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Review of Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

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Starting from the observation that so many of the major Victorian novels are set, not in the railway age in which they were written, but in the horse-drawn world of the previous generation, a world that is 'just past', this fine study explores the ways in which novelists from Walter Scott to Thomas Hardy use the stage coach to connect particular localities, often closely observed and substantially realized, to the larger framework of the nation. This turning back to the past is not, Ruth Livesey insists, a retreat from the complications and dislocations of a modern present into a simpler age, nostalgically recalled; and in resisting the notion of a nostalgic retrospect her argument challenges two important critical works on novels of the mid-century, Kathleen Tillotson’s *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* and Georg
Lukács’s *The Historical Novel*. What Tillotson saw as the recreation of an idealized past by writers uncomfortably inhabiting two worlds and Lukács read as an abandonment of Scott’s serious engagement with the process of history for the cultivation of private dramas in historical fancy-dress, Livesey interprets differently, arguing that there is a continuity between Scott and his successors in their concern with the writing of place as a focus of both individual and collective memory. Crucial to her argument is the definition of nostalgia as it was understood in the nineteenth-century, not as a longing for a lost past but rather as a condition of acute homesickness brought about by the displacements involved in modernity and the expansion of empire. The stage coach offers an antidote. Where the development of toll roads, and later railways, could be seen as unifying the nation through a process of homogenization, the motif of the stage coach in the hands of the writers examined here works in a more uneven way to ‘weave together a nation out of strongly rendered, disjointed localities’ (p. 11), creating a constant interplay between the local and the national.

Scott sets the pattern, connecting the local and the national by spatializing national history as a series of stages by road leading away from the metropolis towards the periphery. Waverley’s journey into the Highlands, for instance, is both spatial and temporal, introducing him to a more dramatic landscape than his familiar English one and taking him back into a feudal world that is alien in both language and custom. Historical time is mapped geographically and specific places like Tully Veolan and Glennaquoich become the means by which the Scottish past can be known. Although only loosely related to actual geography, such fictional locations have the effect of constructing a sense of locality as something tangible and potentially visitable. This sense of place is, Livesey argues, a form of portable memory that can alleviate the home-sickness afflicting a displaced and mobile modernity.

Although the work of novelists is the primary focus of this study, one chapter is devoted to the contrasting perspectives of two radical journalists in the 1820s, William Cobbett and William Hazlitt. Where Cobbett, like the Tory de Quincy a little later, saw mail coaches and turnpike roads simply as symptoms of old corruption, Hazlitt viewed the increasing network of connection and communication that they provided as a potential instrument of reform. It is Hazlitt who anticipates the mid-century novelists in his late essay *The Letter Bell* by seeing the mail coach as mediating between country and city and connecting the blue remembered hills of his Shropshire youth with the metropolitan London of his maturity. He stresses continuity rather than rupture, and, as a committed and consistent radical, finds a particular form of progressive continuity in the way that the Revolution of July 1830 in France recovers something of the glorious revolutionary spirit of the 1790s.

Something like Hazlitt’s radicalism carries over into Dickens’s writing career, which begins in 1833 shortly after *The Letter Bell* and before the railway has put an end to coach travel. In *The Pickwick Papers* the stage coach, for Livesey, speaks of a republican modernity, of a communicative nation marked by ‘constant energetic circulation rather than autocratic direction’ (p. 91) and where members of different classes meet on equal terms. Mr Jingle’s famously lapidary anecdote about the female passenger whose head is knocked off by a low arch and his passing allusion to Charles I losing his head in Whitehall are ingeniously woven into an argument for the central motif of the stage coach in *Pickwick* presenting a levelling vision of a headless modern nation on the move. Of course Dickens has his stage coaches travel on into his novels of the 1850s and 1860s, contributing what
Kathleen Tillotson called an anachronistic ‘phantasmagoria of stage coaches’ to the popular idea of the Victorian; but where one might have expected an examination of the motif in one of the later masterpieces, Livesey turns instead to the earlier and somewhat marginal Martin Chuzzlewit, in which America serves as a vehicle for Dickens’s anxieties about a flattened and diminished democratic future visible in this railway nation without a sense of place. The positively headless nation of Pickwick has its negative counterpart in his dystopian vision of America as a headless monster lacking leadership and direction. Dickens compensates for this in the English section of Martin Chuzzlewit and the later fiction with brilliant evocations of lively places of habitation, by writing an England richly sedimented with life and feeling and history.

The chapter that may be of chief interest for readers of this journal addresses the intersection of locality and national politics in Felix Holt. Starting with the fact that Cobbett was campaigning in the Coventry election of 1820 at the same time as Robert Evans was moving his family to Griff a few months after the birth of Mary Ann, Livesey reads Felix Holt in the light of Cobbett’s radical journalism. She shows how the imaginary stagecoach journey of the ‘Author’s Introduction’ can be read as a riposte to Cobbett’s analysis of rural labouring discontent in the 1820s, carefully negating what he identified as the symptoms of that discontent in the details of rural life as seen from the coach. But despite the obvious ideological contrast between the radical journalist and the conservative George Eliot of the 1860s, they are shown to share a belief in attachment to place and local custom as a centre of being. The opening coach journey is analysed with interesting originality in terms of its grammar, as an exercise in the subjunctive which unsettles the past and renders it something unfixed, a series of possibilities. This is characteristic of George Eliot’s realist project, Livesey argues, in that it re-establishes the ‘connections between local belonging and national destiny’ (p. 193) and creates a memory of place from afar in a modern age of mobility and displacement.

If there is any radicalism in George Eliot it is of the etymological kind, involving a return to roots in a particular landscape. The emphasis is firmly individual and opposed to the kind of mass protest and consciousness that Cobbett sought to arouse. But George Eliot is equally opposed to a Disraelian Romantic Toryism that desired a return to an imaginary golden age of feudalism, and this is spelt out in Felix Holt in the fate of Philip Debarry whose attempts to re-establish pre-Reformation feudal relations take him out of the country altogether to die in Rome as a convert to Catholicism. George Eliot’s conservatism is not backward-looking in that way but committed to movement and change, so that an individual return to original locality – like Felix’s abandonment of his studies in Glasgow to return to his midland roots – is seen as an important ingredient of future progress. Her understanding of progress differs not only from Cobbett’s but also from the Whig and liberal vision espoused, for instance, by Thomas Macaulay and J. S. Mill who saw improved communication and speedier travel to be ironing out local distinctions and creating a homogeneous people. This vision of modernity is one that Felix Holt resists, Livesey argues, and she illustrates the point intriguingly with reference to the striking lacuna in the novel, the theological debate between Rufus Lyon and the Rev. Sherlock that never happens. The acutely apprehensive Sherlock finds deliverance on the morning of the event in a passing stage coach, hails the Tally-ho!, and is wheeled away into the larger world where he does not have to debate face-to-face but can circulate his arguments in print. The local and the national are connected but in this
instance opposed, and the country is shown to be more uneven and less homogeneous than
the liberals imagine.

This is one instance of where the focus on the stage coach serves to cast a new light
on the fiction, linking a minor detail to the larger movements of social history. Livesey
handles the literary texts and the socio-historical context with equal assurance and her study
brings the two into fruitful conjunction. The web of connections between text and context
is finely spun and makes demands that do not allow for casual reading; but for the academic
readership at which it is aimed, this scholarly study, whose arguments are supported by
reference to the latest scholarship, will prove highly rewarding.

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