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# Dickens's *Genera Mixta*: What Kind of a Novel Is *Hard Times*?

Nils Clausson

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... fiction ... is less a genre than a menagerie of genres.

—Irving Howe

Unlike the classical genres of epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral, etc., the novel has no rules except those that it chooses to borrow eclectically from those traditional forms.

—David Lodge

## I

The genre of *Hard Times* (1854) has seemed more or less self-evident at least since 1958, when Raymond Williams grouped together a number of early and mid-Victorian novels, including *Hard Times*, under the name “industrial novels” in his influential *Culture and Society*, and when Arnold Kettle classified the same group of novels as “social-problem novels” in an essay in the new *Penguin Guide to English Literature*.<sup>1</sup> Williams and Kettle did more than identify a subgenre of the Victorian novel; they also defined the terms in which these novels would be discussed for the next half century, beginning with David Lodge’s 1966 essay on H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay* in his *Language of Fiction*, and followed by Catherine Gallagher’s *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (1985), Joseph W. Childer’s *Novel Possibilities: Fiction and the Formation of Early Victorian Culture* (1995), and Josephine M. Guy’s *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel* (1996). This classification has recently been reconfirmed by Richard Simmons Jr.’s essay “Industrial and ‘Condition of England’ Novels” in Blackwell’s *Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2003):

From the late 1830s on, with issues such as the “factory question,” the “hungry forties,” the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the Chartist uprising as rich ground from which to mine subject matter, novels about problems of class conflict and capitalism became one of the

most significant subgenres of Victorian literature. Such fiction has been variously labeled, but the “condition of England” novel seems most inclusive. (Simmons 337)

While this approach has produced illuminating readings of this group of novels, it has also ensured that these novels, including *Hard Times*, have been discussed almost exclusively in terms of their intervention in the condition-of-England debate of the 1840s and 1850s, and especially debates about industrialization and the class conflict it produced. “The industrial novels of early Victorian England,” says Deirdre David in *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels* (1981),

are very often primarily regarded as a source of information about industrial conditions, and then secondarily as novels in themselves with all the attendant difficulties that have to do with the relationship between the actuality of those conditions and their transformation into fiction. The industrial novel . . . provides invaluable depictions of a society in the process of unprecedented and disturbing alteration, and, for readers of the time, offered glimpses of unknown territory.(5–6)

Although explicit questions about the genre of *Hard Times* have not figured prominently in criticism of it, the debates about its social and political engagements, as well as its artistic success, have, as I hope to show, been inseparable from an implicit debate about what kind of novel it should be read as. The question posed by David Lodge in his essay on the novel in *Working with Structuralism* (1981)—“what kind of novel is *Hard Times*” (Lodge, *Working* 38)—has, in my view, never been satisfactorily answered, although the designation of it as a condition-of-England novel has tended to mask this failure. A recurring feature of criticism of *Hard Times* has been a confident assertion of its genre, followed by a qualification or even a contradiction that exposes its generic instability. For example, in a paper delivered to the English Institute in 1967 (and published a year later), Northrop Frye proclaimed, “Every novel of Dickens is a comedy,” specifically a variant of the New Comedy deriving ultimately from Plautus. Yet later in that essay, he says “. . . it is clear that *Hard Times*, of all Dickens’s stories, comes nearest to being what in our day is sometimes called the dystopia, the book which, like *Brave New World* or *1984*, shows us the nightmare world that results from certain perverse tendencies inherent in society getting free play” (67). Matthew Hodgart also finds the novel bifurcated: “There is no one novel which approaches the consistency of a satiric fable [such as *Candide*],” he says; “the nearest approach is *Hard Times*, but even there [Dickens] digresses into melodrama” (229).<sup>2</sup>

The generic instability of *Hard Times* is also attested to by Lodge, who is uncertain about its generic affiliations. In his essay "Tono-Bungay and the Condition of England" (in his book *Language of Fiction*), Lodge, following Williams's and Kettle's lead, grouped *Hard Times* with such novels as *Sybil* (1845), *Mary Barton* (1848), *Alton Locke* (1850), and *North and South* (1855) under the rubric condition-of-England novels. "This description," he says "was often applied to novels which sought to articulate and interpret, in the mode of fiction, the changing nature of English society in an era of economic, political, religious, and philosophical revolution" (216). But in "The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*," also in *Language of Fiction*, Lodge significantly does not discuss Dickens's novel in the context of the other condition-of-England novels he identifies in the essay on *Tono-Bungay*. Although he implies that *Hard Times* is a condition-of-England novel when he says early in the essay that "on every page" it "manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism, acquisitiveness, and ruthlessly competitive capitalist economics" (145), he later explicitly aligns the novel with the fairy tale:

At one level it is possible to read the novel as an ironic fairy tale in which the enchanted princess [Louisa] is released from her spell but does not find a Prince Charming [Harthouse plays the role of "demon king"], in which the honest, persecuted servant (Stephen) is vindicated but not rewarded, and in which the traditional romantic belief in blood and breeding, confirmed by a discovery, is replaced by the exposure of Bounderby's invented snobbery. (161)

Fifteen years later, however, in a second essay on *Hard Times* in his book *Working with Structuralism* (1981), Lodge changed his generic classification of the novel, remarking that "a sympathetic reading of *Hard Times* . . . must recognise that its method is to a considerable extent borrowed from the popular theatre," specifically from "that peculiarly British theatrical institution, the pantomime" (42–43). Nevertheless, Lodge does not abandon his earlier designation of the novel as an ironic fairy tale: "the text of *Hard Times* is saturated with allusions to the world of fairy tale and nursery rhyme with which pantomimes are characteristically concerned: ogres and witches and dragons and fairies, old women on broomsticks, the cow with the crumpled horn, Peter Piper, and so on" (43).<sup>3</sup> Lodge's language is revealing: the novel is "saturated with [not 'sprinkled with'] allusions to the world of fairy tale and nursery rhyme" at the same time that "on every page" it "manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society" (145). The difficulty presented by this critical sleight of hand is clear if we imagine a critic saying of a play that on every page it manifests its identity as a tragedy, and then turns about and proclaims that the text is saturated

with allusions to the world of, say, comedy, or morality play, or satire. I do not wish, of course, to deny that such a play could exist; indeed, one does: Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. But such a text would certainly generate heated debate about its generic identity, just as *Timon* has.

To be sure, "on one level" it is certainly possible to read *Hard Times* as an ironic fairy tale (or as a pantomime), and Dickens clearly drew upon the fairy tale (and popular theatre) as materials to construct his novel. But, as Lodge himself acknowledges, it is difficult, if not impossible, to read the novel as an ironic fairy tale and, simultaneously, as a "polemical work." These two genres, as Lodge's perceptive analysis shows, pull it and hence the reader in two incompatible directions:

. . . the fairy-tale element sets up unresolved tensions in the novel. It encourages a morally-simplified, non-social, and non-historical view of human life and conduct, whereas Dickens's undertaking in *Hard Times* makes quite opposite demands. Mr Sleary's ruse for releasing Tom from the custody of Bitzer, for instance (III, viii), is acceptable on the level of fairy-tale motivation: he returns Mr Gradgrind's earlier good deed (the adoption of Cissy) and scores off an unsympathetic character (Bitzer). But the act is essentially lawless, and conflicts with Dickens's appeal elsewhere in the novel for justice and social responsibility. As long as the circus-folk represent a kind of life that is anarchic, seedy, socially disreputable, but cheerful and humane, they are acceptable and enjoyable. But when they are offered as agents or spokesmen of social and moral amelioration, we reject them. The art they practice is Fancy in its tawdriest form, solemnly defended by Mr Sleary in terms we recognise as the justification of today's mass entertainment:

People mutht be amusthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You mutht have uth, Thquire. (III, viii)

Cissy is meant to represent a channel through which the values of the circus folk are conveyed to the social order. But her one positive act, the dismissal of Harthouse (III, ii), depends for its credibility on a simple faith in the superiority of a good fairy over a demon king. (Lodge, *Language* 162)

The full implications of Lodge's insight into the "unresolved tensions" of the novel's conflicting genres have not, in my view, been sufficiently explored, yet they are pertinent to the debate, inaugurated by Leavis's revaluation in *The Great Tradition* (1948), over both the novel's genre and

its artistic success. For the "unresolved tensions in the novel" concerning Dickens's "critique of mid-Victorian industrial society" cannot be separated from the irresolvable tensions existing among the work's multiple genres. The novel's "menagerie of genres," to borrow Irving Howe's happy phrase, pulls *Hard Times* in incompatible directions. The rest of this paper will explore the implications of the critical debate about the novel's genre for our understanding both of *Hard Times* and of the debates surrounding the interpretation and evaluation of it. In particular, I want to suggest that reading *Hard Times* exclusively as a social-problem, or industrial, novel is an unhelpful way of trying to get beyond the debates that have dominated criticism of the novel for the last half century. The criticisms of Dickens for his inadequate response to the social problems he raises in *Hard Times* are, I shall argue, the misguided result of the attempt to read it as a single genre, the social-problem novel, instead of the *Genera Mixta* I take it to be. The way out of this critical stalemate, in my view, is to recognize that the generic dissonances and inconsistencies in *Hard Times* are not peculiar to this particular novel but are generic characteristics of the other (so-called) condition-of-England novels in whose company it is regularly placed. In short, *Hard Times* is a *genera mixta* because the condition-of-England novel is a *Genera Mixta*.

## II

Like so much of modern criticism of *Hard Times*, the debate over its genre begins with F. R. Leavis's seminal essay on it in *The Great Tradition*. Leavis's generic designation of the novel as a "moral fable" is the key both to his reinterpretation and to his revaluation of it. For Leavis *Hard Times* is a "masterpiece" and "a completely serious work of art" (227), and its artistic seriousness and success are for him inseparable from the deep moral insight he finds in the story: namely, its attack, in the name of "life," on the poverty and immorality of utilitarianism. All this is well known, but what has been overlooked is the extent to which Leavis's judgment of both the novel's moral seriousness and its artistic success is inseparable from his assumption of its genre. For Leavis, the novel's "intention and nature are pretty obvious," and what makes Dickens's "intention" so "immediately apparent" (227) to the reader is Leavis's immediately apparent sense that *Hard Times* is a moral fable, concluding with the generically inevitable "solemn moral" (243): "I need say no more by way of defining the moral fable than that in it the intention is peculiarly insistent, so that the representative significance of everything in the fable—characters, episode, and so on—is *immediately apparent as we read*" (227; italics added).

Leavis's certainty that he is reading a moral fable leads him to expect certain things in the text rather than others, and to ignore, or at least

to downplay, those elements, such as Dickens's representation of trade unions and Parliament, which seem unimportant, or even irrelevant, if *Hard Times* is read as a moral fable. The moral fable is most insistently present in those scenes exposing the failure of Gradgrind's utilitarian-Benthamite system for educating his children, and so Leavis understandably concentrates his analysis on the scenes that demonstrate for him "the confutation of Utilitarianism by life" (236). Thus the three key scenes for Leavis are "the consummate scene" (236) in which Gradgrind conveys Bounderby's marriage proposal to Louisa, the one in which Louisa returns to her father, and the one in which Sissy Jupe persuades Harthouse to leave Coketown. Leavis (to his credit) acknowledges that "Dickens has no glimpse of the part to be played by Trade Unionism in bettering the condition he deplors" (245), and that this blindness is evidence of "a lack of political understanding" (245) on Dickens's part. But since the moral fable is concerned with "the confutation of Utilitarianism by life," and Slackbridge's role does not affect that intention, Leavis does not consider this acknowledged deficiency as a serious fault, since overall "the justice and penetration of [Dickens's] criticism [of Victorian civilization] are unaffected" by it (246). And so Leavis can confidently conclude that "Dickens's understanding of Victorian civilization is adequate for his purpose," a purpose that is intuited mainly from the directions provided to the reader by the genre of the moral fable. Thus both Leavis's interpretation and his radical reevaluation of *Hard Times* are inseparable from, because underwritten by, his designation of it as a moral fable, a genre that for Leavis is so self-evident, so "peculiarly insistent" and "immediately apparent as we read," that it does not have to be argued for.

Less than a decade after Leavis published his heretical reevaluation of *Hard Times*, discussions of the novel underwent the shift that was to define the terms, generic as well as political, in which it would be discussed for the next fifty years. When Williams and Kettle, who came to the novel not only with a different set of political assumptions about the relation of novels to society (Kettle was a Marxist, Williams a socialist), but also a different set of generic expectations, Leavis's genre of moral fable and his evaluation of the novel as "a poetic work" by "a poetic dramatist" (241) were not nearly so "peculiarly insistent" nor so "immediately apparent" to them as they read the novel. When *Hard Times* was read along with Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Disraeli's *Sybil*, and Kingsley's *Alton Locke* as a social-problem novel instead of as a moral fable, the shift in genre was accompanied by a noticeable shift in what critics paid attention to and a corresponding shift in their evaluation of the novel. The very things that Leavis deemed peripheral, such as Dickens's treatment of trade unions, his failure to understand the central role of class in creating the divisions that the novel deplors, and his contemptuous dismissal of

Parliament as the "national dust-yard," now became the focus of critical attention when the genre of the novel was shifted, and, not surprisingly, critics found *Hard Times* to be artistically flawed. For post-Leavis critics, it was precisely Dickens's "lack of political understanding," something that scarcely troubled Leavis, which became "peculiarly insistent" and "immediately apparent" to them. Once the genre shifted, things that for Leavis were minor flaws, such as the failure to understand "the part to be played by Trade Unionism in bettering the conditions he deploras," become major faults. It is not insignificant that Williams and Kettle did not find *Hard Times* an unsuccessful moral fable, or even a flawed conventional realist novel. Their criticism of Dickens's political limitations was accompanied by the creation of a new subgenre of Victorian fiction, the industrial, or social-problem, novel. What critics now came to value or criticize in the novel was inseparable from the (new) kind of novel they read it as.

Reading *Hard Times* as a condition-of-England novel had two consequences. First, it has led critics to expect, in accordance with their definition of the genre, that it will not only represent the historical facts accurately but also offer a solution to the problems it has raised, or at least point in the direction that modern critics believe a feasible solution grounded in history must lie. "Dickens and Gaskell," as David remarks, "have been criticized for not providing remedies for the problems they present, and the perfect industrial novel, we are led to believe, is one in which we find both the logical exposition of a social problem and its feasible resolution" (6). "The so-called industrial novels of the Victorian period, like *Hard Times*," says Lodge, "offer a special problem, or trap, for literary criticism. Because these novels comment directly upon contemporary social issues, they open themselves to evaluation according to the 'truthfulness' with which they reflect the 'facts' of social history. Modern criticism of *Hard Times* shows this tendency very clearly" (Lodge, *Working* 37).

The second consequence of reading *Hard Times* as a condition-of-England novel, one that has not been sufficiently noticed, is that doing so has imposed on the novel a generic uniformity that ignores the two principal literary genres that comprise the novel and that, I would argue, ought to play a decisive role in both our interpretation and evaluation of it. These two genres, the Jonsonian comedy of humors and Menippean satire, are in fact incompatible with the polemical thrust of the social-problem novel, for the first two and the last are pulling the novel in contradictory directions. And it is these generic contradictions, I believe, rather than Dickens's lack of political and historical insight, that explain the "unresolved tensions" that Lodge and other critics find in the novel. In response to Lodge's comment that a novel like *Hard Times* offers a trap to literary criticism, I would ask: But is it really these novels that, by "comment[ing] directly upon contemporary social issues," open themselves to adverse evaluation, or is it the critics'

decision to read them *as* industrial or social-problem novels that, by creating the expectation that they should accurately reflect the empirical facts of social history and offer feasible solutions to social problems, actually lays the trap for the unwary critic? The genre of the moral fable creates no such expectations since moral fables do not offer solutions to social problems: they reconfirm moral truths that are taken to be self-evident.

To us, half a century after Williams and Kettle, the identification of the condition-of-England novel as a subgenre of the mid-Victorian realist novel seems self-evident. It appears to name an obvious, empirically verifiable subgenre of the novel. But Williams and Kettle did not so much discover a hitherto unrecognized species of fiction as construct it. Although novels with a purpose were obviously not new in the 1840s—William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) appeared sixty years before *Hard Times*—novels with a topical purpose certainly seemed an innovation in the 1840s and 1850s. Contemporary reviewers and readers repeatedly commented on the phenomenon. As an anonymous writer in *Fraser's* complained in 1850, "Whoever has anything to say, or thinks he has . . . puts it forthwith into the shape of a novel or a tale" (qtd. in Tillotson 14). But the innovativeness of such novels is easy to overestimate. While the social conditions they commented on were unprecedented, the novels were certainly not without literary antecedents. Until the idea of the *avant-garde* emerged with Modernism in the early twentieth century and then firmly established itself as "the tradition of the new," writers aspiring to create something original, or at least innovative, were much more likely to adopt the strategy H. G. Wells used to create his scientific romances of the 1890s, namely transforming and modifying an earlier genre (for Wells the romance) rather than imagining they were doing something entirely new or original. (Fielding did the same thing in the preface to *Tom Jones*, calling his novel a "comic epic in prose.") When what appears to be a new kind of fiction suddenly emerges, such as the industrial novel in the 1840s, what is new about it, in this case its topical subject matter, is likely to blind readers (then and now) to the fact that new, genuinely new, genres are extremely rare. What seems to be a new genre is more likely a transformation or combination of existing genres. The two earlier genres of fiction that Dickens transforms and combines in *Hard Times* are, as Northrop Frye pointed out forty years ago, the comedy of humours in the tradition of Ben Jonson and Henry Fielding, and Menippean satire (which Frye renames the anatomy) in the tradition of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) and *Crotchet Castle* (1831) and, more recently, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1831). *Hard Times* transforms and combines these two earlier genres, and if it is read in these generic contexts, not only will the difficulties created by reading it exclusively as a social-problem novel become apparent, but the criticism of Dickens's lack of political understanding will also seem to carry much less force.

In what is still one of the best essays on the structure of Dickens's fiction as a whole, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors," Frye argues, "The structure that Dickens uses for his novels is the New Comedy structure, which has come down to us from Plautus and Terence through Ben Jonson, an author we know Dickens admired, and Molière" (52). The "main action" in a Dickens novel, says Frye,

is a collision of two societies which we may call for convenience the obstructing and the congenial society. The congenial society is usually centered on the love of the hero and heroine, the obstructing society on the characters, often parental, who try to thwart this love. For most of the action the thwarting characters are in the ascendant, but toward the end a twist in the plot reverses the situation and the congenial society dominates the happy ending. (52)

According to Frye, "Dickens is, throughout his career, very consistent in his handling of the New Comedy plot structure. All the stock devices . . . can be found in him" (53). Much of *Hard Times* conforms to this structural pattern. Most of the characters in it are one of the characters, identified by Frye, familiar to New Comedy: the miser, the hypochondriac, the braggart, the parasite, or the pedant. The pedant becomes Gradgrind in his windowless Observatory (where he cannot observe what is important); "the pedantry of the obstructing society," Frye points out, "is associated with a utilitarian philosophy and an infantile trust in facts, statistics, and all impersonal and generalized forms of knowledge" (67). In Dickens, says Frye, the braggart soldier is replaced by a braggart merchant or politician: "An example, treated in a thoroughly traditional manner, is Bounderby in *Hard Times*" (57). The hypocrite in Dickens is usually connected with religion, like Chadband in *Bleak House*, but since religion is noticeably absent from Coketown (something Leavis noticed), Bounderby, who pretends to be a self-made man, doubles as the hypocrite. The parasite in the upper classes is Harthouse, who expects Gradgrind to find him a seat in Parliament; in the working classes, it is Slackbridge, the union agitator with no interest in the well-being of the workers. "A frequent form of plot reversal" in the New Comedy, says Frye, "was the discovery that one of the central characters, usually the heroine, was of better social origins than previously thought" (52–53), a plot device that turns up in the revelation of Bounderby's mother (and again at the end of Disraeli's *Sybil*).

However, as most readers instinctively feel, *Hard Times* somehow seems different from Dickens's other novels: "there is something quite distinctive about the 'feel' of this novel," Lodge remarks (1981, 39), and he attributes this distinctive feel to several things: the handling of time ("the pace of the narrative is . . . rapid—considerably more so than in

Dickens's other novels" [39]); compared with Dickens's other novels, "it depends little on mystery for its interest" (41); and it is "unusual in that there are no characters whose perspectives dominate the novel" (41). And, we might add, there is no pair of lovers—integral to the plot of the New Comedy—whose happiness is blocked by characters in what Frye calls "the obstructing society," although Stephen and Rachael appear to be a vestigial trace of that bedrock convention of New Comedy. But the reason the novel differs noticeably from Dickens's other novels, I would argue, is that the New Comedy structure on which, as Frye points out, those novels rely so heavily is combined in *Hard Times* with the conventions of another genre: the anatomy, or Menippean satire. And while these two genres are not necessarily incompatible with one another—Jonsonian comedy is often satiric—both of these genres are certainly incompatible with the novel with a purpose, as Victorians understood it, and even more with the genre of the social-problem novel into which category modern criticism for the past fifty years has been predisposed to place *Hard Times*.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye identifies what he calls the anatomy with Menippean satire. Strictly speaking, anatomies, or Menippean satires, are not novels at all. Frye usefully distinguishes among kinds of fiction in order to remind us what we have lost in critical precision and discrimination by our sloppy habit of lumping almost all prose fiction since *Don Quixote* under the heading of the novel, a term too loose and baggy to consistently include Cervantes's masterpiece, Peacock's *Crotchet Castle*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and whatever it was Ronald Firbank wrote. But this common usage is now so entrenched that any effort to revive Frye's useful distinctions is a lost cause inviting charges of pedantry. But if we provisionally accept Frye's categories, it becomes clear that novels like *North and South*, *Sybil*, and especially *Hard Times* are not realist novels, which portray a familiar social world, but are much closer to Menippean satire, a kind of prose fiction that, says Frye,

. . . deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes . . . . The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of ideas they represent. . . . At its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern. (Frye, *Anatomy* 309)

As Frye points out, the form of Menippean satire that *Hard Times* comes closest to is the dystopian novel, such as Zamiatin's *We* (1924) and Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). The structural pattern of both these novels is anticipated by the opposition between Coketown and Sleary's circus

in *Hard Times*. We is structured by an opposition between, on the one hand, the One State, in which all buildings, tools, and machines are made of glass, and people, identified by numbers, live and work and act in unison, policed by Guardians and ruled by a leader called a Benefactor, and on the other hand, the revolutionary organization, the Mephi, consisting of rebels and savages who live in the jungle beyond the Green Wall and who are planning to destroy the One State. There is a similar structural opposition in Huxley's *Brave New World* between the World State, where babies are produced in bottles and conditioned from conception through puberty to enjoy their future jobs and accept everything the state tells them, and the Savage Reservation where people still believe in such outmoded ideas as families and religion. Both *Hard Times* and *Brave New World* open with satiric chapters on utilitarian education, and Henry Foster, the thoroughly conditioned organization man in Huxley's novel, is a literary descendant of Bitzer in *Hard Times*. And Zamyatin's *Table of Hours*, a clock system that dictates precisely what everyone is to do and when, is foreshadowed by the deadly statistical clock in Gradgrind's observatory.<sup>4</sup>

The dystopian elements in *Hard Times* are conveniently illuminated by Irving Howe in his seminal essay, "The Fiction of Anti-Utopia," in which he discusses anti-utopian narratives as examples of Menippean satire. Much of what Howe says about dystopian fiction as Menippean satire applies to *Hard Times*. Howe identifies five generic characteristics of the anti-utopian narrative. Not all of these characteristics apply to *Hard Times*, but enough of them do to suggest that Dickens's anti-utilitarian fable to some extent anticipates by half a century one of the distinctive genres of the twentieth century. "The anti-utopian novel," Howe observes, "lacks almost all the usual advantages of fiction: it must confine itself to a rudimentary kind of characterization, it cannot provide much in the way of psychological nuance, it hardly pretends to a large accumulation of suspense" (224). This limitation on characterization is evident in the characters in *Hard Times*. According to Howe, anti-utopian fictions

try to present a world in which individuality has become obsolete and personality a sign of subversion. The major figures of such books are grotesques: they resemble persons who have lost the power of speech and must struggle to regain it. [. . .] The human relations which the ordinary novel takes as its premise become the possibilities towards which the anti-utopian novel strains. What in the ordinary novel appears as the tacit assumption on the opening page is now, in the anti-utopian novel, a wistful hope usually unrealized by the concluding page . . . the writer of anti-utopian fiction must deal with a world in which man has been absorbed by his function and society by the state. (224)

Society has obviously not been totally absorbed by the state in *Hard Times*—that threat would not emerge for half a century—but humans, in the form of Gradgrind, Bounderby and M'Choakumchild, have certainly been absorbed by their functions. Another of Howe's generic characteristics of utopian fiction is anticipated in *Hard Times*: "It posits a 'flaw' in the perfection of the perfect" (224; Howe's italics). Gradgrind's scheme for the perfect education of his children is flawed, and the main action of the novel is designed to expose this flaw.

In addition, the dystopian narrative, says Howe, "must be in the grip of an idea at once dramatically simple and historically complex: an idea that has become a commanding passion" (225; Howe's italics). The world of *Hard Times* is in the grip of a "historically complex" idea—utilitarianism—that is dramatically presented in the novel as simple; it is reduced, in accordance with the generic conventions of the Menippean fable, to a caricature of Bentham and Mill's philosophical system. *Hard Times*, then, clearly exhibits unmistakable elements that anticipate the twentieth-century anti-utopian fable. Dickens's imagination projects a comically grotesque if not nightmarish vision of a society in which utilitarian ideals, simplified and vulgarized, have become the dominant ideology of Coketown, a city that is Dickens's imaginative projection of England's possible future. The novel, as Joseph Childers points out, embodies Dickens's insight that "the methods of industry had crept into facets of life seemingly divorced from the factory. For Dickens, industrial culture threatens to turn all of society into a kind of large factory, churning out fact while devouring beings who have lost the capacity for feeling and human connection, not to say imagination" (87).

### III

But despite the fact that *Hard Times* clearly anticipates some of the conventions and motifs of later anti-utopian fiction, it is not a dystopia in the way that either *We* or *Brave New World* are, and reading it as one is open to the same objection as reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as science fiction, instead of as a transformation of the earlier Gothic tale, combined with the Faustian quest for knowledge, in a way that anticipates later works of science fiction. Only parts of *Hard Times* anticipate twentieth-century dystopias. Many scenes in the novel, such as Sissy's shaming of Harthouse into leaving Coketown, and Mrs. Sparsit's pursuit of Louisa, are unrelated to dystopia (or to Jonsonian humors comedy). The inescapable fact is that *Hard Times* is a generically mixed work, a menagerie of genres. Moreover, these different genres, because they create different, incompatible expectations in the reader, are in conflict to the point of undermining one another. The major generic conflict is that between Jonsonian humors comedy and Menippean satire, on the one hand, and the social problem

or industrial novel on the other. Indeed, the other genres of the novel—moral fable, Menippean satire/dystopia, comedy of humors, pantomime and stage melodrama—tend to overwhelm the social-problem genre to the extent that calling *Hard Times* an industrial novel is almost as misleading as calling *Bleak House* an industrial novel because of the presence in it of the ironmaster Mr. Rouncewell and because it anatomizes English society. To be sure, the industrial theme plays a much larger role in *Hard Times*, but mainly because of the rhetorically prominent—and undeniably brilliant—description of Coketown in chapter 5, “The Keynote.” But the anti-industrial theme diminishes to a minor key in the rest of the novel, and the comic unmasking of Bounderby (which derives from the comedy of humors and stage melodrama) is hardly part of a “comprehensive vision” of the “inhumanities of Victorian civilization,” even if we read it as a satirical exposure (which it partly is) of the Victorian myth of self-help and the self-made man.

Although I would say that *Hard Times* comes closer to Menippean satire and humors comedy than to moral fable, ironic fairy tale, or pantomime, parts of it are undeniably closer to a conventional realist novel than are Menippean satires like *Gulliver's Travels* or *Crotchet Castle*. The main generic dissonances in the novel derive from the incompatibility and inconsistency between the conventions of realist fiction and those of Menippean satire and Jonsonian humors comedy. As Leavis acknowledges, “some passages might come from an ordinary novel” (233). The parts of the novel that come closest to fulfilling the generic expectations of the realist novel include the scenes involving Stephen and Rachael and the scene between Stephen and Bounderby in which Stephen asks for advice on how to divorce his alcoholic wife. Neither Stephen nor Rachael is a humors character and the scenes of the novel portraying them are least like either Jonsonian humors comedy or Menippean satire. And in the scene between Stephen and Bounderby, the latter acts much less like a humors character than he does in the rest of the novel.

The main objection to reading *Hard Times* as a social-problem or industrial novel is that doing so sets up a standard of evaluation that the novel cannot possibly meet, should not be expected to meet, and should not be faulted for not meeting. Although as a condition-of-England novel, *Hard Times* has been defined largely in terms of its subject matter and polemical intentions, it has often been artistically judged as if it were a realist novel like *Mary Barton*. Raymond Williams, for example, expressed a judgment of the novel that persists to this day:

... in terms of human understanding of the industrial working people Dickens is obviously less successful than Mrs Gaskell: his Stephen Blackpool, in relation to the people of *Mary Barton*, is little more than

a diagrammatic figure. [. . .] *Hard Times* is an analysis of Industrialism rather than experience of it. (104)

Now this would be a telling criticism of a realist novel, but it is not the standard by which we judge either Menippean satire or humors comedy. We expect a realist novel set in an industrial town to give us the "experience" of life in such a community, not merely an "analysis" of it. But a Menippean satire, as Frye points out, "differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as the mouthpieces of the ideas they represent [as in a Peacock novel] . . . At its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern" (*Anatomy* 310). Whereas *Hard Times* is much closer to Menippean satire than it is to the realist novel, Gaskell's *Mary Barton* is closer to a realist novel and shows no signs at all of Menippean satire (or humors comedy), and therefore a comparative judgment of the two novels is unhelpful and misleading. To say of a Menippean satire that it is "an analysis of Industrialism" is not a criticism of it, but simply a description of one of its defining generic features. If someone were to criticize *Animal Farm* on the grounds that it is "an analysis of the Russian Revolution rather than experience of it," a generically informed critic would be justified in replying, "Yes, it is, but *Animal Farm* (subtitled *A Fairy Story*) is an animal fable and a political allegory, and as such it is not expected to give us experience in the way a realist novel does, and besides, its analysis is generically appropriate for a fable." The difference between *Animal Farm* and *Hard Times*, however, is that the former is, generically, a fable and *nothing but a fable*; no one would ever consider reading it as a realist novel. But *Hard Times*, as I have been trying to show, is a mixture of genres, and there is just enough of the realist novel in it for Williams and many after him to feel justified in comparing it (unfavorably) to *Mary Barton*. Characterization in *Mary Barton*, however, is consistently of the kind found in the realist novel, whereas characterization in *Hard Times* is not nearly so consistent. As we have seen, parts of it do read like a realist novel, and those critics who read it as a social-problem or industrial novel tend to conflate the realistic parts with the whole novel, ignoring its other genres, and thus giving it a generic consistency and uniformity it does not in fact have.

The problem created by Dickens's combination of comedy of humors and Menippean satire with elements of the realist novel is that the former genres presuppose a different set of assumptions about society and of the individual's relationship to it than those assumed by the realist novel and by the social-problem novel as it is understood by modern critics. According to Frye, in the tradition of social realism that, after Austen, came to dominate serious Victorian fiction, society is represented as being organized by its

institutions: the church, the government (including Parliament), the legal system, the professions, the military, the rural squirearchy, business and manufacturing, and, most noticeably in social-problem novels like *Hard Times*, the trade unions. Characters function from within this highly structured society and are largely defined by its institutions and structures. But in Dickens, as Frye points out, we find "a much more freewheeling and anarchic social outlook. For him, the structures of society, as structures, belong almost entirely to the absurd, obsessed, sinister aspect of it, the aspect that is overcome or evaded by the comic action" (63). The comic plot of the Jonsonian humors comedy leads, says Frye, "to a sense of having broken down or through those structures" (63). Since the restraining social institutions in Dickens belong to the "obstructing society" inherited from New Comedy, they are invariably presented negatively and often satirically: "The law, for instance, as represented by the Chancery suit in *Bleak House* and the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*, is a kind of social vampire, sucking out family secrets or draining off money through endless shifts and evasions" (63). The only institution exempt from this onslaught is the family, although of course there are plenty of individual family members in Dickens who are evil. But the representation of institutions as inimical to the anarchic flow of individual energy is not simply an idiosyncratic view held by Dickens, which he then embodies in his novels. Representing institutions in this way is virtually unavoidable if a writer is working within the generic conventions that Frye finds in Dickens's novels. So we are dealing here not only with a particular writer's worldview, but also with the built-in generic prejudices and predispositions of humors comedy and Menippean satire.

When one reads *Hard Times* as a social-problem novel, however, one perforce must take a very different view of social institutions. Parliament, for example, no longer appears as a self-serving private club, as Dickens portrays it in *Hard Times*, but as a potential vehicle for social change, as the Chartists saw it when they called for universal suffrage, secret ballots, and annual parliaments. Viewed from the perspective of the social-problem novel, institutions such as Parliament and trade unions may be moribund and corrupt, and therefore needing reform, but these institutions are essential both for the improvement of the conditions of the workers and for the progress and improvement of society as a whole. But from the perspective of humors comedy and Menippean satire, institutions, including trade unions, are more likely to be seen as a source of the problem, not as the locus of reform and the correction of social problems. Humors comedy and Menippean satire take an entirely different view of society than the social-problem novel does. Put into the starkest terms, the latter is progressive and reformist, whereas the former is skeptical of progress and tends to see reformers and the desire for reform as part of the problem. The themes of the social-problem novel may not refuse to be set forth in the genres of

Menippean satire and humors comedy, but they certainly resist the effort of an author to do so.

Once *Hard Times* is no longer read as a social-problem novel, Dickens's apparent resistance to institutions that could improve the lot of the working classes, such as trade unions, ceases to be evidence of his lack of political insight or resistance to progress. As a matter of fact, the Dickens who wrote nonfiction articles for *Household Words* saw much good in unions and he unequivocally endorsed the right of workers to form unions, or "to combine" as it was then called. Dickens the journalist, reporting in *Household Words* on the Preston strike, in fact represented the workers and their leaders positively:

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. Their astonishing fortitude and perseverance; their high sense of honor among themselves; the extent to which they are impressed with the responsibility that is upon them of setting a careful example, and keeping their order out of any harm and loss of reputation; the noble readiness in them to help one another . . . could scarcely ever be plainer to an ordinary observer of human nature than in this cockpit. (Dickens 304)

Given this biographical and historical fact, critics have been puzzled by what appears to be Dickens's critical representation of unions in *Hard Times*, and particularly by the characterization of Slackbridge. But Slackbridge's role in the novel is not to express Dickens's skeptical view of the usefulness of trade unions since he had so such view. In terms of the comedy of humors structure of the novel, Slackbridge, like Gradgrind, Bounderby, and M'Choakumchild, belongs to "the obstructing society" of the novel as opposed to "the congenial society" of Sissy Jupe, Sleary and his circus people, Rachael, and Stephen Blackpool. As a member of the former group, Slackbridge is one of the "blocking" characters (contributing to Stephen's loss of his job), in conformity to the generic requirements of the comedy of humors. It appears to modern readers (and perhaps appeared even to some of Dickens's contemporaries) incongruous and inconsistent that what we find in Dickens's journalism—a warm acknowledgment of "the noble readiness in [the workers] to help one another"—is utterly absent from the novel, prompting us to ask, Will the real Charles Dickens please stand up? But Dickens is not being inconsistent. Dickens the novelist—whatever Dickens the journalist may have believed—cannot, within the generic conventions of the comedy of humors and Menippean satire within which he is writing, give us a union that is nobly ready to help

Stephen. If Stephen received support from his fellow workers he would not be forced to leave Coketown and would not at end of the novel be found at the bottom of the Old Hell Shaft. Moreover, in a novel in which institutions impede what Frye calls "the free movement of society," unions, like the law and the courts in *Bleak House*, are generically *required* to be yet another impeding or obstructing force in society, just as the antiquated marriage laws and the Parliament that will not amend them thwart the affirmation of Stephen's love for Rachael. Thus Dickens the novelist can no more be faulted for misrepresenting trade unions and their leaders than he can be for misrepresenting factory owners in his portrait of Bounderby, or schoolmasters in *M'Choakumchild*, or MPs in *Gradgrind*. The historical fact that trade unions materially improved the desperate lives of working men and women and the fact that Parliament later amended the cruel and antiquated Divorce Act and passed legislation favorable to unions is irrelevant to our judgment of *Hard Times* if we read it as a Jonsonian comedy of humors and a Menippean satire, although these facts become relevant to our judgment of it if we read it as a social-problem novel—a genre not created until the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

Identifying *Hard Times* as a condition-of-England novel has imposed on it a greater generic uniformity and consistency than it actually possesses. *Hard Times* is, in fact, a *Genera Mixta* that resembles the incongruous mixture of styles comprising Sleary's circus. In chapter VII of the third book, "Whelp Hunting," Sissy, Louisa, and Gradgrind set out to find young Tom, who has been concealed by Sleary in his travelling circus. When Sissy and Louisa arrive at the entrance booth to the circus, "[t]he flag with the inscription SLEARY'S HORSERIDING, was there; and the Gothic niche was there" (III vii 208). Inside,

The Emperor of Japan, on a steady old white horse stencilled with black spots, was twirling five wash-hand basins at once, as it is the favourite recreation of that monarch to do . . . Miss Josephine Sleary, in her celebrated graceful Equestrian Tyrolean Flower-Act, is then announced by a new clown (who humorously says Cauliflower Act), and Mr. Sleary appears, leading her in.

The Clown tells Sleary "an ingenious Allegory relating to a butcher, a three-legged stool, a dog, and a leg of mutton." After the performance, Sleary tells Sissy that Emma Gordon, who had been like a mother to Sissy, lost her husband: "He wath throw'd a heavy back-fall off a Elephant in a thort of a Pagoda thing ath the Thultan of the Indieth, and he never got the better of it" (III, vii, 208). At the Gothic ticket booth patrons buy a ticket that will enable them to see the Emperor of Japan, Tyrolean Flower-Acts, and a sort of Pagoda thing housing the Sultan of the Indies. This incongruous mixture of

Gothic, Tyrolean, Japanese and Indian people and architectural styles is all part of what opposes the circus to the uniformity of Coketown, where everything is like everything else: "All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction" (I, v, 21). The diversity and the disregard for consistency embodied in the circus—with Tyrolean flower acts on horseback next to the Sultan of the Indies perched atop an elephant while the Emperor of Japan twirls wash-hand basins—humorously mirror the equally incongruous literary and popular genres that, mixing but never blending, constitute Dickens's satirical-comical-polemical-allegorical-melodramatic-fairy-tale-pantomime *cum* social-problem novel.

#### IV

The mixture of incompatible genres in *Hard Times* provides, in my view, an illuminating perspective on the perennial debate of Dickens's uncertain status as a serious writer, a problem that Martin Amis, in a perceptive review of John Carey's *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination*, has nicely summed up:

While assured of his status as a great writer, Dickens is still uncertain of his status as a serious one. He insists on being romantic, melodramatic, and unrepresentational (like his trashier contemporaries), and will not be adult, introspective, mimetic (like the major Victorians). Criticism is traditionally nervous about such discrepancies and, accordingly, most of the recent work on Dickens has urged him back into what we invidiously imagine to be "the tradition"—i.e., the social-realist tradition. Robert Garis's *The Dickens Theatre*, stressing Dickens's gift for "social prophecy," explained that he's unrealistic because he is shrewdly deploying theatrical conventions [cf. Lodge]. John Lucas's *The Melancholy Man*, stressing Dickens's social criticism and symbolic structures, explained that he's unrealistic because society is too. The Leavises' *Dickens the Novelist*, stressing Dickens's moral intelligence, erudition, and likenesses to James, Conrad and George Eliot, explained that he's realistic. When asked about the large stretches of implausibility, mawkishness and exaggeration to be found throughout his work, these critics tend to reply that Dickens put them in to beguile his Victorian public. (191)

Though written over thirty years ago, this trenchant diagnosis of "the Dickens problem" is particularly relevant to my argument. Amis's critical

vocabulary—"romantic," "melodramatic," "unrepresentational," "mimetic," "theatrical conventions," "unrealistic," "realistic," "social-realist tradition"—reveals that the debate about Dickens's novels in general and *Hard Times* in particular needs to be seen as part of a not fully articulated debate about what kind of novels he wrote. The history of much of the criticism of *Hard Times* is the history of an effort, in the name of the romantic-modernist desideratum of organic unity, to tame the "menagerie of genres" comprising the novel by elevating one genre to the "keynote" that will impose artistic unity and consistency—and hence moral seriousness—on a novel that resists critics' efforts to limit the free play within Dickens's menagerie, much as Sissy Jupe wisely and successfully resists M'Choakumchild's call for a reductionist definition of a horse. And since none of the genres in Dickens's undisciplined menagerie will keep the others in place, some critics have, reluctantly, had no choice but to judge the work an artistic failure. The debate over whether the novel is an artistic success and whether it adequately responds to the historical condition of England has blinded us to the reason Dickens feels compelled to mix genres much more in *Hard Times* than in his other novels. Dickens's exuberantly promiscuous mixing of genres in *Hard Times* is best understood not as an artistic problem unique to this novel but instead in the wider context of the efforts of social critics such as Carlyle and other condition-of-England novelists, such as Gaskell and Disraeli, to find a narrative form commensurate with the new social realities they were trying to incorporate within the existing conventions of the novel, conventions that were never designed to do the work of political and social analysis. And since no single narrative form would suit their purpose, they understandably were forced to mix genres.

Dickens's mixing of genres in *Hard Times* is typical of what we find in a wide range of early and mid-Victorian novels and nonfiction works that respond to the social, political, economic and spiritual "condition" of England. What is true of *Hard Times* is also true of the other social-problem novels of the 1840s and 1850s, as well as of the works, particularly those of Thomas Carlyle, that heavily influenced the condition-of-England novelists. (*Hard Times*, it is worth recalling, is dedicated to Carlyle.) The mixing of genres in the condition-of-England novel arises from the artistic problem facing novelists such as Disraeli, Dickens, and Gaskell when they came to write about industrial civilization and its discontents: how to find an aesthetic form adequate to respond to the unprecedented social and cultural forces that were transforming English society. Almost all literary historians agree that Carlyle was a seminal figure whose writings from the 1820s to the mid 1840s provided a model not only for *what* early Victorian writers should be writing about ("Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe," he exhorted), but also for *how* they should write about it. However,

Carlyle wrote works that did not fit into any recognizable, traditional genre: each one of his influential works is a *Genera Mixta*, and the condition-of-England novelists, including Dickens, followed his example.

Critics have repeatedly called attention to the multiple genres that comprise Carlyle's works. Leon Jackson, for example, points out that *Sartor Resartus* "mixes elements of German philosophy, Puritan spiritual biography, Menippean satire, Burtonian anatomy, religious, secular, and epic history, wisdom literature, and theology" (147). "Determining the genre of [*Sartor*]," he adds, "was (and still is) problematic" (152). Vanessa Ryan similarly remarks that *Sartor* "is composed by turns of fragments of biography, autobiography, philosophic fantasy, satire, and apocalyptic prose-poetry" (108). To make sense of this "notoriously difficult and complex work" (Ryan 108), most readers privilege one of the genres. As Jackson points out, many nineteenth-century readers took it to be a conversion narrative and "approached it as the key to their [own] conversion experiences" (161). (When I was an undergraduate and graduate student, *Sartor* was classified primarily as a spiritual autobiography and read alongside Newman's *Apologia* and Mill's *Autobiography*.) The same argument surrounds the question of the genre of Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. Clyde De L. Ryals calls attention to the ongoing debates about its genre: "Long before Hayden Whyte's classification of nineteenth-century written histories according to their emplotments, commentators on Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* were concerned to determine its genre. According to some it is an epic, to others a tragedy" (925). Questioning an earlier critic's reading of it as "heroic narrative," Ryals counter-argues that "*The French Revolution* is as much an antiheroic narrative as a heroic one" and proposes that it "is essentially neither an epic nor a tragedy but rather a work of romantic irony in which many genres are mingled" (925).

The generic mingling we find in *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*, appears not just in *Hard Times* but in other condition-of-England novels as well. One of the reasons the condition-of-England novel has remained on the periphery of the Victorian canon is that its mixing of genres has been seen as evidence of artistic failure. But this generic diversity needs to be seen not in terms of the standards appropriate to a different kind of novel but rather, as in Carlyle, in terms of a deliberate strategy by novelists such as Dickens and Disraeli to find a multi-generic form adequate to the new subject matter they were writing about. When Dickens, Disraeli, and Gaskell came to write their novels about the condition of England, they did not invent a distinctly new genre, although, as we have seen, this is how later literary historians tended to account for the "new" genre's emergence in the 1840s. Rather, they refashioned and recombined existing forms of the novel. One of the most frequently renovated forms was the courtship romance. While *Sybil* and *North and South* may very well share

the same social and political concerns that we find in Parliamentary Blue Books and nonfiction works like R. W. Cooke Taylor's *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing District of Lancashire* (1842), their interclass romance plots are lifted from *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel almost as often criticized for its lack of political content as praised for its comic irony and its light, bright, and speaking wit.

In *Shirley* (1849) Charlotte Brontë combines the courtship romance with the historical novel. As James Simmons points out, the two genres create dissonances that Brontë cannot fully resolve: "her industrial novel," he says, "takes industry and industrial matters mainly as a backdrop for its action: the middle-class characters' lives and romances are the centerpiece" (346). Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* is also comprised of a mixture of genres, combining the courtship romance with the Newgate novel popularized by Bulwer-Lytton in such novels as *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Eugene Aram* (1832) and by Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838). So generically bifurcated is *Mary Barton* that it is discussed in both the chapter on the condition-of-England novel and on the Newgate novel in Blackwell's *Companion to the Victorian Novel*. James Richard Simmons Jr. calls it a "fictionalized literary case study" (346) of the class conflict created by industrialism, and F. S. Schwarzbach points out how the novel turns from a sympathetic portrait of factory workers in Manchester to a crime novel: "the reader is shown with great sympathy how impoverished (in every possible way) are the lives of factory workers in Manchester; the 'hands' finally strike, but almost immediately their apparently justified protest turns to violence when the son of the leading cotton-spinner is murdered. The Newgate antecedents of Gaskell's tale now revive with a fury, as the narrative quickly becomes a novel of crime—complete with the wrongful arrest and trial of an innocent ex- and future lover of Mary and the revelation of her father, John Barton, as the perpetrator of the foul deed" (225). As Schwarzbach remarks, "the lines that divide one genre from the other are not distinct" (235).<sup>6</sup> But this perception applies not just to *Mary Barton* but to all condition-of-England novels, each one of which is a *Genera Mixta*.

Because condition-of-England novels have been approached largely in terms of their ideas, critics have ignored questions of form and genre. "The industrial novels of early Victorian England," says Deirdre David in *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels*,

are very often primarily regarded as a source of information about industrial conditions, and then secondarily as novels in themselves with all the attendant difficulties that have to do with the relationship between the actuality of those conditions and their transformation into fiction. The industrial novel for us, as twentieth-century readers, provides invaluable depictions of a society in the process of unprecedented

and disturbing alteration, and, for readers of the time, offered glimpses of unknown territory. (4)

Rosemarie Bodenheimer makes a similar point in *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*:

These novels set themselves in a dramatic way to the task of giving fictional shape to social questions that were experienced as new, unpredictable, without closure. Their story lines offer a particularly well-focused arena of enquiry because they must bring order and meaning to situations characterized by their lack of established historical meaning, or by acute conflicts about the meanings assigned to them in public discourse. (6)

But the only way in which novels can “bring order and meaning” to its subject matter is through the conventions of literature. And so in order to give “fictional shape to social questions,” novelists drew upon the existing fictional forms available to them. Rarely if ever do writers produce original genres. That is not how literary history happens. New (as distinct from original) genres do of course regularly emerge, but not *ex nihilo*; they are re-formed out of earlier genres. A new genre, such as the condition-of-England novel, is always the transformation of one or more antecedent genres. “From where do genres come?” asks Todorov. “Why, quite simply, from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres, by inversion, by displacement, by combination” (161). The generic label social-problem novel or condition-of-England novel has imposed on texts like *Hard Times* a generic unity that they do not in fact possess. And once this fact is recognized we should be able to understand what Dickens and his fellow condition-of-England novelist were trying to do rather than interpret and judge their works as failed attempts at realism.

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#### NOTES

1. See chapter 5, “The Industrial Novels,” of Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), and Arnold Kettle’s “The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel,” in Boris Ford, ed., *The Penguin Guide to English Literature*, vol. 6, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958). The same group of novels was the subject of Louis Cazamian’s *Roman social en Angleterre, 1830–1850*, which was published in France in 1903, but not translated into English until 1973, under the title *The Social Novel in England, 1830–1850: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, Kingsley* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), fifteen years after Williams and Kettle

grouped these novels as social-problem, or industrial, novels. The appearance in the early 1970s of Martin Fido's translation of Cazamian's pioneering study is indicative of the renewed interest in these novels sparked by Williams and Kettle, and its publication no doubt helped solidify the generic identity of the condition-of-England novel. (From 1966 to 1973, Fido taught at the University of Leeds, where Kettle was a senior lecturer in the School of English.)

2. Hodgart's remark exemplifies a recurring move by critics when confronted with a text that, like *Hard Times*, appears to be generically unstable: to posit one genre as the dominant, controlling one, and to treat all others as digressions or deviations.

3. Frye has also pointed out that "the importance of fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and similar genres in education often meets us in Dickens, and implies that Dickens's fairy-tale plots are regarded by Dickens himself as an essential part of his novel" (67–68).

4. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Mikhail Bakhtin lists fourteen characteristics of Menippean satire, many of which are evident in *Hard Times*. Three characteristics that are especially relevant to *Hard Times* are its "wide use of inserted genres," its "multi-styled and multi-toned nature," and "its concern with current and topical issues" (118).

5. It is certainly pertinent to the issue of Dickens's representation of trade unions in the novel that he satirizes the hypocrisy of the factory owners when they object to the workers uniting to form unions while they are "united themselves" against the workers:

"It is much to be regretted," said Mrs. Sparsit, ". . . that the united masters allow of any such class combination."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bitzer.

"Being united themelves, they ought one and all to set their faces against employing any man who is united with any other man," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"They have done that, ma'am," returned Bitzer; "but it rather fell through, ma'am."

6. In "The Seductive Politics of *Mary Barton*," Peter Gardner also calls attention to the generic diversity of *Mary Barton*, arguing that Gaskell's novel combines the social-problem novel with the melodrama, specifically with "the Carlylean melodrama of *Past and Present*" (46).

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