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Composing the Postmodern Self in Three Works of 1980s British Literature

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Jonathan Hill

May 2017

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Keywords: self-composition, postmodernism, R.S. Thomas, Jeanette Winterson, J.L. Carr,  
liminality, technologies of the self

## ABSTRACT

Composing the Postmodern Self in Three Works of 1980s British Literature

by

Jonathan Hill

This thesis utilizes Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" to examine three texts from 1980s British literature for the ways that postmodern writers compose the self. The first chapter "Liminality and the Art of Self-Composition" explores the ways in which liminal space and time contributes to the self-composition in J.L. Carr's hybrid Victorian/postmodern novel *A Month in the Country* (1980). The chapter on Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) titled "Intertextuality and the Art of Self-Composition" argues that Winterson's intertextual play enables her protagonist Jeanette to resist the dominance of religious discipline and discourse and compose a more autonomous, artistically oriented self. The third chapter, titled "Spatial Experimentation and the Art of Self-Composition," examines R.S. Thomas's collection *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), a hybrid text of prose and poetry, arguing that Thomas explores spatial gaps in the text as generative spaces for self-composition.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant and provocative critiques brought by postmodern thought has been directed toward the concept of a free subject. As Paul Sheehan writes in his essay “Postmodernism and Philosophy,” “In the French philosophy of the 1960s, the subject lost its metaphysical aura. The temper of the times is apparent from the widespread eagerness to embrace the ‘death of the subject’” (25). Though differing theorists contributed their own blows to the metaphysical “subject,” Michel Foucault perhaps inflicted the greatest damage. In Eric Paras’s estimation, the theorist “created the twentieth century’s most devastating critique of the free subject” (158) by analyzing the ways in which the individual was “the product of highly rationalized discursive systems ... the effect of a modern configuration of power” (103). In essence, Foucault argued, the self was not an entity inherited at birth and developed over the course of a lifetime, but was instead merely a construction of modern institutions exerting power in societies through various forms of “discipline.” It is for this critique that Foucault’s thought has often been celebrated, even as it has earned him an anti-humanist label.

While this analysis is what Foucault is most recognized for, it represents only one stage within the “pendulum” (Paras 149) of his thought. In the last decade of his life during the 1980s, Foucault himself recognized that he had “perhaps insisted too much on the techniques of domination” (177) in his previous studies, which in turn led to a radical redirection, “a paradigm shift” (102) as Paras calls it, toward a reconsideration of “the concept of subjectivity” (Paras 101) and the practices an individual might seek to create identity and selfhood. He termed these practices “technologies of the self” (Foucault 177) and described them in several essays as “techniques that permit individuals, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their

own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power” (177). As Foucault saw them, these “arts of living” corresponded to all aspects of an individual’s life. Katrina Mitcheson notes that the philosopher “indicates that such technologies span a wide range of spheres” (64) including the cultivation of listening abilities, meditating, and moderating one’s physical gratifications (64). This research on “the genealogy of the subject” (Mitcheson 59) was entirely grounded in practices found in ancient Greco-Roman society and early Christian groups (Paras 101). However, in interviews he gave at the time, Foucault suggested that such acts could potentially have contemporary viability as well. In 1983, he stated that “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (262).

Even as Foucault considered numerous practices through which the individual could create an aesthetic work of the self, one of the foundational practices he identified in his study was the act of writing. He argues in various essays that “writing—the act of writing for oneself and for others— play[s] a considerable role” (208) in the formation and care of the self. Writing about the self, Foucault contends, is not “a modern trait born of the Reformation or of Romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions” (232). What is important to note is that in Foucault’s writing, there is no prior self to be discovered or illuminated in this process; rather, the self is created, or constituted, through actions such as writing, but always within the context of external power relations (Mitcheson 63). This nexus of ideas—that the self does not exist inherently, but is consciously and aesthetically constructed by the individual in relation to language and external systems of power—provides a powerful framework for analyzing postmodern works of literature. It can be argued that writers of the last half-decade or so have

been intensely concerned with issues of the self and its relation to society, particularly to oppressive forms of power whether to do with class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Therefore, just as Foucault traced the role that writing played in the creation of the self in ancient societies, so it is possible to consider how more recent writers have sought to compose the self in writing within a postmodern context.

This study will argue that three works of 1980s British literature —namely, *A Month in the Country* (1980) by J.L. Carr, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) by Jeanette Winterson, and *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) by R.S. Thomas— are all examples of the postmodern self-composition. While these are not the only three works or writers that could be examined in such a study, these particular three are included both for the diversity of their concerns and techniques between themselves, as well as the ways the works intersect within one another. Additionally, along with other writers and theorists of the time, these three writers seem particularly aware of what Sheehan describes as “the postmodernist dictum that language constructs human identity” (23). They each embrace this dictum by creating highly stylized literary works in which the construction of identity is a central concern. Additionally, they all utilize and innovate distinctly postmodern literary techniques in these works. A brief overview of the chapters will offer a sense for the specific ways the three writers seek to compose the self.

The first chapter “Liminality and the Art of Self-Composition” explores the ways in which liminal space and time contributes to the self-restoration of the novel’s protagonist, the war-damaged veteran Tom Birkin. Additionally, this chapter argues that the novel itself is constructed as a liminal text, somewhere between the realist mode of the Victorian era and the postmodern mode. Published in 1980, this text provides a transitional example for the changes in British fiction that occurred during this time, which is generally seen as a bend away from the



realism of the 1970s and toward postmodernist styles of the 1960s (Childs 10). The next text, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, is widely considered one of the seminal texts of the decade and reveals a further break from the realist hold on fiction. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Winterson incorporates fairy tales, legends, and biblical references into a self-reflective narrative that blurs the boundary between fiction and memoir. The chapter on this novel, titled “Intertextuality and the Art of Self-Composition,” argues that Winterson’s highly creative and subversive intertextuality enables her protagonist Jeanette to resist the dominance of religious discipline and discourse and compose a more autonomous, artistically oriented self. While the first two chapters consider two novels which blur boundaries between fictional modes, the third chapter turns to the latest and most experimental text of the trio, a hybrid collection of poetry and prose. This chapter, titled “Spatial Experimentation and the Art of Self-Composition,” argues that Thomas explores literal gaps in the text, as well as figurative gaps in his identity and past, as generative spaces for self-composition. While each chapter argues that the concepts of liminality, intertextuality, and spatiality are central to each individual work, the existence of and interplay between these features within all three texts will also be examined. In the conclusion, further avenues for research will be suggested through the concept of the “dialogical self” (Habermas 23, 1992).

While this study will argue principally for these works as acts of self-composition, and thus as literary examples of Foucauldian “technologies of the self,” mention should be made for how the historical context may have shaped these works. Studies of British literature during the 1980s tend to examine the ways that writers of this period responded to the changes in social and political life that occurred in this decade. This is certainly a worthwhile and reasonable endeavor considering just how profound these changes were, particularly as the valuation of public versus

private life turned dramatically. As Joseph Brooker writes in his study of 1980s British literature, “discussions of British life during the 1980s are not randomly diverse. A dominant theme persists; pervasive, almost inescapable” (2); that is, the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister. This event marked the beginning of a decade-long, fundamental transformation of British society. Essentially, “Thatcherism” as it came to be called challenged the postwar political and social consensus regarding the value of shared public life, favoring instead the importance of the individual in all arenas of life. As Richard Bradford describes it, the ruling Conservative government sought to “replace an ideology and a collective mindset ... with a spirit of enterprise and singularity” (29).

As scholars have traced the far-ranging effects of such societal upheaval on literature of the period, they have discovered something of a literary revival occurred in response, or even opposition, to the political and social conservatism of the decade. Peter Childs writes in his study *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* that “It is a striking phenomenon that the most politically repressive decade in post-war British history should also be one in which fiction was believed to have undergone a renaissance” (9). Spurred by the cultural conservatism of the age, writers in the 1980s explored the interrelated issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and the value of art, resisting the hegemony of the decade which sought a return to “Victorian values” (Bentley 26; Childs 10) and generating new pathways for literature. We see features of this cultural resistance in each of the three works under consideration. In *A Month in the Country*, Carr considers how art and the preservation of cultural artifacts might mitigate the psychologically costly effects of war and Victorian social conformity. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is justifiably famous as a queer-feminist coming of age narrative which also features a critical, yet humorous, portrayal of a conservative religious community in 1960s Britain. In *The Echoes*

*Return Slow*, Thomas also considers the effects of war and middle-class conformity, but with an eye toward the increasing influence of science and technology upon the spiritual condition of humanity and the natural condition of the world. While these are important features in each of the works, this study focuses on examining the technical innovations present within the works and how these postmodern techniques relate to the issue of composing the self.

Indeed, to study texts of this period is to study the maturation of postmodernism in literature. As Brooker puts it, “if any one decade must be named as postmodernism’s temporal heartland, it is arguably the 1980s” (100). Though “postmodern” works can be found in the preceding decade and certainly in the following decades, it can be argued that writers of the 1980s brought the varying aesthetics of postmodernist literature to the forefront of the literary milieu. Writers as diverse as Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, Angela Carter, Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt and Salman Rushdie, among others, all published works during this time which expanded the possibilities of postmodern fiction and even popularized it within British culture. This study does not seek to define or outline this broad realm of postmodern British literature. Rather, the intent is to explore a theme which has perhaps been neglected in previous studies of 1980s British literature; that is, the exploration of selfhood. It is certainly understandable why critical work has shied away from this subject. First off, many writers of this period were deeply immersed in writing about social and political issues and were not particularly preoccupied with the internal dynamics of the self. Additionally, by this time, the concept of selfhood and subjectivity had become fraught, contentious, and suspect in the eyes of many writers, to say nothing of the theorists. However, this study argues that by examining these works through the lens of Foucault’s concept of creating the self as a work of art through certain practices, most notably

through the act of writing, we are enabled and justified in (re)examining these texts as attempts to compose the postmodern self.

## CHAPTER 2

### LIMINALITY AND THE ART OF SELF-COMPOSITION

Although the term liminality has existed within critical discourse across many disciplines for over a century and has gained particular traction in postmodern cultural studies, liminal states, places, and times have arguably existed throughout human history. Bjørn Thomassen articulates in his book-length study of the term that liminality refers to “moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction” (10). In J.L. Carr's novel *A Month in the Country* (1980), we witness such a period of transformative transition. Carr vividly displays the power that entering liminal places and states of being can have for the individual seeking to (re)compose the self, particularly after an experience of trauma. For Birkin, the novel's narrator and protagonist, the source of this trauma is his experiences in the Great War, particularly in one of the Battle of Passchendaele. To make matters worse for Birkin, while he was serving in the war, his wife Vinny deserted their marriage. While Birkin manages to continue his seasonal work restoring a painting in a village church steadily and to perform various roles socially, his psychological trauma manifests itself both physically and linguistically, which Carr registers artfully and subtly throughout the text. However, as Birkin enters and immerses himself in the liminal spaces of the novel, his damaged self is progressively healed. By examining these manifestations of trauma, as well as the liminal sites where Birkin's self is restored, Carr suggests ways that the self can be composed through dwelling within the threshold space of incompleteness and irresolution. Additionally, Carr utilizes certain postmodern techniques within the novel, notably intertextual elements and instances of heteroglossia, within a conventional structure and authorial voice to situate the narrative itself

between postmodern text and a traditional novel. In both its thematic intent and its formal maneuvering, the novel serves as an excellent example of Foucault's "technology of the self" and a postmodern work of self-composition.

Of the three texts under consideration in this study, *A Month in the Country* is the one most concerned with the effects of trauma on an individual's self and the difficulties associated with restoring one's damaged identity. Carr explores this theme through two characters who are World War I veterans, Tom Birkin and Charles Moon. However, neither of these characters displays obvious signs of trauma, at least not to the civilians of Oxgodby, the town they both settle in after the war to complete their short-term projects. Instead, Carr creates two characters who are themselves liminal figures, caught somewhere between shell-shocked and permanently disabled casualties and fully functioning civilians who have not witnessed the horrors of war. While both display signs of their trauma, neither of the men is crippled socially or physically by his psychological wounds. Rather, Carr hints at these wounds by manifesting them in subtle physical mannerisms, particularly in Birkin. In the novel's opening pages, Birkin himself makes the connection between his past traumas and his physical quirks. Speaking with the Reverend for the first time, he describes his face as working "spasmodically" (12) and that he had "caught it at Passchendaele" (12), another name for Ypres. In addition, he notes that "Vinny going off hadn't helped" (12), referring to the desertion of his wife. This facial twitch and his stammering (8) reveal Birkin's interior trauma to others and reminds him of his own separateness. For those in the village, the twitch is a warning sign that Birkin may be a dysfunctional, permanently damaged veteran who, despite appearing to reenter civil society comfortably after the war, cannot be fully relied upon. The figure who most represents this lack of trust is the Reverend Keach. As Birkin notes, it was "people like the Revd. J.G. Keach [that] brought it on badly" (12),

referring to his facial spasms. Carr hints that this is due to Keach's position of authority as a priest who may stand in judgement over Birkin, both for his actions in war as well as his failed marriage. In addition, Birkin finds Keach to be "businesslike" (7), which leads him to think that Keach would have done well as an officer in the war, perhaps joining other leaders of the war in sacrificing men like Birkin to needless slaughter. As Carr suggests, both of these positions (priest and officer) cause Birkin discomfort and unease because they touch on the two sources of Birkin's trauma. Moreover, Keach also clearly does not approve of Birkin's presence in town or his restoration work in the church, which is, in addition to Birkin's sole livelihood, a key component to his gradual renewal. This lack of empathy and understanding from Keach, whose very voice "sapped the spirit" (14) for Birkin, is disturbing for the veteran because it signals to him that his experience in war has made him grotesque, the loss of his wife has made him untrustworthy, and his passion and skill-set for restoring paintings is useless in the modern world. These are all the most significant psychological difficulties Birkin must overcome in the novel in the journey towards self-composition, and sensing Keach's lack of sympathy seems to worsen the physiological manifestations of his psychological trauma.

While Birkin is keenly aware of his facial twitch, there are other, less conscious manifestations. For instance, Birkin does not use the verb "walk" at all in his account; instead, he uses verbs like "stumbles" (3/130), "traipses" (48), "potter[s]" (109), and "saunters" (44/52). Although these verbs do not definitively imply a physical injury or a limp, they do suggest that he remains directionless, unsure of his next "step" in life. However, they also imply that Birkin's time in Oxgodby is unhurried when compared with his time at war. Within the novel's liminal, transitional space, Birkin experiences a sense of restless uncertainty, a pleasurable unease which leads him away from stagnation or regression toward the restoration of his selfhood. Throughout

the novel, we see Birkin dwelling in liminal times and places, taking pleasure in being immersed in the present moment, but also uneasy about the passage of time. However, this in-between tension spurs Birkin toward renewal by giving him time to rest, and yet preventing him from becoming too attached to the place and its people. By the end of this liminal time, Birkin is ready to move on to a new stage in life. Here, Carr suggests that being aware of the present moment as well as the ephemerality of time is an important liminal state in the process of self-composition. We find a similar awareness of the dual nature of time and its part in composing the self in Thomas's *The Echoes Return Slow*.

In addition to his physical movement, Birkin's trauma also manifests itself in his language. Throughout the novel, Birkin's narration becomes militarized as his psyche sees traces of his traumatic experience of war in the mundane and tranquil present. For example, he remembers thinking that "this was enemy country" (3) when he first steps off the train in Oxgodby, a parallel to stepping off a train in Belgium during the war. In addition, as Elsa Cavalié points out, Birkin's "recurrent mention of the word field in the description of the landscape hints at the time Birkin has spent on another 'field' -- the battlefield" (196). Later, when speaking with Alice Keach at her home, he recalls that she "stopped talking and ... stared in horror at something behind me" (58). This ends up being "only a cat" (59), and yet Birkin's following description suggests much more than an outdoor pet. This cat "had a fluttering song-thrush clamped in its bloody jaws ... malevolently eyeing each of us in turn" (59), a vividly graphic depiction which Birkin connects to his own time in the "bloody jaws" of war. One last example is particularly illustrative of the way war has racked Birkin's psyche, affected his view of the world, and therefore warped his language. When asked to lead a small service at a local Methodist church by the family that has been hosting him for Sunday evening dinners, he



describes the situation like this: "The assault's development had been far too rapid and my defenses too over-run for me to mount anything more than a makeshift counter-attack" (85). While Birkin is understandably uncomfortable with this request, the unconscious militarization of the situation is indicative of just how deeply his trauma is entrenched in his psyche. What these instances suggest is that Birkin cannot escape psychologically from the battlefield and that even language is itself a casualty of the war. Put another way, Birkin's state of mind, as well as his linguistic faculties, are themselves positioned within a transitional place somewhere in between the battlefields of Belgium and the grassy fields of Britain. Though liminality ultimately serves as a restorative force in the novel, Carr is also careful not to gloss over Birkin's trauma. This suggests that it is necessary to engage and represent even the most painful and conflicted parts of the one's past in the process of composing the self.

However, we can also regard these moments of linguistic interplay as instances of internal *heteroglossia*. As Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualized it, *heteroglossia* refers to "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (324). In *A Month in the Country*, Carr represents Birkin's speech as "internally dialogized" (Bakhtin 324) in order to represent his divided, fractured sense of self. This "double-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin 324) brings together the voice of Birkin's Other— that is, the voice of the traumatized, disoriented, battle-scarred soldier— alongside his "civilian" voice, which is often ironically cool or else earnestly sincere. We find these moments occurring often within the liminal moments of the novel, which suggests that as boundaries are dissolved and inhibitions relaxed, Birkin's disparate parts of the self can be composed within a transitional discourse. These are important interjections because they gradually allow him to express the experience of war to himself and others, most notably as "hell" (95) when he speaks to Alice near the end of

the novel. Gradually, he is able to compose these pieces self and voice— the soldier who has seen the hell of "bodies split, heads blown off, groveling fear, shrieking fear, unspeakable fear" (95), the husband who has experienced a failed marriage as "a sort of hell" (95), and the artist capable of recognizing and sympathizing with the painter's conception of "hell"— and present this composite self to another person, something which he would have been incapable of or unwilling to do at the beginning of the novel.

Before turning to further, more specific instances of liminality within the narrative, it is necessary to establish the ways in which Carr crafted *A Month in the Country* as a liminal novel in and of itself. As Subha Mukherji writes, there is an "affinity between the artistic process – imagining, creating or representing – and the spatial idea of the threshold in its material and figurative manifestations" (xvii). Carr's novel, along with the other texts under consideration, is an excellent example. Most obviously, due to its short length (around 130 pages in the New York Review Classics edition), it can be considered a novella, a form somewhere between the short story and the novel. Less obvious, perhaps, is the way in which the novel falls somewhere between a "traditional" novel (i.e. Victorian) and a more experimental "postmodern" novel. The novel's linear plot, character development, and setting are in many ways very traditional, echoing the novel's Victorian past. However, these traditional elements are often inflected by postmodern instances of narrative self-reflexivity, authorial blurring, and intertextual variability. This creates a liminal experience for the reader as Carr balances the novel between expectations of traditions and jolts of innovation. The novel's epigraph, for example, nods to tradition as Carr includes Dr. Johnson's definition of "novel," which is "a small tale, generally of love" (vii). This in fact foreshadows A.S. Byatt's postmodern/Victorian framing of her 1990 novel *Possession* as a romance, also through an epigraphic reference to another Victorian-era writer, Nathaniel

Hawthorne. Just as Byatt “validates her own use of the romance genre by referring to an outside authority in Hawthorne, thereby showing that texts help other texts” (Shastri 122), so too does Carr appeal to Dr. Johnson’s literary authority. However, just as in Byatt’s work, this also introduces Carr’s subtle form of metafictional play. Like other British writers of the early 1980s, among them Graham Swift and Julian Barnes, Carr draws attention to his work as a fictional construct; however, unlike these writers, Carr does so by employing a historical (and, by 1980, dated) definition of the novel, thereby signaling that his experiments with the genre will wear the mask of tradition. Furthermore, by introducing the novel with the characterization as a “tale of love,” Carr ensures that the reader will proceed with the expectation of a love story (again, similarly though more slyly as Byatt does in *Possession*). Of course, what we end up reading is more accurately a story of missed love, one that takes place in a trauma-shadowed in-between state of longing and resignation where Birkin is ardently attracted to Alice Keach, the reverend’s wife, but in the end is not able to express his affection. *A Month in the Country*, then, is a rumination on losing a love which was never actually possessed, a loss which nevertheless plays an important role in the process of Birkin finding and recomposing the self. We see a similar postmodern love story in Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (though significantly, her “love story” is decidedly set within contemporary 1980s Britain and features her narrator’s homosexual relationships).

In addition to his epigraph, Carr once again sets up and plays with the reader's expectations in his foreword. Here, he explains (at least in the most recent reissue) that he originally intended the novel to be “a rural idyll along the lines of Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*” (xxvi), which is a direct attempt to categorize and borrow from a sub-genre of 19th century novel. Even if, as Michael Holroyd notes in his introduction, Carr’s novel only

shares "superficial similarities" with Hardy's, Carr clearly intends to evoke comparisons with the conventions and specific details of nineteenth-century fiction. And the fact that the narrator also directly references Hardy further evokes such comparisons (49). Because Carr and his narrator both mention Hardy, the line between author and protagonist is blurred, another key attribute of postmodernism. However, the subtlety of this play more rightly places the novel somewhere between the traditional and postmodern iterations. Carr's light touch of metafiction signals to the reader that he is equally interested in experimenting with novelistic technique as he is with telling a story.

The Hardy references, in fact, are only a part of the novel's intertextuality. Charles Scruggs, in his article on the similarities between the novel and Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," notes that "as a post-modernist novel, *A Month in the Country* has a rich intertextuality" (215). In addition to Hardy, there are references to, and direct passages from, biblical texts, Christian hymns, the war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, as well as several works of visual art. We see a similar play of texts in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *The Echoes Return Slow*, particularly of biblical and literary texts. Furthermore, even as the novel "suspend[s its readers] between shadows from the past and premonitions of the future" (xvii), we are equally suspended between reading the text as Carr's novel and as Birkin's memoir because of Carr's skillful framing. As his biographer Byron Rogers notes, Carr was deeply interested in the play between life and art. Rogers writes that "Before the Fiction there was the Life, and, names and settings changed, the Life was the Fiction" (xii). Carr himself alludes to this in his preface, noting several incidents in the text for their connection to his actual life. He sums up his practice with the metaphor that "All's grist that comes to the mill" (xxii). While Carr was not the first novelist to "use whatever happens to be lying around in memory" (xxii), his self-

conscious blend of imaginative creation, autobiographical excavation, and intertextual play places his work in a similar liminal category with other British writers who construct the self through both autobiographical and fictional methods, among them R. S. Thomas and Jeanette Winterson. Throughout *A Month in the Country*, we see the work of self-composition as a multimodal mix where fact and fiction slide together on the same spectrum and the self is composed in a threshold space of "unlimited freedom from any kind of structure" (Thomassen 10), one of the characteristic formal and thematic actions of many postmodern literary texts.

Even as the novel itself may be regarded as liminal, it is full of particular instances of liminality. Firstly, the "month in the country" narrative frame represents a liminal time of freedom from "structured world-views or institutional arrangements" (Thomassen 14). For Birkin, this transitional time between his former position in the military and his future position within society gives him time to heal and re-compose himself. While he has been hired to complete the job of restoring the fresco, there is no mandated time for when he should finish the work. As he himself says, "I told myself that I didn't care how long the job took me—what was left of July, August, September, even October. I was going to be happy" (20). The indeterminate nature of this time affords him a degree of independence and freedom to structure his days according to his own emotional and financial needs, as well as his own artistic intuition, which he must follow in order to faithfully restore the fresco. This autonomy, in turn, helps Birkin to regain a sense of self-worth and purpose. As he completes the restoration, he develops a skill-set which will aid him in securing future positions as an art conservator. Additionally, by restoring a painting within a local church, he contributes to the cultural and religious health of the congregation. Moreover, his freedom to move and act within the village on his own aids in rehabilitating him socially as he spends time with the villagers, whether by talking with Alice or

Kathy as he works in the church or in visiting with the Ellerbecks at their home. While he does not end up settling in Oxgodby after his work is complete, the work he accomplishes and the relationships he cultivates during this liminal period are important to his transition from shell-shocked veteran and betrayed husband to a functioning member of society. This time adds a new, more peaceful chapter to the story of his self-composition.

In addition to the liminality of time, much of the novel's setting, in particular Birkin's experience of the landscape, can also be seen as liminal; as such, it is no surprise that these, too, contribute to his rehabilitation. As Scruggs sees it, "The pastoral frame, as an artistic form or as an angle of vision, provides an opportunity for place making, and the act of place making helps repair the damage done by the war" (211). In Birkin's first description of this pastoral landscape, we see a strong trace of that damage: there is a "dilapidated farmhouse," "a rusting cast-iron fence," and "a couple of hen huts collapsing amongst nettles in the decaying orchard" (5). These descriptions are notable in several ways. For one, the details are all manmade edifices meant to control the natural world which nonetheless are crumbling and failing. As these phrases suggest, Birkin is sensitively attuned to the deterioration of social structures and strictures around him, possibly due to his experience in the war or to his crumbling marriage. Regardless, these disintegrating human edifices are at the same time being overtaken and reclaimed by the natural world. For example, in the graveyard, Birkin is keenly observant of the "lichen-stained cherubs" (6) of the headstones, the fact that the "hour-glasses and death's heads [are] almost hidden by rank grass, nettle patches and fool's parsley" (6). It is notable, of course, that Birkin points out symbolic figures of time and death being covered by regenerative aspects of nature. What these details represent, then, is a kind of *negative* liminal period in which man-made structures, both literal and figurative, collapse as the natural order reasserts itself. For Birkin, this liminal

landscape thus provides him with a psychological mirror for his own inner deterioration as well as an image of potential rehabilitation through nature. As Cavalié points out, the details "seem to fit perfectly with what Birkin himself expected to find...[as] the landscape appears to function as a mutable space in which Birkin projects his own anxiety and trauma" (196). While this projection may be skewing Birkin's vision of the phenomenal world, it also presents him with an external image of his own psyche. The landscape provides him with a transitional space in which to contact his own inner disarray, since "revisiting the space of trauma needs to be mediated by the contact with another space" (Cavalié 203), but it also suggests to him that, given enough time in the countryside, that inner deterioration and disintegration will be covered and the self will be recomposed in balance between the human realm and the natural.

In fact, this seems to be one of Carr's central themes in the novel and perhaps points to his original concept of the novel as a "rural idyll." In fact, much of Birkin's experience of renewal and rejuvenation occurs during liminal periods between rest and work which allow him to contemplate his surroundings. On his first morning in Oxgodby, Birkin wakes up to find "the pasture I had crossed on my way from the station ... then fields rising toward a dark rim of hills" (19). As this pasture "lightened, a vast and magnificent landscape unfolded," which causes Birkin to reflect that the vision was "immensely satisfying" (19). We note here the interplay between darkness and light as night transitions toward day, but most importantly, we find that this experience of dawn (a liminal time of day) settling upon the landscape produces a positive change in Birkin, causing him to alter his earlier negative regard for this "enemy country" (3). Instead, he sees that "this alien northern countryside was friendly, that I'd turned a corner and that this summer of 1920, which was to smolder on until the first leaves fell, was to be a propitious season of living, a blessed time" (19-20). By witnessing an external period of

transition in the landscape, Birkin's own inner orientation transitions from a state of hostile suspicion to one of hopeful expectation. This occurs again later in the novel when Birkin, "seeing the swathes of hay lying in the dusk" (44), thinks to himself that "looking at Alice Keach was wonder enough" (45). Just as the dawn provides a liminal space for Birkin to experience a sense of possibility and eagerness toward the coming day, here, as dusk settles the hay into lying down, the liminal close of the day also seems to settle Birkin into a state of contentedness.

While these liminal times of day seem to effect positive feelings in Birkin, the opposite is true for less transitional times. During the middle of the day, he finds that "summer's heaviness oppressed me" (53) whereas at night, he has dreams of the war where "the tower was crumbling and, once, sliding forward into machine-gun fire and no pit to creep into, slithering on through mud to mutilating death...[as] my screams too joined with the other night creatures" (19). While these incidents do not represent a perfect parallel between Birkin's inner emotional experience and his external experience to time and space, they do suggest a certain psychic permeability between Birkin and the external world around him, making him both highly sensitive and susceptible to times of dynamic transition, as well as periods of static sameness.

As we have seen, much of Birkin's transitional development is reflected in the liminal qualities of the landscape surrounding the village. However, the most important liminal site in the novel in terms of Birkin's composition of self is the fresco he works to restore. Just as in the other works, this recalls the Foucauldian intersection between self-generation and the artistic process. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the act of storytelling acts as a similar generative artistic work for Jeanette, the novel's narrator, while in *The Echoes Return Slow*, Thomas's attempt to compose the self takes the form of a radical poetic project. In *A Month in the Country*, the work of gradually recovering and restoring the painting from centuries' worth of "taper and



candle smoke, paraffin lamps” (45) as well as from the smoke from the stove which could throw up “as much muck as a medieval decade” (45), enables Birkin to recover, restore, and recompose himself in several ways. For one, the work offers him a means of transitioning from his previous identity as soldier on the battlefield to something very near to an artist. While Birkin does not claim to be an artist himself, he acknowledges that “I had lived with a very great artist, my secret sharer of the long hours I’d labored in the half-light above the arch” (135). Though the novel does not conclusively express whether Birkin ever comes to create his own artwork, there is within this indeterminacy an inherent sense of hope that Birkin might uncover himself as an artist even as he gradually uncovers the identity of the fresco’s artist, Piers Hebron. As Cavalié astutely points out, Carr very neatly matches key features of Birkin’s identity with the medieval painter’s: “Piers Hebron's triple identity—soldier, painter and character in his own fresco – fascinatingly reflects Birkin's triple identity—soldier, artist, and character in his own novel” (208). This kinship brings him into contact with a creative part of himself, a part of his identity which would have presumably been suppressed during his time on the battlefield when he would have been expected to kill and destroy, rather than connect and revitalize. This suggests the potential of creative work in healing, the possibility that in the explicit act of writing, the self may emerge from the “muck.”

Furthermore, the painting also provides a liminal space in which Birkin may gradually re-inhabit and re-experience the trauma of his war experience. However, this takes time as Birkin is not consciously aware of this parallel for much of the novel. In fact, we see another example of Birkin’s psychological damage surfacing through his language. He writes that “each day, I released a few more inches of a seething cascade of bones, joints and worm-riddled vitals frothing over the fiery weir. A few wretches were still intact. To these he hadn’t given a great

deal of attention; they were no more than fire fodder” (74). While this is a vivid depiction of a hell-scape, it also doubles as an evocation for Birkin’s memory of Passchaendale. Thus, as Birkin gradually cleans away the filth and grime from the painting, so he gradually clears away the accumulation of internal “muck” which has prevented his psychic wounds from fully healing. However, this seems to occur subconsciously. It is not until Moon points out that “in some ways, it [the painting] brings back the whole bloody business in France” (76) that Birkin even considers the similarity between the fresco and his battlefield experience. While Moon realizes that, as Rosemarie McGerr writes, “the healing process experienced by these men requires recognition of loss, difference, otherness” (358), Birkin is much more reticent, claiming that he “didn’t see it like that. No doubt I didn’t want to” (76).

However, the two eventually become linked in Birkin’s mind as two versions of hell. As the painting gradually becomes an iconographic representation of his wartime experience, a threshold space is opened for Birkin to re-enter his past and recognize his own experience of “loss, difference, [and] otherness” (McGerr 358). As Birkin “restores the painting, he restores himself to the human community” (Scruggs 220) by finding a way to communicate directly about his time on the battlefield with others. Additionally, by restoring the fresco’s portrayal of hell, he simultaneously provides other people, notably Alice Keach, with a window into his past experience of hell and a graphic depiction of his psychic state. When she asks, “Do you believe in hell, Mr. Birkin?” (95) while she stares at the “daunting” (94) painting, it is clear that she, and presumably others, now have an image which symbolically contains at least some of Birkin’s experience. This question also opens a space in which Birkin can reflect on his experience in hell more directly than at any other point in the novel (95). But most importantly, this question provides him with language to consciously express his past experience to another person: “I’ve

been there,” he says to Alice, “I have a map of it in my head” (95-6). Even though he misunderstands her question (95), he is nonetheless able to confess his involvement in the war to a more sympathetic figure than the “Oxgodby Christ” (33) of the fresco. While he does not describe his war experience in detail to anyone in the novel, he finds in the word “hell” a way to contain the unspeakable within language. Were it not for the fresco’s intermediary position, Birkin might not have been able to reach this cathartic moment and would never be able to later attempt his work of self-composition.

While it is not possible to argue that Birkin, by the end of his time in Oxgodby, is fully healed, or that his problems have all been solved (again, there is quite a bit left unresolved and indeterminate), his self has become more confident, more stable, more purposeful. He is no longer stumbling out of a train as he did in the beginning. Instead, he “sets off across the meadow” (135) at the end. Though Birkin as narrator knows where he goes afterward and who he becomes, he ends his self-composition here without bridging the gap between his younger and older self for the reader. By ending the novel on this somewhat resolved, somewhat indeterminate note, Carr again positions his novel between the Victorian fictional model, which valued conclusions which neatly tie off the narrative thread, and postmodern forms which purposefully leave such narratives open-ended and inconclusive. This ending suggests that in creating oneself as a work of art, even as formative periods of time end, they always open into a new liminal space in the ongoing work of self-composition.

## CHAPTER 3

### INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE ART OF SELF-COMPOSITION

Since its publication in 1985, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* has been widely celebrated as a subversive *Bildungsroman*, telling the story of a young girl growing up in a conservative Christian community and discovering her lesbian identity, as well as an experimental *Künstlerroman*, or “artist’s novel,” about Winterson’s emergence as a writer. As such, it represents an excellent example of a “technology of the self” in the postmodern age. Blurring boundaries between fact, fiction, and fable, between author and character, and between autobiography and novel, *Oranges* is now considered a classic of 1980s British literature and, more specifically, an example of what postmodern scholar Linda Hutcheon has termed “historiographic metafiction” (3). According to Hutcheon, this is “fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past .... [which] works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction” (Hutcheon 3-4). “In the postmodern novel,” Hutcheon continues, “the conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied” (5). We find these traits in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* as Winterson skillfully blends various types of narrative, including fairy-tales and Arthurian legends, into her semi-autobiographical narrative whose chapters are themselves titled after the first eight books of the Bible. In this work of self-composition, we find Winterson creating a dynamic, intertextual self which both subverts the biblical text in order to establish a self which is independent of that text’s moral constraints, particularly in regard to Winterson’s lesbian identity, as well as utilizing tropes of the fairy tale and Arthurian legend in order to trace her beginnings as a story-teller.

This intertextual interplay represents an important component of postmodernism, what theorist Jean-François Lyotard describes as a “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv) and a preference for “petits récits” (60), or “little narratives” which are more localized and less totalizing. In *Oranges*, Winterson challenges the authority of the biblical metanarrative imposed upon her character Jeanette by her evangelical community precisely through her own “little narratives” which compose the writer’s self in both realistic and fantastic depictions. As a work of self-composition, it highlights the need for an individual to question one’s received narrative, particularly when it is in opposition to the self’s development. Additionally, the novel exemplifies how a composition of the self might appropriate and subvert those received narratives, rather than simply questioning them or dispensing with them altogether. This revisionist approach undermines the ideological power of the imposed metanarrative from the inside and, importantly, repurposes its features for the sake of the micronarrative of self-composition. That work often requires courage and cunning, in order to confront and potentially disrupt oppressive social networks and dominant metanarratives, as well as a willingness to enter destabilized, liminal states of identity as one’s received identity is disrupted. Thus, we find a complex and multidimensional process of self-composition in Winterson’s first autobiographical work.

Upon beginning the novel, a reader will note that each of its chapters is titled after the first eight books of the Bible. This feature of the novel is one of its most important, though some critics have found it problematic in that “Winterson uses a supremely patriarchal text to organize her own story” (Grice and Woods 6). While this is a valid point, it does not fully account for Winterson’s highly subversive re-writing of the biblical text. This is possibly because, as Laurel Bollinger notes, Winterson’s “overt references to most of these Biblical books are reductionistic,

in that she relies upon only the most general and conventional sense of each text” (365).

However, it is precisely through this “reductionistic” approach that Winterson both subverts the biblical metanarrative and asserts the primacy and significance of her own micronarrative. By not attempting to match the biblical text feature for feature and story for story, but rather appropriating whatever parts of the metanarrative are useful to her, Winterson asserts the authority of her own self-narrative. This places the importance of her micro-narrative on equal terms with the relevance and centrality of biblical text. Given the highly religious and dogmatic nature of Jeanette’s home and church life, it becomes clear that Winterson’s subversive intertextual play with the Bible is a crucial component to her self-composition. In this aspect, we see a similar, though more extensive blurring, of lines between author and narrator as in Carr’s work. Winterson is similarly interested in the play between herself as writer of the text and character in the novel, rather than in creating absolute boundaries between the two. This is in fact one of the novel’s chief features, that any attempt to clearly distinguish between fact and fiction is misguided. What is important is, as Winterson herself puts it, “what writers do with the experience, whatever the experience is .... [and not] whether it took place in my imagination or in my psyche or whether it took place in my physical body” (Winterson).

In the first chapter, “Genesis,” we see the importance of not “splitting hairs” (Winterson, *Paris Review* interview) between Winterson’s factual origins as the adopted daughter of a Pentecostal evangelist. This allows Winterson to trace Jeanette’s origins in ways that are imaginatively true while simultaneously playing with the biblical account of Creation. While the reader might expect a standard account of the girl’s beginnings similar to the biblical creation account in Genesis, in which God creates the world in an orderly, day-by-day process, Winterson in fact offers a more complicated, less-linear version of Jeanette’s beginnings. In contrast to the

biblical account, Winterson does not begin her novel “in the beginning” but by stating, “Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father” (3). This foreshadows the dramatic change to this domestic relationship which will occur later in the novel, but more importantly, her micronarrative begins after it is already in motion, in contrast to the biblical metanarrative which literally starts “In the beginning.” While this historicized beginning parallels several of the novel’s embedded fairy tales, Winterson does not utilize the “Once upon a time” trope in the beginning of her self-composition, suggesting that Jeanette’s story will not be a “fairy tale.” For Winterson, there is no such thing as a true beginning; instead, Jeanette joins a narrative which is preexisting, in movement, and ultimately acts as a system of discipline to control her life. We find a similar technique in *The Echoes Return Slow* which also begins in the midst of a previous environment, what Thomas refers to as “Pain’s climate” (12).

This opening stands in contrast to the biblical text in another important way in that a female is the most important figure in the story of Jeanette’s origins. While the narrator begins with a description of her father, remarking that he “liked to watch the wrestling” (3), she quickly turns to the mother who simply “liked to wrestle; it didn’t matter what” (3). From here, Jeanette’s relationship with her mother becomes a central aspect of the novel. As Bollinger notes, by focusing on the mother figure, Winterson “contrasts her story with the predominantly male image of creation found in both Biblical texts by removing any significant male figures from her birth narrative” (365). This is one important instance among many where the novel challenges the patriarchal orientation of the biblical text by positing more significance to the female figures in Jeanette’s life and her various relationships with them while regarding the male figures with disinterest, ambivalence, and even outright disgust. In order for Winterson to truly compose a self, it is necessary to trace her both her lived and imagined experience in terms of female

relationships, even when they cause significant conflict within the narrative.

In fact, one of the chief conflicts and themes in the novel is between Jeanette's relativist outlook on life, particularly in regard to sexuality and gender, and her mother's moral and intellectual absolutism. As she writes, her mother "had never heard of mixed feelings" (3), and that "there were friends and there were enemies" (3). This binary system of friend versus enemy, good versus evil, holy versus sinful, dominates the worldview of her mother and much of the church. By opening her "Genesis" chapter with this binary list, Winterson parallels the binary system of good and evil found in biblical account of Genesis, which emphasizes the "good"—the word God uses repetitively in describing his creation—versus the "evil" associated with the serpent and Adam and Eve's eating from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" (*KJV*, Gen. 2:17). Here, as in other instances in the novel, Winterson uses humor to challenge the metanarrative rather than outright aggressive critique, playing upon the simplicity of the binary system by collapsing the degree of importance of each object in relation to the others. Thus, we find that "The Devil" (enemy) and "God" (friend) are equal in importance to "Slugs" (enemies) and "Slug pellets" (friends) within the mother's worldview (3). As is becoming increasingly clear, Jeanette is highly sensitive to areas of moral and theological gray; this in turn challenges her mother's more rigid world view. As Tess Cosslet writes, Jeanette's "insistent relativism is set against, and disrupts, the unbending fundamentalism of her mother religion" (16). It is perhaps no surprise that Jeanette's character and personality develop and evolve throughout the novel, while the mother's character remains largely static. Rather than resisting or denying such areas as her mother must, these areas provide Jeanette with liminal spaces of transformation in the effort to compose a self which is more flexible and open to the world in all its shades of color.



Even as Jeanette's worldview becomes more relativistic, Winterson also allows for multiple narratives to exist equally. This form of *heteroglossia* breaks down the barriers between the different language registers of sacred text, fairy tale, and modern realism, and thus relativizes their values. Later in the chapter, when Winterson describes Jeanette's "origins," she collapses the distinctions between realism, fable, and myth. In the first narrative interruption of the novel, Winterson writes a fairy-tale about "a brilliant and beautiful princess" whose duties would be "1- To milk the goats / 2- To educate the people / 3- To compose songs for the festival" (9). For Jeanette the burgeoning storyteller, these provide a more natural, enriching framework for her later vocation as a writer of "petits récits" (Lyotard 60) and composer of the postmodern self. Immediately after this princess narrative, Winterson describes Jeanette's adoption from an orphanage. Rather than providing a realistic account of this important occurrence, however, Winterson couches the event as a pseudo-Christological miracle in which Jeanette's mother "dreamed a dream" and "followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage" (10). This creates a parallel between the pseudo-biblical origin account and the previous fairy-tale by repeating the list of three "duties" of the child who would be: "a missionary child, a servant of God, a blessing" (10). Through such narrative interplay, Winterson draws attention to the Bible itself, and particularly to Genesis, as a collapsed narrative comprised of history, myth, and sacred text. As Sarah Syrjanen describes it, "By leveling the Bible with popular works of literature and one's own fantasies, Winterson articulates a challenge to contemporary theology" (44), at least in its popular form which emphasizes the cohesion of the biblical account. In doing so, Winterson "models a new, more fluid belief system that ... allows for multiple and shifting truths" (Reisman 12)—a technique which is more expressive of Jeanette's relativistic attitude, and more conducive to the act of self-composition.

In addition, this multi-strand account of her origins allows the narrator to not only assert authority over her creation but also participate in it. While she implicitly acknowledges that an act of self-composition cannot take place apart from a specific and constraining social context (as the beginning of the chapter displays), this secondary account, while not factual, does more to explain Jeanette's entrance and existence in the world than a strictly literal explanation would. Additionally, by not qualifying or explaining the secondary account, Winterson leaves a gap between the strands of realism and fantasy in the novel. This creates new potential for Jeanette's development as a storyteller, who would have similar duties as the princess and her development as a preacher, a missionary in training. Eventually, after she has left the church, she merges the two—her storytelling and her preaching—to create a prophetic voice (161). What this account represents, therefore, is how an individual might “re-create” herself through self-composition which purposefully opens or exposes gaps within one's own narrative in order to allow for new possibilities to emerge. As Winterson herself puts it in her memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, “When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one” (jeanettewinterson.com).

The “Genesis” chapter offers one more important instance of narrative revision in a playful, yet highly significant scene that highlights, on the one hand, the way authority is both questioned and re-asserted through narrative, and, on the other, the way in which an individual might compose the self after such authoritative reestablishment. At church, after facing a litany of contradictory blessings and curses from her pastor for being seven years old (12), Jeanette feels “awkward” (12) and goes to play in her Sunday School room. There, she begins “to enjoy a rewrite of Daniel in the lions' den” (12). In Jeanette's version, Daniel is eaten by the lions because she “wanted to do Jonah and the whale, but they don't do whales in Fuzzy Felt. I'm

pretending those lions are whales” (13). Even at this young age, Jeanette identifies a gap between her lived reality and the Bible’s narrative. This allows her to assert authority over the biblical account and to adapt its narrative to fit her own needs, thus renegotiating its relevance to her life. Rather than being a text filled with moral instruction and theological dogma, it becomes diversionary, existing on the same level as the novel’s other made-up stories. However, when the pastor walks in, he is “aghast” to see Jeanette’s version of the story and is quick to “put it right” (13) by rearranging Daniel and the lions to better match the biblical account. Jeanette then leaves him “in the Sunday School Room playing with the Fuzzy Felt” (13). While the male figure has reasserted dominance and control over the metanarrative, Jeanette does not argue with the pastor and in fact seems unaffected by his amendment, suggesting that his reassertion of narrative control is inconsequential, if not downright ludicrous. In this instance, Jeanette composes herself easily enough, stating that she “left him to it” (13). For Jeanette, her creative and playful act is more important than the pastor’s assertion of authority.

As the novel moves from “Genesis” to “Exodus,” Jeanette also begins a transition, going from a sheltered life at home to one involved in the wider world, primarily in the public school, what Syrajanen describes as an “ideological flight” (31) from her religious upbringing. In this chapter, the narrator is again drawing a structural parallel between the biblical text and her own. She leaves her home, which is familiar, full of well-established boundaries, but where she is not free (a parallel to the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt), and goes into the wider world of public school, where she is free but feels anguish at not being able to adapt to the more challenging environment (a parallel to the wilderness that the Hebrews enter after leaving Egypt). Although she is excited by the thought of going to school at first, as the Hebrews were no doubt excited when they were released from slavery, she soon finds herself “beginning to despair” since she

has not “found many explanations at school” and “it only got more and more complex” (32). This contrasts with her home life, where her mother offers an answer for everything, even when it means “invent[ing] theology” (5), as well as to her church life, where the pastor explains the world entirely through a narrow, superstitious theological framework. While Jeanette initially struggles outside the interpretive frameworks of her mother and pastor, her experience with the complexity and difficulty of school life is what ultimately leads her beyond her inherited frameworks and toward what she calls her “tendency towards relativism” (46).

However, Jeanette also struggles socially at school due to her isolated and religiously focused upbringing, and this causes her to retreat back into her religious identity: “It was obvious where I belonged. Ten more years and I could go to missionary school” (43). This parallels the Hebrews’ own difficulty in surviving the desert on their own, having learned survival skills beyond what their enslavement necessitated, and thus becoming dependent on divine providence for their sustenance and guidance. What makes Winterson’s appropriation of certain elements from the book of Exodus so subversive is the parallel she establishes between her own isolated, narrow religious upbringing and the cruel, ethnically enforced slavery of the Hebrew people. In effect, she is critiquing the circumstances of her religious upbringing with the very text upon which that upbringing was founded. This provides a clear example of how Winterson “use[s] and abuse[s]” (Hutcheon 5) conventions of narrative in order to craft her self-composition.

While much of Winterson’s interplay with the biblical text is structural and below the surface in the Genesis and Exodus chapters, toward the end of the chapter she opts for more outright appropriation and narrative intertextuality. In this excerpt, Winterson overtly refers to the biblical Exodus, then immediately lays her cards on the table: she is appropriating its imagery for her own narrative.

When the children of Israel left Egypt, they were guided by the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. For them, this did not seem to be a problem. For me, it was an enormous problem. The pillar of cloud was a fog, perplexing and impossible. I didn't understand the ground rules. (48)

Although she is not calling into question the presence of God's guidance in her life, she is confessing that her experience in the wilderness is confusing and disorienting. Her freedom is not guided by God but is in fact obscured by God since she cannot resolve the contradictions between her absolutist religious upbringing and her relativist school experience. By appropriating biblical themes and structures but also revising their common interpretation, she is rattling and even undermining the architecture of authority that has been built over her life. As this structure is destabilized, Winterson dissolves the separation between Jeanette's story and the fairy-tale. When Jeanette learns that "Tetrahedron is a mathematical shape" (49) at school, the narrator immediately begins telling her own story about "the emperor Tetrahedron" (49). This now occurs without the usual visual marker which has, up to this point in the novel, indicated a transition into the purely "fictional" realm<sup>1</sup>. While this reflects Jeanette's increasing sense of instability in the world, it also represents her growing imaginative powers as well as her shrinking belief in a world where fact and fiction can be easily and neatly separated. These are all important aspects in Winterson's concept of the self; even as the certainty of a cohesive metanarrative diminishes and its meaning-system break down, the self is able to compose its own micro-narrative to more accurately and creatively explain its identity and purpose in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Grove Press edition, the markers generally occur between narrative strands and are similar to this symbol: ≈

If the end of “Exodus” represents a destabilizing moment for the metanarrative, then “Leviticus,” the novel’s next chapter, represents the metanarrative re-stabilizing. This parallels the biblical book of Leviticus, which is largely a collection of laws pertaining to all facets of traditional Jewish life and codified in the years following their Exodus journey. Just as these laws reveal how a person might become perfect in the eyes of God, the novel’s “Leviticus” is similarly concerned with the (re)establishment of laws or boundaries to ensure that Jeanette stays on the right path, with her people, and becomes perfect, or holy. One prominent boundary emphasized in the chapter is between “the Heathen” (53), those outside of the religious community and the Law, and those within the religious community and the Law. In this chapter, a conflict arises when the church members who have congregated at Jeanette’s house hear the neighbors, to whom her mother refers dismissively as “Next Door,” having sex. This prompts the church members to begin singing hymns to combat their noise, which Jeanette’s mother regards as “not holy” (53). As in other instances in the novel, Winterson highlights the humor and ridiculousness of these situations (consider the Fuzzy Felt episode), particularly in regard to her mother/church’s extreme views, an important and underappreciated method that she undermines the imposing authority of the metanarrative. Nevertheless, this is another clear example of the way her mother seeks to split the world into a binary system, impose that system on Jeanette and anyone in the vicinity, and assert her position on the right/good/holy side of things. We might note that even though this stands in direct opposition to Jeanette’s own means of composing her self, the text suggests that this represents, for Jeanette’s mother, her own means of establishing a self. However, because her mother is ultimately unwilling to assert the importance of her own self-composition, she remains submissive to the patriarchal ideology of her church community and thus incapable of truly composing the self as a work of art.

While Winterson encourages some sympathy from the reader toward the mother figure, she does not condone her views, particularly in regard to sexuality. As this instance makes clear, any deviant (sexual) behavior will be met with religious fervor by the community in order to suppress what is “not holy.” It is one of many examples in the novel where sexuality is equated with sin and where the conservative ideology of heteronormative sex which must be contained within marriage is at the heart of conflict. Eventually, Jeanette will find herself at the center of such a conflict, but at this point, she is still within the religious community and its organizing Law, and as a child does not fully understand the sexual politics at play around her. It is certain, however, that Winterson the author is very aware.

Despite the “laying down of law” that this episode represents, Leviticus is also the chapter where Jeanette “[begins] to develop [her] first theological disagreement” (60). This occurs during a sermon on perfection, which her pastor interprets as “flawlessness” (60). The way that she engages with this disagreement is highly revealing. She does not explicitly state why she disagrees or offer a reasoned argument against the interpretation; neither does she appeal to the Bible to justify her contrary view, which would be essential in a fundamentalist setting. Instead, Winterson frames her theological disagreement within a fairy-tale. By not entering directly or conventionally into the theological battle with her pastor, Jeanette is not only questioning her pastor’s authoritative interpretation but also questioning the grounds of discourse over which morality can be considered. For Jeanette, inventing a story has become a valid mode of discourse for engaging with theology, arguably an *even more valid* mode than a traditional sermon. In other words, a creative theological approach is just as viable as theology based on reasoning, divine inspiration, or whatever other appeals the preacher might claim. By dissolving these boundaries, Winterson indirectly challenges discourse based on binaries, or laws that call

anything holy or unholy, perfect or imperfect, laws that state that one thing is good, the other bad. If she can dissolve or at least blur the binary through creativity, she can also blunt the power of such a binary when it is used against the unprivileged half. Considering what develops in the novel's next chapter, this attempt to break down such binaries as law vs. freedom, flawlessness vs. sinfulness, holy vs. unholy, heterosexual vs. homosexual, as well as how those binaries are leveraged by those in power, is crucial for Jeanette's evolution as a character and Winterson's project in self-composition.

Jeanette's creative engagement with her theological quarrel seems to free her in the next chapter to begin exploring other disagreements she might feel toward her community and the biblical metanarrative, particularly toward marriage and sexual identity. Thus, we can understand this chapter as Jeanette's movement toward a "Promised Land" in which she is free to be herself. In the biblical book of Numbers, the Hebrew people also struggle to get to the "Promised Land." However, Winterson establishes important differences between the two texts. In the chapter's beginning, Jeanette describes a dream where she is getting married. Walking down the aisle, she notices that her "crown [is getting] heavier and heavier and the dress more and more difficult to walk in," (71) which suggests the weight and difficulty of what Adrienne Rich has termed "compulsory heterosexuality" (23) that Jeanette is beginning to experience as she begins her adolescence. Furthermore, when she sees her husband for the first time, he is "blind, sometimes a pig, sometimes my mother, sometimes the man from the post office, and once, just a suit of clothes with nothing inside" (71). This reveals Jeanette's confusion and growing ambivalence about marriage, which then causes her to dream about the fairy tale "The Beauty and the Beast." In her mind, she equates the experiences of some women that she knows have married "pigs" with the beast figure in the fairy tale. This in turn allows her to see clearly for the first time that



does not want to be with a boy (73), since it is likely that he will become a pig or beast, and is the first sign that Jeanette is uncomfortable with the pervading heterosexual expectations of her community. As Reisman notes, “Just as Jeanette expresses her theological disagreement through a fairy tale, she also expresses her ideological disagreement about romantic love and marriage through a deconstruction of fairy tales” (18). Although Winterson references homosexual relationships, which her mother and church community clearly disapprove of, earlier in the novel, this is the first outward sign of tension between Jeanette’s own sexual (dis)interests and the heteronormativity expected by the community. Significantly, it is also the first indicator that eventually, Jeanette’s micro-narrative of the self will come into conflict with the metanarrative of her community.

In fact, it is not until the chapter of “Leviticus,” years after these first signs, that the conflict occurs. After meeting Melanie on a shopping trip with her mother, Jeanette begins an ongoing Bible study with her, which eventually allows them to sleep together (88-89). This occurs almost immediately after her pastor’s warning that an “epidemic of demons” was spreading through the country due to people’s “Unnatural Passions” (85) as well as her mother’s command not to “let anyone touch you Down There” (88). We may again note Winterson’s tongue-in-cheek humor here, but it shortly becomes clear that Jeanette’s actions have seriously breached what her community finds acceptable. In this chapter, however, heterosexual marriage is presented as the “Promised Land” that all women must seek. Yet for Jeanette, marriage to a man is like marrying a beast, more of a nightmare than a dream. This leads her to find an alternative, self-composed promised land in her relationship with Melanie. For Jeanette, there is no contradiction between her religious faith and her same-sex attraction; she only feels “how glad [they] were that the Lord has brought us together” (88). By affirming divine action in their

relationship, Winterson sets up an important contradiction between Jeanette's micronarrative, which has no "laws" against homosexuality, and the biblical metanarrative which does. This calls into question how "the Lord" as divine law-giver views homosexual behavior. Either God does not condone homosexuality (in the metanarrative) or actively participates in bringing two people of the same sex together (in the micronarrative). This opposition goes against the biblical book of Numbers because it again inverts the values of the text: Jeanette finds her promised land in direct disobedience to religious law. Again, we see how Winterson, by framing her self-composition within the structure of the biblical metanarrative, is in fact resisting its authority. While much of this resistance has occurred narratively in the novel thus far, Winterson takes a metafictional approach in the next chapter.

The chapter "Deuteronomy," subtitled "The Last Book of the Law," is the most explicit critique of metanarratives in the entire book. This is in direct juxtaposition to the biblical Deuteronomy, which is largely a restating of earlier laws by Moses. In *Oranges*, the narrator questions how any history is constructed, and by implication, how any religious claims based on that history can hold authority. For Winterson, we never get "the whole story" because "that is the way with stories; we make of them what we will" (93). This statement points to the inherent gaps in any story and the arbitrary attempts taken to make sense of them. She goes on by saying that stories are "a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained" (93), highlighting the contradiction that the more we attempt to understand the universe with our stories, the more we find the universe resistant to our understanding. The result of this contradiction is that the narrator feels that "the only thing [I know] for certain is how complicated it all is, like a string full of knots" (93). She is bewildered by the complexity of her life and the world around her.

In fact, for Jeanette, it is not her own story which is complicated. When she considers the distinction others make between history and fact on one hand, and fiction on the other, she finds it “very curious” (93). She believes that “we are all historians in our small way” (94), alluding to her own process of recounting her history in the form of a novel. Moreover, she is “astonished” when she “look[s] at a history book and think[s] of the imaginative effort it [took] to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset” (95), connecting creative impulse and technique with the work of history writing. For the narrator, the enterprise of historiography and the enterprise of storytelling and self-composition are very much related. By drawing attention to their similarities, the narrator is implicitly calling into question the Judeo-Christian religious beliefs that have been based on such “historical” data. If the historical record has been derived through such unstable measures, then authoritative claims for belief, practice, and law based on those facts must be reconsidered. Rather than trusting and submitting to the metanarrative one has been born into, Jeanette suggests that the individual ought to compose the self through its own micronarrative. Or as Winterson puts it, “If you want to keep your own teeth, make your own sandwiches” (95).

In the next two chapters, *Joshua* and *Judges*, Jeanette begins to act on her skepticism of the biblical narrative. In the Bible, these two interrelated books describe the process of battling for and eventually settling the Promised Land. In *Oranges*, there is a similar oscillation between points of confrontation and longer stretches of peace. Again, the values are inverted so that any sympathy lies with Jeanette, who is being attacked, rather than the religious community who carries out the attacks. After her community finds out about Jeanette and Melanie, they confront the two of them in a church service. While Melanie quickly repents, Jeanette does not back down, claiming that “to the pure all things are pure” (105), quoting Titus 1:15 in an effort to use

the biblical text against her community's fundamentalist perspective. She even goes so far to she "loves both of them [God and Melanie]" (105). Again, for Jeanette, the binary system of her community simply does not apply to her. This of course does not prevent her community from locking her in a room, starving her, and even attempting an exorcism. Despite this punishment, Jeanette again finds herself attracted to another woman shortly thereafter (117). In Jeanette's self-composition, there is no conflict between her homosexuality and her spiritual life; both are integral to her identity. For Jeanette, the tension is never between her and her conception of God, but rather between her and the oppressive ideology that governs her community and family. However, without previously having challenged the metanarrative upon which her community's ideology had been built, she would not be able to claim her relationship with God to be more valid and closer, in fact, to the spirit of the biblical text in comparison to dogmatic believers of her community.

As the novel ends in the "Ruth" chapter, Jeanette finds "a room of [her] own" (158), achieving some freedom for herself. However, she has not completely resolved all of her problems. This stands in contrast to the happy-ending quality of the biblical Ruth. In that text, Ruth eventually marries a man and settles into domestic accord with her mother-in-law. In Winterson's "Ruth," Jeanette has not married, and her mother still considers her "a sinner" (175). Furthermore, in contrast to the biblical Ruth who integrates into a new religious community, Jeanette remains ostracized from her religious community. However, this has not diminished her own religious inclination. She confesses that she "miss[es] God who was my friend" (170) and feels emotionally unfulfilled as she will never be able to find someone who, like God, "will destroy and be destroyed by me" (170). These statements suggest nostalgia for a more masculine, heteronormative relationship with the divine, which is perhaps due to the fact that Jeanette has

not yet been able to fully separate her own understanding of God from her community's. However, this lack of resolution is significant because it allows for further development in Jeanette's sense of self and her religious life. Rather than becoming a "priest [who] has a book with the words set out...words [that] work," Jeanette will instead become a prophet who "has no book," but who "cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning...because [she is] troubled by demons" (161). For Winterson, one of the most important features of a self-composition is to accept that narratives and identity do not ever fully cohere, but are instead open to irresolution and indeterminacy.

We see further evidence of this as Winterson devotes a significant portion of this chapter to her story about Winnet Stonejar. As Bollinger describes it, "The Winnet Stonejar sequence repeats the novel's plot by reframing in a more traditional model" (378). Winnet, who is also adopted, is clearly another version or part of Jeanette. While many points could be made in regard to the narrative parallels between the novel as a whole and this particular micro-fiction, the larger point is that both Jeanette and Winterson are becoming increasingly confident in their own self-composition and less interested in exploring the intersections her story has with the biblical text. This seems to free Winterson from a need for narrative resolution in the novel's final pages. As Jeanette meets her mother and finds herself sympathizing with her, she is not quite able to communicate openly about who she is or how her mother has mistreated her. Instead, Winterson ends the novel ambiguously with Jeanette's mother calling out on the radio "This is Kindly Light calling Manchester, come in Manchester, this is Kindly Light" (176). The reader is left with the sense that this is all that Jeanette, her mother, or anyone can ever do—attempt to reach out to others while never being certain whether or not we will actually connect.

Despite the presence of paradox, the lack of fairy-tale conclusions, and the pervasiveness of doubt Jeanette still experiences at the end of the novel, she still feels that she has “run in a great circle, and met myself again on the starting line” (173). By undergoing the difficult work of composing the self, Winterson suggests, we end up crossing paths and trading glances with our previous selves. This reminds us that the “I” is never a single, contained entity, but a gathering of past identities who each contribute something—perhaps a line of poetry, a short tale, a funny anecdote—which taken together creates the larger story of the self. Since this story never coheres fully, there are always gaps left in which the composition of self can continue to unfold.

## CHAPTER 4

### SPATIAL EXPERIMENTATION AND THE ART OF SELF-COMPOSITION

R.S. Thomas stated that “the cross is the central reality in a world of time and space and it throws its shadow across the countryside, across the field of nature and across human lives” (qtd. in Brown 100). Throughout Thomas’s career, the cross cast a heavy shadow over his poetry as well. Whether the poet is “nailing his questions / one by one to an untenanted cross” (*CP* 180) or asking “how contemporary / is the Cross, that long-bow drawn / against love?” (*CLP* 135), the cross was an important and evolving symbol in much of Thomas’s poetry (Davis 36). In *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), it becomes a central formal feature of the text as Thomas explores the postmodern possibilities of cross-generic experimentation between poetry and prose. What is equally important to the collection is also the gap-space this cross creates visually on the page.<sup>2</sup> Through both of these technical experimentations, Thomas engages in a deeply explorative act of self-composition, fusing his autobiographical intent for the work with an equally explorative form. While the collection’s fusion of prose and verse was a new development for Thomas, the fusion of form and content was already an established aspect of the poet’s craft. As Daniel Westover has written in his *Stylistic Biography* of Thomas, “the ‘theology of his style’ works mimetically, drawing the reader into the process of spiritual questioning because the poem itself is a reflection, an iconic representation, of the poet’s own quest” (129). In *The Echoes Return Slow*, generally considered Thomas’s most innovative and ambitious work, we see this mimesis

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<sup>2</sup> Depending on which edition of the collection you read, the visual between the prose and poetry sections will differ. In the original publication, the prose piece is printed on the left page and the verse on the opposing right page. As it is published in the *Later Collected Poems: 1988-2000* edition, the prose and verse pieces are printed together on the same page. Regardless, the effect is the same—there is always a space between the two which simultaneously conjoins and separates the two texts.

enacted not simply within individual poems, but within the cross-generic interaction of the prose and verse pairings and the gaps between the two. Though the individual pieces contain merit of their own, their full effect is not realized until read in tandem with their counterpart. This interweaving of prose, gap, and verse works to highlight both the inherent instability and potential viability of language and the act of writing as means to compose the postmodern self. For Thomas, the issues of language and selfhood are deeply personal.

In addition to being his most formally experimental collection, *The Echoes Return Slow* is also generally regarded as Thomas's most autobiographical. While Christopher Morgan rightly suggests that, in general, "for Thomas, poetry, by its very definition, *is* autobiography," (13) this collection in particular represents Thomas's most sustained and comprehensive autobiographical volume. The book begins with the poet's birth into "Pain's climate," (12) then continues swiftly with his development as a child whose "cleverness was in running away" (17). It then follows his development as a young man entering the Anglican priesthood who was "sent unprepared to expose his ignorance of life in a leafless pulpit" (23) and as a young father "waiting for the child to speak, waiting for that breaking of silence which is the unique sacrament of man" (29). Poised "on the threshold of middle age" (44), the poet listens to the younger folks around him, "trying to sympathise with their assault upon silence" (44). We eventually encounter the speaker settling into old age and retirement at Sarn y Plas, a four-hundred-year-old seaside cottage in Aberdaron, Wales. It was here that Thomas composed a dozen collections of increasingly experimental poetry, including *The Echoes Return Slow*. As he writes late in this collection, "'Not done yet,' mutter[ed] / the old man, fitting a bent / poem to his broken bow" (49).

And yet, while it is possible to trace a personal narrative arc through the collection, there is more at stake than a straightforward account of the poet's life. As Barbara Prys-Williams puts



it, the collection presents only “on the most superficial level, a chronological account of that life” (121). Indeed, Thomas had already written an autobiographical prose work entitled *Neb* which follows Thomas’s life in greater narrative detail. That title, *Neb*, which means “no one” in Welsh, is telling in that it suggests not a self, but a *lack* of self, and it is this lack that *The Echoes Return Slow* seeks to overcome. Through the juxtaposed crossing of both poetry and prose, the volume attempts to compose a self, and to do so in the shadow of a “Cross [that] always is avant-garde” (53). This in fact echoes one of the insights Foucault discovered in his study of early Christian monastic writings. Foucault highlights the fact that, “As everyone knows, Christianity is a confession” (178) and is therefore a religion which “impose[s] obligations of truth on the practitioners” (178). Foucault’s insight is that, beyond requiring a certain adherence to dogma, “Everyone in Christianity has the duty to explore who he is, what is happening within himself, the faults he may have committed, the temptations to which he is exposed [and is] obliged to tell these things to other people, and thus to bear witness against himself” (178). Though Thomas held a complicated relationship with traditional Christianity, it seems clear from much of his work, including *The Echoes Return Slow*, that he felt these obligations and observed them within his poetry. In this collection in particular, we find a postmodern iteration of the early monastic “technologies of the self” that Foucault studied as Thomas sought to compose his turbulent sense of self, vocation, and spiritual searching, even if this included bearing witness against himself.

In the collection’s first pairings, Thomas begins his self-composition by tracing his own birth and early childhood in a similar fashion Winterson’s origins account. Describing his birth by C-section, he writes that “the woman was opened and sewed up, relieved of the trash that had accumulated nine months in the man's absence” (12). Here, he seems to embody a proto-self in pre-consciousness, a self that would not yet recognize this “woman” as mother, this “man” as

father, but is instead an almost inhuman creature capable only of "groping his way up to the light, coming to the crack too narrow to squeeze through" (12). His usage of the word "trash" for himself suggests that he was unwanted by his parents, whether in actual reality or in his own perception. However, the word also foreshadows the oncoming world wars in which human life would become disposable and bodies would be "rendered down" (22) on the wasteland, to then be consumed by flowers "innocent of compassion" (22). While the effects of war are not as a dominant of a theme in this collection as in *A Month in the Country*, Thomas clearly shares Carr's interest in excavating any possible effects of war on the psyche and here hints at the later pairings which more directly address both world wars. What this suggests is Thomas's awareness that it is not possible to look on the past innocently, even a time before these wars (Thomas was born in 1913) without the veil of future knowledge and perspective.

In the corresponding verse piece, we see both an intensification and complication of the first piece. Again, Thomas seems to inhabit his proto-self by writing that "I have no name:" (12, l.1). As Thomas reinforces the line break with a colon, thus attempting to keep the reader in a suspended state of motion, we note both the switch from third to first person between the prose and verse piece, a common occurrence within the collection, and suggestive of Thomas's sense of self-instability. Additionally, this represents a quasi-state of selfhood which can know itself as "I" and yet does not possess a name. The next line does little to clarify this ambiguity as Thomas describes himself as "time's changeling" (l.2). In M. Wynn Thomas's estimation, this phrase "implies that the self may be understood as not really belonging in, or to, the temporal order—that is, as being rather the child of eternity foisted onto, and abandoned to the care of, unsuspecting time" (197). Thomas goes on to relate this atemporality with Kierkegaard's vision of the self as "profoundly paradoxical in its ontological character . . . an oxymoron compounded

of those two mutually incompatible states, eternity and time" (198-99). Again, this suggests a parallel with Winterson's account of the self's origins. In both compositions, these "origin" poems are not written to tell the exact story of the subject's birth, but rather to contemplate the existential, philosophical, and religious paradoxes of the self as it enters human history and the beginnings of consciousness. Both writers do so in language that is at once concrete and highly visceral, and yet notched with abstraction and ambiguity. For example, in the following two lines of the verse piece, Thomas commands an unidentified person to "Put your hand / in my side and disbelieve // in my godhead (12, l. 3-5). While this command is clearly in reference to his physical body, it is equally an abstract allusion and play on words to Christ commanding his disciple, also named Thomas, to place "hither thy hand, and thrust *it* into my side: and be not faithless, but believing" (KJV John 20:27). Similarly to Winterson, Thomas uses a sudden intertextual reference to connect Thomas's own birth to Christ's death. Both writers are clearly aware not only of their personal place within the metanarrative of the "Christian West." However, they both seek to adapt aspects of that metanarrative for the purposes of self-composition. This reflects Foucault's understanding of "technologies of the self" as practices that allow for some modicum of self-creation even as they are always discursively bound within certain systems of power and discipline. Furthermore, by inscribing an uncertain, potentially unstable foundation for the collection, Thomas suggests his own sense of uncertainty and even confusion regarding his own origins as well as the importance of confronting and potentially expressing this sense in the work of self-composition.

As even this first pairing makes clear, the self that Thomas is engaged in composing is deeply complicated. Williams writes that "in its very structure, *The Echoes Return Slow* . . . appears fragmentary as the story of a life" (123) but that "in its discontinuity, [it] may give an

appropriate feeling of Thomas's lack of an achieved core of being" (123), a lack which Thomas embodies within the gapped structuring of the collection. This leads M. Wynn Thomas to regard the collection as autobiographical writing, "but of a highly unusual kind" (193). As the poet seeks to "address the problem of how to develop a contemporary discourse appropriate for exploring the concept (so alien and unsympathetic to modern minds) of the intrinsically spiritual character of the self" (194), he must radically re-conceptualize his approach to the traditional notion of a collection of poetry. Thomas (the critic) finds that as "prose and poetry are brought together, and used in tandem" (196), the poet "explore[s] the multi-dimensional character of a self that relates to time in an extremely complex fashion" (196). Indeed, we see Thomas (the poet now) delving into the various 'dimensions' of himself throughout the collection: as poet and priest most notably, but also as father and husband, as pacifist and social critic, and as a man immersed in the natural world where his spiritual and scientific senses were most fired.

In fact, we often find these "selves" meeting in the space of the same poem. For example, in the pairing on page 56, Thomas interrelates issues of poetry, science, religion, and of course, his own sense of inner conflict between those forces. He begins the prose piece by mentioning Coleridge's statement that "the opposite of poetry was not prose but science" even as he stands in the pulpit as the priest glancing "through the leaded window to the sea outside" (56). He states, however, that he "defended himself with the fact that Jesus was a poet, and would have teased the scientists as he teased Nathanael" (56). Then, in the corresponding verse piece, he writes that "I have waited for him / under the tree of science, / and he has not come" (56, l. 1-3). Through the gap between the prose and verse, Thomas has renegotiated his position in relation to this memory, again changing his pronoun from the third person "he" to the first person "I". Moreover, though the ensuing lines read that "and no voice has said: Behold a scientist in whom

/ there is no guile” (56, l. 4-6), there is never a final resolution as to who it is Thomas is waiting for under this “tree of science.” It is possible, given the conflicted and complicated nature of Thomas’s religious beliefs, that he himself was not sure. However, after looking “through the windows of their glass / laboratories and seen them plotting / the future” (56, l. 16-18), he decides to “put a cross / there at the bottom / of the working out of their problems” (56, l. 18-20). While various interpretations are possible here, we notice the sense of self-doubt, self-defense, and self-assertion which the pairing holds in equal tension.

David Lloyd, in his article dedicated to this collection, provides a useful conceptual tool for the way that Thomas portrays this conflicted sense of self, which is always a conflation between Thomas’s memory of himself and his current perspective on himself. Lloyd writes of the collection as “a mirror reflecting that [other] mirror” (439) of his past work, which aptly describes much of postmodern British literature. Rhian Bubear also explores this “meta” quality to the work, writing that “the text offers not only an exploration of Thomas’s fragmented and divided sense of self, but most significantly, presents us with what is often an anguished meditation on the theme of life becoming art” (“A ‘Shifting Identity’ Never His Own: *The Echoes Return Slow* as a Poet’s Autobiography”). This is, of course, a significant aspect to postmodern literature more generally. However, as Westover puts it, this “multifaceted exercise in self-definition, self-relating and self-assembly presents R.S. Thomas with unique psychological and technical challenges” (164) that are not entirely common to literature of the period.

As readers, it is not possible to enter this collection without immersing oneself into these psychological and technical complexities, as well the inherent irresolution of such matters. Wolfgang Iser presents a useful way to consider such a demanding text. In his essay “The

Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” Iser writes that it is “The convergence of text and reader [which] brings the literary work into existence” (279), and it is only when “literary texts transform reading into a creative process” (283) that the author “can hope to involve him [the reader] and so realize the intentions of his text” (287). In *The Echoes Return Slow*, Thomas creates a text that invites the reader to collaborate in the creative process of composing the self. For the poet, however, composing the self is not an easy, straightforward process, and so the reader must be willing to engage with the difficulty of the text. By doing so, we more fully appreciate the ambition and skill of Thomas’s project of self-composition.

Indeed, while the cross-generic texts themselves obviously generate most of the collection’s energy, it is important to appreciate the role how instrumental the gaps are to the collection. Again, Iser’s phenomenological approach is useful here. In the same essay, he writes that one of the key ways authors may involve the creativity and imagination of the reader is through gaps within the text: “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (284) because through such omissions, “the opportunity is given to us [the readers] to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (285). *The Echoes Return Slow* is of course full of such gaps, most notably between the prose and verse pieces. By not giving the reader direction or guidance in how to read the pairings in tandem, but only situating an empty space between them, Thomas allows the reader to fill the gaps imaginatively and create synapses between the poems. Regardless of whether the poet intended these connections, the reading process is made infinitely more complex and rewarding to the reader.

Here, I would like to suggest two ways to conceive of the gaps between the prose and verse pieces and how affect our reading of the collection. For one, they act as a middle space

between the two crossing poems, a center of contemplative silence and emptiness. Within this liminal space, Thomas offers the reader a transitional arena between each poem which slows the reading process and allows us to reflect on what we have just read and prepare ourselves to enter the ensuing text. Additionally, this space also allows Thomas to represent his poetics of silence. In these poems, what cannot be expressed in language dwells at the heart of every poetic attempt. In “committing his silence to paper” (35), Thomas discovers a way to distance his self-composition away from the “cacophony” (44) of modern life, which is itself a religious act for Thomas. In this way, he moves himself and the reader “within / listening distance of the silence / we call God” (*CLP* 118) and suggests that such contemplative appreciation for sacred silence and emptiness is an integral to composing the self in the highly mechanized, technologized, and militantly modern and postmodern age.

However, what makes Thomas’s work as a whole so compelling, and this collection in particular so intriguing, is the mixing of sacred and secular, the spiritual and the worldly. As I mentioned earlier, Thomas also attempts to trace the effects of war upon his childhood psyche. In one of the collection’s early pairings, Thomas sketches a dark portrait of his early childhood spent in the build-up to World War I. He remembers the “scrubbed doorstep” (13) of his parent's new home soon “defiled by the day's droppings, circulars, newspapers” (13). This doorstep represents “the threshold of war” (13) for the young Thomas. M. Wynn Thomas characterizes this instance as a “doubling process,” the way in which “Thomas keeps the radical dualities of existence in sight throughout the volume” (195). We can also note the heteroglossic “doubling” on the word which suggests bird droppings, falling bombs, as well as non-essential, extraneous elements which have been dropped by a society on the brink of war. Additionally, we also see this dialogic process occurring in the following verse poem. Here, Thomas writes that “the scales

fell from my eyes, / and I saw faces. I screamed / at the ineffectuality / of love to protect me" (p. 13, l.1-4). It is impossible to tease out the exact relationships between the biblical reference to Paul, the attainment of vision, and the instinctual sense of threat that is intricately interwoven here. However, a (relatively) clear point can be made that from the perspective of the liminal center, the pairing embodies the paradox that consciousness is both deeply inscribed in a specific time and place (largely the domain of the prose poem) yet also archetypically linked in its development of awareness (the grounds of the verse). This suggests that for Thomas, it is only when these "radical dualities" are kept in vision simultaneously that the self can be truly composed.

Another important duality this collection explores and manages to keep in tension is between the past and present selves. For Thomas, the "self" being presented, reflected on, and explored is always a provisional construct comprised of his past "selves" refracted through memory and his present-day "self." Thus, the collection becomes a reflection and meditation on how our past selves collectively compose the present self, and how the contemporary self, in turn, re-composes and revises past selves by sifting through them in memory and committing them to the page. This is of course a highly unstable position for both Thomas and reader. However, the text suggests that such interplay and slippage between past and present selves is an inherent feature to human consciousness. "In a dissolving world," the poet asks, "what certainties / for the self, whose identity / is its performance" (27).

By pairing prose and verse pieces throughout the collection, Thomas seeks to express his sense of dissolution, uncertainty, and the constant performance of self. As Bubea writes, "The volume contains numerous examples where verse and prose work in tandem specifically to engender uncertainty ... an allegory of Thomas' own uncertain and transient sense of self"



("Shifting Identity"). While many prose and verse pairings offer some focusing or clarifying perspective on one another, there are numerous instances where they act as distortive and obscuring lenses on the other. For example, in the pairing on page 45, Thomas writes in the prose piece that "For some there is no future but the one that is safeguarded by a return to the past." The rest of this poem describes Thomas's literal and figurative journey westward toward Wales away from England to the east. In the corresponding verse piece, Thomas asks an unidentified second person, "Are you coming with us?" (45, l. 1). Thomas implies that this person is Christ by situating the poem in the next line as "On the road to Emmaus" (45, l. 2). This poem is also about the question of whether to stay or leave one's current place. However, by framing it intertextually with the biblical text,<sup>3</sup> the second poem only serves to complicate and interrogate the first poem. In many of these pairings, Thomas is clearly not attempting to present a clear and obvious portrait of his life. Rather, the poet merely presents what is blurred and darkened by ambiguity and mystery, what is lost in the breakdown of memory and the passage of time, as he witnesses it through the act of poetic self-composition. Thomas exploits this spectrum of vision to great effect, producing poetry which does not simply depict certain experiences and moments within the poet's life, but also imitates the psychic dynamics of self-scrutiny and the difficulty, uncertainty, and possible distortion in excavating buried, broken memories. As in most of this collection's important thematic and technical features, Thomas achieves multiple angles of vision and degrees of clarity through the prose-verse cross. For Thomas, the work of self-composition must include the willingness to confront paradox, mystery, and even one's own "truths too / frightening to be brought up" (47, l. 15-16).

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<sup>3</sup> See Luke 24: 13-32

However, it is possible to over-emphasize the discordancy within the volume. While the individual pairings are often quite unstable and indeterminate in their relationship, particularly for a reader without biographical knowledge of Thomas, the collection as a whole ultimately coheres as an exploratory act of self-composition. Indeed, the volume manages to find a balance between the micro-instability of the pairings and a macro-coherency within the collection as a whole. What keeps the collection in this dynamic state of movement is the “crossing” of the prose and verse pieces as they speak to each other through the internal gaps within each pair, creating a gear-like effect as each poem successively catches onto an aspect of the next and thus moves the narrative forward. However, such momentum is largely lost if the reader does not attempt to read the poems in tandem by entering and crossing the gap-space between the pairings. This is important not only for the pairings which capture Thomas’s sense of uncertainty and instability, but also in pairings where Thomas seeks inner resolution.

In these pairings, the cross-space seems to absorb some of the anxious and disturbed energies of the texts. For example, on page 24, Thomas writes in the prose piece that “the voices of temptation to disregard Wordsworth’s advice to the poet questioned his shining alone in such murkiness of the spirit (24), which then causes him to ask, “How much is a bird’s song worth? What market value has fresh air?” (24). Soon he is thinking of “imaginary congregations in enlightened parishes” (24), presumably in cities as opposed to his own rural parishes. However, as the prose piece nears the cross space, he concludes that “the fields were too strong. The woods were holier than a cathedral” (24). Here, the gap provides an avenue for the poet and reader to exit the poet’s internal ruminations and transport into a physical landscape of “bunched soil” (l. 1) and “empty sky” (l. 2) where “it is sufficient for you that every pore / should take a little of

their meaning” (l. 3-4). As the poet gathers sustenance from the natural world, he remembers that:

Myself I need the tall woods,  
so church-like, for through their stained  
windows and beneath the sound  
of the spirit’s breathing I concede a world. (24, l. 5-8)

In this pairing, the rich interplay of spiritual, intellectual, and physical pleasure in nature shimmers through the gap between the poems, allowing Thomas to represent a more integrated, open self which does not privilege spirit over mind, or mind over body, but finds unity within the multiplicity of his experience. It is the cross of the prose and verse, as well as the intervening gap between the two, which allows Thomas to fully capture this multi-faceted state.

Indeed, as this pairing indicates, many of the collection’s finest moments occur when Thomas harnesses together his introspective quest for self-composition, his exquisite attention to the natural world, and an exploratory spiritual search for the divine. In one particularly exquisite example, Thomas begins the prose piece by invoking “Minerva’s bird, Athene noctua” (51), the Roman goddess of poetry and her small owl, then ends it by describing how “at night it was lyrical, its double note sounded under the stars in counterpoint to the fall of the waves” (51). Here, the owl’s call is emblematic of poetry, an earthly music which sounds “under” the heavenly realm and in natural “counterpoint” to the forces of the sea. In the verse piece, however, Thomas takes a different tack. Thomas drops the mythopoetic symbolism of the “Athene noctua” and describes it simply as “the small owl calling / far off” (51, l. 2-3). Perhaps because it is more distant now, the owl’s call is not interpreted as “lyrical” or contrapuntal to the ocean. Instead, the poem suggests that the call itself is significant even without a mythopoetic

framework. By doubling the significance of the call in both mythological and phenomenological terms, Thomas again keeps the “radical dualities” of experience in motion at once.

Thomas creates a similar effect in the pairing in regard to the ocean. As noted previously, the prose piece ends on the word “waves,” which Thomas then returns to in the verse piece, writing that:

It is then that I lie  
in the lean hours awake, listening  
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic  
rising and falling, rising and falling  
wave on wave on the long shore  
by the village (51, l. 5-9)

As Thomas mimics the repetitious “fall of the waves,” he lulls himself and the reader into a state of spiritual receptivity in which “the thought comes / of that other being who is awake, too” (51, l. 10-11). Even though this “other being” is nameless and seemingly distant, their wakefulness connects them. And just as the poet has laid receiving the sound waves of the sea, so too has this “other being” received “our prayers break[ing] on him / not like this for a few hours, / but for days, years, for eternity” (51, l. 12-14). Here, Thomas discovers a numinous relationship between his self, the natural world, and the divine, but does not threaten this tenuous connection by attempting to fully articulate the experience. Instead, the cross-space remains at the center of this accomplished work of language as a sign of the unsayable divine reality, the being which “escapes always / the vigilance of our lenses, / the faceless negative / of himself we dare not expose” (68, l. 17-20).

In *The Echoes Return Slow*, Thomas attempts to compose the self from the shards and fragments of his past in familiar, yet experimental forms of language while simultaneously preserving silence toward “that of which we cannot speak” (35). For Thomas, the experience of self, of life, of others, and God is always inflected by mystery. Whether he sees his wife’s dying face emanating that ““over love’s depths only the surface is wrinkled”” (72, l. 8), God’s face “dissolving / in the radiation out of a black hole” (30, l. 19-20), or his own “image in an oblique / glass” (66), his vision scans for immanence within the physical world, his voice traces the silence of the ineffable. What this collection suggests is that the work of self-composition requires a lifetime, and that it is necessary to learn “from the lichen’s slowness / at work something of the slowness / of the illumination of the self” (63, l. 12-15). However slow, dim, or flickering this illumination might be, Thomas pursued it throughout his life in poetry and prayer, through both word and silence.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD THE DIALOGICAL SELF-COMPOSITION

As this study has shown, Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" provides a powerful theoretical framework and impetus for considering postmodern works of self-composition. By seeking to compose the self despite the effects of trauma, repressive society, and existential uncertainty, these writers show that it is possible to create oneself as a work of art in the midst of modern life. What is perhaps most notable about Carr's *A Month in the Country*, Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and Thomas's *The Echoes Return Slow*, is that the authors do not seek to present an entirely coherent, stable self, but rather to envision a concept of selfhood which is always incomplete and provisional, and therefore capable of continued growth and development. We as readers can appreciate the new forms of literature these writers have created from the "fragments of autobiography" (Paras 148), as Foucault describes his own work, and from these fragments perceive new forms of selfhood which have never existed.

However, this concern and effort to create oneself as a work of art has the potential to become narcissistic. While my intent in this study has been to trace the composition of self in the three works, this should not suggest that any of the authors or their works are self-absorbed exercises in literary navel-gazing. On the contrary, what each of these works display is that a concern for self must involve an awareness of and concern for others. For this reason, I would like to suggest that Hubert Habermas's concept of "The Dialogical Self" provides a necessary theoretical balance to Foucault's "technologies of the self," and thus an avenue for future study in these and other works of postmodern British literature. This concept, which Habermas developed from the conjunction of American philosophical pragmatism and Russian dialogism (Habermas 655, 2011), proposes "a (partly) decentralized self that is extended to the social world

with the social other as located not outside but inside the self” (660). The “intersubjectivity” (Habermas 654, 2011) of the dialogical self can thus “be seen as a multiplicity of I positions or as possible selves” (Habermas 30, 1992). These possible selves are created as “other people occupy *I*-positions in a multi-voiced self” (Habermas 661, 2011). By allowing multiplicity and other-ness to reside within the same subject, the self is no longer “essentialized and encapsulated in itself” (Habermas 655, 2011) but is rather a constellation of interconnected voices and perspectives. As such, “the self functions as a mini-society, being part, at the same time, of the society at large” (Habermas 654, 2011). Combining Habermas’s theory of the dialogic self with Foucault’s theory of “technologies of the self” enables us to see that the “self” being created is a complex, socially inscribed and permeated entity. This theoretical intersection is thus useful in considering postmodern literary works which address issues of selfhood and society. Edward Muston, in his comparative study of what he terms the “polyphonic autobiography,” writes that works of this genre “recognize that self-consciousness has its origins in the relationship with an Other, but in understanding that socio-political and socio-economic forces conspire to limit one’s exposure to this alterity, they look within themselves for the Other” (21). We see evidence of this in each of the three works of this study.

In *A Month in the Country*, for example, the liminal space of the church where Birkin lives and completes his work is always open to others. Even as much of Birkin’s self-restoration occurs in relationship to the painting, Carr suggests that the relationships he cultivates while he works with Charles Moon, Alice Keach, and Kathy Ellerbeck, as well as with the medieval painter Piers Hebron, are equally important to Birkin. Additionally, even as the church can be considered a liminal site within the novel, it also functions as a symbolic representation of the dialogical self in which multiple voices and positions may exist within the same space. In

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Winterson represents the dialogical self through the multiple voices and registers of the novel, whether that is Jeanette's wry narrating voice, the voice of her mother or pastor, or the voices of the alternative tales. While most of the narrative is given through Jeanette's own voice, Winterson does not privilege this voice above the others but suggests their interconnection. Without the voices of her religious community, Jeanette's own voice would never develop as fully and powerfully as the voice of a "prophet." And without the voices of the alternative tales, there would be no contrast for her "realist" voice to be measured and appreciated. In this sense, her self is not only comprised of various voices and perspectives, but is even dependent upon them for her own composition. As for *The Echoes Return Slow*, Thomas employs a variety of voices to compose a dialogic self. We see this in the variety of registers he uses—from childlike repetitions in the early poems to the serious philosophical ruminations later in the collection—which all exist within the same collection and the same self. Additionally, Thomas's frequent allusions to other poets does not simply reveal the extent of his reading, but the way he has absorbed and swallowed the voices of his poetic forebears, which is in part what has made him a poet and given him his particular voice. As I hope these brief comments suggest, there is much work to be done in analyzing these texts and others for the intersection between the theories of Foucault and Habermas. By considering how contemporary writers seek to compose the "dialogical self" through postmodern "technologies of the self," we witness the self and the other coming together to form the same multifaceted work of art.



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