WORLDS OF WORDS: Complexity, Creativity, and Conventionality in English Language, Literature and Culture

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Preface

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THE GAP OF TIME: THE CREATIVE CYCLE OF A STORY

Abstract

Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Gap of Time*, a re-writing of Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale*, brings to the fore the function of Time as a means to repair the mistakes and losses in an individual's past. Shakespeare's characters and events are re-created in a totally new narrative which comes to its end in a rather sudden way, leaving questions open and, above all, with the assertion that stories can be resumed and re-written anew in an endless process of literary creation. Interestingly, in the end Winterson leaves her role as narrator and speaks to her readers in the first person both to confess her own personal involvement in the story and her identification, since she herself was a foundling, with Perdita, and to offer her comments as literary critic not only on *The Winter's Tale* but on other plays by Shakespeare where the themes of time and forgiveness are particularly relevant. The conclusion is, again, more personal and autobiographical, offering Winterson's meditation on her own reality, the reality of life, and the power of love.

Keywords: Winterson; Shakespeare; *The Winter's Tale*; Time.

The process of literary writing, with its power of transformation, can be seen as a fascinating, endless journey both in relation to the intrinsic, material act of writing, and in its metamorphoses through time as a result of the various perspectives and critical approaches of ever new readers in different historical periods. Indeed, the literary text continues its 'performance', renewing itself continuously through both new interpretations suggested by the 'structures of feeling' of individual historical moments, and through re-writings by different authors[1].

[1] This aspect is discussed, in its different perspectives, by Agostino Lombardo in *Il testo e la sua "performance"* (Lombardo 1986).

A recent example is the novel by Jeanette Winterson, *The Gap of Time* (2015), a contemporary version of Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale* (1613), which, in its turn, is a dramatisation of *Pandosto* (1588), a narrative writing by Robert Greene – a case, therefore, of a text 'travelling' through time (from the 16th century to our days) and through literary genres (from narrative, to drama, to narrative again) with its images, characters and ideas.

By choosing *The Gap of Time* as a title, Winterson brings to the fore a major concern recurring in her work: the function of time, the crossing of temporal boundaries, the opportunity offered by the passing of time to repair an initial chaos with the restoration, after separations and scatterings, of renewed harmonies. The opening lines of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* – "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past" – reverberate in Winterson's idea of time as she herself declares in an interview in which she defines *Sexing the Cherry*, one of her first novels (1989), as "a meditation on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*" and explains that "time is one of the things that I'm obsessed with... What it is, how it affects us, how it moves through us, how we move through it. And so I took that poem as a starting point to explore".[2] Time, a keyword and a major issue in *The Gap of Time*, plays a predominant role both in Shakespeare's romance and in *Pandosto*, providing an opportunity for personal growth and repentance, the recovery of a lost harmony, and the opening up to new futures.

Pandosto's subtitle, "The Triumph of Time", announces that Time, in the end, will bring the revelation of truth and the happy ending (though the ending is not completely 'happy' in Greene's story). After a short dedication to the Earl of Cumberland, George Clifford, in which, like in a dramatic prologue, Greene admits his own limits and faults but asks for the reader's patience and tolerance, the text proper starts with a new title, "The History of Dorastus and Fawnia", thus specifying the names of the two young protagonists of the second part of the story (Florizel and Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*).

The narration also opens with a sort of prologue, in which Greene indicates the "infectious sore of jealousy" as the crux from which the story moves: "Pandosto, furiously incensed by causeless jealousy, procured the death of his most loving and loyal wife and his own endless sorrow and misery" (Greene 1987: 155). Then the text proceeds in a plain narration of the events, which correspond closely to the first three acts of Shakespeare's play, the major differences being in the charac-

[2] Interview with Jeanette Winterson, Windrush, 14 September 2002 (Estor 2004).

ters' names, in the reversal of the two kingdoms as Pandosto (Leontes in Shakespeare) is King of Bohemia, and Egistus (Polixenes) king of Sicily, and in the prologue, which Shakespeare entrusts to a dialogue between two gentlemen, describing the happy and loving atmosphere at Leontes's court with the presence of his old friend Polixenes, although the reassuring words soon prove to be wrong as, immediately after, the warm friendship between Polixenes and Leontes's wife Hermione generates an unreasonable, furious feeling of jealousy in the king of Sicily.

The second part of Greene's tale proceeds with the narration of the story of Dorastus and Fawnia; indeed, Greene simply informs his readers that he is now "leaving him [Pandosto] to his dolorous passions" (p. 173) – and soon the story concentrates on Fawnia, grown up into a beautiful and gifted young woman, and her complicated love relationship with Prince Dorastus, son of Egistus, King of Sicily. In *The Winter's Tale* the change of time and place, from Leontes in Sicily to Florizel and Perdita in Bohemia, is explained by the figure of Chorus/Time, a dramatic device which not only marks the shift from tragedy to comedy, but stresses the importance of the function of Time[3]. Indeed, Leontes is left behind, off stage, and he is given time for repentance while the comic-pastoral events unfold and lead the story towards the final renewd harmony.

A major difference between the two texts relates to the ending. Pandosto, unaware that Fawnia is his daughter, is openly attracted to her and tries to separate her from Dorastus by imprisoning the young prince. When Dorastus's father, Pandosto's old friend Egistus, arrives and the truth is discovered, Pandosto kills himself for having caused his wife's death and for his shameful, though unconscious, incestuous desire for his daughter. Greene thus chooses to end his narration with an emphasis on the tragic dimension, as the final words openly specify:

> Pandosto, calling to mind how first he betrayed his friend Egistus, how his jealousy was the cause of Bellaria's death, that contrary to the law of nature he had lusted after his own daughter, moved with these desperate thoughts he fell in a melancholy fit and, to close up the comedy with a tragical stratagem, he slew himself […]. (p. 204)

[3] "[…] Leontes leaving, / Th' effects of his fond jealousies so grieving / That he shuts up himself, imagine me, / Gentle spectators, that I now may be / In fair Bohemia, and remember well / I mentioned a son o' th' king's, which Florizel / I now name to you; and with speed so pace / To speak of Perdita, now grown in grace / Equal with wond'ring." (Shakespeare 1990: IV.ii.17-25)

On the contrary, Leontes's incestuous attraction to his daughter is only hinted at, and, in the final scene, Hermione is brought back to life with a powerful *coup de théâtre*, so that the happy ending is complete and the tragedy of the first three acts is partly softened. Indeed, in all his romances, although problems and ambiguities are never fully solved, Shakespeare seems to move from tragedy to an idea of hope and rebirth, perhaps as a result of an emerging confidence in the possibility of a new Renaissance around Princess Elizabeth's court[4].

Jeanette Winterson's contemporary version of the Shakespearean play seems to suggest, with its very title, *The Gap of Time*, that a story can be readapted, after a gap of four hundred years, and made successful for a totally different kind of audience, in a totally new re-creation, proposing an original creative (though faithful) reading of a story. Indeed, although the events of Shakespeare's play are reproduced quite closely, Winterson creates a totally new narrative by supplying her characters with rich backstories, and transplanting the action from the fantasy kingdoms of Sicily and Bohemia to contemporary London and to an American city in the deep south reminiscent of New Orleans.

The Gap of Time opens with a section entitled "The Original", three pages in which Winterson briefly summarises *The Winter's Tale* (openly recalled in the subtitle, "*The Winter's Tale* retold") and concludes:

> The end of the play, without explanation or warning or psychological interpretation, throws all the characters forward into a new life. What they will make of it is left to 'the gap of time'. (Winterson 2016: xvi)

A page with the title "The Cover Version" follows; the novel is then divided into three parts, which are separated, in turn, by a couple of pages indicated as "Interval", thus adapting the traditional drama division into acts to the narrative structure.

Winterson reverses the order of the story, beginning with a flash-forward of the deserted newborn Perdita's finding. The opening words of the novel – "I saw the strangest sight tonight" (p. 5) – are spoken/thought by a black piano player, Shep (Shepherd in Shakespeare), who is returning home late at night, promising, with these words, a tale of marvels.

The first, short chapter is all narrated in the first person by Shep and the reader slowly puts together the scraps of a story: there is heavy rain,

[4] Frances A. Yates, among other critics, examines Shakespeare's romances through this historicist perspective (Yates 1975).

though not "Hurricane Katrina" (p. 7) – a reference which sets the story in recent times and places it in the southern United States. Then his son, Clo (Clown in Shakespeare), picks him up in a car but they soon see "a black BMW6 Series" (another reference to contemporary reality) with the doors open and two men beating someone to death.

Father and son stop by a hospital where there is a lit baby hatch, sign that a baby has been left to her fate, and Shep thinks that somehow it is "all connected – the BMW, […], the dead man, the baby" (p. 8). Here Winterson openly declares that she is using a film technique for her narration as she describes Shep's moving towards the hatch, his body "in slow motion" (p. 8).

Shep thinks that the little baby is a sort of gift for him – "It's as though I've been given a life for the one I took. That feels like forgiveness to me" (p. 15); indeed, he had suffocated his wife when, close to death, she was in too much pain, and his words "I don't regret it but I can't forgive it. I did the right thing but it was wrong" (p. 12) resound as another reference to contemporary life and the current debate on euthanasia. Shep's feeling that the baby gives him a new life "for the one I took" echoes Shepherd's words to his son Clown in *The Winter's Tale* – "thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born" (III.iii.107-8) – words which underline the change of perspective and of dramatic genre in the play: the tragedy of the first part is over and rebirth is now the main theme. On the contrary, Winterson's readers are still unaware of the past tragical events which are narrated only in chapter two.

Winterson thus re-creates the old story by placing it in a new time, a new place, and, above all, by giving all possible details to make the readers feel that they are reading a totally new contemporary story. Indeed, if it weren't for the subtitle and Winterson's initial comments on *The Winter's Tale*, it would take quite some time before a reader would realise that it is a re-writing of the Shakespearean romance.

Winterson then resumes the order of the story in chapter 2, and presents Leo Kaiser (Leontes), a successful London manager, head of a financial enterprise he called "Sicilia because he liked that it sounded just a little bit Mafia. He was Italian on his mother's side" (p. 23) – a reference to the cliché connecting Sicily to Mafia and jealousy.

When he first appears in the story, he is already in the grip of a devastating feeling of jealousy towards his wife, MiMi (Hermione Delannet, a French-American singer, daughter of a Russian diplomat – another reference to Shakespeare's Hermione, daughter of the emperor of Russia). He believes she is having an affair with his best friend Xeno (short for Polixenes) with whom, as teenagers, Leo had been in a short homosexual relationship.

Soon Leo loses control of his jealousy: he first gets an employee, Cameron (Camillo), to install a hidden webcam in his wife's bedroom, and misinterprets all he sees to fit his darkest fantasies; then he tries to run Xeno over with his car; finally, he rapes his pregnant wife who, after the violence is over, gives birth to a little girl with the help of Pauline, Leo's assistant. Pauline is the only person who has always been able to face Leo's difficult personality, and, even on this occasion, after some time she persuades him to undergo a DNA test (Delphi's oracle in Shakespeare) in order to make sure of his paternity. However, Leo kidnaps Perdita (so called from the title of a song her mother has written for her), and asks his gardener, Tony Gonzales, to take her to New Bohemia in the States, and deliver her to Xeno whom he believes to be the baby's true father.

The last chapter of Part I describes again the opening scene of Tony Gonzales's assassination by the BMW men in New Bohemia, after he has safely left the little girl in the hospital baby hatch, thus making this first part of the story come full circle (Anthony Gonzales, being the "cover" of Antigonus who, in Shakespeare's play, dies "pursued by a bear" after having abandoned little Perdita).

The second part is set in New Bohemia, several years later. It is springtime and Perdita, a lovely young woman, is organising a party for her father's (Shep) 70th birthday. The young Zel (short for Florizel), Xeno's son, in love with Perdita, goes to Shep's party where Xeno turns up totally unexpectedly. He happens to mention Tony Gonzales and the baby he was supposed to deliver to him, so the story of how Perdita was found comes to light.

It is important to say that Xeno is a US-based writer of computer games by profession, and, since the beginning of the story, has been working on a video game called "The Gap of Time", in which the final target is to find a baby girl who has been lost, as he explains to Leo at the beginning:

> 'The story is this: the most important thing in the world is lost […]'
> 'What is it?'
> Xeno shrugged. 'You have to find that out […] I think it's a baby […]'
> 'So where is the baby?'
> 'Growing up somewhere unknown, hidden. You have to find her […]' (p. 38)

> […] There are different levels in the game, of course. At level 4 Time becomes a player [Time/Chorus appears in *The Winter's Tale* at the opening of Act 4!]. Time can stand still, move faster, slow down. But you are playing against Time too. That's what it's called – "The Gap of Time" (p. 39).

Later in the story, when Perdita and Zel visit Xeno at his place, he is playing the computer game and explains it to Perdita, also mentioning Leo and specifying that, though at a distance, they have been playing that game against each other for many years – "We keep in touch that way" (p. 207).

In the third part of the novel, Winterson's narration suddenly becomes hasty and rather cursory, often leaving questions open as to the structure and the plausibility of the chain of many unexpected events. Like Shakespeare, she has concentrated more on Leo's story so, as she approaches the ending, it is as if she feels constrained to complete her rewriting of Shakespeare's story without making any further effort to rely on her creative invention; rather, she simply adapts the ending of *The Winter's Tale* to her own story, making the necessary changes to avoid incongruity.

In the final part, all the characters are brought together in London where the expected agnition and reunion scenes take place. In the ending a party is organised in a theatre and MiMi, having spent the intervening time as a recluse in Paris, suddenly appears on stage, standing still like a statue; before singing, she finally says: "This song is for my daughter. It's called 'Perdita'" (p. 284).

The story ends with a very short paragraph:

> Leo stood up, went into the aisle. From somewhere in the theatre Xeno came and stood beside him. He put his arm round Leo. Leo was crying now, long tears of rain.
> That which is lost is found. (p. 284)

The story comes full circle and, in these last words, the words of Delphi's oracle in Shakespeare – "[…] and the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" – reverberate.

This ending leaves the readers somewhat in suspense as to what will ensue, allowing them freedom to imagine/write their own details of the characters' words and actions; however, with no interruption (there is not even an extra space on the page), Winterson continues:

> So we leave them now, in the theatre, with the music. I was sitting at the back, waiting to see what would happen, and now I'm out on the street in the summer night, the rain tracing my face. (p. 284)

So Winterson suddenly comes to the fore, leaving her role as narrator and speaking in the first person. Here, she seems to be stating that there

is no end to creative writing. Her initial comment on the ending of *The Winter's Tale* – "The end of the play, without explanation or warning or psychological interpretation, throws all the characters forward into a new life. What they will make of it is left to 'the gap of time'" – reverberates in her final words: narration could be resumed by yet another writer who could create a new story starting from where this one ends. Indeed, this is true also for *The Winter's Tale*, as, in the first place, the idea of an endless narration is implicit in the very nature of its being a play whose text is meant to be repeated in its different and diverse stage productions; moreover, Shakespeare concludes his romance with the words:

> […] Good Paulina,
> Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
> Each one demand, and answer to his part
> Perform'd in this wide gap of time, since first
> We were dissever'd: hastily lead away. (V.iii.151-55)

Shakespeare, too, is underlining that this story will be re-told over and over again, by different narrators, from different perspectives, and that the process of creative writing/narrating is in continuous progress. In *The Winter's Tale* much remains unexplained, and the spectators are forced to pose questions to which they have to find answers of their own. Similarly, Winterson's novel leaves many empty spaces and ends just as the possibility of reconciliation has opened, so that the reader is left to imagine what may follow and write his/her own ending of the story.

In the final moments of the novel Winterson breaks the fourth wall, as it were, to tell us how much Shakespeare's play means to her – she was a 'foundling' herself, so the story of a child lost and found has particular personal resonance:

> I wrote this cover version because the play has been a private text for me for more than thirty years. […]
> It's a play about a foundling. And I am. It's a play about forgiveness and a world of possible futures – and how forgiveness and the future are tied together in both directions. Time is reversible. (pp. 284-85)

There follow four pages of meditation on Shakespeare's late writings (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*) and their concern with forgiveness, their preoccupation with time and the possibility that it might be reversed, and their

insistence, particularly in *The Winter's Tale*, that redemption can flow out of stillness:

> Hermione does the thing most difficult to do to right a wrong situation: nothing.
> Nothing is the key word of the play. Leontes's demented speech on the supposed adultery contains its own answer, but he can't hear it:
>
> Is whispering nothing?
> Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
> Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
> Of laughter with a sigh? – a note infallible
> Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?
> Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
> Hours minutes, noon midnight? And all eyes
> Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
> That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?
> Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
> The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
> My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings
> If this be nothing. (I.ii.387-99) (pp. 287-88)

Is this insistence on "Nothing" to be considered as another expression of a "gap", of a discontinuity not only in literary discourse but in our life? Is this sudden role change, from the narrator to the literary critic, to be seen as a device to shock the reader who, like the author, is sitting in the theatre enjoying the show, waiting for more action, and is suddenly forced to get out of the novel and move into an essay of literary criticism? Is Winterson, by crossing the border between literature and criticism, somehow suggesting that the process of creative writing is the result of a conscious, critical meditation and that every ending has to provoke a further process of critical reflection? Is Winterson engaging her readers in a critical reading so that they are not only emotionally involved but also intellectually challenged? Perhaps there is an easier technical answer and this ending is simply a way to enclose the narration within a critical frame, creating a parallel to the opening pages of summary and critical comments on *The Winter's Tale* and thus giving the novel a more balanced structure. Surely, one would normally expect the inital pages to be printed as a Preface and the last four pages as an Appendix. But no. They are there, as an opening and a conclusion totally separated from the story itself. Moreover, the very last page moves towards yet another different dimension of writing, standing as

a final paragraph with its own title, "Perdita", becoming more personal and autobiographical (Perdita, like Winterson, was lost and found) with Winterson's meditation on her own reality and the reality of life made of everyday activities ("We have to go to work, have children, make homes, make dinner, make love […]", [p. 289]), ending with a note about the power of love:

> Love. The size of it. The scale of it. Unimaginable. Vast. Your love for me. My love for you. Our love for one another. Real. Yes. Though I find my way by flashlight in the dark, I am witness and evidence of what I know: this love.
> The atom and jot of my span. (p. 289)

To conclude, going back to the narrative proper, "Winterson's tale" reconstructs the story of *The Winter's Tale* organising the literary discourse along new spatial and temporal dimensions, creating a narrative which turns round those universal feelings and values (jealousy, love, friendship, forgiveness, etc.) that were already at the centre of the previous narrations, at the same time giving details as to locations, objects, actions and facts that make it a contemporary story where readers can recognise their own worlds. Another example of how literature is a representation, interpretation, projection of our life, of our feelings, of our ways of being.