

“Murdering the Innocents”: The Dystopian City and the Circus as Corollary in Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*

Stacey Balkan

Bergen Community College, New Jersey

Abstract

There is perhaps no novel that offers a more scathing commentary on nineteenth century conceptions of leisure and industry than Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*. Dickens’ description of Coketown, nay Preston, is a caricature of utilitarian uniformity and the commodification of workers in post-industrial England. Ostensibly Marxist in its depictions of those men of “facts and calculations”—clearly Jeremy Bentham and Adam Smith—Dickens offers a community of “hands” covered in soot toiling under the vulgar Bounderby. Counterpoised against these laborers is the whimsical cast of Mr. Sleary’s circus. Using the circus as a corollary to the dystopian city, he anticipates Angela Carter’s Neovictorian romp through London, St. Petersburg, and Siberia wherein the characters of *Nights at the Circus* likewise offer an antidote to similarly oppressive prescriptions for economic prosperity.

[**Keywords:** Dickens, *Hard Times*; Coketown, dystopian, Angela Carter; *Nights at the Circus*; circus, Marxist, oppression.]

Murdering the Innocents

The circus—a site of spectacle, transgression, and unfettered fancy—rose in prominence with the post-industrial phenomenon of leisure. In the burgeoning Victorian economy the circus served as entertainment for an emerging class of wealthy industrialists—men of “facts and calculations” (Dickens 7). The circus was likewise a projection of desire—grotesque bodies inscribed with the suppressed pleasures of a nascent Bentham-esque utopia. Consequently, it also served as a kind of counter-narrative to the perception of progress at the time, reifying “official order by inverting it temporarily:” “Once the paying customer successfully negotiated the ticket window, one left one’s furs in a cloakroom...as though there one left behind the skin of one’s own beastliness so as not to embarrass the beasts” within (Assael 8, Carter 105). As a site of fancy run amok (presumably), it was a spectacle for the upper-class; but as a repository for the “beasts,” it was as an alternative site of culture forging new definitions of family, class, and also of

“work” for the Victorian underclass. The clowns were the precise antithesis of those wealthy industrialists for whom the “dismal science”ⁱ of industry and the dehumanizing economic prescriptions for a prosperous Victorian England were an ostensible religion. Circus folks “cared so little for plain fact...and were in that advanced state of degeneracy...” that made them “alarming creatures to stalk about in any *human* society” (Dickens 32, 41, emphasis mine). Consequently, as a site of perceived savagery, its presence catalyzed the sort of class antipathy that we see in Dickens’ *Hard Times* between the supposed Benthamites and Sleary’s circus, and likewise in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* between the high culture of London and Colonel Kearney’s circus.

As a kind of corollary to the dystopian cities of “Coketown” in *Hard Times* and St. Petersburg (and London) in *Nights at the Circus*, the circus recuperates the humanity of those “innocents” murdered by the likes of Thomas Gradgrind—he who “annihilate[d] the flowers of existence” (Dickens 169). Angela Carter’s description of her once objective antagonist speaks to this:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognize himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom...Walser’s very self, as he had known it, departed from him; he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque (Carter 103).

Thus, as a means of realizing (or indeed recuperating) our humanity, the circus is not only an alternative to industrial culture, but likewise a viable counter narrative to Jeremy Bentham’s economic utopia: “[t]he Circus itself [was] constructed to house permanent displays of the triumph of man’s will over...rationality” and also of Victorian notions of order (Carter 105). In Carter’s whorehouse, her magical Siberia, St. Petersburg—“a city built of hubris, imagination, and desire”—and certainly in the characters of Sissy and Stephen Blackpool in Dickens’ *Hard Times*, rationality is indeed vanquished (Carter 97). As metaphors for the “inviolable sublime and beautiful”ⁱⁱⁱ characteristics of humanity, the members of Sleary’s circus are stark antitheses of that notorious hegemon Reason. Sleary’s pathetic clowns and the participants in the ostensibly Marxist revolution of Coketown—that “race...of lower creatures...only hands and stomachs”—are indeed inscriptions of those coveted Romantic ideals suppressed in Victorian England (Dickens 52). So too are Thomas Gradgrind (in Dickens) and Jack Walser (in Carter) referents for the oppressive objectivity—that “despotism of fact”—against which the circus is poised (Dickens 106).

If we read 19th century economic progress as a dogmatic adherence to Mr. Bounderby’s conception of an efficient workplace, then the narrative of Coketown is indeed a narrative of progress, because the workers “toil like insects” while the bank of

Coketown flourishes. And the circus is certainly a narrative of regress, or degeneracy, because its population presumably contributes nothing but wanton “stomachs;” and, more notably, they antagonize economic progress by sustaining the very traits that folks like Gradgrind are working so diligently to suppress. They are grotesque spectacles of imaginative fancy that defy simple categorization and thus defy Gradgrind’s conception of order. *Hard Times* is a commentary on the suffocating doctrine of fact (which Dickens clearly attributes to the likes of Jeremy Bentham *et alii*) and the consequently liberating site of fancy (as symbolized by Sleary’s circus); and Dickens’ description of Coketown, nay Preston, is a fitting caricature of utilitarian uniformity and the commodification of workers in post-industrial England—quite literally becoming the oil on their hands. He states accordingly:

The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day, and the sun was so bright that it even shone through the heavy vapour drooping over Coketown...Stokers emerged from low underground doorways into factory yards, and sat on steps, and posts, and palings, wiping their swarth visages...the whole town seemed to be frying in oil...Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed...the atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoon; and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. But no temperature made the melancholy mad elephants more mad or more sane... (Dickens 86).

In *Hard Times*, it is quite clear that Dickens uses the circus—be it the “mad elephants” or that tragic clown, Sissy’s father—as the antithesis of nineteenth century conceptions of progress. Both are indeed murdered in the name of “facts:” “Teach these girls and boys nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts. Nothing else will ever be of any service to them” (Dickens 5). Prior to his latent epiphany, Gradgrind stands “ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature...” and to “educate the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections” (Dickens 6, 41). Sleary’s circus of course resists such efforts at commodification while the “hands” are certainly bound by it: “[Louisa] knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women” (120). The hands are the precise realization of Bounderby’s utilitarian dream—a functional ant colony with no means of upward mobility, “every piece in a violent hurry for one man’s purpose” (Dickens 52). The workers in Coketown—those “melancholy mad elephants...those hands and stomachs”—were merely part of the machinery:

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys...and vast piles of buildings full of windows...where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness...everyday

was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next...Time went on in Coketown like its own machinery...[b]ut, less inexorable than iron, steel, and brass, it brought its various seasons even into that wilderness of smoke and brick, and made the only stand that ever *was* made in the place against its direful uniformity...[Bouderby's] bank offered no violence to the wholesome monotony of the town" (20-1, 71, 87).

This certainly stands in stark contrast to Angela Carter's frivolous St. Petersburg: "...[a] city put together brick by brick by poets, charlatans, adventurers and crazed priests, by slaves, by exiles;" but, even more directly, it is antagonized by the description of Sleary's circus—populated as it is by a dynamic group of men whose "equestrian walk" is the product of a life spent galloping on horseback (Carter 97). They are a people who, more than "hands and stomachs" or mere "machinery," had a "remarkable gentleness and childishness about [them], a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another" (Dickens 31). Bemoaning "the drying up of every spring and fountain" of humanity, he offers his readers the circus—its fanciful humanity and so on—as a viable corollary to the dystopian Coketown (Dickens 150). Gradgrind's system was indeed "an insensible heap... not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell...the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice..." (Dickens 165, 56). Gradgrind had seemingly registered all "human advantages from [an] average of statistical figures and scientific economic formulas"—a dismal science indeed. And Sissy's character was the veritable antidote to such nonsense: "two times two makes four is no longer life...but the beginning of death" (Dostoevsky 19, 30). Dickens dedicated the novel to Carlyle, who likewise saw the mechanization of humankind as a kind of funeral cortege: "... 'the mechanical genius of our time has diffused itself into quite other provinces'...those inward ones of the mind, and the spirit...machines usurp[ed] the functions of men, and men approach[ed] the condition of machines" (Carlyle qtd. in Beauchamp 419-420). In "Mechanomorphism and *Hard Times*" Gorman Beauchamp goes on to cite Andrew Ure's praise of Richard Arkwright who as "celebrator of industrialism praised...the initiator of the factory system above all 'for training human beings to renounce their desultory habits of work, and to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton'" (Ure qtd. in Beauchamp 420). Beauchamp likewise acknowledges Dickens' condemnation of "Adam Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, who treated mankind only in the aggregate, as masses subject to inexorable laws" (425).

Sleary's circus is posited as a reaction against the utilitarian conception of cultural/economic progress that valued reason over fancy, efficiency over empathy—indeed the need to "rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law" (Bentham 65). Dickens' description of Gradgrind in his Observatory is reminiscent of

Mill’s characterization of Bentham: “the faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination” (Mill 339). Sissy is clearly an embodiment of this suppressed imagination. It is likewise clear that her ability to sustain the imaginative fancy and innocence of youth is due to her having abandoned her schooling—i.e., that which dried up the well spring of youth in Louisa—and by having been reared by a collection of characters whose fullness and affection stand in stark contrast to the frail Mrs. Gradgrind, who “looked...like an indifferently executed transparency of a small female figure, without enough light behind it” (12).

As a counter narrative to these vile murderers of innocence, Sissy’s character is basically metonymic. She is the embodiment of fancy, and her presence catalyzes multiple metamorphoses in this novel:

she, grown learned in childish lore...[tried] hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up [and] the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death... (Dickens 222).

Sissy’s magnanimity and Bounderby’s unrelenting obduracy are reminiscent of Mill’s characterization of Coleridge and Bentham, who were likewise embodiments of Dickens’ polemic; “it may be...affirmed that every Englishman [in Victorian England was] by implication a Benthamite or a Coleridgian” (Mill 180). If Bounderby is the embodiment of Benthamite economics, Sissy is surely the embodiment of Coleridgian poetics.

Cecilia Jupe is first introduced to the reader as the “little pitcher” in Thomas Gradgrind’s class who is “unable to define a horse” after offering that her father belonged to “the horse-riding” in the circus ring much to the dismay of this “man of facts and calculations” (Dickens 6, 7). Orphaned early on in the novel, the reader encounters Sissy’s new “family”—“Emma Gordon, in whose lap [she] was a lyin’...” and who “would be a mother to [her], and Joth’phine [who] would be a thithter to [her]...”—who seem like a much better alternative than Bitzer’s adoptive father, Bounderby (33). This alternative conception of family—collective and inclusive—antagonizes the moral order of Coketown—a town distinguished by its continual separations:

the curse of the Gradgrind system is that it separates and alienates, achieving a theoretical order at the expense of real order. The disjointed nature of the Gradgrind family, the many lonely points, both figurative and literal, into which various characters fall; the ostracism of Stephen; the metaphor in the name Slackbridge; and the fact that there is not one true marriage...are expressions of Dickens’ sense of the pervasive separation among human beings. In contemporary pronouncements outside the novel, Dickens revealed the same

fear that the 'the System' was imposing estrangement upon man" (Sonstroem 521).

The "slack bridge" that attempts to unify the hands fails, because the system itself thrives on the alienation of persons from one another and from their communities. Bounderby's isolation signifies progress; on the contrary, the communal nature of Sleary's circus, especially Sissy's non-traditional family, signifies regress because it antagonizes the Gradgrind system. Alternative conceptions of family are pervasive in the Carter novel as well precisely because Angela Carter is likewise using the circus to signify the pre-industrial community that becomes fractured and alienated in modern London. In Ma' Nelson's whorehouse where the Madam functions as a mother of sorts, the women's prison in Siberia, and certainly the circus itself with that "tribe of Cockney nephews and nieces..." persons like Dickens' Sissy Jupe, who have been left behind by progress, conceive of new ways of being (Carter 113).

Additionally, the narrative of Sissy as a more fully realized person than Louisa (*et al*) is a prescient statement about the paradoxical nature of modernity—the sublime subject being replaced by the commodified object; and her characteristic resistance to modernity is likewise a symbol of Gradgrind's failed system. In this sense she is also a kind of harbinger of the postmodern synthesis of fact and fancy that Angela Carter offers in the character of Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*. If such a synthesis were impossible during a period of nascent modernity, not only because of the intrinsically paradoxical nature of a sublime subject being transformed into a sterile object, but likewise because of the general fervor surrounding industrialization, then it would seem that such a viable synthesis could perhaps only occur in a fairytale...and a magical one at that.

We see this as Carter departs from the essayistic approach to the issue of the circus as fancy (and as the antidote to the "grinding despotism" of fact, etc.) and instead uses magical realism (Dickens 106). This narrative strategy effectively satirizes such paragons of reason, in her case Jack Walser and the presumably objective culture of journalism, by positing *them* as the counter-discourse. She inverts the Dickensian model that posits the circus as "other" and instead offers the character of Walser as an antagonist to the magical "Fevvers." As a "man of action"—not unlike Dostoevsky's pitiful "normal man"—Walser was "an *objet trouvé*, for subjectivity, *himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought...he subjected his life to a series of cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle...that was how he knew he was alive" (10). Consequently, he was the perfect observer—not unlike the image of Gradgrind in his Observatory. However, while Gradgrind felt no need "to cast an eye upon the myriads of human beings around him" thinking that he "could settle all their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge," Walser chased Fevvers half way around the world" (Dickens 75).

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter not only posits Walser as the counter discourse, she also relies upon ambiguity rather than antipathy to ultimately achieve a kind of postmodern synthesis of the two opposing theses of fact and fancy. Walser’s character lacks the depth of conviction of Gradgrind—he’s a bit of a chameleon deftly morphing back and forth between the objective observer and the subjective participant; and Fevvers is a fusion of both the objective and subjective—of fact and fiction so to speak. Her characteristic ambiguity is dizzying at times:

Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species, manifestations of Arioriph, Venus, Achamatoth, Sophia...Lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament, reconciler of opposing states through the mediation of your ambivalent body, reconciler of the grand opposites of death and life...[and] Cockney to the bone (81).

Carter’s use of excessive ambiguity in the novel liberates her from the *a priori* polemical relationship between fact and fancy—Coketown and the circus, Bounderby and Sissy, Bentham and Coleridge, and so on; and it allows for more dynamic characters who don’t seem like mere parodies. It is also this confusing ambiguity that enables Carter to fuse the dueling narratives that comprise her magical novel.

Nights at the Circus has been described as a Neo-Victorian novel, because of its commentary on the English class system and that dismal science of Malthus (*et al*) which effectively subjugated the “pain and pleasure” of the nineteenth century underclass; and it has likewise been heralded as a great satire in the tradition of those sardonic magical realists who took similarly oppressive systems to task—Salman Rushdie among others. The novel does indeed do both, and it does so by fusing the Dickensian polemic into a single ambiguous character, who is “Cockney to the bone”—another wink at the reader that Carter is greatly indebted to Dickens’ Victorian satires of English class inequity (118).

The singular consistency in Fevvers’ character is her class status; the reader is constantly reminded of the bawdy and vulgar persona that is the loveable “Cockney Venus.” And so, despite Carter’s imaginary landscape, the divisive category of class remains pervasive; and the clowns are to the circus what the “hands” are to Coketown industry—an exploited under-class upon whose backs their respective cultures thrive. Under the guise of an “elegant...queasy luxury,” this underclass is the “grime under its fingernails” (Carter 105). It is this underclass—“the despised and rejected, the scapegoat upon whose stooped shoulders is heaped the fury of the mob”—that fuels industry, be it the factories in Coketown or the box office in St. Petersburg. Characters like Stephen Blackpool (in *Hard Times*) and Buffo the Clown (in *Nights at the Circus*)—also “Cockney born and bred”—are consequently the tragic underside of both narratives (Carter 119).

Carter's "circus is another business, not unlike Bounderby's factory...[but] the real difference between the factory and the circus is not that between labor and idleness as Bounderby would have it, but rather that between self-seeking, exploiting management and kindly, paternalistic management" (Sonstroem 525). Carter's robust Colonel Kearney—the wacky Uncle Sam sycophant with "old glory" always in tow—sits at the helm of what is perhaps a more rigorous business model than old Sleary, but he is certainly no Bounderby. Kearney, with his psychic pig "Sybil" always at play in the grand "Ludic game,"ⁱⁱⁱ is as fanciful as they come. And while Colonel Kearney's circus (as microcosm) does subjugate its clowns, Carter's clowns (unlike Dickens' hands) are not "insects" so much as pitiful creatures of despair.

Nonetheless, Fevvers belongs to both the artifice of the circus *and* the reality of modern London—a subjective person in Siberia and a subjugated object in London. Like Sissy, her genesis is mysterious—"like Helen of Troy she was hatched"—and her narrative begins with the question: "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (Carter 7). Presumably she is both. Considering Fevvers as a kind of Neo-Victorian Sissy, it is rather easy to posit Walser as her ostensible Gradgrind. Walser—the journalist cum anthropologist who is assigned to chronicle her many adventures—is (not unlike Gradgrind himself) part and parcel of the modern tragedy: "he was a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness...[who] in all his young life had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. If he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave; like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver, Walser did not know *how* to be afraid" (Carter 10). This is certainly a succinct portrait of the suppression of "pain and pleasure" for which Bentham called, and it clearly echoes that same longing that Louisa espouses toward the close of the Dickens novel.

Like Dickens' commentary on the late nineteenth century, the Carter novel is set in 1899—"the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history" (11). Clearly, Carter also sees nineteenth century "progress" as a failed enterprise, and its agents—Walseret *alii*—as mere caricatures of our stifled humanity. Over and against such dejected characters, Carter offers up Fevvers; and Walser, as a portrait of dejection and despair, covets the freedom that the burlesque Fevvers signifies. While Walser's character illustrates the singularity and uniformity of character that we see in Dickens' Gradgrind and Bounderby, Fevvers' character symbolizes the excess (of emotion, etc.) that we see in characters like Sissy Jupe.

Furthermore (and perhaps also like the "equestrian" men and women of Sleary's circus), Fevvers is the grotesque body—exceedingly so—that Assael avers as an "anti-narrative," a subversion of order. She is the essence of spectacle, and all of Europe swarms to capture a glimpse of her: "she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvelous present too good to be played with" (15). She is

drawn as an immense (and exceedingly grotesque) statue of a woman who, at six feet two inches has a face as “broad and oval as a meat dish” and scent far less divine than repulsive—that “solid composite of perfume, sweat, and greasepaint” (8). She is the unlikely “Virgin whore” whose performance is vaguely burlesque—costumed as she is in a transparent leotard with a few solitary sequins sewn strategically to offer a veneer of modesty; and she performs in her gilded cage before a leering audience who are as interested in the freakishness of her size as the presence of her illusive wings. She taunts Walser, and more presciently, she invites the spectator to contemplate his own beastly nature. Fevvers undermines our conceptions of order—civil, biological, moral, and so on—in addition to parodying her own position as an “aerialiste” and a rather successful one at that. Fact or fiction? Well, she was the precise actualization of Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque—“exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness”—and she likewise alternates between “clownish...burlesque...and grotesque” while always remaining that cockneyed giant who constantly tabulates her immense earnings—a modern paradox indeed (303-4). Fevvers resists victimization as a grotesque spectacle precisely *because* of her excessiveness and her ambiguity:

Fevvers’s ability to arouse in others the desire to consume her is offset (and perhaps fed by) her own urge to consume — particularly wealth and, as the signifiers of such wealth, fine food and drink (although she is just as appreciative of the satisfaction of hearty, traditionally working-class meals). As a winged woman, Fevvers is unashamedly aberrant, freakish. However, she is also a desiring subject, and a self-creation who chooses the ways in which her unnaturalness, and her appetites, are performed, thus rejecting the victimization that normally attends freakishness. Eroticism rather than monstrosity, defines her identity as a performer and celebrity...(Dennis 117).

Fevvers lives between dimensions—both in 19th century London as the famed “aerialiste” and likewise in the Siberian underground circus, a site populated with what are clearly correlative analogues for the absurd personae of her London life—Lizzie, Walser, and so on. Carter’s two conflicting narratives use this literary artifice—her grotesque “aerialiste”—as a suture. The temporal dysfunction works because of this: as the reader is thrust between London, St. Petersburg, Siberia, and back to London, the narrative retains its cohesion because of Fevvers.

Steeped in dualisms, and stuck between dimensions, Carter’s text invites the reader into a liminal state—the purgatory of Ma Nelson’s drawing room is a striking example of the arresting of time in the novel:

This clock was, you might say, the sign, or signifier of Ma Nelson’s little private realm. It was a figure of Father Time with a scythe in one hand and a skull in the other above a face on which the hands stood always at ether midnight or noon,

the minute hand and the hour hand folded perpetually together as if in prayer, for Ma Nelson said the clock in her reception room must show the dead centre of the day and night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time (29).

And in a suspended state of confusion, the reader is ultimately drawn into the corollary universe of Siberia—the ultimate actualization of fancy where Walser is finally (and irrevocably) transformed from a “man of action” into an apparition.

Unfortunately, the novel culminates in the statement that Fevvers has turned “from a woman into an idea”—a utopian fantasy into a fixed ideological reality—which is a final comment by Carter about the impossibility of “man’s triumph over the rational” and another wink at the reader who perhaps suspects all along that her fairytale format is indeed a means of doing precisely what Dickens did (Carter 289). *Nights at the Circus* is indeed a Neo-Victorian fairytale of Dickensian proportions. For this reason, the notion of the circus as somehow liberating fails in both novels: it is a corollary indeed, but an artificial one, however much Carter is able to suspend her reader’s disbelief through magic. In both Dickens and Carter we see the incommensurability of justice and prosperity harshly parodied and perhaps rightfully so.

The reader can certainly interpret the character of Walser as a postmodern Gradgrind, a kind of paradoxical character who grapples with the simultaneous affliction with which Thomas Gradgrind likewise grapples—i.e., the devotion to objectivity which is undermined at every turn by that very human impulse toward the “sublime and the beautiful.” And, of course we have our postmodern Sissy in the character of Fevvers, who is the progeny of ambiguous parentage; the offspring of a mythical father (presumably Zeus in the case of Fevvers); and a child of the circus—freakish, alienated, fanciful, innocent. And the Dickensian ending that required Sissy to ultimately conceive of a “normal” family is reconfigured yet present in the story of Fevvers as well:

In Walser’s eyes, she saw herself, at last, swimming into definition, like the image on photographic paper; but, instead of Fevvers, she saw two perfect miniatures of a dream...she felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser’s eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: ‘Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?’(290)

If Carter’s novel was an attempt at synthesis—a departure from the Dickensian polemic so to speak—Fevvers ultimately fails, because the circus as both corollary and analogue is as intrinsically paradoxical as the Modern synthesis of “fact and fancy.” As such, its failure to offer solace resounds with Dickens’ mournful plea for a “fusion of the different classes...the bringing together of employers and employed...the creating of a better common understanding among those whose interests are identical, who depend on

each other, and who can never be unnatural antagonists without deplorable results” (Dickens qtd. in Sanstroem 521). He further muses in *Hard Times*: “Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds?” (19) Of course it was possible; and so too is there a clear analogy between the case of London and the clowns of Siberia; but their fusion can only occur in fiction, because of the aforementioned incommensurability of justice and prosperity...at least Bounderby’s idea of prosperity. If it is indeed the case that economic progress can only be realized within a system that reduces men to insects, then these “men of facts and calculations” and the clowns who bear their crosses can never be reconciled. And so, the idealistic Dickens is ultimately as disillusioned as his protagonist:

The Benthamite Thomas Gradgrind is a Utopian in the sense that he has mapped out and started following a specific path towards an expected improvement of the social order. Paradoxically, this is a path that Dickens himself may have trodden for part of the way: the most poignant critique of utopia comes from utopian idealists who have become disillusioned (Toker 467).

The circus as a kind of failed utopia mimics the factory in Bentham’s failed utopia. Both clearly fail to improve the “social order,” because their ideal sense of order is ultimately impossible: both fail to recognize “the incommensurability of different people’s views of happiness and value...Thomas Gradgrind’s case is one of the earliest literary studies of near-dystopian results of misguided idealism” (Toker 465-6). Of course, Toker is citing Isaiah Berlin’s argument that “the main reason for the decline in utopian thinking is” precisely the failure to recognize this incommensurability. Like Gradgrind (both Thomas *and* Louisa that is), Fevvers is also incapable of negotiating between the fantasy of St. Petersburg—i.e., the artifice of her subjectivity—and the calculating reality of London—her objective self. Consequently, *reason* prevails in both novels. The description of Fevvers awaiting her freedom from the captivity of the whorehouse early on in the novel seems a metaphor for all of the clowns—Stephen Blackpool in Coketown and Buffo the Great in St. Petersburg—who are awaiting the revolution:

I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited...I waited... (Carter 39).

But Fevvers and certainly Stephen would continue to wait, because the revolution fails and both return to their posts as spectacles—be it the “aerialiste” or the broken old Stephen Blackpool, a “stooping” old man at only “forty years of age” (Dickens 52). Sadly, the circus is only a site of potential liberation with the ability to undermine the

hegemony of reason in as much as *any* class system comprised of incommensurable conceptions of “happiness and value” can. Therefore, it is indeed a corollary to Coketown—a departure from and improvement upon Bentham’s vision—but it remains forever trapped in the “shadowless hour...the still hour in the centre of the storm of time” (Carter 29). This artifice of freedom is trapped between “the idea/And the reality...Between the conception/And the creation/Between the emotion/And the response” (Eliot *Li* 73-4, 78-70).

Presumably, if the clock were to unfold its hands and welcome the year 1900, the engines of progress would rely on Frederick Winslow Taylor^{iv} (and not Sleary) to sustain their growth. And so the circus (and the factory) remain a repository for the Victorian and Neo-Victorian underclass “doomed to stay below, nailed on the endless cross of the humiliations of the world” (Carter 120).

Notes

ⁱ Thomas Carlyle famously referred to the “science” of economics (*a la* Malthus and Bentham) as “dismal” because of its gross quantification of persons, etc.

ⁱⁱ In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky uses Edmund Burke’s thesis regarding the sublime and the beautiful as a referent for the waning Romanticism in the Modern period and the tragic implications of our suppression of the sublime.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carter’s use of the term “Ludic” multiple times to refer to Coloney Kearney as the absurd Gepetto is clearly an allusion to Johan Huizinga’s concept of the *Homo Ludens*—men at play participating in the construction of a shifting reality as over and against a *Homo Sapiens*, or simply knowing being.

^{iv} Frederick W. Taylor in “The Principles of Scientific Management” essentially echoes Bentham’s conception of order in his call for “maximum prosperity.”

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Stacey Balkan teaches Latin American and World Literatures at Bergen Community College in New Jersey. Her research interests include post-independence Latin-American and South Asian literatures, post-contemporary and transnational literatures more generally, and cognitive theory. Her recent work on the transnational *mestizo* (*Wretched Refugee: Itinerants in the Postmodern*, 2010, and in the *Cambridge Companion to Comparative Literature*, 2012) focuses on the post-independence Latin American city; and she is collaborating on a forthcoming collection that interrogates the "metropolitan migrant" in the global city.
