"My Monstrous Burden": Queering the Myth, Rewriting the Self in Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*

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Abstract
In *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (2005), Jeanette Winterson reimagines the heroic stories of Atlas and Heracles by giving them new meanings and forms. The novel alternates between a third-person narrator, who tells Atlas' and Heracles' stories, and a first-person narrator who represents the writer herself, in turn interwoven with Atlas' first-person voice. I show how the novel is made up of multiple layers that subvert and transgress the borders of literary genres such as autobiography, epic tale, fantasy and historical fiction through the adoption of myth. I explore how the trio of narrative voices and the deconstruction of canonical literary genres allow Winterson to unveil the multi-directional process of identity-making and to reshape the identity of the narrating 'I' as a way of overcoming trauma. She alternates between identifying with/and differentiating herself from the two male mythic heroes, thus queering gender and sexual binaries. I investigate the symbolic meanings of the two mythic characters, and their influence on the construction of the narrator.
Key-words: autobiography, trauma, boundaries, desire, queer

1. Rewriting myth, rewriting the self

In her fiction, Jeanette Winterson has constantly reworked mythic stories and fairy tales by giving them new meanings and forms. She has rewritten history, myth, epic and fantastic narratives through the adoption of postmodern experimental techniques such as historiographic metafiction, parody, intertextuality and pastiche. In particular, since the publication of her first novel, the fictional autobiography *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), she has woven revised versions of mythic stories and characters into her texts to shed light onto the interior worlds of her protagonists and to provide alternative views on the multi-directional processes of

identity-making. Such an investigation has been carried out through careful attention to the correspondence between form and content, genre(s) and identity structure, language and referents.

In so doing, Winterson has explored the cultural constructedness of identities in order to defy and subvert patriarchal and heteronormative discourses that have historically erased and marginalised those forms of subjectivity that did not fit within the hegemonic discursive order. In particular, she has rewritten classical myth to deconstruct pre-existing patriarchal discourses and create a counter queer feminist mythology. To use Susan Sellers' words, Winterson's rewriting "open[s] the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other points of view" (Sellers 2001: 29). Her narrative search focuses on the possibility of rethinking what has historically been imposed as a univocal and orderly truth, in contradictory and polysemic ways. For the British writer, reality is complex and multi-layered: fiction should open up new spaces for reading and interpreting it.

Furthermore, Winterson has embedded autobiographical motifs in her textual revision and adaptation of myth. In this way, she has built a narrative thread that subtly criss-crosses most of her works. Indeed many of her novels include echoes of the traumatic story of a young girl who happened to find out that she had been adopted by a hostile and unwelcoming family, and who then embarked on a narrative search for herself. The autobiographical focus is also demonstrated by the constant presence of the narrating 'I' that frequently refers to the author's persona.

In addition, the difficult coming of age of a young lesbian in the provincial, industrialised area of the town of Accrington in Northern England in the 1960s has inspired the gender and sexual representations of many a character in the author's fiction. Winterson has narratively transposed the psychological and physical violence that was exercised on her by her family and the local community by representing it in ever new forms. Moreover, in constructing fictionalised mythical versions of herself and her foster mother, she has queered her search by crossing gender and sexual boundaries and by inscribing difference in her textual worlds. In so doing, Winterson decentres the premises of patriarchal and

heterosexual discourses, and offers fictional alternatives in which the very concepts of hetero-centrality and queer marginality are questioned[1]. One main strategy she adopts is that of exposing the constructed nature of sexual and gender identities by creating queer subjectivities which transgress and challenge the categories of identity. This process occurs through her exploration of a number of themes that, in line with her fictionalised and discontinued accounts of herself, constantly return in her novels, such as boundaries, desire, love, loss, fantastic journeys and especially the power of language to shape our own lives and its centrality in the identity-(un)making process.

These themes are similarly explored in *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*, one of the first volumes published in 2005 for the Canongate *Myths Series*[2]. In this novel, Winterson transforms and rewrites her own search for herself by adapting ancient mythical accounts of Atlas and Heracles[3]. She reimagines the heroic stories of Atlas and Heracles from unusual angles and creates a highly hybrid text in which she embeds her own personal, traumatic story. She starts from Atlas' own account of his life: son of Poseidon and the Earth, he was a Titan who owned the Garden of the Hesperides, his daughters, where Hera's golden apple tree was kept. Atlas took part in the war with the gods and, after being defeated, was ordered to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders for eternity. The story of Atlas intersects with Heracles' own vicissitudes as the latter is sent to steal three of the golden apples from the garden for the eleventh of his famous labours. As he cannot pick the apples himself, Heracles agrees to hold the world for Atlas, who returns to his garden to gather them. Relieved of the unbearable weight of the world, Atlas is tempted to leave the globe to Heracles a little longer

[1] For more detail, see my 2008 monographic work on Winterson (especially pp. 9-26).

[2] In 2005 Canongate launched a series in which Greek myths are retold by contemporary writers. Other volumes include Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth* (2005), Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), David Grossman's *Lion's Honey* (2005), Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and Michel Faber's *The Fire Gospel* (2008). The entire project can be found at http://www.themyths.co.uk/.

[3] In the novel Winterson spells the name of the hero as "Heracles", whereas both in the introduction to the narrative text and in a *Guardian* article where she comments her work it appears as "Hercules".

and go and see his daughters. However, Heracles uses deception to return the world to Atlas and leaves him to bear his punishment alone.

In this article, I show that the hybrid texture of the novel is made up of multiple layers that subvert and transgress the borders of literary genres such as autobiography, epic tale, fantasy and historic fiction through the parodic retelling of myth. I then examine how the juxtaposition of historical events, mythic stories and personal reflections enable the multi-directional process of identity-making, with particular reference to the narrator's own search for her origins, and the violent, "monstrous burden" that she has been forced to carry in her own life as an adopted child in a hostile environment. In my view, this is achieved through the careful shift of the narrative voices in the story, which creates a strong ambiguity by creating several layers of queer identification between the female author/narrator and the mythic male characters of Atlas and Heracles. The alternation of a third-person narrator who tells Atlas' and Heracles' stories with a first-person voice that represents the writer herself – in turn woven with Atlas' first-person voice – within a parodic and deconstructed narrative frame, allows Winterson to create a number of narrative threads that open up multiple meanings.

In particular, I analyse how the stories of Atlas and Heracles reflect, share and are actualised by the identity and the story of the narrating 'I', as she undergoes a process of queer identification with/differentiation from the two male mythic heroes, thus destabilising and subverting gender and sexual binaries. In telling the stories of both patient and feminised Atlas, and violent, heroic Heracles, Winterson deconstructs traditional forms of masculinity. Moreover, through these mythic characters she represents two contrasting aspects of her own traumatic experience and her troubled relationship with both her foster mother and her absent and unreachable birth mother. Both seem to be mirrored in the two mythical figures, whose vicissitudes are revisited in the novel. I therefore claim that in *Weight* Winterson carries out a double process of rewriting: to start with, in parodying and adapting the myth of Atlas and Heracles, Winterson rewrites her own personal violent childhood trauma by shedding light on the 'burden' that she, like Atlas, has been forced to carry her entire life. Secondly, I investigate the ways in which she rewrites her own work by citing

and reiterating some key refrains of her previous novels in this text. In so doing, she creates a dense intra- and intertextual narrative that opens up new insights on her own personal experience and on her troubled relationship with her mother(s), as well as providing new perspectives on the mythical account of Atlas and Heracles.

2. "I want to tell the story again": rewriting personal trauma through classical myth

In *Weight* Winterson transforms classical myth by means of metafictional parody. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is a "repetition with critical distance that allows *ironic* signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1988: 26, my emphasis). Winterson carries out her metafictional experimentation with an adaptation of the high epic genre by transposing it into a contemporary context. The ironic detachment, which is at the core of the parodic rewriting process, allows her to rework the original material by embedding her own personal experience within it. Therefore, in crossing the borders of genres such as autobiography, epic and fantasy, Winterson throws into relief their formal conventions and displays their rhetorical artifices. Moreover, within her parodic text she embeds a more personal and self-reflexive narrative that is formally and thematically connected to the issues she explores.

Significantly, in her brief introduction to *Weight*, Winterson points this out by delving into the complex question of autobiography and its artistic transposition. In explaining her decision to retell "the simple story of Atlas' punishment and his temporary relief when Heracles takes the world off his shoulders" (Winterson 2005: xiv), she also focuses on the themes that she intends to explore, such as "loneliness, isolation, responsibility, burden and freedom too" (p. xiv). However, soon afterwards she makes clear that this exploration is also related to her own life experience:

> *Weight* has a *personal story broken against the bigger story of the myth* we know and the myth I have re-told. I have written this personal story in the First Person, indeed almost all of my work is written in the First Person, and this leads to questions of autobiography. *Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important*. The writer must fire herself through

the text, be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements. I believe there is always exposure, vulnerability, in the writing process, which is not to say it is either confessional or memoir. Simply, *it is real*. (pp. XIV-XV, my emphasis)

In positing the apparent opposition autobiography *vs* authenticity, Winterson is ostensibly drawing a line between fact and fiction. However, it is not a clear line that demarcates different territories, as authenticity is not directly related to facts as they happened, but as they are told. The focus then is on the act of narration itself, which has the power to transform things in order to make them real – but only in the textual world of the narrative. Storytelling is thus the way in which the "disparate elements" scattered in the text can be drawn together and shaped into narrative material. Their very existence can only be acknowledged and narrated by the writer. Ostensibly, it is for this reason that he/she cannot produce a "confessional" story or a "memoir": their reality and their very existence are transfigured by art and can only inhabit the realms of fiction. The reality of the narration is reality as it is experienced by the author – and this does not necessarily coincide with 'real' events. Winterson is certainly referring to the reality of the mind, that is, the way in which the mind reworks and transforms violent events – and traumas – into stories.

In invoking the transformative power of art on personal experience, Winterson is acknowledging that such an inner, authentic 'reality' needs to be retold again and again, especially if it is marked by a violent trauma. The search for the self then becomes a narrative journey that is always told in different ways and from different perspectives. Critic Reina van der Wiel has identified Winterson's own childhood as a significant traumatic experience which is at the core of her fictional production. Acknowledging that traumas usually have unsettling effects on the construction of one's own identity, van der Wiel cites Dominick LaCapra, who proposed that psychological traumas can unexpectedly be both the sites on which identity is founded, rather than just where it becomes unsettled (Van der Wiel 2009: 135). LaCapra's notion of "founding trauma" (LaCapra 2001: 23) is particularly relevant for contemporary postmodern identities, which defy any notions of unity and centrality and are characterised instead by

fragmentation and displacement[4]. Roger Lockhurst has further identified the 'founding trauma' as an absence which cannot be remembered in a clear, organic way through a memorial action. It can only be recollected in loosely connected fragments (2003: 28). As a consequence, trauma(s) can become the site(s) from which the narration of oneself can begin; however, it goes without saying that such a process is fated to be fragmentary and has to repeat itself endlessly, in the search for an original unity that will never be achieved (p. 47).

As she makes clear in her introduction to *Weight*, Winterson's search for the self engages in this process of endless and fragmented repetition of a lost original unity: the founding, violent traumas of her childhood – the impossibility of finding her natural parents and the rejection by her foster parents – thus become the main topics of her rewriting of classical myth. As such, they recall the 'loosely connected fragments' to which Lockhurst refers when he illustrates the inability of the traumatised subject to remember fully the source of his/her trauma. This connection is made clear by the writer, as she continues by saying: "Of course I wrote [*Weight*] directly *out of my own situation*. There is no other way" (Winterson 2005: xiv, my emphasis). This passage also recalls what the author herself has written in her dense introduction to her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, where she has claimed, provocatively: "Is *Oranges* an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course" (Winterson 1991: xiv). In an interview with Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes she explained:

> In *Oranges* the narrator has my name, because I wanted to invent myself as a fictional character. There has been some confusion around this […] *all writing is partly autobiographical in that you draw on your experience* […] in a way that *transforms* that experience into *something else*". (Reynolds and Noakes 2003: 17, my emphasis)[5]

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[4] In particular, LaCapra explains that founding traumas are "traumas that paradoxically become the valorised or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity" (LaCapra 2001: 23).

[5] The writer has also ironically remarked on the gendered divisions that lie behind genre definitions: "[I]t's not been difficult for me to use myself as a fictional character. Other writers do it. Milan Kundera does it. Paul Auster does it. Of

In her view, autobiography is the raw material which provides inspiration to the writer. However, art has the power to transform real, personal events into transpersonal and universal experiences. Therefore, even subjective traumas can be turned into narrative or artistic material and made unrecognisable. Transformation and disguise actualise the metamorphosis invoked by art and narrative. In her collection of essays on art entitled *Art Objects*, Winterson has stated that: "Art is metaphor, from the Greek, *meta* (above) and *pherein* (to carry) it is that which is carried above the literariness of life. Art is metaphor. Metaphor is transformation" (Winterson 1996: 66).

In *Weight* she confirms this view and states that storytelling, with "its mythic and not its explanatory purposes" (Winterson 2005: xvi) is the antidote with which writers can oppose the contemporary compulsive search for the 'truth' and the 'real'. Moreover, the challenging potential of art to transform individual experience is the means that allows the re-enactment and the endless repetition of the narration of LaCapra's 'founding trauma'. In this sense, the narrator's metafictional reflection on writing at the end of the novel is significant, as she explains: "That's why I write fiction – so that I can keep telling the story. I return to problems I can't solve […] because the *real* problems can't be solved" (p. 137, my emphasis). Later on, she adds: "I thought that if I could only keep on telling the story, […] I could invent my way out of the world. As a character in my own fiction, I had a chance to escape the facts" (p. 139). In a metanarrative move, Winterson focuses on the central function that storytelling has had for her. Its vital function also seems to evoke Lockhurst's explanation of the "allure of the impossible recovery of original plenitude" (2003: 47) which is at the core of what he defines as "traumaculture".

The necessity of reiterating the narration of the original traumatic experience in ever new contexts in order to reconstitute the 'original' narrative self, is characterised by three recurring formal elements in her work that are particularly evident in *Weight*. First, the adoption of a first-person narrator who, in a kind of metaleptical move[6],

course, when they do it, it's called 'metafiction'. When women do it, it's called 'autobiography'. Unfortunate" (Reynolds and Noakes 2003: 17).

[6] According to Gérard Genette, narrative metalepsis is a figure which consists of

intrudes in the plural narrative layers and dismantles the fictional barrier between fictional and 'real' world. A second device adopted by Winterson is the use of reiterated refrains in her novels, that have the same function that Jacques Derrida has given to language. According to the French philosopher, language is an act of repetition and can achieve new meanings through endless reiterations in a potentially unlimited number of contexts. As a consequence, every sign can be cited and (re)created in virtually infinite situations and creating always new meanings (Ulmer 1985: 58). As Derrida warns, it is important to acknowledge that what is being repeated is not the same as its original[7]. Therefore, linguistic iterability carries with it a sense of absence (Derrida 1988: 47)[8].

"I want to tell the story again" is a metaliterary reference to the writer's own wish to reiterate her own story through myth to infuse it with new meanings. This is also clearly asserted in the Introduction to the novel ("Re-written. The recurring language motif of *Weight* is

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breaking the barriers which keep separate the fictional from the real world. One of its frequent forms is the intrusion of the extradiegetic narrator in the story he/she is telling in order to exercise his/her power on the characters (Genette 1980: 234-235).

[7] In this sense, it is significant to investigate Derrida's notion of the trace: "wherein the residues of an *original* presence, is [sic] still capable […] of reconstructing the *lost* presence. The text or utterance itself is, for Derrida, re-traceable; but retracing it, however, brings the discourse back to the inevitability of turning back to *différance*" (Pada 2009, 81, emphasis in the text). In her work, Winterson engages with the issue of language and its iterability as well as the narrative (im)possibilities of "reconstructing" a "lost", "original" presence through language. For example, *Written on the Body* (1995), which significantly begins with the image of loss as an intrinsic existential condition – "Why is the measure of love loss?" (Winterson 2001: 9) – is about the linguistic search for new ways of expressing love: "You said 'I love you'. Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? 'I love you' is always a quotation" (p. 9).

[8] On this point Joseph Kronick has reflected that: "For instance, for an "I" to be an "I", it must *always already* be subject to repetition and difference. It cannot be discernible as an "I" if it were not recognisable in different contexts; hence, there is no absolute repetition, only *alterity of repetition* or iterability. The suppression of the difference that makes identity possible and impossible in any absolute sense is *originary violence, a violence necessary to the constitution, or institution, of any transcendental or natural category*" (Kronick 1999: 38, my emphasis). The focus on the "originary violence" at the heart of the institution of both individual and transcendental categories seems to be parallel to the founding traumas illustrated by LaCapra, who referred to traumas as constitutive of one's own identity.

'I want to tell the story again'", Winterson 2005: xiv). Significantly, it is also the title of both the first and the last chapter of the novel. Not only does it remind readers of another powerful Wintersonian refrain "I'm telling you stories. Trust me", that occurs throughout *Passion*; its adoption is intertextually alternated in *Weight* with other refrains from Winterson's previous novels. This strategy enables the writer to explore a number of themes and motifs which reinforces the Wintersonian search for the recovery of the self, as she focuses on the centrality of language to her own sense of identity.

Thirdly, her work is characterised by returning, reiterated themes, such as loneliness, love, boundaries and desire, that demarcate a constancy of attention to those aspects that characterise the very process of "repetition with critical difference" which constitutes parody (Hutcheon 1985: 32). As Winterson makes clear in her Introduction:

> My work is full of Cover versions. I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently. In the re-telling comes a new emphasis or bias, and the new arrangement of the key elements demands that fresh material be injected into the existing text. (Winterson 2005: XIV)

In *Weight*, the act of rewriting ("Cover versions") the mythical account of Atlas' and Heracles' stories ("stories we think we know") is "injected" with the author's own story. In this way, Winterson joins personal and fictional in such a way as to make them virtually impossible to separate.

3. Rewriting the origins

Before the "introduction", the novel is opened by a paratext in which a third-person narrator discusses the formation of sedimentary rocks and compares them with the pages of a book:

> The strata of sedimentary rock are like pages of a book, each with a record of contemporary life written on it. Unfortunately the record is far from complete. […] The succession of layers is further obscured as strata become twisted or folded, or even completely inverted by enormous geological forces, such as those involved in mountain building… The strata of sedimentary rock are like the pages of a book… Each with a record

of contemporary life written on it… Unfortunately the record is far from complete… The record is far from complete… (p. x)

Hilde Staels has identified this passage as self-consciously dealing with "Winterson's creation of various story worlds, based on genre conventions, and metaphorically […] her violation of generic boundaries by means of transformative narrative techniques" (Staels 2009: 111). The reference to the uneven and irregular process of the geological stratification of rocks in time is compared to the creative transgressive process of writing. It is a clear warning to those readers who expect to find a traditional narrative structure. Moreover, I also claim that in this brief but dense paratext to the novel, Winterson is already violating genre conventions and stylistic boundaries. To start with, it reveals the way in which the textual structure has been conceived. Once again, there is a close thematic reference and structural connection to her first novel, in which she claimed that:

Oranges is an experimental novel: its interests are anti-linear. It offers a very complicated narrative structure disguised as a simple one […] you can read it in spirals. As a shape, the spiral is fluid and allows infinite movement. […] I don't see the point of reading in straight lines. […] Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway, every turning yields to another turning, not symmetrical, not obvious. (Winterson 1991: p. xiii)

The same could be said of *Weight*: it is an experimental, antilinear novel whose simple structure conceals a multi-layered, multi-perspective form which can be read in spiral. The process of crossing genre and narrative conventions is parallel to her crossing of ontological boundaries, which is signalled by her creation and transgression of different story worlds that are inhabited and narrated by different characters.

Secondly, the paratext relates to the author's own process of sedimentation, that is, her personal search for her origins. It also reveals that it is an endless journey, as it foreshadows the impossibility of reaching a destination ("far from complete"). The focus on incompleteness which is emphasised in the extract quoted above points to the end of the novel and anticipates its open, unexpected denouement. It foreshadows the fact that her search

for her lost original unity is fated not to be accomplished and to be reiterated endlessly. This reading is strengthened by the fact that the first chapter, "I want to tell my story again", is intratextually connected to the paratext in a much more personal way, as it tells in the first person the mythical account of the Book of Genesis. Winterson's creation of different story worlds which exceed and transgress genre and thematic conventions is again expressed here through the adoption of a geological language. Like in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, where she began her autobiographical story with her own personalised version of the Book of Genesis, Winterson chooses to begin her novel with a parodic pseudoscientific version of the Biblical account. In so doing, she adopts refrains from another of her works, *Gut Symmetries* ("What is it that you contain? The dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia opening in your gut", Winterson 2005: 3)[9].

In a similar vein, the last chapter of the novel which has the same title as the first one ("I want to tell the story again") again adopts geological language to convey what has already been anticipated in the paratext. The focus here is on the impossibility of gaining an objective, comprehensive viewpoint on life from both a diachronic and synchronic perspective. The limits inherent in our humanity prevent us from achieving a wider angle on what surrounds us (the universe) and on our own life stories:

> All that we can see is only a fraction of the universe. Some matter is detectable only by its gravitational effects on the rotation of galaxies. This is called dark matter and no one knows its composition. Dark matter could be conventional matter, like the small stars called Brown Dwarfs, or it could even be black holes. Or it could be Atlas holding up the universe. (p. 151)

[9] *Gut Symmetries* (1997) is a work in which quantum physics, Cabbala, alchemy, Tarot cards, ancient myths and astrology are intertwined to create a multi-semantic yet unitary textual world. In an interview about the scientific inspiration for her book, Winterson significantly referred to the motifs that constitute the core of her narrative search and anticipates some of the points she investigates in *Weight*: "What I wanted was for this great *weight* of material to perform quantum work within the narrative and lift it – take the gravity out of it and let the thing *float upwards*. I was using science as a drive. […] It was *lightness* I wanted" (Miller 1997: 2 my emphasis).

The emphasis on the limits of our vision is explained by our human condition. In addition, our view is influenced by the presence of things/events whose existence is undetectable and, like dark matter, can only be postulated. Therefore, the founding experiences that contribute to defining personal destiny are not all detectable, and can be only inferred through their effects. The reference here is to Winterson's failed attempts to find her biological parents, whose choice to leave her in an orphanage had unsettling effects on her life. Moreover, the impossibility of locating her birth parents turns them into ontological dark matter: "I know nothing of my biological parents. They live on a lost continent of DNA. Like Atlantis, all record of them is sunk. They are guesswork, speculation, mythology. The only proof I have of them is myself" (p. 141).

4. "Leaning on the limits of myself": Atlas, boundaries, desire

The geological metaphors used in the paratext as well as at the outset and the end of the novel reveal the author's attempt to rewrite her own story. In addition, they aptly introduce the story of Atlas, whose mythical account gives a crucial insight into the author's story, since myths, to quote Sellers, "offer ways of making sense of our experience and give crucial insights into the ideologies that underlie our understanding" (Sellers 2001: 7). But there is more than that: Atlas' story functions as a Jungian archetype, as it offers the empty structure in which new narrative material can be put. In Jung's words: "the archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear" (Jung 1969: 5). This is confirmed by the narrative structure: the alternation of the narrative voices in the story creates a strong ambiguity by enabling several layers of queer identification between the female author/narrator and the mythic male characters of Atlas and Heracles.

Atlas' first-person account of his story starts from his origins: he is the son of Poseidon and the Earth, who, in line with Winterson's parodic rewriting of Genesis, represent creation itself: "They *were* life. Creation depended on them" (Winterson 2005: 11, emphasis in the text). Ostensibly, Poseidon and Earth embody stereotypical masculine and feminine features. For example, Earth's feminine

virtues are patience and calmness; her anger seems to be the only escape she is allowed to give way to her feelings: "She was serene as a rock but volcano'd with anger. She was quiet as a desert but tectonically challenged. When my mother threw a plate across the room, the whole world felt the crash" (p. 12). Atlas' mother does not match his father's powerful strength. Poseidon is the one who holds the real power: "Poseidon was a deluge of a man. Power flooded off him. He was deep, sometimes calm, but never still" (p. 11). Born of two different gendered personalities, Atlas is a queer hybrid who combines the characteristics of them both:

> I was born. I was born of the Titans, half man, half god, a giant of a giant race […] I was bound to be a fatal combination of [my parents]. I am as turbulent as my father. I am as brooding as my mother. […] the perfect synthesis of a wealthy mother and a proud father. (pp. 14-5)

Atlas' in-betweenness ("half man, half god") becomes the distinctive sign of his personality and points to his queer masculinity. Fated to be a combination of his parents, he shows an increasing awareness of the defining power of sexual limits and gender boundaries. Winterson's portrayal of Atlas as a benevolent, "kind-hearted" figure opposes the dominant and assertive models of masculinity epitomised, as shall be discussed, by Heracles. Rather, he seems to deconstruct such models: in being the perfect synthesis between masculinity and femininity, he recalls another powerful mythological figure, the cross-gendered prophet Tiresias. Like the latter, Atlas is a figure who embodies the characteristics of both sexes and, furthermore, he directs the search for self-knowledge.

It is worth mentioning here that Winterson's artistic search is indebted to Modernist formal experimentations and aesthetic models; as a consequence, it could be useful to mention what T.S. Eliot wrote about Tiresias, whom he placed at the core of *The Waste Land*: "Tiresias […] is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. […] What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (Eliot 1974: 82). Likewise, thanks to his cross-gendered and visionary qualities, Atlas is the unifying character in this novel. As such, he also recalls the queer masculine characters of Henri in *Passion* and Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry* (Antosa 2008). In addition

to this, he describes himself as a calm, patient man who accepts his punishment without anger; rather, he prefers to turn inward to ponder on himself and his fate:

> I have been punished for overstepping the mark. […] I fought for freedom. *Boundaries, always boundaries*. I keep telling the story again and though I find different exits, the walls never fall. My life is paced out […] I can alter its shape but I can't get beyond it. I tunnel through, seem to find a way out, but the exits lead nowhere. I'm back inside, leaning on the limits of myself. (Winterson 2005: 14, emphasis in the text)

Atlas' struggle for freedom with the other Titans against the Greek Gods was his ultimate attempt to maintain his liberty. However, his defeat and consequent punishment force him to carry "the monstrous burden" (p. 21) of the world on his shoulders. Even though he is standing in the infinite open space of the universe holding the world, he perceives it as a prison: the image of the walls delimiting his space is the plastic representation of his feeling. He is thus entrapped in his ontological dimension, whose labyrinthine structure does not allow any possibility of escape. It is the very existence of the walls delimiting insurmountable boundaries that give the narration its urgency: in remarking on the correspondence between the outside "*boundaries*" and the inner "limits", Atlas asserts his loneliness and sufferance. Elsewhere, he reflects that his name means "[t]he long suffering one" (p. 22), as if his destiny were already inscribed in his name.

This passage suggests more than one correspondence between Atlas and the narrating 'I' representing Winterson's persona. Both have experienced a significant violent trauma that has entrapped them, requiring them to continue their search to overcome physical boundaries and cross ontological limits by repeating their stories. Once again, the focus is on the "impossible recovery of original plenitude" suggested by Lockhurst (2003: 47). The repetition of the stories by both Atlas and the narrating 'I' helps them to give meaning to the 'monstrous burden' that they are both forced to bear for an indefinite time in their lives. In this sense, the conclusion to the story seems to break the chain: after an infinite period of punishment, Atlas is now in the company of Laika, the dog sent to her death to explore the universe by the Russians in 1957. The

company of his new friend marks a change in his existence. He develops a mother-child relationship with Laika, as he is caring, nurturing and delicate with her: "Now he was carrying something he wanted to keep, and that changed everything" (Winterson 2005: 127). They thus develop a queer human-animal bond, that takes Atlas beyond the boundaries of his apparent species towards a queer posthuman sensibility (Braidotti 2013). Atlas' queer hybrid status as half human, half god, and his queer human-animal relation with Laika, call into question and problematise categories of "human" and "animal". Atlas' decision to slip the weight of the world off his shoulders is a consequence of this unexpected encounter. Rather than trying to accomplish an act of rebellion, he acknowledges that things have changed, and that the universe around him is empty and still. To put it differently, he seems to realise the meaninglessness of his punishment, which in the course of time has turned into a self-imposed burden.

The opposition between stasis and movement dominates the final scenes of the novel: "Now the earth changed but Atlas had stayed still […] He hardly knew what movement was any more. […] The monstrous weight decided everything. *Why? Why not just put it down?*" (Winterson 2005: 149, emphasis in the text). The end of the story significantly marks the end of the compulsion to repeat the narrative act. In putting down the "monstrous weight", Atlas anticipates the narrating 'I''s narrative conclusion to the story. Such a connection is also prefigured in the textual structure by the juxtaposition of the chapters "Boundaries" and "Desire". While the former is about the climactic moment of the encounter between Atlas and Laika and ends with Atlas' question: "Why not put it down?", the latter is a metanarrative reflection on the power of story-telling. In it, the narrating 'I' reflects on her life and, in constructing a dense chapter full of intertextual references to her work, also constructs a semantic connection with Atlas, thus foregrounding the *explicit* of the novel and the end of the narration: "Beside me, the lamp still glows. Here I am, turning and turning the lit-up globe, *leaning on the limits of myself*" (p. 145, my emphasis). By repeating Atlas' words, Winterson's narrative persona overlaps with the narrative planes and accomplishes a process of queer identification with the mythical character. The conclusion of her story and the end of her narrative discourse are symbolically equated to Atlas' letting go of the world.

5. Violence masquerading as heroism: Heracles and s/t/ex(t)ual excess

The mythical account rewritten by Winterson focuses on the encounter between Heracles and Atlas. After picking the apples for Heracles, Atlas asks Heracles the favour of supporting the world for a little longer as he would like to go and visit his daughters, the Hesperides. However, Heracles is not inclined to help Atlas. Using the trick of requesting relief from pain in his neck, he asks Atlas to give him a fleece that could function as a cushion. However, as Atlas bends over him to adjust it, Heracles moves away with a grin, and leaves him there.

From their first encounter, the two mythical characters display contrasting features: while Atlas is a queer, feminine man who is patient and long-suffering, Heracles represents a phallocentric, patriarchal hegemonic masculinity that is founded on violence, misogyny and physical strength and deception. He stands for the monologic assumptions of the hetero-patriarchal system by literally erasing difference. He wins glory by performing his twelve labours, which he has to do in penance for the murder of his children, and affirms his assertive, strong personality by killing whoever disagrees with him and by conquering women. Winterson's Heracles is a hero whose only strength lies in the degree of violence he is able to exercise on other characters, especially women, who suffer rape, sexual abuse and violent murder. Whoever refuses to be submitted to his orders is thus fated to die, as happens to the Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyte, who refuses to marry him. Like all women, she is not free to decide her own destiny, not even to speak out for herself; rather, she is forced to either obey the dominant symbolic discourse represented by Heracles, or to perish.

In an article written for the *Guardian* in 2006, Winterson reflected on the notions of heroism and masculinity in connection with Heracles:

> The hero figure can be simple – Hercules is no brainbox – but he is not simplistic. He comes with moral strengths and moral flaws […] Heroes were ordinary people […] and they were extraordinary people […]. Yet the hero has one very curious privilege; outside forces cannot kill him unaided. He must collude in his own death. Hercules['s] […] strength

and self-belief become his snare. Heroes fare well when they are working towards a purpose even bigger than themselves. Once that purpose is forgotten, they are easy to destroy […] *Death by female is likely in the hyper-masculine worldview of the hero.* (Winterson 2006, my emphasis)[10]

This passage focuses on the hero's double nature, as he is both a god and a human being. He is not perfect and can be fallible. Moreover, he is a tragi-comic hero whose "doubleness is his strength and his downfall" (Winterson 2005: 35). Heroes always have their Achilles' heel, and Heracles' own is precisely his self-confidence about his strength. This passage prefigures his death, as Heracles is not killed by an enemy during a fight but, ironically, he dies at a woman's hand. He finds death in the moment in which he feels safe, secure, and omnipotent. It is Deianera, his wife, who kills him. In trying to enforce his fidelity by means of a potion, she instead gives him a horrible death, as she has been in turn deceived by Nassus, who made the potion. The irony of the death of a trickster cheated by another deceiver by the hand of a woman is the final, excessive irony characterising Heracles' story.

Winterson's depiction of the mythical hero is thus parodic. He also turns out to be a comic character who exceeds the linguistic and formal features of the high epic genre. According to Dana Sutton: "when a hero does stand at the centre of a satyr play, he is usually Heracles, the most popular Greek hero, precisely since he is the most human and accessible because of his fallibility, his Gargantuan appetites, and his occasional clownishness" (Sutton 1980: 168). Therefore, Heracles and the system of thought he embodies become the target of a parodic, playful rewriting on Winterson's part. In particular, her depiction of him as a macho womaniser whose language is connoted by vulgarity and sexual excess recalls Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque rituals, whose subversive and demystifying function is performed through devices of excess, inversion and parody. According to Bakhtin,

[10] Parts of this article reflect the ideas expressed in the novel. Compare, for example, the following description of Heracles with the quoted passage: "He never paid for anything, and if anyone challenged him, he killed him. His life was simple. He was a simple boy. Women, like wood, were for splitting and for keeping him warm" (Winterson 2005: 60).

carnivalesque rituals also involve the transgression of social norms and propriety, because of the frequent use of obscenities and the stress laid on excess and corporeality, as well as the subversion of high and low hierarchies. Heracles thus exemplifies the anarchic somatic realm of the carnival, which operates between official and popular discourses (Bakhtin 1984: 10).

Through the excessive and anarchic figure of Heracles Winterson also exceeds and subverts the formal structure of her narrative text: the character of the mythical hero helps her to rewrite the high epic genre and to uncover the strategies of the artifice of the fictional formal and rhetorical devices. According to Staels: "In […] *Weight*, the escape from generic constraints in the universe of literature goes hand in hand with the escape from limits set by the dominant social and moral order" (Staels 2009: 116). Moreover, Heracles represents another layer of personal identification for the narrating 'I', defined in terms of opposition: in her parodic narrative deconstruction of the symbol of the hegemonic patriarchal order, Winterson's fictional persona accomplishes her process of 'liberation' from the "monstrous burden" that stands for it. Heracles' death seems then to parallel Atlas' letting go of the world and becomes the objective correlative of Winterson's move beyond her founding trauma, accomplished through her process of rewriting myth.

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