

Poetry in Railways: Thomas, Larkin, Nicholson

In June 1914 a train bound from Paddington to Kidderminster stopped at a small station in the Cotswolds. No one was waiting on the platform; no one by all accounts alighted; but in the minute that passed before the carriages pulled away one passenger recorded that ‘thro the ... extraordinary silence’ he ‘heard a chain of blackbirds [sic] songs at 12.45 & one thrush & no man seen, only a hiss of [the] engine letting off steam ... by banks of long grass willow herb & meadowsweet.’¹

That passenger was Edward Thomas; that station, Adlestrop; and the sixteen lines that Thomas later teased out of his notes would become one of the best-known poems in the language:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop—
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June....²

Thomas wasn’t well known as a poet when, three weeks after his death at the Battle of Arras, these lines appeared in the pages of *The New Statesman*; but through them his name and Adlestrop have found a permanent place in the collective conscience of English verse. Few poems have been so continually imitated and anthologized, few literary localities so affectionately commemorated. But why? What is it about this poem that still continues to captivate readers a hundred years later?

For us today, the poignancy of ‘Adlestrop’ is, perhaps unavoidably, sharpened by the pre-war ambience it evokes. Whether for better or for worse, it’s difficult not to hear in this poem a passing sigh for a nation unknowingly on the brink of irrevocable change. (‘Never such innocence,’ as Philip Larkin would later write, ‘Never such innocence again.’³)

Yet, the popularity of ‘Adlestrop’ cannot be wholly attributed to its provenance, or to the circumstances surrounding its posthumous publication. Certainly, the history of the poem’s reception suggests that the enduring fame of ‘Adlestrop’ has less to do with its context per se, than with the spell of associations it evokes.

In wresting from the name of Adlestrop memories of meadowsweet, blackbird song, and ‘high cloudlets’ above the Cotswolds, Thomas conjures up a scene which, according to many readers, offers a passing glimpse of England’s green and pleasant land.

Similarly, other readers have praised the poem for the way it ‘recalls the deeper pleasures of the country railway station’: that emblem of a bygone age of British steam.⁴

This latter observation hits, I think, rather closer to the mark. For although there's much that might be said about 'Adlestrop', it's in large part the way Thomas's poem taps into the poetic potential of the railway that has made it such a potent archetype.

The poem has, after all, inspired a long and varied list of railway poems, ranging from Dannie Abse's 'Not Adlestrop' to Brian Patten's 'Lockerbie'. Indeed, to paraphrase Sean O'Brien and Don Paterson, 'it would take another Bradshaw and unlimited resources to devise a schedule for the multitude of journeys poets have taken' from 'Adlestrop'.⁵

Some of these 'journeys' are, to be sure, stoked by the same sentiments that power Thomas's poem. Walter de la Mare's 'The Railway Junction' is typical, as is Robert Frost's 'A Passing Glimpse', whose closing lines – 'Heaven gives its glimpses only to those | In no position to look too close'⁶ – capture the spirit of Thomas's poem in a single couplet.

There are, however, 'Adlestrop' poems that head down a rather different track.

Consider, for instance, Philip Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember' (1955), which employs the conceit of the halted train to a more ironic effect.

Here are the poem's opening stanzas:

Coming up England by a different line
For once, early in the cold new year,
We stopped, and, watching men with number-plates
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign
That this was still the town that had been 'mine'
So long, but found I wasn't even clear
Which side was which. From where those cycle-crates
Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? ... A whistle went:
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.
'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'
No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort, just where I started[.]⁷

It may not be immediately apparent, but there's a good deal of 'Adlestrop' in these fifteen lines.

As in 'Adlestrop', the poem describes an unexpected stop at a railway station. Yet, even here, we are aware that Larkin is deliberately deviating from Thomas's example. The scene is set not in the 'heat' of 'late June' but 'early in the cold new year'; the platform is not 'bare' but brimming with activity; the speaker is not alone but in the company of a friend; the landscape is not the rolling hills of the Cotswolds, but the brutalized panorama of post-war Coventry.

Fitting with this pattern of misprision, the speaker's shock of recognition ultimately fails to spark a string of fond reflections and instead gives way to expressions of disdain.

Suitably, in the subsequent stanzas, Larkin proceeds to tally not a list of cherished memories, but a series of non-occurrences and non-events, all of which culminate in the ambivalent utterance with which the poem ends:

'You look like you wished the place in Hell,'
My friend said, 'judging from your face.' 'Oh well,
I suppose it's not the place's fault,' I said.

'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.' (ll. 33-36)

This may seem a far cry from what one finds in 'Adlestrop', or in the tribute poems of Frost and de la Mare, yet it's clear that – at least imaginatively – all of these poems originate at the same station.

All of them, moreover, point up the railway's curious relationship to time. The mysterious power of train travel to hold us in suspense along a fixed line of transit and, in the process, to collapse the distance between past and present.

I quote again from O'Brien and Paterson: 'The train is a time machine that works in both directions and in none. Time can be made to stop when the train moves us to reverie.... It is no accident that the most famous illustration of relativity involves an observer in one train watching another train pass' (p. xi).

Of all 'Adlestrop' poems, I know of none that speaks to this point more impressively than Norman Nicholson's 'Coastal Journey', the twelfth poem in his 1944 collection, *Five Rivers*:

A wet wind blows the waves across the sunset;
There is no more sea nor sky.
And the train halts where the railway line
Twists among the misty shifting sand,
Neither land nor estuary,

Neither wet nor dry.⁸

Here again, as in Thomas's poem, a halting train becomes the scene of a momentary meditation; however, in this case, the precise location of that scene is not named.

When read in the context of Nicholson's collection, the poem's imagery leads one to infer that it unfolds on the viaduct over the Duddon sands: a place quite literally suspended between the elements of water, earth, and sky. But such speculations are really of only secondary importance.

What matters here is that the intertidal landscape Nicholson invokes, with its 'misty shifting sand,' provides a perfect counterpart to the flux-and-flow of the neither-nors that shape the speaker's thoughts in the ensuing stanzas: 'There is no more here nor there, | No more you nor me', 'No more now nor then' (ll. 8-9, 14).

The poem's time setting – twilight – also seems significant in this regard; as the striking description of 'waves' blown 'across the sunset' evokes something of that uncanny hour which is neither wholly night nor day.

In the final stanza of the poem, however, all of the distinctions drawn in the preceding lines give way to a moment of unified perception: 'There is only us and everywhere and always' (l. 15).

There's an undeniable intimacy in this declaration: an intimacy that exceeds anything we find in the aforementioned poems; but equally, as in 'Adlestrop', there's also an intimation of timelessness and transcendence.

In keeping with the pattern of Thomas's poem, moreover, this momentary epiphany takes place in the pause that passes before the train resumes its journey. Crucially, however, Nicholson's poem doesn't end here.

Instead of dissolving into a chorus of bird song, the speaker's reverie is broken as the train lurches forward, and the particularity of the landscape is brought back into focus:

The train moves off again,
And the sandy pinetrees bend
Under the dark green berries of the rain. (ll. 16-18)

The moment is passed; the transcendent vision fled; and we find ourselves once more within the fleeting world of appearances.

This is, of course, much more like what one finds in Frost's 'A Passing Glimpse' or de la Mare's 'The Railway Junction' than Larkin's 'I remember, I remember'; yet one is nonetheless aware

that each of these poems performs a variation on a common theme and, moreover, that they share a common ancestry.

Each uses a halted train to dramatize a moment in which feeling and place are temporarily held in suspension. In doing so, each draws on images, metaphors, and ideas that place it in a poetic lineage. Each looks back to Thomas, remembering 'Adlestrop' in its own way.

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Notes

¹ Edward Thomas, notebook entry, 24 June 1914; qt. Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 139.

² Edward Thomas, 'Adlestrop', *The New Statesman* (28 April 1917), 87; ll. 1-4.

³ Philip Larkin, 'MCMXIV', *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 28; ll. 25, 32.

⁴ John Betjeman, 'Back to the Railway Carriage', *The Listener* (28 March 1940), 622.

⁵ Sean O'Brien and Don Patterson (eds), *Train Songs* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), p. ix.

⁶ Robert Frost, 'A Passing Glimpse', *West-Running Brook* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1928), p. 13; ll. 9-10.

⁷ Philip Larkin, 'I Remember, I Remember', *The Less Deceived* (Hessle: The Marvell Press, 1955), p. 36; ll. 1-15. These verses, of course, also send-up Thomas Hood's 1827 poem of the same title.

⁸ Norman Nicholson, 'Coastal Journey', *Five Rivers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 61; ll. 1-6. Nicholson's poem also suggests the influence of de la Mare's 'The Railway Junction'.