

Dickens and the Pleasure of the Text: The Risks of *Hard Times*

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Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ch. 5

Hard Times (1854) was for many years one of Dickens's less popular novels, until F. R. Leavis's discovery in it of serious art and a "comprehensive vision" (228).¹ Critics have often dismissed the novel as tending to caricature or denigrated it for its overdetermined depiction of the "opposition" between Fact and Fancy, misreading it as an attack on "Coke-town" or on utilitarianism. Critics and scholars from Humphrey House to David Craig either lament or applaud *Hard Times* according to their evaluation of how much "reality" it represents or of the author's political position; they tend to ignore questions of aesthetics or readership (Craig 11–36, House 203–11). To the opposite extreme, Steven Connor deemed *Hard Times* to be eminently deconstructable (100–103), and, exceptionally, Christina Lupton has attempted a Kantian reading of the tension between materialism and subjectivity in its aesthetics. However, such readings of *Hard Times* obscure a more complex struggle of the novel not only to make a case for Fancy in an industrial society ruled by the dominant ideology of utilitarianism but also to stage a performance of its own usefulness in a world of Facts. This struggle raises the stakes for the role of the novel in social criticism as something more than a force for policing discipline — as establishing an aesthetics which reconciles the work ethic with the pursuit of pleasure. Aesthetics was not an uncommon preoccupation of the Victorians, and the idea of play performed a "critical, connective function within the discursive infrastructure of Victorian culture" (Franklin 5). And yet little room has been found in analysis of

¹ Alexander Welsh is puzzled as to what moral message Leavis found in *Hard Times* (149–51).

that discourse for Dickens's playfulness, his theme of children's play, and the obvious theatricality of his writing.²

Hard Times is actually in keeping with the programmatic commitment made in Dickens's opening editorial in his journal *Household Words* — to bridge the gap between Masters and Laborers through the imagination and to vindicate the usefulness of literature in an industrial society governed by a utilitarian ideology. In contrast to "a mere utilitarian spirit" which binds minds to grim realities, Dickens makes the following promise:

In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished. To show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out: — to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination. ("A Preliminary Word," Dickens 1994–2000 II: 177)

Nevertheless, in vindicating its own usefulness and efficient production, Dickens's novel runs no small epistemological risk if the pleasure it gives is not taken seriously or if, like the circus, the conceit and illusion on which the plot depends do not work for all readers. If the reader does not experience pleasure or does not respond with imaginative empathy with the laboring classes, the argument may collapse into a futile battle of Fancy versus Facts. Alexander Welsh, for example, complains that Dickens's didactic repetitions of Bounderby's and Gradgrind's statements and his fairy-tale fables redouble the risk of boring the audience and inviting polarized critical assessments (155). Postmodern readers might find the binding of aesthetics and moral purpose at best embarrassing and would instinctively reject the Victorian assumption that the novel is a vehicle of social criticism and reform.

Elsewhere I have claimed that *Hard Times* is a novel about writing a novel in a utilitarian society where the novel plays a diminishing role and may soon (at least, in the anxious minds of diehard romantics) have no more right to exist than artists in Plato's *Republic* (Sicher 228–66). Here

² Jeffrey Franklin (214–15) explains his exclusion of Dickens from his study as an author uninterested in serious questions of high art and too theatrical in the popular sense. In his chapter on what Robert Garis once called the "Dickens theatre" Joseph Litvak (109–45) issues a caveat in a similar vein, downplaying Dickens's novels as too obviously spectacular.

Dickens makes his most extended plea for his novelistic practice, and perhaps far more risky, the prefaces to *Oliver Twist* and to *Bleak House* or asides in his previous novels. In fantasizing an extreme case of utilitarianism in the Gradgrind system and in the model town of Coketown which it has constructed, Dickens is employing Fancy — his general term for imagination — to show what is wrong with a world of Facts which has no “use” for it. The language and aesthetics of *Hard Times* deny that the world can be known only by collecting facts and applying rational utilitarian principles of classification, a system of knowledge exemplified and exhibited in that indestructible Fact of Facts, the Crystal Palace, which nevertheless burned down in 1936 after being removed to Sydenham.³ In those “ologies,” of which the dying Mrs. Gradgrind complains she will never hear the end, there is something missing, something to which she cannot put a name — not an “ology” at all — which she seeks by penning an imaginary letter in her delirium of wonderful no-meaning (225). This comical inscription of the ineffable something missing from the discourse of Political Economy in education and in industry is the means by which the novel defends (if I may be permitted the irony of using the term) its own ontology.

In mid-nineteenth century Britain pleasure was literally at risk in many factory towns, where popular culture, amusement, and even singing were regulated and policed. Employers wished to wean laborers away from the amusements and pranks that were part of the old craft manufacture and that distracted them from reliable diligence in the new factories: they used their influence to maintain surveillance of their workers’ activities outside the long working hours, while local clergy, temperance campaigners, and sabbatarians clamped down with evangelical zeal on frivolous and immoral amusement. Local authorities curtailed some folk festivities on the grounds that they constituted a public nuisance and encouraged drunken behavior and disorder (Bailey 30–37). Music and dancing were strictly licensed at public houses, the chief recreational meeting place for the working classes and artisans (the latter often associated with the Chartist movement).⁴

The popular legend of a grim existence in the new industrial towns, where one saw nothing “but what was severely workful” (65), according

³ The Crystal Palace serves in many ways as the unspoken dialogical context of *Bleak House*, whose construction of domestic space is the antipode of the Great Exhibition of 1851.

⁴ For illustrations of the political and class issues in the controversies over licensing of entertainment in pubs in the Bolton area in mid-century, see Kift 80–89.

to which a hefty sixpenny fine for singing or whistling was not uncommon in factories in the Leeds district in 1844 and similar penalties were inflicted for coming to work five minutes late or for swearing (Wilkes and Williams 22), does not take account of a boisterous working-class culture that gave relief from arduous labor in factories or in the fields, aside from pleasure taken in self-improvement and education in botany, music, or even poetry (Bailey 13–24). Amusement, including the circus, could, moreover, be regarded by some utilitarian and more benevolent employers as a safety valve to divert working-class political frustrations, as well as to release pent-up energies that would otherwise be spent on smoking and drinking (Taylor 133–36, Stoddart 97). It was not all work and no play in reality for men, women, and children in Victorian factories, since the commercialization of leisure, together with ease of transportation by steamboat and railway, made entertainment and recreation available for the masses. Dickens chronicled the joys of Greenwich Fair in the 1830s: “If the Parks be ‘the lungs of London,’ we wonder what Greenwich Fair is — a periodical breaking out, we suppose, a sort of springrash: a three days’ fever, which cools the blood for six months afterwards, and at the expiration of which, London is restored to its old habits of plodding industry, as suddenly and completely as if nothing had ever happened to disturb them” (*Boz* 135). There is much drinking, dancing, and kissing going on there, beneficial to public and personal health, all conducted in an unimpeded wholesome spirit of joy and merrymaking, which Boz recalls fondly, even if he cannot exactly remember how he got home in the early hours of the morning.⁵

However, in Dickens’s proto-dystopian fantasy it was not such an exaggeration to imagine a whole town or society that was “a triumph of Fact” (65), where Fancy was as efficiently bricked out as Nature itself. This might be a totalitarian state in which imagination is a thoughtcrime,⁶ were it not for the fact that the dislike of literature goes back to Hobbes. John Locke decried figurative language that excited the passions and misled judgment (*On Human Understanding* III: x §34; 288–89), while the banning of the frivolities of the novel was common to Puritans and

⁵ See Bailey, 24–27, 91–105; Judith Flanders, in a study of popular recreation in this period, explains that official holidays and shorter working days came later, in the 1860s and 1870s, but still it was the middle class that reserved the right of moral judgment on which leisure activities were appropriate. On the declining respectability of the pleasure gardens as urban leisure centers, see Lynda Nead’s discussion of changing aesthetics at Cremorne (109–46).

⁶ For a discussion of the dystopian vision in the novel see Toker 218–34.

Evangelicals: fears were expressed that the “promiscuous circulation of books” and desultory reading habits could be harmful for physical and mental health, leading to hedonism and lethargy (Mays 174). J. S. Mill (1863: 174) ascribed to Bentham the aphorism “All poetry is misrepresentation.” To which Mr. Gradgrind adds, “Never wonder” (89). But it would be an unjust exaggeration to ascribe such statements to utilitarianism generally, even if Bounderby insists that he has a monopoly on truth and that any other “imaginative qualities” are mere disguises for demands of turtle soup with a golden spoon (262).

For Jeremy Bentham, pleasure and pain were equal measures of discipline in an industrial society. In his essay on Bentham, J. S. Mill (1863: 173–74) misquotes him as saying, “Quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.” Actually, Bentham (in *The Rationale of Reward*, Book III, ch. 4) said that anyone can play the game, but few enjoy music or poetry; like Plato, he also believed that poets were falsifiers and deceivers: “Truth, exactitude of every kind is fatal to poetry. The poet must see everything through coloured media, and strive to make every one else do the same. It is true, there have been noble spirits, to whom poetry and philosophy have been equally indebted; but these exceptions do not counteract the mischiefs which have resulted from this magic art. If poetry and music deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased” (206–207). Yet, while Catherine Gallagher (62–85) and other new historicists have claimed that Dickens is writing from premises common to many utilitarians and that the novel does not depart from Adam Smith’s definition of useful bodies, a novel of *individual* growth and imagination is surely working against Bentham’s felicific calculus, which regards society as an *aggregate* of individuals who determine through their own interest the “happiness of the greatest number.”⁷

Through the two competing metasystems of representation, Fact and Fancy, *Hard Times* actually resists the naturalization of abstract space in the Malthusian justification of an economic policy based on unbending and divinely ordained “natural” laws responsible for the cruel realities of the industrial city. The butt of Dickens’s satire is a sign system which conceals a void of meaning and which, ironically, serves no useful purpose, except to impose an inhuman uniformity and enforced conformity (the agenda of the pugilist government inspector in the schoolroom). In

⁷ See Arneson on the relation of Benthamite thinking to *Hard Times*.

one of Sissy's "natural" happy mistakes, statistics are exposed as "stutterings," she is made to learn that national, not natural, prosperity is what matters, and that the pain and suffering of the individual one of no account in the happiness of the whole (97–98).

I want to suggest that the pleasure Dickens takes in his satire of Gradgrindery carries risks, but these too are part of the pleasure of reading, rather like the risk of ballooning, as in the depiction of Dickens and Cruikshank in the frontispiece of *Sketches by Boz* going up on a pilot trip, a common entertainment at pleasure gardens that offered a spectacle for those on the ground and a panoramic view (as well as a bumpy landing) for the middle-class gentlemen who paid for the thrills of the hazardous ride. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes matches the pleasure of writing to the desire in reading, in the delight of transgressive codes and the expectation of satisfaction, but unfortunately Barthes writes off Dickens, along with Balzac and Jules Verne, as dreadfully old-fashioned in length and delay of climax, frankly boring, giving the reader satisfaction only in skipping whole passages and pages (tmesis). Indeed, Dickens takes great pleasure in disproving the validity of a purely mimetic theory of representation, which would ban horses on wallpaper or flowers in carpets (Dickens's little joke at the expense of his friend at the Department of Art and Design, Henry Cole; Fielding),⁸ and it is tempting to think of Barthes's location of the "site of pleasure" not in the imitative "relation of mimic and model" but "solely of dupe and mimic," the sheer enjoyment of production which shifts value to the signifier as performance (Barthes 55, 65).

Looking from a Brechtian viewpoint at Dickens's handling of emotion, the stock in trade of the melodrama, Juliet John concludes that Dickens privileges performance over the verbal, and so achieves the impossible — a combination of the text of pleasure with the text of bliss:

To Dickens, emotion as an artistic and political tool can be used to disrupt narratives that reassure, to defamiliarize, and to fragment stories. Alternatively, or simultaneously, they do just the opposite, satisfying primitive monopathic desires for wholeness. . . . The generic fluidity in Dickens's conception of the novel explains the comparative ease with which he can theorize and utilize the novel as a site of "pleasure" and "bliss." (137)

The tension between bliss and pleasure is evident in Dickens's literal performance of "the text of pleasure," when serialized parts of his work

⁸ On "Fancy" in Dickens see Collins; Sonstroem 520–29; and Higbie.

were read aloud or he gave exhaustingly dramatic readings of his work (John 139). We can readily picture ladies feeling faint when Dickens performed Sikes's murder of Nancy, and he must have been only too well aware that his popularity fed on the taste for sensationalist melodrama.⁹

The text's own performance shows that what Dickens calls Fancy is doing its work and doing it usefully. Far from merely subscribing to a status quo sugared by compassion, it shows through exemplary stories that (*pace* Martineau) a Benthamite rational egoism cannot be a fit training for life and that there are other elements left out of Bentham's sum of human motivation, foremost among them, as J. S. Mill had also noted, the role of the imagination in the formation of moral personality. The fallacious opposition of Fact and Fancy is recognizable in Mill's acknowledgment in his *Autobiography* that poetry helped him through his mental crisis after an upbringing in Facts and made the "cultivation of the feelings . . . one of the cardinal points in [his] ethical and philosophical creed" (1909: 95). The opposition nevertheless obscures the more significant debate between organicism or idealism and empiricism in philosophy, not to mention the competing methodologies in science itself.

In his often cited article "Fraud on the Fairies" (*Household Words*, 1 October 1853) Dickens blasted Cruikshank, the illustrator of *Oliver Twist*, for altering fairy tales for use as a propaganda tool in favor of teetotalism (not his favorite cause). For one thing, the conscription of children's stories for any agenda was unjustifiable and sounded like the didactic utilitarian literature of the sort Dickens proceeded to satirize in an updated parody of "Cinderella" which distorted the time-honored originals. Among the reports of the Mudfog Association there is a similar satire of utilitarian attacks on children's ignorance of Fact arising from their indulgence in Fancy: the story of Jack and Jill might be laudable if the children were toiling uphill on a domestic errand, but it was inexcusable that Jill should laugh at Jack's disaster (Dickens 1994–2000 I: 527). However, this was also an occasion, as Dickens explained to Angela Burdett-Coutts in a letter of September 18, 1853, to launch a plea for "a little more fancy among children and a little less fact" (Dickens 1965–2002 VII: 148). He believed that, in a utilitarian age in particular, "it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy Tales should be respected. Our English red tape is too magnificently red to ever be employed in the tying up of such trifles, but every one who has considered the subject knows full well

⁹ See also Hughes and Lund 143; and Hayward's study of Dickens's place in Victorian popular culture.

that a nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun" (Dickens 1994–2000 III: 168). This appeal to empire-building is a way of arguing for capitalism with a human face, for only Fancy can introduce "gentleness and mercy" into working lives; it is a defense of literature as a moral agent indispensable to a humane society that abhors tyranny and brute force.

Dickens knew that Science had banished the fairies in its reading of the Book of Nature, but, as he wrote in an 1848 review of Robert Hunt's appropriately entitled *The Poetry of Science*,

To show that Science, truly expounding nature, can, like nature herself, restore in some new form whatever she destroys; that, instead of binding us, as some would have it, in stern utilitarian chains, when she has freed us from a harmless superstition, she offers to our contemplation something better and more beautiful, something which, rightly considered, is more elevating to the soul, nobler and more stimulating to the soaring fancy; is a sound, wise wholesome object. (Dickens 1994–2000 II: 131)

The plea that fantasy be left inviolate is not just a way of asking for respect for the fairy tales of childhood; it is a plea for imagination in literature and in the workplace. A literature which is neither utilitarian nor instrumental recognizes the true poetry of the "fairy-tales of Science" (to use Tennyson's phrase) by showing that the wonders of Nature can be appreciated only through the imagination and reminding us that if there had been less wondering and wonderment there might have been fewer inventions. James Watt would have been poorer by a penny for his thoughts in that apocryphal tale of his improvement of the steam engine, and Sol Gills would have had no marvelous tales to tell. For both Tennyson and Dickens, the discoveries in geology, anthropology, archeology, and evolution theory that had transformed intellectual horizons, as advances in optics and physics had done in the late seventeenth century, revealed the poetry of science, though not every statistician could see the science in poetry.

What *Hard Times* shows, however, is that Gradgrind's statistical account of society contradicts the lived life of individuals, which it is the business of fiction to show not by policing the poor, as Harriet Martineau urged Dickens in her attacks on *Hard Times*, but by exciting the middle-class readers into pleasurable empathy. At the end of the "key-note" description of Coketown in ch. 5 of Book I, in the transition to the introduction of the circus people, the narrator wonders whether there was not in the employers' stereotype of the ungrateful laborers and the Political Economists' statistical tables one thing that had been

deliberately set at nought? That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions? That exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief — some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits, and giving them a vent—some recognized holiday, though it were but for an honest dance to a stirring band of music — some occasional light pie in which even M'Choakumchild had no finger — which craving must and would be satisfied aright, or must and would inevitably go wrong, until the laws of Creation were repealed? (67–68)

Immediately following this plea, Gradgrind and Bounderby repair to the Pegasus's Arms, a pub which is an appropriate "home" to Sleary's horseriders — it was Pegasus's kick which brought out of the mountain the soul-inspiring waters of Hippocrene that came to be associated with poetic inspiration. Of course the winged horse behind the bar displays a low form of theatrical entertainment, but that is without doubt a deliberate choice: Pegasus was an emblem inevitably linked with the equestrian circus (Schlicke 265n. 48), and very different from Bitzer's definition of a horse. Yet it is not a matter of circus "philothopy" pitted against Gradgrindery — the circus people have a poor view of education and are mostly illiterate — but a question of what is wrong with Gradgrind's definition of social function and of precisely what is at fault in urban industrial civilization. In a passage opening the chapter "Stephen Blackpool" that has apparently nothing to do with the subject, Dickens writes sarcastically: "I entertain a weak idea that the English people are as hard-worked as any people upon whom the sun shines. I acknowledge to this ridiculous idiosyncrasy, as a reason why I would give them a little more play" (102).

As Sleary advises Gradgrind and Bounderby, people must be amused, and in a metafictional parallel to the theme of bridging the gap between the Two Nations the novel performs such playfulness with a spectacle of burlesque exposures, fantasized parodies of utilitarianism, and a comic plot that is resolved by a performing horse, no less, proving Bitzer wrong on more than one count about the definition of that particular creature. The story of Sissy Jupe and the dog Merrylegs shows, in Sleary's endearing lisp, "that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different; t'other, that it hath a way of calculating or not calculating, whith thomehow or another ith at leatht ath hard to give a name to, ath the wayth of the dogth ith!" (308). The circus is not a model society, for all the toleration of its loose morals and bare legs and

its carnivalized display of the body,¹⁰ an admittedly licensed exposure that afforded pleasure to middle-class adult spectators attracted to the theatricality of the spectacle. Yet the circus people represent a childlike sincerity, honesty, and spontaneous compassion that is missing in the calculating language of Gradgrindery:

They all assumed to be mighty rakish and knowing, they were not very tidy in their private dresses, they were not at all orderly in their domestic arrangements, and the combined literature of the whole company would have produced but a poor letter on any subject. Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving, often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the every-day virtues of any class of people in the world. (77)

This natural compassion, in contradiction of Gradgrind's class prejudice, is "one thing needful," like the faith missing in the hedonistic calculus of pleasure of the Motive-Grinders and Profit-and-Loss Philosophers in the Mill of Logic in *Sartor Resartus*. It is in their deeds as well as in performance that the circus people must show compassion in order to refute Gradgrindery, which allows for it neither in its arithmetic nor in its language. Emma Gordon, herself in the family way, nurtures Sissy Jupe after her father runs away, when Bounderby can only offer her the brutal plain Facts of the case — much to the violent indignation of the circus people (79). As Sleary warns Gradgrind after the circus people have persuaded him to do the right thing and take in Sissy, "People mutht be amuthed, . . . they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning" (82–83). Rachael's caring affection for Stephen, too, is testimony of innate compassion among the lower classes. Stephen performs the role of neo-Christian saint of forbearance and kindness, a martyr to the Masters' hardheartedness and criminal negligence, who maintains an all-too perfect moral integrity in the muddle of hypocritical laws made for the wealthy and privileged members of society. But whereas Stephen's labor reduces him to part of the larger machine of Coketown, the performance of the circus must work as pleasure for their audience.

For all the emphasis on the illusion of art and the playful comic representation of the circus (as in *Nicholas Nickleby*), Dickens is not simply advocating the merits of popular culture, and we cannot ignore unsta-

¹⁰ On the "qualified eroticism" of the female body in performance that attracted a middle-class audience see Stoddart 175–79.

ble meanings in his argument or paradoxes such as Sleary's role as a self-made man who collects money in the niche of his capitalist temple. Dickens is pleading for the necessity of art within the industrial city as recreation in the sense of both leisure and creativity, yet the preaching of this moral imperative by a man like Sleary sounds so uncharacteristic that he is himself surprised at being such a "Cackler."

The circus, moreover, performs a narrative art (Lodge 27), and its rhetoric (not to mention livelihood) depends on art as skill as well as stratagem.¹¹ The analogy of novelist with circus performer reminds us that Dickens was an avid fan of the circus in life and fiction. For many years one of London's major attractions, Astley's Amphitheatre purveyed popular entertainment in the tradition of pantomime and entertained the audience with epic presentations of historical battle scenes as well as low comedy. Boz captures the atmosphere of such performances in a sketch called "Astley's" and wonders at the impression made on him as a child, reflecting on his more mature unwillingness to accept that horseriders and clowns are in reality shabby, disheveled individuals given to drink and despair (128–35). Equestrian dramas got around the legal prohibition until 1843 of staging prose narrative and cashed in on the thirst for spectacle among all classes, while the display of horse-riding tricks combined with mime and story-telling (Stoddart 11–20).¹² Astley's followed other Victorian theaters in staging scenes from *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* among adaptations of popular lore and literature, so that Dickens's novels were performances in more than one sense (Schlicke 154).¹³ This was, after all, a novelist who conceived of his characters as actors, who himself raided the melodrama, stole Quilp from the pantomime, and is supposed to have imitated the leading comedian Charles Mathews in drawing the character of Jingle.¹⁴

The circus's strong connection with pantomime is particularly relevant to Dickens's aesthetics. In the "Stray Chapters" that Boz wrote for *Bentley's Miscellany* in March 1837, in parallel with the serialization of *Oliver Twist* which satirized utilitarian "philosophy," the pantomime was

¹¹ One may recollect the spectacular skill in packaging that Dickens learnt in the Blacking Warehouse and that was displayed in the window for the edification of the public (Forster I: 25).

¹² Municipal bye-laws are probably the reason why in *Hard Times* the circus camps on "neutral ground" outside Coketown.

¹³ Mr. Astley was, like Mr. Sleary, a self-made man, and his rise from private soldier to horse-riding was widely documented in guides to the capital.

¹⁴ See also Andrews on Dickens's public readings.

extolled as the “mirror of life” which was the “secret cause” of the audience’s “amusement and delight” (Dickens 1994–2000 I: 501). In 1838, Dickens wrote an introduction to the memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi, the famous Italian clown who transformed English pantomime, which had adopted several personages of the *commedia dell’arte*, such as the pantaloone, the harlequin, and the clown. For Dickens the loss of the pantomime clown (Grimaldi had retired in 1824, when Dickens was only 12 years old) was especially regrettable in a utilitarian age that devalued artisanship and pleasure (Stoddart 129–30). In this essay on mimesis and art, Dickens takes up the slapstick comedy of the clown as the central, cathartic figure in the representation of the ups-and-down of life, disappointed love, and the buffoonery of politics. What Dickens calls “the representation of life” inverts the relation of stage and life, as in Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage” (Dickens 1994–2000 I: 507), when the clown takes the harlequin’s wand and magically transforms the principal actors. The circus conveys Dickens’s understanding of how art should ideally capture both the reader’s empathy and imagination. When Jupe (who never appears in the novel) fails to do that and the audience stops laughing, he is finished as an artist. The figure of the clown introduces into the novels a Bakhtinian carnivalization of the everyday, which redeems it through an anarchic subversive laughter. This is one reason why the circus is a threat to Bounderby and Gradgrind. In the performance of the text, Dickens borrows the language of popular theater: he exploits the mixed-media form of the pantomime, particularly its improvisation, travesty, pathos, obvious jokes, and Shakespearian quips, rather than pursuing a tightly structured literary plot with a controlling narratorial voice (Lodge 42–43, Cave 411).¹⁵ Dickens is in effect defending the legitimacy of his own aesthetics by granting us double pleasure — from the comic portrayal of Mrs. Sparsit’s false genealogy and the burlesque unmasking of Bounderby’s false origins as well as from the comic plot founded on an aesthetics of pleasure.

Our desire as readers is too often measured by the novelist’s resistance, a sado-masochistic relationship which teases meaning out of the text by violating the bounds of imagination, rather like a spectator undressing a strip-tease artist (Barthes 6–7). The pleasure of the text here

¹⁵ Welsh (186–209) discusses the novel *as* circus, all the characters being played by clowns who impersonate their social betters for satirical purposes, as in a later comic critique of industrialization, Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. See also Eigner’s book-length study of Dickens.

is explicitly a sexual fantasy, though (typically for Victorians) Dickens sublimated it and dressed it in the clothes of a child-woman who has been robbed of a childhood which presumably would have allowed the moral growth necessary for the healthy expression of adult sexuality. The fantasy which Louisa dreams into the embers of the fire is a claim to a repressed sexuality, an “unwholesome” fire with nothing to burn. When Louisa, whose imagination has been systematically starved of any fancy, looks out at the monotonous chimney stacks she declares, much to the consternation of her father, that “when the night comes, Fire bursts out” (135). This is the fire missing in the domestic hearth of Stone Lodge. The absolutist ideology of Facts is imagined as an arid desert of utility into which no human warmth or love is allowed, no irrational inspiration, no spark of the imagination. Louisa and Tom, contemplating their fates in the Platonic cave in *Hard Times*, can only see the shadows. The fantasy which Louisa dreams into the embers, is, in a more defined sense than the story-telling fire read by the unnamed steel foundry worker in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a claim to a childhood stolen by industrialization, much as Lizzie Hexam’s fireside dreaming in *Our Mutual Friend* indicates a will to good through an imaginative reading of the past, present, and future.

To come to Reason “through the tender light of Fancy” (223) is to preserve the Wordsworthian garden of childhood innocence that, at the end of *Hard Times*, fortifies the spirit in adversity — the cold ashes of the dissolved household (as I read the last lines) — and adult mortality, in a neoromantic compassion through imaginative empathy, that may be sentimental but not devoid of eroticism (the Dickensian child-woman is never quite asexual). Tasting the forbidden Tree of Fancy in the circus is the primal sin of Peeping Tom and of Louisa playing Eve, a rebellion that indirectly leads her into the hands of the serpent in the garden, James Harthouse. In fact, Dickens sabotages the Victorian convention of the Fallen Woman when Louisa descends her Staircase and falls at the feet of her Father, whose calculations of marriage statistics and planned, obedient, and loveless matrimony cannot help her. Can we ignore the role of Fancy in a counter-argument about aberrant female sexuality? Dickens himself earned snickering derision when word went round that in Urania Cottage, the home for Fallen Women funded by his friend Miss Angela Burdett-Coutts, the inmates were given a piano each, though it is true that, on his instructions, the women were treated to readings from Wordsworth (though the program of self-improvement entailed strict surveillance and concluded with emigration and reform in Australia, the usual

destination for transported convicts and prostitutes). Clearly the effective pleasure of poetry was meant to correct wanton desire and unlawful sexuality by imparting moral sense.¹⁶

It would surely be naïve to think that imaginative pleasure could help to bring about an “affect” (in Lyotard’s libidinal economy) among the working classes and the outcasts of society, despite Martha Nussbaum’s 1995 plea for Dickens and *Hard Times* as a means to reconcile Fact and Fancy; Willie van Peer has similarly enlisted *Hard Times* for a liberal agenda, turning it into a test case for universal moral solidarity.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Art as play belies the contradiction between *homo ludens* and *homo faber* since it is through the production of the novel that the imagination is brought playfully into sympathy with the factory workers and the Fairy Palaces are shown to be monstrous mills belching smoke (107). This point has been missed by D. A. Miller and other scholars who read the novel’s ludic tendency as secretly complicit with panoptic policing, or as ironically reinforcing the ideology which it is parodying.¹⁸ The circus is a performance of the joining of work and play and is surely not supposed to represent a real instrument in social change, like soap for public hygiene.¹⁹

We can follow this principle in Dickens’s juxtaposition of melodrama and the Polytechnic Institute in his 1850 “The Amusements of the People,” published in *Household Words*: imagination is here advocated as a way of educating the lower classes to a better life and to a less criminal one. The Polytechnic Institute, Dickens believed, like other utilitarian displays of machinery, such as the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace, gave the common man nothing that spoke to his imagination, no escape from the “literal world.” To talk to a young man who had been brought up on cogs and wheels was not particularly interesting or useful, and Dickens would rather trust someone who had been to the Pantomime: “there is a range of imagination in most of us, which no amount of steam-engines will satisfy, and which The-great-exhibition-of-the-works-of-all-nations, itself, will probably leave unappeased” (Dickens 1994–2000 II: 181). The Mechanics’ Institute is so thoroughly utilitarian, it cannot even

¹⁶ See Hartley’s book on Urania Cottage.

¹⁷ See also the responses to Nussbaum by Kidder; Stow.

¹⁸ See, for example, Litvak’s discussion of Mrs Sparsit as an agent of ideological surveillance (117–20).

¹⁹ But see Paul Schlicke’s extensive researches on the historical background in this arena, spotlighting the importance of the circus as adult entertainment (137–89).

call a song anything but an illustration, while the books in its library and in a local bookseller's (including one that anathematizes a circus) are mind-deadly instructive, a tendency which Dickens believes to be counter-productive in any effect they might have on public morals.

The insistence in "The Amusements of the People" on the working classes' "right to be amused," later echoed by Sleary, is an anti-utilitarian declaration of faith in the imagination and a defense against censorship and repression (Dickens 1994–2000 II: 196). That article of faith is put to the test in the circus when it acts out a creed of compassion and loving-kindness. Its language — circus slang — is, like Mr. Sleary's lisp or Stephen's regional and class dialect, unreadable and illiterate to Gradgrind or Bounderby. Sissy negates the fundamental principle of Political Economy by restating the commandment, "To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me" (95), in contradiction of Gradgrind's sound principle that the Good Samaritan was a bad economist (a joke repeated in *Little Dorrit* in connection with the workhouse's authority over Mr. Nandy).

For Carlyle, as for Dickens, the light or flame of imagination must resist the choking of the human spirit by a totalizing utilitarian discourse. Without imaginative sympathy, there can be no altruism or charity, no understanding of the Other. According to J. S. Mill, Bentham lacked that Romantic faculty of imagination

which enables us, by a voluntary effort, to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another. . . . Without it nobody knows even his own nature, further than circumstances have actually tried it and called it out; nor the nature of his fellow-creatures, beyond such generalizations as he may have been enabled to make from his observation of their outward conduct. (1962: 61–62).

Dickens's novel is itself resisting the texts of Gradgrindery, just as among Coketown's library readers Defoe resists Euclid and Goldsmith resists Cocker, despite the fact that by mid-century anyone denying the principle of the happiness of the greatest number or the principle of profit-and-loss might be thought insane.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens is in effect carrying out the program of *Household Words*, to apply Fancy to knowledge of current affairs and the state of the nation. In a rehearsal of the romance of familiar things ("Preface" to *Bleak House*), this novel brings the middle-class Victorian reader jour-

neying through the industrial landscape into imaginative sympathy with the worker. The result is not quantifiable knowledge of collected facts that one may expect from the novel as representation, but representation through the imagination, with the pleasure of the text invoking the sense of the life of another through the workings of empathetic play.

Dickens's rallying call in "A Preliminary Word," reiterated in the theme of *Hard Times*, defends a privileging of imaginative vision because it brings a sense of moral responsibility which could be found neither in the factual and statistical representation of the *Chambers' Journal* nor in the sensationalist serial magazines which appealed to the lower classes (such as the Chartist G. W. M. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London*). Dickens's novel presents a defense of Fancy as useful labor, and its representation of Fancy is performative in its imaginative work. Dickens's production of the novel draws on a libidinal economy and pits aesthetic pleasure and erotic play against the sterile production of Coketown (Kearns 178–204). Dickens promotes his prodigious and prolific production as economically and socially valuable, though more in the spirit of Southey's praise for writers as busy bees than Chadwick's ironic appreciation of Dickens's novels as a moral policing of labor.²⁰ To teach that work is not a brutal fact but can come within range of art is to rebut Macaulay's objection to Southey's substitution of fanciful for statistical representation, which added grist to the mill of those utilitarians who argued against the educational or social usefulness of literature.

Recommending the "usefulness" of *Hard Times* as an important social document, in a note to "Unto This Last," Ruskin asserted the truth in this novel, despite Dickens's choosing to speak in "a circle of stage fire" (99–100n. 1). But what if, like Jupe, Dickens misses a trick? What if the caricature of Gradgrind and the comic parody of utilitarianism become too obvious and contrived? Harriet Martineau (who reads after Bentham) and Roland Barthes (who reads after Sade) are among many who do not find satisfaction in Dickens's novel. The novel must work hard to show

²⁰ In an address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1862, Chadwick declared that works of the imagination could have a place in the "dismal science" of Political Economy, and recommended that the writings of Dickens and Ruskin be read out to factory laborers in order to quicken the pace of production (cited in Gallagher 110). In *The Health of Nations*, Chadwick related how an idle apprentice had speeded up production by reading from *The Pickwick Papers* (quoted in Trotter 208). Interested in writers' and even dancers' stimulating labor rather than their entertainment value, Chadwick nevertheless did not dismiss their usefulness (see Gallagher 111–12).

that its fables are not “idle” (as Bounderby and Grindgrind would have it), but represent the lived lives of men and women. Because imagination serves as mode as well as metaphor for the vision of the novel, the novel must be instructive as well as entertaining, in the tradition of Defoe and Richardson, but with a modern consciousness of the illusion of art. If the novelist fails to entertain us with his verbal acrobatics, what chance for literature in an age of utilitarian conformity, let alone in our hedonist culture, where leisure is privileged over work and expects only pleasure from the text? Certainly, in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens showed his disdain for the Wildean wit of aesthetes and cynics such as Eugene Wrayburn before he is reformed through love.

As R. H. Horne noted in his *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), Dickens’s “influence upon his age is extensive — pleasurable, instructive, healthy, reformatory” (Newsom 4). And thus, Robert Newsom seems to suggest in his discussion of Barthes and Foucault, as a “product of his age” Dickens inscribes the Victorian discourses of work *and* pleasure (1–4). Indeed, *Hard Times* argues that reading for pleasure *is* an agent of change. How far such agency worked beyond the middle-class reader, how many laborers read *Hard Times* or how many preferred it to Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1833) must remain a matter of speculation.²¹ Moreover, the pleasure of the text must be contextualized within the debate over the dignity of literature that raged at mid-century, against the background of the acrimonious exchange between Thackeray (in *Pendennis*) and Dickens (in *David Copperfield*), as well as the inclusion of Carlyle in Ford Madox Ford’s painting *Work* (1852–1863). Paradoxically, if the novel seduces the reader into desire, then it too has become a fetishized product, but if it successfully competes with the control and repression of desire, represented by Dombey or Gradgrind, its resistance to commodification of the body becomes a claim also for a ludic celebration of pleasure that allows Dickens to ride both Pegasus and the steam-engine.

²¹ Carolyn Berman contends that the compact and relatively cheap publication of *Hard Times* catered for a wide audience, but Dickens addresses a primarily middle-class readership, competing with governmental Blue Books which misrepresented the workers or failed to give true knowledge of their condition. Eleanor Courtemanche, however, argues that the imaginative narratives and ideologies of Dickens and Martineau were not necessarily diametrically opposed.

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