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The Human Scale: A Note on Hard Times

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the three articles is in inverse proportion to their “seriousness” gives us cause to be grateful that Chapman and Hall turned down Thackeray’s bid for the editorship of their magazine. No quantity of historical articles could make up for the loss of *Vanity Fair*.

GEOFFREY C. STOKES

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#### THE HUMAN SCALE: A NOTE ON *Hard Times*

THE ENERGIES released in *Hard Times* are prodigious. They are seen, heard and felt more perhaps than in any other novel of the nineteenth century. There are the violent sounds of smashing presses, tearing bursts of steam, hissing and shrieking of demented machines. These demonic energies seem to be industrial capitalism incarnate, but there is very little sense of their connection to production, marketing, and selling. *Hard Times* has virtually no economic texture; money and labor are disengaged completely from those processes of transaction which, as we see in Balzac, are at the heart of realism. It is as wrong to wonder what Stephen Blackpool shapes on his loom as it is to theorize what Christian does for a living in the City of Destruction. Dickens’s intention seems like that of Bunyan, but Blake also writes of those bound to

. . . laborious workmanship,  
Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom  
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,  
In ignorance to view a small portion & think that All.

Coketown is not so much a place as a metaphor, not so much a setting as it is a projection of consciousness. It is a place in which two opposites—“the work of God and the work of man”—are engaged in a persuasively tragic agon.

The issue is complicated by the truism that very few minds besides George Eliot had the capacity to handle religion in fiction. Dickens wished to oppose religious and secular values, but he took his usual route of making the latter explicitly social and the former vaguely symbolic. In terms of character *Hard Times* tries to express goodness as sensibility; in terms of theme it expresses this as fertility; in terms of language it tries with what is often desperate intensity to crystallize moral meanings into allusions. These categories are by no means separable—there is little need to insist that

the less categorical the criticism the more chance of encountering the work on the terms it appears to offer.

“Murdering the Innocents” is a chapter-heading that does not need much archeology; Matthew 2 is the place referred to. The Utilitarian morality of this chapter is not so much a philosophical as an existential nullity. The chapter begins the theme of the inability to sustain life, a theme close to being the book itself. Bitzer’s symbolic albinism has many counterparts in fiction. It is the hump, the cloven foot, the signature of something “deficient in the natural,” to twist a Dickensian phrase. Bitzer is the antithesis of the “dark” character of Victorian and Romantic fiction; that figure who, like Heathcliff, shows in the power of his darkness the beauty of his mortality. In the immediate context Bitzer, who “would bleed white” if opened, is contrasted to the 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.” The contrast is (by Dickens’s standards) systematic—by the end of the book Sissy proves to be the only character capable of creating life. *Hard Times* ends, no matter how sentimentally, on the promise of her fertility. The phrases “learned in childish lore,” “innocent and pretty fancy” intimate not only her power to love but a return to the humanity destroyed by that denatured Herod, Thomas Gradgrind. As for Bitzer, his fate on the human scale at least is intimated: “Why look at me, ma’am! *I* don’t want a wife and family. Why should they?” It is not that a wife and children are hostages to fortune; the point is that they are the signs of life.

Bitzer and Mrs. Sparsit only represent a world dominated by the unwed and unconsummated. Of Louisa’s marriage we know a great deal, except what goes on, or fails to go on, in her bedroom. Her affair with Harthouse is never consummated, which is a moral victory but a symbolic defeat. Dickens is careful to point out that Louisa will be neither wife nor mother; she will be forever dead to the “childhood of the body” and the “blessing and happiness” of procreation. Harthouse does not create, in the sense that Sidney Carton may be said to create, a fulfillment. His is simply a great refusal, a recantation of life. He experiences, in fact, a kind of impotence: “a secret sense of having failed.” Dickens is attacking a subject of immense difficulty, one hidden by conventions or entirely ignored. In talking about consummation, sexual and spiritual, he uses allusions of varying rarification. He invokes a special

terminology—the inertia of Harthouse and the endlessly evoked iciness of Louisa are contrasted to “those subtle essences of humanity” in Sissy Jupe. For her, Dickens uses a “natural” vocabulary centering on color, tears, softness and innocence. The stagnation of Mrs. Sparsit and the hopes of Rachel are given form (which is desirable) and distance (which is not) by the allusions leading to them. It seems roundabout to find in Genesis 30 the sense about Rachel that Dickens is trying to convey by her name and her predicament: “give me children, or else I die.” On the other hand circumlocution is sometimes best, as when Dickens’s devious descriptions of Mrs. Sparsit’s isolation, stagnation, and generally buzzard-like quality give more fully than is otherwise possible an appreciation of flesh turned to ashes without ever having been flame.

Character in *Hard Times* connotes two things: what has been done to man in the flesh, and what he is capable of doing to sustain life. In the case of Stephen Blackpool quotation will be as helpful as it is pleasurable:

In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man’s purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it . . . lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age.

Blackpool’s condition has been sculptured into material form; the city is the man. Both have been twisted out of shape by the tremendous counterpressures exerted by “Nature” and the “unnatural.” Whenever the city of Coketown is described this agon makes its presence felt. We have seen it before in the savage red and black appearance of the city, which intimates its moral quality; we will see it again when the “crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism” that is Stephen’s loom is described as being of an order that will “consign Nature to oblivion.” Unnatural sterility has its emotional counterpart in the blocked-up “heart”

of the labyrinth; its moral counterpart in the stunted and crooked shapes; its existential counterpart in the likeness to lower forms of life.

It is perhaps a fault that Dickens refuses to be explicit. He forces us to seek character in externalization, and he forces us to conceive of it within such rigorous limits. But he is in a way able to say more this way. Nature is “bricked out” of the heart of this place, and the metaphor works its own realization. The sealed trap is Blackpool’s life and his fate; its first incarnation is the “citadel” of the city; the next the room he shares as a prison with his wife; the factory itself; the last is the hole in which he dies. The tremendous energies released—“the lights sprung up again, and the Express whirled in full sight of the Fairy Palace over the arches near: little felt amid the jarring of the machinery, and scarcely heard above its crash and rattle”—only actuate the trap. Within is a silence, the contemplation of sterility: Stephen thinking “of the waste of the best part of his life”; Louisa “doubting, misbelieving, despising, regretting,” and knowing too “that life would soon go by.”

*Hard Times* develops its own symbolic zoology in order to show at what level life in Coketown is maintained. The motif of the city is the snake—“interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled”—while that of the factory is the screaming mad elephant of the machine. Dickens himself writes of “an idea in the nature of an allegorical fancy” when he comes to the vision of Mrs. Sparsit, and the figure may, perhaps, be extrapolated. The city is a jungle of men “shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death” and the factory is a dangerous “forest of looms.” What are the forms of life in this “allegorical fancy”? Mankind is likened to “the lower creatures of the seashore.” Individual men have the signature of their character formed in their flesh. There is Bounderby, under the aspect of the toad, “a man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up.” His own sense of himself is that of a maggot in a nut. Tom is self-evidently the whelp; Bitzer some nameless form of fungus. Children are first seen in the classroom as “busy insects” and later in life “like ants or beetles” as they leave the burrow for the hive. The highest Mrs. Sparsit ascends on the Chain of Being is the

carrion hawk; the lowest that fungoid fence "in a mouldy lane" covered with "a stagnant verdure." That is at least the author's impression of "her general exterior." Distortion and freakishness operate throughout; there is the microcephalic Mr. Sparsit whose insectile torso is supported by "two long slim props" and the mysterious Lady Scadgers, immobile, silent, threateningly carnivorous.

The issues are neither of wages nor hours, but of the human scale. The orator Slackbridge is a Bergsonian mechanism giving out "the froth and fume he had in him." He generates tremendous passions without experiencing them. On the outside is the gesture and shout; on the inside almost nothing is going on. Harthouse is the least human of Dickens's seducers because he is unable to experience seduction: when he is touched it is "in the cavity where his heart should have been." Perhaps the clearest of the allegories of invalidated humanity is that of Stephen's wife. In her the conception of flesh without spirit has its culmination:

A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her.

She is beyond the insincerity of voice and gesture, and, with perfect appropriateness, she makes the "hoarse sounds" and "stupid clawing" of the subhuman condition. There is only one step beyond this existence; when we finally view "the figure of a poor, crushed, human creature," we have gone from qualitative to quantitative nothingness.

*Hard Times* is most intelligible when considered as an allegory. The alternative to what Chesterton called the horror of order is the creative chaos of the circus, and the apotheosis of Rachel, who, "a glory shining round her head," is raised to the status of the ultrahuman by the power of love. In the former is all the sensate and in the latter all the spiritual value that Dickens can state. They fail to contain their meanings, but this is a problem not only of the author but of the century. That they are split into flesh and spirit is profoundly revelatory.

The circus is the heaven of the flesh, and if Sleary and the others

are not precisely of "the angel breed" they are a kind of mass figure of *sprezzatura*:

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.

This is the description not only of a traveling circus but of a human plenum. There is no need to overindulge in critical myth-making; it might only be suggested that the prevailing distortions of the Coketown world of flesh are confronted by these marvels of human geometry. The circus is almost too self-evidently what Santayana called the "carnival." The overflow of bodily presence has in it what he called "quick senses and miscellaneous sympathies"; the prevailing non-Utilitarian character of carnival proves that "life is free play fundamentally and would like to be free play altogether." Real existence, Santayana concludes, must be radically comic; if Dickens anticipates and elaborates this it is in the sense of understanding how little existence can be confined to "meaning." Perhaps the great value of carnival is stated by Mr. Sleary, who speaks better than he knows: "we're throng in the Fairy bith-nith and the Nurthery dodge." There are worse ends for the secular life.

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#### PLATONIC ALLEGORY IN POE'S "ELEONORA"

A CLOSE examination of Poe's romance "Eleonora" suggests that it is an allegory about the role of love in man's life and that this allegory was constructed upon a Platonic model.

The key to the love allegory lies in the words of the spirit of the dead Eleonora whose voice the Narrator believes he hears at the conclusion of the story. She announces that "the Spirit of