

Fettered Fancy in "Hard Times"

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FETTERED FANCY IN *HARD TIMES*

BY DAVID SONSTROEM

IN 1948 F. R. Leavis threw down the gauntlet, proclaiming *Hard Times*, hitherto "passed over as a very minor thing," to be a "masterpiece."¹ Dickens' achievement, according to Leavis, was the production of "a richly poetic art of the word. He doesn't write 'poetic prose'; he writes with a poetic force of evocation, registering with the responsiveness of a genius of verbal expression what he so sharply sees and feels. In fact, by texture, imaginative mode, symbolic method, and the resulting concentration, *Hard Times* affects us as belonging with formally poetic works" (p. 346). His study has drawn vigorous counterstatements critical of the book, the most telling retort being that its characters are "creatures of stick": John Holloway finds neither Louisa nor her father "a true embodiment of the standpoint—or predicament—which is their allotted rôle" (p. 364). W. W. Watt describes Louisa as speaking "fustian."² David M. Hirsch notes, "so feeble-minded do the 'good' characters become at times that it is ultimately impossible to take them at all seriously" (p. 371). As early as 1912 George Bernard Shaw had described Sissy Jupe as speaking "'like a book' in the most intolerable sense of the words" (p. 337). In short, Leavis pointed to the novel's success as poetry—its symbolic or imagistic structure—whereas the other critics point to the novel's failure as drama—its failure to produce believable, attractive characters who can act out the meanings entrusted to them.

If one avoids the polar atmosphere of the controversy, it is entirely possible to share both views of the book. I find *Hard Times* to be a truly impressive achievement of meaningful symbolic structuring, but weak dramatically, because the personalities of certain characters do not support their full symbolic charge. The key to both aspects of the novel lies in the cause that it champions: Fancy. Through an examination of the novel's concept of Fancy—its meanings and employments—I hope to show precisely why *Hard Times* succeeds and fails as it does. My purpose is not really to serve as critical mediator (the critical conflict merely calls attention to the area of my consideration) but rather to get at the heart of the book and the somewhat conflicting impulses that moved Dickens as he wrote it.

The first sentence of *Hard Times* discloses the villain of the piece: Facts—narrow, dry statistics and definitions imperiously presented as a sufficient, and the only sufficient, explanation of the world and all living things. Not so obvious is the beleaguered alternative that Dickens champions. The predominant word for it is Fancy, but what he means by it is decidedly sweeping and variable, and therefore unclear. Dickens himself must have felt the need to explain his meaning, for he frequently links the word with synonyms: Thomas Gradgrind describes Josiah Bounderby as not "pretending to anything fanciful, fantastic, or (I am using synonymous terms) sentimental" (p. 75). Elsewhere Fancy is linked with "romance,"³ "wonder" (cf. pp. 5 and 37), "nonsense" (p. 14), and "tastes, aspirations, and affections" (p. 77). Implicitly synonymous terms are "imaginative graces and delights" (p. 226), "childish lore" (p. 226), "Faith, Hope and Charity" (p. 225), and "Heart" (p. 170).

Two areas of meaning emerge from this cluster. The one is imaginative play: mental play unhindered by the strictures of reality. The other is fellow feeling: compassion, sentiment. That imaginative play and fellow feeling are quite different activities seems sufficiently obvious (it is easy to imagine a dull-witted bleeding heart or a thick-skinned dreamer of dreams). It is equally obvious that the two activities might be joined to form the attractive human faculty that we commonly call the sympathetic imagination—the faculty that permits one human being to enter into the mind and circumstances of another. But I will postpone consideration of Dickens' relationship between imaginative play and fellow feeling in order to treat separately the relationship of each to their common enemy, Fact. For Dickens employs each as a weapon in its own defense.

¹ In *The Great Tradition* (London, 1948), pp. 227–248. Quoted here from *Hard Times: An Authoritative Text: Backgrounds, Sources, and Contemporary Reactions: Criticism*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, Norton Critical Eds. (New York, 1966), p. 339. References to the novel, as well as incompletely elaborated page references to background material and critical articles, will be to this helpful volume.

² *Hard Times: For These Times*, intro. William W. Watt, Rinehart Eds. (New York, 1958), p. xxxii.

³ P. 271. From "Frauds on the Fairies," *Household Words*, 1 Oct. 1853.

The first kind of Fancy—imaginative play—is ably and almost exclusively represented by the zestful and defiantly imaginative narrative personality, who uses Fancy against Fact in several direct and very effective ways.

First, the narrator's *jeux d'esprit* are living proof that Fancy does exist, that it can be great fun, and that it contributes to a personality that is more charming, lively, and powerful than that of Gradgrind, the straw man of Fact. There is evident enjoyment in conceiving the description of Gradgrind as "a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge" (p. 2), or of Bounderby as "a commercial wonder more admirable than Venus, who had risen out of the mud instead of the sea" (pp. 186–187). Some of the joy is transferred to the reader, who accords the narrator the victory in the battle of personalities.

Second, the narrator rides circles of Fancy around the Gradgrinds of the world to make them dizzy. Machines become elephants; smoke becomes a snake; a factory becomes a fairy palace; a face, a medallion. No tabular mentality can achieve control in such a verbal environment, but the narrator and we, who are used to such talk (we equestrians, who can keep our balance in a living, changing world), can appreciate the imaginative spin, and the discomfiting of the enemy.

Third, he shows that Fancy is not only more enjoyable and mobile than Gradgrind's Fact, but also more applicable; it comes closer to tracing the twists and complexities of the world as it is, and consequently is more accurate in representing reality. M'Choakumchild, we are told, "had taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics" (p. 6); the narrator revivifies a dead metaphor, even as he mocks the kind of mind that petrified it in the first place. He sees something that M'Choakumchild would not. Later he tells us that Gradgrind was "looking about for a suitable opportunity of making an arithmetical figure in Parliament" (p. 7); the fanciful phrase, beyond Gradgrind's tabular comprehension, succinctly expresses both his aspiration and his devotion to scientific method, as well as the ridicule the narrator heaps upon his pretensions. Such language expresses truths elusive of graphs, yet it rivals them in conciseness and precision.

A fourth employment of image-play against Fact deserves extensive elaboration, and will form the main body of this study. Dickens uses imagery to show that the world he presents is

interrelated, with each part resembling and depending upon every other part. The curse of the Gradgrind system is that it separates and alienates, achieving a theoretical order at the expense of actual order. The disjointed nature of the Gradgrind family; the many lonely pits, both figurative and literal, into which various characters fall; the ostracism of Stephen; the metaphor in the name Slackbridge; and the fact that there is not one true marriage portrayed in the whole book, are expressions of Dickens' sense of the pervasive separation among human beings. In contemporary pronouncements outside the novel, Dickens revealed the same fear that "the System" was imposing estrangement upon man. He condemned a labor dispute for "the gulf of separation it hourly deepens between those whose interests must be understood to be identical or must be destroyed."⁴ Elsewhere he wished for "the fusion of different classes, without confusion . . . the bringing together of employers and employed . . . the creating of a better common understanding among those whose interests are identical, who depend upon each other, and who can never be in unnatural antagonism without deplorable results."⁵ By explicitly encouraging the reader to draw literary analogies, Dickens reveals his belief that the exercise of Fancy could prove very useful in apprehending and encouraging true union: "Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds?" (p. 19). Literary analogies like this one could be used to assert the interrelationship, the interdependence, that exists in the world. A tissue of imaginative links could give the reader a sense of that harmonious world which Dickens feared Facts were destroying. Of course, by composing a novel that uses imagery to suggest analogy and, ultimately, to achieve unity, he does what every other novelist does. The noteworthiness lies in his treating imaginative play as an object as well as a vehicle for consideration, and in employing it in its own defense.

The governing distinction in the imagery of *Hard Times* is that between life and lifelessness. The primary symbols of life are flowers and horses. Flowers represent the passive aspects of life: its tenderness, delicacy, and helplessness. In the first scene, in the schoolroom, flowers are presented as objects that crush and wither when

⁴ P. 298. From "On Strike," *Household Words*, 11 Feb. 1854.

⁵ P. 272. Speech in Birmingham Town Hall, 30 Dec. 1853.

trampled on with heavy boots. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that the three teachers of Fact are stamping out the flower-like fancies of little children (who are themselves described in plant imagery) even as the teachers preach against stepping upon figurative flowers. The connotation of vulnerability is reinforced throughout the book: Mr. M'Choakumchild (as we have seen) had "taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics"; Mr. Bounderby tears up a flower garden to plant cabbages; Tom, Jr., moodily tears roses apart even as he contributes to the destruction of the lives of his sister and Stephen; and his father is described as "annihilating the flowers of existence" (p. 169).

The active side of life is represented by horses, which connote vitality, spiritedness, and movement. The circus people, who look and act as if they are "always on horseback" (p. 25), are repeatedly described as engaged in energetic action: they "perform rapid acts" (p. 27), and, in Sleary's words, "they're accuthomed to be quick in their movementh" (p. 29). Sissy Jupe, in saying of her father that "he belongs to the horse-riding" (p. 2), quite accurately presents him as engaged in an activity rather than a profession. The nobility of the horse image is enhanced through mythic suggestion: One circus performer, Mr. Childers, is described as a centaur, and the whole troupe lives at the Pegasus's Arms, in "the upper regions" (p. 27). The horse image represents a force to be reckoned with, a force worthy to oppose the powers of Fact and all that it represents. Although Bounderby claims to have "eaten in his youth at least three horses" (p. 100), and has brought under his control "so many hundred horse Steam Power" (p. 53), it is the horse that triumphs ultimately. Bitzer is obviously deluded in thinking that he has captured the true beast in his definition of a horse at the beginning of the novel, but the thing itself turns the tables by capturing Bitzer at the end of the book.

Lesser forms of life are nicely defined by measurement against the horse image. Merry-legs, Signor Jupe's performing dog, symbolizes him, in a way: The dog is clever and quick on his feet, like all the circus animals, but he is smaller than they. Like Signor Jupe, he does not quite measure up. Tom describes himself as a donkey and a mule, and the narrator, following the lead of Harthouse, calls him "the whelp." In his humiliating disguise, Tom's hands look "like the hands of a monkey" (p. 216). And, beast that he is, he is engaged in biting straw. The machinery of Coketown is described as "melancholy mad

elephants" (p. 85), more powerful, but less spirited than horses. In a delightful image, Mrs. Sparsit netting—a form of needlework involving looping some of the threads round the lady's shoe—is described as "easily ambling along" (p. 55), "in a side-saddle attitude, with one foot in a cotton stirrup" (p. 54). She is poised beautifully between her own idea of herself (a lady fair on horseback) and her actual occupation (cloth-making for Bounderby, like everyone else in Coketown). Comparison with the livelier and less dignified bareback riders of the circus is also invited. Another extension of the animal imagery is Gradgrind's conception of the circus people as "noisy insects" (p. 9), and Bounderby's reference to his workmen as "pests of the earth" (p. 111). Both expressions are grossly unfair to the people they are supposed to describe, and so serve to mark the imperceptiveness toward others of the two men of Fact. With a greater show of justice the narrator likens Bitzer to an insect (p. 4), and Bounderby calls himself a maggot (p. 129).

A third major image indicative of life is the sun. In his provocative essay, Leavis calls our attention to a descriptive passage in which "Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in, for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the corner of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end. But, whereas the girl was 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 boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed" (p. 3). What might appear, in the absence of sunlight, to be darkness in Sissy is here apprehended as "deeper and more lustrous colour." What seems to be light according to the crepuscular illumination of Gradgrindism is shown up by the sunbeam as unhealthy paleness, bloodless white. Ironically, Bitzer will become a "light porter" who carries no light. That Bitzer stands only to lose from affiliation with the source and symbol of life reveals his contrariety to it. The imagery shows him to be a negative force in the book, whereas it shows Mrs. Gradgrind, for example, in a passage reminiscent of this one, to be a cipher: Mrs. Gradgrind "looked . . . like an indifferently executed transparency of a small female figure, without enough light behind it" (p. 12). Neither she nor the sun affects the other in any significant way.

Elsewhere Dickens pursues the imagery in a very conventional manner. When Stephen unwillingly returns to his home, now occupied by

his besotted wife, Rachael's face unexpectedly "shone in upon the midnight of his mind" (p. 63). Later Rachael herself wanted "no brighter light to shine on their sorrowful talk" (p. 194) than Sissy. Sissy is a sun to Louisa, also: "the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other" (p. 172). Conversely, Coketown's "blur of soot and smoke," satanically "aspiring to the vault of Heaven," makes the city "impervious to the sun's rays" (p. 84).

Fire as a symbol for life may be considered an extension of the sun imagery. Whereas the sun represents life in its purest, most elemental form, fire represents life—liveliness—as it manifests itself in actual and imperfect people. Consequently it can be quenched (Louisa is forever watching fires dying out). And it can be a force for evil as well as for good: Louisa's resentment of Sissy's pity "smouldered within her like an unwholesome fire" (p. 170), and when her scheming brother misleads Stephen, "his breath fell like a flame of fire on Stephen's ear, it was so hot" (p. 123); but when Sissy obtains rescuers to pull Stephen from the shaft, "their spirits were on fire like hers" (p. 203). The fires in the furnaces of Coketown present us with a larger image, representing the passions, and sometimes specifically the resentments, of its inhabitants. Of course fire is anathema to the forces of Fact: there is "a row of fire-buckets" (p. 86) in Bounderby's bank. But more often than not, these men are incapable of seeing it; they do not know that it is there. We first meet Bounderby with his back to the hearth, obliviously enjoying its warmth, and blocking off its benefits from others. Gradgrind looks directly at the fire, and yet does not understand why young Tom and Louisa would wish to see a circus. As Louisa stares into the hearth, her more corrupt brother tells her, "You seem to find more to look at in it than ever I could find" (p. 40). Gradgrind's blindness to the fires of life is best revealed in the passage in which he conveys Bounderby's marriage proposal to his daughter:

"Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works, Louisa?"

"There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!" she answered, turning quickly.

"Of course I know that, Louisa. I do not see the application of the remark." To do him justice he did not, at all. (p. 76)

His blindness to the analogy is due to his blindness to passionate life. Bounderby's blindness is put in similar terms, but more humorously. As

the suspicious Mrs. Sparsit strains her eyes to observe Louisa and Mr. Harthouse strolling in the garden, Bounderby asks, "What's the matter, ma'am? . . . you don't see a Fire, do you?" (p. 144).

Smoke is an image that links images of life with those of lifelessness. An unpleasant derivative of fire, it is even farther removed from the sun, and is symbolically an enemy of the life represented by fire. It is repeatedly linked with the serpent—an obnoxious form of life and the foe of life at its prelapsarian best. Smoke is dirty, and it covers everything; it turns Coketown into "the painted face of a savage" (p. 17)—an image that links industrial progress with the jungle, and prepares us for Tom (that triumph of the System) in blackface. The serpentine coils of smoke that enfold Coketown symbolize disorder, the "muddle" of which Stephen complains. Smoke produces a narcotic effect, which blinds its victims and prevents them from acting in a prudent manner. We see this effect not only in the misguided factory workers, but also in "the whelp," his wits addled by the heady smoke of Harthouse's rich tobacco.

We find opposed to the images of life those of destruction, and usually violent destruction. In reading *Hard Times* one senses a pervasive violence which the action of the book cannot completely account for—which can be explained only in terms of the book's imagery. The names of the antagonists point the way to Dickens' intentions: grind in Gradgrind; bound in Bounderby (Dickens' working plans for *Hard Times* show that Bounderby was first to be called Mr. Bound, until Dickens hit upon the happier elongation; see p. 234); choke in M'Choakumchild; nick (and Old Nick) in Nickits; bite (and horse's bit) in Bitzer. But we hardly need the names to appreciate the destructiveness of Fact and its practitioners: Gradgrind is a "cannon loaded to the muzzle" (p. 2); the "third gentleman" was a "professed pugilist" who was "certain to knock the wind out of common sense" (p. 4); Bounderby is frequently a destructive wind, or a windbag at the breaking point (cf. the fire in Louisa, which threatens to flare out); M'Choakumchild will either "kill outright the robber Fancy" or "only maim him and distort him" (p. 6); Mrs. Gradgrind, frequently "stunned" by "collision" with some Fact, habitually "dies away"; Tom would like to blow up all Facts with "a thousand barrels of gunpowder" (p. 40); the loom at which Stephen works is a "crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism" (p. 53), and Stephen has within

himself a similar violence that he comes close to directing against his wife; Mrs. Sparsit, in carrying the news to Mr. Bounderby of Louisa's passionate flight, "exploded the combustibles with which she was charged, and blew up" (p. 180). Chapters are entitled "Gunpowder" and "Explosion." The reader soon realizes that the flowers of Fancy must find root in soil no more nourishing than gunpowder.

Destruction includes self-destruction. Even as Gradgrind chokes off Fancy in the little children, he is himself throttled by his own necktie, "trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp" (p. 1). Bounderby has a self-destructive streak too, although his has more to do with turbulence than constriction: "One might have fancied," with regard to the scantiness of his hair, that "he had talked it off; and that what was left, all standing up in disorder, was in that condition from being constantly blown about by his windy boastfulness" (p. 11). We see self-destructiveness even in the more restive votaries of Fact: after being kissed by Bounderby, Louisa rubs the spot on her cheek until it is red. Tom cautions her that she will rub a hole in her face, to which she replies, "You may cut the piece out with your penknife if you like" (p. 16). Later we see Tom engaged in similar behavior, "chafing his face on his coat-sleeve, as if to mortify his flesh, and have it in unison with his spirit" (p. 39).

Specific images of lifelessness that find frequent expression, besides those connected with gunpowder and fisticuffs, are the following: (1) Bounderby's windiness, which is not to be confused with the airy qualities of the circus folk. (2) Starvation: related to the Coketowners, who live in material poverty, is Louisa, who is described several times as being imaginatively and emotionally starved. (3) The inorganic in general, which we see in the machinery of Coketown, the "metallic laugh" of Bounderby, the inflexible divorce laws, and the equally inflexible concepts of Gradgrind. (4) The pit: Old Hell Shaft, into which Stephen falls; the ditch out of which Bounderby describes himself as arising; the well into which Mrs. Gradgrind seems to have sunk as she approaches death; and the "dark pit of shame and ruin" (p. 154) that lies at the bottom of the staircase erected by Mrs. Sparsit for Louisa's expected moral lapse. All the pits owe their existence to Fact and all that the word entails: In effecting his rise in the world, Bounderby has thoughtlessly dug the pit for Stephen. Just as thoughtlessly, Gradgrind has prepared the "dark pit" for his daughter.

And in his digging around in the "National dustbin" of Parliament, Gradgrind is only preparing further pitfalls for the innocent and unwary.

The greatest confrontation of the two classes of imagery—life and lifelessness—occurs in the first two chapters, the schoolroom scene. Here we find age versus youth—an opposition that is picked up elsewhere in the book, as we realize from the names "Kidderminster" and "Childers," the pervasive "peterpantheism" (to borrow W. W. Watt's word⁶) among the circus characters, and the precipitate maturity or old age among the characters associated with Fact. We also find the organic opposed to the inorganic—more specifically, human beings described sometimes as plants, sometimes as vessels. Gradgrind himself is appropriately described principally in terms of the latter category, terms of enclosure. His "eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves"; his head is a "warehouse." Everything about him is hard and square, like the "square wall" of his forehead. (Incidentally, his squareness forms a geometric opposition to the round world of the circus.) The students are also described in similar terms—they are "little vessels," "little pitchers," and "jars"—but the expressions are ridiculously inappropriate when applied to them, and obviously represent the terms in which Gradgrind thinks of them: creatures with no value or bent of their now, mere containers. The alternative imagery for them, plants, is supplied in the exemplary flowers that must not appear on wallpaper; in the divisional title, "Sowing"; and in Gradgrind's own injunction, "Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." A measure of Gradgrind's wrong-headedness is his seeing Facts, not children, as plants, and children as the pots to put them in. The wide disparity between the two images applied to children goes far in making Gradgrind look ridiculous.

The book's confrontation of imagery is beautifully concentrated in the two paper horses that we find in this scene. The one is the representation of a horse with which the more natural of the pupils would paper a room. The other is the definition of a horse supplied by Bitzer but emanating originally from Gradgrind. The one is no less a paper horse than the other, and the inability of the three adults to appreciate this fact dramatizes their foolishness. (The point that they are unable to distinguish

⁶ Watt, p. xxx.

between an object and a depiction of the object is reiterated when the third gentleman, in his conceptual blindness, professes that he would not step on a representation of flowers for fear of destroying them, whereas Sissy realizes that they would be "pictures" only and therefore would not "crush and wither.") The great difference between the two paper horses lies in their relationship to life. Sissy would be *adding* a semblance of life to an otherwise lifeless wall (the narrator does much the same thing in his treating prosaic objects, people, and events in more exotic terms: elephants, snakes, fairy palaces, a griffin, Morgiana, Blue Beard, the Sultan, and so forth), whereas Gradgrind, in preferring the definition to the real thing, is *denying* life that actually exists.

Thus does Dickens build bridges of imagery within each of two domains: that of life and Fancy, and that of lifelessness and Fact. The gulf between them is a real one, and members of one domain cannot really touch upon the other. Sissy is curiously unaffected by school or Stone Lodge. Peeping Tom and Louisa can only glimpse the circus horses' hoofs, and Mrs. Sparsit sees little more in her spying upon Louisa and Harthouse. Bounderby is as disruptive a presence in the Pegasus's Arms as Stephen is at Bounderby's home. But the gulf, though real enough, is not a necessary one. Even as Dickens presents it he throws bridges of imagery across it, to indicate the fundamental relationship between the two domains.

For example, people on both sides are ever rising and falling. We remember the pits, wells, and shafts mentioned earlier. The black ladder of the undertaker symbolizes a descent that characters on both sides of the gulf must undertake. Bounderby has risen in life, like the bag of hot air that he is, but the circus people, those denizens of the upper regions, also spend much of their time aloft. Kidderminster suggests the similarity in referring to Bounderby as being "on the Tight-Jeff" (p. 24). The narrator also suggests the similarity in calling Bounderby a circus balloon (p. 11). Louisa and Tom "abase" themselves to watch the circus; so Gradgrind commands them to "rise." Yet he himself must plunge "into the howling ocean of tabular statements, which no diver ever got to any depth in and came up sane" (p. 38). An important feature of this imagery is that no fixed meaning or value is implied by up or down. When Bounderby remarks, "Queer sort of company . . . for a man who has raised himself," Kidderminster retorts, "Lower yourself, then. . . . Oh

Lord! if you've raised yourself so high as all that comes to, let yourself down a bit" (p. 24)—and we see this as good advice. The ambivalence is just one more way in which Dickens upsets an oversimplified system to further the cause of Fancy. Louisa descends Mrs. Sparsit's staircase only to find herself in a saner, "higher" situation than before. Mrs. Sparsit, in making her last exit from Bounderby, "swept disdainfully past him, and ascended the staircase" (p. 225), although it is really a lower, more miserable life she goes to. The sharp separation between men of Fact and Children of Fancy is softened by the recognition that both are caught up in the common vicissitudes of life.

A more direct relationship between the two domains shows the circus to be another business, not unlike Bounderby's factory. Bounderby and Sleary, the two owners, are alike in being rotund and in being described in wind imagery, the chief difference in the imagery being that Sleary is a "broken old pair of bellows" (p. 27, italics mine). On several occasions Sleary refers to the "fairy-business" (italics mine). He is no more apt to confuse representations of fairies with real fairies than Sissy is apt to confuse real and paper horses. A responsible position in the circus must be prepared for with an apprenticeship, just like its Coketown counterpart. Both the circus workers and the mill workers deal with "elephants" of one kind or another. And both classes of workers can be injured by their elephants: Rachael's sister was killed by a machine, and Emma Gordon, an informal foster mother to Sissy, lost her husband in "a heavy back-fall off a Elephant" (p. 213). The circus folk, the practitioners of Fancy, have their hard times as surely as the victims of Fact. The real difference between factory and circus is not that between labor and idleness, as Bounderby would have it, but rather that between self-seeking, exploiting management and kindly, paternalistic management. The difference is an accidental one, and shows factory and circus to be more closely related than one might at first expect.

Conversely, the domain of Fact partakes heavily of Fancy; it is the Fact people who are actually the shameless fictionalizers. Harthouse's older brother made his reputation in Parliament with his cow-and-cap fantasy, a patently false, although humorous, reconstruction of a disastrous railroad accident, an account that his hardheaded fellow M.P.'s were willing to accept as truth simply because it reinforced their prejudices. Although Bounderby's highly imaginative account of his sorry youth is pure

fiction, he manages to persuade everyone, including himself, of its truth. Mrs. Sparsit's conception of the meaning that the world attaches to "Scadgers" and "Powler" is equally fanciful. And Dickens is ever referring to "prevalent fictions" among the mill owners of Coketown: industries, like fragile chinaware, easily ruined; workers desirous of turtle soup, to be eaten with a gold spoon; dissatisfaction in a worker a sign of utter criminality. We see that the domain of Fancy holds no exclusive rights to Fancy. The basic distinction would seem to be rather that the Sissys and Slearys, in accepting both Fact and Fancy, are able to tell them apart, whereas the no-nonsense Gradgrinds and Bounderbys, in refusing to recognize Fancy, engage in it unawares.⁷ Their greatest Fancy is that they do not entertain any. But again, our chief response to the realization that the proponents of Fact are at least as fanciful as anyone else is to see the gulf between the two basic domains of the book as diminished.

My intent in the previous pages has been to convey in detail a sense of the elaborate imaginative webbing or bridging that Dickens applied to the book—to show that Dickens took great pains to make *Hard Times* a unified imaginative whole. His doing so was no mere matter of course, but a necessity, for the tactics of the book demanded that he answer the Gradgrindian world view with the narrator's world view: a conception of imaginative links showing all parts of the world to be interrelated and answerable to one another. A primary activity of the narrative personality, then, is imaginative play—just one of the two meanings that Dickens attaches to the word Fancy.

The second meaning that Dickens attaches to Fancy, it will be remembered, is fellow feeling, "an untiring readiness to help and pity one another" (p. 27). The book is full of scenes of sympathy: Rachael "alone appeared to have compassion on a degraded, drunken wretch of her own sex" (p. 226). When Sissy learns of her abandonment, Josephine Sleary kneels "down on the floor to nurse her, and to weep over her" (p. 28). Louisa tells Tom, when she suspects him of foul play, "You may be certain that I will be compassionate and true to you" (p. 145), although she later must ask, "Where are the sentiments of my heart?" (p. 164). Troubled Louisa pleads with Sissy, "Forgive me, pity me, help me! Have compassion on my great need, and let me lay this head of mine upon a loving heart!" To which Sissy replies, "O lay it

here! Lay it here, my dear" (p. 172). Even Gradgrind comes to plead for fellow feeling from Bitzer—"Pity us!"—although his search for heart is not so successful as his daughter's. Bitzer's reply to Gradgrind's question, "have you a heart?" namely, "The circulation, Sir . . . couldn't be carried on without one" (p. 217), reveals through the divergent meanings that can be applied to the same word the hopeless difference between the sensibility of Fact and that of Fancy. The sensibilities are no closer to touching than the meanings.

Like imaginative play, fellow feeling has a force and strength of its own, which is directed against Fact. Dickens' intentions are manifest in a note from his working plans, or "Mems.," for *Hard Times*: "Carry on Sissy—Power of affection" (p. 235). We see this power in her ingenuous jousting with her schoolmasters, where headless heart is pitted against heartless head: "I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong, too" (p. 44). The two great confrontations between Fact and Feeling are that between Bitzer and the largehearted circus folk, and that between Sissy (speaking in Louisa's behalf) and Mr. Harthouse, in which she, supported only by "my love for her, and her love for me" (p. 176), completely routs the man-of-the-world and sends him packing. The military motif that is carried throughout the conversation underlines the victory of heart over heartlessness. The happy and fruitful marriage forecast for Sissy at the end of the book shows the ultimate might of the values that she represents.

In these several ways Dickens pits both imaginative play and fellow feeling against Fact. If we are not entirely satisfied with the victory of these allies, the reason may be that the two components of Fancy are not always in league, and in fact work somewhat at cross-purposes. It is time to examine their relationship to each other.

That they do not always go together well is indicated by the narrator's curious paucity of compassion. For all his imagination, he displays remarkably little imaginative sympathy. In fact, as E. P. Whipple observes, "Boulderby

⁷ What are we to make of Sissy's nine oils, symbolizing her expectation that her father will return? Is it a knowing, willful self-delusion, an achieved credulity, manufactured for the sake of the health of her psyche? Or is Dickens showing her to be fooling herself in the same straightforward way that the Fact people fool themselves?

becomes a seeming character by being looked at and individualized from the point of view of imaginative antipathy" (p. 325). Whipple goes on to criticize Dickens for his failure of sympathy toward Bounderby, and I would apply his remarks even more generally throughout the book:

When a fictional character is conceived, he shall be not only externally represented but internally known. There is no authorized, no accredited way of exhibiting character but this, that the dramatist or novelist shall enter into the soul of the personage represented, shall sympathize with him sufficiently to know him, and shall represent his passions, prejudices, and opinions as springing from some central will and individuality. This sympathy is consistent with the utmost hatred of the person described; but characterization becomes satire the moment that antipathy supersedes insight and the satirist berates the exterior manifestations of an individuality whose interior life he has not diligently explored and interpreted.

(pp. 325–326)

It should be said in Dickens' behalf that Whipple is too absolute and categorical. He touches upon a characteristic practice that Dickens puts to good use in many of his novels, including this one. Dickens' flat characters and his mode of handling them are rich fare indeed, and count generally as one of his strengths. But Whipple's remarks, applied as they are to *Hard Times*, are fair insofar as they point up an inconsistency within this book: A narrator with a mind and heart closed to certain characters is strangely out of place in a novel that pretends to champion fellow feeling.

The narrator extends his antipathy toward others besides Bounderby. He (and through him, Stephen) displays not the first sign of fellow feeling for Stephen's drunkard wife. Such expressions as "brutish instinct," "debauched features," "greedy hand," and "insensate grasp" (p. 67) show that the narrator is as anxious as Stephen to keep her at a great distance. Stephen's past efforts to abide with her do not entirely atone for his present revulsion; and the kindness of Rachael (who loses at least as much as Stephen because of her) shows up both Stephen and the narrator as callous in their evasive treatment of the wife. (The argument for divorce is oddly out of place in a work celebrating the compassionate bridging of interpersonal gulfs.) Thus would the narrator *limit* the reader's fellow feeling, by extending to Stephen alone the pity that rightfully applies to both husband and wife. Another telltale sign of antipathy is the narrator's customarily referring

to Tom, Jr., as "the whelp." It is a trick of his to highlight the inappropriateness of a designation uttered by one character about another by repeating the offensive expression in his own person (e.g., "young rabble," "Jupe," "Miss Gradgrind"). When he does the same with "the whelp" (p. 100) we take it as another criticism of Harthouse's inability to appreciate what a thing is a man. But then the narrator takes the expression as his own, applying it again and again to Tom. Thus does the narrator, apparently inadvertently, come to share an unsympathetic outlook with Harthouse. Other characters whose plights do not receive their due of sympathy from the narrator are Mrs. Sparsit, Bitzer, and (except, perhaps, at her death) Mrs. Gradgrind. The "sneer of great disdain" (p. 106) on the face of the despised Slackbridge is unexpectedly reflected on his own.

Another, converse indication of cross-purposes between imagination and compassion is the lack of imaginative play on the part of the virtuous, compassionate characters: Stephen, Rachael, Louisa, the circus folk, and especially Sissy Jupe. They show up very badly against the villainous characters: Bounderby, with his magnificent imaginative reconstruction of his past, and with such expressions as, "I didn't four seven one. Not if I knew it" (p. 139) and "if she takes it in the fainting way, I'll have the skin off her nose, at all events!" (p. 79); Mrs. Sparsit, with her staircase and her view of herself as the Bank Fairy; and even young Tom, with his "jolly old—Jaundiced Jail" (p. 39). These characters make the virtuous ones seem very dull indeed. Although the depiction of a wheezy lisp or colorful circus argot may save Dickens from the charge of dullness, there is no imagination required of the circus characters themselves to produce such talk; so they still emerge with dull personalities. They do not produce imaginative leaps and turns to match their physical ones. Stephen's living over a toy shop may be supposed to carry a symbolic charge, but his situation does not reverberate in his personality. Sissy, whose father specialized in "chaste Shakspearean quips and retorts," and—a superb image for the exercise of fantasy—in "forming a fountain of solid iron in mid-air" (p. 9), whose mother was a dancer, and whose childhood reading consisted of highly imaginative literature, turns out to be pedestrian enough to have been the daughter of Gradgrind. In fact, she has as little imagination as any character in the novel. I think that what is lacking in the virtuous characters—what the

critics, quoted in my first paragraph, are objecting to—can be narrowed down precisely to lack of Fancy, in the first sense of the word: lack of imaginative play. Dickens denies his characters one aspect of the very quality that they represent. Their personalities lack one half of their symbolic meaning.

Thus the bifurcation of the two components of Fancy is consistently preserved: The narrator has all the imagination and none of the sentiment; the Sissy Jupes have all the sentiment and none of the imagination. The distinction between imaginative play and fellow feeling, which was educed at the beginning of this essay from Dickens' synonyms for Fancy, is seen to hold, even in implicit ways, throughout the novel.

Yet Dickens would seem to be desirous of having fantasy and sentiment come together into one harmonious activity or state of being. This intention is made clear in his treating the two concepts as synonymous—in his regarding them both as Fancy. It is also made clear, as we have seen, in his ascribing both to the virtuous characters of the book, imaginative play being ascribed to them symbolically, through the narrator's imagery, and fellow feeling, dramatically, through the characters' behavior.

In practice *Hard Times* relates the concepts to each other, but the connection is not really a synonymous or equivalent one. Their true relationship is implicit in Louisa's words to her father upon her returning to Stone Lodge after her near seduction: "Father, if you had known . . . that there lingered in my breast, sensibilities, affections, weaknesses capable of being cherished into strength . . . would you have robbed me . . . of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me? . . . Yet, father, if I had been . . . free . . . to exercise my fancy somewhat . . . I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving" (p. 165). Both concepts are referred to: "sensibilities, affections" on the one hand, "the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief" (that is to say, childhood fantasies, imaginative play) on the other. The function of the latter concept (referred to directly here as "fancy") is to provide a "refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me." In other words, the proper function of imaginative play is to provide a protective atmosphere of delusion, within which a child's fellow feeling can grow to strength without being blighted by the

"sordid and bad" aspects of reality. Thus is fantasy to foster compassion.

The relationship between the two components of Dickens' Fancy is elaborated further in an earlier passage: as Louisa returns to Stone Lodge and her dying mother,

Neither . . . did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood—its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world, wherein it were better for all the children of Adam that they should oftener sun themselves, simple and trustful, and not worldly-wise—what had she to do with these? (pp. 150-151)

The "dreams" and "airy fables" of fantasy rise to "a great Charity in the heart"; imagination leads to sentiment, and the relationship of the previously quoted passage is reasserted. What is especially revealing about the present passage is its likening the "airy fables" of imagination to a Garden of Eden, cut off from "the world beyond," "the stony ways of this world," and the "worldly-wise." Imagination is seen to be a refuge characterized by profound innocence; "little children" and "pure hands" enforce this connotation. We remember the aura of childhood that surrounds the virtuous characters of the novel—the "wonderful kind of innocence" (p. 213) that surrounds Sleary, for example.

Innocence tends to display a self-protective offishness, which is clearly observable in a few telling gestures in the novel. One is Sissy in full flight from Bitzer. Sensing her natural enemy, she runs away from him. Sissy must remain inviolably innocent; she cannot know Bitzer, even mentally or imaginatively. So she flees. Another such gesture is that of Rachael, in answer to Stephen's attempt to express his darker feelings about his wife:

" . . . I thowt, 'How can I say what I might ha' done to myseln, or her, or both!'"

She put her two hands on his mouth, with a face of terror, to stop him from saying more. (p. 68)

Rachael can permit herself to know only the gentle side of Stephen's nature. Knowledge of his other side would compromise her innocence, so she instinctively silences him. Finally, there is Sissy's visit to Harthouse; the innocent enters the lair of the man-of-the-world: "She was not

afraid of him, or in any way disconcerted; she seemed to have her mind entirely preoccupied with the occasion of her visit, and to have substituted that consideration for herself" (p. 175). I would suggest that it is not herself that she is ignoring here but Harthouse, the embodiment of worldliness. In fact the success of her visit comes about precisely because she never really notices, understands, or is touched by him—because "her mind looked over and beyond him" (p. 176): "if she had concealed the least doubt or irresolution, or had harboured for the best purpose any reserve or pretence; if she had shown, or felt, the lightest trace of any sensitiveness to his ridicule or his astonishment, or any remonstrance he might offer; he would have carried it against her at this point. But he could as easily have changed a clear sky by looking at it in surprise, as affect her" (p. 178). His every statement "had no effect on Sissy" (p. 178). Her success against him is seen to depend on her absolute lack of "sensitiveness" toward him. Again, to know him would be to be polluted by him, but she resists his charm, remaining as impersonal and distant as the sky itself.⁸

And thus we come to the heart of the problem of *Hard Times*: Dickens' apparent failure to realize that he has allotted two, contrary roles to the imagination, because he is championing two somewhat conflicting causes: fellow feeling and innocence. On the one hand (as we have seen), through the narrator's imaginative play—his complex pattern of imagistic analogies—Dickens develops a model of a highly interrelated world, to contradict the world of separation and alienation that the Gradgrind system was imposing upon man. On the other hand, through self-delusive imaginative play, the book's innocent characters are able to insulate themselves from "what is sordid and bad" in "the world beyond." The function of the imagination is now to build bridges, now to build buffers. Dickens seems uncertain whether to work toward a coherent, interdependent world, or toward a scattering of islands of innocence. His uncertainty is due to his cross-purposes as to whether one's heart should go out in fellow feeling for others, or whether it should harden itself in

self-protection. Is "the world beyond" to be truly known, or avoided? In his double advocacy of fellow feeling and innocence, Dickens does not seem to realize that either can be achieved only at some expense to the other.

The result of Dickens' cross-purposes is a series of compromises. What he gives on one hand he takes away on the other. True imaginative sympathy—imaginative play working in tandem with fellow feeling—is nowhere to be found in the novel. But we do find unimaginative sympathy—blind compassion—on the part of the virtuous characters, and imaginative antipathy on the part of the narrator. Each is given one quality that permits him to reach out toward others, and another that permits him to fend off those of evil nature. In addition, the innocents are permitted to know only other innocents, or to be touched only by what is congenial to innocence in mixed characters, like Louisa and Stephen. The more observant and adult narrator yet holds his ground within the "garden," denying all sympathy with the "worldly-wise," perhaps out of nostalgia, perhaps the better to protect the innocents. Fancy is decidedly fettered in one way or the other. Because the forces of Fancy are so confused, there is no clear, attractive alternative to the Facts of Gradgrindism. The self-confidence of the narrator is felt to be largely bluster, and the victory over Facts, a paper one. But the greatest defeat in the book is suffered by the elaborately and extensively interrelated imaginative world view that the narrator posits opposite the tabular one of Gradgrind. Dickens himself betrayed it because it showed the things and people of the world to touch in a way and to an extent that he, protective of innocence, was not ready to accept.

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⁸ Of course I am not the first to call attention to Dickens' preoccupation with innocence. See, e.g., Audrey Lucas, "Some Dickens Women," *YR*, xxix (1940), 706-728; and Leonard F. Manheim, "Florás and Doras: The Women in Dickens' Novels," *Texas Stud. in Lit. and Lang.*, vii (1965), 181-200.