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# 'Vision Isolated in Eternity': Nostalgia Catches the Train

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**Abstract:** Nostalgia for steam trains in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries offers a further example of the varying responses to railways evident ever since their first development in the nineteenth century. Several of these responses contributed to, and illustrate, the changing roles of temporality, memory and nostalgia in the literature of the modern period. In particular, though modernist literature is often critical of the contribution railways and their timetabling made to the mechanisation of the modern age, the writers concerned also develop affirmatively the new possibilities of momentary, memorable vision which rapid travel offered to the imagination. The development of this kind of vision in modernist writing allows certain forms of intense memory to be recognized as historically specific, though also, as always, shaped by nostalgia's idiosyncratic, personal aspects.

**Keywords:** nostalgia; railways; modernity; modernism

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Little groups of bystanders sometimes gather on bridges over the suburban railway line, close to my home in Edinburgh. Older men predominate, often carrying hefty cameras, though there are usually several children, too. They've heard, somehow, that a steam engine is due to pass under the bridge, and have come to watch, photograph and remember. A few years ago, such gatherings used to be more numerous—annually, in mid-December—when the Scottish Railway Preservation Society ran steam-hauled 'Santa Trains' around the suburban circle, compellingly combining memories of Christmas past with nostalgia for a distant steam age.

Gatherings of this kind are of course not unique to Edinburgh, and often much less modest in size. When the famous steam engine, 'The Flying Scotsman', toured the country after its refurbishment in 2016, huge crowds of enthusiasts sometimes spilled over station platforms, dangerously, onto the tracks. Here and there throughout Britain, tourists and locals continue to flock to heritage railway lines, usually steam-operated. Their appeal is not hard to explain. For anyone aged more than around 55—those older men on the bridges in Edinburgh, for example—steam trains naturally evoke memories of childhood. They may well recall some of its best moments, too: holiday journeys, brimming with anticipation at Christmas, or summer departures for the seaside, steaming out of the sooty sunshine of some city station.

Yet steam engines appeal much more widely, offering anyone, of any age, picturesque alternatives to the forms of transport which replaced them—ones cleaner and more efficient, but less congenial in other ways. In comparison to their successors, steam engines are likely to seem more familiar and domestic—like giant kettles on wheels. They can also appear more fallible, or even human: noticeably dependent on regular sustenance—albeit only water and coal—and needing to breathe, or at least snort, gasp, or exhale. Electric power, dominant nowadays across the European railway system, allows trains to glide away from platforms almost silently and apparently effortlessly. Even diesel engines usually manage to depart with a steady, confident roar. Not so the old steam locomotives, struggling back into motion with a huge, laboured gasp—"CHA!"—followed by a succession of steamy snorts—"CHA-cha-cha"—as wheels and pistons reluctantly begin to turn over again.

Breathless struggles of this kind shaped the imagination of some of the most celebrated of all railway literature. As a child, the Rev. W. Awdry lived near Box Hill, a long, stiff gradient on the Great Western Railway. Lying awake at night, while listening to the engines emerging from Box Tunnel and panting their way up the incline, Awdry began to construct for them personalities and proclivities for self-exhortatory exclamations, such as “I can, and I must . . . I can, and I must”. This imagination later developed into his popular children’s stories about Thomas the Tank Engine and his locomotive friends—each accentuating the steam engines’ human-seeming qualities through a handy command of language, and at the front of their boilers, a characterful visage with eyes, a nose and a mouth.

For generations of children, Awdry offered a consoling sense that machinery—at least in the form of steam engines—might not be altogether hostile, reifying, or threatening, but endowed instead with a literal human face. First published in the later 1940s, the stories acquired a steady readership in the next decades, and their appeal was greatly extended when they were adapted for television, with a first series appearing in 1984. More than 20 others have followed, continuing more or less to the present day. Thomas the Tank Engine’s popularity thus coincides not only with the twentieth century’s continuing need to humanise the machine, but also with a period of expanding nostalgia specifically for steam engines—one developing strongly, naturally enough, as the last of them disappeared from regular service in the later 1960s.

This nostalgia—along with the wider impact of railways on imagination—illuminates in several ways the role of temporality, memory and the past in modern literature. It confirms how strongly or even inescapably nostalgia has been fostered by the relentless development of modernity. Constant innovations in technology and transport during the last two centuries have repeatedly consigned to the past what were once everyday habits, lifestyles and experiences. This inevitably induces some measure of regret for their loss. Ironically, steam engines—eventually victims of this kind of change—were once among its principal agents and initiators, driving the rapid expansion of the railway system in the 1830s and 1840s. Distressed by the railways’ implacable destruction of older ways, many contemporary authors developed, in their turn, a nostalgia for earlier forms of transport. In *Felix Holt* (1866), George Eliot warmly recalls that “five-and-thirty years ago, the glory had not departed from the old coach roads”, still unaffected by “the initiation of Railways” (Eliot 1995, pp. 3, 8). She goes on in *Middlemarch* (1872) to describe further “the infant struggles of the railway system”, and their impact on a rural community, disturbed by “a projected line . . . run through Lowick parish where the cattle had hitherto grazed in peace” (Eliot 1970, p. 597). Like Eliot in *Middlemarch*, Charles Dickens often set his fiction decades earlier, in a calmer era of travel by coach and horse, before stations and sooty steam engines sullied the countryside and city, as he describes in *Dombey and Son* (1848). In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), looking back like *Middlemarch* on the 1830s, Thomas Hardy emphasises that “the railway had stretched out an arm towards Casterbridge at this time, but not yet reached it”. This leaves intact numerous “old-fashioned features” whose “rugged picturesqueness”—but imminent obliteration by “time and progress”—Hardy highlights throughout his novel, even using footnotes to focus readers’ attention on the extent of historical change and loss (Hardy 1971, pp. 265, 93, 65).

Historical changes concerned were largely complete by the opening decade of the twentieth century, as the railway network in Britain and much of Western Europe reached its fullest extent in the Edwardian years before the Great War. Authors in the next decade and in the 1920s were often nostalgic for the supposedly-placid years of Edwardian *belle-époque*, but too young to follow their Victorian predecessors in readily recalling an earlier, less hurried, horse-drawn age. Nostalgia for railways themselves, along with the Rev. Awdry’s humanising imagination of the machine, lay decades in the future. Early twentieth-century literature—noticeably in its modernist idioms—therefore had to confront directly the transformations wrought by the railways, particularly in imposing exacting new temporalities on daily life. The consequences are summed up by Marcel Proust’s narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–1927). “Since railways came into existence”, Marcel remarks, “the necessity of not missing trains has taught us to take account of minutes, whereas among the ancient Romans . . . the notion not only of minutes but even of

fixed hours barely existed" (Proust 1983, II, p. 853). This necessity, Proust suggests—extending his resistance to "the mighty dimension of Time"—was often difficult or even painful to accommodate (Proust 1983, III, p. 1087). Marcel welcomes opportunities for escaping the city offered by "the fine, generous, 1.22 train", but also records that its

"hour of departure I could never read without a palpitating heart on the railway company's bills or in advertisements for circular tours: it seemed to me to cut, at a precise moment in every afternoon, a delectable groove, a mysterious mark." (Proust 1983, I, pp. 418–19)

Employing the verb *inciser* to represent that 'cut', Proust's original French suggests a still sharper, almost surgical precision in railway timetabling's dismemberment of the more languid passage of days and hours in previous ages. Among writers in English, Virginia Woolf offers a comparable view of this changed temporality when describing in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) the "shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing" effects of "the clocks of Harley Street" (Woolf 1976, p. 113). She also shares Proust's view of the origins of the change—though in ways sometimes opaque for twenty-first century readers. The name of the Harley Street specialist who treats shell-shocked Septimus Smith—Sir William Bradshaw—would have had inescapable connotations for her original audience. These are summed up by the railway historian Geoffrey Kichenside when he remarks that "Bradshaw's surname was synonymous with railway timetables for over 120 years" (Kichenside 2011, p. 2). First published in 1839, Bradshaw's railway guides feature regularly in literature over the next century—in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); in Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger* (1910); in numerous Sherlock Holmes stories, and in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Valley of Fear* (1915); as well as in Woolf's earlier *Night and Day* (1919). For early readers of *Mrs Dalloway*, Bradshaw's name would have contributed a particular resonance to his unsympathetic, even inhumane treatment of his patient, strongly associating it with wider rationalisations and mechanical exactitudes introduced by a modern railway age. The name of Septimus' other doctor—Holmes, recalling Conan Doyle's detective—might have consolidated this impression of rigorously ordering, rationalising attitudes dominating the conduct of modern life.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, at any rate, literature may have reached its greatest distance from the kind of human face the Rev. Awdry created for railway machinery two or three decades later—though other writers among Woolf's modernist contemporaries were scarcely less negative. In *Women in Love* (1921), D.H. Lawrence echoes Proust's wariness of the railway's tightened temporalities when Gudrun Brangwen recalls the kind of "great white clock-face" encountered in stations and how the "the mechanical, monotonous clock face of time" makes "her heart palpitate"—much in the manner of Marcel's (Lawrence 1971b, pp. 522–23). Her reflections extend to more general criticisms of an industrialised, mechanical age which appear throughout *The Rainbow* (1915), as well as in *Women in Love*. Lawrence opens the earlier novel with an account—like Eliot's in *Middlemarch*—of how "the Midland Railway came down the valley" in the 1840s, cutting off the Brangwens from land their family had placidly farmed for centuries (Lawrence 1971a, p. 12). Effects of this kind of "mechanical activity" on "organic formation" are highlighted in later chapters and further extended in *Women in Love*, often focused around the figure of Gerald Crich—determined, in modernising his mines, to ensure "the subordination of every organic unit to the great mechanical purpose" (Lawrence 1971a, pp. 345–36).

Conflicts of mechanical and organic figure particularly intensely in Chapter 9, "Coal Dust", which describes the "mechanical relentlessness" Gerald employs in viciously controlling his horse, terrified by a "small locomotive, panting hoarsely . . . clanking sharply" as it hauls a train of wagons through a level-crossing (Lawrence 1971b, pp. 124, 122). Lawrence establishes an emblematic vividness for this scene through narrative tactics which are almost filmic, assembling a composite picture through repeated alternations between the characters' disparate points of view—between ways "Gudrun looked . . . Ursula looked . . . Gerald . . . looked at her" (Lawrence 1971b, pp. 124–25). Though typical of Lawrence's fiction, these tactics figure unusually, even extravagantly, in this scene when it employs what is almost a tracking shot to highlight how, as the train clanks through the crossing

“the guard’s-van came up, and passed slowly, the guard staring out in his transition on the spectacle in the road. And, through the man in the closed wagon, Gudrun could see the whole scene spectacularly, isolated and momentary, like a vision isolated in eternity.” (Lawrence 1971b, p. 124)

In one way, this vision merely offers Gudrun—and readers—a further insight into Gerald’s character, disturbingly anticipating the unfulfilling, power-oriented sexual relations she will soon find herself sharing with him. In another, though, through that momentary vision of the machine-obsessed man, the terrifying train and the suffering horse—the latter so often a distressing figure in modern writing—Lawrence sums up, vividly and concisely, pressures preying upon society for around a century, perhaps ever since the Industrial Revolution.

The manner of Lawrence’s description nevertheless has more affirmative implications, inviting comparison with other modernists’ interpretation of the role of vision, memory, and, by extension, nostalgia, in responding to the stresses of the modern age. Lawrence’s notion of ‘a vision isolated in eternity’ particularly recalls Virginia Woolf’s reflections at the beginning of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and to an extent her tactics throughout that novel. Her comments about how “future prospects” shape apprehension of “what is actually at hand . . . even in earliest childhood” might strike a chord, incidentally, with those ageing steam-enthusiasts, for whom long-ago train journeys may have remained memorable on account of the excited holiday anticipation originally involved (Woolf 1973, p. 5). However, Woolf offers a fuller insight into memory when she describes the potential of a particular, passing sensation “to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests” (Woolf 1973, p. 5). *To the Lighthouse* regularly demonstrates this “crystallizing”, sometimes returning in its third part to “impressions” shown being “laid down” by the intensity of moments experienced in the first (Woolf 1973, p. 192). Such intensities, Woolf suggests, remain indelible though sometimes inexplicable, accruing around moments set apart as if by a “spell”, or by the “meaning which for no reason at all descends on people”—for example, when one of the Ramsay children, “darting backward”, somehow catches a ball “brilliantly high up in her left hand” (Woolf 1973, pp. 84–85).

Any sports spectator might confirm how readily sudden moments, like that brilliant catch—shaped by exceptional talent, grace or resolve—remain crystallised or transfixed in memory. But Lawrence and Woolf both suggest how readily, even casually, this transfixing could result simply from a new pace of travel: from the kind of “new perception of landscape and motion” which the industrial historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes railways contributing to the modern age (Schivelbusch 1986, p. 24). Each novelist suggests that these new perceptions could even occur independently of the viewer’s expectation, volition, or deliberate attention. Views from a train, such as the guard’s in the passage quoted, could be transfixed or “isolated in eternity” simply because they instantaneously appeared so vivid and significant, yet vanished utterly again in a flash. Woolf suggests how powerful, though ephemeral—or *because* ephemeral—views of this kind could be when she describes in *To the Lighthouse* a sense of things

“happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time, as a traveller, even though he is half asleep, knows, looking out of the train window, that he must look now, for he will never see that town, or that mule cart, or that woman at work in the fields, again.” (Woolf 1973, p. 220)

She offers a further instance of this momentary, fleeting vision when *To the Lighthouse* compares qualities of solitary “loveliness” to “a pool at evening far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen” (Woolf 1973, p. 147). Things “seen from a train window”, Woolf suggests, may have more potential to engrave themselves on memory than things long-familiar, habitual or quotidian. Nostalgic recall of the “far distant”, in other words, may locate itself especially strongly around the “once seen”—around fleeting scenes and visions which the accelerating pace of travel, in the early decades of the twentieth century, scattered more and more copiously across the mind.

“Once seen” views from train windows, at any rate, proved engaging for many authors at the time, both within Britain and beyond—perhaps none more so than Ivan Bunin, the first Russian recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1933. Bunin often found in the pace of modern life and travel—its brief, chance encounters and excruciating partings—ideal material for the condensed form of the short story. Many of Bunin’s stories are intensely nostalgic, describing doomed, truncated liaisons, limited to the duration of a journey or a brief phase of life, yet sometimes painfully revisited through recollections evoked by similar journeys or circumstances. ‘Rusya’ (1940), for example, concerns memories initiated solely because “the Moscow-Sevastopol passenger train stopped at a small station just past Podolsk, where it was not supposed to stop at all, and stood waiting for something” (Bunin 1988, p. 227). A “lady and gentleman” look out of the train window at the surrounding “darkling wooded country”—through which, before long, their journey resumes (Bunin 1988, p. 228). But the unexpected halt recalls for the gentleman an affair experienced nearby—abruptly ended 20 years previously, yet so lyrical, consuming and passionate it still seems to spread over him the seductive light of its remembered evenings: the kind of “sunset glow that lingers for hours in . . . summer skies” (Bunin 1988, p. 28). Chatting the following day with “the lady”, his wife, the gentleman’s ironies and careful evasions nevertheless return the affair firmly to the dark—to a “once seen”, recalled by his train’s brief halt almost as vanishingly as Woolf’s distant, solitary pool at twilight.

Like Bunin, Edward Thomas develops to poignant effect a moment in a station where a train “was not supposed to stop at all”—in a poem, ‘Adlestrop’ (1915), which has become the most celebrated exploration in English of connections between railway travel, memory and nostalgia. The remembered, momentary quality of an unscheduled stop at the country station of Adlestrop is communicated as much by the poem’s line- and sentence-structures as its descriptions. Abbreviated opening phrases—“Yes. I remember Adlestrop”—reproduce the suddenness of the poet’s encounter with an isolated memory springing out of the past. The enjambed third and fourth lines imitate the way “the express-train drew up there/Unwontedly”. Short sentences that follow, enigmatic and disconnected in subject-matter, likewise replicate random recollection of the haphazard perceptions provoked by the train’s brief standstill. Representing the end of “that minute” of its unwonted halt, Thomas’s mimetic tactics extend into a kind of onomatopoeia, with the sound of a steam engine lumbering back into motion—that huge “CHA-cha-cha”—distinctly audible in the closing line’s appreciation of the birds “Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire” (Thomas 2008, p. 51).

In form as well as subject, Thomas thus compellingly engages readers with a vision alternative to some of the problems—destruction of organic nature, and constraints within the human sphere—which authors discussed above diagnosed in the modern industrial world, and in the influence of its railways in particular. Whereas Woolf and Proust worried about new temporalities and Bradshaw-oriented requirements to “take account of minutes”, in “that minute” of his train’s pause at Adlestrop, Thomas celebrates instead a new opportunity to appreciate organic nature and a sunny surrounding landscape. Train travel, ‘Adlestrop’ indicates—or trains stopping, anyway—could contribute to engagements with nature all the more memorable because they are momentary: eternally preserving “meadowsweet, and haycocks dry”, “high cloudlets” and whole shires of birds, through the poet’s intense recall of a sunny minute in June. ‘Adlestrop’ extends and highlights, in this way, a direction followed by much modernist writing, finding in the crystallising powers of memory or vision an alternative to pressures which often seemed irremediable in other ways.

As the editor of Thomas’s *Collected Poems*, Edna Longley, remarks, ‘Adlestrop’ thus offers “a model . . . for the translation of memory into poetic epiphany”: one which has proved useful for later generations of writers, inspiring “homages, imitations and parodies”; even a kind of sub-genre of “train-window poems” (Thomas 2008, p. 177). Longley offers Philip Larkin’s poem ‘I Remember, I Remember’ (1955) as an example of this kind of writing. She might have added Larkin’s ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ (1964), which includes many fleeting scenes which “flashed uniquely”, fragmentary yet

suggestive, during the holiday train journey the poem records—describing, for example, how “An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,/And someone running up to bowl” (Larkin 1988, p. 114,116).

As the twentieth century went on, such flashing of events and scenes on the mind became less exclusively an experience of rail travel and could well be further analysed in relation to other forms of transport, by road particularly. In later volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust shows that the kind of “new perception of landscape and motion” Schivelbusch identifies might be experienced as much through travel by automobile as by train. Virginia Woolf’s changing views of the motor-car are also intriguingly exemplary. Initially hostile, her attitude to motoring altered when good early sales of *To the Lighthouse* allowed her to purchase a second-hand car of her own. Thereafter, in her essay ‘Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’ (1927), she was more than ready to appreciate the access motoring offered to the “beauty and beauty and beauty” of the countryside (Woolf 1986–2011, VI, p. 454). Significantly, though, she remained wary of the fleeting nature of visions rapid road travel offered—scenes flashing vividly on the mind, but in forms fragmented enough, as she also considers in *Orlando* (1928), potentially to fragment the sensibilities of the perceiver.

Further analysis of such effects lies beyond the railway-centred interests of this essay. It concludes instead by suggesting a modification in views of modernity’s influence on nostalgia, and with a couple of consequent questions. As noted above, the pace of change in the modern world sweeps away, increasingly regularly, whole lifestyles, habits of communication, and forms of transport, naturally fostering nostalgia for recently-vanished experience. But nostalgia may have been intensified not only by modernity’s pace of change, but by the change of pace offered by its advancing technologies: by the ways more rapid travel altered cognitive possibilities and transfixed fleeting scenes and images with new intensity in mind and memory.

Other factors must nevertheless shape and direct this transfixing, otherwise every train journey might crystallise images nearly as numerous as the individual frames a cine-camera would capture in filming the same trip. Nostalgia is in any case too idiosyncratic and personal to be explained more than partially through reference to historical or technological change. Why, for example, has a summer day’s railway excursion to the town of Callander, on the edge of the Highlands, endured so vividly yet fragmentarily in my memory for more than half a century? The first surviving fragment might have been retained on account of the kind of anticipation Woolf considers. The earliest remembered moment of that day was its promise of fair holiday weather, signalled by the sun shining onto bedroom window-shutters, as it could only in high summer, in that almost north-facing room, and for no more than a few morning minutes even then. Yet this vividly-recalled opening moment seems not to have been followed by others, most of the rest of that sunny day vanishing from memory almost as completely as Callander station was fated soon to disappear itself. Doomed in any case by Dr Beeching’s draconian 1960s economising, the line it served was closed prematurely, by a hefty rock-fall in Glen Ogle, in September 1965. Only a rusting railway bridge, crossing a corner of the car park now occupying the site of the old station, survives to show that trains ever ran through the town.

Yet I remember Callander, that day, if only through one further fragment: an evening moment, when the southbound train hissed tardily into the station, greeted by my father exclaiming “Oh, a double-header!” I couldn’t imagine what he meant—surely not some reference to football, in which he had little more interest than his weekly pools coupon required? I understood only when looking again at the train, pulled not by one steam engine, but by two—a regular tactic on that line, in those days, and a prudent one, as there were stiff gradients all the way from Oban, particularly between Crianlarich and Glenoglehead. But what ensured the survival of that remark, and that scene—of two engines clanking hastily into the platform, as if guilty about their delay, whooshing their steamy smell through the sunny evening air, late in June 1959? To borrow a question Virginia Woolf asks about a memory in *To the Lighthouse*, “why, after all these years ha[s] that survived, ringed round, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank, and all after it blank, for miles and miles?” (Woolf 1973, p. 194). What crystallising “spell”, in Woolf’s terms, could have been responsible? Those enthusiasts on Edinburgh railway bridges would no doubt attribute the memory’s endurance to a

redoubled excitement: the remembered thrill of encountering not just one steam engine, but two. Woolf's views in *To the Lighthouse*, on the other hand, might suggest that any single, chance remark, especially an unusual one, might provide the grain of impression around which a whole remembered scene, radiant or gloomy, finds means to crystallise. Commentators on literary nostalgia might consider instead—a component of *their* enthusiasm for the subject—that what isolates vision in eternity may never be wholly defined, resulting from intersections of thought, memory, circumstance and chance which neither history, literary criticism, nor even neuroscience, may ever entirely explain.

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