STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIV, 1, 2019, p. 181 - 205
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2019.1.14

JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE STONE GODS* AS AN EBULLITION OF GENRES

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ABSTRACT. ***Jeanette Winterson's The Stone Gods as an Ebullition of Genres.*** This article examines, through the lenses of genre theory applied to *The Stone Gods*, the reasons why the novel has been harshly criticised for failing to satisfy as science fiction. The analysis does justice to the novel's complexity, revealing its multifarious nature, an example of the ebullition of literary genres that characterises many modernist and post-modernist works.

Keywords: *modernist and post-modernist trends, the hybridization of genres, science fiction.*

REZUMAT. ***Opera wintersoniană Zeii de piatră – un amalgam de genuri literare.*** Acest articol examinează, prin prisma teoriei genurilor, motivele pentru care romanul *Zeii de piatră* a fost aspru criticat pentru că nu ar satisface criteriile genului *science fiction*. Analiza scoate în evidenţă complexitatea romanului, care ilustrează tendinţele moderniste şi postmoderniste spre o amalgamare a genurilor literare.

Cuvinte cheie: *modernism, postmodernism, hibridizarea genurilor literare, science fiction.*

Starting from the variant attempts to justify the prominence of one or the other member of the writer-reader-text triad and continuing with the literary critics' constant efforts to assign texts to a given genre, the world of literary theory and criticism has been evolving under the hovering spectre of taxonomical vagueness. This fundamental ambiguity resulted from the incessant dynamism of the writing process that characterises the literary

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imagination, as well as from the affluence of possible interpretations fostered by truly valuable literary creations. Notoriously difficult to appraise, categorise and label, the work of Jeanette Winterson is a case in point, examined in this article through the lenses of genre theory applied to *The Stone Gods*. The 2007 novel has been harshly criticised for failing to satisfy as science fiction, resulting in its author being chastised for what was perceived as supercilious reluctance to fully embrace this genre.

In their introduction to the volume *L'éclatement des genres au XXe siècle* the editors, Marc Dambre and Monique Gosselin-Noat, justify their choice of title by explaining that, out of a plethora of possibilities, such as "dislocation", "drift", "dynamics", "deconstruction", "compositeness", "transgression", "transformation", "indeterminateness", "crisis" and "erasure", they favoured the term "outburst" ("éclatement"), as it conveys the sense of emergence, flourishing and positive explosion of unfamiliar combinations of genres peculiar to the end of the 20th century and to the beginning of the 21st (5). This study relies on a different term, one that refers to the act of boiling up, seething or overflowing, term employed not only literally, in physics – as in "the absolute point of ebullition", namely "the point at which a gas in a container will condense to a liquid solely by the application of pressure," defined in 1860 by Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev (Britannica), but also figuratively, in the literary realm, as in "did not (…) give way to any ebullitions of private grief" – William Makepeace Thackeray's reference to a desperate outpouring of emotion (7). A Latin word that entered the English language due to French influences, "ebullition" enjoys dynamic connotations of positive outburst or sudden emergence of surprisingly new combinations that push literary works beyond the outer limits of genre delimitation. The term "ebullition" is, thus, dynamically expressive and, since it allows for a phonetic word-play with the word "abolition", it also serves to intimate the futility of expecting literary works to fit into neatly defined categories, and to further the idea that embracing difference, boundary crossing and genre transgressions constitutes the only way towards a better understanding and a full appreciation of literature.

Nowadays, the problem of genres needs to be assessed in relation to the concept of modernity, since it has been through the addition of more recent genres to the classical ones that the currently obvious hybridisation occurred. The romantic notion of a literary work's singularity which presupposed its unremitting return upon itself as a result of its purity of genre has been overpassed by the evolution of the novel to its current form which reflects an awareness of the challenges posed by a dynamics of heterogeneity stemming from the apprehension of reality in its vast diversity and from the ensuing impossibility to subscribe to a forcibly unified view of said reality. Born out of

a veritable creative instinct, the modernist novel now embodies a form that requires a more sophisticated audience, as well as better-equipped critics and readers, able to cope with the neoteric ethics, the ludic eroticism and the hybridization of genres displayed together with an ever increasing defiance against fixed lines of demarcation, against clear boundaries and against severe limitations (Dambre and Gosselin-Noat 6-7). Alastair Renfrew points out that, as early as 1941, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin expounded the elusive nature of the novel, which eschews all classification attempts made from definite, stable and unitary positions, showing that even such generic markers as length, fictionality or non-verse structure can easily be dismissed: see Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) versus Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942), Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) or David Peace's *GB84* (2004), and Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* of 1833 (Renfrew 101-102). Bakhtin defines the novel as "a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262) and claims that, being a unique genre, in that it is not a straightforward one, the novel fosters the development of certain stylistic requirements that give shape to discursive layers orchestrated in such a way as to create the novelistic image of another's language, style, consciousness and outlook on the world, without which the characters could not enter "the zone of *dialogical contact*", a zone of "potential contact with the author" (45).

Through her novels, Jeanette Winterson seeks to "reinvent the form for a modern age" by designing "strange and beautiful parables that dispense with straightforward narratives" (Merritt). *The Stone Gods*, like all Wintersonian stories, displays a narrative strategy recurrently employed by Winterson in her attempt to prod away at the relationship between story-telling and life: a blend of the fictional, the historical and the autobiographical that consistently baffles the readers' horizon of expectations. As Fiona Capp argues, "the degree of urgency and prophetic angst" simmering throughout this work is "a reminder of Winterson's evangelical origins", probed in her autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and is informed by "her familiarity with the idea of apocalypse". *The Stone Gods* starts with "overtones of Orwell's *1984*" and ends in a complementary fashion, with grisly images of a "post-nuclear holocaust world" (Capp "Review").

What appears, at first sight, to be a science fiction novel recounting life on a new planet, reveals itself to be much more. The seemingly futuristic depiction of a world facing destruction traces, in fact, not the future of Mother Earth, a.k.a. Planet Blue, but the past of Orbus, a.k.a. Planet Red. Not a new planet, but an old one, and one of many, at that: the sense that one grasps in the process of reading is that of "the devolution (as opposed to an evolution) of

mankind", a self-destructiveness brought forth by the nefarious alliance between anthropocentrism and capitalist patriarchy, which bred a worldview "instrumental to the systematic exploitation of resources leading to environmental devastation" (Preda, "Agential Realism" 26). The novel opens with the presentation of Orbus, approximately 65 million years ago, a red planet that had begun to totter due to the recklessness of its human inhabitants who, in the past, had seemingly managed to bring several other planets to the brink of extinction. Among them, Planet White, which had eventually gotten much too close to its sun, the same one that serves the newly discovered Planet Blue:

> There had been oceans on the white planet. We found a sea-floor, ridged and scooped, and shells as brittle as promises, and bones cracked like hope. White, everything white, but not the white of a morning when the sun will pour through it, nor the white of a clean cloth; (…). This was the white at the end of the world when nothing is left, not the past, not the present and, most fearful of all, not the future. There was no future in this bleached and boiled place. (…) Without armour of a kind, anyone would be crushed. Without oxygen, no one here can breathe at all. Without fireproof clothing, you would be charred as the rest of what was once life. And yet there was once life here, naked and free and optimistic. (SG 52)

This is just one of the strangely familiar accounts delivered by *Starship Resolution*'s crew, a spacecraft under the command of Captain Handsome, commissioned to wipe out the dinosaurs inhabiting Planet Blue, thus turning it into a hospitable environment for the relocation of the population fleeing Orbus. On this dying planet, the three powers fighting for supremacy, namely the communist Sino-Mosco Pact, the religiously fanatic Eastern Caliphate and the technologically advanced Central Power, are neither able nor willing to avoid the sweeping red sandstorms which fire up ecological disaster, or to effectively and judiciously temporize impending conflicts between the Collective and the Believers, conflicts bound to eventually draw in even the peace-loving folks of the Central Power, who want "to live responsibly on a crowded planet" while the others are "scanning the skies for God, and draining the last drop of oil out of the ground" (SG 7-8). This political power-group pretending to aim at peaceful coexistence employs "the euphemism-laden rhetoric of warring civilizations" and displays both a "caustic corruption posing as democracy" (Preda, "New Planets for Old" 148-149), and the political demagogy characteristic of the autocratic state:

> The new planet will be home to the universe's first advanced civilization. It will be a democracy – because whatever we say in public, the Eastern

> Caliphate isn't going to be allowed within a yatto-mile of the place. We'll shoot 'em down before they land. No, we won't shoot them down, because the President of the Central Power has just announced a new world programme of No War. We will not shoot down the Eastern Caliphate, we will robustly repel them. (SG 6)

The avant-garde of the colonisers-to-come is a party of four people and a dog, Rufus, travelling on the *Resolution* spacecraft: Captain Handsome and his protégée, Spike, the Robo *Sapiens* who had explored Planet Blue and was supposed to be destroyed for data-protection purposes, Pink McMurphy, a woman whose husband's proclivity for youthful appearance forces her to consider getting genetically fixed in order to look twelve, Rufus and his master, Billie Crusoe, a female scientist accused of terrorism for her refusal to give up working on her traditional farm, "the last of its line – like an ancient ancestor everyone forgot", "a bio-dome world, secret and sealed: a message in a bottle from another time" (SG 11) and for her pertinacity to live not in the city, but on this very farm, in a "compact stone house, water-barrel by the front door, apple tree at the gate" (SG 40). Captain Handsome had rescued Spike from the terminal process of dismantling and recycling in the hope that he could teach this female robot the subtleties of love, yet Billie Crusoe is actually the one who, at Spike's prompting, shall embark on this major undertaking in the final pages of the first chapter.

Unfortunately, the meteor that the Captain rerouted towards the new planet accelerates, and the collision happens at too high a speed, four days early and in the wrong spot, triggering an Ice Age that, while bringing forth the demise of the scaled monsters, ultimately forestalls the zealously anticipated swift colonisation. A disaster for the crew hired to eradicate the dinosaurs, who decide to use the ship's Landpods to reach the breeding colony's landing-place where there is a food depot and a shelter for the sixty deportees, Class A political prisoners' part of Central Power's colonisation experiment, and where they might have a chance of being rescued. Only Captain Handsome and Pink McMurphy set out on this journey in the end, the latter anticipating an Arctic romance, "with that robot out of the way" (SG 79), as Spike chooses to stay on the ship and persevere in her attempts to contact Orbus and ask for help. She tells Billie: "One day, tens of millions of years from now, someone will find me rusted into the mud of a world they have never seen, and when they crumble me between their fingers, it will be you they find" (SG 79). Climactically, Billie resolves not to abandon the robot, whose feelings of love she obviously reciprocates, if their history up to that point is carefully considered. Billie Crusoe had impressed Spike so much that, as her Last Request before being drained of data, the robot had selected her to do the final interview for

The One Minute Show. Spike had been designed to look gorgeous so as to be of service to the boys sent in Space, because inter-species sex was only illegal on Orbus. Impressed by Spike's beauty from the start, Billie cannot process such outrageous information:

> 'So you had sex with spacemen for three years? (…) But you were also the most advanced member of the crew'.
> 'I'm still a woman'. (…) I want to be outraged on this woman's behalf, but she isn't a woman, she's a robot, and isn't it better that they used a robot instead of dispatching a couple of sex-slaves? And yet. And yet Robo *sapiens* are not us, but they may become a nearer relative than the ape.
> 'Humans share ninety-seven per cent of their genetic material with apes,' said Spike, 'but they feel no kinship.'
> 'Do we feel kinship with robots?'
> 'In time you will, as the differences between us decrease.' (…)
> I decide to ignore the vast implications of this statement as unsuitable for an *In-depth One Minute Special*. Instead I press Record and turn, smiling, to Spike. 'I have a question that will interest many people,' I say, knowing that nearly everyone would be much more interested to hear about robot-sex in space. 'If your data can be transferred, as is happening now, then why must we dismantle you when you cost so much to build?' (…) 'Why aren't you a machine for re-use?'
> 'Because I am not a machine.'
> When she smiles it's like light at the beginning of the day. 'Robo *sapiens* were programmed to evolve'
> 'Within limits.'
> 'We have broken those limits.' (SG 28-29)

Although Billie had agreed to facilitate Spike' escape, the robot benefitted from Captain Handsome's timely help and they only met again on Starship *Resolution* where the budding relationship blossomed nurtured by profound conversations about what it means to be human, about why the robot, who is endowed with neural rather than limbic systems, claims to experience feelings, about whether Robo *sapiens* and *Homo sapiens*, being both conscious beings, might have more in common than previously expected. Still astonished at being wooed by a lover with "an articulated titanium skeleton and a fibre-optic neural highway", yet able to wonder whether one can only love what one knows, and willing to "find a language of beginning" for their love experiment, Billie initially states that she cannot sleep with a computer, but is touched by the green-eyed, dark-haired, olive-skinned robot's desire to feel what it is like to love someone the way Captain Handsome loved her (SG

68). The Captain had opened the floodgates to emotional turmoil and Spike, eager to be an active lover, chose Billie to accompany her on that pioneering voyage. So Billie resolves that, whilst a robot is "an intelligent, ultra-sensitive moving lump of metal", a human may be even less, a "moving lump of flesh", more often than not lacking both intelligence and sensitivity (SG 81).

Following several unsuccessful attempts to contact Orbus, once the air system broke down, the two are coerced into leaving ship and pressed to embark on what is bound to be their last journey. The cold affects them both, albeit differently, since Spike experiences it as "a depletion of energy" (SG 85) and, as the snowy weather relentlessly wears Spike's energy down, the discussion they had back on the Ship regarding biology versus consciousness – "If I were to lop off your arms, your legs, your ears, your nose, put out your eyes, roll up your tongue, would you still be you?" (SG 63) – is tragically mirrored by the self-inflicted dismemberment Spike is forced to resort to:

> Spike said, 'Pass me the screwdriver.'
> 'What are you going to do?'
> 'Take off my leg. I need to conserve energy.'
> With her knife she was already incising the skin at the top of her thigh. In minutes she had removed the limb.
> 'Now the other one ... '
> While she was intent on her operation, she was talking but not looking at me. 'Didn't I ask you what was really you? If I lopped off your legs would you be less than you?' (…)
> Spike wants me to remove one of her arms, then another. She is speaking slowly because her cells are low. (…) Silently we agree that I will detach her head from her torso. I first unfasten, then lay down, her chest, like a breastplate. Her body is a piece of armour she has taken off. Now she is what she said life would be – consciousness. (SG 88-91)

The two lovers wait for their demise while reading James Cook's journals, which Billie had been given by Captain Handsome, a lover of literature in all its forms. Thus, the first chapter of the novel ends, and the second begins with the story of Billy and Spikkers, two lads who fall in love on Easter Island while witnessing another moment in the devolution of mankind. A young sailor left ashore by Captain Cook's crew as they were fleeing the natives, Billy gives up hope of ever setting foot on the Ship called *Resolution*, and tries to survive on this formerly verdant and luxurious island turned barren by its inhabitants, who felled all the trees in order to transport massive statues carved in stone to the coastline. These stone gods hauled to the outer perimeter of Easter Island are now an apple of discord for the natives, and Spikkers – an island-born half Dutch, half native young man, succeeds in protecting Billy from the

warring factions but dies while trying to settle the conflict. This micro-cosmos is the perfect example of an ecosystem brought to the brink of extinction by human recklessness, this time in the name of religious fanaticism rather than financial greed or thirst for power, and works to show that, whatever the drive, men seem to be "doomed to rape the planet and destroy one another" (Merritt "Review").

This denouement is confirmed in the novel's third and fourth chapters, whose action is entirely set on Planet Blue, this time itself very close to becoming uninhabitable. The third section opens with autobiographical references, as the first-person narrator, later identified as Billie Crusoe, chances upon a book manuscript whose title, *The Stone Gods*, immediately reminds her of Easter Island. She glances at fragments familiar to the readers from the first two sections of the book: Daniel Defoe is mentioned here, as well as Dante, Dickens, Emerson, George Eliot and Adam Smith, as the narrator alternates manuscript reading with life telling, her memories scarred by abandonment at the very young age of twenty-eight days. Her mother had been born in 1943, during World War 2, which had been supposed to bring long-lasting freedom but, instead, inveigled contraptions that fostered extremism in all areas of life:

> Identity cards. Tracking devices in vehicles. Compulsory finger print database. Guilty until proven innocent. No right of appeal for convicted terrorists. (…) Diplomatic-style immunity from investigation and prosecution for all elected politicians. Stop and Search. Police powers of arrest extended to 'reason to believe ... '. End of dual citizenship. Curfew Zones. Routine military patrols in 'areas of tension'. CCTV on every street. CCTV compulsory in mosques. Chip implants for prisoners on probation and for young offenders. No demonstrations, on-line protests shut down, those responsible cautioned. New Public Order laws, the Freedom Act, to be signed by all citizens and including the requirement to 'report any person or persons who are or who appear to be acting contrary to the rights and responsibilities of ordinary citizens as outlined in the Act'. Right to enter homes and businesses without a warrant. (SG 130)

And, soon, disaster struck: advertised as a peaceful war, meant to liberate the people of China, Pakistan and Iran, the next global conflict turned nuclear when the latter dropped the bomb ushering in the Post-3 War age. Following World War 3, the nuclear warfare that has left the planet in a state of devastation similar to the one that had plagued Orbus, a near-future London is ruled by the MORE Corporation, a global company whose slogan is "No MORE War" and whose reluctant employee Billie currently is. At MORE-*Futures*, she works with Spike, the first Robo *sapiens*, who does not need a

body, being just a beautiful clear-skinned, green-eyed, dark-haired robot head fixed on a titanium plate. Developed to take over the decision-making process influential on a global scale form the inapt human beings who have been in charge so far, Spike is "Oz, she's Medusa, she's Winnie, she's God" (SG 132). Just like its namesake in the first part, Spike, devoid of limbic pathways and, thus, unable to experience emotion, pursues poetry in order to gain insight into what it means to be human, a rather surprising feat in a world that deems art and love trivial, worthless and incommodious, given the widespread belief that the latest war was "a crisis of over-emotionalism" (SG 141). Billie, the only programmer that does not treat Spike like a robot, gives her *The Stone Gods* manuscript to read, in an attempt to make her understand that loneliness "is about finding a landing-place" and that the opposite of loneliness is not company, but return – "A place to return" (SG 145).

In search of such a landing place, Billie takes Spike, in the final part of the novel, to Wreck City – a No Zone positioned at the outskirts of Tech City. Those who live here view Tech City as a puppet show run by MORE, and among the area's inhabitants who, like the Pilgrim Fathers of 1620, are trying to found an Alternative Community, Billie Crusoe finds her Man Friday. They reminisce about the Pre-War period, deplore the times of conflict, sharply dissect their disastrous outcome and browse through shelves packed with out-dated print media where a copy of James Cook's journals is quickly spotted by the main character. A reminder that these repeating worlds construed in the novel revolve around similarly-named pairs of characters bound to fall in love, eventually. Indeed, Friday warns Billie not to go through the Dead Forest – part of the heavily policed Red Zone, which she plans to explore in an attempt to locate the runaway robot head whose disappearance was noticed by MORE-*Security* and blamed on Billie. He finally helps reunite the two, both outlaws now, since Billie stands accused of having stolen Spike, while the robot has chosen to defect, severing contact with the Mainframe computer before engaging in a surreal lesbian sex-scene with one of the Alternative Community's members. Spike explains: "I am programmed to accept new experiences. Therefore, when Nebraska suggested that I might try this, I was able to agree without consulting my Mainframe" (SG 176). By disabling her Mainframe connection, Spike seals Billie's fate, as now she stands accused not only of negligence or theft, but of terrorist acts, and Tech City's security forces, MORE-*Peace*, "Army and Police rolled into one" (SG 192), have an excuse for invading Wreck City. And, once again, Billie refuses to abandon Spike and save herself. Then the robot head picks up, from a 1960s telescope, "what can only be described as a message in a bottle – except that it isn't in a bottle, it's in a wavelength": a signal sent sixty-five million years before, "one line of programming code for a Robo *sapiens*" (SG 202). Putting

two and two together, the signal and the telescope, James Cook's *The Journals* and *The Stone Gods* manuscript, Billie, in the wake of a revelation tantamount to a transcendental anagnorisis, makes a definitive gesture:

> I put the pages on the desk, picked up Spike and kissed her lightly on the mouth. Then I put her on top of the pages.
> 'See you in sixty-five million years, maybe.'
> 'Billie?'
> 'Spike?'
> 'I'll miss you.'
> 'That's limbic.'
> 'I can't help it.'
> 'That's limbic too.'
> I set off (…) I didn't notice the soldiers coming towards me. (…) Then I heard three reports in quick succession, and I fell down. (…) When I open my eyes again, I'm at the bottom of the track. (…) I know I'm bleeding but the wound was always there. (…) At the bend in the track, I see what I know I will see: the compact seventeenth-century house, built on the sheer fall of the drop to the stream. There's a water-barrel by the front door, and a tin cup hung on a chain, and an apple tree at the beginning of the garden, where it meets the track. (SG 205-206)

And, thus, it all comes full-circle and Billie is back at the farm described in the first chapter, her own "message in a bottle from another time" (SG 11) as the novel ends with its leitmotif: "Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was" (SG 207).

Throughout *The Stone Gods*, the initiated reader will easily spot startling samples of interdisciplinary discourse playing on both intertextuality and intratextuality, such as literary references to the Bible, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Captain James Cook's journals, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, William Shakespeare's *109th Sonnet* and to the works of Dante Alighieri, Adam Smith, Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Eliot, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, W. H. Auden, and to Winterson's own *The Powerbook*, as well as non-literary allusions to Liza Minnelli's song *Maybe This Time*, to the Pilgrim Fathers' *Mayflower* voyage, to Bernard Lovell's telescope and Laika's spaceflight, to the Cuban Missile Crisis, to president Kennedy's civil rights speech, to scientific theories – the existence of a quantum universe, neither random nor determined, a "universe of potentialities, waiting for an intervention to affect the outcome" (SG 205), and to philosophical questions that have extensively been pondered by great thinkers – the nature of consciousness, the evolution of emotions, the essentials of

human existence, what it means to be human, what happens after death, and the forthcoming entropic doom. Additionally, the statement made in the first part of the novel, "This is a great day for science." (SG 9), is a leitmotif of the *Dexter's Laboratory* animated series (1996-2003), whilst Captain Handsome's relationship with Spike, initially rooted in books, mainly works of poetry, leads to a description of the robot inspired by John Donne's poem "The Sun Rising" – "She is all States, all Princes I, Nothing else is ..." and plausibly motivated by the fact that Spike is both solar powered and the centre of the Captain's emotional universe. Intriguingly, Earth Billie's chancing upon the manuscript of *The Stone Gods* on the tube is a happening rooted in reality, as the novel's manuscript forgotten by a Penguin Books employee on a bench at Balham tube station was, indeed, found by Martha Osten in March, 2007 (Briggs) and the integration of this event in the narrative's third part is an intratextual genial gimmick that allows Winterson to consistently reference bits of the first two parts of the novel, taking even further her spirited self-referencing endeavour. Moreover, as Adeline Johns-Putra explains, the fact that the end of the world scenario closing the novel's fourth chapter is a rather open ending, thus devoid of closure, complements the openness of the narrative:

> The novel links an 'open' worldview (receptiveness to new paradigms beyond the status quo, to other beings beyond the familiar) with 'open' narrative form (non-linearity, repetition, and open-endedness). For one thing, it represents openness in terms of plot and practices openness in terms of structure; for another, it makes explicit comments throughout on the illusory nature of conventional narrative continuity and closure. (180)

What is more, the author opportunely employs philosophical, technical, economic, legal and scientific jargon, the narrative discourse brimming with metalanguage characteristic of fields as diverse as art, music, history, philosophy, evolutionary biology, anthropology, psychology, medicine, astronomy, microeconomics as well as macroeconomics, information science and technology.

Orbus's twisted hi-tech world reminds readers of the *Black Mirror* anthology series, especially the *Nosedive* and *White Christmas* episodes, and the Post-3 War devastated Earth makes them recall not only *Blade Runner*, the 1982 sci-fi thriller, based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, but other prominent cyberpunk works as well, such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* of 1984 or Shirow Masamune's *Ghost in the Shell* of 1989, which also brought to life worlds ruled by corporations that turned democracy into an out-dated system of government, much like Orbus's and Post-3 War Earth's Tech City, where the MORE corporation is pulling the

strings to run the show and to control each and every area of individuals' existence. There can, consequently, be no denying that *The Stone Gods* displays features associated with the science fiction genre: samples of soft and social SF, as well as of cyberpunk and feminist science fiction, combine with episodes of pastoral fantasy, time travel or alternate history, Space Western, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, etc. Nevertheless, in the case of fictional works, at least, genre assignment should not be performed on the sole basis of preponderance. No matter how many features belonging to this genre *The Stone Gods* may parade, the definitive assertion that this is a sci-fi novel can best be described as a *non sequitur* and anyone moderately familiar with Winterson's work would avoid jumping to such a conclusion unless, of course, they had a different agenda.

It is actually true that, on 25 August 2007, not too long after sending *The Stone Gods* manuscript to Penguin Books, in an interview for *New Scientist*, the free-spoken Winterson did glibly assert that she hates science fiction, but her statement was meant to emphasise the dangers of borrowing from science irresponsibly and indiscriminately: "science is crucial to our world (…). But you shouldn't fake it because science is too important, it's the basis for our lives. I expect a lot more science in fiction because science is so rich". Regarding *The Stone Gods*, she rationalised: "it is fiction, and it has science in it, and it is set (mostly) in the future, but the labels are meaningless" ("September-2007"). This asseveration is particularly justified when made with reference to a protean genre like science fiction, which is "non-creedal", as Carlos Aranaga emphasises:

> there are as many takes on what constitutes it as there are readers and writers. Some see magical realist novels and works of visionary fiction as within the fold. For others, sci-fi is fantasy for the literal-minded. If not grounded in real science, then it shouldn't be labelled science fiction, some maintain. Such is the cry of a movement afoot promoting "mundane science fiction", a sort of gearhead reaction at the use of non-peer-reviewed devices such as hyper-drives or time travel. ("Review")

Since it comprises such a wide range of subgenres, topoi and tropes, science fiction is a notably difficult to define genre, and yet critics are determined to claim that Winterson "ventures into that realm of writing science fiction without wanting to admit that she's writing science fiction (right down to having characters mentioning how much they hate SF)" (Farquhar "Review"). Even Ursula Le Guin complains that it is "odd to find characters in a science-fiction novel repeatedly announcing that they hate science fiction" ("Review"). This is twice amiss: it was a one-time occurrence – only ***one*** character, Earth

Billie, stated this ***once*** at the beginning of the Post-3 War chapter (SG 119); plus, such an imputation shows its initiators' complete disregard for the fact that an author's participation in the novel is limited to "almost no direct language of his own", as the author's and the characters' distinct languages inter-animate one another, forming a "system of intersecting planes" (Bakhtin 47-48). The author is the mastermind organising the intermingling of the novel's different language levels, but the discursive strata "are to various degrees distant from this authorial centre", so it comes as no surprise that the novelistic discourse always criticises itself (Bakhtin 49), and Winterson actuates such criticism with the cheerful irreverence characteristic of writers skilled in the art of parody and travesty: "parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, (…) the corrective of reality that is always richer, (…) too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (Bakhtin 55).

Additionally, in the readers' case, such accusations might have emanated from a misapprehension on the part of the genre's aficionados, who viewed the author's apparent reserve as conceited disdain for what is sometimes considered low-range consumer fiction. And, if this were the case, it would not be singular. In a discussion on David Mitchell's 2015 book, *Slade House*, Damien Walter explains that literary authors are "the luxury brands of the writing world, the Mercedes, the Harrods and the Luis Vuitton of high culture", whereas genre writers are "mid-range consumer brands, with an equivalent status to Skoda, Argos and Primark", so it is always problematic if "one of literature's big beasts wanders off the reservation into the bad lands of genre" ("Literature vs. genre"). If Winterson had actually avoided forthrightly embracing science fiction by belittling the genre while reaping the pecuniary benefits associated with it, the opprobrium would have been justified. But, Winterson's *New Scientist* allegation notwithstanding, she is not in the habit of making disparaging remarks about commercial genres in general. Instead, she has continually punctuated her lack of concern for marketing categories. Among her writings there are, besides novels, children's books, short stories, a comic-book, a cover version of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, a horror story, etc. All these successfully meet both literary and commercial requirements, without devolving into the banal, the superficial or the cliché. That she chose to engage with such a liberal range of genres openly shows her disapproval of imposing a vertical assessment on cultural production at the expense of a horizontal one, and patently indicates her endorsement of Damien Walter's opinion that literary and genre fiction are "two halves of the same craft, and if the art of fiction is to remain healthy, we should stop narrowing its range with snobbery" ("Literature vs. genre").

In contemporary literature and literary theorisation, science fiction is a genre that had, for a long time, retained a problematic status, as Radu Pavel Gheo rightfully lamented, pointing out, in his discussion of *Hochliteratur* and *Trivialliteratur*, that this distinction, meant to be one between genres, had forcefully been converted into one between valuable and valueless works, by using nothing more than what Eugen Ionescu had termed an "anarchic method" (Gheo 9-10). But Winterson's comments do not evince an outright rejection of popular genres; her value judgements are made based on different criteria. She does consider certain naturalistic works "a kind of printed version of TV dramas" and she does resent the samples of fantasy writing that "feed into a regressive undeveloped imagination" ("September-2007") because she finds the escapism of both counterproductive. Yet she is convinced that not all naturalistic or fantasy writings lack literary quality, nor do science fiction works, as long as through expressive symbolism and varied layers of meaning they can move beyond a single superficial plot, be it chronological or not, amounting to a profound exploration of the human condition that emulates a "fully realised central vision" of the author:

> I have tried to use the exactness of a heightened poetic language to prompt thought and to make new connections – not surface connections, but deeper joints. (…) *The Stone Gods* is not a linear book, and it is not a left-brain book. I know by now that left-brain linear people don't really like my stuff, and I am not criticising them for that (though I wish they would not criticise me quite so much). I write for people whose minds move more like a game of chess than a game of chase. I never go in straight lines. I am sure that when not corralled, the mind moves more in a maze than it does down a motorway. And my mind only moves in a-maze-ment. One thing you learn over time as a writer is quite a lot about your own mind. (Winterson "September-2007").

Jeanette Winterson did not try to avoid the association of *The Stone Gods* with the sci-fi genre in the hope that her novel might be considered a higher form of fiction. This would indubitably have been a hollow gesture since, in spite of many columnists, reviewers and the general public's more or less conspicuous lack of awareness in this regard, world-renowned theorists such a Brian McHale have shown that the boundaries between "high" and "low" literature are growing dimmer and dimmer. Furthermore, just as the detective thriller can be viewed as "modernist fiction's sister-genre", so can science-fiction be seen as "postmodernism's noncanonized or 'low art' double", given that it is "governed by the ontological dominant" (McHale 59) and thus constitutes "the ontological genre *par excellence* (as the detective story is the

epistemological genre *par excellence*)" (McHale 16). Therefore, postmodernist fiction and science fiction are "two ontological sister-genres" (McHale 65). Unlike other postmodernist writers, such as Alasdair Gray or Raymond Federman, who expostulate that they ***are not*** writing science-fiction, and who adamantly refuse to acknowledge "their borrowings from their sister-genre, presumably because of the "low art" stigma that still attaches to science fiction" (McHale 65), Jeanette Winterson neither protests nor remonstrates when *The Stone Gods* is classed as science fiction. Rather, while acquiescing angled reliance on sci-fi topoi and tropes, she reiterates her dismissal of labels, given that her agenda was of a different nature. She is, after all, a gender-bender keen on playful experimentation, less interested in plot, chronology and sequential writing, more focused on emotion, puzzles and fragmentariness, as these are able to deflect readers' attention from the action, inciting them to focus on the workings of language.

Such subtleties, however, are lost on critics like Victoria A. Brownworth, for instance, who is under the impression that Winterson "does not take her subject(s) seriously enough" and who avers that this novel is her "flimsiest" work. She maintains that "[l]ike the world it depicts, *The Stone Gods* is a bit of a mess. Winterson seems to have thought it might be fun to write a sci-fi novel, but Ursula Le Guin or Joanna Russ she's not. At best, *The Stone Gods* is a rant, at worst it's simply not well written", urging Winterson to "stick to the genre she knows best and captures so incisively – the landscape of interpersonal relationships – and leave the world of sci-fi to those who take it seriously" (Brownworth "Review"). Unlike Brownworth, Ursula Le Guin at least grants this novel a closing sense of coherence, reassuring the readers that "it does all add up", despite "some apparently arbitrary initial confusions", as the connections will slowly but surely become apparent. Both critics, however, fail to perceive the relevance of the Easter Island section which, Brownworth states, has been tackled "far more compellingly and intelligently" elsewhere and which, according to Le Guin, displays "distressingly sentimental" outbursts of emotion. But it is not the fact that "this hinge-point of the book" (Le Guin "Review") recounts past occurrences rather than a possible sample of future history that makes critic Philip Palmer conclude that "Winterson is right: this is not science fiction at all. It looks like SF, it has all the elements we commonly associate with SF but it's really a different genre of book entirely". Palmer actually finds the Easter Island episode the easiest to interpret as, he contends, it is the only part of the novel that actually makes sense, since it merely constitutes a variation on the anthropocentrically driven destruction-laden theme, whereas all the other parts display so many inconsistencies as to immediately dismiss any claim this work might make to the science fiction

genre. Magic has no place in science fiction, whose narrative must cluster around a core of rationally explainable occurrences, nor do illogical twists and self-contradictory events, such as Orbus Billie reading James Cook's journals, 65 million years before the explorer's actual birth, or Earth Billie Crusoe reading a book entitled *The Stone Gods*, not long before meeting and befriending Friday, her future guide through the labyrinthine Dead Forest (Palmer "Review"). *The Stone Gods*, Palmer explains, is neither a realist novel nor a science-fiction one, not even a work of magic realism, since "even magic realism has rules and consistencies". Still, piercing through the mist of generic delimitations, he pertinently points out that even though the novel makes no sense, "in the way that abstract art and certain kinds of modernist poetry make no sense", it is **not** nonsensical. While "confuting and mocking the underlying principle of science and hence science fiction – that, ultimately, everything has a rational explanation", Winterson also "connects by simile and metaphor and mirroring and impossible coincidences", using the laws of poetry rather than those of physics to shape "a particular form of literary construct – a prose-poem" (Palmer "Review"). Thus, to a certain degree, his analysis eventually does justice to Winterson's novel, rescuing it from forced compartmentalisation.

As a whole, this prose-poem in novelistic form, simmering with an ebullition of genres, can be considered an environmentalist manifesto doubled by an evolutionary theory bordering on religious criticism, disguised as a geminated traveller's tale. The narrative shadows the human species' errant explorations in search of new planets that they first colonise and then destroy, but this wide scope interpretation infolds another, a narrow scope one, which recounts two distinct versions, mottled with pornographic glimpses, of Billie and Spike's interplanetary lesbian romance, as well as Billy and Spikkers' homosexual romantic interlude on Easter Island. The couple travel from one planet to another, from one island to another, looking for freedom and happiness, for a new home and a new beginning, their journey through variant space-times entailing an interior journey as well, one of self-discovery, self-identification and self-definition, which prompted Jane Shilling to call this novel "an oddly familiar time-travelling romance" (Shilling "Review"). The ever-present, constantly reiterated, connections between these two characters bring to mind a "similarly nested in time novel" (Aranaga "Review"), namely David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*: "we cross, crisscross and recross our old tracks like figure skaters." (88) "Souls cross the skies o' time (…) like clouds crossin' skies o' the world." (160) "Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same, it's still a cloud an' so is a soul" (163). The love that Billie and Spike share transcends the limitations of the flesh, the barriers of time, the confines of space, and even the curbs of

reality once the reader takes the playful make-believe stance required to fully engage with any fictional work. These traveller's tales reiterate human beings' tendency to become their very own apex predator, bound to bring about their own demise, lest the only arch-enemy of Greed, namely Love, is allowed to take over and eventually rescue humanity from impending doom. As Cyan James explains, Billie and Spike's "different versions playing in the same basic story of destruction" create the feeling that they are archetypes which "symbolize Winterson's greater concerns (and her lesser concern regarding plot and specifics)", that they are merely "kaleidoscope fragments that let Winterson constantly shift her focus". By creating alternate chronicles in which the two protagonists are forced to undergo essentially similar predicaments, Jeanette Winterson emphasises the fact that the self-destructive behaviour of humans begs the question of whether salvation is, at all, possible, since "there is no Bruce Willis or Terminator waiting in the wings, no Will Smith or Neo who will deliver last-minute, microwaved salvation. There is only love, or the echo, or futile longing for love" (James "Review"). Since Love keeps trying yet succeeds not in conquering all else, these fictional worlds lack a rightful superhero able to save the day, so the worst possible scenario gets rehashed time and time again, every story echoing each of the others, "by means of repetitions-with-a-difference of recurrent motifs, thus creating what Mónica Calvo has described as a pattern of 'recursive symmetry' along the different narrative strands" (Onega 31).

The worlds inhabited by Billie and Spike closely resemble our own and this allows the novelist to engage with yet another genre: a merciless form of socio-political satire, targeted at anthropocentrism and its harrowing effects on the environment, at the weakening state of Western democracies revealed by agonising civil rights movements and by cutthroat bonds between government and corporate entities, at the technologically driven illiteracy, apathy, superficiality and lack of privacy, at the rampant corruption, the wanton consumerism and the condonance of sexism, ageism, paedophiliac tendencies and violence against both body and spirit, against living beings and living planets. The satirical effect is secured through commentary on and allusion to hot button socio-political issues that our contemporary world has been struggling with. Part one makes it clear that, although it enjoys political, military and economic supremacy, the Central Power is far from epitomizing a land of endless opportunities and even further from engendering democracy. This comes as no surprise, given that the term "Central Powers" historically refers to the coalition initially formed by central European oligarchic states (the German and the Austro-Hungarian empires) during World War I, and that the very concept of a Central Power rests on inherently autocratic principles

of governance. Hence the gravitational pull of the red tape, the highly invasive law enforcement prowess, the cranky obsession with corporate autocracy, the over-encroaching reign of computer technology, the incautious reliance on technologically mediated activities and on electronic information channels which nurtures mass illiteracy, represses real communication abilities and hampers active critical thinking skills. The diet culture's foolhardy infatuation with lab-produced cloned meat and genetically altered food is shown to have led to the eradication of bio-agriculture and farming, whilst the hare-brained obsession with celebrities, the uncouth hunger for standardized beauty, fame and stardom, the narcissistic artificiality combined with the infatuation with youthful appearance have bred an addiction to young age Genetic Fixing. This readily available genetic modification fosters not only sexual perversion in the form of paedophilia but also overpopulation, a terrible predicament for an already superannuated planet, marred by a lack of resources doomed to beget conflicts so riotous as to reach genocidal levels. The failed attempt to prepare Planet Blue for colonisation was an utter disaster for the people on Orbus, since they had recklessly accelerated global warming and increased pollution levels through the unregulated consumption of fossil fuels and via a continuous irresponsible exploitation of the environment.

In the third chapter of the novel it becomes obvious that the Orbus narrative had detailed the past and not the future, that our planet Earth was not the Red Planet, but the newly discovered Planet Blue, whose conjecturable prospect is now presented as a timely warning that humans are headed for an apocalyptic offing. So we are now back-to-the-future, where the new world programme of No War announced by the President of the Central Power in chapter one (SG 6) gives way to No MORE War, "the new slogan for a new kind of global company" (SG 134). This corporate entity, whose name thinly references both acronyms like HSBC, FIAT, ESPN, GEICO, etc. and the prevalent disgruntlement of humankind, constantly searching and wishing for more, is an avatar of human greed and represents the super-villain, the Big-Brother element whose looming presence smothers the inhabitants in each and every setting, just like the Central Power did in the first part of the novel, and the Stone Gods in the second. There seems never to be enough planet, enough Mo'ai statues, enough power or enough money. As Billie explains to Spike, nobody ever concedes that they have sufficient financial resources: "The more we had, the less it seemed to buy, and the more we bought, the less satisfied we became", so MORE turned the "Buy-me-Buy-me world into a Rent-me-Rent-me world" by implementing "the jeton scheme" to replace wages and cash (SG 137-138). The deep connection between addictive consumerism and people's sense of insecurity, instability and isolation supports Billie's dismissal

of the awry claim that what had caused World War 3 was heightened emotionalism: "I think we need more emotion, not less. But I think, too, that we need to educate people in how to feel. Emotionalism is not the same as emotion. We cannot cut out emotion – in the economy of the human body, it is the limbic, not the neural, highway that takes precedence. We are not robots" (SG 141-142).

The fourth part of the novel chronicles Billie Crusoe's Space Western Odyssey, as she follows the robot throughout the "bad lands beyond the boundaries of official civilisation – where, despite its bodiless state, the head contrives to strike up a liaison with a lissom lesbian rock chick" (Shilling "Review"). The depiction of Wreck City, Tech City's unfortunate stepsister populated by misfits, rebels and mutants who must fend for themselves in the absence of authoritarian regulations and state protection, conjures up the semblance of a postnuclear Wild West endowed, however, with an almost dionysiac aura. This lawless, anarchic city is marked by an electrifying diversity – its inhabitants freely parade their idiosyncrasies, often displaying dangerous yet authentic behaviour, but theirs is a much more cohesive and popularly supportive community than the one making up the *1984*-esque world that unfolds beyond its confines, where the MORE corporation has been turning the denizens of Tech City into brainwashed insensitive shopworn automatons. It is this last chapter of *The Stone Gods* that reveals the astounding structural gimmick Winterson has resorted to: the way in which she has been putting forward the caricatural characters (Friday, Alaska, Nebraska, Sister Mary McMurphy, the awe-inspiring rebels, the toxic radioactive mutants) and the graphic environment (the No Zone called Wreck City, the Black Market, the Playa, the Unknown, the Red Zone including the Dead Forest) evokes a paradoxically captivating hostile atmosphere characteristic of the comics genre, an atmosphere whose effect is amplified by the sense of narrative frieze that emerges in the process of reading this last chapter of the novel. At this point, a perceptive reader cannot fail to apprehend that the novel's configuration is fleshed out so as to connect all the scenes from all four parts together, just like comic book panels would, with very specific passages of description added at the perfect time in order to string together related scenes and to further enhance the active reading experience. The information is conveyed non-sequentially and through words rather than pictures: the written counterparts of comic panels non-chronologically displayed set the scene for the innovatively immersive layout the readers are presented with. If, at first, they appeared to be "loosely, almost slackly structured" pieces of writing, "a collection of carelessly linked short stories rather than a novel" (Holgate "Review"), the outwardly fractured chapters now reveal themselves

to be artfully designed individual pieces of writerly work that make up the complete image in the readers' minds once the proper perspective is adopted and as soon as the expectations are adjusted accordingly.

Issues scrutinised in the first part are revisited in parts three and four, as the author's satirical spree continues through dialogues about what it means to be human in a world beset by highly intrusive and readily available genetic modifications and enhancements, DNA screenings and even cloning, about the impossibility to resist or fight the technologized corporatist system once most people's existence is dependent on it, and about the fate of the self-destructive, aggressive, reckless humans, compared to that of the solar-powered, self-repairing, intelligent, peaceful robots. Part three also hosts conversational exchanges between Spike and Billie which occasion philosophical digressions related not only to the underpinnings of poverty in light of the "transition from the economics of greed to the economics of purpose" based on the realignment of resources (SG 136-137) through the shift from consumerism to rental agreements, from Capitalism to Paternalism, once MORE was granted "complete control of everything and everyone" (SG 139), but also to the existence of God and to the scaffolding of belief. Thus, a smooth connection is made between the opening chapter of the novel and its final ones by the Easter Island episode, which voices environmentalist concerns while revealing the insanity underlying religious controversy. This is achieved through both caricature and allusion, as reference is made to a real world context whose fictionalisation is marked by exaggerated features meant to raise historical awareness whilst articulating an urgent call to action. This second part of *The Stone Gods*, in conjunction both with the socio-political satire that dominates the novel's first chapter, and with the combination between a science fiction back-to-the-future fable and a comic-book futuristic dystopia whittled in the last two sections of the book, ponderously contributes to the rich mixture of stories laced with humour that Winterson employs in order to fully engage her audience in the socio-political issues, thickly threaded with an environmentalist twist, which are covered in this novel. The artful mixing and blurring of generic conventions allows Jeanette Winterson to genuinely pay homage to all these various genres, by borrowing some of their tropes in order to affectionately mock and skilfully subvert them in a ustopian postmodern pastiche that lends further credence to Ingeborg Hoesterey's claim that nowadays pastiches are "allegories of culture as a process of meaning constitution, as system, as ideology" (502).

Despite the obvious science fiction tropes permeating it, Winterson's novel may fail to offer what critics and readers would normally expect form a work belonging to this genre; yet, in fact, this work is not a failure, but a

triumph. It is the triumph of the author's writing craft, a celebration of her uncanny ability to create her own brand of science-fiction. The novelist was not deceptive and her work is not a gimmick. *The Stone Gods* may not constitute the futuristic vision of a prophetic science fiction author but it showcases Winterson's unique take on sci-fi writing. This dystopian masterpiece was the only way in which the author, interested neither in politics nor in docu-drama, determined that she could make a difference in today's world by offering "a response to where we are now, and where this now might be taking us" (Winterson "September-2007"). The tone of the novel is infused with Winterson's evangelical drive, and bespeaks her deeply held conviction that ever new creative possibilities ***can*** and ***will*** endow story-telling with opportunities to bring about change. The state that our world finds itself in no longer allows writers to be bystanders, so the repeating histories of destruction do not only decry the human species' toxicity for the environment, do not merely denounce the profit-driven agenda of capitalist enterprise, they argue in favour of urgently making determined attempts to reach planetary sustainability before time runs out. Humans are portrayed as agents of doom in *The Stone Gods* because its author cannot ignore the signs of our planet's impending catastrophe and, while searching for solutions, she entertains no illusions about the nature of human beings and their capacity to destroy each other.

The author is torn between two visions: destruction or salvation. The former foreshadows the terrors of war with a sense of apocalyptic annihilation as a result of recurring self-destructive scenarios; the latter takes the shape of romantic encounters, love being the ultimate saviour. The Orwellian innuendos thus combine with "strands of purple prose depicting the juicy details of a futuristic lesbian love affair – an interplanetary romance between a woman and a female robot" (Preda, "New Planets for Old" 146), mixing critical dystopia with romantic utopia. These two genres, which "mutually encapsulate latent versions of each other", are the two sides of one and the same coin, but they "cannot be cleanly dissociated as the exhilarating side and the dispiriting flipside of utopian thought, which transcends reality and challenges the existing order of things" (Borbély and Petrar 27). In Winterson's ustopia even romance accrues additional overtones, being forged as a posthuman project characterised not by objectivism but rather by "reflexive epistemology", since "distributed cognition overrides autonomous will, embodiment rather than the body seen as nothing more than a support system for the mind"; the writer educes a sense of posthuman subjectivity, suggesting that humans and intelligent machines can "enjoy the dynamic partnership of the end" just as Billie and Spike do (Diamant 109). Consequently, *The Stone Gods* can be considered "a fictional encompassment of the theoretical construction of

posthumanist relational subjectivity" as articulated by Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, and by Lucy A. Suchman's *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, both published in the same year as this particular novel (Preda, "Agential Realism" 24). Moreover, a stream of anti-anthropocentric, bio-egalitarian and environmentalist consciousness runs through all four parts of the novel, overflowing with details that reflect Winterson's verdant powers of aesthetic innovation in combining science fiction with posthumanist experimentalism:

> Winterson's emphasis on the astounding possibilities of reconfiguration with regard to categories such as human/machine, subject/object, social/material, male/female, nature/culture, matter/discourse and interaction/intra-action enables a reframing of accountability issues and a relocation of agency from the separateness of realms (human agency versus machine agency) to an intra-active field of commonalities where on-going socio-material practices come into effect as the boundaries between humans and machines are negotiated, disrupted and transgressed, produced and re-produced, configured and re-configured, constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed. (Preda, "Agential Realism" 36).

A work of impressive structural complexity, *The Stone Gods* tackles an abundance of interrelated themes, many of which have captivated Jeanette Winterson in earlier works: love, loss and risk, boundaries and desire, gender stereotypes, the tussle for power; anthropocentrism, technological advances and their impact on the environment; time, death, memory and the concept of history; identity, metamorphosis, transformation and crossing over; the journey and the homecoming; life as a story and, last but not least, the exacting command of narrative. Her reflections on these topics are "couched in language of thrilling richness and invention" through which "we are reminded that Winterson is a pasticheuse of brilliance, a tender writer on (...) states of longing, (…), an ingenious cartographer of imaginary worlds" (Shilling "Review").

Whilst literary genres have consistently played an important role in the analysis of literary texts, especially in the case of classical and folk literature, it has been argued that genre allotment no longer suits most literary works that belong to the modernist and post-modernist trends. Nevertheless, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer explains, no text can be placed outside the framework of generic norms, since alterity is always relative. Literature is not merely a fixed corpus comprising the tally of the respective individual works, but rather a web of relational threads that they incessantly weave with one another (Schaeffer 12). Moreover, as far as authorship is concerned, out of "an infinite

game of prescriptions and interdictions, of imitations and transformations, of reproductions and subversions", literature egresses as "a collective entity with multiple paternal figures", as a network whose nodes and links intersect in unpredictable ways, yielding "a galaxy of forms, themes and discursive types, getting perpetually reorganised" (Schaeffer 12). In what concerns the reader, "any re-construction of a literary work requires prior knowledge and endorsement of general discursive conventions, knowledge obtained only in the course of acquiring the literary experience necessary to create an adequate horizon of expectations" (Preda, *Metamorphoses* 18).

On the one hand, genre constitutes a framework able to display a system of assessing credibility by tracking facts against assumptions when interpreting a particular work, to grant an undimmed perception of important details, to foster a clearer understanding of literary works, and to reveal untrodden ways of recognizing and responding to different literary techniques. On the other hand, if unwisely chosen along the interpretation route, genre can easily become a rather limiting construct that thwarts understanding, given that it is only the pertinent classification of a literary text into the proper genre that ultimately "facilitates engagement in an informed reading process and provides a means of revealing or constructing new meanings" throughout the labyrinthine process of uncovering a text's true message (Preda, *Interferences* 14). This is why some literary critics' persistence in placing a one and only label on modernist and postmodernist works of literature is conspicuously unsettling, given their not infrequently successful attempts to box in a novel, such as *The Stone Gods*, for instance, by purposely overlooking its multifarious nature and by wittingly undermining, with negative comments, the audience's interest in it.

The review of the plot, the conspectus of the motifs and the synopsis of the themes as outlined above fail, of course, to do justice to Winterson's novel, because this particular author's work does not easily lend itself to abridgement, any compression being tantamount to the lessening of its impact and to the distortion of its message. Yet, however unwieldy, these attempts have at least shown that *The Stone Gods* can be viewed as socio-political satire, environmentalist manifesto, an evolutionary theory bordering on religious criticism, a traveller's tale, a sample of interdisciplinary discourse playing on intertextuality, an interplanetary lesbian romance with pornographic glimpses, a novel of ideas masquerading as postmodern pastiche, a ustopia, a comic-book futuristic dystopia or a science fiction back-to-the-future fable. Hopefully, the analysis has also revealed that the book is none of those, yet all into one, so it would be highly inappropriate to call it by only one of these names taken separately, whatever that chosen name might be.

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