The 'Soft Time' of Dickens' *Hard Times**

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'Go and be something *ological* directly...'
(I, iv, 61, italics added)

Hard Times is a novel of pretty hard corners. Even from its first page, Thomas Gradgrind, a lecturer much like the author of this essay, is described as a man whose mouth is "hard set" and whose hair was "inflexible, dry, dictatorial," atop a bald head "all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie" (I, i,47). The "monotonous vault of the schoolroom" (I, i, 47), one of many real and metaphoric ceilings in the novel, perfectly expresses the hard limitations of the container for assorted receptive vessels of learning that it shapes. No wonder that Tom Gradgrind refers to the Grandgrind home, appropriately named Stone Lodge, as a "Jaundiced Jail," the "expressive name for the parental roof" (I, viii, 91). The "facts" which Grandgrind worships are always "hard facts," "crusty," as opposed to "soft" fancy, wonder, sensibility, or social bonding.

Similarly, Josiah Bounderby has use only for "hard-headed, solid-fisted" (I, iv, 60) companions and employees. As all readers quickly realize, memorization, rote learning, and the susceptibility to intractable definition are all part of the hardness of *Hard Times*. Gradgrind is always well, perhaps too well, prepared, and habitually symbolically underlines (N.B., a way of making the textually soft very hard) the dubious points he wishes to make by extending an arm rigidly outward. As with the noisy machinery that is the predominant

sound of Coketown, even the mere name *Gradgrind*, with its repetitive dentally hard consonants, seems but one more "grinder" who would level all individuation by taking it down to an easily reproducible (because compartmentalized) *aggregate*. The schoolmaster is hence of a piece with the hardness of *Hard Times*, creating a corollary to the more obvious potential victims of the "iron hand of despotism" (II, iv, 169), evoked by Slackbridge, the stony labor union leader. The "hardness" of *Hard Times* persists as image, ideology, gesture, and even the way the novel strikes the ear; for the reader no less than the working classes, who have had collectively, a "hard life" (I, x, 103) even as their masters deploy statistical tools, the "stiff-legged compasses" (III, i, 245) dedicated to inflexible productive mapping.

Early education is apparently to be made of a piece with other forms of hard regimentation in the interests of more efficient production and measurement. I want to commence this short essay with a rebellion of sorts, the rebellion of another kind of teaching. For what I want to do is to engage my readers and listeners rather than regarding you as empty vessels to be filled (requiring a hard container), with knowledge that is not *hard* at all. For the hard-fist, the disciplining (even academically "harassing") teacher, the industrial hard-hearted master all demand something *soft*, even pliable with which to work—otherwise educational or industrial production does not *work*. Hence, my search for softness commences, though at the outset I must confess that, like all searches for softness, pliability, sympathy, the fanciful that resists firm definition, I do not know where this quest will ultimately lead us. In the typical Victorian novel, the quest traditionally leads us to the "softness" of the marital pillow, the recuperative marriage by which all the previous "hard times" of the partners (in overcoming resistance) presumably comes to an end in the soft blessings that accompany marriage.

And hence, my resistance to the "hardness" of Dickens' *Hard Times*, propos-

es an alternative reading of a novel where in fact "hardness" (of facts, production, retentive capacity, repetitive reproduction, measurement, labor discipline, marital and financial "arrangements") appears to be so incessantly persecuted in favor of the "softness" of play, spontaneity, unmediated affect, and what we might called the sensitivity of childish pleasures represented in Sleary's Circus. When one set of values or practices is incessantly persecuted—in the way in which Gradgrind's schoolroom appears to be mocked and thereby persecuted by Dickens' literary critics—the sensitive critic begins to wonder about narrative overkill.[1] And yet, so many critics whose work has been valued for their sensitive readings seem to have, like Stephen Blackpool, followed their dreams down a very large "black hole" from which successive readers (or their rescuers) must work very hard to make them see, not the light of the transcendent stars, but the light of common day. Unlike Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Stephen Blackpool's mortal fall down the deep hole of a coal pit (which in some way "represents" his name, implying perhaps a nominal determination) does not lead either to self-knowledge or sociality—or alternatively, the possibility of community. Even rebellion against the "hard facts" or the figurative "iron law of wages," an analogous "iron law" of educational requirements, or the tough laws proscribing easy divorce can never produce a "soft landing," even if Sleary's Circus tent is nearby.

Transcendence and everyday practice are often regarded as being at odds, but the opposition that I am hoping to illuminate, is a kind of ideological "trap." Yet, it is a "trap" for which Dickens has prepared the sensitive reader. As part of this preparation, *Hard Times* is a novel whose three sections Dickens entitled, respectively, "Sowing," "Reaping," and "Garnering." Such compartmentalized divisions, like those implicit within the passage of seasons or the diurnal rhythms of agriculture, would lead us to believe in a mythical dimension to Dickens' novel, a rhythm by which a cyclical notion of seasonal time is con-

ferred. Yet, no such recurrent cycle is visible anywhere else in a novel, totally devoid of agricultural, or for that matter, any other form of *growth, maturity,* and *harvest* in a Coketown environment where industrial pollution obscures the sun. Those might be appropriate sections or "phases" within a Hardy novel (like say, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*), but seem so inapplicable to Coketown as to pose the possibility of an irony, neglected by those like Phillip Collins, who would interpret the novel as a profound social critique of education. It is rather more aptly described as a critical critique of a certain kind of criticism, but one that remains largely obscured.

From one perspective, my embrace of the peculiar "softness" of *Hard Times* might be regarded as a deconstruction of the familiar structuralist paradigm, illustrated below. In the "soft" argument that follows I opt for neither party to the putative oppositional values, but to a "third way," in which a symbolic "operator" (but not an ideological "operative") serves as a kind of vanishing mediator, even as he reveals a recurrent sameness in difference. *Hard Times* seems to be easily, too easily upon reflection, divided into oppositional paradigms involving, enforced regulated tasks on the one hand, and "free play," even "gaming," on the other. But then Dickens, at least at the outset of *Hard Times*, invites us, as if we were Stephen Blackpool, to fall into this trap. So for the nonce, let us follow him. Students asked to give an anatomically correct dictionary definition of a "horse" in the schoolroom, when once free of its confines, sneak a peak at the carnivalesque horse, equally trained, prancing in the ring at Sleary's Circus. With its attendant clowns, the circus horses lend spontaneous delight to children escaping the pressures of a schoolmaster's demands to define *genus*. Or at least that would be J. Hillis Miller's argument, in his comparison of Sleary's horses with those of Picasso's *Les Saltimbanques* sequence, as Dickens' gesture to the spontaneity of free play in opposition to the despotism of definition.[2] But before criticizing the critics for their too easy

compartmentalization of values, the attuned reader should notice how Dickens sets his trap for us schoolchildren no less than Gradgrind does for his charges, who as may be expected, resemble us students in every way. Like critics, Gradgrind's charges are subtly charged with obedience to a *constitutive* logic dependent upon essences:

> The little Gradgrinds had cabinets in various departments of science too. They had a little concho*logical* cabinet, and a little metal*lurgical* cabinet, and a little minera*logical* cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labeled, and the bits of stone and ore looked as though they might have been broken from the present substances by their tremendously *hard* instruments, their own names; and, to paraphrase the idle legend of Peter Piper, who had never found his way into *their* nursery, If the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at more than this, what was it for good gracious goodness sake, that the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at !
>
> (I, iii, 55, italics added)

As an aged "little Gradgrind" I posit my own very *hard* critical cabinet, like Gradgrind's pedagogical cabinet, intended "to be a model" (I, iii, 53) for Dickens' novel whose complexity has been traditionally reduced by critics attracted to an ideology critical of the submissions demanded by industrial models of educational and social reproduction. The ease with which children's play and enforced academic or industrial work can be placed in structural opposition is as tempting as the United Aggregate Tribunal (II, iv 171), Stephen Blackpool's labor union, would divide the world into masters and laborers, missing the possibility of a third term. Is it possible that F.R. Leavis, Hillis Miller, and Garrett Stewart have an anlaogous "axe to grind ?"[3] As with Slackbridge's union, which Stephen Blackpool resists unconditionally following, am I resisting joining a kind of critic's union that insofar as we have an interest in "play" (or the hermeneutic circle, its metaphysically equivalent cir-

cus "ring") we fail to look closely at alternative orders of experience that Dickens' novel takes great care to elaborate ? Models are always easily reproduced, but those resistant to modeling enjoy a kind of immunity.

Mr. M'Choakumchild "and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles" (I, ii, 52-53), and had worked his way into the "Privy Council's Schedule B" (I, ii, 53), designed to achieve a uniformity in pedagogical practice. Industrial strength uniformity—even among ideological critics—is a feature of Grandgrind's academy, but in order to detect the weaknesses of this privileging of "models" (I, iii, 53), we must propose one and then deconstruct it. Let us, then, in a kind of homage to this penchant for organization, reproduce a facsimile of this "administered" organizational cabinet for knowledge as Schedules A and B for the apparent oppositional values and practices of Dickens' *Hard Times*. There is a temptation to participate in this schematization because the novel even organizationally alternates between "fact" and "fancy." In the chart below, these putative antagonists represent respectively, the values and practices of Coketown and those of Sleary's Circus, the latter of which would appear, given Tom and Louisa's flight to its precincts, to represent an alternative to the hard discipline of one more of Dickens' notorious classrooms, at least in Schedule "A." But Schedule "B" suggests that practices, spaces, and values that initially seemed antagonistic, upon closer examination, may well have an analogous relationship. Are those of a structuralist critical persuasion, prone to explorations of the binary, in fact engaged in placing a kind of critical grid that defines a *priori* imaginary oppositions that only a deconstructive reading can reveal as a kind of disappearing *Imaginary* ?

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(SCHEDULE "A"—ANTAGONISTIC PRACTICES)

COKETOWN	SLEARY'S CIRCUS
1 urban	1 suburban
2 hard-edged/dictatorial	2 soft/consensual
3 facts	3 fancy
4 productive work	4 play or recreation
6 disjunctive (competitive)	5 wasting time (idle)
5 statistically-measured time	6 conjunctive (cooperative)
7 fixed facilities and investment	7 transient performers
8 repetitive acts	8 spontaneous performance
9 boundless energy	9 recurrent fatigue
10 importance of name/reputation	10 assumed (stage) names

(SCHEDULE "B"—SHARED PRACTICES)

1 vaulted ceilings (of schoolroom and bank)	1 vaulted ceiling of a tent
2 industrial production depends upon the efficient use of time/horsepower	2 acrobatic production depends on timing and coordination with "horsepower"
3 machine oil is the smell of Coketown	3 "nine oils" used for acrobats' "renewal"
4 "break" children who define "horse" incorrectly	4 "breaks" horses for child riders

5 industrial pollution obscures identity	5 cosmetic "make-up" obscures identity
6 abandoned children (to education)	6 abandoned child (to education)
7 hidden past crime (Bounderby)	7 hides the present crime (Tom)
8 homeless (multiple homes of the rich)	8 homeless (only a portable tent)
9 *ad hoc* family of defined interests	9 *ad hoc* family of performers
10 return of Bounderby's unacknowledged mother	10 return of unacknowledged dog, "Merrylegs"

* * *

Admittedly, on first reading there does seem to be an apparently oppositional relationship between the lived life of the administered school room and the fanciful performances under the tent, to which Tom and Louisa escape and befriend Sissy Jupe. The hard hand and hard talk (and heavy-handed punishment) seems to contrast, even in its vocal register from the life of the circus, which seems elided as in "Schleary's Thircuth," in every sense dedicated to what a phonetics scholar would call recurrent phonetic elision. Circus speech is verbally slurred and blurred, softened rather than hard; one must listen carefully. Analogously, the circus master has one steady and another floating, unfocussed eye that moves about so that his gaze seems to wander, not unlike the itinerant life of the circus company. Instead of the hard knobs on his head, he exhibits the *Kappa*- like head that appears to the viewer as a mere soft depression in the top of his skull, a place where lint or perspiration might gather or be collected. The mental faculties are, or appear to be, as "squeezed" as the speech faculty, or for that matter, the circus's meager prospects beneath a sagging tent, as opposed to the domed ceiling of the schoolroom. Sleary slips and slides across all defining categories.

The circus is an institution which moves from village to village with an itinerant performance schedule that initially appears incidental, if not *ad hoc*, and whose fixed assets are confined to itinerant performers, or as Sissy Jupe describes her own father late in the novel, a "stroller" (III, ii, 256). That is to say, that physically, existentially, and linguistically the circus master, Sleary seems of a piece with his circus: he cannot be fixed in space, time, body, or language and is hence highly resistant to easy reproduction. In every way, he appears resistant to the industrialized emphasis upon reproductive *models* that dominate education, life, and social practices (including love) in urban Coketown.[4] And it is precisely this "modeling" that draws literary as well as ideological critics, so successfully in fact, that my similar model seems of a piece with Dickens'.

And yet, the closer we read, the more Gradgrind's academy seems to *resemble* Sleary's circus. Both Coketown and its suburban counterpart consume a lot of oil, be it industrial machinery on the one hand, or the bodies of aging performers like Sissy's father, consuming the therapeutic Nine Oils (a brand name among the circus athletes) to lubricate aching joints. If the river flowing through Coketown is dyed a metallic hew as a consequence of industrial pollution, so the performers in the circus exhibit artificially made-up and painted bodies that render them as grotesques, as equally alienated from an individuated "self" as are Coketown laborers and students. If the blast furnaces of Coketown manufacturers give the town the appearance "of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage" (I, v, 65), so the performers beneath Sleary's large tent are bedecked in the costumes of a similar fairyland, "made up with curls, wreath, wings, white bismuth, and carmine" (I, vi, 72). What I am suggesting now is that the two environments—the work of education and the so-called "play" of the carnivalesque—are really not so dissimilar as they originally appear. In Schedule "B" the emergent similarities that are repressed

in the oppositional structural/ideological paradigms of so much formative criticism dedicated to *Hard Times* are graphically displayed, in such a way as to reveal an opposition to the oppositions suggested in Schedule "A, the "model schedule" as it were, of generations of critics of the novel.

Some profound questions—probably best left to the rhetorical register at this point—should arise insofar as one "model" seems not only contradictory to the other, but somehow existing within its stated components. The "deadly statistical clock" (I, xv, 133) which measures socially productive and educational time may be a different representation of time than the "missed tips" (I, vi, 73), the split-second timing of the leaping or balancing acrobat, but the machinery of industry and body are wearing down with age and repetition, producing the characteristic fatigue of which Louisa Gradgrind, indifferent to her father's suggestion that she marry Bounderby, replies, "What does it matter" (I, xv, 131)? The elimination of fancy in education having removed both a child's belief (instrumental to romance) and fears, Louisa neither accepts nor declines her father's invitation, preferring merely to "let it be." And yet, as we shall see, "let it be" comes to be articulated (prior to Heidegger's *Da-sein*, "being there") within another character's *being* in *Hard Times*; notably, that of Harthouse.

Like the contemporary "whatever" of adolescent discourse in western countries, this is a profound, and I would argue, seemingly *metaphysical indifference*, articulating the impossibility of choice or the inability to make one's choices matter. So that what initially appears as the fatigue of excessive work, Louisa's considerate, "you are tired" (II, viii, 216) to a brother having returned from the bank or the incredible fatigue of a Stephen Blackpool worn from both repetitive work and nightly vigilance over his drunken Rachel, or the aching limbs of aging acrobats and clowns, is raised to an altogether different dimension. This is a more general anomie that cannot be classified as either

work or play, but a strategic disinterest in fact, fancy, desire, or even the passage of time which elsewhere in the novel is represented as pressuring both life and efficient production cycles as the ever present threat of a "wanton waste of time" (I, vi, 79). This *metaphysical indifference* is more akin to *boredom*, neither spending nor wasting, but a kind of *loading* of time in a novel where precise timing has been privileged. This boredom is detachable from both statistical and productive time.[5]

Harthouse would seem, at least initially, not to belong in a novel whose characters seem driven by someone else's *program*. His resistance to the programmatic is initially narrated in generic terms that, I would argue, come to constitute his ontology. The reader has no sooner encountered him than he is told that Harthouse is a member of a "wonderful hybrid race" (II, ii, 158), a description that opens an incredible range of possibilities and potentialities, including an attraction to the Coketown that has fallen under the sway of a kind of "drug store" (as in "drugstore cowboy") utilitarianism. The belief in the efficacy of statistical analysis, however, is revealed as one more fashion, the "latest thing" as it were, in the life of a leisure class drifter.

> Now, this gentleman had a younger brother of still better appearance than himself, who had tried life as a Coronet of Dragoons and found it a *bore*; and had afterwards tried it in the train of an English minister abroad and found it a *bore*; and then strolled to Jerusalem and got *bored* there; and then had gone yachting about the world, and *got bored* everywhere.
>
> (II, ii, 158, italics added)

Life among the "hard Fact fellows" (II, ii, 158), a euphuism for the kind of Bentham-inspired statistical analysis embraced by Grandgrind and Coketown manufacturers and bankers, is thus but one more "adventure" for an ontological "stroller" that, save for the costumes and amazing acrobatic feats would, were he of the appropriate class, perhaps have joined Sleary's Circus. But his

recurrent boredom is a kind of perpetual softness in *Hard Times*. For he has always had too much rather than too little time to answer or to produce the manufactured goods and the hard facts on which the future life of Coketown depends, despite his casual perusal of the requisite Blue Books in preparation for his newest venture, a secretary to the newly elected M.P. for Coketown, Gradgrind, who needs what would now be called a man dedicated to statistical research.

Harthouse is remarkable in a number of ways that endear him to a certain kind of critic. When told that he is ignorant of the ways of Coketown and should pay particular heed to the advice of the locals and local knowledge, the newly appointed parliamentary *factotum* (in every sense of the word !) claims that he "would be charmed" (II, ii, 159). When queried about his beliefs, Harthouse will only say to his interlocutor.

> 'I assure you that I am entirely and completely of your way of thinking. On conviction.' (II, ii, 159)

This is, to be sure, the compliance of the parasite, ready to at least temporarily "go along to get along." Although he has cynically found "it all to be very worthless" (II, ii, 162), the new associate of the new M.P. for Coketown, Gradgrind, has a peculiar relationship to the new rage for statistical analysis in the interests of enhanced educational and industrial productivity. As he informs the Grandgrind who has engaged him (only on the recommendation of others), he has in every sense a derivative and dependent existence:

> 'I am quite as much attached to it, *as if* I believed it. I am quite ready to go in for it, to the same extent *as if* I believed it. And what more could I possibly do, *if* I did believe it.'
>
> (II, ii, 163, italics added)

To be sure, Harthouse is precisely what Louisa Grandgrind calls him, "a singular politician" (II, ii, 163) but his singularity resides in the ease with which he agrees with any opinion on offer, thereby escaping the rejection that afflicts recalcitrant or slow-learning students, singular labor union members like Stephen Blackpool, or aging acrobats who miss their "tips," thereby necessitating replacement by younger bodies. In other words, Harthouse's singularity consists in his plural or dual nature, the ability of the chameleon or parasite to disguise subversion by miming the values and practices of a host so that his views seem indistinguishable from the dominant ideology. He is a man of *as if*, and thereby advances the imaginative life, albeit under cover. This duality (not unlike the image projected by a mirror) is acknowledged in *Hard Times* by the narrator who observes Harthouse in terms of his uniqueness, "there never before was seen on earth such a wonderful *hybrid race* as was thus produced" (II, ii, 158, italics added), in a novel that celebrates those who have "become free from any alloy" (I, iv, 62) of sensibility in their constitution. Harthouse's calculated resistance to any singular ideology is made into a singular hybrid ideology that combines in one mode of existence what *Hard Times* (and its student-critics) would place in binary opposition.

One way of addressing Harthouse's unique skills might be to imagine him as infinitely, yet softly adaptable. The utilitarian penchant for statistical analysis, by contrast, had involved the close study of ever more specialized units and their vectors in the interests of establishing models that might be duplicated and applied to different aggregates in order to achieve real or imagined long-term social benefits.[6] The utilitarian method is essentially rhetorical, canonical, and theoretical, as practiced both by educational institutions and the leader of the United Aggregate Tribunal. That is to say, that it is *disjunctive* insofar as it banishes those who do not comply. In contrast, what defines Gradgrind's newly engaged (in essence) Parliamentary Secretary is a kind of social capi-

tal that must be "kept up" or maintained and cultivated by exercising the various correlations born of the novel's polarities (expressed in my Schedules "A" and "B") as both opposed and complimentary. Harthouse concentrates upon *functionality* rather than *finality*. More mythic than competitive, Harthouse is compliantly *conjunctive*, avoiding the logic of exclusion wherever possible.[7] He has been figuratively everywhere and *is* ideologically everywhere, perfecting the "adaptive life."

This polymorphous identity clearly extends to Harthouse's desires which are equally hybrid. Though he will almost seduce Louisa Gradgrind, his attraction to her brother, Tom, is narrated in potentially sexual terms: "he showed an unusual liking for him" (II, ii, 164). And the outsider to the life of Coketown, embracing the "whelp's" vulnerability to "groveling sensualities" (II, iii, 165), introduces Tom Gradgrind to his own exotic tastes when they spend a curious night together in *Hard Times*:

> What with a cooling drink *adapted* to the weather, but not so weak as cool; and with a rarer tobacco than was to be seen in these parts, Tom was soon in a highly free and easy state at his end of the sofa, and more than ever disposed to admire his new friend at the other end.
>
> (II, iii, 165, italics added)

The couple establishes a curious "intimacy" (II, iii, 165), intimated but not elaborated, in Dickens' text. This includes reciprocal winks with Tom Gradgrind's "shut-up eye," as unmanageable under the influence of what must surely be a narcotic tobacco offered him by Harthouse, as the perpetually roving eye of Sleary. A "giddy drowsiness" (II, iii, 169) ensues, including the "fancy" of what surely must be an opium dream, before the young "whelp" is awakened with a kick and sent home by his statistical mentor and seducer who remembers all of what he has heard in the induced "high" of what Tom calls

"very good tobacco. But it's too mild" (II, iii, 169). Such is surely a signal that he welcomes a stronger dose, having fallen under the sway of Harthouse's "eastern pipe."

This is all to suggest of course that Harthouse has brought back a gift from Egypt that functions as both a truth serum (inducing the narrative of what had previously been hidden in Tom's sister's marriage to Bounderby) and an agent of seduction. Not exactly part of the equipment of the late Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*,[8] Harthouse's seductive powers are enhanced by the fact that he returns to England as a political operative, inverting the colonial impulse with the aid of a stereotypical Asian product. He is the carrier of an oriental sensibility that is apparently just as seductive as was the colonial impulse for a certain vulnerable colonial "partners" in the imperial project, with homosexual implications, developed by other "cruisers."[9]

The shared exotic indulgence induces an uncharacteristic indifference in his guest, a careless disregard as if Tom were "lounging somewhere in the air" (II, iii, 169), in a cooperative negligence that accedes helplessly, to all demands for information, including a curious bonding. Tom behaves *as if* he were passively responding to sexual demands from a person wherein "*as if*" constitutes an ethical value. And yet no critic, to my knowledge, has addressed the curious addictive power (over both sexes) that Harthouse maintains. He lives along the margins and hence, as an ideological and sexual hybrid or alloy, can never be "caught out" as can schoolchildren with incorrect answers, labor union members resistant to mass movements, faltering acrobats, or ideological critics. The future Parliamentary Secretary can never be in a "false position" because of his "conviction that indifference was the genuine high-breeding" (III, ii, 251). And this curious indifference, not unlike that of boredom, is apparently, in Dickens' text, *addictive* insofar as it both *attracts* others who are bored (Louisa in her marriage to Bounderby) and *induces* it in others, like

her brother, Tom, neither of whom can resist Harthouse's curious charms any more than could their father. And yet, as we shall see, he will be "outed," will be placed in a false-position.

Surely, part of Harthouse's appeal lies in the fact that he too is a "stroller" who first makes his appearance in Coketown at Bounderby's bank with a letter of introduction, but, as he admits, only "to kill time" (II, i, 155). He is in every sense then, one who loads or "kills" time, an *aficianado* of strategic "loitering" (II, vii, 202), which as Ross Chambers has articulated in a marvelous book, allows him the time to *read* character.[10] In a novel where the reader sees no one ever reading, but only reciting what has already been read, categorized, and given an "ology" as a foundational nomenclature, Harthouse reads faces, induces (under the influence of exotic stimulants which obviously includes himself !) those from whom he would extract *meaning*. Although he may have only a casual interest in the volumes dedicated to statistics which he has read so as to acquire his new appointment an assistant to Grandgrind, "reading character" is more important, thereby establishing him, to misappropriate from Conrad's *Lord Jim*, as "one of us:" Harthouse is a kind of vanishing mediator, who makes his timely appearance in Coketown, gains entrance to all the crucial "houses"—so that he *becomes* even in name their empty heart—and then vanishes, much as do we literary critics.

That is to say, Harthouse is a critic who reads (metonymically) for signs, but not those that have been *a priori* compartmentalized (metaphorically) or open to calculation as either a knowledge that might be taught, or as referential. Despite his confessed refusal "to make any pretensions to the character of a moral sort of fellow" (III, ii, 254), Harthouse throughout *Hard Times* considers himself "on a *public kind of business*" (III, ii, 255, italics added), a bureaucrat *in situ*, as it were. And in fact, in an historically early use of the concept, the narrator refers to Harthouse as one who has taken "to the serving out of

red tape" (II, viii, 207), a man eager to be of "service." What could be more anonymously adaptable than a bureaucrat ? Hence, he exhibits an extraordinary emptiness, presenting himself to Mrs. Sparsit "with the most indolent of all possible airs" (II, ix, 219). Though he ostensibly "troubled himself with no calculations" (II, viii, 207), he is able to read and extract knowledge upon which he can and does pragmatically act, but without leaving a trace, as invisible as bureaucrats often are. He thus seems of a part with the instantiation and development of a large government bureaucracy in the 1850's, partially to service the demands of an expanding British Empire, but also as employment for second and subsequent sons born to families with high levels of personal consumption that could no longer be sustained from rents on land.

His is not theoretical or merely rhetorical knowledge, like that of the schoolroom, but an insightful wisdom that is accumulated in direct proportion to his ability to be all things to all people, or as he exclaims at one point, "ready to sell myself at any time for any reasonable sum" (II, vii, 198). His ambiguous sexuality is thus not separate from, but entirely consistent with, Harthouse's resistance to binary categories. Analogous to Marx's notion of the "transparency" of paper money in the *Grundrisse*, Harthouse confesses to an innate worthlessness, but it is precisely that emptiness which permits him to dissolve into other characters' lives as they dissolve into his life. So profound is his cynicism, "everything being hollow and worthless" (II, vii, 195), that for Harthouse, as with paper money for Marx, he comes to represent the seductive softness of sympathy. He can be dissolved *into* or absorbed *by* any experience or idea, just as they are dissolved into his character.

In *Hard Times*, even Dickens' narrative is implicated in this life of dissolution, for there is no clear distinction between dream narratives and the narratives of day-to-day existence; they rather infiltrate each other, often in the same paragraph, abetted of course by the unusual tobacco offered by Harthouse.

This is Tom Grandgrind's opium dream, indistinguishable (in both space and time) from his actual walk home from the night's curious encounter with Harthouse:

> He had another odd dream of being taken by a waiter through a mist, which, after giving him some trouble and difficulty, resolved itself into the main street, in which he stood alone. He then walked home pretty easily, though not yet free from an impression of the influence of his new friend—as if he were lounging in the air, in the same negligent attitude, regarding him with the same look.
>
> (II, iii, 169)

Harthouse cannot be locked up in a cabinet or otherwise contained, but persists as a lingering "impression," a disembodied *effect* that persists rather than merely exists. Yet it is an impression that resists both calculation and easy reproduction, all of which makes him a difficult *subject*—in his emptiness, at home only in dreams, maybe.

Now the combination of "loading time;" lounging about in a slightly disheveled (but never unfashionable) wardrobe without any apparent long-term purpose; and remaining impassive to the passage of time—"what will be, will be" (II, viii, 207)—suggests that the "humble" Harthouse is a man who works without really working. This avocation is perfectly compatible with his ostensible career, "a tolerable *management* of the assumed honesty within dishonesty" (II, vii, 194, italics added). In a novel dedicated to calculations, he seems to survive by a remarkable *indifference*, his ability to identify on an *ad hoc* basis with the ideologies and practices of others, almost seamlessly, nowhere better illustrated than in Tom Grandgrind's dream. Like bureaucrats then, he belongs to a culture of *management*, what Walter Benjamin has denoted as the life of the perpetual "assistant," with the ominous overtones implicit in the use to which Kafka often puts the type.[12] He is a perpetual adjunct to the

administration of politics—when neutral administration rather than representation becomes the source of power, precisely because the "assistant" lends the cover of deniability and hence anonymity to those in real power.

In some sense, Harthouse is an earlier version of the Inspector Bucket of *Bleak House* who combines the roles of surveillance and the ostensible duty of the civil servant. Value is shifting from what can be accumulated (as assets or historical tradition), classified and worked, to the perceptive "reading" and timely response to information that has been repressed. Harthouse's sexual and ideological ambiguity—"so devoted and distracted" (II, xi, 235) —is repeated in Bucket's uncanny ability to "do the police in different voices," as Jo the Crossing Sweeper reminds us. So vocally ambidextrous is the detective that he can mime Hortense's French accent, just as children flock to him as an eager participant in childhood games with their plethora of heroes and villains, speaking in different voices. Born to a father "in service," Bucket displays the upward social mobility typical of bureaucrats who must identify with the "people" in order to serve them, but most effectively perhaps when anonymous. Again, like Harthouse, Inspector Bucket with his "bull's eye" often veers off suddenly during his nightly, vehicular rambles, whether attracted by dark corners or the familiar personage who might be a source of information. Like his infamous "bull's eye," Bucket, a later evolution of Harthouse, is an *illuminator.* A remarkable stroller, detachment and intense involvement can never be separated with certainty for the detective who is an avid reader of faces and spaces, no matter how seemingly insignificant.

Nicos Poulantzas has argued in a series of brilliant essays on the growth of the bureaucracy that dominant ideologies (in this case that of a burgeoning middle class of social science parasites) often adopt a class-neutral stance (politically) or scientific veneer beneath which to carry out its work in the interests of projecting a falsely "objective," even *disinterest* that is fundamental-

ly dishonest.[13] Is Harthouse really an early instance of Dickens' burgeoning interest in the wandering "detective figure," in this case combined with say, a figure like the Eugene Wrayburn of *Our Mutual Friend*? Feet propped against the grate in a law office with a dearth of customers and bored to his wits end when we first encounter him in Dickens' novel last complete novel, Wrayburn is a chronological and, seemingly, a thematic descendant waiting to read not law, but a unique "case" that will literally plunge him into the soft as well as hard corners and depths of the city. As is the case with Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, he plays a soft, waiting game—loading time. Part of this watchful waiting so conducive to boredom, is the accumulation of time needed for identification with the motives, secrets, ideology, and *modus operandi* of the perpetrator of a crime and his relationships with others.

Insofar as he must imaginatively "make up" potential familial relationships, so as to test them as possible solutions among those who appear discontinuous or unrelated on first reading, the detective-figure whom Harthouse foreshadows is, from one perspective, a counter-patriarch of sorts, often filling in at least figuratively, for the absent fathers who spawn the orphan-figures in Dickens' *oeuvre*. And of course, as is often the case, this sympathetic identification/relationship can become a kind of love, the curious alliance of detective and criminal—in the case of *Hard Times*, replicated in the curious bonding of Harthouse with both Tom and Louisa Grandgrind, perpetrators and victims, respectively. In the process of establishing these curious, because often utilitarian, alliances, Harthouse and his fictional successors in Dickens' novels "map" the city and its environs as a result of their seemingly random loitering that is nonetheless as comprehensive as other sensual tastes.

Harthouse, albeit not quite anticipating the decadent wanderers of the 1890's, is surely a *flâneur*, one for whom "indifference was the genuine high breeding" (*HT* III, ii, 249), and hence completely disassociated from educa-

tional or industrial demands for progress. But that disassociation is crucial to his ability to engage with the culture as a *reader*. What is suggested in his character is that resistance, by and of itself, as opposed to more aggressive modes of oppositionality, enables a re-reading and hence an alternative order of signification. Harthouse is never punctual, never "keeps time," and yet his invariably belated presence contributes to an easy alliance with us readers of *Hard Times*. In tandem we constitute a kind of transgressive invisibility (maybe even a *transparency*) in Dickens' novel in terms of our open-ness. This is surely one mode of overcoming the solitude that afflicts so many "outsiders" in the Victorian novel; Harthouse transforms that solitude into a kind of social glue that when applied, enables bonds with anyone, but especially those victimized by ideological alignments, like Tom and Louisa Gradgrind.

To be sure, Harthouse's identity, as typical of the *flâneur*, is threatened by the effects of mediation: dividedness, difference, deferral, digressivity. There is always a risk implicit in the loss of control inherent in the agential function, and Dickens' narrator monetizes this risk as a speculation at the moment that Harthouse elects to elope with Louisa:

> Mrs. Sparsit saw him detain her with his encircling arm, and heard him then and there, within her (Mrs. Sparsit's) greedy hearing, tell her how he loved her, and how she was the *stake* for which he ardently desired *to play away all that he had in life.*
>
> (*HT* III, xi, 236, italics added)

Harthouse is the unaligned and therefore, at least potentially, *critical* intelligence, vulnerable to being exposed, but only by an equivalent "stroller," the ambassadress, Sissy Jupe, who has in her own way already subverted the Grandgrind household. Both might suggest that a strategically informal, loiterly intellectuality has advantages over disciplined forms of knowledge insofar

as they are more "open" to the oblique criticism of closed contexts, represented in the various "ologies" that recur in *Hard Times*.. Before she dies, Mrs. Gradgrind, Louisa and Tom's mother, wonders aloud "if there is any Ology left, of any description, that has not been worn to rags" (II, ix, 225) in the Gradgrind house. Her question is more than apt, given that Harthouse's unaligned indifference is displacing all ideologies.

At one point, the dangers posed by Harthouse's persistence as a parasite are compared with "the drifting icebergs setting with any currents anywhere" (II, viii, 207), a wonderful metaphor that encompasses simultaneously the absence of any allegedly stabilizing ide*ology* and the danger that he poses to defined intellectual "shipping" lanes. His proclivity to be "idly gay on indifferent subjects" (II, ix, 221), even when under considerable duress, implies a dedication to *indifference*, which I would argue, is both sexual and intellectual. The sensitive reader, catching my own intellectual *drift*, might wonder, justifiably, "where is the author's argument going ?"

And this critic might answer, "why should the critic have to be *going* anywhere ?" My point is that Harthouse is the presence of the critic in Dickens' text, who, when exposed by other critics, *moves on*, the ultimate vanishing mediator, with his "rare tobacco," a metaphoric agent of exposure. His exposure to the orient has been internalized. The return to the job of, at least ostensibly, a "public man," is unusual, albeit replicated in the career of the Harold Transome of George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* who returns, not from Egypt, but a stint in Turkey where he had saved the life of an Armenian. Like Harthouse, Transome's experiences have been so diffuse as to obscure rigid political positions or loyalties. In *Hard Times* are we looking at the leisurely (critical) reader of sociality and ideology potentially emerging as the critical public intellectual *at leisure*, but exposed as an interested predator before he can become a general threat to the culture ? He is "outed," as it were, from his

dispassionate posture, exposed as being "out of position" as a consequence of heretofore unacknowledged desire. Other would-be public men have suffered similar fates, left adrift to "move on."

In his lovely book, *Vital Nourishment: Departing From Happiness*, an analysis of the thought of the fourth century B.C. E. Chinese sage, Zhuanghi, François Jullien advances the notion that Chinese classical philosophy emphasizes the maintenance of a *capacity* for life (even after life) rather than dividing the world into categories like transcendence/worldliness; good/evil; active/passive.[14] To hold onto an ideology for Zhuanghi is to be unable to let it go. And thus began the privileging in Chinese philosophy of a life dedicated not to acting, but rather to help or to assist that which comes naturally. One subsidizes harmony and balance in external and internal relationships, necessary to nourishing existence *in the present.* Hence, for Jullien, the emphasis in Chinese intellectual (and medical) thought of balancing influences and inputs and upon hygiene and the development of physical and spiritual capacities, rather than upon analytical interventions—until the advent of communism. Ideology can never reflect "life" in the true sense of life: a constant flow in which one tries, maybe like the goldfish in a bowl in Chinese classical art, to maintain oneself in a medium by subtle bonding and balance of power. It is to be sure an existence that emphasizes *subtlety* over *analysis*, but it is an existence that would encompass the life of the parasite, as well.

Thus, the ever-present "eastern pipe" with its exotic tobacco is not the only thing that "our" Harthouse has brought back from the orient. His idle gaiety, the combination of detachment and dedication, the willingness to "let things be," all seem in advance of the wisdom Yeats' projects upon those oriental sages atop the mountain with their "ancient glittering eyes" looking down upon a tragic world in the poem, "Lapis Lazuli." They too combine the roles of actors (in a recurrent tragedy) and public intellectuals who cannot break up their

lines to weep.

But what separates Harthouse's experience in *Hard Times* is that he *misrecognizes* himself *in* the lives of those from whom he had thought himself detached enough to read correctly. Louisa *is* unhappy and her brother Tom *is* a manipulative thief who has benefited from her "arranged" marriage to Bounderby. Harthouse has correctly read Tom Grandgrind's addictions to both gambling and exotic tobacco, even as he misreads his own love (one of the few instances of genuine love in *Hard Times*) for Tom's sister, Louisa, and his willingness to risk all. He engages in gambling, no less than did Tom, on his own account. He blows his own neutral, albeit drifting "critical positioning" by suddenly finding himself, "in a more ridiculous position" (III, iii, 256). Such is par for the course for us critics who are never *outside* the text, precisely because as post-structuralist critics remind us, nothing is ever outside the text.

Imaginable as a profound instance of alienation, Harthouse could perhaps more usefully be examined not only as the so-called "split" that defines mystified subjects as sites of misrecognition—what Althusser calls an imaginary relation to the real conditions of production—but also of a distancing from the self that makes possible criticism as a mode of recognition, the recognition of a misrecognition, as it were.[15] The very word "split" would thereby designate a curious relationship to any concept of *difference*, such that the two sides of the relationship (my Schedule "A" and Schedule "B") can neither be absolutely separate or seamlessly joined. Harthouse's recognition of the objects (Tom and Louisa Gradgrind) as living "inauthentic lives," constitutes the critical subject (Harthouse) as other than the inauthentic other (that his career and employment by Gradgrind would imply). He instead becomes something like the other's Other. The subject is thereby *implicated* in the inauthenticity of the object, expressed in *Hard Times* as an interrupted claim: Harthouse's aborted love for Louisa Gradgrind.

As with the contemporary advocates of digitalizing all library books, the Gradgrinds (we must never forget his advanced thought) of the world would reduce all reproducible knowledge to the nineteenth-century equivalent of pixels. Every creative product as well as childhood becomes an aggregate, a "data-base," to be mined. His philosophy would imagine the medium of communication as totally indifferent to the message: matter (childhood or the book held in the hand) no longer matters. Harthouse is more than just the measure of this indifference. He is its embodiment, even its (paradoxically) active principle, which abducts childhood, no less than indifferent schoolmasters, with an equally seductive affection.

And like Harthouse, this literary critic, with some Asian experience, including that of an anonymous "public man" (*komu-in*) and familiar with being labeled a "rolling stone" (not exactly a drifting iceberg, but close enough) because of the range of his academic choices and employers, must recognize himself as more than implicated in a detachment inextricable from devotion, the devotion to a system that produces him. But then, so was Dickens who began his last incomplete novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, in a foggy opium den of very slow time served by Malays. The disappearing patron in that unfinished novel could be the author, the victim, or the critic of his own subjective/objective disappearance, a true vanishing mediator, but vulnerable to assorted non-binding bonding to an assortment of sleuth/critics.

Notes

* All citations of *Hard Times* in the text of this essay are from the Penguin edition, edited by David Craig (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) with book number, followed by the chapter number, and the page number in order. Portions of this essay were initially delivered orally at a meeting of the Dickens Fellowship of Japan at Kyoto University in October of 2007. The author wishes to thank that group of Dickensians for their enthusiasm and helpful commentary.

1 Phillip Collins, *Dickens and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1963), is very instructive on the ways in which educational reform and administration influenced Dickens' various classrooms throughout his career. As formative as Collins' work has been in examining the changes in educational administration and practices, it has never seemed quite adequate in explaining the anomalies: for example, the mixture of violence and boredom that it induced, perhaps owing to beer consumption by very young pupils.

2 J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*: (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 111 ff. The evocation of Picasso's carnival-figures in Miller's essay sets up a dichotomy between *work* and *play* that the rest of the novel would not support. What is not raised is the possibility that both Coketown hard industry and Sleary's Circus seem in tandem to be institutions *already* in decline at a time when industrialization of especially the midlands was expanding.

3 F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus), pp. 238－244 was really the first critic to draw attention to the "moral" amplitude of *Hard Times*, in its evocation of class struggle, though his ideological sympathy with the trade union movement resulted in an oversimplification of individual martyrdom. Perhaps because he seems so potentially sympathetic to (in the sense of projecting himself onto) any opinion, Harthouse scarcely figures in Leavis' discussion at all, for he has no consistent ideology. His absence from scrutiny by most critics of *Hard Times* may well be the result of his understandable transparency as a critical reader to critical readers looking for something else. His is the "presence" of literary criticism, as a parasitical operator that disguises its subversion by a supposed seamless "commentary" on the text.

4 Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007) argues that the use of sociological "modeling" as a tool (like laborer's tools) owes much to the attempt to reconcile morality (as a measurable virtue) with the Bentham/Mill utilitarianism that regarded only empirical knowledge as trustworthy and verifiable. Statistical analysis thus became part of the so-called "commonsense" school of (mostly Scottish) philosophers attempting to mollify the conditions of the poor in the absence of any proof of what Spencer was to call the "Unknowable." Statistical (mechanical) judgment came to displace Divine judgment.

5 Martin Heidegger identifies three different kinds of boredom. The first (*Gelangweiltwerden von etwas*) is merely situational boredom like that which occurs when a flight is delayed and the departing passenger has too much time on his hands. As soon as the situation changes, the boredom would come to an end. The second type is to bore *oneself* with something (*Sichlangweilen bei etwas*), the recognition that comes with the knowledge that I have wasted my own time at a party. Only the third type of boredom (*es*

ist einem langweilig) in which the whole being becomes indifferent and bothersome in its lack of *being* enables radical transformation, because only then is the self brought to a naked encounter with itself. I recognize that this indifference is part of *me*, and that I am imprisoned by it. This third type of boredom reduces the world to such sameness that I attempt to realize my self in an act of liberation, like Harthouse's assumption of risk in his pursuit of Louisa. See Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, World, Finitude, Solitude,* trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 136－149.

6 The notion of the *divisible aggregate* as a principle of organization of the masses that owes something to utilitarian philosophers was also necessitated by the enlarged electoral rolls mandated by the First Reform Bill. Genuine canvassing (and hence modern politics as we know it) with its emphasis upon voters as "forces" that were in varying degrees subject to other forces (influences) and predictability would not have needed men like Harthouse as a kind of surveyor/map-maker of the political landscape, previously. Hence, he is a kind of "new" man politically, entirely in keeping with the pioneering spirit, so quickly bored, also visible in George Eliot's *Felix Holt.*

7 In *Tristes Tropiques* and elsewhere, Claude Levi-Strauss sets up a distinction between *conjunctive* myths, in which a priest or other figure embodying the sacred, incorporates non-believers by means of a set of ceremonies and rituals which create equivalence. Once they participate in the same practices and initiation rituals, there arises a rough equality. Competitive games, while originally "mythic," slowly became *disjunctive*, insofar as they commence with equality (say 0－0 in tennis), and then conclude with a victor being superior to the loser, generating inequalities. *Hard Times* appears as mythic (in terms of its seasonal volumes and circus rituals), but reveals itself as highly competitive in which not merely children, but acrobats, and industry are continually *tested*, in compliance with "schedules."

8 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), xiv, argues that one of the supplementary consequences of imperialism is a radical hybridity of culture, where histories and geographies are so intertwined as to occlude any appeal to cultural, national, or social exclusivity. If true, then the Benthamite statistical analysis that education and politics share in *Hard Times*, neutralizes all exclusivity in the same way as does Harthouse's hybrid "indifference." Harthouse would then be an instance of the internalization of *hybrid*-inducing imperialism. Of course from another perspective, this is the "emptiness" in which he lives.

9 The "cruising narrative" arises from phenomena that propose a cluster of what might be termed *potentially fraught* relationships loaded with the possibility of sudden suspension

(or susceptibility to surveillance) that links male homosociality and male homosexuality. No less than the Roland Barthes of *Incidents*, Harthouse has a history of putting himself at the service of a colonial power abroad. Dickens' used this type in the figure of the attorney, Jaggers in *Great Expectation*, who both reads faces ("what have we here?") on the stairway at Miss Havisham's house and gathers his adopted "boys" for evenings at a his own house, part of which is forever locked up as a secret aspect of his existential dwelling.

10 Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), especially pp. 3－83.

11 The "echoing" features of paper money are discussed in "The Chapter on Money" in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse;The Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp. 115－238. The real value of paper money is deconstructed as it becomes an agent into which other commodities are dissolved in such a way that it becomes a "neutral medium of exchange," an imaginary substance, in ways similar to Harthouse's disheveled ontology.

12 Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," *Selected Writings* II (1927－1934), ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), p. 799.

13 Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and the Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1973), pp. 139－140.

14 François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 104－108.

15 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Ideological Apparatuses," *Essays in Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 1－61.

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