Paul Goetsch

Motifs and Themes in Modern British and American Poetry

Heinz Kosok, Heinz Rölleke, Michael Scheffel (Hg.)

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Preface

This volume brings together fourteen articles, some previously published, others printed here for the first time. All the studies focus on motifs and themes in modern British and American poetry and examine how these textual elements are employed. By drawing attention to constants, variants, and innovations in the evolution of motifs and themes they pursue three aims: (1) to shed light on the aesthetic and interpretative choices made by individual writers, (2) to describe the authors' debt to, and transformation of, tradition, and (3) to show the significance of motifs and themes in the history of ideas and literature.

I thank Heinz Kosok and his co-editors for accepting the book for Schriftenreihe Literaturwissenschaft. I also thank the WVT team.

I dedicate the volume to Monika and Joachim, Nikoletta and Stefan.

The following articles are here reprinted, with slight revisions, by permission:

"Die Prometheusmythe in der englischsprachigen Literatur nach 1945," in Martin Brunkhorst, Gerd Rohmann, Konrad Schoell, eds., *Klassiker-Renaissance: Modelle der Gegenwartsliteratur* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1991), 31-51.

"Orpheus in Modern British and American Self-Reflexive Poetry," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* (Görres-Gesellschaft), 53 (2012), 381-401.

"Das Kirchenmotiv in der modernen englischen Lyrik," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*, 30 (1989), 281-300.

"Rewriting Wordsworth's 'Westminster Bridge' Sonnet: From Byron and Clough to Hughes and Tomlinson," *LWU*, 43 (2010), 231-43.

"Der Holocaust in der englischen und amerikanischen Lyrik," in Franz Link, ed., *Jüdisches Leben und Leiden im Spiegel der englischen und amerikanischen Literatur* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1987), 165-89.

"Der Fernsehkrieg am Golf: Literarische Reaktionen," in Julika Griem, ed., *Bildschirmfiktionen: Interferenzen zwischen Literatur und neuen Medien* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1998), 117-39.

"Thomas Hardy's Poems on Composition and Inspiration," *Anglia*, 128 (2010/11), 446-66.

"Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poets in the Museum," *Archiv*, 163 (2011), 241-57.

"Das Motiv der leeren Seite in der modernen englischen und amerikanischen Lyrik," *Sprachkunst*, 41 (2010), 283-98.

Introduction

In this volume I discuss various motifs, motif clusters, and themes, their development and their functions. Depending on the evolution of the chosen motifs and themes, 'modern' may refer to the twentieth century or the time since the Romantics or the late-Victorians. Examples will usually be taken from both British and American literature, unless the historical context or the contemporary perspective suggest a more limited approach.

In *Varieties of Literary Thematics* Theodore Ziolkowski speaks of the "interminable debate" about literary thematics and its key terms.[1] I do not wish to enter the debate, but I think that a brief introduction is necessary to clarify the aims of the individual studies. Using Stephen Spender's "The Express" (1932) as an example, I will discuss the terms motif and theme and then describe their relationship to tradition and their functions in the text. Later I will introduce the volume's studies of motifs and themes and sketch their relevance in modern poetry.

Motif, Theme, and Spender's "The Express"

Spender's text is one of many train poems written since the time of Charles Dickens:

> After the first powerful plain manifesto
> The black statement of pistons, without more fuss
> But gliding like a queen, she leaves the station.
> Without bowing and with restrained unconcern
> She passes the houses which humbly crowd outside,
> The gasworks, and at last the heavy page
> Of death, printed by gravestones in the cemetery.
> Beyond the town there lies the open country
> Where, gathering speed, she acquires mystery,
> The luminous self-possession of ships on ocean.
> It is now she begins to sing – at first quite low
> Then loud, and at last with a jazzy madness –
> The song of her whistle screaming at curves,
> Of deafening tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts.
> And always light, aerial, underneath,
> Retreats the elate metre of her wheels.
> Steaming through metal landscape on her lines,
> She plunges new eras of white happiness,
> Where speed throws up strange shapes, broad curves
> And parallels clean like the steel of guns.
> At last, further than Edinburgh or Rome,
> Beyond the crest of the world, she reaches night
> Where only a low streamline brightness

[1] T. Ziolkowski, *Varieties of Literary Thematics* (Princeton 1983), 202. See also Werner Sollors, ed., *The Return of Thematic Criticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

> Of phosphorus on the tossing hill is white.
> Ah, like a comet through flame she moves entranced
> Wrapt in her music, no bird song, no, nor bough
> Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal.[2]

Spender has organized his poem around several motifs, that is, textual elements or imaginative units "based on perception, sensation, and/or feeling (any *Vorstellungseinheit oder Gefühlseinheit*)."[3]As is often the case in poetry, the express mentioned in Spender's title can be regarded as the main motif and it is in turn linked to a number of auxiliary motifs which characterize the train, its movement and the sounds it produces. While these auxiliary motifs are in keeping with a realistic description, other minor motifs such as the references to music and the comparisons to a queen, a ship, and a comet go clearly beyond realistic concerns and articulate the symbolic dimensions of the key motif.

At this point it is instructive to consider the place of Spender's poem in English train literature. In summarizing a number of studies, several tendencies can be distinguished from one another.[4]

(1) Many nineteenth-century texts emphasize the dangers of travel by train, gothicize the experience of the passengers, and worry about the increasing mobility of people and the mingling of the classes.[5] In Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848) the "interior sensations" of Dombey, who mourns the death of his son, and "the external impulses" of his journey act upon one another[6] and make him experience the train's 'music' in a manner quite different from Spender's poem:

> Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal; and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. […] So, pursuing the one course of thought, he had the one relentless monster still before him. All things looked black, and cold, and deadly upon him, and he on them. He found a likeness to his misfortune everywhere.[7]

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2 Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems 1928-1953* (London 1955), 54-55.

3 Theodor Wolpers, "Motif and Theme as Structural Content Units and 'Concrete Universals,'" in Sollors, 80-91, 81.

4 General studies include: Dirk Hoeges, *Alles veloziferisch. Die Eisenbahn – vom schönen Ungeheuer zur Ästhetik der Geschwindigkeit* (Rheinbach-Merzbach 1985); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise: Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (München 1977); Peter Wenzel, Sven Strasen, eds., *Discourses of Mobility – Mobility of Discourse: The Conceptualization of Trains, Cars and Planes in 19th and 20th Century Poetry* (Trier 2010).

5 See Ian Duff, "Appalling Rush and Tremble: On the Metaphorical Use of the Railway," *Critical Dimension*, 3 (1978), 447-63; Elmar Schenkel, "Geisterzüge: über Technik, Spuk und Fortschritt," *Scheidewege*, 38 (2008-9), 275-284; Peter Wenzel, "The Fiery Monster as an Incarnation of Danger and Deceit: The Broadside Ballads from the Early Days of the Railway," in Wenzel, Strasen, 7-24.

6 Duff, 451.

7 Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (Oxford 1987), 281-82.

(2) In other Victorian and early-Edwardian texts the railway is accepted as a promise or a sign of progress.[8] Some writers concentrate on the subjective experience of viewing the environment from a speeding train and emphasize the rapid succession of impressions. W. E. Henley captures this way of seeing in the lines

> A rush of streaming hedges,
> Of jostling lights and shadows,
> Of hurtling, hurrying stations,
> Of racing woods and meadows.[9]

while John Davidson expresses the music of the speeding train as follows:

> O'er bosky dens
> By marsh and mead,
> Forests and fens
> Embodied speed
> It clanked and hurled
> O'er rivers and runnels;
> And into the earth
> And out again
> In death and birth
> That know no pain
> For the whole round world
> Is a warren of railways tunnels.[10]

(3) By World War I, people had become accustomed to trains. Therefore, many poems written subsequently regard railway travel as an ordinary, everyday activity, which allows people to meditate, doze, sleep, observe their fellow passengers, enter into conversation, flirt, or simply look out of the window. Quite a number of poems are called 'view from a train' or 'a window.'[11]

(4) As John Lucas has pointed out,[12] some of these 'view poems' deal with significant discoveries and generalizations. Edward Thomas' "Adlestrop" (1915), for in-

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8 See Alfred C. Heinimann, *Technische Innovationen und literarische Aneignung. Die Eisenbahn in der deutschen und englischen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Bern 1992); Schivelbusch; Hans Ulrich Seeber, *Mobilität und Moderne: Studien zur englischen Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg 2007), 101-17.

9 Quoted from Seeber, 112. See also Turner's painting "Rain, Steam, and Speed"; Ana Parejo Vadillo, John Plunkett, "Railway Passenger, or, The Training of the Eye," in Matthew Beaumont, Michael Freeman, eds., *The Railway and Modernity: Time, Space and the Machine Ensemble* (Bern 2007), 45-67.

10 Quoted from Seeber, 113.

11 See, for instance, poems by Michael Hamburger, Phoebe Hesketh, Cecil Day Lewis, Kathleen Raine, E. J. Scovell, C. H. Sisson.

12 See John Lucas, "Discovering England: The View from the Train," *L&H*, 6 (1997), 2: 27-55.

stance, evokes an image of rural England before the war.[13] In "Autumn Journal" (1938), Louis MacNeice offers a panoramic view of a problem-ridden country, whereas Philip Larkin, in "The Whitsun Weddings" (1958), registers "something of the England of burgeoning town and depleted countryside, of the nation's mixture of industry and rural circumstance."[14]

In "The Express" Spender does not mention any passengers and avoids identifying the English towns and regions the express passes through. Yet he does not entirely break with the dominant contemporary motif pattern. Instead of presenting a panoramic view of England from a window, he identifies with the train's movement in time, its vision of a reality that transcends contemporary society and comes to include both the world and the future. Spender underscores the visionary quality of the journey by elevating the train to a royal personage, a self-possessed ship, a musician, and a comet.

The auxiliary motifs and images that articulate the symbolic or mythic qualities of the train direct the reader's attention to the main themes of the poem. Such themes can be defined as guiding ideas[15] or as "central organizational units of texts."[16] They should not be regarded as mere abstractions, but as "something inherent in some of the motifs and the language used."[17]

In Spender's poem, it is not the train as such that is thematically important but what is suggested by the dictionary meanings of the term 'express': quick travel, unimpeded movement, clear and definite action.[18] In the light of other poems by Spender, the movement of the train first of all symbolizes the process of individual liberation. At the beginning of "The Express," the train starts moving slowly like a self-reliant individual and leaves the worries of the present behind, though "with restrained unconcern." Reaching the open landscape, it picks up speed, moves into "new eras of white happiness," and then enters into the night as if it were a comet flying through the universe. This ecstatic release of pent-up psychic energies may remind the reader of Spender's wish in "The Uncreating Chaos" to overcome despair and open himself to other human beings and the world. Whereas the train in "The Uncreating Chaos," which travels 100 miles an hour, embodies the fear of falling victim to speed, machin-

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13 For a parody, see Patricia Beer, "Do You Remember Adlestrop?" See also Magdalena Cullmann, "A Hundred Years After: The View from the Train as a Glimpse into a Last Idyll in Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop' (1917)," in Wenzel, Strasen, 71-77.

14 Lucas, 53.

15 Wolpers, 89.

16 Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich, *Themes & Motifs in Western Literature. A Handbook* (Tübingen 1987), 241.

17 Wolpers, 89.

18 See Katja Kramer, "Singing with a 'jazzy madness': On the Figurative Language in Stephen Spender's 'The Express' (1932)," in Wenzel, Strasen, 87-95; Richard C. Blakeslee, "Three Ways Past Edinburgh: Stephen Spender's 'The Express,'" *CE*, 26 (1964-5), 556-58.