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Acts of Enclosure: The Moral Landscape of Dickens' *Hard Times*

Efraim Sicher

I.

In 1948 F. R. Leavis lamented the lack of recognition given to *Hard Times*, which was owing, he believed, to the unpopularity of the moral fable. It was precisely the moral vision of the novel which Leavis singled out for praise and for which he was attacked by David M. Hirsch in 1964. John Holloway, writing in 1962 and in a 1989 modification of his views, likewise resented the “forced rhetoric” of the novel and the attempt by Leavis to read into it a “single vision.” A healthy corrective to a polemic with the dead is the more recent realization that Victorian fiction presents not a universe, but what Jerome Meckier has termed “multiverses” in his aptly titled *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Revaluation* (1987). It is surely axiomatic that mid-century writing responded to the Condition of England debate, since the principles of utilitarianism and the supposed national prosperity questioned the poetics of the text, its orientation, ideology, and language. Even Jane Austen is no longer considered anachronistically “inconvenient” as A. C. Bradley once saw her. Ignoring the crisis, or, to co-opt a fashionable term, “resisting” it, was itself a response. The polyphony of the discourse embraced all fields of life, notably education, labor relations, and art, and intersected the essay, the novel, poetry, drama, public speeches, and journalism. When Macauley blasts Southey in his review of the *Colloquies* we cannot ignore the head-on clash of ideologies and poetics. Macauley ridicules the poet’s critique of industrialization by negating his pastoral representation of the landscape. What Southey fancies he can see does not exist in fact for Macauley. Rival representations of the landscape essentially negate

the language of the competing ideologies by deconstructing their conventions and attempting to perpetuate an alternate poetics.

I use the word “deconstruct” advisedly, since Steven Connor, in his contribution to Terry Eagleton’s *Rereading Literature* series, *Charles Dickens* (1985), has proposed *Hard Times* as a test case for a deconstructive reading, “a reading,” he writes, citing Barbara Johnson, “that analyses the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself” (Connor 90). Dickens’ later novels offer themselves for deconstructionist criticism, he continues, and even deconstruct themselves from within: “as the novels project increasingly complex and contradictory fictional worlds, the desire to enclose and control those worlds grows in proportion to the intensity of the internal arguments that the novels conduct with themselves” (Connor 90–91). Maire J. Kurrik has included Lewis Carroll and Charles Dickens in a study of Literature and Negation. Jay Clayton has found it difficult to overcome the temptation of which John Carey spoke, “to make Dickens look more modern than he is” (Carey 174), and has claimed that Dickens’ deconstructive awareness of language anticipates postmodernism. The issue, however, is the cultural context of negativity when the definition and proprietorship of culture were in question and the Levites of culture felt themselves on the defensive. There was no greater debunker of convention than Dickens, and his novel *Hard Times* is a conscious deconstruction (though hardly a lone example) of utilitarian positions which makes a statement about its own existence as a negation of those positions. Paradoxically, deconstructive awareness of language leads Dickens to a new morality, however uncertain its ideology, and it will be apparent that Dickens holds a notion of discourse more characteristic of Bakhtinian polyphony as applied to the modern novel than contemporary deconstructionism: “. . . the dialogical approach can be applied to any meaningful part of an utterance, even to an individual word, if that word is perceived not as an impersonal word of language, but as the sign of another’s semantic position . . .” (Bakhtin 152). I stress this because Dickens has been accused of inconsistency in *Hard Times*, as well as weak-headedness and incoherence, whereas the dialogizing of opposing discourses does not necessarily assume that all or any of the represented views are the author’s own.

What I aim to do is to show how Dickens brings into binary relationship competing models of social reality and competing models of representation. These juxtaposed models are in binary opposition of *open* to *closed* systems and the oppositions operate dynamically to generate alternatively false and true representations of social space. Dickens’ comic satire at the same time

exploits and parodies social as well as literary conventions, which may obscure any authorial position, though the concerns of the real-life Dickens are never far away. In particular the boundaries of constriction or enclosure have biographical and social relevance.¹ *Hard Times* offers the most obvious example of visualization of spatial metaphor as a sustained structuring device and it will be necessary to do some close reading to demonstrate the function of spatial metaphor in the ideational thrust of the novel at all levels.² Since *Hard Times* has been so controversial an example of fictional representation of social discourse I shall conclude with a brief response that suggests a need for a multidisciplinary and open-minded approach to the novel which preserves the sense of what Barbara Hardy called Dickens' "moral art."

II.

Elsewhere I have argued that the strategies of spatial representation in nineteenth-century fiction reveal the homologies applied by Greimas to literary texts, which manipulate imagery in the structuring of a visualized fictional actuality (Sicher 211–24). Steven Connor demonstrates a juxtaposition in Dickens' novels between *stasis* and *motion*, *openness* and *enclosure* that relies on precisely such homologies of difference.³ The territorial ordering of perceptions of differentiation in human society, explored by Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, may be found in Dickens' fictional landscape, whose territorial boundaries are marked by similar oppositions of openness to enclosure.

To get an idea of Dickens' set of oppositions, let us take an example from *Oliver Twist*. Oliver is fleeing the supposed benevolence of the Poor Law, but his first encounter with London anticipates the moral danger that awaits him in the hands of Fagin.

A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. . . . Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth; and from several of the door-ways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands. (103)⁴

The city environment—no less tainted and filthy than Oliver's native parish—matches the pollution of the reptile Jew as he slinks through the labyrinth

of London's underworld, except that Fagin's imprisonment of Oliver is moral, not merely physical as in the children's farm or workhouse, a structural opposition which has not escaped perceptive critics such as J. Hillis Miller who writes, "The main axis of the nuclear structure of *Oliver Twist* is a fear of exclusion which alternates with a fear of enclosure" (*Charles Dickens* 68).

In *Oliver Twist* there is an escape route from the Hogarth-like scenes of ginshops and wretched poverty, through the kindness of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies. Redemption is achieved through a portrait (a visual sign and a framing structure parallel to that of the novel), which leads Oliver to his true inheritance, his secular salvation, as Steven Marcus has called it, and his identification as a gentleman both by virtue of class and by virtue of virtue. In *Great Expectations* salvation has to be achieved from within, through a moral rereading of the landscape and a symbolic return to the goodness and virtue to be found in Joe's environs (Marcus 87–88).⁵

The consistent opposition of open to closed space works analogically to the opposition of open to closed systems of ethics and language and it may be further clarified by a scheme we can find in *Hard Times*. This has been for many years one of Dickens' less popular novels, partly because of its tendency to schematicism and caricature. The dissenting view, of course, is that of F. R. Leavis, who acclaimed the novel's moral intention in *The Great Tradition*. The past few years have fortunately seen a greater appreciation of *Hard Times*, but commentators have been slow to recognize one of the clearest examples of Dickens' deconstructive awareness of language. Ian Ousby, for example, has demonstrated how the novel's moral intention is invested in rich metaphorical play and grows out of its figurative use of language which opposes connotative to denotative signs (103–09). We will see that Dickens' sophisticated play of signification and identity satirizes a sign system that insists on the strict one-to-one literalness of the relationship between *signifier* and *referent* and that denies any value but a utilitarian one to the text. Dickens' language of representation uses the openness of metonymy in order to invalidate the enclosure of space and of mind in the Gradgrind system and in the industrial landscape of Coketown for which it is responsible. In a regrettably brief discussion of *Hard Times* Steven Connor shows metaphor and metonymy, or language as presence and language as difference, to be elaborate ploys in the signification of Fact and Fancy, Gradgrindery and the Circus (89–106).⁶

What greater affront could there be to Gradgrindery, which denies the legitimacy of fairy tales and figurative speech as means of representation, than to represent it in imagery borrowed from fairy tales and in flights of

fancy? What could more efficiently debunk its official rhetoric than to ironically describe factories as Fairy Palaces? In the performance of the text, Dickens is borrowing the language of the popular theater, as David Lodge has shown, and exploiting the mixed-media form of the pantomime (Lodge 42–43).⁷ By doing so he is, moreover, making a point and defending the legitimacy of his own aesthetics. Terence Cave has remarked in a critique of Lodge's structuralist analysis that the true analogy is the one that can be drawn between the soft-hearted circus-master Sleary and the producer of popular novels (Cave 411).

The novel opens in "a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom," a scene packed with metaphors that reinforce the characterization of the facts taught there as useless merchandise destined for futile storage. The lines in this realm of facts are uniform, regular, and square. Gradgrind's forefinger, coat, legs, shoulders, his mind, all belie the inhuman inflexibility of his system, rendered ludicrous by the similes of the "plantation of firs" and the "plum pie." Storage is emblematic of an enclosure that is both physical and spiritual. The vault houses both death and material valuables. The square boundaries, suggesting closure of mind, are a recurrent motif, blatant in the description of Coketown, which is undermined by the very same fanciful imagery that it negates.

The realm of Facts is an arid desert of utility into which no human warmth is allowed, no irrational inspiration, no spark of the imagination just as there was no Fancy at Chesney Wold in *Bleak House*, another site of dead spirit and false representation. The fantasy which Louisa dreams into the embers of the fire is a punishable heresy and juxtaposes two conflicting ideological areas of fictional space, much as Lizzie Hexam's fireside dreaming in *Our Mutual Friend* suggests a similar will to good in terms of a spatial and structural break from evil.

The schoolchildren are treated as numbers from an early age, just as the workers are abstracted to the degree of disembodied statistics, "Hands," useful only in as much as they produce and meet planned ends. Anything connected with private life, anything that is at all individual, unaccounted for in the norms of Political Economy, is dismissed into nonexistence. Sissy Jupe's circus life has no place here, nor do representations of horses on wallpaper or flowers on carpets belong here, because they are not functionally useful in the manufacturers' world of production and profits. Closure of mind is the more terrifying because in its own terms it is total, absolute, unquestionable, and infallible. Dickens is prescient of the technological or totalitarian dystopia of the twentieth century and Meckier compares *Brave*

New World in this respect (50–51), for it is a dictatorship that seeks to control both knowledge and representation of the real world.

Knowledge is classified into little cabinets for the Gradgrind children. There can be no unknowns or maybes in an arithmetical “calculated” Stone Lodge where all must conform to $2 + 2 = 4$. Like the schoolroom, the spiritually vacuous mind of Mr. Gradgrind is “cavernous” and bounded by walls. But just as the universal system of rule and scientific logic is enclosed and finite, there exists another world of infinite possibilities. The first glimpse we have of this world is through a loophole—a legalistic and spatial metaphor—into Mr. Sleary’s Horse-Riding establishment.

The loophole suggests a fundamental flaw in the perfect design of Gradgrind’s ideological architecture, and Dickens builds up an amusing set of oppositions between the two structures. The very sounds issuing from the *wooden* structure of the circus clash with the mechanical harmony in Gradgrind’s heartless, *stony* residence. Sleary’s Horse-Riding establishment has encamped on “neutral ground upon the outskirts of the town, which was neither town nor country, and yet was either spoiled” (55). Its alien bohemian presence threatens, encroaches upon urban territory. Tyrolean Flower-acts, tricks by a performing dog, and astounding feats by the Emperor of Japan contradict the teaching of the schoolroom that a horse is a purely functional object and not a creature to pamper the Fancy. The wooden pavilion is itself an enclosure: a temporary tabernacle in the wilderness, the god enshrined “in an ecclesiastical niche of early Gothic architecture” is money, and the self-made man is its priest. However, Gradgrind, who seeks to raise his offspring as models of eminent Practicality, which accepts its due and knows no god except Fact, must be disappointed, for here are his own Louisa and Tom peeping in on Art and Nature, a rebellious Adam and Eve tasting from the Tree of Fancy in the utilitarian utopia. This is an illicit transgression of the boundary which marks off the circus rabble from the “civilized” urban society which would, if it could, confine them to the House of Correction. What divides the “neutral ground” of the Circus from the Town is a “space of stunted grass and dry rubbish” (56), emphasizing the sexual, spiritual and ideological aridity of Coketown. Louisa’s imagination is starved, “a fire with nothing to burn,” her will is subdued, but what she has seen beyond the wooden partition opens her eyes before she is forcibly led back to the castrating, claustrophobic, cold, damp, dark existence of Gradgrindery in Stone Lodge. Even the name of Josiah Bounderby recalls the confining *bounds* of the stifling imprisonment in which Louisa must grow up (but also suggests he might be a bounder).⁸ Other names are also spatially significant: Harthouse

is a man whose philosophy differs only in kind from Gradgrind's. Blackpool, a *natural* resort on the northern coast, suggests both the black chasm which threatens to divide men and masters, and the black abyss into which he eventually falls.

The modern industrial city is characterized as an immoral and inhuman space not just in the unsympathetic "keynote" descriptions of Coketown, the archetypal factory town, but also in the usurping of the entire landscape by its system. If Bounderby has taken a country retreat in a rustic spot, it is linked to the City "by a railway striding on many arches over a wild country, undermined by deserted coal-shafts, and spotted at night by fires and black shapes of stationary engines at pits' mouths" (196). On several occasions in his works Dickens does not hide his admiration for the magnificent railway "striding on many arches," yet he reserves his criticism for what the railway exposes as it mercilessly and indiscriminately cuts through town and country. Nature is spoiled, the City is civilizing the "wild country," organizing it into pits of hell-fire and monsters. Bounderby brings his non-natural City identity to his country retreat, "bullying" the very pictures, which he contemptuously devalues. Horsekeeping is not for him, though he bids Harthouse welcome to bring down horses, for he sees no value in having more than one horse (in keeping with the teaching of the model school). Moreover, the idea insults his self-image of a maggot grown large (197).

Coketown is an "unnatural" town of red-brick, blackened by smoke "like the painted face of a savage" (65), a simile that echoes Carlyle's criticism in *Past and Present* of laissez-faire economics with its jungle law of savagery, as well as exposing "civilized" man's true face. This is a conventional negation of the employers' deceitful idealization of factory conditions by making an analogy between the treatment of colonial slaves and English workers. Worst of all is the mind-deadening monotony of the streets and the daily routine. All buildings are the same, except the Bank and Bounderby's, which are the same only bigger. The canal is black and polluted by purple dye. The alienation of workers from the products of their labor, the "comforts of life which found their way all over the world," is also an alienation from environment. Following Carlyle's attack on worship of Mammon and in the spirit of the novel's dedication, or rather *inscription*, to the author of *Past and Present*, each of the different denominational chapels in the "ugly citadel" is made "a pious warehouse," so different from Sleary's equestrian temple, and the parody of the Doxology provides a sacrilegious representation of the new mercantile faith.

It can be legitimately inferred from the negation of the Gradgrind representation of things that the problem of the laborers is not reducible to such simple causes as alcoholism or narcotics. Their problem stems from the enforced urban condition in their "close rooms," from which they can only escape through death. Indeed, it is with difficulty that a coffin can be got through the window of the narrow houses. In the significantly titled chapter "No Way Out," Dickens again strikes the "key-note" for his description of the City.

The Fairy palaces burst into illumination, before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown. A clattering of clogs upon the pavement; a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy-mad elephants, polished and oiled up for the day's monotony, were at their heavy exercise again. (107)

The City of Man mocks Nature and consigns the work of God to oblivion next to that of man. The "fairy palaces" are really monstrous infernos and the "forest" of looms are scaffolds, not picnic-sites. The natural elements themselves engender death, not life, because of the high levels of environmental pollution, for "so does the eye of Heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable or sordid hands are interposed between it and the things it looks upon to bless" (147). The heat is unnatural, confining, and asphyxiating. It is unpleasantly hot among the "smoke-serpents." In summer the heat is "stifling" and in autumn it is just as unpleasantly damp and cold on the streets.

In order to hammer home the opposition of the machine-world mentality of Gradgrindery and a more humane truthful outlook, Dickens sets up juxtapositions of class and of humanity versus inhumanity in accordance with the Key-note plan of Coketown's ideological territory. Stephen Blackpool walks along the streets of Coketown, chewing a little bread, on his way to see Bounderby, comfortably at lunch on chop and sherry. Stephen's desperate plight cannot touch the great man, who can only see simple causes and self-interest. There is a law for the rich and another for the poor. Stephen cannot afford a divorce, therefore he can have no redress for his personal troubles. His conclusion that "'tis a muddle" (113) only provokes Bounderby's warning to mind his piece-work, for the institutions of England, the institutions of representation, are none of his piece-work. If Hands complain, reasons Bounderby, they must be looking for a golden spoon and turtle soup. In his blue chamber, surrounded by Blue Books, Gradgrind—the parliamentary representative—also fails to perceive the "muddle" which Stephen sees and which Carlyle in *Past and Present* saw as an unilluminated chaos. This

example of false visual and political representation underscores the moral blindness of Bounderby and Gradgrind that is satirized by visual oppositions, which, though at times almost crude, fit in with the general symbolic patterning of what Leavis called Dickens' "moral fable" and create a "comprehensive vision" in the sense of both sight and prophecy.

Coketown remains ever ephemeral, abstract, and shrouded in haze, and, however much the Gradgrinds and Bounderbys claim to dispel the mysteries of life, it is the secrets to which they are blind which must inevitably undo them. These unscientific mysteries are penetrated by those who perceive an existence beyond the reality of the city, such as the members of the Circus who perform their art on the border of, yet beyond, the City.

The choice, however, is not between Town and Country, but between Good and Evil. Tom takes the money and goes to the Bad, implicating Stephen in his sinister machinations. Louisa, drawing on her sympathy of imagination, wants to put money to the good: she offers money to Stephen who has resolved to quit town. The key to social change is individual moral regeneration. Stephen, tied to a drunken woman by an unfair law, overcomes temptation. He fulfills his role as martyr by keeping his oath and suffering for it.⁹ Later, he frees himself from the City with its poisonous chimneys that clutter up the sky and becomes a fugitive among birds, sun, trees (194), but feels compelled to return to clear his name. Louisa falls for the opportunist Mr. James Harthouse and goes down, down, lower and lower, her symbolic descent observed by Mrs. Sparsit on her fanciful Giant's Staircase, mindful of her own social descent, or her phony representation of it, as well as alluding to political fall on the grand staircase of the Ducal Palace in Venice in Byron's *Marino Faliero* (Ford and Monod 153 n 5). Yet Louisa is freed at last from her mental and moral servitude to the empire of Bounderby. In the three-dimensional model of the City, descent implies eventual spiritual ascent.

Louisa Gradgrind is in a sense, and in a very Christian sense, reborn and must adjust her spatial relationship to the City. She must reread the signs around her and recognize that strange fire which sometimes bursts out.¹⁰ She must reread Stephen's behavior which she had earlier misinterpreted because she was indoctrinated by the Gradgrind representation of things. Louisa's "shipwreck" rocks the foundations upon which Gradgrind's principles are built. Moved by Sissy's compassion, even James Harthouse declares himself a Great Pyramid of Failure and sets off for the Nile to go in for camels (257).

The search for truth is a mythic journey which incorporates the chase scene and suspense element of the crime thriller, but the truth is not to be found in an escape to the country. If, with good luck and chance, one could escape

the abuses of the parochial system in *Oliver Twist*, there is here “no way out.” Indeed, when Sissy and Rachael go for a walk in the country, “midway between the town and Mr Bounderby’s retreat,” they discover that the “green landscape” is “blotted” by the urban industrial wasteland and the Sunday peace is broken only by nonconformist larks (283). It is here that they find Stephen Blackpool lying injured in a disused pit called, significantly, the Old Hell Shaft (286). Stephen is rescued from his descent into Hell, which had ensnared him on his path to truth, and his innocence is established, largely through the instrument of Louisa and her reformed father. He is then carried in the direction of the star that seemed to him to be the guide to the Saviour’s house and he finds eternal salvation “through humility, sorrow, and forgiveness” (291–92). Again, descent to Hell leads to spiritual ascent to heaven and a shift in moral valuation. It will be observed that in *Our Mutual Friend*, too, Betty Higden escapes the cruel degradation of the Poor Laws by posthumous salvation, dying in the arms of Lizzie Hexam, a clear counterpart to Louisa in *Hard Times*. The Christological conclusion is emphasized by the book titles “Sowing,” “Reaping,” and “Garnering,” which are also self-referential in the structuring of plot, as well as the New Testament references in the chapter headings “The One Thing Needful” and “Murdering the Innocents.”

The moral is indeed serious and visionary. Sissy, alone untainted by Coketown morality, is rewarded with happy children, and Louisa does penance by

thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show, will be the Writing on the Wall,—she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair; but simply as duty to be done,—did Louisa see these things of herself? These things were to be. (313)

The City, with its mills and schools, can be put to the Good—just as the mill and the school in *Our Mutual Friend* are not inherently evil. Enclosure is opposed to a responsive and responsible relationship with environment, in contrast to the Marxist dictum. By substituting national for natural growth, by enforcing regulated, closed forms, the City is actually shown to be closer to an inferno than to Eden. Stephen Blackpool’s negation of the supposed rational organization of the City as “aw a muddle” shows up the inhumanity of the Commissioners of Inquiry and Captains of Industry, whose attitude to

Charity is that the Good Samaritan was a bad Economist. Dickens clearly had no faith in Parliament, the nation's "dust-heap," as an effective instrument for reform. Nor is much faith shown in the ability of the Trade Unions to safeguard the individual interests of their members. Stephen's oath, which is not given a clear explanation, might be reflective of a belief (close to Dickens' own) that strike action would be counterproductive and that violence was reprehensible.

The City's *integrity* of purpose is spatially and metaphysically impervious to *multiplicity* and *individuality* of will. Yet Dickens' position on liberty and on the working classes is fairly conservative. His editorial and publicistic position in *Household Words*—where both *Hard Times* and *North and South* appeared—shows his awareness of the need for change (though Dickens as a social reformer is too often seen through the prism of the Dickens myth as the converter of Scrooge). He is indeed aware of the appalling conditions of the laborers. The factory accidents are alluded to by Stephen's mention of Rachael's sister and by the footnote reference in chapters 7–8 of the serialized publication to Henry Morley's piece "Ground in the Mill" in the same issue of *Household Words* (deleted in the book edition).¹¹ Dickens shows that established forms of religion are not of practical appeal to the laborers, who, not surprisingly, do not attend the various denominational churches, though some members of Parliament would have them conform by force. And of course he shows that they do not conform to the purely statistical representation of reality projected by Political Economists and would-be Reformers who follow the theories of Malthus and Adam Smith, for whom the younger Gradgrinds are named. But Dickens describes the laborers hazily, as an outsider, with far less sympathy, however sentimental, for their actual conditions than Mrs. Gaskell in *North and South*. Dickens holds far less committed a view, and in the long run a far less utopian one, than Mrs. Gaskell's when compared with the interclass cooperation and affirmative action which Margaret brings about through her ethical self-reformation and moral influence.

In his piece on the Preston lock-out "On Strike" (*Household Words* 11 Feb. 1854) Dickens pleaded for mutual forbearance and consideration, words not to be found in Mr. McCulloch's dictionary, because the greatest obstacle on both sides is dogmatism. To the manufacturer he met on the train he "retorted . . . that Political Economy was a great and useful science in its own way and its own place; but that I did not transplant my definition of it from the Common Prayer Book, and make it a great king above all gods." What Dickens objected to was not Gradgrindery as such but the making of it

into an absolutist system applied with coercion. Dickens wrote of Mr. Gradgrind that “there is reason and good intention in much that he does—in fact, in all that he does—but that he over-does it” (letter to Henry Cole 17 June 1854). What Dickens was attacking was not the principles of Political Economy, but blind subservience to them, as he wrote to Charles Knight (30 Jan. 1855), by “those who see figures and averages, and nothing else.” Dickens was as much out of sympathy with the employers’ monstrous claims as he was with the workers’ discontent.

Nicholas Coles has pointed out internal contradictions in the attack on Gradgrindery in the novel as well as contradictions with some of the positions presented in *Household Words*, where the novel first appeared (Coles 145–79).¹² However, such attempts to resolve the very real problematics of the status of *Hard Times* on the borders of fiction and life underestimate the difference between the mode and the aims of representation of art and journalism. The very notion of Fancy in *Hard Times* should tell us that our expectations of the meaning of the novel should be reconstructed in order to understand by imaginative effort what is “really” wrong with conventional representation of society. It is a faulty vision which Dickens criticizes and readers who test the historical accuracy or verisimilitude of Dickens’ picture of the industrial landscape miss that fundamental aim. As David Lodge noted,

The reason is not that criteria of empirical truthfulness are wholly irrelevant (they are not); but that in referring from fiction to fact and back again, the critics are ignoring a vitally important stage in the creative process by which narratives are composed, viz. the transformation of the deep structure of the text into its surface structure. . . . It is in this process that the particular literary identity of a novel, and therefore the range of reader-responses appropriate to it, are determined. (38)¹³

Fancy is both aim and mode of representation. It is through the aesthetics of *Hard Times* that Dickens preached the urgent necessity of communication between employers and employees, of finding a language of representation that would somehow bring them closer to mutual understanding.

At the end of the “key-note” description of Coketown in book I, chapter 5, in the transition to the introduction of the circus people, the narrator wonders whether there was not in the employers’ stereotype of the ungrateful laborers and the Political Economists’ statistical tables one thing that had been

deliberately set at nought? That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions? That

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

Immediately following this plea, Gradgrind and Bounderby repair to the Pegasus's Arms, a pub which is appropriate "home" to Sleary's horseriders, since it was Pegasus's kick which brought out of the mountain the soul-inspiring waters of Hippocrene that came to be associated with poetic inspiration:

Then who so will with virtuous deeds assay
To mount to heaven, on Pegasus must ride,
And with sweete Poets verse be glorified.
(Spenser *Ruins of Time*)

Of course the winged horse behind the bar displays a low form of entertainment, but Dickens writes sarcastically and punningly, in the introduction to the chapter "Stephen Blackpool," in a way that has apparently nothing to do with the subject:

I entertain a weak idea that the English people are as hard-worked as any people upon whom the sun shines. I acknowledge to this ridiculous idiosyncrasy, as a reason why I would give them a little more play. (102)

As Sleary advises Gradgrind and Bounderby, people must be amused.

What Sleary says is in line with the thinking behind Dickens' 1853 Birmingham speech and it neatly connects the themes of art, education, and industrial relations in the novel. The story of Sissy Jupe and the dog Merrylegs shows "one, that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-intereth after all, but thomething very different; t'other, that it hath a way of calculating or not calculating, whith thomehow or another ith at leatht ath hard to give a name to, ath the wayth of the dogth ith!" (308). The circus is not a model society, but the circus people represent a childlike sincerity, honesty, and spontaneous compassion absent in the calculating language of Gradgrindery—the "one thing needful", as Dickens knew from *Sartor Resartus*, in the hedonistic calculus of pleasure of the Motive-Grinders in the Mill of Logic. Dickens is not merely advocating the merits of popular culture but pleading for the necessity within the industrial city of art as recreation (in the sense of

both leisure and creativity) and for the necessity of a nonutilitarian art which does not substitute model for reality and which recognizes the efficiency of symbolic representation: "People mu~~th~~t be am~~u~~thed. They can't alway~~th~~ be a learning, nor yet they can't be alway~~th~~ a working, they an't made for it. You mu~~th~~t have uth, Thquire" (308). The preaching of this moral imperative in the mouth of a man like Sleary sounds so uncharacteristic that he is surprised at being such a "Cackler." It is in *action* that the circus people must show compassion in order to refute Gradgrindery which allows for it neither in its arithmetic nor in its speech. The circus art is, moreover, a narrative art (Lodge 27), and its rhetoric (not to mention livelihood, like Jupe's) depends on art in the sense of skill as well as stratagem, like the deft sleight of hand Dickens learned when juggling bottles in the blacking warehouse. It is also, incidentally, art as craft in addition to art as imagination ("Fancy"), in opposition to the mechanization of production and of the spirit in the factory.

Fact and Fancy, the two competing metasystems of signification and designification which motivate character and plot in the ideational and spatial spheres of each oppositional model of representation, represent a theory of art and language. Sissy is taught that the sign "horse" represents a sum total of facts and figures, not a creature for amusement, as in her father's profession. Flowers cannot be represented on a carpet, according to the government officer inspecting Gradgrind's model school, because *such a thing does not exist in reality*. This absurdly reductionist argument is crushed by a plot which depends on the discovery of truth and humanity through the workings of fanciful imagination. When Gradgrind is unable to save Louisa in her Fall down the Giant's Staircase, in parodic negation of the conventional melodramatic tableau of the fallen woman, he is forced to admit the failure of the System lying insensible at his feet—the arrogance of the very word *system!*—because it is a lie and as false a representation as Bounderby's self-image is shown to be. When Tom learns the amoral lesson of self-interest only too well and implicates Stephen in his crime, it is the circus people and—supreme irony—a performing horse who save Gradgrind from shame and from another product of the Gradgrind school, Bitzer.

Dickens has been criticized for misunderstanding the utilitarian standpoint on art, just as he got several other points wrong in the novel, but the school-room scene was after all a private joke on Dickens' part aimed at his friend Cole, though it effectively attacked the tastelessness of Victorian design and in particular the barrenness of the industrial town (Fielding 270–77). In any case, as Collins points out, such a discussion would have been out of place

in the model school (Collins 156–59). Moreover, the school was intended for the lower classes, who were not generally considered worthy of such refinements as art. Gradgrind's own children would not have been tutored there. Another joke might be that J. M. M'Culloch, the object of parody in the teacher M'Choakumchild, was a headmaster of a school in *Circus Place*, Edinburgh (Ford and Monod 303n). But, as we have seen, the novel is not "about" these things and that is no doubt why Mrs. Gaskell's work on *North and South* was both annoying and irrelevant for Dickens in his writing of the serial parts of *Hard Times*.

The present discussion does not intend to exhaust the surprisingly rich imagery of *Hard Times*, and one cannot ignore the agricultural patterns which highlight the spatial metaphor of Coketown as the City of Hell, its serpents symbolic of the Fall, the ultimate corrupted Garden which reaps an unnatural harvest (Bornstein 158–70). The analogous oppositions of Jerusalem and Babylon and the reference to the New Testament parable of the seed fallen on barren ground recall the search for a City of the Spirit found elsewhere in Dickens (Welsh). The twin images of Coketown as Babel and Babylon, like Rouhcewell's factory in *Bleak House*, exposes the lie of a unified sign system that conceals confusion in a city of immorality. The opposing discourse of Fancy functions as a dynamic negation of System by designifying its metalanguage. As Connor observes, citing one of Sissy's happy mistakes, statistics are exposed as "stutterings" (103).

Michael Goldberg has described Carlyle's 1829 essay "Signs of the Times" as "almost an ideological prospectus to *Hard Times*" (79–80), although it should be pointed out that Carlyle took his title from the New Testament verse which criticized those who lacked faith and needed Signs of the Times. However, Carlyle's diagnosis of mechanization as the *sign* of the times was surely in Dickens' mind both in his choice of title and in his choice of metacritical metaphor. Not only does the far-reaching notion of machinery or mechanism serve as the Sign of the Times in a semiotics of the Condition of England debate in both works, but both see the reigning utilitarian philosophy of Political Economy as blind to spiritual and visionary truth and to Fancy. They see it driving out the ability to "wonder" as "the sign of uncultivation": "It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance" (Carlyle 59). Carlyle, writing in the *Edinburgh Review* the year before Macauley's

review of Southey's book in the same journal, might despair of his contemporaries *seeing* the dangers that confronted them. For Carlyle the times were "sick and out of joint." Dickens, twenty-five years and two European revolutions later, may well have been in sympathy with Carlyle's conclusion that in a world of physical force mankind's ultimate destiny depended on the slow process of moral reformation which was begun and perfected in *individuals* and was not furthered by the machinery of legislation or social reform (Carlyle 82).

III.

The importance of both political and fictional representation has been realized by Catherine Gallagher in her study of English society in the mid-nineteenth-century novel, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (1985). The representation of facts and the representation of values, she contends, were in a relationship of tension which made the form of the polemical novel itself an object of inquiry and of conflicting claims. The constraint on metaphorical analogies such as that of worker and slave or family and social institutions required a new practice of realism that would resolve the questions of environmental determinism and individual liberty.¹⁴ Gallagher's reading of *Hard Times* as metaphorically discursive, together with Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*, on the tensions between public and private realms and her insistence on the family-society analogy as the *primary* organizing principle of the metaphors in this novel suggest that, while important, social discourse provides no more than a partial reading of the text.¹⁵ Gallagher asserts that in both *Hard Times* and *North and South* the authors "attempted to describe industrial society and present solutions to the problems of class antagonism"; both "ostensibly propose that social cohesion can be achieved by changing the relationship between family and society, by introducing cooperative behavior, presumably preserved in private life, into the public realm." Both, however, realize "contradictions latent in social paternalism and domestic ideology" and "ultimately propose the isolation of families from the larger society" (147-48; cf. Fabrizio).

It is a moot question, which discourse or discourses are referential to public debate on political issues and which determine the shape and form of the novel, not to mention the problem of determining to precisely what extent the artistic text is, accurately speaking, functional in public discourse and on what level. It should be remembered that *Hard Times* was derisively dismissed

in its own day. The novel is certainly relevant to an understanding of the industrial city when read with Engels' description of Manchester or Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*. The latter is contextual like *Hard Times* with the writings of Carlyle, although Carlyle's candidacy of the Captains of Industry as social and managerial leaders might be contrasted with the false Bounderby type who, Ivan Melada thinks, results from a change of heart in Dickens after the example of Cheeryble in *Nicholas Nickleby* fell on deaf ears, and who is largely an instrument for the negation of two "popular fictions" (misrepresentations): the self-made man and the unjust claims of some mill-owners in hearings before parliamentary commissions (110–15).

Yet that imagination serves as both mode and metaphor for the vision of the novel speaks for the novelist's role as entertainer as well as a moralistic and didactic public figure. We can surely not take too seriously any proposal that the circus could be a real instrument in social change, though Paul Schlicke's extensive researches on the historical background in this arena are illuminating (137–89). Rather the circus—in the nineteenth century a form of adult entertainment—is illustrative of an argument against extreme utilitarian positions on art, as well as being morally instructive of the lessons of laissez-faire and education for self-interest. Its language—circus slang—is, like Mr. Sleary's lisp or Stephen's regional and class dialect, impermeable to the mind of Gradgrind or Bounderby, but it is the supposedly privileged discourse of Gradgrindery which proves defective and ultimately illegible. The argument assumes maintenance of the status quo in employer-worker relations but urges more humane treatment of the laborers through education and art. The light or flame of imagination must resist the choking of the human spirit by a totally utilitarian discourse, just as among the library readers of Coketown Defoe resists Euclid, Goldsmith resists Cocker. Alain Bony and Ian Ousby have pointed to the relevance of Dickens' editorial statement on the first page of the first issue of *Household Words* (30 March 1850):

No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast: which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished.

We recall that it was fanciful instead of statistical representation that prompted Macauley to conclude that poets like Southey added grist to the mill of utilitarians who argued against literature in education and society.

The title of *Hard Times* sounds anachronistic for the prosperous mid-century when it appeared, even if the liberty of death in Stockport cellars was still maintained. The subtitle "For These Times" is too frequently ignored. Rather the hardness is a moral indifference that renders Dickens' plea the more urgent. His text negates the usual complacency of mid-century euphoria. Yet its deconstruction of the Gradgrind system of representation replaces it nevertheless with a moral vision. Our preoccupation with modernist or postmodernist attitudes may occasionally sunblind us to the fact that the "Victorian art of fiction is essentially a moral art. It questions the nature and purpose of moral action, and, at its best, shows the difficulty and complexity of giving, loving, and growing out from self in an unjust, commercialized, and denaturing society" (Hardy 3). What distinguishes Dickens' moral art "is his combination of social despair and personal faith, his capacity to distrust both society and social reform while retaining and perhaps deepening a faith in the power of human love" (Hardy 3).¹⁶

The representation of a moral space, as Eric Auerbach has pointed out in his discussion of the Binding of Isaac in *Mimesis*, is a scriptural device, and Dickens is in many ways a Christian artist. This may explain the lack of so-called "realistic" detail and the inaccuracy of the picture of factory life for which Dickens has been criticized. The physical landscape is subordinate to the larger, more fanciful abstractions of the mental landscape.

The fact that Dickens started *Pickwick Papers* by writing the text for sporting plates and that he worked closely with illustrators such as George Cruikshank, who later claimed credit for much of *Oliver Twist*, may explain the painterly approach to the organization of space. But I think that we have here some fundamental narrative strategies which go beyond the usual analogies between the sister arts and which question the shared aims and conventions of the eighteenth-century novel, drama, and painting (for example *The Beggar's Opera*, *Jonathan Wild*, and Hogarth's London scenes). This is not just analogy, not just Dickens' love of melodrama, or his often parodic reworking of romantic and Gothic plots or motifs. The visualization of space in competing representational models negates not by insisting on the indeterminacy of meaning but by mimicking the discourse with which it is dialogizing (as in the Bakhtinian principle of polyphony in the modern novel). Dickens' language represents—in an Aristotelian definition of the word in the *Poetics*—by imitation of voice; it is a "speaking picture," in Sir Philip Sidney's metaphor, "With this end—to teach and delight." Art is not just play; as J. Hillis Miller says of George Eliot, "the one thing needful" is a

mimesis that by representing the distorting mirror in the author's mind strives for truth (*Ethics of Reading* 61–80).

NOTES

1. See my discussion of Dickens' reading of the landscape "Bleak Homes and Symbolic Houses: Athomeness and Homelessness in Dickens," in *Homes and Homelessness in Dickens and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. M. Baumgarten and H.M. Daleski (New York: AMS, at press).
2. The visual aspect of representation in the Victorian novel has been noted before in Michael Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Allen, 1979). Unfortunately, Irwin jettisoned a projected chapter on landscape and the broader context of the visual arts and theory of representation have not been developed. The recent work of Murray Krieger, Stephen Greenblatt, and Wolfgang Iser attempts to penetrate what might be described as "aw a muddle" in the theory of representation: see especially Robert Weimann, "History, Appropriation, and the Uses of Representation in Modern Narrative," *The Aims of Representation*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 175–215. Also relevant to the theoretical issue of visual representation are W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986; and *Allegory and Representation*, ed. S. J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986).
3. Frederic Jameson also applies the four-term homology of Greimas to the binary oppositions in *Hard Times* (*The Prison-House of Language*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972, 166–68), but he is generally critical of the method behind Lévi-Strauss' mythological hermeneutics.
4. References to Dickens' novels are to the following editions: *Oliver Twist*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; *Hard Times*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
5. On the problematics of a "straight" reading of the novel see Christopher D. Morris, "The Bad Faith of Pip's Bad Faith: Deconstructing *Great Expectations*," *English Literary History* 54, 4 (1987):941–55.
6. Robert Caserio has compared Dickens' theory of the sign in *Hard Times* with that of Eco in *The Name of the Rose*, but this is surely too fanciful ("The Name of the Horse: *Hard Times*, Semiotics, and the Supernatural" *Novel* 20, 1 [1986]:5–23).
7. It was this melodramatic language to which John Ruskin objected in his assessment of the novel, and perhaps one reason for this frequent criticism is the way in which Dickens uses that kind of language to deconstruct the reader responses of his middle-class audience. Dickens' article "Fraud on the Fairies" (*Household Words*, 1 Oct. 1853) clearly indicates another mode of designification in the rhetoric and plot of the novel, the language of fairy tales. Regrettably, the notion of Fancy in *Hard Times* has rarely been given serious attention by critics, though see Philip Collins, "Queen Mab's Chariot among the Steam Engines: Dickens and 'Fancy,'" *English Studies*, 42 (1961):78–90; David Sonstroem, "Fettered Fancy in *Hard Times*," *PMLA* 84 (1969):520–29; and Robert Higbie, "Hard Times and Dickens' Concept of Imagination," *Dickens Studies Annual* 17 (1988):91–110. The term "Fancy" was used too diversely and variously for us to seriously relate Dickens' use of it to Coleridge's distinction of "Fancy" and

- "Imagination," but a similar opposition of Fancy and Fact can be found in Discourse 5; vi and Discourse 7; ii of Cardinal Newman's anti-Utilitarian theory of education *The Idea of a University*.
8. This is another example of the inversion of the specific and the universal, of sign and referent, in parody of the kind of utilitarianistic positions on language satirized by Humpty Dumpty in *Alice through the Looking-Glass*.
 9. Stephen is named for a saint and almost incredibly shares with Oliver Twist a "perfect integrity." He is also a Ministering Angel (to his drunken wife) like Joe in *Great Expectations*, which makes him another archetypal Joseph with an angelic countenance.
 10. Compare Oliver's disorientation in the labyrinth of London when he reads the *signs* of streets and shops. It is likewise a labyrinth of *signs* from which Stephen emerges in I, 10 (102).
 11. The deliberate omission of such documentation of the horrors of the factory system seems to me to speak for Dickens' artistic purpose, not at all an attempt to whitewash the employers or ignore abuses of the factory system. The question which occupies so many critics, the bearing of the omission on Dickens' real-life political position, can surely be relevant only if the literary text is put in a polarized position of fictional or historical discourse. In comparing *Hard Times* to Engels' *Condition of the Working-Class*, Stephen J. Spector has pointed to Dickens' use of metonymy, but concludes that Dickens failed to represent the working classes "truthfully" ("Masters of Metonymy: *Hard Times* and Knowing the Working-Class," *English Literary History* 51 (1984):365-84). Patricia Johnson has responded that on the contrary Dickens portrayed the harsh reality of working-class conditions by constructing the Factory as (in her interpretation) a controlling metaphor and the controlling shape of the novel (128-37).
 12. In his response to Coles, Grahame Smith has argued that Dickens as a fictional author ("Dickens") is subversive of any serious intent in his representation of both employers and laborers ("Comic Subversion and *Hard Times*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 [1989]:145-60). The question of the factuality of the novel and its implications (surely paradoxical in view of the satirical thrust of *Hard Times*) has been much discussed in *inter alia* K. J. Fielding, "The Battle for Preston," *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Hard Times*, ed. Paul E. Gray (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1969), 16-21; K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith, "*Hard Times* and the Factory Accident Controversy: Dickens versus Martineau," *Dickens Centennial Essays*, ed. Ada Nisbet and Blake Nevins (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971), 22-45; and Phillip Collins, "Dickens and Industrialism," *Studies in English Literature* 20 (1980):651-73.
 13. Lodge's argument has been reinforced by Roger Fowler, who treats *Hard Times* in Bakhtinian terms as a polyphonic novel by applying M. A. K. Halliday's terminology to a discourse analysis of the speech patterns in the text ("Polyphony in *Hard Times*," in *Language, Discourse and Literature*, ed. Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson [London: Unwin, 1989], 76-93). Jean-Jacques Weber has taken Fowler's approach further and in a modal analysis shown the tensions between the ideological discourses of the fictional worlds in the novel ("Dickens's Social Semiotic: The Modal Analysis of Ideological Structure," Carter and Simpson 94-111). In Weber's view, the novel emerges as lacking any monological authorial or authoritative discourse because the issues it raises are left open; the covert authorial voice, undiscerned by most critics, merely makes a humanitarian appeal for reason and compassion in maintenance of the status quo.

14. Kate Flint demonstrates the complexity of Dickens' position on social change in her book *Charles Dickens* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1986), 85–111. The almost Stalinist term “ideological uncertainty” with which Flint sums up her assessment of Dickens' position on social change reminds us, however, of the politicization of readings of *Hard Times*, various examples of which are to be found in the evaluations of Macauley, Gissing, Ruskin, G. B. Shaw, Raymond Williams, and David Craig. “Ideological uncertainty,” after all, is essential to the designification of Gradgrind's absolutist discourse.
15. On the problems of *Hard Times* for theories of reading see Nancy Armstrong, “Dickens between Two Disciplines: A Problem for Theories of Reading,” *Semiotica* 58 (1982):243–75; and Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
16. Hardy's analysis of *Little Dorritt*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Tale of Two Cities* gives credence to my view of Dickens' realism as being concerned with a broad view of society and social truths rather than with nitty-gritty details that can be held up to the test of verisimilitude. Hardy finds the psychological characterization of Louisa and Sissy no less serious for its being implied. Moreover, Hardy argues, the ending would not ring true if the central protagonists settled down to live happily ever after; the ending is a “sad and sober appraisal” which denies Louisa a bright new future but does look forward to rebirth.

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