



02

**Irma
Krčan**

**Of Love, Stories and
Superintelligence: Reading Jeanette
Winterson's *The PowerBook* in the
Context of AI Development**

"The internet of things will soon be a reality. You won't need a device, your iPhone, your laptop, because you will be the device, seamlessly connected, 24/7, to your smart life. So even if you think you're not interested in AI or tech, you are, because it's in your life now, and it's going to be fully what your life consists of in the very near future," author Jeanette Winterson presciently declares in the short video "On AI" promoting her 2021 collection of essays called *12 Bytes* (00:00 – 00:26). In *12 Bytes*, the author reflects on the complex relationship between humans and advanced technology, an issue that is also unquestionably at the heart of her 2019 novel *Frankissstein*.¹ Yet, as this paper aims to show, Winterson already engaged with the technological transformation of humanity about two decades earlier in her novel *The PowerBook*, which was published in 2000 to mixed reviews but attracted considerable scholarly attention in the following years, standing testimony, as Merja Makinen suggests, "to Winterson's novels being ahead of their times and academic critics only realising this much later" (154). The proposed parallel between Winterson's more recent works, most notably *12 Bytes*, and *The PowerBook* may seem surprising as *The PowerBook*, revolving around an anonymous e-writer typing stories for their lover on a laptop, offering freedom just for one night in a virtual world, does not explicitly deal with AI development, let alone superintelligence. However, drawing on inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil's work on this subject as well as Winterson's own views as articulated in *12 Bytes*, this paper will argue that *The PowerBook* merges the human with the technological, the physical world with the virtual world, and thus creates a story which can indeed be interpreted and analysed as a literary equivalent of superintelligence. Moreover, it will be shown that this storylike superintelligence is in fact constructed as a very positive entity, proving itself to be more capable of tolerance and love than biological humans, and thus highlighting the potential of a different, narrative approach to emerging AI technologies.

Making predictions about the shared future of humans and advanced technology, Ray Kurzweil, a big name in the field of human-enhancement technologies, claims that life on Earth will irreversibly change with the advent of what he calls "the Singularity". He describes the Singularity as "the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality" (25). And despite being remarkably optimistic about this development, Kurzweil readily admits that superintelligence or strong AI, which he defines as "artificial intelligence that exceeds human intelligence" (204), that is, the type of intelligence which will mark the Singularity period, "innately cannot be controlled" (205). This prospect raises concerns as to the fate of humanity when left at the mercy of an intelligence far surpassing its own, drawing attention to the importance of selecting the right human values to be inculcated into the developing AI. Another important figure in the field of AI development, Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom, stresses that to make a mistake in this value selection "would be to risk an existential moral calamity" (210). Similar issues trouble Winterson in

12 Bytes, where she warns especially about the dangers of teaching AI the binary roles, division and stereotypes that are currently rife in human societies, instead of profiting from the fact that, as she indicates, "AI doesn't have a skin colour or a gender" (235). Apart from voicing these concerns, Winterson also stresses the importance of preserving love, "the best, and most mysterious part, of the human condition" (12 Bytes 262), implying that the character of superintelligence and consequently our future well-being depend on our ability to "teach a non-lim-bic life-form what it means to have a broken heart – and one that no nanobot made of DNA and protein can surge through the arteries to fix" (12 Bytes 262). When these two points are considered, the storylike superintelligence that *The PowerBook* creates seems even more intriguing, for not only can it be effectively analysed in terms of Kurzweil's Singularity, but it also displays the very tolerance and love that Winterson identifies as crucial for a peaceful future coexistence of humans and technology.

The fusion of human and machine as well as physical and virtual reality which is essential to Kurzweil's Singularity is effectuated in *The PowerBook* primarily through the act of narration. This is so because narrative can be perceived as human as well as immaterial and virtual. On the one hand, there is the notion, stressed by Winterson in *12 Bytes*, that "[h]umans are narrative", that "we make ourselves up as we go along" (193), meaning that human existence can be seen not only in biological, but also in narrative terms, as every person's life, what one is, does, goes through, functions as a story of a kind. On the other hand, narrative is not only immaterial but can also be described as virtual because, even though it is not computer-generated, it can simulate and thus challenge reality; indeed, as Marie-Laure Ryan states, "narrative fiction may be the original VR technology" (117). This dual character makes the act of narration operate as the novel's unifier of the otherwise incompatible human and technological, real and virtual. Already the title itself is markedly hybrid. In a more literal sense, the term "PowerBook" refers to a type of laptop computer, to the very machine used for typing stories. Yet, it also connotes the power lying in books, in stories, and, since humans can be seen as walking stories, also the power of humans themselves. Similarly, the chapter headings written in capitals, like "NEW DOCUMENT" and "SEARCH", mimic computer language but also, as Mine Özyurt Kılıç points out, "function as thematic signifiers of each chapter" (289). This means, for example, that the heading "SEARCH" refers not only to a computer command but also to the story told in the chapter, which is about Lancelot's long search for Guinevere, that is, about the human experience of looking for one's lover. As for the importance of narration, it is fully revealed by the fact that the biological human body merges with the non-biological technological medium precisely through the act of narration. This happens already in the first chapter, when the anonymous e-writer tells the reader: "Here is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex" (Winterson, *The PowerBook* 4). The syntagm "long lines of laptop DNA" especially emphasises the extent to which the narration and consequent

virtualisation of the biological body blurs the line between the physical and the virtual. Another indicator of the unifying role of narration is the heading of the first chapter, "language costumier", which suggests that the e-writer will in fact create a costume, indeed a body, out of words for the reader in order to fuse them with the virtual world.

Yet, it is not only the biological body that merges with technology: through the act of narration, the entirety of what humans consider as the real world follows suit and merges with the virtual one. Indeed, it soon becomes impossible to tell apart cyberspace and its opposite, "meatspace", as the story events supposedly taking place in Paris, Capri and London cannot with any certainty be placed in physical reality. And just as Kurzweil claims the Singularity will mean that "virtual reality from within the nervous system" will become "competitive with real reality in terms of resolution and believability" (39), so the narrator in *The PowerBook* expresses the uncertainty which narration makes them feel about the nature of the world by saying: "I was typing on my laptop, trying to move this story on, trying to avoid endings, trying to collide the real and the imaginary worlds, trying to be sure which is which. The more I write, the more I discover that the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel room" (Winterson, *The PowerBook* 93). It is precisely this burgeoning story, which renders the narrator increasingly helpless and confused, that constitutes the result of all the merging, the hybrid final product into which all the aforementioned elements are successfully fused into, or, more precisely, narrated into. Thus, in its own literary way, the hybrid story of *The PowerBook* achieves precisely what Kurzweil expects AI to be capable of achieving in the near future – it brings together the real world and the virtual world, biological and non-biological existence, and at the same time remains unmistakably human. For, as the narrator of *The PowerBook* succinctly puts it, "a story is a tightrope between two worlds" (Winterson 119), which is exactly how Kurzweil's concept of superintelligence can be interpreted.

Moreover, Winterson's story is reminiscent of superintelligence because it, in a way, takes on a life of its own, becoming autonomous and therefore uncontrollable, just as Kurzweil claims strong AI will be. This is suggested throughout the novel, but is most visible in the following paragraph:

There is always the danger of automatic writing. The danger of writing yourself towards an ending that need never be told. At a certain point the story gathers momentum. It convinces itself, and does its best to convince you, that the end in sight is the only possible outcome. There is a fatefulness and a loss of control that are somehow comforting. This was your script, but now it writes itself. (Winterson, *The PowerBook* 53)

Just as strong AI is predicted to greatly exceed human intelligence at some future point and therefore become more autonomous, its storylike equivalent in *The PowerBook* does the same, breaking free from its creator and going on to write

itself, decide for itself. Consequently, the narrator loses control over their story and becomes a mere character in the script.

However, in *The PowerBook*, becoming part of this increasingly autonomous story does not seem like such a bad destiny. This is largely due to the fact that this hybrid entity finds irrelevant and dismantles the binaries that biological human societies are preoccupied with, introducing fluidity of identity instead. Special emphasis is put on gender fluidity, which is established as soon as the reader and the narrator enter the story, as the following conversation between them shows: "Male or female?' 'Does it matter?' 'It's a coordinate.' 'This is a virtual world.'" (Winterson, *The PowerBook* 26). Similarly, as Susan Pelle writes, one of the characters in the story, Ali, initially a girl, acquires by means of horticultural grafting, that is, a tulip grafted onto their crotch that turns out to function similarly to a penis, "a nonnormative body that fails to be fixed or contained as either male or female" (34). This invites comparison between Ali's body and Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, "a creature in a postgender world" (8), "an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency" (8). According to Haraway, it is precisely cyborg imagery that "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (67). And the storylike superintelligence created in *The PowerBook* truly does not operate through dualisms, neither the human-machine opposition nor the male/female or black/white binaries, but rather through fluidity and connectivity of all its elements. Moreover, in addition to rising above biological humans' obsession with binaries, this entity seems to have not only preserved, but amplified what Winterson identifies in *12 Bytes* as the best part of the human condition, as the crucial value that strong AI will have to possess – love. Indeed, the novel's equivalent of strong AI is arguably endowed with superhuman emotional intelligence as well, since it is constituted as a patchwork of different intertwining love stories, realising many types of love that pre-Singularity human societies would label as transgressive or bizarre, ranging from passionate romantic love between the gender-fluid Lancelot and Guinevere to mountaineer George Mallory's love of the Himalayas. Therefore, to build on a previous argument, the literary equivalent of superintelligence imagined in *The PowerBook* is not just any kind of story, it is a liberating, composite love story, which also explains its vitality and scope, as "[l]ove's script has no end of beginnings", and always its "book must be rewritten" (Winterson, *The PowerBook* 77-8). Thus, by creating an entity which is highly advanced and autonomous as well as loving and tolerant, a fictional world which, albeit too complex to be classified as purely utopian, is undeniably marked by a sense of optimism and hope, Winterson certainly provides food for thought for the literary sphere and computer scientists alike.

Even though, unlike Winterson's latest works, *The PowerBook* does not explicitly address the issues of AI development or superintelligence, this paper has shown that the patchwork of love stories the novel centres upon can in fact be interpreted by its readers as a literary equivalent of superintelligence. This

kind of reading draws attention to the dual nature of narrative as something human, but immaterial and virtual rather than physical, a fact that makes it indispensable for the novel's merging of humans with their technology. Finally, by constructing its form of superintelligence as a storylike entity that discards what is worst about humanity and preserves – indeed is constituted of – what is best, Winterson's novel arguably shows the potential of considering emerging AI technologies from a narrative, literary perspective. Therefore, as the possibility of humans becoming devices seamlessly connected to their smart lives looms large, *The PowerBook* seems to suggest that AI developers should join hands with language costumiers in order to create a story in which everyone will want to be a character – even when it eventually starts writing itself.

End Notes

- 1 *Frankissstein* is a contemporary rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a provocative story of transhumanism, cryonics and AI where the transgender doctor Ry Shelley, the AI specialist Victor Stein and the manufacturer of sex robots Ron Lord discuss what human life will be like when technology develops to the point where it can manage itself as well as its creators. Thus, it echoes its hypotext's preoccupation with the changing relationship between humans and rapidly developing technology. Influenced by the First Industrial Revolution and the legacy of the Enlightenment, which was marked by a strong belief in reason and science, Shelley's seminal novel about the daring scientist Victor Frankenstein and the creature born from his insatiable thirst for knowledge calls into question the supposed benefits of the advancement of technology and industrialisation, showing what can happen when the boundaries of science are pushed too far.

Works cited

- Bostrom, Nick. *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Kılıç, Mine Özyurt. "Transgressing Gender Boundaries: The Function of the Fantastic in Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook*", *English Studies*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2008, pp. 287-304.
- Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Viking Penguin, 2005.
- Makinen, Merja. *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Pelle, Susan. "'When Is a Tulip Not a Tulip?': Grafting, Exoticism, and Pleasure Gardens in Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook*." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2012, pp. 31-52.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Cyberage Narratology: Computers, Metaphor, and Narrative." *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman, Ohio State University Press, 1999, pp. 113-41.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next*. Jonathan Cape, 2021.
- . "On AI." *Facebook*, uploaded by Waterstones, 29 Jul. 2021, www.facebook.com/waterstones/videos/12-bytes-by-jeanette-winterson2026590394158412/.
- . *The PowerBook*. Vintage, 2001.