

# Jeanette Winterson's *Art & Lies* As the Fictional Embodiment of an *Ars Poetica*

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ALINA PREDÁ

**B**EFORE UNDERTAKING the laborious task of evaluating such an abstruse novel as Jeanette Winterson's *Art & Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd*, a twofold disclaimer might be in order. Firstly, my attempt to demonstrate that this work is the fictional embodiment of an *ars poetica* by no means implies that this is the *only one* of Winterson's writings to delineate her views on art in general and on literary art in particular. Whilst *Art & Lies* is not, per se, a treatise devoted to the art of poetic composition, as an *ars poetica* is commonly defined, it is shaped like a colloquium or, rather, like a series of colloquia on a plethora of themes, among which social repression, epidemic corruption, human nature, sexuality and love. But most of its artful ruminations, visionary musings and evocative poetic digressions focus on the essence, the meaning and the purpose of art. *Art & Lies* highlights art's fundamental role in creating and maintaining the health of both individuals and societies, the reasons for art's most regrettable current deflation and the devastating results of this corrosive and degrading process. Secondly, I do not favor an *either black or white* approach to fictional or non-fictional works, being aware that features characteristic to postmodernism and even to the new baroque<sup>1</sup> could also be and have been identified in Winterson's work in general, and in the case of the novel under analysis in particular. Nevertheless, in my assessment of *Art & Lies* I lay emphasis mainly on its modernist traits in an effort to acknowledge not only their prevalence, but also Winterson's self-declared commitment to this literary trend.

The closing essay in the collection *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (1996), entitled "A Work of My Own," reveals what Jeanette Winterson wanted to convey in the novel *Art & Lies* (1994), namely that it is impossible for a "fully realized piece of work" to be "put into 'other words,'" yet that this is not a result of literary language being "imprecise and subject to landslide," but a consequence of the very exact nature of the selected words and of the subtle and delicate "relationship among the words:"<sup>2</sup>

*The question "What is your book about?" has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did. . . . I have tried to make it clear, in these essays and elsewhere, that the language of literature is not an approximate language. It is the most precise language that human beings have yet developed. The spaces it allows are not formless vistas of subjectivity, they are new territories*

*of imagination. Unlike the language of mathematics (which I admit is beautiful), the language of literature need not be pared of emotion and association to avoid error.*<sup>3</sup>

This statement could be construed as shaping an aesthetics that draws on Parnassianism—in its insistence on firm artistic control, on French Symbolism—in its emphasis on the need for rigorously chosen words, on Early Modernism—in its relentless quest for the best ways of rendering subjective experience. Yet, notwithstanding the focus on the primacy of elegance, refinement and objectivity achieved through a carefully contrived process of selection meant to secure an utmost fidelity to words, the skeptical attitude to language characteristic of the more disruptive exploratory aesthetics of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf is not lost on Winterson. Just like T. S. Eliot, Winterson set out to demonstrate “how alive and resounding with possibility current speech could be” if skillfully wielded by an imaginative writer, able to ingeniously develop a familiar pattern and “to incorporate into it fragments which had been long inert.”<sup>4</sup> Not coincidentally does this essay bear a name that recalls *A Room of One's Own*: Virginia Woolf is one of the modernist writers to whom Winterson has constantly been turning for inspiration and to whose work she dedicated two of her essays in *Art Objects*—“A Gift of Wings (with reference to *Orlando*)” and “A Veil of Words (with reference to *The Waves*)”—both novels whose effect resides in the language. Winterson admires Woolf's ability to employ a language that, in *Orlando*, “offers the outrageous as perfectly natural if a little surprising,”<sup>5</sup> a language that seemingly “invites confidence and suggests informality”<sup>6</sup> but which is, actually, “highly wrought,”<sup>7</sup> showing how Woolf takes full advantage of the associative powers of the English language by using words that carry in themselves “an abundance of meaning”<sup>8</sup> and by never allowing her words to “tire and slip.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Winterson explains, since “rhythm, not logic is the anchor of *The Waves*,”<sup>10</sup> its effort must be “an effort of exactness”<sup>11</sup> and, thus, it is “the taut line, the tightrope of language, that makes possible passages at once delicate and audacious.”<sup>12</sup>

Arguing that modernism provides “a way forward into other possibilities, Winterson aligns herself with the European tradition of experimental writing,<sup>13</sup> whose intentional preservation of modernist traits she reveres. Reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, this novel is the fictional embodiment of an *ars poetica*: the writer delights in endless experimentation with new methods and uses an ironic tone in order to provide hectic, ambiguous and obscure rather than realistic images of the world, through interior monologues shaped by the voices of the three narrators, “aesthetic exemplars or avatars,”<sup>14</sup> each affiliated with an art form—music, painting and literature: Handel, Picasso and Sappho. Yet, these supposedly rigid designators<sup>15</sup> turn out not to be fixed in reference, as Handel is a male doctor and former Catholic priest, Picasso is a young female painter, victim of incestual rape, and Sappho enjoys a twofold portrayal, as a version of the Greek poet or/and as the female counterpart of the Baudelairean flaneur, a woman who strolls the twentieth-century city of London at night. Subtitled *A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd*, the latter being “prostitute-cum-scholar” Doll Sneerpiece,<sup>16</sup> a delightfully entertaining character in a “pastiche of a louche eighteenth-century novel,” this work only apparently ends with the word FIN; it actually “fades away into the silence of written sound,”<sup>17</sup> as

the following nine pages are filled with music: fragments from the musical score of the three-act comic opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, composed by Richard Strauss to a libretto by Austrian dramatist Hugo Laurenz August Hofmann von Hofmannsthal.<sup>18</sup> Readers who are not able to read music or cannot be bothered to end the reading experience with Strauss's heavy orchestration, will at least interpret the musical score as "a *sign* of music, a metaphor for the condition all art aspires to, according to Walter Pater, twice quoted in this text"<sup>19</sup> and may recall the ending of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where the sacred chant "revises the whole poem from a statement of modern malaise into a sacred and prophetic discourse."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the presence of the words on the musical score triggers the recollection of the opera's story line with its "infinitely fraught emotional context."<sup>21</sup> Not incidentally, the famous opera section reminds the reader that one of the three main characters in the novel, Handel, who spent some time at the Vatican as a castrated choir boy and student at the elitist seminary, had been seduced at the tender age of ten by the influential Cardinal Rosso, who, in turn, sixty years before, had been beguiled by the last castrato who ever sang in the Papal Basilica of St. Peter. A passionate and talented singer, whose powerful, high, resonant, hard-edged voice seemed perfect for truly stunning performances of "great arias that now belong to women,"<sup>22</sup> the castrato had always dreamt of an opportunity to portray, in *Der Rosenkavalier*, the aristocratic Marschallin "who helps her young lover love someone else."<sup>23</sup> The life experiences of Sappho, Handel and Picasso are marred by a certain kind of abuse, "mutilated poetry, castration, rape," and each character "discloses deep feelings of alienation in the modern world," being, as a result, "out of step with social conventions and contemporary mores."<sup>24</sup> Each is filled with regret or remorse at the thought of wasted youth, mislaid efforts and sterile journeys, and unable to find consolation in anything other than art:

*Each of the voices has his or her own distinctive style and vocabulary, but Sappho's is clearly a construct and removed from the kind of language we speak. I wanted this strangeness,—sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but it is sustained, and as an experiment in language it was worth doing, if only to question assumptions/expectations about how things should sound.*<sup>25</sup>

Wading through the puzzling layers of characterization laden on the otherwise skillfully constructed unreliable narrators, the persistent readers eventually discover that to preserve the separateness of the three narrative voices for the entirety of the characters' quest is rather challenging. Sappho is somehow able to transcend time and place, since she is not only the ancient poet of antiquity but also "a modern day beat poet living in a squat."<sup>26</sup> Albeit the most difficult to comprehend, Sappho's voice seems to be the most memorable, which is surprising, as she is allotted only two chapters, whilst Picasso, the young female artist from a wealthy family, and Handel, the ex-Catholic priest turned physician, are assigned three each. Handel is "the way into the book," and Winterson encourages us to "think of him as a Handle as well as a play on the composer," whereas Picasso is the re-gendered version of the famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century painter because, as Winterson explains, the thought of Shakespeare's sister, mentioned in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, urged her to consider the difficult life such a talented woman would have had:

*The Picasso in this book is struggling with all the assumptions of gender and creativity and trying to avoid the three options open to women artists of all kinds—1) failure; 2) a modest success (unthreatening to men); 3) madness.*<sup>27</sup>

These three disillusioned characters are “drawn together by an experience that both reaches back historically and connects them contemporaneously through the act of reading a small book”<sup>28</sup> rich in farcical happenings, which incorporates not only “the remains of the Library of Alexandria, one of the wonders of the world before its conflagration,” but also Ancient Greek philosophy, fragments from the Bible and erotic literature “from both the original Sappho and the eighteenth century,”<sup>29</sup> as it details the intriguing love affairs of Doll Sneerpiece, an aging prostitute. Once their high-speed journey on the train comes to a halt and they arrive at the sea, a symbol of death and rebirth, of finality and inception, the written story is superseded by the musical score. The words “It was not too late” seem to end the braided strands of narrative DNA formed by the characters’ memories and by their thoughts regarding “the vacuous and self-satisfied world of their contemporaries.”<sup>30</sup>

They are contemporary London-dwellers in a near-future dystopian England, called The City 2000 After Death,<sup>31</sup> described by Handel as a city that “thrives on fear,” a place “in quiet decay . . . not alive but hyperactive,” “old and patched” yet “modern and brash,”<sup>32</sup> a city resembling “an Eliotean waste land populated by hollow men.”<sup>33</sup> Having no external reality, no physical presence, this city—one of the interior, not a referential entity but rather a state of mind,<sup>34</sup> is a “collective collage”<sup>35</sup> incorporating three layers: a ceremonial, a political and a hidden layer. The ceremonial layer is spoliated by the arrogance of the religious who are faking humility and the political one is defaced by the injustice inflicted by the rich on the poor.<sup>36</sup> The third layer, once exposed, reveals a city gutted by the sordidness of the most wretched society members, outcasts condemned to invisibility by soulless and vacuous “homogeneous people who act, dress, talk and think alike.”<sup>37</sup> The latter are enslaved by an addiction to the representations offered by the media, subdued by the routine of a meaningless existence, rendered insensitive to the suffering of others by their thirst for money, lust for power and hunger for instant gratification:

*The spirit has gone out of the world. I fear the dead bodies settling around me, the corpses of humanity, fly-blown and ragged, . . . the executive zombies, the shop zombies, the Church zombies, the writerly zombies, all mouthing platitudes, the language of the dead, all mistaking hobbies for passions, the folly of the dead.*<sup>38</sup>

At its most pessimistic, the atmosphere created in this novel reminds readers of Charles Bukowski’s words from an interview with John Thomas:

*I see men assassinated around me every day. I walk through rooms of the dead, streets of the dead, cities of the dead: men without eyes, men without voices; men with manufactured feelings and standard reactions; men with newspaper brains, television souls and high school ideals.*<sup>39</sup>

THE DESIGN of *Art & Lies* lays emphasis on rhythm at the expense of traditional plot, since its configuration as a series of small fragments that vary greatly in size, from a mere sentence fragment, question or clause to lengthy paragraphs, undercuts any propensity towards linear narrative and undermines the drive towards closure. Winterson's narrative is punctuated by syntagms that get repeated or recast in more or less unusual combinations, by nouns or noun phrases "arranged paratactically in loose sequences"<sup>40</sup> which, just like Gertrude Stein's lists of objects compiled with no discursive connections in the early poem *Tender Buttons*, create a sense of dislocation and fragmentariness, turning the work into "a heightened play of language."<sup>41</sup> Separated or linked only by commas, the brief segments, which bring to mind Gertrude Stein's vignettes, appear among or within stretches of text displaying different degrees of capitalization and varying length, as longer paragraphs alternate with very short, simple sentences or even with sentence fragments:

*My own mind?*

*My right mind?*

*My true home?*

*Long trains leaving. The square light in the windows. The yellow light on the black train.*

*The reptile train with yellow scales. Yellow and BLACK yellow and BLACK yellow and BLACK chants the train.*<sup>42</sup>

The sense of advancing through a musically organized collection of fragments ultimately conceals the succession of events and reveals the inner workings of the protagonists' minds. The primacy of stylistic composition over storyline allows the writer to abandon traditional character construction and to effect the much sought-after consciousness development. Moreover, this novel enjoys the enviable individuality normally reserved for a piece of poetry: forged in the spirit of the modernist aesthetic experiments, *Art & Lies* is, like Stein's experimental poem, a multilayered art object rigorously erected before the readers' eyes.

Like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, *Art & Lies* is a self-reflexive text, primarily concerned with language, a text where narration and description are constantly flowing into and from each other. Given that, as Woolf argued, "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end," rather than "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged," the writer must find a suitable way "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display."<sup>43</sup> As Emilie Crapoulet pertinently points out, it was "by suggesting that there exist correspondences between the varied and complex perceptions of our experiences of life" that Virginia Woolf sought to reveal "the hidden nature of things."<sup>44</sup> Woolf's deeply-held conviction that musicality must be inherent to an artist's outlook on life and her self-confessed tendency to indulge in "the Modernist musicalization of fiction" account for her constant streamlining of an aesthetics that "integrates musical principles into the narrative itself" by dispensing order, meaningfulness and structure "through pattern and repetition."<sup>45</sup> And just as Woolf, with utmost ingenuity, orchestrated the interventions of her six characters in *The Waves* so as to "function

not in the *pro forma* past tense but in the very strongly felt present,<sup>246</sup> so did Winterson with her three protagonists, as well as with the voice of the bawd and with that of the narrator in *Art & Lies*. Both works clearly show that “a musical novel is not an association of two distinct media but a fusion of the two”<sup>247</sup> and, in a subtle manner, both novels reveal how the respective authors’ search for the inner voice aims not to replicate but to merely suggest the processes governing the conscious mind. So, rather than simply creating characters, Woolf and Winterson manage to depict the consciousness through a voice that “operates as organizing principle,” swiftly generating “an internal monologue which emerges from and reaches deeply within both the characters and their society,” thus “firmly and irretrievably” bridging the gap between the protagonists and the readers, between the literary life and the daily existence.<sup>48</sup>

Winterson strives to shape her works not merely as objects, but as relationships, “to drive together lyric intensity and breadth of ideas,”<sup>249</sup> convinced that “a fully realized work of art” must have an identity that is subsumed neither in the identity of the characters, nor in that of the author, since “the relationships within the book itself are relationships of language.”<sup>250</sup> A careful analysis of the connections between Winterson and the modernist works and writers that she openly declares her allegiance to reveals a similar preoccupation with relationships. For instance, T. S. Eliot’s constant textual presence in Winterson’s work<sup>251</sup> reaffirms her attempt “to engage with a text as [one] would another human being,” so as to forge with her literary forbear a relationship that “offers an alternative paradigm; a complete and fully realized vision in a chaotic unrealized world.”<sup>252</sup> Just like *The Waste Land*, whose reading has been likened to “turning the tuning knob on a powerful radio receiver and catching a succession of different voices . . . out of Europe and the world,” speaking mostly in English, but also in French, German, Italian and even Hindu, *Art & Lies* presents the readers with Latin, Italian, German and French fragments in a textual orchestration where “the voices all speak with variations of the same accent of despair.”<sup>253</sup>

Winterson’s desire to live up to Ezra Pound’s inspirational “Make it New!” dictate is articulated in her claim “I do not write novels. The novel form is finished,”<sup>254</sup> which sounds very familiar, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s declaration that if *Ulysses* “is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve.”<sup>255</sup> Though she appreciates nineteenth-century novels, large and baggy as they may be, Winterson advocates changes to the size, shape and form, as well as to the literary language employed in the newly written novels, as more flexibility is required in order to “make a form that answers to twenty-first-century needs,” a form that “is not ‘a poem’ as we usually understand the term, and not ‘a novel’ as the term is defined by its own genesis.”<sup>256</sup> Although she was by no means the first to take issue with these aspects, her statements coming at a time when the novel had already undergone significant changes in the direction Winterson insisted on, the reading public’s reactions to the publication of *Art & Lies* reveal that there is much more to her claims. Apparently, in the eyes of both readers and critics, Winterson took things too far with *Art & Lies*, a work which many do not even consider a novel because it lacks a conventional story and its fragmentariness creates the impression of an imperfectly realized collage, a few of its parts brilliant and intense, the others disappointingly lame, “smeary and imprecise.”<sup>257</sup> These malcontents claim that,

with the possible exception of the bawd<sup>58</sup> who, however, “is clearly a self-plagiarism of the marvelous Dog Woman from *Sexing the Cherry*,”<sup>59</sup> the three main narrators are just voices that never materialize into fully realised characters, since even their train journey is merely symbolical. Philip Hensher is of the opinion that “something has gone seriously wrong,” as this work is deficient in both clear structure and meaningful content, being annoyingly bombastic so, in spite of the occasional strands of brilliantly written prose, it looks as if the author is merely “trying to mimic the worst excesses of Virginia Woolf.”<sup>60</sup> James Wood also describes *Art & Lies* as “a Woolfian engine of self-advertisement whereby the text is both the novel and the explanation for the novel,”<sup>61</sup> whereas William H. Pritchard explains that it brings to mind “the unreadable Woolf of *The Waves* rather than the magnificent Woolf of *To the Lighthouse*.”<sup>62</sup>

The critical reception of *Art & Lies* was, thus, predominantly negative, yet inconsistent even in this respect, since the weaknesses identified by some of the critics were perceived as strengths by others. Winterson’s compelling critique of patriarchy, whilst admired by Lorna Sage and Michèle Roberts, is vilified by Peter Kemp and William H. Pritchard, who disavow the “messianic vehemence” with which the author voices her condescension to “ordinary folk who have gone in for things such as jobs and marriages” and “abjectly cling to the routine and familiar”<sup>63</sup> and her “general contempt for hearth and home, the family, for ‘our broken society’ and especially for men.”<sup>64</sup> Lorna Sage, Reina C. van der Wiel and Rebecca Gowers find the presence of the bawd propitious, as it provides “a delightful and cogent sidelight on the more elevated troubles of the main characters”<sup>65</sup> and view the use of a castrato as the main male character as effective, but Pritchard argues that Handel, lacking a penis, cannot possibly voice male concerns and Kemp seems angered by what he terms Winterson’s “propensity for scrawling the graffiti of gender-spite across her pages.”<sup>66</sup> Peter Kemp and Rikki Ducornet argue that character construction is unconvincing: “the cast of characters, if ruled by the moon, offer an uninspired lunacy: They are made to stand on soapboxes vapping.”<sup>67</sup> Jeanne DuPrau has no problem with any of the characters, nor is she concerned by the other issues emphasized negatively by reviewers.<sup>68</sup> She does not even frown at Winterson’s persistent self-referencing, which even Sage castigates: “In *Art and Lies* and her essay collection *Art Objects*, she became excessively abstruse and self-referential.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Sage acknowledges Winterson’s ability to write gracefully, yet claims that “even as she does so, she is quoting one of her favorite sources,” relying on previous literary works, prone to “levitating on the ready-made inspiration, the breeze from the breaths of others,” which can be a chancy stunt and, indeed, she “falls off the high wire often.”<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, when it does work, Sage finds Winterson’s intertextual technique impressive, and she gives her review the title “Finders keepers,” making reference to the osmosis of quotations from sources as varied as the Bible, Walter Pater, W. B. Yeats, Shakespeare, Laurence Sterne, Robert Browning, D. H. Lawrence, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, etc.

Michèle Roberts, Nicci Gerrard and Rebecca Gowers disapprove of the heavy reliance on intertextuality, which they regard as an arrogant show of erudition on the part of the author, who “distorts and echoes anything from the Psalms to D. H. Lawrence.”<sup>71</sup> Gerrard, Hensher, Kemp and Sage are annoyed by the uncanny complexity of the novel, especially due to the separateness of the three main narrators and to the unlikely assort-

ment of topics that they toss around, sometimes drowned in sappy maxims which lack wit, sounding like sententious platitudes.<sup>72</sup> All these, concludes Sage, have turned *Art & Lies* into “an arbitrary erection,” but her final verdict is that *Art & Lies*, clearly superior to *Written on the Body*, though not as impressive as *Sexing the Cherry*, is worthy of a “safely good” rating.<sup>73</sup> Although Roberts admires Winterson’s exquisite writing skills and her ambitious choice of themes such as history, time and space, she blames the fragmentariness of the novel on the frequent intertextual references and sterile commentaries,<sup>74</sup> which drive her to make “barbed references to the Emperor’s new clothes” suggesting that *Art & Lies* is not a novel in itself, but rather a mere excuse for a novel.<sup>75</sup>

Rachel Cusk is one of the few critics that has taken the time to adjust to the challenge and has gotten over the initial consternation caused by the neoteric experience of reading that this novel commands. She finds *Art & Lies* “timely and exciting to read,” being especially impressed by Handel’s struggle to accept his personal and professional failure and by his lucid analyses mixed with great compassion, which bring him closest to the reader: “Winterson’s belief in love, beauty, and most of all, language, is evangelical and redemptive.”<sup>76</sup> Jeanne DuPrau explains that conventional narrative is never to be expected from Jeanette Winterson and compares the novel to a tapestry, except that, instead of a “static picture,” Winterson used language that is “bold and strange and often dazzlingly beautiful,” giving life to moving images, “more like the play of a great many shifting, shimmering lights.”<sup>77</sup> Christy L. Burns commends Woolf’s influence on Winterson’s work, where “eroticism is operating associatively with female pleasure and arousal, gleaming its force of seduced consciousness in a manner reminiscent of Woolf’s recurrent collection of a string of associative suggestions.”<sup>78</sup> This critic views *Art & Lies* as a form of literary writing that promotes a new aesthetics, given that it “functions simultaneously as both critical and erotic.”<sup>79</sup> She praises Sappho’s abilities to voice concerns regarding the much needed resuscitation of language in this era of simulacra, a procedure done by resorting to the sensual and the erotic:

*Language and sex are brought together through an eroticisation of speaking, synecdochically focusing on the mouth of the speaker and playing on the sensate properties of language—the rhythm, sound and effect of mouthing such words linked together by overlapping consonants.*<sup>80</sup>

This passionate revitalization of language is achieved once desire is embraced as “the real, sensate connection” that plays the role of linking language “to the physical experience.”<sup>81</sup> This technique brings to mind not only Virginia Woolf, but a few other modernists, such as D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, H.D., Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy, who also dwelt on sexuality in an attempt to “construct new forms to evoke the flux of consciousness and the erotics of mental activity.”<sup>82</sup>

**O**VERALL, IT seems that the aspect that most readers and critics have found extremely annoying is the plethora of historical and literary references that only the learned few can understand, whilst the less erudite masses, flustered and disconcerted, fail to recognize. To the latter, of course, Winterson’s work seems impreg-



nable, but she refuses to write books that are “just printed television” and finds her own approach to writing fiction perfectly justified:

*A lot of modern work is rootless and shallow because the writer has no literary resources—nothing to draw on, in a way that is often unconscious. It doesn't matter how you've been educated, if you can read you can educate yourself. Ignorance has no advantages.*<sup>83</sup>

Such remarks have made critics state that Jeanette Winterson

*turns out to be more modernist than the modernists, dedicated to the mandarin exaltation of art and the free-flowing scorn for popular culture and the masses that Eliot and Woolf are regularly . . . accused of espousing.*<sup>84</sup>

With *Art & Lies* Winterson challenges both readers and critics to put their literary background to work and, performing to the best of their logical and interpretative abilities, thus rise to the challenge posed by the fragmented discourse displayed in this novel. Her work is designed as the search for a riveting relationship between reader and text, as the quest for a new aesthetics of the novel, both “facilitated by purposeful avid reading, highly encouraged, if not absolutely required of those undertaking the daunting task of deciphering *Art & Lies*.”<sup>85</sup>

A vivifying social meditation on life as a journey, *Art & Lies* is teeming with controversial ideas, intense thoughts and dazzling improvisations on themes as varied as abortion, incest and dysfunctional families; homophobia, religion and ecological devastation; love, Eros, sexuality and identity; passion and art. Despite previous remonstrations against Winterson's slightly sententious tone, with a streak of contrarianism, she bewilders readers even more by shifting from a moralizing or confessional tone to impassioned polemical injunctions, from erudite prescriptions to arousing sexual recitations, a definitive proof that this author's conjuring audacity will never be tamed by blind criticism. *Art & Lies* is a unique piece of novelistic art, whose style bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Gertrude Stein's experimental poem, whose character construction is derivative of Virginia Woolf's “genre-busting achievement”<sup>86</sup> and whose substance is permeated by an Eliotesque sense of disillusionment. Embracing the drive towards paratactic phrasing, the author shifts the focus from plot to style, from characterization to language. Thus, Jeanette Winterson succeeds in articulating a fictional *ars poetica* with this quirky novel that illustrates a skillful preservation of connections with the defining core of the modernist trend, namely, the responsiveness to a sense of crisis, the preoccupation with language, the aesthetic commitment, the drive towards formal experimentation, the capacity to bewilder, provoke and entice both the readers and the critics.



## Notes

1. Using the narrative category that Jean-Michel Ganteau, in *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction* (New York–London: Routledge, 2015), described as a “literature of excess” and termed the “new baroque,” Reina van der Wiel argues in *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma: Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire–New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) that *Art & Lies* is best accommodated under this label because its narrative mode displays the following new baroque features: “an overflowing of textual boundaries, hyperbole, sublimity, affective excess and a ‘tyrannical soliciting’ of affect” (21).
2. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996), 171–172.
3. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 165.
4. Martin Scofield, *T. S. Eliot: The Poems* (Cambridge–New York–Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8.
5. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 67.
6. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 71.
7. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 72.
8. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 80.
9. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 70.
10. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 90.
11. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 79.
12. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 70.
13. In an interview published in Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds, *Jeanette Winterson: The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2003), 19, the writer jumps at the opportunity to explain her endorsement of what Andrzej Gašiorek, in *A History of Modernist Literature* (Malden, MA–Oxford–Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 6, had called the “aesthetics of exploration and disruption”: “That’s a tradition which uses fantasy and invention and leaps of time, of space, rather than in the Anglo-American tradition which is much more realistic in its narrative drive and much more a legacy of the nineteenth century. Modernism here really moved sideways and has been picked up much more by European writers.” Winterson thus joins B. S. Johnson, Brigid Brophy, John Fowles, Malcolm Bradbury, Peter Ackroyd and others in the chorus of complaints regarding the turn taken by English literary history.
14. Peter Kemp, “Writing for a Fall,” review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Sunday Times*, 26 June 1994, 7<sup>th</sup> Section, 1–2, 1.
15. In the philosophy of language, proper names are viewed as rigid designators, because they pick out the same individual in all possible worlds. See the Preface, and pages 48–49 and 76–78 of Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980): “I speak of a rigid designator as having the same reference in all possible worlds. I also don’t mean to imply that the thing designated exists in all possible worlds, just that the name refers rigidly to that thing” (77–78).
16. Susana Onega, *Jeanette Winterson* (Manchester–New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 140.

17. Michael Wood, *Children of Silence: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Pimlico, 1998), 183.
18. *Der Rosenkavalier* was one of the first operas that Jeanette Winterson saw, the other being *Turandot*, and, as she explained in the interview with Deborah Ross, “Tea with the Holy Terror,” *Independent*, 8 April 2002, although she used to hate the idea of opera performances, in 1990 these two shows managed to spark her interest: “It’s very primitive. But there’s also the sophistication of it—this artificial art form that we’ve invented because we need that space to play in. It has always baffled me when people talk about it being too contrived. We get naturalism and realism every day of the week. We also need something that is astonishingly and confessedly outside the normal limitation of our lives. When it works, it’s like nothing else.” On which Ross comments: “This is a personal apologia, of course: her novels, too, are playful, extravagant, artificial, and contrived. Like opera, her writing tends to be sublime or bathetic. And her defence of opera is a defence of her own artistic project.”
19. M. Wood, 184.
20. Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study in Poetry and Belief* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 228.
21. M. Wood, 184.
22. Jeanette Winterson, *Art & Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd* (London: Vintage, 1995), 190.
23. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 126.
24. Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire–New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 258–259.
25. Jeanette Winterson, “Books: *Art & Lies*,” accessed 10 May 2010, <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=10>.
26. Winterson, “Books: *Art & Lies*.”
27. Winterson, “Books: *Art & Lies*.”
28. Christy L. Burns, “Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson’s Recovery of the Postmodern Word,” *Contemporary Literature* 37, 2 (1996): 278–306, 302.
29. Merja Makinen, *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire–New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 135.
30. M. Wood, 183.
31. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 67, 150.
32. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 68.
33. Onega, 143.
34. Sorina Chipper, “Representations of the City in Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies* and *The Passion*,” *Annales Universitatis Apulensis: Philologica* 3 (2003): 193–196, 196.
35. Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 257.
36. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 11–12, 19.
37. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 25.
38. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 64.
39. Charles Bukowski, *Sunlight Here I Am: Interviews and Encounters, 1963–1993*, edited by David Stephen Calonne (Northville, MI: Sun Dog Press, 2003), 24.
40. Marjorie Perloff, “The Modernist Poem,” in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, edited by Vincent B. Sherry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 326–349, 336.

41. Mark Morrisson, "The 1910s and the Great War," in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, 100–122, 106.
42. Winterson, *Art & Lies*, 25–26.
43. Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), 207–218, 213.
44. Emilie Crapoulet, "Voicing the Music in Literature: 'Musicality As a Travelling Concept,'" *European Journal of English Studies* 13, 1 (2009): 79–91, 88.
45. Crapoulet, 83, 87.
46. Morton P. Levitt, *The Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction: From a New Point of View* (Hanover–London: University Press of New England, 2006), 97.
47. Crapoulet, 85.
48. Levitt, 98–101.
49. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 173.
50. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 170.
51. In *Art Objects* Winterson announced: "There is at present no twentieth-century poem that means more to me than *Four Quartets*. I know it by heart . . . and it remains a vital influence on my life and on my work" (129). Nimble modified phrases from Eliot's poems continually surface, here and there, in Winterson's novels: the "unimaginable zero temperature" from *The Passion* (45), "Ridiculous this waste sad time"—the narrator's verdict in *Written on the Body* (58) and Sappho's tune in *Art & Lies*, "That which is only living can only die" (64, 67, 133).
52. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 111.
53. Scofield, 110.
54. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 191.
55. M. Wood, 185.
56. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 191.
57. James Wood, "Beware of Shallowness," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *London Review of Books* 16, 13 (1994).
58. According to Reina van der Wiel, the bawd's interventions are timely interludes which critics appreciate as the only narrative fragments that offer some space to the reader, since the main characters simply preach their dystopian worldviews and, in a "'tyrannical soliciting' of affect" (171), leave no room for "ambiguity, contradiction or alternative readings" (170), as if to illustrate Winterson's claim from a 1994 interview: "the most successful preachers are the ones who are able to convince their audience that the audience themselves have got it wrong and the preacher's got it right" (cited in van der Wiel, 170).
59. Makinen, 130.
60. Philip Hensher, "Sappho's Mate," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *The Guardian*, 5 July 1994.
61. J. Wood, "Beware."
62. William H. Pritchard, "'Say My Name and You Say Sex': A Trip into Prose-Poetry, with a General Contempt for Family—and for Men," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *New York Times*, 26 March 1995, Section 7: 14.
63. Kemp, 1.
64. Pritchard, "Name."

65. Rebecca Gowers, "Just Time for One Late Score," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Independent*, 24 June 1994.
66. Pritchard, "Name."
67. Rikki Ducornet, "Fairy Tales for Grown-ups," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 April 1995.
68. Jeanne DuPrau, "Sparks of Light Intersect in a Dark, Grim World," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *SFGATE*, 19 March 1995.
69. Lorna Sage, *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, advisory editors Germaine Greer and Elaine Showalter (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 673.
70. Lorna Sage, "Finders Keepers," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 June 1994: 22.
71. Gowers, "Just Time."
72. Nicci Gerrard, "The Ultimate Self-Produced Woman," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Observer*, 5 June 1994: 7.
73. Sage, *Cambridge Guide*, 22. This conclusion, which Makinen (130) finds rather surprising, does sound indecisive, if not sheepish, given Sage's rather unenthusiastic review.
74. Michèle Roberts, "Words Are Not the Only Art: Jeanette Winterson's Novels Has Courageously Put Lesbians Centre-Stage. But, Beyond the Dazzling Prose, What Is She Actually on About?," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Independent*, 18 June 1994.
75. Makinen, 131.
76. Rachel Cusk, "A Wretchedness New to History," review of *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson, *Times*, 20 June 1994: 39.
77. DuPrau, "Sparks."
78. Christy L. Burns, "Powerful Differences: Critique and Eros in Jeanette Winterson and Virginia Woolf," *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, 2 (1998): 364–392, 372.
79. Burns, "Differences," 369.
80. Burns, "Language," 293.
81. Makinen, 135.
82. Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 19.
83. Jeanette Winterson, "Books: *The PowerBook*," accessed 14 May 2020, <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=10>.
84. M. Wood, 186.
85. Alina Preda, "Crossing the Boundaries between Modernist and Postmodernist Poetics: The Critical Reception of Jeanette Winterson's Novels," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 5, 2 (2019): 22–39, 27.
86. David Bradshaw, "Bootmakers and Watchmakers: Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, Woolf, and Modernist Fiction," in *A History of the Modernist Novel*, edited by Gregory Castle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 137–152, 147.

**Abstract**Jeanette Winterson's *Art & Lies* As the Fictional Embodiment of an *Ars Poetica*

Since its publication, in 1994, *Art & Lies* has been subject to conflicting readings, due to its primacy of stylistic composition over storyline, its high level of fragmentariness and its heavy reliance on intertextual references. Yet, although unlikely to fully resolve the interpretive uncertainty that has marked the reception of this novel, an artful process of reading is bound to unveil Winterson's stunning capacity for defamiliarizing the everyday language and turning it into its literary counterpart by staging poetic figurations of interpersonal relations recalibrated by unwonted experiences. Whilst an exceptionally challenging read, when placed under an unbiased nonnormative lens, *Art & Lies* will, thus, reveal itself as the fictional embodiment of Winterson's *ars poetica*, a multilayered art object rigorously assembled before the readers' eyes.

**Keywords**

intertextuality, fragmentariness, modernist aesthetic experiments, narrative voices, textual orchestration