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**Melancholy monstrosity in Winterson and Shelley: assembling psychoanalytical approaches to melancholy and cultural understandings of object collection to explore the epistemological function of creative praxis**

Abstract:

In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson contends that the purpose of the creative artefact is to provide a ‘focal point’ for memory and desire, principally by wresting language and the body from science’s tendency towards objectification, thus returning the body to the sovereignty of poetics. Winterson achieves this ‘wresting’ courtesy of a Frankenstein-like narrator whose fantastic re-collection of a fragmented body—Louise, the narrator’s ‘love object’ in presence and ‘melancholy object’ in absence—pieces together her own self-satisfying monster object; and not through the use of science, but through prose poetry. By considering the thematic intersections of Winterson’s *Written on the Body* and Mary Shelley’s *Victor Frankenstein* in relation to Julia Kristeva’s discussion on the function of literary representation as a counterpoise to melancholy, this paper explores narrative practice as ‘re-collection’, a methodology of ‘trophying’ the bodily object, functioning for both writers and readers as a process of making-meaning in the epistemological rupture associated with such loss.

Biographical note:

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## Context

This paper is anchored in Port Phillip Bay, where the ashes of my mother's mother were cast because that body of water, beyond topography, had somehow shaped her internal landscape; so much so that she wished to be returned to that place, bodily, in ashen form, following her death. How strange it is, I considered, that her familiar body, a corporeal object, should be burned then dissolved in the sea. What meaning is to be made of this amorphous presence, the sea, signifying some definite thing that is now absent? And what does one do with this absent/present existential reminder that all objects must eventually lapse; a mortal anxiety? Is this melancholy? Can narrative literature somehow resurrect what is lost?

In the opening paragraph of Jennifer Radden's compendium of seminal writings on melancholy, *The Nature of Melancholy*, she asserts:

For most of Western European history, melancholy was a central cultural idea, focusing, explaining, and organizing the way people saw the world and one another and framing social, medical, and epistemological norms. Today, in contrast, it is an insignificant category, of little interest to medicine or psychology, and without explanatory or organizing vitality. (2000: vii)

While melancholy may no longer be a vital concept in the sciences, I question: does melancholy continue to be a 'central cultural idea, focusing, explaining, and organizing the way people [see] the world and one another' in narrative literature? Is the theoretical dialogue regarding the nature and understanding of melancholy being continued and developed both explicitly and implicitly as a narrative aesthetic, particularly in written narratives which explore themes of 'object collection'? And in what ways does the act of writing allow a person to focus, explain and organise the epistemological rupture experienced with loss?

As an extract from my Doctoral exegesis, this paper addresses the above questions (within limitations) primarily through a critical reading of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, an exemplar selected for its melancholy aesthetic and poetic resonances which my Doctoral thesis (by creative artefact) sought to engender, a response to the personal catalyst mentioned above. In the broader context of the academic discipline of Creative Writing, this paper aims to further existing knowledge by assembling currently disparate critical discourses on psychoanalytical approaches to melancholy and cultural understandings of object collection, and does so in order to exemplify the role critical reading practices play in understanding the potential epistemological function of creative praxis (particularly when writing becomes what I term 're-collection')—a discussion that proves continually pertinent for creative writers producing and teaching within the academy.

## Melancholy monstrosities

In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson contends that the purpose of creative artifice is to provide a 'focal point' for memory and desire, principally by wresting language and the body from science's tendency towards objectification, thus returning it to poetics (Burns 1996: 295-301). As will be discussed throughout this paper,

Winterson achieves this ‘wresting’ courtesy of a Frankenstein-like narrator whose fantastic re-collection of a fragmented body—Louise, the narrator’s ‘love object’ in presence and ‘melancholy object’ in absence—pieces together her own self-satisfying monster object; and not through the use of science, but through prose poetry.

In *The Fiction of Rushdie, Barnes, Winterson and Carter: Breaking cultural and literary boundaries in the work of four postmodernists*, Gregory Rubinson references Winterson’s *Art Objects* to locate her central argument for how art should function and be viewed within culture. He notes:

In her fiction and her essays, [Winterson] frequently espouses a traditional Romantic (i.e. anti-Enlightenment) ideal of art as salvation: in *Art Objects*, she writes that ‘the tragic paradigm of human life is lack, loss, finality, a primitive doomsaying that has not been repealed by technology or medical science. The arts stand in the way of this doomsaying. Art objects’. (2005: 139)

This approach to ‘art as salvation’ is not dissimilar to that established by Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, in which she suggests that melancholy—an experience of ‘object loss’ (effectively, when a sign fails to correspond to its meaning, as established by Freud)—is a language which requires learning in order for this state of being (or ‘nonbeing’) to be understood, and that melancholy affect can thus be transposed into art where the ‘symbolic’ is represented through the ‘sign’ (Kristeva 1989:14; 21-25; 40-42; 97-103). In other words, in the experience of ‘object loss’ we look toward the imagination and the construction of signs to fill the void and make meaning—absence evoked by a presence. Perhaps in light of Kristeva’s argument, one could say that art not only objects to Winterson’s ‘doomsaying’, art names it, classifies it and in turn offers a comprehension of fundamental human affect on a level that no other discourse can.

*Written on the Body* tells the story of a name-omitted and gender-omitted narrator who ‘loses’ his/her adulterous lover, Louise, when her husband, Elgin, reveals to the narrator that Louise has cancer. As a doctor, Elgin convinces the narrator that Louise’s health would be better off if returned to his care. The narrator yields, and subsequently the novel undergoes a stylistic and thematic shift mid-way through as the narrator evaluates his/her loss, and Louise’s body ‘transubstantiates’ (Burns 1996: 270) from love object (in presence) to melancholy object (in absence).

Loss is established as an overt central theme in the opening line of the novel when the narrator asks: ‘Why is the measure of love loss?’ (1992: 9). While the circumstances of this implied love and its attributed loss are unravelled as the plot progresses, the effect (indeed, ‘affect’) of this loss is palpable from the outset with Winterson’s investment in imagery associated with drought—withering grapes on the vine, trees prospecting deep into the dry ground, their ‘roots like razors to open any artery water-fat’—and the paragraph ends with a conventional narrative device to create conflict: ‘It was not always so’ (1992: 9). Obviously, this imagery of ‘lack’ purposefully contradicts the ‘Wood pigeon Red Admiral Yellow Harvest Orange Night’ when love was proclaimed by the narrator’s love object (1992: 9). Thus, the disparity between past and present is established, as is the beginning of our knowledge of the narrator’s epistemological rupture resulting from lost love; or, to be more precise, the loss of an

object which the narrator had ‘inventorized’. Louise is the object of passion, as Baudrillard might have it: ‘while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion’ (Baudrillard 1994: 7). Louise, then, mirrors the narrator’s sense of self through the implication of taste and her abstractive operation to subjectivity.

The opening description of Louise is, demonstrably so, the narrator’s language imbued with eroticism for the body object: ‘your body bright beneath the clear green water, its shape fitting your shape, holding you, faithful to you. You turned your back and your nipples grazed the surface of the river and the river decorated your hair with beads’ (1992: 11). It is important to note that ‘eroticism’ should be interpreted on a level other than superficial sexualised body parts (such as ‘nipple’). Rather, as Christy Burns points out in her journal article ‘Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson’s recovery of the postmodern world’:

Language and sex are brought together through an eroticization of speaking, synecdochically focusing on the mouth of the speaker and playing on the sensate properties of language—the rhythm, sound, and effect of mouthing such words linked together by overlapping consonants. [...] Winterson tries to reclaim both the flattened word and the desensitized body, and she effects this through erotic revival. (1996: 294)

These characteristics are evident in the above description of Louise: the alliteration of ‘body bright beneath’; the repetition of ‘shape, shape’ and ‘river, river’; the imagery of buoying fluid metaphorical for the narrator, possessing Louise via language, ‘decorating’ or embellishing or revering her body despite her turned back and ‘grazing’ presence. With the construction of this poetic, the reader is reminded of the speech-act function of the narrator, the narrator’s mouth, and this is linked to Louise as the object of the text through imagery and metaphor. There is also a certain poetic attached to Winterson’s use of first person point of view to address Louise as the apostrophised second person, the repetition of ‘you’ creating a distinct cadence and reinforcing the elegiac qualities of the prose; ‘this is for you, and you only, in your honour’, it seems to be saying.

A part standing for the whole and the parallel function of semiotics is the central concept here, and this synecdochical function is demonstrated even more so once the narrator ‘loses’ Louise to science, as represented by the invasion of her body by cancer, and the invasion of their relationship by Elgin. As Merja Makinen observes in *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*: ‘Winterson’s text first explores Louise’s body, then splits it asunder into its constituent parts, before finally reinventing it anew’ (2005: 117), a concept concurrent with Kristeva’s regard for poetic artifice: ‘Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components—that is doubtless a way to curb mourning. To revel in it at times, but also to go beyond it, moving on to another form, not so scorching, more and more perfunctory’ (1989: 97).

Some time after the loss of Louise, the narrator visits the library and, rather than ‘going to the Russian section as I had intended’, he/she inspects the medical books:

I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the

sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognise her even when her body had long since fallen away. (1992: 111)

The ‘love-poem’ that then follows is a 27 page series of sections divided by anatomical headers—‘The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body’; ‘The Skin’; ‘The Skeleton’; ‘The Special Senses’—with each section containing one or more movements beginning with a medical description of the body part followed by a poetic re-collection of moments, experiences and philosophies associated with Louise. For example:

THE SKIN IS COMPOSED OF TWO MAIN PARTS: THE DERMIS AND THE EPIDERMIS.

Odd to think that the piece of you I know best is already dead. The cells on the surface of your skin are thin and flat without blood vessels or nerve endings. Dead cells, thickest on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet. Your sepulchral body, offered to me in the past tense, protects your soft centre from the intrusions of the outside world. I am one such intrusion, stroking you with necrophiliac obsession, loving the shell laid out before me. (1992: 123)

Returning to Makinen’s aforementioned statement regarding the division of Louise’s body into multiple parts in order to ‘reinvent it anew’, there is evidently a very compelling intersection with the arguably ‘Romantic (i.e. anti-Enlightenment)’ exploits of Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein.

In *From Superhuman to Posthuman*, Theodora Goss and John Paul Riquelme state: ‘The science that Frankenstein practices is a dark, Gothic science, motivated by the technological imaginary’s imperative to overcome death, to “renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption”’ (2007: 435). While *Written on the Body* presents an alternate (poetic) way of salvaging the body from ‘corruption’ through trophying the melancholy object, interesting commonalities between Winterson’s and Shelley’s texts reveal parallel approaches to re-collection as a methodology of *bodily salvation* against mortality and the ultimate ‘loss’.

Victor Frankenstein and Winterson’s narrator are both collectors in a general sense, and re-collectors in the sense that, not only is the process a secondary activity, it is also regenerative in the development of the narrative (re)collection on the page, a further objectification of subjectivity (Brophy 1998: 59-60; Elsner and Cardinal 1994: 1-2). As already signposted, each narrator collects body parts in order to resurrect a being—to bring presence to absence—and both succeed in resurrecting a distorted body, monsters of differing kinds. In this regard, Frankenstein states:

I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature. [...] After having formed this determination, and having spent some months in successfully collecting and arranging my materials, I began. [...] I collected bones from charnel-houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. [...] I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. (1986: 49-53)

In *Written on the Body*, Louise is also *made* (figuratively) into a being of ‘gigantic stature’, and both Winterson’s and Shelley’s narrators rely specifically on breaking apart the body into its anatomical constituents and observing its various ‘corruptions’ to discern and revive its ‘beauty’—Winterson’s narrator ‘calling up parts of the body in clinical form, suffusing them and reconfiguring them with erotic language and imaginings’ (Burns 1996: 295); Shelley’s narrator making apparent his own brand of ‘necrophiliac obsession’:

I became acquainted with the science of anatomy: but this was not sufficient; I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body. [...] [A] churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. (1986: 46)

However, significant differences exist, most notably in that Winterson’s narrator succeeds in re-collecting an object of beauty, while Shelley’s Frankenstein achieves otherwise when, after the creature breathes hard and convulses to life and is revealed to be not an object of beauty—‘I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God!’—the ‘watery eyes’ of the being convincing him of the monster’s horror (1986: 53):

I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body [...] but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. (1986: 54)

Winterson, in her re-collection of monstrosity, also places emphasis on the eyes, as they are the final body part analysed and which resonate in the text that follows. But rather than exposing ‘inhumanness’, the eroticised eyes symbolise potential for clarity: ‘Do you see me in my blood-soaked world? Green-eyed girl, eyes wide apart like almonds, come in tongues of flame and restore my sight’ (1992: 139). The dissimilarities arise because two entirely differing ‘transubstantiating’ resurrections are being attempted, although both objects exist as melancholy bodies.

The fact that Louise is a pre-existing love object that is ‘lost’ results in a much more complex arrangement of emotional circumstances than that of Frankenstein, the consideration of death being far more intimate and immediate for Winterson’s narrator. It may even be considered that the figurative death of Louise as body object enables her metaphysical presence to be felt even greater; as Françoise Dastur observes, due to ‘the very fact that we have lost him or her the dead person is more totally present to us than he or she ever was in life’ (cited in Gibson 2004: 291). The effect of the narrator’s double-sided loss—past loss to Elgin and cancer; future loss to death—is particularly perceived in the second half of the book with thematically loaded sentences such as: ‘The particularness of someone who mattered enough to grieve over is not made anodyne by death. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no-one else can fit it’ (Winterson 1992: 155). The inability to mourn, despite the narrator’s poetic re-collection standing in for the missing body and signifying the Thing, which Kristeva suggests the melancholic perpetually ‘wanders in pursuit of’ (Kristeva 1989: 13), is perpetuated by objective presence:

I found one of her hairs on a coat of mine today. The gold streak caught the light. I bound it around my forefingers and pulled it straight. It was nearly two feet long that way. Is this the thread that binds me to you?

No one tells you in grief-counselling or books on loss what it will be like when you find part of the beloved unexpectedly. The wisdom is to make sure your house is not a mausoleum, only to keep those things that bring you happy positive memories. I had been reading books that dealt with death partly because my separation from Louise was final and partly because I knew she would die and that I would have to cope with this second loss, perhaps just as the first was inflamed. I wanted to cope. (1992: 154)

Winterson's narrator reminds us of Tennyson's plight in *Tears, idle tears*, with its emotive final utterance, 'O Death in Life, the days that are no more' (1847: line 20); that it is only the living who suffer the melancholy bound to death. Melancholy, it seems, can make a spectre of the living. But despite this affect (cf. 'effect') and the ambiguity of Louise's eventual return—whether she is flesh or fantasy—Burns brings us to a closer approximation of Winterson's potential theme of consequence arising from the novel by suggesting: 'The story twists back to imply that fiction might be as satisfying as reality, and it seems to conclude this way', Burns says, 'with Louise's fantastic appearance at the kitchen door, followed by a reflection on the power of fantasy' (1996: 300):

This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. Hurry now, it's getting late. I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields. (Winterson 1992: 190)

Although fiction may function as 'a focal point of our desires' and is ultimately unable to resurrect the object of our loss, it can at least provide both writers and readers with a way of making meaning out of life's many abstractions, such as loss. As Kristeva observes: 'For the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning' (1989: 6).

### **Context: reprise**

In the opening movement of this paper I responded to Jennifer Radden's assertion that melancholy today 'is an insignificant category, of little interest to medicine or psychology, and without explanatory or organizing vitality' (2000: vii) by questioning the continuing epistemological vitality of melancholy in narrative literature. Although due to relevant limitations I have merely begun to address my question here, it is hoped that this critical reading of Winterson's *Written on the Body* reveals the continuing dialogue on the nature and understanding of melancholy, a dialogue that is foundational when writing seeks to perform an epistemological function. Even if only as a way of making sense of all that has been long cast into Port Phillip Bay.

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