LITERARY CULTURE IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

Jens Kirk

Associate Professor,
Department of Languages, Culture and Aesthetics
University of Aalborg

> *"What think you of books?"*
> *Jane Austen*
>
> *"So, have you read any good books lately?"*
> *Helen Fielding*

Literary culture involves people at work. Work implies doing things with or to something in order to create value and significance. Literary culture, then, involves people working with and doing things to things literary in order to produce value. In this essay I look at the work done by writers and fans, more particularly, by British author Jeanette Winterson and her readers at jeanettewinterson.com

The Internet, a global system of networked computers, their users, and their data and the World Wide Web (W3), which uses the Internet to transport hypertext / multimedia documents, are recent systems facilitating the work being done and the value created in and by literary culture in its many shapes and forms. A website offers, among other things, a place for writers to present their work, publishers to advertise their writers, and readers to talk about their favourite authors and books. In these activities there is nothing new, of course. What is new is that the Internet not only makes these activities possible but creates a record of them at the same time. While the work of writers and publishers in terms of, for instance, interviews or publicity campaigns has always been well documented, the activities of their consumers have remained relatively unrecognized as work since they are parts of a predominantly oral culture taking place in informal contexts such as reading clubs, literary societies, and dinner parties. In taking place in the same place so to speak, the activities of producers, mediators, and consumers of text are acts of work forming a new object of research for the student of literary culture.

The literary culture on the Internet that I'm dealing with in this essay relates to the literary culture outside the Internet. The work done on the Internet produces value and significance in the literary culture of the printed book. Writers present their material on the Net in order to sell more books. Publishers and bookshops go electronic for very much the same reasons. And readers buy and read printed books and relate to the Internet both as a distinct literary culture and as the extension of an oral one they're already familiar with.

Bourdieu's accounts (1993, 1996)[1] of the literary field and its agents in terms of a struggle

---

[1] As far as I know, Bourdieu never published anything concerning the Internet.

for the creation of value or capital in terms of two economic logics or "two modes of production and circulation obeying inverse logics" (1996: 142) is an account of a predominantly print-based literary culture. While it looks very much as if the Internet furnishes a field in which representatives of a predominantly print-based literary culture can move about strategically in order to further their own interests in relation to other printed and electronically mediated texts – thus making themselves present in new ways in contemporary culture, Bourdieu's key notion of capital needs a supplement if we are to account for the computer-based literary culture on W3. In this paper, I suggest that Georg Simmel's notion of sociability[2] offers an interesting way of thinking about some of the key processes characteristic of literary culture on the web especially among the consumers whose acts of reception it records.

I've decided to focus on Jeanette Winterson in this paper for several reasons. She is a well established figure in contemporary British literary culture. As a novelist, essayist, co-editor of a new edition of Woolf's work, book reviewer at the *Times*, and book award panellist, she has established herself as a not inconsequential figure in the culture of the printed book. Thus, she is someone with a relatively high level of symbolic capital within the field of cultural production. But she is also an example of a contemporary writer who has been interested in the new computer-based media. Thus, in her first person novel *The Power-book* (2001), her object of imitation is neither the diary nor the personal letter – two discourses which have served as models for most first person novels with homodiegetic narrators – but the electronic discourse of e-mails. Moreover, since the establishment of her website in 2000 (jeanettewinterson.com), she has shown a keen interest in it by updating it every month and adding features on a regular basis thereby creating a forum not just for the dissemination of her own writings, but also a place where her readers can form discussion groups. While her website is relatively well developed and advanced, it is, nevertheless, a representative one in so far that it illustrates the kinds of work that literary culture on the Net makes possible and the value and significance resulting from that work. It is also representative in another sense since it "was selected for preservation by the The British Library" (http://www.webarchive.org.uk/tep/11232.html).

But before I look at her website, it is necessary to address the issue of reading websites. Because W3 is a relatively recent information system, websites raise the fundamental question of how to read them. No authoritative theory or methodology of making sense of that kind of data exists – to my knowledge, at least. What we do have are theories and methodologies concerning the *construction* of websites. A lot of work has been and is being done within the fields of Information Architecture and Web Usability. But theories concerning how websites ought to be constructed and what they ought to look like in an ideal world of dot-com profit making say very little at best about how they are constructed in reality and how people use them. In the following, I propose to exclude matters that concern the appearance of the site and instead focus my reading of the website

---

[2] In his book *Det selskabelige samfund* (*The Society of Sociability* (my translation)), Danish media professor Stig Hjarvard argues that today's "media promotes sociable and purposeless talk among people who have liberated themselves from their social roles and are equally entitled to speak" (2005: 13. my translation).

on two perspectives – those of the owner and the users.[3] The central questions for me are, then, what sort of work does Jeanette Winterson's website do and allow its users to do, and, what kinds of value are produced? By answering these questions I hope to map out a way of understanding the literary culture of the W3 in general.

The front page of Winterson's website[4] (jeanettewinterson.com) consists of a number of hyperlinks taking you to other pages. Each of these pages presents the user with two kinds of use or function that I make a distinction between in terms of individual or off-the-record uses and community or for-the-record uses. In distinguishing between the two I draw upon analogies from outside the Net. The individual function presents the user with a kind of archive. In furnishing a wide range of material in different genres and media, e.g., written texts, photographs, films, and speech, Winterson's website constitutes a public record of her life and work, allowing users to access a variety of sources. Thus, the hyperlink "Books" gives you the opportunity of reading and listening to Winterson reading extracts from her published and unpublished novels and short stories. A monthly "Column" records Winterson's comments and views on a wide variety of subjects. "Journalism" stores Winterson's articles appearing in the printed press. "About" documents Winterson's life in a series of headlines such as "Biography", "Gallery", "Events" and "Profiles and Interviews". Information concerning Winterson's readings of poetry is supplied by "Poetry". Lastly, "Verde's" tells of Winterson's shop, her interest

in food, and the preservation of buildings. The analogy of the archive is not the only one available for understanding her website, of course. Certainly, the ordering of the material into a number of subgroups suggests, perhaps, that other, related analogies are worth thinking about, for instance, the library, the Wunder Kammer, the museum, the exhibition, and the public display. Irrespective of the exact image, however, what is important is the idea that the website supports what I call the individual or the off-the-record function in allowing using it as a place where data concerning Jeanette Winterson's life and work can be accessed from our computers.

Importantly, in doing just that, i.e. in facilitating the individual function, Jeanette Winterson succeeds in making herself present in new ways in the literary culture in Britain and the world. In relying on the capacity of computers to store and access digital data, a website presents you with a unique opportunity of becoming present in many shapes and forms: as written text, images, photographs, film, and sound. From this point of view, the website presents an image of Winterson as an agent positioning herself within the literary field. This motivation is explicitly present, for instance, in her section on books, which is entitled "Action Station":

> This is the action station. What more do you want? We've got content, we've got your questions answered, we've got Virginia Woolf, and we've got a fab Flash Movie. Move over Stephen King.
> (http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/books.asp)

Quite literally, Winterson here situates herself between Woolf and Stephen King, between serious and popular fiction, between the old and the new media, between the book and the Flash Movie. That this example of the creation of difference by bridging mutually

---

[3] I don't want to suggest that the appearance of the site is immaterial. Certainly, that aspect…

[4] The following ought to be read with on-line access to the relevant websites.

exclusive positions in the field[5] is an example of cultural work intended to produce value becomes obvious, again quite literally, as Winterson continues:

> The books are the best of me. When people ask me why I write I tell them it's what I'm for. It really is as simple as that.
>
> In the following pages you'll find excerpts from all the books, my own view of what they are and how they work, and an easy way to buy them. You don't have to buy them but a little retail therapy won't do any harm in the middle of all this art and life.

By spanning writers such as Woolf and Stephen King, the serious and the popular, the old and the new, Winterson comes across as a writer with a particular significance. That significance feeds into an economic logic, which the humorous tone of the concluding sentence cannot erase: first, her value is translated into her books – they are "the best of [her]". Secondly, Winterson's books are available electronically as "excerpts" on her webpage and, thirdly, as printed books, which you are offered "an easy way to buy" from amazon.com.

Looked at from point of view of the individual function, literary culture on the Internet is very much an extension of the literary culture of the printed book. You could say that printed books are the origin and end of literary culture on the Net. As can be seen, for instance, from the fact that the blurb of a book often contains the website address of the publisher and the writer, books and their

writers make us access the Web in search of information concerning books and writers; and that information is designed to make us buy books. As long as literary culture on the Web can be imagined within the literary culture of the printed book, Bourdieu's notion of "[t]he charismatic ideology" (1993: 76) celebrating the author as the origin and end of meaning furnishes a suitable set of terms in which to frame our understanding of the processes involved. However, as soon as we take a look at the second function, i.e. the community function, offered by websites, Bourdieu's framework no longer appears helpful.

On the front page of Winterson's website, the community function, which allows you to interact asynchronically with other people, is manifested by three hyperlinks. "Message Board" permits users to exchange information and points of view with each other. "Mailing list" allows the owner to contact the users and "Feedback" makes it possible for the users to contact the owner. In trying to make sense of this interactive function, it is also useful to think in terms of images and analogies from traditional literary culture. Thus the community function works like a kind of coffee-house in allowing a high degree of contact between its users or visitors and owners concerning things literary. Similarly, apart from the coffee-house, other analogies spring to mind: the club, the literary society, and the letters pages in literary periodicals and journals.

Of the three community functions the "Message Board" stands out by offering the users a range of choices of work as users *and* producers of text: A "main forum" for discussing all things remotely Wintersonian, a forum for the discussion of her books, a forum for the board members' own writings, and a forum for the discussion of Winterson's website, including comments and suggestions from

---

[5] Winterson's attempt to produce difference in this manner echoes the poetics she outlines in *Art Objects*. Here she advocates a "[…] make it new" aesthetics (1996: 12) involving a reclaiming of the past. Similarly, her preference for some of the great Modernists, e.g., Woolf, Eliot, and Stein, springs from their ability to span established categories (of writing) (e.g. 49).

the users. In contrast to the individual function, before using the community functions available on the "Message Board" you have to register as a member. You do that by filling in a short form specifying your login and profile details, i.e. you give your name or the pseudonym you prefer, your date of birth, gender (male, female, or unspecified), location, and you give a short description of yourself, completely of your own choice. Moreover, you have to state explicitly that you agree with the "Terms and Conditions" of the message board – a set of rules forming "your guide to behaviour on these boards". Some of the rules are very general and apply to good behaviour in any public context. For instance, users are asked to "[t]reat others on these message boards as you would expect them to treat you" and you are reminded of the fact that "[t]hese are public boards, so act like you would if you were in a public place". While other rules are highly detailed, prohibiting, for instance, hacking, spamming, and "Flaming, Bashing, and Trolling Hate posts", they are clearly the web-specific equivalent of the broader conventions of good behaviour.

Once you've registered, you are allowed to read, comment on, and create new topics on any of the forums. Each topic and reply on a forum is accompanied by a certain amount of information concerning the author of the post – information reflecting his or her history as a member of the Message Board. Apart from his or her pseudonym, three things about a member are revealed by a post. "Date Joined" and "Location" reflect the profile details offered by the user at the time of registration while "Posts" indicates how many times someone has contributed to the boards, i.e. his or her history as a member. Moreover, two hyperlinks contain information concerning the poster. First, "Profile" repeats the profile particulars and description you registered under and gives the date of your "last login" and the number of posts that you've contributed to. Secondly, "Posts" presents an overview of the topics actually generated by a member of the Message Board. By relying almost exclusively on information generated by the members' behaviour on the Message Board, the identities of the contributors revealed by the posts they offer are electronic. Moreover, the identities are, in fact, website specific, i.e. the personae of the members are fleshed out in terms of their lives on the website - the history of their beginnings and the frequency of their contributions – and are only valid within the confines of that site. Thus, as is the case elsewhere on the Net, Winterson's forum allows you to create a kind of alternative identity for yourself. As a member you are given the possibility of choosing a new name for yourself and to create a new personal history in a new community by contributing to the topics under discussion and creating new ones. You become what you contribute, you literally write yourself, you are your own "language costumier" (Winterson 2001: 1).

The website specific identities and the dynamics by which they are created and maintained on Winterson's website cannot be accounted for by referring to Bourdieu's rules of art. The identities of the authors do not relate to the field of cultural production. If they did, their identities, like the one Winterson creates for herself, would be mapped out in terms of their cultural capital. Instead, I propose that Georg Simmel's concept of sociability is useful in trying to understand what the community function allows its users to do. Simmel identifies an "impulse to sociability in man" (1971: 128), i.e. a desire in human beings to unite, associate, and team up with other human beings. Moreover, he distinguishes

between two kinds of sociability. On the one hand, we unite "for the sake of special needs and interests" (128), and our motive of association is grounded in the "special content" of the association. This is the case, for instance, with various political, economic, or environmental organizations. On the other hand, our forming of associations is determined "by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others." Here examples include various kinds of "sociable gathering" (129), i.e. parties.[6] This kind of sociability is labelled "sociability in the narrower sense" (128–29), "sociability in its pure form", and is defined as "the play-form of association" (130).

Simmel, then, maps out two kinds of sociability according to whether the activities involved are oriented towards the product, the result of the interaction, which is situated outside the activity, or the process, i.e. the activity itself. The two activities are cast as opposites. Any given situation will always further an end outside itself or it won't. However, Simmel finds important similarities between the two kinds of sociability as well. Both are meaningful activities. Directed towards results outside itself, the broad notion of sociability is a literally significant and meaningful activity while pure sociability – notwithstanding its status as a process oriented activity - enjoys symbolic significance:

---

[6] The editor of Simmel's essay remarks in a note that "in German, […] the word *Gesellschaft* means both "society" and "party" (in the sense of a sociable gathering)" (129, n1). Similarly, the words "party" in English and "selskab" in Danish refer, on the one hand, to sociable events, and, on the other, to political or economic organisations respectively.

And just this will show itself more and more as the essence of sociability; that it makes up its substance from numerous forms of serious relationships among men, a substance, however, spared the frictional relationships of real life; but out of its formal relations to real life, sociability (and the more so as it approaches pure sociability) takes on a symbolically playing fullness of life and a significance which a superficial rationalism always seeks only in the content. (129)

Thus, sociability in its pure form has formal relations in common with "real life" or sociability in its broad form. Pure sociability mimes its real life counter part on the level of form. This is why, according to Simmel, sociability values "good form" (129):

For 'good form' is mutual self-definition, interaction of the elements, through which a unity is made; and since in sociability the concrete motives bound up with life goals fall away, so must the pure form, the free-playing, interacting interdependence of individuals stand out so much more strongly and operate with so much the greater effect.

Winterson's forums allow its users to engage in work in the pure form of sociability Simmel has in mind. The alternative identities of its users – their virtual histories as personae in terms of their relative "age" and relative "importance" on the website mirror the ways in which identity is created in the real world, but have no validity there. Similarly, the terms and conditions that you agree to when you become a member foreground the importance of *how* you participate, banning behaviour that is disruptive of the unity of the Message Boards such as flaming, bashing, and hacking, for instance. *What* you actually have to say matters less.

While the idea of sociability is inscribed within the software and the explicit terms that

regulate behaviour on Winterson's website, it is also made concrete by the nature of the actual discussions that takes place on the forums – discussions which can be understood with reference to Simmel's notion of conversation. Conversation is not only the "most extensive instrument of all human common life" (136), it also "realises to the full the abstraction of the forms of sociological interaction otherwise significant because of their content and gives them – now turning about themselves, so to speak – a shadow body" (135–36). As was the case earlier in his outline of sociability in general, Simmel begins his analysis of conversation by emphasising the difference between, on the one hand, "talk for the sake of the content" (136), and, on the other, talk as "an end in itself". Either we talk in order to impart something, i.e., content, to somebody or to arrive at a common understanding of that something, or we talk merely to exchange talk. However, the two kinds of talk share important similarities as well:

> All the forms with which this exchange develops: argument and the appeals to the norms recognised by both parties; the conclusion of peace through compromise and the discovery of common convictions; the thankful acceptance of the new and the parrying off of that on which no understanding is to be hoped for – all these forms of conversational interaction, otherwise in the service of innumerable contents and purposes of human intercourse, here have their meaning in themselves; that is to say, in the excitement of the play of relations which they establish between individuals, binding and loosening, conquering and being vanquished, giving and taking.

From a formal point of view, then, the two kinds of conversation are identical. Both involve the same conversational actions of, for instance, argument, appeal, conclusion, compromise, acceptance, and parrying off. But for one kind of conversation the referential function is important. What matters is the relationship between message and context, i.e. the truth value of the discussion or conversation. Sociable conversation, in contrast, imitates its serious sibling, pretending and making believe that the referential function matters:

> In order that this play may retain its self-sufficiency at the level of pure form, the content must receive no weight on its own account; as soon as the discussion gets business-like, it is no longer sociable; it turns its compass point around as soon as the verification of a truth becomes its purpose. Its character as sociable converse is disturbed just as when it turns into a serious argument. The form of the common search of the truth, the form of the argument, may occur; but it must not permit the seriousness of the momentary content to become its substance any more than one may put a piece of three-dimensional reality into the perspective of a painting. Not that the content of sociable conversation is a matter of indifference; it must be interesting, gripping, even significant – only it is not the purpose of the conversation that these issues should square with objective results, which stand by definition outside the conversation. (136)

Simmel sums up the differences and similarities between sociable conversations and their real world counterparts:

> Outwardly, therefore, two conversations may run a similar course, but only that one of them is sociable in which the subject matter, with all its value and stimulation, finds its justification, its place, and its purpose, only in the functional play of conversation as such, in the form of repartee with its special unique significance. (136)

Any topic on the Books Forum will illustrate Simmel's points concerning sociable conversation. In the following I look at the topic

"Gore Vidal". It consists of the topic proper, i.e., the first post created by the author, "tabou", on 3 November 2006. At the time of the writing of this essay (11 November 2006), a total of 18 replies had been made, involving six authors including "tabou". Several aspects of this electronic conversation can be regarded as instances of sociable conversation. First, the topic is introduced in a way that suggests that "Gore Vidal" is a spin off of an earlier conversation – the function of the topic, it appears, is to maintain or renew the conversation in terms of "the play of relations" that Simmel mentioned earlier:

> "*For that matter*, has anybody read Vidal's new memoir? Heard him speak? Want to weigh in on his comparative weight in the gay canon" (tabou, 03/11/2006, my emphasis).

Secondly, while the original topic offers a question that could easily be replicated in the discourse of, for instance, literary criticism, "Want to weigh in on his comparative weight in the gay canon?", that agenda, while being what Simmel referred to as "interesting, gripping, even significant", in no way controls the discourse of the other contributors or the topic creator, and we move from the problem of Gore Vidal's relation to the gay canon to the hot topic of the Mid-Term Elections in the US (gabrielleh, 09/11/2006) to the difficulties involved in getting a signed copy of the second volume of Vidal's *Memoirs* (papers4ink, 11/11/2006). Thirdly, in principle the conversation could go on for ever in this manner, moving from topic to topic. When it does stop, it is not because a particular result or understanding concerning the content, for instance, Gore Vidal's importance for the gay canon, has been achieved. The last entry is merely last in a chronological not a logical sense.

In this manner, the concept of sociability offers a way of making sense of the work done with and to things literary on the Internet, and, more particularly, that part of the culture which involves a community aspect. Literary culture on the Internet allows you debate things literary with other people in a way that is meaningful not because of the result, first and foremost, but because of the unity that is created and maintained discursively. In this aspect the Internet is no different from the average dinner party; both present their participants with the possibility of association for the sake of association. So you could say that the Internet does not make possible a new literary culture. Rather, it facilitates the same kind of work by offering a new medium, and in doing so the Internet records sociability, offering students of literary culture a new object of study.[7]

So far I have been speaking in very general and impersonal terms about the Internet as if it were a kind of (benign) godlike presence. However, the possibilities and limitations of literary culture on the Internet and the Web are not given once and for all but are constantly being designed by the providers of software solutions. In the case of Winterson's website, the responsibility of the two functions rests ultimately with the company responsible for developing and managing the software determining what you can and what you can't do. The front page of Winterson's website

---

[7] My discussion of literary culture on the Internet in terms of Simmel's notion of sociability reduces literary culture to the level of any other sociable discourse. In principle there is no difference between participating in a sociable discussion concerning literature or cooking, for instance, both are pursued for the sake of unity. But perhaps literature, if we regard literature as having a reduced referential function, offers an ideal subject for sociable talk.

contains a hyperlink to the company in question, i.e. the Pedalo Company. According to their website, Pedalo limited:

> [...] provide a wide range of services including web, print and graphic design, accessibility and usability, content management, website development and website marketing. [We] enable our clients to maximise the effectiveness of their web presence with the priority being that they see a return on their investment. (www.pedalo.co.uk).

This suggests that not only the individual function, which allows us to access information concerning Winterson – information which positions her in the literary field by creating her as different and significant – but also the community function, although the activities we meet there are process oriented examples of sociability, are products of the struggle for value in terms of an end oriented economic logic. Judging from the "impressive list of author, writer and journalist clients" (http://www.pedalo.co.uk/clients.asp) that pedalo limited boasts, the company is becoming a major partner for an increasing number of agents in the British literary field in their struggle to position themselves. Pedalo claims that "[l]eading journalists, writers, authors, publishers, agents and publicists" (http://www.pedalo.co.uk/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=67), e.g. Alain de Botton and Ian Rankin, are among their regular clients. In the future, students of literary culture must account for the work done by companies like pedalo.

In this essay I have outlined the literary culture on the Internet with special reference to Jeanette Winterson's website. I have shown that users of her site are allowed two kinds of work or uses – what I have called the individual and community functions. In relation to the former function, I have offered the image of the archive, claiming that using the archive involves an extension of the literary field familiar from the culture of print. Concerning the latter I claimed that Bourdieu's notion of cultural production has to be replaced by Simmel's notion of sociability if we want to understand the work taking place there. Rather than value in terms of cultural capital, the work done within the forums on the Message Board produced value by discursively creating and maintaining the unity among its users. But, ultimately, I want to maintain that the two functions imply that the website and its uses are firmly inscribed within the literary culture of the printed book. Print is not only the main source of the site – it draws upon and makes available already published material – it is also its destination. Eventually, the different kinds of work on the site lead to printed books, to their production, distribution and consumption. There is then no distinct literary culture on the Internet. Rather, electronic literary culture is furthering the literary culture of the printed book. But, while electronic literary culture clearly serves the literary culture of print by assisting in the author's struggle positioning and fetishization, the study of the former shows that the latter is more complex than we usually think. Certain "hidden" aspects of print culture – the sociable talk concerning books and writers – are recorded by the W3 in the form of the collaboration made possible by the community function.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Edited and Introduced by Randal Johnson. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1995. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Hjarvad, Stig. 2005. *Det selskabelige samfund: Essays om medier og mennesker*. 2. og udvidede udgave. Frederiksberg: Forlaget Samfundslitteratur.

Simmel, Georg. 1971 (1910). "Sociability". In: *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*. Edited and with an introduction by Donald N. Levine. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Winterson, Jeanette. 1996 (1995). *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. Vintage.

Winterson, Jeanette. 2001 (2000). *The Powerbook*. Vintage.

WEBSITES

Jeanette Winterson. 11 November 2006. http://jeanettewinterson.com

Pedalo. 11 November 2006. http://www.pedalo.co.uk/

The UK Web Archiving Consortium. 11 November 2006. http://www.webarchive.org.uk/

Author's address:
Department of Languages, Culture and Aesthetics
University of Aalborg
Kroghstraede 3, DK-9220 Aalborg, Denmark
E-mail: *i12@hum.aau.dk*