

## Article

# Rethinking Love as Passion: Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate*

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**Abstract:** Jeanette Winterson's magical realist love stories, such as *The Passion*, have been read by some critics in terms of a tendency to idealise romance as a transformative passion that transcends social structures. In this article, I propose that Winterson's recent gothic novel, *The Daylight Gate*, critically revises a set of Romantic themes first broached in *The Passion*, exposing and interrogating the fantasy scenario at the centre of romantic love. This narrative about magic and the devil explores the ambivalence of passion as possession—diabolical and contractual—before using this to critique the desire for transcendence implied by “undying love”. Metaphysics becomes a metaphor for metapsychology, where the Romantic motif of undying love as connected to fatal desire is complicated by a traversal of the fantasy of the union of two immortal souls. These revisions have the effect of reversing the implications of Winterson's earlier treatment of romantic love, turning it back from the personal towards engagement with the political.

**Keywords:** Jeanette Winterson; literary fantastic; Romanticism; magical realism; Zizek



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## 1. Introduction

Jeanette Winterson's experimental social realism—such as *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Gut Symmetries* (1997)—has often gained critical attention for its subversion of ideology. Her books, Tatiana Pavlov-West writes, “continue to affect the literary world by constantly questioning and challenging the restrictive hetero-normative rules of Western societies”. These texts “lay bare the dichotomies between fact and fiction, as well as femininity and masculinity, as artificial constructs created by a patriarchal society” (Pavlov-West 2017, p. 424). Although the critical reception of the magical realist strand in Winterson's work has also often been received in terms of ideological subversion, a few critics have sounded a note of caution here. Winterson's magical realist fiction has long exhibited a decidedly Romantic strain that for some suggests a re-enchantment of love as spiritual transcendence. “Does Winterson's experiment succeed”, Ellen Berry pointedly asks, “in liberating the love story from the constraints of gendered and heterosexualized scripts?” (Berry 2016, p. 106). The rhetorical nature of the question is, of course, its own answer. This is because from the perspective of the critical assumption that she is meant to “constantly question . . . universal truth”, any “love story about an ungendered, sexually polymorphous persona” looks suspiciously universal (Berry 2016, p. 106).

According to Sonya Andermahr, indeed, the critical fortunes of Winterson's work have declined in proportion to her fiction's seeming insistence on “the inscription of same-sex desire and specificity into a universal story about love” (Andermahr 2007a, p. 97). Perhaps this is too strong a generalisation, and it would be better to say that after a few provocative and influential articles expressing concerns about “a perhaps disturbing faith in the transforming powers of romantic love” (Moore 1995, p. 105), the critical debate has insistently questioned the extent to which this is the case. Nonetheless, Lisa Moore's early article, setting up the terms for this complication in the reading of

Winterson, points to the way that her “take on love is both romantic and Romantic”, and notes that this is “a fusion that produces interesting results” (Moore 1995, p. 106). A completely Romantic (i.e., the intellectual and literary movement) interpretation of romance narratives (i.e., love stories) would be one that positioned romance as capable of transcending material inscription and historical determinations. This would also imply a characteristically ideological turn from the political to the personal, and the material to the ideal. Virtually no critic is claiming that this is completely the case. But, as will shortly be documented, several critics have maintained that some residual problems are present in texts such as *The Passion* (1987). In this respect, I want to suggest, Winterson’s popular fiction has not yet received sufficiently sustained critical attention. In a work such as *The Daylight Gate* (2012—hereafter, *Daylight*), the potential conflict between idealist re-enchantment and materialist demystification is explicitly thematised. *Daylight* represents a resumption of the themes explored in *The Passion*, but it does so in a way that complicates her earlier Romantic commitments. The novel is far from uncritically celebrating love as an idealistic transcendence of material specificity. Instead, it exposes belief in transcendence as grounded in an impossible desire to escape from corporeality into immortality.

In this article, then, I seek to contribute to the discussion of the ways that Winterson’s focus on (especially erotic) passion involves a critique of cultural investments in Romantic conceptions of love via a reading of *Daylight*. On the interpretation I propose, Winterson’s historical gothic novel interrupts the narrative structures of romance fiction with an interrogation of their underlying (Romantic) fantasy, which articulates the personal to the political. Joining up with new efforts to read Winterson in terms of how her “lesbian exuberance” implies an affective economy that shatters the constraints of patriarchal and heteronormative representations (Bradway 2015, p. 183), I argue that the work is a meditation on what sorts of social subjectivity can truly count as liberating, or liberated. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian psychoanalysis, I then argue that, in this narrative about magic and the devil, metaphysics becomes a metaphor for metapsychology, where the novel explores the paradoxical connection between the psychic drives of death and desire. Winterson invokes the Romantic ideology of undying love as connected to fatal desire, but she complicates this by traversing the fantasy involved. She links this to a refusal of both conventional idealisations of love as personal redemption and irrationalist notions of the Romantic transcendence of social determinacy and collective engagement.

## 2. Alice in Horrorland

Written for Hammer Horror to celebrate the anniversary of the Pendle Witch Trials (1612), *Daylight* is a complex work about the ambivalence of love, set against a nightmarish representation of the historical background. The trials were recorded in Thomas Potts’ *The Marvellous Discoverie of Witchcraft in Lancashire Countie* (1612), which has formed the basis for mainstream histories until recently (Sharpe 2002, pp. 1–18). However, revisionist historiography has now questioned the official record, which disconnected the witch trials from anti-Catholic persecution, suggesting that the witch trials functioned to conceal the incompetence of James I’s secret police (the “pursuivants”) (Pumfrey 2002, pp. 22–41). Winterson is evidently informed about the sceptical interpretation of the witch trials, the nature of witchcraft accusations in village life and the social stratification of the period, as well as the reading of Shakespeare as a Catholic (Wilson 2004, pp. 1–22). The novel intervenes into the politics of historical representation by siding with the revisionists and decoding the main political motivation for the trials as religious persecution. The leading defendants—pro-Catholic gentlewoman Alice Nutter and local “wise woman” Elizabeth Southern—were arrested on Good Friday at an informal gathering rather than the official Protestant service. After torture, however, they were convicted, not of pro-Catholic Recusancy, but of covenanting with the Devil and of conspiracy to blow up Lancashire Castle. *The Daylight Gate* proposes that the most probable reason for the absurd charges was that Jesuit Christopher Southworth, whose sister Jane Southworth was held at the castle as one of the Salmsbury Witches, was in hiding with Alice Nutter. In the novel,

the witch-hunter Thomas Potts constantly reiterates the idea that “witchery” and “popery” are equivalent. This is an ideological screen designed to please the highly superstitious James I, but unlikely to apprehend any fugitive priests, as the magistrate Roger Nowell acknowledges to Alice.

In line with other work in the publisher’s stable, Winterson spares no details in her representation of historical oppression. This includes the disgusting specifics of the ailments of the members of the coven, the rape of one of the women followed by revelations of child prostitution and the tortures that the characters undergo in the name of Jacobean justice:

[Christopher] was naked. They stroked his penis and his balls. To his shame his penis hardened. He felt nothing but he hardened. The men were excited by him. They turned him over and buggered him. They turned him back and prepared a small fire in a tin. Then while one of the men held his penis the other cut it off. Then they cut off his balls. He had fainted but they threw water on him and roused him. They burned his testicles in the small tin. He couldn’t see anything but he could smell himself. The stench of himself. Burning alive. Then they left him alone (Winterson 2012, p. 73).

The horror that this description evokes—just like the other rape scene in the novel—foregrounds the exposedness of the body when it is trapped within the force field of particularist ideologies, such as religious dogmatism and masculine supremacy. The capacity of the wounded body to love, and the agency—the soul?—that is involved, despite an asphyxiation of historical possibilities under terrible oppression, is the theme of the novel.

In *Daylight*, then, the mutability and vulnerability of the ageing and fragile body is set in opposition to the permanence of the soul. The narrative device invoked to represent the scission between body and soul is the Faustian Bargain, the contract with the Devil, in which worldly power is exchanged against the immortal soul. In the standard version of that legend, triangulated by Marlowe, Goethe and Mann, the agent sacrifices their own soul for potency, and then, terrified by the prospect of Hell, tries unsuccessfully to evade the terms of the bargain. In Winterson’s imaginative reworking of the Faust motif, Alice is to be a substitute, the soul lost as consequence of Elizabeth’s diabolical contract with the “Lord of Hell”. A further twist is that Alice, forced to choose between her former lover Elizabeth and her new lover, the castrated fugitive Jesuit priest, Christopher Southworth, elects undying love for Elizabeth. The metaphysical element of the narrative concerns Alice’s efforts to evade the terms of this bargain with the “Dark Gentleman”, while protecting Elizabeth from the fallout. Here, love as possession and as being possessed by the other, in all registers—of obsession, bewitchment and property—defines the coordinates of a complex meditation on love as equivocal. Love is at once an unconditional interpersonal bond, and bondage, enslavement, to passion; it is the wellspring of solidarity and resistance, but also the source of treachery and deception.

Yet, in *Daylight*, the inversion of the Faust motif is not the only reversal at work in a novel whose twists and turns, decoys and hides, replicate the space of persecution and betrayal. Although the novel evokes and then evades expectations that it will restrict itself to denouncing misogyny and celebrating homosexuality through naturalistic styles of social realism, it is not only about documenting oppression. Instead, it concerns the capacity of individuals to resist domination despite the terrible weight of historical structures—even when the scope of that resistance shrinks to choosing how to die. In short, the novel is about the transformation of subjectivity, figured as the alternatives of the transmutation of the soul or its alienation, and the openness to the transfiguring force of passion that motivates defiance or submission. The key magical trope provides a thematic metaphor for the stakes involved, for it involves an opposition between John Dee’s “Right-Hand Path” of spiritual perfection and the Dark Gentleman’s “Left-Hand Path” of magical mastery. Both are at work on the soul through idealisation and articulation of passion (respectively), and this trope makes possible a complex thematic exploration of the oppositions between corporeal desire and idealised love. But the unconventional twists of the narrative defeat

any resort to transcendent ideality or Romantic ideologies. Perhaps surprisingly, Alice turns out to be on the Left-Hand Path: there is no transformation without the mutability of the material world and the riskiness of passions that can as easily become forms of compulsion as sources of defiance.

The scission between body and soul at the metaphysical level plays out in the historical world as a tension between stomach-turning documentation of oppression and sketching the forms of resistance that remain possible. It is important to keep in mind that the framework for the narrative involves interrogation and imprisonment, because it is, in this situation—where torture is used to elicit betrayals even of loved ones—that the love story becomes politically significant. Nonetheless, censuring the narrative's departures from historical realism, book reviewers of the work, some of them academic historians, were incensed at what they saw as a turn from politically setting the record straight about the oppression of women to the magical exploration of a romantic space (Merritt 2012, p. 1; Purkiss 2012, p. 1). Their disappointment resonates with early critique of Winterson's *The Passion*—a book whose themes *Daylight* develops and transforms—as “not lesbian in any real political sense” because of its representation of the transcendent power of love to release subjects from social determinations (Pearce 1995, p. 94). I now want to describe in more detail the critical debate around Winterson's magical realist love stories in order to zero in on what might reasonably be said to be Romantic about her early treatment of romance.

### 3. The Questions around Romance

Critical responses to Winterson's fiction have tended to foreground different strategies from within the complex texture of her work. Although Merja Makinen shows that both the focus on subversive representations of social reality and the focus on metafictional ironisation of ideological discourses contribute to an understanding of Winterson's strategies of questioning heteronormativity (Makinen 2005, esp., pp. 71, 79–81), I shall for convenience present them sequentially. For critics focusing on a feminist agenda or queer-theoretical concerns, Winterson defends lesbian experience by representing the injuries caused by homophobia, while valorising same-sex desire. For critics attuned to postmodernism, Winterson's experimental work deliberately foregrounds narrative technique in order to highlight the constructed, and therefore political, character of knowledge. In both cases, the leading idea is that social norms—such as heterosexuality—and their legitimating ideals—such as heteronormativity—remain culturally uncontested because they seem natural and eternal. Critical fictions that disclose the conventional status, historical variability and social interestedness of these norms and ideals make possible a challenge to stereotypical modes of identity formation.

In question here is the degree to which this advocacy can possibly be successful when the author engages with the conventional structures of romance fiction. Not surprisingly, then, texts valorising romance and spirituality, texts that seem to redeem Winterson's prophetic declaration that “romantic love . . . is written on tablets of stone” (Winterson 1985, p. 165), have been the subject of particularly close interpretation. Romance fiction conventionally involves an ideological narrative of the erotic reconciliation between asymmetrical subject positions, which functions to preserve oppression rather than to critique it. Insofar as fictional romance depends on a supposedly universal narrative about the affective transcendence of a series of emotional and social obstacles on the path to true love, it is a literary structure that uncritically supports ideologies of masculine domination and heteronormativity. Winterson's typical introduction of non-heteronormative departures (such as love triangles involving lesbian desire) into the stereotypical schemas of romance fiction has subversive effects, as shown for instance in essays on her “anti-romances” (Kauer 1998), trans-romances (Smith 2011) and passionate excess (Bradway 2015). But these interpretations represent, at least to some degree, responses to a debate sparked by a provocative early critique of *The Passion*, by Lynne Pearce, who expressed her “disappointment” with it. In her view, its departures had been

recuperated by Romantic transcendence into a substitution of personal transformation for political engagement:

[In Winterson's work] there is an ambivalence that centres on the tension between the perception of romantic love as a non-gendered, ahistorical, "cultural universal", and as an "ideology", which the specificities of gender and sexual orientation constantly challenge and undermine. By attending to the "universalising" discourses in Winterson's work the (heterosexual) "general reader" can see the texts as transcending the particulars of sexual orientation. She or he can regard the fact that she or he is reading about lovers of the same sex as incidental and, consequently, apolitical. Indeed, the fact that in her later fiction Winterson has shown many different combinations of love-relationship (homosexual and heterosexual) has, perhaps, contributed to the reader's impression of (great) "love" as being transcendent of history, culture, and gender (Pearce 1995, p. 84).

Direct and indirect responses to this sort of perception shape the contributions of Moore (1995), Stowers (1995), Palmer (1999), Gustar (2007), Ellam (2010) and Berry (2016). These critics attend to the ways that the metafictional devices in Winterson's texts, which destabilise the borders between historical fact and fictional representation, also denaturalise ideologies and render identities indeterminate. Following Linda Hutcheon's influential work on the poetics and politics of postmodernism, historiographic metafiction is understood to subvert ideology by revealing that texts do not reflect reality, but instead construct perceptions and interpretations of the extra-textual world (Hutcheon 1989, pp. 1–2). The politics of the parodic denaturalisation of generic conventions therefore involve the critique of the authority of certain cultural narratives through their exposure as contingent fictions, rather than necessary truths. From this perspective, Winterson is a writer of companionate friendship and erotic love, seeking to subversively inscribe the particularity of homosexual desire into the spaces of heteronormatively legitimated social institutions. According to Lisa Moore's catalytic paper, Winterson not only creates lesbian love stories, but also a decidedly lesbian erotic that negates traditional representations of erotic passion. Nonetheless, she concludes:

[There is a] decisive distance from contemporary sexual politics that . . . distinguishes Winterson's fiction and determines the way in which it will approach questions of history, identity and community. Such issues for Winterson are transcendent; her characters are engaged in the production of histories, identities and community in ways that do not vary predictably along the lines of gender, or historical period. This Romantic investment in the transhistorical qualities of human nature means that unlike other post-modern lesbian novelists . . . Winterson is not intervening in, or attempting to correct, homophobic misrepresentations of, or assumptions about, lesbian relationships. Conflict in this fictional world is always romantic conflict. . . . Thus, Winterson's novels may be read politically, but they themselves make no explicit political argument (Moore 1995, p. 113).

Critical reactions to the notion that Winterson's love stories, especially *The Passion*, "make no political argument", have been extraordinarily complex and wide-ranging, and I cannot hope to summarise them completely here. Stowers foregrounds the idea that a feminist cartography represents a negation of patriarchal mappings (Stowers 1995, p. 94), while Palmer proposes that the main female character's lesbian love interest is a negation of compulsory heterosexuality (Palmer 1998, pp. 104–5). Gustar uses psychoanalysis to argue that desire's materialisation in the body locates love in the space of power, as a force of negativity (Gustar 2007, p. 64). Ellam suggests that the tension between dependence on the other and independence of the other in love functions to let romance probe the limits of sexual freedom (Ellam 2010, p. 49). Meanwhile, Berry contends that although the metafictional ironisation of the romance narrative releases love from prescriptive constraints, it does so by means of a divestment of desire's particularity (Berry 2016, p. 106). What these responses have in common is that they highlight Winterson's strategies of



aesthetic subversion as a way of showing how her narratives imply political negations. In describing the affirmative side of this strategy as a politics of indeterminacy, Berry, I think, usefully points to the element of Moore's and Pearce's provocations that have not been fully answered. This is the question of whether or not this affirmation entails the idea of love as a universal medium for the dissolution of determinations, that is, a force that transcends—indeed, dissolves—social determinations and cultural roles.

#### 4. Winterson's "Late Romances"

What might be explored at this juncture in the debate, I suggest, is the possibility that a positive aesthetic of universal love might be presented ironically in what I am tempted to call, with tongue in cheek, Winterson's "late Romances". The complex of interpretive problems here is, of course, intended to evoke Shakespeare's final works, with their apparent return to Tudor ideology and a reconciliatory positivity. Long regarded as Shakespeare's penitent restoration of ideological certainties, they are now increasingly considered to be masterpieces of subversive irony (Lyne 2007, pp. 1–12). Winterson herself has foregrounded this as a possible reading of her own work in her most recent novels, *The Gap of Time* (2015), which is a retelling of *The Winter's Tale*, and *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), which is a retelling of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, mediated by *The Winter's Tale*.

*The Gap of Time*, written only three years after *Daylight*, replicates the plot of the, for her work, "talismanic" play (Winterson 2015, p. 291), point for point. Though set in the contemporary world, the "gaps of time" that it completes in relation to the original have the function of sketching out the historical background to character trajectories. Winterson therefore insists that reconciliation and restitution are produced within social structures that both demand an apology for their injustice and secrete redemptive hopes because of this. This complex and ironic reading of the dialectics of ideology and utopia, she implies, is what Shakespeare's late Romances were all about in the first place. That is not speculation: Winterson has Shakespeare say just this in *The Daylight Gate*.

This line of thinking is prolonged in *Frankissstein*. The novel encloses the genesis of Shelley's masterwork around the pearl of the Romantics' response to the revival of Hermione's statue in *The Winter's Tale* (Winterson 2019, p. 60) and Shakespeare's sonnets. It then enfolds this in a contemporary narrative about artificial intelligence—another kind of undead creature—concerning Victor Stein, who is both inventor and monster, and Ry Shelley. Stein and Shelley dance through time in a sort of minuet of human dreamer and dream figure of the desire for immortality and deification. In terms that resonate with *Daylight*, the repetition of lines from Sonnet 53 shapes the love story of the novel in terms of the puzzle of the relation between body and soul (e.g., Winterson 2019, pp. 31, 61). Meanwhile, the frame event of Hermione's resurrection tilts the retelling of *Frankenstein* towards the suggestion that ultimately the entire story is about the desire to believe in a transcendence of the mundane and the material.

In many ways, then, the real key to *Daylight*, too, is the figure of Shakespeare. Encountered by Alice at nearby Hoghton Tower after a performance of that archetypal late Romantic work, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare provides a set of thematic clues that unlock relations between ideology and fantasy, natural and supernatural, in the novel. At one point, Shakespeare challenges Nowell:

Shakespeare interrupted: 'What is a Black Mass? The rusty candlesticks and hasty altars you find in remote places, wild, and away from men, are the remnants of the Catholic High Mass, sometimes celebrated in secret, if it is to be celebrated at all.' 'You do not believe in witchcraft then?' said Roger Nowell. 'I did not say that. I say that it suits the times to degrade the *hoc est corpus* of the Catholic Mass into satanic hocus pocus' (Winterson 2012, p. 96).

Shakespeare here deciphers the ideological augmentation that transforms the illegal Catholic Mass (a naturalised ideological position within the Protestant terms of Jacobean absolutism) into a secret "Black Mass" (a fantasy construction involving supernatural powers) in the interests of the politics of the state. He then goes on to discuss magical

representations in the theatre, posing the problem in terms of how the desire to believe in supernatural forces can have real effects.

‘Tell me, do you think a stone statue can come to life? I have used that device in a play I am still revising called *The Winter’s Tale*. The end cannot succeed unless you believe, just for a moment, that a statue could perhaps step down and embrace you. Return what you had lost’ (Winterson 2012, p. 91).

The idea presented here by Winterson, through Shakespeare, goes beyond the opposition between reality and illusion that dominates most critical thinking about society and ideology. Ideology is not a mere smokescreen that conceals social reality behind the empty illusion of naturalised relations. Instead, it is part of that reality because it motivates the actions of agents, and part of this motivation is the desire to believe in ideology itself. This desire to believe manifests as a supernatural supplement, a fantasy scenario, beyond the ideological representations themselves. For instance, the social reality of the Jacobean state demands an anti-Catholic ideology as part of its polarising terms. But this anti-Catholic ideology, because it is grounded in the desire to believe in the Satanic inspiration of the papacy, secretes anxiety, which manifests in the dystopian fantasy scenario of the witch trials. Likewise, Shakespeare’s representation of the reconciliatory utopia of romantic love is a representation of that utopia *as the product of the desire to believe*. Rather than a naïve celebration of romance, it is a sophisticated demystification of the fantasy scenario that social reality, and its attendant ideological representations, secretes at its heart.

Winterson’s Shakespeare resonates with Žižek’s Lacanian reworking of the theory of ideological interpellation, according to which ideology manipulates a kernel of unconscious desire structured through fantasy (Žižek 1989, pp. 87–127). According to Žižek, the demystification of ideology through its de-naturalisation is insufficient because the ideology is sustained by a fantasy scenario that has to be “traversed”, gone through, before it can be neutralised (Žižek 1989, p. 125). Shakespeare’s “Žižekian” meditation on how the supernatural represents the desire to believe, structured by a fantasy scenario, provides a key for decoding the romantic narrative in *Daylight*. From this perspective, Shakespeare’s late romances, apparently a retreat from high tragedy into erotic reconciliation, become analytical keys for the deciphering of the ideological mechanisms behind the social tragedy of Reformation politics. But equally, Winterson’s novel, seemingly about the interpersonal crisis within a relationship triangle, decodes the contribution of erotic investments to the ideologies that structure political communities.

The ideology in question is romantic love—the culmination of sexual passion in companionate marriage, supported by contractual relations that function to separate politics from the personal—unmasked as magical belief in a myth about the union of souls. Winterson implies that it is not enough to denounce the heteronormative substance and heterosexual form of companionate marriage and its love story. It is not the case that, with this ideological illusion stripped away, what is left is material reality, the conjugation of bodies in lesbian relationships that are historically specific and politically insurgent. What Winterson’s Shakespeare implies is that what is actually left is *love as passion*, i.e., a fantasy scenario that articulates sexual longing to a supernatural entity (the soul). The interrogation of love as passion, with its fantasies of transcendent destiny and its potential for sexual obsession, is, of course, the role of both Shakespeare’s late Romances and Winterson’s magical realist texts. It is to a central instance of this that I now want to turn.

## 5. A Resumption of *The Passion*

The reception of *The Passion* (1987—hereafter, *Passion*) can illustrate the critical stakes here while throwing *Daylight* into relief, for the more recent book repeats some of the key motifs of the earlier success. Set in the Napoleonic era, *Passion* charts four episodes in the tragic encounter between Henri, a cook for the Emperor who eventually deserts and flees to Venice, and Villanelle, a Venetian boatwoman. Villanelle happens to be a female transvestite with webbed feet (Winterson 1987, p. 51), whose husband has sold her to the Grand Army to be a high-class prostitute accompanying Napoleon’s campaigns. Ultimately,

Henri's nemesis, the Cook, turns out to be Villanelle's husband, but his enactment of both her-and-his revenge sees Henri committed to a madhouse, partly because Villanelle prefers the Queen of Spades to a man. Juxtaposing the political passion of love for country against the erotic passion of sexual desire, the novel also contrasts the fluid labyrinth of Venice to the regular and regulated grid of post-Enlightenment Napoleonic Europe. Secondly, it contrasts Villanelle's transgressive (lesbian) desire for the Queen of Spades with Henri's helpless infatuation with Villanelle. In a moment, I will explore the way that *Daylight* repeats the romantic trio of *Passion*, although it locates the moment of frustrated potential in the Reformation rather than the Enlightenment. But first, I want to set the scene by exploring some critical reservations about what is, after all, seemingly an emancipatory work—one about lesbian desire and the Romantic valorisation of “mad love” over cultural conventionality and political conformity.

In terms of the critical approaches developed a moment ago, lesbian-feminist readings focused on the capacity of Villanelle to change roles and shift objects—the Protean morphing of her character alongside the hermaphrodite nature of her body. They read this as a representation of the transgressive subversion of fixed gender identities (Doan 1994, pp. 137–55) and the antinomian mutability of sexual desire (Moore 1995, pp. 104–27). By contrast, post-modern approaches focused on unconventional narrative strategies, such as the alternative love triangle (involving two women and one man) and the opposition between the rational arrangement of Europe and the subversive anarchy of Venice. Here, critics interpreted inverted conventions, fragmented identities and parodic intertextuality as a rejection of narrative authority (Stowers 1995, pp. 142–43), and as the deconstructive activity of an excess of femininity that refuses unified selfhood (Palmer 1999, pp. 104–6).

Nonetheless, for some, the suspicion remained that “Winterson's fiction concerns the vicissitudes of romantic love” (Andermahr 2007b, p. 1), and although she “reinvents the romance” as the tragic entwining of an extra-marital trio (Andermahr 2007a, p. 82), she also opts for “personal, individual change rather than the social, collective change of political utopianism” (Andermahr 2007a, p. 97). As Julie Ellam also argues, the implication of *Passion* is that erotic passions have the potential to transcend social determinations in ways that are personally transformative, but whose wider social implications are suppressed by an interpersonal, rather than intersubjective, focus (Ellam 2010, pp. 64–74).

Confronted with this problem, several critics argued that Winterson's target is actually the philosophical structure of the subject, rather than the material structures of institutions. For Laura Doan, Villanelle's cross-dressing implies a subversion of gender identity along lines mapped out in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Doan 1994, p. 149), while for Lisa Moore, “Winterson's Byronic investment in love as philosophy takes the form of a critique of the Cartesian subject” (Moore 1995, p. 106). But breathless critical enthusiasm for Winterson's rejection of any authoritative narrative voice and verbalisation of passion as the unsayable, however, hardly clarifies whether Winterson's conception of romance is Romantic (i.e., transcendent) or materialist (Andermahr 2007b, pp. 158–59). The problem with these interpretations is that their argument for dissolution, fluidity and uncertainty, against rational critique and institutional specificity, endorses and rehearses, rather than analyses, the Romantic topography that was to be evaluated.

The key here is to acknowledge the centrality of erotic desire in human sociability without ballasting that with the idealist freight of love as transcendence, or with the Romantic valorisation of passionate love as a redemptive, boundary-crossing force that somehow dissolves all social barriers. As Jana French notes, “Villanelle's bisexuality exposes the social construction of this bifurcation, even as her cross-dressing calls attention to the construction of gender as an extension of the fantasy of core sexual identity” (French 1999, p. 237). Probing the unconscious dynamics at work in Winterson's representation of romance, Judith Seaboyer specifies the psychoanalytic dimension of this critique of fantasy. Her focus on the continuity of Winterson's novel with Romantic depictions of Venetian excess and decay makes it possible for her to propose a psychoanalytic interpretation of the book as a representation of Freud's death drive (Seaboyer 1997, p. 489). Seaboyer's basic move is to oppose



the mirror relations in the book—Imaginary unities, such as the unified ego, and specular patterns, such as the grid-like perfection of a rationalised map of post-Enlightenment Europe—to the imagery of watery dissolution and bodies in metamorphosis. These motifs announce the realm of the drives, the zone of fragmentation that Freud describes as death drive and Lacan as the Real. For Seaboyer, this domain is “between the two deaths”, characterised by equivocation and ambivalence, where binary oppositions “collapse into a mixture that is at once confusing and stimulating” (Seaboyer 1997, p. 484). The novel is, in other words, an allegory of the psyche, in which passion is ultimately a potent fusion of desire and death, an amalgam of Eros and Thanatos, with the capacity to dissolve every psychological unity. Although Seaboyer does not say so, against this background, the novel is Romantic precisely to the extent that it is idealist, that is, to the extent that the dissolution of psychological fixity is mistaken for, or conflated with, transcendence of social structures.

## 6. Body and Soul

The relation between psychological transmutation and the material structures that even a transformed subjectivity must continue to inhabit is precisely the landscape traversed by *Daylight*. It is in this specific sense that *Daylight* is a resumption, and reversal, of *Passion*, for in *Daylight*, as opposed to *Passion*, there will be no redemptive escape from historical constraints. Before laying out this argument, however, I need to relate the theoretical concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the categories of the supernatural and the natural. The way to do this is through Rosemary Jackson’s discussion of the literary fantastic in her work on this “literature of subversion”, for *Daylight* is a text written in the fantastic mode. Jackson follows Tzvetan Todorov’s celebrated definition of the fantastic as a mode that combines the mimetic and the marvellous in such a way that every significant event has both a supernatural, and a natural, explanation (Todorov 1975, p. 62). On the one hand, the “magical” and “supernatural” events of Winterson’s novel can be explained with reference to social structures and historical ideologies. On the other hand, the alchemical and diabolical events of the novel can also be explained with reference to Renaissance magick and the existence of the soul. According to Todorov, the effect of this narrative strategy of duplication is to create an epistemological hesitation that generates both uncertainty and uncanniness (Todorov 1975, p. 33). On Jackson’s reading, though, what this represents is the irruption of the Real in the midst of the Imaginary, a “return of the repressed” in which the fixity of the ego is disintegrated by an entwinement of death and desire (Jackson 1981, pp. 73–75). This “death drive” is “the profoundest drive of the subject . . . a point of absolute unity of self and other . . . an eternal desire for the non-relationship of zero, where identity is meaningless” (Jackson 1981, p. 77). Jackson references the Faustian Bargain and the manifestation of Mephistopheles as a privileged site for the irruption of the Real in post-Enlightenment literary culture (Jackson 1981, p. 57). Not surprisingly, then, in *Daylight*, the death drive surfaces around the Devil, the “Dark Gentleman”, the “Lord of Hell”, who is a figure of desire as well as a personification of nothingness, suppuration and liquefaction.

Now, the Faustian Bargain in *Daylight* revolves upon the relation between the body and the soul. But these entities are best grasped as points of intersection rather than as reified things. The body is the point where the psyche and society intersect in the medium of a mortal animal; the keynote here is torment, physical and mental, and possession, both property and obsession. The body is also—perhaps above all—a bodily image, that is, the ego as an Imaginary (self-)relation, that is linked, in desire, to the image of the other; it is beautiful, pleasurable, unified—but it is also vulnerable, excruciated, dying. It dies because it has a soul, or, perhaps, better, because it is ridden by a soul.

That is certainly not the standard presentation of the matter; in the novel, John Dee is the spokesperson for the conventional idea that the perfection of the soul involves transcendence of the body. In a series of dialogues with John Dee, however, Alice persistently denies the existence of this kind of soul and affirms the materiality of the body—its mortality and fragility; in short, what Jonathan Dollimore describes as “mutability”

([Dollimore 1998](#), pp. 102–16). The body here is, of course, above all the bodily image, something that is not without a certain quality of idealisation, indeed, of fixation—of Elizabeth, Alice says:

I had never seen a more beautiful body on a man or a woman. She was slender, full, creamy, dark, rich, open, luxurious. In her clothes she was like any other well-formed woman, but naked she seemed like something other than, or more than, human. I do not say like a goddess but like an animal and a spirit combined into human form. An angel, Edward Kelley said ([Winterson 2012](#), p. 59).

The events of the novel will bring Alice to believe in something beyond the bodily image, something associated with the diabolical rather than the angelic. Before coming to the “demonic” soul, though, it is important to note that the novel anchors the supernatural firmly in material reality. In a second strand of metaphysical reflections in the novel, John Dee is not only a believer in the existence of the soul, but also believes in fate, and his most significant intervention in the novel consists in his prophecy of Alice’s death by fire. By contrast, Alice insists that she can choose her own destiny. Again, the novel does not make decoding the metaphor particularly difficult for the reader. “Destiny”, here, for the majority of the characters, describes what seems to them to be a supernatural mechanism that allocates individuals to their fates. Social determinations appear as a mysterious destiny that individuals can decide on their attitude towards, rather than alter by means of agential interventions into conditioned possibilities. But for Alice, as for Christopher, it refers to the anonymous socio-historical forces, operating behind the backs of the agents themselves. These forces determine the options that individuals have, sometimes narrowing these down to the choice between defiant and compliant deaths. For Christopher, for instance:

He lay on the stones. He could change his name, his country, his faith. The tortures had changed his body. He had tried to change history. He could not change the fact of his birth or, by very much, the fact of his death. This was his time. He had an image of an hourglass ([Winterson 2012](#), p. 147).

In his remaining hours, Christopher journeys back from hiding in London into the dangers of Lancashire in order to intervene subversively at Alice’s public execution. The question of fate that confronts Christopher is repeated in Alice’s insistent repetition of the horoscope that John Dee cast for her—that she is to die by fire—and its connection to free will. Sometimes, she reflects, freedom reduces to choosing the time of one’s death and the manner in which one faces it ([Winterson 2012](#), pp. 126, 152, 221). But what of the soul, subject of intimations of immortality and demonic possession? Does it too have a materialist decipherment, or is this where Winterson’s discourse of Romantic idealisation emerges? To possess a soul is to risk destruction through the liquefaction of the beautiful image of the bodily whole:

Alice was standing on Pendle Hill. . . . By a group of standing stones she saw Elizabeth Southern, her hair down, naked, smiling at her. . . . Alice touched Elizabeth’s naked body, but . . . it was like reaching into black water. Alice pulled back, her hand and arm dull and dark with the thick black viscous substance that was Elizabeth. Elizabeth was laughing, and as she laughed, her white skin began to spot with dark eruptions. The firm white flesh became distended and pulpy. The eruptions burst like boils. Her hair turned grey, then loosened from her scalp, falling away from her like dirty water. The skin on her bones hung in useless folds. She had no teeth. She was laughing at Alice, her mouth like a gap. She was suppurating, liquefying. ‘As I am so shall you be.’ ([Winterson 2012](#), pp. 94–95)

Alice shall be as Elizabeth is, because Alice’s soul will be released by the Dark Gentleman, in fulfilment of Elizabeth’s inverted Faustian Bargain. This is not in contradiction with the idea that the soul is the agency responsible for love—only with the Imaginary figuration of soul and love as a bright, permanent thing and a shiny, unconditional ideal. To have a soul is to have the capacity for love, but “to love” is not a transitive verb here: it is intransitive, “to fall in love”, meaning to Fall, to sin, to plummet, to fall for something.

In short, it is to be possessed by something: “He would love her if she were a wolf that tore out his heart. And he wondered what that said about love”; “She knew that love leaves a wound that leaves a scar. . . . Love is as strong as death” (Winterson 2012, pp. 158–65). Alice is *driven* by love back to Elizabeth. The scene of the exchange of souls is compulsively repeated in the novel—in the diabolical contract, in the portrait of Elizabeth that Alice has magically created, in the mercury mirror that facilitates her deception of the Devil—culminating in Alice’s self-destruction for love. Even this repetition is itself a repetition of the story of Isolde de Heton, heretic and magician, driven from a convent by love into exile on Pendle Hill, baptised twice (once for Jesus, once for Satan), and the grandmother of Elizabeth, whose narrative Elizabeth’s life history rehearses (Winterson 2012, p. 168).

In a related way, magic—the summoning of Dee’s spirit at the daylight gate, the magic mirror that makes it possible to see the soul, the conjuration of the Dark Gentleman for the possession of Alice’s soul—is an inscription of desire. The spirit that brings Alice to Edward Kelley’s letter, with the formula for the summoning of a daemon, responds to her wish to “act when [she is] ready”, just as her hawk, which magically brings her ring to Christopher, responds to her wish for death on the scaffold and descends to tear her throat out. The horrific *Caput Mortuum* created by Elizabeth, that speaks in Dee’s words the prophecy of Alice’s death by fire, also responds to desire—in this case, Elizabeth’s wish to possess Alice, to sacrifice her soul for the sake of Elizabeth’s soul. Magic is the manipulation of the soul through the representation of its wishes in an image or story, making visible what otherwise remains invisible. From the materialist perspective implied by the Shakespeare character, then, the “soul” is the drive, while “magic” is fantasy, so that the main question posed by the novel—what sort of magic is transformative of the soul, and what is the effect of this on destiny?—can be decoded. It is a question about the modification of the ego in light of the repetition compulsion exercised by the drives, and the effect of this modification on the capacity of individuals to resist oppression.

## 7. The Right-Hand Path and the Left-Hand Path

Now, in the face of a “daemonic” compulsion to repeat, one that generates anxiety because of its arousal of images of disintegration, and that also seems to fuse death and desire into a diabolical impulse to transgress, the ego might be modified in two basic ways. Either its resistances can be strengthened through a reinforcement of its defence mechanisms, or some of its defence mechanisms can be dismantled to make way for new articulations of desire. The latter decision is perilous, for some obvious reasons. Making way for “evil” wishes to become actions is (morally and psychologically) risky, for the expanded capacity of the ego to accommodate desire presupposes a controlled disintegration of present structures before they can be replaced with new formations. Even when this succeeds, the mature ego, capable of an expanded and deepened range of the expression of desire, still confronts the problem that the social acceptance of new forms of satisfaction is often blocked by ideological stereotyping and cultural intolerance. The resulting crisis of sublimation, which relegates tolerant individuals to the social margins, is reflected in the novel not only through the repressive inanity of Potts’ “witchery popery” (and other manifestations of domination and intolerance), but also through its consequences, Alice’s and Elizabeth’s social isolation.

From the Lacanian perspective, the strengthening of the ego’s defences corresponds to a reinforcement of the Imaginary, whereas the articulation of desire involves the action of the Symbolic. The passions that are mobilised in transformations of social reality originate in the corporeal reality of the sexed body, where they are fixed into identities that must be transmuted from regressive to progressive forms before change can happen. In *Daylight*, Winterson presents a strikingly similar intuition through the opposition between the idealisation of desire, and a Symbolic formation that articulates (transgressive and ambivalent) desire. The most important instance of Imaginary fixation is Alice’s initial relationship with Elizabeth, which involves conventional desire linked to the imaginary image of the beautiful body and connected to the motif of contractual exchange, for both

desire to possess the other as “mine” (Winterson 2012, p. 69). Love becomes a relation involving property and possession, as an extension of the specular relation, but this all changes with the Faustian Bargain struck between Elizabeth and the Dark Gentleman, for this brings the Symbolic domain into play.

In the novel, this key magical trope provides a thematic metaphor for the intervention of the Symbolic, for it involves an opposition between John Dee’s “right-hand path” of spiritual perfection and the Dark Gentleman’s “left-hand path” of turbulent passion. Both of these involve symbols, rather than the binary realm of mirror images or the disturbing irruption of the real, for they are constituted by contractual arrangements, magical writing and ceremonial ritual. Entry into these Symbolic domains is paid for with a “piece of flesh”, the loss of direct access to the somatic basis for drive energies, which forces desire into the “defiles of the signifier”, that is, into the linguistic world where the symbol takes the place of the body. “I felt something strange about her left hand”, Alice remembers. “I pulled it up from my body. The third finger of her left hand was missing. ‘I married the Dark Gentleman,’ she said. ‘The Christians give a ring. The Dark Lord takes a finger’” (Winterson 2012, p. 69).

But entry into the Symbolic register does not alone solve the problem of satisfactory access to desire, because a certain “Imaginary fixation” of symbolisation, corresponding to the Freudian concept of repression, is a permanent potential of the individual’s lack of direct access to the drives. This is the problem with the Right-Hand Path of spiritual perfection, for, although it involves the renunciation of mastery, it also involves the repression of corporeality. Its purified embrace of the soul as a permanent entity, as an eternal thing, is a denial of mutability and desire. In the many discussions between Dee and Alice on the existence of the soul, Dee constantly identifies spiritual transcendence with unconditional reciprocity and selfless love. The problem is that this (highly conventional) gesture corresponds exactly with the Freudian definition of repression as an idealisation with de-sexualisation, something that is achieved through the splitting of the sexual affect from the idealised symbol for desire. By contrast with the conventional idealisation of romance, Winterson inflects the opposition between the soul and the body in an unconventional direction. It turns out that the Left-Hand Path of passion and danger is actually the only route to subjective transformation and worldly engagement. Alice has always been on the left-hand path, in reality, as confirmed by her development of the magical mirror, and her problem is to follow this alternative pathway without surrender to possessiveness.

In this context, the Dark Gentleman represents the action of the Symbolic register—as Lacan maintains, “the death drive is the mask of the symbolic order” (Lacan 1988, p. 326)—in the deconstruction of Imaginary fixations. The Dark Gentleman instigates a prohibited social contract through the taking of a finger, providing entry into the Symbolic realm of the “death’s head” (that speaks truth about destiny), the ceremonial magic of the witches’ Sabbath. Like the signifier itself, the Dark Gentleman is a non-being, composed of nothingness, an incarnation of desire constructed from the textures of the world, and a representation of the excess in desire that drives towards death:

In the room, making itself out of nothing, piece by piece by piece, formed a human shape. Feet, groin, chest, neck, head. The figure was dressed in grey. He wore no hat. He was short, handsome, deadly. Alice had seen him before. He gave a short bow. ‘Mistress Nutter.’ [Elizabeth] had hidden her face. ‘He has come for my Soul.’ The man opened his hand. His palm was covered in dark hair. He was holding a small clear glass bottle of blood. ‘I have here the seal of our contract,’ he said. Alice tried to think. She was half mad with the torture. Everyone in this cell was wholly mad, driven out of their wits by poverty and cruelty. This was an hallucination. . . . The cell was on fire. Sheets of flame seared the walls. Fire was under her feet. The Dark Gentleman took Elizabeth’s free hand and began to dance. In burning flames he and Elizabeth danced, while Alice tried to free herself from the terrible grip. ‘You shall not take her!’ shouted Alice. ‘I am the sacrifice and I am not dead yet.’ Alice freed both her hands and

she put them either side of Elizabeth's face. She said, 'He shall not have your Soul. . . . I will pay the price.' (Winterson 2012, pp. 177–78)

Here, Alice contracts her soul with a being of “nothing”, a non-being, perhaps hallucination, perhaps diabolical, who represents at once the negative action of the symbol (which represents through absence) and absolute otherness, the “death drive”. It is worth considering the significance of this symbolic contract with a transgressive desire for transformative otherness in relation to the love triangle. Why does Alice forsake Christopher and return to Elizabeth, who has betrayed her? Alice's romance with Christopher involves unconditional reciprocity with the other, linked to the motif of companionate friendship and a non-phallic, non-possessive sexuality. Christopher's castrated body and mutilated face defeat the Imaginary register of the beautiful whole, and instead highlight the mutuality of a symbolic positioning on the margins of society and a dialogical exchange between intellectual equals. Alice's return to Elizabeth and apparent surrender of her soul involves an affirmation of the Symbolic, of fidelity, trust and reciprocity, beyond the beauty of the other's body, that is at least in part made possible by this non-possessive relationship. In effect, Alice sets one sort of (non-phallic) symbolic code, signified by her ring, sent to Christopher as love–friendship token, against the phallic order of the Dark Gentleman, within which Elizabeth is inscribed.

## 8. Conclusions: “By Fire to Die”

Although the novel involves a love story in which Alice is forced to choose between her former lover Elizabeth and her new lover Christopher, its climax is an act of political defiance, rather than a statement of personal redemption. As Alice's hawk takes her life on the scaffold, defeating both the repressive forces of authority and the possessive potential of love as passion, politics intervenes. Christopher leaps onto the platform to expose the crucifix around her neck—evidence for Catholicism, rather than witchcraft—and denounces the executions as an ideological smokescreen. Whether or not this ending feels contrived in narrative terms, its political implications are surely unambiguous: transformative passion leads forwards into engagement with the world, rather than back, in a retreat into personal satisfaction. Significantly, Alice decides for the Symbolic aspect of love—as reciprocal agreement and mutual fidelity—over the Imaginary scenarios of the beautiful body or the transcendent soul. That discourse on love complicates any notion of undying love as an escape into personal redemption because it links her refusal of possessive discourses of love, as well as her defiance of the Pendle show trial, to the effort to “change the world”. Christopher's acknowledgement of the erotic potential for compulsive repetition is as crucial to the resolution of the novel as is his final exchange of glances with Alice on the scaffold. The love story at the centre of the novel foregrounds the problem of the capacity of individuals to resist domination. It does so because it reframes its own opposition between the mutability of the body and the supposed permanence of the soul as a question of the openness of the personality to the riskiness of desire.

Instead of Romantic investment in permanent flux and identity dislocation, as an antidote to repressive structures and enlightenment ideals, *The Daylight Gate* advocates political engagement with social institutions. In addition, the novel reflects on the opposition between corporeal (sexual) love and spiritual union, explicitly positioned as a meditation on a spiritual dimension to human existence, but its conclusion embraces the material world rather than fleeing to a timeless ideal. The subversive force of passion is interrogated for its capacity to dislocate identity, but that is now contextualised socially, and the novel thematises a return to institutional situations and political engagements based in traversal of the fantasy.

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