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**Charles Dickens:   
*Hard Times* and Hyperbole**

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As I said in my last lecture, ‘Rhetoric’ has a bad name. Phrases like ‘empty rhetoric’, ‘it’s just rhetoric’ and the like suggest that the main purpose of rhetoric is to deceive. This, of course, can be true. But rhetoric is also an ancient discipline that tries to make sense of how we persuade. Now we could argue that all human communication sets out to persuade. Even a simple rhetorical question as clichéd and mundane as ‘isn’t it a lovely day?’ could be said to have a persuasive element. So this year I want to explore the nuts and bolts of rhetoric in relation to a number of famous works of literature. What I hope to show is that knowing the terms of rhetoric helps us to see how literature works, *how it does its magic*, while at the same time arguing that great works of literature take us beyond rhetoric. They push the boundaries and render the schema of rhetoric too rigid and too approximate. In my first lecture in the new series we considered Jane Austen’s novel entitled *Persuasion* (1817/1818) – what rhetoric is all about – in relation to irony and narrative technique, how the story is told. I concluded that these two features of Austen’s last completed novel functioned to introduce all manner of ambiguities leaving the reader in a position of uncertainty and left to make certain choices about how to understand the novel. Irony, rather than being a stable feature of rhetoric turned out – in Austen’s novel – to be a subtly shifting trope. Irony can mean communicating the opposite of what is said. In *Persuasion* the ironies teeter between meaning what they say – and the opposite of what they say. It is down to the reader to decide which.

Tonight I want to proceed in a similar way, considering another feature of rhetoric – that is, hyperbole.

Here’s a fairly standard dictionary definition:

noun, *hyperbole*

1.

obvious and intentional exaggeration.

2.

an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally, as “to wait an eternity.”

And I want to explore the trope in relation to one of hyperbole’s greatest admirers and practitioners – Charles Dickens.

Dickens' use of exaggeration is key to his style. Its use has myriad effects from making a character's disposition unmissable, to adding quirkiness and comedy. Hyperbole is closely related to the idea of caricature. Hyperbole is also closely associated with aptronym. Aptronym is the rhetorical term for a character’s name reflecting his or her personality or dominant traits. Mr ‘Murd-stone’ in *David Copperfield* conjures up the twin allusions to "murder" and stony coldness. Mr ‘Gradgrind’, in *Hard Times*, is intent on his pupils ‘graduating’ and this is by way of nothing by ‘grind’. Often the names of Dickens’ characters are synonymous with their unique traits. For instance, with Scrooge, his inhumanity and meanness. His coldness and stinginess are conveyed by means of hyperbolic phrasing:

‘…a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint…solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features…. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas.

‘…No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, not falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.’

The hyperbole repeatedly used in relation to Scrooge in part explains why his name has come into the English language to describe anyone deemed to be supremely mean and callous.

Sometimes Dickens uses a whimsical inverted personification in which hyperbole also plays a part. [‘Personification’… describing an inanimate object as an animate one.] Dickens often does the opposite, referring to a member of the British aristocracy as the ‘Noble Refrigerator’, for example. Similarly he refers to orphans as stocks and shares, school children as nameless but numbered empty vessels, people as tug boats, or dinner-party guests as furniture.

Now, given that Dickens had strong views about the society in which he was living and the need for all manner of social reforms, why did he rely so heavily on hyperbole, a trope which, on first sight, would appear to be a somewhat frivolous one. Its rhetorical significance has been debated since ancient times. Often it was dismissed as an obvious, offensive, and simplistic trope which offers few or no theoretical or philosophical insights. The ancient philosopher Quintilian uses this graphic example, ‘As he [Antony] vomited, he filled his lap and the whole platform with gobbets of food’. Many commentators consider that there is no more to hyperbole than this kind of obvious – and in this case also crude – exaggeration. Hyperbole was also often accused of *cacozelia*, or ‘perverse affectation’, which results from disingenuousness or poor judgment and is “the worst fault of all eloquence”. Aristotle, for example, considered hyperbole to be ‘adolescent’.[[1]](#endnote-1) When my sons were at that stage of life I was well aware of this. Any teacher for whom they had even a modicum of respect was a ‘legend’ and, contrariwise, any teacher with whom they didn’t altogether get along was ‘evil’.

So what does Dickens do with hyperbole? In the vast majority of his writings it serves a satirical and comic function. But does it do more in Dickens’ *Hard Times*?

*Hard Times* (1854), Dickens's only novel-length exposé of the industrial working class, is also his most vociferous indictment of the iniquities of class. He uses sarcasm, bitterness and satire to demonstrate, for example, how these marginalised workers were called ‘hands’ by the factory owners: not ‘people’, but dismembered body parts, vulnerable appendages of the machines they work.

Let me try to summarize the novel. It was published in serial form in *Household Words*, April to August. This was a weekly magazine that was published from 1850-1859. The publication cost 2 d. (tuppence) and was aimed at a lower middle-class and middle-class audience. Dickens often provided glimpses of the austere lives of the working class for his middle-class audience.

The novel is made up of three ‘books’ – as I try to summarize the novel we’ll identify myriad examples of different forms of hyperbole. Each book has a title which refers to the biblical *Epistle to the Galatians*, Chapter 6, verse 7: ‘For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ Book I is entitled ‘Sowing’, Book II, ‘Reaping’, and Book III, ‘Garnering,’ (or gathering in).

The novel opens at Superintendent [Mr Gradgrind](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gradgrind)’s school in the fictitious Coketown – another example of aptronym - a northern industrial town possibly based on Preston. Gradgrind is described as ‘a man of realities, facts and calculations.’ He insists that all he wants from the pupils is ‘facts’. We’ll look at the passage in detail in a moment but for now, the story. In the second chapter, one of the pupils, Sissy, who has a father who works with horses in the circus is asked by Gradgrind to define what a ‘horse’ is. Although she has known horses at close hand all her life she cannot come up with a definition. Grandgrind then asks another pupil, Bitzer, who replies, ‘”Quadruped. Graminivorous [eats grains]. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive [incisors]. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.” Thus (and much more). Bitzer.’ The rhetorical technique here, ‘Thus (and much more) Bitzer’, is known as *asyndeton*, the omission of conjunctions between a series.

In the next chapter, entitled ‘A Loophole’ – this turns out to be both metaphorical and literal - Louisa and Thomas, two of Mr. Gradgrind's children, decide to go past the travelling circus run by Mr. Sleary, and look through a hole in the canvas big top. They are spotted by their father: ‘In the name of wonder, idleness and folly!’, said Mr Grandgrind, ‘leading each away by a hand, ‘what do you do here?’ The enumeration here, ‘wonder, idleness and folly’, conflates three different abstract nouns. He castigates them for their frivolousness and they return home.

The fourth chapter is entitled ‘Mr Bounderby’ – alluding to the idea of a ‘bounder’, and he is introduced as ‘a man perfectly devoid of sentiment’, and Gradgrind’s close friend. Bounderby is a wealthy mill owner who claims – speciously – to be from an extremely impoverished background. Discussing Louisa and Thomas and their wrongdoings, and the possible influence of Sissy, Gradgrind and Bounderby decide she must be expelled from the school. When they propose this to her, Sissy explains that she has been abandoned by her father in the hope that she will be able to live a better life than the life of the circus. Mr. Sleary is also involved in discussions. Mr Gradgrind gives Sissy a choice: either to remain with the circus, but no longer attend the school, or to continue her education in the employ of Mrs Gradgrind, leaving the life of the circus forever. Sissy accepts the latter, hoping, nevertheless, one day to be reunited with her father. The stark choice that Sissy has to make underscores the opposition between the life of the circus and life in Coketown. This contrast will emerge as intrinsically bound up with another kind of hyperbole in the novel to which I’ll refer later.

A parallel story concerns Stephen Blackpool, a mill worker and ‘man of perfect integrity’, known as ‘Old Stephen’ because his life has been one of extreme suffering and he looks older than his forty years. He is introduced at the end of his working day when he meets Rachael, a close friend. His wife, an alcoholic, has left him but on arrival home he discovers – to his horror - that she has returned. This is more than he can contemplate and he asks Bounderby how he can end his marriage. Mr. Bounderby has a paid companion, Mrs Sparsit, and the two of them discuss Stephen’s enquiry. Mrs Sparsit strongly disapproves of the idea of bringing a marriage to an end and, influenced by her, Bounderby informs Stephen that the legal process would be both complicated and extremely expensive. A further narrative strand is then woven in. Leaving Bounderby’s house Stephen meets an elderly woman who informs him that she visits Coketown annually. It isn’t until the end of the novel that her role in it fully emerges.

The main focus of the next part of the novel is on Louisa’s putative marriage to Bounderby who is some thirty years older than her. Again, the age difference is an exaggerated one. Grandgrind tries to persuade his daughter that the difference of age is of no significance. The two set off to France on a ‘working honeymoon’; Bounderby wants to research the factory practices in Lyon. So by the end of Book 1 a number of parallel stories have started to unfold.

Book 2 opens in Bounderby’s new Coketown bank which brings various characters together. Both Mrs Sparsit and Sissy’s former classmate, Bitzer, oversee the bank at night. A friend of Gradgrind, James Harthouse, who has failed to find a satisfactory profession in London arrives with a letter of recommendation from Gradgrind. Harthouse finds Bounderby a perfect bore but falls for the now world-weary Louisa. Her brother, Thomas, or Tom, is also in Bounderby’s employ, but behaves irresponsibly and disrespectfully. Harthouse becomes aware of Tom’s contempt for Bounderby. It emerges that Tom encouraged Louisa to marry Bounderby to make his life easier. It also emerges that Tom has serious money problems.

Meanwhile, Slackridge, a union activist, accuses Stephen Blackpool of treachery at a union meeting. Blackpool has refused to join the union and is sent to Coventry by his co-workers. Bounderby gets wind of all this and summons Blackpool to explain himself. Bounderby fails to understand Blackpool’s explanation and sacks him as an agitator. Louisa helps him out financially. And Tom arranges for him to wait outside the bank after work. Tom’s motive is to set him up. When the bank is burgled, Stephen is fingered for the crime. Louisa is also implicated because she is suspected, by Mrs Sparsit, of having an affair with him. But it is Harthouse who is in love with Louisa but when he declares his love he is rebuffed. Louisa leaves for the station, surreptitiously followed by Mrs Sparsit, and leaves by train for her father’s. Mrs Sparsit has lost her. When she arrives, she is near collapse and faints in front of him.

**Book 3: Garnering**

Mrs Sparsit, the snoop, visits Bounderby in his London hotel to brief him with her news. The two of them return to Coketown, and to Stone Lodge, where Louisa is convalescing from her breakdown. Bounderby is apprised by Gradgrind of Louisa’s refusal of Harthouse's attentions and that she has had a nervous collapse and needs time to find her feet. Bounderby is horrified and immensely indignant and bad-mannered, particularly in his exchanges with Mrs. Sparsit for misleading him. Bounderby delivers an ultimatum: either Louisa returns home the next day, or he will start divorce proceedings. She stays with her father.

Sissy advises Harthouse to leave Coketown for ever. Stephen Blackpool has moved away to look for employment elsewhere and Rachel knows where he is. She tells Bounderby that she will contact him suggesting that he return to clear his name. She also explains that Louisa and Tom visited Stephen on the night that he was dismissed. Bounderby is suspicious and brings her to Gradgrind's house where Louisa confirms Rachael's story.

A further, perhaps not altogether convincing, narrative re-emerges at this point. With Rachel’s help, Mrs Sparsit has tracked down the mysterious woman, a Mrs Pegler, who visits Coketown on an annual basis for reasons that have hitherto remained mysterious. She turns out to be Bounderby’s mother. Bounderby’s story of extreme poverty and abandonment by his mother turns out to be wholly invented. He is the ‘dishonorable man’, that it a ‘bounder’. On the contrary, his mother gave him a good childhood and it was Bounderby, when wealthy and established who insisted that she never visit him. Bounderby falls from grace and is regarded as a preposterous ‘Humbug’.

A parallel aspect of the novel’s denouement concerns Stephen. Somewhat improbably, perhaps, he has fallen down a disused pit shaft on his way back to Coketown. Rachel and Sissy come cross him on a Sunday walk. The local villagers rescue him. He manages to reiterate his innocence but then dies. Stephen emerges as a martyr, a Christ figure who gives up his life. This too is exaggerated.

The accusing finger now points towards Tom. Louisa and Sissy are convinced that he is responsible for the bank heist. Stephen was encouraged by Tom to loiter outside the bank the night of the robbery in order to implicate him in the crime. Sissy had helped Tom escape, arranging for him to be employed in Mr Sleary's circus. Louisa and Sissy find Tom at the circus. With Gradgrind’s and Sleary’s help they conspire to get Tom to Liverpool whence he can escape overseas. Bitzer, however, appears and does his best to scupper things. His motive is to curry favour with Bounderby, in the hope of promotion, by bringing Tom to justice. Sleary manages to set up an ambush and Tom succeeds in travelling to Liverpool where he boards ship. Again the twists and turns in the plot are improbable and exaggerated.

Other ends are then tied up. Mrs Sparsit is turned onto the streets by Bounderby for disgracing him. Five years later he will collapse and die in the street. Gradgrind changes his ways, rejects the utilitarian basis of his educational method and is distanced by his M.P. friends. Tom dies abroad having written a letter of penitence to Louisa. Louisa herself lives on, a widow. Rachel continues with her life of hard work and decency, and Sissy continues her happy life, concerned to be benevolent with the underprivileged and bringing up loving children. She educates them to take the life of the imagination seriously and to appreciate beauty. Their education is in stark contrast to what she received in Gradgrind’s school.

The summary I’ve provided is based on the conflation of a number of synopses. I think – in fact - that Wikipedia’s is one of the most comprehensive! So if you want a fuller account of the novel, Wikipedia is a good place to start – in this instance!

So what was Dickens trying to do in this, his tenth novel?

There is no doubt that Dickens set out to satirise the radical Utilitarians who believed that utility, maximising happiness or pleasure, was the best guide to life. In a letter to his close friend Charles Knight, he accused them of ‘see[ing] figures and averages, and nothing else,’ reminiscent of Gradgrind’s philosophy. Dickens thought Utilitarianism a selfish philosophy. In conjunction with the unrestrictive capitalist economics of the time, the educational system encouraged a lack of respect between mill owners and workers and emphasised facts, while neglecting imagination.

Now we know that Dickens was appalled by the working conditions in industrial England. He had visited large numbers of factories and had himself, as a boy, experienced the harshness of employment within the industrial sector. In a letter to his friend E.M.Fitzgerald, Dickens wrote that he aimed to ‘strike the heaviest blow in my power’ for those who worked in such terrible conditions.

So given the seriousness of Dickens’ concerns, why does hyperbole continue to constitute such an important technique in the novel? I’d like to suggest that his use of hyperbole in *Hard Times* is different and more fundamental from his use of it in earlier novels.

Here hyperbole is often akin to a fundamental impulse of the imagination. Parody and simile and caricature all become different kinds of exaggeration.

I’d like to explore two passages in detail to see how Dickens re-invents hyperbole by combining it or confusing it with other rhetorical tropes.

Here is the opening paragraph of the novel:

‘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 any service to them.  This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children.  Stick to Facts, sir!’

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room, and the speaker’s square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster’s sleeve.  The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall.  The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set.  The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial.  The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside.  The speaker’s obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders,—nay, his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was,—all helped the emphasis.

‘In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!’

The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

So what’s going on in terms of Dicken’s use of rhetoric here?

‘Facts’, at the end of the first sentence, is capitalised. The stylistic use of capitalisation – not for a proper noun – adds emphasis, a form of hyperbole, and suggests personification – which also adds emphasis. ‘Facts’ is repeated at the end of the second sentence, and the beginning of the third. This technique – using a word at the end and then the beginning of two successive sentences is known, rhetorically, as ‘anadiplosis’, from the Greek, *anadiplosis*, ‘to be doubled back, to be made double’. Figurative language is then employed: ‘Plant nothing else, and root out everything else’. This, of course, ties in with the titles of the three books that make up the novel, ‘Sowing’, ‘Reaping’ and ‘Garnering’. And the naturalistic imagery continues in the reference to ‘thinking *animals*’. And there is enumeration: ‘plain, bare, monotonous’.

Geometrical imagery is then introduced – ‘*square* forefinger’… ‘a *line*’, ‘*square* wall’. Again the linked imagery adds emphasis. And ‘square’ will be repeated a further three times at the end of the paragraph.

Indeed the actual word ‘emphasis’ occurs five times in the space of a few sentences and is the last – and therefore most emphatic word – of the paragraph. It’s also used at the start of successive sentences. This rhetorical usage is known as ‘anaphora’.

We only need to look at the first two paragraphs of the novel to see hyperbole at work in all manner of ways from the most obvious and ‘adolescent’ to the most complex and integral to other rhetorical devices. The absurdity of Mr Grandgrind emerges with full comic effect when his hair is described. How many schoolchildren laugh at their teacher’s hair – the comb-over, the undyed roots, the toupee etc.? Dickens tells us that ‘the speaker’s hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie’… etc. The exaggeration here is one of scale and incongruous juxtapositions between the man’s head, a windswept landscape with firs, and the crust of a plum pie.

And facts, at the beginning of chapter 5, will become synonymous with the industrial town itself: ‘Coketown, to which Messrs. Bounderby and Gradgrind now walked, was a triumph of fact; it had no greater taint of fancy in it than Mrs Gradgrind herself.’ Here the hyperbole of likening a fact to an entire city is compounded by the irony. Mrs Gradgrind is repeatedly shown to be singularly lacking in ‘fancy’; in fact Gradgrind has married her in the full knowledge that she will be incapable of interfering with his fact-obsessed educational methods.

But hyperbole also conspires with other stylistic features as we have seen – capitalisation, personification, anadiplosis, figurative language, repetition and anaphora.

I mentioned that in the classical world hyperbole was often dismissed as frivolous and ‘adolescent’. There were, however, some writers who argued that it had a potentially much more significant force. Certain definitions and conceptions of hyperbole indicate that it can serve as a significant epistemological (pertaining to epistemology, a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, method and limits of human knowledge) force within language. Cicero, in *De oratore*, despite his emphasis on control, defines hyperbole (which he refers to using the Latin word ‘superlatio’) as ‘exaggeration and overstatement of the truth for the sake of amplification or diminution’. In *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (‘Rhetoric for Herennius’), thought to be by Cicero but this is contested, the author states that ‘emphasis is produced through Hyperbole [*exsuperationem*] when more is said than the truth warrants’. Quintilian suggests that hyperbole (the Latin word he uses is ‘superiectio’) is ‘an appropriate [or elegant] exaggeration [or surpassing] of the truth’.

By the time we reach the Renaissance, rhetoricians such as Erasmus, in his influential system of *copia* (a method of teaching rhetoric), he emphasised the playful exaggeration of the truth delivered by hyperbole. Renaissance writers often underline hyperbole’s imaginative force. As Ritter argues in a philosophical discussion of hyperbole, ‘Recovering Hyperbole: Rethinking the Limits of Rhetoric for an Age of Excess’, the point is to exploit hyperbole in order to try to communicate ‘the extraordinary “beyond” of thought and language, to make the transcendent immanent and to express the ineffable’.

Later theorists have claimed that hyperbole can offer possibilities for exploration with meaning at the extreme boundaries of thought. Ritter describes Stanivukovic’s argument, that hyperbole can be ‘an incredible, exaggerated utterance [that] interrupts the language and logic of the existing argument’ by shifting ‘one level of meaning to another, re-invented meaning’. The French theorist Gerard Genette has also explored the complexities and ambiguities of hyperbole, in his essay ‘Hyperboles’. Ritter quotes from him: ‘Does not this hyperbolic mode of thought (wit) have its reasons, which common sense ignores and which reason wishes to know?’ For these writers hyperbole is not the weak, obvious trope; rather it is complex in relation to both language and thought, can offer epistemological insight. Hyperbole interrupts logic and constitutes a mode of thought. The purpose of hyperbole can be to open up novel horizons for meaning and being. As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests when discussing the carnival grotesque, by its transgression of convention “hyperbolization” can be an “act of becoming”.

The hyperbole associated with facts and figures goes beyond the straightforwardly comic and trivial. It serves to point to the ideological defects of Utilitarianism and similar ideologies and points to new and exciting ideological possibilities.

In addition, hyperbole in *Hard Times* is associated with a major binary opposition in the novel - between fact and fiction, or fact and fancy.

Key to the novel is a contrast between the world of industry (associated with fact) and the world of the circus (associated with fancy). Dickens, not altogether incidentally, loved the circus. Astley’s circus was one of the most famous and innovative circuses in the world at this time. Founded by Philip Astley, who was an expert horseman, his was the first circus to hold its acts in a ring with the audience seated around it. Charles Dickens visited this incarnation of Astley’s Circus several times during the 1830s, and wrote about it in his Sketches by Boz (1836).

So what is the significance of the circus in the novel? Sleary claims, ‘“People

mutht be amuthed, […] they can’t be alwayth a working, nor yet they can’t be alwayth a

learning” (Dickens 35)

But the circus is much more than a source of amusement. It is quasi-metonymic. Metonymy, in rhetoric is the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant. One famous example of metonymy is the saying, ‘The pen is mightier than the sword,’ where the ‘pen’ stands for the written word, and the ‘sword’ for military might. The circus is a manifestation of hyperbole in its exaggerations of scale and proportion. Everything about the circus is hyperbolic.

Sleary’s circus is also the first world to stand in contrast to the orderly, productive world that both Bounderby and Gradgrind stand for. The circus is described as untidy and chaotic. No patterns emerge and nothing seems to have a beginning and an end. Nothing fits into the quantifiable world that Grangrind approves. How do you calculate the worth of a worker whose contribution is to “dance upon rolling caskets, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing”? (Dickens 31)

The symbolism of the circus, which promotes sociability, escape, and a blurring of the boundaries between what is real and what is imaginary, is associated with the symbolism of Pegasus – the white, flying horse of Greek mythology and a symbol of wonder and fancy. In the novel, Pegasus is associated with the circus people. The circus people live at an inn called the Pegasus Arms and the inn has a picture of Pegasus on its sign-board. Inside there is a portrait painting of one of the circus horses, which is described as ‘another Pegasus’. This Pegasus has ‘real gauze let in for his wings, golden stars stuck on all over him, and his ethereal harness made of red silk’. The circus horses and their fearless riders, create a sense of wonder in the audience, and giving them a brief escape from the grind of Coketown. The circus horses emerge as a direct opposition to the ‘factual’ horse described by Bitzer at the beginning of the novel.

The circus and Pegasus embody the idea of hyperbole in its exaggerations and improbabilities.

To some degree this remains the case today. Here is an advertisement for a ringmaster or ringmistress from <http://www.insidejobs.com/careers/circus-ringmaster>. The deadline hasn’t passed…:

As circus Emcee, you entertain and excite audiences by introducing and narrating each of the show’s acts, from the [Acrobats](http://www.insidejobs.com/careers/acrobat) and [Aerialists](http://www.insidejobs.com/careers/aerialist) to the [Clowns](http://www.insidejobs.com/careers/clown) and [Jugglers](http://www.insidejobs.com/careers/juggler). Known for your hyperbole, you have a vocabulary that’s littered with words like “spectacular,” “amazing,” “astonishing,” and “sensational.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The circus – and hyperbole – also delight in the improbabilities of scale.

Dickens loved elephants, no doubt for their exaggerated size. He often used them for hyperbolic effect, sometimes exploiting simile at the same time as in this description from *Hard Times:* ‘Where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.’

Given Dickens’ love of elephants – and hyperbole – he would no doubt have been delighted by this photograph of an elephant receiving a welcome pedicure.

Thank you.

1. For a full account of hyperbole, see, Joshua R. Ritter, ‘Recovering Hyperbole: Rethinking the Limits of Rhetoric for an Age of Excess’, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2012), pp. 406-428 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.insidejobs.com/careers/circus-ringmaster>

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   [www.gresham.ac.uk](http://www.gresham.ac.uk) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)