

# Imagined Pasts

Magical Realism and Historiography in Jeanette  
Winterson's *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*

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Paper submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
“Bachelor in de Taal- en  
Letterkunde: Engels – Latijn”  
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May, 2016

‘What makes you think you can see anything clearly? What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we’re still alive, and say you’ve got the truth?’

‘I don’t care about the facts, Domino, I care about how I feel. How I feel will change, I want to remember that.’ (*The Passion* 28-29)

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(11.235 words)

# 1. Introduction

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Jeanette Winterson said that she aims to set her stories “in an imagined past or in an imagined present.” She explains that she constructs the background of her novels, both in terms of place and time, in such a way that her readers can “identify with a being, with a state of consciousness, with a particular kind of imaginative value” (Ibid.), rather than with a recognisable moment or place. *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* are two of her novels that one might consider “imagined pasts.” Set during the Napoleonic Wars and in 17<sup>th</sup> century London respectively, they inevitably engage with history. In the preface of each novel, however, Winterson argues that “*The Passion* is not history, except in so much as all our lives are history” (*The Passion*), and that “*Sexing the Cherry* could be called an historical novel because it is mostly set in the reign of Charles I. But if yesterday is history what is an historical novel? The past happens every minute” (*Sexing the Cherry* ix). Before the novels have really begun, Winterson has already raised questions regarding history and the way her texts interact with their historical background. These questions are very much present throughout the narratives: “How we know the present, how we know the past, and how we represent both or either are questions which are repeatedly raised in and by Winterson’s novels” (Pykett 55). Although Winterson herself has expressed a desire to distance herself from terms like “magical realism,” her writing shows many important characteristics of magical realist fiction and it is usually included in studies on the genre. Magical realism is a genre that fundamentally challenges the Western distinction between realism and fantasy in which realism is considered the more valuable mode. By extension, the genre can also effectively raise questions regarding other categories that we use in our understanding of the world around us. Furthermore, “[i]n complementing an empirical historiographic practice with other types of discourse, magic realist texts go beyond revisions of specific historical accounts to a revision of historiographic practice itself” (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 177).

In my bachelor thesis I want to explore why magical realism is a genre particularly suited to write these “imagined pasts” and how they can be read as “a revision of historiographic practice.” In other words, I will examine how the use of magical realism challenges modern historiography in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson. My analysis is based on a close-reading, focusing in particular on the main characters and the way they interact with the magical realist world they inhabit. This methodology is especially useful for magical realist texts because they can deal very explicitly with the issues that they raise. In the theoretical introduction I will introduce magical realism as a genre and its interaction with historiography more generally. Secondly, I will introduce the narrators of the novels in order to move on to my analysis of different themes: language, space and time, and remembering. I will examine these themes to illustrate how the magical realist texts work to challenge them as categories and ultimately to explore how they contribute to the way these novels challenge modern historiography.

## 2. Magical realism

Magical realism is a genre of ambiguities. Both in its relation to other genres and in its typical themes and techniques, nothing gets to be quite one thing or the other. The name of the genre itself points to its ambiguous position. Stephen Slemon calls it “an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational mode of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy” (409), but while magical realism draws attention to the opposition between realism and fantasy, one of its defining features is that it also links these oxymoronic aspects together in such a way that it becomes difficult to see them as binary opposites. The genre originated in South American literature as a reaction to realism, with authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Isabel Allende as some of its most well-known representatives. Like realist literature, magical realism relies on our conception of what is possible in the world, but instead

of affirming our assumptions and expectations uncritically, it transfers strange elements, often from fantasy, myth or legend, into the realist fictional universe. This is experienced as a strong disruption of generic boundaries, which “forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (Slemon 409), especially because realism and fantasy are seen as opposites on the generic spectrum. Anne Hegerfeldt compares how fictional worlds are constructed in realist and fantastic literature:

Once distinctive items [...] [have activated] the reader’s knowledge about the extratextual world, this is then projected onto the world of the narrative, so that the fictional world ultimately is constructed as a duplicate of the reader’s world. [...] By contrast, fantasy often must explain at length the fundamental rules of its particular fictional world, in some cases presenting the reader with a complete cosmology, which functions as an alternative megatext. (*Lies* 74)

In comparison, magical realism initially seems to construct a realist world, but then breaks the rules according to which we assume this world functions; it does this without the explanation that fantasy provides, and nevertheless keeps the realist frame firmly in place. The fantastic, impossible or magical is treated as self-evidently belonging in the same realist world, which allows the magical realist text to question the conventions of realism without transforming into something unrecognisably different. Rather than presenting the fantastic and the real as binary opposites, magical realism inserts the fantastic into a realist world, “suggesting that reality cannot be reduced to the empirically observable or rationally explicable, but that so-called fictions need to be taken into account as well” (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 90). In other words, this effect of magical realism applies not only to generic boundaries, but can be extended to our understanding of reality as a whole. An important distinction that we make in our categorisation of reality, for instance, is between the rational, the objective, the scientific and the irrational,

the emotional, and the intuitive. Magical realism, with its ambiguous position on the generic spectrum, has shown itself to be a genre very well suited to challenging this dichotomy. A comparison of realism and fantasy, for example, will result in a similar opposition. Similarly, the genre allows other categories that we use to make sense of the world around us to be questioned, as it reveals how the tools we use to shape or perceive reality are ultimately constructs rather than the given truths they appear to be. These categories can be generic, but meaning-making tools like language or categories that are important in the construction of an identity, such as culture, politics, sexuality and gender, also play a central role in many magical realist texts. Wendy Faris and Lois Zamora provide a comprehensive definition of magical realism from this perspective:

[M]agical realism is a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. (5-6)

Magical realism can have this effect because elements that might be experienced as unfamiliar, contradictory or not belonging are embedded in a realist frame. As a result, the text raises questions and concerns, but does not allow the reader to dismiss them as simply strange or impossible. If anything, the magical realist text seems to suggest that what we would like to dismiss due to its unfamiliarity or contradictory nature, is also valuable within the realist or rational frame.

Because magical realist texts typically demonstrate a high level of self-awareness, possibly bordering on meta-commentary, what magical realism means to *do* can also become what it is *about*. The issues that are raised by the text can be explicitly addressed within the text itself. The text typically does not provide a conclusive solution, however. Moreover, Anne Hegerfeldt defines “reader hesitation” (*Lies* 88) as one of the central aspects of magical realism.

Confronting the reader with contradictions, impossibilities or unfamiliar elements without providing a satisfactory explanation causes them to hesitate as to how the text ought to be interpreted. The reader might try to make sense of these elements in an attempt of “recontextualization” (Ibid., 89) by, for example, applying reason and looking for some kind of logic or underlying meaning to explain what they experience as a disruption within their expectations. Readers will want to try to naturalise the text one way or another, but the text itself continues to refuse explanation, leaving the unexplained “to speak for itself, to be accepted or not, so that the fantastic element cannot actually be recontextualized” (Ibid., 97). Furthermore, the self-conscious magical realist text can draw attention to this very process of hesitation and contextualisation. Strange elements are presented as self-evidently existing in the world, but the text often anticipates the issues readers will face by, for example, letting characters within the story point out the unbelievable nature of the events. The reader’s reaction is affirmed by the text, but at the same time this complicates the process of recontextualisation, since the text itself seems fully aware of its problematic nature. Through these gaps in the reader’s interpretation, magical realism creates space for questions concerning fundamental categories in our understanding of the world.

It is not surprising that magical realist texts often engage with history. Personal history and collective histories are fundamental in the construction of identities and cultures. Human beings constantly use the past to give meaning to the present and draw on their history as an example, an inspiration, something to move forward from, etc. This past is only accessible in so far it is recorded and to put it in writing has been one of the main methods to preserve the past throughout a significant part of human history. Modern-day historiography aims to be objective, encompassing, detailed and, most of all, to present a truthful account of events. Hegerfeldt even claims that “[p]ost-Enlightenment historiography resembles science in that it,



too, aims at an accurate and objective representation of an external reality” (Ibid., 173-174).

However, she points out that this approach is being questioned:

Scholars have shown that historiography fundamentally relies on the same narrative strategies as fiction in bestowing form, teleology and coherence on historical events, and there have been calls for a form of historical discourse that reveals, rather than obscures, the constructedness of historical accounts. (Ibid., 174)

An important term in this context is “historiographic metafiction,” a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to refer to a type of literature that works to do precisely what Hegerfeldt suggests is needed. Many magical realist texts are associated with Hutcheon’s concept due to the self-aware manner in which they engage with history. Since “the realist mode has been considered one of the strategies that enables historiography to produce a plausible and convincing account of events” (Ibid., 174), magical realism’s interaction with historiography is similar to its interaction with realism. By challenging historiography while keeping it recognisable as such, magical realism allows it to be questioned effectively, both implicitly and explicitly in the text: “Showing up the methodological and ideological limitations of historiography offers new chances, for it now becomes possible to question received versions of history as well as historiography’s claims to neutrality and validity” (Ibid., 176). Historiographic metafictional texts essentially draw attention to the inevitably subjective nature of history, because we simply do not have access to an objective, entirely truthful history. This issue is addressed in magical realist texts, as what we would like to dismiss due to its unfamiliarity, subjectivity or lack of evidence can nevertheless be shown as valuable within the historiographical frame. For individuals of a less privileged background in particular, magical realism can be a tool to create space in the Western historiographical paradigm for voices and experiences that are excluded from, for example, an imperialistic or patriarchal perspective. Ultimately, magical realism

“creates space for interactions of diversity” (Faris and Zamora 3) and acknowledges that there are various valuable ways of experiencing the world:

Using an ensemble of literary techniques, magic realist fiction insists that the concept of reality cannot be confined to the empirically perceivable. Rather, people’s multiple ways of perceiving and constructing their world must be acknowledged as real, for insofar as these fundamentally influence actions and decisions, they have significant repercussions on the level of social and material reality. (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 3)

While history is revealed “as the product of meaning-making strategies” (Ibid., 176) magical realism emerges as a genre that enables “other possibilities of representing the past” (Ibid.), which can be understood both in terms of a collective history or someone’s individual past. The genre not only “implies that eternal mythic truths and historical events are both essential components of our collective memory” (Faris, “Scheherazade” 170), but also draws attention to the act of remembering, both on a personal level and in a collective sense. History is essentially a way of remembering and by challenging the conventions of post-Enlightenment historiography, magical realism raises questions regarding the way we remember and what we remember. In many ways we rely on our past to give meaning to the present, but that past is not necessarily the version recorded in conventional historiography. In magical realism, “[h]istory is inscribed, often in detail, but in such a way that actual events and existing institutions are not always privileged and are certainly not limiting: historical narrative is no longer chronicle but clairvoyance” (Faris and Zamora 6). In other words, magical realism creates space for what is considered valuable or true according to established conventions to be examined and questioned and for alternatives to be explored, by drawing attention to the constructed nature of many tools and categories that we use to shape reality.

### 3. Narrators

The narrator is a central figure in the reader's interaction with the text. The matter-of-factness with which a magical realist narrator describes fantastic events can prevent reader hesitation from developing into absolute disbelief, as "the narrative voice bridges the gap between ordinary and bizarre, smoothing the discrepancies, making everything seem normal" (Wilson 220). At the same time, the contrast between the events and the affirming tone of the narrator is in itself one of the main causes for reader hesitation, since it is based on the magical realist opposition between realism and fantasy: "The impression that the strange, the implausible and even the impossible are perfectly natural [...] is attained by applying realist techniques to non-realistic elements" (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 87). Winterson's narrators also use what seems to be the opposite of this technique, as they often draw attention to the wondrous nature of reality itself, implying that some of the things that have been proven to be true are so strange or difficult to believe in our experience of reality that they seem to belong in the realm of fantasy. Through techniques such as these the narrator can challenge the boundaries between reality and fiction. Both *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* have multiple narrators who often represent different world-views and, consequently, the discrepancies that are smoothed from one character's point of view can be experienced as startling or unusual by another, complicating the process of recontextualisation as the reader struggles to determine whether any of the narrators can be trusted over the other, if at all.

The first narrator of *The Passion* is Henri, a French soldier in Napoleon's army. Although he is an atypical soldier, Henri's narrative is very much one of disillusionment with the war he is involved in. He joins the army out of love for Napoleon and applies to be a drummer, but is sent to the kitchens instead to kill and prepare chickens for the emperor. Eventually he deserts the army, meets Villanelle, with whom he falls in love, and follows her to Venice. Henri's voice is presented through the medium of a journal. He writes about his

experiences with Napoleon, about his childhood in the French countryside, about his feelings, or whatever seems to come to him at the moment he is writing. That he is, in fact, writing, becomes clear as he refers to his notebooks or explicitly mentions that he has been writing. Moreover, especially in the second half of the novel it becomes clear that this act of writing is really an act of remembering. Increasingly more often he refers to his immediate environment or the present moment, suggesting that he is really looking back on what he describes from wherever he is. This place is revealed to be San Servolo, the mental hospital where he is sent after killing Villanelle's husband. His entire narrative seems to be puzzled together by thoughts as they come to him and memories that may or may not have been revised as he re-reads his old journals. He depicts a very personal world, focusing on his feelings and carefully choosing what he wants to remember, and especially as it becomes clearer that he may have gone mad, his reliability becomes more questionable.

In the second part of the novel Villanelle is introduced as the second narrator. She presents herself by means of legend and rumour, describing how the Venetian boatmen are said to be born with webbed feet: "Rumour has it that the inhabitants of this city walk on water. That, more bizarre still, their feet are webbed. Not all feet, but the feet of the boatmen whose trade is hereditary. This is the legend" (49). This legend is revealed to be Villanelle's personal historical reality, but she also appears to be an exception to the legend, as she describes how she, too, was born with webbed feet while "[t]here never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (51). As a narrator, Villanelle relies on imagination and narrative modes such as the legend or fairy tale. While Henri appears to be writing, "Villanelle is never tempted to transcribe reality as it is; she believes in the healing potential of the imagination and is therefore best described as an 'oral' narrator" (Aróstegui, *Recurrent* 126). She is explicitly characterised as a story-teller, the term referring to the narrative structure and content of her stories as well as to the act of speaking. When Henri and Villanelle meet, their

different world-views, characterised by different types of discourse, are confronted with each other. This confrontation is an example of how “magic realist fiction uses hesitation in order to actively question [its rational-empirical] world-view from a meta-level” (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 90). In this sense, Henri usually enacts the hesitation the reader may be experiencing, relying on a realist world-view: “If the text concedes that [fantastic elements] might be thought of as unlikely or impossible, it is at that moment taking into consideration the realist world-view, which actually is foreign to the text” (Ibid.). The matter becomes more complicated when in the second half of the novel there is often no clear indication of whose voice it is we are reading and whether that voice is mediated through someone else’s. Especially towards the end of the novel the narrator’s identity becomes more ambiguous and the ending itself allows for many possible readings depending on who we believe to be the speaker.

One of the main narrators in *Sexing the Cherry* is the Dog Woman, an enormous woman who lives in a hut by the Thames where she breeds fighting dogs. When she finds Jordan, the second narrator of the novel, on the banks of the river, she adopts him as her son. Relying on her physical strength, she actively engages with the religious and political issues that she is confronted with in 17<sup>th</sup> century London, while also continually reviewing her past in an attempt to understand herself. Rather than applying realist techniques to non-realistic elements, she strongly applies realism to a reality that could be experienced as unpleasant, as explicit sexual and violent scenes are often described in great detail. She is very sincere and straight-forward in her interactions and well-intentioned when it comes to Jordan and her dogs, but she is also very violent and seems to lack an understanding of many social conventions. As a result, her narrative is often startlingly explicit and she remains an outsider figure to the world around her. Jordan, on the other hand, is a young traveller and explorer. When he meets John Tradescant, the royal gardener, he joins him on his explorations to the New World to discover new fruits, but these are not the journeys that he describes as a narrator:

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I may have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time. I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books. I could faithfully describe all that I saw and heard and give you a travel book. You could follow it then, tracing those travels with your finger, putting red flags where I went. (2)

He describes how he travels through dreams, through stories, or through what appears to be his imagination, searching for love in the form of the elusive dancer called Fortunata, as well as for a better understanding of himself. In this way Jordan differentiates his narrative from an objective travelogue. While these journeys seem personal, his voice often becomes very impersonal as he approaches his journeys from a theoretical and often almost scientific standpoint. He shows an awareness of the limitations of the imaginary nature of the journeys he describes, but nevertheless presents them as a valid reality. Furthermore, Jordan explicitly challenges “[r]eality as something which can be agreed upon” (93) or “[r]eality as truth” (Ibid.) by illustrating how objective realities and subjective experiences are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, when he introduces himself on the first page of the novel he says: “My name is Jordan. This is the first thing I saw” (1), and when he finally finds Fortunata she tells him her story and says: “This is the first thing I saw” (106). However, Jordan notes:

*Lies 8:* It was not the first thing she saw, how could it have been. Nor was the night in the fog-covered field the first thing I saw. But before then we were like those who dream and pass through life as a series of shadows. And so what we have told you is true, although it is not. (109)

In this way he challenges the difference between what is objectively true and what is true in someone’s individual experience, encouraging the reader to reconsider what determines what can be accepted as a valid truth. Because of Jordan’s mediating position regarding different

realities and because they simply do not interact very often, there is less of a confrontation between Jordan and the Dog Woman. The strongest confrontations they experience are those within their own different environments, since they are very different people and very much seem to have their own stories, unlike Henri and Villanelle whose lives are eventually closely linked.

Later in the novel two more narrators are introduced. Nicholas Jordan and a nameless activist woman seem to function as doubles to Jordan and the Dog Woman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They have similar interests and follow similar paths in their lives, as if they are somehow interconnected across space and time. In a number of scenes they appear to shift through each other's consciousness, becoming one another. This relationship between the 20<sup>th</sup> century and 17<sup>th</sup> century characters remains an ambiguous one. While their involvement, as well as other characters' brief role as a narrator such as the Twelve Dancing Princesses, means that there are ultimately more narrators in *Sexing the Cherry*, there is less confusion as to who is speaking in this novel, since the narrator is indicated by a symbol at the beginning of each chapter. Consequently, their voices interact less ambiguously than those of Henri and Villanelle.

*The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* present a set of very different narrators with different world-views, relying on different narrative modes. The text provides little help to interpret the contradictions and ambiguities they present both individually and in comparison to one another, leaving large gaps of hesitation in which the reader is encouraged to reconsider their criteria for unreliability. As it creates space for individuals of different backgrounds to be acknowledged in this way, the magical realist text becomes a medium for different voices.

#### 4. Language

Both *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* draw attention to language itself as one of the most fundamental meaning-making tools. Maria Aróstegui argues that “if history is discourse, it is

constructed in and through language and that, consequently, it is open to revision and recontextualization” (*Recurrent* 8), suggesting that language itself is a possibly ambiguous category. In this context Winterson explores the discrepancy between language itself and the meanings it evokes: “As Winterson presses on the limits of language, she hits upon its necessary mediation, the recognition that words call up visions distinctly different from those they actually present, letter-by-letter, on the page” (Burns 297). She uses different techniques to explore how these visions and meanings can change, illustrating how an understanding of language is dependent on context and conventions.

#### **4.1. Motifs in *The Passion***

A first technique that is used to reveal how meanings are dependent on context is repetition through the use of motifs. As the story develops or as different characters apply them to different situations, motifs in *The Passion*, such as “There’s no such thing as a limited victory” (133), will get different meanings or connotations. Furthermore, repetition itself is not only shown to have the potential to evoke different meanings, but it can also be a conscious attempt at meaning-making or defining, as illustrated by the motif of situating passion between two extremes: “In between freezing and melting. In between love and despair. In between fear and sex, passion is” (76). Both Henri and Villanelle are continually trying to define passion through repetition and association with different concepts, apparently struggling to put it into words. On the other hand, motifs can also become more ambiguous as they are repeated. The main motif in *The Passion* is its most ambiguous one: “Trust me. I’m telling you stories” (5). This paradoxical motif is repeated by different characters and either means to support or undermine the speaker:

The emphatic use of the ‘I’ persona, combined with the imperative ‘Trust me’, have the effect of convincing us of the veracity of the speaker’s account, but this assumption of



truth is undercut by the ambiguity of the word ‘story’ which can signify either a factual account or, alternatively, a tissue of fiction and lies. (Palmer 108-109)

It is impossible to know the speaker’s intention and the magical realist text does not make an effort to resolve the hesitation caused by this ambiguity. While the motif seemingly brings two opposites together, this opposition is exactly what magical realism as a genre challenges. In this way the motif can be read as a representation of the typically magical realist claim that “stories” can be trustworthy narrative forms, but eventually the motif comes to represent all of its possible meanings, refusing a simple interpretation.

Moreover, some motifs can be read across the two novels. *Sexing the Cherry* either literally quotes *The Passion* or uses very similar wording, for example when Artemis repeats Villanelle’s words within Fortunata’s story: “what you risk reveals what you value” (*Sexing the Cherry* 155, *The Passion* 91). In other words, the same ideas can be used in completely different narratives and different interpretations can be read through the two novels. This interaction between the novels becomes even more significant when Jordan explicitly contradicts something that Henri had said in *The Passion* by including it in his list of lies: “*Lies 1*: There is only the present and nothing to remember” (Ibid., 92). By challenging the idea that one text expresses, the other text seems to create space for a dialogue between the two novels.

Ultimately, through the process of repetition, previous interpretations will inevitably become a ground for comparison to later interpretations. As a result, motifs produce layers of meaning as they are repeated throughout the narrative or even across different narratives, effectively illustrating how language as a meaning-making tool is subject to processes of recontextualisation.

#### **4.2. Literalisation in *The Passion***

Another important magical realist technique is what Anne Hegerfeldt calls “literalization” (“Contentious Contributions” 68), referring to the literal use of expressions that are usually

considered figurative speech. Literalisation challenges the reader because, according to Hegerfeldt, “the violation of the boundary between the literal and the figurative disrupts the reading process, engendering a certain amount of hesitation in the reader about how the text is to be understood” (*Lies* 237). This technique is used especially in *The Passion*.

The most important figurative expressions in *The Passion*, whether they are literalised or not, refer to the heart. The heart is a popular metaphor for feelings, especially of love. We often imagine the heart as the centre of our emotions. It is therefore not unusual to find Henri hiding “[his] heart in the leaves” (21). The first figurative expressions the reader encounters in the novel will not necessarily raise questions, but they do anticipate the potential hesitation Hegerfeldt mentions long before the reader’s direct confrontation with literalisation. As the story progresses, the characters’ insistence on referring to the heart, more often than not in association with an action, becomes jarring. Villanelle tells Henri and his friend: “They didn’t give me enough time to collect my heart, only my luggage, but I’m grateful to them for that; this is no place for a heart” (99). The emphasis on physical actions poses a challenge. In these contexts, especially when the characters appear to experience very real consequences, the metaphoric heart seems to want to become a tangible reality. Because the heart is a vital organ in the human body, a literal meaning of these metaphors would be all the more problematic.

A central moment in the book is the scene in which Henri, as well as the reader, is finally explicitly confronted with the issue of Villanelle’s missing heart. She has already spoken of her heart and its absence, how she gambled it away, how she fell in love and lost it. Because of our familiarity with the metaphor of the heart this does not necessarily strike us as particularly unlikely and Henri does not express any objection when Villanelle mentions it: “In return, she would ask of me a favour and that favour concerned the re-possession of her heart. ‘My lover still has it. I left it there. I want you to help me get it back’” (109). In this key-scene, however,

we find that she was not merely expressing her feelings through a metaphor when she referred to her missing heart:

‘In that house, you will find my heart. You must break in, Henri, and get it back for me.’

Was she mad? We had been talking figuratively. Her heart was in her body like mine. I tried to explain this to her, but she took my hand and put it against her chest.

‘Feel for yourself.’

I felt and without the slightest subterfuge moved my hand up and down. I could feel nothing. I put my ear to her body and crouched quite still in the bottom of the boat and a passing gondolier gave us a knowing smile.

I could hear nothing.

‘Villanelle, you’d be dead if you had no heart.’

‘Those soldiers you lived with, do you think they had hearts? Do you think my fat husband had a heart somewhere in his lard?’ Now it was me shrugging my shoulders.

‘It’s a way of putting it, you know that.’

‘I know that but I’ve told you already. This is an unusual city, we do things differently here.’ (116)

As Villanelle reveals that she has literally lost her heart, the heart metaphor is literalised. The text emphasises the problematic nature of this scene as the reader’s hesitation is both anticipated and affirmed by Henri, who clearly experiences the discovery as unsettling. Through Henri’s reaction, the text itself draws attention to the issue readers will face when confronted with the figurative transgressing into reality. Anne Hegerfeldt writes:

magical realist fiction characteristically renders its techniques of literalization transparent, deliberately drawing attention to and more often than not even formulating the figurative expression that has given rise to a certain magic element. One could say that the text, in a counter-move of ‘figurization’, hesitates or suspends the literalized element, causing the reader to hover between two possible interpretations. (*Lies* 244)

In this case the literalised element is suspended especially by Henri’s reluctance to accept the reality Villanelle represents. The scene explicitly acknowledges different possible interpretations and forces the reader to think back and consider previous encounters with what they thought to be figurative speech. This particular scene excludes other interpretations of Villanelle’s words; we can now assume that when Villanelle referred to her heart, she meant her heart as the tangible object she has revealed it to be. However, other instances of figurative language, especially referring to the heart, become problematic. Henri expresses his disbelief as a character that exists within the same fictional reality Villanelle inhabits, indicating that the phenomenon might be limited to the mysterious atmosphere of Venice, where they “do things differently” (116), or to Villanelle herself, as she already poses an exception to the rule that only boatmen can have webbed feet. It is, however, typical for Winterson’s magical realist elements to refuse an unambiguous explanation.

Ultimately, the scene only adds to the questions and contradictions of the narrative. Earlier in the book, Henri expressed his preference for one particular interpretation of the word “heartless”: “When I say I lived with heartless men, I use the word correctly” (83). It is important to note that when Henri tells us this, he is remembering his past at a later point in his life. Perhaps he has already retrieved Villanelle’s heart from her lover’s house. Even now the reader, too, has been confronted with an alternative meaning of the word, it remains unclear exactly which meaning Henri refers to. Villanelle’s literal heartlessness, interestingly, does not

make her emotionally heartless the way we would usually interpret the word, unlike other characters who are presumably in possession of their literal heart. Villanelle's husband, for example, is deemed heartless by both herself and Henri. Villanelle wonders: "Do you think my fat husband had a heart somewhere in his lard?" (116), to which Henri responds later: "You said he had no heart, Villanelle, let's see" (128). In the end he does have a heart, but that does not necessarily provide an answer to Villanelle's question. By now the text has completely dissected what it means to be heartless. In addition, Winterson applies literalisation primarily to metaphors that have to do with a feeling or an emotional state of being. These are by nature subjective and therefore neither true or untrue. The text suggests that different people will have different experiences; Villanelle is a passionate woman and when she loses her heart she does so literally, whereas Henri can only metaphorically hide his heart under the leaves in an attempt to survive the horrors of war, although that, too, remains ambiguous to a certain extent. The narrative affirms that Villanelle's way of experiencing the world is valid, even if it seems unlikely or contradictory. The literalisation of the metaphoric heart also draws attention to the metaphor itself: "Endowing figures of speech with the referentiality of literal language, magic realist fiction strikingly insists that metaphors are not merely the rhetorical ornaments or even the lies great thinkers of modernity have made them out to be, but that they have a decidedly real influence on human perceptions of the world" (Hegerfeldt, "Contentious Contributions" 69). In other words, by literalising these metaphors, thus making them more real, the text presents them as meaningful tools within language as one of the categories we use in our perception of reality.

### **4.3. Failure of language in *Sexing the Cherry***

While *Sexing the Cherry* does contain examples of literalisation, the text does not explicitly draw attention to this aspect. When the Dog Woman says: "We saw the sun rising over the water, and the light got louder and louder until we were shouting to make ourselves heard" (10),

it is the reality of the shouting that emphasises the literal meaning of this synesthetic scene. The text itself never directly addresses this kind of language the way *The Passion* does, leaving it up to the reader to overcome their potential hesitation. At the same time, however, *Sexing the Cherry* seems to go even further than literalising the meaning of figurative language, by turning language itself into a physical reality. Jordan describes how spoken words become tangible objects in one of the cities he visits: “Their words, rising up, form a thick cloud over the city, which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language” (11). As a result of techniques such as literalisation “[t]he reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic – a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience” (Faris, “Scheherazade” 176). In this example, the text firmly closes that gap between words and the world by actually bringing words into the world as an object that can be interacted with.

However, language also often seems to fail as a conveyor of meaning in *Sexing the Cherry*. Jordan appears very frustrated with language, arguing that it refuses to accurately express a particular meaning: “Language always betrays us, tells the truth when we want to lie, and dissolves into formlessness when we would most like to be precise” (102). Meanwhile, The Dog Woman longs to understand the meaning of things, showing a great interest for the Scriptures, and thus thematising the issue of interpreting the Bible, in which language and meaning have always been central concerns. Despite her efforts, however, she often misunderstands, especially sexually connoted language, eventually making her feel more isolated. Furthermore, both words and feelings, which are strongly associated with each other, frequently refuse to be articulated in the novel: “but thirteen years of words were fighting in my throat and I couldn’t get any of them out” (126), “when I tried to speak my throat was clogged with feelings that resist words” (166). Ultimately, while language can become so present and real that “words [literally] resist erasure” (11) in the city Jordan visits, the characters themselves

seem to feel distanced from language, unsatisfied with it as a conveyor of meaning or confused by its conventional meanings.

In conclusion, by using these techniques, the novels draw attention to language as an ambiguous meaning-making tool that relies on context and conventions in order to be understood, illustrating how language, too, “is open to revision and recontextualization” (Aróstegui, *Recurrent* 8). As the text thematises the hesitation the reader experiences as a consequence of the dislodging of meanings, the use of these techniques contributes to the sense that the novels work to question the categories and tools we use to perceive and shape reality, refusing definite answers to the questions that are raised, but acknowledging alternative meanings and interpretations as valid truths at the same time.

## 5. Space and time

The emphasis on experience that emerges in Winterson’s novels is also obvious in the way they deal with space and time as categories that play a fundamental role in our perception of reality, in which events unfold against a physical or temporal background. Rawdon Wilson suggests that the magical realist space is a “*hybrid*” (220) space, in which “[i]t is as if there are two worlds, distinct and following dissimilar laws, that interpenetrate and interwind, all unpredictably but in a natural fashion” (Ibid., 222). In this hybrid space oppositions or boundaries can be interacted with in a more substantial way. Both of the novels draw attention to how we maintain a sense of physical space when dealing with abstractions, illustrating how we use space as a mental construction to make sense of both our external and internal world. Moreover, since the plasticity of space in magical realism is often linked to the experience of time (Ibid., 219), as will be illustrated especially in *Sexing the Cherry*, space and time will be significant factors to consider when examining the way characters remember within the magical realist world.

*The Passion* is set mainly in France and Venice. While France is not unusually presented in terms of space, Venice emerges as a city where the impossible is possible. With its labyrinth-like structure and waterways Venice is in itself an unusual city compared to the prototypical city. When it is introduced by Villanelle, Venice is immediately associated with rumour and legend, presented as if it were a city from a fairy tale in some undetermined place: “There is a city surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets and roads and silted up back ways that only the rats can cross” (49). The city seems impossible to navigate to those who rely on conventional means, since “[y]our bloodhound nose will not serve you here. Your course in compass reading will fail you” (Ibid.), and over time Venice is explicitly differentiated from realist spaces: “In this enchanted city all things seem possible. Time stops. Hearts beat. The laws of the real world are suspended” (76). Not only the events that transpire within Venice defy the laws of the realist world, but the space itself disregards the rules according to which we would expect it to function:

The city I come from is a changeable city. It is not always the same size. Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land. There are days when you cannot walk from one end to the other, so far is the journey, and there are days when a stroll will take you round your kingdom like a tin-pot Prince. (97)

Space appears to have the ability to change, to shrink and stretch, or to fold in on itself. Venice becomes a space of layers, concealing a mysterious inner city and continually changing its structure. Villanelle suggests that to find your way “in this mercurial city, it is required you do awake your faith. With faith, all things are possible” (49), but faith is nothing like the straightforward, scientific tools such as a compass or a map. Venice resists logic and order, refuses to be depicted on a map, and seemingly “has invented a time of its own” (Aróstegui, *Recurrent* 150) through its association with the mythical temporal setting of the fairy tale and legend, making it difficult to approach this “city of mazes” (49) or “city of disguises” (56) from a realist



standpoint. Instead, Villanelle presents intuition and imagination as valuable tools to navigate this world of fantasy and chance.

The significance of space as a mental construction is highlighted especially as the meaning of spatial elements is shown to change depending on the perspective. For instance, Villanelle describes bridges, generally understood as a construction meant to “avoid walking on water” (57), as “a meeting place. A neutral place. A casual place” (Ibid.), whereas “[f]or lovers, a bridge is a possibility, a metaphor for their chances” (Ibid.). Moreover, Villanelle seems to associate physical space with an emotional dimension. Interestingly, while she clearly feels at ease in a strange place like Venice, she experiences emotional disruption as being in an unfamiliar place:

How is it that one day life is orderly and you are content, a little cynical perhaps but on the whole just so, and then without warning you find the solid floor is a trapdoor and you are now in another place whose geography is uncertain and whose customs are strange? (68)

Evidently, Villanelle may be accustomed to different kinds of spaces, but she still experiences the unfamiliar or the deceptive as distressing. When Villanelle situates passion “[s]omewhere between the swamp and the mountains” (68), adding a geographical aspect to the motif of situating passion between two extremes, she explicitly relates a sense of space to this abstract concept. These examples draw attention to the significance of space in the process of understanding or dealing with emotions, which “are developed not only in texts, but in pictures, in sounds, in the way space is organized” (Pernau and Rajamani 47). In this way *The Passion* presents spaces that extend beyond what is initially visible as well as beyond the immediate physical reality.

To understand Venice, and by extension to understand Villanelle, it appears you need a different understanding of space. This difference is especially emphasised when Henri finds

himself in Venice with Villanelle, as their conflicting world-views are confronted with each other. To Henri, Napoleon's Paris, an ordinary city in comparison to Venice, had been a "city of dreams" (37), whereas Venice becomes "a city of madmen" (112). When he arrives he says it is "like seeing an invented city rise up and quiver in the air" (109) and, entirely unfamiliar with the changeable nature of the city, he asks Villanelle for a map:

'I need a map.'

'It won't help. This is a living city. Things change.'

'Villanelle, cities don't.'

'Henri, they do.' (113)

This scene is another clear confrontation between Henri and Villanelle and the things they stand for. Once again, Henri represents a realist world-view and his objection to Villanelle's claim affirms the hesitation the reader might be experiencing in their attempt to make sense of Venice the way it is presented in the novel. The space where Henri will eventually feel the safest is the static, closed space of San Servolo, the mental hospital where he is imprisoned. In this place he is free to navigate his thoughts and memories in peace, while his external environment stays in place and, moreover, actively works to keep him in place. Venice, on the other hand, is "[r]uled by chance, intuition, and imagination" (Aróstegui, *Recurrent* 151). Like Villanelle, it comes to represent a different world of experience in which space and time can function according to the rules of the inner world.

*Sexing the Cherry* deals much more explicitly with space than *The Passion* does. Jordan visits a number of places that are similar to Venice in the way space functions, describing for instance how he jumps out of a tower only to fall into a market stall from what then suddenly appears to be a street-level windowsill. In contrast with *The Passion*, however, space is one of the central themes of this novel. Jordan in particular shows a great interest for space on a theoretical level. From the beginning he makes a distinction between his journeys through the

real world, from which he brings back exotic fruits with his friend John Tradescant, and the journeys “[he] may have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time” (2). Evidently, the space that Jordan wants to navigate is not necessarily here and now and not necessarily that what is visible on the surface, restricted to the physical environment. Through his consciousness he has access to imaginary or dream-like spaces, or a mental rendering of the space he physically inhabits: “To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is, in conversation or at dinner, and walk through a series of winding streets to a house standing back from the road” (11). This escape from the physical world is later revealed to be a search for a better understanding of himself: “I saw that the running away was a running towards. An effort to catch up with my fleet-footed self” (89). Evidently, Jordan, like Villanelle, uses spaces to interpret his feelings and so his journeys through the realm of stories and imagination become part of a larger mental project. His heart, too, is presented as a space that has not yet been explored: “Islands are metaphors for the heart, no matter what poet says otherwise. My own heart, like this wild place, has never been visited, and I do not know whether it could sustain life” (89). In this way, emotional spaces, dream-like spaces or imaginary spaces are presented as a reality that can be explored. Consequently, Jordan’s journeys in search for himself can also be read as a literalisation of the psychological exploration of the inner world as he is shown to literally explore these emotional spaces.

Furthermore, time is consistently connected to space in *Sexing the Cherry*. In the preface Winterson refers to the difference between time the way it is objectively measured and psychological time as we experience it: “The measure of our days is uniform, but that is not our lived experience of time, nor is it how we remember” (viii). This difference between measured time and experienced time is emphasised throughout the novel and the ideas that Winterson raises in the preface are echoed later by the 20<sup>th</sup> century activist woman:

I have a calendar and a watch, and so rationally I can tell where I am in this thing called a year. My own experience is different. I feel as though I have been here for years already. [...] And so my strongest instinct is to abandon the common-sense approach and accept what is actually happening to me; that time has slowed down. (145)

Consequently, time, too, is presented as a mental construction that we use to make sense of our experiences. Jordan is especially preoccupied with the questions regarding time and space that run through the narrative. He argues that the claim that “[t]ime is a straight line” (91) is a lie and instead presents time as a kind of space in another theoretical chapter titled “The Nature of Time” (101): “Thinking about time is like turning the globe round and round, recognizing that all journeys exist simultaneously [...] If all time is eternally present, there is no reason why we should not step out of one present into another” (101-102). In Jordan’s experience, time becomes another space that can be navigated. This connection between space and time is made even more explicit in the novel, as spaces actually overlap through time and consciousness. In a chapter titled “Hallucinations and Diseases of the Mind” (91) Jordan describes how 20<sup>th</sup> century Nicholas Jordan or the activist woman shift to their 17<sup>th</sup> century double, while later in the novel these shifts are narrated from the perspective of the 20<sup>th</sup> century characters themselves. In these scenes the characters seem to become one another as they suddenly find themselves as someone else in a different place and time. The relationship between these doubles remains an ambiguous one. A possible interpretation might be to read the 20<sup>th</sup> century characters and their strong connection with the past as an embodiment of the significance of the past in our understanding of ourselves. Through this strange connection space, time, and even the self are presented with the ability to change or transform, stretching beyond the physical space, measured time, or a single sense of self.

While characters in *Sexing the Cherry* will also express disbelief or confusion regarding other characters’ experiences within these different spaces, the confrontations are less startling

than the ones between Henri and Villanelle, who represent two very different world views. As mentioned earlier, Jordan and the Dog Woman are somewhat distanced from one another and their differences are not emphasised as strong oppositions in the same way. When the Dog Woman questions Jordan she usually relies on a world view that is outdated from the reader's perspective. She worries, for example, that Jordan will eventually fall off the earth during his journeys since she believes it to be a flat surface. However, when Jordan addresses this idea in a theoretical chapter titled "The Flat Earth Theory" (90), he also affirms his mother's seemingly outdated experience: "The earth is round and flat at the same time. This is obvious. That it is round appears indisputable; that it is flat is our common experience, also indisputable" (Ibid.). From this mediating perspective Jordan actively affirms the validity of different spatial perceptions, contributing to the idea that seemingly impossible or contradicting experiences are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Ultimately, the way Winterson presents space suggests that one understanding of the space around us does not exclude the reality of a different, subjective, or contradictory understanding of that space. Many objective measuring tools such as the compass, map, or clock, are revealed to be flawed since they cannot acknowledge aspects of the human experience that are excluded from a strictly rational perspective. Instead the novels present faith, love, and intuition as valid alternatives to navigate and make sense of both external and internal spaces. In this hybrid magical realist world, in which physical spaces and abstract spaces can interact, different experiences and perceptions can exist and be true at the same time. The emphasis on the multiplicity of experiences of space and time suggests that there are multiple realities to take into consideration when constructing an image of reality and draws attention to the importance of space and time as a mental construction in the way we order our thoughts, emotions, and memories.

## 6. Remembering: interactions with the past

Remembering itself is essentially a meaning-making act, in which the past is given meaning and can in turn be used to give meaning to the present. If historiography can be seen as a mode of remembering, it clearly relies on “manufactured time” (*Sexing the Cherry* viii) to construct an historical account, but as Winterson points out, that is not “how we remember” (Ibid.): “For [...] Winterson, time exists in the space between fact and fiction, and is itself merely a construct, as our lives are not lived solely in the material world depicted by historical accounts” (Campbell 27). Wulf Kansteiner advocates “for the conflation of individual and collective memory” (185) due to “the social nature of individual remembering and forgetting” (Ibid.), suggesting that individual memories are also shaped by the conventions of collective history: “The very language and narrative patterns that we use to express memories, even autobiographical memories, are inseparable from the social standards of plausibility and authenticity that they embody” (Ibid). Winterson’s novels, however, seem to point out an imbalance in the interaction between individual memory and collective history that Kansteiner presents. The standards of plausibility of realist discourse are based on objectivity and rationality, leaving no room for subjective or irrational experiences. As Megan R. Campbell suggests, “our lives are not lived solely in the material world depicted by historical accounts” (27) and our individual memories will include experiences that an objective historical account cannot acknowledge. As if drawing attention to this imbalance, Winterson raises questions regarding how and what we remember throughout her novels.

By writing down his memories, Henri actively partakes in an act of remembering. His prison in San Servolo provides time and space for him to revisit the past through his memories and old journals. As he frequently refers to these old journals, suggesting that he is re-reading memories while he writes, his project becomes a cycle of remembering and re-interpreting: “I

go on writing so that I will always have something to read” (159). In this continual process of remembering he focuses on a particular reality, namely one of emotions:

‘What makes you think you can see anything clearly? What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we’re still alive, and say you’ve got the truth?’

‘I don’t care about the facts, Domino, I care about how I feel. How I feel will change, I want to remember that.’ (28-29)

Clearly, Henri’s intention is not to create an inclusive record of events or an objective historical document. In this dialogue with his friend Domino he challenges the opposition between fact and feeling, suggesting that his changeable feelings are a valuable truth to remember. He illustrates the significance of these feelings in his process of remembering when he re-reads the following in an old journal: “I say I’m in love with her. What does that mean? It means I review my future and my past in the light of this feeling” (123). Evidently, through his feelings the past and the future can be given new meanings, but Henri is aware that those feelings and, as a consequence, his perception of the world will change. As a result, by writing and re-reading, he creates layers of memories and meanings, as he documents how his feelings change.

As a narrator Henri inevitably draws attention to issues regarding the reliability of memories. Memories, too, are flawed representations of the past, not only due to the fact that the human brain can only remember so much, but also because those memories can change, re-interpreted over time or transformed by our imagination. Jordan addresses this issue in *Sexing the Cherry*: “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” (105). In this sense all of our memories will inevitably differ from the past exactly the way it happened. Henri, too, cares increasingly less about his credibility or the truthfulness of the things he describes, emphasising the personal value of his memories: “It may

or may not be true. It doesn't matter. Hearing about it comforts me" (158). What Henri wants to remember may not be considered truthful from a realist perspective, but he suggests that it is meaningful nevertheless, based on criteria of personal value. Furthermore, Henri also actively chooses to forget in this process of remembering. While he seems to be clinging to the past on the one hand, he also often shows a desire to escape from it: "I threw the filthy water I used along with the remains of my beard into the canal and prayed that my past had sunk forever" (112). As illustrated in his conversation with Domino, Henri is not interested in a factual, objective historical account. In his project of remembering he can make a clear distinction between what he wants to remember and what he wants to forget. By rewriting his own history in this way, he "illegitimizes history as a grand narrative and shows instead that history, like the past, is always subject to manipulation" (Aróstegui, "History as Discourse" 17).

Villanelle, too, continually revisits the past in order to make sense of the present, but she presents a very different mode of remembering. She relies on stories and legends to remember and give meaning to the past, deliberately differentiating herself from realist modes. Instead "she explores the possibilities of turning her back on history through the use of the mythical as a narrative mode" (Aróstegui, *Recurrent* 156). Fantastic genres are much better suited than realist historiography to record her experience of the world, in which imagination and chance play a central role. Villanelle even argues that imagination is an essential aspect in the process of giving meaning to the past and the present: "There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming. Thus the present is made rich. Thus the present is made whole" (62). The involvement of Villanelle and other characters such as the Twelve Dancing Princesses in *Sexing the Cherry*, who each get to tell their own fairy tale-like autobiographies, "suggests that historical truth is not restricted to the realist discourse of post-Enlightenment historiography, but may also be conveyed through overtly fictional forms, which sometimes are better suited to express human experience" (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 181). In this sense *The Passion's* "paradoxical



slogan ‘I’m telling you stories. Trust me.’ becomes the quintessence of a new historiographical practice” (Ibid.) in which stories are acknowledged as potentially truthful narratives.

Remembering appears to be more complicated in *Sexing the Cherry*, in which time is a space that can be entered anywhere, stretched out before and after us. In Jordan’s perception of time, remembrance becomes disconnected from the past. Instead, he seems to represent the idea that Winterson derived from recent neuropsychological developments that “we imagine the past and remember the future” (Winterson, *Vogue* interview). Eventually Jordan will be unable to differentiate between his memories and his imagination: “*Memory I*: 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” (106). The ambiguous relationship between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century doubles can also be interpreted in terms of remembrance, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century characters can be read as an embodiment of an interaction with the past, illustrating how the past can be meaningful to our present self. However, this interpretation is complicated by Jordan’s role as the narrator of some of the scenes in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century characters become their 17<sup>th</sup> century double. In this way Jordan establishes a complex connection between imagination and remembrance in which both of those acts can be applied to both the past and the future.

Finally, in their processes of remembering and in their interaction with the world around them, the narrators of these novels also interact with history as a category. They are linked especially to the historical time in which their narrative is set through their interaction with real historical figures such as Napoleon or John Tradescant. Through his direct connection with Napoleon, but also more generally as a soldier in the context of the Napoleonic wars, Henri becomes a significant individual in the grand scheme of history. As a soldier his past and future were given meaning by Napoleon, but the reality of the war destroyed every notion of a future, which “had turned so relentlessly into identical presents” (86). In an attempt to escape the war

and to reclaim agency over the meaning of his life and his experience of time, he deserts the army and eventually appears to have found his own time in his project of writing and remembering: “Henri goes back to his past as a necessary movement to control it. Writing himself, mastering his experience of the world in language and syntax, is the best way to escape from the constraints of History” (Aróstegui, *Recurrent* 76). Because she relies on imagination and legend to give meaning to her past, “Villanelle, though living in French-occupied Venice, seems to exist outside of the history that nearly swallows Henri” (Campbell 28). The Dog Woman and the activist woman, on the other hand, actively engage in the politics of their time, thus arguably attempting to influence what will become history. However, they remain virtually nameless outsider figures to the higher authorities in the novel, in part due to their unconventional femininity, also illustrating how specific groups or individuals can be excluded from historical recognition from a patriarchal perspective. In this way the novels bring conventionally significant and insignificant people together, as well as those who actively try to contribute to what will become history and those who try to distance themselves from it. As a result, they create space for all kinds of individuals, narrative modes and experiences to be included in a revised historical context or a more general context of remembrance.

## 7. Conclusion

By drawing attention to different meaning-making processes and tools, emphasising different experiences as a valid reality, and uncovering how realist discourse excludes many of those experiences based on its rational standards, as illustrated in this thesis, Jeanette Winterson’s magical realist texts challenge realist discourse as the only objective, truthful, or inclusive mode to construct a representation of reality. By extension, by interacting with aspects of history and remembrance Winterson challenges the notion that historiographical representations of the past are the only valid versions of that past. The reality that is ultimately illustrated in these novels

is that the realist and historiographical ideal of an entirely objective, scientific, rational truth is unattainable. “[H]istoriography’s claims to neutrality and validity” (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 176) are effectively challenged by the texts as they draw attention to how the genre, influenced by standards of realist discourse, or ideologies and social conventions, can exclude certain experiences or groups of individuals from the reality it presents. Instead, other genres or modes emerge as alternatives to represent the past and those aspects of the past that are excluded from an historiographical account. By explicitly addressing the issues they deal with and by actively engaging the reader in a process of recontextualisation through reader hesitation, the magical realist texts encourage the reader to take part in this discussion and re-evaluate the established conventions that determine what can be considered valuable or true.

An important theme in Winterson’s work that I have not included in this thesis, is gender. Because it is such a central theme, to effectively examine gender in relation to the aspects that I have discussed would easily become a separate research project. Many scholars have written about gender in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, exploring especially how the novels work to challenge patriarchal structures. In the context of the texts’ interaction with historiography, attention has been drawn in particular to how the novels create space for outsider figures or minorities, especially in terms of gender or sexuality, to challenge the Western patriarchal perspective from which they are excluded.

Like most magical realist texts, Winterson’s novels seem to contribute to discussions about the importance of magical, mythical, or irrational thinking in the modern world. Questions regarding the role of the myth in post-Enlightenment society, for example, have been raised by scholars such as Laurence Coupe, who draws on Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence’s concept of “the myth of mythlessness” (Coupe 12) to challenge “the belief that humanity has successfully transcended the need for mythical forms of thought” (Ibid.). Magical realism, too, draws attention to how realist discourse excludes these other forms of thought and

Winterson frequently advocates for the importance of the irrational, arguing that irrationality is inherent to our experience of the world. Similarly, “magical thought appears to be a fundamental aspect of human thinking which always is at least potentially available as a cognitive resource, even when individuals consciously reject it” (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 284). Hegerfeldt argues that magical realism creates space for magical thought within a realist frame by closely linking realism and fantasy together into a space of contrast and interaction, acknowledging different so-called “modes of truth”: “To suppress these modes of truth is [...] to ignore alternative possibilities of accessing reality and creating understanding that may in turn have positive repercussions on rational-scientific thinking” (Hegerfeldt, *Lies* 293). The absolute opposition between rational-scientific thinking and less rational forms of thought is challenged and, instead, the genre illustrates how these two seemingly opposite perspectives inevitably interact. In her imagined pasts Winterson ultimately suggests that both the rational and the irrational are central aspects of our understanding of reality and, moreover, necessary to fully experience the wonder of the world.

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