FUNCTIONS OF THE LANCASHIRE DIALECT IN *HARD TIMES*

Hard Times has had a chequered career. It has been completely ignored as a novel since F. Kitton excluded it from his book *The Novels of Dickens*. For John Ruskin and George Bernard Shaw, it was the best of Dickens's writings, whereas for George Gissing (usually an enthusiastic reader of Dickens) it was a sorry failure. In 1947, a striking essay by F. R. Leavis argued that *Hard Times* was in fact, Dickens's finest achievement, his "masterpiece". Although this essay was received at that time with ridicule, most literary critics of the second half of the twentieth century share Leavis's high assessment of this short novel.

After reading a few lines of *Hard Times* we are aware that Charles Dickens has a great love of language, and a great ability to use it effectively. The "inimitable" makes each class, each group and profession speak in its own characteristic way, an he even individualizes the main figures through their language. In recognition of the qualified value of those registers this paper will consider some of the functions of the Lancashire dialect not yet studied by literary criticism exhaustively.

DIALECT AS REALISM OR LOCAL COLOUR

Dialect is part of the novel's realism. In *Hard Times* dialect is of the working poor of the North, because with the Industrial Revolution it was there that the most poor people were congregated and it was there the violence erupted most frequently in the nineteenth century.

Stephen Blackpool -the central dialect speaking character of *Hard Times*- is a product of Coketown: together they form both a realistic and allegorical indictment of industrial conditions. The physical setting reminds us of Engels' Manchester of 1844 where the upper classes enjoyed healthy country air and lived in comfortable dwellings. In this industrial context Stephen's speech was created with vivid impressions of the dialect of the Preston area fresh in the novelist's mind, though his knowledge of it was certainly limited. It is worth emphasizing that Stephen Blackpool echoes what Mrs Gaskell aimed to do in John Barton. But while Mrs Gaskell's source for Lancashire dialect was observation, Dickens did not adopt this source exclusively. Contrary to what Stanley Gerson contends: "He (Dickens) had spent some weeks in Lancashire in November 1838 - January 1839",[1] and in disagreement with Norman Page's allusion to the marginal use of certain readings by Dickens, Patricia Ingham demonstrates that Dickens's dialect material has come from a documentary source. Patricia Ingham clarifies that the popular work *Tim Bobbin: View of Lancashire Dialect, with Glossary* John Collier

[1] Stanley Gerson. 1967: *Sound and Symbol in the Dialogue of the Works of Charles Dickens*. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell: 367.

(1746) of which Dickens owned an 1818 edition furnished *Hard Times* with dialect material.[1] Either relying on a short visit to Preston or on a documentary source for local colour, Dickens studied to create a strongly-marked regional dialect for Stephen Blackpool and Rachel and many of the features of this dialect can be paralleled in north-country speech today.

The dialectal forms occur in Book I, chapters 10, 11, 12 and 13; Book II, chapters 4, 5 and 6; Book III, chapters 4 and 6. The following are the chief north-country words used in *Hard Times*: *afore, ahind, ahint, along of, dree, ere, fewtrils, fratch, fro, haply, har-stone, hetter, hey-go-mad, hottering, humanly, Hunmobee, lass, letsome, missus, moydert, mun, na', sin, sure.*

Many of the authentically Lancashire features of the dialect used in *Hard Times* could have been found in the *Glossary*: Loss of final *-l* as in *aw'* all, *fearfo'*, *dreadfo'*, *wishfo'*, *wa'*, *faithfo'*. The loss of *l* before a consonant: *awmost, fawt.* Dickens would not have found the form *th'* "the", or *wi'* "with", but these would have been evident on a short visit to Lancashire.

Most features of Stephen's speech are primarily substandard:

The loss of final consonants, especially in lightly-stressed words: *fro', o', fra', ha', wi'.*
Variation in vowel-length, sometimes accompanied by a difference in the quality of the vowel: *yo* "you", *fok* "folk", *yor* "your".
Aphesis, the loss of a lightly-stressed initial syllable: *Sizes* "Assizes", *'deed* "indeed", *'times* "sometimes", *'stead* "instead", *'bout* "about".
Lack of concord between subject and verb: *I wishes, they has.*
Double and triple negatives: I hope I never had nowt to say, not fitten for a born lady to year.

Stephen's and Rachel's dialect have been criticized as both inaccurate and illiterate. Norman Page clarifies that this shortcoming is more apparent than real: "Not that accuracy is a prime consideration, since completeness and consistency both give way at times to the demands of intelligibility".[2] Basically, Dickens adheres to the convention adopted in Cockney dialect: "Dickens isolates and emphasizes certain features of pronunciation, indicates them orthographically often enough to signal the presence of the dialectal, but makes no attempt at a complete or consistent rendering".[3]

As Stanley Gersen observes, it is worth noting that the forms which Dickens used to indicate Lancashire pronunciation are "accurate and used with consistency". Of the morphology this does not seem to be true. There is clearly some attempt to make Stephen Blackpool use *thou* to the women he loves, but elsewhere there is an uncertain wavering between *yo'* and *you*, and to his hated wife he uses *thou*, while she addresses him as *yo* and *thee.*

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[1] Patricia Ingham. 1986: Dialect as 'Realism': *Hard Times* and the Industrial Novel in *The Review of English Studies* 37: 521-523.

[2] Norman Page. 1973: *Speech in the English Novel.* London, Longman: 64

[3] Ibidem.

A problem that has to be faced by every writer who makes use of dialect vocabulary is that of making sure that the reader, who may have no knowledge of the dialect in question, understands the meaning of the dialect words. Some writers rely on the context to make the meaning clear, and this method is usually effective, provided that the number of new words is not very large. Charles Dickens incorporates a gloss into the text, putting it into the mouth of the supposed narrator.

DIALECT AS A CLASS INDICATOR

There is a detailed effort to make Stephen's language indicate his function of a lower class. A number of different features of his language combine to make his language suggest the regional, uneducated and oral properties of the language of hands. He is first shown in an intimate conversation with his wife Rachel, an introduction which makes an immediate point that his speech style is shared. I quote an extract, including some commentary by the narrator which offers a clear contrast of style:

> 'Ah, lad! 'Tis thou?' When she had said this, with a smile which would have been quite expressed, though nothing of her had been seen but her pleasant eyes, she replaced her hood again, and they went on together.
> 'I thought thou was ahind me, Rachel?'
> 'No.'
> 'Early t'night, lass?'
> 'Times I'm a little early, Stephen! 'times a little late. I'm never to be counted on, going home'.
> 'Nor going t'other way, neither, 't seems to me, Rachel?
> 'No, Stephen.'[1]

In the conversation between Stephen and Rachel the minimum of deviant spellings are not to be judged as realistic transcription, they are simply conventional signals of sociolinguistic difference. Only a very slight deviance is needed to persuade middle-class readers that they are in the presence of a social group below their own.

Dickens has (in writing, of course) deliberately constructed a oral model of language for these two humble characters, contrasting with the formal, written model used for some unsympathetic middle-class speakers such as Harthouse. I think there is a contrast of values intended here: solidarity and naturalness on the one hand, deviousness and insincerity on the other.

DIALECT AS A MORAL INDICATOR

Beyond the marks of local colour and class indicator, Dickens creates an impression of dignity and moral principle in a character who departs from standard language. In doing that,

[1] Charles Dickens. 1994: *Hard Times. For These Times.* London, Everyman: 62-63.

Dickens's use of the convention of a standard of correct English upon those who enjoy a certain moral status in the novels in which they appear is broken by Stephen Blackpool, "a man of perfect integrity" *(Hard Times.* I, 10, 62).

In order to enlighten the moral function of Stephen's dialect it would be relevant to remark that Charles Dickens is a master of the technique of concocting names with tonal and allegorical qualities. In this sense, for J. Miriam Benn "Stephen's name reflects his allegorical function: he is a Lancashire saint and a martyr";[1] and Geoffrey Sadock maintains that "Dickens has modelled the humble weaver trapped by a bad marriage and a heartless system on the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen".[2] And the antitype to Christ-Stephen is Slackbridge, symbolically a *slack bridge*, "a spiritual No Thoroughfare, sign of treacherous footing over the void. No Two Cities, Christ celebrating sunrise is seen from the vantage point of a Slackbridge. Following him, men follow a false saviour and reject the Stephen-revealed, true way."[3]

The convention of the use of the dialect as a moral indicator is reflected by the different code in which Stephen and Slackbridge speak. At the first meeting of the United Aggregate Tribunal, Slackbridge stigmatizes him as being as great a traitor to his class as "he who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage" (*Genesis* XXV: 34). At the second "Consult" -after Bounderby's bills have proclaimed Stephen a bank-robber -Slackbridge characterizes Stephen as having betrayed the honour of the proletariat to the employer-class, who sees already little reason why the labourers should not crawl on their bellies all their lives, "like the serpent in the garden" *(Hard Times.* III, 4, 231). Thus primed, when Slackbridge demands the ostracism of the "viper", despite a few negative voices, "the general assemblage subscribed to the gospel according Slackbridge (p. 232). In fact, Slackbrige is a Trade Union leader who fails to deliver what he promises, he is exactly an unreliable person.

Having pointed out the connection between Stephen Blackpool and Slackbridge, the opposite moral status is supported by the different code in which they speak. In Book II, chapter 4, the discourse of Slackbridge -in standard English- is built on empty formulas of a foaming rhetoric as a typical speech of an outside agitator. It has been objected that no trades unionist of the time would have spoken like that. Dickens has created a symbolic language, a sociolect for his conception of "Slackbridges", but this language signifies nothing precise: it is a generalized bombastic rhetoric which might inhabit the pulpit, the House of Lords, or any kind of political or public meeting. The signification of his speech style is inadequate to the situation. So Dickens is forced to comment directly on what Slackbridge represents: "He was not so honest, he was not so manly, he was not so good-humoured; he substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe solid sense" (*Hard Times.* II, 4, 131).

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[1] Miriam Benn. 1970: A Landscape with figures. Characterization and expression in *Hard times* in *Dickens Studies Annual* 1: 178.

[2] Phillip Allingham. 1991: Theme, Form, and the Naming of Names in *Hard Times for These Times* in *The Dickensian* 87: 22.

[3] Jane Vogel. 1977: *Allegory in Dickens.* Alabama, Alabama University Press, 64.

In the same chapter 4, the counterpoint to the standard language of Slackbridge *-a slack bridge-* is the vernacular speech of Stephen, the man of moral integrity:

> 'My frinds', Stephen began, in the midst of a dead calm: 'I ha' hed what's been spok'n o' me, and 'tis lickly that I shan't mend it. But I'd liefer you'd hearn the truth concernin myseln, fro' my lips than fro' onny other man's, though I never cud'n speak afore so monny, wi'out being moydert and muddled' (Hard Times, Book II, ch. 4, p. 133-134).

This dialect as a moral indicator is conveyed by the different code in which Stephen Blackpool and Bounderby speak. But this convention becomes clear if we are conscious that the strong and evil people claim names for themselves and assign them to others. So that, Mr Bounderby, "the Bully of Humility" always refers to himself as "Josiah Bounderby of Coketown". At this door, his name is inscribed "(in letters very like himself) upon a brazen plate, and a round brazen door-handle underneath it, like a brazen full-stop" *(Hard Times.* I, 11, 67). As a "Bully of Humility", however, Bounderby is a "juggernaut, a possible connection being the "bunder" of the 1850's -a four-wheeled cab". The suffix in his name associates Bounderby with the north of England as surely as the brass metaphor, reminiscent of such place names as Grimsby and Whitby, and of such description personal appellations as *"idelsby (=idler, Mr Idleness).* The process of paranomasia with the suffix "by" seems to be chiefly pejorative, so that a reasonable translation of "Bounderby" might be (uttered in contempt or derision) "Mr Marker", or "Mr Energetic".

In contrast to strong or evil people, the weak people use personal Christian names because their whole attitude toward different people is founded on acceptance and love. In this sense, Stephen's name expresses both his allegorical and realistic role: he suffers personally as well as alluding to the passive suffering of workers.

The opposite moral status of these emblematic characters is reflected by the different code in which they speak. Bounderby and Slackbridge, embodiment of the absurd aspects, use the language of wicked people: standard English. Stephen Blackpool, who epitomizes virtue or moral integrity and represents the counterpoint to the evil society, speaks the language of the exploited "hands": the vernacular language.

The following instances may be considered very representative in the dichotomy of code characterizing the moral status. The charge of tension is obvious in the dialogue between Bounderby and Stephen:

> 'Now, what do you complain of?' asked Mr Bounderby.
> 'I ha' not coom here, Sir, ' Stephen reminded him, 'to complain. I coom for that I were sent for.'
> What', repeated Mr Bounderby, folding his arms, 'do you people, in general way, complain of?'

> Stephen looked at him with some little irresolution for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind.
> 'Sir, I were never good at showin' o't, though I ha' had'n my share in feeling o't. 'Deed we are in a muddle, Sir. Look round town -so rich as 'tis- and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same way, somehows, 'twixt their cradles and their graves ... Who can look on't, Sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?' *(Hard Times.* II, 5, 141)

Throughout this dialogue Stephen's dialect stresses his social inferiority to the prosperous and hypocritical Bounderby and also underlines his "moral integrity" and the badge of a down-trodden class; Bounderby, who comes "of humble parents" and prides himself upon being a self-made man, shows almost no trace of dialect.

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