“SOOTY MANCHESTER” AND THE SOCIAL-REFORM NOVEL 1845-1855

AN EXAMINATION OF *SYBIL*, *MARY BARTON*, *NORTH AND
SOUTH*, AND *HARD TIMES**

BY

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“Sooty Manchester—it too is built on the infinite Abysses: overspanned by the skyeey Firmaments; and there is birth in it, and death in it;—and it is every whit as wonderful, as fearful, unimaginable, as the oldest Salem or Prophetic City.” (Carlyle, *Past and Present* III, xvt)

It was because others discovered this truth at about the same time as Carlyle, whose *Past and Present* came out in 1843, that there arose that succession of novels about social conditions that begins with Disraeli's *Sybil* and goes on into the next decade and even into the sixties. The creative imagination was stimulated by the social conscience, and in the product of that event “sooty Manchester”—whether it have as fictional approximation Milton, Mowbray, Coketown or be just itself—figures as a grim recurrent location.

Carlyle with his penchant for choosing extraordinary incidents and extravagant language to describe them would have been a match for even the most sensational of modern journalists, but we have to remember that his gifts enabled him to startle his generation into realizing what was going on amongst them. Amongst his examples at the beginning of *Past and Present* is this:

“At Stockport Assizes . . . a Mother and a Father are arraigned, and found guilty of poisoning three of their children, to defraud a ‘burial-society’ of some £3. 8s., due on the death of each child: they are arraigned, found guilty; and the official authorities, it is whispered, hint that perhaps the case is not solitary, that perhaps you had better not probe farther into that department of things. This is in the autumn of 1841; the crime itself is

of the previous year or season. ‘Brutal savages, degraded Irish’, mutters the idle reader of Newspapers; hardly lingering on this incident. Yet it is an incident worth lingering on; the depravity, savagery and degraded Irishism being never so well admitted. In the British land, a human Mother and Father, of white skin and professing the Christian religion, had done this thing; they, with their Irishism and necessity and savagery, had been driven to it . . . A human Mother and Father had said to themselves: What shall we do to escape starvation? We are deep sunk here, in our dark cellar; and help is far . . . The Stockport Mother and Father think and hint; Our poor little starveling Tom, who cries all day for victuals, who will see only evil and not good in this world: if he were out of his misery at once; he well dead, and the rest of us perhaps kept alive? It is thought, and hinted; at last it is done.” (I, i)

Beside the fact Disraeli's fiction is pallid in its impact, if little less sombre in its implications. Liza Gray, faced by her creditor Mrs. Mullins, calculates on “a death in our family soon—this poor babe can't struggle on much longer; it belongs to two burial clubs—that will be three pounds from each, and after the drink and the funeral, there will be enough to pay all our debts and put us all square” (*Sybil* III, iii). Carlyle's examples are striking, but they are not exceptional; or, if they are exceptional, they are so only in degree and not in kind. In a sentence which I omitted from the middle of the quotation he wrote: “Such instances are like the highest mountain apex emerged into view; under which lies a whole mountain region and land, not yet emerged.” For the sharp evocation of sympathy and concern Carlyle's method of flashing the reader's attention on singular suffering and degradation is most suitable. The novelist seeks to bring forth that

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†Large roman figures are book numbers and small roman are chapter numbers.

sympathy and concern by inducing our longer, more concentrated gaze on the trials and pains of fairly ordinary people.

Disraeli visited Manchester in 1844 and Dickens a decade later, but Mrs. Gaskell lived there from her marriage in 1832 to her death in 1865. The population of Manchester and Salford grew from 90,000 to 400,000 in the first half of the nineteenth century. Much of this influx was of Irish origin, but, as Mrs. Gaskell indicates, many also came from rural areas of England and in time of strike there were "knob-sticks" from Burnley, "poor depressed men tramping in . . . to work at the condemned 'Starvation Prices'." (*Mary Barton*, c, xv). Nevertheless, this did not affect the near-preponderance of Irish. In a short but telling and painful survey, *Distress in Manchester* (1842), Joseph Adshead reported on the city in which Mrs. Gaskell had then lived for 10 years. Dealing with selected areas such as Ancoats and that between Brook Street and Oxford Street, Adshead found that four-ninths of the population was Irish (p. 12), that the average income of 2,000 families was 5s. 3½d. per week (p. 18), and that 9,000 people were living in cellars, "most of them neither drained nor souged. They are consequently damp, —are always liable to be flooded, and are almost entirely without the means of ventilation" (p. 14). He went on: "Frequently, different families occupy opposite corners of the same room, . . . Six or eight persons I witnessed inhabiting a damp cellar, males and females congregated together" (p. 15). Resort to the pawnshop was a widespread and inevitable practice (pp. 20–21). The general statements are surpassed in their pathos only by the citation of individual cases, of a widow with three children turned out of her house and her goods seized in satisfaction of rent arrears; of a dyer with a family of four children, whose wife had been lately confined, all of them having "been whole days without any food"; and, most terrible of all, the household where the father was dying and there were three small children (the eldest, aged 10) weaving till past 11 o'clock on Saturday night, coming home to find his father in his death-throes and being sent out in a state of semi-nudity to fetch a relative to the bedside.

It is surprising that the novelists did not exploit the industrial conditions under which children worked more fully. Only Mrs. Trollope in *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840) dealt with this subject. At the same time, however, we have to notice how little any of them dealt with the actual working conditions. This may have been the consequence of insufficient knowledge and experience, or else of their being principally concerned

with the wider problems of social, as distinct from those of industrial, welfare. Certainly, if they lacked direct acquaintance, they might have had recourse to Blue Books and reports of committees—as indeed Disraeli did. He comes nearest to dealing with the horrors of child labour. In 1841 and 1842 Parliament received reports on factories, handloom weavers, truck, town housing, sanitary conditions, and the employment of women and children in mines. Disraeli probably used all of these, but it must suffice us to refer only to one. Here is a passage from *Sybil* (III, i):

"They come forth; the mine delivers its gang and the pit its bondsmen; the forge is silent and the engine is still. The plain is covered with the swarming multitude; . . . troops of youth, alas! of both sexes, though neither their raiment nor their language indicates the difference; all are clad in male attire; and oaths, that men might shudder at, issue from lips born to breathe words of sweetness . . . But can we wonder at the hideous coarseness of their language when we remember the savage rudeness of their lives? Naked to the waist, an iron chain fastened to a belt of leather runs between their legs clad in canvas trousers, while on hands and feet an English girl, for twelve, sometimes for sixteen, hours a day, hauls and hurries tubs of coal up subterranean roads, dark, precipitous, and plashy . . . See, too, these emerge from the bowels of the earth! Infants of four and five years of age, many of them girls, pretty and still soft and timid; entrusted with the fulfilment of responsible duties, and the nature of which entails on them the necessity of being the earliest to enter the mine and the latest to leave it. Their labour indeed is not severe, for that would be impossible, but it is passed in darkness and in solitude . . . Hour after hour elapses, and all that reminds the infant trappers of the world that they have quitted and that which they have joined is the passage of the coal wagons for which they open the air doors of the galleries, and on keeping which doors constantly closed, except at this moment of passage, the safety of the mine and the lives of the persons employed in it entirely depend."

It is sufficient to place alongside this passage one or two quotations from the *First Report (Mines) of the Children's Employment Commission* (1842):

"121. . . . 'One of the most disgusting sights I have seen was that of young females, dressed like boys in trousers, crawling on all fours, with belts round their waists and chains passing between their legs'. (Statement by Sub-Commissioner in the West Riding of Yorkshire.)"

Conclusions

. . . In regard to Coal Mines—

1. That instances occur in which children are taken

into these mines to work as early as four years of age . . .

7. That the nature of the employment which is assigned to the youngest children, generally that of "trapping", requires that they should be in the pit as soon as the work of the day commences, and, according to the present system, that they should not leave the pit before the work of the day is at an end.

8. That, although this employment scarcely deserves the name of labour, yet, as the children engaged in it are commonly excluded from light and are always without companions, it would, were it not for the passing and re-passing of the coal carriages amount to solitary confinement of the worst order.

11. That, in the districts in which females are taken down in to the coal mines, both sexes are employed together in precisely the same kind of labour and work for the same number of hours; that the girls and boys, and the young men and women, and even married women with child, commonly work almost naked, and the men, in many mines, quite naked; and that all classes of witnesses bear testimony to the demoralising influence of the employment of females underground."

But even here Disraeli is content to comment; he does not attempt to dramatize, as he does for instance, in his treatment of the evils of the truck system. And great as was the potential of this report, what might have been made of the 1832 report on factory children with its revelation of children working regularly from 6 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. and at busy periods from 3 a.m. to 10 p.m. with only a total of one hour off for meals and all this for 3s. and 3s. 7½d. per week, with its account of severe penalties for being late by as little as five minutes and of serious accidents as a result of fatigue, of crippling deformities, and premature death? The conscience of Victorian England woke up to two generations of merciless exploitation, and not before it was time.

When he wishes, Disraeli can not only describe, but also convey the spirit of, a scene very well. His treatment tends to be episodic and, as a result *Sybil* covers a wider area of activity than the other social novels. At one time it is the village life of Marney, rural but by no means idyllic (I, iii), at others the scramble and tyranny of the truck shop (III, iii), the model factory of Mr. Trafford (III, viii) or the barren Wodgate with its semi-heathen community (III, iv). The ability to describe so wide a range is the product of Disraeli's observation and intelligent reporting; the corresponding drawback, however, is a certain loss of concentration and of intimate understanding of personal predicaments. The characters are looked at from outside and even from there not for long enough. They are often little more than passing acquaintances.

Occasionally, however, Disraeli attains a noticeable power within an episode. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the description of a handloom weaver Warner and his family (II, xiii).

"It was a single chamber . . . In the centre placed so as to gain the best light which the gloomy situation could afford, was a loom. In two corners of the room were mattresses placed on the floor . . . In one was his sick wife; in the other, three young children: two girls, the eldest about eight years of age; between them their baby brother. An iron kettle was by the hearth, and on the mantelpiece, some candles, a few lucifer matches, two tin mugs, a paper of salt and an iron spoon. In a farther part, close to the wall was a heavy table or dresser; this was a fixture, as well as the form which was fastened by it.

The man . . . looked around him at his chamber without resources: no food, no fuel, no furniture, and four human beings dependent on him, and lying in their wretched beds, because they had no clothes."

Warner reflects on past sufficiency and present sufferings, on his broken-spirited wife and starving children, on the conflict between the instinct for survival and the temptation to crime, on a prospect even bleaker than the pitiable present. All this is powerfully suggested; the oscillations of Warner's inner struggle, the hopelessness of his wife, the pathetic state of the children with the baby comforted with the last morsel of a crust soaked in water and tied in a cloth for him to suck. Detail such as this last has a very authentic ring. Moreover, this scene and these characters are in the central line of the novel's development, unlike the descriptions of the mines and the truck-shop, which, though quite effective, represent a kind of superadded demonstration of social evil.

Mrs. Gaskell, though she is undisciplined in other directions, does not dissipate her creative energy in this one. *Mary Barton* was written out of avowed "sympathy with the careworn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want" (Preface). Possessed of a knowledge, or more correctly of a sort of knowledge, to which neither Dickens nor Disraeli could lay claim, she delineated accurately the Manchester she knew so well; Berry Street, for example, "unpaved: and down the middle a gutter forced its way, every now and then forming pools in the holes with which the street abounded . . . As they passed, women from their doors tossed household slops of every description into the gutter . . . Heaps of ashes were the stepping-stones, on which the passer-by, who cared in the least for cleanliness, took care not to put his foot", and on to Davenport's cellar "very dark inside.

The window-panes many of them were broken and stuffed with rags", the foetid smell, "the thick darkness of the place" and "the three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up" (*Mary Barton*, c. vi). The parallel of this description of the cellar with that given by Adshead and quoted earlier, the parallel, that is, of fiction and fact is obvious. The extra detail of the fiction serves only to make it more vivid. Confirmation of Mrs. Gaskell's faithfulness to actuality in her description of the street is provided by another witness, the surgeon John Robertson, in his evidence about Manchester to the Committee on the Health of Towns (1840) with his references to streets badly drained, "full of pits, brimful of stagnant water, the receptacle of dead cats and dogs". In his testimony Robertson quoted a pamphlet by a fellow doctor, J. P. Kay (later Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth) now remembered for his work as secretary to the Privy Council's committee on education. I mention his name however, because he was a friend of Mrs. Gaskell's. Robertson's evidence also contains reference to Manchester's having no public park and to the rapid expansion of the city so that "those who live in the more populous quarters can seldom hope to see the green face of nature". Facts such as these give added importance to the manner in which Mrs. Gaskell chose to open her "tale of Manchester life" with its description of Green Heys Fields, "these commonplace but thoroughly rural fields" with here and there a black-and-white farmhouse, with "the lowing of cattle, the milk-maid's call, the clatter and cackle of poultry," the flowers and hedges, the place of picnic. We remember this during our sustained and sombre acquaintance with Berry Street and its like in the body of the novel. Mrs. Gaskell was adept in the implications of contrast. In *North and South* the poverty of people like the Higgins and the Bouchers comes out the more strikingly as we contemplate the vulgar ostentation of the Thorntons' drawing-room.

Mrs. Gaskell's scenes are built up stage by stage by an accumulation of detail. It is therefore possible quite easily to notice the contrasts. Dickens does not seek his effects in this manner. His method is altogether less patient; his detail is of the sharp and isolated kind. Not for him the laboriously faithful catalogue technique, but rather the single fact. As the weaver Stephen Blackpool calls on his employer, Mr. Boundery "at lunch on chop and sherry"—not even a verb to complete the sentence (*Hard Times* I, xi). Dickens perhaps skilfully avoided detailed description. He did not know his Lancashire well enough. He went to Preston

in 1852 to see a strike in progress, but he soon returned home after finding "very little in the streets to make the town remarkable" (Forster, *Life of Dickens* III, 49). Certainly when he gives us details, we often want to question them. Allowing that Stephen Blackpool was as intelligent as Dickens sometimes suggests (and at other times he appears remarkably uninformed), one wonders about those "few books and writings . . . on an old bureau in the corner" (I, x). There were learned workmen—Mrs. Gaskell's Job Legh was one of them—but Dickens' detail is here not to describe the place where Stephen lived or even to tell us something about him, but to contrast with his drunken wife, the sorrow of his life, who has suddenly reappeared and is there before him lolling almost insensibly on a chair. Here, of course, is a contrast, but it is achieved by a method, in a direction and with a purpose and effect quite different from those of Mrs. Gaskell. Dickens' skill at his craft made him seek that which made the town remarkable. This search after the remarkable is seen in the initial description of Coketown. The view is panoramic, the method is that of broad strokes and strong colours:

"Coketown, to which Messrs. Bounderby and Gradgrind now walked, was a triumph of fact; it had no greater taint of fancy in it than Mrs. Gradgrind herself. Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing our tune. It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next." (I, v)

None can miss the power by which the frightening monotony of the whole place is suggested. There is one phrase, however, which immediately measures Dickens' distance from his subject; it is: "inhabited by people equally like one another". The likeness of Manchester to everywhere else, Carlyle reminded

us, is in the universal and fundamental—"there is birth in it, and death in it"; but that phrase reminds us also that the universal and fundamental is but an agglomeration of innumerable individuals. Dickens did not see this; he did not see the individual as he was. Indeed, the common Dickensian method of characterization by caricature is, in one aspect, a failure to see the individual in his fullness.

Method reflects purpose, and it is well therefore with this comment on Dickens that we should clearly distinguish what our three novelists were trying to achieve. Dr. Leavis in his penetrating, though somewhat too laudatory, estimate of *Hard Times* has described the novel as a moral fable (*The Great Tradition* 1948, p. 227), and the last paragraph certainly indicates the didactic intention. The value of Leavis's comment is to direct our minds to the way in which places, events, and people in the novel are to be regarded. The fable teller concentrates upon essentials and arranges them with their single insistent meanings into a significant pattern. *Hard Times* is an attack on Fact, on Benthamite utilitarianism and its practical application in the debased commercial materialism of the mid-nineteenth century. Of all this Coketown is the hideous architectural symbol, Bounderby its hard-faced apostle and the workers of Coketown its mass of mute and nameless victims. Dickens was attacking the whole system, and so was Disraeli; but with him there was little of Dickens' concentration but much of an ulterior purpose. He too attacked the system whose glorification of freedom brought such semi-slavery and degradation, but for him there was a political alternative which would heal the breach which unnaturally divided "the two nations" of Englishmen. His work draws upon political information and looks towards a partly political solution. Moreover, the peculiar position of Sybil herself brings in an extra dimension. Mysterious, romantic, religious, she is deliberately and often unexpectedly dramatized. Through her the hope of a partly religious solution is projected into the book. Dickens' picture is a dark one; in Disraeli's there are always rays of light. At the end of the passage describing Warner's sufferings there comes a knocking at the door "and there entered SYBIL" (II, xiii). The thesis obtrudes more prominently in this novel than in the others, much more for instance, than in *North and South* or *Mary Barton* where Mrs. Gaskell is anxious to stress the need for greater mutual understanding between employers and employed. The measure of success she achieves derives from the same quality within her which dictated the nature of the solution she propounded, namely, her deep sympathy springing from an interaction of her humanity with her

intimate knowledge of the things about which she wrote. That is why with her we are more aware of actual relationships of actual people.

We must therefore now consider characterization. In general, these novelists recognized that three-fold division of society, Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace, which Matthew Arnold noted in *Culture and Anarchy*. For him the Barbarians or aristocracy were bent upon field-sports and honours, the Populace on beer and brawling, and the Philistines or middle-class on money-making and Methodist tea-meetings. Neither Mrs. Gaskell nor Dickens is much occupied with the aristocracy—in *North and South* the frivolous occupations of her London relatives set off for Margaret the seriousness of life in Milton and in *Hard Times* the bored fatalism and total lack of principles of James Harthouse are utilized in the plot,—but for Disraeli the place of aristocracy is central, not the effete and corrupting aristocracy of the Marneys and the Mowbrays but the rightful idealist aristocracy of Sybil. The triumph of this latter is symbolized at the end in the destruction of Mowbray Castle by fire, the union of the religious Sybil and the political idealist Egremont and the recovery of the documents proving the right of Sybil's family to the Mowbray lands. Again, unlike the other two, Disraeli has a definite place for the Church. The ruins of Marney Abbey are a symbol of the work which the Church once had in the daily life of the community and of the fact that it no longer fulfilled this work; and the presence of the Tractarian St. Lys is a continual self-critical commentary on the Church's shortcomings in failing to perform its social obligations.

The chief interest of all three novelists lies, however, in the middle and lower classes, the manufacturers and workmen, and the constant struggle between them.

"The Working Aristocracy; Mill-owners, Manufacturers, Commanders of Working Men: alas against them also much shall be brought in accusation; much—and the freest Trade in Corn, total abolition of Tariffs, and uttermost 'Increase of Manufactures' and 'Prosperity of Commerce' will mend no jot of it. The Working Aristocracy must strike into a new path; must understand that money alone is *not* the representative either of man's success in the world, or of man's duties to man; and reform their own selves from top to bottom." (*Past and Present* III, viii)

Thus Carlyle, and thus the burden also of our novelists. Here again Disraeli differs from Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell. They have little about the aristocrats; he has little about the manufacturer as such. Dickens, on the other hand, has the bad master in Bounderby, pompous, egotistical, stupid

and cruel. For Bounderby the workers were "Hands", so many units in a mass,

"something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielding such another percentage of crime, and such another percentage of pauperism; something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made; something that occasionally rose like a sea and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself) and fell again." (*Hard Times* II, vi)

So Louisa Bounderby (née Gradgrind) had been taught to regard them in the course of her "fact" - circumscribed education. So her husband regarded them, with an admixture of contempt and even hatred. Louisa, in the course of the book, is emancipated from these arid, emotionless generalities, and led to show that kindness which she possesses and which her husband so monstrously lacks. Mrs. Gaskell's employers are hard, but they are never inhuman. Carson in *Mary Barton*, though he swears terrible vengeance on his son's murderer, is reconciled with John Barton on the latter's death-bed, and in *North and South* (probably being careful to forestall a recurrence of some of the criticisms levelled against her first novel) Mrs. Gaskell is at pains to stress the humanity of Thornton. This does not mean that she fails to portray what she regards as the limitations of his class. Indeed, these limitations help to make him convincing. He genuinely believes in the inescapable operations of the trade-cycle (c, xix), in the opportunities for economic self-advancement and in the battle of masters and men (c, x). Mrs. Gaskell writes understandingly of him—"Of course, speaking so of the fate that, as a master, might be his own in the fluctuations of commerce, he was not likely to have more sympathy with that of the workmen" (c, xix); and she is anxious to speak justly of him. When in the pique of argument he quibbles momentarily, she has him recover immediately: "His straightforward honesty made him feel that his words were but a poor and quibbling answer to what [Margaret] had said, and, be she as scornful as she liked, it was a duty he owed to himself to explain, as truly as he could, what he did mean" (c, x). Thornton eventually learns partly from Margaret and, through her, partly from the workman Nicholas Higgins something of the lot of the workers, and he takes practical steps to help them by instituting a system of bulk-buying and communal cooking.

These novelists are concerned to stress that much of the trouble arises from a failure in communication, in the ignorance and the inability to imagine on the part of one half the way in which the other half of the world lives. Inhuman theories and social isolation stifle sympathy. The trouble, however, is seen to be by no means all on the masters' side. The workers, too, are the victims of inadequate understanding and sometimes even of deliberate misinterpretation. The Trade Unions and Chartism, in particular, come under severe attack. Disraeli has much to say about the Chartist agitation of 1839 and of the willingness of its leaders to exploit suffering for their own ends. The destructive outburst of the Wodgate Hell-cats is the direct result of Chartist instigation (VI, vii). Chiefly, however, attention is concentrated on the exploitation of power by the Trade Union leaders. This is seen in the hollow insincerities and the glib rhetoric of the agitator Slackbridge in *Hard Times*. With an inflated style and ample recourse to exclamation and rhetorical question, with skilful alternation of appeals to flattery, fear, loyalty, and the instinct to attack, Slackbridge brings the workers to cast off Stephen Blackpool, to send him to Coventry. Slackbridge is described as a somewhat repulsive figure; he is openly criticized as a character lacking the integrity and nobility of those he misleads; his address to "friends and brothers" is shot through with ironic condemnation, and his fluent dishonesty is only the more evident by contrast with the halting ineffectual defence of the man he is persecuting. (See, e.g. II, iv; III, iv.) Mrs. Gaskell also dwells on the isolation of a man from his fellows on the orders of the Union:

"If a man doesn't belong to the Union, them as works next looms has orders not to speak to him—if he's sorry or ill it's a' the same; he's out o' bounds, he's none o' us; he comes among us, he works among us, but he's none o' us. I' some places them's fined who speaks to him. Yo' try that, miss; try living a year or two among them as looks away if yo' look at 'em." (*North and South*, c, xxviii)

Mrs. Gaskell again gains the effect so justly and so succinctly. She also emphasizes the conspiratorial aspect of the Unions, for example, in the dark plottings, "strange faces of pale men, with dark glaring eyes", the beckoning of a hand within the door in *Mary Barton*. "They were all desperate members of Trades' Unions, ready for anything"; but, she goes on, "made ready by want" (c, x). Beside this Disraeli's account of a Union committee at work appears theatrical, meeting at a secret rendezvous, disguised in dark cloaks and black masks, denouncing offending

workmen and masters alike, planning vengeance against them, conducting demonic initiation rites and binding their members even to murder (*Sybil* IV, iv). That this last did happen—or that the novelists believed it to happen—is shown also by the lot John Barton drew which required him to kill young Carson. Here again, however, with the emphasis upon the strain which the demand represents in the life of an individual with whose history and feelings we are intimate, Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of the matter appears more convincing than that of Disraeli. The common element underlying the criticism of the Trade Unions is the objection to the oppression of the individual which their activity brings about. Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* is excluded and thereby driven from the company of his fellows; the pitiable Boucher in *North and South* is compelled to join, to participate unwillingly in a strike and finally, in desperation at his family's sufferings, to drown himself; John Barton is led to commit murder and die of remorse.

Histories such as these remind us that in the kind of novel with which we are here concerned there is a strong tendency to predispose both character and action to fit the thesis. Dickens especially was prone to this, and in *Hard Times* there is a simple, perhaps over-simplified, distinction of the rich and villainous on the one hand and the poor and virtuous on the other—Slackbridge alone excepted. Mrs. Gaskell, after the criticism of *Mary Barton*, sought a less biased position in *North and South*, whilst Disraeli (this is one virtue of his wide range of reference) included characters of varying degrees of worth at the different social levels he considered. Mrs. Gaskell and Disraeli, however, used characters for the benefit of their commentary in other ways. Esther, the prostitute, aunt to Mary Barton, is little more than a lurid object-lesson of the end to which flighty young girls who listen to smooth-tongued would-be seducers inevitably arrive; whilst in *Sybil* herself there is a strong fairy-godmother element. Mention of *Sybil* also reminds us that there is a method by which Mrs. Gaskell and Disraeli seek a reliable, superior and detached commentator position within the novel itself by the use of a suitable character. *Sybil* herself in some ways fulfils this role, but the better example is that of Margaret Hale in *North and South*, the outsider knowing places other than Milton, acquainted with both sides of industry through her friendships with master and men but not involved with or sharing the prejudices of either side. Yet another technique of characterization to be noted is the use made of children and young people, especially in their suffering. Dickens rather surprisingly, considering what he does elsewhere, makes little of this in *Hard*

Times, but what Disraeli does we have seen already and Boucher's family in *North and South* has also been mentioned. More prominent, however, is the suffering of Bessy Higgins in this novel. There is a noble fortitude and a moving strain of piety in her character.

The use of characters such as these had both its strength and weakness. The latter is manifested in sentimentality, moralizing and melodrama. It is easy to overpaint the suffering for ulterior effect; it is easy to idealize a character to point a lesson; it is easy, too, to refuse to follow out the logic of suffering in the mistaken desire to spare the reader's feelings. Mrs. Gaskell—perhaps this is a mark of her humanity, or perhaps only of her femininity—is prone to these faults, though we must not forget Dickens' climax with the death of Stephen, referring in his dying words to Rachel's long-dead little sister and to shining stars that point beyond the present muddle. Even symbolic interpretation does not clear away the incongruities of inescapable actuality here; and the bringing-in of references to the star of Bethlehem and the chapter's last sentence—"The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor: and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest"—may give the right aura of divine comfort at the last, but they do not issue necessarily out of what has gone before.

This sort of failure, like the exploitation of helpless suffering in children, points us also to strength, indeed the radical source of strength, the very inspiration out of which these novels issued, namely, an intense sympathy with suffering mankind and a strong desire for the amelioration of the human condition. The evil thing that separates, the baffling isolation of man from his fellow men, is what all these novels attack. As one might expect, it is Disraeli the politician who most precisely envisages a social and political solution, but he with the others sees that basically the problem is a moral one. Rachel puts it to Louisa in *Hard Times*: "The like of you don't know us, don't care for us, don't belong to us" (III, iv), but Rachel is only partly right. There may be ignorance or misunderstanding, but there is no necessary indifference or inevitable separation. Disraeli speaks of "the community of purpose that constitutes society" (*Sybil* II, v). Men had to recognize that truth, and in doing so they had also to recognize the concomitant truth that each man is an inviolable entity; in Stephen Blackpool's words, not "Rating 'em as so much Power, and reg'lating 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines: wi'out loves and likens, wi'out memories and inclinations,

wi'out souls to weary and souls to hope", but "drawin' nigh to fok, wi' kindness and patience an' cheery ways" (*Hard Times* II, v). A system that produced the evil which these writers lament had to be changed. Labour had its rights as well as its duties (as Disraeli reminded the electors of Shrewsbury in 1843); and these rights, the basic human dignities, could not continue to be flouted, they would have again to be regarded. I began with Carlyle; let me end with him, for his is a

seminal mind in this phase of English history.

"Men cannot live isolated: we *are* all bound together, for mutual good or else for mutual misery . . . In this world there is one godlike thing, the essence of all that was or ever will be godlike in this world: the veneration done to Human Worth by the hearts of men." (*Past and Present* IV, vi)

With this attribute Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell and Disraeli were abundantly endowed.