4. Panoramic Travel

Dreamlike travelling on the railroad. The towns which I pass between Philadelphia and New York make no distinct impression. They are like pictures on a wall. The more, that you can read all the way in a car a French novel.
— Emerson, Journals, February 7, 1843

In Goethe’s journal on his trip to Switzerland in 1797, we find the following entry:

Left Frankfurt shortly after 7:00 A.M. On the Sachsenhausen mountain, many well-kept vineyards; foggy, cloudy, pleasant weather. The highway pavement has been improved with limestone. Woods in back of the watchtower. A man climbing up the great tall beech trees with a rope and iron cleats on his shoes. What a village! A deadfall by the road, from the hills by Langen. Sprendlingen. Basalt in the pavement and on the highway up to Langen; the surface must break very often on this plateau, as near Frankfurt. Sandy, fertile, flat land; a lot of agriculture, but meager . . .

As Goethe tells Eckermann, this journal was “merely jotted down as given by the moment.” Thus it is no poetic text, but a description of a journey by coach in the late eighteenth century, a record of impressions received on that journey. Goethe’s trip from Frankfurt to Heidelberg consists of a continuous sequence of impressions that demonstrates how intense the experience of the traversed space has been. Not only the villages and towns on the way are noted, not only the formations of the terrain, but even details of the material consistency of the pavement of the highway are incorporated into his perceptions.
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The railway puts an end to this intensity of travel, which reached its peak in the eighteenth century and found its cultural expression in the genre of the "novel of travels." The speed and mathematical directness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain destroy the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space. The space of landscape becomes, to apply Erwin Straus' concept, geographical space. "In a landscape," says Straus, "we always get to one place from another place; each location is determined only by its relation to the neighboring place within the circle of visibility. But geographical space is closed, and is therefore in its entire structure transparent. Every place in such a space is determined by its position with respect to the whole and ultimately by its relation to the null point of the coordinate system by which this space obtains its order. Geographical space is systematized." Straus sees the railroad as the essential agent of the transformation of landscape into geographical space:

The modern forms of traveling in which intervening spaces are, as it were, skipped over or even slept through, strikingly illustrate the systematically closed and constructed character of the geographical space in which we live as human beings. Before the advent of the railroad, geographical connections evolved, for the traveler, from the change in landscape. True, today the traveler also goes from place to place. But now we can get on a French train in the morning, and then, after twelve hours on the train (which is really being nowhere), we can get out in Rome. The old form of traveling provided for a more and better balanced relationship between landscape and geography.³

The nineteenth century found a fitting metaphor for this loss of continuity: repeatedly, the train is described as a projectile. First, the projectile metaphor is used to emphasize the train's speed, as in Lardner: a train moving at seventy-five miles an hour "would have a velocity only four times less than a cannon ball."⁴ Then, as Greenhow points out, there is the cumulative power and impact that turns a speeding train into a missile: "when a body is moving at very high velocity, it then, to all intents and purposes, becomes a projectile, and is subject to the laws attending projectiles."⁵ In 1889, after the complete cultural assimilation of the railroad, the projectile metaphor is still quite attractive. "Seventy-five miles an hour," says a technical text published in that year, "is one hundred and ten feet a second, and the energy of four hundred tons moving at that rate is nearly twice as great as that of a 2,000-pound shot fired from a 100-ton Armstrong gun."⁶

The train is experienced as a projectile, and traveling on it, as being shot through the landscape — thus losing control of one's senses. "In travelling on most of the railways ..." says an anonymous author of the year 1844, "the face of nature, the beautiful prospects of hill and dale, are lost or distorted to our view. The alternation of high and low ground, the healthful breeze, and all those exhilarating associations connected with 'the Road,' are lost or changed to doleful cuttings, dismal tunnels, and the noxious effluvia of the screaming engine."⁷ Thus the rails, cuttings, and tunnels appear as the barrel through which the projectile of the train passes. The traveler who sits inside that projectile ceases to be a traveler and becomes, as noted in a popular metaphor of
the century, a mere parcel. "It matters not whether you have eyes or are asleep or blind, intelligent or dull," says Ruskin, "all that you can know, at best, of the country you pass is its geological structure and general clothing."9

This loss of landscape affects all the senses. Realizing Newton's mechanics in the realm of transportation, the railroad creates conditions that will also "mechanize" the travelers' perceptions. According to Newton, "size, shape, quantity, and motion" are the only qualities that can be objectively perceived in the physical world. Indeed, those become the only qualities that the railroad traveler is now able to observe in the landscape he travels through. Smells, sounds, not to mention the synesthetic perceptions that were part of travel in Goethe's time, simply disappear.

The change effected in the traveler's relationship to the landscape becomes most evident in regard to his sense of sight: visual perception is diminished by velocity. George Stephenson testifies to this in a statement given at a parliamentary hearing on safety problems on the railways in 1841: when asked for his estimation of the engine-driver's ability to see obstacles, he replies, "If his attention is drawn to any object before he arrives at the place, he may have a pretty correct view of it; but if he only turns himself round as he is passing, he will see it very imperfectly."10

Unlike the driver, the travelers have only a very limited chance to look ahead: thus all they can see is an evanescent landscape. All early descriptions of railroad travel testify to the difficulty of recognizing any but the broadest outlines of the traversed landscape. Victor Hugo describes the view from a train window in a letter dated August 22, 1837: "The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red or white; there are no longer any points, everything becomes a streak; the grainfields are great shocks of yellow hair; fields of alfalfa, long green tresses; the towns, the steeples, and the trees perform a crazy mingling dance on the horizon; from time to time, a shadow, a shape, a spectre appears and disappears with lightning speed behind the window: it's a railway guard." (Quoted in Baroli, Le Train dans la Littérature Française, Paris, 1964, p. 58). And Jacob Burckhardt writes in 1840: "It is no longer possible to really distinguish the objects closest to one — trees, shacks, and such: as soon as one turns to take a look at them, they already are long gone."11 In a text from 1838 we find the statement that it is impossible to "recognize a person standing by the road while driving past him" at the "greatest speed,"12 which prompts the following advice: "He who has good eyesight ... does well to acquire the habit of observing from a certain distance everything that attracts his attention while traveling: given some power of observation, he will not miss anything at all, not even during the stage of utmost velocity."13

The recommendation to look at things "from a certain distance" does not seem entirely realistic, in view of the traveler's situation in train compartment: enclosed in it, the traveler has no way of distancing himself from the objects — all he can do is to ignore the objects and portions of the landscape that are closer to him, and to direct his gaze to the more distant objects that seem to pass by more slowly. If he does not modify his old way of observing things while traveling — if he still tries to perceive proximity and distance in

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equal measure — the result, as noted in 1862 by the *Lancet*, a medical journal, is fatigue:

The rapidity and variety of the impressions necessarily fatigue both the eye and the brain. The constantly varying distance at which the objects are placed involves an incessant shifting of the adaptive apparatus by which they are focused upon the retina; and the mental effort by which the brain takes cognizance of them is scarcely less productive of cerebral wear because it is unconscious; for no fact in physiology is more clearly established than that excessive functional activity always implies destruction of material and organic change of substance.\(^\text{14}\)

Increased velocity calls forth a greater number of visual impressions for the sense of sight to deal with. This multiplication of visual impressions is an aspect of the process peculiar to modern times that Georg Simmel has called the development of urban perception. He characterizes it as an "intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli."\(^\text{15}\) (Italics in original.) "Lasting impressions," Simmel says, "impressions which take a regular and habitual course and show regular and habitual contrasts — all these use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions."

The difference between the quality of stimuli in the metropolis and those of railroad travel need not concern us here: what is decisive, is the quantitative increase of impressions that the perceptual apparatus has to receive and to process. Contemporary texts that compare the new travel experience with the traditional one demonstrate how that stimulus increase produced by increased velocity is experienced as *stressful*. The speed causes objects to escape from one's gaze, but one nevertheless keeps on trying to grasp them. This is implied in Eichendorff: "These travels by steam keep on shaking the world — in which there really is nothing left but railway stations — like a kaleidoscope, incessantly, the landscapes speeding by in ever-changing grimaces even before one has been able to perceive any genuine traits of physiognomy; the flying salon presents one with ever new coteries, even before one has been able to really deal with the old ones."\(^\text{16}\)

John Ruskin, whose dislike of the railways created the most sensitive descriptions of the peculiar traits of preindustrial travel, proposes an almost mathematical negative correlation between the number of objects that are perceived in a given period of time and the *quality* of that perception: "I say, first, to be content with as little change as possible. If the attention is awake, and the feelings in proper train, a turn of a country road, with a cottage beside it, which we have not seen before, is as much as we need for refreshment; if we hurry past it, and take two cottages at a time, it is already too much: hence to any person who has all his senses about him, a quiet walk along not more than ten or twelve miles of road a day, is the most amusing of all travelling; and all travelling becomes dull in exact proportion to its rapidity."\(^\text{17}\)

That final statement — "travelling becomes dull in exact proportion to its rapidity" — represents the evaluation of railroad travel made by all those nineteenth-century travelers who were still accustomed to preindustrial travel
and thus not able to develop modes of perception appropriate to the new form of transportation. Dullness and boredom result from attempts to carry the perceptual apparatus of traditional travel, with its intense appreciation of landscape, over to the railway. The inability to acquire a mode of perception adequate to technological travel crosses all political, ideological, and esthetic lines, appearing among the most disparate personalities of the nineteenth century. Flaubert writes to a friend in 1864: "I get so bored on the train that I am about to howl with tedium after five minutes of it. One might think that it's a dog someone has forgotten in the compartment; not at all, it is M. Flaubert, groaning."18 Before a railway journey, Flaubert stays up all night in order to be able to sleep through the journey and not experience it at all: he can do nothing with the vista offered to him by the compartment window.19 The most diverse sources provide any number of similar complaints. To indicate the width of the spectrum, and its independence from attitudes based on weltanschauung, let us
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attend to one more piece of evidence: the report given on a railroad journey in the United States by the politically liberal German-American Francis J. Lieber in 1834:

From Albany to Schenectady, you travel by rail-road; and the least exciting of all travelling, it seems to me, is decidedly locomotion by steam on a rail-road. The traveller, whose train of ideas is always influenced by the manner in which he proceeds, thinks in a steam car of nothing else but the place of his destination, for the very reason that he is moving so quickly. Pent up in a narrow space, rolling along on an even plain which seldom offers any objects of curiosity, and which, when it does, you pass by with such rapidity, that your attention is never fixed; together with a number of people who have all the same object in view, and think like you of nothing else, but when they shall arrive at the journey's end — thus situated, you find nothing to entertain or divert you, except now and then a spark flying into the window of the car... There is no common conversation, no round-laugh, nothing but a dead calm, interrupted from time to time, only by some passenger pulling out his watch and uttering a sound of impatience... (Italics in original.)

While the consciousness molded by traditional travel finds itself in a mounting crisis, another kind of perception starts developing which does not try to fight the effects of the new technology of travel but, on the contrary, assimilates them entirely. For such a pair of eyes staring out of the compartment window, all the things that the old consciousness experiences as losses become sources of enrichment. The velocity and linearity with which the train traverses the landscape no longer destroys it — not at all; only now is it possible to fully appreciate that landscape. Thus, a description of a trip from Manchester to Liverpool in the year 1830:

The passenger by this new line of route having to traverse the deepest recesses where the natural surface of the ground is the highest, and being mounted on the loftiest ridges and highest embankments, riding above the tops of the trees, and overlooking the surrounding country, where the natural surface of the ground is the lowest — this peculiarity and this variety being occasioned by that essential requisite in a well-constructed Railway — a level line — imposing the necessity of cutting through the high lands and embanking across the low; thus in effect, presenting to the traveller all the variety of mountain and ravine in pleasing succession, whilst in reality he is moving almost on a level plane and while the natural face of the country scarcely exhibits even those slight undulations which are necessary to relieve it from tameness and insipidity.

That is not a picturesque landscape destroyed by the railroad; on the contrary, it is an intrinsically monotonous landscape brought into an esthetically pleasing perspective by the railroad. The railroad creates a new landscape. The velocity that atomizes the objects of Ruskin's perception, and thus deprives them of their contemplative value, becomes a stimulus for the new perception. Now it is the velocity that makes the objects of the visible world attractive. Let us
compare the following quote to Ruskin's comments, and we shall see how differently velocity and evanescence can be experienced during the same period of time: "The beauties of England," an American traveler writes in 1853, "being those of a dream, should be as fleeting"; and further:

They never appear so charming as when dashing on after a locomotive at forty miles an hour. Nothing by the way requires study, or demands meditation, and though objects immediately at hand seem tearing wildly by, yet the distant fields and scattered trees, are not so bent on eluding observation, but dwell long enough in the eye to leave their undying impression. Every thing is so quiet, so fresh, so full of home, and destitute of prominent objects to detain the eye, or distract the attention from the charming whole, that I love to dream through these placid beauties whilst sailing in the air, quick, as if astride a tornado.\(^{22}\)

To Benjamin Gastineau, whose newspaper essays on travel were collected in 1861 in book form as *La Vie en chemin de fer*, the motion of the train through the landscape appears as the motion of the landscape itself. The railroad choreographs the landscape. The motion of the train shrinks space, and thus displays in immediate succession objects and pieces of scenery that in their original spatiality belonged to separate realms. The traveler, gazing through the compartment window at such successive scenes, has acquired a novel ability that Gastineau calls "la philosophie synthétique du coup d'œil" (the synthetic philosophy of the glance). It is the ability to perceive the discrete, as it rolls past the window, indiscriminately. The scenery that the railroad presents in rapid motion appears in Gastineau's text as a *panorama*, without being explicitly referred to as such: "Devouring distance at the rate of fifteen leagues an hour, the steam engine, that powerful stage manager, throws the switches, changes the decor, and shifts the point of view every moment; in quick succession it presents the astonished traveler with happy scenes, sad scenes, burlesque interludes, brilliant fireworks, all visions that disappear as soon as they are seen; it sets in motion nature clad in all its light and dark costumes, showing us skeletons and lovers, clouds and rays of light, happy vistas and somber views, nuptials, baptisms, and cemeteries."\(^{23}\)

In another, roughly contemporary, French text we find all three essential characteristics of the *panorama* described. Jules Clarétie, a Parisian journalist and publicist, characterizes the view from the train window as an evanescent landscape whose rapid motion makes it possible to grasp the whole, to get an *overview*; defining the process, he makes specific use of the concept of *panorama*: "In a few hours, it [the railway] shows you all of France, and before your eyes it unrolls its infinite *panorama*, a vast succession of charming tableaux, of novel surprises. Of a landscape it shows you only the great outlines, being an artist versed in the ways of the masters. Don't ask it for details, but for the living whole. Then, after having charmed you thus with its painterly skills, it suddenly stops and quite simply lets you get off where you wanted to go."\(^{24}\)

What, exactly, does this new perception that we are referring to as "panoramic" consist of? Dolf Sternberger uses this concept of the *panorama* and the panoramic to describe European modes of perception in the

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The Railroad Journey as Panorama.

For the opening of the Paris-Orléans Line in 1843, the landscape along the journey was reproduced on three large sheets, in a sequence of pictures entitled "Vues panoramiques du chemin de fer de Paris à Orléans." (The first of these is reproduced here). In contrast to the usual representations of railroad scenes, the tracks themselves are not depicted in this picture. Obviously, this was an attempt to illustrate the view from a compartment window.

Columbia University, Parsons Collection.

nineteenth century — the tendency to see the discrete indiscriminately. "The views from the windows of Europe," Sternberger says, "have entirely lost their dimension of depth and have become mere particles of one and the same panoramic world that stretches all around and is, at each and every point, merely a painted surface." In Sternberger's view, modern transportation, the railroad first and foremost, is the main cause for such panoramization of the world: "The railroad transformed the world of lands and seas into a panorama that could be experienced. Not only did it join previously distant localities by eliminating all resistance, difference, and adventure from the journey: now that traveling had become so comfortable and common, it turned the travelers' eyes outward and offered them the opulent nourishment of ever changing images that were the only possible thing that could be experienced during the journey."26

What the opening of major railroads provides in reality — the easy accessibility of distant places — was attempted in illusion, in the decades immediately preceding that opening, by the "panoramic" and "dioramic" shows and gadgets. These were designed to provide, by showing views of faraway landscapes, cities,
and exotic scenes, "a substitute for those still expensive and onerous journeys." A newspaper of the year 1843 describes the Parisian public "reclining on well-upholstered seats and letting the five continents roll by at its pleasure without having to leave the city and without having to risk bad weather, thirst, hunger, cold, heat, or any danger whatsoever." That the diorama fad dies out in Paris around 1840, more or less at the same time that the first great railways are opened (lines from Paris to Orléans and Rouen appearing in 1843) would seem corroborative evidence for the presumed connection. The simultaneous rise of photography provides more support for the thesis. According to Buddemeier, the public became fascinated, at first,

Not by the taking of a picture of any specific object, but by the way in which any random object could be made to appear on the photographic plate. This was something of such unheard-of novelty that the photographer was delighted by each and every shot he took, and it awakened unknown and overwhelming emotions in him, as Gaudin points out... Indeed, the question arises: why did the exact repetition of reality excite people more than the reality itself? Gaudin hints at an answer: he describes how intensely the first photographs were scrutinized, and what people were mostly looking for. For instance: looking at a picture of the building across the street from one's own window, one first started counting the roof shingles and the bricks out of which the chimney was constructed. It was a delight to be able to observe how the mason had applied the mortar between the individual stones. Similar instances occur in other texts dealing with photographs. Tiny, until then unnoticed details are stressed continuously: paving stones, scattered leaves, the shape of a branch, the traces of rain on the wall.

Thus the intensive experience of the sensuous world, terminated by the industrial revolution, undergoes a resurrection in the new institution of photography. Since immediacy, close-ups, and foreground have been lost in reality, they appear particularly attractive in the new medium.

Sternberger observes that the vistas seen from Europe's windows had lost their dimension of depth; this happened first with the vistas seen from the train compartment window. There the depth perception of preindustrial consciousness is literally lost: velocity blurs all foreground objects, which means that there no longer is a foreground—exactly the range in which most of the experience of preindustrial travel was located. The foreground enabled the traveler to relate to the landscape through which he was moving. He saw himself as part of the foreground, and that perception joined him to the landscape, included him in it, regardless of all further distant views that the landscape presented. Now velocity dissolves the foreground, and the traveler loses that aspect. He is removed from that "total space" which combines proximity and distance: he becomes separated from the landscape he sees by what Richard Lucae, speaking of ferrovitreous architecture, has called an "almost immaterial barrier." The glass separates the interior space of the Crystal Palace from the natural space outside without actually changing the atmospheric quality of the latter in any visible manner, just as the train's speed separates the traveler from
the space that he had previously been a part of. As the traveler steps out of that
space, it becomes a stage setting, or a series of such pictures or scenes created by
the continuously changing perspective. Panoramic perception, in contrast to
traditional perception, no longer belongs to the same space as the perceived
objects: the traveler sees the objects, landscapes, etc. through the apparatus
which moves him through the world. That machine and the motion it creates
become integrated into his visual perception: thus he can only see things in
motion. That mobility of vision — for a traditionally oriented sensorium, such
as Ruskin’s, an agent for the dissolution of reality — becomes a prerequisite for
the “normality” of panoramic vision. This vision no longer experiences eva-
scence: evanescent reality has become the new reality.

While the railroad causes the foreground to disappear, it also replaces
looking at the landscape with a new practice that did not exist previously.
Reading while traveling becomes almost obligatory. The dissolution of reality
and its resurrection as panorama thus became agents for the total emancipation
from the traversed landscape: the traveler’s gaze can now move into an imagi-
nary surrogate landscape, that of his book. By the mid-nineteenth century,
reading while traveling has become an established custom. The following ob-
servation is found in the minutes of an 1860 congress of French physicians:
“Practically everybody passes the time reading while traveling on the train. This
is so common that one rarely sees members of a certain social class embark on a
journey without first purchasing the means by which they can enjoy this
pastime.”

The idea of reading while traveling on trains is as old as the railroad itself.
An article in the Quarterly Review of 1830 notes that the journey is “so easy, that
a passenger might read a newspaper with perfect comfort.” A German text of
1833 makes a connection between the dissolution of the outer world by means
of velocity, and the opportunity to compensate for this by developing an activity
within the train compartment that will engage one’s attention. Lips speaks of “a
speed at which the objects outside rush past the eye without color or contour,
and thus cannot be recognized anymore,” and continues: “And yet, the motion
of such a steam-car is so imperceptible, smooth, and comfortable, that it is not
only possible to read but even to write in it with the greatest ease; thus, a great
number of people, such as scholars, officials, merchants, etc., need no longer
rest or interrupt their regular routine while traveling, but can pursue it while
sitting in the steam-car.” (Italics in original.)

In the late 1840s, English booksellers establish stalls in railway stations, as
well as a peculiar kind of lending library, to meet the general demand for things
to read while traveling. John W. Dodds describes this development:

The development of railways encouraged the sale of books of all kinds.
Until 1848 no systematic attempt had been made to supply passengers
with either books or papers at the railway stations. In that year W.H. Smith
got the exclusive right to sell books and papers on the Birmingham Rail-
way. His first bookstall was at Euston Station. Shortly he had the franchise
for the entire London and Northwestern System. By 1849, the station
library at Paddington terminus contained one thousand volumes, chiefly
works of fiction. Here, for the charge of one penny, a passenger had free
access to the use of the library while waiting for trains, and for slightly more could take a volume with him on his journey, turning it in at his destination. To meet this new demand Routledge launched his *Railway Library* — novels by Cooper, James, Hawthorne, James Grant, Dumas, and others. Murray advertised his “Literature for the Rail” — “works of sound information and innocent amusement.”

In 1852 Louis Hachette emulates the English model in France: in a communication to the French railroad companies he proposes a “large-scale operation of bookselling that apart from its advantages for the companies would also be both useful and pleasing to the public.” The monotony and boredom of travel by rail, mentioned in so many contemporary descriptions, reappears here as a commercial argument for the establishment of railroad bookstalls:

The traveler finds himself condemned to idleness as soon as he enters the carriage. The monotony of the trip soon takes effect: boredom arrives, and, what is worse, impatience engulfs the unfortunate traveler, pulled along by the machine like a piece of baggage. . . . L. Hachette and Company have come up with an idea for turning the enforced leisure and the boredom of a long trip to the enjoyment and instruction of all. They have
thought of establishing a railway library that will provide only interesting volumes in a handy format and at a moderate price.\textsuperscript{31}

Only two years after the opening of the first railway bookstall in France, of whose income the rail companies receive thirty percent, Hachette operates sixty branches in the whole of France. In 1864, the income exceeds for the first time one million francs, while the sale of books is still greater than that of newspapers. A little later that ratio is reversed: in 1866 the income from the sale of newspapers is 969,000 francs, that from the sale of books, 527,000 francs.\textsuperscript{32}

A glance at the offerings of the English and French railway bookstalls shows that the reading public is almost exclusively bourgeois. An English survey of 1851 shows that, in contrast to the supply of trashy mass literature in the regular bookstores, the railway bookstalls and lending libraries in London carry highly respectable nonfiction, fiction, travel guides, etc.\textsuperscript{33} Hachette's catalogue has the following categories: travel guides, books about travel, French literature, classics, agriculture and industry, children's books.\textsuperscript{34}

Reading while traveling is an exclusively bourgeois occupation. The lower classes who use the railroad do not read not only because they cannot afford to, but also because they have no desire to do so. Their traveling situation is quite different from that of the more privileged strata. The carriages of the third and fourth class are not divided into compartments: they have no formal resemblance to the traditional means of travel, while the compartments of the
first and second class do. The lower classes, who really join the ranks of travelers only after the advent of the railroad, are unencumbered by memories of previous forms of travel; thus the new forms are not as strange to them as they are to those classes that have to abandon their private coaches for the train. The primitive, spacious third- and fourth-class carriages into which the proletarian traveling public is crowded characteristically promote continuous communication: in the compartments of the bourgeois first- and second-class carriages, such communication has died out, at least by the end of the nineteenth century.

“How often ... I have ... , while traveling alone or with people with whom it was impossible to start a conversation, envied the travelers of the third and fourth class, from whose heavily populated carriages merry conversation and laughter rang all the way into the boredom of my isolation cell,” says P.D. Fischer, in his *Betrachtungen eines in Deutschland reisenden Deutschen* (Observations of a German traveling in Germany), published in 1895.35

The emergence of reading while traveling is not only a result of the dissolution and panoramicization of the outside landscape due to velocity, but also a result of the situation inside the train compartment. The railroad disrupts the travelers' relationships to each other as it disrupts their relationship to the
traversed landscape. Constantin Pecqueur explains the phenomenon of dissolution, dispersal, and trivialization of perception and communication, by the greatest number of objects and persons with which the travelers' powers of attention (which have remained constant) now have to deal: "In these great halls, and in the cheerful caravans of the trains and steamships, one's affections tend to go out to a greater number of objects and individuals, and consequently become less intense or durable in each case. This encourages inconstancy and creates excitement over variety; life and affections are seen to lose in depth what they gain in range; the social and general sentiments, on the other hand, find this to be a most pleasing state; while the private sentiments, the familial ones, would seem to suffer from it."  

Travelers of the eighteenth century, prior to the railroads, formed small groups that, for the duration of the journey, were characterized by intensive conversation and interaction: the travel novels of the period testify to this quite eloquently. The travelers in the train compartment do not know what to do with each other, and reading becomes a surrogate for the communication that no longer takes place. This connection between reading and the alienation of railroad travelers from one another is made by all authors dealing with the subject of travel reading. It appears in the following contribution to the medical congress of 1866, in which travel reading is cited as the general and sole activity of travelers:

Nowadays one travels so fast and sees, if the journey is of any duration, such a succession of new faces, that one frequently arrives at the destination without having said a single word. Conversation no longer takes place except among people who know each other, at least not beyond the exchange of mere generalities; any attempt to go beyond these often lapses due to the indifference of some travelers. Thus one might say that the railroads have in this respect, too, completely changed our habits. Whenever, in the past, one knew that one was going to pass several hours, sometimes several days, in the company of others, one tried to establish a rapport with one's companions that often lasted beyond the duration of the journey. Today we no longer think about anything but the impatiently awaited and soon reached destination. The traveler one takes one's leave from may get off at the next station where he will be replaced by another. Thus reading becomes a necessity.

The effects of reading while traveling are generally discussed in medical circles in the 1860s. The debate as to whether it is harmful or beneficial relates the practice to the special stresses put on the optical sense by rail travel, and to visual perception in general. According to one side of the argument, reading while traveling is harmful to the eye because "when the traveller sets himself to read, he imposes yet further labour on the eye in tracing the shifting characters of his book or newspaper, and also on the brain." The traveler who concentrates on his reading behaves in just as old-fashioned a manner as the traveler who, accustomed to the pace of the stagecoach, attempts to fix his stare on the objects flitting past the compartment window. In both cases, the result is exhaustion of the senses and of the mind. To adapt to the conditions of rail
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travel, a process of deconcentration, or dispersal of attention, takes place in reading as well as in the traveler’s perception of the landscape outside: Hachette’s rising sales of newspapers and falling sales of books attest to that. The afore-mentioned contribution to the medical congress of 1866 states that travel reading may have deleterious effects on eyesight, but adds that it would be impossible to curtail it: “Nevertheless, no matter what one says or does, reading will remain the most natural occupation of railway travelers, in this new form of locomotion that has so profoundly altered the travelers’ relations to each other.”38