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Dickens in Motion: Still Moving after Two Hundred Years

Adam Abraham¹

The following is a meditation on the career of English novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1870), on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of his birth. Taking its cue from Jonathan H. Grossman’s *Charles Dickens’s Networks*, this piece reflects on the themes of Dickens and motion (the role of public transport in his novels), Dickens and emotion (his determination to move his readers), and Dickens in motion (his personal restlessness).

KEYWORDS: DICKENS, MOTION, TRANSPORT, PICKWICK

Dickens was born: to begin with. As many around the world noticed, this year marked the bicentenary of Charles Dickens’s birth (7 February 1812). The patron saint of plucky orphans and Christmas cheer was duly commemorated with academic conferences and a British Film Institute retrospective. Even Google joined the celebration. On 7 February 2012, the Web site refashioned its logo into a colourful panorama of Dickens characters. And, of course, English-language booksellers flourished a mini-industrial revolution of Dickensian publications. Among these is a fascinating new work by Jonathan H. Grossman, *Charles Dickens’s Networks: Public Transport and the Novel*. For our own age, intoxicated as it is with the impact of social networks, Grossman illuminates key networks of Dickens’s era, namely the public transport systems of both the stage coach and the railway. It is a valuable insight. Readers of Dickens’s works find themselves confronted with all sorts of conveyances—hackney carriages, barouches, phaetons—and Ivor

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Brown contends that “[t]ravel by cab is constant in the novels” (110). Indeed, Dickens’s characters are very much in motion: upwardly mobile, downwardly mobile, or posting themselves hither and thither across the novelist’s imagined landscape.

Even as Charles Dickens began his writing career, he was a writer *in motion*. In 1834, Dickens worked as a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*, which competed vigorously with the *London Times*. He recalled stage-coach races in order to deliver news from the provinces first: the information superhighway of the nineteenth century was a stage-coach system in which one recruited fresh horses at regular intervals. “The Times and I changed Horses together”, Dickens enthused; “they had the start two or three minutes: I bribed the post boys tremendously & we came in literally neck and neck—the most beautiful sight I ever saw” (*Letters* 58). Continuing this interest in motion, Dickens’s first published book, *Sketches by Boz* (1836), offers an anatomy of a number of modes of transport. Sketches include “Omnibuses”, “Early Coaches”, and “Hackney-coach Stands”. On the day of the book’s publication, Chapman and Hall asked Dickens to write text for a series of sporting illustrations to be issued monthly. According to Dickens, he countered that he “was no great sportsman, except in regard of all kinds of locomotion” (*Pickwick* 761). It can certainly be debated whether locomotion is a sport at all, but the result was Dickens’s first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836–1837).

Many modern readers are baffled by *The Pickwick Papers*. G. K. Chesterton concedes that it is “not a novel” (59). A friend who tried to read the lengthy work gave up in despair about halfway through because, he said, it has no plot. One might recall Mark Twain’s warning to readers of his *Huckleberry Finn* (1884): “persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (xxv). Into this confusion rides Jonathan H. Grossman. He argues cogently that the structuring principle of *The Pickwick Papers* is motion itself, not any particular goal or destination: “Pickwick’s traveling around this stage-coach system has been his purpose” (40). In the 1830s, as the railways developed in Britain, Dickens chose to set *Pickwick* in the 1820s, the last gasp of the coaching era. While many view this as an exercise in nostalgia, Grossman counters that for Dickens the stage coach in its mature form represented speed, efficiency, and interconnectivity: “What the steam-powered railways were conceptually to the 1830s and 1840s, modernized stage coaching was to the 1810s and 1820s” (20). The novel’s hero, Samuel Pickwick, in fact took his name from an actual coachman, one Moses Pickwick. In an inspired scene, Mr Pickwick encounters the Pickwick coach, emblazoned with “the magic name” (472). Later, when Pickwick is about to be arrested, “a queer sort of fresh

painted vehicle drove up” (532), which Grossman explains is “a nineteenth-century police car” (70). The ubiquity of coach travel even infects the characters’ diction. Tony Weller, a convivial cockney coachman, mourns the passing of his wife with an extended metaphor: “she took the wrong road and vent down hill with a velocity you never see and... she paid the last pike at twenty minutes afore six o’clock” (689).

Dickens’s fondness for the coaching era is palpable. As Edmund Wilson remarks, “His early novels are freshened by breezes from an England of coaching and village taverns” (25). However, Dickens’s relationship with the railway is more tempered. Ivor Brown claims that for Dickens, trains “are roaring monsters” (96). Tony Weller, who would not be inclined to praise the newer form of transport, describes the steam engine as “a nasty, wheezin’, creaking, gasping, puffin, bustin’ monster, always out o’ breath” (*Humphrey* 107). Mr Carker, in *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848) is killed by the railway. In a perfect commentary on the subject of technological change, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1851) offers a character who is engrossed by the coaching-era *Pickwick Papers* in the moments before he is flattened by an oncoming train. In 1865, Dickens himself endured a railway accident (he survived). Other forms of motion, of course, are found in Dickens’s life and works. In 1842, he crossed the Atlantic to visit the United States. One year later, his fictional character Martin Chuzzlewit recreated the journey, on a vessel named the *Screw*. Dickens’s last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, returns to his childhood in Kent and the coaching era of *Pickwick*.

It is perhaps unsurprising that an author so interested in moving his characters would also want to move his readers. Among the most famous (or infamous) aspects of Dickens’s art is his sentimentalism, especially his morbid fixation on the death of a child. Little Paul Dombey dies. Jo the crossing sweeper succumbs. Nancy, in *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), is brutally murdered by Bill Sikes. A favourite iteration for Victorian audiences was the death of Little Nell, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1841). George H. Ford, in *Dickens and his Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism since 1836*, uses Little Nell as a test case in the reception history of Dickens’s works. Ford quotes a Victorian commentator, Francis Jeffrey, who compares Dickens to Shakespeare and claims that there has been “nothing so good as Nell since Cordelia” (57). The scene of American readers waiting by the docks for the next installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in order to learn Nell’s fate is a standard in most accounts of Dickens’s writing. Although death is certainly a part of life, this luxurious wallowing in (and capitalizing on) a young person’s demise appears, for twentieth-century and twenty-first-century audiences, awkward, embarrassing, or lame. Commentators from Aldous Huxley to Henry

Miller have taken Dickens to task, and Dwight Macdonald includes the death of Little Nell, verbatim, in his book *Parodies*, as an example of an unconscious self-parody. By the 1970s, Little Nell inspired the stage name of actress “Little Nell” Campbell, who appears in the cult film favourite *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

But those who dislike or mock Little Nell fail to register Dickens’s desire to—and ability to—move his readers. In *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins makes a case for nineteenth-century U.S. writers (mainly women) who had *designs* on their readers. It was not enough to tell a tale; these novelists needed to move, alter, or persuade their audiences. Tompkins’s work proves an important corrective to F. O. Matthiessen’s seminal book *American Renaissance*, which, notoriously, excludes Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) from the nineteenth-century canon. Dickens, too, had designs on his contemporaries, and he experimented with different modes of publication in order to manage his proximity to the reader. Ultimately, he launched a series of public readings, in which he stood at a podium and read aloud from his works. An actor at heart, Dickens was thus able to embody his novels and their characters. Late in life he was drawn to reading the murder of Nancy, despite the advice of medical professionals who thought that the reenacted trauma would damage his health. Edmund Wilson argues that “Dickens obviously derived from thus horrifying his hearers some sort of satisfaction” (78). With Dickens’s mesmeric power over his reading audiences, he became something like his character John Jasper, in *Edwin Drood*. The beleaguered heroine Rosa Budd feels that Jasper can reach through time and space to touch her—like an author touching or moving his audience through the medium of the printed word.

Emotional and ambitious, Dickens was ever on the move: moving houses, changing publishers, exchanging a wife of twenty-two years for an actress aged nineteen. By the 1850s, according to Wilson, “he had shown signs of profound discontent and unappeased restlessness” (37). Dickens was well known for his marathon bouts of walking or hiking: he might walk miles at a stretch—the sport of locomotion—and this exercise was apparently part of his compositional process. *The Old Curiosity Shop* begins, “Night is generally my time for walking” (5). In his early years, he often wrote two novels *at once*, in addition to generating newspapers pieces, editing periodicals, and launching private theatricals. It is no wonder that the narrator of *Dombey and Son* can blandly remark, “The world was very busy now” (857). Two centuries after Dickens’s birth, his works have moved into our own busy era, with its complex transport networks of highways and air

travel and its information networks that supersede Victorian systems such as the Penny Post and the electric telegraph. Readers can access *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations* in various paperback editions or download a digital copy to the Kindle, Nook, or iPad. While fellow Victorian novelists such as Harrison Ainsworth and Edward Bulwer Lytton now seem fusty or antiquarian, Charles Dickens has continued to move readers for nearly two hundred years. If, as Keats has it, a thing of beauty is a joy for ever, then perhaps a great work—a truly great work—is always our contemporary.

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