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## Postmodernist Revisionism

**Christian Gutleben**

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### Set of documents

#### Document A

I had a name but I have forgotten it.

They call me the Dog-Woman and it will do. I call him Jordan and it will do. He has no other name before or after. What was there to call him, fished as he was from the stinking Thames? A child can't be called  
5 Thames, no and not Nile either, for all his likeness to Moses. But I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound to anything, just as the waters aren't bound to anything. When a woman gives birth her waters break and she pours out the child and the child runs free. I would have liked to pour out a child from my body but you have to have a man for that and there's  
10 no man who's a match for me.

When Jordan was a baby he sat on top of me much as a fly rests on a hill of dung. And I nourished him as a hill of dung nourishes a fly, and when he had eaten his fill he left me. Jordan...

I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood-tide he slipped  
15 away.

When Jordan was three I took him to see a great rarity and that was my undoing. There was news that one Thomas Johnson had got himself an edible fruit of the like never seen in England. This Johnson, though he's  
20 been dead for some twenty years now, was a herbalist by trade, though I'd say he was more than that. When a woman found herself too round for her liking and showing no blood by the moon, it was Johnson she visited with only a lantern for company. And when she came back all flat and smiling she said it was Mistletoe or Cap-Nip or some such, but I say he sucked it  
25 out for the Devil.

Nevertheless, it being daylight and a crow promised such as we see only for a dog and a bear, I took Jordan on a hound-lead and pushed my way through the gawpers and sinners until we got to the front and there was Johnson himself trying to charge money for a glimpse of the thing.

I lifted Jordan up and I told Johnson that if he didn't throw back his  
30 cloth and let us see this wonder I'd cram his face so hard into my breasts

that he'd wish he'd never been suckled by a woman, so truly would I smother him.

35 He starts humming and hawing and reaching for some coloured jar behind his head, and I thought, he'll not let no genie out on me with its forked tongue and balls like jewels, so I grabbed him and started to push him into my dress. He was soon coughing and crying because I haven't had that dress off in five years.

40 'Well then,' I said, holding him back, the way you would a weasel. 'Where is this wonder?'

'God save me,' he cried, 'a moment for my smelling salts, dear lady.'

But I would have none of it and whipped off the cover myself, and I swear that what he had resembled nothing more than the private parts of an Oriental. I was yellow and livid and long.

45 'It is a banana, madam,' said the rogue.

A banana? What on God's good earth was a banana?

'Such a thing never grew in Paradise,' I said.

50 'Indeed it did, madam,' says he, all puffed up like a poison adder. 'This fruit is from the Island of Bermuda, which is closer to Paradise than you will ever be.'

He lifted it up above his head, and the crowd, seeing it for the first time, roared and nudged each other and demanded to know what poor fool had been so reduced as to sell his vitality.

55 'It's either painted or infected,' said I, 'for there's none such a colour that I know.'

Johnson shouted above the din as best he could...

'THIS IS NOT SOME UNFORTUNATE'S RAKE. IT IS THE FRUIT OF A TREE. IT IS TO BE PEELED AND EATEN.'

60 At this there was unanimous retching. There was no good woman could put that to her mouth, and for a man it was the practice of cannibals. We had not gone to church all these years and been washed in the blood of Jesus only to eat ourselves up the way the Heathen do.

Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 1989. London: Vintage: 11-13.

**Document B**

IT was finished almost as soon as it began. Kitty felt such little intrusion from the overseer Tam Dewar's part that she decided to believe him merely jostling her from behind like any rough, grunting, huffing white man would if they were crushed together within a crowd. Except  
 5 upon this occasion, when he finally released himself from out of her, he thrust a crumpled bolt of yellow and black cloth into Kitty's hand as a gift. This was more vexing to her than that rude act – for she was left to puzzle upon whether she should be grateful to this white man for his limp offering or not...

10

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 Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please, pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink. Waxing upon the nature of trees when all know they are green and lush upon this island, or birds which are plainly  
 15 plentiful and raucous, or taking words to whine upon the cruelly hot sun, is neither prudent nor my fancy. Let me confess this without delay so you might consider whether my tale is one in which you can find an interest. If not, then be on your way, for there are plenty books to satisfy if words flowing free as the droppings that fall from the backside of a mule is your  
 20 desire.

20

Go to any shelf that groans under the weight of books and there, wrapped in leather and stamped in gold, will be volumes whose contents will find you meandering through the puff and twaddle of some white lady's mind. You will see trees aplenty, birds of every hue and oh, a hot,  
 25 hot sun residing there. That white missus will have you acquainted with all the many tribulations of her life on a Jamaican sugar plantation before you have barely opened the cover. Two pages upon the scarcity of beef. Five more upon the want of a new hat to wear with her splendid pink taffeta dress. No butter but only a wretched alligator pear again! is surely a  
 30 hardship worth the ten pages it took to describe it. Three chapters is not an excess to lament upon a white woman of discerning mind who finds herself adrift in a society too dull for her. And as for the indolence and stupidity of her slaves (be sure you have a handkerchief to dab away your tears), only need of sleep would stop her taking several more volumes to  
 35 pronounce upon that most troublesome of subjects.

35

And all this particular distress so there might be sugar to sweeten the tea and blacken the teeth of the people in England. But do not take my word upon it, peruse the volumes for yourself. For I have. And it was

40 shocking to have so uplifting an act as reading invite some daft white  
missus to belch her foolishness into my head.

45 So I will not worry myself for your loss if it is those stories you  
require. But stay if you wish to hear a tale of my making. As I write, I have  
a cup of sweetened tea resting beside me (although not quite sweet enough  
for my taste, but sweetness comes at a dear price here upon this sugar  
island); the lamp is glowing sufficient to cast a light upon the paper in front  
of me; the window is open and a breeze is cooling upon my neck. But wait  
... for an annoying insect has decided to throw itself repeatedly against my  
lamp. Shooing will not remove it, for it believes the light is where salvation  
lies. But its insistent buzzing is distracting me. So I have just squashed it  
50 upon my open book. As soon as I have wiped its bloody carcass from the  
page (for it is in a volume that my son was reading), I will continue my  
tale.

Andrea Levy, *The Long Song*, 2011. London: Headline Review: 7-9.

Linda Hutcheon has famously defined postmodernism as an ironic dialogue between the present and the past, a contemporary reassessment and recycling of the past, since, for her, “it critically confronts the past with the present” (Hutcheon 39). If postmodernist fiction thus partakes of “an art of shifting perspective, of double consciousness” (Hutcheon 11), the theme of the past in the present (*‘Le passé dans le présent’*) is intrinsically linked to this type of contemporary literature and the two texts presented here manifestly confirm this thematic presence and significance – which have also aesthetic and ideological implications.

Here, then, are two contemporary texts staging first-person women- and mother-narrators. The gendered perspective should not be undervalued since these mothers cannot not be concerned with the generation of the future and these women appear to be struggling to provide their own historical testimony. Beyond this common perspective, though, the situations appear quite dissimilar. Levy’s text, consisting of a short scene followed by a long metafictional digression, is set in the context of Jamaican slavery whereas the extract from Winterson’s novel, consisting of a short presentation and a long scene, relates the episode of the first public exhibition of a banana in England in an unspecified but distant past. Naturally, these very unlike contexts entail unlike treatments and the tendentious humour with which the presentation of the banana is related is replaced by a harsher satirical vein in Levy’s version of a slave narrative. In spite of the different tonalities linked to the themes (satire as a response to the seriousness of slavery and comedy as a way of dealing with the derisive quality of the banana), what is at stake in these contemporary texts about past events is the problem of otherness and the unknown. The double enunciation of Levy’s text, with a fictional situation set in the past and a communication between author and reader situated in the present, renders the question of otherness particularly complex just as the similar duality in the system of enunciation in Winterson’s text sheds an ambiguous and ironical light on the question of the unknown – which is of course quite different in the distant past and today. The distancing devices used in these postmodernist fragments make it clear that the perspective is fundamentally historical and revisionist and the question raised by these reconsiderations of the past is necessarily related to the purpose of these contemporary takes on yesterday’s issues. The crucial convergence between these two texts, I wish to argue, lies in fact in the reconsideration of history through her story in order to castigate universal prejudices. In order to highlight this ideological purpose, I will start by analysing the contrast between satire and comedy and, thus, between two different

rhetorical strategies. The goals of these divergent strategies may be similar, though, and the second part of this comparison will then examine how the two excerpts deal with the concepts of otherness and the unknown. Finally, it is the interaction between the past and the present, facts and fiction, history and her stories, that will be studied so as to call attention to these postmodernist texts' re-writing/re-righting of history.

Because satire is etymologically linked to the satyrs<sup>1</sup>, it is deliberately unpleasant and unsavoury. Levy's text displays this intended aggressiveness in her indictment of English colonisers. The narrator's bellicosity can first of all be traced in her rhetorics: the simple simile, "as the droppings that fall from the backside of a mule" (l.19), associate the colonisers' words and texts to the lowest matter and thus belittle the colonisers themselves to the level of animals. We have here a clear case of rhetorical dehumanisation in a sort of textual revenge for the dehumanisation of slavery inflicted by the colonisers. Similarly, the metaphor "to belch her foolishness" (l.40), applied as it is to the "white missus" (l.25 and 39-40), magnifies the contrast between the alleged purity and ethereality of the "white" subjects and their actual behaviour directed by the vulgar laws of physiology. The scatological and physiological images are typical of a satirical undertaking which systematically degrades the butt of satire and relies on a principle of belittlement transforming the spiritual or cultural into the bodily or material and generating a lowering movement from the high to the low. Here, it is in particular the literature of the white missus which is consistently defamed being thus reduced to a literature of futility, fickleness, superficiality. In a meaningful repetition, this type of literature is twice reduced to trees, birds and the sun (l.13-15 and 24-25), that is, the most obvious, literal and unremarkable elements of the environment. It is mainly through irony that this kind of literature is mocked since the white ladies' "many tribulations" (l.26) are manifestly antiphrastic, the "hardship" (l.30) of not having butter is clearly ridiculous compared to the hardship of slavery and "the indolence and stupidity of the slaves" (l.32-33) is obviously meant to be read as the token of racial prejudice. The white missus' "discerning mind" (l.31) appears then as the most literal illustration of this biting form of irony which systematically discredits any quality in the target of satire. Perhaps one might add

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<sup>1</sup> « The connection of satire with satyr served to add emphasis to the idea that satire was characteristically uncouth and crabbed, if not rustic and obscene as well » (Macdonald Alden 39).

hyperbole to the satirical strategies used by the narrator for “the several more volumes” (l.34) needed to deal with the colonisers’ complaints and “the five more” for “the want of a new hat” (l.27-28) only emphasise the narrator’s accusation and condemnation of these complaints.

However, satire also means etymologically a medley, a mish-mash, and Levy’s novelistic fragment is indeed heterogeneous since it combines a narrative scene written in the third person and a metafictional digression penned in the first person in which the narrator exposes her project. In this combination one might perceive the hybrid nature of the narrator as both story-teller and commentator and therefore also the miscegenated nature of the novelistic extract itself which associates fiction and history, entertainment and reflection, art and analysis. What is remarkable in this dual composition is the link between the two parts: the relationships between whites and blacks, servants and masters. And so the satirical presentation of the white missus in the metafictional part finds an echo in the sarcastic portrait of the white overseer Tam Dewar. The criticism of the white male coloniser is effectuated through another typical device of satire: sexual mockery. The phrase “Tam Dewar’s part” (l.2) undoubtedly reads like a pun, a sexual double-entendre; and since it is associated to “such little intrusion” (l.1-2), the implication is clearly to ridicule the white man’s virility, a mockery confirmed by the similarly ambiguous use of the adjective “limp” (l.8). Of course, in this additional trait of satire it is not only this particular man’s masculinity which is detracted but the general idea of the white man’s power and authority.

In Winterson’s text, the tonality is more playful as the paratextual enigma of the title immediately suggests. The theme of the banana, like its peel, is slippery and indeed the text unashamedly exploits this tendentious aspect. When the banana is first called “this thing” (l.30) and then twice “a wonder” (l.32 and 41) and finally and explicitly “the private parts of an Oriental” (l.44-45), the contrast is immediately comic because of the incongruous discrepancy between the evocation of the extraordinary and the actuality of what for the contemporary reader is most banal. The sense of transgression linked to the overtly sexual (putting into words what is usually unsaid, putting on scene what is usually ob-scene) is then increased with the pedlar’s suggestion of fellatio (l.58-59) and the comedy reaches its apex with the sacrilegious association of the fellatio in question and the idea of a Christian subject, that is, with the irreverential association of sex and religion. Comedy and sexuality are often linked, one deriving from the other, and Winterson makes the most of this connection between sex and



laughter<sup>2</sup>. Because Winterson's text is imbued with such a pervasive Christian imagery and wording, the strong presence of these phallic references creates an effect of grotesque lowering whereby the religious becomes sexual and the lofty lowly. The grotesque emphasis on the body is also illustrated in the Dog-Woman's outrageous threat to smother Johnson with her breasts: the evocation of these hyperbolic and lethal breasts combined with her capacity to lift a man like a weasel suggests a Gargantuan woman whose excess is again characteristic of grotesque comedy – as can be seen also in the exaggerated degree of her uncleanness (five years without taking her dress off), an exaggeration which likens the Dog-Woman to a character from a fairy-tale. By transforming the Biblical apple into a phallic banana, this passage also reveals a parodic streak whereby a profane text replaces a sacred text and an opportunistic drive supersedes a moral purpose. The comic force of the scene additionally stems from the inversion of sexual stereotypes, the woman being clearly here in a position of physical dominance and the man being feminised through his association with the typically lady-like “smelling salts” (1.42). In a similar vein, the uncouth woman who does not even know her name mishandles the herbalist who in turn calls her “dear lady” (1.42) or “madam” (1.46 and 49) in a comically ill-adapted appeal which shows simultaneously his cowardice and his hypocrisy.

Now, apparently, the comic vein seems mainly present in the scene but in fact it is already heralded in and subtly linked to the introductory passage. When the homodiegetic narrator specifies that “there's no man who's a match for me” (1.10-11), this emphasis on her grotesque oversize manifestly introduces the idea of an excessive, hyperbolic, Gargantuan presence, of a woman residing outside the sphere of ordinary men and ordinary laws: hers is a world of extra-ordinariness. Likewise, the choice of the simile “as a fly rests on a hill of dung” (1.12-13) already announces her lack of propriety, her ontological otherness (she is literally closer to matter than to humanity) and the scatological nature of her rhetorics highlighting her lack of taboos. Finally, the superstitious naivety of her belief that it is her naming which determined her son's fate, this naivety explains the incongruity of her narrative and the unawareness which she displays when dealing with certain delicate topics.

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<sup>2</sup> « Que cela plaise ou non, c'est un fait qu'on rit (et fort) de tout ce qui touche au corps et que la pudeur tend à cacher : organes sexuels, borborygmes et bruits incongrus, excréments et excréments, du plus inconvenant au plus répugnant » (Blondel 43).

But, of course, beyond the jocular, playful tonality, there are in Winterson's comedy like in Levy's satire serious ideological issues, in particular the relation to newness and the unknow in the extract from *Sexing the Cherry* whereas in the passage from *The Long Song* it is the notions of the other and the exotic which are at stake.

In *Sexing the Cherry*, novelty is stressed in a distinct lexical field ("a great rarity" 1.18, "news" 1.19, "of the like never seen in England" 1.20) and it is immediately associated to the revelation of "my undoing" (1.19), as if the new and the unknown were automatically synonymous with failure. The geographical indications are crucial for they stand for the paradigmatic axiologies presented as opposed in the text: London is thus opposed to the Island of Bermuda, the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar, the civilised to the savage and, crucially, the Christian to the pagan. The text takes great pains to emphasise the I-narrator's Christian and Biblical frame of mind. The choice of the name Jordan is of course linked to the river Jordan in which Christ was baptised just as the reference to the Nile and Moses manifestly evokes the miraculous finding of the one who was literally drawn out of the water. The narrator's language is imbued with Christian references, the crowd being likened to "sinners" (1.29), the world to "God's good earth" (1.47) and the community is said to have been "washed in the blood of Jesus" (1.62-63). What is crucial here is that this Christian worldview is not individual, not limited to the narrator, it is collective: the crowd is depicted as undifferentiated, "unanimous" (1.60) and the passage at the end of the extract from the first person singular to the first person plural draws attention to this collective ideology. It so happens that this ideology is essentially characterised by its opposition to the "Heathen" (1.63). This term which concludes the passage bears a particular force in the text because, at the end of the twentieth century, it is clearly an offensive term which shows to the contemporary addressee the narrator's and the whole community's prejudices. The association of the Heathen to "cannibals" (1.61), a clear case of undue generalisation, confirms this Christian sectarianism – and of course the text's criticism of such sectarianism. Crucially, then, this postmodernist text uses a voice from the past and unveils the limits of this voice's opinions, it reverts to the past to criticise any form of prejudice – including those of the present. The new and the unknown are here systematically demonised by the close-minded narrator since the introducer of novelty is unambiguously correlated with "the devil" (1.26) and since the simile "like a poison adder" (1.49) confirms this association to Satan embodied in the

serpent of Eden. It may be noticed that the evocation of “a genie”, that is, an oriental, hence un-English, spirit is straightaway compared to another devilish creature with a “forked tongue” (l.37), as if anything different from the familiar native standard were diabolical. Winterson’s text ridicules this systematic demonisation by applying it to the banana, an object which is necessarily *for the contemporary narratee* ordinary and harmless. Through the comic example of the banana and because of the temporal and ideological gap between the diegetic events and the extradiegetic reception, the text suggests in fact a very serious warning against the fear of the unknown and the rejection of strangeness.

In *The Long Song* it is explicitly through the act of writing itself that the question of the other is tackled. The apostrophe “Reader” (l.11) evidently implies that the narrator is actually writing just as the repetitive mention of her “tale” (l.12, 17, 42 and 52) stresses the metafictional nature of this passage dealing with literature and in particular the literature produced on or about her West Indian island. The narrator’s tale is opposed to the “words” (l.15 and 18), the “pages” (l.27 and 30), the “chapters” (l.30), “the books” (l.18 and 21), the “stories” (l.41), “the volumes” (l.22, 34 and 38) of the white missus. So, what is at stake here is a single tale vs a numberless of books and volumes, in other words, a singular work vs a plurality of works, a specific perspective vs a general perspective, a new version vs a series of similar and preceding versions. The novelty of the anonymous narrator’s tale resides then mainly in its original viewpoint. Such originality might be detected in the narrator’s main diatribe against slavery. When she observes, “all this particular distress so there might be sugar to sweeten the tea and blacken the teeth of the people in Europe” (l.36-37), she recalls Voltaire’s memorable verdict “C’est à ce prix que vous mangez du sucre en Europe” (Voltaire 198), but she adds the idea of the rotting teeth, thus rhetorically pointing to the corrupting consequences of slavery, a form of corruption which is both physical and moral, both literal and figurative.

Because it is so emphatically opposed to the white missus’s narratives, this tale implicitly stems from a black and subaltern point of view. This different version elicits two principles. On one hand, it denounces the prejudices evinced in the white ladies’ books against their black slaves as can be seen in the hyperbole “that most troublesome of subjects” (l.35), in the ironic antiphrasis “the indolence and stupidity of her slaves” (l.32-33) and in the biting irony of the displaced suffering (encapsulated in the metonymy of the “handkerchief” l.33 meant to wipe the tears) which is here falsely attributed to the slave-owners rather than

the slaves themselves. That these prejudices are boundless and unlikely to disappear is suggested in the indefinite nature of the “*several* more volumes” (l.34, emphasis mine) dedicated to the subject. On the other hand, however, this narrative displays its own prejudices since it systematically associates the white woman with “a mule” (l.19) or “the puff and twaddle” (l.23) using offensive or belittling terms in which the presence of contempt is ostensible. The phrases “the white lady” (l.23-24) and “the white missus” (l.25 and 40) reveal a sense of generalisation, a lack of nuance, typical of a prejudiced logic. According to this other perspective, the literature originating from a white lady is inevitably silly, superficial and as trivial as “a pink taffeta dress” (l.28) – the luxury of the taffeta dress being of course also shocking because of its contrast with the destitute slaves. Synthetically then, the white for the black or the black for the white is in this text the systematic victim of racial prejudices and it is these prejudices which Levy’s text denounces, a denunciation which once again brings to light the major difference between the narrator’s point of view in the past and the text’s contemporary vision and version. The incompatibility between the two ethnic groups is highlighted in the short introductory scene in which a sexual act is perverted insofar as it represents the contrary of a meeting or a union. When sexuality is reduced to an “intrusion” (l.2) then it is not love anymore but brutality, not reconciliation but violation.

Clearly then, the otherness of the two idiosyncratic narrators’ points of view has an ideological purpose and since these texts are both set in the past, the ideology in question is linked to a historical dimension which will be the focus of the last and main argument.

Andrea Levy chooses to open her contemporary novel with the anecdote of Kitty having to submit to the sexual privileges of a white overseer on a Jamaican sugar plantation, thus immediately making it clear that one of her main preoccupations is the power struggle between masters and slaves and between whites and blacks. That Kitty should be the focaliser (and the verbs of perception leave no doubt on this subject: she “felt” l.1, she “decided” l.2, “she was left to puzzle” l.7) and that this focaliser should be black (which is manifest because of the repeated emphasis on and contrast with the “white man” (l.4 and 8) also shows that this perspective is going to be that of the underprivileged and the victim rather than the powerful and victimiser. Jeanette Winterson also begins her late twentieth-century tale with an anecdote, namely the first public presentation of a banana in England in an unspecified past. This apparently

derisive episode stands in fact, as we have seen, for a public reaction in front of the unknown. The point of view chosen by Winterson is that of a so-called Dog-woman, a hybrid appellation pointing to the hybrid identity and ontology of the narrating-I. The monstrosity implied in this half-animal half-human creature is confirmed in her supernatural strength (holding a man aloft as one holds a mere weasel) and in the fact that “no man’s a match for [her]” (l.11), as if she were outside the league of men. The specificity of Winterson’s narrative mouthpiece is not only her monstrous hybridity but also her namelessness – as the opening line stresses. The Dog-Woman does not have a Christian name, she is not a typical representative of the English Christian society. Besides, the absence of an official patronym also means the absence of a father so that what is being underlined here, if one keeps in mind that there is no husband either, is the narrator’s severance from the society of men.

If one tries to synthesise the narrative choices made in both novels there are two aspects that appear striking. First, the two first-person narrators are manifestly unorthodox and most importantly not the typical witnesses of history, that is, not the voices of masters and victors. Their visions of history are therefore necessarily different, necessarily of a revisionist nature. Second, both narrators stress their motherhood and their tales will then logically be distinguished by their gendered nature. The combination of these two aspects emphasises the postmodernist nature of these two texts which typically set out to reconsider history through her stories. Rethinking and recasting history through the perspective of the forgotten of history, of the downtrodden, of the subaltern, replacing the master-narratives or metanarratives by slave-narratives or micronarratives, such is the characteristic postmodernist undertaking. The idiosyncratic choice of narrators is then a means, again a very postmodernist one, of returning to the past through a new angle, of coming back to tradition through a new voice, of achieving repetition with a difference.

Adrienne Rich notoriously defined “re-vision” as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical direction” (Rich 35). The “fresh eyes” of revisionism mainly look at historical or even historiographic considerations, but the “critical direction” also implies a new manner of writing history, in other words it implies a renewal of the literary approach. Levy, like Tony Morrison before her, thus reuses the tradition of the slave narrative but adds today’s freedom of speech to broach the crucial theme of sexuality in the context of slavery. The “indelicate” (l.11) quality of her tale, her “forthright tongue” (l.13), bear the stamp of the contemporary *Zeitgeist* and its

emphasis on the denunciation of sexual abuses. The sylleptic sweetness which is so crucial to this opening section of *The Long Song* is then precisely what the narrator wants to avoid. As the short narrative prelude illustrates, this tale will not be sweet, it will not shun the violence or ruthlessness of the world of sugar plantations. On the contrary, it is a tale which promises to reveal unsavoury or bitter truths as well as the harsh, unsweetened reality. To a certain extent, it is the promise of historical revelations which constitutes the narrative pact of this introduction to a postmodernist slave narrative. Quite evidently, it is the very possibility of giving her own testimony which is fundamental for this heterodox narrator and which represents her narrative empowerment. Telling her version of the history of slavery is a form of power and the narrator does not forget to draw attention to this quasi demiurgic possibility when she advertises “a tale of my making” (1.42): if one remembers that the verbs to make or to create tally with the etymology of poetry, then it becomes manifest that this self-made account stands for the narrator’s poetic achievement. This self-created tale, this personal fabrication, this literary concoction represents then for the narrator the work of her life, her sacred mission, and for the author, Andrea Levy, a means to shed a new light on the problem of slavery and on the question of racial relations.

If the emphasis in Levy’s text is racial (and strikingly not feminist, for the scorn heaped on the white ladies goes against the crucial feminist principle of sororal solidarity), in the extract from *Sexing the Cherry* the emphasis is clearly religious. The parallel between Jordan and Moses, the constant references to God, Jesus and the devil manifestly inscribe this text in the Biblical tradition, but this inscription is of course unequivocally ironic since the religious dispositions of the narrator clash with her grotesque and sexual rhetoric – as can be noticed in her scatological similes (1.12 and 13), her bawdy suggestions (1.45) and her combination of outspokenness (1.38-39) and sexual euphemism (1.54). The constant clash between a religious and an outrageous language may be a comic device, but it also makes it clear that Winterson strives to mix tonalities and modalities. Her demonstration here consists in showing that one can make serious historical claims (and the indictment of Christian intolerance, the condemnation of the demonisation of the other or of the unknown are very serious claims indeed) in a carnivalesque fashion which celebrates the freedom of stylistic excess. The text’s insistent determination not to be “bound to anything” (twice 1.8 and 9) is then its central metaphorical claim highlighting the unlimited freedom of associating various traditions (the Biblical tradition, the tall tale, historiography and the carnivalesque) in

order to generate a generic and diachronic medley which, like in Levy's text, is the trademark of postmodernism itself.

In conclusion, what these two texts bent on rewriting/re-righting history reveal is the tendency of today's fiction to revise certain historical episodes by adopting new perspectives and new literary amalgamations. Giving a voice to the voiceless, writing the history of those who have not been able to leave a trace, restoring narrative power to those who have been deprived of that power, means of course redressing certain forms of historical injustice and for that reason these texts embody an ethics of justice. Because they try to imagine other perspectives and other narratives, they also appear to be taking responsibility for the other and defend then also an ethics of alterity, typical of the ethical drive and revival of late postmodernism. The main value of these contemporary fragments, however, is not only ethical, it is also and fundamentally poetic, insofar as they create new languages, unheard languages, like the language of a nineteenth-century Jamaican slave or ex-slave and the language of an irreverential, bawdy Dog-Woman. These languages have no model, no hypotext, they are then necessarily creative and innovative although they revert to the past. So, in the final analysis, what these two excerpts show is the way postmodernism proceeds to innovate by going backwards, by combining the past and the present, by celebrating and reenchanting the presence of the past in the present.

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