

## WITHIN AILING DISTANCE

I THINK DICKENS'S *Hard Times* went out of fashion a few years ago when hard times themselves went out of fashion. There was a time, we like to think, when people began to believe in possibility, and in the possibility of alternatives to enclosed lives. When jobs were available. Work was constructive. Children were considered a resource. Brains were considered a resource. Money was available for ideas. Thoughtfulness went into human relations. And the open ideas of progress and improvement did not seem bizarre.

Somewhere along the line, all that changed. Children became a commodity again. Work became a privilege. Money became restricted to those who would not question what it did or where it came from. Human relations and brains both became peripheral as the closed idea of categorical functionality took over from the sparkling chaos of imagination.

When enclosure lives, choice dies. *Hard Times* has come back.

*Hard Times* is a brilliant book, of course, full of extravagant sentiment and acid aspersions — despite which, it's hard to appreciate simply aesthetically, for it asks to be read not so much as fictional invention as a fierce and clear-sighted indictment of social stupidity. The world that Dickens savages is one that makes wealth and family connections the only arbiters of power *and therefore of value*. It's one that permits pollution and restricts children's education *as though neither of these were consequential acts*. Such a world gives authority to particular versions of evidence, and uses the *names* of patriotism, factuality, science, and the Almighty as buttresses to a private and exclusive agenda of social organization. This world works invidiously, for by appealing *in name* to the moral integrity of ordinary people, it gathers credibility, but only so that in effect it will be able to exclude such ordinary people from real opportunities to live decent lives. The Almighty is made the rhetorical skill in a socioeconomic con game. The Golden Rule turns imperceptibly into the Rule of Gold — which is somehow justified in public by the name of necessity.

Sound familiar? The temptation to quote Dickens directly is irresistible. There is, to begin with, his wonderful travesty of an educational system in which knowledge is reduced to data — unrelated and unexamined data, data unprobed for its inevitable ramifications — and the individual person is reduced to numeric abstraction:

“Bitzer,” said Thomas Gradgrind. “Your definition of a horse.”

“Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.” Thus (and much more) Bitzer.

“Now, girl number twenty,” said Mr. Gradgrind, “you know what a horse is.”

Then there is Dickens’s exposé of irrational literalism, which suppresses imagination, which restricts possibility to images that accord directly with restricted empirical perceptions, and which converts reality to an illogical system of binary divisions that nevertheless masquerades as logic:

“I’ll explain to you, then,” said the gentleman, after another and a dismal pause, “why you wouldn’t paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see horses walking up and down and sides of rooms in reality — in fact? Do you?”

“Yes, sir!” from one half. “No, sir!” from the other.

“Of course, No,” said the gentleman, with an indignant look at the wrong half. “Why, then, you are not to see anywhere what you don’t see in fact; you are not to have anywhere what you don’t have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact.”

There is Dickens’s reflective aside after his outline of a functionary’s ideal syllabus (which can never be anything more nor less than a parroted list of names, points, and boundaries, for to be other is to open up to possibilities, for which of course there are no safe and predigested rules):

Ah, rather overdone, M’Choakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!

Wonder, in these circumstances, is unacceptable behaviour. Concern for others is deemed unprofitable, financially and *therefore* emotionally. Other people consequently come best to be seen as objects to arrange on a balance sheet, for that removes the temptation to become attached or curious or concerned or involved. And yet *does* such a world function? Dickens is clear:

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M’Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everywhere was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn’t state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

A town so sacred to fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course got on well? Why no, not quite well. No? Dear me!

No.

Utilitarianism, Dickens demonstrates, will ultimately destroy itself. But it’s a hurtful process, for unhappily it makes victims of millions of ordinary people along the way. The hurt, therefore, is fundamentally *unnecessary*. That’s why we have

to recognize the utilitarian model for what it is: an insidious means of intellectual, economic, and emotional coercion. It's a way of making ordinary people think they have no option but to go along with a named authority. It's an undeclared system of control. We have also to deal with it. We can do so in part by exposing the irrationality of so many of the current Institutes among us, the shrink-tanks of private interest, and by ridiculing the Authorities' infatuation with absolutes in an ongoing age of change.

If we do, then one day, perhaps, we'll be able again to read Dickens for pleasure, and not see what he has written just as a diagnosis of our own disease.

W.N.

## LOVE, HE SAID

*Susan Musgrave*

In Spain, sixteen years ago,  
I sat under a twisted pear tree  
writing doomed poetry.

At night I put on black  
and went down into the peaceful village.

My eyes, he said, were like  
terrifying raped blossoms.  
I loved him because so much was always lost  
in translation.

Love, he said, is taking a long time  
always. In my room where we lay  
for a small night above the peaceful village  
I think, looking back, I understood him.