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## ***PASSING TRAINS, FLEETING GLIMPSES***

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**Abstract:** *The terms durability and transience imply, above and beyond the persistence of images in the brain and on the retina, the notion of time, and its derivatives, such as speed or velocity. In the Early and Mid Victorian period with which this paper is concerned, there was still confident acceptance of Newton's concept: 'Absolute and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external'. The experience of railway travel that burst upon society in the 1830s and 1840s tended, I shall argue, to shake this confidence, to sow seeds of doubt, and to pave the way for a new conception, one which is still with us.*

The changeover from stagecoach travel to railway travel in England, a gradual one to be sure, was qualitative as well as being quantitative. It was not simply that the early railway engine, the 'iron horse', could travel at eleven times the speed of a man walking and could sustain indefinitely the top speed of a racehorse. The new mode of travel eased communication and social relations: Queen Victoria led public opinion by using the 'railroad', which she found 'charming', for rapid transit to Windsor, at the maximum speed which she permitted the driver, forty miles per hour. In this sense the railway was a force for *revolution*, a metaphor, be it remembered, from the turning of an industrial wheel. This metaphor was still a live one at the period we are looking at:

Not only we, the latest seed of Time,  
New men, that in the flying of a wheel  
Cry down the past...

Since railway accidents (like the one in which the young Dickens was involved) were by no means rare, it was also possible to see in the railway train something of the elemental and disastrous:

Thundering like some Alpine avalanche

The railway train dashes along the line...

The embodiment of swiftness and of power.

At very least it was a monster, if an amiable one:<sup>1</sup>

I like to see it lap the Miles –

And lick the Valleys up -

And stop to feed itself at Tanks...

And then a Quarry pare

To fit it's sides...

And neigh like Boanerges –

Then – prompter than a Star

Stop – docile and omnipotent

At it's own stable door –

The railway timetable that scheduled arrivals and departures from A to B with intermediate stopping points had an immediate effect on the general perception of time. (The only final certainty about stagecoach journeys along turnpike roads as a class of travel had been the day one which you would set out.) Now a new unit, the unforgiving minute as a subdivision of clock time, began to thrust itself on the everyday and the scientific world, with an importance which it still retains. 'Running to time', that most Victorian expression, was

<sup>1</sup> Dickinson, Emily. I like to see it lap the Miles.

enshrined in a kind of secular Bible, *Bradshaw's Railway Guide*. It provided the framework for Hardy's finely sardonic railway lyric:<sup>2</sup>

At nine in the morning there passed a church,  
At ten there passed by me the sea,  
At twelve a town of smoke and smirch,  
At two a forest of oak and birch,  
And then, on a platform, she:  
A radiant stranger who saw not me.  
I said: "Get out to her do I dare?"  
But I kept my seat in my search for a plea,  
And the wheels moved on. O could it but be  
That I had alighted there!

One marker of this new attitude to exact chronometry was the central station clock, masterpiece of the craftsman's art, for example the great clocks that stood like swords of Damocles, reminders of obligation whether as meeting places or as indicators of departure, at the London termini of Paddington and Victoria, where they are still prominent features. A second marker was the 'Electric Telegraph', a technical innovation of the Great Western Railway and ultimately possible only thanks to Faraday's brilliant experimental work. Of it, Thackeray wrote in fun, but the point at issue is a serious one: 'And he began hopping on that singlar and ingenus electricle invention, which aniliates time, and carries intelligence in the twinkling of a peg-post'.<sup>3</sup>

An unintentionally ironic comment on 'railway time' in relation to 'archaeological time' was provided when the navies digging out the track for a new line brought to light British and Roman antiquities. This is also the theme of a well known painting, *Train Landscape* (1940) by Eric Ravilious, in which<sup>4</sup> the White Horse of Westbury, as symbol of (relative) antiquity, is shown through the left panel of a railway carriage window. Also worth noting is a cartoon from *Punch* in 1844, evidently inspired by Turner's exhibition in the same summer of his picture *Rain, Steam and Speed on the Great Western Railway*. It parodies the artist by showing a railway engine in the guise of Old Father Time, relentlessly pursuing an agitated foxhunter, the symbol of an outmoded and disappearing Georgian world.

What could a passenger on one of these new-fangled trains see, out of what was (and is) technically known as the 'side window'?<sup>5</sup> To answer this we need to delve a little into the social history of the British railway and into a technical feature that interacted with it, the physical construction of British rolling-stock.

The stratification of Victorian society was perfectly mirrored in its railways: from the very outset, there were three rigidly-defined classes of ticket: 'third', 'second', and 'first'. They correspond closely to Matthew Arnold's celebrated division of Mid Victorian society into Populace, Philistines, Barbarians. For the formative first two or three decades of railway travel, the third-class carriage offered an unrestricted view in the sense that it was open-topped. But this also meant 'open to all weathers', and *Mr. Punch* accurately described these carriages as 'little better than sheep-pens'. Consequently, few of the 'excursionists' packed into them will have entertained Wordsworthian sentiments about what they saw, especially if it was raining. The second-class carriage was by contrast enclosed, but here too the rain came in through the window apertures and flooded one's

<sup>2</sup> Hardy, Thomas. "At Nine in the Morning", *Complete Poems*, p.576. The date is uncertain, but perhaps from the 1860s or 1870s.

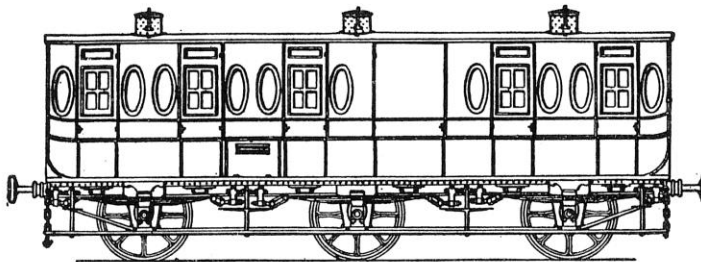
<sup>3</sup> A telescoped phrase meaning 'as fast as a train passes and leaves behind a telegraph-pole'. The poles are placed at regular intervals, hence a train's speed can be calculated by the number of seconds elapsed between the instant at which it passes one pole and the instant at which it passed the previous pole.

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly with some cooking of the actual physical details of the landscape and its spatial relations with the track. Carter (note 9 below) sees the painting as a 'refraction' of August Egg's picture *Travelling Companions*.

<sup>5</sup> Most often of the side window of the driver's cab, but also generally, as in the Canadian Railway Passenger Car Instruction & Safety Rules: 'Rule 20.4: Every passenger carriage side window...shall be a double glazed window...'

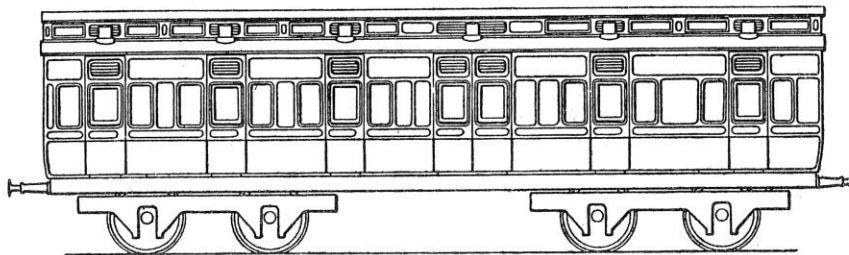
boots. First-class passengers were of course better catered for: they tended to be shareholders. They were provided with window panes that could be lowered and raised by means of a substantial leather strap.

By the mid 1860s, however, all carriages were enclosed, and had the movable window panes. But despite the introduction, from the United States, of the rather better-lit Pullman coach in the 1870s, it was not until just before the First World War that some long-distance trains had the 'observation-car', a carriage purpose-built or converted expressly to afford passengers relatively unimpeded views. It is also important to note that whereas in democratic American trains the carriage was an open saloon that you could walk along, or alternatively shoot your way along, British carriages were constructed as a series of non-communicating compartments accessible only from the platform.



Left: Second class carriage,  
Bristol and Exeter Railway.

Below: Broad gauge 40 ft.  
composite coach; wide  
body (two 'first'; three  
'second'), 1874 design.



The bodywork of the British carriage was, as might be expected from the nation of the 1851 Exhibition, a work of art in its own manner. Exteriors, even of third-class carriages, were elaborate 'Palladian' designs. They were elegantly coloured and carefully finished, sometimes with as many as four coats of varnish. Thus the frame of a carriage window, in its dimensions, its position, and its restricting view, may legitimately be compared to a picture frame, with all that this implies about visual perception.

The standard convention, in literature, in art, and in the cartoons of the great satirical magazine *Punch*, or the *London Charivari*, an excellent source for railwayana, was to show passengers from a viewpoint within the compartment. Exceptions to this convention, whereby passengers are viewed *through* the window, as if from outside, are thus all the more striking. One such occurs in Hardy's poem *The Journeying Boy*. Another is a dramatic scene in an early *Punch* cartoon where a sheriff's officer on the edge of the platform, seen as if from the ticket barrier, is serving notice through the carriage window on a defaulting railway company director.<sup>6</sup> But the most famous passage, full of delicious ambiguities, is from *Alice*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mr Punch's Almanack for 1846. Cf the turgid comment of R. McDougall, in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 28/1 (1988) 75-82: '...the point of view depends on which side of the railway-carriage window one is standing. Station and train represent the relationship between stasis and flux...'

<sup>7</sup> 'Lewis Carroll', *Alice Through The Looking-Glass* (1865), iii, with Tenniel's incomparable illustration.

All the time the Guard was looking at her, first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass. At last he said: "You're travelling the wrong way", and shut up the window and went away.

Normally, however, the passenger is seen within the tidy little domain of the compartment, looking out of the window or not looking out of the window, as the case may be. One of those who did not was Thomas Moore; he took the railway as it came, and enjoyed being able to sit in a comfortable armchair<sup>8</sup> and write memorandums in his pocket-book 'as easily' (he tells us) 'and as legibly as I should at my own study-table'. (His spiritual descendants can be seen with their laptops on the Intercity services from London to Bristol of a weekday evening). Two others were the 'Travelling Companions', in Augustus Egg's celebrated canvas of the same name (1862), engrossed with one another and blind to the beauties of the Bay of Naples.<sup>9</sup> But most Victorians were more adventurous and imaginative than this, and they did enjoy surveying the scenery, said by *Mr. Punch* to constitute 'more than half the pleasure of travelling', even when it only consisted of a cat walking along the city housetops.<sup>10</sup> Freud himself, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, relates having dreamt that he was traveling by train alongside the Tiber, and looking out at the river and the Castel San' Angelo.

The narrowness of the carriage window imposed its own limits to vision. Neither the whole sky nor the ground immediately below was part of the picture, as it would have been for a stagecoach passenger. Horizons and the horizontal plane were artificially emphasized.<sup>11</sup> The window's tripartite construction, of necessity, into large central pane and smaller flanking panes, 'split up' reality into what might be called, in cine camera parlance, 'frames'. Indeed among the standard 'novelty' fare of the first primitive cinema films were the movement of a train, the to and fro of crowds on the streets, and landscapes seen from the carriage window.<sup>12</sup>

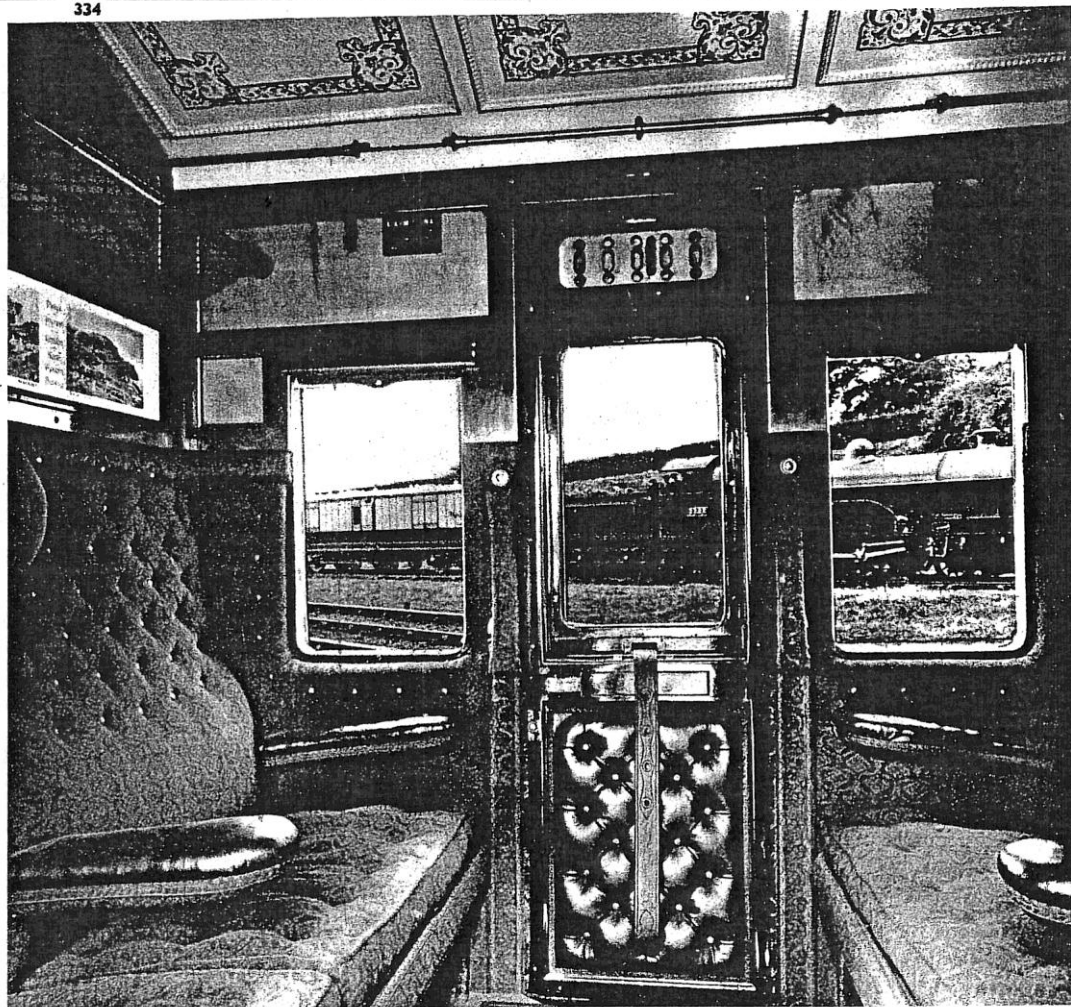
<sup>8</sup> I still fondly remember a carriage with swivelling armchairs – it must have been one of Queen Victoria's specials – in which I travelled from, I think, Hever to Tunbridge Wells in about 1960.

<sup>9</sup> The painting by Egg is in the Birmingham Gallery. Cf Carter, Ian, letter published in the *London Review of Books* Vol.20 No.9 (7 May 1998): '...Egg shows us two richly clad young women in the mould of Ingres, luxuriously (and, surely, erotically) ignoring the view of the Bay of Naples through the window of their first-class carriage...'. In Claudio Magris' *Danube* (1989) 'adventures in trains' are a main category of the theory of a companion of the author about the connection between erotica and travelling.

<sup>10</sup> *Punch* 12.IX.1845, with heavy irony, describing the 'panorama' of the Blackwall Railway, not 'a feast of reason and a flow of soul' but 'the feast of chimneys and the flow of smoke'.

<sup>11</sup> Borrows, Andy. [olderandgrowing.blogspot.com](http://olderandgrowing.blogspot.com) (29 November 2003): 'Looking out of the other side of the carriage...the horizon is low, the landscape wide open,...rolling clouds on the horizon are like a distant mountain range...'

<sup>12</sup> Pudovkin, V.I., *Film Technique*.



Moreover, it was not possible, except by leaning dangerously far out of an open window, to ‘pan’ one’s gaze across a landscape. Objects of observation<sup>13</sup> were caught only fragmentarily; on any given journey, reality disappeared from sight in an instant and for ever. Thus the verb *glimpse* became almost a technical term of railway travel: not the leisurely Wordsworthian glimpse, as of ‘Old Proteus rising from the sea’, not even Shelley’s longer-term ‘mutability’, but something altogether more urgent and utilitarian. This urgency marks a letter enthusiastically describing a pioneer rail journey, to the Editor of a leisure magazine.<sup>14</sup> Notice how the themes of speed (*transience*) and history (*durability*) are artfully interwoven:

When the passengers were seated, and the doors of the carriages properly secured, the engine, called the Vulcan, with its attendant carriages, containing coal and water, were attached to the train. The moving mass...seemed to pant with eagerness for its career on the road. At length the important words – all right! - were pronounced... We are off... London receded from the view: we caught a glance of the cemetery at Kensal Green; ...Wormwood Scrubs, scene of many a bloody and bloodless battle, was scarcely approached but it was passed. Onward we flew... Acton and Ealing, the scene of Major Sturgeon’s exploits<sup>15</sup>, appear and vanish from

<sup>13</sup> On observation as a key notion in Victorian literature, see Witt, Richard, ‘Hardy, Einstein, and the observing eye’, in *Spaces, Gaps, Borders* (Sofia University Press 2006).

<sup>14</sup> *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1838, pp.210ff ‘Great Western Railway.’

<sup>15</sup> The reference is to Samuel Foote’s farce *The Mayor of Garratt* (1763).

our sight. We are now soaring in air, looking down upon fields and villages that seem spread beneath us like a map. Now on the Wharncliffe Viaduct; beneath is the village of Hanwell: here we are presented with a complete bird's-eye view of the Middlesex Lunatic Asylum, a most extensive pile of buildings... Englishmen may well be proud of their country, that is studded with such glorious proofs of its beneficence and wealth. Away!—we cross the Uxbridge-road by an iron bridge... The train stops, and the passengers for Drayton step from the carriage to the platform. A farewell scream from the engine, and the train whirled onward; ere we could descend from the platform to the road leading to the village, it was out of sight.

Underlying this account is a subjective awareness: 'we live in feelings, not in figures on a dial'.<sup>16</sup> The Early Victorian exhilaration, fearful albeit, with speed and the world of becoming had its effect on the psychology of perception. The core was maintained, but other objects were relegated to the margin. One might compare the scientist's procedure of centrifuging. Thus what was seen in the foreground – human beings, animals, buildings, trees and so on<sup>17</sup> – appeared and vanished 'in the twinkling of an eye', as the phrase was,<sup>18</sup> or slid into and then out of focus.

Time driveth onward fast...  
All things are taken from us, and become  
Portions and parcels of the dreadful Past,

wrote Tennyson; his use of the word *parcel* is not without interest in view of its currency in quantum physics.<sup>19</sup> As the foreground blurred,<sup>20</sup> so the background, the 'scenery', became 'more real', acquiring its own durability and ontological status, its 'seamless wide-angle vision',<sup>21</sup> by what was effectively an extension of the Romantic doctrine of the Awful Sublime. Distance did indeed lend enchantment to the view.

Of the two states it was however transience, and the sense of inevitable loss, that predominated, as we can see in Robert Louis Stevenson's dithyramb:<sup>22</sup>

Faster than fairies, faster than witches,  
Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;  
And charging along like troops in a battle,  
All through the meadows the horses and cattle.  
All of the sights of the hill and the plain  
Fly as thick as driving rain;  
And ever again, in the wink of an eye,  
Painted stations whistle by.

<sup>16</sup> Bailey, P., Festus

<sup>17</sup> Punch 13.XII.1845, 'Depositing the Plans – a Poem': '...And faster, faster by degrees/Thro' tunnels, past towers, towns and trees/We flew at headlong speed...'. Note the adjective 'headlong', properly of a horse.

<sup>18</sup> MacNeice, Louis, Restaurant Car (1966): 'Mad country moves beyond the steamed-up window/So fast into the past we could not keep/Our feet on it for one instant'.

<sup>19</sup> Tennyson, Alfred Lord, The Lotos-Eaters.

<sup>20</sup> Trevor, William, 'A Meeting in Middle Age': a man in a railway train is '...pretending to observe the drifting landscape...'. Note incidentally Carpenter, H., J.R.R.Tolkien (1977) 26: (of Tolkien at King's Heath) 'Later in childhood he went on a railway journey to Wales, and as the station names flashed past him he knew that here were names more appealing than any he had yet encountered, a language that was old yet alive'.

<sup>21</sup> Taken up by Auden (who misquoted the term as 'wide-angled'), and then implicit in Philip Larkin's Whitsun Weddings, this phrase was originally a commonplace of the camera trade.

<sup>22</sup> Stevenson, R.obert Louis, A Child's Garden of Verses (1885), 'From a Railway Carriage'. I have been unable to trace the Internet author of the following perceptive commentary: '...Like all the best poetry, of any sort, this piece also blends form and content beautifully, the regular metre evoking the rhythms of the train, and the rhyme scheme rushing the reader along and lending a sense of speed. To complete the effect, note that each image is contained entirely within its couplet, splitting the poem into a series of snapshots, 'each a glimpse and gone forever'.

Here is a child who clammers and scrambles,  
 All by himself and gathering brambles;  
 Here is a tramp who stands and gazes;  
 And there is the green for stringing the daisies!  
 Here is a cart run away in the road,  
 Lumping along with man and load;  
 And here is a mill and there is a river,  
 Each a glimpse and gone forever!

I would not want to leave out a most extraordinary happening<sup>23</sup> in a first-class carriage stationary for ten minutes at Bristol at the height of a terrible storm in May 1843. The narrator is a peeress, Lady Simon. There are two other material characters, two elderly Victorian, or rather, Georgian, gentlemen, one of whom (she tells us) ‘had the most wonderful eyes I ever saw, steadily, luminously, clairvoyantly, kindly, paternally looking at me... I should describe them as the most “seeing” eyes I had ever seen’. This individual, after trying vainly to rub the windowpane clear of moisture with his coat cuff, asked Lady Simon: ‘Young lady, would you mind my putting down the window?’ ‘Oh no, not at all.’ ‘You may be drenched, you know.’ ‘Never mind, sir.’ ‘Immediately, down goes the window, out go the old gentleman’s head and shoulders, and’ (says the narrator) ‘there they stay for I suppose nearly nine minutes.’<sup>24</sup> Then he drew them in, and I said: ‘Oh, please let me look.’ ‘Now you *will* be drenched’; but he half opened the window for me to see. Such a sight, such a chaos of elemental and artificial lights and noises, I never saw or heard, or expect to see or hear. He drew up the window as we moved on, and then leant back with closed eyes for I dare say ten minutes...’ To cut a long story short, Lady Simon was visiting the Royal Academy summer exhibition the following year. She went, as was her custom, to see the new paintings by J.M.W. Turner. ‘Imagine my feelings:’ (she writes) ‘RAIN, STEAM, AND SPEED, GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY, JUNE THE - , 1843.’ ‘I had found out’ (she goes on) ‘who the “seeing” eyes belonged to!’ Her astonishment was interrupted by ‘a mawkish voice’ behind her: ‘There now, just look at that; ain’t it *just* like Turner? – who ever saw such a ridiculous conglomeration?’ ‘I turned round very quietly and said: ‘I did; I was in the train that night, and it is perfectly and wonderfully true’, and walked quietly away.’

The most exotic experience that the Victorian railway traveller underwent, and commented on, was that of two trains passing one another at speed: *Thro’ winking arches swift we pass/And flying, meet the fkying trains...*<sup>25</sup> This, for the more thoughtful, posed some quite unfamiliar questions about spatial relationships. Which train of the two, if either, should be considered the determinant of position and motion? Was time moving forwards for both sets of passengers equally and evenly? How did the rapid motion of the two trains relate to the known rapid movement of the circling Earth? Was there a point, an instant, when the two trains so to speak coincided in one dimension, where Time was somehow frozen?<sup>26</sup> These questions were not in the least simple, as the mathematician Henri Poincaré was to shock his colleagues by demonstrating in 1889. They are half implied in a fine lyric by James Thomson in which love equates with motion:

As we rush, as we rush in the train,  
 The trees and the houses go wheeling back,

<sup>23</sup> Lady Simon quoted in Ruskin, John, *Dilecta: Works*, pp. 559-601. Gage and others have cast doubt on the details of other more elaborate versions of the anecdote, and the finished painting was of course only ‘true’ in its own terms.

<sup>24</sup> Unconscious proof of what was said earlier about the tyranny of the Minute.

<sup>25</sup> Allingham, William, *Life and Phantasy* (published 1889, but incorporating material from a poem 20 or 30 years earlier). The poem continues: ‘Whirr – Whirr – gone!/And still we hurry on;/...(house, platform, post,/Flash, and are lost!’

<sup>26</sup> Cf Magris, Claudio, *Danube*, tr. P. Creagh (1989) chapter i, section 8 : ‘There is not a single train, moving in one direction at a constant speed. Every so often it meets another train coming in the opposite direction, from the past, and for a short while the past is with us, by our side, in our present’. Magris goes on: ‘Units of time...are mysterious and difficult to measure’ and adds (ch.vi, sect.4): ‘of course, any mere three-dimensional traveller - ...even if the fact of travelling is itself four-dimensional, or multi-dimensional by definition – is rattled when faced with the whims of the fourth dimension...’

But the starry heavens above the plain  
Come flying on our track.  
All the beautiful stars of the sky,  
The silver doves of the forest of Night,  
Over the dull earth swarm and fly,  
Companions of our flight.  
We will rush ever on without fear;  
Let the goal be far, the flight be fleet!  
For we carry the Heavens with us, dear,  
While the Earth slips from our feet!

We can thus see intrepid (and trepid) Victorian railway travellers playing their part in constructing the narrative of Time,<sup>27</sup> that narrative in which Einstein was obliged to abandon invariant frame-independent notions of simultaneity and duration. Einstein himself was well aware of the usefulness of the train, the then standard means of transport, as a way to explain his abstract propositions:

I stand at the window of a railway carriage which is traveling uniformly, and throw a stone on the embankment... I see the stone descend in a straight line.

Thus Victorian railway travel and its poetry<sup>28</sup> can legitimately be seen as a curtain-raiser for a new and pervasive climate of thought<sup>29</sup> that could admit, and eventually accept, theories of Relativity.

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<sup>27</sup> Long before Dali, the malleability of Time is seen in those poems of Tennyson where Time 'slows down' or 'stops' altogether; and cp the elastication of musical and dramatic time in Acts II and III of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

<sup>28</sup> In vain did Mr. Punch maintain from the outset that the railways were 'anti-poetical'.

<sup>29</sup> A casual example from the first pages of Philip Larkin's *Jill* (1946): 'John Kemp sat in an empty compartment...he looked out over the fields, noticing the clumps of trees that sped by... He looked from the window...presently the railway line was joined by a canal, and rows of houses appeared. He got to his feet and stared at the approaching city. Their speed seemed to increase, as they swept towards the station round a long curve of line...then the eaves of the platform, hollow shouting, the faces slowing down...'