"A.I. is a distraction. The glory of language is in its ambiguity": Narrating Contemporary Reality with Jeanette Winterson

A conversation with Jeanette Winterson
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JEANETTE WINTERSON was born in 1959 in Accrington, a small town in the north of England. Her early life was shaped by her complicated relationship with her adoptive mother and the trauma of having her own sexuality clash with a strict Pentecostal upbringing. As a reaction, Winterson embarked on her literary career with her debut novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), a semi-autobiographical work that established Winterson as an extremely influential literary figure, known for her exploration of complex themes such as gender, sexuality, and identity. Throughout her career, Winterson has been celebrated for her innovative postmodernist narrative structures and thematic boldness, through works that blend genres and challenge conventional storytelling norms. However, in recent years, Winterson has also explicitly turned her attention to posthuman themes, exploring the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technology on biological human existence. Her

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engagement with the Posthuman is found both in novels like *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), a contemporary take on Mary Shelley's classic, and in essay collections such as *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next* (2021). Equally opposed to technophobic and technophiliac reactions to AI, Winterson maintains a more critical stance, positing that language and the human experience it conveys continue to possess a distinct emotional resonance that AI cannot fully replicate.

The following interview was kindly granted by the author in July 2023 at the Forum Hotel in Rome, previous to her participation in the capital's International Literature Festival with a piece on Italo Calvino. In the course of this conversation, it becomes evident that Jeanette Winterson reaffirms her commitment to the fearless exploration of today's burning questions, positioning herself as a pivotal figure in the artistic examination of humanity's relationship with technology in the 21st century.

Andrea Raso: My first question takes its cue from the lecture you recently gave at Oxford University on the meaning of TARDIS,[1] and has to do with what has been defined as *technocritique*,[2] intended as a non-deterministic consideration of the possibilities, and not only the risks, of our contemporaneity. As a writer, how do you think we could come to talk about the future to those who struggle to keep up with the modern times or are still anchored to pessimistic views of the future?

Jeanette Winterson: In her essay "Composition as Explanation", Getrude Stein once wrote: "If only our contemporaries could be our contemporaries."[3] I think it's a great line, in that she is showing how most people who live in the past are only comfortable with what has already happened and they're not comfortable with the future. Of course, the future is bewildering. Marx was right when he started to talk about acceleration during the Industrial Revolution. For many people it is just too much, and so they shut down. They say, "I don't want to know" or "it won't affect me" because they are of a particular age. Obviously, that is the wrong approach. I think you have to encourage people to live in the world fully and therefore to try and understand it and not say that that's for the younger generation to deal with. But unfortunately, this is the pervasive attitude. Really, we have to tell people who are always worried about the apocalypse and the doom, that human beings have believed the world is ending since it began, as far as I can tell. There has always been end time, there has always been Apocalypse or Armageddon.

[1] As part of her appointment as Visiting Professor of Creative Media at Oxford University, Winterson held a talk titled "The Word Tardis" on 4 May 2023.

[2] Scholar Simona Micali defines *technocritique* as "a problematizing investigation on the relevance and effects of practices aimed at human enhancement" (181).

[3] "Composition as Explanation" was originally delivered as a lecture to the Cambridge Literary Club and at Oxford University in 1925-6. The exact quotation reads as follows: "[I]t is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody if one can have contemporaries all one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries" (Stein 30).

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Every culture has it. Mayans have it. Egyptians have it. Hesiod was writing about it years before Jesus was born. Then the world was going to end in a flood, think of Noah's ark. It's a doom loop, and if you look at the narratives, either we end in a flood, but then we come back, and that is the regenerative and optimistic narrative; or it's a kind of fireball horror, a blow-up Terminator, zombie-style, where the Earth is in flames—goodbye, you're never coming back. It's one or the other, but because it is so hardwired, whether you are a religious person or not, you have to admit it's an interesting fact about the human psyche. We're always thinking about the end of the world. So, what do we do about that? We recognize that it's there, this fear, but we also have to fight against it. Otherwise, it becomes true. Because if you believe, as we do, that the mind is the most powerful thing that we have and that it determines everything we do, then anything that happens starts here in this invisible, imaginative space. Donna Haraway talks about this as well, saying that you have to tell better stories (see Haraway). You have to find the story that you want, not through magical thinking, but in a way that makes you say: "Alright, there are many possibilities". There is not one end, but many possibilities which depend on the choices we make individually in the microcosm, as well as in the macrocosm. If people understood this, I think they would feel more powerful, more able to make decisions and also to understand that they are part of a historical sweep which make them think it's all over, but it's not. Endings are in some ways easier because you don't have to do anything but accept that you're going to die. It's very hard to stay alive, to change things and that's why the effort is required. Gravity is against us. Gravity affects every object on this earth with mass, and it keeps us down. And we're always pushing against gravity. Artists in particular are always trying to cheat gravity, get above it, dodge it and imagine other futures, and one thing that I know for sure as a writer is that when you begin a story or a longer piece, as it gathers momentum, then possible endings come in sight that you may not have planned. Then you have to stop the story from going in the direction you don't want, and you think "who is in control here? Excuse me, this *my* story". And you realize you have to pull things back and ask, "why was I going there when I didn't want to?". Then you start examining your unacknowledged ideologies, your own biases, your own fears, the things you don't want to write about, or your own wishful thinking. You look at your own psyche and think you don't want such ending. But it's somewhere, it's inside and coming out. That is why writers and artists are the practical visionaries we need now, since we understand that endings are not inevitable, that you do make your own. But it takes a huge amount of effort to stop that momentum, to let the stone roll down the hill held by gravity to an ending that nobody wants. It's the myth of Sisyphus: we have to keep pushing up stones back up that hill even when they keep coming down. We do make progress, technologically and scientifically, but also in terms of our moral capacity. We're always relearning the same things, trying to teach ourselves to be better humans. It all started here in Italy, in Florence, with the idea of *rinascita*, a whole renewal, the new beginning and that feeling that the Renaissance was about how to make a better state, a better citizen, a better life. Those are the kind of exciting questions we need to be asking again, not how to earn more money or what to do with a new technology. What is the further

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along that we would like to see? That's what we're not hearing from our politicians and certainly not from our technocrats. It's just one more toy or one more social media platform, think about Threads from Zuckerberg.[4] That's not where any of the answers lie. People have been asking me why I am optimistic about technology when we should be fearing it. I think the only thing to fear is humans, although we are trying to blame somebody else. It is not outside of our control yet and so it may be that we have to grow up and have grown-up conversations about how we manage the amazingness of what it means to be human past our absolute stupidity.

Andrea Raso: Similar questions have been tackled on the literary side as well, of course. Recently, in Italy, scholars like Giuliana Misserville, have been proposing new concepts, such as that of *mixtopia* (see Misserville), which somewhat links to what you were saying about the many possibilities of our contemporaneity. Also, you have mentioned Haraway so, rather than resting on utopias or dystopias, we might consider embracing a string-figured view of the world (see Haraway), where there are no static opposites, but dynamic encounters which are not mutually exclusive. That is why I would like to ask about your view on the emergence of literary genres and subgenres resting on utopistic imageries, like Solarpunk, which paradoxically seem to reaffirm the unattainability of a real change. How about having concrete purposes?

Jeanette Winterson: The fact is we haven't globally started to come up with any kind of plan for what the future should look like and the rise of nationalism has gone in the way of all this. You've got Giorgia Meloni in Italy who, like useless Trump, is convinced of having to protect her own little space, which is ludicrous. It is too late. You can't go back to that after globalisation unless there is a nuclear war or a definitive ecological disaster. Then, of course, things are going to look very different, and both things could happen any time soon. But if we want to try to avoid that, I think the only solutions now are cooperative ones, not competitive ones. We need to do what we did after WWII, with the United Nations, the World Bank, then later with the International Monetary Fund. I know all these things have all gone wrong, being corrupted, but they were great ideas about the need of global cooperation. The EU was meant to be against other European wars. These were noble ideas, and of course humans can never do anything perfectly or in an unalloyed state. It's always diluted and corrupted and compromised, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try, and it seems to me now that we're exactly at a point where we need to realize that there is a war being waged, a war against the planet, and that humans are going to lose it. We need that kind of cooperation, which means serious conversations, from politicians to their citizens. If Putin launched a nuclear attack tomorrow and we were all on a war footing, we would have to start having those conversations immediately. People can make changes quickly and the only time that happens is when we're on a war footing. It's not that it can't be done, it's that we won't do it unless we are threatening one another. I don't know how we're ever going to get

[4] Launched in July 2023, Threads is designed to be a companion app to Instagram, focusing on text-based communication and real-time updates.

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the political will, so I guess it'll have to come from street and grassroots movements. I am horrified that in Italy only 47% of you people voted in the last election.[5] That kind of apathy is terrible and that's how fascists get in.

Andrea Raso: Still people are convinced they have agency when they decide not to vote, claiming that not to vote is a clear enough statement. That is not a statement.

Jeanette Winterson: That's not a statement at all, that's ignorance. It worries me that we call ourselves *homo sapiens* while being so stupid. People talk about the menace of intelligent systems, but I would rather talk to an intelligent operating system than to most stupid humans. I think it is a distraction, all this fear of the threat of AI at the moment, or even AI utopias: we are not going to get there, unless we can urgently stabilize the planet first. I am sure that is what our future depends on. Otherwise, we're going to be back to sticks and stones soon, and what is a beautiful world in many ways will be lost.

Andrea Raso: That is also why the idea of the Anthropocene is now being questioned, as it suggests that we have only recently discovered the disastrous consequences of human activity on the planet. It is something that's been here for decades, if not centuries.

Jeanette Winterson: It has for 250 years. We did bad things before, but we couldn't have much of an impact until we reached the machine age and fossil fuels started coming out of the ground for the first time in history. We could already decimate forests, but we weren't as many as today. There is no denying that we hadn't been able to make the same impact on the planet we are making now. There are more of us living more destructively and wanting more items that are in fact luxury, not in any sense essential or necessary for wellbeing. All of that needs to be discussed until we start to dismantle this crazy idea of the myth of endless growth and that economic progress is always about growth, which most people do not experience anyway. They experience the opposite: poverty. I do worry that we're finding excuses to wriggle out of our responsibilities and every day in the newspapers now I see something about AI, which is a mere distraction. AI is nowhere near intelligent. It will be, I think, but it isn't.

Andrea Raso: That is also the case with academic research. It is changing fast, but it is not going thoroughly non-human, yet. I could ask ChatGPT to talk about Jeanette Winterson's oeuvre, and it might even offer useful insights, but it's not that rare to have it start quoting books and authors that do not even exist, which destabilizes AI's reliability in that sense.

[5] The figure mentioned here refers to the voter turnout recorded at the end of the first day of the municipal elections in Italy, held in May 2023.

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Jeanette Winterson: Also, it really has to do with what humans want and what we mean by knowledge and learning. It will certainly make us consider what we think of as knowledge and what we can outsource. We outsource so much anyway, and it's quite good, but also, what are we for? If we are all about the *res cognita*—although I believe we're more feeling than thinking things—what we're for is not yet clear. I think artists know what they're here for, so I never understood this fear of us being out of a job when nobody ever even gave us a job. We just do what we always did, which is make our own world while also trying to make a living. I don't care at all if bad books are written by computers. I'm not going to read those bad books, but somebody will enjoy them. Why worry? Just let the AI do it. You can feed in the information, it'll come out with something ludicrous, but it won't be any worse than what some humans are writing. It's why in *12 Bytes* I wrote a piece about the Industrial Revolution and how it could have been if we had approached it differently. I mean, there is no reason why, when you invent a machine that can do the work of eight men, you couldn't say that is fantastic. They couldn't at the time because the mindset was not there. But now there's no reason to worry if AI is doing the work for us. The money's coming in or the income's coming in, the lifestyle is there. All we have to do is distribute it, and we cannot bring ourselves to consider that. The technology is there to free us in lots of ways, as it always has and can, but we use it all wrong. We invent the motor car, what a wonderful idea, and then a hundred years later, we're all sitting in traffic jams. We just can't manage any good thing for long. It always becomes this crazy bad thing. But that's the way we use our inventions, isn't it? It's not the inventions themselves. That's why I remain optimistic. Maybe enough young people will come along and be prepared to live differently. We know it will mean a simpler life, less moving around, less wanting stuff. All of that is going to change, but would that be so terrible if people were happier? I think it wouldn't. I think it would be a lovely thing. People have always been told that happiness is something you outsource and get from stuff and status, that it's not inside you, nor does it belong to you. But if it's always out there, you've got problems. That's why I think artists are going to be fine, because we know it's not out there, and that won't change. We have valuable lessons to teach others about where meaning lies, how happiness is to be found and how to be a useful citizen. After all, why do you need to do a crummy factory job if a robot can do it for you?

Andrea Raso: The relationship between external and internal realities somewhat reminds me of what Audre Lorde meant with the 'erotic', that is something that it's not about external manifestations, but that comes from the inside first and only then moves outward.[6] This way, a dialogue ensues between what is outside and what is inside. As you said, conversation is key, not thinking but feeling. We can discuss about the meaning of TARDIS, but at the end of the day, language-less communication is not only a detrimental possibility, but it's not a possibility at all.

[6] In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", Audre Lorde writes that "the erotic is not a question only of what we do, but of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" and that "when we begin to live from within outward […] we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense" (24, 28).

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Jeanette Winterson: I don't think so, but some people do. I probably say so because computers don't use natural language, which is in itself very interesting. Again, the question is about what kinds of communications we will have, and whether we allow ourselves to be part of a hive-mind state because of BCCI chips. I'm not greeting it with joy because I don't think that language is a means to an end. It is a thing itself. A highly skilled neurosurgeon may think of language as a tool that we have invented in order to communicate, but I think it is far more than that. Do I think humans will give up language? I don't know, because I used to say that couldn't happen, but then I look at how shrunk and impoverished and desiccated so much of language has become, because of TV or social media language, which is not fit to describe self-states or complexity. This is what worries me because the glory of language, whatever language, is that it is able to do what is otherwise impossible for me to be inside your head or inside your heart. That seems to me to be a huge achievement, and not one that science necessarily understands.

Andrea Raso: Is that why in *12 Bytes* you also suggest how much science is in need of good writers?

Jeanette Winterson: Yes, and not just because they write terrible prose. In fact, not all of them do, but most of them use language in a destructive way, not in a sense that destroys meaning, since they think of language as they do mathematics. Instead, they need language to be narrow and rinsed of ambiguity. Well, that's not what language is. Its glory is in its ambiguity. People can know absolutely what you mean, but the layers and layers that come with the words that you choose are also offering multiple other meanings, other possibilities within the simplest sentences and constructions, and the words you choose will shade the meaning in interesting ways. Certainly, tech bros aren't interested in that, but scientists aren't only because they mistakenly think they must say what they mean. Nobody's ever said what they mean, because it changes. It's not just that each word within it has a different shade, it's that when it's put together in the sentence, in the paragraph, in the page, in the whole, it's offering so much more. It's absolutely not a flat surface. It's dimensional, and that is why so many of us in across town can approach the same text and find in it multiple meanings. People can impose on the text, of course, but often the text is simply yielding up things that are not perhaps available even to the writer at that time or in that society. I think it's something I mentioned about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, that we are the first generation who can read it right because we know what it means to invent a life form that's going to depend on electricity. That was a hell of a vision, but nobody knew that. The thing itself, the vision of it and the way it's constructed, and of course the language, allows these readings across time. Otherwise, why would we bother? And the books that we don't bother with anymore, they were good for their moment, but they are one dimensional. They've done their thing and that's the end of it. Things that move on are full of these strange shades of meaning that we find later. I love that, I don't want to lose it, and most of all, I don't want young people to lose it. I hate it that they may not have access to the

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vastness of what language can offer because nobody's bothering to show them. The problem is that if you're not giving some decent education, it's hard to read anything outside of your own time. Education for me is the basis of everything but a more joyful education, where children think, "Wow, this is exciting", and they are inspired to want to make their own journeys. We know we have to inspire them in the sciences, but in the arts, we somehow seem to think that they'll find it themselves, but they won't. Very few of them, anyway. That is my worry, and it's not to do with tech, but with the moment there is a flattening ubiquitous medium, whether it's TV or social media, which will make it hard to get the obsessive users of that medium to manage complexity in other media since they just train on one thing. A friend of mine, a classical musician at a very high level, says that the ear is like everything else when you're little: what it's trained on is what it expects. Classical music is complex, and if you're never exposed to it and you can't play an instrument and all you get is a three-minute pop song with two chord changes, it rolls out a lot of experience that people could have. We're back to the same question: what are humans for? We are amazing. Do we really want to keep narrowing? All this is not only for the very cultured or the very rich. I do believe this could be for everybody.

Andrea Raso: That is also why I find your many retellings of older stories to be incredibly thought-provoking. You did it with *Frankissstein*, your take on Shelley's classic, but you also did it with Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, and even with the myth of Atlas and Heracles.[7] You really are keeping the conversation going.

Jeanette Winterson: Of course, and I think it's good that scholarship is also doing that, because it shows us that the thing is still alive, that it's still relevant, it's still continuing. It's not the Museum of Archive, it is a living thing. I can understand that some people want to protect the things they love, and they feel that they might be somehow dumbed down. That can happen, but it's much more important that things are kept alive, even if sometimes they're misunderstood or misinterpreted. It will come right in the end. I mean, I love the madness that's happened around Jane Austen, and I think she would find it very funny as well. Why not? What seems to be more wrong to me is what many TV adaptations do when they simply change the ending to fit with contemporary standards. But to take it and to rework it, to play with it, why not? My sense is that if schools were doing their job, people would know both the original contexts and the joyful reinterpretations of them in all their madness, some more successful than others, and then they would have it all to choose from. I don't think less is more. I think that more is more. We want people to be engaged with the act of creation, whatever that is. I want young kids to feel that they can go into the hallow text and play with it.

[7] Respectively *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), *The Gap of Time* (2015), and *Weight* (2006).

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Andrea Raso: That is what postmodernism was all about. Indeed, the public usually look at your works as belonging to the postmodernist canon, if one believes in such thing as a canon. However, much of the debates around gender and corporeality, for example, as well as technology, was already circulating when you wrote your first novels. How much of what would later become explicit with discourses around the Posthuman condition you think has got into your fiction?

Jeanette Winterson: What happens with writers is that the theories always come after the work. And I don't know any good writers who sit down thinking about theory. They think of a great idea, a feeling tone, or they have a visual image that they want to enter and explore. It's much more play, it's moving around something that is magnetically attracting your attention. You don't ask yourself at that point why that is attracting your attention, because that would get in the way of the process. You just feel you can't get rid of this thing, or it might be a dream, all sorts of things. We are now far more self-aware than we used to be, but I don't think you can create from a place that is self-conscious because you're just being receptive to whatever is happening and it is, at the beginning, an unconscious process. Certainly, as time goes by you can make sense of things in a way that other people are likely to, but it's not causing effect, I am absolutely sure of that. It does come from an inner space which doesn't yield itself at that point to any kind of analysis. It simply is the doing of it. Obviously, no one can escape their own time. You can escape lots of things, but not your own time, so everything that you are born into is going to affect you. But it's your wallpaper, your background, and that's why people make such a mess when they write historical novels if they can't be bothered to do their research, because we don't consider the time. We just assume everybody will know what it's like to be your contemporary, but if you're writing about something which is in the past, you have to get it right because it's not wallpaper, even though it used to be. It's about recognizing that we are, without thinking, very much in the zone of our lives. That applies to writers just as it applies to everybody else about everything, the practical as well as the political ways that we live. I always get a little bit nervous about theory. The grapes are on the vine, and they're made into the wine and that's what happens. Then you can go back and look at it but at the time you're just making the wine, so that's what I'm doing, I suppose. My political views and my activist platform don't ever, even at this stage, affect what it is that I'm going to write. It always has to come from some deep conviction that this is the thing that I'm prepared to spend quite a lot of time on in the near future. I don't choose it. I might if it was a piece of nonfiction, but even with *12 Bytes*, I did it wholly and solely because I wanted to inform myself better about what was going on. Of course, I do read new scientists and keep up, so I am better informed than most people of my kind about what is happening, but I felt I didn't know enough. I wanted to think about philosophy, politics, gender, religion, so naturally I would bring those considerations in and explore them, but wholly to educate myself, to start with, and then realizing that some other people will be interested in this because it will help them have a way through. As for fiction, of course, right from the beginning, there have been all sorts of questions of gender, but I do make some simple

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decisions. I use simple structures to start with. With *Oranges*, I knew that I would take the first seven books of the Bible and use the stories in those books to loosely inform the content of my own chapters. I knew that I would use myself as a fictional character, and I knew that I would bring in fairy stories, invented or existing, at certain points to break up the narrative. Those were my simple decisions. I am a very simple person in many ways as well as a very complex one, and when it came to *The Passion*, I immediately thought about four sections, two narrators, a male one and a female one, each starting off with completely separate stories. Then, I thought to myself that the qualities that we think of as masculine, and which are not, I would put into the woman, Villanelle. And the ones one thinks of as feminine I'd put into Henri. I am not going to *say* that, I am just going to *do* it. You could say that's a political decision, but it's a decision made for a very good story. Do you see how simple my thinking is when it comes to it? As soon as I've done that, I just have to type it out and see what the story itself offers to me. Once I've had the idea, I think of the structure—structure is everything—and when I'm satisfied with those decisions and feel they are practical, I just go. It was the same with *Frankissstein*. Very simple: I will start from the original story, and I will take the characters who are present there and push them through a portal into the present day. I don't need to talk about that, I just will, with certain changes. We've got them there and we've got them now and let's see what unfolds!

Andrea Raso: What I find in your work is also a continuous blurring of the boundaries, as is the case with *Frankissstein* and *12 Bytes*. One is a novel, and then you have *12 Bytes*, which could be looked at as a guide to the novel. Yet, it's nice to see how the boundaries blur in terms of narration and language, too. *12 Bytes* is told like a story. It's not a dull piece of nonfiction, although the research behind had to be the solid foundation. You mentioned the character of Villanelle and the political choices behind its construction, but it didn't take anything away from the aesthetic value of what you wrote, did it?

Jeanette Winterson: That's because I never, ever wanted to be highly aware of it, like D.H. Lawrence, who kept messing up his story with a bit of preaching and soapboxing and continually tied himself up with his ideologies. It's like he was creating something sensitive and beautiful, and then all of a sudden thought, "Oh no, I've got to put my message in, my message, my message!". We've seen how that mars a narrative and I didn't want to do that. Of course, if my decision to reverse what we think of as the cliched qualities of the male and the female hadn't worked, I'd have pulled back and looked again, but it did work. I could see it was working straight away, but you have to be open to all possibilities. So, once I had done Henri at the beginning of *The Passion*, I had no idea what the second section was going to be, except that it would be about a female person. I hadn't worked out who she was at all because I was busy with the Napoleonic Wars, which I've always found very interesting. Then, I thought, "Alright, I'll just start telling myself a story". That's why Calvino has always been so helpful to me, so much so that I literally sat down and started writing about a city surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets and roads, until the boatman story comes in and

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there, what I was looking for simply popped up.[8] I couldn't have got there any other way except by telling myself a story and suddenly finding that Villanelle was waiting for me. But, although I think it's very important to have an early structure and a sense of where you are, I also think you have to have an organic belief in the creative process and allow it to lead you. You just have to be humble with it and let the thing talk back to you so that you are sensitive to all these possibilities again. Later, I end up doing exactly what AI does when it's doing predictive text. I know that I am going through my mind just because every so often I can catch it going through multiple moves continuously and then closing them down in nanoseconds. The difference is I can always pull back out and take time to think about what to do next. What makes a unique voice is a particular patternmaking out of the multiple choices. It's the way the brain itself is formed, its neurons are firing and things we don't need are being discarded. Maybe writers stay healthy because we are doing that every time we make a new piece of work, continually firing neural networks together. It's a mini world that we've made out of remaking ourselves and it is terrible when writers become cliches or parodies of themselves. That happens because they're no longer in the process of allowing all of that to happen. They know what to do, we all know what to do by now, but that isn't how creative work is done. It's launching yourself each time as though you've not done this before and not allowing your facility to get in your way, but to be able to still be absolutely fresh and new while bringing your skills in.

Andrea Raso: Now I really must ask you about your upcoming book.[9] You've been basically talking about the ghost of a writer's former selves, but recently you've also been writing about the different kind of ghosts we are surrounded by nowadays, whether they are digital spectres and the idea of mind uploading or even our avatars on social media. However, the evanesce of ghostly entities often clashes with the material dimension of reality we find in many of your novels. What do you think is the state of the relationship between ghosts and bodily realities today?

Jeanette Winterson: Probably because of my religious upbringing, I'm rather charmed by the idea that we might be within striking distance of not needing our biological bodies anymore. It's incredible, Mrs Winterson was right! I do wonder very seriously if the only way we could talk about where we are now is through a religious mindset where our body's not the end and there is something beyond this. Every culture has talked about that without fail, whether it's a sky God or not. It doesn't matter whether you believe in a deity or whether you just believe in a world soul. It's still the idea that this is not it. If that were to be proved correct, it would be fascinating in terms of how the human mind works, because it would mean that we knew it all along, although we could only talk about it in terms of a deep conviction which became religious conviction. Imagine if one day we could all be out of our bodies and just remember when we were

[8] The passage evoked here is the description of the city of Esmeralda as found in the novel *Le città invisibili* (1972) by Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985).

[9] *Night Side of the River*, a collection of short stories published in 2023.

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made of meat. It may be that we will get there and in fact the next evolutionary step will allow us to understand fully what the human journey actually was. There's no final say, no last word, and consciousness is not obliged to materiality, which is fascinating. I think because people have forever lived with the idea of a non-biological entity called God and all the panoply of things that go with that—angels, demons, the ghost of your dead grandma—we're quite comfortable with that. Even secular people are not really worried about the idea of non-biological entities floating about. Maybe that is closer to a reality than superstition, and science may be taking us down that road, but for now it does mean all kinds of weird hauntings because you can stalk somebody in the metaverse and it'll be just as frightening as doing it in real life, should that happen. I've seen one of those apps that scrape your social media and sound like you, which I could access to have a conversation with someone who's dead. It's insane but it's all part of the fact that we cannot accept death because we knew it was always a temporary condition and we were never meant to be dead.

Andrea Raso: I agree, but sometimes people get triggered, as if they were being forced to turn their back on their reality, as if ethical debates around the body were being put aside. I don't think that to join a critical conversion around the ever more concrete possibility of leaving the body behind is taking anything away from the embodied nature of the present. Still, when it comes to themes like motherhood, which you often talk about in your own books, the tendency is to resort to biologism and think of a mother as a rather static figure. Yet, cisgender, heterosexual women and fertile women are not the only ones who can be called 'mothers'. Do you think that we could come to look at the mother as a progressively mutable signifier, especially in the face of AI growth?

Jeanette Winterson: 'Mother' is a nurturing term which has so many connotations. Everybody knows what we mean by 'mother' or 'bad mother'. This idea of compassion, which has been usually assigned to a female that will intervene before the rough male and bring some mercy into the picture is due to how we divided the world, because we're binary and don't believe that people can in themselves have the same qualities. I don't think it's a fundamental, biological truth, that if you were born with a certain biological kit formation, you will be one thing, and if you are not, you'll be something else. I have not given birth myself, but I do believe that the experience of giving birth is not like anything else, and that those women who have had another life growing inside them would say so. It is a very particular and specific thing and none of this is about dishonouring any bodies or bodily experience. It's about honouring and celebrating and recognising it, but that doesn't mean this is permanent or the only way humans can engage with life. Certain conditions work very well for a species that needs to breathe, to take in nutrients every day, excrete them out the other end, and gives birth via reproduction. There's no reason to believe that is the only way any conscious life can exist, though. That's why people are frightened with the AI revolution, because we are creating something that is none of those things: it doesn't eat, it doesn't sleep, it doesn't reproduce in the way we do, although it can reproduce itself; it doesn't have a limbic

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system, so it's not going to have any emotions in the way that we do. It's going to be fascinating, but are we going to be able to talk to it? Are we going to form relationships with it? It's a challenge to what it is to be embodied, and I understand that a lot of feminists in particular feel that it's some sort of patriarchal assault on the body as the site of life where everything begins and ends. You can read it like that, but I see it in macro terms as probably something beyond the male or the female. Something that will take us beyond the binary, beyond the male and female. I mean, the fact that we gender AI is ridiculous. It does not have a gender and it has no biological sex. We have to ask these very uncomfortable questions and that's why I love technology in one way, because it's making us ask, "why do we do this?".

Andrea Raso: Also, when it comes to feminist thought, it sometimes deforms into strands of pseudo feminism which exclude trans women, for example. They cherish the idea of difference as an essentialist notion, but not that of differences.

Jeanette Winterson: That's right, and I certainly don't agree with any feminist position that has become exclusionary towards trans women. That's why it might turn out to be a good thing for us to get past biology. We've got to find a way of making everybody feel okay.

Andrea Raso: My last question for you is one you were already asked back in Oxford. What is your favourite word right now? On that occasion, you said you don't have a favourite word, which also confirms the idea of language as something that's living. At the time the word was 'joy'. What is it now?

Jeanette Winterson: I think it is 'amazed', because that's what I am when I travel. After Oxford, I went to Singapore and to Sydney and I feel like it's my magic carpet made of words that brings me to all these places. I've come on the lightest of things, haven't I? I travel by word, and it doesn't use any fossil fuel. Whenever I land up in another place, given my own past and the prospect of having to stay in a narrow little hole in the north of England, it's marvellous how words have been my wings. Everything I've done is because of words and for that I am amazed.

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