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Junctions : the railroad, consumerism, and deep time in nineteenth-century literature

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JUNCTIONS: THE RAILROAD, CONSUMERISM, AND DEEP TIME
IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

A dissertation presented
by

Laurel Ann Kornhiser

to
The College of Arts and Sciences

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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January 2010

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The railroad was both the icon of the Industrial Revolution and one of the most significant transformative forces of the nineteenth century. Despite this, as Herbert Sussman suggests, “With few exceptions, during the Victorian period, the machine appears in the minor works of major poets and the major works of minor poets” (2). The same can be said of prose writers. This study examines four major prose works, two written by American authors and two by British writers, in which the railroad plays more than a minor role: *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, *Dombey and Son* by Charles Dickens, *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser. These works represent the railroad at different stages of development. *Middlemarch* (1871) is set at the moment when the railroad is poised to appear on the Midlands landscape. *Walden* and *Dombey and Son* were both written within the first two decades of the train’s appearance, a time period when the far-reaching effects of this new technology were first being registered. Dreiser set *Sister Carrie* (1900) in the mid 1890s, shortly before the automobile and the aircraft will overshadow the train as the dominant means of transportation. Despite this time spread, all four works engage with similar issues related to the train: the rise of consumerism, the disconnection of producers from consumers, the re-evaluation of self as consumer, as cargo, and as one of the masses, and the disconnections from origins that result from these circumstances. Concomitant with the public debut of the railroad was the publication of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, which had far reaching effects on epistemologies and metaphysical beliefs. At the moment that the train was said to be annihilating time and space, Lyell’s evidence was

suggesting that the earth was much older than previously believed—millions rather than thousands of years old—and that the evidence showed geological processes to be slow and uniform over deep time rather than quick and catastrophic, as the Bible suggests. This study analyzes the interpenetration of these forces and the issues that arise from them within these works.

The coming of the railroad and the new sense of deep time foundationally challenge notions of self as these writers show. Train rides raise new sensations within the human body, demonstrate the relativity of perspective, and transport the individual en masse in a newly mobile society, one in which identities can be changed along with venues. Drawing the focus outward, both along endless horizontal rails and toward a wide range of mass manufactured goods, eventually displayed in the Crystal Palace and the subsequent department stores to which the railroads helped give rise, the railroad symbolized the superficial track of life. Lyell's theories challenged notions of self not only by raising the question of the significance of any one life on a time line of millions of years, but also by suggesting that there were no discernible beginnings or endings, leaving uncertain not only origins but ultimate destinations. Though it may seem these two forces ran along parallel tracks, their paths did cross: excavations for railway tracks exposed to the public the layers of the geological record. The four works of this study suggest that these tracks crossed in the minds of their writers as well. Thoreau and Eliot use the notion of deep time to assimilate or understand the long-term meaning of the railroad. Dickens uses the seemingly eruptive nature of the railroad to challenge uniformitarian theory, while Dreiser uses the railroad to symbolize the metonymic line of evolution.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	5
Table of Contents	7
Introduction	9
Chapter I. The Railroad in <i>Walden</i> : Digging Deeper to Rise Higher	20
A. Introduction	20
B. “Sounds” in Light of “Economy”	27
C. Clothes, Commodities, and the Masses	30
D. Shelter, Fluctuating Markets, and the Division of Labor	48
E. Food, Dissipation, and Disease	58
F. The Train in Deep Time	67
Chapter II. The Railroad in <i>Dombey and Son</i> : Commodities, Consumerism, and Catastrophe	82
A. Introduction	82
B. Dombey: The Man of Commodities Rides the Rails	87
C. Carker: The Man and the Machine	104
D. Mr. Toodle: The Railroad Man	116
E. Staggs’s Gardens: Overturned by the Railroad	121
F. Conclusion	129

Chapter III. The Railroad in <i>Middlemarch</i> : The People, The Place, and Perspective	132
A. Introduction	132
B. Chapter 56: The Coming of the Railroad	136
C. The Railroad, Commodities, and Consumerism	158
D. Deep Time, Perspective, and Reflections on “Railway”	173
E. Conclusion	189
Chapter IV. The Railroad in <i>Sister Carrie</i> : Consumerism in Chicago, Spectacle in New York	192
A. Introduction	192
B. The Track to Consumerism: Drouet and Destination Chicago	200
C. Hurstwood: Spectacle’s Shadow in the City of Spectacle	214
D. The Railroad, Restlessness, and Relentlessness	232
Notes	244
Bibliography	260

INTRODUCTION

The railroad was a prominent transformative force of the nineteenth century. In England, it signaled the end of mercantilism and gave rise to a new national cohesion. Disconnected provincial villages, with their localized politics, disparate dialects, and self-sufficient cottage industries became absorbed in the country's growing mainstream as it finalized the shift from a feudal to a capitalist economy. The train facilitated the movement of workers as they left the countryside to labor in the new manufacturing and service industries. For a country expanding its influence and holdings around the world, the train also became part of the machinery of empire. While England debated and slowly implemented reforms as part of the rising spirit of democracy, uncertainty about class equality and anxiety about shifting class statuses was outwardly symbolized through the configurations of their first trains. The British initially favored designs based on stagecoaches: they were compartmentalized, with groups of riders isolated from each other (Schivelbusch 72-76).

In the United States, the train was heralded as the means of fulfilling Manifest Destiny, and by 1869, the East and West were connected by the transcontinental railroad. The country grew and grew up with the Industrial Revolution. To many, the railroads and their industries exemplified the bold energy of the nation and signaled a new era of democracy. The designs of American trains embodied that ideal—long coaches that encouraged the congregation of a melting pot citizenry. The American railroad system remained classless until 1865 when the luxury Pullmans became first class cars. (Schivelbusch 110). In a country with few good roads prior to the rise of the railroads,

the train allowed markets to move inland, producers no longer dependent of limited canal and river transport.

To the four writers represented in this study, two from each side of the Atlantic, the train was deeply implicated in some of the most profound and far-reaching issues of their time, and despite the differing nationalities, the writers expose concerns with similar bases. In *Walden*, *Dombey and Son*, *Middlemarch*, and *Sister Carrie*, the train is a physical force and presence, but for Thoreau, Dickens, Eliot, and Dreiser, it also represents aspects of nineteenth-century culture that they found deeply disturbing or puzzling. All four writers express or betray a deep ambivalence about the train. While many on both sides of the Atlantic praised the railroad for opening up markets and invigorating commerce, for these writers, this new expedient means of transporting cargo (including human cargo) meant that the railroad not only represented the physical means that allowed widespread consumerism to take hold, it became the symbol of that consumerism. The railroad's transport of goods meant that goods became commodities, and a result of this was that people became disconnected from the sources and even the significance of the goods they desired. Disconnected from their creators and their regions of origin, goods became, as Thoreau called them, "floating merchandise" (*Walden* 81). Over time, the producers themselves became separated from the final products of their labor as specialized divisions of labor became more common. Mass manufactured, more heavily advertised, and globally circulated, commodities, like the trains that carried them, had no semblance of an origin. For those on the receiving end of these goods, want was quickly replacing need. For the writers featured in this study, the train, as the carrier of cargo, somehow bore responsibility for the rampant consumerism that they were

observing. Thoreau reflects on this phenomenon often and directly in the “Economy” and “Sounds” chapters of *Walden*. Dickens dramatizes consumerism through the characters of Dombey and Carker, Eliot through Rosamond, and Dreiser through Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood.

These writers suggest that people as well were becoming commodified. As more and more people outside the institutions of slavery and indenture found themselves in masses and transported as “chattel,” to use the term Ruskin employs, they thought of themselves and identified themselves in new ways—consumer goods being the most expedient means. Goods were increasingly desired not for their inherent properties or to fill a need; they were being desired for what they represented, and then the representations, the images associated with the goods, became paramount. As Dreiser reveals and Guy Debord later theorizes, consumerism gives way to spectacle. All four of these writers engage with the idea that when life becomes outwardly focused—sight being the dominant sense in the consumerist world—the inner life diminishes in proportion to the extent that the outer life becomes more devoted to the superficial, which for Thoreau, the train’s horizontal tracks represented. The idea of widespread consumerism, and the fact that not only the wealthy but the middle class and even the poor (as Thoreau, Eliot, and Dreiser show) were becoming devoted to acquiring goods for the sake of the acquisition, was an abstraction. As a physical entity that circulated these goods, the train became guilty by association.

Further complicating the reactions to the train by these writers is the sense that with the emergence of the railroad, the origins of the transported goods and people were becoming difficult to discern. Having burst onto the landscape and rapidly appearing

everywhere, trains, like the commodities they carried, seemed not to have origins. Each of the works of this study exhibits a preoccupation with origins. Thoreau writes at length about the origins of his necessities and the disconnection of goods carried by trains away from their origins. He not only wants “to be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark” (*Walden* 16), he wants to determine the origins of others who once lived on the shores of Walden as well as ascertain the origins and scope of the pond itself (the erroneous idea of its being bottomless becomes a recurring motif in the book).

Dickens not only includes a character like Carker, who would deny his family origins, all but surrender his humanity to a machine-like nature, and lose his life to a locomotive, but as well describes at length a neighborhood, Staggs’s Gardens, whose origins become more obscure as it undergoes various transformations, the latest being its complete upheaval by the railroad. Eliot not only populates Middlemarch with several characters whose origins are obscure or unknown, she also features two characters whose life work is to determine origins: Lydgate would identify the primitive tissue, the biological key to life, and Casaubon spends his life searching for the key to the world’s mythologies.

Dreiser’s three main characters have all cut themselves completely off from their origins. Carrie forgets her family as soon as she moves away from them. Drouet, as a salesman in constant circulation, has no origins, and Hurstwood decouples from his family when he falls for Carrie.

Anxiety about origins arises in a culture in which people are increasingly mobile and are being inducted into the masses. More fundamentally, as a vehicle in motion going at speeds never experienced before (at their fastest horses go ten to fifteen miles per hour, while within a short time trains were reaching speeds upwards of sixty-five miles per

hour), trains disconnect people from the landscapes they were traversing. They also challenged human beings' notions of their own bodies, and that includes challenges to sight. The instability of perspective became apparent, space shrank, and time sped up. Knowledge of the relativity of perspectives became unavoidable. Railway travel gave rise to panoramic vision. Unable to focus on immediate foregrounds, passengers were forced to look out at a broad sweep of scenery, which most felt they were "flying" by. Wolfgang Schivelbusch asserts that this experience helped prepare rail travelers for their ultimate destination: department stores, which required panoramic vision for scanning vast spaces filled with goods on display. Train travel as well highlighted effervescent vision, as scenes flickered by impressionistically, eventually marked off by regularly placed telegraph poles. These experiences not only required new means of recording them verbally and artistically, they were as well unsettling. The senses could no longer be relied upon to give a stable version of the world.

This constellation of forces and the anxieties they raise is complicated in the works of this study by another factor equal to the railroad in its influence in the nineteenth century, if not more far-reaching in the long run. It, too, challenged notions self, belief in origins and terminus points, as well as perspective, and it made its public debut in the same year as the railroad: the notions of deep time and uniform principles codified in Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. While railroads represented one dominant strand of science—physics and mechanical engineering—Lyell's work represented another. Its effects on metaphysical beliefs and epistemologies were as profound as the train's were on economics and sociology. The railway and geology, though representing different trajectories—one strictly horizontal and riding the earth's

surface and collapsing time and space, the other vertical and deep and expanding notions of time and space—actually intersected in ways not lost on the public. Railway construction involved massive public works projects and massive excavations of the earth. As soon as Lyell's theories were published, the geological evidence on which they were based was being laid open to view. As Michael Freeman comments, "Newly excavated railway cuttings in the 1830s and 1840s became instantaneous field sites for budding geologists, amateurs and pros alike" (231). As he goes on to say, this evidence was not lost on the public, who viewed the exposed layers of the earth as they rode along the rails.

This double helix involving the railway's challenge to long-held notions of self, time, space, and perspective and geology's restructuring of the same is at the center of struggles within the four works of this study to understand the meaning of the individual life and resolve the indeterminacies suggested by both the railway and the geological and evolutionary lines. Darwin built on the work of Lyell, and though his evolutionary theories were too late to influence *Walden* (though Thoreau eagerly read *Origin of Species* when it was published in 1859) or *Dombey and Son*, his addition of the evolutionary line certainly influenced Eliot's and Dreiser's work. For Thoreau, deepening the earth's physical timeline was neither wholly unexpected nor disconcerting (though in his journal he expresses dismay at the thought that an individual life means little in the larger scheme of things). Because he was a transcendentalist, his sense of time ultimately took the form of a belief in the timelessness of the present. Moreover the notion of deep time helped him to reconcile, at least partially, to the railroad, as he knew that like other

aspects of civilizations past, the railroad, too, would be buried in the earth's layers to become a "puzzle for future geologists" (208).

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens dramatizes a seemingly irresolvable tension between Lyell's theory of uniformitarianism—the notion that the earth's processes are gradual and the principles governing those processes consistent over the stretch of millions of years—and the sense that the railroad's seismic eruption onto the scene testified instead to the long-standing belief of catastrophism, the idea that events were singular and that natural catastrophes, like floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, were engineered by God to play specific roles in human history. At the same time that he depicts the total upheaval of Staggs's Gardens by the railroad as catastrophic, he also makes clear that the neighborhood has not been stagnant but has had several reincarnations, its most recent already falling into decay.

Eliot's one extended episode involving the train in *Middlemarch* focuses on local fears about the railroad's disruption of their farming community and the threat that it poses to their livelihood and to the lifestyle they have long known. Eliot complicates the representation of this situation, which could easily have fallen into an opposition between innocent country farmers and greedy outside railroaders, by showing elsewhere in the novel that the lifestyle these poor and middle class people have been living has hardly been fair to them, that country dwellers are not by nature any more innocent than their town, city, or corporate counterparts, and that they resist change because it is change, even when it may bring them benefit. That Eliot creates this episode somewhat outside of the continuity of the novel's narrative line raises important questions about her literary techniques and about her epistemology. The question of what Chapter 56 is doing in the

novel requires an answer that goes beyond highlighting its role in delineating local character or showing the various sides of the railroad debate. First of all, it is part of the chain of causes and effects, similar to those proposed for the natural world by evolutionary theory. One can focus light on a particular cause and show its immediate effects, but that represents a limited perspective. Eliot suggests that when one steps back to take in a broader or longer view, more of the chain becomes visible, but any final pronouncements are precluded by the nature of causes that can have unpredictable or unknown effects and by the fact that at different times, those effects will appear differently to different perceivers. Eliot's sense of the railroad's impact and the appropriate perspectives to adopt toward it become more clear in light of her essay "The Natural History of German Life." When her meditation on the word "railway" in that essay is read alongside the key metaphors on perspective in *Middlemarch* (the uneven web, the pier glass, and the unturned stone), the comparison reveals that though Eliot was deeply engaged and comfortable with Lyell's and Darwin's theories, she was aware as well that these theories themselves were indeterminate and that any theory of life remains open to revision. Eliot knows as well that in Darwin's and Lyell's work, chance plays a rogue card, and this she locates in Raffles, a disruptive figure first associated with the railroad in the novel and a character who proves disruptive to events in *Middlemarch*.

Dreiser saw himself saved from the shackles of his Catholicism when he was introduced to Spencer's *First Principles*, based on Darwin's theories, and he alludes to Darwin's evolutionary theories on occasion in *Sister Carrie*. He asserts that there is ultimately progress along the human line, even though it is not evident within the events of his novel and in terms of the characters he has constructed. Instead he demonstrates in

the novel that the economic determinism he sees leads one character first to destitution and then to death (Hurstwood), another to be caught up in a superficial cycle of seduction, satisfaction, and disappointment (Drouet), and a third vaguely aware that somehow being swept along the track to consumerism and then spectacle has left her missing some vital truth of and connection to life (Carrie). In this work, the train symbolizes the metonymic compulsion of cause and effect.

Within the new matrix of the railroad, consumerism, and deep time, Thoreau, Dickens, Eliot, and Dreiser engage with issues surrounding the stability of identity and, more importantly, the importance of the individual in a world where masses are aggregating, consumers are being created, and humans are existing on a timeline millions of years old. All four authors suggest that there is a loss or compromise of self happening in a century devoted to mass movement by machine, focused on buying things, and framed by geological and evolutionary theories that do not represent the human species as unique and divinely guided. Thoreau expresses it as a fear that people are losing touch with themselves and the sources of their goods, that they are being ruled by rail time, are pursuing a superficial track, and like railroad sleepers are being ridden on rather than riding. In *Dombey and Son*, Dombey loses himself to the world of commodities, sees his son as nothing more than the heir to his empire, and treats his second wife as one more business venture. His hellish train ride to the seaside after Paul's death links these aspects of the narrative. Carker, disconnected from his family as well as his own humanity, acts as an automaton, clearly connected to consumption by his glaring, mesmeric teeth and his "manufactured" home. His one moment of self-recognition occurs when he confronts the train that bears down upon him, and it chews him to pieces. Toodle, though a comic

character in the novel, is shadowed by the fact that he has lost himself to the world of the railway. His thinking and so his speech have been usurped by the railway world, as has the neighborhood he lives in, Staggs's Gardens, whose new businesses proclaim themselves through their names and signage to be frighteningly uniform. George Eliot locates the loss of self in Rosamond, product of a third generation manufacturing family who only knows that she must make a show of herself and her home. Her superficiality undermines Lydgate, who has high aspirations to conduct foundational medical research, and once he dies, she carries on with spectacle, marrying a wealthy London physician and showing off with her daughters through the city.

In *Sister Carrie*, all three main characters are inextricably linked and directed by the railroad and lose themselves to nineteenth-century consumerism and the next level of disconnection that results: spectacle. Carrie disconnects from her family when she travels by rails to Chicago, then leaves her sister's home to live first with Drouet (a drummer) and then with Hurstwood, one-time rider on Pullmans and future railway strike scab. Carrie first loses herself to the big city of Chicago and department stores, neither of which would have existed if not for railways, and then to the city of spectacle, New York.

These four works represent different stages in the railway's complete restructuring of life in the nineteenth century. *Walden* and *Dombey and Son* were written in the first decades of the railway. Though the railroad was initially greeted by many as a marvelous novelty, Thoreau and Dickens, both regular riders of the rails, register some of the more troubling implications of this new technology. Thoreau chooses to transcend the train's time, while Dickens re-elevates the role of family in a machine-driven world. George Eliot writes from a perspective that is well acquainted with the world before

railways as well as the world thirty years into its reign. With the benefit of hindsight, she recognizes the inevitability of the spread of the railways, but she does not automatically ally such an occurrence with a loss. As she has Caleb pronounce, the railway “may do a bit of harm here and there to this and to that But the railway’s a good thing” (531). To her view, over the course of time, it all becomes a matter of perspective. Dreiser was born in a time when the railroad had just about reached its apogee and publishes *Sister Carrie* right when the next products of technology—the automobile and then the aircraft—will begin to take over. Unwilling if not unable to stand outside of the culture he is depicting, he nevertheless reveals the train’s deep penetration of all aspects of life by the end of the nineteenth-century as well as the sterility of the lives devoted to the consumerism and the spectacle that the railway spawned.

For these four writers, the assimilation of the railroad is about more than adjusting to new speeds and perspectives, accepting a new ubiquitous iron presence on the landscape, and thrilling to new possibilities for travel and new goods available for purchase. The railroad served as a locus for anxieties related to consumerism, lost origins, disconnections from self, and deep time. It is this matrix of issues that gives rise to the decided ambivalence toward the railroad that each of these writers either directly expresses or dramatically represents.

Chapter 1

THE RAILROAD IN *WALDEN*: DIGGING DEEPER TO RISE HIGHER

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau's reaction to the railroad, as Henrik Gustafsson and others have said, is one of the most famous in nineteenth-century literature. While many of his generation heralded the train as a unifying force—connecting regions of the country in fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, leveling social classes as they traveled en masse, and bridging the gaps between producers in one area and consumers in another—these are among the very aspects Thoreau found troubling. For him, Manifest Destiny meant focusing on the horizontal, superficial track of the nation. Becoming one of the masses meant losing touch with one's individuality. Connecting producers and consumers from different areas meant that producers were being disconnected from the products of their labor, that labor was becoming more specialized, and that consumers, rather than using what was locally available, were losing their self-reliance by becoming increasingly dependent on fluctuating markets of mass-produced, mass-transported, mass-marketed goods. Like others of his time, Thoreau was disgusted by the train's overwhelming physical impact—its smoke trails, its destruction of its surrounding environment, its rumblings; however, his response to these factors goes beyond their immediate manifestations. He suffered from tuberculosis, beginning probably in his college day, and so for him, the train's pollution may have had personal health implications. Though

in *Walden* the disease he associates with inhaling the train's smoke is malaria, on his deathbed, he conveys a dream to William Ellery Channing, Jr., in which his subconscious fears about the train's effects on his lungs emerge. Thoreau indulges the train as an efficient means of transportation, but when he reflects on the dislocations and disconnections it fosters and represents as well as its effects on his health and that of the planet, his position toward it is decidedly negative.

Thoreau positions himself as one who sees clearly the superficiality that the train stands for and the consumerism to which it gives rise. He is opposed to it on deeply theoretical and far-reaching bases. For him, it has personal, national, and universal implications. This becomes especially clear when the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden* is read in terms of his analysis of necessities and occasional allusions to the railroad in "Economy." When Thoreau's discussion of clothing, shelter, food, and fuel is coupled with his account of the cars and their goods in "Sounds," any excitement he may seem to register in the latter chapter is seriously compromised. One of the most serious faults he finds with the railroad is its role in divorcing people from the sources of their necessities. Rather than supply their needs from their own local environments, they are consuming goods transported over long distances. Not only does this result in waste—both industrial waste and wasted time—but such transport of goods represents a disconnection from origins. In these two chapters, he construes the rail cars and their cargo as both symptomatic and purveyors of a wide-range of disconnections that he is observing all around him—physical, natural, environmental, material, economic, local, historical, social, and spiritual.

When Thoreau considers the train within his own immediate time his assimilation of the it and all that it represents remains problematic, but when he places it in the context of deep time—the geologic timeline of millions of years proposed by Charles Lyell in the 1830s—as he does in the “Spring” chapter, he takes consolation in the knowledge that like other human artifacts, remnants of the railroad will one day be “puzzles for future geologists” (*Walden* 208). In *Walden*, a tension exists between the new fast pace of train time and the equally new understanding of geologic deep time codified by Lyell and partly exposed by the excavations done on behalf of railroad construction. At stake in both the new railway world and the newly understood earth of deep time is the loss of self—through its transformation into consumer, through the industrial redefining of self as cargo, and through an awareness of the possible insignificance of self on a timeline of millions of years. Leo Marx suggests that Thoreau accepts the train by taking the pastoral hope it challenges and removing it from history—from real time and place—and returning it to the realm of literature where it belongs, I will suggest that even more crucial to Thoreau’s acceptance, albeit uneasy, of the railroad is his coming to understand it in terms of deep time. The spring thaw episode does more than illustrate nature’s undermining of technology and suggests a different coming to terms with the railroad than what Torsney argues in suggesting that in the thaw passage Thoreau unified “the natural world of the pond and the mechanical, modern world” (26). When Thoreau places the train in the context of deep time in that episode, the mechanisms’ ultimate powers of transformation are diminished since the train and its tracks will eventually themselves be buried in the earth to become one more layer written into the geological record. Just as artifacts—such as remnants of chimneys and the traces of foods once

consumed—can testify to the existence of previous settlers in the vicinity of Walden Pond, so will the massive and extensive railroads one day become mere fragments within the layers of the earth. Ultimately, though, deep time, too, will need to be transcended, and for Thoreau, this is achieved by way of words, the means of escape from time-dependent reality. In *Walden*, Thoreau frequently shows his awareness of deep time, but he is not interested in getting caught up either in the lives lived “too fast” by the railroad generation (63) nor in the deep time of history. Unlike the Vedas, the Upanishads, the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and even his own works, words being the only artifacts to truly stand the test of time, the railroad will leave only fragments. By cycling through seasons, by returning to sources and to origins, by adding verticality through transcendent thought and language (expansion through metaphor as opposed to staying on the metonymic track represented by the train), and by adopting the perspective of the deep timeline testified to by geology, Thoreau arrives at a sense of ultimate timelessness, which is presentness.

In assessing Thoreau’s attitude toward the train, many critics isolate the “Sounds” chapter, which can lead to an oversimplification of Thoreau’s deeply skeptical reactions to the train. Based on this chapter alone or in light of other occasional comments about the railroad that Thoreau makes, they characterize his attitude as “ambivalent.” They acknowledge that Thoreau found the train an expedient means of travel as it transported him to Harvard’s library, Cape Cod, Maine, Canada, and Minnesota (Cronkhite 306)¹. G. Ferris Cronkhite, Leo Marx, and Henrik Gustafsson are among those who highlight the excitement Thoreau claims to feel in “Sounds” as he watches the trains and their cargo go by.² They recognize as well his association of the train with consumerism and the

superficiality of his time. Cronkhite's summary of Thoreau's attitude reflects the conclusions of others: "At whatever level he examined them [the effects of the railroad] . . . an ambivalence was always present in his attitude" (316), an ambivalence that "resulted from appraising the railroad at two different levels: performance and purpose" (320). Cronkhite sees Thoreau as having a new appreciation for commerce as he watches the cargo go by the pond, but he adds, "much as cargo was accomplishing and respectable as it might be in itself, it was contaminated by what Thoreau called, in his Harvard commencement essay, 'the commercial spirit'—that is, an undue interest in trade to the exclusion of higher concerns" (317). When Cronkhite measures Thoreau's response against that of his fellow transcendental authors, he concludes that while Emerson ultimately saw railroads as "the product of one controlling World-Soul" (314),³ and Hawthorne "Completely and impersonally [subdued] the railroad to the literary purpose at hand" (327), "Thoreau . . . availed himself of the railroad both as symbol and allegory to condemn the low and material aims of the period" (327).

Leo Marx, too, registers Thoreau's ambivalence, but places it in the broader context of the Industrial Revolution's encroachment into the American pastoral ideal. In his seminal work *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx suggests that the competing images Thoreau uses to describe the train reveal his ambivalence: "First it is like a partridge, then a hawk; first it blends into the landscape like the industrial images in the Inness painting, but then, a moment later, it becomes the discordant machine" (251). Thoreau, Marx says, makes "plain the danger of technological progress" but is "delighted by the electric atmosphere of the depot and the cheerful valor of the snow-plow crews. He admires the punctuality, the urge toward precision and order . . ." (252) that railway

enterprises represent. Marx suggests that the railroad ultimately serves as a foil to the image of Walden Pond: “Man-made power, the machine with its fire, smoke, and thunder, is juxtaposed to the waters of Walden, remarkable for their depth and purity The iron horse moves across the surface of the earth; the pond invites the eye below the surface” (251).⁴ Marx puts Thoreau’s reactions to the train to the test of American pastoralism and concludes that with the thaw of the bank in “Spring,” Thoreau restored “the pastoral hope to its traditional location. He removes it from history, where it is manifestly unrealizable, and relocates it in literature, which is to say, in his own consciousness, in his craft, in *Walden*” (265).

Gustafsson and Cheryl Torsney each represent opposite ends of the ambivalence spectrum. Gustafsson, recognizing the amount of attention the “Sounds” chapter has received, analyzes Thoreau’s earlier letters, journal entries, and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack* and determines that when all of his comments are taken together, on the whole, Thoreau was antagonistic toward the train.⁵ Torsney is one of the few (if not only) critics who characterizes Thoreau’s attitude toward the railroad as decidedly positive, and unlike Marx who sees the train as an opposite symbol to the pond, she characterizes it as a twin symbol to Walden Pond, representing another means to transcendence: “We must learn the language of the railroad, a language of metaphor and symbol—a language structured like that of nature—to realize that rather than being adversaries, the railroad and the pond are twin symbols offering alternate routes to transcendence” (19).⁶ She further claims that in *Walden*, the “railroad blends into the pastoral calm of the place” and “mimics its natural context” (20).

Thoreau would seek to understand the full ramifications of the railroad until his death, but the gist of his views and his means of accepting, if not assimilating, this icon of the Industrial Revolution are present in *Walden*. Over the nine years that he worked on this book, the train came to represent many things to him. It was a convenience, a fascination, and a nuisance. It provided a convenient track to walk on (*Walden* 80); an apt metaphor for adhering to one's own track—"Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track then" (*Walden* 82); and a metaphor for not being thrown off track: "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito wing that falls on the rails" (*Walden* 97). It also symbolized some of the key negative factors he saw in his contemporary world. In *Walden*, he charges the train with contributing to the restlessness of his times, the too-rapid pace of life, its increased noise and decreased air quality. He holds it and its overseers responsible for the rape of his beloved pond and its surrounding woods. He sees it literally and figuratively running over its workers while the corporations funding and fueling its rise are growing richer. It represents not only physical and environmental degradation but also what he sees as the runaway tendencies taking his generation down the wrong (and decidedly superficial) track. He further accuses it of being one of the factors contributing to the widespread dissipation of his fellow countrymen, dissipation arising from their being absorbed into the masses, from excessive consumption of luxury material goods and foods, and from "consumption" in the form of tuberculosis. The range of charges he hurls at the train illustrates Nicholas Daly's fundamental point in *Literature, Technology, and Modernity*: ". . . the response to new technologies often condenses fears, anxieties, and longings in the face of . . . other changes" (5), and the

nineteenth century, defined by the Industrial Revolution, was a period of rapid and far-reaching changes. Confronting the many changes of his times and recognizing the potent force of the railroad in fostering them, Thoreau offers his antidote: dig deeper and rise higher.

“Sounds” in the Light of “Economy”

To gain a more comprehensive view of the matrix of meanings Thoreau assembles from the railroad’s presence and the commerce it engenders and aids, one must read “Sounds” in the context of “Economy.” Thoreau mentions the train several times in “Economy,” but it is when the preoccupations of this chapter, particularly his desire to ascertain the foundation of the four “necessaries” of life and the most expedient means of satisfying them—locally and simply—are coupled with his observations about the goods he sees being transported by the train in “Sounds” that it becomes clear that he finds the train deeply implicated in what is to him a very troubling aspect of his time: people are becoming disconnected from the products of their region, the products of their labor, labor from itself, humans from self-reliance, humans from nature, and humans from spirit. As the dominant means for transporting commodities separated from their context (Thoreau calls the train’s cargo “floating merchandise” *Walden* 81), the train not only symbolizes disconnections, it is for Thoreau a direct cause of disconnection.

It is important to read every subsequent chapter of *Walden* in the context of the first, “Economy,” for this chapter is in many ways the book in microcosm. Like the concentric circles that emanate outward from a stone tossed into a pond, the images, parables, principles, symbols, and metaphors of “Economy” reverberate outward all through the book. Unlike ripples, however, these structural and figurative aspects not

only expand across the surface area of the book that they cover, they both broaden and deepen in meaning as they are revisited. Thus the comments he makes about the train and its goods in “Economy” and “Sounds” will continue to accumulate meaning, so that by the time he reaches the culminating description of the thawing railroad bank in “Spring,” the image is loaded with significance, and his thoughts travel far beyond the original tracks he laid down for them.

Being both a literalist and an analogist, Thoreau often starts with a metonymic account of a subject or image and then dilates through its metaphoric possibilities, often contracting it back to its narrowest terms, though it can never again mean what it first meant.⁷ In “What I Lived For,” Thoreau correlates his goal of reducing his needs with his need to confront “meanings.” He writes:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience (*Walden* 62)

One of Thoreau’s projects throughout *Walden* is to take a material reality (whether a natural fact—the pond, a loon, a bean field—or one of the four material necessities—clothing, food, fuel, shelter), strip it of accumulated layers of meaning, confront its essentiality, and then pass through it to its transcendent correspondence in the spiritual realm. The train seems to be a major site of this type of transaction (and Torsney would

assert it is), but unlike its other analogical counterparts, the train never fully sheds its material reality nor can it be separated from its implication in material commerce and consumerism. In other words, despite Torsney's assertion that the train represents another vehicle of transcendence, it resists becoming the pond's equivalent in this respect, leaving Thoreau instead to have nature assimilate it into deep time.

The Four Necessaries

In the somewhat labyrinthine chapter of "Economy," critics have found everything from a newly minted economic philosophy to a competing version of domestic economy meant to rival that proposed by popular handbooks to a form of disguised capitalism.⁸ Thoreau begins his "account" of Walden with essential facts, rendered as a string of metonymic statements⁹: "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again" (1). This opening line reads like linked railroad cars, a series of prepositional phrases offering the most superficial outline Thoreau can provide to those curious about his life at Walden Pond. From this basic starting point, he enacts his own deep cycle of layering until he surfaces at the end of "Spring" with a parallel metonymic conclusion: "Thus was my first year's life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6th, 1847" (218). Sandwiched between these two concise declarations is a palimpsest of Thoreau's experience, a compilation of thoughts recorded while at the pond, journal entries from before and after the actual experience, and parts of essays written for other

purposes. In fact, a good portion of the famous train passage in “Sounds” was first published in 1852 as “The Iron Horse” in *Sartain’s Union Magazine* (Harding, *Walden An Annotated Edition* 111, Note 1).¹⁰ Thoreau’s compilation method is typical of many Transcendental texts, which are often hybrids of genres as well.¹¹ After his succinct opening summary of his stay at Walden, Thoreau gets down to business, not only analyzing life’s necessities and their most basic and immediate fulfillment, but the reasons people wander so far off track from what is essential: First he asserts, “The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success” (7).

Clothes, Commodities, and the Masses

The first necessity Thoreau confronts is clothing. He bemoans the fact that, like so many newly mass-produced, shipped goods, clothing has become disconnected from its sources and producers, the producers in turn have become disconnected from the wearers of their products, and the wearers have lost touch with themselves. Moreover, rather than serving its function of retaining the vital heat (14), clothing has become all about the superficial following of fashion trends dictated from afar. In losing touch with their clothing’s origins and function, people are losing touch with their higher natures. Thoreau opens his discussion by stating, “As for Clothing, to come at once to the practical part of the question, perhaps we are led oftener by the love of novelty and a regard for the opinions of men, in procuring it, than by a true utility. . . . I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched

clothes, than to have a sound conscience” (14). That Thoreau holds the train partly accountable for these superficial concerns becomes clear when in “Sounds,” he enumerates the details of the restless traffic in goods expedited by the train: “Up comes the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the woollen; up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them” (80).¹² As he expands his rant about rail commerce in that same chapter, we see how the goods become detached from their places of production and circulate without discernible points of origin or terminus. Like these goods, the railroad tracks themselves seem to have no beginnings or endings, only stations along the way. In this sense, the train to Thoreau is like a comet. It moves “with planetary motion,—or rather, like a comet, for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system, since its orbit does not look like a returning curve” (80). This characterization of the railroad as similar to a comet, a catastrophic event—an unlikely event that happens by some sort of divine decree—in an era when Lyell’s theory of uniformitarianism—which asserts that the principles and processes in action now have always been in action and even seemingly “catastrophic” events represent the culmination of gradual processes—is taking hold testifies to Thoreau’s sense that the train represents a cataclysmic upheaval of life.

In a book whose author prides himself on making use of what is in his immediate environment and who wants to ascertain the origins of his necessities, Thoreau finds this frenzy to send and sell things out of context and the quickness with which acquired objects are discarded in favor of the new disconcerting. To return to the cars and their cargo in “Sounds,” Thoreau writes, “These rags in bales, of all hues and qualities, the lowest condition to which cotton and linen descend, the final result of dress,—of patterns

which are now no longer cried up, unless it be in Milwaukee, as those splendid articles, English, French, or American prints, gingham, muslins, etc., gathered from all quarters both of fashion and poverty, going to become paper of one color or a few shades only, on which forsooth will be written tales of real life, high and low, and founded on fact” (83). The breathless and chaotic disconnections in the syntax, the springing from a geographical area to adjectival nationalities mimics the disconnectedness of the cloth from final product and its ultimately becoming mere remnants, all serving to underscore his basic point about the result of mass production and mass transport of goods. This regional and national dislocation of clothing and cloth appears to be part of a freewheeling circulation and illustrates Thomas Richard’s point that, “Once products enter a capitalist market, it is notoriously difficult to figure out how, when, or where they were made” (4). Thoreau suggests that a society that mass produces becomes a throwaway society; fashions are quickly replaced and are left to tell their stories as “rags.” For his part, Thoreau knows where his pantaloons came from, for, as he says they were “woven in a farmer’s family” (44).

In observing his fellow Americans’ preferences, he sees mass capitulation to superficiality and a widespread focus not on function but on fashion, a preference for what Guy Debord would later label “spectacle” over substance. Anticipating Debord’s *The Society of Spectacle*, Thoreau recognizes the arbitrariness of taste and the human susceptibility to spectacle. After declaring what has become more than a clichéd truth, “Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new” (17), he makes an observation key to the development and encouragement of consumers: “The childish and savage taste of men and women for new patterns keeps how many shaking

and squinting through kaleidoscopes that they may discover the particular figure which this generation requires today. The manufacturers have learned that this taste is merely whimsical. Of two patterns which differ only by a few threads more or less of a particular color, the one will be sold readily, the other lie on the shelf, though it frequently happens that after the lapse of a season, the latter becomes the most fashionable” (17-18). As John Dolis remarks in “Tracking Thoreau: Double-Crossing Nature and Technology,” “Like all forms subject to conventions, clothing is the product of manufactured taste—a popular commodity designed to sell” (20). Cultural historians and critics often locate susceptibility to spectacle as emerging in the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,¹³ but Thoreau shows that it was occurring much earlier, substantiating Thomas Richards’ point: “The cultural forms of consumerism . . . came into being well before the consumer economy did. But because most cultural historians have assumed the opposite, that consumerism followed the consumer economy, they have not been in a position to see how vividly the nineteenth century has left its mark on twentieth-century commodity culture” (8). Thoreau exposes the existence of the “cultural forms of consumerism” in his discussion of clothes. He sees people changing their clothes so often that they and their history become shallow: “Only they who go to soirées and legislative halls must have new coats, coats to change as often as the man changes in them I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes” (15). That they do so is a credit to mass manufacturing, expanding advertising, and wider distribution via railroads. He counters this tendency to change and discard clothes by reminding his readers that clothes are by their nature, “but our outermost cuticle and mortal coil” (16), their primary purpose being to “retain the

vital heat” (14). Rather than stripping ourselves of unnecessary layers, Thoreau says, “We don garment after garment, as if we grew like exogenous plants by addition without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are our epidermis, or false skin” (16). Instead, he insists, clothes should eventually bear “the impress of the wearer’s character” (14).

As Robert Sattelmeyer has shown, Thoreau was very much in touch with the larger culture around him (Preface x), a fact evident in his discussion of clothing: “We worship not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion. She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority. The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same” (17). Thoreau here invokes a growing consumer phenomenon of his time: the proliferation of French fashion magazines, a proliferation aided by their distribution through an expanding shipping and rail network, with such publications often being sold in train stations and read in transit. With “rising literacy, good reprographic techniques, [and] urbanization” (Hahn 206), a fast-track movement was afoot to turn shopping into a pastime and middle class women into consumers of visual images that would entice them to become consumers of fashion, as Hazel Han summarizes:

French magazines, whether featuring aristocratic style or more modest styles, represented Paris as the fashion capital, and Parisian women as arbiters of taste. . . . Rather than the ideas of making the home beautiful and comfortable or aimed at fulfilling the duties of a housewife, it was shopping as a pleasurable activity, and dress as an expression of one’s taste, that dominated the magazines. (219)

Hahn also asserts, “English fashion magazines and consumers agreed with French fashion houses and magazines that Paris indeed was the capital of fashion at the time” (220). As Thoreau clearly understood, Americans obviously thought the same. The articles and ads found in these and other fashion and consumer magazines promoted the products of this new commodities-driven market (Laird 23). Ironically, the disconnections Thoreau registers and holds the train accountable for—between cloth maker and wearer, between fashion dictators and their subjects—was to be bridged by advertisement, according to one advertiser writing in 1890: “. . . But the producer and the consumer should know each other . . . The railroad only allows producers and consumers to drift farther and farther from an acquaintance with each other. Only the printer’s ink can bridge the distance, and bring the producer and the consumer in relations of intimacy” (as qtd. in Laird 15). As the nineteenth century progressed, desire for goods was increasingly manipulated if not determined to a large extent by advertisements. Advertising arose, claims John Fairfield, at that “‘critical point’ when ‘society shifts from production to consumption’” (135).

Railroad companies led the way in changing advertising from a declaration of a product’s qualities to creating desire—for travel, for experiences—where desire did not exist. Railroad managers and their marketers were key innovators in the forms, images, artistry, and direction advertising was to take throughout the century, a point that cannot be overstated. In their book *Travel by Train: The American Railroad Poster and Advertising*, Michael Zega and John E. Gruber convincingly argue that railroad men broke new ground in advertising with “their pioneering promotional efforts”: “They virtually invented the illustrated booklet, pioneered in using the halftone, and produced

countless timetables, calendars, and posters” (1-2). That Thoreau made the link between the railroad and its powers of advertising surfaces in his comment about railroad time tables, the syntax of his sentence revealing a passivity in the face of the two inextricably linked forces: “Men are advertised that at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass” (*Walden* 82). The railroad companies not only distributed the burgeoning amount of printed materials containing advertisements for goods,¹⁴ but encouraged the expanding habit of reading while riding.¹⁵ Consumer magazines, easily digestible dime novels, and penny papers were popular sellers at railroad stations. When Clifford and Hepzibah make their famous flight from home via the train in *The House of Seven Gables*, for instance, they observe fellow travelers who “had plunged into the English scenery and adventures of pamphlet novels, and were keeping company with dukes and earls. Others whose briefer span forbade their devoting themselves to studies so abstruse, beguiled the little tedium of the way with penny papers” (197). Many of the novels being published at the time as well carried advertisements and used product placements within the pages of the narrative itself. By distributing and promoting at its stations—through magazines, books, and posters—the advertisements that were to connect the producers and the consumers of the goods their trains carried, railroad managers were serving their own interests on several fronts.

In *Walden*, Thoreau registers an important change occurring in the economy during his time: the transformation of essential goods into commodities. In the nineteenth century, the economy was undergoing a profound shift. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, rural economies operated on a bartering system, and the value of most objects sold for money was loosely based on the amount of labor that went into creating

them (Adam Smith's theory of value, the authority of which persisted well into the nineteenth century). When products were mass produced, mass transported, and mass marketed, the basis of their value changed. This process, of course, became a key focus of Karl Marx's critique of capitalist economies. Labor, the products it produces, the money used in their exchange, and the buyers of these products, all seemingly have an independent existence but actually operate within a social matrix. Marx's opening comments in "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" indicate the complications of value that arise in a commodities-based economy:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily misunderstood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it . . . It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to start dancing of its own accord. (444-445)

A commodity's value becomes a hieroglyph because it is no longer defined by the labor used to produce it. Thomas DeQuincey, whose works Thoreau read, described an

additional key factor in determining value: consumer desire (Bigelow 102), a desire that is often changeable, such fickleness being encouraged by marketing and advertising practices. Thoreau well understands the arbitrariness of values based on manufactured desires. He is also attuned to the effects of the marketplace on perception of value. In a journal entry, his analysis bears kinship with Marx's:

. . . the value of things generally is commonly estimated by the amount of money they will fetch. A thing is not valuable—*e. g.* a fine situation for a house—until it is convertible into so much money, that is, can cease to be what it is and become something else which you prefer. So you will see that all prosaic people who possess only the commonest sense, who believe strictly in this kind of wealth, are speculators in fancy stocks and continually cheat themselves, but poets and all discerning people, who have an object in life and know what they want, speculate in real values. The mean and low values of anything depend on it[s] convertibility into something else—*i. e.* have nothing to do with its intrinsic value.

(*Journal* Nov. 29, 1860) ¹⁶

Adjusting Smith's assertion that the cost of a thing is based on the labor required to produce it, Thoreau claims "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately and in the long run" (*Walden* 21). This is why Walden Pond represents the ultimate value; it gives immeasurable returns and charges nothing. It is the "perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer" (130). In their discussion of Thoreau's "alternate theory of value," Thomas P. Birch and Fred Metting summarize the way Thoreau turns traditional

political economic theory upside down: “Whereas in classical political economy, the value of a good is enhanced if the labor required to produce it increases, in Thoreau’s economy, the value would be depressed, for the act of production could involve a sacrifice of life’s potentially expansive moments” (593).

Just as marketing forces such as advertising were becoming ubiquitous and unseen motivators of behavior, the arbiters of fashion had become a ubiquitous, yet amorphous, “they,” as Thoreau recounts, “When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, ‘They do not make them so now,’ not emphasizing the ‘They’ at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates” (*Walden* 16). This allusion to the Fates here foreshadows the name Thoreau will give to the train, calling it the new Atropos, the thread cutter: “We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside” (*Walden* 82). With this image, he refers not only to the Fate that cuts the cloth (yet another image of disconnection associated with the train), but highlights the relentless nature of the train’s undertaking. To mix metaphors, the train creates a momentum that sweeps up everyone in its tide of commodity distribution and transport.

Thoreau objects to the mass trafficking and production of clothing not only because they contribute to the fetishism of commodity, but also because mass marketing and fickle fashion consumption contribute to a factory system whose abuses Thoreau witnessed first hand, having toured the Bigelow Mills in Clinton, Massachusetts, (Harding *Walden An Annotated Edition* 24 Note 1). There he saw the degradation suffered by those working the production end of a consumer society. He writes in *Walden*: “I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the

English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched” (18). This system, Thoreau suggests, widens the economic gap between the worker and management, as he later says, “the luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another” (23). This observation was born not just of his experience with the expanding factory system, but with railroad corporations, for whose workers Thoreau feels at some times sympathy and at others near contempt.¹⁷ They are among those sleepers whom he would wake up:

If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you even think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. (*Walden* 63-64).

Thoreau’s pun on “sleeper” is telling; it speaks directly to the railroad’s complicity with consumerism, says G. Ferris Cronkhite: “Thoreau made apt literary use of still another feature of the railroad. The current word *sleeper* for *railroad tie* gave him an opportunity

to embody in allegorical form his fears that material progress was lulling man into a dangerous kind of sleep, an unawareness of life's spiritual potentialities" (320).

When Thoreau entertains an imaginary dialogue with Irish railroad workers about their lot and the products of their labor, and they ask him, "'What! . . . is not this railroad, which we have built, a good thing,'" he answers that it is comparatively good and concludes the conversation by saying, "I wish that as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt" (37). Despite their poverty, despite their brutal lives, however, he sees the Irish railroad workers as falling into the same consumer pits as their contemporaries. When he conducts an inventory of the shanty he will buy from James Collins (to recycle its boards and nails in the construction of his own cabin), the superfluous items stand out in their gaudy inappropriateness for a poor family: "There was a stove, a bed, and a place to sit, an infant in the house where it was born, a silk parasol, gilt-framed looking-glass, and a patent new coffee-mill nailed to an oak sapling" (29).¹⁸ That Thoreau includes the Collins family in those he sees as leading lives of quiet desperation is certain; that he sees them as helpless in the situation, less so. When he recounts trying to convince an Irish bog farmer, John Field, father of several children, and all living in a "hut" (140) that he could reduce his needs, become more self-sufficient, and live in a better place if he followed Thoreau's example (giving his "example" rather than money being Thoreau's mode of philanthropy), he realizes that the "culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe" (141).¹⁹

Yet another objection Thoreau has to the railroad is that as a means of mass transport, it serves as a vehicle for introducing the individual into the masses and for the

transformation of people into commodities. Thoreau's work is, in part, his own declaration of independence, of self-hood, and one impetus for this is his resistance to the induction of the individual into the "masses." Thoreau often voices concern about the loss of self in the market and the transformation of people into cargo, as in 1852, when he wrote in his journal, "The cars do not make much noise—or else I am used to it and now whizzes the boiling sizzling kettle by me—in which the passengers make me think of potatoes—which a fork would show to be done by now" (*Journal* Feb. 3, 1852).

Emerson echoes this observation: "'The railroad makes a man chattel, transports him by the box and ton; he waits on it. He feels that he pays a high price for his speed in this compromise of his will'" (as qtd. in Cronkhite 312). The railroad not only transforms a human into cargo, but into a consumer as well. In his introduction to Schivelbusch's "The Railway Journey," Alan Trachtenberg writes:

Compared to what it replaced, the journey by stage coach, the railway journey produced novel experiences—of self, of fellow travelers, of landscape . . . of time and space. Mechanized by seating arrangements and by new perceptual coercions . . . routinized by schedules, by undeviating pathways, the railroad traveler underwent experiences analogous to military regimentation—not to say to 'nature' transformed into 'commodity'. He was converted from a private individual into one of a mass public—a mere consumer." (xiv)

In a mobile society, one way to declare one's identity and decipher that of others in crowds, like those found at railway stations and on trains, was through clothing, which itself translated "the subject into a commodity, a fashion product . . . Commerce and

commodification displace the subject, place it in the service of the object—dependent on it, not its own” (Dolis 30-32). Thoreau suggests that donning new outer garments is done to compensate for the loss of inner self-awareness: “It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes. Could you, in such a case, tell surely of any company of civilized men which belonged to the most respected class? . . . Even in our democratic New England towns the accidental possession of wealth, and its manifestation in dress and equipage alone, obtain for the possessor almost universal respect” (15). That Thoreau believes the revelation of one’s status through clothing has become paramount for those in transit is apparent when he comments on Ida Pfeiffer’s *A Lady’s Voyage Round the World* (Harding *Walden An Annotated Edition* 20 note 2): “When Madam Pfeiffer, in her adventurous travels round the world, from east to west, had got so near home as Asiatic Russia, she says that she felt the necessity of wearing other than a travelling dress, when she went to meet the authorities, for she ‘was now in a civilized country, where . . . people are judged by their clothes’” (15).

Edgar Allan Poe picks up the thread of this compulsion to evaluate people in mass movement by their clothing in his short story “The Man of the Crowd.” Poe’s unnamed, probably unstable narrator, recovering from a vaguely defined illness, takes a break from “poring over advertisements” (262) to look out from a hotel salon. He observes crowds of Londoners as they make for “continuous tides of population . . . rushing past the door,” the “tumultuous sea of human heads” filling him with a “delicious novelty of emotion” (263). That he identifies this mass movement of people with a train is suggested when he calls them “passengers” on several occasions: “I looked at the passengers in masses”;

“the passengers had gradually diminished” (263; 269). He begins to identify their professions by their dress, the “noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stockjobbers” placed in their “order” by their “habiliments” (263). He describes the “tribe of clerks” as “young gentlemen with tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair, and supercilious lips” (264). He identifies upper clerks, pickpockets, gamblers, and others by both their dress and their countenances. When confronted by a passerby whom he cannot easily categorize, especially as his clothing was “filthy and ragged” though of “beautiful texture” (268), the narrator sets out to follow him. Like a train, this unidentifiable flaneur circulates around and through the city. The narrator recounts: “He urged his way steadily and perseveringly. I was surprised, however, to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square, that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times” (269). That this movement is aligned with the train becomes apparent when the narrator summarizes: “In this exercise he spent about an hour, at the end of which we met with far less interruption from passengers than at first” (269).

The flaneur’s relentless pace mimics that of the train, as “he rushed with an activity [the narrator] could not have dreamed of seeing on one so aged”; he “ran with incredible swiftness through many crooked and people-less lanes”; and at one point, “with a heavy sigh, turned in the direction of the river, and plunging through a great variety of devious ways, came out at length in view of one of the principal theatres I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd” (269). This alignment of the man’s ceaseless circulation through the city, gaining and losing passengers, moving with a “mad energy,” walking “to and fro, and during the day [and]

not pass[ing] from out the turmoil of the street” (270) captures the restless energy of the city. Thoreau describes the train as exhibiting a similar restlessness and ceaseless level of activity: “All day the fire-steed flies over the country, stopping only that his master may rest, and I am awakened by his tramp and defiant snort at midnight, when in some remote glen in the woods he fronts the elements incased in ice and snow; and he will reach his stall only with the morning star, to start once more on his travels without rest or slumber” (*Walden* 81).

Unlike the flaneur of Poe’s story, however, Thoreau finds the company of the masses dissipating, and he faults the industrial world for this: “Consider the girls in a factory,—never alone, hardly in their dreams” (*Walden* 94). While Poe’s narrator tries to keep up with the frenetic pace of the city flaneur, Thoreau writes in “Conclusion”: “I delight to come to my bearings—not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may,—not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by” (*Walden* 225). This sentiment recalls his comment in “Sounds”: “Now that the cars are gone by and all the restless world with them, and the fishes in the pond no longer feel their rumbling, I am more alone than ever. For the rest of the long afternoon, perhaps, my meditations are interrupted only by the faint rattle of a carriage or team along the distant highway” (85). In contrast to the overwhelming intrusion of the train, traditional means of travel—the carriage or a team of horses or oxen—barely register on Thoreau’s senses, allowing him to return his attention to the natural sounds he had started to record at the beginning of the chapter.

Thoreau returns to the subject of clothes, and, by association, the train in “Conclusion” when he states, “There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dullness We think that we can change our clothes only” (226). Clothing, like the other commodities the train transports, has not only been separated from its place of production, its wearers have lost sight of its essential function, to preserve the vital heat, the fire of spirit: “The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us” (8), but as he has said, “the vital heat is not to be confounded with fire; but so much for analogy” (8). Those who spend their lives traveling the globe and devoting themselves to trade, the “luxuriously rich” (9) are, instead of preserving the vital heat, “kept . . . unnaturally hot; as I implied before, they are cooked, of course *a la mode*. Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (9). Clothing has become, he suggests, fashion merely, manufactured in exploitative factory systems and donned by herds that ficklely follow trends. For his part, Thoreau declares that he wants to stay in touch with himself, literally and figuratively: “It is desirable that a man be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark” (16). His objections to conspicuous consumption of clothes come from various points, but most apropos to his transcendental project is his belief in shedding, in molting. Layers of accumulation must be released to lighten the spirit and new clothes donned only when there is a newness in their wearer. “Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it [like the writer himself]. Thus also the snake casts its slough and the caterpillar its wormy coat, by an internal industry and expansion Otherwise we shall be found to be sailing

under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind” (16).

Thoreau is not alone in decrying the train for leading passengers away from origins and into a world of endless consumerism. Hawthorne reaches the same conclusion in “The Celestial Rail-road,” a story Thoreau refers to several times in *Walden*: “I would rather ride on an ox cart, with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train” (25); “But if railroads aren’t built, how shall we get to heaven in season?” (63); and “celestial train” (81)²⁰. While this short story satirizes the transcendentalists’ belief that the spiritual path can be without struggle and avoid the challenges of temptation, that Hawthorne chooses to rewrite the story of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in terms of the train derailing spiritual seekers by leading them to a dead end spent perpetually shopping in a bazaar confirms the extent to which consumerism has taken hold in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Hawthorne’s allegory clearly asserts the train’s connection to consumerism. The narrator recounts of the “train thunder[ing] into the ancient city of Vanity” (the station, rather than heaven, becoming his end point): “. . . as the new railroad brings with it great trade and an influx of strangers, the lord of Vanity Fair is its chief patron, and the capitalists of the city are among the largest stockholders. Many passengers stop to take their pleasure or make their profit in the Fair, instead of going onward to the Celestial City” (817). The train makes it too easy for pilgrims to travel toward the celestial city; it even carries the seeker’s baggage, but it only leads to a seductive bazaar that feeds insatiable material desires and leaves its riders in a spiritual desert of endless shopping.²¹ Hawthorne, like Thoreau, makes a connection between the train and conspicuous consumption, and like

Thoreau, reveals through his insistent concern in this story that the consumer culture had taken hold earlier than many suspect.

Shelter, Fluctuating Markets, and the Division of Labor

When Thoreau assesses shelter and the ways his contemporaries have gone off track in their pursuit of large, accessory-filled edifices that own their occupants rather than being owned by them, he voices objections similar to those cited in his discussion of clothing. Materials are no longer found locally but are transported via train and ship, and the markets for these goods obtained through rapid transit are like their vehicles—constantly in motion, constantly fluctuating. To Thoreau, people have lost the connections to their shelters on several levels: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Most immediately, they have lost touch with their homes, no longer having a hand in their construction and no longer connected to the materials of their making. Instead his neighbors have become more concerned with the outer spectacle of their shelters and with filling them with an increasing number of superfluities provided by mass manufacturing and mass transport. A house must not only originate from its occupant's being, it should, Thoreau suggests, be constructed of locally available materials:

In such a neighborhood as this, boards and shingles, lime and bricks are cheaper and more easily obtained than suitable caves or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities, or even well-tempered clay or flat stones. I speak understandably on this subject, for I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically and practically. (27)

As a practical example of using local materials, he says in “House-Warming,” “I had the previous winter made a small quantity of lime by burning the shells of the *unio fluviatilis*, which our river affords, for the sake of the experiment; so that I knew where my materials come from” (168). Thoreau offers a literal accounting of the materials that he used in the construction of his cabin, demonstrating by example that he was responsible for obtaining every material, using the recycled boards of the Collins shanty, borrowed tools, and natural materials found around the pond. The total monetary outlay was \$28.12 1/2 (33). On the other hand, with the advent of machinery, factories, and trains, Thoreau sees people losing touch with what is available in their own environments and losing the self-reliance to fulfill their own needs; the price paid involves a sacrifice of the opportunity to hone higher faculties: “Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and family simply and honestly enough the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?” (31).

One of the reasons Thoreau advocates using local materials is that rapid transportation has contributed to instability in the market as well as to the unnatural disconnections between products and their destinations. As he assesses cargo cars going by in “Sounds,” he observes

Here goes the lumber from the Maine woods, which did not go out to sea in the last freshet, risen four dollars on the thousand because of what did go out or was split up; pine, spruce, cedar,—first, second, third, and fourth qualities, so lately all of one quality to wave over the bear, and moose, and

caribou. Next rolls Thomston lime, a prime lot, which will get far among the hills before it gets slacked. (83)

In Thoreau's assessment, the mass transport of goods not only leads to wild price fluctuations, the newly volatile market it creates is as unnatural as the sight of "the palm leaf which will cover so many flaxen New England heads the next summer" (83). The leaves are divorced from their tropical climates where they would be better suited as adornments for natives. As the passage continues, he highlights the physical decay and waste spawned by a throw-away industrial economy. The car bears "old junk," "scrap iron," and "rusty nails." In analyzing Thoreau's attitude toward the train in this passage, some critics read such remarks as "I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me" and "I feel more like a citizen of the world at the sight of the palm-leaf" (83) as reflecting his capitulation to the positive attributes of the train. Cronkhite comments, "Thoreau would not deny that the railroad was accomplishing much at the material level. He himself could feel a certain excitement in watching this sturdy servant of commerce perform its work" (316), and Torsney suggests that the lists of cargo represent "a microcosm of sensuous experience, . . . the train . . . represent[ing] total sensory perception, like the pond, uniting man with his own nature" (25). More often than not, though, Thoreau's tone in these instances is ironic or the comment is immediately or elsewhere qualified with assertions such as "If the enterprise were as innocent as it is early!" or "If the enterprise were as heroic and commanding as it is protracted and unwearied!" (81).

Not only does Thoreau fault the railroad for divorcing people from the materials used in their home's construction, he also sees it implicated in workers becoming

disconnected from the products of their labor as labor becomes increasingly specialized. Thoreau's discussion of shelter leads him to reflect on the increasing specialization of college studies, and he sees this ultimately mirrored in the workforce. Students are unprepared, he says, to apply their "knowledge" in any practical way.

The mode of founding a college is, commonly, to get up a subscription of dollars and cents, and then following blindly the principles of a division of labor to its extreme, a principle which should never be followed but with circumspection,—to call in a contractor who makes this a subject of speculation, and he employs Irishmen or other operatives actually to lay the foundations, while the students that are to be are said to be fitting themselves for it; and for these oversights successive generations have to pay. I think it would be *better than this*, for the students . . . even to lay the foundation themselves" (34-35).

Not only is the laborer divorced from his product and those who will use the product are denied a hand in its creation, laborers are separated from any whole sense of what is being produced: "Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men? . . . It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant, and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve" (31).

Thoreau suggests that even animals, removed from their natural habitats to be shipped via rail to other parts of the country, have been disconnected from their traditional labor roles. In "Sounds," he says of the cattle train whirling by that it "bear[s]

the cattle of a thousand hills, sheepcots, stables, and cow-yards in the air, drovers with their sticks, and shepherd boys in the midst of their flocks, . . . A car-load of drovers, too, in the midst, on a level with their droves now, their vocation gone, but still clinging to their useless sticks as their badge of office. But their dogs, where are they? It is a stampede to them; they are quite thrown out; they have lost the scent” (84).

Thoreau’s belief that the railroad contributed to such disjunctions and disconnections was not universally shared in his time. In fact, many heralded the railroad as a unifying force, but David E. Nye shows in *American Technological Sublime* that this was not true for artisans: “As geographically extended enterprises, railroads were controlled by telegraphic communication to central offices, and they did not tolerate the self-directed artisan who wished to control the tempo of his own work. . . . Nor did railroads unite the regions as had been hoped. Instead, they accelerated industrialization in the Northeast and helped make the South a dependent, agricultural region. Just as the unity of the trades had been replaced by specialization, the railroad had encouraged regional economic specialization” (70-71). Such disconnectedness became evident in the public celebrations of technological projects, including the opening of railroads. Contrasting a celebration held for the opening of the Baltimore line in 1828 with a three-day jubilee event for the railroad held in Boston in 1851, Nye comments:

In the 1828 Baltimore parade, the trades had been deployed as a coherent system of occupations, painters marched next to glazers, tailors next to cloth makers, and so forth. In the Boston parade, this image of organic relation was shattered; positions in the procession were determined by lot. This procedure resulted in meaningless sequences, such as this: sewing

machines / fireworks / wooden wares / railway cars The parade could no longer be ‘read’ as a coherent representation of labor. Instead, it presented a jumble of specialized activities, each pursued for profit only, with no connection to other trades. In this shift, labor ceased to be a calling and became a commodity. (70)

In other words, not only were the products of labor becoming commodified, labor itself was as well.

Thoreau has company in his objections to the growing division of labor. While Emerson may at one time have seen such specialization as allowing each man “to choose his work according to his faculty and to live by his better hand” (“Civilization”), Thoreau and Emerson’s contemporary, Ruskin (whom Thoreau read with increasing frequency during the 1850s) commented: “We have much studied and much perfected of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour, only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men:—Divided into mere segments of men” (283). Ruskin sees a slippery slope in this division of labor, as it amounts to no more than “the degradation of the operative into a machine” (282), the man becoming a mere automaton, a fear Dickens dramatizes through Carker in *Dombey and Son*.

Since they are not building their own shelters, Thoreau’s neighbors are going into life-long debt to pay for them and being turned into machines in the process, and machines, Thoreau asserts, are emasculating: “Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has not time to be anything but a machine” (3). He sees economic salvation in neither the farm nor the factory: “I think

the fall from the farmer to the operative as great and memorable as that from the man to the farmer” (44). The ideal of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer, dreamt of by Jefferson, is not what Thoreau witnesses in Concord. Instead he see farmers working themselves into the ground trying to pay the debt on properties that own them: “When I consider my neighbors, the farmers of Concord, who are at least as well off as the other classes, I find that for the most part they have been toiling twenty, thirty, or forty years, that they may become the real owners of their farms, which commonly they have inherited with encumbrances, or else bought with hired money The man who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that every neighbor can point to him. I doubt if there are three such men in Concord” (22). Thoreau implicates the train, not only in the volatile markets it contributes to but also in relation to the general restlessness to which it gives rise: “The railroads as much as anything appear to have unsettled farmers. Our young Concord farmers and their young wives, hearing this bustle about them, seeing the world all going by as it were, —some daily to the cities about their business, some to California,—plainly cannot make up their minds to live the quiet, retired, old-fashioned country-farmer’s life. They are impatient if they live more than a mile from the railroad” (*Journal* Sept. 28, 1851). He shows his disdain for the worship accorded the train when he writes, “To do things ‘railroad fashion’ is now the byword and it is worth the while to be warned so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track” (*Walden* 82). The train represents both opportunity and disaster for farmers. Farmers are no longer self-sufficient: “To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair springe to catch comfort and independence, and then, as he turned away, got his own leg into it” (*Walden* 22). Emerson comments on this in

“Wealth”: “When men now alive were born, the farm yielded everything that was consumed on it. The farm yielded no money, and the farmer got on without it . . . Now, the farmer buys almost all he can consume—tinware, cloth, sugar, tea, coffee, fish, coal, railroad tickets, and newspapers” (“Wealth”). The order of this list is telling. Staples come first, followed by the fuel of trains, train tickets, and the mass purveyors of information: newspapers, the final two being paper emblems of mass transportation and mass circulation. Michael Gilmore’s analysis of the shift from self-sufficiency to market dependency is in accord with Emerson’s. He notes that prior to the 1830s, “the exchange of goods tended to be local and, in rural areas, often unmediated by money. . . . The scale and character of American enterprise changed dramatically by the Civil War. A variety of factors combined to fuel a runaway expansion of the economy. After 1815 improvements in existing land routes and the construction first of canals and then of railroads sharply reduced transport costs and led to the emergence of a national market” (2).

In addition to the general lack of self-sufficiency railroads induce, trains also distribute the conspicuous superfluities with which Thoreau’s contemporaries fill their shelters and for which they must make space. They go into debt paying for extra “gloves, shoes, and umbrellas, and empty guest chambers for empty guests” and fill them with carloads of “fashionable furniture”(24). As they seek the origins of America’s consumer culture, Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears look to the urban world and cite “the maturation of the national marketplace, including the establishment of national advertising, the emergence of a new stratum of professionals and managers, rooted in a web of complex new organizations . . . and the rise of a new gospel of therapeutic release

. . . (4). While these forces may have crystallized in urban areas in the late nineteenth century, the mandate to buy for one's personal happiness and even for the sake of patriotism, in service to the nation's happiness, was present earlier, evidenced in Catherine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*. She feared that if Americans stopped purchasing superfluities, and "relinquished the use of everything not absolutely necessary to life and health" half the country's citizens would be thrown out of work and those left employed and with money would have to support them. To avoid such an economic catastrophe, she concludes, "The use of superfluities, therefore, to a certain extent, is as indispensable to promote industry, virtue, and religion, as any direct giving of money or time" (as qtd. in Gleason 161). Victorians, of course, were known to be inveterate collectors. With new gadgets, clothing, furnishings, and other home embellishments being mass produced, the Victorian penchant for collecting and for excessive adornment was to become legendary. Thoreau's "informal literary agent," Horace Greeley (Gilmore 10), looking into the future, declared: "'Not until every family shall be provided with a commodious and comfortable habitation, and that habitation amply supplied with Food and Fuel not only, but with Clothing, Furniture, Books, Maps, Charts, Globes, Musical Instruments and every other auxiliary to Moral and Intellectual growth as well as to physical comfort, can we rationally talk of excessive Production'" (as qtd. in Richards 29).

This is the vision that Thoreau counters in *Walden*: "When I consider how our houses are built and paid for, or not paid for, and their internal economy managed and sustained, I wonder that the floor doesn't give way under the visitor while he's admiring the geegaws upon the mantelpiece, and let him through into the cellar, and to some solid

and honest though earthy foundation” (25). Like the molting season necessary before new clothes are acquired, houses must be stripped of their accoutrements back to their foundations. They should then grow organically from the life being lived within their walls: “Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects, the walls must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper” (26).

At Walden, Thoreau claims to have been “terrified” when he realized that the three pieces of limestone on his desk “required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust” (24). He sees the drive to satisfy the desire for luxuries at the cost of utility as ultimately emasculating and believes that railroad companies contribute to this trend: “The traveler who stops at the best houses, so called, soon discovers this, for the publicans presume him to be a Sardanapalus, and if he resigned himself to the tender mercies he would soon be completely emasculated” (25). He moves immediately from the word “emasculated” to this observation: “I think that in the railroad car we are inclined to spend more on luxury than on safety and convenience, and it threatens without attaining these to become no better than a modern drawing room, with its divans, and ottomans, and sunshades, and a hundred other oriental things, which we are taking west with us, invented for the ladies of the harem and effeminate natives of the Celestial Empire, which Jonathan should be ashamed to know the names of” (25). Thoreau will return to this image and again fault the train for the pervasive sense of disconnection he detects in the world: “In the darkest nights dart these bright salons without the knowledge of their inhabitants” (81). Typical

of Thoreau's prose, this line can be read in more than one way. On one hand, the inanimate yet emasculating machine cannot know its inhabitants because it is an "iron horse" (81). On the other hand, its inhabitants are just more of those sleepers, who are unconsciously living their lives and whom Thoreau would awaken.

Food, Dissipation, and Disease

As he has with shelter and clothing, Thoreau charges the train with playing an active role in dissociating people from the origins of their food. Relying on products transported from other places not only means a diminishment in the nutritional quality of the food consumed, but, again, a disconnection from and dismissal of the products available in the immediate environment. To return again to "Sounds," Thoreau shows the questionable perseverance of a car-load of salt cod:

This closed car smells of salt fish . . . Who has not seen a salt fish, thoroughly cured for this world, so that nothing can spoil it, and putting the perseverance of the saints to the blush? with which you may sweep or pave the streets, and split your kindlings, and the teamster shelter himself and his lading against sun, wind, and rain behind it,—and the trader, as a Concord trader once did, hang it up by his door for a sign when he commences business, until at last his oldest customer cannot tell surely whether it be animal, vegetable, or mineral, and yet it shall be as pure as a snowflake, and if it be put into a pot and boiled, will come out an excellent dun fish for a Saturday's dinner. (83)

As with home construction materials, the train enabled local foodstuffs to be shipped elsewhere, leaving that which is needed to be purchased: "For the most part, the farmer

gives to his cattle and hogs the grain of his own producing, and buys flour, which is at least no more wholesome, at a greater cost, at the store” (44). The unnatural transportation of the products of one area to another is highlighted when Thoreau laments the skimming of Walden Pond’s ice coat one particularly cold winter, the blocks cut by “a hundred Irishmen, with Yankee overseers” (201) and ultimately carried away by the train, so that “the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well” (203). This undertaking is not only unnatural, it is also wasteful. Thoreau is told that “not twenty-five percent of this [ice] would reach its destination” (202). At times Thoreau seems concerned that his beloved Walden Pond too may be completely dissipated by greed, not only that of the ice cutters but also of the woodcutters, whose clients included the railroaders looking to feed the train’s vast need for wood. “Though the woodchoppers have laid bare first this shore and then that, and the Irish have built their sties by it, and the railroad has infringed on its border, and the ice-men have skimmed it once, it is itself unchanged” (133). Emily Dickinson joined Thoreau in characterizing the train as having a voracious appetite: “I like to see it lap the miles/ And lick the valleys up / And stop to feed itself at tanks; / And then, prodigious step / Around a pile of mountains, / And, supercilious, peer / In shanties by the sides of roads . . .” (Dickinson 585). Dickinson lulls us into light admiration for the railroad, personifying it so that it sounds no more harmful than a puppy licking and lapping from a trough, but its domination of the landscape, its usurpative appetite, and its arrogance as it peers at the poverty of those who construct it stand in sharp contrast to such innocence.²²

Not only did the train carry away “the only coat, ay, the skin itself, of Walden Pond in the midst of a hard winter” and not only did its appetite for fuel threaten the

surrounding woods, the train, too, was responsible for stripping the land of its wild foods: “All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city” (80). Having considered huckleberrying as a possible vocation, Thoreau decides that the minute he sends the berries to market, they have been compromised: “Trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business” (48). He picks up this line of thought later and again faults transportation systems with degrading the original value of the foods carried: “It is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them. A huckleberry never reaches Boston; they have not been known there since they grew on her three hills. The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed on in the market cart, and they become mere provender” (120).

Thoreau, as both a man of his time and a man who unwittingly anticipates movements gaining ground in this century, advocated slow food, both in his promotion of basic and slow food preparation and in his belief in the use of local ingredients: “I have made a satisfactory dinner, . . . simply off a dish of purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) which I gather in my cornfield, boiled and salted” (42). He extrapolates this for those living in his region: “Every New Englander might easily raise all his own breadstuffs in the land of rye and Indian corn, and not depend on fluctuating markets for them” (43).

As he pointed out when he commented on wood and lime shipments in his discussion of shelter, he sees the mass transportation of food as contributing not only to a lack of self-sufficiency but again to the volatility of markets, the value of whose goods becomes suspect as they traverse distances. As he did with his housing, Thoreau offers a

literal accounting of his food, “Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account. It appears from the above estimate, that my food alone cost me in money about twenty-seven cents a week” (42). All totaled, he spent \$8.74 for a year’s worth food. He supplemented purchased food items with fish he caught, beans he grew, and berries he picked (along with occasional meals in town) (42). After his analysis, he concludes, “I learned from my two years’ experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one’s necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength” (42). Though he claims to be treating this subject more from “an economic than a dietetic point of view,” he is doing both and more. He is ultimately transmuting the material facts of his diet into spiritual nutrition, which is arrived at by first getting to the root “of the matter”: “There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once,—for the root is faith,—I am accustomed to answer that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say” (44).

Thoreau not only wants people to become more self-sufficient by eating what is available because that makes economical and common sense—“Yet we are so far from simplicity and independence that, in Concord, fresh and sweet meal is rarely sold in the shops, and hominy and corn in a still coarse form are hardly used by any” (43-44)—he wants people to be in touch with the origins of the products they consume. He suggests that by relying on food transported from elsewhere, humans may be forgetting the source and roots of local foods; lest they forget, though, the earth holds the memory. As he does elsewhere in *Walden*, in “House-Warming” he reads the landscape as a palimpsest and

sees that it reveals a history, in this case, the food history of previous inhabitants.²³

Digging for fishing worms one day, he “discovered the ground-nut (*Apios tuberosa*) on its string, the potato of the aborigines. . . . Cultivation has well-nigh exterminated it

In these days of fatted cattle and waving grain-fields this humble root, which was once the *totem* of an Indian tribe, is quite forgotten, or known only by its flowering vine; but let wild Nature reign here once more, and the tender and luxurious English grains will probably disappear before a myriad of foes” (163-164).²⁴ As part of his quest for the roots of foods, Thoreau analyzes the ingredients used in making bread—“the staff of life” (43) and goes back in time to determine those that have always been considered absolutely necessary, becoming a food archaeologist of sorts. He ultimately learns that he can even eliminate yeast, the *spiritus*, from the bread-making process, and though his contemporaries cannot understand this, and the elderly “prophesied a speedy decay of the vital forces” (43), he is proud to know he is making his bread “according to the recipe which Marcus Porcius Cato gave about two centuries before Christ” (43).

As he did with the other necessities, Thoreau performs a dissection of his and his neighbors’ diets to determine the essential requirements for basic sustenance. Again, he finds that the necessities for a healthy diet are abundant, but that “men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries” (42). Thoreau frequently disparages appetites for luxuries, not only because they deter attention from more fundamental matters and from overriding spiritual quests, but also because luxuries are among the factors he charges with leading to dissipation. The wrong foods; “shallow” reading (69) (which Thoreau equates with “gingerbread,” and whose ingestion leads to “dulness [sic] of sight, a stagnation of the vital circulations, and a

general deliquium” (73); too much company (94); overwork (112); “loose” generative energy (151), and too “many influences” (224) all lead to dissipation. Even the labor required to purchase a train ticket is ultimately dissipating. When told that since he loves to travel he should take the train to Fitchburg, Thoreau launches into an analysis of which is quicker, walking there or working for the fare, essentially a day’s labor. The man who would pay for the train, Thoreau concludes, would arrive after the walker, “And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you No doubt they can ride at last who shall have earned their fare, that is, if they survive so long, but they will probably have lost their elasticity and desire to travel by that time” (37-37).

Thoreau’s rejection of rich foods and luxuries, his general fears of dissipation, and his disgust with train smoke are all linked with his concerns for his lungs, which were tubercular. He writes, “I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion. I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart, with a free circulation, than go to heaven in a fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a malaria all the way” (25).²⁵ While railroads were attacked for the noise and sparks they produced, they were also derided for the clouds of smoke they trailed through the air. In *America as Second Creation*, David Nye says, “By 1906 the American Medical Association recognized that exposure to coal smoke [from railroads] increased mortality rates for tuberculosis and pneumonia” (192). Tuberculosis was rampant in Thoreau’s family, with his grandfather, brother John, and sister Helen among his close relatives with the disease (Harding *The Days of Henry Thoreau* 44). In his time, consumption, so called because of the way the lung appeared to be consuming itself from within (Caldwell 8), was particularly rampant in New England (Bowditch 1), causing nearly half the deaths in

Boston in 1851 (Hirshhorn 103). In 1862, the year Thoreau died of the disease, tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in Concord (Harding “Thoreau and Tuberculosis” 1). Some saw the disease as a symptom of America’s over-active lifestyle. As Henry Bowditch, writing in 1864, explains, “The climate, the genius of our republican institutions, the all-powerful stimulus of necessity in the grand struggle for existence,—ambition, competition, emulation,—all tend to force us to overactivity” (91). In “Re-Creating *Walden*: Thoreau’s Economy of Work and Play,” William Gleason cites several sources contemporary with Thoreau who noted how devitalized and dissipated Americans had become. Gleason argues that in response to such signs of dissipation, Thoreau had it as one of his goals in *Walden* to increase the level of play in proportion to the decrease in “unceasing labor,” (677) and ultimately to “make one’s work and play as alike as possible” (686).

Even some of Thoreau’s precepts for a spiritual life may have had their foundations in concerns for his health. While he deems a spare, mostly vegetarian diet as best for the spiritual seeker, “It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who loved so well the philosophy of India” (*Walden* 42), Harold Hellenbrand argues that Thoreau’s elimination of meat from his diet was part of his effort to spare his lungs from overwork: “Thoreau intended to starve the ‘animal’ in himself. He would not consume meat. Meat was a fuel too rich; meat was ‘unclean.’ It congested his ‘stove,’ causing stomach and lungs to work too hard. Also, since meat was expensive, the human carnivore had to devote an inordinate amount of time and money to procuring it” (Hellenbrand 73-74). He further argues that Thoreau denigrated overeating as straining the lungs, as “the body’s bellows had to work hard to aid the digestion of large amounts of food” (72). Thoreau

was also thought to believe that constipation exacerbated TB symptoms (Hellenbrand 72). In light of this, his “excrementitious” passage describing the melting of the railroad bank in “Spring” has a personal as well as environmental purgative association: “This phenomenon is more exhilarating to me than the luxuriance and fertility of vineyards. True, it is somewhat excrementitious in its character, and there is no end to the heaps of liver, lights, and bowels, as if the globe were turned wrong side outwards; but this suggests at least that Nature has some bowels” (210). That the earth’s bowel movement means a softening and release of the railroad bank acts as a counterbalance to the ransacking of the bowels of the earth that took place to build it originally. In a school essay, written in 1837, Thoreau, addressing the “prevalent ‘commercial spirit’s’ effects on the moral character of the nation,” blames the “‘commercial man’s’ . . . ‘yearning for freedom and speed: when winds and waves no longer suffice, ‘he must needs ransack the bowels of the earth that he may make for himself a highway of iron over its surface’” (Gustafsson 48).

Thoreau held the train partly accountable for the strain on his lungs, a connection Hellenbrand makes clear:

For Thoreau, inspiration became a subject for bodily and spiritual anxiety. Coughing and raspy breath were symptoms of dissipating strain and symbols of a moral lassitude before material indulgences. Thus, in ‘Economy,’ Thoreau is especially anxious to maintain ‘slow combustion’ in the lungs.

This vital worry manifested itself in ‘Sounds’ also. The locomotive

that threatened to put out Thoreau's eyes and ears with its steam and hisses did not just invade his peaceful solitude. The train's massive consumption of fuel and its telltale exhalations dramatized the dissipation that loomed over Thoreau's personal health. (72)

In an early essay entitled "Paradise (To Be) Regained" (1843), Thoreau makes a potent connection between machines, the planet, and personal health. Attacking J. A. Etzler's proposal for a machine paradise based on Joseph Fourier's principles, Thoreau makes a "humorous" though critical connection between global and human health:

"What matters it whether I remove this humor out of my flesh, or this pestilent humor from the fleshy part of the globe? Nay, is not the latter the more generous course? At present the globe goes with a shattered constitution in its orbit. Has it not asthma, ague, and fever. . . . Has it not its healthful laws counteracted, and its vital energy which will redeem it?" (144).²⁶

In his final days with the fatal disease, Thoreau's subconscious revealed how strong the connection between the train and his wasted lungs was in his mind. Walter Harding recounts Thoreau's restless deathbed scenes, witnessed by William Ellery Channing (the younger): "When he did sleep, he was troubled by strange dreams. 'Sleep seemed to hang round my bed in festoons,' he told Channing and he reported a pitiful dream he had 'of being a railroad cut, where they were digging through and laying down the rails'—the place being his lungs" (464). In the spring thaw passage of *Walden*, the undermined railroad bank becomes leaves and then lobes, "a word especially applicable to the liver and the lungs and the *leaves* of fat" (209). This image gives way to one of streams, which become blood vessels, and Thoreau asks, "What is man but a mass of

thawing clay?” (210). What is left is immaterial: “They love the soil which makes their graves but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay” (219).

Like the railroad bank, the body, too, will be absorbed in the earth’s layers, geologic time trumping railway and human time.

The Train in Deep Time

Thoreau’s early student comments about the train and his deathbed dreams of his lungs as iron rails bookend his preoccupation with the train throughout his adult life.

Beyond its implications for his and for the earth’s health, the train, above all, represents for Thoreau a horizontal track. It kept its riders, its promoters, its workers, and its onlookers focused on superficial concerns. He felt that life had become too much about the horizontal line, a state symbolized by the train: “Such is the universal law, which no man can ever outwit, and with regard to the railroad even we may say it is as broad as it is long. To make a railroad round the world available to mankind is the equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet” (*Walden* 36). Thoreau had expressed a similar sentiment in *A Week on the Concord and the Merrimack*: “Go where we will on the *surface* of things, men have been there before us But the lives of men, though more extended laterally in their range, are still as shallow as ever . . . (*A Week* 248).

Part of Thoreau’s project was to take the mind and the eye down, to dig deeper, to re-establish a connection with roots and origins in order to establish a secure position from which once could rise higher and transcend the trappings of contemporary existence. Early on in *Walden* he remarks, “The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in

the same proportion into the heavens above?" (10). This sentiment recurs in "Spring," when he describes the re-emergence of grass as it "streams from the sod into the summer, checked indeed by the frost, but anon pushing on again, lifting its spear of last year's hay with the fresh life below. . . . So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity" (212).

While the railroad represents the superficial and the horizontal, Walden Pond stands in contrast with its elusive depth. Walden's purity protects it from the taints of technology and consumerism. As God's drop, Thoreau says, the pond "helps wash out state street and engine soot" (134). Its depth and timelessness not only make it immune to the forces of economy and technology but also make it the antidote to their poison. Thoreau makes it a point to suggest several times that the pond is believed to be bottomless, for example when the Canadian woodchopper tells Thoreau that men of genius can be found in the "lowest grades in life" who are as "bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be" (104) and after describing the pond's circumference, its scenery, its pure waters, and its pulse, Thoreau suggests, "Some think that it is bottomless" (123). Thoreau is, of course, the man to finally determine the exact depth of the pond. A sometimes surveyor by profession, he measures the pond as he was "desirous to recover the long lost bottom" (195) and ascertains "Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth" (195). Once the factual reality of the pond is established, (it measures "exactly one hundred and two feet,") he realizes it as a symbol: "What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol" (196). By book's end, its metaphoric coverage has reached an all-encompassing expansion: "There is a solid

bottom everywhere” (225). When these comments about the pond are contrasted with his assertion of the railroad’s superficiality, the dangers to the minds and spirits of his contemporaries becomes evident. Reflection on something deep like Walden Pond draws its onlooker deeper, while the train sweeps the eye along a never-ending superficial track.

That Thoreau is concerned with adding the vertical axis of depth and height to a world preoccupied with the horizontal plane becomes clear when he generalizes a method for determining the deepest point of any pond. Having mapped Walden and having “put down the soundings, more than a hundred in all” (197), he notes a “remarkable coincidence” (197): “I laid a rule on the map lengthwise, and then breadthwise, and found, to my surprise, that the line of greatest length intersected the line of greatest breadth at *exactly* the point of greatest depth, . . . who knows but this hint would conduct to the deepest part of the ocean as well as of a pond or puddle” (197). When he transfers this theory to human nature, his insistence on the importance of the vertical axis is clear: “Such a rule of the two diameters not only guides us toward the sun in the system and the heart of a man, but draws lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man’s particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character” (198). Necessary for this leap from the metonymic to the metaphoric, is, of course, the imagination: “Often an inquisitive eye may detect the shores of a primitive lake in the low horizon hills, and no subsequent elevation of the plain have been necessary to conceal their history . . . The amount of it is, the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than nature goes” (197). When nature is intersected by a receptive mind, it is instilled and distilled with the correspondent possibilities.

To Thoreau the train, the telegraph, and similar inventions transport people away from an internal yet infinitely deep view. In an extended entry in his journal, dated February 27, 1851, he contrasts the superficiality of the railroad world and the deeper world of transcendent thought. He describes lecturers who are

went to describe the 19th century—the American the last generation in an offhand & triumphant strain—wafting him to Paradise spreading his fame by steam & telegraph—recounting the number of wooden stopples he has whittled. But who does not perceive that this is not a sincere or pertinent account of any man’s or nation’s life. It is the hip hip hurrah & mutual admiration society style. Cars go by & we know their substance as well as their shadow. They stop & we get into them. But those sublime thoughts passing on high do not stop & we never get into them. Their conductor is not like one of us.

I feel that the man who in his conversation with me about the life of man in New England lays much stress on rail-roads telegraphs & such enterprises does not go below the surface of things— He treats the shallow & transitory as if it were profound & enduring. . . aye even in one of the interstices of a Hindoo dynasty perchance such things as the 19th century with all its improvements may come & go again. (*A Year* 25)

Many saw the nation’s lateral push, most prominently evident in the westward and eventually transcontinental connection (1869) of the railroad, as the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny: “A line from the Atlantic to the Pacific was not merely an engineering project or a business proposition; it was the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny” (Nye,

America as Second Creation 160). Edward Everett was among the most public proponents of the conquest of the continent and of nature, to be accomplished via the railroad:

‘Here we should be taught to behold him, a Titanic colossus of iron and brass, instinct with elemental life and power, with a glowing furnace for his lungs, and streams of fire and smoke for the breath of his nostrils.

With one hand he collects the furs of the Arctic Circle; with the other he smites the forests of Western Pennsylvania. He plants his right foot at the source of the Missouri—his left on the Gulf of Mexico.’ (as qtd. in Nye,

America as Second Creation 157)

Though Everett’s description is meant to convey the train as a positive transformative power, his depiction of it as an overriding, usurpative, dominating, and devouring colossus makes it sound like the fire-breathing dragons of lore that blighted landscapes and hoarded treasures, the very qualities of the train that Thoreau bemoans.²⁷

Thoreau’s is a book of self-culture, but it is not only individuals who need to follow a deeper program, the country does too: “The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain” (*Walden* 63). Thoreau’s redirection of his readers’ focus on “internal industry and expansion” runs in opposition

to the country's thrust to expand externally and horizontally. In an 1853 letter to Harrison Blake, he wrote: "The whole enterprise of the nation which is not an upward, but a westward one, . . . is totally devoid of interest to me, whether performed on foot or by a Pacific Railroad. . . . a filibustering toward heaven by the great western route. No; they may go their way to their manifest destiny, which I trust is not mine" (*Familiar Letters* 252-253).

The extent to which Thoreau accepted and assimilated the train within his own time remains questionable, dogged as it was by its service to consumerism, superficiality, and a wide range of disconnections. Most often the negative side of his ambivalence outweighs any positive attributes he might assign to the railroad. When he considers it in terms of deep time, however, its ultimate impact, for better or worse, is completely diminished. Lyell's concept of geologic time—of uniform principles acting consistently over millions of years—offers him a means of subverting the railroad to greater forces acting over the long term. In the first half of the nineteenth century, geology was gaining important benefits from the earth-moving required to build the railroad. The excavations involved in railroad construction were contributing to the bank of geological knowledge that was fortifying Lyell's theories, first published between 1831-1833, the first years of the train's public debut. While Lyell was building on the work of James Hutton and his *Theory of the Earth* (first published in 1788), railroads were playing an important, but underappreciated, role in expanding the emerging geologic picture, says Michael Freeman. Trains were celebrated as a scientific feat, he argues, but: "What was much less celebrated was the association of the railway with the extension of contemporary knowledge," with "railway excavations" becoming a "magnet for field geologists from

the earliest days of the railway age” (53). It is ironic that the railway, seen by Thoreau as the physical manifestation of the superficial, horizontal track society was heading down, was in part responsible for the growing understanding of deep time. Railroads not only supplied additional evidence for the geologic record as a byproduct of their construction; they were also critical in spreading the word of this deepening knowledge, both as mass distributors of the many newspapers and magazines flooding the market (Gilmore 3) but also as vehicles for viewing the evidence directly. Freeman explains:

Nor was the narrative that the [railway] sections might support, about the history of the earth and about evolution, out of sight of the wider population. Railway travelers, for example, could not fail to observe through their carriage windows the varied structures and hues that newly exposed rock cuttings presented to view. Meanwhile the navies who worked in excavation with pick and shovel found themselves daily face to face with the bones of giant reptiles and a host of other fossiliferous remains. (52)

Robert Sattelmeyer summarizes the reverberations of this information: “For decades, evidence had been accumulating to undermine theories of creation that were consistent with a literal interpretation of the account rendered in Genesis. The gradual deciphering of the fossil record led to a growing awareness that the age of the earth would have to be measured at least in millions rather than thousands of years” (79-80). Lyell’s theories would be critical to the development of Darwin’s work, and the expanding scientific picture contributed to an even larger upheaval of religious beliefs in the century.

Thoreau read Lyell's work in 1840 and "noting grimly of the latter that it is hard 'to convince a man of an error It took 100 years to prove that fossils are organic, and 150 more, to prove that they are not to be referred to the Noachian deluge'" (Richardson 82). He was as well an enthusiastic follower of Darwin's earliest work, having read *Voyage of the Beagle* in 1851 (Richardson 242). When *The Origin of Species* was published, he read it immediately upon its publication and, "took six pages of notes on it in one of his commonplace books" (Harding *The Days of Henry Thoreau* 429). For Thoreau, the information came as no surprise. He had been absorbing the ideas of evolution and of geologic deep time for more than a decade prior to the publication of *The Origin of Species*. In a journal entry from 1851, he writes, responding to Robert Hunt's work *The Poetry of Science*, "The figures of serpents and griffins flying dragons and other embellishments of herald . . . are thought by Hunt? to 'indicate a faint and shadowy knowledge of a previous state of organic existence'—such as geology partly reveals. The fossil tortoise has been found in Asia large enough to support an elephant" (*A Year* 24). Absorbing this expanded sense of the past means a re-evaluation of the meaning of any one life, and Thoreau remarks, "how little eventful is our lives" (*A Year* 24) in response. At first the idea dismays him as he wonders, "What have been all of these wars & survivors of wars and modern discoveries & improvements so called a mere irritation on the skin" (*A Year* 24). Naturally Thoreau wants to believe that each life matters, that is at center of works like *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience." He recognizes this thought as a shadow and dispensing with it, he asserts that human episodes to matter, that "there are events of importance whose interval to us is a true historic period" (*A Year* 24).

Thoreau's awareness of deep time is everywhere present in *Walden*, seen in such comments as "I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day" (109) and "No doubt many a smiling valley with its stretching cornfields occupies exactly such a 'horrid chasm,' [as Loch Fyne] from which the waters have receded, though it requires the insight and the far sight of the geologist to convince the unsuspecting inhabitants of this fact" (196). This sense of deep time born of Lyell's work and exposed by railroad excavations adds the vertical axis to the graph that would have time's arrow shooting primarily horizontally, the direction allied with the Biblical account of progression. Stephen Gould defines "time's arrow" as history "being an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events . . . and all moments, considered in their proper sequence, tell a story of linked events moving in a direction. Time's arrow is the primary metaphor of biblical history" (11). "Time's cycle," on the other hand, suggests that "events have no meaning as distinct episodes with causal impact upon a contingent history Apparent motions are parts of repeating cycles, and differences of the past will be realities of the future. Time has no direction" (11). Thoreau is aware of both, as is clear when he comments on the "shelf-like path . . . alternately rising and fall, approaching and receding from the water's edge," encircling Walden. He believes it to be "as old probably as the race of man here, worn by the feet of aboriginal hunters, and still from time to time unwittingly trodden by the present occupants of the land" (124), and suspects that even when villas have one day been built around the pond, its grounds, "may still preserve some trace of this" (124). Thoreau's thinking ultimately embraces both geologic cycles and progression measured not in human time but in spiritual growth.

As James Saucerman comments, the picture emerging from the scientific world did not pose the same threat to Thoreau as a transcendentalist as it did to the adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition: “Thoreau was sympathetic with this picture of earth history. He moved in a world where God culminates in the present moment For him the earth was neither recovering from some prehistoric cataclysm nor in decline from a previous Golden Age; it was not merely a museum, but rather a living earth of which he was part” (7).

While he welcomes the deep time that the geological record was revealing, Thoreau realizes even this must be transcended, as it is in the climactic passage of the railroad bank’s thaw in “Spring”: “The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquarians chiefly, but living poetry . . . not a fossil earth, but a living earth” (*Walden* 210). Thoreau understands the cyclical nature of the earth, a cycle that on a small scale is represented by the alternating seasons and the changes each season reveals through the aspect of nature, but on the scale of deep time represents the emergence and disappearance of species, as well as of civilizations and their artifacts, to be buried and recorded in the layers of the earth. In *Walden*, Thoreau reads through the palimpsests of his culture’s artifacts, of the landscape, of the pond, and arrives at that moment of the spring thaw when he is able to consolidate deep time and immediacy into one eternal present:

Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which the thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village, a phenomenon not very

common on so large a scale, though the number of freshly exposed banks of the right material must have greatly multiplied since railroads were invented. . . .

What makes this sand foliage remarkable is its springing into existence thus suddenly. When I see on the one side the inert bank,—for the sun acts on one side first,—and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me, (208-209)

This description of the thaw of the railroad bank enacts in microcosmic form the cycle of creation and destruction that is the history of the earth. The manmade railroad bank slumps and is reshaped by nature. While he may have been looking for a knight with a lance to meet the “devilish Iron Horse” at the Deep Cut and have it “thrust an avenging lance” (134), he shows with this melting of the bank, that the earth’s uniform processes have taken on the task. The spectacle he observes embodies the forms of all natural creation through the patent of a leaf: “You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. . . . The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype” (209). From this point, Thoreau journeys through the etymology of lobe, and find relatives in shape and language in lungs, livers, labor, lapsus, lapsing, globus, globe. His flight with words and associations become a microcosm of the transcendent flight through nature: “The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit” (209).²⁸

Thoreau recognizes that the artifacts of this scene he is witnessing will one day become “a puzzle to future geologists” (208). Others imagine future historians looking at

the artifacts of the railway era and seeing a time equivalent to the golden age of Greece and Rome, as David Nye suggests: “These improvements seemed equivalent to the wonders of the ancient world. In 1840 an essayist noted proudly that Americans had ‘dug through plains, hills, and solid rocks, in our long lines of canals and railroads, works that have stamped upon the soil a lasting impression, which, if the republic were swept away, and all records of its existence were blotted out forever, would be viewed by posterity with the same wonder with which we now gaze upon the mouldering ruins of Rome, the marble temples of the Acropolis . . . ’” (59-60). To Thoreau, the only timeless artifact, however, is the written word: “A written word is the choicest of relics . . . it is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips . . . carved out of the breath of life itself” (71). A moment in time becomes timeless, as Thoreau says language itself should be: “Our discourse should be *ex tempore*, but not *pro tempore*” (*Journal* July 12, 1840). While many commented on the speeding train turning the landscape into a blur of effervescent scenes, for Thoreau, it is language that is evanescent. The meanings it carries become distilled in the instant, leaving the letters of their making behind: “The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains” (221).

Thoreau knows that though on a large and deep scale, natural laws remain constant, at the same time, every moment is a new translation, and all of the things held so dear by his contemporaries, too, will be undermined by deep time: “The sudden revolutions of these times and this generation have acquired an exaggerated importance,” he wrote in his journal in 1842. “They do not interest me much, for they are not in

harmony with the longer periods of nature God does not sympathize with popular movements” (*Journal* Jan. 5, 1842). Emerson puts a sharper point on the subject in “Circles”: “The old continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the foregoing. New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts made useless by hydraulics; fortifications, by gunpowder; roads and canals, by railways; sails by steam; steam by electricity” (1). Everything new and heralded is superceded by the next invention.

In one of his last journal entries, Thoreau, rather than undermining the railroad bank, melds the train and the geological record. He reads a storm through its markings on the earth, demonstrating how the processes of erosion become the layers of the geological record, a record which incorporates human artifacts, a scene which survives through the relic of Thoreau’s words:

After a violent easterly storm in the night which clears up at noon (November 3, 1861), I notice that the surface of the railroad causeway, composed of gravel, is singularly marked, as if stratified like some slate rocks, on their edges, so that I can tell within a small fraction of a degree from what quarter the rain came. These lines, as it were of stratification, are perfectly parallel, and straight as a ruler, diagonally across the flat surface of the causeway for its whole length. Behind each little pebble, as a protecting boulder, an eighth or a tenth of an inch in diameter, extends northwest a ridge of sand an inch or more, which it has protected from being washed away, while the heavy drops driven almost horizontally

have washed out a furrow on each side, and on all sides are these ridges, half an inch apart and perfectly parallel.

All this is perfectly distinct to an observant eye, and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most. Thus each wind is self-registering.

(Selected Journals 322-323)

Thoreau's is, of course, the observant eye, reading the effects of a natural phenomenon on a human-altered landscape. There is an immediacy, a present-ness, in this passage that recalls the "Spring" thaw. The spring thaw passage allows Thoreau to reconcile his arguments with the present and its spurious "improvements" like the train, through his sense of deep time. The greater uniform processes of the earth not only subdue but record within geologic layers fragments and artifacts of human activity, whether arrowheads, chimneys, or massive public works projects like Roman palaces and American railroads. Many see the culminating vision of the railroad bank's thaw as Thoreau finding his way to unity. James Saucerman is among them. "When Thoreau saw solid-seeming forms, warmed by the sun, begin to flow and change shape, he felt no fear of dissolution, nor terror; but rather he described the event as a vision of the essential harmony of the universe, a harmony that does not reside in the particular objects, but in the living action of nature" (4). The picture that emerges deepens into a larger engagement with geological cycles, ultimate origins, which exist not in a particular place but everywhere, and eternal timelessness. Thoreau uses his knowledge of geology to suggest that the powers of nature, as they always have, will absorb the world that exists on the superficial layer of the earth and incorporate it as part of its record. He ends *Walden* referring to these processes followed by a final parable. "The life in us is like the

water in the river. It may rise this year higher than any man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed, before science began to record its freshets” (227). The earth, in other words, is always re-translating itself. People, too, have the same opportunity, he suggests, as he follows this comment with the parable of the “strong and beautiful bug” that gnawed its way out of a farmer’s table, born of an egg that like every life may have “been buried for ages under man concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society” (227). Each may emerge, he suggests, from some state of being buried in the dross and dead layers of society to “enjoy its perfect summer at last!” (227). No doubt Thoreau feels his words are the light in the darkness for most lives. To him, “That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics . . . when the Vatican shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successfully deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile may we hope to scale heaven at last” (72). One can guess that Thoreau saw his *Walden* as another addition to the pile. Transcendence was to be found not along superficial tracks and through new fangled improvements nor in deep geological layers, but was to be arrived at on the wings of words.

Chapter 2

THE RAILROAD IN *DOMBEY AND SON*: COMMODITIES, CONSUMERISM, AND CATASTROPHE

Introduction

Charles Dickens wrote *Dombey and Son* (published between 1846-1848) at around the same time that Thoreau was living at the pond and drafting *Walden*. During that mid-decade period, the train, which barely ten years earlier had been a novelty on the English landscape, was penetrating the cities and outlying villages. By the time Dickens finished writing *Dombey and Son*, “more than 5000 miles of railway were open in the United Kingdom and 2000 more were under construction” (Marcus 306). This was also the time of Railway Mania, the feverish period of stock speculation, which lasted from 1844-1847 (Freeman 98).²⁹ Dickens was trying to adjust to, assimilate, and represent the train at the moment of its most profound impact. As did Thoreau, he found the train an expedient means of travel, both at home and abroad, and in many ways found it fascinating. His ambivalence toward the railroad becomes clear when in *Dombey and Son*, he fictionalizes the installation of the London-Birmingham line as the dramatic, seismic upheaval of Staggs’s Gardens, a neighborhood that completely loses its identity to the railroad. Likewise, two characters in *Dombey and Son*, Carker and Toodle, both associated with consumption in very different ways, are themselves consumed by the railroad, Carker literally and tragically, Toodle figuratively and comically. In other words, through Carker, Toodle, and Staggs’s Gardens, he highlights the usurpation of

people and places by the railway. Through *Dombey*, he associates the train with the increasing commodification of life in his time. The rise of nationalism and reign of imperialistic capitalism in Great Britain were significantly aided by the train, for an economy based on the mass production of goods requires an extensive and efficient means of moving those goods, and *Dombey*—the character most allied with heartless capitalism in the novel—has a company whose business is the global trafficking of commodities.³⁰ Dickens, then, links the railroad to aspects of his culture that he found deeply disconcerting and difficult to reconcile and puts the loss of self-contact and self-awareness in an increasingly capitalist, commodified, industrial world at the center of his novel.

In Dickens's mind, the train was associated with disconnections besides the separation of self from one's humanity and of products from their sites of production and consumption. The train itself represented a disconnection, or as Ephraim Sicher suggests of it, the train is, "a place that is nowhere" (111). Dickens writes in "Railway Dreaming," a piece written for *Household Words*: "I am never sure of time or place upon a Railroad. I can't read, I can't think, I can't sleep—I can only dream. I take it for granted that I am coming from somewhere and going to somewhere . . . for anything I know, I may be coming from the moon" (*The Works of Charles Dickens*). This feeling of dislocation and the sense of unclear origins or destinations had its correlative in Lyell's theory of uniformitarianism, a theory gaining its foothold concurrently with the rise of the railroad and a theory with which Dickens was undoubtedly familiar. As Michael Freeman says, "Geology appeared to be suggesting that there was neither end nor beginning" (13). Dickens seemed to accept emerging scientific theories, though with a

lingering belief in some ultimate source and director of human life, but as well with a sense that events in his own time seemed catastrophic. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens exposes the tension that exists between the notion of slow, gradual change (uniformitarianism), testified to by the increasing exposure of the geological record through railroad excavations, and the sudden change represented by the railroad, which seemingly testified to a catastrophic, Biblical explanation of history. In other words, through his portrayal of the railroad in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens reveals the epistemological tension created when evidence of deep geological time is challenged by the eruptive and immediate arrival of the train, which was seen as speeding up time and shortening space.

While Thoreau was most intent on registering the train's role in dissociating people from the origins of their necessities and thus contributing to a general lack of self-reliance, Dickens is more interested in portraying dissociations from human and social origins, and his indictment of capitalist culture and the consumerism it spawns becomes literalized through several characters in his book. In this world of expanding global trade and expedited rapid transit, the risk is that one will compromise one's humanity, as does Carker and, to a slightly lesser degree, Dombey, or that one will become absorbed by the industrial machine, as happens to Mr. Toodle. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens incorporates the railroad's potency and influence in a variety of ways. It is the transformative agent of a London neighborhood as well as the vehicle that transports Dombey to the sea after the death of his son, Paul, leading him to the fateful meeting with Edith, who will become his second wife and prove to be his economic and personal downfall. As a means of mass transportation, it affords opportunities for communion among the classes, but this thought

terrifies Dombey. It is as well the industry that employs Toodle, giving him a means to support his many children, but there is the price of selfhood to be paid for employment by the railroad. It is most chillingly the amoral machine that dismembers and consumes the avaricious Carker. As a function of the plot, it is all of these things, but suggests so much more. In *Dombey and Son*, the train, like Dickens's novels themselves, is a site of multiplicity—of experiences, perceptions, connections, and meanings.

Playing such a prominent role in a novel by a prominent depicter of Victorian society, the train in *Dombey and Son* has naturally garnered a fair amount of critical attention. While Henrik Gustafsson declared Thoreau's reaction to the train one of the most famous in American literature, Dickens's treatment of the railroad in *Dombey and Son* has been accorded similar status in British literature. Richard Altick says, "The most celebrated railway passages in Victorian fiction are the four in *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848) . . . In this powerful use of topicality for artistic purposes, Dickens induced his readers to bring into focus the various impressions and ideas that this portentous social phenomenon had so far generated in them" (190-191). Most critics agree that Dickens's attitude toward the train is best characterized as "ambivalent" (Marcus, Arac, Sussman, and Baumgarten among them). Stephen Marcus is among the critics who offer a more comprehensive analysis of the railroad in *Dombey and Son* on a broad platform. He calls the railroad the "symbol of social transformation" in the novel (306), and he lists the major passages, quoting the Staggs's Gardens description and the chapter that narrates Carker's flight at length, but he does so in service to his greater argument that Dickens's working out of the novel's theme of change and in the use of the railroad as the agent and symbol of that change arises out of the same imagination and impulse that went into his

efforts to transform the distress he was experiencing into other forms of activity” (312).³¹

In *Victorians and the Machine—The Literary Response to Technology* (1968), Herbert Sussman suggests that for Dickens, the machine is more than an image. It is a symbol “that suggests a complex of meanings beyond itself” (3). While other Victorian novelists, despite claims of seeking to represent life as it was “shied away from writing the machine into their works”(3), Sussman correctly claims that Dickens, like the industrial novelists, had in his imagination, “so absorbed machine technology that he could use it as vehicle rather than tenor, as a complex symbol for the combination of industrial mechanization and mechanistic thought that he, like Carlyle, saw as the shaping principle of Victorian life” (41-42). Sussman further says that in *Dombey and Son* the machine serves as a symbol of “amoral commercialism” (59), but the presentation is not all negative, as he sees Dickens approving the redevelopment of Staggs’s Gardens by the railroad (Marcus suggests the same). He also argues that though the train has infiltrated Toodle’s speech, it in no way “warps his intuitive morality” (59). These are both claims that I will dispute in this chapter, as Dickens renders the Staggs’s Gardens episodes and Toodle’s total absorption by railway culture with deep irony and ambivalence.

More recently, in *Rereading the City, Rereading Dickens* (2003), Efraim Sicher, finding the major critical approaches inadequate or limited in their capacity to explain the relationship between the city and Dickens’s fiction, sees the railway as “functionally an extension of the street in time and space, connect[ing] narratives and places in a way that symbolizes the social and economic machine of the city in conflict with the flow of natural values represented by the eternity of the sea” (xix). This opposition of the railway and the sea becomes the core of his discussion of *Dombey and Son*, arguing the novel is

the first in Dickens's oeuvre in which the city is both the "geographical and ideological center of a commercial and financial body. Yet in *Dombey and Son*, it is the cold heart of an unfeeling monstrous body. The capital of empire has become an empire of capital that commodifies the bodies of its subjects, disciplining them to the iron will of economic principles and the railway timetable" (92). Further, he asserts, "Dickens's novel attempts to incorporate in its characters a radical subjectivity that resists colonization by the business and railway empire" (92).³²

In general, existing scholarship on Dickens's treatment of the railroad in *Dombey and Son* often makes claims that are too narrow to represent the full complexity of Dickens's reactions to the train, largely because the critics subordinate Dickens's use of the railroad to some other argument or focus on just one or two of the train-related episodes in the novel. This approach produces overly simplified versions of Dickens's attitudes toward the railroad. When the railroad itself becomes the focus and the characters and landscapes associated with it are viewed together, the extent and depth of Dickens's engagement with, rendering of, and ambivalence toward the railroad become clear.

Dombey: The Man of Commodities Rides the Rails

Just as Thoreau and Dreiser expressed concern about losing oneself in the masses and in the marketplace, Dickens makes threats to identity a central theme in *Dombey and Son*. Dombey loses himself in the empire of capital and globally circulating, undefined commodities. He goes so far as to consider his son and his second wife components of his business plan. It is when his son dies, and so his business heir is lost, that Dombey is forced to confront human mortality, a confrontation that occurs most directly aboard the

train that carries him to the sea after his son's death. Such a confrontation does not, however, save Dombey from his overriding capitalist mindset nor his class-consciousness. The ride does, however, lead him to his second and commodified wife who, along with Carker, the machine-like man, will contribute to his downfall.

Dickens's only son Paul has no identity or force in the new world of industrial capitalism. As a romanticized, consumptive figure, he will gently fade from the world at a young age. When he dies, Dombey does not mourn the loss of his son as an individual whom he loved, but as a lost future business partner: "The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light" (4). Until the birth of this child, Dombey had had "no issue," or none that mattered, only a girl. "But what was a girl to Dombey and Son!" (5). Yet, Paul had no personal identity from the start. To his father (Paul's mother, his "origin," died during childbirth), he is a blank capitalist whom Dombey would have schooled to fit a niche in his corporation. In some ways, this aligns him with the commodities in which Dombey trades. As Sicher describes those commodities, their description bears a striking resemblance to the way Dickens characterizes Paul: "The commodities in which Dombey trades are unnamed. This makes them all the more ephemeral and abstract, products of the Steam Age that have lost any connection with their origin and no longer have any identity as unique products" (100).³³ Dickens consistently characterizes Paul as "old-fashioned" (see p. 90, 185, 189). He even "Grows More and More Old-Fashioned" according to the title of chapter XIV. More than just the Romantic or the old-fashioned, Paul represents the old patriarchal order. When Pipchin asks him what he wants to be when he grows up, he answers, "I mean to put my money all together in one Bank, never try to get any more, go away into

the country with my darling Florence, have a beautiful garden fields, and woods, and live there with her all of my life” (184). This vision represents the world of inheritance, of feudal economy. Paul has neither the disposition nor the inclination to fit into the new world of capitalism.

Dickens highlights the transition that is occurring in his time by associating Paul with nature, the sea in particular, and having his death come right after the transformation of Staggs’s Gardens by the railroad, icon of the new. Harland Nelson comments on the proximity of these two episodes: “It cannot be chance, then, that in chapter xiv Paul’s health fails, in chapter xv we learn that the completed railroad has worked a transformation which entirely wiped out the old Staggs’s Gardens, and in chapter xvi Paul dies” (48). Nelson links Paul’s loss to something lost with the transformation of Staggs’s Gardens. Its transformation is to be understood as “the death of something, not as a birth”(50): “So the transformation of Staggs’s Gardens, though the magnitude of it excites wonder, and though it has its happy aspects . . . is a change for the worse” (50). While I will discuss the Staggs’s Gardens episodes in more detail later, suffice it to say here that Dickens has not presented Staggs’s as some pastoral ideal to be saved, however attached to the rundown neighborhood its residents were. As he characterizes it prior to its disruption by the London-Birmingham line, the neighborhood is in a state of decay, its grounds littered with refuse. The narrator tells us, “If the miserable waste ground lying near it could have laughed, it would have laughed it to scorn, like many of the miserable neighbours” (64).

While Garland finds a correlation between the loss of Paul and the loss of the neighborhood, this sequence also makes a connection between the loss of Paul and the

very neighborhood that could have made him ill. When Paul's nurse, Polly Toodle, took him to Staggs's as an infant so that she could see her own children, including the infant from whom she had been separated, the trip may have resulted in the consumptive-type illness that eventually kills him. Paul begins to fail soon after his exposure to this run-down neighborhood. Like Thoreau, Dickens makes a connection between the train not only as a transporter of commodities to be consumed, but as implicated in the disease of consumption, the disease from which his sister, Fanny, was suffering while he was writing *Dombey and Son*. She died of the disease just about the time he finished the novel (Fred Kaplan, 215; 238). When Dombey discovers that Polly took Paul into this lower class neighborhood, he fires her, and the narrator says of Paul, "perhaps he pined and wasted away after the dismissal of his nurse" (88). Certainly the loss of both mothers who would nourish Paul could lead to his demise, but the descriptions of Paul are consistent with the characteristics shared by consumptives. He has moments of "precocious mood" and "would sometimes lapse into it suddenly, exclaiming that he was tired" (90). He is dissipated, has "great constitutional weakness," and wants vital power" (185). Still Dombey does not worry about his son's illnesses. Anxious to arrive at the future when his son would be the "'Son' of the Firm" (90), he accepts Paul's illnesses as of the ordinary childhood types. That Paul will become the "deceased [future] capitalist" right after the completion of the newly re-invented Staggs's suggests that despite being the "Colossus of Commerce"(347), Dombey is ultimately impotent both as a parent and a capitalist. Far from being a "stag," Dombey not only cannot save his son, but his marriage to Edith, whom he likewise sees as a fortunate business relationship, will remain unconsummated.

Dombey loses his empire twice (the first time figuratively through the loss of his son and the second time literally after his second wife runs away), and both times the loss is linked to the railroad. While Sussman and Harland suggest Dombey is aligned with the eighteenth-century economic model, I, along with Henkle, Arac, and Sicher, see him representing nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Sicher sees Dombey as “at the epicenter of a trading empire” (93) and, in contrast to “Nature and Providence,” aligns “Dombeyism and Railway Time” (135). Given that association, it is appropriate that after Paul dies, he takes a death-dogged journey to the sea by train. Unable to understand his grief (for he is ultimately grieving for what did not exist), Dombey projects his subjectivity onto the train, which he sees as representing that “remorseless monster, Death” (269). In this episode, Dickens engages several key associations with this still fairly new mode of transportation: it is an irresistible force and a figure of fate, it is an inductor into altered states of consciousness and new angles of perception, and despite the rise of compartment accommodations labeled by class (Freeman 109), it is thought to be a social leveler.³⁴ When he arrives at the train station to get on the newly completed London-Birmingham line, Dombey “looked over the vulgar herd” (266). Ironically, he is in the company of the vulgar Bagstock, an obsequious caricature of over-consumption, described here as being “in a state of repletion, with essence of savory pie oozing out at the corners of his eyes, and devilled grill and kidneys tightening his cravat” (265). Bagstock, traveling with an “unusual quantity of carpet-bags and small portmanteaus” (266) is bogged down with all of the “stuff” necessary for a train ride: “Seltzer water, East India sherry, sandwiches, shawls, telescopes, maps, and newspapers” (266).

Bagstock, overfed, and literally overstuffed, provides a self-indulgent contrast to the simply well fed Toodle, whom Bagstock and Dombey encounter at the station.

Dombey's encounter with Toodle at the train station challenges the notions prevalent in the nineteenth century that one of the train's greatest promises was a social equalizer. As Laura Berry suggests: "The rails . . . are a particularly threatening site for inter-class relations. Even as the railroad was a place where the gap between the bourgeois subject and the machine was narrowed, the railroad even more controversially limited the distance between middle-class passenger and the working class as a social group. Most obviously, the railroad tangibly represents the demise of the aristocratic coach and the rise of more egalitarian transport" (12). When Toodle emerges from the "vulgar herd," he takes his hat off to Dombey, who sees him only as someone who "would make his very eyesight dirty" (267). When told who he is, Dombey immediately assumes Toodle's wife, Polly, wants money from him. Dombey is so anxious to escape this encounter that he would get to his own rail carriage even if it meant "rub[bing] the stoker underneath the wheels" (267). The sight of Toodle's cap, which bears the sign that he is in mourning, having lost a baby himself (though he boasts having had four more since he last saw Dombey), momentarily stops him. The railroad was heralded by its promoters and supporters for bringing the classes together and fostering community among them, but Dombey sidesteps this moment of possible connection. Instead he is indignant at the thought: "To think that this lost child, who was to have divided with him his riches, and his projects, and his power, and allied with whom he was to shut out all of the world as with a double door of gold, should have let in such a herd to insult him with their knowledge of his defeated hopes and their boasts of claiming community of feeling

with himself” (269). With this episode, Dickens reveals that the leveling of social classes requires more than bringing them into close physical proximity with each other.

As Dickens describes it, the train is a deterministic force. It is characterized as a “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, it was a type of triumphant monster, Death” (269). Dickens gives voice to a sentiment felt by many who experienced the first generation of trains: The coming of the railroad, like it or not, for better or for worse, was all-powerful in its forward motion. Dickens’s description is reminiscent of Thoreau’s characterization of the train as a fate figure, an Atropos, moving with a comet-like speed and trajectory.

While Paul’s death is described as a gentle sail, a “gliding smoothly on” (218), and spoken of as “The old, old fashion! The fashion that came in with our first garments, and will last unchanged until our race has run its course, and the wide firmament is rolled up like a scroll. The old, old fashion—Death!” (219), the death represented by the train is noisy, jarring, chaotic, remorseless. During the course of Dombey’s ride, this refrain repeats with variation: “in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!”; “in the track of the indomitable monster, Death!” (270). Dombey’s mind can only register the noise: “Away with a shriek and a roar, and a rattle”; “with a shrill yell of exultation, roaring, rattling, tearing on”; “Louder and louder yet it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal” (270). At this point, Dickens has nearly merged the minds of the narrator and Dombey in the same way that Dombey’s mind has merged with the noises and racket of the train. The machine has overtaken the mind, having found a correlation

there, a mind driven in its need to move on and escape but pained by a grief he must project outside of himself.

Everywhere Dombey looks, he sees wretchedness, decay, decimation. The want and squalor he passes represent not only the landscape laid waste by the train—“ . . . its way is strewn with ashes. Everything around is blackened. . . . There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand” (270)—but also the poverty exposed by tracks laid through poor neighborhoods: “through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes” (270).

Dombey’s journey through this squalor is echoed by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Beautiful and the Damned*. As Anthony travels back to the city from his country house: “The drab visions of train-side Mamaroneck, Larchmont, Rye, Pelham Manor, succeeded each other with intervals of bleak and shoddy wastes posing ineffectually as country” (221).

Anthony distances himself emotionally from what he sees by registering it as a spectacle, a “performance” being “staged” for him. The train moves

past half a hundred cheerful sweating streets of the upper East Side, each one passing the car-window like the space between the spokes of a gigantic wheel, each one with its vigorous colorful revelation of poor children swarming in feverish activity like vivid ants in the alleys of red sand. From the tenement windows leaned round, rotund, moon-shaped mothers, as constellations in this sordid heaven . . . women like great bags of abominably dirty laundry. (222)

Anthony does suspect that once the train has passed through, these people will “all stop leaping and laughing, and, instead, grow very sad remembering how poor they are”

(222). What both Dombey and Anthony witness is not only the tendency of the neighborhoods that have grown up around the railroad to become those “on the wrong side of the track,” devalued because of their proximity to the railroad, but also the role of land prices in determining where lines are laid, particularly as they get closer to the city, where real estate values reflect great discrepancies. In *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities*, John Kellet asks among other questions, “To what extent did the railways on the one hand, demolish, on the other, preserve but dilapidate the existing urban fabric?” (4). He writes, “Usually the last part of the approach line ran through open land leased out in small market-gardens or through slum terrace and cellar dwellings leased in batches of eight or ten to middlemen, but, in each case, conveniently owned by a few larger landowners . . . Yet, despite their anxiety to avoid adding to the total cost of their projects by disproportionate expenses entering the city, the railway companies of the mid-1830’s immediately encountered the shock of urban land prices” (5). In seeking the cheapest ways in and out of cities, railway developers preyed upon the poorest neighborhoods whose residents were often at the mercy of landlords and unscrupulous speculators.

Dombey (revealing the possibility of remaining disconnected from what is seen when one is flying by it) remains closed to the meaning and implications of the scenes through which he passes. It does not occur to him that what he is seeing represents the other end of the economic scale from that at which he lives: “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. It was the journey’s fitting end, and might have been the end of everything; it was so ruinous and

dreary” (271). Sussman claims that through the narrator’s assertion that the train has “let the light of day in on these things: not made or caused them,” Dickens is revealing his ambivalence toward the train, his “bourgeois enthusiasm assert[ing] itself . . . It is as if Dickens suddenly remembered the material benefits of England’s progress” (56). Clearly, however, Dickens is cognizant that the “benefits” are not equally distributed, and in fact, in the midst of such material progress, the poverty of those exploited and those left behind becomes even more conspicuous.

Meanwhile, for a second time, Dombey has ignored an opportunity offered via the railway to commiserate with his fellow humans, in this case those whose worlds he is passing through. Once again, he is incapable of getting out of his own mind: “So, pursuing the one course of thought, he had the one relentless monster still before him. All things looked black and cold, and deadly upon him, and he on them” (271). The narrator assures us, though, that Dombey is aware of his own subjective interpretation of the train experience: “Because he knows full well in his own breast, as he stood there, tinging the scene of transition before him with the morbid colours of his own mind, and making it a ruin and a picture of decay, instead of hopeful change, and promise of better things, that life had quite as much to do with his complainings as death” (271). Further “deepening the gloom” for Dombey is the image of Florence that keeps penetrating his mind, an image of the child he wished had died instead of his son. On the train, he confronts mortality, and eventually, of course, it will be Florence who will bring Dombey back to his humanity.

How, when, or why Dombey lost his humanity remains unexplained. That it has been lost is clear with the book’s opening scene as he witnesses his first wife’s death: “. . .

. . if his wife should sicken and decay, he would be very sorry and that he would find a something gone from among his plate and furniture, and other household possessions, which was well worth the having, and could not be lost without sincere regret. Though it would be a cool, business-like, gentlemanly, self-possessed regret, no doubt” (7). We are left only to assume that the loss of his humanity was a caused by his being devoted to the world of global capitalism and circulating, expendable commodities.

As Dombey rides through the English countryside, it becomes clear that what has not been completely altered by the train, soon will be:

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 smoothes or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away with a shriek and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace left behind but dust and vapour. (269)

The syntax of the last part of this passage is interesting, for though it is meant to suggest the train has moved through and past these scenes with the train leaving no trace but “dust and vapour,” the phrasing as well could suggest that that is all that is left of the landscape once the railway has its way with it. Moreover, the dust, like the dust blanketing everything in the scene of Staggs’s Garden’s reconstruction, is industrial dust. This will as well be the final material left after Carker’s destruction by train. Meanwhile, the railroad’s “great works and massive bridges” (270) contrast with what has long been

on the scene. Historical hindsight will show this scene and its inhabitants as significantly having been altered by the train over time, particularly the husbandry and handicraft: “glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry, of handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted, small and insignificant as they are left behind” (270). Sussman comments, “. . . the industrial wasteland through which the train runs is not merely an objective correlative for the emotional blight of Dombey’s mind but suggests also in its destruction of an older way of life that the machine is somehow responsible for its emotional desiccation” (56). In *Dombey and Son*, though, Dickens does not set up a clean dialectic between the past/ pastoral/ benign and the present/ industrial/ malignant. In the novel, neither past nor present is free from blame. Both support their own versions of social, economic, and environmental contaminants and disparities.

As Thoreau does in his description of the railroad cars going by in “Sounds,” Dickens strings together prepositional phrases, the pacing and sound mimicking linked railroad cars: “out into the meadows . . . , mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness . . . , bursting out again into the sunny day . . . through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock . . .” (269). At first the prepositional phrases are modified, but once the prose picks up speed, they form a relentless pattern, with the train barreling through the landscape and even the bowels of the earth itself. This description could also be mimicking the regular placement and passing of telegraph poles, which started appearing on the landscape in the early to mid 1840s. In addition, Dickens conveys the train’s relentlessness and swiftness: 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 inexorably to its fore-doomed end” (269). As Sicher suggests, “Dickens’s description of Dombey’s train journey brilliantly mimics the onomatopoetic rhythm of the powerful machine rushing through time and space, quite new sensations in a culture that was used to measuring time and space in stagecoaches and distances between inns” (109).

Dickens’s prose mimics the speed, the ravenousness, and the barreling force of the train ride:

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, sometimes pausing for a minute where a crowd of faces are, that in a minute more are not: sometimes lapping water greedily and before the spout at which it drinks had ceased to drip upon the ground, shrieking, roaring, rattling through the purple distance! (270)

The idea of the landscape as well as Paul’s life and Dombey’s capital dreams receding is emphasized with the repetition of “Away with a shriek and a roar” (repeated three times 269-270). While Paul’s death had been a gentle flow and merging of waters, Dombey’s train ride in the aftermath of that death is disturbing, mimicking a mind on edge.

Dombey’s railroad journey, with its inward and outward shifts of perception and the disconnections from the landscapes being traversed, contributes to a general sense of discomfort and disconnection. In response to these rapidly changing landscapes and cityscapes (and the new means of perceiving them), and to changing notions of space and time, there is a sense of life becoming unhinged. With these railroad passages, Dickens seeks to express the disorientation experienced by many in his time, due not just to

rapidly changing technologies, but dramatically changing economic and political situations. Explanations about reality that come from without (Lockean versions) give way to more phenomenological and so subjective explanations—all exemplified by Dombey's train ride. The world outside exists to Dombey only as it is filtered through his dejected mind. The train renders palpable and immediate the growing awareness of the subjectivity of experience and the lack of a master narrative to explain human reality (a phenomenon Lyell's and Darwin's theories fuel). The subjectivity of the experience of the material world borne of the railroad's "annihilation of space and time" (Schivelbusch 33) contributes to a new and dominating awareness of that outer world. George Levine asserts that in general, Dickens differs most from Darwin and the realist tradition in his emphasis on the "external rather than the internal," but he admits that that becomes problematic. "In keeping with the natural theological tradition, the emphasis on the external itself depends on strong confidence in the legibility of the material world, its expression of spiritual and moral realities comprehensible to those who choose to see" (145). Ultimately, he says, Dickens delineates worlds of clear "moral borders" (145). Though he does not connect this next statement with the passages of Dombey's train ride, his point illustrates the shift in Dickens's narrative that becomes apparent in those passages: "Ironically, when the world is secularized, as in the Darwinian scheme, narrative must turn inward because the material world becomes increasingly unintelligible. In Dickens, whom I have been characterizing as 'essentialist,' there is a visible growing inability to be satisfied with the essentialist imagination" (145).

With each major train episode in the novel—Dombey's ride, Carker's flight, Staggs's Gardens—Dickens's writing anticipates modernist writing, born of a desire for

greater mimesis and a recognition that mimesis means that experience is subjective and needs to be delivered through multiplicity, fragmentation, and streams of consciousness. Henkle expands the idea that Dickens, like other writers of the mid-Victorian era, needed a new discourse to render experience: “Structurally, *Dombey and Son* seems to abort itself about a third of the way through,” meaning after Paul’s death, when we, like Dombey, “seem to fall upon a dead spell in the narrative in which, like Paul’s bereaved father, Dombey, we need to reorganize ourselves emotionally—as the novel’s plot seems obliged to do. Such an apparent dislocation, however, signifies something other than authorial indecision; it marks Dickens’s realization that the old novelistic strategies of his previous successes can no longer serve to represent the new experience of the mid-Victorian period” (90). Henkle claims this pressure to change the direction of discourse arises from “an engagement on new terms with another set of issues: the conjunction of the discourses of adult sexuality, middle class economic desire, and the ambiguous role of art in rendering them” (90). This shift is also dictated by the railroad and the dislocations—physical, emotional, social, perceptive, geologic, and economic—that it both engenders and signifies.

Though the narrator does not call the train a fate figure, in this chapter it certainly serves as one. It not only bears Dombey away from the situation of Paul’s death, it transports him to the next fateful encounter in his life, the meeting with Edith. In *Dombey and Son*, Edith has long been at the mercy of the “male” market. Her mother has been trying to peddle her to a man since she lost her first husband, an older man whom she loved no more than she would love Dombey, and with whom she had a child who died. (Though she wants to nurture Florence and Florence would dearly love to be

nurtured, maternal love has no place in a world designed for “and Son” until the novel’s end.) Just as Dombey saw his son as a future business partner, so is his courtship of Edith just another business transaction. She is a commodity he adds to his holdings and displays to his business associates at a post-honeymoon dinner served in the mansion he refurbishes for her. In attendance at the dinner are an East India director, a bank director, public company chairmen, and others (488). Even before their wedding, Edith recognizes that she is just another holding. She says to her mother, ““You know he has bought me,” she resumed. ‘Or that he will, tomorrow. He has considered of his bargain; he has shown it to his friend; he is even rather proud of it; he thinks that it will suit him, and may be had sufficiently cheap; and he will buy tomorrow” (377). She feels she has been paraded like a slave: ““There is not slave in a market: there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years . . . Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself?”” (379). Though Edith has an artistic temperament (she paints and plays piano), any connection she would have with these creative outlets has been killed by the market; they become merely part of her resume (379). Edith, like Dombey, has lost her humanity in the world of capital, and in Dombey’s world she becomes one more commodity.

Like the goods circulated by the train, Edith is not associated with any place. “The need to traffic in goods, of course, is most aptly proven in the Firm itself, which hinges upon continual circulation in that the business of import and export is responsible for circulating goods all over the world. And of course, Mrs. Skewton’s circulation of her daughter’s body qualifies as a necessary economic move, as much as it is a socially

strategic one” (Berry 9). Edith, like Dombey, is described in terms that suggest her hardening in the industrial age. Her pride and Dombey’s, “though different, [was] equal in degree and in their *flinty* opposition, struck out fire between them which might smoulder or might blaze, as circumstances were, but burned up everything within their mutual reach, and made their marriage way a *road of ashes*” (emphasis mine 613). Just as the railroad that leads Dombey to Edith rides along a “way strewn with ashes” (270), so too is the Dombey marriage associated with this industrial waste, underscoring the idea that the marriage was doomed as it is born of consumerism and allied with industrialism, the two being inextricably linked. Gordon Bigelow suggests that in *Bleak House* Dickens bears out his assertion that “As industrial society is perceived to cause constant decay, the bank and household appear to be realms of compensation, control, preservation” (97). In *Dombey and Son*, however, Dickens complicates that picture, with Dombey contaminating his home with business and industry. The lines of demarcation have not been kept clear, as Jennifer Fletcher argues: “Mr. Dombey’s refusal to separate public role from private identity and his counting house from his family home results in a disastrous merger of spheres; commercial values blight Dombey’s domestic circle while his business perverts personal relationships” (27).

While both are subject to the industrialism and consumerism of their time, Edith possesses something that Dombey does not: self-awareness. Edith declares her marriage to Dombey a sham: “I will be exhibited to no one, as the refracting slave you purchased, such a time. If I kept my marriage-day, I would keep it as a day of shame! Self-respect! appearances before the world! what are these to me? You have done all you can to make them nothing to me, and they are nothing” (625). Edith recognizes and rejects the role

of commodity. She will not be consumed; the marriage will not be consummated. She throws off her role as a commodity, symbolized when she stamps on the “glittering heap” of jewels Dombey has given her when she deserts the marriage (627). She effectively takes herself out of the market and out of circulation.

Carker: The Man and the Machine

The railroad serves as the link between Edith and the two men she brings to ruin: Dombey and Carker. A train delivers Dombey to the seaside resort where he has his fateful encounter with her, and when she leaves Dombey and goes to meet Carker only to reject him, Carker is tormented by an imaginary train before a real train destroys him. Carker arrives in Paris, finding that an utterly disdainful Edith has duped him and is dumping him, leading to his frenetic trip back to England by coach. He checks into a railway hotel where, unable to sleep, he slips into a paranoid state, and when he sees Dombey by the track side, he steps in front of the Express train and dies. The matrix of associations I have been proposing—the train’s connections to consumerism, to disconnections from origins, and to the loss of self—all culminate in Carker. He is a caricature of consumption, a ladder-climbing capitalist, and he is linked to the railroad metaphorically, psychologically, and finally physically. Moreover, though he has a brother and a sister, his origins remain unclear. His older brother occupies a lower rung on the ladder of Dombey’s corporation, a position he is relegated to due to a past transgression, and so Carker does have contact with him, but he has shunned his family, shutting them out of his personal life. As Henkle suggests, “Desire defines Carker, because like so many of Dickens’s villains, he seems to have no origins” (107). Instead, “the governing dynamic [of Carker] is acquisitiveness” (106). I would suggest as well

that in Carker, Dickens has constructed a character who could be read as an automaton, an embodiment of Carlyle's idea that in the Industrial Age, men were becoming "mechanical in head and in heart" (63), representing the ultimate loss of one's humanity in a commodities-driven, industrial world characterized by consumerism and symbolized by the train.

Carker represents the ruthlessness involved in climbing the corporate ladder. He owes allegiance to no one, and Dombey knows this but fails to understand the implications it will have for him: "'You respect nobody, Carker, I think' said Mr. Dombey" (167). Showing the difference between the potentially redeemable Dombey and the irredeemable Carker, Dickens makes clear that Carker is content to continue punishing his older brother who once cheated the company. Dombey, on the other hand, has forgiven him and keeps him in his employ, firing him only when Carker, the manager, has run off with Edith. Even then, Dombey gives him "an equivalent in money to a generously long notice" (703).

With Carker, Dickens literalizes the consumptive nature of capitalism. Carker would consume Dombey's business and status, and he would consume Dombey's wife, but in the end, it is he who is consumed by the train. That Carker is meant to embody consumption is clear through frequent references to his teeth. A few examples represent many: "two unbroken rows of glistening teeth, whose regularity and whiteness were quite distressing" (40); in a conversation with Cuttle, he looks "down upon the Captain with an eye in every tooth and gum" (225); during an encounter with him, Edith raises her eyes "no higher than his mouth, but she saw the means of mischief vaunted in every tooth it contained" (501). Gail Turley Houston says Dickens "dramatically images [Carker] as an

acquisitive mouth . . . in his most ominous orality, Carker bankrupts and cuckolds his employer in one bite” (97). She further states, “Carker’s mouth, then, seems to represent unrestrained acquisition—hostile takeovers as well as corporate and corporeal raids—of female as commodities, in a grotesque duplication of his employer’s acquisition of wives” (98). To this could be added that Carker’s teeth represent a version of the technological sublime. This is felt most keenly by Toodle’s prodigal son, Rob, whom Carker employs as a spy after Rob quits working for Cuttle:

Rob kept his round eyes on the white teeth with fear and trembling, and felt that he had need to open them wider than ever.

He could not have quaked more, through his whole being, before the teeth, though he had come into the service of some powerful enchanter, and they had been his strongest spell. (559)

Just as the train is a fate figure for Carker, Carker himself is a fate figure and as well serves as an embodied form of the technological sublime. A mesmerist himself who believed in mesmerism’s therapeutic powers, Dickens projects this ability onto Carker, whose teeth, like the gears of a machine, serve as the tool of mesmerism.³⁵ When in an earlier episode, Rob tells Carker that he has not been home because his family does not want to see him, something that has caused him great grief, he confesses in a way “as if the teeth of Mr. Carker drew it out of him, and he had no power of concealing anything with that battery of attraction in full play” (293). This is underscored again in a later conversation between the two:

The boy had a sense of power and authority in this patron of his that engrossed his whole attention and exacted his most implicit submission

and obedience . . . Face to face with him, Rob had no more doubt that Mr. Carker read his secret thoughts, or that he could read them by the least exertion if he were so inclined . . . The ascendancy was so complete, and held him in such enthrallment [sic], that, hardly daring to think at all but with his mind filled with a constantly dilating impression of his patron's irresistible command over him, and power of doing anything with him, he would stand watching his pleasure, and trying to anticipate his orders, in a state of mental suspension, as to all other things. (559)

Throughout the novel, Dickens insists that we understand there is something uncanny about Carker. Rob feels it, as does Florence: "Mr. Carker, in the two visits with which he had followed up his first one, had assumed a confidence between himself and her—a right on his part to be mysterious and stealthy . . . a kind of mildly restrained power and authority over her—that made her wonder and caused her great uneasiness" (381). She invests him "with an uncomfortable fascination" (381). Edith knows it as well, as does Cuttle, who thinks Carker somehow of unnatural birth, as one "whom no sea could ever render up" (447).

This characterization relates to Carker's mechanistic nature. For example, we are told that when in his office, he is so focused, "he mechanically avoids objects" (607). He is the machine plotting machinations. After Carker's infamous flight, Morfin tells Carker's brother that he had seen Carker "extending and extending his influence until the business and its owner were his football; and saw you toiling at your obscure desk every day; and was quite content to be as little troubled as I might be, out of my own strip of duty, and to let everything about me go on day by day, unquestioned, like a great

machine” (707). He appears to have become so mechanistic as to be an automaton. Closer scrutiny of the interior design of Carker’s surroundings and art holdings reveals a machine-like lack of attachment or connection to his home and belongings. As the narrator describes it, everything “sounds” perfect, though the detachment of the description makes the scene somehow suspect. We are told the grounds are “beautifully arranged, and tastefully kept”; the trees are “not wanting”; the offices are of a “scale proper to a mere cottage” (449). Inside, the furniture’s proportions are “admirably devised”; the colors are “excellently blended”; “there are a few choice prints”; “no want of books”; and “games of skill and chance set forth on the tables” (449). That Dickens means for us to read this overly benign description as suspect is soon clear: “And yet amidst this opulence of comfort, there is something in the general air that is not well” (449). Speculations include that “carpets and cushions are too soft and noiseless . . . the prints and pictures do not commemorate great thoughts or deeds, or render nature in the poetry of landscape, hall, or hut, but are of one voluptuous cast—mere shows of form and colour—and no more” (450). Even the books are chosen not for their content, but because their exteriors qualify them to be “companions of the prints and pictures” (450). In addition, the interior decorations highlight a lack of connection to the types of goods multiplying in the consumerist culture. Like the man, the scene projects an air of being too studied, too unreal, too detached from human emotions. The objects have no personal significance to Carker.³⁶

While Carker exercises magnetism over others, when he flees from Dombey, he becomes almost magnetized to the train. He cannot resist its call and eventually steps right in front of the Express, which chews him to pieces. His death by machine is the

most sensational aspect of this novel. Though he does not discuss this episode, as he is most interested in sensation novels of the 1860s, Nicholas Daly sees such scenes playing an important role in the acclimatization of people to the machine culture. Such acclimatization, he argues in “Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses” is achieved partly through sensations produced by such novels, where the body is experienced as “as the interface between the new technology and nature, both as a potential machine itself, and as resistance to the modernizing effects of the machine” (468).

Edith may herself function mechanically, but she is aware of this façade she presents. She has consciously compartmentalized herself, but that she has not lost herself as a woman is clear when, holding a knife, she confronts Carker: “I am a woman . . . who from her very childhood has been shamed and steeled, I have been offered and rejected, put up and appraised until my very soul has sickened. I have not had an accomplishment or grace that might have been a resource to me, but it has been paraded and vended to enhance my value, as if the common crier had called it through the streets . . . I stand alone in the world” (721). She plays the capitalist and the mechanical man against each other, calling Carker the “tool of the proud tyrant” (726) and is the catalyst for the downfall of each.

Dombey is hard on Carker’s heels after his manager has run off to rendezvous with his wife in Paris. When Carker flees, a dizzying scene begins. His initial flight by coach sounds more like a train ride, and, indeed, mocking the vocabulary of trains and their horsepower, Carker demands enough horses to give his coach the power of a locomotive. In fact, much of the action in this episode mimics the way the train ride is

often described, and it arises out of Carker's desire for speed and the warped perspective such speed affords—all impressed upon a mind whose tight screws are quickly loosening:

The clatter and the commotion echoed to the hurry and discordance of the fugitive's ideas. Nothing clear without, and nothing clear within. Objects flitting past, merging into one another, dimly descried, confusedly lost sight of, gone! Beyond the changing scraps of fence and cottage immediately upon the road, a lowering waste. Beyond the shifting images that rose up in his mind and vanished as they showed themselves, a black expanse of dread and rage and baffled villainy. (729)

The flight goes on for pages. Much as in a train ride, time and place are confused. Reality and its effervescent, unstable perception are highlighted in these pages. The images serve as a prelude to the train scene that will kill him, whose foreshadowing Carker has sensed as an electric shock: “Some other terror came upon him quite removed from this of being pursued, suddenly, like an electric shock . . . Some visionary terror, unintelligible and inexplicable, associated with a trembling of the ground,—a rush and sweep of something through the air, like Death upon the wing” (727). This description is an industrialized version of Marvell's “time's winged chariot.” Carker again feels the “nameless shock” as it comes “speeding up, and as it passes” (730). As he did with Dombey's ride, Dickens recognizes that to describe industrial time, faster speeds, mechanization, and disorientation calls for a new mode of narration. Recording a hyper-speed coach ride, he narrates it with the same deterministic aspect as Dombey's train ride. Again there is the stringing together of prepositional phrases: “Of morning, noon, and sunset . . . Of long roads temporarily left behind . . . of galloping away again . . . of never sleeping . . . Of

having a deadly quarrel . . . Of town and country . . .” (732-733) and so on, the method a form of stream of consciousness. The phrases also sound like the tolling of a death knell, or “Of the monotony of bells and wheels” (733). A few pages later, the narrator slips into free indirect discourse, yet another a precursor to modernist stream of consciousness, as Carker’s thoughts are rendered through the narrator’s voice, their minds completely melded: “A curse upon the fiery devil, thundering along so smoothly” (736). As Marcus says of the ten or so pages that recount Carker’s journey: “. . . as far as I know, nothing quite like it had ever appeared before in the history of the novel. Carker’s consciousness is registered in its immediacy; the very syntax and rhythms of the prose become a part of it” (334).

Carker decides to head to a quiet railway inn in the countryside to “rest and recover the command of himself”(734). “Wearied to death” (735), he still cannot sleep. He remains uncertain of the day or time, which the waiter at the inn assumes is due to his travels by train, known to be disorienting: ““Been traveling a long time, Sir, perhaps? . . . By rail, Sir? . . . Very confusing, Sir”” (735). The rumble and rattle he had been feeling on his flight out of Paris is now no longer in his mind, but surrounding him at the railway hotel. At first, the sensation of the train’s immediacy is so intense, Carker feels he has been “plucked out of its path, and saved from being torn asunder” (736), but the train’s force is ultimately irresistible: “Unable to rest, and irresistibly attracted—or so he thought—to this road, he went out and lounged on the brink of it, marking the way the train had gone, by the yet smoking cinders that were lying in its track” (736). One could suggest that with this scene, Dickens is dramatizing the irresistibility of the train in general, but in terms of the novel, it is acting as a magnet, drawing the machine-like

Carker, as he did with Rob, Florence, and even Edith, into its power. He stands by the side of the track and subjects himself several times to the passage of trains, as if he is experiencing a physical release through the sensations they cause: “A trembling of the ground, and quick vibration in his ears; a distant shriek; a dull light advancing, quickly changed to two red eyes, and a fierce fire, dropping glowing coals; an irresistible bearing on of a great roaring and dilating mass . . . He waited for another, and for another!” (736). Schivelbusch explains that sexual arousal attributed to the train contributed to the fears of it.³⁷ Carker, the man of the mechanical nature, realizes he is out of control. He can no longer control his mind—“His object was to rest, and recover the command of himself, and the balance of his mind” (734)—nor can he control his body, as he drinks quantities of wine in an unsuccessful effort to sleep (735). And he is incapable of resisting the train, physically or psychologically as he is “holding to a gate, as if to save himself” (736).

Dickens has clearly established Carker as an appetite out of control. He would consume Dombey’s business and then his wife, and it is the latter relationship, the awakened sexual appetite, that finds its outlet and destruction in his final scene with the train. Dickens infuses the train with so much power and possibility through Carker: it is a “cruel power,” a Vulcan, a devil, a phallic force, and Carker is attuned to all. His teeth are described as cogs, and it was through teeth-like cogs that the first trains achieved traction (Schivelbusch 18). Just as Carker once hummed until his teeth vibrated (300), when he felt the “trembling and vibration” of the train, he is impelled to get up and go to the window to watch it (737). The man of teeth who would consume others is finally, literally, graphically chewed up, dismembered, and symbolically castrated by the train.

But, before he is dispatched from earth, Carker witnesses the “divinely solemn” beauty of the sunrise (738). While for pages, Carker has been relentlessly pursued by industrial time, just before his death, deep time takes precedence: “As he cast his faded eyes upon it, where it rose, tranquil and serene, unmoved by all the wrong and wickedness on which its beams had shone since the beginning of the world, who shall say that some weak sense of virtue upon Earth, and its reward in Heaven, did not manifest itself, even to him?” (738). When Carker is on the verge of annihilation, the narrator suggests he may have remembered his filial connections, and so his essential humanity: “If ever he remembered sister or brother with a touch of tenderness or remorse, who shall say it was not then? He needed some such touch then. Death was on him” (738). In this romanticized scene of his transition—a stark contrast to the maniacal mechanical ride to get to it—Carker pays for the journey and walks alone “looking along the lines of iron, across the valley in one direction, and towards a dark bridge near at hand in the other” (738). It is at this moment that he sees Dombey, and slipping, he struggles backwards to “interpose some wider space between them.” It is at that instant that the Express flies through.

Though the narrator evades the identification of the one who shouts a warning to him, we know it is Dombey, whose face changes from “vindictive passion” to “faint sickness and terror” (730).³⁸ Like the sensation writers of the 1860s, including Dickens’s good friend Wilkie Collins, Dickens graphically portrays the destruction of Carker, as he 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” (738). Destruction by train is different

from any type of death known before the machine age. The description of it is reminiscent of an 1845 cartoon by George Cruikshank, one-time illustrator of Dickens's work, called "The Railway Dragon," which features a train chanting "I come to dine, I come to sup, I come . . . I come to eat you up" (Sicher 117) bearing down on a family. While Nicholas Daly's study *Literature, Technology, and Modernity 1860-2000* makes use of Dickens's own real-life train accident (which occurred in 1865, nearly twenty years after *Dombey and Son* was published), his essential point about the role of sensation novels aiding in the assimilation and allaying of new fears born from the threats technology poses to the body has relevance to this scene. Typically, Daly shows, sensation novels include the threat of annihilation and then the rescue, but unlike the sensation novelists and later the filmmakers, Dickens does not rescue his character from the physical dangers posed by the train. Daly realizes that the sensation novels of the 1860s, long thought to elicit corporeal responses in readers, actually incite situations of nervousness, and in doing so act as a means for mid-century Victorians to assimilate the new technologies. In other words, he says, these novels serve to help "modernize the senses" (468). That Dickens not only pays attention to machine culture but is doing so early in its penetration of Victorian life may account for the difference in the Carker episode from depictions of train accidents in fiction to follow. Dickens does not raise nervous fears to dissipate them through rescue; rather, he shows graphically the machine's destructive capabilities, though he does so through a heartless character for whom he has built up little sympathy. This probably had the effect of distancing his readers from the potential horrors of train accidents. As these accidents increase in frequency and destruction over the next few decades, and as they are more sensationally

highlighted in mass circulated newspapers, different tactics of raising nervousness and dissipating it will be employed by other writers, as Daly chronicles.³⁹

Carker's is not the only accident in the novel. As a contrast to the dramatic dismembering of which the train is capable, Dickens describes Dombey having a mishap on his horse after having engaged Carker as the emissary between him and Edith. Dombey and Carker mount their horses to ride to the city, and Dombey's horse, "while going at a round trot, stumbled on some loose stones, threw him, rolled over him, and lashing out with his iron-shod feet, in his struggles to get up, kicked him" (570). Contrasting coach to railway accidents is a trope of nineteenth-century literature. Sussman suggests, "In the sense that it consistently opposes the organic to the mechanistic, Victorian literature can be said to continue the romantic tradition" (5). Eventually, the "apposition" of the organic mode of horse travel against travel by rail becomes a cliché, says Richard Altick (188). After Dombey's accident, Carker is quick to the rescue. He rights the horse "in a moment" (570). Being rolled over by a horse is survivable. "Though severely cut and bruised" and having broken a "lesser rib or so," Dombey survives. The situation is filled with irony, as Carker has just been asked to be the go-between in Dombey's marriage and now has to literally rescue him.

There are those, including Houston and Arac, who suggest that Carker brings down the House of Dombey, but that is debatable. He may have been speculating with company assets, possibly even railroad stock, as the period in which Dickens was writing the novel was, as was mentioned earlier, the height of railway speculation, which was partly responsible for the market crash in 1847 (Bigelow 81).⁴⁰ We know Carker was "in the receipt of some per centage [sic] on [the firm's] dealings; and in participating in all its

facilities for the employment of money to advantage” (602). But Carker was not alone responsible for the company’s downfall. The narrator suggests a confluence of factors as contributing to the ultimate fall of Dombey and Son. We are told that following Edith’s flight and Carker’s death, “Through a whole year, the famous house of Dombey and Son had fought a fight for life, against cross accidents, doubtful rumors, unsuccessful ventures, unpropitious times, and most of all, against the infatuation of its head, who would not contract its enterprises by a hair’s breadth, and who would not listen to a word of warning that the ship strained so hard against the storm, was weak, and could not bear it. The year was out, and the great House was down” (769). What we know for sure is that Carker’s actions in conjunction with Edith’s brought down the man, and Dombey’s own obsessions and neglect ultimately ruined his company.

Mr. Toodle: The Railroad Man

Like Carker, Mr. Toodle represents another man usurped by the train. He is possibly more closely allied with the railroad than even Carker, for his professional trajectory parallels railroad history. Most critics pay little if any attention to Toodle in their discussions of the railroad in *Dombey and Son*. Herbert Sussman is one of the few who does, asserting that Toodle’s association with the railroad modifies it as an industrial spectre as he holds to his “instinctual moral sense” (59-60). When Toodle is discussed, it is most often his class and by association, his wife’s class (as she stands in relation to Dombey and his need for her to feed his infant son). Like the train, Toodle got his start in the mines. Small, linked cars were first used to haul coal and minerals from the underground. When Dombey asks Toodle where he had worked, he answers, “‘Mostly underground, Sir, ’till I got married. I come to the level then. I’m a going on one of these

here railroads when they comes into full play” (20). In the meantime, he is a “stoker” on a “steam engine” (16). As Miss Tox questions him further to ascertain what he does for a living and whether he likes it, he responds saying he likes it pretty well, but ““The ashes sometimes gets in here . . . and makes a man speak gruff, as at the present time. But it is *ashes*, Mum, not crustiness” (17). As a stoker, Toodle is inhaling the refuse of the machine, to the detriment of his lungs (and remember, it is when he has been brought to Staggs’s Gardens, Toodle’s neighborhood, that Paul contracts his tuberculosis-like disease), yet that he bears much fruit in his family life is equally true. Toodle’s family is associated with fruit and fertility. At the beginning of the novel, he has five children and his wife, Polly, is hired to be Paul’s wet nurse when Dombey’s first wife dies. She is described as a “rosy-cheeked wholesome apple-faced young woman, with an infant in her arms; a younger woman not so plump but apple-faced also, who leads a plump and apple-faced child in each hand; another plump and also apple-faced boy who walked by himself; and finally, a plump and apple-faced man who carried in his arms another plump and apple-faced boy” (15). This exaggerated insistence on both the fruitfulness as well as the edibility of the Toodle family contrasts with Dombey’s meager output, but it also raises flags in a novel about loss of identity in a capitalistic, mechanistic world being heartily fed upon by the railroad.

Though it seems Toodle is fairly able to support his growing family through his employment with the railroad, the fact that his wife must be hired out and leave her own infant behind to feed Dombey’s child shows his salary is inadequate for the family’s expenses. Further, he is unable to afford the opportunities for his eldest son’s betterment in a rapidly changing society, and so Dombey foots the education bill for the Biler,

Toodle's first-born son named in "remembrance of the steam engine" (22). Differences in class will come to the fore, though, as Biler fails at school, leading to Dombey's dismissive comment to Bagstock about the lack of dividends in educating the poor: "The usual return'" (268). Biler, also known as Rob and Rob the Grinder, will go to work for Cuttle and eventually become Carker's spy. So, despite being from an apple-faced family with much love to give, Biler goes astray, and this child, named for a steam engine, ends in thrall to the mechanical Carker.

Toodle represents the most explicit example of personal identity being absorbed in the world of the railroad. When the railroad overtakes his language, it has determined his perception of the world. Just as Cuttle frequently speaks in metaphors of the sea, Toodle speaks and thinks in the language of the railroad. When he meets Dombey at the train station, he says he would "have the honour of stokin' you down'" (267) and confesses his son is on "the wrong track'" (268). When he counsels his children, he does so in metaphors of the railroad: "If you find yourselves in cuttings or tunnels, don't you play no secret games. Keep your whistles going, and let's know where you are'" (509-510). As he ponders Rob's situation, he again considers it in terms of the railroad: "I starts light with Rob only; I comes to a branch; I takes on what I finds there; and a whole train of ideas gets coupled on to him, afore I knows where I am, or where they comes from. What a Junction a man's thoughts is'" (509). Certainly being limited to metaphors drawn from the railway world limit the range of Toodle's thinking, but what is more insidious is the extent to which, in a way very different from Carker, he has been absorbed by the railroad. Not only has his language been fully penetrated, so, too, has his clothing. When he is working in the mines, there is a more earthly quality to his

demeanor. His hair is “deepened in its natural tint, perhaps by smoke and coal dust,” his hands “as coarse in grain as the bark of an oak” (19). When Dombey comes upon him at the station, he is wearing evidence of his work: “He was dressed in a canvass suit abundantly besmeared with coal-dust and oil, and had cinders in his whiskers, and a smell of half-slaked ashes all over him” (267), yet another instance of the ashes of the industrial revolution leaving their deathly refuse over people as well as places. Once he is working for the railroad, Toodle, we are told, “has three stages of existence”: “He is either taking refreshment . . . , tearing through the country at from twenty-five to fifty miles an hours, or he was sleeping after his fatigues”(509).

The Toodle family is associated with appetites of all types. Polly is a feeder and is being fed upon by the rich. When Mr. Toodle is in the midst of his family and “setting an awful example to his children in the way of appetite” (510), Dickens is calling upon a stereotype of railway workers familiar to his generation. John Francis wrote in 1851: “The waste of power which their daily labour necessitated, was supplied by an absorption of stimulant and nourishment perfectly astounding . . . They devoured as earnestly as they worked” (67). Because Toodle lives, we are told, a “mild and equable life” (509), and he “seemed to have made over all his own inheritance of fuming and fretting to the engines with which he was connected,” (509), and because he is “not regardless” of “the younger branch members of his family” (510) and shares with them “irregular morsels” (510), the image of the rapacious, rough railroad worker is humanized.

Sussman finds nothing ominous in the complete takeover of Toodle’s language, clothing, and family life by the railroad for whom he works:

The railway . . . gives Toodle a job as locomotive fireman that is not only safer than his former work in the mines, but also stirs his soul with the romance of machinery. . . . Although the railway molds his speech, his connection with the machine does not in any way warp his intuitive morality. . . . Dickens could present Toodle's morality in railway terminology as easily as he could symbolize Carker's amorality because of his own ambivalence to the machine. (59)

Sicher, too, finds the characterization of Toodle as benign if not outright positive, and Murray Baumgarten sees Toodle as "at home in the world of the railroad; he is also someone who knows how to feel" (85). Calling him a "figure from the folk vocabulary," he says he is "the inspiration for *The Little Engine that Could* bringing into the impersonal modern world the episodic, picaresque, and folk world of the personal enchantment of Don Quixote" (85).

Toodle, unlike Dombey, is certainly a devoted family man. This is clear when Dombey first meets him and inquires how he can afford to keep so many kids, and Toodle answers simply that he cannot afford to lose them (19). However, though Dickens's portrayal of the Toodle family is conveyed with humor and has the outward appearance of warmth, happiness, and deep familial connection, that Toodle has been taken over by the railroad, physically, linguistically, and mentally, and that his wife must be hired out as a wet nurse, and that their oldest son has gone astray, casts a shadow over the rosy, apple-faced family portrait. Laura Berry comes much closer to the mark of what is at stake in the Toodle characterization when she connects the Toodle family with the loss of self in the world of the railroad and circulating commodities. She suggests,

“Mr. Toodle is no home-wrecker; in fact he is a solid, if simple-minded, bulwark of the family. Far from spreading pestilence, the railway laborer and his kin exude the kind of health only possible in Victorian novels among those whose morals are as clean as their kitchen floors” (8). Yet, she goes on to say, “The train represents the most frightening, and least resolved, threat of the text—that one’s self will be lost entirely in the disorienting, equalizing, monotonizing world of public travel. *Dombey and Son* radically obscures this unresolved threat in representing the railroad in Mr. Toodle” (18).

Staggs’s Gardens: Overturned by the Railroad

That Sussman calls the railway the symbol of “amoral commercialism,” yet praises its giving Toodle “new housing” (59) seems contradictory, for the passages that describe this new housing cast further aspersions on the train as it consumes all in its path, as is the case of Staggs’s Gardens. Staggs’s Gardens is where the Toodle family lives. It is also the neighborhood that is completely transformed by the train just before Paul’s death. While disconnections from origins (personal as well as commercial) are present in the Carker and *Dombey* aspects of the story, Staggs’s Gardens is the place that most completely represents the disconnection from origins represented by the train, and it is through these episodes that Dickens engages the disorientation and disjuncture that results from the concomitant emergence of Lyell’s theories of deep time and slow change and the shallow time and catastrophic change that the railroad represents. Levine makes a key point that Dickens (with Thoreau), though welcoming a movement away from Biblical revelation and catastrophic events as explanations of history, betrays mixed feelings about the full consequences of that, both in the loss of a personal power responsible for the way things are and as seemingly contradicted by the massive upheaval

that the railway represents. In his analysis of Dickens's relationship to science, Jude Nixon sees Dickens struggling between ideas of catastrophism and uniformitarianism: "[Dickens] is unwilling to concede that revelation is complete . . . believing, instead, that 'Nothing is discovered without God's intention and assistance, and I suppose every new knowledge of His works that is conceded to man to be distinctly a revelation by which men are to guide themselves'" (273).⁴¹ When Dickens describes the construction of the railroad in Staggs's Gardens, it is compared to an earthquake, most often seen as a catastrophic event of Biblical proportions: "The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighborhood to its centre" (62-63). That the train's eruption onto the scene feels like a catastrophic event is clear, though the description is metonymic, a figure of speech allied with uniformitarianism and later evolution: "Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up . . . Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions to the scene" (63). The picture is positively volcanic: "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" (63).

The irony of the railroad as Dickens represents it is that though it appeared to defy gradual change, having seemed to "spring" into existence, and unlike the natural type of cataclysm with which he seems to align this transformative force, he clearly knows that the railroad and the social transformation it created were wrought by humans: "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." Instead, it has been

completely effaced by this new neighborhood, which seems to have “sprung into existence” (211). This is not evidence for uniformitarian change. The railroad’s rapid and complete takeover seems to challenge this notion and yet the terms in which it is rendered suggests a deterministic force. “The carcasses of houses, and beginnings of new thoroughfares, had started off upon the line at steam’s own speed, and shot away into the country in a monster train” (211).

The struggle Dickens may have been experiencing between new scientific evidence and catastrophic changes of biblical proportions is revealed throughout this episode. The scene is reminiscent of some kind of primordial soup (more like a Darwinian concept which will come later) yet with Biblical overtones, the combination conveyed through words like “chaos,” “topsy-turvy,” “confused,” “jumbled,” “Babel towers,” “fragments” (63). “In short,” we are told, “the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course, of civilisation and improvement” (63). Though George Levine is discussing *Bleak House*, his insight applies to *Dombey and Son* as well: “Dickens, then, hovers half way between the conventions of reality implicit in natural theology (analogical, teleological, catastrophic, and beneficent), and those developing in modern science toward Darwinism (metonymic, organic, dysteleological, uniformitarian” 254).⁴²

The railway will completely transform Staggs’s, absorbing any remnants of what it was.⁴³ But, even what it was is questionable. Dickens forestalls any nostalgic sentimentalism by characterizing the neighborhood that was there before the transformation as decayed, rusted, and dilapidated: “a *little* row of houses, with *little*

squalid patches of ground before them, fenced off with *old* doors, barrel staves of tarpaulin, and *dead* bushes; with bottomless tin kettles and *exhausted* iron fenders thrust into the gap” (emphasis mine 64). Sicher suggests that lamenting the loss of Staggs’s means participating in a “false nostalgia which fails to see the advantages of the new” (123), and he argues that the Staggs’s Gardens descriptions need to be read as “double-voiced irony” directed at this “false nostalgia.” While I agree with his point about Dickens’s position about waxing nostalgic for the lost neighborhood, I am not convinced Dickens allows any comfort in the so-called “advantages” associated with the new neighborhood. He sees both the neighborhood before the railway and after its completion as fraught with the problems inherent in capitalist and consumerist ideologies. It is through the name that Dickens forges a link between capitalist impulses, railway speculation, the railroad itself, and the loss of origins that come with both industrial upheaval and geographic evidence.

The narrator acknowledges that the origins of the neighborhood and the origins of its name prior to the railway’s coming are unclear. As has been noted by Altick, Sicher, Baumgarten, and others, the word “stag” referred to railway stock speculators who were thought to have “precipitated the financial panic of 1845” (Sicher 117). The narrator tells us, significantly, that one of the origins of the name may have been “from a deceased capitalist, one Mr. Staggs who had built it for his delectation” (64). In addition to suggestions that Staggs’s is associated with railway stock and with a deceased capitalist, the narrator offers yet another alternative for the source of Staggs’s name, saying “Others, who had a natural taste for the country, held that it dated from those rural times when the antlered herd, under the familiar denominations of Staggses, had resorted to its

shady precincts” (64). In addition to the loss of original associations with the name Staggs’s (though the narrator keeps them alive by suggesting them, writing them into imagined history), other things, too, are losing their names to the new order. Alongside a new tavern called The Railway Arms, the “old-established Ham and Beef Shop had become the Railway Eating House” (63). Whatever the origins of its name, its inhabitants, we are told, consider it a “sacred grove not to be withered by railroads,” and they were “confident . . . of its outliving any such ridiculous invention” (64).

That this neighborhood may have been built by a capitalist for his enjoyment and is already being replaced in the next round of economic change and expansion speaks to a lack of depth, characteristic of the throw-away society capitalists create and even speaks to the transitory nature of empires. That this transitoriness may have been on Dickens’s mind as he was writing the book is easily inferred. Steve Marcus notes that while writing *Dombey and Son*, Dickens was (as he always was) struggling with his personal past, but as he was also traveling through Europe at the time, he was being confronted as well by evidence of civilizations past: “To Dickens, the Continent often seemed a monument to a past which, no matter how familiar he became with it, never ceased to horrify him” (303-304). In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens refers to the ruins found in his own country, as Edith, her mother, Dombey, and Carker “stroll among the haunted ruins of Kenilworth” in chapter XXVII of the novel. This awareness that great civilizations could fall, leaving only ruins to testify to their existence must have cast some shadow on the pride felt for the British Empire. As Alex Warwick argues and Dickens suggests with the Staggs’s Gardens episode, “The city is always potentially a city of ruins . . . The great expansion

of building projects in Victorian London in the making of the modern city paradoxically drew attention to the fact of its ancientness” (132).⁴⁴

The alliance of the railroad and the rapid transformation of the landscape are juxtaposed in Dickens’s mind with the geological record being exposed by railway excavation. Writing of the construction of the London-Birmingham line, the line that disrupts the fictional Staggs’s, Michael Freeman writes, “As the navvies laboured to make the cuttings of Robert Stephenson’s famous London and Birmingham trunk line, they were simultaneously striking out at the Creation story. For the cuttings laid bare to view the Uniformitarianism of Lyell’s new geology” (15). As he saw with the ruins of ancient Rome, Dickens seems to be suggesting that like the Staggs’s of early capitalism, that like the Staggs of possible past pastoralism, the newest incarnation, too, will one day be a ruin, a half memory, and like *Dombey*’s empire, it too, with time, will fall. Through this episode, Dickens joins Lyell in meditating on “how much has passed away” (Warwick 129). By the time Paul is living his final hours and requests to see his former nurse and so is taken back to Staggs’s Gardens, the previous neighborhood, like Toodle himself, has been completely absorbed by the railroad: “There was no such place as Staggs’s Gardens. It had completely vanished from the earth” (211).

What has taken its place seems an intact version of the crumbled grand columns and Roman palaces, which had left behind only fragments. Though these aspects stand as monuments to the railroad and progress, the shadow of their future ruins might be lingering in the background: “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” (211). To forestall any sense of loss, the narrator reminds us

of what is gone: “The miserable waste ground, where the refuse matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone” (211). The connection of the railroad with the rise of consumerism is made in the very next thought: “and in its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise” (211). The scale and impersonality of this new version of Staggs’s are underscored as this system for mass transport of goods and people represents relentless activity, mobility, and disconnection, rendered in terms reminiscent of the effervescence associated with railway travel:

“Crowds of people and mountains of goods, departing and arriving scores upon scores of times in every four-and-twenty hours, produced a fermentation in the place that was always in action. The very houses seemed disposed to pack up and take trips” (212). In reading the descriptions of the new Staggs’s, Raymond Williams sees a “pride of power—the new power of the Industrial Revolution” evident in the language. In addition, he says, it represents “the critically altered relationship between men and things . . . In seeing the city, as he here sees the railways, as at once the exciting and the threatening consequence of the new mobility . . . Dickens went to the centre, the dynamic centre, of this transforming social experience” (164).

Though the proliferation of ways that the railroad has infiltrated the neighborhood seems dazzling if not dizzying, there is a decided lack of variety in the list, yet another legacy of the industrialization of the country. Any sense of uniqueness, of a business organically grown is gone:

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, and sandwich-boxes, and timetables; railway hackney-coach and cabstands; railway omnibuses, railway streets and buildings, railway hangers-on and parasites, and flatterers out of all calculation. (211)

Steven Marcus sees in this description an “affirmation of life,” a view which Harland Nelson is right to correct, saying Marcus “misses the ambiguity of the passage” (52). To Nelson, this description represents “the dehumanization of that neighborhood” (50), and it also represents the loss of “variety unpredictable and delightful irregularity” that Dickens “wants to keep . . . in the world” (45).

The above passage from *Dombey and Son* ends with these words, “There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in” (211), and this last point becomes one more aspect of the disorientation introduced by the train and felt by Victorians. Whenever the train’s impact on nineteenth-century inhabitants is discussed, the changes it brought about in time and space perceptions are linked together. This new relentless twenty-four/seven operation described by Dickens in these terms, “Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work” (212), necessitated a new, strict adherence to clocks and is seen as speeding up existence. Awareness of time comes in many forms in the novel. First there is the eternal time represented by the sun and the sea. There is the “old” time kept by the chronometers in Gills’ shop. The time of Gills and Cuttle is a more patient time—symbolized by waiting patiently for the perfect occasion to drink the precious bottle of Madeira wine, to be drunk finally when Florence, Dombey, Walter, and Gills become a family: “A bottle that has been long excluded from the light of day, and is hoary with dust and cobwebs, has been brought into the sunshine; and the golden wine within it sheds a luster on the table” (828). The Gills/Cuttle

timetable also moves slowly enough to allow seemingly useless stocks to pay off handsomely: “Some of Mr. Gills’s old investments are coming out wonderfully well; and that instead of being behind the time in those respects as he supposed, he was, in truth, a little before it, and had to wait the fulness [sic] of the time and the design” (828). These experiences contrast with the frantic new time of railways, its catastrophic upheaval, its quick and complete takeover of businesses, and the fast flights through landscapes that it affords. They contrast as well with the rapid fall of Dombey’s personal empire.

Conclusion

Though Dickens is witnessing and chronicling through his fiction the rapid and catastrophic changes of his times, through Gills and more definitively through Walter, he offers an alternative view of a slower, more gradual induction into the capitalist world of globally moved goods. Walter’s journey to become a successful capitalist begins with his induction via the sea. He survives the wreck of Dombey’s ship the *Son and Heir*, returns to London, marries Florence, and with her moves on to China, where it is presumed he shall take part in the import/export business. After his stint abroad, he is “released from sea-going” and “appointed by the same establishment to a post of great trust and confidence at home . . . mounting up the ladder with the greatest expedition” (832). Though many place Walter in the opposite camp of the capitalist world, he actually represents a middle ground between the natural world associated with pre-industrial society and the industrial world of the new capitalism. In his discussion of “Dickens and the Uses of Nature,” which examines the problematic relationship of nature versus nurture in the novel, Paul Schacht reviews Julian Monynahan’s assertion that *Dombey*

and Son is sentimental after all, and seeking the source of Moynahan's "irritation" (95) with the novel, he finds: "Dickens suggests that because nature is female, perhaps culture should be too. Not surprisingly, then, the conventionally 'feminine' characteristics that Dickens associates with culture do not belong exclusively to women. Moynahan makes note of this fact, and worries about the novel's apparent suggestion that a real-life triumph of Florence's values would mean 'control of railroads, shipping lines and investment houses' passing into the hands of, for example, 'milky young men like Walter Gay'" (95). Schact agrees with this reading, but wonders why the thought disturbs Moynahan: "And so when Moynahan complains that the message of *Dombey and Son* is that 'the meek shall inherit the Industrial Revolution,' one cannot take issue with his reading. But one may be excused for wondering why this should be any worse than—indeed how it differs from—the meek inheriting the earth generally. Is it really the meek who disturb Moynahan or the milky?" (97). Sicher sees Walter as "a moral and socioeconomic type in a modern allegory, especially suited for slaying the dragons of the railway age, monstrous bodies with an uncharitable and merciless iron heart" (140). I would argue instead that Walter is actually associated with the railroad but to a far less extreme degree than Carker and Toodle. While Gills and Cuttle both have sea-derived names and speak in a language fully penetrated by metaphors and images of the sea, Walter is described early on as being "locomotive" (78). Gills hopes that Walter will not be left behind in the new world, saying: "therefore it is that I am anxious you should be early in the busy world, and on the world's track" (40), and with this metaphor, Dickens places Walter firmly in the present and as a viable player in the newly emergent industrial

world. Unlike Dombey, however, Walter will perform his role with heart. As Schact comments, “it is Walter who finally provides Florence with the nurturing love her mother could not live to supply, her father refused to offer, and Edith feared to provide” (95). All modes of transportation available in Dickens’s day have their role in *Dombey and Son*. The ship the *Son and Heir* carries Walter far from Florence at Dombey’s direction. Its sinking in a storm happens off-stage, and as Walter survived, it has no long-term impact on the plot. Dombey’s horse accident and Carker’s manic coach ride across France involve organic mobility, and while Dombey’s accident causes no permanent damage, the train is used to bring about a horrific death. Clearly, though, Dickens has the train and its expanding railways represent several other forces important in the nineteenth-century. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens links the major forces of his time—the railroad and expanding capitalism and consumerism—and shows the threat to the individual of each. Dombey becomes so thoroughly identified with global capitalism and commodities, that he loses his son, two wives, his business, and almost his daughter before he awakens to more timeless values of love and family. Carker, the mechanistic man, is chewed up and spit out by the most potent machine of the time. Toodle, a railway worker, is absorbed figuratively and linguistically by the railroad. The train blurs class distinctions and introduces the self into the “mass.” Not only are personal histories threatened by the train, so, too, are social and geographical histories, as symbolized by the Staggs’s Gardens transformation. Its excavations bring deep time into daily awareness, while its speed alters perspectives of time and space. The train is an irresistible force, a transformer of the man, the city, and the country.

Chapter 3

THE RAILROAD IN *MIDDLEMARCH*:

THE PEOPLE, THE PLACE, AND PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Though she wrote *Middlemarch* between 1869 and 1871 when over 13,000 miles of tracks had already been laid in England (Crouzet 291), George Eliot set the novel during the period of 1829-1832, when the railroad was making its public debut, when due to the rise of manufacturing, the middle class was expanding its numbers, its buying power, and its political clout, and when Sir Charles Lyell was publishing his *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833). *Middlemarch* engages key issues that arise from those changes: the penetration of fairly insular villages and towns by outside forces like the railroad, a shifting economic order, the birth of the consumer, and the revision of human history based on Lyell's geological revelations. As do the other writers in this study, Eliot explores the challenges these forces pose to notions of self: self in the industrial world of mass manufacturing and mass mobility, self as consumer, and self within the new scope of time and space.

One might expect Eliot to indict the railroad for its transformation of the Midlands countryside she knew growing up, for its undermining of regional economies,

and for its role in the destruction of artisan cultures. Instead, in *Middlemarch*, she suggests that though many locals are resistant to the railroad and the changes it represents, they are resistant to change in general, not because they have a lifestyle that necessarily merits preservation. In Chapter 56, Eliot represents the anti-railway attitude through farmers and wagoners who fear exploitation and dispossession, but earlier in the novel, she has shown that they are already exploited and dispossessed. Moreover, she suggests in *Middlemarch* and in “The Natural History of German Life” that times are changing, and that some of the regional folkways and remnants of feudal culture being superseded possibly should be relegated to history.

Writing with forty years’ hindsight, Eliot knows, as her character Caleb Garth asserts, that there is no stopping the railroad. She also suggests in her journal that though the railroad was rapidly changing the details of the countryside landscape, the countryside itself still maintained its familiar aspect to those like Eliot who knew it prior to the railroad. In other words, when she considers the railroad itself, she seems fairly neutral about it. When the railroad is coupled with one of its chief ends, the transportation of commodities to stimulate and supply the consumer culture, Eliot’s conciliatory stance is undermined, and her attitude towards the railroad becomes complicated by these associations. Unlike Thoreau, Dickens, and Dreiser, she does not make the connection between consumerism and the railroad directly; rather, the connection is indirect, to be traced through Rosamond, who as the third generation child of a manufacturing family, represents the consumerism that arises from mass manufacturing and the mass transit of commodities. All of the commodities she desires have become readily available through transportation along railway lines. The novel

suggests that her relinquishment of self to spectacle is a byproduct of an existence dedicated to this pursuit of consumerism.

Though in many ways *Middlemarch* is a realist text, and in service to that, Eliot adheres to her own advice to realist writers in “The Natural History of German Life” and does not, for instance, sentimentalize the anti-railroad farmers and their lives, her realist vision is complicated by her engagement with the scientific theories of Lyell and Darwin, which, ironically, leads to some of the indeterminacy of the novel. In her insistence in *Middlemarch* on the subjectivity of all perception and the revisability of all understandings—seen through the pier glass, uneven web, and unturned stone analogies—she has created a text that to an extent carries on the Romantics’ project and anticipates that of the Modernists. *Middlemarch* is a novel preoccupied with indeterminate origins and unclear destinations, symbolized by the train, theorized by science, and evidenced by many characters’ searches for origins—personal, biological, economic, and metaphysical. It is as well a novel that includes characters (Lydgate, Casaubon, Dorothea) searching for the master narrative that will give their lives meaning. In many ways, the novel exemplifies Jeffrey Moxham’s assertion that in becoming “unsure of absolutes,” Eliot, like other writers of her time, “reflect[s] different moments in a growing crisis of values and beliefs” (2). This crisis is brought about, of course, by emergent technology and industrialization, rising capitalism and consumerism, and the growing authority of science, but as Eliot shows herself to be aware, even science’s authority is not absolute. Through her key metaphors and through the narrator’s observations, Eliot suggests that over the course of time—whether it involves the forty-year gap between when her narrative took place and when it was written, whether over

the course of centuries or the course of millennia—new perspectives could be brought to bear, new information could come to light, and new understandings could emerge.

Just as the railroad shadows the novel, existing mostly as an unrealized probability, so, too, does deep time and the challenges the notion poses to the importance of any one given life and the role of perspective in understanding the immediate present and the long-term past. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot often adjusts perspective, moving between telescopic and microscopic views. To her, this is a necessity, for neither view is wholly accurate nor is any perspective other than subjective. The works of Lyell and Darwin undoubtedly influenced this assessment of perspective, its instability, and the impossibility of pronouncing something to be absolutely true.⁴⁵ Both scientists acknowledged the limitations of their own views, the incompleteness of the physical records substantiating their theories, and the impossibility of holding both the long and the immediate ranges in full focus simultaneously. Of course, scientific theories, with their admittance of indiscernible beginnings and endings (Lyell) or evolutionary beginnings and unpredictable endings (Darwin) are not alone in destabilizing notions of origins and master narratives in the nineteenth century; the railroad itself was seemingly originless and without final termini. The commodities it carried as well seemed without origins and disconnected from human interaction. Goods were no longer produced at home or in town but in factories by nameless workers and then divorced from their contexts and sent to markets via rail. All of these elements, though not directly connected, are associated in *Middlemarch*. The strand of the railroad, the line of Rosamond's consumerism, the spotlight on perspective, and the search for origins in this novel, when joined with the other topics of the moment—Reform and cholera—create a

complex picture of a culture reacting to foundational changes to environment, to individuals, and to historical perspective. Just as in the “Finale,” the final word cannot be pronounced on the effects of Dorothea’s life on others, the final word on the railroad cannot be pronounced, nor can the final word on geological uniformitarianism or on biological evolution. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot taps into the immediate concerns of her century—the effects of industrialization, the rise of consumerism, the spread of infectious diseases, the extent and expediency of political reform, but she is also tapping in to deep uncertainties arising out of the meaning of any one life on the line of deep time and within the evolution of species.⁴⁶

Chapter 56: The Coming of the Railroad

Because Eliot’s Chapter 56 in some ways seems to be a discrete episode, critics question its role in the novel. In the simplest sense, the debate over the railroad in Chapter 56, as Richard Altick suggests, acts as an indicator of the narrative time frame and serves to delineate character, add local color, and provide one of the best illustrations “of the pros and cons of public opinion” about the railroad, “sharply differentiat[ing] men and women of conservative temperament from those of more liberal inclinations” (*Presence of the Present* 195). Paul Lorenz expands the scope of that conflict in “Technology and Development: Opposition to the Railway in *Middlemarch*.” He argues that through the railway episode, Eliot “has deftly presented the complex reactions of the English people to the Industrial Revolution” and has shown that the class conflict evident in the exchange bears out Darwin’s principle that “each species (or class) of man seeks its own preservation while only the fittest, most adaptable, survive” (23).

Recently, several critics—Jeffrey Moxham, J. Hillis Miller, Gillian Beer, and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth among them—have argued that *Middlemarch* is more indeterminate than has been historically claimed, and Ermarth uses Book 6 which includes Chapter 56, the railroad episode, to argue her point that with this novel, “It is not unusual to end up with more questions than answers.” To illustrate, she asks “What do Fred’s romantic interests, the Lydgates’ domestic unhappiness, and Bulstrode’s fear of discovery have to do with the fact that Dorothea considers herself prevented from accepting Ladislaw by her dead husband’s will? What does any of this have to do with the encroachment of the Railway system into the countryside of Middlemarch or the behavior of electric batteries?” (Ermarth 126). Ermarth never answers this question directly, as her thesis is that the text resists narratorial authority and proliferates possibilities. Sally Shuttleworth, too, selects the railroad chapter to illustrate one aspect of Eliot’s narrative strategy. She argues that in this novel in which “chapters move either linearly . . . or laterally, from larger social issues to its effects on the thoughts and reflections of a single life,” Chapter 56 illustrates the latter, with its movement from “a general discussion of the coming of the railway to trace its effects on individual lives” (148). To Shuttleworth, the “material effects” of the railroad, along with two other timely issues—cholera and the Reform Movement—serve as a unifying force, though “less in their material effects than in their mobilization of public opinion” (148).

In Chapter 56, Eliot sets up a debate between Caleb Garth and local farmers about the merits and disadvantages of the imminent railroad. Their encounter appears as the meeting of two very different minds. Cooper sees the railroad as “good for the big folks to make money out on” (531). For him, as well as for Solomon Featherstone—“overseer

of the roads at the time” and brother of Stone Court’s owner, Peter—and Hiram Ford, a “waggoner,” the railroads represent the industrial machine overriding the poor rural worker. Caleb Garth, on the other hand, represents a moderate position of acceptance. In Darwinian terms, his is the adaptable mind, and he tells the gathering of rustics, “You can’t hinder the railroad: it will be made whether you like it or not. . . . Somebody told you the railroad was a bad thing. That was a lie. It may do a bit of harm here and there to this and to that; and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway’s a good thing” (531). One of the railroad’s contemporaries wrote about this inevitability and irresistibility of the railroad that Caleb mentions: “‘It avails nothing to complain of this tendency as novel, inconsiderate, hazardous. The pressure towards such an issue is irresistible, nor do we see the slightest prospect of it ceasing to be so’” (Crouzet 124). Of course, Garth makes his living from surveying land and bending it to human purposes. He is surveying a corner of Dorothea’s property, hoping to negotiate with the railroad to obtain the best price for her. The question becomes, what does it mean that Eliot casts Garth in the role of railroad defender? Though Paul Lorenz puts Garth in the class of “big folks” who “will profit from the railway” (22), Garth is actually a middleman, paid a wage to survey and manage properties by those who own them. He is often just one job loss away from financial disaster. In many ways, Garth is the most sentimental character in the novel, and Eliot uses him as one of its moral compasses. He works without greed, helps those in need, is the father of the faultless Mary, and is one of the few who refuses to circulate the story Raffles shares, though it tells against Bulstrode, whom most in the town dislike. Garth is well respected by Chettham, Cadwallader, and Dorothea, and the narrator too heralds his work ethic and his childlike wonder before the practical things of the world:

“I think his virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings; his prince of darkness was a slack workman. But there was no spirit of denial in Garth, and the world seemed so wondrous to him that he was ready to accept any number of systems, like any number of firmaments, if they did not obviously interfere with the best land-drainage, solid building, correct measuring, and judicious boring (for coal). In fact, he had a reverential soul with a strong practical intelligence” (238). Garth somehow operates outside of the two opposed economic systems represented in the book: the mercantile and the industrial-driven consumer economy. As Moxham says, “Eliot wishes to protect his integrity by curtailing his knowledge of the nature of business; he is virtually a pre-lapsarian innocent” (176).

By making Garth the defender of the railroad, Eliot may be capitalizing on her hindsight vision of the railway and, as she saw it, its limited impact on the countryside. The railroads were the physical force and embodiment of economic and industrial change, and writing forty years after the fact, Eliot knows their impact on England.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the railroad represented changes in the landscape and opened up areas once isolated to trade on a national scale. Richard Altick comments that the train altered “a landscape which, except for the checkerboard effect of hedgerows and ditches resulting from several periods of enclosure, had not changed since the Middle Ages,” (75). Furthermore, he claims, “They and the cities they helped build meant the end of the regional cultures and economies into which Britain had so long been divided” (79). Though the Featherstones, Waules, and Coopers saw the train as a hostile force to be resisted and thwarted, there is evidence that many in England welcomed the railroad, impressed with its engineering, its speed, and even believing that it contributed to a

“pleasing prospect” in the countryside landscape (Robbins 57). Contrary to Altick’s assertion, Michael Robbins holds that the general acceptance of the railroad was due to the fact that England had already been physically reshaped by enclosure, a Parliamentary act which “led to minor landmarks being destroyed wholesale, little woods and coppices being uprooted, and small fields thrown together into larger ones, which left the land in the counties most affected looking as though it had been newly shaved” (60). Given this, he says the railway “slipped . . . easily into the landscape of Britain” (57). George Eliot seems to have agreed with that. As this passage from “Impressions of Theophrastus Such” suggests, the railroad had its way and yet did not destroy the countryside as she knew it: “Our Midland plains have never lost their familiar impression and conservative spirit for me; yet at every other mile, since I first looked on them, some sign of world-wide change, some new direction of human labour, has wrought itself into what one may call the speech of the landscape There comes a crowd of navvies, with pickaxes and barrows, and while hardly a wrinkle is made in the fading mother’s face, or a new curve of health in the blooming girl’s, the hills are cut through, or the breaches between them spanned, we choose our level, and the white steam-pennon flies along it” (as qtd in Robbins 59). Despite rapid and extensive upheaval, the countryside, Eliot suggests, maintains a familiar countenance.

In *Middlemarch*, debates over the railroad’s possible impact were taking place alongside debates over Reform, these two joining cholera in forming an “exciting” triangle of topics being heatedly debated on the local level. In each case, the powerlessness of the people—whether in the face of government and the growing clout of cities like London, seen by Hiram Ford as “as centre of hostility to the country” (527),

in the face of nameless railroad builders and speculators, “big folks,” who would come “trampling right and left,” or in the face of a disease whose origins and means of transmission were not to be understood until germ theory emerged—is the central issue. Timothy Cooper, Widow Waule, and Solomon Featherstone are among those who are certain that the railroad will compromise the health of their animals and the integrity of their roads and that it will bring with it rough, greedy outsiders who will disrupt their peaceful enclave. The farmers see little benefit in the railroad for them, a position represented by Cooper, whose dialect proclaims him as decidedly uneducated. Cooper has his own perspective on human history and its changes in leadership and technology, proclaiming that these changes have done nothing to improve his life: “‘I’n seen lots o’ things turn up sin’ I war a young ‘un—the war an’ the peace, and the canells, an’ the oald King George, an’ the Regen’, an’ the new King George, an’ the new un as has got a new ne-ame—an’ it’s been all aloike to the poor mon. What’s the canells been t’ him” (532). The much-heralded canal system of transport did not, he says, bring him meat nor bacon, and he expects nothing more from the railroad.

We naturally sympathize with Cooper, as among the dispossessed and those always at the mercy of government bureaucracies and corporate interests. Critics like Lorenz are right to assert that the railroad speculators “made handsome profits” and that the middle class too benefited from the railroad, while “the lower classes became dispossessed” (21) and Jeffrey Moxham can say that Cooper embarrasses Garth’s values as he defends the railroad, “memorializ[ing] an initial skirmishing in the uneven struggle between commercial and agrarian capitalism that had momentous issue in the world

beyond the book” (176), but Eliot suggests Cooper’s is a species that is dying out. He is cast as a Neanderthal of sorts⁴⁸:

Timothy was a wiry old labourer, of a type lingering in those times—who had his savings in a stocking-foot, lived in a lone cottage, and was not to be wrought on by any oratory, having as little of the feudal spirit, and believing as little, as if he had not been totally unacquainted with the Age of Reason and the Rights of Man. Caleb was in a difficulty known to any person attempting in dark times and unassisted by miracle to reason with rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth which they know through a hard process of feeling, and can let it fall like a giant’s club on your neatly-carved argument for a social benefit which they do *not* feel (532).

Eliot plays with our loyalties here. By describing Cooper’s position as being like a “giant club” and forcing us to puzzle out a double negative to determine whether and to what extent Cooper was acquainted with the Age of Reason and Rights of Man, she avoids allowing the confrontation to be strictly a case of the small, innocent farmer against the giant industrial complex. While Moxham, too, sees this portrait of Cooper as a “rustic wielding a giant club of truth” as unflattering, he says that even as it serves to “retrieve Garth’s positive standing, it cannot deny Cooper’s truth or expunge the arrested dignity and force of its utterance” (177). Lorenz goes so far as to call Cooper’s utterance “eloquent” (22). What is more to the point, though, is that Cooper has never felt himself to be part of the feudal spirit or the Age of Enlightenment, and he feels the Industrial Age will mean little to him as well. To him, these are abstract concepts. He is not trying to

reason his existence; he is simply trying to exist the best way he knows how, and the railroad poses a threat to the existence he knows.

One of the fears voiced by those in Lowick is that the rail lines running through the farmland will lead to infertility. The widow Mrs. Maule bemoans: “‘The cows will all cast their calves . . . if the railway comes across the Near Close; and I shouldn’t wonder at the mare too, if she was in foal’” (526). Industrial fecundity, in other words, poses a threat to natural fertility. The transition to the discussion of the railroad in Chapter 56 actually occurs by way of breeding. When Garth is given an assignment from Dorothea to take care of the farms and tenements attached to Lowick, happy to have the additional work, he embraces the idea that “Business breeds.” This allows the narrator the transition, “And one form of business which was beginning to breed just then was the construction of railways. A projected line was to run through Lowick parish where the cattle had hitherto grazed in a peace unbroken by astonishment” (525). The business of railroad building is breeding, while the farmers fear their livelihoods will become sterile and obsolete. The narrative never returns to the effects of the railroad on animal fertility, though Eliot does include an ironic incident two chapters later, which shows that animals themselves pose a threat to human fertility, as Rosamond, who is very much taken by the “high-breeding” of Lydgate’s relatives, loses her baby after her horse is frightened by the crashing of a tree (556). Though she will go on to have daughters, they are last mentioned as a parade of spectacle. Ultimately Rosamond will represent the sterility of consumerism, her fertility compromised by Nature, which she is affronting.

Among Solomon’s fears is that the “‘ruffian’” railway workers will trample his crops (526). As with much of the gossip that circulates through Middlemarch, there is

some measure of truth to Solomon's characterization of the railroad navvies who showed up with pick, shovel, and axe in rural areas to build the long beds for the railways.

Though some of the labor force building England's railways was made up of locals, many of the workers were itinerant, and some were criminals "who found the anonymity of the navvies' existence a welcome cover from arrest and prosecution" (Freeman 174).

Francois Crouzet characterizes the railway workers as "Living in wretched hutments, great eaters and heavy drinkers, picturesquely clad, violent and riotous, they terrorized the countryside" (286). To keep these outsiders at bay, or at least capitalize on their presence, Featherstone spreads rumors about the railroad to help the bottom line when the farmers inevitably sell out. He tells Mrs. Waule, "the more spokes we put in their wheel the more they'll pay us to let 'em go on, if they must come whether or not" (526). "This reasoning," the narrator informs us, "was perhaps less thorough than he imagined, his cunning bearing about the same relation to the course of railways as the cunning of a diplomat bears to the general chill or catarrh of the solar system. But he set about acting on his views in a thoroughly diplomatic manner by stimulating suspicion" (526). In portraying Solomon's strategy, Eliot proves her fidelity to the early history of the maneuvers between locals and railroad developers. In *The Railway Age in Britain*, Michael Robbins recounts the strategy of erecting opposition as a means of obtaining more money from the railroad companies: "Even a hundred and more years ago, few voices were raised against railway builders on the grounds that natural beauties or amenities were being destroyed. There were, it was true, plenty of proprietors who used some such argument to screw more money in compensation from the companies; but when the argument had served its turn, and the money was paid, most of them continued

to dwell quite happily on their ravaged domains” (58). What emerges from this perspective and Eliot’s presentation is that railroaders and landholders alike were engaged in mutual exploitation.

Cooper and his fellow Middlemarchers probably saw themselves as employing the same strategies used by the railroad companies, who with the government’s sanction, were trampling on landowners’ rights. Michael Freeman writes: “According to one recent writer, ‘the railway movement brought about the most dramatic infringement of private property rights in England since the Civil War.’ Virtually no stretch of land was immune from the grasp of railway promoters” (31). But, he argues, it was not just the poor who paid with their land: “Social rank and wealth meant comparatively little in the face of what came to be known as ‘the railway invasion of the land’. Railway companies were entitled under their private Acts ‘to take a man’s land without any conveyance at all’. The Acts gave companies the authority to ‘enter, survey and even to excavate private land situated on a prescribed route’” (31).⁴⁹ What compromises slightly the integrity of the farmers’ position is that Mrs. Waule and Featherstone—two of the opponents to the railroad—are obsequious relatives of Peter Featherstone, who hope to get money the old fashioned way, by inheriting it. Both situations—trying to obtain more money from the railroad companies by putting up a fight and seeking to ingratiate themselves with Featherstone to inherit his estate bears witness, most of all, to the powerlessness these smaller farmers and landowners feel in the face of both feudalism and industrial capitalism.

That the construction of the railroad was on such a grand scale contributes to the helplessness Middlemarch locals feel, they see it in catastrophic terms. But, just as

Dickens is careful not to idealize Staggs's Gardens prior to the complete upheaval wrought upon it by the railroad, Eliot does not idealize the pastoral setting about to be disrupted. While the farmers fear for their livelihoods and the integrity of their land if the railroad passes through, she has been careful to outline practices established long before the railroad ever arrived that were unfair to these very farmers. In many ways, Eliot presents a rural world that could have been the subject of this description by Charles Kingsley: "Those picturesque villages [were] generally the perennial hotbeds of fever and ague, of squalid penury, sottish profligacy, dull discontent too stale for words" (qtd. in Altick 78). Middlemarch is rife with amateur jockeying for power, hidden agendas, hidden identities, and economic control and manipulation of the poor by the landed. A confusing change of economic and political order is taking place in Middlemarch. The old patriarchy, represented by the impotent Casaubon and the weakening Featherstone, is dying out. A manufacturer (Vincy) is the mayor, an Evangelical is the banker (Bulstrode), a naturalist becomes Lowick's preacher (Featherstone), a would-be artist and poet becomes a politician (Ladislaw), a rich woman (Dorothea) would be a saint, and her uncle, a landowner with ill-treated tenants stumps for national reform. Middlemarch is ruled by small-minded provincial politics, exemplified by Bulstrode, the bully of the hospital Board, who forces others, including Lydgate, to cater to his will. The pool of marriage candidates is limited, as are the job opportunities, as Fred learns. Add to that that the gossip of the town's residents is enough to ruin careers, and that though the city was believed to be the hotbed of disease, certain areas in the country, too, bred diseases, as in Houndsley, where Fred contracts typhus, and even in Middlemarch, where a cholera

victim dies. In fact, the new fever hospital Lydgate oversees is bracing for a cholera outbreak.

Eliot challenges any inclination to cast the rural poor in the role of wronged innocents in the face of an unstoppable industrial force. In doing so, she dramatizes the realist project that she theorizes in “The Natural History of German Life” published in 1856. Chiding writers and painters for idealizing a country life they have never closely inspected she says, “Idyllic ploughmen are jocund when they drive their team afield; idyllic shepherds make bashful love under hawthorn bushes; idyllic villagers dance in the chequered shade and refresh themselves, not immoderately, with spicy nut-brown ale” (2). She exposes the stereotype that construes those in the country as innocent and naïve: “The conventional countryman of the state, who picks up pocket-books and never looks into them, and who is too simple even to know that honesty has its opposite, represents the still lingering mistake that an unintelligible dialect is a guarantee for ingenuousness, and that slouching shoulders indicate an upright position” (2). In reflecting on peasants and on whether or not any outsider can truly represent them, Eliot does recommend sympathy for one’s subject by understanding what really does act on them and not projecting onto them what one feels should be the determinants of their behavior and viewpoints.

Eliot advocates a fidelity to what is there, not to what one imagines is there. One reality is that even the peasant class is changing, and it, too, is prey to the consumer culture taking hold: “In England, at present, when we speak of the peasantry, we mean scarcely more than the class of farm-servants and farm-labourers; and it is only in the most primitive districts, as in Wales, for example, that farmers are included under the

term” (4). Eliot suggests that one need only take inventory of the local farmhouses to see that these once unadorned, basically furnished abodes now sport “a bad piano in the ‘drawing room,’ and some annuals disposed with a symmetrical imitation of negligence, on the table; and it is only in very primitive regions that they will consent to sit in a covered vehicle without springs” (4). Eliot is suggesting two very different realities (and, of course, offering would-be realists a bit of narrative theory) with these comments. One is that peasants and farmers are neither picturesquely innocent nor naively immune to the influence of material desires. She is also warning writers not to project their own desires, suppositions, and romanticized interpretations onto what really exists. Though many bemoaned the loss of regional cultures and dialects brought about by the industrial age, including Eliot to a certain extent in *Silas Marner*, Eliot does not overly sentimentalize the loss in *Middlemarch*. To return again to “The Natural History of German Life,” she writes, “In the cultivated world each individual has his style of speaking and writing. But among the peasantry it is the race, the district, the province, that has its style; namely, its dialect, its phraseology, its proverbs and songs, which belong alike to the entire body of the people. This provincial style of the peasant is again, like his physique, a remnant of history to which he clings with utmost tenacity” (5). The peasant clings to his dialect, to his regionally defining traits, but Eliot does not sentimentalize them. The peasant holds onto them “with utmost tenacity,” which seems a hyperbolically futile effort given that they are “remnants of history.”

Part of the reason that Eliot does not sentimentalize the position of the poor farmers is because they were already dispossessed, and the “big folks” like Peter Featherstone, Brooke, and Casaubon had long been in control of the land and the lives of

the poor. In attacking the railroad, Cooper, Waule, and Featherstone are defending a way of life—a feudal / tenant farming system—that has been unfavorable to the very people who work the land. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot introduces the railroad after showing that land, land values, and land uses are changing—and could be changing for the better. Landowners like Chettham are actively raising the standards of living for their tenants. The Featherstones, Brookes, and Casaubons, who seek to control their land even after death by manipulating those in a position to inherit, will be thwarted by new market forces and changing situations. In *Society and Economy in Modern Britain 1700-1850*, Richard Brown offers a glimpse of the control of land prior to the railroad:

Though land was owned by a small elite, fewer than 10,000 aristocrats and gentry, their estates were sub-let to such an extent that for the majority of the rural poor their landlord was not the owner of the soil but a large farmer. These farmers were mostly leaseholders . . . Small farmers and especially cottiers were usually tenants-at-will. As a result large farmers could adjust the rents their tenants paid while being themselves protected by the fixed lease. Labourers and cottiers often became victims of the narrowing margin between what they had to pay for food and land and the means they possessed for doing so. They were economically squeezed by rising rents, falling real wages and tithes. (392)

In *Middlemarch*, Brooke represents one of these landholders. Though as an independent candidate he would advocate for national reform, what is most in need of reform is the way he treats his own tenants and the countryside where he prospers. As Cadwallader remarks, “I see they are beginning to attack our friend Brooke in the

Trumpet There are tremendous sarcasms against a Landlord not a hundred miles from Middlemarch, who receives his own rents, and makes no returns” (361).

Chettham, who advocates doing “the best for one’s land and tenants, especially in these hard times,” believes farms should be re-evaluated, so the rents become fair. He is certain that scrutiny of Brooke’s management of his own estate will quickly drive him out of politics (363). The rival newspaper to Brooke’s *Pioneer* attacks Brooke on these very points:

we should say, he is one who would dub himself a reformer of our constitution, while every interest for which he is immediately responsible is going to decay: a philanthropist who cannot bear one rogue to be hanged, but does not mind five honest tenants being half-starved, a man who shrieks at corruption, and keeps his farms at rack-rent: who roars himself red at rotten boroughs, and does not mind if every field on his farms has a rotten gate . . . what he objects to giving, is a little return on rent-days to help a tenant buy stock, or an outlay on repairs to keep the weather out at a tenant’s barn-door or make his house look a little less like an Irish cottier’s. (366)

While one could suspect that this newspaper, as a rival to Brooke’s own, is exaggerating to win support to its causes, when we add Chettham’s urging of Brooke to reform his own practices and Dorothea’s castigation of her uncle for overseeing a farm where in one instance a family of nine lives in a home with one-sitting room and one small bedroom, and in another, the family lives in the back kitchen, leaving “the other room to the rats” (371), we see the legitimacy of the charges. Dorothea’s conscience is pricked each time

she goes among the tenants and returns home to Brooke's drawing room, where paintings on the wall—idealized portraits of country cottage life—seem to her “a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false” (371).

The dangers of holding perspectives fed by the fine arts are highlighted in the episode in which Brooke goes to confront one of his tenants—Dagley—whose son has poached a leveret. The narrator introduces Dagley's farm, ironically named Freeman's End: “It is true that an observer, under that softening influence of the fine arts which makes other people's hardships picturesque, might have been delighted with this homestead called Freeman's End” (375). Though Farmer Dagley lives in “midnight darkness,” as the narrator explains, “nothing was easier in those times than for an hereditary farmer of his grade to be ignorant, in spite somehow of having a rector in the twin parish who was a gentleman to the backbone, a curate nearer at hand who preached more learnedly than the rector, a landlord who had gone into everything, especially fine art and social improvement, and all the lights of Middlemarch only three miles off” (379). Ignorance and squalor live next door to education and material comforts, and yet there is no cross-pollination. Outside the realm of fine arts and picturesque renderings, Dagley's knowledge resides in “the slovenly habits of farming, and the awkwardness of weather, stocks and crops.” As he says, “An' what I say is, as I've lived upo' your ground from my father and grandfather afore me, an' hev dropped our money into't, an' me an' my children might lie an' rot on the ground for your topdressin' as we can't find the money to buy it, if the King wasn't to put a stop'” (378). When Brooke suggests if Dagley doesn't like the way things are, he is free to leave, the narrator suggests, “there was no earthly 'beyond' open to him” (379). Though Dagley is aware of the Reform talk going

on, his “farming conservatism” consists of a view that holds “whatever is, is bad, and any change is likely to be worse” (376), this being the same attitude that the farmers confronting the railroad agents hold.

The railroad chapter opens with Caleb Garth surveying a corner of Lowick, which he expects “to dispose advantageously for Dorothea” (528). Dorothea was going to use the proceeds from the sale of this land to finance her cottage colony and build “real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections” (27). In the chapter preceding Chapter 56, Dorothea tells Celia that with some of the inheritance from her now deceased husband, “I should like to take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make a little colony, where everybody should work, and all of the work should be done well” (522). In other words, she wants to use the money gained from the wealthy railroad companies to help fund a colony for the tenant farmers like those ill treated by her uncle who yet fear their dispossession by the railroad. Eliot complicates the picture of the opposition to the railroad with her depiction of the land uses in the countryside it is to intrude upon. The farmers and the poor are already dispossessed, the poverty of the countryside’s residents is not picturesque, nor are its farmers innocents, and its landed gentry could be as careless of the poor as the industrial corporations were expected to be.

In Chapter 56, Eliot represents the positions of the farmers and wagoners and shows their fear of being dispossessed and exploited, but she does so having already established that Middlemarchers are in general resistant to change, even when it may do them good. This is seen clearly in the case of Lydgate’s work with fevers and his refusal to dispense drugs, believing as he does in the separation of physician and pharmacist (139). His holistic approach to treatment is held as suspect, despite its proven successes,

for no other reason than that it is a new method, a position articulated by one of the local doctors: “I say the most ungentlemanly trick a man can be guilty of is to come among the members of his profession with innovations which are a libel on their time-honoured procedure” (425). At one point Lydgate, described as a man “not . . . ill-tempered” and with “an ardent kindness of . . . heart” and active intellect (615), remarks that the ignorance of the people of Middlemarch is “stupendous” (417). Just as the railroad delineates character and allows Eliot to deftly expose the various opinions on its intrusion held at the time, so, too, do Lydgate and the proposed fever hospital serve to expose the character of the townspeople. Lydgate is aware of the opposition, and the narrator seems to agree with his assessment of the causes of that opposition as it derives from jealousy and “dunder-headed prejudice”:

. . . oppositions have the illimitable range of objections at command, which need never stop short at the boundary of knowledge, but can draw for ever on the vasts of ignorance. What the opposition in Middlemarch said about the New Hospital and its administration had certainly a great deal of echo in it, for heaven has taken care that everybody shall not be an originator; but that there were differences which represented every social shade between the polished moderation of Dr. Michin and the trenchant assertion of Mrs. Dollop, the landlady of the Tankard in Slaughter Lane . . . [who] became more and more convinced by her own asseveration, that Doctor Lydgate meant to let the people die in the Hospital, if not to poison them, for the sake of cutting them up (419-420).⁵⁰

In the earlier discussion of Lydgate and his methods, though, the narrator warns us not to suppose “that opinion at the Tankard in Slaughter Lane was unimportant,” for though Lydgate had performed “astonishing cures” and rescued those given up for dead, the balance of opinion against him was swayed by two members who argued that such cures went against “providential favors” (420). As in the reactions to Lydgate and the new and seemingly improved means of caring for Middlemarch patients, the reactions to the railroad are based on fear of the new and of the unknown, on gossip, and on limited perceptions.

Middlemarch has been a fairly insular society before the novel opens and before the railroad arrives, but Eliot lines up a slew of disruptive forces that will challenge and erase this insularity, from Lydgate and his medical reforms to national Reform to characters like Rigg and Raffles. A disruptive force itself, the train is, appropriately, first associated with a disruptive character, Raffles. After being dismissed by his stepson, Rigg, Raffles journeys to a nearby town to catch the “newly made railway” from Brassing. Though associated with this industrial mark of progress, Raffles is nevertheless described as being on the lower order of the evolutionary scale, as he looks like “a baboon escaped from a menagerie” (397). He inappropriately makes a joke about William Huskisson, the railway supporter who was its first victim when he was run over crossing the tracks during the debut of the Liverpool-Manchester line.⁵¹ While on board the train, Raffles jokes “that he considered it pretty well seasoned now that it had done for Huskisson” (397).

It appears that Eliot has taken the association of Raffles’ name with baboons straight from Lyell’s *Principles*. Lyell refers to Sir Stamford Raffles in his chapter on the

“Variability of Species,” in which he discusses examples of animals adapting their behavior, at least in the short term, to the promise of human-offered rewards. Lyell uses as an example an assertion made by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck that the orang-outang (sic) is “the most perfect of the inferior animals” tamed through “severe discipline” yet believed by some to “have been transmuted into ‘the dominant race’” (218). He then goes on to cite Sir Stamford Raffles’ research: “One of the baboons of Sumatra . . . appears to be more docile, and is frequently trained by inhabitants to ascend trees for the purpose of gathering cocoa-nuts, a service in which the animal is very expert. He selects, says Sir Stamford Raffles, the ripe nuts with great judgment, and pulls no more than he is ordered” (219). In melding Sir Stamford Raffles with the orangutan-like Raffles, Eliot suggests that rather than evolving, some humans appear to be morally devolving and have been trained like circus animals to perform for immediate rewards. The suggestion that this, the orangutan, being an “inferior animal” is believed to have been “transmuted into ‘the dominant race’” becomes highly suggestive. Moreover, with this one association, Eliot deftly brings a reference to Lyell’s work on deep time into relationship with the eminent symbol of the annihilation of time and space, the railroad.⁵² Rigg, too, represents a change of course that could be read as a devolution to the lowest common denominator of society. Rigg symbolizes most materially the shift from the feudal economy to one based on the creation and increase of capital. He inherits Stone Court but sells it to Bulstrode so that he can go to London to run a money changing shop, preferring to breed coins rather than livestock. The fact that the narrator pronounces him as one who would in other contexts be seen as a “superfluity” (394) and describes him as “frog-faced” (394) suggests that this aspect of the new economy represents a degeneration of values.

Though Raffles makes use of the products of industrial progress (the railroad), as an alcoholic and a blackmailer he falls far short of representing moral progress; with this instance, Eliot dissociates any connection between technological progress and human progress.⁵³ Like the baboon or a circus animal, Raffles adapts his behavior as a short-term expedient for expected rewards. He tries to capitalize on Rigg's new inheritance and on his knowledge of Bulstrode's past. In some ways, Raffles has been trained to capitalize on human weakness. He is stepfather to Rigg, Featherstone's illegitimate son. Featherstone, like the animal trainers, held out hopes of inherited money and land to his various family members in return for their obsequious attention to his needs. Bulstrode, whose secret Raffles holds, obtained his money unethically through Ladislav's grandparents. Having gone to work for Mr. Dunkirk (Ladislav's grandfather), he runs the pawn side of the business for him and marries Dunkirk's much older wife after her husband dies. He conceals the whereabouts of the Dunkirks' daughter, the rightful heir to the fortune he enjoys, which should have passed to Ladislav. This is the information in which Raffles traffics and earns his living. He has adapted his tactics to capitalize on the shady origins represented in these situations. Unfortunately, he has a genetic weakness, and that is alcoholism.⁵⁴

It is ironic that while the train is debated and feared for its expected transformation of Middlemarch, a single character, Raffles, is able to touch off a "train of causes" (587) that results in a scoundrel coming to light (Bulstrode), a couple finding their way to each other though at the sacrifice of material comforts (Dorothea and Ladislav), and another couple being sealed to a fate where one of the partners (Lydgate) relinquishes his desire to help the human race to satisfy the material wants of his wife.

All of this bears out Darwin's assertion that what may seem to be of "very trifling importance" could play a key role within natural selection (77). These events signal not only the complicated interconnections of chains of causes and effects, but also the role chance plays in human and nature's affairs. As Moxham suggests about the interplay of self and environment: ". . . in staging such struggles between perceptions reliant on inner promptings and those deriving from external influences, *Middlemarch* neither idealizes individualism, nor rejects communal values outright. Either way contingencies play rogue cards, and the sudden introduction of Joshua Riggs and Raffles exposes the vulnerability of all constructions, communal and personal" (181). Ermarth sees such chance encounters in *Middlemarch* as creating the same destabilizing effects as shifts in attention from one disposition to another, as when Bulstrode shifts from seeing his future life as "submerged in its evening sunshine" at Stone Court to the disruption of that vision caused by Raffles (123). She includes the train as among the intrusions on Middlemarchers' "awareness" and as part of Eliot's "continuous compounding of apparently extraneous matter": "Apparently extraneous metaphors to do with electric batteries or foreign wars get mixed into the language, always requiring a step back from the moment; and occasionally a completely foreign system of intelligibility, such as Railroad workers laying track (ch. 56), intrudes . . ." (124). Though the novel resists the "will to master narrative" to borrow David Parker's phrase, such intrusions invite the search for connections and explanations. Through such a search, we can connect Lyell's work with Darwin's and both with the railroad through Raffles and Eliot's description of him. We might then seek to connect those elements to Eliot's overall plan for the novel. Our desire to make connections, to overlay seeming disparate elements with a master

narrative, bears a relationship to Lydgate's and Casaubon's projects in Eliot's fiction as well as to Lyell's and Darwin's impetus to create a master narrative out of disparate elements from the evidence of geology and natural history. Another connection we are left to make is the connection between the railroad and the consumerism it fostered. As Gillian Beer argues is the case with so many other aspects of *Middlemarch*, Eliot's contemporary readers were expected to supply connections and understand contexts based on shared cultural experience. Looking back from the twenty-first century, we are left to understand that Eliot's generation knew implicitly the link between the train and consumerism.

The Railroad, Commodities, and Consumerism

The railroad, the icon of the Industrial Revolution and the conveyor of mass-produced goods and mover of the masses, represents one of the challenges to the sense of self in the nineteenth century. In *Middlemarch*, it exists as an imminent presence and as a force without origins—no railroad company is identified as being behind the efforts to create a line through the Midlands, the agents surveying the properties are faceless and nameless, and the future workers who will come to build it are already suspect and expected to remain disconnected from the community. Certainly, the railroad was a double-edged sword. For many it represented a better life for those in the country. But as Altick points out the benefits meant the loss of regional identities:

They [the railroads] and the cities they helped build meant the end of regional cultures and economies into which Britain had been divided so long as bad roads discouraged all but the most determined travel and the most essential communication. . . . Each section of the country had its own dialect, its own

mores, its own cultural heritage; each, furthermore, had been a relatively self-sufficient economic entity, consuming most of what it produced and having only a limited trade with the rest of the country. Within a generation, provincialism gave way to national cohesion. The commodities and services of any given area were integrated into a single large economy, with great gains in efficiency and cheapness. (79)

Machine manufacturing of goods preceded the railroad, but without the revolution in transportation that the railroad represented, a countrywide consumer-driven economy could not have taken hold. As Paul Lorenz states, “When the Liverpool-Manchester railway opened in 1830, the time necessary to transport goods between the two cities was reduced from 36 hours to one hour and 45 minutes” (21). On one hand, the railroad cut significantly the time it took for goods to get to markets beyond their site of production, and to many, both producers and consumers, this was seen as a benefit. On the other hand, Karl Marx, speaking of the classifications of commodities in the railway goods depots, sees a top-heavy result from this burgeoning capitalist system. Michael Freeman comments on the connection in Marx’s mind between the railroads and commodities, especially as the latter become subject to fetishism:

Britain’s railways in the Victorian era were embedded in the contemporary workings of capital. We need look no further than Karl Marx’s monumental work on capital, where it is made plain in his comments on the ‘general classification of goods’ of the Railway Clearing House. The classification for 1869 covered 28 pages and was marked ‘private and not for publication’. Under the letter ‘B’, it encompassed items from boilers,

bolts and bomb-shells to bonnets, boots, and books. This was part of what Marx termed the ‘fetishism’ of commodity, and [employing the phrase Eliot uses as the title of Casaubon’s work on mythology] ‘no one entity came so close to being the key to all the mythologies of Victorian life’. The commodity was ‘present everywhere, but fully concentrated nowhere’ (92).⁵⁵

Like their transporter, the railroad, commodities were “present everywhere and concentrated nowhere”; they were without origin and without clear destination, in circulation. With God as primogenitor challenged by science, commodities became, Thomas Richards suggests, the “prime mover of a variegated universe,” and so represented to Marx a theological problem (3). If as Crouzet claims, railroad stations became the new cathedrals of the nineteenth century (xiii), the Great Exhibition of 1851, known also as the Crystal Palace, became Mecca for the worshippers of those commodities transported by the train. Appropriately, train tracks led both to and through the massive iron and glass Crystal Palace exhibition hall. Special rail lines were set up to deliver spectators (the middle class being the strongest class represented) to the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, and once inside, they “followed the path of locomotives set on railroad tracks” (Richards 24), surveying the goods displayed, in Richards’ words, as in “a modern shopping mall” (4). The railway journey, Schivelbusch argues, was itself “a decisive mode of initiation of people into their new status within the system of commodities production: their status as object of focus whose point of origin remained out of view” (Trachtenberg xiv). Despite the fact that the Crystal Palace was a forum where proud manufacturers, guilds, industries, and nations had come to represent

their goods, nevertheless, Richards claims, “. . . the Exhibition made it extremely difficult to pinpoint the origins of individual objects” (68). The displays ultimately codified the “autonomy and ahistoricity of commodities” (68). George Eliot was among the millions who visited the Crystal Palace, as was Charles Darwin, and Richards makes a link between the sheer variety on display at the exhibit and the variety Darwin would register in the natural world: “In effect, though hardly by intuition, the Crystal Palace advanced a prescient vision of the evolutionary development of commodities. Under one roof, commodities appeared in the endless variety of forms that Darwin later saw in the natural world” (27).

Writing two decades after having seen the exhibit, Eliot set *Middlemarch* in the first half of the nineteenth century before the commodity craze took over. With the hindsight that she had in writing in the late 1860s, when the commodity was well on its way to becoming “the one subject of mass culture, the centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world” (Richards 1), she recognizes in the earlier period the building momentum toward consumerism and locates it in Rosamond. Prior to its use in powering trains, the steam engine had already been pressed into the service of mass manufacturing, the business with which Rosamond’s family is associated. In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond represents both ends of the spectrum—from manufacturing to consumerism. The daughter of a manufacturer, she represents the consumer culture and the loss of self that results when one defines oneself through commodities and the spectacle they and their worshippers become.

Many historians claim that the shifts in manufacturing and transportation that occurred during this period improved a number of aspects of British life. Certainly the

Industrial Revolution, as Roderick Floud shows in *The People and the British Economy 1830-1914*, bettered the material lives of many Victorians: “In 1914 the economy of the United Kingdom produced nearly seven times as many goods and services as it had done in 1830. During that time, the population doubled. As a result, the average amount produced, and then consumed or invested by a member of the UK population rose by nearly three and a half times. This means that, after taking account of inflation and deflation prices during the period, the average person—man, woman or child—was nearly three and half times better off in 1914 than in 1830” (4). With these changes in material circumstances and in the resulting reconfiguration of the class structures within society came the unrest that was to drive calls for reform off and on throughout the nineteenth century. That some dissatisfaction with the gaps between labor and manufacturer, labor and corporations, became violent was evident in the Chartist movement and other more radical efforts, their supporters gathering in large numbers, aided by their mass transportation via railways to sites of protest.⁵⁶ This social unrest was seen as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Harold Perkin suggests that prior to 1815, “class politics in the modern sense did not exist The Industrial Revolution was to change all this. In the large new towns the old society and its traditional social control by the landlord, parson and master broke down, and the middle and working classes, pressed together in large numbers, asserted their independence and hostility to the landed class and each other” (156). Eliot invokes such unrest when in *Middlemarch* Brooke cautions his potential constituents not to break machines in protest: “I’ve always gone a good deal into public questions—machinery, now, and machine-breaking—you’re many of you concerned with machinery, and I’ve been going into that lately. It won’t do,

you know, breaking machines: everything must go on—trade, manufactures, commerce, interchange of staples—that kind of thing—since Adam Smith, that must go on” (481). In his unfocused way, Brooke goes on to suggest that people must understand they may profit from mass manufacturing and expanded transportation of goods (481). The Industrial Revolution set off feelings of disconnection in the period, as Sir Walter Scott comments as early as 1820. He saw a decided contrast between the ways manufacturers in the days of water power took care of employees, who built villages around their source of work, and the “unhappy dislocation” brought about by new technologies, where ““the manufactures are transferred to great towns, where a man may assemble five hundred workmen one week and dismiss them the next, without having any further connection to them”” (157).

Though Eliot set *Middlemarch* during the early thrust of mass manufacturing, she focuses not on the industrial context nor on treatment of workers or worker unrest or even on the manufacturing of silk cloth by Mr. Vincy, which is alluded to only a few times. Instead, she traces the effects of the changing economy from feudalism to consumerism through Rosamond and her material desires. Rosamond, as Andrew Miller says in *Novels Behind Glass*, “is fully associated with commodified goods, and with dress in particular” (192). She is the daughter of a silk manufacturer, whose industry is implicated in the decline of the traditional means of producing textiles. In Gillian Beer’s discussion of absences in *Middlemarch*—absences which the novel’s contemporary readers would supply through their shared cultural experiences, further prompted by the advertisements inserted within the original editions—she includes the textile workers as an apparent absence. After showing that an ad for Judson’s Simple Dyes appeared in the original

copies of the novel, she asks if the industrial workers truly are “excluded from this work” as generally argued. She suggests otherwise:

But in the nearby villages are the handloom weavers and in Middlemarch itself the dyers: Mr. Vincy, mayor of Middlemarch (‘a very good fellow’) is also, as Mrs. Cadwallader says, ‘one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family looks so fair and sleek.’ The cloth these weavers produce is dyed by some new methods. And the new dyes rot the silks. (23)⁵⁷

The new dyes are made from manganese, mined in the Midlands in the 1820s and ’30s. Mining, of course, invokes the railway, which before its full-scale commitment to transporting manufactured goods, was first used in mining operations. By association, manganese mining is coupled with the railroad in the mind of Mrs. Waule. When speaking of her brother, Peter Featherstone who, along with Bulstrode, has made money from the mines, she says “Brother Peter, God forgive him, got money out of a company. . . . But that was for manganese. That wasn’t for railways to blow you to pieces right and left” (526). Mrs. Waule ignores the fact that rail cars were used to bring mined minerals to the surface. She justifies the industrial operation that may benefit her through her brother (manganese mining), but in the next progression of her thought, she casts the outgrowth of that operation—expanded rail service—in catastrophic terms and lends her voice to Cooper’s in trying to discredit the railroad.

These manganese dyes have been rotting the silks Vincy manufactures and so threaten his economic viability, which he, too, sees in catastrophic terms. Vincy, a voice of pessimism in the novel, links his personal fortunes to those of the country and, like

Brooke, comments on the attacks displaced workers have been making on manufacturing machinery. He is also pessimistic about his future son-in-law Lydgate's prospects: "I hope he knows I shan't give anything—with this disappointment about Fred [not getting the inheritance from Featherstone], and Parliament going to be dissolved, and machine-breaking everywhere, and an election coming on" (337). When Rosamond asks what this has to do with her wedding, her father responds, "We may all be ruined for what I know—the country's in a state! Some say it's the end of the world, and be hanged if I don't think it looks like it" (337). Like Mrs. Waule, Vincy's is a catastrophic view, and like her (and Brooke), he does not see himself implicated in the unrest that is occurring. His response to the proposed changes in government is akin to Waule's and the townspeople's response to the railroad.

That Vincy's daughter has fully adopted a life based on manufactured goods and the new consumerism is clear. She is introduced in the novel after the narrator offers a meditation on the shifting economic scene in England, as evidenced by the decrease in the importance of landholding and the increased worship of coins. After suggesting that "Old provincial society had its share of subtle movement," Eliot's narrator observes, "Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection—gradually, as the old stocking gave way to the savings-bank, and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct; while squires and baronets, and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship. Settlers, too, came from distant counties, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage in cunning" (90). What is absent in this history the narrator is recounting is the role of the railroad in fostering those new connections and

encouraging the new mobility and resettlement of people “from distant counties.” In remarking on the parallels between this history and one told by Herodotus, who, too, used a maiden as his starting point, the narrator introduces Rosamond as one “beguiled by attractive merchandise” (91). She is immediately aligned not only with rising middle class consumerism, but also spectacle and the loss of self that results, evident when she realizes Lydgate is looking at her: “Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own” (110). She, as a consumer and product of the manufacturing age, has come to “act” her own character. The spectacle of who she is has replaced some primary version. That she is visually oriented and outwardly directed is again alluded to when she thinks of Lydgate as the “ideal” man she has envisioned, “carrying a certain distinction congruous with good family, and possessing connections which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven” (112).

The organizers of the Crystal Palace Exhibition understood that sight was the key to unlocking the world of commodities and seducing consumers. They presented goods in a way that foregrounded sight and banished touch: “Illuminated by light, commodities appeared autonomous and untouchable. The organizers of the Exhibition had done their best to bring people as close as possible to things without actually allowing them to touch what they saw. . . . If, as Roland Barthes has remarked, touch is the most demystifying of the senses, and sight the most magical, then the Crystal Palace both extended the sway of sight over all commodities and signaled the rise of a new imagistic mode for representing them” (Richards 32). Schivelbusch argues that goods lost their sensual properties before

they became part of department-like displays—they were lost the minute they were transported by train: “With the spatial distance that the product covered on its way from its place of production to the market, it also lost its local identity, its spatial presence. Its concretely sensual properties, which were experienced at the place of production as a result of the labor process . . . appeared quite different in the distant market-place” (40-41). Rosamond is particularly vulnerable to the allure of such items, and though *Middlemarch* takes place two decades prior to the Exhibition, it was written after and shows that the groundwork for such predisposition to spectacle and commodities consumption is being laid in the early manufacturing and mass transport years of the 1830s. Items once within reach only of the upper classes were seen as necessities by the rising middle class. Eliot seems to suggest that, as the children of a third generation manufacturer (91), Rosamond and Fred have been sheltered from witnessing the connection between the making of goods and the profits one reaps, between the monetary rewards of labor and what those rewards can purchase. No longer made at home, goods were instead made off-site as shops stocked “a growing number of commodities which had formerly been produced in the household” (Altick 52).

The disconnections of goods from places of production via trains, and consumers from goods and their producers became further abstracted when at the exhibition nothing was even for sale. There were no price tags: “At one and the same time the Exhibition conjured up a vision of commodities and banished from sight the reality of their exchange. . . . In all fourteen acres there was not one price tag to be found. A price tag would have intervened with the information that the objects were beyond the reach of all but the very rich. In the absence of a price tag, the gaze of the beholder was directed

instead to the immediate sensual attributes of the commodity on display” (Richards 38). Fred and Rosamond are clearly under the lure of spectacle. Shortly after meeting Lydgate, Rosamond marries him in her mind, imagining their future home, the “costume and introductions of her wedded life” (112), and the manners of Lydgate’s upper class relatives that she “could appropriate.” None of this was to be tainted by the work that goes on behind the scenes: “There was nothing financial, still less sordid, in her previsions: she cared about what were considered refinements, and not about the money that was to pay for them” (112). There are, in other words, no price tags on Rosamond’s vision. While she is fantasizing about her material life with Lydgate, Fred is preoccupied by his lack of a gentleman’s birth and the leisure and land that accompany such a distinction: “To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer, and inevitable heir to nothing in particular— . . . certainly life was a poor business, when a spirited young fellow, with a good appetite for the best of everything, had so poor an outlook” (113). Fred, like his sister, fails to understand the connection between work and buying power. Disenchanted with the field of ministry for which he has been schooled, he sets his hopes on inheriting Uncle Featherstone’s estate and until then borrows money from Caleb Garth to pay debts secured against this future inheritance (102). Fred wants to be a country gentleman, but unfortunately, he has no means of supporting such a lifestyle. In yet another of the many instances of the role of chance in the novel, Fred’s chance encounter with the railroad clarifies his life’s path. Until he substitutes for Caleb’s assistant, injured by the farmers who are ready to fight the railroad agents with hayforks, Fred is at a loss as to what his vocation should be. The railroad becomes the catalyst for Fred’s revelation as Garth thinks about it: “and thus it happened that the infant struggles of the railway

system entered into the affairs of Caleb Garth, and determined the course of this history with regard to two persons who were dear to him” (525). Fred has his vocational revelation working alongside Garth as he surveys land to be sold to the railroad. With such an opening pronouncement, one would think Fred was to become a railway employee—as the railroads became major employers in the nineteenth century (Floud 6). Fred seems a prime candidate for one of the new railroad jobs, dissatisfied as he is with the old system that dictates he should go into the ministry. Again, serving as an example of the seeming nonsequiturs in the novel, Fred’s revelation in surveying land to sell to the railroad is not to go forward with the new industry, but to become an old school land manager, operating the Featherstone estate for Bulstrode, owning nothing but the furniture inside. He does, however, make a fair living from the land once he decides to work it rather than simply inherit it: “He became rather distinguished in his side of the country as a theoretic and practical farmer, and produced a work on the ‘Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-Feeding’” (793). This is not to suggest that the disconnection between hard work and profit was totally eradicated in him, as the narrator confesses, “I cannot say that he was never again misled by his hopefulness: the yield of crops or the profits of a cattle sale usually fell below his estimate; and he was always prone to believe that he could make money by the purchase of a horse” (794). Fred never became rich, but “gradually saved enough to become owner of the stock and furniture at Stone Court” (795). Though his vocation becomes clear to him while surveying land about to be sold to the railways, Fred does not join the modern world the railways represent. Instead, he reverts back to the vision he had of occupying his Uncle Featherstone’s land, though without resources, he manages it for its new owner, Bulstode.

Having been sheltered from the actual labor needed to produce goods, Vincy's children see only the end result: the goods of their desires and a lifestyle of spectacle. As Gordon Bigelow suggests, quoting John Dupré, “ ‘the desire to consume or to express one's individuality through consumption is not the same thing as the power to consume’ ” (8). The financial reality of the lifestyle to which Rosamond aspires simply has not occurred to her, for she “never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide” (176). She insists that Lydgate go into debt to provide for them in the style to which she has imagined. Kurt Heinzelman, in *The Economics of the Imagination*, faults Lydgate for his own ignorance concerning economics in the situation: “Lydgate, in an interlocking complex of ways, pays for his vast indifference to the knowledge which money represents. Married to a wife whose engrossing materialism he is never able to imagine, he ends up administering to sufferers of the gout, a disease of the rich” (21). Rosamond is all about spectacle, and as the episode in which Lydgate falls for a Parisian actress who has intentionally killed her husband on stage proves, he is susceptible to spectacle. In Rosamond, he falls for an actress of a different kind, as Andrew Miller comments, “Lydgate twice misunderstands the relation of theater and reality, and he will suffer again from his inability to read this relationship accurately when he meets Rosamond” (209).

From the beginning, Rosamond makes clear that she is more interested in the outer furnishings that come with married life than in the man she is marrying. Lydgate, “left an orphan” (134), is not searching for love, he is hoping to “work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery” (138), and he “was not going to have his vanities provided by contact with the showy worldly successes of

capital, but to live among people who would hold no rivalry with that pursuit of a great idea” (138). He sets out to dedicate himself to identifying the primitive human tissues, the origins of human biology, in a world increasingly given over to superficiality, spectacle, and commodities. Of course, as others have pointed out, most prominently Gilbert and Gubar, who call Rosamond a “brilliant strategist” (520) because she ends up getting what she wants, Rosamond was brought up to play the role she plays. She appreciates Lydgate as an “admirer,” and for him, she polishes the act she was taught to develop at Miss Lemon’s school (158). In a world increasingly focused on outward show, Rosamond knows her outer presentation is her greatest asset, and clothing—as it does in the new world of mass and class mobility—serves as her declaration of self. As John Mackenzie suggests in *The Victorian Vision*: “Appearances certainly mattered. . . . Style and presentation of clothing were badges of status, with cleaned, pressed linen an especially telling marker. . . . Indoors, presentation of self, of servants and style to guests might introduce a minefield of conflicting choices and signals. Furniture and décor were often supposed to mark distinctions between the solid middle classes and the *nouveaux riches*” (53).

While Gilbert and Gubar construe Rosamond as a savior (519-520), Andrew Miller more convincingly argues that through her Eliot is “devaluing feminine material culture” because it “opposes ‘responsible’ reason. Her discomfort with material culture arises from the ability, associated with the feminine, to operate beneath the notice of reason. While material culture can be associated with wider thoughts and cares, the connection is suspect. When Eliot does focus on material culture . . . her concern is . . . the alienation of people from the goods around them” (192). Miller shows through

Eliot's letters that she herself was impatient with matters of dress and attention to the details of home furnishings, feeling that "attention to material culture stagnates the mind" (189). Certainly Rosamond's attention to material culture seduces Lydgate into that world and stagnates his mind, leaving him feeling, that, though a commercial success once he leaves Middlemarch, he was "a failure" (795). Lydgate's and Rosamond's susceptibility to spectacle, both the spectacle that Rosamond is and the expected spectacle of their lives as a middle class couple, sends the couple into debt from which they cannot emerge until they sell off their furniture and move from their house.

Rosamond symbolizes the commodification of self spawned by the new consumerism. The product of an upbringing and culture that especially prizes spectacle in women, deters them from any meaningful work, and seduces them with a plethora of newly manufactured goods, advertised in the exploding number of magazines targeting the female audience⁵⁸—the distribution of all enabled by the railroad—Rosamond disconnects from her inward world. After Lydgate dies prematurely at the age of fifty, She marries an "elderly and wealthy physician" (796) and is content to make a "very pretty show with her daughters" (796). The new economic and industrial order is partly responsible for this sublimation of self. Bigelow comments on one of these dual forces: "The rise of economics [as opposed to political economics] relied on a broad redefinition of individual life in capitalist societies. This redefined individual is now what we would call a consumer" (74). Rosamond suffers from an identity crisis because she has been raised in a superficial world of manufacturing and consumerism, a world where labor and its products and products and their prices have been disconnected. She goes no deeper than the superficial requirements dictated by her middle class culture. As the engine for

the new economic order, the machine plays its role in disconnections from inner worlds. Thomas Carlyle served as the spokesman for this belief: “For man is not the creature and product of Mechanism; but, in a far truer sense, its creator and producer. . . . By our skill in Mechanism, it has come to pass, that in the management of external things we excel all other ages; while in whatever respects the pure moral nature, in true dignity of soul and character, we are perhaps inferior to most civilised ages. . . . The truth is men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe and hope, and only work in the visible” (74).

Deep Time, Perspective, and Reflections on “Railway”

Carlyle’s remark about the loss of belief in the Invisible suggests that he felt Victorians were looking to the visible world to discern and reflect their self-worth and self-meaning. The divine master narrative long relied upon to justify lives, with God as author—undermined by increasingly secular concerns prior to the nineteenth century—receives a decisive blow from the length of the earth’s history as theorized by Lyell and the long chain of evolution as described by Darwin. Though Lyell himself believed in a divine designer (*Principles* 438) and continued to insist that human history was special and somehow separate from the story told through the layers of rock (92-93) (bringing him into conflict with Darwin’s ultimate assertion that humans and animals evolved from a single progenitor), his codification of geological evidence undermined the biblical story of creation as well as cast further uncertainty on ultimate destinations after this earthly life. His argument on a uniformity of causes ran counter to the biblical accounts of the earth’s and human history, accounts that depended on catastrophes like the Flood to explain changes in earthly trajectories. Instead of catastrophic events, Lyell insists, the

earth's history told a tale of changes "brought about by the slow agency of existing causes" (16).

Middlemarch is a novel deeply engaged with issues that arise from the loss of traditional explanations for life's meaning, including the meaning of an individual life in a time of rapid and foundational changes, the frustration of desires to achieve major goals on a scale of deep time when constrained by the material realities of the present, and the realization that just as the prevailing master narrative (Biblical) could be overturned, so, too, could any that replaced it. In *Middlemarch*, despite ending with a chapter titled "Finale," which suggests that strands can be tidied up, Eliot undermines any final narrative by engaging in that final chapter as well as throughout *Middlemarch* with the idea that perspectives are subjective, perceptions are unreliable, and narratives are revisable. This is suggested most prominently through three key metaphors: the web, the pier glass, and the unturned stone. In "The Natural History of German Life," written prior to *Middlemarch*, Eliot offers yet another variation on the limitations of perspectives in the essay's opening meditation on what the word "railway" would conjure in the minds of two different men with different scopes of experience with railways. Her point in this meditation is that it is difficult to hold the broad and long view, which relies on imagination, concomitantly with the concrete and pragmatic view. When the metaphors of perspective in *Middlemarch* are read in terms of Eliot's comments on the word "railway" in "The Natural History of German Life," and these in turn are read in the context Lyell's and Darwin's own admissions of the limitations of their evidence and perspective, it becomes clear that Eliot believes it impossible to hold simultaneously the

long/broad and near/narrow perspectives, yet neither alone represents an accurate picture, and this has implications for her realist project.

In her accounting of absences in *Middlemarch*, Gillian Beer includes God and says, “Many of George Eliot’s contemporaries were perturbed by the work’s determined avoidance of transcendence. . . . In *Middlemarch*, answers or redress exist only in the present world, in interchange between human beings” (26-27). There are certainly a number of gestures toward religion in the novel—Dorothea would emulate St. Theresa; Casaubon, Farebrother, and Cadwallader are all ministers, yet there seems no deference to a higher power. Casaubon would elevate the intellect’s ability to unify the world’s mythologies (as if he needs to prove to himself that one God made them all), Farebrother’s passion lies in natural history and the specimens he collects, and Cadwallader is more of a social than a spiritual minister, feeding town gossip. The one character who claims to be devout is the scandalous banker and near murderer Bulstrode.⁵⁹ With the religious master narrative undermined, some Victorians, including Eliot and Lewes, looked to science to provide a substitute master narrative (the subject of George Levine’s most recent book *Realism, Ethics and Secularism*).⁶⁰ While Eliot was working on both *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, G. H. Lewes was working on his *Problems of Life and Mind* and asserting that “Science is penetrating everywhere, and slowly changing men’s conception of the world and of man’s destiny” (as qtd in Levine *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* 29-30).

Eliot’s deep interest in the emerging scientific and social theories of her time has been well documented and analyzed.⁶¹ Long before she started writing novels, she was fully engaged with Lyell’s theories, commenting on them in her journal as early as the

1830s (Smith 435). While a good deal of attention has been paid to the influence of Darwin's theories on Eliot's thought and narrative strategies, notably by George Levine, Gillian Beer, and Sally Shuttleworth, fewer critics have looked at the influence of Lyell's theories on her work, and when they have, it is not usually *Middlemarch* where they seek the influence, focusing instead on *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*.⁶² The fact that Eliot sets *Middlemarch* on the cusp of the codification of geological principles by Lyell as well as at the moment of the advent of the railway and writes a novel deeply engaged with mid-nineteenth-century events seen from a short-term historical perspective, while frequently reminding readers of longer time perspectives, suggests as much an engagement with Lyell as with Darwin. Like the other works of this study, *Middlemarch* seeks to understand the implications for Victorians of the concomitant new knowledge of deep time and an awareness that theirs was a time that seemed to be undergoing catastrophic transformation, symbolized by the railroad. For Eliot, this meant accepting relativity and the limitations of any one system of knowledge and any one perspective.

One manifestation that results when a long-held explanation of individual and human history is overturned (an explanation that sanctifies the value of both) in favor of theories that place the human on a timeline of millions of years, on an earth that holds evidence of the extinction of species, theories that do not assert discernible originating and terminating points is a preoccupation with origins. This is certainly a central concern in *Middlemarch*, visible in Casaubon's and Lydgate's searches⁶³ as well as in the many characters with unknown or shadowy origins: Bulstrode, whose unknown background causes locals to seek "to know who his father and grandfather were, observing that five and twenty years ago nobody had ever heard of a Bulstrode in Middlemarch" (116);

Lydgate, a man of “dimly known origins” (91), Ladislaw, who is unaware of his origins; and Dorothea and her sister who are orphans. Gilbert and Gubar see Lydgate’s and Casaubon’s obsession with origins as a sign of male aggression (509-510), and they further argue, “All of the professional men in Middlemarch seem caught in what Eliot shows to be the deathlessness of nonbeing Through these men, Eliot calls into question the possibility of such a stable origin, end, or identity, not only for these men and their projects, but also by extension, for her own text as well” (509). I would add that Dorothea, too, wants a comprehensive theory to give her life meaning. The narrator informs us, “. . . she yearned for [something] by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent; and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge?” (81). Gillian Beer makes the connection between Lyell’s theories and the uncertainty and instability Victorians were experiencing. She suggests that “The problem with a system of thought, which promises ‘no vestiges of a beginning . . . no prospect of an end’ . . . are being borne in on writers from the mid-nineteenth-century on” (*Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century* 145). The Romantic search for the “One Life,” she asserts, has been exchanged in the Victorian era for a “search for origins” (*Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century* 144). Even Lyell could not create a master picture from the massive amount of geological evidence available: “To assume that the evidence of the beginning or end of so vast a scheme lies within the reach of our philosophical inquiries, or even of our speculations, appears to us inconsistent with a just estimate of the relations which subsist between the finite powers of man and the attributes of the Infinite and Eternal Being” (438). Though he believed in a supreme creator, as a

scientist, he could not argue that he had evidence of creation. Rather, early in *Principles*, he reiterates James Hutton's assertion, quoted above by Beer, "I can find no traces of a beginning, no prospect of an end" (16).

Losing a sense of origins and destinations removes an important frame for life, but even the picture within that frame poses new challenges. Much like viewing an impressionistic painting, Eliot shows her awareness that one's perspective of life and the picture that emerges depends on the nearness or distance of the viewer. *Middlemarch* returns several times to the idea that records are imperfect, that our vision and our mind's capacity to understand is limited, and that perspective is all, yet perspective is itself always subjective. A shift in perspective means a shift in understanding. This Eliot illustrates with the pier glass parable:

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent—of

Miss Vincy, for example. (251).

Though the narrator directs our attention to Miss Vincy, in truth, the candle is “the egoism of any person now absent,” the egocentric vision of any perceiver. Though Comtean positivism would assert that there is a knowable world and that there is such a thing as scientific objectivity, Eliot makes clear all perception is skewed and imperfect. Even a targeted focus can be subject to the variants of situation and perspective. The narrator suggests, “In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up” (380).

The alternation within *Middlemarch* of telescopic and microscopic views of life, the many narrative strands that connect and disconnect, the seeming indeterminacy of her narrative—all are entangled within a web of a book that J. Hillis Miller suggests, “implicitly deconstructs . . . its own power to make an orderly narrative and the reader’s power to comprehend the novel integrally” (138).⁶⁴ In this, Eliot shares affinities with Lyell, who insisted that even his seemingly comprehensive work built on exhaustive evaluation of detailed evidence was only an “attempt” to explain the earth’s history. The mind, he suggested, much like *Middlemarch*’s narrator, reader, and, seemingly, its critics feel, cannot hold the whole story. Lyell articulates the overwhelming nature of trying to comprehend deep time:

The imagination was at first fatigued and overpowered by endeavouring to conceive the immensity of time required for the annihilation of whole continents by so insensible a process. Yet when the thoughts had wandered through these interminable periods, no resting place was

assigned in the remotest distance. . . . Such views of the immensity of past time . . . were too vast to awaken ideas of sublimity unmixed with a painful sense of our incapacity to conceive a plan of such infinite extent. Worlds are seen beyond worlds, immeasurably distant from each other, and beyond them all innumerable other systems are faintly traced on the confines of the visible universe. (16)

Just as Lyell seeks to give us a sense of how difficult it is to fathom the physical universe, so, too, does Eliot suggest that even narrating the stories of a select number of lives in a small town within a confined time period is an undertaking of vast scope. Her narrator ultimately insists that in the long narrative of *Middlemarch*, the tales told are only “the fragment of a life” and not the “sample of an even web” (793). The narrator’s task is a daunting one and involves spotlighting irrelevancies that may really be relevant and understanding that such an undertaking is always fraught with complications. After envying Fielding’s extensive amounts of time for “copious remarks and digressions,” Eliot’s narrator claims, “I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe” (133). But this particular web may not have been fully illuminated nor its strands clearly or completely followed or understood. We learn in the “Finale,” that “For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval” (793).⁶⁵ Setting a novel forty years prior to its actual narration does, of course,

offer some historical perspective, but the narrator insists that perspective is always limited, is always driven by egoism, and is subject to change over time.

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot adheres to both Lyell's and Darwin's assertion that the available record of evidence represents an extremely small portion of what has existed. We saw earlier that Lyell recognized the impossibility of any comprehensive view, and despite the reams of evidence he piles up, the subtitle of *Principles* is "An Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface by Reference to Causes Now in Operation." Darwin, too, sees the limitations of the evidence and of human vision and understanding: "It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; We see nothing of these changes in progress, until the hand of time has marked the long lapse of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long past geological ages, that we see that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were" (77). As would be expected in a novel informed by Lyell's and Darwin's work, Eliot infuses *Middlemarch* with an awareness of deep time as well as immediate time.

The preoccupation with time is driven by a central interrogation posed by the novel. It asks, what is the meaning of any one life within its own period and over generations: "Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa. . . . Many Thesas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched

with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept to oblivion” (1). The novel will go on to show, however, that one can never truly pronounce a life, a body of work, even a civilization obscure, oblivious, or dead. The evidence is incomplete and misleading, the story is always subject to revision, and the ending ever open. In the short term, Bulstrode never realizes his philanthropic aims; Lydgate fails to follow through on his research; Casaubon dies before his work is finished; Dorothea never succeeds in ministering to the poor; and Ladislav does not become a great poet or artist. Big dreams are not realized. However, one never really knows if some fragment left behind will lead to new or revised understandings down the road, just as Lydgate was poised to build on the work of Bichat. Before the rogues Rigg and Raffles are introduced, the narrator ruminates on this phenomenon:

As the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labours it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions, so a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stop-gap may at last be laid open under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe. To Uriel watching the progress of planetary history from the Sun, the one result would be just as much of a coincidence as the other. (393).

This passage suggests that all history, all narrative, all attempts to make a comprehensive statement remain open to radical revision, needing only a different perceiving mind to encounter the evidence. It also suggests that the seemingly insignificant and lowly can play key roles in the unfolding chain. The next passage in the chapter introduces this

idea: “Having made this rather lofty comparison I am less uneasy in calling attention to the existence of low people by whose interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined. It would be well, certainly, if we could help reduce their number, and something might perhaps be done by not lightly giving occasion to their existence” (393). It is then that Rigg is introduced. With the “frog-faced” Rigg and the “orang utang” Raffles touching off their domino effect and with the narrator showing lofty human dreams unrealized, Eliot is at her most Darwinian. Darwin writes:

Under nature, the slightest difference of structure or constitution may well turn the nicely-balanced scale in the struggle for life, and so be preserved. How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and how poor his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods. . . . Although natural selection can act only through and for the good of each being, yet characters and structures, which we are apt to consider as of very trifling importance, may thus be acted on. (77)

Humans make their lofty plans, but their “wishes and efforts” are “fleeting.” Their time is a mere speck on the evolutionary line. Meanwhile, like the character Raffles, “characters and structures” of “trifling importance” may prove key to some critical shift. Eliot’s narrator comments on just this phenomenon: “But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life to another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with

which we look at our un-introduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand” (90).

Eliot also plays with the potential misreading of even seemingly “objective” evidence as she describes outsiders’ views of Dorothea’s life. Simply examining the “facts” of her life would lead to wrong or incomplete conclusions:

Sir James never ceased to regard Dorothea’s second marriage as a mistake; and indeed this remained the tradition concerning it in Middlemarch, where she was spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin—young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born. Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been ‘a nice woman,’ else she would not have married either the one or the other. (798)

This synopsis of her life as viewed by outsiders negates all of the inner turmoil she went through in deciding her marriage partners as well the fact that Ladislaw actually would have had property had Bulstrode not hidden his existence from his grandmother. A comment that narrator makes about Lydgate applies to all characters, all lives, all evidence: “. . . a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with . . . and yet remain virtually unknown—known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbours’ false suppositions” (134).

In Eliot’s suggestion that objective evidence can be incomplete and grossly misleading, she is staying true to Lyell and Darwin who as well admitted as much about

the speculation on the earth's evidence. Lyell writes, "When the unlooked for association of . . . rare phenomena is witnessed in the present course of nature, it scarcely ever fails to excite a suspicion of the preternatural in those minds which are not firmly convinced of the uniform agency of secondary causes It is, therefore, not surprising that we imperfectly estimate the result of operations invisible to us; and that, when analogous results of some former epoch are presented to our inspection, we cannot recognize the analogy" (32). Darwin, summarizing Lyell's work, too, sees that the big picture of geology is flawed, but the focused vision too is subject to its own distortion. He says, "From the foregoing considerations it cannot be doubted that the geological record, viewed as a whole, is extremely imperfect; but if we confine our attention to any one formation, it becomes more difficult to understand" (236). In other words, the record of history—like the geological record—is as, Darwin calls it, "intermittent" and again, the picture, whether seen through the long view or the close-up is imperfect and can lead to false conclusions. While Darwin and Lyell both suspect a "grand system," their words betray the revisability of their own theories. Eliot comments on the limitations of Lyell's work, recognizing its indeterminacy and revisability. In his introduction to Lyell's *Principles*, James Secord writes: "George Eliot, who drew on *Principles* in her novels, wondered in a late notebook whether Lyellian geology really could serve as a key to 'the interpretation of man's past life on earth'. Was there, she wrote, 'something incalculable by us from the data of our present experience? Even within comparatively recent times & in kindred communities, how many conceptions & fashions of life have existed to which our understanding & sympathy has not clue!" (xxxix). Like the parable of the kicked about stone, the message is that at a different time, with a different perceiver, seen

from a different slant of light or through a different frame for the web, the story shifts. With a good portion of the record missing, with the evidence having been mis-read by earlier scientists, the implication is that it is still potentially mis-readable.

The frustrations that Eliot, as well as Lyell and Darwin, reveals in her acknowledgement of the incomplete, misreadable, and imperfect record, and the impossibility of discerning the whole of the big picture yet knowing the limitations of a narrow focus bear kinship with Eliot's opening meditation on the word "railways" in "The Natural History of German Life." In general, the train not only caused Victorians to "perceive" that time had sped up, it also invited them to reflect on perspective, whether through absorbing the new panoramics or through experiencing the fleeting sensations of sequential yet fragmented blocks of landscape. Eliot used the new technology to reflect on perspectives afforded by broad knowledge backed by few specifics and specific knowledge without the broad perspective:

The word railways, for example, will probably call up in the mind of a man who is not highly locomotive, the image either of a 'Bradshaw,' or of the station with which he is most familiar, or of an indefinite length of tram-road; he will alternate between these three images, which represent his stock of concrete acquaintance with railways. But suppose a man to have had successively the experience of a 'navvy,' an engineer, a traveller, a railway director and shareholder . . . and it is probable that the range of images which would by turns present themselves to his mind at the mention of the word 'railways,' would include all the essential facts in

the existence and relations of the thing. Now it is possible for the first-mentioned personage to entertain very expanded views as to the multiplication of railways in the abstract, and their ultimate function in civilization. He may talk of a vast net-work of railways stretching over the globe, of future 'lines' in Madagascar, and elegant refreshment-rooms in the Sandwich Islands, with none the less glibness because his distinct conceptions on the subject do not extend beyond his one station and his indefinite length of tram-road. But it is evident that if we want a railway to be made, or its affairs to be managed, this man of wide views and narrow observation will not serve our purpose. (1)

Eliot suggests that a man with limited concrete experience is able to "entertain very expanded views," able to imagine and even theorize possibilities from very limited evidence, even to multiply railroads in the abstract, imagining a vast network of railways stretching across the globe. This is not unlike the work of both Lyell and Darwin as they themselves represent it. They offer a picture of deep time, of a long chain of causes and effects, based on very limited evidence. They envision a geological record of millions of years, suspecting that untold numbers of species have come and gone, and basing their expanded vision on a very small percentage of examples, this despite the exhaustive evidence they present. On the other hand, the man with varied, immediate first-hand experience would think of "all the essential facts" of railways, and this view has its pragmatic applications.

The two types of mind represented in this railway passage are echoed in Chapter 2 in *Middlemarch*, which opens with the contrast between Sancho's Lockean vision and

Don Quixote's Romantic version of reality: "Seest thou not yon cavalier who cometh toward us on a dapple-grey steed, and weareth a golden helmet?" "What I see," answered Sancho, 'is nothing but a man on a grey ass like my own who carries something shiny on his head.' "Just so," answered Don Quixote: 'and that resplendent object is the helmet of Mambrino'" (12). These two mindsets have their parallel in those of the scientist and the novelist, who, Gillian Beer suggests, are alike. Eliot "emphasizes the congruity between all the various processes of the imagination: the novelist's and the scientist's enterprise is fired by the same prescience, the same willingness to explore the significance even of that which can be registered neither by instruments nor by the unaided senses; the same willingness to use and to outgo evidence" (141). To gain the broader view, whether in a fictional or scientific narrative, requires an imaginative leap. In "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot suggests that the man who imagines the big picture is not the pragmatic man to get on with building and managing in the real world, Caleb represents the latter, adapting to the concrete realities of the material world, including accepting the railways. Dorothea represents the former. Her imagined role of saint, minister to the poor, translator for a great mind, cottage community architect, must instead give way to the day-to-day management of life with a poor husband and children. But, linked with this reality is the other reality Darwin defines and the pragmatic railway builder creates—small, concrete acts can shift the whole trajectory.

If critics find *Middlemarch* indeterminate, it is because without the master narrative provided by religion and with the incompleteness of the scientific record and the possible revisability of both, Eliot lives in a world without final meanings. Again, the problem is determining what will or will not be relevant over deep time. It is with this

thought that Eliot closes *Middlemarch*. Rosamond achieves her goals in the immediate present. After Lydgate dies, she marries a wealthy doctor, lives in London, and parades as a spectacle with her daughters. As Karen Chase suggests, Rosamond is “frighteningly consistent” (7). Dorothea, on the other hand, does not achieve renown as a modern day Theresa in her life. We are told, however, “Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth” (799). The effects of Dorothea’s acts were “incalculably diffusive” (799). The word “incalculably” is critical. Reading the evidence in the immediate present leads to a concrete yet limited and possibly misguided understanding of reality. In the longer term, a life can continue to have an effect, but being “diffusive,” it is difficult to trace, though it may in some way contribute to the bigger picture, the greater narrative. The thought is overwhelming. Even full attention to the present material reality would be overwhelming Eliot’s narrator suggests. Out of self-protection, we “walk about well wadded with stupidity” to protect ourselves from overload: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (185).

Conclusion

Middlemarch, like *Walden* and *Dombey and Son*, is a novel that navigates the emergent understanding of deep time, and in Eliot’s case, Darwin’s theories of evolution, and seemingly radical shifts happening during a century believed to have been the boundary line between a past forever lost and a radically different present, with the railroad serving as the symbolic line of division. While throughout the novel Eliot makes

references to deep time perspectives, her inclusion of the seemingly disconnected episode concerning the train's imminent passage through the town of Middlemarch makes use of the century's icon of dramatic transformation: the railroad. William Thackeray comments on the historical demarcation the train represented: "Your railroad starts the new era and we of a certain age belong to the new time and the old We elderly people have lived in a praerailroad world, which has passed into limbo and vanished from under us. I tell you it was firm under our feet once, and not long ago. They have raised those railroad embankments up, and shut off the old world that was behind them. Climb up that bank on which the irons are laid, and look to the other side—it is gone" (qtd. in Altick *Victorian People and Ideas* 75). Ermarth asks what the railroad has to do with the other strands of the novel. To answer that, I would say that the railroad in *Middlemarch* serves several functions. It is one of many disruptive forces that will penetrate Middlemarch and shift its course economically. It exposes the narrow mindedness of the countryside residents, a collective narrow mindedness, which, while it will not have the power to stop the railway, will have an impact on the lives of several characters. It is also implicated in the importance of perspectives to understanding, both in the short and long terms.

An important question that arises from Eliot's setting *Middlemarch* when Lyell's theories are being published, when the railroad is on the horizon, and Reform movements are afoot, is, given her own forty-year perspective on all three, whether these represent real progress in human affairs. In other words, in *Middlemarch* does Eliot subscribe to notions of progress—material, social, and biological? Many Victorians prided themselves on the belief that theirs was a progressive age, and they saw machines as an emblem of

that progress (Altick 109). The railroad, in particular, was heralded as the icon of that progress (Tractenberg xiii). It was seen by some Victorians as the “great connector” and “great liberator,” suggests Richard Brown: “It symbolized the ‘spirit of the age’ in a way that no other development did . . . It made possible the development of an integrated and national economic system where canals and turnpikes had not. Railways brought people closer together by cutting down the time spent traveling, broke down parochialism and regionalism and made the products of economic change more readily available” (227). As we have seen, to Eliot, the railroad may have signaled the end of the unfair system of feudalism and helped usher in the new economic order, but that order too was problematic as it led to the consumerism and subscription to spectacle exemplified by Rosamond.

Critics are far from unanimous in discerning whether Eliot believed that society was progressing or not. Sally Shuttleworth, Jeffrey Moxham, Gillian Beer, Frederick Karl, and Jonathan Smith are among those who suggest that Eliot remains skeptical about the possibility of individual and societal progress.⁶⁶ In *Middlemarch*, the lowly Rigg and Raffles have an immediate impact; meanwhile the characters with lofty goals must seriously readjust their visions and recalibrate the scale on which they weigh their self-worth. The narrator’s assessment of Lydgate’s situation speaks for many: “There was the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him, while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears, and vulgar anxieties for events that may allay such fears” (616). While the society around them seems to be experiencing material progress, especially through the expansion of cheap transportation and through increased availability of goods—a boon to the newly

born consumers like Rosamond—those who might have represented progress, Lydgate in science, Dorothea in humanitarian efforts, and Casuabon in metaphysical realms, are thwarted in their immediate impact. However, the final result of any effort, any life is impossible to determine. The long-term effects of any force, like the railroad, as of any person, are indiscernible. Like the shift in light that exposes scratches on the pier glass, and like that uneven web, it appears that to Eliot, industrial inventions, possibly along with new scientific theories, represent shifts of focus rather than marks of progress.

Chapter 4

THE RAILROAD IN *SISTER CARRIE*:

CONSUMERISM IN CHICAGO, SPECTACLE IN NEW YORK

Introduction

Written at the end of the century often labeled the “railway age,” *Sister Carrie* realizes many of the fears Thoreau expressed in *Walden* about the new technology. Dreiser is the only author of this study not to have been born prior to the arrival of the railroad. Born in 1871, he entered a world in which thousands of miles of railroad tracks had already been laid, and the East and West coasts of the United States had already been connected by the transcontinental railroad (1869). When Dreiser published *Sister Carrie* in 1900, the tide was ready to turn—the next generation of technology—the automobile

and the airplane—would emerge. The story of *Sister Carrie*'s beginning is well known: Urged to write a novel by a friend, Dreiser conjured an image of a woman, Sister Carrie, aboard a train, and spun his tale by asking himself questions about her (Moers 73). In imagining a life for Carrie, though, he mostly succeeds in creating a portrait of a culture obsessed with consumerism and spectacle, its next phase, and through the journeys Carrie takes with Drouet and Hurstwood, he links these two with the railroad. Though critics of the novel at the time of its publication were scandalized by his portrait of a woman who lives with a man without being married and then goes on to marry a man who is already married without being sufficiently punished for her transgressions, the pervasive consumer culture he constructs seemed a secondary concern, if it was addressed at all. Having been born at the time that the railroad was reaching its apogee, Dreiser lacks the perspective that Thoreau, Dickens, and Eliot bring to bear on the transformations the railroad wrought. Rather than being a subject of fascination, speculation, and fear, the railroad for Dreiser was a fact of existence. Though he does not meditate on the meaning of the railroad for his time, he certainly shows its full penetration of life by the end of the nineteenth century.

In *Walden*, Thoreau expresses concerns that the nation will, following the railroad's horizontal tracks, focus on the superficial, evidenced by a devotion to consumerism. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser shows that consumerism has become all consuming. Carrie's first work experience in Chicago reveals that those producing the goods cannot afford to buy them. Drouet initiates Carrie into the world of commodities, to be followed by Hurstwood, who conveys her to the world of spectacle, the next level of consumerism according to Guy Debord: "The real consumer thus becomes a

consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form” (32). Thoreau sees as well in his time that the railroad is already causing people to live according to the railroad’s pace, feeling restless and pressured to hurry. In *Sister Carrie*, the main characters are compulsively restless. If they are not moving from place to place or walking the streets, they are rocking back and forth in a chair. Further, Thoreau feared that people would lose touch with their inner lives and higher purposes in a world of mass transit and a world focused always on acquiring more. Dreiser’s characters are manifestations of that fear. More than unwilling to be introspective, they are unable to be. When Hurstwood realizes that he has made a mistake in running away to New York where his life falls apart, the narrator tells us, “Not trained to reason or introspect himself, he could not analyze the change that was taking place in his mind” (305). When Carrie, in one of her few moments of self-reflection, is reviewing her treatment of Drouet and her coercion by Hurstwood, the narrator says, “There was something cruel somewhere, and not being able to track it mentally to its logical lair, she concluded with feeling that he [Drouet] would never understand what Hurstwood had done” (402). Carrie and Hurstwood are both unable to follow through on thoughts that might give them insight into their deep dissatisfaction with others and ultimately with themselves.

Thoreau, too, feared wide-ranging disconnections in a world where trains carried cargo and people from one environment to another. People would lose touch with where they lived and what their own surroundings naturally offered, losing their self-reliance in the process as they became dependent on goods shipped from other places. Producers and consumers would be divorced, and goods would become, as Thoreau labeled them,

“floating merchandise.” As a further result, people would be at the mercy of exploitative markets whose fads and fluctuations were impossible to predict. Dreiser shows in *Sister Carrie* that this has indeed become the case. Carrie desires things not for any inherent properties they might have but because she has become beguiled, by newspaper ads, drummers, sales clerks, and displays, to desire things simply because they exist. Though she spends a short time working in a shoe factory, when she no longer has to work and she has Drouet’s money in hand, she forgets her connection to being an underpaid producer and becomes only a consumer.

Carrie’s movement from the small city of Columbia, Wisconsin, where her father was a flour miller, to the industrial city of Chicago symbolizes the country’s shift in the nineteenth century from its early agrarian roots to its rise as an industrial power. As Schivelbusch says, “Since American history really began with the industrial revolution (all else being colonial pre-history), that revolution is a constituent part of American national and cultural identity to a far greater degree than it is in Europe” (91). What industrialism—mass manufacturing and mass transportation—creates is expanded consumerism. As a greater variety and excess goods are produced, larger venues for their sales are needed, leading to the advent of department stores, and the railroad prepared the way. In addition to providing easier access to cities, trains helped future department store shoppers to develop the panoramic vision necessary to scan vast floors of merchandise. The Crystal Palace Exhibit of 1851, reached by special rail lines, and with its exhibits accessed via rail lines set up within the Palace, prefigures the department store. In fact, the final thesis of Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey* is that the railroad ultimately leads to the department store, and that without the circulation of traffic that the railroad

promoted, the department store could not have come into being. Both the train ride and the department store give rise to panoramic vision, a required trait needed to operate in a world where goods, like landscapes, need to be scanned:⁶⁷

It is perception based on a specific developmental stage of the circulation of commodities, with corresponding specific stages of technology in general, traffic technology in particular, retail merchandising, etc.

Panoramic perception of objects, panoramic ways of relating to objects, made their appearance in connection with, and based upon, the accelerated circulation of commodities—as distinct from the traditional mode of perception, which, being still attuned to a prior development stage of circulation, found it difficult to deal with the now accelerated objects.

(191-192)

While Dreiser set *Sister Carrie* in Chicago, having grown up outside the city and having moved there himself, Chicago, as well, represents a city whose entire growth was fueled by the railroad, and though not technically the first city to have a department store, it is the city whose identity at the end of the nineteenth century was inextricably linked to its flagship department stores, including Marshall Field's and Sears, Roebuck and Co.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser creates a world of characters obsessively devoted to merchandise—especially clothes—as well as to spectacle, and to movement, and all are linked with the railroad. Like the three scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*, which Dreiser had read and written about just prior to writing *Sister Carrie* (Loving 138), Dreiser uses the railroad as the platform on which he builds his novel and as the site for three fateful encounters. The novel opens with Carrie being seduced not only into the

status of a sexually “fallen” woman by Drouet, the traveling salesman, but into the world of covetousness, wanting what everyone else has. She has a moment of awareness on that ride when she realizes that she could return home, but she does not. A short while later, when Drouet is willing to give her all the things she desires if she moves in with him, she again has a moment of hesitation, and again goes forward. The second major transition for her occurs on a train with Hurstwood, when he tricks her into staying with him, using the seduction of spectacle and sights of Montreal and New York City to keep her on board with him. This is a moment of crisis for her. She could get off at the next station and return, but the train is restless to move on, and so she does. The third instance occurs when Hurstwood, his life of ease and spectacle having become one of harsh realities, takes a job as a scab during a railway strike. His violent encounter on the rails finally defeats him and leads to Carrie’s desertion of him and eventually to his destitution and demise. Physically beaten and morally degraded, he joins the ranks of the homeless and hungry, eventually annihilating himself and being buried as a nameless body in Potter’s Field on Staten Island.

The railroad in *Sister Carrie* represents not only a structural element of the plot, it also symbolizes the metonymic line of evolution and economic determinism. The mechanical and economic forces which gave rise to the railroad—the employment of the steam engine in factories to mass-produce goods, which in turn necessitated an efficient distribution network—lead right back to the goods, now completely displaced and displayed on department store shelves and delivered there by railroad. This circularity parallels Debord’s analysis of consumers and spectacle. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser reveals, unwittingly or not, that the train functions according to deterministic principles—the

onward propulsion of causes and effects—but with a cyclical element as well, cycles being a component of Lyell’s theories (on which Darwin based his work) and of Spencer’s who built on Darwin’s work. Whether these cycles spiral upward in a progressive movement as Spencer suggests (and Dreiser was a proclaimed believer in Spencer’s *First Principles*) is seemingly contradicted in this novel. Hurstwood devolves, Drouet remains consistent, and Carrie is caught in an endless cycle of wanting, getting, and wanting more. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser suggests he is representing characters at a certain moment of evolution, out of touch with instincts, but not yet at the stage where higher reason asserts itself. His characters show themselves to be not so much biologically determined—though one could argue that Drouet’s constant chasing of females and flaunting of his plumage in the form of his clothes and Hurstwood’s desire for Carrie represent biological determinism—as economically determined. This determinism does not manifest in its most basic form—economic circumstances limiting life choices—but as forces that prevail in the consumer level of culture. A cause and effect chain is made up of mass-produced merchandise leading to increased desire for that merchandise spawned by advertising and display. The ceaseless consumerism that results leads not to satisfaction but further and further along a line where the images of what the goods represent totally overshadow any inherent value in the things themselves. That humans fall prey to this line of determinism inherent is manifested in Carrie, who over the course of the novel loses connection with her origins and loses her humanity as she gives herself over first to commodity and then to commodification. Like the metonymic line of Darwinian determinism, the train carries her along this track.

The railway and its related industries are everywhere present in *Sister Carrie*, yet despite its deep infiltration of the novel, critics either ignore or gloss over the role of the train, their attention more focused on plotting Spencer's influence on Dreiser's naturalism or seeking the sources of Carrie's insatiable desire. When mentioned, the railroad receives only cursory comments, as when Philip Fisher says that of all of the images of motion in *Sister Carrie*, "the most profound are not the horizontal motions of train rides, carriage excursions, trips to Europe, and walks on the Bowery, but instead the tragic and vertical motions of rising and falling" (260). Fisher then enumerates the appearances of the train in Dreiser's novel, along with other modes of transportation and says simply of them, "Travels are proportional to wealth" (260). In *The City in Literature*, Charles Lehan, too, lists the appearances of the train, stating, "All of the major characters in *Sister Carrie* come to the city, usually on a train. The city, which has become more and more like a machine, is even accessed by one: this blurs where the machine begins and ends in the industrial city. . . . In the tradition of the Balzac novel, the city reaches out its iron rails and entices the pilgrim to a realm of desire that only it can offer and probably never fulfill" (201). Though Lehan hints at the connection Dreiser makes between the railroad and consumerism, this connection warrants more detailed analysis.

While in *Sister Carrie* Dreiser shows the complicity of the railroad in the rise of consumerism, exemplified through its links with carrying merchandise, transporting its sellers, and leading to cities and the department stores they fostered, in an essay he wrote for *Harpers*, published the same year as *Sister Carrie*, he counters accusations that suggest railroad corporations are "soulless," entities. With these two very different characterizations of the railroad, one dramatized and one theorized, Dreiser represents

another example of the complicated reactions that existed toward the railroad in the nineteenth century. In “The Railroad and the People,” he praises these corporations and their agents for educating populations along their routes, helping them to be more productive farmers and more effective merchants. What Dreiser leaves unaddressed is that in encouraging these farmers and merchants to be more efficient and produce surplus, these same railroad companies make them more dependent on trains to ship the excess goods far distances to find markets. Dreiser sees the situation as mutually beneficial and claims that no corporation is “soulless” that “seek[s] to educate and make prosperous the public in order that they in turn may be prosperous No corporation is soulless, whatever else may be thought of it, which helps all others in helping themselves” (479). In the essay Dreiser extols the virtues of the railroad companies and the consumerism they encourage, but when this position is compared to what he shows in *Sister Carrie*, an ambivalence of which he was possibly unaware becomes clear. The world he creates in *Sister Carrie*, a world structured and infiltrated by the railroad, is a world of shallow traveling salesmen, endless shopping, shady resort managers, exploited factory and railway workers, and superficial, soulless existence. By the time Carrie is called a “pilgrim” in the title of chapter 28, the novel has already fulfilled the vision Hawthorne created in “The Celestial Rail-road.”⁶⁸ These pilgrims are not following a strenuous moral route of self-abnegation and spiritual purification; they are riding the rails to bazaars of endless shopping. Like Hawthorne’s pilgrims, who do not need to carry their “enormous burthens” on their train ride to Vanity Fair, (as they “were all snugly deposited in the baggage car” (810)), Carrie rides the rails first to Chicago, the new mecca of shopping, with very little in the way of luggage, and then to a mecca of

spectacle, New York, carrying “not an earthly thing” with her. Hurstwood, not having planned their escape well, likewise has no trunk. While the hellish end for Hawthorne’s narrating pilgrim is a cruise aboard a steamship on the river of death, for Hurstwood it is a gas oven in a homeless shelter, and for Carrie it is living with a deep dissatisfaction she cannot understand or and therefore cannot remedy.

The Track to Consumerism: Drouet and Destination Chicago

The first part of *Sister Carrie* represents the induction of the individual (Carrie) into consumerist society, initiated by Drouet and conducted along the rail lines leading to Chicago, the city that grew up with the railroad and the city synonymous with the department store.⁶⁹ *Sister Carrie* opens with the elements that will constitute the major forces of the novel: “When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister’s address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money” (7). In this deceptively simple description lies the core of the novel’s matter. It is clear in this passage that Carrie will soon become dissatisfied with her accessories: her trunk is “small,” her lunch is “small,” her satchel “cheap imitation alligator skin.” She will also soon enough relinquish her name—Caroline Meeber—leaving it along with her past behind and becoming in succession Sister Carrie, Mrs. Drouet, Carrie Madenda, Mrs. Murdock, Mrs. Wheeler, and back to Carrie Madenda, each identity adopted for her current situation and easily shed like the clothes she frequently changes. Her notions of herself are no more stable than the mobile world in which she moves. The changes she goes through—from farm girl to sister to Drouet’s mistress and then to Hurstwood’s, and

her rise as an actress—correspond to the rising levels of consumerism and spectacle to which she is ascending. Moreover, they signify the disconnections from self in a world of mass culture and easy mobility, both fostered by the train.

Her ticket becomes the motif of her life, each man, each train ride, a ticket to greater material gain—but ultimately, like a ticket, any satisfaction from material goods is ephemeral. That her sister's address is written on a scrap of paper signifies as well the ephemerality of family connections and of home to Carrie. As she thinks of the home she is leaving behind, she suffers a “touch of regret,” though it is not, we are told, for what she is giving up. She does exhibit “A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review” (7). Then, employing the metaphor Thoreau allies with the train, the Atropos—or the fate cutting the cloth—the narrator says, “and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken”(7). Though she knows Columbia City was “only a little way off” (14), and thanks to train travel, “What pray, is a few hours—a few hundred miles?” (1), the threads to her past are “irretrievably broken.” Carrie is bound lightly to her girlhood, but we will learn that “light” connections are all she is capable of and all that are encouraged in worlds entered and departed by trains, which themselves have little connection to the stations where they briefly stop or the landscapes outside their cars' windows (Carrie thinks of those landscapes as “flying scenery” 206). Over the five or so years represented in the novel, she will briefly remember her father at one point, and her sister will dream of her when she has left her home (Carrie's departure conveyed through a note, another scrap of paper). Movements through the landscape become the pattern of

Carrie's life, and with a "puff, a clang, and a clatter of rails"(14) this passing scenery is gone. She leaves her home, her sister's home, her home with Drouet, her home with Hurstwood, her first apartment with her friend Lola, unable to establish a lasting connection to any one place or person. The novel ends with Carrie at the Waldorf Hotel, another "temporary" home.

Carrie is going to the big city, but she seems not to have dreams. We are never told her motivations, though we can guess they are similar to those of Carl Sandburg's "Mamie," whose life trajectory and relentless search for the next thing parallels Carrie's, and whose journey is also intimately linked to the railroad:

Mamie beat her head against the bars of a little Indiana town
and dreamed of romance and big things off
somewhere the way the railroad trains all ran.

She could see the smoke of the engines get lost down
where the streaks of steel flashed in the sun and
when the newspapers came in on the morning mail

she knew there was a big Chicago far off, where all the trains ran. (1-7)

Mamie will find a "basement" job in a department store, and like Carrie, wonder if "there is a bigger place / the railroads run to from Chicago" (17-18) where she can find the "romance / and big things / and real dreams / that never go smash" (20-23). What Carrie dreams of in going to the city is not clear because it is not really relevant. She is "venturing to reconnoiter the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy" (8). The only concrete goal we are told she has is "to gain in material things" (8). Her dream is the consumer's dream.

Carrie is cast as the potential consumer of material things from the book's beginning, and appropriately the first man she meets is Drouet, a traveling salesman who represents a firm that sells goods to department stores and whose territories are accessed by train: "Here was a type of the traveling canvasser for a manufacturing house—a class which at that time was first being dubbed by the slang of the day 'drummers.' He came within the meaning of a still newer term, which had sprung into general use among Americans in 1880, and which concisely expressed the thought of one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women—a 'masher' (9). As Charles Lewis notes, as a salesman and a womanizer, Drouet's "marketplace is . . . every place" (128). Moreover, he is "as deluded by fine clothes as any silly-headed girl" (64). Just as the trains he rides for a living engender disconnections—from places, from landscapes—Drouet is first represented as a disembodied voice: "'That,' said a voice in her ear, 'is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin'" (8).⁷⁰ His disembodied voice prefigures the disembodied voices of the merchandise that will soon call to Carrie from the department store display cases: "Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate!" (99). So, too, lace collars and the leather of the soft new shoes (99) spoke to her, and unlike the voice of her "average little conscience," which was silenced in her mind by the voice of "want" (92), she was unable to quiet the seductive voices of pretty things.

Though Carrie knows she is supposed to "forestall and deny" Drouet's familiarity with her on the train, his "daring and magnetism," and his clothes override her better

sense. Upon seeing Drouet, Carrie is immediately aware of his dress (with no other compass to navigate this new world she is entering, she will judge everyone by their dress). Drouet's suit "was of a striped and crossed pattern of brown wool, new at that time, but since become familiar as a business suit" (9). His vest, cufflinks, rings, gold watch chain, shoes, and gray fedora are all catch her attention. Just as Thoreau and Poe predicted fifty years earlier, clothing becomes the means of identification in the world of mass transit. Thorstein Veblen comments on the sociology behind this. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), he remarks on the difference between being in a small community or social group in which "the individual is required to adapt himself in respect of reputability . . . within his sphere of personal acquaintance and neighbourhood gossip"(86) and being an individual in a mass of people: "The means of communication and the mobility of the population now expose the individual to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging his reputability than the display of goods (and perhaps of breeding) which he is able to make while he is under their direct observation" (86).⁷¹

Dreiser construes Drouet's outer show in a way that evokes the male of various bird or animal species, which have only a brief chance to attract and keep the attention of a potential mate. In the world Dreiser is creating, however, the couplings are biologically sterile, and the idea of the chase rather than the catch has become the goal: "There is an indescribable faint line in the matter of man's apparel which somehow divides for [a woman] those who are worth glancing at and those who are not. Once an individual has passed this faint line on the way downward he will get no glance from her" (10). The effect of his wardrobe on Carrie is to make her self-conscious of her own: "She became

conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress, with its black cotton tape trimmings, now seemed to her shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes” (11). Though Drouet is dressed to impress and preys upon innocent women on trains as well as in department stores, the narrator assures us he is not a villain. Drouet is governed by an inborn drive to attract women: “He loved to make advances to women, to have them succumb to his charms not because he was a cold-blooded, dark, scheming villain, but because his inborn desire urged him to that as a chief delight” (64). His “act,” however, is carefully rehearsed for the ever new situations he enters: “Upon entering a parlor car, for instance, he would select a chair next to the most promising bit of femininity and soon inquire if she cared to have the shade lowered. Before the train cleared the yards he would have the porter bring her a footstool. At the next lull in his conversational progress he would find her something to read, and from then on, by dint of compliment gently insinuated, personal narrative, exaggeration and service, he would win her tolerance, and, mayhap, regard” (10). This act aboard the train has its parallel in the act he performs in the department store: “In the great department stores he was at his ease. If he caught the attention of some young woman while waiting for the cash boy to come back with his change, he would find out her name, her favorite flower, where a note would reach her . . .” (10). Drouet is showing the effects of being in a mobile world. As the outer situations constantly change, the stable self becomes a rehearsed “act.”

Drouet sells his act, and one role he plays on the train parallels the train’s own role: he connects Carrie to the city and its department stores, seducing her into the world of endless consumerism. Drouet enters Carrie’s world first as a voice, then as a vision of well-dressed man, and then by making a connection with her hometown, and this is made

through the commodities he peddles, assuring her that he knows the clothier and dry goods man—men of commodities. With Drouet, Dreiser makes the connection between the railroad and the department store that Schivelbusch theorizes. In “Circulation,” the last chapter of *The Railway Journey*, Schivelbusch argues that if it were not for the railroad, there would be no department stores, for they depended on volumes of people carried by an integrated transportation system. They also depended on people who, thanks to the adjustments of vision born of train travel, were able to scan panoramically large quantities of goods (189). But, before meeting the salesman, Carrie has already been primed for her new life as a consumer as she has become acquainted with Chicago’s department stores through advertisements in the *Daily News*.⁷² A necessary component of the world of consumerism—whether appearing in the form of an advertisement or a salesman—is a mediator, suggests Lahoucie Ouzgane, and Drouet is one of the mediators in the *Sister Carrie*. Mediators represent the value of something, and so the subject will desire not so much what that other person has but “what they themselves appear to be” (2). That Carrie becomes aware of appearance, as she does when she first meets Drouet, shows she is “in the grip of mediated desire” (4). Mediators, Ouzgane suggests, raise consciousness of something, and Carrie’s pattern throughout the novel is to see others as emissaries of the goods and images she would like for herself. Notably two are associated with the railroad—Drouet and the railroad treasurer’s daughter. The railroad treasurer’s daughter, who represents the rising wealth connected with railway corporations, lives across the hall from Carrie and Drouet and is a girl whom Carrie tries to emulate, not only in her display but in her affectations. In keeping with his role as mediator, Drouet directs Carrie’s attention to this neighbor with his gaze and

appreciation: “What Drouet said about the girl’s grace, as she tripped out evenings accompanied by her mother, caused Carrie to perceive the nature and value of those little modish ways women adopt when they would presume to be something” (103). Ouzgane comments, “From now on, Carrie will rely on Drouet’s standards to judge people and places. . . . Because Carrie is under the sway of mimetic desire, she considers herself insignificant whenever she encounters people who seem to her to be superior models, comparing herself to them . . . (3). As both Carrie and Drouet require recognition to feel alive, Ouzgane argues that “both are thus caught up in the process of mutual mediation. . . . Just as Carrie will try to measure up to his standards of dress by imitating his presumed elegance, Drouet himself behaves so as to conform to the expectations of young women like Carrie” (2).

In a world where everyone asserts his or her identity through clothing and is judged by clothing, identity becomes chameleon-like. Carrie changes her clothes and carriage to first to please Drouet and “to imitate the [railroad] treasurer’s daughter,” and then to keep up with her New York neighbor, Mrs. Vance: “Carrie showed the influence of her association with the dashing Mrs. Vance. She had constantly had her attention called by the latter to novelties in everything which pertains to a woman’s apparel” (293). By the time she arrives at the Waldorf by novel’s end, she has become vaguely aware of how empty this pursuit of an outer self represented by clothing is: “In her walks on Broadway, she no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her” (464). The men whose clothes captivated her—Drouet and Hurstwood—had become discredited “ambassadors,” the worlds they lead her to ultimately dissatisfying. If Thoreau worried that in their dedication to ever-changing fashions people were losing touch with

themselves, Carrie exemplifies this. As Paula Geyh asserts, “As [Carrie] intuitively understands, in this capitalist economy of desire, to lack desired things is to lack the desired self” (419).

The train not only carries Carrie’s into the city of consumerism, it is as well the lifeblood of Chicago, whose exploding population has reached 500,000 when the novel begins, and, writes Dreiser, it was increasing by 50,000 every year (*Sister Carrie* 19). In America particularly, the railroad companies built their lines in anticipation of future growth. Like the “anticipatory self” that Carrie is, to use Philip Fisher’s words (264), Chicago is an anticipatory city: “Its population was not so much thriving upon established commerce as upon the industries which prepared for the arrival of others” (*Sister Carrie* 20). The railroad was the engine driving all of this growth, as Dan Server explains:

In 1830, before the railroad arrived the total population of the location which was to become the city of Chicago was only about forty people. But after the locomotive started to travel through the area beginning in 1848, the city grew dramatically. From 1850-1860, Chicago’s population rose from about 29,000 to well over 100,000, and, by the last half of the nineteenth century, the city had become America’s main shipping center for all rail traffic. . . . In fact, there was so much travel in and out of Chicago that, beginning in 1885, six large train stations were built in the city over a forty-year period, more than anywhere else in the country. (75-76)

As Carrie nears the city on her initial ride, Chicago proclaims itself through “signs,” and the signs are all industrial—the factories, the trains, and the suburban sprawl both give rise to: “They were nearing Chicago. Signs were everywhere numerous. Trains flashed by them. Across wide stretches of flat open prairie they could see lines of telegraph poles stalking across the fields toward the great city. Far away were indications of suburban towns, some big smokestacks towering high in the air” (13). The city is associated clearly with iron—the iron of the rails (it was “The Nation’s Freight Handler,” Carl Sandburg says in “Chicago”)—and its power as a “giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless” (19). Lehan suggests in *The City in Literature* that in the tradition of Balzac, Drieser saw the city as “a magnet luring young men and women from the provinces because only there could they realize the fullest sense of self. . . . Within the confines of the city, Carrie’s role is purely mechanistic; she is matter controlled by principles of physical laws” (200).

As Carrie goes about her job search, the railroad’s role in determining the city’s configuration is clear. The central portion of the city is the “vast wholesale and shopping district,” slowly being dominated by large plate glass windows, so, like a railroad passenger, a passerby could “see as he passed a polished array of office fixtures, much frosted glass, clerks hard at work, and genteel business men in ‘nobby’ suits and clean linen lounging about or sitting in groups” (20). This central district was not to be tainted by the labor that went on behind the scenes: “The entire metropolitan center possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both deep and wide” (20). Eventually as Carrie walks along, she passes through a region of “lessening importance, until it

deteriorated into a mass of shanties and coalyards, and finally verged upon the river” (20). As Lehan points out, Dreiser’s city bears out Robert E. Park’s and Ernest W. Burgess’s urban theories that the city is “externally organized in terms of laws of its own” and “grows in concentric rings” (200).⁷³ Lehan himself comments: “Both Dreiser and Park and his school drew from nineteenth-century positivistic thought as they approached the city, and everything in *Sister Carrie* can be accounted for in such terms. Chicago is a series of concentric circles with the business area in the center, surrounded by factories, where Carrie works; surrounded by cheap homes for the workers, where she lives with the Hansons; surrounded by more expensive apartments where she lives with Drouet. Beyond these are the richest homes, at which Carrie marvels, and finally the suburbs, where Hurstwood lives with his ungrateful family” (200).

While early explorers of North America had to adjust to the vast and bewildering landscape they encountered, by the end of the nineteenth century, the cities and their department stores had become the new wilderness. As she goes about her job search, Carrie sees “vast railroad yards,” “huge factories,” “vast offices,” “strange mazes”: “It was all wonderful, all vast, all far removed” (21). She becomes lost and disoriented as she seeks to encounter the vast “retail combinations,” (25). Though she starts out seeking a job as a sales clerk, she first becomes a producer, one of the “machine girls”(54) working in a factory that makes shoes, “the poor man’s train,” (Fisher 265). Carrie resents this work, not only because it represents hard labor to her, but because it is devoid of visual stimulation, which as a would-be consumer and as a future devotee of spectacle, she requires: “She had no time to look about” (39). While she succumbs easily to Drouet’s attire on the train, she has no patience for the that of the male factory workers “who

beside Drouet, seemed uncouth and ridiculous. She made the average feminine distinction between clothes, putting worth, goodness, and distinction in a dress suit” (42). After her short stint as a factory worker (she was fired after she missed work, having gotten sick from being without a basic coat), Carrie, dismayed by the pittance she was paid for such work—pay which barely covered the rent at her sister’s never mind the purchases she desired to make—easily relinquishes her role as producer when given the chance by Drouet to be a consumer. With this step, the connection between producer and consumer is severed. Even Drouet’s job as a salesman has no connection with production. Rather he is a middleman—a representative of goods. Carrie had known she could not endure a life as a “common” laborer, “her idea of work had been so entirely different” (43). Much as goods did not have price tags for *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond, money has no connection to labor for Carrie: “As for Carrie, her understanding of the moral significance of money was the popular understanding, nothing more. The old definition: ‘Money: something everybody else has and I must get it.’ (63). Not only does Carrie separate herself physically from being a producer, she achieves psychological distance as well. Paula Geyh remarks:

Her desire for the shoes reveals no trace of her own, earlier relation to such things or of the grim realities of the conditions of their production. The ‘soft new leather’ of the shoes evokes no memory of her days in the shoe factory where she had her first job, of her aching muscles and the increasingly distasteful repetitive action she was required to perform on the factory assembly line. . . . In a stunning demonstration of commodity fetishism, the shoes in the department store exist for Carrie solely as

objects of seduction and allure, and all memory of the circumstances of human relations involved in their production are lost to her. (423)

While Geyh says this episode suggests the remarkable “transformation that the city has wrought in Carrie” (423), it also parallels on an individual level the disconnection between consumers and producers that occurs on citywide. Relegated to a different part of the city, the places of production are not allowed to taint the sites of consumption—this is consumption without social conscience, an attitude Carrie quickly adopts as she returns, not as an unemployable clerk, but as a buyer, to the Fair Department store. She feels “rich reveries” at the corset counter (67). The language Dreiser uses to describe Carrie’s experience at the store shows that for her, shopping has become both a mystical and sexual experience —“Her woman’s heart was warm with desire for them [the things of finery]” (67). At first Carrie resists the temptation of the tan jacket that calls out to her, and with her salesman lover urging her to buy it, she finds “that the shine and rustle of new things . . . immediately laid hold of [her] heart” (70). “By accident” the jacket she longs for fits perfectly. Carrie has fallen under the spell of modern merchandising. As Susan Porter Benson writes in *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores 1890-1940*: “Retailers most obviously attempted to impress customers with the delights of consumption through the design of store buildings and the provision of various services. . . . Managers wanted not only to make their stores efficient, to make them machines for selling; they wanted to make them beautiful, to make them palaces of consumption” (82).

The purchase of one thing leads her to purchase others, her desires flowering under Drouet’s “radiating presence” (70). An artificial source of light in an artificial

world, Drouet, “the essence of sunshine” (58) who “fairly shone”(60), guides Carrie through a city of “lights in stores”; “lights sputtering overhead”; and “lighted windows” (77). He captivated this pilgrim while on a train, and as in Hawthorne’s short story, her “celestial” city is a place of insatiable shopping. Drouet has become god-like in her world with his power to provide for her heart’s desire, which is not love, but clothes. Once he seduces her with clothes, the next step, convincing her to take a room with him, is easy. Just as she experienced a “middle state” moment on the train to Chicago, when she could have gotten off to go back home to Columbia City, she experiences just such a moment before her full capitulation to consumerism: “There is nothing more delightful than that middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of the means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision” (67). Ultimately, though, Carrie, reacts “passively” when Drouet suggests they rent a room (70). As she looks at herself in the mirror, adorned by all of the things Drouet has bought for her, she can only think, “Drouet was so good” (76).

Hurstwood: Spectacle’s Shadow in the City of Spectacle

Through Drouet, Chicago, the city’s department stores, and their advertising, Carrie is fully initiated into the world of commodities, but the consumer’s journey does not end there. Carrie’s journey to this stage of spectacle, represented by New York, is as well made by train, and represents the second major episode in which the train signifies a shift in Carrie’s fate. Her initiator for this stage is the man closely associated with spectacle in the novel, Hurstwood. Guy Debord says, “The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now

all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of commodity” (29). When this level of “autonomous economy” is reached “all ties with authentic needs” are broken (34), and society becomes a society of spectacle, “where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making” (34). Paula Geyh argues that the city of signs supplants the city of things by the 1920s and suggests that this shift can be tracked when *Sister Carrie* is compared to Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*. She argues that the capitalism of things dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; whereas, the capitalism of signs dominated from the 1920s through post-industrial capitalism. I would assert that both the city of things and the city of signs (spectacle) are present in *Sister Carrie*. Carrie goes to the city wanting only to “parad[e]” on Broadway as an equal among people of “riches and show” (289), becomes a star of spectacle, an actress on Broadway, no longer anything more to Hurstwood, her initiator into spectacledom, than a name lit up in lights.

That Carrie is poised to become fully immersed in the society of spectacle by becoming a commodity who contemplates herself is signaled by her foray into acting in Chicago, which represents as well Carrie’s shift of allegiance from Drouet to Hurstwood. Both are present for her first stage performance in the play *Under The Gaslight*, whose premise, appropriately, is that a woman is pursued by a man who would “steal” her. (Also notable is that the play is credited with introducing the “thrill,” which involves a character tied to railroad tracks in need of rescuing.) Drouet and Hurstwood become enamored of Carrie the actress. Everyone is under the spell of spectacle: Carrie is thrilled to be admired and “petted” (181); Hurstwood receives her dramatic lines as if a “personal appeal” (180); and both he and Drouet see Carrie as their “idol” (180). Carrie’s

performance leaves “the two men in the most harrowed state of affection” (180). That they fall hardest for Carrie when she is acting is appropriate given that all are playing roles. Carrie and Drouet have been pretending to be married, and Hurstwood has been pretending to be single. That Carrie eventually becomes a successful actress represents the culmination of her induction into the society of spectacle. Debord says, “Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles” (38). Just as Hurstwood will lose his identity completely, Carrie will become identified through her name in lights, bearing out Debord’s assertion that “The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom’s spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things” (39).

Hurstwood represents the world of spectacle, and this is clear from his first introduction. He is the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy’s in Chicago and is acquainted with Drouet, both men assessing each other based on clothing. Drouet recognizes that Hurstwood represents the next higher level in the consumer hierarchy. Hurstwood had been pointed out to Drouet “as a very successful and well-known man about town. Hurstwood looked the part, for, besides being slightly under forty, he had a good, stout constitution, an active manner, and a solid, substantial air, which was composed in part of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and above all, his own sense of his importance” (45). Based on this outward information, Drouet “immediately conceived a notion of him being a someone worth knowing” (45). Hurstwood, likewise, assesses

Drouet on the level of dress and recognizes in him an inferior, though worthy, sort, as Drouet's "genial nature and dressy appearance pleased him. He knew that Drouet was only a traveling salesman . . . but the firm of Barlett, Caryoe & Company was a large and prosperous house" (47).

Hurstwood's sense that he is important because he thinks he is, not because he does something important, is a key indicator that he represents spectacle. He has an "imposing" position, but he "lacked financial control" (46). This statement is true not only in his position with Fitzgerald and Moy's but also practically in his relationship with his wife, in whose name he has put all of their assets, a fact which will be disastrous for Hurstwood when he leaves her. (Hurstwood was not in love with his wife, but, until he meets Carrie, he does not enter into any affairs, because, in keeping with his association with spectacle, it would not "look good to his office" (87)). When he steals money to fund his flight with Carrie to New York, he is not only financially out of control, but morally as well. There is a fatalism to the episode. His mind wavers about whether to take the money, and though he puts the money back, he suspects he has mixed up two piles. As he attempts to re-sort them, the safe closes and locks. His next impulse is to check his watch, find a phone, and catch a train, the vehicle associated with fate in the novel (247). Meanwhile, the money he has earned as a resort manager is left to serve his family's devotion to spectacle. His wife, as she desired, will succeed in showing off their daughter, Jessica (yet another character devoted to clothing), watching with pleasure the "spectacle" of her daughter being courted by the wealthy Mr. Blyford.

Hurstwood is a resort manager in Chicago, a position increasingly popular not only as tourism grew along with the number of railway routes, but as mid-level

managerial positions increased in the new corporate world (Fox 4). It is a job all about spectacle: “For the most part, he lounged about, dressed in excellent tailored suits of imported goods, a solitaire ring, a fine blue diamond in his tie, a striking vest of some new pattern, and a watch of solid gold . . . and a watch of the latest make and engraving” (46). Just as Drouet sets the scenes of his seductions, having rehearsed his approach whether in a department store or aboard a train, so, too, does Hurstwood play a role finely tuned: All of his greetings, whether to actors, politicians, merchants, and “the general run of successful characters-about-town” are carefully calculated on “a finely graduated scale of informality and friendship” (46). A “cold make-believe” usually “dwelt” in his eyes (47). Hurstwood plays Drouet’s game, but better. Just as Drouet would be solicitous of a woman who caught his fancy, pulling up a stool for her aboard a train, arranging for her comfort, Hurstwood plays this game “in a hundred more ways” better than Drouet. “Drouet had ability in this line himself when the game was worth the candle, but he was too much the egotist to reach the polish which Hurstwood possessed” (94). Hurstwood is “Schooled in winning those birds of fine feather among his own sex, the merchants and professionals who visited his resort” and so “could use even greater tact when endeavoring to prove agreeable to someone who charmed him. In a pretty woman of any refinement of feeling whatsoever he found his greatest incentive” (94). Hurstwood, like Drouet, is intimately associated with his clothing, and his attire helps to seduce Carrie to his side, especially as her eye has become more attuned to nuances, seen when she compares Hurstwood’s dress to Drouet’s: “His clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance. . . . His cravat was a shiny combination of silken threads, not loud, not inconspicuous. What he wore did not strike the eye so forcibly as that which Drouet had

on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. Hurstwood's shoes were of soft, black calf, polished only to a dull shine. Drouet wore patent leather, but Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favor of the soft leather, where all else was so rich. She noticed these things almost unconsciously" (95).

It is when Hurstwood enters the novel, in the setting of Rector's, a popular night spot, that Dreiser introduces one of his key metaphors—the moth to a flame: "To one not inclined to drink and gifted with a more serious turn of mind, such a babbling, chattering, glittering chamber must even seem an anomaly, a strange commentary on nature and life. Here come the moths, in endless procession to bask in the light of the flame" (48). As this passage continues, Dreiser shows that these glitterati are attracted to a false light as under "the serene light of the eternal stars," this "love of light and show and finery" must "seem a strange and shiny thing." Unlike the celestial stars, this light is "strange glittering night-flower, odor-yielding, insect-drawing, insect-infested rose of pleasure" (49). This dissociation from natural light and the new preference for artificial light has its counterpart, Schivelbusch argues, in the dissociation of people from the landscape people experience as they travel by train. Speaking of the emergence of glass and steel architecture exemplified by the Crystal Palace, Schivelbusch says:

In dissociating light and atmosphere from the context of the natural overall atmospheres by means of 'an almost ethereal' barrier, ferro-vitreous architecture created a novel condition. Light and atmosphere were perceived as independent qualities, no longer subject to the rules of the natural world in which they had hitherto manifested themselves. This process was comparable to the experience of pure speed of the railroad,

that is, speed perceived as an independent quality because it is divorced from the organic base of horse-power. (48)

Just as Drouet, who “was lured as much by his longing for pleasure as by his desire to shine among his betters” (49), is a false radiance, so is this scene. The artificial light of the night scene attracts people like Drouet (who is called an “unthinking moth to the lamp” at one point (63)), who go to see and be seen, and Hurstwood is there to make the introductions. Further, such lights as candles and glittering nightclub lights are effervescent, the other visual effect associated with rail travel. If panoramic vision is associated with the department store, effervescence, flickering scenes, characterize the world of spectacle.

In many ways, Hurstwood re-enacts many characteristics of *Dombey and Son's* Carker. Attending to the rich in the same manner that Carker attends Dombey, Hurstwood has obsequiousness down to a science: “There was a class, however, too rich, too famous, or too successful, with whom he could not attempt any familiarity of address, and with these he was professionally tactful, assuming a grave and dignified attitude, paying them the deference, which could win their good feeling without in the least compromising his own bearing and opinions” (46). Though Carker was not married, both men live in homes decorated to display a style with which they have no emotional connection, both relying on reproductions, the hallmark of the manufacturing era (and bane to the Ruskin line of aesthetics). After evoking the type of “lovely” home atmosphere that “cradled and nourished” the natures within it, and which would provoke a “tear” of its memory, the narrator says,

Hurstwood's residence could scarcely be said to be infused with this home spirit. It lacked the toleration and regard without which the home is nothing. There was fine furniture, arranged as soothingly as the artistic perception of the occupants warranted. There were soft rugs, rich, upholstered chairs and divans, a grand piano, a marble carving of some unknown Venus by some unknown artist and a number of small bronzes gathered from heaven knows where, but generally sold by the large furniture houses along with everything else which goes to make the 'perfectly appointed house.' (82-83)

Not only does his home bear an uncanny resemblance to the coldly calculated "home" Carker resides in, but like Carker, Hurstwood, too, desires the wife of another (both women really are pseudo wives as Carrie and Drouet are not married, and Edith probably never consummated her marriage to Dombey). Just as Carker hopes to entrap Edith, Hurstwood has the same plan for Carrie and seeks to kidnap her. While Hurstwood's efforts will be temporarily successful, he will, like his counterpart, live through a nightmarish episode involving a violent run-in along a railroad line. Though Hurstwood is not killed directly by the train, his skirmish with striking railway workers and the physical assault he suffers triggers his final demise.

As a man of spectacle, it is appropriate that Hurstwood is Carrie's conductor into the world of spectacle, and his maneuvers to get her there are based on deception. He tricks Carrie into boarding a train with him by saying they are going to see Drouet in a hospital. When Carrie realizes the truth, she thinks about escaping, but she feels trapped and sped onward by the train: "The progress of the train was having a great deal to do

with the solution of this difficult situation. The speeding wheels and disappearing country put Chicago farther and farther behind. Carrie could feel that she was being borne a long distance off—that the engine was making an almost through run to some distant city. She felt at times as if she could cry out and make such a row that some one would come to her aid; at other times it seemed an almost useless thing—so far was she from any aid no matter what she did” (255-256). As it has in the other three works in this study, the train serves as a fate figure. Carrie’s sense that she is trapped as well realizes a common fear associated with train travel. There is a fatality to it that Dreiser suggests not only with Carrie’s meeting of Drouet but with her being trapped by Hurstwood. Though most pronounced in England, where its first trains were designed as linked coaches, which did not allow communication between them and thus truly trapped potential victims, there remained even with the newer designs that allowed passage between cars the sense that one was trapped.⁷⁴ Helping railroad riders adjust to this sense of vulnerability, especially women who feared sexual assault, Nicholas Daly argues, is one of the roles of sensation novels. “. . . [T]he sexual potential of the railway also entailed certain anxieties The train as harbinger of modernity, appeared to promise an erosion of the social barriers between the sexes that was both tantalizing and threatening. . . . The traveler, like the reader of sensation fiction, is thought of as having been harnessed into a particular apparatus” (“Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses” 470). Carrie chooses to go on with Hurstwood, and the effects will prove fateful for both her and Hurstwood, as she will be in the city where she was originally urged to go if she wanted to be an actress and will realize riches from her roles, and Hurstwood will find himself a “common fish” in a “sea . . . already full of

whales” (273). He will begin to dissipate until he fades away, his light fading as Carrie’s brightens on a Broadway marquee. While in the novel’s initial chapter, Carrie was a waif subject to the forces of a “magnet attracting,” in this situation, she is construed as a “pilgrim,” but the light she is going toward is her own name lit up, artificially, on Broadway. Debord suggests of such mediation, “Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of senses, and most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction” (17).

Carrie and Hurstwood’s ride to the city of spectacle takes place in two Pullman berths—Pullman cars being the epitome of train luxury. Within a few short years, Hurstwood will go from riding Pullmans, the height of train spectacle, to reading of the wealthy and of the world he is barred from entering: “Each day he could read in the evening papers of the doings within this walled city. In the notices of passengers from Europe he read the names of eminent frequenters of his old resort. In the theatrical column appeared, from time to time, announcements of the latest successes of men he had known. He knew that they were at their old gaieties. Pullmans were hauling them to and fro about the land, papers were greeting them with interesting mentions, the elegant lobbies of hotels and the glow of polished dining rooms were keeping the close within the walled city” (306). His wife, daughter, and new son-in-law will be among those riding Pullmans into New York City on their way to Europe just as Hurstwood is committing

suicide, a penniless man. Hurstwood can be the prophet who leads Carrie to the promised land, but he is barred from entering it once they arrive.

On his flight from Chicago, Hurstwood changes his name twice. Such name changes are symbolic of the compromise and loss of identity in a world of mass mobility, where people are defined by their outerwear rather than their inner qualities. On the way to Montreal, Hurstwood changes his name, choosing one seen from the passing train car he is riding in (261)—the name having no more stability than the visions of what he is passing. He identifies himself as Murdock, but keeps his first two initials, G. W. and thus half of his identity at this point. He will then change his name again in New York, choosing a name evocative both of the railroad and the gamble he has taken with his life, Wheeler. His name changed, his status begins to decline, and he realizes, “. . . he was forgotten! Who was Mr. Wheeler? What was the Warren Street resort?” (306). Philip Fisher allies these frequent name changes—Hurstwood’s as well as Carrie’s enumerated earlier—with the idea that Dreiser’s characters live as “anticipatory” selves longing for “anticipatory worlds” of “might be,” which, of course, is balanced by “has been,” the characters never in the “full present” (264), and he says this “mobility of names” and epithets in the novel “marks the self in relation to the future or the past” (264). When the roles Carrie plays on stage are added to her list of names, “Proper names are multiplied until they vanish” (265).⁷⁵

Representations of reality have superseded reality itself. Hurstwood is moving in a world in which signifiers have become disconnected from what they signify. Not surprisingly, he begins to live on paper news. He tries to find himself in the newspaper after he has stolen the money from his employer and fled. He finds out through the

newspaper that the ground beneath his business is being sold out from under him (310). Increasingly the world of the newspaper becomes more real to him than his own, and it is there that he escapes: “He buried himself in his papers and read. Oh, the rest of it—the relief from walking and thinking! What Lethean waters were these floods of telegraphed intelligence!”(321).⁷⁶ Philip Fisher suggests that the newspaper is a “mediating object in New York,” and for Hurstwood it marks his shift from the anticipatory to the retrospective self: “Each [character] is defined by prospective being and the acting that practices the yearned-for role or by the retrospective being for which Dreiser’s image is the newspaper and the compulsive reading that Hurstwood, once fallen, uses to keep track of the things he has lost. The newspaper is always about yesterday’s news” (264).

As Hurstwood becomes more obsessed with reading the newspaper, Carrie begins to attract notice in the news and is featured in the advertisements for the play she is in because she is “very pretty” (410). Appropriately, it is through the newspaper that Hurstwood first encounters Carrie after she has left him. At first, he decides not to bother her, but later, he loiters around the Casino where she is performing, and after she passes him one night without observing him, the next night she sees him, a “shabby baggy figure” (443). In a novel where clothing is used as the key identifier, this conflation of man and wardrobe signifies Hurstwood’s inner and outer demise. When Carrie and Hurstwood first move to New York, he continues to carry himself with the same self-importance and at first allows himself a “moderate allowance” for clothing. As his bar business picks up, he allows himself “more clothes” (283). Once he loses his job and becomes more spectator than spectacle, though he notices more the “good fortune” of the city’s pedestrians as it “showed in their clothes and spirit” (324), and he begins to

downplay his own, wearing his old clothes, and not even changing when Mrs. Vance comes to visit, much to Carrie's horror. Just as Hurstwood begins to wear "a poor man's clothes" (373), Carrie begins to spend money on fine clothes. In fact, when Carrie is selected to take on a bigger role in the show she is in when another actress leaves, she has to buy new clothes for the part. The clothes, in fact, are "calling for instant purchase" (400).

Just as Hurstwood reads of Carrie and his former peers in newspapers, he reads as well of his future peers, railroad strikers and the scabs who replace them. His own reality too harsh to bear, Hurstwood, Amy Kaplan suggests, "constructs a new reality" through the newspapers, but his mistake, "lies in reading literally, in trying to enter that reality by participating in the streetcar strike" (153). As the character most allied with spectacle, he is the one forced to witness first hand the underside of spectacle and to be violently confronted with his own essential physicality and mortality by the railroad. Instead of riding Pullman trains, he becomes a scab motorman.⁷⁷ Hurstwood is at first in denial about the reality of the situation in which he has placed himself. When he hears other scabs talking of violence, he thinks they are merely scared, and "Their gabbling was feverish—things said to quiet their own minds" (381). He immerses himself in this world, eating and sleeping with the other scabs, out of touch with the newspapers that would have warned him that on the fourth day, the strike had taken a turn for the worse: "Cars were assailed, men attacked, policemen struggled, with tracks torn up, and shots fired, until at last street fights and mob movements became frequent, and the city was invested with militia" (386). When Hurstwood witnesses such violence first hand, he is at first "warmed and excited It was an astonishing experience for him. He had read

of these things, but the reality seemed something altogether new” (390). Yet he is not cut out for such a world. When he is called to work the line where he will be beaten, he realizes “His clothing was not intended for this sort of work” (391). After he is kicked, punched, nearly suffocated, and shot at, he is left to trudge through a blinding snowstorm. He returns home to resume his position reading the newspaper (395). Karl Zender sees Hurstwood’s decline as partly the result of a “paralyzing conflict between present and remembered selves,” and includes his stint on the railroad as part of that repeating pattern: “Even his one main effort at employment, his work as a strikebreaker in the Brooklyn streetcar strike, reveals his desire to retain (or regain) his former identity. If we ask why Hurstwood seeks this particular employment, which runs directly counter to his sympathy with ‘the demands of these men,’ the answer is that ‘he [is] a great believer in the strength of corporations’” (68). Zender goes on to say that when Hurstwood answers the streetcar company’s employment officer, saying that he is “not anything,” he is seeking to “reassociate himself with the ‘strength’ he had known as an employee of Fitzgerald and Moy’s, and as an acquaintance of rich and powerful men” (68). Another possibility is that when Hurstwood asserts he is nothing, he is signifying that having given himself over to spectacle, he has lost himself completely.⁷⁸

Hurstwood’s can be read as a cautionary tale, as can Carrie’s. As Hurstwood declines to destitution and eventually self-destruction, Carrie’s star is rising to its apogee.⁷⁹ In the world of spectacle, her greatest desire is not for material gain but not to be “insignificant” (355)—a state harder to achieve in big cities. She leaves Hurstwood and quickly forgets him, “Gradually the desire for notice took hold of her. She longed to be renowned like others. . . . The showy world in which her interest lay completely

absorbed her” (406). When she receives her first check for \$150, she thinks of when she received a paltry sum from the shoe factory as part of a “servile group of petitioners”(which Hurstwood is at the moment she thinks this (421)).⁸⁰ She knows that Chicago is “full of poor, homely clad girls working in long lines at clattering machines” (421), but she disconnects herself from truly feeling their plight even though she recognizes that they were getting “small pay for work a hundred times harder than she was now doing” (421). The narrator’s mind melds with Carrie’s as she quickly moves on from that thought to this one: “Oh, it was so easy now! The world was so rosy and bright. She felt so thrilled that she must needs walk back to the hotel to think, wondering what she should do” (421). It is not long before this enthusiasm is proven fleeting. She can think of nothing to buy with her new-found wealth. Her hotel bill is paid, and she finally has all the clothes she needs. Still, she thinks of wanting more: “It began to appear as if this were not so startlingly necessary to maintain her present state. If she wanted to do anything better or move higher she must have more—a great deal more” (422). This wanting “more” is followed by an episode that highlights the spectacle her life has become. A critic calls to arrange “one of those *tinsel* interviews which *shine* with clever observations, *show* up the wit of critics, *display* the folly of celebrities, and *divert* the public” (422 emphasis added). Carrie is upset when the critic focuses on the spectacle that she is rather than on her talent as an actress. He says that she was “merely pretty, good-natured, and lucky” (422). Carrie has achieved the “stuff” of her dreams—she has gowns, a carriage, furniture, fawning friends, applause, publicity (462), but it all comes up empty: “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy” (463).

She is left restless, rocking in her chair, aware that “Time had proved the representations false” (463).

Dreiser shows that once Carrie enters the world of consumer desire and spectacle, there is no going back. There is only “more” to be had ahead. The source of the desire for “more” is the subject of Blanche Gelfant’s essay “What More Can Carrie Want? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Wisdom.” Gelfant finds a link between a desire for the elusive “more” and “determinism as a doctrine of causation common to literary naturalism, behavioral psychology, modern advertising, and consumerism” (178). Carrie, she says, is “conditioned both biologically and culturally to want and buy . . . the simple sequence of seeing, wanting, and buying constitutes a deterministic structure underlying naturalistic novels like *Sister Carrie*” (179). In other words, one enters a metonymic chain that propels one along its length. As Gelfant suggests, because Carrie’s “desire is illimitable” but her “imagination is limited to the word of goods” (179), she is always looking for the next thing which can never provide any real satisfaction. Fox and Lears suggest that this ceaseless pursuit of what is ultimately not satisfying stems from a sense of powerlessness:

Consumer culture is more than the ‘leisure ethic,’ or the ‘American standard of living.’ It is an ethic, a standard of living, and a power structure. Life for most middle-class and many working-class Americans in the twentieth century has been a ceaseless pursuit of the ‘good life’ and a constant reminder of their powerlessness. . . . Although the dominant institutions of our culture have purported to be offering the consumer a fulfilling

participation in the life of the community, they have to a large extent presented the empty prospect of taking part in the marketplace of personal exchange. Individuals have been invited to seek commodities as keys to personal welfare, and even to conceive of themselves as commodities. (4)

While critics debate the sources of desire in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser suggests there is a dynamic between the inner self and the outer world that drives desire.⁸¹ Desire, he suggests, is both an inborn trait that exists in some people, and it is activated by different types of external stimuli, both visual and aural. On one hand, when Carrie hears her neighbor play the piano, the music awakens “longings for those things she did not have” (102). Hurstwood’s desire for Carrie is kindled by her voice, like a “pathetic strain of music” (176). The city, too, creates cravings, as Dreiser shows both in his depictions of Chicago and New York, (though not all fall prey to the creation of material cravings, as we see in Ames, who is able to enjoy the theater as well as fine food without becoming its subject). Speculating on the glittering social scene over which Hurstwood presides, the narrator suggests that the outer show of finery is not in itself to blame: “The worst effect of such a thing would be, perhaps, to stir up in the material-minded an ambition to arrange their lives upon a similarly splendid basis. In this last analysis that would scarcely be called the fault of the decorations, but rather of the innate trend of the mind” (49). When Carrie is exposed to the beautiful things in the department store, the narrator suggests that “desire *in* her bent a willing ear” (emphasis mine 99). Dreiser shows that when an inner predisposition interacts with aspects of the external environment, innate tendencies awaken or gather strength. As a final example, when Carrie and Hurstwood

arrive in New York, the city acts on their inner promptings in a way akin to a chemical experiment (Herbert Spencer's principles evident in the passage)⁸²:

Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds . . . and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and mighty. Little use to argue that of such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable realm which it must attain, so long, to that heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also, will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man. It is like a chemical reagent. One day of it, like one drop of the other, will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desire of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed. A day of it to the untried mind is like opium to the untried body. A craving is set up which, if ungratified, shall eternally result in dreams and death. (274)

In suggesting that desire is born of inner promptings and outer circumstances, and that some people are more susceptible than other, Dreiser is betraying his sense that there remains something elusive, something inexplicable about desire. Undoubtedly as the nineteenth century went on, individuals were exposed to more and more goods in department store settings, these goods more enticingly displayed and heavily advertised. Once manufacturing took off, the supply exceeded the demand, so the demand was stimulated artificially through advertising, and as mentioned earlier in this study, in that realm, the railroads lead the way. In the nineteenth century, classical economics gave way to neoclassical economic principles, and as Gordon Bigelow suggests, desire is the

“founding principle of neoclassical economics.” This form of economic theory, he explains, “considers it irrelevant *why* any particular economic agent may desire a commodity, or which desires might be socially beneficial. The desire of the consumer is primary: untheorized and untheorizable” (102).

There is ultimately a decided sterility to Carrie’s life (biologically as well as metaphysically). She senses this but is unable to understand why, and her reaction remains the same—to sidestep deeper self-inquiry by focusing outwardly on what more she can want: “Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real. Ames had pointed out a further step [he recommended she become a dramatic actress] but on and on beyond that, if accomplished would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world” (464). Her life is summed up as the move from the city of things to the city of spectacle, handed off by the conductor to commodities to the man of spectacle: “Hence she drew near these things. Chicago, New York; Drouet, Hurstwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage—these were but incidents. Not them, but that which they represented, she longed for.” (463).

The Railroad, Restlessness, and Relentlessness

Sister Carrie famously ends with Carrie rocking in a sterile motion: “In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel” (465). This image has prompted much critical comment. In support of his theory that Carrie represents the heterogeneous side of Spencer’s equilibrium equation, the side allied with a dissipation of motion, Christopher Katope suggests that final scene with the rocking

chair joins the train as a terminal point: “We see Carrie in the opening paragraph riding on a train to Chicago, and in the final paragraph we see her in her rocking chair—the terminal points of her ‘dissipation of motion’ (68).⁸³ Philip Fisher says the rocking chair, like the Ferris wheel which debuted in Chicago in 1893, represents “rising and falling” (260), and this symbolizes the structure of *Sister Carrie*, a tragedy that “compels us to see and comprehend the rise of Carrie by means of the fall of Hurstwood” (270). Amy Kaplan, on the other hand, says, though Carrie rises, she stays in place, “Carrie is constantly on the move up the social scale—from one city, one man, one job to the next—yet she always seems to end up in the same place, as the final scene suggests: rocking and dreaming, and longing for more” (149).

I suggest that the rocking chair also represents the inner and outer restlessness experienced by the characters of the novel, and that this restlessness arises from the train culture. This is the restlessness of which Thoreau warned in *Walden*. By the end of the nineteenth century, people were so accustomed to being in motion that when they were not, they felt restless and continued to move, even though their movements were not always purposeful and often were simply nervous. Michel Chevalier identified this trait as being part of the American character when he observed people on his visit to the U.S. in the late 1830s. Schivelbusch quotes Chevalier to provide evidence for why railroad travel in America stimulated so much more mobility than it did in Europe: “‘He [the American] is devoured with a passion for movement, he cannot stay in one place; he must go and come, he must stretch his limbs and keep his muscles in play. When his feet are not in motion, his fingers must be in action . . .’” (112). While mobility is to be expected in a nation born of transplants, who have historically always been a people on the

move—pushing westward across a continent in fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, crossing state borders with no encumbrance, in search of new territories, new lives—this cultural restlessness was certainly exacerbated by the railroad. When Carrie’s movements are lined up, her restlessness is apparent: The novel opens with her on the move. She has left her home and is riding a train to Chicago. In the city, she is in constant motion, either walking the streets in search of work, shopping, or rocking in her chair, first at her sister’s and then at Drouet’s. She then boards a train with Hurstwood. They spend a short time in Montreal then move on to New York City, where they live first in one place and then another before Carrie moves to an apartment with her friend Lola and then to the Waldorf, a hotel, which by its nature signals an impermanent home. All of this occurs in a span of five or so years.

Despite Fisher’s assertion that Drouet and Hurstwood represent “alternative fixed destinations” and are “static,” while “only Carrie is in motion,” (271), Drouet and Hurstwood, as well are infected by their era’s restlessness, born of the train culture. As a traveling salesman, Drouet is always preparing to go on a trip or returning from one. He, too, leaves one place behind to move in with Carrie, then moves into the same hotel where Hurstwood is staying after Hurstwood leaves his wife, and then he moves to New York. In similar fashion, Drouet moves from one relationship to another. His job as a traveling salesman either satisfies his own innate restlessness or contributes to it, but either way, the train’s motion is integral to his livelihood. Hurstwood is also a man on the move, leaving his home to live in a hotel. He then travels by train to Montreal with Carrie, and when he is identified by a detective, they pack up and move to New York. Once there, he walks the streets as Carrie did in Chicago, searching for work. Unable to

find it, he moves from hotel to hotel, watching pedestrians pass through the lobbies and along the streets. Finally, as a homeless man, every shelter he stops in is temporary.

When not in motion themselves, all three characters watch others' movements, often as if viewed through large windows as if from a train. When Carrie is at her sister's she stands in the doorway to observe life on the street, which "continued to interest her for a long time" (53). Drouet always takes his meals at tables by windows because "He loved to see the changing panorama of the street—to see and be seen as he dined" (58). Hurstwood at first watches the passing panorama from hotel lobbies, but after his fall, he watches all of the action at street level, sometimes while in line seeking free food or shelter. All three characters as well rock in the rocking chair: Carrie throughout the novel, Drouet when he realizes he is losing Carrie, and Hurstwood in the New York apartment when he reads his newspapers and when he must digest the news of Carrie's leaving.⁸⁴ William Carlos Williams commented on American obsession with sterile yet relentless motion in *The American Grain*. Cecelia Tichi presents his view in *Shifting Gears*: "Williams . . . sees rapid motion starved of vitality. There is only action without imagination. 'We fly abroad for sensation,' he wrote, 'anything to escape'" (241). Out of touch with their inner lives, the characters in *Sister Carrie* stay in motion, as if the movement might help dissipate or move along any uncomfortable thoughts and feelings they are having.

The train is both the instigator and symbol of the restlessness felt in the era of its heyday. In *Sister Carrie*, the train is more than a vehicle of restlessness, more than the vehicle to and symbol of consumerism and spectacle, it is as well a symbol of Darwinian evolution, of the metonymic chain of causes and effects without recourse to the past, reference to transcendence, or lingering feeling. At the two key moments when Carrie is

on the verge of being inducted into the new worlds that await, first Chicago and consumerism and then New York and spectacle, a station represents a moment of decision, a place where she could decide to change course. As Carrie approaches Chicago, the narrator says, “To be sure there was always the next station, where one might descend and return,”(7), but then Dreiser reveals the nature of the train’s role in metonymic compulsion: “There was the great city, bound more closely by these very trains which came up daily. Columbia City was not very far away, even once she was in Chicago. . . . She gazed at the green landscape, now passing in swift review, until her swifter thoughts replaced its impression with vague conjectures of what Chicago might be” (7). Carrie’s route will carry her only further and further along railway lines. There is no going back. She seems compelled to make and continue her trips. The title of the opening chapter suggests that Chicago (as well as Drouet) draws her to it with its the magnetism: “The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces.” Despite the option of getting off at the next station and returning to Columbia City, Carrie’s lightweight nature is no match for the iron attraction of the city, its salesman, and its goods.

On her way to New York, Carrie has a moment when she could choose to escape from Hurstwood’s coercion. She again knows that she can get off at a station and reverse direction, but the train and its forward motion are somehow coercive and spellbinding. This onward compulsion becomes more pronounced when the manipulative Hurstwood entices her with seeing the sights of Montreal and New York. Carrie announces that she wants to get off the train, but when Hurstwood tells her the next stop is Detroit, she says, “‘Oh’ . . . in a burst of anguish. So distant and definite a point seemed to increase the difficulty” (256). Again Hurstwood mentions Montreal and New York and assures

Carrie she can go back if she wants to, but again the compulsion of way leading onto way means this possibility quickly fades from view. Hurstwood, a resort manager, using the seduction of promised sights, starts to have his effect on Carrie, and the attraction is rendered in terms of light. Carrie reacts like the moth to the lamp: “The first gleam of fairness shone in this proposition for Carrie. It seemed a plausible thing to do Montreal and New York! Even now she was speeding toward these great, strange lands, and could see them if she liked” (256). There is again a moment of equilibrium, of indecision, when Carrie can choose to go backward or forward. When the train stops, she “hung in a quandary, balancing between decision and helplessness” (257). The train’s motion mimics Carrie’s thoughts, the engine backs a few feet, stays still as she hesitates, and then when she gets Hurstwood to reaffirm that he will let her go back to Chicago if she wants to, and she feels herself (falsely) to be in control, “The train was again in rapid motion” (257). The cause of where she is is always behind her, the effect in front of her, and yet the present does not stand still for long enough for her to make meaningful changes. Lehan comments on this cause and effect pattern: “The meaning of one scene in the novel becomes the motive for the next: a cause-effect-cause progression. Thus, like Spencer’s, Dreiser’s world is one of physical limits—a world in which the self constantly tests such limits, a universe held in a process of expansion and contraction, which establishes the physical realm beyond which the individual, the crowd, the city, and even the world cannot go” (199). The train represents economic determinism, not only in its role in creating cities, but in its role as in fostering consumerism. Gelfant connects the relentless pattern of the novel and the determinism it represents with consumerism. She begins by arguing that, “As a naturalistic novel, *Sister Carrie*

dramatized biological determinism through a plot that made every action consequential. No matter how casual a character's gesture, look, or comment seemed, it became the cause of an effect, the stimulus to a response that could produce a significant but unforeseen, and perhaps, tragic outcome" (179). She goes on to say that "the simple sequence of seeing, wanting, and buying constitutes a deterministic structure underlying naturalistic novels" (179). The train symbolizes the patterns of both of these situations. It represents through Carrie's decisive moments the cause and effect links in life, and it plays its role in the consumerist pattern Gelfant detects.

There is a decided lack of transcendence of any sort in *Sister Carrie*. There is only immediate gratification and the search for the next thing. While the narrator would assert these characters are caught at the moment of evolution when their ultimate reason and free will are inhibited by fading instincts, there is underlying this novel a nihilism that can result from Darwinistic thinking, from seeing oneself as subject to an irresistible force of cause and effect determinants. Thomas Carlyle predicted such a fatalistic result from the machine age:

By arguing on the 'force of circumstances' we have argued away all force from our lives Practically considered, our creed is Fatalism; and, free in hand and foot, we are shackled in heart and soul with far straiter than feudal chains. Truly may we say with the philosopher, 'the deep meaning of the Mechanism lies heavy on us'; and in the closet, in the Marketplace, in the temple, by the social hearth, encumbers the whole movements of our mind, and over our noblest faculties is spreading a nightmare sleep.
(79-80)

In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser succeeds in showing the indifference that can result from a deterministic view. Recent critics, including Donald Pizer, Philip Fisher, Charles Lehan, Blanche Gelfant, Christopher Katope, Charles Lewis, and others, have analyzed Dreiser's naturalism and the extent to which Spencer and other deterministic thinkers influenced the structure of the novel. Dreiser shows the dark side of Darwinian and Spencerian thinking when not only are the forces of the universe indifferent, but when the people themselves become indifferent to each other, an indifference born of a culture that has made consumerism and spectacle its hallmarks and easy mobility its ticket to escape. Charles Lewis focuses on the number of times the word "indifference" appears in *Sister Carrie* (and indeed, it appears in conjunction with nearly every character and situation), and he argues that this indifference is a naturalistic trope as well as a mask of desire (128). Such indifference may result in a world governed by Darwin's theories and Spencer's application of them to sociological and economic situations. When the reality of her life as a worker in Chicago becomes too harsh, Carrie becomes indifferent to her own fate. When Drouet proposes that she move in with him, she receives his proposition "passively. The peculiar state she was in made it sound like the welcome breath of an open door (69). As Hurstwood encounters the hardships of making it in New York, he becomes more and more indifferent to his own fate. His final action is not to save himself but to render himself immobile through death. Carrie and Hurstwood have given themselves over to impulses they cannot resist or even understand. Dreiser's narrator admits the limitations of his own understanding in light of the theories he subscribes to: "For all of the liberal analysis of Spencer and our modern naturalistic philosophers, we have but an infantile perception of morals. There is more in the subject than mere

conformity to a law of evolution. It is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone. It is more involved than we, as yet, perceive” (90).

In this novel there are metonymic horizontal lines built on causes and effects, but there are also cycles, and this stems from the cyclical Lyellian model (laws governing physical matter are consistent and what appears to be catastrophic is actually cyclical) on which Darwin builds his theories (though he will assert progression, suggesting that “old forms having been supplanted by new and improved forms of life” (276)). Spencer’s model integrates both forward and upward movement that occurs through a cyclical dynamic. Katope suggests that the rocking chair is a “relevant prop in a narrative structured according to Spencerian laws The image seems to have as its source Spencer’s corollary to his law of evolution that ‘all motion is rhythmical’ and that in an organism’s course of development ‘every new order of aggregation initiates a whole new order of rhythm’” (70). Whether this new order of rhythm is in any way progressive in *Sister Carrie* is in doubt. Debord would say that such cycles as those that manifest in *Sister Carrie* stem from capitulation to spectacle: “The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity” (15). Hurstwood represents the end of the cycle of spectacle and his life becomes the shadow side of that cycle: he becomes a spectacle for his poverty rather than his savoir faire. Carrie has reached a stasis point. She needs no more money, no more clothes, no more fame. She is rocking in a sterile movement that is neither moving forward nor backward. Carrie’s loss of desire for things, her disenchantment with the outer world by novel’s end—“But since the world goes its way past all who will not partake of its folly, she now found herself alone. . . . In her

walks on Broadway, she no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her” (464)— may signal that she, like Hurstwood, has reached her high point, and the next movement of the cycle is loss. All of her movements, as Hurstwood’s became, have been for the sake of movement, not toward purpose. The content of her next chapter can only be guessed. While Katope sees Carrie as having grown wiser, now being more conservative with her energy—she has written Drouet off, forgotten Hurstwood, and let go of the vague girl she was at the beginning—whether she or any of the characters has progressed or become wiser is debatable. Carrie has a vague sense that Ames may point to a new way for her, a way to be in the world without being of it, but this remains elusive: “She could hardly tell why the one-time keen interest in him was no longer with her. Unquestionably, it was because at the time he had represented something which she did not have; but this she did not understand” (445). While Ames will make his mark creating a company of electric light without being dazzled by its artificiality, Carrie has missed opportunities to make her mark other than through spectacle. When she sees the factory girls on the streets after having moved in with Drouet, she feels no sense that they are being wronged or that her purchases of goods that they have made for a pittance makes her complicit with the system that exploits them. She ignores the homeless beggar that Hurstwood gives a handout to when he is first courting her, and though she does give Hurstwood her cash when he comes to beg of her, the homeless who line Broadway make no impact on her. She simply does not “observe” them (443).

Carrie starts on a superficial track, “ambitious of material gains” and continues on that track, accumulating goods along the way and becoming a “good” herself. Her trip has not only been one from consumerism to spectacle, it has also been one from human

being to commodity, or as Debord would say, she has gone from “*being* into having . . . to *appearing*” (16). She leaves the agrarian world behind, and boarding a train, she becomes its cargo. Drouet is the first to “buy” her; Hurstwood steals to purchase her and steals her as well. As she circulates, and her value rises, she becomes more unattainable to others and more inaccessible to herself. What she represents becomes more important than who she is. The process of her commodification is complete when mass audiences buy her as a theater spectacle. Her identity has fully become a commodity, her name in lights on Broadway. Just as Drouet and Hurstwood see Carrie as a conquest, she sees them as means to ends. Like a train, she moves through the world stopping at stations for a time without fully engaging with where she is. She picks up merchandise as well as people like Drouet and Hurstwood, but drops them off when they no longer serve her purposes. She feels no deep connection with where she is, what she is, or whom she is with. She has disconnected from her origins, from place, and ultimately from the community of others, which she senses at book’s end. As she sits in her room at the Waldorf, she watches a wintery scene unfold. Little does she know that that scene includes Hurstwood, trying to reach her. He slips, falls, and feels his shame. Lola, looking out the window with Carrie, sees a man slip and fall and laughs. Carrie, who a moment before had been briefly thinking of those who “haven’t anything,” quickly lost that thought when Lola, laughing at the man who fell, is triggered only into thinking she must take the coach that night, to prevent her own fall (457-458). She was more than likely not thinking of Hurstwood nor was his wife, who at that same moment is riding on that Pullman, with her daughter, the spectacle. Drouet, meanwhile, is recruiting a lounge in the lobby to join him for a “dandy” time with a couple of girls he had met (458). All

four of these episodes happen simultaneously—Hurstwood’s final fall, Carrie’s momentary sympathy for the plight of others quickly overruled by her self-preoccupation, Hurstwood’s wife riding a Pullman, and Drouet continuing to live only for a “good dinner, the company of a young woman, and an evening at the theatre” (458). Though the material circumstances of Carrie, Hurstwood, and to a lesser degree, Drouet, have changed, the inner lives of these characters remain consistent. Furthermore, the simultaneity of the scenes and the fact that Carrie has forgotten Drouet and Hurstwood makes the point that there is no need for memory in a metonymic world. Memory is a delving deep, and it has no place in the fast-paced, onward pressing world of the railroad, consumerism, and spectacle. Disconnected from their origins, disconnected from an epistemological system that gives meaning to life beyond immediate gratification, these characters are ultimately motionless, caught in a repetitive pattern, despite their constant mobility, and the only way out is not by train, but by a “slow black boat” to “Potter’s Field” (464).

NOTES

¹ Thoreau is a bit disingenuous in *Walden* when he claims to prefer walking to taking the train, as the latter costs too much in labor and so in life. He not only found the train the most expedient way to get to other parts of New England and Canada as well as to his lectures, but used its “annihilation of space and time” to argue for borrowing privileges at Harvard’s library. In his discussion, “Henry Thoreau and the Advent of the American Rail,” Henrik Gustafsson includes a letter Thoreau wrote in 1849 to Harvard’s president requesting borrowing privileges despite not being a resident graduate, alumni clergyman, or among a select few within a ten-mile radius of the campus granted access. Thoreau’s letter argues he should be granted privileges because, as a man of letters, he is “one of the clergy embraced by the spirit at least of her rule” (58). When Emerson recounts this episode in his eulogy for Thoreau, he remembers, “Mr. Thoreau explained to the president that the railroad had destroyed the old scale of distances,” and then proceeded to renounce the library rules as “‘useless.’” The president, Emerson adds, capitulated. (“Eulogy”).

² Gustafsson, for example, says Thoreau was “fascinat[ed] with an exotic train cargo” and characterizes his tone as he watches the cargo go by as “positive” (51).

³ Though his views on the train oscillated over time, Emerson, a railroad stock investor, saw the train as the “servant of manifest destiny” (Cronkhite 315) and believed that man’s application of mind and will to the materials of nature to create machines was all part of the divine plan: “‘We could not else have held the vast North America together which we now engage to do. It was strange too, that when it was time to build a road across the Pacific, a railroad, a shiproad, a telegraph, and, in short, a perfect communication in every manner for all nations,—’ was strange to see how it is secured. The good World-soul understands us well” (as qtd. in Cronkhite 314-315). (By 1853, however, he would decry in his journal, “‘The age has an engine but no engineer” [as qtd. in Nye 157]).

⁴ Marx does detect some admiration for the train in Thoreau, who he says is fascinated by its “electric atmosphere . . . and punctuality . . . and [the] adventurousness of the men who operate this commercial enterprise” (252), he ultimately argues that for Thoreau, the train is “the type and agent of an irreversible process: not mere scientific or technological development in the narrow sense, but the implacable advance of history the Walden site cannot provide a refuge, in any literal sense, from the process of change” (252-253).

⁵ Henrik Gustafsson, writing in 1997 and acknowledging the extensive analysis Thoreau’s comments in *Walden* had already received by Chronkhite and Marx, seeks to determine how Thoreau felt about the train prior to its arrival in Concord. He traces Thoreau’s comments chronologically to determine whether his written responses mirrored his “practical attitude toward [the train]” (48), concluding that even before *Walden*, Thoreau’s attitude was “ambivalent” (48) and that “Thoreau’s idealistic disdain for the railroad’s materialism and intrusiveness was soon complicated by a pragmatic indulgence of its efficiency, and thereafter by a selective admiration for its more ‘natural’ characteristics” (48). He characterizes Thoreau’s attitude toward the railroad in *Walden*

as essentially “antagonist”: “Its utility was questioned. The supposedly grand notions that urged it on were deprecated. And as the railroad physically disturbed the writer’s peace of mind, he treated it as an unwelcome intruder. Yet like every other person, Thoreau was powerless against its advance” (47). He does, however, acknowledge Thoreau’s gradual if not begrudging acceptance of the train and demonstrates through isolated journal and letter entries that at times Thoreau praised the train as a seed disperser and saw that its deep cuts allowed willows to take root undisturbed (58-59).

⁶ I agree with Henrik Gustafsson that Torsney’s thesis is “tendentiously upheld,” and I as well support his finding that “The diffuse nature of Torsney’s thesis is further marred by a number of inaccuracies that effectively disarm her argumentation” (64 Note 5).

⁷ Kurt Heinzelman finds a correlation between Thoreau’s method and that of artist Marcel Duchamp: “Thoreau, like Duchamp, constantly plays with the fallen duplicity of language, translating its literalizing function into its metaphoric significance and back again” (23).

⁸ In his analysis of Thoreau’s “wild rhetoric,” Henry Golemba makes the case that after a *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* met with little commercial success, criticized “for being a clueless labyrinth” (174), Thoreau, through more extensive editing and revisions, created the final version of *Walden* as “a consummate negotiation of private desire with public demands” (174). Despite this, “Economy,” the earliest chapter written and the one he “preserved” in later revisions (Howarth 93) maintains a looser circulation of ideas and a more external focus than subsequent chapters. “Economy” has been mined by numerous critics, who seek to find there the heart of Thoreau’s economic philosophy. Critics find an alternate theory of value (Thomas Birch and Fred Metting), a reformulation of the independent capitalist (Gilmore), a quintessential representation of the romantic relationship to economics (Gallagher), and a serious economic theorist entering the “materialist camp” of Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus in order “to destroy it from within” (Smith 113). Etsuko Tatekani argues that Thoreau is engaging with the domestic divas of his day, namely Lydia Marie Childs, whose *The Frugal Housewife* was a bestseller, to beat them at their own game of running an efficient, clean household, Thoreau’s own work highlighting the interplay between two cultural practices—“domestic economy and literary Transcendentalism” (65). Harold Hellenbrand argues that Thoreau was ultimately most concerned with his vital visceral economy, in service to his health, and that his desire to conserve vital heat was born of fears for his lungs, which were believed to have been consumptive, a subject explored in more detail further on in this chapter. While Thoreau may have been advocating a conservative economy for reasons of fiscal and/or physical health, Richard Grusin sees an extravagance at work in Thoreau’s economy. Grusin claims that, unlike the theories of nature’s economy propounded by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, who measured economic success, including Nature’s, according to a yardstick of utility, Thoreau, convinced that “Nature’s motive is not economy but satisfaction,” (36) practiced a symbolic economy “of extravagances” (32). That all of these divergent theories (and there are several others) can be supported by this chapter speaks to its deep layering of ideas.

⁹ My use of the terms “metonym” and “metaphor” and their alignment with horizontal and vertical directions respectively draws on the work of Roman Jakobson. Metonymic

phrases have the relationship of contiguity, metaphors of similarity, the former “underlies and actually predetermines the so-called ‘realistic’ trend; the latter having “primacy . . . in the literary schools of romanticism and symbolism” (Jakobson 92). As touched upon earlier, Transcendental texts defy easy categorization, and in *Walden*, the hybridity of literal and analogic accounts gives the text its breadth and depth.

¹⁰ Thoreau spent several years revising, adding chapters, and expanding on the basic structural points of the book. In fact, Robert Sattelmeyer documents seven distinct drafts of *Walden* (Barbour 58). “Economy” and the second chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” however, were left relatively intact from the first draft, composed in 1846-1847 (Sattelmeyer 76-77).

¹¹ Lawrence Buell discusses ways to approach transcendental texts, which he calls a “hybrid mixture of religion and rhetoric” (18) in *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (1973), saying: “Most of what the Transcendentalists wrote falls into this category of nonfictional literature, presenting a mixture of piety, poetry, and sententiousness that is neither art nor argument but a compound of both” (1). He further asserts that as “postromantic expressionist writing,” both *Walden* and Emerson’s *Nature* are to a large extent unique, and the problem of sorting out actual stylistic influences is insuperable . . . each model is viewed as a cluster of motifs rather than a fixed form” (17).

¹² For a lengthy discussion of Thoreau’s complicated relationship with the marketplace, see Gilmore’s *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*.

¹³ The contributors to *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980* are among those who locate the genesis and earliest expressions of “conspicuous consumption” as occurring late in the nineteenth century and place it in the urban world. Pamela Walker Laird, too, sees a significant shift and places it in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century portion of the timeline: “The accelerating concentration of business during this period (1895 and 1905) and the decline of the owner-manager in favor of specialized, professional management working on behalf of stockholders . . . affected many industries producing nationally distributed consumer goods. During the same years, large circulation magazines expanded into national markets with the help of nationwide rail networks” (6).

¹⁴ A discussion of the changes in publishing technology and practices is beyond the scope of this project. A general overview of the American reading market is provided by Michael Gilmore in *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*. He addresses the “sweeping changes” that “occurred in the production, circulation, and status of literature” (3), touching upon “technological advancements,” the “innovation of cloth bindings and improved ways of making paper” and the role of railroads in removing “many of the obstacles to distribution” (3). Added to these factors are the increased literacy rate and aggressive advertising to create a “mass market” (50).

¹⁵ Bill Brown notes in his introduction to *Reading the West*, “As George Putnam’s pocket-size “Railroad Classics” of the 1850s had already made clear, reading was becoming a diversion for commuters” (20). Reading was not only a means of making long train journeys more bearable, it also provided a focal point: “While the railroad caused the foreground to disappear, it also replaced looking at the landscape with a new practice that had not existed previously. Reading while traveling became almost

obligatory (Schivelbusch 64). Emerson comments in a journal entry (February 7, 1843), “Dreamlike travelling on the railroad. The towns through which I pass between Philadelphia and New York make no impression. They are like pictures on a wall. The more, that you can read all the way in a car in a French novel.”

¹⁶ Though his work *Fiction, Famine, and the rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* is confined, obviously, to British literature, Gordon Bigelow would find in *Walden* ample additional support to shore up his finding that the “expressive theory of the romantic subject”: “the artist who makes an internal quest to strip away the layers of acculturation and find his most natural responses and desires, and then represents them in language, corresponds exactly to the dominant theory of economic value which takes hold after the 1870s in England, where the desire of the individual economic agent is assumed to be inherent in the individual, and authentic indicator of selfhood, which finds its objective representation in commodity” (72).

¹⁷ As Walter Harding, among others, has documented, “Thoreau often speaks disparagingly of the Irish, who were at the time swarming into New England as a result of the potato famine. . . . However, as Thoreau got to know them personally, he changed his mind about them and became their defender. Why he did not then excise his disparaging remarks is not known” (*Walden An Annotated Edition* 32 Note 6).

¹⁸ Etsuko Tatekani offers a different perspective on this episode. Thoreau actually tours the shanty and completes the transaction with Mrs. Collins. Tatekani comments: “In transacting with Thoreau, the housewife underscores the remarkable quality of the “dwelling materials, exhibiting her advertising skill: ‘good boards, overhead, good boards all around, and a good window.’ The reader, however, may no longer maintain interest in the second-hand boards, focusing instead on the few items of domestic comfort that speak in silence of her life of harsh necessity in America. The mute domestic items in Mrs. Collins’s household offer a marked contrast to the clamorous Fitchburg Railroad on which her husband James Collins works” (72).

¹⁹ Thoreau is going fishing and has told Field that “in an hour or two, without labor, but as a recreation, I could, if I wished, catch as many fish as I should want for two days, or earn enough money to support me in a week” (*Walden* 141). Field eventually gives up his hard work of bogging for a day to fish with Thoreau, and while Thoreau makes a fair catch, John, “poor man, disturbed only a couple of fins . . . thinking to live by some derivative old country mode in this primitive new country,—to catch perch with shiners” (*Walden* 143). Though he knows he has offered helpful tools to him for a better life, John Field will remain one of the “sleepers.” It will take more time for the John Fieldses of the world to evolve, as Thoreau suggests in near Darwinian terms: “With his horizon all his own, yet he a poor man, born to be poor, with his inherited Irish poverty or poor life, his Adam’s grandmother and boggy ways, not to rise in this world, he nor his posterity, till their wading, webbed bog-trotting feet get *talaria* to the heels” (W 144). Thoreau suggests with this comment that poverty consciousness is inherited, both through national and religious lines. John Field, as an Irish man and probably as a Catholic, is handicapped, unable to recognize the readily available natural abundance that would serve his needs.

²⁰ These allusions were pointed out in Walter Harding’s and Jeffrey Cramer’s annotated editions of *Walden*.

²¹ In a vision echoing Hawthorne's "The Celestial Rail-road," Victorian illustrators Mayhew and Cruikshank published an illustration called "The Commodity Pilgrimage," which showed hordes climbing the hill to the England's Crystal Palace, many stopping to worship along the way (Richards 18).

²² In his parody of railroad advertising, John Muir dramatizes the train's destruction of the environment:

Every train rolls on through dismal smoke and barbarous melancholy ruins, and our companies might well cry in their advertisements: 'Come! Travel our way. Ours is the blackest. It is the only genuine Erebus route. The sky is black and the ground is black, and on the other side there is a continuous border of black stumps and logs and blasted trees appealing to heaven for help as if it is still half alive, and their mute eloquence is most interestingly touching. The blackness is perfect.' (716)

²³ In "The Bean-Field," he reflected on disturbing remnants of the past, remembering the "ancient Indians" who farmed his bean field before him (*Walden* 108) as he realizes he has "disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day" (*Walden* 109). In a later reading of the landscape, he finds traces of former inhabitants like the slave Cato whose, "half-obliterated cellar hole still remains, though known to few" (*Walden* 175), Wyman the potter, Hugh Quoil, and others whose mark is "a dent in the earth" whose "cellar dents" and "well dent[s]" speak of their one time presence (*Walden* 180).

²⁴ Lance Newman has shown in his analysis of Thoreau's later natural history essays, especially "Wild Fruits," that Thoreau has expanded on ideas such as these found in *Walden*: Thoreau sees himself as "'wild,'" though he did not "'belong to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock.'" Convoking such a community is a matter, then, of deliberately straying into the woods, of rewilding society, of collectively reviving lapsed ways of living on the land that were characteristic of agrarian cultures" (110).

²⁵ Thoreau will recant his point about the pumpkin, after providing an inventory of his home's furnishings—including a "looking-glass three inches in diameter" (*Walden* 45), obviously meant to contrast with that of the Irish owners of the shanty, who had among their meager possessions a "gilt-framed looking-glass" (*Walden* 29)—, he says, "None is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin. That is shiftlessness" (*Walden* 45).

²⁶ There is an irony inherent in the perceptions surrounding tuberculosis. A dissolution of the flesh to become immaterial is allied with the disease. Despite being a disease of "wasting," it has a long association with a surge in creativity, and most apropos to Thoreau's case, it "was seen as the most spiritual, the most ennobling, a purger of base qualities, and a distiller of lofty ones" (Caldwell 18). Mark Caldwell shows that for some, the body consuming itself through tuberculosis became a physical sign of "dedication to the immaterial" (22): "Even the purely economic meaning we now mostly ascribe to 'consumption' has roots surprisingly connected to this idea. Thorstein Veblen devised his theory of conspicuous consumption precisely at the height of the American war on tuberculosis. His idea, simply put, was that early in the history of human society, the unproductive consumption of goods became a mark of honor and dignity. . . . If wasteful

consumption of food, drink, and fancy goods is proof of nobility and refinement, how much greater a leap in distinction must it not be if one can similarly waste one's own body?" (22)

²⁷ Whitman too celebrated the train's role as nation builder and boundary breaker in "A Passage to India." In this paean to exploration—worldly and metaphysical—he presents a picture of oneness, with the globe and its people connected by wires and lands welded together.

²⁸ Henry Golemba sees the railroad bank passage as an example of Thoreau's language of desire, as an example of the belief that "a true answer will not aim to establish anything, but rather to set all well afloat": "Believing that the mind abhors a vacuum as much as nature does, Thoreau plays upon this phenomenon in order to create a more enticing text, one that will place the reader in a relationship to Thoreau's text that mirrors Thoreau standing on the brink of the deep cut and reading the text of nature's landscape spread out unbounded before him. Through a language of desire that creates vacuums and erases statements as soon as they are made, Thoreau makes readers feel more intensely compelled to discover the text's 'true meaning' and to experience a sense of communication, even communion, with its author" (8)

²⁹ In *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*, Michael Freeman documents the rise and fall of railway stocks, noting "Against a value of 100 in 1840, railway shares had risen to 149 by 1845, a 50 per cent gain. By 1848, however, they were down to 95.5 and by 1850 to 70.4" (102).

³⁰ As Wolfgang Schivelbusch states in *The Railway Journey*: "The fate wrought upon outlying regions by the railroads affected goods even sooner: as long as production and consumption were strictly regional—which they were until the beginning of modern transportation—goods remained part of the local identity of their place of production . . . Only when modern transportation created a definite spatial distance between the place of production and the place of consumption did the goods become uprooted commodities . . . With the spatial distance that the product covered on its way from its place of production to the market, it also lost its local identity, its spatial presence" (40).

³¹ Reading the book through this lens of an overriding theme of change, Marcus subordinates opportunities to analyze Dickens's complex view of that social transformer to his interest in how the various characters represent, resist, or accept change. Marcus does make several important points about the troubled sense of time in the novel, which in one of its variations is represented by the railroad, for it "literally changes the nature of time . . . Railway time has altered the nature of reality, and in the description of Dombey's railroad journey, Dickens shows us just how radical a transformation has occurred, for space and time contract and expand relative to the motion of the train" (332-333).

³² A good portion of Sicher's discussion traces the many manifestations of the body/city trope, the body as pitted against the "monstrous city," and the railway's role in "remap[ping] the nation as a circulatory system. Its colonization of land and its commodification of the bodies of the passengers . . . play out tensions between the natural and the mechanical, old-fashioned traditions and modernity, town and country" (104).

³³ Sicher comments on the antagonistic relationship between the Romantic mind and the nineteenth-century world of the railroad and consumerism: "The commodity exchange of

modern capitalism threatens the sacred portals of the home . . . and the incursion of fetishized money and goods reinforces Romantic hostility toward urban culture as the railway reached into every part of the country” (92).

³⁴ Freeman writes, “Before the first railways, the term ‘class’ appears to have had no currency in passenger travel. Stage-coach and boat travellers had only the choices, respectively, of ‘inside’ and ‘cabin’ accommodation or ‘outside’ and ‘deck.’” (109). The London-Birmingham Line of which Dickens writes, “had a kind of hybrid system in place around 1840. There were first-class trains, mixed trains (that is, first and second) and third-class trains” (111).

³⁵ Dickens first encountered a mesmerist at a lecture he attended in 1838 and became an amateur practitioner, first testing his powers on his wife, Catherine, and then regularly mesmerizing, “friends and members of his family, sometimes for their social amusement, sometimes to alleviate illness” (Kaplan 182-183). While Dickens used his mesmeric powers for good, Carker, employs his seeming skills for selfish ends.

³⁶ Carker’s home is contrasted to the one of squalor inhabited by his brother and sister, who once looked out on a meadow but whose view now is of a “very waste, with a disorderly crop of beginnings of new houses, rising out of the rubbish”(452), a description which echoes some of the sights Dombey saw from the train.

³⁷ Freud and Karl Abraham have indicated the connection between mechanical agitation and sexual arousal and have called the railroad the most powerful agent of that arousal. The joy of riding trains found its counterpart, as soon as there is repression, in what Freud termed ‘fear of trains’, Karl Abraham interprets the fear experienced by neurotics in the face of accelerating or uncontrollable motion as the fear of their own sexuality going out of control: ‘Their fear is related to the danger of finding themselves in a kind of unstoppable motion that they can no longer control. The same patients generally exhibit fear of locomotion in any vehicle they cannot bring to a halt themselves at any time’ (Schivelbusch 77-78).

³⁸ Critics differ in their interpretations of the meaning of this scene. Marcus sees Dickens as projecting his own “frantic journeyings across the Continent” onto the episode (336). He calls the train in its destruction of Carker a “Nemesis” (311). Sussman argues that Carker’s death is both in “the psychological and the symbolic sense” suicide. Further, he says, “The death of Carker beneath the machine that objectifies his own amoral power suggests, as does Dombey’s train, the self-destructive energy of technological power uncontrolled by ethics” (58). Daly characterizes the train as a “judicial mechanism” (*Literature, Technology, and Modernity* 46); Henkle says it “wreak[s] Dombey’s revenge for him” (101), while Gail Turley Houston claims (to me unconvincingly) that “Carker is killed by the very train in which Dombey’s train of thought desires his daughter’s death,” calling the scene a “displacement of Florence by Carker” (97).

³⁹ It will be another decade or so before Victorians really start to experience and react to this new way of dying or of being traumatized. Insurance claims resulting from train accidents will divert the focus from the mere physical effects to include the psychic shock that occurs with railway accidents, something Dickens will experience first hand when he is aboard a train that crashes through a bridge. Though he escaped physically unscathed (and managed to rescue his mistress, her mother, and his manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*), Dickens suffered “a form of psychic shock” (Schivelbusch 137).

³⁹ It is as the psychological after-effects are recognized that the railway rescue becomes a familiar trope: “. . . the railway rescue was so popular, thrilling audiences on both side of the Atlantic . . . Such popularity suggests that the scene was putting in play some very pressing cultural fears, anxieties, or indeed longings” (Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity 1860-2000*, 12).

⁴⁰ Karl Marx “used the railway to exemplify his concept of ‘fictitious’ capital—in 1846, the demand for capital for the establishment of railways did not increase the value of money” (103). Marx would go so far as to call the mania of 1844-1847 “The Great Railway Swindle” (Freeman 104).

⁴¹ Jude Nixon undertakes a comprehensive account of Dickens’s engagement with scientific theories and knowledge of his time. This extensive essay builds a detailed case to refute any lingering notions that Dickens was indifferent to or ignorant of the scientific findings of his age. From listing the books on archaeology, science, and natural history Dickens owned, including all sixteen volumes of Buffon’s *Natural History, Containing a History of the Earth, General History of Man*, etc., works by Agassiz, (271) and later Lyell (*Antiquities of Man*, published in 1863) to locating specific references to science in his novels and revealed through reviews published in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, Nixon convincingly argues that Dickens was more extensively engaged with scientific thought than previously realized.

⁴² Dickens is among the authors whom George Levine reads to gauge the level of Darwin’s influence on Victorian literature. He argues that “Dickens is not self-evidently a Darwinian novelist—much of his catastrophist and apocalyptic imagination is incompatible with Darwin’s gradualist work,” yet he finds that Dickens’s “preoccupation with irresistible multiplicity” and his detection of connectivity through genealogy are compatible with Darwinian thinking (119-120). As *Dombey and Son* preceded Darwin’s best-known works, Levine pays the novel scant attention. Yet in this novel, Dickens illustrates both his tendency toward a “catastrophic and apocalyptic imagination” and his recognition of time’s cycle, the uniformitarian view of history.

⁴³ Raymond Williams traces the contrasting worlds of outside and inside the city in Dickens’s work and highlights his “power of dramatizing a social and moral world in physical terms,” for the “physical world is never in Dickens unconnected with man. It is of his making, his manufacture, his interpretation. It is the capacity to remake the world, in the process we summarize as the Industrial Revolution, that men reached this crisis of choice” (161). When Williams takes this insight and applies it to the Staggs’s Gardens episode, he sees Dickens “responding to the real contradictions—the power for life or death; for disintegration, order and false order—of the new social and economic forces of his time. His concern is always to keep human recognition and human kindness alive, through the unprecedented changes within this unrecognizably altered landscape” (163).

⁴⁴ Alex Warwick, in *The Victorians and the Ancient World: Archaeology and Classicism in the Nineteenth Century* writes: “The response to the classical ruin or artefact [sic] is melancholy because it is perceived as a mark of decadence representing the fall of great civilizations. The perception of its fragments recalls the vanished greatness, the whole that was classical civilization. In the context of the Victorian imperial project the classical ruins evoke a more pressing concern: the progress and eventual fate of their own empire. (129)

⁴⁵ Among the works that lend insight into Eliot's engagement with science are Sally Shuttleworth's *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*; George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists*; and Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots*.

⁴⁶ For an overview of the importance of these concerns to Victorians, see, for instance, Richard Altick's *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973) and his *The Presence of the Present* (1991).

⁴⁷ Michael Freeman includes a satirical piece written by a contemporary of nineteenth-century railway construction that demonstrates how railways were redefining the country's geography:

It is quite evident that the old Geographies and Road-Books must be getting useless, except as guides to the antiquities of our country The geographical questions which will shortly be in use have reference to nothing but railways. Instead of saying, 'What is the capital of England?'—the instructor of youth will inquire, 'What is the capital of the London and Birmingham Railway?' 'Name the chief towns in the West', is to be expunged, and 'Name the chief stations on the Great Western' is to be the substitute. Distance, of course, will no longer figure in the maps, but time will be the substitute. 'How many miles?' will be altered into 'How may minutes?' (78).

⁴⁸ The Neanderthal man was first discovered in 1856 (Altick *Victorian People and Ideas* 226).

⁴⁹ Freeman quotes a stanza from William Pickering's *Railroad Eclogues*, written in 1846, to illustrate a squire's view on these proceedings:

Those railroad bores, who, papers in hand,
Request permission to cut up our land—
Request permission! I should rather say
Who, leave unasked, invade our lands, survey,
Trample, and trespass, and break people's legs. (31)

⁵⁰ There is a small measure of truth in the townspeople's fears that Lydgate is looking to cut up bodies in service to his desire to identify the web of primitive material, as in a conversation with Rosamond, Lydgate mentions Vesalius, who three hundred years before had introduced a "new era in anatomy," supported by his findings from snatching "bodies at night, from graveyards and places of execution" (434). Lydgate defends Vesalius against the type of public opinion under which he himself suffers: "'They called him a liar and a poisonous monster. But the facts of the human frame were on his side; and so he got the better of them'" (434).

⁵¹ George Eliot refers to Huskisson in *Felix Holt* as well, his death by train seen by a coachman as divine retribution for the unnaturalness of the railway: "His view of life had originally been genial, and such as became a man who was well warmed within and without, and held a position of easy, undisputed authority; but the recent initiation of Railways had embittered him; he now, as in a perpetual vision, saw the ruined country

strewn with shattered limbs, and regarded Mr. Huskisson's death as a proof of God's anger against Stephenson [one of the original engineers of trains]" (8).

⁵² While many, including prominently Schivelbusch in *The Railway Journey*, discuss the annihilation of time and space by the railroad, Michael Freeman offers a nice historical summary of the introduction and early use of the phrase in his book *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. See particularly p. 78.

⁵³ The machine and its transformation of life and role in the growth of cities were at the heart of debates over progress. While Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Kingsley, and to a certain extent Dickens were among those who faulted the Industrial Revolution with degrading human life, others, notably Thomas Macauley championed the Industrial Revolution.

⁵⁴ Eliot's belief in the inheritance of alcoholism becomes clear later on when Lydgate, desperate and distraught over his debts, tries gambling, drinking, and drugs, but he had not inherited the addiction gene: ". . . he had once or twice tried a dose of opium. But he had no hereditary constitutional craving" (636).

⁵⁵ If goods become commodities when they enter circulation through mass transportation, the railway too, both in its physical circulation and also in the stock speculation that fueled its construction, becomes another symbol of a force without transcendent meaning. While the capital for railroad companies originally came from area businessmen hoping to capitalize on the new technology, over time, investment capital began to flow from London, "anonymous 'blind' capital seeking a worthwhile return on its investment or speculative gains in time of boom" (Crouzet 289).

⁵⁶ As Charles Francis Adams, Jr. recounts, there were even fears that protests would mar the construction and the official opening of the Manchester-Liverpool line: "Never in modern times had England passed through a sadder or more anxious period than that during which the Manchester & Liverpool road was built. The great reaction which naturally followed the close of the long Napoleonic wars was coming to a close, and the patience of all, and the endurance of many, were thoroughly worn out. The suffering of the poorer classes, especially in the manufacturing districts, was extremely severe" (15). The Duke of Wellington's railroad car during the train's debut was "pelted, as well as hooted; and at Manchester a vast mass of not particularly well disposed persons had fairly overwhelmed both police and soldiery, and had taken complete possession of the tracks" (Adams 27).

⁵⁷ Beer argues that weaving and dyeing serve as metaphors "suggesting the fabric of society and how it rots or is close-knit" and that "the workers in the mines and the dyeing houses and at the hand-loomers are crucial to the town of Middlemarch, its economy, and its psychic health" (23).

⁵⁸ In "George Eliot and the Production of Consumers," Leah Price points out that the only book Rosamond is seen reading is *Keepsake* "Eliot's reference to the annual which 'marked modern progress at that time' emphasizes the ephemerality of gift books. . . . The phrase clinches Eliot's summary of Rosamond, earlier in the same chapter, as 'that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, *private album for extract verse*, and perfect blonde loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man *of that date*'" (153-154). Eliot herself objected to the excerpting of lines from her works for Birthday books and other collectible albums, feeling that the contexts of the words were lost. For much the same reasons, she hesitated when Lewes

suggested selling her books in train stations. In a novel where half the characters choose the wrong spouse, Rosamond does not choose Ned Plymdale, the local boy who makes good. He first appears bringing the newest issue of *Keepsake*, “the gorgeous watered-silk publication which marked modern progress at the time” (256) to Rosamond, a magazine that allows her to dwell “on the ladies and gentlemen with shiny copper-plate cheeks and copper-plate smiles, and pointing to comic verses as capital and sentimental stories as interesting” (256). In the changing economic order of Middlemarch, though, superficial Ned will be in a position to rent the Lydgates’ house when they can no longer afford it.

⁵⁹ Bulstrode exemplifies Altick’s characterization of the warring factions in Victorian thought: utilitarianism and evangelicism, or as he terms it, “The everyday businessman was Sunday’s evangelical” (167).

⁶⁰ In *Darwin’s Plots*, Beer explains how this loss of faith in a higher being led authors like Eliot to rely on structure as “the bearer of signification” (148): “Fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century was particularly seeking sources of authoritative organization which could substitute for the god-like omnipotence and omniscience open to the theistic narrator” (149).

⁶¹ See, for instance, Sally Shuttleworth’s *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (1984); Gillian Beer’s chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in *Darwin’s Plots* (second edition 2000); and George Levine’s chapter “George Eliot’s hypothesis of reality” in *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (2008). Frederick Karl discusses the same in his biography of Eliot.

⁶² For instance Jonathan Smith argues that despite the catastrophic flood in *The Mill on the Floss*, the novel essentially adopts the uniformitarian line (431).⁶² With this position, he counters Sally Shuttleworth, who having analyzed *Silas Marner*, concludes that George Eliot holds “contradictory attitudes toward organicist theories of history” (“Fairy Tale or Science? Physiological Psychology in *Silas Marner*” 286).

⁶³ Possibly Lydgate’s search for the primitive tissue has parallels with Darwin’s suggestion that life’s “several powers, having originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved” (384).

⁶⁴ Sally Shuttleworth will dispute J. Hillis Miller’s conclusion. In *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, she writes, “George Eliot adheres, in *Middlemarch*, to the moral ideal of organic unity while simultaneously demonstrating the social impossibility of attaining this goal. Such an internal contradiction does not lead her, however, to deconstruct notion of historical unity and continuity as Hillis Miller, for rather different reasons, has suggested. Though innovatory in form, *Middlemarch* is a solidly nineteenth-century text, constructed in the light of contemporary social and scientific debates concerning historical growth. In true realist fashion, the novel poses a social and moral problem which the narrative seeks to resolve. George Eliot is committed, ultimately, not to openness and discontinuity but to narrative closure” (151).

⁶⁵ Darwin suggests that the totality represents a “grand system; for all are connected by generation” (275), and just as Eliot will, he twice calls upon a web metaphor to convey

this thought: "I am tempted to give one more instance showing how plants and animals, most remote in the scale of nature, are bound together by a web of complex relations" (69). He concludes his chapter on "Mutual Affinities of Organic Beings" with this idea: "In this chapter I have attempted to show, that the subordination of group to group in all organisms throughout all time; that the nature of the relationship, by which all living and extinct beings are united by complex, radiating, and circuitous lines of affinities into one grand system" (359).

⁶⁶ Shuttleworth, analyzing the conflicts between social and scientific theories as they play out in *Silas Marner*, says, "In Comte's work and in the writings of her close associate Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and G. H. Lewes (1817-1878), she was presented with a theory of social change which suggested that society, like a biological organism, followed a slow process of natural growth from simplicity through to complexity, which permitted change without disruption" ("Fairy Tale or Science" 251). Jonathan Smith asserts that "Eliot was uncomfortable with the equation of 'development' or 'evolution' with 'progress,' especially moral progress But this question of progressionism, far from repudiating Lyell and Darwin, as Shuttleworth suggests, actually offers a very Lyellian reading of Darwinian evolution in which progressionism is not a 'necessary accompaniment' of natural selection" (442). One Eliot biographer, Frederick Karl, finds Eliot attracted to Comte's positivist philosophy without becoming dogmatic:

We can find strong positivist elements in Eliot: the religion of humanity the negation of an afterlife, the rational restructuring of a society in which religion withers away, the emphasis on social reform, and the progression of society from theological through metaphysical to scientific. . . . What is likely is that while Eliot did not accept any formalized system of beliefs, within postivism . . . she found enough sympathetic material parallel to her own beliefs to make her a believer of sorts. (315)

More recently, Susan Anger in her chapter "George Eliot and philosophy" echoes Karl when she states: "While it seems clear that she was not a committed devotee of Comte's positivism . . . she found key ideas in his thought compelling, particularly his consideration of the possibility of objective knowledge" (78). Beer suggests that Eliot's use of the time disjunction in *Middlemarch* allows her to ask whether things have improved (*Middlemarch in the Twenty-first Century* 17). Her position as gleaned from a novel like *Middlemarch* where everyone's efforts at betterment are thwarted naturally prompt such discussions. Ultimately Eliot suggests that only deep time can reveal the impact of an individual life and of her own era. This is very much in keeping with Darwin's assertion: "It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life. We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has marked long lapses of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long past geological ages, that we only see that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were." (77).

⁶⁷ In *Railroad Vision*, a book dedicated to showing how the advent of photography in 1839 worked with the railroad to shape "our experiences of the modern world." Anne

Lyden writes, “The notion of ‘vision ferroviare,’ or railroad vision, was first discussed by the French scholar Clément Chéroux in 1996 as an instantaneous perception that is simultaneously fragmented and focused.” Yet, at the same time, Lyden continues, “one cannot focus on the immediate foreground, which rushed by as a blur; instead, one looks beyond to a great panoramic distance.” These two aspects of railroad vision—fragmented and evanescent scenes—flickers—as well as panoramic scanning, answer the necessity of scanning required by the department store.

⁶⁸ In preparation for an article he was writing just prior to working on *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser had immersed himself in the works of Hawthorne. Though biographer Jerome Loving makes a connection between *Scarlet Letter* and *Sister Carrie*, the fact that Dreiser alludes to “most of the novels and the major short stories” in the article suggests that he probably recently read “The Celestial Rail-road” as well (Loving 138).

⁶⁹ Though there is a bit of controversy over which was the first department store in America, the definition of department store itself being part of the problem, the first department store in the world is generally acknowledged to have been the Bon Marche in Paris, built in 1852. Chicago had established itself as a “leader in the development of the department store” by the late 1800s (Brune).

⁷⁰ Drouet’s first words, like the animated voice of railway advertising, call Carrie’s attention to a tourist resort, ““That is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin””(8), referring to Waukesha—a town renowned for its healing springs and the retirement home for Richard Warren Sears, founder of Sears, Roebuck & Co., one of the flagship department stores of Chicago. (Sears had, notably, begun his career with the railroads and started circulating his goods via mail order) (*New York Times* “Obituary.”)

⁷¹ Dreiser had been reading Crane around the time he wrote *Sister Carrie*, and both authors make the connection between train travel and self-consciousness about one’s clothes: In his story “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” written at the end of the nineteenth century, Stephen Crane dramatizes this same trend as the sheriff of Yellow Sky and his new “eastern” bride become self-conscious about their new clothing, indicative of their changing status, once they board the Pullman car back to Yellow Sky:

The man’s face was reddened from many days in the wind and sun, and a direct result of his new black clothes was that his brick-colored hands were constantly performing in a most conscious fashion. From time to time he looked down respectfully at his attire.

The bride . . . wore a dress of blue cashmere, with small reservations of velvet here and there and with steel buttons abounding. She continually twisted her head to regard her puff sleeves, very stiff, straight, and high. They embarrassed her. It was quite apparent that she cooked, and that she expected to cook dutifully. The blushes caused by the careless scrutiny of some passengers as she had entered the car were strange to see upon this plain, under-class countenance.”

This couple’s clothing indicates their aspirations and symbolizes the infiltration and gentrification of the West by the East, with the train acting as the force of this cross-pollination.

⁷² In *Mysteries of the Great Cities*, John Fairfield discusses the “great proliferation” of newspapers and journals between 1870 and 1890, an “upsurge of information” that

answered to needs created by growing physical distances among sections of the city, by enlarged city size and scale, and by social distinctions” (122-123). While the numbers of publications were increasing dramatically, Fairfield does suggest that the telegraph system, born of railway technology, “made all the leading papers so nearly alike as to their news that one does not differ in that respect materially from the others.’ . . . The conditions themselves of fathering what had been thought of as news, then, made the world seem the same regardless of the name of the newspaper” (124).

⁷³ As Schivelbusch shows in *The Railway Journey*, the situation in Europe was a bit different from that of the United States. Major cities in Europe existed long before the railroad came, and though circulation patterns within those cities and routes to them were affected by the railroad, and though industrial cities like Manchester and Liverpool in England saw a major boost in their sizes and populations due to the rise of manufacturing and the connection via railway, in many ways, the situation was as Max Maria Von Weber states: “With the construction of railroads, American culture *began* what European culture completed with them, *before* the humble footpath, before the cattle road, the railroad stretched itself through the wild savannah and primeval forest. In *Europe*, the railroad system *facilitates* traffic; in America, it creates it” (as qtd. in Schivelbusch 89).

⁷⁴ Schivelbusch discusses the fears that arose from the isolation of the train compartment and recounts the murder of Chief Justice Poinsett, who had shared a train compartment with his murderer. Schivelbusch comments: “The compartment’s total optical and acoustical isolation from the rest of the train and its inaccessibility during the journey (until the 1860s, even the compartments of express trains could be entered only from outside: there was no communication between them) cause the travelers’ interrelationships to change from mere embarrassment at silence to fear of potential mutual threat. The train compartment became the scene of crime that could take place unheard and unseen by the travelers in adjoining compartments. This novel danger captivated the nineteenth-century imagination” (79).

⁷⁵ In addition to Fisher’s detailed discussion of the shifting identities and epithets in *Sister Carrie*, see also Karl Zender’s essay “Walking Away from the Impossible Thing: Identity and Denial in *Sister Carrie*.” Zender, in addition to adding human agency back into the story of Hurstwood’s tragedy, also explores the “plasticity of identity” in the novel, arguing that the characters in *Sister Carrie*, are remarkably deficient in received identity” and yet the novel is “deeply ambivalent about the prospects for success in this effort of self-creation” (64-65).

⁷⁶ In his obsession with the news, Hurstwood exemplifies a trend Wightman and Fox cite in *The Culture of Consumption*. Referring to a study done by the *Atlantic Monthly*, they show how news became a “commodity,” and readers increasingly turned away from “literature” to “timely topics.” Editors became interpretive rather than selective, and showed “a bias toward the romance of business, professions, technology, and politics” (51).

⁷⁷ In “Injury’s Accountant: Theodore Dreiser and the Railroad” (2008), Jennifer Travis recounts Dreiser’s own experience working on a railway in New York, hoping the manual labor would expedite his recovery from the neurasthenia he was suffering from after his completion of *Sister Carrie*. She says, “he connected his need to revive his

literary skills with his capacity to work his body . . . holding fast to the promise that the metonymic dismemberments of head and hand might literally be made whole—and what better job of bodily work that the seemingly infinite task of building the railroad in the U.S.”(42). While such labor did not cure him, she says it did give him a “vehicle through which to reconceptualize and to rewrite masculine woundedness” (43). As she study focuses on Dreiser post-*Sister Carrie*, she does not mention Hurstwood’s injuries. Instead, she argues, “Through his painstaking account of recuperative failure in *An Amateur Laborer*, and his subsequent short narratives ‘The Mighty Burke’ and ‘The Mighty Rourke,’ Dreiser depicted the injured male body in industrial capitalism (and the glaring tragedy of railroad wounds) in order to rewrite the stigma of the injured male psyche” (43).

⁷⁸ A key point that Zender does make is that Dreiser’s characters are “deficient in received identity”—nothing is known of Drouet’s origins, Carrie’s are briefly mentioned and forgotten, and we meet Hurstwood once he is already living a life of spectacle, and his climb up the company ladder warrants only a brief mention.

⁷⁹ In her analysis of *Sister Carrie* in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan sees Carrie’s rise as indicative of Dreiser’s sentimentalism and Hurstwood’s fall as an example of his realism.

⁸⁰ Zender suggests that “Carrie and Hurstwood enact linked modes of denial. Her restless rush toward the future is the mirror image of his regression toward the past, and at the heart of both is a pervasive emotional evasion” (73). Zender cites several causes of this evasion, born of the destabilizing power of that milieu, with its rapid urbanization, growth in population through immigration, and shift from agrarian to industrial modes of production and consumption (73).

⁸¹ Gelfant, for instance, says that “Desire is a natural force in the novel, but the objects of desire are social constructed artifacts imbued with impossible dreams of happiness” (179). Paula Geyh agrees with Clare Virginia Eby in locating the source of desire as outside the individual: “As Eby observes, ‘Dreiser understood that while desire—for specific consumer goods or for a superior class position—seems to emanate from the individual, it is in fact, socially produced’” (420). Charles Lewis will, like Walter Benn Michaels, locate it within the consumer culture. To him, it is a byproduct of neoclassical economics (134).

⁸² Jerome Loving summarizes this idea: “Spencer reduced man to a chemical atom, or combination of the same, which reacted to other chemical formulas or human personalities or situations to produce what we call chance or fate. Man’s options, therefore, consisted not in free will but merely in the necessity of acting out the particular ‘will’ or chemism he or she chanced to receive, mainly through a combination of heredity and environment” (88).

⁸³ Katope sees the second half of the novel as bearing out Spencer’s *First Principles*. Carrie’s rise, he argues exemplifies Spencer’s assertion that in evolution there is a movement from homogeneity (or simplicity to use Katope’s word) to heterogeneity (complication). With the heterogeneous status, there is a concomitant dissipation of motion, a theory he says Carrie’s lessening activity bears out. Hurstwood, on the other hand, represents a character who has reached equilibrium and has begun a downward spiral accompanied by increased motion. Dreiser was certainly under the influence of

Spencer when he wrote *Sister Carrie*, having discovered his works in 1894 and claiming they “quite blew me to bits intellectually” (as qtd. in Loving 88). Not only did his encounter with Spencer’s *First Principles*, along with Thomas Huxley’s work “destroy the last traces of his adherence to conventional religion,” they gave him “a new religion.” The higher power was not to be accessed through nature, its emblem, as the Transcendentalists thought, it was unknowable leaving only nature knowable, and it “was evidenced by the evolutionary movement of life, or force” (88). Spencer further held that this force operated through a series of chemical reactions, and the role of the human was to act out his or her formula. Moreover, Spencer believed in a progressive world, “evolving towards perfection as forces and counterforces came into balance (Loving 89). Loving sees *Sister Carrie* dramatizing this deterministic belief that all three major characters are “pawns of heredity and environment” (143).

⁸⁴ Katope does a nice job detailing all of the references to Carrie’s rocking. See pp. 71-72 in “*Sister Carrie* and Spencer’s *First Principles*.”

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