COLLISIONS: IDENTITY AND THE RAILWAY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of RICHARD MENKE)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the effects of the technology of mobility, specifically the railway, on personal identity and the human body in British literature of the nineteenth century. Examining three popular works from the nineteenth century, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White,* Ellen Wood's *East Lynne,* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest,* I trace the development of anxieties over the relationship between man and machine, from the omnipresent nervous panic present in Collins's work to the nonchalant archness present in Wilde's. I suggest that these works are used to negotiate and control the complex and often disturbing matrix of bodies, identities, and the railway present in Victorian British consciousness.

INDEX WORDS: Wilkie Collins; The Woman in White; Charles Dickens; Oscar Wilde; The Importance of Being Earnest; Ellen Wood; East Lynne; sensation novels; railway; Victorian; technology; railroad; Britain.

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DEDICATION

To Stephen, husband and writer extraordinaire: I love ya, babe.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A profound and deeply split discourse surrounded the British railway during the nineteenth century. The reality of the railway was unavoidable; as Walter Bagehot, a prominent critic and editor, wrote in 1867, "A new world of inventions – of railways and of telegraphs – has grown up around us, which we cannot help seeing" (Bagehot qtd. in Simmons 13). Views on this modern technology of mobility, however, differed widely. What I seek to do with this project is to trace the development of both the apprehensions and the intense curiosity regarding the railway's effect on Britain (and Britons) through an examination of its appearance and role in some of the nonfiction and fiction of the nineteenth century. Alan Trachtenberg has argued that "in their railway journeys nineteenth-century people…encountered themselves as moderns" (xv); it is through interactions with this technology, so emblematic of forward progress, that a person's identity is partly inscribed. The Victorian myth of progress, espoused by Mill and Carlyle among others, suggests that "wondrous Mankind is advancing somewhither; that at least all human things are, have been, and forever will be, in Movement and Change" (Carlyle 98). Walter Houghton admits that this myth was not altogether linear or universally positive even to the Victorians; he claims, however, that – thanks in large part to influence of writers such as Mill and Carlyle – popular sentiment still reflected a belief that "Change is *progress,* and the age is one of *transition to a greater age*" and that the period after 1850 was marked by a period of "ecstatic anticipation" of the future (Houghton 32-33, italics in original). The Victorians' own deep reservations about the myth of progress have been much discussed in scholarship, and this project seeks to add to the conversation by highlighting the fraught attitudes towards the railway

as emblem of modernity present in some of the nineteenth century's most popular literature. The matrix of body, identity, and technology present in these works is complex, suggesting both a faith in the "Movement and Change" espoused by Carlyle and a deep uneasiness with the power such elements have over the human subject.

That the railway is a consistent and significant force in the British popular consciousness is undeniable: it appears in texts as divergent as William Wordsworth's poem "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways" (1833), Elizabeth Gaskell's charmingly nostalgic novella *Cranford* (1851), Wilkie Collins's sensational hit *The Woman in White* (1860), George Meredith's protofeminist *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), and Oscar Wilde's *fin de siècle* farce *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). While the eminent railway historian Jack Simmons may claim that "there is no English novel of any importance in which the railway takes a central place" (217), there are many novels (and poems and plays) in which the railway is a constant presence, whether used as a crucial plot point or a mere tangential reference.

Charles Dickens's treatment of the railway in his 1848 novel *Dombey and Son* is a useful exemplar of the fraught relationship many Britons had with the railway. Dickens describes the erasure of the Staggs's Gardens neighborhood in London thus:

> As to the neighbourhood which had hesitated to acknowledge the railroad in its struggling days, that had grown wise and penitent…and now boasted of its powerful and prosperous relation. There were railway patterns in its drapers' shops, and railway journals in the windows of its newsmen. There were railway hotels, coffee-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses; railway plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes, and time tables….To and from the heart

> of this great change, all day and night, throbbing currents rushed and returned incessantly like its life's blood. (245)

The emphasis on urban and cultural uniformity evident in this passage suggests a distrust of the railway, or at least nostalgia for the era when places such as Staggs's Gardens existed in all their chaotic individuality. Yet Dickens is not consistent in his portrayal of the railway only as a force of oppression and sanitization. In one of the most memorable passages from the novel, he describes Dombey's journey through the English countryside in poetic language foreshadowing the paean to the English mail-coach written a year later by Thomas De Quincey.[1] In Chapter 20, Dickens writes:

> The very speed at which the train was whirled along, mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably….Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, burrowing among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, flashing out into the meadows for a moment, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide….Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below….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. (311-12)

Here, the railway serves as a shrieking, smoking metaphor for Dombey's own monstrous subjectivity, and Dickens expiates it from the charges previously laid against it as a violent decimator of the landscape and the populace. The novel's villain, Mr. Carker, is destroyed by the

[1] "The English Mail-Coach," published in *Blackwood's* in 1849, was a nostalgic eulogy to the mail coaches that were rapidly being replaced by trains, and the way of travelling (personal, scenic, and intensely sensual) that was also becoming a lost experience by the 1840s.

railway in a scene of graphic mechanical violence in Chapter 55, but once again, with its "shriek" and "red eyes, bleared and dim" (842), the train represents man's tumultuous internal subjectivity as much or more than an outer force acting upon human bodies with relentless precision.

Others were not so generous in their discussion of the railway. Martha Vickery, a first-time railway traveller in 1855, described her journey in language blending disdain and terror: "the devil himself was a drawin of em [the carriages] – the vire an the smoake comm'd out o an and on they went the Lord knows where," and preferred to make her return journey on foot rather than venture onto another train (qtd. in Simmons 16). Alfred Haviland, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, wrote a 56-page pamphlet in 1868 warning of "the danger of hurry and excitement" concomitant with railway travel, urging travellers to exercise caution when travelling on trains. His opening chapter is foreboding and rather glum:

> [A]ll classes enter the same train; all alike hurry to one spot, with one object – to save the train. Everything is changed, even our bodies are changing; *omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*;[2] for all this striving to do certain distances in certain given times has told upon thousands, and will tell upon thousands more. (10)

Yet despite Haviland's dire view of railway travel and its effects on human physiology, even he was forced to admit that "we cannot do without railway travelling" (10), and his treatise includes several chapters on how best to manage the physiological stresses of such travel (and twelve case-studies providing examples of fatalities from the lack of careful management, should modern, mobile Britons fail to realize the seriousness of his message).

[2] "All things are changing, and we are changing with them." Attributed by sixteenth-century poet Matthew Borbonius to Lothair I, the grandson of Charlemagne, but possibly a variation on a similar maxim from Ovid, *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis* [the times are changing, and we are changing with them].

The anxiety over interaction between the human and the railway was not limited to its effects on the human body. Elizabeth Gaskell prefigures the 1860s obsession with the railway and its impact on identity with her novella *Cranford* (1851-1853), in which the railway is responsible for eliminating Captain Brown, whose Continental travels bring a certain exoticism to the reserved and largely-female town of Cranford. Brown is run over by a train while reading the latest Dickens, suggesting the capacity of the railway for a kind of ironically literal social engineering; the railway preserves Cranford as a nearly all-female community separate from the intrusions of the outside world represented by Captain Brown, but it does so by perpetrating modern mechanical violence upon him.[3] Gaskell's later novel *North and South* (1855) also incorporates the railway, particularly in a crisis of identity for its heroine Margaret Hale. Gaskell describes Margaret using highly physical, often commercial language, suggesting her awareness of how interaction with the technology of mobility represented by the railway constructs and affects personal identity, particularly for women. The increasingly public nature of travel both allows Margaret independence and the ability to make prompt decisions – she is able to go to Oxford at very nearly the drop of a hat – and disallows her personal freedom. She is subjected to unwanted male attention and "undisguised admiration" (66, 241) during her public walks, and an innocuous appearance with her brother Frederick at the Milton railway station is fatefully misconstrued by the novel's brooding hero, Mr. Thornton.

Anxiety over the railway seeps into popular culture in other areas as well, but nowhere more so than in the sensation novel, which emerged in the early 1860s.[4] Literary critics such as

[3] It may also be a playful, if violent, nod towards *Dombey and Son.* Gaskell was quite familiar with Dickens's work: early in her career he was her editor, and *Cranford* was originally published serially in his *Household Words*.
[4] The 1860s seem a particularly important decade for the railway, which may explain its emerging importance in fiction. P.J.G. Ransom notes that"[b]y the mid-1850s the country, and the railways, had largely recovered from the violent financial fluctuations of the mania/slump period" (109) and the railways expanded steadily for several decades thereafter, with a series of new lines and amalgamations opening new possibilities for transport across the kingdom. Railways were also some of the largest stock companies in Britain by the 1860s and dominated the British

H.L. Mansel decried the role of the railway in shaping the public's reading taste. In an 1863 essay written for *The Quarterly Review,* Mansel writes that "the exigencies of railway travelling do not allow much time for examining the merits of a book before purchasing it" and that passengers are therefore content to grab something "hot and strong" that they will enjoy only for the short duration of their journey rather than a work of lasting literary merit (485). Despite the vitriol often directed at the form by contemporary critics and moralists, sensation novels were wildly popular among the reading public, and therefore provide modern scholars with an excellent insight into what themes dominated public consciousness during the period.

Novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* opened new spaces for discussions of the effect of the railway not only on physical health but psychological stability and even personal identity. Discussions such as Lord Shaftesbury's 1862 report to the *Lancet* on the safety of railway travel and Haviland's *Hurried to Death* tend to center around the railway's effects on men, since most employees of the railway were male, as were most commuters and business travellers. Haviland's discussion is distinctive among scientific literature of the period for including in its twelve case-studies three cases of women fatally interacting with the railway, including one of a woman who suffered a fatal heart attack after rushing in a panic to catch a train. In contrast, the sensation novel focuses more often than not on how interactions with the railway affect not only the body but the mind and personal subjectivity, and traces in particular these effects on women.

In Ellen Wood's 1863 novel *East Lynne,* for example, the railway provides a convenient plot device with which to punish the novel's transgressive heroine, Isabel Vane. Gail Walker argues that the treatment of Isabel's sexuality in *East Lynne* reflects "a widespread need on the

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landscape with their developments. 1863 saw the emergence of the underground railway, when the Metropolitan Railway running from Paddington to Farringdon Street opened. Such developments meant that the railway was increasingly visible to the popular, non-specialist consciousness.

part of the Victorian middle-class reading audience for the kind of sexual 'safety' that the enunciation of rigid sexual standards might supply" (23). At first glance, the novel upholds this type of conventional reading. Isabel is originally a modest and beautiful young girl who marries despite not being in love with her intended, Archibald Carlyle, and despite harboring a deep (and intensely physical) love for the rakish Captain Francis Levison. Wood highlights the transgressive physicality of this affection through repeated descriptions of Isabel's rapidly beating heart and deep blushes, which recur so frequently as to quickly become clichéd. Following the precedent set by the beautiful but unhappily married Edith Dombey, Isabel leaves her husband and begins a tempestuous affair in France with the dashing young Levison, who excites deep physical passion in her: "What was it that caused every nerve in her frame to vibrate, every pulse to quicken? *Whose* form was it that was thus advancing, and changing the monotony of her mind into a tumult?" (Wood 171, italics in original). The language of this passage is standard sensation novel fare, pulsating nerves and wildly beating hearts, but is interesting nonetheless for the resemblance it bears to the language used to describe the effects of railway travel, which carried with it serious health concerns. Haviland notes that the "vibratory motion of railway carriages" was damaging to the brain and nerves (10), while nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel voiced concerns over the "*intensification of nervous stimulation…*from the swift and uninterrupted change of inner and outer stimuli" created in humans by the metropolis and the frenetic life it both created and required (51, italics in original). The implied cultural baggage of these vibrating nerves and quickened pulses, then, is a sense of danger and the possibility of destruction. And indeed, as is usually the case in midcentury Victorian novels, Isabel is punished for her sins; she is abandoned in France, pregnant with an illegitimate son, by her nefarious lover. In a reversal from Dickens's model in

Dombey and Son, however, it is Isabel, and not her rakish lover, who is devastated by her attempted return to England.

Isabel's endeavor to return to England via rail, and the subsequent accident that kills her infant and permanently disfigures her, has often been interpreted by critics, including Walker, as a further form of punishment. While this may be true, it also signifies the new potential provided by the railway for women's mobility in a multiplicity of ways: because she reaches England without the burden of an illegitimate child and her appearance is permanently changed by the accident, Isabel is able to construct a new identity for herself. This allows her, however briefly, to interact with her children once more. While Wood may have intended to chastise Isabel by literally turning her life upside-down on the railway, she succeeds also in giving her heroine a fresh slate. As Elaine Showalter notes, *East Lynne* gives expression to a "wide range of suppressed female emotions...tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape" (159). Literal escape is possible only through Isabel's fateful interaction with the technology of the railway, which by changing her body changes her identity.

Wilkie Collins's 1860 novel *The Woman in White* also has a great deal of railway travel in it, and is perhaps more significant than Woods's novel in its treatment of how the railway and the concept of "railway time" affects the populace, and particularly women.[5] For example, the identities of two central female characters are predicated on the date of a railway journey. Collins's novel is of particular importance because the railway and its emphasis on schedule and strict time-keeping affect everyone in the novel, male and female alike. Indeed, many of his male characters, including his protagonist Walter Hartright, are feminized by their interactions with the

[5] For more information on the standardization of time-keeping in nineteenth-century England, aka "railway time," see Simmons, *The Victorian Railway,* Chapter 15, "Uniformity and Difference," and Menke, *Telegraphic Realism,* Chapter 2, "Electric Information."

railway and its social effects. Collins's astute psychological portraits also incorporate, quite literally, the anxieties over travel in general pandemic in mid-nineteenth century British society.

Literally hundreds of mid-century novels utilize the railway as a plot device, with varying degrees of complexity ranging from the gimmick to the serious consideration of its influence on its human participants. Lucy Audley, the eponymous heroine of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's widely popular *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) was commended by Henry James in 1865 as being a thoroughly modern heroine; he describes her as "an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph" (744). Her modern ease with technology is also her downfall, however, as her true identity a is exposed by some fateful railway stickers on her luggage and at the end of the novel she is exiled (via rail) to a mental hospital in Belgium, where she is allowed to live out her days under an assumed identity (her third in the novel). Other novels, such as Charles Reade's 1863 novel *Hard Cash,* are now generally neglected by scholars but were quite popular during the nineteenth century.[6] One critic, J. L. Bushnan, compared the novel to the massively popular *Lady Audley's Secret*, claiming both were a sort of "highly seasoned dish" that produced irrational fear in readers' minds (qtd. in Reade 411). Reade's novel provides a glimpse into several areas of anxiety involving the railway. The central plot device is an unlucky investment in the "railway bubble" of the 1840s, which leads the conniving banker Mr. Hardie to his fateful decision to steal the upright Captain Dodd's "hard cash," in the amount of fourteen thousand pounds. The new capacity for rapid, scheduled travel also provides the other dominant plot device of the novel, the young hero Alfred Hardie's false imprisonment in a mental institution. Like *The Woman in White*, *Hard Cash* involves the unjust institutionalization of persons in mental "hospitals" that turn out to be more like prisons.

[6] *Hard Cash* was first published as *Very Hard Cash* in Dickens's literary magazine *All the Year Round* from 1862-63; it is to *VHC* that Bushnan is referring, although Reade changed very little between editions.

Intriguingly, also like Collins's novel, the characters are subject to the demands of "railway time," and a central plot point involves Alfred Hardie's decision to pursue on his wedding day what he believes to be a clue to the stolen fortune's whereabouts, the consequence of which is his imprisonment. The reason he chooses to pursue this information on the morning of his wedding is that he can conveniently catch a train for a short trip and, he reasons, be back in enough time for his noon ceremony. He does not return, but his fiancée believes that he has not abandoned her, since the train to London left more directly from another station than the one Alfred was observed to be heading towards. Later, Alfred is on the brink of escaping from the institution when men come to spirit him away on the night train to another hospital, getting him away in the nick of time. Without the ability to travel rapidly and at short notice provided by the railway, and the intense focus on time down to the minute that railway time universalized, this plotline – and the excoriation of mental institutions for which Reade employs it – would be impossible. Both Reade's and Collins's protagonists are imprisoned falsely in mental institutions thanks to the handy availability of fast transit. However, there is one critical difference between *The Woman in White* and *Hard Cash*: while Laura Fairlie Glyde and Anne Catherick both begin to question their own identities after a term of imprisonment in the mental institution, Alfred Hardie maintains his firm sense of personal identity regardless of the institution's attempts to convince him otherwise. Such a distinction between the novelists' treatments of female and male characters may suggest that identity is a more complicated and subjective thing for women, and therefore more fragile and subject to pressure from outer forces such as the railway. Regardless, the connections in both works (and many others like them) between the wide availability of the railway and the fragility of personal identity signal a distrust of railway technology and its ability to transform those who collide with it.

The distrust of the technology of mobility exemplified in novels such as Collins's also extended to the language of sensation itself. The language used by authors, and particularly "sensational" ones, reflects the anxieties and excitements of railway travel. The increased emphasis on physicality, coupled with the serial mode of sensation novels' delivery, bespeak a profound awareness of the railway's impact on the self, both physically and psychologically. Nicholas Dames has noted the Victorian observation of what he calls the "physiology of the novel," claiming that nineteenth-century writers were aware of the ability of fiction to "condition the physiological apparatus of the reader for the temporal rhythms of modernity" (10). Serial publication conditioned the reading public to be always on the edge of their seats and always wanting more stimulation; Margaret Oliphant argues in 1862 that the sensation novel, typically published serially, has caused a chronic desire for "a supply of new shocks and wonders" in readers (564), and worries that the "violent stimulation of serial publication – of *weekly* publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident" will result in weakening the fabric of the novel so severely that writers less gifted and disciplined than Wilkie Collins (whose *Woman in White* she was reviewing) would create chaotic and immoral fiction "without any discretion" (568). Dames argues that, morality aside, the serial publication of novels certainly had an effect on readers; according to him, "the novel of the nineteenth century trained a reader able to consume texts at an ever faster rate, with a rhythmic alternation of heightened attention and distracted inattention locking onto ever smaller units of comprehension" (7). The rhythmic interchange between attention and inattention, focus and distraction, echoes language used by historians of the railway to describe railway travel itself, suggesting a physiological link between the Victorian experiences of modern reading and of modern mobility. And the link is noted by characters, too; Wilde's Gwendolen Bracknell claims

as late as 1895 that one "should always have something sensational to read in the train" (*Importance* 2.635-36).

While the fad for sensation novels would die out, the influence of the railway on the language of fiction would not. While neither can properly be categorized as a sensation novel, the railway as an intrusive physical force and as a fluid figure of speech pervades both George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). In the latter novel, an exchange with Herr Klesmer shatters the illusions about herself that the mobile young Gwendolen Harleth has harbored, and Eliot describes this disillusionment in railway figures: "Gwendolen had never in her life felt so miserable….For the first time since her consciousness began, she was having a vision of herself on the common level, and had lost the innate sense that there were reasons why she should not be slighted, elbowed, jostled – treated like a passenger with a third-class ticket" (235). George Meredith's protofeminist novel *Diana of the Crossways,* published in 1885, sees the eponymous heroine defending herself using the railway as a mixed but particularly effective metaphor: "We women are the verbs passive of the alliance, we have to learn, and if we take to activity, with the best intentions, we conjugate a frightful disturbance. We are to run on lines, like the steam-trains, or we come to no station, dash to fragments. I have the misfortune to know I was born an active" (98). If what we read affects who we are – and Victorian critics at least seem to espouse this notion – then the continued prevalence of the railway in fiction, both as literal presence and as metaphor for larger concerns, points to a society and a reading public still coming to terms with the technology of modern mobility embodied by the railway, and with that technology's effects upon themselves.

In this work, then, I attempt to trace the pre-eminence of the railway in three works of nineteenth-century literature: Oscar Wilde's 1895 play *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Wilkie

Collins's 1860 sensation novel *The Woman in White,* and Ellen Wood's 1862 sensation novel *East Lynne.* From Wilde's text I will derive a set of *leitmotifs* from which to trace dominant concerns over modernity and identity in the nineteenth century. In beginning at the end of the century, and with a text so determinedly light-hearted as Wilde's "trivial comedy for serious people," I hope to show that the process of acclimation to the technology of modernity, as figured by the railway, was a fraught issue throughout the century, and one that had not been resolved by the *fin de siècle,* despite Wilde's own rather gleeful dismissal of what he sees as outdated Victorian tropes. Representations of the identity in crisis shift from the deeply internalized psychological subjectivity of *The Woman in White,* to the more externalized physicality of *East Lynne,* until in Wilde's play identity seems reliant only on exterior markers and characters seem to have no interior subjectivity at all – as many scholars have noted, everyone in *The Importance of Being Earnest* sounds the same, and the most important markers of identity are railway tickets and buttonholes. Yet while Wilde may wish to leave the mid-century concerns over identity and mobility in a hand-bag in Victoria Station, they follow him into his country retreat nevertheless.

Moving then to the sensation novels of the 1860s, I will examine two ways in which the railway is shown to have a lasting impact on both the body and concepts of personal identity, and the common inextricability of the two. Wilkie Collins's masterful sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1860) relies heavily on the concept of "railway time" and distinctions between the city and the country for its intricate plot to function. It is also a novel in which, as Nicholas Daly has pointed out, "nervousness is pandemic" (41), and no main character is spared some sort of nervous malady; their fraught relationship to modernity is inscribed in the frailty of their bodies, particularly those bodies which interact with the technology of mobility represented by the

railway. This inscription becomes literal in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne,* in which the heroine's body is physically rewritten by a railway crash, giving her a new identity that provides her – and those heroines who would come after her – a sort of freedom she has not had before. It is this freedom, I think, that creates space for heroines later in the century such as Gwendolen Bracknell: mobile, open to sensation, and capable of seeing identity only as a name, without the baggage of frail subjectivity to get in the way.

As we shall see, the tempestuous relationship between the human subject and "mechanized modernity" (Daly 55) haunted both authors and readers throughout the nineteenth century. However, writers found ways to both express their anxieties over this relationship and open new spaces for its consideration, suggesting through collisions between man and machine potentially new ways of interacting with the railway, and with modernity itself.

CHAPTER 2

GUYS GONE WILDE: *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* AND ISSUES OF IDENTITY

> A sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in incident. Indeed, as a general rule, it consists of nothing else.
>
> --- H.L. Mansel, "Sensation Novels"
>
> I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.
>
> --- Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Oscar Wilde's effervescent comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* may seem a strange text with which to begin a discussion of connections between the technology of mobility, particularly the railway, and questions of identity in the nineteenth century. After all, Wilde himself subtitled the play "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." Yet if one were to change in the Mansel quote above "sensation novel" to "Oscar Wilde play" and "incident" to "aphorism," Mansel's own tidy aphorism (written over thirty years earlier, in 1863) seems as if it were tailor-made for *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Wilde's play, in typical Wilde fashion, boils down and crystallizes many concerns simmering throughout the century over mobility and identity. Wilde reduces these critical issues to the point of absurdity and then, as Nicholas Daly says, "determinedly [waves] goodbye from the platform, with tears of mirth rolling down his cheeks" (*Literature* 51). In true Victorian fashion, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a "day-trip into a less demanding, less adventurous kind of theatre" (Jackson 165), but theatre in which issues of importance are nevertheless front and center. As Wilde himself acknowledged, in "The Soul of

Man under Socialism," farcical theatre had the potential to be every bit as socially incisive as a pamphlet or essay: "[B]urlesque and farcical comedy, the two most popular forms, are distinct forms of art. Delightful work may be produced under burlesque and farcical conditions, and in work of this kind the artist in England is allowed very great freedom. It is when one comes to the higher forms of the drama that the result of popular control is seen" ("Socialism" 143). Wilde's peculiar method, as scholars have noted, is one of not only "comic flippancy" but of the "satirist and the revolutionary" (Eltis 171).

Wilde was by no means the first playwright to use the railway in his work. England's first "railway drama," Edward Stirling's *The Lucky Hit or Railroads for Ever!*, hit English stages in 1836, and plays making use of the railway as a setting emerged in the 1840s. The railway as plot device came into its own in the sensation dramas of the late 1860s, to which Nicholas Daly has devoted an excellent chapter of his recent book.[7] These later plays may be seen as Wilde's most direct influence for *The Importance of Being Earnest,* as they share many of his play's devices: mistaken identities, melodramatic human relations, sudden shocks, and a frenetic energy driving both characters and plot. Nicholas Daly argues that "the historical roots" of such theatre lie "in the broader experience of industrial technology and modernity" in the middle of the century (12). While neither earlier plays such as Dion Boucicault's *After Dark: A Tale of London Life* (1868) nor Wilde's 1895 *The Importance of Being Earnest* positioned themselves as deep social commentaries, they share certain underlying interests and concerns that, one may argue, reflect their cultural zeitgeist. If, as Daly asserts, "what we see on stage only makes sense within the context of the experience of off-stage modernization – not just direct human/machine encounters,

[7] See "Sensation drama, the railway, and modernity," *Literature, Technology, and Modernity 1860-2000,* 10-33. According to Daly, in the autumn of 1868 alone there were no fewer than five theatres in London playing these "railway dramas," both lower-budget theatres such as the East London and the more upmarket Princess's on Oxford Street. For a brief discussion of the railway theatre prior to sensation drama, see Jack Simmons, "Literature," *The Victorian Railway,* 195-218.

but also urbanization, bureaucratization, and the more general acceleration of the pace of everyday life" (13), the pre-eminence of the railway in English literature of the nineteenth century, even Wilde's most unabashedly fluffy farces, is a telling sign. In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* his most polished and most nonsensical play, Wilde takes the tropes of mid-century sensational railway drama, and perhaps the concerns that such tropes reflect, and exaggerates them to the point of ridiculousness, all the while neatly keeping them in the forefront of his audience's consciousness.

So what has the polished nonchalance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* to do with the railway of the mid-century? Sos Eltis argues that the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of anarchy, in which "there is no division between chaos and order, fact and fiction" (172). This lack of division is particularly relevant in light of the concerns throughout the nineteenth century with boundaries. The dividing lines between man and machine, the interior self and the exterior body, were points of debate that were hotly contested even in Wilde's era. Indeed, in 1883, just over ten years before the premiere of Wilde's play, *The Book of Health* noted that "man, for the time being, becomes a part of the machine in which he has placed himself" during railway travel (Reynolds 581). The murky boundaries in Wilde's play between fact and fiction mirror the similar lack of distinction between man and the machine that worried so many writers in the nineteenth century. In "[reducing] the central tenets of Victorian society to farce" (Eltis 175), by Wilde's own admission, he is enabled to comment on what he perceives as the obsessions of an era rapidly moving out of date while using the very tropes that obsessed them.

An example of such commentary is in Wilde's choice of plot points. It can hardly be seen as coincidental that the three-volume novel, the dominant form in fiction publishing throughout most of the nineteenth century, had been the subject of a voluntary discontinuation by various

publishers in 1894, just a year before *The Importance of Being Earnest* premiered, on Valentine's Day, 1895.[8] Wilde, trend-master extraordinaire, was quick to make fun of the now-outdated form by putting it into the mishap-prone hands of Miss Prism and making it a central point in his play's denouement.[9] Elaine Showalter has argued that

> [t]he disappearance of the three-decker suggested a movement away from subjects, themes, and forms associated with femininity and maternity … The three-part structure dictated a vision of human experience as linear, progressive, causal, and tripartite, ending in marriage or death… *fin de siècle* narrative questioned beliefs in endings and closures, as well as in marriage and inheritance. (*Sexual Anarchy* 17)

This sort of questioning is rampant in Wilde's play, in which women are convinced they can marry only men with specific names, and maternity and those associated with it, such as Miss Prism, are the subjects of confusion and ridicule. The play ends in engagements which, as the Victorian Lady Bracknell comments, display "signs of triviality" (*Importance* 3.472-73). There is so much closure at the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that the audience's tolerance for it is only sustained by the farcical lightheartedness of the play, and this overdetermination seems calculated to call the fictionalized closures of earlier novels into question. Wilde's play also ends in a tableau, spatially positioning the characters so that we may understand the

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[8] See Chapter 15 of *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Identities,* ed. Dennis Walder. Simon Eliot notes that by June 1894, "Mudie's and Smith's [circulating libraries] issued an ultimatum to the publishers: they agreed they would buy a three-decker novel from the publisher only if it were priced at no more than 4s a volume…and only if the publisher agreed not to issue a cheap reprint within a year of publication…the ultimatum was in fact designed to kill off the three-decker….the three-decker form ceased to be issued within two years" (347). For a detailed discussion of the circumstances of the production of *Importance*, including the multiple changes between the first draft and the performed version of the play, see Russell Jackson, "*The Importance of Being Earnest*," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde,* 161-177.

[9] Miss Prism's name seems to recur to Charles Dickens's formidably shallow governess Mrs. General in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), who insists that her charges use words like "poultry, prunes, and prism" to properly cultivate the shape of their lips (500). Dickens describes Mrs. General as "surface and varnish, and show without substance" (528), which aptly describes every character in Wilde's play.

relationships between them visually: at the ending, as editor Peter Raby notes, "Lady Bracknell was center stage, Gwendolen and Jack to her right, Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble also right but further back, and Algernon and Cecily to her left" (368n475). Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble, the governess and the reverend, are positioned in the back, perhaps to signify that they represent institutions which can no longer co-exist successfully with modernity, while Lady Bracknell, a self-confident matriarch who is savvy enough to follow her flighty daughter from the city into the country via railway (even if she can only catch a luggage train), presides in the center. However, even those characters who accommodate themselves to modernity, with its rapid pace and ease of mobility, do not escape the ridiculous physicality of Wilde's conclusion, in which the focus is directed entirely upon the body and any concept of a humanist subjectivity is discarded.

According to William Cohen, Victorian novelists "posed the body against or athwart the self, decentering the humanist subject by focusing on its materiality...the body as a sensory interface between the interior and the world, as a process of flux and becoming, and as a radical source of both the making and the unmaking of human subjects" (xiii). Cohen directs his attention to major novelists such as Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, but Wilde's play, farcical and anarchic as it is, nevertheless reflects these same concerns with bodies and all their ramifications. Wilde's own materialistic tendencies are well-documented, as is his attention to the presentation of the body to the senses, and his plays' dandies reflect the intensity of a "body as a sensory interface."[10] This is nowhere better illustrated than in Algernon Moncrieff, the dandaic gentleman of *The Importance of Being Earnest* who takes an existential delight in cucumber sandwiches and muffins.[11] While none of the characters in the play could be said to have an

[10] See Sean Latham, "The Importance of Being a Snob: Oscar Wilde's Modern Pretensions," *Am I A Snob?* 31-56.
[11] Algernon's surname may be an homage to playwright W.T. Moncrieff, famous for his "locomotive engine and railway terror" *The Scamps of London*, written in 1843 but revived with great success (and additional railway carnage) in 1868.

"identity" in any humanist definition of the word – Wilde plays fast and loose with the very concept, as will be discussed later – Algy's attention to sensory details and fastidious consumption highlight his sensual interaction with his world, which positions him as a post-Paterian figure of experience as "a good in itself" (Daly 51).[12] His preoccupation with the joys of buttered muffins and perfect buttonholes suggest that, in the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at least, outward markers of identity are the only ones that matter. Unlike the world of the Victorian sensation novel at which Wilde's play pokes merciless fun, the world in which Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing exist is one in which rapid and easy travel between the city and the country, a fluid sense of personal identity, and intensely sensual experiences are not forces of modernity that oppress and endanger the human body and senses (as in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*), but forces that allow for the pleasurable broadening of one's experiences (and the occasional retrieval of a wayward daughter).

The Importance of Being Earnest centers on two male characters, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, who play with identity to such an extent that as a concept it becomes meaningless. Both men have established elaborate fictions of self. Jack has invented a fictional brother, Ernest, so that he can live a hedonistic life in London and blame it on his brother: as he tells Algernon, "[M]y name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country" (1.166) because "[w]hen one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring" (1.47-49). Algernon sums up this invention neatly, while confessing to his own fictive identity: "You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country

[12] Some of this emphasis on the senses was cut from the play before performance; the four-act version of the play included a scene where Algernon is pursued for debts run up on luxurious dinners at the Savoy Hotel (Jackson 168).

whenever I choose" (1.220-24). The ease of mobility between the city and the country allows each man to live a double life. According to Georg Simmel,

> [t]he metropolis exacts from man as a discriminating creature a different amount of consciousness than does rural life. Here the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly. Precisely in this connection the sophisticated character of metropolitan psychic life becomes understandable – as over against small town life, which rests more upon deeply felt and emotional relationships. (52)

Written in 1903, nearly ten years after Wilde's play, Simmel's argument is that the country allows a more intimate if less sophisticated existence than does the city. He continues, arguing that "the metropolitan type of man…develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart" (52). The characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* seem to both affirm and deny such an argument; they act with no more emotion in the country than they do in town, although the easiness of physical transition between the two does allow for enjoyments that would be denied a person limited geographically to one or the other. The casual intellectual urbanity of everyone in the play, however, suggests that these modern characters have evolved protections against the stimuli of modern life by reacting with their heads rather than their hearts; such protections might be particularly necessary because of their frequent travel between the two spheres of city and country.

Jack's identity crises do not end with his fictional brother. Both he and Algernon find that in order to appeal to their prospective love interests, they require self-rechristening: they have discovered, as Wilde's trademark aphoristic style sums up at the end of the play, the "vital

Importance of Being Earnest" (3.475). Gwendolen Bracknell, perhaps typically for a woman in a century obsessed with social class and position, links identity and name: she tells Jack that "The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deepest fibres of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination" (1.688-90). The "romantic origin" is of course Jack's discovery in a hand-bag, which Gwendolen links to her perception of Jack as "Ernest." Cecily Cardew too ascribes greater importance to her future husband's given name than to any innate humanist qualities: "There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest" (2.498-500). When Algernon asks her, "if my name was Algy, couldn't you love me?" (2.510-11), Cecily replies that "I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention" (2.512-14). Neither woman cares anything for her love-object's surname, where presumably lineage and power would traditionally be found, nor does either woman care much for any innate character in their chosen man: the given name, and the fiction of identity it represents to these girls, is everything.

Despite the importance placed on names by Gwendolen and Cecily, neither man seems particularly attached to his given name. When the Reverend Chasuble asks Jack if he has any "grave doubts" about rechristening himself as Ernest, Jack flippantly responds that "I certainly intend to have" (2.264), and as soon as Algernon discovers Cecily's distaste for his current moniker he rushes out to find Dr. Chasuble "on a most important christening – I mean on most important business" (2.521-22). Algernon himself points out the discrepancy between Jack's name and his personality, at least so far as Algernon perceives it: "You answer to the name of

Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest" (1.158-61).

Yet Wilde goes to great pains to label Jack as pointedly *Victorian*: Jack notes casually that he was found "[i]n the cloak-room at Victoria Station" (1.547-48), named for the Queen herself. Wilde's choice of station here is interesting. While the Chatham company's station at Victoria had one of the most elegant roofs among London transit hubs, "a pair of shallow ellipses graced by light and delicate ironwork," both Victoria Stations "had no facades at all and were among the public shames of London" until well into the reign of Edward VII (Simmons 35).[13] Jack Worthing is therefore orphaned and reborn in a station symbolizing both the opulent wealth of urban London (witness the elegance of the roof) and its shame. When Lady Bracknell claims haughtily that "The line is immaterial," referring no doubt to both the physical railway line and Jack's dubious family pedigree, one cannot help but wonder if she would have been quite so outraged had Jack been found in one of the larger, more fashionable stations such as St. Pancras, which Jack Simmons describes as "the most spectacular" station opened between the years of 1860 and 1875 (35).

Perhaps Jack's flippant disregard for his given name as a marker of his identity has its origins in his unusual infancy as a "railway child." He tells Lady Bracknell that "the late Mr Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort" (1.533-37). The fact that his surname originates in a seaside resort, and that he was found in the Brighton line's cloak-room, help to position him within the social hierarchy; rather solidly middle-class, despite his

[13] As Jack notes, there are two lines running to the Victoria transit center, and there were therefore two stations. See Jack Simmons, *The Victorian Railway*.

dodgy origins. His haphazard designation also serves as a jab at the class-based systems prevalent in Victorian society; Worthing's name is more than typically random and carries with it no signifier of inherited social standing, but nevertheless distinguishes him from someone whose adoptive parent was *not* able to afford a holiday to a seaside resort.[14]

Miss Prism, the locomotive who sets the play's denouement in motion, represents another Victorian in crisis. Having written a three-decker novel in her youth, she is obsessed with the sensation genre. When Cecily complains that such novels "[chronicle] the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened" (2.43-44) Miss Prism begs her young charge not to belittle the form. Miss Prism even hints at the manuscript's nature when she says it was "unfortunately abandoned" (2.56-57); while this obviously refers to the hand-bag incident in Miss Prism's past, it is also likely a play on words, suggesting the licentiousness and sensuality prominent (and prominently castigated) in sensation fiction of the mid-century. Miss Prism, as she later confesses, is so overwhelmed by the confluence of sensations provided by the railway hub and her beloved three-decker novel that, in the ultimate dissolution of human identity, she confuses the human body with the book. Miss Prism's name seems an obvious play on "misprision," the failure to do one's office or duty, but may also signal that she acts as a sort of mirror, or "prism," to the rest of the populace. As H.L. Mansel warned nearly 50 years before *The Importance of Being Earnest*, being too absorbed in novels – particularly those of a sensational nature, as Miss Prism's is – can be hazardous to one's mental and physical health: sensation novels are trash, "an efflorescence, as an eruption indicative of the state of health of the body in which they appear" (Mansel 512).

[14] It is perhaps interesting to note that, according to Haviland, "season-ticket holders, especially on the Brighton line, age very rapidly" (22). Mr. Cardew has given Jack a name, but it is entirely possible that Jack has saved Cardew's life by sparing him such frequent travel on the Brighton line.

In her "moment of mental abstraction," no doubt heightened by the general chaos of Victoria Station and the unhealthy excitement produced by her three-decker novel, Miss Prism commits an act that will have ramifications not only for herself (she admits she can "never forgive" herself) but for young Jack, whose identity is transformed through his (accidental) interaction with a hub of transport. While Jack is dubbed "Worthing," the suggestion is that Jack's name really could have been anything; found in a cloak-room at Victoria Station, on the Brighton line, he might just as easily have ended up Jack Victoria or Jack Brighton. Lady Bracknell's claim that "The line is immaterial" is true, to an extent; Jack is Jack (at least when he is not Ernest) regardless of his randomly-chosen surname. That he turns out to be *not* Jack at all is another way for Wilde to ridicule the idealized conception of fixed human identity and to highlight the fluidity of modern boundaries. External markers of identity triumph in the end; as Algernon has pointed out, Jack "looks" like an Ernest, and his name is conveniently discovered to suit his appearance regardless of any inner subjectivity.

Jack Worthing is not the only person whose identity is shaped by and, to some degree, reliant on the railway: Algernon's fictional cousin Bunbury and his fictive identity as tender to Bunbury's health rely on the ease of interchange between the country and the city and rapid mobility provided by the railway. Even Lady Bracknell is a "railway child, insofar as the Victorian culture that she represents, with its particular problematics of modernization, was a railway culture" (Daly 54). Lady Bracknell's concern over the union of Jack and Gwendolen echoes deeper concerns running throughout the nineteenth century over physical manifestation and self-hood: she exclaims indignantly to Jack that he could hardly assume that she and Lord Bracknell would ever allow "our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel" (1.573-75). Jack's origination

within the confines of a hub of transport has effectively transformed him into a non-entity, a "parcel" rather than a person (although Lady Bracknell conveniently elides her own status as a parcel on the "luggage train" which she took to retrieve her daughter). John Ruskin, one of the foremost critics of the Victorian era, described railway travel as transforming "the traveller from a man into a living parcel," and he was not the only one: Wolfgang Schivelbusch quotes several other nineteenth-century travelers as saying that "the traveler demotes himself to a parcel of goods and relinquishes his sense, his independence," and that "for the duration of such transportation one ceases to be a person and becomes an object, a piece of freight" (Schivelbusch 54n8). Lady Bracknell's concern is not isolated to her own daughter, either; on hearing that Cecily and Algernon are engaged, she questions Jack, Cecily's guardian, about the girl's origin: "Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus" (3.126-29). While Lady Bracknell is making her point as obnoxiously as she can, she does have one; the idea that a family or person could *begin* in a point of termination flies in the face of the entire nineteenth-century theory of progress as forward motion.

Wilde began his time at Oxford as a devotee of Ruskin's, whom he called the "Plato of England – a Prophet of the Good and True and Beautiful" (qtd. in Armitage 19), and Ruskin's literary influence on Wilde has been characterized as a form of "discipleship" (Armitage 20). Miss Prism's "mental abstraction" and Jack's central crisis of identity therefore seem peculiarly fitting when read in conjunction with a passage from Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* lectures, published in 1849. In "The Lamp of Beauty," Ruskin writes:

> If there be any place in the world in which people are deprived of that portion of temper and discretion which are necessary to the contemplation of beauty, it is [at the railroad station]. The whole system of railroad travelling is addressed to people who, being in a hurry, are therefore, for the time being, miserable…The railroad is in all its relations a matter of *earnest* business, to be got through as soon as possible. It transmutes a man from a traveller into a living parcel. (111, emphasis mine)

That most Victorian of keywords, "earnest," is here a negative element of modern travel; Ruskin, ever one to look at the past with an idealized lens, bemoans in the same passage that more travellers do not have the time "to go leisurely over hills and between hedges, instead of through tunnels and beneath banks" (111). For Ruskin, it would seem, Being Earnest is only for those who are Important enough to be in a hurry, not for true connoisseurs of beauty. Miss Prism's immersion in her three-volume novel can be read, in this light, as a failing; had she the sense enough to appreciate the beauty of hedges and hills, she perhaps might have had the sense not to confuse a living, breathing object with one designed to be read on the train. While Gwendolen remarks in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that "one should always have something sensational to read in the train" (2.635-36), she prefers her personal diary to the novels from Mudie's circulating library (mentioned by name in the play), and there is no intimation that she worries (as Mansel did) about overstimulation from the coupling of the train and her sensational reading. Gwendolen's preference of her own diary to the traditional three-decker demonstrates that Wilde's characters have "outgrown such mid-Victorian pleasures…because they have also outgrown mid-Victorian anxieties," signaling a world in which the "body-made-nervous" has no role (Daly 54). Rather than allow her interaction with mechanized mobility to configure her

identity, as it might have earlier in the century, Gwendolen is tenaciously self-fashioning, preferring to glean her "sensational" reading from reviewing her "own thoughts and impressions," which she gleefully notes are "consequently meant for publication" (2.416-17). Ruskin's "earnest" Victorian travelers, bent only on their destinations, are here transformed into Lady Bracknell, who coolly remarks that she is concerned about missing "five, if not six, trains" not because she is desperate to catch one but because "[t]o miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform" (3.285-87).[15] Far from the train calling her identity into question, as it does in novels such as *The Woman in White,* exposure to the railway reifies her position as one who should be observed and commented upon – an aristocrat for whom public mobility acts as another outward marker of identity. Even Miss Prism's climactic confession does not produce the result a reader of sensation novels would expect: rather than bringing about death and destruction, Miss Prism's revelation provides Jack with the name that will get him his spouse, and a family in the form of Lady Bracknell as aunt and Algernon as younger brother.

Despite their unconventialities, Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell are both examples of the "woman with a past" that had continued to be popular in fiction and theatre (Jackson 166). Miss Prism especially, with the terrible secret that has haunted her ever since the incident at Victoria Station, and for which she "can never forgive [herself]" (3.350-51), is reminiscent of the mysterious heroines of sensation fiction from decades earlier. Like Lady Audley, Miss Prism's interactions with the railway have created a schism in identity that has repercussions years later. Unlike her sensational ancestress, however, Miss Prism's misprision is not the result of conscious, calculated scheming, but of mental abstraction. Ironically, Miss Prism is so wrapped

[15] Lady Bracknell's attitude towards the train is a distinct contrast to the anxiety and fear expressed by physicians in the mid-century; for one of the more concerned examples, see Haviland, "*Hurried to Death*," in which he relates twelve case-studies of people killed by "hurry and excitement…especially whilst endeavouring to catch the train" (2).

up in the three-decker sensation novel – a form quite trendy when she would have written her book, but one that was rapidly aging by the time in which *The Importance of Being Earnest* is set – that she fails to recognize the difference between fact and fiction: the crucial difference between a book and a baby. And in a reversal from the traditional pattern in sensation novels, in which the heroine's secret is found out and she is punished (usually with her own death, and, in the case of Ellen Wood's novel *East Lynne,* the death of several of her children), Miss Prism's "dreadful" revelation brings about only happy consequences: Jack is revealed to be Lady Bracknell's wealthy nephew (and therefore elder brother to Algernon) and his name is discovered to be Ernest – precisely the result he had been ready to rechristen himself to attain. The play ends with Jack/Ernest and Gwendolen still rapturously in love, thanks to the aversion of the identity crisis.

Wilde's point here seems to be that those who consider identity to be innate are fatuous; Gwendolen shrieks gleefully "Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!" (3.461-62), but we have seen her just a few lines earlier ready to discard "her own" lover Jack should his name not fit her preconceived ideal. Rather than being delighted that Jack's *internal* subjectivity has not been affected by his fateful interaction with the railway, Gwendolen is merely relieved that the outward marker of identity that she has craved remains unchanged. Wilde's ending also reduces to absurdity and then discards the matrix of identities and bodies with which the railway had been entangled throughout most of the century. Contrary to the dire warnings of mid-century physicians such as Alfred Haviland, Wilde's travellers face no adverse effects from their frequent travel, and the "fidgety and inexplicably nervous" state Haviland describes railway travel as inciting in his case-studies is nowhere to be seen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; as more than one critic has noted, everyone in the play maintains their calm

enough to speak in constant aphorisms, and Gwendolen Bracknell is so self-contained (despite her "sensational" reading in the train) that she notes incidents of importance, such as Jack/Ernest's proposal to her, in her diary (an agency denied Laura Fairlie Glyde in *The Woman in White*, and one which would have obviated the ensuing conspiracy over her identity). Even Jack's true identity, in flux for so much of the play, is discovered and found to be not only perfect for him and his beloved, but a matter of trivial concern to everyone else; nobody can be bothered to recall his christening. And while Jack's identity is settled, at least concerning his given name, little else is: Gwendolen sighs rapturously that "I feel that you are sure to change" (3.466). The very problems that mid-century sensation novels seem preoccupied with are no longer significant in Wilde's world; if, as Daly argues, what we see in the theatre and read in novels is made understandable only in the context of "the experience of off-stage modernization" (13) in all its complexities, the sensation novel and railway drama are emblematic of Victorian responses that are out of date by the time the "vital Importance of Being Earnest" is discovered. The play dismisses concerns over the technology of modernization, particularly the railway, and its impact on the self, as it does the concept of an innate and stable humanist identity; like Miss Prism's ill-fated three-decker, they have outlived their functionality and are destined to be abandoned.

CHAPTER 3

"HURRIED TO DEATH" : TIME, BODIES, AND *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

> The nervous system is the medium through which we are first affected…it is noteworthy that after the experience of one or two journeys some persons get into a fidgety and inexplicably nervous condition when they are about to travel by rail, although they feel that there is no cause for alarm, nor have they anything either to worry or hurry them.
>
> --- Alfred Haviland, *Hurried to Death*
>
> There is no English novel of any importance in which the railway takes a central place.
>
> --- Jack Simmons, *The Victorian Railway*

While by 1895 Oscar Wilde could bid a gleeful adieu to the concerns surrounding the technology of mobility embodied by the railway (although, as we shall see, such a farewell did not mean that they were gone for good), in 1860 such concerns were a dominant presence in the popular consciousness, and for good reason. The 1840s had seen both the rapid expansion of the railways and the panic resulting from the implosion of the investment bubble popularly known as "Railway Mania" in 1845.[16] By the mid-1850s, "the country, and the railways, had largely recovered from the violent financial fluctuations of the mania/slump period" (Ransom 109), and the railways expanded steadily for several decades thereafter, with a series of new lines and amalgamations opening new possibilities for transport across the kingdom. From the 1860s on,

[16] See P.J.G. Ransom, "The Railway Mania, and After," *The Victorian Railway and How It Evolved,* 79-111.

the railway was "steadily extended into rural districts, some of them very sparsely populated" (Simmons 285), and "excursion trains," which allowed passengers to go sightseeing at a cheaper rate than regular fare, had been running in one form or another since the 1830s. In 1863 the underground railway emerged, with the opening of the Metropolitan Railway running from Paddington to Farringdon Street. Such developments meant that the railway was increasingly visible to the popular, non-specialist consciousness; while still viewed with distrust by many, the railway was quickly becoming a fact of modern life.

It is from this background that Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White* (1859-60) emerges. The centrality of the railway to the plot of Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White* is made possible by the nonchalance and ease with which characters engage in cross-country travel that would have been impossible just a few decades earlier. While *The Woman in White* is not centered on the railway in the same obvious way as, for example, Dickens's novel *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), without it, the novel's time-centered plot could not function. Characters such as Countess Fosco or Walter Hartright more than once take the morning train to London or the express up North and return the same day in possession of vital information, obtained and delivered with a speed that would have been unthinkable just thirty years earlier. In fact, the pivotal plot point of the novel is the date of Laura Fairlie Glyde's train journey to London: without an exact date of transportation, her identity cannot be proven. Time in Collins's novel is of the utmost importance, yet its manifestations and uses differ from place to place, and several characters in the novel make use of this variation to further their own interests.

Several critics have noted the importance of time to both this particular novel and the genre it helped to create. Nicholas Daly claims that "the sensation novel reinforced the transformation of human experience of time and space being effected by the railways" (47), a

transformation noted by Wolfgang Schivelbusch as having a compressive quality so distinct that it produced an "annihilation of space and time," which he considers a nearly universal rhetoric in the nineteenth century (Schivelbusch 33). Others have noted the railways as producing in the English populace "a preoccupation with the calculability of time as with punctuality" (Freeman 84). Daly claims that "even more essential to the sensation novel than being contemporary is being on time: like its descendant, the thriller, this is a *punctual* form, depending on accurate time-keeping and scrupulous attention to the calendar" (Daly 47). With its dependence on the ability of characters to make fast rail journeys (and to be able to pinpoint the dates of such travel), *The Woman in White* certainly fits this characterization. Indeed, the female heroine of the novel, Marian Halcombe, poses a significant threat to the villains of the novel because of her close attention to dates, which she records in her journal and the significance of which she seems aware: "In the perilous uncertainty of our present situation," she writes, "it is hard to say what future interests may not depend on the regularity of the entries in my journal, and upon the reliability of my recollection at the time when I make them" (Collins 304). Yet according to several mid-century physicians, this essentiality of punctuality to modern life was devastating to the health of the average English citizen. Collins's novel seems to link this modern obsession with time and mobility to debility, sometimes physical but more often nervous, for his characters.

Yet the measurement of time was still somewhat fluid in 1859, at least when it came to determining the time of day. Prior to the railway, "[t]raditionally, each city or town had its own local time based on the calculation of noon at its longitude. The coming of the railway made this system unwieldy; timetables had to include elaborate information about time conversions, and travelers had to set and reset their watches, or to perform constant calculations" (Menke 82-83).

As Dickens's novel *Dombey and Son* and other works of the period note, standardized "railway time" became increasingly observed in areas heavily served by rail traffic, but a distinction between the country and the city is still visible in Collins's novel, and this distinction is manipulated by the novels' villains to serve their purposes (and, by extension, by Collins to serve his).

The lack of a standardized time awareness throughout the country is demonstrated in the second half of the novel. Walter Hartright goes to Hampshire to interview the physician Mr. Dawson, to attempt to ascertain the date of Laura Fairlie Glyde's train journey to London, which is of crucial significance to confirming her identity. While Mr. Dawson's books "certainly showed when he had resumed his attendance on Miss Halcombe, at Blackwater Park…it was not possible to calculate back from this date with exactness" (456). Nor can the Park's housekeeper Mrs. Michelson aid in the discovery, as she is unable to recall

> how many days had elapsed between the renewal of the doctor's attendance on his patient and the previous departure of Lady Glyde. She was almost certain of having mentioned the circumstance of the departure to Miss Halcombe, on the day after it happened – but then she was no more able to fix the date of the day on which this disclosure took place, than to fix the date of the day before, when Lady Glyde had left for London. Neither could she calculate, with any nearer approach to exactness, the time that had passed from the departure of her mistress, to the period when the undated letter from Madame Fosco arrived (456).

Hartright questions other people in the area, but gets the same response each time. They can estimate the time within a week or so; for example, the Park's gardener knows that the journey in question had occurred "'some time in July, the last fortnight or the last ten days in the month' –

and knew no more" (457).The rurality of Blackwater Park, in addition to its isolation and distance from London, means that the punctuality of railway time does not apply there. As Hester Pinhorn, a cook working at the Park, explains, "it's no use asking me about days of the month, and such-like. Except Sundays, half my time, I take no heed of them" (409). For people who have no need of mobility, like those confined by poverty and their employment to one locality, there is no need of railway time either. However, the increasing incursion of the railway into rural areas in the 1850s and 1860s, as noted by Simmons, means that such an ignorance of "railway time" can have nefarious side-effects for those who are forced to interact with the train; regardless of how deep in the country Blackwater Park may be, Laura Fairlie Glyde is not safe from the encroachment of modern mobility, but the illiteracy of her neighbors and servants with the subjectivity required to deal with that technology – the consciousness of railway time and the set of terms used to comprehend and control it – has the potential to devastate her.

Time works against Hartright again in Old Welmingham, where he is searching for the villainous Percival Glyde's official birth record. The parish clerk there boasts of the town being a "lost corner…Not like London" (497). Unlike "new" Welmingham, which has been forced into "clean desolation [and] neat ugliness" by the arrival of the railway, Old Welmingham maintains its country ways. The clerk repeats to Hartright that "[W]e are all asleep here! *We* don't march with the times" (497, 499), commenting both figuratively and literally on the absence of time awareness in his neighborhood, which Percival Glyde has exploited to his advantage. Hartright notes this mentality a few pages later, when he remarks that the clerk has "that exaggerated idea of distances and that vivid perception of difficulties in getting from place to place, which is peculiar to all country people" (502). Hartright's own idea of distance is demonstrably quite different, as throughout the novel he has taken trains, sometimes to fairly great distances, without

appearing to consider such travel an inconvenience; however, he does not seem to consider the possibility that it is his idea of distance, and not the parish clerk's, which might be inaccurate, thanks to the rapid transit available to him via the railway. For a parish clerk living in the sleepy town of Old Welmingham, the compression of time and space brought about by the railway, which Schivelbusch notes as characteristic of the modern Victorian mentality, does not apply.

Despite the lack of time awareness in some of the rural areas in the novel, the characters most deeply involved in the plot have a consciousness of time that is so integral to their worldviews that it has potentially lethal consequences at the end of the novel. In a calculatedly desperate attempt to prove Laura Fairlie's identity once and for all by ascertaining the date of her journey from Blackwater Park to London, which Hartright is (correctly) convinced is "the weak point of the whole conspiracy" (555), Hartright decides to set a literal deadline for Count Fosco. He leaves a letter with his friend Pesca, who gives him a receipt in return which reads: "'Your letter is received. If I don't hear from you before the time you mention, I will break the seal when the clock strikes'" (580). Pesca, a member of a secret Italian "Brotherhood," has the means at his disposal to arrange Count Fosco's certain death, a fact of which Fosco is aware. Using this clever mechanism, Hartright protects himself from foul play and blackmails Fosco into admitting his role in the conspiracy to institutionalize Laura.

More importantly, however, Hartright makes use of standardized time to obtain from Fosco a standardized date; Daly says of this scene that "the temporal discipline of the railway or factory timetable has entered the home" (49). Fosco responds in kind; while his nerves show a brief sign of strain – Hartright says that upon his entering Fosco's home, "[Fosco's] face still betrayed plain traces of the shock" (578) – he regroups quickly, "with a sudden composure, so unnatural and so ghastly that it tried [Hartright's] nerves as no outbreak of violence could have

tried them" (580). Convinced that the time deadline he is faced with is immutable – and one that is too short for him to "get [his] passport regulated" in order to leave London anyway – Fosco responds by creating timelines of his own, literally taking time into his hands and regaining power over the situation. He stipulates to Hartright that he must wait a certain length of time after his departure before regaining his own "freedom of action," and furthermore demands a duel "The time and place, abroad, to be fixed in a letter from my hand" (584) at a later date which he declines to set, leaving Hartright in suspense. Even more intriguingly, Fosco then sets forth a "programme" for the morning's activities: "Four o'clock has just struck. Good! Arrangement, revision, reading, from four to five. Short snooze of restoration for myself, from five to six. Final preparation, from six to seven. Affair of agent and seals letter from seven to eight. At eight, *en route.* Behold the programme!" (587)

Fosco is perhaps the only character whose awareness of time allows him to be more calm, not less so. For example, Hartright's knowledge of his own working against time, combined with the "rapid motion of the cab" he takes to St. John's Wood, serves only to drive him "into such a fever of excitement that [he] shouted to the man to go faster and faster" (577). Despite the horses' obvious physical speed limits, Hartright stands up in the cab so that he can "see the end of the journey before we reached it" (577). The "rapid motion" of his method of transportation combines with Hartight's awareness of time to create in him a "fever" of excitement. Fosco, on the other hand, achieves his composure by strictly programming his activities to a standardized concept of time not much different from that of a railway line's, both in his writing of the account Hartright demands and in his preparations for leaving London. The difference in the way the men respond to the time demands of the situation is reflected in how they respond to

transport as well; while Hartright's nerves are enflamed by excitement on the journey, Fosco handles his coming departure with a nearly "unnatural" composure.

Such composure is perceived as "unnatural" because, as Nicholas Daly claims quite rightly, "nervousness is pandemic in *The Woman in White*" (41), and such nervous complaints result in at least one death in the novel, that of Anne Catherick. Yet even before the titular character's appearance, both the characters and the physical landscapes in the novel are aquiver with sensation. In Walter Hartright's first Narrative, he describes the twilight as "trembling on the topmost ridges of the heath" (Collins 51) and his own spirits on his way home as "jarred" and "not to be commanded" (61). It is because of this nervous disarray that he chooses an alternate route home, which brings him into contact with Anne Catherick. Hartright arrives at a crossroads both literal and figurative shortly afterward, and finds himself transported seemingly without his own agency: he remarks that he had "mechanically turned in this latter direction...when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me" (63).

Here, Hartright finds himself transported "mechanically," passively rather than interactively, much like a railway passenger. Georg Simmel noted of railway travel that "Modern traffic increasingly reduces the majority of sensory relations between human beings to *mere sight*, and this must create entirely new premises for their general sociological feelings" (qtd. in Schivelbusch 75, italics mine). In direct contradiction to this ocular emphasis, Hartright first *feels* the presence of another and then sees her. His sudden interaction with his surroundings – in the form of the Woman in White – therefore has a doubly intense effect on him; the abrupt intrusion of the physical into the mechanical, and the controverting of the typical "sensory relations" between himself and another person, cause nothing short of the shock similar to that from a

railway collision. Throughout the novel, in fact, physical contact causes Hartright to recur to this event and often sends peculiar sensations through his body, "sensation[s] that quickened [his] pulse, and raised a fluttering at [his] heart" (98). Even away from the direct stimulation provided by railway travel, the psychosomatic effects of the mechanical linger in his consciousness.[17]

Hartright foreshadows the rest of the novel in his opening Narrative in a way that also owes much to the language of transportation. He refers to saving Pesca's life at Brighton as an event that would "turn the whole current of my existence into a new channel" (53), once more characterizing himself as a passive object of external transportation. As noted in Chapter 1, railway travelers often complained of feeling like "mere parcels…the object of an industrial process" (Schivelbusch 73). Rail travelers were both accustomed to and objected to passively being transported by the machine, yet here Hartright is not only aware of his subjection to transportation but seemingly at peace with it. In his musings on rescuing Pesca, he continues, saying that if he had not acted, "I should never, perhaps, have heard even the name of the woman, who has lived in all my thoughts, who has possessed herself of all my energies, who has become the one guiding influence that now directs the purpose of my life" (53). Anne Catherick's brief yet intensely physical contact with Hartright sets in motion a chain of events that have repercussions years later. This is quite similar to physician John Eric Erichsen's characterization of railway injuries, which he writes lack "evidence of outward and direct physical injury" and have "[obscure] early symptoms [with] slowly progressive development" (18), yet produce profound physical and psychological effects later. As in railway injuries, *The Woman in White* involves an instance of intense yet seemingly insignificant physical contact that

[17] Alfred Haviland notes the capacity of shock to linger well after the initial trauma, particularly with sensations linked to the railway; he writes that the "vibratory motion of railway carriages…sometimes lasts for days after a journey" and that limbs which have been previously traumatized will "[retain] a feeling of this motion for many hours after" (10).

evolves into a progression of events that will become the driving force behind the lives of each character in the novel. Hartright does not resist this stimulation, but willingly and passively acquiesces to it.

Hartright is not the only character subject to bouts of nervous excitement, however. Unlike other novels of the era, like *East Lynne* or *Hard Cash,* in which principally female characters suffer from nervous maladies while the men remain solid, stiff-upper-lip Britons, *The Woman in White* is a novel in which almost no character is without mental distress of some sort. While the women in the novel do indeed suffer from varying degrees of mental and emotional difficulty, with Anne Catherick's case being the most extreme, the men are equally susceptible. Frederick Fairlie, the uncle who is anything but avuncular, complains repeatedly of the "wretched state of [his] nerves," which are so tremulous that "loud sound of any kind is indescribably torture to [him]" and even a letter upsets him. He is insistent that he can neither travel nor have other people come to see him; "movement of any kind," he says, "is exquisitely painful to me" (82). Sir Percival Glyde lives on the edge of apoplexy, so unstable that Count Fosco gloats over his ability to control the weak-minded man "whose moral courage required perpetual stimulants" (598). This muddling of presumed gender boundaries serves to imbue the novel as a whole with a sense of confusion; readers can no longer depend on clear behavioral demarcations based on a character's sex, and are thus held in suspense as to what to expect from them as events unfold.

The distinction between masculine and feminine is perhaps the most notable breakdown in the novel. While Walter Hartright at times fits the stereotype of the solid, protective Englishman, his nerves are easily impressed upon, and his interactions with Anne Catherick blur the lines between her condition and his; just moments after questioning aloud whether Anne,

with her singular focus, is deranged, he states: "I began to doubt whether my own faculties were not in danger of losing their balance. It seemed almost like a monomania to be tracing back everything strange that happened, everything unexpected that was said, always to the same hidden source and the same sinister influence" (118). Like Fosco, Hartright is effeminized by his nervousness. This effect is also seen in Frederick Fairlie, an invalid whose "wretched" nerves are so paralyzing that he becomes a caricature of feminine passivity, "a frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined" man with "effeminately small" feet (81) who chooses not even to handle his own books and is seemingly always on the brink of collapse.

The opposite, of course, is Marian Holcombe, a woman whose figure Hartright notes is "comely and well-developed" (a term which one cannot help but think signifies something like "stacked") but who possesses a definite "masculine form and masculine look": Hartright writes with dismay that her complexion is "almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip [is] almost a moustache" and comments on her "large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw" (74). He decides that, despite the attractiveness of her figure, she is "altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete" (74). Yet despite her "incompleteness," Marian is possibly the strongest character in the novel, commanding the respect even of Count Fosco, who calls her a "magnificent creature" (592), and while she too suffers from nervous complaints – her pivotal illness seems aided, if not caused, by her emotional distress over Laura – they are less prominent than those of several of the male characters.

The confusion of gender is not the only area of murky distinction in *The Woman in White.* Boundaries are in fact unclear on a multiplicity of levels, with lines blurring between masculine and feminine (and within genders, between individuals), animal and human, and

organic and mechanical. The crux of the novel's elaborate plot rests on the resemblance between Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, which is so distinct that Walter Hartright notes it on multiple occasions: "In the general outline of the countenance and general proportion of the features; in the colour of the hair and in the little nervous uncertainty about the lips; in the height and size of the figure, and the carriage of the head and body, the likeness appeared even more startling than I had ever felt it to be yet" (132).

Count Fosco and his precious mice are another example of pandemic confusion. He is rarely without his menagerie, and there is a bizarre lack of distinction particularly between him and the mice, who "perch fearlessly on his hand, [and] mount his fat outstretched fingers one by one, when he tells them to 'go up-stairs'….They crawl all over him, popping in and out of his waistcoat, and sitting in couples, white as snow, on his capacious shoulders" (243). The perpetual interchange between Fosco and the mice "excites a strange, responsive creeping in [Marian's] own nerves," suggesting to her images of men consumed by rodents in prison "preying on them undisturbed" (254), a distinct image of shifting roles as predator and prey that incites nervous stress in her. It perhaps also suggests to her Fosco's very physicality, which she also remarks upon as being indistinct: she says that "his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women; and more than that, with all his look of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us" (242). Even Fosco, whose "force of character" is made quite clear throughout the novel and who is possibly the most powerful male in the book, occupies dual roles, embodying both masculine force and feminine passivity and nervousness.

In a move that posits the "body as a sensory interface" (Cohen xiii) in a literal sense, the novel also elides the distinction between the organic and the mechanical. Hartright refers to

himself as “mechanically” transported in the first chapter, and “mechanically walking” to and fro in a daze after his encounter with Anne Catherick (70). The word is repeated throughout the text in reference to other characters, always in a scene of intense emotion, almost always of a disturbing sort, and generally accompanied by a blush. Laura Fairlie’s fingers find themselves beating a rhythm on an album of Hartright’s drawings during Percival Glyde’s unwelcome marriage proposal “as if her memory had set them going mechanically with the remembrance of a favorite tune,” and throughout the scene her “colour” flushes deeply and fades to pallor almost instantaneously (175). After a deeply emotional discussion with Laura, Marian Halcombe narrates that she cannot find her seal (an important item to the novel’s plot), saying that she may have “laid it mechanically in the right place” but cannot remember doing so (321). Mrs. Catherick, her “barrier of impenetrable reserve” finally broken by Hartright, momentarily flushes, and Hartright notes that “her hands [grew] restless, then unclasp[ed] themselves, and [began] mechanically smoothing her dress” (487). At these moments of intense emotion, in which we might assume the characters to be their most human, their human physicality is both highlighted by devices like the blush and undermined by their automaton-like response to the trauma. If the railway has indeed resulted in “even our bodies…changing,” as Alfred Haviland claimed in 1868, there is no better sign of it than bodies simultaneously becoming both more and less like machines.

What all of this has to do with the railway and ideas of time related to it is not immediately obvious. Yet in the 1860s, perhaps in response to the ever-increasing number of people interacting with the railway on a frequent basis, a mountain of literature regarding the conjunction of physical bodies to the railway emerged, particularly regarding the relationships between nerves, increasing mobility, and time. Erichsen’s treatise on railway injuries, published

in 1867, was not the first or last of its kind. In 1862 a special Commission on the Influence of Railway Travel on Public Health reported its findings to the *Lancet*, in which Lord Shaftesbury is quoted as saying that "the very power of locomotion keeps persons in a state of great nervous excitement" (qtd. in Daly 43), and which suggested that the increasing numbers of mental patients in asylums were directly attributable to "the now universal rapid locomotion" available to railway travellers (Porter 152). *Punch* highlighted this same nervousness in a comic piece published in December of 1864, called "The Wonders of Modern Travel," in which the anxiety of rail travel is presented as a long list of worries beginning with the word "wonder." Several of these have to do with anxiety over time: "Wonder if my watch is right, or slow, or fast," "Wonder if that church clock is right," and "Wonder if the young lady at the counter is deceiving me when she says I've got exactly a minute and a half" (240-41). That neurosis is a potential side-effect of subjecting one's body to rail travel, with its rapid mobility and demands for punctuality, seems a distinct possibility to all these writers.

Nor was the danger strictly psychological. In 1868, Alfred Haviland, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, wrote a short piece entitled "Hurried to Death," which was published in the *Medical Times and Gazette* and which was so popular that Haviland published it as its own monograph, largely expanded, later that year. In the monograph, Haviland expresses a deep concern over the unfamiliarity of people with their own bodies and the effects wrought upon them by the railway, writing that

> It would be interesting to know, as a statistical fact, the number of persons that have fallen down dead whilst hurrying to the train. Most of us can remember some friend or acquaintance who has overdone himself by this unwise haste; and even if death has not taken place at once, a fatal warning has been given which, if

> unheeded, sooner or later must be followed by fatal consequences…For there [is] many a person who had prided himself on being sound as a bell, [who] has found, to his utter dismay, a flaw where he least expected one. (11)

Haviland here makes the link explicit between modern demands of time and punctuality and issues of passengers' mental and physical health. While he cannot return England to an era before rail travel, Haviland urges ameliorative practices including abstaining from heavy meals before travel in order to minimize the inevitable effects of railway trauma on the body, which nevertheless many travellers exacerbate by "[risking] their lives…in the hurry of business or pleasure" (11). In language that echoes Collins's combination of the organic and the mechanical, Haviland states the purpose of his work as helping to prevent unnecessary trauma to the organs that form so "primary and important a part in the *machinery of life*" (6, italics mine).

Haviland supports his thesis with multiple case-studies – two in his introduction and twelve in a later chapter – of travellers who have fatally interacted with the railway. The introductory examples are dire evidence of his concern; the first, a woman so desperate to catch her train that her heart bursts from a combination of physical exertion and mental terror, and the other of a farmer who "had been accustomed to the old-fashioned mode of going to market, but since the opening of the new line he had availed himself of it, and hurrying to catch the train, found too late that he had carried about with him for years, in his most vital organ, an unsuspected flaw, which only required hurry and strong emotion to become fatal" (15). In both cases it is a combination of physical exertion and emotional disorder – spurred on by the terror of missing the implacable, impersonal train – that sends the hapless railway passengers to their deaths, deaths which Haviland implies would not have happened in the "old coaching time" (10). Perhaps most significantly, Haviland suggests that the dangers of railway travel are equally

applicable to both sexes, as seen in his deliberate presentation of both a man and a woman succumbing to the fatal combination of "hurry and strong emotion" in his strongly-worded introduction.

Yet despite their dangerous application to the human body, "hurry" and "strong emotion" are key ingredients of the sensation genre, and *The Woman in White* is no exception. In 1863, H. L. Mansel complained that sensation novels provided only temporary excitement, all "Action, action, action!" His principal complaint, with which he opens his essay, is that such novels are guilty of "preaching to the nerves" (482). Margaret Oliphant, in 1862, complained similarly of the "palpitating" readership of sensation novels, who "feel the need of a supply of new shocks and wonders" (564) and willingly and eagerly subject themselves to the "violent stimulant of serial publication" (568). The sensation reader's addiction to stimulation through novel-reading is akin to the effects of the train upon the human traveller; as Haviland notes, "one characteristic of the evils of railway travelling is that we do not get accustomed to them: on the contrary, those which cause us serious alarm grow worse instead of better" (22). Daly states that "[w]hat the sensation novel was preaching to the nerves was a new time-discipline: to be immersed in the plot of a sensation novel, to have one's nerves quiver with those of the hero or heroine, was to be wired into a new mode of temporality" (49). Oliphant herself, in her glowing review of *The Woman in White,* supports this interpretation, claiming that "The reader's nerves are affected like the hero's. He feels the thrill of the untoward resemblance, an ominous, painful mystery. He, too, is chilled by a confused and unexplained alarm…The effect is pure sensation" (Oliphant 572). Like Hartright, the reader too acquiesces to the stimulation of the Woman in White and is swept mechanically into a labyrinth of "new shocks and wonders."

In claiming that "[e]verything is changed, even our bodies are changing" (204), Haviland is perhaps more correct than even he suspected. The very bodies of readers change as they respond to the stimulus of the sensation novel – and dangerously so, if Haviland's emphasis on the perils of "strong emotion" is correct. And bodies are perceived and treated as fluid, changing objects throughout the novel. It seems likely that this is in part due to the increased mobility of such bodies. Almost every character in the novel suffers from nervous dysfunction of some sort, and almost every character travels far more than was customary prior to the coming of the railways. Haviland and others strongly argue causes that such travel engenders the very confusion and disorder from which these characters suffer: Haviland remarks bluntly that "all this striving to do certain distances in certain given times has engendered an irritability in our organs" that has imperiled and/or killed "thousands" and will continue to do so (204). The novel's one exception to this travel-engendered irritability is, of course, the sedentary Frederick Fairlie, but his nervousness often seems a performance, whereas the other maladies are palpably real. The only characters with truly solid emotional states are those who exist within a small, relatively stable environment and do not frequently travel outside it. They are also, significantly, those whose idea of time is the least modern: the housekeeper Mrs. Michelson, the gardener at Blackwater Park, Old Walmingham's parish clerk. Those characters more familiar with the conveniences of modern transport – and the concomitant demands of railway time – fare less well. Indeed, in the novel's opening, even Walter Hartright's short travels between London and Hampstead seem to provoke his nerves, and he projects his own excited state onto his surroundings and stands petrified when forced to interact with them. He also endeavors to manipulate time in this scene, choosing "the most roundabout way [he] could take" to return to London in an attempt to sooth his "jangled" nerves (62).

Far from the railway effecting an "annihilation" of time, as Schivelbusch claims it to have done for nineteenth-century Britons, it seems at least for the characters in *The Woman in White* to produce exactly the opposite effect. Their acute awareness of the railway's standardized time (and the capacity of some to manipulate it) threatens to annihilate *them*, whether merely by causing intense nervous stress or, in the case of Laura Fairlie Glyde, obliterating her identity. The increased mobility offered by the railway, its passengers' acute awareness of railway time, and the attendant "hurry and strong emotion" that Haviland warns of as being so dangerous all coincide in Collins's novel, emphasizing not only the "transformation of human experience of time and space being effected by the railways" (Daly 47), but a transformation of the body itself, both as it is perceived and as it exists. Haviland's warning of the effects of modern time on the human body is borne out in Collins's novel, despite the novel's predating it by nearly a decade: "Everything is changed, even our bodies are changing."

CHAPTER 4

IMPACT: *EAST LYNNE* AND THE FEMALE BODY

> Railway accidents are less frequent in France than they are with us; but when they do occur they are wholesale catastrophes, the memory of which lasts for a life time.
>
> --- Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*

If *The Woman in White* is a novel in which the railway metaphorically affects concepts of identity through mostly psychological effects, its close kin *East Lynne,* published in 1861, is its younger literal-minded cousin. Unlike Collins's cosmopolitan novel, in which characters seem familiar and comfortable with frequent long-distance train travel, *East Lynne* is a novel in which most of what travel there is comprises short distances traversed either on foot or by horse, and most of the action in the text is confined to the small country village in which the house of East Lynne is situated. However, the central plot device of Ellen Wood's novel, without which its final startling revelation would be impossible, is a railway accident. In Chapter 31, titled "An Accident," Wood begins by prefacing her protagonist's catastrophe by saying that "Railway accidents are less frequent in France than they are with us" (320). As the editor of the Oxford World's Classics edition notes, this was quite frequent indeed: Charles Dickens's *Household Narrative,* a supplement to his *Household Words,* regularly published accident statistics, which were often appalling: for example, in the first half of 1853, as the novel's editor Elisabeth Jay notes, "148 people were killed on the railways and 191 were injured" in Britain (630). And they

would not get less frequent in the decade; one of the worst accidents of the 1860s, the Staplehurst Railway Accident (in which Dickens was famously involved), was not to occur until 1865.

Despite the regularity with which the public was confronted with these tragedies, they never became perceived as mundane. Rather, such incidents remained exceedingly powerful in the popular consciousness, demonstrated by their frequency in popular fiction, and particularly in that breed of fiction that so calculatedly "[preached] to the nerves" (Mansel 482). Indeed, Peter W. Sinnema argues that the power these accidents had over the public was precisely *because* of their frequent publication; in addition to journals like *Household Words,* which published statistics, newspapers quickly discovered that railway accidents were moneymakers, as exemplified by Sinnema's case-study, the *Illustrated London News,* which was the "English-speaking world's first regularly illustrated, weekly newspaper" (Sinnema 142). Sinnema argues that the tension underlying public opinion of the railway is illustrated in the *ILN*'s dual treatment of railway accidents, which they published on almost weekly: the paper "tend[ed] to produce reassuring assessments of the railway's impact on the nation" with its illustrations, which attenuated the trauma of the events; however, the paper's journalists paid "close attention to detail and complexity," creating in the *ILN* "a conflict between words and pictures" – a conflict, in other words, between the body and the word. With such anecdotes so frequently available, it is understandable that mid-century readers would attempt to develop an "industrialized consciousness" (Schivelbusch 159), one which positioned the body in relation to the machine in a way that did not annihilate its human subjectivity.

Wood's description of the pivotal railway crash in her novel echoes the emphasis on shock, both physical and psychological, seen in novels such as Collins's *The Woman in White,* in which the abrupt intrusion of the mechanical into Walter Hartright's everyday life causes

aftershocks that ripple throughout the rest of his narrative. Of Isabel Vane's fateful train trip from Grenoble to Paris, Wood writes:

> when [railway accidents] occur, they are wholesale catastrophes, the memory of which lasts for a life time. The train was within a short distance of the station when there came a sudden shock and crash as of the day of doom; and engine, carriages, and passengers lay in one confused mass at the foot of a steep embankment. The gathering darkness added to the awful confusion. (320)

Wood's evocative description of shock would be echoed just a few years later in the decade by the Inimitable himself, Charles Dickens. Writing about the 1865 Staplehurst railway crash, which was to haunt him for the rest of his life, Dickens uses language quite similar to Wood's: "No imagination," he writes to Thomas Mitton, "can conceive the ruin of the carriages, or the extraordinary weights under which the people were lying, or the complications into which they were twisted up among iron and wood, and mud and water" (qtd. in Slater 535). Wood's characterization of the "shock" of the crash, and the lasting impact it has on both the body and subjectivity, are psychologically insightful: Dickens too was to suffer repercussions from the crash until his death in 1870. Michael Slater quotes Dickens as telling friends that railway travel was "inexpressibly distressing" to him (537), and haunting interactions with the railway appeared in his later fiction, most notably *The Signalman,* published in the Christmas 1866 edition of *All the Year Round.*

Like many of its sensational kin, *East Lynne* relies on physical sensation, shock, and sudden collisions for its impact, and the language of these elements often echoes that used to describe this railway accident. The incidents of physical sensation in this novel are too numerous to note comprehensively: on nearly every page, some character (both male and female) is

"flushing," "tingling," "throbbing" or "pulsating," sometimes all at once. Shocks are built into the narrative, and Wood's narrator frequently heightens them by warning us (sometimes several hundred pages in advance) that her characters are on their way towards grand misfortune, as she does for Lady Isabel Vane just thirteen pages into the novel: "admire and love her while you may, she is worthy of it now....the time will come when such praise would be misplaced. Could the fate, that was to overtake his child, have been foreseen by the earl, he would have struck her down to death...as she stood before him, rather than suffer her to enter upon it!" (13) Violence, of one sort or another, is the only way to ultimately correct Isabel's identity. And it is only through a series of sudden collisions that the narrative of the novel progresses, as characters come together and part in what can best be described as "awful confusion."

The railway accident, which occurs at almost the exact middle of the novel, thus becomes emblematic of the novel's larger concerns. While West Lynne, the village adjacent to the East Lynne house, is a rural town far from the hustle and bustle of London or Manchester, in which everyone knows everyone else and a newcomer to town is immediately the subject of gossip, there is a sense that the dangers of modernity have begun to penetrate even there. Even the most delicate, stereotypically ideal characters perform tasks "mechanically." A crucial witness to a murder is unavailable because he has decided to travel in Norway, despite his working-class income. Travel in particular is noted for its ability to transform communities and bodies (and especially Isabel's body) both positively and negatively: Isabel's travel via railway and boat to France changes her, in a process described as "little short of a miracle," from a sickly invalid into a woman flushed with "the hue and contour of health" and the "sensation of ecstasy" (209), yet her later flight by train from Grenoble to a more rural area of France, "unpenetrated by the steps of civilised man" (320), results in a disfigurement so severe that she is mistakenly taken for dead,

and not even her own ex-husband later recognizes her in the "pale, thin, shattered, crippled invalid" (323) she has become. However, it is because of this disfigurement that she is able to return to her former home, posing as governess to her own children right under the nose of her ex-husband and his new wife. *East Lynne* seems to suggest that the insidious invasion of modernity – like the incursion of the railway – into a comfortably rural area is unavoidable.

Yet it is implied, by some, that this may be the community's own fault. Margaret Oliphant, in her famous essay on the "Sensation Novel" in *Blackwood's Magazine* (1862), decries modern industry as "volcanic din and passion," and the sensation novel as a tawdry form necessary only because the modern English "feel the need of a supply of new shocks and wonders" (564). Serial publication, the mode of choice for most sensation novelists, is even considered potentially physically dangerous: Oliphant calls it "violent stimulation...with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident" (568). These sentiments seem to suggest that not only are people inured to modernity's "shocks and wonders," through their constant exposure to railway accidents and the general "din" of industrial life, they have actually formed a *dependency* on them, seeking such "violent stimulation" out when their own lives are too plain. Like the readers of sensation novels, who endanger themselves by seeking out and devouring shocking fictional stimulation, the characters who populate *East Lynne* are categorically aquiver with palpitations both physical and emotional, and often willfully court such sensation in just the way Oliphant describes the reader of the modern sensation novel as doing. While Ellen Wood as narrator seems eager to remind us that those who seek such sensation fall into ruin, her novel, as Oliphant notes disapprovingly, ends up enshrining her palpating, disfigured heroine as a Christ figure by the end of the narrative,

and in so doing perhaps ends up demonstrating the triumph of the "shocks and wonders" of modernity more than condemning them.

The repercussions of Isabel's accident echo throughout the second half of the novel. Describing Isabel's injuries in Chapter 31, Wood writes:

> She had not counted upon dying in this manner, and death in the guise of horrible suffering was not the abstract thing of release and escape which it had seemed, when she had wished for it as the end of all her wretchedness. She was unable to move, but the shock had deadened sensation, she was not yet in pain, and her mind was for a short interval preternaturally clear and lucid. (321)

Ironically, Isabel's traumatic collision with and subjection by the railway, and the resulting excess of physical sensation, have effectively "deadened sensation," producing a "preternaturally clear and lucid" period for her to begin to put into motion the events that will allow her return to England. As a writer of sensation fiction, Wood would not have been oblivious to the irony of this; unlike her readers, whom Oliphant decries as addicted to "violent stimulation" but who continue to read the novels that affect them so, Wood's heroine is able to act only when such violent stimulation is deadened.

In an undeniably ironic move for an author of sensation fiction, Wood creates her Isabel Vane as a heroine who is perhaps *too* open to sensation. In her interactions with the dangerous Captain Levison, she observes the rest of the people in her rooms "with her eyes, not with her sense; her senses were holding commune with herself…a sensation all too warm, a feeling of attraction towards Francis Levison, was working within her; not a voluntary one; she could no more repress it than she could repress her own sense of being" (211-12). As her jealousy of her husband and his supposed mistress grows, she lives "in a state of excitement" (252). It is

therefore not surprising that Isabel would require the quiet of a hospital room to sort out her thoughts and prepare a course of action; her interactions with modernity, especially on the Continent, have left her as neurally and physically overwhelmed as Oliphant's stimulation-addicted readers. As with other sensation novels, *East Lynne* is a novel in which confusion is rampant: an innocent man is confused with a murderer, an innocent woman is taken for an adulterous seductress, a villainous rake is confused with a gentleman, and a disgraced, divorced noblewoman neatly disguises herself as a governess to her own children. The concerns over identity present in other mid-century novels – Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* being the best example of this, especially as Wood's novel is certainly influenced by it – are here literalized and their impact on the human subject emphasized: if in 1859 it takes only the elision of the date of her journey to erase Laura Fairlie Glyde's identity, by 1861 it requires a full-on collision with the "confused mass" of modern transportation technology to elide Isabel Vane's identity (and, by extension, her indiscretions).

The suggestions of such amplification are manifold. Laura in *The Woman in White* is a largely passive character, treated by Walter and Marian rather as their pet and described by Walter as "faint and pale" and "a fair, delicate girl" (Collins 89-90). She takes no direct action of her own, and her characterization aligns her strongly with Barbara Hare, the insipid blonde "virtuous rival" of Isabel in *East Lynne*, whom even reviewer Margaret Oliphant – typically tolerant of sensation fiction, and warmly respectful of Wilkie Collins's works – said "we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of" (Oliphant 567). Isabel, on the other hand, while more beautiful than Collins's Marian Holcombe, is not that passive, at least not physically: the reader of *East Lynne* is constantly reminded that Isabel's body "[flushes] with gratification," blushes with desire, and has a heart that "beats wildly" in the company of men she finds attractive (Wood

120-21). Perhaps, as Gail Walker argues, the "sin" of Isabel Vane – her sexual awakening and urge for the gratification of her passion – is too shocking for the Victorian consciousness to bear; her status as a heroine who takes action to fulfill her desires may also require a more forceful intervention by the technology of modernity than that required to suppress Laura Fairlie Glyde.

Elaine Showalter views Wood's treatment of her heroine as a "terrible punishment" for Isabel's freewheeling sexual passion: she notes that "Lady Isabel is abandoned by her lover, she loses her illegitimate child in a train wreck, and, in the same wreck, she is disfigured beyond all recognition" (172). Quoting from one of Wood's frequent moralistic passages of the novel, Showalter reads the physical rewriting of Isabel as an object lesson for Victorian readers. Wood's strident tone certainly seems to support such a reading; writing in Chapter 29, sarcastically titled "Charming Results," Wood describes Isabel's plight after her flight from her home to France:

> Never had she experienced a moment's calm, or peace, or happiness, since the fatal night of quitting her home….Oh, reader, believe me! Lady – wife – mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awake. Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolve* to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them…bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name…for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death. (283)

Isabel's traumatic disfigurement, to Showalter and several other scholars, is a "fate worse than death." As Showalter points out, as the governess Mrs. Vine, Isabel must watch her children interact with Barbara, a dull young country girl whom even Victorian readers found difficult to

like; she must mourn the death of her son without revealing her secret; and she must live in the same house with a husband whose value she can only appreciate once she has irrevocably lost him. The narrator is insistent on the suffering of Isabel's position, referring to it (through Isabel's subjectivity) as "the cross that she had undertaken to carry" (411) and writing that

> Terribly, indeed, were [Isabel's and Barbara's] positions reversed; most terribly was [Isabel] feeling it…Barbara was now the honoured and cherished wife, East Lynne's mistress. And what was she? Not even the welcomed guest of an hour…but an interloper; a criminal woman who had thrust herself into the house. (432)

Wood continues to subject the reader to such insights into Isabel's subjectivity for the remaining two hundred pages of the novel, so that we are continually reminded of Isabel's suffering by her own voice. This strategy, in fact, may have been one of the reasons for the novel's popularity; Oliphant remarks in her review that Isabel, "only moderately interesting while she is good, becomes, as soon as she is a Magdalen, doubly a heroine" and that the continual reminders of her "wickedness and sufferings" create in the reader "a strong hold upon our sympathies" (567).

Gail Walker argues that "the fact that the norms [of sexuality] are expressed at all through the vehicle of the popular novel indicates a widespread need on the part of the Victorian middle-class reading audience for the kind of sexual 'safety' that the enunciation of rigid sexual standards might supply" (23). She, like Showalter, suggests that Isabel's punishment "exemplifies the Victorian obsession with female sexual purity through the extreme severity with which her misconduct is punished" (24). While this reading is undeniably plausible, it elides some of the crucial attention to Isabel's subjectivity that I read as, in a way, empowering her. In contrast to the heroine whose identity is affected by the railway in *The Woman in White,* we

generally get Isabel's thoughts, even the painful ones, directly from her. Even her sufferings at the home of her family are self-imposed; the narrator reminds us several times within the space of one chapter that Isabel has chosen to return home, and has chosen to assume a different identity in order to be near her beloved children. In this aspect, at least, Isabel is successful: she interacts with her children, and demonstrates her affection for them, something the traditional "fallen woman" is generally denied. Indeed, it is construed as fortunate for her children that she returns, as their step-mother Barbara, while a pretty blonde thing, "never was fond of being troubled with children" and expresses a disdain for Carlyle and Isabel's offspring as "noisy, troublesome, cross" youngsters whom she prefers to interact with only occasionally (Wood 406-07). After hearing enough of this sort of sentiment to be thoroughly disgusted with Barbara, the reader gets Isabel's views on the subject again: "Lady Isabel [felt] a sort of thankfulness…that the system had not been hers – when she had a home and children" (407). While Isabel is indeed subjected to physical defacement and psychological mortification, she nevertheless transforms her traumas into benefits, and it is with her, not her traditionally virtuous rival, that our sympathies lie.

Wood's unconventional (and perhaps unintentional) moral was not lost on the Victorian audience; Nell Le Strange, the heroine of Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), reads *East Lynne* and decides that remaining in an unhappy marriage is preferable to running away from her husband. Nell's description of *East Lynne* is delightful:

> I am buried in an arm-chair in my boudoir, reading a novel. It interests me rather, for it is all about a married woman, who ran away from her husband and suffered the extremity of human ills in consequence. I have made several steps in morality

> of late, I flatter myself, but even now, I can hardly imagine that I should have been very miserable if Dick had taken me away with him.
>
> The naughty matron is just dying of a broken heart and starvation in a Penitentiary, when I hear carriage wheels. (389)

Nell openly admits that she would not have been "very miserable" if her lover had taken her off to the Continent, but considers that running away would be impractical. Her tale ends in her claiming that "I have been a good wife…at least, I have tried to be" (411). Nell seems to be dying of an excess of sensation; she describes the process, saying: "Never did anyone leave the world with more lagging, lingering feet than I am doing" (411). Yet unlike Isabel, who must be physically traumatized and ultimately die to expiate her sins, Nell seems to triumph in the end: her body remains with her husband Hugh for a short while, but she seems convinced that she will be reunited with her lover after death: "God was very good and pitying; he was going to release me from the long pain of existence, and 'through the grave and gate of death' I should pass to my beloved; should see his hero face immortal *then* in its beauty" (414-415).

The movement observable in the treatment of bodies and identities, particularly female ones, from the pioneering *Woman in White* through the sensation fiction of the mid-century to Wilde's *fin de siècle* play *The Importance of Being Earnest,* serves to map out the cultural concerns surrounding one of modernity's most striking emblems, and also the continual adaptation to that entity. The technology of the railway was increasingly impossible to escape as the century progressed, and with its physical effects on human subjects came psychological aftershocks that lingered long after the initial contact. While the railway undoubtedly opened new spaces for exploration and provided new mobility to those able to interact with it, with the expansion of horizons came the potential for confusion: confusion of the human with the

mechanical, as in Collins's novel; confusion of virtue and vice in Wood's fiction; or confusion between fact and fiction, humanity and its textual representations, as in Wilde's farce. Gender also seems to play a significant role in the elaboration of fears over the railway and its effects: while nine of Haviland's twelve case-studies of fatal railway interaction in his monograph *Hurried to Death* are male, many of the characters who are most transformed (and often traumatized) by the railway in contemporary fiction are female. The exception to this is of course Collins's *The Woman in White*, in which nearly all the men suffer from some kind of nervous complaint similar to those suffered by railway travelers. Yet the fact that Collins's men are also to a great extent feminized, and his female heroine Marian Holcombe is a quite masculine woman, also point to the deeply problematic nature of gender in the nineteenth century. A traditionally "masculine" technology such as the railway, with its stimulating and often violent mechanical force, is not a direct oppressor of stereotypical femininity: even in the extreme case of Isabel Vane, the railway is a liberator as well as destroyer. And by the end of the century, the effects of the railway on identity, while still present, seem to have very little significance to either men or women; in *The Importance of Being Earnest* there is no agony over Jack's elision as "Jack Worthing" and reinscription as "John Ernest Moncrieff," and no cataclysmic collision with the technology of mobility is necessary to effect his transformation.

The gradual change over the century, from the "pandemic nervousness" of *The Woman in White* to the pandemic archness of *The Important of Being Earnest,* also signal developments in the perception of human/machine interaction. As Schivelbusch argues, the nineteenth century was one in which the human subject became both physically and psychologically transformed by the railway; he writes that "gradually everything connected with the [railway] became psychically assimilated" by those who interacted with it, and that "the stimuli [of mechanical

experiences] burnt their way into the skin layer of consciousness and 'its substance to a certain [depth] may…become permanently modified'" (165). This evolution – a concept with which the Victorians were no less than obsessed – marks a transformation of the human body, but also of its identity, its self-hood: "stimuli, once they have been psychically assimilated, determine consciousness and perception to the extent that stimuli of a quality entirely different from the assimilated ones no longer register" (Schivelbusch 165). If one's consciousness is determined by what one perceives, and what one perceives has been fundamentally altered by interaction with and assimilation to the technology of modernity, then the impact of the railway on the body and identity can be measured in terms far greater than its psychological manipulation of a Laura Fairlie Glyde or its physical disfigurement of an Isabel Vane. The railway, in effect, makes new people. The indifference of Wilde's characters to their interactions with the railway (except for Lady Bracknell's social disgust at Jack's lack of relations), even when such interactions have determined a character's identity for his entire life, mark a fundamental shift in consciousness and world-perception along the lines of what Schivelbusch suggests for ocular perception. In addition to bidding a gleeful farewell to forms of fiction that have "outlived [their] function" (Daly 54,) Wilde's play suggests the conclusion of a tempestuous relationship with "mechanized modernity" (55) that has haunted human subjects throughout the Victorian era. The old paradigms which characterized the interplay between the body, the identity, and the railway are as defunct as Miss Prism's ill-starred three-decker (a form in which most sensation fiction, including the novels of Collins and Wood, appeared). If novels such as *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne* suggest the difficulties of such relationships, Wilde's play consigns these difficulties to an outdated past, looking forward to a future where "signs of triviality" and an identity consistently in flux are no longer liabilities but valuable assets in their own right.

CHAPTER 5

CODA

The potential of the railway to open new spaces for exploration did not disappear with the passing of the Victorian age, nor did its immense influence over both the bodies and the imaginations of the British populace. Published in 1910, E.M. Forster's classic novel of connections and boundaries, *Howards End,* presents a passage about the railway very early on:

> Like many others who have lived long in a great capital, [Margaret] had strong feelings about the various railway termini. They are our gates to the glorious and the unknown. Through them we pass out into adventure and sunshine, to them, alas! we return. In Paddington all Cornwall is latent and the remoter west; down the inclines of Liverpool Street lie fenlands and the illimitable Broads; Scotland is through the pylons of Euston; Wessex behind the poised chaos of Waterloo….[He] is a chilly Londoner who does not endow his stations with some personality, and extend to them, however shyly, the emotions of fear and love. (12)

In a reversal of Wilde's scenario, in which the railway station endows Jack Worthing with an identity, Forster's Londoners bestow on "their" stations identities, personalities, and a certain degree of emotional attachment. The narrator continues, writing that to Margaret, "the station of King's Cross had always suggested Infinity…a comment on the materialism of life" (Forster 12). St. Pancras, once the grandest railway station in London, is to the twentieth-century Margaret a place of "facile splendours" (12). In contrast, King's Cross, hidden behind the façade of St.

Pancras's faded glories, provides "fit portals for some eternal adventure, whose issue might be prosperous, but would certainly not be expressed in the ordinary language of prosperity" (12).

Margaret's perception of the railway, fanciful as it is, has less in keeping with the traditional Victorian interaction with train travel than her aunt Mrs. Munt's. In another passage placed very shortly after Margaret's blissful, expansive characterization of "her" train station, Forster describes Mrs. Munt's train journey to Hilton thus:

> The train sped northward, under innumerable tunnels. It was only an hour's journey, but Mrs. Munt had to raise and lower the window again and again. She passed through the South Welwyn Tunnel, saw light for a moment, and entered the North Welwyn Tunnel, of tragic fame. She traversed the immense viaduct, whose arches span untroubled meadows and the dreamy flow of Tewin Water. She skirted the parks of politicians. At times the Great North Road accompanied her, more suggestive of infinity than any railway awakening, after a nap of a hundred years, to such life as is conferred by the stench of motor-cars, and to such culture as is implied by the advertisements of antibilious pills. To history, to tragedy, to the past, to the future, Mrs. Munt remained equally indifferent; hers but to concentrate on the end of her journey, and to rescue poor Helen from this dreadful mess. (14-15)

Like Ruskin's "earnest" traveler of 1849, or the traveler for whom "there is nothing left but railway stations" (Schivelbusch 57), Mrs. Munt is "indifferent" to the paradisiacal scenery expanding before her gaze through the windows of the railway carriage; the train, for her, is not an experience itself, but a mere means to an end. Her interaction with the railway, unlike Margaret's raptures on the potential of "the glorious and the unknown" that it provides, is

perfunctory; modern woman that she is, she has learned, like Lady Bracknell, to subdue the technology of modernity to her necessities. Nor is she troubled by the variations of time and space presented by her journey; Fredric Jameson comments that the passage describing her travel present "reflections on…authentic and inauthentic existential time (Mrs. Munt's version of Heideggerian *Sorge*)" (52), but unlike Walter Hartright's conflicted response to difficulties posed by time and space in *The Woman in White,* the pragmatic and practical Mrs. Munt's response to such stimuli is not narrated by Forster, and the reader is left guessing as to whether she is at all influenced by her journey when she has such "inattentive eyes" (15).

The automobile is also a significant technological presence in Forster's novel, but the motorcar has no paean like Margaret's brief hymn to the train station. Instead of acting as "gates to the glorious and the unknown," presenting always the potential for adventure and change, the automobile in *Howards End* tends to be a force of destruction; Charles Wilcox's car destroys the roads in the village of Hilton, kicking up dust that the villagers must then breathe in, and a later scene in the novel reinforces Charles's casual class-based cruelty by showing him running over a family's cat and not bothering to stop. The railway, the symbol of progress (if conflicted and often painful) for so much of the nineteenth century, is to Forster an almost nostalgic entity, still presenting the opportunity for adventure and excitement to some, but a technology of a past era, without the threat of modernity and personal mobility present in the automobile. The Great North Road, and not the slumbering railway, is suggestive of "infinity," but it is one of "empty endlessness" and mechanical desolation. While Wilde projects a world where the past is of little significance to the future as an ideal space, here such ignorance seems deleterious: Mrs. Munt is indifferent alike to "history, to tragedy, to the past, to the future" (Forster 215). Despite the charming vistas presented to her as she travels from London to Hilton, she exists not in a world

of sensual overstimulation but in a vacuum. Contrary to Wilde's glib predictions of a culture that would outgrow "the antinomies of modernization" (Daly 55), Forster's characterization of transportation in *Howards End* demonstrates that Wilde's train may have left the platform of *Victorian* concerns over the technology of mobility, but it arrived promptly in the twentieth century with baggage of its own.

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