy over ideology, but never question the importance of ideology, Winterson implicitly questions it and explicitly revokes it. Instead of representing »both sides« of Napoleon's wars, as Fowles would do, or deconstructing them, as would Barnes or Ackroyd, Jeanette Winterson's message tells us that history is only a series of events determined by the individual passions of all its participants. Passion in fact stands for history as such: according to Henri or Villanelle, nothing precedes Napoleon, and nothing follows. The passage of time and the flow of history, even if meticulously documented, are irrelevant – all is ruled by timeless and irrational passions. No wonder then that Winterson's principal narrators (Henri, Villanelle, Patrick) are either madmen, whores or drunkards – people who are by definition ruled by passion, not by ratio.

Since the principal story-tellers are passion-ruled, it therefore follows that the events and the characters of their stories are similarly passion-ruled. The notion of history as narration of deeds³ is thus replaced by the narration of individual

³ History as defined by the historiographic texts coming from the Middle Ages – *historia est narratio rei gestae* (Ivić 1992:101). It is interesting to note that Linda Hutcheon shares the same notion of history and historiography in her book about politics of postmodernism. According to Hutcheon, it is this definition of history and historiography that postmodernism redefines and rewrites as **parody** (Hutcheon 1989). Even more interesting in this sense is the fact that Jeanette Winterson, in metafictional passages of her novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, argues with the same notion of history and proposes a solution not only very similar to what she actually did in *The Passion*, but also to the postmodernist propositions of Linda Hutcheon: »History should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing, the way cats play. Claw it, chew it, rearrange it and at bedtime it's still a ball of string full of knots. Nobody should mind. Some people make a lot of money out of it. Publishers do well, children, when bright, can come top. It's an all-purpose rainy day pursuit, this reducing of stories called history (...) And when I look at a history book and think of the imaginative effort it has taken to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset, I am astonished. Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it. God knows. But I am not God. And so when someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own« (Winterson 1991:91–93). Thus, if one should read *The Passion* (1987) after reading *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985), one might very easily be led to the conclusion that *The Passion* is the implementation, even incarnation, of Winterson's own metafictional and metahistoriographical strategies.

passions. The principal figure in this sense is the figure of Napoleon. While the generally accepted *historia* of the nineteenth century sees Napoleon through his conquests (= deeds, to be narrated), and the overall historical context (in the manner of Tolstoy and his contemporaries), Winterson narrates not about his wars or conquests, but about the consequences of his various passions – for power, Josephine, chicken... Napoleon, as seen by Winterson's narrators, was great not because of his military or political skills, but because he was able to indulge in passion and induce it in others. His soldiers fought his wars not because they had to, due to higher historical laws, but because they desired to – pure, raw desire having nothing to do with will or accident, patriotism, morality or any philosophy (again, as Tolstoy would have it). Thus, if the ending of the novel is an intertextual duel with the enlightenment and the rational philosophy of the eighteenth century thinkers, the figure of Napoleon as structured by Winterson is an implicit intertextual dialogue with the nineteenth-century notions of history, primarily with the philosophy of history as offered by Leo Tolstoy in the concluding chapters of *War and Peace*. The comparative shortness of Winterson's *The Passion* is only one facet of her textual game with Tolstoy's historiographic ambitions: while Tolstoy's *historia Napoleoniana* requires four books of words and a world of ideas, passion, even in telling, presupposes shortness and emotional intensity, allowing no contextual remarks.

In this respect another name must be mentioned – that of Walter Pater, the Victorian author who inaugurated the idea of sensuality, of passion, and was warmly welcomed by the trend-setters of British decadence. If Tolstoy's *War and Peace* be seen as a framework for Winterson's handling of **history** (Napoleon's Moscow days), Pater's ideas on **sensuality** of the **present** moment could be seen as an intertextual injection, inoculating the chosen historical moment with a different, sensuous philosophy. Again, there is a link between contemporary writers, and thinkers of the late nineteenth century, and again neohistoricism combined with latent intertextuality proves a very useful strategy. Extremely intriguing in this sense is Pater's »Conclusion« to *The Renaissance* (1873, 1888), a work openly opting for the pre-eminence of vivid sensations of the present moment. Even more intriguing is the fact that one of Pater's favourite words in this text is the same word so skilfully used by Winterson: passion. Thus, »Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us – for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. (...) How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. (...) While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend« (Pater, 1961:222–3).

If the notion of historiography in Winterson's *The Passion* is radically erased and then replaced by a series of passion-motivated events, a similarly radical gender orientation replaces »soft« feminism or »soft« women's writing. While A. S. Byatt and Isabel Colegate combine the erudition of George Eliot and the emotional refinement of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson chooses the extremist gender politics. If in Winterson's »passionate« concept of history there is no before and no after, the same lack of contrast marks her understanding of gender: all there is is but a radical historical and sexual transgression. Instead of defining or cultivating the position of a woman writer, she decides to construct a world ruled by exclusively lesbian passions and overall sexual cross-overs. In Winterson's literary world males and writers are powerless and their lives depend on cunning women and their ability to reverse their sexual identities. Villanelle is a lesbian who often dresses as a boy and seduces both men and women, governing their lives, while she herself is governed only by the passion for her unattainable lover. Moreover, she never questions her sexual preferences, considering all possible options equally probable and equally appealing. Venice, as a prototype of a decaying city sinking under the burden of its own degenerate passion for money and power, is a perfect setting for the thinning of all borderlines, including that between sexes.

One could argue that Winterson's Venice, as viewed by the postmodern *fin de siècle*, is comparable to another turn-of-the century venue: that of Yeats's Byzantium⁴. In both cases an old Mediterranean city overloaded with history, political power and artistic refinement is eventually sentenced to utmost decadence, both in terms of artistic sterility and non-productive sexuality. Both Byzantium and Venice are devoid of the historical consciousness about before and after, immersed instead in timeless passions. Both are lacking the purifying and the fertilizing touch of nature. The only ideological and structural twist that differentiates Winterson's Venice from Yeats's Byzantium is their gender politics: while the Yeatsian version of Byzantium is characterized by sexuality for its own sake, regardless of the sexes involved, the postmodernist Venice is in capable hands of homo- or bisexual women.

If the figure of Napoleon is an epitome of Winterson's handling of history, the figures of Henri and Villanelle epitomize her handling of gender. Coming from a fresh French village, Henri is initially a convinced male believer in historical laws and heterosexual love, whose ambition is to compose a record of the days he spent with Napoleon. His war diary becomes for him the proof of a purposeful personal existence as well as the proof of a historically purposeful era. After his meeting with Villanelle, however, Henri ends up as a mute and almost sexless gardener in an obscure madhouse, who has no history – personal or political, and no sexual identity. His initial narratorial creed – »Trust me, I'm telling you stories« – is thus as discredited and as blurred as his innermost, kernel-I, the I of his sexuality. The plants and the flowers in his prison/madhouse garden are thus the

⁴ Especially as depicted in his »Sailing to Byzantium«.

only remnants of his childhood and his youth. Eventually, however, one is not sure if even the plants and the flowers are really there or if they are only a figment of Henri's imagination: his last words convey the message that passionate Josephine is sending him special seeds(!) to be planted in his garden. The reverse sexual imagery only reinforces the sexual uncertainty of Henri, the narrator: Josephine as father and seed-giver, begetting, and Henri as mother, giving birth – to plants, passion, story, history. So, although there is no doubt about the fact that Winterson's narrators are indeed telling stories, readers can do little but doubt their trustworthiness. As it turns out, their stories, just like any version of history, are not about trust or events, but about the blind and illogical nature of – passion.

Magic realism as used by Jeanette Winterson only reinforces the passion-induced discrediting of any historical or sexual certainty. While in Latin American fiction magic realism usually means surpassing realism by breaking through towards an excessive story-telling potential, in Winterson's *The Passion* it only undermines this potential.

Why? In Winterson's *The Passion* story-telling as such, especially its magic component, belongs almost exclusively to men. Moreover, magic in this sense is seen as a poor compensation for the lack of female or even lesbian experience of passion, because – according to Winterson – such a passion far surpasses any male magical world-making. While Henri stands for an attempt at a male version of historiography, the principal magic-maker in this novel comes from a nation famous for its fairy tales – he is a prototypical Irishman. Patrick, as a volunteer in Napoleon's army, is a gregarious drunkard and a compulsive story-teller, but also literally embodies certain magic-realist qualities. One of these is a kind of physical abnormality – he is a literal hawk-eye, whose vision resembles capacities of a satellite. However, just like Henri, he is destined to die unloved and unconscious, failing to accomplish the physical passion that – again according to Winterson – rules both history and magic. Even Villanelle physically embodies one magic realist trait – she has webbed feet and can walk on water. However – and this makes the gender politics in this novel even more obvious! – webbed feet in Winterson's Venice are typical of **male** fishermen. The fact that Villanelle, due to a perverse twist of fate, was born with a distinctive male feature, whereas, on the other hand, she is a bisexual with strong lesbian inclinations, makes her an embodiment of sexual transgression. As such, she is capable of dominating/transgressing over both magic and history. No wonder, then, that she is the only narrator in Winterson's novel who survives the Napoleonic wars.

Sexual transgression, combined with her handling of magic, place Jeanette Winterson next to another *fin-de-siècle* bard: Oscar Wilde. The famous Irishman (= magic-maker and story-teller) and infamous paramour (= nearing Winterson's notion of passion) comes closest to Winterson's fictional and autobiographical pos-

ture. The fantastic webbed feet in *The Passion* play the same structural role as the fantastic portrait of Dorian Gray in Wilde's novel, while the lesbian confessions of a Jeanette(!) in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* are the same kind of autobiographical account as the confessions of a certain prisoner in Reading Gaol. As always when a century is nearing its end, art is life, and life is art.

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One might conclude by agreeing with what Malcolm Bradbury pointed out in the passage quoted above: the new British fiction, as epitomized by Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, indeed resembles the fiction of the British 1890s. It too feeds on a bizarre interplay of neohistoricism, magic realism and sexual eccentricities, as its prevalent codes. The mirror of the postmodern world being irrevocably cracked into disjointed splinters, the only prospect left for this fiction is a fine craftsmanship of style, stock motives and narrative variations. Winterson could thus be – in more ways than one – compared to her great predecessor, Oscar Wilde.

However, it is difficult to say whether the 1990s will be followed by a great literary revolution, as it was the case with the 1890s and the upsurge of modernism. Unfortunately, there are still no signs that the twentieth century season of green carnations will be followed by yet another Mr Bloom.

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STRASTI NOVE EVE (KONTEKSTUALNO ČITANJE ROMANA *STRAST* JEANETTE WINTERSON)

Jeanette Winterson zacijelo spada među najzanimljivije spisateljice u suvremenoj britanskoj književnosti. Njezin roman *Strast* (1987) vrlo zorno ilustrira autorsku poetiku ove književnice. Valja, međutim, istaknuti da ovaj roman otkriva ne samo za nju tipične književne stavove, koji se nerijetko vežu na ideologije radikalnog feminizma, već i trenutnu situaciju suvremene britanske proze u cjelini.

Cilj mi je raščlaniti vezu između tekstualnih strategija Jeanette Winterson – tako karakterističnih za književnost devedesetih – i više od dva desetljeća postmodernističkog naslijeđa iza njezina djela (neo-historicizam, magijski realizam, žensko pismo). Kontekstualno čitanje *Strasti* moglo bi tako polučiti obrise promjena koje je britanska književna scena doživjela od 1969. godine, kad se pred čitateljstvom pojavila *Ženska francuskog poručnika*, kao prvi veliki hit britanskog postmodernizma.