

for *JRAI* 2015

## REVIEW ESSAY

Jackson, Michael 2013 *The other shore: Essays on writers and writing*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

### **I. The rite of writing**

This is a collection of 27 essays that evince Michael Jackson's unique mixing of sources, genres and styles: anthropological, literary, philosophical, autobiographical. Titles include: 'Writing in Limbo', 'Writing for Bare Life', 'Writing So As Not to Die', 'Writing in the Dark', 'Writing, Naturally', 'Writing in Ruins'. The references and allusions are too long to list, but here Heidegger and Theodor Adorno rub shoulders with George Devereux and Meyer Fortes, Paul Cézanne and Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), Walter Benjamin and W. G. Sebald, John Berger and Frank Kermode, Gerald Manley Hopkins and Philip Larkin, Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges.

What are the imaginative affordances of writing? It is a cognitive technique for going beyond the limits of the self and the quotidian. Writing is that (incomplete) attempt to consummate a relationship with otherness—to close the gap between self and not-self—while reading the writing of others is an intimation of an intersubjectivity that may never yield certain knowledge or understanding.

'I considered myself a writer long before I completed a volume of poetry, wrote a novel, or published an anthropological monograph', Michael Jackson offers in the Preface (2013:ix). 'Writing for me was a way of life':

'Writing, I came to realize, was a *techné*, like prayer or ritual, for bridging the gulf that lay between myself and others (...) where the absent is made present, the distant becomes near, the inanimate appears animate, and the singular subsumes the plural'.

This being the case, what might a focus on 'the rite of writing' reveal to an existential anthropology concerning the universal capabilities and liabilities of our human condition? 'In exploring the lifeworlds of writing and writers we discover the same existential imperatives that have always preoccupied human beings, regardless of their cultural or historical circumstances', Jackson elaborates (2013:xi). One travels beyond history

and culture to the human and the individual, and to where writing answers to the writers' intrinsic needs: 'the need to belong to lifeworlds wider than their own, to feel that they can act on the world rather than merely suffer its actions upon them, and to express what seems peculiar and problematic about their own experiences in ways that resonate with the experiences of others' (ibid.).

## **II. The character of writing**

I do not do justice in this review to the experience of being immersed in Jackson's writing, but let me adumbrate a number of key themes.

**Writing is a kind of passion**—keeping that word's religious overtones and Kierkegaard's notion of passion as a source of knowledge. Writing is a leap of faith, a 'passionate' attempt to wrestle with paradox and achieve the impossible: to reach beyond ourselves. 'In the act of writing, as in spirit possession, sexual ecstasy, or spiritual bliss, we are momentarily out of our minds' (Jackson 2013:3). We imagine the impossible and we stretch the possible. 'Regardless of *what* we write, the very act of writing signifies a refusal to be bound by the conceptual categories, social norms, political orders, linguistic limits, historical divides, cultural bias, identity thinking and conventional wisdom that circumscribe our everyday lives' (Jackson 2013:2).

**Writing provides testimony to the everyday.** Writing was a supplement to his academic life, Jackson reveals. But he did not anticipate in this act an *escape*, more an exultation: such artistry *enhanced* life. One wrote and so kept faith with the everyday. 'The writer's task is not to provide definitive solutions to the mysteries of existence but to describe these as they are encountered and endured in our everyday lives' (Jackson 2013:141). Moreover, comparing, say, Rainer Maria Rilke writing poetry and Kuranko Keti Ferenke telling stories was to be struck forcibly by the parallels between their acts of creation: 'one is led to doubt the view that culture and history make us complete strangers to one another' (Jackson 2013:98-99).

**Writing provides a home.** The concept of 'home' must refer more to a state of mind than a roof over one's head if it is to do itself justice and offer universal insight. In essence, 'home' implies not substantives—a house, a nation, a family—but 'a sense that one's actions matter, that one possesses some say over the course of one's life, and that one's humanity is recognized' (Jackson 2013:125). In the words of Japanese poet Bashō: 'a sense of living / as we choose' (ibid.). To write of a life is to instantiate a home within it.

**Writing is a mode of individual interiority.** 'The lifeworld that an author creates and inhabits is a virtual universe, a terra incognita of the mind. That it often remains in the shadows or unrevealed makes it no less

real than the former and more visible realms to which we apply the terms *social* or *cultural*' (Jackson 2013:140). More than this, writing reveals something of the character of personal consciousness as being more an assemblage of fragments than a synthetic whole, or closed or final. Holism is false (*contra* Hegel). The genius of Cézanne, then, was that he inscribed spaces where opposites could be *seen* to be framed, showing the human condition to exist in contrariety and contradiction. The craft of the writer is surely to recognize in Cézanne's art an analogue of the way in which authentic writing of the self concerns accepting the paradoxical in life. Consciousness always entails having (at least) two minds: having a sense of the world being orderly and certain *and* chaotic and mysterious.

**Writing is also a paradoxical confrontation** with the silence and ambiguity *beyond* the individual self. The gaps between human beings can never be closed. We never know exactly what others are feeling, thinking or intending, and we only pretend we can read one another's minds. Moreover, we have an 'extraordinary capacity for talking past each other and not catching each other's drift'; there is an 'inherent ambiguity [in] everything human beings say and do in the presence of one another' (Jackson 2013:1). Despite this, we expend enormous energy supposing to overcome this ambiguity: as if we could actually represent our experience of the world in words... What is required, then, is the honesty to admit that at the core is silence: the silence of experiences' ineffability; the silence of personal integrity and privacy; and the silence of social honour and politesse. The silence, too, of historical anonymity. (We are graced by the brilliance of the writing of Michel de Montaigne, say, because of the efforts of his widow to disseminate them in 1595, but what of the countless others whose equal idiosyncrasy disappeared into the anonymous cemetery of history?)

**Writing is an exercise in humility.** Theory is proud in its claims at comprehension. But theory would nevertheless seem to be a principal means of *misrecognition*—not the reverse—in its making of the other into an object whose point is to prove that theory's assumptions. Academia would seem prone to theoretical pride: trafficking in coherent stories and plausible interpretations. But as with 'culture' in general, this is to bring an artificial order to a wild world. Culture and theory are 'delusional' both. We may believe that we 'make and unmake the world' but the reverse is true (Jackson 2013:173). Hence the antidotal nature of writing that eschews theory for a return to the everyday.

### **III. The consequences of writing**

If writing is humble, providing testimony to the vicissitudes of everyday experience—to the ambiguity of social exchange, to the anonymity of history, to the contrariety of consciousness—and yet if writing is also a

passionate engagement transcending culture, then what might our ambitions for it be? At the beginning of the book, Michael Jackson quotes D. H. Lawrence: ‘One is in oneself the whole of mankind (...); each of us is in himself humanity’; this is an opinion he shares, Jackson reveals (2013:4). How might writing help illuminate the relation between the self and humankind and contribute to an anthropological methodology that makes manifest the connections between the particular and the universal?

When Oscar Wilde (1913:156) described personality as an ‘element of revelation’ and advised that ‘if you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism’, he was, I believe, offering more than *bons mots*. Here is a version of what Devereux (1978:178) called his ‘complementary methodology’: if one were able to study one human being ‘on all levels’ it would be to discover the ‘complete repertoire of human behavior’. And, according to literary critic P. N. Furbank, it is this ‘monadic idea’ that also lay behind D. H. Lawrence’s pronouncements: to introspect is to meditate on oneself as an exemplar of the human species and to engage in an act of human solidarity (Furbank 1999:1; cf. Rapport 2008). But what exactly is being proposed here, and what is its warrant? Why introspection, and how is looking inward to see outward? I venture the following brief outline.

The terrain of an existential, or cosmopolitan, anthropology is the tension between the particularity of a unique individual human life and the universality of a common species inheritance. The anthropologist endeavours to map *an inheritance of common human capacities* as these are made manifest in individual lives that *effect those capacities in the form of unique substantiations*. A universal sameness in capacity and an absolute difference in substance... To introspect, let us say, is to practice a human capacity for an ironic self-awareness: we all have the power to know ourselves as though strangers (Rapport 2003:42ff.): ‘I might have substantiated my life otherwise’. To find otherness within is an analogue for looking out, moreover, for the world is other to us (‘filled / With forks and faces’, in the words of the poet (Larkin 1988:181)). However, the homology is only partial for while I also know the otherness of myself from the inside—what it feels like to be me—when it comes to the otherness of the world I only have the (ironic) perspective of an outsider. There are the faces and there is the material world (the forks) ... and there is my ignorance (ignorance which Emmanuel Levinas insists is also my duty to admit).

Alongside such ironic introspection and ignorance, then, what may writing avouch us? When others’ writing touches us in a memorable way, I suggest, it bears the signature of an alien interiority: its authentic quality is its singular strangeness. (Using a language of conventional symbolic forms individual writers inscribe a world in their image.) But we may

also recognise the general humanity of the voice: writing evidences a human capacity for self-expression (Rapport 1994). (Even the computer-generated, pseudo-meaningful text bears the impress of the humanity responsible for concocting the artificial intelligence.) Writing offers the anthropologist a route to knowing certain universal capacities even as it urges respect for the personalism (and irreducible strangeness) of any one individual substantiation.

## References

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**Nigel Rapport**  
Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies  
University of St Andrews