Monsters of Metonymy: Hard Times and Knowing the Working Class

Stephen J. Spector

ELH, Vol. 51, No. 2. (Summer, 1984), pp. 365-384.

Stable URL:

ELH is currently published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

MONSTERS OF METONYMY: *HARD TIMES* AND KNOWING THE WORKING CLASS

BY STEPHEN J. SPECTOR

> Every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it.
>
> <div align="right">Dickens, Hard Times</div>
>
> What sort of outside is the certain sign that there is or is not such an inhabitant within?
>
> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

I

Dickens bestows hardly a single spark of his vitalizing genius upon Stephen Blackpool and Rachael, *Hard Times*'s thwarted working-class lovers. Like Victor Frankenstein's creation, a monstrous assemblage with limbs and features ironically chosen for their beauty, Stephen and Rachael are automatons compounded of such Victorian middle-class virtues as industry, honesty, self-denial, chastity, and deference. Where Frankenstein's unattractive child entertains, Dickens' beau ideal of the industrial worker bores. Silhouetted against a vivid environment, the new industrial landscape of Coketown, the textile workers' lifelessness stands out in bold relief. Coketown continues to serve as a model of the grimy factory town and as a demonstration of the power of Dickens' realism, which, as his contemporaries were fond of repeating, rivalled the photograph. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that as early as 1856 the incommensurability of the stereotyped industrial workers to their finely drawn environment should have been noticed. In the *Westminster Review* George Eliot, in one sentence, brought forth the classic indictment of Dickens: "We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological character—their conception of life, and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contributions."[1]

At least as regards Dickens' portrayal of industrial workers, Eliot is right. The great question is why Dickens failed. George Bernard

Shaw, in the course of criticizing Slackbridge, the trade union organizer, provides the obvious answer: "All this is pure middle-class ignorance. It is much as if a tramp were to write a description of millionaires smoking large cigars in church, with their wives in low-necked dresses and diamonds. We cannot say that Dickens did not know the working classes, because he knew humanity too well to be ignorant of any class. . . . But of the segregated factory populations of our purely industrial towns he knew no more than an observant professional man can pick up on a flying visit to Manchester."[2]

Shaw's amusing answer captures part of the truth, but it fails to ask why Dickens, certainly aware of his "middle-class ignorance," had the confidence even to attempt to write about the industrial worker. Moreover, Dickens' failure joins a long, undistinguished line of unconvincing industrial workers who burden not just novels but serious nonfiction as well. In this essay I will argue that Dickens' confidence, and ultimately his failure, rests upon his implicit faith in the power of language, and more specifically upon epistemological assumptions embedded in the rhetoric of realism.

Because a double-barreled phrase like "the rhetoric of realism" is daunting, it will be best to make a few prefatory remarks about each term separately and then let them combine, following the procedure of Pott, editor of the Eatanswill Gazette, when writing on what Mr. Pickwick accurately called the "abstruse subject" of Chinese metaphysics: "he read for metaphysics under the letter M, and for China under the letter C, and combined his information" (*Pickwick Papers*, chap. 51).

Realism seems safely immune from definition, but one can say with some confidence that realistic texts, like realistic paintings and photographs, intend to tell the truth: what they report they intend to be verifiable. The realistic text, of which the newspaper report accompanied by a photograph is probably the archetype, assumes that it is simply telling the truth by presenting a scene. When *Hard Times* presents industrial workers it embraces that assumption. Dickens, at times a working reporter, solicits readers to use the standards of journalism; and, as the critical record shows, readers have done just that.[3] The reader of realism naturally focuses on content, not style. When a realistic text is discussed or questioned, the issue is its mimetic truth. As David Lodge points out, to comment upon realistic writing usually means to ignore style and instead discuss "truthfulness, or representa-

tiveness, its contribution to, and consistency with, the sum of human wisdom."[4] In fact, from the point of view of reader-response criticism, a text can be called realistic if the discussion it generates is predominantly about its verisimilitude. In this light, attacks on the accuracy of *Hard Times* attest to its status as a realistic text just as much as does praise for its accuracy.

Rhetorical figures informing realism tend to be invisible because they belong to a mode of discourse in which, by convention, tropes are overlooked. Not until Roman Jakobson's famous formulation, in which metonymy, in contrast to metaphor, was identified as the basic trope of realism, did rhetorical analysis decisively enter the interpretation of realism. As Jakobson's model would predict, when Dickens strives to produce the effect of realism, as he does when he describes the industrial workers, he relies heavily on metonymy.[5] Broadly speaking, metonymy is a figure in which one entity is identified by another with which it is contiguous; to cite the standard example, a king is called the crown because he wears one. In *Hard Times,* as in realism generally, a person's character is "read" by contiguous exteriors such as his actions, his environment, his clothing, and—in the novelist's formula—his face and figure. To identify an invisible quality—character—by a visible exterior is realism's fundamental metonymy. And in a wider perspective metonymy is more than a rhetorical figure used to express knowledge about a person; it is also the process through which such knowledge is obtained. Because Dickens, like writers before and after him, shared the assumption that what he could observe about the industrial workers would be a reliable index of their subjectivity, he set out on his project confidently.

Yet *Hard Times* is extraordinary because it casts doubt on its own premises. With at times disarming candor it asks whether metonymy generates truth, especially in regard to industrial workers. The limitations of metonymy become most apparent in *Hard Times* when Dickens, the virtuoso observer of character, must admit that no amount of observation will permit him to penetrate the "mystery" of the workers' subjectivity. Indeed, after Louisa Gradgrind realizes she is totally ignorant of the Coketown Hands as individuals (about midway in the novel) Dickens drops the workers except for Stephen Blackpool's brief, pathetic death scene.

But when Dickens first broaches the industrial theme, he is at his self-assured best:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

(17)

Dickens' description of Coketown, the "keynote" of *Hard Times*, is justifiably famous. In it, the new industrial landscape—what David Craig recognizes as the verisimilitude of realism when he calls it a "specific real location" in a "specific society"—finds embodiment in language that seems adequate to its task.[6] To describe a scene that left many observers speechless, as Steven Marcus has pointed out in connection with Engels, was no easy achievement.[7] The passage triumphs because Dickens imaginatively transforms the scene through the use of figurative language: the town becomes the "painted face of a savage"; the smoke becomes "interminable serpents"; the piston the "head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness." Such metaphorical transformations are habitual with Dickens, whose figures of speech often involve an exchange of the attributes of the human and non-human, the animate and the inanimate.[8] But in this context the transformations take on a special sense of correctness because Dickens makes it clear that the city is a system of economic exchange and prior to that a transformation of the natural landscape: clay is turned into brick whose natural earthy color is further transformed into an "unnatural red and black"; the river has been similarly discolored, and it is yoked with the artificial river, the "black canal." When the already denaturalized scene metamorphoses again—into the savage, the snake, and the elephant—Dickens has in effect forced a thematization of the process of change (or exchange) itself.

The reader is left with a disorienting and defamiliarizing picture.

Human beings, in such a setting, are especially and ironically—since human labor must be the agent of the metamorphosis—out of place. Only at the *end* of the passage are human beings mentioned, and properly so, since they are subsumed by the savage, unnatural city as interchangeable parts in a machine they have created but which seems to run without them. Each person has been reduced to a small, repetitive "behavior." Instead of being human creators (producers), they become the same as the objects they produce; "equally like one another," as Dickens says.

Dickens' keynote is a standard "reading" of the new industrial scene. This reading, which imagines industrialization as a cataclysm for the workers, promises to be a disaster for the novelist subscribing to Victorian ideas about character; without differentiation and individuation the Dickensian novel cannot exist. Thus *Hard Times* must ultimately repudiate its keynote; and in fact, the people of Coketown—Rachael, Stephen Blackpool, Slackbridge, and the factory operatives—are not "equally like one another," though as Peter Keating has argued, their uniform seriousness makes them less idiosyncratic than Dickens' urban poor.[9] The failure of the keynote's assertion informs almost every aspect of the novel, not just the description of the operatives themselves.[10]

The same theme, the difference between what the industrial workers are really like and what outsiders assume them to be, animates the subtly ironic narrative of "On Strike," Dickens' article about his visit in January 1854 to witness the textile workers' strike in Preston. Published in *Household Words* on 11 February 1854, about three weeks after Dickens began writing *Hard Times* and about six weeks before the first installment of the novel appeared (also in *Household Words*), "On Strike" reveals, with the clarity afforded by small compass, the contradictions that disturb the novel.[11]

"On Strike" begins with a description of Dickens' train ride north, seated next to a man whom he transforms into Mr. Snapper, a typical Dickens character. Snapper's view of the strike is that the workers "want tc be ground." While Dickens has some fun with this cousin to Gradgrind and Bounderby, the straw man does force Dickens, who has been confidently expounding his views on the necessity of "feeling and sentiment" between "employers and employed" (288), to face a serious problem. Snapper's challenge, which betrays his stereotypical and classbound view of the workers, is unexpectedly pointed: "You *know* very little of the

improvident and unreasoning habits of the common people" (288; emphasis added). Dickens' response is so characteristic that it is worth examining at some length:

> "Yet I *know* something of those people, too," was my reply. "In fact, Mr. -----," I had so nearly called him Snapper! "in fact, sir, I doubt the existence at this present time of many faults that are merely class faults. In the main, I am disposed to think that whatever faults you may find to exist, in your own neighbourhood for instance, among the hands, you will find tolerably equal in amount among the masters also, and even among the classes above the masters. They will be modified by circumstances . . . but they will be pretty fairly distributed. I have a strong expectation that we shall live to see the conventional adjectives now apparently inseparable from the phrases working people and lower orders, gradually fall into complete disuse for this reason."
>
> <div align="right">(288, emphasis added).</div>

Nowhere does this response give any evidence that Dickens does *know* the "common people," despite the anxiety-covering modesty of his initial claim to "know something" of them. Not only are all specifics about "those people" omitted—Dickens' level of generality is the same as Mr. Snapper's—but whatever knowledge he possesses is cast as a theory whose validity awaits the test of time. This qualified knowledge is further weakened by a series of mitigating phrases. The repeated "in fact" is followed by "I doubt"; the generalizing "in the main" is qualified by "I am disposed to think"; and the concluding sentence begins with the anticlimactic "I have a strong expectation." While the persuasive rhetoric of the character of "Dickens"—and Dickens has created a persona here—is meant to indicate that the speaker is a model of reason as opposed to the snap-judgmental Mr. Snapper, that same rhetoric, in all its calculated *class*iness, inaugurates a distance between Dickens and the workers that will not be easily overcome.

The Dickens persona in "On Strike" is a reporter, a role he was long accustomed to and in which he found his vocation. His purpose is the quintessence of journalism: "*to look* at the strike" (289; emphasis added). While Dickens' response to Mr. Snapper casts his knowledge of the working man in the form of an "expectation" (288), the report of the observant journalist on the "scene" consists largely of expectations that are proved false. Of course, the text needs to be read as propagandist persuasion in which Dickens' expectations are calculated to coincide with those of his readers.

For example, he underscores repeatedly his difference from the workers, as when at a strike meeting he describes himself and his "companion" as "the only persons present, not of their [the workers'] own order" (297). However, there is little reason to suspect that the persona and the historical Dickens differ in any fundamental way in their attitudes toward the working man.[12]

As he begins his description of Preston, Dickens sounds two disturbingly familiar themes found in middle-class writings about the industrial workers; first, the fearful expectation that the workers will be an angry, hostile mob; and second, in a slightly submerged form, the feeling that the workers are like foreigners, just as the new industrial city is a foreign country uncannily growing up in the homeland—

> When I got to Preston, it was four o'clock in the afternoon. The day being Saturday and market-day, a foreigner might have *expected*, from among so many idle and not over-fed people as the town contained, to find a turbulent, ill-conditioned crowd in the streets. But, except for the cold smokeless factory chimnies, the placards at the street corners, and the groups of working people attentively reading them, nor foreigner nor Englishman could have had the least suspicion that there existed any interruption to the usual labours of the place.
>
> (290; emphasis added).

No doubt Dickens is sounding a note of patriotic pride here: the expectation of an angry mob is attributed to a "foreigner," but it is Dickens' expectation too. Indeed, as Keating has shown, Dickens is performing a function that was familiar to his readers: as a member of the middle class he is visiting the new nation of workers growing up in the north and reporting on the sights. Significantly, Dickens does not plunge into the scene and evoke it in sensuous detail or figural language. Instead, he adapts himself to this new world by self-consciously "reading" the scene—quite literally reading the handwriting on the wall—by quoting texts he finds in the town: a letter to the operatives from the strike committee, workers' songs, the balance sheet of "receipts and expenditures," and doggerel written on contribution lists. Dickens scrutinizes the texts, expecting violent demagoguery, and makes gratuitously negative pronouncements, but he concludes on a note of surprise: "The Masters' placards were not torn down or disfigured, but were being read quite as attentively as those on the opposite side" (293). Implicit once more is the expectation that the workers

would be violent and disrespectful. In fact, one of the most curious notes in "On Strike" is Dickens' repeatedly expressed feeling of relief that his person was treated with respect. At a Delegates' meeting, he assures himself and his readers that he is different from the workers, but that, surprisingly, his fears of active hostility are without foundation:

> the unexpected appearance of a stranger differently dressed from themselves, and with his own individual peculiarities of course, might, without offence, have had something droll in it even to more polite assemblies. But I stood there, looking on, as free from remark as if I had come to be paid with the rest.
>
> (297)

While Dickens' fearful and condescending middle-class expectations are striking because they keep returning despite repeatedly being thwarted, his most severe reversal of expectation is this: "Perhaps *the world could not afford a more remarkable contrast* than between the deliberate collected manner of these men proceeding with their business, and the clash and hurry of the engines among which their lives are passed" (296; emphasis added). This sentence comes close to revealing the crux of the problem by showing how the truth about the workers would normally come to Dickens. What he knows comes from a "reading" of the new industrial scene that is based on the familiar assumption of realism, that men must be like their environment: the workers should be like the most striking and visible aspect of their lives, the machines. Thus the expectation that the workers will be a violent, unthinking mob is based explicitly on their contiguity with the violent, unthinking machines. That the workers are peaceful and reflective astonishes Dickens the observer. The note of astonishment, of firm expectations defeated, gains much of its strength because it results from a failure of the fundamental assumption of reporting: Dickens has discovered that there is no way to know what the workers are like from "looking" at the scene.

The keynote statement of *Hard Times* that the workers are "equally like one another" is generated by the same reportorial assumption. Within the dense web of metaphor that describes Coketown, Dickens says that "it contained several large streets all very like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another" (17). The people, Dickens assumes, must be alike because they live in streets that are alike. Here metonymy functions with

almost primitive simplicity, generating a reading of character so common that it approaches the linguistic invisibility of dead metaphor; in fact, it might be called dead metonymy. For Dickens metonymy is habitual; it is the trope upon which he relied to create characters in his fictional world. From the very beginning of his career, when in *Sketches by Boz* he created characters out of secondhand clothes hanging in store windows, through his late novels in which urban environments become dominating symbols of modern life, Dickens relied upon the truth of metonymy.[13] Yet in *Hard Times* the link between environment and character breaks. One of the central metonymic figures, the synecdochic correspondence between container and contents, outside and inside, fails. The premise that "to look" or "to see" is "to know" does not stand up, and as a consequence the figure loses its reliability.

Hard Times cannot be read, however, as a thorough and continuous rupture of metonymy, just as it would be absurd to imagine that it is a novel without characters—which for Dickens would be one consequence of such a permanent break. It is important to recall that there is a legible correspondence between the outside and the inside for most of the characters in the novel. The circus people, Mrs. Sparsit, Harthouse, Bounderby, Slackbridge, Bitzer, Choakumchild, and the Gradgrinds can be known by observing their appearance and environment. Metonymic character creation begins the novel in the figure of Mr. Gradgrind, who exhorts the students about "Facts" in "a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom," which is echoed in "the speaker's square forefinger" and "square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base" (1). The progression from the container to its contents and the equation of one with the other are paradigmatically Dickensian. When Dickens describes Gradgrind's house, the easily understood figure of speech is extended so that the home of the man hoping to become "an arithmetical figure in Parliament" (7) is itself once more that simplest geometrical figure: "A great square house, with a heavy portico darkening the principal windows, as its master's heavy brows overshadowed his eyes" (8). While Dickens' procedure here is transparent and self-conscious (it does not seem stretching things to guess that Dickens intends "figure" to read as a pun that includes the meaning "trope"), the "realism" of the presentation is not seriously compromised by that reflexive clarity. Certainly no hint of irony is present when Dickens contrasts the evil Slackbridge with the essentially good workers by simply con-

trasting appearances: "An ill-made, high-shouldered man, with lowering brows, and his features crushed into an habitually sour expression, he contrasted most unfavourably, even in his mongrel dress, with the great body of his hearers in their plain working clothes" (106). Similarly, moral quality and outward appearance are equated in the figure of Stephen's wife: "A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her" (52).

Such metonymies function throughout the novel, but they exist alongside an awareness that there is no basis for believing such metonymic readings to be true. Indeed, when in chapter 11 Dickens repeats the keynote, he thematizes the fact that contiguity of environment and person fails to provide a reliable reading of character. The opening paragraph, using the same imagery as the original keynote, paints the industrial scene as one of sameness and repetition. Nature (the diurnal cycle), the machines, and human beings (reduced to the sound of footsteps) are presented as a monotonous routine:

> The Fairy palaces burst into illumination, before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown. A clattering of clogs upon the pavement; a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy mad elephants, polished and oiled up for the day's monotony, were at their heavy exercise again.
>
> (53)

The next two paragraphs, however, end with a recognition that such metonymy is misreading. First Stephen and his fellow workers are described in words that sound the note of defeated expectations of "On Strike": "Stephen bent over his loom, quiet, watchful, and steady. *A special contrast,* as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured" (53; emphasis added). Revealingly, the next sentence states the difference between the machines and the men, not in the form of the narrator's astonishment or surprise, as in "On Strike," but projected onto the reader: "Never fear, good people of an anxious turn of mind, that Art will consign Nature to oblivion. Set anywhere, side by side, the work of GOD and the work of man; and the former; even though it be a troop of Hands of very small account, will gain in dignity from the comparison" (53). But the next paragraph con-

cludes with a statement that has disquieting implications not only for a distanced reader but for Dickens himself. He postulates the presence of something unknowable within the workers: "there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them, for ever" (53).

Dickens' recognition that the workers' selves can never be known completely is, in context, directed at the purveyors of "fact"—compilers of Blue Books, utilitarians, laissez faire economists, etc.—but this own method of knowing (observing, reporting) is implicated so, since he bases his knowledge on that which is the bedrock of "fact"—the visible. Dickens' intention in *Hard Times* is to move beyond a surface reading of the workers and to reveal them in their particular, complex reality. That he fails to create a convincingly "real" working-class character makes his effort more poignant, but it does not detract from his awareness of the gap between himself and his subject. His position is more or less Louisa Gradgrind's as she enters Stephen Blackpool's lodging:

> For the first time in her life Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown hands; for the first time in her life she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them. . . . She knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women.
>
> (120)

Louisa faces directly the dilemma that Dickens' persona in "On Strike" faces only obliquely. In *Hard Times,* ironically, Dickens most convincingly illustrates the seemingly insurmountable problems faced by the middle-class observer who would like to know the mysterious character of the working class. Stephen Blackpool speaks for Dickens and the middle class when he proclaims over and over, " ' 'Deed we are in a muddle' " (114).

The presence of "mystery" and "muddle"—figures of illegibility—continually undercuts the authority of the presentation of the working class.[14] No matter how carefully Dickens reports the workers' conditions, he recognizes the severe limits of his knowledge. His modesty is apparent when he describes Stephen Blackpool's knowledge of the workers: "he knew them, far below their surface weaknesses and misconceptions, as no one but their fellow-labourer could" (109). Even this statement is questionable, since the narrator cannot know what a worker knows or does not know. To "mystery" and "muddle" must be added the recurring figure of

the labyrinth. There is no need to document what is so well known—that the labyrinth appears throughout Dickens' works—but its significance becomes clear when it is juxtaposed with the figure of the city as a machine. Basically, the city as machine is a figure of legibility. The machine, however demonic, is rational; and through metonymy its inhabitants partake of that rationality and are made knowable. The labyrinth, while familiar, is a figure of illegibility. If the city is an endless maze whose pattern cannot be mapped, then its inhabitants, by the synecdochic equation of the contained and the container, are similarly mysterious. Dickens does not, then, completely abandon metonymy—perhaps an impossible task—when he offers the labyrinth as a figure to compete with the machine, but instead invokes a metonymy that signals its own limitations.

II

Dickens' honest admission of his own limitations stands out clearly if it is juxtaposed with another attempt to "know" the industrial worker, Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class*. Like *Hard Times*, it has become an established classic in literature about the working class, despite challenges to its factual accuracy. And recently, in the light of Steven Marcus' much acclaimed analysis, Engels' ability to penetrate to the reality of the industrial worker has been given high marks. In sharp contrast to Dickens, Engels faced the labyrinth of the new industrial landscape and turned it into a knowable pattern.[15] As he proclaimed in his Dedication addressed to the "Working Classes of Great Britain," Engel's claim to knowledge, like Dickens', came not from theory or reading but from seeing: "I have not been satisfied with this [reading documents] . . . I wanted *to see* you in your own homes, *to observe* you in your every-day life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to *witness* your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors" (7; emphasis added). And despite the chaos that assaults his sight when he makes his expedition into the interior of Manchester, Engels manages, to use Marcus' apt phrase, to read the illegible. In fact, Engels produces not just a discursive reading but a virtual schematization of the city—complete with maps. These maps are both product and process: Engels masters the labyrinth by turning it into a geometrical figure.[16] In his geometry, Manchester has a center (the commercial quarter) surrounded by concentric circles of residential housing. The con-

centric circles are intersected by main thoroughfares lined with shops hiding the housing behind them, so the upper classes can travel through the city oblivious to the workers' existence. As Marcus observes, Engels' reading of the city is a triumph of observation and analysis.

Engels falters, however, whenever he attempts to identify the intention of the builders—a sure sign that the truth of metonymy is getting shaky. The vexed question of intention leads to sentences that seek to clarify but only obfuscate. Even propagandistic invective cannot paper over Engels' uncertainty: "When the middle classes zealously proclaim that all is well with the working classes, I cannot help feeling that the politically 'progressive' industrialists, the Manchester 'Bigwigs,' are not quite so innocent of this shameful piece of town planning as they pretend" (56).

On the other hand, Engels hardly wavers when he reads the minds of the workers. In this connection it is worth recalling that Dickens' assertion that the people of Coketown are "equally like one another," while embedded in the metonymy that equates a city and its inhabitants, is part of his larger association of machine and labor that reinforces the definition of the workers' character. The paragraph that follows the famous keynote passage states: "These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained" (17). To assume that work or activity defines a person—another metonymic figure—is deeply etched in many Victorian elevations of work, and it is present in Dickens.[17]

For Engels the connection between work and character is clear—dull work signifies a dull character:

> In den meisten Arbeitszweigen ist die Tätigkeit des Arbeiters auf eine kleinliche, rein mechanische Manipulation beschränkt, die sich Minute für Minute wiederholt und jahraus, jahrein dieselbe bleibt. Wer von Kindesbeinen an jeden Tag zwölf Stunden und drüber Nadelknöpfe gemacht oder Kammräder abgefeilt und ausserdem in den Verhältnissen eines englischen Proletariers gelebt hat, wieviel menschliche Gefühle und Fähigkeiten mag der in sein dreissigstes Jahr hinüberretten?
>
> (346–47)
>
> [In most branches of industry,] the activity of the worker is limited to some insignificant and purely mechanical [repetitive] manipulation, repeated minute after minute, remaining year in and year out the same. How much human feeling or capacities can a man of thirty expect to retain if since childhood he has spent twelve

> hours or more every day making pin heads or filing cogwheels, and has in addition lived amid [all the other] circumstances of the English proletariat.[18]

Engels' premise, following the law of metonymy, is that a worker who performs repetitive, mechanical tasks must be reduced to a subhuman entity, usually an animal or a machine.

Engels usually imagines only one alternative to that metamorphosis: a refusal to be transformed, generated by the workers' own anger and hatred. For Engels the workers are finally of two kinds: those who submit and those who rebel. Those actions are perfect mirrors of the two interior states he allows the workers: animal stupidity or aggressive anger. The stark simplicity of this psychology is an ineluctable conclusion because of the rhetorical premises by which Engels operates.[19] Ironically, Engels' characterization of the workers therefore sounds like the absurd rhetoric of Josiah Bounderby. If workers are not filled with violent class hatred, Engels imagines that the "physical and mental powers" of those workers are "atrophied" (199; "seine körperlichen und geistigen Kräfte gänzlich in dieser Langeweile verkommen zu lassen" [397]). Because of the "torture" of factory work, the workers' minds, which must correspond to their disfigured bodies, are "stunted" (199–200; "Sie wirkt aber auch im höchsten Grade abstumpfend, wie auf den Körper so auch auf den Geist des Arbeiters" [397–98]). Submission to factory work means one is a "mere animal" (134; "und dann vertiert er ganz gewiss" [347]), and children especially are turned into beasts by the boredom of their labor. In a polarity that Bounderby will reproduce in his tirade against Stephen Blackpool, Engels writes: "if they are workers who are not inspired to a fury of indignation against their oppressors, then they sink into drunkenness and all other forms of demoralising vice" (200; "Und wenn diese Indignation gegen die Bourgeoisie nicht zum vorherrschenden Gefühl beim Arbeiter wird, so ist die notwendige Folge der Trunk und überhaupt alles das, was man gewöhnlich Demoralisation nennt" [398]). Such violent, degrading rhetoric, because of its obvious distortion of reality, exerts a centripetal force that calls into question the author's control over his language. Engels, swept up by his rhetoric, does not seem to recognize that he is disfiguring the men he seeks to praise.[20]

The opportunities for the "fury" of the workers to manifest itself were frequent in England in 1844, and never more so than in the mining strike in Durham and Northumberland of that year. What

Engels has to say about that strike dramatically reveals what he "knows" about the workers, much as Dickens' "knowledge" of the working class is displayed in his report about the Preston strike of 1853–54. The colliers' strike, like that at Preston, resulted in extreme privation and hardship. The strike was a prolonged one that finally collapsed, but the strikers committed no acts of violence. The keynote of Engels' description of the workers' behavior during the strike is their "self-control" (292; "Selbstbeherrschung" [471]), precisely the attribute that would strike Dickens so forcibly at Preston a decade later. Moderation, rationality, and self-control—those middle-class traits Engels witnessed in the workers—are attributes that his figural system could not predict. What Engels expected is evident from his enumeration of what did *not* occur:

> trotz alledem blieben die Grubenleute fest und, was noch mehr sagen will, bei allen Feindseligkeiten und Herausforderungen der Grubenbesitzer und ihrer getreuen Diener ruhig und friedlich. Kein Akt der Rache wurde geübt, kein einzelner Abtrünniger misshandelt, kein einziger Diebstahl verübt.
>
> (469)

> And to their credit let it be said that they remained quiet and peaceful in the face of every provocation that the coal-owners and their faithful lackeys could devise. No act of vengeance occurred: no blackleg was molested: no theft was committed.
>
> (290)

Engels is led to attribute an incredible heroism of character to the strikers. His rhetoric demands that the workers had to be in the grip of "burning hatred against their oppressors" because they were not acting like "mere machines" (202) or "stupid animals" (278). The strike, therefore, must represent a triumph of collective self-repression: the acquisition of "self-control." Engels, like Dickens, is amazed that the workers were able to display that preeminent middle-class virtue: "And what a struggle it was—not a fight against invisible enemies who could be struck down, but a fight against hunger and want, destitute misery and hopelessness—against their own passions which had been provoked almost to madness by the brutality of wealth" (Marcus, 244; "Und welch einen Kampf—nicht gegen sichtbare, tödliche Feinde, sondern gegen Hunger und Not, Elend und Obdachlosigkeit, gegen die eignen, durch die Brutalität des Reichtums bis zum Wahnsinn herausgeforderten Leidenschaften" [471]).

What such rhetoric reveals about Engels, as it does about Dickens, is the gap between the character of the workers generated by his rhetoric and their character as revealed in their actions. Or, put another way, the gap demonstrates that between character and action no meaningful linkage necessarily exists. Character and action are simply two terms of a metonymic relationship, like character and work, character and clothes, and character and environment. It seems naive to assume that the two terms of these metonymic pairs are identical, but that assumption occurs repeatedly and without notice. The readings of the industrial worker's character constituted by those metonymic operations in *The Condition of the Working Class* are not subtle; instead, they are crude and distasteful. To find such monstrous characters drawn by a perceptive, sympathetic writer testifies to the power and pervasiveness of the rhetoric of metonymy.[21]

III

After *Hard Times* and *The Condition of the Working Class*, relatively early attempts to represent industrial workers, equating the worker and his environment became almost automatic. *Germinal* (1885), the most influential literary representation of the industrial worker, in the Engels-Dickens tradition based on direct observation (Zola's trip in 1884 to the mining region during the Anzin strike), carries the metonymic characterization of workers as machines and animals to the limits of intelligibility—and for many readers beyond the bounds of realism. Miners become a brutal, mechanical herd, indistinguishable from the pits and machinery that devour them. Zola's personal and nightmarish vision is unmistakable, but he creates his miners by following the impersonal convention of realistic metonymy: he identifies them with their horrific surroundings. Zola would have had no trouble accepting Disraeli's formulaic description of the people of the factory town of Wodgate in *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, published in the same year as *The Condition of the Working Class*, forty years before *Germinal*: "they are animals; unconscious; their minds a blank; and their worst actions only the impulse of a gross or savage instinct."[22]

The lifelessness of Dickens' industrial workers in *Hard Times*, when seen in this tradition, paradoxically may be taken as a sign of his humaneness. Instead of allowing them to develop into savages or grotesque robots, he lets them fade into the colorless an-

Monsters of Metonymy

onymity of moral personifications while quietly relinquishing the project of presenting the truth about them. He permits his initial expectation that the new industrial world would be peopled by a mob of interchangeable, mass-produced characters to be shown a delusion, revealing in the process that he had been mistaken in assuming a necessary connection between Coketown and its inhabitants. Because it dramatizes its own futility, *Hard Times* displays an unusual intellectual and moral honesty. After all, in the equivalence of work and character in the dogma of social prophets like Carlyle, Ruskin, and Marx; in the insistence upon the determining effects of environment on character in realist and naturalist fiction and painting; in the belief in the photographic image as a means of knowledge—in these and countless other macroscopic ways, the microscopic truth of metonymy dominated the nineteenth century. For Dickens to resist both his own and his culture's inner laws was an act, if not of what Morse Peckham has called "cultural transcendence," at least of unusual humility.[23]

University of Bridgeport

NOTES

[1] *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 343. See reviews by R. H. Hutton (*Spectator*, 18 June 1870) and George Scott (*Contemporary Review*, Jan. 1869) for typical Victorian echoes of Eliot's lament. Collins points out that Dickens is frequently compared to a photographer and that the novelist as photographer is a "frequent image in Victorian novel-criticism" (6).

[2] Shaw's Introduction to *Hard Times* (London: Waverley, 1912); rpt. in the Norton Critical Edition of *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: Norton, 1966), 337–38. Quotations from *Hard Times*, cited parenthetically, refer to this edition. Philip Collins gives a balanced assessment of Dickens' familiarity with industrialism in "Dickens and Industrialism," *SEL* 20 (1980), 651–73.

[3] Representative recent studies in this line include Geoffrey Carnall, "Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, and the Preston Strike," *VS* 8 (1964), 31–48; Robin Gilmour, "The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom," *VS* 11 (1967), 207–24; K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith, "*Hard Times* and the Factory Controversy," *NCF* 24 (1970), 404–27; N. N. Feltes, "To Saunter, To Hurry: Dickens, Time and Industrial Capitalism," *VS* 20 (1977), 245–67. In "*Hard Times*: The News and the Novel" (*NCF* 32 [1977], 166–87), Joseph Butwin argues convincingly that the original readers of *Hard Times* "were encouraged to see the novel as a form of journalism to be read continuously with *Household Words*, the weekly magazine in which it appeared. The novel of social reform exists in a continuum with journalism and defines its audience within the general public rather than among the community of 'ideal readers' of fiction whose response justifies most literary criticism" (167).

[4] *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 94.

[5] Jakobson's observations are contained in "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of*

Language (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), 53–82, esp. section V, "The Metaphoric and Metonymyic Poles," 76–82. Most relevant here is his observation that, "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in place and time. He is fond of synecdochic details" (78). In "Metonymy, Schematism, and the Space of Literature," (NLH 11 [1980], 469–87), Alexander Gelley notes that "Jakobson's discussions of metonymy involve both the contiguity of objects and places delineated in a fiction and the contiguity of semantic elements which need to be accounted for by syntactic or other formal principles" (471). My focus here is restricted to the former.

   [6] David Craig, Introduction, Hard Times (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 19. The passage's status as a key monument in realism is attested to by its inclusion in the following texts and anthologies: Francois Bedarida, A Social History of England, 1851–1975 (London: Methuen, 1979); Nature and Industrialization: An Anthology, ed. Alasdair Clayre (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977); The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, et al, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1968). In the 3rd edition of the Norton Anthology (1974) Dickens' description of Coketown has been dropped, but selections from Engels' "The Great Towns" chapter of The Condition of the Working Class have been added. The substitution neatly illustrates the interchangeability of fictional and nonfictional texts as documentary evidence of the real conditions of the Victorian industrial worker.

   [7] Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class (New York: Random House, 1974). A substantial part of Marcus' book first appeared as an article entitled "Reading the Illegible," in The Victorian City: Images and Realities, ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 1:257–76.

   [8] The classic article on the subject is Dorothy Van Ghent's "The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's," Sewanee Review 58 (1950), 419–38.

   [9] The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 8.

   [10] That metonymy's truth is rarely questioned because it is simply read as literal realism is neatly illustrated in the following misreading by the usually perceptive David Lodge. Note that in this passage his use of the term "non-metaphorically" is intended to signal the absence of figurality, not the presence of metonymy: "The people of Coketown . . . take their character from the architecture of the town non-metaphorically conceived—'large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another.' They are reduced to indistinguishable units caught up in a mindless, monotonous, mechanical process, superbly represented in the droning repetition of sound and syntax in the last sentence of the passage quoted" (The Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966], 156).

   [11] Quotations from "On Strike" are taken from the version reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of Hard Times (286–99). "On Strike" and Hard Times (and The Condition of the Working Class) are early representatives of what Peter Keating describes as "A distinctive branch of modern literature in which a representative of one class consciously sets out to explore, analyze, and report upon, the life of another class lower on the social scale than its own" (Into Unknown England, 1866–1913: Selections from the Social Explorers [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1976], 13). In The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction, after noting that working-class novels "are usually written by authors who are not working class, for an audience which is not working class" (2), Keating cogently discusses the importance of the authors' ignorance (32–40).

   [12] A rather chilling study of Dickens' attitudes toward an actual working-class man is Sheila M. Smith's "John Overs to Charles Dickens: A Working-Man's Letter and its Implications" (VS 18 [1974], 195–217). Even though the letters end in 1841, Smith's conclusions seem appropriate for the Dickens of Hard Times and "On Strike":

"So, at a period of his life when he was accounted his most radical, Dickens showed himself unable to comprehend his need, both as a social reformer and as an artist, to approach the working man as a serious, complex human being" (217).

[13] The importance of metonymy for Dickens has been pointed out by J. Hillis Miller in "The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz, Oliver Twist,* and Cruikshank's Illustrations," in J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz, *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Univ. of California, 1971), 1–69. Miller asserts that "for Dickens, metonymy is the foundation and support of metaphor" (13). In contrast, in *The Modes of Modern Writing,* David Lodge comments: "Arguably, Dickens was never an essentially realistic novelist . . . and achieved his finest work when he allowed his novels to develop according to metaphoric principles" (103). Taylor Stoehr's *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965), an early study of Dickens' use of metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche, emphasizes the importance of metonymy. No matter—the issue at hand is not whether Dickens is primarily metonymic or metaphoric, but how he allows metonymy's inherent epistemological instability to surface. Of course, a critic interested in a full-fledged deconstruction might undo the opposition metaphor/metonymy. Epistemological problems inherent in all language are explored in Paul de Man's "The Epistemology of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), 13–30. My epigraph from Locke is cited by de Man, 20.

[14] "Mystery" and "muddle" are a crucial pair of words in the work of another novelist who explored the problem of knowing people in alien cultures—E. M. Forster. See esp. *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924), 69, 208, 263.

[15] Patrick Brantlinger, in "Dickens and the Factories" (*NCF* 26 [1971], 270–85), praises *Hard Times* as realistic because in it the city is presented as an "unfathomable" labyrinth, which for Brantlinger is the truth. From a Marxist perspective, in which the city is necessarily a knowable part of knowable history, the illegibility implied in the figure of the labyrinth is itself part of bourgeois ideology, as no doubt would be criticism praising Dickens' "vision of the labyrinthine complexity of society, open to no rational analysis" (Brantlinger, 283). Marcus praises Engels' ordering of the chaos of the slums of Manchester: "But this chaos of alleys . . . is not a chaos as well. Every fragment of disarray, every inconvenience, every scrap of human suffering has a meaning" (198). For Engel's use of the figure of the labyrinth, see *The Condition of the Working Class,* trans. W. O. Chaloner and W. H. Henderson (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968), esp. 61–65, 74. Quotations from *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* cited parenthetically, are from this translation, except when Steven Marcus' in *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* seems better, in which case the quotation will be followed by "Marcus" and pagination. When Engels' German is provided after the English, the source is Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke,* 2 (Berlin: Dietz, 1970).

· [16] There is a humorously ironic but unsettling similarity between Engels and the geometrical Gradgrind here. The Victorians' fascination with statistics and their use of them as a tool to know their own strange new world are of course targets of Dickens' ridicule in *Hard Times.* For the importance of statistics to the Victorians, see Asa Briggs, "The Human Aggregate," in *The Victorian City,* 1:83–104.

[17] Of course, the counterproposition, that there is a profound difference between an inner self and a social role, is one of the standard themes of the Victorian novel and Victorian social criticism—including *Hard Times.*

[18] Marcus, 213. To give Engels his due, once more his awareness that his reading is tenuous is apparent—here he couches his statement about character in the form of a question, even if the question is rhetorical. Marcus, too, is quick to point out that the relationship of work to character remains problematic, even though he retains the assumption that work and character must have some knowable relationship (215–16).

[19] See *The Condition of the Working Class,* 12, 133–34, 187, 199–200, 202, 240,

241, 248, 278. Engels' figural system is also employed by his sources. See for example, the remarks of Kay-Shuttleworth quoted on 200, n. 2.

[20] Marcus is forced to assert that this must be Engels' "personal projection" (225).

[21] Engels' "reading" of the character of the Irish in *The Condition of the Working Class* is a good indicator of the power of metonymy. The Irish ("Irish Immigration," chap. 5) seem to arouse his disgust more than his pity or understanding partly because he sees them as almost identical to their most important possessions—pigs. See esp. 106.

[22] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 204.

[23] The complexities of the problems of knowing the industrial workers are enormous, and many other lines of analysis have not been followed here. For example, in addition to the vast historical and sociological literature on the Victorian worker, the epistemological problem in these texts could be treated as an instance of the formal philosophical topic known as the "other mind" problem; similarly, the difficulty of knowing what is essentially an alien culture is a classical subject in anthropology. Two admirable studies that seek to present the workers in their own voices are particularly interesting: *The Annals of Labour: Autobiographies of British Working-Class People 1820–1920*, ed. John Burnett (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1974); and Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach's oral history, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Both offer evidence that for some workers factory work was far from the mind-destroying horror that Dickens and Engels imagined. The reliability of both modes of presentation (autobiography and oral history) is, of course, open to question. Even if the epistemological constraints of rhetoric are set aside, one cannot help noticing that the autobiographies are all recognizable as belonging to a literary genre, autobiography; and the oral histories are shaped by the questioner, the presence of the tape recorder, and the imagined listeners of the future. An unmediated vision of the industrial worker is as elusive as any other unmediated vision.

Monsters of Metonymy