
H-France Review Vol. 22 (March 2022), No. 30

Katie Chenoweth, *The Prosthetic Tongue: Printing Technology and the Rise of the French Language*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 350 pp. Appendix, notes, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812251494.

Review by Jennifer Oliver, Worcester College, University of Oxford.

In this richly researched and compellingly argued book, Kate Chenoweth revisits an apparently familiar story—that of the “birth” of the modern French vernacular—from an original and often exhilarating perspective. Intertwined with this history, Chenoweth shows, is the story of another “beginning,” that of movable-type printing in Europe. The latter, it is argued, is an innovation that arrives less as a “violent incursion” (p. 21) of technicity (per Heidegger)—a rupture that announces the arrival of modernity—than as a series of cumulative advances. “The central deconstructive gesture of this book,” writes the author, “will be to de-naturalize the modern French language,” and in doing so, *The Prosthetic Tongue* also makes a strong, reciprocal case for viewing printing technology as emerging gradually: in distinct enmeshment, as we are reminded, with manuscript culture of the period. What the book presents, advisedly, as the “*biotechnology* of early modern culture” (author’s emphasis, p. 19), then, is a kind of graft (a concept used to great effect by both *The Prosthetic Tongue* and, famously, by one of the book’s subjects, Joachim Du Bellay) between a de-naturalised vernacular language and a technological turn that is argued to be less unnatural than might previously have been purported. The nature/culture divide is challenged, symbolically, by reminders that the first printing presses emerged from existing agricultural technology and also by attention to the frequent allusions in the period to management of the “fecundity” of the French language (as, for example, on p. 128, within the chapter on Geoffroy Tory’s *Champ fleury*).

The author’s own intellectual and academic trajectory informs and enriches the approach taken here. An expert on Derrida and director of both the *Bibliothèque Derrida* at Éditions du Seuil and the *Derrida’s Margins* digital humanities project at Princeton, Chenoweth is an authority on deconstruction, but was drawn initially to the history and philosophy of science. The decision to specialise in French literature came relatively late. Taking as its primary focus the period between 1529 and 1549 (from the publication of Tory’s *Champ fleury* to that of Du Bellay’s *La Deffence, et illustration de la langue francoyse*, both of which make use of the book’s emblematic image, the Gallic Hercules), a twenty-year span marked by the flourishing of debates over typography, orthography, and the contested field of printing and publishing itself, *The Prosthetic Tongue* spans a wide range of disciplines, making a case for this period as a “new media moment” marked by the capital investment of printers (p. 158). It deals with well-known and less familiar

texts intervening in these linguistic-printerly-political territorial jostlings, providing a helpful chronological list of sixteenth-century technical treatises as an appendix.

The book is most challenging in its densely theoretical introductory chapter, in which the bases of many of its key arguments are established, but the following chapters reward the close attention demanded at this early stage. Drawing on deconstruction and Derrida in particular, but also Stiegler, Leroi-Gourhan, and media theorists beginning with Benjamin [1], chapter one takes as its counter-model--besides Heidegger's privileging of handwriting over typing--Walter Ong's account of printing as a kind of deadly technologization of a previously living, spoken, language, which is taken as representative of the standard or accepted view of this history. Here, as in the chapters to follow, Chenoweth takes to task such phono-and logocentric views of what was at stake in these moments. In chapters three and four, "Teleprinting" and "Phonography" respectively, the complexities of the relations between speech and writing, changing and fixed or regulated language, are traced with great nuance, and comparisons to more recent forms of media technology (the Olivetti teleprinter of the 1980s, or late-nineteenth-century practices of phonography) are made carefully and meaningfully, opening up productively provocative lines of reflection. At the same time, established turns of phrase pertaining to early modern French language (as the *langue maternelle* of speakers and writers in the period, or, retrospectively, the *moyen français* to linguists of the modern era) are interrogated, their metaphorical underpinnings taken seriously, and their implicit naturalising claims made visible.

If the notion of the "prosthetic tongue" is for the most part deployed in a metaphorical (though not, importantly, wholly dematerialized) sense, the book's first two chapters in particular are also attentive to early modern medical prosthetic practices and (emergent) theories. Not only the (biological) tongue, but the hand, too, is considered as *already* prosthetic, in lines of argument drawing on David Wills's 1995 study *Prosthesis*, and revealing the technicity already inherent in what had been regarded, or would come to be cast as, "natural" writing.[2] The less than radical, but nonetheless profound, shift from the handwritten to the printed word is illustrated by the comparative close reading of a pair of images of writing and printing bodies: a portrait miniature (c. 1450) of a seated Jean Miélot ("a celebrated scribe, ducal secretary, and compiler of manuscripts at the Burgundian courts of Philippe Le Bon and Charles Le Téméraire," [p. 60]) at his desk, and Josse Bade's printer's mark in Guillaume Budé's *De Assè* (1514). In the former, the scribe's hand, tools, and book are all already "double;" the "mediation and technics" of writing is central to this staging of transcription (or translation) (p. 62). In the latter, the single writing body in the centre of the image has been displaced by the new "writing body" of the printing press, but human bodies and hands are still part of the scene: now occupying the edges of the frame and each taking on a newly separated, or articulated, part of the process. The (scribal) hands, the "synecdoche of the human," "despite [their] symbolical amputation by Gutenberg's machinery," persist, in the multiplied forms of the hands of the compositors, beaters, and pullers of the movable-type print workshop (p. 82).

In this reading, and in the many other instances in which Chenoweth richly illustrates the moves of her argument with finely analysed textual and visual evidence, these are easily, and enjoyably, followed. But very occasionally (and perhaps fittingly, as when reading a text such as *De la grammatologie* itself), a reader might find the full sense or weight of a certain statement only becomes clear some lines later, in the light of its later development (sometimes even several paragraphs or pages later, in the case of Derrida's text). So, for example, the claim that Tory's grid technique for crafting letters in the *Champ fleury* "allows for a perspectival projection that

opens onto a national French space while simultaneously looking *back* to an illustrious ancient past and *forward* to an even more illustrious vernacular future” (author’s emphases, p. 94), is an argument that leans on the “cartographical” readings of Tory (p. 94) by Tom Conley, interpolating the latter perhaps too obliquely for the connection to a specifically French spatial context to be immediately apparent. But when, in the next paragraph, the argument winds up in a firework-like final sentence (“Tory wants to make the French language travel farther and longer, with higher fidelity sound, resonating through the apparatus of press-book-tongue-ear; he wants to dial up the *tele* in the vernacular language” [p. 95]), the drawing together of threads lands with all the greater a sense of satisfaction.

This book’s considerable strength lies in its genuine interdisciplinarity, its flexibility, and nimbleness of approach. The deceptively familiar *histoire* of the French language is told differently here, in ways that highlight its particularity (notably the wide-reaching and polyvalent influence of François I), while also pointing to broader questions that will interest and inspire early modernist scholars more widely. If it has a weakness, it is perhaps its relative lack of interest in those moments where early modernity might challenge or extend the Derridean or otherwise deconstructive modes of thinking that inform its approach. While the range of such material brought into dialogue with the sixteenth-century cultural questions explored is not narrow, and is certainly not applied in some constricting way to the texts and examples considered (as readers sceptical of such approaches might fear), the book might have made a stronger case, or left more space, for those aspects of the objects of study less readily accounted for by recourse to existing deconstructive lines of argument. There are moments, as in the first chapter, “The Artificial Tongue,” where early modern texts (in this case Ambroise Paré’s *Œuvres*) appear, momentarily, to challenge, or “[do] not conform to” (p. 41) the logic of supplementarity put forward by Derrida and which underpins the book’s argument. Yet such a moment tends to be short-lived, the resistance or failure to conform being swiftly recuperated by reference to alternative material from the Derridean archive. But this is likely an unfair criticism, given the book’s stated aims, its scope, and its many substantial achievements. Perhaps most significantly of all, in bringing together this period of book history, linguistic history and cultural history with a deconstructive approach, *The Prosthetic Tongue* succeeds in demonstrating afresh the enduring potential interest of both to early modernist scholars working in and between a wide range of disciplines, in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

[1] See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998); André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993); and Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Techno-logical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[2] David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Jennifer Oliver
Worcester College, University of Oxford
jennifer.oliver@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172