DIALECT AS ‘REALISM’: HARD TIMES AND THE INDUSTRIAL NOVEL

By Patricia Ingham

In Nicholas Nickleby and David Copperfield Dickens experimented with dialect in areas remote from direct concern with social class. In Hard Times (April–August 1854) he confronts the difficulty of handling it in a work where the injustices of industrial society are central. This novel marks a treatment of dialect in literature that belongs specifically to the nineteenth century: the presentation of local speech as part of the factual accuracy for which many industrial novelists strove in other respects. For the salient feature distinguishing Hard Times from Dickens’s two earlier dialect novels is the nature of the story; it is one arising, in part, out of contemporary concern with the industrial areas of England, particularly those of the North. This concern had already shown itself in several novels before Dickens wrote Hard Times. They included Frances Trollope’s The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy (1840), ‘Charlotte Elizabeth’s’ Helen Fleetwood (1841), and Elizabeth Stone’s William Langshawe, The Cotton Lord (1842).¹

Each of these dealt with a community based on cotton manufacturing, like the Coketown of Hard Times.

They are also distinguished as a group by a concern with social problems in the cotton industry. Michael Armstrong and Helen Fleetwood stress particularly the vile conditions in the mills, and the exploitation of workers; William Langshawe, while accepting this, is more concerned with the masters and those qualities for which, in spite of the evils of industrial life, they are to be admired. What all have in common is a documentary element in their representation of life in an industrial area though the degree of authenticity varies according to the predispositions of the authors.

The link between this tradition of the novel and Dickens is provided by Mrs Gaskell’s Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life (1848), perhaps the most popular of such accounts, since five editions had already been printed by 1854. Like the authors of the novels just mentioned Mrs Gaskell knew an industrial area at first hand, as she had lived in Manchester since 1832. Despite a somewhat confused desire to exonerate the middle classes, she presents a strikingly detailed account of slum housing and factory conditions.

¹ Later references are to these editions.
While Dickens was writing *Hard Times*, she was producing her other industrial story *North and South*, which was serialized in *Household Words* from September 1854 onwards. Dickens clearly regarded himself as a co-worker in the field of industrial fiction when he wrote to reassure her that he would not use a strike in his story.2

Undoubtedly, Mrs Gaskell pushed the concern for accuracy of fact further than any of the earlier novelists, and may have affected Dickens; this is particularly evident in her new treatment of speech. The earlier industrial novels showed only a sporadic interest in presenting working-class speech with anything like the verisimilitude they aimed at generally. In *Michael Armstrong* the pauper children at Deep Valley, the prison-like factory in Derbyshire, use a few non-standard expressions like ‘You’ll be strapped dreadful if you bide here’ (p. 185). There is a reference to a nearby farmer speaking ‘in north-country dialect, so broad as to be dangerous for south-country folks to spell’ (p. 178). Similarly there is merely the faintest of indications in *Helen Fleetwood* that workers do not talk like the upper classes. Helen speaks of ‘the vile filthy talk that his poor labourers use’ (p. 157). The Irishman Malony is given a few forms like *spake* ‘speak’ and *ould* ‘old’; a trace of different morphology with *yees* ‘you’; and one or two constructions intended as Irish: ‘what else would I spake and I an Irishman’ (pp. 210 ff.). The would-be schoolmistress shows her inadequacies by a mixture of pronunciations like *warmint* and *ere*, as well as substandard elements in her grammar like *comed* ‘came’, and *wot* used as a relative pronoun (pp. 226–7).

*William Langshawe* differs strikingly from these two earlier novels. There is a certain awareness of dialect, since it is specifically said of William Bladow, the hermit, that he spoke a ‘homely dialect’, that his ‘dialect and speech declared him at once to belong to the humbler walks of life’ (i. 90). The factory workers, Nance and Jem, use a few colloquialisms; Nance's parents use forms like *mun* ‘must’, *wunna* ‘will not’, *wi* ‘with’, *tak* ‘take’, and a few dialect words like *greet* ‘weep’ and *mayhap* ‘perhaps’ (ii. 133–4). Most striking, however, are the indications of dialect speech for one of the masters, Balshawe, who uses conspicuous forms like *reeght* ‘right’, *tak* ‘take’, *o* ‘of’, and the reflexive *thysel* ‘thyself’ (i. 117–19). It is significant that Balshawe is, unlike Langshawe, not only rich but vicious and dissipated. It seems as though dialect in this novel is being used at once as a class marker and, rather illogically, as an indication of

2 *Nonesuch Letters*, ii. 554.
moral coarseness. Such are the traces of attempts to handle dialect in the industrial novel before 1848.

But with Mrs Gaskell an accurate rendering of the Lancashire dialect becomes central to her object in writing. She speaks in her Preface to *Mary Barton* of the desire to present ‘the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets’ of Manchester:

The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people. (pp. 37–8)³

She chose to give this utterance through John Barton, the mill-worker, after whom she originally intended to name her novel, as well as through other minor characters. With all of them she aimed at verisimilitude in her presentation of dialect. This desire is explicitly referred to in a letter to Edward Chapman, written in December 1848, when she speaks of ‘errors’ in the printing.⁴ The novel, too, was provided with glosses of dialect by her husband William Gaskell.⁵ It is important to register his responsibility, since they suggest a rather different attitude to the subject.

Mrs Gaskell’s desire to be accurate is, however, better evidenced by her results than by overt statements. As Melchers⁶ has shown, she certainly achieved authenticity for her dialect, both as to pronunciation and morphology. The latter can be illustrated by the treatment in *Mary Barton* of forms of address in the second person: Job Legh, a consistent dialect speaker, uses ye or yo to everyone, John Barton, Mary’s father, uses thou to his daughter, and sister-in-law, Esther, but yo to his fellow workers; Mary, her mother, and Esther use you to everyone, but Mary is specifically said to recognize in Esther’s voice ‘the accents of her mother’s voice; the very south-country pronunciation’ (p. 287). Another (Quaker) speaker of dialect, Alice, uses thou to everyone except Mary, to whom she uses you, perhaps because of Mary’s own speech. Mary’s lover Jem also addresses her as you. His mother, Mrs Wilson, usually uses thou to both of them. This pattern of usage seems to depend on how ‘broad’ a dialect speaker is involved, and on relative ages and degrees of

³ All quotations from *Mary Barton* are taken from the Penguin edition by S. Gill (Harmondsworth, 1970).
⁵ Ibid., no. 25.
intimacy between speaker and the person addressed. Certainly Jem’s mother when rebuking him uses you, but reverts to thou when saying with what is described as ‘much fondness, notwithstanding her deprecatory words’: ‘Thou’rt not so fine a man as thy father was, by a deal!’ (p. 410).

As this illustration demonstrates, moreover, the dialect, presumably because of Mrs Gaskell’s familiarity with it, does not obtrude; it is interwoven into the fabric of the novel. Nor is it idealized like the Scots dialect in Scott. No more is claimed for John Barton than ‘a ready kind of rough Lancashire eloquence’ (p. 220); and this claim is substantiated. In the crucial passage during the strike when the point of conflict between men and masters, the crux of all industrial novels, is reached, his impassioned plea is unimpeded by the dialectal colouring. This is there in the phonological and morphological forms, and in the occasional lexical elements like flags, but the passage is as fluent and articulate as anything the masters have to say:

‘It makes me more than sad, it makes my heart burn within me, to see that folk can make a jest of earnest men; of chaps, who comed to ask for a bit o’ fire for th’ old granny, as shivers in the cold; for a bit o’ bedding, and some warm clothing to the poor wife as lies in labour on th’ damp flags; and for victuals for the childer, whose little voices are getting too faint and weak to cry aloud wi’ hunger. For, brothers, is not them the things we ask for when we ask for more wage? We do not want dainties, we want bellyfuls; we donnot want gimcrack coats and waistcoats, we want warm clothes, and so that we get ’em we’d not quarrel wi’ what they’re made on. We donnot want their grand houses, we want a roof to cover us from the rain, and the snow, and the storm; ay, and not alone to cover us, but the helpless ones that cling to us in the keen wind, and ask us with their eyes why we brought ’em into th’ world to suffer?’ (pp. 238–9)

Unlike the other linguistic features, the syntax of this is that of a formal standard speaker: its balanced symmetry and rhetorical pattern suggest a commanding intellect marshalling powerfully felt and powerfully conceived arguments. This almost Johnsonian structure bears out the assertion of John Barton’s ‘Lancashire eloquence’, forcefully conveying the burning indignation that raises his stature.

What Mrs Gaskell aimed to do in John Barton, Dickens evidently paralleled in Stephen Blackpool, the central dialect-speaking character of Hard Times. But while Mrs Gaskell’s source for Lancashire dialect was observation, Dickens’s was not. Although Gerson asserts that ‘He had spent some weeks in Lancashire in November 1838–January 1839’, this is not borne out by the letters. These show

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him newly arrived in Shrewsbury on 1 November 1838, Liverpool
on 5 November, and back in London by 9 November 'after a brief
visit to Manchester'. He was then in London, except for a visit to
Manchester from 12 to 17 January 1839. In January 1854, as has
been said, he briefly inspected the Preston strike. Such fleeting visits
as he paid to the North hardly seem likely to have given an untrained
researcher time for a serious collection of dialect words and forms.

I can now for the first time demonstrate that these have come
from a documentary source, just as did those of the Peggottys in
David Copperfield. Included in the catalogue of books which were in
Dickens's library on his death is Tim Bobbin: View of the Lancashire
Dialect, with Glossary. Dickens evidently owned an 1818 edition of
this popular work, which was first published in 1746 by John
Collier (1708–86), a native of Lancashire. Though the composition
itself must have been largely unintelligible to Dickens, it is evident
that the Glossary was invaluable.

Most strikingly it contains almost all the words in Hard Times
that have no standard English form, all of which are glossed with
senses that fit the context in which Dickens used them. They include
dree 'long, tedious', fewtrils 'little things', fratch 'a Quarrel', hetter
'keen, eager as a Bull-Dog', hey-go-mad 'like mad, shouting mad;
also to do anything after an exceeding Manner', hottering-mad 'very
mad, or ill vexed', hummobee 'the large round Bee', and moydert
'puzzl'd, nonplussed'. All of these are found in the text from its
earliest composition, and several of them are so distinctive as to
point firmly to the Glossary as their source.

In the Glossary are also found many words with standard English
forms for which it gives, in a large number of instances, the very
forms that Dickens uses in his first version of the novel. In fact,
many of the authentically Lancashire features of the dialect used in
Hard Times could have been found in the Glossary without reference
to the text (or to his own researches): loss of final l, loss of l before
consonants, /ʃ/ for /sk/, /u/ for /ao/ (spelt oo), and /ao/ for /ɔ/ (spelt
ow). He would not have found the form th 'the', or wi 'with', but
these would have been evident even on a short visit to Lancashire.
Nor would he have found matther 'matter', but he had already used
similar forms for North-country speech in Browdie.

Moreover, at various stages of revision of the text there is evidence
for considerable alteration in the treatment of dialect. Already in
the correction of the proof several changes were made which brought

8 Pilgrim Letters, i. 447–50. 9 Ibid. i. 491.
10 J. H. Stonehouse, Reprints of the Catalogues of the Libraries of Charles Dickens and
the form used in the manuscript to one identical with that used in
the Glossary. Examples are a' changed to aw, came to coom, afeerd
to fearfo', fra to fro, nought to nowt, of to o', and thought to thowt.
Similar forms not found in the corrected proofs but present in the
Household Words version are identical with those in the Glossary.
These modifications are, save exceptionally, kept in the Charles
Dickens Edition, and, even at this late stage, there is a further slight
alteration. It is noticeable that only in a rare change of aw to a’ is
there, at any time, a change away from the Glossary form. There is
also rare normalizing to the standard forms such as came for earlier
come, but these may be accidental, or the kind of minor ‘toning
down’ observable in David Copperfield.

Dickens may also have used, as has sometimes been suggested,
another source, William Gaskell’s Two Lectures on the Lancashire
Dialect (1854), of which he owned a copy. This is a limited work
in which Gaskell is chiefly concerned to defeat the notion of dialect
as corrupt by citing etymologies. There are no striking correspon-
dences between Stephen Blackpool’s speech and Gaskell’s catalogue.
What the two have in common are some things which Dickens
would have discovered in the Glossary referred to above, or from
observation. Contrary to what has often been thought, the lectures
can have been only of marginal use.

As Gerson observes, it is worth noting that the forms which
Dickens used to indicate Lancashire pronunciation are ‘accurate and
used with consistency’. Of the morphology this does not seem to
be true. There ‘consistency’ requires with, say, the second personal
pronoun a delicate skill such as Mrs Gaskell’s. This Dickens was in
no position to exert. There is clearly some attempt to make Stephen
Blackpool use thou to the woman he loves, but elsewhere there is an
uncertain wavering between yo’ and you, and to his hated wife he
uses thou, while she addresses him as yo and thee.

The conclusion to be drawn is that documentary evidence was
certainly used by Dickens for dialect in Hard Times, particularly for
Stephen Blackpool’s speech, and that he took more care over what
he assumed to be an authentic version than in his two previous
novels which used it. But to say that he was aiming at a higher
degree of verisimilitude than before is to come to terms only broadly
with the implications of the use of dialect in this novel. Dickens’s
precise attitude seems to lie close to Mrs Gaskell’s wish to ‘give

11 Nonesuch Letters, ii. 563.
12 N. Page, for example, in Speech in the English Novel (London, 1973), p. 64, alludes to
the likelihood of its use by Dickens.
13 Gerson, p. 338.
some utterance' to 'this dumb people'(s) . . . agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy’ (pp. 37-8). The vehicle chosen for the expression of this utterance is Stephen Blackpool who, in the scheme of the novel, represents the exploited 'Hands'. He is clearly intended as a vindication of their moral superiority. Hence his story culminates in a 'martyrdom' to which his name, chosen after John and George had been considered and rejected, presumably alludes. This interpretation is substantiated by the treatment of his death: the pit shaft into which he falls when returning to Coketown to face the unjust charge of robbery is called the Old Hell Shaft. He speaks pointedly in Christian terms of the star that he saw as he lay dying after his fall:

'Often as I coom to myseln, and found it shinin' on me down there in my trouble, I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour's home. I awmust think it be the very star!' (p. 208)

The presentation of Stephen-Martyr is made through the narrator, who takes up the role of a hagiographer faced with readers in need of instruction about the evils of industrialism. He offers them ironic reassurance as they view Coketown:

. . . Never fear, good people of an anxious turn of mind, that Art will consign Nature to oblivion. Set anywhere, side by side, the work of GOD and the work of man; and the former, even though it be a troop of Hands of very small account, will gain in dignity from the comparison. (p. 53)

His demonstration of this is to be made through Stephen Blackpool, but from the beginning he adopts a form of reference that immediately undermines his hero's dignity: the nickname 'Old Stephen' used by the other hands for this man of merely 40:

Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life. It is said that every life has its roses and thorns; there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own. He had known, to use his words, a peck of trouble. He was usually called Old Stephen, in a kind of rough homage to the fact. (p. 49)

The clichés about thorns and roses, the proverbial 'peck of troubles' suggest a man who thinks in banalities, and the interpretation of the name as 'rough homage' is in itself reductive. The disastrously condescending effect it has is evident in the narrator's later use, after Blackpool's refusal to join the union: 'Old Stephen, with all his troubles on his head, left the scene' (p. 109). This parallels the approval he wins from the narrator when in talking to Bounderby.

he keeps in mind his underdog status. Though provoked, ‘... he fully remembered where he was, and did not even raise his voice’ (p. 113). In bold strokes the narrator outlines his strategy: Stephen, he makes clear, is not like those whom Dickens himself met and encouraged at Mechanics’ Institutes. He is not like Job Legh in *Mary Barton*, who is introduced as belonging to ‘a class of men in Manchester’ who can claim kinship with famous scientists, among them ‘common hand-loom weavers’ familiar with Newton’s *Principia*.

... Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly intelligent man in his condition. Yet he was not. He took no place among those remarkable ‘Hands’, who, piecing together their broken intervals of leisure through many years, had mastered difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things. He held no station among the Hands who could make speeches and carry on debates. Thousands of his comrades could talk much better than he, at any time. (p. 49)

This denial of an outstanding intelligence is to clear the way for a different kind of eulogy:

He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity. What more he was, or what else he had in him, if anything, let him show for himself. (p. 49)

It might be expected that Stephen’s conduct would demonstrate what ‘he had in him’, his moral, as opposed to intellectual worth. But his actions in practice do not suggest even self-reliance: in his struggle against the temptation to destroy his sottishly drunken wife he depends on the woman Rachael; it is a promise to her that binds him to what is evidently intended as a nobly aloof refusal to join the union; he is easily tricked by Tom Gradgrind into hanging about the bank so that he is suspected of the robbery. His last positive action is flight, which confirms the suspicion of his guilt. All this serves to underline his lack of practical intelligence without suggesting inner reserves.

This lack of inner resources is stressed by his reaction to his workmates’ rejection:

He had been for many years, a quiet silent man, associating but little with other men, and used to companionship with his own thoughts. He had never known before the strength of the want in his heart for the frequent recognition of a nod, a look, a word; or the immense amount of relief that had been poured into it by drops through such small means. It was even harder than he could have believed possible, to separate in his own conscience his abandonment by all his fellows from a baseless sense of shame and disgrace. (p. 110)
This suggests, fatally to the idealized conception of him, a certain moral confusion.

In effect Stephen's force in the novel comes to depend on his verbal encounters, chiefly those with Bounderby, the representative of the middle class and the masters, to whom he goes for advice on getting a divorce, and with whom he discusses his position, after his refusal to join the union has led to his fellow-workers' rejection. In the event he is worsted, not only because in an atmosphere of debate he answers argument with complaint, but even more because of the failure of his language to achieve the 'rugged' eloquence that the narrator purports to hear and that Mrs Gaskell's John Barton certainly possesses.

This comes out most strikingly in a passage comparable to the quotation above from Barton's speech. In the chapter entitled Men and Masters he speaks on the central issue in the industrial novel: the injustice of the relative rewards of men and masters. Bounderby, speaking for the masters, asks: 'What . . . do you people, in a general way, complain of?' The answer is presumably intended to be definitive, the apologia for the speaker and his like:

"Sir, I were never good at showin' o'it, though I ha' had'n my share in feeling o'it. 'Deed we are in a muddle, Sir. Look round town—so rich as 'tis—and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein' heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows, 'twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an' wheer we live, an' in what numbers, an' by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no nigher to onny dis'ant object—ceptin awlus, Death. Look how you considers of us, and writes of us, and talks of us, and goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin ever we were born. Look how this ha' growen an' growen, Sir, bigger an' bigger, broader an' broader, harder an' harder, fro year to year, fro generation unto generation. Who can look on 't, Sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?" (p. 114)

This shows all the usual faults of the man's syntax. A failure to make logical links explicit is evidenced in the sentence beginning 'Look how you considers of us', where it is not clear in what way 'how yo' are awlus right' related to the preceding part. Similarly, what follows—'and never had'n no reason in us'—is unclear. Does it mean, 'You accuse us of never having rationality' or, 'But there was never cause in us for your thinking us wrong'? The 'and' fails to make the point, while the repeated imperative as an indirect expression of protest helps to increase the obscurity of his argument.
There are redundant phrases: 'somehows', 'fro year to year', 'fro generation unto generation'. To these is added the vagueness of reference referred to above: anaphoric reference with nothing to refer back to. From the rather vague "'t' of the opening, which presumably means what is complained of, the passage leads to a culmination in an account of an even vaguer 'this', growing 'bigger . . . broader . . . harder'. The marvellously specific quality of Barton's similar complaint is lost in uncertainty. The pronunciation of dialect in this novel is reasonably accurate, and the syntax colloquial. The result is that what the narrator hears is a narrow, limited, and rather confused mind. Stephen's catchphrase, '"Tis a' a muddle' (with all its variations), seems to reflect not merely the confusion of society, but a confusion within, incompatible with a man of 'perfect integrity'. The ambivalence, then, lies in the narrator: he asserts that he sees integrity, but reveals the belief which underpins the idea of non-standard speech as the usage of social inferiors—that those who use it are morally and intellectually impoverished. Ironically prejudice merges with probability: this confused consciousness is a likely result of crushing poverty and inequality upon a limited intellect.