

A New Sound; a New Sensation: A Cultural and Literary Reconsideration of the Motorcar in Modernity

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“And to think I never knew!” went on the Toad in a dreamy monotone. “...never even dreamed.”
(Kenneth Grahame - *The Wind in the Willows*)

In my 2013 article ‘The Motorcar and Desire’ (*Southern Semiotic Review*, Vol 2), I introduce a series of papers ‘seeking to retrieve the largely forgotten clatter, rumble, and roar of the internal combustion engine as it (quite literally) erupted onto the stage of the modern world (*op. cit.* n.p.).’ In pursuit of that objective, that foundational paper leverages the work of Victor Shklovsky (see ‘Art as Technique’, 1917) to show how processes of habitualisation have rendered us (more or less) deaf and blind to the manifold cultural significances of the automobile. In a definitively structuralist-semiotic mode, the paper also traverses the changing pattern of literary reception *vis-à-vis* the motorcar over the first quarter of the twentieth century: that is, while initially celebrated as an icon of freedom and conquest, the motorcar later came to be represented as a sign of confinement and destruction. Broadly, and echoing the trajectory of Ilya Ehrenburg’s *The Life of the Automobile* (1929), this is the direction of my long-promised series of papers—each of which is subtitled ‘A Cultural and Literary Reconsideration of the Motorcar in Modernity’. While Wolfgang Sachs (1984/1992) famously wrote of the automobile in terms of the history of our desires, the present paper (the second in the series) takes up and develops certain of Sachs’ ideas: specifically that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not only the desire for the new that excited the imagination of drivers and would-be drivers, but the desire for escape and the desire for speed. Accordingly, I engage a range of semiotic engines to argue that, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the motorcar is received as a ‘*relatum profundis*’ of freedom. To put it another way, and as Roland Barthes (1964/1977) indirectly proposes, I argue that the motorcar fits into a ‘highway code’ and into a broader ‘car system’ in which its various attributes—including its architectural details—are received as signs of liberation (pp. 10; 29).

A new sound

In his *Life of Johnson* (1791), as he looks back on the year 1776, the ever-prescient James Boswell expresses little more than a detached fascination for the technologies of his day while in 1829 in his *Edinburgh Review* essay ‘Signs of the Times’, Thomas Carlyle confidently declares his era to be ‘the Mechanical Age...the Age of Machinery’;
an
‘age

which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches, and practices the great art of adapting means to ends (Carlyle in Marx, 1964, p.43).’ Six years later, in 1835, Andrew Ure wrote this of the factory system: ‘In these spacious halls the benignant power of steam summons around him his myriads of willing menials (p. 18).’ And in 1842 Tennyson’s ‘Locksley Hall’ offered the following memorable encomium to the steam era: ‘Forward, forward let us range, / Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change (Tennyson, p.73).’ Another six years on, in *Principles of Political Economy*—and despite the perspectives of some equally famous contemporaries, John Stuart Mill could only find machinery ‘injurious to the labouring class’ in that it might ‘draw [capital] from other employments... (p. 96).’ Of course, these were relatively early assessments of what would come to be called the Age of Steam or the First Machine Age. Here, in the late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries—as would be the case with George Bernard Shaw some seventy-five years later—technological development is embraced as a sign of humanity’s will to exert dominion over nature; as emblematic of freedom from a life of repetitive servitude; as a reflection of an all-round amelioration taken, in turn, as a metaphor for improvements in all manner of cultural mechanisms. In the meantime, in America, the optimistic outlook of industrial proponent Tench Coxe and others seems to have inspired Walt Whitman who asserted that ‘the steam engine [was] no bad symbol of the United States.’ (Whitman in Marx, 1964, p.164) Certainly, Whitman’s ‘Passage to India’ of 1868 sings of ‘the great achievements of the present’ and condemns the past as that ‘dark unfathom’d retrospect (Whitman, 1982, p.531).’ While not to last much beyond the middle of the nineteenth century, a certain degree of knee-bending greeted the Age of Steam—with the same sort of naïve enthusiasm manifesting in response to the emergent technologies of the Second Machine Age.

The beginning of the twentieth century ushered in a raft of new technologies that informed *fin de siècle* sensibility. In 1903 the Wright brothers took to the air in an engine-driven aircraft, and by the late 10’s anxiety over powered flight had eased to the point that commercial flight became possible. In 1910 itself Madame Curie isolated the element radium (it had only been discovered in 1898) and Marconi was hard at work developing the wireless, while Bell, who had long since invented the telephone, was now working on the hydrofoil and on sonar detection systems. Meanwhile, geneticists were building on the work of Mendel and the Newtonian universe was being upended by Albert Einstein, who, in 1905, published his *Special Theory of Relativity*. Moreover, while Karl Benz had developed the internal combustion engine back in 1885, by 1907 Henry Ford’s famous ‘Model T’ was being turned out at the industrialist’s Piquette Avenue Plant. Ford, who went on to build fifteen-million of the vehicles, had declared:

‘I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to

be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one – and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces (Ford & Crowther, 1922, p.73).'

Here, the notion of human agency finds a bold new expression: while yoked to the political economy of capitalism, motorised transport would be democratised (Paterson, p. 30). The idea that a people's car would free all individuals—not only the wealthy—to access America's great garden is one to which I return but, for the present, it is fair to assert that by the early 1900s a new consciousness was emerging: one firmly aligned with the tempos of twentieth-century technological innovation. Of the era's plethora of inventions, it is nonetheless the motorcar that seems to suggest most completely the unfamiliar and accelerated rhythms of life to which all—and especially artists—had to pay attention. As Julian Symons writes in *Makers of the New*, 'the noise, clatter, and movement of the internal combustion engine...' ushered in a new and profoundly liberating aesthetic to which artists and others clearly responded. (Symons, p.35)

In early February 1900, Henry Ford issued an invitation to a young reporter to ride in a new horseless delivery wagon. A few days later, the following appeared in the *Detroit News-Tribune*:

'There has always been at each decisive period in this world's history some voice, some note, that represented for the time being the prevailing power. There was a time when the supreme cry of authority was the lion's roar. Then, came the voice of man. After that it was the crackle of fire...And now, finally, there was heard in the streets of Detroit the murmur of this newest and most perfect of forces, the automobile, rushing along at the rate of 25 miles an hour... . It was not like any other sound ever heard in this world. It was not like the puff! puff! of the exhaust of gasoline in a river launch; neither is it the cry! cry! of a working steam engine; but a long, quick, mellow gurgling sound, not harsh, not unmusical, not distressing; a note that falls with pleasure on the ear. It must be heard to be appreciated. And the sooner you hear its newest chuck! chuck! the sooner you will be in touch with civilisation's latest lisp, its newest voice...' (in Lacey, pp.47-48).

Here, at the beginning of a new millennium, the American press woke up to the new rhythms of modernity. While Ford's initial foray into the manufacture of automobiles would, perhaps emblematically, turn sour (founded in 1899, the Detroit Automobile Company that boasted the above delivery van was wound up in November 1900), the road ahead was nonetheless clear. As Ford drove the mesmerised reporter past the

premises of a saddler and harness-maker, the industrialist scoffed at a doomed business (Ford in Lacey, p. 48). A new mode of transport was now at hand: one offering an entirely new rhythm and asserting an entirely new tempo; one promising to untether human agency from every one of life's misery-making hitching posts. So, while journalists toyed with onomatopoeia, artists more comprehensively echoed the quickening pulse of modern technics. As Ezra Pound made clear in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' (1920/1975, p.98), 'the age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace', and the motorcar seemed to oblige. Accordingly, the years 1908 and 1909 were full of famous declarations and startling new artistic forms: the brash manifestos of Marinetti were published; the revolutionary art works of the Futurists and Vorticists were hung on gallery walls; the compositions of Debussy and Stravinsky assaulted the ears of music lovers; and the breath-taking choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky and Serge Diaghilev dumbfounded theatre audiences.

On 17 May, 1909, Serge Diaghilev's first Russian Ballet opened in Paris at the Théâtre du Châtelet. Opening night audiences went away concussed by the score's pounding rhythms, confused by the unconventional choreography, and perturbed by provocative displays of clashing colours. While reviews were nonetheless favourable, these displayed little understanding of the cultural phenomena influencing either the ballet or its music. Three years later—the city having scarce recovered from the 1909 season—the *Ballet Russes de Diaghilev* returned to Paris. Premiering was Debussy's *L'Après-Midi d'un faune*, a ballet about a Roman deity besotted by a young wood nymph. As the work reached its questionable climax, Nijinsky (attired in leotards, and with hips undulating) descended over the nymph's scarf and quivered in feigned orgasm (Eksteins, p.27). Gaston Calmette, editor of *Le Figaro*, refused to publish a favourable review on offer, and instead excoriated the ballet: 'We are shown a lecherous faun, whose movements are filthy and bestial in their eroticism, and whose gestures are as crude as they are indecent (*Le Figaro*, 31 May 1912, in Eksteins, p. 27).' Calmette's damning review also levelled withering criticism at *Faune's* brutal score while Cyril Beaumont, who saw the ballet in London on 17 February 1913, noted that the opening night audience was left profoundly divided. Some clapped, while others jeered and hissed in response to Nijinsky's questionable writhing, the shattering of academic convention, and Debussy's predilection for percussion (Beaumont, pp.51-54).

But Diaghilev was not done. Accordingly, the 1913 season opened with *Jeux*, a ballet set around a tennis match. *Jeux* was considered audacious less for its suggestiveness, and more for its anti-classical poses, its massive score, and its startling rhythms. Stravinsky, himself a radical reformer, was horrified and declared the music to be 'awful (Buckle, p.92).' Audiences were similarly disenchanting, but when *Le Sacre du Printemps* premiered two weeks later at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (29 May 1913) anger erupted. The evidence indicates that Stravinsky wanted *The Rite of Spring* to provoke. He wrote to his mother that she should not be surprised if people 'whistle[d] at *Le Sacre* (Stravinsky & Craft, p.29)', and wrote to Diaghilev advising that: '...we must wait a long

time before the public grows accustomed to our language (in Eksteins, p.41).’ Then there is Nijinsky’s correspondence to go by. Writing to Stravinsky on 25 January 1913, he noting that *Le Sacre* would be, ‘for the ordinary viewer a jolting and emotional experience (*op. cit.*).’ Stravinsky’s score is undoubtedly jarring—violating classical laws of harmony and rhythm. Melody is introduced, only to melt away in moments; replaced by bludgeoning percussion. On opening night, moreover, classical movement was undercut: Nijinsky’s celebrated *pas d’élévation* was complemented by stomping while the elegant *pirouette* was reduced to sliding. And, in even greater defiance of tradition, Nijinsky confronted his audience so: feet turned inward, hands on hips, and shoulders hunched. With the exception of a few sympathetic reviews, the press response was predictably hostile.

One critic declared the score to be ‘Hottentot music’ (*op. cit.*, p. 50) while another complained: ‘never has the cult of the wrong note been applied with such industry, zeal, and ferocity’ (*op. cit.*, p. 51). As Alex Ross writes of the period, ‘atonality was destined to raise hackles (p.61)’ and so *Le Sacre*’s London premier, on 11 July 1913, met with a similarly unsympathetic response. However, Cyril Beaumont’s assessment is that the English audience, like the Parisian one, was ‘about equally divided in their dislike and their appreciation (p. 75).’ Despite the enthusiasm of Brussel, Beaumont, and others, it was not until 1921 that the genesis of *The Rite of Spring*, and the *Ballets Russes* more generally, was properly unpacked. Perhaps predictably, it was T. S. Eliot who perceived the cognate forms that underpinned Stravinsky’s score and Nijinsky’s choreography. In 1921, the poet attended a performance of *Le Sacre*. His biographer, Peter Ackroyd, writes: ‘at the end he stood up and cheered (p.112).’ Acknowledging the primacy of Stravinsky’s work, Eliot wrote in the *Dial* that it metamorphosed ‘the rhythm of the steppe into the scream of the motor-horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life... (Eliot in Crawford, p.139).’ While Stravinsky’s radical forms perhaps underpin Eliot’s own musical endeavours in ‘The Waste Land’— a work in which broken rhythms and fractured cadences stimulate the imagination— the Italian Futurists had already wrenched their sensibilities away from the *locus amoenus* and had adopted the automobile as their primary symbol of the new freedom.

In my introductory paper of 2013 (see above), I foreshadow the significance of the Futurists’ response to the motorcar. In the present paper, while essaying over some of the same territory, I emphasise the sense of artistic freedom afforded those who, in accordance with the desires of Futurist musician Luigi Russolo, chose to ‘cross the great modern capitals ‘with [their] ears more alert than [their] eyes’ (Russolo in Apollonio, p. 75). In deference, perhaps, to Filippo Marinetti, who, in his *Manifeste du futurism* of 1909, called for artists to interpret ‘the musical soul of...trains, tanks, automobiles, and aeroplanes’, in *The Art of Noises* Russolo calls for the ‘palpitation of valves, the coming and going of pistons, [and] the howl of [the mechanical]’ (see Apollonio, pp. 17; 75). It was, then, little wonder that Russolo considered his greatest triumph to be the creation

of his noise intoners. Unveiled in June 1913, the first of these monolithic instruments produced the noise of an unsilenced internal combustion engine.¹ In 1914, not long before offering *Convegno d'aeroplani e d'automobili* (*The Meeting of Automobiles and Aeroplanes*) at the Coliseum, Rossolo gave a private performance of his noise intoner. The far-too-small venue was Marinetti's home, with Stravinsky and Diaghilev in attendance. When Rossolo fired up the intoner, Stravinsky 'leapt from the divan like an exploding bedspring' while Diaghilev quavered "Ah Ah" ... for him the highest sign of approval (Francesco Cangiullo in Bozzola & Tisdall, p.118).' Since it seemed to suggest everything they were about, for the Futurists, then, the motorcar was the machine *par excellence*: through it, as Tim Benton has observed, artists like Marinetti and Rossolo were able to realise their Nietzschean fantasies (Benton, p.19). Prized for pace and unrivalled noise, the automobile unequivocally signalled that the world was now to dance to a new tune. As Rossolo had declared, 'Let us break out...make the music lovers scream...[i]t's no good objecting that noises are exclusively loud and disagreeable to the ear (in Apollonio, p.76).'

Inevitably, artists in other disciplines engaged with the Futurist aesthetic—thereby freeing their work from convention. By 1928, at the end of our era of interest, and after William Carlos Williams' poem 'I Saw the No. 5', Charles Demuth painted his iconic 'I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold'. As noted in my paper of 2013, faithful to the poem, the painting shows a fire engine slicing its way through dark metropolitan streets. Demuth's appropriation is a brilliant blur of energy: an astonishing cacophony captured on canvas. Despite mounting complaints against motorcars and motorists from around 1900—British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith labelled the automobile 'a luxury...apt to degenerate into a nuisance' (in McShane, p.113)—this sympathetic aesthetic was, to a very significant extent, embraced by writers. While *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) is the first novel written in English to deal with the deleterious effects of the motorcar, it is impossible to find a literary text from the early part of the twentieth century that *flatly* condemns the machine. Indeed, and as I have noted at some length in my preliminary paper, while acknowledging the destructive potential of motorcars, writers like Bernard Shaw, Kenneth Grahame, Ian Hay, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and F. Scott Fitzgerald celebrate the artistically liberating sound of the internal combustion engine, also adopting it as a sign of more obvious freedoms. Having considered the former (in the 2013 paper, and above), I now turn to the latter.

Back to the garden

What does one do with this new mode of transport; this engine of transformation? Conquer territory, of course. And conquer it quickly. Unlike many other technologies, the motorcar is not of a local environment: rather, it intrinsically speaks of 'beyond' and makes it possible for us to quickly access that which is remote. For instance, a companion-piece to this second essay (and the third in the now-established series) will highlight how Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and *Daisy* use the motor-car to escape to out-of-the-way places, how Forster's *Henry* and *Margaret* (and *Ronny* and *Adela*) drive into the

country, and how Lawrence's Skrebensky and Ursula similarly escape the city in order to conduct a private romance in the country. Of course, the desire to escape to the country was (and is) not only driven by libido. The will to renounce culture in favour of nature has a long tradition—one that may be traced back to the earliest journey literature and one distilled in novels such as *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Natty Bumppo*. What seems to have fuelled the search for the *pleasance* in the modern era was not only the rapid rate of urbanisation from around 1850, but the arrival of the automobile—a machine that 'inherited these desires and lent them a new expression (Sachs, p. 155).' So then, the popular cure for urban congestion (a theory also promulgated by Ford, as we have seen) was to simply leave it behind. Motoring commentator James Flink (1988) confirms that the automobile was indeed welcomed as a panacea to both urban pollution and the crush of crowds: '[w]ith the motor-car', he writes, 'people were able to leave behind 'the masses;...the stench of rotting drays;...the regular but generous smatterings of horse droppings (p.88) .' Not surprisingly, the automobile came to be regarded as friend of the natural world and in *The Graphic* of 13 June 1908, there appeared a large photograph of flower-laden motor-vehicles participating in Paris' annual *Fête Des Fleurs*. This remarkable image suggests a happy marriage between nature and the machine. Significantly, even those authors who publicly condemned the very idea of the machine in the garden privately revelled in the rural motor-tour.

In early December 1912, for example, E. M. Forster wrote to his mother, Clara, from Chatarpur describing 'a wonderful moonlight drive' in the Maharaja of Dewas' automobile (Selected Letters, Vol. 1, p. 163). Later in the month, Forster again wrote to his mother, this time proudly announcing that his party was seeing the Maharaja every day and that he 'usually [took them] on a country motor drive (*op.cit.*, p.169).' Interestingly, those in Forster's party included G. L. Dickinson who, just six years earlier, had vehemently attacked motor vehicles in the *Independent Review*. While Scott Fitzgerald's love of motoring, motorcars, and travel is well known, here it is noted that D. H. Lawrence was another who, while publicly railing against the automobile, enjoyed motoring into the country. In March of 1915, in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Lawrence wrote: 'Monica has a motorcar every day to drive her out, so we go too. Today we drove to Bognor. It was strange...- a white vague, powerful sea, with long waves falling heavily...' (*Selected Letters*, p.80). Clearly, Lawrence's objections to the automobile did not prevent him from taking advantage of its power to put him in touch with Sussex.

With respect to the machine's presence in the garden, while voices of condemnation clearly dominate in the novels of both Forster and Fitzgerald, suggestions of approval may nonetheless be sensed. In Forster's *Howards End*, for instance, Henry takes his daughter, Evie, on a motor-tour through tranquil English hinterlands and proselytises, quite credibly, that there is no greater felicity while in *A Passage* the Nawab Bahadur takes Ronny and Adela on what starts out to be an enchanting early evening drive—

much like those enjoyed by the author himself. In *Maurice*, albeit it on a motor-cycle, the hero and Clive Durham ride away from Cambridge to be 'outside humanity' and end up talking in a peaceful, open field (p. 66). In all cases, initially at least, there is an emphasis on the beauty of the countryside, social engagement, and an atmosphere of imperturbability.

As has been observed both above and in the preliminary paper of this series, Scott Fitzgerald's novels similarly acknowledge the automobile's power to take us away from it all. At the end of *This Side of Paradise*, hero Amory Blaine clearly enjoys the panoramic views made possible by the high wheel-base of the Locomobile and in *The Beautiful and Damned* Anthony and Gloria's sojourn into the country puts them among 'a familiar roster of pastoral figures who enact the ideal life of the American self-journeying away from the established order of things into unexplored territory... (Leo Marx in Jaye and Watts, p.74).' Of course, to begin with, this is precisely how Fitzgerald wants us to view the couple, and so their journey into heartland America is presented as a great adventure. Ostensibly, Anthony and Gloria are cast as archetypal wanderers searching for an identity well outside establishment norms. While we are to eventually understand that their motivation is in fact a mixture of cowardice and profound restlessness, the opening movements of the novel felicitously foreground the idea that the couple is seeking to connect with the authentic spirit of the Midwest—and, for a time at least, their motor journey into rural America reinforces this illusion.

It is in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, however, that the motorcar is most clearly connected with bucolic idealism. Once again, while the narrative finally steers us toward the inescapable conclusion that the machine has no place in America's garden, Fitzgerald's love for the automobile periodically shines through. While a sense of excitement accompanies the cataloguing of Jordan Baker's geographical conquests in a convertible and while Daisy (both romantically and portentously) draws her open car up beneath 'dripping bare lilac-trees' (p.81), Nick's description of Gatsby's 'gorgeous car' itself speaks to pastoral idealism. As always, Fitzgerald's words are carefully weighted—the ambiguous 'conservatory' (*op. cit.* p. 64) alluding to both the labyrinth of glass that comprises the vehicle's complex windscreen arrangement and to the idea of preserving something that might otherwise be lost forever. In context, the word 'terraced' (*op. cit.*) suggests a careful cultivation and of course both words may be connected with the lost garden and an associated state of innocence so central to Gatsby's consciousness. The word 'conservatory', moreover, is especially significant since it symbolises a defiance of the seasons—something that we must inevitably associate with Gatsby's great, but impossible, enterprise: that is, to turn back time.

So it is that the 'green leather' interior of Gatsby's car is an emblem of an unattainable Golden Age (*op. cit.*). Throughout the novel, references to an Edenic foretime are deftly adumbrated through images of gardens. Of his rented domains, Nick observes: 'Once more it was pouring...and my irregular lawn...abounded in small muddy swamps and

prehistoric marshes (*op. cit.*, p. 83).’ By contrast, Gatsby’s vast and commercially cultivated *pleasance* nonetheless symbolises the desire for a purity of heart. Indeed, we may observe the same naïve desire in Nick himself, who, having motored over to Fifth Avenue, muses that it is ‘so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that [he] wouldn’t have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner (*op. cit.* p.36).’ Of course, the motorcar’s capacity to connect us with the natural world is otherwise highlighted in *The Great Gatsby*. We learn that the hero has romanced Daisy in ‘out-of-the-way places’—milieux accessed in the latter’s white car, and we learn too that among Gatsby’s more enduring memories is that of a ‘yellow trolley’ racing through green ‘spring fields’ (*op. cit.* p.135).’ At this juncture in the novel the hero’s cream-yellow Rolls Royce with its green leather interior surely rises in consciousness?² Nor may we forget the motorcars that park, five-deep, on Gatsby’s driveway—a ribbon of metal that emblematically bisects his sweeping and profoundly symbolic lawns. So, while images of the pastoral ultimately give way to various simulacra of destruction in *The Great Gatsby*, the novel does reinforce the idea that in the motorcar we may find something of the *deus ex machina*. Despite the tragedy that comes to pass in Fitzgerald’s third and greatest novel, the automobile is never fully stripped of its aura; never completely robbed of its promise to liberate.



A body in movement

In her essay *Autonomy and Automobility* (1997), Loren Lomasky argues that, ‘[f]or Aristotle, being a ‘self-mover’ is the central marker of human agency (p.8). It might equally be argued that central to the notion of liberty is the freedom to travel—and a corollary of this is that the faster we travel, the more our freedom must be enhanced. ‘Mechanical civilization’, writes Raimon Panikkar, ‘makes possible the realization of the most far-fetched dreams: we can fly, calculate otherwise impossible operations, transport ourselves from one continent to another...etc (p. 245).’ As for Lewis Mumford (1967) and Paul Virilio (1997/2006), Panikkar argues that ‘[i]t is all reduced to the

discovery of higher speeds and the desire for limitless acceleration (*op. cit.* p.246).’ Since it gives us access to multiple horizons, the motorcar makes a profound contribution to the fulfilment of these desires. As Alvin Tofler observes: ‘[it is a] growling engine of change...a major force behind the accelerative thrust (p.90).’ As may be imagined, the history, here, is easily traced.

In 1895, in a hard-fought contest against the world’s best gasoline, steam, and electric vehicles, driving a four horse-power Panhard, Émile Levassor won the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris motor-race at an average speed of some fifteen miles an hour. Less than a decade later, a petrol-driven Mercedes exceeded eighty miles-an-hour. In these early days of motoring, huge engines were employed with Clive Gallop and Count Louis Zborowski’s twenty-three litre monster the most famous of them. Registered for the Brooklands meeting of Easter 1921, the race convenors (the Royal Flying Corp) rejected the bland original name for the Gallop-Zborowski entry—but excitedly admitted the quickly-christened ‘Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang’. Achieving an average speed of just over one-hundred miles-an-hour, it easily won. By now, performance had become an end in itself with changes in tempo stimulating changes in consciousness—and, therefore, changes in cultural representation. As has been suggested, it did not take long for a strong public interest in motor racing and record-breaking to find expression in the visual, and, later, literary arts.

The first to recognise the artistic possibilities inherent in the automobile was Toulouse-Lautrec whose 1896 lithograph ‘*The Motorist*’ gently mocks his auto-centric cousin. Like Demuth’s ‘I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold’, the work is characterised by a tremendous intensity and a striking impression of speed. In 1900 French sculptor Aimee-Jules Dalou was commissioned to design a memorial to Émile Levassor who had died in 1897 following a serious crash in the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris race of 1896. Embracing the commission since it would send shockwaves through the artistic establishment, Dalou’s notebooks contain thirteen iterative and emblematic sketches. The first of these depict mythical goddesses while the series concludes with an indefatigable Levassor driving through an imaginary triumphal arch. There are, in these sketches and in the finished work itself, profound suggestions of pace and flight. Levassor’s machine, with driver hunched over the wheel, seems to burst forth from the marble relief. A sense of triumph is palpable: hats are waved, figures strain forward to witness the spectacle, and the bough of a great tree seems to genuflect in submission.

We have seen that the Italian Futurists celebrated the new rhythms of the internal combustion engine, but they too wanted to capture the essence of movement: to represent flux itself. As Boccioni would assert in 1913, ‘a body in movement...is not simply an immobile body subsequently set in motion, but a truly mobile object, which is a reality quite new and original (in Apollonio, p.93).’ Apropos, the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* calls for ‘universal dynamism...rendered as dynamic sensation...(Bozzola & Tisdall, pp.33-35).’ ‘All things move, all things run, all things are

rapidly changing...space no longer exists...' declares the Manifesto before going on to assert that '[a]ll subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fervour and speed (*op. cit.*).' Published in 1910, the *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters* declares: 'we must breathe in the tangible miracles of contemporary life (in Apollonio: 25).' 'How', its contributors ask, 'can we remain insensible to the frenetic life of our great cities...(*op. cit.*)?' In an interview with the *Evening News* Marinetti declared London to be 'a Futurist city (in Cork, Vol 1:, p.28).' Seeing in the metropolis the stimuli for Futurist endeavour, Marinetti praised the 'coloured electric lights that flash advertisements in the night..., the enormous glaring posters...the brilliant hued motor-buses (*op. cit.*).' This aesthetic found sublime expression in Futurist works like Carlo Carrà's 'What the Tramcar Said to Me' and 'Jolting Cab', both completed in 1911, and in Giacomo Balla's 'Abstract Speed' and 'Speeding Automobile', both of 1913. Indeed, Balla devoted himself to capturing the subjective dynamism of speeding cars and had, by 1915, completed at least twenty works relating to the automobile.

Others, too, had adopted the automobile as their symbol. Arthur Symon's enthusiastic observation of London motor-omnibuses is particularly well-known while, later, influential Swiss architect and urban planner Le Corbusier produced his 'L'Esprit Nouveau, no. 13 - Evolution des formes de l'automobile 1900 - 21', a collection of drawings that stress the increasingly long lines of automobile bodies. Even Ernest Sheppard's characteristically static representations of reality find a new energy when the artist is depicting transit technologies. For instance, in his autobiography *Drawn From Life*, Sheppard offers a wonderfully vibrant drawing of a Roman centurion driving a chariot. The piece—completed as a homework exercise when the artist was just fifteen years old—betrays a fascination for speed that was to culminate in his inimitable representation of automobiles in *The Wind in the Willows*.

Inevitably, writers also wanted to celebrate speed. Inspired, perhaps, by the success of Italian automobiles on the world circuits of 1907, Marinetti's poem 'À mon Pégase' is a celebration of motor racing. Marinetti's machine 'plunges down country roads...overcom[ing] placid mountains like a whirlwind...' the machine symbolising '...the wind of destructive change...the coming of age of the mechanical man (Marinetti in Benton, p.20).'³ Moreover, there is, in 'À mon Pégase', a suggestion of the driver roaring into oblivion to achieve a destination beyond that of the temporal world. It is, of course, this same urge to achieve 'somebody else's horizon' that so completely besots Kenneth Grahame's Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* (p.30). Having sighted his first '...immense, breath-snatching, passionate,' motor-car 'with its pilot tense and hugging the wheel, possess[ing] all the earth and air for a fraction of a second...', Grahame's indubitably flawed but undoubtedly favourite character revels in 'the poetry of motion (pp. 26)' That was in 1908. Yet as early as 1776 James Boswell urged Dr. Johnson to consider the proposition that '...a man is never happy for the present, but when he is drunk...or when driving rapidly in a post-chaise (Boswell, p.297).'

In his *Behaviour in Uncertainty*, psychologist John Cohen argues that when behind the wheel of a car our capacity for self-regulation is dramatically reduced; that the various chemical regulators that bring about homeostasis are muted; that when we drive fast, we experience that curious mixture of terror and pleasure called exhilaration—the result of pushing one’s self and one’s machine to the limits of endurance (p.62). Similarly, Wolfgang Sachs notes a commensurate swelling of the ego as acceleration increases; as a multiplication of forces somehow colonises the consciousness of the driver who then imagines himself to be an invincible. Likewise, Berman (1982), Gartman (1986; 1994), Wolf (1996), and Urry (2004) propose that the automobile inverts the processes of alienation by which it is produced, inviting us into a space of complete delusion in which we imagine ourselves to be somehow at one with the machine. In the same mode, under the heading ‘Auto-mythologies’, Richardson and Ryder (2018) note that the automobile became a sign of superhuman achievement (online).’ And so, when at the wheel, Kenneth Grahame’s *Toad* begins ‘...to lose his head (p.165).’ And when the original driver tries to regain control, the *Toad* pins him down in his seat and puts on full speed. As the air rushes over his face and the vehicle’s engine hums, the *Toad*’s ‘weak brain’ becomes intoxicated (*op. cit.*, pp. 165-166).

As Brian Pearce (2016) has noted, Colonel T. E. Lawrence was another who enjoyed speed; another whose personal agencies were in a sense enhanced by the swift-moving automobile. In *Oriental Assembly* he boasts that ‘...petrol makes light of the deserts, and space is shrinking to-day, when we travel one hundred miles an hour instead of five (p. 89).’ But it is, of course, in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—that greatest of all narratives of conquest and destruction—that Lawrence’s celebration of motoring finds its most full and felicitous expression. For Lawrence, the motorcar literally became an ally in his campaigns against the Turks. At times, the colonel’s celebration of the machine borders on the poetic. Certainly the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost armoured car that Lawrence used in the desert afforded him unprecedented agency as the conquering hero: ‘Once I had been proud of riding from Azrak to Akaba in three days; but now we drove it in two, and slept well of nights after this mournful comfort of being borne at ease in Rolls- Royces, like the great ones of war (p. 581).’

Through the motorcar, moreover, Lawrence was able to employ the classical military virtues of speed and surprise. As recorded in *The Seven Pillars*, with the Turks in utter disarray, Lawrence’s armoured vehicles bore down mercilessly on a major objective: a Turk station. Lawrence remembers it as a race, proclaiming proudly that ‘our car won’ allowing the Bedouin to engage in ‘the maddest looting of their history (pp. 522-3).’ A few pages on Lawrence recounts the sprint for the Mejaber Springs: ‘...so Rolls made his car leap forward in a palpitant rush across the great width. The earth fell away in front of us, and a plume like a dust-devil waved along our track behind (p. 558).’⁴ On this particular day, roughly eighty miles fell into the colonel’s hands and of their

conquests a few days later he could write: 'We ran at speed over the smooth flint or mud-flat, letting the strong car throb itself fully... (p. 619).'

As often in *The Seven Pillars*, there is a strong sense of the hero leaving lesser men in his wake and Ford motorcars come in for some particularly disparaging comments since they cannot achieve any respectable speed. In one dismissive aside, Lawrence complains of a 'Ford car' struggling to 'keep up with successive advances (p. 520).' A little later he complains again of the same 'painstaking little Ford' which barely hangs on as his '...splendid car [drinks] up the familiar miles (p. 528).' A few pages on, Lawrence recounts his rush for the Mejaber springs: '...so Rolls made his car leap forward in a palpitant rush across the great width. The earth fell away in front of us, and a plume like a dust-devil waved along our track behind (p. 558).'

Writers of the first quarter of the twentieth century, then, commonly saw in the automobile a vehicle for expressing aspiration and agency. Accordingly, theirs was not a strictly scientific fascination—although, from about 1910, they did become increasingly interested in the commodity status of the automobile. However, Bernard Shaw was never interested in the motorcar as a sign of instrumental rationality. For him, as for T. E. Lawrence, the machine was a sign of improvement. In *Man and Superman*, in the figure of the chauffeur Straker, Shaw plays up the importance of technological competence. Tanner himself announces that Henry Straker is the 'New Man...caring for nothing but tearing along in a leather coat and goggles, with two inches of dust all over him, at sixty miles an hour at the risk of his life and mine (Act 3, p. 81).' Straker's identification with the motor-car is so profound that his very being is predicated on his mastery of it. After a break-neck twenty-one-minute motor-ride from Hyde Park to Richmond, in which a steam-car is raced, a disconcerted Tanner walks around the house to calm his nerves while a disconsolate Straker complains that with a clear road he might have achieved the distance in fifteen minutes. When it transpires that Hector Malone's steam-car has beaten the motor-car by a full four minutes, a furious Straker savagely kicks his employer's automobile. He has lost the race against a more primitive machine and has, therefore, had his mastery of the road—indeed his entire validity as a social agent—called into question.

Like James Boswell, Scott Fitzgerald suggests that a fast drive is a sign of life and progress. Accordingly, the final section of *This Side of Paradise* is entitled 'Going Faster' and here Amory Blaine appears to experience profound psychological revelations as a speeding Locomobile takes him west. This is certainly consistent with the author's misplaced belief that his hero gets somewhere. And in *The Beautiful and Damned* Gloria Patch, though ultimately condemned as shallow and perfidious, likes to live life fast and drives accordingly. Indeed it is a source of infinite frustration to her that 'this old thing' (she refers to her motor-car) 'won't go over thirty-five'.⁵ (p.159) Even the chariot sign outside Anthony's favourite club elicits suggestions of pace and progress and emblematises this rather conservative figure's ostensible desire to live life in the

fast lane. Similarly, in what the reader quickly recognises as a vain attempt to animate a rather lack-lustre consciousness, Anthony surrounds himself with vibrant and dynamic personalities. The spendthrift Parker Allison whose 'notion of distinction consist[s] in driving a noisy red-and-yellow racing car up Broadway with two glittering hard-eyed girls beside him' is a symbolic acquaintance, his automobile an emblem of the vigorous and engaging sensibility to which Anthony himself aspires (p. 363).

In *Gatsby*, too, the speeding car reinforces notions of a super-agency. A rigorous Barthesian analysis of the novel would reveal significant and systematic links between various figures' proper names and certain rapid transit technologies wherein each such connection would underscore the notion of lives lived at extraordinary pace. While not seeking to offer a thorough-going high-structuralist analysis of *Gatsby* here, connections between the hero's name and particular modes of transport nonetheless give the illusion of a certain moral determinacy. And so Gatsby's Silver Ghost (symbolising monarchy, money, magic, and the great beyond), speeds past slums and saloons on the edge of Fitzgerald's waste land—annihilating squalor and the things of the temporal world generally. In a later paper in this series, I shall more comprehensively consider the two-edged symbolism of Gatsby's Rolls-Royce but for the present note that, with its 'fenders spread like wings' the circus wagon, as it is contemptuously labelled by Tom Buchanan, elicits a magic variously associated with its owner (p.67).

Far from the deep-seated selfishness and moral insouciance informing the characters of Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker, references to transport technologies, as they apply to the hero alone, imply an elevated consciousness: a spiritual rather than atavistic or strictly worldly drive. In a quasi-Barthesian mode, then, the numerous references to rapid transit technologies, particularly the motorcar, linked to sites denoted by the proper name 'Gatsby' allow us to form an impression of the hero such as 'skimming hastily through a dozen magazines' might elicit (p.65). Indeed, it is not too much to say that Gatsby's structural function as a notional quester (his restlessness is marked by a positivity not informing the personality of any other individual figure in the novel) is defined by such references since, as suggested above, they are deployed with such frequency so as to officiate as semantic alibis for the notion of spiritual progress. In this way, and as Barthes himself would argue, we may systematically rescue units of meaning from the background noise of the text and so arrive at a narrative determination that may be properly defended.⁶

While in E. M. Forster's fiction the speeding car is, among other things, represented as a sign of social hubris, if we are alert to the voice of the 'other' in his novels there is nonetheless a sense that the fast and dynamic are infinitely more attractive than the passive or quiescent. The idea that the devil gets all the good tunes notwithstanding, I focus on two instances in which Forster foregrounds the speeding automobile as an emblem of personal agency—albeit an agency finally condemned as both shallow and

transitory. In *Howards End* I consider Charles Wilcox's break-neck drive from the railway station to his parents' country estate and in *A Passage to India* I examine Nancy Derek's passion for speed. While Forster's judgement of the industrial mind is as harsh as we may find anywhere in modern literature, there nonetheless inheres in these narratives another voice: one that acknowledges the vitality of the motorist—a being contemporaneously represented as an exponent of high rationalism. Although there can be little doubt that Charles Wilcox's connection to automobiles serves to foreground the young man's technical disposition, there is also a strong sub-text suggesting that his modern sensibilities are nonetheless more vigorous and engaging than those of the Victorian mind; a mind represented in *Howards End* by the ultra-conservative figure of Juley Munt.

When Charles drives Aunt Juley from the railway station to Howards End, he drives recklessly—largely because he wishes to punish the woman for accusing his brother, Paul, of emotional impropriety. But in his engagement of the active voice—always more direct and vigorous than the passive—Forster's prose betrays a degree of admiration for both machine and its driver. Certainly, the short sentences suggest the dynamism of both man and machine: 'Charles...sent the motor swerving all over the lane. She screamed (p.35).' So, while Forster's main interest in the automobile is as an emblem of instrumental rationality, his diction, grammar, and syntax collectively bespeak an otherwise unacknowledged admiration. The same phenomenon may be observed in *A Passage to India* where Nancy Derek's 'on-the-go' consciousness is emblematised through her association with the speeding automobile.

Finally, while Forster's disapproval of *A Passage's* Nancy Derek is scarcely veiled, a deconstructive approach to the text nonetheless reveals a certain authorial approbation. As in *Howards End*, active verbs, strong adjectives, and short sentences give the impression of profound agency. For instance, when driving the Europeans away, at speed, from the scene of the accident on the Marabar Road, Miss Derek is said to be in 'tearing spirits (p.89).' To be sure, the adjective 'tearing' carries with it the pejorative connotation of destruction but its force nonetheless implies vigour and energy. And so Forster's ostensible intention to foreground Miss Derek's somewhat flighty and reckless disposition is inherently compromised. As we have seen, Forster's letters suggest a certain love of the automobile; one ostensibly eschewed in his fiction—but it is not my intention to suggest that the voice of the approbatory 'other' drowns out the voice of condemnation that that makes itself so persistently and so plainly heard in his fictions—or, indeed, in those of Scott Fitzgerald. As will be argued in a later paper, the two men wrote in the mid-capital era during which proponents of high culture roundly excoriate materialism, technology, and the commercial drive. The preliminary and present papers, though, have considered just one half of the structuralist divide: that which sees the automobile mobilised as a sign of multiple agencies. In the next paper in this series I likewise consider those agencies, but as they

specifically apply to women at the wheel and to the mobilisation of libido more generally.

NOTES

¹ Apropos, in a 1993 interview given by the late Sir Len Southward, founder of New Zealand's famous Southward Car Museum, the then octogenarian noted that prior to 1914 many vehicles has no silencers and were 'terrifically loud' (pers. comm).

² Following correspondence with Rolls-Royce, I discover that the rich cream-yellow paint used on Silver Ghosts in 1922 (the year in which *Gatsby* is set) appears, in muted light, to be a soft green. As I shall discuss in a later paper, this is of profound significance since 'the death car' is identified as both yellow and light green—and as 'new'.

³ In 1907 Felice Nazzaro won the Targa Florio and the prestigious Grand Prix of the Automobile Club de France in a Fiat while Nando Minoia drove a Milan-built machine to victory in Spain. An Italia won the Peking-Paris endurance race of the same year.

⁴ Rolls is the nick-name of Lawrence's driver.

⁵ Fitzgerald had intended to entitle the novel '*The Flight of the Rocket*'. See Fitzgerald: *Letters*, p. 145.

⁶ A full discussion of character determination may be found in Barthes' *S/Z*, pp. 94ff.

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