

**From philosophy to psychotherapy: retelling the story in Jeanette Winterson's
Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles (2005)**

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The free man never thinks of escape.

– Winterson, *Weight*, p. 3; *Why Be Happy*, p. 157.

I want to tell the story again.

– Winterson, *Weight*, *passim*

Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles by Jeanette Winterson retells the encounter between Atlas and Heracles, when the hero arrives to collect apples from the garden of the Hesperides and thereby completes his canonical Labour. Commissioned by Canongate and published as one of the first in a new series, the book remains amongst the most provocative contributions to 'The Myths'. The series invites writers to revisit world myths, described as 'universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human', and to retell them 'in a contemporary and memorable way'.¹ Far from simply updating stories, authors have taken the opportunity to revise and reframe: for example, Victor Pelevin projects Theseus and the Minotaur into the cyber maze of the world wide web in *The Helmet of Horror* (2006), Sally Vickers sets a dying Sigmund Freud into conversation with Tiresias about Oedipus in *Where Three Roads Meet* (2007), and Philip Pullman bifurcates the Gospel's hero in *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010). Within such imaginative company, *Weight* stands out not so much through the novelty of its conception – although in inventiveness it stands in comparison to these other 'Myths' – but for its challenge to the series' underlying proposition. For *Weight's* 'universal' myth is highly personal to its author.

By 2005, Winterson had been writing innovatively to popular and critical acclaim for two decades. No longer the *enfant terrible* of the British literary scene, loathed by the conservative media on account of her perceived Lesbianism and apparent self-regard, Winterson was, and remains, a self-reflective and experimental writer. Although her work regularly sends a central character on a quest to self-knowledge and fulfilment, a convention of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*,² in other ways it deviates from the standard novel form. Linearity is interrupted, genres blur, intertexts arise, reality blends into fantasy, voices are plural, gendered identities become confused, and autobiography merges with fiction.³ *Weight's* general conformity to this non-conventionality is signalled in the volume's opening material: a dedication 'For Deborah Warner, who lifted the weight' (p. vii), a prefatory analogy on an untitled page between writing and the layering of sedimentary rock (pp. ix-x), and a first person Introduction outlining the author's subject choice and approach (pp. xiii-xvi). Together these paratexts have a dual illocutionary force.⁴ First, the punning dedication to Warner, Winterson's lover at the time, and the Introductory explanation, 'I wrote it directly out of my own situation. There is no other way' (p. xiv), connect the author's biography to the coming narrative. And secondly, the analogy between the earth's strata and pages of a book indicates an underlying proposition. As the comparison progresses, certain words are supersized and coloured red: 'pages of a book', 'far from complete', 'interrupted', 'eroded', 'twisted or folded', 'mountain building'. Sedimentary rock and by implication the written page bear traces of 'contemporary life', although, in duplicate, 'the record is far from complete...' (p. x). The following myth, subject still to tectonic forces of erosion and change and laid out on the pages of the book, will be partial and inflected by the present. In the Introduction, Winterson praises 'The Myths' series for 're-telling stories for their own sakes, and finding in them permanent truths about human nature' (p. xvi). However, before the story has even begun, *Weight* promises a tendentious new version that will resonate intimately with the author's personal experiences.

Weight thus expresses a conundrum at the heart of 'The Myths' series: how to write universal and timeless tales in a contemporary fashion. Thanks to the influence of psychoanalysis and structural anthropology, and especially their widely-read adherent Joseph Campbell, the understanding that myths from across cultures follow shared patterns and symbolically encode universal human concerns has become commonplace.⁵ However, scholars today emphasise the diversity within Classical myths, and so deprive them of monolithic narratives and inherent meanings. In the place of Campbell's

'monomyths' arise interpretations that are specific to the time and place of composition and reception for each retelling.⁶ While the upfront ambition of the Canongate series appears to reflect the former way of thinking, the intervention of the author through the paratexts of *Weight* comes closer to articulating the latter. To tell a myth in a contemporary way means to tell a contingent, rather than a timeless, story. A Winterson myth will be unavoidably inflected by its author, with meanings emerging in the present. However, as the coming analysis of *Weight's* reception of the myth of Atlas and Heracles will show, Winterson does not follow the scholarly turn and dismiss myth's universality. Rather, her particular propensity for mixing autobiography and fiction locates *Weight* at the fissure between myth as universal and personal, timeless and specific. On the one hand, the encounter between Atlas and Heracles forms a philosophical meditation on issues of Fate and Freedom and the limits of self-determination, a theme indicated by the first chapter's opening statement 'The free man never thinks of escape' (p. 3).⁷ On the other, that theme represents the author's particular psychosis, established through a third character, a first person voice that replays experiences familiar from Winterson's personal mythology and shares the mental predicament of Atlas and Heracles. The work therefore operates as a form of psychotherapy, through which Winterson can 'tell the story again', to quote a frequent refrain. By tracing the fault lines of *Weight's* distinctive reception, this paper proposes that this post-modern appropriation of the ancient myth of Atlas and Heracles articulates a new way of understanding the universality of myth, locating it firmly within the personal. Winterson thereby reasserts the value of myth and makes a special claim for its relevance today.

ATLAS AND HERACLES: A NEW 'COVER VERSION'

In the Introduction, Winterson describes her *oeuvre* as consisting of 'Cover Versions' (p. xiv), new spins on old favourites that offer a 'new emphasis or bias', 'new arrangement', and 'fresh material'. Conforming to this trend in its treatment of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, *Weight* thus also follows in the footsteps of Classical artists working in a multimedia environment. As the myth moved between poetry, painting and prose, and from Archaic Greece to Imperial Rome, it appeared with some variety. Indeed, this propensity is evident already in the scenes adorning two Athenian oil jars decorated in the black-figure style. Dated to the late sixth or early fifth century BCE they are amongst the earliest extant narratives of the myth.⁸ On the first, attributed to the Athena Painter, Heracles holds aloft the starry heavens whilst Atlas approaches with apples in outstretched hands.⁹ On the second, the Edinburgh Painter portrays the lion-skin wearing hero in the company of Hermes and an armed companion; bending over, Heracles put in his basket fruit from a tree around whose trunk a serpent is entwined.¹⁰ Taken together both images contain the key elements known to the epic poets, dramatists and mythographers who combined and/or omitted them in various ways to create their own cover versions: namely, Heracles, apples, garden, Atlas, snake.¹¹ However, already the scenarios are distinct, and Atlas is entirely missing from the second scene. In Greek antiquity more generally, the focus rested primarily on Heracles, the Panhellenic hero who visited the Garden of the Hesperides whilst undertaking Labours for Eurystheus (*Iliad* 8.364), either in atonement for past misdemeanours (killing his wife and children: Euripides, *Heracles* 13-21) or in a bid for immortality (Diodorus 4.10.7; [Apollodorus], *Library* 2.4.12 combines both).¹² By contrast, the Romans frequently depicted Atlas holding up the heavens, but rarely in the company of Heracles.¹³ Knees bent and arms raised to support the globe balanced on his shoulders, as in the 'Farnese Atlas' (a Roman copy, in fact, of a Hellenistic sculpture),¹⁴ he occupies a brief narrative moment, albeit one that lasts an eternity. *Weight* flips both these trends. Atlas' priority in the subtitle *The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* reflects a wider re-positioning: the Titan enters first, speaking in the first person, and outlives the hero. The bit-player who helps Heracles fulfil his labour now possesses his own narrative trajectory too.

With this new emphasis, *Weight* nonetheless follows the general story, as laid out in the section of the second- or third-century CE Apollodoran *Library* devoted to Heracles.¹⁵ The basic components are all here: Heracles' arrival; the surrender by Atlas of the heavens to Heracles, enabling him to fetch three apples from the garden on Heracles' behalf; Atlas' offer to carry the apples to Eurystheus, and Heracles' subsequent trickery, duping Atlas into taking back the earth on the pretence of making himself a cushion for his shoulders. So are two episodes set on either side of the central action: the slaying of the serpent by Heracles (identified as a variant in the *Library*; cf. Diodorus 4.26.4), which allows Winterson's Atlas

to enter the garden; and the killing of the eagle that torments the Titan Prometheus and his release by Heracles. In the Apollodoran narrative the Prometheus episode precedes Heracles' visit to Atlas; in *Weight* Heracles visits Prometheus after leaving Atlas to carry the globe. Here, and no doubt more broadly, Winterson appears to have followed Robert Graves, whose book on *The Greek Myths* has been a go-to source since its publication by Penguin in 1955.¹⁶ Graves' summary of Heracles' Eleventh Labour both embellishes the Apollodoran account and supplements it with details selected from earlier and later versions.¹⁷ Winterson's close engagement is seen, for example, in Zeus' readiness to free Prometheus (p. 91; see more below), the harassment of Prometheus specifically by a 'griffon-vulture' (pp. 87, 91), and the setting of Heracles' bow by Zeus as a constellation in the sky (p. 93; cf. Hera's similar elevation of the serpent Ladon at pp. 41-2). In *Weight*, as in the Apollodoran *Library* and *The Greek Myths* before it, elements of the myth already circulating are reworked to give variable and occasionally conflicting versions a fixed structure and direction.¹⁸ In this mediated fashion, the ancient stories set the pattern of Heracles' and Atlas' interaction.

Within this narrative, *Weight's* two protagonists are each granted a distinct biography, leading from past, to present, to future. In line with this, they also acquire a full psychological life and undergo character development. Insights into the heroic mind are not without precedent in ancient receptions of the myth. Philostratus the Elder could read hidden sentiments and physical distress into the scene of pitying Heracles' request to assume exhausted Atlas' burden, conjured in ecphrasis (*Imagines* 2.20). However, this is one-dimensional by comparison to the range of emotional responses, the facility for introspection, and the levels of self-awareness displayed by *Weight's* protagonists. For all Winterson's hostility towards the novel – 'I do not write novels. The novel form is finished'¹⁹ – the ancient mythological figures are transformed into novelistic characters with feelings and motivations. That is to say, each possesses an inner life. Through their actions and reactions, conversations and internal monologues, Atlas and Heracles negotiate their individual situations. The mythological drama thus becomes a psychological drama, in which their encounter causes the central characters to confront issues of freedom, fate and personal responsibility. These provide the thematic bedrock of this cover version, turning the myth of Atlas and Heracles into a philosophical meditation.

At the root of this meditation lies the protagonists' shared predicament. This is expressed by Heracles when they first meet: 'Have a drink Atlas, you old globe. We've all got our burdens to bear. Your punishment is to hold up the universe. My punishment is to work for a wanker' (p. 29). In idea and terminology, Heracles' observation chimes with Atlas' previous assessment of his own situation. 'Punished for overstepping the mark' (p. 14), the self-styled freedom fighter who led the Titan's revolt after Zeus aided in the destruction of Atlantis (p. 20) had described how,

I was allowed to be my own punishment ... Because I am strong, my punishment was to support the Kosmos on my shoulders. I took up the burden of the whole world, the heavens above it, and the depths below ... This is my monstrous burden. The boundary of what I am. (pp. 20-1)

As Heracles shortly explains, his burden is to spend twelve years completing tasks set for him by Eurystheus to atone for his own misdemeanour: the slaughter of his children and other anonymous victims when driven mad by Hera (p. 32). Punished and burdened, compelled and restrained, their situations appear complementary. In addition, both characters view their situation through the prism of Fate. 'Who is strong enough to escape their fate? Who can avoid what they must become?' (p. 22), Atlas had earlier mused, echoing the Hesiodic description of Atlas holding up heaven at the ends of the earth under compulsion (*hup' anangkês*) and fulfilling the fate (*moiran*) apportioned by Zeus (*Theogony* 517-20). Soon, invited by Atlas to cast blame upon Hera, Heracles replies 'Call it Fate, not blame' (p. 29). As he proceeds to explain, Hera's response is normal for a woman tricked by her husband into nursing his bastard (p. 30), and when Zeus created that bastard he was simply conforming to the general truth that 'Men are unfaithful by nature' (p. 31). Even gods are constrained in their actions. Both Atlas and Heracles accept their particular Fates as unavoidable consequences of who they are. While each protagonist preserves his core mythological identity, shouldering the heavens and

Labouring on behalf of Eurystheus, their biographies at the point when they meet are shaped according to the same underlying pattern. Atlas and Heracles possess a shared worldview.

In Winterson's work, parallels are often created 'in order to question the limits of objective thinking', to destabilize default perceptions.²⁰ So *Weight's* two protagonists will both question their assumptions, following individual encounters with Hera in the garden of the Hesperides. Making an epiphany in fully divine form (as opposed to Zeus, who later enters the garden in epic-style disguise as a humble labourer), the goddess challenges each character in turn to recognize his culpability in their present predicament. For Heracles, the conversation picks up on questions of nature and blame, raised previously with Atlas.

'Must you kill everything, Heracles?' [asks Hera]
 'Kill or be killed. Don't blame me.' [replies Heracles]
 'Whom else should I blame?'
 'Blame yourself, drop dead gorgeous, all this starts with you.'
 'All this started with my husband's trickery and your brutality.'
 'You drove me mad.'
 'I didn't ask you to kill your own children.'
 'A mad man has no reason in his head.'
 'A brutal man has no pity in his heart.' (p. 40)

Heracles has just slain Ladon, the serpent guarding Hera's apples. In a stichomythic exchange reminiscent of Athenian tragedy in form and function, the hero and goddess contest their mutual responsibility for Heracles' present condition.²¹ Both deflect their responsibility onto other people: for Hera that person is Zeus, for Heracles it is Hera (whose jealousy is likewise credited for the hero's madness in Euripides' *Heracles*, 822-74, 1308-12).²² But Hera adds another factor: Heracles' natural disposition. A man with a different disposition would not have killed his children, even if mad. In a similar vein, turning prophet, Hera predicts that 'Not what you meet on the way, but what you are, will destroy you, Heracles' (p. 41). Heracles is implicated in his Fate. So too is Atlas. This time Hera's lesson is allegorical and involves a quasi-Biblical Tree of Knowledge. By contrast to the apples in Genesis (chapter 3), which offer Adam and Eve knowledge of good and evil, these apples are said by Hera to provide knowledge of past, present, and future. The tree is abundant with fruit, but selective vision means that when Atlas reaches out to pluck them he sees only three. Noticing his perplexity, Hera explains:

There was no enchantment, Atlas. You could not see the tree as it is. You could not see the changefulness of the world. All these pasts are yours, all these futures, all these presents. You could have chosen differently. You did not. (p. 75)

Atlas, Hera has just argued, was blind to other options when he chose to make war on the gods. Now she instructs him to 'choose your destiny' (p. 76). Where Heracles is bound by his nature, Atlas is bound by self-imposed limits. Neither has ever questioned their Fate, until now. Other factors are influential here: the serpent Ladon's instruction to Heracles to 'go home' (pp. 37, 43, 44), and Atlas' nascent self-awareness as he lies on the ground, weighed down by the third apple. Here, the Titan recognizes the vanity that prevents him even imagining exchanging his life for that of the human whose activities he hears: a female dyer who toils endlessly and in contentment (pp. 69-70), that is to say a free woman who never thinks of escape. However, here he also re-evaluates his choice to make war on the gods. Thus, in the garden of the Hesperides, each protagonist is moved 'for the first time' (pp. 43, 70) towards introspection, to ask 'why?', and in Atlas' case to begin to imagine an alternative future. Heracles and Atlas face the same existential conundrum, one that invites them to re-examine who they are and consider who they might be.²³

On the surface, their responses to the revelations in the garden, at the Tree of Knowledge, are different and bring the characters into tension. Where Atlas desires to postpone his burden, to travel to Eurystheus and carry on to visit his daughters, Heracles remains unable to create a new paradigm for

himself. Unable to bear the possibility that Atlas will not return, he deploys base cunning to trick the Titan into taking back the globe. Yet, once again Atlas is complicit. 'What could Atlas do? He wanted to hurl the universe at Heracles, crush him, annihilate time and make the story start again.' Instead,

Slowly, so as not to spill one drop of milk, Atlas lowered the Kosmos back onto his shoulders, and bent himself under the burden. He did it with such grace and ease, with such gentleness, love almost, that Heracles was ashamed for a moment. He would gladly have dashed the world to pieces if that would have freed him. He saw now that Atlas could do just that, but did not, and he respected him but would not help him. (pp. 83-4)

Atlas, whose kind-heartedness also leads him to be duped (p. 82), is constrained as much by his nature as Heracles. Both protagonists attempt to take charge of their future, but neither is able to step beyond their normal patterns of behaviour. They are trapped in a psychological bind. Yet, Heracles is changed by the encounter. His feeling of shame is reanimated when he meets Prometheus, who is physically bound in his own punishment on a mountain top.²⁴ Moved by pity, Heracles soothes the wound made by the vulture who returns daily to peck at the Titan's liver; and reminded of his brother Atlas's gentleness and his burden, he is inspired to ask Zeus to pardon Prometheus (p. 89). Zeus consents, and when Heracles notches his arrow against the vulture, and later sees his arrow emblazoned in the heavens, 'He felt he was at last being rewarded, instead of punished, for the hero, the conqueror, the *good man* that he was' (p. 93, original emphasis). Heracles has chosen to direct his heroic energies, to bend them to a moral purpose. This is not quite the Choice of the youthful hero whom Prodicus (DK 84 B1), Xenophon's Socrates (*Memorabilia* 2.1.21-34) and later Cicero (*De Officiis* 1.118) imagined contemplating a future life of virtue or vice through conversation with their divine incarnations. Nonetheless, it mirrors the presumption of self-determination imbedded in that scenario.²⁵ In assuming a quest for goodness, Heracles displays the pity Hera earlier implied he lacked (p. 94; cf. p. 91: "Mercy from a murderer," said Hera, without looking at him, "Well well".'), Heracles, it appears, has overcome the bounds of his nature. Yet, Zeus is in fact the architect of events, pleased to find a reason to release Prometheus (p. 91). Thus, the hero's self-determination, his ability to transcend the will of the god, is to some degree illusory. And when later pressed by Prometheus to save Atlas, Heracles can only refuse, witnessing the limits of his goodness in 'Hera's mocking smile' (p. 94). Ancient philosophers might anticipate that Heracles will follow the road to virtue, but the hero in *Weight* is unable to complete this journey. Eventually he will meet his death at the hands of his wife Deianeira (pp. 117-9), in fulfilment of the Fate predicted by Hera and the narrative requirements of Sophocles' tragedy, *The Women of Trachis*.²⁶ As a protagonist in a philosophical drama mapped onto his mythological career, Heracles exemplifies the inevitability of fate.

Atlas, by contrast, challenges it. In the final pages of Winterson's cover version Atlas releases the globe (pp. 149-51). In a sudden moment of free will, provoked again by the question 'Why?' (p.149, original emphasis), the Titan escapes not only the weight of his burden, but the confines of his myth. The existential bind upheld by Heracles is thus overcome by Atlas. With this apparent resolution, *Weight* draws to a close the core psychological drama by which the protagonists in tandem work through the thorny issue of Freedom versus Fate, identifying the boundaries that define their physical and mental conditions, and challenging them with various degrees of success. Written onto the long-standing story of Heracles' encounter with Atlas, this drama lends the ancient myth a universal application as a philosophical meditation on the experience of being.

AUTHOR INTO MYTH

The universality of the myth, however, is complicated by the injection of a third character, a voice who speaks in the first person, spliced between the 'ancient' material. This first person is a version of the author, as Winterson explains in the Introduction:

I have written this personal story in the First Person, indeed almost all my work is written in the First Person, and this leads to questions of autobiography.

Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important. The writer must fire herself through the text, be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements. I believe there is always exposure, vulnerability, in the writing process, which is not to say it is either confessional or memoir. Simply, it is real. (p. xv)

With this qualification, a straightforward interpretation of *Weight's* third character as the author is pre-empted. To some degree, these comments directly address a frequent confusion over the 'autobiographical' elements of Winterson's writing: for example, regarding her breakout work, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985b). In *Oranges* the character Jeanette is a fictionalized version of the author, whose life story references and mirrors, and also deviates and distorts, the author's biography.²⁷ And yet, the comments are necessary here because the First Person in *Weight* shares basic biographical details with the character Jeanette in *Oranges* and with Jeanette Winterson, as revealed by the author in interview and in her 2011 memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* All three are rejected first by their birth and then adoptive mothers; they have girlfriends; they grew up in Accrington or the town's fictional counterpart; they leave their homes for new lives; their mother was extreme in her Christianity. *Weight's* First Person is thus 'authentic' in part because its story replays Winterson's personal mythology. This is the basis of the claim to reality.²⁸ Alongside the revisioned myth of Atlas and Heracles, Winterson fictionalizes herself in a new cover version.

Indeed, authenticity further builds from the parallels constructed between the drama of Atlas and Heracles and the psychological disposition of what, for simplicity, we might call the authorial first person. This is bluntly established by the quip 'My girlfriend says I have an Atlas complex' (p. 97), and the shouldering of burdens, 'Books, houses, lovers, lives, all piled up on my back' (p. 99). Atlas has been rightly labelled an 'alter ego'.²⁹ And yet the resonances between the characters triangulate further. For example, the author's burdens are determined by the circumstances of her birth: experiencing maternal rejection twice over and 'Having no one to carry me, I learned to carry myself' (p. 97). Born of Zeus' infidelity, this is Heracles' perception too. Yet, Atlas' circumstances are also set by his birth. In *Weight's* genealogy, he is the direct progeny of Poseidon and Earth.³⁰ They are opposites: the sea is attracted by the fixity of the earth, while the earth adores his fluidity (p. 11). Together they represent the poles of Atlas' experience: the boundaries, and eventually the desire to wash them away. All three characters are entrapped by the factors associated with their birth. Then again, the opening gambit posed by the authorial first person strikes a chord with the experiences of Atlas and Heracles: 'What can I tell you about the choices we make? / Fate reads like the polar opposite of decision, and so much of life reads like fate' (p. 97). The question and answer summarize succinctly the outcome of the narrative so far, with the two protagonists still locked in their fated trajectories, despite and as a result of the choices they make. Later, she will reflect, 'We lie helpless in the force of patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behaviour. The burden is intolerable' (p. 99). The recognition by Heracles and Atlas of their complicity, their attempts to lay down their burdens, and their ultimate resumption of them mirror the entrapment of the author in her own past and her own patterns of behaviour. Moreover, she too desires to challenge this status quo: 'I want to tell the story again' (p. 100; cf. p. 137 and p. 146, below). Working as a title for both the first and final chapter, this refrain frames the new cover version and in the end anticipates Atlas' success.

The juxtaposition of 'fantasy' and 'reality', or legendary stories with quasi-autobiographical narrative, is familiar from *Oranges*. In that work, imaginative retellings of Biblical stories and Arthurian Legend clarify the experiences and feelings of the fictionalized Jeanette.³¹ In *Weight*, by comparison, the 'real' material – itself heavily mythologized – clarifies the dynamic at the heart of the new myth of Atlas and Heracles. On reflection, when Winterson writes in the Introduction 'Of course I wrote it out of my own situation. There is no other way' (p. xiv), she asserts a very personal relationship with the material: her experiences are transposed onto the mythological protagonists. Her mental attitude, shaped by preoccupations with boundaries, their self-imposition and the desire to transcend them, is acted out by her characters. Thus, Atlas and Heracles do not simply reveal the problems and issues attendant upon abstract philosophical ideas like fate and freedom through their adventures. They represent Winterson's individual psychoses.

MYTH AS PSYCHOTHERAPY

The myth of Atlas and Heracles thus operates as psychotherapy: a practical meditation on the author's specific mental condition that seeks a transformation. In the therapist's room, 'The creation or discovery of fresh stories ... is not merely a matter of *insight*: these new stories are then used back in the everyday world to construct different patterns of relationship and feeling.'³² Likewise in *Weight*, one stated purpose of retelling stories is to change the ending (p. 137). Another is 'to make ourselves come true' (p. 145):

Let me crawl out from under this world I have made. It doesn't need me any more.
Strangely, I don't need it either. I don't need the weight. Let it go. There are
reservations and regrets, but let it go.
I want to tell the story again. (p. 146)

This request immediately anticipates the release of Atlas, whose story is granted a new ending. He will put down the earth and dispose of his burden, and the author in First Person appears ready to follow. Yet, previously she remarked, 'I reach this moment, not once, many times, have been reaching it all my life, it seems, and I find there is no resolution' (p. 137).³³ This observation might be applied to Winterson's *oeuvre*, characterised as it is by thematic recursiveness.³⁴ In particular, *Weight*'s specific themes are long-standing: the shackles of the past on present and future action, for instance, feature in *Oranges*, *The Passion* (1987), and *The PowerBook* (2000).³⁵ Indeed, they will be revisited in the 2010 short story 'The Agony of Intimacy', another riff on a Classical myth. 'When you start a new life the past comes with you because there is nowhere else for it to go' (p. 281). This is the pronouncement of Helen, regarding the consequences of rape by Zeus in the guise of a swan on Leda, her now drug-addicted flatmate (cf. Leda's parallel description at p. 282). Leda, and Helen, and Daphne too, are locked into presents determined by their pasts, unable to alter their futures. This is the predicament of Atlas, Heracles and the authorial first person in *Weight*. In the short story, however, it is a message for the unnamed protagonist, a young woman navigating her way to sexual realisation whose joyful masturbation/cosmic copulation expresses her desire to move beyond the strictures of those other women's lives. She would rather touch and be touched, love and be loved than 'retreat into plant life, or have the same bad dream every night ... [or] watch a city burn because I was there' (pp. 284-5). The protagonist is offered the same opportunity as Atlas to realise the desire of *Weight*'s authorial first person to live in a different way. For Winterson's characters, resolution remains a possibility: perhaps the dark matter in space 'could be Atlas holding up the universe', says the authorial first person, 'But I think it is Atlas and Laika [his companion, the Russian cosmonaut dog] walking away' (p. 151). Just as telling the story in psychotherapy generates new possibilities for the client, closure for her characters creates new openings for the author to move beyond her personal mythology.

And yet not only does Winterson continue to tell the story through the repetition of themes, as evident in 'The Agony of Intimacy'. After writing *Weight*, she will reprise her mythology once more, giving it a new form and a tentative conclusion in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* *Weight*'s authorial first person aspires to follow the new mythological trajectory of Atlas, to change her ingrained patterns of behaviour just as the author has changed those of her protagonist. On past evidence, however, she may (and through Winterson's future writing, will) fall back into the mode of Heracles, trapped in a Fate of his own making (caught in the repetition of narratives about herself). That opening dedication to Deborah Warner implies that for now the weight is lifted. However, beyond the text Winterson is still compelled 'to tell the story again'.

This reading of *Weight* chimes with van der Wiel's recent analysis of Winterson's 'autobiographical' writings through the prism of contemporary trauma culture.³⁶ Like any victim, the author inevitably and invariably returns to and re-enacts the site of her childhood distress. *Weight* addresses this trauma; the written text replaces oral storytelling on the therapist's couch. In this context, Atlas and Heracles become psychotherapeutic agents, playing the role imagined for myth in psychoanalysis by offering 'truth in symbolic clothing'.³⁷ However, *Weight* reverses the standard dynamic, as sketched by Sigmund Freud in his seminal study *The Interpretation of Dreams I*, in relation to Oedipus:

His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so.³⁸

From this perspective myth services the unconscious by mediating universal anxieties, experienced by the individual and evidenced through the repetition of mythological story patterns in their dreams.³⁹ In *Weight*, by contrast, the ‘truth’ of Atlas and Heracles is contingent upon Winterson’s individual biography and specific to her mental outlook. As the author has remarked of all her work, ‘it is an explanation in code of myself to myself’.⁴⁰ And indeed, the story arose out of the author’s unconscious, where it was ‘waiting to be written’ (pp. xiii, xiv). Furthermore, by explaining herself in myth, making the universal ciphers Atlas and Heracles symbols for her personal psychoses, Winterson appropriates another component of psychoanalysis. Building on Freud’s work, Carl Jung identified a collective unconscious within which ‘pre-existing forms, the archetypes ... give definite form to certain psychic contents’.⁴¹ Evident again in myth, these are the ‘inherited schema that organize experience’.⁴² From the debris of the ancient myth – ‘far from complete’, ‘interrupted’, ‘eroded’, ‘twisted or folded’, ‘mountain building’ (*Weight*, pp. ix-x; printed large and in red as already noted) – the author generates her own archetype. The questing hero of the *Bildungsroman*, whom Joseph Campbell, a specialist in comparative literature with a penchant for psychoanalysis, made archetypal in his *Hero with A Thousand Faces*, acquires a new transformation, moulded through the author’s psyche: the burdened hero who seeks escape. Having previously found expression in Jeanette (*Oranges*), the same now manifests itself in *Weight*’s authorial first person and the ‘ancient’ mythological characters Atlas and Heracles.

CONCLUSION

Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles offers a rich reception of the story of Heracles’ visit to the garden of the Hesperides. It combines elements from earlier incarnations and extends beyond their confines. We have seen in passing how the author reworks ancient cosmologies, sends in the gods in full epiphany and in disguise, incorporates specific narratives from Greek literature, and deploys epic-style epithets and tragic stichomythia.⁴³ The result is a boisterous and vivid retelling, and, for the Classically attuned reader, a mythological world that possesses an ‘authenticity’ and ‘reality’ to match those constructed for the author through her reprised personal mythology. Moreover, by appropriating ancient Greek myth and creatively harnessing tools of contemporary analysis, Winterson creates a highly contingent retelling of Heracles’ Labour, one that prioritizes her own subjectivity.

This reorientation of the myth from the ‘universal’ to the ‘personal’ resonates in spirit with *Oranges*, which moves ‘from the “monologic and totalizing” history of the creation of the world by God to the “individual” story of the redemption of a woman’ through its retelling of Jeanette’s narrative within an Old Testament chapter structure.⁴⁴ As Front observes, Winterson’s work repeatedly offers women subjectivity, thereby releasing them from dominant masculine discourses, as part of a commitment to ‘inscribing women’s experience onto the history of the world’.⁴⁵ Although *Weight* lacks the wholesale feminist revision of the Bible in *Oranges* and *Boating for Beginners* (1985a),⁴⁶ the interventions of the female author into the story effects a similar intrusion into another such discourse: Greek myth. Drafted into literature and art, and thence into the European imagination, by male poets, philosophers and painters of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the diminishing and demonizing of women characteristic of Greek myth has generally persisted in modern receptions. Over the past century, however, this trend has been increasingly challenged by women authors who set female characters centre stage and write from female perspectives.⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), published in the Canongate *Myths* series at the same time as *Weight*, is one such example. There Penelope and the maids wrest control of the narrative from Odysseus (and *The Odyssey*), talk about their life experiences as his wife and in service, express their own emotions and desires, and formulate rebukes to the binds of patriarchy and class that delineate their lives.⁴⁸ *Weight* redresses the balance in a different way. The investiture of the author alongside her characters enables the myth of the male protagonists Atlas and Heracles to become truly universal, in the sense that the experiences and

psychology represented are not gender dependent. This equalization matches the bolder gender fluidity of Winterson's central character Ali(x) in *The PowerBook* or the sexually indeterminate narrator of *Written on the Body* (1992), who destabilize standard boundaries between women and men. Without fanfare, the reworked myth of Atlas and Heracles sustains a quiet assertion of gender equivalency.

Furthermore, by creating her own psychotherapy through myth, even inventing a personalized archetype, Winterson appropriates another predominantly masculine discourse, whilst also rejecting it. 'I am not a Freudian,' asserts the authorial first person, 'I don't believe I can mine the strata of the past and drill out the fault-lines' (p. 139). As a therapy, psychoanalysis focuses on the patient's regression into childhood under the guidance of a parent-analyst with the aim of bringing the patient to psychological maturity.⁴⁹ This attention corresponds to Freud's conclusion in *The Interpretation of Dreams II* that dreams, and by implication then also myth, comprise 'a perfect likeness of the past'. The knowledge they afford is restricted therefore to the past, and any seeming allusion to the future is to a future predicated on the past.⁵⁰ Instead of dissecting her past, Winterson seeks a new ending through constructive rather than deconstructive story-telling. By denying the knowability of the past, described as partially erased and incomplete (p. 139-40), the author frees her myth from the Freudian bind, and in the process opens up a route to the future. In this way the author acquires agency in her own therapy.

Cast into myth, Winterson's story offers new perspectives and opportunities for the reader too. As Winterson notes in *Art Objects*, when we contemplate any art, 'we are clearing a space where new stories can take root, in effect we are clearing a space for new stories about ourselves'.⁵¹ The enactment in myth of the underlying philosophical and psychological dilemma – the possibilities and limits of self-determination encapsulated in that conundrum, 'The free man never thinks of escape' – offers the reader a chance to reappraise their own lives and mental proclivities and thereby pursue their own transformation. For this reason, Plate's criticism that *Weight* lacks the forward-looking vision of literary revisions in the 1980s and 1990s seems too strong. Certainly the work avoids setting out a communal agenda, but it preserves a 'sense of rewriting or revisiting the past in order to the change the future' for the individual reader.⁵² Attending to its reality, the reader might further join the author in breaking free of the clamour of modern media and its banalities, to hear instead about 'the life of the mind and the soul's journey' (p. xvi). (There is a further thematic recursiveness here: see Handel's lament on the desensitising hubbub of media news in *Art & Lies*, 1996a: 12-14.) With this ambition and possible effect, *Weight* is political once more.⁵³

Weight is thus at home in Winterson's provocative *oeuvre*. In light of her autobiographical and subversive tendencies, it is perhaps unsurprising that the paratextual praise of the Canongate Myth series for its dedication to retelling 'universal' and 'timeless' stories (p. iii), for finding in them 'permanent truths about human nature' (p. xvi), is followed by the execution of a highly personal retelling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles that is also time-specific, fitting within a post-modern literary environment, harnessing the forms and ideas of modern psychotherapy, and aiming to effect change within the current socio-political climate. The universality is not that of the popular imagination, in which myths from diverse societies are conventionally considered to be equivalent carriers of cross-cultural truths. Nor is it the universality effected by feminist authors like Atwood who reframe female characters through the prism of contemporary female experience. Rather, it is a universality refracted outwards from the individual. Aware from the beginning of the incompleteness, distortions and partiality of stories, and committed to telling her own story again, in *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* Winterson renegotiates what it means for myth to be 'universal' and 'timeless', and claims value for her own mythic truths.

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¹ The programmatic agenda stated on the series website and printed in preface to each volume: see <http://www.themyths.co.uk/> (accessed 5 April 2016).

² See Winterson (1997).

³ For an introduction to Winterson's work, see Grice and Woods (1998), along with other essays in their collection.

⁴ For this terminology and function, see Genette (1997: 10-1).

⁵ Csapo (1994) details the relevant intellectual movements and theories.

⁶ Buxton (1994) illustrates the new focus on myths in the moments of their performance. For contextualized readings see also Dowden and Livingstone (2012), and essays in their *Companion to Greek Mythology*. For the monomyth, see Campbell (1993).

⁷ The priority of this theme is confirmed by Winterson (2011: 157).

⁸ The story of Heracles' encounter with Atlas is better preserved in the visual than literary material: see the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)* III/1 s.v. 'Atlas', pp. 1-16, for discussion of both.

⁹ Athens, National Museum 1132 (*Beazley Archive Pottery Database* 330739).

¹⁰ Gela, Museo Archeologico N125 (*Beazley Archive Pottery Database* 303369).

¹¹ Stafford (2012: 46-7) offers a short summary; for a full synopsis with sources, see Gantz (1993: 410-3). See also Brommer (1972: 47-52).

¹² Note that in line with his absence from the Athens lekythos, Atlas' role in scenes where he holds up the heavens, as depicted on the Gela oil jar, may be minimized. Already in Hesiod (*Theogony* 517-20), Atlas is situated at the ends of the earth with the Hesperides. Carpenter (1991: 129) reads depictions of the Titan on a sixth-century shield band and black-figure cup as follows: 'Atlas has taken back the heavens and Herakles moves off with the apples'. However, in such scenes he may operate as part of the geographical setting, rather than as an active participant in the adventure.

¹³ Compare the thirteen Greek (and four Etruscan) depictions of Atlas and Heracles listed in *LIMC* III/1 (n.8, above) with the two Roman items; by contrast there are fifteen stand-alone Atlases from the Roman period.

¹⁴ Naples, National Archaeological Museum 308.

¹⁵ [Apollodorus], *Library* 2.5.11, supplemented in Frazer (1921) by the Scholion to Apollonius of Rhodes (Schol. *ap.* AR 4.1396), which was indebted to a lost fifth-century BCE mythography by Pherecydes (*BNJ* 3 FF16, 17).

¹⁶ As noted by Pharand (2001: vii).

¹⁷ For the Eleventh Labour see Graves (2001: 507-12; see esp. 510-11, with footnotes 14-15 and commentary on p. 514 on the Prometheus episode).

¹⁸ As the author of the *Library* also attempted but to minimalist effect: see Smith and Trzaskoma (2007: xiv-xv), who describes the purpose of ancient mythographers as '*retelling or paraphrasing* myths to capture their essential features, or at least their essential plots, and provide a reliable version without embellishment' (original emphasis). For Graves' comparable methodology, which nonetheless extended to extrapolation and interpretation, see Pharand (2001: xv and *passim.*) and Zajko (2015). See also n. 30, below.

¹⁹ Winterson (1996b: 191).

²⁰ Childs (2005: 263).

²¹ For verbal response of the type displayed by Hera and Heracles, see Collins (2004: 3-29). In function the exchange combines the common parrying of questions and answers, persuading and resisting, and insulting identified by Brown (1996) for stichomythia.

²² Although in that tragedy Heracles' Labours lie in the past, but possibly this is a Euripidean invention: see Griffiths (2006: 20-1). Note that Papadopoulou (2005: 128) reads Euripides' presentation of Heracles as problematizing the nature of the hero when sane, much as Hera does here.

²³ For a bolder reading of *Weight* as an Existentialist project, see Basak Baskan (2010).

²⁴ The burdens of the two Titans were already brought into parallel on the tondo of a mid-sixth-century drinking cup from Laconia, found in Cerveteri: Vatican City, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco 16592.

²⁵ See Biesecker (1991: 163) for Prodicus' innovation, and Kuntz (1993-4: 178): 'The Prodikeyan Herakles defines through his choice his own will to virtue and subsequent heroism.'

²⁶ The tragedy parallel is noted by Stafford (2012: 240).

²⁷ For the intersections, see Antakyalioğlu (2009), who also reflects on the autobiographical fictions of *Weight*.

²⁸ Cf. Winterson (1996b: 60): 'If we fictionalise ourselves, and consciously, we are freed into a new kind of communication. It is abstract, light, cheerful, *genuine...*' (my emphasis).

²⁹ For example, by Janković (2008: 200), for whom the leitmotif is also central to a song adaptation of *Weight* by the Serbian composer Anja Djordjević, and by Staels (2009: 111).

³⁰ For the Poseidon paternity, together with Atlas' back-story regarding the destruction of Atlantis, see Graves (2001: 143-5). Here Graves is drawing from Plato's *Critias* (113d), where Cleito is the mother. Note that the connection drawn between Atlas' participation in the Titanomachy and the destruction of Atlantis is Graves' own. For a 'live' mythological tradition (as opposed to one shaped to serve a philosophical proposition), compare Hesiod's *Theogony* (507-9), in which Atlas is the son of the Iapetus, a Titan son of Heaven and Earth, and Clymene, daughter of Ocean. See Gantz (1993: 40-1), who adds (at p. 46) that Atlas' leadership in the Titan's war against Zeus and his consequent punishment is first attested in Hyginus' *Fabulae* (150), a Latin mythography that may have circulated from the first century CE but that was adapted down into the fifth (Scott Smith and Trzaskoma, 2007: xlix-l).

³¹ Antakyalioğlu (2009: 8).

³² McLeod (1997: 39), original emphasis.

³³ Compare Winterson on her writing, in interview with Bilger (1997): 'Things are continually beginning again; they're never really resolved, you know. They are only resolved temporarily.'

³⁴ See Onega (2006: 223).

³⁵ See Cox (2009: 53).

³⁶ van der Wiel (2009).

³⁷ Freud (1961: 44-5), quoted by Campbell (1993: vii).

³⁸ Freud (1953-74, vol. 4: 262).

³⁹ Caldwell (1993: 346) offers a clear synopsis of psychoanalytic perspectives in relation to Classical myth.

⁴⁰ Winterson (2007).

⁴¹ Jung (1968: 42-3).

⁴² As described by Armstrong (2011: 481).

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- ⁴³ Note the proposal by Staels (2009) that in its burlesque *Weight* resembles also a satyr play.
- ⁴⁴ Onega (1996: 141), cited by Williams-Wanquet (2006: 406).
- ⁴⁵ Front (2009: 11).
- ⁴⁶ See Williams-Wanquet (2006: 400-7).
- ⁴⁷ See Zajko (2007: 396-8).
- ⁴⁸ Atwood's feminist agenda is highlighted by Howells (2008); cf. Braund (2012: 202-6).
- ⁴⁹ For the process see Zetzel and Messner (1973). Though described as a 'therapeutic alliance' in which the analyst becomes an object for transference for the patient as they enter regression, 'the analytic situation requires that the patient place himself in a passive and recumbent position' (pp. 297-8). As the patient works towards autonomy (individuation, maturation) they are reliant still on the interpretation of the analyst, who starts and ends the process as a 'parent': 'The ultimate achievement of maturity – whether for the child or for the patient – involves recognition that he is neither so independent nor so invulnerable that he can do without the help and support of meaningful objects' (p. 299).
- ⁵⁰ Freud (1953-74, vol. 5: 621), quoted and discussed by Forrester (1990: 90-6).
- ⁵¹ Winterson (1996b: 60).
- ⁵² Plate (2008: 391).
- ⁵³ The political agency of Winterson's writing is discussed by Hutchison (2010: 359). Cf. the author's statement in interview with Jeffries (2010) that 'My aim in writing is never just to give pleasure. Art isn't a luxury product. It's always about trying to change people's lives'.