



“The Wound and the Gift”:
Rewriting the Wounded Self
Through the Gift of Language. A
Study of Jeanette Winterson’s Au-
tobiography *Why Be Happy When You
Could Be Normal?*

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ABSTRACT: Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) is the autobiography of the writer whose life is marked by traumas connected with her abandonment at birth, her subsequent adoption, and a further rejection by her adoptive family when they discover that she is having a lesbian relationship. In the memoir, the paper will argue that the author tackles the hermeneutics of self-representation. She wishes to make sense of the personal past and to trace its trajectory as a means to discover the origin of the self and re-write it along different existential and psychological lines.

During her memory journey back into her past, Winterson relentlessly returns, and revisits, the traumatic events of her early life, still stored in her buried memories, allowing them to surface to her conscious mind. She gradually deconstructs her old self through a slow and painful interpretive process that, in the end, leads to psychic healing and artistic creation.

Winterson’s autobiography will be read in the light of memory and trauma studies; psychoanalysis, as well as Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985).

KEYWORDS: autobiography, memory, trauma, postmodernism



This paper examines Jeanette Winterson's autobiography *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011)¹ to discuss how she constructs a narrative of the self and articulates the essence of a specific *who* in a dynamic framework inside which, it is maintained, the protagonist turns out to be a subject in process, constantly shifting and undergoing change. In this perspective, the narration of her life story can be viewed as a performative action which reveals, and exposes, who she is, so a vehicle of discovery both of herself and the world.

This issue is approached through an analysis of the narrative structure of the text in conjunction with close attention to its architectonic themes of loss, memory, and desire. The aim is to bring to light the strategies and rhetorical devices at work in the textual construction of the self. In order to do so, the analysis will follow the writer's attempts to retrieve incomplete images, half-recollected or repressed fragments of memories when she retraces the past to decode it from the present. The discussion will focus on the relationship between memory and identity, a relationship that is problematic because, on the one hand, Winterson appeals to memory to determine the truth about her past. However, on the other hand, both 'memory' and 'truth' are unstable and destabilizing terms, and we cannot assume a direct correspondence between the past experience and *how* it is remembered in the present. Memory is slippery, it may distort or misrepresent events, especially when the psyche is dealing with trauma; its system of representation may fail or resist the enormity of the shattering truth that the subject is trying to recollect.

The discussion of Winterson's memoir will be grounded on the double theoretical framework of memory and trauma studies because the two areas intersect and are closely interwoven in Winterson's autobiography.

The recourse to memory studies is motivated by the nature of Winterson's text, which inscribes the writer's desire to revisit the past and (re)write the self. Memory informs our narratives, being the raw material of personal identity and of all human experience. It is the agent that mediates our access to past events, sometimes mere shadowy residues of unconscious psychical processes. Yet, the retrieval of such events is essential to reconstruct the life journey of the autobiographical self and reach deep within the personality to give it narrative form.

Trauma theory offers a cluster of ideas and discourses relating to the psychology of individuals. It helps explain the source of particular types of psychic distress or a traumatic event, the meaning that the human mind attaches to it, and how the narrative of the self can be affected by such an event. In this light, both theoretical

frameworks are necessary axes on which to ground the analysis of Winterson's memoir. In the field of trauma studies, the paper will draw specifically from the insightful contributions of those scholars who view trauma, not only as an event that can precipitate a crisis of identity but also as possibly sustaining, and being constitutive of, one's identity, thus contributing to articulate the narrative account of selfhood.

The paper will argue that in *Why Be Happy* there is a clear, constant conjunction between trauma, identity, and artistic creation. The traumatic events the writer has to face become markers of her identity and are transformed into art, being an important source of material for her whole oeuvre, from her first autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (2001)² up to her last work of fiction, *The Gap of Time* (2015), a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1610–11). These events even direct the choice of themes as if, in the end, the very act of narration can offer her mastery over an otherwise dissociated narrative fragmentation of a self that is often dispersed across different discourses.

The close reading of the text will disclose that the protagonist has to face past traumas that, buried for too long in her subconscious, begin to resurface, to be painfully relived and revised. First, when she finds out that she has been abandoned at birth and adopted; second when, at a critical moment in her adult life, she discovers her adoption papers in a little box. This is an epiphanic revelation for her that detonates a private apocalypse and drives her in search of her biological mother, the missing object of desire and the helper she needs to heal her split self. It is a search that starts both her retrospective narration and her inward quest for a vision of self in the depths of her own psyche. The challenge that lies in wait for her is to articulate such traumatic experiences in a life-narrative that, retrospectively, appears muddled and opaque, and resists her desire for a meaning and a pattern.

The analysis of Winterson's memoir will unfold by addressing first, her early life, then her maturity, and her revisitation of these early years.

The shape of memory: the wound

What is memory anyway but a painful dispute with the past?

J. Winterson, *The Gap of Time*, 11

Why Be Happy can be divided into three sections plus a brief "Coda". The first part, narrated in non-chronological order, consists of eleven chapters and covers the

years up to the moment when she is compelled to leave home for good to go to Oxford, upon Mrs Winterson's discovery of her lesbian identity,. It is roughly the same territory that she has already explored in *Oranges*. The second section is a dense two-page long unnumbered chapter titled "Intermission", in which she ponders over time's unraveling, art, and life, intentionally missing out her twenty-five years as a professional writer. In the third part, which contains the remaining four chapters, there is a "flash forward to 2007" (Winterson, 2011, p. 156), a period when she was facing once more loss and abandonment: the end of the relationship with her partner, her subsequent psychological breakdown and suicide attempt, and the death of her father, with whom she had resumed a fond relationship over time. These chapters are devoted to the theme of adoption and the search for the lost biological mother. The search begins when she stumbles over a birth certificate hidden among the effects of her adoptive father, a piece of paper that has momentous implications for her psychology and self-perception.

Winterson's is a typical quest narrative, for which she relies on the crucial role of storytelling as the structuring principle to articulate or represent identity. This view is also held by P. J. Eakin (1988), who maintains that autobiography is "both an art of memory and [...] of the imagination", adding that memory, necessary in the narration of the self, "is really a form of storytelling" (pp. 5-6). Winterson tends to privilege storytelling in much of her fiction first, because it had a vital role in her life, as she was brought up on her mother's stories and those of the community she grew up in. Second, because she believes in the power of narrative to treat trauma that actually deprives people of their voices and reduces them to silence. She uses storytelling both as a theme and as a structural paradigm in her memoir, a choice that attributes to life and identity a fictional dimension.

In order to tell her own story, the adult Winterson must confront the traumatic truth that as an adopted child, a foundational part of her story is missing. This awareness is at the basis of the urge to rewrite the text of the self in a narrative designed to make sense of the past, of herself and others. Through the backward gaze of recollection, Winterson attains a form of truth unavailable in the flux of the immediate and rewrites the text of the self in a narrative that celebrates its plurality.

The autobiography dramatizes her quest for identity through the conflict with her adoptive mother, who is a pivotal figure in her life. She is the Other that is a frequent presence in women's autobiographies, with whom Winterson has a dev-

astatingly disappointing, guilt-ridden relationship that leaves her emotionally and psychologically damaged. The writer engages dialogically with her: she struggles to escape from the dark narrative of their life together and constitute her own autonomous subjectivity, a struggle whose intensity pervades the whole text.

Why Be Happy is a journey deep into hell and back, where she speaks of what she had silenced in her debut novel, *Oranges*, a light semi-autobiographical work. The memoir is a fragmented narrative, organized into self-sustained units, constituted by a number of stories. They are held together by some motifs as well as by the cohesive power of memory that juxtaposes and fuses together a series of possibly discrete events that do not follow a clear continuous or sequential linear time-frame, a type of irregularity that frequently informs women's autobiographies. It is a metaphorical text, with a tendency for rapid shifts, that has much in common with poetry, including its musical, repetitive, formulaic quality, and the foregrounding of formal devices.

At the core of Winterson's autobiography is the wound she feels inside her, a memory-image that haunts the text with a sort of hallucinatory quality, a presence that signals an almost "pathological incrustation of the past at the heart of the present" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 54). This open wound that has its root in her childhood drives her on a journey into her past, a process in which memory and interpretation play a crucial role. She constantly appeals to memory as a tool that might confirm, subvert or contradict her adoptive mother's 'truths', presumed statements of authority that, in her view, are glaring distortions and fabrications. Her act of recollection digs deep into the layers of memories, emotional landscapes of loss, isolation, and missed dialogues. She desires to fulfill a primeval fantasy of union with the mother's body, return to a safe place that she believes she has irretrievably lost, and feel no longer exiled from the maternal continent.

The wound triggers off the process of remembering, driven by "a wish and a conviction that the wounds of the past be healed in the very activity of rescuing memory from the oblivion of forgetfulness and repression" (Kuhn, 2000, p. 184), a recollection that has a clear therapeutic aspiration. At the same time, the past that slowly surfaces demands to find representation in speech, ordering the mass of memory-images in some communicable form and giving this confusion an artistic shape. It is a psychological and existential journey, a liberating process that becomes difficult to stop as if the self wished to reconstitute itself according to

a biological scheme akin to the healing of wounds, and such a healing might be achieved by the very act of speaking and being heard.

Her quest has its prototype in the mythic patterns of spiritual journeys: the protagonist begins her search for self in a psychological Dantesque 'selva oscura', a 'dark wood',³ in her memoir the literal darkness of the nights when she is locked out by her adoptive mother as a punishment. Then, sitting alone on the doorsteps outside her house, convinced that she is unloved, she is assailed and engulfed by fears which involve terrible feelings of division and loss of self.

Pushing against the linear temporality of a patriarchal narrative and shifting narration backwards and forward, she subjects memories to retrospective transformation and reinterpretation and begins a gradual deconstruction of her old self.

Winterson's memoir, the paper maintains, articulates the essence of a *bios*, where "the mind works with its own brokenness" (Winterson, 2011, p. 169), a narrative that honestly offers to our gaze the naked shards of her life. In this sense, her autobiography is performative of a life that unfolds, is profoundly transformed, and finally takes shape before our own eyes. The performative value of her narration finds supportive evidence in the fact that, in the end, rewriting the self, the story reveals the meaning of what "would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 8), leaving behind a pattern that *is* her life story. In order to achieve such a unity of design, she *must* go back to her missing origins, the founding trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother, be reconciled with the "lost child" (Winterson, 2011, p. 173) inside her and be healed "through being loved and loving others" (Winterson, 2011, p. 119). In this process of remembrance, a *core self* is formed, without which Winterson could not reimagine herself for a future of renewed creative and imaginative work. Thus, this process is essential for her, both as a human being and as an artist: remembering involves facing and working through her feelings of anger and destructiveness.

In her autobiography Winterson tackles the hermeneutics of self-representation, flouting the typical features of the genre and revising it from a postmodernist stance. In her revision, her treatment of narrativity and subjectivity interrelates the postmodern and the feminist/lesbian. In fact, her memoir structurally rejects the idea of a totalizing vision and the concept of a narrative centre, features that are also common to postmodernism. Besides, she does not construe and narrate herself as continuous through time, but as episodic, fractured and discontinuous,

once more in keeping with a postmodernist stance. At the same time, as a feminist/lesbian, she problematizes essentialist ideas of sexuality and gender. Against most traditional Western autobiographical practices, she does not erase the body from her text, rather the opposite. She moves it to the thematic and epistemological fore of her narrative. So, her autobiography demands to be read against the grain of conventional interpretations: first, for her disruption of the autobiographical form, with its flouting of chronological organization and narrative development. Second, because she claims the lesbian body as the autobiographical subject and the location of autobiographical identity.

The wound and the gift

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder Said', l. 430

The repercussions that a traumatic event can have on a person's life is debated by Dominick LaCapra in his *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). He uses the term "founding traumas" (p. 23) to refer to those traumatic events that can paradoxically become the formative basis of identity for an individual, allowing her/him to emerge stronger. The intersection between trauma and identity can be traced in Winterson's narrative in the recurrent memories of the dramatic events of her early life.

The abandonment of her biological mother and her subsequent adoption; the fanatically religious upbringing by her adoptive Pentecostal parents; the additional adolescent trauma of being forced to leave her adoptive family upon discovery of her lesbian relationship. These are all events that can be considered as "founding traumas" for Winterson, contributing to the psychological fragmentation, alienation, and madness that punctuate the articulation of subjectivity in her memoir. Winterson's life and personality bear the imprint of the original loss that is the spring of her search for an origin in the autobiography, as well as a haunting presence in most of her production through the ever-recurring themes of loss and deprived childhood.

The shaping function of trauma is given a central position in Winterson's narrative through the symbol of the 'wound'²⁴ the result of the abrupt severance from her

mother at birth. In time, this event hurt her deeper and deeper as Mrs Winterson would invent stories of "many bad mothers for [her]; fallen women, drug-addicts, drinkers, men-chasers" (Winterson, 2011, p. 220). However, the wound, seared directly into the psyche, also has a transformative power: it is not only a source of agony but "a key to being human" (Winterson, 2011, p. 221), as well as a spring to find the gift of her true self and her most authentic voice to assert her gender identity. This is a lesson that emerges from the variety of stories she is brought up with. From them she learns that there is "the nearness of the wound to the gift" (Winterson, 2011, p. 221); that the wound can be healed once she, the heroine of the quest, completes her return journey back home, to her birth mother, the "lost loss" (Winterson, 2011, p. 223) that had separated her from herself, a loss that, though mitigated, is never quite redeemed. So, the wound and the meaning-pattern it creates is a metaphor of the self, a trope through which Winterson tends to decode both the inner workings of her mind and external reality.

Her quest begins from her fractured mind and reaches even the abyss of a suicide attempt when, in 2008, she concludes that her time is up, and she needs to vacate life. However, at the depth of the dark night of the soul, she remembers John's biblical moral imperative, "ye must be born again" (Winterson, 2011, p. 168). As if obeying him, she feels not only reborn to a new sense of life but also consciously committed to it, despite its chaos and pain, and morally bound to make the best possible use of what she had been given.

Along this slow, painful process she has to confront and defeat the "violent rages" of a "furious vicious child living alone at the bottom bog" of Jeanette (Winterson, 2011, p. 171), that hides inside her and threatens the actual dissolution of the self. It is a presence similar to the "strange little creature [with] glittering eyes" (Brontë, 1992, p.10) who is Jane Eyre's double in Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel, a creature that feeds on her and even refuses to let her live. In Richard D. Laing's view, the image of the doppelgänger reflects a split self, the result of society's tendency to categorize people and prescribe stereotypical roles, a tendency that breaks the *whole* person and divides the self (Laing, 1967). However, in *Why Be Happy* the doppelgänger is not a totally demonic or haunting figure, as in Brontë's. It has an essentially positive function in the end, because "she acts as a guide in the exploration of the wild places of the self, the acceptance of which is always crucial" (Rigney, 1978, p. 122). This *other* self has an ethical effect: it challenges

Winterson to face the past and accommodate it in the present through forgiveness and healing, avoiding the risk of being dragged back by painful memories. It helps her comprehend that her capacity to move forward rests on a healthy relationship with the past and reconciliation with it. Winterson will face this challenge also thanks to the loving presence of her new partner, the typical helper of a traditional fairy tale narrative, who also supports her search for her biological mother, Anne. She realizes that the old wars might come to an end and that before her lies an order that emanates from love. After this, she can resurface, phoenix-like, as a sane, fully-integrated subject.

Winterson openly admits that all her life she has “worked from the wound” because she is aware that “to heal it would mean an end to one identity- the defining identity” (Winterson, 2011, p. 223). This proves how the abandonment at birth was a founding trauma for her, formative of her innermost identity. She was marked out and made different by her childhood experiences, which will be healed but will not disappear. Even more, she appropriates such events, stored in her buried memories, into the fabric of the self and incorporates them within a narrative framework. It is an interpretive process that, according to Freud (1911–1913), leads to psychic healing. Besides, in her new life, there is also a further conquest: the awareness that she has always been wanted and loved. This new consciousness will finally help her deconstruct the image of the bad mother that Mrs Winterson had articulated in the stories about her biological mother. This realization generates forgiveness in her, even towards her adoptive mother, a feeling that redeems the past, unblocks the future, brings about a sort of rebirth and, with it, renewed creativity.

Translating trauma into art: Re-writing the self

We can mend what others broke

J. Winterson *Why Be Happy*, 58

Winterson’s autobiography articulates a trauma narrative that hinges on her childhood experiences of abandonment and loss, expressed in the form of fragmentary nightmares and flashbacks, textualized in an intensely figurative language, replete with metaphor and metonymy, typical memory’s tropes. In the text, it is very clear

that there is an intersection between trauma, identity and art, and that her identity has been profoundly affected and shaped by certain events in her early life.

Winterson appears to feel the need to answer a sort of inner urge to draw on her personal experiences and to embrace an identity narrative at the root of which lie the traumatic effects of adoption, initially repressed in *Oranges*, then openly acknowledged and voiced in *Why Be Happy*, where they take a central position. In this light, both texts endorse Philippe Lejeune's (1989) claim that "the impossible quest of birth" is "the final object of any autobiographical endeavor" (p. 73), a quest that is now successfully accomplished. At last, this allows her to tell her own version of the story against her parents', a counter-narrative that uses the memory traces of the past as raw material for a new, more personal story that may heal her wounds. It is a creative act of vital importance for her: it gives her power and agency in a life narrative in which she is no longer at the margins, but at the very centre.

However, in the passage from *Oranges* to *Why Be Happy* there are some crucial transformations in relation to the trauma of adoption. First, in the fourth chapter of *Oranges*, "Numbers", her adoption is only referred to in passing when she mentions that she found her adoption papers while looking for a pack of cards, adding that this is the reason why she "ha[s] never since played cards" (Winterson, 2001, p. 73). Her remark appears to gesture at a trauma that she is repressing, yet unable to represent and voice it. Second, and consequently, in the same novel the quest for birth is problematized and made even more hopelessly exasperating by the absence of the person who might satisfy her quest and the obstinate silence of her adoptive parents, a silence that the novel mirrors.

So, on the one hand, *Oranges* reveals the young protagonist's most intimate life; yet on the other, it is opaque about this crucial event and declines the memoirist's confidence that the past can be revealed, a feature which Frank Kermode (1979) refers to as the "radiant obscurity of narratives" (p. 47). *Why Be Happy*, instead, registers Winterson's desire to achieve an in-depth retrospective understanding of the event that hurt her psyche, and that returns even after a lapse of time of twenty-five years. She needs to transform the meaningless strings of childhood recollections into significant memories, by which the autobiographical self can be firmly secured inside a cohesive narrative, and to define herself in relation to the traumatic episode. Besides, the text also inscribes the narrative of adult Jeanette who searches for her biological mother and the successful completion

of the quest. Consequently, her memoir is also a careful and extensive tracing of female development towards authorship.

Winterson, then, works up her life into art, a creative act that traces the birth, growth and development of the writer, the artist. In this sense, *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy* can be likened to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): both Stephen Dedalus and Jeanette are followed in their personal and artistic growth; both are rebels at heart; both leave family and religion behind, rejecting or being rejected by them, a radical choice that marks them out as special individuals whose profound sensibility transforms them into intense and solitary natures. However, whereas *Oranges* draws the portrait of the young artist up to the moment when she decides to escape home and religion, as happens in Joyce's *A Portrait*, *Why Be Happy* follows her growth to maturity, thus complementing the story that the former had started.

The theme of the quest for birth can also be found in *The PowerBook* (2001). In the same novel, there is the image of the wound as well as that of the 'treasure' - the 'gift' in *Why Be Happy*; this is the discovery of self and of love, a motif that is the linchpin of her oeuvre. Winterson's pursuit of self and love is the outcome of the emotional and psychological deprivation that she experienced in her childhood as an adopted child who felt unwanted and unloved. It is only by rediscovering the preciousness and value of loving and being loved that she can heal the wound the mind feels, that her psyche can find coherence, not disintegration. At that point, she can finally silence the damaged "demented creature" (Winterson, 2011, p. 173) that rages inside her, a sort of disturbing Kristevan *object* that "draws [her] toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), constantly threatening the narrative with bursting.

However, despite the cautious conclusion, "I have no idea what happens next" (Winterson, 2011, p. 230), *Why Be Happy* traces a different trajectory in the final section. Though the return back home has to follow a blood-trail which entails revenge, it also brings about reconciliation, both with herself, her biological mother Anne, and even with Mrs. Winterson whom she defends against Anne's charge of cruelty, claiming: "She was a monster, but she was my monster" (Winterson, 2011, p. 229). In the process of coping with her traumatic childhood, in *Why Be Happy* she has come a long way since *Weight* (2006), where, when talking about her adoption she had written that anger was still burning inside her, and forgiveness not

contemplated yet. It is clear, then, that Winterson implicitly advocates the power of narrative to treat trauma. So, the memoir is her moment of disclosure in which the unspeakable finds representation in speech. The relationship between silence and speech is figured as liberating: it heals the self by the very act of speaking and being heard.

In the process of disclosing the truth about her birth, memory plays a central role because, "in psychical terms, remembering [...] is part of the properly human quest for origins" (Kuhn, 2000, p.187). Digging deep into the layers of memories, she remembers and relives the losses, the yearning, the emotional hunger that punctuated her life and comes to acknowledge that she has been obsessively writing "stories of longing and belonging" (Winterson, 2011, p. 160). So, the pivotal traumatic episodes of her past become both the site on which her identity is founded and material for her artistic creation. It is as if she were impelled to write by the injunction to remember, relive the past, and even reiterate the trauma. Winterson's constant revisiting the themes of loss and longing appears to be in line with what Freud (1911–1913) maintains, that when it comes to a psychic trauma, the compulsion to repeat is the means by which the traumatized individual remembers. However, her compulsion to return to her founding trauma in her case is not a pathological response to trauma. Rather, it is a sort of 'talking cure', as evidenced by her transformation of the traumatic traces in her psyche into intensely lyrical narratives.

Winterson's obsession with stories of parents and children; of origins and adoption; of loss and love seems to justify the view that she inclines towards a form of self-narration, thus encouraging a reading of her works as autobiographical texts. However, at the same time, on many occasions, she has voiced her aversion to such a reading of her work, both in interviews and essays, as she does in *Art Objects* (1996). Here, she shows her allegiance to Eliot's theory of impersonality, what she calls "his cry against autobiography" (Winterson, 1996, p.184), adding that "Art must resist autobiography" and "free [...] the writer from the weight of her own personality" (Winterson, 1996, pp.106, 187).

The question of autobiographical writing is a problematic issue in relation to Winterson, as she keeps refusing this interpretation for her work. However, despite her objections and her refusal to consider *Why Be Happy* a memoir and preferring to call it a "cover version", it is undeniable that the book has the basic features of an

autobiography, even though it bears the imprint of her postmodernist touch. She uses the creative power of the imagination to transform facts into a different kind of reality because she maintains, “if we can fictionalise ourselves [...] we are freed into a new kind of communication” (Winterson, 1996, pp. 49, 60). It is an encoding process in which the act of recollection translates life into a semiological code. For Winterson, writing life entails writing a story of the self in process and reading oneself as a fiction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in *Why Be Happy* Winterson uses the vectors of memory and desire to reassemble the different memory images evoked during her psychological journey, reconstruct her hidden story, and move on from it. The self that gradually comes to life from the recollected past is a dispersed and traumatized subject that recovers its original plenitude only once she is able to fill the original gap at the very heart of herself and to find wholeness in love. It is a typical Lacanian subject created in the fissure of a radical split, driven by the incessant desire to recover what has been lost; “a being that can only conceptualise itself when it is mirrored back from the position of another’s desire” (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 5). The lack and the experience of loss stimulate Winterson’s creative potential, empowering her to write her counter-history and articulate it in her *own* highly original language, not her adoptive mother’s, a defiant, liberating action that has a cathartic quality. So, though the damage done to her would always be her reality, she embraces the oxymoronic “painful joy” (Winterson, 2011, p. 42) with exhilaration and looks to her future life full of expectations.

Why Be Happy is a text to which Winterson brings a different kind of voice: it is a narrative of ruptures, gaps, repetitions, fragmentation, intertextuality, devices typical of memory texts. On the one hand, it heightens the emotional and affective impact on readers, opening up new narrative possibilities of addressing the trauma paradigm. On the other hand, it encompasses what Kristeva (1984) calls the pre-Oedipal rhythms of the semiotic (pp. 49–50): breaking up logocentric discourse and challenging essentialist gender assumptions, Winterson inscribes a fluid and plural subjectivity that embraces the polyphonic possibilities of selfhood. In doing so, she breaks down the hegemony of formal autobiography and speaks her

identity in a resonant, profoundly original voice of her own. Engaging the genre of autobiography with inventiveness and ingenuity, she refigures the self through the perspectives of her own experience, a creative gesture that inscribes a woman's life-story that is both alive and vital.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hereafter referred to as *Why Be Happy*.
- ² Hereafter referred to as *Oranges*.
- ³ The reference is to the famous opening tercet of Dante's 'Inferno', the first part of his *Divine Comedy* (1308–1320).
- ⁴ Trauma derives from the ancient Greek word τραυμα meaning "wound".

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