

“Why do I collude in this mis-use of language?”:

Language and the Implication of the Reader in the
Creation of the Gendered Subject in Jeanette
Winterson’s *Written on the Body*

GHISLAINE SINCLAIR

Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* is well-known for the ways that it tells readers a story of their own relationships with gender as much as it tells of the narrator’s life. A sensual and evocative postmodern piece, Winterson’s first-person narrator refuses to be gendered as they discuss elements of their life including numerous sexual and romantic relationships, all the while teasing the reader with statements that serve as false clues to readers who try to impart a gender identity onto them. Ghislaine Sinclair’s “Why Do I Collude in this Mis-Use of Language?: Language and the Implication of the Reader in the Creation of the Gendered Subject in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*” skillfully unpacks this positioning of the narrator and reader, and the ways that discourse creates its own subject. Sinclair, likewise, analyzes the utterative value of different speech acts, including how the narrator frames and deconstructs the languages of both love and science with equal skill. The resultant paper – articulate and well-researched – concludes that the narrator’s refusal to conform to the role of gendered speaking subject highlights and problematizes the ethical dilemmas of language use.

–Dr. Holly Morgan

Nothing about Jeanette Winterson’s 1993 novel *Written on the Body* has captured the attention and imagination of readers and critics alike more than

its anonymous, ungendered narrator. At one point in the novel, the narrator refers to herself¹ as “unreconstructed,” situating the novel firmly within postmodern conversations on the deconstruction of the subject and acknowledging that the subject was deconstructed by theory which has yet to return to its positive existence. This moment further gestures to an awareness that their audience will go on to dissect their every gesture or thought in search of a classifiable gender. To read the novel as a mystery which can be solved if only we find the right clues reveals to us our entrapment as readers within our own discursive frameworks, the linguistic structures and practices through which we experience and communicate the world. These frameworks continue to be built on and around the binaristically gendered subject, in spite of theory’s best efforts to deconstruct this framework. To gender the narrator, regardless of the textual evidence accrued in favour of a given argument, is to construct a gendered subject within our own discursive practices as opposed to reading an ungendered subject which the narrator makes herself within their own discursive practice. The refusal of the narrator of *Written on the Body* to be gender herself places

¹ This essay will employ they/them/themself pronouns to refer to the narrator of *Written on the Body*. This choice to use gender neutral pronouns is not intended to assign a non-binary or trans identity to the narrator, but serves to both acknowledge this possibility, and to correct for the trans/non-binary erasure inherent to scholarship which uses she/him/her/his pronouns.

“WHY DO I COLLUDE THIS MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE?”

them in a unique position to show the ways in which discursive practices bring subjects into being, and the ontological impossibility of certain subjects within dominant discursive practices unless these practices are confronted and engaged with self-consciously.

Third-person singular pronouns are evidently a shorthand way of disclosing gender, but there are numerous other ways in which a narrator can be recognizably gendered; their absence is ultimately not what leaves the narrator outside the gender binary, though this aspect of Winterson’s writing has certainly been fixated upon by many critics of the novel. The absence of these third-person pronouns does not simply leave the narrator ungendered so much as reveal how the existent first- and second-person pronouns positively construct the narrator. In his essay “Pronouns in Literary Fiction as Inventive Discourse,” Henrik Skov Nielsen challenges the standard definition of pronouns as words which “indicate some person or things without either naming or describing,” believing this definition to exclude the productive power of pronouns as used in literary contexts (Nielsen 221). This definition assumes there to be a “real connection and physical contiguity” between a pronoun and what it stands in for, thus requiring there to be something which exists prior to and outside of the pronoun (Nielsen 221). Nielsen questions whether this is always the case in literary texts, in which what is articulated does not necessarily have any existence prior to the utterance of a pronoun. This point is particularly

salient in a text narrated in first-person, which collapses the speaker and the spoken. With the first utterance of the "I" in *Written on the Body*, our narrator writes themself into existence. As Nielsen puts it, "'I' is a sign devoid of meaning until pronounced – at which point it fills itself with significance" (228). As the narrator is only referred to using first- or second-person pronouns, they are never brought into being in a context devoid of their physical presence, and are thus never involved in uses of language which do not directly involve them. When the narrator is written, and consequently made textual and real, it is always that either they call themself into being or are called into being by another character who wishes to engage with them directly and affirms their existence as an interlocutor. In discussing the narrator of this novel, I, and any other reader, must then refer to the narrator in a way they do not allow themselves to be referred to in the text, forcing us to choose pronouns. Finding ourselves without pronouns to refer to for these purposes, we are forced to reconcile with our own acting on the narrator in a way they did not consent to; we are reminded of the ethical implications of being readers and the ethical stakes of language insofar as it can grant, and accordingly deny, being.

The use of first-person pronouns as a means of bringing the narrator into being underscores the importance of creation and self-definition to their status as a subject. The anxiety of being constructed inauthentically by the discursive practices of others, or by one's own failure to do

“WHY DO I COLLUDE THIS MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE?”

so as a result of the inadequacy of language, leads the narrator to scrutinize their own ability to narrate themselves. In an aside to the reader, they comment that “[they] can tell by now that [we] are wondering whether [they] can be trusted as a narrator” (Winterson 24). Just as their utterance of the “I” brings them into being as narrated narrator, their utterance of “you” in this context brings us into being as readers. While assigning pronouns to the narrator raises questions for us as readers because of the decision we must make concerning gender, the narrator’s assignation of pronouns to us is equally powerful in the sense that each involves one granting ontological status to another. In this instance of apostrophe, the narrator does not so much question themselves as narrator but posit a reader who would be distrustful of their particular narrative voice, insofar as its lack of gender puts it outside of dominant discursive practices which are heavily informed by our own gender and that of our interlocutor. In referring to themselves as narrator, and suggesting we ought to question their reliability we are made into distrustful readers, who will from then on question what is authentic and what is fabricated. This simultaneity or inseparability of being written as (distrustful) and being made (distrustful) is explored in Jonathan D. Culler’s essay “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative,” which discusses theories of performative speech acts and their applicability to literature. He argues that performative speech acts, speech acts “that actually perform the action to which they refer,” do not function

the same in literary and everyday language, because in literary theory “the notion of the performative stresses above all the self-reflexive character of language, the fact that the utterance itself is the reality or the event to which the utterance refers” (Culler 506, 508). Literature cannot be outside of language, and thus the “event[s] to which the utterance refers” – the characters, ideas, and moments which make up a work of literature -- thus do not exist outside the words we use to access these events. The aforementioned apostrophe does not make us distrustful readers by virtue of the narrator’s reminder that they exist as a figure we could question the authority of, but because these words as they are printed on this page are the materialization of our reader-ness and our distrust. This materialization is a reversal of our application of gendered pronouns to the narrator, as the narrator is granting us ontological status within their narrative, as opposed to our granting them ontological status within a gendered discursive framework – our narrative.

The narrator, whilst demonstrating the creative, productive powers of language as the speaker of their story, is keenly aware of the absolute limits of language. Their relationship to cliché oscillates throughout the novel as their relationship to socio-sexual scripts of monogamous love shifts with their relationship status. When in love, they express a desire for “the saggy armchair of clichés” (Winterson 10). This armchair is both a metaphor for the stability and comfort of a committed, monogamous relationship, and the material manifestation of clichés in

“WHY DO I COLLUDE THIS MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE?”

the text. Clichés are paradoxical because they are both universally comprehensible and devoid of meaning as a result of repetition, making them a performative speech act which only brings itself into being *as cliché*. The “armchair of clichés” seductive power is in its situatedness within dominant discursive practices, but lacks any substance as it becomes itself a cliché in the text through repetition. Brian Finney’s article “Bonded by Language: Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*” argues that Winterson is attempting to “revivify the jaded language of love” often expressed through cliché (Finney 25). He focuses on the narrator’s refrain of “it’s the clichés that cause the trouble” and their flippant use of clichés to “contemptuously [dismiss] the safe confines of marriage” (Finney 25). For Finney, the genderless existence of the narrator puts them outside of any sexual or romantic script which depends on its actors existing within the gender binary, uniquely positioning them to critique the limitations of those scripts. Ultimately, as they exist metatextually within the scripts within which the readers of the text and its author live, the narrator is “trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as [their] parents’ roses round the door” (Winterson 21). The narrator also switches to the format of a literal script to materialize the connection between clichés and social scripts, writing an imaginary scene in which a “married woman attempts to reconcile her divided loyalties with a series of clichéd excuses” to stand in for an actual conversation between Louise and the narrator about whether she will leave her husband (Finney 26). From her

perspective, she is simply enacting the story of a woman torn between husband and lover, though the ambiguity of her lover's gender interrupts the particularities of the story. When Louise actually leaves her husband, the narrator writes that "this is the wrong script" as Louise has not chosen the "saggy armchair of clichés" which she was in but has rather chosen a relationship with someone whose genderlessness puts their relationship outside of discursive frameworks of hetero- or homosexuality.

The narrator is equally preoccupied with the phrase "I love you" insofar as it is a phrase central to sexual romantic scripts which can never become cliché. At the very beginning of the novel, they muse about the ways in which every utterance of the phrase is distinct and magical, despite the frequency of its utterance, making it a phrase which resists becoming cliché: "You said, 'I love you.' Why is that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? 'I love you' is always a quotation. You did not say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them." (Winterson 9) Insofar as a quotation is defined as the repetition of words said previously, "I love you" is absolutely quotation. This articulation of "I love you" is highly postmodern, in the sense that everything said is a reformulation of something previously articulated, and nothing genuinely original can be created. Quotation thus becomes a mode of creation, in which context and juxtaposition are the means through which words

“WHY DO I COLLUDE THIS MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE?”

previously stated can take on new meanings. The radical originality found in each utterance of “I love you” can be found in the productive power of pronouns which both dominate and frame the phrase. If the utterance of a pronoun is a bringing into being, the power of “I love you” is bringing into being two individuals in a profoundly connected and intimate way. As it uses first- and second-person pronouns, it is utterly outside of gender and thus exists outside of socio-sexual scripts, despite being a constant refrain within such scripts. “I love you” cannot become cliché so long as it is said in good faith, which would allow the utterance to succeed in bringing two new subjects into being situated in the time and place of the utterance. Should the loving I not in fact love the loved you, the entire speech act will “misfire,” to use J.L. Austin’s vocabulary as cited by Culler (504). The narrator writes that “those words soon became [their and Louise’s] private altar;” “I love you” brings the two of them into being in a newly opened, sanctified space (Winterson 11). Words being a physical space is particularly crucial in the context of the material object of the novel in which “I love you” occupies space in a literal way. Louise repeatedly asserts the active, performative power of “I love you” over the course of the novel. She accuses the narrator of trying to “regain control of [her] by telling [her they] love [her]” (Winterson 53). Louise is gesturing towards the exercise of power inherent in the speech act of making another come into being as a loved you, a subject position imbued with responsibility towards the loving I who is making themself

vulnerable in this declaration, especially if the loved you is also a loving I in their own right. Similarly, Louise's request that the narrator "not declare [their] love until [they] had declared it to [themselves]" is a request to be allowed to not be subsumed into the narrator's discursive practices until the narrator is sure they can take on the responsibility inherent to the relationship between loving I and loved you and responsibility inherent in bringing another into being within one's own discursive framework (Winterson 84). This responsibility is not actively taken up by the subject but is inseparable from the existence they are spoken into. The decision to say "I love you," insofar as it brings into being a subject imbued with responsibility is both an ontological and an ethical problem.

The narrator's appropriation of scientific language, particularly at the end of the novel, reverses the totalizing nature of discursive frameworks by incorporating it into their own discursive practice. The narrator cannot have ontological status within scientific discourses because of their refusal to be a gendered subject, though they have already granted themselves ontological status within their own narrative discursive practice, highlighting the insufficiency of any framework which claims to be totalizing or objective. As Gregory J. Rubinsond writes, "confirmation of the narrator's sex would merely reinforce gender stereotypes rooted in male-constructed, 'scientific' knowledge about sexed bodies" (220). Scientific knowledge is constructed within a framework of binary gender, meaning the narrator cannot exist according to this

“WHY DO I COLLUDE THIS MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE?”

form of knowledge without identifying as or claiming a gender. Simultaneously, the narrator is not able to be gendered without immediately being absorbed by the scientific framework which reproduces the framework of binary gender through its construction of biological sex. Rubinsond discusses the danger scientific language poses to the ontological status of the subject. In reference to the narrator's citation of passages from medical textbooks to invoke Louise's body in biological, anatomical terms, he writes the following: “This clinical language assumes an implicit authority over its subject matter while obscuring any sense of a speaker [...] the most characteristic convention and conceit of scientific writing is that there is no place for the personal” (Rubinsond 224). As Louise's body is sexed and gendered in the novel, she has ontological status within scientific discourse. Ironically, the passages from medical textbook quoted have nothing to do with those characteristics which would be cited to sex a body in scientific terms and in no way refer to Louise as a particular sexed body. In the narrator's preoccupation with Louise, the idea of Louise has overtaken their speech acts even as they adopt a linguistic mode which is radically different from their personal style of narration. Their particular emotional state has affected the ways they engage with language in general, as they are consumed by a desire to bring Louise into being through any performative speech acts, even those which are part of dominant discursive frameworks. The citation of medical textbooks is performative both in the sense that it brings

the physiological reality of Louise's body into being and in the sense that the narrator is performing this speech act for an audience, the reader having announced to us that "through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating [...] self, [they] found a love-poem to Louise," which they go on to deliver (Winterson 111). The narrator's grief pushes them to take a discursive framework which they themselves cannot fit into and adopt it so that they might bring into being their beloved, thus prioritising Louise's ontological status over their own.

The narrator of *Written on the Body* cannot fit into standard discursive practices which are constructed on the basis of and continuously reproduce the notion of a gendered speaking subject. The narrator is aware of the impossibility of their becoming a speaking subject in standard discursive practices, playing with the productive aspects of language and challenging the limits of language to create themselves as a speaking subject within their own narrative. The discursive practice of bringing a subject is practiced by narrator, as they bring themselves and other characters, particularly Louise, into being within the text, and the reader who is tempted to bring the narrator into being as a gendered subject within the discursive practices of the world in which the text was written and read. The narrator's active linguistic and textual resistance to totalizing discursive practices which deny them subjectivity reveals the ethical problem of discursive frameworks which only allow certain individuals to come

“WHY DO I COLLUDE THIS MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE?”

into being, and the ethical problems inherent to bringing an other into existence through language.

WORKS CITED

- Culler, Jonathan D. “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative.” *Poetics Today*, vol. 21, no. 3, Fall 2000, pp. 503-519, muse.jhu.edu/article/27834. Accessed 17 Nov. 2018.
- Finney, Brian. “Bonded by Language: Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*.” *Women and Language*, vol. 25, no. 2, Fall 2002, pp. 23-31, search.proquest.com/docview/60274790?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo. Accessed 18 Nov. 2018.
- Nielsen, Henrik Skov. “Pronouns in Literary Fiction as Inventive Discourse.” *Pronouns in Literature*, edited by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, 217-234.
- Rubinsond, Gregory J. “Body Languages: Scientific and Aesthetic Discourses in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2001, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111610109601140. Accessed 17 Nov. 2018.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. London, Vintage, 2001.