Tony E. Jackson

THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE NOVEL: WRITING AND NARRATIVE IN BRITISH FICTION (Johns Hopkins, 2009) ix + 234 pp.

Reviewed by Laura Mooneyham White

The title of this book seems to promise that it will examine the role of technology as a theme or subject in the British novel, with a chapter, perhaps, on the train in Victorian novels such as *Middlemarch*, or on industrial machinery in early modernist novels such as *Decline and Fall*. But for Tony Jackson, technology means something altogether different: it is the the technology of print, through which all novels are delivered. Following Walter Ong and other "non-poststructuralist thinkers" about language who have studied the transformation in human culture that occurred as written speech replaced orality, Jackson seeks to extend the historical sweep of this sort of "concrete and historical" analysis into "times of established literacy and . . . a literary form that has been primarily associated with the technology of print: the novel" (2-3). Nevertheless, though Jackson keenly tracks cause and effect along with technique and response, he is not offering a mechanistic the novel; he does not envision it t as (to paraphrase Le Corbusier) "a machine for living in." Instead he shows in a profoundly humanistic way how printed writing, especially printed fiction, brings both blessing and curse. This excellent study, balanced, shrewd, and creative, does an extraordinary job of unveiling to novel-readers the technology they take for granted.

In the introduction, Jackson takes up the daunting challenge of de-naturalizing what seems so intensely natural to his audience, the experience of reading printed words, an experience we are of course re-enacting by reading Jackson's book. Starting with Jesus's writing in the dust in *John* 8:1-11, he suggests both the magnitude of the shift from speaking and hearing to writing and reading and also something of the mystery of that shift: though we never learn what Jesus wrote, John tells the reader what he said: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone" and "Go and sin no more." From writing we move to print. Having argued that writing tends to dominate speech as it objectifies and conflates itself with speech and as it shifts our somatic response from the listening ear to the focussed eye, Jackson turns to the particular effects of printed words in the English novel. While oral fiction –viva voce storytelling--depends on the speaker's voice and gestures, and on memory, tradition, and sensational characters and plots, the novel retains features of orality even as it chiefly draws on what Jackson terms "alphabetic" speech, "those types of story or elements of story that can be reasonably explained as a function of the technological nature of alphabetography" (18). Finding evidence of anxiety about lost or displaced orality among the early English novelists such as Defoe, Sterne, and Scott, Jackson argues that *Tristram Shandy*, for instance, with its insistence on interruptions from the audience and its attempts to reproduce oral speech through conversation and digressions, "may be the most exaggerated of the early attempts to get an oral teller onto the written page" (23). Yet the almost total loss of the oral teller is offset by the gains of novelistic experience, including the illusion of intimacy, even telepathy, between the narrator and

the reader as well as the novel's inevitably enhanced claims to authority, authenticity, and originality.

Can writing be used to critique writing itself? Jackson himself identifies what is sometimes disorienting about his line of argument and what may sometime have disoriented him as he began this project. It is an "unavoidable contradiction ," Jackson notes, "[to use] writing story to question, if not outright condemn, writing" (26). Ultimately Jackson indicts but does not condemn writing; rather, his work makes visible what we cannot usually see, that writing words and reading them are not "natural" processes at all, but a kind of technology that has certain specific effects on the reader. Examining in detail these effects of our absorption in written story, Jackson purposely puts to the side the ideological elements of the novel's technological character. But he does argue that "as with ideological readings, [his] claims depend importantly on a notion of unconscious causality" (37). By this he means that the communicative technology of the novel creates its own motifs and imperatives above and beyond those created by the novelist. And without an exegesis of this sort, those motifs and imperatives are hidden to us exactly because as readers we have been conditioned to expect certain effects from written narrative, including an air of originality, detailed representation of ordinary experience, intimacy between author and reader, and quasi-legal claims of authenticity (it is not surprising, perhaps, that Jackson repeatedly returns to the metaphor of the novel as affidavit).

Despite a back-of-the jacket blurb comparing this book and Auerbach's Mimesis, Jackson is not attempting a grand historical narrative about the history of realism . (But he does trace a sort of progress, or, more fairly, development, in the English novel. In readings of individual novelsranging from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Atonement*, Jackson examines the consequences of the "unconscious causality" noted above. This critical meta-narrative begins with the early novel, which displays anxieties about alphabetic fiction, especially the loss of the embodied oral teller and the loss of sensational, spectacular story. Jackson then shows how an author like Austen can seem to master these anxieties, as she does in her complex and knowing representation of alphabetic writing's effects in *Pride and Prejudice* (especially as evidenced by the scene in which Elizabeth reads—and rereads—Darcy's letter). In reading *Bleak House* Jackson follows the dual role of the narrators: while the third-person narrator shows the troubling, even fatal, consequences of writing through such characters as Krook, Esther's narrative ultimately makes redemptive claims for writing. The novels examined in other chapters show the darker side of alphabetic fiction. Jackson argues, for instance, that Shelley's *Frankenstein* ultimately tropes the monster as a figure for writing itself, with the corollary implication that writing is inherently monstrous. Similarly, in Forster's *A Passage to India*, the contrast between the orality of the Indians and the writing-fixated Adela and other "advanced" English figures leads Jacksonto claim that "literacy taken to the all-embracing level of the English is debilitating to human existence in some fundamental ways" (122). And yet Jackson does not ultimately convict writing as decadent or dehumanizing—how could he, writer that he is? As he acknowledges,

"The more alphabetic . . . or 'advanced' the reading, the more the reader will have engaged in just the kind of hyperliterate literary experience that [*A Passage to India*] seems to find so unnatural. And yet such is the ongoing paradox of any critique of writing" (122). Even when he treats the experimental endgames of modernist fiction—Woolf's *The Waves* and Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, which show every sign of exposing the humanistic dead-end of "radical solipsism, --he finds something of a way out hrough the "just-in-time deliverance" of film. Addressing this technology, which subsumes and overwhelms alphabetic fiction (167), he begins discussing it in the chapter on *The Golden Notebook* and concludes in the last chapter, on *Citizen Kane*.

In all these readings, Jackson scrupulously works for balance. Repeatedly, he urges the reader to resist viewing the triumph of alphabetic story as a tragic narrative, with the golden age of oral narrative shimmering in a lost Avalon. A typical moment comes at the close of his chapter on *Bleak House*, which traces Esther's happy ending through the lens of her control over her own written narrative: "Esther," Jackson concludes, "has written herself into a living, material version of the heaven that illiterate Jo could only get to by dying. . . . [S]he has conformed herself to the letter of writing without dehumanizing herself" (101). Raising the stakes as he closes this chapter, Jackson alludes again to Jesus and his writing in the dust: "Dickens both condemns the letter, but gives us right here in the text the image of the letter as saving rather than only killing. Considering the novel as a whole, the unnamed narrator casts the first stone at writing; but Esther is the writing in the sand" (102). Though one might

expect it, Jackson also declines to endorse film as the apex of this historic trajectory. , Film, he admits, blends some of the advantages of written story with the tremendous advantages of showing--even, one might note, the kinds of showing that directly affect the body, such as 3D vision, thundering surround-sound, and vibrating seats. Yet while his argument "may sound like another entry in the list of 'death of the novel' prognostications," it is, he insists, "not so" (212). The novel can do what film and oral narratives cannot: "The sense of intimate communion between written story and reader, so peculiar to the novel, guarantees an apparently endless audience, and the originality, responsibility, and self-skepticism that are built into alphabetic story guarantee an apparently endless creativity" (212).

These observations on alphabetic fiction and its effects raise profound questions about our ultimate purposes and identities. The penultimate chapter on *Atonement* makes these issues plain, for, as Jackson argues, McEwan is not content to end the story of Briony, his protagonist, with the formal tidiness and poetic justice achieved in the novel-within-a-novel. Rather, the final chapter of *Atonement* raises the urgent but perennial question of writing itself: what is it for? Jackson quotes Briony's lament: how "can a novelist achieve atonement, when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity of higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her." Jackson sees this need for forgiveness as a need to redress. Those lost in the alphabetic realm, he argues, need to redress wrongs done to the former world of the oral: "Briony's] kind of story carries an

automatic sense of having violated some other unspecified, but evidently right, kind of story. . . . That teller, who would have to be the conveyor of a community's stock of already-known tales, would not have these anxieties" (191). In this formulation, the oral teller begins to stand for primal identity, organic experience, union with the divine, even apotheosis. Jackson does not make these claims, but one feels the larger implications of this tale of human self-consciousness and self-telling at every point. Why, one wonders, did Jesus erase what he wrote in the sand?

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