The Best of Time, The Worst of Time: Temporal Consciousness in Dickens

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‘It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.’

*(David Copperfield, p. 1)*

‘Mr Shandy’s Clock was nothing to mine – wind, wind, wind, always winding am I...’

*(Dickens to Walter Savage Landor, 26 July 1840)*

I

In September 1834, the *Morning Chronicle* sent its cub reporter Charles Dickens to Edinburgh to help cover a dinner in honour of ex-Prime Minister Earl Grey. ‘It had been announced that the dinner would take place at five o’clock precisely;’ Dickens reports, ‘but Earl Grey, and the other principal visitors, as might have been expected, did not arrive until shortly after six.’ *As might have been expected*: Dickens’s studied irony shows just how alert he already is to the unwritten social rules of time. He cannot resist narrating an amusing consequence of the guest of honour’s fashionable lateness:

A gentleman who, we presume, had entered with one of the first sections, having sat with exemplary patience for some time in the immediate vicinity of cold fowls, roast beef, lobsters, and other tempting delicacies (for the dinner was a cold one), appeared to think that the best thing he could possibly do, would be to eat his dinner, while there was anything to eat. He accordingly laid about him with right
good-will; the example was contagious, and the clatter of knives and forks became general ... this is, perhaps, one of the few instances on record of a dinner having been virtually concluded before it began.³

By watching the clock, and studying people's responses to it, Dickens has just made his first major journalistic assignment memorable – and Dickensian.

Nearly a year before this, he managed to get his first piece of fiction into print. 'A Dinner at Poplar Walk' tells another comico-cautionary tale of the perils attendant upon unpunctuality. Augustus Minns is invited to dinner by a loathed cousin, who makes a simple request: 'Be punctual.' Minns sets out from his home in good bourgeois time but the exasperating refusal of a coach driver to get moving for some twenty-five minutes delays his arrival. After a wretched dinner, the opportunity for a getaway presents itself in the form of the nine o'clock stagecoach. Minns however wastes precious minutes looking around for his umbrella and so misses the coach – the last of the night. Loss of minutes means loss of hours: 'It was somewhere about three o'clock in the morning when Mr Augustus Minns knocked feebly at the street door of his lodgings in Tavistock Street, cold, wet, cross, and miserable.'⁴ This tale will reappear in Sketches by Boz under the title 'Mr Minns and his Cousin'. It is far from the only tale of temporal excruciation in that collection. Percy Noakes in 'The Steam Excursion', has 'confused dreams' of 'steamers starting off, and gigantic clocks with the hands pointing to a quarter-past nine'.⁵ His horological anxiety dream is shared by the traveller in 'Early Coaches', who 'start[s] up suddenly from a terrific dream of a large church clock with the small hand running round, with astonishing rapidity, to every figure on the dial plate'.⁶ Clock time in these and other Boz pieces is like an atmospheric pressure in people’s heads.

The young Dickens is not just channelling early Victorian London’s intensifying chronomania here. Thanks to what his daughter Mamie will call 'the irregular, unmethodical life of the reporter',⁷ he himself is in a constant race against time – and The Times. A November 1835 expedition to Bristol to cover a speech by Lord John Russell occasions a frenetic dispatch to his sub-editor:

In conjunction with The Herald we have arranged for a Horse Express from Marlborough to London on Tuesday night, to go