

## Social Critique and the Imagining of Perversion as Satire in *Hard Times*

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### *Abstract*

This essay studies how Charles Dickens's *Hard times* problematizes social issues by imagining a heteroglossia of perverted rhetoric. I argue that perversion, as a limited and distorted form of fancy/imagining, is rhetorically used in the novel as a device of satire against social ills perceived by the author(ial narrator). Characters' perverted rhetoric at the intra-diegetic level—including that of Gradgrind, Bounderby, Bitzer and the union agitator Slackbridge—is used to satirize them. This is shown through their turning away from what is true or holding idolatrous beliefs according to the Bible. The narrator's comments on wrongdoings imitate such perversion. The essay shows that forms of perversion are used both as an instrument for characterization and as a narrative strategy to make social critique.

Keywords: social critique; perversion; satire; imagining; Charles Dickens; *Hard times*

The ability to imagine is one of the goals that Charles Dickens intends to cultivate among the reading public who are conceived as being threatened by industrial and educational monotony. Dickens, the journal 'conductor,' as he referred to his editorship of *Household Words* (1850–1859), proclaimed this in 'A preliminary word' of the opening issue:

[W]e would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy . . . —to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together, . . . and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding—is one main object of our *Household Words*.

(Dickens 1850: 1)

'Fancy' and 'imagination' are conceived as conducive to the realization of mutual (or cross-class) understanding between 'the greater and the lesser.' *Hard Times*, which was serialized in the journal, echoes this goal by imagining 'the lesser' as its moral center and 'the greater' as targets of critique satirized through forms of perversion.

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The meaning of the word ‘perversion’ is here adopted from the *Oxford English dictionary (OED)*:

1a. The action of perverting or condition of being perverted; the action of turning aside from what is true or right; the diversion of something from its original and proper course, state, or meaning; corruption, distortion; (Theology) change from Christian belief or truthfulness to non-Christian belief or falsity (opposed to conversion: see conversion n. 8).

The *OED* traces its earliest usage to the late fourteenth century and shows its active usage until the twentieth century, which precedes, by three hundred years, its present more widely used meaning of ‘1b sexual behavior or preference that is different from the norm.’ In my article, the meaning of the word ‘perversion’ or its adjective ‘perverted’ is limited to ‘1a.’ I examine how Dickens’s *Hard times* problematizes social issues by imagining a heteroglossia of perverted rhetoric shown as turning aside from what is true or as holding idolatrous beliefs according to the Bible. I argue that this kind of perversion, as a limited and distorted form of fancy, is a device of satire aimed at its users. The dialogism between characters’ perverted use of the Bible and invoked biblical messages exposes the follies of individuals’ perversions and satirizes their embodied social ills. The author(ial narrator)’s commentary and imitation of such perversion, as another stratified voice, strengthens the satirical criticism. Before the textual analysis, I turn to a brief review of the novel’s reception with a particular focus on that related to the novel’s use of the Bible and parables.

Ever since its publication in installments, critical responses to *Hard times* have been few and unappreciative, complaining about Dickens’s ‘not amusing his readers’ and ‘his trying to instruct them’ (qtd. in Coles 1986: 146). The novel was initially involved in controversies not only due to its polemic views on education, political economy and factory issues,<sup>1</sup> but also because of Dickens’s use of caricature in

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith’s essay (1970: 409–27) on the controversy between the novelist and Harriet Martineau due to their different views on political economy and factory issues. See Jane Sinnett’s protest against Dickens’s attack on the education system (1854: 331).

characterization.<sup>2</sup> Positive responses were seen in a note on *Hard times* in John Ruskin's '[U]nto this last' justifying Dickens's use of caricature (1860: 159), and Bernard Shaw's praise of its 'truthful' portrait of the working class (1912: 360). As Grahame Smith points it out, Shaw observes Dickens's 'daring abandonment of conventional realism' and his special style in making social criticism (2018: 237). This style is closely related to the use of irony, satire, and symbolism as well as characterization and drama, as F. R. Leavis's seminal work demonstrates. Leavis's acclaim of its 'creative exuberance' and 'profound inspiration' as 'a moral fable' and 'a completely serious work of art' (1950: 227–28) was followed by criticism of the novel's flaws either as a piece of art or social history.<sup>3</sup>

That the novel is permeated with religious allusions was first noted by George Bornstein (1971), who mainly discusses its imagery of miscultivated fields and corrupted gardens.<sup>4</sup> Pointing out inadequate attention to biblical allusions in *Hard times*,<sup>5</sup> Michael Wheeler (1979) explores the novel's allusions to the apocalypse and asserts their importance in relation to Dickens's symbolism,<sup>6</sup> while Margaret Simpson traces overt biblical allusions in *The companion to Hard times* (1997).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Edwin P. Whipple's criticism of Dickens's representation of the middle classes (1877: 355–56). See George Gissing's negative response to the portrayal of the working classes (1898: 356).

<sup>3</sup> See review of the criticism by Fowler (1983: 101) and Coles (1986:147 and 174n).

<sup>4</sup> The failure of Dickens's contemporary critics to comment on his use of the Bible is probably due to the wide readership of the Bible and the readers' familiarity with it, which made it unnecessary.

<sup>5</sup> Except for Linda Lewis's *Dickens, his parables, and his reader* (2011), monographs after Wheeler on the relation of Dickens and religion and Dickens's use of biblical allusions and parables have scarcely touched on *Hard Times*.

<sup>6</sup> Wheeler further relates the Four Last Things of eschatology, i.e., death, judgment, heaven and hell to the novel, connecting the hellish landscape at Coketown with the dismal condition of Louisa's inner being (1979: 62–67).

<sup>7</sup> Such as those overt allusions in the book section titles 'Sowing,' 'Reaping' and 'Garnering,' and those in chapter titles 'The One Thing Needful,' 'Murdering the Innocents' and 'Another Thing Needful,' which are also discussed by scholars such as Wheeler (1979: 65), Bergvall (2000: 110–29) and Lewis (2011: 189–90).

What Wheeler observes of characters' 'perversions and inversions of received ethical lore' (1979: 66) indicates that there is more to be said about these instances. Pointing to Carlyle's influence on Dickens as secular preacher, Åke Bergvall (2000) reads *Hard times* as a sermon based on key texts in the church year. Bergvall (2003) then investigates how the novel's parabolic techniques and discourses at narrative, interpretative and pragmatic levels undercut authoritarian voices.<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Gribble argues 'that the Parable of the Good Samaritan 'alone' is adequate to interpret the plot and characterization, setting and symbolism of *Hard Times*' (2004: 428). The narrative on Coketown worker Stephen Blackpool captures the attention of both Linda Lewis (2011) and Jude V. Nixon (2016): Lewis reads Blackpool as an allegory of a martyred savior in juxtaposition with Carton in *A tale of two cities*, whereas Nixon uses the Easter discourse on Blackpool's death to explore Dickens's view of Christ in the context of the Victorian religious debate. However, neither the perverted rhetoric in characters' speeches at the intra-diegetic level nor the narrator's satirical comment on such perversion has gained adequate attention. My essay focuses on several instances of perverted rhetoric by characters and the narrator, which not only contributes to characterization, but also establishes the antithesis between the novel and its perceived targets of criticism, including Thomas Gradgrind, schoolmaster and believer in Facts, his bosom friend Bounderby the factory owner and banker of Coketown, their disciple and admirer Bitzer and Bounderby's perceived threat from the union agitator Slackbridge.

The novel's first chapter employs the trope of idolatry in Gradgrind's speech to critique his deification of 'Facts':

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the

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<sup>8</sup> A related study is Roger Fowler's article 'Polyphony and problematic in *Hard times*' (1983), which adopts a linguistic approach and uses M. A. K. Halliday's functional theory to analyze phonetic and syntactic features of characters' speeches indicative of their social classes and worldviews.

principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!  
(1.1.5)<sup>9</sup>

His words reveal the monological teaching philosophy anchored in the belief in the prevalence of 'Facts.' Its capitalization shows the speaker's idolatrous rhetoric in that 'Facts' is allegorized and elevated as the governing order and the only principle that he abides by, which foreshadows his role as its faithful servant both in teaching and living. Idolatry that incurs God's judgment on the idol worshipper in the Old Testament is thus used as a trope characterizing while simultaneously criticizing Gradgrind,<sup>10</sup> which solicits immediate judgment on him by readers familiar with biblically based values.

In the meantime, the rhetoric in his speech is presented as being self-contradictory in that the reference to humans as 'reasoning animals' makes reasoning incompatible with humanity. For one thing, by worshipping 'Facts,' part of people's humanness has to be sacrificed (to become animals). For another, the perverted rhetoric damages the notion of reason. Thus the perversion in his speech already foretells the collapse of his educational goal, which he does not see until the breakdown of his daughter Louisa's marriage and the disclosure of his son Tom being guilty of bank robbery. The trope of idolatry not only justifies the narrator's immediate mockery of Gradgrind's 'square' features (from square forefingers, forehead and mouth to his dictatorial voice and even his square coat and shoulders),<sup>11</sup> but also consolidates the impression of Gradgrind's fallen state, foretelling his ultimate failure as an educator and his own disillusion with the deity of Facts. As a result of his indoctrination, Coketown becomes 'sacred to fact' (1. 29). To show its turning away from the truth, the narrator imitates Gradgrind's rhetoric:

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<sup>9</sup> The in-text citations of the novel are taken from the following edition: Charles Dickens, 2001, *Hard times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, edited by Fred Kaplan and Sylvère Monod, London: Norton. I give citation information about the number of the book section, chapter and page in Arabic numerals separated by dots in parentheses.

<sup>10</sup> There are many Old Testament verses on God's commandment against idolatry, such as Levitus 19:4, 26:1, 29:16–17; Ezekiel 14:4–7.

<sup>11</sup> Referring to David Lodge and Richard J Watts, Bergvall also highlights the irony and 'rhetorical artificiality' in the narrator's descriptions of Gradgrind as well as Coketown, its inhabitants and natural surroundings (2003: 146–47).

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial . . . everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen. (1.5.21)

The trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost in 'Gloria' in the Book of Common Prayer is distorted to become the trinity of fact (1.5.21n). Such imitation highlights the absurdity of the rhetoric and uses its source text as a moral compass to both reveal the perversion and condemn it.

Another target of criticism, the industrialist Bounderby appears in 'spiritual relationship towards' Gradgrind, for both are 'perfectly devoid of sentiment' (1.4.15), and both are under the spell of idolatry, either idolatry of Facts or of oneself. Similarly, the narrator emphasizes Bounderby's bigotry by describing his appearance and quoting his speeches. His personal traits are first summed up and expressed through the anaphora 'A man . . .'. This phrase is repeated six times and highlights his 'puff[iness], 'inflat[ion]' and 'vaunt,' tellingly concluding him to be 'A man who was the Bully of humility' (1.4.15). Wealth and his business roles as 'banker, merchant and manufacturer' seem to be the cause of his self-centeredness and prevent him from having natural feelings for anyone. Bounderby's authority is maintained by a monological discourse of his made-up miseries before his business success, which aims to distance him from the ordinary working classes. He fabricates a miserable childhood and then boasts about his past ignorance and experience of poverty, such as growing up in a 'ditch,' being deserted by his mother and maltreated by his grandmother. To show off his present success, he emphasizes his determination to pull through the miseries and finally to make himself 'Josiah Bounderby of Coketown' (1.4.17). As Bounderby says, he refuses to 'suppress the facts of his life' (1.4.17). Once these invented facts are uttered by him, they convince him of his honor and worthiness. His made-up life story is 'wonderfully designed to literalize the phrase "self-made" man' (Bodenheimer, 1988: 198). His rhetoric based on the perversion of facts feeds the need for imagining his own miseries that allegedly have been endured, which justifies to him his lack of compassion for others, like

Blackpool's need for advice on his marriage and the workers' need for improved working conditions.

There are other examples of Bounderby's inability to empathize with others: when Mr Jupe, circus performer and father of Sissy Jupe, chooses to leave his daughter and is found missing, Bounderby considers it a waste of time to comfort Sissy, and he, by alluding to his being deserted in childhood, bluntly breaks it to her that she is deserted and 'mustn't expect to see him again' (1.6.32). His distorted imagining of himself destroys fundamental relationships with other human beings. When Blackpool refuses to tell on workers in the union, Bounderby cannot understand Blackpool's faithfulness to those who repudiate him, and he threateningly says: 'you are one of those chaps who have always got a grievance. And you go about sowing it and raising crops. That's the business of your life, my friend' (2.6.116). Alluding to the Parable of Reaping and Sowing, Bounderby warns Blackpool of the consequence of not reporting to him about the union without realizing that the same parable may be used to pass judgment on his fabricated life history. His rhetoric of self-assertion based on made-up facts awaits his mother Mrs Pegler's exposure.

Bounderby makes himself an idol through his perverted rhetoric. His spiritual condition is further revealed when his self-esteem is endangered at the break-down of his marriage. He complains to Gradgrind, his father-in-law, that Louisa does not 'properly know her husband's merits, and is not impressed with such a sense . . . of the honor of his alliance' (3.3.182). To vent his anger at being forsaken by Louisa, he discharges the following words to Gradgrind:

You know my origin; and you know that for a good many years of my life I didn't want a shoeing-horn, in consequence of not having a shoe. Yet you may believe or not, as you think proper, that there are ladies—born ladies—belonging to families—Families! who next to worship the ground I walk on. (3.3.182)

Though his true origin has not been revealed by the time he talks to Gradgrind, his repetition of the old rhetoric sounds irrelevant in this context, foregrounding the absurdity and futility of the perverted rhetoric to assert his authority. His disclosure of being worshipped by other ladies further exposes him as a self-made idol. However, Mrs Pegler's unmasking Bounderby does not affect his prosperity in the business

world. His expansion shown through all the estates named after him such as 'Bounderby Hall' and 'Bounderby Buildings' only highlights his business success. Nevertheless, his sudden and lonely death on Coketown's streets, surrounded by these buildings named after him, underlines both Bounderby's state of isolation and the limit of his commercial success, which, in Carlyle's words, reveals the 'sum total of wretchedness to a man' (qtd in Tillotson 1962: 212).

Bounderby's repetitions of those fabricated miseries, or 'facts' as he claims, echo Gradgrind's deification of 'Facts,' both of which highlight falsehoods. The middle-class monological rhetoric is used as 'an instrument of domination' and it 'misses the life experience of the poor or of its own children' (Bodenheimer 1988: 190). Consequently, the eventual revelation of Bounderby's 'wicked imagination,' as his mother refers to it (3.5.195), exposes him as the true scoundrel. As 'Bully of humility,' he has 'built his windy reputation upon lies' (3.5.196), as the narrator comments. The difference between Gradgrind and Bounderby is reflected by their different types of perversion. Gradgrind's deifying 'Facts' and observing them in his living and teaching does not deprive him of all sentiments. As the narrator comments, 'Mr Gradgrind, though hard enough, was by no means so rough a man as Mr Bounderby. His character was not unkind' (1.5.24). His reflections on his children's failures and his observation of Sissy's role in the family make it possible for him to transform from a man having prejudices against imagination and regarding his children's innate curiosity in the Sleary circus as 'wonder, idleness, and folly' (1.5.14), to a rehabilitated man, 'mak[ing] his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity' (3.9.221). Alluding to 'Faith, Hope and Charity' in Corinthians 13:1-13, the narrator evokes 'free will and the human capacity for transformation and redemption' (Çelikkol 2018: 547), highlighting Gradgrind's change and him finally embracing Christian sentiments. Both Gradgrind and his children are portrayed as the victims of a false teaching practice and belief, and are subjected to both punishments and improvement. By contrast, Bounderby remains the same without reflection or change until his lonely death on Coketown's street witnessed by his own buildings.

The third target of criticism is Bitzer, a model student in Gradgrind's school, capable of defining 'horse' to Gradgrind's satisfaction and taught to judge everything according to his self-interest. He becomes a light porter for Mrs Sparsit, Bounderby's former housekeeper, according to

whom Bitzer is ‘an extremely clear-headed, cautious, prudent young man’ of ‘the steadiest principle’ (2.1.89). Bitzer’s principle is a utilitarian one at its most inhumane extreme: he feels ‘satisfied’ by his father’s death; he ‘assert[s]’ his mother’s right of settlement in Coketown ‘with such a steadfast adherence to the principle of the case’ in order to ‘shut [her] up in the workhouse’; he does not give his mother any gift except for ‘half a pound of tea a year’ (2.1.89-90). The following reasons for Bitzer’s meanness highlight his understanding of Political Economy:

first, because all gifts have an inevitable tendency to pauperise the recipient, and secondly, because his only reasonable transaction in that commodity would have been to buy it for as little as he could possibly give, and sell it for as much as he could possibly get; it having been clearly ascertained by philosophers that in this is comprised the whole duty of man—not a part of man’s duty, but the whole. (2.1.90)

Here the narrator imitates Bitzer’s rhetoric and reports on his understanding of ‘the whole duty of man’ in economic terms, which perverts what is said in Ecclesiastes 12:13: ‘Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.’<sup>12</sup> The perversion satirizes man’s priorities in the commercial world.

Bitzer’s perverted rhetoric must be read dialogically with Sissy’s plain words, as his first appearance in the novel is described insistently in juxtaposition with her: ‘Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the corner of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end’ (1.2.7). The seating of the two at Gradgrind’s school, separated by rows, with Sissy closer to the sunbeam, a metaphor for the light of truth, and Bitzer at its end is echoed by their respective interpretations of the catechism and Political Economy. When asked about the first principle of Political Economy, Sissy gives the answer: ‘To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me,’ alluding to one’s duty towards one’s neighbor recorded in the Catechism of the Church of England (1.9.46 and 46n). However, Sissy’s answer is judged by the teacher M’Choakumchild as ‘absurd,’ and Gradgrind considers it a sign showing her need of ‘infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge’ (1.9.46). What M.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Kaplan and Monod, *The whole duty of man* is the title of an exceptionally popular religious treatise (2.1.90n).

M. Bakhtin says about the '[o]ppositions between individuals [being] only surface upheavals of the untamed elements in social heteroglossia' (1981: 326) is also true here: Gradgrind's metaphorical use of 'grinding' indicates that suppression is involved in the process of his centralized indoctrination of the young students and he intends the 'mill of knowledge' to exert centripetal forces to submerge centrifugal and stratified forces against his centralization, such as Sissy's knowledge of kindness. Close to the novel's end, when Gradgrind pleads for Bitzer to stop pursuing Tom, Bitzer answers that the whole social system is 'a question of self-interest. What you must always appeal to, is a person's self-interest. It's your only hold. We are so constituted. I was brought up in that *catechism* when I was very young, sir, as you are aware' (3.8.214; my emphasis). Bitzer's reference to the catechism is intended to remind Gradgrind of his own teaching philosophy solely based on calculation and denying interference of sentiments; meanwhile, it also recalls Sissy's reference to the Catechism. Both Sissy's and Bitzer's answers concerning the meaning of Political Economy are mediated through their understandings of 'catechism,' but of different kinds: the former uses the religious teaching of catechism to resist Gradgrind's philosophy, whereas Bitzer absorbs Gradgrind's indoctrination of Political Economy and regards it as a substitutive catechism. The incompatibility of these contradictory meanings of 'catechism' highlights the idolatrous nature of Gradgrind's teaching and brings out the satire against Gradgrind's educational failure. The narrator imitates the perversion: 'Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter. And if we didn't get to Heaven that way, it was not a politico-economical place, and we had no business there' (3.8.215). The narrator's simulation of the perverted rhetoric reveals people's pragmatic concern for this life, which, at the same time, also expresses judgment on them in that they have nothing to do with 'Heaven.' In contrast to the coldness and lack of feelings of Political Economists such as Bounderby, Bitzer and Gradgrind's old self, Gradgrind discovers that it is those whom he despises who render him help and service, such as Sissy and the Sleary Circus. When Sleary offers to hide Gradgrind's guilty son in return for his kindness to Sissy, Sleary paraphrases the Catechism through his lipping: 'The Thquire thtood by you, Thethilia, and I'll thtand by the Thquire' (3.8.215). Being the 'philosophical antithesis to Gradgrind's utilitarian educational thesis' (Fowler 1983: 107), Sleary

tells the simple truth through his idiosyncratic speech. Thus we see the novel's internal stratification of voices and embodied values about 'catechism' and Political Economy and its dialogical juxtaposition of perverted rhetoric of Gradgrind, Bounderby and Bitzer with the earnest and plain voices of Sissy and Sleary.

Next, I turn to the union agitator Slackbridge whose speech leads workers to ostracize Stephen Blackpool. This discussion may shed some light on how Dickens fictionalizes the separatist force on factory issues. Slackbridge considers Blackpool who refuses to join the union as a threat. To remove the common sympathy that workers feel for Blackpool and to agitate their anger at him, Slackbridge says, 'he who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage existed, and Judas Iscariot existed, and Castleagh existed, and this man exists!' (2.4.108). Slackbridge alludes to betrayers like Esau and Judas in the Bible, as well as to Castlereagh, the politician who suppressed open air meetings and caused severe casualties (2.4.108). In such a parallel, Blackpool is seen as a potential 'traitor' telling on other workers (2.4.108).

After Bounderby announces that Stephen Blackpool is the thief who robbed his bank, Slackbridge delivers a speech in order to deny any connection with Blackpool:

Oh, my prostrate friends, with the galling yoke of tyrants on your necks and the iron foot of despotism treading down your fallen forms into the dust of the earth, upon which right glad would your oppressors be to see you *creeping on your bellies* all the days of your lives, *like the serpent in the garden*—oh, my brothers, and shall I as a man not add, my sisters too, what do you say, now, of Stephen Blackpool, with a slight stoop in his shoulders and about five foot seven in height, as set forth in this degrading and disgusting document, this blighting bill, this pernicious placard, this abominable advertisement; and with what majesty of denouncement will you crush the *viper*, who would bring this stain and shame upon the *God-like* race that happily has cast him out for ever! (3.4.185; my emphasis)

Slackbridge's speech twists biblical verses, combines the curses in Genesis 3 on Adam ('In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread') and the serpent ('upon thy belly shalt thou go') and applies both to workers. They are like serpents 'creeping on [their] bellies'; they also toil and bear 'the galling yoke' (3.4.185). When Slackbridge wants to show sympathy with the workers, they are elevated in status to be Adam's toiling sons

who can also be ‘God-like’; when he wants to get rid of one of them, they are referred to as serpents and vipers. Slackbridge’s rhetoric is thereby charged with danger and cunning, which redirects workers’ antagonism toward the ‘tyrants’ and ‘oppressors’ to that between the workers and Blackpool. However, when referring to Bounderby’s accusation of Blackpool on a placard, he calls it ‘this degrading and disgusting document,’ ‘this blighting bill’ and ‘this pernicious placard’ (3.4.185). But he does not question the accusation itself and accepts and intensifies the charge against Blackpool while obscuring the fact that he accepts how ‘oppressors’ and ‘tyrants’ describe the worker. By expelling and disowning honest Blackpool, Slackbridge is portrayed as a tyrant and an oppressor. This portrayal has incurred lots of criticism,<sup>13</sup> although Dickens is not alone to make the union orator a tyrant in fiction.<sup>14</sup> Withholding Blackpool’s reason for not joining the union except for his promise to Rachel, the narrator highlights Blackpool’s own choice in so doing. The workers’ ostracism together with Bounderby’s accusation gestures towards the lack of mutual understanding among workers, and between workers and employers, which should not be based on complete knowledge of the situation, but on respect for free will. In addition, through Slackbridge’s ‘absurd comic panache of oratory,’ to use Nicolas Coles’ words (1986: 165), Dickens imitates mob oratory,<sup>15</sup> through which he achieves two points. One is to reveal how rhetoric may (mis)lead its audience. The other is to cast suspicion over the divisive force that the union may exert.

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<sup>13</sup> Critics appreciative of the novel find this figure problematic: Shaw, for example, considers Slackbridge as ‘a mere figment of the middle-class imagination’ and ‘a real failure’ (1912: 362). Leavis notes Dickens’s lack of understanding about the role to be played by the union (1950: 245). Coles refers to him as a major flaw (1986: 165).

<sup>14</sup> The portrayal of Slackbridge conforms to the tradition of union tyranny (Coles 1986: 164). See also Coles’ comparison of Slackbridge with the orator in *Mary Barton* (Coles 1986: 179n).

<sup>15</sup> Fowler considers Slackbridge’s speeches as symbolic for ‘a generalized bombast which might inhabit the pulpit, the House of Lords, or any kind of political or public meeting’ (1983: 106). Bergvall regards Slackbridge’s speech as an example in the sophist tradition (2003: 143).

Here I want to add a short discussion about Dickens's article 'On Strike' since it adds to my discussion of Slackbridge.<sup>16</sup> 'On strike,' published in *Household Words* one and a half months before the first installment of *Hard times*, is about Dickens's visit to Preston in February 1854. Critics observe parallels between the two works in the portrayal of workers and union leaders.<sup>17</sup> In *Hard times* Dickens inverts the honesty and earnestness shown by both workers and their union leaders in the Preston strike.<sup>18</sup> But the interesting contrast between union leaders and workers in 'On strike' and their counterparts in *Hard times* reveals how Dickens's imagining of the agitator Slackbridge's perverted rhetoric implies the novelist's view on industrial separatism.

In 'On strike,' Dickens quotes the letter addressed to the operatives by the committee of the Preston strike. The letter, thick with biblical allusions, invokes the 'great Architect' and 'impartial God' to change the situation to 'establish a new and improved system,' so that the 'divine precept' (2 Thessalonians 3:10) is enforced and 'Those who will not work, shall not eat' (Dickens 1854: 555). However, unlike their fictive counterpart, Slackbridge, the strikers' committee in 'On strike' is presented as eloquent and earnest without being cunning.<sup>19</sup> In spite of the heroism and eloquence shown by the Preston strikers' leaders, Dickens

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<sup>16</sup> Butterworth considers if the fictional representation of the industrial problem is based on Christian moral principles of justice, love and brotherhood (2016: 102-109).

<sup>17</sup> Butterworth observes the difference between Slackbridge, his prototype Gruffshaw in 'On strike' and Preston strikers' leader Mortimer Grimshaw (2016: 99-104). Lewis mentions the similarity between the union committee's use of 'biblical-style exhortation' and Slackbridge's use (2011:190). Referring to G. B. Shaw, Coles notes how the relation between the orator Gruffshaw and the union chairman in 'On strike' is inverted in *Hard times* in that the chairman remains silent and does not interfere with Slackbridge's attack on Blackpool (1986: 167).

<sup>18</sup> See more examples in Butterworth 2016: 100 and Coles 1986: 165-167.

<sup>19</sup> Although Lewis notes the similarity of using 'biblical-style exhortations' by the union committee in 'On strike' and Slackbridge, she does not note the subtlety that Dickens expresses through the fictional speaker's more schematic use of biblical sources. Butterworth states that union leaders like Slackbridge 'speak the language of brotherhood and Christian principle . . . but they do not adhere to the values embodied in the words' (2016: 106). But Butterworth does not comment on the divisive effect of Slackbridge's speech either.

regards both the workers' strike and the employers' 'lock-out' as 'deplorable,' and he dislikes the waste or unemployment caused by strike when the factories stop production (Dickens 1854: 558). In 'On strike,' Dickens speaks more explicitly of the need for improving the situation of the working class and the understanding between the employees and their employers so that there is 'something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance, and consideration' between them (Dickens 1854: 553), which is just what Blackpool pleads and calls for before his death:

in our judgments, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear. In my pain an trouble, lookin up yonder,—wi' it shinin' on me—I ha' seen more clear, and ha' made it my dyin prayer that aw th' world may on'y coom together more, an get a better unnersta'in o'one another, than when I were in't my own weak seln. (3.6.204)

With the deviant spellings indicating a northern industrial working-class accent,<sup>20</sup> the speech dialogically echoes Dickens's view expressed in his journalism. The emphasis on mutual understanding helps explain the characterization of Slackbridge and Bounderby as unworthy, as well as Dickens's skepticism of unionism and contempt for uncompassionate employers. Thus we see there is a resonance between Dickens's novelistic discourse and his journalism as a 'dialogizing background,' to borrow Bakhtin's words (1981: 332).

Coles considers the novel's ending as showing Dickens's despair for he 'presents a vision of society on the basis of which socially redeeming action, including his own reforming practice, is effectually impossible' (1986: 173).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, I think the ending can also be seen as echoing Dickens's journalism that intends to 'bring the greater and the lesser in degree' together, and it is through the middle-class characters' experience of life's uncertainties and miseries that they might reach 'a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding' of the lower classes (Dickens 1850: 1). Therefore, Louisa's life deprived of a proper marriage

<sup>20</sup> See Fowler's Bakhtinian reading of *Hard times*, which explores the linguistic and semiotic characteristics of various characters' voices (1983: 103–12).

<sup>21</sup> Highlighting the fallacy in regarding Dickens the journalist and Dickens the novelist as the same person (1986: 145–46), Coles notes Dickens's dialectic optimism and the anxiety reflected by his journalism and fiction respectively (1986: 173).

and children, Tom's exile from home and death in atonement, and Gradgrind's failure as an educator echo the lives experienced by the lower classes, such as Rachael's life in solitude, Blackpool's death in spite of his hope for the star 'guided to Our Savior's home' (3.6.204), and Mrs Pegler's loss of her son to the commercial world. The novel's hope does not lie in a social wholesale solution but with individuals and in mutual understanding, or 'humanheartedness' in the relationship between classes, to borrow Kathleen Tillotson's word (1962: 212).

As language is 'ideologically saturated' and always about 'world view' (Bakhtin 1981: 271), perverted uses of language indicate perverted values. Dickens's fictional critique of Political Economy, utilitarianism and the union does not deny their validity but questions excessive trust in them. His imaginings of multiple characters' perverted speeches not only *portray* their peculiarities, but also present their embodied and stratified socio-political values as problematic. How Dickens fictionalizes the social problems echoes *Household Words*' editorial appeal to 'Fancy' and 'imagination' (Dickens 1850: 1). By imagining the authoritative speeches of Gradgrind, Bounderby, Bitzer and Slackbridge as forms of perversion, their self-conceited authority is dissolved and becomes one of the stratified social voices in dialogism with other speeches, which is how Dickens incorporates heteroglossia into his novel.

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