Reviews

Science and Technology in the Age of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James: Thinking and Writing Electricity. By Sam Halliday. (American Literature Readings in the 21st Century) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. xiii+245 pp. £40. ISBN 978–1–4039–7672–7. R02853

Sam Halliday's book explores cultural, mainly literary, appropriations of scientific and technological language, concepts, and materials of mid nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Anglo-America. Much of the book's schema hinges on its subtitle, 'Thinking and Writing Electricity', which describes electricity as both an object of investigation and a means by which that investigation takes place. This cultural dichotomy is grounded in scientific and technological developments of the period, which it helps to illuminate. To orient us amid these back-and-forths, Halliday provides an array of cultural reference-points. Apart from its titular authors Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James, the book engages with Henry Adams, Whitman, Bierce, Emerson, Poe, Dana, Holmes, Hardy, Kipling, and a vast network of cultural theorists, physicians, psychologists, scientists, entrepreneurs, jurists, and politicians.

Throughout, electricity is shown as metaphor, model, and substance of our ideas; able to foster new intimacies and revise notions of the social or the personal. The telegraph, for instance, becomes a method of mechanical production and reproduction of ideas, but one in which individuality itself might be replicated. In something of a departure from Benjamin's analysis of the effects of mechanical reproduction, Halliday demonstrates how a 'locus' or 'aura' of individuality endures by moving to new registers. He provides a fascinating account of how the more adept telegraph operators, through a kind of 'physiognomic logic', apperceived the idiosyncratic machinations of their fellow experts across great distances. Halliday thus explores how nineteenth-century communications technologies fostered an unexpected interpersonal communicative transparency, but he also shows how they gave rise to new kinds of blindness and misrepresentation. He shows how the telegraph, and later the telephone, brought people together in a hitherto unknown co-presence, but also facilitated new miscommunications, allowing the deceptions of language to be newly instantaneous and transcontinental.

Like other similar investigations of the period, Halliday's characterizes technological innovations as alternately both boon and bane. He evokes the boosterist optimism of many who felt these new technologies would solve all global and interpersonal conflicts. He counters this optimism with discussions of how writers like Adams and Twain responded to the new law of thermodynamics, which seemed to undermine ideas of universal progress. Later other pessimistic voices arise, such as Mary Moss, George Miller Beard, and others who felt that the technological annihilations of time and space and this new heightened level of activity were leading to increased nervousness, debility, and other ills.

Halliday keenly contextualizes these concerns within a vast array of works. Like a network of telegraph cables and telephone wires criss-crossing through Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, and others, Halliday's book repeatedly shows how electric currents include and exclude, connect and divide these authors' characters as well as non-fictional societies and individuals.

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