

Symptom of the Universe:

Hard Times and Representing the Working Class

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(I) The Industrial Novels

The expansion of industrialization in nineteenth-century England caused rapid changes in psychological, material, and economic conditions. And the responses to such situations were also multiple, often collectively called the "Condition-of-England Question." The Victorian novelists and critics, in their writings, attempted to understand and represent the complex structure of industrialized society, and tried to present various plans for social reform. Some regarded the mechanization of industrial production as the manifestation of social progress. Others deplored that the industrial system brought about the disintegration of social harmony and the miserable plight among the workers. Some of the industrial novels, which strongly articulated the latter position, shared certain common assumptions. For example, these novels illustrate the widening gulf between the rich and poor, inefficient Parliamentary attempts to improve social conditions, the movement of the trade unionism, and so forth. Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society*, discussed the general "structure of feeling" seen in a group of industrial novels: He took up Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), *North and South* (1855), Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850) and George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866). These six novels are now regarded as representatives of the industrial novels. As Williams notes, all these novels attack utilitarians for their profit-and-loss, supply-and-demand view of (in)human relationships, while illustrating certain regressive assumptions: "Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal."⁽¹⁾ That

is to say, "sympathy" for the working class, and "fear" of "being involved in violence," both contradictory attitudes can be observed.

Charles Dickens also shared such a general "structure of feeling." Dickens was certainly a radical writer who attacked English institutions very ferociously even if he was a bourgeois writer. In the novels like *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*, he claimed that the government was indifferent and did nothing about England's condition, and insisted that the total system needed change quickly. His tone sometimes became even revolutionary. Yet, as Angus Wilson suggests, no revolutionary aim was intended: "It was simply an expression of the frustration to which his aims at social reform had brought him in a petrified, indifferent social order."⁽²⁾ Despite his respect for and trust in English workers, he never admitted the possibility of revolution. In addition, it is famous that, although he had sympathy for the Ten Hours Movement and Chartism, he did not have much sympathy for trade unions and strikes. In his article entitled "On Strike," he expresses ambivalent feelings toward the collective action of the working class. He paid much attention to the "great civility" and "perfect good humour" seen in the workers of Preston, whereas he went there already convinced that the strike was a "mistake":

In any respect in which it can be viewed, this strike and lock-out is a deplorable calamity, in its waste of time, in its waste of a great people's energy, in its waste of wages, in its waste of wealth that seeks to be employed, in its encroachment on the means of many thousands who are laboring from day to day, in the gulf of separation it hourly deepens between those whose interests must be understood to be identical or must be destroyed, it is a great

national affliction. (296)³⁹

Even though he was impressed with the working people's perseverance and civility, and that the Preston strike was conducted by them in a peaceful manner, he never changed his former opinion that the strike was wrong, deplorable. Probably, as Patrick Blantlinger suggests, his hatred for trade unions and strikes is based on the larger "fear of revolution" characteristic of much early Victorian writing.⁴⁰ Fundamentally, even when he sympathetically discusses the sufferings of the operatives, his point of view clearly belongs to the middle class. His position is that of a "foreigner" (288), an outsider. Therefore, his identification with the workers must be problematic or ambivalent.

In *Hard Times*, we can observe that there is a radical entanglement between the need for revolutionary changes in the industrial system and the feeling of "fear of revolution" largely seen in the middle class. The industrial novels face some problems: How do they represent (know) the working class? How do they represent the evil industrial system and probe into the causes of misery? That is to say, novelists must "map" the structure of a whole society as long as they try to attack industrialism and suggest social reform. I shall consider this question in relation to *Hard Times* in the next section.

(II) Dickens's Representation of the Working Class

For Dickens, there is an important problem about the representation of the actual lives and characters of the working class. Even if he has much sympathy for the working people, he cannot but admit the presence of something unknowable within them. His writings always express a certain kind of "distance" from the industrial workers: He is observing "the new nation" growing up in the north, as a foreigner, an outsider. In "On Strike," we can find in him a curious mixture of middle class prejudice and strange sympathy for the actual workers:

When I got to Preston, it was four o'clock in the

afternoon. The day being Saturday and market-day, a foreigner might have expected, from among so many idle and not over-fed people as the town contained, to find a turbulent, ill-conditioned crowd in the streets. But except for the cold smokeless factory chimnies, the placards at the street corners, and the groups of working people attentively reading them, nor foreigners nor Englishman could have had the least suspicion that there existed any interruption to the usual labours of the place. (288)

Dickens, as a "foreigner," had expected to find an "ill-conditioned crowd" in Preston. Yet actually, he witnessed only "the groups of working people attentively reading" the placards. Probably he was surprised to find that everything was so quiet. He was impressed with the difference between the "expected" workers and the "actual" workers.

In *Hard Times*, too, such difference can be observed. When Louisa visits Stephen Blackpool's home for the first time, she is surprised to observe the "actual" lives of workers, and experience the "individual" character of Stephen:

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 connection with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands....She knew them in *crowds* passing to and from their nests, like ants and beetles. ... [S]omething that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again; this she knew the Coketown Hands to be. But she scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of *separating* the sea itself into its component drops.⁴¹ (emphases added)

Louisa's (Probably Dickens's) perception of workers in "crowds" will be easily connected with the general "structure of feeling" seen in the Victorian age. When the novel defines the working people as masses, aggregates, crowds, a certain ambivalent feeling

becomes characteristic. The crowd of workers rises "like a sea," and does "some harm and waste." Dickens's use of metaphor, "like a sea," reminds us of the description of the crowd in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841): "A mob is usually a creature of very mysterious existence, particularly in a large city.... [I]t is as difficult to follow to its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable, or more cruel."⁶⁶ Needless to say, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) is even more notable for its frequent use of sea-imagery. As David Lodge points out, in Thomas Carlyle and the Victorian novelists in general, the favorite metaphor for the crowd is the sea: "The overturning of the culture/nature distinction in crowd behaviour, and the mob's compulsion, ... to break down all barriers and boundaries that normally create distance between human beings, are therefore strikingly conveyed in metaphors of inundation."⁶⁷ In this way, the image of a violent crowd evokes the "transgression" of the culture/nature distinction, above all, of traditional power relations between the middle class and the working class. The Victorian novelists did not hide their fear of amorphous crowds. They were obsessed with the fearful expectation that the workers would be a hostile, violent mob. Such an expectation has something to do with their hatred for trade unions and strikes. And perhaps this is why *Hard Times* contains no violent collective action, no hostile mob.⁶⁸

On the other hand, Dickens must avoid the fearful image of workers and interpret ("tame" or "train") the fundamentally unknowable character of them to suit his convenience. In other words, he must "symbolize" or "fictionalize" the real (mysterious) character in order to acquire some knowledge. Needless to say, he can escape the fear of working class militancy, the fear of the crowd, by means of "individuation" or "separation." Louisa changes her previous view of the Coketown Hands "in crowds" by "separating them into units." For Dickens, "individuation" is the only way to render "the other" knowable. Especially, in the scene depicting the union meeting (II: ch 4), he tries to individuate the crowd of workers and emphasize their honesty and diligence, although they are agitated by the malignant

Union orator, Slackbridge: "[I]t was particularly strange, and it was even particularly affecting, to see this crowd of earnest faces, whose honesty in the main no competent observer free from bias could doubt, so agitated by such a leader" (170). We can observe in this passage the interesting conflict of crowd/individual. Dickens stresses that each worker has an earnest face and honesty, while deploring that "the whole of that crowd" are agitated by an evil demagogue and go "astray" (170). That is to say, he regards the "individual" worker as respectable, while regarding a "crowd" of them as unreliable. Relevant to this point is Igor Webb's remark: "The Novelists ... proceed precisely as Bentham does: the disorder of the mass, its unknowableness, is broken down by means of various kinds of partitioning. In order to study the working class the novelist isolates one or two individuals, and then studies this encapsulated person in his or her separateness."⁶⁹ In *Hard Times*, the "encapsulated" person is none other than Stephen Blackpool: "He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity" (100). Dickens's perfect image of workers is perfectly embodied in the character of Stephen. The primacy of individuation seen in the novel is closely connected with the notion of "free will": Social values reside in the concept of "free individual" or "free will." The free individual separated from a mass exemplifies "order." On the other hand, the crowd of workers means "disorder." Dickens thinks that the violent mass of working people is influenced by the evil circumstances (machines). The notion of determinism assumes that men must be like their environment. As Stephen J. Spector points out, "the expectation that the workers will be a violent, unthinking mob is based explicitly on their contiguity with the violent, unthinking machines."⁷⁰ The primacy of free will over determinism is also reflected in the following description of Stephen: "Stephen bent over his loom, quiet, watchful and steady. A Special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured" (104). In this passage, Dickens implicitly suggests that Stephen, representative of his class, has a respectable will in his mind enough to overcome the

destructive effect of “the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism.”⁽¹¹⁾

We may put the whole question briefly in the following way. In *Hard Times*, Dickens’s reliance on the “individual” workers conflicts with his fear of the “crowd” of working people. Consequently, he cannot but admit that “there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them, for ever” (104). To put it in a Lacanian way, Dickens’s image of workers are split into two poles: the imaginary other(a) and the symbolic Other(A). In the imaginary relationship, the attitude toward the other is fundamentally characterized by “aggression” or “eroticization” (grounded in narcissism). Dickens’s eroticized reliance on the individual workers is nothing but an imaginary identification with them. From this point of view, both Dickens’s admiration of Stephen’s character and Bounderby’s hostility against the workers may be seen as two sides of the same coin. Bounderby, the Coketown banker and manufacturer, insists that the working people always expect to “be set up in a coach and six, and to be fed on turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon” (106). For him, the Coketown hands are “a set of rascals and rebels whom transportation is good for!” (178). Bounderby’s excessive aggression toward the working class seems to be based on the imaginary (dual) relationship. Bounderby always says that he is a “self-made man,” because he was “born in a ditch,” abandoned by his mother, brought up by his drunken grandmother (54). He was promoted to the present rank through his own efforts. Yet his story is nothing but a boastful lie: “The public, other self he creates dominates the private, inner self.”⁽¹²⁾ He identifies himself with his ideal image, and despises the “actual” workers from this “fictional” position. Imaginary identification is supported by “the illusion of the self as the autonomous agent which is present from the very beginning as the origin of its acts.”⁽¹³⁾ In addition, Dickens’s sympathy for the workers is also problematic, because he implicitly expresses his hatred of trade unions and strikes with the help of Bounderby’s statement. Dickens’s eroticized image of workers may be an inverse reflection of Bounderby’s aggressivity.

On the other hand, when Dickens regards the

crowd of workers as “something unknowable,” his attitude is toward the symbolic Other(A). As Slavoj Žižek points out, the big Other is constituted as unknowableness, as impenetrability itself. A subject is prevented from penetrating the heart of the Other: “[The] Other is already in itself hindered, structured around a certain ‘indigestible’ rock, resisting symbolization, symbolic integration.”⁽¹⁴⁾ Dickens must forcibly “symbolize” or “fictionalize” the unknowable Other, however, in order to acquire knowledge of it. And he cannot admit that millions of “honest” workers could be transformed or dissolved into the amorphous, violent mob. In order to avoid this horrible vision, he always needs to grasp the character of the working class from the position of “individuality.” In other words, he manages to mitigate the fear of the unknowable Other, by reducing it to the imaginary other. This is why the representation of the violent mob is absent from the novel. What does the absence of crowd-representation mean? The Other is excluded from the text. To put it more precisely, the representation of the violent, mysterious crowd is driven away from the symbolic universe of the text to the Real. By means of “exclusion” of the mysterious part of workers, in *Hard Times*, everything about the working class is apparently quiet and the men well-behaved. However, as Žižek says, “[the symbolic] integration is never brought about without remainder.”⁽¹⁵⁾ The Real is nothing but the absent cause of the Symbolic. The excluded representation of the crowd remains in the Real, always threatening the text’s symbolic universe as absent cause. Later I shall try to give a more precise account of the “absent cause,” the “answer of the Real.”

(III) The Symbolic Universe Represented in *Hard Times*

As I have suggested in the previous section, Dickens’s representation of the working class produces something residual in the process of symbolization. The workers are represented as a tamed and sentimental version of the lawless mob, a closed and organized crowd, although they are agitated by an incompetent and egoistic leader, Slackbridge. Dickens thinks that

they are merely in need of a guiding and fatherly hand to turn them in the right direction. However, the truth of the working class, as something unrepresentable, something leftover, remains in the Real. The (real) fear of the violent mob threatens the internally coherent symbolic universe of the text, secretly but undoubtedly. The crucial point is that the literary text must symbolize (fictionalize) some real elements in order to be internally coherent. Symbolization may be regarded as mystification, but it is essential mystification. In this way, Dickens tries to symbolize the working class and construct his own symbolic universe. Fredric Jameson gives us a useful account of the relationship in the literary text between the Real and the Symbolic:

The literary aesthetic act... always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow "reality" to preserve inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must draw the Real into its own texture,... whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. Insofar, in other words, as symbolic action, ... is a way of doing something to the world, to that degree what we are calling "world" must inhere within it, as the content it has to take up into itself in order to submit it to the transformations of form.⁽¹⁶⁾

As can be seen in this passage, *Hard Times* should be seen as a "socially symbolic act" with the function of inventing imaginary solutions to unresolvable social contradictions. At the same time, we should notice that "the social contradiction addressed and 'resolved' by the formal prestidigitation of narrative must, however reconstructed, remain an absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text."⁽¹⁷⁾ For the present, it may be useful to look more precisely at the structure of the symbolic universe in *Hard Times*. How does Dickens construct his symbolic structure?

Generally speaking, in the novel, the symbolic universe is constituted of three realms.

① **Sleary's circus**

Dickens undoubtedly grasps the realm of the circus as

an imaginary solution to social contradictions caused by industrialism. The circus embodies "Fancy," its utopian ideology is clearly contrasted with the utilitarian emphasis on "Facts." In addition, the circus also embodies a kind of new affiliative order, because the unrelated individuals come together and behave like a loyal family. The affiliative form of the circus is contrasted with the filiative order of the authoritative discourse, that is, the Gradgrind system.

② **The Gradgrind System**

The middle class, particularly the Gradgrind family, is the central realm of Dickens's symbolic universe. Yet this realm is so badly contaminated by industrial ideologies that it becomes a kind of malignant tumor producing various evils. It is a prerequisite for Dickens's solution to social contradictions, to heal the corruption of the Gradgrind family.

③ **The Working Class**

Dickens cannot represent the real character of the working class. By means of symbolization (fictionalization), therefore, he splits his image of workers into the imaginary other(a) and the symbolic Other(A).

I think that Dickens tries to resolve various problems caused by industrial society by taking two steps; (1) the recovery of the corrupted middle class (Gradgrind family), and (2) the reconciliation between these three realms. Both steps for social reform, needless to say, are closely connected with each other. Because it is impossible to reform the middle class through its own effort, it is necessary to be helped by the circus. Therefore, although he emphasizes the middle class reform, Dickens gives priority to (2) the reconciliation between three realms. That is to say, the roles of Sissy Jupe and Stephen Blackpool are very important for such a task.

In addition, we can observe three kinds of holes in the three realms of the symbolic universe. The function of each hole is explained as follows:

① **Loophole**

A "loophole" (I: ch 3) is, for the middle class, the only conduit to the utopian realm of the circus. This hole is made in the boundary (wall) between the circus and the middle class. Tom and Louisa strive to

peep in at the “hidden glories” of the circus through “a hole in a deal board” (51). The “fancy” of the circus is separated by the “deal board” from the “facts” of the Gradgrind family. “The young rabble” deprived of emotion is longing for “fancy,” and fascinated with the circus spectacle. Yet the fanciful realm is strictly prohibited by Gradgrind’s “model school”: Mr Gradgrind imagines that he consigns the circus people to “the House of Correction” (50). For the middle class, as well as his children, the “loophole” is the only passage to “fancy,” that is, to social reform. Of course, Sissy bridges the gulf between the middle class and the circus, by stepping in the Gradgrind family through this loophole.

② Dark pit of shame and ruin

This is a “pitfall” dug in the middle class (the Gradgrind system). Louisa is imagined by Mrs Sparsit to be slowly descending a moral staircase that leads to adultery, what the novel calls “a dark pit of shame and ruin” (227). This symbolic pit always warns every individual against the violation of social law. In other words, the pit clearly marks what Slavoj Žižek calls “the structure of a *forced choice*”: “The choice of community, the “social contract,” is a paradoxical choice where I maintain the freedom of choice only if I “make the right choice,”: if I choose the “other” of the community, I stand to lose the very freedom, the very possibility of choice.”¹⁰⁸ The pit prevents Louisa from failing to make the forced choice. Louisa maintains her freedom only insofar as she follows the community’s law. Namely, she must be fashioned into a kind of useful “object of exchange” which the system needs.¹⁰⁹ She allows herself to be used as a “circulating” object by her father and her brother, Tom, in her marriage to Bounderby. The system is guaranteed and reinforced by this exchange. If she succumbs to Harthouse’s seduction (that is, when she does not follow the forced choice), she would be excluded from the community to a “dark pit of shame and ruin.”

③ Old Hell Shaft

The “Old Hell Shaft” (III: ch 6), into which Stephen falls, plays an important part in the novel. The countless coal-pits embody the gulf between the

middle class and the working class. Yet these holes have plural meanings.

- (1) First, the deserted coal-pit into which Stephen falls undoubtedly epitomizes unresolvable industrial contradictions. For the development of industry, the system has driven many workers very hard, exploited and killed them in the coal mines full of “Fire-damp” (291). These pits, still left untouched and killing many people, have produced no serious reaction from the “lawmakers,” as Stephen deplures (291–2).
- (2) Secondly, in the novel, the antagonism between the middle class and the working class is symbolized as these coal – pits. That is, these holes embody contradictions of social relations in the structure of the novel. For the reconciliation between both classes, needless to say, they must be filled in. Stephen, representative of the workers, functions in the novel to fill up these holes and bridges the gulf between classes, until he falls into the pit.
- (3) For the integration of the symbolic universe, therefore, these holes must be filled up (by Stephen), because they lead to the Real outside the text. By preventing the amorphous horrors of the Real from returning to the Symbolic, Dickens can maintain the symbolic structure of the novel. Stephen also serves to sever the Real from the Symbolic, to enclose and guarantee Dickens’s ideal society. In this sense, Stephen Blackpool may be the most important figure of all characters in the novel.

Sissy, Louisa and Stephen, related closely to these three kinds of holes, have a common feature in the novel. Each of them is regarded as a kind of “object of exchange” in *Hard Times*. As Patricia Johnson points out, Louisa is used and consumed as the “fuel” or the “waste products” of the Gradgrind system. Sissy and Stephen also function as “objects of exchange,” but they try to reconcile the antagonism between the middle class and the working class for Dickens’s vision of ideal society. The crucial point is that each of them, for some reason or other, is isolated from his or her own class and gender, and regarded as a kind of “diaspora.” Louisa rarely returns home after her marriage, because she is deprived of “[t]he dreams of childhood” (223) and seen as a “container of the reason” by the Gradgrind

system. The more she accepts her position in the system, the more she deepens her loneliness. Sissy decides to leave the circus and find her lost father. Taken into Gradgrind's household, she proves a ministering angel and helps its members in their varying troubles. Only when she is separated from the circus and her father, can she serve in the novel as an agent who spreads the utopian ideologies of the circus. Stephen is ostracized by other working class men for his refusal to join the union. He is also dismissed from his job by Bounderby and driven away from Coketown, his own community.

Paradoxically, these three "diasporas" play important roles in the novel, as characters are isolated or separated from their own realms. What we have to notice here is that Dickens, rather than focusing on subjectivities, emphasizes their "structural" roles in the symbolic universe of the novel. Stephen and Sissy, particularly, function to guarantee the organic relationship of Dickens's ideal society. In the next section, I shall more closely examine the "structural" function of Sissy and Stephen.

(IV) The Structural Roles of Sissy and Stephen

When Dickens attacks the Gradgrind system, he apparently regards Sleary's circus as an alternative, an imaginary solution to this authoritative system. The realm of circus embodies a kind of new affiliative, transpersonal order, because its unrelated members behave like a big family. The utopian ideology of the circus is clearly contrasted with the monologic authority of the Gradgrind system. The important role played by Sleary's Horse-riding is to transgress the boundary between the middle class and the circus through a "loophole." Certainly, Sleary's circus travels and performs its programs from place to place, spreads its utopian ideology over England. Sleary is proud of his name: "Thleary. Thath my name, Thquire. Not athamed of it. Known all over England, and alwayth paythe ith way" (76). However, even if his name is "known all over England," it is all too insufficient for such a task that the circus should surpass the system's power. The system would exert its negative powers to render

meaningless and powerless the utopian ideology of the circus, as well as Mrs Gradgrind's "wonderful no-meaning" (226). Therefore, Dickens must foreground a "diaspora," Sissy Jupe, who goes into the Gradgrind family single-handed. The job of reforming family and society falls on her shoulders insofar as she is stubbornly unincorporated by the authoritative system.

As I described in the last section, when she is separated from the circus and her father, paradoxically she embodies the utopian ideology of the circus more than ever. Sissy's important role is to give full meaning to "wonderful no-meaning," which is marginalized by the Gradgrind system. She fulfills her role, as a kind of "foreign body" within the system. The crucial point is, however, how Sissy has relations to the working class. Her "structural" role is to link the circus with the working people, as well as with the middle class. Apparently, she succeeds in spreading out her power within the working class, because she makes friends with Rachael who deplores Stephen's supposed bank robbery. However, Sissy knows only Rachael, the only female worker in the novel. Dickens describes Rachael's emotional tie to Stephen, her sympathy and kindness for his unhappy marriage, but not her position as a female worker. As a result, Rachael's character lacks a sense of working class life, rather she is seen as a version of the sentimental "middle class woman" Dickens often praises. Actually, Sissy can have relations with the working people not with the help of Rachael, but only with the "invisible" help of Stephen, the only "individuated" male worker. Stephen's role is far more important than Sissy's, because Dickens's attempt to know the workers falls on Stephen's shoulders, but not Sissy's.

Stephen is the only worker who is in contact with the middle class people like Bounderby, Tom and Louisa. Particularly, his relationship with Bounderby deserves our attention. Stephen visits Bounderby to ask his advice on the question of marriage and divorce (I: ch 11). On another occasion, Bounderby demands that Stephen tell him of something about Slackbridge and the union meeting (II: ch 5). Dickens's view of the working class question is clearly summed up in these

scenes. On the one hand, Dickens criticizes Bounderby's arrogant attitude toward the workers, and puts great emphasis on the mutual understanding between employers and employed. On the other hand, he expresses his hatred of trade unions and strikes with the help of Bounderby's statement. Stephen, as an "individuated" worker, must shoulder Dickens's ambivalent view of workers. Stephen firmly defends the sincerity of most of the (individual) workers against Bounderby, whereas he cannot but agree with Bounderby in that the working people's (collective) action is unfortunate and their leader is bad and egoistic. As I have already suggested, Dickens's image of workers is split into the imaginary other(a) and the unknowable Other(A). We may say that Stephen can be seen as Dickens's compromise with these two poles (a-A). As a result, he is ostracized by his workmates for refusing to join the union. His position in the novel is very peculiar and strange: He is an "ideal worker," representative of the working class, although he is separated from his class. Rather, it may be more precise to say that Stephen becomes an "ideal worker" because he is excluded from the community of the working class. He plays a part of "diaspora" like Sissy in this way.

It may be said in a Lacanian sense that Stephen exists "between the two deaths," that is, between the symbolic death and the real death. His symbolic death means his exclusion from the symbolic community of the text, and precedes his real death, his falling down into one of the coal-pits. According to Žižek's explanation, the place "between the two deaths" is the site of either "sublime beauty" or "fearsome monsters": "[I]n Antigone's case, her symbolic death ... imbues her character with sublime beauty, whereas the ghost of Hamlet's father represents the opposite case — actual death unaccompanied by symbolic death, without settling of accounts — which is why he returns as a frightful apparition until his debt has been repaid."²⁰ In Stephen's case, he is similar to neither Antigone nor Hamlet's father. Between the two deaths, he is nothing but a void. He is excluded from the text, but his absence plays an important role in the novel. His role can be understood as purely "structural." Then, let us closely

look at his "structural" role.

After his symbolic death, Stephen must leave Coketown alone looking for his new job and changing his name, since he is dismissed from his job by Bounderby (the middle class) and ostracized by Slackbridge and his workmates (the working class). He disappears from the text for a while. However, Stephen's position is "structurally" reinforced by the plot of the novel: He is reduced to his structural function, emptied of his subjectivity, emotion. Stephen's "absence," paradoxically, causes various events and becomes the focus of attention in *Hard Times*. Tom entraps Stephen into loitering around Bounderby's bank for three days. Consequently, Stephen is falsely charged with the bank robbery. Bounderby draws up a placard, offering a reward of twenty pounds for the discovery and arrest of Stephen. The workers "devour" the placard which most of them cannot read, with "a vague awe and respect." Because this kind of "public ignorance" is "threatening and full of evil" (269), the workers are agitated and excited by Slackbridge's condemnation of Stephen's dishonest actions, and give "three cheers" for Slackbridge (270). Strangely, Stephen's "absence" serves as a kind of "device" which facilitates the knitting together of both the interest of the middle class and that of the working class: Bounderby must recover his financial loss, and the workers must clear themselves of "a fester and a wound upon the noble character of the Coketown operative" (270). Dickens thus organizes the symbolic universe around Stephen's absence, and begins his job of reforming family and society. Rachael visits Stone Lodge with Bounderby and Tom in order to clear Stephen of the charge wrongfully laid against him. Her entreaty wins at least both Louisa's and Thomas Gradgrind's sympathy for her (III: ch 4). Needless to say, Sissy comes to befriend and encourage Rachael (III: ch 5). Mrs Sparsit delivers an old woman, who was thought to be Stephen's accomplice, to Bounderby. The old woman, however, turns out to be Bounderby's mother, who discloses his boastful lies (III: ch 5). (After Stephen's real death) Thomas Gradgrind realizes that his son's crime and hears how Sissy helped him to hide at Sleary's circus (III: ch 7). As can be seen in these

events, Stephen's absence accelerates the advance of the story, and knits together different people belonging to different classes. Dickens can reveal the limitation of the Gradgrind system and implicitly suggest his social reform plan. In other words, Stephen's "apparition" apparently fills up the real holes (coal-pits) dug in the boundary between the middle class and the working class, points out the defects of both classes, and integrates the symbolic universe of the text.

How do we understand Stephen's position in the novel? He exists between the two deaths, by being deprived of his subjectivity and reduced to the structural function. In a sense, his position is nothing but an absence, a lack. That is to say, the place between the two deaths is nothing but a void, an empty place. In the novel, however, Stephen's absence becomes the focus of attention and structurally guarantees the symbolic order. Stephen maintains the symbolic community although (because) he is excluded from it. Namely, in Jacques Lacan's terms, he becomes $S(\mathcal{A})$. Žižek explains $S(\mathcal{A})$ as follows:

[W]hat matters here is precisely its presence, the material presence of a fragment of reality — it is a leftover, remnants which cannot be reduced to a network of formal relations proper to the symbolic structure, but it is paradoxically, at the same time, the positive condition for the effectuation of the formal structure. We can define this object as an object of exchange circulating among subjects, serving as a kind of guarantee, pawn, on their symbolic relationship.... [This] circulating object of exchange is $S(\mathcal{A})$, the symbolic object which cannot be reduced to imaginary mirror-play and which at the same time embodies the lack in the Other, the impossibility around which the symbolic order is structured.⁽²¹⁾

Stephen (his absence) circulates among different people, and paradoxically forms their relations. Yet Stephen himself cannot "be reduced to a network of formal relations," nor occupy a certain position within the symbolic structure. He is excluded from the community (therefore, deprived of his subjectivity) and

reduced to the "object of exchange." This "object in subject" is in a sense what is "in Stephen more than Stephen himself." We can say that this is the function of Dickens's "ideal worker." Stephen is so much idealized and elevated to what is "in him more than himself" that he is split or divided as to the "ideal worker," as to "the object in himself." The symbolic universe represented in *Hard Times* is, however, guaranteed by Stephen. Stephen fills up the holes (coal-pits) opened in the Symbolic(A), or to say more precisely, he "takes the place of the lack (hole) in the (symbolic) [O]ther, embodies what is lacking in the [O]ther."⁽²²⁾ In addition to this, Stephen's position in the novel can be substantially regarded as the Name-of-the-Father, the governor of the symbolic universe. When he is symbolically dead and becomes an "empty" object of exchange, the symbolic universe is paradoxically structured and organized around his absence. It is not the authoritative father (Gradgrind), but the symbolically dead Name-of-the-Father, that governs the symbolic order behind the curtain. If we understand in this way, Stephen is clearly the most important character in the novel, especially, in Dickens's attempt to know the working class and represent the symbolic universe.

(V) The Psychotic Solution: Stephen's Real Death and the Dark Pit

Why, then, does Stephen physically fall into an old pit-shaft? How do we understand the "second death" of Stephen? On his way back to Coketown to redeem his name, he travels at night in a notoriously dangerous area, and falls down a disused pit-shaft by mistake. Probably, Stephen's (real) death plays out Dickens's intention to expose the sufferings of the workers, to attack inefficient Parliamentary attempts for social reform. Yet at the same time, Dickens implicitly warns the working class about their deplorable strikes and trade unions, because Stephen's miserable plight is caused in part by his ostracization from the union. We may say that Dickens chose Stephen as a "sacrifice" for the realization of his presupposed symbolic universe. Dickens plans to criticize the evils of modern

industrialized society and construct the symbolic community purged of such evils, at the sacrifice of Stephen. Stephen himself is of course innocent and not guilty. Paradoxically, however, he must assume the guilt of the symbolic community. He does not shoulder the guilt of the supposed bank robbery, but the responsibility for social contradictions.

This "sacrificial logic" precisely corresponds to what Žižek calls "the utilitarian sacrifice": "[T]he organizer of the scapegoating in no way believes in the victim's guilt, his point is simply that one has to give preference to the interests of the community over the rights of the individual — the individual's sacrifice is acceptable insofar as it prevents the disintegration of social fabric."²³ Dickens the organizer gives preference to "the interests of the community" over "the rights of Stephen." Stephen is a sacrifice both for industrialism and for the symbolic community. As I have suggested, his supposed bank robbery, his absence, paradoxically, integrates different people into the symbolic universe. From this point of view, we can say that his "real" guilt is nothing but his innocence. Stephen tries to return to Coketown to clear himself of the charge laid against him. Yet the novel does not allow him to return. He is totally deprived of the chance of salvation. Why? Because it is the symbolic "mandate": "[T]he more he proclaims his innocence, the more he is guilty — since his guilt resides in his very resistance to the assumption of the guilt," i.e., the symbolic mandate of the victim conferred on him by the community."²⁴ For the "integration of social fabric," Stephen's absence is necessary, but Stephen himself is unnecessary in the novel. Dickens must kill him for the symbolic community when he tries to return to Coketown in order to proclaim his innocence.

Stephen is thus sacrificed for the integration of the symbolic community. In the novel, Dickens's ideal community is symbolically represented as "the starlight" (III: ch 6). Although in the dark pit Stephen feels "aw th' things" so "muddled," feels angry at those who mistook him ("my own fellow-weavers and workin' brothers," "Mr Bounderby," "the young ledy" and "her brother"), he strangely calms his anger and accepts his "sacrificial" fate by gazing at a star:

.....But look up yonder, Rachael, Look abovee!"
Following his eyes, she saw that he was gazing at a star.
"It ha' shined upon me," he said reverently, "in my pain and trouble down below. It ha' shined into my mind. I ha' look'n at t' an thowt o' thee, Rachael, till the muddle in my mind have cleared awa, above a bit, I hope.... When I fell, I were in anger wi' her[Louisa], an hurryin on t' be as onjust t' her as oothers was t' me. But in our judgements, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear. In my pain and trouble, lookin' up yonder, — wi' it shinin on me — I ha' seen more clear, and ha' made it my dyin prayer that aw th' world may on'y coom together more, an' get a better unnerstan'in o' one another, than when I were in't my own weak seln."
(292)

The starlight embodies the symbolic "mandate," that is, Dickens's vision of ideal society. Stephen is given a kind of "sublime beauty" by the starlight. He becomes a holy sacrifice for the integration of the symbolic universe: "I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour's home. I awmust think it be the very star!" (293). He is discharged from the symbolic guilt. His real death gives him peace forever: "The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest" (293).

However, had he really gone "to his Redeemer's rest"? Was he really "guided to Our Saviour's home" by the starlight? The "Old Hell Shaft" has ever devoured and killed "hundreds and hundreds o' men's lives" (291), as well as Stephen's life. Probably, the Old Hell Shaft will repeatedly need another sacrifice. The abandoned coal-pits are still abandoned, still left untouched, still opened in the symbolic universe. If we think in this way, we are tempted to suspect a possibility that the starlight implicitly justifies the Old Hell Shaft. For the integration of social fabric, the pit shaft continues to demand new sacrifices from the starlight? The Old Hell Shaft casts a shadow on the ending of the novel. The closure of the novel is

ominously marked by “infertility” of the family: Tom and Louisa will have no children; Stephen and Rachael will never marry. Mr Gradgrind will be a “white-haired decrepit man,” “despised by his late political associates” (314). Bounderby, Bitzer and Harthouse personify “futile bachelorhood.”²⁵⁾ Except for Sissy, the future of the family is very gloomy and dark. In addition, the novel’s end is structured as a kind of “dark pit,” “absence,” because Dickens does not affirm their future in the present tense, but makes the reader imagine in the future tense. In the future, too, the Old Hell Shaft is still opened in the symbolic universe, waiting for new sacrifices.²⁶⁾

Stephen’s real death thus does not guarantee the future of the symbolic universe represented in *Hard Times*. On the contrary, his second death reveals that the symbolic universe is always perforated, surrounded by countless holes. Coketown is geographically contiguous to “the land of coal-pits past and present,” which is spanned with “the arches” (234–5). Stephen, by filling up these coal-pits symbolically, bridged the gap between the middle class and the working class, and, as the Name-of-the-Father, maintained the symbolic order. Nevertheless, he is foreclosed outside the text because of his real death. What does this mean? Stephen was the only “individuated” male worker, representative of the working class. Dickens gave up his attempt to know (represent) the working class? He did not lose the only figure who had guaranteed the symbolic network of human relations? According to the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father causes psychosis: “[T]he hole [is] dug in the field of the signifier by the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father.”²⁷⁾ This psychotic hole exactly corresponds to the Old Hell Shaft dug in the symbolic universe of *Hard Times*. In psychosis, there is “a hole, a rupture, a rent, a gap, with respect to external reality.”²⁸⁾ The crucial point is, as is well known, that “*what has been rejected from the symbolic reappears in the real.*”²⁹⁾ Then, what has been rejected from the novel? It is nothing but the real fear of the crowd. These fears function as the “absent cause,” which is always threatening the text from the outside, the Real. It is the Old Hell Shaft surrounding Coketown that symbolically

embodies the absent cause. The more the system reduces human relations to interchangeable economic units and exploits the working class, the more the crowd would attract violent effects inherent in the system and perform demoniac carnivals. In this sense, *Hard Times* may be called a psychotic symptom of industrial illness: “It is precisely the symptom which persists as a surplus and returns through all attempts to domesticate it, to gentrify it....., to dissolve it by means of explication, of putting-into-words its meaning.”³⁰⁾

Notes

- (1) Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958; London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p.109.
- (2) Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.227.
- (3) Quotations from “On Strike” (*Household Words*, Feb. 11, 1854) are taken from the version reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Hard Times*, 2nd ed., George Ford and Sylvère Monod ed., (New York: Norton, 1990), pp.285–97. All references to “On Strike” are to this edition.
- (4) Patrick Blantlinger, “The Case against Trade Unions in Early Victorian Fiction,” in *Victorian Studies*, 13 (1969), p.41.
- (5) Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed., Graham Law (Peterborough Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), p.187. All further references in the text are to this edition.
- (6) Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.475.
- (7) David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.107.
- (8) It seems to me very interesting that, of all six industrial novels which Raymond Williams took up, four novels (*North and South*, *Sybil*, *Alton Locke* and *Felix Holt*) include the scenes of violent and lawless crowds. The only writer who does not depict a riot is Charles Dickens. Yet no one could evoke the fearful image of hostile masses more vividly and imaginatively than

Dickens. In *Barnaby Rudge and A Tale of Two Cities*, he exerts his powers to describe demonic carnivals of “explosive masses.” Both novels are set in the late-eighteenth century, the Gordon Riots and the French Revolution, but in *Barnaby Rudge*, it is a commonplace to connect Dickens’s attitude toward the Gordon Riots with his actual attitude toward the Chartist movement of the late 1830s. Yet these novels are not regarded as “industrial novels” or “social novels,” but as “historical novels,” like those which Georg Lukács discussed in *The Historical Novel*. Dickens could describe the attack on Newgate as if he came nearer to identification with the mob, because he was distanced from his contemporary “Condition-of-England Question” by positing a historical difference. Probably he is much more sensitive to the “actual” violent effect of workers’ strikes and riots than any other novelists.

- (9) Igor Webb, *From Custom to Capital: The English Novel and the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), p.192.
- (10) Stephen J. Spector, “Monsters of Metonymy: *Hard Times* and Knowing the Working Class,” in *ELH*, 51 (1984), p.372. For a useful account of deterministic/free will thinking in *Hard Times*, see Raymond Williams, “The Reader in *Hard Times*,” in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1991), pp.166–74.
- (11) The creation of individual is very similar to the effect of Bentham’s Panopticon. As Webb clearly points out, the Panopticon achieves “a demonic individualism” (Webb, p.186). The same effect often works in the novelists’ individualism. “Individuation” implicitly corresponds to the advent of disciplinary power which Michel Foucault formulated in *Discipline and Punish*.
- (12) Richard Fabrizio, “Wonderful No Meaning: Language and the Psychopathology of the Family in *Hard Times*” (1987), in *New Casebooks: David Copperfield and Hard Times*, ed., John Peck (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995), p.230.
- (13) Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p.104.
- (14) Žižek, *Ideology*, p.178.
- (15) Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), p.23.
- (16) Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), p.81.
- (17) Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, p.82.
- (18) Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.74–75.
- (19) Patricia E. Johnson, “*Hard Times* and the Structure of Industrialism: The Novel as Factory,” in *Studies in the Novel*, 21 (1989), p.134.
- (20) Žižek, *Ideology*, p.135.
- (21) Žižek, *Ideology*, p.182, 185.
- (22) Žižek, *Ideology*, p.172.
- (23) Žižek, *Symptom*, p.73.
- (24) Žižek, *Symptom*, pp.73–74.
- (25) Fabrizio, “Wonderful No Meaning,” p.226.
- (26) The Old Hell Shaft, the hole opened in the Symbolic universe, may be compared to what Hannah Arendt calls “holes of oblivion.” Arendt points out that the totalitarian secret police not only kill “criminals” or “undesirables,” but also erase even the memory of those who knew and loved them. She explains the function of the detention camp as follows: “In totalitarian countries all places of detention ruled by the police are made to be veritable holes of oblivion into which people stumble by accident and without leaving behind them such ordinary traces of former existence as a body and a grave.” (Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed., Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958, p.434.) In the scene of Stephen’s death, Stephen may leave behind him the “memory of those who knew and love him” (Rachael). Yet, how about the countless workers who have fallen down into the coal-pits? At least, their deaths are “unaccompanied by symbolic

death," "without settling of accounts" (Žižek). The industrial system will reinforce the disciplinary power by excluding "undesirables" into "holes of oblivion." In a sense, we may say that the coal-pits represented in the novel omen the advent of totalitarianism. Yet what I have consistently emphasized is that "the symbolic integration is never brought about without remainder," to echo Slavoj Žižek's remark. "Holes of oblivion" can only provoke an explosive reaction. Needless to say, in the novel, the violent crowd will return to the symbolic universe. However, Etienne Balibar, although he also points out the impossibility of totalitarianism, tries to find in "the masses" a positive condition "to resist, to struggle, and to transform politics." (Etienne Balibar, "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses," in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.37.)

- (27) Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), p.205.
- (28) Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III. The Psychoses 1955-1956*, Ed., Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans., Russel Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), p.45.
- (29) Lacan, *Seminar III*, p.46.
- (30) Žižek, *Ideology*, p.69.