“Fellow Passengers to the Grave”? Dickens and the London Necropolis Railway

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WHEN it opened in 1854, the London Necropolis Railway provided a novel infrastructural solution to the problem of overpopulation in the capital’s churchyards. Dedicated funeral trains would transport coffins and mourners out of the city to a vast, rural cemetery thirty miles away in Brookwood, Surrey. With every confidence in the project, the London Necropolis Railway Company purchased an enormous tract of land, “supplying London with a place of sepulchre for centuries.”[1] Despite overestimating the amount of space required, the venture enjoyed some longevity: railway services continued into the mid-twentieth century, and Brookwood Cemetery itself is still open to interments at the time of writing.[2] This apparatus forms an intriguing case study for the unusual configurations of temporality that Akhil Gupta identifies as permeating infrastructural development and decline.

> Perhaps because of the investment involved, infrastructure is almost always built to exceed present needs: it is built in anticipation of a not-yet-achieved future. Once finished, infrastructures occupy a dead time, an inertial existence, until they break down and are suddenly thrust into the temporality of birth, life, and decay.[3]

Infrastructure is at its most potent, it seems, when imagined. Literal interpretations of “dead time” aside, the London Necropolis’s entanglement between commemoration, sanitation, and transport infrastructures lend a potentially unnerving restlessness to its already liminal temporalities. So how did those seeking to fund this scheme encourage Londoners to make the imaginative leap and trust their loved ones to such an innovation?[4] My aim here is not to trace the material history of the London Necropolis Railway itself, but to understand the role fiction played in

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producing the creative conditions that transformed the Necropolis project from concept into a "not-yet-achieved" future.

In its appeal to those with means "to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys," Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) espoused a message that became central to the Necropolis Railway project. In the 1840s, the rationale for changes to postmortem infrastructure was already clear both on public health and logistical grounds. G. A. Walker documented the "dangerous and fatal results of inhuming the dead in the midst of the living" for Parliament in 1839.[5] Edwin Chadwick supplemented these findings in *The Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843), calling for the abolition of intermural burial in all but exceptional cases.[6] Augustus Sala later describes funeral logistics of the 1840s impeding the business of the living: "in the bad old days of town burials traffic was often hopelessly blocked for hours together by strings of hearses and mourning coaches."[7] Yet the question of where to lay loved ones to rest was a deeply personal issue; those seeking reform could only succeed by appealing to individual sentiment rather than widespread responsibility. Dickens had a track record of leveraging sentimentality toward social change through fiction, evident in his sympathetic treatment of poverty in *Oliver Twist* (1837). Throughout *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens aligns spacious extramural burial with moral purity in the figure of Tiny Tim, in contrast with Ebenezer Scrooge's imagined wretched grave within the city walls. The miser's moral recalibration hinges on this notion of those in need as "fellow passengers to the grave," rather than a "surplus population" whose burden on society would be relieved through death.[8]

We may not think of *A Christmas Carol* as a technologically invested novella, but its structured itinerary and compressed temporality correspond with the organization of a railway line. As with a terminus from which trains arrive and depart, this story begins with an ending in its two-staged opening sentence: "Marley was dead: to begin with" (9). From Marley's miserly funeral to Ebenezer Scrooge's reckoning with his own grave, Dickens bookends Scrooge's likely demise between two unwholesome termini. Transported by the Ghost of Christmas Future, Scrooge surveys his projected burial site in horror:

> A churchyard. Here, then, the wretched man whose name he had now to learn, lay underneath the ground. It was a worthy place. Walled in by houses; overrun by grass and weeds, the growth of vegetation's death, not life; choked up with too much burying; fat with repleted appetite. A worthy place! (75)

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"Choked up with too much burying," this churchyard is exactly the kind of polluting, unsustainable site that the London Necropolis Railway sought to prevent by establishing a new cemetery at a spacious distance from the city's limits. A "walled in," "worthy place" clogs up the city with a cancerous "growth of death" associated elsewhere in 1840s discourse with urban deprivation. Uncultivated vegetation crowds an already claustrophobic setting. Dickens aligns this uncared-for site with Scrooge's selfishness and greed; it will not serve as an enduring memorial, and—more importantly—it offers no room for moral improvement.

In direct contrast, Dickens gestures toward the moral core of Tiny Tim (the moral and sentimental core of *A Christmas Carol*) as being laid to rest in an open and idyllic pastoral site, much like what eventually became Brookwood Cemetery. Returning from the site, Tim's father praises the "industry and speed of Mrs Cratchit and the girls" and reflects, "[i]t would have done you good to see how green a place it is. But you'll see it often" (73). Bob Cratchit's reassurance, "you'll see it often," emphasizes the accessibility of an otherwise unidentified "green place" anticipating "extent, beauty, privacy, and due remoteness in conjunction with accessibility" as core attributes of the London Necropolis.[9] Without the railway, such an expansive site would likely have been beyond the Cratchit family's means and too remote to visit regularly on foot. As Thomas Laqueur notes, "place of burial had become a powerful representation of a great determinant of social standing in the nineteenth century—money."[10] With space and provision for varying classes, the London Necropolis Company attempted to mitigate this financial obstacle to widespread uptake in extramural burial infrastructure. They limited third-class tickets for paupers' funerals "to the sum of 14s," to include "every charge of reception, transmission, interment, and the conveyance and return of two friends or attendants" (299). The London Necropolis Railway was literal in its treatment of humanity as passengers to the grave; several funeral parties set out with each train from London to Brookwood. One-way "coffin tickets" for the deceased, and returns for mourners were differentiated by class, in keeping with custom across British railway companies.[11] While Dickens's Christmas fantasy promotes shared wealth and communal respect, social hierarchies were maintained in the Necropolis Railway's practice.

Rather than steam power, ghostly mobility propels this narrative toward morally careful treatment of human remains of all classes. Moments before we meet Marley's ghost, and some time before we meet the spirits of past, present, and future, the narrator observes:

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> say you might have got a hearse up that staircase. . . . There was plenty of width for that, and room to spare; which is perhaps the reason why Scrooge thought he saw a locomotive hearse going on before him in the gloom. (17)

Though the term "locomotive" refers here to a hearse that is self-propelled, rather than horse-drawn, the word was adopted as a synecdoche for railway locomotion as early as 1829.[12] Its association with railway travel would not have been lost on Dickens's readership, hinting at rational processes underpinning this spectral movement. This passage signals how postmortem travel in this text moves with the times; it is not confined to operating within the limitations of outdated mechanisms. As Daniel Tyler notes of Dickens elsewhere, the author's "flexible syntax and an inventive grammar . . . can keep pace with the rapidity of journey and the strangely visionary perspectives it can afford."[13] Here, Dickens's "inventive" language outpaces modern applications of the railway and affords "strangely visionary perspectives" that envision funeral trains in motion prior to their widespread use.

What is also striking about this passage in relation to the Necropolis Railway is that the hearse goes *up* the staircase. Given the traditional trajectory of a coffin downward into the ground, the direction of travel here is surprising; mechanized postmortem travel effects a form of ascent. Yet a similar ascent was built into the Waterloo terminus of the Necropolis Railway, as the coffins had to be conveyed from street- to platform-level on a bridge above. As the reporter from *Chambers's Journal* notes:

> on a level with the platform are offices and first-class waiting rooms. . . . The floor below contains offices and second-class waiting-rooms; and the ground floor is occupied by offices and rooms for third-class passengers, undertakers, and attendants. . . . The coffins upon arrival are conveyed to a recess, and thence raised to the level of the railway platform on a lift worked by steam. (298)

Staircase aside, this mechanism to elevate coffins through the class strata to the terminal's platform is not dissimilar to Dickens's vision. The Necropolis Railway is promoted as a vehicle of ascent into a moral, extramural, utopian afterlife, and one that equalizes as coffins of all classes are loaded onto the same level platform to be borne away to a peaceful resting place. For Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*, and those promoting the London Necropolis in *Chambers's Journal*, postmortem travel offers a redemptive solution to funeral infrastructure that was no longer fit for practical or moral purpose in the 1840s.

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Dickens offers a counterpoint to Tiny Tim's pastoral resting place by exposing to Scrooge the risk of interminable restlessness that awaits should his current route through life go unaltered. After death, Marley's ghost experiences "I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere!—in my life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole; and weary journeys lie before me!" (23). Once buried, Marley learns that "no space of regret can make amends for life's opportunities misused"; there is no equivalent opportunity for redemption beyond the grave, leaving the soul to wander without welcome sense of journey's end.

If *A Christmas Carol* is an advert for morally admirable, extramural burial, then it recommends it with urgency along with a convivial life rich in human connection rather than materialism. The imaginative recalibration effected by Dickens's most famous Christmas story enabled spiritually complex infrastructures like the Necropolis Railway to advance from proposal to practice by lending unfamiliar systems an inhabitable form in fiction.[14]

Notes

1. "The London Necropolis" (1855), 298. This article extensively promotes the Necropolis Railway and was most likely arranged at the company's request.
2. For a history of the London Necropolis Railway see Clarke, *The Brookwood Necropolis Railway*; and Crosby, *A History of Woking*, 189–91. As Crosby notes, land north of the line was sold in 1864 to be used for Brookwood Lunatic Asylum and Woking Convict Prison.
3. Gupta, "The Future in Ruins," 63, 73.
4. The company was advertising shares as early 1837 in the *Examiner;* see "The London Necropolis" (1837), 190.
5. Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards.*
6. Chadwick, *The Practice of Interment in Towns.*
7. Sala, "Locomotion in London," 463.
8. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 12, 14. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
9. "The London Necropolis" (1855), 297.
10. Laqueur, "Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals," 116.
11. "The London Necropolis" (1855).
12. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "locomotive, n., sense 2.a," https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8366140701 (accessed July 2023).

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13. Tyler, "Introduction," 3.
14. For fleeting and sustained engagements with the Necropolis Railway in contemporary fiction, see Martin, *The Necropolis Railway*; Hooper, *Fallen Grace*; and Smith, *The Fraud*, 135.

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