‘Steam of Consciousness’

Technology and Sensation in Dickens’ Railway Sketches

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> No hurry! And a flight to Paris in only eleven hours!
> —Charles Dickens, “A Flight”[1]

The advent of high-speed passenger railway travel in the mid-nineteenth century radically altered the traveler’s perception of self, other people, and the landscape. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Nicholas Daly, and others have discussed in detail the railway not only rebuilt the landscape, but also altered the contours of Victorian temporal and spatial awareness.[2] Unlike the slow-going stagecoach that rolled along the pre-existing contours of the countryside, trains now cut across terrain with a smoothness, speed, and rectilinearity that divorced the passenger from any perceived connection with his or her surroundings. Journeys that once required days or weeks by stagecoach were accomplished in a matter of hours, and the rapidity of such transport compressed the passenger’s experience of both time and space, leaving the traveler disoriented and unsettled — and more often than not, entranced. Charles Dickens was fascinated by the destabilizing effects brought about by new technologies like the railway, acting sometimes as critic and often as enthusiast. His novel *Dombey and Son* is widely considered to be the “great railway novel” of the nineteenth century.[3] But Dickens’ journalistic sketch of railway travel, “A Flight,” is equally fascinating, even though it and his other railway sketches have received far less critical attention. Though Schivelbusch has conducted a near-encyclopedic account of how the railway “industrialized” human consciousness in the nineteenth century, and Daly has made a compelling case for how railway literature and the “sensation novel” in turn accommodated the passenger to the shocks of modernity, few critics have given "A Flight" close inspection. In fact, Schivelbusch mentions Dickens only in the context of the famous 1865 Staplehurst Railway Crash, in which Dickens occupied the only first-class carriage that did not plunge off a bridge after the rails had been mistakenly removed for repair (the accident and subsequent shock inspired Dickens' famous 1866 short story "The Signal-Man"). Tony Williams briefly highlights "A Flight" in his recent overview of Dickens' relationship to the railway, "Dickens and 'The Moving Age,'" saying that it "gives wonderful description of impressions during a high-speed journey, again identifying the unsettling quality of travel, such a new experience for the time."[4] David Seed, in reference to the sketch as literary form mentions how "A Flight" "uses rapid montage effects to capture the flickering visual impressions on a train journey from London to Paris."[5] John Edmondson's *Dickens on France* and Trey Philpotts' recent essay "Dickens and Technology" provide the lengthiest treatments I've been able to find, and the only ones that examine actual passages from "A Flight" in any detail.[6]

Published in August, 1851 as part of Dickens' weekly journal *Household Words*, "A Flight" narrates the sensations that Dickens experiences on a train (and steamboat) journey from London to Paris.[7] The piece is intriguing from a formal perspective because Dickens writes in a first-person, phenomenological mode throughout, referring directly to the mental and emotional phenomena that spontaneously arise for him on his railway journey.[8] Consequently, the form of the text is dictated by Dickens' stream of consciousness instead of being arranged into a tidy, reader-accommodating narrative account. In this one respect at least, the mid-nineteenth-century sketch form — set on rails and impelled by steam — anticipates the impressionistic turn of modernist writing that renders fragments of linear sensation into lines of literary narrative. Dickens' writing in "A Flight" is at times fluidly continuous, in other places fragmented, with some sections almost telegrammatic in their sparseness or cinematic in their abrupt "jump cuts." His writing is affected by sheer *speed* to such a degree that even tenses become problematic. Ultimately, the experience of "Paris in eleven hours" leaves Dickens' narrator — as it did Victorian railway culture more generally — both alienated and enchanted. Though utterly disoriented by his mechanical translocation, he also discovers himself equipped with a transformed aesthetic that evokes a feeling of euphoria that carries over with him long after he disembarks. Here I want to examine "A Flight" and a few brief selections from Dickens' other railway sketches to see how they represent the novel technological interface of passenger rail travel. One reason why Dickens' sketches of the railway (and especially "A Flight") deserve a particularly close look is because of the sort of reading that they typically do *not* invite. Critics who address the effects of the railway on perception (following the lead of Simmel, Freud, and Benjamin) tend to focus on the experience of trauma, shock, and the anxiety surrounding the potential (or actual) railway accident. As important as such considerations might be they have already been addressed at length by Jill Matus and others, and would at any rate serve little use in reading "A Flight."[9] Instead of focusing on the dangers of rail travel or its role in revealing and creating urban blight (as in *Dombey and Son*), "A Flight" offers something quite different, namely an altered visual and literary aesthetic driven by the speed of steam — an aesthetic that inflects itself in Dickens' innovative narrative form.

"No hurry!" — the injunction of the railway guard to Dickens and his fellow travelers in "A Flight"[10]—might seem an unexpected thing for the Victorian railway traveler to hear. The railway induced speed not just in its carriages but in its passengers. In particular, railway timetables created a sense of constant urgency for fear of missing one's connection (the individual pocket-watch thus functioned like a temporal compass, indispensible for navigating such shifty terrain). The railway station is for

Dickens a picture precisely of such frenetic haste. In a later issue of *Household Words*, Dickens comments on the destabilizing effect of such stations and how individuality is lost to the mass of things in unending motion, calling the Railway Terminus Works "a picture of our moral state."[11] "I have come to the conclusion that the moment Luggage begins to be always shooting about a neighborhood, that neighborhood goes out of its mind."[12] He carries the analogy further by internalizing the effect of all this matter in motion, applying it to his own person and belongings:

> I am convinced that there is some mysterious sympathy between my hat on my head, and all the hats in hat-boxes that are always going down the line. My shirts and stockings put away in a chest of drawers, want to join the multitude of shirts and stockings that are always rushing everywhere, Express, at the rate of forty miles per hour. The trucks that clatter with such luggage, full trot, up and down the platform, tear into our spirits, and hurry us, and we can't be easy.[13]

Once safely secured inside the train, however, the passenger in marked contrast discovers the opportunity for leisure activities like reading and writing.[14] The irony is not lost on Dickens: when the railway guard in "A Flight" repeatedly says "No hurry!" — the railway promises to liberate the harried Victorian traveler by using the very technology that demands that he hurry in the first place. The railway thus paradoxically makes possible not just an escape from the contours of the earth, but an actual "flight from reality."[15]

Once sitting aboard the train as a cramped carriage passenger, Dickens experiences himself primarily in terms of *passivity*. There is literally nothing for him to do that has any bearing on where he is going or how he is to get there:

> I have but to sit here thinking as idly as I please, and be whisked away. I am not accountable to anybody for the idleness of my thoughts in such an idle summer flight; my flight is provided for by the South Eastern and is no business of mine.[16]

Once seated aboard the train the narrator changes from volitional subject into inert object, no longer a mover of his own but merely a body "to be moved." Dickens finds his own actions wholly superfluous, for he needs not "do so much as…flap [his] wings."[17] In *The Railway Journey*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out that as an object among objects, the dependent, inactive passenger finds himself effectively transformed into a piece of freight[18] — or as Ruskin puts it, into "a living parcel."[19] Dickens amplifies the feeling of being turned into a commodity by comparing himself and the other passengers to the produce they carry with them, identifying the passengers' cramped and overheated conditions to that of cucumbers, melons, and pineapples enclosed in a forcing-frame.[20] Isolated in his carriage from the sight (though not the sound) of the forces acting upon him, the passenger performs at best the role of "mere consumer" in the railway's mobile micro-economy of production (steam and labor) and consumption (passenger transport). In "Railway Dreaming," (*Household Words* 10 May, 1856), Dickens comments in a similar vein, "I am never sure of time or place upon a Railroad […] Rattling along in this railway carriage in a state of luxurious confusion, I take it for granted I am coming from somewhere, and going somewhere else. I seek to know no more."[21] In this way, as Karl Marx observed, "production not only creates an object for the subject but also a subject for the object."[22] The interface of the "machine ensemble" (Schivelbusch's term) retrains the human to function as mere freight. John Ruskin elaborates on such perceived losses in a famous critique of the dehumanizing effects of the railway:

> The whole system of railroad travelling is addressed to people who, being in a hurry, are therefore, for the time being, miserable. No one would travel in that manner who could help it – who had time to go leisurely over hills and between hedges, instead of through tunnels and between banks: at least those who would, have no sense of beauty so acute as that we need consult it at the station. The railroad is in all its relations a matter of earnest business, to be got through as soon as possible. It transmutes a man from a traveller into a living parcel. For

> the time he has parted with the nobler characteristics of his humanity for the sake of the planetary power of locomotion. Do not ask him to admire anything. You might as well ask the wind.[23]

Although a passive rider of the rails like Ruskin, Dickens' own experience is more nuanced. He perceives his relationship to the train in conflicting terms, understanding it simultaneously as an extension of himself and as an alienated "other" operating upon him. Even before he begins to move the alienation creeps in with the experience of disembodied sounds with unclear referents: "Something snorts for me, something shrieks for me."[24] However, at the same time he identifies himself with the train's unimpeded forward motion — "something proclaims to everything else that it had better keep out of my way, — and away I go."[25] Because both the sounds and the impetus for forward motion find their source in the engine, not in the carriage, it is almost as if Dickens' conscious, analytic self rides the carriage while his will unconsciously performs the rest, steam-powered and embodied in tons of machinery, metal and track.

Sitting in the railway carriage also alters Dickens' perception of other people. Although the passengers in the carriage do travel in close physical proximity to one another, their behavior bears no resemblance to either pilgrims on the road or to groups traveling by stagecoach — although they face one another they do not interact. According to Schivelbusch, with hearing difficult and their experience of one another limited to shared sights and smells, the carriage passengers simply "did not know what to do with each other." [26] As a result, reading becomes the passengers' coping mechanism for avoiding looking at one another: passengers mimic the train itself in following lines of text as they are blithely conveyed "down the line" and flung across the narrative landscape. Because the other passengers in his carriage never introduce themselves to Dickens (being perhaps unwilling to shout), he fills in epistemic gaps by bestowing his own names upon them. One person is merely a visual/olfactory conjoint: "Tobacco-smoky

Frenchman." Other carriage companions he dubs by way of stereotype: "Monied Interest" or "Demented Traveller" — and considering the form of his writing it should come as no surprise to see the train inhabited by such "sketchy" characters. For others he composes alluring titles out of romantic projections: the supposed actress is "Compact Enchantress," her companion, "Mystery." Dickens refers to the nameless train officials as the "Collected Guard," alluding to his analogy between the train compartment and a cage; at this early stage of the ride the Guard serves only to reinforce the inert and parcel-like nature of the passengers, assuring them repeatedly that there is "Plenty of time…there's no hurry."[27]

As off-putting as Dickens' experience is within the compartment, his experience of the landscape outside the train is even more strikingly alien. The motion of the train is so smooth and projectile-like that it feels to Dickens, as it did to countless other Victorians, as if he is flying — hence the story's title. When the train is about to re-embark, he prepares to "take wing again."[28] Lacking the concrete contact with the ground present in stagecoach journeys, he becomes both temporally and spatially disoriented and doesn't know what to make of the images that rapidly flit by out the window:

> Here we are — no, I mean there we were, for it has darted far into the rear — in Bermondsey where the tanners live. Flash! The distant shipping in the Thames is gone. Whirr! The little streets of new brick and red tile, with here and there a flagstaff growing like a tall weed out of the scarlet beans […] Whizz! Dustheaps, market-gardens, and waste grounds. Rattle! New Cross Station. Shock! There we were at Croydon. Bur-r-r-r! The tunnel.[29]

The rapidity of Dickens' conveyance makes his attempt to "write to the moment" highly impressionistic; narration becomes a string of sketchy outlines rather than a coherently painted world.[30] Note the similar appeal to immediacy in Dickens' railway sketch "Fire and Snow," (*Household Words* 21 January, 1854), an account of a train journey in winter to Wolverhampton, an immediacy he conveys by repeating the word "now": "Now, a smoky village; now, a chimney […] now, a pond with black specks sliding and skating; now, a drift with similar specks half sunken in it throwing snowballs; now a cold white altar of snow with fire blazing on it; now, a dreary open space of mound and fell, snowed smoothly over, and closed in at last by sullen cities of chimneys."[31] In "A Flight," an altogether terser passage reads "Now a wood, now a bridge, now a landscape, now a cutting, now a—Bang!"[32] In employing such narrative compression and repeated "nows" in order to "write to the moment," Dickens is not unprecedented. In a journal recording her experience riding the railway in 1839, Elizabeth King composed a stylistically similar account: "Long stop at Warrington, with steam puffing loudly; afterwards undulating country. Now we pass through a deep cutting—now a tunnel! Now trees flying past!"[33] In an 1852 sketch from "Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England" the experience of the landscape comes likewise compressed and apportioned through "successive gleams," for example, "A market-garden, with rows of early cabbages, and lettuce, and peas; - A field of wheat, in drills as precisely straight, and in earth as clean and finely-tilled, as if it were a garden plant; - A bit of broad pasture, with colts and cows turning tail to the squall; long hills in the back, with some trees and a steeple rising beyond them; - Another few minutes of green bank; - A jerk—a stop. A gruff shout, 'BROMBRO!'"[34] Through the sensations of its riders the railway thus begins to generate its own unique mode of narrative self-representation, one which might punningly be described as "steam of consciousness."

Whereas earlier modes of travel — like the foot, coach, or sailboat — acted mimetically, moving in imitation of the landscape's contours or the direction of the wind, steam and rail in contrast dictate a course of their own, in effect virtualizing the landscape outside the railway carriage. Adding to the de-realizing effects of the rail was the experience of locomotion with no visible source of propulsion. Based on early reports, these effects conspired to make the experience of the railway feel more magical, however, than alienating. For instance, an account from the days of earliest passenger railway in 1830 enthuses that:

> You can't imagine how strange it seemed to be journeying on thus; without any visible cause of progress other than the magical machine, with its flying white breath and rhythmical, unvarying pace, between these rocky walls, which are already clothed with moss and ferns and grasses; and when I reflected that these great masses of stone had been cut asunder to allow our passage thus far below the surface of the earth, I felt as if no fairy tale was ever half so wonderful as what I saw.[35]

It's no surprise, then, that "A Flight" likewise evokes the enchantment of the *Arabian Nights*, with the carriage filling in as flying carpet.[36] Andrew Sanders contrasts such magical imagery with the dreary mundanity of coach travel that Dickens represents elsewhere, noting how *A Tale of Two Cities* for example "captures something of the attendant problems of road travel in the late eighteenth century."[37] Dickens himself, according to Sanders, "long remembered the inconveniences of his earliest journeys to Paris. What had once been a grueling stagecoach journey to Dover, an unsettling sea-crossing by a sailing ship dependent on winds and tides, and finally a tiresome, dusty overland journey to the capital by French diligence was, by the 1850s, a matter of smooth transition from train to steamship to train."[38] In "A Flight" Dickens notes how the train eradicates countless unpleasant details of the coach-experience:

> What has the South Eastern done with all the horrible little villages we used to pass through, in the *Diligence*? What have they done with all the summer dust, with all the winter mud, with all the dreary avenues of little trees, with all the ramshackle postyards, with all the beggars (who used to turn out at night with bits of lighted candle, to look in at the coach windows), with all the long-tailed horses who were always biting one another […] Where are the two-and-twenty weary hours of long hot day and night journey, sure to be either insupportably hot or insupportably cold? Where are the pains in my bones, where are the fidgets in my legs…?[39]

But even here Dickens proves ambivalent. Tony Williams points out a passage from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (worth quoting at length) that paints a far more congenial — indeed, dreamlike — picture of stagecoach travel:

> What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly-moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses' bells, the occasional smacking of the carter's whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers jogging past on little short-stepped horses—all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! The very going to sleep, still with an indistinct idea, as the head jogged to and fro upon the pillow, of moving onward with no trouble or fatigue, and hearing all these sounds like dreamy music, lulling to the senses—and the slow waking up, and finding one's self staring out through the breezy curtain half-opened in the front, far up into the cold bright sky with its countless stars, and downward at the driver's lantern dancing on like its namesake Jack of the swamps and marshes, and sideways at the dark grim trees, and forward at the long bare road rising up, up, up, until it stopped abruptly at a sharp high ridge as if there were no more road, and all beyond was sky… [40]

Contrast such languorousness of description with Chapter Twenty from *Dombey and Son* in which Dombey travels by railway from Euston to Birmingham. Whereas the "soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling" in the coach passage above lulls the reader in its smooth and prolonged cadences, the passage from *Dombey and Son* uproots and jolts the reader in its staccato form and adjectival sparseness. In Williams' words, it "captures the rhythms of the train as it sweeps through the countryside. The language bristles and crackles; the disorientation is exposed; the whirl and vision presented to us is the finest piece of early railway poetry I know."[41]

> Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, burrowing among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, flashing out into the meadows for a moment, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through

> the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock, among objects close at hand and almost in the grasp, ever flying from the traveller, and a deceitful distance ever moving slowly within him: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death![42]

The repetition of verbal nouns like "flashing," "mining," "booming," and "bursting" manifest the steam train's dynamism and energy — the passage demands to be read aloud for one to hear the parallelism[43]—as if this phenomenon of the railway cannot be accounted for either by verb or noun, but only as a technolinguistic hybrid of the two.

In *Dombey and Son*, the narrator described the landscape as "ever flying from the traveller." Likewise, when the narrator of "A Flight" attempts to convey his encounter with the surrounding terrain, he comes face-to-face with the problem of narrative perspective while being "always in motion." Even as he writes he discovers that his signifiers temporally misrepresent what they had intended to signify; before he can complete his sentence, "here we are" must become "there we were" because of the inexorable rush of time and space induced by the speed of the railway. In this respect train travel amplifies the experience of *différance.* Because of speed-induced temporal deferral, Dickens palpably feels the inability of his words to stick to durable referents — and he must as a result continually revise his wording in an effort to evoke immediacy — and by the time he does so, the referent has vanished behind him, ever ungrasped by his language.[44] In short, railway travel exceeds the speed of narrative representation — but rather than feel thwarted by this steam-driven manifestation of the technological sublime, Dickens chooses to represent his very inability to represent. To cope with an onslaught of stimuli rushing around him Dickens conveys the rapidity of his sensory impressions not only with the repeated word "now" as discussed above, but also by conveying such sensations *as sensations.* He conveys sonic and visual imagery using both onomatopoeia—"Flash!" "Whirr!" "Whizz!" "Rattle!" "Shock!" "Bur-r-r-r!"—and simple enumeration: "corn-sheaves, cherry orchards, apple-orchards, reapers, gleaners, hedges, gates"[45] or "Ramparts, canal, cathedral, river […] open country, river, earthenware manufactures, Creil."[46] Because there is no time for him to fully assimilate (let alone describe) the space through which he travels, he instead catalogs it. Of all his senses, the only one that is neither inoperative nor utterly overwhelmed is the visual. He becomes in essence no more than an eye, barraged by an unremitting stream of images that render the landscape in terms of its barest generalities and its primary qualities of size, shape, quantity, and motion.[47] Like the brushwork in J.M.W. Turner's proto-impressionistic oil painting "Rain, Steam, and Speed—the Great Western Railway" (first exhibited in 1844), Dickens sketches his train-mediated landscape wholly in outline. The recurrence in *Dombey and Son* of "through the fields," "through the corn," "through the hay" had likewise underlined not only the railway's repetitive chug but the abstraction of the landscape it produces. Though much of Dickens' travel occurs through the countryside, prominent features of the pastoral narrative — attention to secondary qualities such as color, smell and texture, for example — become overrun by the onrush of sense data if they have not already been eradicated by the truncation or saturation of all senses but the visual. Contrast Dickens' monochromatic sensory experience with the vivid sensuousness portrayed by the speaker's reverie in George Eliot's roughly contemporary (1860) novel *The Mill on the Floss* (the passage is worth quoting at length):

> A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships—laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks […] are borne along […] Far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures, and the patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn […] As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water here among

> the withes, unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above.
>
> The rush of the water, and the booming of the mill, bring a dreamy deafness…[48]

If the same landscape had presented itself to Dickens' speeding railway carriage it is probable that he would have of necessity condensed it, generalized it, and enumerated it as something like "plain, banks, tide, ships, pastures, crops, stream, trees, waterfowl, mill." If Eliot's narrator is guilty here of a kind of "affective fallacy" by depicting the landscape in terms of her own emotional responses to it, the railway-journey should perhaps in turn be held culpable for an inverse "fallacy of affectlessness" that occurs when a landscape's infinite facets are reduced to a descriptively barren catalog.

Dickens' railway journey results not only in a fragmented *mode* of perception, but also leads him to depict the *objects* of his perception as being themselves fragmentary. The Parliamentary train rushes by not "full of people" but as a "crowd of heads and faces…and some hats, waving"[49] — all body parts and accessories. At his first French railway-stop, Dickens uses synecdoche to describe Demented Traveller's rescue by railway officials, referring to the rescuers as "two cocked hats."[50] He relates his encounter at another station similarly, in terms of "uniforms, beards, moustaches."[51] Railway travel has produced in Dickens a kind of "gestalt switch" wherein his perception becomes governed by metonymic patterns — specifically, the perception of parts to the exclusion of the wholes to which they belong. In a similar manner, Dickens projects properties onto the objects he encounters that are properly a function of his own carriage-situated perspective. Like many other riders of the time, he perceives the motion of the train as the motion of the landscape itself[52], insisting more than once that "Everything is flying"[53] — including in his account such wonderful absurdities as "four flying cows."[54] By ascribing motion to the objects of his perception rather than to himself and the train, Dickens further reinforces the impression of his own parcel-like passivity: "The hop-gardens turn gracefully towards me, presenting regular avenues of hops in rapid flight, then whirl away. So do the pools and rushes, haystacks, sheep…"[55] Visually, the railway journey transforms the world from static diorama — a stable, well-ordered image that invites the inspecting gaze — to moving panorama, an all-encompassing view that avails only glimpses at the finer details as they slide quickly out of view. Through such effects, nineteenth-century vision becomes, in Jonathan Crary's words, "inseparable from transience."[56] One of the risks of this mode of perception echoes Marx's critique of commodity fetishism: the carriage window provides a frame that, like distance, "lends enchantment to the view."[57] Such visuals carry with them a quaintness and charm that only become possible when treated as "scenery" divorced from the material conditions required to bring them about. Thus, "it is 'the travelers by express train' who see the illuminated factories as 'Fairy palaces,' a sort of naïve vision only possible from a distance, and only on the fly."[58]

However striking these passages might be from a narrative perspective, they are all examples from railway *sketches*, and as such, one might wonder to what degree they are informed by the sketch form itself as opposed to being shaped by sensations specific to railway travel. Certainly, significant aspects of Dickens' railway sketch "A Flight" are representative of the nineteenth-century sketch form more generally. The term "sketch," as Kristie Hamilton points out, itself draws not only from the form of visual media (e.g., "pencillings," "outlines," and "lights and shadows") but also digressive subject matter such as "scenes," "sights," and especially "incidents."[59] Perhaps most salient to the context of the railway and speed are the "brevity and ephemerality" of the sketch, which in Hamilton's words make it a form "consonant with an age that was perceived to be marked by a new momentum, a new pace, in which one must see quickly and write with haste, offering 'dashes,' 'jottings,' 'peeps,' 'glances,' and 'glimpses.'"[60] As such, sketches are, in Hamilton's words, "Pretexts for modernity"[61] and hence not a form easily disentangled from its social and technological context.[62] Moreover, the speed-intoxicated railway sketch of "A Flight" incarnates not only Whitman's "type of the modern" but through its form would seem to anticipate several crucial aspects of *modernism*. Aestheticizing concrete, everyday experience in everyday language for instance anticipates imagism. Depicting one's fragmentary perceptions of phenomena in a fragmented style—bracketing out "the things themselves" in favor of conveying the immediacy of sensation—anticipates the phenomenological turn of literary impressionism and stream-of-consciousness narration. (Like an impressionist painting, the literary sketch is mimetic not of the world, but of one's patchy, situated *awareness* of the world in all its flux and ephemerality.[63]) And of course, relishing the thrill of metal in motion is taken up over half a century later by Marinetti and other speed-hungry Futurists. Moreover, the reader of "A Flight" finds himself confronted with passages that, like high-modernist texts, challenge one's ability to even make sense of what he reads. In encountering fragments and enumerations rather than fleshed-out descriptions in Dickens' sketch, the *reader* is put into a position much like that of the bewildered *rider* of the railway. Confined to a pre-defined "line," he seeks to make sense of a whirl of images that flash past his eyes without ever receiving the details needed in order to make sense of the "whole picture." Note for example how Dickens couples indistinct visual impressions and temporal qualifiers to convey technologically-induced uncertainty as the train exits a tunnel: "After long darkness, pale fitful streaks of light appear. I am still flying on for Folkestone. The streaks grow stronger—become continuous—become the ghost of day — become the living day — became I mean."[64] Each line of text, like the railway, confines and tantalizes through its narrow purview. (As

Hamilton explains, the sketch does not "foreclose interpretive possibilities" — unlike "the finished picture"[65]). The effect upon the reader is part of what Schivelbusch calls the "industrialization" of nineteenth-century consciousness. Like the sensation drama and the sensation novel[66], the sketch form itself trains Victorian readers how to become moderns: "by reconstructing brevity of parts as a literary norm, writers foreshortened the time it took not only to relax but also to know. By making discontinuity a literary convention, sketch writers diminished the shock of the perception of constant change. The sketch must be understood […] within the history of modernity."[67] By regularly reading weekly journals like *Household Words*, whose self-proclaimed focus was the "extraordinary condition" of "looking forward or *progress*"[68], the reader naturalizes technological acceleration. "The literary sketch was instrumental, then, in generating a cultural consensus about what constituted the everyday life of a nation while expanding the literary market to meet the demands of a mass readership. …the sketch had prepared the reading public to accept as ordinary the fragmented and diverse experiences and identities that now constituted their inner and outer worlds."[69] In the nineteenth century, evanescence, as Schivelbusch points out, becomes an everyday expectation.[70] Through habit, rail becomes a Heraclitean real in which everything is in flux.

In light of the above it might be tempting to conflate the sketch form in general with the hyper-abbreviated textuality and ephemerality of sensation represented in railway sketches like "A Flight." But the terseness, immediacy, and evanescence found in the railway sketch inscribe their own peculiar signature on the narrative landscape in ways absent from other sketch-contexts. For instance, in another sketch of Dickens' from *Household Words*, "Our Watering Place," (2 August, 1851), Dickens describes a fishing village and his "lazy inclination to sketch its picture" while taking leisure there.[71] One particular selection is worth reading in full to get a feel for how much this sketch differs from "A Flight," which he published later that same month in the very same journal:

> The place seems to respond. Sky, sea, beach, and village, lie as still before us as if they were sitting for the picture. It is dead low-water. A ripple plays among the ripening corn on the cliff, as if it were faintly trying from recollection to imitate the sea; and the world of butterflies hovering over the crop of radish-seed are as restless in their little way as the gulls are in their larger manner when the wind blows. But the ocean lies winking in the sunlight like a drowsy lion—its glassy waters scarcely curve upon the shore—the fishing-boats in the tiny harbour are all stranded in the mud—our two colliers (our Watering Place has a maritime trade employing that amount of shipping) have not an inch of water within a quarter of a mile of them, and turn, exhausted, on their sides, like faint fish of an antediluvian species. Rusty cables and chains, ropes and rings, undermost parts of posts and piles and confused timber-defenses against the waves, lie strewn about, in a brown litter of tangled sea-weed and fallen cliff which looks as if a family of giants had been making tea here for ages, and had observed an untidy custom of throwing their tea-leaves on the shore.[72]

Crucially different details emerge in this sketch made in "lazy" repose and with a sauntering gaze. Even if the details remain "sketchy," the pen takes time to not only linger, but ruminate on a world that languidly reveals itself more as diorama (if not "still life") rather than moving panorama. The stillness of the landscape invites the narrator to jointly inhabit the space of the objects he describes and to ascribe unique internal motivations to each of them: the rippling corn moves "as if it were faintly trying from recollection to imitate the sea," and the butterflies are "restless in their little way as the gulls are in their larger manner." In marked contrast, the flash of the retreating landscape in the railway sketch implies motion, but not self-impelled action: dynamism but not animism. But here the ocean is personified — indeed, "The place seems to respond," for it "lies winking" like "a drowsy lion." Likewise, the quiescence of the landscape and the stability of the sketch-artist's vantage point create the space — and critically, the *time* — for artful comparisons, revealing the two colliers not synecdochically but rather metaphorically: "like faint fish of an antediluvian species." Instead of merely being catalogued, the "Rusty cables and chains, ropes and rings" are likewise substantive enough to warrant extended metaphors rather than shorthand prose: the area looks "as if a family of giants had been making tea here for ages, and had observed an untidy custom of throwing their tea-leaves on the shore." The invocation of giants moreover suggests a re-enchanted landscape, animated by inscrutable impulses of its own rather than having motion flung upon it by the impulse of steam. Although this non-locomotive sketch in "Our Watering Place" resembles the railway sketch in its account of experiences via personally situated "jottings" and "scenes," it lacks the railway sketch's compression and urgency. For that reason, such sketches lose some of their impressionistic quality because the author's own impress pushes back so much onto the scene, ascribing conjectured figural relations to the objects of sensation within it. Thus, if phenomenology is understood as the *pre-reflective* experience of the world as it enters one's immediate awareness, then the *railway* sketch (and not just the sketch itself) becomes a hallmark of phenomenological representation, for it does not give the rider (or writer) the time required for reflection in the first place. (Consider in contrast how the nineteenth-century novel could compress years into only a few lines!) Of course, taken at its word this view might seem naïve, for it supposes that what we read in "A Flight" is an unmediated account of Dickens' sensations rather than an artfully contrived narrative account (which, of course, it is). Other efforts to "write to the moment," however — as happen in dramatically interrupted diary entries in epistolary novels like *Pamela* or *Frankenstein* — often feel forced, if not outright laughable. Dickens' attempt to "write to the moment" in the railway sketch in contrast feels plausible, probably partly because of its subject matter and partly because of its "humble" journalistic and quasi-documentary origins, which permit a linguistic rawness that rarely found its way into the nineteenth-century novel.

Both Dickens' alienation and his rapt fascination in "A Flight" result from the railway's "annihilation of space and time," the well-known nineteenth-century trope for the effect of the railway on sense experience. The train's speed compresses both time and space, and because the passenger feels no relation to the outside of the compartment (apart from a stream of visual impressions) he experiences himself as being in fact "nowhere."[73] The journey is defined solely in terms of its destination, with no localizable "in between" to fixate upon or orient oneself by. As Trey Philpotts points out, when the traveler arrives at a new station he finds "Everything the same except the name," further abstracting his sense of geographical space.[74] Even the landscape becomes reduced to abstract categories. When in "A Flight" Dickens' journey resumes after a stop, the next line repeats the very same list of landscape features he had listed two pages before (corn-sheaves, apple-orchards, cherry-orchards, reapers, gleaners, etc.) — except altering the order in which they are listed.[75] Despite such apparent experiential losses, for Dickens, this speed-driven "annihilation" is perceived as not just alienating but exhilarating. Although the potential of disaster does lurk in the very back of his mind—"a bugle, the alarm, a crash! What is it? Death? No, Amiens"[76] — his spatial and temporal disorientation evoke more euphoria than angst: "There is a dreamy pleasure in this flying. I wonder where it was, and when it was, that we exploded, blew into space somehow.…What do I care?"[77] (Perhaps his metaphor of the carriage as a flying cage provides an illusion of security from high-speed impact?) Dislocated in the French countryside, he asks himself where England lies and when he was last there — to which he languidly replies, "about two years ago, I should say."[78] Having at last arrived in Paris, he stares in disbelief: "I have overflown myself, perhaps, but I can't believe it. I feel as if I were enchanted or bewitched […] Surely, not the pavement of Paris?"[79] Having disembarked, his depiction of Paris is telling because such detail of description was missing from his prior travelogue while sequestered in the train-carriage:

> The crowds in the streets, the lights in the shops and balconies, the elegance, variety, and beauty of their decorations, the number of the theatres, the brilliant cafés with their windows thrown up high and their vivacious groups at little tables on the pavement, the light and glitter of the houses turned as it were inside out, soon convince me that it is no dream; that I am in Paris, howsoever I got here.[80]

Although he is at last on his feet again, the experience of the journey does not end with his arrival. It infects his interactions with Paris in a manner both disorienting and enjoyable. "I walk up to the Barrière de l'Etoile, sufficiently dazed by my flight to have a pleasant doubt of the reality of everything about me…"[81]

Dickens' speed-induced exhilaration puts him on the cusp of apprehending railway travel on its own terms as a method of transport requiring a new mode of perception, rather than exclusively in terms of alienation or loss. Schivelbusch relates that for those who have assimilated railway travel into their consciousness, "the velocity and linearity with which the train traversed the landscape did not destroy it"[82], but rather enriched it. As Philpotts points out, such technologically-driven modes of representation are derived more generally from "new insights into the fluid nature of material reality itself"[83] that emerged in the nineteenth century — namely "solid matter," in Lewis Mumford's words, reconfigured as "flowing energy."[84] Dickens appears to *enjoy* the rapidity of the railway journey and his consequently transformed awareness; he revels in it, both during and after his actual time on the railway, experiencing a euphoric altered state of consciousness (his "dreamy pleasure" reminds one of the emerging recreational use of nitrous oxide at the time!). Emerson had complained that "dreamlike" train travel reduced passing towns to "pictures on the wall" that "make no distinct impression."[85] Ruskin likewise equated the railway with lament for lost pathways of experience, a denial of the leisure that the foot or even coach would maintain. But in "A Flight," Dickens ultimately does not apprehend such a transformation of the landscape as a reduction or loss. Philpotts considers such a seemingly-technophilic response characteristic of Dickens: "Typically, Dickens desires to have it both ways: to acknowledge the dark side of industrialization and technological innovation, but also to promote a more positive outlook, one that accords with his general optimism and personal buoyancy."[86] To be sure, when riding the railway, crisply delineated, multi-sensory pastoral imagery may indeed be no more, but it has not been erased but rather replaced — with a new visual and literary aesthetic characterized by flashing fragments, the sensation of flying, blur and whirr. Dickens has been *transported*, both in body and in spirit, the railway functioning both as machine and as flying carpet. This perhaps should be no surprise, for (as Arthur C. Clarke put it), "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." [87] For Dickens, the railway journey's machine-driven compression of time and space is a disorienting, alienating, and ultimately enrapturing bewitchment:

> So, I pass to my hotel, enchanted; sup, enchanted; go to bed, enchanted; pushing back this morning (if it really were this morning) into the remoteness of time, blessing the South Eastern Company for realizing the Arabian Nights in these prose days, murmuring as I wing my idle flight into the land of dreams, "No hurry, ladies and gentlemen, going to Paris in eleven hours. It is so well done, that there really is no hurry."[88]

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[1] Charles Dickens, "A Flight," *Selected Short Fiction,* Deborah A. Thomas, ed. (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1983), 143.

[2] See especially Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), and Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[3] Not all scholars agree. Ian Carter, for instance, argues that the role of the railway in *Dombey and Son* is overstated, for it contains only "eight great pages" on the railway (out of more than 800 total in the novel). See Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 71.

[4] Tony Williams, "Dickens and 'The Moving Age,'" *Gresham College*, 13 November 2006, http://www.gresham.ac.uk/printtranscript.asp?EventId=520.

[5] David Seed, "Touring the Metropolis: The Shifting Subjects of Dickens's London Sketches," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 34, Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing (2004), p. 161.

[6] See John Edmondson, *Dickens on France*, (New York: Interlink Books, 2007), 1-4, and Trey Philpotts, "Dickens and Technology," *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. David Paroissien, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 199-215.

[7] "A Flight" originally appeared in *Household Words* 3:75 (August 30, 1851), 529-533. *Household Words* was a two-pence weekly journal that began 30 March, 1850. Michael Slater, editor of the multi-volume *Dickens' Journalism* (of which selections from *Household Words* comprise Volume 3), describes it as a mix of "high-grade fiction (it included the first installment of a serial by Mrs Gaskell), occasional poetry, biographical-historical pieces, and articles about many different aspects of life in London together with others relating to topical social issues such as emigration to Australia" (xi). The masthead declared it to be "Conducted"—that is, guided by a "hands on" editor—"by Charles Dickens," a huge selling point (Slater xi).

[8] For convenience, I take the liberty of referring to Dickens' nameless first-person narrator here as "Dickens," though of course he comprises a literary persona distinct from the author.

[9] See for example Jill Matus, "Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection," *Victorian Studies* (Spring 2001), 413-436; Ralph Harrington, "The Railway Accident: Trains, Trauma, and Technological Crises in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*, ed. Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Peter W. Sinnema, "Representing the Railway: Train Accidents and Trauma in the 'Illustrated London News,'" *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), 142-168.

[10] Dickens, "A Flight," 143.

[11] "An Unsettled Neighborhood," 11 November, 1854. Charles Dickens and Michael Slater, *'Gone Astray' and Other Papers from Household Words, 1851-59* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 247.

[12] Dickens and Slater, 245.

[13] Dickens and Slater, 247.

[14] Michael Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 82.

[15] Philpotts, 208.

[16] Dickens, "A Flight," 143.

[17] Dickens, "A Flight," 143-144.

[18] Schivelbusch, 54.

[19] John Ruskin, *The Lamp of Beauty* (London: The Electric Book Company, 2001), 166.

[20] Dickens, "A Flight," 142.

[21] Dickens and Slater, 370.

[22] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth Eng.: Penguin, 1993): 92, quoted in Schivelbusch, 164.

[23] Ruskin, 165.

[24] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[25] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[26] Schivelbusch, 67.

[27] Dickens, "A Flight," 143.

[28] Dickens, "A Flight," 145. Schivelbusch (78) points out that the image of a winged wheel was a standard visual icon and trademark for railway travel in the nineteenth century.

[29] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

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[30] The term "writing to the moment" was coined by eighteenth-century novelist Samuel Richardson, who used it to designate the effect of seemingly "present tense" representation in the diary form. Both action and writing are depicted as happening together simultaneously, creating a feeling of heightened immediacy (and sometimes outright urgency) in the reader, who gains intimate access to not only actions in the world but to the innermost thoughts of the narrator. More generally, it can account for the incursion of present-day feelings into narrated reflections on earlier life, as in autobiographical novels like *Robinson Crusoe*. See John Mullan, "Feelings and Novels," *Rewriting the Self*, ed. Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 130.

[31] Dickens and Slater, 192.

[32] Dickens, "A Flight," 145.

[33] Quoted in Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium: 1660-1886, The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 209.

[34] Quoted in Jennings, 248.

[35] Quoted in Jennings, 174.

[36] Dickens, "A Flight," 151.

[37] Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens* (Oxfordshire: Oxford University Press, 2003), 168.

[38] Sanders 168.

[39] Dickens, "A Flight," 150.

[40] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003): 280, quoted in Williams, n.p.

[41] Williams, n.p.

[42] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*. (Oxfordshire: Oxford University Press, 2001), 298.

[43] Listen to a recording of Tony Williams' lecture at Gresham College, "Dickens and the 'Moving Age'" for a stirringly rhythmical rendition of this passage. *Gresham College* (13 November 2006, http://www.gresham.ac.uk/printtranscript.asp?EventId=520)

[44] Of course, even if the train were stopped, it does not follow that the world outside would suddenly become "graspable" by Dickens' language, either. But the *semblance* of such "graspability"—as evinced by the exhaustive world-building mimetics of nineteenth-century novels like those of Dickens—might however present an *illusion* of stability in the feigned completeness of novelistic representation (as opposed to, say, the mere outlines offered by the literary sketch). To further pursue the finer points of poststructuralist critique here would, however, take us too far afield.

[45] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[46] Dickens, "A Flight," 149.

[47] See Schivelbusch, 55.

[48] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

[49] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[50] Dickens, "A Flight," 148.

[51] Dickens, "A Flight,"149.

[52] Schivelbusch, 60.

[53] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[54] Dickens, "A Flight," 145.

[55] Dickens, "A Flight," 145.

[56] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 21, quoted in Hamilton, 137.

[57] Freeman, 81.

[58] Philpotts, 207.

[59] Kristie Hamilton, *America's Sketchbook: The Cultural life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 3.

[60] Hamilton, 3.

[61] Hamilton, 132.

[62] In examining cultural and technological contexts for the literary sketch, one might also consider the timing for the publication of "A Flight"—August 1851. This date occurs in the middle of the first major World's Fair, the "Great Exhibition" in Hyde Park, London, which ran from 1 May to 15 October 1851 (the full name was the "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations"—a celebration of technological "progress." See Sabine Clemm, *Dickens, Journalism, and Nationhood* [New York: Routledge, 2009], 16-47, for a detailed account of Dickens' response to it and the reaction in *Household Words*.) Though Dickens personally grumbled about the Exhibition's self-satisfied tone (not to mention the

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crowds and the noise), like the Exhibition, *Household Words* was oriented around "the progress of mankind" and devoted several articles to the Exhibition itself (Clemm 28-29). Though Dickens was skeptical about the unbridled, commodity-based technological optimism represented at the Exhibition, he was more sanguine about technology's practical usefulness to common people, particularly through the train. In Sanders' words, "To Dickens's mind, the railway exemplified beneficent change" (168)—which could perhaps in part account for the concurrent timing of "A Flight" in *Household Words* with that of the Great Exhibition. Ruskin went further in his assessment of Dickens' alleged technophilia, considering him "a pure modernist—a leader of the steam-whistle party *par excellence*" (qtd. in Sanders 157).

[63] The mimetics of speeding awareness finds literary precedent at least as far back as Laurence Sterne's 1759 novel *Tristram Shandy*, whose narrator attempts to represent his own wildly digressive form of thought through linear strings of words. The results, like Dickens' railway narration, are experimental in form and dizzyingly euphoric to read.

[64] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[65] Hamilton, 4.

[66] Daly, 7.

[67] Hamilton, 134.

[68] Philip Collins, "W. H. Wills' Plans for *Household Words*," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 8 (1970): 33-46, quoted in Philpotts, 200.

[69] Hamilton, 149.

[70] Schivelbusch, 64.

[71] Dickens and Slater, 11.

[72] Dickens and Slater, 11.

[73] Schivelbusch, 53.

[74] Philpotts, 207.

[75] Dickens, "A Flight," 146.

[76] Dickens, "A Flight," 149.

[77] Dickens, "A Flight," 144.

[78] Dickens, "A Flight," 148.

[79] Dickens, "A Flight," 150.

[80] Dickens, "A Flight," 150-151.

[81] Dickens, "A Flight," 151.

[82] Schivelbusch, 59.

[83] Philpotts, 209.

[84] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), quoted in Philpotts, 209.

[85] Schivelbusch, 52.

[86] Philpotts, 214.

[87] Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future* (New York: Popular Library, 1977). The phrase is known as "Clarke's third law."

[88] Dickens, "A Flight," 151.