Railways and the End of British Romanticism

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RAILWAYS AND THE END OF BRITISH ROMANTICISM

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Introduction

In the span of one generation the railway was transformed from the subject of isolated experimentation to an inextricable feature of the British economic, cultural, and geographic landscapes. Its impacts were dramatic and were made all the more affecting by how little time society had to adjust to these changes. By 1850, merely twenty years after the opening of the first fully modern railway line, roughly 6,000 miles of track (approximately two thirds of what exists today) were open for public traffic, connecting the major cities of the nation together as part of a new railway network.[1] The expansion of the railways gave people the ability to visit, interact with, and be influenced by faraway places as never before in what Wolfgang Schivelbusch called the "annihilation of time and space."[2] Soon after introduction, the railways had remade economic, social, cultural, and geographical relationships between people and redefined the experience of modern civilization.

Railway scholarship is extensive and quite diverse, effectively outlining the railway's implications for socioeconomic interactions between members of society. From the general histories of Christian Wolmar and Nicholas Faith, to the economic narratives of Mark Casson and John R. Kellett, and the social and psychological studies of Jeffrey Richards, John M. MacKenzie, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, railway historians have identified, studied, and described the transformative powers of the railways and the ways in which they were felt across society.

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[1] Michael Robbins, *The Railway Age*, 3rd ed (Manchester, UK ; New York: Mandolin, Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the USA by St. Martin's Press, 1998), 23.

[2] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (University of California Press, 1986).

However, none of these works fully relates the findings of railway scholarship to the parallel changes in contemporary British popular literature. While the Romantics drew inspiration from the medieval, chivalric past, the natural and supernatural, and the sublime, the Victorians were driven by realism, money relationships, and the pragmatic. Popular literature in the nineteenth century underwent a transition from expressions of lofty ideals and poetic abstraction to the articulation of middle and lower class everyday life. The Romantics inhabited a world intellectually dominated by the fantastic and the transcendent, while the Victorians looked to rational, technological solutions.

The transition in worldview from Romantic to Victorian artistic priority has not gone unnoticed in the field of literary history and criticism. However, most often the causes behind the shift are of secondary importance or ignored completely in favor of focusing on the works of individual authors or specific novels. In his work, *English Poetry of the Victorian Period, 1830-1890,* Bernard Richards proposes that the Victorians had a different "world-picture" than the Romantics, one that was "urban rather than rural, rational rather than intuitional…skeptical rather than fideist, democratic rather than aristocratic, prosaic rather than poetic, [and] scientific rather than mystic."[3]

Richards attributes this shift largely to the rise of Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of utilitarianism. This philosophy was harshly critical of the arts, as Bentham succinctly summarized when in 1825 he remarked, "the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and science of music and poetry."[4] Utilitarianism looked at the world purely in terms of value and use, and found none in poetry beyond distraction. Adherents to utilitarianism,

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[3] Bernard Arthur Richards, *English Poetry of the Victorian Period, 1830-1890*, 2nd ed, Longman Literature in English Series (Harlow, England ; New York: Longman, 2001), 5.

[4] Bentham, Jeremy, quoted in Richards, *English Poetry of the Victorian Period, 1830-1890,* 5.

according to Richards, made it "impossible to take poetry with complete seriousness," by ushering in a new cultural mindset of value-based aesthetics.[5]

Joseph Bristow similarly emphasizes the role of the philosophical developments of the times, though he places much more significance on the politics of the times. In his interpretation, the political unrest following the Napoleonic Wars surrounding the issue of political enfranchisement and suffrage charged popular culture with a deeply political energy. Playing into this politicization of the public, Bentham's utilitarian evaluation of poetry pushed authors to create a meaning for their work as poetry could no longer be done for its own sake. Particularly in the 1830s, poets such as Ebenezer Elliot began to publish verses openly critiquing unpopular legislation and thereby shifted the focus of poetry as a medium towards political debate. This lasted until the publication of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Poems* in 1842 that revitalized the medium and cemented him as "the first Victorian Poet."[6] However, poetry could not fully recover from the loss of artistic stature it sustained in the 1830s and could not as a medium establish itself fully as art or polemic.[7]

Lionel Stephenson's *The English Novel, A Panorama,* provides an economic interpretation of the shift. In his introduction, he points out that the rising the middle class consumers of literature "were less interested in the heroic exploits of antique nobles than in the difficulties of people with whom they could identify themselves."[8] People wanted to read the stories of characters that made sense to them; they desired a literature reflective of their experience and lifestyle that was more immediately real than the high-minded

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[5] Ibid, 5.

[6] Joseph Bristow, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

[7] Ibid., 1–22.

[8] Lionel Stevenson, *The English Novel: A Panorama* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, USA, 1960), 8–9.

poetics of Romanticism. Victorian literature, embodied in the novels of Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, was "the primary literary medium of a bourgeois culture."[9]

Avoiding the question of the causality behind the transition altogether, Carol T. Christ argues against the periodization of literature and focuses instead on the continuity between what she considers anachronistically divided authors. Christ points out the inherent difficulties of periodization, stating, "There is no point at which one literary period ends and another begins."[10] Christ's point is that the labels of "Romantic" and "Victorian" are entirely retrospective constructions that do not capture contemporary self-interpretation; each encompasses such breadth over fluctuating periods of time that defining either in a meaningful way becomes impossible without massive oversimplification. Instead, one should rather understand the authors and their works in terms of continuity and mutual influence than as clean-cut steps along a timeline.[11]

The goal of this study is to show that truly there was a stark contrast between the Romantics and the Victorians caused by the introduction and normalization of the railways. Because of the railways, the Romantics and the Victorians lived in different worlds that necessitated a different cultural language of expression.

One of the most important features of popular literature and widely consumed culture is its ability to form a shared "cultural language." This cultural language provides a vocabulary of experience, allowing people to draw on the content, tone, and values of a particular work to articulate and communicate more complex ideas or experiences to

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison, eds., *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 15 (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Pub, 2002), 19.

[11] Ibid., 19–20.

others in everyday conversation.[12] The predominant cultural language during early railway production was that of Romanticism, which served as a framework for early understandings of the railways. In the face of the radically new railway experiences, people relied on the cultural language of Romanticism to communicate the wonder, fear, and awe that the early railways inspired.

However, the establishment of a mature, society-wide railway network of tracks, stations, and locomotives compelled a reconstruction of the Romantic cultural language to capture. Unlike other great inventions such as anesthesia, oil refinement, or space exploration, the introduction of the railways sparked immediate profound changes in the day-to-day life of nearly every member of society across all economic, social, and geographic divides. The changes set in motion by the railways and the normalization of those changes led to the creation of a different experiential world for the average person, one that could no longer be described in the same terms. It was this new worldview that forced the move from Romanticism to Victorian literature. As a reflection of societal and personal experience, literature had to mirror the dramatic changes worked by the railways. The establishment and regularization of the railway into everyday British culture made a Realist world, one that was driven not by the sublime but by the pragmatic. This new world compelled the redevelopment of popular literature to help people describe and understand their new lives.

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[12] This phenomenon is readily observable in the modern world. For instance, one has only to say "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse," or "Houston, we have a problem," to instantly communicate very specific emotions, actions, or experiences. The words of such cultural icons as Marlon Brando and Tom Hanks and their ubiquity within popular culture allow people ways to articulate their own situations and reactions in a succinct and unequivocal manner through shared cultural knowledge.

In order to make this case, this study will trace the effects of the introduction and adoption of the railways over time, starting with early Romantic reactions. The railway network was recognized as revolutionary from its initial appearance. Speaking through the contemporary cultural language of Romanticism, people responded to and understood themselves in relation to the railways in terms of this revolutionary quality. Romanticism was apt at communicating experiences of wonder and technological awe and formed the basis for conversations of early railway interaction.

Chapter 1: Romanticism and Early Railway Industrialism

One of the hallmarks of the Romantic movement was a glorification of the ancient and medieval past. J.M.W. Turner painted Roman ruins, Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* celebrated the medieval Scottish and Saxon past respectively, and numerous Romantic poets regularly drew inspiration from observing Roman ruins. When confronted with the railways, many people reacted with the same kind of orientation towards the past. In a letter to a friend from around 1840, Charlotte Brontë wrote:

> A distant relation of mine, one Patrick Boanerges, has set off to seek his fortune, in the wild, wandering, adventurous, romantic, knight-errant-like capacity of clerk on the Leeds and Manchester Railroad. Leeds and Manchester, where are they? Cities in the wilderness -- like Tadmor, alias Palmyra -- are they not?[13]

The cities Tadmor and Palmyra to which she refers are in modern day Syria and date back to the second millennium BCE. For Brontë, the cities on the other side of the rail line held the same mythical quality of distance as these ancient cities on the other side of the globe. Railways, for Brontë, radically increased the size of her world by connecting her to locations within her own country that had been effectively foreign and spatially disconnected from her world experience. The cultural language of Romanticism and its classicism in a few words easily communicated the novelty of this complex feeling of overturned concepts of distance.

In this letter Brontë also makes use of the Romantic cultural language in her description of her relation's new position by using words such as "adventurous" and "knight-errant-like." These are the kinds of descriptors Romantic authors might use to

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[13] Charlotte Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, ed. Margaret Smith, vol. 1 (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1995), 228.

characterize a chivalric hero, here used in the context of a mere clerk. Despite being what might today be considered a mundane, unremarkable job, the position of railway clerk was part of the grand technological marvel that was the railways, a marvel that very few understood. This gave railway clerks a certain stature as men on the cutting edge of the new and awe-inspiring railway technology. To many, like Brontë, the radically new and yet undefined status of railway men and the pioneering spirit that they embodied was best articulated by likening them to the heroes of popular stories. The characters and settings of Romantic literature gave people the means to more easily articulate and understand the changes in their society.

Romantic thought could also be used to articulate opinions less approving and celebratory of the rails than Brontë's. Mary Russell Mitford, the daughter of a doctor from Hampshire in England, in 1835 described to a friend a sketch of the archangel Uriel she observed, writing, "I should like you to see it. In these days of railways and steam engines, a restored art, a new medium of beauty is worth looking at."[14] To Mitford, the industrial world of the railways was a time of decline in art, a time that necessitated a "restored" beauty. The ideal for the "restored" beauty that revitalized her sentiments of artistic satisfaction was the archangel Uriel, a common subject of medieval and renaissance artwork. Mitford was in this way rejecting the railways through Romanticism. The cultural affinity for glorifying the past and older styles and subject matter was pervasive enough in her mental framework that it helped conceptualize her reactions to the railway world.

Alongside the celebration of the past, Romantics also used naturalism and the fantastic to articulate early railway experiences. An 1829 letter to the editor of *The Times*

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[14] Mary Russell Mitford, *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford...Related in a Selection from Her Letters to Her Friends*, ed. Alfred Guy L'estrange, vol. 3 (London, England: Richard Bentley, 1870), 38–39.

reports a Mr. Dickinson saying, "[E]very time the piston rod rose and fell, they [railway engines] made a noise like an elephant: which would startle any horse that would approach them. It was not the smoke merely, they sent forth noise, smoke, steam, and fire. There was no engine of so infernal an appearance."[15] Dickinson's language here makes the railway engine seem almost as some form of demon or monster. The engine in his eyes bellowed forth fire and smoke, makes a horrible noise, startles any horse, and is even "infernal" in appearance. This demonic imagery spoke to widespread industrial shock and mistrust of the intimidating new technology. To many, including Dickinson, the railway was best understood as some sort of fantastic, supernatural entity beyond normal human understanding and therefore somewhat monstrous. Dickinson was attempting to convince a committee not to allow railways into Manchester, and he communicated his reservations and displeasure at the idea through the shared language of Romantic supernaturalism.

A similar form of supernaturalism in reactions to the railways can be seen in John Martin's *The Last Judgment* (image 1). This painting's depiction of the end of days prominently features a locomotive barreling towards the abyss.[16] In Martin's artistic vision, this kind of railway disaster was of such magnitude that it could meaningfully contribute to a depiction of the apocalypse. While uncommon, derailments, crashes, and other railway disasters could have a devastating impact on those involved. In 1865 Charles Dickens survived a railway accident physically unharmed, but suffered what might today be termed post-traumatic stress regarding the incident. In his words, "I don't want to be examined at the inquest and I don't want to write about it. I could do no good either way,

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[15] "Liverpool and Manchester Railway," *The Times*, March 16, 1829, sec. News, 5.

[16] Martin, John. *The Last Judgment*, oil on canvas, 1853 (The Tate Collection). http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/martin-the-last-judgement-t01927.

and I could only seem to speak about it to myself…But in writing these scanty words of recollection I feel the shake and I am obliged to stop."[17] Clearly, railway disasters were a powerful event. Martin expresses the momentousness of these tragedies with Romantic imagery by placing a railway disaster in the supernatural setting of the end of days.

Image 1: Martin, John. *The Last Judgment*, oil on canvas, 1853 (The Tate Collection). http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/martin-the-last-judgement-t01927

The experience of the railway was also commonly communicated in terms of the natural world, the most significant framework for Romantic thought. In 1830, actress Frances Kemble attempted a rather technical description of the machinery involved in the railway engine in a letter to a friend. Eventually, however, the difficulty of the details drove

[17] Dickens, Charles, *Journey in England.* New York, 1835, 68, Quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, 137–138.

her to abandon a purely scientific explanation of the railways in favor of Romantic naturalized imagery,

> I wonder if you are understanding one word I am saying all this while! We were introduced to the little engine which was to drag us along the rails. She (for they make these curious little fire-horses all mares) consisted of a boiler, a stove, a small platform, a bench, and behind the bench a barrel containing enough water to prevent her being thirsty for fifteen miles, -- the whole machine not bigger than a common fire-engine. She goes upon two wheels, which are her feet, and are moved by bright steel legs called pistons; these are propelled by steam, and in proportion as more steam is applied to the upper extremities (the hip-joints, I suppose)…The reins, bit, and bridle of this wonderful beast is a small steel handle…The coals, which are its oats, were under the bench, and there was a small glass tube affixed to the boiler, with water in it, which indicates by its fullness or emptiness when the creature wants water, which is immediately conveyed to it from its reservoirs…This snorting little animal, which I felt rather inclined to pat, was then harnessed to our carriage…[18]

Here, Kemble lost faith in the ability of technical talk and mechanical specifications to fully capture the nature of the railway engine. In order to more effectively articulate her experience in a way understandable to her friend, Kemble turned to Romanticized analogies affectionately comparing the railway engine to a "wonderful beast." The strictly technological language of gears and pistons was deemed insufficient for communication; it was so new that it was alien to the cultural language of the times. Steam engine mechanics were strange, almost mystical to most and only understood by few, and so did not fully exist within the realm of easily communicable experience. Kemble here turned to the cultural language of Romanticism as a means of articulating what would otherwise have been incommunicable.

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[18] Frances Anne Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood* (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co., 1879), 281.

However, the railways gradually ceased producing experiences easily described within the cultural vocabulary of Romanticism. A very depressed Caroline Anne Bowles Southey[19] wrote to her husband in 1835,

> The worst to me is, that when I am leading this sort of restless, unsettled life, I cannot make the most (as I see others do) of the spare half hours, or hours even, that I may call my own; once out of the railroad of my own silent solitary life, I am absolutely good for nothing but mere mechanical exertion -- and no matter, if the end be but peace.[20]

Conversely to the above examples of Romantic language used to respond to railways, this is an instance of Romanticism co-opting railway experience to articulate personal Romantic emotionalism: instead of using the language of Romanticism to articulate the railways, Southey here uses the railways to articulate her Romantic feelings. Cultural languages are constructed and evolve over time as reflections of the most widely resonant experiences of the day. By 1835, the railways were mature enough to begin sometimes producing a new kind of railway experience, one that was not characterized by wonder, fear, or awe, but by normalcy. Southey's inclusion of the railways into her common cultural vocabulary heralded the transition away from a purely Romantic period and a move towards a new cultural experience.

As shown in the above examples, the Romantic cultural language was widely used as a vehicle for communication of railway experiences. Upon their introduction, the railways were simply too revolutionary to be expressed on their own terms, but could only be characterized, understood, and articulated using the cultural vocabulary of wonder, fear,

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[19] Southey was the daughter of an employee of the East India Company who received some education before taking up poetry herself, though various financial difficulties and the death of her husband kept her from giving much consistent attention to her poetic career.

[20] Caroline Anne Bowles Southey and Robert Southey, *The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles*, ed. Edward Dowden (Dublin, Leinster, Ireland: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1881), 328.

and awe native to Romanticism. In the early stages of railway industrialism, Romanticism was a powerful tool for communication of human interaction with railway technology.

However, this integration of railways and Romanticism could not last. Gradually, the far-reaching changes brought about by the introduction and normalization of the railways would undermine the utility of Romanticism as a means of expression and articulation. The omnipresent tracks, stations, and locomotives of the railway network and their effects on society over time remade the world of the Romantics into something new. This new world necessitated a new cultural language to describe its experiences, one that was no longer medieval, naturalistic, emotional, or supernatural.

Chapter 2: Railways and Societal Change

The railways were engines of great and rapid change within Victorian society, affecting people in profound ways from the start of railway construction. Mechanized travel created new economic opportunities, gave both upper and lower classes access to new amenities and conveniences, and facilitated the development of a wider British culture. At the same time, the railways destroyed many old forms of employment, underscored the divide between rich and poor, and served to reinforce many regional prejudices.[21] The forces at work were complex and affected different people in sometimes contradictory ways, benefitting some and hurting others across society. However, in nearly all cases and across all contrasting railway experiences, the transformative force of the railways was so powerful that the railway network became inextricable from the new British culture and civilization it created. The railways and their influence worked their way into nearly all aspects of British culture and forced drastic change; leaving Britons and their world reliant on the once invasive industrial technology.

One of the most immediate ways the railways ingrained themselves into British civilization was through its massive labor force. The railways demanded hordes of workers for the construction of track, regularly employing up to sixty men per mile under construction.[22] Additionally, the railways demanded the purchase of huge amounts of raw material, as much as 156 tons of iron per mile of track laid. Further, railway shipments necessitated enormous administrative machines able to track goods moving across the

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[21] Nicholas Faith, *The World the Railways Made* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1990), 280; Christian Wolmar, *Fire & Steam: A New History of the Railways in Britain* (London: Atlantic Books Ltd., 2009), 85, 90–107.

[22] M.C Reed, *Railways in the Victorian Economy* (Newton Abbot: Latimer Trend & Company Limited, 1969), 18.

country.[23] As an industry of interconnected economic enterprises, the railways prompted massive expansion of businesses across many sectors and companion industries. Between 1830 and 1870, railway employment was the fastest growing occupation in the Victorian economy, rising to the sixth largest in 1870 with roughly a quarter of a million men, over three percent of the British workforce.[24] Paid competitive wages for their work, these men were largely former agricultural laborers or loom weavers, especially in the early years.[25] Most of these men were illiterate or had little to no inkling of how railways worked but were empowered to take part in revolutionary railway enterprise.[26]

Once employed by the railways, these men very seldom reverted back to agricultural labor. This was because working for the railways was in many ways a unique opportunity with certain advantages compared to equivalent jobs in other industries. Unlike many other fields that offered essentially dead-end positions, the railways offered advancement and promotion to men with aptitude and skill. Enginemen and other higher skilled laborers were in short supply particularly in the 1830s and '40s when the technology was still new and there were scant few men with any experience. The railway was a young, glamorous and technologically demanding industry without an established labor pool, and railway owners were eager to remedy this situation as quickly and as economically as possible. New enginemen were recruited from wherever they could be

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[23] Robbins, *The Railway Age*, 25.

[24] Peter Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen: The Emergence and Growth of Railway Labour, 1830-1870* (London: Cass, 1970), xii.

[25] In Christian Wolmar's words, "Wages were paid in pubs, encouraging the long drinking bouts that could last for several days and the navvies [highly skilled railway workers] normally returned to work only once their money had run out. Long lived navvies were a rarity, with the combination of diet [he earlier states that one gallon of beer and two pounds of beef daily was not uncommon], drinking, and danger killing most of them by their forties…Neither their sobriety not the safety of their work was helped by the fact that some companies refused to hire a man unless he agreed to receive part of his wages in beer." Quote from *Fire and Steam,* 32, cited in full in the bibliography.

[26] Kingsford, *Victorian Railwaymen*, 2–5.

found; anyone who demonstrated ability and skill was offered training and could rise to attain a better job. This made railway labor one of the few reliable avenues for economic advancement within the Victorian economy, one that people across the country eager embraced and were unwilling to abandon.[27] Compared to most unskilled and semi-skilled labor positions, railway labor was fairly stable; workers could expect to keep their jobs for a longer period of time and on a more regular basis than in other industries. Decent wages, bonuses, limited injury compensation, the provision of cheap housing, fashionable uniforms, and a feeling of being part of a special, cutting edge enterprise all contributed to engendering a unique sense of commitment among the railway workers to their company.[28]

The benefits of the railways quickly created a large, loyal workforce of fully industrialized laborers. These men and their families worked and lived by the railways; their livelihoods were intertwined with railway economics. Soon after their introduction, the railways became inseparable from the British labor economy.

Railways also normalized themselves into the British consumer experience. One of the many new possibilities of the rails was increasing the variety of foods available in any given location. Transportation allowed for the geographical divorce of production and consumption; food could be sold outside of the immediate surrounding area where it was produced. In practical terms, this meant that Londoners now had access to milk, fish, and other perishables from the English countryside—and, with the later development of refrigeration, even overseas—that had not been even possible to attain previously. The

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[27] Ibid., 4–5.

[28] Wolmar, *Fire & Steam: A New History of the Railways in Britain*, 32, 46.

railways broadened people's diets and fostered a limited culinary integration of different regions.[29]

However, the railways were not always so benevolent. They could very easily destroy people's livelihoods or uproot families in the way of planned tracks, especially in urban areas. From the start, railways desired the best access possible to the centers of their source of business, the cities. Companies pressured cities to allow them to construct terminals and stations within the metropolitan area so that the rails would be more attractive and better able to access and service the lucrative urban market. Unable to deny the obvious economic benefits of a railway connection, all major cities let the railways in. Furthermore, the railways were given the limited right to compulsorily purchase land and relocate people for the purposes of constructing these urban lines and stations. Railway land hunger was significant, gobbling up directly or strongly influencing the use of up to twenty percent of some cities' central land. Railways, as prudent financial organizations, were drawn to the cheapest land available, the slums and poor districts. Railway construction in practice was in many ways a kind of slum clearing exercise, as countless new "railway refugees" were displaced by railway companies' construction projects.[30]

Urban rails could also have negative consequences for small merchants and shopkeepers. On one hand, land near railway terminals increased in value and small retail businesses boomed from access to a larger consumer base. At the same time businesses that were farther away from the stations and too poor to relocate suffered immensely, as the locus of commerce moved away from their street or small town. Small shops far

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[29] Ibid., 263–264.

[30] John R Kellett, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 2, 26–7, 37.

enough away to be "inconvenient" were in many ways cut off from the economic development resulting from the railways and suffered as a direct result of railway construction marginalizing their opportunities. Though positive in some spheres and negative in others, the railways irreversibly redefined British economics and consumers' possibility space.[31]

The railways also ingrained themselves into society through consumer understanding of their transportation capability. One of the psychological benefits of railway transportation was the alleviation of much of the fear of famine. Even in the comparatively prosperous British economy, agricultural shortage was a constant threat. France, another productive modern nation, was hit with severe food shortages as late as 1846-7, demonstrating the vulnerability that modern societies faced at the caprice of the weather and the harvests. While railways could not prevent bad agricultural years, they could provide famine stricken regions with aid from more productive areas. The Irish potato famine of the 1840s and 50s shows how promises of technological solutions to problems were not always met, but the railways significantly altered people's perceptions of famine. In times of poor harvest in England after the introduction of the railways, there would be considerably less panic at initial signs of food shortage, and less of a motive for merchants and consumers to start hoarding foodstuffs and increasing prices. Railways served as a normalizing influence on the agriculture economy and pushed markets away from drastic price changes.[32]

Railways were also very rapidly integrated into the social hierarchy of the country. As early as 1830, first and second-class tickets were sold in separate booking offices and

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[31] Ibid., 16–17, 37.

[32] Faith, *The World the Railways Made*, 262.

waiting rooms on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, and the Stockton and Darlington offered third class accommodation starting in 1835.[33] This had the effect of reinforcing class divisions, as the wealthy now had their own separate time and space of travel devoid of any and all lower class passengers.[34] Beyond travel itself, the railways enabled the establishment of wealthy suburbs outside of the city proper, further heightening class divisions.[35] Within the cities, railway lines had the power to clear slums, reshape economic geographies for good and ill, and even establish "proper places" of respectable neighborhood in relation to the "right" and "wrong" sides of the tracks.[36] Alongside their physical integration presence in the land, the railways were coopted wholly into the social and cultural framework of Victorian lifestyles. Soon after they arrived, the railways, along with the greater industrialism they heralded, became inextricable, permanent features of Great Britain.

Beyond the economic realm, the railways were also a powerful social and psychological force, with an equally diverse range of effects that embedded the railways into social culture. The railways replaced old understandings of distance and travel with a new railway experience of time and space. On a basic level, the increased frequency of travel and a greater number of people moving around the country meant a higher level of interaction between people of different regions. Novelist R. S. Surtees stated in his 1865 novel, *Mr. Facey Romford's Hounds,* "Among the great advantages afforded by railways has been that of opening out the great matrimonial market, whereby people can pick and choose wives all the world over, instead of having to pursue the old Pelion on Ossa of Pig

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[33] Simmons and Biddle, *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History from 1603 to the 1990s*, 84.
[34] Faith, *The World the Railways Made*, 235.
[35] Robbins, *The Railway Age*, 39.
[36] Kellett, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities*, 12–17, 36–7, 384–6.

upon Bacon system of always marrying a neighbor's child."[37] While localities and regions would certainly still hold on to their distinct cultures, the railways enabled a period of increased, though still limited, inter-regional cultural exchange and a mixing of peoples.

Most often, regional cultures mixed through the tourism industry that sprung up around the railways. Ever eager for more business, railway companies quickly began to advertise excursion trains—day trips via rail out to the country, the coast or some other attractive location. For the lower classes, this was an exciting opportunity to go sightseeing and experience what would have been comparatively exotic locations in "one day that could be recorded with pleasure in otherwise grim lives."[38] Conversely, for the wealthy, most of which largely already had access to these tourist locations, the advent of the cheap excursion train ended the purity of their favorite vacation spots. Most wealthy people who travelled did so to escape the bustle of the city or experience tranquility they saw as ruined by an influx of lower class day-trippers. This pushed the rich further afield to find the remoteness that they craved. William Wordsworth himself wrote one day to the *Morning Post* expressing his fear that his preferred lake retreat was no longer "safe from the molestation of cheap trains pouring out their hundreds at a time."[39]

While the new tourists were exposed to new areas and different people, the actual cultural exchange was often quite limited. In a way, the accessibility of these far off places made them lose some of their significance. What in the time before railways would have been an extraordinarily significant, extended visit was now reduced to "just another item in

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[37] Surtees, R. S., *Mr. Facey Romford's Hounds,* quoted in Faith, *The World the Railways Made*, 233.

[38] Michael J. Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999), 115.

[39] Ibid., 114. Citing Wordsworth, William.

an impersonal itinerary."[40] The steep economic and temporal cost of travel before railways made journeying to somewhere far away carry a certain weight that was lost when the same could be accomplished in an afternoon. Travelling became an ordinary, unspectacular experience, which could rob the locations visited of their significance and make the whole affair somewhat underwhelming. Railway transport, through experiences of the mundane and the exotic found beyond the horizon, reshaped people's relationship with distant places.[41]

The railways also affected people's understanding of the space of the railway journey, the space between the two stations. Wolfgang Schivelbusch aptly uses the phrase "annihilation of space and time" to describe this relationship. After the adoption of the railways, distances that had previously taken days or weeks to traverse could now be travelled in a few hours. In a sense, the intervening spaces were cut out of the journey, as they were only experienced as a blur of motion in the window. Travel by railway precluded acquiring the detailed knowledge of the land one would gain from an extended journey by carriage or by horse. Geographically disparate locations such as London and Manchester became linked and pushed closer together; each was merely on the other side of a train ride from the other. To use Schivelbusch's words, "They [passengers on the railway] were no longer travelers–rather…they were human parcels who dispatched themselves to their destination by means of the railway, arriving as they left, untouched by the space traversed."[42]

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[40] Faith, *The World the Railways Made*, 272.

[41] Ibid., 271–275.

[42] Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, 33–39.

The metaphor of passengers making themselves into packages speaks to another major facet of railway travel, a perceived loss of connection with the landscape. While travelling under animal power, one was subject to the bumps of the path and the whims of the weather. Each imperfection in the road was felt, and heavy weather such as storms could slow, postpone, or even cancel a trip. However, railways were not bounded by nature in these ways. The railway moved at a regular speed across a flat surface heedless of all but the most extreme external conditions. Many celebrated this as man's long overdue freedom from the sometimes unpredictable natural world, while others were nervous about the implications of widespread mechanization and the possible loss of soul it represented. No matter where they placed on this question, all people who experienced railway travel had their conceptions of distance, time, and the landscape around them remade by the railways.[43]

Isolation was also felt in terms of one's fellow passengers. One of the key features of railway travel was that it was fast, that travel times were drastically reduced. This meant that passengers were only in contact with one another for short periods of time in a railway compartment, as opposed to the long stretches spent in others' company in a traditional carriage. In the course of a carriage ride, people were in the same place long enough that they would start conversing; it was generally expected that one would get to know their fellow travellers over the course of their long shared journey. However, on the railway, this was not the case, as the short course of a railway journey made such socialization less natural. In practice, it was hardly uncommon for passengers in compartments to spend the entirety of the journey in silence, never exchanging a word with their fellow travelers. This

[43] Ibid., 9–14.

was of course a rather uncomfortable experience, and people quickly turned to reading as a means of escape from the embarrassing isolation from their fellow passengers. Books and newspapers came to replace the conversation of the old carriages as the primary expected and appropriate social etiquette.[44]

The railways also remade the physical landscape of Britain. By 1870 there were already roughly 13,000 miles (nearly nineteen times the length of Great Britain) of track physically imposing technological modernity on the landscape.[45] The material impact of the railways was immense, as each mile of track could consume over 300 tons of iron alone. By this metric, the five years of railway construction from 1846-1850 alone consumed no less than a million and a half tons of iron, roughly equivalent to Great Britain's entire annual iron output at the time.[46] Physically, the stations, tracks, and locomotives of the railway network had become an integral part of the landscape and could no more be removed than the Thames.

In nearly every sector of society, the railways were almost hyperbolically powerful in their capacity to alter and reform class dynamics, economic interactions, cultural priorities, and physical geography, even if in sometimes contradictory ways. Collectively, these changes contributed to a piecewise replacement of the preindustrial Romantic world with an industrial Victorian one. People of all backgrounds, socioeconomic standings, and localities were put into contact with the railways. This had the profound effect of placing the whole of society into contact with industrialism, modernizing the whole of Britain from its very core. To a much greater extent than any other single invention, reform, or cultural

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[44] Ibid., 64–75.

[45] Derek H. Aldcroft, *British Railways in Transition: The Economic Problems of Britain's Railways Since 1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 2.

[46] Robbins, *The Railway Age*, 25.

practice, this had the effect of creating a new world. In this new world, people required a new cultural language to describe their new experiences. The vocabulary of Victorianism arose as a response to that need and directed later conversations of railway experiences.

Chapter 3: Normalizing the Extraordinary

As detailed above, the rapid integration of the railways into British economic, social, and physical geographies set in motion numerous momentous changes with far-reaching effects. The railways opened up new commercial opportunities and created entirely unprecedented patterns of social mobility. Old businesses struggled to stay afloat and the poor were forcibly shunted out of the way of progress while others were simultaneously pulling themselves out of poverty through railway employment and rising towards a whole class of nouveau riche railway entrepreneurs. As a social actor, the railways had the power to alter class relationships, foreign stereotypes, and individuals' experiences of time and space through the transportation possibilities they created.

At first, while the railways were still swiftly evolving in mechanical form and societal implementation, people responded to and understood the railways through the linguistic and cultural lens of Romanticism. From the hopeful optimism and wonder at the seemingly miraculous new possibilities to the fearful traditionalism and unease at the uncertainties of change, the poetics of Romanticism encompassed sufficient cultural vocabulary to effectively describe the variety of early railway experiences. The railways were born in a Romantic world, and were accordingly first understood and accepted on that world's terms.

However, as the railway network took permanent form and became integrated ever more fully into the economic, geographic, and psychological landscape of Britain, it brought with it wholly new cultural experiences that incrementally replaced those of the existing Romantic world. As time passed, the railways rapidly developed increasing speed, power,

reach, and capability to serve the needs of Britain's burgeoning urban industrial society. However, each of the new advancements in railway technology or convenience diminished the excitement, fear, and awe that so characterized the Romantic world's railway experience. Each step forward was experienced as less shocking than the one before it, and each passing year further distanced people from their first, revolutionary experience of the rails. As it matured and began to take their permanent form, the railway network lost its initial magic and wonder and slowly became a normal, even boring fixture of everyday experience. What was once thought to herald either a new golden age of incredible possibility or the inevitable destruction of mankind was just a few years later little more than another potential annoyance in a normal, routine life. This regularization of the extraordinary marked a transition into a qualitatively different world, one that could no longer be described by the cultural vocabulary of Romanticism.

As stated above, one important factor in the regularization of the railways was the integration of previously extraordinary capabilities into everyday life. Over the years, repeated exposure to the once astonishing capabilities of the railways replaced feelings of wonder and awe with comfort and normalcy, as can be seen in the letters of George Eliot. Writing to Maria Lewis in 1841 from Coventry, Eliot mentions, "I am expecting the Bride and Bridegroom to return by the railway this evening. They have had a delightful excursion amongst the lakes and in Scotland."[47] The entire matter of this couple's honeymoon is treated almost as inconsequential; the bride and bridegroom are not explicitly named, and these are the only two sentences on the subject in a somewhat lengthy letter. While in earlier years this kind of trip would have been impractical or even impossible, it is here

[47] George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters, Vol 1: 1836-1851*, ed. Gordon Height (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 98–99.

listed as a mundane detail in the midst of a letter much more concerned with various preachers' interpretations of finer points of Christian belief.

The normalization of the railways into the quotidian is further felt in Eliot's other writings. In a letter of 1851, she began, "Dearest Cara, By an oversight I have left behind the two volumes of Flügel's German Dictionary, which you will find in my room. Will you have the goodness to send them to me by Railway, as they are too bulky for anyone to carry. Also my *scissors* for want of which I am tormented."[48] Here, Eliot is asking Cara to make use of the railway network to send along some rather trivial items. In the context of this letter, the railways were almost taken for granted as the solution to minor annoyances. Inevitably, the wondrous possibilities of the railways came to serve the everyday needs of people too wrapped up in their own affairs to continue to appreciate the significance of their technology. The ubiquity and constancy of the transportation possibilities of the railway network gradually eroded its revolutionary character, as it became a familiar feature of the British landscape.

The familiarization of the railways can also be seen in the art of William Powell Frith. In his 1863 painting, *The Railway Station* (image 2), Frith depicts a crowded scene set in the Great Western Railway's Paddington Station. Featured in the painting are a multitude of figures engaged in a diverse array of separate railway experiences stretching even beyond the bounds of the nearly 30,000 cm^2 of canvas. Noticeably, these figures and their stories are the central focus of the painting, as opposed to the railway itself. While the figures catch the eye with their conspicuous foreground placement and detailed individuality, the locomotive and the station behind them are both largely monochromatic

[48] Ibid., 363.

and much less visually interesting. Frith's use of color, lighting, and compositional placement each pull the eye immediately to the figures; the locomotive and the station slide into the background and are noticed afterwards.[49]

Image 2: William Powell Frith, *The Railway Station*, Oil on Canvas, 1862, Royal Holloway, University of London. http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/frith/paintings/5.html

This normalized, almost secondary nature of the railways in Frith's painting lies in stark contrast to artwork in prior years. Thomas Talbot Bury's *Taking in Water at Parkside (The Station where Mr. Huskisson Fell)* from 1831 (image 3) depicts a very similar scene, with multiple figures tending to their own business in front of and around a locomotive at a train station. However, the locomotive and the station are much more than simple background elements in Bury's aquatint. The locomotive is prominently placed directly on the vanishing point, making it a natural center for the entire piece. It is also much more darkly colored than its surroundings, making it even more visually striking. The station itself is also much more noticeable in Bury's aquatint, as it features multiple varied

[49] William Powell Frith, *The Railway Station*, Oil on Canvas, 1862, Royal Holloway, University of London.

structures that dwarf the figures moving in its shadows. The figures, on the other hand, are significantly less visually interesting than in Frith's painting, as Bury uses a much more muted color palette for their dress and repeats several figures instead of constructing personalized characters.[50] In the timespan of a single generation, artistic focus shifted away from the physical presence of the railways towards the experiences of the people using them. The railway itself as a technological innovation over time lost its extraordinary character and became one more unremarkable feature of the everyday landscape.

Image 3: Thomas Talbot Bury, *Taking in Water at Parkside (The Station Where Mr. Huskisson Fell)*, Aquatint, 1831, National Railway Museum.
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taking_in_Water_at_Parkside,_from_Bury's_Liverpool_and_Manchester_Railway,_1831_-_artfinder_267572.jpg

[50] Thomas Talbot Bury, *Taking in Water at Parkside (The Station Where Mr. Huskisson Fell)*, Aquatint, 1831, National Railway Museum.

The railways not only became a regularized part of the societal experience of adults, but were also integrated into the lives of children. Published around 1840, *Wallis' Locomotive Game of Railway Adventures* featured a linen board adorned with forty-eight pictures of railway related scenes serving as the spaces for the game.[51] This would have served as entertainment but also as an educational tool for teaching elementary mathematics and cultural values (the victor won by reaching the figure of Britannia in the center) to children.[52] Such a game suggests that railways were integrated into the wider culture to the point that they were a regular or at least acceptable feature of children's recreation and education. The normalization of the railways granted it inclusion in the often simplified portraits of the world presented to children.

The 1840s also produced more overtly didactic railway related educational tools, such as *Cousin Chatterbox's Railway Alphabet*, published in 1845.[53] This and other railway alphabets featured a series of illustrations and verses meant to teach younger children their letters and older, literate students about the railways. These railway alphabets display a coopting of the railways into the educational system as both a tool for the explanation of school material and as a necessary subject of study in and of themselves. The inclusion of the railways in an alphabet suggests that they were a cultural touchstone that would be assumed to be familiar even to young children. The more detailed information on the various pieces of the railways implies that there was a perceived need for the educational system to provide knowledge of the railways to the youth, that the

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[51] Wallis, "Wallis' Locomotive Game of Railway Adventures," linen, 1840, reproduced in Freeman, Michael J. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999, 204.

[52] Freeman, Michael J., *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999), 203–5.

[53] "Cousin Chatterbox's Railway Alphabet," Thomas Dean and Son's, 1845, reproduced in Freeman, Michael J. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999, 197.

railways were a vital part of what it meant to be educated. Railways were so deeply ingrained into society that they were able to permeate the spheres of childhood education and entertainment as well as adult enterprise.[54]

This acceptance of the assumed ubiquity of the railways is further highlighted in those cases where they were dysfunctional. In an 1845 letter to the editor of *The Times* titled "Railway Grievances," a certain Civilis voiced a complaint against the railways:

> I travelled by the Grand Junction train which should have reached Chester at 10 minutes past 10 a.m…Owing, however, to the state of the weather, we were behind our time…This was a very serious inconvenience to myself and others. I had an appointment in Liverpool for half-past 12 o'clock, and as there was no train leaving for Birkenhead until 1 o'clock, it was impossible for me to keep it. But there was no redress; the office was shut, and the porters and people about, as is usually the case, 'had nothing to do with it.'[55]

Evidently, Civilis had come to rely on the railways to the point that he had, at least in this instance, based his personal schedule around expected arrival times. The significance of this episode in Civilis' life was not the experience of travelling by railway, as it might have been in the Romantic worldview of years past, but rather that the railway company had not provided the promised services as expected. For Civilis, this entire episode would likely have passed into memory without much experienced significance were it not for the "serious inconvenience" that served as the sole impetus for this letter. The nature of these and other similar "Railway Grievances" implies that the railways themselves were accepted as wholly normal in times when they were running as promised. The abnormality lay in the violation of the tacit contract between service provider and consumer. Gone was the fear of the demonic, "infernal" nature of the steam engines from Mr. Dickinson's 1829

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[54] Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*, 197.

[55] Civilis, "Railway Grievances," *The Times*, January 3, 1845, sec. Letters to the Editor.

letter. The Romantic fears of the 1820s and 30s had been replaced by the practical concerns and petty grievances of the 1840s and onwards.

This attitude of reliance on the expected services of the railways is mirrored in the letters of Mary Russell Mitford. In 1852, after receiving flowers via railway delivery, Mitford wrote back to the sender that "in spite of the nicety of the nurseryman's packing, five of the pots were smashed to atoms in that vile railway."[56] As detailed in the previous chapter, Mitford had in 1835 complained that the railways were an inhibitor to art, and proposed a need for a "restored" beauty in an age dominated by railways and steam power. Yet in this passage, the issue was not that the railways were endangering the future of beauty or anything of the sort, but rather that one particular train had been the source of personal inconvenience to her. The railway was "vile" no longer simply because of what it was, but because its actions had not been satisfactory in a single, specific instance. Mitford in 1852 takes for granted the position of the railways as a feature of everyday British life and is only dissatisfied with the relatively mundane fact that a few of her flowerpots had been smashed.

Even in cases of truly horrible lower class riding conditions and open corporate apathy towards their passengers, people willingly accepted the railways as a normal part of their culture. Another letter written to *The Times* by one calling himself Germanus deplores the state of poor railway passengers:

> How, then, is it that the directors of several railroads display such a studied coldhearted indifference to the loud complaints of those respectable classes of the community, who, unable to pay first class fares, are under the dire necessity of sacrificing their health and their lives to the cupidity and avarice of those potentates…Such things would not be tolerated on the continent of

[56] Mary Russell Mitford, *Letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, ed. Henry F Chorley, vol. 2, 2 (London, England: John Lane Company, 1925), 43.

> Europe. The open carriages there are only in use for fourth class of travellers at a very low fare, and even these are provided with seats for human beings, and are not constructed like pens for cattle.[57]

At least in Germanus' eyes, the railway companies in question regularly offered accommodation in cars without "seats for human beings" that were "constructed like pens for cattle." Yet despite all of the "loud complaints" of the passengers and vocal outcry from Germanus and others, fourth-class tickets were sold even until the 1870s,[58] and third class accommodation, often hardly better than what Germanus observed, witnessed an equivalent or even greater rise in sales as compared to first and second class tickets (see images 4, 5, and 6).[59] Apparently people were still willing to purchase a ticket and tolerate the poor conditions for the duration of the trip; railway travel was important and necessary enough that even the dreadful conditions seen outside of first class would not push passengers to find an alternative. Railway travel was sufficiently integrated into society that people could at least temporarily tolerate what was recognized as horrible treatment at the hands of the railway companies. Practically speaking, the lower classes had no choice but to accept third class accommodation. Just as for Civilis above, railway transportation had already become an integral part of people's lives and affairs. By 1845, the railways had ceased to invoke wonder, fear, or awe, and had become an everyday necessity, no matter the cost.

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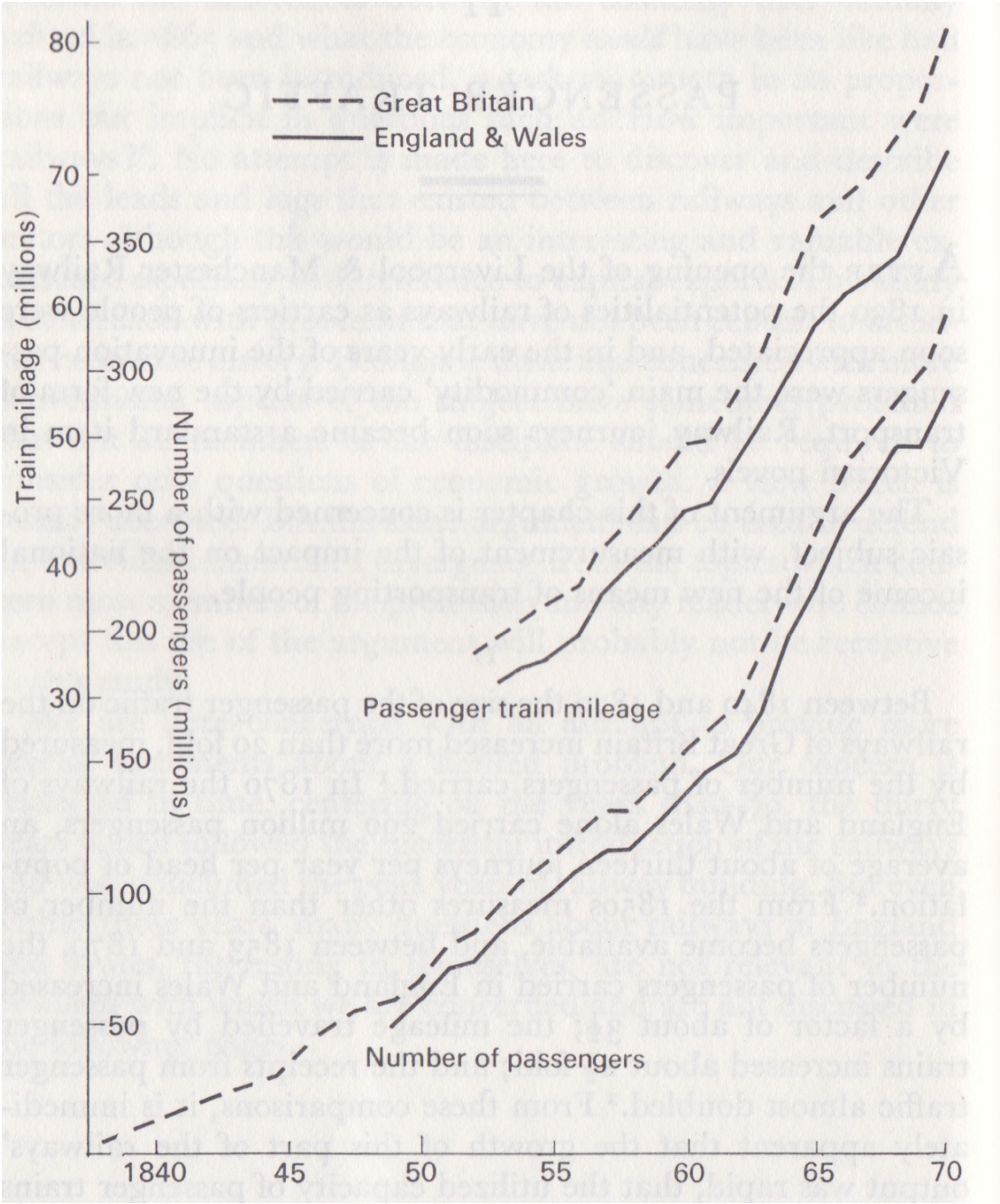
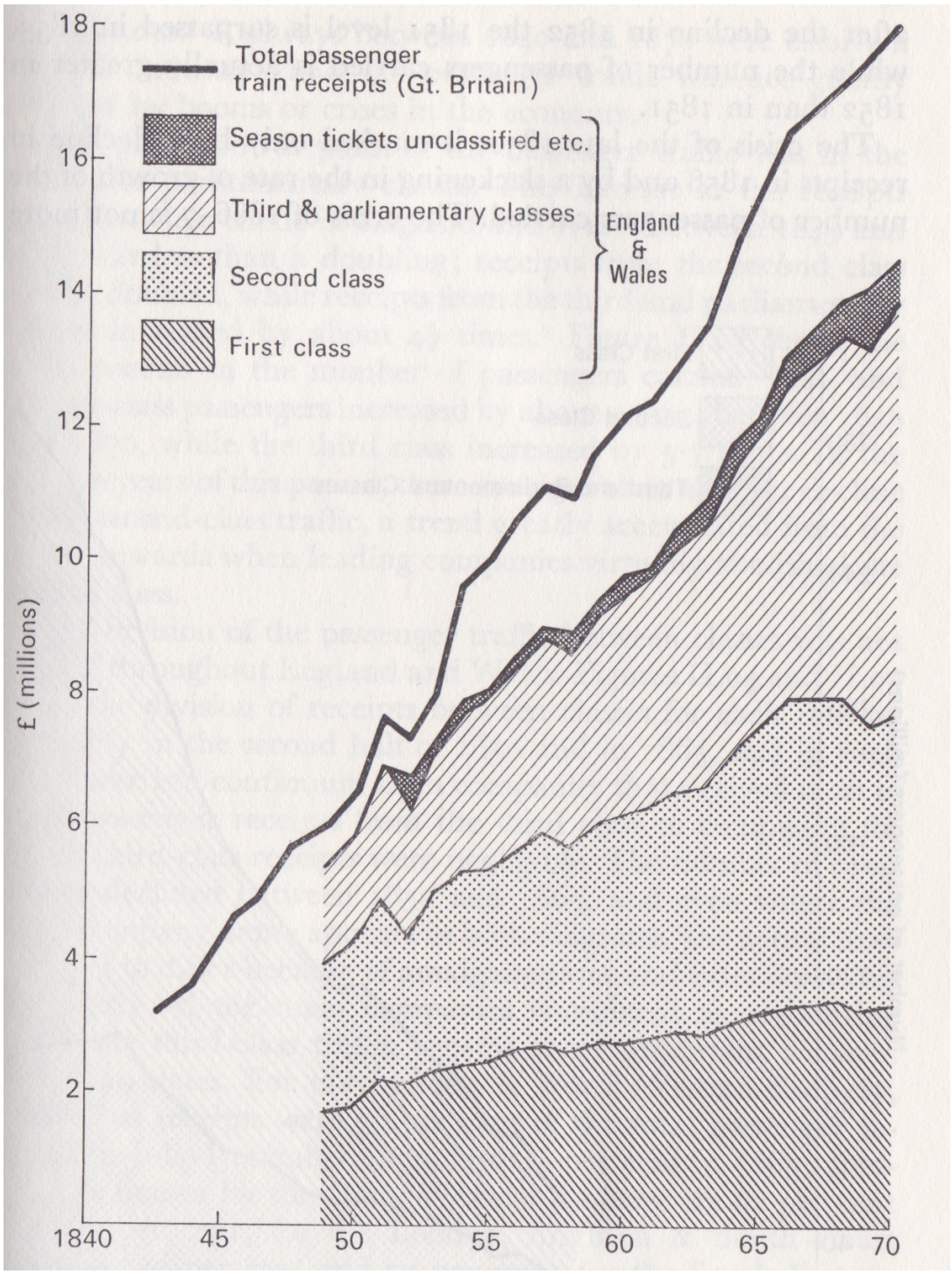
[57] Germanus, "Railway Grievances," *The Times*, January 23, 1845, sec. Letters to the Editor, 5.

[58] Jack Simmons and Gordon Biddle, eds., *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History from 1603 to the 1990s* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84–85.

[59] G.R. Hawke, *Railways and Economic Growth in England and Wales 1840-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 34–36. Charts reproduced as images 4, 5, and 6.


Great Britain
England & Wales
Train mileage (millions)
Number of passengers (millions)
80
70
60
50
40
30
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
Passenger train mileage
Number of passengers
1840
45
50
55
60
65
70


Total passenger
train receipts (Gt. Britain)
Season tickets unclassified etc.
Third & parliamentary classes
Second class
First class
England
&
Wales
£ (millions)
18
16
14
12
10
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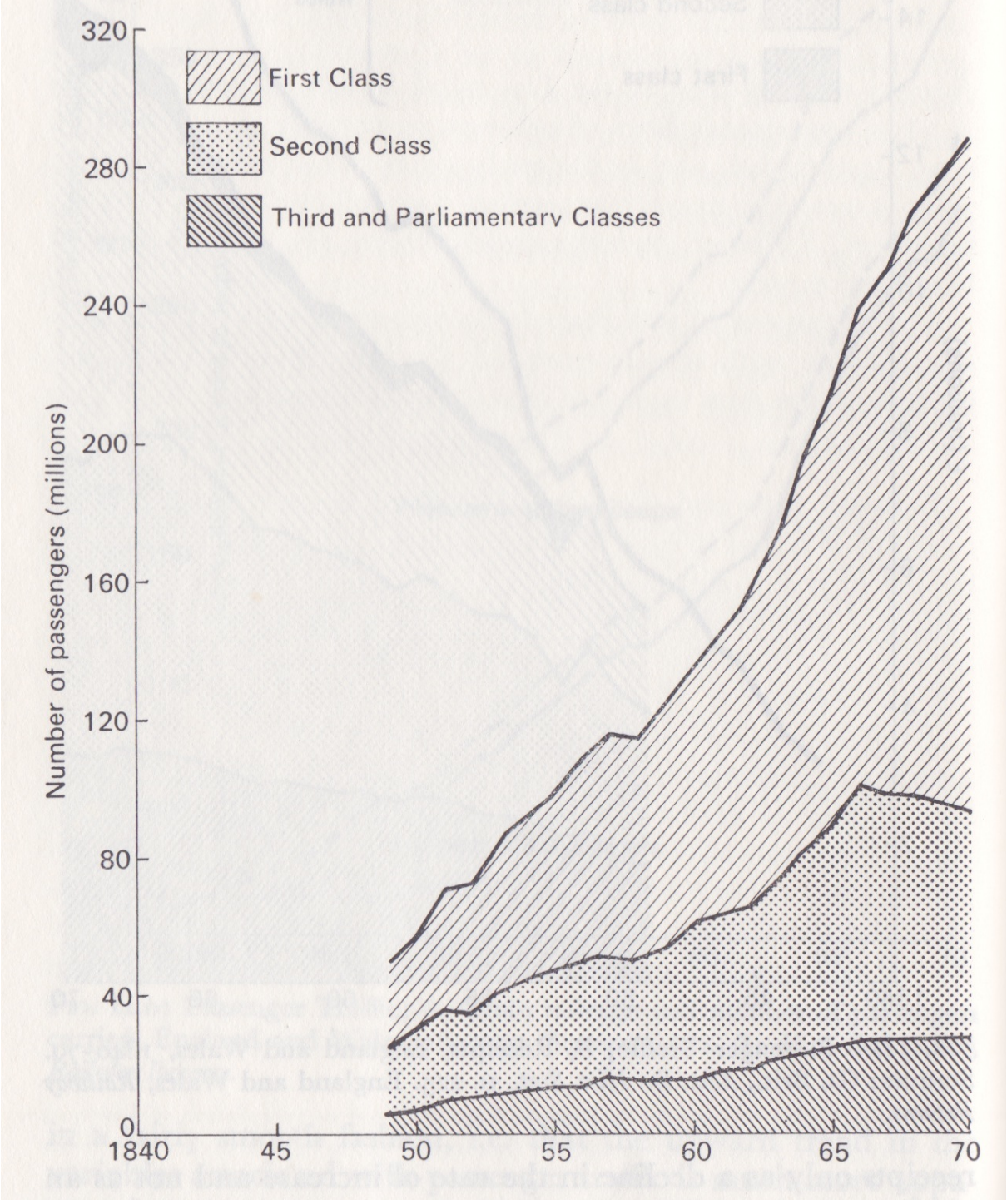

Images 4, 5, and 6: Graphs taken from Hawke, G.R. *Railways and Economic Growth in England and Wales 1840-1870*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, 34-36.

As noted above, by the 1840s the ubiquity of the railways had become so ingrained into the physical and mental landscapes of Britain that those rare regions without a railway connection were jarringly abnormal to contemporary observers. In another of Mitford's letters, she complained to a friend in 1848, "It is certainly most provoking to be, as the crow flies, so near to you, and yet so entirely separated, from the absence of railways and communication of all sorts."[60] Here, the conveniences of railway connections for correspondence and travel had evidently become so much a part of Mitford's lifestyle that their absence was keenly felt as "most provoking." Mitford wrote a letter to her friend, clear evidence of the possibility of communication between the two, and yet the lack of a ready railway connection made the two "so entirely separated…[lacking] communication of all sorts," in Mitford's eyes. For Mitford the railway network had, since 1835, become an assumed feature of her perceived normality. Any deviation from this mental picture of the world was an unexpected intrusion upon her standards of the new regular British experience.

As can be seen, the Victorians did not understand the railways and their relationship with them in the same way as the Romantics before them. While initial Romantic reactions to the railway experience were swept up in the wonder and awe of both the beneficent and malevolent potential of new technology, in as little as one decade the rails had drifted into the British mental background as a fully familiarized feature of everyday routine. This transformation of collective cultural experience would have profound and far-reaching effects on literary styles and artistic priorities.

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[60] Mitford, *Letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, 23.

Perhaps the single most revolutionary property of the railway was that it forced almost every single person in the country to come face to face with industrialization. Romantic critics of early, pre-railway industrialism were largely concerned with combatting what they saw as a growing threat to the human soul and the natural world. Perhaps the starkest example of this fear of rampant industrialism and technology is embodied in Mary Shelley's 1819 novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus.* The entire novel serves as a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of an unrestrained pursuit of knowledge and power over nature. Victor, in devoting himself to his studies, isolated himself from his family and disregarded his own health. Victor's body metaphorically displayed how industry can be a method of self-destruction. When Victor finally realized his vision, the horrid creature he produced made him feel as though "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."[61] Victor harmed himself to create a gross facsimile of man, ultimately destroying himself and everyone he cared about in the pursuit of scientific power. Victor's fall was avoidable; it was the result of his technological greed that, had Victor chosen otherwise, might not have destroyed him. Romanticism viewed early industrialism thusly, as a potential fatal flaw of society that could be prevented or undone.

However, as stated above, the advent of the railways quickly regularized industrialism as a permanent feature of modern society. The many changes wrought by the railways redefined society around railway transport and established railways as part of the new normal. This normalcy surrounding the previously extraordinary railway technology marked the key difference between the Romantics and the Victorians. For the Romantics,

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[61] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (Simon & Brown, 2010), 48.

the railways were extraordinary, truly a monumental intrusion upon the normal. Railway experiences were hugely significant episodes in one's life, and were accordingly wrapped up in Romantic cultural language of awe, fear, wonder, and supernaturalism. The Victorians, conversely, could see the railways as unremarkable features of the background. While the railways grew to enjoy ever greater influence over people's daily lives and societal experience, the magic soon wore off, leaving something normal that was commonly not the center of focus. The railway was a kind of invader into the Romantic mind, but was an assumed member of the Victorian world. The normalization of the railways marked a transition into a fundamentally changed civilization. In this new civilization, the rising middle class created by the railways became the new primary consumers of commercial literature. This new readership had a transformative impact on popular literary styles of the time.

As they grew in economic stature and consumption capacity, the new middle class demanded a new literature that spoke to their industrialized experiences. Previously, great poets such as Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and William Wordsworth had dominated the literature of Romanticism; poetry was the dominant art form. However, the new literate middle class had "neither the scholarly background nor the imaginative responsiveness needed for appreciating poetry with its ornate style and oblique allusions."[62] Romantic literature as an art form had been written by the highly educated, for the highly educated, and was as a result largely inaccessible to the general public. The new class of readers demanded a new style that they could enjoy without an expensive classical education, a literature that did not reject their everyday life. However, the railways again served the

[62] Stevenson, *The English Novel: A Panorama*, 8.

needs of the people popularizing the sale of mass-market books through bookstands in stations.[63]

Satisfying this demand was Charles Dickens, whose work pioneered the popularity and critical acceptance of the novel as the embodiment of new literature reflective of a post-railway world. What was most significant about the novels of Dickens was their "unique ability to cut across the social boundaries of his readership;" Dickens' work could at the same time entertain the casual public and engage critical literary theorists.[64] This was due to Dickens' fervent belief in the value of popular entertainment as culture with artistic validity. Dickens accepted mass-market entertainment styles such as the theater and incorporated them into his novels. In his novel, *Oliver Twist,* Dickens makes use of a morality play, an oral narrative, episodes of acting, newspaper reports, and a pantomime, each a regular feature of popular cultural forms. Throughout his novels, Dickens drew on the personal experiences of his intended audience, a readership that embraced popular culture rather than classical formalism. The railways changed the lives of the people, and Dickens' novels were the first major literature to acknowledge and embrace this reality. Dickens' work was accessible and relatable on a broad scale that the poetry of the Romantics could not match because it was a part and product of the industrial world rather than in opposition to it.

In the new intellectual and experiential climate created by the railways, Dickens' novels were able to capture the spirit of the new zeitgeist and provide a literature reflective of a post-railway world. No longer were readers able to relate to the "ornate style and

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[63] Ibid., 246.

[64] John J. Richetti, ed., *The Columbia History of the British Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 382.

oblique references" but instead turned to the emerging novels of Charles Dickens to help them reconstruct a cultural language appropriate for their industrialized lives. The disorienting experience of railway industrialism necessitated the rise of an author like Dickens to help society make sense of itself and establish a firm, mature relationship with mechanization. Authors after Dickens followed in his footsteps, further cementing the novel as the dominant literary form through acceptance of the post-industrial realities made inescapable by the railways.[65]

[65] Paroissien, *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, 142–7, 455.

Conclusion

Perhaps the single most revolutionary quality of the railways was their ability to force almost every individual person across society to come face to face with industrialization. Early industrial advancements in textile manufacturing, machine tools, metallurgy, and agriculture were all incredibly significant in their own right, each marking a transformation of their field and a huge leap forward. However, the railway was unique among them in how accessible and present it was within the lives of everyday people. A factory or a technologically innovative farmstead, can be easy to underappreciate simply because they are outside of the quotidian; what is not seen is seldom fully understood or even sometimes recognized at all. This distance characterized much of the relationship between the Romantics and early, immature industrialism. Romanticism, as a cultural vocabulary of experience, could very easily condemn early industrialization because it was largely still embryonic and only its faults were widely known.

The railways, on the other hand, were a force in everyone's daily life, whether they themselves rode the rails or not. People from all social strata were buying tickets and were travelling all over the country and even abroad. Private enterprise, class dynamics, the physical landscape, and even time itself bent to the will of the railways and were remade into features of an industrialized civilization. For the first time, the railways brought the entirety of the general public in full, first hand contact with mature industrialism. Once face to face with the railways, people began to enjoy their many benefits, and realize that there was much more to industrialization than the fear mongering poetics of Wordsworth and Blake. Hardly anyone believed this industrialization was perfect, but those who had

had a real encounter with the railways were calling for such things as more comfortable accommodation or more regular timetables rather than the abolition of the technology altogether. These railway encounters and the comfort with technology that they brought with them heralded a new experiential world for society as a whole, not just for individual factory workers or mechanized farmers.

Literature was forced to follow suit as a reflection of its times and of the new railway experiences of its authors. Just as society changed from a preindustrial world to an industrial one, literature moved from the Romantic to the Victorian after the introduction of the railways. The majority of literary scholarship tends to underplay or ignore the causality behind this shift. As mentioned above, authors generally focus on literary critique of individual authors and their works, dissecting the elements of style and device that make great literature. When mentioned at all, the causality behind the large-scale nineteenth century shifts in artistic style are attributed to Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, Tennyson's popularity, the politicization of literature surrounding controversial legislation, or the rise of the middle class.

However, examination of the radical and far-reaching changes brought about by the railways reveals that the reason literature shifted from the Romantic poem to the Victorian novel was because it had moved into an entirely different experiential world. People's lives were different; where they lived, how they moved about their day, what was possible and impossible, and how they understood themselves in the context of the world were all fundamentally dissimilar when compared with the years before the railways. As a feature and expression of the shared cultural vocabulary, popular literature merely described and communicated this new world.

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