

Hard Times

THESE WERE hard times, and Dickens wanted to mend them in his own way. In the last month of 1853, just a few weeks before he started work upon *Hard Times* itself, he gave three public readings of his Christmas Books – chief among them, of course, *A Christmas Carol*. He read that seasonal tale in Birmingham to an audience of ‘working people’ (he had insisted to the organisers on addressing such a gathering) and before he began to recite the adventures of Scrooge and Cratchit he made a short speech to his audience, during the course of which he declared the need for ‘. . . the fusion of different classes, without confusion; in the bringing together of employers and employed; in the creating of a better common understanding among those whose interests are identical, who depend upon each other, and who can never be in unnatural antagonism without deplorable results . . .’ This was the principal article of his political and social beliefs – to create precisely the same kind of benevolent unity and familial concord which he celebrated in his fiction. He wanted his audience to become one family, as if it were sitting around the hearth as he read to them, and then leaving the hall with a settled belief in the need for harmony and mutual forbearance among all classes. *Hard Times* is the direct consequence of that belief, and might be said to have sprung out of his encounter with the working people of Birmingham.

But he had not wanted to start a new novel, not yet. Only five months before, he had exhausted himself over the completion of *Bleak House*, and had been hoping for a period of rest in which he might restore his energies and repair his bat-

tered and weary spirit. But there was to be no rest. There never was, in his life. There had been an alarming drop of sales in his weekly periodical, *Household Words*, and his publishers urged him to start work upon a new serial which could be printed in it and thus arrest the decline in circulation; he may at this time have been neglected or reviled by the more intellectual of the critics, but he maintained his hold upon the public. He saw the force of their arguments and, with his usual expedition, set to work at once: in the first weeks of the new year, 1854, he began to experiment with titles for this new serial even though the main lines of its development were still obscure. Two titles which occurred to him almost immediately were 'Fact' and 'Thomas Gradgrind's Facts' and it is clear that, even at this early stage, Dickens wanted to direct his attention towards those whose political philosophy or educational principles depended solely upon facts and statistics (a science then very much in vogue) and who did not attend to the very lesson instilled in *A Christmas Carol* which he had recited only a short time before – a lesson which emphasised the importance of imaginative sympathy, and of that 'Fancy' which is to be discovered in the true use of memory. Memories of the past. Memories of childhood. Only thus could the world be redeemed – for was it not the case that the world being created all around, by those who depended solely upon facts and numbers, was a harsh and forbidding place?

He wanted to discover more about that world on his own account, however, and soon after beginning work on the novel he set off for Preston in order to investigate the progress of a weavers' strike in that city. He stayed for only a short time but he found all the material he needed, and on his return he wrote an article for *Household Words* in which he asserted that '... into the relations between employers and employed, as into all the relations of this life, there must enter something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance, and consideration...' Feeling. Sentiment. Consideration. These were precisely the principles he had es-

poused in his fiction, and we can see how all his essential interests move easily from the world of his novels to the world of public engagement and discourse. Of course they must suffer a change in the transition, and the stated beliefs are turned into the spectacle of Louisa Gradgrind as '... she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash'. She is an exemplary image of a young woman starved of the very gifts which might have saved her, and when she declares that Fancy might have become '... my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me...' she is enunciating one of the central principles of Dickens's own art.

He was writing about something larger than Preston, in other words, when he was describing the abject conditions of Coketown. That place is in any case a composite portrait of several industrial towns but, more importantly, he was carrying on the assault which he had started in his Christmas Books. That is why *Hard Times* has all the simplicity and directness of style which are characteristically associated with Dickens's Christmas fables, and as a result lacks the length and elaboration which mark his more familiar novels. Of course that brevity and directness are also connected with the fact of the novel's weekly appearance in a periodical – it was published on the front page of *Household Words* each week very much as if it were some kind of signed editorial, and does contain certain topical references to the conditions of the time. But Dickens was not interested in writing a political or social tract; he was writing a fairy story of the industrial age.

He properly embarked upon the narrative in the middle of February 1854 (serialisation was not about to start until the beginning of April, so he had given himself a little 'leeway' for his own development) and almost at once, as he confessed later '... the idea laid hold of me by the throat in a very violent manner'. There appeared in quick succession the principal characters of the tale – Gradgrind, Sissy Jupe, Bounderby, Sleary the circus-master, and of course that strange melan-

choly hero, Stephen Blackpool, who begins life as some emblem of the iniquities of organised labour and ends up as a symbol of humankind itself. The narrative reads easily and freely yet Dickens found that '... the difficulty of space is CRUSHING. Nobody can have an idea of it who has not had an experience of patient fiction-writing with some elbow-room always, and open places in perspective. In this form, with any kind of regard to the current number, there is absolutely no such thing . . .' Yet he worked on intently, insistently. Indeed the story had laid hold of him 'by the throat' in an almost physical sense, since his doctor advised him to take on a regimen of 'fresh air' to alleviate the exhaustion he was beginning to feel at his unremitting labour. Nevertheless day by day he was 'planning and planning the story' which seemed to be changing all the time.

There is a point, for example, when the narrative looks likely to become a saga of union and management, and one in which Dickens would repeat his often stated belief that the workers suffered just as much under bad union representatives as they ever did under bad employers. For although Dickens was accused of a form of 'sullen socialism', it ought to be remembered that he never espoused anything close to socialist principles; he supported the rights of working people to a proper education, as well as proper sanitation and housing, but he was an instinctive conservative in social matters. In particular his imaginative sympathy with the individual victim, like Stephen Blackpool, quickly turned to hostility or anger if those victims organised together and in any way threatened the *status quo*. Hence his treatment of the workers' representative in this book. When he could not identify with the suffering human being, then he became something of a disciplinarian. In a similar spirit he was not generally opposed to the claims or methods of the more advanced industrialists of his period; he reserved his animus for the remnants of the aristocracy, and for the government bureaucracy, which seemed to be impeding 'Progress' at every turn. That is why,

in *Hard Times*, the satire against the employer, Bounderby, has very little to do with his political or social principles and everything to do with his hypocrisy and denial of his own past. That in itself proves to be another aspect of *Hard Times*: it begins as an exercise in public statement but soon is enlarged to become a much more vivid and ambiguous record of Dickens's central vision of the world.

The novelist left London for Boulogne in June, so that in his French retreat he might finish the book in relative seclusion. Indeed he did manage to conclude it, just a month later, and in what he described as a 'hot' and nervous state – very much like that of his heroine, Rachael, who at one point utters what might be described as characteristically Dickensian sentiments: '... I fall into such a wild, hot hurry, that, however tired I am, I want to walk fast, miles and miles'. Dickens returned to London in his own hot haste, read the proofs of the completed story and then divided it into three 'Books' for its appearance in volume form.

That appearance was not greeted with approbation on all sides. *The Rambler*, for example, called it a '... mere dull melodrama, in which character is caricature, sentiment tinsel, and moral (if any) unsound'. It was in other words treated very much as a topical or political tract; not for the first, or the last, time Dickens's real intentions and preoccupations were ignored or overlooked. For the essential truth remains that *Hard Times* is in no sense a 'realistic' novel. Dickens is a visionary as much as he is a realist, and in this novel he was giving shape to his own understanding of the forces of the world which brings him closer to William Blake than to Henry Mayhew.

That is why the political and social landscape of the novel is in reality dominated not by the smoke-stacks of Coketown (although Dickens's pictures of the industrial world are in every respect powerful and moving) but rather by the rigid and unfeeling patterns of what he describes here as the 'unnatural family' – absconding fathers, like that of Sissy Jupe,

rigid fathers, like that of Louisa Gradgrind, and ungrateful or unfeeling children. It is once again a world of the self-deceivers and the deceived, the hysterical and the wretched, a grim world shot through with passages of laughter, a world in which the unhappy wanderings of Stephen Blackpool seem so much like a re-enactment of Dickens's own state during this period of his life – 'Wandering to and fro, unceasingly, without hope, and in search of he knew not what (he only knew that he was doomed to seek it) . . .' So Dickens exists everywhere within his own creation. He exists in Stephen Blackpool but he also exists in Mr Bounderby whose terrible posturings are like some rancid image of Dickens's own self-worth. He exists, too, in Louisa Gradgrind in the sense that it is her own deprivation, betrayal, and final redemption which comprise the essential statement of the novel: as he writes of Sissy Jupe in the penultimate paragraph, to be ' . . . grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death . . . '

Hard Times is a spare and determined work but, as a result, it has what can only be described as an elemental concern – as Stephen Blackpool himself dies and rejoins 'the God of the poor'. This is a fable but one which deals with last and extreme things, with the plight of poor bare-forked mortality. Ruskin considered it to be one of the finest of Dickens's novels; certainly it is the one in which he mounted the fiercest defence of his own art, and the strongest argument for his own belief in the powers of the imagination.