

Martha Nussbaum on *Hard Times*

or

What you see is what you are

All page references are to *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.

Martha Nussbaum epitomizes many of the elements of the academic world that are most discomfiting and alienating. Her academic success story is what most young, ambitious North American graduate students are taught to model themselves upon: the extremely successful, self-marketing, academic entrepreneur who has triumphed by embracing multiculturalism and interdisciplinarity, advocating social reform, and delivering her gospel to conferences and universities around the globe. Her successful self-marketing has earned her the reputation as the “Academic Action Figure,” a phrase used only half-jokingly. My question is, what does it all amount to?

She certainly isn’t content to be any mere library- or study-bound philosopher-critic. Alongside her purely academic activities she also undertakes “more technical philosophical projects” (xviii). She wants to make a difference and to give practical economics—the kind concerned with the greatest happiness of the greatest number—a human face. For instance, during 1986 to 1993, when she was a consultant to the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) in Helsinki, she, along with the economist Amartya Sen, “used *Hard Times*”, as she says, “to develop criticisms of standard economic paradigms of quality of life assessment, which seemed to us reductive and lacking in human complexity, and to illustrate the types of information such assessments would need to include in order to be fully rational, offering good guidance of both a predictive and normative type” (vxi).

Poetic Justice—making its starting point the insight that the novel (and literature generally) “invites criticism and completion from philosophical theories” (45)—continues this work:

What I now wish to claim is that a novel like *Hard Times* is a paradigm of such assessment. Presenting the life of a population with a rich variety of qualitative distinctions and complex individual descriptions of functioning and impediments to functioning, using a general notion of human need and human functioning in a highly concrete context, it provides the sort of information required to assess quality of life and involves the reader in the task of

WORDS IN EDGEWAYS - 9

making the assessment. (52)

Encapsulated in such a remark is the secret of academic success: marrying boldness and originality of conception—*Hard Times*, or some novel like it, is a paradigm of non-standard quality of life assessment—with modesty of manner. She not only isn't asserting what she's saying; she isn't even claiming it; she just wishes to claim it, that's all. (Have a look at her photograph on the Chicago Law School website, and tell me you could deny her.) Dickens, she has discovered, has done in *Hard Times* just what she herself wants to do in *Poetic Justice*: “construct a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic” (8).

Throughout her book she repeatedly says that her “antagonist throughout will be, not sophisticated philosophical forms of utilitarianism . . . but cruder forms of economic utilitarianism and cost-benefit analysis” (3)—which, coincidentally, is just what, in her book, Dickens's antagonist throughout his book is and is not too. Early on she alerts the reader to what the two books share:

The reader should be aware from the beginning that my criticism (like the novel's) is directed toward a particular conception of economic science, not toward the idea of economic science itself, and certainly not toward the idea that abstract theories of a scientific sort can be crucial to the good conduct of public life. (19)

Hard Times

suggests a subtle internal critique of certain species of utilitarianism, not its complete repudiation. The suggestion is that what is finest in the theory has not been well served by the theory in its full elaboration (especially, though not only, in contemporary economics); that a different a fuller vision of persons is necessary to do justice to the deepest insights of Bethamism itself. (33)

Therefore: it

should not displace the workings of economic science, which can do many things that the imaginations of individuals, without such formal models, cannot do, giving us, among other things, a practical sense of how certain goals that the imagination may present to us – less unemployment, lower prices, in general a better quality of life – might be accomplished. (12)

So there you have, behind the modesty, the breathtaking scope and ambition of *Poetic Justice* (this really is a book the aspiring academic should study): to do nothing less than effect a

WORDS IN EDGEWAYS - 9

reconciliation between the two great opposing principles of nineteenth century life and thought, as manifested in their most plainly representative (and, therefore, seemingly most mutually hostile) embodiments, the authors of *Hard Times* and of *The Principles of Morals and Legislation!* And to do so by describing the one in the language of the other! And (here's the clincher—the clincher, I mean, for modesty in search of success) where is that reconciliation to be found, *concretely*? Where else but in a book that simultaneously uses the novel to develop criticisms of philosophical theory, and supplies the philosophical theory that criticizes and completes the sense made by the novel, a book aptly named *Poetic Justice?* (By whose means chalk and cheese are made interchangeable—though not, alas, by analogy with the water that was turned into wine.)

And what—as we might vulgarly put it—is the pay-off, critically speaking, for this enterprise? Well, it is that Dickens, in some very important respects, thinks just like Martha Nussbaum—or, at least, that there is nothing in his book that's out of reach of her style. (If it's good enough for the World Institute for Development Economics Research, how, for fact's sake, could it not be good enough for Dickens?) He, like her, has some damaging criticisms to make of standard economic theory but then he too stops short “at the price of jettisoning moral and political theory” altogether (45). What both writers favour is “alternative conceptions” of economic theory (33). It is as true of his book as of hers that “political and economic treatises of an abstract and mathematical sort would be perfectly consistent with its purpose” (44). His book, like hers, “makes a contribution to economic science” by suggesting that “a more complicated theory of the person might deliver better predictions” (47). “Sissy Jupe's Economics Lesson” is, for instance, one key passage where Dickens tries to make room for more sophisticated approaches than those of the unreformed utilitarians. Sissy's answers there show up the “crude measure” of the utilitarian-informed questions she's asked and, in doing so, show Dickens advocating the need for a “more sophisticated approach” to measuring “the quality of life in a nation” (50).

Then the characters of the novel generally illustrate the economic theme. Bitzer exemplifies unreformed utilitarian economics; Harthouse represents “explanatory/predictive” “rational-choice models” and uses Louisa to test the truth (or truth-value) of, “certain actions are chosen, certain results will follow” (14, 15); Bounderby is the embodiment of “aggregation” in pooling the data from the workers' lives without regarding their individuality (14); Tom demonstrates the meaning of “maximizing” by becoming a thief and stealing as large an amount of money as possible (14); Mrs. Sparsit is “exogenous” in assuming Louisa's preferences can be taken as given (14). And then, where the two books are not simply alike, they are complementary. Where the one “invites criticism and completion from philosophical theories” (45); the other supplies them; that is, where Dickens goes wrong, Nussbaum puts him right: his “hostility to formal mathematical modeling prevented him from seeing that

problems for which he sought a solution in private charity might in fact be susceptible of a public institutional solution” (11).

Nussbaum could hardly think reading literature more important than she does. She thinks it essential to our living: by exercising our literary imagination, we improve our capacity to think and act as responsible citizens, and become more fully human. And how do we know whether the books we read are “literary” ones or not? “to the extent that they promote identification and sympathy in the reader, they resemble literary works” (5); “literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences” (5); the literary imagination is all “identification and sympathy” (7, 30); what counts is the “sympathetic identification” (73) literature promotes.

Unfortunately it’s not Charles Dickens she sympathetically identifies with in *Hard Times* but Thomas Gradgrind, whose change from an unreformed to a half-reformed utilitarian embodies the very process her own reformation of utilitarian economics means to imitate. He is “an interesting character” because of “his failure to be the sort of person his utilitarian theory represents” (30); “he is not like his own theoretical constructs ... he is qualitatively distinct and separate in a way not recognized in his theory’s vision of persons ... he is motivated by love, commitment, and plain decency in ways that do not find expression in his theory of human action.... So this man has a soul” (31). Change the personal pronouns and the gender references, and here you have simultaneously Nussbaum’s idealized self-portrait and her idealized reformation of utilitarian economic modelling. She too is a loving human being distinct and separate from her utilitarian arguments, not a utility container, not a crude practitioner of unfeeling utilitarian programmes. She wants to find a way to transform her utilitarian economics reform project into something motivated by love and commitment. *Hard Times* isn’t anti-utilitarian, after all. It’s utilitarianism with a human face—and not just any face either, Martha’s

And her sympathy for Gradgrind, the utilitarian who has lost his confidence in utilitarianism is matched by her antipathy to Bitzer, economic man free of any doubt that in maximizing his utility function he is doing just what he ought. The one is what she would be (and amazingly seems to think Dickens is too), the other what she wouldn’t. Bitzer is “chillingly weird and not quite human” (30) and, because of “his incapacity for any sympathy or commitment that extend beyond a use of others to serve his own ends”, a “monster,” (30). Well, yes but in transforming and assimilating *Hard Times* to her own project—to reconcile Dickens with Bentham—isn’t she using the former to serve her own ends? Isn’t she also, in her own way, a “monstrous product of the utilitarian system”, her thought informed by it, her language shaped by it? How much of the novel is just invisible to her? The circus and everything it represents. Everything that has to do with love, marriage, family relations. The *style!* But for her sentimental identification with Gradgrind, what she says of Bitzer—he’s “just weird; we cannot identify with him or wonder about him, for we sense that all within is empty. A novel

WORDS IN EDGEWAYS - 9

peopled entirely by Bitzer would be a kind of science fiction” (30)—
would be no less true of herself.

Reading *Poetic Justice* is a strange experience. In it *Hard Times*
is transformed into something entirely new and completely
antipathetic to itself, an image of Nussbaum and her own “more
technical projects”.

Alfred Applegate