Trains and Ships—Elements of Mobility in Western Culture and Literature[1]

⊙ DING Hongwei
Peking University

Abstract: If our focus is only applied to Western countries, then the concept of "mobility" may bear on such areas as social phenomena, cultural ideas, and literary themes; hence the possibility to examine what the concept contains and how it has evolved in the past from different perspectives, especially with regard to how different authors represent it in their works. With an expansion of our horizon, we may revisit the ideological elements pertinent to "mobility" that mark the dawning moments in Western modernity, such as ideas related to the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the middle class. A further expansion of our view may lead to a longer historical period of Western culture and literature, informed with other elements of mobility. This may enable an interaction between our topic and age-old literary themes, the Ulysses theme as a case in point. Thoughts evolving from such examinations may also enliven our awareness of some obvious differences between Chinese and Western literatures.

Keywords: western culture, literature, mobility

CLC: G0 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2025)02-0059-08

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202502005

The 2023 annual conference of *Foreign Literature* (外国文学, a prestigious Chinese academic journal) was themed "Literature and Mobility." If we narrow our focus to Western culture and literature, it can be said that this theme intersects with some core ideological components. Of course, all literary works, regardless of nationality, depict human activities, but not all activities equate to mobility, which often involves conscious, purposeful journeys over a certain distance, either linear or meandering. It might be said that, at least superficially, the West, especially the Western literary world that runs parallel to the broader modernist trend, seems to readily evoke various depictions of human mobility, along with related ideas and issues. I will further narrow my focus, addressing only the first specific topic presented by the conference, "the definition and evolution of mobility," hoping to re-engage with certain general aspects of Western culture and literature.

The initial conference included a particular emphasis on the invention of the railway. The association of mobility with the railway draws our attention to 19th-century Europe, particularly Britain, for obvious reasons. However, when it comes to 19th-century Britain, some readers might

first think of the novelists' complex relationship with the train, as their ambivalent attitude is a frequently discussed topic in relevant research fields. Charles Dickens privately did not much like trains and sometimes felt fear towards them. Of course, his case was not unique in the British literary world, but as he held such a prominent literary position, let us take him as a representative for now. When discussing Dickens's work with regard to the railway, critics usually quote a passage from Chapter 6 of *Dombey and Son* (1848):

> The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood […] Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable […] carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, moldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream.
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> […]
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> In short, the yet unfinished and unopened railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement. (63)

To sum up, the neighborhood has been demolished, roads blocked, with ruins, trenches, mud, piles of bricks, scaffolding, and cranes everywhere. This scene refers to the construction of the railway from London to Birmingham in 1834, which is depicted by Dickens as a chaotic scene akin to hell.

What we need to focus on is the last two lines of this passage, which contain three key words: progress, civilization, and improvement. These words happen to be the popular words frequently used in the Victorian culture at the time, reflecting the typical optimism believed by some: the railway will continue to extend, unstoppable, because it is related to the "mighty course" of human civilization. With fast means of mobility, society will progress, and life will improve. Dickens uses the buzzwords of his times, with a tone that reveals his teasing and ridicule; he tended to believe the opposite: that once the steam engine started to operate, in the accelerated pace of life, in the roaring noise, in the factors that stir up dreams, the previous more natural state of existence may be disturbed, and human nature may be crushed. Dickens initially started writing *Dombey and Son* in 1846 when he was living in Switzerland. As he was impressed by the tranquil atmosphere of various places in Switzerland, some of his negative memories of the British industrialization were intensified. Before we expand our topic, we might as well use his perspective to glimpse the different implications of the mobility issue, so that we may slightly subvert the blind optimism about progress and improvement.

However, at that time, the above three concepts were not empty words or derogatory terms, and the playful use and ridicule of them by Dickens were probably not intended to really stigmatize them. This is also because typical Victorian literati were good at looking at the same issue from a dual perspective, so the value concepts implied in their words were often more

complex than they appeared at first glance. The three important writers, Thomas Carlyle, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Dickens, had a close personal relationship and influenced each other in thought. The steam locomotive in Dickens's novel is connected to the steam engine depicted by Carlyle, who in his implicit spiritual autobiography *Sartor Resartus* (1836), regarded the society where mechanical civilization, utilitarianism, and money worship prevail as a desolate wilderness. Then it seems that there emerges in the universe a "huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O, the vast gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death!" (151). However, such text appears in the part of "The Everlasting No," which embodies the negative factors, and according to Carlyle's dialectical thinking, where there is "negation," there will be "the negation of negation," so the book will inevitably have a part titled "The Everlasting Yea," showing the revival of spirit and belief, and the social scene in front of us will also become clear. Namely, there are two perspectives: negative and positive.

Being the best representative of this dual perspective, Tennyson is surpassed by no one in British literati in his clear and vivid expression of the coexistence and dilemma of the necessity and absurdity of human mobility. On the one hand, he will show the inevitability and even the necessity of life breaking away from a closed space and embracing change and mobility, with an epic demeanor. On the other hand, he deeply questions the so-called "progress" and sees its illusory nature. Speaking of the former aspect, Chinese readers may immediately think of Tennyson's famous short poem "Ulysses," especially the perfect iambic pentameter at the end of the poem: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." The poem is indeed promoting the idea of a dynamic and unceasing life. The context of the work also shows the opposition between the two forms of life: exploring the outside world and staying at home, so Tennyson implants Ulysses's ambition into the Victorian society, and he may not mind evolving the ancient sails and oars into the steam turbines that drive modern ships. Of course, the treatment of this poem cannot stop at this general interpretation of mobility, which we will skip for now.

Another example is Tennyson's poem "Locksley Hall," which also contains epic-like lines and mentions the train. A few lines in this poem are eye-catching: "Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range, / Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change. / Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day; / Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay" (Tennyson 121). The "ringing grooves" refer to the railway, and the mobility it carries brings changes to human life and can make society more civilized. Therefore, whether it is a train or ship, with especially the process of traveling from west to east, supplemented by the earth's rolling from east to west, it seems that one can experience a rapid change from night to morning, as if running from darkness to light.

"Cathay" in the last line of this quoted piece refers to China. Literally, "a cycle" can also mean "a century" (or sixty years and the entire life span), which is longer than "fifty years." The word "spin" reminds us of the aforementioned "rolling" criticized by Carlyle, but here it becomes the way of heaven, implying that change is better than no change and that longevity is not equal to vitality. Such lines are somewhat harsh, as it seems that before the emergence of modern political correctness, Europeans did not know how to restrain their speech and could easily say offensive words about other civilizations. In the 19th century, China was under the rule of the Qing Dynasty, and roughly since the 18th century, some Western European countries, influenced by travelogues and other records, formed an impression that Qing society was stagnant in all aspects. In addition, what this line refers to cannot equate to Tennyson's own understanding, as this poem is written in

the form of dramatic monologue, and the speaker who says these words is a character in the play. The character fell in love with a girl named Amy, but was finally heart-broken because she fell in love with and married a rich man. So he looked for other spiritual supports, first by comforting himself that Amy is of low character and not worthy of his pursuit, and then turning to the train or the ship, turning to the so-called higher life that is in line with the spirit of the times.

With the plot extending in such a way, the speaker's experience seems to have a typical characteristic of being progressive: infatuation—being abandoned—"going to sea"—grand rhetoric—spiritual redemption. The reason why spiritual redemption is mentioned is that, like the protagonist in *Sartor Resartus*, the speaker in "Locksley Hall" seeks to cheer himself up in his ventures and practical work after experiencing a certain type of disappointment, to show that he is not an ordinary person. Of course, there is a satirical element in this, and it even makes people speculate in reverse whether some people who talk big have been frustrated in love. After all, the sudden shift from Amy's love to the rolling earth representing the grand space is too dramatic, and it seems that even the latter is not enough to alleviate the hidden pain caused by the former. Moreover, the so-called venture, in the era when the narrator was, was often related to the British Empire's trade with the East, and this specific instance of mobility might involve South Asia or East Asia and other regions, and even connect with the opium trade, not all of which can have a noble epic sentiment. However, Tennyson's "man going to sea" looks down on those who make money for the sake of making money, so he adds a spiritual dimension to his own pursuits. Regardless of whether there is an excuse in what the speaker says, Tennyson allows him to express a typical Victorian mindset. In his other works, characters may say words with contrary meanings. Of course, a dual perspective does not mean being on both sides, and like Dickens, Tennyson also has his own ultimate concern.

Mobility in the industrial field is related to spiritual redemption, and once these two are intertwined, what can we think of? Let us broaden our horizons a bit. What we can directly associate with is a kind of Christian ethic: people live in the world and need to be proactive, and they need to prove themselves useful to the family, the country, the individual, and God through practical actions and specific gains. This Christian ethic is exactly what the English phrase "active usefulness" suggests. This ethic is reflected more conspicuously in Puritan doctrines than in the Catholic Church. Puritanism is a branch of Protestantism, and Protestant thought burgeoned quite early; the strength and depth of Protestantism (as well as the Protestant Reformation that leads to its confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church) began in the early 16th century, which also witnessed the rise of the Western modern bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie (or the middle class) holds the value of relying on individuals, and its recognition of human mobility in the secular world reflects the emphasis of Protestantism on individuals. The changes in the economic and social fields seem to find their own support in religious doctrines or in the ideological aspect. This connection is well sorted out and interpreted in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by the German sociologist Max Weber.

Roughly speaking, it is difficult to define the so-called concept of "modernity" that emerged in Europe and America, and different scholars have different spatiotemporal positions for the start of Western modernist thought and culture. But from a broader perspective, the mid-to-late 15th century is also a period when this trend of modernity began to emerge, and mobility, especially individual mobility, became one of the key elements of the concept of "modernity." Protestantism, the bourgeoisie, mobility, modernity—all these words point to loosening of the old restraints in

European society, the tolerance for and the necessity of individual worldly journeys, the possibility of vertical social mobility, and the spiritual dimension behind individual secular journeys. That is to say, at the level of ideas, individuals enjoy more freedom, and can participate more in economic activities, and achieve value in life through specific gains or success. Hence the ethical significance: without mobility, there is no progress, which seems immoral. It is not surprising that there is a famous book from the 17th century that organically integrates Puritan ethics and mobility, *The Pilgrim's Progress* by the British religious writer John Bunyan. In the book, which is often regarded as the so-called simplified version of "the Bible" written in allegory, far-away places are tinged with glory. The protagonist seeks spiritual redemption and consults an itinerant evangelist, who tells him that he needs to leave his original residence and go in the direction of the light, and then will be saved in a holy city. So the protagonist sets off alone, leaving his hometown, not going to church, not going to college, but looking up at the stars, down to earth, and finally passing through a place called Vanity Fair. "名利场" (*mingli chang*) is a common Chinese translation for "vanity fair," but in fact, this fair is a market that sells everything; in terms of age and area, it is equivalent to the concept of the secular world in Christianity. As this fair or market is actually as big as the world, people seeking spiritual redemption cannot bypass it, and only by going through it can they transcend it. This is reason why the heavenly road is also the worldly road.

In this context, without action, there will be no experience and advance. The title itself contains the word "progress," of course. To think that being reclusive is the way to transcendence and that being idle is necessary for keeping the integrity of life, is regarded by some people as a spiritual disease. Some writers in 19th-century Europe did indeed examine similar problems, and even called this disease "mal du siècle" ("the disease of the century"). For example, in the middle of the 19th century, the Russian writer Ivan Goncharov published *Oblomov* (1859), which deals with the typical laziness reflected in the male protagonist. Oblomov is noble but lacks vitality both in his temperament or behavior. The old aristocratic group he represents contrasts sharply with the new mercantile class who are mobile and pragmatic. He would stay at home rather than travel far, and would lie down instead of standing if he could. Being lazy and uncommitted, he spends his time dreaming or meditating, and shows no interest in the world. He even gently refuses his friends' advice of travelling to Paris and other places. He is a good, morally upright person, but ends up becoming a useless person trapped on the sofa and in bed. The word "oblomovshchina" (Oblomov-like habits), which was once a very popular word in cultural communities, is just derived from this story.

Let us change our perspective and further broaden our horizons. The elements of mobility in European culture and literature are not limited to the economic field, nor to any other mobility of specific and pragmatic purposes. Even if we mention the deconstruction of similar behaviors in the literary world, it is not limited to the novels of Dickens and later writers such as Joseph Conrad and others. Trains can help different people, and different ships may have different functions; thus the ocean is of different significance to different people. Therefore, if we adjust the focus to observe human mobility in Western culture and literature, we may see a larger and longer tradition. More than fifty years before the publication of *Oblomov*, the German Romantic writer Novalis also published a novel called *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802). The male protagonist in the novel is a German poet in the late Middle Ages. He left his hometown and embarked on a journey, not for pragmatic purposes, but mainly to meet people and see the world, with a view to appreciating other people's life experiences and spiritual pursuits that he happened to discover during his

journey. But on a deeper level, what drives him to go on is a blue flower he once saw in a dream. This somewhat mysterious blue flower symbolizes beauty, ideals, the sustenance of religious feelings; the object and evidence of poetic thinking; and a higher and romantic living space, thus differing from the goals that modern trends such as pragmatism and rationalism recognize as what humans should pursue. Heinrich even believes that the place with blue flowers is his true home.

Not long ago, I visited the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, where I saw the tombs of the British Romantic poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. These two British poets, who came to Italy one after another from afar, lived in a foreign country before they died there, and their bodies were not repatriated: What type of mobility is this? What is the purpose of this mobility? Is it to find a spiritual home that one considers peaceful? In contrast to Keats's, Shelley's tomb is a bit shabby, without a standing tombstone, and can be easily overlooked by tourists. He liked the Mediterranean and died at sea, drowning when the sailing boat "Don Juan" that he was on was caught in a storm. But it is puzzling that Shelley seemed to refuse the rescue of another ship and also refused to lower the sail (Holmes 1017). Such a maritime disaster reminds us of another person who died at sea, a famous literary figure: Ulysses in Dante's work. Ulysses, or Odysseus in Homer's epic, led his troop back in triumph after the Trojan War. On the way home, he wandered at sea for ten years, taking things as they came, but never missed his goal, and he finally returned to his home on the island of Ithaca in Greece. Dante made a change by making Ulysses's purpose vague, and Ulysses's journey lost its boundary. The journey home became a deliberate journey away from home, and finally, the storm also swallowed his ship. With such a change, an important point in the evolution of the Ulysses theme in Western literature was achieved.

In Canto 26 of "the Inferno" in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, as a young traveler, guided by the ancient Roman poet Virgil, came to the eighth *bolgia* of the eighth circle of hell and saw a group of spirits suffering in the flame, including Ulysses; with the help of Virgil, Dante heard Ulysses tell about his last journey in his life:

> Not fondness for a son, nor duty to an aged father, nor the love I owed Penelope which should have gladdened her, could conquer within me the passion I had to gain experience of the world and of the vices and the worth of men; and I put forth on the open deep with but one ship and with that little company which had not deserted me. The one shore and the other I saw as far as Spain, as far as Morocco, and Sardinia and the other islands which that sea bathes round […] we had entered on the deep passage, when there appeared to us a mountain, dim by distance, and it seemed to me of such a height as I had never seen before. We were filled with gladness, and soon it turned to lamentation, for from the new land a storm rose and struck the forepart of the ship. Three times it whirled her round with all the waters, the fourth time lifted the poop aloft and plunged the prow below, as One willed, until the sea closed again over us. (Sinclair 323–327)

This passage presents Ulysses as a person who does not go home and finally drowns in the Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Africa, in his pursuit of the so-called "mondo esperto" (experience of the world). He pursues experience for the sake of experience, and he straightforwardly says that he wants to seek experience "in the sun's track, of the unpeopled world" (326), with a persistent mind and lofty but insubstantial words, making the purpose of mobility difficult to define. The common ideas of home and life value also have a unique significance here. There is longing, but no

destination, so even if we can find the elements of spiritual pursuit in this Ulysses-style mobility, when comparing it with the pilgrimage in Bunyan's book, we cannot see the holy city with walls and gates as the destination. Dante makes us see the establishment of a tension: on the one side, there is family, livelihood, islands, lands; on the other side, there is individual restlessness, sea, stars, moon, and wandering. The former is safe but boring, the latter attractive yet risky. Dante just let Ulysses choose the latter, and by doing so he also created a character that is obviously against the grain but can be sympathized with in private. Though his version of Ulysses is controversial, it inspired many later writers, including Tennyson who wrote the short poem "Ulysses."

Though both travels on the sea and are related to human mobility, it is quite clear that Ulysses's boat is very different from those British merchant ships in the 19th century. Once the ship and the activity of mobility have different types that symbolize different realms, the ocean and even nature itself cannot present a single aspect. When it comes to the difference between seas, the French thinker Rousseau's two perspectives of the forest can help us further understand the different intellectual threads in Western culture and literature. Rousseau often presents a dual perspective, one rational and pragmatic, the other romantic and transcendent, and thus the forest he sees will also change its form accordingly. Scholars outside China have done a good job of sorting out this issue. First, Rousseau sometimes fails to live up to his reputation as the "natural man," and he views nature from a practical perspective, even claiming "its potential exploitation for social and political purpose" (Harrison 125). Rousseau with this perspective becomes "enlightened," just like other typical Enlightenment thinkers who, at the sight of the forest, would think of resources, management, logging, marketing, and practical uses. However, Rousseau is also different from Enlightenment thinkers, in that he would feel the "original" state of nature in the forest, believing that the forest serves as the "origin" and the "guardian" of the human soul. In this way, the forest becomes a "mysterious" object for "intuitive" poetic thinking, and in turn it needs our protection rather than management (127–128). This mysterious forest is greater than the one as "resource," just like Ulysses's ocean is greater than the ocean in Mr. Dombey's eyes, because the former also carries a primitive, unceasing, boundless desire for mobility, while the latter is narrowed down to a usable waterway. The latter is useful, but we should not neglect the so-called useless usefulness of the former.

Overall, *The Divine Comedy* describes the vertical spiritual journey from hell to heaven. This vertical journey is, of course, a journey of spirit, but it is also a kind of mobility, which is more epic because it promotes the transformation of individual life and soul in a way that does not exist in the world. Throughout the history of Western literature, few successive writers have been able to imitate the vertical mobility as presented in *The Divine Comedy*. Despite this, the Ulysses theme developed by Dante has inspired many writers, generating some equally important literary themes, all related to the mobility of individuals in the world, and all embodying Ulysses's inner "passion" to varying degrees.

Themes such as Don Quixote, Faust, and Don Juan all carry some genes from Canto 26 of *The Inferno*, which can date back to the tradition of Homer. These themes have all developed into their own characteristics, successively exerting their own influence. The thought contained in these branches of literary tradition still exists in the modernist trend, but even so, compared with those trends that have inherited the legacy of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment movement, their role should be more defined as "regulation" or "adjustment," rather than "enhancement" or "confluence."

So far, we have gathered more substantial materials for the discussion of mobility, but it also brings challenges. The human mobility involved in the aforementioned Ulysses and other themes, together with other mobility activities mentioned earlier, such as business travel and pilgrimage, as well as expeditions, migrations, the rescue of a beauty, explorations, wandering, vagrancy, truth-seeking, and the Grand Tour, among others, makes a dynamic, grand, and colorful phenomenon of Western literature. As a result, our thinking about mobility becomes more complex, making it difficult to draw a clear-cut conclusion for the somewhat well-prepared conference speech. Perhaps we might as well stop at this phenomenon of mobility in literature and envisage this dynamic picture in an empathetic way. Indeed, from the ancient epic masterpieces such as *The Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and *The Divine Comedy* to more modern stories like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, some of the most famous literary works in Western history are more or less related to the mobility activities of individual humans. Especially from the perspective of Chinese readers, this phenomenon will be more eye-catching, as its general difference from the typical merit of Chinese traditional literature will be more easily recognizable. We might as well allow ourselves to be a bit superficial, simply listing those familiar foreign literary classics, rethinking those literary characters who have thrown themselves into various journeys, and then we can appropriately ask ourselves: is this phenomenon of mobility in Western literature, which is quite conspicuous, worth more exploration by us? Perhaps with this kind of affective overview and the perspective of comparative literature, we can expect more valuable academic research with acute sensitivity to fundamental problems.

Translated by ZOU Wenxin

Note

1. This paper was originally published in Chinese in *Foreign Literature*, no. 6, 2023, pp. 124–131.

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