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**The Railway as a Gothic Space in
Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and *The
Signal-Man***

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Introduction

The railway is commonly remembered as one of the most powerful symbols of nineteenth-century progress. Perhaps more visibly than any other technological innovation of the Victorian age, it embodied the promises of speed, connection, economic expansion, and mastery over space and time. It reorganised cities, transformed habits of travel and communication, and appeared to offer a new model of modern life based on movement, regularity, and efficiency. Yet, from its very beginnings, it also generated anxiety, as it cut through landscapes, altered territories, exposed passengers to new forms of danger, transformed perception, and revealed the fragility of a world increasingly dependent on machines, timetables, signals, and technical systems. This thesis takes this ambivalence as its point of departure, considering the railway both as a structure of modernity and as an uncanny space.

My interest in this subject stems from both literary and personal motivations. I have always been drawn to horror stories, not only in cinema but also in literature, and I have long been fascinated by the way fear can emerge from ordinary spaces rather than from settings traditionally associated with terror. At times, unease arises precisely where life appears most organised, rational, and controlled. The railway is one such space, since it belongs to the everyday world of travel and social exchange, yet in nineteenth-century literature it is often associated with anxiety, violence, disorientation, fatality, and spectral presence. This literary motivation is accompanied by a personal dimension. My father worked as a train conductor, and this biographical connection has made the railway more than an abstract object of analysis. In this sense, it has always belonged to my family history and imagination, not only as a means of transport but also as a place of work and responsibility. At the same time, my perspective has been shaped by the construction of a high-speed railway line in the area where I live. Seeing the landscape torn apart, fenced off, and reorganised in the name of speed has made the nineteenth-century railway seem less distant than it might initially appear. The subject of this thesis is therefore not merely a remote historical topic, but is connected to a lived awareness of the ways in which infrastructures enter landscapes and everyday experience.

This study focuses on the representation of railway modernity in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and *The Signal-Man*. The central question guiding the

analysis is how Dickens transforms the railway into a Gothic space, understanding this category not as a simple repertoire of archaic images, ruined settings, or supernatural presences, but as a form capable of expressing the anxieties generated by technological modernity. The interpretative hypothesis proposed here is that the railway acquires a Gothic function when it renders visible the loss of control, the violent transformation of space, the fragility of technical communication, and the instability of perception. It therefore does not constitute a mere narrative background, but an active force that intervenes in space, individual experience, and narrative representation. In the two texts, this function assumes different configurations. In *Dombey and Son*, the railway forms part of a broader urban and social transformation, whereas *The Signal-Man* focusses on the enclosed space of the cutting and its signalling systems. The comparison makes it possible to observe how Dickens associates railway modernity with contrasting experiences of movement and confinement, connection and isolation, order and disorientation, thereby avoiding a representation of progress that is either simply hostile or celebratory. A further strand of the analysis concerns the relationship between space and subjectivity. Railway travel transformed the Victorian perception of distance, speed, and landscape, which was no longer traversed slowly and physically but observed through the carriage window, fragmented by movement, and mediated by the machine. In Dickens's works, railway environments therefore never appear neutral, but become intertwined with the characters' emotions, moral tensions, and psychological conditions. This theme is connected to that of communication and its failures. The railway depended on systems of signalling, temporal coordination, and telegraphic transmission that promised precision and control. In *The Signal-Man*, however, the instruments intended to convey reliable information produce obscure signs that are difficult to interpret, revealing human vulnerability within apparently efficient structures.

In light of the critical studies examined, the contribution of this thesis lies in showing how Dickens translates the contradictions of railway modernity into Gothic narrative forms, revealing the precariousness that accompanies the apparent triumph of technological progress.

Chapter 1

Railway Modernity: Progress, Anxiety, and Trauma in Nineteenth-Century Britain

1.1 The Industrial Revolution as Context

To understand why the railway became a disturbing place in the Victorian imagination, it is necessary to situate it within the historical and cultural context of the Industrial Revolution in nineteenth-century Britain. As Nicholas Daly argues, '[f]ew aspects of Victorian life escaped the impact of industrialization', a process that not only made the creation of the railway system possible but also prompted an early ambivalent public reaction.¹ Indeed, he emphasises that British society was profoundly reshaped by this historical phenomenon, observing that '[t]he experience of time and space was transformed in fundamental ways, but so too were the visual, aural, olfactory and tactile environments'.² According to William J. Ashworth, a decisive step concerned the structure of production. The relative flexibility of artisan work patterns gradually gave way to the factory model, in which, as he notes, 'a distinct culture of time-discipline came to replace task-discipline'.³ Within this new disciplinary regime, '[s]ocial labour now had to be trained to work to the dictates of the factory bell, and in some instances, the rhythm of a machine'.⁴ Paradoxically, even legislative reforms aimed at protection, such as the reduction of the legal working day to ten hours in 1847, often encouraged entrepreneurs to intensify the pace of output, concentrating their efforts in as little time as possible.⁵

In Ashworth's account, technological advances made this reorganisation even more incisive. It was only in the 1820s that the mechanical loom, patented by William Horrocks in 1803, became widespread, putting hand weavers in crisis. By this point, many of them were 'either compelled to work in the cotton factories or doomed to life-long unemployment'.⁶ Industrialisation thus produced growth and prosperity, but also tangible

¹ Nicholas Daly, 'Technology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 43–60, p. 43.

² *Ibid.*

³ William J. Ashworth, 'Industry and Transport', in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Chris Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 223–237, p. 225.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 225–226.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

social divisions, often painfully visible. A further structural change concerned energy supply. For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, water, animal, and human labour remained important. However, during these decades a decisive shift towards mineral fuels took place. Coal assumed a central role, fuelling steam engines in the textile and iron industries and, later, in the steel industry.⁷ Drawing on Werner Sombart's formulation, Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes this transition as a true 'emancipation from the boundaries of nature', made possible by the combination of iron and coal in the steam engine, capable of producing virtually unlimited power.⁸ In this context, where energy appears to escape natural constraints, the railway emerges as a paradigmatic infrastructure of modernity.

Against this background, industrialisation also helped to shape new collective identities. Accelerated urbanisation, harsh working conditions and the dissolution of rural solidarity gave rise to the formation of an increasingly aware urban proletariat. For Daly, the '[w]orking conditions in the manufactories of the new towns and cities were often abysmal', provoking anger among workers and radical observers alike.⁹ For example, Friedrich Engels, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), used the term 'hands' to describe the reduction of the individual to mere labour power. It was in this climate that the Chartist movement arose, demanding political dignity and better living conditions in the 1830s and 1840s. Although its immediate claims were rejected, the Reform Act of 1867 nonetheless granted voting rights to a significant portion of working-class men for the first time.¹⁰

Alongside these social dynamics, the space of consumption also changed profoundly. As Daly observes, 'improvements in glass and lighting created a new consumer environment of arcades and department stores'.¹¹ This transformation was not limited to commerce. Indeed, steam printing accelerated the circulation of knowledge, while new communication and transport systems contributed to the standardisation of national time, replacing the plurality of local hours with a single shared temporal framework.¹²

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 226–228.

⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), p. 2.

⁹ Daly, 'Technology', p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹² *Ibid.*

Ashworth suggests that the Great Exhibition of 1851, housed in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, became the icon of this industrial culture, offering a spectacular representation of progress conceived as unlimited and consolidating England's image as the 'workshop of the world'. The building itself, described as a gigantic 'modern shopping mall' made of iron and glass, stood as an architectural symbol of the age taking shape. Thanks to the affordable Shilling Days, millions of visitors — including many labourers — travelled to London to see machinery and technology from all over the world. As Henry Mayhew observed, groups of craftsmen and factory hands gathered in front of the mechanical looms, 'all eagerly listening to the attendant, as he explains the operations', fascinated by the precision and power of the new machines.¹³ What the Exhibition tended to conceal, however, was what lay behind the scenes, namely the factory, the workplace and the material conditions of industrial production, which Ashworth describes as 'a celebration of the commodity and not of labour'.¹⁴ This idealised and homogenised representation of progress stood in marked contrast to the uneven and often contradictory reality of industrial development in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. In many areas of engineering, the expertise of craftsmen remained essential, and production often continued to be built to order. 'Precision was more important than speed' and this element of flexibility, at the same time, conflicted with the increasing standardisation demanded by international markets.¹⁵ British society of the period thus appears as a complex mosaic of modernity and traditional persistence, mechanical momentum and cultural resistance. It is within this scenario — shaped by profound economic and social transformations, but also by changes in perception — that the significance of new mobility infrastructures can be fully understood. Among these, the railway emerged as a distinctive marker of Victorian modernity, redefining the relationship with time and space, as well as the very experience of travel.

1.2 The Advent of the Railway: Technology and Myth

If the Industrial Revolution redefined the economic and social structure of nineteenth-century Britain, the railway was one of its most obvious and, at the same time, most

¹³ Ashworth, 'Industry and Transport', p. 223.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

significant manifestations. Its arrival was not merely a technical development, involving new forms of traction and infrastructure, but also the source of narratives and expectations that transformed the train into a symbolic space capable of concentrating the hopes and fears of modernity.

Before the widespread adoption of the locomotive, the British transport system had already undergone significant changes. In the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century, improvements in road networks and the development of waterways and canals contributed, according to historiography, to setting Great Britain apart from the rest of Europe. More specifically, as Ashworth points out, this infrastructural transformation was ‘the crucial factor enabling the Industrial Revolution’.¹⁶

The construction of the Bridgwater Canal, often referred to as one of the most spectacular engineering achievements of the eighteenth century, ushered in the rapid expansion of the canal network, which was particularly suited to the carriage of coal and bulky goods. This growth was accompanied by coastal shipping, favoured by the country’s geography and advantageous in terms of cost, with coal and wheat among the predominant cargoes.¹⁷

The system also included land transport and stagecoach services. As Ashworth notes, ‘[r]oad transport during the eighteenth century was generally unreliable owing to the appalling condition of roads and their vulnerability to the notoriously wet British weather’; moreover, under the old Act of 1555, repairs were left to ‘unpaid farmers and local labourers’, so that roads ‘generally remained neglected’.¹⁸ It was only in the 1830s, with the introduction of a parish tax for repairs, that more coordinated action was taken.¹⁹ Despite this, the eighteenth century saw a sharp increase in public conveyance services and passenger numbers. According to Schivelbusch, by the late eighteenth century ‘even the lower orders traveled by stagecoach’.²⁰ In this context, the horse-drawn vehicle represented the most advanced form of land transport then available; at the same time, the sustained efforts to improve land traffic efficiency, within the limits of animal traction,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 8.

introduced ‘a trend that eventually made mechanization appear as the final logical step’.²¹ The railway was therefore incorporated into a complex system, but one that was destined to be radically reconfigured. In the north-east of England, demand for coal had already led to the creation of a dense network of tracks linking the mines to the River Tyne, in some cases stretching up to ten miles in length, and derived from rails used in mining tunnels since the late Middle Ages. These early lines were extensions of the mines, as they were used to transport coal and relied on horse-drawn wagons. It was only after the Napoleonic Wars that animals began gradually to be replaced by steam locomotives, partly because coal was cheaper than fodder in that region. In the 1820s, a genuine ‘railroad movement’ took shape, supported by the idea that the railway should be powered by steam and used for passengers as well as goods.²²

For Ashworth, the symbolic turning point came with the opening, in 1830, of the Liverpool–Manchester line, often considered the first major public railway entirely operating on steam traction and characterised by significantly higher speeds than previous solutions.²³ As Stefan Fisher-Høyrem observes, during the Rainhill Trials, George Stephenson’s *Rocket* reached velocities of 29–30 miles per hour, demonstrating the feasibility of a regular and reliable service and, above all, its capacity to attract investors. Although initially designed for freight, the line carried 460,000 passengers in its first year, four times the number of travellers who had previously made the same journey by stagecoach. Such services ceased almost immediately, signalling the speed with which the railway rendered previous modes of transport obsolete.²⁴

According to Ashworth, the expansion was rapid but not linear, because the years 1836–1837, marked by an initial railway boom, were followed by the more intense phase of railway mania between 1844 and 1847. In this context, the figure of the navvies emerged, employed in the construction of the lines in often harsh and precarious conditions. The Railway Clearing House (1842), created by Glyn and Stephenson, then helped to integrate the network, coordinating nine lines between London and York or Leeds and managing forty-five by 1849. Technical and political resistance also persisted,

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

²³ Ashworth, ‘Industry and Transport’, p. 233.

²⁴ Stefan Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, in *Rethinking Secular Time in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 69–112, pp. 83–84.

such as that of the Great Western Railway, which maintained a wider gauge and only adapted to the standard in the 1870s.²⁵

The first public railways were often regional, but within a few decades the situation changed. As Fisher-Høyrem shows, between 1825 and 1835, Parliament approved fifty-four acts authorising new lines similar to the Liverpool-Manchester railway, and in the early 1840s growth accelerated. In 1842, most industrial centres were directly or indirectly connected to London, thus offering ‘the semblance of a national railway system’.²⁶ By the mid-1850s, half the population lived in parishes with at least one station, and over the next two decades branch lines connected rural areas and small towns to the main arteries. This process also transformed the relationship between town and country, for example through the widespread distribution of daily newspapers. Moreover, the railway reshaped social geography. In fact, railway towns such as Crewe and Swindon sprang up, while cities such as Exeter and Norwich experienced relative decline for hesitating to connect to the main lines. From the 1870s onwards, the number of stations increased by about 10 per cent per decade, supported in part by tourism and excursions to seaside resorts.²⁷ As William Hughes observes, ‘[r]ailways, historically, represent change. They are a dynamic force, rendering obsolete other modes of transport and communication [...] and imposing a new cultural regime founded upon a pervasive predictability manifested in regulated speed and adherence to centrally printed timetables’.²⁸

Within this material context, a mythical dimension emerged. For Schivelbusch, ‘[t]o adherents of progressive thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, the railroad appeared as the technical guarantor of democracy, harmony between nations, peace and progress’.²⁹ Constantin Pecqueur described it as a ‘living mosaic of all the fortunes, positions, characters, manners, customs, and modes of dress’, capable of promoting ‘the reign of truly fraternal social relations’ and of shortening ‘for everyone the distances that separate localities from each other’, thereby also reducing the distances between people.³⁰

²⁵ Ashworth, ‘Industry and Transport’, pp. 233–234.

²⁶ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 8.

²⁷ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, pp. 83–86.

²⁸ William Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, ed. by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 445–462, p. 445.

²⁹ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 70.

³⁰ Constantin Pecqueur, *Économie sociale*, vol. 1, pp. 335–336, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 70–71.

In his view, '[i]t is the *same convoy*, the *same power* that carries the great and the small, the rich and the poor', making the train 'a continuous lesson in equality and fraternity'.³¹

In Fisher-Høyrem's analysis, in Great Britain, part of this ideal was translated into regulation, as William Ewart Gladstone's Railway Regulation Act (1844) imposed parliamentary trains at moderate fares, with covered third-class accommodation, at no more than one penny per mile. By 1860, most passengers travelled third class, and companies such as the Midland Railway began introducing padded seating to improve comfort. Others, such as the Great Eastern Railway, presented themselves as 'the poor man's line', focusing on commuting. Thomas Cook & Son organised special trains for excursions, making leisure travel more accessible. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was, in this sense, an emblematic moment, as the railway network brought the provinces to London for leisure and instruction.³²

Yet the egalitarian myth coexisted with clear hierarchies. As Schivelbusch notes, '[f]or the lower classes this experience was quite immediate: in England they were transported in open boxcars on freight trains, up to the 1840s. They were regarded not as recipients of passenger service but as freight goods'.³³ First-class carriages, by contrast, replicated the traditional mail coach with enclosed compartments. It was precisely this spatial arrangement that can be read as contributing to a perception of depersonalisation, with many first-class travellers claiming to feel like 'mere parcels', transported by a machine over which they had no control.³⁴ Furthermore, the isolation of railway compartments, hidden from both sight and sound from the rest of the train, made them potential scenes of crime. This was suggested by contemporary reports concerning the murder of Poinot in France in 1860 and that of Briggs in Britain in 1864, in which assaults could take place unheard and unseen.³⁵ Poinot's murder was widely covered in the continental press as an illustrative example of the dangers associated with railway travel in such enclosed spaces. In the January 1861 issue of the *Annales d'Hygiène Publique*, under the heading 'Dangers Run by Travelers on Trains' as given in Schivelbusch, the discovery of the body was described in detail. Upon the arrival of a train from Mulhouse at the Paris station at a quarter past three in the morning, railway

³¹ Pecqueur, *Économie sociale*, vol. 1, p. 338, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 72.

³² Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', pp. 87–88.

³³ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 72.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79, 82–83.

staff noticed that the door of one compartment remained closed. When a railway employee opened it, he perceived, in the dimly lit interior — further obscured by a black silk curtain — ‘the shape of a man lying between the seats’, soon recognising it as ‘a cadaver bathed in a pool of blood’.³⁶ The account emphasised how the visual isolation of the compartment, combined with inadequate lighting, delayed both the detection of the crime and the recognition of its severity. Subsequent investigations revealed that Poinot had shared the compartment with only one other passenger, identified as the perpetrator, who was never apprehended. The case was also reported by *Galignani’s Messenger*, an English-language newspaper published in Paris, which noted that ‘[t]he painful interest excited in Paris by the dreadful death of M. Poinot has been extraordinarily great’ and that ‘a certain feeling of uneasiness has arisen at the idea of the extreme facility with which the crime appears to have been perpetrated’.³⁷ A similar dynamic characterised the murder of Briggs on the North London Railway, which triggered widespread public concern in Britain. During an evening journey, the violent assault initially went unnoticed, despite the presence of staff and passengers elsewhere on the train. Only later did two passengers entering an apparently empty first-class carriage become aware of the crime through visible traces of blood. A subsequent inspection by the railway guard revealed a compartment heavily smeared, as well as personal items belonging to the victim. Briggs himself was discovered some distance away, lying severely injured and unconscious beside the railway line, where he had evidently been thrown from the moving train; he succumbed to his injuries the following night. The absence of his gold watch, chain, and other valuables pointed clearly to robbery as the motive. Unlike the Poinot case, the investigation led to the identification and arrest of Franz Müller through possession of the stolen items, culminating in his conviction and execution.³⁸ In Schivelbusch’s analysis, taken together, the murders of Poinot and Briggs highlighted the structural vulnerabilities of the closed railway compartment, showing how spatial isolation, limited visibility, and the absence of immediate supervision could allow acts of violence to occur without detection. Although part of a public transport system, the compartment thus emerged as an inherently ambiguous space, where privacy coexisted with a high degree of exposure

³⁶ *Annales d’hygiène publique et de médecine légale*, vol. 15 (1861), p. 224, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 80.

³⁷ *Galignani’s Messenger*, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 80.

³⁸ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, ‘Trial of Franz Müller for the Murder of Thomas Briggs’, trial account, Central Criminal Court, 24 October 1864 (ref. t18641024-920) <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/record/t18641024-920>.

to risk, leaving passengers — especially those travelling alone — in a state of pronounced insecurity. Technical solutions sought to reconcile the ‘desire to be left alone’ with the need for communication, including talking tubes, alarm cords, electrical signalling systems, peephole windows between compartments, and external walkways for staff. The introduction of Edmund Heusinger von Waldegg’s side corridor stabilised a compromise between internal communication and the preservation of the compartment as a closed environment.³⁹ The railway space therefore embodied a constant tension between intimacy and surveillance, isolation and control.

As Fisher-Høyrem demonstrates, another pillar of the railway myth was the promise of safety and regularity. Railway companies invested heavily in first-class comfort, transforming carriages into ‘parlours on wheels’, equipped with cushions, foot warmers, lunch baskets, and, in some cases, electric lighting. These devices helped to build a protective ‘psychic layer’, a barrier not only against physical impact but also against anxiety about risk.⁴⁰ In 1860, a traveller described how, while the train ‘rivalling the eagle in its flight’ crossed viaducts and ravines, passengers remained ‘reclining on their easy couch, reading or writing, thinking, or sleeping, or dreaming, as if they were under their own roof-tree’.⁴¹ Already in 1853, however, another pamphleteer, writing with a clear sense of wonder, concluded that ‘the regularity and safety of railway travelling seems [...] quite miraculous’.⁴² This perception of reliability, however, depended on pervasive practices of discipline. The railway sought to transform travellers into immutable mobiles, in motion yet controllable.⁴³ Manuals such as *The Railway Traveller’s Handy Book* instructed travellers that ‘[t]he proper place for the head is inside, not outside the carriage, and so long as it is kept there, the chances are that it will remain whole’, explicitly condemning the habit of leaning out of windows as extremely dangerous.⁴⁴ Other instructions concerned moving around the station without ‘causing a stir’, the management of luggage, and the internalisation of timetables as a choreography of

³⁹ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 85–87.

⁴⁰ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 97.

⁴¹ Anon., ‘Railway Accidents’, *The North British Review* 34 (61, 1860/61): 399–427, quoted in Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 97.

⁴² William Peters, *Railway Dangers; and How to Avoid Them* (Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1853), p. 45, quoted in Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, pp. 97–98.

⁴³ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Anon., *The Railway Travellers’ Handy-Book* (1850), p. 93, quoted in Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 99.

connections and appointments.⁴⁵ In this context, ‘the habit of reading while travelling developed partly as a response to the experience of social friction’, and also because it could ‘help divert the reader’s attention from the otherwise constant awareness of potential accidents’.⁴⁶

As Schivelbusch observes, the railway profoundly reshaped the urban environment. The station ‘was not an integral part of the city: it was located outside the traditional city limits, and for a long time it remained an alien appendage’.⁴⁷ Its architecture combined a neoclassical stone façade with large iron-and-glass roofs.⁴⁸ With the increase in traffic, many cities were forced to modify and reorganise their road systems in order to accommodate uninterrupted flows, a process that altered the appearance of older urban centres and accelerated the transition towards spatial configurations characterised by expansion and movement.⁴⁹ Within a few decades, the railway established itself as both infrastructure and myth. It reorganised markets and networks, but also became a symbol of progress, promising equality, technical mastery, and the control of risk. This mythical construction had a direct impact on Victorian perceptions of time and space.

1.3 The Destabilisation of Space and Time

The impact of the railway on Victorian modernity was not limited to the introduction of a faster means of transport, but also affected the very way in which space and time were perceived, organised, and experienced. From the outset, many contemporaries felt a profound break with pre-industrial sensibilities. It was not just a matter of increased speed, but of the feeling that distance and duration were collapsing, to the point that contemporaries frequently used the phrase ‘[a]nnihilation of time and space’ to capture the new sensation produced by rail travel.⁵⁰

The opening of the Liverpool–Manchester railway clearly illustrates this tension. As reported by Ashworth, actress Fanny Kemble described ‘[t]he most intense curiosity and excitement’ among the ‘enormous masses of densely packed people’ who lined the

⁴⁵ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 100.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 171.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–181.

⁵⁰ Ashworth, ‘Industry and Transport’, p. 234.

road, ‘shouting and waving hats and handkerchiefs’ as the train ‘flew by’.⁵¹ Yet this initial enthusiasm waned as the journey approached Manchester, where the sight of crowds belonging to ‘the lowest order of mechanics and artisans’ and of a ‘tattered, starved-looking weaver’ beside his loom brutally recalled the human cost of the ‘triumph of machinery’.⁵² The railway thus appeared simultaneously as a technical apotheosis and as the aggressive face of industrial modernity, producing progress and displacement, wonder and ruin.

On a perceptual level, it was the locomotive itself that was most striking. Schivelbusch identifies the projectile as a fitting nineteenth-century metaphor for this transformation, describing rail travel as the experience of ‘being shot through the landscape’, accompanied by a loss of sensory and bodily control.⁵³ Unlike pre-industrial means of transport, the train was no longer driven by a visible external force, such as horses or human labour, but seemed to move by itself, endowed with an autonomous and impersonal energy.⁵⁴ This impression was reinforced by what Schivelbusch describes as the radical impact of the railway on the natural environment, since, in order to reduce friction and irregularities, the track was constructed through ‘cuttings, embankments, tunnels, and viaducts’, and its strict linearity meant that ‘mechanical regularity triumphed over natural irregularity’, imposing an abstract geometry on the landscape.⁵⁵

Such engineering practices fuelled a widespread sense of alienation. As Schivelbusch records, a commentator in 1844 lamented that, when travelling by train, ‘the face of nature, the beautiful prospects of hill and dale, are lost or distorted to our view’.⁵⁶ In this sense, travellers experienced almost two parallel realities, the physical world through which they were moving and a second world mediated by the machine behind the window.⁵⁷ The so-called machine ensemble — tracks, cuts, viaducts, signals, telegraphs — stood between the individual and nature, since ‘the machine ensemble [...] interjected itself between the traveler and the landscape’, so that the traveller perceived the external world only as it was ‘filtered’ through it.⁵⁸ This condition was not confined

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 54.

⁵⁴ Ashworth, ‘Industry and Transport’, pp. 234–235.

⁵⁵ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ *Horse-Power Applied to Railways at Higher Rates of Speed than by Ordinary Draught* (London, 1844), p. 48, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 23–24.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

to theoretical reflection, but also found expression in the narrative and journalistic culture of the time. Charles Dickens, in particular, was attentive to describing how the railway system tended to isolate travellers from their surroundings, while offering an illusion of safety and fluidity grounded in complex forms of technical risk management.⁵⁹

As Schivelbusch argues, speed mechanised the gaze. What was close by dissolved, echoing Jacob Burckhardt's 1840 observation that '[i]t is no longer possible to really distinguish the objects closest to one', since 'as soon as one turns to take a look at them, they already are long gone', and the landscape was reduced to a sequence of distant outlines.⁶⁰ *The Lancet* spoke of eye and brain fatigue caused by the velocity and variety of visual impressions. For observers linked to contemplative travel, such as John Ruskin, acceleration made travel dull precisely because it negated the intensity of the sensory experience. Over time, however, this new mode of perception was gradually assimilated. Speed became ordinary, and the train came to choreograph the environment as a rapid succession of juxtaposed pictures, appreciated for their visual dynamics.⁶¹ In this process of adaptation, the traveller's distraction took on a central role. Dickens, in particular, often depicted seemingly calm passengers, immersed in reading or conversation while travelling in a potentially dangerous machine, rendered tolerable precisely through habit and sensory attenuation, as discussed by Fisher-Høyrem.⁶²

The destabilisation also affected temporal experience. In 1830, Henry Booth — secretary and treasurer of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway — spoke of a 'sudden and marvellous change' in prevailing ideas of time and space, describing it as one of the most surprising effects of the railway.⁶³ Before the expansion of the railway network, each city observed its own local timekeeping, defined by solar noon, and the slowness of travel meant that such differences were of little significance. Schivelbusch shows that railway transport required strict temporal coordination, since '[r]egular traffic needs standardized time' and safety and regularity depended on overcoming such temporal differences.⁶⁴ Initially, each company introduced its own railway standard, but the expansion of the

⁵⁹ Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', pp. 98–99.

⁶⁰ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 56.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 56–60.

⁶² Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', pp. 98–99.

⁶³ Henry Booth, *An Account of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, Comprising a History of the Parliamentary Proceedings, Preparatory to the Passing of the Act, a Description of the Railway, in an Excursion from Liverpool to Manchester, and a Popular Illustration of the Mechanical Principles Applicable to Railways* (Liverpool: Wales and Baines, 1830), pp. 89–90, quoted in Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', p. 74.

⁶⁴ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 43.

network and growing cooperation between lines eventually led to the adoption of Greenwich Time, which became the national standard in 1880.⁶⁵ As cited by Fisher-Høyrem, Scottish geographer Hugh Robert Mill observed in 1892 that '[r]ailways have made the uniformity of time within narrow belts of longitude a necessity, and so largely does the railway effect modern civilized life that railway time soon comes to regulate all affairs'.⁶⁶

The telegraph played a decisive role in this process of synchronisation, according to Schivelbusch. By enabling the instantaneous transmission of information, it made possible the coordination of clocks across the network and became a central element of the railway imagination. Max Maria von Weber compared it to the nervous system of a railway organism, without which the machine could not function coherently.⁶⁷ However, the standardisation of time was not only a technical necessity, but also functioned as a means of discipline, as Fisher-Høyrem suggests. *The Lancet* argued that rigorous timekeeping was an essential condition for safety and that anxiety caused by delays amplified the adverse effects of journeys.⁶⁸ Travel guides and pocket timetables helped passengers internalise these rules by assisting them in coordinating their physical movements with those of the network.⁶⁹ *The Railway Traveller's Handy Book* went so far as to define passengers as 'prisoners of state', who were 'permitted to indulge in any relaxation and amusement to while away the time', but denied 'that essential ingredient to human happiness, personal liberty' for the entire duration of the journey.⁷⁰ These transformations can be interpreted, according to Hughes, as a profound reorganisation of cultural geography and as the imposition of central control over peripheral areas, since railways brought distant spaces into a 'communicative connection to the metropolitan centre' and ultimately 'bent the nation to a new industrial servitude'.⁷¹

In Schivelbusch's analysis, for industry promoters, this contraction of the natural environment represented a gain, as transport became measurable, predictable and controllable. Mechanical energy rendered transportation 'calculable', and steam power

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

⁶⁶ Hugh Robert Mill, 'Time Standards of Europe', *Nature* 46, no. 1182 (1892): 174–76, quoted in Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', pp. 74–75.

⁶⁷ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 29–30.

⁶⁸ Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', p. 91.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷⁰ Anon., *The Railway Travellers' Handy-Book*, quoted in Fisher-Høyrem, "Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers", pp. 105–106.

⁷¹ Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', pp. 445–446.

was praised for its ability to eliminate the ‘untractableness of horses’ and the unpredictability of animal-based transport. As Thomas Gray, an early railway advocate, argued, mechanical power was ‘uniform and regular, whilst horse-power [...] is quite the reverse’.⁷² For others, however, the loss of slowness and irregularity meant the breakdown of a direct and experiential relationship between man and nature. Rather than a simple removal of obstacles to efficiency, this change was perceived as the loss of an embodied and sensory mode of travel. Thomas De Quincey, reflecting on coach travel, described how speed was once perceived through the body itself, noting that ‘we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling’, an experience rooted in the living presence of animal power.⁷³ As technical improvements were progressively introduced, vibrations and shocks were reduced, and railway carriages were transformed into mobile living spaces capable of neutralising the harshness of travel.⁷⁴ As Schivelbusch argues, the traveller thus learned to divert his attention, to read, and gradually to forget, within this artificial environment, ‘how tremendous and potentially destructive were the amounts of energy it contained’.⁷⁵ It is precisely this forgetfulness, induced by technical regularity and habit, that Dickens captures with particular lucidity, showing how the passenger’s sense of security depends on a fragile system constantly engaged in containing risk and preventing the sudden return of catastrophe.⁷⁶ In this context, expressions such as human parcels can be read as critical formulas that, paradoxically, testify to the success of the railway project, which transformed travellers into subjects in transit with minimal physical involvement, suspended between physical immobility and continuous movement.⁷⁷ It was from this profound transformation of experience — involving space, time, the body, and perception — that doctors, psychologists, and writers began to interrogate the new forms of suffering associated with rail travel and accidents, describing them as railway shock.⁷⁸

⁷² Thomas Gray, *Observations on a General Iron Rail-Way*, 3rd ed. (London, 1822), p. 55, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 11.

⁷³ Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings*, ed. David Masson (London, 1897), vol. 13, pp. 283–284 (first published in 1849 in *Blackwood’s Magazine*), quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 97.

⁷⁵ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 161.

⁷⁶ Fisher-Høyrem, *Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers*, pp. 98–99.

⁷⁷ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁸ Fisher-Høyrem, *Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers*, pp. 89–90.

1.4 The Medical Dimension: Railway Trauma

In mid-nineteenth-century Britain, the railway quickly became not only an emblem of modernity, but also a privileged laboratory for the emergence of medical thinking on trauma. It was within this context that the idea of an intimate connection between modernity and traumatic experience took shape, since, as Roger Luckhurst argues, trauma is typically held to be ‘responsive to and constitutive of “modernity”’.⁷⁹ If, as we have seen, rail travel in the early decades of the nineteenth century could still appear as a miraculous cancellation of space and time, from the 1860s onwards medicine began to systematically question its physiological and psychological effects.

This attention, as documented by Fisher-Høyrem, stemmed from concrete clinical observations. *The Lancet* reported, for example, the case of a traveller who, after disembarking from an express train, experienced paralysis that was interpreted as ‘reflex paralysis of the lower extremities’ induced by the journey.⁸⁰ In 1862, the magazine established a commission to study the impact of travel on health, collecting data on ailments such as nausea, headaches, muscular fatigue, and nervous weakness, which were attributed to repeated vibrations, cold draughts, and continuous noise. Added to these factors was a psychological component, since *The Lancet* commission highlighted the ‘vague dread of certain undefined consequences to health resulting from influences peculiarly produced by this mode of travelling’ and warned that the traveller might not be consciously aware of the ‘thousands of successive jolts which he experiences’, although ‘every one of them tells upon his body’.⁸¹ This sensitivity was part of a broader transformation in which nineteenth-century modernity reorganised space and time, dissolving local ties and standardising rhythms, and producing new forms of physical and mental stress. The railway took on a paradigmatic role as a triumph of engineering and simultaneously as an industry perceived as inherently dangerous. As Luckhurst observes, the railway was ‘the icon of British modernity’, yet, while British clocks were eventually standardised across the country, it ‘remained a dangerous and chaotic industry’.⁸² From the public run of the *Rocket* in 1830, marked by the death of William Huskisson, accidents

⁷⁹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 20.

⁸⁰ Fisher-Høyrem, ‘Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers’, p. 69.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸² Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 21.

fuelled the collective imagination; and even after systematic records began, the number of deaths remained consistently high, exceeding two hundred passenger fatalities each year, thereby keeping the perception of risk alive.⁸³

In the 1860s, a crucial problem emerged concerning whether an accident could produce a violent yet invisible shock, with symptoms appearing after a delay even in the absence of macroscopic injuries. This issue carried significant medico-legal implications, since Schivelbusch notes that victims who suffered damage ‘without a pathologically demonstrable cause’ created a legal and medical problem, as experts had to determine whether the claimant’s condition was ‘an imaginary one, simulated in order to receive compensation’, or ‘a manifestation of a new medical syndrome’.⁸⁴

As Luckhurst later puts it, ‘railway spine’ was therefore ‘from the first, a *medico-legal* problem’, in which rival experts sought to define ‘the protean signs of trauma’ within their specific disciplinary languages.⁸⁵ Within this same medico-cultural framework, a culturally emblematic case was provided by Dickens. After the ‘terribly destructive accident’⁸⁶ of 1865, during which he assisted the injured and recovered the manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens reported a series of subjective disturbances in the months that followed, describing himself as ‘not quite right within’ and attributing his condition to what he referred to as ‘the railway shaking’.⁸⁷ While any retrospective diagnosis must be approached with caution, this experience has nevertheless been interpreted as indicative of a form of traumatic response, reinforcing the paradigmatic role that railway trauma came to assume in later understandings of nineteenth-century modernity. Against this backdrop, John Eric Erichsen developed the concept of ‘railway spine’, arguing that accidents could produce a concussion of the spinal cord even in the absence of vertebral disorganisation. He defined the condition as ‘a certain state of the spinal cord occasioned by external violence; a state that is independent of, and usually, but not necessarily, uncomplicated by any obvious lesion of the vertebral column’.⁸⁸ To account for the loss of nerve power, Erichsen relied on a physical analogy, arguing that, just as ‘when a magnet is struck a heavy blow with a hammer, the magnetic force is jarred, shaken, or concussed

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 135.

⁸⁵ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

out of the horse-shoe [...] So, if the spine is badly jarred, shaken, or concussed by a blow or shock', the sufferer may have 'lost nerve-power'.⁸⁹ Clinically, he described symptoms such as insomnia, memory disorders, melancholy, paralysis, and a sudden inability to work, often with a delayed onset. Schivelbusch similarly stresses that, in many victims who had suffered 'no injuries, or only minor ones, symptoms of psychic and physical deterioration appeared after some time' and could result in 'total disability'.⁹⁰ The organicist interpretation was soon criticised by Herbert Page, who reinterpreted the symptoms as a functional disorder linked to the emotional shock of the accident. He argued that '[t]he vastness of the destructive forces [...] the imminent danger [...] and the hopelessness of escape' could generate a traumatic state even in the absence of structural injuries.⁹¹ For Page, this also explained how symptoms could arrive belatedly, since, '[w]arded off in the first place by the excitement of the scene, the shock is gathering, in the very delay itself'.⁹² He also addressed the problem of simulation and the influence of the legal context, observing that 'the knowledge that compensation is a certainty for the injuries received, tends, almost from the first moment of illness, to colour the course and aspect of the case'.⁹³ At the same time, as Schivelbusch argues, the mechanical dimension of travel was analysed, showing how continuous vibration, resulting from insufficient track elasticity, forced the body to absorb what the machine failed to cushion, thereby producing a new form of sensory wear and tear.⁹⁴

In this context, Dickens's later testimony provides a further point of contact between lived experience and medical-discursive formalisation. In a letter written a few days after the railway accident of 9 June 1865, Dickens presents an apparent contrast between his composure during the event and the later bodily return of shock, explaining that 'I have a — I don't know what to call it — constitutional (I suppose) presence of mind, and was not in the least fluttered at the time. I instantly remembered that I had the MS of a number with me and clambered back into the carriage for it. But in writing these scanty words of recollection I feel the shake and I am obliged to stop'.⁹⁵ This sudden interruption is

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 134.

⁹¹ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 23.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹⁴ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 113–118.

⁹⁵ Charles Dickens, in Jack Simmons (ed.), *Journey in England* (New York, 1969), pp. 210–211, quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 138.

particularly significant, precisely because it stands in sharp contrast to Dickens's usual fluidity and stylistic mastery. This passage highlights, in an almost micro-clinical way, the logic of latency and the somatic return of memory, both of which, as underlined by Luckhurst, are crucial to the cultural history of railway trauma. The normalisation of travel made the accident even more traumatic precisely because it abruptly disrupted a system that had come to be perceived as natural, turning the accident itself into the characteristic risk of the new railway environment.⁹⁶ By the end of the century, as Schivelbusch argues, the notion of railway spine had been progressively supplanted by the concept of 'traumatic neurosis', as the pathological view was replaced by a psychopathological one in which the accident affected the victim 'psychically' and the experience of shock became 'the main causative factor of the illness'.⁹⁷ This trajectory marks a decisive stage in the history of modern trauma, as psychological injury itself became the central focus of the debates surrounding its emergence.⁹⁸ As Luckhurst observes, '[t]he railway accident was the encounter of the general public with the consequences of industrialization that had largely been concealed within the factory system'.⁹⁹ The railway thus emerged not only as the technical origin of modern trauma, but also as a device through which the profound contradictions of modernity became visible.

1.5 Public Opinion and Cultural Responses

The perceptual and temporal transformations analysed thus far were not confined to the individual experience of rail travel, but instead fuelled a broad, articulated, and structurally ambivalent social and cultural response. As Daly shows, '[f]or the middle and upper classes their most significant encounters with mechanization were not in the workplace, but on the railway platform and compartment'.¹⁰⁰ It was precisely in these spaces that '[m]ore than any other machine, the train became their icon and vehicle of industrial change, introducing them to the same time-discipline that had arrived with the factories'.¹⁰¹ On the one hand, the railway aroused enthusiasm, confidence in progress,

⁹⁶ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 26.

⁹⁷ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 136.

⁹⁸ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 34.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ Daly, 'Technology', p. 47.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

and admiration for technical power; on the other, it generated anxiety, a sense of vulnerability, and a loss of control. Pamphlets such as *Hurried to Death* by Alfred Haviland (1868) looked at ‘the pernicious effects of railway-driven time-consciousness’, highlighting how the new organisation of travel produced nervous fatigue, overexcitement, and an altered perception of time.¹⁰² This literature did not invent new categories out of thin air, but rather translated changes already underway in modern culture into moral and emotional terms.

The railway also transformed the ways in which space was perceived and inhabited, as ‘the railways shrank the country, bringing remote regions within easy striking distance of London, the ports and the industrial towns’ and ‘[p]eople as well as goods circulated as never before, for pleasure as well as for business’.¹⁰³ However, the transformation was not limited to geographical distance, but also affected the perceptual experience of the landscape, which from the train window appeared fragmented, unstable, and discontinuous. The train journey was thus perceived as a form of sensory disorientation, in contrast to the relational slowness characteristic of pre-industrial mobility. In this context, the railway carriage acquired a strong symbolic significance and was often described as a veritable mobile cage. It was a closed, constricting, and potentially claustrophobic space in which speed, tunnels, and the impossibility of interrupting the journey fuelled a latent sense of threat. The passenger experienced passivity and isolation, which, on an emotional level, could translate into depersonalisation and a loss of agency.¹⁰⁴ This condition finds an effective expression in Ruskin’s formulation, since, as Daly notes, he ‘equated railway travel with being “a living parcel”’.¹⁰⁵

The telegraph, which accompanied the railways both physically and symbolically, had an impact almost comparable to that of the railway itself, as it ‘made it possible to send a message over long distances without its incorporation in a physical object’.¹⁰⁶ This development had ‘obvious ramifications for the military, for business and for journalism’, while also profoundly altering everyday private communication for those who could afford telegraphic messages.¹⁰⁷ When the Atlantic cable was successfully laid in 1865,

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Luisa Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania. Gioie e paure ‘ferroviarie’ nella letteratura inglese dell’Ottocento* (Bari: B.A. Graphis, 2001), pp. 3, 33–36.

¹⁰⁵ Daly, ‘Technology’, p. 47.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

‘the speed of communication between Great Britain and the United States was greatly increased (while being far from instantaneous)’, contributing in the long term to the emergence of an intercontinental, Anglophone media network.¹⁰⁸ This simultaneity accentuated the feeling of a compressed and coordinated world, redefining the imagery of space and time.

Artistically, the response to the railway was far from uniform. While in the early Victorian era works such as *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844) by J. M. W. Turner attempted a relatively harmonious fusion of landscape and progress, art as a whole ‘eschews the direct representation of the industrialized landscape’.¹⁰⁹ Many artists instead took part in an ‘anti-industrial counter-revolution, confining themselves to the painting of pastoral landscapes and pre-industrial genre scenes’.¹¹⁰ However, some mid-century works explicitly placed the railway at centre stage. *The Railway Station* (1862) by William Powell Frith ‘deploys Paddington to provide a panorama of urban Victorian life’, while other paintings set within railway interiors captured the random, crowded, and at times claustrophobic character of modern experience; indeed, ‘[t]ransport interiors allowed artists to convey the random and sometimes claustrophobic aspects of urban experience’.¹¹¹



Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway (1844), by J. M. W. Turner.
Oil on canvas. London, National Gallery.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*



The Railway Station (1862), by William Powell Frith.
Oil on canvas. London, Royal Holloway, University of London.

In nineteenth-century British literature, as discussed by Daly, ambivalence towards the railway found particularly dense formulations. William Wordsworth, initially receptive to new technologies, later expressed strong opposition to the industrial intrusion into the Lake District. In *On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway* (1844), he asks whether there is ‘no nook of English ground secure / From rash assault?’.¹¹² Similarly, Dickens’s work shows how the railway had become firmly embedded in the Victorian narrative imagination as a powerful and ambivalent symbolic device. He internalised the railway world, transforming it into a narrative instrument capable of conveying both the fascination and the unease of modernity. The specific ways in which this dual tension is articulated in *Dombey and Son* (1848) and *No. 1 Branch Line. The Signal-Man* (1866) will be examined in detail in the following chapters.¹¹³ As Hughes observes, ‘[t]he railway, being both mechanical and institutional, is inhuman and inhumane’;¹¹⁴ a particularly revealing formulation of this cultural response is ultimately found in the words of Thomas Carlyle, who, in *Sartor Resartus* (1836), through the voice of Herr Teufelsdröckh, describes a universe reduced to an impersonal machine in which ‘[...] the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was

¹¹² Daly, ‘Technology’, pp. 48–49.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹⁴ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 447.

one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb'.¹¹⁵



The Pleasures of the Rail-Road (1831); Punch Magazine.

Finally, a significant aspect of cultural reception concerns the practice of reading on trains, which can be interpreted not only as an individual habit but as a cultural phenomenon with material effects. This practice may be understood as an adaptive response to isolation and perceptual fragmentation, insofar as the carriage could be transformed into a ‘travelling living room’, a suspended space moving through the landscape where passengers could retreat to alleviate the discomfort of the journey. This phenomenon had significant repercussions on the publishing market, promoting the spread of railway newsstands, railway novels and yellow backs, and ultimately making reading an integral part of the journey itself.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, London: Oxford University Press, 1943, p. 142, quoted in Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, pp. 447–448.

¹¹⁶ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, pp. 42–45.

Chapter 2

The Victorian Literary Framework

2.1 The Victorian Novel: Genre, Readership, and Cultural Function

The literary responses to the railway mentioned in the previous chapter show how nineteenth-century British literature places modernity at the centre of its concerns. The Victorian novel, more than any other genre, is particularly well suited to representing the ambivalence between progress and disorientation, accommodating the intertwining of technological innovation, social transformation, and individual unease within a context shaped by new conditions of cultural production and consumption. The integration of reading into everyday practices, such as train travel, signals the emergence of a literary culture in which the novel becomes both more accessible and pervasive. The first part of this chapter therefore aims to outline the fundamental characteristics of the Victorian novel — in terms of social circulation, publication methods, target audience, and cultural function — in order to establish the theoretical and historical framework within which Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* will subsequently be analysed.

To understand why the Victorian novel can be considered a dominant genre, it is useful to begin with its characteristics and the ways in which nineteenth-century critics defined its main features. Before addressing reading practices and audiences, it is necessary to clarify what the term 'novel' implied, what qualities were associated with it, and why it appeared both recognisable and difficult to define. Its extraordinary popularity, together with the wide range of cultural, moral and social functions attributed to it, made the novel not only a commercial form but also a central object of cultural discourse in the period. As James Eli Adams notes, Henry James's 1884 essay *The Art of the Novel* contributed to establishing the idea that critical reflection on the Victorian novel had begun relatively late. He observes that 'there was a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding', alluding to a general theoretical indifference towards the genre.¹ This apparent confidence, however, masked a more

¹ Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 44, quoted in James Eli Adams, 'A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 62–83, p. 62.

complex reality, since the Victorian novel was a deeply varied form, lacking a coherent structural model and resistant to stable artistic principles. It was precisely this heterogeneity, combined with the relative novelty of the genre, that fuelled a lively critical debate about its formal principles and moral implications.²

While formal heterogeneity is a given, Victorian discourse on the novel nevertheless reveals certain recurring criteria of orientation and evaluation, among which the reference to the real and the plausible occupies a central position. This lexicon does not perform a purely descriptive function, but contributes to defining the narrative credibility of the text, its moral adequacy, and its ability to represent the present. The realistic ambition of the Victorian novel thus emerges as a fundamental feature of the genre, relevant both at the aesthetic level and in terms of its cultural legitimacy. Deirdre David observes that Henry James identifies the ‘air of reality’ — understood as ‘solidity of specification’ — as the fundamental quality of the novel, defining it as ‘the supreme virtue of a novel – the merit in which all its other merits [...] helplessly and submissively depend’.³ Similarly, George Eliot, through the narrator of *Adam Bede* (1859), claims the duty to offer ‘a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind’,⁴ comparing narrative responsibility to that of a witness called to testify under oath.⁵ Yet, this insistence on fidelity does not resolve the definitional instability of realism. Though the mode may appear ‘easy to grasp and define’, as Caroline Levine points out, ‘no consensus has ever emerged among scholars about the essential qualities of a realist novel’.⁶ She further suggests that, even in the Victorian context, the idea of ‘truth’ can refer to different objectives: representative transparency, narrative plausibility, social comprehensiveness, or psychological verisimilitude. This plurality of meanings contributes to making realism an elusive category, resistant to stable definitions. Against this background, Amanda Claybaugh proposes understanding realism as a ‘syndrome’, namely as a heterogeneous configuration of features, including ‘contemporaneous subject matter, events and

² Adams, ‘A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel’, p. 62.

³ Henry James, ‘The Art of Fiction’, in Eigner and Worth (eds.), *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, p. 202, quoted in Deirdre David, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1–12, p. 3.

⁴ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* [1859], ed. Mary Waldron (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2005), chapter 17, quoted in David, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁵ David, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁶ Caroline Levine, ‘Victorian Realism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 84–106, p. 84.

characters understood as types, and a thick description of the social world'.⁷ Such an approach allows different authors and texts to be read as realist, without the need to postulate a unified and totalising model.⁸ This adaptability is especially important in the context of industrial modernity, since it allows the realist novel to take into account phenomena that defy conventional narrative structures, such as social dislocation and technological advancements. In the Victorian critical debate, as Adams shows, the term 'realistic' could carry suspicious connotations — for example, as a synonym for 'coarse' — but at the same time it functioned as an evaluative criterion, to the extent that some contested elements were defended on the grounds that they were 'real'.⁹ This reconstruction suggests that realism is not a stable, clearly definable category, but rather a fluid and overlapping constellation of heterogeneous practices and criteria.¹⁰

In David's account, 'Victoria's coronation in 1837 signals the official inception of the genre we now designate the Victorian novel', even if, as she also notes, the British novel had already enjoyed cultural visibility prior to this date.¹¹ Its progressive establishment encourages the emergence of an explicit and sustained public discussion about the aesthetic nature of the novel and its impact on readers' experience. In this context, the Victorian novel is distinguished by its expansive ambition and its remarkable ability to traverse multiple spheres of social experience. Demonstrating familiarity with vastly different realities — from inheritance law to doll fashion, from cosmopolitan financiers to manual labourers — the novel constructs a broad and layered representation of the contemporary world, offering a veritable social cartography. This narrative omniscience, in line with J. Hillis Miller's suggestion, can be interpreted as a form of symbolic compensation in an era marked by the weakening of religious certainties, given that a 'Victorian reading public dislodged from religious certainty by scientific discovery found consolation in a novelistic power that both resembled divine omniscience and accepted responsibility for creation'.¹² However, the very breadth that allows the novel to take on a compensatory function exposes its structure to a risk of dispersion. It is no coincidence that Henry James described some great nineteenth-century novels as 'large

⁷ Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 44, quoted in Levine, 'Victorian Realism', p. 85.

⁸ Levine, 'Victorian Realism', pp. 84–85.

⁹ Adams, 'A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel', pp. 64–65.

¹⁰ Levine, 'Victorian Realism', p. 85.

¹¹ David, 'Introduction', p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

loose baggy monsters'.¹³ By this expression, he meant a lack of formal economy and a deformation from an ideal of aesthetic harmony. For him, monstrosity was primarily a defect of structural cohesion, whereas contemporary criticism tends to locate the 'monstrous' in the thematic content itself. This notion manifests itself in the impulse to include and make narratively legible the deformations of contemporary society: inhumane working conditions, domestic violence, sexual repression, economic crises, and ideological conflicts. It is not surprising, therefore, that these novels sometimes appear 'out of control', since, in David's words, they are 'about so many things'.¹⁴ This variety of subject matter is not abstract but historically determined, since population growth, urbanisation linked to industrialisation, the advent of the railway, the political demands of the working class, and debates on the 'Condition of England' all contribute to shaping a narrative deeply engaged in representing the present.¹⁵

In this climate of profound social and economic change, Adams observes that the tensions of the 'hungry forties' prompted growing attention to 'a world beyond domestic life', redefining domesticity as 'a focal point of broader social struggle rather than a refuge'.¹⁶ In a broader historical context, drawing on Georg Lukács's interpretation of realism as a response to major industrial and political transformations, Levine emphasises how nineteenth-century realism developed alongside a new sense of history on a mass scale. These economic and political transformations produced a sense among ordinary individuals that they were participating in processes shaping national and even global history. From this perspective, Lukács understands realism as an attempt to render the forces of historical change 'not as abstractions but as the detailed and tangible experience of ordinary people caught at specific moments in history'.¹⁷ In this sense, realism may be read as an aesthetic of movement, combining Lukács's emphasis on historical experience with Harry Shaw's focus on the representation of 'social change and motion'.¹⁸

In light of these elements — formal heterogeneity, realistic ambition, expansive tendencies, and the ability to represent the present — it becomes easier to understand why the novel did not remain confined to a narrow educated elite, but became part of the

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

¹⁶ Adams, 'A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel', p. 63.

¹⁷ Levine, 'Victorian Realism', p. 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

rhythm of everyday life for a broad reading public belonging to different social classes, and a widely shared cultural form. As evidence of this diffusion, David recalls a famous statement by Anthony Trollope, who wrote in 1870 that '[n]ovels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last appointed scullery maid. We have them in our library, our drawing-rooms, our bed-rooms, our kitchens – and in our nurseries'.¹⁹ Novels circulated widely across social classes, and what united different readers was not so much the sharing of the same titles as the pleasure of reading fiction, which offered intense and engaging emotional experiences. Victorian readers immersed themselves in worlds populated by a multitude of characters and settings, exploring different social landscapes and experiencing a wide range of emotions.

At the same time, fiction also introduced readers to the central debates of the period, from scientific discovery to the crisis of religious faith and parliamentary reform.²⁰ As Kate Flint observes, the growth of the reading public during the nineteenth century was both a material and a numerical phenomenon, linked to the expansion of cities, the development of overseas readerships in the colonies, the reduction in the cost of paper and printing, the improvement of distribution networks, and the advertising and promotion of books. Education became progressively more accessible — with a turning point in 1870 — and by the end of the century literacy levels were very high. In addition, a growing number of jobs required at least basic reading skills, while inexpensive texts and shared practices, including reading aloud, helped to further expand the readership. In this print culture, fiction occupied a prominent position and circulated widely, especially in its most popular forms. Changes in work patterns within the middle class and the growing separation between home and work environments led to a clearer definition of leisure time and helped establish reading as a recognised leisure practice. Fiction thus became a space for relaxation and temporary withdrawal, as a character in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) states '[a] novel's a splendid thing after a hard day's work'.²¹ The novel thus did function as a mental refuge and a way of filling hours that might otherwise be perceived as empty, especially for women not engaged in paid work.

¹⁹ Anthony Trollope, 'On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement', in M. L. Parrish (ed.), *Anthony Trollope: Four Lectures* (London: Constable, 1938), p. 108, quoted in David, 'Introduction', p. 1.

²⁰ David, 'Introduction', p. 1.

²¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 3, quoted in Kate Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 13–35, p. 16.

At the same time, a growing distinction emerges between fiction considered intellectually and aesthetically demanding and fiction primarily oriented towards escapism; however, diaries, letters, and autobiographies reveal eclectic readers capable of moving between different registers and modes of reading according to their needs.²²

In Simon Eliot's analysis, '[p]rice is, of course, a major determining factor in the distribution and consumption of books', and reading practices cannot be separated from the material structures that made access to books possible, since prices, formats, distribution networks, lending institutions, and commercial channels not only affected the availability of texts but also shaped the form of the novel and the rhythms of its consumption.²³ During the nineteenth century, the respectable and prestigious format of the first edition stabilised in the three-decker, whose price remained set at thirty-one shillings and sixpence for decades. Such a high cost had an obvious structural effect, for, as Eliot observes, '[a] high price means that few will buy and many will borrow'.²⁴ It was therefore not a neutral element but a decisive factor in the distribution and consumption of novels, shaping purchasing, borrowing, and reading practices. For most of the century, the newly published novel was not primarily a commodity to be purchased but an object to be borrowed or rented, within a culture in which the rental of expensive goods was a common economic practice. It was in this context that the system of circulating libraries became fully established. The most famous was Mudie's Select Library, founded in 1842 by Charles Edward Mudie. Although circulating libraries had already existed in the eighteenth century, it was during the high Victorian period that this model became central to the production and consumption of the novel, particularly the three-decker. Mudie's system influenced not only the distribution of fiction but also its material form and content, as the practice of reading 'one volume at a time', made possible by the annual subscription, reinforced and consolidated the three-decker format. The designation 'select' also signalled a principle of selection that applied both to its overwhelmingly middle-class clientele and to its catalogue. The library thus assumed the role of a cultural and moral filter, exerting a tangible influence on editorial decisions and on the circulation of novels.²⁵

²² Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', pp. 15–16.

²³ Simon Eliot, 'The Business of Victorian Publishing', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 36–61, p. 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–39.

Alongside the volume system, Flint emphasises the decisive importance of serialised publication. Serialisation — particularly in monthly parts — generated a demand that cut across social classes and fostered an ongoing relationship with readers, creating anticipation for each new number.²⁶ These publishing practices, therefore, not only influenced the circulation of novels, but also shaped the narrative form of Victorian fiction itself, encouraging expansive plots, episodic structures, and a careful distribution of suspense across successive parts. Adams observes that, the success of a work published in instalments could significantly increase the visibility of the genre while at the same time undermining established critical categories. The serialisation of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837), for example, did not fit the established models associated with either Austen or Scott and, for this very reason, confounded some critics, who were unsure how to classify the work. This uncertainty does not concern reception alone, but also affects the way the genre is conceived by authors themselves, as in the early years Dickens still spoke of his plan to write 'a novel', meaning a three-volume work modelled on Scott. The coexistence of different models thus signals a field in transformation and shows how publishing practices — particularly serialisation — contributed to redefining what could be recognised as a novel in the Victorian period.²⁷ Eliot likewise demonstrates that serialisation was not only a formal choice but also an economic strategy. By spreading the investment over time, it allowed a wider audience to access a novel over a period of months, avoiding the immediate outlay required by the three-decker. The material format of publication could also include a substantial advertising supplement, which helped to make the serial system financially advantageous for both author and publisher.²⁸ Publication in periodicals could place novels in dialogue with other texts and contemporary debates, as Flint notes, since it 'implicitly encouraged the reading of novels alongside other forms of writing', prompting readers to relate them to such issues.²⁹ Different modes of publication also exerted specific pressures on authors, who might extend a story to fill three volumes, compress it to fit the column of a magazine, or distribute moments of suspense at regular intervals to sustain serial publication. Traces of these material conditions of production continue to shape the reading experience even

²⁶ Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', p. 18.

²⁷ Adams, 'A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel', p. 63.

²⁸ Eliot, 'The Business of Victorian Publishing', pp. 43–44.

²⁹ Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', p. 19.

after the work is reprinted in a single volume, as the original format leaves recognisable marks on the narrative structure.³⁰ It was precisely this influence of production methods on the form of the novel that gave rise to a lively critical debate about its overall coherence. While the Victorian novel had established itself as a structurally heterogeneous form, critical reflection began to develop a normative ideal of formal unity. According to Adams, '[t]here was widespread agreement from the 1850s onward that serial publication undermined the coherence of novels', reinforcing 'a model of unity and economy [...] drawn from loose analogy with drama'.³¹ From this perspective, serialisation was perceived as a potential source of dispersion, while the novel was increasingly evaluated according to its capacity to maintain structural coherence and narrative control.

Flint further points out that, when novels become a widespread and everyday presence, their cultural function comes to be defined not only by their popularity but also by the anxieties they provoke. Precisely because fiction is both pervasive and regarded as socially influential, its reading becomes subject to intense scrutiny. At the heart of these concerns lie issues of class and gender, since fiction was perceived as 'particularly suspect: likely to influence adversely, to stimulate inappropriate ambitions and desires, to corrupt'.³² Examining what people read thus becomes a means of investigating the moral and mental condition of readers, especially where, in William Alexander's view, many are assumed to approach reading without method, guided merely by 'natural taste' or 'an easy curiosity', and where the texts they consume are taken to constitute 'a true and reliable index to both their moral and mental habits and condition'.³³ At the same time George Eliot describes men and women as 'imitative beings' and cannot avoid being shaped by the ideas that pass through their minds in the act of reading.³⁴ This suspicion forms part of a broader cultural context, since, as Adams observes, in 1837 the novel was still widely perceived as an idle amusement, fuelling evangelical mistrust of forms of leisure deemed vain and unedifying.³⁵ Flint likewise recalls, citing Trollope in his *Autobiography* (1883), that fifty years earlier '[t]he families in which unrestricted

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Adams, 'A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel', p. 65.

³² Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', p. 13.

³³ William Alexander, 'Literature of the People – Past and Present', *Good Words* 17 (1876), p. 92, quoted in Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', p. 14.

³⁴ Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', p. 14.

³⁵ Adams, 'A History of Criticism of the Victorian Novel', p. 62.

permission was given for the reading of novels were very few, and from many they were altogether banished'.³⁶ By the time of writing, however, such prohibitions no longer existed, and novels were read 'right and left, above stairs and below [...]' across different social contexts.³⁷

This shift is important because it clarifies how, in the nineteenth century, fiction was not merely a form of entertainment but a cultural practice that shaped the imagination and emotional life. Rachel Ablow argues that the cultural function of the novel extends to the realm of feeling, not in the trivial sense of sentimentality, but as a reflection on the relationship between feeling, consciousness, and identity. It is significant, for example, that the inability to recognise pain is associated with a minimal threshold of personhood, since, in her discussion of James Mill, '[t]o feel is to know that one exists'.³⁸ On a historical and cultural level, during the nineteenth century a progressive separation between the public and private spheres became increasingly consolidated, tending to relegate emotions such as sympathy and compassion to the domestic sphere. In this context, feeling lost its central role as a principle of social cohesion and became increasingly associated with intimate and familial relationships. This development contributed to reinforcing the identification of the novel with the home and with the cultivation and regulation of emotions, since fiction did not merely represent feelings, but educated and disciplined them. It is therefore not surprising that one of the central devices of the Victorian novel is the marriage plot, which structures a path of emotional formation from childhood to maturity, offering a model of development in which one learns not only whom to love, but also how to love.³⁹ In nineteenth-century debate the dimension of feeling was closely intertwined with the social vocation of the novel. In a context marked by the growing distance between rich and poor, fiction was credited with the ability to make the experience of others perceptible where statistics and generalizations presupposed a sympathy already in place. The novel thus appears as an instrument of mediation between classes, capable of transforming the representation of suffering into a potential engine of understanding and, ideally, of change. This trust in the transparency

³⁶ Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (1883; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 199, quoted in Flint, 'The Victorian Novel and Its Readers', p. 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Rachel Ablow, 'Victorian Feelings', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 193–210, p. 193.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 194–199.

of feeling, however, is called into question in Victorian literature, as a discernible undercurrent begins to challenge both the privacy and the self-evidence of emotion. As Ablow shows, this shift becomes especially evident in the sensation novel of the 1860s, where attention turns to the ambiguity of feeling, its contagiousness, and the possibility that emotion and sensation may become detached from meaning. In particular, the ‘thrill’ emerges as a mode of engagement capable of suspending judgement and destabilising moral orientation, thereby undermining the very reliability of emotional experience.⁴⁰

Thus, the Victorian novel emerged as a dominant cultural form not only because of its wide social circulation, but also because of the multiplicity of functions attributed to it: representing the present, organising emotional experience, offering tools for knowledge, and intervening symbolically in the fractures of contemporary society.⁴¹ However, the novel was not the only literary genre through which the tensions and transformations of modernity were articulated. Within the same cultural and material system — comprising periodicals, reading practices, stratified audiences, and new transport and communication technologies — the Victorian ghost story also took shape and consolidated its position, differing in scope and formal devices yet remaining fully integrated into nineteenth-century culture.

2.2 The Victorian Ghost Story: Characteristics and Development

If the Victorian novel established itself as the preferred form for representing the complexity of industrial and colonial modernity, the tensions generated by these profound social and technological changes found equally significant expression in the ghost story. Within the same cultural and material system outlined in the previous section — characterised by the expansion of the periodical press, serialisation, and the growing integration of reading into everyday practices — the ghost story became established during the nineteenth century as an autonomous genre, with its own formal conventions and a stable place within Victorian periodical culture, capable of giving narrative shape to experiences of uncertainty, fear, and interpretative ambiguity. The second part of this chapter aims to reconstruct the development of the Victorian ghost story, examining its

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–208.

⁴¹ David, ‘Introduction’, pp. 5–6.

progressive formal stabilisation, the publishing conditions that favoured its dissemination, and the cultural function it assumed within the context of scientific and industrial modernity. This analysis will show how the supernatural does not represent a marginal residue in an era dominated by realism, but rather an element fully integrated into nineteenth-century culture, particularly suited to interrogating the technological and infrastructural transformations of the period. It is on this theoretical basis that I will examine Charles Dickens's *The Signal-Man* in the final chapter.

The ghost story is not a nineteenth-century invention, as Dale Townshend argues in his account of the genre's long-term development, but rather part of a much broader tradition whose origins date back to ancient oral culture, as confirmed by Julia Briggs's observation that '[g]host stories are as old and older than literature'.⁴² However, what matters more than its antiquity is the way in which the genre became established. Sasha Handley notes that, before the end of the eighteenth century, 'a settled genre of ghost stories had yet to emerge', as apparitions circulated across theological, scientific, and antiquarian discourses because no stable fictional framework yet existed to contain them.⁴³ The emergence of the genre is therefore linked to the differentiation between fact and fantasy and to transformations in print culture. This marks a decisive turning point for the nineteenth century, as the ghost story comes to be recognised in what Townshend defines as a 'shorter, self-contained work of prose fiction that generates a certain readerly *frisson* through graphic depictions or subtle suggestions of spectres, hauntings and other forms of supernatural encounter'.⁴⁴ Within this genealogy, the late eighteenth-century Gothic represents a crucial phase, but, as Townshend suggests, it constitutes only one episode within a broader history of supernatural storytelling and does not coincide with the Victorian ghost story.

With Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the supernatural assumes an autonomous and spectacular narrative form, characterised by enormous presences, skeletal apparitions, figures that irrupt into the narrative, and forces such as the 'invisible

⁴² Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), quoted in Dale Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story: 1764–1832', in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Andrew Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), p. 17.

⁴³ Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), quoted in Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', p. 18.

⁴⁴ Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', p. 18.

hand'.⁴⁵ Yet that kind of supernatural spectacle remains tied to a novelistic framework and an ancient imaginative world. M. R. James, widely regarded as a leading figure in British ghost fiction in the early twentieth century, retrospectively describes *The Castle of Otranto* as 'perhaps the progenitor of the ghost story as a literary genre', but remarks that it is 'merely amusing in the modern sense'.⁴⁶ Implicit here is a distinction that would later become structural over the course of nineteenth century, within the historical development of the Victorian ghost story. As Townshend observes, the central issue lies in the tension between the construction of ambiguity and its subsequent resolution through what has often been described as the 'explained supernatural'. What matters, then, is not simply the presence of ghosts, but the way in which the apparent supernatural is constructed and subsequently resolved through rational explanation, a device that, drawing on M. R. James's reflections, is identified as 'particularly inimical to the generation of the ghost story's pleasurable terrors'.⁴⁷ In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Ann Radcliffe stages an episode of apparent haunting capable of generating a genuinely disturbing effect, but later provides a deferred material explanation that reabsorbs the supernatural into a rational framework.⁴⁸ Walter Scott, discussing this technique in his Preface to James Ballantyne's *Novelists' Library* edition of Radcliffe's works (1824), insists that the author may be more successful in arousing apprehension than in rendering the final explanation convincing, and defines as 'torment' the author's task of 'unravel[ing] the skein of adventures which they have been so industrious to perplex, and account for the incidents which they have been at so much pains to render unaccountable'.⁴⁹ From this follows a lesson that would prove central to the nineteenth-century ghost story, namely that the effectiveness of the supernatural depends on preserving a degree of obscurity. As Scott states in 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition', a review article published in *The Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1827, '[t]he marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious composition, loses its effect by

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ James, M. R. *Collected Ghost Stories*, ed. by Darryl Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, quoted in Townshend 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', p. 23.

⁴⁷ Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', p. 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–21.

⁴⁹ Walter Scott, 'Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe', in *The Novels of Mrs Ann Radcliffe* (London: Hurst, Robinson, and Co., 1824), pp. i–xxxix, quoted in Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', p. 28.

being brought much into view'.⁵⁰ The spectre, he argues, is a figure of radical otherness, to the extent that 'the exhibition of supernatural appearance in fictitious narrative ought to be rare, brief, indistinct, and such as may become a being to us so incomprehensible, and so different from ourselves'.⁵¹ From this perspective, narrative reticence — understood as limiting the representation and explanation of the supernatural phenomenon — is not a flaw but a technique, and the ghost story does not coincide with the full articulation of a theory of the supernatural, but rather with the impression of an event that retains a margin of indeterminacy and resists complete explanation.

Closely related to this is the question of setting. M. R. James formulates, in the Preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), a principle that becomes almost a rule of the genre, according to which the setting must be 'fairly familiar' and the characters such that the reader can think, '[i]f I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'.⁵² The medieval and Renaissance settings of Gothic fiction are too 'antique' and place the reader in the position of a spectator; Victorian ghost stories, by contrast, tend to relocate the supernatural within everyday space. This shift is crucial because it transforms the nature of fear. Anxiety no longer arises from a remote elsewhere, but from the destabilisation of the familiar, from the fact that what is familiar — home, room, street, work, travel — suddenly becomes the site of an intrusion.

The progressive autonomy of short fiction points precisely in this direction. Anthony Mandal observes, drawing on Nick Freeman's analysis, that, during the nineteenth century, 'the ghost story developed from an embedded narrative in a novel or miscellany into a distinctive genre of short fiction'.⁵³ At the same time, Bourne Taylor notes that, while the novel moved towards the everyday realism that became dominant in the 'high Victorian' period, short fiction maintained a link with 'an older popular culture disseminated by broadsheets, ballads, and chapbooks', becoming 'the means of keeping

⁵⁰ Walter Scott, 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and Particularly in the Works of Ernest Theodore William Hoffman [sic]', *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, July 1827, pp. 60–98, quoted in Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', pp. 28–29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵² M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, ed. Darryl Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), quoted in Townshend, 'Gothic Fiction, Romanticism and the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story', p. 24.

⁵³ Nick Freeman, 'The Victorian Ghost Story', in Andrew Smith and William Hughes (eds), *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 93–107, quoted in Anthony Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Andrew Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), pp. 34–50, p. 34.

ghosts, apparitions, and spirits alive within a secular and rationalist society which was almost able to explain them – but not quite’.⁵⁴

In this tension — almost explicable, yet not entirely so — lies a decisive aesthetic resource, and the ghost story thrives not against realism, but alongside it, exploiting the friction between the need to interpret and the impossibility of foreclosing interpretation. As Mandal observes again, just as the ghost story was emerging as an autonomous genre, the period 1830–1870 marked its consolidation and diversification. In this context, massive population growth and the rise of print culture, together with the emergence of a mass readership, fuelled the proliferation of publications and the expansion of the publishing market.⁵⁵ The role of periodicals makes this development particularly visible. As Jessica Cox observes, literary annuals such as *The Keepsake* (1828–1857) provided an important venue for gothic short fiction, while *The Terrific Register* (1823–1825) marked ‘a significant development in publishing: the emergence of a distinct market for the poorer reader’, offering ‘graphic accounts of crimes, deaths and executions, as well as supernatural occurrences’ that helped shape Dickens’s early imaginative world and, ultimately, his own ghost fiction.⁵⁶ In general, the ghost story found a natural home in periodicals, as its brevity suited the serial form of publication and the repetition of issues helped to cultivate habits of reading and expectation. In this context, Mandal also emphasises that the publishing and seasonal dimensions take on decisive importance. Christmas books institutionalise a stable seasonal market for supernatural tales. Published shortly before Christmas 1843, Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* was an immediate publishing success, signalling not only a remarkable reception but also the emergence of a seasonal tradition for supernatural fiction. This consolidation concerns the thematic content as well as ritual practice, as the Christmas hearth becomes established as a privileged spatio-temporal setting for the ghost story within a modernised domestic culture shaped by innovations in print.⁵⁷ At the same time, two periodicals edited by Dickens further amplified this function, as *Household Words* (1850–1859) and *All the Year Round* (1859–1895) published numerous ghost stories and contributed to the

⁵⁴ Jenny Bourne Taylor, ‘Short Fiction and the Novel’, in John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, vol. 3: *The Nineteenth Century 1820–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 239–55, quoted in Mandal, ‘The Ghost Story: 1830–70’, p. 34.

⁵⁵ Mandal, ‘The Ghost Story: 1830–70’, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁶ Jessica Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, in Dominic Head (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 49–66, p. 56.

⁵⁷ Mandal, ‘The Ghost Story: 1830–70’, pp. 39–40.

formation of a periodical canon of the genre. The recurrence of these texts in widely circulated periodicals shows that the supernatural was not relegated to the margins but found a stable place within Victorian reading culture.⁵⁸

In this same historical and cultural context, marked by reforms, conflicts, and social transformations, industrial and scientific momentum converged to produce an image of modernity as a transformative force. As already discussed in the first chapter, the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace, with its six million visitors, was regarded as a symbol of the ‘spirit of the age’. Within this framework, Scott Brewster suggests that the ghost story may be understood as a liminal genre, positioned at the intersection of discourses on the invisible, ranging from optical science and ‘invisible’ technologies — which seemed to generate a specifically modern form of the supernatural — to spiritualism and psychical research.⁵⁹ These material transformations are mirrored in a reconfiguration of spaces and objects. The haunted house becomes a central device in the Victorian ghost story. At the same time, by the middle of the century, a constellation of technological innovations — railways, steamships, telegraphs, and penny postage — transformed logistical, communication, and transportation networks, contributing to the expansion of the readership. Reflecting on these developments, E. S. Dallas noted in 1866 that these innovations had ‘enormously increased the number of readers’ and had ‘of themselves created a literature’.⁶⁰ As Bridget M. Marshall observes, the ghost story becomes a particularly apt language for representing the invisible dimensions of modernity — networks, signals, systems, speed, chains of labour, and machines, forces that cannot be seen but are nonetheless at work. It is significant, then, that even visual representations of early industrialisation evoke a spectral imagination. *Arkwright’s Cotton Mills by Night* (1782) by Joseph Wright and *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801) by Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg depict industrial buildings at night as luminous yet unsettling presences in the landscape.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–46.

⁶¹ Bridget M. Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith, Edinburgh University Press, 2025, pp. 99–113, p. 100.



Arkwright's Cotton Mills by Night (1782–83), by Joseph Wright of Derby.
Oil on canvas. Derby, Derby Museum and Art Gallery.



Coalbrookdale by Night (1801), by Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg.
Oil on canvas. London, Science Museum.

Even the inactive factory during the cotton famine of 1861 was described by Henry Adams as ‘ghostly and inactive’, and Ruskin went so far as to suggest that factory smoke might be ‘made of dead men’s souls’.⁶² In these examples provided by Marshall, the use of spectral imagery does not function as a mere rhetorical ornament, but becomes a way

⁶² *Ibid.*

of expressing the traumatic relationship between industrial production and the expenditure of human bodies. This perception finds explicit narrative expression in *A December Vision* (1850), where Dickens personifies industrialisation as a relentless and omnipresent force, writing ‘I saw a mighty Spirit, traversing the world without any rest or pause. It was omnipresent, it was all-powerful, it had no compunction, no pity, no relenting sense that any appeal from any of the race of men could reach’.⁶³ This spectral entity not only overwhelms human life but also extends its destructive reach to the natural world, suggesting a vision of industrial modernity that is both relentless and dehumanising. Such a portrayal resonates with what Andrew Smith has described as the ideal of the ‘robotic employee’ and an ‘unthinking assimilation to the system’, highlighting how industrial production generates human and mechanical agents that operate in an automatic and repetitive manner, to the point of lending life itself a spectral quality.⁶⁴ It is not surprising, then, that between the mid- and late nineteenth centuries images of workers as new ghosts recur insistently. In his 1845 study *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels describes Manchester workers as ‘pale, lank, narrow-chested hollow-eyed ghosts’,⁶⁵ while Rebecca Harding Davis, in her short story *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), depicts night workers as ‘vengeful ghosts in the red light’.⁶⁶ The most disturbing element is not the individual spectre, but the collective and serial dimension of the phenomenon, namely masses of consumed bodies and lives reduced to function, ghosts produced on an industrial scale.⁶⁷

The other major line of transformation concerns machines and, in particular, transport technologies. As Mandal points out, nineteenth-century ghost stories frequently shift anxiety to mobile and transitory environments, such as travel, the railway network, and the functional isolation of station and signal workers. In this context, William Hughes suggests that the experience of travel produces an uncanny relationship with space, as the traveller is placed in a destabilising relationship with both the terrain and the mode of

⁶³ Charles Dickens, ‘A December Vision’, *Household Words*, vol. 2, no. 38, 1850, pp. 65–67, quoted in Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, p. 99.

⁶⁴ Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840–1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. XX, quoted in Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, p. 99.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. XX, quoted in Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, p. 101.

⁶⁶ Rebecca Harding Davis, ‘Life in the Iron Mills’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1861, pp. 430–451, quoted in Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, p. 101.

⁶⁷ Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, pp. 99–102.

travel. The railway thus becomes a privileged space of modern spectrality, integrating technical infrastructure into the genre's repertoire. It is within this framework that *The Signal-Man* emerges as a central text in the development of the railway ghost story. The narrative intertwines a technological environment, professional isolation, and interpretative uncertainty, inserting the supernatural into a distinctly modern communicative and mechanical system. Here, the question of what the apparition means plays a decisive role in shaping the narrative. A detailed analysis of these dynamics will be developed in the chapter dedicated to railway ghost narratives.⁶⁸

This turning towards inwardness and interpretative instability becomes particularly evident in the second half of the century. As Freeman notes, at the time of Charles Dickens's death in 1870, *The Times* predicted that his passing would send a 'thrill of sorrow' through the nation and would be felt as a personal loss by millions of people.⁶⁹ It is precisely this cultural centrality of Dickens that underlies his ability to make the supernatural a shared language and a periodic habit. Alongside this, a change in the very nature of the ghost emerges. In 1880, the British writer and critic Vernon Lee observed that the ghost should not be understood as 'the vulgar apparition which is seen or heard in told or written tales', but rather as 'the ghost which slowly rises up in our mind, the haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies', thereby redefining the ghost as a psychological and imaginative experience rather than a purely external presence.⁷⁰ Fear is internalised; the experience of being haunted becomes a mental condition, not merely an external event. Between 1870 and 1900, the genre developed a dual dynamic, absorbing on the one hand techniques of realism and mainstream fiction and thereby acquiring greater psychological depth and a self-conscious literariness, while on the other hand the stratification of markets and audiences favoured both more conventional tales and more elliptical and ambiguous texts.⁷¹

In this sense, certain works became emblematic of a form of ghost story that operates at the boundary between the supernatural and mental disorder. In Sheridan Le

⁶⁸ Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', pp. 46–48.

⁶⁹ Anon., 'Mr Charles Dickens', *The Times*, 10 June 1870, p. 1, quoted in Nick Freeman, 'The Ghost Story: 1870–1900', in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith, Edinburgh University Press, 2025, pp. 51–65, p. 51.

⁷⁰ Vernon Lee, 'Faustus and Helen: Notes on the Supernatural in Art' (1880), in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 309–310, quoted in Freeman, 'The Ghost Story: 1870–1900', p. 52.

⁷¹ Freeman, 'The Ghost Story: 1870–1900', pp. 51–54.

Fanu's *Green Tea* (1869), the persecution assumes a form that progressively wears down the protagonist, and the inadequacy of medical explanation in the face of psychic collapse leads to a tragic outcome. Similarly, Margaret Oliphant's *The Library Window* (1896) constructs an ambiguity so persistent that it becomes impossible to determine whether the apparition is real or the product of psychological instability, and its effect derives precisely from the endurance of that doubt.⁷²

At the same time, the late nineteenth century saw an increasing engagement between literary ghost stories and 'real' ghost stories through psychical research. The Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, investigated apparitions 'in a spirit of objective scientific enquiry rather than blinkered conformism' and published *Phantasms of the Living* in 1886, a work based on over seven hundred reported encounters with apparitions.⁷³ This material, even when criticised by the scientific establishment, had a significant cultural impact, as it compelled writers and readers to reflect on the difference between fictional ghosts and apparitions documented in the SPR's archives. Literary ghosts often possess well-defined motivations and narrative functions, whereas those recorded by the SPR appear mostly fleeting, silent, and narratively thin, and it is precisely this contrast that makes more visible what fiction must actively construct.⁷⁴

In her essay *Faustus and Helen: Notes on the Supernatural in Art* (1880), Vernon Lee insists on the need for atmosphere and nuance, arguing that the supernatural is 'necessarily vague' and that the best stories are 'those in which the ghost is heard but not seen'.⁷⁵ In texts such as *Amour Dure* (1890), the diary form and sustained ambiguity make it impossible to determine whether the supernatural is real or the product of the protagonist's obsession. Henry James likewise pushes this tendency to its most extreme conclusions, using the genre as a space for psychological ambivalence and technical experimentation.⁷⁶

As Mandal suggests, what matters in this evolution is not only the history of the genre, but the ability of the ghost story to become a tool for representing modernity, as seen in 'the spectrality that emerges from the collision between modernity and subjectivity', and thus engaging with networks and signals, machines and labour, speed

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 55–57.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

⁷⁵ Lee, 'Faustus and Helen', quoted in Freeman, 'The Ghost Story: 1870–1900', p. 60.

⁷⁶ Freeman, 'The Ghost Story: 1870–1900', pp. 60–63.

and risk, automatism and trauma.⁷⁷ For this reason, the emergence of spectral railway narratives does not occupy an eccentric margin, but rather a strategic position where the material conditions of periodical culture, technological innovations, and shifts in sensibility converge. The railway, with its promise of efficiency and its constant exposure to disaster, thus produces a privileged space for the modern uncanny.⁷⁸

Within this convergence of industrial modernity and the spectral imagination, the figure of the haunted train, the accident as trauma, repetition as fatality, and the isolated worker responsible for safety become particularly powerful narrative nodes. It is on this terrain — marked by the intertwining of technical innovation, material risk, and subjective vulnerability — that the railway ghost story assumes one of its most complex and troubling forms.

⁷⁷ Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', p. 47.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–48.

Chapter 3

The Railway and the Ambivalence of Perception in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*

3.1 Charles Dickens and the Experience of Modernity

The analysis developed in this chapter begins with Charles Dickens (1812–1870), a key author for this study and for understanding representations of modernity in Victorian fiction. Before analysing *Dombey and Son* and, in the following chapter, *The Signal-Man*, I consider it necessary to highlight essential aspects of his upbringing and cultural context, to clarify how his narrative imagination was shaped within the social, urban, and media transformations of the nineteenth century. I will therefore first examine relevant elements of Dickens's biography, namely his childhood marked by economic instability, his early familiarity with social hardship, his observational practice, and his subsequent apprenticeship as a journalist. I will then consider the central role of London in his imagination, his habitual exploration of the city on foot as a means of understanding urban space, and his integration into the system of serial publication and Victorian mass culture. Subsequently, I will shift the focus to Dickens's engagement with visual culture, serial publication, and the theatrical dimensions of both his fiction and his public readings, demonstrating how his work operates at the intersection of word, image, spectacle, and new forms of modern perception. Through this exploration, Dickens emerges not only as an acute observer of his own time, but also as an author who rearticulates the contradictions of modernity. This framework is particularly useful for reading *Dombey and Son*, in which technological progress, urban transformation, and social disintegration are intertwined, while also anticipating the increasingly unsettling connotations that the railway assumes in Dickens's *The Signal-Man*.

First of all, it is important to recognise that Dickens's life cannot be taken at face value. As Grahame Smith observes, one of the most significant contributions of poststructuralist theory is its emphasis on the 'centrality of writing in the construction of the self and the world, as well as of literary texts'.¹ This perspective is particularly

¹ Grahame Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1–15, p. 2.

relevant in Dickens's case, since his biography must be reconstructed 'in recognition of the extent to which Dickens's life is a textual construct, much of it created by the writer himself'.² At the same time, his entry onto the literary scene is marked by a profound ambivalence. As Robert L. Patten notes, his initial reactions to publication were 'mixed, even contradictory', as he sought to fashion himself as 'an author who publishes anonymously and pseudonymously, striving to be at once a professional author, writing for pay, and a gentleman and amateur, working for the love of it'.³

In light of these considerations, it is useful to begin by focusing on Dickens's upbringing and his direct engagement with the social reality of Victorian modernity. As Frank T. Marzials, a nineteenth-century critic and biographer, observes, the term 'education' should not be understood exclusively as formal schooling, but rather as 'the whole set of circumstances which go to mould a man's character during the apprentice years of his life'.⁴ As Grahame Smith notes, a decisive moment for understanding Dickens's upbringing is his experience, at the age of twelve, at Warren's Blacking Factory, a shoe-polish warehouse, an episode recorded in the so-called *Autobiographical Fragment*, written by him for John Forster in 1847. However, this episode cannot be interpreted in isolation, but must be situated within a broader family and social context, since the Dickens family was 'richly representative of the social and class tensions which [...] intensified in the Victorian period'.⁵ In this context, his work in the factory — a situation that arose following his father's imprisonment for debt — represented not only a personal trauma, but also a rupture in his path towards social respectability, which Dickens himself described as 'the secret agony of my soul as I sank into this companionship... of the shame I felt in my position... of the misery it was to my young heart'.⁶ From an early age, Dickens developed a particular sensitivity towards hardship and marginalisation. As Marzials observes, '[p]erhaps no novelist ever had a keener feeling of the pathos of childhood than Dickens, or understood more fully how real and overwhelming are its sorrows. No one, too, has entered more sympathetically into its

² *Ibid.*

³ Robert L. Patten, 'From Sketches to Nickleby', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 16–33, p. 17.

⁴ Frank T. Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Walter Scott, 1887; repr. Project Gutenberg, 2005), available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16787>, p. 11.

⁵ Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', p. 3.

⁶ Charles Dickens, 'Autobiographical Fragment' (1847), quoted in Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', p. 4.

ways'.⁷ This focus stems from an intense and enduring personal experience, which led him to continually rework his past in his writing, to the extent that '[a]gain and again in his writings he reverts to the scenes and incidents and emotions of his earlier days'.⁸ Factory work, experienced as humiliating, leaves a lasting mark, as 'the sensitive, bookish, imaginative child felt that there was something uncongenial and degrading'.⁹ Precisely for this reason, his autobiographical wounds are transformed in his writing into a broader social imagination, as Dickens articulates his own suffering through what Smith describes as 'generous indignation and righteous anger at the fate of the helpless, the poor, and the unprotected', a tension that runs throughout his work and through which the narrative engages with the contradictions of urban and industrial modernity.¹⁰ At the same time, these circumstances contributed to the development of an extraordinary capacity for observing social reality. As Marzials points out, Dickens 'thoroughly mastered the humours of the place' and, more generally, demonstrated that 'if he learnt little, he observed much'.¹¹ This aptitude for observation is reflected in a writing style capable of capturing social dynamics, urban environments, and human types with remarkable precision, elements that would become central to his representation of modernity.

To this keen eye for detail is added another decisive factor, namely his experience in journalism. After a brief apprenticeship in a law firm, Dickens chose to become a reporter, entering a profession that brought him into direct contact with social movements, politics, and urban life. As Marzials writes, Dickens 'threw himself into this new career with characteristic energy', while his technical training was both intense and rigorous, since 'the best powers of his mind were directed to "Gurney's system of shorthand"'.¹² Smith develops this point further, showing how Dickens's professional trajectory was grounded in self-discipline, technical competence, and speed, as evidenced by his own words, according to which 'if I could not do my work as well as any of the rest, I could not hold myself above slight and contempt',¹³ until he attained 'the reputation of being the best and most rapid reporter ever known!'.¹⁴ In his well-known account from 1865,

⁷ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', p. 4.

¹¹ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³ Dickens, 'Autobiographical Fragment' (1847), quoted in Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', p. 6.

¹⁴ Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 6 June 1856, quoted in Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', p. 6.

delivered as chairman of a public dinner on behalf of the Newspaper Press Fund, Dickens describes the work of the reporter as an activity carried out under extreme conditions, recalling, as reported by Marzials, that he had ‘often transcribed for the printer, from my shorthand notes, important public speeches, in which the strictest accuracy was required [...] writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern [...] galloping through a wild country, and through the dead of the night’.¹⁵ This experience contributed to the development of a dynamic narrative perspective, linked to speed, movement, and the urgency of recording reality. It is no coincidence that Dickens himself recognised its foundational value, stating, in a later address to journalists in New York, that ‘to the wholesome training of severe newspaper work [...] I constantly refer my first success’.¹⁶ This trajectory, however, does not initially appear linear, since, as Patten observes, Dickens himself at this stage ‘didn’t exactly know what he wanted to become’,¹⁷ wavering between various professional possibilities—from journalism to the theatre, and to forms of writing ‘of kinds, subjects, and genres not yet clear’.¹⁸

From this perspective, Dickens’s fiction appears, from its very inception, to be deeply rooted in the concrete experience of urban and industrial modernity. The return to childhood, the depiction of poverty, and the construction of complex social environments are not merely autobiographical elements, but tools through which Dickens engages with the transformations of his time. This vocation is already evident in his early writings. Marzials observes that in *Sketches by Boz* (1833–1836) one can already recognise the precocity of Dickens’s gaze, noting that, as Arthur Helps remarked, ‘[h]is powers of observation were almost unrivalled’.¹⁹ In particular, it is London that emerges as the primary focus of this observation, to the extent that ‘its sins and sorrows, its gaieties and amusements, its suburban gentilities, and central squalor, the aspects of its streets, and the humours of the dingier classes among its inhabitants,—all this had certainly never been so seen and described before’.²⁰ The city thus enters Dickens’s writing not merely as a backdrop, but as a living, problematic space. In this context, the metropolis also appears as a complex space to decipher, in which, as Patten suggests, ‘understanding the babble

¹⁵ Dickens, quoted in Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Patten, ‘From Sketches to Nickleby’, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Arthur Helps, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, July 1870, quoted in Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 32.

²⁰ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 32.

of tongues and the semiotics of signs [...] required expert guidance'.²¹ This perceptual complexity also forms part of what Kate Flint defines as a 'conspicuous restlessness' that characterises Dickens's fiction of the 1840s. In this sense, the journey 'has everything to do with offering different perspectives', functioning not merely as a geographical movement but as a device for reorienting reality.²²

This relationship with urban space is explored in greater depth through the writer's daily practices. As Marzials notes, Dickens developed a constant habit of walking, becoming 'an indefatigable pedestrian' and tirelessly roaming London and its surroundings.²³ Movement through space thus takes the form of continuous observation, through which he gathers that 'food for observation' intended to nourish his narrative activity.²⁴ Particularly significant, too, is his predilection for the nocturnal dimension of the metropolis. Indeed, '[t]he darkness of the great city had a strange fascination for him',²⁵ and, more broadly, '[t]o the eye that knows how to see, there is no stage where so many scenes from the drama of life are always being enacted as the streets of London'.²⁶ From this perspective, the modern city appears to Dickens not merely as a space for observation and imaginative inspiration, but also as a place marked by collective tensions and a more uneasy perception of the urban crowd. This dynamic fits into the broader context of modernity, which, as Flint observes, is characterised by mobility and instability understood as 'a response to modernity, and to the multiplicity of choices that a rapidly changing world brings with it'.²⁷ As Nicholas Daly notes, concerns regarding the masses as a potentially destabilising force were already emerging in late nineteenth-century fiction, as in the case of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), in which Dickens 'revivifies the spectres of the mob and working-class "combination" that had haunted the political elite in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries'.²⁸ In *Dombey and Son*, this dynamic becomes particularly evident, since, as Flint observes, 'named individuals are set against

²¹ Patten, 'From Sketches to Nickleby', p. 22.

²² Kate Flint, 'The Middle Novels: Chuzzlewit, Dombey, and Copperfield', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 34–48, p. 34.

²³ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁷ Flint, 'The Middle Novels', p. 36.

²⁸ Nicholas Daly, 'Technology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 43–60, pp. 44–45.

the anonymous, restless crowds who are swallowed up by the ever-expanding, hungry capital city'.²⁹

Alongside this experience of urban space, another key aspect for understanding Dickens's position within the Victorian cultural system is his relationship with visual culture. This convergence between writing and image is further reinforced by the famous portrait of Dickens painted by Daniel Maclise, an Irish artist active in Victorian London, which, as Richard L. Stein points out, does not merely depict the author, but 'refers beyond [the text] and beyond the writer's mere textual presence to his life as a public figure'.³⁰ The portrait thus forms part of a broader transformation of the author's identity, no longer based exclusively on the text but also on public visibility; in this sense, 'to know the writer we must see his face'.³¹ In the publishing world, this dynamic is also evident in the position Dickens occupies within the Victorian cultural system. He does not merely fit into a model based on the interaction between text and image, but actively shapes its very definition. This is particularly clear from the very genesis of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837), where, as Marzials observes, Dickens establishes himself as the centre of the narrative project, reversing the relationship between image and text, to the extent that 'Dickens was to have the command of the story, and the artist was to illustrate him'.³²



Charles Dickens (1839), by Daniel Maclise.
Oil on canvas. London, National Portrait Gallery.

²⁹ Flint, 'The Middle Novels', p. 43.

³⁰ Richard L. Stein, 'Dickens and Illustration', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 167–188, p. 167.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 41.

At the same time, the success of his debut novel depends not only on the manner of its publication, but also on certain formal characteristics that would become typical of Dickens's fiction. Marzials observes, in fact, that '[t]here is a fervour of youth and healthy good spirits about the whole thing',³³ and, above all, that the book 'increased in scope and power as it proceeded'.³⁴ In this sense, serialisation represents not merely a material medium for publication, but a dynamic mode of textual growth, which expands and takes shape progressively as the work is composed. Serialisation also proved decisive in building his readership. As Marzials points out, *The Pickwick Papers* quickly exceeded all expectations, expanding from an initially limited print run to an extremely wide circulation. This growth not only documents the author's rise, but also demonstrates the serial novel's ability to capture and expand an ever-wider audience. This reception was immediate and widespread, as '[e]verybody read his book. Everyone laughed at it. Everyone talked about it. Everyone felt [...] that a new and vital force had arisen in English literature'.³⁵ From this perspective, as Marzials observes, Dickens emerges as a central figure at a time of transition in the British literary system, when 'the time may be said to have been waiting for its master-novelist'.³⁶ Hence the emphatic judgement that 'there was a vacant throne among the novelists. Here was the hour—and here, too, was the man'.³⁷ Despite its celebratory tone, this observation highlights the contemporary perception of Dickens as an author destined to occupy a dominant position, in a context in which 'English literature just then was in one of its times of slackness'.³⁸ Marzials also suggests that the relationship between Dickens and his audience went beyond mere literary success, taking the form of an emotional and almost personal bond, as 'Dickens claimed, and claimed truly, that the relationship between himself and the public was one of exceptional sympathy and affection'.³⁹ This is illustrated by an anecdote reported by William Makepeace Thackeray, in which two readers, discussing *A Christmas Carol* (1843), each concluded by saying 'God bless him!', showing how Dickens was perceived

³³ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

not merely as a popular author, but as a moral and familiar presence in the readers' imagination.⁴⁰

In the years following the success of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens distinguished himself through an extraordinary productivity. As Marzials observes, '[t]he amount of work which he accomplished in the years 1836, 1837, 1838, and 1839 is, if we consider its quality, amazing'.⁴¹ The speed of this output was the subject of criticism even at the time. *The Quarterly Review*, in October 1837, accused him of writing 'too often and too fast' and of publishing material that was still 'crude, unfinished, undigested', going so far as to suggest that, just as he had 'risen like a rocket', he risked 'coming down like the stick'.⁴² However, this judgement fails to take into account Dickens's extraordinary discipline, founded on what Marzials describes as an 'infinite faculty for taking pains'.⁴³ The success of *The Pickwick Papers* also brought about a significant transformation in Dickens's relationship with the publishing market. A growing awareness of the economic value of his work, combined with tensions with publishers and collaborators, shows how the figure of the writer was now fully embroiled in the contractual dynamics of modernity. As Marzials observes, Dickens 'never undervalued his own work', firmly asserting its value.⁴⁴ In this vein, Smith emphasises how Dickens perceived himself as 'a professional in a country run by amateurs', highlighting the contrast between new forms of professionalisation and structures still marked by privilege and inefficiency.⁴⁵ For this reason too, his critique of contemporary society does not take on a celebratory tone, but insists on the difficulties of change, showing how 'reform came with agonising slowness – always against huge opposition and often qualified – or not at all'.⁴⁶ This exceptional public profile was also linked to Dickens's awareness of his public responsibility. As Marzials observes, he believed that 'his books and he himself were a power for good, and he foresaw how greatly his influence would suffer if a suspicion of hypocrisy—the vice at which he had always girded—were to taint his reputation'.⁴⁷ This self-awareness is accompanied, as Smith points out, by an incisive critique of contemporary society,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁵ Smith, 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens', p. 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 137.

particularly in the fields of education, penal reform, the legal system, and public health, identified as ‘the three dominating passions of his political life’.⁴⁸ In this context, Dickens denounces the inefficiency of institutions, observing that ‘the one great principle of English law is to make business for itself’,⁴⁹ within a society marked by the principle of laissez-faire, ‘a doctrine regarded by many as God-given’.⁵⁰ His fiction is thus not limited to representing the modern world, but highlights its contradictions and human costs.

This immersion in the rhythms of modern culture is accompanied by a deeper aspect of Dickens’s personality, which Marzials describes as ‘that restless desire to see the world which is strong in a great many men, and was specially strong in Dickens’.⁵¹ His 1842 trip to the United States and his 1844 stay in Italy confirm the role of travel and direct observation in the development of his imagination. Particularly significant is the contrast between the American and Italian experiences, which emerges in the comparison between ‘that young giant land of the West, which is still in the garish strong light of morning, and whose great day is in the future’ and ‘this lovely land of age and hoar antiquity’,⁵² delineating two distinct configurations of modernity. In both cases, travel becomes for Dickens a privileged means of perceiving reality. From this perspective, the American experience also brings him into contact with forms of large-scale mobility, through ‘the unending railways, water-courses, and chaotic coach-roads of the great Republic’.⁵³ And yet, even in the midst of these experiences, Dickens continues to perceive London as the centre of his imagination. As Marzials observes, upon returning to work, ‘the child of London turned to the home of his heart, and pined for the London streets’, demonstrating how the urban space of London remains the privileged locus of his creative energy and perceptual memory.⁵⁴ This centrality becomes especially evident at the very moment when Dickens began composing *Dombey and Son*. On 28 June 1846, he marked the beginning of the novel with emphatic capital letters in a letter to Forster: ‘BEGAN DOMBEY’.⁵⁵ Although he had moved to Lausanne earlier that year and intended to begin the novel there, the distance from London soon became a significant imaginative

⁴⁸ Smith, ‘The Life and Times of Charles Dickens’, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852–1853), quoted in Smith, ‘The Life and Times of Charles Dickens’ p. 13.

⁵⁰ Smith, ‘The Life and Times of Charles Dickens’, p. 14.

⁵¹ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 72.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵⁵ Dickens, letter to Forster, 28 June 1846, quoted in Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 103.

constraint. Even the splendour of the surrounding landscape could not compensate for the absence of the metropolis, whose streets had long provided Dickens with a vital source of creative stimulation. As he confessed, ‘the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic-lantern (of the London streets) is IMMENSE!’.⁵⁶ This observation is particularly significant because it confirms that London represented for Dickens not merely a setting, but a genuine perceptual and imaginative condition for his writing. At the same time, a crucial phase in the composition of *Dombey and Son* coincides with Dickens’s stay in Paris. As Marzials observes, it is ‘with the help of streets and crowded ways’ that Dickens writes ‘the great number of *Dombey*, the number in which little Paul dies’, highlighting the role of urban space as a stimulus for his writing.⁵⁷

Even in later works such as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Dickens continues to construct his narrative representation through the juxtaposition of major urban spaces, setting London and Paris in contrast and presenting them respectively as a city ‘comparatively at peace’ and a reality ‘running blood and writhing in the fierce fire of anarchy and mob rule’.⁵⁸ From this perspective, urban space emerges as a privileged site for the representation of historical events, suggesting an interpretation of the city not merely as a backdrop, but as a sphere in which collective tensions and historical transformations converge.

On a broader level, the centrality of the city and the devices of representation can be understood in the light of subsequent critical reflections. Stein’s observation on the *Bleak House Advertiser*, described as ‘a varied assemblage of texts and images’ which constitutes ‘a kind of reader’s guide to the novel’s place in mass society’, allows us to situate Dickens’s work within a context of cultural production that is already mediatised.⁵⁹ This perspective complements Marzials’s findings, demonstrating how Dickens’s fiction actively participates in a culture of representation and textual circulation that extends beyond the individual narrative space. In this sense, Dickens appears immersed in a cultural context strongly shaped by the media, and his focus on the performative dimension and the languages of representation aligns with John Glavin’s observation,

⁵⁶ Dickens, in a letter, quoted in Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 104.

⁵⁷ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 110.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵⁹ Stein, ‘Dickens and Illustration’, p. 184.

who describes him as ‘the most theatrical of Victorian novelists’,⁶⁰ as well as with Joss Marsh’s claim that ‘from no other author did film inherit so much as from the Victorian writer who most imaginatively absorbed the influences of those other ancestors’.⁶¹ This visual dimension must be understood in relation to the material conditions of the production and reception of Dickens’s texts. Serial publication in monthly instalments, which combined text, illustrations and advertising material within a broader commercial framework, makes this dynamic particularly evident, revealing a complex interplay of textual and visual elements.⁶² The relationship between text and image, however, is never simple or automatic. Marzials observes that many of Dickens’s illustrators, particularly Cruikshank and Browne, are ‘pre-eminently caricaturists, and caricaturists of an old school’, and emphasises how their art is characterised by ‘grotesqueness and exaggeration’, adding that ‘the mischief of it is, too, that Dickens’ humour will not bear caricaturing’.⁶³ The problem becomes even more evident when one considers Marzials’s further observation that ‘the defect of his own art as a writer is that it verges too often on caricature. Exaggeration is its bane’, so that ‘Dickens’ comic effects are generally quite forced enough, and should never be further forced when translated into the sister art of drawing’.⁶⁴ This insight therefore invites us to consider Dickensian visual culture not as a unified element, but as a space of tension between narrative imagination, illustrative mediation and public reception.

This interplay between narrative and performance is further explored in Glavin’s analysis of the relationship between Dickens and the theatre. Dickens is one of the most distinctly theatrical authors of the Victorian era, yet this theatricality is marked by a fundamental tension. As he points out, ‘Dickens both loathed and longed for the playhouse. He turned, reluctantly, from stage to page, because the action-prone stage demands from its protagonists a degree of agency Dickens found literally unimaginable’.⁶⁵ He further argues that ‘Dickens can imagine performance, but not drama’, favouring ‘the displacement of dramatic action: surrogate intervention, someone

⁶⁰ John Glavin, ‘Dickens and Theatre’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 189–203, p. 189.

⁶¹ Joss Marsh, ‘Dickens and Film’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 204–223, p. 204.

⁶² Stein, ‘Dickens and Illustration’, p. 184.

⁶³ Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 142.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Glavin, ‘Dickens and Theatre’, p. 190.

else acting on your behalf'.⁶⁶ This suggests that, in Dickens's novels, action is not generally driven by the protagonists' own initiative, but is often delegated to external figures who intervene in their stead. This is a world that tends 'to be acted upon rather than to act',⁶⁷ in which the intervention of an outsider plays a decisive role in determining the development of the plot. Further confirmation of the performative dimension of Dickens's writing is provided by his public readings, in which the author does not merely read his own texts, but transforms them into a fully-fledged theatrical event. Marzials emphasises the rigorous preparation that went into these performances, quoting Dickens's own words, as reported from a letter to Forster, in which he stresses that '[y]ou have no idea how I have worked at them [the readings] [...] I have tested all the serious passion in them by everything I know, made the humorous points much more humorous; corrected my utterance of certain words; [...] I learnt "Dombey" like the rest, and did it to myself often twice a day, with exactly the same pains as at night, over, and over, and over again'.⁶⁸ It is no coincidence that, as reported by Marzials, Carlyle describes the effect of Dickens's readings by observing that he 'acts better than any Macready in the world; a whole tragic, comic, heroic *theatre* visible, performing under one *hat*'.⁶⁹

At the same time, Dickens's distance from the theatre does not imply a rejection of spectacle. On the contrary, his work approaches what Glavin defines as 'Spectacular Theatre', in which 'realism [is] eradicated'⁷⁰ and replaced by 'apparently inexhaustible sequences of full, distinct, and diverse worlds'.⁷¹ At a further level, this spectacular logic is also reflected in Marsh's analysis, which places Dickens at the crossroads between the Victorian novel and nascent cinema. As Marsh observes, cinema inherits from Dickensian fiction 'its mass audience, its social function, its plots, and its techniques of narration'.⁷² In particular, technological modernity, and above all the railway, contributes to radically transforming the way the world is perceived, since it 'turned the world into "moving pictures" and opened up touristic pleasures'.⁷³ This perceptual transformation is directly linked to Stein's observations on Dickensian fiction, which 'depict[s] the very conditions

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Dickens, letter to Forster, quoted in Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 124.

⁶⁹ Carlyle, quoted in Marzials, *Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 124.

⁷⁰ Glavin, 'Dickens and Theatre', p. 190.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁷² Marsh, 'Dickens and Film', p. 204.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

of seeing and knowing, the limits of our access to truth'.⁷⁴ The reader is thus called upon to 'strain to see what cannot be seen, to penetrate darkness, to unravel secrets', thus highlighting the inherently partial and unstable nature of knowledge.⁷⁵ Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Dickensian modernity is defined by a constant tension between visibility and instability. In this context, developments in transport systems assume central importance, since, as Flint observes, in works such as *Dombey and Son*, the railways 'slice through urban and rural environments [...] effecting shifting points of view', helping to redefine not only space, but also the modes of perception through which it is experienced.⁷⁶

In light of the above considerations, Dickens's relationship with industrial modernity finds its most concrete expression in the railway. The railway is not merely a technological innovation; it introduces new ways of experiencing space and movement, altering the ways in which the world is perceived and represented. Within this framework, attention to perception assumes a central role in Dickensian fiction, shaping a progressive interpenetration between external space and inner life. As Flint observes, this translates into a 'porosity of the psychological and the topographical' and a 'blurred ground between the inner and the outer self'.⁷⁷ According to Fisher-Høyrem, drawing on the work of Daniel Martin, Dickens's railway journalism depicts the network as 'a fragile system whose ideal of perfect and frictionless movement was ultimately illusory and potentially dangerous', while at the same time capable of instilling in passengers 'a sense of transcending their own present material environment with all its dangers'.⁷⁸ In works such as *A Flight* (1851) and *Railway Dreaming* (1856), Dickens depicts an experience of perceptual dislocation, described as 'a perpetual somatic sense of spatial and temporal displacement'.⁷⁹ This ambivalence also emerges in the way Fisher-Høyrem, drawing on Martin, interprets railway accidents as moments that offer 'glimpses of the potential for travellers to imagine the fanciful and terrifying experiences of becoming unbounded from local geography'.⁸⁰ At the same time, the railway network ultimately 'functions to

⁷⁴ Stein, 'Dickens and Illustration', p. 173.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁷⁶ Flint, 'The Middle Novels', p. 34.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷⁸ Stefan Fisher-Høyrem, 'Railways: Tracks, Trains, and Travellers', in *Rethinking Secular Time in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 83–84, p. 98.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

insulate—physically as well as mentally—its ever-increasing number of travellers from the frictions of their environments’.⁸¹ The railway thus emerges as a promise of fluidity and, at the same time, as a space of fragility, dislocation and risk.

These considerations are crucial to understanding the function of the railway in *Dombey and Son* and in *The Signal-Man*. In the former, it intervenes in the urban and narrative fabric, whilst in the latter it becomes the centre of an uncertain and unsettling perceptual experience, in which vision, knowledge, and threat are rendered profoundly unstable.

3.2 *Dombey and Son*: Commerce, Patriarchal Authority, and the Crisis of the Family

Before examining the role of the railway in *Dombey and Son* in greater detail, it is useful to introduce the novel through its publication history, plot structure, and principal characters, since these elements provide the narrative and thematic framework within which the railway motif develops. Published between 1846 and 1848, *Dombey and Son* was written at a pivotal moment in Dickens’s career and in British history. As Dennis Walder observes, this work is ‘one of the great novels about social and personal change, and the resistance to change. Written during a key phase of the industrial revolution, when the railway boom was altering both the topography and the economic organization of Britain, and the country’s commerce was becoming global in reach, it explores the ambivalent implications for a City merchant and his family of a new society coming into being’.⁸² From the very beginning, therefore, the story of the Dombey family is deeply intertwined with the economic and social transformations of Victorian modernity. Dickens is not alone in recording the impact of new historical realities on individual and family life, but what distinguishes this novel, the author’s seventh, is ‘the coherence, concentration, and sensitivity with which he pursues his theme over a long narrative’.⁸³ The core of the story lies, in fact, in what Walder defines as ‘the barely visible, even unconscious struggle of its central character to overcome the death of feeling created by the loss of his son and heir’.⁸⁴ This dynamic emerges with particular clarity in his

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸² Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Dennis Walder and Alan Horsman, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2008. ‘Introduction’ by Dennis Walder, p. 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

‘extended resistance to the claims of his loving but neglected daughter, Florence’.⁸⁵ As Dickens himself observes in the 1858 Preface, ‘a “sense of his injustice” is within Mr Dombey all along’ and ‘[t]he more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is’.⁸⁶

The novel originated following the relative commercial failure of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–1844), which, although regarded by Dickens himself and by critics as a work of great merit, sold ‘so far below expectations that Dickens had felt compelled to send the eponymous hero to America to encourage interest’.⁸⁷ After a two-year hiatus, Dickens began writing *Dombey and Son* on 27 June 1846 in Lausanne, where he had moved ‘to distance himself from the demands of London’.⁸⁸ Walder notes that ‘one product of this distance is the unusual amount of evidence we have about the planning and execution of *Dombey and Son*, including correspondence with his confidant John Forster, and, for the first time, the complete part or number plans which Dickens used in writing his novels [...] with notes for general topics and themes on the left-hand side, and chapter summaries on the right’.⁸⁹ According to Tony Laing, *Dombey and Son* is the first novel in which Dickens systematically employed the ‘Mems’, or ‘working notes’, which constitute ‘the author’s distinctive response to the problems of publishing a novel that is predetermined in the length of the whole and of each instalment’.⁹⁰ Alan Horsman observes that the novel was initially ‘[i]ssued in instalments from 1 October 1846 to 1 April 1848, and in one volume without change except for two lists of errata’.⁹¹ Walder further emphasises that the novel presents ‘such clear indications of conscious construction, confirmed, too, by the subordination of Dickens’s familiar comic extravagance to an overall design for the novel’.⁹² The writing process itself was characterised by an extremely demanding schedule, since, as Laing notes, Dickens ‘was obliged to produce over fifteen thousand words every month [...] then in the following final month, to write at least twenty-three thousand’.⁹³

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Tony Laing, *Dickens’s Working Notes for Dombey and Son: Facsimiles and Transcriptions of the Original Manuscript with Commentary on Dickens’s Working Methods* (London: Dickensian Society, 1977), p. 3.

⁹¹ Alan Horsman, ‘Note on the Text’, in Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Dennis Walder and Alan Horsman, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 25.

⁹² Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

⁹³ Laing, *Dickens’s Working Notes for Dombey and Son*, p. 4.

This concern with narrative structure is particularly evident in the letter sent to Forster on 25 July 1846, in which Dickens outlines his narrative intentions. He writes, ‘I design to show Mr. D with that one idea of the Son taking firmer and firmer possession of him, and swelling and bloating his pride to a prodigious extent [...] But the natural affection of the boy will turn towards the despised sister [...] When the boy is about ten years old [...] he will be taken ill, and will die [...] The death of the boy is a death-blow [...] to all the father’s schemes and cherished hopes; and “Dombey and Son” [...] “is a Daughter after all”’.⁹⁴ These words already outline the essential structure of the plot, which revolves around the father’s identification with his son, the emotional bond between Paul and Florence, and the child’s death as an event that shatters patriarchal and commercial expectations. Dickens further specifies that the relationship between father and daughter will undergo a dramatic evolution, observing that Mr Dombey’s ‘indifference and uneasiness’ towards Florence would become ‘a positive hatred’, while her feelings towards him would continue to grow ‘through the decay and downfall of the house, and the bankruptcy of Dombey [...] when his only staff and treasure [...] will be this rejected daughter [...] whose love [...] will be his bitterest reproach’.⁹⁵ The plot thus revolves around the gradual decline of the Dombey household, the protagonist’s financial ruin, and the final revelation of Florence’s emotional and moral worth. Walder also notes that, whilst keeping Mr Dombey and Florence at the centre, Dickens expands the novel through various narrative developments, including ‘Dr Blimber’s Academy at Brighton for aspiring young captains of industry; the back parlour at the Wooden Midshipman, where a lack of business acumen is offset by affection and companionship; or, most notably, the whole sub-plot of Dombey’s disastrous second marriage to the proud and beautiful Edith Granger’.⁹⁶ What emerges is thus a complex narrative structure, in which educational, economic, and matrimonial threads are interwoven with the domestic core.

It is against this backdrop that the story unfolds, opening with the birth of Mr Dombey’s long-awaited son, Paul—an event that consolidates his view of the family as an extension of the ‘Dombey and Son’ business. From the outset, this patriarchal and economic mindset leads him to neglect his daughter Florence, whose exclusion—both emotional and symbolic—forms one of the central tensions of the narrative. Mrs

⁹⁴ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 472, quoted in Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

Dombey's early death and the child's frailty further contribute to a domestic setting marked by profound emotional imbalance. As Paul grows up, his physical frailty and precocious sensitivity stand in stark contrast to his father's utilitarian and rigid outlook. His upbringing, first with Mrs Pipchin and then at Dr Blimber's school, highlights the limitations of contemporary educational models, whilst simultaneously strengthening his bond with Florence. In this context, the boy's upbringing emerges as an artificial and coercive process, incapable of respecting his nature and fragility. The boy's death represents a turning point in the novel's structure, as it shatters Dombey's expectations and exacerbates his emotional detachment, particularly towards Florence. It constitutes not only a devastating emotional loss, but also the collapse of the entire system of expectations upon which the protagonist had constructed his paternal and social identity. In the second part of the novel, the narrative expands through the introduction of new relational and economic dynamics. Dombey's marriage to Edith, motivated more by pride and social prestige than by genuine emotional commitment, proves profoundly unsuccessful, further destabilising the domestic sphere. At the same time, the figure of James Carker, the manager, embodies the most aggressive and predatory aspects of commercial logic, progressively contributing to the moral and economic disintegration of the Dombey household. Walter Gay's departure and Florence's growing isolation accentuate the fragmentation of family ties. The crisis reaches its climax with Edith's escape and the ensuing public scandal, events that expose the fragility of Dombey's authority. Carker's death and the subsequent failure of the business complete the protagonist's downfall, leaving him deprived of both economic power and family ties. The final phase of the novel is characterised by a movement towards reconciliation. Florence, now married to Walter, returns and offers her forgiveness, allowing Dombey to recognise, albeit belatedly, the value of emotional bonds over commercial ambition. From this perspective, memory plays a central role in the protagonist's transformation, becoming the foundation of any possible change. The novel thus concludes with a partial moral regeneration of the protagonist, as he moves from a mindset based on pride and profit to a renewed, albeit fragile, openness to emotional and familial bonds.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ The summary and analysis in this section are based on Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Dennis Walder and Alan Horsman, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Within this narrative structure, the novel centres on the figure of Mr Dombey, whose emotional rigidity is rooted in the loss of his son and in his inability to recognise Florence's affective value. The character therefore embodies a form of affective rigidity that also reflects broader social tensions.⁹⁸ As Walder suggests, this vision is linked to an absolute conception of trade and patriarchal succession, expressed in the famous opening passage which states that '[t]he earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light ... A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son'.⁹⁹ This is described as an 'overweening, imperialist, even blasphemous notion of life', in which the male child becomes the symbolic centre of a system founded on power, continuity and prestige.¹⁰⁰ However, an internal tension within the character emerges already in the opening scene, when Dombey, after kissing his son's hand, recoils as if fearing to compromise his own dignity, as suggested by the passage in which he 'raised one of his hands to his lips, and kissed it; then, seeming to fear that the action involved some compromise of his dignity, went, awkwardly enough, away'.¹⁰¹ Walder also underlines that Dombey's investment in his male child is absolute, as he 'invests all his hopes and ambitions in the newborn "young gentleman", who has to "accomplish a destiny. A destiny, little fellow!"'.¹⁰² In this sense, his paternal and commercial identities have been inseparable from the very beginning.

Alongside Mr Dombey, Florence represents the novel's emotional pole. Her constant and unconditional love constitutes the principal contrast to her father's pride. However, her figure has provoked divergent critical reactions. Walder observes that 'Florence's passivity and infinite loyalty under duress have led to much critical impatience'¹⁰³ and refers in particular to Julian Moynahan's influential 1962 reading of the character, according to which 'her behaviour was essentially masochistic [...] to get Dombey's head down on the pillow where she can drown him in a dissolving love'.¹⁰⁴ This interpretation is countered by more nuanced readings, such as that of Helene Moglen,

⁹⁸ Walder, 'Introduction', p. 7.

⁹⁹ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Dennis Walder and Alan Horsman, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2; discussed in Walder, 'Introduction', p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ Walder, 'Introduction', p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, pp. 3–4; discussed in Walder, 'Introduction', p. 11.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Walder, 'Introduction', p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ Julian Moynahan, 'Dealings with the Firm of *Dombey and Son*: Firmness versus Wetness', in John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (eds.), *Dickens and the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 121–31, quoted in Walder, 'Introduction', p. 21.

who argues that the novel reflects the tensions of ‘gendered dualisms’ and how ‘[t]he repressed “femininity” in both Dombey and his marginalized “other”, Carker, makes them both victims of a rigidly “gendered” world’.¹⁰⁵ From this perspective, Florence can be read as ‘the ambiguous sign and victim of her culture’s repressive sexuality’¹⁰⁶ and as a figure whose role highlights the complexity of Dickensian narrative design. The character thus assumes a central function, not only narrative but also ideological. Walder also insists that the tension between father and daughter is constantly kept alive by the narrative structure, which multiplies ‘hints and echoes’ and shows how Mr Dombey ‘repeatedly turns away from her childish advances, or merely offers an unresponsive, formal hand when she appears’.¹⁰⁷ Florence is therefore not only an emotional figure, but also the term of comparison through which the novel measures the father’s inability to recognise family ties.

Little Paul also plays a decisive role. Dickens had foreseen his death from the beginning, noting ‘Boy born, to die’, and had established that his illness was ‘only expressed in the child’s own feelings—Not otherwise described’.¹⁰⁸ According to Walder, the death of Paul constitutes ‘an astonishing achievement’, deliberately crafted from ‘the dying boy’s perspective alone’.¹⁰⁹ Through the child’s point of view, the novel challenges the certainties of the adult world, as demonstrated by the dialogue about money between Mr Dombey and his son Paul. The father’s belief that ‘[m]oney [...] can do anything’ is contrasted by the child’s response, which highlights its limitations by observing that ‘[i]t can’t make me strong and quite well, can it?’.¹¹⁰ Paul’s centrality is also defined through the places of his education. Walder shows how the child’s perspective emerges forcefully when the boy is sent to Brighton, first to Mrs Pipchin and then to Dr Blimber’s school. Mrs Pipchin embodies a repressive educational model, aimed ‘not to encourage a child’s mind to develop and expand itself like a young flower, but to open it by force like an oyster’,¹¹¹ while at Dr Blimber’s Academy ‘[e]very description of Greek and Latin vegetable was got off the driest twigs of boys, under the frostiest circumstances. Nature

¹⁰⁵ Helene Moglen, ‘Theorizing Fiction/Fictionalizing Theory: The Case of *Dombey and Son*’, *Victorian Studies*, 35.2 (Winter 1992), pp. 159–84, quoted in Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Moglen, ‘Theorizing Fiction/Fictionalizing Theory’, quoted in Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 22.

¹⁰⁷ Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, pp. 99–100; discussed in Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 15.

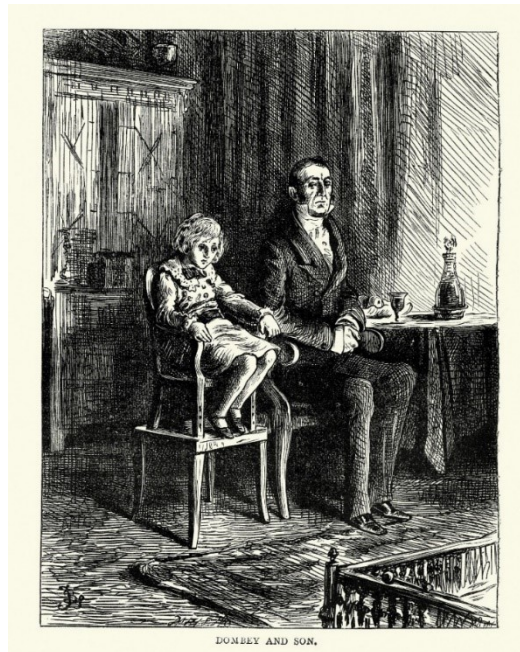
¹¹¹ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p. 109; discussed in Walder, ‘Introduction’, p. 14.

was of no consequence at all'.¹¹² These episodes deepen Paul's narrative function and reinforce the contrast between the child's universe and the disciplinary logic of the adult world.



Hablot Knight Browne ("Phiz") (1846).

Steel engraving. Illustration for *Dombey and Son*, depicting Mr Dombey, Florence, the young Paul, and the nurse Polly Toodle (Mrs Toodle, also known as Richards). London.



Hablot Knight Browne ("Phiz") (1846).

Steel engraving. Illustration for *Dombey and Son*, depicting Mr Dombey and little Paul. London.

¹¹² Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p. 150; discussed in Walder, 'Introduction', p. 15.

Alongside the three main characters, Walder also emphasises figures who expand and complicate the novel's structure. Among these, Edith occupies a central place, as the protagonist of the subplot concerning Dombey's second marriage.¹¹³ Through her, the novel introduces a further narrative thread, which challenges Dombey's authority on the domestic and symbolic levels. Drawing on Moglen's reading, Walder observes that Edith 'achieves a radical consciousness that allows her to comprehend, with Dickens, the principles of opposition that rack the family and cripple the larger society that the family reproduces and reflects' and thus comes to refuse to be "'inscribed in the text of male desire", humiliating and destroying both husband and seducer'.¹¹⁴ Edith thus assumes a decisive function in demonstrating the limits of the patriarchal logic that governs the Dombey household.

Closely connected to Edith is Mr Carker, whom Walder presents as a key figure in both the economic and relational spheres. He is the manager to whom Dombey ultimately leaves space, encouraging him to express 'the more dynamic, predatory qualities required of a successful businessman in a *laissez-faire society*'.¹¹⁵ In this sense, Carker represents a more aggressive and unscrupulous version of the protagonist's commercial logic. Not surprisingly, Walder, again through Moglen, defines him as Dombey's 'marginalized "other"'.¹¹⁶ The character therefore performs an essential function in connecting the crisis of the Dombey family to the competitive violence of the economic world.

Another important character is Walter Gay, whom Walder mentions among the narrative developments modified during the composition of the novel, noting that 'the fate of the newcomer to the firm, young Walter Gay, was not shown trailing away into ruin as the novelist first thought it might'.¹¹⁷ Walter is also linked to the environment of the Wooden Midshipman, where, as Walder observes, 'lack of business acumen is offset by affection and companionship'.¹¹⁸ In contrast to the rigidity of Dombey's world, Walter thus belongs to a narrative space founded upon more humane and supportive relationships. Captain Cuttle fits into the same category, being included by Walder among that 'large group of whimsical characters'¹¹⁹ that also includes Susan Nipper and Miss

¹¹³ Walder, 'Introduction', p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Moglen, 'Theorizing Fiction/Fictionalizing Theory', quoted in Walder, 'Introduction', p. 22.

¹¹⁵ Walder, 'Introduction', p. 10.

¹¹⁶ Moglen, 'Theorizing Fiction/Fictionalizing Theory', quoted in Walder, 'Introduction', p. 22.

¹¹⁷ Walder, 'Introduction', p. 9.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Tox. Although belonging to the eccentric component typical of Dickensian narrative, the Captain assumes a specific moral function in a novel that, according to Walder, is ‘dominated by ungentle paternalism’, since, as he further observes, ‘the Captain’s rough tenderness, in particular his guardianship of the homeless and fatherless Florence in Chapter XLIX, is of signal relevance’.¹²⁰ He therefore emerges as a counter-model to the cold and authoritarian paternity of Mr Dombey. Among the secondary characters who contribute to the story’s development, it is worth mentioning Major Bagstock, defined by Walder as ‘the Mephistophelean Bagstock’.¹²¹ It is under his influence that Dombey attempts to distance himself from the grief caused by the loss of his son, without ever truly managing to process it. Although this figure already introduces motifs that will become central to the subsequent analysis, he is also important on a narrative level, since he accompanies the protagonist through a decisive phase of his inner transformation.

Overall, *Dombey and Son* emerges as a strongly unified novel, in which plot, characters, and narrative construction are closely intertwined. As Walder observes, despite the narrative deviations, ‘the “off-shoots and meanderings” of the story provided a continuity of character, image, and theme which shows that Dickens kept his aims steadily in view throughout’ and that ‘the central focus upon Mr Dombey and Florence was confirmed, and maintained’.¹²² The tension between pride and affection, rejection and recognition, therefore constitutes the structural backbone of the novel, which unfolds as a reflection on family, loss, and the always uncertain possibility of transformation. Although the railway has not yet emerged as a central narrative force, the tensions surrounding commerce, control, and emotional repression already foreshadow the destabilising role it will assume in the course of the analysis.

3.3 The Railway as a Force of Death, Dislocation and Renewal in *Dombey and Son*

This section examines the representation of the train in *Dombey and Son*, focusing on its function as an ambivalent force within the novel. Through the analysis of key episodes — including the transformation of Staggs’s Gardens, Mr Dombey’s railway journey, Carker’s death, and the figure of Toodle — the discussion explores how Dickens

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

associates the railway with movement and visibility, but also destruction and renewal. Particular attention is also given to the relationship between railway space, subjective perception, and the broader transformations of Victorian modernity.

In his analysis of *Dombey and Son*, Murray Baumgarten places the railway within the transition from the pre-railway world to Victorian industrial civilisation. His discussion opens with Thackeray's 1860 reflection that '[t]he railroad "starts the new era"', while those of his generation still belonged simultaneously 'to the new time and the old one'.¹²³ He further recalls the pre-railroad world as something that had once seemed 'firm under our feet', but had now 'passed into limbo and vanished from under us'.¹²⁴ This rupture is then conveyed through the image of the railway works, since '[t]hey have raised those railroad embankments up, and shut off the old world that was behind them'.¹²⁵ As Baumgarten notes, this passage constitutes '[a]n elegy for a landscape that had changed very little since the Middle Ages', while simultaneously signalling the disappearance of the stagecoach world linked with earlier forms of travel.¹²⁶ In this context, the railway becomes a symbol of the transition from the 'rural civilization of the country'¹²⁷ to increasingly populous cities, which were 'creating a host of social relationships, institutions, and values'.¹²⁸ Baumgarten also suggests that Thackeray's remarks articulate a profoundly ambivalent historical perception, since 'the doubled image of the train bearing down upon the past like a Juggernaut [...] and taking England into the future like a prophecy' constituted 'the common starting point of most mid-Victorian explorations of the railroad world'.¹²⁹ The railway thus emerges both as a destructive force and as a vehicle of historical transformation, capable both of erasing the pre-industrial past and projecting society towards an uncertain future. From this perspective, it becomes one of the principal structures through which Dickens conceptualises urban modernity. As Ben Moore observes, such structures can 'serve as a means of creatively conceptualising or re-imagining the modern city, having the capacity to break apart as well as connect city space, fracturing or transforming old forms of

¹²³ William Makepeace Thackeray, quoted in Murray Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time: *Dombey & Son* and the Industrial World', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 19 (1990), pp. 65–89, p. 65.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time', p. 65.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

urbanism even as they create new ones'.¹³⁰ He further argues that '[t]he railway encompasses the creative destruction of the modern city, its capacity to produce new forms of technologised vision amidst scenes of spectacular ruination', while 'railway and river [...] cut through time as well as space, bringing together the old city and the new'.¹³¹ In this sense, Moore recalls Fritz Stahl's formulation, cited by Walter Benjamin, according to which 'the old city and the new are not left standing opposite each other [...] but are drawn together into one'.¹³² The Dickensian city thus appears as 'a spatio-temporal palimpsest where ancient and modern cross over one another', producing an urban landscape that is 'at once exhilarating and radically dislocating'.¹³³ Moore ultimately argues that 'in Dickens' sensorium modernity is not symbolised simply by the construction of new conduits [...] but by their dialectical connection with old conduits'.¹³⁴ In this context, as William Hughes points out, the railway appears as a force '[a]rbitrary and totalitarian in its extensive compass of human life and aspirations'.¹³⁵ At the same time, Baumgarten observes how railway imagery could 'enshrine the iron linkages of the railways in an icon that [...] articulated the idea of one world', while also underlining that 'Victorian views of the train and of modernity were nevertheless multi-layered'.¹³⁶

Following the chronological development of the novel, one of the first manifestations of the transformation wrought by the railway emerges in the passage dedicated to Staggs's Gardens in Chapter VI. Luisa Pontrandolfo identifies this episode as one of the most significant, closely connected to the disruptive arrival of the railway, which is described as a violent and destabilising event, comparable to a sudden upheaval of the urban landscape:¹³⁷

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

¹³⁰ Ben Moore, 'The Railway and the River: Conduits of Dickens' Imaginary City', in *Dickens and the Virtual City*, ed. by E. Murail and S. Thornton, *Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 35.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 148 [E14a], quoted in Moore, 'The Railway and the River: Conduits of Dickens' Imaginary City', p. 36.

¹³³ Moore, 'The Railway and the River', p. 36.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ William Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, ed. by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 445–462, p. 448.

¹³⁶ Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time', p. 67.

¹³⁷ Luisa Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania. Gioie e paure 'ferroviarie' nella letteratura inglese dell'Ottocento* (Bari: B.A. Graphis, 2001), p. 75.

ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; 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, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.

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.

[...] frowzy fields, and cow-houses, and dunghills, and dustheaps, and ditches, and gardens, and summer-houses, and carpet-beating grounds, at the very door of the Railway. [...] Staggs's Gardens was uncommonly incredulous. It was a little row of houses, with little squalid patches of ground before them, fenced off with old doors, barrel staves, scraps of tarpaulin, and dead bushes. [...] Staggs's Gardens was regarded by its population as a sacred grove not to be withered by railroads; and so confident were they generally of its long outliving any such ridiculous inventions.¹³⁸

In this context, Baumgarten connects the transformation of Staggs's Gardens to the climate of railway speculation in the 1840s, recalling how the term 'Stag', introduced by Thackeray in 1845, referred to a speculator in railway stocks.¹³⁹ Once again in Chapter VI, the narrator insists upon the ambiguity of the name, observing that:

Some were of opinion that Staggs's Gardens derived its name from a deceased capitalist, one Mr. Staggs, who had built it for his delectation. Others, who had a natural taste for the country, held that it dated from those rural times when the antlered herd, under the familiar denomination of Staggses, had resorted to its shady precincts.¹⁴⁰

Baumgarten underlines how this very setting, perceived as 'a sacred grove', is destined to be erased, stating that '[w]hat the rural population regards with awe, the railroad will destroy, and in its place put Camden Town, a prosperous London suburb and business centre'.¹⁴¹ He also observes that 'the iron rails that smash Staggs's Gardens and teach Dombey about transition also bring a new order in which change is now part of everyday

¹³⁸ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter VI: Paul's Second Deprivation', in *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; online edn, Dec. 2020), pp. 68–69.

¹³⁹ Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time', pp. 78–79.

¹⁴⁰ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter VI: Paul's Second Deprivation', p. 69.

¹⁴¹ Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time', p. 79.

life'.¹⁴² Pontrandolfo interprets the long passage as a representation of Staggs's Gardens, in Camden Town, as perceived by little Paul, who travels to that suburban area in search of his nurse, Polly Toodle. The critic describes it as a '[l]uogo indefinito — o meglio — non-finito, in cui la mano della speculazione ha cominciato a lasciare il segno del proprio potere, ma non ha ancora completato quel suo lavoro'.¹⁴³ For Pontrandolfo, the disturbed landscape is 'il riflesso evidente del movimento, di quel cambiamento repentino della società che però non è ancora riuscita a trovare una sua dimensione "altra"'.¹⁴⁴ Dickens, she argues, reproduces 'tutte le contraddizioni, le sfasature di un cambiamento che è per alcuni aspetti ancora incerto, solo abbozzato, per altri versi è fin troppo accelerato e brusco'.¹⁴⁵ Elements of irregularity and acceleration consequently emerge alongside signs of immobility, stasis, and resistance to novelty, which together convey the complexity of the nascent industrial order.¹⁴⁶ Along similar lines, Moore observes that 'the confusion of Staggs's Gardens is just such a dream of a new epoch', underscoring the almost visionary dimension through which modernity takes shape in the text.¹⁴⁷ From this perspective, the scene highlights how the construction of the railway coincides with a form of destruction, since 'the railway is a form of architecture that undoes any such permanence'.¹⁴⁸ Moore also emphasises that 'the ruin always refers to the future as well as the past', thereby revealing the intrinsically unstable and transitory nature of the represented environment.¹⁴⁹ In this sense, it becomes 'an inverse image of construction' that 'reveals a building's scaffolding, and hence its earliest beginnings'.¹⁵⁰ The image of the 'Babel towers of chimneys' finally suggests a reference to an archaic and almost biblical dimension of transformation, reinforcing the idea of a process that appears both modern and primordial.¹⁵¹ On an even more radical level, as Hughes points out, Dickensian representation shifts from a geological language to apocalyptic imagery, since the emphasis placed on 'the glare and roar of flames' and 'mounds of ashes' is 'more redolent of a theological hell than of seismic upheaval'.¹⁵² From this perspective, the landscape

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴³ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 77.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Moore, 'The Railway and the River', p. 41.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', p. 449.

emerges as a space in which ‘demolition and construction have become elided into one chaotic mass’, to the point that ‘nothing is complete nor seems to be in hope of imminent completion’, turning what had once been Camden Town into what is perceived as ‘a non-place’, devoid of its previous coordinates of meaning.¹⁵³

By Chapter XV, the same space appears in an entirely transformed state. At this point, the process is complete, and Staggs’s Gardens belongs to the past, reduced to a mere memory:¹⁵⁴

There was no such place as Staggs’s Gardens. It had vanished from the earth. Where the old rotten summer-houses once had stood, palaces now reared their heads, and granite columns of gigantic girth opened a vista to the Railway world beyond. The miserable waste ground, where the refuse-matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone; and in its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise. The old by-streets now swarmed with passengers and vehicles of every kind [...]. Bridges that had led to nothing, led to villas, gardens, churches, healthy public walks.¹⁵⁵

At this point, Pontrandolfo notes that ‘[t]utto è cambiato e tutto è soprattutto all’insegna dell’incessante movimento, come il pulsare del sangue nelle vene’.¹⁵⁶ This impression is reinforced by Dickens’s use of terms such as ‘throbbing’, ‘fermentation’ and ‘every four-and-twenty’, which emphasise the incessant activity of the transformed space. The new landscape thus appears as the result of a process in which, according to Pontrandolfo, ‘lo stravolgimento causato dai lavori ferroviari risulta essere l’unica soluzione possibile’,¹⁵⁷ while a sense of ‘continuity and tradition’¹⁵⁸ still survives. The railway works therefore do not simply erase the past; rather, they produce a precarious equilibrium in which destruction, persistence, and reorganisation coexist. From this perspective, the space seems progressively to move towards a new form of urban development. The original landscape, characterised by ‘miserable waste ground’, gives way to the growth of St Pancras station and to a modern urban environment shaped by structures and dynamics that would have appeared unimaginable only a short time earlier:¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

¹⁵⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 77.

¹⁵⁵ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter XV: Amazing Artfulness of Captain Cuttle, and a New Pursuit for Walter Gay’, p. 233.

¹⁵⁶ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 78.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens*, p. 193, quoted in Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 78.

¹⁵⁹ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 78.

There were railway patterns in its drapers' shops, and railway journals in the windows of its newsmen. There were railway hotels, coffee-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses; railway plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes, and time tables; railway hackney-coach and cab-stands; railway omnibuses, railway streets and buildings [...].¹⁶⁰

David D. Marcus reads the transformation of Staggs's Gardens as part of a broader historical and perceptual shift. He observes that '[t]he history of Staggs' Gardens illustrates on a social level this temporal discontinuity'.¹⁶¹ The new neighbourhood, he adds, represents the 'culture of the railroad',¹⁶² a culture visible 'not only in the many physical changes that the railroad has caused but in the state of mind and style of life that people have assimilated'.¹⁶³ Pontrandolfo observes that, just as Mr Dombey appears out of step with the age in which he lives, attempting to maintain a rigid and immutable position within an ever-changing context, so too the stagnant immobility of Staggs's Gardens cannot survive for long. The still partly rural spaces, the 'little squalid patches', and the old dilapidated structures are progressively replaced by a profoundly different environment, marked by the dynamism characteristic of the railway world. In this new context, rather than the stable presence of individuals, what emerges are the traces of their continuous passage, shaped by rapid circulation and by practices already associated with forms of consumerism, of which material signs such as 'wrappers', 'bottles', and 'sandwich-boxes' remain. Pontrandolfo identifies the modernity of the novel in Dickens's ability to create 'un vero caleidoscopio di opinioni e visioni', where everything is filtered 'attraverso la soggettività di ciascuno'.¹⁶⁴ The representation of modernity is thus not a simple condemnation, but rather an acknowledgement of its complexity. In this sense, Pontrandolfo argues that the railway, as 'espressione eccellente del mondo industriale', 'molto ha distrutto, ma molto ha anche costruito'.¹⁶⁵ This confirms its ambivalent function within the novel. From this perspective, the concluding commentary of the passage also

¹⁶⁰ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter XV: Amazing Artfulness of Captain Cuttle, and a New Pursuit for Walter Gay', p. 233.

¹⁶¹ David D. Marcus, 'Symbolism and Mental Process in *Dombey and Son*', *Dickens Studies Annual* 6 (1977), pp. 57–71, p. 63.

¹⁶² Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 168, quoted in D. D. Marcus, 'Symbolism and Mental Process in *Dombey and Son*', p. 64.

¹⁶³ D. D. Marcus, 'Symbolism and Mental Process in *Dombey and Son*', p. 64.

¹⁶⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 79.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

acquires an ambiguous dimension marked by a subtle ironic undertone¹⁶⁶: ‘But Staggs’s Gardens had been cut up root and branch. Oh woe the day! when “not a rood of English ground”—laid out in Staggs’s Gardens—is secure!’.¹⁶⁷ Pontrandolfo observes that the reference to ‘not a rood of English ground’, which explicitly recalls the opening line of Wordsworth’s sonnet against the railway, has often been interpreted as clear evidence of Dickens’s nostalgia for the past. The Wordsworthian allusion, according to Pontrandolfo, ‘mostra segni e veicola intenzioni [...] di dubbio e di sicura e maggiore complessità, sì da non potersi ridurre a puro rimpianto passatista’.¹⁶⁸ It is precisely this ambiguity, which also constitutes a defining feature of the novel’s modernity, that allows the representation of the train in *Dombey and Son* to be read, following Kathleen Tillotson, as a moment in which the intensification of style and description reflects both fascination and anxiety:¹⁶⁹

is emphasized by a volcanic upsurge in the style, by description much overflowing its narrative function. In this description may be discerned the fascination of the new as well as the horror of the strange; [...] This colouring of the gloom and horror may derive from the over-riding mood of the novel; it may be a picturesque reflection of contemporary doubts; but more probably [...] it represents a persistent shade in Dickens’s own social view, which contains at least as much pessimism as optimism.¹⁷⁰

Pontrandolfo interprets the symbol of the train both as an expression of equality and democratic social levelling and, above all, as a reference to the dimension of death. She writes that the ‘mostro di acciaio’ is not simply a bearer of death, but ‘contiene tutta la forza per poter ricordare ai lettori il senso vero e profondo dell’esistenza che è “rinascita morale”’.¹⁷¹ From this perspective, a symbolic connection may also be identified between the train and the river, another central element in *Dombey and Son*, particularly in Chapter XVI, which marks the death of little Paul. The river emerges as an ambivalent presence, simultaneously associated with life and death and capable of arousing contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion. With its solemn and almost ritual quality, it seems to assume, for little Paul now approaching death, a rapid and unstoppable rhythm, while for the other characters it maintains a slower and more regular flow. The sounds and noises

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

¹⁶⁷ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter XV: Amazing Artfulness of Captain Cuttle, and a New Pursuit for Walter Gay’, p. 234.

¹⁶⁸ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 80.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

¹⁷⁰ Kathleen Mary Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 200.

¹⁷¹ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, pp. 80.

accompanying the movement of the river reach the child through the half-open windows of his room:¹⁷²

His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now he thought how black it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the hosts of stars—and more than all, how steadily it rolled away to meet the sea.¹⁷³

Pontrandolfo observes that the course of existence, effectively evoked by the river, is accompanied by another form of flow, more specifically modern yet equally significant, represented by the train. She links the railway to the river, observing that ‘[q]uesto, con il fiume, infatti, rappresenta vita e morte insieme, entrambi attraversano la metropoli in lungo e in largo’.¹⁷⁴ If the river belongs to a natural sphere, the train is instead an artificial product generated by human intervention; nevertheless, both share the same dynamic force, configuring themselves as elements in constant motion and conveying a sense of pulsating vitality.¹⁷⁵

Pontrandolfo suggests that this same continuous movement is also reflected in individual experience, becoming internalised within the subject’s own perception. In Chapter XX, Dickens describes the journey undertaken by the protagonist after the death of his son Paul, presenting him as a man profoundly affected by this loss and unable to escape the weight of his emotional condition. In this context, Mr Dombey travels from London to Leamington:¹⁷⁶

He found no pleasure or relief in the journey. Tortured by these thoughts he carried monotony with him, through the rushing landscape, and hurried headlong, not through a rich and varied country, but a wilderness of blighted plans and gnawing jealousies. The very speed at which the train was whirled along, mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably to its fore-doomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own—defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death.

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

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

¹⁷³ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter XVI: What the Waves were Always Saying’, p. 236.

¹⁷⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 81.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock [...] like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is floating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking, where the stream is running, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smooths or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace to leave behind but dust and vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Breasting the wind and light, the shower and sunshine, away, and still away, it rolls and roars, fierce and rapid, smooth and certain [...]. Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry and handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted, small, and insignificant as they are left behind: and so they do, and what else is there but such glimpses, in the track of the indomitable monster, Death!

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, plunging down into the earth again, and working on in such a storm of energy and perseverance, that amidst the darkness and whirlwind the motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward, until a ray of light upon the wet wall shows its surface flying past like a fierce stream. Away once more into the day, and through the day, with a shrill yell of exultation, roaring, rattling, tearing on, spurning everything with its dark breath [...].

Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke, and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance. As Mr. Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in on these things: not made or caused them.¹⁷⁷

Marcus's reading of Dombey's railway journey confirms the centrality of subjective perception in this episode. He writes that Dickens makes 'Dombey's perception of the railroad a measure of the perceiving mind'.¹⁷⁸ The passage, therefore, does not impose a single meaning on the train, since the narrative voice 'pointedly intersperses reminders that there are alternative ways of seeing these same events'.¹⁷⁹ Most significantly, Marcus observes that Dombey is 'tinging the scene of transition before him with the morbid colours of his own mind'.¹⁸⁰ As Moore points out, 'the railway can produce a movement towards past as well as future when entering a tunnel, by "plunging down into the earth" as if towards the underworld, at which point, "amidst the darkness and whirlwind the

¹⁷⁷ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter XX: Mr Dombey Goes Upon a Journey', pp. 297–299.

¹⁷⁸ D. D. Marcus, 'Symbolism and Mental Process in *Dombey and Son*', p. 63.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward”’.¹⁸¹ Pontrandolfo notes that, with the exception of the opening paragraph, the subsequent sections are shaped through a careful use of rhetorical effects, particularly the persistent recurrence of alliteration and anaphora, evident in the repetition of terms such as ‘and’, ‘away’, ‘by’, and ‘through’. This pattern is reinforced by the repeated presence of ‘Death’, whose recurrence seems to accompany and mark the duration of the journey, almost reproducing the rhythm of the wheels upon the tracks. Its insistent repetition has led many critics to establish a direct association between the train and death, a reading that has subsequently been extended to the novel as a whole. From this perspective, the train frequently emerges as a symbol of progress and modernity marked by negative connotations, within a pessimistic vision that Dickens appears to project onto the new industrial world.¹⁸² Tillotson follows a similar critical approach, emphasising this pessimistic dimension and reading the train also as a symbol ‘of the oneness of society’, observing that ‘as the train slows down among the black-battered slums of an industrial city, the double allegory becomes clear’.¹⁸³ At this point, the ‘steel monster’ reveals what Tillotson defines as its ‘social and spiritual desolation’.¹⁸⁴ Pontrandolfo nevertheless argues that, while the train undoubtedly carries with it fears and anxieties and may be read as a sign of an inexorable movement towards death, the question remains whether an exclusively negative interpretation is truly adequate.¹⁸⁵ In this sense, as Moore observes, ‘the train in Dickens also brings out the death and ruin which the domestic interior seeks to cover over’.¹⁸⁶ Pontrandolfo’s analysis further reveals the considerable complexity of meanings and references embedded within the passage and, more broadly, within the novel as a whole. The image of the train as a symbol of life moving towards its final destination is undeniably present, just as it is understandable that, for Dickens’s contemporaries, speed, noise, screeching, and smoke could generate uncertainty and fear, especially in light of the numerous railway accidents that contributed to strengthening the association between trains and death within the collective imagination. As previously noted, Dickens himself had direct experience of such events; nevertheless, Pontrandolfo warns against reading the train-death association

¹⁸¹ Moore, ‘The Railway and the River’, p. 39.

¹⁸² Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 63.

¹⁸³ Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, p. 188.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 64.

¹⁸⁶ Moore, ‘The Railway and the River’, p. 42.

as ‘la dimostrazione inequivocabile della visione dello scrittore, pessimistica in toto, del mondo industriale’.¹⁸⁷ On the contrary, she stresses Dickens’s complex position, arguing that he cannot be considered ‘né come un conservatore assoluto [...] né tanto meno un “fautore del progresso”’,¹⁸⁸ despite the fact that Ruskin described him as ‘a pure modernist’ and ‘the leader of the steam-whistle party’.¹⁸⁹ The symbol of the train thus assumes a complex function, also connected to the ‘moral hierarchies that are supposedly Dickens’ answer to the social and individual problems his novels pose’.¹⁹⁰ It is not employed in a univocal manner, but rather through contradictory meanings, acquiring both positive and negative connotations. For Pontrandolfo, ‘[i]l valore e il significato da attribuire al treno [...] variano con il variare del personaggio’, since the railway is not represented through a single predetermined interpretation.¹⁹¹ It is rather ‘il risultato dello stato d’animo, della situazione particolare, del momento in cui ciascun personaggio lo vive’, becoming a ‘personale reazione emotiva’ to that symbol.¹⁹² This multiplicity of visions reflects what has been described as the ‘malleability of human vision’¹⁹³ and constitutes one of the central aspects of Dickensian modernity, expressed precisely through the capacity to sustain ambivalence and contradiction without offering a single definitive interpretation, but instead foregrounding the complexity of reality.¹⁹⁴ In Dombey’s journey, Pontrandolfo argues that the alliterations, anaphoras and onomatopoeic sounds reproducing the noise of the train ‘sono il frutto dello stato mentale di Mr. Dombey’.¹⁹⁵ His ‘tortured’ condition derives from the incessant overlapping of thoughts flowing relentlessly through his mind. As Pontrandolfo observes, this is encapsulated in the expression ‘he carried monotony with him’, since ‘la monotonia dei suoi stessi pensieri finisce con l’invadere il paesaggio esterno’ through which Dombey travels passively and almost unconsciously.¹⁹⁶ This fusion between interiority and reality produces a perceptual transformation. Pontrandolfo describes this process as ‘una sorta

¹⁸⁷ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, pp. 64–65.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁸⁹ John Ruskin, *Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and A. D. O. Wedderburn (London: Murray, 1905), vol. XXXVII, p. 7, quoted in Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 65.

¹⁹⁰ S. Marcus, *Symbolism and Mental Process in Dombey and Son*, p. 58, quoted in Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 65.

¹⁹¹ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 65.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ S. Marcus, *Symbolism and Mental Process in Dombey and Son*, p. 65, quoted in Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 65.

¹⁹⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 65.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

di osmosi tra interiorità e mondo esterno', through which the landscape becomes, for Dombey, a 'wilderness of blighted plans and gnawing jealousies'¹⁹⁷. In this process, jealousy, pride, and a broader attitude of emotional closure and hostility toward the world recur as a true leitmotif accompanying the journey to its conclusion. Dombey tends to perceive a reflection of his own condition everywhere, as suggested by the passage in which he searches for 'a likeness to his misfortune everywhere. There was a remorseless triumph going on about him, and it galled and stung him in his pride and jealousy'.¹⁹⁸ The movement of the train, with its irregular rhythm and screeching sounds, thus becomes part of a vision that may be described as 'panoramic' yet one dominated by the obsessive presence of death, which prevents the character from experiencing any form of pleasure or detachment during the journey. The use of the present tense further reinforces this identification, giving the reader a direct and simultaneous perception of Dombey's thoughts and emotions.¹⁹⁹ The train journey to Leamington traverses a reality composed not only of natural landscapes but also of fragments of urban space, described through terms such as 'dark', 'wretched', 'falling down' and 'broken' — images of decay dominated by smoke, disease, and deformity, reflected in the 'distorted chimneys and bricks'. For Pontrandolfo, the dominant impression of negativity and destruction 'va ricondotta non tanto alla realtà generale, quanto al particolare stato d'animo di Mr. Dombey'.²⁰⁰ Grief over Paul's death constantly accompanies Dombey and is projected onto the external world, intensifying every dark aspect of reality. Added to this dimension is Dombey's own predisposition toward the rejection of change. As Pontrandolfo observes, his condition is one of 'una staticità sia fisica che mentale', since change means 'innovazione, perdita di controllo sulle cose e sugli altri'.²⁰¹ This also explains why, as Robin Gilmour observes, he is described as 'associated with rigidity, paralysis, ice, and death'.²⁰² The landscape he observes from the train window is certainly marked by elements of degradation — poverty, smoke, and disease — yet his perception further intensifies its negative aspects. Pontrandolfo clarifies that the poverty, smoke and disease seen from the carriage window are indeed present in the urban landscape, 'ma non è certo

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter XX: Mr Dombey Goes Upon a Journey', p. 299.

¹⁹⁹ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, pp. 65–66.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Robin Gilmour, *The Novel in the Victorian Age*, Edward Arnold, London, 1986, p. 90.

il treno ad essere causa di tanta bruttura'.²⁰³ In this perspective, Moore underlines how this revelation clashes with 'the refusal or inability of Dombey, a representative of the dominant classes, to confront the "want" on which his own edifice of wealth is built'.²⁰⁴ He, in fact, 'has no conception of space as a social product, since for him it exists purely to serve the firm, becoming an index of the firm's troubles, and his own. He comprehends the ruin outside as a monstrous, but virtual, excess that confronts him, rather than part of a system within which he is financially and morally invested'.²⁰⁵ Pontrandolfo suggests that the railway journey is perceived as a 'viaggio infernale', a 'discesa agli inferi', above all because 'in quello stato d'animo Mr. Dombey lo affronta e lo vive, percorso doloroso nella propria interiorità e nel proprio disagio esistenziale'.²⁰⁶ Moore reads this passage as a scene in which '[t]he train breaks through architecture here, revealing the death and lack within'.²⁰⁷ He further observes that '[a]ll Dombey sees is a "ruinous and dreary" scene', which becomes 'little more than an externalisation of his state of mind'.²⁰⁸ At the same time, however, Moore adds that 'the narrator repeats Dombey's error', since he distinguishes 'the railway from the social system that has "made or caused" this poverty', without acknowledging that 'the train, too, is implicated in the ruin it reveals'.²⁰⁹

In this regard, Pontrandolfo recalls Baumgarten's interpretation of another passage from the novel, in Chapter XLVII, where the narrator meditates on the way human beings intervene in nature, altering its original order and imposing an artificial dimension that ultimately comes to appear natural, observing that '[i]t might be worth while, sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural'.²¹⁰

Following Pontrandolfo's reading, the passage is centred on the idea that 'lo stato "naturale" delle cose viene volutamente stravolto dall'uomo, il quale ne impone uno artificiale, "innaturale", di sua creazione'.²¹¹ The reflection does not concern only the physical transformation of nature, but also 'i legami familiari così come tutti i rapporti interpersonali che si vengono a creare nella società', whose outcome, according to her, is

²⁰³ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 67.

²⁰⁴ Moore, 'The Railway and the River', p. 43.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

²⁰⁶ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 67.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²¹⁰ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter XLVII: The Thunderbolt', p. 683.

²¹¹ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 68.

‘molto sconsolante’.²¹² In Pontrandolfo’s account, this reflection is directly connected to Mr Dombey’s coldness and to his selfish and cruel decision to distance himself, both physically and emotionally, from Edith and Florence.²¹³ This connection between Dombey’s emotional sterility and his relationship with Florence is also confirmed by Dickens’s own outline of the novel, reproduced by Tillotson. There, Florence is described, in relation to her father, as ‘a mere convenience and handle to him’, while Dickens explains that Dombey’s initial ‘indifference and uneasiness towards his daughter’ is intended to develop ‘into a positive hatred’.²¹⁴ At the same time, Florence’s response is defined by ‘a greater desire to love him, and to be loved by him’,²¹⁵ and the ‘Unknown Good Genius’ is identified as ‘this rejected daughter’.²¹⁶ Mr Dombey thus becomes, in Pontrandolfo’s words, an ‘esempio palese di negatività’, leading to ‘una invocazione affinché un *good spirit* abbia la voglia e la forza di cambiare l’atteggiamento dell’umanità tutta e quella di Mr. Dombey in particolare’:²¹⁷

Was Mr. Dombey’s master-vice, that ruled him so inexorably, an unnatural characteristic?

[...] Oh for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off, with a more potent and benignant hand [...] and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them! [...] Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night: for men, delayed to no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making [...], would then apply themselves, like creatures of one common origin, owning one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place! [...] But no such day had ever dawned on Mr. Dombey.²¹⁸

Moore recalls Jeremy Tambling’s observation that ‘[t]he novel and the train act analogously to each other in letting the light of day in’.²¹⁹ In this sense, the train is ‘like the good spirit which takes off the housetops’, since both ‘work to make the invisible visible’.²²⁰ Pontrandolfo underlines how the insistence on the idea of a human nature rendered ‘unnatural’ serves to highlight the value Dickens places on the communal dimension and the possibilities for recovery it offers. From this perspective, the writer

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, p. 316.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

²¹⁷ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 68.

²¹⁸ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter XLVII: The Thunderbolt’, pp. 683–685.

²¹⁹ Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), p. 116, quoted in Moore, ‘The Railway and the River’, p. 45.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

seems to distance himself from the idea of an order guaranteed by a 'divine force', instead presenting a vision in which 'man's bestiality' emerges above all, devoid of a true 'belief in a transforming God'.²²¹ If man has been capable of introducing the unnatural into the natural world, he may also follow the opposite path, recovering a different balance; it is precisely this possibility that Dickens appears to hope for. In this sense, one may detect a shift in his way of questioning the human condition, as the traditional 'What am I?' is progressively replaced by 'What shall I do?', which becomes the new principle upon which a form of salvation can be grounded. The perspective is thus no longer primarily oriented toward the redemption of the soul, but rather toward the necessity of taking concrete action in order to live adequately within the world. Within this framework, Dickens identifies 'selfishness', often disguised as 'respectability', as one of the principal causes behind the impossibility of building a 'genuine community in England',²²² as the figure of Dombey emblematically demonstrates.²²³

Pontrandolfo observes that another character, Carker, also undergoes a journey that acquires a clear moral significance. His death, which occurs in Chapter LV, represents one of the novel's most significant turning points. He is described as 'classless, anonymous, cunning in manipulating Dombey [...] with a mixture of servility and arrogance' and, similarly to Dombey, he appears incapable of accepting change and entirely resistant to the new.²²⁴ His story culminates in his death beneath the wheels of the train, an event that may be interpreted as a form of punishment for his sins, a sort of atonement inflicted upon the villain. As Baumgarten suggests, Carker may also be interpreted as Dombey's 'managerial double', a sort of distorted reflection of his own figure, whose destruction acquires a symbolic value within the protagonist's journey.²²⁵ In Carker's case too, Pontrandolfo argues that 'è la sua soggettività, il suo stato d'animo, a determinare gli avvenimenti'.²²⁶ His attempt to escape from the man pursuing him ultimately leads him to his own destruction. The return journey from France thus takes the form of a frenetic and disorderly flight, first by carriage and then by train, driven by fear and by the desire to reach an isolated and distant place associated in his memory with

²²¹ B. Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 98, quoted in Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 69.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 69.

²²⁴ A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens*, p. 101, quoted in Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 69.

²²⁵ Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time', p. 79.

²²⁶ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, pp. 69–70.

a condition of peace. More than a real destination, however, it represents an escape from himself, sustained by the illusion of finding refuge in an idealised reality, ‘a certain station on the railway, where he would have to branch off to his place of destination, and where there was a quiet Inn’.²²⁷ The attempt to recover a state of tranquillity, especially mental, nevertheless proves doomed to failure. His guilt and fear produce such confusion that ‘Carker perde così la cognizione del tempo e dello spazio’.²²⁸ As Moore observes, this experience takes the form of a profound perceptual disintegration, in which ‘things past and present [are] all confounded together; [...] his life and journey blended into one’,²²⁹ thus configuring an experience of radical temporal and spatial confusion.²³⁰ Marcus offers a similar reading of Carker’s final journey. He argues that ‘Carker’s fevered journey through France and England to his eventual death on the railroad tracks portrays [...] a change in his perception of himself’.²³¹ His vision of the train as a ‘fiery devil’ externalises ‘this process of internal dissolution’, while ‘[t]he railroad acts as a locus for the mental conflict’.²³² Marcus further observes that, in taking Carker’s life, ‘the railroad functions as an instrument of his consciousness’.²³³ Pontrandolfo suggests that this bewilderment can be traced in part to the experience of train travel, its speed, and the ‘panoramic’ view of the outside world, but that it stems above all from Carker’s internal condition, marked by a troubled conscience and the constant feeling of being hunted, as emerges from the following passage:²³⁴

“What day is this?” he [Carker] asked of the waiter [...].
 “Day, Sir?”
 “Is it Wednesday?”
 “Wednesday, Sir? No, Sir. Thursday, Sir.”
 “I forgot. How goes the time? My watch is unwound.”
 “Wants a few minutes of five o’clock, Sir. Been travelling a long time, Sir, perhaps?”
 “Yes.”
 “By rail, Sir?”
 “Yes.”
 “Very confusing, Sir. [...]”²³⁵

²²⁷ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter LV: Rob the Grinder Loses his Place’, p. 819.

²²⁸ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 70.

²²⁹ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter LV: Rob the Grinder Loses his Place’, p. 817.

²³⁰ Moore, ‘The Railway and the River’, p. 45.

²³¹ D. D. Marcus, ‘Symbolism and Mental Process in *Dombey and Son*’, p. 64.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 70.

²³⁵ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter LV: Rob the Grinder Loses his Place’, p. 820.

Carker's death has often been compared to that of another famous literary figure, Anna Karenina; however, whereas in that case feelings of pity and horror prevail in the face of a tragic end, the death of Dickens's character assumes, according to Pontrandolfo, a different connotation, characterised by a form of horror that seems to produce an almost complacent reaction. She describes Carker's death as 'fotografata e cronometrata', followed by the reader 'in tutte le sue fasi', both through the eyes of the mysterious pursuer, who is ultimately revealed to be Mr Dombey, and through those of Carker himself.²³⁶ The latter appears, almost unconsciously, aware of the imminence of his own end, which seems in some way alluring, as suggested by the expression 'Death was on him'.²³⁷ At the same time, Mr Dombey observes the scene without being able to intervene. As Pontrandolfo writes, he undergoes 'un'esperienza di morte che, consumandosi sotto i suoi occhi, assume per lui una funzione simbolica di atto liberatorio':²³⁸

And their eyes met.

In the quick unsteadiness of the surprise, he staggered, and slipped on to the road below him. But recovering his feet immediately, he stepped back a pace or two upon that road, to interpose some wider space between them, and looked at his pursuer, breathing short and quick.

He heard a shout—another—saw the face change from its vindictive passion to a faint sickness and terror—felt the earth tremble—knew in a moment that the rush was come—uttered a shriek—looked round—saw the red eyes, bleared and dim, in the daylight, close upon him—was beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill, that spun him round and round, and struck him limb from limb, and licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air.²³⁹

The rapidity with which the events unfold, combined with their almost fragmented and relentless progression, transforms the scene into an inescapable vortex, whose violence is intensified by the profoundly human impossibility of finding a way out. In particular, it is the most brutal descriptions — such as 'beaten down', 'whirled away', 'spun round and round', and above all 'struck limb from limb', together with 'licked his stream of life up' — that convey Mr Dombey's perspective and the way he perceives the 'iron monster' as a force associated with death. Equally striking is the fact that Dombey witnesses the scene without averting his gaze. Pontrandolfo reads this moment as a 'visione rivelatrice' in which Carker, Dombey's 'alter ego', allows him to appropriate that experience of

²³⁶ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 71.

²³⁷ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter LV: Rob the Grinder Loses his Place', p. 823.

²³⁸ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 71.

²³⁹ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 'Chapter LV: Rob the Grinder Loses his Place', p. 823.

death.²⁴⁰ As Moore points out, the ‘red eyes’ of the train that overwhelms Carker symbolically recall the ‘red eye’²⁴¹ already associated with Carker himself within the House of Dombey in Chapter XIII, thus transforming the railway mechanism into a force that reveals a previously hidden ruin.²⁴² Baumgarten, in fact, emphasises how what is ultimately at stake is not so much the railway itself, but rather ‘Dombey’s incomplete and subjective experience of it’, which shapes the perception of events and directs their meaning.²⁴³ Pontrandolfo suggests that, in Carker’s case, death does not represent a conclusive moment in the novel, nor does it directly concern the protagonist. Rather, it is positioned at the most appropriate point in the narrative to help Dombey ‘a “vedere” — attraverso quella morte — la propria [...] natura “innaturale” e a prendere coscienza di sé’.²⁴⁴ As Moore further observes, Carker ‘represents death, lack, and ruin within the house’, and his obliteration ‘makes this visible’, transforming his death into a revelation of the internal structure of both the family and Dombey’s enterprise.²⁴⁵ From this perspective, Baumgarten argues that death acquires the value of transformation, according to the dynamic whereby ‘death is transition’ and ‘the place where feeling erupts’.²⁴⁶ Pontrandolfo notes that the particularly insistent sequence of violent and bloody images may also be interpreted as having a liberating effect on Dombey, who, from this episode onward, appears to begin a process of recovery from his own crisis of conscience. Responsibility for Carker’s death is therefore attributed to his own guilt and moral condition, while the locomotive is only a ‘strumento involontario’ and ‘di per sé non possiede una carica di negatività assoluta’.²⁴⁷ As Hughes points out, Dickens insists on the ‘frailty of the human body in the face of mobile and intractable steel’, thereby highlighting human vulnerability in the face of the mechanical power of modernity.²⁴⁸ Baumgarten further supports this interpretation by observing that railway elements are substantially absent from Phiz’s (Hablot Browne’s) illustrations accompanying the novel’s publication, since neither stations nor trains appear, with the exception of a small locomotive included in the frontispiece of the final issue. Referring to this image,

²⁴⁰ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 72.

²⁴¹ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, “Chapter XIII: Shipping Intelligence and Office Business”, p. 182.

²⁴² Moore, ‘The Railway and the River’, p. 46.

²⁴³ Baumgarten, ‘Railway/Reading/Time’, p. 73.

²⁴⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 72.

²⁴⁵ Moore, ‘The Railway and the River’, pp. 45–46.

²⁴⁶ Baumgarten, ‘Railway/Reading/Time’, p. 82.

²⁴⁷ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 72.

²⁴⁸ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 448.

Baumgarten notes that ‘the locomotive that kills Carker has a humorous look and is part of an otherwise happy, even sensually rendered, scene’.²⁴⁹ This detail contributes to undermining the idea of a uniquely negative representation of the railway.



Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz') (1848).

Steel engraving. Frontispiece illustration for *Dombey and Son*. The locomotive associated with Carker's death appears in reduced scale within a wider, harmoniously composed scene populated by multiple characters and allegorical figures. London.

²⁴⁹ Baumgarten, 'Railway/Reading/Time', p. 70.

Pontrandolfo observes that Dickens contrasts the gloomy and negative perception embodied by Dombey and Carker with that of another character in Chapter XX, a ‘working man [...] dressed in a canvass suit abundantly besmeared with coal-dust and oil, and (having) cinders in his whiskers, and a smell of half-slaked ashes all over him. He was not a bad-looking fellow’, identified as Mr Toodle, ‘professionally clothed’.²⁵⁰ As an engine driver, characterised by a plump apple-cheeked appearance, he introduces a markedly different relation to the railway world, also shared by his family, including his wife Polly. Unlike Dombey and Carker, Toodle has ‘una visione ottimistica del nuovo mondo della strada ferrata’, seeing the railway not only as a workplace, but also as a familiar and reassuring environment.²⁵¹ Baumgarten emphasises precisely this aspect, observing that, unlike other characters, Toodle ‘is at home in the world of the railroad’ and is also ‘someone who knows how to feel’.²⁵² In his case, therefore, the railroad does not produce alienation or disorientation, but instead becomes a habitable, even familiar, space capable of preserving a form of affective continuity within industrial modernity. Pontrandolfo notes that the material signs of labour — such as the ashes that have altered Toodle’s voice — represent the price to be paid for this new condition, but do not negate its value. His role also allows him to abandon his work in the mine and emerge into the light, thus fulfilling a wish expressed from the very first pages of the novel, ‘I’m going on one of these here railroads when they come in full play’.²⁵³ The contrast between Dombey’s bourgeois condition and that of the worker Toodle is already present in the opening pages of the novel and is rendered ironically through a dialogue marked by linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. When Toodle describes himself as ‘a stoker’, the term is misunderstood by Miss Lucretia Tox, who interprets it as ‘chocker’, giving rise to a surreal exchange that highlights the distance between two worlds incapable of communicating.²⁵⁴

‘[...] You were going to have the goodness to inform me, [...] that you were by trade, a-’
‘Stoker’, said the man.
‘A choker!’ said Miss Tox, quite aghast.

²⁵⁰ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter XX: Mr. Dombey Goes Upon a Journey’, p. 295.

²⁵¹ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 74.

²⁵² Baumgarten, ‘Railway/Reading/Time’, pp. 84–85.

²⁵³ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter II: In Which Timely Provision is Made for an Emergency that will Sometimes Arise in the Best Regulated Families’, p. 20.

²⁵⁴ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, pp. 74–75.

‘Oh-h! Yes!’ returned Miss Tox, looking thoughtfully at him, and seeming to have a very imperfect understanding of his meaning.²⁵⁵

This character, marked by simplicity and optimism, seems to have been constructed by Dickens through the use of that vast ‘folk vocabulary’; as Baumgarten observes, Toodle ‘springs from the stagecoach world of Sam Weller fully formed into the ironmaster’s civilization’.²⁵⁶ In Pontrandolfo’s reading, this demonstrates Dickens’s ability ‘nel saper dosare e far convivere elementi differenti’, since traditional elements are ‘riusati e trasformati in nuova realtà sociale’.²⁵⁷ This process also recalls Baumgarten’s observation that ‘the iron rails that smash Staggs’s Gardens and teach Dombey about transition also bring a new order in which change is now part of everyday life’.²⁵⁸

Overall, the railway in *Dombey and Son* emerges as a profoundly ambivalent presence. It destroys spaces, alters social relations, and becomes associated with death, instability, and perceptual disorientation; yet at the same time it also generates movement, transformation, new forms of visibility, and possibilities of renewal. Dickens therefore avoids presenting the railway through a single, fixed meaning. Instead, its significance changes according to the characters, situations, and emotional perspectives through which it is experienced. This complex and unstable representation of the railway constitutes an important point of transition towards *The Signal-Man*, where the themes of perception, anxiety, and technological modernity will be developed in an even more unsettling way.

²⁵⁵ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ‘Chapter II: In Which Timely Provision is Made for an Emergency that will Sometimes Arise in the Best Regulated Families’, p. 16.

²⁵⁶ Baumgarten, ‘Railway/Reading/Time’, p. 85.

²⁵⁷ Pontrandolfo, *Railway Mania*, p. 75.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Chapter 4

Spectral Warnings and Uncertainty in Dickens's *The Signal-Man*

4.1 *The Signal-Man* and the Rise of the Railway Ghost Story

This chapter analyses *The Signal-Man* as one of the most significant intersections between railway modernity and Victorian Gothic imagery. Set within the isolated environment of a railway cutting, the story reflects the anxieties generated by technological acceleration, industrial accidents, and the increasing dependence on systems of communication, signalling, and control. It constructs a landscape dominated by uncertainty, traumatic repetition, and the anticipation of catastrophe. The chapter first examines the story's narrative structure and publication context, before foregrounding the importance of the Staplehurst accident and contemporary debates on railway safety. It then situates Dickens's tale within the Victorian ghost story and the emerging tradition of railway supernatural fiction. Finally, it analyses the railway cutting, the tunnel, the signal box, and the figure of the signalman as elements of a Gothic space in which modern communication becomes unstable and warning signs resist interpretation.

Norris Pope defines *The Signal-Man* as characterised by 'a simple but effective plot'.¹ The narrator, during an evening stroll along a railway line, is drawn to 'an isolated signal box at the bottom of a steep cutting, just outside the entrance to a tunnel'.² Here he observes the signalman, who 'responds peculiarly to the sudden appearance of a figure above',³ a reaction that immediately arouses the visitor's curiosity. The next evening, the narrator returns to the signal box and the signalman reveals the source of his agitation. A few years earlier, in fact, 'a ghostly messenger had appeared to him, hovering near the danger lamp just outside the tunnel', where the narrator had found himself during their first meeting, 'signaling frantically as if trying to warn of some impending catastrophe'.⁴ 'Shortly afterward, an appalling train wreck occurred inside the tunnel, in which many passengers perished'.⁵ A few months later, the spectral messenger reappears, 'again seeming to give some kind of warning signal', and shortly after 'a young girl died inside

¹ Norris Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', *Technology and Culture*, vol. 42, no. 3, July 2001, pp. 436–461, p. 441.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

a railway carriage, just as the train passed the signalman'.⁶ When the figure returns for a third time, the signalman becomes increasingly distressed by his inability to understand the meaning of the apparition and the nature of the disaster it seems to foretell. The narrator then agrees to return the following day to try to alleviate 'the signalman's acute anxiety, which he fears might endanger public safety'.⁷ However, when he returns to the signal box, 'he finds a solemn group assembled near the signal box, discussing a gruesome accident: earlier that day, the signalman himself had been struck by a locomotive and killed'.⁸

The Signal-Man originally appeared as the fourth chapter, under the title *No. 1 Branch Line*, in *Mugby Junction*, the Christmas issue of *All the Year Round*, published in 1866.⁹ Pope specifies that the story was written entirely by Dickens and that Charles Kent classified it among Dickens's ghost stories, defining it as a 'Tale of Presentiment'.¹⁰ As Angus Wilson observes, *All the Year Round* functioned as 'the forum for [Dickens's] ideas upon every sort of social question – poverty, crime, education, factory conditions, the position of women, divorce, foreign missions, housing, hygiene and sanitation, trade unions, administrative reform'.¹¹ According to Pope, the very title of *Mugby Junction* was 'an obvious play on Rugby Junction'¹², one of the best-known railway stations in Victorian England. Indeed, for Dickens it 'served as both an organising device and a metaphor, naming a place where multiple narratives cross and interact, and where possibilities for various beginnings and various endings are drawn together'.¹³

The story's engagement with railway culture is inseparable from Dickens's own experience of disaster. Pope recalls that Dickens wrote *The Signal-Man* 'little more than a year after the Staplehurst accident, in which he was involved as a passenger'.¹⁴ Describing the accident as 'the most traumatic experience of the final decade of his life', the scholar underlines that it was caused by 'a signaling failure' and argues that *The Signal-Man* addressed 'issues of railway operation and railway safety that closely concerned Dickens's mid-Victorian readers, the first generation to experience high-speed

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

¹¹ Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 220.

¹² Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 436.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 437.

railway travel and high-density railway traffic'.¹⁵ Dickens was not entirely candid about the reasons for his reticence regarding the accident, since his travelling companions included 'his mistress, Ellen Ternan, along with Ellen's mother'.¹⁶



CHARLES DICKENS RELIEVING THE SUFFERERS AT THE FATAL RAILWAY ACCIDENT, NEAR STAPLEHURST.—SEE "GOSSIP," PAGE 54.

'Charles Dickens Relieving the Sufferers at the Fatal Railway Accident, Near Staplehurst', front page illustration from the *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 24 June 1865.

Dickens's personal experience at Staplehurst belonged to a wider Victorian debate over the dangers and management of railway travel. According to Pope, 'public concern about railway safety played a critical role in shaping the behavioral and regulatory context within which Victorian railways operated'.¹⁷ He also highlights that 'anxieties about the perils of high-speed railway travel and what has been called the "technological accident" were commonplace throughout the mid-Victorian era'.¹⁸ Nicholas Daly likewise insists

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 437–438.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 438.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

on the relationship between the railway accident and industrial modernity, observing that '[i]t was this dimension of the industrial accident that Dickens recorded as the uncanny in his Christmas ghost story of 1865, "The Signalman"'.¹⁹ Marshall notes that '[c]onsiderable scholarship on the tale considers the story's supernatural depiction of what was unfortunately an all-too-mundane occurrence: deadly train accidents'.²⁰ Drawing on Jill Matus, the story is described as 'a creative way of articulating [Dickens's] personal experience of railway shock'.²¹ Matthew Wilson Smith likewise interprets the Staplehurst accident as a central element of the tale, demonstrating how 'the railroad disordered the Victorian world in ways that strain our imagination today and very nearly baffled theirs at the time'.²² William Hughes argues that *The Signal-Man* 'must necessarily be read in the light of actual events'.²³ While '[t]he first of the three fictional incidents' is 'particularly reminiscent of the collision between two trains within Clayton Tunnel on the Brighton Line in 1861', Dickens 'may well have been aware of other incidents, such as the 1864 accident in Blackheath Tunnel or the 1866 collision and fire in Welwyn Tunnel, in which imperfect communications between signal-men, stations and train crews contributed to fatalities among passengers or railway employees'.²⁴ According to Çelik, *The Signal-Man* also recalls 'different facets of the issue of railway safety, including not only the safe travel of passengers but also safe working conditions of railway employees'.²⁵ In this light, the story 'directs attention to railway environments, working conditions of railway employees and their influence on the occurrence of railway accidents'.²⁶

¹⁹ Nicholas Daly, 'Blood on the Tracks: Sensation Drama, the Railway, and the Dark Face of Modernity', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, Autumn 1998–Autumn 1999, pp. 47–76, p. 60.

²⁰ Bridget M. Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), pp. 99–113, p. 107.

²¹ Jill L. Matus, 'Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection', *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2001), pp. 413–436, quoted in Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', p. 107.

²² Matthew Wilson Smith, 'Victorian Railway Accident and the Melodramatic Imagination', *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (2012), pp. 497–522, quoted in Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', p. 107.

²³ William Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, ed. by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 445–462, p. 457.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Ş. Seda Coşar Çelik, 'Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens' "The Signalman"', *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, vol. 6, no. 10, June 2018, pp. 124–132, p. 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

As Anthony Mandal observes, '[t]he mid-Victorian ghost story is perhaps no better exemplified than in [...] Dickens's own "No. 1 Branch Line. The Signal-Man"'.²⁷ According to Jessica Cox, Dickens was 'instrumental in popularising the Victorian ghost story – as both editor and author'.²⁸ At the same time, she highlights 'Dickens's own skepticism and the tension which existed between "old" superstitions and progressive (scientific) thinking'.²⁹ Scott Brewster argues that *The Signal-Man* develops a central question that runs through much of Dickensian ghost fiction, namely, '[w]hat does the spectre mean?'.³⁰ Echoing Andrew Smith, he emphasises that 'Dickens's ghosts are always about something other than just being ghosts'.³¹ In Dickensian fiction and journalism, ghosts can indeed take on very different functions, including 'sources of diverting fireside entertainment', 'agents of justice, vengeance, moral guidance or social critique', or 'symptoms of physical or psychological illness'.³² They also continue to represent 'an unresolved question in Victorian culture'.³³ Indeed, Dickens himself observed in 1848 that ghosts were '[d]oubtful and scant of proof at first, doubtful and scant of proof still'.³⁴ Furthermore, Cox underlines that he attributed particular importance to the ghost story as a form capable of representing 'particular states of mind and processes of the imagination'.³⁵ She argues that his supernatural tales consequently explore 'psychological states as much as apparent supernatural occurrences'.³⁶ Pope shifts the discussion towards railway signalling technology, arguing that *The Signal-Man* 'has never been seriously considered, however, within the context of railway signaling technology, the system for providing advance information about traffic and line conditions on which railway safety depended'.³⁷

²⁷ Anthony Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), pp. 34–50, p. 47.

²⁸ Jessica Cox, 'Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales', in Dominic Head (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 49–66, p. 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁰ Scott Brewster, 'Charles Dickens', in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Andrew Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), pp. 195–209, p. 195.

³¹ Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840–1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 195.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Michael Slater, ed., *Dickens' Journalism: The Amusements of the People and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834–51*, vol. 2 (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), pp. 80–91, as cited in Scott Brewster, 'The Ghost Story', quoted in Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840–1920: A Cultural History*, p. 195.

³⁵ Charles Dickens to Elizabeth Gaskell (25 November 1851), in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), vol. 6, p. 546, quoted in Cox, 'Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales', p. 57.

³⁶ Cox, 'Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales', p. 57.

³⁷ Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 437.

From a broader Gothic perspective, Bridget M. Marshall argues that numerous Victorian railway narratives transform the locomotive into an almost spectral presence. Rail accidents involving both passengers and workers left behind ‘mangled machines and human bodies’, while newspapers circulated ‘vivid descriptions of scenes of carnage’.³⁸ In this context, ‘[g]hosts readily took to the rails and the ghost story thrived in these new environments’.³⁹ ‘While trains offered luxury and speed to passengers seeking to travel for business or pleasure, they also created new dangers that could not be overlooked; ghost stories provided vivid reminders of the darker side of the new transport’s efficiency’.⁴⁰ Marshall also draws on Jen Cadwallader’s work, according to which Dickens and his *Mugby Junction* collaborators participated in the “spectralization” of the locomotive’, transforming railway technology into ‘a haunting, alien, uncontrollable force rather than a tool for human betterment’.⁴¹ Alicia Barnes highlights how the train rapidly became a central presence in the nineteenth-century imagination. The ghost train emerged as ‘a multifaceted cultural phenomenon’,⁴² taking different forms, including ‘a spectre of a real train, often one which was involved in an awful and deadly crash, and continues to transport its now-deceased passengers on their final journey’, ‘an empty train, that travels between this world and the next, sometimes taking unsuspecting living passengers into worlds unknown’, or ‘a physical train for ghosts, where living passengers are haunted by the spectres and memories of long-dead passengers’.⁴³ Despite these variations, what many nineteenth-century railway representations have in common is ‘steam locomotion and inorganic mobility identified as threatening’.⁴⁴ Unlike other forms of Gothic transport, it is precisely ‘the (ghost) train’s unnatural capacity for movement that disturbs both passengers and readers’.⁴⁵ Seda Coşar Çelik similarly observes that Victorian responses to the railway were profoundly ambivalent. Railways generated both ‘keen public interest and curiosity’ and ‘dubious feelings towards this new form of transportation’.⁴⁶

³⁸ Bridget M. Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, p. 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Alicia Barnes, ‘Railing through Reality: Trains and Mobility in Victorian Ghost Stories’, *The Journal of Transport History* 45, no. 1 (2024): pp. 104–120, p. 104.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Çelik, ‘Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens’ “The Signalman”’, p. 124.

These concerns regarding railway safety, technological reliability, and the management of warning signs are central to *The Signal-Man*. Yet Dickens's tale ultimately transforms such material anxieties into a broader meditation on communication, perception, and the difficulties of interpreting warning signs within the modern railway system.

4.2 The Haunted Railway: Misread Signals and the Failure of Communication in *The Signal-Man*

Having situated *The Signal-Man* within the Victorian debate on railway accidents, signalling practices, railway safety, and the emerging tradition of railway supernatural fiction, this section turns to the narrative itself. It examines how Dickens transforms these historical and technological concerns into the spatial and symbolic structure of the tale, focusing on the isolated railway cutting, the signal box, and the figure of the signalman. Through these elements, the story presents the railway not simply as a modern system of transport and communication, but as a haunted environment in which signals fail to guarantee certainty, warnings resist interpretation, and the mechanisms designed to secure safety become themselves sources of anxiety.

Brewster links the railway environment depicted in *The Signal-Man* to a series of psychological and supernatural phenomena. He observes that the story recalls 'theories of spectral illusion, clairvoyance and psychic sympathy, and notions of suggestion and expectation'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, 'the railway is also a site of the uncanny, a return to the superstitious past'.⁴⁸ For the narrator, '[o]n first sight the cutting seems tomb-like',⁴⁹ to the extent that he feels he has 'left the natural world'.⁵⁰ Within this isolated setting, the signalman's behaviour is attributed to a possible 'infection in his mind'.⁵¹ The narrator also attempts to explain the 'imaginary cry' as an effect 'of the wind in this unnatural valley while we speak so low, and to the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires'.⁵² Çelik suggests that the railway cutting described in the story constitutes 'a perfectly apt

⁴⁷ Brewster, 'Charles Dickens', p. 206.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Charles Dickens, 'No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man', in *Horror Stories: Classic Tales from Hoffmann to Hodgson*, Oxford World's Classics, online ed., Oxford UP, 2020, doi:10.1093/owc/9780199685448.003.0010, p. 141.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

metaphor for the places railway employees spend most of their time'.⁵³ The narrator presents this environment as 'a solitary and dismal place', delimited by 'a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky', while one side of the cutting appears as 'a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon', ending in 'a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air'.⁵⁴ The place also appears dominated by 'an earthy deadly smell', so much so that 'so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to [him]'.⁵⁵ It is within this setting that the signalman first appears, described as 'a dark sallow man'.⁵⁶

Among the various professional figures employed along the railway network, the signalman occupied a particularly delicate position. Hughes recalls that '[t]hose who travel, it is assumed, are to be protected by what have historically been termed "railway servants"'.⁵⁷ The signalman is also defined as 'a solitary personage whose participation in a chain of communication that literally runs parallel to the conveying rails facilitates the safe and punctual passage of traffic'.⁵⁸ Indeed, this is a figure for whom 'life is no joke', so much so that '[t]he signalman is the last person one would suspect of frolic'.⁵⁹ The pressures associated with this role were not merely fictional but reflected broader concerns about railway labour during the Victorian period. Çelik underlines how railway signalling constituted 'a serious problem, first, because of technical matters which were yet to be developed, and, second, due to the difficult and stressful nature of the signaling process'.⁶⁰ Signalmen and pointsmen were employed along the various railway lines and had to operate 'using rudimentary techniques', while many of those who held these positions were 'inexpert and untrained because the railway system itself was newly emerging'.⁶¹ Under these conditions, the work necessarily required 'strict precision and attentiveness'.⁶² This dimension also emerges directly in *The Signal-Man*, where the

⁵³ Çelik, 'Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens' "The Signalman"', p. 129.

⁵⁴ Dickens, 'No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man', p. 141.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', p. 459.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁵⁹ John Pendleton, *Our Railways: Their Origin, Development, Incident and Romance* (London: Cassell and Company, 1894), p. 312, quoted in Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', p. 456.

⁶⁰ Çelik, 'Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens' "The Signalman"', p. 127.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

protagonist states that ‘he had enough responsibility to bear; but exactness and watchfulness were what was required of him’.⁶³

The psychological burden of this role emerges more fully through the figure of the signalman himself. Hughes observes that the narrator initially considers him ‘a contented man’⁶⁴, a judgement that is progressively undermined by the narrative. The protagonist’s ‘exact and vigilant demeanour’ appears instead as a symptom of ‘pathological attentiveness’.⁶⁵ Living entirely according to the demands of the railway system, he organises ‘the routine of his life’ around repetitive tasks such as ‘[t]o change that signal, to trim those lights, and to turn this iron handle now and then’.⁶⁶ He is, in Hughes’s words, a ‘timetabled man’⁶⁷, whose vigilance ‘subsumes the present and all its certain demands into an abstracted futurity’.⁶⁸ This condition is reinforced by the representation of the signalman’s workplace. The signalman progressively appears as an ‘employee-prisoner’, confined within a workplace where he remains ‘anxiously mindful of being at all times liable to be called by his electric bell’.⁶⁹ Hughes further notes that, among railway workers, ‘none engages so much mystique as the signal-man’.⁷⁰ Quoting a Victorian commentator, Hughes observes that the signalman, ‘whether his many-windowed cabin stands sentinel near the railway bridge [...] or is perched on the breast of some crag [...] gives no heed to his surroundings. His work occupies his thoughts’.⁷¹ The protagonist thus moves within a space dominated by levers, signals, and mechanical devices, ‘pulling one this way, or pushing one that way, opening the track here, closing it there, and raising the signal to “danger”’.⁷² He constantly presides over a space in which ‘life and death may meet’.⁷³

The responsibility implied by this position acquires an even darker significance in light of the supernatural events that structure the narrative. The story links technological responsibility to psychological distress, since, as Marshall observes, ‘[w]hen a signalman

⁶³ Dickens, ‘No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man’, p. 142.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶⁵ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 458.

⁶⁶ Dickens, ‘No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man’, p. 142.

⁶⁷ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 458.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁷¹ John Pendleton, *Our Railways: Their Origin, Development, Incident and Romance* (London: Cassell and Company, 1894), pp. 310–311, quoted in Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 456.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 457.

fails at his job, people can die, and both the threat of this and the actual occurrence of accidents and deaths haunted workers – in both fiction and real life’.⁷⁴ Victorian medical discussions also expressed growing concern about the psychological consequences of railway labour. In *Engine Drivers and High Speed* (1896), the *British Medical Journal* observed that, although there was little evidence linking high-speed railway work directly to heart disease, ‘in regard to general nervous breakdown there is a good deal to be said’.⁷⁵ The article then shifts attention from exceptional accidents to the ordinary pressures of railway employment, arguing that ‘there are men on the line who are working very near to their breaking strain’.⁷⁶ This concern becomes particularly clear in the discussion of a signalman involved in a railway collision, for although ‘the signals were right’, when the signal-box was entered ‘the signalman was found to have gone mad, and had to be taken to an asylum, where he remained for long’.⁷⁷ The article explains that he ‘was broken utterly by the horror of the dilemma’, before extending the problem beyond this single case and asking ‘what shall we say about the smaller dilemmas which every hour of his working life he had had to solve?’.⁷⁸ It further notes that ‘the sickness-rate among the signalmen of certain lines was becoming excessive’, and that some companies consequently abandoned ‘the system of leaving to one man the whole responsibility of taking charge of a signal-box’.⁷⁹ Once each signal-box was supplied with two men, the predicted problems did not occur, although critics had feared that workers ‘would talk, and lark, and neglect their duties’.⁸⁰ Instead, ‘the sickness stopped’.⁸¹ Under ‘shared responsibility’, the article observes signalmen ‘no longer broke down’.⁸²

Victorian debates about railway safety frequently focused on the working conditions of signalmen and pointsmen. In *Sleepy Signalmen* (1883), the *British Medical Journal* stated that ‘inquiries into railway accidents have shown, over and over again, that the safety of railway travelling is daily imperilled by the employment of railway signalmen and pointsmen under circumstances which render the exercise of vigilance in

⁷⁴ Marshall, ‘Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting’, p. 108.

⁷⁵ ‘Engine Drivers and High Speed’, *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1838, 1896, p. 741.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

their very responsible duties difficult or impossible'.⁸³ The article argued that 'many a so-called accident, involving destruction of human life' occurred because a signalman 'has at last failed to be on the alert at his post, after twelve or more hours of continuous and exhausting night-work'.⁸⁴ Rather than presenting these accidents as isolated failures, the author insisted that 'some railway companies, blind alike to their own interests and to the perils of their passengers, appear to continue to overwork their servants in charge of points and signals'.⁸⁵ Consequently, 'the safety of the public demands that the evil should be put down once and for all by stringent enactment'.⁸⁶ Commenting on the Clayton Tunnel disaster, *The Times* observed that, unlike railway machines, signalmen were 'men whose nerves and brains are susceptible of disorder'.⁸⁷ Railway workers were described as 'good steady pieces of human clockwork', yet 'human machinery is a very different thing from the machinery which you move by steam or spring'.⁸⁸ Pope situates these concerns within the broader context of Victorian railway modernity, observing that Dickens's readers were 'the first generation to experience high-speed railway travel and high-density railway traffic'.⁸⁹ In such conditions, railway safety depended upon 'rapid and unfailingly accurate information handling', which constituted 'the precondition for safe and efficient operation within increasingly complex systems'.⁹⁰ *The Times* further warned that, when trains followed one another in excessively rapid succession, 'the telegraph itself is confused by it, and sends wrong answers', so that 'there is an end to all security'.⁹¹ Trains travelled 'at speeds in excess of fifty and sometimes sixty miles per hour',⁹² while major stations such as Clapham Junction and London Bridge Station handled hundreds of trains each day. As Pope observes, 'the speed and complexity of Victorian railways were thus sources of both pride and alarm'.⁹³

⁸³ 'Sleepy Signalmen', *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1158, 1883, p. 471.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 27 Aug. 1861, p. 6, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 447.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 438.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *The Times*, 27 Aug. 1861, p. 6, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 447.

⁹² Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 440.

⁹³ *Ibid.*



FIG. 48.—Signal-box on the North London Railway

Signal-Box on the North London Railway. Illustration from Robert Routledge, *Discoveries and Inventions*, 9th ed. (London: George Routledge, 1891).

In Dickens's tale, this burden is concentrated in a protagonist described as 'intelligent, vigilant, painstaking, and exact' and who regards his role as 'a most important trust'.⁹⁴ Indeed, 'immediate responsibility for railway safety fell heavily on operating personnel, and a particularly large share fell on signalmen'.⁹⁵ Pope further situates this issue within Dickens's own periodical context, noting that both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* had published articles on railway signalling. Particularly significant is *The Hole in the Wall*, an essay published in *All the Year Round* in October 1866. The article offered a detailed account of a technologically advanced signal box controlling access to the Brighton Line platforms at Victoria Station, and emphasised that even a single mistake by a signaller could produce 'dire consequences'.⁹⁶ The psychological burden associated with such responsibilities emerges in Pope's discussion of a visitor overwhelmed by the atmosphere of a signal-box, who confessed to 'a morbid and an increasing longing to try the experiment of turning the wrong handle and bringing two full trains into collision'.⁹⁷ The same account attributes this impulse to 'the strain on the

⁹⁴ Dickens, 'No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man', p. 150.

⁹⁵ Pope, "Dickens's 'The Signaller' and Information Problems in the Railway Age," p. 450.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ 'The Hole in the Wall', in Mengel, p. 127, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signaller" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 450.

nerves produced by the noises and signals described'.⁹⁸ Marshall further observes that a number of Victorian railway ghost stories depict railway workers 'haunted [...] by the actual occurrence of accidents and deaths'.⁹⁹ Among these is *A Desperate Run*, an anonymous tale published in the 1878 Christmas annual *The Mistletoe Bough*, edited by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In the story, 'an unnamed narrator is awakened by the ghost of a railway worker who delivers a message that he must prevent a train collision'.¹⁰⁰ The ghost 'guides him in what to do', allowing the disaster to be averted, and the narrator later discovers that the railway worker 'died of a heart attack on the job'.¹⁰¹ As Marshall notes, 'the railway worker in this case is portrayed as an exceptionally dedicated employee, managing to complete his appointed duties even after his own death'.¹⁰² Such a representation reveals the extent to which passengers entrusted their lives 'to men who might fail, mentally or bodily, to complete tasks that had life or death consequences'.¹⁰³ A similar association between professional responsibility and psychological trauma emerges in the anonymous poem *The Signalman's Dream* (1880), written in response to the Tay Bridge disaster of 1879. After the catastrophe, the protagonist discovers that he is 'haunted by the ghosts of the victims of the disaster'.¹⁰⁴ He continues to see 'each blood-stained human shred – / The crushed, the slain',¹⁰⁵ while the victims seem to follow him constantly. Although the collapse of the Tay Bridge 'had nothing to do with the failure of railway signals or signalmen', 'it is nonetheless the signalman who is haunted by the horror of the events'.¹⁰⁶

The signalman's isolation is repeatedly emphasised throughout the narrative. The railway cutting is described as 'a lonesome post to occupy', while the presence of a visitor appears to be 'a rarity'.¹⁰⁷ The atmosphere of estrangement surrounding the character is further reinforced by the narrator's perception of him. At one point, he confesses that '[t]he monstrous thought came into my mind [...] that was a spirit, not a

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', p. 108.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Anon., 'The Signalman's Dream', *People's Journal*, 10 Jan. 1880, p. 5, quoted in Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', p. 108.

¹⁰⁶ Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', p. 108.

¹⁰⁷ Dickens, 'No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man', p. 141.

man'.¹⁰⁸ Later, while speaking with the narrator, the signalman 'twice broke off with a fallen color, turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring, opened the door of the hut [...] and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel'.¹⁰⁹ On each occasion he returned 'with the inexplicable air upon him which I had remarked, without being able to define'.¹¹⁰ As Mandal observes, the story revolves around 'the feelings of alienation and separation from the rest of humanity experienced by the titular railway worker'.¹¹¹ This isolation is closely linked to the story's broader concern with communication, perception, and interpretation. Brewster observes that *The Signal-Man* continually frustrates rational explanations, since 'the tale has a troubling excess that no conventional orders of knowledge can explain'.¹¹² Pope similarly argues that railway signals function as systems of communication that reflect 'the inevitably troubled relations between the seen and unseen, known and unknown, determinate and indeterminate'.¹¹³ Quoting Samuel Smiles, he notes that 'the electric telegraph may, indeed, be regarded as the nervous system of the railway', through which 'the whole line is kept throbbing with intelligence'.¹¹⁴ In this sense, Victorian railway signalling made visible 'the need for rapid information transfer and unfailingly accurate information management', while also exposing 'the possibilities for system overload and for breakdowns in human and machine interaction'.¹¹⁵

The complexity of railway signalling also generated different modes of perception for railway workers and ordinary observers. In an article published in *Household Words* in 1857, John Hollingshead describes a night railway journey through 'a brilliant galaxy of red, green, and white lights, looking like a railway Vauxhall'.¹¹⁶ While the passenger may 'allow my fancy full play in looking at these signs', the driver reads them as 'signal lessons of danger, caution, and safety'.¹¹⁷ Similarly, W. M. Acworth observed that, for 'a stranger on an engine', 'nothing is so remarkable as the signalling and the organisation of

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', p. 47.

¹¹² Brewster, 'Charles Dickens', p. 206.

¹¹³ Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 460.

¹¹⁴ Samuel Smiles, *The Life of George Stephenson and His Son Robert Stephenson* (New York, 1868), p. xiii, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 461.

¹¹⁵ Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 461.

¹¹⁶ John Hollingshead, 'Riding the Whirlwind', reproduced in Mengel, p. 37, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 459.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the trains'.¹¹⁸ Pope further observes that, beyond their practical communicative function, railway signals had become 'omnipresent features of the railway landscape'.¹¹⁹ Discussing *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (1857), written by Dickens in collaboration with Wilkie Collins, he notes how signalling devices and communication systems dominate the representation of railway space. Dickens describes a junction station in which 'the wooden razors [...] shaved the air very often', while 'the sharp electric-telegraph bell was in a very restless condition'.¹²⁰ In *Mugby Junction*, railway signals and train movements are similarly represented as 'unknown languages in the air, conspiring in red, green, and white characters'.¹²¹ As Pope argues, these images reflect a railway world increasingly structured by systems of communication whose meanings were not always transparent to those who observed them. Within such a landscape, '[a] disturbed and isolated signalman, haunted by ghostly premonitions, was thus a naturally Dickensian subject'.¹²²

Drawing on Andrew Smith, Mandal argues that in *The Signal-Man* the ghost functions not simply as a supernatural presence but as an interpretative problem.¹²³ The narrator initially attempts to explain the signalman's experiences through a possible 'disease' affecting 'the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye',¹²⁴ thereby raising questions about perception itself. Mandal observes that this uncertainty extends beyond the characters and involves the reader as well, who is repeatedly confronted with the question: 'What does the spectre mean?'.¹²⁵ Indeed, according to Smith, 'the ghost serves to raise questions about interpretation' and encourages both narrator and reader to dwell 'on the problems of interpreting the ghost which more formulaic tales do not'.¹²⁶ For Smith, the central issue becomes not what the ghost means but rather 'what it is supposed to mean'.¹²⁷ Çelik likewise suggests that the story brings together 'two

¹¹⁸ W. M. Acworth, *The Railways of England*, p. 80, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 459.

¹¹⁹ Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 459.

¹²⁰ Dickens and Wilkie Collins, *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (1857; repr. London, 1895), p. 62, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 459.

¹²¹ Dickens, *Christmas Stories* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1898), pp. 429–30, quoted in Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 460.

¹²² Pope, 'Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age', p. 460.

¹²³ Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', p. 48.

¹²⁴ Dickens, *No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man*, p. 146.

¹²⁵ Dickens, *No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man*, p. 148, quoted in Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', p. 48.

¹²⁶ Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story, 1840–1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 45, quoted in Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', p. 48.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

seemingly contradictory yet equally Victorian discourses': 'the realist/rational discourse represented by the narrator's voice and perspective' and 'the supernatural discourse represented by the signalman's voice and perspective'.¹²⁸ Mandal also describes that the signalman appears as 'a robot-like product of industrialisation', so deeply immersed in the mechanisms he operates 'that he is unable to step outside the system to interpret it'.¹²⁹ The relationship between haunting and communication is further explored by Brewster, who observes that spectral experience in *The Signal-Man* is closely associated with modern communication technologies. He notes that, like messages transmitted by the telegraph and the telephone, 'ghosts could emerge from silence and invisibility, returning to the living world from unaccountable distances'.¹³⁰ Brewster further remarks that '[t]he ghostly bell in the signal box is audible and visible only to the signalman', who finds himself 'enmeshed in a network circulating indecipherable messages' that 'also elude the narrator, even with the benefit of hindsight'.¹³¹ He additionally argues that, when the two men peer into the tunnel, 'they look into the darkness of the future, anticipating what might arrive'; at the same time, 'each instance of haunting, including the narrator's account of the signalman's death, represents an aftermath, the trace of what remains' (Brewster, p. 207). Marshall similarly observes that many railway ghost stories transform railway disasters into forms of recurring trauma. According to her, 'phantom train sightings were often inspired by real-life train disasters', suggesting that such apparitions were 'a trauma response as much as a warning of the real dangers of the new transport technology'.¹³² Discussing the Tay Bridge disaster, Leslie-McCarthy likewise argues that 'hauntings are a result of strong emotional events having taken place resulting in death, and that the residual emotions cause the event to be repeated'.¹³³

A similar connection between railway catastrophe, repetition, and communication appears in Lucy Gertrude Moberly's *A Strange Night* (1897). As Hughes observes, the story centres on a fatal accident caused by a 'signal-man drunk at his post', whose events are 're-enacted each night'. In this case, the ghostly return does not merely repeat the

¹²⁸ Çelik, 'Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens' "The Signalman"', p. 125.

¹²⁹ Mandal, 'The Ghost Story: 1830–70', p. 48.

¹³⁰ Brewster, 'Charles Dickens', p. 207.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', pp. 108–109.

¹³³ Sage Leslie-McCarthy, "Spectral Traffic," in Sue Thomas (ed.), *Victorian Traffic: Identity, Exchange, Performance* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 273–83, esp. p. 280, quoted in Marshall, 'Ghostly Machines and Mechanical Ghosts: Industrialisation and Victorian Haunting', p. 109.

accident, but becomes an ‘act of communication as much as of memorialisation’. Hughes therefore suggests that such manifestations operate as ‘signals that record the passage of incidents’, linking supernatural repetition to the regularity and warning systems of railway technology. Daly likewise links *The Signal-Man* to the altered temporality produced by railway travel, arguing that industrial accidents occur in “‘machine time’, not human time”.¹³⁴ In such circumstances, ‘[h]uman agency cannot usually move rapidly enough to intervene, and there are few rescues’.¹³⁵ Moreover, ‘such incidents are often too quick for the eye, and perception takes place after the event’.¹³⁶ Within this context, the supernatural assumes a distinctive function, since ‘the Signalman sees an accident happen before it takes place. Response precedes stimulus; that is the only way a “railway rescue” would be likely’.¹³⁷ The communicative dimension of haunting reaches its culmination in Hughes’s interpretation of the signalman’s predicament. Hughes further develops the problem of communication in *The Signal-Man*, arguing that the signalman is increasingly dominated by ‘existential powerlessness and pervasive uncertainty’.¹³⁸ Although his professional duty requires him to respond only to ‘actual – rather than a supposed – danger’,¹³⁹ the apparition communicates a threat whose nature remains undefined and impossible to identify. Hughes draws attention to the signalman’s imagined attempt to transmit a warning: ‘Danger! Take care!’ [...] ‘What danger? Where?’ [...] ‘Don’t know. But for God’s sake take care!’.¹⁴⁰ In this sense, ‘it is not the ghost that is the problem but the ghost-seer’.¹⁴¹ The signalman receives a message that he can neither understand nor ‘pass [...] further down the line’.¹⁴² As Hughes succinctly observes, ‘if he receives, he does not understand, and what he receives he fails to transmit’.¹⁴³ The apparition thus announces ‘a coming danger whose nature and imminence are yet not known’,¹⁴⁴ transforming a railway system founded upon precise signalling and communication into a space dominated by uncertainty and unreadable messages.

¹³⁴ Daly, ‘Blood on the Tracks: Sensation Drama, the Railway, and the Dark Face of Modernity’, p. 60.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 459.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Dickens, ‘No. 1 Branch Line: *The Signal-Man*’, p. 149, quoted in Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 459.

¹⁴¹ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 459.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Freeman similarly argues that *The Signal-Man* reflects ‘humanity’s growing subservience towards machines’.¹⁴⁵ The protagonist, whose ‘given name [is] subordinated to his function’, lives ‘in terror of the railway’s timetable and the ringing bell in his signal box’.¹⁴⁶ Freeman further interprets the story as the representation of ‘a character attempting to cope with profound psychological distress, even trauma’.¹⁴⁷ The signalman himself admits that he is ‘troubled’ and describes his condition as ‘difficult to impart [...] very, very difficult to speak of’.¹⁴⁸ More broadly, Freeman argues that *The Signal-Man* marks a shift in Victorian supernatural fiction towards ‘the experience of being haunted rather than the immediacy of seeing a ghost’.¹⁴⁹ Freeman further notes that many of the ‘most accomplished late Victorian ghost stories’ developed from the example of the ‘troubled protagonists of stories such as “The Signal-Man”’¹⁵⁰, whose psychological distress persists even in the absence of an apparition.



Townley Green, 1868.

Wood engraving illustrating the meeting between the narrator and the signalman inside the signal-box in ‘No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man’. *Christmas Stories*, vol. 2, *The Illustrated Library Edition of Dickens’s Works*, facing p. 190. London.

¹⁴⁵ Nick Freeman, ‘The Ghost Story: 1870–1900’, in *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith, Edinburgh University Press, 2025, pp. 51–65, p. 51.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁸ Dickens, ‘No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man’, p. 144, quoted in Nick Freeman, ‘The Ghost Story: 1870–1900’, p. 52.

¹⁴⁹ Freeman, ‘The Ghost Story: 1870–1900’, p. 52.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Cox likewise describes *The Signal-Man* as ‘one of [Dickens’s] most important contributions’¹⁵¹ to the Victorian Christmas ghost story. She argues that ‘the story’s success lies partly in its refusal to reveal the “true” meaning of its signs and symbols’.¹⁵² As John Daniel Stahl similarly observes, the tale ‘presents a world in which there are signals that have some awful significance, but the signals are confusing and inconclusive’.¹⁵³ The persistence of this interpretative uncertainty is reflected in the diversity of critical responses to the story. As Cox notes, Jill L. Matus ‘reads the narrative through the lens of trauma theory, and links it to the train crash in which Dickens was involved the previous year’¹⁵⁴, while Ewald Mengel interprets the tale as expressing ‘Dickens’s fears and apprehensions as to the dehumanizing effects of technological progress on man and the dangers of the Industrial Revolution’.¹⁵⁵ Graeme Tytler, by contrast, defines it as ‘a story about a man evidently suffering from a type of partial insanity’.¹⁵⁶ As Cox ultimately argues, *The Signal-Man* is able to ‘encapsulat[e] an array of social and cultural anxieties’ without ‘lend[ing] itself to any single interpretation’.¹⁵⁷

Andrew Smith similarly argues that ‘engaging with the social, political and economic issues of the period is a key driver in the innovation of the Victorian ghost story’.¹⁵⁸ He further observes that ‘[t]he ghost becomes the figure who draws attention to what is lost and what might be regained in tales that address an often fragile confidence in the social and economic authority of the Victorians’.¹⁵⁹ Hughes concludes that railway ghost stories increasingly present ghosts as entities aspiring ‘to a new regularity of being’, a form of ‘institutionalisation’ that renders them ‘as purposeful as the modern infrastructure they now haunt’.¹⁶⁰ Rather than appearing as ‘the dusty spectres of a distant past’, they become presences that are ‘if not actually timetabled,

¹⁵¹ Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, p. 57.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ John Daniel Stahl, ‘The Source and Significance of the Revenant in Dickens’s “The Signal Man”’, *Dickens Studies Newsletter*, 11 (1980), p. 101, quoted in Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, p. 57.

¹⁵⁴ Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, p. 57.

¹⁵⁵ Ewald Mengel, ‘The Structure and Meaning of Dickens’s “The Signalman”’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, 20.4 (1983), p. 271, quoted in Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, p. 57.

¹⁵⁶ Graeme Tytler, ‘Dickens’s “The Signalman”’, *Explicator*, 53.1 (1994), p. 26, quoted in Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, p. 57.

¹⁵⁷ Cox, ‘Gothic and Victorian Supernatural Tales’, p. 57.

¹⁵⁸ Andrew Smith, ‘Introduction: Victorian Ghosts’, in Andrew Smith (ed.), *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Hughes, ‘Gothic and the Coming of the Railways’, p. 461.

then at least signalled in [their] significance'.¹⁶¹ In this perspective, ghostly manifestations function as 'signals that record the passage of incidents, and warn of the consequences of not addressing such things'.¹⁶² For this reason, the adoption of the railway as a supernatural setting ultimately 'effectively industrialised the occult', bringing the ghostly 'into the purlieu of the modern world'.¹⁶³

In this sense, *The Signal-Man* transforms the railway into a Gothic structure of modern uncertainty. The cutting, the tunnel, the signal box, the telegraph, and the bell all belong to a system designed to organise movement, transmit information, and prevent catastrophe. Yet Dickens reimagines these instruments of order as sources of ambiguity, delay, and fear. The signalman's tragedy lies precisely in this contradiction: he inhabits a world governed by signals, but receives a warning that cannot be translated into action. The story therefore presents railway modernity as a space in which technological precision does not eliminate uncertainty, but intensifies the anxieties surrounding perception, responsibility, and communication.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

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