The Literary Imagination in Public Life
Author(s): Martha C. Nussbaum
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/469070
Accessed: 26/01/2015 15:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to New Literary History.

http://www.jstor.org
The Literary Imagination in Public Life*

Martha C. Nussbaum

‘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.

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands,

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, a scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic; and it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white, Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

*This essay is a revised version of a paper presented under the Distinguished Scholars program at the Commonwealth Center.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.
This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.
Walt Whitman, Song of Myself

NOTING IN his children a strange and unsavory exuberance of imagination, an unwholesome flowering of sentiment—in short, a lapse from that perfect scientific rationality on which both private and public life, when well managed, depend—Mr. Gradgrind, political economist, public man, and educator, inquires into the cause:

"Whether," said Mr. Gradgrind, pondering with his hands in his pockets, and his cavernous eyes on the fire, "whether any instructor or servant can have suggested anything? Whether Louisa or Thomas can have been reading anything? Whether, in spite of all precautions, any idle story-book can have got into the house? Because, in minds that have been practically formed by rule and line, from the cradle upwards, this is so curious, so incomprehensible." (63)

Mr. Gradgrind knows that storybooks are not simply decorative, not simply amusing—though this already would be enough to cause him to doubt their utility. Literature, he sees, is subversive. It is the enemy of political economy, as Mr. Gradgrind knows that science. It expresses, in its structures and its ways of speaking, a sense of life that is incompatible with the vision of the world embodied in the texts of political economy; and engagement with it forms the imagination and the desires in a manner that subverts that science's norm of rationality. It is with good reason, from his point of view, that Mr. Gradgrind teaches Sissy Jupe, the uneducated circus girl, to regard the storybooks she once lovingly read to her father as "wrong books" (99), about which the less said the better. And it is with good reason that he lapses into depression about the nation's future when he considers the citizens who, flocking to the public
libraries of Coketown, "took DeFoe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker" (90). When idle storybooks get into the house, political economy is at risk. The world is seen in a new way, and uneconomical activities of fancying and feeling are both represented and, worse still, enacted.

I shall argue that Mr. Gradgrind is right: literature, and the literary imagination, are subversive. Literary thought is, in certain ways that remain to be specified, the enemy of a certain sort of economic thought. We are accustomed by now to think of literature as optional: as great, valuable, entertaining, excellent, but something that exists off to one side of political and economic and legal thought, in another university department, ancillary rather than competitive. The segmentation of the modern academy—along with narrowly hedonist theories of literary value—has caused us to lose hold of the insight that Mr. Gradgrind securely grasped: that the novel (for from now on I shall focus on the novel) is a morally controversial form, expressing in its very shape and style, in its modes of interaction with its readers, a normative sense of life. It tells its readers to notice this and not this, to be active in these and not these ways; it leads them into certain postures of the mind and heart and not others. And, as Mr. Gradgrind all too clearly perceived, these are the wrong ways, and highly dangerous postures, from the point of view of the narrow conception of economic rationality that is, in his view, normative for both public and private thought.

But if literature is, from the political economist's viewpoint, dangerous and deserving of suppression, this implies as well that it is no mere frill, that it has the potential to make a distinctive contribution to our public life. And if one should have some doubts about the texts of political economy—as to their adequacy as visions of humanity, expressions of a complete sense of human social life—one might then see in the very zeal of Mr. Gradgrind's repudiation a reason to invite idle storybooks into the house to plead their cause. And if they should plead their cause successfully, we might have compelling reasons to invite them to stay: not only in our homes and schools, shaping the perceptions of our children, but also in our schools of public policy, and government offices, and courts, and even law schools—wherever the public imagination is shaped and nourished—as centerpieces of an education for public rationality.

I shall focus, then, on the characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy-makers in measuring the quality of life of people both near and far. Elsewhere I
have argued the case for the novel as an ineliminable part of personal deliberation; I have also made a beginning on the task of commending it in the public sphere. This task is difficult, since many people who think of literature as illuminating concerning the workings of the personal life and the private imagination believe that it is idle and unhelpful when the larger concerns of classes and nations are at issue. Here, it is felt, we need something more reliably scientific, more detached, more sternly rational. But I shall now argue that here, all the more, literary forms have a distinctively valuable, and ineliminable, contribution to make. I shall make this case by focusing on the novel above all, as I have said—and, in particular, on Dickens's *Hard Times*, which takes as its explicit theme the contribution of the novel to the moral and political life, both representing and enacting the novel's triumph over other ways of imagining the world. The antagonist throughout will be not sophisticated philosophical forms of utilitarianism, and not the political economy of the greatest philosophical political economists, such as Adam Smith—but the cruder form of economic utilitarianism that is actually used in many areas of public policy-making, and is commended as a norm for still others. (Later I shall exemplify this with cases drawn from quality of life measurement in development economics.) I shall focus above all on the issue of measuring the well-being of a population, which happens to be a central theme of *Hard Times*, as well as an excellent place to see the contrast between the economic and the literary at work; and I shall be asking what activities of the personality are best for this task, what thoughts, what sentiments, what ways of perceiving. This will lead naturally to the question, what texts represent these desired activities, and call them into being?

My question, then, will be not just about what the novel represents, what goes on inside it. That is an important part of my project. But I want to ask, as well, what sense of life its form itself embodies: not only how the characters feel and imagine, but what sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative, the sense of life that animates the text as a whole. And I shall ask as well, and inevitably, what sort of feeling and imagining is called into being by the shape of the text as it addresses its imagined reader, what sort of readerly activity is built into its form. I shall ask, then, not only about the opposition within the story of *Hard Times* between Gradgrind and M'Choakumchild on the one hand, Sissy Jupe and the circus on the other, but also about the ways in which the sentences and chapters of the novel itself, and the activity of reading it, triumphantly enact their exuberant rebellion against
political economy,⁴ and against the "blue books" in which its view of the human world is encoded.

I. Nothing but Facts

Dickens's *Hard Times* contains a normative vision of a scientific political economy and of the scientific political imagination. It presents this norm, to be sure, as a target of withering satirical attack, a goal that cannot be truly described without being made to appear both ridiculous and sinister. But since the attack is a deep attack, the satirical target itself is described with insight, as the novel both depicts and shows the deeper significance of what is still today very often taught as normative in public policy-making, in welfare and development economics—and, recently, even in the law. What makes this norm appear so odd to the reader of the novel is that it is taken seriously all the way down, so to speak: understood not just as a way of writing up reports, but as a way of dealing with people in daily encounters; not just as a way of doing economics, but a way of defining a horse or talking to a child; not just as a way of appearing professionally respectable, but as a commitment that determines the whole content of one's personal and social life. But since this norm does in fact claim to be a norm of rationality, and not just a handy professional tool, and since, if it is really a norm, it seems fair to ask people to abide by it consistently, it seems perfectly fair to examine it in this way, asking what people who really and thoroughly saw the world in the way this norm recommends would be like, and whether such a vision does really seem to be a complete one. (And it seems reasonable, too, to suppose that the personal vision and conduct of committed social scientists is actually influenced at least to some extent by the content of the norm their science upholds, by the habits of perception and recognition it encourages. So in examining it this way we can expect to learn something about what we do to people by holding it up as a norm, and what we can expect from people so treated.) Dickens pays the economic utilitarian the tribute of taking him at his word and holding him to his word; of this treatment he can hardly, it seems to me, complain. Later I shall draw some explicit connections between the Gradgrind philosophy and some aspects of contemporary economic thought and practice. But for now I need to set out the features of this norm, as the novel dissects it. (This will mean beginning to speak of its limitations as well: for in seeing it we see what the novel sees.)
What I am about to say here may seem in some respects obvious. For it is part of the novel’s design that the economist’s way of thinking, seen in the full context of daily life, should look extremely strange, and the opposing way natural. What I hope to bring out here, however, is that the economic opponent is not a straw man: it is a conception that even now dominates much of our public life, in a form not very different from the form presented in this novel. Once, focusing on the subtle modifications of utilitarianism that one finds in recent philosophy,5 I felt that the satire of _Hard Times_ was unfair. But now that I have spent time in the world of economics (see sec. IV), reading the prose and following the arguments, I am convinced that the criticisms in the novel are both fair and urgent. The simple utilitarian idea of what rational choice consists in dominates not only economic thought and practice, but also—given the prestige of economics within the social sciences—a great deal of writing in other social sciences as well, where “rational choice theory” is taken to be equivalent to utilitarian rational choice theory as practiced in neoclassical economics. Public policy-makers turn to these norms to find a principled, orderly way of making decisions. And the allure of the theory’s elegant simplicity is so great that it is having an increasing influence even in the law, which has traditionally reasoned in a very different way, using a different norm of the rational.6 Recently the theory has even made its way into literary studies, where the prestige of neoclassical economics, Chicago style, is evoked in defense of a broad application of its behavioral theory to all areas of human life.7 To the reader who has no familiarity with the opposing position and the prose in which it is expressed, a short course in the writings of Gary Becker or Richard Posner might be recommended. (For their views are extreme—but only in the sense that, like this novel, they apply across the board a theory that economics treats as normative for rational choice in general. If it is indeed a norm of rationality, they are right to do so: and we are justified in examining their works as tests of the theory’s normative appropriateness.)8 To the reader I leave, then, the further investigation of the economist’s position in contemporary life. For now I myself shall turn to Mr. Gradgrind—who at least ends the novel by expressing remorse, and revealing, in the process, a certain human complexity.

“‘In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts’” (47). This famous demand, announced in the Gradgrind schoolroom in the opening chapter of the novel (a chapter entitled “The One Thing Needful”), states the essence of the Gradgrind philosophy. And the novel shortly characterizes it further, speaking
for Mr. Gradgrind in the hard blunt confrontational sentences that seem well suited to express the quality of his mind: "Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir—peremptorily Thomas—Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic" (48). Gradgrind's political economy claims to be a science, to offer facts in place of idle fancy, objectivity in place of mere subjective impressions, the precision of mathematical calculation instead of the intractable elusiveness of qualitative distinctions. "The reason is (as you know)," he remarks to Bounderby, "the only faculty to which education should be addressed" (62). And Gradgrind economics claims proudly to approach the world with reason rather than sentiment—and with the detached theoretical and calculative power of the mathematical intellect, rather than any more qualitative type of reasoned deliberation. Gradgrind intellect sees the heterogeneous furniture of the world, human beings included, as so many surfaces or "parcels" to be weighed and measured.

In this brief description we see four aspects of the economic-utilitarian mind, neatly encapsulated. First, it reduces qualitative differences to quantitative differences. Instead of Louisa, Tom, Stephen, Rachael, in all of their complex qualitative diversity, their historical particularity, we have simply so and so many quantifiable "parcels of human nature." This effacement of qualitative difference is accomplished, we see, by a process of abstraction from all in people that is not easily funneled into mathematical formulae; so this mind, in order to measure what it measures, attends only to an abstract and highly general version of the human being, rather than to the diverse concreteness with which the novel confronts us. We see this abstracting mathematical mind at work in the Gradgrind school's treatment of its students, called by number ("Girl number twenty") rather than by name, and seen as an "inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim" (47–48). We see it at work in the treatment of the workers of Coketown as so and so many "hands and stomachs" (102–3), as "teeming myriads" whose destinies could be reckoned on a slate (131–32), their qualitative differences as irrelevant as those of "ants and beetles" "passing to and from their nests" (187).
Second, the Gradgrind mind, bent on calculation, is determined to aggregate the data gained about and from individual lives, arriving at a picture of total or average utility that effaces personal separateness as well as qualitative difference.11 The individual is not even as distinct as a distinct countable insect; for in Mr. Gradgrind’s calculation it becomes simply an input into a complex mathematical operation that treats the social unit as a single large system in which the preferences and satisfactions of all are combined and melded. Thus, in Louisa’s education, the working classes become:

Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear, and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielded such another percentage of crime, and such another percentage of pauperism; something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made; something that occasionally rose like the sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again; this she knew the Coketown hands to be. But, she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops. (187–88)

Lives are drops in an undemarcated ocean; and the question how the group is doing is a question whose economic resolution requires effacing the separate life and agency of each.12

Mr. Gradgrind does not achieve this goal perfectly in his school, where students, though numbered rather than named, retain their distinct levels of performance, their abilities to think and speak as separate centers of choice, and even some measure of qualitative distinctness. He does not achieve this goal perfectly, we are bound to observe, in his relation to himself: for his internal rhetoric, in the passage cited, insists on the separateness and the qualitative difference of his own mind from those of others: “You might hope to get some other nonsensical belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind, or John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all suppositious, nonexistent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind—no sir!” (48). It is a subtle point in the novel that the measure of personal autonomy and self-respect that Mr. Gradgrind wishes to claim for himself requires him to view himself with a distinctness denied in his calculations—and even to indulge in a rare bit of (however crude) fiction-making.13

But within his immediate family, he fares better. For he does manage, most of the time, to perceive his own children in more or less the way that political economy recommends.14 When Louisa, in
inner agony about her impending marriage to Bounderby, bursts out: "'Father, I have often thought that life is very short,'" her baffled father replies:

"It is short, no doubt, my dear. Still, the average duration of human life is proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life assurance and annuity offices, among other figures which cannot go wrong, have established the fact."

"I speak of my own life, father."

"O indeed? Still," said Mr. Gradgrind, "I need not point out to you, Louisa, that it is governed by the laws which govern lives in the aggregate." (135)6

And in one of the novel's most chilling and brilliant moments, we see what it can be like to see one's own self through the eyes of political economy. Mrs. Gradgrind, subservient and with an always fragile sense both of her own qualitative distinctness and of her separate boundaries, her separate agency, lies on what will soon be her deathbed. "'Are you in pain, dear mother?' asks Louisa. The answer comes back. "'I think there's a pain somewhere in the room,'" said Mrs. Gradgrind, 'but I couldn't positively say that I have got it'" (224). Political economy sees only pains and satisfactions and their general location: it does not see persons as distinctly bounded centers of satisfaction, far less as agents whose active planning is essential to the humanness of whatever satisfaction they will achieve. Mrs. Gradgrind has learned her lesson well.

If we return now to the initial description of Mr. Gradgrind, we see in it a third feature of the political-economical mind: its determination to find a clear and precise solution for any human problem.16 Mr. Gradgrind, we recall, is prepared "to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to" (48). And his study, later on, is described as a "charmed apartment" in which "the most complicated social questions were cast up, got into exact totals, and finally settled" (131–32). Because it has from the start cast the human data into "tabular form," the economic mind finds it easy to view the lives of human beings as a problem in (relatively elementary) mathematics that has a definite solution—ignoring the mystery and complexity that are within each life, in its puzzlement and pain about its choices, in its tangled loves, in its attempt to grapple with the mysterious and awful fact of its own mortality.17 The cheerful fact-calculating mind plays round the surfaces of these lives, as if it had no need to look within, as if, indeed, it "could settle all their destinies on a slate" (132). Gradgrind children are taught from an early age to approach the world of
nature without any sense of mystery, awe, and depth. Thus Bitzer's definition of a horse, which gives a remarkably flat and abstract description of the surface features of that animal, refusing to imagine either its own complex form of life or its significances in the lives of humans who love and care for horses. So too with human lives. Mr. Gradgrind does not even understand the significance of his own child's outburst, when she speaks obscurely of a fire that bursts forth at night, and wonders about the shortness of her life (135). How much less, then, does he feel a sense of mystery and wonder before the distant human beings who work in the factories of Coketown. In one of the most striking incursions of a first-person voice into this novel (whose narrative structure I shall describe more fully later), this habit of mind is described, and criticized:

So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions. There is no mystery in it; there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them, for ever.—Supposing we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown quantities by other means! (108)

If political economy does not include the complexities of the inner moral life of each human being, its strivings and perplexities, its complicated emotions, its perplexity and terror, if it does not distinguish in its descriptions between a human life and a machine, then we should regard with suspicion its claim to govern a nation of human beings; and we should ask ourselves whether, having seen us as little different from inanimate objects, it might not be capable of treating us with a certain lack of tenderness.

And this brings us directly to the fourth characteristic of economic rationality with which the novel acquaints us. Seeing human beings as counters in a mathematical game, and refusing to see their mysterious inner world, the Gradgrind philosophy is able to adopt a theory of human motivation that is elegant and simple, well suited for the game of calculation, but whose relation to the more complicated laws that govern the inner world of a human being should be viewed with skepticism. In accordance with Gradgrind's view of himself as a down-to-earth realistic man, a man of cold, hard fact rather than airy fancy, the theory has an air of hard-nosed realism about it, suggesting the unmasking of pleasant but airy fictions.
Human beings, this unsentimental view teaches, are all motivated by self-interest in all of their actions.\textsuperscript{18} The all-too-perfect Gradgrind pupil Bitzer, at the novel’s end, reveals the principle on which he was raised. As the chastened Mr. Gradgrind attempts to appeal to his gratitude and love, Bitzer cuts in:

“I beg your pardon for interrupting you, sir,” returned Bitzer; “but I am sure you know 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.” (303)

Bitzer, the perfect product of political economy, refuses to acknowledge even those residual motivations of love and altruism that now deeply grip the heart of Mr. Gradgrind himself. For that is the philosophy on which he was raised. And this philosophy leads to odd and implausible interpretations of the world.

Earlier in the novel, when Sissy Jupe’s father has left her, and her own first tendency is to impute to him altruistic motives, projects for her good, Bounderby will have none of it. She had better know, he says, the hard bad facts of her situation: she has simply been abandoned, her father has simply pleased himself and run off. The novel pointedly leaves this particular case unresolved; its function is to point up different behavioral assumptions, different ways of construing the world. The novel as a whole convinces the reader (and Mr. Gradgrind) that Gradgrind is wrong to deny the possibility of genuinely altruistic and other-regarding action. But if there exists this other possibility, then Bounderby has construed Sissy’s situation hastily, and also ungenerously. The suggestion is that the economist’s habit of reducing everything to calculation, combined with the need for an extremely simple theory of human action, produces a tendency to see calculation everywhere, rather than commitment and sympathy. “Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter” (304). This tendency leads to crude analysis, and frequently to error. Even when it does not lead to error, it leads to an ungenerous perception of people and events. And, worst of all, taught from an early age, it produces pupils in its own image.

In short, the claim of political economy to present all and only the facts of human life needs to be viewed with skepticism, if by “facts” we mean “truths.” And its claim to stand for “reason” must also be viewed with skepticism, if by “reason” we mean a faculty that is self-critical and committed to truth. For the “facts” of political
economy are actually reductive and incomplete perceptions, and its "reason" is a dogmatic operation of intellect that looks, frequently, both incomplete and unreliable. The fact-finding intellect plays around the surfaces of objects, not even obtaining very adequate perceptual data—Mr. Gradgrind's study is compared to an astronomical observatory without windows, where the astronomer arranges the world "solely by pen, ink, and paper" (131) determined to perceive only those abstract features of people and situations that can easily be translated into economic calculations. From its own point of view it has positive motivations for this way of proceeding—in its determination to be realistic and not sentimental, its determination to be exact, and even its determination not to be biased in favor of what is near at hand. (For Mr. Gradgrind reflects that Louisa "Would have been self-willed . . . but for her bringing-up" [57].) The novel permits us to see these positive goals. Its very sentences express a commitment to be detached, and realistic, and unbiased—in their blunt square shape, their syntactical plainness, their hard sound and rhythm. (We must, however, note that the prose the novel imputes to the Gradgrind imagination is far more expressive, more succinct, more rhythmical, more pleasing in its odd squareness, than the flat unexpressive jargon-laden prose that is actually used by most economists of the Gradgrind type. Dickens has been able to make Mr. Gradgrind a lively character in a readable novel only by to this extent changing him.)

But, the novel shows, in its determination to see only what can enter into utilitarian calculations, the economic mind is blind: blind to the qualitative richness of the perceptible world; to the separateness of its people, to their inner depths, their hopes and loves and fears; blind to what it is like to live a human life and to try to endow it with a human meaning. Blind, above all, to the fact that human life is something mysterious and not altogether fathomable; something that demands to be approached with faculties of mind and resources of language that are suited to the expression of that complexity. In the name of science, the wonder that illuminates and prompts the most creative and deepest science has been jettisoned. And we have, simply, a reductive charade of science, in which some small part of human life appears, as figures on a slate. We shall shortly see the political consequences of relying on such a picture.

But now we must pause to ask what sort of writing we are reading when we read this novel, how it differs from Mr. Gradgrind's economic texts, and how its own way of imagining and speaking shapes its reader's perception of the issues.
II. Mere Fables about Men and Women

Let us ask, then, how Dickens's novel differs from the texts in political economy that Mr. Gradgrind reads, with their "tabular statements" measuring social welfare. And we must begin with the most obvious facts: not taking for granted the fact that we are reading a work in a different genre, but asking about the features of the genre itself, how they form the reader's imagination, and what sense of life they express.

First of all, then, we are reading a story. This story contains characters—men and women in some ways like ourselves. It represents these characters as very distinct one from another, endowing them with physical and moral attributes that make it possible for us to distinguish every one from every other. We are made to attend to their concrete ways of moving and talking, the shapes of their bodies, the expressions on their faces, the sentiments of their hearts. The inner life of each is displayed as having psychological depth and complexity. We see that as humans they share certain common problems and common hopes—and yet, as well, that each confronts these in his or her own way, in his or her concrete circumstances with the resources of his or her history. Even the utilitarians Bounderby and Gradgrind are rich and complex humans, whose abstract philosophy emerges from an inner world with which it is not always—as we have begun to see—in harmony. The exceptions to this general rule are Mrs. Gradgrind, so weak that she surrenders the boundaries of her selfhood to economic calculation, and, above all, the pupil Bitzer, that terrifyingly empty automaton of utilitarian calculation. Bitzer is the exception that proves the rule, the exception that invites us to notice what the instantiation of the economic portrayal of humanity really looks like, when consistently realized in a concrete human life.21 We see the novel's abstract deliberations, then, as issuing in each case from a concrete human life, and as expressing only a part of the content of that life's inner richness. And although we do not always have extended and explicit access to that complexity, we are always invited to wonder about it, to imagine it—imagining the motives that drive Bounderby to deny his origins and Mrs. Sparsit to pursue Louisa, imagining, later on, with warmer sympathy, the complex turmoil in the heart of Mr. Gradgrind as he greets the collapse of his system with humble expressions of remorse. We wonder how to interpret their actions; and we wonder with a mixture of sympathy and criticism that is likely to vary to some extent from reader to reader, as attitudes do towards actual people in life. (Thus we can argue about what the correct interpretation of some element
of the novel might be, and how justified our sympathies have been—
without losing the fundamental concern that draws us together as
readers.) All these things the novel, in its very ways of speaking to
its reader, recognizes as salient, as worthy of attention and concern.
This we take for granted, since we know what it is to read a novel.
But we should not take it for granted. We should be aware at all
times how our attention and desire are directed, and how differently
from their direction in the course of reading a treatise on welfare
economics.

If we want to become aware of this directedness in a more graphic
way, we might focus on our relationship, as readers, to Mr. Grad-
grind. If Mr. Gradgrind wrote an economics book, placing himself
in it as an agent in a way consistent with his system, what would
be interesting and salient about the Gradgrind character? How would
it address the reader’s imagination? Only, clearly, through the fact
that his life was governed by the laws that govern lives in the
aggregate, and through the fact that he exemplifies the so-called
rationality of the economic bargainer. Only under these descriptions
could Mr. Gradgrind appear in his own book. The “story” of such
a book would be the story of transactions; and its reader would be
held to it not by love or fear, but by a mixture of intellectual
exhilaration and rational self-interest. Such is the moral content of
the genre, if genre it is.

How different our own relation to Mr. Gradgrind here. What is
it, in fact, that makes Mr. Gradgrind an interesting character for
the reader, a gripping and ultimately a deeply moving character,
in a way that Bitzer and Bounderby are not? It is, surely, his failure
to be a consistent utilitarian. Bitzer is just weird; we cannot identify
with him or wonder about him, for we sense that all within is empty.
A novel peopled entirely by Bitzers would be a kind of science
fiction, and would not grip its reader in the manner characteristic
of the traditional novel, which relies on bonds of identification and
sympathy. But we do, by contrast, find ourselves taking a sympathetic
interest in Mr. Gradgrind; we are encouraged to wonder about him
even as we criticize him, to care about what befalls him—in short,
to experience him as an interesting and significant character in a
compelling novel. Built into our aesthetic experience is a certain
shaping of desire.

What in Mr. Gradgrind arouses this desire? It is, we have to say,
the fact that we know early on that he is not consistent—that he is
motivated by love, commitment, and plain decency in ways that do
not find expression in his philosophy. We notice how he refuses to
endorse Bounderby’s crude dismissal of Sissy’s father. We are aware
of high-minded humanitarian motives in his preference for reason
over fancy, motives which may have been misdirected but which
are admirable in themselves. Above all, we notice a degree of love
for his daughter, a hesitation in his implementation of his schemes
for her, that make us think—so this man has a soul. All this, I want
to say, this fancy and wonder, this respect before a soul, is built
into the genre itself, into its modes of address to its reader. Without
a certain number of characters to whom we can have this relation,
we lose interest, and our pleasure ceases. But when we engage in
such relations we are, from the economic point of view, acting badly.

This novel tells a story. In so doing, it gets its readers involved
with the characters, caring about their projects, their hopes and
fears, participating in their attempts to unravel the mysteries and
perplexities of their lives. The participation of the reader is made
explicit at many points in the narration. And it is brought home
to readers that the story is in certain ways their own story, showing
possibilities for human life and choice that are, in effect, their own
to seize. Thus their attempts to interpret and evaluate are encouraged
to be both affectionate and critical: for the text portrays them as
social agents responsible for making a world that is either like or
unlike the world depicted here, agents who must in life stand in
some emotional and practical relation to the problems of the working
classes and to the conduct of managers and leaders. In imagining
things that do not really exist, the novel, by its own account, is not
being "idle": for it is helping its readers to acknowledge their own
world and to choose more reflectively in it.

In short, the experience of reading this novel has, not surprisingly,
just the properties that it imparts to the experience of novel-reading,
when (through the puzzled eyes of Mr. Gradgrind) it describes the
tendency of the people of Coketown to prefer novel reading to the
reading of government statistics: "They wondered about human
nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles,
triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and
deaths, of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen
hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women,
more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like
their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid,
and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than
by Cocker" (90). As Mr. Gradgrind wonders about "this unaccount-
able fact," the reader of course notices that it is her own preferences
and current activity that are being described.

So far we have spoken of features of the novel that it shares with
numerous narrative genres: its commitment to the separateness of
persons and to the irreducibility of quality to quantity; its sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance; its commitment to describe the events of life not from an external perspective of detachment, as the doings and movings of ants or machine parts, but from within, as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives. The novel has an even greater commitment to the richness of the inner world than do many other narrative genres, and a greater commitment to the moral relevance of following a life through all of its highly concrete adventures in all of its concrete context. To this extent, it is even more profoundly opposed than other genres to the reductive economic way of seeing the world, more profoundly committed to qualitative distinctions.

But with Mr. Gradgrind’s musings about the strange library habits of the Coketown working classes, we come upon a feature of the novel that sets it apart, to some extent, from histories and biographies and even tragic dramas: namely, its interest in the ordinary, in the daily lives and struggles of ordinary men and women. Think of the places we visit, as readers of this novel: a schoolroom, a middle-class home, a circus, a working-class home, the office of a manager, the factory in which working people toil, an abandoned mineshaft in which many working people have met their death. Not one of these places would have been judged fit for inclusion in tragedies of Sophocles or Racine. And even in political history and biography, the lives of the insignificant many appear, on the whole, only as classes or statistics, not too differently from the way they figure in books of political economy. But in reading this story we embrace the ordinary. It is made an object of our keenest interest and sympathy. We visit these places as involved friends, concerned about what is going on in them. And this means that we have already as readers, if we read well, the moral experience that Louisa is represented as having when she visits the home of Stephen Blackpool, and is jolted out of all calculation by the perception that a Hand has a name, a face, a daily life, a complex soul, a history:

For the first time in her life, Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands; for the first time in her life, she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. She knew what results in work a given number of them could produce, in a given space of time. She knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women. (187)
This is one of the most striking of many self-referential passages in the novel. For, coming well after much of the novel's own detailed description of the life of Stephen Blackpool, it reminds us that our own education and experience as readers have been and are very different from the economic education of the young Gradgrinds. The person brought up solely on economic texts is not encouraged to think of workers as fully complex human beings like herself, with stories of their own to tell. The novel's depiction of working-class life has some grave flaws. There is some sentimentality; there is an odd failure in basic literary technique, in that the mysterious promise of Stephen to Rachel is never explained and impossible to figure out—and yet it is permitted to determine the shape of the plot. Again, there is such great suspiciousness of all group or collective action that the work of trade unions is portrayed in a light manifestly unfair, even by the standards of Dickens's own nonfictional writing of this period. And yet, the essential point made in this passage stands: the novel makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own, makes us acknowledge workers as deliberating subjects with complex loves and aspirations and a rich inner world. It makes us see their poverty and their oppressive labor conditions in relation to those emotions and aspirations. It thus inspires compassion, wonder, and the passion for justice.

If, then, from Gradgrind's viewpoint novels are bad economics, lacking in mathematical refinement, from the novel's viewpoint sophisticated economics is a bad novel—crude in its powers of representation and depiction, falsely detached toward the situations of fellow human beings, impoverished in the range of sentiments it recognizes and inspires. (Consider, too, the stories its utilitarian characters tell about themselves, and what crude fictions these are: Bounderby's cliché-ridden tale of abandonment and self-sufficiency, Gradgrind's plotless account of his victory over Joseph and George and the other Gradgrinds, the "leaden books' " account of the "good grown-up baby" and the "bad grown-up baby." ) This fact can hardly, it claims, be politically irrelevant. For what one can do to ants and beetles is, morally, altogether different from what one can do to a being whom one sees as invested with the dignity and mystery of humanness. The social atrocities practiced in the novel are not unconnected with the vision of the Hands nourished by utilitarian education—by Gradgrind's mechanical vision, by Bounderby's equally impoverished vision of Hands as, all alike, longing to eat turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon. Dehumanize the worker
in thought, and it is far easier to deny him or her the respect that human life calls forth.

The first principle of the science of political economy, according to Sissy Jupe the circus girl, miserably failing at her lesson, is "To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me" (95). (On which Mr. Gradgrind observes, "shaking his head, that all this was very bad; that it showed the necessity of infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge, as per system, schedule, blue book, report, and tabular statements A to Z" [96].) I am claiming that Sissy Jupe's first principle is not merely represented in this novel; it is built into the novel's entire structure, as its guiding principle. For we are invited to concern ourselves with the fates of others like ourselves, attaching ourselves to them both by sympathetic friendship and by empathetic identification. When, then, we are invited at the close to think what we shall do, our natural response will be, if we have read well, to do unto other ordinary men and women as to ourselves, viewing the poorest as one whom we might be, and seeing in the most ordinary and even squalid circumstances of life a place where we ourselves have made in fancy our dwelling. (And by "reading well," I do not mean coming up with one set of interpretive judgments rather than another, but something simpler and more basic: I mean, simply, reading with fancy and wonder, caring about the characters, being moved by their fate. This is compatible with many different interpretations. What it rules out is reading with disdain for them all, or viewing them all as inputs into a formula fixed in advance.)

And this brings me to one further feature of the novel, about which I have so far been silent: its capacity to give pleasure. For its moral operations are not independent of its aesthetic excellence. And it makes us bind ourselves to the workers because it causes us to take pleasure in their company. A tedious novel would not have had the same moral power; or, rather, the precision of attention that makes for interest is itself a moral feature. This is no incidental aspect of *Hard Times*, but one that it prominently stresses in its self-referential manner. The moral antitype of Gradgrind's school is Sleary's circus, whose capacity to please is closely linked to its moral superiority. And if we ask once again our obvious question about differences between this work and a text in political economy, we surely must answer that one of the greatest is that this book is fun to read. Like the circus, it contains humor and adventure, grotesqueness and surprise, music (note the frequent use of musical metaphors), rhythm, and motion. Its language is lyrical and full of poetic figures. Its plot is dramatically compelling; its characters inspire our trust and sympathy, or excite our laughter, or frighten
us, or generate anger and disdain—or some complex combination of several of these. Its pleasure is more complexly critical, more richly moral, than the pleasure of the circus; and it depicts the circus as intellectually incomplete, insisting on a complex mixture of storytelling and social criticism that the novel as genre is well equipped to offer. But in all of its art, the novel acknowledges the importance of art—of the play of the imagination, the amusement of reading a good story.

It is the novel's explicit contention that this is an important aspect of the way in which it focuses the reader's attention and desire, and thus an important part of the moral and political action it expresses and generates. As Sleary twice observes, "People must be amuthed." Without play human life is drab and mean, all work and use, and no intrinsic delight. The capacity of this circus (this novel) to play, to give delight—inseparable, as in the circus, from the craft that informs it—is part of what makes it a valuable part of human life, part of the generosity with which it speaks to and for its reader. For it expresses in its very artistry the wish that the reader should live a life of delight, of generous and liberal fancy, rather than merely the cramped drab life of political economy lessons. And by forming with the reader a relationship rich in pleasure, as well as in moral reflection, it shows the reader a style of human relating in which deliberation is nourished by the exuberance of fancy, and moral attitudes are made more loving and more generous by the play of the imagination. Unlike Louisa, the reader of this novel "com(es) upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy" (223); this colors reason, making it, the novel claims, both more lively and more humane.

III. Fancy and Wonder

We have spoken of the novel, of this novel, as embodying in its form a certain sort of moral-political vision—radical, democratic, compassionate, committed to complexity and to qualitative differences. We have said that it does not merely represent a competition between fancy and political economy, but also enacts it in its very structure, in its ways of conversing with its hypothetical reader. But we must now go deeper, trying to say more about the fiction-making imagination itself, as the novel both represents and exemplifies it: above all, about fancy, that capacity to see one thing as another and one thing in another. For it is this activity of the mind that the Gradgrind school above all abhors and seeks to extirpate; and it is
this capacity that the novel most centrally defends as necessary for
good life, and triumphantly, exuberantly exemplifies in its every
chapter.

Fancy is the novel’s name for the ability to see one thing as
another, to see one thing in another. We might therefore also call
it the metaphorical imagination. It begins simply, as an almost
instinctual reflex of mind (only Bitzer and Mrs. Gradgrind lack it
totally). Even Louisa, forbidden its cultivation, sees shapes in the
fire, endows perceived patterns with a significance that is not present
in the bare sense-perception itself.\textsuperscript{30} Things look like other things;
or, more precisely, the other things are seen in the immediate things,
as Louisa is aware at one and the same time both of the conjured
images and of the fact that they are not present realities.\textsuperscript{31} (With
the good sense natural to fancy, she does not rush into the fire to
grasp the images she reads there—a good sense, we might add, that
eludes her father, who objects to a flower pattern in a carpet on
the grounds that one does not tramp on flowers with one’s boots.
Sissy, objecting, knows that the flowers, being flowers of the fancy,
will not be hurt by the boots of reality.) Seeing a perception, then,
as pointing to something beyond itself—seeing in the things that
are perceptible and at hand other things that are not before one’s
eyes: this is fancy, and this is why Mr. Gradgrind disapproves of
it.

In childhood, the novel reminds us, this ability is usually cultivated
in countless ways—by games, stories, nursery rhymes—all of which
are forbidden in the Gradgrind scheme for education:

No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon. . . . No little
Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how
I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on
the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the
Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles’s Wain like a lo-
comotive engine driver. No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in
a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog
who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt, or with that yet
more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard of those
celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous
ruminating quadruped with several stomachs. (54)

From the Gradgrind viewpoint, this is the omission of useless frills,
leaving more time for the real stuff of education. But the novel
announces, and shows (as we shall see), in its portrayal of Thomas
and Louisa, that it is the omission of a morally crucial ability, one
without which both personal and social relations are impoverished.
As Louisa, chastened and empty, returns home, the authorial voice reminds the reader of the difference between her memories of home and the influences that home and the childlike imagination usually exert:

Neither, as she approached her old home now, did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood—its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world, wherein it were better for all the children of Adam that they should oftener sun themselves, simple and trustful, and not worldly-wise—what had she to do with these? Remembrances of how she had journeyed to the little that she knew, by the enchanted roads of what she and millions of innocent creatures had hoped and imagined; of how, first coming upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy, she had seen it a beneficent god, deferring to gods as great as itself: not a grim Idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand to foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage—what had she to do with these? (223)

Here the novel makes some complicated connections, which the narrative as a whole has prepared us to see. We should pause to examine them. How exactly is Fancy connected with charity and generosity, with general human sympathy and a beneficent use of reason?

The man in the moon, the cow with the crumpled horn, the little star—in all these cases the child fancies that a form, which perception presents to it as a simple physical object, has a complex inner life, in some ways mysterious, in some ways analogous to its own. To see moon craters as a face, to speak to a star, to tell a story about a cow—these are things that the factual detached imagination of economic science is unwilling to do. But there is, as the novel says, a charity in this willingness to go beyond the evidence. And this charity is a preparation for greater charities in life.

Consider, now, what it is to see a human being. Perception represents a physical object, possibly in motion. It has a certain shape, rather like the one we ascribe to ourselves. Well, how do we really know what sort of physical object this is, and how to behave toward it? Do we ever have unimpeachable evidence that it is not a sophisticated robot or automaton? That it does indeed have a complex inner world of the sort that novels depict? How do we
know, really, that this is a face before us—and not, say, a complex mechanical object with craters, a fiendishly clever machine? Where could such evidence ever be obtained? In this sense, Dickens suggests, all of human life is a going beyond the facts, an acceptance of generous fancies, a projection of our own sentiments and inner activities onto the forms we perceive about us (and a reception from this interaction of images of ourselves, our own inner world). We are all of us, insofar as we interact morally and politically, fanciful projectors, makers of and believers in fictions and metaphors. But the point then is that the “fact” school—which denies life to cows and horses, humanity to workers—engages in fiction making as much as do the novel-readers and fanciers, in its adamant denials of life and humanity, which go, like the other’s assertions, beyond the limits of the evidence. We never know for sure the contents of this perceived shape’s heart; we have a choice, only, between a generous construction and a mean-spirited construction. Seeing-in or Fancy, the great Charity in the heart, nourishes a generous construal of the world. This construal is not only, as the novel suggests, more adequate as an explanation of the totality of human behavior as we experience it, but also a cause of better ways of living.

We see the difference, for example, in the contrasting ways of regarding workers: Bounderby seeing only self-interest, the novel seeing a complex variety of motives. We see it in the ways of contemplating possibilities for political change—for even when the ways of the world are “stony,” Fancy can imagine a garden growing there. We see it too in the contrasting attitudes of the circus and of Tom Gradgrind toward the appetites of the body. The circus people are passionate in a romantic and tender manner, always seeing in one another a complex life, and delighting in that. Of Tom, the novel remarks, with heavy irony, “It was altogether unaccountable that a young gentleman whose imagination had been strangled in his cradle, should be still inconvenienced by its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities” (165). Seeing bodies only as physical objects in motion produces an impoverished sexual life. It is by no means accidental that the utilitarians are depicted throughout with language at once phallic and military, as hard aggressive weapons conducting a pitiless assault on all that is tender. Mr. Gradgrind is a “cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts,” a “galvanizing apparatus,” directed against “the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away” (48). By contrast, the approach of fancy is depicted as delicately, tenderly sensuous, as delighting in the dexterity of speech and gesture, the intricate rhythm and texture of
words themselves. Gradgrind language sounds hard, intrusive, its cadences fierce and abrupt. As language, its body moves itself with a pitiless directness, combining aggressiveness with self-righteous complacency: "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 everything 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" (66). By contrast, the speech of Fancy has, so to speak, a supple and acrobatic circus body, a surprising exuberant variety. It loves the physical texture of language, and plays with it, teasing and caressing the reader. Even when it speaks about its adversaries, it cannot long restrain itself from treating them playfully and almost tenderly, as partners in a game of words, in which delight is taken for its own sake. Thus the many alliterative linguistic games in the depiction of the Gradgrind house, as the narrator enjoys the play of his supple speech around their blunter bodies—as in this passage, where an initially straightforward description becomes more and more joyously sensuous, until the play of the tongue quite takes over, defeating its own subject matter:

The little Gradgrinds had cabinets in various departments of science too. They had a little conchological cabinet, and a little metallurgical cabinet, and a little mineralogical cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labelled, and the bits of stone and ore looked as though they might have been broken from the parent substances by those tremendously hard instruments their own names; and, to paraphrase the idle legend of Peter Piper, who had never found his way into their nursery, If the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at more than this, what was it for good gracious goodness sake, that the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at! (55)

Here the literary imagination opposes to the hard instruments of the names used by political economy its own very different language, and is carried away by its sensuous play. It does not stick to the subject, or move unswervingly to its goal. It thus deliberately embodies forms of desire and sensuality profoundly opposed to those it imputes to political economy. Imagine language as a way of touching a human body, Dickens suggests—and you have a good way of scrutinizing the claims of political economy to stand for us in the fullness of our selves.

(I should add here that Dickens has sometimes been represented as repressing sexuality, especially female sexuality. I believe that this
reading cannot stand up to a close scrutiny of this novel's depiction of the ways in which tongue and mind approach a human form. It is not only that a crude aggressiveness is condemned while a gentler, more varied, and more playful sensuality is celebrated; it is also plain that this sensuous play is linked repeatedly with the influence of the female. What I have elsewhere argued about Dickens's feminization of the author-narrator in erotic contexts fits well here: the susceptible, playful side of life, the side lost, David Copperfield says, by most adult males, is the side out of which novels are generated.35 "This one is no exception, clearly."

And with this mention of play, we come to a further element in Fancy, which we must now explore to complete our account of its social role. When a child learns to fancy, it is learning something useless. This is the Gradgrind school's main objection to it: storybooks are "idle." Facts are what we need, "the one thing needful"; and what use has anyone ever gotten from the man in the moon? But the child who takes delight in stories and nursery rhymes is getting the idea that not everything in human life has a use. It is learning a mode of engagement with the world that does not focus exclusively on the idea of use, but is capable, too, of cherishing things for their own sake. And this too it takes into its relations with other human beings. It is not only the ability to endow a form with life that makes the metaphorical imagination morally valuable; it is the ability to view what one has constructed in fancy as serving no end beyond itself, as good and delightful for itself alone. Play and amusement are thus not simply adjuncts or supplements to human life, but also exemplary in a crucial way about how to view life's central elements. In this sense, the reader's delight in this novel has yet a further moral dimension, and is a preparation for moral activities of many kinds in life.86

We can perhaps sum all this up by examining the two contrasting scenes of education presented in the two epigraphs to this paper. Both are scenes in which a request for a definition or account of something has been made. In the first, we have the orthodox Gradgrind answer given by the pupil Bitzer. The second passage is, of course, not from Dickens at all, but from Walt Whitman's Song of Myself. And I shall not pretend that I selected it simply because it is so apt as a contrast with the Gradgrind definition, and so much in the spirit of Dickens's novel, although it is both. In fact, I arranged the contrast around it, so that I could have an excuse for discussing it in this otherwise Dickensian argument—because I love it, and find it very beautiful. Perhaps this surprising circuslike declination from the straight path of my exposition will be found not out of keeping with the spirit of my argument.
Bitzer has never loved a horse, and has no interest in thinking what it might be like to be one. With an air of finality and certainty he recites the detached external description. The horse emerges as a useful machine, no more. How different is Whitman's speaker. First of all, he is motivated not by a mechanical urge to complete enumeration, but by the child's real curiosity, and by the sight and touch of the grass of which, lying in the grass, he speaks. His first response is to acknowledge that he does not finally know—to acknowledge, that is, a mystery in nature. All his ensuing answers are presented as guesses. He speaks first of his inner life, his hope; next, whimsically and not at all dogmatically, of a child's idea of god; then he tells the child that the grass is sort of like him, a young bit of vegetation—he asks the child to see it as like himself. He then shows the child that it can have, as well, a social significance: for one can see in it the equal vitality and dignity of all Americans, their equal rights and privileges across racial and ethnic differences. Then, turning in, we imagine, on himself, the speaker sees in the grass a darker set of significances, pondering in and through it about the beauty of dead men. He endows even their corpses beneath the earth with beauty, and speaks of them with a profoundly erotic reverence and tenderness—but in a way that does not exclude further thoughts of the grass as from elderly parents, or prematurely dead children. And yet, in its darkness—too dark to come from old mothers, or even from the mouths of those he has or might have loved, he sees an image of his own death.

Here we see all the abilities of fancy, deftly woven together: its ability to endow a perceived form with rich and complex significance; its generous construction of the seen; its preference for wonder over pat solutions; its playful and surprising movements, delightful for their own sake; its tenderness, its eroticism, its awe before the fact of human mortality. It is Dickens's view, as it is also Whitman's, that this imagination—including its playfulness, including its eroticism—is the necessary basis for good government of a country of equal and free citizens. For, as Whitman elsewhere writes, the literary artist "sees eternity in men and women, he does not see men and women as dreams or dots." With it, Reason is beneficent, steered by a generous view of its objects; without its charity, Reason is cold and cruel.

We can now understand that the persistent exuberant metaphoricity of the language of Hard Times is no mere game, no stylistic diversion; it goes to the heart of the novel's moral theme. Even while the novel portrays the Gradgrind schoolroom, it cannot help comparing one thing to another, seeing one thing in another: two
dark caves, in Mr. Gradgrind's eyes; a plantation of firs in his hair; the 
crust of a plum pie in the bald surface of the top of his head (47). Even 
while it depicts the monotony and soul-crushing dreariness 
of the Coketown factory, it triumphs over it in language, comparing 
the coils of steam to serpents, the moving machine parts to "mel-
ancholy-mad elephants"—showing in these ways the human 
meaning of the inhuman. The novel cannot describe its opposition without 
doing battle with it, approaching it through Fancy and playfully 
surmounting it.39

I must now insist that in this novel—and in my own view—there 
is no disparagement of reason or of the scientific search for truth. 
What I am criticizing is a pseudo-science that claims to stand for 
truth and for reason. What I am saying about it is that it fails to 
stand for truth insofar as it dogmatically misrepresents the com-
plexity of human beings and human life. It fails to stand for reason 
when it uncritically trusts half-baked perceptions and crude psy-
chological theories in order not to complicate its elegant models. 
The novel speaks not of dismissing reason, but of coming upon it 
in a way illuminated by fancy, which is here seen as a faculty at 
least both creative and veridical. The alternative I am proposing is 
not Sleary's circus. The circus offers the reader essential metaphors 
of art, discipline, play, and love; but even within the novel its 
attitudes are shown as politically incomplete, too ill-educated and 
whimsical to govern a nation. The novel offers us an alternative: 
itself, its complex combination of qualitatively rich description with 
critical social reflection. And it indicates that political and economic 
treatises of a more abstract and mathematical sort would be perfectly 
consistent with its purpose—so long as the view of the human being 
underlying the treatises was the richer view available in the novel; 
so long as they do not lose sight of what they are, for efficiency, 
 omitting. Government cannot investigate the life story of every citizen 
in the way a novel does with its characters; it can, however, know 
that each citizen has a complex history of this sort, and it can remain 
aware that the norm in principle would be to acknowledge the 
separateness and qualitative difference of each in the manner of 
the novel.

In one particular way the novel, as genre, is strongly in league 
with a certain norm of rationality: namely, in its insistence on the 
fundamental role, in its own construction, of a general notion of 
the human being. The description of the Coketown library speaks 
of "human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears," as 
the subject matter of the novel. In so doing it reminds us that the 
 novel does not purchase its attention to social context and to in-
dividual variety at the price of jettisoning a sense of human community. It forges a complex relationship with its reader in which, on the one hand, the reader is urged to care about concrete features of circumstance and history, and to see these as relevant for social choice; but is, on the other hand, urged always to recognize that human beings in different spheres do have common passions, hopes, and fears, the need to confront the mystery of death, the desire for learning, the deep bonds of the family. Its hypothetical reader is explicitly addressed as one whose sphere of life is different from that of the author—with different concrete choices and possibilities. And yet it is assumed that the reader can still identify with the characters and events of the novel as with possibilities for human life in general, and think how “such things” can be instantiated in his or her own concrete life. This complex movement of imagination and reason, from the concrete to the general back to the concrete, through both sympathy and identification, is built into the genre, as Hard Times correctly states. And in real life one does find that works of imaginative literature are frequently far more supple and versatile deliberative agents across cultural boundaries than are philosophical treatises, with their time-bound and culture-bound terms of art, their frequent lack of engagement with common hopes and fears.

In its engagement with a general notion of the human being, this novel (like many novels) is, I think, while particularistic, not relativistic. That is, it recognizes human needs that transcend boundaries of time, place, class, religion, and ethnicity, and it makes the focus of its moral deliberation the question of their adequate fulfillment. Its criticism of concrete political and social situations relies on a notion of what it is for a human being to flourish, and this notion itself, while extremely general and in need of further specification, is neither local nor sectarian. On the other hand, part of the content of the idea of flourishing is a deep respect for qualitative difference—so the norm enjoins that governments, wherever they are, should attend to citizens in all their concreteness and variety, and should respond in a sensitive way to particular historical and personal contingencies. But the point is, that is itself a universal injunction, and part of a universal picture of humanness. And it is by relying on this universal ideal that the novel, so different from a guidebook or even an anthropological field report, makes the reader a participant in the lives of people very different from herself and also a critic of the class distinctions that give people similarly constructed an unequal access to flourishing. Thus the novel, in its structure and aspiration, is, I think, a defender of enlightenment ideals of the equality and dignity of all human life—not of traditionalism or
parochialism. It is opposed to the perversion of that ideal in the name of the pseudo-science of economics, and also to its insensitive application with insufficient respect for stories told within a concrete historical context—not to the ideal itself.

IV. Sissy Jupe’s Political Economy Lesson—And Ours

What does all of this mean for political economy? I shall conclude by telling the story of my own instruction in that science, in which I am no better a pupil than Sissy Jupe. For the past five years I have been affiliated with the World Institute for Development Economics Research, a research institute connected with the United Nations University, whose aim is to explore broader interdisciplinary approaches to the economic problems of the developing world. I have been a research advisor in a project that discusses how one should measure the “quality of life” of developing countries. This is in fact the topic of Sissy Jupe’s first lesson in political economy. And my interest in Dickens’s novel was very much increased by the fact that it corresponds still, even in its broad satirical elements, to much of the practice of development economics, and to public policy as influenced by it.

This is how the Gradgrind school, then as now, proceeds (Sissy narrating to Louisa):

“And he said, Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn’t this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn’t this a prosperous nation, and a’n’t you in a thriving state?”

“What did you say?” asked Louisa.

“Miss Louisa, I said I didn’t know. I thought I couldn’t know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all,” said Sissy, wiping her eyes.

“That was a great mistake of yours,” observed Louisa. (97)

Today in fact, when the prosperity of developing countries is compared in “tabular form,” by far the most common strategy is simply to enumerate GNP per capita. This crude measure, of course, as Sissy immediately recognizes, does not even tell us about the distribution of wealth and income. Far less does such an approach, focusing exclusively on the monetary, tell us about how the human beings who have or do not have the money are functioning, with respect to various activities that might be thought to be important for human life. It does not even tell us about life expectancy and
infant mortality—far less about health, education, political functioning, the quality of ethnic and racial and gender relations.

A slightly more sophisticated approach measures, as Gradgrind would wish, the total or average utility of the population, amalgamating satisfactions. This at least has the advantage of looking at how resources work for people, in promoting human aims of various sorts. But it has a disadvantage that the novel makes all too plain: it ignores the fact that desires and satisfactions are highly malleable, and that people who are especially miserable can adapt to the circumstances in which they live—that one of the worst parts about deep deprivation is that it robs people of the aspirations and dissatisfaction connected with a robust sense of what is due to their dignity. The Hands in the Coketown factory do manifest some discontent; but, given their exhaustion, the material and imaginative limitations under which they labor, they seem likely to welcome any small relief, and to accept a very inadequate and insensitive leadership, since they have not fully been able to form the ideal of full equality. Stephen can see that his life is "a muddle"; but he cannot clearly articulate the nature of his discontent, or fully feel its force. Gradgrind, on the other hand, is very satisfied with his life, which the novel shows to be spiritually impoverished; and his discontent at the novel's end is clearly a progress over his early equanimity. At the limit, the character Bitzer shows us the extreme unreliability of the feeling of satisfaction, when not linked to any more probing ethical evaluation. For whatever makes that empty vessel of self-interest feel pleased fills the reader with anxiety and even horror. And we know from the start that there is more worth, more humanity, in Sissy Jupe's misery and discomfort—a sensitive barometer of cant and injustice—than in Bitzer's empty self-complacency. "Whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous color from the sun when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little color he ever possessed" (49–50). By this eloquent symbolic description, the novel expresses the human richness of Sissy's response to life, including her unhappiness, and the ghastly mechanical quality of Bitzer's optimism. Can utility give us the measure of these lives, of the education of which they are the fruit, and the human functioning they do and do not contain?

Such criticisms of utility as a measure—together with the other points I have mentioned about aggregation and qualitative differences, which have been much stressed in recent philosophical critiques of economics—have led a group of economists and philosophers, of which I am a part, to defend an approach to quality of
life measurement based on a notion of human functioning and human capability, rather than on either opulence or utility. (This approach was pioneered within economics by Amartya Sen, who is also a philosopher; and it has more adherents to date within philosophy than within economics.) The idea is to ask how well people are doing, by asking how well their form of life has enabled them to function in a variety of distinct areas, including, but not limited to, mobility, health, education, political participation, and social relations. This approach refuses to come up with a single number, reducing quality to quantity. And it insists on asking about the actual functional capabilities of each distinct and qualitatively different individual, rather than simply about how much in terms of resources an individual commands. This is so because the approach recognizes that individuals need varying amounts of resources in order to arrive at the same level of functioning: the handicapped person more resources to be mobile than the person of ordinary mobility, the large and active person more food than the small and sedentary person, and so forth. Nonetheless, the approach does actually permit modeling and measurement: as when one studies the access that mobility-impaired people do and do not have to functions of various sorts in a given society; as when one studies the different food needs of people of different sizes, ages, and occupations; as when one studies the ways in which class distinctions impede access to political participation. The governments of Finland and Sweden actually use such plural quality-based measures to study inequalities in their populations—proving, by doing so, that it is possible to measure in this way. Such measures will indeed be plural and not single, qualitatively diverse rather than homogeneous. This, we argue, makes them better, not worse.

What I now wish to claim is that a novel such as this one is a paradigm of such assessment. Presenting the life of a population with a rich variety of qualitative distinctions, and complex individual descriptions of functioning and impediments to functioning, using a general notion of human need and human functioning in a highly concrete context, it provides the sort of information such an assessment requires, and involves its reader in the task of making the assessment. Thus it displays a kind of imaginative paradigm for public work in this sphere, to which any more quantitative and simplified model should be responsible.

*Hard Times* ends by invoking one of its most central characters: "Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires
turn gray and cold” (314). Addressing the reader as a friend and fellow agent, though in a different sphere of life, the authorial voice turns this reader’s sympathetic wonder at the fates of the characters back on him or herself, reminding her that she too is on the way to death, that she too has but this one chance to see in the fire the shapes of fancy, and the prospects these suggest for the improvement of human life. The novel is right: it does rest with us whether such things shall be or not. I claim, with it, that it is not as economic utilitarians but as readers of novels that we should approach the social choices before us, trying, before our death, to consider our fellow citizens, our fellow human beings, with the wonder and the generosity that this imagination promotes.48

Brown University

NOTES

This paper is the first of three Alexander Rosenthal Lectures delivered at the Northwestern University Law School in April 1991. I wish to thank the Law School for permission to publish it here before its (revised) publication in the book based on the series. The series as a whole has the title “The Literary Imagination in Public Life.” The second lecture investigates the role of the emotions in literary experience on the one hand, public rationality on the other. And the third lecture describes a norm of legal judgment based on the account of rationality in the first two lectures, describing its implications for conceptions of judicial neutrality, the rule of law, and certain areas of constitutional interpretation.

1 All citations from Hard Times are taken from the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, 1969), edited by David Craig; hereafter cited in text. The studies of the novel from which I have learned most are Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (London, 1958) Part I, ch. 5; Craig’s excellent introduction to the Penguin edition; and F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (New York, 1948).
3 Compare the account of the reader’s activity in Wayne Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley, 1988); the account of the ways in which narratives embody forms of desire in Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot (New York, 1984); and the account of the reader’s acknowledgment in Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason (New York, 1979), Pt. IV.
4 Today “political economy” is a term used (in self-description) primarily by the most critical and philosophical of economists, for example Amartya Sen; so what I am criticizing here is not what would be so described in contemporary economics.
Jurisprudence (Cambridge, Mass., 1990) Posner has modified his approach, espousing a kind of “pragmatism.” For a good general critique of economic reasoning in public life generally, see the introduction to Utilitarianism and Beyond, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge, 1988).

7 See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Contingencies of Value (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).
8 See Posner, Economic Analysis of Law and The Economics of Justice; Gary Becker, The Economic Approach to Human Behavior (Chicago, 1976), and A Treatise on the Family (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). Especially instructive is the opening of Posner’s The Economics of Justice, where he first introduces the “assumption that people are rational maximizers of their satisfactions,” noting that “the principles of economics are deductions from this assumption”—and then goes on to use the word “rational,” without further philosophical argument, as if it just meant “maximizers of satisfactions.” (See pp. 1–2.) One trenchant critique of Posner, with regard to the worth of one’s personal integrity, is Margaret Jane Radin, “Market-Inalienability,” Harvard Law Review, 100 (1987), 1849 ff.
9 Some of these criticisms do apply, as well, to philosophical utilitarians, many of whom do treat values as commensurable by a single quantitative standard. See, for example, James Griffin, “Are There Incommensurable Values?” Philosophy and Public Affairs, 7 (1977), 34–59, criticized in Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception.”
10 The workers complain that their lives are constrained by an enforced “sameness” (180), an absence of qualitative variation. It is no wonder that a theory bent on eliminating qualitative distinctions would treat them in this way.
11 See the good account of this feature in Sen and Williams, Introduction to Utilitarianism and Beyond.
12 Shortly after this, hearing of Stephen’s misfortunes, Louisa remarks that she had previously heard them mentioned, “though I was not attending to the particulars at the time” (188).
13 For another example of crude economic fiction-making, see the account of the “leaden little books . . . showing how the good grown-up baby invariably got to the Savings-bank, and the bad grown-up baby invariably got transported” (90).
14 That this is no mere fiction can be confirmed by reading Becker’s A Treatise on the Family.
15 Contrast p. 241, where Louisa now sees that her marriage failed because of “all those causes of disparity which arise out of our two individual natures, and which no general laws shall ever rule or state for me, father, until they shall be able to direct the anatomist where to strike his knife into the secrets of my soul.”
16 This lies very deep in the motivation behind utilitarianism in general, and inspires some of its deliberate departures from ordinary belief. Henry Sidgwick, for example, conceding that to adopt a single metric of choice is to depart from ordinary belief, writes, “If we are not to systematize human activities by taking Universal Happiness as their common end, on what other principles are we to systematize them?”—and remarks that such departures are always found when a science is born (Methods of Ethics, 7th ed. [London, 1907], pp. 401, 406, 425).
17 Just before we hear of the “leaden books,” the narrator himself describes the people of Coketown as “walking against time towards the infinite world” (90).
18 For a trenchant documentation and critique of these behavioral assumptions, see Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools,” Philosophy and Public Affairs, 6 (1976–77), 317–44.
19 Indeed, if we bear in mind that one of utilitarianism’s central claims on its own behalf is that it can take seriously the pain of the poor, we see the novel as offering, in addition, a devastating internal critique. I develop this argument further in the second Rosenthal Lecture.
20 At the same time, the utilitarian's particular conception of science owes something to the Cartesian conception of nature as a machine; this shows up especially clearly in the attitudes to animals in the Gradgrind schoolroom.

21 This is one way of reading Bitzer; but one might also wonder about him, and whether he is not in fact a hypocrite, manipulating the education he has been given for his own ends. In this way, the curiosity inspired by the novel prompts one to try humanizing, in fancy, even the most inhuman of characters.

22 The reader's emotional participation is discussed in the second Rosenthal Lecture.


24 See the excellent discussion by David Craig in the Penguin edition Introduction.

25 This does not mean that there could never be an inequalitarian novel; it does mean that inequalitarianism is in tension with the structure of the genre, which invites concern and respect for any story to which it directs the reader's attention. See also Watt, The Rise of the Novel and Taylor, Sources of the Self.

26 See also p. 238, where Mr. Gradgrind proves that "the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist."

27 In these ways, the novel constructs, in its imagined reader, an ideal moral judge who bears a close resemblance to the parties in John Rawls's Original Position (A Theory of Justice [Cambridge, Mass., 1971]). But the faculties the reader is invited to use would not correspond to Rawls's account of "considered judgment"—on this see "Perceptive Equilibrium" in Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge.

28 Thus the novel also embodies a (rather Aristotelian) conception of pleasure according to which pleasure itself contains qualitative distinctions and supervenes on activities of various different sorts.

29 The utilitarian claims to be maximizing pleasure. Why, then, is novel-reading so opposed? Apparently the source of the opposition is Mr. Gradgrind's fear that this reading will cause people to behave in various inefficient ways in the rest of their lives; thus, from his point of view, it will do more harm than good.

30 See p. 240, where Louisa contrasts the perception of "the shapes and surfaces of things" with the exercise of fancy.

31 On this, see Richard Wollheim, "Seeing-In and Seeing-As," in Art and Its Objects, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1980), and Painting as an Art (Princeton, 1987), ch. 2.

32 See the wonderful account of this in Cavell, The Claim of Reason, Part IV.

33 See p. 77, where the circus people are said to be "deserving" of both "respect" and "generous construction"; and also Sleary's famous injunction to "make the beth of uth: not the wurlt!" (83).

34 For it is part of the novel's claim that the simple economic model does not really reliably predict how people will behave: its formulae are not even in that sense useful. See Sen, "Rational Fools."

35 See "Steerforth's Arm" in Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge. This of course does not imply that Dickens is altogether free of contradiction on this point, as the harsh treatment of Em'ly shows. But in this novel it is noteworthy that the representative of the artistic imagination, Sissy Jupe, is also the only character to achieve a happy and loving marriage.

36 In the second Rosenthal Lecture I explore the reader's moral operations further, focusing on the connection between fancy and the emotions of love and gratitude.


38 One might naturally ask, but can't one use Fancy to hate? I say more about this in the second lecture, where I talk about the range of sentiments the reader is and is not invited, by the novel's form, to have; I connect this with Adam Smith's
account of ideal emotional spectatorship. *Hard Times* urges us, further, to consider the nonjudgmental participation of the novel in each and every life, its recognition that each life does have its own story, its invitation to see each life from the person's own point of view. Here, I think, we see what Dickens means by "the great Charity in the heart": the novel, even while permitting and even suggesting certain criticisms of its characters, promotes mercy through its invitations to empathetic understanding.

39 Compare Mr. Gradgrind on pp. 242, 244, where he is able to see a fire in Louisa's eyes, and begins to use metaphorical speech.


43 To some extent and in some contexts, inroads have been made by other approaches in terms of "basic needs" or, now, Sen's approach in terms of functioning and capability. But on the whole this remains all too true; see Sen, *Resources*, and the Introduction to Nussbaum and Sen, *The Quality of Life*.


45 See Leavis's account of this passage in *The Great Tradition*.


47 See the papers by Robert Erikson and Erik Allardt in Nussbaum and Sen.

48 This paper was delivered at the Commonwealth Center in November 1990; I am most grateful to Ralph Cohen and to the Center for that opportunity to discuss my work in progress. I am grateful, as well, to Dan Brock, Kenneth Dornstein, Elliott Dunn, Jean Hampton, Linda Hirshman, Amartya Sen, and Cass Sunstein, all of whom made comments that contributed to my revisions.