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'Putting Things up against Each Other': Media History and Modernization in Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton*

Abstract: This article examines Adam Thorpe's novel *Ulverton* (1992) as a prime example of what literature can achieve from its increasingly marginalized position in an unfolding media culture. It traces in detail how the novel combines a thematic focus on the history of the fictional village of Ulverton from the 17th century to the present with a formal staging of unfolding conditions of mediality which are in turn utilized as a medium of narrative progression. The novel's self-reflexive engagement with the interrelation between media history and modernization is based on a flexible post-modernist poetics of "putting things up against each other" which establishes the genre of fiction as a kind of 'meta-medium' for storing and communicating information as well as for processing cultural relativity.

In an essay called "Is Nothing Sacred?", written in 1990 in response to the "affair" to which his name has become chained, Salman Rushdie points out that there are good reasons for considering the novel "the crucial art form [...] of the post-modern age" (1992, 424). At the heart of his argument lies an insistence on the freedom that is opened up by literature's old-fashioned, "low-technology" mediality. "Literature," Rushdie writes,

is the art least subject to external control, because it is made in private. The act of making it requires only one person, one pen, one room, some paper. (Even the room is not absolutely essential.) Literature is the most low-technology of art forms. It requires neither a stage nor a screen. It calls for no interpreters, no actors, producers, camera crews, costumiers, musicians. It does not even require the traditional apparatus of publishing, as the long-running success of samizdat literature demonstrates. (*ibid.*)

A similar argument, though slightly more on the defensive with regard to contemporary literature's precarious position in media history, can be found in Jochen Hörisch's monograph with the punning title *Ende der Vorstellung: Die Poesie der Medien* (1999). Hörisch acknowledges that the book as the characteristic medium of literature is moving to the periphery of an unfolding media age, and that the relationship between the private and the public sphere as structured and presupposed by modern 'bourgeois' literature and evoked by Salman Rushdie is changing accordingly. But, Hörisch wonders, does this peripheral position not offer a better

view of the tumultuous processes at the centre of today's media culture? There are indeed a number of recent literary texts (Rushdie's novels among them) which emphatically reject today's fashionable denigration of literature's relevance. These texts recognize that the seeming weakness of literature's outdated mediality does still offer advantages that are specific to literature (and literature only), and these texts try to make use of the privileged vantage point of observation and reflection that results from the newly found 'ex-centricity' of modern literature in its advanced age (Hörsich's pun).²

One of these texts, and a most interesting one with regard to literature's position in an unfolding media culture, is Adam Thorpe's novel *Ulverton*, which was published in 1992.³ In spite of the fact that *Ulverton* breaks with realistic conventions, the novel has found an astonishingly wide readership,⁴ and it has also found a secure place in the emerging canon of late 20th-century fiction as defined by literary scholarship. In fact, the novel has been singled out as an exemplary case of a literary engagement with problems of 'Englishness' (cf. Steinhage, 1999 and Griem, 2000) and as a typical example of hybrid tendencies in contemporary fiction (cf. Nünning, 1995, 341–43, 349–58 and Galster, 2002, 329–56). In this paper, I will trace in detail how the novel combines a thematic focus on the history of the fictional village of Ulverton in the South-West of England from the 17th century to the present with a formal staging of unfolding conditions of mediality. Accordingly, I will begin with an analysis of the novel's complex narrative form, which rejects traditional linear modes of narration and utilizes media history as a medium of narrative progression instead. I will then trace the interrelation between media history and modernization as staged in the novel. All these aspects combined will result in a reading of Thorpe's novel which paradigmatically illustrates my introductory remarks about contemporary literature's specific potential and function in today's media culture.

1. Media History and Narrative Form

The most striking feature of *Ulverton* is the novel's formal discontinuity, which is counterbalanced by a continuity of place. While the first chapter, a first-person

¹ Cf. Hörsich, 1999, 130: "Zusammen mit der klassischen Öffentlichkeit (und ihrem Komplement: der Privatsphäre), zu deren Strukturierung es unterschieden beitrug, wandert das Buch an die Peripherie des entfallenen Medienzeitalters. [...] Aber läßt sich von der Peripherie her nicht besser beobachten, was im tumultösen Zentrum vor sich geht?"

² Cf. Hörsich, 1999, 112: "Ermöglicht doch gerade die Ex-zentrität des alten Mediums seine privilegierte und überlegen (de) Beobachterposition."

³ Page numbers given in the text refer to the following paperback edition: Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton*. London: Vintage, 1998. In addition to his (so far) five novels (*Ulverton* 1992, *Still* 1995, *Pieces of Light* 1998, *Nineteen Twenty-One* 2001 and *No Telling* 2003) Thorpe, who was born in 1956 in Paris, has published one collection of short stories (*Stiffs* 2000) and three volumes of poetry (*Mornings in the Baltic* 1988, *Meeting Montaigne* 1990, *From the Neanderthal* 1999) as well as five radio plays for the BBC and one play for the theatre. Cf. <http://www.contemporarywriters.com>.

⁴ Cf. Thorpe's remark "*Ulverton* is selling well and is continuing to" (Hagenauer, 1996, n.p.).

narration by the shepherd William who recounts events which took place in 1650, introduces the reader to the village of Ulverton in a fairly conventional novelistic way, it turns out that this chapter is the only conventional literary narrative in the book. The following chapters present episodes from provincial life in Ulverton, jumping (roughly) from one generation to the next one,⁵ and they do so in all kinds of genres and forms. A passionate confessional sermon by the parish preacher, the Reverend Crispin Brazier, set in 1688, is followed by the diary of a well-to-do farmer written in 1712. The letters written in 1743 by the young and newlywed Mistress of Ulverton Hall to her lover William Sykes in London – letters obviously modelled on the contemporary fashion for epistolary novels – are followed by the letters from an illiterate Ulverton mother called Sarah Shail to her son who awaits his execution in London in 1775 – these letters are written by the only slightly less illiterate village tailor John Pounds. In 1803 the old joiner Samuel Daye tells a gentleman passing through Ulverton in a pub about a practical joke he played upon his former master Abraham Webb when he was young, and in 1830 a bored clerk moves swiftly between taking down the depositions of the townsfolk during a trial against Luddites in Ulverton on the one hand and long rambling letters to his fiancé on the other. In 1859 a woman photographer puts down brief comments on her photographic plates depicting scenes from Ulverton and, most strikingly, Egypt. Chapter 9, an interior monologue, charts the stream of consciousness of the old field worker and gardener Jo Perry while he is wandering about in Ulverton in 1887. The year 1914 is represented by an excerpt from the memoirs, written in 1928, of the colonial civil servant Fergusson who has retired to Ulverton after years of service in India, and the year 1953 is evoked through entries in the diary of Violet Nightingale, longtime secretary of the egocentric cartoonist and self-styled artist Herbert Bradman, among these the transcript of a radio broadcast by Herbert Bradman on the end of rationing in England. The novel finally comes to a close in the year 1988 in chapter 12, which comprises the post-production script of a TV-documentary on the history of estate agent Clive Walters's failed development project in Ulverton ("*A Year in the Life: Clive's Seasons*"). The following table provides a survey of this complex structure:

⁵ The years singled out by the text tend to imply more or less prominent events from British history: ch. 1/1650: beginning of Commonwealth, ch. 2/1688: the Glorious Revolution, ch. 3/1712: last witch trials/executions, ch. 4/1743: England's involvement in the War of the Austrian Succession, ch. 5/1775: beginning of the American War of Independence, ch. 7/1830: Luddism, ch. 8/1859: Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 10/1914: beginning of WW I, ch. 11/1953: coronation of Elizabeth I, ch. 12/1988: The Thatcher era. Cf. Galster, 2002, 330. However, these events do not figure prominently or are not even mentioned in the text, except for ch. 7, which deals explicitly with Luddites on trial.

ch.	title	year
1	<i>Return</i>	1650
2	<i>Friends</i>	1688
3	<i>Improvements</i>	1712
4	<i>Leeward</i>	1743
5	<i>Dissection</i>	1775
6	<i>Rise</i>	1803
7	<i>Deposition</i>	1830
8	<i>Shutter</i>	1859
9	<i>Stitches</i>	1887
10	<i>Treasure</i>	1914
11	<i>Wing</i>	1953
12	<i>Here</i>	1988

Thorpe's novel, as much should be clear by now, is a historical novel that programmatically rejects the conventional realistic modes of representing a seemingly pre-existent reality characteristic of historical novels in a traditional sense. Instead, the synthetic narrative imitation of reality at large has been replaced by an analytic pseudo-documentary imitation of the language use of the past. Thorpe himself confirms this orientation when he comments in an interview that "in order to get into the mindset of a period you can't really do it without using the language of the period" (Hagenauer, 1996, n.p.).⁶ However, what has been passed down to us of the language use of the past has been, if at all, passed down in writing, and so it is not surprising that long stretches of *Ulverton* are well researched imitations of historical sources.⁷ The sermon in chapter 2, the journals in chapters 3 and 11, the letters in chapters 4, 5, and 7, the trial transcripts in chapter 7, the descriptions of photographs in chapter 8, the memoirs in chapter 10 and finally the transcripts of radio and television broadcasts in chapters 11 and 12, are examples of 'historicising period-pastiche' (cf. Galster, 2002, 346) and suggest quite plau-

sibly that they are authentic and therefore non-literary and non-fictional historical sources.

However, the plausibility of this simulated documentary character that dominates most of the novel is put to a test in those chapters which are made up of instances of oral communication or even the 'content' of a protagonist's consciousness. In what way, the reader could ask him- or herself against the backdrop of the surrounding chapters, could an anecdote related colloquially and in dialect in a pub in 1803 possibly have found its way verbatim into chapter 6 of Thorpe's novel? A similar question applies to the rambling thoughts of field worker Perry, wandering about in Ulverton on a non-specified day of the year 1887, thoughts that make up chapter 9 of Thorpe's novel. Obviously, these chapters rely upon conventionalized literary modes of representation, and it is one of the implicit reflexive ironies of the novel that these non-documentary chapters with their staged orality create an impression of even greater immediacy and authenticity than the chapters based on seemingly authentic historical sources (for a general assessment of this phenomenon cf. Goetsch, 1985). As Thorpe himself points out, chapter 9 is particularly important in this respect:

One of the ironies of the book is that the long dialect chapter is [...] uttered by a peasant but in a copy of the great modernist text, Joyce's Molly Bloom monologue at the end of *Ulysses*. [...] Normally the peasant figure in English literature has a walk-on part, and he's laughed at, he's simple, and it is he who cannot understand the speech or the language of the other, the higher classes. So that's why giving him the most elusive and difficult chapter was very important; [...] I was trying to show that the peasant figure in the novel can have a language as rich and complex as great modernist texts. (Hagenauer, 1996, n.p.)

This is what Thorpe's *Ulverton* is most centrally concerned with: the novel employs all kinds of literary devices in order to make marginalized voices of history 'visible' and to reflect upon the precarious relationship between these voices on the one hand and the complex interwovenness of media history and the emerging historical records on the other.

It is this basic orientation which motivates the novel's highly characteristic utilization of media history as a framework for facilitating narrative development behind the protagonists' backs, as it were, a narrative development which represents the evolution of modern culture: In *Ulverton* the conventional narrative re-presentation, mediation and integration of a sequence of events is replaced by a sequence of examples for specific modes of mediation between orality and literacy in their respective historically specific socio-cultural embedding. The inaccessibility of the oral component in this medial continuum is compensated by a self-conscious and self-confident deployment of modes of representation that have been conventionalized in the course of the evolution of modern fiction from the 18th century to the present. At the same time, it is this self-consciously literary level which provides the means for an integration of the otherwise heterogeneous material in the novel, an integration which in turn is, as it were, beyond narrative. The most important factor in this respect is the novel's metafictional frame.

⁶ See also Adam Thorpe, "The Squire's Treasure," an early version of what became chapter 10 of *Ulverton* ("Treasure 1914") which does not yet display the complete linguistic immersion in the period that is so poignant in the later version.

⁷ Cf. Thorpe's acknowledgements where he singles out documents on the Luddite uprisings in the early 19th century accessible in the Public Record Office, Major B. Lowsley's *A Glossary of Berkshire Words and Phrases* (1888) and Edward Lisle's *Observations on Husbandry* (1757). In fact, the diarist in chapter 3, ever interested in agricultural improvements, reports that he has met 'Mr Lisle, Esquire' on the road and engaged him in mutually fruitful conversation (48).

As mentioned earlier, the beginning of Thorpe's episodic history of the village of Ulverton is marked by the first-person narration of the shepherd William, set in 1650. As a starting point for the sequence of examples for specific modes of mediation between orality and literacy outlined so far one would expect this first-person narration to be recognizable in the oral tradition of storytelling. In contrast to the old joiner's story related in an Ulverton pub in chapter 6, however, there are no markers of orality and dialect in the opening story. What is more, chapter 1 is the only chapter that is unaffected by the mode of 'historicising period-pastiche' so characteristic of the rest of the novel.⁸ Instead it seems to be a narrative written in late 20th-century English, and this impression is supported by the enigmatic note "[Reprinted by kind permission of *The Wessex Nave*]" (19) at the end of the chapter. An explanation for all this is at last provided in the final chapter of the novel: Here we learn that it was the "LOCAL AUTHOR & PERFORMER" (330) Adam Thorpe, a resident of Ulverton in 1988, who wrote the story reprinted as chapter 1 and published it originally in the local newspaper, *The Wessex Nave* (379-81). The story, it turns out, is based on a local legend which the fictional Thorpe unearthed during his research in regional history for a projected book.

However, the expectation that the novel *Ulverton* by the real Adam Thorpe turns out to be the book written by his fictional counterpart, an expectation likely to be formed by readers well-versed in the conventions of postmodernist metafictional play, is disappointed: the fictional Adam Thorpe describes his book project in the TV-documentary on estate agent Clive Walters as "a whole series of stories on shepherds" (381), and from the preceding remarks about *Ulverton* it should be clear that the novel as a whole does not conform to this description. Thus, the metafictional turn at the end of the novel describes only one example for a (narrativizing) engagement with (local) history, an example which the novel at large does not embrace. Instead, the literary (and narrative) representation of history in chapter 1, as set against the documentary character of chapters 2 to 12, turns out to have next to no relevance for an assessment of historical reality in the year 1650. It is rather, like the post-production script in chapter 12, a (fictional) historical source text from the year 1988, a text which could teach future historians about the attitudes to the past prevalent in the late 20th century. This frame, then, focuses and integrates the novel's engagement with the historicity of the media and the medial conditioning of historiography,⁹ and it positions the novel *Ulverton* as an outstanding example of the typically postmodernist genre of historiographic metafiction.¹⁰

⁸ Thorpe comments on the special position of chapter 1: "I thought of the first story as a story complete in itself and indeed one of the problems [in the composition of *Ulverton*] was to incorporate the first story, to explain it; it is explained in the last chapter, although very subtly, why it is not written in the authentic manner, the authentic text and style of the period" (Haugenauer, 1996, n.p.).

⁹ Cf. "Die Historizität der Medien und die mediale Bedingtheit der Historiographie" (Nünning, 1995, 349).

¹⁰ Cf. on this general trend Hutcheon, 1988; Hutcheon, 1989; Nünning, 1995.

2. Media History and Modernization

In spite of the novel's emphasis on aspects of mediality and historicity there is still a story hiding behind the layers of reflexivity and the episodic structure of *Ulverton*. In fact, as Christin Galster has pointed out in her very detailed reading of the novel, there is even a 'hero,' whom she describes as a 'collective protagonist':

Im Falle *Ulvertons* manifestiert sich der kollektive Protagonist in der Dorfgemeinschaft, die sich selbstverständlich im Laufe der Jahrhunderte im einzelnen wie im Ganzen verändert, dennoch aber durch die Konstanz des Raums und die Zugehörigkeit zu diesem als eine Einheit aufgefaßt werden muß. Wie bunte Fäden in einem Gewebe tauchen an verschiedenen Stellen des Romans immer wieder die gleichen Familiennamen auf. Auf diese Weise kann der aufmerksame Leser aus den verstreuten Referenzen in jedem Kapitel ganze Genealogien erstellen und nachvollziehen, wie sich das Leben der Familien von Ulverton im Spannungsfeld von Tradition und Fortschritt verändert. (Galster, 2002, 344-45)

In terms of media history the novel suggests that there is, metaphorically speaking, 'behind' or 'beneath' its discontinuous structure a continuum of oral communication as experienced by the village community of Ulverton. The sequence of episodes, however, illustrates the dynamics of, among other aspects, medial modernization which nevertheless modifies this continuum with, in the long run, drastic results. As we have seen, the novel's framing construction puts the oral beginnings of this process of medial modernization in brackets, as it were. But with this literary stylization of unrecoverable origins the full range from oral traditions via the intrusion of writing into the everyday life of an increasing number of villagers to the emergence of new media like photography, radio and television is representatively covered for the given period from 1650 to 1988. The various episodes can then be read as exemplary illustrations of the effects that these developments had on village life.

At the beginning of this historical process Reverend Crispin Brazier in chapter 2 relies heavily on the position of power provided by his exclusive literacy. Preaching to his parish in 1688 he uses all available resources of theological discourse in his sermon to wash his hands off the death of the dissenter Simon Kistle, but today's reader detects hints at an intentional denial of assistance or perhaps even manslaughter or murder. The cultural emergence of individual subjectivity hinted at in Brazier's description of Simon Kistle's death finds its medium of expression in the diary, written in 1712, of the well-to-do farmer in chapter 3. Here, the validity of Christian rules and guidelines is questioned without recourse to religious dogma strictly on the basis of daily experience and personal circumstances of living. The medium of this questioning is the transformation of experience into writing, and the answers are more concerned with secular 'improvements' than matters of religion. They legitimize, for example, the replacement of the farmer's ailing and barren wife by the vivacious and, as it soon turns out, fertile maid. That this weakening of a traditional religious framework is not only limited to written reflections but finds its outlet in everyday life is then illustrated in the oral pub anecdote in chapter 6, in which an old joiner reminisces in 1803 about the day

when, as a young man some sixty years earlier, he successfully assumed the role of God in order to make his deeply religious master shorten the working hours.

As the travelling gentleman passing through the village and listening to the joiner's tale indicates, the secluded rural world of Ulverton comes to an end in the early 19th century. The earlier stages of this process of dissolution with its serious consequences for all walks of life are illustrated by the numerous letters sent to London in chapters 4 and 5, which are set in the 18th century. Writing as an emerging medium of private communication that bridges large distances destabilizes the social order of the village and increases mobility, and the 'outsider' lover of the young mistress of Ulverton Hall and the fate of the poor woman's son who is waiting for his execution in London for stealing a hat can be taken as representative cases. This mobility, which the novel presents as an effect of the spread of literacy, brings new people to Ulverton, people who see the village from the outside in most of the remaining chapters. The first of these outsiders is the clerk of the court transcribing the hearings of a Luddite trial in Ulverton in 1830: he has no sympathy whatsoever for the existential problems of the rural populace and does not even refrain from improving upon the depositions of the public hearings, not for the sake of truth but because he wants to go home.¹¹ It is clear that from this perspective the actual conflict at the heart of the trial, a conflict revolving around the social consequences of modernization in agriculture, appears completely unimportant, while the novel at large acknowledges its importance by making it the focus of three chapters (3, 7, 9) and, implicitly, its ending.

In chapter 8, however, set in 1859, the focus is clearly back on media history, and one of its decisive evolutionary steps at that: photography is the first medium that suggests the possibility of an immediate visual 'transcription' and fixation of images from reality.¹² The resulting documentary orientation is strongly reminiscent of the novel's own poetics of textual documentation (cf. Nünning, 1995, 349-50), but the comments of the anonymous female photographer on her work are full of reflexive passages which leave no doubt that documentary objectivity is unattainable even in the medium of photography. Thus her detailed account of the genesis of her plates casts an implicitly metafictional light on the genesis of the seemingly objective representation of historical sources in chapters 2 to 12 of the novel. Somewhat parallel to the range of texts 'documented' in *Ulverton* the range of photographic plates described in chapter 8 comprises pre-arranged scenes as well as 'spontaneous' snapshots, landscapes as well as social studies and representative (in its double sense) portraits, poetic object studies (of an icy thatched roof, for example) and the scientific documentation of excavations in Egypt. It is important, then, that the reader of the novel realizes that in spite of

¹¹ Cf. "round and round again, the identical histories – or histories I must hope are identical, else the mismatch might prolong the Prosecution to a tedious extent. I nudge here and there [...]" (158).

¹² Cf. on the background in the history of photography Frizot, 1998, and von Brauchitsch, 2002, 29-70.

her self-professed sober professional gaze the photographer's perspective of *Ulverton* is by no means free of conventional poetic sentiment and nostalgic idealization. The chapter illustrates convincingly the extent to which the appearance of new media is affected by pre-existent cultural frames of meaning.¹³

However, the reverse is obviously also true: the emergence of new media induces change in long-standing cultural frames of meaning. Against this backdrop chapter 9 testifies to the competition between novelistic realism and photography in the late 19th century (cf. Armstrong, 1999, and North, 2001). In direct comparison to the new immediacy of photography, the conventions of realistic writing lose their aura of authenticity, and one possible reaction is to shift the focus of fiction towards invisible realities which cannot be photographed. Thus, one strand of late 19th-century and early 20th-century fiction strives for a quasi-photographic depiction of human consciousness, and the fact that this invisible and ungraspable 'object' is not depicted but discursively produced in writing is camouflaged by the fundamental continuity of mimetic conventions from realism to modernism. This is the reason why the overall illusion of a documentary orientation in *Ulverton* is not severely disturbed by the artificial literary character of chapter 9. In spite of the fact that the staged orality of Jo Perry's interior monologue has a tendency to tip over into formal defamiliarization in writing, it can still fulfill its function of evoking an oral dimension of culture which cannot be accessed by non-literary forms of writing.

Ulverton's collective memory, however, which draws upon centuries of oral tradition, becomes increasingly marginalized by an influx of newcomers in the late 19th century. Increasing mobility results in increasingly cosmopolitan attitudes which are beyond the reach of the collective memory of the village, and so the novel suggests that Perry's stream of consciousness is one last storehouse of many of collective memory's central motives. It is a pity, then, but also symptomatic, that this integrative fund, which provides many links between the chapters of *Ulverton*, is in its written form extremely hard to read for today's readers, as even a cursory glance at the beginning of the chapter, which goes on for 19 dense pages, demonstrates:

gate ope now maunt lope about in Gore patch wi' they crusty bullocks yeeeeeeeeow bloody pick-stiekin them old hooks jus yowlin out for grease haaf rust look yaa that old Stiff all pinch an screw all pinch an blood screw aye shut he fast now hup ram-shackle old bugger see med do with a stoop spikin onto post wi' that hang yaa a deal more years nor Hoppetty have a-had boy eh why Mr Perry why ah well they says [...]. (191)

¹³ In the real year 1859 the English photographer William England produced his sequence *America*, the first photographic images of the New World commercially, available in Europe. Many of England's chosen subjects find an equivalent in the plates described in chapter 8 in *Ulverton*. The medium, it seems, operates within pre-existent cultural modes of meaning ("Arcadia") in order to assimilate the unknown (America) to the known and to exoticise the known (*Ulverton*) in terms of the unknown. The title of Ian Jeffrey's introduction to his edition of England's sequence is "Utopia 1859: William England's America" (cf. Jeffrey, 1999).

It is also clear, however, that this formal complexity pays tribute to the actual inaccessibility of this dimension of culture, which can only be made 'visible' with the help of literary techniques (for a detailed analysis cf. Galster, 2002, 343, 353-54). Against the backdrop of the final shift from oral to written modes of knowledge transmission, which the novel locates in the late 19th century, the old field hand Jo Perry, who later becomes a gardener, is considered "a rather tire-some rambling fellow" (247) by the next generation, and it is safe to say that many of the novel's readers will share this opinion. Furthermore, the contrast between the lived, 'timeless' history of a rural culture revolving around questions of fertility and productivity within the seasonal cycle as represented by Jo Perry on the one hand, and the change towards an archeological interest in the remnants of history as induced by media history on the other hand, is accentuated in the novel when the narrator of chapter 10, the retired colonial civil servant Fergusson with his strong interest in local history, finds out to his annoyance that Jo Perry has used the photographic plates described in chapter 8 for building a greenhouse in his garden (247-48).

In the 20th century the archeological interest in history which is, the novel suggests, the result of the unfolding media culture of modernity, becomes the dominant attitude towards the past, beginning with the upper circles of society and then working its way down. In chapter 10, for example, the Squire of Ulverton Hall is completely absorbed by his archeological excavations and pays no attention whatsoever to the unfolding 'real' history of World War I, at least until his diggers are conscripted by history, as it were. Conversely, the egocentric artist figure Herbert Bradman in chapter 11 buries or, as he himself puts it, 'plants' his autobiography with great pomp on the occasion of the coronation of Elisabeth II in 1953, depositing written instructions for the steel container with this profound document of 20th-century life to be excavated and opened on the 2nd of June in the year 4953. In both cases 'history' seems to be just an aristocratic or artistic game that is completely removed from the present, while on the other hand ever increasing numbers of people are affected by the democratization of access to information brought about by radio and television with their daily updates on the complexity and the historical import of the present moment. Herbert Bradman's secretary Violet Nightingale, for example, sees through the reductively rhetorical character of the coronation as an 'official' historical event when she annoys the members of the Ulverton Coronation Committee with the remark that "one had to think in bigger terms than our Sovereign's Coronation: what with atomic and hydrogen bombs, the Reds, 70,000,000 homeless, refugees, world hunger and so forth" (262).

At the end of the novel we have finally reached our own multiply mediated late 20th-century present. The final two chapters suggest that one of the characteristic features of our present state is the intrusion of oral elements in written communication. Even Violet Nightingale's mid-20th-century diary and her ultimately doomed attempt at preserving her view of things under the title "[M]y Life under Herbert E. Bradman" (267, 274) are marked by this re-assertion of

orality, which seems to be an effect of the material technical foundations of the available media.¹⁴ Having been a secretary all her life, Violet Nightingale writes everything, even her private diary, on the typewriter, which is effective, but prevents her from cancelling or erasing mistakes or false starts. Frequently the reader finds passages like this:

I should really
I really ought
Mr Bradman is not a 'la
Although

I ought to say at this point that our professional relationship while clo intimate, has never impinged on our private domains. I am quite I am well aware of the 'Freudian' implications of an employer and his female 'assistant' living toge living under the same roof, but [...]. (290)

Here it is the typewriter (and not, as in chapter 9, a literary convention) which reveals a character's state of mind to the reader, and this state of mind becomes increasingly agitated in the case of Violet Nightingale who finds out that in spite of her own unacknowledged love for Herbert Bradman she had no part whatsoever in his life – she was just a human typewriter. Consequently she destroys Bradman's historical project in a highly symbolic scene by stealing his autobiography from its container and burning it on the pyre of history erected on the occasion of the dawning of the second Elizabethan Age. There it burns with many other old-fashioned commodities which would have been, it turns out in chapter 12, much sought after in 1988 for their authenticity in a context of increasing nostalgia.

The last chapter, finally, presents a culture in which writing finds itself in a subordinate position to another medium, a position which restricts it to two very limited functions: The primary text of the TV post-production script that makes up chapter 12, transcribes the spoken word with all redundancies and disturbances, and the secondary text consists of highly condensed descriptions that avoid full sentences completely and favour abbreviations of all kinds instead. This mediated secondary orality, which short-circuits orality, visually, writing and printing, is the site where the various threads of the novel are pulled together: When estate agent Clive Walters, who is ironically also a sheep farmer and shepherd in his spare time and whose family goes back a long way in Ulverton, tries to modernize the village by developing attractive flats and offices which include the latest amenities and local colour at the same time, he finds that the traditional pragmatic, indifferent, and resigned attitude of the few remaining descendants of the older village population has been supplemented by a much more militant resistance to change on the part of recent newcomers who defend 'their' rural idyll against all latecomers. Walters's project fails in the end when the remains of a dead body are discovered on the building site. Both to the villagers of Ulverton (who are apparently regular readers of *The Wessex Nave*) and to the readers of Thorpe's novel (who have obviously read chapter 1) it seems highly likely that

¹⁴ In the sense of Friedrich A. Kittler's notion of *Aufschreibesysteme* (discourse networks); cf. Kittler, 1985/1990.

these are the remains of the soldier Gabby who was murdered by his wife and her second husband Thomas Walters in 1650. In spite of the fact that the fictional Adam Thorpe who wrote the story points out that he took the name Walters from the oldest tombstone on the churchyard, that he simply considered it a typical name for the region and thus used it more or less arbitrarily in his retelling of a local legend (381), the public insists on linking the story to estate agent Clive Walters (379) who finds himself confronted by a hostility rooted in unacknowledged superstition which he cannot overcome.

3. "Putting Things up against Each Other"

This final turn of affairs indicates that Adam Thorpe's novel *Ulverton* is a prime example for contemporary literature's insistence on its relevance as outlined in the introductory passages of this paper, even if the re-oralisation of culture brought about by the new media in an unfolding media age seems fundamentally hostile to literary concerns (cf. Griem, 2000, 213-14). As the novel as a whole indicates, literature's relevance (or fiction's relevance in particular) cannot be equated with the accidental topicality of the fictional Adam Thorpe's shepherd story, which is then used for propagandistic and political purposes. What is more important is the persistence of a cultural space for reflecting upon cultural processes *in writing*. In this respect the literary coherence of *Ulverton* as facilitated by many recurrent themes¹⁵ and a number of leitmotifs¹⁶ does not seem to be predicated first and foremost on traditional narrative closure or on a modernist ideal of the integrated work of art that transcends history but rather on a reflexive "putting things up against each other" *within* history, as Thorpe himself indicates in an interview (Hagenauer, 1996, n.p.). The medium of this reflexive "putting things up against each other" is the post-modernist evolutionary state of the genre of modern fiction, which has shed all generic formal restraints and is thus open for processing all kinds of discursive practices between orality and literacy *in writing*. "That's what postmodernism is all about," Thorpe comments, "borrowing, putting models together in a collage of things of the past or contemporary things, and the two sort of jangle together" (*ibid.*). In this sense, the novel is a kind of 'meta-medium' for storing and communicating information¹⁷ as well as for processing cultural relativity. And perhaps it can even generate new information from what Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* calls "fusions, translations, conjoinings,"¹⁸ i.e. the "fusions, translations, conjoinings" facilitated by the perma-

¹⁵ Cf. Nünning, 1995, 356, who mentions sheep breeding, infant mortality, sexuality, the tension between religion and morality on the one hand and between religion and individuality on the other, and the interplay between progressive and traditional forces.

¹⁶ Most importantly 'bedwine' and 'red ribbons,' the latter of which supports the reader's identification of Gabby's corpse in the end; cf. Galster, 2002, 347-49.

¹⁷ This double function could be described in terms of Aleida Assmann's distinction between *Speichergedächtnis* and *Funktionsgedächtnis*; cf. Assmann, 1999.

¹⁸ Rushdie, 1988, 8, coins this formula in response to the question "How does newness come into the world?"

nence of writing in a highly flexible structure. Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* realises this potential impressively.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Universities of Darmstadt and Tübingen on February 7 and July 19, 2003, respectively. Thanks are due to Antje Kley for drawing my attention to Thorpe's novel and for a number of helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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