

The speed of the train during prayer

P II. 87: He saw the darkening lands slipping away past him, the silent telegraph-poles passing his window swiftly every four seconds

In chapter 2 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus and his father, Simon, were on a train leaving Dublin's Kingsbridge Station. They were travelling "by the night mail to Cork". As Stephen looked out his window, he saw:

the silent telegraph-poles passing his window swiftly every four seconds [...]". This anecdote was repeated when he was praying to himself, making the words "fit the insistent rhythm of the train; and silently, at intervals of four seconds, the telegraph-poles held the galloping notes of the music between punctual bars.

Don Gifford's note in *Joyce Annotated: Notes for Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1982: p. 170) is spot-on:

The standard distance between telegraph poles along railroads in Great Britain and Ireland in the late nineteenth century was sixty yards: therefore a telegraph pole every four seconds meant a speed of roughly thirty miles per hour. The nightmail train from Dublin to Cork (164 miles) took a little over seven hours in the 1890s.



Telegraph poles by a railway line
Freeman's Journal (1885), 17 September p. 9

It is possible, however, to supplement some of the statements Gifford made with contemporaneous documentation, and to provide a parallel context in which a similar observation is made.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle indicates the standard distance between telegraph poles at the time early in his detective story *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*, as Sherlock Holmes was attempting to calculate the speed of the train he and Watson were travelling on. Holmes said:

But the telegraph posts upon this line are sixty yards apart, and the calculation is a simple one.

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes (1894), ch. 1 p. 2



Holmes in discussion with Watson in the railway carriage

Likewise, according to Garnet Wolseley's *The Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service*, published in 1871:

To judge distances accurately is of great importance; every opportunity should be taken of practicing the eye in doing so. Where there are telegraph poles in the direction you wish to know a distance, they are a great assistance, as they are from 50 to 60 yards apart, according to the country. (p. 324)

Additionally, *The Railway Engineer*, published in London in 1908, provides further information on the topic:

The telegraph poles alongside the line, for instance, are usually placed from 60 to 70 yards apart where the road is straight and thus form a ready means whereby the distance travelled by the engine in a given time may be determined," wrote Jas. Hodgson and John Williams. "There are 1,760 yards in a mile, and taking the distance between the poles as 60 yards there will be 29.33 poles fixed to the mile, so that after allowing for slight curvatures or deviations in the road 30 poles

will be a fairly accurate and very convenient unit upon which [sic] the calculations may be based".

Railway Engineer (1908), vol. 29, no. 336, p. 23

The telegraph posts were sixty yards apart in Conan Doyle's story. This gives an average speed of the train as it passes the posts of just over 30.5 mph. It can be assumed with "fairly accurate and very convenient" certainty that the night-train on which Stephen and Simon Dedalus were travelling from Dublin to Cork in the 1890s was moving, at the time of Stephen's prayers, at approximately the same speed.

For some contemporary validation, we can examine timetables for the Dublin-Cork night-train in the 1890s. In 1894 the *express* train service from Dublin to Cork on the Great Southern & Western Railway took 3 hours 47 minutes on its journey (*Thom's Directory*, Advertisements section p. 47), but the night-mail was much slower. In 1897 the evening mail "down train" from Dublin to Cork left at 7.45 p.m. and arrived in Cork at 2 a.m., a time of 6 hours 15 minutes, according to the *Freeman's Journal* of 12 April 1897. This suggests an average speed of 26.25 mph. Allowing to stops and acceleration, it seems reasonable that Stephen's night-mail was travelling at just over 30 mph as it travelled on the open route between Dublin and Cork.

Dylan Emerick-Brown