



J.M.W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway*, 1844 (National Gallery, London)

PUBLIC TRANSPORTED: AN INSIDE NARRATIVE

Until yesterday I thought it virtually impossible, in the age of the TGV, ICE, Pendolino Nuovo, Shinkansen etc., to relive the excitement of the very first railway travellers. So vertiginous — in the region of 10 miles an hour, downhill — was the speed of the new steam locomotives, catapulting them from Darlington to Stockton or from Nürnberg to Fürth, that even when collision, derailment, or boiler explosion could be averted, many a foolhardy passenger would suffer a shock and trauma, and everybody went giddy, and some mad, as the countryside was hurtling past in one great blur.

Yesterday morning, reluctantly, I took the No. 4 bus, at the Chinese pagoda-style bus stop five minutes from here, having just missed the No. 9A passing through my street in Paradies. While the 9A drops you at the opposite end of the university campus, No. 4 goes close to our department, on the way to Insel Mainau, its final destination. Despite this advantage, I usually avoid No. 4, because its bread-and-butter business is to transport gaggles of old-age pensioners to this tourist hotspot, which I find an even more depressing ordeal than being squeezed among droves of smartphone-wielding students on the 9A. A withering branch of the Bernadotte family, claiming distant roots (on the maternal line) in Baden, hold Mainau Island under a long-term

lease, and they have been marketing it as a sort of flower Disney Land in eternal bloom, with the side effect of so polluting the surrounding water that no fish had a chance to survive. Other than busloads of Swedes, every South German middle class family is under a moral obligation to visit these indescribably nondescript horticultural badlands at least once. It caused lifelong trauma when my parents dragged me there at the impressionable age of 6, and ever after I've striven to eradicate those dismal memories of Konstanz in general and Mainau in particular. (It's tough luck I've had to overlook that place, of all places, from my office for some three decades now.)

But I must not digress. Yesterday's No. 4 carried a horde of schoolkids rather than the customary chirpy oldies to Mainau Island. They will have boarded the bus at the train station, and at the pagoda stop I and some others who were headed for the university could hardly get on because neither pupils nor teachers would move away from the doors. It turned out there was a reason. The aisle and seats in the bus's interior, an articulated red Mercedes Citaro (not a Silver Arrow by any means), had vomit all over: not a few young travellers, of either sex, had already been sick on the short hop from the train station to the pagoda. As we flew over the bridge and were winding our route along the *rive droite* and then meandered through suburbia, several others next to me, clinging to the door like sprats desperate for a gasp of fresh air, turned green, and duly informed the cicerone in charge of their outing that they were about to lose their breakfasts, too. Familiar with the terrain, I saw no light at the end of the tunnel, since we were now near the end-of-speed-limit sign and about to hit the home stretch of Mainau Chaussee. I felt some light conversation was called for and genially asked the pedagogue which part of the country they hailed from — presumably it was rural backwaters and what public transport they had must be by bullock cart — but she was too busy rummaging in her rucksack for plastic bags into which her wards could throw up.

Today I'll be on the No. 9A again, among the expert handlers of smartphones at however high speed. I need to rush: it's my office hours, and there will be plenty of clients, since 40 of the 140 who sat the History of English exam last week were informed yesterday that they had failed. They are usually on the 9A, glued to their smartphones while they could study my lecture notes (Would such reading make them sick when in motion?), so perhaps I had better take the No. 4 on my way home ...

