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The Frantic Atlantic: Ocean Liners in the Interwar Literary Imagination

The High Seas Bookshop in the *Transylvania* has become an Atlantic Exchange in the World of Books.

- High Seas Bookshop catalogue, *R.M.S. Transylvania* (Anchor Line c.1925: back cover)

For our locale we chose a great liner: this, because the transatlantic liner is essentially an achievement of this age, and with all its absurdities, one of its greatest creations. The exterior of one of these great vessels is a symbol and a thing of beauty.

- Osbert Sitwell, preface to *All At Sea* (Sitwell 1927: 96)

Transatlantic literary exchange depended, during the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, on the ocean liner. Books and periodicals were exported via sea routes, lent among passengers or through ships' libraries, and even bought and sold on board. The High Seas Bookshops, established on some Anchor Line vessels in the 1920s, strikingly demonstrate the active role of shipping lines in the transatlantic print marketplace. The shops, whose staff were themselves writers, promoted new American and British publications, as well as providing spaces for literary networking. Increasing numbers of authors and journalists travelled on the Atlantic during the interwar years, and many found material for their writing in these journeys. Among them was Osbert Sitwell, who co-authored a play, *All At Sea*, with his brother Sacheverell. As his comment on their choice of setting suggests, the liner was taking on an increasingly important symbolic value in a transatlantic literary imaginary. Its broader cultural influence was felt in fields ranging from painting to photography, from performance to architecture.

This essay connects the practical and semantic aspects of the liner's role in interwar literary culture. It investigates what reading and writing practices the transatlantic steamship enabled, and what kinds of meanings were invested in it by authors of the period. Interwar texts refer back, of course, to traditions of nautical fiction which developed during the nineteenth century. Yet there is a distinctively modern literature of the ocean liner because there was a specific set of social, economic and technological conditions which, around the turn of the century, produced a new kind of vessel and new possibilities in overseas travel. The first section of the essay offers a concise explanation of the liner as technological, cultural and design object. The second section explores literary responses to the steamship as an emblem of modernity, of social mobility, and of transatlantic style, focusing on the Sitwells' collaborative text together with an American novel published two years earlier, Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). The third section considers the steamship as a space for literary activity and an agent of print culture, drawing on a range of mostly non-fictional sources. My aim is to analyse the role of the ocean liner in inspiring and enacting transatlantic literary exchange.

'Tangible miracles': Defining and representing the ocean liner

An ocean liner may be defined as 'a ship that carries passengers between ports according to a fixed schedule' (Finamore and Wood 2018: 12). This became possible with the advent of steam power in the mid-nineteenth century; in earlier periods, sailing ships carried passengers, mail and cargo, advertising a fixed departure date but with no guaranteed date of arrival. From the 1880s, as wood and iron hulls were replaced with steel ones, liners became faster and more efficient. The main

purpose of these ships, during most of the nineteenth century, was 'to service the empires of various European nations', via trade, communication, and emigrant transport (ibid.: 18). Around the turn of the century, increased demand from wealthy travellers led to radical alteration to internal layouts on board, so that more people could be carried and in greater comfort. At the same time, 'intensifying national rivalries in Europe began to lend passenger liners new public and political resonance that led to the construction of the unprecedentedly fast and large transatlantic vessels whose names are recognized to this day' (Rieger 2018: 92). Following the First World War, as US immigration restrictions tightened, tourists began to take over from emigrants as the main source of ticket revenue. Liners grew ever larger and their First and Second Class accommodation became truly luxurious, while the steerage section was gradually replaced with Tourist Third Cabin. A trip to Europe was increasingly within the reach of middle-class North Americans.

Contemporary travel guides offer insight into the aspirations of this new group of passengers. Basil Woon's *The Frantic Atlantic* (1927), for instance, is addressed to first-time travellers.¹ Woon, a British-born journalist who made a career in the US, comments that while a quarter of a million Americans cross the Atlantic every year, 'only about ten percent do the thing as it should be done. This book is written to show you how' (Woon 1927: 5). This, then, is a guide for the upwardly mobile. The text begins: 'Drinks, divorces and dresses are the principal reasons why Americans go to Europe. Some few make the crossing with a view to 'seeing Europe', and often Europe is more successful in seeing them' (ibid.: 3). The trip eastward, Woon suggests, is really about opportunities for consumption, display, and escape from the restrictions of Prohibition-era America, even though its ostensible aim is to immerse the traveller in culture, art, and history. American tourists expect that the spectacle of Europe will be laid out before them, yet they risk becoming a spectacle themselves.

The arrival of cruising had an important impact, economically and culturally. Pleasure cruising had begun on a small scale during the late nineteenth century, and in the 1920s, the industry entered a phase of dramatic expansion. A cruise differs from a crossing (or 'line voyage') in that it is the voyage itself, not a particular destination, which attracts travellers. A purpose-built cruise ship is, in turn, very different from an ocean liner. The liner has a deep draft to withstand rough seas, and extensive storage capacity for fuel and supplies for a long journey. It maximises passenger capacity using spaces below the water line, and traditionally offers accommodation in several classes, with separate public rooms for each. A cruise ship has a shallow draft, allowing entry into more ports, and its fuel consumption and storage capacity are relatively low. Usually all cabins have windows, and cruise ships are generally 'one-class', meaning that while cabin sizes and facilities (and therefore, prices) might vary, the public spaces are open to all. However, while mass-market cruise ships weren't introduced until the 1970s, the design of ocean liners was influenced, from the twenties onwards, by the growing popularity of cruising. For instance, Cunard's *Franconia*, launched in 1922, included a special ventilation system appropriate for tropical voyages in wintertime. In 1930, Canadian Pacific's *Empress of Britain* was built specifically for conversion to cruising; this was done by removing barriers between passenger classes. Its summer crossing route, from Quebec to Southampton, was impassable when the St Lawrence River was frozen, so in winter, it offered 130-day world cruises.

The idea of the ocean voyage as a holiday, rather than simply a means of getting somewhere, prompted the growing attention to décor, service, and entertainment on board. In the 1930s, 'liner design began to feature permeable divisions between outside and inside' (Wealleans 2006: 103), and 'to acknowledge the ocean and the activities on deck as pleasurable' (ibid.: 102).

This contrasted with earlier design strategies which aimed to help passengers to forget that they were at sea. The most fashionable ships of the thirties – such as French Line's *Normandie* and Cunard's *Queen Mary* – provided outdoor pools and large promenade decks, as well as elegant indoor spaces such as cinemas, shops, lounges and restaurants.

Ocean liners fascinated many of the artists and architects associated with modernism. The Italian 'Manifesto of Futurist Painters' proposes: 'we must draw inspiration from the tangible miracles of contemporary life, from the iron network of speed which winds around the earth, from the transatlantic liners, the dreadnoughts, the marvelous flights that plow the skies, the shadowy audaciousness of submarine navigators, the spasmodic struggle to conquer the unknown' (Boccioni [1910] 2009: 62). In this vision, new transport and communication technologies generate the responses of awe and wonder that formerly belonged to the religious domain. For architects, the attraction of liners was not only related to speed, but also to internal organisation. Le Corbusier wrote in *Vers une architecture* (1923): 'If we forget for a moment that a steamship is a machine for transport and look at it with a fresh eye, we shall feel that we are facing an important manifestation of temerity, of discipline, of harmony, of a beauty that is calm, vital and strong' (Le Corbusier [1927] 1946: 96-97). The hermetic world of the ship is comparable to land-based Modernist structures such as apartment or hotel complexes that were separated from the existing cityscape and 'were supposed to be read as fragments of tomorrow's world' (Dawson and Peter 2010: 8).

The ever-increasing size, speed, and technical sophistication of each generation of liners meant that, for the five decades, they continued to be characterised using discourses of novelty and forward movement. But their role as embodiments of national prestige meant that the design of the ships themselves, as well as of the materials used to advertise them, had to evoke the maritime and cultural traditions of their country of origin. These contradictory requirements were held in a delicate balance by publicity writers. A 1936 brochure for the *Queen Mary* read:

Despite the modernity of the setting, the latest ingenious provisions for your comfort, you sense that all this has been going on for a very long time, perfected from generation to generation [...]. Progress must never be permitted to alter the feeling of being at home, of sharing the warm hospitality that has always been Britain's own. (qtd in Coons and Varias 2016: 245)

Whilst new liners were still being constructed in the 1950s, this was the last phase of their heyday. The coming of the jet age did not immediately close down passenger sea routes, since flights were at first very expensive. Literary texts from this era, however, begin to lament what now appeared as a declining practice of leisurely travel by sea. In later decades, mass-market cruise ships 'shrewdly cultivated [the] mystique' of liners (Quartermaine and Peter 2006: 34), and a similar nostalgia for sea travel is legible in numerous late-twentieth and twenty-first-century fictional narratives set on liners.

A significant part of the action in several major plays, shows, and novels unfolds on board a transatlantic liner. Among the more recognisable British and North American examples from the first half of the twentieth century are: Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Shuttle* (1907), about a transatlantic marriage; Eugene O'Neill's play *Hairy Ape* (1922), centring on a stoker and his horrified encounter with an upper-class passenger; Cole Porter's musical *Anything Goes* (1934); and Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), with its famous romantic sequence that unfolds during an Atlantic storm. My wider research project examines, too, lesser-known texts such as

British dramatist Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* (1923); American food writer M.F.K. Fisher's memoir, *The Gastronomical Me* (1943); and Canadian novelist Ethel Wilson's *Hetty Dorval* (1947). In the following sections of this essay, I will concentrate specifically on the mid-1920s – exploring why the ocean liner was so powerfully symbolic at this historical moment, what exactly it was symbolic of, and how its meanings are contested.

'Just like being at the Ritz': style and replication

In 1925, Anita Loos, a successful screenwriter, published her first novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. It takes the form of Lorelei Lee's badly spelled and innuendo-laden diary. Lorelei lives in New York, where her luxurious lifestyle is funded by Mr Eisman, a button manufacturer. Eisman sends her with her friend Dorothy on a tour to Europe, which both he and Lorelei insist will be educational. The novel became a best-seller, and was also admired by intellectuals ranging from James Joyce to George Santayana (see Hammill 2007: 58-61). The figure of Lorelei achieved great cultural prominence in the 1920s, and she is referred to in many contemporary texts, including the Sitwells' *All at Sea: A Social Tragedy in Three Acts, For First-Class Passengers Only* (1927). The aristocratic British siblings Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell made important contributions to modern poetry, fiction and criticism. The two brothers also made a little-known venture into dramatic writing with *All at Sea*, a farce whose action unfolds during a transatlantic crossing. It was published along with an extended preface by Osbert alone. Cecil Beaton designed the beautiful cover, and the sets for the five-night run of the play at London's Arts Theatre Club (Lloyd 2001: 49). The Sitwells are evidently enthralled, yet profoundly disturbed, by the liner and what it represents, and like Loos, they present it as a stage for performance and masquerade. In both texts, the idea of travel as a means to social mobility is comically literalised.

Lorelei and Dorothy leave New York on the *Majestic*, and Lorelei's first on-board diary entry reads:

Well Dorothy and I are really on the ship sailing to Europe as anyone could tell by looking at the ocean. I always love the ocean. I mean I always love a ship and I really love the *Majestic* because you would not know it was a ship because it is just like being at the Ritz.
(Loos [1925] 1998: 19)

This contradictory statement evokes contemporary debates about nautical design. The liners of the pre-World War I era favoured sumptuous period interiors, which evoked the 'elegance of a luxurious hotel' and would 'foster a belief in the rigid stability of the ship when at sea' (Bone 1955: 146). The *Majestic*, originally launched by Hamburg-Amerika Line as the *Bismarck* in 1914, was not fully completed until 1922, once it had been ceded to Britain as a war reparation. Its interior layout therefore belongs to the 1910s and is aligned with the hotel aesthetic, rather than with the modern, art deco-influenced styling and functional simplicity that would so soon be showcased in liners of the late twenties, such as the *Ile-de-France* and the *Bremen*. The hotel atmosphere, is however, the perfect setting for Lorelei's meretricious performance as a well-off, respectable traveller. Her system is based on demanding the best of everything, since she knows that her own value depends on what men are prepared to pay.

For instance, she insists on eating in the ship's Ritz restaurant, describing it as: 'a special dining room on the ship where you can spend quite a lot of money because they really give the food away in the other dining room' (Loos [1925] 1998: 21). Her ticket would have included meals

in the table d'hôte restaurant, whereas you had to pay extra to eat in the Ritz. Of one acquaintance, Mr Bartlett, she comments: 'he did ask me to dine at his table, which is not in the Ritz and I told him I could not' (ibid.: 27). Of another: 'Major Falcon is really quite a delightful gentleman for an Englishman. I mean he really spends quite a lot of money and we had quite a delightful luncheon and dinner in the Ritz' (ibid.: 22). The Ritz brand originated with the Hotel Ritz in Paris, opened in 1898 by the Swiss hotelier César Ritz and the French chef Auguste Escoffier. In 1906 they added the Ritz Hotel in London, and they also managed London's Carlton Hotel. Highly prestigious hotels such as these were designed 'to exude comfort and a kind of universality of design language so that visitors from far afield would not feel alienated' (Dawson and Peter 2010: 10). Ritz and Escoffier opened à la carte restaurants on several Hamburg-Amerika Line ships. These included the two that were handed over after the war, to become Cunard's *Berengaria* and White Star's *Majestic*. Both ships, then, had Ritz-designed dining rooms, but White Star, unlike Cunard, did not take on the Ritz restaurant operators. So the *Majestic's* restaurant was still referred to as the Ritz, but it was in effect an imitation, just like Lorelei herself.

The Ritz-Carlton name was franchised in the US, and the New York hotel, which Lorelei frequents, opened in 1911. The European hotels appear to Lorelei to be replicating American culture. Arriving in London, she writes: 'So Dorothy and I came to the Ritz and it is delightfully full of Americans. I mean you would really think it was New York' (Loos [1925] 1998: 33). On the way to France, the only thing she looks forward to is seeing the Paris Ritz. Lorelei never seeks to engage with local cultures. Rather, she is always looking for a globalised, luxury style that is identical no matter the location, on land or sea. Indeed, this style reaches its perfect expression in the liner itself. Although liners were designed with national prestige in mind, their eclectic interiors rarely evoke a recognisably national aesthetic. Detached from all land-based geographies, they refer to place – if at all – only through stylised representations of possible destinations. Liners, even more than hotel chains, separate people from external contexts. 'A ship is a habitat before being a means of transport' writes Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, defining a habitat as 'a known and enclosed space' that can be appropriated (Barthes [1957] 1991: 66). The *Majestic* pleases Lorelei because its interiors and social organisation reproduce her usual surroundings, which she knows how to manipulate.

'I always think', says Lorelei, arriving at another Ritz hotel, 'that the most delightful thing about traveling is to always be running into Americans and to always feel at home' (Loos [1925] 1998: 33).² Her phrase 'feel at home' recurs in Osbert Sitwell's preface to *All At Sea*. Here, too, it refers to spaces and décor that belong to no particular place or time, and have no functional quality. But while Lorelei describes these with approval, Sitwell offers a fierce critique. Although the exterior line of a steamship 'expresses essential fitness to purpose', he writes, the opposite is true of the interiors: 'in order to make you 'feel at home', only the things most inappropriate to the sea, armchairs on rollers and French eighteenth-century prints, are permitted to be seen. The sea is hushed up and put in its place. Indeed such a luxurious interior recalls, in its rich silliness and elaboration, the furnishing and fitting of some great Roman bath' (Sitwell 1927: 96). Sitwell, like Loos, outlines a globalised culture, powered by America but collecting up and commodifying trophies from European history. The flattening of historical time through the mixing of period styles, together with the miscellaneous geographical references, suggests that the modern subject may be most 'at home' not in a particular place or time but rather in what Michel Foucault would call a 'heterotopia'. Foucault describes the ship as 'a floating piece of space, a place without a place that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the

sea' (Foucault [1967] 1986: 27). It is the best possible example of an heterotopia, which is 'a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (ibid.: 24).

The setting for the play *All At Sea* presents just such a commentary on, and subversion of, real locations. The first scene takes place in the cocktail bar of a transatlantic steamship, and the stage directions specify: '*the general style of the room is Tudor, half-timber, with oak beams and plaster. The bar faces the stage; and the bar itself, and the shelves behind, are decorated with hundreds of bottles, their corks stuck with Allied flags*' (Sitwell and Sitwell 1927: 111). In another context, the multiple flags might suggest cosmopolitanism, constructing the Atlantic as a space of exchange and co-operation. But in this setting, the flags point to globalisation as a process of loss. The décor invokes a lost English past, re-imagined for mass consumption, just as happens in the Hollywood films which the drinkers discuss. One character has been 'having a divine conference with Zoe and Clarissa about the influence of the cinema on modern morals' (ibid.: 114). Osbert Sitwell's preface argues that 'American influence and economic conditions have conspired to liquidate the past, and to translate into reality the dreams of the Italian Futurists' (Sitwell 1927: 99). The rhetoric of size and speed had moved outwards from the avant-garde realm of Futurism into the mainstream of American promotional discourse. Sitwell foresees most of London's historic buildings being torn down, to make way for 'the nondescript but gigantic' structures 'that are to shelter the big-businesses of to-morrow' (ibid.), though he imagines that St Paul's will be retained as a tourist attraction.

These changing responses to London's built heritage are acted out in *All at Sea*. One of the characters, Clarissa Clear, is a film star. When someone remarks that America is a wonderful country, she comments:

Well, I guess England is better; but perhaps that's because I'm American. I've just stayed there ten days. The first day I gave up to sight-seeing. I saw St Paul's in the morning; lunched at the Ritz; went over to the little florist's opposite, bought the biggest wreath money could buy, and just plumped it on the Cinemataph. (Sitwell and Sitwell 1927: 141)

Converting London's war memorial into a monument to cinema, Clarissa embodies the Sitwells' horrified vision of the impact of American mass culture in Europe. The reference to the Ritz signals, just as it does in Loos' novel, the growing power of globalising brands, with their erasure of local cultures and aesthetic traditions. (This passage is one of several which suggest that Loos's text influenced *All at Sea*.³)

Sitwell evokes a dramatic change to cityscapes, as the historic towers of churches are replaced or dwarfed by modern skyscrapers. Skyscrapers can liquidate the past, Sitwell suggests, because they are the headquarters of international corporate capitalism. They are part of a culture which depends on cycles of destruction and reconstruction on an ever-larger scale, and the same is true of the steamship. By 1925, the association between the two had already become well established through the visual idioms of advertising. Posters showed liners towering over harbour buildings, or upended and exceeding the height of famous landmarks.⁴ Sitwell subverts the advertisers' message: 'A modern liner is, in fact, a mad runaway skyscraper, that has taken to water' (Sitwell 1927: 96). This surreal image is simultaneously a critique and an acknowledgement of the allure of the new urban skyline and the power of modern design. Sitwell's response is a complex blend of distaste and fascination; indeed, he even begins to elaborate a poetics of the liner:

'The loveliness which is there is due to a line that expresses essential fitness to purpose, and to a certain triumphant insolence in the very conception of it'. It has, he suggests, 'that same quality of beauty possessed by some great building in New York, by the Telephone Building, in itself a little city, or by the [...] Radiator Tower' (ibid.).⁵

The notion of the 'little city' evokes a different aspect of the liner's verticality. Cutaway diagrams, another kind of visual that was often used in travel advertising, showed the hierarchical social organisation of the liner, and the possibilities for upward mobility which a voyage might allow (see Ross). The tourist journeys of Clarissa Clear and Lorelei Lee are oriented towards accumulation, as they seek to amass both social and financial capital. In his typology of regular Atlantic travellers, Basil Woon includes a category into which both Clarissa and Lorelei fit: 'Professional Women, meaning actresses, alimony hunters and ocean vampires' (Woon 1927: 3). He later adds: 'And whether Anita Loos had anything to do with it or not, most of the ocean vamps I have met are blondes' (ibid.: 144). Indeed, Loos's novel is subtitled *The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*, and her heroine literally makes a career out of appearing to be a lady. She insists on her own respectability, which she continually contrasts with the supposedly 'unrefined' and profligate (but actually far more sincere) behaviour of Dorothy:

So Dorothy is out taking a walk up and down the deck with a gentleman she met on the steps, but I am not going to waste my time going around with gentlemen because if I did nothing but go around I would not finish my diary or read good books which I am always reading to improve my mind. (Loos [1925] 1998: 25–26)

The circular, purposeless yet potentially pleasurable movement around the deck is contrasted with linear, productive processes such as reading or writing books. Lorelei's references to books are always part of her discursive project of 'improvement', which ostensibly involves the productive use of leisure time, according to the middlebrow ideals of her period.

The transatlantic middlebrow culture of the twenties took shape through book clubs, digest publications, and literary broadcasts, designed to guide the bewildered reader through the process of self-education. The rhetoric of self-improvement emphasised mental cultivation, but the real purpose of many who engaged with middlebrow cultural institutions was to enhance their social and hence financial status (see Hammill and Hussey 2016: 138–50). Lorelei makes the hidden aims of middlebrow culture explicit. She receives from Mr Eisman 'a large book of Etiquette as he says there is quite a lot of Etiquette in England'. She takes it on deck to read, but the volume disappoints: 'I glanced through it and it wastes quite a lot of time telling you what to call a Lord. [...] So I will not waste my time on such a book' (Loos [1925] 1998: 23). Time spent on reading may be considered an investment, but Lorelei wants a quicker return. So she pays someone, not to guide her reading but to do it for her. Another of her admirers sends her a set of the works of Joseph Conrad, and she comments: 'They all seem to be about ocean travel although I have not had time to more than glance through them' (ibid.: 8). She gets her maid to read the books and tell her about them, so that she can pretend she has read Conrad.

Although Lorelei criticises Dorothy for disporting herself on deck, there are moments when she is herself obliged to walk round and round the ship with gentlemen. The tedious Mr Bartlett turns out to possess information which Lorelei wants to acquire, and so she endures his company. At a masquerade ball for an orphans' charity, she records:

Mr Bartlett made quite a long speech in favor of orphans [...] Mr Bartlett really likes to make speeches quite a lot. I mean he even likes to make speeches when he is all alone with a girl when they are walking up and down a deck. But the maskerade ball was quite cute and one gentleman really looked almost like an imitation of Mr Chaplin. [...] So Dorothy and I won the prizes. I mean I really hope I do not get any more large size imitations of a dog as I have three now. (ibid.: 29)

There is no escape from prolix companions on an ocean liner, which allows only circular movement in a confined space. This hermetic world generates its own language of repetition and automation. Indeed, Lorelei's own style is full of redundancy, and she herself, like the dogs and the masqueraders, is a fake. She gives a calculated performance of childishness, but is highly strategic in her methods, continually claiming to desire education while her sole purpose is economic gain. Her discourse is insistently respectable on the surface, and yet, through her euphemisms, omissions and evasions, actually suggestive and revelatory.

Lorelei is entirely a product of modern technology. She has previously worked as a typist and a cinema actress, and Laura Frost comments on the 'labor of automatism' (Frost 2010: 302) which these activities represent. Dorothy even likens Lorelei's brains to a radio, endlessly broadcasting junk, aside from an occasional moment of genius – or at least, cunning. Here we find another connection to the Sitwells' representation of the ocean liner: they, too, repeatedly disconnect 'technology' from 'progress'. For instance, *All At Sea* comments on radio. One character shouts: 'I've got a real treat for you. [...] It's the end, just the very end of Expensky's lecture at New York on 'The Hereafter, the Hitherto and the Wherewithal.' The listener-in was only just put up this morning. What a wonderful age we live in' (163–64). With the installation of the radio, the passengers abandon more traditional art forms – they stop playing instruments or dancing themselves in order to listen to truncated or inaudible broadcasts. Osbert Sitwell's preface – an essentially antimodern text – resists the idea of a 'wonderful' age of technology:

The triumphant lack of reverence with which the passenger part of humanity acts on a liner, the manner in which it carries out into the middle of this grey terror and Atlantic darkness its own habits of speech much as a sparrow chirrup on a telegraph wire, its own pleasures of over-eating and over-drinking, all further exaggerated by the want of outside influences and by the solicitude of the shipping company for the 'comfort of its passengers,' is something of which mankind can be almost proud. But then everything, so the passengers, if they consider the matter at all, can comfort themselves, is at the disposal of this cosmopolitan and comatose cargo. Wireless hems them in and joins them to the world: there are doctors and nurses too, should the tennis, golf, swimming and the rather abstract electric ghosts of horse and camel, fail to jog them into some degree of life. (Sitwell 1927: 102)

The conjunction of 'cosmopolitan' and 'comatose' suggests that the growth of modern travel reduces, rather than enhancing, the human subject's responses to the world around them. Sitwell rejects mass communication and transport technologies: not only the ship itself but the communication systems (wireless telegraphy allowed ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore messages), and the electrical equipment on board. The reference to the electric horse, an item found in many ships' gyms in this period, might remind us of the imitation dogs with which Lorelei is beset. Similarly, the 'habits of speech' to which Sitwell refers can be connected with the automated discourse which Barbara Everett beautifully describes as 'Lorelei Lee's electric-drilling sweetly-

lethal note' (Everett 1984: 258). In both *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *All at Sea*, the social reality constructed by liner passengers' conversation is imitative and inauthentic, oriented towards repetition and therefore 'comfort', rather than stimulation. Loos and the Sitwells evoke a world of simulated reality.

Writing, reading and not-reading on board

Most texts about liner passengering reflect on the question of how to fill one's time on board. Basil Woon feels he ought to spend the time on literary work:

I have never begun a voyage yet that I didn't swear to myself that I would do two things: I would rest, and I would work.

I have never done either.

But I have eaten too much, and drunk too much, and played cards too much [...]

You, too, brother, will follow much the same progress. (Woon 1927: 128)

In literary narratives set on liners, there are far more scenes of not-reading than of reading. The temptations of sensory indulgence, romance and dissipation almost always seem to be at war with the conventional construction of travel as a mode of learning and self-development. In fiction, at least, ship passengers are frequently seen surrounded by books, but rarely do they actually read one. This extract from American novelist Margaret Ayer Barnes's *Westward Passage* (1931) is sufficiently representative:

Olivia's maid [...] had established Olivia in the steamer chair, with seven farewell telegrams and two new English biographies and three French novels – *vient de paraître* – on her lap and the five gardenias sent by that amusing boy in the Paris embassy pinned to the lapel of her new mink coat. [...] Olivia had not opened the books. She had glanced at the telegrams and had sniffed the gardenias and thought instantly of Nick. (Barnes 1931: 4-5)

Along with the flowers and the fur, the books are accessories, enhancing Olivia's performance of glamorous modernity. They are chosen to demonstrate her up-to-date tastes and cultural and linguistic knowledge. This is a more benign version of Lorelei Lee's entirely instrumental use of books to advance her social progress.

Whilst few novels represent passengers actually reading, there is a certain amount of historical evidence about practices of reading and writing on board. Most research in this field examines the reading of emigrants or sailors, and centres on the long nineteenth century. Whilst I do not have space for a full engagement with this intriguing topic, I will provide a very brief summary of the role of the liner in transatlantic manuscript and print cultures, before giving a little more detail about two examples that are specific to the interwar decades. To begin with, passenger steamships carried letters. The British Admiralty issued the first transatlantic mail contracts in the early Victorian period: Samuel Cunard ran a mail steamer from Liverpool to Halifax and Boston from 1840, and James MacQueen's Royal Mail Steam Packet Company started its Caribbean service in 1842.⁶ Mail subsidies were crucial to the success of numerous commercial shipping firms. The transatlantic postal service, of course, enabled the transfer of material between British and North American periodicals, and allowed authors to publish on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to the personal letters transported in mail sacks, further manuscript materials were produced on board: voyage diaries and scrapbooks, for instance, some of which survive in archives.⁷

Liners also carried libraries. Early collections were often rather haphazard, including some books left behind by previous passengers and others introduced by authorities or charities for the purpose of educating emigrants and convicts (see Bell 1999). With the arrival of the age of steam, however, as Susann Liebich explains, 'shipping companies began to more purposefully contemplate the provision of reading matter for the use of passengers as part of their facilities' (Liebich 2019: 6), and sometimes kept their collections up to date by establishing arrangements with publishers and booksellers, so that books could be changed at the end of each voyage. Liebich has studied numerous extant catalogues of ships' libraries from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her archival work allows insight into the ratios of books to passengers (it was higher than that of most land-based lending libraries), the type of reading matter which was mostly provided (fiction predominated; poetry, biography and travel writing were also commonly available), and the material practices of librarians, such as inserting bookplates or rebinding books to prevent their removal or damage by passengers. Liebich's research relates to intercolonial routes in the Anglophone Pacific, but many ships on the Atlantic held multi-lingual collections. Simon Frost, commenting on late nineteenth-century emigrants' reading, notes that: 'The ship's libraries of the Hamburg-America and North German Lloyd Line were particularly luxurious, stocking German, French, Spanish and English books' (Frost 2016: 37). This historical evidence allows us to recapture a sense of the Atlantic liner as a site of intercultural exchange, something that might have been rather compromised by the above reading of satirical literary texts.

Liners not only transported printed reading matter; they also published it. On 4 June 1904, the earliest maritime daily newspaper brought out its first issue. The *Cunard Daily Bulletin* was produced on board the RMS *Campania*, one of the earliest liners to be fitted with a Marconi wireless system. The *Bulletin* consisted of 8 pages and cost 5 cents. Daily wireless newssheets would soon become standard on passenger liners. They included information about the progress of the voyage, together with international news reports transmitted to the ship by telegraphy. These items were added onto sheets that had been pre-printed before departure with advertisements, a masthead, and sometimes general-interest articles.

With the advent of tourist-class accommodation, a new kind of collaborative on-board publication emerged, as Woon explains:

The Tourist Cabin on the *Leviathan* has its weekly magazine – possibly the most curious magazine in the world because of the fact that its editors as well as contributors change with each number. The number before me has sixteen pages and is handsomely printed and bound. [...] There is an Editorial Board, chosen from among the passengers, and all the contributions [...] are from passengers. Occasionally a tit-bit of rare literary excellence finds its way into this magazine. (Woon 1927: 164)

Woon affirms the ideal of travel as an occasion for learning and creativity, praising the United States Line, which took the lead in establishing Tourist Third Cabin, 'for the initiative which has made Europe an annual goal not merely for the wealthy, pleasure-loving few, but for the student-American who now completes his education by actual contact with countries and foreigners he had known only through books' (ibid.: 157). Woon celebrates the value of physical – as opposed to armchair – travel. Yet his comment also reveals the crucial role of reading in creating a desire to travel in the first place, and his account of the *Leviathan's* magazine constructs the ocean voyage as itself a textualised experience.

Onboard publishing extended, in 1923, from periodicals to books. The American author Christopher Morley identifies David Bone, a captain with the Glasgow-based Anchor Line, as the trailblazer:

Captain Bone published the first book (so far as I know) that was ever published at sea. [...] An edition of one of his own books, *The Lookout Man*, was especially imprinted for the High Seas Book Shop, and on the publication date, those copies were broken out and sold in mid-ocean. As you know, printing is not publication. The publishing of a book means the actual vending of it to customers. (Morley 1932: 62–63)

The High Seas Bookshop was an innovation of the twenties which enhanced the potential of the ship as a site for literary activity. The first one was opened on Anchor Line's *Tuscania* in 1922. In his autobiography, *Landfall at Sunset* (1955), Bone describes the excitement it generated among journalists reporting on the *Tuscania*'s maiden voyage: 'A news-stand or bookstall would have passed unnoticed, for these are fugitive fixtures on shipboard as a rule, only set up on sailing days as a convenience for embarking passengers, then vanishing until the next sailing day. But the quiet atmosphere of a well-furnished bookshop was something refreshingly new' (Bone 1955: 149). The bookshop was designed not only to sell reading material, but to provide a new kind of on-board space: 'A table perhaps, and a chair or two where the customers can sit down to examine the stock and perhaps talk about books with the attendant' (ibid.: 148). The 'attendants' were serious literary figures in their own right. On the earliest journeys, the shop was kept either by William McFee, a marine engineer and writer of sea stories, of Canadian parentage and English upbringing, or by the Scottish journalist and critic William Mathie Parker. These were well connected men. They were acquainted with, for instance, Joseph Conrad, whom Bone and Parker met on board the *Tuscania* in April 1923 (Dryden 1998: 227). Christopher Morley socialised with Bone and McFee at gatherings in Frank Shay's famous bookshop in Greenwich Village (Schwartzburg 2016: 78). These professional and social networks enabled the success of the bookshop which, in turn, enhanced the literary careers of this group of men. A surviving, undated catalogue for the bookshop on the *Tuscania*'s sister ship, *Transylvania*, features titles by Conrad, McFee, Bone, Morley and Bone's brother, James.

The catalogue includes a section for 'Books about the Sea and Sea Life', together with lists of travel guides and general fiction. It makes this claim for the High Seas Bookshop:

Through its good offices American authors not widely known in Britain have found a public and not infrequently a British Publisher. Similarly, British writers have been introduced to American readers who might not otherwise have been made aware of their merits. In this unique Bookshop an International Agency has been established. (Anchor Line n.d.: back cover)

The titles listed do indeed represent a fair balance between American and British authors, although male writers outnumber female by thirty to one. This by no means reflected the passenger demographic: numbers of women passengers were increasing rapidly at this time.⁸ It reflects, instead, a preference for particular genres: a vision of transatlantic literature that centres on the sea itself and on tropes of adventure and discovery. In circulating such books, Bone performed an important function as a tastemaker, and he actively intervened in the transatlantic publishing marketplace. For instance, he arranged for the US publication of the British writer C.E. Montague's influential war memoir *Disenchantment* (1922), which had been declined by a dozen American

publishers. Through these varied roles – as author, publisher, bookseller, host, and ship's captain – Bone himself becomes emblematic of transatlantic literary exchange.

The golden age transatlantic liner provided rich subject matter for many writers and artists, who were fascinated by the liner as machine, as designed space, and as site of cultural encounter. In one sense, then, the literature of the ocean liner is the ideal transatlantic form. In 1910, the Futurist painters described the steamship as a contemporary miracle. Yet as early as the 1920s, writers and artists could imagine the day when liners would become obsolete. As Osbert Sitwell put it:

just as the Roman roads that lie like arrows over Europe and North Africa are still the chief monuments to the Roman Empire, so it may well be that the rusty hulks of transatlantic liners, like the cast shells of some gigantic crustacean fallen from another planet, littering the shores of two quiescent continents, will one day seem the supreme monument which this age has left to itself. (Sitwell 1927: 101)

In texts such as *All at Sea* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as well as many other contemporary narratives, the ocean liner is simultaneously an inspiring and a deeply troubling object. It may have had beauty of line, and symbolic resonance, yet it also stood for everything that was wrong with frenetic, self-indulgent, unproductive, technologically-obsessed modern life. These texts offer valuable insight into the complexity of contemporary response to the culturally powerful object that was the ocean liner. Yet their critiques should not be allowed to obscure the influential role of the liner in transatlantic literary culture. It carried mail, used the latest in radiotelegraphy, printed its own newssheets and magazines, bought and sold books, and provided spaces for on-board reading and discussion. It can, then, be understood as a media technology, as well as a crucial agent of international literary exchange.

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¹ This volume interests book historians because of its striking cover, by the Harlem artist Aaron Douglas. It has otherwise attracted no critical commentary. Woon emigrated to the US at 16, and worked as a foreign correspondent, a ghost-writer, and a notably unreliable celebrity biographer.

² The concept of the 'non-place', while not exactly fitting the liner (given that shipping companies intended their vessels to have individual identities), does have some resonance here. The term, in its French original, was coined by Marc Augé in *Non-Lieux: Introduction à un anthropologie de la surmodernité* (1992). It refers to spaces of transience which do not hold enough significance in historical or relational terms to be regarded as 'places'. A stranger in an unfamiliar country, Augé writes, 'can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains' (106).

³ Clarissa Clear's alliterative name recalls that of Lorelei Lee, who is likewise an actress; both texts feature a black servant named Lulu; other similarities include the comic misspelling and the mockery of the American preference for large-sized things.

⁴ Yet, when the ship itself becomes vertical, the impression is one of catastrophe – as in pictures of the sinking *Titanic*. The *Titanic* had previously been advertised using collages showing it upended beside skyscrapers (Flood 32-34).

⁵ An image of New York's Telephone Building also features as the frontispiece in Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture*.

⁶ See Anim-Addo on RMSPC, and on the significance of mail delivery rhythms to colonial life.

⁷ See Ashmore on 'how the diary can be approached and understood as a record of passengering' (597).

⁸ See Coons and Varias 49-54. They note that Cunard's *Aquitania* was actually marketed as 'A Ladies' Ship'; on many sailings in the early 1930s, two-thirds of passengers were women (51).