

## **Transporting Scenes: Motion and Sensation on the Victorian Stage**

'What sort of play are we to expect?  
'It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy [...]'  
'You have no leaning towards realism?'  
'None whatever. Realism is only a background; it cannot form an artistic motive for a play that is to be a work of art.'

'Mr Oscar Wilde on Mr Oscar Wilde.'<sup>1</sup>

### *1. Aim, Methodology and Field of Enquiry*

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate how the Victorian drama, defined largely as a realistic theatre in staging, acting techniques and content,<sup>2</sup> represents in a concentrated form and often challenges - given the era's complex dialectic between codes of *genre* and social codes - the idea of modernity which arose in Great Britain during the Nineteenth Century. To this end I wish to explore how the Victorian stage expressed the contradictions and unrest of the times as well as the certainties, all of which derived from the global expansion of British commerce, from the country's increasing mobility for reasons of work or pleasure both within and without its borders (to which attest the many tourist companies created during the period, including Thomas Cook's, founded at mid-century), from extensive urbanization and the spreading of the empire. All these developments were dependent upon the rapid evolution in means of transportation and navigation – in trains and ships - which may be considered not only the key *instruments* of these historic changes, but also the key *symbols* of them. For this reason I have investigated the functions assigned to trains and ships in the farces and melodramas of the era (limiting my

<sup>1</sup> *St James's Gazette* (18 January 1895), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> See the epitextual frequency of terms such as "life" and "times" (*Under the Gaslight, or, Life and Love in These Times*, 1867, *After Dark, A Tale of London Life*, 1868) or referential place-names (*The Lancashire Lass, or Tempted, Tried, and True*, 1867, *The Scamps of London*, 1843, *London By Night*, 1868).

analysis of the latter form to nautical and domestic melodramas), two theatrical genres often neglected by high-brow criticism, which, however, enjoyed a great vogue.

As participatory forms *par excellence*, often deeply self-referential (as we shall see in the case of nautical melodrama), these two dramatic forms testify to an extremely lively and colourful popular culture, thus permitting us to assess the real impact of the means of transportation on the daily life of the Victorians. Rarely escapist, farce and melodrama were profoundly imbued with the political implications and latent ideologies which underline the complex cultural dialectic of a period - such as the Victorian - usually perceived through the lens of rationality and realism. The boisterous but innocuous physicality of the farce, its dazzling nonsensical language similar to musical composition,<sup>3</sup> and its poetics of the absurd and incongruous distanced this form from the inflexible causality in which realism is grounded, placing it more in the realm of “play,” and of continual self-representational irony. In a similar fashion, melodrama may be compared to fantasy, to reassuring illusion. Its irrationality and the emotional gut-response it elicited - proper to its non-verbal fabric of multiple codes and systems (such as music, gestures, stage scenery) coordinated in a language of continual sensorial excitement which brought on stage the compelling stimuli of contemporary life - heightened the *pathos* of the situations and accentuated the spectator’s sense of wonder.

According to theatre historian Jane Moody,

[m]elodrama’s privileging of the instinctive against the rational, its use of music as an unconscious language of fear and desire, its dialectic between a frozen, silent stasis (often visually encoded in picture and tableaux ...) and the inexorable, rushing determinism of

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<sup>3</sup> For instance Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Ernest*, 1895 was famously dubbed by W.H. Auden “perhaps the only purely verbal opera in English” (“An Improbable Life”, in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Ellmann, London, Prentice Hall, 1969, p. 136).

apocalyptic endings in fire and floods: these characteristics all contribute towards melodrama's world of dream, fantasy and nightmare.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the narrative structures privileged by farce and melodrama rely on (and often boldly exploit) mistaken identity, extraordinary coincidences, improbable solutions, fragmented time sequences and are constructed through the accumulation of isolated scenes and tableaux, rather than through the diegetic continuity proper to the novel, "ha[ving] far greater tolerance [...] for episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together to be able to be kept in line by a cause and effect chain of narrative progression."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. *The dramatic functions*

Having defined the dramatic field in which this enquiry is situated, I will proceed to classify the functions assigned to means of transportation in the Victorian drama. I have identified eight basic functions pertaining to trains, carriages, and various means of navigation (ships, boats, and even, in one example, a canoe):

- a) **Sensationalist function.** A) *Display of modernity*. The vehicle of transportation appears directly on stage as in *The Lancashire Lass* (II.ii) where a steamer is part of the stage set. This play enormously impressed the critics of the time who watched in amazement as passengers in flesh and blood bustled up and down the gangway, and marvelled as the ship itself moved out to sea from a perfect replica of the Egremont Pier in Liverpool.

*SCENE 2. Lights quite down. The pier at Egremont, Liverpool, seen in the distance; lights in windows of the houses and lamps. One row right along the Docks. [...] Music. Large steam-boat with red light on pole and steam from funnel enters and rakes by pier. MAN comes on from top of pier. MAN on boat throws rope to him; he loops it over post, then places gangway. [...] Two or three passengers then get out and walk off pier. [...] MAN draws up gangway and exit as the boat goes off.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup>"The Silence of New Historicism: A Mutinous Echo from 1830", *Nineteenth-Century Theatre*, Vol. 24 (1), Summer 1996, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup>Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity. Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup>In *Plays by H.J. Byron*, ed. Jim Davis, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 98-99. In a French edition of the play we read: "[...] ferryboat [...] to be run on from right, smoke-pipe, black and white band round top, the edge serrated; a little blue fire to burn in it; paddle-wheel in box, not to work; water-coloured canvas hung around the side, falling from the supposed water-line; wheel for steersman, name Egremont; her length to be as much as can be disposed of off right; the stern is detached when she is backed off; gang-plank, with hand-rail, ready

B) *Catastrophic accident*. To save himself, the villain causes a serious accident endangering the lives of many innocent people. An example of this appears in Dion Boucicault's drama *The Octoroon, or Life in Louisiana* (1859).

PETE (*re-entering from boat*) O, law, sir, dat debil Closky, he tore hisself from de gen'lam, knock me down, take my light, and trows it on the turpentine barrels, and de shed's all afire!  
(*Fire seen*)

[...]

(*Cry of 'Fire' heard – engine bells heard – steam whistle noise.*)

RATTS: Cut all away forward – overboard with every bale afire.

(*The steamer moves off – fire still blazing. M'CLOSKY re-enters, swimming.*)

M'CLOSKY: Ha! Have I fixed ye? Burn! Burn! That's right. [...]

(*The Steamer floats on at back, burning.*) (V.i)<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere one or more characters may be miraculously saved from a mechanical catastrophe involving a ship, a moving train, or other means of transport. Although the disastrous accident may also be invested with a moral function (it may serve to confirm the Manichean ethnics typical of melodrama) it prevalently serves to impress the audience with an eminently spectacular display.

C) *Atmospheric sensationalism*. An excellent example of atmospheric sensationalism is offered by J.M. Barrie's completely unrealistic play, *Peter Pan*, in which Captain Hook's pirate ship is described in the stage directions as follows,

In the strange light thus described we see what is happening on the deck of the *Jolly Roger*, which is flying the skull and crossbones and lies low in water. [...] Most of [the pirates] are at present carousing in the bowels of the vessel, but on the poop Mullins is visible, in the only great-coat on the ship, raking with his glass the monstrous rocks within which the lagoon is cooped. Such a look-out is supererogatory, for the pirate craft floats immune in the horror of her name.<sup>8</sup>

b) **Redemptive function.** Here the play acquires powerful elements of social criticism and implies a challenge to the axiological presuppositions of the era. The destruction of a transportation vehicle (for example the sinking of a ship, or a fire on a train on which

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on pier; small boat, to hold two, on rollers, to be worked from right to centre; ship's stern, with sail hanging loose, as if drying from the spanker-gaff, in profile, right 4<sup>th</sup> groove, to run on as ferryboat is drawn off, and mask its bow when off." ("Appendix I. The Pier Scene in 'The Lancashire Lass'", here, p. 198).

<sup>7</sup> In *Plays by Dion Boucicault*, ed. Peter Thomson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 164-65.

<sup>8</sup> J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [1904], Act 5, Scene I "The Pirate Ship", in J. M. Barrie, 'The Admirable Crichton', 'Peter Pan', 'When Wendy Grew Up', 'What Every Woman Knows', 'Mary Rose', ed. Peter Hollindale, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995. In the novelization of the drama the above stage directions became even more symbolic: "[...] a rakish-looking craft foul to the hull, every beam in her detestable, like ground strewn with mangled feathers. She was the cannibal of the seas, and scarce needed that watchful eye, for she floated immune in the horror of her name" ("The Pirate Ship", *Peter and Wendy* [1906], in J. M. Barrie, 'Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens', 'Peter and Wendy', ed. Peter Hollindale, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 187).

the protagonists are travelling, among whom the heroine always manages to save herself) allows the hero - previously unjustly accused - to prove his true nature by displaying his noble-hearted and unselfish courage. Likewise a mechanical catastrophe may lead to the moral recognition of the protagonist (as in the case of Augustin Daly's *A Flash of Lightning.*, *A Drama of Life in our Day*, 1868 and Tom Taylor's *The Overland Route*, 1860), but it can also bring social redemption (and ensuing enhancement of social status) as happens to the handy Crichton, the protagonist of J.M. Barrie's comedy, *The Admirable Crichton*, (1902), proclaimed Guv. of the deserted island where the ship on which he and his fellow-travellers were wrecked.

(Enter CAPTAIN SMART, *his arm in a sling.*)

SMART: I'm glad to see everything looking so ship-shape.

HARDISTY: Ah! We may thank Dexter for that. You may imagine the state of things on board after you were disabled. .... Officers and quartermaster did their duty like English men – the passengers have behaved well on the whole – but Dexter was our life and soul. She struck at nine and thanks to him, we had every man, woman, and child ashore, tents rigged, passengers under cover, and all with a comfortable basin of soup in either holds by six in the morning.

TOTTEL: And that ain't half, Captain. Why, he's collected the stores, settled the messes, regulated the allowances, parcelled out the duty. Blest if he ain't been steward, cook, and bottle washer, to say nothing of purser, doctor, and loblolly boy. I never see such a beggar to turn his hands to things! (III)<sup>9</sup>

c) **Instrumental function.** The sinking of a ship causes a temporary loss of important documents proving the identity or property ownership of the hero. These papers fall into the hands of criminals who attempt to exploit the hero's temporary "incognito" status in order to defraud him (as in H.J. Byron and Dion Boucicault's *Lost at Sea. A London Story* 1869).<sup>10</sup> The redemptive function could also be called into play in connection with the development of commerce and transportation on a global scale which entailed investments in engineering projects with immediate financial consequences for the characters. The hero, victim of discrimination or unjustly persecuted, may be socially vindicated by his hard labour on one of the new intercontinental transportation routes (for example the Pacific Railroad in *A Flash of Lightning*),<sup>11</sup> while the more reckless

<sup>9</sup> In *Plays by Tom Taylor*, ed. Martin Banham, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 147-48.

<sup>10</sup> "WALTER: Unfortunately, I have no means of identifying myself. I am unknown in London. They gained possession of all my documents and effects!" (II. iv), in *The Golden Age of Melodrama. Twelve Nineteenth-Century Melodramas*, abridged and introduced by Michael Kilgarriff, Wolfe, London, 1974, p. 339.

<sup>11</sup> "JACK: (*gaily, standing by the fire and shaking hat*): You thought I was on the wilds of the West with the snorting locomotives, didn't you? Bless your heart, I've slept with 'em, ate with 'em, and played with 'em, *until I'm sort of locomotive myself*. Don't I act as if I had a full head of steam on?" (I), in *Plays by Augustin Daly*, eds. Don B.

hero may be blackmailed for unwise dealings in maritime speculation (as for example, the opening of Suez Canal in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, 1895). Participation in an engineering project may provide the basis for a character's financial security, while a heroine may become victim of her antagonist's attempt to defraud her of the inheritance bequeathed by her deceased father, a wealthy ship builder (*The Lancashire Lass*). Remaining within the configuration "vehicle of transportation-money", the assignment as commander of a military ship may allow two lovers to fulfil their dreams of union, which otherwise would have been impossible due to overwhelming financial obstacles, as in Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*, c.1852.

ASA (*showing bottle of hair dye in his right hand*): Say, I think you better let me have that ship.

DUNDREARY: No sir. (*Sees the bottle, and reaches out his hand for it. [...]*)

ASA: Wal, darn me, if there ain't a physiological change taking place. Your whiskers at this moment- [...]

DUNDREARY (*horror-struck*): My whiskers speckled and streaked?

ASA (*showing the bottle*): Now, this is a wonderful invention.

DUNDREARY. My hair dye. My dear sir. [...]

DUNDREARY: Dear Mr Trenchard. [...]

ASA: Now, look here, you get the lieutenant a ship and I'll give you the bottle. It's a fine swap. (II.ii)<sup>12</sup>

It is worth pointing out here that the instrumental use of the Victorian transportation vehicle may assume historical implications. For instance *Our American Cousin* brought the expansion of the merchant marine and British Navy on to the stage while substituting and modernizing a typical comic device of Eighteenth-Century theatre in which the lovers' economic, and hence sentimental, impasse was resolved through the delivery of an inheritance or a gift of money.

d) **Identifying function.** The characters in the play may owe their current identity and social context to an accident that occurred while travelling (*The Importance of Being Earnest*). A chance mishap, adventure, encounter, or other unexpected event (as in Thomas Egerton Wilks' *The Railroad Station*, 1840) or choice of profession may have unforeseen, far-reaching, and even dangerous consequences which prove to be a shaping force for the character's personal or social identity. This is often true of nautical

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Wilmeth and Rosemary Cullen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 61 (emphasis mine). For a similarity with the idiolect of the hero of nautical melodrama, see below, under d) "the identifying function."

<sup>12</sup> In '*Trilby*' and Other Plays. Four Plays for Victorian Star Actors, ed. George Taylor, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 174-75.

melodrama, a sub-genre which developed in the 1840s but which remained popular till the end of the century as attested in 1878 by the popular production of *H.M.S: Pinafore*, Gilbert and Sullivan's highly successful burlesque, in which the use of parody presupposes the audience's familiarity with the codes of the genre and with numerous melodramatic hypertexts. In nautical melodrama the SHIP serves both as a metaphor and synecdoche for the protagonist, as well as the base of the sailor's idiolect with which he describes and comments on his life, relationships, and inner world, including his feelings for his own wife. In this context, see the comments by the valiant William, the hero of Douglass Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan or All in the Downs* (1829), the most celebrated nautical melodrama of the century. Here the patriotic atmosphere typical of early Nineteenth-Century navy performances has already been watered down into the more domestic tones typical of Victorian melodrama.

WILLIAM: [...] There's my Susan! Now pipe all hands for a royal salute; there she is schooner-rigged – I'd swear to her canvas from a whole fleet. Now she makes more sails – outs with her studding booms – mounts her royals, moon-rakers and sky-scrappers ... I am afraid to throw out a signal – my heart knocks against my timbers, like a jolly boat in a breeze, alongside a seventy-four. Damn it, I feel as if half of me was wintering in the Baltic, and the other stationed in Jamaica. ... [Susan's] name, spoke by another, has brought the salt water up; I can feel one tear standing in either eye like a marine at each gangway: but come, let's send them below. (*Wipes his eyes*) (II.i)<sup>13</sup>

e) **Retributive function.** The breakdown or malfunctioning of a vehicle of transportation leads to the capture and justly deserved punishment of the villain whose escape is thus thwarted, as in Edward Fitzball's *The Inchcape Bell or the Dumb Sailor Boy*, 1828. Here the cruel smuggler's boat crashes against the rocks as a consequence to an act of sabotage he himself has performed.

*The wreck of the rover's vessel on the Inchcape Rock, during a storm. As the scene changes, a dreadful crash is heard. Sailors clinging to the shrouds, c. Some of the rigging falls. [...] A boat is seen leaving the shore in the background, R, and crossing to L, just as GUY RUTHVEN, the DUMB BOY, and JUPITER are sinking with the mast, which is struck by a thunderbolt. (II. iv)<sup>14</sup>*

<sup>13</sup> In *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. I. *Dramas 1800-1850*, ed. Michael Booth, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 173

<sup>14</sup> In *The Lights o' London and Other Victorian Plays*, ed. Michael Booth, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

The retributive function is often fruitfully associated with the sensationalist function, as in Dion Boucicault's popular play *The Corsican Brothers, or The Vendetta* (1852), a melodrama tinged with gothic tones in which the murderer's carriage breaks down right in the very place where just a few days earlier he murdered the hero's brother, and where now, the hero, may seek his revenge.

RENAULD: ... I cannot conceal the sensations that oppress me. For the first time I feel as if urged on by some controlling influence to something fatal.

MONTGIRON: You, Château-Renauld, grown superstitious?

RENAUD: 'Tis weak, I own; but the strongest minds are sometimes moved by trifles – the breaking of a mirror, or the howling of a dog. I have laughed all these things a hundred times, and now my nerves are shaken by the overturn of our post chaise – and in what locality? In the forest of Fontainebleau, in the very glade were, five days since – stay, do you not recognise the spot – this path – that tree –

MONTGIRON: Yes, 'tis the very place. The accident is strange.

RENAUD: Montgiron, there's more than *accident* in this; 'tis destiny – perhaps in the hands of Providence. (*Crosses left*) (III)<sup>15</sup>

f) **Scenographic or realistic function.** Railway stations, maritime or river docks and piers, waiting rooms, are all places of modernity where characters arrange to meet or encounter each other by chance and to which they return from distant continents (typically from India, Ceylon, or Singapore). It is here we find the theatrical representation of the Victorian city's phenomenological complexity. Moreover, this function reveals the derivation of Nineteenth-Century stage scenery from the Romantic theatre, in which the use of the diorama and the eidophusikon (tri-dimensional panorama) had reached an elevated level of artistry with the work of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg. See in this connection the following description of a setting taken from *London by Night*.

*Scene I. A London railway terminus, exterior. The stage filled with passengers, newspaper boys calling out the names of their papers, shoeblocks following their occupation, vendors of fruit and cigar-lights, porters with luggage. Railway and engine heard without; the scene, in fact, to realise the arrival of a train.<sup>16</sup>*

In the case of docks along the Thames, the pursued heroine, victim of deceit, or worse, consenting to sinful acts (thus destined to a deterministic and redemptive suicide), finds her way to the docks in order to put an end to her miserable existence (*Lost at Sea*). Thus

<sup>15</sup> In 'Trilby' and Other Plays. Four Plays for Victorian Star Actors, cit., p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> *London by Night*, a drama in two acts sometimes attributed to Charles Selby, in Victorian Melodramas. Seven English, French and American Melodramas, ed. James Smith, London, Dent, 1976, p. 225.

we should not be surprised to discover the development of proverbial or metaphorical expressions relating to travel and amorous intrigue. One drama by the prolific playwright Boucicault is entitled *Formosa or The Railroad to Ruin: A Drama of Modern Life* (1869), while in 1887 Augustin Daly gave us *The Railroad of Love*.

g) **The function of setting.** The play is set in/on the vehicle of transportation (*The Overland Route*). Here again nautical melodrama offers a typical example. The ship, as we have seen in our discussion of the identifying function, represents the experiential, ethical, and personal universe of the hero. The vessel - a spatial and cultural composite - becomes a metaphorical space. In many nautical plays, the spatial organization of the ship, with its divisions into the quarters aloft, the cabins, and the quarterdeck corresponds to the structure of a theatre with gallery, box, and pit. The self-referential nature of nautical melodrama was further corroborated by the composition of its audience, who, in the theatres of the South Bank (especially the Royal Coburg and the Surrey, then Royal Circus) hailed from professions connected to the maritime or river sectors, including crewmembers from ships. In the more patriotic melodramas, the ship commanded by a wise officer who manages to avoid mutiny (a popular topic in an era which had witnessed the famous "Nore" case) comes to symbolize the whole nation in which the prudent and wise government of the sailor-king William IV prevented the country from being transformed into a "floating republic" (as in the title of a pioneering study dedicated to the genre).<sup>17</sup>

h) **Recognizing or agnition function.** The characters, forced by circumstance to share the same space aboard a vehicle of transportation (*The Overland Route*) or in a waiting room (*The Railroad Station*) or who meet near the station on the river (*London by Night*) mysteriously recognize each other although they have never met.

The epistemic value of these functions, often used in combination, and the study of their intertextual and contextual correlations lead us to identify two dramatic hypofunctions, i.e. the two primary functions performed by vehicles of transportation in Nineteenth-Century popular theatre. The first hypofunction - which I have previously defined as sensationalistic - illustrates

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<sup>17</sup> G. E. Manwaring e Bonamy Dobree, *The Floating Republic: An Account of the Mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in 1797*, G. Bles, London, 1935.

the derivation as well as the evolution of mid- and late Nineteenth-Century melodrama from gothic theatre and romantic melodrama, not only in terms of its acting styles, play structure and dramatic content, but also as far as concerns its use of spectacular elements, which become increasingly connected to the action in a functional manner.

The Nineteenth-Century stage was progressively more dominated by the collaborating of stage machinists, managers, and actors, as the theatre adapted to modernity and technological innovation. This technical updating is attested for instance by the frequent references made by playwrights and stage set designers to the pictures of daily life which appeared in contemporary magazines and newspapers such as *Illustrated London News*. The acrobatic rescue of the pursued maiden, the spectacular punishment of the villain, and the highly scenographic display of the hero's bold courage and the nobility of his actions are transformed and brought up to date through recourse to the instruments of modernity. From the miraculous rescue of a boy from a crumbling bridge or from the whirling currents of a flood, or from the liberation of the persecuted heroine from a dark cave, we pass to the girl's deliverance from the wheels of a speeding train or from the cabin of a ship in flames, while the villain - still destined to a reassuring failure - finds his rightful punishment in a train crash or among the foaming waves, dragged down to his death by a ship sunk by the hand of providence. His torments offer a technological echo of the exaggerated expressions of remorse awoken in his breast by his realization of his imminent demise, as in the laments of the pyromaniac M'Closky who has set fire to the steamer "Magnolia."

M'CLOSKY. Burn, burn! Blaze away! How the flames crack. I'm not guilty; would ye murder me? Cut, cut the rope – I choke – choke! Ah! (*Wakes*) Hello! Where am I? Why, I was dreaming – curse it! I can never sleep now without dreaming. (*The Octofoon*, V.iii)<sup>18</sup>

The second hypofunction, also dominant in this era, associates the vehicle of transportation to the identity of the characters in the Victorian drama, who are inextricably linked to the vehicle in a substitution that represents all the cultural uncertainties and dislocations of the period. Much more than a simple means of conveyance or a type of synecdochic prosthetics (as we will find in the successive transmigrations of narratives concerning men and machines, and particularly in comics and science fiction narratives), Victorian trains or ships have the power to determine the

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<sup>18</sup> In *Plays by Dion Boucicault*, cit., p. 166.

identity of the plays' protagonists, by delimiting that identity, changing it, sometimes even creating it. Thus these vehicles betray the hidden fears and epistemic crises of an entire epoch.

### *3. A Very Victorian Declination: Sensation, Gender, and Identity*

We have previously mentioned how in Nineteenth-Century melodrama, the extraordinary rescue from a maritime or railway disaster allows the positive protagonist to display his heroic function, in a spectacular objective correlative expressive of his generosity and abnegation heretofore held in question. However, there is an interesting development of this invariant which confirms once again the degree to which Victorian transportation vehicles were imbued with powerful epistemic values. The case in point foreshadows the utopia of feminine assertion typical of early silent film melodramas which proposed a new typology of female heroics defying the Victorian ideology of feminine domesticity.<sup>19</sup>

First produced at the New York Theater on August 12 1867, Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight, a Totally Original and Picturesque Drama of Life and Love in These Times* is remembered as the first melodrama to bring trains onto the American stage (in Great Britain a similar effect was achieved in *The Engineer*, Victoria Theatre, London, March 23, 1863.) In this drama, the climax during which the realism achieved by the staging is transformed into pure spectacle is even more accentuated. Laura, the heroine, locked inside the station house of the Shrewsbury Railroad Station watches in horror the approaching train which will kill Snorkey who has been tied by the villain to the railway tracks. The piercing whistle of the locomotive enhances the kinetic excitement aroused in the audience whose hypertextual competency has prepared for the inevitable and fatal collision.

BYKE (*fastening [SNORKEY] to the rail*) I'm going to put you to bed. [...] When you hear the thunder under your head and see the lights dancing in your eyes, and feel the iron wheel a foot from your neck, remember Byke. (*Exit L.[eft]*)  
LAURA: O heavens! He will be murdered before my eyes! How can I aid him?  
SNORKEY: Who's that? [...] Where are you?

<sup>19</sup> Ben Singer helpfully discusses these early silent "serial-queen melodramas", whose extremely flexible diegesis easily absorbed and successfully adapted melodramatic acting and staging conventions. In the well-known 1914 serial *The Perils of Pauline*, the eponymous protagonist engages in "dangerous airplane races, horse jockeying, balloon flights, automobile racing, submarine exploration." Similarly, the admirable Pearl in *Pearl of the Army* "hops into an airplane (still a real novelty in 1916) and takes off single-handedly, leaving an assortment of less deft men on the ground" (*Melodrama and Modernity*, cit., pp. 226-27 et foll.) It is highly significant that in all of the above cases female heroism is expressed through technological mastery, physical vigour and endurance, in a destabilising exploration of the realm of man-made technology and science ultimately aimed at subverting traditional gender positions.

LAURA: In the station.  
 SNORKEY: I can't see you, but I can hear you. Listen to me, miss, for I've only got a few minutes to live.  
 LAURA (*shaking the door*): And I cannot aid you. [...] (*in agony*) O, I must get out! (*Shakes window-bars*). What shall I do?  
 SNORKEY.: Can't you burst the door?  
 LAURA: It is locked fast.  
 SNORKEY: Is there nothing in there? No hammer? No crowbar?  
 LAURA: Nothing. (*Faint steam whistle heard in distance*). Oh, heavens! The train! (*Paralysed for an instant*). The axe!!!  
 SNORKEY: Cut the woodwork! [...] (*A blow at door is heard*). Courage! (*Another*) Courage! (*The steam whistle heard again – nearer, and rumble of train on track – another blow*). That's a true woman. Courage! (*Noise of locomotive heard, with whistle. A last blow – the door swings open, mutilated, the lock hanging – and Laura appears, axe in hand*).  
 SNORKEY: Here – quick! (*She runs and unfastens him. The locomotive lights glare on scene*). Victory! Saved! Hooray! (*Laura leans exhausted against switch*). And these are the women who ain't have a vote!  
 (*As Laura takes his head from the track, the train of cars rushes past with roar and whistle from L.[eft] to R.[ight]*)<sup>20</sup>

Compare this scene from *Under the Gaslight* with a canonical episode of mechanical sensationalism, similar in structure, but very different in its ideological implications: the rescue of Bessie Fallon in Daly's own *A Flash of Lightning* produced by the Broadway Theater on June 10, 1868.

*Scene 5. View of the broadside of the burning steamboat; she is lying motionless in the river. The sky and waves lit up with lurid reflections. The entire stern and portion of wheelhouse, smoke chimneys and cabins seen, and the hull of boat continues off at left. A row of closed windows of staterooms seen. The fire is burning from left to right. From windows left, flames issue. The upper deck is burning also. FRED is seen in a small boat which floats in front of the burning steamer, towards the right. He is much disoriented.*

FRED: Bessie is not aboard. She must have escaped in the other boats. Now I can face Rose with a clear heart. [...]

(*JACK appears on deck from left with a fire axe in his grasp, his appearance smeared and burned.*)

JACK: Help! All the boats are gone freighted to the water's edge.

FRED: Jack Ryver, there is no room in this boat for *you*!

JACK: I can perish! Fire has been my toy, I don't fear it – but for her!

FRED: Who?

JACK: Bessie! She is there within a wall of flame.

(*A scream is heard. BESSIE dashes her manacled hands through the window under JACK's feet, as a tongue of flame bursts from the next window.*)

FRED: Great Heaven! She is imprisoned in the state room – she is lost!

JACK: Not while this heart beats!

(*JACK cuts through the deck on which he stands to reach BESSIE. FRED propels his boat to the stateroom window, and dashes it in as flames shoot out. JACK draws BESSIE out of the opening he has made.*)

CURTAIN<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, ed. Michael Booth, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964.

We have previously mentioned that the form of melodrama represents the complex outcome of a dialectic involving multiple genre codes, social codes, and gender codes. The revolutionary reversal of the classic triangle of passive, victimized heroine, active and crisis-resolving hero, and scheming villain portrayed in *Under the Gaslight* gives voice to the contestations and contradictions of the era regarding women's role. However this female desire for assertiveness and dynamism, which anticipates the social demands of the "New Woman" at the century's end, betrays - and thus paradoxically confirms - the persistence of a repressive model of femininity which could be effectively contested within the anti-realistic or para-realistic dimension of the melodrama.

At the same time, this female dismantling of a traditionally spectacular genre anticipates the rejection of the sensationalistic function of the train as proposed by its farcical counter-model, of which *Engaged. An Entirely Original Farcical Comedy in Three Acts* by W.S. Gilbert (1877) remains the most complete example. In this play sensationalism has been merrily banished and the derailing of the Glasgow express takes place off-stage, revealing its nature as a pure expedient – dismantling the finalistic and climactic function usually played by such events in blood-and-thunder melodrama - that sets the action in motion. Gilbert prefers to imagine the unusual consequences caused by the arrival of the railway into the serene existence of a picturesque community of the Scottish Lowlands - a scrap of idyllic rustic life situated between Rousseau and Scott - whose traditional sources of income, no longer dependent on the gruelling work of herding sheep and agriculture, have been modernized and simplified thanks to this new and unheralded development.

*Maggie MacFarlane and Angus MacAlister embrace. Enter Mrs Macfarlane, from cottage door, R..*

MRS MACFARLANE (R): Angus [...] thou'lt treat her kindly, I ken that weel. Thou'rt a prosperous, kirk-going man, and my Mag should be a happy lass indeed. [...]

ANGUS (C, wiping his eyes): [...] Yes, I'm a fairly prosperous man. What wi' farmin' a bit of land, and gillieing odd times, and a bit o' poachin' now and again; and what wi' my illicit whisky still; and throwin' trains off the line that the poor distracted passengers may come to my cot, I've mair ways than one of making an honest living and I'll work them a' nicht and day for my bonnie Meg!

MRS MACFARLANE (seated R): D'ye ken, Angus, I sometimes think that thou'rt losing some o' thine auld skill at upsetting railways trains. Thou hast not done sic a thing these sax weeks and the cottage stands sairly in need of sic chance custom as the poor delayed passengers may bring.

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<sup>21</sup> In *Plays by Augustin Daly*, cit., pp. 91-93.

MAGGIE: Nay, mither, thou wrangest him, Even noo, this very day, has he not placed two bonnie baw sleepers across the up-line, ready for the express from Glaisgie, which is due in two minutes or so. (*Crosses to L*).

MRS MACFARLANE: Gude lad. Gude thoughtfu' lad! But I hope the unfortunate passengers will na' be much hurt, puir unconscious bodies!

ANGUS (C): Fear nougat, mither. Lang experience has taught me to do my work deftly. The train will run off the line, and the traffic will just be blocked for half-a-day, but I'll warrant ye that, wi' a' this, nae mon, woman,, or child amang them will get soa much as a bruised head or a broken nose.[...]

*Railway whistle heard, L.*

ANGUS: [...] There, see, lass, (*looking off*) the train's at a standstill and there's nae harm done.<sup>22</sup>

*Engaged* questions and parodies a series of stereotypes typical of Victorian domestic melodrama and sentimental comedy, in which marriage and disinterested love prevail. The tenacious defence of appearances, beyond all limits of plausibility and heartless sentimental calculations conceived by Gilbert – according to whom “it [was] absolutely essential to the success of this piece that it should be played with the most perfect earnestness and gravity throughout”<sup>23</sup> - anticipate the stinging Wildean farces of the late century. More than just a farcical expedient drawn from a “trivial comedy for serious people,” the travelling incident at the core of *The Importance of Being Earnest* gives playful though absolute expression to the deep doubts concerning identity, the clash between appearance and substance, between reality and secrecy, and to the whole cultural disorientation that marked the entire Victorian *fin-de siècle*.

We all remember the improbable complications concerning the family genealogy and social context of Jack, lover of Gwendolen, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Parody of the contextual tribulations traditionally awaiting a literary foundling – a stock figure of comedy and melodrama whose origins may be traced back to Tom Jones – Jack Worthing bears inscribed upon himself the era’s connection between men and transportation vehicles.

LADY BRACKNELL: [...] Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

JACK: I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL: Both?... That seems like carelessness. [...]

JACK: [...] The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents have lost me. ... I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was... well, I was found.

LADY BRACKNELL: Found!

JACK: 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.

<sup>22</sup> In *London Assurance and Other Victorian Comedies*, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 148-49.

<sup>23</sup> Here, p.146.

LADY BRACKNELL: Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this sea-side resort find you?

JACK (*gravely*): In a hand-bag.

LADY BRACKNELL: A hand-bag?

JACK (*very seriously*): Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag – a somewhat large, black leather bag, with handles to it – an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

LADY BRACKNELL: In what locality did this Mr James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

JACK: In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL: The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

JACK: The Brighton line.

LADY BRACKNELL: The line is immaterial. Mr Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. [...] I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

JACK: Well, I don't see how I could possible manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.<sup>24</sup>

Left in a handbag in the luggage deposit of Victoria Station and baptized with the surname Worthing, the name of a seaside town, destination to which his benefactor was travelling when he found the baby, Jack represents the unusual offspring of a train station and a railway line. Lacking noble origins in a society obsessed with the idea of social respectability and family dignity - elements which were to be proudly displayed when proposing to a future wife - Jack is thus the remarkable issue of a railway journey, of a travel mix-up which has determined the course of his existence and his future philosophy of life. Mistaken by the nurse Prism for the manuscript of the novel “of more than usually revolting sentimentality” (III)<sup>25</sup> she had just finished, and inadvertently bundled up into a suitcase instead of the pram, Jack, alias Ernest, is the result of a railway line and a storyline, of modern travel and narrative fiction. In a final upturning of the traditional scene of recognition (the dramatic agnition central also in *A Woman of No Importance*, 1893), Prism ratifies Jack’s epistemic origins by identifying the fateful handbag scarred during an omnibus accident occurred many years before.

MISS PRISM: The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in his perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I can never forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette and placed the baby in the hand-bag. [...] (*calmly*) It seems to be mine. [...] The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so

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<sup>24</sup> In O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Ernest and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Raby, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 266-67.

<sup>25</sup> Here, p. 303.

unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.<sup>26</sup>

In *the Importance of Being Earnest* the spectacular element of the mechanical catastrophe has been removed while the classical functions of the Victorian transportation vehicle have collapsed one into the other, transforming social redemption, melodrama, recognition, and sensational excitement into parody and biting satire. To paraphrase the contemporary dramatist Henry Arthur Jones we can conclude by stating that in Victorian theatrical texts, as in all the texts of the culture of the time, vehicles of transport - ships, trains, canoes, carriages, bicycles, and omnibuses - are more than funny or sensational theatrical things.<sup>27</sup> They represent, as Jones remarks, a true interpretation of life and thus a model of the world, the symbolic staging of personal and social identity as well as the tri-dimensional representation of the sensorial cacophonies of modernity, with all its certainties and its doubts.

If on one hand mechanical sensationalism opened the Victorian theatre to the unexplored universe of silent cinema and vast scale popular entertainment, on the other hand the revisions of the concept of social and personal identity arising from the period dialectic opposing man to vehicles of transportation mark the cultural anxieties and dislocations of an entire century. We need only step out of the brightly-lit London drawing-rooms and sail away to another land or to an another island to discover that even the most innocuous stage shipwreck is enough to awaken the Crichton within us. Once the ship has been destroyed and has abandoned all its passengers to “the life- stripped to the buff” (*The Overland Route* III.iii),<sup>28</sup> as remarked by Jack Dexter - the melodramatic prototype of Barries’ character - the Victorian transportation vehicle displays its ambivalence as a conveyor of rationality, technology and order but also of dangerous regression, involution, and decline. “A Map of the World that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing,” claims Wilde in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. “Progress,” makes us indeed travel towards “the realization of Utopias,”<sup>29</sup> but sometimes - as Taylor’s and Barrie’s democratic shipwrecks remind us – it also shows us the way to sensational, eventful, and often enough dangerous distopias.

Francesca Saggini

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<sup>26</sup> Here, pp. 303-305.

<sup>27</sup> H.A. Jones, *The Renascence [elsewhere Renaissance] of English Drama. Essays, Lectures, and Fragments Relating to the Modern English Stage*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1895.

<sup>28</sup> In *Plays by Tom Taylor*, cit., p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Both quotations from Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* are taken from *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, introd. V. Holland, London-Glasgow, Collins, 1986, p. 1089.