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CARLO PAGETTI

HARD TIMES/HEART TIMES/ART TIMES:  
CARLO DICKENS'S MORAL FABLE FOR OUR TIMES

In Preston town I do believe  
The masters are our foes,  
But some of them, before it's long,  
Will wear some ragged clothes.  
(from *Ten per Cent! A New Song, on the Preston Strike*, *Household Words* 194, December 10, 1853).

I

I am sorry to see that there have been some disturbances in Lancashire, arising out of the unhappy strikes. I read in an Italian paper last night, that there had been symptoms of rioting at Blackburn. The account stated that the workers of that place, supposing some of the obnoxious manufacturers of Preston to be secreted "nel palazzo Bull" assembled before that Palazzo, and demanded to have them produced; and that thereupon, "la Signora Loson, padrona del palazzo Bull", appeared at a window and assured the crowd that they were not within. I suppose the Palazzo Bull to be the Bull Hotel, but the paragraph gave no hint of such a thing (*Letters* 7: 213-14).

The first news of the social unrest upsetting the Lancashire industrial area reached Dickens while he was travelling through Italy, as we know from an often quoted letter written in Venice to Angela Burdett Coutts on November 27, 1853. The Palazzo Bull, or Bull Hotel, was going to be visited by Dickens many years later, in April 1868 during the tour of Farewell Readings which took the writer and his manager, George Dolby, to Northern England, "in the smoky and oppressive atmosphere of Blackburn, or of Preston, our next town" (Dolby 1885: 405). According to Dolby, "Preston [...] was if possible more dirty and melancholy than usual" (406), a veritable incarnation of Coketown. At the Bull Hotel Dickens, whose health had been steadily deteriorating, was examined by his doctor, Mr Bird, and warned that he should immediately stop his readings lest "he goes through life dragging a foot after him" (408). Not a landlady, this time, but the Bull Hotel landlord, Mr Townsend, "who had formerly been station-master at Preston" (409), helped Dolby collect the money which was employed to refund the tickets to the townspeople who had already purchased them. Thus Preston did not have the honour of listening to the great artist's performance, although, if Dickens had succeeded in reading from his works, he would not have selected a passage from *Hard Times* (never in his list) to entertain his audience. Too serious a novel, *Hard Times* elicited neither laughter nor tears, the two basic reactions played out by Dickens in his tours.

If Preston was peripheral to London – the great worldstage of Dickens's fiction – *Hard Times* has been basically on the margins of Dickens's canon, at least until F.R. Leavis, in 1947, discovered his literary excellence as a "moral fable" and Northrop Frye stressed, two decades later, that "What he writes, if I may use my own terminology for once, are not realistic novels but fairy tales in the low mimetic displacement" (Wimsatt 1974: 537). But, on the whole, even among the most enthusiastic admirers of Dickens *Hard Times* was and is considered a minor work. The Canadian writer Stephen Leacock, for example, who declared Dickens a universal genius, superior to Shakespeare himself, brushed aside *Hard Times* unhesitatingly: "The story *Hard Times* has no other interest in the history of letters than that of his failure [...]. A large part of the book is mere trash; hardly a chapter of it is worth reading today: not an incident or a character belonging to it survives or deserves so" (Leacock 1936: 169-170).

In recent times, despite the efforts of Martha Nussbaum, who tries to resurrect it on ethical grounds as a crucial work defining the moral issues and shortcomings of the Victorian industrial scene, *Hard Times* has been largely ignored in favour of the keener attention to the early sanguine novels (*Pickwick Papers*) or of the dark mood so instrumental in the complex pattern of *Little Dorrit* or *Our Mutual Friend*. It is relevant, though, that *Hard Times* seems now to stimulate the response of women critics (Carr 1989; Humpherys 1996; Thomas 1997). We must also remember that one of the major studies published by an Italian critic on *Hard Times* is Vanna Gentili's "*Hard Times: per questi tempi*" (1972), in which Mr Sleary's circus is taken away from the pure sphere of fancy to become a humble, but significant literary job, "the metaphor of an activity" connected with artistic creation itself (Gentili 1972: 106).

It is also not without significance that Dickens heard of the Preston strikes for the first time while visiting another peripheral region, Italy, as the dynamics of class struggle – making their appearance in *Hard Times* – did introduce a theme, or a keynote, which would spread throughout Europe in the second half of the century, when middle-class authors began to discuss the condition of the working class, the dangers to be feared and the remedies to be suggested in order to defuse the explosion of a Socialist revolutionary movement. Dickens had for a long time been a friend to the Italian Risorgimento, and an advocate of the short-lived Repubblica di Roma, founded in 1848, although Giuseppe Mazzini was maybe too subversive a figure for the English writer (Pagetti 1998). Another Italian exile, the novelist Giuseppe Ruffini, had been complimented by Dickens for "the most charming conception" of Lucy in *Doctor Antonio*, published in

Edinburgh in 1855 (Marazzi 1999: 163). Dickens was linked with Italy in many ways, and even his Christian name could be changed into the Italian equivalent Carlo in a funny anecdote related by the writer to George Dolby, during their first meeting in 1866:

The late Catherine Hayes's mother did not possess any talent in a remarkable degree, except perhaps that of committing astonishing blunders. Charles Dickens, who she used to dub *Carlo* Dickens (for the old lady had been to Italy, and deemed perhaps that it was her duty, as the mother of a singer, to drag into her conversation Italian names, which she spoke with a broad Irish accent) was somewhat a favourite with her. One day she was at his house with her daughter, and expressed the great pleasure it gave her to be the guest of the celebrated Carlo Dickens's [...] (Dolby 1885: 12).

According to another Carlo – the Italian critic Carlo Izzo (1974: 120), *Hard Times* was translated into Italian for the first time in 1877 as Carlo Dickens's *Tempi difficili*. Most of the Dickens works were at that time available in French (Delattre 1927), and the *litterati* living in Turin were proud of their knowledge of this language, due to the historical links existing between Piedmont and France. Thus it is not surprising that in the second half of the nineteenth century the Italian author most deeply attracted by Dickens was Edmondo de Amicis, who travelled extensively in Europe, Morocco, Constantinople, South America, and as a young man was fascinated by the reading of *David Copperfield*. He wrote in 1886: “*David* continua a trionfare. Quante nuove idee e nuovi affetti, e nuove forme m’ha fatto nascere in mente! Prevedo che la lettura di questo libro mi farà del gran bene. Lo sento” (Portinari e Baldissoni 1966: XCVIII). A sort of Italian version of *David Copperfield*, also capturing some of the preoccupations of *Hard Times*, was the unfinished novel *Primo maggio*, written in 1893, after De Amicis's conversion to Socialism, whose middle-class hero, Alberto Bianchini, a Turin schoolteacher who writes a book on the exploitation of factory children, is wounded and killed on the first of May by the carabinieri and the military police charging the insurgent crowd. De Amicis, who had visited London in 1873, conjures up the spirit of Dickens in *Ricordi di Londra* (1874), in whose pages he describes himself as a sort of Italian Pip, wandering in the labyrinth of the metropolis without knowing one word of English, or rather “senza conoscere una saetta d’inglese”. He is involved in strange meetings and funny misunderstandings, and, finally, finds himself in the poorest quarters of the metropolis, in a cityscape worthy of the author of *Our Mutual Friend*, where

[...] la ferocia, la lascivia, la miseria si dan la posta nelle tenebre, come mostri schifosi, e s'accoppiano, per mandar vittime al Tamigi, agli ospedali e al patibolo; dove fermenta, infine, il putridume della grande città, e dove Carlo Dickens [sic] andava a bere birra col suo servitore (27).

Although De Amicis's most famous novel, *Cuore*, that is, "Heart", is possibly indebted to Dickens's early technique of inserting particular stories into the frame of the general narration, a more relevant Dickensian inspiration can be found in his later *La carrozza di tutti* (1899), whose conception based upon the idea of a democratic work of art, built upon the manifold voices of the passengers of a horse-drawn omnibus travelling the roads of Turin throughout the year 1896, is clearly stated in a letter written to his publisher Emilio Treves on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1897: "è una specie di romanzo in tranvai [...] un romanzo a lanterna magica, con Torino per isfondo, che si svolge tutto sulle rotaie della strada pubblica. Il tranvai non è stato ancora utilizzato da questo punto di vista" (Tamburini 1990: 132). *The omnibus has not yet been employed in such a perspective*, declares De Amicis – not in Italy, maybe; but in English fiction the same subject crops up in another work devoted to urban life seen as a magic lantern of fleeting emotions and colourful events, Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*:

The passengers change as often in the course of one journey as the figures in a kaleidoscope, and though not so glittering, are far more amusing [...]. Yes, after mature reflection, and considerable experience, we are decidedly of opinion that of all known vehicles, from the glass-coach in which we were taken to be christened to that sombre caravan in which we must one day make our last earthly journey, there is nothing like an omnibus (BOZ :139).

Such a passage confirms the hypothesis that De Amicis did know his Dickens, at least in French, although the literary reinvention of the omnibus at the very end of the nineteenth century – while the electric street car was substituting the former vehicle – has a peculiar touch of nostalgia (Traversetti 1991: 101-106). In any case, what De Amicis learns from Dickens is not only the need to give life to the urban scene, but also the awareness of the democratic, polyphonic nature of its inhabitants. Such a Dickensian theme is stressed by the Italian writer in the first pages of *La carrozza di tutti*, when De Amicis describes the source of his inspiration:

[...] mi ritornarono in mente scene, incontri, conversazioni, piccole avventure allegre e tristi, che non si possono dare che in quella specie di carrozza democratica, dove tutte le classi continuamente si toccano e si confondono; mi sfilò davanti una processione di personaggi che conoscevo soltanto per avere fatto delle 'corse' in loro compagnia, coi

quali non avevo mai parlato che sulle piattaforme, e che formavano per me come una famiglia a parte di compagni abituali di viaggio; e mi suonò dentro un'esclamazione che per poco non mi sfuggì dalla bocca "To'... uno studio... un libro... la carrozza di tutti!" (De Amicis 1899: 2-3).

That is, while reflecting on a proper structure to give to a story where many different voices are uttered and embodied, De Amicis carefully constructs the realistic and at the same time imaginary space of an omnibus, where everyone can speak with his or her own voice, each one the inhabitant of a unique and self-contained world, a study, a book, the carriage of all, for all...

Was Dickens only an obvious source of literary themes and characters for the Italian culture of the Risorgimento, or was he himself aware that an Italian fiction did exist and was available also in England? I wonder how far Dickens was acquainted with Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. He might have heard about the famous Italian novelist during his travels to Italy or read the English version, *The Betrothed*. After the 1828 translation by the reverend Scharles Swan published in Pisa (Colquhoun 1954: 262), *The Betrothed* was printed in London in 1834, "complete in one volume" by Richard Bentley, with whom Dickens was going to sign an agreement in November 1836 as editor of the *Bentley's Miscellany* (Ackroyd 1991: 213-14).

One of the crucial episodes in *Hard Times*, the meeting between Sissy Jupe and James Harthouse in Chapter Two, Book 3, seems to replicate, in a less Catholic mood and through Dickens's personal interpretation, chapter 21 of *I promessi sposi*, where the pure and simple peasant girl Lucia – or, rather Lucy – persuades the powerful aristocrat the Innominato – the Unknown in the older translation, the Unnamed in the modern version by Foster – to let her free instead of delivering the prey to the brutal rapist Don Roderick, and indeed, to listen to the very voice of God, emerging from his inner soul as an irresistible prayer in favour of hope, mercy, charity, the same spiritual values advocated by Dickens at the end of *Hard Times*. Although Harthouse does not have the nobleness of the Innominato, being a much more sceptical, selfish kind of character, his inability to destroy Louisa's reputation, his sudden meekness, his astonishment at the simple words of Sissy – a Dickensian Lucy, who is linked with light, throughout *Hard Times* – remind the reader, maybe especially the Italian reader, of certain similarities between the two texts, based on the use of largely allegorical situations conceived as dramatic turning points and on both authors' faith in the workings of the divine Providence. Like the Innominato, Harthouse, his lesser brother, disappears from the scene of the novel after his own ambiguous repentance: this emasculated demonic tempter cannot be accepted in

the household world of household words and Louisa's destiny moves towards sterility, not seduction and sin.

Dickens's sentimentality and melodramatic effects did cause the same kind of literary sunset for him as that which De Amicis experienced in Italy, although *Cuore* was hugely successful as a pedagogic fictional treatise no less than some of Dickens's novels. Not surprisingly, a negative critical attitude was emphasised by the most influential Italian "anglista", Mario Praz in his widely-read *Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*. According to Praz, Dickens is largely "a slave to the mechanical conventions of the novels" (Praz 1956:162). On the other hand, recent studies have re-valued Dickens's influence on modernist writers, not excluding James Joyce himself (Berrone 1997: 75-101).

It is worth noting that the best critical contribution by Joyce on Dickens took place in 1912 in Italy, more exactly in Padua, near the border with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to which Trieste was still annexed. In 1912 Joyce was asked to write a paper on the centenary of Dickens's death in order to pass an exam as professor of English in Italian schools. While distancing himself from Dickens, Joyce does perceive the powerful linguistic sensitivity of the Victorian master (1979: 178), and does not seem to express a very strong disapproval of his narrative methods based on "exaggeration": "It is precisely by this little exaggeration that Dickens has influenced the spoken language of the inhabitants of the British Empire, as no other writer since Shakespeare's time has influenced it" (Berrone 1997: 37).

On the whole, the impact of Dickens on the Italian literary milieu has been disappointing. What Italo Calvino wrote a few years ago about Jane Austen could easily be applied to Dickens. In an interview to the weekly *Europeo* on his favourite authors, the "classics" of modern literature, after going through a long list ranging from Stendhal to Stevenson, from Conrad to Kafka, Calvino adds: "amo Jane Austen perché non la leggo mai, ma sono contento che ci sia". It is fair to remember that Calvino wrote a perceptive article on Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and that one of his beloved masters, Cesare Pavese, was particularly fascinated by Dickens especially while translating *David Copperfield* into Italian in 1939. In his preface to *La storia e le personali esperienze di David Copperfield* Pavese compared Dickens to Balzac, but singled him out as a forger of "minor characters", full of curiosity and wonder, especially good at representing David's adolescent life (1952 : 184-85). But the fact – I must use this dangerous word – the fact that Dickens "non si legge" in our country must be acknowledged as an unquestionable truth. This concept has been stressed by the one exception we find among our contemporary

novelists, Giuseppe di Lampedusa, a lover of England and an affectionate reader of Dickens, the author of *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*) published in 1958, three years after Tomasi's death and a narrative work that owns maybe something to Dickens, in the sense that it deals with a crucial time in the chronicles of the Italian Risorgimento – the downfall of the South in the hands of the “Garibaldini” and the collapse of the Sicilian aristocracy – not as a learned reconstruction of the past, but in the perspective of the present, inheriting the failures and ambiguities of national history.

In 1954, exactly one century after the appearance of *Hard Times*, Tomasi di Lampedusa held a series of lectures on English literature for an elected circle of pupils, living in Palermo, among them the well-known scholar Francesco Orlando. These lectures, published for the first time in 1990-1991, devote a remarkable number of pages, in the written version we have, to Dickens, who is compared to a few other great writers such as Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Jane Austen, Fielding, Ariosto, Balzac, Manzoni, Tolstoy and Proust as a “cosmourgo”, a creator of worlds, one among the very few artists who are able to imagine “un'opera vasta, popolosa, omogenea nella varietà, avente la facoltà di continuare a vivere indipendentemente dal creatore rischiarata da una luce tutta sua, arricchita da paesaggi peculiari” (1995: 1020). Tomasi di Lampedusa, who had visited the Dickens House as a young intellectual with his fiancée, and future wife, in 1925 (Vitello 1987: 122), has such a knowledge of Dickens that he can list all his novels, give a clever summary of many of them and wind up his presentation with a final observation about Dickens's fortune throughout Europe, except Italy: “Charles Dickens è ancora ai nostri giorni lo scrittore maggiormente letto. Non bisogna giudicare dall'Italia, dove, in Inea di massima, non si legge; ma non vi è chiosco di stazione o biblioteca circolante in Inghilterra, Francia, Stati Uniti, o Unione Sovietica (mi è stato riferito) dove non siano esposte due o tre sue opere” (1041) [“In Italy on the whole, he is not read, but at least two or three of his works are displayed in every railway station newsstand or circulating library in England, France, the United States, the Soviet Union – so I am told”]. While he goes carefully through practically all of Dickens's novels, Tomasi di Lampedusa is particularly critical about some of them and especially about the two published after *Bleak House*, and both of which, we should notice, appeared in *Household Words*, i.e. *A Child's History of England* and *Hard Times*. Both of them should be omitted and deserve to be forgotten, or left aside, being an unfortunate enterprise. *A Child's History of England* is not a history for children, but –according to Tomasi di Lampedusa – a history written by a child, and with regard to *Hard Times* he states that

“al contrario di qualsiasi libro di Dickens, non suscitò nessuna controversia: tutti, conservatori e radicali, dickensiani e antidickensiani furono d'accordo nel trovarlo pessimo”. An awful book, according to everybody, although, Tomasi adds, “le macchiette dei personaggi secondari vi sono, e sempre pari in valore alle figure passate” (1038).

If Northrop Frye, as we have seen, labels Dickens's works “not realistic novels but fairy tales in the low mimetic displacement”, Tomasi di Lampedusa shapes his own perceptive definition by naming “Dickens's kingdom” “magic realism”, something which seems to belong to a higher sphere of existence, to the writers' Paradise. Although Kafka is also the creator of such an extraordinary world, Dickens's is more cheerful and therefore beautiful:

Dickens è uno dei più insigni creatori di mondi. E il suo mondo è uno dei più singolari: di esso conosciamo ogni campo, ogni strada, ogni volto. Eppure dobbiamo ogni volta dire a noi stessi che non abbiamo mai incontrato alcunché di simile: forse li rivedremo se saremo buoni e andremo in Paradiso. Il regno di Dickens è il realismo magico. Regno di infinita attrattiva, regno difficilissimo da governare. Kafka soltanto ne ha avuto uno simile; ma il riso di Dickens rende il suo più bello (1021).

Supplied with Tomasi's introduction, we can start the countdown, timing our journey towards Coketown – or rather a region of hell – in the same way in which at the beginning of Lars von Triers' film *Europa* Max von Sidow's voice evokes the dark tunnel of the past leading the spectator to the ruins of Germany immediately after the end of World War Two.

## II

One of the most difficult regions of Dickens's kingdom is set in Coketown, and this is partly due to the need to compress the narrative to fit it into the pages of a weekly magazine devoted to a miscellany of topics. We know that Dickens complained several times about the strain and the lack of opportunities he had to face week after week in 1854. The traditional view held by the critics is that such an effort robs *Hard Times* of the richness and the complexity of other works. One of the first comments on its form and meaning is expressed in the biography by Adolphus William Ward, who states:

The book thus acquired a precision of form and manner which commands it to the French school of criticism rather than to lovers of English humour in its ampler forms and more flowing moods. At the same time, the work has its purpose so visibly imprinted on its front, as



almost to forbid our regarding it in the first instance apart from the moral which avowedly it is intended to inculcate (Ward 1909: 127).

But we must also add that the restrictions imposed by Dickens on his prose become a sort of thematic concern in the novel, to the point that Coketown itself appears to be less the product of a restrained imagination than the symbolic dystopian prison of language itself – a prison whose boundaries, of course, Dickens's imagination challenges and evades. On the one hand, in fact, we have to deal with the authorial voice – a cartographer trying to mould landscapes and meanings according to a moral pattern suitable to the readers of *Household Words* – who guides the readers through the pages of the book and into the infernal region constituted by Coketown, the town as *other* also in comparison to the multi-faceted London of Dickens's fiction, and by its scarred surroundings. On the other hand, we hear the suffering voices of the inhabitants of Coketown, articulating themselves through the idiom of “a specimen of ‘em”, Stephen Blackpool, whose individual experience becomes the key to display the secrets of the working-class. It is not without relevance that a woman, Louisa, discovering as a child the wonderful alternative world of the circus, is the ideal witness to the middle-class readers of *Household Words*:

For the first time in her life Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands; for the first time in her life she was face to face with anything like individuality in comparison with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. She knew what results in work a given number of them would produce in a given space of time. She knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women (*Hard Times*: 120).

Instead of the scornful viewpoint of the heartless outsider, Harthouse, and of the self glorification of the deceitful Bounderby, we now learn the mystery of a new human entomology. Conflicting meanings and paradoxes cross the whole text shaping itself reluctantly week after week, while we can read it as a battlefield where each of the most powerful characters – the patriarchs of the nation – tries to impose on the reader his personal interpretation of the events as if it were the only one authorised and absolutely true to reality. And of course they fail. So *Hard Times* reconfigures itself as an uncertain map which gives the reader different clues to understand the ‘reality’ of the industrial town, or rather, to identify an unstable balance between the imaginative and ideological constructs pertaining to an industrial world, in an attempt to validate itself

according to a keynote, whose elusiveness is exposed by the dichotomy between public and private experience, facts and fancy, blue books and fairy tales. "From this time begins your history" (*Hard Times*: 36), as Gradgrind explains to the captive Sissy, the one who should give up all links with the circus, and instead – due to one of the many ironies crossing the text – the one that can 'save' Gradgrind's son and his soul thanks to her connection with the circus. Stephen Blackpool's "It's a muddle" and Mr Sleary's "People mutht be amuthed" are contradictory commentaries which the readers must take into account and put into a reasonably coherent perspective. In the same way, the nature itself of men and women is not restricted to one definition – there is not really one keynote – but it is enlarged according to different factors – social class, gender, personal feelings – and ranges from machinelike automata steeped in boredom and moral obtuseness, through the demonic machinations of deceivers and self-deceivers, up to the primeval fantasy of a pantheistic world where dogs and horses have a more than humane sensitivity and compassion. Thus, the boundaries imposed upon Coketown, similar to the restrictions of the pages of his magazine that Dickens had to accept, are questioned by the narrative techniques employed by the writer, so that we must recognise *Hard Times* as a book structured not around a rigid and circumscribed moral argument – the superiority of fancy, or imagination, or, as has been aptly said, of an imagination no longer 'idle', but fecundated by faith over the sterility of the Utilitarian dogmas – but about a narrative dilemma: how to create – in the pages of a weekly magazine – the story and the myth of the industrial town, of its inhabitants and of its conflicts, how to mould the authorial voice, and ultimately, how to create and re-create the readers as an essential part of the dramatic performance. If the citizens of Coketown inhabit a city of ant-like uniformity and anonymity, this is perhaps due to an illusion, the cunning falsity of an ideology, which wants to cancel identities. When the readers understand this implication, they can visit Coketown, and maybe discover that the Coketown Hands are their brothers, or even themselves. If we consider this relation upside down, the readers are characters, inscribed by the author into the text: "Sympathy, indignation, concern: all these are written into the reader's characterization" (Williams 1983: 173).

The narrator's voice, enacting the manifest ideology of a compassionate patriarch, full of consideration and sometimes of embarrassment for all his characters, is not sufficient: the author as artist and mid-century intellectual must descend into the pit of his own imagined world in order to represent his own failures and

shortcomings. We recognise him in the figure of Gradgrind, the good and insensitive father, whose iron philosophy of facts constitutes a pedagogical program similar to the moral and conventional intentions of Dickens, the editor and proprietor of *Household Words*, the family review fighting against the corrupt fantasies of Reynolds' periodicals. When Gradgrind catches his two model children "peeping with all [their] might through a hole in a deal board" (*Hard Times*: 9), the devil is loose "In the name of wonder, idleness, and folly!" (10). In fact, he "knows that storybooks are not simply decorative, not simply amusing [...] Literature, he sees, is subversive" (Nussbaum 1996: 1).

And, of course, the esthetical theories forcefully expressed by the third gentleman at the beginning of the novel, based as they are on a literal interpretation of the relationship between objects and their representations, are a parody of the old arguments against fiction itself, about the distortions and the bad example set by 'invented' stories. *Hard Times* is a denial of such an attitude, as Coketown itself is built on 'fictions' and the fictionality of all the events, the artificiality and inner fragility of all the ideological constructs, is emphasised throughout the novel, in which hard facts, based on the apparent strength and authority of their interpreters, collapse and melt into the thin air of unfulfilled desires, of unashamed deceptions and grotesque self-deception. In this sense the most paradoxical representation of the deluded and dangerous artist is, of course, Bounderby, the narcissistic mythographer, who aptly reconstructs his origins to justify an even more fanciful representation of his slaves – from his worthy feminine counterpart Mrs Sparsit to his own workers. All the same, we must acknowledge that Bounderby is an excellent storyteller, that what he says about the condition of poor children is probably false if referred to himself, but not devoid of a sociological truthfulness, and, above all, that his youthful experiences – as he presents them – remind at least the modern reader of the painful experience Dickens himself had struggled with all his life when he was sent, a middle class boy, to work in a blacking factory. This happens in chapter seven of Book the second, when Bounderby boasts about the pictures hanging on the walls of his "smug little estate", the grotesque love nest bought for him and his wife:

"No, by George, I don't forget that I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. For years upon years, the only pictures in my possession, or that I could have got into my possession, by any means, unless I stole 'em, were the engravings of a man shaving himself in a boot, on the blacking bottles that I was overjoyed to use in cleaning boots with, and that I sold when they were empty for a farthing a-piece, and glad to get it!" (*Hard Times* :128-29).

Through Bounderby's half-deceitful, half-inspired eyes, we also have the chance of observing, as if in a cracked mirror, a circus-like, fairy London, centred around the Italian Opera, in Pall Mall, where a young Mrs Sparsit "in white satin and jewels, a blaze of splendour" could have met a vagrant destituted young Bounderby:

A hard bed the pavement of its Arcade used to make, I assure you. People like you, ma'am, accustomed from infancy to lie on down feathers, have no idea *how* hard a paving-stone is, without trying it (*Hard Times*: 35).

The mock pauper and the mock wealthy woman rehearse their comic act, and their fictions have a vitality of their own which should not be underestimated.

The only father figure, another image of the artist, who seems to partially work in the text of *Hard Times* is the owner of the circus, Mr Sleary, the manager of the horse-riding performances so similar to the popular plays Dickens enjoyed and made fun of when he tried to describe in a couple of articles in *Household Words* "The Amusement of the People". Sleary's portrait is certainly ironic, and Sleary himself has limited and temporary powers, being a second rate Prospero, afflicted by asthma and unwilling to save Sissy from Gradgrind's colonising plans: "Sleary is the nearest thing *Hard Times* offers to a father-substitute; but he cannot replace Gradgrind, as the circus cannot provide an alternative home. Sleary is not only a fairly weak character but he also remains largely cut off from the novel's plot, able to function only within the circus. It is as if he cannot enter the novel's 'reality'" (Higbie 1988: 95). All the same, Sleary is a magician, who can transform a cheap and childish performance into an act of mercy, while Tom – a blackamoor clown – hides in the circus and, at the same time, reveals the black nature of his unredeemed soul, becoming the subversive "other" he has already proved to be in the dark reality of Coketown, the robber, the traitor, seizing Bounderby's money which he was supposed to faithfully guard. His final act of transformation, from "comic blackamoor" to "a jothkin – a Carter" (*Hard Times*: 206), is performed thanks to a grotesque ritual of rebirth aided by a mug of beer:

Mr Sleary rapidly turned out from a box, a smock frock, a felt hat, an other essentials; the whelp rapidly changed clothes behind a screen of baize; Mr Sleary rapidly brought beer, and washed him white again (*Hard Times*: 216).

Being the only father figure who does not fail, who seems to possess total power over his women, Sleary is an idealised atemporal

version of the true patriarch, and even his readiness to leave Sissy with Gradgrind could be symbolically conceived as a magician's trick, meant to conquer the enemy's citadel.

Like Dickens, Sleary entertains people and amutheth them. A more refined Sleary, Dickens, the owner of a sort of paper circus, believes in the manipulative power of words, transforming hard facts into matters of the heart, the hard reality of the industrial city into the fragmented voices of his characters, telling very different stories and histories, and reshaping the whole experience into a discourse about the art of fiction, and its relation to literary tradition, narrative modes, contemporary ideologies, personal autobiography.

The major Italian scholar who dealt with Dickens in the fifties was Carlo Izzo, and his book on *L'autobiografismo in Charles Dickens*, mainly devoted to *David Copperfield* and to *Great Expectations* shows how Dickens could work with autobiographical details and place them in the dimension of nonsense and fairytale, as happens when Pip deconstructs and re-invents his visit to Satis House. In *Hard Times* autobiography incorporates into the narrative discourse the genesis of the work itself, based both on reading and on personal experience, from that first glimpse of interest generated by the article about Preston read in an Italian newspaper to the actual visit to Preston, which becomes printed matter in *Household Words*, the two autobiographical pieces, that is, where Dickens elaborates on his personal approach to that distant reality (somewhat close to George Orwell's expedition in *The Road to Wigan Pier*) and shifts the emphasis from the social milieu to the creation of characters and situations which provide the narration with a symbolic density. It is a method which reminds the critic of the creative process as recorded in Nathaniel Hawthorne's diaries (a very private document, while Dickens has to work in public, to reveal his mind to his accomplices, the readers). It is not by chance, I think, that the revaluation of *Hard Times* as "a moral fable" by F. R. Leavis was possibly helped by the knowledge of Hawthorne possessed by Leavis's very influential wife, Q. D. Leavis – and a clear connection between some of Hawthorne's works and *Hard Times* is suggested by Edward Stokes (1985), although, according to Stokes *Hard Times* is a rather inferior product. In any case, Dickens was strongly in favour of an interpretation which did not tie the novel to the topicality of the Preston strike, as we know from the letter to Peter Cunningham – March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1854 – in which he complains about Cunningham's comment because, among other shortcomings, "It localizes a story which has a direct purpose in reference to the working people all over England, and will cause, as I

know by former experience, characters to be fitted on to individuals whom I never saw or heard of in my life" (*Letters* 7: 291).

The relationship with *Household Words*, Dickens's paper-creature, inhabited by the author and by his chosen friends and colleagues, is ambivalent, because on the one hand *Hard Times* is introduced in order to save the weekly journal, and boost its falling sales; on the other hand, the text of the novel breaks through middle-class values, the familiar background of humorous pieces and national chronicles forming the backbone of the journal. As a matter of fact, *Hard Times* swallows up all the other contributions, so that its final instalment – August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1854 – is nearly all occupied by, colonised by the major text and, at the same time, its author re-arranges previous materials published in the journal, not only his own articles on Preston. Thus, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1853, we find an article on "Manchester Men at their Books", in which a fair amount of lines are devoted to the Manchester public library:

The reference library is crowded in the evening by working men; and their great delight and refreshment appears to consist in an escape from routine life to dreams of romance or peril, in relieving the monotony of toil with tales of battle, shipwreck, or adventure. In a word, the imagination, even in Manchester, refuses to be crushed. The pleasure book most read, during the first six months after the library opened, was – the *Arabian Nights*. The weary warehousemen, mill-hands, and shopkeepers spent their evenings with Haroun al Raschild. The next best books for them, after the *Arabian Nights*, appear to have been *Ivanhoe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (*Household Words* 195: 378).

The same kind of library and readers resurface in *Hard Times*, where Dickens's version is somewhat more conservative, but equally subversive to the eyes of Gradgrind:

It was a disheartening circumstance, but a melancholy fact, that even these readers persisted in wondering. They wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read more fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker (*Hard Times*: 38).

On the 3<sup>d</sup> of December, in the same year, in the leading article "Fairyland in '54" (*Household Words* 193), the author's loving memory of his youthful books – a long list starting with the Grimm Brothers,

Madame D'Aulnois and the *Arabian Nights* – is rekindled by the spectacle of a modern fairy palace, not ironically, a Coketown factory, but The Crystal Place, a marvellous building indeed, whose exotic and extraordinary items make it similar to a cave full of treasures, or, maybe, a library full of fairy books. The same kind of attitude was displayed by Dickens in “Fraud on the Fairies” (*Household Words* 184), but with a further effect of ambiguity, since the author declares his indignation about the manipulation of fairy-lore, of an old English tradition, and offers as an example of its corruption a parody of Cinderella, placed in a contemporary background. Nevertheless the same kind of literary pastiche appears as one of the substantial devices employed in *Hard Times* where fables can and must live anew, to dispel the deadly shadow of the machine-world.

In a sense, both the first three chapters of *Hard Times* – aptly published on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1854, Fool’s Day (*Household Words* 210) – and the other pieces printed in the same issue establish an uneasy and somewhat subterranean relationship between themselves, as the reader can perceive both in the story of a poor and virtuous scythe-stone cutter, tormented by a drunken father-in-law, dying in the bottom of a cave, and in a controversial article on “Rights and Wrongs of Women”. In *Hard Times*, women seem to hold the key to a rejuvenated universe: Rachel with her sense of pity and never-ending charity; Louisa, whose life has become a suffering journey through the urban hell; Sissy, the ultimate child not only of the circus, but of Dickens’s novel itself:

All children loving her; she grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show will be the Writing on the Wall (*Hard Times*: 226).

Dickens actually questions and cannibalises the more traditional points of view supported by his own journal: the subversive weaver at the loom transforms his meta-text into an intertextual discourse both reinforcing and denying the dominant ideology expressed in *Household Words*. After all, if we want to quote the title of the first novel of Anthony Powell’s great narrative sequence, *The Music of Time*, it’s all a question of upbringing. *Hard Times* also has a musical rhythm – fit for a journal “conducted by Charles Dickens” – suggesting future developments in the discontinuous and on the whole shady pattern of events and characters which make up the scenery of the industrial

town, imposing its own grim authority on the personal stories of some of its inhabitants and visitors, on the countryside, where natural horses and power horses can still compete as suitable vehicles connecting the city with its surroundings, with the remote reality of London, while the unpredictable but cyclical movements of Sleary's circus point towards other lands, other worlds between reality and imagination. Looking for the circus and for its mysterious signs requires a difficult journey in the labyrinth of industrial England, in those areas where, years later, Dickens would perform his Readings:

[...] the town to which Sissy had directed him [Gradgrind] was within three hours' journey of Liverpool, whence he [Tom] could be swiftly dispatched to any part of the world. But, caution being necessary in communicating with him [...] it was concerted that Sissy and Louisa should repair to the place in question, by a circuitous course, alone; and that the unhappy father, setting forth at another time and leaving the town by an opposite direction, should get round to the same bourne by another and wider route [...]. The First thing they saw on entering the town was the skeleton of Sleary's Circus. The company had departed for another town more than twenty miles off and had opened their last night. [...] It was noon before they began to find the bills of Sleary's Horse-riding on barns and walls, and one o'clock when they stopped in the market-place (*Hard Times*: 210-11).

After all, the true miracle of the master magician – the author – is not to conjure up the circus simply as an oppositional set of values challenging the iron philosophy of facts and of the industrial production, but to forge the tool of imagination itself, the alchemic crucible allowing the dear reader to find a hole in the fabric of everyday reality and become the spectator of a play, in which he or she is an extra, or maybe, under disguise, one of the main characters. Thus the circus is a medium, the revelation that the representation of reality is a matter of clowns, of buffoons, of horse-riders, of seductive young ladies – and that on the stage of life all the characters play their comic roles, exactly like the most abject and the most mythical fathers of all, Father Jupe, tumbling while employing his funny Shakespearian language. Art is a question of heart, as well as of literary consciousness.

*Hard Times* was one of the major sources of inspiration for the great Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini. Especially in some of his films – *La strada*, *Giulietta degli Spiriti*, *Otto e mezzo* (a fanciful autobiography as Dickens could have wished) – Fellini employed the circus in a way which reminds us of the Victorian novelist, as a source of entertainment, even of literary quotations, and of escape from the hard facts of life, but also as the search for another interpretation of



them, an interpretation that only the artist has the power – or the desire – to project onto the texture of the imagined reality he is trying to narrate.

If a book is similar to a library, whose readers select fairy tales and romances instead of blue books or sociological tracts, if a book is the metaphor of a family weekly review which cannot be devoted to one subject, to one single vision of reality, a book can become in its turn a complex entity reaching towards contemporary worlds – the flesh and blood of everyday experience – investing them with the spell of its words.

If the real library in Manchester does still function as a self-contained alternative universe, if the fictional library in Coketown still refuses and refutes the authoritarian wisdom of the pedagogical works cramming its shelves, then, in both universes, we can find among their favourite books Charles Dickens's – Carlo Dickens's – *Hard Times*.

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