Humanity Invested with a New Form: The Post Office and the Hospital in Household Words, c. 1850

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores some of the techniques employed to present new infrastructural formations to a general reading public through close examination of writings about the postal system and the hospital in Dickens's popular general interest magazine, *Household Words*. Reading these articles against Marc Augé's account of late twentieth-century 'supermodernity', I argue that the newly extended reach of such systems is presented as a way out of chaotic overabundances of detail, especially in busy urban environments, as well as a means to acquire a greater mastery over the world. Yet at the same time, these articles also seek to reform the role of the individual in relation to these systems, subjugating individual agency to the primacy of systemic control. This essay aims to deepen our understanding of the reception and portrayal of infrastructural industrialisation in *Household Words* specifically, and the periodical press more broadly, in the years immediately following the Great Exhibition.

KEYWORDS: Household Words; Victorian Periodicals; Division of Labour; Industrialisation; Systemisation; Networks

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IN THE OPENING of his 1992 book on late-twentieth-century 'non-places', Marc Augé outlines the three primary characteristic figures of what he calls 'supermodernity': first, an 'overabundance of events', which encompasses both a sense of 'overabundant information' and of a 'growing tangle of interdependences in what some already call the "world system"'; secondly, a 'spatial overabundance', which is characterised by 'the proliferation of imaged and imagined references', and by 'the spectacular acceleration of means of transport', which has changed our sense of scale so that the world is seeming both smaller and yet more open; and finally, a sense of alienated individualism

generated from the 'individualization of references', in which all meaning is available to individual interpretation and all interpretation can be critiqued as an individual's interpretation.[1] Scholars in Victorian studies are likely to recognise similarities between Augé's first two figures and Victorian remarks about the world becoming smaller or closer in writing on telegraphy and railways. We might also see parallels between the way Victorian pictures became mass commercial objects that claimed to bring the world into one's parlour (or at the least to a nearby exhibition hall), and Augé's account of 'the proliferation of imaged and imagined references' across our myriad screens, which 'assemble before our eyes a universe that is relatively homogenous in its diversity'.[2]

For those writing at the mid-nineteenth century, similar shifts in scale and in what space and time meant to lived experience were not so much reformations of a previous system, but an entirely new way of being. The lead article in the launch issue of *The Engineer and Machinist and Engineering and Scientific Review*, for example, extolled the ability of the railway to open 'wide fields for commercial and industrial enterprise', and to establish 'new communities of skilful and busy artisans', through transit 'so swift and easy, that to be *here, there, and everywhere* is almost a truism'.[3] The 'electric flash' of the telegraph, meanwhile, was described as effecting an unprecedented level of communication, 'annihilating time and space'.[4] These new public institutions and systems had significant socio-cultural potential, as the address of Charles Ellet, president of the Schuylkill Navigation Company in Pennsylvania (reproduced in issue 2

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[1] The author would like to thank the Victorian Popular Fiction Association for the Mary Eliza Root prize (2019) which provided the means for archival research used in this article. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2008), pp.23-33.

[2] This has been extensively covered since the publication of Wolfgang Schivelbusch's classic *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1979, repr. 2014). See, for example, Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2007); Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840-1940*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[3] 'The Progress of Invention', *The Engineer and Machinist and Engineering and Scientific Review*, 1 (March 1850), pp.1-2 (p.1).

[4] *Ibid.*, p.1.

of *The Engineer and Machinist*), pointed out: '[m]en know themselves and each other better; national characteristics are obliterated; it seems that humanity is invested with a new form; organisation is established between states, and between continents'.[5]

In the effusive Victorian descriptions of new systems like the railway, something akin to supermodernity's overabundances of event and space might thus be identified in the texts of the nineteenth century. The significance of these systems, however, was entirely different. Rather than prompting a reflexive turn inwards to individual subjective interpretation, as in Augé's third figure of supermodernity, in the 1850s, large-scale systemisation elicited a very different kind of reformation of self and system. In this essay, I explore this reformation by analysing some of the techniques employed to present new infrastructural formations to the readers of Charles Dickens's popular general interest magazine *Household Words*, concentrating on two articles about the postal system and the hospital. There are obviously important distinctions to be made between these disparate systems and the forms they took, but, as will be seen in these articles, such distinctions could be lost to the overwhelming sense of rationalised systemisation that pervades each example. For a generation that had lived through such rapid developments, from the stage coaching of the 1820s to the railways and penny post of the 1840s and 1850s, to the new promises of the telegraph, it is plausible that a general sense of rationalisation and systemisation might overwhelm the changing details of any given system. These articles from *Household Words* are significant primarily not because of their subjects—the post office or the hospital—but because of how they portray these subjects.

Augé's work forms a backdrop to my reading of these two texts, acting as a comparative framework to foreground the historical specificity of each text. That is, I intend to use Augé's work not to read back and claim trajectories of historical change (or worse, 'progress') but to do exactly the opposite – I foreground the similarities in order to more ably avoid taking them at face value, whilst remaining alert to divergences and historical specificity. In doing so I borrow from Caroline Levine's innovative study of forms – taken broadly to mean the structures, configurations, and

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[5] 'Influence of Coal on the Progress of Mankind', *The Engineer and Machinist and Engineering and Scientific Review*, 2 (April 1850), pp.56-57 (p.57).

patterns we identify both in texts and in the physical and socio-political world around us. Levine approaches forms through their 'affordances'—the potential uses and meanings latent in them—thereby enabling an understanding of 'both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space'.[6] Thus, although we might to some extent see a replication or re-enactment of nineteenth-century systems and institutions in supermodernity, under closer examination we find that this is because the formal elements—organising principles and configurations—have repeated while the particulars and the values ascribed to them have shifted. Using Augé's account of supermodernity as a comparison will help separate the form from the content, or in other words, separate the thing itself—the hospital, the post office—from the historically particular uses and meanings ascribed to it.

In a similar way, we might also compare the form of a text and the form of a public institution described in it, for instance the hospital, and ask questions about how the one teases out certain values latent in the other. In what follows, I will discuss how the forms of journalistic articles in *Household Words* complemented, even replicated, the forms of the social institutions they described, in order to enact a certain formal relation between reader and society. This relation, then, is what I mean when in my title I repurpose the line from Charles Ellet that 'humanity is invested with a new form'.

The periodical, *Household Words* (1850-1859), 'conducted' by Charles Dickens but written by a multitude of writers—some famous (such as Wilkie Collins, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Gaskell, as well as Dickens himself) and some less well known—was a unique entry into the periodical market in 1850. Aimed squarely at a middle-class readership with a price of two pence for weekly issues or nine pence for monthly numbers with wrappers, *Household Words* intended to combine entertaining, vibrant prose with intelligent, original journalism, both in fiction and non-fiction (often blurring the line between the two). In relation to industrialisation, on the one hand *Household Words* campaigned for factory workers' safety and, in featuring Dickens's

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[6] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.6.

own novel *Hard Times* (1854) highlighted some of the human costs of industrialisation. On the other hand, as Catherine Waters points out, such views were not ubiquitous and, overall, the magazine's stance was ambivalent and complex.[7] As an assemblage of many writers, the magazine did not present a single worldview or ideology, and part of its challenge to scholars is its multiplicity: there were over 380 contributors (including ninety women), though, as John Drew notes, a small group of male writers wrote many of its articles in line with Dickens's 'broadly Liberal agenda'.[8]

Despite this multiplicity, Dickens did intend the journal to have a unifying identity across its disparate parts, albeit a diffuse one that is difficult to pin down. Jonathan V. Farina has shown how *Household Words* invoked a sense of 'deep character', an ineffable sense of identity stemming from its sometimes contradictory articles, through a rhetorical approach that combined practical observations with an 'affective, spiritual subjectivity'.[9] Thus, Farina argues, 'Dickens could imagine that the form of his journal would represent deep character whatever the specific content of its individual articles'.[10] Indeed, Farina makes a persuasive case that the subjectivity in Dickens's journal—the way objects are personified for instance—functions as a 'clear epistemological unit' within an 'earnest, non-fictional mode of representation'.[11] In an article on a paper mill, for example, Farina finds the paper itself is presented as an embodiment not just of

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[7] See Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words: The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) p.6-7; p.83-96. Furthermore, as Tamara Ketabgian demonstrates, even in Dickens's novel *Hard Times*, the tension between human and machine is not as clear cut as it might seem, conveying 'a more porous and productive relation among human nature, industrial technology, and that most contested of topics—emotion'. Tamara Ketabgian, *The Lives of Machines: The Industrial Imaginary in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011) p.48 <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dcbooks.9544598.0001.001>.

[8] John Drew, 'Household Words', in *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (Gent; London: Academia Press and the British Library, 2009) pp.292-93 (p.293).

[9] Jonathan V. Farina, 'A Certain Shadow: Personified Abstractions and the Form of Household Words', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 4.42 (2009) pp.392-415 (p.400); Farina, 'Characterizing the Factory System: Factory Subjectivity in "Household Words"', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 1.35 (2007), pp.41-56.

[10] Farina, 'A Certain Shadow', p. 400.

[11] *Ibid.*, p.408.

'future progress' but of 'the narrator himself and thus the capacity for narrative and emotional meaning where rags [from which the paper is manufactured] had only monetary value'.[12] However, as I hope to demonstrate, in *Household Words* the use of this epistemological unit, this way of presenting a physical object or social institution as though their values are personal and human, is not politically neutral but works to constitute a specific relation between self and society. My argument is that these two journalistic articles about public institutions, through their use of subjectivity and narrative character, elide the differences in institutional particularities, forms and structures, in order to enact—or at least emphasise—specific sets of meanings latent in those forms.

I make this argument through detailed analysis of two articles published around the time of that most emblematic symbol of Victorian industrialisation, the Great Exhibition of 1851: 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', an 1850 article by Charles Dickens and William Henry Wills, and an article by Frederick Knight Hunt from the following year entitled 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital'.[13] Dickens and Wills' article, published in the inaugural issue of *Household Words*, acted, in Harry Stone's words, as a 'prototype' for what Dickens called the 'process' article.[14] Stone's observation is borne out by examination of Knight Hunt's article the following year, which takes the formal elements from Dickens and Wills and applies them to the hospital. By reading the two articles together in this way, I outline the beginnings of a general formal approach to documenting rationalized systems which posits a formal relation between public institution and the individual.

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[12] Farina, 'Characterizing the Factory System', p.48.

[13] Charles Dickens and William Henry Wills, 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', *Household Words*, 30 March 1850, pp.6-12 (p.9) <http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-6.html> [Accessed: 02/11/2019]; Frederick Knight Hunt, 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital', *Household Words*, 8, February 1851, pp.457-465 <http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-ii/page-457.html> [Accessed 30/05/2019].

[14] Harry Stone, 'Introduction', in *The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens, Household Words, 1850-59*, ed. by Harry Stone, 2 vols, repr. <http://www.djo.org.uk> [Accessed: 09/10/2020].

1. THE POST OFFICE

In 1850, Charles Dickens and William Henry Wills wrote an account of one of the century's newly massive systems, on one of its busiest days – the General Post Office on Valentine's Day. The article begins with a description of 'an individual who bore not the smallest resemblance to a despairing lover, or, indeed, to a lover in any state of mind', posting three letters – one stamped, one unstamped, and one paid for with coins at the counter. He then joins his accomplice and they enter the post office to observe, using the letters as 'tracers for mapping [the] network', as Richard Menke puts it in his excellent account of the Victorian postal system.[15] The article, at the mid-point of the century, neatly demonstrates how one might look for order in the systematised social institutions of the age which, as mass entities, defied observation. Dickens and Wills point to the almost constant operation of the system to indicate scale ('six nights every week, all through the rolling year!'), while using temporal units to rationalise that scale into discrete elements.[16] Dickens and Wills take the temporal demarcations used in the sorting office and use them as regular discourse markers; paragraphs are introduced with chronological development, such as '[w]hile this dialogue was going on', and direct temporal signposts – for example, '[s]uddenly it struck six', and '[t]he clock now struck eight'.[17] Towards the end of the article, the narrator explicates this, announcing that time 'is the most striking peculiarity of the extraordinary establishment'. 'Everything is done on military principles to minute time', they write, with such precise 'drill and subdivision of duties' that the offices would go from a noisy, crowded environment before the hour, to 'hardly a light or a living being visible' by ten minutes past the hour.[18]

The article makes a large system observable, therefore, by looking at small constituent parts and then multiplying up to scale. Chronology is crucial here, as what is done in a minute is multiplied to an hour, and what is done in a night, is multiplied to 'six nights every week, all through the rolling year!' but so, too, are material aspects

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[15] Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, p.51.

[16] Dickens and Wills, 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', p.9.

[17] *Ibid*. pp.8-11.

[18] *Ibid*., p.11.

of the system.[19] Dickens and Wills begin by dividing up geographical space: '[the] Great National Post-Office in St. Martin's-le-Grand is divided into halves by a passage', where 'huge slits gape for letters, whole sashes yawn for newspapers, or wooden panes open for clerks to frame their large faces'.[20] These small-scale divisions relate to larger ones: 'the southern side is devoted to the London District Post, and the northern to what still continues to be called the "Inland Department," although foreign, colonial, and other outlandish correspondence now passes through it'.[21] The article begins by describing the posting of a single letter, before moving onto the reproduction of a numerical ledger of the number of letters posted every hour that day. Dickens and Wills take care to describe in detail the different types of post and the numbers processed, moving fluidly between these abstract recitations of figures to descriptions of concrete details as they observe the process in action. In doing so, they simultaneously emphasise the system's large scale whilst attempting to delineate its scope and workings.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the process of extrapolating a whole from disparate fragments enabled mid-century readers to conceptualise the otherwise unobservable (or only partially observable) systems that formed in this newly industrialised society, including the periodical press itself. Waters notes that *Household Words* was forced to find 'new ways of representing magnitude' as it wrestled with 'the new gaps in knowledge created by industrialisation'.[22] These new techniques included graduated calculations, and explorations of the manufacture and origins of mass-produced goods, which linked industrial manufacture to everyday objects. Most readers would likely have also been accustomed at this point to the process by which geologists and naturalists extrapolated large-scale systems and process from small, fragmentary artefacts and relics (perhaps most famously Georges Cuvier and, later, Charles Darwin). Indeed, some readers may also have been familiar with the parable of the blind men and the elephant: long before John Godfrey Saxe's popular poem 'The Blind Men and the Elephant' (1872), Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine* published a short piece entitled

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[19] *Ibid.*, p.9.

[20] *Ibid.*, p.6.

[21] *Ibid.*, p.8.

[22] Waters, p.97.

'The Partial and the Comprehensive – a Hindustanee Parable' (1843).[23] In Knight's version, the inhabitants of a village of blind men each recount what they touched of the elephant to 'an old blind man of some judgement'. On hearing that the creature was like a 'plantain-tree', a 'winnowing-fan', a 'snake', and a 'pillar', the old man correctly identifies the different parts of the elephant they have touched. 'In this way', the story concludes, 'the old man, uniting all their conjectures, made out something of the form of the elephant'. It is not coincidental that the parable makes use of blindness; the point is that true understanding (and therefore mastery) of the world around oneself does not come only through perception or interaction (seeing, touching, etc.) but through the abstract interpretation and understanding of perceptual data. So, too, the systems of 'civilisation' that sprung up in the nineteenth century are presented to readers as physical interventions that represent, or are made useful through, intellectual abstraction. Examples abound of this intellectual sense-making technique. For example, in another of Knight's publications, the companion to the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge's *Almanac or, Year-book of General Information for 1853*, the meaning of a railway line is extrapolated beyond its physical properties, described as being more than simply a set of iron rails but 'a line of civilisation.'[24] Similarly, telegraph lines are presented as 'lines of thought.'[25]

Industrialised systems tend to be valued in this abstracting process as key forms or practices of 'civilisation'. In Charles Knight's *London* (1841), for example, J. C. Platt writes that without the post office 'the whole world would be thrown backward in civilization, and all the springs by which it is urged onward would lose some portion of their elasticity'.[26] In Knight's *Companion to the Almanac; or, Year-book of General Information for 1853*, readers are told that the telegraph in the central United States is especially striking because it 'contrasts more forcibly with the semi-civilised condition

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[23] 'The Partial and the Comprehensive – A Hindustanee Parable', *The Penny Magazine*, 1 April 1843, p.124.

[24] 'Railways of the Continent and America', in *Companion to the Almanac; or Year-Book of General Information for 1853* (London: Charles Knight, 1853) pp.68-85 (p.68).

[25] 'Electric Telegraphs', *Companion to the Almanac* (1853) pp.34-53 (p.43).

[26] J. C. Platt, 'LXVIII. The Post Office', in *London*, ed. by Charles Knight, 6 vols (London: Charles Knight, 1841) III, pp.273-288 (p.273).

of those regions only a few years ago', while the railways are more important to continental Europe than Great Britain, as they ensure that 'prejudices of race and of creed should be softened down by intercommunication', and 'each country should benefit from the produce of others by interchange'.[27] Although these articles give practical information on line gauges and lengths and different systems and so on, such particularities are occluded by the final, ultimately abstract, analysis. The individual railway carriage or line, although the products of precise engineering, are details that become subordinated to the overall railway system. The physical material of the system is then reconceptualised into an abstract system. As a result, the reader is taken from tangible particulars like lines, carriages, and signalling devices to overarching systems of railways and telegraphs and post and then, finally, these systems become extensions of personal actions – of communication, of thought, or, at the social level, 'civilisation'. Dickens and Wills' article uses a similar strategy: it moves fluidly from the journeys of specific letters, and the physical spaces and temporal rhythms of the organisation, to the abstract statistics that outline the system as a whole, and finally gestures to further abstractions that apply the underlying logic more broadly.

Charles Knight was closely acquainted with Dickens, who personally requested his services as a writer for *Household Words*. Knight obliged with twenty articles between 1850 and 1852, including a series, 'Illustrations of Cheapness', which explored the manufacture of various 'cheap' commodities. Two things stand out from this series: first, that Knight is keen to outline the 'principles' of cheap manufacture, especially the division of labour (citing Adam Smith in the first article of the series – an account of Lucifer matches); and second, that labourers and workers are largely glossed over as parts of the overall machine or system.[28] Knight variously comments on the 'facility of habit' and skill 'which makes fingers act with the precision of machines', and tends to ignore the other human aspects of the work, such as who the people are, what they

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[27] 'Electric Telegraphs', p.43; 'Railways of the Continent and America', p.68.

[28] For a similar depiction, see Harriet Martineau's series of factory visits in *Household Words*. See also Ketabgian, pp.35-36; Farina, 'Characterizing the Factory'; Waters, pp.95-99.

look like, and what they say or think.[29] Knight is firmly in favour of the division of labour as a principle of 'cheapness', but he also implies that divided labour can be mindless, mechanical labour.[30] Readers, then, were being taught division as a principle and this principle—if taken to also include its inverse, multiplication—applies across a wide range of contexts.[31] Like the railway or telegraph, the forms of the system—its processes and organising principles—are not restricted to physical apparatus, but are extrapolated and reapplied across a range of particulars. In this way, people and machines become conflated because they share the same formal characteristics of repetition and regularity within the division of labour.

The system emerges, in Dickens and Wills' article, from the chaos of particulars, some of which are themselves abstract, vague, or open to variation and interpretation. 'All the history of the time', they argue, 'all the accidents, all the vanities, all the changes, all the realities,' are, despite appearances, 'really in a system of admirable order, certainty, and simplicity'.[32] Here, we can see something similar to the compression of space and time that Augé finds in supermodernity, but rather than positioning the reader in a place of interpretation, Dickens and Wills do the reverse. The chaos and confusion of reality, or 'realities', is, in their view, rationalised, simplified, and made certain by the large-scale system. Whereas the description of the telegraph as 'lines of thought' in the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge's 1853 *Almanac* might seem to empower the reader, Dickens and Wills position the individual's limited powers

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[29] Charles Knight, 'Illustrations of Cheapness [i]: The Lucifer Match', *Household Words*, 3.1, 13 April 1850, pp.54-57 (p.57).

[30] See Waters, pp.86-92, for a comparative analysis of two articles on glass factories – one by Dodd for Knight's *Penny Magazine*, and one by Dickens and Wills (likely drawing on Dodd's article) for *Household Words*.

[31] George Dodd, another recruit from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge publications, provides an exemplar of this in a list-like article that describes an array of engineering feats, such as boilers, bridges, steamships, lighthouses, cranes and houses, which were made possible by a new construction process using iron plate and rivets. The article reduces each construction—described with numerical measurements to emphasise scale—to its smallest constituent parts, the plate and the rivet, which are measured in fractions of an inch. See George Dodd, 'The Present Hollow Time', *Household Words*, 128.5, 4 September 1852, pp.589-593.

[32] Dickens and Wills, 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', p.9.

to organise and master reality as subordinate to the powers of the system. The processes of division and multiplication, as outlined in the parable of the elephant, only empower the observer if they are able to comprehend and then synthesise all of the parts. In Dickens and Wills' article, the multivarious particulars make such synthesis nigh on impossible: we are not taken through a series of calculations or logical steps to reach the whole, but simply assured that it is a rational system.

Farina argues that 'deep character' in *Household Words* is formed from rhetorical moves that combine 'affective, spiritual subjectivity' through an 'idiom of mystery and secrecy', with objective, observable facts, often figured via 'self-division, paradox, and synecdoche'.[33] In this reading, such moments enact a specific mode of non-fiction, a 'clear epistemological unit', which invokes within the journal a sense of a unified, if sometimes self-contradictory, identity. Dickens and Wills' article on the post office complicates this impression however, as the narrative character is both impersonal and cognitively inadequate to the task. It might seem odd to say it is impersonal, given that the article begins with two characters who seem to represent Dickens and Wills, from a twenty-first-century perspective at least. Nonetheless, the tone is not that of distinct individuals.[34] For a start, we are distanced from the two observers, who are described in the third person by an unidentified narrator, and even the descriptions of them are wittily vague, playfully calling them 'mysterious visitors'.[35] We are told, for instance, both what they do *not* look like—'an individual who bore not the smallest resemblance to a despairing lover'—and how they move—'he retired from the counter with extraordinary *nonchalance*, and coolly walked on'—but we are not told much else about them.[36] As the article progresses, these vague descriptions soon give way to descriptions of the postal system which is, after all, the article's real focus. The impersonality, owing to the lack of specific identifying characteristics, means that

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[33] Farina, 'A Certain Shadow', pp.400-406.

[34] Menke, in his discussion of this article, identifies parallels between the description of the posting of the individual letters at the start and Dickens's recollection, in the 1847 preface to *The Pickwick Papers*, of submitting an early sketch for publication. See Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, p.50.

[35] Dickens and Wills, 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', p.7.

[36] *Ibid.*, p.6.

the reader can easily slot themselves into the narrative viewpoint, but also that individuality is lost to a sense of a *someone* but not a specific person. That, combined with the narrator's insistence on the post office's incomprehensible scale, undermines the interpretative confidence of the voice itself.

Underneath the descriptive certainty of the documenting voice lies the implication that the narrator, like the reader, is just one of many interchangeable individuals who might have observed the post office. In fact, not only is the individual interchangeable, but the system is in any case too vast for observation. Levine suggests that in the novel *Bleak House*, published two years later, Dickens creates narrative suspense by withholding information at the same time as 'replacing the centrality of persons with the agency of networks', in order to portray a networked world in which information, narrative and system can never be complete, but simply extend and expand in overlapping layers of connection.[37] A similar thing happens on a smaller scale in Dickens and Wills' article, in which information is withheld, not to create suspense but instead to signal the incompleteness of the description, and where the centrality of a narrative character seems to have been replaced by the logic and agency of systems of labour beyond their comprehension. In place of a distinct individualised character to observe and narrate the account, we have a narrator defined mostly by the function they perform. At stake here is the deeper relation between self and system, a relation generalisable beyond the post office to include other large-scale systems. If the individual is defined primarily by their function, then it follows that the value ascribed to them is dictated by the system with which they are interacting and is liable to change as they move from one context to another. The postal worker performs one function at the post office and another when they post their own letters or, more widely, when they travel on a train or attend a hospital.

The usual idea of agency is explicitly reversed in Dickens and Wills' description of the post office. The physical structure of the General Post Office, an embodiment of that system, is the subject of active verbs, as in 'huge slits gape', 'sashes yawn', and 'panes open for clerks', creating the appearance that the system acts and the clerk is

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[37] Carline Levine, 'Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 3.42, (2009) pp.517-523 (p.520).

acted upon. Where people are the subjects of active verbs, they are often overwhelmed and subsumed by scale, as when they are 'up to their knees in newspapers'.[38] Dickens and Wills' use of rhetorical techniques to create a sense of character is not a gesture of individual empowerment over facts and figures, but nor is it the same as the alienated individualism in Augé's supermodernity, where all meaning is available to individual interpretation and all interpretation can therefore be critiqued as an individual's interpretation. Instead, what we see is a shift from a faith in a particular individual's interpretation to a belief in the logic of the system which takes apparent chaos and rationalises it into 'a system of admirable order, certainty, and simplicity'.[39] The article initially describes an overwhelming, even alarming, level of detail, but this is then turned into a foil for the ordering system, and the article overtly positions the workings of the system over individual judgement. We can see this in the course of a single sentence:

> All the history of the time, all the chronicled births, deaths, and marriages, all the crimes, all the accidents, all the vanities, all the changes, all the realities, of all the civilised earth, heaped up, parcelled out, carried about, knocked down, cut, shuffled, dealt, played, gathered up again, and passed from hand to hand, in an apparently interminable and hopeless confusion, but really in a system of admirable order, certainty, and simplicity, pursued six nights every week, all through the rolling year![40]

The comforting order of the system actually takes up a very small part of the text, occurring only in the final moment in a rhetorical move that tells readers to trust the system over their own perceptions: 'but really,' Dickens and Wills reassure, despite appearances, all this apparent chaos is 'a system of admirable order, certainty, and simplicity'.[41] The paragraph ends, in a final flourish, by using its progression from chaos to order as a way to reaffirm conservative Anglican values: 'Which of us, after this, shall find fault with the rather more extensive system of good and evil, when we don't quite understand it at a glance; or set the stars right in their spheres?'.[42]

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[38] Dickens and Wills, 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', p.9.

[39] *Ibid.*, p.9.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Ibid.*, p11.

Towards the end of the article, Dickens and Wills give a mildly alarmed description of the supervisory surveillance conducted on postal workers. This surveillance is in the form of 'an invisible individual' who at any given moment may or may not be 'stealthily watching behind the ground glass screen'.[43] 'Only the other day', Dickens and Wills report, this hidden supervisor is said to have 'detected a sorter secreting 140 sovereigns'.[44] For Dickens and Wills, although such surveillance is 'deplorable' it is the fault of the public for creating the temptation to steal in the first place 'by enclosing actual coin' in their post.[45] In their view, the individual clerk is powerless before situations created by the system: '[n]o man can say that, placed in such circumstances from day to day, he could be stedfast'.[46] The system thus enacts its principles and laws upon the individual. Whereas one might read the situation as a critique of a system that places a poor worker in constant temptation and under constant surveillance, in the article, the surveillance is excused by the temptation and the temptation is blamed on the public putting coins in the post. In effect, this becomes an example of a system having to mitigate the foibles of individual people and human error. The overall thrust of the article is thus to encourage readers to trust the system over their own experience, perception, and judgement. With its post slots that 'gape', 'open', and 'yawn', the system itself is personified in a way that smooths the tension between human and non-human, while glossing over the differences between individuals who become parts of the system's machinery, in a manner akin to the workers in Knight's articles on 'cheapness'. In essence, we see the two versions of society that Caroline Levine finds in Dickens's novels *Bleak House* (1853) and *Hard Times* (1854): '[w]hile *Hard Times*, by relying on synecdoche, renders society as a finite sum of social groups, *Bleak House*, by choosing networks over representative types, constantly runs up against the limits of its own capacity for representation'.[47] In Dickens and Wills' article only a few years earlier, people are represented as exchangeable parts defined by their

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[43] *Ibid.*, p.9.

[44] *Ibid.*, p.11.

[45] *Ibid.*.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] Levine, 'Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form', p.522.

function within the system and as a sort of 'finite sum of social groups'. Anyone cast in the role of clerk, it is suggested, would act in the same way. However, the system itself, as a network, is constantly running up against the limits of the article's capacity for representation and, by implication, the observer's capacity for observation and understanding.

2. THE HOSPITAL

A year after the publication of 'Valentine's Day at the Post Office', Frederick Knight Hunt wrote a similar article for *Household Words* about another social institution, entitled 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital'. Knight Hunt's article offers us a useful comparison to examine how the strategy employed by Dickens and Wills to portray the post office was then adopted for other subjects in the journal's 'process' articles. Through the comparison we can begin to see how readers were encouraged to view such institutions as exemplars of a broader systemising logic, and on a more personal level, how this shapes the relation between self and system.

Knight Hunt presents the hospital as an ordered system of particulars using similar techniques to Dickens and Wills. In fact, three key strategies are at work in his article. First, he uses a similar temporal structure to Dickens and Wills, but his article begins and ends with jarring contrasts between clock time and subjective time. The article begins in the early morning with the statement that 'everything looks so dim and dark, that when you hear it [the clock] strike six, you fancy it must have made a mistake', and ends in the early hours of the next morning: 'A night nurse [...] counts the hours—these long still watches of the night—wearily enough. St. Paul's Clock speaks audibly from hour to hour. One; two; still all quiet; three [...]'.[48] Time, as measured by clocks, organises the human experience but it also chafes against it. In other words, like Dickens and Wills, Knight Hunt employs temporal discourse markers in a way that encourages readers to trust external systematisation over their own perception and judgement.

Secondly, Knight Hunt contrasts the regimented order of the hospital with the more chaotic city scenes surrounding it. The first page of the article (the entire front

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[48] Knight Hunt, 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital', pp.457-465 (p.457, p.465).

page of that particular issue of *Household Words*) makes hardly any mention of the hospital itself beyond the title, but is instead devoted to describing the city, which is 'a very whirlpool of life'.[49] Indeed, the city confounds abstract ordering:

> Look out upon the army of sheep, oxen, calves, and pigs there drawn up, all full of life, and remember, then, that all this is not three days' meat for London; that within a week all these living things will have been killed, cooked, eaten, and digested, their skins in the tan-yards, their horns in the turner's workshop, and their hoofs in the glue-pot. Gone; used up; to help feed London for just a few days, and you will have one element for making up a notion of how vast an affair this same London is. But Smithfield is not a safe place for abstraction.[50]

London literally consumes, kills, eats, digests, and uses up its 'living things', and although the city may be construed through the same scaling technique of multiplication used by Dickens and Wills for the postal system, one can only get towards a 'notion' of its vastness. Indeed, abstraction is dangerous in this place: the city moves too quickly and is too chaotic for the observer and threatens, one supposes, to use up the observer along with all the other living things. The hospital, in sharp contrast, 'stands just where it stood centuries ago', and is inhabited by nurses who possess 'withal the modes of good management requisite for preserving order, cleanliness, quiet, and an air of comfort in places where disease in its worst forms, and with its most unpleasant accompaniments, is ever present'.[51] Knight Hunt's second strategy, then, is to contrast the hospital's order and stability with the human chaos surrounding it.[52]

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[49] *Ibid.*, p.457.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] *Ibid.*, p.458.

[52] Although not the main focus of Knight Hunt's article, it is worth noting that views of London tended towards two extremes: at the street level London was often portrayed as a bewildering chaos, while from elevated positions (panoramic views and views from balloons) London was more often portrayed as a single coherent entity. Henry Mayhew, as a striking example, longed to see London from a balloon, having focussed on its street-level chaos for his journalism. See Henry Mayhew, '"In the Clouds;" or Some Account of a Balloon Trip with Mr. Green', *Illustrated London News*, 18 September 1852, p.224.

Knight Hunt's third key strategy is the way in which he presents the order of the hospital. Knight Hunt uses multiplication to create a sense of its scale. After a detailed description of a single ward, for example, he writes: 'we have only to multiply by twenty, and the whole hospital may be, thus far, understood'.[53] This technique necessarily relies on regularity and generalisation, and thereby elides the subtle differences that naturally occur in real-life particulars. Knight Hunt's description of a single ward, although detailed, is pointedly not of a specific ward but is a generalised description of what every ward contains. When he advises multiplying up by twenty, he qualifies it: '[o]ne ward may be appropriated to medical cases, in charge of physicians: and another to accidents, and other visible injuries and diseases entrusted to surgeons: but each has the knot of resident attendants we have described'.[54] Similarly, the total number of patients might fluctuate, 'but, be the number what it may, they are arranged in companies, controlled and attended as we have seen'.[55] Regularity, then, is more important to Knight Hunt than specificity. The ordering system takes precedence over the chaos of details.

The hospital is rendered generic and decentralised in the manner of larger-scale phenomena. Even though one can stand in front of it and point to a material entity that is the hospital, it exists in Knight Hunt's text as something more complex. Knight Hunt is clear about the problems of conflating the hospital with its physical structure: although the hospital has stood, reassuringly for 'centuries', the 'present building has no remnant of the old one in its construction'.[56] One can indeed stand and look at it, but the buildings, we are told, 'give no idea of the real character, or exact extent of the place'.[57] Although one might observe a specific ward, Knight Hunt chooses not to do so because, in order to multiply to scale and conceive of the whole hospital, one must understand the generalities of *a* ward, not of *this* ward.

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[53] Knight Hunt, 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital', p.459.

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] *Ibid.*, p.458.

[57] *Ibid.*

The prioritisation of general regularity over specific differences is central to both the description of the post office and the hospital. These are locatable, concrete institutions, but their 'real character', in Knight Hunt's words, is in their decentralised regularity and subordination to systematised processes. This cognitive technique employs relatively new ideas about systematic order to make the world observable, but it does so by moving away from detail to present a higher-level view. Specific wards are lost to the overview of the hospital as a formation of wards in general. The technique helps alleviate issues with overabundance, since it omits or avoids details, and also precludes Augé's third figure of individuality of reference, since such individual reference would be necessarily attentive to specific individual details.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of these Victorian texts is their shared attention and adherence to chronological time, an aspect of rationalisation most fully realised by the recent adoption of standardised or 'railway' time in the 1840s. Augé writes of supermodernity's excess of events, whereby too much occurs within a compressed timeframe to be properly understood within a historical framework. Yet, this impression is only made possible by the absolute rule of standardised chronology and the technologies of communication that share news of increasing numbers of events regardless of spatial distance. Overabundance requires us first to think of multiple events happening at a certain moment – at 2pm, say. If, instead of linking those events through their moment, I think of them in relation to other events at other moments through thematic connections, or I think of them as occurring separately since I was not aware of them all at the same moment but only learned about some at a later time, then my sense of overabundance becomes allayed. In fact, the number of things happening is not really the problem; the issue is that distance no longer limits the sharing of news of those events. In the supermodern context it may also be difficult to disentangle my sense of event from my learned sense of standard chronology. But in the Victorian instance, we see in texts like those in *Household Words* the instigation of standard chronology as an organising principle to waylay overabundance. The telegraph and railway might seem to annihilate space and time, but this is not seen as

a problem in these texts; instead, it allows for the homogenisation of particulars and thus helps rationalise and control them.[58]

Returning, finally, to Augé's three figures of supermodernity, we can form an overall view of the techniques employed in Dickens and Wills' account of the post office and Knight Hunt's account of the hospital. These articles begin with chaotic descriptions of London where too many things happen all at once—an 'overabundance of events' as Augé might put it—but this overabundance does not stem from the systems of infrastructure and information which sublimate the individual and particular. Instead, in an inverse of late twentieth-century supermodernity, these writers find a solution in large-scale organisational systems and suggest that the sublimation of the individual is actually the way to untangle the 'tangle of interdependences' and to process the chaotic overload of information.[59] Similarly, as in Augé's second figure—spatial overabundance—space does indeed seem both smaller and larger in these articles: we are in a single place looking at a single thing and yet to look at the hospital buildings, to consider a specific ward, is to lose the 'idea of the real character', just as to consider a single letter, or a single newspaper, or a single worker, or a single destination, is to lose sight of the whole of the post office system.[60] But again, this effect is not seen as a problem by these writers. Instead, the newly extended reach of such systems is portrayed as offering greater mastery over the world, to move out of the chaos of details, and to extend the range of influence from any given point.

To offer up some of one's individual agency—or better yet, someone else's, such as the anonymous worker or the colonial subject—was seemingly a small price to pay for the socio-economic and epistemic advantages. If, as Charles Ellet proclaimed, humanity was 'invested with a new form' by industrialisation, then these two articles in

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[58] This view was not universally shared. Elsewhere, writers were sceptical of systematic methods of ordering. For example, Beth Seltzer, argues that M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) uses railway timetables to draw attention to 'the fictions of organization and usability, the fiction that the timetable represents the real, and the fiction that detailed information denotes human meaning'. Beth Seltzer, 'Fictions of Order in the Timetable: Railway Guides, Comic Spoofs, and Lady Audley's Secret', *Victorian Review*, 1.41 (2015) pp.47-65 (p.47).

[59] Augé, p.23.

[60] Knight Hunt, 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital', p.458.

Household Words show us one way in which some writers imagined this form.[61] Although on the surface Dickens, Wills, and Knight Hunt are interested in the recent reformations of post office and hospital, underneath lies a greater interest in the ongoing reformation of individuals into industrial subjects.

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[61] 'Influence of Coal on the Progress of Mankind', p.57.