***Literature in the First Media Age: Britain between the Wars*. David Trotter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 342 (cloth).**

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There is a notable scene staged around a domestic telephone in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (USA, 1943), between young Ann Newton and her mother Emma. Mrs Newton is returning a call to the telegraphist at the Postal Union office, but at vocal levels that baffle and embarrass the bookish Ann, who had taken the call earlier with perfect equipoise.

> "Mama, you don't have to shout! Really, papa, you'd think that mama had never *seen* a phone! She makes no allowance for science. She thinks she has to cover the distance by sheer lung-power!"

This domestic contretemps raises a number of questions—about telephone etiquette, the contested place of the medium in the household, its material bulk as against the connections it makes possible, the technical precocity of the younger generation (and *bêtises* of the older), and the linkages between film, telegraph, telephone, and codex (Ann is never without her editions of Walter Scott)—that tend to slip between the cracks of standard media histories. Among other things to single out here, Ann's appeal to her father is surely conventional, since she has already curtly dismissed the paterfamilias as foolish (on the basis of his avid appreciation for crime fiction), and her speech is in effect addressed, in close-up, directly to the film's spectators—in such a way as to secure our loyalties on behalf of a newly calibrated generational wisdom about and comfort with communicational media. She is asking us to be what her mother is so conspicuously not: namely, *cool*.

It is word that resounds throughout David Trotter's new book, where he defines it as a quality associated "with the attitudes and behaviours, cultural or otherwise, endemic to an information age."[1] Specifically, he describes it in terms of "slack," or the self-aware occupation of an available gap between dumb instrument and light-speed connectivity, between machine and medium, in which

[1] David Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain between the Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 35.

a subject can gather her wits and play—a gap that Mrs Newton is incapable of registering, but which young Ann seems to know all too well. Indeed, the shift to an information age is one that we appear to have always already been making. Trotter nominates 1927 as the watershed year, a tipping point when the "energetic" regime specific to Modernism began haemorrhaging its semantic legitimacy in a world increasingly stitched together by connective media like telephone, radio, and television, and spatially shrunk by commercial flight paths, subway trains, and automobile routes. Trotter's book is about this protracted moment, between the wars, when the representational media of literature and film confronted the communicational regime of electromagnetic connectivity and mass transit, not as a perplexing novelty, but as an achieved social order of things. Examining this confrontation is, he says, "as good a way as any of investigating the process by which, from the mid-1920s onward, a regime of information gradually superseded a regime of energy. Connective media demanded something other than Modernism" (29-30).

One thing they seem to have demanded (apart from a good deal more sex and promiscuity) was a new form of sociability, adequate to the frequent and instantaneous intrusions upon privacy made endemic by telephone and radio, and alive to the possibilities of their spreading social networks. Trotter maps this emergent sociability in a number of novels and films which, abandoning Modernism for its formal insistence on the disasters and mesalliances pursuant upon any too thoroughgoing an intimacy with these media, drew up instead the nascent protocols of an information age. Drawing on Maud Ellmann's superlative account of Elizabeth Bowen's work, for example, he shows how Bowen's novel *To the North* (1932) foregrounds its protagonists' "exercise of connective sociability" (76): a subsumption of older, face-to-face forms of sociality within an abstract network of distributed private locales. The sociability appropriate to this new technocratic sense of community is decidedly hardened, relatively amoral, and deprived of the ritualistic dimension of older forms of intercourse. In its place is the cool aplomb of a leap into informational anomie: "that sense of adventuring, of speculation, of pleasurable drift, but at a distance, since the stage upon which the action took place would be other people's lives" (79). If there is any ritual, it is what the system does for you or with you, converting you into its integer, so that the "subordination of flows of energy to flows of information" is felt in your own spontaneous submission to, say, "the predictable alteration of signals, […] the semaphore of horns" that is modern

traffic (80). Connective sociability amounts to managing the dialectic interplay between the telephone network's mobilised privacy and the objective systematicity of traffic; or, as Trotter writes, it means keeping abreast of "the solitary-promiscuous traffic of interactive privacies" (82). The technological regulation of once anarchic flows effectively pacifies Benjamin's jarring account of modernity's "shocks," and allows for the general experience of interactivity to attain to its own stable logic of representation. The novels of the 1930s warm to that task, so that in them the Modernist "shock of the new" is replaced by the self-congratulatory mastery of the art of being cool. Building on Raymond Williams's pioneering account of communications technology as "an attitude before it is a machine or a set of codes," Trotter characterises this new literary orientation as a kind of "meta-attitude": "the attitude taken in literature to the attitude exemplified by the proliferation of connective uses of media" (273).

That "meta-attitude" entailed a relative underprivileging of many of the accepted aesthetic eccentricities of Modernism. In a situation where the formal challenge is to adapt a representational medium to an informational regime, rather than to outrage and defamiliarize the *déja-lu*, the technical emphasis will tend to fall on the reliability of representation as such. And this is why, in the book's most curious and unexpected turn, Trotter devotes two chapters not to the electric pulses and petrochemical velocities that made interactivity possible, but to the material carapaces in which such pulses and lines of flight were obliged to become solid objects in their own right: technological forms manufactured out of semisynthetic substances, whose representability within a newly re-affirmed mimetic vocation for the art of letters made them peculiarly totemic of the era. Fredric Jameson has written of Modernism's constitutive "excitement" over machinery as such, which he relates to the unique "capacity for representation" possessed by the technology that shaped it on all sides: "the turbine, […] Sheeler's grain elevators [and] smokestacks, […] the baroque elaboration of pipes and conveyor belts, […] the streamlined profile of the railroad train," *ad infinitum*.[2] But Trotter is on to something different and subsequent. While representability remains very much the point, the tonal posture shifts away from futuristic "excitement" to a decathected and resourceful composure, or cool.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 36-37.

If Bakelite, the semisynthetic material out of which early telephones were built, was resistant to "give or play or slack" (86), then the same could not be said for rubber, which coated the multifarious wires and ("inflated to / fifty pounds pressure"[3]) bore the weight of the ubiquitous motorcars of this period. Pliant and elastic, supple and strong (thanks to vulcanization), this entirely natural, colonially extracted substance found its specific lease of economic and cultural life in a world of emergent communications networks. Thus "exposing the archaic in the contemporary, the raw in the cooked" (87), rubber is Trotter's exemplary case of "techno-primitivism." This latter is a twist in the tail of Modernism's oft-recounted primitivist turn, whereby the aggressive displacement of feminine sentimentality by female sexuality across a number of narratives in the 1920s and 1930s was raised to an acute paradox by their frequently indulged sensory awareness of new mass-produced synthetic and semisynthetic substances. The emblematic case in this account is that of Constance, Lady Chatterley, whose modish mackintosh and rubber-soled shoes allow her to straddle both the modern industrialized landscape her author so excoriates, and the ancient forest to which she is drawn by Mellors. Her mixed constitution as a character is allegorized in the mixed constitution of this amphibious substance, at once modern and primitive, in which she is often clad. She is "cool" precisely in her immunity to the currency of Mellors' earnest beliefs, in the rubbery insulation she provides to his blazing charge. (One shudders to think what Trotter might make of Temple Drake in this context, with her traumatized and apotropaic fantasy "about being a man, and as soon as I thought it, it happened. It made a kind of plopping sound, like blowing a little rubber tube wrong-side outward.")[4]

Meanwhile, if the Modernists had often featured glass as a privileged metaphor for the brittleness and treacherous fragility of modernity's social relations when exposed to its latent energies, the rapid displacement of that substance by compound thermoplastics—celluloid, cellophane, plexiglass, Perspex—demanded new allegories, new formal approaches. The increasingly strong and

[3] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, *1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, (London: Paladin, 1991), 196.

[4] William Faulkner, *Sanctuary*, in *Novels 1930-1935* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 331.

stable transparency of these semisynthetic substances was not susceptible to the kinds of spectacular breakage the Modernists had spotlighted in glass, and led, in various works of the 1930s, to a very different set of narratives: less about fracture than about what Trotter calls "adhesion". "By 1930," he writes in a sweeping historicization, "glass no longer mattered so much, because other substances had begun to articulate a relation to the world neither tense nor hotly explosive, but instead coolly seeking out by adhesion the slack of the system. A flexible transparency became the cool gesture at what might come next, after energy's heat death" (137-38). Auden's *The Orators* (1932) contains poems which, we understand, "constitute a thermoplastic rhetorical event sustained by astute techno-primitivism" (139); their trick is to get us to adhere so closely to the world as it is—rapt as we are by a cinematic "nostalgia for the present" manifest in the verse's repeated definite articles—that we are provoked, exasperated, to transform it. Hugh MacDiarmid's late prosodic addenda to Scottish Modernism, also descriptive to a fetishistic fault, seek in the very stones themselves grounds for a primitivism not culpably awash in the blood of nationalistic chauvinism. In the bracing, tactile verse of "On a Raised Beach," MacDiarmid confounds any expectations of an unbroken Celtic Gaelic, let alone English, linguistic heritage; his semisynthesis of the spoken and written mineral record pays due deference to French nouns, classificatory Latinisms, Biblical cadences, and built-up Miltonic deposits. The results are crusty yet perfectly transparent, resilient as a tangy, salt-like crystal, lapsing from the sacred domain of poetry just long enough to expose the underlying carriage of tropes by rhetoric itself, and the undead rasp of some ceaseless chthonic song. Trotter is in his element here: "Rhetoric, as communication's matrix, precedes and outlasts individual human consciousness. It shapes thought, as lithogenesis has shaped the universe" (156).

But what element is this, exactly? The reader will be forgiven for feeling, throughout the second and third chapters, somewhat adrift from the argumentative trajectory that the introduction and chapter on telephony had set in motion; though our author has worked hard, here and there, to manufacture bridging passages and maintain the insistence on "cool" as a thematic constant. For although they may well belong to a "first media age," rubber and thermoplastics can hardly be said to typify its dynamics or tendencies—they are, as Trotter makes very clear, the substances in and through which whatever

follows Modernism between the wars looks back to a usable past. And while that may be of legitimate interest, there is no question but that the impedance presented by these chapters results in a certain amount of frustration. Above all, the frequently felt need to provide potted histories of these materials—from the chemical engineering as well as the industrial and economic points of view—derails the intensity of the now more distantly spaced textual readings; we all too often find ourselves afloat on a sea of stuff, wondering what possible relevance it might have to the formal history of literature. When the applied readings do then appear, there is the occasional sense of something like hermeneutic bathos, as a kind of substance-sensitive trainspotting assumes the critical reins: stray references to rubber-soled shoes in Lawrence and Barnes elevated to the central fact, rather strained homologies to thermoplastic transparency in the Thirties poets' attentiveness, and throughout a kind of wilful forcing of the point. There is no doubt that the concept of techno-primitivism has a good deal to offer a revised literary history of the period between the wars, or that semisynthetic substances will offer something to that revision, but the meat of this book lies elsewhere.

There is, then, a sense of real excitement about the later chapters on "Talkativeness" (on radio, primarily) and "Transit Writing" (on motor cars and airplanes), especially this last, which rewrites our very concept of media history. But Trotter's first turn is to literature's putative alliance with cinema over the matter of radio broadcasting, and their hybrid imagining of a "connective sociability," enabled by new telecommunications technologies, but not yet subsumed within the predatory violence of capital. Particularly, his interest is in the so-called "collective novel" of the 1930s, as a left-leaning form looking openly to inflect, if not revolutionize, the bourgeois media system in the service of more enduring social solidarities. The rising rates of alienation and isolation fostered by suburbanization were supposedly offset by the rising numbers of connective devices (radio sets and telephones) implanted in the separated households, but there could be no doubting the tendency of the former device toward authoritarian command, and of the latter toward compulsive and empty loquacity. Literature re-entered this altered social space, where language languished as mere grist to the connective mill, in order to find "words with some drama to them, words that represent one person to another," and found them, of all places, at the movies (175). For there, after a few rich years of

synchronized sound, it found a medium no longer simply hostile to the telephony and radio which had threatened it as a representational medium, but actively seeking to construct a veritable "sonic 'centre of gravity'" of its own (181). Cinema was now at least technically in league with sound technologies (acousmatic voices, optical sound tracks, and so on) that had once imperilled it, but rather than simply submit to an electromagnetic sonic hegemony, its narrative discourse worked hard to discipline these new overheated conductors of speech. That is, it constructed a spatial order in which to limit and buffer, or at least organise and administer, and so cool down, the unchained connectivity of the era. It did so by dividing the world up into shallow and deep spaces, spaces of semipublic sonic fission and spaces of reserve and quiet solitude, where these noises might be better channelled. Given this prevailing architecture, cinema could submit at will to the thrills of connectivity, but then tactically withdraw into a more meaningful kind of speech, often on the telephone, when the action so demanded. It could, so to speak, offset the sonic centre of gravity by switching, spatially and dramatically, to the centre of gravity of the action itself—where, often enough, the key moments of intercourse were conducted by telephone. The intriguing result of this interplay was "the dialectical product of the extreme claims made on behalf both of a narrowcast medium (telephony) and of a broadcast medium reconfigured as narrowcast (radio)" (200). And *this* was a resource that literature could learn to draw upon.

The form in which it did so, the collective novel of the 1930s (think Henry Green and Winifred Holtby), particularly in the hands of explicitly Leftist authors like Harold Heslop and John Sommerfield, performed for Trotter the task of "expos[ing] and resist[ing] the class and gender bias of the technological mediation of experience" (199). It pursued this task by battening on to the cinema's achievements in "absorbing" connectivity within a representational matrix; above all, the "stylized representation of a space for sociability, a space neither wholly private nor wholly public" (203)—a space like the hotel lobby, or indeed like the cinema itself. Reconfigured by the communicational vectors that traversed such spaces—and their old-fashioned avatars the pub and café, which now looked very different indeed—the novel as a form found itself engaged in nurturing a sociable solidarity among working-class and lower-middle class characters, enabling them to ward off media systems that threatened to dismantle their integrity. Here, "cool" was not really the issue; rather, what mattered was

how techno-mediation could provisionally be rewired by the older technology of the novel in order to forge new, informal, and historically responsive social links that befit a media age without succumbing to its economics.

Nothing could have prepared the reader, however, for the next turn of the screw, in which we find that "transportation" has all this time steadily been transformed into that newer and far less familiar thing, "transit." And in this transformation, something very significant indeed is at stake. For transportation had long been stabilized within the representative matrix of literature as a sort of "medium" in its own right; specifically, a medium of "views"—seen either from the train or motorcar window, streaking past or momentarily stilled. And indeed, the period between the wars has often been understood as travel writing's belle époque, as Trotter himself drily notes: he makes room for several delicious readings of Graham Greene, D. H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis's satirical contribution to the sub-genre of "motorcar pastoral." But the real tendency of the period was precisely away from this now rather stale and stereotypical representational genre, and toward something truly novel: a confrontation with transit itself, whose principle was not representational at all, but informational. In transit, the traveller does not accumulate experience in his or her technologically enhanced mastery of more and more space, but is transformed into something like a "living parcel" (the phrase is Ruskin's) within a spreading network of signal stops and transfer points. That is to say, transit makes of the traveller a bundle of information, a "message" within the medium whose ironic realisation is always, finally, that the medium itself is the message.

Of course, representational media such as literature and cinema tended to find ways for the communicational destiny of humankind abandoned to mass transit to be tactically deferred. These media framed transit in such a way as to release representational energies and episodes—of talkativeness, of symbolic notations, of clues and ciphers—above all by arranging for breakdowns and interruptions in the high-speed flows of spatial connectivity. Once again, because such episodes "involve the exploitation for personal benefit of slack in the system" (225), we are back on the terrain of cool. But not all literature of the period was exclusively concerned with these opportunistic seizures of the slackness in the system; for some, there was a kind of evolutionary logic to the suppression of representation's self-interested longevity, and an open embrace of transit as such. Trotter's outstanding illustration of this tendency, of an author whose

characters are "in transit *consciously*," is of course Elizabeth Bowen—thus allowing the other foot to fall long after the strong section on her novels' telephonic prowess in chapter one. That this results in a productive tension, between the novel's potent representational egotism as a form and the new narrative drifts available to "transit writing" as such, is the very key to Bowen's remarkable formal successes on this terrain. The "moving pause created by transport as a communications medium" (264) is variously occupied or foreclosed by Bowen's characters, depending on their relative independence from the novel's residual narrative formulae. Trotter here arrives at a superlative critical insight:

> Transit writing suspends itself parergically, at once inside and outside narrative. The greatest transit writing—*The Revenge for Love*, *The House in Paris*, or Henry Green's *Party Going* (1939)—asks how meaning can be made out of the meaningless pauses or suspensions that make up so much of the everyday; or, rather, how much meaning *is* made, whether we want it to be or not. They do so by folding parergon back into ergon. (266)

At which point, we had better leave off our critical survey of the book's riches, lest we give too many of its discoveries away. Suffice it to say that this last chapter is one of the most exciting, rewarding, and inspiring to be published on the topic of mid-century letters in many years. It is genuinely transformative of the way we must now see the social and cultural landscape of mid-century Britain, and beyond that, the modernized world.

What, however, of the book's larger argumentative sally? After all, there is more than a little provocation in the recurrent insistence that "the rapid and widespread development during the late 1920s of telephony and radio, in particular, rendered Modernism's diagnostic fragmentariness obsolete. Other techniques supervened, as an acknowledgement of, and resistance to, information overload" (271). This recurrent dating of Modernism's death certificate at (or around) 1927 flies in the face of a good deal of scholarship on what is most often referred to as "late modernism," and (I think) doesn't satisfactorily make sense of the towering achievements of Beckett (though Trotter certainly tries). However, his case has the signal virtue of spotlighting a real and progressive change in the aesthetic history of prose writing from the late 1920s onward: a decline of experimentalism, a return of representational

concerns, a passage away from metaphors of energy, and a growing concern with what it is to be "cool" in a social space articulated not by speech but by ubiquitous codes and signals. It grasps what is historically essential in the exasperation young Ann Newton feels for her hapless mother Emma, still trapped in a mechanical model of energetics and power; it makes sense of that sangfroid in the submission we all daily, hourly, minutely make to the electromagnetic pulses in whose limitless propagation we "reconfigure ourselves as messages, which send and receive messages" (272). It helps us, finally, to grasp our unexpected contemporaneity with the writers of the period between the wars who first made the radical discovery that connectivity is an attitude, and that that attitude was now everywhere.