

Fact and Taste

Thematic and Metaliterary Impurity in *Hard Times*

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Abstract *Hard Times* is an example of Dickens's desire to create a narrative hybrid, composed – as it is – of different literary genres and styles. Nevertheless, the carnivalesque nature of the circus, which epitomises the transgression of social and cultural norms, is not to be intended as a negation of those social and family principles that Dickens's novel advocates against the disruptive utilitarian politics. This textual impurity inevitably affects and determines the ideological complexity of a work that can be only superficially classified as a realistic factory novel. Thomas Gradgrind's and Mr. Sleary's different uses of language, for instance, embody their adherence to (the facts), or their infraction of («People must be amused») specific ideological norms. In Dickens's view, it is exactly through their (apparent) negation that traditional Victorian values may be affirmed and consolidated thanks to a mutual form of cultural infection. At the same time, *Hard Times* may be approached as a metaliterary reflection on Dickens's role as a writer (and editor) in a particular phase of his career. In this respect, Sleary, the creative artist, and Gradgrind, the factual Victorian paterfamilias, represent two facets of Dickens's own personality.

Keywords Charles Dickens. Circus. Dialogism. *Hard Times*.

Hard Times (1854) is a difficult novel to classify, and defies any easy categorization amidst Dickens's works. Since F.R. Leavis's reflections in *The Great Tradition* (1948) on the peculiarity of *Hard Times* in Dickens's artistic production – a «moral fable» that has «all the strengths of his genius» and the status of «a completely serious work of art» (Leavis 1972, p. 258) – there has been a constant interrogation of its nature. This lack of critical agreement derives from its elusiveness with regard to literary genres, narrative construction and characterization. Whereas aesthetic impurity may be considered a recurring feature in Dickens's macrotext – characterized as it is by a constant mingling of the tragic and the comic, of high and low literary sources, of idealizing and crude representation, and of a metaphorically refined use of language and of colloquialisms – *Hard Times* gives the impression of including this principle of impurity not just as one of many elements but as the thematic and formal foundation of the novel. Although it retains some of the lugubrious atmosphere of *Bleak House*, the novel that was published before it, *Hard Times* does not possess anything like the narrative *tour-de-force* and plotting intricacies of

Bleak House. Indeed, *Hard Times* seems to be written against the grain of its illustrious predecessor, being decisively more compact in shape and size than *Bleak House*. Even though it bears witness to Dickens's attempt to set his narrative in a specific context (as he does in *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*), *Hard Times* cannot be reductively described as a historical, factory (or social) novel. Moreover, Dickens's text is less focused on topical issues than, say, *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*.¹ Finally, whereas *Hard Times* does not explicitly draw from the writer's biography (as do *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*), it does contain some of Dickens's most personal and intimate reflections on the uses of imagination and fancy in dealing with factual questions, as well as with the artist's complex role.²

Hard Times therefore stands in a peculiar position in Dickens's macro-text from both a thematical-ideological and a formal point of view. With respect to its formal features, it seems constructed as a hybrid assemblage of contrasting styles. Equally heterogeneous is the range of the ideological frames or the «ideologemes», in Mikhail Bakhtin's definition (Holquist 1981, p. 357), of the various characters involved in the story. If the presence of circus folks reveals Dickens's peculiar interest in using an inventive and creative language (in particular as regards Sleary's lisp) and in idiosyncratic characterization, the novel's references to social issues (mainly embodied by Stephen Blackpool) downplay some of its comic premises, and complicate its ideological background. Accordingly, the formal and ideological aspects of *Hard Times* are not separated from one another. The aesthetically impure quality of the form that contains so much comic entertainment serves indeed to convey its complex message. The aesthetic principle that underlies the comic becomes a vehicle for proposing subversive meanings, according to a practice that Hugh Grady has described well: «[precisely] because of [its] special status», Grady argues, «[...] the aesthetic becomes an arena for all kinds of 'dangerous' material, but it achieves its license to do so because it is socially constituted as harmless, playful, dreamlike» (Grady 2009, p. 29). And it is certainly this formal impurity in mixing the comical and the dangerous that continues to puzzle and attract readers and critics.

1 Hilary Schor maintains that «[d]espite a flurry of scholarly articles connecting *Hard Times* to the Preston lock-out and other contemporary factory controversies, the novel in fact seems far less topical in its references than *Bleak House*, a novel completed the year before» (Schor 2001, p. 68).

2 *Hard Times* is obviously not the only novel to allude (directly or indirectly) to the figure of the artist, with examples ranging from *Bleak House* (for instance, Nemo as the unnamed creator of legal documents) to *Our Mutual Friend* (Silas Wegg, the ballad seller with a wooden leg) and *David Copperfield*, which may be reputed as the most extensive treatment of the role of the writer and the artist.

Hard Times provides an interesting access to a creative internal struggle experienced by Dickens, which concerned his job as a writer. Composed in an important phase of Dickens's emergence as a brand-name for Victorian novel-writing and editing, *Hard Times* may also be interpreted as an interrogation of the role of the nineteenth-century artist in the figures of Sleary, the embodiment of unbridled creativity, and of Thomas Gradgrind, the down-to-earth factual individual. The characters represent complementary facets of the same authorial persona. In this respect, along with its social and political references, Dickens's novel demonstrates a metaliterary drive centred on aesthetic and creative issues.

In a letter to Henry Cole, dated 17 June 1854 and written during the periodical publication of *Hard Times* in *Household Words*, Dickens reports his dialogues with Thomas Gradgrind, the novel's protagonist. The more he talks about this «man of realities» and of «fact and calculations» (Flint 1995, p. 10), the more it seems that Dickens is talking about himself as a writer, a journalist and an editor with multiple artistic and familial engagements:

I often say to 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. Perhaps by dint of his going his way and my going mine, we shall meet at least at some halfway house where there are flowers in the carpets, and a little standing room for Queen Mab's Chariot among the Steam Engines. (Hartley 2012, p. 276)

Along with the allusion to Queen Mab from *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 1, Scene iv), the sentence «there are flowers in the carpet» is an explicit reference to *Hard Times*, Chapter 2. After having offered through Bitzer his famous definition of a horse as «Quadruped. Gramnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive» (Flint 1995, p. 12), the novel's narrator introduces an unnamed third gentleman working as a government officer. This passage of *Hard Times*, to which Dickens's letter to Henry Cole alludes, is worth quoting at length:

«[...] What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact».

Thomas Gradgrind nodded his approbation.

«This is a new principle, a discovery, a great discovery», said the gentleman.

«Now, I'll try you again. Suppose you were going to carpet a room. Would you use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it?»

There being a general conviction by this time that «No, sir!» was always the right answer to this gentleman, the chorus of No was very strong. Only a few feeble stragglers said Yes: among them Sissy Jupe [...].

- «So you would carpet your room – or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband – with representations of flowers, would you?» said the gentleman. «Why would you?»
- «If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers», returned the girl
- «And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?»
- «It wouldn’t hurt them, sir. They wouldn’t crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy –».
- «Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy», cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. «That’s it! You are never to fancy».
- «You are not, Cecilia Jupe», Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, «to do anything of that kind».
- «Fact, fact, fact!» said the gentleman. And «Fact, fact, fact!» repeated Thomas Gradgrind [...].
- «You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don’t walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets [...]. You must use», said the gentleman, «for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste». (Flint 1995, pp. 13-14)

The «third gentleman» who discusses matters with Sissy may be eventually interpreted as a parody of Henry Cole, the director of the Department of Practical Art – the addressee of Dickens’s letter – who warmly supported the association between «taste» and factual rules. As a matter of fact, Cole and Dickens were on friendly terms and worked together on many occasions: for instance Cole gave Dickens information, which would be used in many articles published in *Household Words*, about abuse in the patenting system and about neglect in public records. Between the lines of his instructions to the Coketown schoolchildren, «the gentleman» (whose opinions are shared by Gradgrind, who nods «his approbation») illustrates his ideas about artistic expression, and in particular about realistic figuration. For him there has to be a relationship between aesthetic «taste» and mimetic factual representation («What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact»; «This is fact. This is taste»). Through him Dickens is denouncing a certain approach to scholastic education (and indirectly to its Utilitarian background) and, at the same time, he is introducing a subtle reflection on aesthetic issues. Sissy, who acts in the novel as a figure of mediation between fact and art, is the only character who takes a stand for and defends her opinions. According to «the gentleman», the leading characteristic for any product of art should be its mimetic congruity (to

avoid being «a contradiction in fact»), whereas for Sissy what matters is the mere enjoyment of it («I am fond of them»).

As the above-quoted excerpt from Dickens's novel indicates, notwithstanding its political and social topicality *Hard Times* cannot be interpreted merely as a realistic narrative; it is, rather, a text that turns into a reflection on the role and job of the Victorian artist, and on the factual and cultural implications of aesthetic principles. Dickens's implicit assumptions in *Hard Times* seem to anticipate Theodore W. Adorno's reflections, included in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), on the ir/rationality of the aesthetic, according to which «[art] is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it; art is not something prerational or irrational, which would peremptorily condemn it as untruth [...]. Rational and irrational theories of art are therefore equally faulty» (Adorno, Tiedemann 1997, p. 55). Dickens's letter to Henry Cole thus suggests that the author of *Hard Times* is talking about (and against) himself as a professional writer who was realising that his relationship with literature was becoming Gradgrindian (to the point of losing touch with the joy of creativity) in a particular phase of his career, during which his editorial, journalistic, and literary engagements were imposing on him an overly demanding working schedule. For this reason, *Hard Times* attempts to find a middle ground between artistic integrity and editorial politics, a middle ground where writing and duty «shall meet at last», as Dickens writes to Cole.³

The destiny of *Hard Times* is interlaced with *Household Words*, in which this novel appeared between 1 April and 12 August 1854, and with Dickens's own evolution as a literary lion. The genesis of the novel is concerned with hard economic facts, since Dickens was asked by Bradbury and Evens to start writing (and serializing) a new novel so as to improve the sales of *Household Words*, which were falling consistently. Once again, he had to reconcile facts with taste in an extremely busy period of his career. Nevertheless, «despite the fact that he had been exhausted to the point of collapse during the latter stages of *Bleak House*, he was ready to begin again» (Ackroyd 1990 p. 724). Even the editorial positioning of *Hard Times* in Dickens's weekly confirms the centrality of facts as a fundamental background to its arguments. The novel was printed alongside numerous articles on contemporary issues, many of them dealing with the supposedly abhorred statistics that Dickens repeatedly puts under question (and even ridicules) in *Hard Times*. This is one of the reasons why *Hard Times* cannot be reductively described as a mere attack upon factuality and Utilitarianism and upon the rising Victorian economical sciences. In fact, *Household Words* was a periodical meant to amuse peo-

3 In Katherine Kearn's words, *Hard Times* becomes «a parable of correlatives for the artist's impasse between duty and pleasure» (Kearns 1992, p. 859).

ple instructively through the inclusion of literary pieces and of articles on cogent questions, among which Dickens's own piece on the Preston strikes (published on 11 February 1854) that provided the source of inspiration for many descriptive sections of *Hard Times*. As evidence of Dickens's heterogeneous and impure taste, enhanced both by fact and fancy, there is the novelist's great admiration for Henry Thomas Buckley, the author of the unfinished *History of Civilization in England* (published in 2 volumes, out of the planned 14, between 1858 and 1861), a work that made extensive use of statistics, and whose writer was among the models for the creation of Gradgrind.⁴ In a letter to Frank Stone dated 30 May 1854, Dickens described Henry Thomas Buckley as a «perfect gulf of information» (Hogarth, Dickens 2011, p. 334). Yet Dickens had long been well aware of the paradoxes of statistical sciences, as evinced by one of his first journalistic pieces published in *Bentley's Miscellany*. The collection of articles known as *The Mudfog Papers* (1837) described the so-called «Mudfog Society for the Advancement of Everything», which was nothing but a parody of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

The ideological impurity of Dickens's extremely divided opinions on Utilitarianism and on statistical sciences informs many sections of *Hard Times* from a stylistic and formal point of view too. In some cases the representative of factual thought resorts to artistic expressions and literary metaphors that seem to contradict the premises of Utilitarian principles. A telling example is Thomas Gradgrind's opening speech, in which he illustrates his philosophy - juxtaposed to what would be described as «The Sleary philosophy» (Flint 1995, p. 47):

«NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!». (p. 9)

Gradgrind's talk includes multiple figures of speech: his use of a metaphor («Plant nothing else, and root out everything else»), of an epiphora («Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts») and a chiasmus («Facts alone are wanted in life [...]. Stick to facts, sir») contradicts his dislike for literary language, and for the «destructive nonsense» (p. 53), as he calls it, of stories about fairies, dwarves and genies. More-

4 Dickens's attacks against statistics were not indiscriminate; in Alexander Welsh's opinion «[like] most of his countrymen he admired, on the whole, the kind of investigation of the condition of England that was current and the way in which its results were tabulated» (Welsh 1986, p. 19).

over, Gradgrind's agricultural metaphor in his address to the schoolchildren in Coketown («root out») reminds readers of Dickens's use of this very figure of speech in «The Amusements of the People» (1850), one of the three articles he wrote for the first issue of *Household Words*, in which he clarifies the aims and scope of his new weekly. Whereas Charles Dickens's and Thomas Gradgrind's ideas diverge on many accounts, the Victorian novelist and the 'factual' Utilitarian sometimes (and unexpectedly) resort to the same rhetorical strategies:

It is probable that nothing will ever root out from among the common people an innate love they have for dramatic entertainment in some form or other. It would be a very doubtful benefit to society, we think, if it could be rooted out. (Dickens 1850b, p. 13)

In the same piece Dickens introduces the image of steam-engines as epitomes of a sterile and alienating expression of modernity, which will recur in *Hard Times* in the statement, «[there] is a range of imagination in most of us, which no amount of steam-engines will satisfy» (p. 13).

Hard Times was written under pressure during a period in which Dickens had to face the manifold commitments that his role as novelist and editor of the day entailed. The weekly format of *Household Words* represented, first and foremost, a great challenge for him. In order to maintain the crushing schedule, Dickens had to subject himself to hard times of self-discipline and to an almost industrial-like working plan. The terms and expressions adopted in one of his memoranda, written on a sheet of paper preserved in the manuscript of *Hard Times*, seem to anticipate Anthony Trollope's organization of his writing. As described in *An Autobiography* (1883), Trollope's schemes could also be called factual.⁵ In similar terms, Dickens - who resembles Gradgrind too in being a man «of facts and calculations» - gives detailed information about how to adapt the monthly format of *Bleak House* to the weekly format of *Hard Times*:

5 «When I have commenced a new book, I have always prepared a diary, divided into weeks, and carried it on for the period which I have allowed myself for the completion of the work [...]. According to the circumstances of the time, - whether my other business might be then heavy or light, or whether the book which I was writing was or was not wanted with speed, - I have allotted myself so many pages a week. The average number has been about 40. It has been placed as low as 20, and has risen to 112. And as a page is an ambiguous term, my page has been made to contain 250 words; and as words, if not watched, will have a tendency to straggle, I have had every word counted as I went» (Sadleir, Page 1999, pp. 118-119).

One sheet (16 pages of *Bleak House*) will make ten pages and a quarter of *Household Words*. Fifteen pages of my writing, will make a sheet of *Bleak House*. A page and a half of my writing, will make a page of *Household Words*. A quantity of the story to be published weekly, being about five pages of *Household Words*, will require about seven pages and a half of my writing. (quoted in Butt, Tillotson 1957, p. 202)

Furthermore, in a letter to John Forster dated February 1854, Dickens describes the problems he had in adapting his writing methods to the weekly format, complaining that «[the] difficulty is CRUSHING. Nobody can have an idea of it who has not had an experience of patient fiction-writing with some elbow-room always, and open places in perspective» (Hartley 2012, p. 274).⁶

Nevertheless, Dickens's weekly also provided the perfect editorial setting in which to manifest his passion for popular amusements and for fancy, a key term in *Hard Times*. In «A Preliminary Word», published in the first issue of his weekly along with «The Amusements of the People», Dickens offers the following definition of the human «light of Fancy»:

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. (Dickens 1850a, p. 1)

This excerpt highlights the didactic aspirations of *Household Words* to teach readers «nothing but facts» through the essential mediation of fancy. Through the description of the «light of Fancy» burning with «an inspiring flame», Dickens is anticipating, moreover, one of the most renowned scenes and metaphors of *Hard Times*, associated with Louisa Gradgrind's doomed passions: «there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression» (Flint 1995, p. 19).

In *Household Words*, and then in *Hard Times*, fancy becomes not just an evocative term, but a fundamental cultural, inventive, narrative and textual strategy through which the narrator counterbalances, and even integrates, the world of facts. In her study *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Martha C. Nussbaum describes (Dickens's) fancy as «the novel's name for the ability to see one thing as another, to see one thing

6 Dickens's letters testify, according to Lyn Cain, «in the most poignant terms to the abject misery that increasingly infiltrated his life and literary composition, hinting at periods of unimaginable anguish and pain under which he composed his novels, especially those of his middle and late periods» (Cain 2008, p. 5).

in another. We might therefore also call it the metaphorical imagination» (Nussbaum 1995, p. 36). This peculiar use of fancy explains and justifies the novel's idiosyncratic and hybrid imagery, characterized – among the other things – by a constant association between technology and the natural world (identified by exotic animals such as serpents and elephants), between the bleak Western industrial landscape of Coketown and Eastern fairy tales (Dickens's sources are mainly derived from *The Arabian Nights*). The stern M'Choakumchild, for instance, is described working at his preparatory lesson «not unlike Morgiana in the Forty Thieves: looking into all the vessels ranged before him, one after another, to see what they contained» (Flint 1995, p. 15). With a similar strategy, the unnatural red and black colour of Coketown is compared to «the painted face of a savage», with its steam-engines «like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness» (p. 28). In Chapter 10, the lights of great factories are «like Fairy palaces» (p. 69), while the chapter that follows includes a description of «the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown» (p. 73). In Book 2, Chapter 1, Coketown is again compared to a Fairy palace, although the atmosphere here is a terrifying one, reminiscent of a circle in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*:

The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. (p. 116)

Kate Flint notices other examples of ideological and formal impurity in the hybrid construction that make *Hard Times* peculiar in Dickens's canon. In the sections describing the childlike appearance of circus folks, she points out, Dickens resorts to the same expressions and rhetoric that he adopted in his *Household Words* article «On Strike» (devoted to the Preston strikes), although «on this occasion he was referring to the industrial workers» (p. 305). Coherently with this process of formal (and ideological) hybridization, the room of Mr. Gradgrind, a man who criticizes fables and fairy-tales, is ironically compared to Bluebeard's chamber because of «its abundance of blue books» (p. 98), namely of huge collections of statistics. By using such textual strategies, Dickens defies the expectations of those readers (and critics) who were looking for a traditional social-problem novel based on the model represented by Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), by Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), by Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845) or by Elizabeth Gaskell, whose *North and South* would be published soon after *Hard Times* in *Household Words* (from September 1854 to January 1855).

While drawing on a traditional association between circus life and crea-

tivity, Dickens's treatment of the circus people is particularly nuanced. Like that of the writer, the art of the circus depends, according to Efraim Sicher, «on skill as well as stratagem» (Sicher 2011, p. 321), and it represents an antithetical perspective to factual (Gradgrindian) thought. The Sleary circus identifies what Mikhail Bakhtin has defined as the carnivalesque element of culture. By way of its liberating use of body movement and its provocation of laughter, the circus questions the authority and the established order of factual thinking, as embodied by Gradgrind, Bounderby and Bitzer. Like the circus – through its momentary suspension of normative behaviours, of privileges, of rules and of the laws regulating the way humans (and animals) use and manage their bodies – the carnival is «the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal» (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10). By incarnating, moreover, a fanciful alternative to a Gradgrindian view of reality, the Sleary circus offers a model of family life and education that stands against Gradgrind's failing model.

In its depiction of the circus people *Hard Times* resorts to a grotesque filter that counterbalances Gradgrind's, Bounderby's and Bitzer's roles as factual characters. In the eyes of the narrator, the individuals working at Sleary's circus are culturally, bodily and linguistically alien, since they behave, move and speak in a non-normative way, using a peculiar linguistic code:

[Childers's] legs were very robust, but shorter than legs of good proportions should have been. His chest and back were as much too broad, as his legs were too short. He was dressed in a Newmarket coat and tight-fitting trousers; wore a shawl round his neck; smelt of lamp-oil, straw, orange-peel, horses' provender, and sawdust; and looked a most remarkable sort of Centaur, compounded of the stable and the playhouse. (Flint 1995, p. 35)

Both Mr. Childers and Master Kidderminster walked in a curious manner; with their legs wider apart than the general run of men, and with a very knowing assumption of being stiff in the knees. This walk was common to all the male members of Sleary's company, and was understood to express, that they were always on horseback. (p. 39)

Apart from their fanciful appearance, their alien nature and their peculiar job as entertainers, however, the circus folk also represents a close-knit community (or a social «symbol», according to Hillis Miller)⁷ if compared to Gradgrind's crumbling household:

7 As Hillis J. Miller argues, «In *Hard Times* Dickens dramatizes in strikingly symbolic terms the opposition between a soul-destroying relation to a utilitarian, industrial civilization [...] and the reciprocal interchange of love». Therefore «the circus here is still only a symbol of a good *society*, that is, of communion around a third thing, the 'act'» (Miller 1969, p. 226).

[The] various members of Sleary's company gradually gathered together from the upper regions, where they were quartered, and, from standing about, talking in low voices to one another and to Mr. Childers, gradually insinuated themselves and him into the room. 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. All the mothers could (and did) dance, upon the slack wire and the tight-rope, and perform rapid acts on bare-backed steeds [...]. Last of all appeared Mr. Sleary: a stout man as already mentioned, with one fixed eye, and one loose eye, a voice (if it can be called so) like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows, a flabby surface, and a muddled head which was never sober and never drunk. (p. 41)

The only character that does not fit well into the extended Sleary family is Signor Jupe, Sissy's father. A horse-trainer and circus performer, he decides to abandon his daughter because he feels unable to be of help to her in the future. As another complex fatherly figure, Signor Jupe becomes, along with Thomas Gradgrind, a biographical projection of Dickens's own difficulties in dealing with his family engagements, and in particular with his son Charley. Before and during the composition of *Hard Times*, Dickens's projects for Charley's future oscillated between idealistic hopes and Gradgrindian pragmatism.⁸ As a consequence, the difficult relationship in *Hard Times* between Gradgrind and his two children reflects Dickens's fatherly worries and dissatisfaction. This biographical similarity is strengthened by the fact that, in the novel, Tom is named after Thomas Gradgrind, just as Charley Dickens is named after his father Charles.

Dickens's decision not to assign a major role to Signor Jupe in the story, and his description of him as a father-artist who abandons his only daugh-

⁸ At first Dickens hoped that his son would take after him. For this reason, he sent him to Eton at the beginning of the 1850s. After two years, anyway, Dickens decided to move him because he was dissatisfied by Charley's poor progresses. Although Charley wanted to become an Army officer, Dickens - following a Gradgrindian factual attitude - suggested a career in business. But also this plan failed: after studying German in Leipzig, Charley's lack of inclination towards business convinced Dickens to desist. In a letter to Miss Coutts dated 14 January 1854 (a few months before *Hard Times* began to be serialized), Dickens blames his son for lassitude of character. Then, after a couple of failures in commercial training in Birmingham and London, Charley started working at Barings Bank at eighteen.

ter because of his failures as an acrobat, serves to counterbalance the novel's positive representation of the circus folk. Rather than a celebration of circus life, viewed as a symbol of creativity and artistic freedom, *Hard Times* offers a complicated and nuanced treatment of the role of artists.⁹ In this sense, the circus does not offer the sole escape from the gloomy Coketown reality (another one could be love, or mutual understanding). Dickens was evidently trying to mediate between artistic freedom and social cohesion (represented by the circus people) and Gradgrind's rationality.

At first, the dialogue between the circus people and Thomas Grandgrind (and Bounderby) appears an impossible attempt to communicate, as they seem to speak two different languages:

- «Kidderminster», said Mr. Childers, raising his voice, «stow that! - Sir» to Mr. Gradgrind, «I was addressing myself to you. You may or you may not be aware (for perhaps you have not been much in the audience), that Jupe has missed his tip very often, lately».
- «Has - what has he missed?» asked Mr. Gradgrind, glancing at the potent Bounderby for assistance.
- «Missed his tip».
- «Offered at the Garters four times last night, and never done 'em once», said Master Kidderminster. «Missed his tip at the banners, too, and was loose in his ponging».
- «Didn't do what he ought to do. Was short in his leaps and bad in his tumbling», Mr. Childers interpreted.
- «Oh!» said Mr. Gradgrind, «that is tip, is it?»
- «In a general way that's missing his tip», Mr. E.W.B. Childers answered.
- «Nine oils, Merrylegs, missing tips, garters, banners, and Ponging, eh!» ejaculated Bounderby, with his laugh of laughs. «Queer sort of company, too, for a man who has raised himself!». (p. 37)

The unintelligibility of their conversation - whose immediate effect on readers is comical - will have a darker (and finally tragic) implication for Gradgrind, who does not seem to understand the language spoken by his own children (Dickens repeatedly associates the circus folk with childhood and infancy).

By juxtaposing these opposite linguistic codes and idiolects in *Hard Times*, Dickens deliberately includes multiple voices. Each identifies a different ideologeme as an expression of the speech patterns and individual styles that stand for a set of social beliefs or, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, that represent the linguistic *Weltanschauung* of the various

9 As Alexander Welsh has noticed, «[for] all the overt propaganda on behalf of art, Dickens - so committed to earnestness and the work ethic - remains distrustful, or very cautious about artists» (Welsh 2000, p. 160).

characters/voices. While Gradgrind's language is «standardized» and «bookish» (Blanco 1985, pp. 22-23), the seducer James Harthouse resorts to a sophisticated and ornate style. Whereas Bounderby is usually explicit (to the point of being rude) and plain in his assertions – as is typical of his nature as a self-made man – Stephen Blackpool's way of speaking indicates his lack of education and his social status (he stands for factory workers):

«What», repeated Mr. Bounderby, folding his arms, «do you people, in a general way, complain of?»

Stephen looked at him with some little irresolution for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind.

«Sir, I were never good at showin o 't, though I ha had'n my share in feeling o 't. 'Deed we are in a muddle, sir. Look round town – so rich as 'tis – and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows, 'twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an' wheer we live, an' in what numbers, an' by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no nigher to ony dis'ant object – ceptin awlus, Death [...]».

«I'll tell you something towards it, at any rate,» returned Mr. Bounderby. «We will make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We'll indict the blackguards for felony, and get 'em shipped off to penal settlements».

Stephen gravely shook his head.

«Don't tell me we won't, man», said Mr. Bounderby, by this time blowing a hurricane, «because we will, I tell you!». (Flint 1995, pp. 152-153)

As for Slackbridge, he uses a «violent, biblical rhetoric» in another example of what Roger Fowler calls, in his Bakhtinian analysis of *Hard Times*, «the exceptional range of clearly differentiated voices» of the novel (Fowler 1989, pp. 82, 81). Moreover, in Slackbridge's language Dickens emphasizes the oratorical attitude and the theatricality – two aspects relevant to Dickens's increasing involvement in the dramatization of his own novels for public readings:

«Oh, my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh, my friends and fellow-countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism! Oh, my friends and fellow-sufferers, and fellow-workmen, and fellow-men! I tell you that the hour is come, when we must rally round one another as One united power, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labour of our hands, upon the strength of

our sinews, upon the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!». (Flint 1995, p. 141)

Along with diegetic incongruities, which represent the novel's limits and also its peculiarities, *Hard Times* is thus characterized by the presence of competing voices, each identifying a specific frame of mind. This makes it a dialogic text in which reality is not perceived from a single perspective and described monologically but reproduced and filtered through a heterogeneous, and aesthetically impure, assemblage of voices. These include those of the factual Gradgrind, the glacially Utilitarian Bitzer, the villainous and hypocritically plainspoken Bounderby, the linguistically impeded Sleary and the unfortunate Stephen Blackpool. The various styles and modes of speech of the different characters correspond to the multifaceted ideological messages that Dickens's novel provides. As a consequence, Bakhtin's definition of the polyphonic novel as a «phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice» may be applied to *Hard Times*: «[every] concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear» (Holquist 1981, pp. 261, 272).¹⁰ The plurality of voices in *Hard Times* not only dramatizes its ideological hybridity but also conveys the aesthetic impurity of this novel, since it clearly foregrounds its mixture of different literary forms and styles. As a consequence, this heterogeneous textual and narrative assemblage (which mirrors the novel's ideological complexity) turns *Hard Times* into a novel that oversteps the traditional categories of low-brow and high-brow literature.

An exemplary element in the novels's complex multivocality is represented by Sleary, whose speech impairment mirrors his philosophically eccentric approach to everyday matters. Sleary has certainly been at the centre of much critical discussion, because he is the chief embodiment of fancy and of the principle of amusement per se. In characterizing him, Dickens makes his peculiar lisp an appropriate addition to his non-normative and carnivalesque nature: his speeches become the perfect instruments for the vocal channelling of his ideas.

«People mutht be amuthed, Thquire, thomehow», continued Sleary, rendered more pury than ever, by so much talking; «they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning. Make the betht of uth; not the wurtht. I've got my living out of the horthe-riding all my life, I know; but I conthider that I lay down the philothophy of the thubject when I thay to you, Thquire, make the betht of uth: not the wurtht!»

¹⁰ In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin defines the polyphonic novel as a text marked by a «plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices», whose characters must be «not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse» (Emerson 1984, pp. 6-7).

The Sleary philosophy was propounded as they went downstairs and the fixed eye of Philosophy – and its rolling eye, too – soon lost the three figures and the basket in the darkness of the street. (Flint 1995, p. 47)¹¹

By the end of the novel, Sleary's «philothophy» will be successful, in contrast to the false clear-headedness of Grandgrind, who will realise the necessity of existential, experiential and ideological impurity, namely of mixing and mingling with people (and opinions) that are different from his. After having confessed the failure of her marriage and her sentimental interest in Harthouse, Louisa addresses her father in tones that are accusing and pleading at once: «All I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!» (p. 219). Louisa here begs her father to intervene in the resolution of the plot and to question his own values as an individual. In this sense, *Hard Times* resembles a 'conversion narrative', in particular as regards Gradgrind, who undergoes a gradual evolution and a change of heart in the course of the narration. In the final chapter of the novel Gradgrind is emblematically presented as a different individual:

Here was Mr. Gradgrind on the same day, and in the same hour, sitting thoughtful in his own room. How much of futurity did he see? Did he see himself, a white-haired decrepit man, bending his hitherto inflexible theories to appointed circumstances; making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity; and no longer trying to grind that Heavenly trio in his dusty little mills? (p. 296)

Unlike him, Signor Jupe and Sleary – traditionally considered the emblems of artistic creativity – do not change as individuals. In one of the most significant scenes of the novel, the factual Mr. Gradgrind is sitting in the middle of a circus ring, confronting his son Tom disguised as a clown. Metaphorically speaking, the necessity of impurity, in the sense of mixing opposite ideologemes such as fancy (the circus) and fact (Utilitarianism), offers a way out for the Gradgrind family:

¹¹ Robert L. Caserio interprets Sleary's lisp through a poststructuralist lens, underlining that what this character says is «complemented by his speech impediment. If language is envired by phenomena hard to name, if it is always hard times for nomination and definition, then language itself is Sleary's impediment. Since language only lisps the truths that matter, we must, as Sleary would say, take on 'trutht' the truths that evade our namings [...]. Fancy or imagination in the novel plays the role of trustworthy conductor or guide to the realms of articulation that articulateness obstructs» (Caserio 1986, p. 6).

Mr. Gradgrind sat down forlorn, on the Clown's performing chair in the middle of the ring. On one of the back benches, remote in the subdued light and the strangeness of the place, sat the villainous whelp, sulky to the last, whom he had the misery to call his son. (p. 283)

Fancy and inventiveness are the only instruments that can allow Gradgrind (and, metaliterarily speaking, Dickens the writer) to avoid becoming slave to facts, and to the laws of profit and gaining. Only through the necessary mediation of fancy, can Louisa's life (and Dickens's writing) be «saved by some other means». When Sleary gives his final lesson to Mr. Gradgrind just before the novel's end, readers have the impression that the circus manager is not just talking to Tom and Louisa's father, but to the writer of *Hard Times* as well:

«Thquire, thake handth, firht and latht! Don't be croth with uth poor vagabondth. People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You *mutht* have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the betht of uth; not the wurht!» (p. 292)

Differently from Bitzer, a firm disciple of the Utilitarian doctrine «for whom all human relations are market transactions», Gradgrind embodies Dickens's desire to become a «good Utilitarian agent», being able – as Martha Nussbaum writes – «to address productively the needs of those around him» (Nussbaum 1995, pp. 66-67). Through the story recounted in *Hard Times*, the narrator teaches Gradgrind, Dickens's factual alter ego, the value and importance of impurity.

The symbolic function fulfilled by Sleary and the Sleary circus, which incarnate Dickens's exaltation of fancy as a release from the constraints of facts, is confirmed by the author's omission of all financial facts in the circus narrative. Even though he was well-informed as a professional writer and entertainer about financial matters, Dickens avoids mentioning the way circus people earn money and survive the hard times recounted in the novel. Dickens purposely ignores, in a way, all those material aspects of circus life that he knew well (as testified by his interest in the Astley circus and in the famous clown Joseph Grimaldi). For this reason Paul Schlicke repeatedly underlines Dickens's tendency towards «idealization» in his treatment of the circus. The striking element about circus life in *Hard Times* «is not that Dickens included it, but that he virtually ignored its relevance to the increasingly dominant tendencies of popular entertainment». Dickens must have known that from the 1850s onwards the old tradition of popular entertainment, with which he was so familiar, was undergoing a profound change, and that the new circus economy reflected the way leisure was becoming a brand product regu-

lated by market laws. Yet «instead of including demonstrable evidence of the circus as an enterprise consonant with modern society, [Dickens] chose to focus on the desire for shared enjoyments of small groups of spectators and the desire to please which motivated the performers» (Schlicke 1985, p. 152).

The circus and the factory in *Hard Times* are therefore two facets of the same narrative project focused on a reflection about narrative representation and literary aesthetics. The fact that Dickens writes about factories without mentioning what the Coketown «hands» manufacture, and, at the same time, that he focuses on circus people from an extremely allusive perspective, reinforces the impression that *Hard Times* was not intended as a traditionally realistic text. The peculiar formal and ideological nature of this novel suggests that Dickens's view of realism and of realistic narration needs to be approached as an exceedingly nuanced aesthetic issue. In a letter to John Forster, Dickens comes to the point of admitting his partial inability to cope with the necessity of «stating the truth», adding that «[it] does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth. The exact truth must be there; but the merit or art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth. As to which thing in literature, it always seems to me that there is a world to be done» (Forster 1966, p. 279).

Through its polyphonic structure and its formal mixture of opposites, *Hard Times* interrogates the aesthetic principles of realism from within. The novel's hybridity and impurity stand as a material example of Dickens's experimental attitude in writing a novel that, though only superficially realistic, meditates on the ways in which reality can be experienced, and fictionally reproduced. It is indicative in this respect that, before the conclusion, Dickens decides to sacrifice – as it were, to kill – Stephen Blackpool, one of the few representatives – along with Slackbridge – of the factory people he met in person during his brief visit in Preston. Even the name of the character, as usually happens in Dickens's *oeuvre*, has an ironic undertone. Unconvincing, flat, stereotyped, and doomed to an untimely death, Stephen is basically a waste and a blotch of ink, a 'black pool'.

As proof of the impossibility of offering a final solution to such a tale (and such a novel), Dickens leaves the epilogue of *Hard Times* in the hands of his readers. By handing responsibility to his audience on the moral meaning of his story Dickens not only replicates the conventions of Victorian sermons but, in some respects, may be also seen as anticipating the twentieth-century reader-response theories developed by Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, according to which readers are not passive consumers of art but active agents in the construction of meaning:

Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter

bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.
(Flint 1995, p. 298)

The destiny of Louisa, Sissy, Gradgrind and of the other characters of *Hard Times* is finally left in the hands of the reading public. In fact, the ambiguous conclusion of Dickens's novel suggests something more about his ambivalent attitude towards the economic theories of the Victorian age. If, as Regenia Gagnier points out, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a transition from the consideration of people as producers (advocated, among others, by Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx) to that of people as consumers (Gagnier 2000, pp. 2-4), Dickens's choice to leave the last decision to his reading public is appropriate. It indicates even that he was ahead of his times in sensing that literature, rather than being simply produced, was destined to be consumed just like any manufactured good of the Coketown mills. Dickens's aesthetically impure narration of the hard times of factory workers and family relations thus becomes a parable of the uneven relationship between fact and consumer taste in his own art. And, as readers know, Dickens's own art was destined for reproduction in innumerable formats (e-books, movies, audiobooks, digital sources etc.) and for endless consumption by future generations.

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