

LINGUISTIC CARICATURE IN *HARD TIMES*

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Introduction

Hard Times was first issued as a weekly serial in *Household Words* between 1 April and 12 August, 1854; then published as a single volume in the same year. It was fairly neglected, at least by the critics, until F.R. Leavis 'revaluated' it in 1948¹. Maybe this was because, to a certain extent, *Hard Times* stood apart from the main trends in Dickens's fiction. From a thematic point of view, it was his sole attempt at an 'industrial' novel taking place in an urban North country setting which he knew only superficially—yet it is fair to remember that a number of critics would say that Dickens did not mean *Hard Times* to be an 'industrial' novel at all².

There is a general agreement that Dickens's views on the class-struggle, unionism, and the industrial proletariat in general, were not particularly sound—to say the least³. Maybe a certain overlapping—conscious or unconscious—of the 'political' and the 'artistic' sides of the novel in the mind of some critics has been responsible for the comparative disparagement of the novel.

¹ See F.R. Leavis, «*Hard Times: An Analytic Note*», in *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, [1948] 1960), pp. 227-48.

² See David Craig, «Introduction» to his edition of *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 16, and «*Hard Times* and the Condition of England», in his *The Real Foundations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 125ff.

³ See P.J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 224-35; Ramón López Ortega, *Movimiento obrero y novela inglesa* (Salamanca: Universidad, 1976), pp. 47-52, and David Craig, «Images of Factory Life», in Francisco García Tortosa and Ramón López Ortega (eds.), *English Literature and the Working Class* (Sevilla: Universidad, 1980), pp. 140-42). Some of Dickens's views on the social question as displayed in the novel were implicit in his first-hand account of the Preston conflicts: See his report «On Strike», published in *Household Words*, December 1853.

Let us bear in mind that this is not a recent phenomenon. Chesterton remembered what had happened when the novel was first published and, by doing so, hinted at what would go on happening frequently. He wrote:

While economists were writing soft words he [Dickens] wrote *Hard Times*, which Macaulay called «sullen Socialism» because it was not complacent whiggism⁴

In any case, today we have a considerable body of criticism on *Hard Times*—either on the novel specifically or from broader viewpoints—which deals chiefly with the sociopolitical aspects of the work⁵.

Yet there is not the only feature which individualizes *Hard Times* among Dickens's production. Editorial circumstances have left their imprint on a novel which first appeared as a *weekly* serial -while Dickens was accustomed to *monthly* parts. Therefore, *Hard Times* had to be written in a series of short, almost self-sufficient chapters, with no room left for digression, sub-plots or inventiveness. As has been pointed out, Dickens *had* to concentrate on the plot and the theme: he himself complained, in a letter to John Forster, about the «disjointed form of publication» of the novel, while grudgingly admitting that «the difficulty of the space is CRUSHING»⁶.

As a result we have a highly economical text, subdivided into three books which give the whole a tight structure and underline the main themes. The chapters, 37 in all (few when compared to the 64 in *David Copperfield* or the 67 in *Bleak House*), are both distinguished and interrelated in the novel, creating a movement which is at once halting and continuous.

If the book, as a whole, is more condensed than other Dickensian novels, so is its language. F.R. Leavis finishes his essay on *Hard Times* by stressing the author's «command of word, phrase, rhythm and image»⁷. Recently, Sørensen has further demonstrated that Dickens really had a fine ear for language⁸. A consequence of such fits is that we find in the characters of *Hard Times* a higher degree of *caricature* than in the author's other works. As is well known, Dickens tends to identify the physique of his characters with their personality: by caricaturizing the former, he gives us a clear-cut view of the latter.

Of course the characters' language comes fully into the picture. As Quirk has rightly emphasized, in Dickens's art speech is «an integral part of the personality of each character and a part which we recognize each time he or she appears»⁹ -especially so in this novel, we can add. Peculiar locutions and systems

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Burns & Dales [1906], 1975), p. 94.

⁵ See P.E. Grary (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of «Hard Times»* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), plus the items mentioned in notes 2 and 3 above.

⁶ See D.R. Elloway, «Commentary» to his edition of the novel (London: Longman, 1970), p. 334f.

⁷ Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 247.

⁸ Knud Sørensen, «Charles Dickens: Linguistic Innovator», *English Studies*, Vol. 65, N° 3 (June 1984), pp. 237-47.

⁹ Randolph Quirk, «Some Observations on the Language of Dickens», *Review of English Literature*, N° 2 (July 1961), p. 21.

of grammar to individualize his characters are particularly striking in *Hard Times*. In other words, the *idiolect* which Dickens bestows on all the major characters in the novel will be a key-element in delineating his or her personality -even to a greater extent than the characters' physical appearance, behaviour, belongings or surrounding atmosphere.

Language produces caricature. Accordingly, in what follows I will try to dissect and analyze the *linguistic* aspect of these caricatures in *Hard Times*. As I hope will be seen, a number of factors constituting the characters' idiolect, such as their use of slang or jargon, their regional and social accents, their favourite catch-phrases, and the presence or absence of different codes, styles and registers in their speech will be a major device in the individualizing process referred to above¹⁰.

Mr and Mrs Gradgrind

Mr Gradgrind, the eminently practical man, opens the story with a doctrinaire and dogmatic account of his 'Hard Facts' philosophy (p. 1f.). Afterwards, we are informed that he had «virtually retired from the wholesale hardware trade..., and was now looking about for a suitable opportunity of making an arithmetical figure in Parliament» (p. 8).

A sincere, but utterly misguided character, he boasts of being led by Reason only. As one would expect, his speech mirrors his personality: he speaks in a totally standardized variety of English. The same as many other Dickensian characters, Mr Gradgrind is subjected to personal and linguistic caricature¹¹. He asks the child Sissy to «call yourself Cecilia» (p. 3). His own young children are «Louisa» and «Thomas» (never «Loo» and «Tom») for him (p. 10). He and his wife address each other «Mrs» and «Mr», in the formal Victorian fashion (pp. 15, 17)¹².

As far as contracted forms go, he uses the more 'correct' ones (*I'm, you're*) only when addressing his young daughter (p. 15), intimate friends like Mr Bounderby (p. 22), or 'inferior' people like the circus 'gentleman', E.W.B. Childers (p. 26). In general, he talks in a dogmatic, self-asserted and bookish style. This is especially true when he shows off his philosophy and basic beliefs. Unlike Bounderby, he is neither boastful nor pompous. Naturally enough, he has trouble in understanding the circus people's slang, and Childers has to act as his interpreter

¹⁰ Text quotations follow this edition: *Hard Times*. Introduction by G.K. Chesterton (London: Dent & Dutton, [1907], 1974. Everyman's Library, N° 1.292). Other paperback editions of the novel include those that have been referred to above, notes 2 and 6, and the one which will be mentioned below, note 11.

¹¹ The linguistic caricature starts of course with his very name, which suggests the ideas of *grad-ing*, *graduating*, *gradual* and *grinding*, as López Ortega has pointed out in his edition of the novel (Madrid: Alhambra, 1981), p. 25n.

¹² See G.L. Brock, *The Language of Dickens* (London: André Deutsch, 1970), p. 215.

(p. 27f.). In the last context, he is reluctant to use the word 'goosed': he says it, we are informed, «forcing the word out of himself» (p. 28).

Furthermore, he tends to correct his own words when producing long speeches—the result being an abundance of dashes in the text. This could be considered a realistic feature, very well conveyed by Dickens, and meant to indicate how carefully Mr Gradgrind chooses his words and how he tends to build his 'philosophical' sentences in an argumentative way (p. 87f.)¹³. His many statements (for he does not question much!) are short, precise, and emphatic (p. 16). He makes frequent use of commands (p. 5). At times his language becomes rhetorical, as when admonishing his children (p. 11).

Significantly enough in a novel where many of the characters employ catch-phrases, Mr Gradgrind uses none (apart from the word *fact* itself!). This would indicate his correctness and his analytical mind—something which does not allow him to 'reduce' things to oversimplifying tags—, and also the fact that his personality is perfectly drawn in itself, so that the usage of subsidiary tags is unnecessary. On the contrary, his 'hard facts' vocabulary is pretty extensive: «facts», «measure», «calculations», «arithmetic», «mechanical», «demonstrations», «practical» or «figures» are words which come often to his lips. His speech is as 'square' as he and his own house are.

When «time went on in Cocketown» and Mr Gradgrind reappears (see diagram below), he remains unchanged. He addresses Sissy as «Jupe», (p. 81), makes a minimal number of contractions when admonishing her or when addressing his grown-up daughter, and avoids contracted forms when talking to the latter about something important, like her own marriage (pp. 85-90). Mr Gradgrind has become an MP for Cocketown. It would not be far-fetched to suspect that his original Northern accent—however mollified by his belonging to the upper classes—would have almost vanished: he has been associated with the London political class and its Queen's English by now.

Mr Gradgrind is «at home for the vacation» when we last meet him (p. 192). He is to undergo a deep change of personality at this final stage in the story. Louisa's and Tom's misfortunes, which epitomize his system's bitter failure, make him «a wiser man, and a better man» (p. 247). A remarkable change in his speech habits becomes apparent: first, he now speaks «in a subdued and troubled voice, very different from his usual dictatorial manner» (p. 198), and in «a forlorn manner» (p. 200), being often «at a loss for words» (p. 198) -for words expressing his sentiments and feelings; something new to him. Second, he becomes reluctant to use, not the word 'goosed' as before, but the word *system* itself! (p. 200). Third, he now addresses his protégée, Cecilia Jupe, as Sissy (p. 216).

Likewise, the contrast between Mr Gradgrind and the «Bully of Humility», namely Mr Bounderby, is more clearly displayed at this stage: Mr Gradgrind has 'softened', while Mr Bounderby has 'hardened' (p. 214). The former's speech has

¹³ Dickens had already used dashes, as a means of identifying a character, in *The Pickwick Papers*—there they were meant to show the jerky, broken speech of Mr Jingle: See Raymond Chapman, *The Language of English Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), p. 73.

become more humanized: he admits that «we are all liable to mistakes», is «patient», even «submissive» (p. 215), talks «in a low voice», and addresses Sissy «in a tone of softened gratitude» (p. 248). He does not get angry anymore when he does not understand Sleary's «jothkin», but simply admits, «I don't understand» (p. 255).

Direct imperatives give way to polite requests in his speech: «Let me beg you to restrain...» (p. 213). On the same line, self-asserted statements give way to questions now: «I ask you—ignorantly and humbly, my daughter—for the better do you think?» (p. 200). Finally, he becomes movingly humane when he asks Bitzer, the accomplished product of the system, if he has a heart? (p. 257).

Mrs Gradgrind, for her part, is a character only subservient to her husband. A «little, thin, white, pink-eyed bundle of shawls, of surpassing feebleness» (p. 131), she is dominated by Mr Gradgrind and his theories. Tending to be pushed often into the background, her essential hollowness is epitomized in one of her two favourite tags, the suffix *-ology* or *-ologies* (p. 15). This stands in her feeble mind for anything concerning sciences, figures and facts. Her second favourite catch-phrase, «I shall never hear the last of it»—from her husband—(p. 48) is meant to remind us of her subordinate nature. Called by the author an «imbecile» (p. 13) and «an absolute idiot» (p. 16), she is nonetheless given a tragic and symbolic dimension at her dying moment, when she acknowledges that «something—not an Ology at all—» (p. 179) was omitted from her husband's system.

Mr Bounderby

Mr Bounderby «was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not... A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man... A man who was the Bully of Humility» (p. 12). Such qualities Dickens bestows upon this character: as a consequence, anything concerning his person (speech included) will be bound to justify that *a priori* caricature¹⁴. Therefore, he will be earmarked by his bigotry, egotism, pomposity and also cruelty. He will speak an unreal kind of Standard English, made of pet-words, catch-phrases, chichés and nonsensical constructions. He is a sad caricature, in a word, drawn bitterly and farcically by the author. He remains completely unchanged throughout the story.

His boasting about his supposedly wretched past is his dominant characteristic: showing off the fact that he is a self-made man, he explains how, after being born «in a ditch» (p. 13), he has been «vagabond, errand-boy, labourer, porter, clerk, chief manager, small partner, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown» (p. 14).

¹⁴ Again, the name gives us a clue to the man's personality. On the one hand, Bounderby *sounds* 'explosive', 'windy' and 'bombastic' to an English ear. On the other, a *bounder* is an upper-class 19th century slang word meaning «a vulgar though well-dressed man, an unwelcome pretender to Society, a vulgarly irrepressible person within Society»: See Eric Partridge, *The Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 105 *s.v.*

He makes extensive use of contractions, which are rather different from Gradgrind's in that he uses them on any occasion and in any circumstance. He eventually shifts into non-standard forms such as *a-going*, *'em*, *thank'ee* or *ain't*. In fact, though normally standard, his idiolect is a queer mixture of short, crippled sentences and a rough, unimaginative choice of words. Likewise, his speech is *always* blunt (p. 64), often emphatic (p. 41), and almost totally self-centered: I's are prevalent when he holds the floor (p. 59).

Bounderby is harsh and rude to everybody, looking down on the circus people and abruptly telling Sissy about her father's leaving (pp. 26-33). With Mrs Sparsit he makes use of all sorts of contractions, idioms, etc., while scorning her for her higher origins: «What's the matter now, ma'am», he says, «in a very short, rough way» (p. 263), as well as: «Not that *I* care for that society, you know! But *you* do» (p. 94). He is so rude as to say to himself, «I'll have the skin of her nose» (p. 92).

His marriage speech is pompous and bigoted to the extreme: he says he hopes that «every spinster may find as good a husband as my wife has found» (p. 79). With Mr Harthouse, his inverted snobbery becomes apparent: «I have never been in the way of learning compliments myself», he says, «and I don't profess to understand the art of paying 'em. In fact, despise 'em» (p. 115). His self-definition is this: «I am a bit of dirty riff-raff, and a genuine scrap of tag, rag, and bobtail» (p. 113) -which sums up perfectly the man's character.

Poor Stephen Blackpool he treats first with scorn, then in a revengeful manner. The worker is just «you» or «lad» for him. He commands this 'hand' of his to «speak up!», his «blowing» manner contrasting with Stephen's «quiet» ways (pp. 131-134). Next, he addresses his wife «in a blustering way» (p. 175), and admits that «I am not speaking to you [Mr Gradgrind] politely; but, as you are aware, I am *not* polite» (p. 215). Talking about Tom, he affirms that «if he don't fall in my way, I shan't, for it won't be worth my while to do it» (p. 219). Finally, he defines his conjugal situation by saying that «the two horses wouldn't pull together» (p. 219).

When Bounderby gets angry or nervous, his speech is filled with colloquialisms and contractions. On his discovery of the Bank robbery, he exclaims: «Here's Tom Gradgrind's daughter knows pretty well what it might have been, if you don't» (p. 162), then goes on making extensive use of contractions (*let's*, *you're*, *didn't*, *hadn't*), and ends up saying that «they have got the gift of the gab» (p. 165).

Bounderby has not one, but several favourite swear-words, tags and mottoes: his «by the Lord Harry!» (p. 131), «by George!» (p. 92), «I am Joshia Bounderby of Coketown» (p. 96)¹⁵, «I was born in a ditch» (p. 13), or workers wanting «to be fed on turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon» (p. 217), are all stupid clichés which mirror his coarse, non-analytical mind. He refuses to have any consideration for others, but simply imposes upon them one of his unimaginative and harsh judgements, for which he claims universal validity.

¹⁵ This catch-phrase of Bounderby has been well analyzed by Susana Onega, «Temática y caracterización en *Hard Times*», *Miscelánea*, N° 5 (1980), p. 47f.

But everything about Bounderby proves to be one big hoax when Mrs Pegler, his mother, uncovers his true background: he had never been deserted by his mother, nor had he been a ragged London street-boy. He comes «of humble parents», who «never thought it hardship on themselves to pinch a bit that he may write and cipher beautifully». He was «put ‘prentice» at eight, and later on «worked his own way forward to be rich and thriving» (p. 234). Seen in this light, Mr Bounderby cuts a very curious figure: having lower-class origins and having then become a rich man, he exaggerates his own merits and shows a profound contempt for the humble classes, to which he originally belonged -yet he likewise disdains the high-bred (Mrs Sparsit, Harthouse) for, at bottom, he is bitterly envious of their superior origins. In short, he is both a snob and an inverted snob, and his idiolect—a strange compound of blunt, unrefined items within a standard framework—reflects this situation. As far as his possible accent goes, it is not improbable that he uses (and even boasts of, at times) a fairly marked Northern non-refined accent.

Louisa and Tom

Louisa’s and Tom’s lives run almost parallel in the story (see table above). Both are a product of the system, and both are destroyed by it -though in very different ways. Louisa is annihilated in her imagination, feelings and personality: her catch-phrase, «what does it matter?» (p. 89) sums up well her own passive attitude to life. Tom, on the other hand, is «the Whelp», an indolent and selfish social parasite who eventually becomes a robber. Having different personalities, they develop distinct idiolects.

Louisa uses common colloquial contractions (*don’t, can’t, wouldn’t*), especially when addressing her family -yet she does not when talking to Harthouse (p. 189). A victim of the system, her feeble traces of self-will («yet when the night comes, fire bursts out, father», p. 89) result eventually in her cursing the hour in which she was «born to such a destiny» (p. 193), strong condemnatory words which fall heavily upon her father. Yet, as a heroine, she never loses dignity or is made an object of ridicule. Her speech is perfectly correct, and never pretentious or affected though often literary (p. 216).

Tom, Louisa’s only love, is a different case. Like Bounderby’s or Gradgrind’s, his personality is conditioned beforehand. Less self-willed than his sister, he does not even say a word when Mr Gradgrind finds his two children peeping through the back of Sleary’s circus (pp. 10-12). Very early in the novel, he confesses that «I am sick of my life» (p. 144). Next, when he has become «almost a young man» (p. 80), he uses an idiolect which clearly identifies him: his is a mixture of inverted snobbery (constant use of substandard features) and indolence (likewise reflected in his speech). He makes a generous use of contractions (*I’ll, an’t, mightn’t, I’d*) and calls Louisa things like «a capital girl» (p. 84), «a first rate sister» (p. 97), and «a regular girl» (p. 121), while his father is «the governor» (*ibid.*): in other

words, the key notion to Tom's speech is *slang* by now. His speech is full of juvenile slang—a public-schoolish, upmarket kind of playful and casual vocabulary.

Tom, as a character, is carefully developed by the author by means of a masterful choice of adjectives and adverbs: he is «a sullen young fellow», who talks «sulkily» (p. 157) or «bitterly» (p. 223). He even «growls» when addressing Rachael, who is but «a pretty article» to him (p. 224). Again, at the end of the novel he answers «moodily» to his father and «grumbles» when cynically reporting his robbery to him (p. 254f.).

As has been written, Tom is a lout, and talks like one¹⁶. In the third chapter of the second book, entitled «The Whelp», he proves himself to be an overtalkative and hypocritical sort of fellow by openly boasting of his gambling debts and easy way of life. He answers Harthouse's question «do you smoke?» by saying «I believe you» (p. 118; probably rhyming slang for 'Yes, I do'). For Tom, Mr Bounderby is «our governor» (p. 120). About his sister's marriage he says that «I should get into scrapes there, if she put old Bounderby's pipe out» (p. 121). Louisa is «a regular girl... she don't mind» (*ibid.*). Concerning Bounderby's householder, «Mother Sparsit—he says—never set her cap at Bounderby» (p. 122; that is, she never tried to enveigle him into marriage). His insolence reaches its high point when, at the end, he says to his sister that «you never cared for me» (p. 284).

Sissy and Bitzer

Cecilia (Sissy) Jupe performs a leading role in *Hard Times*: her introduction opens, by contrast, the bitter tone of the novel; later she contributes to Gradgrind's change of attitude, and becomes a solace for Louisa and Rachael. Finally it is she who, making the Gradgrind party reassess the circus, produces the final contrast and triumph of Fancy and sweet-heartness over the cold 'Fact and Figures' philosophy. Once again her speech forms part of her personal caricature by mirroring her character. A rather conventional figure, her speech is conventional too.

Although she comes from a background precisely defined by its non-standard linguistic characteristics (see below), she speaks in a very correct Standard English almost from beginning to end. In this she parallels other Dickensian characters of the *Oliver Twist* Type: whereas her background—a modest, happy childhood, a loving father, a world of fancy—explains, or is meant to explain, her gentle character, current literary conventions answer for her 'unrealistic' idiolect.

Yet there is an attempt at realism here, so that a certain development takes place in her linguistic habits. As a child she produces a couple of substandard constructions («it's father as calls me Sissy», p. 5; «they bruise themselves very

¹⁶ Brooks, *The Language of Dickens*, p. 100.

bad sometimes», p. 23), uses the normal contractions (*don't, it's*) and respectfully addresses her protector *Sir*. Afterwards she is corrected by Louisa when producing a number of malapropisms on school subjects: Sissy says «natural» for «national» and «stutterings» for «statistics» (p. 50f.)¹⁷.

When «time has passed in Coketown» (p. 80) she has developed into a maturer character and «an affectionate, earnest, good young woman» (p. 81) who has not been and will not be thwarted by the system. Louisa's formerly cold attitude towards Sissy changes now, at the same time as Sissy becomes a solace to her. While at the beginning she was referred to as «Jupe», at this stage everybody calls her «Sissy» and, finally, Louisa will call her «my dear», and Mr Gradgrind himself, «my child» (p. 248). She had already dismissed and ridiculed Harthouse with her plainness, self-assurance and modest dignity. «But this is very strong!» (p. 206), Harthouse had commented to himself on that occasion.

Sissy's loving humanity is much enhanced by a deliberate counterpoint: Bitzer, the «colourless boy» and the accomplished product of the system, who stands in complete contrast to Sissy¹⁸.

His early appearance in the novel parallels Sissy's (see table above). His dry 'definition' of a horse (p. 4) contrasts abruptly with what Sissy is and represents. He reappears later on, again with Sissy, only to show off his contempt for «horse-riders» (p. 22). In the central part of the novel, whereas Sissy's mollifying influence becomes apparent in Gradgrind's house, he has just succeeded in holding «the respectable office of general spy and informer in the establishment» (p. 103). He has also acquired a servile tag to address Mrs Sparsit: the title *ma'am*, which he repeats a great deal of times (no fewer than 44 times in a five-page fragment of conversation) when talking to Bounderby's governess. The one occasion that he lets slip *my lady*, the author comments: «he now and then slid into my lady, instead of ma'an, as an involuntary acknowledgement of Mrs Sparsit's personal dignity and claims to reverence» (p. 102).

Again, he is indirectly confronted with Sissy in his third appearance, when Mrs Gradgrind is dying. Whereas Sissy stands at her guardian's bedside, Bitzer's only task is to serve, the author says, «as a fit colourless servitor at Death's door» (p. 176).

At the very end of the novel, Bitzer is contrasted not only with Sissy, but also with his former Hard-Facts master Gradgrind. The pupil has sunk deep into the system while the master has come out of it: Mr Gradgrind asks him if he has a heart, his response being, «in a very bussiness-like and logical manner», that he does have an organ called the heart, as Harvey had demonstrated, and that he is «accessible to Reason only» (p. 257).

¹⁷ As Mary Eagleton and David Pierce comment, Dickens of course shares Sissy's malapropisms as true perceptions: See their *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979, p. 43).

¹⁸ Bitzer's name and personality seem to have had a real-life model: See López Ortega's edition of the novel, p. 26n.

Mrs Sparsit

Mrs Sparsit, the «highly connected lady» (p. 37) is undoubtedly the most grotesque character in the story¹⁹. She is made to speak not plain or ‘normal’ Standard English, but a veritable caricature of it. She is pretentious and hypercorrect in her speech. However ‘flat’, she is not a ‘simple’ character. She is hypocritical, full of prejudices and servile, and is used by Bounderby as a foil to his own supposedly miserable past. She is full of contempt for Louisa, calling her «Miss Gradgrind» instead of «Mrs Bounderby» («I really cannot call her Mrs Bounderby», she informs Harthouse in p. 174).

Yet she is no fool, but a very shrewd woman. While flattering Bounderby, she knows how to manipulate him for her own ends. On the other hand, one feels that her origins are not so high as she claims or implies and, in any case, they prove unremarkable. Her subtle exploitation of Bounderby’s stupidity becomes increasingly apparent: the author tells us how «Mrs Sparsit’s ‘Sir’, in addressing Mr Bounderby, was a word of ceremony, rather exacting consideration for herself in the use, than honouring him» (p. 40). Afterwards, she addresses her patron «with an affectation of humility the very opposite of his», while feeling «a kind of social widowhood upon her» (p. 41). The following exchange is significant enough:

Mr Bounderby: Not that *I* care for such society, you know! But *you* do.
Mrs Sparsit: Mr Bounderby, you are very considerate. (p. 94f.).

When she is asked whether she has heard Bitzer snoring, she answers, «I have heard him on such occasions produce sounds of a nature similar to what may be sometimes heard in Dutch clocks» (p. 163). At times, her vocabulary and grammatical patterns are so pretentious as to produce sentences like «to take refuge in tears» (p. 214) or «Sir, there was wont to be an elasticity in you which I sadly miss. Be buoyant, Sir!» (p. 185).

Significantly enough, the only time she uses some contractions (*don’t, it’s*) is when Bounderby has got married. She does not miss the chance to flatter him and slight Louisa (p. 168). Yet what seems specially interesting in her is that, in complete contrast with her public utterances, she takes off the mask when she is alone. Then she produces very shrewd and cynical comments on everything around her.

For instance, she pigeon-holes Harthouse as soon as she sees him: «Five-and-thirty, good-looking, good-figure, good teeth, good voice, good breeding, well-dressed, dark hair, bold eyes» (p. 107). She muses about the Louisa-Harthouse

¹⁹ Her name is a pun on *sparsity, sparsely, sparse*, that is, thinly scattered, not dense, thick or crowded, and refers to her idiosyncrasy. When young, we are informed, she was «chiefly noticeable for a slender body, weakly supported on two long slim props, and surmounted by no head worth mentioning» (p. 38). There is also of course a pun on *spar*, a wooden or metal pole used as a mast, yard, boom, etc.

affair: «This is a device to keep him out of the way... Harthouse is with his sister [Tom's] now» (p. 187). When discovering the lovers in the garden, she reflects: «You may hang your head... I don't know what they see in you when you hold it up» (p. 189). When quarreling with her patron in the final chapter, her speech loses all the precedent pomposity, becoming strong and full of bitterness: «Don't disparage your judgement—she says—. Everybody knows how unerring Mr Bounderby's judgement is. Everybody has had proofs of it...» (p. 265). Naturally enough, she is dismissed by Bounderby.

But when she is really ridiculed, is on 'discovering' Mrs Pegler: all her hypocrisy and prejudices are fully displayed in this sardonic scene. Holding Mrs Pegler by the collar, she treats her as if she were a dangerous wild beast. She displays a coarseness in her speech and behaviour normally unbelievable for such a highly connected lady: «Come out—she shouts—, or we'll have you dragged out!... Leave her alone, everybody! Let nobody touch her. She belongs to me. Come in, ma'am!... or we'll have you dragged in!» (p. 231). Then a sardonic contrast is provided: «Fetch Mr Bounderby down!», she commands. And when he is in: «Sir—she says—, I trust it is my good fortune to produce a person you have much desired to find. Stimulated by my wish to relieve your mind, Sir...» (p. 232).

This strange old woman Mrs Pegler, Bounderby's mother, who is the cause of Mrs Sparsit's fall «from her pinnacle of exultation into the Slough of Despond» (p. 236), had already appeared twice in the narrative (see table above). In book I, chapter 12, she stands before Blackpool «cleanly and plainly dressed... an old woman from the country» (p. 68). In book II, chapter 6, Stephen himself «had to conquer an instinctive propensity to dislike this old woman» (p. 138). Finally, in book III, chapter 5, she explains her and her son's true background: she is socially «humble», and owns «a little village shop» (p. 234). Just a couple of things she says, in contrast with his son's torrential verbosity about himself. Now the question is, does her background correspond with her idiolect?

In fact, she speaks a gentle, smooth and plain variety of Standard English. When we first meet her she uses the normal contractions (*didn't*, *I'm*, *that's*) and colloquialisms (she came «by Parliamentary»; p. 69). In her second appearance she tends to use contracted forms only when she is asked about her son and gets nervous (p. 137). Her non-standard features (some of them are general substandard forms and some others North country usages) are not many: the contraction *an't*, the use of the words *lad* and *lass*, expressions like «eigh sure!», ««dreadful busy!» and «I come regular», or the use of *says you?* as a question-tag (pp. 78 and 260f.). Most of these are employed only once. Therefore, one would think that her idiolect is too standardized for her background: you would have expected a more socially and regionally marked variety of English for her. But she is, if not a heroine properly speaking, a 'good', even idealized character. As a consequence her speech needs to be as plain as possible, thus producing a sharp contrast with both Mrs Sparsit's and Bounderby's speech eccentricities. It is not a matter of 'lack of consistency' on the author's part, but a current—all well used here—literary convention.

Harthouse

Mr James Harthouse, the political agent from London, enters the scene when the general tone of the novel has already been established (see table above)²⁰. His task will be to push the plot towards Gradgrind's and Luisa's final catharsis. His first words, addressed to Mrs Sparsit, set his personality's key note: «I beg your pardon—he says—; pray excuse me. «Then he goes on to flatter her: she is not a native, he thinks?, while finding her «very philosophical» (p. 107).

Harthouse combines the «indolence of his manner» and his «accessions of boredom» with a cultivated languor and a «lightness and smoothness of speech» (p. 108). Like Bounderby and Mrs Sparsit in their respective ways, he uses the system for his own ends -till he is adequately disposed of by Sissy. A sarcastic account of his background is displayed by the author in book II, chapter 2. He belongs to the kind of people who «yaw-yawned» in their speech, «in imitation of fine gentlemen». Before «'going in' for statistics», he had tried life «as a Cornet of Dragoons, and found it a bore; and had then strolled to Jerusalem, and got bored there; and had gone yatching about the world, and got bored everywhere» (p. 111f.). In short, he is both the aristocratic counterpart of the Utilitarians and a social parasite. Once again, his speech will be in accord with his personality.

He always agrees with Bounderby («Mr Bounderby, perfectly right», he says; p. 113). Paralelly, he gloats in the whelp's admiration for him, calling him «Tom» and «my dear fellow» (p. 119f.) and addressing him in a very casual way: «don't mind me, you know», or «come, Tom!» (p. 120). He also knows how to manipulate Louisa: he does not use contractions when addressing her (p. 152), and talks to her in an absolutely polite way («may I hint at the probability of your sometimes supplying him with money with these purposes?», p. 153). He also manages to flatter Mrs Sparsit. At one point he talks exactly like her, fully adopting her hypercorrect style:

Mrs Sparsit: I recall, Sir, that on that occasion you went so far as to say you were actually apprehensive of Miss Gradgrind.

Mr Harthouse: Your memory does me more honour than my insignificance deserves. I availed myself of your obliging hints to correct my timidity... (p. 173).

As for Tom, while endeavouring to be familiar with him in the way commented above, he thinks of him as «a whelp»²¹ and «an ass» (p. 159). His sybil-

²⁰ The connotations of his name are pretty clear: Saint *James* is the patron saint of England, and London is the Court of St James. *Harthouse* makes us think of *harsh*, *hard*, and also—by way of ironic contrast—of *heart*. Maybe there is another pun on *Harthouse*, which would refer to the House of Commons: a political body, therefore, to which this character is connected, that is *harsh* and *hard* while it should be full of *heart*. There could also be a complementary pun on *hot-house* -that is, the heated building for growing delicate plants.

²¹ David Lodge has discussed very well the cliché *whelp* as having been first used by Harthouse and then adopted by the novelist himself: See «The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*», in *The Language of Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 95f.

line way of conquering Louisa's attention is reflected in his speech: «My dear Louisa -as Tom says», he addresses her in p. 182. Afterwards, he courts her in a ridiculously melodramatic fashion: «My dearest love... knowing you were alone, was it possible that I could stay away?... To look at your sunny welcome that has warmed me into life, and to be received in your frozen manner, is heart-rending... Your cruel commands are implicitly to be obeyed...» (p. 189). Yet he does not hide his ironic views about Bounderby before the latter's wife (p. 155), nor does he care about exposing his egotistical creed before Louisa («I attach not the least importance to any opinions», p. 116), and also before Sissy («I am not a moral sort of fellow... I am as immoral as need be», p. 208).

Finally, his favourite meaningless motto, «what will be, will be» (p. 210)²², together with his catch-phrase, the slangish expression 'go in for', which he repeats dozens of times, epitomize the hollow and detached nature of this chameleonic gentleman.

Stephen Blackpool and Rachael

«In the hardest working part of Coketown..., among the multitude of Coketowners, generally called 'the Hands'... lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age... a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity» (p. 56f.). Such is the author's account of the chief character in the novel, the man who pays tribute to «the system» with his own life²³.

Hard Times, as a novel, has a definite aim: it is conceived as an attack on an idea, the Utilitarian philosophy; and on the principles of the laissez-faire economy. This does not imply that its author is a reactionary: Dickens attacks, not the system itself, but the miserable consequences it has for individuals. As a consequence of his attitude, every element in the novel will be pre-determined and fitted to that concrete end. This is very clear in Blackpool's figure: a non-realistic character, always perplexed and puzzled by having harm done to him while he himself does none, he falls into the pit—literally and symbolically— and has a terrible, martyr's death.

Again, all this will be reflected in his speech. He speaks a broad (however literary) Lancashire working-class dialect which is, as has been written, «a guarantee of his integrity, but also the badge of a down-trodden class»²⁴. So far the opposite has been true: 'idealized' characters belonging to the lower strata of society (Sissy, Mrs Pegler) speak more or less 'good' Standard English. Why is

²² As Elloway remarks Harthouse's motto is only a more elegant phrasing of Louisa's own catch-phrase, «what does in matter?» («Commentary» to his edition of the novel, p. 347).

²³ The linguistic caricature is of course self-evident in this case: the man is the Lancashire (*Blackpool*) protomartyr (*Stephen*). The name of his faithful companion, Rachael, also partakes of the Biblical atmosphere.

²⁴ Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (London: Longman, 1973), p. 63.

Stephen made to use dialect, then? Two complementary answers can be provided: first, we would have been completely unconscious of his playing a class-role if he had spoken Standard English; second, heroes or heroines are not always supposed to use the standard variety in Victorian fiction. The important thing for a literary hero or heroine was his or her integrity; and this had to be reflected, not necessarily by their talking standard, but by their using *any* variety of the language—including a social accent or a regional dialect—which, while proving consistent in itself, conforms to the hero's or heroine's total archetype. As a corollary, this excluded eccentric idiolects such as Harthouse's, Tom's or Bounderby's, which are at bottom a queer mixture of standard patterns, substandard features, catch-phrases, and the like.

The above could be an explanation for Blackpool's constant use of dialect. Apart from this, there is not much to be said about him: we are not concerned here with the linguistic peculiarities of the Lancashire dialect (always literary to some extent) that Dickens puts on Blackpool's lips²⁵. Stephen remains unchanged throughout the story, the same as his speech, and his hall-mark when addressing everybody (Rachael, Bounderby, the workers...) is integrity, honesty and an exaggerated capacity of endurance. At the Union meeting his plain talk contrasts with Slackbridge's empty rhetoric²⁶. There is «a propriety, not to say a dignity, in his [Stephen's] words» (p. 123), while he addresses the company as though they were individuals—a fact underlined by the author (p. 128). Likewise, he «did not even raise his voice» (p. 133) at his second meeting with Bounderby; here, finding refuge in Louisa's face, he bitterly denounces the principles of *laissez-faire*: «Nor yet lettin alone—he says— will never do't» (p. 135).

The expression «'tis a muddle», finally, is his favourite catch-phrase. It epitomizes his own situation as described in the novel, and maybe also represents Dickens's own puzzled attitude towards certain situations that he did not understand fully.

If *Hard Times* were a realistic novel, Rachael's idiolect should have been the same as Stephen's, taking into account the fact that she comes from exactly the same background and social class as he. Yet this is not a realistic work of art, and Rachael is as much conditioned as the other characters. She is meant as a subsidiary figure to Stephen's, her principal task being to emphasize what is best in him: his integrity, tenderness and honesty. As a consequence, her dialect *could not* be so broad and consistent as Stephen's. In fact, she has very few dialectal features properly speaking (the use of *thou* and *thy*, for instance), and this not always. She speaks perfect Standard English with Louisa (p. 142) and only makes

²⁵ For a full treatment of Stephen's and Rachael's Lancashire dialect, see Brook, *The Language of Dickens*, pp. 125-30. Dickens had no doubt profited from the dialect writing in Mrs Gaskell's earlier novel. He was also familiar with the two lectures on the Lancashire dialect by Mr Gaskell, which he read «with uncommon pleasure» while writing *Hard Times*: See Page, *Speech in the English Novel*, p. 64.

²⁶ Slackbridge's figure and demagogical speeches have been charged with lack of authenticity and representativity: See López Ortega, «La lengua de Slackbridge y la ideología de Dickens en *Hard Times*», *Atlantis*, N° 1 (july 1979), pp. 7-24. The ironic connotations in *Slack-bridge* are obvious enough.

use of contractions (*hadn't, can't, I'd*) when talking to Sissy (p. 227). She tends to use broader dialect with Stephen («I ha' been», «I canna», «'tis», «o' the poor lad», etc.), but even so she slips into the standard variety: «Have you left his work, Stephen?», or «then where will you go?» (p. 138). This is not Dickens's 'inconsistency': rather, he did not *think* about striving to be 'consistent' with Rachael's speech -so that her idiolect is in fact consistent as it stands. One feels that it would have been a kind of usurpation of Blackpool's personality and meaning in the novel if she had spoken as broad a dialect as his.

Sleary and the circus troupe

As can be seen in the table above, Sleary and the circus troupe —a symbol from Dickens's own heart, standing for fancy, imagination and vitality as opposed to the dry bitterness of the hard-facts world— open and close the movement of the story. At the beginning, they establish the basic duality of the novel -Fancy versus Facts. At the end, the defeat of 'Gradgrindism' is, symbolically enough, their own triumph.

As far as their speech goes, everything is intended as a complete contrast to the 'correctness' of the system that Gradgrind and Bounderby represent, as is plainly seen when both parties meet for the first time in book I, chapter 6. But previously, we have an amusing contrast between the 'turgid English' they use in advertising their performances (...«Signor Jupe was that afternoon to elucidate the diverting accomplishment of his highly-trained performing dog Merrylegs», p. 10) and the vivid casual speech, full of professional slang terms, they use when talking back-stage²⁷. Both registers are parts of the same unity, and contrast, successfully, with Mr Bounderby's and Mr Gradgrind's correctness.

These two men are hailed «by your leaves!» (p. 26) by E.W.H. Childers, a circus «gentleman» who prides himself on being what he is and on using his professional jargon -though he demonstrates that he is capable of very correct English, pp. 26-30. He has to act as a translator for Master Kidderminster's unintelligible slang. «Supersciliously throwing the interpretation over his shoulder», «with stern irony», and eyeing Mr Bounderby twice «from head to foot», he explains to the gentleman what «missed his tip» and «offered at the barthers» mean. Afterwards, he himself says that Jupe has «cut» (run away) because he has been repeatedly «goosed» (hissed), though he still has some future as a «cackler» (speaker) (pp. 26-30).

²⁷ Perhaps 'turgid English' is their idea of what 'correctness' is. The phenomenon is probably universal: Compare the 'turgid English' of the advertisements of Sleary's circus with, for instance, the 'turgid Spanish' of the advertisements of Leviton's circus in *Tinieblas en las cumbres*, by Ramón Pérez de Ayala. On the other hand, Dickens went to some trouble to collect authentic circus slang and jargon. On 20 February 1854 he wrote to Mark Lemmon: «Will you note down and send me any slang terms among the tumblers and circus people, that you can call to mind? I have noted down some—I want them in my new story— but it is very probable that you will recall several which I have not got» (*Apud* Elloway, «Notes» to his edition of *Hard Times*, p. 361).

Mr Sleary is the outstanding character, both personally and linguistically, in the circus party²⁸. A stout man with «one fixed eye, and one loose eye» (p. 32), he has a voice «like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows» (p. 32). Troubled with asthma, the salient feature of his speech is his permanent lisp -his very first word in the story being «Thquire!» (p. 32). Professor Page has strong, condemnatory words for Mr Sleary's lisp: «The lisping of Sleary—he writes— not only gave Dickens a lot of trouble, but can quickly prove irksome and tedious in the reading: they interfere and slow down the reader, and compel him to 'listen' to Sleary... Sleary's lisping pronunciation has no *raison d'être* beyond eccentricity on its own sake»²⁹. These appreciations are, in my opinion, rather unjust. Page does not seem to take into consideration the following facts:

First, to say that Sleary's lisping «interfere and slow down the *reader*» (my italics) is to lose sight of the fact that Dickens's novels were primarily intended to be read aloud and therefore listened to: it is by 'hearing' it, and not by 'reading' it, that the effect of the lisping pronunciation is meant to operate³⁰.

Second, Sleary's lisp is as much a part of the circus world of fancy, imagination and vitality as their jargon, slang expressions and whole-hearted character of the other members of the group. All this is meant to provide a sharp contrast with the dry correctness of the hard-facts gentlemen. One would never imagine a Mr Gradgrind having a similar speech peculiarity -in fact, he has none at all.

Third, Page also forgets about the fact that Sleary and the circus party have first to 'open' and then to 'close' the story, so that they must be easily and rapidly recognizable when they appear for the second time. As a consequence, their linguistic characteristics had to be very well defined in the reader's mind, so that he would be able to 'recognize' their voice after an absence of more than two hundred pages. So, what Dickens did here was to bestow a very definite, unmistakable idiolect on Sleary. He succeeds: when, twenty-eight chapters after we last heard him, we see the word «Thethilia!» printed on the text (p. 251)—and all the better if we *hear* the word!—, we know without any doubt that an old friend is speaking again.

Conclusion

The preceding lines have been a 'listening' exercise on Dickens's gift for language as displayed in the delineation of the main fictional characters in *Hard*

²⁸ As noted by López Ortega, Sleary's very name tells us of his word-'slurring' (p. 57n. of his edition of the novel).

²⁹ Page, *Speech in the English Novel*, pp. 27, 93.

³⁰ In this connection we should also remember Dickens's own penchant for public readings from his own work: See Anne Cluysenaar, *Introduction to Literary Stylistics* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1976), p. 82.

Times. Linguistic typification does not merely 'add' to other types of characterization in the novel. On the contrary, as I think has been demonstrated, it constitutes a key element—perhaps *the* key element—in the whole artistic process which has produced the work under study. No doubt Dickens had not forgotten his own early 'listening' days as a shorthand reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons when he undertook the writing of this novel -perhaps his best as far as mastery and economy of language are concerned.

