

ART OBJECTS

Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery

JEANETTE
WINTERSON



Alfred A. Knopf New York 1996

WARREN AND LOUISE BRINKE MEMORIAL LIBRARY
SPRING HILL COLLEGE
4000 DAUPHIN STREET
MOBILE, AL 36608

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

Copyright © 1995 by Jeanette Winterson

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American
Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York. Distributed by Random
House, Inc., New York. Originally published in Great
Britain by Jonathan Cape, London, in 1995.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Winterson, Jeanette, [date]

Art objects : essays on ecstasy and
effrontery / Jeanette Winterson.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-679-44644-3

1. Winterson, Jeanette, [date]—Aesthetics.
2. Woolf, Virginia, 1882–1941—Criticism and interpretation.
3. Women and literature.
4. Aesthetics, Modern.

I. Title.

PR6073.I558A8 1996

824'.914—dc20 95-33215

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

FIRST AMERICAN EDITION

0-13
I 558
A
911

for Peggy Reynolds with love

24
07 19 95

THE SEMIOTICS OF SEX

I was in a bookshop recently when a young woman approached me.

She told me she was writing an essay on my work and that of Radclyffe Hall. Could I help?

'Yes,' I said. 'Our work has nothing in common.'

'I thought you were a lesbian,' she said.

I have become aware that the chosen sexual difference of one writer is, in itself, thought sufficient to bind her in semiotic sisterhood with any other writer, also lesbian, dead or alive.

I am, after all, a pervert, so I will not mind sharing a bed with a dead body. This bed in the shape of a book, this book in the shape of a bed, must accommodate us every one, because, whatever our style, philosophy, class, age, pre-occupations and talent, we are lesbians and isn't that the golden key to the single door of our work?

In any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded, whilst homosexuality is foregrounded.

What you fuck is much more important than how you write. This may be because reading takes more effort than sex. It may be because the word 'sex' is more exciting than the word 'book'. Or is it? Surely that depends on what kind of sex and what kind of book? I can only assume that straight sex is so dull that even a book makes better reportage. No-one asks Iris Murdoch about her sex life. Every interviewer I meet asks me about mine and what they do not ask they invent. I am a writer who happens to love women. I am not a lesbian who happens to write.

What is it about? Prurience? Stupidity? And as Descartes didn't say, 'I fuck therefore I am.'? The straight world is wilful in its pursuit of queers and it seems to me that to continually ask someone about their homosexuality, when the reason to talk is a book, a picture, a play, is harassment by the back door.

The Queer world has colluded in the misreading of art as sexuality. Art is difference, but not necessarily sexual difference, and while to be outside of the mainstream of imposed choice is likely to make someone more conscious, it does not automatically make that someone an artist. A great deal of gay writing, especially gay writing around the Aids crisis, is therapy, is release, is not art. It is its subject matter and no more and I hope by now that I have convinced my readers in these essays, that all art, including literature, is much more than its subject matter. It is true that a number of gay and lesbian writers have attracted an audience and some attention simply because they are queer. Lesbians and gays do need their own culture, as any sub-group does, including the sub-group of heterosexuality, but

the problems start when we assume that the fact of our queerness bestows on us special powers. It might make for certain advantages (it is helpful for a woman artist not to have a husband) but it cannot, of itself, guarantee art. Lesbians and gay men, who have to examine so much of what the straight world takes for granted, must keep on examining their own standards in all things, and especially the standards we set for our own work.

I think this is particularly urgent where fiction and poetry are concerned and where it is most tempting to assume that the autobiography of Difference will be enough.

Let me put it another way: if I am in love with Peggy and I am a composer I can express that love in an ensemble or a symphony. If I am in love with Peggy and I am a painter, I need not paint her portrait, I am free to express my passion in splendid harmonies of colour and line. If I am a writer, I will have to be careful, I must not fall into the trap of believing that my passion, of itself, is art. As a composer or a painter I know that it is not. I know that I shall have to find a translation of form to make myself clear. I know that the language of my passion and the language of my art are not the same thing.

Of course there is a paradox here; the most powerful written work often masquerades as autobiography. It offers itself as raw when in fact it is sophisticated. It presents itself as a kind of diary when really it is an oration. The best work speaks intimately to you even though it has been consciously made to speak intimately to thousands of others. The bad writer believes that sincerity of feeling will be enough, and pins her faith on the power of experience. The true writer

knows that feeling must give way to form. It is through the form, not in spite of, or accidental to it, that the most powerful emotions are let loose over the greatest number of people.

Art must resist autobiography if it hopes to cross boundaries of class, culture . . . and . . . sexuality. Literature is not a lecture delivered to a special interest group, it is a force that unites its audience. The sub-groups are broken down.

How each artist learns to translate autobiography into art is a problem that each artist solves for themselves. When solved, unpicking is impossible, we cannot work backwards from the finished text into its raw material. The commonest mistake of critics and biographers is to assume that what holds significance for them necessarily held significance for the writer. Forcing the work back into autobiography is a way of trying to contain it, of making what has become unlike anything else into what is just like everything else. It may be that in the modern world, afraid of feeling, it is more comfortable to turn the critical gaze away from a fully realised piece of work. It is always easier to focus on sex. The sexuality of the writer is a wonderful diversion.

If Queer culture is now working against assumptions of identity as sexuality, art gets there first, by implicitly or explicitly creating emotion around the forbidden. Some of the early feminist arguments surrounding the wrongfulness

of men painting provocative female nudes seem to me to have overlooked the possibility or the fact of another female as the viewer. Why should she identify with the nude? What deep taboos make her unable to desire the nude?

Opera, before and after the nineteenth century, but not during, enjoyed serious games of sexual ambiguity, and opera fans will know the delicious and disturbing pleasure of watching a woman disguised as a man and hearing her woo another woman with a voice unmistakably female. Our opera ancestors knew the now forbidden pleasure of listening to a man sing as a woman; in his diary, Casanova writes of the fascination and desire felt for these compromising creatures by otherwise heterosexual men. Music is androgynously sexy and with the same sensuous determination penetrates male and female alike. Unless of course one resists it, and how much sex-resistance goes on under the lie of 'I don't like opera.'

Similarly, I am sure that a lot of the coyness and silliness that accompanies productions of Shakespeare that include cross-dressing roles, is an attempt to steer them clear of Queer. As long as we all know that a pretence is happening; the pretence of Principal Boy or music-hall camp, we are safe in our het-suits. Too many directors overlook the obvious fact that in Shakespeare, the disguises are meant to convince. They are not a comedian's joke. We too must fall in love. We too must know what it is to find that we have desired another woman, desired another man. And should we really take at face value those fifth acts where everyone simply swops their partner to the proper sex and goes home to live happily ever after?

I am not suggesting that we should all part with our husbands and live Queer.

I am not suggesting that a lesbian who recognises desire for a man sleep with him. We need not be so crude. What we do need is to accept in ourselves, with pleasure, the subtle and various emotions that are the infinity of a human being. More, not less, is the capacity of the heart. More not less is the capacity of art.

Art coaxes out of us emotions we normally do not feel. It is not that art sets out to shock (that is rare), it is rather that art occupies ground unconquered by social niceties. Seeking neither to please nor to displease, art works to enlarge emotional possibility. In a dead society that inevitably puts it on the side of the rebels. Do not mistake me, I am not of the voting party of bohemians and bad boys, and the rebelliousness of art does not make every rebel an artist. The rebellion of art is a daily rebellion against the state of living death routinely called real life.

Where every public decision has to be justified in the scale of corporate profit, poetry unsettles these apparently self-evident propositions, not through ideology, but by its very presence and ways of being, its embodiment of states of longing and desire.

Adrienne Rich, What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (1993)

And not only public decisions but also private compromises. Calculations of the heart that should never be made. It is through the acceptance of breakdown; breakdown of fellowship, of trust, of community, of communication, of

language, of love, that we begin to break down ourselves, a fragmented society afraid of feeling.

Against this fear, art is fresh healing and fresh pain. The rebel writer who brings healing and pain, need not be a Marxist or a Socialist, need not be political in the journalistic sense and may fail the shifting tests of Correctness, while standing as a rebuke to the hollowed out days and as a refuge for our stray hearts. Communist and People's Man, Stephen Spender, had the right credentials, but Catholic and cultural reactionary T. S. Eliot made the poetry. It is not always so paradoxical but it can be, and the above example should be reason enough not to judge the work by the writer. Judge the writer by the work.

When I read Adrienne Rich or Oscar Wilde, rebels of very different types, the fact of their homosexuality should not be uppermost. I am not reading their work to get at their private lives, I am reading their work because I need the depth-charge it carries.

Their formal significance, the strength of their images, their fidelity to language makes it possible for them to reach me across distance and time. If each were not an exceptional writer, neither would be able to reach beyond the interests of their own sub-group. The truth is that both have an audience who do not share the sexuality or the subversiveness of playwright and poet but who cannot fail to be affected by those elements when they read Rich and Wilde. Art succeeds where polemic fails.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of heterosexual readers who won't touch books by Queers and plenty of Queer readers who are only out to scan a bent kiss. We all know of

men who won't read books by women and in spite of the backlash that dresses this up in high sounding notions of creativity, it is ordinary terror of difference. Men do not feel comfortable looking at the world through eyes that are not male. It has nothing to do with sentences or syntax, it is sexism by any other name. It would be a pity if lesbians and gay men retreated into the same kind of cultural separatism. We learn early how to live in two worlds; our own and that of the dominant model, why not learn how to live in multiple worlds? The strange prismatic worlds that art offers? I do not want to read only books by women, only books by Queers, I want all that there is, so long as it is genuine and it seems to me that to choose our reading matter according to the sex and/or sexuality of the writer is a dismal way to read. For lesbians and gay men it has been vital to create our own counter-culture but that does not mean that there is nothing in straight culture that we can use. We are more sophisticated than that and it is worth remembering that the conventional mind is its own prison.

The man who won't read Virginia Woolf, the lesbian who won't touch T. S. Eliot, are both putting subjective concerns in between themselves and the work. Literature, whether made by heterosexuals or homosexuals, whether to do with lives gay or straight, packs in it supplies of energy and emotion that all of us need. Obviously if a thing is not art, we will not get any artistic pleasure out of it and we will find it void of the kind of energy and emotion we can draw on indefinitely. It is difficult, when we are surrounded by trivia makers and trivia merchants, all claiming for themselves the power of art, not to fall for the lie that there is no

such thing or that it is anything. The smallness of it all is depressing and it is inevitable that we will have to whip out the magnifying glass of our own interests to bring the thing up to size. 'Is it about me?' 'Is it amusing?' 'Is it dirty?' 'What about the sex?' are not aesthetic questions but they are the questions asked by most reviewers and by most readers most of the time. Unless we set up criteria of judgement that are relevant to literature, and not to sociology, entertainment, topicality etc., we are going to find it harder and harder to know what it is that separates art from everything else.

Learning to read is more than learning to group the letters on a page. Learning to read is a skill that marshals the entire resources of body and mind. I do not mean the endless dross-skimming that passes for literacy, I mean the ability to engage with a text as you would another human being. To recognise it in its own right, separate, particular, to let it speak in its own voice, not in a ventriloquism of yours. To find its relationship to you that is not its relationship to anyone else. To recognise, at the same time, that you are neither the means nor the method of its existence and that the love between you is not a mutual suicide. The love between you offers an alternative paradigm; a complete and fully realised vision in a chaotic unrealised world. Art is not amnesia, and the popular idea of books as escapism or diversion, misses altogether what art is. There is plenty of escapism and diversion to be had, but it cannot be had from real books, real pictures, real music, real theatre. Art is the realisation of complex emotion.

We value sensitive machines. We spend billions of pounds to make them more sensitive yet, so that they detect minerals deep in the earth's crust, radioactivity thousands of miles away. We don't value sensitive human beings and we spend no money on their priority. As machines become more delicate and human beings coarser, will antennae and fibre-optic claim for themselves what was uniquely human? Not rationality, not logic, but that strange network of fragile perception, that means I can imagine, that teaches me to love, a lodging of recognition and tenderness where I sometimes know the essential beat that rhythms life.

The artist as radar can help me. The artist who combines an exceptional sensibility with an exceptional control over her material. This equipment, unfunded, unregarded, gift and discipline kept tuned to untapped frequencies, will bring home signals otherwise lost to me. Will make for my ears and eyes what was the property of the hawk. This sharpness and stretch of wings has not in it the comfort of escape. It has in it warnings and chances and painful beauty. It is not what I know and it is not what I am. The mirror turns out to be a through looking-glass, and beyond are places I have never reached. Once reached there is no need to leave them again. Art is not tourism it is an ever-expanding territory. Art is not Capitalism, what I find in it, I may keep. The title takes my name.

The realisation of complex emotion.

Complex emotion is pivoted around the forbidden. When I feel the complexities of a situation I am feeling the many-

sidedness of it, not the obvious smooth shape, grasped at once and easily forgotten. Complexity leads to perplexity. I do not know my place. There is a clash between what I feel and what I had expected to feel. My logical self fails me, and no matter how I try to pace it out, there is still something left over that will not be accounted for. All of us have felt like this, all of us have tried to make the rough places smooth; to reason our way out of a gathering storm. Usually dishonesty is our best guide. We call inner turbulence 'blowing things up out of all proportion'. We call it 'seven-year itch'. We call it 'over-tiredness'. Like Adam we name our beasts, but not well, and we find they do not come when called.

Complex emotion often follows some major event in our lives; sex, falling in love, birth, death, are the commonest and in each of these potencies are strong taboos. The striking loneliness of the individual when confronted with these large happenings that we all share, is a loneliness of displacement. The person is thrown out of the normal groove of their life and whilst they stumble, they also have to carry a new weight of feeling, feeling that threatens to overwhelm them. Consequences of misery and breakdown are typical and in a repressive society that pretends to be liberal, misery and breakdown can be used as subtle punishments for what we no longer dare legislate against. Inability to cope is defined as a serious weakness in a macho culture like ours, but what is inability to cope, except a spasmodic, faint and fainter protest against a closed-in drugged-up life where suburban values are touted as the greatest good? A newborn child, the moment of falling in love, can cause in us seismic shocks that will, if we let them,

help to re-evaluate what things matter, what things we take for granted. This is frightening, and as we get older it is harder to face such risks to the deadness that we are. Art offers the challenge we desire but also the shape we need when our own world seems most shapeless. The formal beauty of art is threat and relief to the formless neutrality of unrealised life.

'Ah' you will say, 'She means Art as Consolation. The lonely romantic who reads Jane Eyre. The computer misfit wandering with Wordsworth.'

I do not think of art as Consolation. I think of it as Creation. I think of it as an energetic space that begets energetic space. Works of art do not reproduce themselves, they re-create themselves and have at the same time sufficient permanent power to create rooms for us, the dispossessed. In other words, art makes it possible to live in energetic space.

When I talk about creating emotion around the forbidden, I do not mean disgust around the well known. Forget the lowlife, tourist, squeaky clean middle-class bad boys who call their sex-depravity in blunt prose, fine writing. Forget the copycat girls who wouldn't know the end of a dildo from a vacuum rod. They are only chintz dipped in mud and we are after real material. What is forbidden is scarier, sexier, unnightmared by the white-collar cataloguers of crap.

'Don't do that' makes for easy revolt. What is forbidden is hidden. To worm into the heart and mind until what one truly desires has been encased in dark walls of what one ought to desire, is the success of the serpent. Serpents of state, serpents of religion, serpents in the service of education, monied serpents, mythic serpents, weaving their lies backwards into history. Two myths out of many: the first, Hebrew: Eve in the garden persuaded to eat that which she has never desired to eat ('The serpent bade me eat'). The second, Greek: Medusa, the Gorgon, whose serpent hair turns all who look on her to stone.

There are many ways of reading these myths, that is the way with myths, but for the purposes of this argument, I want us to be wary of bodies insinuated to desire what they do not desire and of hearts turned to stone.

How can I know what I feel? When a writer asks herself that question she will have to find the words to answer it, even if the answer is another question. The writer will have to make her words into a true equivalent of her heart. If she cannot, if she can only hazard at the heart, arbitrarily temporarily, she may be a psychologist but she will not be a poet.

It is the poet who goes further than any human scientist. The poet who with her dredging net must haul up difficult things and return them to the present. As she does this, the reader will begin to recognise parts of herself so neatly buried that they seem to have been buried from birth. She will be able to hear clearly the voices that have whispered at her for so

many years. Some of those voices will prove false, she will perhaps learn to fear her own fears. The attendant personalities that are clinically labelled as schizophrenia, can be brought into a harmonious balance. It is not necessary to be shut up in one self, to grind through life like an ox at a mill, always treading the same ground. Human beings are capable of powered flight; we can travel across ourselves and find that self multiple and vast. The artist knows this; at the same time that art is prising away old dead structures that have rusted almost unnoticed into our flesh, art is pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed. The convenient lies fall; the only boundaries are the boundaries of our imagination.

How much can we imagine? The artist is an imaginer. The artist imagines the forbidden because to her it is not forbidden. If she is freer than other people it is the freedom of her single allegiance to her work. Most of us have divided loyalties, most of us have sold ourselves. The artist is not divided and she is not for sale. Her clarity of purpose protects her although it is her clarity of purpose that is most likely to irritate most people. We are not happy with obsessives, visionaries, which means, in effect, that we are not happy with artists. Why do we flee from feeling? Why do we celebrate those who lower us in the mire of their own making while we hound those who come to us with hands full of difficult beauty?

If we could imagine ourselves out of despair?

If we could imagine ourselves out of helplessness?

What would happen if we could imagine in ourselves authentic desire?

What would happen if one woman told the truth about herself?
The world would split open.

Muriel Rukeyser

In search of this truth, beyond the fear of the consequences of this truth, are the flight-maps of art. When truth is at stake, and in a society that desperately needs truth, we have to be wary of those side-tracks to nowhere that mislead us from the journey we need to make. There are plenty of Last Days signposts to persuade us that nothing is worth doing and that each one of us lives in a private nightmare occasionally relieved by temporary pleasure.

Art is not a private nightmare, not even a private dream, it is a shared human connection that traces the possibilities of past and future in the whorl of now. It is a construct, like science, like religion, like the world itself. It is as artificial as you and me and as natural too. We have never been able to live without it, we have never been able to live with it. We claim it makes no difference whilst nervously barring it out of our lives. Part of this barring is to gender it, to sex it, to find ways of containing and reducing this fascinating fear. But to what are our efforts directed? What is it that we seek to mock and discourage? It is the human spirit free.

I was in a bookshop recently and a young man came up to me and said

'Is Sexing the Cherry a reading of Four Quartets?'

'Yes,' I said, and he kissed me.

THE PSYCHOMETRY OF BOOKS

Book collecting is an obsession, an occupation, a disease, an addiction, a fascination, an absurdity, a fate. It is not a hobby. Those who do it must do it. Those who do not do it, think of it as a cousin of stamp-collecting, a sister of the trophy cabinet, bastard of a sound bank account and a weak mind. Money you must have, although not necessarily in large quantities, but certainly in disposable amounts. What makes money disposable is a personal question. My first First Edition was bought courtesy of a plastic sheet nailed over a rotten window. The price of fitting a new frame and glass was the price of Robert Graves: *To Whom Else?* Seizan Press, 1931, hand-set, cover by Len Lye.

Why choose the insistence of winter and a book? I took it home, lit my fire and made a proper sacrifice of my comfort. Snow and hail are nothing to happiness and I was happy. Two hundred copies and one was mine.

Signed and dated of course. I insist on that. The dealer from whom I bought it called it autograph hunting. I was