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**"IT MAY OR MAY NOT BE TRUE. IT DOES NOT MATTER":
(MAGIC) REALISM AND JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE PASSION***

Most definitions and descriptions of magic realism stress the privileged position of realism in its fusion with fantasy since the world created by the fusion is meant to be recognized as still reflecting a reality ontologically identical with that existing "objectively" even though the irrational and the impossible become possible in it. David Lodge, for example, identifies the distinctive feature of magic realism in fiction as one that is present "when marvelous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic novel."¹ The mode of writing with its "oxymoronic label," as G. Gazda rightly describes it in his dictionary of literary trends and groups,² often makes the marvelous or the grotesque function as a natural and factual element of reality which is to be taken for granted.

Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) is studied in literary courses at universities and referred to in critical reviews as one of the most outstanding examples of magic realism in British fiction. In his comment quoted above, David Lodge puts the name of Jeanette Winterson with those of two other writers considered representative of the "magic variety" when he states that it "has been imported into our fiction from outside rather than springing up spontaneously, though it has been enthusiastically embraced by a few native English novelists, especially women novelists with strong views about gender, such as Fay Weldon, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson."³

More specific references to the magic realist aspect of *The Passion* will be found, for instance, in L. Sikorska's *An Outline History of English Literature*, which contains the suggestion that the magic realism of the book "further undermines the factual realism expected from a historical

¹ David Lodge, *The Art. Of Fiction* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1992), p. 114.

² Grzegorz Gazda, „Realizm magiczny” in: *Słownik europejskich kierunków i grup literackich XX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 2000), pp. 544–550.

³ David Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

novel,"⁴ or in the quotations from journalistic reviews printed on the cover of the novel itself, which describe it as "a fantasy, a vivid dream" or "an allusive psychological fantasia with roots in Virginia Woolf and modern *realismo magico*"⁵ and also in the internet publications (e.g. in Tim Conley's comment on Jeanette Winterson's art, which expresses the opinion that: "Novels such as *The Passion* [...] flirt with fantasy, match fairy tales and labyrinthine cities against recognizable historical backgrounds, swim through what has been variously called magic realism and historiographic fiction"⁶). A close examination of the nature of *The Passion*, however, proves that the matter is certainly not so obvious since the realism of the book is qualified and limited by "magic," and the magic can be regarded arguable on the grounds that the novel does not break "the laws of the real world" after all. The aim of the present paper is to examine this aspect of the novel in order to show its indeterminate, ambiguous character which makes placing the book in a fixed literary category a rather difficult, if not futile, task.

The main reason why one may have doubts about magic realism usually ascribed to *The Passion* depends mainly on the fact that, contrary to the requirements of this mode of writing, the fantastic element does not quite become part of the book's "objective" reality, if only because its two narrators, Villanelle and Henri, can be deemed unreliable and their narratives - biased and distorted accounts of what they have "really" experienced.

Henri writes down his story at San Servelo where he is kept after he has been convicted as insane in result of his killing the obnoxious cook, Villanelle's husband. He writes about voices he thinks he is hearing and the dead visiting him in his cell as facts, but others, his warders, for instance, and Villanelle, speak of this as a symptom of his madness. Villanelle remarks on the situation: "I tried to make him understand that there are no voices, only ones of our own making. [...] In a madhouse you must hold on to your mind."⁷ This straightforward statement concerning Henri's insanity cannot but undermine the credibility of his narration. On the other hand, however, Henri often expresses his thoughts in a very lucid, convincing way, far from a lunatic's ravings, and has a rational doubtful attitude to

⁴ Liliana Sikorska, *An Outline History of English Literature* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2002), p. 493.

⁵ Quoted from the *Observer* on the cover of *The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1988).

⁶ Tim Conley, „Jeanette Winterson”, <http://www.themodernworld.com/scriptorium/winterson.html>.

⁷ Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1988), p. 147. All quotations from *The Passion* are from this edition of the novel.

what the reader, too, must judge unrealistic or untrue. He finds, for example, that he cannot accept stories told by Patrick, the defrocked Irish priest, without reservations and is dubious when the Irishman tells him "stories about Ireland, about the peat fires and the goblins that live under every hill" (P, 38). He often merely reports Patrick's claims of experiencing extraordinary adventures and refrains from commenting on them, as if wishing to distance himself from what his friend says (as when "Patrick says the Channel is full of mermaids", P, 24). Patrick's eye, which supposedly can see what takes place at great distances, is mentioned by Henri in the context of "old wives tales", "fantasies", "web of hearsay" as well as in Patrick's own explanations, and opinions expressed by others. Henri himself does not make it clear whether he is fully convinced that Patrick has a miraculous eye or not. There is, however, a suggestion of disbelief in the mention of Patrick's "wild sightings" and of how he even "once claimed to have spotted the Blessed Virgin herself touring the heavens on a gilded donkey. He was always seeing things..." (P, 107).

It is basically because of Henri's skeptical observations that Villanelle's narrative is also rendered uncertain. The following quotation, for example, provides evidence that he and Patrick do not believe a word of what Villanelle tells the credulous Poles they meet during their journey from Moscow to Venice after deserting Napoleon's army:

Villanelle, who loved to tell stories, wove for their wildest dreams. She even said that the boatmen had webbed feet, and while Patrick and I could hardly swallow our laughter, the Poles grew wide-eyed and one even risked excommunication by suggesting that perhaps Christ had been able to walk on the water thanks to the same accident of birth. (P, 104)

Elsewhere, Henri mentions Villanelle's ability to persuade people to look at the world around them from her point of view so that ordinary things become wonderful in their eyes. When he compares himself with her, he states: "I'm not like Villanelle, I don't see hidden worlds in the palm of my hand" (P, 155) and he notes that: "She had a knack of raising your spirits just by saying, 'Look at that,' and that was always an ordinary treasure brought to life. She can even charm the fishwives" (P, 156).

It is most appropriate therefore that Villanelle, who "loves to tell stories" (in addition to its neutral meaning, the expression suggests fabrication) and can "charm even the fishwives", should, rather than write as Henry does, present her passionate narrative orally. By telling the story to her listeners (or listener?) she can impress them directly and make them suspend their disbelief. According to Pauline Palmer, her gift of storytelling secures her dominant position in the book; "From the moment of her first appearance Villanelle appropriates the role of the narrator and becomes the focus of

narrative interest.”⁸ And yet, in spite of her magnetic power, Villanelle occasionally says something that can weaken the faith of her listeners. As a result, not only do the two main narrators undermine the veracity of each other’s stories, but they also make their own narratives less certain in spite of their (and Patrick’s) frequently repeated call for trust. “I’m telling you stories, trust me” may be indeed considered, in view of its ambiguity, as “calling the trustworthiness of the narrator into question.”⁹

Villanelle’s talent of changing the mundane into wonders and real experience into tales frequently makes her narration exaggerated; either downright fantastic (as is the case with the “interpolated” story about Salvatore offering his heart in a box to a young woman he has seen flying past) or, at least, ambiguous, vague, cryptic, paradoxical and tense with inner contradictions. The way she talks about Venice, for example, provides a fair amount of factual information concerning the city and its history on the one hand, but, on the other, she speaks of it as “an enchanted city” in which “the laws of the real world are suspended” (*P*, 76), as a “city of mazes,” and “disguises,” which is “littered with ghosts” (*P*, 61), a place where it is required that one does awake one’s faith to make things possible. When Villanelle talks about certain strange situations and phenomena such as the Venetian boatmen’s (and her own) webbed feet believed to make walking on water possible, she tends to use myths, legends and rumours (all of which are “stories”) as “evidence”. She relies on other people’s stories in order to tell her audience about why and how she was born with webbed feet, but the feet are not spoken of as seen by others “in front of the eyes” of the reader.

A similar device is used to describe Villanelle’s first attempt at walking on water: again, instead of giving a direct presentation of the event, she reports what others have said about it:

Could I walk on the water?

Could I?

I faltered at the slippery steps leading into the dark. It was November, after all. I might die if I fell in. I tried balancing my foot on the surface and it dropped beneath into the cold nothingness.

Could a woman love a woman for more than a night?

I stepped out and in the morning they say a beggar was running round the Rialto talking about a young man who’d walked across the canal like it was solid.

I’m telling you stories. Trust me. (*P*, 69)

⁸ Paulina Palmer, “*The Passion: Storytelling, Fantasy, Desire*”, pp. 103–116, in: *I’m Telling you stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, ed. by Helena Grice and Tim Woods (Amsterdam–Atlanta, Ga: Editions Rodopi, 1998), p. 105.

⁹ Liliana Sikorska, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

Villanelle's account of the occurrence, is suggestively, and manipulatively, juxtaposed with what "they say" about what the beggar *said* so that it does appeal to one's imagination, but, like all hearsay, the evidence remains uncertain.

The other walking-on-water incident is reported by Henri in his narrative. It takes place immediately after the cook has been killed and Henri is clearly in a state of shock, sitting in "the boat that swam with blood" (P, 129). He then wonders how their two boats are moving:

How?

I raised my head fully, my knees still drawn up, and saw Villanelle, her back towards me, rope over her shoulder, walking on the canal and dragging our boats.

Her boots lay neatly one by the other. Her hair was down

I was in the red forest and she was leading me home. (P, 129)

In Paulina Palmer's interpretation, it would be "one of several episodes of magic realism which Winterson introduces in the text" and which "occur at moments of particularly intense emotion, illustrating the way that our passions and fantasies have the power to transform the mundane, rational world by generating events that defy the laws of nature."¹⁰ However, whether this particular event takes place in the "physical reality" or is imagined remains an unresolved question; Henri is subject to "seeing things" when he later writes about the event, but his madness surfaces because of the violent shock, and his vision of Villanelle walking on the canal may be considered as a symptom of his mental breakdown. In "objective reality", Villanelle, who is only partly visible to Henri, may be walking close to and along the canal. The irresistibly suggestive close-up view of Villanelle's boots lying "neatly one by the other" and the stories of her webbed feet cannot but evoke the picture of her walking on the water in the mind of Henri as well as the reader's.

The readiness with which the impossible events involving Villanelle are thus accepted is largely due to the persuasive power of her stories, to what she says and to what she omits to say. If Villanelle can even charm the fishwives, she surely is able to make the man who loves her believe what she tells him. It may be especially because of his passion for Villanelle that Henri is willing to believe that her heart has been stolen quite literally by the woman she loves. The rationalist in him thinks it all fantastic, but he agrees to help her retrieve the heart. He steals a jar with something pulsating in it from the house of the woman and hands it to Villanelle, who then tells him to turn away and does something with it. A moment later Henri can feel her heart beating in her chest.

¹⁰ Paulina Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 107-108.

Typically, there are gaps in the account of what has taken place. Henri has not actually seen the heart, he does not really know what is in the jar, he does not know what Villanelle has done behind his back either, and so his report of the events leaves quite a few open questions and possibilities for making guesses about "facts".

Villanelle is not helpful in clarifying the situation and Henri notes: "I was learning not to ask her too many questions: truth or lie, the answers were usually unsatisfactory" (*P*, 113). Indeed, if asked questions, she often gives evasive answers; when, for instance, Henri tries to find out why she never takes her boots off, she responds in a way that makes the young man even more curious:

'I told you. My father was a boatman. Boatmen do not take off their boots,' and this was all she would say, but I determined on my arrival in her enchanted city to find out more about these boatmen and their boots. (*P*, 109)

Being an expert in disguises, who knows how to cheat her customers at the Casino (which we learn from her own story), Villanelle can give appearances of truth to a lie and make the truth sound like a lie: she is apt to express herself in a misleading manner, which may be illustrated by her conversation (on the very same topic of boatmen's webbed feet) with the woman she is in love with:

I told her that my real father had been a boatman and she laughed and asked could it be true that we had webbed feet?

'Of course,' I said and she laughed the more at this joke. (*P*, 66)

Later, Villanelle confesses that she "began to feel like Sarpò, that Venetian priest and diplomat, who said he never told a lie, but didn't tell the truth to everyone" (*P*, 70).

The indeterminacy of Villanelle's narration and the "unsatisfactory" explanations and answers she gives, her complex personality eluding definition as well as her ability to charm her listeners, together with the fact that she does not abhor cheating (apart from connecting her with poetry, her name may denote a mischievous person), give sufficient grounds for distrusting her and, perhaps in this situation, it would not be altogether unjustified for some readers to suspect her of tricking Henry and her listeners into believing that the icicle with a gold chain in it, which has become Henry's talisman, stays intact in the warmer climate of Venice. If all things are possible, perhaps there is also a "realistic" explanation for this phenomenon; one may make guesses about how much in this case is due to illusion and perhaps also to cheating.

Like Villanelle, Henri does not seem to mind exposing himself as an unreliable storyteller: apart from his insanity, it is also his tendency to

misrepresent facts in order to achieve a desired effect that renders his narrative uncertain. In one of the two following short quotations, he seems to be motivated by the desire to create various images of his own identity in relation to others:

Everyone else in the village had strings of relations to pick fights with and know about. I made up stories about mine. They were whatever I wanted them to be depending on my mood. (*P*, 11)

In another, he aims at pleasing his audience:

In my soldier's uniform I was treated with kindness, fed and cared for, given the pick of the harvest. In return I told stories about the camp at Boulogne and how we could see the English quaking in their boots on the opposite shore. I embroidered and invented and even lied. Why not? It made them happy. (*P*, 30)

The matter becomes further complicated with Henri's remarks about his "writing this story, trying to convey [...] what really happened. Trying not to make up too much" (*P*, 103) which suggests that even when he appears to make a deliberate attempt at truthfulness, he is still likely "to embroider" and, due to his "memory tricks" (*P*, 28), to distort the reality he remembers, especially since it is not facts but his feelings he wishes to remember correctly.

And it is emotional states of mind, indeed, not facts, not even facts about feelings, that *The Passion* is meant to represent. In the *Salon* interview with Jeanette Winterson published on the internet the novelist explains:

There are two ways of understanding reality. There is physical reality, the table, the chair, the cars on the street – what appears to be solid, knowable world, subject to proof, all around us. But there is also the reality of the psyche, imaginative reality, emotional reality, the things which are not subject to proof and never can be.¹¹

If the purpose of the novel consists in representing "the reality of the psyche" rather than "the physical reality," which can be achieved only indirectly by providing images of inner states, the question of how much magic realism, plain realism, or sheer fantasy there is in the narration of the novel loses relevance. Henri, himself a narrator, listens to quite a few stories told by others, makes it clear that he does not care whether the stories are "realistic" or not and, because of this attitude, he is (like other narratees) willing to listen to the most improbable tales told by Patrick. What matters is "that he told us stories. Stories were all we had," he says (*P*, 107). He has a similar attitude to what is said about Joséphine:

¹¹ *Salon*, interview with Jeanette Winterson, <http://archive.salon.com/april97/winterson2970428.html>.

It may or may not be true.

It doesn't matter.

Hearing about it comforts me. (P, 158)

Since it is the emotional effect achieved by the stories, not their realism or fantasy, that has the greatest significance in *The Passion*, its well-known "refrain": "Trust me, I am telling you stories" should not, perhaps, be read as an appeal to the narratees to accept the narratives as true accounts, but rather as a promise and gift of comfort, an escape from the chaos and misery of life, a gift which will captivate the imaginations and hearts of the listeners (or readers) and satisfy the needs of the storytellers, too.

Stories are essential for the listeners/readers as well as those who tell them. Henri acts as both narrator and narratee in the novel. Having deliberately and nearly completely isolated himself in the San Servelo asylum and not wishing "to see the world any more" (P, 152) he has no one to tell him stories and so he narrates one himself. He states in the ending of the book: "I go on writing so that I will always have something to read" (P, 159) and this narrative situation reveals the extremity of the self-centered existence in which he has imprisoned himself.

Unlike Henri, Bonaparte, who "was in love with himself" (P, 13) and "came to believe in myths of his own making" (P, 131) and who "tells stories" about his future victories to himself, his army and his country, needs a very large 'audience' to believe and then realize his visions and so confirm his own myths. Henri is aware of this need of Bonaparte when he notes that "his face is always pleading with us to prove him right" (P, 25).

If to Henri storytelling is a means of temporary escape from harsh reality and also a repository of his memories of past feelings, Villanelle, "who loved to tell stories," uses it (in keeping with her name denoting a lyric poem) mainly in order to create imaginative, poetic visions of her experiences and she, too, is glad to have "a reprieve such as only the stories offer" (P, 151). Stories are greatly valued by Napoleon's soldiers and they mean a great deal to the Russian peasants:

They worked hard in the hours of daylight and comforted themselves with stories from the Bible and stories of the forest. Their forests were full of spirits, some good some not, but every family had a happy story to tell; how their child was saved or their only cow brought back to life by the agency of a spirit." (P, 81)

Volumes have been written about the reasons why storytelling is so important in human life; numerous questions about its nature and functions have been asked and a variety of answers given to them. Many of them by storytellers themselves, for example writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, who asks:

Why do we tell tales, or tales about tales – why do we bear witness, true or false? We may ask Aneurin, or Primo Levi, we may ask Scheherazade, or Virginia Woolf. Is it because we are so organized as to take actions that prevent our dissolution into the surroundings?¹²

Or Graham Swift, who makes the nature and *raison d'être* of history, story and fairytale one of the major concerns of his *Waterland*, and who suggests in the novel that we need them because they dispel our fear of the dark by helping us to create patterns for our experience and impose order on chaos.

Quite a long list of motives both for telling tales and for reading or listening to them could be added to the two given above, but whatever suggestions and ideas about the nature of storytelling are put forward, most commentators would probably agree with Hayden White who begins his essay on “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” with the following observation:

To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself. So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent.¹³

A voice from a very different place in the world, India, which, however, corresponds with Hayden White's opinion, gives evidence to the universality of storytelling; Balashouri Reddy believes that:

The art of story-telling is, perhaps, as old as human civilization. In the spirit of constant inquiry into the phenomenon of nature, in the effort to seek casualty, the bare simplicity of questions (Why? Wherefore? Whereto?) constitutes the basic brickwork on which stands the earliest edifice of narrations – primitive, romantic, literary.¹⁴

The numerous references to stories and storytelling in *The Passion* highlight their pivotal position in the novel. In addition to the two main narratives, the book includes a great number of shorter accounts and stories, tales and fairytales (such as the one about “an exiled Princess whose tears turned into jewels as she walked”, *P*, 84) told not only by the two principal

¹² Ursula K. Le Guin, “It Was a Dark and Stormy Night: or, Why Are We Huddling about the Campfire?”, in: *On Narrative*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 194.

¹³ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity”, in: *On Narrative, op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Balashouri Reddy, “The Role of Mythology in Children's Literature”, pp. 74–78 in: *Telling Tales*, ed. by Amit Dasgupta (special issue of *Indian Horizons*, vol. 44, no 2, 1995), p. 74.

narrators, but also by a variety of other storytellers including those who tell stories to themselves thus indulging in wishful thinking and myth-making. The reader is constantly reminded of the act of narrating and the presence of the narrators who address him/her directly and who are, more often than not, characters in their own stories.

The narrativity of the book is emphasized also by its discourse using typical storytelling devices such as, to mention but two, the opening of various sections of the narration with "There was once..." and the narrators' manner of telling their stories as if in response to their listeners' questions ("And the boatman? / He was my father." P, 50). The foregrounding of the act of storytelling and its linguistic devices in *The Passion* gives the book its autothematic and self-referential aspect¹⁵ and, as always in such cases, draws attention to its literary form and underlines its character as a construct. And so it contributes significantly to making the narrative important as a story in itself, not "a slice of life" and thus weakening of the connection of the novel with 'physical reality'. The basic function of the story in *The Passion* depends on giving the invisible and inexpressible a "shape in words." In other words, it serves as a kind of "objective correlative".

The implication of the use of the term "objective correlative", suggesting possible affinities between *The Passion* and Eliot's poetry and his views, is not accidental. Various sources mention Winterson's interest in T. S. Eliot and the influence his work has exerted upon her writing. Helga Quadflieg, for instance, includes his name in the list of writers from whom Jeanette Winterson has borrowed¹⁶ and the expression *waste waters* in the title of her essay must be an allusion to "The Waste Land." The novelist herself confirms her indebtedness to Eliot when she mentions in "The Semiotics of Sex", in *Art Objects. Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*¹⁷, a young man asking her if her novel *Sexing the Cherry* reflects her reading of Eliot's *The Four Quartets* to which question she gives an affirmative answer. Quite a number of connections with Eliot will be found also in *The Passion*. Echoes of his poetry sound in some of its phrases. "Till human voices wake us and we drown"¹⁸ (74), for example, repeats the last line of "The

¹⁵ For the discussion of the terms "autothematic" and "self-referential" see: David Malcolm, *That Impossible Thing. The British Novel 1978-1992* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2000), pp. 24-27.

¹⁶ Helga Quadflieg, "Feminist Stories Told on Waste Waters: Jeanette Winterson's Novels", pp. 97-112, in: (Sub)Versions of Realism - Recent Women's Fiction in Britain, ed. by Irmgard Maassen and Maria Stuby, *anglistik und englischunterricht*, Band 60 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996), p. 98.

¹⁷ See: Jeanette Winterson, "The Semiotics of Sex", in: *Art Objects. Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", in: *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1961), p. 16.

Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "In between freezing and melting. In between love and despair. In between fear and sex, passion is." (P, 76) echoes the last stanza of "The Hollow Men":

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow¹⁹

There are similarities also between the descriptions of the "unreal city" with the dirty water of the Thames in Eliot and the "enchanted city" with its dark filthy canals in *The Passion*. There are references to bones, rats, water and rocks in both. There are similarities in vocabulary and imagery, and in the rhythmical patterns of language of *The Passion* and that of Eliot's blank verse poetry.

T. S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative hardly needs explaining as it is still very popular with literary critics. The poet first formulated it in his essay on *Hamlet* as follows:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.²⁰

The other of the two well known ideas distinguishing Eliot's attitude to poetry (art) in the early stages of his literary career is his conviction about the need to avoid "the dissociation of sensibility". His poems of the early period are dominated by "the search for the rhythm of common speech and the transmuting of thought and emotion into images of sensation."²¹

This is exactly what the author of *The Passion* seems to be doing: she uses a "poetic diction" which is very close to common speech and she strives to express emotion as well as thought (not divorced from emotion) by presenting "sets of objects", situations and images. Her images often undergo condensation more typical of poetic expressions. As is pointed out by Camille Renshaw, "Winterson's diction is sparse and dense, such as when Henri describes Napoleon," "But he had furs to keep his blood optimistic."²² Expressions like: "Colour drained from his face as though

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men", in: *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1981), p. 80.

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet", in: *Major British Writers*, ed. by G. B. Harrison e.a. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), p. 846.

²¹ Elizabeth Drew, "Introduction to 'T. S. Eliot'", in: *Major British Writers*, op. cit., p. 821.

²² Camille Renshaw, *The Passion*, <http://www.pifmagazine.com/SID/396>, Jan. 3, 2005.

someone had pulled a plug in his throat" (P, 18); "with no one to love, a hedgehog spirit seemed best and I hid my heart in the leaves" (P, 21); "my mother [...] kneeling [...] and cupping her hands for her portion of the Kingdom" (P, 42); the "curious fingers" of a baby (P, 43), or "many drunken hands on festival nights" (P, 55), or the one in the sentence: "I did not live in the fiery furnace she and I inhabited..." (P, 75) are only some of the long list of vivid images and metaphors that could be added to this example.

Poetry is present not only in individual phrases; the mood of the narration (especially Villanelle's) is permeated by it throughout the novel. The following passage may serve as an illustration of how this poetic mood is created:

The great clock in the Piazza struck a quarter to twelve. I hurried to my boat and rowed without feeling my hands or feet into the lagoon. In that stillness, in that quiet, I thought of my own future and what future there could be meeting in cafés and always dressing too soon. The heart is easily mocked, believing that the sun can rise twice or that roses bloom because we want them to.

In this enchanted city all things seem possible. Time stops. Hearts beat. The laws of the real world are suspended. God sits in the rafters and makes fun of the Devil and the Devil pokes Our Lord with his tail. They say the boatmen have webbed feet and a beggar says he saw a young man walk on water.

If you should leave me, my heart will turn to water and flood away. (P, 75/76)

There are strong connections between magical realism and poetry as a rule, but the poetic aspect of *The Passion* reveals the difference between the book and the classic magic realist novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: Márquez's novel leaves no doubt about its reality containing "objectively" existing elements of fantasy as its component, whereas in *The Passion* features of realism, fantasy and magical realism usually become undermined almost as soon as they are established. The kind of writing that the novel by Winterson comes very close to is, in my opinion, best represented by David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937), a book which is sometimes given the label of "a poem (largely prose in form)"²³ and, at other times, gets only a description avoiding nomenclature, e.g. when *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* characterizes it as "experimental in form, being written partly in prose and partly in free verse..."²⁴ David Jones, usually introduced by literary dictionaries as a "poet and artist" or a "writer and artist", used the words "writing" and "book" when he presented *In*

²³ Harry Blamires, "Jones, David (Michael)", entry in: *A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English*, ed. by Harry Blamires (London & New York: Methuen, 1983), pp. 137-138.

²⁴ *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. by Paul Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 435.

Parenthesis to his readers. Also T. S. Eliot, a great admirer of what he regarded "a work of genius," described it as a "book of the experience of one soldier in the War of 1914-1918."²⁵ The difficulty with allotting the appropriate compartment of literature to *In Parenthesis* may partly be explained by what Jones says about his method of writing:

None of the characters in this writing are real persons, nor is any sequence of events historically accurate. There are, I expect, minor anachronisms [...] I have only tried to make a shape in words, using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior, the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular time and of those particular men.²⁶

His purpose then is not to give an exact report on what happened, but rather to recreate emotional responses to the experience of the Great War. The result is that fidelity to facts does not matter much in the "writing" and the book indeed, as is pointed out by its reviewers and critics, creates simultaneously an impression of a phantasmagoria and of reality.

Jeanette Winterson appears to have similar aims both when she depicts Henri's experience of the Napoleonic campaign and when she describes evocatively the enchantment of Venice; the result is a combination of impressions of reality and dream or fantasy. She, too, tries to make "a shape in words" and freely chooses disparate ways and means to do so.

The sharing of certain qualities by Winterson's and David Jones's book may be due to the influence that T. S. Eliot's work has exerted on both of them. Winterson's interest in Eliot and her borrowings from him have already been noted here. Jones's indebtedness is confirmed by Eliot himself in the introduction to *In Parenthesis*, where he states: "The work of David Jones has some affinity with that of James Joyce [...] and with the later work of Ezra Pound, and with my own."²⁷ When comparing Winterson's book with David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, one cannot fail to note that their texts are often arranged in a certain order and patterned so that they can reflect meaning and emotion. Jones's comment on his method: "I frequently rely on a pause at the end of the line to aid the sense and form. A new line, which the typography would not otherwise demand, is used to indicate some change, inflexion, or emphasis"²⁸ could be also made about Winterson's *The Passion*. This may be illustrated by the following two excerpts. One from Jones:

²⁵ In "A Note of Introduction" to *In Parenthesis* by David Jones (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1963), p. vii.

²⁶ David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p. ix-x.

²⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Introduction" to *In Parenthesis*, p. vii-viii.

²⁸ David Jones, "Preface" to *In Parenthesis*, p. xi.

They stepped delicately from this refuge.

They 've halted in front sir.

German gunner, to and fro, leisurely traversed on his night-target.

Sergeant Snell with No. 4 crumpled, low crouched, in ineffectual ditch-shelter.²⁹ (42)

and from Winterson:

Perhaps Patrick loved her? Perhaps she loved him?

Love. In the middle of a zero winter. What was I thinking?

We packed the rest of her food and a good deal of Bonaparte's.

He trusted me and I had never given him reason not to.

Well, even great men can be surprised. (*P*, 88)

Similarity will be found also in such minor technical features as the tendency to repeat certain phrases. Jones, when mentioning the use of "impious and impolite words", remarks that "The very repetition of them made them seem liturgical..."³⁰ Perhaps Jones's explanation could serve also as a justification of Winterson's use, sometimes criticized, of repeated phrases such as variations of "Between fear and sex, passion is". Likewise, *The Passion* sometimes introduces a liturgical tone, and echoes, too, with Eliot's poems (e.g. the lines from "The Hollow Men" quoted earlier in this paper). It is also worth noting that repeated lines give Winterson's book: certain characteristics of the villanelle, a type of poem with line repetitions.

The fact that Winterson's and Jones's book have been influenced by T. S. Eliot and that the two writers are interested, even though in different proportions, both in prose and in poetry and make use of similar experimental techniques, places their respective works, *In Parenthesis* and *The Passion*, in the same kind of "writings" fusing prose with poetry. The significant role of poetry in Winterson's book provides sufficient reason for arguing that it is a kind of "poem in prose" which has numerous links with the more usual type of novel and with realism, including its magic variety, but its relation to reality is like that of a poem with its "licentia poetica" which transforms life into "a shape created by words". *The Passion* is, in fact, like its heroine, Villanelle: a supreme storyteller with an artist's creative imagination, a poet, who, as Henri observes, has the talent of bringing an ordinary treasure to life and finding hidden worlds in the palm of her hand. Like Villanelle, the book can "weave for the wildest dreams" of those who like the story. "It may or may be not true. It does not matter" (*P*, 158).

If Jeanette Winterson's tendency to fuse poetry with prose, sophisticated expressions with colloquial language and realistic elements including references to historical situations with a "phantasmagoria", the unreal or the

²⁹ David Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. xii.

fantastic, does not necessarily earn her the label of "magic realism", it certainly manifests her bold transgressing of borders between literary categories. This fact, together with the self-conscious aspect of the book and experiment with hybridization of various elements, forms, motifs and intertextual allusions, as well as direct borrowings from other writers, skilful use of ambiguity and indeterminacy side by side with frankly proclaimed truths, make *The Passion* a highly original work recalcitrant to classification and categorization and a perfect example of postmodernist writing. As Helga Quadflieg notes in her essay on the writer, "When it comes to talking about British postmodernism, Jeanette Winterson will certainly be one of those writers who cannot be passed."³¹

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³¹ Helga Quadflieg, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

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