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Illustrating the Accident: Railways and the Catastrophic Picturesque in The Illustrated London News

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In his frontispiece to *The History and Description of the Great Western Railway* (1846), John Cooke Bourne depicts a steam railway engine emerging from the well-sculpted mouth of a tunnel (figure 1). Intentionally left unfinished and ornamented with planted ivy, this tunnel had been styled as a gothic gateway by the hero-engineer of the Great Western, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The ivy made the structure look aged and integrated with its green surroundings. Bourne tried for similar effects in his lithographs, blending the marvel of industrial engineering with the charm of natural disarray. His frontispiece—with its contrasts of light and dark, its chiseled stonework and weathered mountain blocks, and its central cloud of the engine’s steam—is a classic example of the “industrial picturesque.” Beginning in the late eighteenth century, artists adapted the picturesque to represent industrial sites, including collieries, factories, and railways. As an aesthetic category, the picturesque emphasized landscape irregularities, which, in the hands of artists like Bourne, could be made to accommodate industrial forms newly present on the landscape as well as in Britain’s social consciousness. Art historians and cultural critics have shown how the industrial picturesque reimagines the political, material, and ideological disruptions of industry in terms of pictorial harmony. As a contemporary review noted, Bourne’s prints aim to “gratify both the lover of the picturesque and the man of science: the former, by variety of lines and combinations; and the latter, by different modes of application of machinery, mechanism, and manual labor.” These images harmoniously integrated the railway into its natural surroundings to convey the tranquility of the picturesque.

Bourne’s work was commissioned by the Great Western as part of a campaign to assuage public anxiety about the early railway and to directly
counter representations of the railway’s dangers in the press. According to F. D. Klingender, the press featured a “flow of caricatures . . . designed deliberately to shake confidence by introducing the public to a feast of explosions and sudden death.” Picturesque railway prints, often commissioned during the construction of new lines and available for sale soon afterwards, focused on the railway’s most placid moments and idealized visual features. It is ironic, then, that the picturesque would also eventually be used in press coverage of the railway’s most sensational disasters, portraying the very dangers that railway companies hoped to downplay. A wood engraving for the *Illustrated London News* report “Damage to the South Devon Railway, Near Dawlish” (1855) draws its pictorial elements directly from the tradition of the industrial picturesque (figure 2). It is one

Figure 1. J. C. Bourne, frontispiece to *The History and Description of the Great Western Railway* (London: David Bogue, 1846).
of many such images published in the Victorian illustrated newspapers that developed alongside the railway and capitalized on its spectacular disasters. The stylistic coincidences are uncanny, revealing how the *Illustrated London News* redeployed the pictorial conventions of eighteenth-century aesthetics to illustrate accident reportage.

This essay argues that the aesthetic category of the industrial picturesque was paradoxically reinvigorated in depictions of industrial catastrophe, especially those circulated by illustrated newspapers. The picturesque aesthetic provides one of the more curious linkages between the railway and popular illustrated journalism. It proves particularly useful for studying the material production and the developing ideological concerns of the *Illustrated London News*. Between 1850 and 1890, the *Illustrated London News* published numerous illustrations of railway accidents in this style that disclosed the newspaper’s complex attitudes towards industrial modernity and its unique uses of the wood-engraved medium. These illustrations do not simply rehearse the industrial picturesque; they create a different category, a hybrid of picturesque repose and industrial rupture that I call the “catastrophic picturesque.” The catastrophic picturesque shows the *Illustrated London News* engaged in covering up the disturbances of
industrial modernity with an aesthetic that paradoxically reopens them to view. Recent scholars, including Lynda Nead, Peter Sinnema, and Paul Dobraszczyk, have identified how Victorians represented industrial modernity by using inherited aesthetic strategies in depictions of accidents in the illustrated press. I want to emphasize the ways in which the catastrophic picturesque enabled artists and engravers to depict broader uncertainties and violent disruptions associated with railway construction and travel. Doing so positions the catastrophic picturesque as an important turn in the aesthetic strategies of Victorians coming to terms with modernity. Furthermore, if the Victorian railway was a significant "aesthetic problem," as critics have claimed, such a problem was solved by capturing the railway's manifold uncertainties in moments of picturesque catastrophe.

The images considered within this essay are not simply the dark side of the industrial picturesque but rather its uncanny after-image made uniquely possible by railway accidents and the reprographic techniques of Victorian illustrated mass journalism. I argue that the catastrophic picturesque offers a critical framework for understanding the form and development of illustrated news media, as exemplified by the Illustrated London News. From its outset, the Illustrated London News celebrated the representational power of its own images and by extension, the uniqueness of its own hybrid journalistic form. Alan Liu has described the picturesque as a "highly specialized experience of form... It made the very idea of form, or 'picturicity,' cognate with experience." The picturesque let the Illustrated London News reinforce its own claims of experiential picturicity, offering its wood-engraved illustrations and newspaper form not only as innovative journalism but also as a supplement for embodied experience. As Liu also suggests, the picturesque invites a formal self-consciousness, which in the Illustrated London News closely follows its shifts in reprographic media from wood engraving to photo-process blocks by the century's end. Thus, this essay charts Victorian mutations of the picturesque and proposes its material dependence upon the reprographic technologies that periodicals like the Illustrated London News were instrumental in developing.

The Picturesque Careers to Catastrophe

Whether as a category for analysis or as a historical phenomenon, the picturesque can be unstable and difficult to define. As Stephen Copley and Richard Garside explain, in its long-eighteenth-century heyday, the term was used in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, frequently overlapping with related theories of the “sublime” and “beautiful,” and active in a variety of contexts, including tourism, picture-making, landscape design, and literary representation. Ironically, inconsistencies are the picturesque’s major constant. As Nead describes it, the “picturesque is found
in contrast rather than in unity, in irregularity rather than in continuity, and in the fragment rather than in the whole.” Its most prominent theorists, including William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight, all recommended the picturesque for incorporating “irregularity, variation, decay and wildness” as sources of aesthetic pleasure. While acknowledging the historical complexity and discursive sprawl of the picturesque, I will draw from this tradition the notion of converting irregularity into its own kind of aesthetic order. This capacity to harmonize apparent discord strongly informs the nineteenth-century legacies of the picturesque in its industrial and catastrophic forms.

The industrial picturesque used aesthetic harmony to redress the social and political disruptions of its depicted subjects. As Klingender points out, it allowed artists and viewers “to escape the more baleful aspects of industry” by removing workers from depictions and imaging factories within pastoral or evocative landscapes productive of beauty or awe instead of material goods, contested labor conditions, and margins of capital. By the late eighteenth century, theories of the picturesque and aesthetic tourists’ itineraries had already assimilated mines, steam collieries, and steam-powered factories in England. Decades later, railway companies harnessed the industrial picturesque to do similar ideological work. In fact, railways might have revitalized a tradition of the industrial picturesque when, according to Esther Moir, urbanization and the worsening conditions of the working class made industrial sites less pleasant to view—and hence more politically charged. Railway companies employed artists and engravers to create polite prints emphasizing the “grace and order of the railway in the landscape.” Bourne’s prints stand out among the most refined productions of picturesque railway art, a pictorial and printmaking tradition that has been well documented by F. D. Klingender, Gareth Rees, and others.

While the industrial picturesque was frequently used to assuage concerns about technological danger or political-economic disruption, it was also used to depict industrial accidents. Accidents, in a more philosophical sense, had always featured in the perception and composition of picturesque subjects. For eighteenth-century artists and landscape designers, the accidental referred to the seemingly unplanned development of a scene, its evolution or gradual degradation by all the chance circumstances of its environs, resulting in a serendipitous arrangement that suited the appreciative eye. As Richard Payne Knight explained in 1795, “Picturesque effects can only be obtained by watching accidents, and profiting by circumstances, during a long period of time.” The goal of the picturesque designer should be to accentuate the “accidental character” of a landscape or scene and “to preserve the appearance of neglect and accident,” which, as Knight points out, was actually hard aesthetic work. Malcolm Andrews
describes this attitude as the “picturesque love of the agency of accident, of letting nature take its course.” However, as we shall see, “watching accidents” and studying their deformative power were also responses to scenes of industrial catastrophe wherein steam-powered agents went radically off course.

Even in its more traditional guise, the picturesque was already characterized by destructive interests and perhaps even an impulse to destroy. Consider the acts of demolition implied in William Gilpin’s commentary on how to make elegant architecture into something picturesque: “We must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps.” While Gilpin wanted to promote natural irregularity over neoclassical and Palladian control, his verbs reveal the picturesque artist as a violent and potentially sadistic agent, beating down, defacing, and throwing around the mutilated remains of objects. Gilpin had little interest in industry as an aesthetic subject unless it showed weathering or deformities. But industrial sites increasingly offered the potential for producing just such effects. They functioned as self-deforming landscapes or as ruins instantly sculpted by catastrophe—odious to some, fascinating to others. Industrial catastrophe invited a similar kind of contemplation to what Gilpin (and others) praised in the picturesque. For Gilpin, the picturesque evokes a satisfying historical awe about degeneration over time. The representative classical ruins depicted in an 1842 edition of *Sir Uvedale Price on the Picturesque* reveal a structure whose deformities testify to the accidents and contingencies of its long endurance (figure 3). In industrial accidents, such weathering or deforming happens more suddenly. The notion of gradual decay contracts into the catastrophic moment of now. The pleasure of contemplating the *longue durée* shifts to apprehension about whatever accidental processes are shaping or distorting the present.

Several scholars have demonstrated how the Victorian appropriation of the picturesque focuses attention on the historical present and the deformative agencies that were shaping, for better and worse, new urban-industrial landscapes. These scholars have demonstrated how Victorian artists and engravers repurposed eighteenth-century aesthetics as a strategy for organizing their own chaotic, inchoate modernity and attempting to contain its social consequences. For example, Michael Wolff and Celina Fox argue that depictions of the metropolis in the *Illustrated London News* drew from picturesque traditions of topographical prints, amounting to a “rearguard action . . . against any too meaningful acknowledgement of the social and cultural problems brought about by urbanization.” In his study of depictions of railway accidents, Sinnema claims that during its first decade, the *Illustrated London News* used the “popular aesthetics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ‘industrial’ art” to diminish anxiety about railway dangers in its readers. Because a publication like the *Illus-
trated London News was simultaneously dependent on disaster news and complicit in the industrial modernity and networked communication that accidents so profoundly disrupted, it used such pictorial conventions to manage its own ideological contradictions, to find “an imaginative resolution of real anxieties.”

Other critics, including Nead and Dobraszczyk, have challenged the view that these aesthetic strategies are always repressive. In Nead’s study of representations of Victorian London, she argues that “while the picturesque still struggled to contain the full implications of change, it also kept drawing attention to the very processes producing it.” Dobraszczyk elaborates upon Nead’s argument in his review of the Illustrated London News’s engravings of the building of London’s metropolitan sewer. Dobraszczyk prefers the “industrial sublime” to the picturesque, but his claim is similarly persuasive, arguing that it offered an “effective aesthetic tool for celebrating the project, [and] it also provided a vehicle for the more disturbing experience of the destructive nature of the construction process itself.” These critics demonstrate how such aesthetic strategies ironically reveal the material and social disruptions they were originally used to suppress.

I want to build on the insights of these scholars but also to promote the picturesque as the dominant form of representing industrial modernity. In the depiction of railway accidents, the picturesque mutates into a unique

Figure 3. Illustration from Uvedale Price, *On the Picturesque* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh, Caldwell, Lloyd, 1842), 147.
and previously undefined form that is inseparable from the reprographic media that periodicals like the *Illustrated London News* employed. The “catastrophic picturesque” extends the cultural dynamics these scholars have identified and also focuses on the changing production contexts of a new illustrated mass media. Sinnema has suggested that the *Illustrated London News* lacked an “imagistic vernacular” in illustrating railway accidents; however, I would argue that the catastrophic picturesque is this vernacular, structuring a significant number of reports on accidents in the *Illustrated London News* between 1850 and 1890.

Industrial accidents were standard fare in the press, which had a seemingly endless appetite for disaster news. The Victorian railway booster F. S. Williams bemoaned that railway accidents received special attention: “The newspapers do not write on the subject in connection with the various industries carried on in this country, whereas concerning every railway accident they supply the amplest information.” As the engineer L. T. C. Rolt complained, “A railway accident is always news.” Williams and Rolt both accuse the press of over-reporting the dangers of railways relative to their statistical risks or compared to accident news of any other kind. Rolt reasons that railway accidents offer a special “contrast between trivial error and terrible consequence” that appeals to a sensationalist press. While Rolt is discussing reports of railway accidents in general, he unwittingly reveals why accident illustrations often resorted to the picturesque. In identifying the special appeal of railway accidents, Rolt underscores the governing dynamic that aesthetic theorists had highlighted within the picturesque: how the trivial produces the consequential, how the error or accident generates fascinating change. Just as Knight had recommended “watching accidents” to learn about the picturesque, the illustrated press used the picturesque to encourage spectatorship of railway accidents, not necessarily to make them visually appealing but to formalize their tragic contingencies.

The picturesque was well equipped to answer the unique representational challenges of the railway, whether in the picturesque repose of railway prints or the catastrophic rupture of illustrated news images. According to Matthew Beaumont, the railway presented Victorians with an especially difficult aesthetic problem. Beaumont argues that the railway resists realism and manifests instead as “phantasmagoria,” including radical visual disturbance, proto-cinematic narrative, and dream-like disorientation. However, as Margaret Oliphant suggests in a description of a chaotic railway junction in *The House on the Moor* (1861), phantasmagoria was a characteristic of the railway: “The roar and rustle with which some one-eyed monster, heard long before seen, came plunging and snorting out of the darkness, and all the rapid, shifting, phantasmagoria, of that new fashion of the picturesque which belongs to modern times.” To
rephrase Oliphant, a “new fashion” of the picturesque emerges to stabilize the “roar and rustle” of the railway’s vertiginous sensory assault. As I will show in depictions of railway accidents in the *Illustrated London News*, this new fashion is the catastrophic picturesque. It is not an antidote for fears of roaring railway monstrosity but rather a deformation of those picturesque conventions in order to depict the railway’s perceptual and cultural distortions.

The following analysis applies these insights on the historical and critical development of the catastrophic picturesque to specific examples. The series of images to follow, all from the *Illustrated London News* after mid-century, reveal the mutation of the industrial picturesque into catastrophic forms and suggest how it responds to the challenges of representing the Victorian railway. These images help us understand the proliferation of journalistic accident reports as more than popular critiques of the railway or sensational attempts to sell copies of newspapers. While they might assuage anxieties about railway dangers or deflect the force of critique, these images also use the picturesque to insist on watching accidents very closely. Born from an interest in the accidental, the picturesque asked its viewers to contemplate the contingent and destructive processes that shaped the urban-industrial landscape. In so doing, picturesque illustrations reveal the irony of how the *Illustrated London News* resolves the disturbances of industrial modernity with an aesthetic that actually demands their scrutiny. They offer a kind of forensic picturicity, a version of what Liu calls the “arrested violence” of the picturesque. Picturesque illustrations of catastrophe capture the railway at moments of fascinating arrest, calling our attention to the agency of accident in its transformation of landscape, human perception, and Victorian visual media.

**Illustrating the Accident in the *Illustrated London News***

In 1869, the *Illustrated London News* published a report on “The Disaster on the Great Indian Peninsula Railway” with an accompanying illustration titled “Scene of the Accident.” Below the image of the accident scene appears another illustration of the same railway but depicting “The Reversing Station” situated amid striking hills and landscape cuttings. In the center of the picture, two miniscule figures stand atop a rock surveying the majestic scene (figure 4). The single page demonstrates the paradoxical usage of the picturesque. The image at the bottom illustrates the industrial picturesque of scenic railway prints, and the image at the top shows its catastrophic reversal. The irregularities of the mountainous landscape around the reversing station are echoed in the profile of the train wreckage above. In each scene, tiny figures wander the hills, taking in prospects of a landscape recomposed by the railway. In both images, landscapes are
Figure 4. “The Disaster on the Great Indian Peninsula Railway,” *Illustrated London News*, March 6, 1869, 238.
structured by accidents: one references the architectural weathering of the
traditional picturesque, the other, the aftermath of the sudden technolog-
cal catastrophe. Their juxtaposition on the page suggests the disrupted
sense of time associated with railways, moving from the *longue durée* of
the pre-technologized landscape to the “annihilation of space and time”
that seemed to characterize the railway age itself.34

Though the correspondences between the two scenes are inexact, they
suggest how the picturesque can accommodate the railway in tranquil
repose as well as violent rupture, how it can invoke timeless beauty as
well as highlight a topical news event. The catastrophic picturesque allows
the *Illustrated London News* to manage its own timeliness, claiming to
offer the “very form and presence of events as they transpire” while issu-
ing a weekly newspaper with wood-engraved illustrations whose own pro-
duction took time, moving from sketch to engraving to published image
through a variety of hands.35 Other images of railway disasters in the *Illus-
trated London News* adapt the picturesque to serve a variety of functions,
including promoting the newspaper’s advanced use of illustration technol-
ogies and artistry and answering viewers’ apprehensions about the railway
more generally. If Bourne used the industrial picturesque to stabilize the
early railway’s strangeness, these images use the catastrophic picturesque
to interrogate the inscrutable forces and manifold instabilities of the nine-
teenth-century railway at its apex.

Conservative critiques of the expanding railway blasted its violation
of the English landscape, but these images make the railway’s most vio-
 lent interruptions ironically congruent with the pastoral. In “The Railway
Accident near Newark” (1870), the harried human rescuers near the burn-
ing wreckage are offset by elements such as the dilapidated country cot-
tage, the rustic windmill in shadow on the horizon, and the viaduct lost
in the smoke (figure 5). The cottage shows the gradual effects of decay,
marked by its weathered rooftop and the wooden beams resting against or
perhaps propping up its wall. Nearby, the railway’s wrecked carriages are
likewise scarred and strewn with beams broken from the radical degrada-
tion of its structure. Images like “The Railway Accident at Arlesey” (1877)
demonstrate the visual similarities between smoke from wreckage and the
dramatic clouds typical of picturesque vistas (figure 6). They erase the
boundaries between the accident’s effusions and the sky above; the placid
rural landscape and mechanical catastrophe work together to create a har-
monious scene depicted in a uniform style of illustration. At the same time,
the image updates the idea of picturesque weathering, transforming it into
a modern nightmare. Whereas Gilpin and Knight wanted to hide the labor
necessary to create a picturesque scene, as if letting nature take its course,
these illustrations of accidents expose this aesthetic fantasy. Something
unnatural has clearly taken place. Yet these illustrations also exploit the
Figure 5. “The Railway Accident near Newark,” *Illustrated London News*, July 2, 1870, 18–19.

spontaneous and artistic disorder of the picturesque, which compensates for any accident’s immediate lack of apparent cause. Since news reports such as those in the *Illustrated London News* often preceded railway accident investigations, the cause of the accidents was often initially unknown. Just as picturesque artists strove to “preserve the appearance of neglect and accident” in their scenes, these illustrations attempted to stabilize engineering failures, human neglect, or unlucky accidents within an aesthetic that converted them to visual order. These images simultaneously invited the viewer to contemplate what might have caused the disaster, while allowing the composed scene, like other varieties of the picturesque, to exist merely by accident, having no apparent cause at all.

Illustrations of railway accidents in the *Illustrated London News* also foreground the surprising and often horrifying interactions among the components of what Wolfgang Schivelbusch has called the “machine ensemble”: a hybrid of human, machine, and tracked landscape which may no longer be separable except by violence. Jamie Bronstein has suggested that contemporary reports about industrial accidents “reflected surprise about the very variety of ways in which . . . bodies could interact with machines.” Illustrations of accidents do a similar kind of work, using the “arrested violence” of the picturesque to dissect the machine ensemble’s hybrid elements. The railway’s interactions with the landscape have a similar focus. Michael Freeman reminds us that for early observers, the stark, expansive linearity of railway tracks was a profoundly strange and disorienting experience. Such uncompromising linearity could be improved through picturesque deformation, thus following Gilpin’s suggestion to “throw the mutilated members around in heaps.” These images foreground heaps of deformity in machines, mutilated tracks, and even human bodies. They perversely answer one of the primary perceptual challenges of train travel. According to Schivelbusch, “velocity dissolved the foreground” of perception and separated observers from a landscape to which they previously would have felt joined. An accident radically arrests that velocity, and illustration puts the dissolved foreground back into visual focus. These images do not attempt to depict accidents in process or the phantasmagoric blur of rapid motion. However, if passengers can imagine themselves as part of this landscape, they also become brutalized or frenzied participants, reconstituted as victims or as a crowd of onlookers.

Picturesque railway prints frequently depicted locations representing the thresholds between built and natural environments, including bridges, viaducts, landscape cuttings, and tunnel mouths, as featured in Bourne’s frontispiece (figure 1). These sites expressed the peaceful integration of engineered and natural domains. In the catastrophic picturesque, these domains are co-present but unsettling. In “The Disaster at Bullhouse Bridge” (1884), the elongated perspective, the geometrical embankments,
and the telegraph wires paralleling the unseen tracks all starkly contrast with the jumble of the train wreckage and the flocking of the human crowd at a point of junction (figure 7). On a two-page spread, the panoramic scene of the aftermath is located below several other illustrations of the accident, each suggestive of a different interpretive approach. In one, a single victim is wheeled through an urban crowd to an infirmary. In another, a diagrammatic sketch of the crank axle and couplings offers an abstracted perspective of the accident’s source. An image of Bullhouse Hall echoes the peaceful prospect views of neighboring landmarks in railway prints—save for the panicked figures running to the scene. Yet another image gives the point of view from the nearby railway signal box, looking across the bridge and down to the wreck. But it is telling that this sanctioned spot for railway surveillance is not the perspective offered by the primary and much larger image directly below. Its perspective is instead determined by where best to watch the scene and more importantly, how to compose elements of the picture.

These images do not just depict wrecks; they actively wreck the scene by bringing its disparate elements into an encompassing view. If the machine ensemble represents the industrial fusion of previously distinct aspects of human experience, then the catastrophic picturesque deconstructs the scene and its primary agents. Engines are separated from smoke, the crowd from their carriages, and trailing carts from the horizontal tracks, which are often haphazardly twisted across the prevailing lines of embankments. Sinnema suggests that “Goods-Train on Fire Run into by an Express Mail-Train on the Caledonian Railway” (1867) is concerned less with an accident’s carnage and more with the “newly-wrought interruption” of landscape by train and track, which is the illustration’s real subject (figure 8). This image uncharacteristically represents the accident as it happens, claiming a perspectival immediacy, as if the Illustrated London News had a “special artist” on site. It seems to contradict the picturesque convention of reflection once damage (or weathering) has occurred. But we are not shown the actual inferno that lies around the bend, inferred from the billowing smoke ascending beyond the hillside. Instead of focusing on the actual collision, the image is preoccupied with the accidental composition of a landscape. It makes sense of violent industrial interruption by depicting it as a flowing stream meandering through the valley and captured at a moment of scenic arrest.

The extreme to which the Illustrated London News converts a railway disaster into an aesthetic encounter comes through in the report accompanying “Damage to the South Devon Railway, Near Dawlish” (figure 2). The image is similar to one of Montagu Stanley’s engravings in Sir Uvedale Price on the Picturesque, which features dark storm clouds engulfing a sea cliff ravaged by waves and a single ship dangerously caught at the thresh-

Figure 8. “Goods-Train on Fire Run into by an Express Mail-Train on the Caledonian Railway,” *Illustrated London News*, October 26, 1867, 462.
old of ocean and shore. In the illustration of the railway accident, the ocean surge breaks through the tracks, as if subordinating their linearity to the rough and imposing coastline, which is visually echoed by the blustery clouds overhead. The accompanying text explicitly links its visual appeal to catastrophic violence: “Owing to the violence of the sea . . . the waves [are] tearing up also a considerable portion of the embankment under the romantic cliffs, forming a sort of chasm, and destroying the line.” The scene of the “romantic cliffs” was already picturesque, but the new landscape of catastrophe and salvage actually accentuates its appeal. The article continues, “The scene, although a melancholy one, has a picturesque appearance, especially at night time, as many workmen are employed, and work by fire-light, while the raging sea is threatening them with destruction.” Echoing the industrial picturesque, this statement interprets the accident as a “scene,” sketching the workmen in imminent danger and the “melancholy” of catastrophe as affecting contrasts. Amazingly, the article even concludes with advice to future artists on how to improve it: “The cliffs at this part of the coast are highly picturesque, and the distant ones are visible for many miles; and with the addition of vessels, the prospect is, perhaps, not to be surpassed for pictorial effect. For the Sketch we are indebted to Mr. F. W. L. Stockdale.” The article closes with ruminations on how this catastrophic landscape could be improved (though the prospect already includes “vessels” as the stranded carriages on the shoreline). The article ends with the sketch artist’s name (as if signed by him). The description works with the image to draw attention to the illustration as art rather than just a news report.

With this article, the Illustrated London News encourages its readers to relate to the image as aesthetic critics. But while the text promotes aesthetic pleasure by distancing viewers from the catastrophe’s horrors, it nevertheless reminds them that dangers persist. The catastrophic picturesque invites and simultaneously undermines contemplative repose, creating an oscillation between enjoyment and fear that characterizes the Illustrated London News’s representations of industrial accidents in general. The most spectacular example is splashed across the front page of the Illustrated London News on January 10, 1880, one of several of its reports following the infamous Tay Bridge Disaster two weeks prior (figure 9). No one witnessed the collapse of the Tay Bridge; it plunged into the stormy firth during a December nighttime gale, taking with it an oncoming train. There were no survivors. The Illustrated London News’s full-size, front-page image locates the viewer behind a man peering precariously over the ripped edge of the tracks. He has moved forward on hands and knees, holding the remains of a nearby railing, apprehending the precipitous drop. Just months before, the view had similarly captivated Queen Victoria on her return trip from Balmoral (figure 10). Hardly seeming like the master of all she surveys, the
Queen gazes downward from a vertiginous height. Victoria is presented from an almost impossible angle, captured from a viewpoint on the bridge’s extreme edge. The image of the 1880 disaster recalls the composition of the 1879 image, inviting a rereading of Victoria’s dangerous journey. The picture locates the queen on the sickening edge of risk, gazing—in awe or anticipation—at the drop and the vessels that would soon be searching for the bodies of seventy-five people.

For the man crawling to the edge of the damage, the vertigo is even stronger. We do not see what he sees: the place where the train crashed into the water. Instead, we are presented with ravaged railway lines, distant ships on the firth, hills on the horizon, and clouds in affective chiaroscuro. The location and cause of the disaster are eclipsed by its picturesque environs which are intended to generate pathos and to relieve the uneasiness of being perched on this fearful promontory. The moment of the accident, partially reconstructed in the extensive prose coverage, has been lost except to reflection. Like the figures clambering along the Dawlish coastline and the man peering over the Tay Bridge, the viewer has become a modern tourist contemplating ruins created not through slow decay but in

an unthinkable instant. The picturesque emerged contemporaneously with
eighteenth-century landscape tourism; the catastrophic picturesque merges
this earlier notion of scenic appreciation with the forensic gaze of the
onlooker who has been alerted to catastrophe by the news. In the former,
the viewer contemplates the gradual weathering of an accidental scene; in
the latter, the viewer reckons with the results of near-instantaneous change.
The catastrophic picturesque records the after-image of the railway’s anni-
hilation of space and time.\(^5\)

In almost all of these images, the catastrophic picturesque formalizes
disaster in ironic repose. It takes shape as form because of the accident’s
challenge to narrative. According to Sir Daniel Gooch, engineer and later
director of the Great Western Railway, “The first intimation that people
in the train get . . . is the accident itself; it is all over before they have time
to think of it.”\(^5\) The accident represents a gap in conscious experience
that has to be reconstructed. Similarly, it is an event whose immediacy the
Illustrated London News had to reconstruct for public consumption. As
a weekly newspaper, the Illustrated London News faced a major repre-
sentational challenge with accident coverage. Its claims to topical imme-
diacy—or simply to report “news”—were offset by its deferred production
schedule and the chain of graphic mediation in its woodcuts. The pictur-
esque offered an elegant solution. Because the picturesque could make
“picturicity cognate with experience,” as Liu suggests, the Illustrated Lon-
don News was able to offer pictures in place of the “experience” they
claimed to deliver. The newspaper grandly claimed in its 1842 opening
issue to offer the “very form and presence of events as they transpire, in all
their substantial reality.”\(^5\) The picturesque offered just such a “specialized
experience of form.”\(^5\) It encouraged readers to see illustrations as aesthetic
objects and to examine illustrations of disasters from a safe, contemplative
remove. The picturesque images of railway wreckage in Illustrated London
News depended, as theorists of the picturesque had insisted, on the agency
of accidental events which must be reconstructed as style. In this sense,
the catastrophic picturesque was perfectly suited to the Illustrated Lon-
don News’s signature reprographic medium, wood engraving. But both
the catastrophic picturesque and wood engraving would be obsolete by
century’s end.

The Catastrophic Picturesque after Photography

In closing, I want to explore how the trajectory and demise of the cata-
strophic picturesque discloses some of the formal characteristics of the
Illustrated London News, particularly the illustration technologies that
underwrote its most ambitious editorial claims. If the catastrophic pictur-
esque flourished in the wood engravings of Victorian illustrated journal-
ism, it disappeared with the obsolescence of the technique. I will hazard to suppose that the catastrophe picturesque was no longer possible after the switch to photographic reproduction. The expressive possibilities of wood engraving, including the multiple mediations of an image through various artists and engravers, allowed an aestheticization of catastrophe that photography did not allow. Wood engraving went into decline after the *Illustrated London News* began using half-tone and photoengraving processes for wash drawings and photographs in the 1880s. By the turn of the century, the *Illustrated London News* no longer included wood engravers on its staff. I do not mean to draw a clear line between the *Illustrated London News*’s wood engravings and photographs, as these reprographic technologies were mutually informative and developed synchronously. Furthermore, as Gary Beegan argues of late Victorian periodical media, the “introduction of photo-mechanical technologies destabilized reproduction and representation so that the discrete categories of photograph, wood engraving, and drawing took on a new fluidity.”

But while photo processes made the “visual content of periodicals more abundant, complex, and increasingly hybrid,” they also disrupted the aesthetic patterns structuring that visual content. By examining the *Illustrated London News* once it transitioned to photo-mechanical image processes, it becomes clear, by contrast, how wood engraving facilitated a picturesque style and formal self-consciousness.

In his 1899 review article, “Illustrated Journalism: Its Past and Future,” Clement K. Shorter, editor of the *Illustrated London News*, suggests that process engravings and photography promise “to convey with such intense reality many of the incidents of the hour,” as if renewing the *Illustrated London News*’s 1842 inaugural vows in “Our Address.” But Shorter also insists that the camera is blind to “so large a part of life, and particularly of public life,” reaffirming the “potency of the artist against the photographer.” Shorter bemoaned the supersession of photography in illustrated journalism and sneered at its insipid uses in the “mere photographic journal,” compared with the high standards of the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News.* Shorter claims that while other journals are “restricted in their presentation of news by the limitations of the camera,” the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* have invested substantially in artists as well as the art of manipulating photographs for publication.

Before half-tone processing and photolithography made photography feasible for mass-distribution printing, artists for the *Illustrated London News* were still using photographs as a basis for wood engravings, often printing captions that explicitly noted an engraving’s photographic source. Even with the advent of photo-processing, the *Illustrated London News* continued to employ artists for sketches and washes which could be similarly transferred to the mass-produced page. But in the century’s closing
decades, the picturesque was lost as the *Illustrated London News* moved to photographic techniques. Three documents will illustrate this transition. The first is a page titled “The Railway Disaster in the Riviera—From Photographs” (March 20, 1886), which includes two wood engravings (figure 11). The lower image has a caption of its own, “Scene of the Collision: Monte Carlo and Monaco in the Distance,” describing the blend of scenery and wreckage that characterizes the catastrophic picturesque. The curving coastline, distant hillside towns, ambling rusticators pausing near the contorted wreckage—so many conventional picturesque elements are on display. But the image above, “Part of the Wreck of the Two Trains,” begins to reveal how photography disables the picturesque with a fixed point of view and high-fidelity details. Though this image is a wood engraving based on a photograph, its point of view is resolutely eye-level with the photographer’s vantage point. In comparison, the picturesque allowed the viewpoint to float to the best place to compose and appreciate the scene. Even if that viewpoint was physically impossible to occupy, it was licensed by an aesthetic tradition of depicting scenic views and grand prospects. The visual interest of “Wreck of the Two Trains” is not the landscape but the fine details of metal, carriage, and shredded wood. Compared to earlier idealized wood engravings in which artists often fudged the unfamiliar intricacies of machinery, the photographic image measures angular distortions and parts with conspicuous fidelity.

The second example, “The Railway Accident at Northallerton” (October 13, 1894), demonstrates what Beegan describes as the “complex, and increasingly hybrid” forms of image production at this historical juncture (figure 12). The page juxtaposes several techniques, showing how wood-engraved and photographic processes intermingle and complicate their respective mimetic and aesthetic claims. On the bottom appears a wash drawing or lithograph captioned “Cranes Raising the First Engine,” which looks much closer to photographic reproduction than wood engraving. The image is signed by Holland Tringham, an in-house landscape specialist. The very fact of his signature suggests how this image identifies itself more conspicuously as art, or as a named artist’s production, in the context of the photo-reproductions which surround it on the page. In the upper-left corner appears “The Pullman Car and Tender of the First Engine, Showing the Wreck of the Composite Carriage,” which is also signed, suggesting that the image is an original work of art. In actuality, the signature “Meisenbach” refers instead to the trademarked Meisenbach Process devised by the Meisenbach Company. According to an 1893 advertisement, Meisenbach offered photo-engraving services at various levels, from open-grain quality for newspapers to fine-grain quality for “high-class Art Reproductions.” Where, then, on the spectrum of art object and functional graphic, does this image fall? It is presented as both photograph and artistic reproduc-
Early on Thursday morning, Oct. 6, the East Coast express train, leaving Edinburgh for London at half past ten in the morning, came into collision at Northallerton, in Yorkshire, on a curve with a sudden change in direction, with a siding. The guard's van was wrecked, and one passenger carriage was destroyed, the others were damaged and heavily clogged, and the passengers, who were between a hundred and thirty, were mostly killed. Only the Pullman sleeping-car was taken forward off the rails, and the passengers were the Markhams, Lord Porchester and

Figure 12. “The Railway Accident at Northallerton,” Illustrated London News, October 13, 1894, 460.
tion, a hybrid image with an ambiguous aesthetic status. The third image on the page, “The Second Engine and Tender,” is an unsigned prosaic photograph which seems to make no special claims for its artistic labor or the uniqueness of its medium. Taken together, these images not only show the transitions within the *Illustrated London News*’s illustration technologies but also how the picturesque diminishes with those transitions. The picturesque gradually disappears as wood-engraving technique blends with, and ultimately cedes to, photographic processes.

The final example is “The Snowdon Railway Accident” (April 18, 1896), a page entirely composed of photographs that are captioned with the name of the photographer and the place of capture in italics (e.g., Symons, Llanberis) (figure 13). With a layout featuring multiple views of the accident, the page compares to the 1884 spread depicting “The Disaster at Bullhouse Bridge” (figure 7). In that earlier illustration, the *Illustrated London News* used several different representational modes that wood engraving could accommodate: diagrammatic, documentary, and picturesque landscapes. “The Snowdon Railway Accident” incorporates close-ups featured in “Remains of the Engine at the Bottom of the Precipice” and “The Carriages after the Accident.” It also offers an alternative view and depicts a picturesque prospect of the tracks ascending the perilous mountainside, as in “Llanberis Terminus after the Accident.” But none of these images employs the picturesque. Even the dramatic mountain landscape is overlaid with the letters A, B, C, and D diagramming the accident. The image itself is no larger than the others and is starkly different from the “Disaster at Bullhouse Bridge” image, which spanned two pages and privileged the picturesque over other representational modes featured in the surrounding smaller images. Compared to its counterparts earlier in the century, “Scenes of the Disaster” renders a famously sublime landscape as strikingly dull, labeled A-D for forensic scrutiny rather than for aesthetic reflection. The photograph seems devoid of the aesthetic possibilities of accident, the subtle construction of disorder upon which the picturesque had always relied.

Why should this be? By the 1890s, photographers for the *Illustrated London News* were still “watching accidents” (following Payne’s prescription), yet they did not employ the accidental as a compositional technique. Theoretically, the spontaneity of photographic capture should allow for picturesque composition, emphasizing contingent, fragmentary, and uncon- trived yet harmonious scenes. Furthermore, photographic engravings in the *Illustrated London News* should have been able to accommodate the catastrophic picturesque since they were often touched up by artists and engravers for clarity and effect. But perhaps the photograph too precisely located the temporality that the picturesque imaginatively suspended—the missing catastrophic moment. Perhaps the loss of the engraved “line” in
photographs undercuts the aesthetic self-consciousness of the picturesque, which calls attention to form and the artist’s agency in its composition. The “limitations of the camera,” in Shorter’s phrase, also include the fixed viewpoint that did not always constrain the perspective of wood engraving—even when those engravings were based on photographs, as in “The Railway Disaster in the Riviera” (figure 11). A page can offer a composite of photographs, but these images cannot coalesce into the grand picturesque prospect that wood engraving inherited and exploited when representing railway disasters. While the Illustrated London News did not intend to reduce its visual drama, the catastrophic picturesque became a casualty of the newspaper’s reprographic shifts. By the 1890s, the Illustrated London News had adopted techniques better suited to its foundational commitment to deliver illustrated immediacy. In so doing, it ended its long career of using the picturesque as a device for revealing the forms and fissures of industrial modernity, including those newspaper forms that had developed contemporaneously.

By employing the catastrophic picturesque in illustrated journalism, Victorians reckoned with the impact of machines on landscape, human
lives, and print culture. Even if it rendered industrial incursion and disaster more visually palatable, it also underscored the troubling distortions of industrial modernity. Examining this history of representation enables us to understand why accident journalism proliferated and why it often took such unique forms in illustrated newspapers like the *Illustrated London News*. These illustrated reports were devised not simply to critique the railway’s dangers but to explore the agency of accident in industrial modernization. Furthermore, the picturesque allowed news media to accommodate production delays, displacing the timeliness of news into the aesthetic contemplation of aftermath, while also calling viewers’ attention to the forces shaping the historical present. Thus, the catastrophic picturesque allowed the *Illustrated London News* to capitalize on its memorable claims to “keep continually before the world a living and moving panorama of all its actions and influences.” Liu has described the picturesque as making the “very idea of form, or ‘picturicity,’ cognate with experience.” The *Illustrated London News* undertook those formal endeavors well before photography began to make similar claims. It did so through depictions of railway accidents wherein the industrial picturesque was updated with a vengeance, revealing the ideological contradictions and representational possibilities of industrial catastrophe in an emerging mass media.

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NOTES

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17. Ibid., 44n, 48n.
20. Liu argues that the picturesque’s “roughness was sadistic,” quoting from the Gilpin passage which follows. See Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, 64.
23. Ibid., 146.
28. Ibid., 15, 16.
30. Ibid., 36.
35. “Our Address,” 1. For a discussion of how the production process employed by the *Illustrated London News* problematized notions of art and labor, see chapter 2 in Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*.
41. Illustrations of accidents are disorderly by default, but for examples where that deformity might be resolved aesthetically, see “The Accident on the Midland Railway,” “The Great Northern Railway Disaster (Abbots Ripton),” “Disastrous Railway Accident (Flying Dutchman),” and “The Railway Disaster at Monchenstein, Near Bâle.”
43. Other examples of this can be seen in illustrations for articles, including “The Accident on the Midland Railway” and “Kentish Town Railway Accident, on the Hampstead Junction Line.”


45. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, 64.


47. “Damage to the South Devon Railway, Near Dawlish,” 196.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. This is consistent with the primary association of illustrated journalism with fine art prints and engravers’ artistry rather than with news. See Brake and Demoor, *The Lure of Illustration*, 4.

51. Dobraszczyk makes this point beautifully in “Sewers, Wood Engraving and the Sublime,” 366, 370.

52. For a history of the phrase and its widespread usage, see Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*, 21.


55. Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, 65. Liu contrasts this with the power of the Burkean sublime, which “denoted experience ipso facto in excess of form.”


57. Ibid., 9, 8.


59. Ibid., 487.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 486.


64. My thanks to the anonymous reviewers who pointed out this and several other insights relating to image and production processes.

65. As Sinnema suggests, “Lines thus point to ‘form’, to the materiality of the wood block itself.” *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, 32.


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