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Inventing Speed

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Inventing Speed

In 1800 we could move on land with the speed of a horse, or on sea with the speed of a sail-boat. For a few minutes, a human being might outrun either one, but that was it. Yet, by 1907 a Stanley Steamer had reached the *astonishing* speed of 150 miles an hour.

We've talked and read so much about the invention of locomotives, automobiles, airplanes - always focusing upon this technology or that, rather than on what was really being invented. What we were really doing was serving the human *craving* behind all the machinery. For this was the century in which we invented speed.

By 1800, we'd experienced significant speeds only in short *bursts* - *diving*, swinging on a rope. The prime metaphor for speed was the horse. In the mid-1800s, poet Bayard Taylor wrote,

From the desert I came to *thee*
On a *stallion shod* with fire,
And the winds are left behind
In the speed of my desire.

But even the horse had merely *teased* us. A horse might *taunt* us with forty miles an hour, but only for a minute or two at a time.

Then the steam engine: It had evolved throughout the eighteenth century before Watt began *improving* its power-to-weight ratio to the point that it might actually fit in a vehicle. At last, we had a power source that might *sustain* the experience of speed. Watt wanted no part of powered vehicles. But, if speed didn't catch his *fancy*, it *tempted* others. Since the largest existing vehicles were ships, several functioning steamboats were actually made using *bulky* pre-Watt engines.

When Fulton finally put a commercial Watt engine in a boat, the game was *afoot*. And, even before Fulton, steam-driven cars had been made. Richard Trevithick began building steam cars, then turned to the steam locomotive. He publicly demonstrated a small working steam railroad in London, in 1808 - the year after Fulton's first steamboat. And serious aerial experimentalists began *devising* both balloons and airplanes to be powered by steam.

Finally, in 1844, artist William Turner captured this impulse, this urge, with a fine metaphor. His painting *Rain, Steam, and Speed* is abstract. A railroad train *hurtles* across a bridge in a storm. We *squint* through

the *slanting* rain to see it. The engine appears to be a machine before its time - an anticipation of things to come. The painting implies speed yet to be realized.

That same year, the American *diarist* Philip Hone wrote, "By and by we shall have balloons pass over to London between sun and sun. Oh for the good old days of heavy post-coaches and speed at the rate of six miles an hour!" And Aldous Huxley wrote, "Speed provides the one *genuinely* modern pleasure."

So the coming of speed frightened some; *elated* others. What we invented in the nineteenth century was more than the sum of the parts. Not trains, not planes, not airplanes, but the all of them. It was speed - pure, hedonistic, and *inexorable* speed. ■

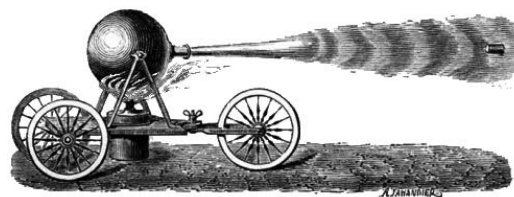


Fig. 1. — Éolipse à recul.

<i>afoot</i>	im Gange
<i>astonish, to</i>	erstaunen
<i>bulky</i>	sperrig, wuchtig
<i>burst</i>	Ausbruch
<i>craving</i>	Verlangen
<i>devise, to</i>	ersinnen, gestalten
<i>diarist</i>	Tagebuchsreiber
<i>dive, to</i>	ins Wasser springen
<i>elate, to</i>	begeistern
<i>fancy</i>	Einbildungskraft, Laune
<i>genuinely</i>	echt
<i>hurtle, to</i>	rasen
<i>improve, to</i>	verbessern
<i>inexorable</i>	unerbitterlich
<i>shod</i>	beschlagen
<i>slant, to</i>	neigen, schiefstellen
<i>squint, to</i>	blinzeln, schielen
<i>stallion</i>	Hengst
<i>sustain, to</i>	aufrechterhalten, tragen
<i>taunt, to</i>	spotten, verhöhnen
<i>tease, to</i>	reizen, necken
<i>tempt, to</i>	verlocken
<i>thee (you)</i>	altertümlich für du, dich, dir

Lange Zeit war ein Pferd im Galopp das Schnellste, das der Mensch sich vorstellen konnte. Doch mit einigen technischen Errungenschaften des 18. Jahrhunderts wurde nebenbei auch die Geschwindigkeit erfunden.

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