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Source: *ELH*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 857-881

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2873298>

Accessed: 06-02-2020 10:10 UTC

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A TROPOLOGY OF REALISM IN *HARD TIMES*

BY KATHERINE KEARNS

The following are facts which no man attempts to deny:—

1. Large numbers of honest and industrious people are badly fed, badly clothed, and badly housed.
2. Many thousands of people die every year from preventable diseases.
3. The average duration of life amongst the population is very short.
4. Very many people, after lives of toil, are obliged to seek refuge in the workhouse, where they die despised and neglected, branded with the shameful brand of pauperism.
5. It is an almost invariable rule that those who work hardest and longest in this country are the worst paid and the least respected.
6. The wealthiest men in our nation are men who never did a useful day's work.
7. Wealth and power are more prized and more honored than wisdom, or industry, or virtue.
8. Hundreds of thousands of men and women, willing to work, are unable to find employment.
9. While on the one hand wages are lowered on account of over-production of coal, of cotton, and of corn, on the other hand many of our working people are short of bread, of fuel, and of clothing.
10. Nearly all the land and property in this country are owned by a few idlers, and most of the laws are made in the interests of those few rich people.
11. The national agriculture is going rapidly to ruin to the great injury and peril of the State.
12. Through competition millions of men are employed in useless and undignified work, and all the industrial machinery of the nation is thrown out of gear, so that one greedy rascal may overreach another.

—Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England*, 1894

Realism, whose only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art, always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch.

—Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

Just as the dream “is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish,” so is Dickens’s tropology in *Hard Times* a condensation of the sterile landscape of industrialism into a more enriched, less linearly-inclined medium: the daylight, paternal authority by which “realisms” are claimed and displayed comes up against the venereal inclinations of language—hard times, indeed.¹ All those square-faced men insistent on flagellating their daughters, their pupils, their constituents, and their very Hands with those stinging, occlusive words, “Fact, fact, fact! . . . And fact, fact, fact!” comes up against females who elude the program in one way or another: vixens all, not one woman can be trained to speak the language (6).² No more will Dickens bring language completely to realism, to do the father’s service of instating a clear code between addressor and addressee that holds no secrets for its designated audience: a “realism” in which, as is customary, the terms are agreed upon beforehand.³ In the explicit gestures of plot, Gradgrind’s resolute scourging of “fancy,” his unreserved disapproval toward all carnival things, and his anxieties about acrobatics and hostelry suggest that, for him, these are a periphrasis for sexuality and thus antithetical to the realist’s (and the father’s) agenda, which is driven by a more sublimated form of desire (these contorted bodies, simulacrum of some ecstatic fit, these virile horses and their handlers, are things no young girl, no daughter of his, should see).⁴ Gradgrindism’s repression of every available outlet for the play of fantasy—the not-real—generates within the story the extremisms of both Tom’s debauchery and Louisa’s blank depression. Correlatively, Dickens’s chosen setting within the most rigorous of anti-romantic “realisms” generates his surreal tropology of madness and nihilism.

Hard Times reveals itself always at two competing levels, and, if the Coketown mills spin out Dickens’s political agenda, there is as well another “factory.” Dickens names himself within the text as “Time,” that force which gradually weaves character into complexity, and “his factory is a secret place, his work is noiseless, and his Hands are mutes” (87). “Time,” the weaver-artist, is realism’s adversary, as it inevitably complicates the synchronous metonymies by which character is locked into the materialities of a limited time and space to enact its predetermined role.⁵ Time reveals instead that the hidden and unspeakable—that which emerges in dreams and in poetry—is a potent alternative “reality” whose metonymies reciprocate to a transformative inner landscape. Yet Bounderby’s power-looms do in truth weave a new kind of fate and spin a new kind of dream about which

Dickens's realism must speak, despite the threat posed to the artist by this mechanically-inclined world and the exponentially-increasing obligation to address its problems. Dickens thus takes on in *Hard Times* an industrial-based reality that repudiates all that is fanciful, perhaps all the more effectively as he also implicitly problematizes the realistic and therefore fanciless mode this system demands of his artistry. *Hard Times*, with its serious moral intent and its condensed length, reacts with a surfeit of fancy, a density of absurdist language games, and a series of characters so conflictually denominated as to become a parade of correlatives for the artist's impasse between duty and pleasure. Dickens's instinct for the "unfathomable mystery" of human character and for the "secret place" in which art is made tells him that "realism" is, in every case, an epistemologically suspect, politically driven notion (64, 87): that character defined metonymically through the prescribed materialities of its circumstantial reality is character reduced to thesis and antithesis, and that language held to the agenda of realism turns on itself. His desire for what one might call "justice" ensures that he will address the realities of the industrial state, nonetheless.

Hard Times, consciously intent on gazing at the most sterile and blackened of landscapes, thus becomes an enriched medium for the examination of fictional realism, which must itself seduce even as it protests; as art it must, as Barthes says in *The Pleasure of the Text*, project between itself and the reader a mutual "site of bliss" even as it seeks, as realism, to "tell the truth" reportorially.⁶ *Hard Times* consistently brings the reader to share in the deconstruction of its stated "realism," whose utilitarian surface yields throughout to those alternative and ineffable truths produced by the artist's "mute Hands," which do not tell but only feel and make. Every character, every turn of the plot, every image has its doubled function as that which most precisely illustrates industrialism's ugly realities and as that which most thoroughly problematizes the notion of realism: the word games that exploit doubled or tripled meanings perform the trick in small.⁷ Dickens cannot bear too much earnestness, even as he sees the goodness in it; it is not insignificant that he drops Stephen Blackpool, spokesperson for all that is right, down a shaft where no one can hear his voice. Blackpool, the earnest man in love, reifies the dilemma of the artist who commits himself to two mistresses and impotently moans "'tis a muddle": bound to a language intrinsically "figurative," the artist who sees his responsibilities as moving inexorably toward realism with its fixed and moral intent and its pretense of representationalism

must see himself endangered. Irrevocably tied to an unregenerate sensualist, Blackpool yearns towards purity, towards productive action, and is thus reduced to such impotence that he is canceled out as a character (which is why Dickens loses him on the road for so long). Neither the “whore,” purely visceral, nor the “angel,” all morality, is available to him; and it is highly significant that Blackpool’s relationship reverses the more usual dynamic wherein the man is married to propriety and yearns after (sexual, ecstatic) “love.” Blackpool is *wedded* to the embodiment of anarchy, antidomestic and literally subversive of household, just as the nineteenth-century artist is wedded to a language that exceeds and subverts one’s desire to utter only those exemplary “Household Words” that promote a virtuous realism. Thus while Dickens’s realism speaks with a seriousness of intent that itself excludes fancy, his tropology supplies the lack even as it turns fancy to phantasms and madness: The realistic text may pretend to abnegate desire—it is not “romantic”—even as *Hard Times* specifically subverts or corrupts all marital and romantic desire within the story it displays, but the *body* of the text must arouse an alternative *aphrodisia*. If Dickens’s image of the making of a woman/character/text suggests something of the seraglio—a secret place whose workers are muted so that no female mysteries can be revealed—so too must the text hold its secrets.

The realism of *Hard Times* (let us define realism here simply as that which reflects Dickens’s reformist focus on the material parameters of industrialization) is in fact infiltrated with language games in which the tacit, reassuring and therefore unexciting, code between addressor and addressee is broken: by the term of the novel, the fact-bound males are countered by females whose language, nonsensical, nihilistic, spiritual, or ingenuously humane, suggests that they hear differently from men and remain resistant to the realisms of their surroundings.⁸ One hears/reads always at two levels in this novel, and the most hackneyed clichés, the mundane realisms of speech mouthed by the essentially unimaginative, may transform themselves elementally. When Mrs. Gradgrind says, “if it was ever to reach your father’s ear I should never hear the last of it” (50), one first reacts to the statement’s function as a botched cliché, uttered by a woman as free from linguistic fancy “as any human being not arrived at the perfection of an absolute idiot, ever was” (17). Yet one also sees in this conflation an alternative, surreal vision of Mrs. Gradgrind as a contiguous extension of her husband, the ear of the other grafted to a man who is himself the “warehouse” of facts that is Coketown.⁹ There is also in this a near-parodic reification

of Dickens's doubled hearing: his ear for the (journalistic, political, masculine) "real" news versus his ear for the surreal, the anarchic, the desirous, the "feminine," the irrational. As stereotypical as the terms of this dichotomy are, they nonetheless define the doubleness of Dickens's own authorial voice, that balance between the generative and therefore unpredictable "female" and the retributive, backward-looking "male." Throughout the novel one is meant to feel that paternal power is in part dependent upon the daughter's ministrations: the fact that Sissy carries always a salve—"The nine oils, sir. To rub father with"—is only a most literal instating of the daughter's curative/erotic powers (24). Derrida, in "Otobiographies," makes this dichotomy explicit: "I have, I am, and I demand a keen ear, I am (the) both, (the) double, I sign double, my writings and I make two, I am the (masculine) dead the living (feminine) and I am destined to them, I come from the two of them, I address myself to them, and so on."¹⁰ As long as Gradgrind remains only a man of facts—a "realist"—he deserves no more than his wife's pallid, worn out head with its diminished echoes. When he can at last hear his daughter, he has learned what the artist must always keep in mind, that one must transcend "realism" for truth: to hear both the (masculine) prescribed and the "living (feminine)," to sign double, is to have an ear for the generative, the antiprogrammatic, the desirous.

Yet desire is explicitly forbidden within Dickens's industrial state, which is by its terms sterile, and realism too is held to an obligation to channel itself towards productivity: it means to *get* someplace, to do some damage, to make some statement. Jakobson says of realism: "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time."¹¹ The realist follows the path to its inevitable conclusion, led down it by the inexorable pull of contiguities: this is why Louisa's leaving the road to cross "a space of stunted grass and dry rubbish" for a glimpse of the circus is perceived by Gradgrind as such a serious infraction (11). In *Hard Times* the figures of Stephen Blackpool and Rachel literalize, in their enforced celibacy and their incorruptible and dogged goodness, realism's necessary withholding of passion and its vested interest in behavior that best serves the interest of the (particularly-defined realistic) state.¹² But Stephen's wife is the witch-like madwoman/whore who defies the sterile materiality of desire channeled into endless productivity or, as in the case of the antitheses to Bounderby and his lot, into endless virtuous action; she refutes the realist's system, as regards femality

gone bad and productivity turned to profligacy, with her obstinate refusal to be killed off (the very figure of a text divorced from moral and domestic obligations, she is invincibly potent and damaging; she has become a “dead woman” replaced “by a demon in her shape,” and Old Stephen cannot fathom why others die “while this abandoned woman live[s] on!” [74–75]). Yet if Dickens despises her, and only a willfully gynocentric reading can wrench her from her clear function as a homewrecking slattern, he nonetheless allows her to wander out of the picture alive and to reenter it at the end (273). In this Dickens refuses yet once again to fulfill unequivocally the realist’s pact by which metonymy functions not only synchronously—the fallen woman’s corruptive effect on her surroundings defines her—but diachronously—her corrupt dissolution in its extremity should signal the immediate inevitability of her death.¹³ Mrs. Blackpool is a marker, among the many markers, of Dickens’s ambivalent regard for the realistic mode, which does not tolerate character unless it is made a lesson of, its synchronous metonymies predicting its diachronous, politically correct outcome.

Dickens subverts his realist’s agenda with great subtlety, however, for the explicit energies of the story further the propaganda that human desire is withered by Coketown’s oppressive power, that people are *made* by the ruthless contiguities of their environment into undifferentiated and therefore unsexed replicants: Mrs. Sparsit will forever keep her foot in the stirrup, but she will always be riding side-saddle; Rachel will die a virgin; Louisa will never find love or bear children; and Mrs. Gradgrind will always have a headache. Bounderby’s refusal to help Stephen Blackpool obtain a divorce is the literalization of this forbidden state of desire among the workers, and James Harthouse’s lassitude is its contingent effect among the aristocracy; and while their evocative names, Blackpool and Harthouse, defy the angular metonymies of their surroundings, their conditions are such that the black pool remains opaque and unstirred and the heart house remains empty. Within the acceptable realisms about the industrialist, it is implied that desire produces and is produced by the productivities of the factory; the closed circle shuts out Bounderby’s mother as a locus for his desire as certainly as it does his wife—he gets up “out of the ditch”—, and a man who does not need/want his mother and who seems utterly indifferent to the removal of his wife functions as a most literal contiguity of the “plant” as factory, not born but made, not desirous man but machine. This is a world, we are clearly meant to

believe, that sublimates all its erotic energies into marketable productivity.

Dickens's realism, itself productively inclined, assumes (pretends?) that it can present discrete "Facts" within the syntagmatic relationship appropriate to its chosen subject, and it depends upon the directional force of cause and effect to keep its ducks in a row; his surrealism puns on these ingenuous expectations. The Gradgrind children live with a "little conchological cabinet, and a little metallurgical cabinet, and a little mineralogical cabinet," which function as neat metonyms of their fragmented and insufficient selves; within the propaganda of Dickens's chosen realism one knows *a priori* how this is to be read. There is no mystery in this metonymy: the children are themselves concretized fragments produced by a hard father formed from a hard system. Yet Dickens goes on to say, "the bits of stone and ore looked as though they might have been broken from the parent substances by those tremendously hard instruments of their own names" (9). Thus Gradgrind's "own metallurgical Louisa" is most literally a metonymic chip off the old block who lives in Stone Lodge, having been struck off the parent with a piece of the thing which names her (11): the implied syntagmatic progression goes nicely from the obdurate industrialism embodied in Coketown's red-brick buildings to Stone Lodge to the wall- and warehouse-like Mr. Gradgrind to his flinty offspring. Yet, as in the vision of Mrs. Gradgrind hearing through her husband's ear, this image forces a turn; it will not keep to the straight and narrow causeway at the end of which one finds industrialism exposed and berated through its own realities. To think of Louisa as broken by what she *is*—by her "own name"—is to fracture the metonymic contiguity by which all cause emanates from the single source of Coketown. This image signals Louisa's insular and impenetrable masochism, as it suggests that she has performed her own scoriations, inflicted her own fragmentation in the name of the father. It inevitably suggests the incestuous nature of Gradgrind's withholding of Louisa from all pleasure and all love. This invitation to enter and participate in Louisa's madness is, as Bounderby would say, another "kettle-of-fish" entirely from Dickens's realist agenda as it halts the code and breaks the syntagmatic progression by virtue of its density (15). Moreover, it alters the terms of the novel to include a psychosexual subtext, an act that effectively questions the primary construct of industrial realism by offering the possibility that cause—industrialism—and effect—character—may in fact be reversed or even obviated.

Oscillating between such doubled messages at every level of its discourse, this novel about the hazards of productivity, whose own composition “used up” Dickens to exhaustion, reflects in its tropes his anxiety about and his resistance to the realistic mode: like Mrs. Gradgrind, who is always “dying out,” “invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her,” Dickens knows the danger of never hearing the last of the father’s authoritative voice (14), of allowing one’s artistic, spiritual, aesthetic, and erotic imperatives to become diminished by the din of “realisms.”¹⁴ (Mrs. Gradgrind epitomizes the disassociativeness of one whose head drums out everything else: “Are you in pain, dear mother?” Louisa asks at her deathbed. “I think there’s a pain somewhere in the room . . . but I couldn’t possibly say that I have got it,” she says [182].) He brings his metonymies to challenge their own directional, propagandistic contiguities; people, their characters formed in some secret place, seem as much to create or to alter their surroundings as to be created or altered by them. If the men of power in *Hard Times* have heads that are warehouse- and factory-like, their “Hands” generate an erotic energy that forces Coketown to its own exudant physiology: its black canal (like bile or excrement), its purple river (like blood), its head (like an elephant’s), its face (like a painted savage’s), and, therefore, its savage, elephantine body. The artist has a vested interest in this metonymic reciprocity, of course, for without it there could be no “story” but only a preachment on the given deterministic text, but one can not help but notice how Dickens goes out of his way to make characters refute their industrial identities with alternative fantasies: of them all, only Bitzer’s albinism is pale enough to assure that he will take his character entirely from his surroundings. Even Mrs. Gradgrind retains a vague and urgent memory of love: “There is something . . . missed or forgotten. . . . I shall never get its name now. . . . It makes me restless. I want to write to him, to find out for God’s sake, what it is. Give me a pen, give me a pen” (183). So while the writer’s mind—his particularized vision of the Preston strike, his journalist’s referentiality, his propagandistic intent—is set, that which comes from his Hand whips up an alternative set of fantasies (“Give me a pen, give me a pen”). Attuned to other imperatives (aesthetic pleasure, artistic amusement—“People must be amuthed . . . thomehow,” [38]), as well as to social responsibilities, Dickens consistently undermines the essential message of his particular realism: that humans must be made automatons—“people equally like one another”—in such an environment (20). Contrariwise, as Tweedledee would say: machines must be brought to the blood’s madness

in such a repression. Correlatively, the deictic pretensions of realism must be revealed as vulnerable, for what is manifested in *Hard Times* emerges as much through indirection and obliquity, through puns and word games, as in the syntagmatic precisions of logical discourse.¹⁵

Hard Times is thus a most complex kind of realism, as its tropological venue is the nightmare and the fantasy, for the metonymies of such a place as Coketown must reflect the dual nature of its site as a locus of one form of productivity purchased at the danger of “using up” or perverting other desires: it is the paradigm both for industrialism and for an artistry committed to realism. The disguised fulfillments of repressed and suppressed wishes are condensed by the rigid parameters of Coketown’s daylight reality, much as Dickens’s typical methodologies are intensified by his conviction that, in conforming to the requisite number of parts for *Household Words*, “the difficulty of that space is CRUSHING.”¹⁶ The town sits within a landscape that enhances the sense that one is enclosed and locked in Pandemonium, as it is surrounded by a treacherous country “undermined by deserted coal-shafts, and spotted at night by fires and black shapes of stationary engines at pits’ mouths” (154). Dickens wants simultaneously to expose the logic of industrialism (of realism? of parts publication explicitly produced to boost subscription sales?) as both flawless and quite mad, fueled by a monomania that, in its failure to account for necessary variables, becomes the profoundest unreason: realism’s methodology alone is insufficient to discover this duality, as it must itself be driven by a similar, single-minded intent. At one level the very epitome of an enforced and fanciless order, Coketown sheds its linearities on the people defined within it. Yet Coketown, which looks like “the painted face of a savage,” must also be seen as the very body of a madman, with its systemic physiology of black canal and purple river, and its sweat and steam and smoke (20): it mimics the madman as it conducts itself so completely within the “faultless armature of a discourse” on material productivity that it approximates the undeviating and rigorous precision of insanity.¹⁷ All red and black, acrid, and panting, it constrains itself to its one allowable discourse: as with the madman, “this discourse, in its logic, commands the firmest belief in itself, it advances by judgments and reasonings which connect together; it is a kind of reason in action.”¹⁸ Dickens makes palpable the secret delirium that resides underneath the “chaotic and manifest delirium” of Coketown’s poisonous exudations; and it is in this secret delirium that we find “both what makes madness true (irrefutable logic, perfectly organized discourse, faultless connection in the transparency of a virtual language)

and what makes it truly madness (its own nature, the special style of all its manifestations, and the internal structure of delirium)."¹⁹

Coketown, a strange town that is not a town, spontaneously generated by the inhuman imperatives of mass production, signifies the fundamental distortions that must arise in a system of literary realism as it represents the correlative distortions of industrialism: "realism" is a similar sort of town in that its truth is all at one level and its agenda fixed; all narrative movement, that which accounts for the past or generates the future, is pinned to one present reality. "Coketown" begs the question of what *town* means, just as certainly as the term "realism" always begs the question of its particular limited reality. Thus the language that reveals character through metonymy in *Hard Times* must communicate Coketown's essential nature as a fabricated construct, its strangeness only masked by the conventional linearities of its architecture (again, Coketown also reifies Dickens's text production, with its "intense rushing," its "disjointed form of publication," its preexistent necessity as a boost for sales of *Household Words*).²⁰ In speaking of language, Wittgenstein uses this analogy: "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this is surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."²¹ But Coketown is without a history: it has "several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the pavements, to do the same work, and . . . every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next" (20).²² Its density is composed all of the same red-brick material with no buried layers of past discourses, and it generates only one allowable metadiscourse, a purely syntagmatic progression with everything leading to the factory, with all the Hands moving back and forth in lines to and from the work that names them. This is industrial Coketown's "realism," but language rebukes this merely reproductive linearity. Language is an ancient city, with an archeological opacity; it *turns* even when one tries to make it go straight because it is by nature tropic.²³ If the piston goes eternally up and down, caught in that line of "feeble agitation, without power or violence" that characterizes melancholia, the smoke serpents turn on themselves forever and ever and never get uncoiled (20).²⁴

The steam engine's pistons, "all the melancholy mad elephants," drive the plant that drives the town, and indeed melancholia as the

dominating sickness of Coketown serves Dickens well, both to illustrate the realist's dilemma and the industrialist's communicable madness (63); melancholia is "madness at the limits of its powerlessness," a condition appropriate to the worker and to the worker-artist ("I am so stunned with work, that I am really not able . . . to answer your questions"; "I am three parts mad, and the fourth delirious, with perpetual rushing at Hard Times"; "Why I found myself so 'used up' after Hard Times I scarcely know. . . .").²⁵ As that state in which one believes oneself to be something else entirely, melancholia is a most vivid incarnation of metonymy consuming itself, of the imperatives of realism, which sees the world as one contiguous extension of its chosen "reality," taken to a logical conclusion. Among melancholics, "some think themselves to be beasts, whose voice and actions they imitate. Some think that they are vessels of glass, and for this reason recoil from passers-by, lest they break."²⁶ (This is, perhaps, a figure of the artist who calls himself a realist as the metonymous impact of his surroundings consumes his spiritual or aesthetic vision.) Coketown, a town, thinks itself a machine or a savage or a beast. Bounderby's vision suggests a similar mad logic: he is a "self-made man" and therefore, by the rigorous logic of such a construct, cannot have had a family. Capable of this delusion whereby he imagines himself as self-constructed, he may extend such autism to others: people work at machines with their hands, therefore they are Hands. To treat them as if they were otherwise would be to break the code, to give these Hands feet so that they would want to "be set up in a coach and six," to give them mouths so that they would eat "turtle soup and venison," and most horrifically, to bring them to expect that they might be "fed [by other hands] . . . with a gold spoon" (65).

The melancholic's derangement is metonymous characterization with a vengeance: one *becomes* one's very symbolic projection, thinking metonymically, "I am as fragile and as frangible as that glass which seems my contiguous state; I am, therefore, made of glass." Bounderby, quintessential realist, mimics this paradigm as if its logic is irrefutable: "I am a self-made man, thus I am made from mud and dirt and water" — born in a watery ditch; "I am therefore unmothered," "kept . . . in an eggbox" as an unborn, commodified thing, left to hatch autonomously and accidentally into a "self-made" state. This free play of contiguities is a most material madness of things, one best suited to the industrial and to the realist's state. The tautology by which such "reasoning" proceeds is so enclosed as to seem incestuous (and is thus mirrored by the incestuous connotations in the Sissy Jupe/father [her

own and Gradgrind] and the Louisa/father/brother pairings), and, indeed, its products are monstrous. Thus the mad turns Dickens brings to bear on language—Hands with feet and mouths, “mute Hands,” people as pistons, therefore pistons as elephants—takes the syntagmatic interdependence to its (il)logical extreme to reveal the surreality in reality.

In this mad, metonymically-declined world, body parts necessarily prevail over the intact human form, and while Hands and legs are prominent synecdoches, it is most typically “addled heads” which dominate Dickens’ toponymy.²⁷ Coketown, its weekday “reality” generated by the mad, plunging elephant-head piston, looking itself like the savage’s painted face, is also a town of at least eighteen belfries filled with “barbarous jangling . . . bells” that “drive the sick and nervous mad” (21); the bats in the belfries are, of course, clearly implied. Thus Coketown must be filled, by the closed logic of Dickens’s metonymy, by humans similarly afflicted, and indeed it is jam-packed with people whose own heads are in danger of exploding or falling off or rupturing. The knobs on Mr. Gradgrind’s overstuffed head are “like the crust of a plum pie,” a simile that defies the consistent metonymies whereby his forehead is a wall and his eyes take “cellarage in two dark caves,” to suggest that those knobs might suppurate and ooze purple, like the ill-smelling purple river. Mrs. Gradgrind’s poor head is continually wearing her out (49). Tom fears for Sissy that “they’ll bother her head off, . . . before they have done with her” (46). Bounderby’s head is stretched to grotesquery: he is “a man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins to his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up” (13). This place where all the people are imminently headless, over-inflated balloons about to pop, suggests as an alternative to industrial or religious control a libidinal fantasy whereby the body could go amuck, the mad elephant give in to must. *Acephale*, their heads ruptured like so many balloons, the figures once so encased and concretized by their red-brick physiognomies, would discover that, in matters of the id, “the head . . . is not any more than any old bit of skin.”²⁸ One who “loses his head” becomes incapable of the flawless tautologies by which behavior is controlled and determined by one’s perceptions of external contiguities (and it is not only the insane who impose upon themselves such control): the “barbarous” church bells compete with the clanging piston to drive people beyond melancholia into frenzy, to a place where language is released from its obligations

to contexture and combination, a place where desire rises up and presides over more utilitarian realisms.

Josiah Bounderby himself best embodies Dickens's dual impulses to bring language to his linear service and to yield to its dense and transformative pleasures; Bounderby's character, as dependent as it is on localized and temporalized metonymies for the substance by which it displays itself, resists the realistic program in *Hard Times* by refuting itself with its past. Bounderby is caught most literally in the realist's dilemma of needing to bring language to the univocal service of his present and manifest reality (30). He works to create retrospectively the quintessential "realism" of the self-made man, and in attempting to work backwards syntagmatically from his present reality, he is held to certain "truths" exclusive of, for example, a mother and father and a grandmother. His litanic repetition of the scenarios most likely to lead, realistically speaking, to his current state fails to contain the story, however. Like Louisa,³ he thwarts his metonymous identification as having been made from the crudest of Coketown materials even as he seems to fit the terms of Coketown most exactly: his utterly appropriate "metallic laugh," his "brassy speaking trumpet of a voice," and his makings "out of a coarse material" (13) are all revealed as fraudulent metaphors when we discover that he has been "loved as dear . . . as the best could," privileged, and sacrificed for by decent parents (239). He has been "love[d] for love's own sake," which is to say that he has *not* been loved for the sake of the materialities he represents, and that this is not mere rhetoric is proven by his mother's actions and her genuine indignation when her son's honor is impugned (240). He is *not* what he is because he was born in a ditch and kept in an egg-box; his character has nothing (that we can see) to do with his past and is not, therefore, explicable in the terms of his own current realism.

His words fill all the available space as he seeks to make himself consistent: when he is speaking his opinions among the circus people, Mr. E. W. B. Childers says, "Give it mouth in your own building, will you. . . . Because this isn't a story building, and too much of you might bring it down" (30). And indeed it can be said that Mr. Bounderby brings his own metonymous house down around his ears as it becomes apparent that there is too much of him—too much past, too much love, too many relationships—to fit the realism he now represents. Dickens signals this quite clearly from the beginning in the flamboyant hyperbole of Bounderby's tales of his past. "I passed the day in a ditch,

and the night in a pigsty”; “I was so ragged and dirty you wouldn’t have touched me with a pair of tongs”; “She kept a chandler’s shop . . . and kept me in an eggbox”: these are statements which declare Bounderby’s fictionality simultaneously at two levels (his own fiction and Dickens’s), for they are so artistically-wrought as to amount to an authorial intrusion by which one’s sense of fictionality is kept to the fore (14–15).²⁹ Mr. Bounderby professes to “call a spade a spade” (and having been born in a ditch, he should be able to do so), but Dickens uses him to imply that such resolutely utilitarian language most literally must distort “truth”—Bounderby is, in fact, a habitual liar—for the sake of “realism.” One could almost imagine that Bounderby is the parodic construct that reifies Dickens’s own dilemma (if he is Blackpool in his desire to tell the truth and behave well, then he is Bounderby in his addiction to the most outrageous of language games): the man who is so caught in the imperatives of his limited, programatically-ordained text that he reveals himself to be a “noodle,” which is to say, among other things, to be flaccid and undesirable even to the likes of a hungry Mrs. Sparsit, for “the proceedings of a noodle can only inspire contempt” (271).

One must insist upon thinking about *why* Dickens supplies Bounderby with the very past that most thoroughly subverts the novel’s “realistic” assertion that a man’s inhumane environment afflicts his character: the “realistic” assertion that, in the face of such determinism, mysteries of the spirit—evil and goodness—and mysteries of the flesh—desire and its concomitant states—may be explained in more gainful terms by the contiguities of one’s material environment. Bounderby, with a fraudulent “realism” he has invented and endlessly rehearsed to aggrandize himself, is deployed by Dickens to be perceived by the reader simultaneously at several contradictory levels. Within terms familiar to both addressor and addressee as regards the party-line on poverty and industrialization and their affects on character, he is bad because he has been misused; he is ruthless because he has had to raise himself out of the ditch; he is unregenerate because he has become the embodiment of the factory system. That one is clearly meant to recognize Dickens’s prolepsis, to know all along the identity of the old woman who watches his house, brings one *at the same time* to exit the terms of this sociopolitical assumption as regards Bounderby while not discarding the validity of the assumption itself. That Bounderby has lied does not negate the “realism” of the generalized pernicious effects of industrialization, even though his inexplicable badness brings to the fore Dickens’s ambivalence about the realistic mode, and, cor-

relatively, his competing and oppositional ideologies about the very nature of character. In fact, Dickens does not ever halt the play of significance between his oppositional concepts of character—that it is determined by its surroundings and that it is immune to its surroundings—although he makes manifest in *Bounderby* how the reader may accommodate at once several levels of discourse on “reality.”³⁰ But in supplying, as he so consistently does, two simultaneous possibilities for the assessment of character, and in giving *Bounderby* a dual function, he once again acknowledges that realism, while it serves a necessary purpose, is univocal and finally insufficient.

Dickens does not belittle in *Hard Times* the dark realities of the industrial state, yet one is constantly invited to exit Coketown’s metonymies for others more appealing; Dickens *plays* with every one of his realist’s obligations, freeing both language and character to act out, independently of their syntagmatic obligations. Like Louisa, who is “peep[ing] with all her might through a hole in a deal board” and Tom, “abasing himself on the ground but to catch a hoof of the graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act,” the reader is invited to get down to it. One has only to consider the sexual implications of a “graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act” to see that there is an alternative agenda to industrial sterility in this “neutral ground upon the outskirts of town, which was neither town nor country” (10). Apart from its industrialized constructs and on the periphery of Coketown’s realism, it is implied, is a place where language is freed from all political imperatives; existent in a “neutral place,” it may perform as it is inclined rather than as it should. So too is “character” made a playful concept here, for when the circus comes to this neutral ground to play out its Rabelaisian fantasies the Centaur, the Wild Huntsman, the Cupid, and the Infant are all played convincingly enough by two men (27).

In this carnival world all the linear expectations based on discrete paradigms of identity and action merge:

There were two or three handsome young women among them, with their two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of a third family often made a pyramid of both those fathers with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. (32)

The conglomerated actants, “handsome young women,” “husbands,”

“little children,” “mothers,” seem piled on one another in a dense and glorious heap, for when fathers pile up so does everything else: “the father of one . . . was in the habit of balancing the father of another,” “the father of a third often made a pyramid of both these fathers.” In the context of those ruthless metonymies that control all the heads in Dickens’s industrial world, it is provocative to think here of Jakobson’s discussion of “contiguity disorder” whereby syntactical rules give way to agrammaticism, causing the “degeneration of the sentence into a mere ‘word heap.’”³¹ Dickens might almost be said to fantasize the visual equivalent to this a-linearism in the jubilantly pyramidal world of the carnival: to give, as an antidote to the word bound and trussed syntagmatically, a sense of alternative energy. This is a place where propositions complete themselves with no regard for linguistic conventionalities—“stand upon x” becomes “stand upon bottles”; “twirl x” becomes “twirl handbasins”—as if the sheer pleasure of the word prevails. The subtextual suggestion is of a remarkable sexual freedom and energy: the mothers performing “rapid acts on bare-backed steeds” and “not at all particular in respect of showing their legs,” the passel of indiscriminate children. This is a place where all the fathers can indeed “ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing.” Mr. Sleary, the benign father, presides over the circus world, and his very name and his very speech are meant to suggest that rigorous, hard-edged pronouncements may not be made here. He talks and talks (a luxury Dickens himself has lost to his preestablished compact format), and he urges others to “give . . . a Bethpeak” about that which is solely for amusement (38). He holds a mysterious sexual alternative to Coketown’s garish frustrations (children here seem to emerge in great litters); his voice is “not eathy heard by them ath don’t know me” because he represents a code oppositional to that of industrial realisms.

Although all of his characters may be found to subsidize their political functions with alternative complexities, it is in the enigmatical Louisa Gradgrind that Dickens most thoroughly questions realism: if the parent (paternalistic) text is the scathing attack on the mad realities of industrialism, there is a daughter-text that refutes antithesis and posits a complete exit from the realistic mode. A character who is neither an embodiment of her surroundings nor one who brings her surroundings to embody her self, Louisa is the speculum from which one might read one’s own desires and the figure that predicts Dickens’s instinct that “realism” is insufficient to his desirous relationship with language. Louisa is described most consistently in terms of absences and vacan-

cies: in her face “there was a light with nothing to rest on, a fire with nothing to burn” (11), and on this face is “no tear” (12). Louisa is “a blind face groping its way” (11). In a landscape of house- and factory-like people, she exists outside the spatial metonymies of her surroundings: her habitual retreat is “an opening in a dark wood” (155). She does not actively resist the metonymic identifications that mark the others, as Sissy instinctively resists when she furnishes her imagined space with flowered carpets or as Blackpool’s wife defiantly resists when she perpetually sells the furnishings out from under her placed and dogged husband: Louisa’s vacancy is the profoundest emptiness, the nihilism of one who cannot even *imagine* the alternatives to nothingness and who has no terms for the nothingness she feels. (Harthouse must talk of nothingness for her.) In a fiction that operates at one level with ferocious, journalistic realism she is the void at the hard edges of material realities.

Defying metonymy, Louisa is a most potent blank space. She leaves no mark of where she has been: “From the mistress of the house, the visitor glanced to the house itself. There was no mute sign of a woman in the room. No graceful little adornment, no fanciful little device, however trivial, anywhere expressed her influence” (117–18). Her absence from her husband’s house has two-fold significance, as it confirms Louisa’s inability to touch or to be touched by any but the father/artist. Without any “graceful little adornments” or “fanciful little device,” this red-brick house and all its contents are exclusively a periphrasis for Bounderby, just as is the repossessed country house from which Louisa habitually absents herself for a hole at the wood’s edge. Her refusal to touch Bounderby’s houses is mute testimony to her refusal to touch or be touched by her husband, and it is verification that she will never love him. Far from translating desire for Bounderby into hands placed lovingly upon metonymous artifacts of him, she pointedly refutes any libidinal attraction to him in her disdain for his things. There is no cathexis, no narcissistic transference onto her surroundings, but only vacancy. Thus, once again in this novel of turns, the diegetical geometry is skewed as the indices for Louisa’s inward state are revealed as empty, designating only that which she is not.³²

Nor is Louisa physically declined by a landscape that confirms or disputes the metonymies of Coketown. She is not substantial: not a house, a wall, a warehouse; if she is “metallurgical,” she is a state of metal without a named shape or function (11). She is not, like Sissy, “a girl so dark-eyed and dark-haired that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon

her," able to transubstantiate her surroundings. In fact, Louisa remains most extraordinarily vague in this landscape of people so vividly drawn: "She was pretty"; "her features were handsome"; she is a "most remarkable girl" (11, 117). Harthouse, who is effete but acutely observant, is said diegetically by Dickens (who thus valorizes his perceptions by his own nonironic tone) to see her as cold and proud/sensitively ashamed; constrained/careless; reserved/watchful; indifferent/uneasy (117). Yet she is neither one nor the other in these oxymoronic extremes, for we are not meant to see her as capricious. Nor is she the sum of their resolutions, that comprehensible if otherwise inarticulate middle term within the oxymoronic pairing. She is quite literally what language cannot say; she is the embodiment of that which is inarticulate and therefore inaccessible to realism. She refutes syntagmatic relationships just as she rebuffs the standard plot lines of realism for women. She does not love beyond her brother, she does not descend Miss Sparsit's staircase to hell, she does not capitulate to desire, she does not recover in the end to become a wife, a mother, a happy person and neither does she die; she is, in short, as subversive as her twin Estella, who brings Dickens to the unthinkable exigency in realism of a novel with two endings that negate each other. "I am here beside you," she says, "barefoot, unclothed, undistinguishable in darkness" (174): she is what fiction must become—an erotic cipher—if it repudiates the "realistic" externalities by which character is defined and delimited to the stereotypes imposed by (economic and therefore political) materialities.

Louisa exists between the poles of an industrial/fictional "realism" that forbids or attenuates desire and the phantasmagoric dreamscape this reality must generate in compensation. Louisa is an alternative to the other topological fantasies within the text, a dream-symbol that replaces Dickens's dense industrial metonymies with an opening for the erotic fantasies of those who watch her: she "baffle[s] all penetration," a state which invites the effort, awakening dreams of penetration effected (117). Her past is made of "plumbless depths," which arouse one to plumb them (92). She is the antithesis to the notion of literary realism, for she is the unsayable who may only be displayed in terms of what she is not. Louisa is the antithesis to the "useful," linguistically and economically, in this world of use, for her social class raises her above the productivity of the Hand, and her sex disqualifies her for managerial work. In *Dombey and Son*, Dombey thinks of his daughter in terms which make explicit the moneyed female's purely ornamental and domestic value within the world of the trader/realist: "But what

was a girl to Dombey and Son! In the capital of the House's name and dignity, such a child was merely a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested—a bad boy—nothing more."³³ Her ornamental function disallowed in this place without fancy, Louisa is designated as the most irredeemable casualty of her surroundings, and she is also, *ex post facto*, immune to the "realisms" of her situation as a character. She is neither an angel (Rachel), nor a whore (Mrs. Blackpool). Nor is she, as is Sissy, that potent conflation of sensuality and innocence that makes up the domesticated "angel of the house."³⁴ She looks to the very depth of the fire she watches and can say "I don't see anything in it, . . . particularly" (49), because she does not dream—has "never dreamed"—and she does not desire (93).³⁵ She is not, in other words, a personality gradually destroyed by accretions from her industrial, fact-filled surroundings, for she has "never had a child's heart," "never dreamed a child's dream" (93). Neither are we meant to believe that she is, like Bounderby, born insufficient, her vacancies intrinsic to her nature.

Louisa's is an alternative pathology, an alternative reality: she is a place both dense and empty, the embodiment of a father's fantasy of a daughter/woman/text born utterly pure, utterly open, and utterly his. "You have dealt with me so wisely, father, from my cradle to this hour," she says to Gradgrind, "that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear" (93). She is not formed by nature to be what she is, and she is not made what she is by her world: she is *made* by her father. It is her father who pronounces her sexually mature: "My dear Louisa, you are a woman!" (86). It is her father only who holds her, only her father whom she touches, both hands on his shoulders, only her father's eyes into which she gazes fixedly (199–200). Louisa is the text of the father's deepest and unwritten desire: it is no accident, then, that her mother is made to be so completely inconsequential, "a weak transparency," a "feeble and dim" light (183–84). Mrs. Gradgrind is no competition at all, either for Louisa's affections or for Gradgrind's, and she inspires only mild exasperation in the reader, who is, after all, accustomed to Dickens's excising of the mother for the daughter. Nor is it an accident that Louisa's husband is a bumptious fool, or that her brother is a selfish baby, or that her lover is a effeminate, half-hearted nihilist. Even the ending—"Herself again a wife—a mother—lovingly watchful of her children. . . . Such a thing was never to be"—holds her apart. It is no accident that the *only* one in *Hard Times* who becomes worthy of this fantasy woman is, finally, her own father, who begins as "Gradgrind" and ends as Dickens.³⁶ If Bounderby lampoons

the imperatives of realism in his retroactive justification of character, Louisa is the very figure of the artist's desire and fear. Lovely, untouched and untouching, she is the poesis of an eroticism that does not yield its secrets to the word. Yet she is also utterly disassociative; and just as she defies the syntagmatic trap indispensable to realism she also defies description.

Thus she is also utterly damaged—"tired," "tired a long time" (12)—and has become what Catherine Clement calls the "indifferent hysteric" who signifies eros through every kind of anesthesia that will still her body, who turns all erotic stirrings into her own pain, who defies stimulation.³⁷ When, at age fifteen, she allows herself to show her revulsion at Bounderby's kiss—a first and a last—she rubs the spot until it is "burning red": "You'll rub a hole in your face," says Tom; "You may cut the piece out with your penknife if you like. . . . I wouldn't cry," she responds (19). Once she becomes Bounderby's wife, "There was no mute sign of woman in the room," says Dickens: nobody home. "What does it matter?" is her refrain (93). Her attraction to Harthouse is never brought to a state of pleasure; it does not go through the realist's romantic arc of resistance, capitulation (actual or imagined) to desire, and finally guilt, as it circumvents the middle term with the ruthless economy of the hysteric and goes straight to pain: "If you ask me whether I have loved him, or do love him, I tell you plainly, father, that it may be so. I don't know," she cries just before becoming "an insensible heap" (200).³⁸ Like her equally isolate sister Estella of *Great Expectations*, she is the one break in the reciprocal contiguities of place and person in *Hard Times*, and as such she is a most poignant monstrosity and a most perfect purity: she is the paradoxical figure of an art/woman that cannot comprehend or feel desire and, exiting that most singular and potent realism, is thus at once both unimpeachable and utterly violable. Metonymy is subverted by such interiority: dream yields to dream.

It is at the least not sufficient to reduce Louisa Gradgrind to those psychosexual terms that might suggest something of Dickens's own libidinal fantasies and preoccupations.³⁹ I would suggest instead that she is a potent sign within the text of *Hard Times*, a figure that embodies Dickens's resistance to realism's co-opting of language to its causes. She is a form of desire, and as such she resists the language that may only describe a woman/text through the physicalities that limit that desire as they concretize it: however the metonymy for woman (desire) is chosen, whether the contiguity is as intimate as "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with

light brown hair!)” or as distant as the periphrastic elaborations of her by the surrounding landscape, it delimits. But Louisa, indefinable, is also necessarily a completely internalized figure; damaged, with no language to describe her state, she is made to embody an eroticism turned in on itself—the trope that winds itself into a tight, impenetrable coil.

One must not hope to resolve the antinomies by which *Hard Times* works, for, after all, one *understands* at every moment of reading it the necessity for, and the validity of, both truths: the real and the surreal coexist because they are interdependent. It is not every reader who is disturbed by these seeming contradictions: it is the reader who returns to the text with her own realist’s agenda, by which she makes sense of, orders, and reduces all the terms, who is disturbed. In retrospect, one searches for the novel’s telos: what *are* “the limited options for and restrictive means towards the denouement,” and what *is* the “plot allowed by the narrative given and by the genre to which it belongs?”⁴⁰ Viewed in these terms, *Hard Times* is a curious novel indeed, almost dissolute, as it seems perpetually distracted from its retributive sacrifice of Tom Gradgrind (about whom we care so little) and its martyring of Stephen Blackpool (whose implacable virtue makes us impatient). One’s interest is not really in these two characters; nor is it in the action which surrounds them, and thus one finds that the telos of Dickens’s realism is made to be virtually insignificant by the alternative densities within the novel. There is so much turning going on. Bounderby’s history is reversed, and though we know all along he is “the Bully of humility” who coerces and bullies humility into his service, the prolepsis of the old woman does not prepare us for the analepsis of his thoroughly mundane, healthy childhood. Mr. Gradgrind turns good, and while there are ample clues that he is not a bad man, his salvation at the expense of both Louisa and Tom is a significant generational irony and an unusual investment of authorial energy.⁴¹ In one of the strangest elaborations of character in any novel, Mrs. Sparsit ends up behaving—one can hardly think of what to call it—like a combination of Sherlock Holmes and a jealously crazed husband; she awakens an entire, wonderful subtext as she stands streaming, in parti-colored stockings, with prickly things in her shoes and caterpillars festooning her dress (195). And then there is Louisa, fainting at her father’s feet like a proper heroine, not because she has gone the Clarissa route and not because she has taken the low road of desire, but because . . . well, one cannot say, exactly. These are all gestures subversive of “realism,” and they are subsidized by a tropology that exposes the

unreason in reason and the unreality in reality. But if the mimesis in *Hard Times* is meant to be comically slipshod, its semiosis is not. Dickens seems to say that one must acknowledge “realisms” even knowing that they are all prescribed by the systems they choose to attack or valorize, just as one must understand the essential barrierlessness of pure desire. Neither one nor the other, but both.

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NOTES

¹ Quoted from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 21. Lyotard's "The Tensor," and "The dream-work does not think" (1–55), discuss metonymy and metaphor in the context of the dream, evaluating Jakobson's formula regarding metonymy and narrative found in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956). See, too, Jakobson, 81.

² Charles Dickens, *Hard Times: For These Times* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), 6. All further references to the novel will be cited parenthetically in the text. It is of interest that Robert Blatchford, in the 1894 socialist text, *Merrie England* (New York: Humboldt Publishing Co., n.d.), which is also a refutation of Manchester School political economy, plays throughout on the repetition of the word "Fact." Blatchford refers occasionally to Dickens and explicitly to *Hard Times* through references to Gradgrind. See John Holloway, "Hard Times: A History and a Criticism," in *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1962), 159–74, for his location of Dickens's examination of utilitarianism within the specific context of the Manchester School. It is profitable to think of the uniformly recalcitrant, if variable, female characters with which this novel is filled: Sissy, Louisa, Mrs. Gradgrind, Mrs. Sparsit, Mrs. Blackpool, Rachel all undermine the paternalistic systems of industry, education, and domesticity in which they exist, Rachel with her spirituality no less than Mrs. Blackpool with her physicality. See Lynda Zwinger, "The Fear of the Father: Dombey and Daughter," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 39 (1985): 420–40. Zwinger reads Florence's relationship to her father in terms that are informative in the context of my argument.

³ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988), 73–79. Lyotard speaks of the "therapeutic uses" to which realism is put, as it stabilizes the referent, arranging it "according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others" (74). See Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990), for a discussion of the agreement, equally implicit but less ideologically oriented, that the reader makes with fiction to accept simultaneously that the story is both fictional and true.

⁴ See Blatchford (note 2), 125, as he uses "Gradgrind" as a generic term.

⁵ See J. Hillis Miller, "The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank's Illustrations," in *Dickens Centennial Essays*, ed. Ada Nisbet and Blake Nevius (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press), 98–103, for a discussion of the relationship between synchronous metonymies and diachronous events: "The predominance of metonymy reinforces that deterministic vision of man's life which is often said to be an essential aspect of realistic fiction" (101).

⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 4. See Stephen J. Spector, "Monsters of Metonymy: *Hard Times* and Knowing the Working Class," in *Charles Dickens*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), for his assertion that, while realism is difficult to define, "one can say that realistic texts, like realistic paintings and photographs, intend to tell the truth: what they report they intend to be verifiable" (230). John P. McGowan, in "*David Copperfield*: The Trial of Realism," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 34 (1979): 8–9, gives a more explicitly detailed definition. Like Spector, I offer no elaborate definition of realism. *Hard Times* is not, and clearly was not meant to be, a realistic novel, if by realism one means that its overriding purpose is to persuade the reader that it is committed to verisimilitude. Dickens problematizes realism generally (he is said by McGowan to have made an "absolute abandonment of realism in the celebration of 'Fancy' in the 1850's," [8]), and in *Hard Times* he intensifies his ambivalence: in his patronymics, in the humor which signals his amused and ironic distance from his actors at their play, and in his omniscience he seems to claim "truth" while undermining an illusion of realism. See Riffaterre (note 3), 29–52.

⁷ In fact, Dickens's industrial landscape is a thin covering over the carnival spectacle of language turning people's mouths against themselves. The most fanciless realists find themselves in the coils of their own language, their syllogisms having become as absurd as if they had blundered through the looking glass. The third gentleman undertakes to teach a lesson about the difference between realism and aestheticism: "You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. . . . This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste" (6–7). This is a parody of utilitarianism in all its arrogance, and yet still Sissy would have representational flowers on her carpet, because, "If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers," she says. And the third gentleman plays his trump card in this language game: "And that is why you would put tables and chairs upon them and have people walking over them with heavy boots?" he crows (6). Like Alice, the third gentleman starts out with a baby in his arms and ends up holding a pig (6). Dickens has Sissy make the crucial distinction between words, things, and representations that the fact-man cannot see. She knows that these "flowers" are representations and not "realities": "They wouldn't crush and wither . . . they would be pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant" (6). Dickens clearly intuits the surrealist comedy that must arise when language imagines itself as representative of "reality." Where Margritte paints much later his precise representation entitled, "This is not a pipe," Dickens has Sissy: "This (word or picture) is not a flower." Thus Dickens suggests again that "realism" will be assaulted by language the moment it is articulated. See Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. James Harkness (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), for a meditation on this painting. See too McGowan's (note 6) argument on Dickens's changing apprehension of the function of the word in its relationship to "reality." One must, in fairness, read Holloway's (note 2) defense of the third gentleman as a spokesperson for the Board of Trade's "Department of Practical Art" (163–64).

⁸ This is not to say that the reader is baffled or confused by what Dickens is doing but only that Dickens reverses, retards, and even accelerates the movements towards decipherment with a tropology that introduces madness—unreason and antireality—as a subtext.

⁹ See Jakobson and Halle (note 1), 78, on the connection between surrealism and metaphor, as opposed to cubism and metonymy.

¹⁰ In *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Avital Ronell (New York: Schocken, 1985), 21.

¹¹ Jakobson and Halle (note 1), 78.

¹² Blatchford (note 2) makes it clear that socialism, no less than this realism, argues against the excesses to which *aphrodisia* is prone: "My ideal is frugality of body and opulence of mind" (12).

¹³ See Miller (note 5): "The diachronic sequence has the same irresistible coercion

as the synchronic law which says that between a man and his door knocker there will inevitably be some degree of resemblance and sympathy" (103). For an alternative perspective as regards this woman's behavior, see Xavier Gauthier, "Why Witches?" in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 199–203.

¹⁴ See Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylvere Monod (New York: Norton, 1966), 277, for Dickens's comments on his exhaustion upon finishing *Hard Times*.

¹⁵ See Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), xv–xvii, for a discussion of deixis.

¹⁶ Ford and Monod (note 14), 274.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1988), 96.

¹⁸ Foucault (note 17), 97.

¹⁹ Foucault, 97.

²⁰ Ford and Monod (note 14), vii.

²¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 8e.

²² Spector (note 5) examines the problems this passage raises from a different angle in "Monsters of Metonymy."

²³ See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 29–52, for a discussion on the density of language; see too Miller (note 5), 100, on Dickens's archaeological metonymies.

²⁴ Foucault (note 17), 122.

²⁵ Ford and Monod (note 14), 276–77.

²⁶ Foucault (note 17), 117.

²⁷ Legs become a significant synecdoche throughout the novel: the teachers turned like identical table legs (7); the church on its "florid wooden legs" (21); Merrylegs, the dog (25); Mr. E. W. B. Childers, the circus star, whose legs are "very robust, but shorter than legs of good proportion should have been" (27); Mr. Childers and Master Kidderminster, "with their legs wider apart than the general run of men, and with a very knowing assumption of being stiff in the knees" (31); the leg of pork to be raffled off (61); the leg riddle (256–57); the circus ladies "so demonstrative of leg" (258); Lady Scadgers, with her "mysterious leg," etc.

²⁸ See Lyotard (note 1), 12–17.

²⁹ The balanced, metrically sophisticated line, "I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty," the vaudeville ring of "I was so dirty that . . .," and the double-duty of "kept" in "She kept a chandler's shop . . . and kept me in an eggbox," are all meant to draw explicit attention to Dickens's comic virtuosity.

³⁰ Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), 169. Williams points out that to attack one's material surroundings as corruptive of the humans within it is to take a relatively modern view of character as influenced, if not determined, by environment, and to suggest that one promotes a realism of material cause and effect. To suggest, as Dickens does so clearly with Bounderby, Sissy Jupe, Rachel, and Stephen Blackpool, that "some virtues and vices are original and both triumph over and in some cases can change any environment" is to take a less modern, more spiritually-oriented view, and to suggest that what is "real" about human character is predetermined and unalterable; therefore it is immune to all propagandas and programs of reform (169). See Williams's chapter, "The Reader in *Hard Times*," 166–74.

³¹ Jakobson and Halle (note 1), 71. See too Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (New York: Midland Books, 1984), for the antitotalitarian implications of the carnival.

³² See Riffaterre (note 3), 14.

³³ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Collins, 1954), 23. One will think, too, of Mrs. Pocket in *Great Expectations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston,

1972), 181, who has been raised to be “highly ornamental, but perfectly helpless and useless.”

³⁴ For elaborations on these categories see Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).

³⁵ That Louisa so often stares into the fire seems another of Dickens’s subversions of standard expectations, for by the inescapable symbolisms of fire and passion, one expects that sooner or later Louisa’s fire will be unbanked, her flames awakened. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), for a reading on the symbolisms of fire.

³⁶ Which is to say that he begins as a flat, ideologically-declined puppet and ends up as a man. See, among the many discussions of fathers in Dickens, Leonard F. Manheim, “The Law as Father,” *American Imago* 12 (1955): 17–23. See too Zwinger’s feminist essay (note 2) on “The Fear of the Father.” This intimate and problematic association between daughters and fathers at the expense of the living and present mother has received a great deal of critical attention as regards its psycho-sexual implications. Yet the pattern is so frequent in the nineteenth-century novel as to suggest something beyond the preoccupations of men regarding their daughters, and the equivalent oedipal attraction of daughters to their fathers. One need only look at Jane Austen or George Eliot to find female novelists who create utterly ineffectual and foolish mothers, against whom powerful father/daughter liaisons are formed. As in *Hard Times*, this pattern suggests as much about stereotypes of authorship—that rigorous ordering which must be subsidized by “paternal” authorship—as it does psycho-sexual “realisms.”

³⁷ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), 39.

³⁸ See Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1957), for case studies that illustrate this phenomenon whereby eroticism is channeled directly into pain.

³⁹ See Zwinger (note 2), 428–31, and Robert Clark, “Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in *Dombey and Son*,” *Journal of English Literary History* 51 (Spring 1954): 69–84, for a psycho-sexual reading.

⁴⁰ Riffaterre (note 3), 131–32.

⁴¹ See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), 167–68, for a brief reading of *Hard Times*, which suggests that “the novel is primarily the education of the educator, the conversion of Mr. Gradgrind from his inhuman system to the opposing one. It is thus a series of lessons administered to Mr. Gradgrind.”