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‘Doing the Graphic’: Victorian Special Correspondence

Catherine Waters

Readers of Victorian newspapers will be familiar with the range of common by-lines used to refer to the journalist responsible for a news report before the introduction of the practice of signature later in the century. ‘Our Special Commissioner’, ‘An Occasional Correspondent’, ‘Our Own Correspondent’ and ‘Our Special Correspondent’ were all used imprecisely, if not interchangeably, in newspapers throughout the nineteenth century. But notwithstanding the employment of such seemingly generic by-lines, the roles of the journalists so designated were not all the same – as an article in the *Leisure Hour* published on 1 January 1868 sought to explain. Entitled ‘Our Own Correspondent’, it begins: ‘Who is the mysterious and apparently ubiquitous functionary that figures every morning under the above designation in the columns of the newspaper, few people comparatively have any very definite notion’.¹ The writer seeks to clarify two different roles for ‘our own correspondent’:

We are not speaking now of the regular correspondent, who, residing constantly in some foreign capital, gleans from the officials of the Government such information as they choose to impart, and as much more as he can; but of him who is the special messenger of the London press, and is ready to start to any quarter of the globe at a moment’s notice.²

The article attempts to distinguish between the journalist now referred to as the foreign correspondent – based in one place and charged with keeping the public at home abreast of political affairs transpiring elsewhere – and the roving reporter who,

when he has used up one place[,] ... gets orders to be off to another. Thus, he may be in Russia one day, shivering almost at zero, and after a brief interval, sweltering under the hot sun of Spain or Italy; and a month later he may be bound for India, or on the voyage to China.³

However, the distinction drawn here – between those correspondents who were fixtures in various foreign capitals and the peripatetic ‘special’ – is at the same time obscured by the use of the common by-line, ‘from Our Own Correspondent’, for both of these journalists.

In her seminal study, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (1985), Lucy Brown distinguishes the foreign correspondent from the war correspondent, and argues that while ‘the phrase “special correspondent” had no very precise meaning’ in the nineteenth century, it nevertheless described someone who was working on a ‘particular assignment’ and who typically presented his investigations ‘in a series of letters in successive issues’ of the newspaper.⁴ Thus war correspondence may be regarded as one form of special correspondence. In his 1871 survey of *The Newspaper Press*, James Grant argued that

‘The Special Correspondent’ is an entirely different personage from the Correspondents regularly established in all the leading towns of Europe, or in America, India, or Australia. The latter are fixtures in the various capitals or important towns from which their communications are dated. These places are their spheres of duty all the year round. The Special Correspondent, on the contrary, so far from occupying a stationary position, is a gentleman whose vocation it is to go from place to place according to circumstances, and to record whatever matters of importance transpire in the different localities to which a sense of duty calls him.⁵

Having drawn this distinction, Grant says that the by-line used to designate this journalist – as ‘Our Own’ or ‘Our Special’ – is merely a matter of editorial preference. However, two decades later in his 1890 account of *The Newspaper World*, Alfred Baker distinguished between these two by-lines, explaining that the duties of the special ‘are to deal with the especial event in hand, and he in no way supersedes or interferes with “our own correspondent,” should the paper have a resident representative at or near the spot.’⁶

Despite this lack of clear definition of his role, the special correspondent played a significant part in the popularisation of news journalism from the 1850s onwards, not the least evidence of which may be deduced from the recurrent criticism directed towards him by conservative commentators who deplored what they saw as a commercially driven press deploying sensational reportage to sell newspapers. The specials were a *bête noire* of the *Saturday Review* (or ‘Saturday Reviler’ as this abrasive weekly was nicknamed by some for its slashing reviews), which criticised William Howard Russell’s coverage of the Crimean campaign in *The Times*, for example, for ‘mak[ing] his letters piquant by describing a general

in his night-cap with a heavy cold, and the Commander-in-chief in a trench with a cloak up to his eyes. ... [A]nd so the commander is drawn in this interesting attitude – caricatured and laughed at from one end of the kingdom to another. But no harm was meant – it was only a Special Correspondent in his vocation. He was getting up an interesting letter – showing off his style and his facility in composition. He was doing the graphic – that was all.’⁷ ‘Doing the graphic’ was indeed a hallmark of the special correspondent’s work. This essay briefly surveys the role as a mobile practice of journalism and explores some of the key features that distinguished the graphic writing associated with it.

While the employment of foreign correspondents for major metropolitan dailies like *The Times* dates from the early nineteenth century, and Henry Mayhew’s reports on London labour and the London poor for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849-50 carried the by-line ‘From our Special Correspondent’, the peculiar role of the special as a roving journalist sent out to report upon particular events really begins in the 1850s, with the famous Crimean War reports of Russell for *The Times*. Indeed, John Black Atkins’s two-volume biography of Russell, published in 1911, identifies him in its subtitle as ‘The First Special Correspondent’. But while reporting from the seat of war was undoubtedly the assignment that most tested the special correspondent’s mettle, as Atkins notes, ‘[w]ar correspondence is only the dramatic branch of special correspondence’⁸; and when no war was in preparation or progress, specials had to turn their hand to cover all manner of events in any location at home or abroad as required by their newspaper.

As George Augustus Sala wryly described the multifarious demands placed upon the special correspondent in 1871, ‘He must be Jack of all trades, and master of all – that are journalistic.’

[W]hen there is no war afoot, he must be prepared to ‘do’ funerals as well as weddings, state-banquets, Volunteer reviews, Great Exhibitions, remarkable trials, christenings, coronations, ship-launches, agricultural shows, royal progresses, picture-shows, first-stone layings, horse-races, and hangings.⁹

Sala's heterogeneous inventory indicates that versatility was a key distinguishing attribute of the special correspondent. Mobility was another:

It is expected from them that they should be able to start for the World's End at a moment's notice; to go to Russia in January and to India in July; to explore a district where typhus and small-pox are raging with the same equanimity as they displayed when they attended the marriage of the Prince of Wales, and which they have had an opportunity of airing at the wedding of the Princess Louise.¹⁰

As well as manifesting resourcefulness and versatility in this roving role, the special correspondent needed to possess an unusual medley of skills and some distinctive habits:

It will be better for him to speak half-a-dozen languages with tolerable fluency; to have visited or resided in most parts of the habitable globe – if he knows something about the Rocky Mountains or the interior of Africa, so much the better; to be a good cook, a facile musician, a first-rate whist-player, a practised horseman, a tolerable shot, a ready conversationalist, a freemason, a philosopher, a moderate smoker – for tobacco is a very good buckler against the pangs of hunger – and a perfect master of the art of packing; that is to say, he should be able to compress a good-sized writing-case, a despatch-box, a pair of jack-boots, a Roget's *Thesaurus* and a Bible, a small keg of brandy, a change of linen, a waterproof sheet, a dark lantern, and a gridiron, into the area of a pair of saddle-bags.¹¹

The comic miscellaneousness of the special's kit bespeaks the multi-purpose nature of his work. Looking back over his career as a special – from the days of the Crimean war to the Russo-Turkish conflict of 1877 – in an essay for the *Boy's Own Paper* in 1896, George A. Henty provides a similar list of requirements but adds to those that Sala mentions 'a stock of the few medicines absolutely necessary – quinine against fevers, cholorodyne and Cockle's pills for general purposes, ipecacuanha for dysentery; and if you add a bottle of essence of ginger and another of ammonia you are stocked for anything that may come'.¹²

Henty also highlights another distinctive feature of the role – the special's preparedness for departure at a moment's notice – giving examples of the kind of abrupt orders he received to cover an event overseas for the *Standard*: ““We are going to send out a man with this Ashanti expedition,” or “You are to go with this Chitral expedition. One of the Castle line or a P. & O.” as the case may be, “starts tomorrow; you had better go to the office at once and take your passage.””¹³ Sala comically remarked in the preface to his republished

correspondence describing a tour from Waterloo to the Spanish Peninsula in 1866 that his long connection with the *Daily Telegraph* ‘has converted me, into a kind of human teetotum, and given to my progression on this earth’s surface a most fitful and erratic character’.¹⁴ As he had been making preparations to leave Berlin for Königsberg late in 1864, Sala ‘received a telegram containing only these words – “Revolution. Spain. Go there at once.” The instructions were certainly vague’, he writes, ‘still I understood them at once, and thoroughly’.¹⁵

The instructions given to W.J.C. Meighan of the *New York Herald* when he was sent by editor James Gordon Bennett to report on the Chicago fire of 1871 were similarly peremptory:

‘Go to Chicago by the first train today; wire us simply the word “Here” when you arrive there. Spare no expense. Go anywhere, and by any mode of travel, to get all the news. Picture graphically what you see, so that *Herald* readers will have as they read the burning city before their eyes. At the same time, bear in mind that while graphic picturing of scenes makes attractive reading, what the people all over the world wants to know are *facts*, FACTS, FACTS.’¹⁶

Finding the Chicago telegraph offices blocked by messages being sent to the East imploring help from relatives, Meighan took the initiative to send a message twice a day by engine to Cleveland, Ohio, ‘whence his reports were telegraphed to New York’.¹⁷ Set alongside the correspondence of Sala and Henty, his account suggests the similarities between the practice of special correspondence on both sides of the Atlantic and the way in which it was bound up with the new mobile technologies of the railroad and telegraph.

Arguably, however, the mobility and versatility of the Victorian special correspondent would have counted for nothing without the roving journalist’s capacity to enter into the experiences of others so as to provide a vivid eyewitness report: an ability to observe and seize upon events wherever they happened, rendering them for the press in sufficiently graphic prose so as to transport readers imaginatively through vivid first-hand accounts. As Bennett’s instruction to his special makes clear, his correspondence is to ‘picture graphically’

what he sees ‘so that *Herald* readers will have as they read the burning city before their eyes’. Similarly, *Chambers’s Journal* outlined the essential requirements of the ‘modern Special Correspondent’ in 1873 thus: ‘[h]e must be able, and that at a moment’s notice, to put himself in the position of somebody else; to see with his eyes, to hear with his ears, and to express the results of another’s experience in the first person’.¹⁸ Special correspondence was, in effect, a new technology – like the railroad, the telegraph and the photograph, with all of which it was associated – that brought the world closer, shrinking space and time and conveying readers to distant places. Amongst other things, thinking about special correspondence as a mobile practice of journalism refocuses our attention upon its role in helping to produce the time-space compression we have been used to associate with the railroad and telegraph.

Notwithstanding the heterogeneous assortment of topics they covered, some specials came to be distinguished by particular aptitudes or associated with certain kinds of reporting. Alfred Baker identifies three ‘varieties of the “special”’: the ‘travelling correspondent’ who, he says, ‘is in many cases merely the journalist on a holiday trip’¹⁹; the ‘special commissioner’ who is charged ‘by his editor to pursue some special line of inquiry on a matter of public moment’²⁰; and, ‘most arduous’ of all, the war correspondent. His categorisation provides a useful framework for my survey of special correspondence and its peculiar attributes here.

For an example of the ‘travelling correspondent’ we can do no better than turn again to Sala – the ‘chief of travelled specials’, according to Joseph Hatton²¹ – who sent special correspondence to the *Daily Telegraph* from many parts of the world, including Algeria, Australia, New Zealand, America, and a number of European countries. Whether he was despatched to report upon a particular event or merely to provide a descriptive account of his travels, his special correspondence is marked by a colourful, loquacious style of ‘word-painting’ that was highly popular. As the *Athenaeum* remarked in a review of his republished

correspondence in *From Waterloo to the Peninsula*, ‘Mr Sala cannot be otherwise than a droll and enlivening companion; and as we travelled with him from Belgium to Holland, from Amsterdam to Hamburg, and from Northern Germany to Madrid, he has provoked a good deal of merriment.’²² Sala’s letter to the *Daily Telegraph* of 9 December 1865, describing the depopulated aspect of Antwerp, encountered out of the tourist season in November, is a good example of his style as he eschews factual information about the city for fanciful reflection, ruminating upon the advantages and disadvantages of employing a local guide.

I took one at Antwerp. After all, it was a new sensation. He plodded on before, like a horse on a towing-path. His tongue was the cable, and he drew me on leisurely, a lazy canal-boat. You get dazed and dreamy at last. You find yourself wondering what the *commissionaire* is like when he is at home; what he has for dinner; whether he rehearses to his family at supper-time that the Hotel de Ville is ‘an elegant Gothic structure, built in 1377, the niches of which were formerly decorated with curious statues of the Counts of Flanders,’ or puts his children through a course of chronology touching upon the dates of the erection of the cathedral and the fountain of Quentin Matsys.²³

Playing with the role of the tourist, Sala’s travelling correspondence is impressionistic, digressive and often whimsical. The move from the first- to the second-person pronoun in this passage is part of the beguiling effect. While used as a form of self-address by Sala, the repeated ‘you’ pulls the reader figuratively into the scene described here, creating a sense of jocular companionability with ‘Our Special’, whose correspondence remains centred incorrigibly upon himself.

The focus of the special correspondent upon his own role as eye-witness, while deplored by some critics as unwarrantable egotism,²⁴ was in fact a key ingredient of his report, endowing it with its distinctive effects of immediacy and authenticity. As Judy McKenzie argues, public fascination with adventurous specials, like Sala or Russell, ‘depended on their ability not just to record events in an interesting and colourful fashion but to project themselves into those events – to be there’.²⁵ Eye-witnessing was an important source of the verisimilitude of his report, as the example of special correspondence sent by those journalists commissioned to cover the maiden voyage of the *Great Eastern* in

September 1859 shows. Writing of ‘the profession of seeing and describing everything in the character of “our own correspondent”’ in *All the Year Round* on 1 October, John Hollingshead sought to justify the publication of his account of the *Great Eastern*’s trial journey almost a month after the event by arguing that his purpose was ‘strictly to record what *I saw with my own eyes on board the ship*, and not what was brought to me by well-meaning friends or well-instructed messengers’.²⁶ Like Sala, Hollingshead had developed his skills as a special correspondent in working for Dickens on *Household Words*, and both journalists were included in the sizable press contingent that accompanied the *Great Eastern* when she left the Thames estuary for Weymouth on Friday 9 September 1859.²⁷ Dickens had commissioned Hollingshead to report on the voyage for *All the Year Round* and paid £10 for his passage.²⁸ But neither editor nor contributor could have anticipated the dramatic nature of the report that would be necessitated by the events of the journey.

Hollingshead’s ‘Great Eastern Postscript’ provides a vivid account of the tragic explosion that took place in a heater attached to one of the paddle engine boilers just after the ship had passed Hastings. The eye-witness veracity of his narrative is conveyed by its being recounted from the perspective of his actual position in the dining room, ‘between half-past five and six P.M.’, where ‘a dozen of “our own correspondents” had remained to congratulate a director of the company and a proprietor of newspapers [Herbert Ingram], upon the prospects of the great vessel in which they were seated.’ Suddenly, he writes,

death ... stared us all in the face and spoke to us in a voice of thunder through a dull booming sound, a crash, another crash, and a fall of some heave weight upon heavy wood. A number of shrieks upon deck, a distinct shock, a shower of broken glass which fell upon our table and about our heads, a smell of hot steam, and a sense of some awful danger, brought us all upon our feet.’²⁹

He goes on to describe the scene of devastation and initial panic on deck, the rescue of the Captain’s young daughter, the fatal injuries of the stokers who bore the brunt of the blast and the desperate efforts made to relieve their suffering with whatever materials were to hand.

Despite the lapse of time between its publication and the accident it describes, Hollingshead's article shares the effect of immediacy that characterised the accounts of the special correspondents that appeared straight after the event in the metropolitan newspapers on Monday 12 September. In his report for the *Daily Telegraph* from 'on Board the Great Eastern, Portland Harbour, Saturday, 10.30am', for example, Sala describes the explosion and the reverberation that followed, as he too witnessed it from the dining saloon, in similarly vivid terms:

Then came – to our ears, who were in the dining room – a tremendous crash, not hollow, as of thunder, but solid, as of objects that offered resistance. Then a sweeping, rolling, swooping, rumbling sound, as of cannon balls scudding along the deck above. Remember, I am only describing now my personal experience and sensations. The rumbling noise was followed by the smash of the dining room skylights, and the irruption of a mass of fragments of wood and iron, followed by a thick cloud of powdered glass, and then by coaldust. My garments are full of the first, my hair and eyebrows of the last, now.³⁰

The surprising shift from past to present tense in the final sentence here helps to convey the dramatic effect. Even more graphic is the description of the injured stokers: '[t]he face of one was utterly without human semblance, and looked simply like a mass of raw beefsteak. Another was so horribly scalded about the groin, that the two hands might be laid in the raw cavity, and scraps of his woollen undergarment were mixed up with hanks of boiled flesh.' According to his biographer, Ralph Straus, it was Sala's despatches on this trial voyage of the *Great Eastern* that confirmed the proprietors of the *Daily Telegraph* 'in their belief that they had found a prince of special correspondents, and henceforth his status in their office was appreciably improved'.³¹

There is another less reputable feature of special correspondence, however, that Hollingshead's subsequent account of his involvement in reporting upon the trial run of the *Great Eastern* reveals. The practice of sham eye-witnessing or fabricating reports sometimes brought the specials into disrepute and in this case a journalist for the *Morning Post* was caught out. As Hollingshead later explained, upon his arrival at Weymouth he made straight

for Fleet Street by train, arriving about midnight. He immediately wrote a third of a column about the explosion for the Sunday edition of the *Weekly Dispatch*, and the next morning made for the office of the *Morning Post*, since he knew that their correspondent had left the *Great Eastern* at Gravesend: ‘This representative had assumed that the voyage would be all “chicken and champagne,” and he had written a paragraph for a “special edition” on the Saturday, stating that the vessel had arrived in Weymouth, after a most pleasant and successful voyage.’³² Although the fabricated report as it appeared in the *Morning Post* was dated ‘From Our Own Reporter on Board the Great Eastern, Weymouth, Saturday Morning’, it said not a word of any accident and concealed its subterfuge with such spurious eye-witness claims as that ‘we could distinctly see the crowds that were assembled in the beach at both [Hastings and Brighton]’ and that ‘we arrived about 10 o’clock this morning, pleased and gratified with the trip. The weather has been magnificent and the appearance of the sea by moonlight was sublime.’³³ Consulted as to how the *Morning Post* should deal with this false news in the Saturday special edition, Hollingshead ‘advised utter silence’ and ‘reeled off three or four columns’ which appeared under the by-line ‘From Our Own Correspondent’ in the Monday edition.³⁴ What readers made of these contradictory reports in subsequent issues of the newspaper can only be conjectured. But it was episodes like this one that periodically fuelled suspicion regarding the authenticity of special correspondence throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁵

Against the tarnished image of the special correspondent associated with such subterfuge, Hollingshead opens his ‘Great Eastern Postscript’ with an account of the profession that emphasises its heroism:

they are men who live only in action, who feed upon excitement. They belong to the same race who have wandered over parched deserts, who have sailed out into unknown seas who have thrown themselves amongst howling savages, who have sat over powder mines to gather information, and to spread it, when gathered, before an ever ravenous public.³⁶

Sala was equally keen to promote the intrepidity of the special. ‘His life!’ he exclaims:

It is to rise early or sit up late, completely as the exigencies of his situation compel him; to fear no peril, to shrink before no difficulty; to be able to recall the exordium of Burke's speech at the trial of Warren Hastings in the middle of a bombardment; to write his letters on a drum, on the deck of a steamboat during a gale, on horseback, in the garret of a house on fire, on the top of an omnibus, or on the top of Mont Blanc. Some Specials can write very well standing up in the coupe of an express train; others can indite their matter on mantelpieces; others in the dark; and others in bed.³⁷

This elaboration of the seemingly endless flexibility and coolness in the face of danger required of the special correspondent may be hyperbolic. But the arduous demands of the role were real enough – even to the extent that the special sometimes became newsworthy in his own right, eclipsing the news he was delivering. Indeed, as Phillip Knightley argues, in his thrilling accounts from the field of battle, the war correspondent ‘rapidly became the hero of his own story’.³⁸ Archibald Forbes's ride from the field of British victory at Ulundi to despatch his report as special correspondent for the *Daily News* is a case in point.

Forbes first made his name as a special for the *Daily News* in covering the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71; but the Anglo-Zulu war, fought between Britain and the Zulu kingdom in 1879, arguably secured his greatest fame. The battle of Ulundi brought the war to an end on 4 July, and in order to despatch his report of the outcome, Forbes had to reach the nearest telegraph office at Landman's Drift some 110 miles distant. As the *Daily News* proclaimed on 24 July, ‘His solitary and speedy ride ... through a wild and hostile country, seamed with dongas, in any one of which cruel and exasperated enemies might be lurking, is an exploit much more spirited and stirring than that of the three who “brought the good news to Ghent”’.³⁹ The same issue of the paper published Forbes's accounts of the battle, dated 3 and 4 July, and followed them with a report of the speech of Sir Michael Hicks-Beach to the House of Commons announcing the victory of her Majesty's forces under Lord Chelmsford: ‘All arms reported to have done their duty admirably. Zulus slain estimated at eight hundred by Mr Archibald Forbes, who rode with the above news in fifteen hours to Landsman's Drift. (Cheers)’.

The heroism of Forbes was lauded in the *Illustrated London News* with a front-page engraving representing the special correspondent as ‘the bold, unwearied, dauntless, solitary horseman, “bloody with spurring, fiery red with haste”’ (See Figure 1).⁴⁰ It was drawn by Richard Caton Woodville, Jr., who worked for the *ILN* as a military artist for most of his life, thus underlining the extent to which Forbes’s prowess as special correspondent was being merged with the heroism of the British army by the metropolitan press. Filling the entire front page, it shows Forbes looking determined but remarkably poised as his horse races across the Transvaal. The *ILN*’s call for him to be awarded a suitable honorary distinction at the request of the Secretary of State for War in recognition of his performance of ‘this valuable public service with such intrepid courage and so much personal address’⁴¹ situates the special correspondent as hero of his own story – a position that Forbes clearly relished when he later wrote of this episode: ‘To have held once and again in the hollow of my hand the exclusive power to thrill the nations; to have looked into the very heart of the turning points of nations and dynasties! What joy equal to the thrilling sense of personal force as obstacle after obstacle fell behind one conquered, as one galloped from the battle with tidings our people awaited hungrily and tremblingly!’⁴²

The story of Forbes’s adventurous night ride was a thrilling narrative that received widespread publicity. But of more interest for my purposes is the way in which the episode highlights the function of special correspondence as a new technology associated with the ‘annihilation of space and time’ that is usually attributed to the railroad and telegraph in the nineteenth century. Reflecting upon the ‘extraordinary’ exploit of its special correspondent on 25 July, the *Daily News* argued that its ‘novelty’ lay neither in the ‘boldness of the adventure’ nor ‘the manner of conveying the news’, but in ‘the character and occupation of our Special Correspondent himself’ who was forced to report on the conflict ‘under somewhat antiquated conditions’ that recalled the circumstances and methods of the Crimean

war correspondent of two decades earlier. As it explained, ‘The Special Correspondent on the battlefield is a novelty altogether, but the rapid growth of the telegraphic system has brought out a newer development of this strictly modern innovation’.⁴³ Contrasting the task of the war correspondent of the present with that of his Crimean forebears, it observed:

The telegraph wire follows him almost up to ‘the rough edge of battle’. It was only by a curious chance that our Special Correspondent has now fallen upon a campaign which was cut off from the immediate companionship of the electric cord.⁴⁴

As the trope of companionship here makes clear, like the telegraph, special correspondence was a technology whose development both cultivated and responded to the need for speed in the transmission of news. Their status as parallel technologies is similarly suggested by a writer in *Chambers’s Journal* in 1873 who described them as compeers:

There was an interval of competition between laconic telegrams recording bare facts, and the freer-handed ‘descriptive’ of the ‘specials’, and for a little it seems [sic] as if the telegraph system was discounting special correspondence. But the ‘specials’ rallied, and subdued their rival into being their slave.⁴⁵

The development of the relationship between these ‘rivals’ was, however, uneven and specials like Russell and Sala did not embrace the use of the cable in the same way that Forbes did. Nevertheless, as the cost of telegraphy was reduced, and following Forbes’s Franco-Prussian war success in arranging for his despatches to reach the telegraph office with the least possible delay, an increasing premium was placed upon speed of transmission from the 1870s onwards.

This did not lessen the need for the special to provide a vivid discursive presentation of scene or event, but instead compounded the task. As a commentator in the *Newspaper Press Directory* in 1903 put it, ‘He must wield a graphic pen, and a swift pen as well’. *Chambers’s* noted that ‘the price of the triumph’ of the special correspondent over his rival, the telegraph, ‘is costly’:

For [him] there is no longer dalliance over a late dinner, or a nap to refresh himself before commencing to write. His work is done now at the very acme of high-pressure speed. Eating, ease, or sleep alike must be disregarded by the ‘special correspondent’ who cares for his own credit and that of the journal which he represents. He must be

able to write graphically faster than most clerks can copy, else he may as well retire from a profession for which he is unsuited. His bodily endurance and energy must keep pace with his mental vigour; he cannot afford to have a digestion, and the best preliminary training he can undergo is a full course of gymnastics, including equitation, and the ability to do without sleep.⁴⁶

Thus what might have started out as a prosthetic relation between special correspondent and telegraph (the latter serving to overcome some of the limitations of distance encountered by the former) had begun, by the 1870s, to blur the boundary between human and machine. Like the factory worker compelled to work according to the rhythms of the steam-powered engine, the special correspondent had to adapt to the new time discipline associated with the telegraph: a process that accords with the industrial development of the press in other areas.

If the role of the special correspondent was being impacted by the rise of the telegraph in this way, what were the implications of these developments in technology for the Victorian newspaper reader? Combining swiftness of despatch with the picturesque presentation of scene or event, special correspondence had from the beginning sought to transport readers imaginatively to the location described. As the writer in the *Leisure Hour* with which I began goes on to explain,

We do not so much *hear* of the stirring events which take place abroad, as *see* them through the optics of the correspondent. We travel with him on his devious round, and share the excitements of the way; while, knowing everything through his minute and faithful reports, we need not accept his conclusions, because he furnishes us with the means of arriving at our own.⁴⁷

To facilitate such virtual travel, special correspondence attempted to reduce the imaginative distance between the positions of the correspondent and reader, and the time and place of the events described, so as to generate an effect of spatio-temporal immersion, of vividly evoking the presence of temporally and spatially distant scenes. Russell set a high benchmark in this regard, but other specials became equally adept. Consider, for example, the account given by the special correspondent of the *Daily News* (probably Hilary Skinner) of the field of battle the day after the surrender of the French at Sedan in 1870:

You must have been on several battle-fields to understand the signs of what has taken place by the look of the spot next morning. This group of dead horses, with a helmet or two and a dozen cuirasses with a broken trumpet and three dead cuirassiers, means serious work. The dark stains on the ground are where the wounded have lain and been removed. The little heap of swords under that hedge is where some dismounted troopers were forced to surrender. Then we come to Prussian helmets crushed and trampled. Some are marked by shell or bullet, and have blood upon them. They tell of loss to the regiment to which they belonged. Others have no particular trace of violence, and may either be signs of wounded men, or of men who have simply thrown their helmets away in the heat of the action, and put on their forage caps to march more lightly. These dark stains, surrounded by knapsack and rifle, by greatcoat and cooking tin, are where men have lain who have been badly wounded, or even killed, but whose friends have made them as comfortable as could be under the difficulties of the time.⁴⁸

The immersive quality of the representation of time and space in this passage is palpable. As we saw in the earlier extract from Sala, pronoun selection – ‘you’ and ‘we’ – is used as a boundary-crossing form of address from the correspondent to the reader. Sharing his perspective, the reader is taken upon a forensic tour of the battlefield that is nonetheless artfully designed to draw us into the narrative scene. The miscellaneous itemisation of the debris scattered about – ‘a helmet or two’, ‘a dozen Cuirasses’, ‘a broken trumpet’, ‘three dead cuirassiers’ – is set in tension with the effort to make sense of this scene of carnage. While the time lag separating the moment of writing on 3 September 1870 and the moment of its publication on 6 September is an inevitable effect of transmission delay, the use of the present tense, combined with deictic demonstratives (like ‘this’ and ‘these’), seeks to create the illusion of simultaneity between the occurrence of these events and the act of their reading. The correspondent’s retrospective construction of what took place here from the ghastly remnants of the preceding day’s violence creates a complex layering of temporal reference in the passage that contributes to its haunting effect.

As the examples of Russell, Sala, Hollingshead and Forbes finally show then, special correspondence was a new mobile technology, characterised by the roving work of its practitioner whether as travelling correspondent, special commissioner or war correspondent. The journalists who worked in this role had to be versatile and resourceful, ready to cope

with the peculiar exigencies of space and time that constrained the writing and despatch of their letters. As the *Leisure Hour* noted, however,

Even with all these rare qualities he will be nothing unless he have a faculty of observation rapid and comprehensive enough to seize upon everything that comes in its way, and sufficient volubility with the pen to chronicle all events as they take place, and pourtray [sic] all circumstances at once with a fidelity not to be impeached, and sufficient graphic effect to render the perusal of his despatches interesting and agreeable.⁴⁹

Special correspondence was thus distinguished by the virtual mobility afforded readers who sought immersion in ‘a vivid and dramatic presentation of scenes and events’ that, as the *Newspaper Press Directory* put it, might ‘surpass ... the enduring work of our leading novelists’.⁵⁰ Indeed, the very fact that so many of the special correspondents subsequently republished their journalism, transferring their correspondence from the pages of newspapers to books, says something important about the ambiguous position of their writing – in between literature and journalism - in the print culture of their day.

¹ ‘Our Own Correspondent’, *Leisure Hour*, 1 January 1868, p. 53.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴ Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 216-17.

⁵ James Grant, *The Newspaper Press: Its Origin, Progress and Present Position* (London: Tinsley, 1871), p. 248.

⁶ Alfred Baker, *The Newspaper World: Essays on Press History and Work, Past and Present* (London: Pittman, 1890), p. 56.

⁷ ‘Our Own Correspondent’, *Saturday Review*, 17 November 1855, p. 45.

⁸ John Black Atkins, *The Life of Sir William Howard Russell: The First Special Correspondent*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1911), vol. 2, p. 372.

⁹ George Augustus Sala, ‘The Special Correspondent: His Life and Crimes’, *Belgravia: A London Magazine*, 4 (1871), pp. 220-21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 220.

¹² G. A. Henty, ‘The Life of a Special Correspondent, Part II’, *Boy's Own Paper*, 20 June 1896, p. 599.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *From Waterloo to the Peninsula: Four Months' Hard Labour in Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Spain*. 2 vols (London: Tinsley, 1867) 1, p. ix.

¹⁵ *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala, Written by Himself*. (London: Cassell, 1898), p. 422.

¹⁶ Quoted in Michael MacDonagh, ‘Our Special Correspondent’, in *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory* (London: C. Mitchell and Co., 1903), p. 90.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ‘A Versatile “Special”’, *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 20 September 1873, p. 597.

¹⁹ Baker, *The Newspaper World*, p. 56

²⁰ Ibid. p. 57.

²¹ Joseph Hatton, *Journalistic London: Being a Series of Sketches of Famous Pens and Papers of the Day* (London: Routledge, 1882), p. 169.

²² Rev. of *From Waterloo to the Peninsula. Four Months' Hard Labour in Belgium, Holland, Germany and Spain*. by George Augustus Sala, *Athenaeum*, 15 December 1866, p. 791.

²³ (From Our Special Correspondent), ‘The Lions of Antwerp’, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 December 1865, p. 7.

²⁴ For example, the *Saturday Review* complained again about William Howard Russell’s reports, this time as *The Times*’s special correspondent on the American Civil War in 1861: ‘It is evident that the great object for which a special correspondent is sent out is to report to admiring readers at home the thoughts, the actions, the comforts and discomforts, the honours and the slights of the special correspondent himself. ... What are such trifles as the disposition of armies to him? He has far more important matters to tell about. “Yesterday morning I left Mobile in the steamer *Florida*,” and so he goes on for well nigh a column, with all that Our Special Correspondent did, and thought, and saw, and felt, in the steamer *Florida* – all in the highest flights of the high polite style.’ ‘Current History’, *Saturday Review*, 29 June 1861, p. 664.

²⁵ Judy McKenzie, ‘Paper Heroes: Special Correspondents and their Narratives of Empire’, in *Victorian Journalism: Exotic and Domestic*, ed. by Barbara Garlick and Margaret Harris (Brisbane: Queensland University Press, 1998), p. 125.

²⁶ [John Hollingshead], ‘Great Eastern Postscript’, *All the Year Round*, 1 October 1859, p. 546. Emphasis in the original.

²⁷ Apart from his periodical contributions, Hollingshead was a special correspondent for the *Morning Post* during the severe winter of 1860-61, and contributed a series of ‘London Horrors’, serialized between 21 and 31 January, describing the distress of the working poor that was republished as *Ragged London in 1861*.

²⁸ Letter to Herbert Ingram, 13 September 1859. In Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, *The Letters of Charles Dickens* 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), vol. 9, p. 122.

²⁹ [Hollingshead], ‘Great Eastern Postscript’, p. 551

³⁰ (From Our Special Correspondent), ‘The Trial Trip of the Great Eastern’, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 1859, p. 5.

³¹ Ralph Straus, *Sala: The Portrait of an Eminent Victorian* (London: Constable, 1942), p. 151. Straus is presumably echoing Carlyle’s praise of George Henry Lewes as the ‘prince of journalists’.

³² John Hollingshead, *My Lifetime*, 2 vols (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co, 1895), vol. 1, p. 109.

³³ (From Our Own Reporter), ‘The Great Eastern’, *Morning Post*, 10 September 1859, p. 5.

³⁴ Hollingshead notes that ‘on Monday morning I reported myself to Charles Dickens, and told him what I had done. He quite approved of my action, and said our article, a fortnight hence, would not be affected by this special reporting.’ Hollingshead, *My Lifetime*, p. 109

³⁵ While the London papers appear to have turned a blind eye to the false report, it was noticed by some of the American papers – although their explanation for the mishap was different to Hollingshead’s. Under the headline ‘Danger of Drawing Upon the Imagination’, the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* reported that the *Morning Post* ‘writer had accidentally

missed his passage and had accordingly invented a description, in total ignorance that anything of a momentous character had taken place', 30 September 1859, p. 2. See also the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 28 September 1859, p. 2.

³⁶ [Hollingshead], 'Great Eastern Postscript', p. 546

³⁷ Sala, 'The Special Correspondent', p. 220

³⁸ Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Mythmaker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Prion, 2000), p. 44.

³⁹ 'London, Thursday, July 24', *Daily News*, 24 July 1879, p. 5.

⁴⁰ 'Zulu War Illustrations', *Illustrated London News*, 9 August 1879, p. 125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴² Quoted in Jennifer Crwys-Williams, *South-African Despatches: Two Centuries of the Best in South African Journalism* (Cape Town: Ashanti, 1989), 6.

⁴³ 'London, Friday, July 25', *Daily News*, 25 July 1879, p.4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 5.

⁴⁵ 'The Special Staff', *Chambers Journal of Literature, Science and Art*, (1873), p. 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* pp.17-18.

⁴⁷ 'Our Own Correspondent', *Leisure Hour*, p. 55

⁴⁸ (From Our Special Correspondent), 'War Letters. The Capitulation of the French Army', *Daily News*, 6 September 1870, p. 6. The report is attributed to Archibald Forbes in John Fisher, *Eye-Witness: An Anthology of British Reporting* (London: Cassell, 1960) and Jon E. Lewes, *The Mammoth Book of Combat: Reports from the Frontline* (Philadelphia: Running P, 2013). But Forbes joined Robinson's staff on the *Daily News* only *after* the battle of Sedan. Skinner was attached to the staff of the Crown Prince and carried his account to London, according to the *ODNB*, 'riding neck and neck with W.H. Russell of *The Times*, and crossing from Ostend in the same boat; their narratives appeared simultaneously on 6 September'. Thomas Secombe, 'Skinner, John Edwin Hilary (1839–1894)', rev. H. C. G. Matthew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25682>, accessed 11 Aug 2015]

⁴⁹ 'Our Own Correspondent', *Leisure Hour*, p. 53

⁵⁰ MacDonagh, 'Our Special Correspondent', p. 90

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