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Dickens and the Factories

PATRICK BRANTLINGER

GISSING AND OTHERS AFTER HIM have criticized Dickens for the "noticeable omission from his books" of "the workman at war with capital."[1] The excuse has been offered that "Dickens did not know the north of England," but he often traveled to Manchester and Birmingham, toured a number of factories, studied several strikes, and read his quota of blue books on industrial conditions. Besides, the omission of the war between labor and capital from his novels is not the same as an omission of factories and factory workers. There are industrial scenes in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a paragraph on factory children in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the whole of *Hard Times*, factory masters Rouncewell in *Bleak House* and Daniel Doyce in *Little Dorrit*, and even the factory town of Muggleton in *Pickwick Papers*. There can be no doubt that Dickens was concerned about "the factory question" throughout his career, but the shape which his concern takes in the novels is unsatisfying to many readers, for it seems to justify Ruskin's gibe about his membership in "the steam-whistle party." It is simple to prove that Dickens supports that "party," for his speeches are larded with the praises of British industry. At Birmingham in 1844, for instance, Dickens said that its Polytechnic Institution would be of giant growth:

I found that strong belief upon the splendid array of grace and beauty by which I am surrounded, and which, if it only had one-hundredth part of the effect upon others it has upon me, could do anything it pleased with anything and anybody. I found my strong conviction, in the second

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[1] George Gissing, *Charles Dickens, A Critical Study* (New York, 1898), p. 264.

place, upon the public spirit of the town of Birmingham—upon the name and fame of its capitalists and working men; upon the greatness and importance of its merchants and manufacturers; upon its inventions, which are constantly in progress; upon the skill and intelligence of its artisans. . . .[2]

As John Holloway argues, even Dickens' attack on industrialism in *Hard Times* is compromised by his failure to relinquish middle-class values, his lack of sympathy for trade unionism, and the apparent shallowness of his alternative to Gradgrindism—"the Sleary philosophy."[3] But if Dickens had no deep-rooted quarrel with industrialism, why did he proceed to quarrel with it anyway in *Hard Times*? What are the reasons for his "whole love-hate relation to Victorian industry"?[4] And why does it take such a blatantly contradictory form, leaping between fulsome praise and wrathful condemnation? Answers to these questions must show Dickens trapped in an inconsistent stance toward industrialism throughout his career, but the inconsistency is not caused by ignorance of industrialism and it does not lead to literary debility. On the contrary, it is my belief that Dickens' confusion over industrialism stems from knowledge rather than ignorance and that, in any case, it leads to a definite artistic virtue—to Dickens' unique vision of society as a dismal, unfathomable tangle.

When Little Nell and her grandfather run away from Quilp, their wanderings take them to a "great manufacturing town reeking with lean misery and hungry wretchedness" (44–45).[5] By night, the factory workers are "maddened men, armed with sword and firebrand," who rush "forth on errands of terror and destruction." By day, Nell stops at a "wretched hovel" to beg for a piece of bread, but the "gaunt man" who lives there points to the corpse of a starved child: "Do you think *I* have charity to bestow, or a morsel of bread to spare?" Nell's "dismal blighted way" is lined with terrifying machines grinding "like tortured creatures; clanking their iron chains, shrieking in their rapid whirl from time to time as though in torment unendurable, and making the ground tremble with their agonies." The machines which Nell sees are at least as dreadful as

[2] *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. K. J. Fielding (Oxford, 1960), p. 60.

[3] "*Hard Times*: A History and a Criticism," in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London, 1962), pp. 159–74.

[4] Holloway, p. 167.

[5] Citations from the novels are from the *New Oxford Illustrated Dickens*. Parentheses contain book and chapter numbers.

the train of Death which Mr. Dombey rides—perhaps more dreadful, since the speed of the train "roaring, rattling through the purple distance" generates so much enthusiasm in the prose of the later novel that its fatal association is offset (besides, it has the fatal Mr. Dombey aboard). But there is no enthusiasm for the machinery in Nell's path, and nowhere in Dickens' later stories, including *Hard Times,* are there such frightening, dreary glimpses of the industrial landscape.

In *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit,* factories and factory owners are treated quite favorably. The factory of Doyce and Clennam, despite the generally increased gloom of *Little Dorrit,* is apparently a place of light and hope in the midst of the social wilderness. Its workers perform their tasks with a "vigorous clink of iron upon iron" (II:8). It forms the real "heart" of "Bleeding Heart Yard" (I:12), a vital contrast to the death-dealing jumbles of red tape and high society which hem it in, although, as we shall see, there is a sinister undercurrent in Dickens' descriptions of it which reveal his ambivalence. And far from describing "the workman at war with capital" in *Little Dorrit,* Dickens describes just the opposite, for the relations between Doyce and his men are entirely harmonious. When Doyce is lured away by a "barbaric" nation which has sense enough to recognize his value as an inventor and manufacturer, he is seen off by a band of loyal workers, all of whom are "mightily proud of him":

> "Good luck to you, Mr. Doyce!" said one of the number. "Wherever you go, they'll find as they've got a man among 'em, a man as knows his tools and as his tools knows, a man as is willing and a man as is able, and if that's not a man where is a man!" This oration . . . was received with three loud cheers. . . . In the midst of the three loud cheers, Daniel gave them all a hearty "Good Bye, Men!" and the coach disappeared from sight, as if the concussion of the air had blown it out of Bleeding Heart Yard. (II:22)

"The concussion of the air" from the cheers, no doubt, contrasts with the suffocating airlessness of the prisons and of the houses of Mrs. Clennam and the Merdles, just as the comradeship between men and master contrasts with the hollow lovelessness in higher circles.

It is possible, however, to see the factory of Doyce and Clennam in too positive a light. While its owners are entirely virtuous and

laudable as small businessmen (the smallness of their enterprise, in contrast with the vast, shadowy affairs of Merdle, is an important virtue), the factory and its machinery are somehow sinister. In the chapter entitled "Machinery in Motion," the factory is described as

> a long low workshop, filled with benches, and vices, and tools, and straps, and wheels; which, when they were in gear with the steam-engine, went tearing round as though they had a suicidal mission to grind the business to dust and tear the factory to pieces. (I:23)

The "suicidal mission" of the machines might be dismissed as an insignificant piece of macabre irony, a frequent practice with Dickens, but the description continues:

> A communication of great trap-doors in the floor and roof with the workshop above and the workshop below, made a shaft of light in this perspective, which brought to Clennam's mind the child's old picture-book, where similar rays were the witnesses of Abel's murder.

The hints of suicide and primeval murder which attach to the factory, suggesting quite an opposite result from the progress Doyce and Clennam seem to be contributing to, are hardly incidental. One recollects that of the two morbid theories for the origin of the name, "Bleeding Heart Yard," one hinges upon the legend of a captive lady dying of a broken heart and the other involves "the tradition of a murder" (I:12), though it is just possible here that the factory should be viewed as a victim and the Circumlocution Office as the murderer. In any case, a very broad significance attaches to these "murderous" images. By associating not just the Circumlocution Office and a villain like Merdle, but also the factory, Doyce, Clennam, and everything Clennam encounters with ideas of homicidal destruction and original sin, Dickens suggests the all-encompassing nature of guilt.

If there is ambivalence in Dickens' fairly positive treatment of industrialism in *Little Dorrit,* then there is a similar ambivalence in his much more negative treatment in *The Old Curiosity Shop.* The diabolic machines in the earlier novel run, it appears, of their own volition. Dickens describes the workers who tend them, including the kindly furnace man who gives Nell a place to sleep, but he does not describe the masters who own them. The industrial landscape through which Nell passes is a nightmare, but unless we

extend the pall of Quilp's evil to the North Country, there is no one to blame for the nightmare. Furthermore, Dickens was writing at a time when he was under the influence of the Ten Hours Movement and was concerned about the fate of factory children. But just as no factory owners appear in *The Old Curiosity Shop,* neither do factory children appear. In the context of his age, this is a more puzzling omission than that of the strife between labor and capital, because before 1847 most middle-class writers approached "the factory question" through the Ten Hours Movement.

It was through the encouragement of Ten Hours reformers that Dickens made his first tours of factories in 1838, and his initial response was entirely hostile to "the enemy," "the factory system advocates," and entirely favorable to Lord Ashley's drive to shorten the hours of factory children. "With that nobleman's most benevolent and excellent exertions, and with the evidence which he was the means of bringing forward, I am well acquainted."[6] Even before his tours Dickens was sympathetic to factory reform. In *Pickwick Papers,* he mocks the Christian and commercial citizens of Muggleton, who have presented to Parliament "no fewer than one thousand four hundred and twenty petitions against the continuance of negro slavery abroad, and an equal number against any interference with the factory system at home" (7). But it took a journey through "miles of cinder-paths, and blazing furnaces, and roaring steam engines, and such a mass of dirt, gloom, and misery as I never before witnessed,"[7] to stir Dickens deeply against the factories, and at the end of his first industrial tour he wrote to E. M. Fitzgerald:

> So far as seeing goes, I have seen enough for my purpose, and what I have seen has disgusted and astonished me beyond all measure. I mean to strike the heaviest blow in my power for these unfortunate creatures, but whether I shall do so in the "Nickleby," or wait some other opportunity, I have not yet determined.[8]

No task could have been more suited to Dickens than writing about "these unfortunate creatures," the factory children, and that

[6] Dickens to Edward Marlborough Fitzgerald, 29 Dec. 1838, *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, 2 vols. (London, 1965–69), 1:483–84; hereafter cited as *Letters.*

[7] To Mrs. Charles Dickens, 1 Nov. 1838, *Letters,* 1:447.

[8] 29 Dec. 1838, *Letters,* 1:483–84.

he planned to join Mrs. Trollope, Douglas Jerrold, and other writers in an already loud chorus of Ten Hours protest is very clear. Except for one brief, moving paragraph in *Nicholas Nickleby* (50), however, there are few signs of his concern in that novel, and he has no more to say about factory children in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, although the furnace man's story and the opinions of Miss Monflathers are perhaps swipes in that direction. The strange fact is, Dickens never did "strike the heaviest blow in my power for these unfortunate creatures," for apart from the brief passages noted, there is no word about factory children in any of his novels. But as late as the summer of 1841, the theme was still on his mind, although he postponed handling it until he could get the Report of Lord Ashley's Mines Commission. On 16 August, he wrote to Forster: "I had a letter from Napier on Saturday, urging the children's-labor subject upon me. But, as I hear from Southwood Smith that the report cannot be printed until the new Parliament has sat at the least six weeks, it will be impossible to produce it before the January number."[9] In 1838, on the basis of his trips to the North and his reading of Parliamentary reports, Dickens planned to attack "the factory system" in one of his novels. In 1841, he waited for more information, and his projected article for the *Edinburgh Review* was never written, if only because his American journey intervened.

It is possible that Dickens' trips to the North as a Ten Hours supporter did not affect him in quite the simple, negative way his letters imply. His statement to E. M. Fitzgerald in 1838 that he had seen "the *worst* cotton mill" as well as "the *best*"[10] must be taken as doubtful, for it is probable that his tours of factories took him inside only the model establishments run by Ten Hours advocates, like that of William and Daniel Grant, the Cheeryble Brothers of *Nicholas Nickleby*. Why would the owner of "the *worst* cotton mill" in Manchester open its doors to a Londoner armed with letters of introduction from Lord Ashley? Mill owners both benevolent and otherwise had already proved extremely reluctant to admit official inspectors after the passage of the Factory Bill of 1833, so the truth is probably that Dickens got past the doors of only those factories owned by friends of Lord Ashley and the factory children. *Nicholas Nickleby* shows the result of this difficulty clearly enough. As a Ten Hours advocate, Dickens inserts a paragraph contrasting the

[9] *Letters*, 2:359–60.
[10] *Letters*, 1:483.

blighted lives of factory children with the happy lives of gypsy children (50), but the main result of his trips North turns out to be the Cheerybles. Dickens knew that barbarous things went on in some factories, but the few manufacturers whom he met were probably all paragons of bourgeois virtue who supported factory reform, and it may be that between these extremes his plan to "strike the heaviest blow" in his power for the factory children was simply left dangling.

Dickens' visit to America seems to have served as a watershed for his opinions about industrialism. Before 1842, he was sympathetic towards the Ten Hours movement and at least planned to support it in his novels. After 1842, the subject of child labor in factories vanishes from his writings, and his speeches become paeans to British industry and ingenuity. If he knew little about the industrial North early in his career, his growing acquaintance with it seems to have made him more friendly towards it rather than more hostile. Dickens toured several factories in Lowell, Massachusetts, and wrote about them in *American Notes*. Again, these factories were probably all model establishments, but he was willing to accept them as typical. The places he toured included "a woollen factory, a carpet factory, and a cotton factory.... I may add that I am well acquainted with our manufacturing towns in England, and have visited many mills in Manchester and elsewhere in the same manner" (4). Dickens paints a rosy picture of life among the young women who work in one factory. They are clean, well-dressed, and prosperous. There are pianos in their boarding houses, they subscribe to circulating libraries, and they produce their own journal, *The Lowell Offering*. How different this is from factory life in Manchester! Dickens insists that he has "carefully abstained from drawing a comparison between these factories and those of our own land," but his abstention is only rhetorical:

> The contrast would be a strong one, for it would be between the Good and Evil, the living light and deepest shadow. I abstain from it, because I deem it just to do so. But I only the more earnestly adjure all those whose eyes may rest on these pages, to pause and reflect upon the difference between this town and those great haunts of desperate misery; to call to mind, if they can in the midst of party strife and squabble, the efforts that must be made to purge them of their suffering and danger.... (4)

These are strong sentiments, no doubt, but they are ambiguously expressed. For one thing, Dickens does not mention child labor in England, but speaks in general terms about "desperate misery"—certainly he does not object to young women working in the factories of Lowell. And although the difference between factory life in Lowell and in Manchester is as great as that between "Good and Evil," Dickens does not "deem it just" to point out that difference, giving as his sole reason that there are "many . . . circumstances whose strong influence has been at work for years in our manufacturing towns," from which Lowell is free. Evidently Dickens would like to pass a categorical judgment on the English industrial scene, but his awareness of unnamed "circumstances" makes him draw back. The strangely cautious rhetoric of the passage implies that he could not have made the comparison between English and American industry convincing anyway—not nearly as convincing as that between "Good and Evil." For it is by no means a question of the intrinsic goodness or evil of "the factory system" itself. If English factories are bad, it is because they are badly run, but the factory system works very well in Lowell, and it ought to work very well in Manchester.

Following his return from America, Dickens seems to have found it easier to support the Anti-Corn Law League than to support the Ten Hours Movement. In a letter to Dr. Southwood Smith early in 1843, Dickens objects to limiting the hours of workers for the rather flimsy reason that this would cause a decrease in their wages—an argument the opponents of the Ten Hours Bill had been using for years.[11] Perhaps as a reply to this argument, Smith sent Dickens a copy of the Report of the Children's Employment Commission. Dickens was so moved by the Report that he thought of "writing and bringing out a very cheap pamphlet called An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man's Child, with my

[11] Dickens says that "it is almost a cruelty to limit, even the dreadful hours and wages of Labor which at this time prevail" because to do so would increase poverty. His thinking is rather confused, but it is clear that he is rejecting an offer to write in support of the Ten Hours Movement (to Southwood Smith, 1 Feb. 1843, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter, Nonesuch Dickens, 3 vols. [London, 1938], 1:505). See also Dickens' opinions as expressed in *Household Words* in the controversy with Harriet Martineau. Dickens seems to agree with Sidney Smith's criticisms of the Ten Hours Movement, even while insisting on the necessity of fencing dangerous machinery (*Charles Dickens Uncollected Writings from "Household Words": 1850–1859*, ed. Harry Stone, 2 vols. [Bloomington, 1968], 2:561).

name attached, of course."[12] Again, however, as in the instances of the *Edinburgh Review* article and the factory novel which did not get written, Dickens postponed his "Appeal," explaining apologetically to Smith that "reasons have presented themselves for deferring the production of that pamphlet till the end of the year."

> I am not at liberty to explain them further just now; but rest assured that when you know them, and see what I do, and where, and how, you will certainly feel that a sledge-hammer has come down with twenty times the force—twenty thousand times the force I could exert by following out my first idea.[13]

It may be that Dickens saw either "A Christmas Carol" or "The Chimes" as the "sledge-hammer" substitute for the pamphlet "Appeal," but one cannot avoid the feeling that he promised more than he performed. Neither story is a criticism of industrialism based on the Report of 1843, even though, of course, both can be read as general blows on behalf of the poor.

In any case, while Dickens again shied away from unequivocal alignment with the Ten Hours factory reformers in 1843, the Anti-Corn Law League offered an explanation of economic distress which exonerated the manufacturers and blamed the aristocracy and the government, and Dickens and the *Daily News* adopted this formula enthusiastically. Dickens recognized the need for laws to protect factory workers from dangerous working conditions, and he came to advocate a national insurance program for the lower classes,[14] but he was also a free trader in his opposition to the tariff system and in the great importance he placed on its abolition. Further, the portrayal of class strife in many of his novels is in essential agreement with the class attitudes of the Anti-Corn Law League. The governing classes—either aristocrats like Sir Leicester Dedlock or shady millionaires like Mr. Merdle (who do not manufacture anything, but merely lend money and "speculate")—misgovern the middle and lower classes, which are united at least in their martyrdom. There is little difference between Daniel Doyce and his workers: Doyce is of working-class stock and is as humbly innocent as his men, and together they are victims of the Circumlocution Office and of Merdle's vague crimes. In *Little Dorrit,* therefore, Dick-

[12] To Southwood Smith, 6 Mar. 1843, *Letters,* ed. Walter Dexter, 1:512.
[13] 10 Mar. 1843, ibid.
[14] See Monroe Engel, *The Maturity of Dickens* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 58.

ens is roughly following the notions of class strife to be found among free traders and some political economists, according to which factory owners and workers—"the productive classes"—share interests against the upper classes. Dickens sympathizes with all of the poor and oppressed, including people like Daniel Doyce, and outside of *Hard Times* and *Household Words* he rarely makes a firm distinction between manufacturers and workers. The story of Doyce's difficulties with patenting is a revision of "A Poor Man's Tale of a Patent" from *Household Words*, with one instructive alteration. Dickens' "poor man" is a Chartist worker, while Doyce is a middle-class master. The switch suggests that Dickens saw little difference between the two roles.

With the return of more prosperous times after 1842 and with the partial victories of both the Anti-Corn Law League and the Ten Hours Movement, the fad for novels and poems about factory children disappeared. But while such reasons may help to explain Dickens' failure to write about factory children, they hardly explain his attack on industrialism in *Hard Times*. Bounderby is to Doyce as Uriah Heep is to Ham Peggoty, and, no doubt, factory conditions in *Hard Times* are to factory conditions in *Little Dorrit* as evil is to good. In the later novel, Plornish the Plasterer gives a bleak picture of working-class poverty, but no part of the blame lights on the firm of Doyce and Clennam, which is struggling energetically to increase national prosperity and to overcome the forces of darkness in the Circumlocution Office. In *Hard Times*, however, the factories of Coketown seem to embody those forces, and the two attitudes cannot be reconciled.

Even so, *Hard Times* reveals Dickens' ambivalent feelings towards industrialism as clearly as any of his other novels. For one thing, Bounderby is hardly the kind of bloody tyrant who represents the factory owners in the most extreme pieces of Ten Hours propaganda. In Mrs. Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1839), for example, Elgood Sharpton, owner of Deep Valley Mill, is portrayed as a child-murdering sadist. Although Bounderby is an insufferable clodpole, the worst that can be said of him as a factory owner is that he has no sympathy whatsoever for his workers, whom he wants to keep down and ignore. Bounderby's major sin has little to do with the wages he pays or with conditions in his factory, let alone with child labor, which is not mentioned. He is "the Bully of humility," a satire upon the myth of the self-made man, and his abuse of Mrs.

Pegler and the parasitic relationship between himself and Mrs. Sparsit receive much more stress than his role as a factory master.[15] If there is trade unionism in Coketown, if the workers are in "a muddle" and the masters are mean and selfish, it is because there is too little trust and good will between them. The harmony between Daniel Doyce and his workers is perfectly natural and easily practiced. Not recognizing this natural identity of interests, Bounderby unwittingly encourages discontent and strikes. Dickens' criticism of industrialism in *Hard Times* does not go much beyond the fact that mill owners too often fall short of their moral obligations.

> Surely there never was such fragile china-ware as that of which the millers of Coketown were made. . . . They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined, when such inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machinery; they were utterly undone, when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke. (II:1)

Dickens' satire, here and throughout *Hard Times*, does not suggest (as some of the early Ten Hours zealots did suggest) the destruction of the factories, the establishment of any new economic system, nor even the passage of more factory laws. It only suggests that the factory owners should scrap their plea of laissez-faire and abide by the laws which exist—laws prescribing the education of factory children, the appointment of inspectors "to look into their works," the fencing of dangerous machinery to avoid "chopping people up," and smoke abatement. Dickens' criticism of industrialism in *Hard Times* is generally specific rather than abstractly ideological, unless one is willing to interpret "the Sleary philosophy" and Stephen Blackpool's martyrdom as expressions of an ideology. When Stephen falls down Old Hell Shaft, one of the lessons has to do with the negligence of mine owners who do not close up abandoned pits.

The story of the trade union in *Hard Times*, moreover, does not illustrate the justice of working-class demands for better wages, shorter hours, more benefits. Dickens does not describe working conditions within the factories, and he does not describe a strike.

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[15] John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson show that in the plans for the weekly numbers of *Hard Times* " 'Mill Pictures' are indeed mentioned . . . but the subject of principal importance here is 'Law of Divorce' " (*Dickens at Work* [London, 1957], p. 210).

He does not even describe, at least in much detail, working-class poverty. Bounderby's narrow-minded selfishness is deplorable, but so is trade unionism, although it is a natural response to Bounderby's bullying lack of sympathy for his workers. As George Orwell says, Dickens believes "that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious."[16] The war between capital and labor is simply an unfortunate mistake, to be corrected by better feelings on both sides.

Dickens hopes that the workers will one day get what they want in the way of higher wages and improved conditions, but their deepest need is for more fun rather than for more money. In his articles on "The Amusements of the People" in *Household Words*, he contends that "there is a range of imagination in most of us which no amount of steam-engines will satisfy,"[17] and this, of course, is the main theme of *Hard Times*. Steam engines are very necessary—Dickens never loses touch with "the steam-whistle party"—but Sleary's horse-riding is just as necessary. Dickens has only scorn for "the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear" Coketown mentioned (I:5); he also has scorn for the "direful uniformity" (I:14) of the place and the monotony of its routines. The machines of Coketown clang round with an inkling of monstrous life, like "melancholy mad elephants," but without Imagination Coketown is a city of Death, its progress arrested in time like the lives of Miss Havisham and Mrs. Clennam, and its factories and warehouses draped in funeral black. So dreary is Coketown, that it approaches the "wretchedness" of the factory scenes through which Little Nell passes, but its particular malady is much more psychological than economic, and its cure lies partly in establishing the natural harmony between workers and masters as had been urged by the Anti-Corn Law League and partly in increasing humble good fun. Whenever Dickens scores the ugliness and monotony of Coketown, there is a hint of the "esthetic socialism" of Ruskin and Morris, but there is no suggestion of a return to handicrafts or any other preindustrial condition, no outline of a future utopia, and only equivocal sympathy for working-class brands of radicalism.

The criticism of industrialism in *Hard Times*, then, is scarcely as hostile as some of its readers have thought and wished, and it seems

[16] George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," *A Collection of Essays* (New York, 1953), p. 59. Originally published in *Inside the Whale* (London, 1940).

[17] "The Amusements of the People," *Household Words*, 30 Mar. 1850, p. 13.

hardly fair to view it, with Edgar Johnson, as the fulfillment of Dickens' vow of 1838 to "strike the heaviest blow" in his power for factory children. On the other hand, its criticism of industrial morals is not confused or trivial, as John Holloway implies. It is true that "the Sleary philosophy" contains no profound revelations, no metaphysical alternative to materialism nor "anything even remotely Lawrentian," just as it contains nothing close to socialism. It is a largely practical and moderate approach to "the factory system"—more parks, more time off, less smoke, and so on—which, it must be conceded, seems very anticlimactic and even contradictory in comparison with the bitter rage against cold reason and the failure to love—"Gradgrindism"—which Dickens everywhere expresses. But how great Dickens thinks the value of humble fun to be! Shoals of Lawrentian or at least Coleridgean profundities might have been spawned together with all "the howling ocean of tabular statements" (I:46) and other theoretical balderdash which he wishes to the devil, and not have touched nor improved the lot of the working man in any way. Theories do not feed the poor, they do not house the poor, they do not amuse the poor, they do nothing for the poor except overlook them or grind them down. In the swirl of his anti-intellectual wrath, Dickens does not care whether his tirades against political economy and all other Gradgrindisms are well informed, logical, profound, or the reverse. Why should he proceed logically when he is attacking logicality? And although he makes no clear distinctions between all of the things that rouse his ire, the anger which he aims at "tabular statements," " 'ologies," and other forms of death by science and by intellect is surely greater than that which he aims at factories and machines. In a vague way, of course, Gradgrindism includes the factories of Coketown, not to mention its Bank, its jerry-built houses, its dirty river, and its eighteen squabbling churches. But it includes much else only dimly associated with steam engines, such as the Department of Practical Art and the science of geology. Dickens believes that the factory owners, their allies, and also their opponents, all use political economy and "tabular statements" to excuse their moral and legal failures, and he also believes that such scientific mumbo jumbo glosses over suffering and blunts love and generosity. It is this, and not the evils of machinery or of capitalism, which is the main theme of *Hard Times.*

Gissing notes that Dickens' working-class characters rarely entertain political opinions or social theories—they know themselves to

be in "a muddle," and that is all—but the same is true of his virtuous middle-class characters as well, and it is also true of Dickens, whose most consistent social theory has to do with the limitations of social theories. England's bane is not the factory system, not this or that blot on the social landscape to be cured by this or that Morison's Pill, but a lack of moral responsiveness, the bottling up of benevolent emotions by "Facts" and "tabular statements" and "enlightened self-interest" and doctrines and dogmas of all sorts. Dickens' good characters—his Cheerybles as well as his Stephen Blackpools—do not need to theorize in order to recognize suffering and to try to alleviate it through kindness. Moreover, although Dickens never sorted his responses to factories into consistency, his inconsistencies point to one of his finest achievements as a novelist—to that vision of the labyrinthine complexity of society, open to no rational analysis, suffocating, dismal, shrouded in fog and darkness, which is the strange corollary to his "steam-whistle" allegiance and which is the high poetic equivalent of the pathetic "muddle" described by Stephen Blackpool and Plornish. When Plornish gives Arthur Clennam "a confused summary of the interior life of Bleeding Heart Yard," Dickens opens himself to charges of failing to portray workers accurately, of portraying them as safely unopinionated and apolitical, and of having no deep ideas about social reform, but Plornish's statement is an integral part of the novel's quite profound probing of the human condition:

> They was all hard up there, Mr. Plornish said. . . . As to who was to blame for it, Mr. Plornish didn't know who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was. It wasn't *his* place to find out, and who'd mind what he said, if he did find out? He only know'd that it wasn't put right by them what undertook that line of business, and that it didn't come right of itself. . . . Thus . . . did Plornish turn the tangled skein of his estate about and about, like a blind man who was trying to find some beginning or end to it; until they reached the prison gate. (I:12)

If Plornish alone were "like a blind man," Dickens might be fairly accused of downgrading the working classes. But we are all blind men, all fumbling at "the tangled skein" of our lives, all imprisoned by forces which we cannot perceive and do not understand. This is Dickens' final assessment of the Victorian social mess, his way of resolving his own deeply rooted and ambivalent feelings towards in-

dustrialism. He can veer from extreme hostility to industrialism to extreme approval without fully realizing his inconsistency, vacillating uneasily in a dim borderland in which the new machinery sometimes seems infernal and sometimes heavenly, sometimes threatens the destruction of life and sometimes promises utopia. Unable to resolve the contradiction, Dickens instead projects a vision of society in which all theories, whether "Lawrentian" or Gradgrindian, are non sequiturs, all paths are paths in a labyrinth, and all notions about "who is to blame for it" are mere swats at flies.

The first two paragraphs of chapter 10 of *Hard Times* reveal Dickens' problem in a small compass. In the first, he says that the common people of England are overworked and that he "would give them a little more play." If this is all his indictment of industrialism in *Hard Times* leads to, it clearly does not lead to much. But in the second paragraph, Dickens gives us a piece of symbolic landscape, the implications of which clearly defy Morison's Pills, whether slick theories or simple antidotes:

> In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it; among the multitude of Coketown, generically called "the Hands,"—a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs—lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age.

There is obvious irony in juxtaposing such a complex scene, in which the chaotic shape of the single, enormous sentence mimics the chaotic state of society, with such a simple remedy ("more play"). Dickens senses the inadequacy of all remedies and theories, including his own, to cope with the situation. Perhaps it should be regretted that his attitudes towards industrialism waver so much and that his criticism of industrial morals in *Hard Times* leads only to "the Sleary philosophy," but surely his lapses of logic make great

poetry possible. On one level, his responses to the factory system are mere froth and confusion (even when these are hostile, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Hard Times,* the kinds of hostility are very different). But on another level, mere froth becomes the essence of the human condition—everyone's "muddle" when confronted by tangled, inscrutable forces—that muddle of life which never can be fully understood, and never reformed except through love.