
"A Mere Question of Figures": Measures, Mystery, and Metaphor in "Hard Times"

Author(s): Razak Dahmane

Source: *Dickens Studies Annual*, Vol. 23 (1994), pp. 137-162

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44371862>

Accessed: 06-02-2020 10:12 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Dickens Studies Annual*

“A Mere Question of Figures”: Measures, Mystery, and Metaphor in *Hard Times*

Razak Dahmane

When in book 2, Chapter 10, of *Hard Times* Mrs. Sparsit asks Bounderby, “Have you received intelligence respecting the robbery?”, he replies by using a Roman metaphor:

“Why, ma’am; not yet . . . Rome wasn’t built in a day, ma’am.”

“Very true, Sir,” said Mrs. Sparsit . . .

“*Nor yet in a week*, ma’am.”

(151; emphasis added)

We are struck with the appropriateness of the Roman metaphor, here a result of Dickens’ insistence on the sometimes comic congruence in a character of language with physiognomy. It is fitting that Mrs. Sparsit, that “Roman Matron” (91) “with the Coriolanian style of nose” (37) should understand the tenor of the Roman metaphor: great accomplishments take time. The interest of the metaphor, however, lies as much in the appropriateness of Mrs. Sparsit’s grasp of it as in the interlocutor’s reply. The addition of “Nor yet in a week” serves of course the purpose of characterization; it illustrates Bounderby’s blustering temperament with its tendency, in the heat of boastfulness, towards humorless exaggeration; “humorless” because Dickens has from the start portrayed Bounderby as a strident bully, so that there is no risk of detecting the faintest echo of humor or irony in that earnest, peremptory talking at people that he mistakes for conversation. There is, however, something else at work here beyond humorless hyperbole, something, I shall argue, central to a reassessment of Dickens’ alternative to the Gradgrindians: Bounderby’s addition of “nor yet in a week” betrays his literal apprehension

of the whole figure of speech; the culprit is a mentality that has been—like Louisa's and Thomas's—"trained to mathematical exactness" (16) and that cannot therefore conceive of "day" as meaning anything else beside twenty-four hours' duration. A strict adherence to the statistician's figures, at the expense of the poet's accounts for Bounderby's failure to grasp fully the metaphorical import of "day" in his Roman metaphor. Dickens has Bounderby unwittingly literalize "day," by making him—again unwittingly—reduce it to its precise factual astronomical meaning at the expense of its figurative tenor of brevity. As we shall see, Dickens in *Hard Times* invites us to consider metaphorical proficiency a linguistic badge of moral decency and imaginative health; and where he histrionically pins this badge on the narrator, he seems unwilling to grant it to Bounderby, not even in the guise of a metaphor that has been deadened by usage into a cliché.

Dickens' sabotage of Bounderby's figurative percipience is but a part of his effort to undermine the language of the Utilitarians in *Hard Times* by selectively aborting in their speech any instances, deliberate or inadvertent, of figurativeness, however hackneyed the figures. This attempt I call "literalization," a rhetorical process that draws attention to the literal-mindedness of the Utilitarians, or to their deafness to the metaphoric import of figures of speech that they unwittingly use or hear used, or to ironic circumstances that fetter their metaphors with a satiric application beyond their grasp. In his characteristic exploration of language at the intersections of the literal and the figurative, Dickens for the first and, I think, only time pushes literalization beyond the conventional purposes of characterization, humor, and satire to press it into the sustained service of an idea. Literalization, I shall argue, represents his most convincing though so far critically overlooked answer to the Gradgrind philosophy. Not in the lisping, inarticulate humaneness of Sleary's pleas for tolerance of popular amusements, but in the narrator's blaze of figurativeness and in the memorable literalizations of the language of the Gradgrindians as they intone their mystery-denying gospel of facts and figures, does Dickens articulate his alternative to the hard-fact faction.

I

Clearly the conflict between fact and fancy is the central theme of *Hard Times*, the one which subsumes and unifies its otherwise loosely related subjects: education, divorce, industrialism, trade unionism, and hippodrama. The deep sympathies of the imagination, so Dickens' argument runs, if

granted a measure of tolerance and freedom in an inimical Utilitarian society, would bring about happier, more productive teachers, school inspectors, legislators, employers, manufacturers, mine owners, workers, and entertainers; and a richer quality of life animated by a fancy-fostered vitality that is sure to urge insurgency against industrial blight.

The prevalent criticism of *Hard Times* regards the Slearys as representing the claims of the imagination and providing the chief counterpart to the forces of fact, and then goes on to expose their weaknesses.¹ Admittedly, the circus immediately strikes one as a tawdry arena that seems to have fallen on hard times long before Bounderby and Gradgrind come along to make matters worse. The ostensible precariousness of the warm-hearted Slearys, however, should be seen as proof that they are meant to illustrate the severity of the Gradgrindian threat, not represent an answer to it. Jupe’s debilitating aches that call for “nine oils” and eventuate in his desertion of his young daughter and in his death in exile; Sleary’s lisp; his timorousness of character that reduces what should have been a vigorous assertion of artistic freedom into a pitiable plea for tolerance—these impediments heighten our sense that far from representing an enduring alternative, the Slearys stand in pressing need of help themselves, of—as Sleary pleads—a “bethpeak” (213). Dickens seems fully aware of this fact as he comes to the rescue in the guise of an articulate, narrator-novelist enviably at ease with figurative language. This is the real counterpart to Gradgrindism, a subtle and sustained one articulated in the provocatively demonstrative figurativeness of the narrator’s language and in the restrictions he imposes on Utilitarian speech through literalization.

Indeed Dickens images forth his objection to the Gradgrindians in the narrator’s deliberate and pointedly provocative image-making; in his imagery of smoke serpents and melancholy-mad elephants and horses and flowers and light and dark; in his pausing to quote the lines “in a flowing scroll” beneath “The Pegasus’s Arms” (26); in his quoting from *Oliver Goldsmith’s The Deserted Village* (38); in his allusions to fairy tales, nursery fables, and *The Arabian Nights*; in his reference to “The Fairies, Sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies” (37); and, generally, in his demonstrative delight at fancying and wondering despite the Utilitarians’ pointed injunction to—in the title words of book 1, chapter 7—“Never Wonder.”

This delight in metaphor amounts to a satiric flaunting of the verbal privileges that will be denied the language of Gradgrindism. Dickens’ most apparent strategy of metaphoric divestment lies in his treatment of literalization in terms of symbol, theme, and character. First, there is the symbolization of

the literal in the celebrated opening chapter of *Hard Times* through a factualizing and a concretizing of the speaker.² In it the rhetoric works to reduce the speaker to concrete non-sentience. He becomes an extension of the “plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom” as much as it becomes an extension of his “square forefinger,” his “square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellerage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall”; and, finally, an extension of his “warehouse of a head,” and of “his obstinate coat, square legs, and square shoulders” (7). The ideological correspondence between the speaker, Gradgrind, and his materialistic school, coupled with the consistent application of architectural and geometric metaphors to Gradgrind’s physiognomy and with the grammatical and stylistic repetitions of word, syntax, and (passive) voice, erects him into the very symbol of that hard, mechanistic pedagogy. The opening chapter of *Hard Times* is a figurative rendition of the literal and of a literalist.

Similarly, chapter 2 dramatizes literal-mindedness through the government officer’s comico-grotesque confusion of word with thing. Literality clearly lies in his explanation of “why you wouldn’t paper a room with representation of horses”—“Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of a room in reality—in fact? Do you?”—and in his indignant objection to Cecilia Jupe’s willingness in carpeting a room to “use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it” because she is “very fond of flowers”: “and is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them and have people walking over them with heavy boots?” (11). The import of this literalization scene is much subtler than may suggest the comico-grotesqueness of the government officer’s explanation. By objecting to literature, the verbal repository of meaning, the hard-fact fellows balk at the implication that meaning lies in words, not in things—not in the bricks and chimneys of Coketown; not, in other words, in what Boudierby considers “real” (179); hence their exclusive emphasis on facts. They are, Dickens intimates, semantic-literalist-empiricists whose blindness to or rejection of the intrinsic worth and connotative wealth of language prompts them to reduce its function to one that is restrictive, definitional, and solely denotative.

The government officer from the Department of Practical Arts makes but a brief appearance and is replaced by a bolder, harsher version of himself—Boudierby. In this professedly self-made businessman we are dealing with the epitome of literal-mindedness. His wedding speech establishes him as a literalist par excellence, “a man who, when he sees a Post, says ‘that’s a Post,’ and when he sees a Pump, says ‘that’s Pump,’ and is not to be got

to call a Post a Pump, or a Pump a Post, or either of them a Toothpick” (84). He is also a strident version of his father-in-law, Thomas Gradgrind, an earnest literalist with an “unbending, utilitarian, matter-of-fact face” (77–78) who comes to realize the inadequacy of an education by facts and figures alone.

II

The literalists’ exaltation of facts and figures is solidly anchored in an enmity to fancy and a scornful dismissal of its claims as idle and puerile amusement. To them, then, Dickens must have felt the need to deny figurative percipience. Dickens does not, however, undermine the metaphoric import of every single utterance by the enemies of fancy; he does so selectively. Systematic literalization in a novel is of course impossible. It would mean dramatic and narrative paralysis, for “language,” as Emerson tells us, “is fossil poetry” (1:1084), dead metaphor whose most common and ordinary usage is seldom literal. In the rare cases where Dickens allows the Gradgrindians a conscious rise to figurativeness, he seems to do so chiefly because the figurativeness furthers his satiric intent. Hence it is, for example, that he allows Bounderby to use an agricultural metaphor in his attack on Stephen Blackpool as “one of those chaps who have always got a grievance. And you go about, sowing it and raising crops” (115). This is a figurative concession to Bounderby, but one partly allowed at least because of its congruence with the extended meteorological metaphor that the narrator establishes at Bounderby’s expense throughout the chapter. In the first sentence of book 2, chapter 5, the narrator notes Bounderby’s “windy manner” (110), then develops the remark into an extended analogy: “Bounderby, who was always more or less like a Wind, finding something in his way here, began to blow at it directly. . . . The wind began to get boisterous” and was “springing up very fast. . . . (Gushing weather with deceitful calms. One now prevailing)” (111); but not for long because soon Bounderby was “blowing a gale” (113) that intensifies into “a hurricane” (114), the full brunt of which is borne by Blackpool, who is dismissed from Bounderby’s employment.

Dickens grants Bounderby figurative speech only when it furthers satiric intent, but this is rare since more often than not the satire lies in denying the word-cherishing privileges of the metaphor to a literalist mentality that posits the supremacy of things over words. One means to such denial lies in the

creation of a literalizing context in instances of conscious or unwitting figurativeness on Utilitarian lips. This method might be called literalization by juxtaposition. We note at least three instances where Dickens specifies circumstances propitiating literalization through the physical presence of an object, a referent, whose meaning was used figuratively. First, Bounderby sees in Stephen's dissatisfaction with the Divorce Laws "traces of the turtle soup and venison, and gold spoon" (57). The culinary metaphor effectively expresses Bounderby's dismissal of the aspirations of the working class as illegitimate and self-indulgent. Dickens however hastens to literalize the metaphor by putting it in a mouth full of chop and sherry. In the course of the dialogue Bounderby takes sherry and stays Sparsit from her fainting to leave the room, to ensure the privacy of her employer and his employee, "by holding a mouthful of chop in suspension, before swallowing it, and putting out his left hand. Then, withdrawing his hand and swallowing his mouthful of chop" (57), he resumes his conversation with Stephen. In other contexts Dickens would have invited his readers to admire the food metaphor as a clever adaptation of speech to circumstance, but here on Utilitarian lips he undermines it by emphasizing Bounderby's consumption of food and thus dwelling on the obvious hypocrisy of a glutton with a mouthful of chop and sherry using food as a metaphor for greed-fed discontent. Having established a literalizing context for the turtle-soup-and-venison metaphor, Dickens will allow Bounderby to use it again at least twice more, once to acquaint the visiting Harthouse with the "one ultimate object in life" of every "Hand in this town." During this same interview Bounderby also uses a variation on this food metaphor: "First of all, you see our smoke. That's meat and drink to us" (96). The turtle soup metaphor is used again by Bounderby in reply this time to Gradgrind's admission of the harsh neglect of "qualities in Louisa" (178); Bounderby vehemently answers that he knows the bricks, the works, the chimneys, the smoke, and the Hands of Coketown. "They're real. When a man tells me anything about imaginative qualities . . . he means turtle soup and venison . . ." (179). Bounderby's figure of speech incisively establishes here, at his own expense, what Dickens has only alluded to elsewhere: that the singleminded allegiance to the factual breeds a literal-mindedness that often evidences not alert and wise realism but subjection to materialism and a coarse hedonism betrayed by food metaphors. Again, Dickens allows Bounderby the use of food metaphors because these are consistent with the attack on the materialistic Benthamite philosophy which advocates the pursuit of quantifiable and weighable pleasures. These pleasures Dickens calls "grovelling sensualities," "the ghost" of the sound imagination (101).

The supervisor of Bounderby's meals, Mrs. Sparsit, “implied that in her stately person she considered lunch a weakness”; but not sweetbread: “In yielding my trust here” [Bounderby's home], says Mrs. Sparsit, “I shall not be freed from the necessity of eating the bread of dependence.” And the narrator adds, undermining the metaphor, “she may have said the sweetbread, for that delicate article in a savoury brown sauce was her favourite supper” (82). In this instance the sweetbread is not actually present in the scene, but the narrator insists on reminding us of the literal basis, the physical occasion, of the food metaphor. Finally, when Bounderby during a fireside chat with Mrs. Gradgrind, dwelling on his (fictitious) childhood ordeals, declares, “I was so ragged and dirty, that you wouldn't have touched me with a pair of tongs,” Mrs. Gradgrind “faintly looked at the tongs” (17). Her action of course dramatizes Mrs. Gradgrind's literal-mindedness but it also divests of its metaphorical import Bounderby's hyperbole. Dickens uses her action to make plain that Bounderby's figure of speech, ordinarily evidence of a clever adaptation of figures of speech to matters of fact, is inspired by the actual material presence of tongs in the room: Bounderby cannot be expected to use “a pair of tongs” to express forcibly his childhood mendacity unless he sees one. There would have been no figurative speech had there been no putative referent. Dickens thus literalizes by noting the literal basis of the figurative so that literalization becomes his stylistic means of dramatizing the Utilitarians' servitude to the material.

Sometimes the literalizing context is not physical but mental. It does not consist in the actual physical presence of the material occasion for figurativeness, but results from a mentality whose exclusive emphasis on facts and figures and immediate utility blinds it to the metaphoric import of even dead metaphors. Three chief examples of this type of literalization are anatomical. First, Dickens draws attention to the dehumanization implicit in the literal generic reference to “the multitude of Coketown [as] ‘the Hands’—a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seas, only hands and stomachs” (52).³ Dickens allows the Utilitarians to use this synecdoche to reveal their exploitative view of humanity. By reducing human beings to the most practical of their members, the reference divests them of hearts and souls, and implies a definition of men and women as animals of immediate, empirical utility. Literalization in this case is a form of dismemberment.

The same Utilitarian literal-mindedness informs Bitzer's implied definition of the heart through its function.

"Bitzer," said Mr. Gradgrind . . . "have you a heart?"

"The circulation, Sir," returned Bitzer, smiling at the oddity of the question, "couldn't be carried on without one. No man, Sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood, can doubt that I have a heart." (210–11)

The obsession with utility, which Dickens implies is often conducive to a cynical assessment of human nature, blinds Bitzer to the figurative use of "heart" to connote compassion. Gradgrind's conversion from an inflexible literalist to a man who has come to perceive the inadequacy of his views of men and women in statistical terms is mirrored in his figurative use of "heart," a linguistic intimation of heightened sensibility. And it is this sensibility that will afford the new Gradgrind a glimpse of what transcends the bottom-line materialism of facts and figures and the shallow cynicism of the self-interest cult. For the figurative—associated with "all the inappreciable things that raise [life] from the state of conscious death," "the graces of the soul," and "the sentiments of the heart" (161)—becomes an appropriate vehicle for "the unfathomable mystery in the meanest of [Hands]" (56).

Bitzer's literal understanding of "heart" saps the spirit out of the word just as his celebrated definition of a horse (9) saps the vitality out of the horse. This Dickens achieves by having Bitzer define "horse" piecemeal in a heap of factual and grammatical fragments that rely on numbers and quantity and minimize the use of that lifeblood of the English sentence, the verb. Dickens' point is that we should be aware of experience in both its affective and effective dimensions just as we should be aware of "heart" in its physiological as well as its figurative meaning. Any emphasis on the letter at the expense of the spirit, on the quantifiable at the expense of fluid and intuitive experience, results in a loss of our wholeness of vision, a loss which—Dickens warns us—would soon degenerate into a myopic and fragmentary view. As Colin Manlove points out, there is *bit* in Bitzer (63).

Where he suffuses with pathos the literalizing of hand and heart, Dickens imbues with comedy Bounderby's literalization of "nose" during the scene following the public deflation of his myth of the self-made man, the unforeseen disastrous result of his lady housekeeper's overzealousness:

"What's the matter now, ma'am?" said Mr. Bounderby, in a very short way . . .

"Pray, Sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "do not bite my nose off."

"Bite your nose off, ma'am?" repeated Mr. Bounderby. "Your nose!" meaning, Mrs. Sparsit conceived, that it was too developed a nose for the purpose. After which offensive implication, he cut himself a crust of bread and

threw the knife down with a noise."

(216)

Bounderby's repetition of Mrs. Sparsit's sarcastic plea betrays the literality that blinds him to the tenor of her figurative meaning: her resentment of his brutal manner. Bounderby's literal-mindedness humorously compounds the noise-nose pun with one less evident. The cutting of a crust of bread with a knife suggests, through the grimly humorous equivalence between biting off and slicing, the literalization of "matter": the nose has become as much non-sentient matter as the crust of bread. "Matter" in this context is a dead metaphor, a word whose metaphoric energy has been lost, deadened, through common usage; but Dickens here denies Bounderby even a dead metaphor. To dramatize Bounderby's literal-mindedness, which seems at least partly responsible at once for the repetition of Mrs. Sparsit's sarcastic hyperbole and of the subsequent slicing of the bread, Dickens divests the word "matter" of the thick patina of its normal and unquestioned dead "metaphoricality," its "fossil poetry," (meaning "problem") to reveal it in its starkly literal initial sense of inert mass. Dickens deftly shows the unwitting restoration to its literal basis of the word "matter" in Bounderby's exasperated question, "What's the matter now?" Literalization has become materialization, a result of Bounderby's unwitting poetic defossilization.

The most pervasive instances of literalization have to do with Dickens' treatment of the concept of Time, "Old Time, that greatest and longest-established Spinner of all" (74), the eponymous hero of book 1, chapter 14, "The Great Manufacturer." In book 2, chapter 3, young Thomas Gradgrind insolently boasts to James Harthouse, "I am not going to begin to be polite now, about old Bounderby. It would be rather late in the day" (102). His use of "day" is of course figurative, and the figure of speech has hardened into the unquestioned rigidity of the dead metaphor. It is doubtful, however, whether "old Bounderby" would have grasped this figurative use of "day," for the most notorious instance of literalization of that word occurs in his use of the Roman metaphor mentioned earlier. There are other examples of time-related literalization. One is inherent in the literalization of a key word in the novel, "fire." The word is used metaphorically by Louisa who, as the novel's fire-gazer, has come to see in the flames an objective correlative to her inner "fire with nothing to burn" emitting "a light with nothing to rest upon" (15). She tells her mother that "the red sparks dropping out of the fire, and whitening and dying . . . made me think, after all, how short my life would be, and how little I could hope to do in it" (45). Mrs. Gradgrind however

dismisses as “nonsense” her daughter’s subjective reading of the ephemerality of life in the red sparks dying into ashes: “after the lectures you have attended and the experiments you have seen! After I heard you myself going on with your master about combustion and calcination and calorification” (45).

Where the wife rejects the figurative connotations of a literal fire, after Louisa explains them to her, the husband cannot even see them. The classic example of the hard-fact fellows’ inability to understand metaphor occurs in the seminal chapter 15 of book 1, “Father and Daughter.” Gradgrind imparts to Louisa Bounderby’s marriage proposal and awaits her response, which is so long in coming that he says at length:

“Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works, Louisa?”
 “There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!” She answered, turning quickly.
 “Of course I know that, Louisa. I do not see the application of the remark.”
 To do him justice he did not, at all. (78)

Gradgrind perceives only the literal meaning of Louisa’s words; sees nothing in fire but what his wife, not his daughter, has reductively seen. He is also blind to Louisa’s figurative use of “night.” She will later use the word at once literally and figuratively when, appealing to her brother’s better nature in the name of “all the night of my decay,” she entreats him to tell her “the truth now” (142). Her use of “night” in this example is explicitly figurative. It is fitting that she uses the word first literally, when she speaks to Tom of his lying “alone, my dear, in the melancholy night,” then figuratively, for she is linguistically a double center. Her Utilitarian education did not altogether obliterate her struggling disposition towards the figurative. Book 1, chapter 15, pits Louisa’s symbolization of the literal against Gradgrind’s failure to see anything beyond it.

The ability to perceive metaphorical language Dickens links with a capacity for compassion and sensitivity. This Gradgrind lacks: he fails to see the “one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to . . . give him the pent-up confidences of her heart,” blinded as he was by “the artificial barriers he had for many years been erecting between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra” (77). The systematic envisaging of “everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation, [and] [f]rom that ground alone” (75) leads to an unwitting imperviousness to the emotive and connotative depths of language. Gradgrind fails Louisa here not because he fails to listen, not because he is

a bad father—on the contrary he is from the start a responsible one—but because he fails to discern the somber poetry of his daughter's despair.

Another instance of literalization more closely related to the theme of time occurs in Louisa's use and Gradgrind's misapprehension of "short."

"Father, I have often thought that life is very short. . . ."

"It is short, no doubt, my dear. Still the average duration of human life is proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life assurance and annuity offices, among other figures which cannot go wrong, have established the fact."

"I speak of my own life, father."

"O indeed? Still," said Mr. Gradgrind, "I need not point out to you, Louisa, that it is governed by the laws which govern lives in the aggregate." (78)

Louisa uses "short" subjectively to express duration of inner time; Gradgrind understands it in its statistical sense to mean chronology or clock time. The father confuses fugacity with fewness, longevity with fulfillment, failing to understand that life can be chronologically long yet short in terms of human aspirations. The Bergsonian distinction between time as chronology and time as duration is inherent in the Utilitarians' and the narrator's respective uses of language. More specifically, Gradgrindian time is mechanical, external, factual: the time of the "deadly statistical clock" in Gradgrind's Observatory which "measured every second with a beat like a rap upon a coffin-lid" (75), a mode of measurement appropriate to a life in which "every day [was] the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next" (22). The narrator's time, on the other hand, is organic, the time not of being but of becoming, the time of the seasonal rhythm of natural life; of "Sowing, Reaping," and "Garnering"; a time qualitatively assessed in terms of the novelist's central themes—"human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears . . ." (42), "the capacity for good and evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse" (56). Book 1, chapter 15, dramatizes a clash between a static and statistical definition of life as an accumulation of years and a dynamic and organic definition of life as a striving towards spiritual, emotional, and social plenitude. Both definitions are imaged forth in the paradoxical personification of Time as at once the father of machinery and the mother of seasons: "Time went on in Coketown like its own machinery . . . [but also] brought its varying seasons even into that wilderness of smoke and brick" (71). This trope translates the clash between the literal and the figurative into the dialectical tension between the multiple and heterogeneous times

expressed in the main title and the homogeneous and cyclical time expressed in the three books' subtitles.

III

The Utilitarians' blindness to the figurative import of language, Dickens suggests, traps them into a joyless view of life as the mechanical unwinding of grimly monotonous chronology. The culprit, of course, is an exaltation of facts and figures based on what Dickens suggests is a mistaken notion of scientific exactitude and a subsequent hostility to the imagination. Indeed, Dickens debunks this obsession with exactitude as consistently as he notes it carefully. Thomas and Louisa "have been trained to mathematical exactness" (16). Their father becomes a "Member of Parliament for Coketown; one of the respected members for ounce weights and measures, one of the representatives of the multiplication tables" (73), with a room that was "quite a blue chamber in its abundance of blue books" (75). When his daughter insists that he repeat "word for word" her answer to Bounderby's marriage proposal he again fails to see the sardonic despondence of her request: "it is quite right, my dear, to be exact" (78). Gradgrind finally comes to realize the error of his exclusive emphasis on facts and figures, and Dickens tries to do justice to his good intentions in quantitative metaphors: "In gauging the fathomless deeps with his little mean excise-rod, and in staggering over the universe with his rusty stiff-legged compasses, he had meant to do great things" (165).

Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer are also models of meticulous accuracy. "Mrs. Sparsit's talent for—in fact for anything requiring accuracy—is too habitually developed to admit of any question." The words are those of Harthouse, who praises the bank guardian for having drawn Miss Gradgrind's "portrait perfectly. Presented her dead image" (145). Her confidant, Bitzer, is also a stickler for accuracy. When Bounderby informs his close friends that "In the little safe in young Tom's closet . . . there was a hundred and fifty-odd pounds," the porter specifies: "A hundred and fifty-four, seven, one" (136).⁴ In Bounderby's reply Dickens derides the compulsion for misplaced accuracy.

"Come! . . . It's enough to be robbed while you're snoring because you're too comfortable, without being put right with your four seven ones. Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, you say you have heard him snore?"

"Sir," returned Mr. Sparsit, "I cannot say that I have heard him precisely snore, and therefore must not make that statement. But on winter evenings, when he has fallen asleep at his table, I have heard him, what I should prefer

to describe as partially choke. I have heard him on such occasions produce sounds of a nature similar to what may be sometimes heard in Dutch clocks.”
(137)

Dickens, of course, does not object to accuracy per se. In his private life he has shown himself to be by all accounts a stickler for accuracy and punctuality.⁵ His satire, however, focuses as much on a concern with factual accuracy as on the implied rejection of fiction behind it: for, to the utilitarians, fiction can never be anything more than lies invented for idle amusement. Further, Dickens suggests that such an obsessiveness turns discourse into a means of persecution similar in intent to the placards about Blackpool with which Bounderby had the walls of Coketown covered. Language ceases to be a bridge between human beings and becomes a center of indifference where the humane hardens into the intransigence of the legal. Mrs. Sparsit assumes the “air of giving strict evidence” and of bearing “testimony” (137).

An overriding concern for factual and numerical accuracy, Dickens implies, not only spawns callous calculators but also falsifies human reality. The paradox of the literal-factual-statistical error that is a figurative-moral-psychological truth is clarified in Cissy’s “mistakes” in answering M’choakumchild’s questions. M’Choakumchild reports that the mistakes of Girl Number Twenty, a girl who is “extremely deficient in [her] facts” and whose “acquaintance with figures is very limited” (72), come from her reluctance to take “the smallest conceivable interest in [the globe’s] exact measurements” and her being “extremely slow in the acquisition of dates, unless some pitiful incident happened to be connected therewith” (46). Gradgrind is disappointed in her: “You have not acquired, under Mr. and Mrs. M’Choakumchild, anything like that amount of exact knowledge which I looked for” (71–72). Hers are statistical mistakes but profoundly humane verities intuitively reached through the gift of selflessness; of envisaging human sorrow not from the safe, cruel, and abstract distances of facts and figures but from an imaginative, personal participation in that sorrow. “National Prosperity” should be “Natural.” And the percentage of the “five hundred persons drowned or burnt to death [out of] “the hundred thousand persons who went to sea on long voyages” is indeed “Nothing—to the relations and friends of the people who were killed” (48). Cissy’s statistically incorrect answer is morally right. In the light of the individuating imagination, the depth of whose sympathies enables it to see that what is accurate does not always mirror what is right, suffering humanity cannot be reduced to—in the words of one of the proposed titles—“A Mere Question of Figures.”

IV

Indeed, in a letter of 20 January 1854 to John Forster Dickens enclosed fourteen titles, among them "Two and Two Are Four," "Simple Arithmetic," "A Matter of Calculation" and "A Mere Question of Figures."⁶ All four are apt, but it is the double sense of "figures" in the last proposed title that reflects the magnitude of Dickens' effort in *Hard Times*. For the dynamic fluctuations of the literal and the figurative Dickens conflates into a campaign of defense and attack, rejection and advocacy. The figures of title are seldom either poetic or numerical, and Dickens' sense of the myopic reductiveness of the numerical invariably exacerbates his sense of the indispensability of the poetic:

So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions. There is no mystery in it; there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them, for ever. Supposing we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown quantities by other means! (56)

This passage fulminates against the materialism of the numerical approach, its inadequacy to express the "mystery." Where he feels the rejection of figures of speech as a personal affront and a professional threat, Dickens perceives as a national threat the Victorian ethos of the numerical-quantitative approach to life. The repetition of intensifiers and superlatives—"so many," "single," "one," "meanest"; the repetition of "hundred"; the repetition of "Hands," a synecdochical designation that he has already denounced as economic commodification (52); the use of categorical absolutes, "not all," "for ever"; the use of negatives, "not all," "no mystery," "unfathomable"—these stylistic devices convey not only a rhetoric of rejection, but a high pitch of vehemence in that rejection.

To Dickens the phrase "A Mere Question of Figures" crystallizes the essence of a Victorian economic orthodoxy that he denounces on several grounds: it resonates for him with the dismissive oversimplification voiced by at least four overlapping types of Utilitarian adversaries. First, the Hartleyan-inspired Benthamite empiricists who trace knowledge to sense-impression and by so doing deny that emotion is an integral part of the intellectual process. Such empiricists deny the existence of an innate moral sense, the

existence of the “awful unknown quantities” and a fortiori of the existence of the “other means” that would “govern” them; hence the hostility to cultivation of the affective life, the inward culture of the individual. Second, the political economists, especially those whose statistical accounts of the socioeconomic state of the citizenry are relied upon by Members of Parliament like Gradgrind. Dickens rejects their statistically based conclusions because he questions the validity of their means: to Dickens statistics are abstractions divorced from flesh-and-blood humanity; they dehumanize, deindividuate; they reduce Cecilia Jupe to Girl Number Twenty and the Coketown workers to Hands. “Whatever [blue books] could prove (which is usually anything you like), they proved there [in Gradgrind’s room], in an army constantly strengthening by the arrival of new recruits. In that charmed apartment, the most complicated social questions were cast up, got into exact totals, and finally settled—if those concerned could only have been brought to know it” (75). Third, the mainstream Benthamites who reduce happiness to a pain-and-pleasure calculus. Fourth, the Victorian demographers—Gradgrind names one of his sons Malthus—whose “mere figures” are Malthusian figures that chart a nightmarish discrepancy between production and reproduction, between the arithmetic progression of food increase and the geometric progression of population. Here “A Mere Question of Figures” resonates with the ring of exoneration. Malthus, Dickens believes, conveniently furnishes the ruling classes with the opportunity to wash their hands of any civic responsibility, chalking human misery up to rampant overpopulation whose rise can be checked only positively through birth control and negatively through infanticide, wars, famine, and epidemics.

V

The insistence on empirical accuracy and a numerically objective approach to life goes hand in glove with the Utilitarian emphasis on the diffusion of useful knowledge. The implication that fiction serves no useful goal also stands behind Dickens’ satire on those whose emphasis on tangible exact facts is an effort to reduce the rich figurative realm of the emotions to that of literal information. The reduction is in his eyes a contamination of art by immediate utility. Dickens has already made a similar point in his lead article “Frauds on the Fairies,” published only three months before he was to write the first page of *Hard Times*.⁷ In that article Dickens rehearses his message

to the Utilitarians in *Hard Times*: "Supposing we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects and to govern these awful quantities by other means!" (56). Besides religion, imagination is one of these means. Indeed, Dickens makes high claims for the imagination since its virtues, he insists, are both aesthetic and ethical. The imagination "adorns" and "graces" lives of monotonous toil in somber industrial citadels of melancholy mad-elephants and smoke-serpents. Further, like Wordsworth's Nature, it serves as a moral guide without which "the sturdiest physical manhood would be morally stark death" (219).

But not all imaginations are good. Central to the case for the imagination as a vital and enduring alternative making its own case through defiant metaphorical density and unmaking the Utilitarians' through literalization strategies is the distinction in *Hard Times* between sound and perverse or "wicked" imaginations. Tom's and Louisa's imaginations have been perverted by the systematic repression of the natural imaginative impulse especially strong at childhood, but in Louisa too strong to admit of utter eradication. Her fire gazing reveals at once "a jaded sullenness" and "a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened her expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheerful youth, but with uncertain, eager, doubtful flashes" (15). As the contrite Gradgrind hesitantly tells an obdurate Bounderby, "there are imaginative qualities in Louisa, which . . . have ben harshly neglected . . . and a little perverted" (178).

The perversion of Tom's imagination through starvation and repression is more pronounced. Dickens defines this damaged imagination as the "ghost" of a sound one that has been "strangled in [Tom's] cradle" and is now inconveniencing him "in the form of grovelling sensualities" (101). The starved imagination consequently seeks other outlets and finds them in quantitative Benthamite pleasures; Tom becomes "quite a gentleman of pleasure" (73). Sparsit's and Bounderby's imaginations are similarly perverse; in Mrs. Pegler's words, "wicked imaginations" (192). She is addressing Gradgrind, who has innocently repeated to her some of Bounderby's accusations of maternal desertion, but her phrase aptly applies to her son's autobiographical inventions and his lady housekeeper's "allegorical fancy." Indeed, Mrs. Sparsit's "Staircase" shows a pernicious inventiveness but not a sound imagination because it is grounded in the gratification of malice, if not in downright evil:

Now, Mrs. Sparsit was not a poetical woman; but she took an idea in the nature of an allegorical fancy, into her head. Much watching of Louisa . . . must have given her as it were a lift, in the way of inspiration. She

erected in her mind a mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom; and down those stairs, from day to day and hour to hour, she saw Louisa coming. (150–51)

Dickens’ point is that the wicked imagination can only invent lies actuated by all gradations of evil, where the sound imagination spawns tales informed by the wish for the common good and celebrates the “unfathomable mystery” even in the meanest of human beings (56).

The distinction between good and pernicious imaginations entails a distinction between two types of imaginative speech.⁸ Dickens exalts figurative speech in *Hard Times* because it provides a barometer of cultural, moral, and even spiritual aplomb. Not all the users of figurative speech, however, are moral and aesthetic positives. Slackbridge, Harthouse, Sparsit, Gradgrind, and Bounderby are articulate, even eloquent. In the case of the first three, especially, their eloquence rises at times to the narrator’s figurativeness. But the difference is significant. Harthouse’s smoothness of speech, Mrs. Sparsit’s “allegorical fancy,” Slackbridge’s hyperboles, and Bounderby’s lies have lapsed into the transparent polemics of malicious and manipulative rhetoric. Like Mrs. Sparsit’s “allegorical fancy,” Harthouse’s eloquence is contaminated by bad intentions. The good speech that his elder brother claims Harthouse could make is a “devilish good speech” (96) and would have lacked the novelist’s compassionate commitment.⁹ The point is that these polished rhetors are resourceful, clever, and even arresting in their incisive articulateness, but Dickens gives them words and actions that deny them the benevolence, the vitality, of the sound imagination. This divestment of the moral energy of the figurative dimension of language on articulate Utilitarian lips is also a form of literalization.

Inherent in the distinction between sound and “starved,” “wicked” imaginations, and between Gradgrindian and narratorial eloquence is one between the good lies of art and the damaging lies of the Utilitarians, each of whom is shown to be either lying or belied. Where, for example, Bounderby’s lies are immoral, the narrator’s are not. The rhetoric of his defiant figurativeness invites us to regard his lies as moral constructs grounded in the truth of inner reality. The presence of Mrs. Pegler and its culmination in the explosion of Bounderby’s lies (book 3, chapter 5), arising partly from the need to hammer home such a distinction, make it even more difficult to see how the forces of fancy could be considered “fettered” and “confused” and the forces of fact articulate and more imaginative (Sonstroem 531).

VI

Not the least distinction of *Hard Times* is its introduction for the first time in the Dickens canon of a new type of literalist. To note the differences between the literalists in this novel and those in his other novels, let us take the example of that notorious literalist in *Our Mutual Friend*, Nicodemus Boffin. In book 4, chapter 3, Boffin hastens to Venus at Clerkenwell, where he receives the much-dreaded intelligence that “Wegg is likely to drop down upon [him] tonight.”

“Why, therefore, you suppose he’ll turn to at the grindstone, eh, Venus?”
said Mr. Boffin.

“Just so, sir.”

Mr. Boffin took his nose in his hand as if it were already excoriated, and the sparks were beginning to fly out of that feature. (718)

Beyond recalling the comico-grotesqueness of caricature, the gesture and the thought illustrate the graphic quality of Dickens’ humor as well as the powers of visualization that words exert upon his characters’ vivid imaginations. Paradoxically, Boffin’s keen sensitivity to words, despite his literal-mindedness, is nothing short of a poet’s by virtue of his visceral, almost hallucinatory, response to language.

Generally speaking, before and after *Hard Times* we meet mainly two kinds of literalists in the novels of Charles Dickens. First, there are those whose utter naiveté renders them childish ignoramuses, fodder for farce. Second, there are those whose literalism makes them semiliterate poets. Childlike in their literalism, they perceive words in a fresh relation to things and so respond to language with a spontaneity unmediated by formal education or stylistic sophistication. Through an uncanny feel for the literal basis of language these literalists defossilize its poetry. They are poets of a kind because, paradoxically enough, their intellectual guilelessness sometimes heightens their untutored etymological awareness. Boffin seems to belong to both categories at once. The Boffin who believes “a Secretary to be a piece of furniture, mostly of mahogany” (227) belongs to the first category of literalists; to the second belongs the Boffin who holds his nose as if sparks were flying from it upon overhearing Wegg’s threat to put Boffin’s nose to the grindstone.

Boffin-like literalists, whom Dickens’ comic linguistic exuberance made easy—and delightful—for him to create, radically differ, however, from the literalists in *Hard Times*, who are articulate and educated. Boffin, though

semiliterate, is literary in his aspirations. The Gradgrindians, on the other hand, are literate but not literary; in fact, they are dogmatically anti-literary. They represent a type of vehemently ideological literalists whom Dickens has not introduced before *Hard Times* and to whom he was not to return afterward. To Dickens Gradgrindian literalists pose a twofold threat. First, their literalism stems not from an etymological keenness or linguistic innocence but from a scathing and unrelenting rejection of metaphor that amounts to a sworn enmity. “I should as soon have expected to find my children reading poetry,” says an indignant Gradgrind who has just caught Tom and Louisa “peeping at the circus” (19). Second, because they are articulate and socially powerful Dickens must have feared that their gospel of facts could take them a long way, as indeed it did, in giving mid-Victorian culture its tone, its temper, and its doctrine. In the stridency of his fulmination against their faction, especially in the early chapters, we measure Dickens’ resentment, perhaps dread, of their assault on his profession, on his very livelihood. And the rhetoric in this novel is essentially defensive, even when Dickens seems—in his narrator’s figurative flourishes—at his most militant and affirmative, for the affirmation is too shrill and there is something too theatrical in the defiant metaphoricality. For *Hard Times* is at once Dickens’ most anti-Utilitarian novel and his most utilitarian one.

VII

From *Pickwick* to *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens’ extraordinarily keen sensitivity to the interpenetrations of the literal and figurative levels of language has led him to explore in their light and at their intersections the elements of fiction. In book 4, chapter 3, of *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens shows how a character, Venus, uses the distinction between the literal and the figurative to avert an altercation. Silas Wegg accuses Noddy Boffin of spying on him:

“You’ve placed in this yard a skulking, a sneaking, and a sniffing menial [Sloppy].

“He hadn’t a cold in his head when I sent him here,” said Mr. Boffin.

“Boffin!” retorted Wegg, “I warn you not to attempt a joke with me!”

Here Mr. Venus interposed, and remarked that he conceived Mr. Boffin to have taken the description literally; the rather for as much as he, Mr. Venus, had himself supposed the menial to have contracted an affliction or a habit of the nose, involving a serious drawback on the pleasures of social intercourse, until he had discovered that Mr. Wegg’s description of him was to be accepted as merely figurative.” (720)

The inconsequentiality of the figurative and the literal interpretation of Sloppy's nasality must be stressed, for the literal would mean a head cold for Sloppy and trouble for Boffin, where the "merely figurative" would at once further underscore Boffin's lack of formal education and reassure Wegg of the dustman's good faith and innocuous literal-mindedness: a first step towards defusing a potentially nasty confrontation that would have forced Venus to disclose prematurely his disgust at Wegg's blackmailing scheme. The passage is comic. The reader emerges from it with a sharper sense of Mr. Wegg's intransigence, Sloppy's comico-grotesqueness, and Venus's mental promptitude.

In stark contrast, the figurative in *Hard Times* is all but "merely figurative." Through figurativeness Dickens insists on an extension of significance beyond the literal. *Hard Times* is unique in the Dickens canon in its sustained use of the figurative and the literal. There is reason to insist on a larger role for these two levels of language than that of their service to the conventional goals of characterization, comedy, and satire: this role is enacted in the novel's metaphoric density; in the rendering of literalization in terms of symbol in the opening scene; in the creation of three memorable literalists in Gradgrind, Bounderby, and Bitzer; in the numerous instances of textual and contextual literalizations; and in the defense of culture beneath the satire on facts, figures, multiplication tables, statistics, quantities, ounce and pound weights, and measures. Literalization is part and parcel of the idea of *Hard Times*, at once its method and its meaning. And indeed method and meaning coalesce as Dickens runs Utilitarian speech aground on the shoals of literalism in an effort to alert his contemporaries to the cultural skull beneath Utilitarian skin by protesting the attempted repression of poetic vocabulary and narrative impulse and by denouncing the obsession with the thing behind the word, the matter behind the metaphor, and the pound weight and measures behind the mystery.

It is with a few words about the nature of the mystery in *Hard Times* that I would like to conclude. Grahame Smith, commenting on Dickens' assertion of the existence of "an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of [the Coketown Hands]," rightly argues that "[t]he mystery of humanity is hardly separable, in Dickens, from the absolute and unconditional value he accords the individual," a value which accounts for Dickens' method, his "work[ing] by indirects, because he believes that there is finally a core of personality which can only be guessed at, interpreted, implied and not explained" (Smith 168). True, Dickens advocates the supremacy of the human being as a unique individual, and this stance certainly justifies the particular stridency in *Hard*

Times of his criticism of the inadequacy of statistics to penetrate the socio-economic reality of human suffering in mid-Victorian England. One should add, however, that the mystery with which Dickens suffuses this elusive “core of personality” is not only immanent but also transcendent.

The notion of transcendent mystery is inherent in Dickens’ use of astronomical imagery in *Hard Times*. In the opening paragraph of book 1, chapter 15, Dickens draws an analogy between the futility of political economy’s efforts to fathom “the most complicated social questions” and a windowless astronomical observatory:

As if an astronomical observatory should be made without any windows, and the astronomer within should arrange the starry universe solely by pen, ink, and paper, so Mr. Gradgrind, in his Observatory (and there are many like it), had 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. (75)

The passage implies an attack on the astronomical basis of empiricism. Indeed, Copernicus with his description in 1530 of the sun as the center of the solar system was the first to shift the concept of the universe from the religious to the secular. The Copernican revolution marks the abolition of sacramental astronomy.¹⁰ In his Observatory Gradgrind goes a step further: He ushers Copernican astronomy into the Victorian bleak house of political economy. Astronomy becomes not only secular but fundamentally economic. Dickens’ rejection of the statistical approach of political economy in terms of an extended astronomical simile suggests that the numerical approach to life is celestial divestment, spiritual nullification, a denial of the mystery. His astronomical observatory represents a microcosmic version of the Copernican macrocosm: a purely materialistic, mechanistic universe both in its nature and in its operation; a triumph of rationalism, materialism, and that fundamental tenet of Utilitarianism ethics, one that constitutes a denial of ultimate sanctions, secularism. The extended astronomical analogy exposes the limitations of this Benthamite triad of rationalism, materialism, and secularism.¹¹

For this reason, were Gradgrind able to look upward and see through “the languid monotonous smoke” (78) the star that Stephen Blackpool sees as he lies dying at the bottom of Old Hell Shaft, he would neither see, feel, nor imagine what Blackpool sees, feels, and imagines. Blackpool’s star shines on him with a promise of transcendent reality and redemptive vision:

“It ha’ shined upon me . . . in my pain and trouble down below. It ha’ shined into my mind. I ha’ look’n at ’t and thowt o’thee, Rachael, till the muddle in

my mind have cleared awa, above a bit, I hope. If soom ha' been wantin' in unnerstan'in me better, I, too, have been wantin' in unnerstan'in' them better. . . . [I]n our judgments, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear. In my pain an' trouble, lookin' up yonder,—wi' it shinin on me—I ha' seen more clear, and ha' made it my dyin' prayer that aw th' world may on'y coom toogether more, an' get a better unnerstan'in o' one another, than when I were in 't my own weak seln. . . .

"Often as I coom to myseln, and found it shinin on me down there in my trouble, I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour's home. I awmust think it be the very star!" (201–02)

Clearly the star functions for Stephen as an agent of spiritual vision, a celestial light that appears to him when he is on the brink of writing off his life as a complete "muddle." Here, then, is the nature of the mystery at the core of the human personality in *Hard Times*: it is religious—Christian—as well as secular, however orthodox the symbol Dickens uses to intimate spirituality.

Stephen Blackpool is able to read the star symbolically because Dickens endows him with a good heart and a "fancy," however "rugged," that allows him to see Rachael as a starlight of love. Stephen watches Rachael, who has just saved him from becoming a partner to his wife's death, walk down the road and

As the stars were to the heavy candle in the window, so was Rachael, in the rugged fancy of this man, to the common experience of his life. (71)

The saving power of Rachael's radiance illuminates Blackpool's common experience, enabling him to "see or think o' onnything that angered" him, "wi' a better eye" (123). Blackpool, the victim of an unjust social system, is able to perceive the star metaphorically as the symbol of spiritual vision. Through Stephen—and of course Cissy—Dickens reiterates in *Hard Times* one of his enduring themes, the contingency of social reform on spiritual vision. Herein, precisely, lies the vital question of figures: it is a question of seeing the mystery, the wonder—Carlyle's "natural supernatural"—at the living heart of human reality, and of seeing it "with a better eye," a question of vision. To reform society, Dickens implies in his defense of the metaphor, we must first re-form it. We must re-imagine it. Any successful attempt at banishing the poet's mystery-intimating figures in favor of the political economist's would doom us to the tragic futility of the astronomer trying to plumb the revolution of "the great wheel of earth" (195) and the depths of "the starry universe" (75) from an observatory "made without windows." *Hard Times* was Dickens' warning to his contemporaries against reenacting the Victorian version of the myth of Sisyphus.

Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois.

NOTES

1. The bulk of the adverse criticism of *Hard Times* centers on the tawdriness and superficiality of Dickens' alternative to the Gradgrind-Bounderby world of Utilitarianism. John Holloway is disturbed by the frivolity of the novelist's "counterpart to the world of the 'hard-fact men' which operated at a relatively shallow level of consciousness, one represented by the Slearies not as vital horsemen but as plain entertainers." John Holloway, "*Hard Times*: a History and a Criticism," *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge, 1962), repr. in *Hard Times: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod [New York: Norton, 1991] 362). David M. Hirsch laments that "tears, idle tears, bitter orgies of tears are the only alternative that Dickens seems to have to offer to fact-grubbing Gradgrindianism." "*Hard Times* and Dr. Leavis," *Criticism VI* (Winter 1964), repr. in the Norton Critical Edition of *Hard Times* 372). David Lodge deplores that the fancy which Dickens pits against facts is "merely a temporary escape from what is accepted as inevitably unpleasant. It is 'relief,' 'a vent,' 'a holiday.' To be cruel, one might say that Dickens offers the oppressed workers of Coketown bread and circuses." The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*," *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel* (London: Routledge, 1966) 159.
2. David Lodge argues that the rhetoric here differs from that in the opening chapters of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. In *Hard Times*, he writes, the rhetoric "works to establish a thematic Idea—the despotism of Fact," whereas with "the fog at the beginning of *Bleak House* or the sun and shadow in the first chapter of *Little Dorrit* . . . the rhetoric works to establish a symbolic atmosphere." Could it not be, however, that in this first chapter of *Hard Times*, too, the rhetoric works not only to invest "this abstraction—Fact—with remarkable solidity through the figurative dimension of the language," but to establish a symbolic character? The hardness of massive matter here is as pervasive a symbol as the fog in *Bleak House* or the sun and shadow in *Little Dorrit*. The basic difference is that in *Hard Times* the symbol has become harsher, starker, more accurate. We do not so much witness the concretization of an abstract idea—fact—as we witness the solidification, as it were, of the speaker. Lodge, "The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*" 151.
3. For a full treatment of the proletariat topic in *Hard Times*, see Stephen J. Spector's article "Monsters of Metonymy: *Hard Times* and the Working Class," *ELH* 51 (1984): 365–84.
4. By adding seven and one and switching two digits, the sum becomes the year of publication: 1854. This is no mere ingenuity on my part but an (I hope) educated guess inspired by the obliqueness and surreptitiousness with which Dickens likes, or feels compelled, to refer in his fiction to autobiographical or biographical elements. See for example Henry Fielding Dickens' account of "The Memory Game" in *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Philip Collins (New York: Barnes, 1981) 1:162.
5. Dickens' staggering duties as a writer, speaker, editor, and provider for a large family would have been impossible without a fastidiousness about dates and details and an overriding carefulness about facts. In a letter of 18 March 1853 to W. H. Wills he demands that the facts about a submitted article on India Rubber be "closely enquired into. . . . Nothing can be so damaging to *Household Words* as carelessness about facts. It is as hideous as dullness." *The Nonesuch*

Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Walter Dexter, 454–55. The last sentence especially leaves no doubt about Dickens' insistence on factual truth.

6. Dickens enclosed fourteen titles in a letter of 20 January 1854 to John Forster which is reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Hard Times*, p. 273. Titles of a tenor to similar "A Mere Question of Figures" include "Two and Two are Four," "Simple Arithmetic" and "A Matter of Calculation."
7. "Frauds on the Fairies" was published in the *Household Words* issue of 1 October 1853. The fraudulence lies in the sabotage of fairy tales by Utilitarianism. To dramatize this abuse Dickens proposes to "write the story of Cinderella, 'edited' by one of these gentlemen, doing a good stroke of business, and having a rather extensive mission." In the retelling the editor parodies the effort to coerce the fairy tale through the specificities of time, place, facts, and calculations into obeisance to a pseudo-scientific spirit of exactitude further made appealing by a healthy dose of useful knowledge. Examples abound. When Cinderella was nine her mother died, "and all the Juvenile Bands of Hope in her district—the Central district, number five hundred and twenty-seven—formed a procession of two and two, amounting to fifteen hundred, and followed her to the grave, singing chorus number forty-two, 'O come,' and & co." This grave was "under the direction of the Local Board of Health, which reported at certain stated intervals to the General Board of Health, Whitehall" (98). The King proposed to adjourn the meeting at exactly a quarter before twelve. The Prince "hands Cinderella to one of the reserved seats for pink tickets on the platform." He rose to address his audience "at precisely ten minutes before eight" and "held them enthralled for four hours and a quarter" (99). In this mock sacrifice of an immortal fairy tale to a misplaced emphasis on exactitude, a misunderstanding of the scientific spirit, and a crass obsessiveness with the materialistic, the useful, and the practical, language becomes no more than a form of courtroom discourse in which human beings are made to give fastidious evidence. The fairy tale now reads like a writ from Chancery.
8. There are two types of figurativeness in *Hard Times* but four distinct languages. Besides the antithetical languages of the narrator and the Gradgrindians there is the language or rather the slang of the Sleary circus, which Dickens took pains to get right, as well as the Yorkshire dialect of Stephen Blackpool. Dickens brings Cecilia and Rachel together, but perhaps cramped by difficulties of space, not Sleary and Blackpool; yet the tenor of both their languages is similar in its advocacy of reconciliation and compromise. "Make the beth of uth; not the wurth!" Sleary urges Gradgrind (36). Similarly Stephen tells Bounderby that "Not drawing nigh to fok, with kindness and patience and cheery ways . . . Most o' aw, rating [the workers] as so much Power, and reg'rating 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines wi'out souls . . ." will not solve the "muddle" (114). The similar messages of both Sleary and Blackpool at once stand in stark contrast to the Gradgrindians' theme and represent a variation on the narrator's. Underlying these four distinct languages are two views on the function of language. One view clamors that language is the handmaiden of the pragmatic and the objective, and should not therefore be seen as anything more than a vehicle of information. The other decries this restrictive view, arguing that the word is also a vehicle for emotion, the voice of the affective life, the poet's medium. *Hard Times* recognizes the inevitability of the literal view of language and life but also argues the cultural merits and perhaps necessity of a figurative apprehension of reality. The somber industrial landscape of Coketown is spawned as

- much—Dickens insists—by the prevalence of the literalist view of language as by the smoke from the factory stacks.
9. For the same reason, Dickens openly (and unconvincingly) debunks Slackbridge’s diction. The oratory in Slackbridge’s two addresses to the members of his union Dickens derides as “froth and fume” (105), a result of the speaker’s getting caught in the rhythms of his own hyperbolic truculence at Blackpool’s expense. What is debunked, however, is not figurative language itself but the bad faith in which it is used.
 10. “The dethronement of the Earth from the centre of the universe caused profound shock. No longer could the Earth be considered the epitome of creation, for it was only a planet like the other planets. . . . And the belief in a correspondence between man, the microcosm, as a mirror of the surrounding universe, the macrocosm, was no longer valid.” *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 16:761.
 11. As if to emphasize the limitations of the mystery-denying empiricist world, Dickens furnishes Gradgrind’s Observatory with “a deadly statistical clock . . . which measured every second with a beat like a rap upon a coffin-lid” (75). Gradgrind’s star is timebound, phenomenal, where Blackpool’s is timeless, noumenal; it is an eradication of time leading into eternity. Dickens, who has dedicated *Hard Times* to his mentor Carlyle, seems to agree with Carlyle’s explicit statement in *Sator Resartus* that time and space are garments of the noumenal world and that, more to the point, time as chronology is only a custom, a convention whose eradication we tend to overlook because of the linearity of language.

WORKS CITED

- Campbell, Jane. “‘Competing Towers of Babel’: Some Patterns of Language in *Hard Times*.” *English Studies in Canada* 10 (1984): 416–35.
- Caserio, Robert L. “The Name of the Horse: *Hard Times*, Semiotics, and the Supernatural.” *Novel: A Forum On Fiction* 20 (Fall 1986): 5–23.
- Collins, Philip, ed. *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections*. 2 vols. New York: Barnes, 1981.
- Dexter, Walter, ed. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. 3 vols. Bloomsbury: Nonesuch, 1938.
- Dickens, Charles. “Frauds on the Fairies.” *Household Words* 1 Oct. 1853:35–39.
- . *Hard Times: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1990.
- . *Our Mutual Friend*. Ed. Stephen Gill. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The Poet.” *Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. George McMichael. 2 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1985. 1:1077–91.

- Fabrizio, Richard. "Wonderful No-Meaning: Language and the Psychopathology of the Family in Dickens' *Hard Times*." *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 16 (1987): 61–94.
- Hirsch, David M. "*Hard Times* and Dr. Leavis." *Criticism* 6 (Winter 1964): 1–16.
- Holloway, John. "*Hard Times*: A History and a Criticism." *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*. Ed. John Cross and Gabriel Pearson. London: Routledge, 1962. 167–74.
- Lodge, David. *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*. London: Routledge, 1966.
- . *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1971.
- Manlove, Colin N. *Critical Thinking: A Guide to Interpreting Literary Texts*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- Smith, Grahame. "'O Reason Not the Need': *King Lear*, *Hard Times* and Utilitarian Values." *Dickensian* 86 (1990): 164–70.
- Sonstroem, David. "Fettered Fancy in *Hard Times*." *PMLA* 84 (1969): 520–31.
- Spector, Stephen J. "Monsters of Metonymy: *Hard Times* and Knowing the Working Class." *ELH* 51 (1984): 365–84.