Soon after dawn on May 13, 1827, Mr Samuel Pickwick looks out of his bedroom window and sees that Goswell Street (now Goswell Road) is dull. The prospect of its uniform inner suburban terraces confirms his resolution to "penetrate to the hidden countries which on every side surround it" (Pickwick Papers, Ch. 2). Fortified with coffee and equipped with portmanteau, notebook, and telescope, he walks half a mile or so to the cab rank at St Martin's le Grand, soon to be the location of the new General Post Office and the point of departure for the Great North Road. There he hires a new-style cabriolet to the Golden Cross Inn at the western end of the Strand. In the first of innumerable comic misprisions, the driver takes him for an informer bent on detecting cruelty to horses. In the first of many instances of gullibility, Pickwick believes the cabbie's tale of keeping his nag in harness for weeks at a time -- a classic example of an English wind-up -- and makes a note of it "as a singular instance of the tenacity of life in horses." Once he has escaped from the pugnacious cabbie and booked a place in the Commodore, one of the 1500 coaches leaving London almost every day, Mr. Pickwick sets out for Rochester, a cathedral city in Kent some twenty-five miles away and by coach a three-hour jaunt. In all his journeys Mr Pickwick never travels much more than a hundred miles from London, and he never explores the seedy "hidden countries" lying on either side of respectable Goswell Street. Nevertheless, according to Jonathan H.
Grossman's exhilarating study, he ventures into a far-flung, busy, and remarkably efficient transportation network.

Grossman sets out to investigate time, space, individuality, and community as experienced by the characters who criss-cross the landscapes of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (nested within *Master Humphrey's Clock*), and *Little Dorrit*, and as embodied in the very structures of these novels. Before discussing this agenda, one should spell out the whats and whens of Grossman's vision. In every case and to great effect, he cites the serial versions (1836-37, 1840-41, 1856-57). This choice of texts makes possible a running analogy between the experience of reading part by part and the experience of going on an extended journey. Thus *Pickwick*, presented here as even in serial form a much more artful work than is usually thought, creates "a shared here-and-now of individuals in constant circulation" (66). Close examination of the three serials also generates an abundance of fresh ideas about illustrations, point of view, narrative framing, and the narrative grouping of events. More generally, anyone interested in that somewhat neglected subgenre called the picaresque will find treasures in this volume.

In part or whole and more or less specifically, all three novels hark back to the 1820s. By the late 1820s some of the earliest passenger railways were already in business (the horse-powered Swansea and Oystermouth in 1807, the steam-hauled Stockton and Darlington in 1825), but the great booms in floating companies and laying track -- the latter not an automatic consequence of the former -- reached their peaks in 1836-37 and 1845-46; connecting London Bridge with Greenwich, London's first line opened piecemeal between 1836 and 1838 and thus nearly coincided with the serial of *Pickwick*. 
Dickens writes chiefly of a period before Carlyle's "fleet fire-horse" had left behind the coach-horse fed on oats and hay. But the retrospective nature of the three novels, Grossman argues, bears no traces of nostalgia: "Pickwick is not a historical novel drawing a parallel between a present age and a past one" (15). In other words, rather than distinguishing between an age of steam and an age of oats, he places both in an age of acceleration and precise scheduling. With this trajectory in mind, he invokes Paul Virilio's work on "dromology" -- the science of speed (14, 98, and especially 240, n. 23). Grossman's version of the stagecoach network is not the sentimental one that still embellishes British Christmas cards but a smoothly operating system enabled at the end of the eighteenth century by the making of tar-macadmamed roads and well-sprung vehicles. (As further evidence, we have the Diaries of Anne Lister, who timed her frequent stagecoach travels across Lancashire and Yorkshire to the minute; see also her entry in the Oxford DNB).

One might argue, of course, that railways disrupted the landscape far more than the coaching network ever did, thus enraging, for example, William Wordsworth and that most reactionary of Tory MPs, Colonel Sibthorp. Again, the immense cost of opening railways led to furious speculation, which often led to tears: in 1845, in the days when Punch was still iconoclastic, a full-page cartoon showed a familiar lady with a bun turning to an almost as familiar whiskered gentleman slumped in dejection: "Tell me, dearest Albert," she asks. "Do you have any railway shares?" Yet Grossman is not writing a full-scale history of Victorian transportation. He has little to say about scheduled horse-drawn services in cities, which began in London and Paris in the late 1820s. (In London, the first ever school bus carried pupils at a Quaker academy for girls in 1827, and George
Shillibeer launched his carefully-timetabled cross-town omnibus service in 1829.) Except as it affects the narrative of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Grossman ignores the canal network, and he mentions railway freight services only to note their absence from his study (8). Grossman makes it clear that his topic is "the system as a system (e.g. not as an economic entity)" (227, n. 64), and by the system he means long-distance passenger travel by coach or train, supplemented by cross-Channel ferries (briefly discussed in Chapter Three). I shall have more to say later about this reluctance to consider economics and politics. For now, I must admit that his theoretical purism is justifiable at least in terms of speed and length of journey: canal traffic was slow and the attempt to introduce fast "fly-boats" had little impact (123-27); commuting -- or going on a jaunt -- between Paddington and the Bank of England was far more humdrum than catching an express from Paddington to Bristol. I must also say that even though the scope of this study is limited, Grossman's commentaries on his chosen texts are vigorous, shrewd, and engaging.

Like practically everyone else writing on the social, psychological, and epistemological effects of travelling by train, Grossman owes a lot--as he acknowledges--to Wolfgang Schivelbusch's irresistible and wide-ranging *The Railway Journey* (1977, 1986), especially with regard to the organization of time. (Unsurprisingly, he is less interested in Schivelbusch's discussion of the fortunes made from railways by some contractors and investors.) What particularly fascinates Grossman and becomes his leading idea is a paradox:

The rise of a public transport system transformed people's journeying, making it shared and thus making all individually interchangeable in its system, while at the same time the system was subordinated to its individual users' purposes, ensuring that its riders
were not at all interchangeable, but on the contrary were individuals each pursuing their individual ways. (46)

Thus the railway (or fast stagecoach) experience was a double one: an ever-fluctuating network of people with their separate agendas travelled by means of a more stable network standardized in time and space. To acknowledge this paradoxical experience, in Grossman's view, is not only to identify a significant aspect of early nineteenth century cultural history or a fictional theme, but also to see narrative itself as its corollary.

Pickwick himself, Grossman argues, is a "passenger-avatar of the public transport network" (41), and the plot of the Pickwick Papers strives toward "a social cohesion that overcomes the divisive features" of conflicting drives and interests (48). "Over and over again . . . the Pickwickians become embroiled in turmoil and hostilities, the repeated overcoming of which produces the novel's triumphal comic viewpoint" (48). In Grossman's second chapter, however, the mood and mode darken. When Nell and her grandfather leave London on foot and thus step outside the public network, they disappear: "Nell's walking forth . . . severs her from her community" (103), and since those who ride to the rescue do so by stagecoach, they stand virtually no chance of tracking the nomads down. Evoking a geography that embraces western Europe as well as Britain, the third chapter shows the network shrinking in time even as it expands in space. International travel in Little Dorrit has been facilitated by the advent of cross-Channel paddle-steamers linking Britain to the Continent in the early 1820s.

Each chapter has something striking to say about plotting, motif, and point of view. Mr Pickwick's innocent (but easily misread as sexual) blunders create his
doppelgänger, "a kind of shadow Don Juan Pickwick" (41). His penchant for straying into the wrong bedroom takes "community" a step too far; although in terms of the network passengers are interchangeable, in terms of individual behavior they are not. For Grossman, the "ideological work" (53) is not to reflect this dichotomy so much as to make sense of it: "in the nineteenth century the chief place where one could experience such imagined synthesis of networked relations was in the novel. This was Pickwick's contribution" (53). Grossman thus vindicates Dickens's artistry, not least in the early novels. He notes, for instance, that as soon as Nell and her grandfather leave London, "the novel dramatically divides itself between following Nell sequentially on her foot-journey and the multiplotted realm of the London-headquartered characters. . . . This is as serious a formal experiment as that of the more famously split narrative of Bleak House" (107). Furthermore, taking Master Humphrey's own frame narration into the reckoning, "this is a retrospective narrative ... of two different retrospective narratives that fail to converge" (118).

Grossman is equally illuminating on Little Dorrit. In a profusely suggestive reading of its first seven paragraphs, he treats them as a "narratorial filibuster" (169), a miniature essay on perspective and perception. This beginning, as he sees it, proffers "the kind of knowing that projects such a multistranded plot for his characters as part of their own and his readers' awareness" (169). What's more, the concept of multistrandedness offers a way out of the debate over prison and pilgrimage: between the majority of critics, who find the novel dominated by the metaphor of life as a prison, and the minority, who see it driven by the metaphor of life as a pilgrimage. Citing Jastrow's (and later
Wittgenstein's) duck-rabbit as an analogy, Grossman argues that either choice is regrettably single-minded (157-62).

It is also in his discussion of Little Dorrit that Grossman expands upon the networks' epistemological effects. However much individual participants within a network may think they know about it, they can never know the whole of it:

Dickens has all along been showing his characters journeying around a world in which the density and complexity of their interconnections, multiplying with every step, perpetually outruns its comprehension, such that they regularly encounter strangers who know things about themselves that they do not, while there is nothing like friends and family to highlight one's manifold obliviousness. (207)

Here is a world not so much fragmented (the Modernist view) as swamped with information (195). In a comment probably more relevant to the time of writing (the 1850s) than to the time of setting (the 1820s, when a passenger from a paddle-steamer at Calais would have to wait until high tide to disembark and then board a lumbering diligence rather than a train), Grossman writes of the fictional travellers: "What is new about their interconnectedness is that it happens in simultaneous time because there no longer seems to be the same distending, dilated experience involved in getting from here to there" (179).

Grossman's remarks on serialization play upon an experience of time that is both extended and immediate. The mystery and suspense of Little Dorrit stretch across months. Reading it number by number means that readers share with characters a sense of "baffling untimeliness" (203). In Pickwick, the connections of author, character, and reader sometimes amount to metafiction, as when Sam Weller "dismissed the subject
from his mind, however, with the consolatory reflection that time alone would shew; and this is just the reflection we would impress upon the reader" (Pickwick Ch. 27, qtd. 55). Yet also in Pickwick, Grossman notes, "serialization tied the novel to the here-and-now of the readers' living bodies, albeit via the communications system, and it lent the fictional characters a similarly irreversible past and semi-open-ended future that specially set them in contemporaneous time as well" (54). In short, the serial format made "a contemporaneous collective of its readers" (67). The very heterogeneity of its events, characters, and narrative modes "showcased how the public transport system unified people as a collective in shared space and time whatever the various activities happening in its reach" (67).

But here I must raise an objection. Unless I have missed a vital pause for disambiguation, and if so I heartily apologize, Grossman's one collective seems really to be split in two. That not all members of the set of people travelling on the new networks would have read Pickwick does not matter; but it does matter to the book's argument if any significant proportion of the set of readers had not travelled by long-distance coach or train. If we add those who listened to rather than read the installments, that proportion would rise, especially among those who were illiterate and / or unable to afford the price of a train or coach. This objection is more than a cavil and less than a landslide, for it could have been forestalled by a brief assessment of vicarious travel. Even in Chapter Three, where Grossman impressively revises Benedict Anderson's theorization of imagined communities, this topic does not come up.

Furthermore, the gap between those who had experienced the network and those who hadn't raises questions about the argument of the book as a whole, which is
handicapped by Grossman's steadfast insistence on excluding politics and economics. It
did not have to be this way. For instance, in *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (1992, trans. 1996), Bruno Latour's playful "scientifiction" about an on-demand modular transport system for Paris, cited by Grossman as one of his inspirations (227, n. 64), both politics and economics find a place. To take other networks into account is not to assert that one of them must be the übernetwork or the key to all ideologies, but simply to acknowledge that networks impinge upon each other. Grossman admits to exaggerating the universality of the transportation networks (91), but he never quite acknowledges the extent of his exclusions. Quite apart from those who were not well enough to travel, or restricted by the liabilities of work or family, expense was a major deterrent. A seat inside a coach cost between 3½ and 4½ old pence per mile; a more invigorating but less comfortable place on the roof cost between 2 and 2½. In other words, to ride the *Commodore* to Rochester with Mr Pickwick, a labourer would have to part with two days' wages--and that would only buy a one-way fare. During the early years of their existence, railway companies charged about the same as coaches (Michael Freeman and Derek Aldcroft, *The Atlas of British Railway History*, 1985, 28). Thus the "ordinary people" who were "no longer exclusively bound together and separated spatially by the static geographic places in which they lived" (37) were fewer in number than Grossman suggests. It was not until 1844, well after the appearance of *Pickwick* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, that the then President of the Board of Trade, W. E. Gladstone, steered legislation through Parliament requiring the companies to provide seats on at least one train a day at a charge of a penny per mile. Not for the first or last time, the "magic of the markets" had needed the thaumaturgic intervention of decent, thoughtful politicians.
Inevitably this book (like this review) is a child of its times. The language of technical supersession is audible throughout. With Grossman's talk of the shrinking of space and its effect on human consciousness, one wonders what words remain for the telephone and the laying of the great intercontinental cables toward the end of the nineteenth century or the coming of wireless transmission in the early twentieth, let alone the spinning of the Web. When Grossman claims that "letters written in the context of the new public transport now circulated around a network of people already understood to be networked in person" (73), he seems to imply that the question of the hour was, "Why send Cousin Tom a letter, when you could hop on a train to Leeds and see him face to face?" (By a no doubt unintended irony, this is a direct inversion of the question now being asked by university managers: "Why do professors need lecture theaters and seminar rooms when all they have to do is Skype?") For reasons outlined in the previous paragraph, hopping on a train to Leeds wasn't always an option. In 1840, on the other hand, with the introduction of universal rates (and the abolition of payment on delivery, a frequent complaint, for instance, in Jane Austen's correspondence), a penny stamp would take your half-ounce letter not just to Leeds but John O'Groats or Donegal. Here, surely, was another advance in the "historic march of democracy in the era" (85).

Nevertheless, it would be a shame if Grossman's over-systematized readings of history frightened any readers off. His claims about the redundancy of letters (often supported by quotations from Dickens's own twelve volumes of correspondence) are on the extravagant side, but they result in brilliant commentaries on the correspondence of Mr Weller Senior (79-85) and on *Pickwick* as an "anti-epistolary novel, the story of a corresponding club that never did" (79). Though the roads down which Little Nell
trudges would have been more crowded than Chapter Two suggests, the contrast between
journeys on foot and journeys by coach is excellently drawn, and the whole chapter is
touching, giving both *The Old Curiosity Shop* itself and the *Master Humphrey* narrative
the artistic--and emotional--respect they deserve but do not always get. Likewise
powerful and suggestive is his comment on Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*, which illuminates
the entire novel; he takes her disconcertingly strong-minded predictions as the words of a
real prophet speaking in "a theater of pseudo-prophets" (210). Grossman's close
engagement with the texture of each work is a constant delight. For those whose hearts
sink at the very mention of narratology, here is an abundance of pills to purge their
melancholy. To toy a little with a cliché, Grossman has an eagle eye -- that is, he knows
the landscape intimately yet from a considerable height and, when relevant to his
nourishment, can see the slightest movement. For Henry James, everything in fiction
depends on the intensity of the impression; in a critical study of fiction such as this,
nearly everything depends upon the choice of eyrie.

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