

"Hard Times" and a Critique of Utopia: A Typological Study

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Hard Times and a Critique of Utopia: A Typological Study

Shortly after the publication of Dickens's major novels, a wave of Utopian literature rose on both sides of the Atlantic—to subside only at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Utopian imagination began to yield its place to dystopian nightmares.

Most Utopian authors had read one another's work as well as their common precursor texts, such as Thomas Moore's *Utopia* and Plato's *Republic*. They had also read Dickens. In H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, a relatively late work of the genre, a Utopian society is created, in front of our eyes, in a conversation between two traveling companions, one active and the other passive. On one occasion the latter is moved to say, "To tell you the truth I've rather hated this Utopia of yours at times. You mustn't mind my saying this but there is something of the Gradgrind—". The sentence remains unfinished but the other protagonist readily concedes that he is "a Gradgrind," as well as a Herbert Spencer, a vivisector, a materialist, an Atheist (433–34), and, implicitly, a hard-facts man whose vision of the brighter future involves a down-to-earth "gradual grinding" of experience (Allingham 19). In other words, one man's *utopia*, a place that is nowhere, or *eutopia*, a good place, is another man's *dystopia*, a bad place in which we may, for all we know, be trapped here and now.

In addition to enriching the text in which it appears, a literary allusion can also illuminate the text to which it refers (see Ben-Porat). Along with calling our attention to the gradgrindian quality of Wells's Utopia, the remark quoted above also points to the possibility of reading Dickens's Thomas Gradgrind as a person with a Utopian temperament and the novel *Hard Times* as a critique of Utopian thinking.¹ Indeed, quite a number of issues raised in *Hard Times* may be found

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to repay a typological study in relation to traditional Utopian and modern dystopian fiction.

As Sir Isaiah Berlin has argued, the main reason for the decline of utopian thinking in our times is the relatively recent recognition of the incommensurability of different people's views of happiness and value (1–48). Dickens's novel was ahead of its time not so much in showing that there is more than "One Thing Needful" (47, 243) for social justice and private contentment as in suggesting that the very nature of things needful in individual pursuits of happiness may vary in many ways.² In *Hard Times* a well-meaning social reformer who upholds essentially progressive ideas is shown inadvertently promoting some of the most dangerous tendencies of the society which he strives to perfect.

Thomas Gradgrind's case is one of the earliest literary studies of near-dystopian results of misguided idealism. Whereas seeds of dystopian possibilities can be detected in most Utopian works (including the book that has given the genre its name), it usually takes a narrative rather than a descriptive discourse to reveal their force. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates only explains the principles on which his idea of the perfect society should be based; Thomas Moore takes a step further by imagining how such a society would be statically described by an enchanted traveler. Later Utopian works, such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, invent functional narrative plots in which a visitor from the contemporary world chances into and is shown around a future earthly paradise, or else a paradisiac enclave in the modern world—as in B. F. Skinner's *Walden II*. And when such plots break away from their functional matrix and give play to nondidactic imagination (even if minimally, as in Butler's *Erewhon* and Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Coming Race*) the utopian idyll almost inevitably begins to turn into a nightmare, whether an inchoate one of *Gulliver's Travels* or a full-fledged one of Orwell's *1984*. Narrative art tests systems of thinking about social realities, revealing their hidden flaws and potential liabilities (cf. Iser 72–79); it is less apt to promulgate a specific vision of social good. Dickens's critical exploration of the nature and the results of Gradgrind's single-minded adherence to a Utopian vision is thus associated not only with the liminal place of *Hard Times* in the history of ideas, but also with the general tendencies of a fictional narrative's processing of ideological systems.

The most prominent morphological feature³ of utopian/dystopian literature is the presence of a *foundational principle*, a philosophical or sociological idea which forms the deep structure of a Utopian setting. Such an idea may, however, take a somewhat debased surface form. Thus, the surface form of Gradgrind's Utopianism is its total valorization of factual knowledge⁴ and total exclusion of anything that can fall under the heading of "fancy." The deep structure of Gradgrind's utopia is, of course, a benevolent utilitarianism, à la Jeremy Bentham.

Bentham sought scientifically based social and legal reform. His ideas can be called "utopian" in the sense that Karl Mannheim has given to this word: they are "situationally transcendent ideas . . . which . . . have a transforming effect upon the existing historical-social order" (205). Thus defined, "Utopian-

ism” is opposed to “ideology”—a system of thinking that is oriented towards the perpetuation of the existing order of things.⁵ The Benthamite Thomas Gradgrind is a Utopian in the sense that he has mapped out and started following a specific path towards an expected improvement of the social order. Paradoxically, this is a path that Dickens himself may have trodden for part of the way: the most poignant critique of utopia often comes from utopian idealists who have become disillusioned.

Mannheim’s concept of “Utopia” is to be distinguished from the notion of “Utopia” as a literary genre, but it serves our purpose in so far as it helps to emphasize that a Utopian vision is not necessarily based on the communal ownership of property. In other words, unlike the imaginary island-state in Thomas Moore’s little masterpiece, many later Utopias are not communist ones—examples range from Francis Bacon’s “The New Atlantis,” through Harrington’s *Oceana*, to H. G. Wells, and to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Indeed, the kind of social Utopia pursued by Bentham’s Utilitarian followers was based on a study of the relationship between people’s needs and resources available to satisfy them; it sought to establish a social structure that would optimize this relationship on the principle of the “greatest happiness of the greatest number.” This structure is not to be perceived as based entirely on the free-market economy which would self-adjust on the *laissez-faire* principle; it also involved a degree of interventionism. Dickens was opposed to the idea of “laissez-faire”: as his Stephen Blackpool puts it, “lettin alone would never do’t” (182). Yet while constantly negotiating improvement in culture and education, sanitation, or legislation, Dickens was skeptical about leaving it entirely to social reform to alleviate human suffering: reform had to be complemented by active work of compassion, by immediately addressing the suffering of separate individuals, by, that is, philanthropy—though Dickens seems to have preferred to see it in terms of an individualized charity rather than in terms of a semi-institutionalized corrective to the established social order.

It is such a preference that forms the background to Sissy’s argument with her teacher on the subject of statistics. The teacher, who asks her to evaluate the extent to which a city is to be considered a thriving one if “in it there are a million inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are starved to death in the streets” (97), is not indifferent to the problem of poverty. In his word “only” one may hear the wish that the number of the destitute should be reduced to zero—a theoretical wish, perhaps, vitiated by a touch of complacency and by an attempt to insulate oneself from the suffering of others by calculating it away.⁶ One can also hear in this word an echo of the contemporary principle according to which, to quote Bulwer Lytton, “When abuses arise to a certain pitch, they must be remedied.”⁷ The teacher evidently believes that it is *only* when the statistics of abuses rises to a certain level that these abuses emerge not as isolated events but as epiphenomena of the socioeconomic structure—which structure must then be modified. Sissy, however, would want suffering to be dealt with in the present rather than in the future—“Do it at once,” as Bounderby would say, about other things (63). She wants it to be addressed irrespective of the statistics that may present a specific kind of suffering as atypical, and addressed directly rather than via a

slow-paced social engineering. She does not voice the millenarian belief that all suffering can be eliminated altogether, but she would evidently likewise reject the callous view that the small statistics of destitution is evidence that society is essentially healthy and that those exceptional characters (such as Sissy's father) for whom it does not work are themselves to blame for their failure to fit in—"it must be just as hard upon those who were starved," she says, "whether the others were a million, or a million million" (97). We may infer that Sissy may have a little golden-age utopia of her own.

However that might be, the basically Gradgrindian view that low statistics reflects the marginality of those who do not fit in is utopian *par excellence*. Most utopias are exclusive and intolerant of systems of value incommensurate with their foundational principles. Unlike Mr. Sleary of the fancy horse-riding, utopians do not really wish that "both thides of the banner may be equally theen" (80).⁸ Dickens does not present the circus as an alternative to Gradgrind's scientific positivism any more than Huxley presents an Indian reservation as an alternative to his Brave New Civilization. In the natural course of things, fancy and fact complement each other. What Dickens satirizes is the single-mindedness with which a utopian tends to ban whatever may divert him from the straight and narrow: "I often say to Mr. Gradgrind," wrote Dickens to Henry Cole, "that there is reason and good intention in much that he does—in fact, in all that he does—but that he overdoes it. Perhaps by dint of his going his way and my going mine, we shall meet at last."⁹

"His going his way and my going mine"—like Abraham and Lot who started by going part of the way together. Bernard Shaw read *Hard Times* as indicating Dickens's conversion from the complacency characteristic of the first half of his century (and best exemplified by Macaulay's optimism) to the massive criticism of the basics of society as in "Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris and Carpenter." From Marx Dickens would of course always differ on the question of means (his appeals for reform were made, consistently, to the ruling classes and the idea of popular revolution was abhorrent to him), but Shaw's main point is that Dickens abandoned the opinion that the horrors of contemporary life are merely a matter of "individual delinquencies, local plaguespots, negligent authorities" and adopted the belief that "it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible; that it is not our criminals but our magnates that are robbing and murdering us; and that it is not merely Tom All Alone's that must be demolished . . . but our entire social system" (41–42).

Shaw, however, overstates the case on both counts. From the beginning of his literary career Dickens attacked social evils that were not entirely localized—suffice it to recall the system of education described in *Nicholas Nickleby*. What seems to have changed by the fifties is his view of the relationship between individual suffering and its social causes, or rather his treatment of the relationship between the typical and the marginal. Cases of suffering that characterize society may be of two kinds. An abuse and the suffering it causes may be regarded as typical if the statistics of this abuse reaches a certain waterline—according to the principle invoked by Bulwer Lytton, something must then be done to straighten out the ship of state. And yet the kind of suffering of which not many instances

are recorded may also be regarded as characterizing a social state of affairs, insofar as this state of affairs has made it possible for such suffering to take place. This view is not acceptable to Gradgrind-type reformers prior to conversion. Dickens's own change of attitude in mid-century may have been precisely from the quasi-Gradgrindian view that marginal phenomena are regrettable relics of obsolete ways of thinking and living (Gradgrind would say, wrong education) to the view that such phenomena dramatize the habitually camouflaged social evils.

Moreover, *Hard Times* makes it quite plain that one of the major troubles with the never-mind-the-misfit principle is its propensity to be extended to phenomena that are not even statistically marginal: however large the number of alcoholics and opium addicts among factory hands may be, the eminently practical Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby dismiss them as "a bad lot altogether, gentlemen," adding "that do what you would for them they were never thankful for it" (67)—the implication being that nothing could or should be done. And yet Thomas Gradgrind can be moved to alleviate suffering by direct intervention when, on a rare occasion, he is brought face to face with it—this is evident in his almost instantaneous decision (despite Bounderby's objections) to take charge of Sissy Jupe after her father's disappearance.

The most recurrent structural consequence of the need to explain the foundational principle of a utopia in a narrative work is the *tourist-guiding* topos. The reader is introduced into the imagined world together with a stranger, a visitor from the outside, who becomes, as it were, the reader's scout—an accidental tourist as in Lytton's *The Coming Race* or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, a seeker of alternative values as in Morris's *News from Nowhere* or Skinner's *Walden II*, a young neophyte (actually a group of young-generation neophytes at the beginning of Huxley's *Brave New World*), or an oversleeping Rip van Winkle in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes*. One or several representatives of the utopian society show the substitute reader around and explain to him the forms or ideas on which their life is based. The relationship between the visitor and the happy aborigines may, however, become tense or even hostile, so that even the pastoral world of *News from Nowhere* at times threatens to turn into a dystopia. This is one of the reasons why the tourist-guiding technique is less common in dystopian works: a visitor from a different world is either impossible since imperialist dystopias, such as that of *1984*, allow no other worlds to exist, or else, like Savage in Huxley's *Brave New World* or Cincinnatus in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, he is immediately endangered.

The monologue of Gradgrind in the opening chapter of *Hard Times* likewise serves a *tourist-guiding* purpose: Gradgrind has ushered a Government official into his model classroom and is explaining the nature and function of the training that he has devised in accordance with his social beliefs. The official, however, is not allowed to provide a focal consciousness of the episode (it is only in the end of the chapter that he is referred to as the anonymous "third grown person present," 47): the reader is invited to perceive the scene as mediated only by the ironies of the narrating voice. Bounderby's explanation of his idea of himself and of Coketown to the prospective M. P. James Harthouse on his fact-finding visit (159–62) is, in a sense, a caricature of Gradgrind's opening harangue.

Which brings us to the second major morphological feature of utopian/dystopian fiction, its characters' concerns with *educating* the kind of people who would thrive in and further promote the society built on the proper foundational principle. The Gradgrindian view of social justice is that every man should get according to his deserts, where the deserts are a matter of hard work and correct thinking. The education that Gradgrind offers the children in his school and his own children at home has two aims. One is to teach them correct thinking, that is, a proper respect for hard facts and a rejection of wonder, emotion, fantasy and nonscientific surmises or hopes; the other is to get them used to hard work: the cramming of facts is painstaking and thus simulates that which is supposed to be in store for these children in the future. The children are expected to shape up like Bitzer, otherwise they will find themselves ill-suited for making it in the world.

The system is self-defeating, yet not entirely vicious.¹⁰ The "squareness" of the classroom and of Mr. Gradgrind's features (47) has been interpreted as automatonlike (Beauchamp 72). If, however, one reads the novel with later Utopian writings in mind, Gradgrind's "squareness" may turn out to have positive connotations as well: to be "square" is also to be nonmanipulative. With minor exceptions like a bit of censorship (about which more later), Gradgrind's educational methods are based on the principle of rational persuasion: his scholars are imagined as little vessels that must be filled, quite mechanically, to the brim. Unlike the educators in *Brave New World* or, *mutatis mutandis*, in Skinner's *Walden II*, he does not practice any Pavlovian conditioning or behavioral engineering other than the removal of stimulants to fancy and the constant threat of communal or parental displeasure.

Both the foundational principle of a literary utopia and its appropriately devised system of education are usually based on a tendency or a philosophical idea present in the author's contemporary reality, yet this tendency or this idea is taken "one step further" (Howe 245), as if by way of a *Gedankenexperiment*. The "squareness" of Gradgrind's thought and conduct prior to his conversion is too perfect for verisimilitude; and the type of school he establishes is likewise a satiric exaggeration—whether of Jeremy Bentham's idea of "chrestomatic schools," in which finished products would be turned out, as in factories, under the eye of monitors (Saffin 167–68) or of the Birbeck schools established by William Ellis. In the latter, political economy was, indeed, at the center of the curriculum, yet the schoolday would, rather tellingly, begin with singing (Coles 154–55). In fact, the *extended-hyperbole technique* that *Hard Times* shares with utopian/dystopian fiction may be largely accounted for by their shared element of satire of the contemporary state of affairs.

What makes Gradgrind a genuine Utopian is that he identifies with his principles in a total way. A Utopian temperament is *totalitarian*: Gradgrind, indeed, does not confine his activities to the promotion of his vision on the sociopolitical arena but endeavors to live his idea, to be both its spokesman and its visible embodiment. He speaks of himself in the same way, "whether to his private circle of acquaintance, or to the public in general" (48). His adherence to hard facts is

manifest in his precise, pointed, and unimaginative manner of speech, in his marriage, in his house where life goes “monotonously round like a piece of machinery which discourages human interference” (96), in the school he has endowed, and, of course, in the names and education of his own children.

In Dickens’s novels houses usually reflect, in a vast variety of ways, the personalities of their inhabitants. Architecture being the most Utopian of all arts,¹¹ Gradgrind’s house is a deliberate expression of his philosophical stance. Its square shape is geometrically the most sensible arrangement of space; its lack of adornments and “the primest quality” (55) of its materials and contraptions require no comment; the scientific cabinets in his children’s apartments remind one of the work of another Thomas, Tommaso Campanella, in whose Utopian *City of the Sun* the walls of buildings double as museum-type exhibitions of substances found in nature and of other kinds of useful knowledge. The same unrelenting quasi-totalitarianism stands behind the remarks made in the schoolroom by another Utopian, the abovementioned Government official who seems to have it in his charge “to bring about the great public-office Millennium, when Commissioners should reign upon earth” (50) like philosophers in Plato’s *Republic*. Quite in tune with Plato, this official believes that one should not have pictures of horses on wallpaper because horses do not walk up and down the sides of the room in reality. For the same reason one should not have “foreign birds or butterflies” painted on one’s crockery or flower designs in one’s carpet. Sissy’s remark that one cannot hurt the flowers in the carpet by treading on them (52) belongs to an irrelevant sphere of discourse: the official knows that flowers in the carpet are not iconic and cannot be hurt, but the point for him is that the man-made part of the human environment should be a visible expression of foundational ideas. This episode is usually read as Dickens’s somewhat misguided caricature of the “heavy-handed literal-mindedness” of the actually quite intelligent attacks on “the over-decorating side of Victorian taste,”¹² but it can also be read as presenting a utopian totalizing vision of educational engineering meant to censor anything that conflicts with the foundational principle—here anything that might stimulate fancy: “‘Ay, ay, ay! But you musn’t fancy,’ cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. ‘That’s it! You are never to fancy’” (52).

Indeed, it is a similarly motivated *censorship* that makes Gradgrind play false to the very Hard Fact that he worships. He does not want children to start thinking about the circus; therefore he forbids Sissy Jupe to mention her father’s belonging to the circus horse-riders as if this occupation were an obscenity—just as in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, where people must be prevented from longing for family feelings, the words “mother” and “father” are turned into obscenities. (The tradition can be traced back to Moore’s *Utopia*, where, to prevent people from placing value on gold, this metal is made use of for making chamber pots.) Having elicited just enough flexible facts from Sissy to find a euphemism for Mr. Jupe’s occupation, Gradgrind defines it as that of “a veterinary surgeon, a farrier and horse-breaker.” To divert the audience from the sleight-of-hand nature of this Orwellian doublethink, Gradgrind demands a definition of the horse, establishes that Sissy does not know what a horse is, and then takes recourse to Bitzer’s readiness to redescribe a horse beyond recognition in scientific terms (50).¹³ It is as if,

through the use of analogy, Gradgrind attempts to present his little exercise in what Orwell would later call reality control as just another case of the use of 'proper' terminology.

As noted above, a utopian statement usually entails an implicit dystopian counterstatement. Accordingly, a *bona fide* utopian is almost inevitably followed by a *bend-sinister double*. It is, indeed, quite appropriate that from almost the beginning of the novel Thomas Gradgrind is shadowed by the sinister figure of Josiah Bounderby, a powermonger trailing behind an idealist reformer. Their friendship is based on a misunderstanding: if for Gradgrind the study of hard fact is a way to social improvement, Bounderby is an ideologist of the present state of affairs; if, in Gradgrind's system, value is attached to the availability of fact (it being good to have facts about social conditions), in Bounderby's system, value is displaced to the contents of factual information. The *bend-sinister double* of the idealist reformer insists that the facts about social conditions in his little realm are not just good but the best: the Coketown smoke is "the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs"; and the work in his mill is "the lightest work there is, and it's the best paid work there is," and one "couldn't improve the mills themselves" unless one "laid down Turkey carpets on the floors" (159).

Bounderby does not care for the common good, like Gradgrind, but is concerned with his personal prestige as a self-made man. In the Coketown world he functions, among other things, as a stock character of the dystopian genre, a figure represented by, for instance, Miles Plastic in Evelyn Waugh's "Love among the Ruins"—the token *showcase* of the achievements of foundational principles, the Golden Youth, the fair-headed boy of his society. There is something in Bounderby to accommodate politicians of both temperaments: for the Utopians he is the rags-to-riches meritocratic hero;¹⁴ whereas for the ideologists he is "the Royal arms, the Union-Jack, Magna Carta, John Bull, Habeas Corpus, the Bill of Rights, An Englishman's house is his castle, Church and State, and God save the Queen, all put together" (84–85).

Two more utopian/dystopian issues are associated with Bounderby's image: (a) *the nonhereditary aristocracy*—in Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, "of" sounds like the "de" in the names of French gentry; (b) the so-called "*noble lie*": in Plato's *Republic* (IV, 1) Socrates is shown inventing a "magnificent myth" of origins (sometimes translated as "the noble lie") that is supposed to carry enough conviction to justify the hierarchical order of his projected ideal society; in *Hard Times* the myth of origins is recycled into the "rags-to-riches"/"if-I-could-do-it-so-could-you" story epitomized by Bounderby's doublethink fantasies of having been born and bred in a ditch.

Bounderby's role being that of an "inflated-balloon" type of model specimen, he does not quite fit the bill as a potential totalitarian usurper. Indeed, he lacks the power mystique of Orwell's O'Brien or of Paduk in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*; he does not display the sleazy Machiavellianism of a Uriah Heep. And yet Bounderby's wish to discard the people who knew him at the outset of his career (such as his own mother) is disconcertingly reminiscent of well-known twentieth-century tyrants. So is his reinvention of his identity and past (cf. Al-

lingham 24). So is the “moral infection of clap-trap around him” (84), that is, his power to draw others into singing his praises and spreading his myths. So also is the cluster of consummate cynics in his retinue—Harthouse, Sparsit, and another fair-headed boy, Bitzer.

So is his use of language. The totalizing tendencies of the utopian state and its dystopian shadows are characterized by the shifts that take place in familiar linguistic forms. As is well known, twentieth-century totalitarian states had their own complex rules of political correctness in lexicology. And so did most of the twentieth-century utopian/dystopian fictions. For example, in the egalitarian feminist utopia envisioned in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the word “person” is used instead of both the masculine and feminine personal pronouns (no more “she or he”) and the unisex neologism “per” replaces the possessives “his” and “her.” Dickens’s ironic exclamation “Fact forbid!” (54) may have been the source of Huxley’s play with the substitution of “Ford” into the expressions that usually contain the words “God” or “Lord” in *Brave New World* (e.g., “cleanliness is next to fordliness”). A comic effect is produced by the characters’ bland uses of familiar lexical and syntactic structures to express values that are totally opposite to the ones that we might expect in a realistic narrative. Says Mr. Gradgrind, appalled at his children having peeped into the circus pavilion: “I should as soon have expected to find my children reading poetry” (61), giving the reader’s frame of reference a minor jolt.

The coining of new expressions supplements the subversion of old ones. Bounderby’s rhetoric about the fact of smoke being good subverts and defuses the whole issue of the significance that scientifically studied fact may have for social improvement. Defusion of the semantic load of certain words is a characteristic feature of dystopian languages: strange things happen, for instance, to words like “sacrifice” in Zamiatin’s *We*, “predestination” and “pneumatic” in *Brave New World*, “equal” in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, or “salvaging” in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Bounderby boasts of calling a spade a spade, and so Gradgrind takes him for a hard-facts man: for Gradgrind the idiom means not seeing a spade, fancifully, as a fairy’s wand or a torture instrument; for Bounderby, however, the same idiom suggests the absence of upper-class refinement—it is as if Bounderby prides himself on not calling a ‘spade’ a ‘manual excavation instrument’ just as he would not call it a ‘bloody shovel.’

The would-be totalitarianism of utopian thinking would hardly have been complete without some form of *surveillance*. As early as in Thomas Moore, a belief in the potentialities of the human being is joined with a total mistrust of the man-in-the-street (cf. Morton 47). Hence in Moore’s *Utopia* and in Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, quite as well as in Orwell’s *1984* and in Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, everyone is supposed to be informing on everyone else; in *Brave New World* this seems to be happening naturally. Coketown is not as dystopian a setting as, say, Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle*, but Bitzer, the young model product of Gradgrind’s utopian system, is, of course, a full-time spy who would snoop for any convenient master (cf. Malone). Public opinion, the god Ydgrun (Grundy) of *Erewhon*, is also a form of surveillance. This, of course, is typical of Victorian society in general; but in no other Dickens novel is a character as keenly aware

of the panopticon of public opinion as is Rachael in *Hard Times*. Rachael's policy of not being seen too regularly in the streets with Stephen is a typological anticipation of *camouflaged relationships* in a dystopia, whether romantic relationships, as in *1984*, or homosocial ones, as in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Surveillance is, of course, facilitated by *regimentation*. In *Hard Times* we first encounter this motif in the presentation of Gradgrind's school. The scholars are referred to by numbers rather than by names—as in Zamyatin's *We*, the first major twentieth-century Utopia, as, partly, in *1984*, and as in Nazi concentration camps and some Stalinist ones as well (all too many aspects of our century's history surpassed the gloomiest dystopian imagination). The teacher, moreover, is one of the mass-produced pedagogues, "some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters" who "had been lately turned out at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs" (52–53)—though not in quite the conveyor-line manner of the batches of low-IQ identical twins hatched and conditioned in the incubators of Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Regimentation and uniformity are features of the industrial cityscape. In Coketown there are "several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets even more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, and who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound on the same pavements, to do the same work" (65). This is relatively mild in comparison with the regimentation that transpires in industry-oriented Utopias, including even Bellamy's *Looking Backward*,¹⁵ and the streamlined science fictions of our century. Uniformity is notably absent from those Utopian works where the foundational principle is counterindustrialist, as, for instance, in William Morris's *News from Nowhere*; similarly, there is little place for it in the natural setting of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

It has been suggested that the representation of the working class in literature may be affected by the conventional metonymic movement of the imagination: the image of working people is affected by the qualities of the objects with which they come in contact (such as the dull and potentially destructive mechanisms of production) and by the faceless, dull, and dingy setting in which they find themselves. It has been further suggested (see Spector) that Dickens refrained from extending to the workers a robot- or elephant-like "melancholy madness" (65), and that he thus broke at least partly free from the stereotypical metonymic literary imagination in which the features of the industrial environment rub off on the workers themselves. One can add that it is also quite in tune with Dickens's critique of Utopianism that the above suggestion of the sameness, the uniformity, of the industrial workers is withdrawn as soon as the narrative comes to dwell on the worker Stephen Blackpool and on his love for one particular irreplaceable woman.¹⁶ One could argue that in his psychological make-up Stephen is, indeed, different from others—no wonder he gets himself ostracized—but his is just one of many ways of being different: most individuals will be found 'different' if one pays sufficient attention to them. The workers may be called on by Slackbridge to act in a united and uniform way, they may receive uniform treatment from the factory owner and from the undertaker, but Dickens reminds us of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of each person when he notes that what

the undertaker removes from the poor houses is “all that was most precious in the world to a striving wife and a brood of hungry babies” (119). Moreover, Dickens does not fail to remind us of “those remarkable ‘Hands’, who, piecing together their broken intervals of leisure through many years, had mastered difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things” (103)—a reference perhaps to the Mechanics’ Institutes of which there were hundreds in the industrial towns of Dickens’s England yet which, apart from the above remark, have no place in the repertoire of the novel.¹⁷

Dickens’s critique of industrialist uniformity, as well as his attacks on Utilitarian statistics, target dystopian *threats to the discreteness of an individual identity*. In a statistics-oriented picture of the world, “Lives are drops in an undemarcated ocean; and the question how the group is doing is a question whose economic resolution requires effacing the separate life and agency of each” (Nussbaum 884).¹⁸ Though Dickens refers to workers ironically as Hands, and though he mentions Louisa’s erstwhile view of them as “something that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again” (187–88), none of the body-language imagery for which the authorial narrator is directly responsible, not even that pertaining to the trade-union meeting, suggests the dissolution of the borderlines of the individual self or its merger with an undifferentiated force. The oil whose smell pervades Coketown on a hot day may “ooze” and “trickle” through the many stories of the mills but it “soils” only the dresses of the Hands (146), leaving no metaphoric stain on their identities and causing no metaphoric leaks. Dickens’s quasi-reactionary satire on the trade-union movement is part of his attack on the forces that refuse to recognize and would zestfully crush the uniqueness and separateness of individual identities.

Among the almost omnipresent concerns of utopian literature are the issues of *euthanasia* and *eugenics*, wish-fulfilling fantasy transformations of the time-honored themes that realistic fiction knows by the names of death and love. Ironically, the idea of euthanasia raises its head for a minute in *Hard Times*, when Stephen Blackpool thinks about the “unequal” hand of Death which so often stretches itself out to “any human creature who [is] serviceable to, or beloved by, another” but does not take that “abandoned woman” (119), his wife. After such thoughts, and under the influence of nightmares and exhaustion, Stephen is unable to stop his wife when she is about to drink poisonous antiseptic in mistake for gin. This is presented as the moment of greatest peril to his soul; the situation is saved by Rachael’s instinctive response.

Stephen’s paralysis at the moment when his wife reaches for the wrong bottle is certainly associated with his wish that she should die—a wish that has nothing to do with any charitable form of euthanasia. Yet the episode can be read as a subversive commentary on the hollowness of fake euthanasia in utopian literature: it seems quite obvious that even in Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* the mercy killing serves the interests of the thrift-minded community: a sick or very old person has to be *persuaded*, if not *bullied*, to accept this option. In Huxley’s *Brave New World* one is not even given any other option when one’s energies run out, and it is quite obvious that the poisoned, easeful, drug-promoted death of those who have

grown weak is the society's way of minimizing the taxation, and the humanity, of the still young and restless.

Obviously, euthanasia, as of *Brave New World* or Waugh's "Love among the Ruins," is incompatible with Christian ethics; this motif is, indeed, one of the signs that Thomas Moore was not earnestly recommending the ways of his *Utopia*. The para-utilitarian principle of minimizing the suffering of the sick and the expense of the energies of the healthy has no place in *Hard Times*. There is a brief account of a shortcut in funeral arrangements: instead of being carried down the narrow staircases, the bodies of the dead are removed through the windows and made to slide to the street down the undertaker's black ladder (105). Even this, however, is first and foremost a reflection on the structure of the houses occupied by the working class. Funerals, "the one poor ghastly pomp of the neighborhood" (105), are not treated lightly by working people.

An issue related to *eugenics* is briefly evoked in *Hard Times* when we learn that one of the Gradgrind children is named Malthus. Yet the square utopian Thomas Gradgrind does seem to have a notion of the right ways of pairing the citizens of his world. Happily free from passion, he has reduced the issue of the right marriage to "a question of figures" (62), and nothing short of major conversion, which does, indeed, take place, can make him revise this view. Even after the conversion, however, the change in divorce laws is unthinkable for Gradgrind: supporting his daughter's decision to live separately from her husband at the end of the novel is as far as he can possibly go. Gradgrind's own conjugal experience has evidently suggested to him that, in general, things are well enough and that well enough had better be left alone—otherwise, as his wife would put it, one would never hear the last of it. The experimentation with family restructuring is left for twentieth-century dystopian fictions and semipornographic romances that exploit utopian or dystopian frameworks for their own purposes.

And yet the sexual energies that may have called for such experimentation are hinted at in *Hard Times*. The undercurrent psychodrama of his novel has been variously interpreted. According to Robert Caserio, for instance, "Gradgrind, not Louisa, weds Bounderby; Louisa in effect marries her brother; Stephen yearns for bigamy; Mrs Peggler acts like Bounderby's secret paramour instead of like his mother . . . and Harthouse has a hothouse effect on both women and men, for he not only inflames Mrs. Sparsit and Louisa, but in a scene of homoerotic insinuation (II, 3) he seduces adoring, rapt Tom as a first step towards seducing Louisa." Caserio further suggests that Dickens does not present such relationships as perverse products of the Gradgrindian tyranny: "The Gradgrindian system asks to be read not as the perversion of a normative sexuality but as the obstruction of a polymorphous, unnameable sexual force. Harthouse makes trouble in Coketown, but he also makes Coketown know its anarchic desires in a way it had unhappily refused to know them so far" (Caserio 21).

However the case might be, it is the issue of love that can most clearly diagnose the vulnerability of a utopia. It is an unsolved problem in the criticism of utopian/dystopian fiction whether romantic love is or is not a subversive force. In the world of *Hard Times* every form of love provides a subversive counterbalance to the evils of the social system, but of probably the greatest importance is

the love between a father and a daughter—whether or not it can or should be reinterpreted as sublimating incestuous drives.¹⁹

There are usually three reasons for a Utopia's turning into a nightmare, and all three operate in *Hard Times*: (a) the foundational principle is flawed and so backfires (in the case of young Tom); (b) the implementation of the foundational principle succeeds only too well (Bitzer); and (c) too much is sacrificed in the effort of implementation. The third reason for the failure of Utopia is central to the novel. Dickens's critique of utopianism comes to a head in the two major interviews between Gradgrind and Louisa, the one when Louisa's marriage is agreed upon and the other when this marriage collapses.

A number of dystopian fictions take the shape of novels of ideas, with much of the action culminating in impassioned dialogues, most often (and under partial influence of Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor") between the judge/executioner and the victim. *Hard Times* is not a novel of ideas; it is rather a novel about people's attitudes to ideas. The scene where Gradgrind announces Bounderby's marriage proposal is a play of attitudes that remain un verbalized. We find Gradgrind in his study, which is compared to "an astronomical observatory" without windows: equipped with his blue books, Gradgrind has no need "to cast an eye upon the teeming myriads of human beings around him, but could settle all their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge" (131–32). As obvious as Gradgrind's wish to insulate himself from the suffering of the multitudes around him is his wish to remove that suffering, to wipe out people's tears, though preferably without much inconvenience to himself. We may here choose to recollect the complaint of Sterne's Uncle Toby who *will* visit the dying Le Fever at great risks to his own health: "I wish I had not known so much of the affair . . . or that I had known more of it" (405); we have already seen that, when brought face to face with human suffering, Gradgrind is immediately impelled to alleviate it.²⁰ The word "dirty" in "one dirty little bit of sponge" may evoke the image of tears wiped by the dirty rags of the poor: the sponge, a companion of the highly educational slate, is also the sponge of censorship—to adopt the language of Milton's "Aeropagitica," the figures on the slate may go either "to the press or to the sponge" (9). A great deal does, indeed, go to the sponge in the ensuing dialogue, but the discomfort that Gradgrind strives to censor out of his verbalized attitudes finds expression in symbolic body language: in his perplexity Gradgrind starts toying with the paper knife, as if vaguely aware of being about to sacrifice his daughter on the altar of his creed (see Caserio 17). Louisa's own misguided readiness to sacrifice herself for the sake of her brother will also backfire, as it might do in the best feminist tradition. Just about the only fulfillment that Louisa will be granted in the novel is the fulfillment of eventually having her say—and being listened to—in the second major interview with her father. Indeed, after that scene all invention of a happier post-Bounderby romantic future for Louisa would have been anticlimactic.

Unlike a complex of other motifs in the novel, Gradgrind's famous conversion at the sight of Louisa's misery is *not* a typological anticipation of changes of heart among rulers of literary dystopias. Fictional dystopias are either shown to

be grimly perpetual (as in Huxley and Orwell) or are cataclysmically destroyed by outside forces, or else are expected to run themselves down like hermetic closed systems. And yet critics who deny Dickens a prophetic stance can be invited to take another look.²¹ *Hard Times* does not, indeed, foreshadow any positive transformation of literary dystopias through their rulers' changes of heart, but it does foreshadow exactly this type of development on the actual sociopolitical arena of the late twentieth century. For several decades a debate has been going on between critics who praise and critics who disparage *Hard Times*.²² The unexpected predictive power of this novel should, I believe, lend additional support to those who believe it to be one of the more significant and artistically perceptive of Dickens's works.

ENDNOTES

1. To my knowledge the only existing remarks on a relationship between *Hard Times* and dystopian fiction can be found in Allingham, pps. 17 and 30.
2. The incommensurability of systems of values was also recognized by Dickens's contemporary Lytton. In his semi-satirical Utopia *The Coming Race* (1871) Lytton's protagonist, a stranger in what he considers a quite perfect society, admits that "if you would take a thousand of the best and most philosophical of human beings you could find in London, Paris, Berlin, New York, and even Boston, and place them as citizens in this beatified community, my belief is, that in less than a year they would either die of ennui, or attempt some revolution by which they would militate against the good of the community" (381).
3. Recurrent *themes* of the Utopian genre are surveyed in, for instance, Walsh 136–65. The "morphological" features that I discuss span both the thematic and the structural aspects of the Utopian/dystopian narratives.
4. Cf. Klingel's discussion of *Hard Times* as a commentary on St. Paul's attack on the so-called "Knowledge Party" in the Corinthian Church in First Epistle to the Corinthians.
5. Mannheim notes, in addition, that "[w]e begin to treat our adversary's views as ideologies only when we no longer consider them as calculated lies and when we sense in his total behavior an unreliability which we regard as a function of the social situation in which he finds himself. The particular conception of ideology therefore signifies a phenomenon intermediate between a simple lie at one pole, and an error, which is the result of a distorted and faulty conceptual apparatus, at the other. It refers to a sphere of errors, psychological in nature, which, unlike deliberate deception, are not intentional, but follow inevitably and unwittingly from certain causal determinants" (61).
6. On 30 January 1854, in a letter to the statistician Charles Knight, Dickens wrote that the satire in *Hard Times* was "against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else—the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time—the men who, through long years to come, will do more to damage the real useful truths of political economy than I could do (if I tried) in my whole life; the addled heads who would take the average of cold in the Crimea during twelve months as a reason for clothing a soldier in nankeens on a night when he would be frozen to death in fur, and who would comfort the labourer in travelling twelve miles a day to and from his work, by telling him that the average distance on one inhabited place from another in the whole area of England, is not more than four miles" (*Letters* 329).

7. Mr. Bluff of Bulwer Lytton's *England and the English* would consider that a shallow statement, but "if you were to say to him, 'One thousand pauper children are born in London; in 1823, wheat was forty-nine shillings; hop-grounds let from ten to twelve shillings an acre, and you must, therefore, confess that, when abuses arise to a certain pitch, they must be remedied'; Mr Bluff would nod his wise head, and say of you to his next neighbour, 'That's the man for my money, you see what a quantity of facts he puts into his speech!'" Quoted by Margaret E. Belcher, "Bulwer's Mr Bluff: A Suggestion for *Hard Times*," 105.
8. See Naslund for a most subtly perceptive discussion of Mr. Sleary's function in the novel.
9. Quoted by Coles 151. Gradgrind's and Dickens's paths were, respectively, Utilitarianism and nondenominational Christian ethics which would claim that "(1) it is wrong to do whatever act has the highest expected utility, without regard to whether the act is in conformity with moral rules or not, and (2) it is sometimes right to violate moral rules, even perhaps the most severe moral prohibitions, on occasions when the compensating benefits of such violations are very great" (Arneson 71).
10. For interesting comments on Dickens's view of education in the arts as, by contrast to Gradgrind's view, a vitally necessary compensation for hard work in modern industrial society see Sussman 63-69.
11. "Architecture . . . has a longstanding concern with the marriage of mathematical and human forms, the finding of a harmony and correspondence between the mathematical relations of the cosmos and the forms and functions of the human body. Between the cosmic order of nature and the corporeal structure of man it interposes the ideal city, as the rationally designed mediator and link between the macrocosmic and microcosmic spheres" (Kumar 5).
12. See David Craig's notes to p. 51 of *Hard Times*; see also Collins 157 and Coles 152.
13. See Sonstroem 521-22 for a discussion of Dickens's further use of the motif of the horse in the novel.
14. See Gilmour on the ambiguities and changes in Dickens's attitude to the implications of a self-made man's character and career.
15. Not only are production and marketing properly standardized in *Looking Backward* and not only does the narrator admire a regimented nineteenth-century parade, but, with a touch of unconscious auto-subversiveness, the author makes the heroine of the novel prefer the man from the past to her own contemporaries whom, owing perhaps to their uniformity, she does not expect to make sufficiently interesting lovers.
16. Cf. Williams's accounting for this contradiction by the co-presence in the text of the theory "that environment influences and in some sense determines character" and of the belief that "some virtues and vices are original and both triumph over and in some cases can change any environment" (169).
17. On Mechanics' Institutes see Jefferson 200-201. Jefferson's general argument is that the repertoire of the novel is insufficiently grounded in the kind of facts with which Mr. Gradgrind might have operated.
18. Nussbaum brings *Hard Times* to bear on the United Nations' project of finding ways of measuring the quality of life in developing countries. I must, however, put on record a disagreement with Nussbaum's interpretation of the dying Mrs. Gradgrind's famous statement: "I think there's a pain somewhere in the room . . . But I couldn't positively say that I have got it" (224). Nussbaum comments that "Political economy sees only pains and satisfaction and their general location: it does not see persons as distinctly bounded centers of satisfaction, far less as agents whose active planning is essential to the humaneness of whatever satisfaction they will achieve. Mrs. Gradgrind has learned her lesson well" (885). Mrs. Gradgrind, however, has been presented as a woman vaguely aware of lessons to be learned but never really learning even the names of the "ologies" involved. Her agony, moreover, makes her see the insufficiency of those lessons. The

words quoted above may be interpreted both as reflecting the effect of an opiate distancing one's pain as well as voicing an unwanted awareness of another sort of pain present in the room—the pain of Louisa.

19. For a mild suggestion of such an interpretation see Kearns 863.
20. On the philosophical significance of this remark in its context see Harrison 82–90.
21. Cf. John Holloway: “Dickens was not a profound and prophetic genius with insight into the deepest levels of human experience” (169).
22. An overview of this controversy is given in, for instance, Fowler 91–93. The debate was ignited by F. R. Leavis's privileging of *Hard Times* over other works of Dickens (1948, 227–48) and his further praise of it (1970, 187–212). Ensuing discussions of the artistry of *Hard Times* explicitly or implicitly supported this view; yet Leavis's evaluation of the novel was challenged by, among others, Holloway, Hirsch, and Jefferson.

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