



Paradise regained in Nicholas Nickleby

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PARADISE REGAINED IN
NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

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I

Unlike Dickens' later novels, *Nicholas Nickleby* is lacking in symbols which pervade the whole story, but images coming close to those symbols are found even in this early work.¹ The key words are "heart," "world," and "home." These three words appear so recurrently that they command attention in our analysis of the novel. This leads us to wonder if Dickens attaches any significance to these three words, and if they can give us any clues to the understanding of the work. In my view these three words are important in the analysis of *Nicholas Nickleby* because the novel is, I think, based upon Dickens' conception of the three ideas. Therefore, in this study, I apply the three concepts as a clue to the understanding of the novel.

Nicholas Nickleby can be, in a certain way, considered as a moral fable. In the novel is fully revealed young Dickens' sense of moral value though it may strike the sophisticated reader as unrealistic. In it the author draws a sharp distinction between good characters and bad ones in his effort to drive home to the reader the moral point he feels so strongly. Therefore good characters come out triumphant in the end as a reward of their virtues (at least in Dickens' eye), whereas bad ones are defeated as a severe punishment for their vices. In short this novel forms a world in which everything goes in the way the author's sense of moral value dictates.

The main plot of this novel opens with the death of the hero's father, when he, left with his mother and sister to support, and nothing to rely on

financially, goes out into the world. He first goes to London, seeking the help of his uncle, Ralph Nickleby, who is destined to be Nicholas' chief antagonist. In their first encounter, we are impressed with the sharp contrast between Nicholas and Ralph; it is "the contrast," to borrow Dickens' own phrase, "between the simplicity of the nephew and the worldly manner of the uncle."² The difference between the two characters, as implied in this phrase, arises out of how much or how little they know of the world. Nicholas is, as Ralph despisingly says, "wholly ignorant of the world" (p. 38). So are the rest of the family. Ralph contemptuously comments on the ignorance of the world on the part of his nephew's family: "This simple family [were] born and bred in retirement, and [are] wholly unacquainted with what is called the world . . ." (p. 28). On the other hand, Ralph repeatedly boasts himself to be "a man of the world and a man of business" (p. 249) who knows the way the world works.

Before going into further analysis, let us check how this phrase, "the world," is defined in the novel. Dickens clearly indicates, when he is commenting on the ignorance of the world on the part of this family fresh out of the country, that "the world . . . signifieth all the rascals in it" (p. 28). Dickens' own definition of the word implies that it has negative connotations, and that the thorough acquaintance with the world is in no way considered a virtue. On the contrary, the initiation into the world, as is implied throughout the novel, usually signals the beginning of the corruption of one's heart, whose purity Dickens values above anything else.

This difference between Nicholas and Ralph goes beyond the ignorance of, or acquaintance with, the world. It involves their different attitudes toward the world. Their difference is made clear at the beginning of the novel when Dickens describes how differently Ralph and Nicholas's father³ reacted respectively to the accounts of "their father's sufferings in his days of poverty, and of their deceased uncle's importance in his days of affluence"

(pp. 2–3). These accounts determined Nicholas' father "to shun the world and attach himself to the quiet routine of a country life" (p. 3). On the other hand, the accounts urged Ralph to go out boldly into the world, where crafty business dealings were a way of life, and to make himself a fortune.

It, then, follows that Ralph holds sacred the belief that "riches are the only true source of happiness and power, and . . . that there was nothing like money" (p. 3). He, therefore, cares "for nothing in life, or beyond it, save the gratification of the two passions, avarice, the first and predominant appetite of his nature, and hatred, the second" (p. 567). For Ralph, money is the supreme god as is indicated in the following passage where he boasts of its power: "As a portion of the world affect to despise the power of money, I must try and show them what it is" (p. 441). When Ralph despises his brother's family, saying that they have "no idea what business [is] . . . [and are] unacquainted . . . with the very meaning of the word" (p. 119), it is clear that the usurer denounces the family for their sense of value which fails in exalting the power and importance of money.

This worship of money brings an undesirable effect on Ralph, absorbed in "his old pursuit of money-getting" (p. 4), and surrounded by a gold-induced haze as Dickens comments metaphorically upon its dehumanizing process: ". . . gold conjures up a mist about a man more destructive of all his senses and lulling to his feelings than the fumes of charcoal . . ." (p. 4). In other words, this gold-induced greed causes one's heart to be rotten to the core as Dickens indicates that "the man of business had a more than commonly vicious snarl lurking at his heart" (p. 117). It is, then, no wonder that "Ralph was well acquainted with its [the human heart's] worst weakness, though he knew nothing of its best" (p. 28).

As we have seen above, in this novel is found a basic antithesis between "heart" and "money," around which the whole story revolves. Dickens believes that one is born with a pure, innocent heart, which is only corrupted

when he goes out into the world. This belief of Dickens' makes him declare thus:

'If we all had hearts like those which beat so lightly in the bosoms of the young and beautiful, what a heaven this earth would be! If, while our bodies grew old and withered, our hearts could but retain their early youth and freshness, of what avail would be our sorrows and sufferings! But the faint image of Eden which is stamped upon them in childhood, chafes and rubs in our rough struggle with the world, and soon wears away: too often to leave nothing but a mourning blank remaining.' (p. 57)⁴

The deeper one is involved in the affairs of this money-oriented world, as the novelist finds it, the more corrupt his heart becomes. In other words, Dickens believes that this money-oriented world is basically heartless, and that a person with a heart is not fit for survival there. The young novelist deplors this fact, sounds the warning of the evil influence money has on one's heart, and tries to solve this moral dilemma in his third novel in a peculiarly Dickensian way.

Nicholas and Ralph are more than the protagonist and antagonist of this novel. Dickens makes them respectively the representatives of Mr. Good Heart and of Mr. Evil Money to demonstrate his moral point. Naturally they hate each other because their views of the world and value systems are poles apart and are incompatible with each other. One value system, represented by Nicholas, exalts the purity of a heart; the other, represented by Ralph, exalts the power of money. Therefore this encounter "galled Ralph to the heart's core, and he hated Nicholas from that hour" (p.24), and made Ralph declare, "if we were only citizens of a country where it could be safely done, I'd give good money to have him [Nicholas] stabbed to the heart . . ." (p. 493). Of course this hatred of Ralph's is reciprocated by Nicholas.

This characterization of Ralph as a man of the world, "intent on schemes of

money-getting" (p. 127) whose heart has been made rotten by greed is metaphorically implied at the beginning of the novel in the description of the gardens on Gold Square, another name indicative of the attributes of those who live there:

Some London houses have a melancholy little plot of ground behind them, usually fenced in by four high whitewashed walls, and frowned upon by stacks of chimneys: in which there withers on, from year to year, a crippled tree, that makes a show of putting forth a few leaves late in autumn when other trees shed theirs, and, drooping in the effort, lingers on, all crackled and smoke-dried, till the following season, when it repeats the same process, and perhaps if the weather be particularly genial, even tempts some rheumatic sparrow to chirrup in its branches. People sometimes call these dark yards 'gardens' (p. 8).⁵

The preceding passage is very suggestive of the state of Ralph's heart. It implies that Ralph is after all a "crippled tree" (a corrupted heart), "frowned upon by stacks of chimneys . . . all crackled and smoke-dried" (led astray by gold-induced, benumbing smoke, one would suspect). It is "usually fenced in by four high whitewashed walls," suggesting that Ralph isolates himself from the rest of the world.⁶ It also "makes a show of putting forth a few leaves late in autumn" to no avail, repeating this fruitless process the following season. These few leaves and "some rheumatic sparrow to chirrup in its branches" represent what little humanity is left in Ralph's heart. This remnant of Ralph's humanity is revealed when he shows some pangs of conscience⁷ by using Kate for his monetary gains:

Meanwhile, Ralph walked to and fro in his back office, troubled in mind by what had just occurred. To say that Ralph loved and cared for—in the most ordinary acceptation of those terms—any one of God's creatures, would be the wildest fiction. Still, there had somehow stolen upon him from time to time a thought of his niece which was tinged with

compassion and pity; breaking through the dull cloud of dislike or indifference which darkened men and women in his eyes, there was, in her case, the faintest gleam of light—a most feeble and sickly ray at the best of the times—but there it was, and it showed the poor girl in a better and purer aspect than any in which he had looked on human nature yet. (p. 341)

There is no doubt, however, that in spite of a few signs of the remnants of Ralph's humanity, he symbolizes the center of the evil force in the novel.

This attribute of "good heart" or "corrupt heart" works as a test to judge various characters and divides them into two groups in this novel. *Nicholas Nickleby*, then, forms a bipolar world, in which good characters are morally in conflict with bad (or corrupt) ones.

Let us see how these characters are characterized by the key word of "heart." One group, represented by Nicholas, is characterized by the purity of their hearts, and include, to name but main ones, such people as Kate, Smike, John Browdie, the Cheeryble Brothers, Tim, Madeline, and Frank. They all share, with Nicholas, a good aspect of a human heart, (or disinterestedness untainted by money-induced greed), and put consideration of others before their own self-interest.

Kate, like Nicholas who is "kind-hearted" (p. 330) and "wholly ignorant of the world" (p. 38), is described as an "innocent, true-hearted girl" (p. 373). She is also described as a "noble-hearted" (p. 512) girl who has "a woman's heart" (p. 716). After suffering in the heartless world, she complains to her brother: "I shall die of a broken heart" (p. 421).

Smike is, as Nicholas asserts, "the most grateful, single-hearted, affectionate creature, that ever breathed" (p. 386). Therefore Nicholas' heart is linked to Smike's, as the hero himself admits: "My heart is linked to yours [Smike's]" (p. 256). Dickens even suggests the possibility of Nicholas' love (or heart) transforming the ill-treated boy into "an altered being":

He was an altered being; he had an object now, and that object was to show his attachment to the only person—that person a stranger—who had treated him, not to say with kindness, but like a human creature. (p. 143)

John Browdie is another one, whose heart is linked to Nicholas': "... his [Nicholas'] warm heart yearned towards plain John Browdie" (p. 819). After a foul start, their friendship is sealed when John hears that Nicholas has beaten Squeers:

'What!' cried John Browdie, with such an ecstatic shout, that the horse quite shied at it. 'Beatten the schoolmeaster! Ho! ho! ho! Beatten the schoolmeaster! who ever heard o' the loike o' that noo! Giv' us thee hond agean, yoongster. Beatten a schoolmeaster! Dang it, I loove thee for't.' (p. 157)

Mr. Frank Cheeryble, destined to be Kate's future husband, whose "demeanour [is] full of that heartiness which . . . is peculiarly prepossessing" reminds "Nicholas very strongly of the kind-hearted brothers" (p. 558). He is also highly regarded for his disinterested love for Kate.⁸ Madeline Bray, destined to be Nicholas' future wife, also has "warmth of heart" (p. 794), "the truth and purity" (p. 625) of which Nicholas reveres.

In the characterization of Tim Linkingwater, his youthfulness is emphatically stressed despite his actual age. Charles Cheeryble says of him:

'My dear brother,' said the other, seizing Tim's disengaged fist, 'Tim Linkingwater looks ten years younger than he did on his last birthday.'

'Brother Ned, my dear boy,' returned the other old fellow, 'I believe that Tim Linkingwater was born a hundred-and-fifty years old, and is gradually coming down to five-and-twenty; for he's younger every birthday than he was the year before.' (p. 473)

Brother Ned calls Tim "a mere child—an infant" (p. 561). His view of marriage confirms "the disinterestedness of his heart" (p. 643):

Miss La Creevy earnestly recommended a lady she knew who would exactly suit Mr. Linkingwater, and had a very comfortable property of her own; but this latter qualification had very little effect upon Tim, who manfully protested that fortune would be no object with him, but that true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife, and that if he had these he could find money for the moderate wants of both. (p. 643)

In spite of their success in the world, the Cheeryble Brothers remain eternal children with innocent hearts. When they shake each other by the hand, as Nicholas observes, the face of each lights up "by the beaming looks of affection, which would have been most delightful to behold in infants" (p. 453). They consider themselves unchanged except in age and social status since they were simple-hearted boys:

The time was, sir, when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor simple-hearted boys, wandering almost barefoot to seek our fortunes; are we changed in anything but years and worldly circumstances since that time? No, God forbid! (p. 812)

The other group, represented by Ralph, is characterized by the corruption of their hearts, and includes such people as Squeers, Arthur Gride, Sir Mulberry Hawk, and Walter Bray. They all share, with Ralph, an evil aspect of a corrupt human heart and are characterized by the pursuit of their own self-interest and monetary gains at the expense of others.

Ralph has, as Nicholas denounces, a "black and dastardly heart" (p. 586) which lies "rusting in its cell, beating only as a piece of cunning mechanism, and yielding no throb of hope, or fear, or love, or care, for any living thing" (p. 122) in contrast to Kate's "warm young heart [palpitating] with a thousand anxieties and apprehensions." For Nicholas (and Dickens) it is a "false heart" (p. 425) incapable of such ordinary human feelings as hope, fear, love and above all, care for a living thing. It has ceased to be a human heart and has

become “a piece of cunning mechanism” which Jerome Mechier calls an “iron heart.”⁹

Squeers is what Nicholas calls a “black-hearted scoundrel” (p. 174) who exploits unwanted, “natural children” (p. 34) for his own economic gains. He only considers these children whom he calls his “blacks” (p. 99) to be disposable goods: “I’m afraid of one of them boys falling off, and then there’s twenty pound a year gone,” and squeezes every penny out of them: “Subdue your appetites, my dears, and you’ve conquered human natur” (p. 45). The food is served to the pupils at the Dotheboys Hall on the same principle as Mrs. Squeers explains to Nicholas:

They have the brimstone and treacle, partly because if they hadn’t something or other in the way of medicine they’d be always ailing and giving a world of trouble, and partly because it spoils their appetites and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner. So it does them good and us good at the same time, and that’s fair enough I’m sure. (p. 86)

Naturally these children come at the bottom of his concern:

‘How is my Squeery?’ said this lady in a playful manner, and a very hoarse voice.

‘Quite well, my love,’ replied Squeers. ‘How are the cows?’

‘All right, every one of ‘em,’ answered the lady.

‘And the pigs?’ said Squeers:

‘As well as they were when you went away.’

‘Come; that’s a blessing,’ said Squeers, pulling off his great-coat.

‘The boys are all as they were, I suppose?’ (p. 78)

He even exploits his son and heir for a business purpose as “a specimen of the Dotheboys Hall feeding”: “ain’t he fit to bust out of his clothes, and start the seams, make the very buttons fly off with his fatness” (p. 434). He even boasts:

I've brought little Wackford up, on purpose to show to parents and guardians. I shall put him in the advertisement this time. Look at that boy—himself a pupil—why he's a miracle of high feeding, that boy is. (p. 437)

The result of all this is children's hell at Squeers' school:

But the pupils—the young noblemen! How the last faint traces of hope, the remotest glimmering of any good to be derived from his efforts in this den, faded from the mind of Nicholas as he looked in dismay around! Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining; there were vicious-faced boys brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted in its birth, with every young and healthy feeling flogged and starved down, with every revengeful passion that can fester in its swollen hearts, eating its evil way to their core in silence, what an incipient Hell was breeding there! (p.88)

Sir Mulberry Hawk is “a ruffian at heart” (p. 240) who is “remarkable for his tact in ruining . . . young gentlemen of fortune” (p. 237). He exploits the Lord's soft heart for his own self-interest, destroying him at last financially as well as physically.

Arthur Gride, who is “not too nice of . . . heart” (p. 574) and is a man with

"misers' hearts" (p. 667) expresses "the most covetous and griping penury, and sufficiently [indicates] his belonging to that class of which Ralph Nickleby [is] a member" (p. 611). He plots, with Ralph, to marry Madeline for her inheritance and the satisfaction of his own lust.

Walter Bray is a self-declared "man of the world" (p. 714), who is "proud and mean by turns, and selfish at all times" (p. 620). He conspires, with Ralph and Arthur, what Nicholas calls a "heartless scheme" (p. 681) to marry his daughter to the old miser in order to seek his own self-interest. Ralph perceives his character with piercing insight:

. . . he [Ralph] enlarged upon the character of her father, arguing, that even taking it for granted that he loved her in return with the utmost affection of which he was capable, yet he loved himself a great deal better; (p. 615)

It comes as no surprise to us, then, that Mr. Bray suffers from the disease "of the Heart" (p. 616). As we have seen so far, these two types of characters make up a fable-like world in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

II

Another word that bears an important meaning in this novel is "home." There is a great longing, among the chief characters, to find, or more precisely speaking, to restore, a long-lost home. Kate appeals to Ralph for a home, however humble it may be, when she fears that she might be separated from her mother; "I cannot leave her, uncle. I must have some place that I can call a home; it will be wherever she is, you know, and may be a very humble one" (p. 122). Nicholas dreams "of home, or of what was home once" (p. 42), on his way to Dotheboys Hall after he was separated from his family. And Kate promises herself that "I will try to do anything that will gain me a home and bread" (p. 25). When her determination is about to forsake her after many

hardships in this heartless world, Nicholas exhorts her to persevere "till I can carry you to some home of mine, where we may revive the happiness denied to us now, and talk of these trials as things gone by" (p. 254). Smike finds a home in Nicholas when he declares: "You are my home" (p. 159) and swears to follow Nicholas to his own death as he literally does.

When these characters talk of a home, what do they mean by the word? Nicholas defines what it means in the novel:

'When I talk of homes,' pursued Nicholas, 'I talk of mine—which is yours [Smike's] of course. If it were defined by any particular four walls and a roof, God knows I should be sufficiently puzzled to say whereabouts it lay; but that is not what I mean. When I speak of home, I speak of the place where—in default of a better—those I love are gathered together; and if that place were a gipsy's tent or a barn, I should call it by the same good name notwithstanding. (p. 443)

In other words, it is a place where good characters with pure hearts are gathered to form an ideal society. Nicholas (and Kate, to a lesser extent) goes out into the world, filled with heartless people corrupted by their self-interest, to seek good candidates, with whom he can form an ideal family circle. It is needless to say that, in recruiting these people, the purity of their hearts is a crucial test of their admission or rejection into this circle.

The original paradise, where they had enjoyed "all the comfort and happiness of home" (p. 254), was lost when Mrs. Nickleby¹⁰ introduced to her husband the forbidden knowledge of monetary speculation, reminding him of Ralph's economic success: "Think of your brother." She urges him to:

'Speculate with it [his capital],' said Mrs. Nickleby.

'Spec-u-late, my dear?' said Mr. Nickleby, as though in doubt.

'Why not?' asked Mrs. Nickleby.

'Because, my dear, if we *should* lose it,' rejoined Mr. Nickleby, who was a slow and time-taking speaker, 'if we *should* lose it, we shall no

longer be able to live, my dear.'

'Fiddle,' said Mrs. Nickleby.

'I am not altogether sure of that, my dear,' said Mr. Nickleby.

'There's Nicholas,' pursued the lady, 'quite a young man—it's time he was in the way of doing something for himself; and Kate too, poor girl, without a penny in the world. Think of your brother; would he be what he is, if he hadn't speculated?'

'That's true,' replied Mr. Nickleby. 'Very good, my dear. Yes. I *will* speculate, my dear.' (pp. 4–5)

It is no wonder, then, that as a result of this, "he died of a broken heart" (p. 23).

This loss of their paradise forces the family to go out into the hard world, where they recruit the warm-hearted, while rejecting the heartless,¹¹ in their effort to rebuild the lost paradise. In this sense *Nicholas Nickleby* is the nineteenth-century version of Paradise (or Home) Lost and Regained.

Naturally, Satan in this novel is Ralph, who tries to thwart every attempt on the part of good characters to build a happy home. Ralph with a corrupt heart is no less anti-domestic than he is anti-social. He himself is solitary without any family ties and is shut up in his own world because:

Affecting to consider himself but a type of all humanity, he was at little pains to conceal his true character from the world in general, and in his own heart he exulted over and cherished every bad design as it had birth. The only scriptural admonition that Ralph Nickleby heeded, in the letter, was 'know thyself.' He knew himself well, and choosing to imagine that all mankind were cast in the same mould, hated them; for, though no man hates himself, the coldest among us having too much self-love for that, yet, most men unconsciously judge the world from themselves, and . . . sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it. (pp. 567–8)

Ralph's avarice corrupts all his humanity, and makes him hate people, which

in turn isolates him from all the world. He is stuck in this vicious cycle. Ralph shuts "out the world" (p. 803) and is "against all the world" (p. 612). Consequently all people "fall from me and shun me like the plague" (p. 771).

Ralph tries to balk the Nicklebys' attempt to form a family circle to the same extent as he shuts himself up from the world. It is Ralph who first of all suggests the idea of breaking up the Nickleby family fresh out of the country. He expels Nicholas from London to Squeers' Yorkshire school. It is also Ralph who paves the way for Sir Mulberry Hawk's attempt to seduce Kate, entailing the possibility that she might become unfit for a happy home. When a family circle is about to be formed, he abducts Smike from it, using Squeers, one of his lieutenants, as his proxy. Ralph plots to prevent Nicholas from marrying Madeline by persuading and cajoling Mr. Bray into marrying his daughter to Arthur Gride.

This attitude of Ralph's is in sharp contrast to those of the open-hearted, "whose truth of heart and grateful earnest nature had everyday endeared him [Smike] to them [people around Smike] more and more" (p. 791). Nicholas is touched by Mr. Cheeryble's "pure openness of heart" and instantly makes himself his friend:

There was something so earnest and guileless in the way in which all this was said, and such a complete disregard of all conventional restraints and coldnesses, that Nicholas could not resist it. Among men who have any sound and sterling qualities, there is nothing so contagious as pure openness of heart. (p. 451)

Here is found another antithesis of "a closed heart" versus "an open heart." A closed heart shuts itself up in its own world and isolates people from the rest of the world, while an open heart unites people in love. In this moral fable of *Nicholas Nickleby*, whether naturally or surprisingly, an open heart triumphs over a closed heart, and good characters succeed in regaining the

long lost paradise (or home), defeating Satan (Ralph) and his lieutenants (Squeers, Arthur Gride, and Mr. Bray), as Ralph himself prophesies: "... this devil [Nicholas] is loose again, and thwarting me, as he was born to do, at every turn" (p. 434).

As the prophecy proves right, the Nicklebys regain their lost home of paradise as Kate says, "I know no difference between this home and that in which we were all so happy for so many years, except that the kindest and gentlest heart that ever ached on earth has passed in peace to heaven" (p. 563). When Nicholas becomes rich and prosperous enough, he goes one step further by buying back his father's old house:

The first act of Nicholas, when he became a rich and prosperous merchant, was to buy his father's old house. As time crept on, and there came gradually about him a group of lovely children, it was altered and enlarged, but none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old tree was rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed. (p. 830)

This completes the Nicklebys' search for a paradise because all they have been hoping for is their lost, happy home (or their going back to the old state), which they are given as a reward for their hearts untainted through their struggle in the world. This home includes such good-hearted characters as Madeline, Frank (as spouses of Nicholas and Kate), John and Matilda Browdie (through correspondence), Miss La Creevy (with a warm heart "brimfull of the friendliest feelings to all mankind" (p. 246), Newman Noggs (who still retains a good heart in spite of his suffering in the world), Tim Linkingwater, and the Cheeryble Brothers. For Tim and the Cheeryble Brothers, this home is an unfulfilled paradise come true. There was a time when the Cheeryble Brothers were in love with Madeline's mother and her aunt; Tim, with their maidservant. They all had a chance of forming a happy family circle, which never materialized. In this sense Nicholas' home

represents their old dream home come true.

The only exception to this home is Smike who is "less and less qualified for the world, and more unhappy in his own deficiencies" (pp. 797–8). It is implied, however, that Smike is allowed to enter into a higher order of paradise in recompense for his failure to enter into an earthly paradise.¹²

He fell into a slight slumber, and waking, smiled as before; then spoke of beautiful gardens, which he said stretched out before him, and were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then whispered that it was Eden—and so died. (p. 763)

As is well-expected, a happy home ends up unfulfilled for Ralph. There is a moment, however, when even Ralph dreams of a home:

. . . towards Kate herself—still there was, strange though it may seem, something humanizing and even gentle in his thoughts at that moment. He thought of what his home might be if Kate were there; he placed her in the empty chair, looked upon her, heard her speak; he felt again upon his arm the gentle pressure of the trembling hand; he strewed his costly rooms with the hundred silent tokens of feminine presence and occupation; he came back again to the cold fireside and the silent dreary splendour; and in that one glimpse of a better nature, born as it was in selfish thoughts, the rich man felt himself friendless, childless, and alone. Gold, for the instance, lost its lustre in his eyes, for there were countless treasures of the heart which it could never purchase. (pp. 400–1)

It even turns out that Ralph also had an opportunity to form a happy home, which he had abandoned for money:

The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept strictly private, for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. . . .; Mr. Nickleby would

consent to no such sacrifice, and so they went on keeping their marriage secret, and waiting for him to break his neck or die of a fever. He did neither, and meanwhile the result of this private marriage was a son. (p. 787)

After waiting for the death of her brother for some years, which never took place, Ralph's wife urged him to make their marriage known to her brother, but Ralph flatly refused it. Being fed up with the secret marriage, his wife "eloped with a younger man and left him" (p. 788). The son, born out of their marriage, turns out to be Smike, whom Ralph unwittingly persecutes to his death. In a word, his love of money destroys a possible happy home, and consequently himself.

Nicholas Nickleby is, as we have seen, a moral fable which well expresses young Dickens' sense of moral values. It forms a bipolar world, where the young novelist draws a sharp distinction between good characters and bad ones by the purity of their "hearts," and where the good-hearted emerge triumphant, while the corrupt-hearted are defeated. This sentiment of Dickens' certainly strikes the sophisticated reader as a naive assumption which it is. Maybe Dickens knew it. After going through many hardships in the heartless world, where (it seemed at least to Dickens that) many people are only pursuing their own self-interests at the expense of the socially underprivileged, he was irresistibly driven to portray in this novel the world as he wished it were. In this sense *Nicholas Nickleby* is an instance of young Dickens' wish-fulfillment and his escape from reality.

Notes

- 1 The same is pointed out in Jerome Mechier, "The Faint Image of Eden: The Many Worlds of *Nicholas Nickleby*," *Dickens Studies Annual*, ed. Robert B. Partlow, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), I, 142.
- 2 Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (The Oxford Illustrated Dickens. London:

- Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 38. Subsequent quotations from this novel are from this edition and are to be indicated in the text by page numbers only.
- 3 Nicholas' father can be considered as Nicholas' double.
- 4 This passage is quoted from the interpolated tale in the novel, but it expresses Dickens' sentiment all the same.
- 5 J. Gold elaborates on the same point in J. Gold, *Charles Dickens: Radical Novelist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c1972), pp. 79–80.
- 6 This is an important point, upon which I will elaborate in the next section.
- 7 We find many passages in the novel, in which Ralph is inspired by Kate to be humane. For instance:

Ralph would have walked into any poverty-stricken debtor's house, and pointed him out to a bailiff, though in attendance upon a young child's deathbed, without the smallest concern, because it would have been a matter quite in the ordinary course of business, and the man would have been an offender against his only code of morality. But here was a young girl, who had done no wrong but that of coming into the world alive; who had patiently yielded to all his wishes; who had tried so hard to please him—above all, who didn't owe him money—and he felt awkward and nervous. (p. 243)

As the door of the vehicle was roughly closed, a comb fell from Kate's hair, close at her uncle's feet; and he picked it up and returned it into her hand, the light from a neighbouring lamp shone upon her face. The lock of hair that had escaped and curled loosely over her brow, the traces of tears yet scarcely dry, the flushed cheek, the look of sorrow, all fired some dormant train of recollection in the old man's breast; and the face of his dead brother seemed present before him, with the very look it wore on some occasion of boyish grief, of which every minute circumstance flashed upon his mind, with the distinctness of a scene of yesterday.

Ralph Nickleby, who was proof against all appeals of blood and kindred—who was steeled against every tale of sorrow and distress—staggered while he looked, and reeled back into his house, as a man who had seen a spirit from some world beyond the grave. (p. 244)

- 8 All the disinterested love and marriages are considered to be good, while mercenary ones are considered to be corrupt in Dickens' novels generally. R. H.

Dabney elaborates on this theme of disinterested marriage versus mercenary marriage in R. H. Dabney, *Love and Property in the Novels of Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1967)

9 Mechier, p. 143.

10 Mrs. Nickleby can be considered to be a marginal character. To be sure, she can be vain to the point of selfishness as is indicated in the passage: "But, although there was no evil and little selfishness in Mrs. Nickleby's heart, she had a weak head and a vain one . . ." (p. 484). But she can be forgiven for her pride by her virtue of domestic concern as Dickens declares: "Pride is one of the seven deadly sins; but it cannot be the pride of a mother in her children, for that is a compound of two cardinal virtues—faith and hope" (p. 566).

11 Let us review briefly Nicholas' and Kate's encounter with various characters in the world. After breaking with Squeers, Nicholas goes to see Mr. Gregsburly, a deceitful politician to seek a job. After disillusionment at politics, he employs himself as a tutor to the children of the Kenwigs who expect out of Mr. Lillyvick nothing but his inheritance. Mr. Lillyvick deplores that:

'If a bachelor happens to have saved a little matter of money,' said Mr. Lillyvick, 'his sisters and brothers, and nephews and nieces, look *to* that money, and not to him; even if, by being a public character, he is the head of the family, or, as it may be, the main from which all the other little branches are turned on, they still wish him dead all the while, and get low-spirited every time they see him looking in good health, because they want to come into his little property. You see that?' (p. 321)

After this Nicholas finds a temporary refuge in the theatrical Company of Mr. Crummles, who is an open-hearted fellow. It turns out, however, that even open-hearted Mr. Crummles exploits his daughter for profit-making:

. . . the infant phenomenon, though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age—not perhaps to the full extent of the memory of the oldest inhabitant, but certainly for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall, and perhaps this system of training had produced in the infant phenomenon these additional phenomena. (p. 290)

It is only in the Cheeryble Brothers that Nicholas finds a worthy employer and a suitable member, with whom to form a family circle.

The same is true with Kate. She first employs herself as a milliner at Madame Mantalini's, a "lady of business" (p. 208) where Mr. Mantalini exploits the lady's heart for money. After the bankruptcy of Madame Mantalini, Kate becomes a paid companion to Mrs. Witterly who is hungry for social distinction and connections with high society. There Kate is subjected to humiliation from Sir Mulberry Hawk and snobbish slights from her employer. She must find a worthy protector in the Cheeryble Brothers.

12. It might strike some reader as embarrassing, as it did me, that Dickens so conveniently gets rid of Smike, who was secretly in love with Kate. When Frank Cheeryble, a suitable marriage partner for Kate comes around, Smike's fate is sealed; he becomes "less and less qualified for the world," and dies, saying, "it's better as it is" (p. 798).