‘Writing Facts’ and 19th-Century English Realist Fiction

Theoretical Reflections and the Complexity of the Relationship in Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, and George Eliots *Adam Bede*

Werner Wolf (University of Graz)

1. Introduction: Fact-Writing and Fiction – a Relationship with a Variegated History[1]

‘Fiction,’ by its very name, is commonly understood as the opposite of fact. Thus, a literary genre which uses, at least in English, this term as its denomination appears to be an unfitting choice for a volume sporting the topic “writing facts.” Indeed, strictly speaking, fiction seems to have nothing to do with facts. Yet, literary history belies this impression. In ‘fact,’ the role of ‘writing facts’ is anything but immaterial to the development of fiction in general, and the novel in particular, with which I will be concerned in the following. Rather, the novel’s relationship with facts has a variegated and interesting history. This is true both with respect to the more or less factive objects of novels, and the ways and effects of novelistic storytelling which oscillate between seemingly objective, factual[2] narration and the laying bare of fictionality or, rather, fictiveness. From the ‘editor’s’ claim that his text is “a just history of facts,” as made in the “Preface” to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*,[3] to a postmodernist narrator’s metafictional disclaimer, “I wander the island, inventing it”

1 My thanks are due – as so often – to Cecilia Servatius and Jutta Klobasek-Ladler for their expert help with the manuscript.

2 For the use of ‘factive/fact’ vs. ‘fictive/fiction’ in an ontological and ‘factual(ity)’ vs. ‘fictional(ity)’ in a reception-oriented sense, see below.

3 Defoe 1719/1965: 25.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY

(the first sentence in Robert Coover's short story "The Magic Poker"),[4] dealing with facts has obviously changed in a drastic way. After the 'rise of the novel' as we know it, epitomized by *Robinson Crusoe*, 19th-century realism appears to be a continuation, if not an intensification, of the preceding proto-realism, especially when it comes to often critical (hetero-)references to individual geographical, sociological, historical, etc., facts of contemporary reality and/or making the reader believe in the facticity of the represented world.

In view of this privileged place of the 19th-century novel in the history of the relationship between fact and fiction, I will, in the following, focus on English 19th-century realist fiction by way of two mid-century examples which appear to me to be of particular relevance: Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859). From a superficial point of view, the relationship between 19th-century realism and positivistic fact-orientation appears to be un-problematic. At closer inspection, however, this relationship turns out to be more complex, as will be shown with respect to the two novels mentioned. *Hard Times* implies a strong criticism of a one-sided contemporary belief in positivistic facts as the only phenomena one ought to care or know about, a belief drastically represented by the fact-ideology as practiced in the school of Mr. M'Choakumchild. However, when it comes to the reception attitude presupposed by the novel, the seeming factuality of the represented world (within the reception contract of illusionist storytelling) is never really challenged. Something similar can be said about *Adam Bede*, albeit with the difference that the criticism of a belief in objective facts is here not transmitted through the reprehensible activities and attitudes of problematic characters but rather through an authorial narrator who, at times, betrays a remarkable, if limited, skepticism towards objective storytelling.

My remarks will be structured as follows. First, I will briefly deal with the concept of 'fact' and with related terminology and concepts such as truth, reality, and aesthetic illusion as a 'reality effect' of sorts occurring in the process of reception. In the preliminary theoretical reflections on the fact/fiction opposition and the use of facts in novels, I will also characterize the prototypical relationship of 19th-century realist fiction with these concepts. In the ensuing two chapters, the two novels and their complex relationships to facts, factuality, and the immersive illusionist reading-effect will be discussed, before placing, in conclusion, the position of these novels in a wider historical context between romanticism, modernism and post-modernism.

4 Coover 1969/1970: 20.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY

2. 'Fact(s)': Concept, Terminology, Related Concepts, and the Prototypical Relationship of Realist Fiction to These Concepts

What is a 'fact'? In the present contribution, while this question cannot be answered in detail in a philosophical sense, it can be addressed with respect to the common-sense use of the term, which is also the sense relevant to literary studies. Generally, according to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, a fact is "a thing that is indisputably the case."[5] More precisely, and as mentioned in the call for papers of the conference on which the present publication is based, one may describe 'fact' in accordance with today's usage as a verifiable phenomenon of reality believed to exist independently of the observing subject and thus objectively true. The belief in such facts and such a reality is what I term 'epistemological realism.' Fact, in this context, has an obvious relationship to the notions of 'objectivity,' 'truth,' and 'reality' (which I will also refrain from further discussing here). It should be noted, however, that in today's use of the term the etymological origin of *factum* is obscured: *factum* as something made or created (especially by God – the "Nicean Creed" refers to this meaning twice in a positive and once – concerning Christ – in a negative sense).[6]

For literary and media studies, a further antonymic concept is of obvious importance, namely 'fiction,' which in English has the somewhat unfortunate double meaning as a literary genre (as used in the title of the present contribution) and as an ontological or reception-centered category (related to construction, simulation, invention, delusion or lie and opposed to truth and reality). The complex literary relationship between fact and fiction has been systematized in a thought-provoking way by Andreas Kablitz (2008): he distinguishes between an ontological or referential and a reception-centered facet of the opposition, which results in two pairs of opposition (see Figure 1). With somewhat clumsy English translations, the ontological facet is the opposition between **facticity** and **fictiveness** (or factive vs. fictive), while the

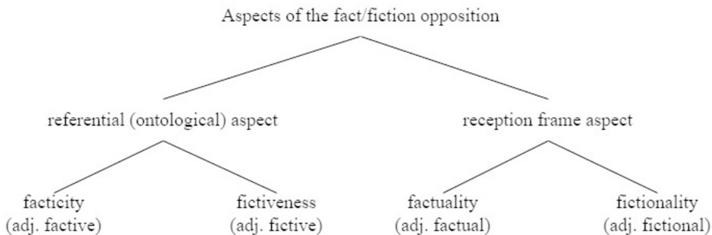
5 *New Oxford Dictionary of English* 1999: 656–657; note the interesting implied reference to a community within which something is 'indisputable'!

6 "Credo in unum Deum [...] **fact**orem caeli et terrae [...] et in [...] Iesum Christum [...] genitum, non **factum** [...] consubstantialem Patri; per quem omnia **facta** sunt [...]"; from another, more (post)modern, point of view, used by deconstructivists and the like, the constructivist nature of so-called facts is highlighted, and this may also serve to gesture to the obscured etymology in which fact and fiction become merged.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

reception-centered opposition may be called **factuality** vs. **fictionality** (or factual vs. fictional). The advantage of the differentiation is the possibility of distinguishing between what is the case in a given text (the first pair of terms) and how and in which cognitive frame a given text is received (the second pair of terms). Novels, for instance, are generally read in the cognitive frame of fictionality, while autobiography is received, as a rule, in the frame of factuality. However, both genres can contain factive as well as fictive elements: a novel may refer to real historical persons but characterize them with fictive features, while an autobiography may combine facticity with fictive (untrue) self-stylizations or errors. One may say it is the predominance of either facticity or fictiveness in a genre and/or convention which makes it eligible for the respective frames through which it is received (with literary deviations being possible in fictional biographies parading as factual ones, for instance).

Figure 1: Aspects of the fact/fiction opposition in literature (and other arts/media) after Kablitz 2008



A further differentiation is helpful for our context, namely one with respect to where facts, their discussion, or the impression of factuality are created or occur: within a literary text and its represented world or in the relation between this text-world and the recipient (see figure 2).

As for the latter, '**extracompositional**' facets of facts and related concepts, they concern two aspects: a) an impression a text and the world represented in it creates in the recipient, and b) the referential, or, as I term it, hetero-referential relation[7] between text (world) and the world of reality or facts.

7 The term serves to distinguish between hetero-reference and self- as well as meta-reference. (Cf. Wolf 2009: 16–25)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - [cc] BY

In the former, '**intracompositional**' case, facts or the concept of 'fact' can occur in two forms: facts can either be thematized (in the mode of '**telling**') or be observed (and believed) as parts of the represented world (in the mode of '**showing**'). The **thematization of facts** may refer to mentions of truthful phenomena by characters or the narrator as opposed, for instance, to lies; in rare cases, it may also include quasi 'philosophical' discussions of the existence and perception of facts and related concepts and problems. The **showing of facts** refers to the world building of literary texts which create their own realities by positing the existence of their elements. Here, again, an opposition exists between fictional facts and mere dreams, illusions, simulations, etc., in short, elements of the represented world that are supposed to be taken seriously as fictional facts and those that are not.[8] The 'facts' a novel creates or refers to can – and in fact often do – coalesce in the recipient's mind into a more or less coherent representation of a world in which one has the impression of being immersed – in short, they are the buildings blocks of 'aesthetic illusion.'[9]

This reader-related immersion, or in Roland Barthes's term 'effect of reality,'[10] can be differentiated according to its nature or 'level.' On a first level, we encounter the general impression created by immersive or illusionist works of an 'as-if-reality.' As I have discussed elsewhere, the creation of **aesthetic illusion** can in principle occur in both texts that are read in the framework of factuality and in texts that are received under the auspices of fictionality.[11] Likewise, both fictive and factive representations can exist within either frame, and the respective objects can trigger an impression of being immersed in the respective worlds regardless of their ontological or referential status. When these worlds are narrative worlds (as in fiction) and not, for instance, descriptive worlds (as in much poetry) the impression of a quasi-reality is enhanced. The reason for this is that aesthetic illusion is essentially coupled with experientiality. As experience is arguably more intense when related to dynamic objects in time, the immersive part of aesthetic illusion (as opposed to the quantum of distance and media-awareness which keeps it from becoming a delusion) is intensified by the essentially dynamic nature of narrativity.

---

8 In narratology, parts of these 'deleted' or non-'factual' facts have been discussed under the terms 'disnarrated elements' (cf. Prince 1996: 98) and "shadow stories" (Abbott 2015).

9 Cf. Wolf 2013.

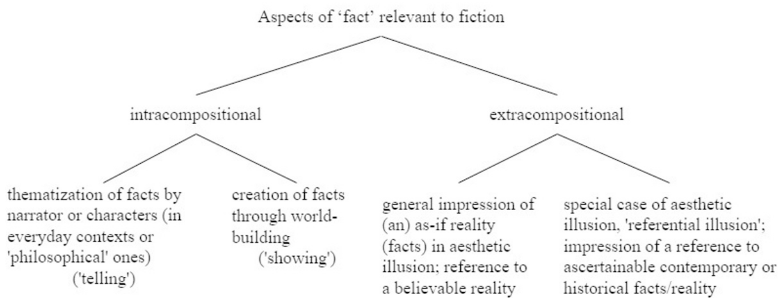
10 Cf. Barthes 1968.

11 Cf. Wolf 2013.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - [cc] BY

As opposed to this first and general level of the impression of a quasi-reality which, owing to the common reception contract of a 'suspension of disbelief,' we tend to provisionally accept as if it were fact, there is a second level implied by some works: This is the additional impression that one is not confronted with **a** reality or with fictional facts but with **our** reality as we know it or with reality *tout court* and thus with actually, or seemingly, ascertainable facts of contemporary or historical reality. In literature, this impression is termed '**referential illusion**.' One should, however, note that referential illusion is not co-extensive with aesthetic illusion but a special case of it.[12]

Figure 2: Aspects of 'fact' relevant to fiction



To sum up: aesthetic illusion (as well as its breaking) can occur both within the frame of factual and fictional reception; it always creates the effect of an experienceable reality and thus of 'facts,' that is, being immersed in **a reality**; in some rare cases, the additional impression is elicited of being immersed in **reality *tout court***.

It should be noted that literary hetero-reference comprises references to **general** facts of life as well as **specific** references to contemporary or historical reality. 'Reference' can in both cases imply positive reference but also problematization or, in extreme cases, for instance in postmodern deconstruction, denial.[13]

12 Cf. ibid. 2008.

13 It should be noted, though, that even the most radically anti-referential (or anti-mimetic) texts cannot dispense with using references to the world of our experience and knowledge (hence to what Iser called the 'repertoire,' cf. Iser 1975: 299).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

What is now the prototypical position of 19th-century realist fiction in relation to these aspects, uses, and impressions of 'fact'? Generally, one can align this kind of novel with what was termed 'epistemological realism' above. This can already be seen in the intracompositional dealing with facts: in realist fiction, the represented world, as a rule, is a system of probable, believable (fictional) facts, and the phenomena of this world are observable and (ultimately) explicable rationally or, at least in an inner-worldly way, without recourse to transcendental or supernatural agencies. This can, for instance, be seen in the frequent use of physiognomic descriptions of characters' faces and bodies, since such descriptions are based on a belief in transparency, that is, in the belief (or, we tend to say today, myth) that empirically observable surface facts reveal underlying character dispositions and histories.[14] Moreover, the fact-orientation of realism can be observed in the emphasis placed on the ultimate revelation of truth and facts wherever they are temporarily obscured by characters and the novel's action. This emphasis is also responsible for the frequent 'disillusionment' of characters as a topos of realist story telling. The underlying positivistic belief in the unproblematic existence of facts and the possibility of accessing and representing them correctly also renders the problematization of facts as such through characters of the narrator relatively rare in realism.

As for the extracompositional aspect of dealing with facts and concomitant reception effects, 19th-century realist novels are, according to widespread opinion,[15] based on the belief in an objective, subject-independent reality to whose facts they refer, often in a concrete and specific way, and about which they try to create a consensus between implied author and reader.[16] This optimistic, positivist epistemology is supported by a pervading illusionism and thus by the novels triggering the impression, in the readers, of being immersed in a quasi-reality. While this general illusionism is also true of Gothic fiction or, for instance, H.G. Wells' science fiction, realist novels, in addition, frequently elicit the impression that the readers are confronted with contemporary reality as they know it from experience of history. Realist fiction thus often reaches the second level of illusionism, namely referential illusion. Symptoms of the fact that realist writing tends towards this direction include the use of well-known settings with real place-

14 Cf. Wolf 2002a, Wolf 2002b.

15 Cf. Ermath 1983: 77.

16 Cf. Fluck 1992: 27, 35.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

names, the choice of temporal settings that are contemporary or quasi contemporary, and the representation of characters from all classes and milieus observable in Victorian society. In harmony with the middle-class orientation of this society and the predominantly middle-class readership, both the dominant reservoir of characters and most of the implied norms tend to show clear middle-class preferences. All of this creates the impression that the represented world is an extension of the (middle-class) readers' world.

This is, perhaps, best illustrated by the frequent use of the formula "one of those" as, for instance, in the initial characterization of Marty South in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Woodlanders*: "She was one of those people who, if they have to work harder than their neighbours, prefer to keep the necessity a secret as far as possible [...]."[17] "One of those," here and elsewhere, is an appeal to the reader to link the observation following this formula to their own world-knowledge and thus both an appeal to see, and a confirmation of, the close relationship between the novel's world and their own world. This strategy of realist storytelling to reference experiential reality may even be so intense that the frame of fictionality, in which realist fiction, like all fiction, is read, may temporarily be obscured in favor of the opposing framework of factuality. As announced above, the complex relationship between (seeming) fact writing and 19th-century fiction will be illustrated in the following by two examples.

3. Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*: The Implied Criticism of Facts in a Novel Based on Critical References to Contemporary Facts of Life

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls 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 service to them."[18] These are the instructions of a major character, Mr. Gradgrind, which he gives to the schoolmaster M'Choakumchild in the opening of Dickens' *Hard Times*. This *medias-in-res* beginning is emblematic of

17 Hardy 1999 [1887]: 16.

18 Dickens 1854/1969: 47. References to *Hard Times* (Penguin edition) in the following in the abbreviated form: "*HT*: page number". In the case of subsequent quotations only with page numbers in brackets.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

the relevance of this novel to our topic 'writing facts.' Indeed, I do not know of any other 19th-century novel in which facts and a fact-centered worldview are so pervadingly thematized and its effects so graphically shown, more precisely, in which such a worldview is so devastatingly criticized.

The details of this criticism in this frequently discussed novel are too well known[19] to require further belaboring, so that I can restrict myself here to a few 'facts': The fact-ideology at issue in the novel is represented by a number of negative characters, some of them with telling names denoting facets of their negativity: the schoolmaster M'Choakumchild; the industrialist Gradgrind; the "banker, merchant, manufacturer" and alleged self-made man Bounderby; and, moreover, the dandy and promoter of statistics Harthouse. Their fact-centered ideology is based on a materialist empiricism, positivism, and utilitarianism, in which only reason (cf. *HT*: 62), measurable and classifiable facts, and their general calculability in statistics and economics count. This ideology is linked to a view of man in which self-interest, or rather selfishness (Harthouse's belief "everyman is selfish in everything he does") (205), and generalities rather than individuality (131–132) are emphasized. The effects of this ideology are critically shown in several fields.

The first fact-related issue the reader is confronted with right from the above-quoted opening scene onwards is education, epitomized by M'Choakumchild's model school and the education of Mr Gradgrind's children Tom and Louisa and his foster-daughter Sissy, an education in which "it hailed facts all day long." (95) The importance of this area, in particular in a moral respect, is underlined by the titles of the novel's three parts which suggest a natural causality between "Sowing" (Book 1), "Reaping" (Book 2) and "Garnering" (Book 3). The consequences of an education exclusively based on 'facts,' which suppresses fancy or imagination, and neglects morality speak for themselves: Sissy is unhappy, and so is Louisa, who is encouraged, especially by her egoist brother, to enter a merely rational marriage (from which she tries to escape in an all but adulterous affair with Harthouse). Yet it is Tom who, besides the model-pupil Bitzer (see III.8), is the most glaring illustration of what can be 'reaped' and 'garnered' from the 'seeds' of an erroneously fact-centered education and a neglect of morality in particular (which is also present in Harthouse's moral indifference and relativity): Tom becomes a gambler and a criminal: he steals a considerable sum of money, for which he directs suspicion on the innocent worker Stephen Blackpool,

19 Cf. Simpson 1997, notably 1–11.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

who then, in his flight from criminal persecution, has an accident and dies. Tom himself is ultimately forced to flee Britain, repents too late, and dies on his return journey.

Another area where the pernicious effects of the fact-ideology loom large is the industrial world in the manufacturing city of "Coketown", described by Dickens in the well-known chapter entitled "The Keynote:" "COKETOWN [...] was a triumph of fact; it had no greater taint of fancy in it than Mrs Gradgrind herself." (*HT*: 65) The novel represents at large the poor labor conditions of the working class, the "unnatural" (ibid.) life they are forced to lead, and its consequences: poverty, rebellion (in the chartists), alcoholism (in Stephen's wife), and endless suffering. It is made clear that all of this is connected with the view that only material facts, in this case, the calculable financial profit of the masters, count.

A third area, in part linked with the industrial theme, is aesthetics. The exclusive reign of useful, utilitarian facts is most graphically illustrated in the terrible architecture which this mindset produces. This refers to Gradgrind's Stone Lodge, to Bounderby's home, and, above all, to Coketown at large. It is a town full of "severely workful" and monotonously repetitive buildings (ibid.), where "[a]ll the public inscriptions were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white," and where "[t]he jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either or both [...] Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town." (66)

All in all, the criticism of the fact-ideology implied in *Hard Times* rests on its following deficiencies:[20] It is wrongly holistic owing to its claim to embrace the totality of reality. It is reductionist in disregarding or neglecting essential human dimensions: moral and religious feelings, general emotions, human motivations, imagination/fancy, and individuality.[21] And it is generally accused of forming an inadequate approach to human nature and reality at large. Its negative effects impact vast areas of reality: education, ethics, religion, arts/literature, economics and society at large, and last but not least, epistemology.

In the face of such an intracompositional indictment of 'facts' – can one say that *Hard Times* is really a realist novel, for which, as was said above, the

20 As partly detailed by Nussbaum 2001 [1991].

21 There are numerous references to human nature and its incalculability, starting with p. 48.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

validity of facts must be postulated? Do facts here only play a role as the cornerstones of a pernicious ideology which the novel strives to dismantle in favor of ethics and the imagination? No, facts do play a major and positive role both on the intra- and extracompositional level, that is, both with respect to the relation between the novel and contemporary reality and the way and effects of the world building within the novel.

As for the extracompositional reception effect created by *Hard Times*, it is in line with all realist fiction in its eliciting aesthetic illusion, even to the extent of creating a referential reality effect. As opposed to, notably postmodernist fiction, the reader is at no point meant to doubt the reality of the fictional facts.

In addition, the impression is frequently elicited that the novel deals with specific aspects of contemporary reality and thus at times adds 'referential illusion' to the general aesthetic illusion it elicits. This impression of referential illusion is corroborated by the history of the novel's gestation: *Hard Times* first appeared in serialized form in Dickens's weekly journal *Household Words* in 1854 and, as Simpson convincingly argues in a chapter entitled "The Interdependency of the 'Great Magazine of Facts' and 'Hard Times'",[22] manifests a common concern with contemporary England and a remarkable "correspondence between the journalism and the fiction."[23] The fact-orientation of the novel has also been acknowledged by its generic classification as an 'industrial novel' or 'Condition of England novel.'[24] These designations, which have traditionally been used for a special sub-genre of 19th-century realist fiction dealing with the problems of the Industrial Revolution, imply a clear critical hetero-reference to the poor living conditions in industrial towns and 'chartism' and 'chartists,' the forerunners of modern trade unions, as a reaction to what was referred to as the "Condition of England Question" (Dickens is known to have visited the Midland industrial town of Preston in order to study this problem,[25] which is why Preston is generally considered to be the model on which Coketown was created). Yet, the novel's gestures at contemporary facts of life go further: they also include the well-known references to the "Manchester Lancasterian School"[26] and the importance given in con-

22 Simpson 1997: 4.
23 Ibid.
24 Cf. Lodge 2001 [1981]: 400.
25 Cf. Maack 1991: 138.
26 Cf. Craig 1969: 22–23.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

temporary politics to statistics as published in the so-called blue books. (cf. *HT*: 96, 131 and note 26, 327–328) And, last but not least, the main critical object of the novel, namely the fact-ideology, shows clear references to contemporary utilitarianism, materialism, and positivism. While *Hard Times* as literature presupposes, of course, the reception frame of fictionality, these details gesture towards an occasional readability with the frame of factuality in mind.

Admittedly, the in part highly satirical representation of the above-mentioned facts, which, as in all satires, goes along with their distortion,[27] relativizes the realist 'fact-writing' nature of *Hard Times*, and so does Dickens' general tendency towards sensationalism, caricature, and occasional sentimentalism (for instance, observable in the scene of Stephen's death after having fallen into what aptly is called "Hell Shaft"). *Hard Times*, with its sentimentalism and socially critical and satirical exaggerations, is thus hardly an example of novelistic fact writing in the strictest sense. Indeed, where was there ever a school as one-sided as M'Choakumchild's (and directed by a teacher of such a tell-tale name!), and where was there ever an industrial city with *such* monotonous architecture and life as Coketown, and where can or could one really encounter a fact-propagating character such as Mr. Gradgrind, whose outer, regular appearance – to which we will come back later – is so much in harmony with his attitudes and inner convictions?

Yet, satire also implies clearly readable hetero-referentiality to its objects in real life, for otherwise it would not work. This realist hetero-referentiality of the novel and its relevance to contemporary reality is underlined by the subtitle of the one-volume edition, *For These Times*, and its own fact-orientation is thematized in one of the rare direct metafictional self-characterizations of the book by the narrator, who calls it "the present faithful guidebook." (*HT*: 54). This metaphor aligns *Hard Times* with a non-fictional genre bound to facts as typical of realist fiction.

The novel's implied fact-orientation not only shows in the intracompositional detailed world building as typical of realism but also in the emphasis on disillusionment, which is responsible for the novel's tendency to reveal obscured fictional facts and the truth in the course of the plot: this applies to the debunking of Bounderby's myth of the self-made man by his mother which

27 Satire works, according to a concise formula by Preisendanz (1976: 413), on the basis of the principle of "transparent distortion" ("transparente Entstellung").

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

shows that he had a very comfortable childhood and upbringing,[28] and especially to Gradgrind, who over several steps is made to see his error in giving his children a wrong education.[29]

Thus one can say that, on the one hand, facts do play a (positive) role in *Hard Times*, and its affiliation with realism is to a large extent justified (except for the caricatures and theatrical sentimentalism/sensationalism typical of Dickens in general).[30] On the other hand, the novel is not only fact-oriented itself but, as detailed above, is also an indictment of relentless fact-orientation. Yet, what are we to make of this ambivalence? What is, after all, the real view on facts in the worldview implied in *Hard Times*? This is an epistemological question and in harmony with what Warning, drawing on a formula by Umberto Eco,[31] considers one of the major functions of literature, namely to form epistemological allegories.[32] Doris Feldmann (1986), in an illuminating article, endeavors to highlight what she considers a certain skepticism towards objective facts which she sees at work in *Hard Times*. To substantiate this claim, she quotes some elements in which characters are given clearly subjective perspectives but neglects the fact that the narrator is ultimately reliable and an agency able to highlight erroneous views as such (for instance, Bounderby's conviction that "dissatisfied" workers invariably are "fit for anything," a "fiction" as the narrator says and as Stephen's history shows [*HT*: 211]). While it is true that the epistemologically sharpened gaze of the narrator recognizes the subjective element in the perception of others,[33] his own perceptions and statements of fictional facts are hierarchically superior and never relativized so that, in sum, no epistemological skepticism can be derived from the novel. This is in part acknowledged by Feldmann herself, who states that the novel ultimately does not contain "a radical epistemological skepticism." (cf. *HT*: 227) Consequently, one can state that while facts as part

28 Cf. Humphreys' (2008: 395) felicitous formulation: "Bounderby, one of the hard fact man, is really the great fiction-maker in the novel […]." Appearances can lead to deceptions and illusions, but eventually – and this is important for the epistemology underlying realism – the facts of reality are allowed to surface.

29 One fictional fact, however, remains obscure, namely the reason for Sissy's father to abandon her (cf. 308: "never will be known," as Sleary says).

30 For a certain ambivalence in the relationship between *Hard Times* and realism, see Kearns 1992.

31 Cf. Eco 1967 [1962]: 151–159.

32 Cf. Warning 1990: 357.

33 Cf. Feldmann 1986: 206.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - cc by

of the fact-ideology illustrated in *Hard Times* are subject to a critical perspective, this criticism does not aim at facts *per se* but at their exaggerated and absolute position in an ideology and in the one-sided, wrong use made of them in the practice of life. All of this testifies to the reality and in part importance of facts, but also to their relativity.

The implied positive norms point to this relativity and in particular to the poverty of the fact-ideology represented in the novel by emphasizing additional or alternative accesses to facts and an ultimate reality: In this context, we encounter traditional values, such as "the wisdom of the heart" (246), love (as propagated by Sleary),[34] "fanciful imagination" (92), epitomized by the circus world and, by implication,[35] also literature and, thus, Dickens's own literary product(s). This latter aspect is best perceptible in the fanciful similes and metaphors which the narrator uses in describing the monotonous reality of Coketown in the afore-mentioned chapter "The Keynote" (in itself an imaginative musical metaphor).[36] Most important, though, for the relativity of facts is the novel's endorsement of a view of man that allows for areas inscrutable to reason but that can nevertheless be experienced by the heart. This includes the "unfathomable mystery" presented by even the "meanest" of individual human beings (*HT*: 108), human morality (as the narrator reflects: "not all the calculations of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred [...] in any single moment of the soul," ibid.). And this also includes religion, that is, Christianity (I here differ from Feldmann[37]); although Victorian realism is generally characterized by a tendential secularization which brackets off metaphysical explanations and frames of references in favor of secular ones.[38] And yet, at times, realist novels show curious 'lapses' into remnants of an old episteme in which the supernatural and religion played a greater role in this respect. In *Hard Times* such traces may, for instance, be seen in the narrator's – and no doubt also the implied author's – belief in the superior dignity of "the work of GOD" as opposed to "the work of man." (*HT*: 108)

34 "[...] there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-intereth after all" (*HT*: 308); the novel shows that love is not restricted to humans but extends to animals such as Merrylegth, "Sissy's father's dog" (*HT*: 307).

35 Cf. Feldmann 1986: 204 and note 22.

36 Cf. also "like the painted face of a savage," "Serpents of smoke," "like the head of an elephant." (*HT*: 65)

37 Feldmann 1986: 210–211.

38 Cf. Wolf 1998: 438–442.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

As a result, *Hard Times* does not invalidate a belief in the objective existence of facts (Feldmann's emphasis on subjectivity implied in the novel therefore appears to be exaggerated). Yet the realm of facts is both enlarged and restricted: On the one hand, it is enlarged, since certain elements of human nature are also represented as facts although not as calculable ones, in particular psychological needs such as the yearning for fanciful entertainment, for which the circus world caters. It is restricted, on the other hand, since there are areas of mystery which are part of reality but cannot be ascertained as facts in a positivistic way. As the narrator says: "Supposing we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown quantities [of human nature] by other means!" (108) Reason as an epistemological means thus does have a place in *Hard Times*, but not one of absolute power,[39] for it must be coupled with the wisdom of the heart, with imagination and "other means" which, no doubt, include literature itself with its fanciful imagery as displayed in *Hard Times*. In sum, there is a complex relationship between *Hard Times* and facts, an ambivalence which, however, does not destroy the basis of a largely unshaken belief in an objective reality 'outside' fiction. It includes both facts and inscrutable mysteries, and both may be accessed, at least to some extent, through fictional literature such as *Hard Times*.

4. George Eliot's *Adam Bede*: Narratorial Uneasiness with the Representation of Objective Facts. A Novel Based on and Criticizing Historical Facts

George Eliot (Marianne Evans), in her novels, appears – at least at first sight – to testify to an attitude towards facts and their role in (social) reality that is less ambivalent, relativizing, and critical than the one observable in Dickens's *Hard Times*. The subtitle of Eliot's best-known novel *Middlemarch* (1871/72), *A Study of Provincial Life*, aligns her with the endeavor of French realists and naturalists in particular to close the gap between fiction and science by giving fiction a scientific, and that is fact-oriented, touch.[40] While, as is well known, Balzac chose biology as the model of accounting for the diversity of character

39 Cf. Nussbaum 2001 [1991]: 437.

40 For the close relationship between George Eliot and 19th-century science, see Shuttleworth 1984.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

in *La Comédie humaine*,[41] Zola tended towards various branches of science and scholarship, including sociology and historiography,[42] and based his fiction on extended research of individual milieus as a preparation to the writing of the individual parts of his novel cycle *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*. In a similar way, Eliot's use of the term 'study' for *Middlemarch* suggests a fact-oriented representation of contemporary provincial life in England and, more strongly than with Dickens, implies an affinity with the reception frame 'factuality' into the general literary frame of fictionality.

In *Adam Bede*, the novel in focus here, this fact-orientation is emphatically and famously propagated and combined with a poetological program of realism in what can be called a *locus classicus* of English realist aesthetics: the metafictional chapter 17, entitled "In Which the Story Pauses a Little."[43] The terms the narrator uses here are, besides "fact" (*AB*: 221) as the object of his[44] mimetic representation, "truth" (222) and "truthfulness" (223) as the attitude to achieve his realist ideal. This ideal consists in "giv[ing] an exact likeness" of reality, including humble everyday reality as epitomized in Dutch 17th-century genre painting, of which the narrator includes two ekphrastic descriptions. (Ibid.) All of this is destined to contribute to an ethical function Eliot's realism is meant to fulfill (and which she already pursued in her first novel, *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton* [1857]), namely to elicit sympathy even with humble, morally mediocre, and fallible characters – which is why one may label her particular kind of realism 'sympathetic realism.'[45]

The chapter in question is triggered by a problematic non-reaction of the parish priest of Broxton, Rector Irwine, to the selfish courting of the beautiful Hetty by a young squire and heir to an aristocratic estate, Arthur Donnithorne. In fact, Arthur is about to start an amorous relationship with Hetty in spite of the fact that the class difference between the two of them makes

41 Cf. Kablitz 1989.

42 Cf. Warning 1990.

43 Eliot 1985 [1895]: 221–230. References to *Adam Bede* (Penguin edition) in the following in the abbreviated form: "*AB*: page number". In the case of subsequent quotations only with page numbers in brackets.

44 In harmony with the common practice of attributing the author's sex to the narrator, and since 'George Eliot' is a male pseudonym, the narrator will here be referred to with the masculine form.

45 For the importance of an ethics of empathetic 'sympathy' in Eliot's works, see Nünning 2015.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

marriage highly unlikely (a 'fact of life' which Hetty does not consider properly. (Cf. *AB*: 196) What is more likely is that Hetty becomes pregnant and is then abandoned by Arthur, which is what does happen. But, before it comes to this, Arthur wants to make a clean breast of his feelings and moral scruples. Yet the rector, being dependent on Arthur's father, is too delicate or pusillanimous to speak his mind. And so, the chance of reforming the potential 'rake' Arthur is lost – with catastrophic consequences for Hetty in the following story (she will abandon her baby, be sentenced to death, and ultimately be transported to the colonies). This over-cautious conduct of the priest in a decisive moment is criticized by a fictitious lady reader, who complains about the unedifying portrayal of the rector and would have preferred that the narrator "had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice" and, if necessary, "improve[d] the facts." (221) To this, the narrator opposes his feeling of being "obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact," a fact-orientation which he then develops into a programmatic aesthetics of a "faithful representation of commonplace things" and behavior rather than of rare "prophets," "heroes," and "sublimely beautiful women" (224), "picturesque lazzaroni or romantic criminals." (225) Thus, the narrator clearly espouses a realist and anti-romantic, and in any case anti-conventional, aesthetics based on the conviction: "It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste," (221) Rather than an infraction of conventions, the narrator "dread[s] nothing [...] but falsity," even if "[f]alsehood is so easy, truth so difficult." (222) Yet in spite of this difficulty, his aim is a representation of common, average reality "as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath." (221)

The novel – with some exceptions – follows this fact- and truth-based aesthetics. As in *Hard Times*, the fictional world shows its fact-orientation through detailed world building that contains a plethora of real-life (hetero-)references. These include, for instance, references to the work life of carpenters (the profession of the eponymous central character), to religious life at the end of the turn of the 18/19th century (the tensions between Methodism and the Church of England in particular) and to contemporary social problems (the utter dependence of tenant farmers on their landlords, abusive attitudes of young aristocratic heirs to village beauties). And, like Dickens in *Hard Times*, the implied attitude towards, among other things, the problematic social facts is clearly critical.

Yet, unlike Dickens's novel, in *Adam Bede* there is less satirical distortion and more serious, quasi objective representation of country life around 1800.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - [cc BY]

As has been pointed out,[46] the novel can be read as a fulfilment of Eliot's own plea for a book "studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans and peasantry" which she made in her essay (published in 1856 in the *Westminster Review*) on Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl's sociological study on "the German peasantry,"[47] an essay which Cunningham qualifies as "a programme of sociological research into the life of ordinary England." (Ibid.) The parallels between Eliot's wording "natural history" and Zola's later novel cycle, which also sports 'natural history' in its subtitle, are striking and gesture towards a common quasi scientific, fact-oriented concern in realist and naturalist novel writing. Incidentally, this orientation was also perceived by Eliot's first readers, albeit in a negative light, as the criticism of the alleged incompatibility between the "brutal facts" represented in the novel with "a work of Art" in a contemporary review shows.[48]

Where, however, yet another parallel with *Hard Times* appears is in the extracompositional effect created by both novels: they both elicit a strong belief in the quasi factuality of the represented storyworlds and thus keep the reader immersed in them through a powerful aesthetic illusion that is sometimes even expanded to referential illusion. This powerful impression is strengthened in *Adam Bede* by a number of devices: They include graphic descriptions of (here often idyllic rural) settings and of the main characters but also – quasi covertly – by the appeal to a world (knowledge) shared by both narrator and reader through the frequent use of the phrase "one of those." (See, e.g., *AB*: 67, 293, 225) In addition, the term "fact" appears a number of times in the novel, although intracompositional thematization of the concept 'fact' is less frequent than in Dickens's novel (where, as we have seen, it is linked to an ideology thematized in the storyworld). When the term 'fact' appears in Eliot's text, it does so without the negative connotations it has in *Hard Times*. Moreover, its occurrence is not limited to a quasi grammatical expletive of the conjunction 'that', as in the phrase 'the fact that,' but "fact" – besides its telltale use in the aforementioned programmatic chapter 17 – frequently refers to givens of the fictional world (e.g., 178, 181, 221, 268, 323) and thus emphasizes not only the belief in its assumed factuality which all illusionist representations require but more specifically the firm spatial and historical setting of the storyworld in a recognizable English reality.

46 Cf. Cunningham 1996: x–xi.

47 Ibid.: x.

48 Quoted from ibid.: xxiii.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

So far, one may have received the impression that *Adam Bede*, much more than *Hard Times,* is in harmony with the contemporary veneration of objective positivistic facts and strives to represent them in novel form. Yet this impression is misleading. For the narrator – and one may with confidence claim the implied author as well – is quite conscious of the problems, if not impossibility, of objective representation: this consciousness derives from the awareness that the subjectivity of perception is inescapable and that experience and representations stemming from it are therefore also tinged by subjectivity. Interestingly, the narrator enters this relativization and his uneasiness with exact and objective fact writing into the very program of realism discussed above, when he says: "I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; [...]." (221) To speak of such a "defectiveness" of the literary mimetic "mirror," which is the narrator's (and implied author's) mind, is a clear acknowledgment that absolute truth is cognitively and epistemologically impossible and that therefore "there is reason to dread" the very opposite of what the program of realism strives for, namely "falsity." (222)[49]

Eliot's skepticism towards the accessibility of objective facts can be illustrated with one particularly tell-tale detail, namely the handling of physiognomic descriptions. As I have detailed elsewhere,[50] such descriptions are a privileged site when it comes to ascertaining the position of the worldview implied in a text concerning the epistemological question of the readability of the world and its perceivable facts. The reason for this is the literary convention that descriptions are rarely 'innocent': they do not simply make the reader 'see' something in an imaginative perceptual sense, they are also frequently enriched with implicit connotations, explicit evaluations, and other elements of meaning which make the reader 'see' the described character or object in the cognitive sense of 'understanding'. In this context, 'transparent' physiognomic descriptions are depictions of bodies and faces in which

49 In *Middlemarch*, at the beginning of chapter 27 (p. 296), the authorial narrator uses a well-known simile (the "concentric circles" produced by a light shining on a scratched surface) for the same purpose of laying bare the subjectivity of the perception of reality and facts, the "flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement," that is, of some seemingly objective fact, while it is in reality the subjective "candle" of a subjective consciousness which produces the impression depending on its point of view. (Cf. Nünning 2015: 124; Postlethwaite 2001: 115)

50 Wolf 2002b.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - [CC BY]

the perceivable surface, the fact of the bodily signifier, is – often explicitly – linked to, and gives access to the hidden character beneath this surface as its 'signified.' Frequently, the meaning of bodily details is made explicit in the narratorial discourse, and where such semiotically 'transparent' descriptions precede the actions of the described character – as is often the case, descriptions being a convention of character exposition not only in realism – the subsequent behavior is in line with the meaning and expectation elicited by these descriptions. On the level of the implied worldview, this can then be read (by way of the afore-mentioned 'epistemological allegorization' operating in literature) as an indication of a positive, unproblematically optimistic attitude towards the readability of the world and its facts. In contrast to this, 'opaque' physiognomic descriptions do not yield results with respect to the readability of the respective character on the basis of an allegedly transparent semiotic relationship between what can be observed as a bodily fact on the surface and a deeper essence and, per extension, the represented world may remain partially 'opaque' and inexplicable as well. Such descriptions may thus betray some degree of epistemological skepticism as part of the implied worldview.

In *Hard Times*, descriptions, physiognomic and otherwise, tend to be epistemologically transparent. For instance, the representative of the condemned fact-ideology, Thomas Gradgrind, after having his say on the necessity of teaching facts only at school, is introduced on the first page, to give just one of the many details, as showing "bald head [...] all covered with knobs [...] as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside." (*HT*: 47) Needless to say, the character is then shown to behave exactly in the way this description makes us expect.[51]

Eliot, in *Adam Bede*, also introduces such elements of transparency in some of her physiognomic descriptions, notably at the beginning when it comes to outlining the appearance of the eponymous hero: His strong body is said to betray racial origins by pointing to his being a "Saxon," while "the dark eyes that shone from under strongly marked, prominent, and mobile eyebrows indicated a mixture of Celtic blood" and that his "face" showed "no other beauty than such as belongs to an expression of good-humored honest intelligence,"

51 Cf. also Wolf 2002b: 396–398. Interestingly, the same transparency extends, in *Hard Times*, to the description of the main setting, industrial Coketown, the (highly satirical and rhetorical) portrait of which is metafictionally announced in the chapter title "The Keynote" (ch. I.5).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

(*AB*: 50) a narratorial qualification to which the character, in his behavior and actions then is shown to conform. Yet, this is not the whole story. Consider the description of Hetty's beauty in the context of her being an object of male desire:

> The dear young, round, soft, flexible thing! Her heart must be just as soft, her temper just as free from angles, her character just as pliant, [...] Every man under such circumstances is conscious of being a great physiognomist. Nature, he knows, has a language of her own, which she uses with strict veracity, and he considers himself an adept in the language. Nature has written out his bride's character for him in those exquisite lines of cheek and lip, in those eyelids delicate as petals, in those long lashes curled like the stamen of a flower, in the dark liquid depths of those wonderful eyes. (197–198)

However, as opposed to the higher authority of the 'descriptor' of the passage quoted from *Hard Times*, this description is rendered from a limited, subjective and biased point of view (here the view of a lover): "It was very much in this way that our friend Adam Bede thought about Hetty; only he put his thoughts into different words." (198) And while the satirical bias in Dickens's description of Gradgrind turns out to be justified and thus approaching objectivity, the subjectivity of Adam's gaze is treacherous, for Hetty, with her self-delusions, coquetry and hard-hearted neglect of her own abandoned baby, is anything other than an ideal woman. Appropriately, the narrator relativizes Adam's all too positive physiognomic impression by stating:

> Nature has her *language*, and she is not unveracious, but we do not know all her intricacies of her *syntax* just yet, and in a hasty *reading* we may happen to extract the very opposite of the real *meaning* [...] One begins to suspect at length that there is no direct correlation beween [sic] eyelashes and morals or else, that the eyelashes express the disposition of the fair one's grandmother, which is on the whole is less important to us. (198–199, my emphasis)

This is a clear warning against physiognomic naivety – interestingly expressed in linguistic, almost semiotic terms (in italics). If the 'syntax' of natures 'fact-writing' is not clear for us to read, what we consider as facts becomes problematic.

However, such a departure from an optimistic fact-reading is, in Eliot's fiction, as yet not coupled with a diffidence towards fact-writing, as the opening metafictional paragraph by the narrator indicates:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter, and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (49)

While the simile of the "sorcerer['s] [...] visions" might be read as an indication of fictionality, the opposite is true here – the use of the mirror, the mimetic metaphor par excellence which we encounter here again, testifies to this: what is 'conjured up' in the narrator's mirror is not (as one might think) fantasy but a world anchored as solidly in fact as the date and the name of the village are meant to indicate.

The only drawback with respect to this typically realist claim is an episode in which the implied author deviates from a major rule of realism, namely, never to include supernatural elements: In a memorable scene, Adam works late at night, appropriately on a coffin, a task which he has taken over from his dipsomaniac and sloppy father, who has once again not come home in time. While doing so, Adam twice hears a strange knocking at his door which he opens and twice finds no-one before the house. This incident makes Adam "shudder" and reminds him of the "willow wand" as a "sign when some-one was dying." While this could be discounted as a subjective "superstition" of Adam's, fostered by the "blood of the peasant in him" and the stories "told him" by his "mother," there is one detail in the story which belies this: Adam's dog Gyp appears to be startled repeatedly by this knocking as well, each time giving a loud "howl." (93–94) The narrator does everything to dispel 'unrealist' surmises the reader may get from the episode, but the subsequent story appears to endorse the supernatural, for shortly afterward we learn that Adam's father has in fact died, drowned in a stream, while Adam heard the knocking. This is a coincidence (?) which is never really explained, so that one is almost nudged towards a supernatural assumption. Making readers accept something supernatural, be it ever so insignificant for the plot as a whole, is a puzzling departure from the, as we have seen, almost scientific fact-orientation of this realist novel, all the more so as the author is known to have been an atheist for a long period in her life.[52]

---

52 To some extent, this 'puzzle' may be explained as a residue of an older episteme in a novel which, in its 'rage for explanation,' harnesses a striking plurality of methods and

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

What does all of this amount to with respect to Eliot's 'fact writing' in *Adam Bede*? On the one hand, one must state the following: The aesthetics on which the novel is explicitly based endorse a positive attitude to 'fact writing': the novel is a prime example of fact-friendly realism by an author who emphasized "patient watching of external facts" as a scientific way of accessing truth.[53] As could be observed with respect to *Hard Times* (and perhaps even more so, since *Adam Bede* never caricaturizes), Eliot's way of writing elicits a powerful immersion in a represented world that can be experienced as if it were a world of real facts – the introductory metaphor "sorcerer" has an indicative value in this respect, too, gesturing towards the 'magic' of aesthetic illusion.[54] Moreover, *Adam Bede* is firmly based on historical and social facts, which (again as with *Hard Times*) at times elicits elements of referential illusion and gestures towards a readability in the frame of factuality. In addition, as I have detailed elsewhere,[55] the novel not only posits the facts of the represented world but strives to explain them to the reader as much as possible. This applies in particular to the characters' actions and motivations, so that clear cause and effect relationships appear again and again (this is even done more systematically than in *Hard Times*).

On the other hand, the novel contains some elements that run counter to an easy endorsement of objective facts: besides the strange inclusion of the possibly supernatural (which is absent in *Hard Times*), there is above all a marked diffidence towards physiognomic readings which we did not find in Dickens. Of course, from a modern perspective,[56] physiognomics – in particular as a characterological reading of physiognomies – is a pseudo-science and not affiliated with facts. Yet, this was not seen as such by all in the nineteenth century. Hence, an emphasis on subjective misreadings not only of physiognomies but generally, as chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* eloquently indicates, is a noteworthy relativization of the belief in objective facts. While *Adam Bede* is certainly not based on a downright epistemological skepticism which would deny the existence or accessibility of facts altogether, the novel is informed by

ideas in order to account for the fictional facts while the implied author is aware of the limitations of all explanations. (Cf. Wolf 1998)

53 From Eliot's essay "The Influence of Rationalism", quoted from Postlethwaite 2001: 108.

54 For the "air of reality" of *Adam Bede*, see also Gill 1980: 26.

55 Cf. Wolf 1998.

56 Which is not so 'modern' after all, since Lichtenberg, in the 18th century, was already skeptical about the physiognomic teachings of Johann Kaspar Lavater, the most important contemporary representative of this pseudo-science.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

a remarkable ambivalence that is noteworthy in the history of literary 'fact-writing' and concomitant epistemological stances.[57]

5. Conclusion: *Hard Times* and *Adam Bede* – Ambivalence towards Fact-Writing and Different Historical Affiliations

On the basis of general theoretical reflections on the complexity of the relationship between fact and fiction we have seen that both *Hard Times* and *Adam Bede* as realist novels show a strong concern with facts and fact-writing, albeit in different ways. What they share is a realism-typical focus on contemporary (or recent) historical reality, and on the lower classes in particular, and the eliciting of a powerful aesthetic illusion, that is, a belief in the verisimilitude of the represented worlds and, at times, even a referential illusion in the facticity of the representation of aspects of reality. In their intracompositional showing and thematization facts, the latter being particularly outstanding in *Hard Times*, as well as in their extracompositional immersive effects on the reader, they thus can be considered remarkable examples of 19th-century literary attempts at fact-writing. While the constituents of, and happenings in, the represented worlds are clearly fictive and presuppose a reading under the auspices of fictionality, the realism in the representation and its at times historically specific and thus 'factive' hetero-referentiality invite the readers to occasionally adopt a reception frame of factuality which permits them to consider parts of the novels as sources of socio-historical information.

However, as we have seen, the attitude towards facts is ambivalent in both novels, although from different motivations and with different historical affiliations. In Dickens's novel, in spite of the importance which fact-writing has, a hostility towards facts as absolutes in contemporary fact-venerating ideologies in education, economy, and society at large is clearly marked. Moreover, as typical of Dickens, the satirical and social-critical function of the novel at times leads to a distortion of the strict credibility of fictional facts such as the exaggeratedly monotonous aspect of Coketown or some character-caricatures such as Mr. Gradgrind's portrait. In *Adam Bede* criticism is also conveyed but

57 For the ambivalence underlying Eliot's thoughts (an awareness of the subjectivist difficulties in the perception and processing of facts and the simultaneous maintenance of the "goal of impartiality" and hence of objectivity), see Anger 2001: quotation on p. 92.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - cc by

without the distortion of satire, as the novel strives to elicit sympathy even with fallible characters rather than harsh criticism.

Another difference between the two novels lies in the historical affiliation of the implied positions that create tensions with an unmitigated trust in objective facts. In *Hard Times*, crude fact-veneration and the reliance on economic reason is opposed to a celebration of the imagination which points back to romanticism. One might even see relationships between the implied norms of this novel and Wordsworth's sonnet "The world is too much with us" and its indictment of "getting and spending."[58] In *Adam Bede*, while a certain Wordsworthian nostalgia with respect to rural life cannot be overlooked,[59] distance towards an overly optimistic perspective on objective facts comes from an epistemological awareness of subjectivity as a relativizing factor of all reality perception – which arguably also applies to fact-writing. In this, *Adam Bede* does not point back to romanticism but rather forward to modernism. A remarkable proto-modernist element gesturing towards modernism's focus on subjectivity is to be found in the ambivalent attitude towards the readability of physiognomies. This ambivalence includes a 'reliable' portrait, such as the one given of the eponymous hero but also an incipient skepticism towards too much trust in 'physiognomics.' It is a skepticism which Virginia Woolf will later radicalize in storytelling that showcases the subjectivity and constructivism of perception, as is the case in her 'anti-physiognomical' short story "An Unwritten Novel" (1921/1991).[60] All of this is, however, at best a proto-modernist awareness of subjectivity in dealing with facts, since the aesthetic and epistemological basis of *Adam Bede* remains rooted in the notion of facts existing independently of subjectivist distortions[61] and of truth as the ideal of literary representation, and this truth includes the representation of social milieus and external details, toward which Woolf was highly critical.[62]

---

58 Cf. also Lodge 1969 [1966]: 99, who sees a relationship between *Hard Times* and Shelley's "criticism of the 'accumulation of facts'" in the latter's "Defence of Poetry".

59 Cf. Gill 1980: 29: "George Eliot's vision of rural life is [...] essentially Wordsworthian."

60 In this story, a focalizer who is apparently quite confident about her ability to read faces, observes a female fellow traveler in a railway compartment and, on the basis of her physiognomy and facial expression (pathognomy), constructs a whole 'novel' about her, which, however, turns out to be false – which is why the imaginary 'novel' remains 'unwritten.' (Cf. Wolf 2002b: 412–416)

61 Cf. Anger 2001.

62 Cf. her parodic criticism of Arnold Bennett's 'Edwardian' (i.e., late Victorian realist writing style) in her essay "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" (Woolf 1928 [1924]).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - CC BY

All in all, both novels, for all their affiliation with realist fact-writing, also testify to the complexities of, and tensions in, the relationship between fact and fiction. They also show that even realism, which from a postmodernist perspective was a period of almost naïve veneration of positivistic facts and fact-writing, was not so naive after all. And these novels perhaps also show something else: With an eye to the romantic affiliation of *Hard Times* and the proto-modernist attitudes discernible in *Adam Bede,* one may be led to suspect that the oppositions literary historians have created from various perspectives in their fact-writing, oppositions between the mentalities and epistemologies allegedly underlying epochs and trends such as romanticism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism are – at least to some extent – facts in the etymological sense: *facta*, constructions. They are indispensable and useful for orientation but must again and again be subject to scrutiny – in order to approach the elusive ideal which Eliot's narrator so eloquently propagated in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, namely Truth.

Bibliography

Abbott, H. Porter (2015): "How Do We Read What Isn't There To Be Read? Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps", in: Zunshine, Lisa (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, Oxford, 104–119.

Anger, Suzy (2001): "George Eliot and Philosophy", in: Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 76–97.

Barthes, Roland (1968): "L'Effet de réel", in: *Communications* 11, 84–89.

Coover, Robert (1970) [1969]: "The Magic Poker", in: id.: *Pricksongs and Descants*, New York, 20–45.

Craig, David (1969): "Introduction", in: Dickens, *Hard Times*, 11–36.

Cunningham, Valentine (1996): "Introduction", in: id. (ed.): Eliot, George: *Adam Bede*, Oxford, vii–xl.

Defoe, Daniel (1965) [1719]: *Robinson Crusoe*, Harmondsworth.

Dickens, Charles (1969) [1854]: *Hard Times*, Harmondsworth.

Eco, Umberto (1967) [1962]: *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee*, Milan.

Eliot, George (1985) [1859]: *Adam Bede*, Harmondsworth.

— (1965) [1871]: *Middlemarch*, Harmondsworth.

Ermath, Elizabeth Deeds (1983): *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*, Princeton, NJ.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Feldmann, Doris (1986): "Erkenntnis und Sprache in Charles Dickens' 'Hard Times'", in: *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 19, 195–214.

Fluck, Winfried (1992): *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit: Der amerikanische Realismus. 1865-1900*, München.

Gill, Stephen (1980): "Introduction", in: Eliot, George: *Adam Bede*, 11–39.

Hardy, Thomas (1999) [1887]: *The Woodlanders*, Harmondsworth.

Humphreys, Anne (2008): "Hard Times", in: Paroissien, David (ed.): *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, Malden, MA, 390–400.

Iser, Wolfgang (1975): "Die Wirklichkeit der Fiktion. Elemente eines funktionsgeschichtlichen Textmodells der Literatur", in: Warning, Rainer (ed.): *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, München, 277–324.

Kablitz, Andreas (2008): "Literatur, Fiktion und Erzählung – nebst einem Nachruf auf den Erzähler", in: Rajewsky, Irina O./Schneider, Ulrike (eds.): *Im Zeichen der Fiktion. Aspekte fiktionaler Rede aus historischer und systematischer Sicht*, Stuttgart, 13–44.

— (1989): "Erklärungsanspruch und Erklärungsdefizit im 'Avant-propos' von Balzacs 'Comédie humaine'", in: *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 99, 261–286.

Kearns, Katherine (1992): "A Tropology of Realism in 'Hard Times'", in: *English Literary History* 59, 857–881.

Levine, George (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Cambridge.

Lodge, David (2001) [1981]: "How Successful Is 'Hard Times'?", in: Dickens, Charles: *Hard Times*, New York, NY, 400–409.

— (1969) [1966]: "The Rhetoric of 'Hard Times'", in: Gray, Paul Edward (ed.): *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Hard Times": A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 86–105.

Maack, Annegret (1991): *Charles Dickens. Epoche – Werk – Wirkung*. Arbeitsbücher zur Literaturgeschichte, München.

Nünning, Ansgar (2015): "'The Extension of our Sympathies': George Eliot's Aesthetic Theory and Narrative Technique as a Key to the Affective, Cognitive, and Social Value of Literature", in: Meretoja, Hanna et al. (eds.): *Values of Literature*, Leiden/Boston, MA, 117–136.

Nussbaum, Martha C. (2001) [1991]: "The Literary Imagination in Public Life", in: Dickens, Charles: *Hard Times*, New York, NY, 429–439.

Pearsall, Judy (ed.) (1999): *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford.

Postlethwaite, Diana (2001): "George Eliot and Science", in: Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 98–118.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Preisendanz, Wolfgang (1976): “Zur Korrelation zwischen Satirischem und Komischem”, in: id./Warning, Rainer (eds.): *Das Komische,* München, 411–413.

Prince, Gerald (1996): “Remarks on Narrativity”, in: Wahlin, Claes (ed.): *Perspectives on Narratology: Papers from the Stockholm Symposium on Narratology*, Frankfurt am Main et al., 95–106.

Shuttleworth, Sally (1984): *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*, Cambridge et. al.

Simpson, Margaret (1997): *The Companion to ‘Hard Times’*, Mountfield.

Warning, Rainer (1990): “Kompensatorische Bilder einer ‘wilden Ontologie’. Zolas ‘Les Rougon Macquart’”, in: *Poetica* 22/3–4, 355–383.

Wolf, Werner (2013): “Aesthetic Illusion”, in: Bernhart, Walter/Mahler, Andreas/id. (eds.): *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam, 1–63.

— (2009): “Metareference across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions”, in: id. (ed.) in collaboration with Katharina Bantleon and Jeff Thoss: *Metareference across Media: Theory and Case Studies – Dedicated to Walter Bernhart on the Occasion of his Retirement*, Amsterdam/New York, NY, 1–85.

— (2008): “Is Aesthetic Illusion ‘illusion référentielle’? ‘Immersion’ and Its Relationship to Fictionality and Factuality”, in: *Journal of Literary Theory* 2/1, 99–126, 171–173.

— (2002a): “Gesichter in der Erzählkunst: Zur Wahrnehmung von Physiognomien und Metawahrnehmung von Physiognomiebeschreibungen aus theoretischer und historischer Sicht am Beispiel englischsprachiger Texte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts”, in: *Sprachkunst* 33, 301–325.

— (2002b): “‘Speaking faces’? – Zur epistemologischen Lesbarkeit von Physiognomie-Beschreibungen im englischen Erzählen des Modernismus”, in: *Poetica* 34, 389–426.

— (1998): “‘I must go back a little to explain [her] motives [...]’ – Erklärung und Erklärbarkeit menschlichen Verhaltens, Handelns und Wesens in englischen Romanen des Realismus: ‘Hard Times’ und ‘Adam Bede’”, in: *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 48, 435–479.

Woolf, Virginia (1991) [1921]: “An Unwritten Novel”, in: id.: *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, London, 14–27.

— (1924/1928): “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”, in: id. *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, London, 319–337.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839462713-009 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY