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Idealist aesthetics in realist frameworks : working dialectically towards the reconciliation of the real and the ideal in the Victorian social-problem novel

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MASTER'S THESIS

IDEALIST AESTHETHICS IN REALIST FRAMEWORKS:

WORKING DIALECTICALLY TOWARDS THE RECONCILIATION OF

THE REAL AND THE IDEAL IN THE VICTORIAN SOCIAL-PROBLEM NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

For several good reasons, literary theory has always tended to classify social problem novels in the nineteenth century tradition of critical realism. This, however, has been done at the expense of one substantial aspect that these works contain, and which literary criticism has since continued to neglect: their idealism. More recently, scholars such as Naomi Schor have been raising this long-running failure from critics to acknowledge and consequently to study the idealist dimension of Victorian novels: "so massive, so crushing has been the triumph of realism that at least in the field of literature . . . idealism has all but vanished from our critical consciousness" (Schor, 60). Yet, crucial figures of the time have theorized on this latter realm of aesthetics, among which George Henry Lewes and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. As they strive to furnish idealism with its rightful place in Art, the aesthetic theories formulated by these two literary critics may offer original insights into some of the most read Victorian novels: Bulwer brilliantly defends the universalist and transcendental truths of an idealizing and generalizing image while Lewes adopts a dialectical approach that reconciles realism with idealism, which is for him but "this vision of realities in their highest and most affecting forms" without necessarily having to be "removed from or opposed to realities" (Lewes, 1865, 42). This master's thesis endeavors to explore the dialectical relationship of idealism and realism by arguing that the socially critical message contained in Victorian social-problem novels is forwarded by their idealist aesthetics as much as, if not more than, by their realist conception.

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INTRODUCTION

SEEKING COMPROMISES BETWEEN CONFLICTING PARADIGMS

> Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each others habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.
>
> You speak of— said Egremont hesitatingly.
>
> THE RICH AND THE POOR.
>> —Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845)

Political Idealism in the Industrial Age

The typical and commonly accepted meaning of idealism, the one which popular culture generally retains, remains relatively removed from the metaphysical sense of the word as well as from the various artistic definitions that critical theorists have attempted to endow the concept with. Indeed, it is not its philosophical complexity nor is it its aesthetic theories that springs to mind when using the word idealism but rather its political connotation. To be an idealist, for many, equates to being somewhat of a visionary that sees the world around them as it could be rather than as it presently exists. Such idealism entails a utopian standpoint—in the dominant imaginary at least—that directly enters into conflict with a realistic and practical view of life. For instance, an idealist might advocate for the end of famine or poverty in the world whereas a realist will deem such goals to be impractically ambitious and thereby unachievable. Important political theorists of the mid-twentieth century, such as the American theologian Reinhold Niebhur and John H. Herz in his work *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and*

Realities (1951), have thus distinguished these two broad schools of thought that seem to have for ever existed in political philosophy according to them.

I would myself put forward that the Industrial Revolution, well remembered as a time of great paradoxes, might be the period in history to have the most substantially widened the polarizing gap between political realism and political idealism. It is indeed difficult to think of a more socially-divided society than the Victorian one, whose two famously conflicting politico-economic doctrines, i.e. liberalism and socialism, relentlessly clashed with one another. Most interesting is the paradigm shift between the two ideologies: to defend one over the other does not result merely in disagreements over economic theories or divergent viewpoints regarding certain laws; no, each goes as far as involving a particular conception of the fundamental nature of reality and society that remains essentially and quite philosophically opposed to the other. Understanding these different paradigms demands that we mentally project ourselves into the era that is at stake here; undertaking this effort may eventually help us better to grasp the outlook of social-problem novelists, whose critical approaches inevitably find themselves attached to and influenced by the political landscape of the time in which they wrote.

That the Industrial Revolution had shaken the political "harmony" of Great Britain is not surprising when we consider the groundbreaking changes that it introduced. In the middle of the eighteenth century, pre-industrial English society was entirely static and based upon aristocratic privileges: while the nobility fully enjoyed its influential power over Parliamentary affairs, political decisions barely faced oppositions as the majority rural population of the time quietly worked far away from the cities like London, where all the laws were passed. By the 1840s, the face of the country had completely changed as urban aeras became crowded with the new working class. In the span of a few decades

only, industrialization had completed the transition from an agrarian economy to a manufacturing one: animals and human muscle power were steadily replaced by steam-power engines and large factories, in which the majority of the goods were now being produced.

No historian has studied the effects caused by these changes as thoroughly and cautiously as Karl Marx himself. In *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx offers theories on the underlying dynamics of human history by recuperating the dialect method[1] of the German philosopher Hegel; however, viewing it as "standing on its head," Marx suggests that Hegel's dialectics "must be turned right side up again" (Marx, 15). Whereas the process of thinking and the ideas that they involve are the central and dynamic forces at work in Hegel's phenomenology, Marx believed that it was material circumstances that ultimately shaped our human minds. Though he acknowledges the potential of the dialect method to analyze history and understand the contemporaneous state of society, the idea, for Marx, "is nothing more than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought" (Marx, 14). Hence, Marx's materialist way of thinking seeks to highlight the deplorable economic and living conditions of the proletariat since, not only do they shape human thought, but they are also at the source of the social problems faced by society. The last straw that encouraged the rise of Marxism happened with the 1832 Reform Act: by extending the right to vote to the male landowners of the middle class, this Act of Parliament overlooked the working class and left them disappointed. Political upheavals soon became the general tendency as the proletariat's exploitation by the middle class started to become more than obvious.

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[1] Hegel's dialects refers to the discursive process in which the internal contradictions contained in an idea are overcome through their synthesis. See page 13 for more.

This is the climate and context in which arose in the middle of the nineteenth century the turbulent antagonism between liberalism and socialism. As mentioned earlier, their global thought tendencies tend to be classified into two main philosophical categories. To grasp the paradigm of the distinctly bourgeois ideology first, we may depart from a reworked definition that Robert Keith Ward offers of political realism:

> Political realism is defined as any political theory which postulates historic and existing impulses in the nature of man, politics, and society as fixed and immutable realities which determine the basic and enduring irrationality of historical political existence.[2] (Ward, 15)

This conception of human nature and politics highlights the former's intrinsic "impulses," among which we may identify—as a case of example—greed or selfishness. The crucial peculiarity of the political realist is their conviction of the "fixed" condition of those instincts, whose "immutab[ility]" Ward crystallizes through their designation as "realities." This position results in a resignation to the "enduring irrationality of historical political existence," which may be understood as a euphemism to describe the passive tolerance regarding distressful misery and absurd economic gaps between the rich and the poor. Ward ultimately adds that "the [political] realist must emphasize the irresistible strength of the impulses in a pre-determined existence which [they are] powerless to change" (Ward, 16).

Notable liberals like Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo or their precursor Adam Smith, through their defense of laissez-faire capitalism, clearly adhere to this determinist view of an unalterable social system. Throughout the industrial revolution free market capitalism dominated, an economic system in which the competition between private owners regulates the country's trade. Adam Smith invented the concept of the "Invisible

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[2] Ward adapted this definition of political realism from John H. Herz's in his *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities*.

Hand" to portray metaphorically the process by which self-interests ultimately serve the natural balance between supply and demand. As a result, Smith argued that the government, at the risk of disrupting the business cycle, should never intervene within economic affairs. The founding father of capitalism thus fulfils at least two elements of Ward's definition that set him up as a political realist: first of all, by promoting selfish interests, he seems to have renounced on fighting off the impulses existing in human nature; and secondly, his reluctance about any sort of state intervention underlines a determinist viewpoint that accepts the current state of society as fixed while showing no intention of altering its order.

Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo similarly belong to the school of political realists. The latter's Iron Law of Wages saw the low income of workers as a fatality. In *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), he shared his liberal sympathies by arguing that "wages should be left to the fair and free competition of the market, and should never be controlled by the interference of the legislature" (Ricardo, 110). His reasoning was that if a particular generation enjoyed too much financial security, an uncontrolled population growth would ensue as economically prosperous workers would marry earlier while creating larger families. This high rate of reproduction, he argued, would impact the social stability of the next generation, who would be forced to compete for a limited number of jobs available. Thomas Malthus was equally wary of population growth. He expressed a brutal pessimism by arguing that the impoverished condition of the working classes was necessary in order to avoid a graver problem of famine. Indeed, his theory advanced that without stern limits on reproduction, population growth would inevitably outrun the food supply.

The paradigm proper to these economic theorists is founded on a strong empiricism as they take as their starting point for their reflection the raw realities of the time of industrialization. Political idealism, on the contrary, seeks to overcome this empirical logic through an aspiration towards ideal models. Ward defines this other school of thought in these words:

> Political idealism is defined as any political theory which in its particular conception of the nature of man, politics, and society, by effect or by design resolves any seeming contradiction between existing impulses in the empirical world and the historical attainability of a rational and moral order derived from universally valid abstract principles. (Ward, 9)

This definition raises a conflict between "the empirical order and the ideal world." The political idealist firmly believes in the power of universal and abstract principles to overcome basic impulses and to improve the current state of society. According to them, a rational and moral order may thus be attained through the application of principles such as justice or equality.

To this school of thought may be attached any political movement that strives for an alternative society through the establishment of social reforms, the most relevantly obvious one being socialism. This political ideology promotes an economic system in which, for the greater good and benefit of the whole of society, the means of production are owned collectively and publicly rather than privately. The Welsh philanthropist Robert Owen was an early believer in this political and economic philosophy; more precisely, he believed in what was termed "utopian socialism." Where Marxists thought that a violent revolution was necessary to overthrow capitalism, this earlier form of socialism was confident that society could be reformed peacefully and that the industrial owners would voluntarily surrender the means of production just for the sake of justice and equality. As a utopian socialist, Robert Owen was a thorough political idealist who

placed philanthropic values such as kindness and respect at the source of political change. The title of his work, *A New View of Society* (1816), by itself well emphasizes the general attitude of political idealists: whereas political realists passively align themselves with a presupposed fixed and immutable state of society, idealists contemplate an alternative social order, one which can be grasped only through an imaginative effort of opening *new* perspectives on reality.

This investigation into Victorian politics has uncovered two general tendencies towards the conception of reality: the first places an emphasis on the fixed state of nature while deciding to submit to its pre-determined order; the other believes in its improvement through an optimistic reliance on abstract principles. Ultimately, these two visions are so remotely opposed to one another that we may call them paradigms. In leaving this foundation, my critical intent is not to argue in favor of one view over the other. Rather, I endeavor to explore how social-problem novelists—who by writing this genre have no choice but to take a stand on the condition of England question[3]—might deal with the existence of such conflicting attitudes towards the interpretation and treatment of reality.

The Dialectical Approach of Critical Realism

As I now shift the focus from a political standpoint to literary issues, what better way to transition than to invoke the novelist and British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. In the same way that we may recognize a polarizing gap between two broad schools of thought in Victorian politics, Disraeli wrote his social-problem novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845) with the intent of portraying the growing gap between two social groups—

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[3] The Condition of England is an expression coined by Thomas Carlyle in his article *Chartism* (1839) and which ties back to the contemporaneous debate on the social state of the nation.

the wealthy and the destitute. Indeed, the author depicts the deep social divide between two classes whose disparity is so striking that they nearly seem to belong to different countries. As the father of modern Conservatism, we might be tempted to classify Disraeli as a political realist. Indeed, the Conservative Party of nineteenth-century England tended to express skepticism towards changes and reforms more so even than its opposition— the Liberal Party—as Conservative members would traditionally emphasize the importance of maintaining the established order of society while protecting the already existing privileges, especially those of the landed gentry. Yet, Disraeli's novel contains a social purpose as he aims to shed light on the politically ignored plight of the working classes. Like political idealists such as Owen, the soon-to-be Prime Minister thus accomplished the effort of broadening the perspective that he had from his privileged position so as to include in it the angle of proletarians. Disraeli therefore transcends the conventional categories of political realism and idealism: while conservatively resisting the changes that manufacture had recently brought into society, his pre-industrial ideals to some extent aligned themselves with the interests and aspirations of the lower classes[4]. This latter claim may be substantiated through the example of the Second Reform Act of 1867, which—being largely the work of Disraeli himself—granted the vote to many urban working men.

I would suggest that Disraeli's case represents an illustrative example of the kind of outlook that social-problem novelists aim to adopt. Indeed, the perspective on society

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[4] Disraeli was the leader of "Young England," a Tory political group quite distinct for its concern and sympathy for the poor. About them, Louis Cazamian writes:

> There were three principal aspects of Young England: the landed gentry were outraged by the encroachments of industrial radicalism; romantic young men were filled with imaginative enthusiasm for the majestic monarchy and beautiful religion of the past; and there was a feeling of simple, humane sympathy for the poor in town and country (178).

embraced by authors like Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë is neither completely pessimistic nor completely utopian, neither omnisciently detached nor restrictively subjective—it is panoramic. This panoramic view strives to encompass both the empiricism of the realist standpoint and the abstractedness of the idealist one. My selection of social-problem fictions as a primary source for the conduct of this study thus finds itself justified by and grounded on their authors' admirable capacity to conciliate seemingly incompatible paradigms, which may allow me to explore the dialectical relationship between literary realism and idealism.

As a genre that emerged roughly between the first two Reform Acts, the condition-of-England novel[5] is deeply concerned with the very real and practical social issues of a time which saw the rise of Chartism[6] and other trade unions. Its primary aim lies in the portrayal of economic inequalities, industrial abuses and social injustices that working-class members had to endure. Accordingly, these works inscribe themselves in the realist tradition of "depict[ing] contemporary or recent social life" (Shumway, 184). However, what distinguishes their style of writing from conventional realism is their highly critical intent. Indeed, to best raise collective awareness, these social-problem novelists do not satisfy themselves with copying the external appearances of reality, they strive to infuse their critical judgement in it. This particular branch of the literary movement is referred to as critical realism[7].

Sobirova Zarnigor defines critical realism as a literature that "address[es] huge social issues" while "discovering the conflict between man and the existing bourgeois order"

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[5] "Condition-of-England novel" and "industrial novel" are alternative terms to refer to social-problem novels.
[6] Chartism, which remained active during the 1830s and 1840s, is a working-class movement protesting for political reform.
[7] It is important not to confuse this literary trend with the twentieth century branch of philosophy that happens to bear the same name.

(Zarnigor, 191). Critical realist texts constitute a fertile ground for the dialectical study of idealist aesthetics within realist frameworks. Such writing, I suggest, leaves room to the expression of various ideals conceived by reformist minds without once departing from the plausibility of realist fiction. It is for this same reason that the French critic Hippolyte Taine would point out about Dickens that "[h]e is as much at home in the imaginary as in the real" (221). Through their non-negligence of imagination, it seems to me that industrial novels surpass what George Henry Lewes would himself call a "crude realism of surface detail" (Greenhut, 494).

Tying back to the peculiar outlook of social-problem novelists, Lewes determined greatness in literature "on the basis of the depth of its insight into reality" (*ibid.*, 510). For this reason, he was especially wary of the growing "confusion between the representation of significant aspects of experience and the reproduction of a surface realism" which was becoming increasingly popular at his time (*ibid.*, 495). What is at stake in this distinction that Lewes establishes is the novelist's capacity to brush aside the merely hazardous dimension of the world. Since the universe in which we evolve is not a rationally or divinely ordered one[8], it is important for authors to evaluate which are the parts of our experience that may be susceptible to communicate truths about ourselves and society. It is by rejecting the contingent aspects of basic reality and focusing on its meaningful principles that a novel may acquire depth and completeness. In short, replicating details of ordinary life did not make for effective literature according to Lewes, a "completeness of representation of the aspect of experience" did (*ibid.*, 510). This, it would seem, aligns

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[8] This view has predominated since the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) which proved that, rather than being brought into being by a creator, humans shared their origins with other species and had evolved over the course of time through a process of natural selection.

with the panoramic view of social problem novels that I have sought to define and describe earlier in this introduction.

We may conclude this vast historical and politically-oriented introduction of the condition-of-England novel in this way: through its belonging to the current of critical realist literature, this genre offers the opportunity to reflect on the relationship that literary realism entertains with idealism. Indeed, social problem novelists aim to panoramically reconcile conflicting conceptions of reality—or paradigms—through the adoption of a dialectical approach. With the introductory purpose of giving the most complete picture of idealism and of what this complex notion may intend, we ought now to make a brief detour on the side of German philosophy before proceeding to consider the concept more deeply in the field of literature.

IDEALISM OVERCROSSING CULTURAL BARRIERS

The English mask hides German features.
—Hippolyte Taine, *Charles Dickens : son talent et ses œuvres* (1856)

Fichte's Subjective Idealism

During the decades that saw the publication of social-problem novels, viz. the 1840s and 1850s, Hegelian thought was slowly leaking into Britain. S.T. Coleridge[9] and Thomas Carlyle[10] are some of the early figures who contributed to the introduction of Hegelianism to the English people. Together with G.H. Lewes[11] and George Eliot[12], who wished to refashion taste and awaken sensitivity, they led German idealism towards the wide popularity that the philosophical current enjoyed over Britain all throughout the Victorian era. This period, nevertheless, strikingly demarks itself from the history of English thinking. Tibor Frank states:

> Before and after the interspace of Idealist dominance, British thought has been marked by a strong mistrust of metaphysics and by the presence for the language of common sense, by empiricism, hedonism and the occasional tendency to exalt scientific method as the proper model for ethic and political philosophy. (Frank, 49)

The empirical way of thinking, it appears, was not isolated to the political realism of John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus—it was part of a larger British tendency in favor of everything pragmatic. Hence, the hold that the empiricist and utilitarian

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[9] Coleridge reappropriated Friedrich Schelling's philosophy in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

[10] While it helped familiarize British audiences with German idealism, Carlyle's novel *Sartor Resartus* (1831) was originally conceived as a parody of the philosophical current. It depicts Fichtean and Hegelian theories just to better deride their reliance on idealism to make sense of the world.

[11] Published in a major and important review of the time—the *British and Foreign Review*—, Lewes wrote "Hegel's Aesthetics" in 1842 to offer comments on Hegel's aesthetic doctrines.

[12] Eliot translated the religiously controversial *Leben Jesu* (1846) from the Hegelian theologian Friedrich Strauss.

doctrines of John Locke or David Hume once had on the Victorians makes the triumph of German idealism seem even greater.

Emerging in the 1780s, this philosophical tradition kept receiving theoretical contribution by its four most influential members—Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel—until the latter's death in 1831. While idealism emphasizes the central role of thought and consciousness in the interpretation of the world, its principal tenet holds that basic reality is wholly related to ideas and minds. This philosophy can be considered either metaphysically or epistemologically. Metaphysical idealism supposes that the world is constituted exclusively of spirit; consequently, it is directly opposed to materialism which holds that physical matter is the fundamental substance in nature. Epistemological idealism posits that knowledge can be obtained only with the mind; this view conflicts with epistemological realism, which maintains that objects can be known and seen independently of the mind since they exist outside of it.

Fichte is one of the earlier proponents of German idealism. However, philosophers draw a distinction between "the subjective idealism[13] of Kant and Fichte and the objective idealism of Schelling and Hegel" (Beiser, 34). Fichte's type of idealism is intended in the subjective sense, meaning that the realm of thought—overall, the ideal—as conceived by him is to be directly attached to the self-conscious subject. Indeed, Fichte emphasizes the "self-assertive and reflective" role of a self-affirmative being, whose "creativity is the source of all that is real" (Lachs, 312). Since experience results from the mental activity of the self, subjective idealism posits that the existence of objects is entirely dependent from their perception by a self-conscious subject.

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[13] It is an Irish philosopher from the early half of the eighteenth century who built the foundation for this doctrine. George Berkeley was the first to believe that the existence of objects was tied to experience. His view can be incapsulated in his famous claim: "esse est taut percipi aut percipere"—"to be is to be perceived."

Hegel's Objective Idealism

Contrastingly, objective idealism as it is conceived by Hegel tends to detach the realm of thought—or the ideal—from such self-conscious subject. This view accommodates the independent reality of nature as the existence of external objects does not rely on their being perceived by a mentally active self. For this reason, Frederick Beiser places objective idealism on "a middle path between complete materialism and subjective idealism" (Beiser, 34).

As it rejects the view that the world is man-made, objective idealism embraces the doctrinal idea that "an absolute ego creates all of reality" (*ibid.*, 35). This part of Hegelian thought is better known as "absolute idealism."[14] According to Hegel, there exists an absolute mind—sometimes identified with God—who takes the charge of perceiving the world and whose ideals find unity in an all-embracing order. Our knowledge of reality, then, is communicated to our minds by this one and absolute mind. Consequently, human beings do not think independently: it is not our thoughts that determine the nature of the world; rather, the world expresses itself in our minds.

At the core of Hegelianism lies the essential and fundamental dialectical method— best summarized as the "thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis" model (Forster, 131). This pattern, according to Hegel, is the only way to grasp and comprehend Truth as an historical process. This access to Truth unfolds in three phases: the first involves any subjective idea, which being conceived independently, manifests in its immediate and simplified identity; the second involves a more objective idea, whose perception in relation to the external world allows the recognition of a contradiction that it bears with the previous idea; the third involves a coherent synthesis of the first two ideas from which emerges an

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[14] Beiser claims that absolute idealism is a synonym for objective idealism (35).

absolute idea that "renders [the first two] no longer contraries, and therefore no longer

self-contradictory in virtue of their reciprocal containment" (*ibid*, 133).

One may be able to conceive how skeptically such metaphysically complex philosophy

could have been received by a British nation schooled in empiricism and utilitarianism.

Out of all the tenets advanced by German idealists, Hegel's dialectical method occasioned

the most controversy. A notable Victorian logician, Joseph Devey, contended:

> It is idle to attempt to refute a man who assumes the livery of falsehood
> as the badge of truth, and who asserts that, when you have involved him
> in a contradiction, you have only established the truth of his principles.
> (24)

While accusing Hegel of tearing up "the old logic by the roots," he mocks the philosopher

for "introducing as the criterion of truth the very tenet that [he] upheld as the test of

falsity" (*ibid.*). Thus, for a long time during the first half of nineteenth century England,

German idealists continued to be viewed as dreamy speculators and were deemed

unworthy of attention. Kirk Willis goes as far as suggesting the existence of "general

cultural barriers" between the two nations (Willis, 105).

Despite the practical tendency that characterized the English, Hegelianism ultimately

did pervade British thought completely by the 1850s. From this unforeseen blending,

Hippolyte Taine remarks an internal conflict, which he believes can be solved in writing.

The French critic states:

> when a writer of talent—who often rises into a writer of genius—
> reaches the sensibilities that lie chilled or buried under the national
> education and institution, he moves the Englishman to the very depths
> of his being; he becomes the master of all hearts. (264)

Taine concludes that beneath the British "icy exterior . . . hide[s] a kind and tender heart"

as the "English mask [conceals] German features" (*ibid.*). It is this kind of paradoxical

agreement that I now seek to explore more deeply in the fields of art and literature.

IDEALISM AS AN AESTHETIC CATEGORY

It is quite a different thing to ideali[z]e what is realistic,
than to reali[z]e what is ideal, and this is what has actually
to be done in free fiction.
—Friedrich Schiller, letter to Goethe, January 5, 1798

The Real and the Ideal in Art

Between 1823 and 1829 in Berlin, Hegel delivers his extraordinarily influential lectures on aesthetics. To inform about these enriching yet abstruse aesthetic theories is not an easy task; G.H. Lewes himself attempted to accomplish the deed in a *British and Foreign Review* article but left many of his readers skeptical. The distinguished critic himself confesses: "[w]e candidly admit that we neither understand every part of Hegel's 'Aesthetik', nor do we agree generally with German philosophy" (Lewes, 1842, 44). While he recognizes as the cause of these issues "the difference of procedure between the Germans and [the English]," Lewes nonetheless encourages the most "earnest [and] inquiring spirit[s]" to endeavor the rewarding study (*ibid. 43,* 45).

Lectures on Aesthetics (1835) was published posthumously by one of the philosopher's students. Throughout his university career, Hegel enforced himself to illuminate pupils on how he believed art to be able to convey Truth: namely, through its "reconveyance of external existence into the spiritual realm" (Hegel, 156). Indeed, the supreme function of art, according to Hegel, lies in its idealizing capacity of shaping a sensuous form that corresponds to the inner soul of the subject. When this deed is accomplished, the spectator of such a piece of art will be able to contemplate the Ideal—viz. Truth in its purest nature—which emerges from the harmony between the outer and the inner. While many sceptics accused Hegel of dreamy speculations, they overlook one of his surprisingly pragmatic tenets, namely that "the true has existence and truth only as it unfolds into

external reality" (*ibid.* 153). The challenge in the comprehension of Hegel's aesthetic doctrines thus primarily results, I would say, in the ability to overcome the disconcerting paradox that "art communicates [T]ruth through idealized images" (Houlgate). To start to illuminate these Hegelian theories more concretely in the field of literature, I may take Dickens' idealist characterization as an example: by creating characters that are either thoroughly and ideally perfect or thoroughly and ideally detestable, Dickens represents types that may communicate simple yet large truths about human nature.

Despite the reliance on external manifestations, Hegel warns his students against the servile and restricting imitation of nature. Art's role, he maintains, should not be to present us with the all too familiar contingencies of daily existence but rather to endow us with an insight into "the inmost soul of the subject" (Hegel, 155). This imperative, he illustrates with the example of the portrait-painter:

> The portrait painter . . . must flatter, in the sense that all the externals in shape and expression, in form, colour, features, the purely natural side of imperfected existence, little hairs, pores, little scars, warts, all these he must let go, and grasp and reproduce the subject in his universal character and enduring personality. (*ibid.*)

He adds:

> It is one thing for the artist simply to imitate the face of the sitter, its surface and external form . . . and quite another to be able to portray the true features which express the inmost soul of the subject. (*ibid.*)

The artist, if they want to surpass the mere superficial level of reality, must thus raise the subject to universality by leaving all surface details behind. It is only through this intermediary movement towards the universal, Hegel argues, that a glimpse into the Ideal—and thereby into absolute Truth itself—is made possible.

By liberating the spirit from the surface appearance of contingent forms, Hegel thinks that art reveals truths about ourselves and our freedom—a state which is absolutely

central for Hegel's aesthetic doctrines. However, if art wants "to give sensuous expression of spiritual freedom, . . . it must move beyond abstraction towards concreteness" (Houlgate). Indeed, the free Ideal, which ultimately "comes to particularity and therefore to restrictedness," expresses itself not through universality but through individuality (Hegel, 160). Hegel thus nuances his claims on universality:

> [n]ow the nature of the artistic Ideal is to be sought in this reconveyance of external existence into the spiritual realm, so that the external appearance, by being adequate to the spirit, is the revelation thereof. Yet this is a reconveyance into the inner realm which at the same time does not proceed to the universal in its abstract form, i.e. to the *extreme* which *thinking* is, but remains in the *centre* where the purely external and purely internal coincide. (*ibid.*, 156)

Hegel seems to draw a distinction between "objectified universality"[15] and "universality in [the] abstract way" (*ibid.*, 73, 156). It is only the former which enables us to see our freedom more clearly as the Ideal must be "lifted above and opposed to [abstract] universality, as living individuality" in order to become "self-enclosed, free [and] sensuously blessed in itself [while it] [] delight[s] in its own self" (*ibid.*). Thus, ultimately, it is in individuality—but an individuality that has extinguished and annihilated everything *purely* external through an artistic work of extracting what is concretely universal in the subject—that "freedom concentrated in itself" may triumph.

Hegel's aesthetic doctrines conspicuously resonate with Friedrich Schiller's. More than thirty years before these lectures were given, Schiller wrote to his friend Goethe: "[the] poet and artist has two things to do; to lift himself above the real, and to keep within the circle of the sensuous. Where both are combined, there is aesthetic art" (Schiller, 1865, 329). Schiller seems to strive for the perfect balance between the real and the ideal.

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[15] By objectified universality, Hegel intends that which contains universal qualities which yet may be embodied in an outer form that directly corresponds to the inmost soul of the subject. The difference with a universality intended in the abstract way is that this one does not manifest externally; it is restricted to the sphere of thoughts.

He therefore warns the artist who, by excessively confining themselves to the real, produces a work that is "servile and common"; conversely, the artist who puts too much imagination into his work takes the risk of rendering it "fantastic" (*ibid.*) Hence, it is only through fair measure that good art prevails according to Schiller.

On January 5, 1798, he made a fundamental and enlightening distinction: "[i]t is quite a different thing to ideali[z]e what is realistic, than to reali[z]e what is ideal, and this is what has actually to be done in free fiction" (Schiller, 1890, 5). The nuance between idealizing the real and realizing the ideal is extremely subtle. For Schiller, to idealize what is realistic implies moving away from Truth by forcefully altering its nature; meanwhile, to realize what is ideal means that we successfully spring an idea that had remained hidden until then.

German aesthetics, as we can notice, present a peculiar and quite unique approach to the philosophy of art. From Schiller's dialectical treatment of the real and the ideal to Hegel's paradoxical reconciliation of Truth with idealization, German theories of art undoubtedly represent a source of interest for any Englishman or woman who wishes to break out of the empiricist and utilitarian constraints imposed by their national education.

Literary Conceptions of Idealism

In a class-based society that has been caught in a crisis of conflicting paradigms, some Victorians soon realized the potential of German aesthetics to overcome the cleaving debate about the condition of England question. Edward Bulwer-Lytton and G.H. Lewes are two of the most influential literary critics of their time who, by recuperating both the conceptuality and terminology of German idealism, were able to come up with new and insightful theories on the novel as a literary form.

Hegel's influence on Bulwer is quite conspicuous in the fact that the English writer directly quotes from the renowned philosopher in his *Caxtonia* essay "On Certain Principles of Art in Works of Imagination": "[a]s Hegel well observes, '[t]hat which exists in nature is something purely individual and particular. Art, on the contrary, is essentially destined to manifest the general' " (Bulwer, 312). Departing from this claim, Bulwer argues that "if a writer of fiction narrow[s] his scope to particulars . . . it must be a very poor novel" (*ibid.*) Indeed, Bulwer depreciates the servile imitation of nature, which produces nothing more than particulars; conversely, he values large generalities which he thinks "elevate[] the model into an idealized image" (*ibid.*). In alignment with Hegel's paradoxical reconciliation of such idealized images with Truth, Bulwer believes that "[T]ruth is found in the preference of generals to particulars" (*ibid.*, 315).

For this reason, Bulwer tends to privilege types over portraits. He argues in favor of the former basing himself on the fact that the reader of a novel is more inclined to recognize themselves in "large types of mankind" (*ibid.*, 327). This act of recognition shelters another striking paradox:

> the rarer and more unfamiliar the situation of life in which the poet places his imagined character, the more in that character itself we must recognize relations akin to our flesh and blood, in order to feel interest in its face. Thus . . . we become unconsciously reconciled, not only to unfamiliar, but to improbable, nay, to impossible situations, by recognizing some marvelous truthfulness to human nature in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the characters represented. (*ibid.*, 316)

The paradoxical claim that unfamiliarity is the most auspicious to the act of recognizing oneself in fictional characters seems to be explained by the universal reach of types. Indeed, taking the example of passions, Bulwer writes:

> [a]ll delineations of passion involve the typical, because whoever paints a passion common to mankind represents us with a human type of that passion . . . sufficiently germane to all in whom that passion exists. (*ibid.*, 323)

He concludes that "the passions of love, ambition, jealousy . . . expressed in the breast of an individual are not special—they are universal" (*ibid.*, 324).

While Bulwer elevates the ideal superiorly above the real, Lewes dialectically acknowledges both. In "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction," he introduces his project by dismissing a common dichotomy:

> [a] distinction is drawn between Art and Reality, and an antithesis established between Realism and Idealism which would never have gained acceptance had not men in general lost sight of the fact that Art is a Representation of Reality . . . [indeed,] Art always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth . . . Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*. (Lewes, 1858, 493)

Rather than being "something removed from or opposed to realities," Lewes contends that "the true meaning of Idealism is precisely this vision of realities in their most affecting forms" (Lewes, 1865, 42). While he argues in favor of the "legitimate style of idealization which consists in presenting the highest form of reality," Lewes finds himself wary of conventional realism which tends to "confound[] truth with familiarity and predominance of unessential details" (*ibid.*, 1858, 495) (*ibid*, 1865, 42).

The latter concern may be clarified through the distinction that Margaret Oliphant establishes between facts and Truth. Writing in *Blackwood's*, she recognizes that "[T]ruth is one thing and [f]act is another. Truth is that grand general rule of humanity, the harmonious law which runs through everything . . . [f]act is the exceptional and contradictory" (Oliphant, 185). Facts, then, are not more pertinent than mere accidents— or the particulars that Bulwer disdains—which conventional Realism, Lewes fears, foolishly strives to reproduce.

Part of Lewes' rejection of conventional Realism adjusts with his belief that Truth emerges not from plain objectivity but from subjective interpretations of Nature. Indeed,

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the literary critic highlights "the different ways in which minds—especially poetic ones—look at things" (Lewes, 1865, 42). To defend the relevancy of "poetic way[s] of seeing things," he takes the example of two painters representing the same village group (*ibid.*). One of them, seeing only with the outer eyer, produces a mere photographic representation; the other painter, by using "his sympathy," sprouts up "something of the emotional life of the group" (*ibid.*, 1858, 494). Hence, the literary critic praises the second painter for having expressed the inner life of the subjects without once departing from strict reality. Thus, both Hegel and Lewes, through their pictural analogies, come to emphasize the importance for art to transcend raw materiality so that it may be able to communicate the spirit of its subjects. The means and processes however differ: the former insists on the portraitist's *creative* capacity to seek and reveal what is universal in the subject while the latter insists on the artist's *moral* ability to sympathize with whoever it is that they are representing. In her article "The Real versus the Ideal: Theories of Fiction in Periodicals, 1850 – 1870," Lyn Pykett elaborates on the transfiguring power that Lewes endows sympathy with: "sympathy was the moral and imaginative basis of all art. It was the power of imaginative projection, the power of entering imaginatively into the experience of others" (Pykett, 70). This conception of sympathy, it seems to me, aligns with the critical stand of social-problem novelists. Through their social critique and panoramic view, these authors indeed prove their ability not only to show compassion for the working classes but also to sympathize with their fictional characters.

Throughout this introduction, I have moved from the political, through the philosophical and finally to the aesthetic meanings of idealism. It is by relying on these different aesthetic theories that I undertake to propose a new reading of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849): one that restores the balance

between their realist and their idealist aspects. Through this task, I argue that the socially critical message contained in these two social-problem novels is forwarded by their idealist aesthetics as much as, if not more than, by their realist conception; thus, idealism and realism here dialectally work together towards the common goal of depicting the condition of England. The analysis of these literary works will concentrate on passages and quotations that combine idealist concepts with realist elements. This method aims to solve the paradoxes that these associations at first seemingly display by drawing on the resourceful theories formulated by Hegel, Bulwer and Lewes. By loosening the hold that strict and traditional realism has had on our reading of social-problem novels, I hope that this study into idealist aesthetics will awaken a part of our critical consciousness that has vanished with the dominance of a literary movement, i.e. of realism.

CHAPTER 1:

CHARLES DICKENS' *HARD TIMES* – FREEING OURSELVES FROM THE
"CHAINS [OF] MATERIAL REALITIES"

to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those
imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart
or infancy will wither up
—Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854)

As can be noted through the polysemy of its title itself, *Hard Times* problematizes not only the general unhappiness of a dismal society but also the deeply utilitarian and materialist way of thinking that seemingly participates in that social dissatisfaction. Indeed, the adjective "hard," intended in the sense of tough and difficult circumstances, points first to Stephen Blackpool's pessimistic view on life as a "muddle" (141); however, comprehended as something that is "firm, solid [and] unyielding," it may also refer to Mr. Bounderby's stony vision of realities (*OED*, "hard, ajd.," I.)[16]. This polysemous title may prove the panoramic ambition of Dickens' novel, which successfully marries conflicting paradigms under the same adjective. Yet, as Paul Schlicke best puts it in his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel, the author constructs "a series of contrasts, between facts and fancy, head and heart, age and youth, work and play" (Schlicke, 18). This ongoing dichotomy leads us to wonder about the seeming absence of intermediate stages. Indeed, *Hard Times* would lose the completeness of its representation of reality if it were to acknowledge only the extremes while neglecting all the nuances in-between. As a result, the challenge of this chapter lies in mediating these antagonistic forces so that a dialectical reading of Dickens' novel does not lose sight with a panoramic and complete picture of reality. I will argue throughout this chapter that

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[16] Incidentally, the word "hard" in English is often linked to the word "fact."

Dickens' idealism manifests above all through plurality—a plurality that can endorse all the different and various ways to perceive reality. Similarly to the manner in which thoughts may influence our perception of material objects, we will see that language too plays a key part in this manipulation of reality. Wordplays such as syllepses are literary devices used by Dickens to provoke the authority of utilitarianism, which problematically accepts one sole pragmatical way to look at our world.

The Case of Louisa Gradgrind: An Agreement between Empirical Thought and Idealist Thinking

Throughout the novel, Louisa Gradgrind arduously strives to detach herself from the pragmatic logic that she has inherited from her utilitarian education so that she may develop her imaginative faculty. Despite her efforts though, she remains "chain[ed] [to] material realities" as her schooling has rendered her unable to apprehend objects on a spiritual[17] level rather than on a merely sensual one (156). Ever since the rise of the novel throughout the eighteenth century[18], realism—Joseph T. Flibbert reminds us—has been "associated with reproduction of the physical world by accumulation of facts and details and continual reference to sense experience" (Flibbert, 23). Through the complex situation of his character, Dickens brilliantly manages to reconcile the empiricism of such realist novels with idealism.

In an open-hearted discussion with her father, Louisa makes an unusual confession:

> If I had been stone blind; if I had groped my way by my sense of touch and had been free, while I knew the shape and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser . . . than I am with the eyes I have. (201, 202)

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[17] I use this term in its secularized meaning and in the Hegelian sense of the notion of spirit.
[18] Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is illustrative of the early novel whose authors, in the attempt to allow the genre to be seen more seriously, tried to incorporate formal realism and empirical philosophy into their writings.

The surprising effect of this situational irony is quite powerful; being physically blind, according to Louisa, allows for a better knowledge of the environment that surrounds us. By suggesting that wisdom and Truth do not emerge from strict empirical observations, this view strongly rejects materialism. Nonetheless, external forms do play an important role in that reality: whereas sight is dismissed, the sense of touch appears as the crucial first step in the access to—in Hegelian terms—the Ideal. However, touch grants access to Truth only as it is complemented by the exercise of fancy. This process strikingly resonates with William Wordsworth's *Fenwick Notes*, in which the poet has to "grasp[] at a wall or tree to recall [him]self from [an] abyss of idealism to the reality" (Wordsworth, 160). Although he may freely transition from one world to the other, Wordsworth establishes a clear boundary between the realm of thoughts and the material world: he is either physically connected to the external objects or spiritually engaged in this abyss of idealism, but not both at the same time. Contrastingly, when Dickens reproduces this image offered by Wordsworth, he gets rid of any such boundary by dialectically merging empirical thought with idealist thinking: in a condition where she would be continuously forced to having to fancifully guess—by way of groping—the exact forms of things, the spiritual proximity that a blind Louisa would have entertained with the physical objects surrounding her would have been only greater. Indeed, in default of knowing the external appearances of objects, she would have turned her attention more to their inner souls. This interpretation strongly aligns with Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, which place an emphasis on the spiritual realm to reach universal truths: "the nature of the artistic Ideal is to be sought in this reconveyance of external existence into the spiritual realm" (Hegel, 156). A Hegelian reading of this quotation also demands that we notice the presence of the notion of freedom. By freeing Ideals from their external appearances,

Louisa would have also found herself free—spiritually free that is—from the chains of material realities as she would have been able to see further and beyond these. Ultimately, Dickens does not entirely reject materialism; rather, he seems to advocate for empirical discoveries that leave room for the imagination.

Subjective idealism represents another way through which Dickens manages to bridge the gap between empirical approaches and idealist concepts. As she awakes from her torpor, the objects from Louisa's old room first appear to her as strangely unfamiliar, as if they were "the shadows of a dream" (205). This expression efficiently conveys how removed these objects are from her consciousness initially: a dream by itself is elusive already but the shadows of a dream are only even more so. "[G]radually" though, "as the objects bec[o]me more real to her sight, the events bec[o]me more real to her mind" (*ibid.*). This parallelism correlates Louisa's "sight" and "mind" as the two words occupy the same position and grammatical function in the two similar sentence structures. The quotation thus seeks to merge the sphere of ideas with sensory experience. It is first through her senses that Louisa apprehends the reality of these objects; ultimately though, her knowledge of their existence is confirmed only by her mind, which appears to have the final say over their realness. Hence, Louisa here acts as a self-affirmative being whose perception of objects determines the ultimate confirmation of their existence. In a similar vein to Fichte's subjective idealism, the mental activity of the self, whose perception is at the source of all that is real, thus plays a central role in the interpretation of the world. This reading may better illuminate the apparition of objects as "the shadows of a dream." This expression indeed suggests that the objects found in Louisa's room have merged with the dream that she just had. As a result, material things do not exist independently here: they seem to have become subordinate to the mental, dreaming activity of the self.

Overall, my analyses demonstrate how *Hard Times* transcends the binary systems established by Schlicke: my previous paragraph reconciles the sense of touch with fancy, this latter the sense of sight with ideas.

The "marvelous truth[s]" Found in Dickens' Idealist Characterizations

In his article "'Hard Times' and Dicken's Concept of Imagination," Robert Higbie identifies a similar "compromise between imagination and realism":

> Evidently [Dickens] feels imagination is unconvincing if it is unrealistic, just as realism is unsatisfactory if it does not allow for imagination. He is trying to rescue imagination, to find a way for it to accommodate realism and yet continue to exist. (Higbie, 105)

Higbie offers a balanced vision of Dickensian literature that is quite evocative of Schiller's ambition for fair measure between the real and the ideal. The very peculiar characterizations of Dickens, I would argue, best illustrate Higbie's claim. David Masson was one of the first literary critics to draw attention to the simple characters of Dickens as he confronted them with the mixed characters of William Makepeace Thackeray. Masson associated Thackeray with "the real style of art" because his mixed characters, who could show both the good and the bad, reflected the complex and ambiguous personalities that humans in real life exhibit (Masson, 69). On the other hand, he associated Dickens' simple characters, who were either "thoroughly and ideally perfect" or "thoroughly and ideally detestable" with a superior and higher level of style which is "ideal" (Pykett, 66). In *Hard Times*, this type of characterizations serves a narrative purpose by building the antagonism between different characters: the social conflict between the rich and poor is for example recast through the conflictual relationship between the worker Stephen Blackpool—an ideally perfect character—and the industrialist Mr. Bounderby—an ideally detestable one; similarly, the conflict between the forces of fancy and utilitarianism is crystalized in the verbal confrontations between

the circus owner Mr. Sleary—ideally perfect—and the schoolmaster Mr. Gradgrind—ideally detestable until he partially redeems himself towards the end of the novel.

Bulwer, who defends the value of large generalities which according to him express more truths than what is merely individual or particular, wholly embraces these types found in Dickens' novels. The two men of letters shared a close friendship and entertained a great influence over each other, both in the intimate and professional spheres: Dickens, who "had, early and late, the highest admiration" for Bulwer's "genius," indeed named his last child Edward Bulwer Lytton Dickens, born in 1852, after his friend (Forster, 229). The final say that Bulwer had over the ending of *Great Expectations* (1861) is also quite notoriously known: it is only on the advice of his friend that Dickens changed the original unhappy ending of one of his most famous novels in favor of a more hopeful closure to Pip's relationship to Estella. The influence of Bulwer on Dickens is quite conspicuous throughout *Hard Times*; the members of Mr. Sleary's company for example all come to represent the same type of mankind simply through their peculiar walk:

> [b]oth Mr. Childers and Master Kidderminster walked in a curious manner; with their legs wide apart than the general run of men, and with a very known assumption of being stiff in the knees. This walk was common to all the male members of Sleary's company, and was understood to express, that they were always on horse-back. (37)

This image of men on horse-back—though they are so only in their imagination—simultaneously conveys the circus company's general aspiration to the spiritual realm of ideas and their reluctance against any utilitarian or materialist philosophy. Indeed, not only are their heads striving for more proximity with the sky—where Ideas are to be located according to Plato's allegory of the cave—as they mentally mount horses, but they also find their feet virtually lifted off and separated from the ground—hence from the empirical domain as well. The text itself points out to the fact that this walk is highly

unfamiliar ("than the general run of men"), which according to Bulwer paradoxically builds realism. Indeed "the rarer and more unfamiliar the situation of life in which the poet places his imagined character, the more in that character itself we must recognize . . . some marvelous truthfulness to human nature" (Bulwer, 316). Through such large types of mankind, Dickens thus hoped that the reader would understand the nature, the temperament and the disposition of his characters more rapidly and more effectively than any detailed portraits of them could have ever hoped to produce.

This block quotation allows me to introduce the capacity of language to manipulate reality. While idealism proves that our thoughts may change our perception of the appearances of reality, the words that we decide to use may also reflect these different views on the material world in which we live. Lewes himself brings brief attention to this linguistic issue when he condemns the majority of novelists for their "disregard of reality in conception and *in language*" (emphasis added) (Lewes, 1866, 637). Dickens falls short of this category as he strives to illustrate the mind-prism of language through his wordplays: while talking about the "walk" of the circus company, Dickens intentionally uses the expression "the general *run* of men" (emphasis added); while mentioning their "legs" and "knees," he refers to these men as "members" of Sleary's company. These syllepses, I would argue, may reflect the plurality of the possible ways to perceive reality. Quite paradoxically, they may also show us ways to connect together; as Garrett Stewart reveals in *The Deed of Reading*, words on a page are nothing more than "the sensed coming into place of a potentially shared thought" (Stewart, 62). Indeed, it is Dickens' insight on the circus company that ultimately prevails here, but readers are able to share that particular vision, not merely through images, but also through the author's consciously calculated choice of words.

We start to get a sense of how meticulously—and in fact linguistically—elaborate Dickens is on characterization. On the question of portraits, his style of writing resonates not only with Bulwer but also with the precepts of Hegel's aesthetics, namely that the artist must "portray the true features which express the inmost soul of the subject" so that they may "reproduce the subject in his universal character and enduring personality" (Hegel, 155). Indeed, Dickens transforms the disagreeable housekeeper of Mr. Bounderby into a type by attributing to her some unflattering physical traits that are meant to reflect her malevolent nature. Mrs. Sparsit's "Coriolanian style of nose and [] dense black eyebrows" are deeply characteristic of the old lady, who will "mak[e] her nose more Roman and her eyebrows more Coriolanian in the strength of her severity" (108). This last quotation directly associates the idiosyncratic appearance of the character with a personality trait, i.e. her harshness. For Hegel, perfect art is that which successfully expresses the soul of a subject through their external form; hence, it is intriguing to notice how Dickens metaphorically elevates Mrs. Sparsit into a piece of art, as if she were one of those artistic works valued by Hegel: "[r]egarded as a classical ruin, Mrs. Sparsit was an interesting spectacle" (220). The "interest" found in the observation of Mrs. Sparsit may come from the Ideal that she has come to represent as a universal and insightful type. Indeed, it is from such harmony between the outer and the inner, Hegel contends, that the ideal image of Truth ultimately emerges. Thus, Bulwerian and Hegelian readings of Dickens' characters highlight the imaginative extravaganza of these types, all the while turning them to realist personifications of emblematic truths found in human nature.

Nuancing the Nature of Illusions

Through these extravagantly unfamiliar characters and situations, *Hard Times* expresses the potential for fiction to embark their readers into a more pleasing illusionary

world. For Bulwer himself, the contemplation of general truths comes with the "desire to escape . . . out of this hard and narrow world in which we live" (Bulwer, 313). He contends that we come to the realm of fiction "to lose sight of the *particulars*" of our everyday life; according to Bulwer, the reader does "not want to see that real life, but its ideal image, in the fable-land of art" (*ibid.*). In his interpretation of *Hard Times*, Higbie goes against the position of Bulwer: he writes that Dickens "does not advocate escape from realism, much as he might like to. On the contrary, he concedes the need to accept reality" (Higbie, 105). I would tend to disagree with Higbie and maintain that on this question, Dickens aligns once again with his friend Bulwer. I would defend this position of mine first through the character of Louisa, who metafictionally echoes the reader's desire to escape reality through fiction: "[w]hat escape have I had from . . . realities that could be grasped?" (98). Through the use of the verb "grasp," this quotation ties back to the issue of empiricism, which needs to be complemented by idealism so that it may surpass the chains of material realities. Further in the novel, it is the narrator themselves who emphatically rejects pragmatic visions of life: "when romance is utterly driven out of [our] souls, and [we] and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of [us]" (154). It seems to me that Dickens promotes anything *but* the acceptation of reality mentioned by Higbie. Indeed, as the quotation ends on a hyperbolic allusion to death, the wolfish metaphor communicates the dangers of confronting the unidealness of reality. This standpoint highly reminisces Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In "The age of chivalry is gone," Burke defended imaginative and "pleasing illusions," which he thought the French Revolution, through its "new conquering empire of light and reason," was slowly tearing away (Burke, 13). That context in which Burke lived finds parallels with the time through which

Dickens wrote: a half-century later, it is not Enlightenment anymore but the Industrial Revolution that now spreads the philosophy of utilitarianism and represents the most active threat to the moral imagination. Without these imaginative illusions, Burke argued, men and women will be no different than animals, exposed in their "naked, shivering nature" (*ibid.*). This idea of nakedness comes back with Dickens through that "bare existence;" most importantly, Dickens reuses Burke's beastly metaphor through the animalization of disillusioned humans as wolves ("wolfish").

Defending the illusionary effects of idealism nonetheless demands the highest carefulness: while I will later defend the idealism of Stephen Blackpool, there exists a form of idealism—best represented by Mr. Bounderby—that is deceptively corruptive and that the next paragraphs will prove to be irreconcilable with realism. The OED defines an illusion as a "mental state involving the attribution of reality to what is unreal" (*OED*, "illusion, n.," 2.b.). The two characters reflect Dickens' important distinction between "illusion" and "delusion": while Stephen and Mr. Bounderby share the mental state mentioned by the OED definition, they ultimately fully diverge in their ability to reliably reconcile their mental visions with the circumstances of reality. The narrator of *Hard Times* invites the implied reader to "cultivate . . . the utmost graces of the fancies and affections, to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament," and as a conclusion to the novel, "to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart or infancy will wither up" (154, 274). These "adorn[ments]" and "ornament[s]" form an extended metaphor of decoration that already hint to the potential for idealism to disguise the appearances of reality. The one in question throughout these two quotations, however, is of an order that guarantees a certain honesty and faithfulness to reality. Dickens hints at this fidelity through an organic metaphor

("cultivat[ion]," "wither[ing]") that may support the idea that this idealizing process maintains a connection with Nature. With the "withering" of a decaying heart resurfaces the threat of death that has been encountered earlier through the wolfish metaphor; to idealize life therefore becomes an absolute necessity, a survival instinct almost. I would argue that this is where the distinction between the two kinds of idealism is to be drawn. Indeed, it seems that the motivations of the idealist conditions their ties to realism: on the one hand, the idealism of a deprived worker like Stephen Blackpool emerges from a profound and genuine distress that maintains its grip with the raw and harsh reality; on the other hand, the idealism of Mr. Bounderby is guided—or rather misguided—by nothing else than his personal self-interests.

Mr. Bounderby's Misguided Idealism

     When Lewes argued that the antithesis of realism was "not idealism, but Falsism," *this* is certainly the sort of distinction that he had in mind (Lewes, 1858). Let me present us with the ill-conceived idealism of Mr. Bounderby before turning to the more legitimate one of Stephen Blackpool. Discussing the work in his mills, Mr. Bounderby says that "[i]t's the pleasantest work there is, and it's the lightest work there is, and it's the best-paid work there is" (120) The three time repetition of the same noun through analogous sentence structures points to the idea that Mr. Bounderby is proactively trying to convince others as well as himself of his own lie about work; it is as if he is looking to force that narrative into everyone's heads through a hammering syntax. Moreover, the polyptoton of the conjunction of coordination "and" acts as a cue that he is overexaggerating and overdoing his positive picture of the work in the mills. The ill-conceived nature of Mr. Bounderby's idealism is even more conspicuous when it directly contradicts not merely the moral condition of his employees but scientific facts, notably on the issue of

"smoke[:] [t]hat's meat and drink to us. It's the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs" (119). This is the fourth time that Mr. Bounderby employs the superlative form, whose occurrences may serve to highlight the man's hyperbolic tone. In this latter case, however, calling his claim about smoke a hyperbole—which figure of thought at least has a foundation of truth to it—would be an understatement since it is in fact completely erroneous. All these figures of speech found in Mr. Bounderby's discourse show the way in which he comes to utilize language to manipulate reality according to his own interests. The quotation finally closes on a taint of dramatic irony, mainly concentrated in the use of the adverb "particularly," since the implied reader should know that smoke is *particularly* bad for the lungs. Dickens uses this adverb even less innocently when we notice its paronomasia with the word "particles," the matter of which smoke is made. This wordplay by Dickens thus again points out to the way in which terms may strategically and ideally disguise others: indeed, it seems as if Mr. Bounderby is trying to smother these pollution particles by replacing that term with another similar sounding one, i.e. "particularly." Thanks to his artful manipulation of language, Mr. Bounderby thus idealizes—or rather falsifies—reality in ways that can suit his industrial affairs.

These distortions of reality operated by Mr. Bounderby form together the "popular fictions of Coketown" (172). I would put forward that the "popular[ity]" enjoyed by Mr. Bounderby's fictions communicates his burdensome authority over the minds of Coketown, who, officially, are offered no alternative than to adhere to these prevailing yet ill-conceived myths. A fiction may be defined as "something that is imaginatively invented . . . as opposed to fact" (*OED*, "fiction, n.," 3.b.). Yet, I have had the occasion already to illustrate the possibility of a dialectical compromise between imagination and

realism. We should thereby know that fictions are not necessarily and automatically removed from reality, and that they may contain truths. The disadvantaging nuance when it comes to Mr. Bounderby's fictions, however, revolves around the narrator insisting at different moments that they are "very popular" (105). This recurrent adjective, I think, is key in understanding the distinction between misguided idealism and real idealism. A *popular* fiction is one that is "prevalent or current among the general public; generally accepted, commonly known" (*OED*, "popular, ajd.," 1.). This definition accommodates materialist or empirical modes of thinking, which acknowledge that which is *commonly* known and accessible by human sensual experience. As he tries to take the charge of the Hegelian "absolute ego [that] creates all of reality," Mr. Bounderby strives to spread and communicate *his own* knowledge of realities to the other minds of Coketown (Beiser, 35). No matter how successful he is in increasing the popularity of his fictions though, those are ultimately condemned to "falsism" since Mr. Bounderby is obviously no absolute mind. Mr. Bounderby's idealist approach is to be rejected not only from this perspective of Hegel's objective idealism but also from the one of Fichte's subjective idealism: indeed, these popular fictions are problematic in the fact that they accommodate the view and perspective of Mr. Bounderby only while disregarding the personal experience of any other subjective individual.

In a passage that ultimately illustrates his materialist disposition, Mr. Bounderby nonetheless acts in a similar way to the "self-assertive" being that we find in Fichte's theoretical explanation of subjective idealism (Lachs, 312):

> I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. I know the bricks of this town, and I know the works of this town, and I know the chimneys of this town, and I know the smoke of this town, and I know the Hands of this town. I know 'em all pretty well. They're all real. (224)

Mr. Bounderby opens his speech by reasserting his own identity. Through this preamble, he erects himself as the central and self-assertive being that will determine the existence of all the objects enumerated hereafter. The anaphor "I know" further posits him as the source of the comprehension of the world. While he thus operates like a subjective idealist, Mr. Bounderby ultimately gets stuck to the mere material level of objects: he sees nothing but the "bricks," "works," "chimneys," "smoke" and "Hands" of the town. Confirming his incapacity to see the ideal, he concludes with the affirmation that these things "[a]re all real." Ultimately, the essential quality that Mr. Bounderby lacks is one that is central for Fichte: namely creativity, which is but "the use of imagination or original ideas to create something" (*Oxford Languages*, "creativity, n."). Incapable of the inventiveness which alone can give shape to ideals, Mr. Bounderby cannot produce a convincing picture of life—only an incomplete one that remains chained to material realities.

   Perhaps the most noteworthy example of Mr. Bounderby's ill-conceived idealism is the one of his "social climbing." Born in a wealthy and caring family, Mr. Bounderby lies about the modesty of his origins so that he may perpetuate the myth that he is a self-made man. The detestability of the character thus unceasingly grows from the imposter type that he comes to embody. Dickens' satirical caricature of Mr. Bounderby is quite politically engaged as it aims to criticize the wide-spread contemporaneous concept of self-help, which will later come to be best crystallized and explained in Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859). Smiles, just like most of the members of the Liberal Party, advertised self-fashioning through a rhetoric of self-reliance and industriousness. In other words, they optimistically believed that Victorians could improve their social condition if they strove hard enough to improve themselves first. This concept of self-fashioning has been

critically developed by modern scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980). At the beginning of this work, Greenblatt elaborates on the "general power to control identity" by arguing that "the fashioning of human identity [has become] a manipulable, artful process" (Greenblatt 1, 2). Dickens himself was already critical of that idea as he denounces the shamefully fraudulent aspect of Mr. Bounderby's self-fashioned reputation. Indeed, the narrator detects the imposturous character as "the Bully of humility, who had built his windy reputation upon lies, and [whose] boastfulness had put the honest truth as far away from him" (243). This quotation virulently attacks Mr. Bounderby through a degrading periphrasis ("the Bully of humility") that emphasizes the fake modesty of those pretending to be self-made men. Dickens indeed highlights how these people manage to cheat humility through the following paradox: while explicitly claiming modesty through their humble origins, they also implicitly boast themselves by leaving the suggestion that they owe their success to their merits only. For a man that is obsessed with the material level of realities, it is furthermore intriguing to see something as immaterially abstract as his reputation being described in terms of materiality, i.e. through the element of air. It is quite as if Mr. Bounderby is trying to make that element into material and hard facts. The narrator indeed mentions the "wind[iness]" of his reputation, which well conveys the void on which Mr. Bounderby has developed his success story. Finally, the quotation correlates the imposter's idealism with Lewes' "falsism" when they affirm his removal from "honest truth." By caring to underline that Mr. Bounderby's ill-conceived idealism is not reconcilable with realism, the narrator seems to suggest that other forms of idealism might be.

Stephen Blackpool's Real Idealism

The more valid and credible form of idealism is best represented by Stephen Blackpool. In the examination of the character of Stephen, I will argue that it is primarily through Lewisian sympathy that Dickens comes to reconcile realism with idealism. Throughout the novel, Stephen naturally attracts the implied reader to empathize with the moral and social precariousness of his condition. Misunderstood and overlooked by both his employer and his union, the character stands out as a misfit. I have had the occasion already to illustrate the antipathy of Mr. Bounderby towards his workers. As for the laboring group, Stephen gets ostracized from it as soon as he starts to disagree with their leader Slackbridge. Through the negative picture of these turbulent agitators, Dickens avoids taking clear sides on contemporary issues such as the recent conflict between Chartists and Parliament. Although he is known for his sympathy towards the working classes, Dickens strives for the most complete and panoramic picture of political life by offering criticism of both thriving industrialists and struggling trade unions. As he is let down by his co-workers, Stephen "fall[s] into the loneliest of lives, the life of solitude among a familiar crowd" (136). This paradox accentuates the social isolation in which Stephen finds himself despite being surrounded by his peers. Indeed, from the antithesis between the words "solitude" and "crowd" further emerges the deep sense of seclusion experienced by Stephen. Yet, one prominent figure maintains their sympathy with the character: the narrator themselves.

To offer glimpses into the "internal" and "emotional life" of the subject is fundamental for Lewes (Lewes, 1858, 494). Through the energy of emotional sympathy, the narrator of *Hard Times* faithfully expresses the inner-life of Stephen Blackpool. Before diving the implied reader into the interiority of the character, the narrator explicitly declares this

purpose of theirs: "what more he was, or what else he had *in* him, if anything, let him show for himself" (65) (emphasis added). The preposition "in" confirms the ambition of surpassing the merely external circumstances of Stephen's existence in order to present more of his inner-life. By allowing Blackpool to "show [his internal life] for himself," the novel claims some realism to it: Dickens indeed makes sure to erase any deforming filters between the character and the implied reader so that the voice of such misfits can be as unmediated and as audible as possible. This realism is complemented by idealism since it is Stephen's subjective and poetic interpretation of reality that we are granted access to.

The interiority of Stephen is conveyed through two narrative techniques, which are free indirect discourse and interior monologue. In both techniques, the narrator erases himself so that the consciousness of the character may emerge more freely and clearly. After facing disappointment from both his wife and his employer, Stephen sinks into the stream of his thoughts. The man finds himself so desperate that he at one point thinks to himself: "O! Better to have no home in which to lay his head, than to have a home and dread to go to it" (79). Although the narrator takes this speech in charge, it is clear from the exclamatory mark of desperation "O!" that it is from Stephen's mind that this bleak reflection comes. The thoughts of the character are then once again communicated through free indirect discourse: "[t]he wind? True. It was blowing hard. Hark to the thundering in the chimney, and the surging noise! To have been out in such a wind, and not to have known it was blowing!" (81). This quotation about the unnoticed presence of the wind is charged with meaning when compared to the "wind[iness]" of Mr. Bounderby's reputation. The humble, discreet and quiet worker is accompanied in his walk home by the rage of elemental forces while the loud and boastful industrialist is

associated with calmer windy air. The comparison between the two passages shelters

further irony: a materialist Mr. Bounderby must forcefully invoke an absent wind through

the use of figurative language; meanwhile, a less materialist Stephen is the one that is

naturally surrounded by this material presence of wind while completely overlooking it.

This quotation indeed shows Stephen to have been so profoundly engaged in the act of

thinking to the point where he had for a moment lost grip and connection with the

surrounding physical environment. The insistence on the "hard" "blowing" of "such a

wind", "the thundering" and "the surging noise" aims to convey how meditative Stephen

must have been for him not to have sensually perceived these raging elements. Ultimately,

ideas thus seem to represent a realm of their own—the realm of thoughts—through which

one may escape the world of materiality for a brief and temporary moment.

Finding relief in this break from tangible reality, Stephen hence keeps "thinking and

thinking, and brooding and brooding" (79). The repetition of the conjunction of

coordination "and" reflects the cycling movement of the act of thinking; this polyptoton

further portrays Stephen falling into a Wordsworthian abyss of idealism as he gets lost in

the cycle of his thoughts. A lengthy paragraph filled with the anaphor "[h]e thought of"

thus dramatizes the interior monologue going on in Stephen's head:

> [h]e thought of the home he might at that moment have been seeking
> with pleasure and pride; of the different man he might have been that
> night; of the lightness then in his now heavy-laden breast; of the then
> restored honour, self-respect, and tranquility all torn to pieces. He
> thought of the waste of the best part of his life, of the dreadful nature of
> his existence . . . He thought of Rachael . . . He thought of the number
> of girls and women she had seen grow up around her . . . (79, 80).

Besides the anaphors, the several zeugmas introduced by the preposition "of" add an

accumulative effect to this heavy paragraph. Stephen thus ultimately appears to be

exceedingly overwhelmed by all these passing ideas. The primary cause behind such an

agitated and unpeaceful internal life is regrets: we indeed see Stephen lingering on his past and rehashing what could have been. The interior monologue thus appears as the narrative technique that best unveils the internal states of characters.

Dickens shows such thoughts and ideas as playing a central role in our perception of reality. Stephen is much too "[f]illed with these thoughts—so filled that he ha[s] an unwholesome sense of growing larger, of being placed in some new and diseased relations towards the objects among which he passe[s]" (80). While the objects themselves have remained the same, the relations that the character entertains with them did change after his brooding. Dickens' interest for idealism comes precisely with this capacity that thoughts have—just like language itself—of influencing our perception of material objects. Thinking has opened to Stephen a new perspective on life, one that is more full and complete since he gets this "sense of growing larger." Ultimately, Stephen has widened his scope on reality by analyzing the circumstances of his life and recognizing the individual place that he fills in this world and the personal role that he plays in it. This shrinking movement towards his own subjectivity is interesting in that, quite paradoxically, it ultimately opens a door towards a larger and more faithful perspective on life. We may conclude that Truth, as Lewes would also argue, is to be found not in the objective observation of external reality but in the internal life of subjective beings.

As a result, the subjectivity of characters often contributes to shaping the diegetic world of *Hard Times*. Dickens allows his characters to express their poetic ways of seeing things—although it is obviously *his* own poetry that is at work ultimately—through fancy and imagination, which may attribute ideal forms to objects. Hippolyte Taine also recognizes this close relationship between characters and objects, whose descriptions become quite dependent on the subjectivity of their perceivers; Taine indeed notices that

"[i]nanimate things take the color of the thoughts of [Dicken's] personages" (Taine, 221). After being ostracized by his co-workers, Stephen heads for "the red brick castle of the giant Bounderby" (137). These two metaphors, which arise from the internal focalization on Stephen, mobilize the imaginary of a fairy tale. Matching Mr. Bounderby to a "giant" conveys his imposing and threatening personality while his ownership of a "castle" well communicates the power of the industrialist. Comparing this passage with Stephen's own sense of growing bigger with his thoughts once again highlights the role played by language in the manipulation of reality. Blackpool has also become a "giant" in some way, but Dickens voluntarily reserves the negative connotation of that term for Mr. Bounderby. The recurrent metaphor of illuminated factories as "fairy palaces" is another way in which the characters of *Hard Times* collectively idealize life (65). This embellishment of reality ties back to the narrator's call for workers to "beautify their lives of machinery" if they want to survive in this society (274). This process of idealization is quite arresting in the fact that it involves a striking gap between the fantastical splendor of the ideal image, viz. fairy palaces, and the bleakness of the actual place, viz. factories. These ironical gaps are even more conspicuous when conflicting points of view collide with each other: "Mrs. Sparsit considered herself, in some sort, the Bank Fairy. The townspeople who, in their passing and repassing, saw her there, regarded her as the Bank Dragon keeping watch over the treasures of the mine" (107). The contradicting visions of the two fanciful creatures through the same person further draws on the imagery of the folklore genre. However, this quotation brings to light the possible existence of conflicts between subjective perspectives. Whereas Mrs. Sparsit likes to think herself highly as a "Bank Fairy," most Coketowners defiantly regard her as a "Bank Dragon." Ultimately, the important question is not to argue over which of the two ideal images is the most

accurate to the objective reality, but which one is truer to the subjectivity of the current observer. As he rejects the supreme authority of Gradgrindian facts, Dickens aspires for a society in which different perspectives may co-exist without constantly accusing each other of being removed from reality. Dickens does not shy away from portraying these different, illusory worlds in which we live because however fantasized they may be, he understands that they are always susceptible of revealing some truths and instructive new ways to consider the circumstances of life.

The Fetters of Disorganized Fancy

Yet, ideals reveal themselves to be unsatisfactory throughout the novel. Whereas characters may succeed in freeing themselves from the chains of material realities, they ultimately fail in relishing in the ideal, making *Hard Times* one of the very few Dickensian novel with an unhappy ending. I would argue that the dissatisfaction on which the book ends owes to a lack of what it was criticizing in the very first place: namely, materialism. Despite being an idealist, Hegel himself would emphasize the importance for ideals to unfold into external existence. By dismissing all forms of materiality, *Hard Times* seems to neglect the sensuous expression of ideas. In his article "Fettered Fancy in *Hard Times*," David Sondstroem picks up on the fact that "fancy is decidedly fettered . . . because the forces of Fancy are so confused [that] there is no clear, attractive alternative to the Facts of Gradgrindism" (Sondstroem, 529). I would argue that this confusion and vagueness around the forces of fancy are due to a problem of abstractedness. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel contends that the Ideal must be "lifted above and opposed to [abstract] universality, as living individuality" so that it may become "free" (Hegel, 156). If ideas remain restricted to the spiritual realm exclusively and fail to coincide with

some outer forms, these forces of fancy will remain "fettered" since all we end up with is a vast mass of immaterially abstract concepts that cannot satisfy anyone.

The character of Louisa, in her desperate lack of creativity, best illustrates this inability to move beyond abstraction towards concreteness. Eager of expressing her fancy, yet incapable of the inventiveness that it requires, there is in her "a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow" (17). The "light" and the "fire" within Louisa both symbolize her desire to emancipate herself from the darkness of utilitarianism's moral ignorance through the more enlightening path of imaginative fancies. From there, the central issue that the character faces is the lack of any external existence that could support her ideals; indeed, the light is shown to have no concrete surface to shine upon and the fire no combustible material that could help develop and maintain it. Further demonstrating this impossibility for her to imagine sensuous forms that may match her ideals, Louisa "unconsciously close[s] her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly open[s] it as though she were releasing dust or ash" (98). The disappointing contrast between the "solid[ity]" of the imagined object and the "dust or ash" that she mentally ends up with communicates to the reader Louisa's sense of defeat against the hold that the Gradgrindian school maintains on her. Although the characters of *Hard Times* may occasionally succeed in freeing themselves from the chains of material realities, fancy ultimately remains fettered because ideals fail to unfold into the external appearances of Coketown, whose landscape and situation ultimately remain unchanged in the end.

I would conclude that *Hard Times* presents us with a complete yet highly ambivalent picture of reality. The primary ambition of the novel lies in its rejection of utilitarianism, whose facts problematically cloud the ambivalent nature of life. As a result, Dickens

distances himself from an objective kind of idealism because, for him, Truth lies not in overhead omniscience but in plurality. This plurality strives towards a completeness of representation by endorsing all the various subjective consciousnesses that exist out there in the world. The novel thus embraces idealism by turning away from the purely external and commonly-known appearances of the material world to focus more on the different illusory worlds in which the characters actively participate through their ideals. Despite this spectrum of illusions, Dickens brilliantly achieves a dialectical compromise between realism and the imagination: potentially influenced by his friend Bulwer, he boldly portrays extravagant types that contain recognizable truths to humankind. Furthermore, the novel manages to merge empirical thought with idealist thinking through the extremely unique condition of Louisa Gradgrind. Ultimately though, the unsatisfactory ending of the novel points towards a failure in the maintenance of the Schillerian balance between the real and the ideal. By lacking in creativity, the characters not only lose sight with the circle of the sensuous but also all hope of thriving on fanciful ideas, which remain fettered as long as they do not unfold into external reality. In the end and overall, imagination is condemned to remain a mere, ephemeral escape from the chains of material realities.

CHAPTER 2:

CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S *SHIRLEY* – A MANIFESTO ON THE RIGHT TO BE A
"ROMANTIC FOOL"

what a dreaming fool she was; what an unpractical life she
led; how little fitness there was in her for ordinary
intercourse with the ordinary world
—Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849)

Ideals, as we have seen well enough from Dickens' novel, can take various shapes and forms—influencing one's perception of reality in the meantime. A comparison between *Hard Times* and *Shirley* may verify this rule even directly outside of the realm of fiction as the ideological tendencies of Charlotte Brontë remarkably differ from Dickens' own set of beliefs. Although both express concerns for the plight of workers in their social-problem novels, it does not necessarily mean that the two writers align politically. Brontë's Tory view indeed opposes Dickens' sympathies with socialism. Contrary to popular belief, Brontë expressed pessimism towards social reforms; in a letter to W.S. William, she comments vehemently on Chartist demonstrations—one of which failed to march on Parliament on the 10th of April 1848—by saying that "an ill-advised movement has been judiciously repressed" (Rogers, 161). However different the social messages that they contain might be, *Shirley*, just like *Hard Times*, dialectically combines idealism with realism to defend and promote a particular stance on society. I will argue throughout this chapter that Brontë's idealism links the misery of workers together with the distress of many women. The novel indeed addresses not only the condition of England question but also the Woman Question[19]. This chapter will depart from Lewes' criticism of

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[19] The Woman Question refers to a large debate on women's place in society. In Victorian England, many scholars interrogated the political and legal rights of the female sex, which craved for its access to education as well as its emancipation from constraining domestic roles.

Brontë's writing to illustrate the sexist dynamics at stake in the literary circles of late Romanticism: tired of being condemned for romantic excess, Brontë denounces through *Shirley* the double standard in which men who use their imagination are recognized as genius poets while women who do the same are immediately discredited as romantic, dreaming fools. Through the critical reconsideration of what is egoistically considered as "real experience," I will be able to bridge the gaps between fiction and reality while highlighting the role that imagination plays in the process of life-writing. As Brontë correlates enlightenment principles, such as utilitarianism or empiricism, with the social upheavals taking place in *Shirley*, we will see that it is once again through the dialectical combination of realism and idealism that the peaceful promising Schillerian balance is restored and that the attack on French rational imperialism is led.

The Role Played by George Henry Lewes in the Composition of *Shirley*

George Henry Lewes had a great influence on the writing style of Brontë by stimulating in her the ambition of merging the real with the ideal throughout *Shirley*. In his review of *Jane Eyre*, Lewes complimented the authoress for uniting her "faculty for objective representation" with "a strange power of subjective representation" (Lewes, 1847, 693). He had found in her style "the power also of connecting external appearances with internal effects—of representing the psychological interpretation of material phenomena." These observations positively encouraged Brontë to continue to apply these very Lewisian—and somewhat Hegelian—principles in her second novel, *Shirley*. The review however contains one negative critique, which alone made a deep impression on the novelist: Lewes deplores in *Jane Eyre* an abundance of "melodrama and improbability" (Lewes, 1847, 692). This comment became the primary subject of the correspondence which initiated between the two. In a letter written on the 4th of January

1848, Brontë assures Lewes that "if [she] ever do[es] write another book, [she] think[s] [she] will have nothing of what [he] call[s] melodrama" (Gary, 529). The radicality of this promise demonstrates how stung Brontë was by Lewes' remark on the romantic excess of her first novel. The vexation of the novelist may have been exacerbated by the close relationship that her melodramatic style entertains with her own personality and temperament.

Repressing melodrama was particularly difficult for Brontë since for her it meant restraining a faculty to which she was personally attached, i.e. her creative imagination. Brontë indeed shared with Dickens this passion in creativity; in a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey, she mentions "the dreams that absorb [her], and the fiery imagination that at times eats [her] up" (Smith, 144). Because she is not always able to express it, Brontë describes the overflowing of her imagination almost as a painful experience, susceptible of burning her through its "fiery" quality. The sake of verisimilitude—as promoted by Lewes' review for example—pressured Brontë into such distressful containments of her imagination. Before reading Lewes' review, Brontë did not mind if melodrama made her works seem improbable because expressing her emotional intensity mattered more to her. Franklin Gary offers a definition that helps to grasp and understand the full extent of Brontë's attachment to the one thing criticized by Lewes: "[t]o Charlotte Brontë melodrama meant the creation of startling incidents and situations which she could live through in imagination to compensate for the lack of excitement in her own life – a kind of wish-fulfillment" (Gary, 540). Renouncing melodrama, therefore, was not merely a formal matter of changing her writing style; for Brontë it also involved a deeper level of self-suppression.

Although difficult to accept, Brontë did receive the criticism of Lewes and resolved to follow his advice in her next novel. On the 6th of November 1847, she responded to the review on *Jane Eyre* in exactly these terms:

> [y]ou warn me to beware of melodrama, and you exhort me to adhere to the real. When I first began to write, so impressed was I with the truth of the principles you advocate, that I determined to take Nature and Truth as my sole guides, and to follow their very footprints; I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement. (Gary, 523)

The three verbs on which the quotation ends all connote the idea of self-suppression while pointing towards the novelist's attempt to temper the subjectivity of her poetic visions. Brontë executes this resolution of hers right in the opening of *Shirley*:

> If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning (5).

This introductory note officially serves as a warning from the narrator to their reader. However, its extradiegetic resonance makes it sound more like a desperate attempt on the part of the authoress herself to appeal to her critics. The quoted passage is structured around two parts—between expectations and actuality. Polyptotons, whose accumulative effect reflects the overflowing of the imagination involved in "sentiment, and poetry and reverie [as well as in] passion, and stimulus, and melodrama" run throughout the first part. The absence of such polyptotons in the second part of the quotation formerly contrasts the "lowly standards" with the previous enumerations; the juxtaposition of the adjectives "real" and "cool" confers even a rough, hammering tone to the last sentence, thereby conveying the "unromantic" mood that the text announces. Most interestingly, the promise of something "solid" ties the novel to a hard-headed empirical practicality. How is it possible, one might wonder, to defend any idealist reading of *Shirley* after

having read these opening lines? Although she tries to drown it in a pragmatically realist framework, the passionate expression of Brontë's subjectivity quickly resurfaces, notably through the two female protagonists.

The Autobiographical Function of Caroline Helstone

Social Alienation as a Burden of Creative Imagination

The abortive self-restraint of the authoress' romanticism is embodied in the autobiographical character of Caroline Helstone. Like Brontë herself, Caroline is overwhelmed with sentimentality while being also similarly called by society to repress her overflow of feelings. It is during a tea party with the curates and the Sykes family that Miss Helstone starts to "fe[e]l her ignorance and incompetency" (107). In this episode, during which she finds herself unable to express an opinion on a topic in which everyone else around her is participating, Caroline realizes "what a dreaming fool she was; what an unpractical life she led; how little fitness there was in her for ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world." The repetitions found in this free indirect discourse—first of a syntax structure and then of the word "ordinary"—show a ruminating Caroline who cannot help but beat herself up over her emotional intensity. It is the contact and direct confrontation with worldly society that triggers this shame in the protagonist, whose Byronism mirrors that of Brontë herself. The previously quoted letter from Brontë to Ellen Nussey in fact ended on a similar note of cynicism: "if you knew my thoughts, the dreams that absorb me, and the fiery imagination that at times eats me up, *and makes me feel society, as it is, wretchedly insipid*" (emphasis added) (Smith, 144). The apposition "as it is" evokes a contrast with how society *could be* imaginatively. Brontë notices the blandness of society the most when she forces herself to look at it in a pragmatical manner. It is only when she allows herself to adopt a more poetic view that she finds alternate and more interestingly

exciting ways to consider it. Ariella Bechhofer Brown claims that this letter to Nussey reveals the novelist as a "romantic artist, consumed by the fire of imagination which alienates her from society" (Brown, 1). This social alienation is similarly noticeable in Caroline Helstone, who is "slow to make fresh acquaintance" and "indisposed for common gossip" (197, 382). There is notably one event that accelerates this social alienation of the heroine: her eighteenth anniversary.

A Transitionary Time for Both

   At the beginning of the novel, Caroline is passing through a significant stage of her life as she is just coming of age. Her birthday precipitates her status of social misfit since she becomes an adult that is still attached to the illusions of youth. The narrator indeed distinguishes adulthood from childhood on the basis of one's demystified vision on life:

> Caroline Helstone was just eighteen years old; and at eighteen the true narrative of life is yet to be commenced. Before that time, we sit listening to a tale, a marvellous fiction; delightful sometimes, and sad sometimes; almost always unreal. Before that time, our world is heroic; its inhabitants half-divine or semi-demon; its scenes are dream-scenes (94).

The block quotation opens on an extended metaphor of life as a literary work: before the age of eighteen, life is to be associated to a "tale" or a "marvellous fiction" while "the *true* narrative of life" commences only after that anniversary. The narrator adds that "[a]t that time – at eighteen, drawing near the confines of illusive, void dreams, Elf-land lies behind us, the shores of Reality rise in front." The same transition from enchanted childhood to practical adulthood is expressed here, this time through a geographical metaphor. The whole passage seems highly critical of romantic views on life as the narrator emphasizes the irreconcilable gap between reality and fancy once adulthood is entered. That position, which is thoroughly surprising for a writer as romantically passionate as Brontë, once again highlights her efforts to resolve Lewes' criticism on her

melodramatic excess. As Nicholas Shrimpton puts it, the narrative voice of *Shirley* "is that of Brontë – or, more precisely, of Charlotte Brontë unsuccessfully trying not to sound like herself" (Shrimpton, 326). Several inconsistencies consequently emerge from a discordance between the diegetic level—where Brontë reveals her creative imagination—and that of fictional mediation—where she rechannels that romantic subjectivity to appeal more to her critics. This lack of coherence will later allow me to requestion the dichotomy that the narrator has forcefully established thus far between practically real experience and fanciful imagination.

While Caroline goes through this transitionary period, the years in which *Shirley* was written incidentally coincide with a period of significant change and self-growth in Charlotte Brontë's both personal life and writing career. The popularity of her first novel faced the novelist with several critical reviews, with some affecting her more than others; the questioning provoked by one of Lewes' comments has proven this fact already. An even more difficult event to face for Brontë was the loss of her siblings. Charlotte saw Branwell, Emily and Anne die at an interval of only eight months, a period which saw the interruption of the writing of *Shirley*. All these marking events highlight the years 1847 – 1849 as a time of transitional growth for Brontë. During this period, she confesses to Miss Wooler that

> [she] ha[s] now outlived youth; and, though [she] dare[s] not say that
> [she] ha[s] outlived all its illusions—that the romance is quite gone
> from life—the veil fallen from truth, and that [she] see[s] both in naked
> reality—yet, certainly, many things are not what they were ten years
> ago (Shorter, 265).

In this letter dated from March 1848, Brontë corelates her maturity with a partial detachment from her romantic imagination. The quotation thus contains zeugmas that oppose romance to life; by noting the existence of this gap, Brontë proves awareness and

contends that she is not just a naive victim to the charms of illusions. Rather, in what can be considered as a political act of rebellion, Brontë *consciously* renounces to "see both in naked reality," following Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In a society that repudiates female artists, Brontë provocatively determines to make her creative visions even more conspicuous throughout *Shirley*.

The Obstructions to the Female Expression of Romantic Subjectivity

In reality, it is less her emotional intensity than her condition as a woman that gets Caroline into conflict with the rest of society. Brontë's social protest denounces precisely this inability for women to express their imaginative capacity without automatically being discredited as dreaming, romantic fools. Throughout her writing career, Brontë had experienced firsthand the unfair existence of this sexist prejudice, especially in the very masculine circles of English Romanticism, whose poets "wrote from a male perspective which excluded women from the center of the Romantic experience" (Brown, 2). This gender bias even encouraged Brontë to publish her novels under the androgenous name of Currer Bell, her male persona. Brown identifies "women[, who] are subordinate to the masculine center of Romantic texts," "[a]s objects rather than subjects of poetry" (Brown, 18). Indeed, only male writers can embody the "sublime power of the true artist" while the "female" is associated to the depreciating attributes of "receptivity, passivity [and] softness" (Battersby, 91). Throughout *Shirley*, Brontë makes this gender discrimination particularly conspicuous through the experience of Caroline Helstone.

I would put forward that Caroline's resolute obstinacy in expressing her romantic subjectivity reflects Brontë's objection to the placement of women within Romanticism as defined by the male poets. Throughout the narrative, Caroline is encouraged into sedentary tasks, such as reading and sewing, by the people in charge of her education, i.e.

her uncle Mr. Helstone and her cousin Hortense Moore. Rather than remaining the mere receiver of passive occupations, Caroline eventually rebels herself by looking for a position as a governess despite her uncle's disapprobation. This newly claimed agency proves the observation made by Brown on the heroines of Brontë's novels, who "are not merely passive female others but speaking subjects who are granted a voice with which they express their own Romanticism" (Brown, 20). For Caroline, voicing this Romantic subjectivity of hers thus becomes an empowering act of self-assertion. Caroline asserts herself as a woman for example when she complains about the way in which her sex is forced into "a sense of their own incapacity" by being offered "no earthly employment, but household work and sewing" (369, 370). She then suggests that society "give[s] [women] scope and work," "a field in which their faculties may be exercised and grow" so that they finally have "an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvrer, the mischief-making tale-bearer" (371). This last expression denounces the double standard in which men who use their imagination are recognized as genius poets while women who do the same are immediately discredited as rambling daydreamers.

Brontë sheds more light on this issue in a metafictional—perhaps metapoetical in this case—passage that is directly concerned with literary works. Caroline and Shirley share a Romantic sensibility that enables them to bond over the poetry of William Cowper. As they engage in a common reading of "The Castaway," Shirley conceives that few "men or women have the right taste in poetry: the right sense for discriminating between what is real and what is false" (212). Through its use of the word "discriminating," this thought from Shirley seems to question the authority of influential men of letters, who may be granted "the right taste in poetry" just on behalf of their male gender. Most importantly, the quotation interrogates the distinctions made between "what is real and what is false"

in literary works. By reconsidering that boundary, Brontë slowly works towards the dialectical compromise between creative imagination and reality. During the reading of Cowper's poem, Shirley argues that "nobody should write poetry to exhibit intellect or attainment. Who cares for that sort of poetry? Who cares for learning – who cares for fine words in poetry? And who does not care for feeling – real feeling – however simply, even rudely expressed?" (214). Shirley's defiance against a utilitarian conception of poetry resounds deeply with *Hard Times'* objection to an education imbued by pragmatism. The emphasizing of "real feeling" between two dashes, which may be seen as an oxymoron for the most practical minds, further insists on the reconciliation between sensibility and reality. By juxtaposing the two words, Brontë seeks to legitimize the Romantic experience of the female sex, whose subjective feelings are not as disconnected from the ground of experience as some social prejudices make them appear to be.

Testing the Boundaries between Fiction and Reality

Real Experience Creating Gulfs between Minds

Several other metafictional passages contained in *Shirley* seek to interrogate the relationship between fiction and reality. Throughout their analyses, I will argue that it is less a gap between two ontological levels than a gulf existing between minds that the novel portrays. In his study on the panoramic nature of *Shirley*, Shrimpton claims that Brontë "constructs her novel as a debate or encounter between Romantic and Enlightenment values" (Shrimpton, 338). A "debate" seems like an accurate word to mention these clashes since they occur primarily through dialogues. Caroline, who defends her poetic vision on life, is at the center of all those heated discussions. When Mrs. Yorke condemns the romantic sensibility of Miss Helstone, she blames her fondness of books by saying that the "bookish, romancing chit of a girl['s]" ideas are "better suited

to a novel-heroine than to a woman who is to make her way in the real world, by dint of common sense" (382, 380). Mrs. Yorke not only points to a disparity between the ideal of romance and reality, she also imposes a unique vision on and experience of life, one that is guided by "common sense." This one way of viewing life promoted by Mrs. Yorke is at the source of dissention since it tyrannically oppresses the other, more romantic visions on life. Through this verbal confrontation, the Burkean Brontë posits reason as a political threat to peace and social harmony. As Burke argued, it is imagination that binds society together; once that faculty is abandoned, there remains nothing but conflicting points of view—all put under pressure by the one tyrannical authority of Reason.

Mrs. Pryor, who condemns the illusions of love and marriage as circulated by novels for being deceptive, also finds herself on the side of Enlightenment. She responds to her daughter's romantic vision on love and marriage by condemning novels for "the false pictures [that] they give of those subjects" (358). "[Romances] are not like reality," Mrs. Pryor says, "they show [] only the green tempting surface of the marsh, and give not one faithful or truthful hint of the slough underneath." According to Mrs. Pryor and contrary to what romances suggest, love always perishes, transforming itself into torture, and marriages are "never wholly happy" (359). The discourse of the old governess is based on her personal experience as she reveals the unhappy ending of her own marriage. She thus concludes that "all *facts* go to prove what [she] say[s]." Her intonational emphasis on the italicized word "facts" likens her to the utilitarian personality of Mr. Gradgrind. This empirical reliance on experience, which is ultimately but a chain of accidental events, prevents Mrs. Pryor from transcending stultifying reality.

Given the contingent nature of the life circumstances that shape our experience, I would put forward that Truth is accessible through imagination rather than through real

experience. The life of Mrs. Pryor being but the mere result of unfortunate circumstances, she cannot use her experience—no matter how lived and real it is—to illustrate a gap with fiction. Brontë expresses similar skepticism against real experience in one of her letters to Lewes, after he had advised her "not to stray far from the ground of experience [for] [she] become[s] weak when [she] enter[s] the region of fiction":

> is not the real experience of each individual very limited? And, if a writer dwells upon that solely or principally, is he not in danger of repeating himself, and also of becoming an egoist? Then, too, imagination is a strong restless faculty, which claims to be heard and exercised (Smith, 559).

Since our experience of life is limited to the hazardous situations in which we—and only *we*—find ourselves, Brontë advocates the need for imagination, which faculty can grant us access to a more complete picture of reality by helping us to transcend the limits imposed by our own and personal experience. Fiction, which enables us to live other lives than merely our own, then becomes the best means of access to Truth.

This observation allows us to displace that gap established between fiction and reality to a gulf that ultimately exists merely between minds. During her conversation with Mrs. Pryor, Caroline remarks that the governess "echo[es] [her] uncle's words" (359). Mr. Helstone indeed speaks scornfully of marriage too because of his bad experience with it: he mistreated his wife, Mary Cave, who ended up dying of illness. On reviewing and repeating her uncle's sentiments on marriage, Caroline "sound[s] the gulf between her own mind and his" (99). This conscious awareness of the existence of differently-shaped minds, filled by thoughts so contradicting that they may be figuratively conceived as being separated by gulfs, ties Brontë's work to the philosophy of idealism. The quotation indeed portrays the central role played by consciousness and subjective ideas in the different interpretations of reality that we all have. To conclude here, Brontë works

towards the merging of fiction with reality by reconsidering real experience; rather than endowing it with synthetic power, she sheds light on its limited aspect and thereby concedes the need for imagination. While the former creates a gulf between minds, the latter may bind society together.

Life as a Tale

As the subtitle of *Shirley: A Tale* may suggest, Brontë seeks to reconcile the fanciful universe of tales and romances with the more serious and grave reality that the other novels of her time usually deal with. In his article, Shrimpton identifies *Shirley* as an "an *intellectual* as well as a social panorama": while it emphasizes the need for realism at the beginning, the novel ends on a characteristically Romantic tone, filled with fairies and other folkloric elements (Shrimpton, 340) (emphasis added). The peculiar opening of *Shirley* brings us "back to the beginning of this century" (5). Brontë indeed sets the action of her narrative in the years 1811– 1812, a time marked by several historical events. This realist framework of the novel is fostered by several references to both the external and internal politics of England at that time. Brontë hints at the Napoleonic wars but also at the Luddite riots—protests by workers who targeted machines for fear of losing their jobs due to mechanization. Most importantly, the narrator recounts this harsh period of British history without an ounce of idealization. They describe a time of "crisis" by stressing all the "[d]istress," "suffer[ing]" and "[m]isery" that were caused by "[w]ar" and "famine" (29, 30). This documented setting constitutes a solid ground—or background—on which Brontë may feel freer to develop her creative imagination.

As Brontë complements her romantic subjectivity with a realist form, more credibility may be granted to the poetic visions of the former. Rather than polarizing realism and imagination, the novel thus smoothly and naturally transitions from one to the other. In a

utilitarian society that rejects everything non-pragmatic, Martin Yorke is forced to seclude himself in the middle of the forest of Briarmains when he wants to read his "contraband volume of Fairy tales" (531). As he opens its pages, a metalepsis creates ambiguities between the diegetic level of *Shirley* and the metafictional level of the fairy tale:

> [h]e reads: he is led into a solitary mountain region; all round him is rude and desolate, shapeless, and almost colourless. He hears bells tinkle on the wind; forth-riding from the formless folds of the mist, dawns on him the brightest vision – a green-robed lady, on a snow-white palfrey; he sees her dress, her gems, and her steed; she arrests him with some mysterious question: he is spell-bound, and must follow her into Fairy-land (531).

This passage transgresses different levels of narrative reality as Martin, being "led," enters the fantastical universe of his book. I would interpret the "shapeless," "colourless" and "formless" appearance of the "solitary mountain region" with the help of Hegel's aesthetics, which insists on the correlation between minds and forms: "[t]o spirit alone . . . is it given to impress the stamp of its own infinity and free return into itself upon its external manifestation" (Hegel, 154). In other terms, Hegel argues here that only spirit, i.e. thoughts, may give sensuous forms to an artistic Ideal. The shapeless, colourless and formless vision of the solitary mountain region hence owes to a lack of imaginative creativity on the part of Martin's mind. In fact, this Hegelian analysis may describe the reading experience that many of us have occasionally: literary descriptions indeed demand from our minds to form images about the things being described; a scene then may become "rude" and "desolate" when we find ourselves unable of encompassing all the shapes, colors and forms mentioned by the description into one mental picture. However, Martin's excursion into "Fairy-land" is not merely mental; he goes through a sensory experience as he "hears bells" and "sees" the green-robed lady's "dress," "gems"

and "steed." The use of senses further develops the metalepsis by reconciling empirical reality with the fantastical universe of the fairy tale. This same lady that he sees shows Martin some "Nereids" right before he abruptly shuts his book and hides it when he hears a tread. At this moment appears "a lady dressed in dark silk," who is none other than Caroline Helstone. This periphrastic manner of introducing Caroline likens her to the "green-robed lady" that was present in Martin's fairy tale. As a result, Miss Helstone herself—as the most fervent defender of idealism—happens to embody the connection between the two different levels of reality.

While the narrative thus transitions from one narrative level to the other, it ultimately fully merges them: in the end, life itself becomes a tale through the process of life-writing. As Martin and Caroline confide in each other, the former confesses that "[t]he tale of [his] life seemed told." He adds that "the book lay open before [him] at the last page, where was written 'Finis';" to which Caroline answers that he "speak[s] [her] experience" (547). Martin later elaborates on this extended metaphor of life as a "tale" when he "cast[s] about in his mind for the means of adding another chapter to his commenced romance" (550). Martin thus assimilates the experience of life to the writing of a book. The expression "life-romances" further crystallizes this same metaphor through an oxymoron. Most importantly, the process of life-writing highlights one's agency over their present and destiny: we are all responsible for the book of our lives since only *we* hold the pen that writes its content. I would put forward that this reflection on agency is part of Brontë's social protest, which advocates for women's self-conception. As Martin spends another day in the woods to read, he brings with him not only "his book of fairly legends" but also "that other unwritten book of his *imagination*" (emphasis added). This latter periphrasis, used to describe the process of life-writing, reminds us about the important

role that imagination plays in Brontë's social protest: it is this faculty that guarantees our freedom and agency in life since only through it can we produce a narrative that gets around the oppressive and absolute authority of reason. As writing a book—and especially a fiction—mobilizes the faculty of imagination, it seems appropriate that writing one's life similarly demands from us the use of that faculty. Overall, Brontë manages to blur the boundary between fiction and reality by highlighting the role that imagination plays in both.

The Schillerian Balance of Shirley Keeldar

The fusion between realism and idealism is ultimately best personified not through Caroline Helstone but through Shirley Keeldar. I would argue that the character of Shirley is written as a model of fair measure that honors Schiller's ambition of balancing the real with the ideal. I would furthermore add that Shirley's androgyny reflects that same balance. Gender biases existing in Victorian society tend to associate the male sex to pragmaticism and the female sex to the cult of feeling; however, the education received by Shirley allows her to transcend these sexist categories. Indeed, "her parents, who had wished to have a son . . . bestowed on her the same masculine family cognomen they would have bestowed on a boy, if a boy they had been blessed" (191). As a result, Shirley declares that she was given "a man's name[20][, that she] hold[s] a man's position[21] [and that] it is enough to inspire [her] with a touch of manhood" (194). For a writer who struggles with the constraints imposed on her literary career as a woman, Shirley is the androgenous model towards which Charlotte Brontë herself strives as an artist. Miss

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[20] The name "Shirley" was originally a male name. Charlotte Brontë's heroine contributed to the emergence of Shirley as a popular female name.

[21] After the property of Fieldhead descended to her due to a lack of male heirs, Shirley holds a quite unique position as a female landlord. In the nineteenth century, laws of primogeniture guaranteed that property would be inherited by the eldest son.

Keeldar voices this emancipatory relief offered by androgyny when she claims to be "no longer a girl, but quite a woman and something more" (194). This "something more" not only translates the androgenous personality of Shirley but also hints at the greater position that comes with it. Contrastingly, the first stage of "girl[hood]" may evoke Caroline, who for a long time languishes between immaturity and unrestrained passion.

A juxtaposition of the two female protagonists may enhance the Schillerian balance of Shirley: Caroline usually talks overly "passionately," whereas Shirley strives for more temperate expressions of her romantic subjectivity (329). This divergence has significant effects on the quality of their poetic visions: while Caroline has "distressing," "baleful" and "melancholy dreams," Shirley remains a "blissful dreamer" (185, 227, 219). I would put forward that Shirley's healthier way of dreaming is guaranteed by a mix of self-awareness and self-fulfillment. In one of their conversations, the two heroines plan to visit the North Atlantic, where Shirley expects to see mermaids. As they thus project themselves, Mrs. Pryor interrupts them: "does it not strike you that your conversation for the last ten minutes has been rather fanciful? . . . We are aware that mermaids do not exist: why speak of them as if they did? How can you find interest in speaking of a nonentity?" (233). To these questions, Shirley only responds that "there is no harm in [their] fancies." This simple reply illustrates the self-fulfilling purpose of idealism: rather than absolutely trying to bind her fancies to practical issues, Shirley already finds the value in ideals simply for what they stand. She once confesses to Caroline that she "ha[s] dreamed . . . a mere day-dream; certainly bright, probably baseless" (220). Through this quotation, a self-aware Shirley acknowledges that not all subjective visions find their ground on reality; yet, the blissful dreamer is still able to find enjoyment from and get something substantial out of them. Miss Keeldar herself admits that she "borrow[s] from imagination

what reality will not give her" (286). The use of the verb "borrow" well emphasizes her dialectical compromise between imagination and reality; rather than overly engaging herself in one over the other, she seeks to lend from both. This mindset echoes Brontë's disposition, which may be condensed in one of her letters: "the occupation of writing has been a boon to me – it took me out of dark and desolate reality to an unreal but happier region" (*Letters*, 243). Just like her character, the writer is used to borrowing from imagination what reality will not give her.

The parallels between the authoress and her protagonist do not stop there as Shirley's political discourse articulates the Tory convictions of Brontë herself. Shirley makes further proof of her self-awareness during the Luddites' attack on Hollow mill. As Caroline wishes to join the conflict so that they may help Robert Moore, Shirley reasons her friend with these words: "[h]ow? By inspiring him with heroism? Pooh! These are not the days of chivalry!: it is not a tilt at a tournament we are going to behold, but a struggle about money, and food, and life." In this passage, Shirley explicitly hints at Burke's "The age of chivalry is gone" by directly recuperating his words ("[t]hese are not the days of chivalry!"); she however moderates his claim: whereas Burke categorically condemns Enlightenment egotism in favor of binding imagination, Shirley concedes the need for pragmatic visions by reaffirming that this is a "struggle about money, and food, and life." Shirley's traditionalism—and Brontë's, as a matter of fact—thus arises from a similar compromise between practicality and idealism: the novel's conservative ideal for an established order based on paternalism is propelled by both a pragmatical outlook on the condition of workers and an idealist faith in the benevolence of aristocrats. In this way, *Shirley*'s Tory values conspicuously align themselves with the ideas promoted by Disraeli's Young England movement. Disraeli's rhetoric promoted an idealized

feudalism based on inherited responsibilities and duties, which may be embodied in the character of Shirley: "I have money in hand," she says, "and I really must do some good with it. The Briarfield poor are badly off: they must be helped" (252). Lucasta Miller confirms this echo between radical Toryism and Brontë's work, "whose eponymous heroine is striving to be a responsible landowner." Accordingly, "[t]he benevolent aristocrat is, really, the only solution the novel offers to economic distress," claims Miller (Miller, 21). Despite its charitable side, this political outlook nevertheless draws away from Dickens' social ideals which were more in favor of reforms.

As a Tory concept, traditional paternalism strives not towards social progressivism but rather towards class rigidity. As an aristocrat, Shirley endorses the responsibility not only of helping the poor but also of maintaining the established order. She thus warns that if "[her] property is attacked, [she] shall defend it like a tigress . . . If once the poor gather and rise in the form of the mob, [she] shall turn against them as an aristocrat: if they bully [her], [she] must defy; if they attack, [she] must resist" (253). These four if-clauses construct parallelisms that reflect the firmness of Shirley's response in the case of an attempt by the workers to overthrow bourgeois society. Most importantly, conditional clauses are used by Shirley as a rhetorical device that allows her to reverse the traditional roles of the oppressor and the oppressed: in her hypothetical scenario, and in opposition to what we may find in a Marxist work or a Dickensian novel—or simply in real life, really—, it is the workers who "bully" and the higher classes who "resist." This subversion of a political theme of oppression draws us back to where I started this chapter: the Woman Question.

The Tory discourse contained in *Shirley* leads Philip Rogers to the conclusion that "[t]he novel's solution to women's suffering is the same one that it offers to workers –

gradual paternalism" (Rogers, 165). I would further conclude, on a more hopeful note, that this gradual paternalism leads to gradual emancipation. Once a poor governess who suffered both sexist and social abuse from her employers, the character of Mrs. Pryor perfectly represents the link between the misery of women and workers. In a conversation with Caroline, she manifests her own subversive way of conforming to radical Toryism: "[i]mplicit submission to authorities, scrupulous deference to our betters (under which term I, of course, include the higher classes of society) are, in my opinion, indispensable to the wellbeing of every community" (357). The adjectives "implicit" and "scrupulous" function as revealing keywords here: they suggest that the submission and deference of oppressed groups should be merely affected and never wholly accepted. In this slow and self-conscious way, women like workers may hope to claim gradual changes in their conditions without disturbing the harmony of social order in any abrupt way. Brontë's social protest is thus as dialectical as her aesthetics: her conservative ideals indeed hold the promise of a gradual emancipation for both workers and women.

In conclusion, Brontë's novel by itself represents a subversive piece of writing: by providing her novel with a realist form, Brontë merely pretends to agree with the unfair review of *Jane Eyre* offered by Lewes; subversively, she imbues the content of *Shirley* with idealist reflections on the conditions of women and workers. Progressively, this dialectical association of realism and idealism tends towards a merging of reality and fiction that offers a new view on the experience of life: imagination is as legitimate as real experience. Ultimately, the social message of *Shirley* is double-edged too: despite her Tory attachment to a peace that she sees as being guaranteed only by the supposed harmony offered by the established order, Brontë advocates for gradual change. The themes of female self-suppression and social submission to aristocrats see further than

mere traditionalism; with the right balance between the real and the ideal, Brontë envisions a gradual emancipation of women and workers where social order does not need to be disturbed as abruptly as it would be in a revolution.

CONCLUSION

I would conclude by saying that idealism does have the binding and synthetic power that Burke foresaw in the faculty of imagination. Despite the existence of important gaps between the political ideology of a pro-socialist like Dickens and a Tory sympathizer like Brontë, their social-problem novels aesthetically merge towards a similar philosophical stance on society: both writers share their opposition to French rational imperialism as their novels express hostility towards enlightenment principles, such as utilitarianism or empiricism. It is through the dialectical combination of realism and idealism that *Hard Times* and *Shirley* manage to forward their respective social message most effectively. The two novels share a realist form that does not fail to address the condition of England question; it is more on the spectrum of idealism that the two works diverge: Dicken's idealism points forwards while Brontë's looks backwards. *Hard Times*, which considers the different illusory worlds in which we live, advocates for the release of fancy from the chains of material realities. This mental emancipation entails the philosophical rejection—or abolition even—of utilitarianism, which is upheld mainly by bourgeois capitalism. Dickens thus encourages a sort of Marxist revolution, though merely a philosophical one, that has the potential to finally free imagination from the mind-prism imposed by materialist or empirical modes of thinking. Brontë's reactionary politics instead looks backwards rather than towards such a future revolutionary movement. *Shirley*'s "insufficiently sympathetic treatment" of the working classes and the Luddites, who the narrative continually depicts as violent mobs, indeed highlights the authoress' pessimism about revolution (Schrimpton, 331). Although Brontë too critically denounces the responsibility of enlightenment egotism in all these social problems, she seeks to transcend the tyrannical supremacy of reason by turning back to what existed before it,

i.e. to the traditional and conservative values of the Young England movement. Less categorial than Edmund Burke, *Shirley* nonetheless concedes the need for practicality; like Dickens, Brontë indeed recognizes that there exists a productive way of balancing realism and idealism. The aesthetic theories formulated first by Schiller and Hegel in Germany, and then recuperated by Bulwer and Lewes in England, thus highlight the essential roles that each of the two aesthetic categories plays in these novels; most importantly, they serve well to demonstrate the possible harmony between the real and the ideal.

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