book review

Modernism's Rubber Sole

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David Trotter

Literature in the First Media Age: Britain between the Wars

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013

ISBN 9780674073159 RRP US$31.50

Here we are, lost in the fenland undergrowth of what is surely the most forbidding thicket of literary prose from the 1930s: James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Before us a scene plays out in which 'preausteric man' chases after his mate, 'pan-hysteric woman'. Despite its paradigmatic familiarity, we might struggle to parse the sexual language with which these two communicate. Instead of 'Me Tarzan, you Jane', he shouts after her:

O june of eves the jenniest, thou who fleeest flicklesome the fond fervid
frondeur to thickly thyself attach with thine efteased ensuer, ondrawer of
our unconscionable, flickerflapper fore our unterdrugged, lead us seek,
lote us see, light us find, let us missnot Maidadate, Mimosa Multimimetica,
the maymeaminning of maimoomeining!

These phrases abound in imagery that might fix our location not only in the
primeval forest but also at the modernist frontier where literary narration
encounters its rival medium, film. The 'flickerflapper' of 'light' is an expression of
what Joyce would call 'monthage', the blindly mechanical sequencing of frames and
figures associated with the medium of cinema. Yet the catalytic energy that drives
Joyce's literary-cinematic sentence forward ultimately gives way to a more
thoroughgoing interrogation of meaning. That final exclamation, which switches the
focus from medium back to message, or from machine to mimesis, positions the
reader in that strange hinterland between modernist and postmodern ontologies,
which is what makes Joyce's late-career prose so disorienting and, according to
David Trotter, so timely.

Trotter's recent book, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain Between the
Wars*, makes episodes like this one speak to a larger media history. Its argument not
only supplies us with an account of literary transformation during the interwar
years but also establishes why the period from the late 1920s through the 1930s
produced the kind of literature it did—novels, stories and poems more interested in
representational intelligence than in the desire for newness that typified literary
production in the 1910s and early 1920s. From around 1927 up until 1939, Trotter
argues, the explosive energies of modernism—'the energy addict's aesthetic' (29)—
solidified into a regime defined by mediated connections. The preoccupation with
media 'shock' that defines, for instance, Walter Benjamin's early writings on
modernism is superseded by a 'cool' reflexive attitude which takes as its object
'something else altogether: call it information, or connectivity'. (23)

The most consequential expressions of this shift from media shock to media
connectivity are the statewide rolling out of telephony and the emergence of a global
transit system, discussion of which provides the two bookends to Trotter's study.
The opening chapter on telephony accounts for what Raymond Williams calls
'mobile privatization' which, in Trotter's view, takes shape in the middle-class desire

for 'connecting in order to connect, connecting in order to stay connected, at a distance'. (38) Literature seized upon the spatial paradox of telephonic communications with writers attempting to capture 'a solitary-promiscuous erotics of connection, and, almost as disturbing, a kind of clannishness', (38) which can be overheard in a wide array of novels though is at its most pronounced in the writing of Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf. Building on Maud Ellmann's account of the 'vast relay systems' in Bowen's *To the North*, Trotter considers the internal media network of the novel emblematic of a newly emergent social structure that is constituted 'by a linking of private spaces that circumvents the socially validated protocols of courtship through the exercise of very particular skills, through technocracy'. 'A community exists', he argues, 'though not one founded on any discernable moral or political basis.' (77) Woolf's late novel, *The Years*, provides another example of this telephonic sociality with all its attendant promiscuity. However, this novel also shows 'the dark side of mobile privatization', which reveals itself when a 'fear of physical contamination reinforces, and is in turn reinforced by, the fear of racial difference'. (83)

Having established a social theory of the telephone, Trotter then goes on to address the material interface between the telephone and its user, namely the semisynthetic substances of vulcanised rubber and thermoplastic. At this point Trotter's operative term is 'techno-primitivism', which designates the 'imaginative opportunity' embodied in a medium that, as both a natural element and a scientific marvel, exposes 'the archaic in the contemporary, the raw in the cooked'. (87) In a bravura reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Trotter puts the emphasis on Connie Chatterley's rubber-soled tennis shoes. Connie's shoes insulate her against both the primitive and the modern worlds respectively embodied by her lover, the groundskeeper Mellors, and her industrialist husband, Clifford. In a performative endorsement of Mellors' denunciation of the 'industrial epoch', the atavistically naked Connie steps into her shoes and proceeds to execute ultra-modern 'eurythmic dance-movements' in the rain.

Trotter's second sustained example of 'techno-primitivism' is 'the supersession, during the mid-1920s, of glass by thermoplastics, and then of one kind of thermoplastic by another, as a way at once to conjoin and to separate self and world'. (124) His chief example of literature's response to this is the rhetorically

inventive synthetic-Scots or Lallans deployed in the late-career poetics of Hugh MacDiarmid. Comprising 'an assemblage of past and present Gaelic derivatives, and Scots vocabulary and mannerisms, said to express the character of everyday Scottish speech and behavior more closely than English', this plastic language is 'a reaction against the increasing standardization of English during the early decades of the twentieth century'. (145–6) Elastically connecting the natural and the artificial, the standard and the aberrant, the concocted language of MacDiarmid's verse is analogous to the 'techno-primitive' tendencies embodied in thermo-plasticity more generally: 'as glass gave way to semisynthetic plastic as the membrane that separates us from the real world, and mucous-paper to cellophane in the wrapping of bonbons, so it became possible to enjoy rather than deplore the experience of the technological mediation of experience'. (165–6)

In a chapter on interwar 'talkativeness' Trotter enunciates clearly the hitherto muffled political question that can be sensed throughout the book: 'To what extent was it possible to hold out against, or propose an alternative to, capitalist exploitation of the connective potential of broadcast radio, television, and telephony?' (169) The answer is found in the leftist 'collective novel' written by the likes of Winifred Holtby, A.J. Cronin, Storm Jameson and Harold Heslop, where 'difficulty lay in imagining a solidarity that would take shape within the limits of capitalism's media system, and yet open out beyond it'. (170) In order to evade total media these novelists seek out a kind of informal speech that promotes solidarity. Trotter points out that this speech often occurs in semi-public spaces such as cafés, pubs, offices and lobbies and is associated with an equivalently semi-public-making medium, the radio. What this chapter shows is that while the literary left's preferred social worlds are often 'defined against the media systems that penetrate and surround them' the resulting sociability is nonetheless 'defined after and as a result of, technological mediation, not before it'. (212) The final chapter discusses mechanised transport in the 1930s and the way that, for the likes of Wyndham Lewis, transportation became the experience 'not just of being sent to a place, but of being communicated telegraphically', as if transported subjects were no different from 'packages of data'. (271–2)

Distinguishing this book from comparable work in the field—most notably that by Julian Murphet, Michael North and Juan A. Suarez—is its methodological range.

Relative to Trotter's own earlier scholarship we encounter a move away from comprehensive explorations of evolving literary forms and specific aesthetic programs to a more panoramic survey of British literature by way of a voluminous array of seemingly disparate examples. While it might be tempting to charge Trotter with unwanted positivism, especially given the extent to which he tracks various media almost exclusively as representational content, this would be to dismiss his myriad references to telephony, rubber, cellophane, radio and transport as mere trainspotting. Though idiosyncratic to the works that contain them, these references only acquire their full meaning alongside other contemporaneous references. In Trotter's hands quantity becomes quality and the sheer mass of data he collates bears witness to a historical transformation that has a collective rather than individual reach. Indeed, Trotter's impressionistic style of reading seems consistent with his object of study and his overarching assertion that it was during the interwar period that communications began to be conceived not as an electrifying novelty but as an established social order. These modern writers, he insists, gazed unflinchingly 'forward into a future in which information would flow faster than energy'. (273)

Trotter's peripatetic mode of argument is also grounded in the book's sensitivity to that which is 'cool', a term he endorses as the book's chief theoretical concern. Taken from the work of Alan Liu (as opposed to Marshall McLuhan), this term describes the human subject's conscious occupation of the 'slack' between technological materiality and codified information, between machines and their media: 'Cool demonstrates that the alignment between technique and technology that has been the premise of both industrialism and postindustrialism need not be precise, or complete. Technique, in short, can be diverted, momentarily, as it slackens or slacks off.' In this view literary or cultural technique reframes itself 'not (only) as obedience to the laws of nature and their social enforcement but as a "reflection upon those laws"'. (36) As an example of 'cool' in operation, Trotter gives Lawrence's description of the sexually impotent industrialist Clifford Chatterley as 'one of the amazing crabs and lobsters of the modern industrial and financial world, invertebrates of the crustacean order, with shells of steel, like machines, and inner bodies of soft pulp'. Like Lawrence, Trotter is against Clifford who aspires to be all machine and no interior: 'This is not cool. In cool, steeliness without does involve an

acknowledgement of the pulp within: acknowledgement, rather than expression or disavowal, being what emotion most needs.' (116)

Without doubt, Trotter is cool: his charismatic readings of material connectivity inhabit the space 'between the need to work and the desire for play', (36) making their points convincingly without ever belabouring them. That said, this reader cannot help but feel impatient with some of the book's narratives of particular media technologies. While Trotter's thick descriptions are invariably interesting they sometimes come unmoored from literary history. To my lights the sections on 'Marketing Telephony' and 'A Brief History of Rubber' seem excessive to the analyses they support but they will no doubt hold the interest of others cooler than me. By contrast, highpoints for me include the readings of Lawrence and those moments when Trotter conveys the aesthetic torsions that vitalised the period in question. His argument about 'thermoplastic writing' begins with the remarkable contention that 'Consider this and in our time', W.H. Auden's poem from 1930, 'while it does not develop a new aesthetic, could be said to indicate the need for one, and to do so by expressing a certain dissatisfaction with glass as an enabling material'. (136) This statement reveals Trotter's seismic sensitivity to literary transformation before it even happens; there is an awareness of an event in the offing as Auden strains within the carapace of older forms before they give way to the new. Observations like this one—some elaborate, some telegraphic—abound in all five of the book's chapters so that even if some chunks of historical and theoretical argument don't quite persuade, the readings around them certainly will.

To return to where we began: according to Trotter it has always been tempting to speculate that *Finnegans Wake* might 'belong to the prehistory of cyberspace and virtual reality', that it somehow prophesied the material exigencies of our own media present. 'The more plausible assumption,' Trotter suggests, 'might be that Joyce kept himself informed concerning the analog technologies of his day.' (13) As Trotter's conclusion makes perfectly clear, British literature from the interwar years anticipates the questions raised by contemporary media ecology and our lived experience of the new. Acknowledging the 'temptation to draw parallels between the ways the new media of the 1920s and 1930s sometimes appeared to people at the time and the way the new media of our own era sometimes appear to us', (287) Trotter restricts himself to a comparison between early telephony and Facebook

before suggesting that, while 'literature of the interwar period may not be continuous with our own', it nonetheless 'remains exemplary'. (287) From this standpoint Joyce shares with us a 'cool' attitude toward our discontinuously similar media moments. If we now live in an age of peak connectivity and information multiplicity, then the interwar books read by Trotter are the 'survivor's guides we still need'. (274) As for *Finnegans Wake*, this is 'just about as close to connectivity as literature was ever to get in the first media age'. (13)

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