狄更斯社會小說中的政治牽連與文學地位之失衡

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摘 要

由於狄更斯寫作中涉入社會與政治議題，使其文學聲譽不論於其生前或過世之後都遭到質疑。本文檢視狄更斯描寫這些政治與社會議題時，如何改變方法以解決文學牽扯時政的問題。

本文以《孤雛淚》和《艱難時世》為例，說明狄更斯如何處理文學和政治這兩個相反的需求。一八三〇年代寫成的《孤雛淚》是狄更斯的早期作品，當中因文學與政治動機相互牴觸，損及作品的一致性；到了一八五〇年代《艱難時世》完成時，已經是狄更斯的寫作中期，這本作品是他的社會政治小說已臻至名家巨作的典範，一方面避開了文字中相互牴觸的敘述，另一方面卻未落入二十世紀社會寫實主義的枯燥乏味。

狄更斯廣受讀者喜愛，而後現代主義評論家也回頭推崇他的小說，兩者或許都歸功於他在一八三〇年代末期所寫的那些「龐雜怪物」，然而若非後來發展出結合藝術與社會政治元素的世故文風，進而創造出天衣無縫的完整作品，狄更斯的典範地位也不可能崛起，更遑論持續至今。

關鍵詞：狄更斯、濟貧法、功利主義、政治經濟學

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The Uneasy Balance Between Political Involvement and Literary Status for Charles Dickens in his Social Novels

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Abstract

This paper traces the challenges to Charles Dickens’s literary status posed by his career-long engagement with the social and political problems largely of the working- and lower middle-class segments of British society, challenges which plagued the author during his lifetime as well as in his literary posterity.

The paper follows the progress made by the author in integrating the often contradictory and intractable demands of the political and literary spheres between the 1830s and the 1850s. It begins with a general discussion of the uncomfortable jostling between literary and political elements of the writer’s work, and moves on to more specific examples of the conflict over utilitarianism and political economy, as shown in Oliver Twist and Hard Times, which serve as examples of his early- and middle-period work. Where the work of the earlier decade is fractured by opposing motivations, the work of Dickens’s middle period is a masterful example of the socio-political novel, avoiding a clash of narratives within the text without resorting to the dry twentieth-century measure of social realism.

Dickens’s popular reputation, as well as his postmodernist resuscitation, may rely upon the ‘loose baggy monsters’ that emerged from the late 1830s, but his canonical status could not have arisen or endured without the sophistication he developed in the marriage of artistic and sociopolitical elements to produce a seamless whole.

Key Words: Charles Dickens, poor law, utilitarianism, political economy.

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The aphorism 'Jack of all trades and master of none' does not seem to have sufficed for the young Dickens; he appears to be the quintessential Victorian amateur and 'self-made man', much as he disparages those traits in some of his literary figures. The main difference between these characters from his fiction and his own reality seems to be commitment; that is not just to 'go in for' a pursuit out of ennui as does his character James Harthouse in *Hard Times*, but to excel in its mastery. The sheer volume of his literary pursuits would make most baulk at the task. At one time in the 1830s he was engaged in writing a pamphlet against Sabbatarianism, a farce, a burletta, fourteen sketches by Boz, papers and reviews, as well as two novels in serialised form (Patten 19). Outside the literary field, his social and political engagement in sanitation, penal and legal reform, and education (Smith 12) plunged him straight into the vitriolic environment of party politics. This provides one of the defining features of Dickens the writer, that a discussion of his work cannot divorce literary from socio-political import; a literary evaluation is of necessity also a statement of the judge's political sympathies. As one of his contemporaries put it: 'There have been at work among us three great social agencies: the London City Mission; the novels of Mr. Dickens; and the cholera' (Schor 64). To be in the company of Dr. Livingstone and the century's major killer was high praise indeed. Dickens could have taken any number of paths from actor to playwright to journalist or even politician, and so varied a collection of hats brings him under often decidedly unliterary criticism. A contemporary critic attacks exaggeration in his fiction as well as factual inaccuracies concerning industrial accident statistics in his journal, and she does so with ideological not literary opprobrium (*Hard Times* 309-12); and even modern critics like Terry Eagleton are seen to shift from accepted literary modes of analysis. Eagleton insists that Dickens's ostensibly industrial novel is 'pretty ignorant' of industry, that the reader never finds out what Bounderby's mills produce, and that Dickens did not know the life expectancy of a Manchester 'Hand' (Eagleton 143).

**Dickens and the Political Gauges for his Literary Works**

That Dickens grew up in the commercial capital of London rather than the industrial one of Birmingham, that he draws, in Eagleton's terms, a 'sheep versus smoke' dichotomy of town and country, and that he is not intimately acquainted with the minutiae of industrial life are extraordinary grounds upon which a professional literary critic should slate a novel. It is a measure of the controversy that Dickens generated in the nineteenth century and still arouses today that such unliterary agendas are exposed amongst his critics. Could we imagine Tennyson berated for factual inaccuracy amongst the Light Brigade's dead or Tolstoy for weaknesses in the portrayal of Franco-Russian War tactics? However, this is precisely what happens with Dickens because he is trying to achieve so many different things at the same
time; he is constantly shifting between different modes of discourse in each serial episode of the novels--those of Evangelical proselytiser, Victorian moraliser, political reformer, and sentimental Romantic. Schor relates that Carlyle condemned the 'foolishness' of Dickens's fiction in his mock dour style, but also acknowledged its power to influence the reader's opinion, something of which a critic of the Victorian periodical The Rambler complains: 'It is a thousand pities that Mr. Dickens does not confine himself to amusing his readers, instead of wandering out of his depth in trying to instruct them' (Schor 66). Dickens's themes are troublesome in that they do not allude to transcendental or universal human experiences which often separate canonical writers from the discomfort of immediate controversy, but to names and places in real English society; wider arguments can be brought to bear on the immediate social context both he and his critics inhabit. This may be an advantage to an ambitious parliamentary journalist and feature writer--apparently all the M.P.s in the 'Parliamentary Sketch' were immediately recognisable to the political nation (Slater 151)--but it also causes enormous problems to a canonical literary reputation.

The polarity of responses to his reform agenda does not seem to have weakened with time. Benjamin Disraeli's works, of necessity political in tone since he was among other things a prime minister, no longer carry the same social impact that leads to criticisms such as Eagleton's. One probable reason for the difference is the sheer scale and longevity of Dickens's influence by comparison with his contemporaries: sales of his serialised Pickwick Papers jumped from four hundred to forty thousand during the publication run, and, at a shilling per issue, this amounted to really serious money for both the author and Chapman and Hall. As Bradbury explains,

The evidence of audience response in sales figures, like the visible output of the author, engendered an economy of production and consumption: a measure of the dialogue between the novelist and his public (Bradbury 153).

Unfortunately, this was a kind of political economy rather than a literary one, and with all the wrong kinds of connotations for the real Political Economists. His print success carried over into the twentieth century, as numerous films were made based upon the novels. The same kind of difficulty his works were subject to within his period has carried over into the period of his canonical evaluation, with similar results. Dickens the product has eaten away at Dickens the author. He is now a rather tacky tourist attraction, a crudely drawn symbol of London, England, and the Victorian age, fragmented into countless different vignettes--Dickens the social reformer, Dickens the amateur scientist, Dickens the Christmas herald--all created by subsequent generations to construct and reconstruct Dickens to suit their own social, political, historical or economic purposes, which in many ways obscures the really radical side of his politics in the Victorian context but also invests his prose with more modern social applications. David Lean's Oliver Twist of the 'Forties may retain aspects of
the vitriolic original with its anti-Semitic hatred, but the musical of the 'Sixties is about as reflective of the criminal life of the fast expanding London slums as Julie Andrews, Christopher Plummer, and their warbling minions trotting about the Alps are of the cheerlessly disciplinarian von Trapps.

Without Dickens’s own social and political commitments to the meta-narratives of history, class and national culture, such later appropriations and misappropriations of his works would probably have been less striking. However, one cannot blame the author for ‘radical’ preoccupations, in the wider sense of the word as pertains to working-class improvement (Altick 115), since his own family background acutely reflected the triumph and tragedy possible along the road to ‘self-made’ status. Dickens had been the preparatory school boy of lower middle-class stock safely on the path to a profession and he had also been an apprentice in a factory thanks to draconian measures regarding personal bankruptcy and debt (though these were obsolete by the 1830s). Two reactions to such circumstances are possible, either a callous pride in having overcome adversity (as Bounderby in Hard Times mendaciously illustrates) or a charitable concern with improvement to the lot of the unfortunate casualties of the boom and bust cycle of galloping capitalist industrialisation, yet whichever approach is adopted, political commitment is a must, either to radicalism with a small ‘r’ or one with a capital, Benthamite Utilitarianism.

Dickens’s own choice persisted into adulthood, and he courted controversy with his editorship of the radical periodical Household Words, a force pulling him inexorably away from the artistic arena into the social one. However, there is another clash of agendas, not between literary work and political pamphleteering, but one within the novels, particularly the early serialised ones, between political and literary symbolism. Two millennia separate Aristotle from Vladimir Nabokov, yet the point holds steadfastly true that an excessive concern with the historical or narrative mitigates against the successful achievement of poetry for the former or great writing for the latter:

Time and space, the colours of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds, all these are for writers of genius...not traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way. To the minor authors is left the ornamentation of the commonplace: these do not bother about any reinventing of the world; they merely try to squeeze the best they can out of a given order of things, out of traditional patterns of fiction (Nabokov 656).

There is a tension in the early fiction of Dickens between this minor trait--with minor readers to boot, for Nabokov believes that such readers only want to recognise preconceived, predetermined ideas of conventional wisdom in new clothes--and his impetus towards the creation of a new world and canonically great literature. Political engagement has
unexpected literary hazards beyond the ruffled feathers of acrimonious critics, including the
dangers of descent into allegory or polemic, singularity of meaning, the direct
correspondence of question with solution, and of generally overstepping the bounds of
literary realism into prosaic reality. The tension between these uneasy bedfellows or warring
parties (depending upon which chapter it is), political and literary engagement, is allowed to
run riot in the 1830s and Oliver Twist, but it is under the control of a much firmer literary
hand by the 1850s and Hard Times.

The New Poor Law and Utilitarianism

To understand the collision of political and literary concerns, it is necessary to establish
in just what way Dickens was in his own terms 'radicalish' (Patten 26). Dickens’s life
shadowed the transformation of British society from the predominantly agricultural, rural and
aristocratic to the urban, industrial and middle-class. The country was migrating en masse
to the city, which had been vastly over-expanding to meet the astronomical rise in the demand
for cheap labour, a migration mirrored in the journeys of many of his leading characters,
Oliver Twist among them. At the beginning of the nineteenth century only one city,
Dickens’s own, had a population of over 100,000, but by the end more than twenty had
surpassed that number (Altick 76). To call the resultant suffering from overcrowded and
unsanitary working and living conditions industrial ‘growing pains’ would be a grotesque
understatement. It is no surprise that in an era of such universal change, of mass
migrations of people into areas wholly unprepared for their impacts, that Victorians of all
class complexions sought order from apparent chaos, preferred temporary stasis over constant
flux, and grasped with both hands ideologies which purported to make sense of the void with
universal application.

With the parochial institutions upon which local order had rested disappearing and local
identity subsumed into anomalous class identities, the newly empowered middle class sought
anchors for their new prosperity and influence; these were to be found in the patina of
respectability, that most important of Victorian assets, afforded by the three dominant
movements of the period, and the three targets for Dickens’s moral satire: Utilitarianism,
classical economics or Political Economy, and Evangelicalism, a kind of industrial mixture of
Anglicanism, and Stoicism, and the previous century’s Methodism. Dickens assails two of
the three in his Household Words piece ‘On Strike’. Political Economy, or Thomas Carlyle's
'dismal science' which reduced gauges of success and failure to ‘buying cheap and selling
dear’ (Hard Times 346-7), and Evangelicalism were the unassailable bulwarks of the newly
founded middle class world view, and Utilitarianism was the vehicle by which the thoughts
were made flesh. Encountering a Political Economist on the train to Preston, a journey he
was making McNamara-style to research his forthcoming industrial novel, Dickens delivers a
sharp rebuke to one Mr. Snapper, who sees the factory workers' strike in terms of blasphemy as well as poor economics. Dickens says:

   Political Economy was a great and useful science in its own way and its own place:
   but that I did not transplant my definition of it from the Common Prayer Book, and make it a great king above all gods (Hard Times 296).

Such is the degree to which he courted controversy, however, that even his political position is in doubt. To trade-minded contemporaries he may have been a dangerously ignorant left-winger, although that term had not achieved currency by then, but to subsequent Marxists he was a reactionary conservative, cloaking his unpalatable acceptance of working class impotence and suffering under the cover of evangelical assumptions about individuals and society in grossly sentimental terms. To them, he harked back to a Wordsworthian happy pastoral paradise, free from industrial complications, in the same hopelessly nostalgic vein that Marie Antoinette did while she still enjoyed court life. To the Edwardian Bloomsbury set, who hated him for both his popularity and aesthetic sense (Patten 24), he was the archetypal Victorian middle-class apologist, finding answers in light sentimentality to deep-rooted social problems, and to ultra-conservatives he remains a dangerous liberal challenging the ultimate legitimacy of monetarist principles with expensive humanitarian policies.

One aspect may go a considerable distance in explaining the controversy on both his political side and his literary one. Eagleton, who appears to have his own Marxist axe to grind with respect to Dickens, bemoans the underdeveloped, distorted and fragmentary description of character, and he suggests the possibility that the author was attempting to convey something of the disruption of city life on character through a rather obtrusive stylistic device. In fact, something else entirely can far more explicitly account for the peculiarities and fantastic distortions of character. William Hogarth was the preeminent caricaturist of the preceding century, accomplishing a considerable body of work despite his inordinately short life. Hogarth had the habit of sketching satirical sequences of situations based around a unifying theme such as an election for a parliamentary seat, or alcoholic behaviour amongst the working classes, or mercenary upper-class marriages. Distinct associations exist between Hogarth's sketches--'Canvassing for a Seat', and 'Gin Alley'-- and Dickens synonymous Sketches--'The Election for Beadle', and 'Gin shops'. Like Dickens, Hogarth's work was able to affect changes in the social opinion of his time, particularly regarding the use and abuse of gin. Critics of the Victorian era and later have suggested that Dickens was trying to emulate with words what Hogarth achieved with pen and brush (Bradbury 156), for both exceed the relatively good-humoured satire of Fielding with raw and biting polemic of a far more serious nature.

Hogarth's greatest strength, however, was also what kept him out of the artistic canon.
As a caricaturist he dwelt on enlarged and distorted physiognomies, grotesque imitations and often faintly surreal or gothic surroundings, as witnessed in the 'Marriage a La Mode' series, all of which elements can be found in Oliver Twist, coincidentally. Dickens, whilst utilizing some of the same strategies but in linguistic form, must tread a fine line between caricature on the one hand and sufficient realism on the other, between instantly recognisable traits and the depth necessary for literary characters to be taken seriously. Polemical discourse alone may have been suitable in the context of the vignettes in Sketches by Boz, but it lacks the sustained interest needed to carry characters through a novel. Instantly comprehensible, 'single-issue' characters have nowhere to go and can fulfill only the most minor of roles within the realist novel. Equally themes must not suffer reduction to one-faceted political assertions, but they must have a dynamic complexity to bind them; otherwise, rather than a canonical novel, the author will finish with an extended, if colourful tract, exemplary only of his ideological position. It is the extent to which Dickens can blend the contradictory demands of the realist novel, the political treatise, and the caricaturist's sketch that determines the respective positions of Oliver Twist and Hard Times in Dickens's body of works and guarantees the security of the novels within the canon, and that places the latter work, though less popular and characteristic of what was to become widely known as the Dickens style, amongst his great novels, or as Ruskin put it, his greatest novel.

It is Benthamite Utilitarianism which unites the near criminally callous authorities of what Cobbett called the 'System' administering poor relief in Oliver Twist with the attitudes towards men and machines of those who own and manage the factories in Hard Times. Termed variously 'felicitous calculation' or 'moral arithmetic', ideally it sought to reduce all human decisions to a simple process of determination whereby the best course could be chosen by placing given factors into an equation of pleasure versus pain. All moral obfuscation and potential dilemmas could thereby be swept aside, with self-interest being the prime consideration. It was a kind of perversion of the Socratic ideal that 'any man who knows the good cannot choose the evil' into the much diminished 'any man who knows his own interest cannot commit an error.' Whilst such an attempt to reduce morality and philosophy to spurious calculus might have seemed risible--Charles Babbage spent the bulk of a fortune trying to develop a clockwork computer to automate the process (Cannon 70)--some of the uses to which it was put were certainly not. The famous adage concerning 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' seems laudable until one follows the logic to the end that the Political Economists were prepared to reach, utter misery and destitution for those outside the confines of the privileged elites or the 'labour aristocracy' of the working classes. Once these two schools were united, as personified in Hard Times by the relationship between the educator Gradgrind and the mill owner Bounderby, the 'dismal' science became even darker; suffering was but an inevitable and direct consequence of population growth against natural resources and attempts to alleviate this in the short term.
would simply defer the problems until a later time when they would return with redoubled severity. Such an apologism was a gift to those who would happily ignore wider progress to focus on their own, hardly an exclusively Victorian failing. The Economist published a view on Chadwick's attempts to introduce a Public Health Act in 1848 (the same, incidentally, who was responsible for the New Poor Law of 1834):

Suffering and evil are nature's admonitions; they cannot be got rid of; and the impatient attempts of benevolence to banish them from the world by legislation, before benevolence has learned their object and their end, have always been more productive of evil than good (Trevelyan 534).

It was this attitude that it was better to do nothing that really incurred the wrath of Dickens and like-minded liberals like John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle. Indeed, his anger was the spur for Dickens to write a satirical series, 'The Mudfog Chronicles', which formed the basis for Oliver Twist.

**Oliver Twist and the New Poor Law**

Jeremy Bentham has become, partly as a result of Dickens and partly as a result of the real intellectual savaging he got from Mill (Williams 70), the figure from history that everyone loves to hate. From this perspective the Poor Law in Oliver Twist is the apotheosis of the Radical Philosophers’ attack on the moral unity of traditional England, with Bentham as the standard bearer. It is fortunate that the legitimacy of the novel does not rest on this point, however, because it was wrong-headed. Chadwick and other Benthamites enjoyed support from Dickens and many others, and were not the straw men erected in the novel like Bumble or the master of the workhouse, though such ideology-toting ignoramuses no doubt existed then, as they do today. The Utilitarians espoused clean, accountable, and efficient public service, universal education (for without it how could one employ their equations?), sanitation improvement, penal reform, enfranchisement of the lower classes and many other causes which were of interest to the socially conscious Dickens (Meacham, Lerner and Burns 774-5). As Raymond Williams points out, even opponents of Bentham such as Mill were not completely opposed to the ideology, just the man with whom it was synonymous (Williams 70). Mill saw of both Benthamism and its opposite, Romantic Idealism, largely espoused in the writings of Coleridge, that their respective failings lay not in what they included but what they proscribed, and that with a reasonable, intellectual approach rather than a mathematically absurd or sentimentally emotional one the best of both could be incorporated into one appropriate balanced world view. As the villain Monks is presented with his options at the end of Oliver Twist, he asks, 'Is there no middle course?' (Oliver Twist 358). The point is fatuously coincidental, it has to be admitted, since in
Dickens’s novel no attempt is made to strike Mill's balance. The novel's sympathies lie wholly in the Coleridge camp even if its author may have understood otherwise.

Neither could it be argued that the workhouse system and decline of 'outdoor relief' was necessarily unfavourable when compared with its predecessor. As the social historian George Trevelyan explained: 'An operation was necessary to save society, but the knife was applied without anaesthetics' (Trevelyan 542). Under the old Poor Law, welfare had been administered by the parish, the basic unit of local government of town and country--Dickens had a Beadle in his own 'parish' in London (Slater 5)--a system which persisted almost until the end of the century. The poor, of the same parish only, were taken care of by a parish council consisting of a Board including churchwardens, a clerk and a Justice of the Peace. In what Trevelyan sees to have been a monumental mistake, the justices, who had updated the system of support to cope with the demands of the eighteenth century, rather than imposing a minimum subsistence wage on landowners for their landless labour, decided to top up the wages of anyone who fell under that subsistence level with money from parish coffers. Chadwick and the Utilitarians saw this 'Speenhamland System'-- so called after the place where the aforementioned Justices had met--to be full of local graft and corruption, which impoverished pretty well all of the working-class community and forced paupers to move from one parish to another, none willing to pay out for their support. Why should the employers pay a living wage if the parish would take up the slack in their expenditure and why, moreover, should one parish pay for another parish's problems? Even if the Board did decide someone to be deserving of relief, that 'outdoor relief' was woefully inadequate, as shown by the Bumble's dispensation to the impoverished family in one of Oliver Twist's more powerful depictions of poverty and destitution (Oliver Twist 44). Clearly the brutality of the 'System' that the young Oliver experiences at the workhouse was not new, and there were worse places that he could have been. The New Poor Law and its workhouses were a tough solution to what had been an even tougher, and more unjust, situation. It had not only been the unemployed and unemployable poor; under the old Poor Law, nearly everyone else was being dragged into poverty, all to the benefit of the landowning farmer, both administrator and benefactor of the system. The utilitarian Chadwick had to change things, and radically at that. As Trevelyan puts it:

And on the labouring poor, in field and factory, fell the heavy weight of the New Poor Law of 1834, when outdoor relief was abolished (not indeed quite universally) and the 'workhouse test' was imposed on applicants for public alms. Such was the remorseless utilitarian logic of the Poor Law Commissioners, to whom the Act gave power. It was a harsh remedy for a terrible disease: the Speenhamland policy of granting the poor rate in aid of wages had pauperized even the employed workman and kept wages down; moreover, it was now ruining the ratepayers (542).
Despite these stalwart reasons for reform, Dickens’s resounding effect on Victorian opinion is acknowledged even by Trevelyan, who a century later was still trying to reverse it. The workhouse system's implicit denial of deserving and undeserving poor, and its severe methods regarding families and children provided the author with plentiful ammunition for satire, with a large helping of sentimentality to drive the points home to a Victorian readership. In terms of polemical writing, then, the novel was a resounding triumph, but the question must arise regarding the artistic costs to the novelist.

Dickens's 'radicalish' novel confines itself largely to the first third of the book, those sections dealing with childhood exploitation first in the 'baby farm' and second in the workhouse in the characters of Bumble, Gamfield and the Sowerberry 'family'. The motif of the corruption of innocence has a heavy impact on a society still under the influences of Wordsworth's 'cult of child worship' (Newsom 93), for without this a character such as the angelic fatalistic Dick could never have been accepted (as indeed Hardy found out later when readers laughed off his character 'Father Time' in Jude the Obscure). The culprits for this corruption are instantly identifiable individually and systemically:

Well, well, Mr Bumble, there's no denying that since the new system of feeding has come in, the coffins are somewhat narrower and more shallow than they used to be: but we must have some profit Mr Bumble (Oliver Twist 32).

The idyllic childhood is sacrificed to productive and gainful employment. Having just avoided apprenticeship to the near homicidal monster Gamfield, Oliver is seconded to the undertaker's so he can learn a useful trade, very useful considering the social circumstances. Naturally he flees the cruelty of a typical Dickens harridan and finds his own trade in London; the ironically welcoming criminals are juxtaposed with the hostility of the law-abiding Utilitarians.

Here lies one of the author's first major difficulties. Those characters used to stress the unfairness and selfishness within the system, those directly representative of its aspects—the beadle, the master, and the workhouse board— are not the most realistic of the characters and therefore not the best exponents of its effects. These characters remain one-dimensional walking flaws, stock characters from minor literature or theatre whose purpose is to be the vehicles by which the plot can unfold, not to carry significance in their own right. It is only with Fagin, Nancy and Sikes that the true implications of a society in hottest pursuit of self-interest achieve their full literary manifestation. However, these figures are primarily affected by the system, but not responsible for it. In any case, their complexity also limits their value. Fagin, though a thief, a fence, and even a pimp, is not wholly self-serving and villainous, as much as the often racialist invective which describes him would have the readers believe. He shows kindness to the new arrival Oliver, before he has become a pension plan for Fagin, genuine concern for him before Oliver is handed over to the tender
mercies of Sikes and his gang for the robbery, and righteous (if manipulative) anger at Nancy's treasonable 'peaching' or informing on the gang. Even the otherwise totally brutish Sikes is allowed to clothe his bestial rage with some justification when Fagin informs him of Nancy's clandestine meeting with Maylie and Brownlow. The point is that the gang, or at least the leaders, are not wholly motivated by self-interest and money, for such reasons could not provoke the incendiary response of Sikes, for whom the immorality of her action demands the ultimate penalty. The tension between their villainy and more praiseworthy- or at least more human elements prevents their reduction to one side of the Bentham-Coleridge opposition, which renders them more literary and less exemplary.

Critical opinion has long disparaged the qualities of the 'good' characters of the novel, Rose Maylie for example being described as the blandest heroine of a bland group (Smith 9). Concessions are made to some complexity--Brownlow's irascible streak and Rose's 'shame'--but none reach the tension of Fagin's inner debate on the right course of action regarding Oliver's corruption (Oliver Twist 330), and so the reader must overcome the inevitable frustration of a novel which at once always takes a political side but simultaneously lacks the fully developed literary side of hero or heroine. The problem for the great and the good is that they must be just that. As chief representatives of a Christian moral tradition they need to exhibit those qualities exclusively: Oliver must be a virtuous mirror to the vices of the society which holds him, for if there is any equivocation then the political message will be obscured. Dawkins could not elicit the same sympathies. One ends up with characters bleached of emotional impurity and vice and thus characters of diminished realism, more substantial perhaps than the stock characters of minor Victorian literature but similar to these nonetheless. The conditioning of his hero and supporters is not only proscriptive. Of course, they must show no signs of sin, but they also need to be consistently and unambiguously altruistic in contrast to the villains' egocentricity. Brownlow's single-minded pursuit of others' interests (Oliver Twist 304) lacks the power and credibility of Fagin's 'Number One' speech to Claypole (Oliver Twist 316).

Most symptomatic of this is Oliver's brief and idyllic existence with the Maylies, so heavily overlaid with Romantic imagery of innocence, pastoral contentment, sublime affection, and evangelical ardour as to be far less digestible than the sausages Oliver receives in Fagin's ramshackle house at the heart of the slum environment:

Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquility, the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness, deep into their jaded hearts! (Oliver Twist 231)

Oliver goes on to experience country walks, bible reading, and moralistic bliss for the
rest of the chapter. Dickens appears to be borrowing exclusively from the romantic pastoral canon and this form has nowhere to go; his existence, from a literary perspective, is pure stasis and so devoid of artistic interest. Not only does this preoccupation with the idyllic limit literary significance, but it also does little to further the political case of the book. In presenting the impossible, since England could never return to feudal aristocracy, it is not meaningful to present its associations as an alternative to corrupt, city life. One-nation agricultural communities did not smack of reform but regression, and they do nothing to attack the Benthamite view. This may be impertinent, however, since the tradition versus reform debate preponderates in the first third of the book, and by this point *Oliver Twist* can be seen as a different novel.

The initial sections of the novel display clear political radicalism, and to some extent themes from these are repeated later in the novel as Bumble and Claypole once again afford the chance of condemning the hypocrisy and selfishness of the Political Economists. The point is rather laboured, however, and Claypole's return seems to be one coincidence too many, not necessarily because the device is weak--it does after all provide economy of plot--but because the novel has shifted the grounds upon which it had been focused. *Oliver Twist* begins as a work about poverty and the workhouse, a morally and politically controversial topic of the day, and it ends as a novel about crime, against which the whole of Victorian society, conservatives and liberals, could happily unite. Oliver himself has changed and the point is fore-grounded by the author as he brings the hero back to the town of his birth, the first time he has returned since he fled the Sowerberry's (*Oliver Twist* 377-8). Oliver left as working-class orphan and victim but it is in the guise of a privileged middle-class foundling that he returns, made clear by Bumble's due deference to himself and his middle-class family. Perhaps because the loose form of the *Bildungsroman* (one genre to which the novel pays homage) demands development and progression, and because none is available to someone in the class position of the orphaned Twist, Oliver has to undergo this transformation to meet formal literary requirements, rather than to maintain realism. The sting is gone from the political agenda and Oliver has become a good little conservative, and this is probably what aggravates Marxist critics like Eagleton so much. Bradbury draws attention to the binary oppositions of character and symbol in the novel (Bradbury 155), yet this may not be enough. There are two Olivers, the orphan and the heir; there are two Bumble's, the ilustrious, bombastic Beadle and then the defeated, demoralized, henpecked oaf who is master of the workhouse; even Fagin in his cell is only a shadow of the former vibrant character and his death will carry no pathos; and there may even be said to be two novels, one a polemically-drawn vision of a distorted system of priorities, the other a picaresque novel of personal growth, though ‘change’ would be better than ‘growth’ in regard to Oliver. Whatever the case, the unifying theme has changed since the latter sections of the novel are not about poverty but punishment and the search for the criminals Monks, Sikes and
Fagin together with their accomplices and all will either see the light or get their just deserts.

The two directions it seems to take tear at the integrity of Oliver Twist, suggesting a failure on the part of the author to combine the competing demands, something Dickens to some extent acknowledges. Of course, he does not admit to its being a house divided, but he does rather humorously directly draw the reader's attention to the 'streaky bacon' structure of his novel, but the layers seem further apart than that. The novel opens with a 'farmed' baby, treated worse than a domestic animal by the system touted by the reformist Whig government. The novel ends with an abnegation of the political voice, a retreat into the status quo and hardly a thought for those in the same poor condition; the workhouse, the city and the system still exist, but Oliver is not interested in them any more:

Mr Brownlow adopted Oliver as his son. Removing with him and the old housekeeper to within a mile of the parsonage house where his dear friends resided, he gratified the only remaining wish of Oliver's warm and earnest heart, and thus linked together a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world (395).

The political voice of the great society at the opening has been reduced to the 'little society' of middle-class safety and pastoral bliss: perhaps Oliver has gone to live with the von Trapps after all.

**Hard Times and the Remorseless Logic of Benthamite Utilitarianism**

Oliver Twist enjoyed success far beyond Dickens's other utilitarian novel, Hard Times. Many elements of the Dickens style so evident in the former, minor characters signified by detail or gesture, sentimental exhortations, and the partisan nature of a narrative demanding the reader take its side are understated or absent from the latter. On the surface, the problems of integrating the two discourses of novel and political treatise should be more difficult, since Hard Times is far more concerned with the wider impact of industrial revolution upon Coketown than Oliver Twist is about London. London is an abstraction, a collection of the good and the bad with Brownlow's suburban address and Fagin's slum maze as opposite ends of a spectrum of communities; Coketown is a living beast in the novel, a bizarre distortion of feudal agriculture where nameless product has replaced food and vast 'serpents' rise to obscure the sky in a testament to its efficiency (Hard Times 20). Nowhere lies beyond the grasp of industry--even Bounderby's mock estate, miles away from the dirt of the town is crisscrossed with railways and undermined by old pit shafts (Hard Times, 197-8), one of which will kill the 'Hand' Stephen Blackpool. The problems of interweaving ideological and literary subject might seem even more formidable, therefore, since the allegiances of Gradgrind and Bounderby go further and are far more explicitly stated than the
occasional references to ideas that are imperfectly understood by the workhouse staff in *Oliver Twist*.

Many of the novels strongest criticisms are its greatest strengths in this respect. Eagleton remarks that we do not learn what is made in the mill (Eagleton 143), and Schor says that for an 'industrial' novel it does not start with an industrial theme, nor does it 'litter' the narrative with realistic details:

*Hard Times* seems far more fantastical, taking its opening notes not from discussions of pauper education but fairytales and Ali Baba--the little children in the Gradgrind School are compared to the forty thieves (Schor 68).

She stresses the ‘fantastic’ rather than the ‘mimetic’ quality of the novel, which is to say that it does not rely upon a factual and ideological base as a dry exercise of social realism would.

This is of course not to say that the political battle lines are not so clearly drawn in the novel. There is no doubt the 'Life of Facts', which enables Gradgrind to employ a Hitlerian teaching assistant in his school and force his daughter into a loveless conjugal business merger instead of a marriage, is 'moral arithmetic' in personified form. As if that were not enough, the names of his children are those of the leading Political Economists of the day. Flanked by Bounderby for the first half of the novel, Gradgrind serves to underline the invidious relationship between Bentham's and Malthus's ideas and their subsequent estrangement to show the implicit contradictions within the alliance. Capital and labour clash head-on twice in the novel when Bounderby meets with Blackpool, the paragon of worker loyalty, and extensive coverage is given to the trade union representative, a very topical note since the Preston Lock-out had only just finished.

The proximity of character and ideology enables the author to dovetail the two and avoid the inevitable tension that form and content suffer in his earlier novel. The story is largely that of Tom and Louisa, the elder children, who respond variously to the same industrial and social forces that hold everyone in Coketown under their sway. Both are ruthlessly educated in Utilitarianism by the father, and both are seconded to the ‘Coketown way’, Louisa as wife to the industrial overlord and Tom as an assistant in the Bounderby Bank. Yet character outstrips political function, certainly in the case of the good characters, for Tom has learned the Gradgrind way so thoroughly that he cannot even think beyond the limits of his self-interest and he fully justifies the epithet 'the whelp', though a modern equivalent would be decidedly less polite. The contrast between Louisa and Oliver far better illustrates what has changed between *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, and that is complexity. In no situation is Oliver ever morally reprehensible or wrong, never does he act unjustly, nor is he ever torn between principles and behaviour; he remains the perfect innocent, beyond criticism by the most fundamental Calvinist and the most respectable
Evangelical. Oliver, in these respects, is similar to the circus girl, an idealised female whose desires to please, help and serve, but she is not the heroine of the novel, as Oliver is the hero in his, and she can disappear throughout the bulk of the action of the book, only to return in the last section. Louisa combines shades of altruism with selfishness; the two have been at war during the dry childhood that Gradgrind gave the children and were some egocentricity not there, her character would lack the credibility and complexity required to develop.

Louisa's charity is magnified by her resentment. She cuts off her relationship with Sissy when she realises that she must adopt the Coketown way and marry Bounderby, not because of enmity but because of willing sacrifice to help her admittedly worthless brother 'get on' (Hard Times 75). Her later return to the Gradgrind home finds her envious and bitter towards a younger sister for her untroubled and happy childhood and towards the friend-cum-nanny, Sissy, who provides it. Even the mechanism of her return is highly significant of both her character and her politics. Driven to distraction by the attentions of Harthouse and the dissatisfaction with her marriage, she reaches her denouement, returns to her father's house and confronts him with the fallacies of his way of life (Hard Times 163-4). Her breakdown is far more meaningful both in the development of the novel and in the political discourse which permeates it than one of Oliver's frequent 'fevers', precisely because it originates from personal struggle. Oliver's frequent bouts of unconsciousness--at the magistrates court after apprehension for pick-pocketing, at Fagin's after his kidnapping, and at the Maylies' after his inadvertent wounding--are no more than dry literary devices to punctuate the different stages of the story; they reflect change, but not epiphany, as is the case in the second father-and-daughter chapter of Hard Times, 'Another thing needful'. Oliver's only violent outburst comes when Claypole insults his mother, which is hardly a deeply significant passage and ends with a Fieldingesque punch-up (Oliver Twist 50).

Certainly Brownlow's upbraiding of Monks seems pompous and contrived next to Louisa's attack on her father's outlook:

Father...if you had known that there lingered in my breast, sensibilities, affections, weaknesses capable of being cherished into strength, defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no more known to his arithmetic than his Creator is,--would you have given me to the husband whom I am now sure that I hate? (Hard Times 164)

Some characters are irredeemable. Bounderby, the wonderfully termed 'Bully of Humility' takes perverse pride in his false exaggerations of the privations of his childhood and magnifies his foil Sparsit's questionably genteel background out of all reasonable proportions to serve his own pride. Accordingly, Bounderby is condemned to one facet, that of stereotypical mill owner, and in his exposure he becomes a buffoon--even his
apoplectic death is faintly ridiculous. This is not the case, however, for Gradgrind, who, like his daughter, finds that his flaws throw his benevolence into high relief. Perhaps because Dickens’s view of Utilitarianism, like Mill’s, could not be entirely antithetical, Gradgrind is rescued from Bounderby’s predicament when he too finds Louisa’s breakdown a revelation upon the misconceptions inherent in the Gradgrind way. Even before this, evidence exists of a human side, first in his charitable motive regarding the abandoned circus girl, Sissy Jupe, and later in the troubling doubt that her positive emotional effect on his household gives rise to:

He really liked Sissy too well to have a contempt for her; otherwise he held her calculating powers in such very slight estimation that he must have fallen upon that conclusion. Somehow or other, he had become possessed by an idea that there was something in this girl that could hardly be set forth in tabular form (Hard Times 73).

**National Politics and National Art: Finding a Balance**

Dickens is as important as a canonical figure as he was as a popular nineteenth-century novelist. *Oliver Twist* was a Victorian crowd pleaser from a serialised novelist at the beginning of a literary career and already earning vast sums from the endeavour. *Hard Times*, one of his ‘middle’ novels, is by an established writer at the peak of reputation for whom sales figures are not a worry. Perhaps the first novel does contain elements of minor literature, of rehashing the commonplace, but more importantly the form of *Bildungsroman* is dictating the content, not vice versa, and that is why the conclusion seems to be at odds with the opening. In his preface Dickens makes clear that whatever the content of the novel the import will remain familiar and ultimately conservative:

In this spirit, when I wished to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last (*Oliver Twist* 3).

Since his workhouse system is not one of virtue rewarded, the reader can be assured that for a conventional ending the radical agenda will have to be abandoned; the two can never be incorporated into one seamless whole. The ending of *Hard Times*, on the other hand, whilst disappointing the Victorian myth of resolution into good, reaches much closer to unity. The bad characters do not receive the instant punishments of Fagin or Sikes, and the good are not able to find Oliver’s ‘little society’, but they must like Rachael, return to the great industrial one. Even clear notions of heroes and villains are faintly disingenuous, for it is rather a question of realistic, fully-rounded figures versus comically sketched one-faceted ones, or as Eagleton puts it, ‘Dickens’s bunch of grotesques, perverts, amiable idiots and moral monstrosities’ (149). Benthamism and Political Economy are going to continue, with or
without Bounderby and his acolytes, as is the industrial system. Oliver Twist is consistently demanding that the reader take a side with or against the character, whereas Hard Times refuses to do this; Slackbridge the union agitator is as repugnant as Bouncerby in full flight on 'the Hands'. Dickens finds it impossible to reconcile his politics with his artistic form in Oliver Twist; he achieves this with consummate skill in Hard Times, which is probably what impressed Ruskin so much, who believed it to be the author’s best novel.

Works Cited