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Mimesis as Subject in *Nicholas Nickleby*

"There are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast," Dickens had written at the end of his first novel. (pp. 799)¹ By and large, in *Pickwick* he had dealt with the light. *Pickwick* himself was the sun, a source of light and joy in his world, which had many other similar beacons in the persons of Tony, Sam, Wardle, and the others. It is a world which in its way is even more "light, bright and sparkling" than *Pride and Prejudice*, a world bursting with energy, cheer, and joy. It is, of course, not without its shadows, but they are the shadows which function as intensifiers of the light. In *Oliver Twist*, as though the young Dickens were testing his powers in one mode after another, he created a world in which the shadows predominate. The workhouse, and Fagin's dens, and the dim foetid alleys of underworld London, form the essential and memorable ambiance of *Oliver*, and the airy streets of Pentonville and the sunshine of the Maylies become merely the assisting gleams that emphasize the dark. Dickens was flexing his muscles by deliberately writing a second novel that was to be as different from his first as the mind of a single creator could make it. As *Pickwick* was middle-aged, and fat, and jolly, and financially secure, so *Oliver* was to be a child, and starved, and terrorised, and utterly vulnerable. As *Pickwick* celebrates laughter, and eating and drinking, and fatness, *Oliver Twist* was to turn the tables: the irrepressible and joyful mirth of Tony Weller becomes transformed to the heartless cacchinations of Charley Bates, whose sense of humour is most stimulated by the pains of others.

A novel, said Trollope, should be "enlivened by humour and sweetened by pathos."² And Wilkie Collins's formula for pleasing the public was "Make 'em laugh; make 'em cry; make 'em wait."³ Humour and pathos being recognized as the two most popular constituents of novels, Dickens deliberately set out to prove his mastery of both. Having made his readers laugh uproaringly at the antics of the Pick-

wick Club, he made them cry piteously with his workhouse orphan asking for more.

The pattern of extreme contrast operates within the novels as well as between them. Chiaroscuro is the method of *Oliver Twist*, particularly. Oliver's career takes its shape as alternating between the extremes of evil and darkness on the one hand and the forces of goodness and light on the other. In the familiar "streaky bacon" passage, in which Dickens makes an address to his reader in the Fielding manner, he comments satirically on the practice of extreme contrasts in the alternation of tragedy and comedy in melodrama. It is an account that looks forward to the practices of the Crummles company in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. (*OT*, 118)

Though Dickens satirizes the streaky bacon principle, he also adheres to it, both at large in the structure of the novel (Oliver lying wounded and abandoned is juxtaposed with a comic bit of flirtation between Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney), and immediately following this discussion, where he defends the extreme and artificial contrasts of the stage as being realistic after all:

Such changes appear absurd, but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight. The transitions in real life from well-spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling; only, there, we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference. (*OT*, 118)

This sounds as though Dickens is warming up to the writing of *Nicholas Nickleby*,⁴ where he similarly suggests that the wildest artificialities of the theatre are not so different from reality after all, and that life, when we come to look at it, is much more improbable than what we condemn as preposterous and impossible in art. In the Preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* he similarly complained of the narrow licence allowed the artist in his rendering of the extremes that are readily observable in life. He has been accused of exaggerating, he says, in the presentation of his bad man Squeers, and his good men, the Cheerybles; but, he assures us, all of them are "drawn from life," and, far from exaggerating, he has actually toned down his representations of reality in order to make them credible to readers of fiction. "Mr. Squeers and his school are faint and feeble pictures of an existing reality, [he claims]

purposely subdued and kept down lest they should be deemed impossible" (xviii). (I like the notion of Squeers as a "faint and feeble picture") It is clear that Dickens *thought* he was being realistic, and therefore that his vision of what went on about him must have been an extraordinarily heightened and intense one. His responses to the communications from his readers showed him always ready to defend the authenticity of his characters by asserting that they *were* realistic after all: he had made the same defence in his preface for *Pickwick* and *Bill Sikes*.

It was a basic assumption with Dickens whenever he spoke *in propria persona* that his art was a mimetic art; and when his critics objected that this or that character or action was not true to life he would not take a position like Oscar Wilde's, and claim that precisely therein lay its art; he would rather ransack history, as he did in the case of Krook's spontaneous combustion, to prove that precedents for his art did exist in reality. But in his fiction itself he was much nearer to recognizing the Wildean position that life imitates art. And though he would never have formulated such a position explicitly, in *Nicholas Nickleby* he dramatises it fully and variously. Samuel Pickwick had been Dickens's Don Quixote in being a middleaged innocent abroad, who is thrust into acquaintance with ordinary diurnal vice and suffering. But it is in *Nicholas Nickleby* that Dickens more fully explores Cervantes' handling of the human propensity to live after literary or artistic models. *Nickleby* was his most artistically conscious novel to date. In the overlapping novels *Pickwick* and *Oliver* he had already run the gamut from sunshine to shadow, from humour to pathos, from the brightest benevolence to the darkest evil. In the next novel, overlapping again with his second, he is already pausing to consider the nature of an art of extreme contrast, of a mimesis that conveys the intensity of his own wisdom.

Nickleby stands in the Dickens canon rather as *Northanger Abbey* stands in the Austen one: both are early works of their authors, who are light-heartedly exposing the extreme examples of their own medium even as they add to their number. Jane Austen parodies the Gothic novel, and satirizes the vogue for it, while exhorting novelists to stick together, and suggesting through the total structure of her work that though life is not a Gothic romance it is not so far removed either. And Dickens, who is concerned not just with fiction but with all forms of mimetic art, including the drama and the visual arts, similarly offers wild parodies of artistic conventions and artificial heightening, while being ready to use the same conventions himself, and to defend their legitimacy. And both novelists are delightedly exploring the intricate interrelation of art and life.

More than *Northanger Abbey*, *Nickleby* is a novel about art and artists. And Dickens was particularly concerned with his own art which, whether or not we call it an art of exaggeration, is one that presents extreme contrasts, high colouring, pointed gesture, heightened action; nature at the stretch, as it were. The world of Dickens's novels is like the London that assaults Nicholas's vision as he enters in the coach, full of the sharpest extremes:

The rags of the squalid ballad-singer fluttered, in the rich light that showed the goldsmith's treasures; pale and pinched-up faces hovered about the windows where was tempting food; hungry eyes wandered over the profusion guarded by one sheet of brittle glass—an iron wall to them; half-naked shivering figures stopped to gaze at Chinese shawls and golden stuffs of India. There was a christening party at the largest coffinmaker's, and a funeral battlement had stopped some great improvements in the bravest mansion. Life and death went hand in hand; wealth and poverty stood side by side; repletion and starvation laid them down together. (409)

Everything is thrust to its ultimate state, zeniths and nadirs, and every extreme is heightened by its opposite extreme—rags and riches, starvation and plenty, penury and luxury, birth and death. We are in a world of superlatives again in the description of the Hampton race that leads up to the duel and the death of Verisopht (whose name is another superlative): "The little race-course at Hampton was in the full tide and height of its gaiety; the day as dazzling as day could be; the sun high in the cloudless sky, and shining in its fullest splendour. Every gaudy colour . . . shone out in its gaudiest hues" (653). And of course it is not only in its scenic description that *Nickleby* deals in extremes of high colouring and artistic heightening. Appearance, gesture, dialogue, and action are similarly at a stretch. Peg Sliderskew is a grotesque gargoyle endowed with the power of mopping and mowing: "Peg . . . stood, mouthing, and grinning, and blinking her watery eyes, like an uncouth figure in some monstrous piece of carving" (669). The gestures are likewise vivid. Kenwigs in his distraction pulls his daughter up on tiptoe by her flaxen pigtail. Mrs. Nickleby enters a sickroom "with an elaborate caution, calculated to discompose the nerves of an invalid rather more than the entry of a horse-soldier at full gallop" (724). The characters themselves are masters of the art of hyperbole. "Here's richness!" exclaims Squeers of the watered milk (45); and "There's oiliness!" of his son's tears. "Rough!" cries Miss La Creevy, in exclamatory mood, of Ralph Nickleby: "a porcupine's a feather-bed to him!"

All this, perhaps, is only to say that Dickens is Dickensian. But in *Nicholas Nickleby* he is being Dickensian in a newly self-conscious and self-regarding way, just as he is creating characters who are acting

themselves in a newly self-conscious and self-regarding way. He sees himself as practising an art of extremes, including extremes of good and evil, light and dark, humour and pathos. And he is exploring the artistic conventions that depend on the exploitation of such extremes, such as satiric exaggeration, sentiment, melodrama, and the high colouring of visual representation.

Miss La Creevy, the miniature-painter, is a sharply-perceived vision of the artist, and is in some senses an on-stage self for Dickens. In the vividly rendered scene in which she is commenting on her art while she executes a likeness of Kate, we have the verbal equivalent, I think, of those complex paintings of Van Eyck and Velasquez in which the artist appears in a mirror beyond his ostensible subject. As the portraitist portrays Dickens's heroine, a degree of identification takes place, so that we have not only a portrait of an artist but in some senses a portrait of *the* artist.

Miss La Creevy's business is mimesis, and she has a proper respect for the authenticity of her subject as a determining constituent of the finished product. But she would scorn the merely recording capacities of the camera, and extols the adjustment of reality that for her constitute her "Art." The scene is worth quoting at length:

Kate Nickleby sat in a very faded chair raised upon a very dusty throne in Miss La Creevy's room, giving that lady a sitting for a portrait upon which she was engaged

'I think I have caught it now,' said Miss La Creevy. 'The very shade! This will be the sweetest portrait I have ever done, certainly.'

'It will be your genius that makes it so, then, I am sure,' replied Kate, smiling.

'No, no, I woun't allow that, my dear,' rejoined Miss La Creevy. 'It's a very nice subject—a very nice subject, indeed—though of course, something depends upon the mode of treatment.'

'And not a little,' observed Kate.

'Why, my dear, you are right there,' said Miss La Creevy 'Ah! The difficulties of Art, my dear, are . . . beyond anything you can form the faintest conception of . . . What with bringing out eyes with all one's power, and keeping down noses with all one's force, and adding to heads, and taking away teeth altogether, you have no idea of the trouble one little miniature is . . . and then people are so dissatisfied and unreasonable, that, nine times out of ten, there's no pleasure in painting them. Sometimes they say, "Oh, how very serious you have made me look, Miss La Creevy!" and at others, "La, Miss La Creevy, how very smirking!" when the very essence of a good portrait is, that it must be either serious or smirking, or it's no portrait at all . . . In fact,' said Miss La Creevy, sinking her voice to a confidential whisper, 'there are only two styles of portrait painting; the serious and the smirk; and we always use the serious for professional people (except actors sometimes), and the smirk for private ladies and gentlemen who don't care so much about looking clever.'

Kate seemed highly amused by this information, and Miss La Creevy went on painting and talking, with immovable complacency. (114-15).

In one sense, of course, this is hilarious satire at the expense of the miniature-painter. Her art is a reductive art, an art of paring off excrescences, and emphasising the conventionally admirable—"bringing out eyes with all one's power, and keeping down noses with all one's force"—an art of annihilating all that's made to the serious and the smirk. Accordingly Kate laughs at her and patronises her.

But Miss La Creevy does not come out of the scene so badly after all. Kate, in being reduced to a smirk (clearly she would be one of the smirkers) is not being reduced by much. Phiz's own illustrations of her, as Michael Steig points out, recall "the sentimental and idealized mode of the *Keepsake* and *Friendship's Offering*."⁵ For all Kate's amused patronage, Miss La Creevy retains her authority on her subject. She is a shrewd critic, and able to sum up the fashionable mode of Royal Academy portraiture with telling effect: "All those beautiful shiny portraits of gentlemen in black velvet waistcoats, with their fists doubled up on round tables, or marble slabs." As an artist she has her integrity, and refuses to rent out uniforms to her sitters who choose to appear in military guise, with the proud declaration, "I don't consider it legitimate" (115). Her penchant for high colouring — including the unique bright salmon flesh-tint that she considers one of her triumphs—matches Dickens's own. Her adjustments of her subject matter in the direction of insipidity are the equal and opposite to Dickens's, as others saw him: if she devotes her energies to bringing out eyes and keeping down noses and doing away with teeth, Dickens pursues the vocation of the intensifier. Trollope's parody of Dickens as Mr. Popular Sentiment in *The Warden* includes a description of the clerical villain in the Dickens mode: "He was a man well stricken in years, but still strong to do evil: he was one who looked cruelly out of a hot, passionate, bloodshot eye; who had a huge red nose with a carbuncle, thick lips, and a great double, flabby chin, which swelled out into solid substance, like a turkey cock's comb, when sudden anger inspired him" (chapter 15). Such artistic heightening, such adjustments of reality, Dickens was able within his novel itself to contemplate with delighted appreciation, however he claimed in his Preface to be drawing accurately from the life. In creating Miss La Creevy,⁶ as in creating the many other artists and imitators in the novel, Dickens is delightedly considering the mimetic enterprise, the legitimate adjustments allowed to the artist in his rendering of reality, and the illusory nature of what it is that gets communicated.

There are many artists in various mediums in the novel, and many people who would not consider themselves artists who nonetheless

partake in the process of snatching at reality and trying to capture and communicate it. But reality is a slippery property, and frequently eludes such efforts. Letter-writing, for instance, is an activity that we expect to communicate some degree of personal experience, to be in some reliable if partial way a record of what is. But this means of communication is clearly demonstrated to bear little relation to fact. These are Mrs. Nickleby's recollection of Kate's letters from school: "Such a delightful letter every half-year, telling us that she was the first pupil in the whole establishment, and had made more progress than anybody else! . . . The girls wrote all the letters themselves, . . . and the writing master touched them up afterwards . . .; at least I think they wrote them, though Kate . . . didn't know the handwriting of hers again; but anyway, I know it was a circular which they all copied" (340). This document, which at first seems to have the accuracy and particularity relating to the single first and foremost pupil, delightfully topples in credibility. By the time we know that the content was prescribed and even the handwriting suspect, the letter is not left with much authenticity as a personal record. But Mrs. Nickleby is none the less satisfied, as Miss La Creevy's sitters are with her portraits. "Of course it was a very gratifying thing—very gratifying" (340). The utterly conventionalised rendering carries within it its own satisfaction.

Mrs. Nickleby's reminiscences, based on memory, are supposed by herself at least to have the authenticity of true history. But we only need to follow one of her monologues through to a conclusion to find how utterly non-existent is its historical base. Her narratives are really fanciful projection, "triumphs of aerial architecture" (343), by which she convinces herself of such pleasant fictions as that milliners are opulent (when her daughter is about to become one) or that a madman is an eligible suitor. These enjoyable adjustments of reality are indulged in by many other characters who are busy fitting life into various conventional and comfortable moulds;—for instance the Wit-titerlys, who are determined to be delighted with Sir Mulberry and Lord Verisopht: "with Mrs. Witterly the two titles were all-sufficient; coarseness became humour, vulgarity softened itself down into the most charming eccentricity" (364-5). So Fanny Squeers, looking in her glass, sees, "like most of us . . .—not herself, but the reflection of some pleasant image in her own brain" (135). Although in some cases Dickens is concerned to expose these adjustments of reality as delusion, he is also amusedly tolerant of the human need for sustaining fictions. Mrs. Nickleby's optimistic projections of successful marriage for Kate and partnership in the firm for Nicholas actually happen, making her an accurate oracle and so an agent of providence: "Mrs. Nickleby's prophetic anticipations were realized at last" (829). And the

Kenwigs family, who have created their own mythology on how Lillyvick is to be their hearthside deity to cherish and enrich them, is likewise blessed in being allowed to continue to live in this comforting faith.

Letter-writing and memory may be inaccurate records of fact, but Arthur Gride is convinced that he has grasped the reality that counts, in his grimy little account book. To him a column of figures contains all the imaginative gratification of the *Arabian Nights*, and all the human interest and satisfying realism of the first-class novel. "This is all my library," he gloats, as he fingers the record of other people's debts to him and the accumulated interest, "but it's one of the most entertaining books that ever were written! It's a delightful book, and all true and real—that's the best of it—true as the Bank of England, and real as gold and silver. Written by Arthur Gride. Ha, ha, ha! None of your story-book writers will ever make as good a book as this" (701). Gride's kind of mimesis is a specialized one, and the reality that it records is strictly limited, but it is of a kind highly satisfactory to himself, like the other imitations of nature considered in the novel.

In frequent imagery and action concerning clothes Dickens is presenting another art form, another kind of creation, in which the medium is the human body. The Mantalini establishment is firmly based on the premise that clothing maketh man. Madame Mantalini has married her husband for his appurtenances—for his whiskers, his dandy's wardrobe, and his pretty speeches—and she appropriately runs a business that deals with externals, producing "the finery that bedecks the thoughtless and luxurious" (205).

But the enterprise to adjust the self by the artistic embellishments of the milliner and dressmaker is less reprehensible than that to adjust and recreate others, using the human body and the human identity as a medium. This is the way in which the villainous manipulations of Squeers and Ralph Nickleby are connected with the novel's prolonged consideration of the interrelation of art and life. For these villains too are artists in their way, and condemned as sculptors of mankind. Squeers works crudely on the bodies of his victims. Ralph works more subtly on their minds and self-respect, but both are guilty of treating human beings as malleable objects. Squeers treats his various instruments of punishment and capture, his cane and his hooked umbrella, like an artist's tools: to flog the run-away Smike he flourishes "a fearful instrument of flagellation, strong, supple, wax-ended, and new,—in short, purchased that morning, expressly for the occasion" (153). And he takes what one can almost call an aesthetic delight in his calling of thrashing. When he recaptures Smike, and carries him off in a coach, he starts by slapping "his old pupil's face several times—taking the right and left sides alternately." These preliminary touchings-up he

presently follows with some bolder strokes with his tool, the umbrella, until he is at last obliged to pause for breath. "I never thrashed a boy in a hackney-coach before," he reflects. "There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish, too!" (497-8). An artist who had discovered a new way to extend the limits of his medium could hardly be more elated.

As Smike has been so reduced to material, he is by so much less a human being. He is permanently damaged, being a product not just of nature but of systematically applied human brutality. The matching victim in Ralph's sphere is Newman Noggs. He, like Smike, is dressed in humiliatingly ill-fitting clothes, is physically grotesque, and is eccentric, to say the least. He was a gentleman who was "ruined" by Ralph, and he is conscious of having been ground down and wrought into a distortion of his old self. "Who made me 'a fellow like this?'" he demands of Ralph (773).

The view of the human body as material for art is followed through particularly in the humorous consideration of legs, which almost become detachable constituent parts. The men's legs are viewed partly as an index to their sexuality, but also as elements for elevated and even aesthetic contemplation. Fanny Squeers hears from the maid about Nicholas's straight legs—"upon which last-named articles she laid particular stress; the general run of legs at Dotheboys Hall being crooked—" and at once falls in love: "I never saw such legs in the whole course of my life," she tells herself (101-3). Females likewise respond to Mantalini's elegant legs; and even Mrs. Nickleby is not unsusceptible to the eccentrically displayed legs of the gentleman who dances on the wall in his small-clothes and grey worsteds, and later gives a similar display by flourishing his legs in the fireplace while the rest of him is still up the chimney. Mrs. Nickleby defends him, "he may be proud of his legs. I don't see why he shouldn't be. The Prince Regent was proud of his legs, and so was Daniel Lambert, who was also a fat man" (481). It is part of their appeal as part of the male's sexual apparatus that the legs are also viewed as *objets d'art*. We hear, for instance, of a footman "whose legs, although somewhat large for his body, might, as mere abstract legs, have set themselves up for models at the Royal Academy" (348). Miss La Creevy views other parts of the human anatomy in the same light. "When I want a nose or an eye for any particular sitter, I have only to look out of window and wait till I get one . . . Snubs and romans are plentiful enough, but perfect aquilines, I am sorry to say, are scarce" (43). So we are reminded that all humanity is grist to the artist's mill; and also that, when an artist wants a nose for a sitter, the last place she is apt to look for it is in the middle of his face.

The verbal arts also get their full consideration, from Mantalini's flowery rhetoric, composed on the formula of a ton of poetical decoration to every ounce of truth, to Squeers's basic grammatical mode, which humorously involves words and the things they denote: "We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickelby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, clean, verbal active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of the book, he goes and does it" (90). The unreliability of words as a means of truthful communication is constantly testified, with reference to one medium after another. Advertising and fiction are burlesqued as having scant relation to reality. Even literary criticism, I'm sorry to say, is taken off in Mr. Curdle's fatuous disquisition on the Unities.

Not surprisingly, in view of the unsteady uses of words, some characters find it necessary to resort to non-verbal means of expression. The most inventive of these is the gentleman in small clothes, who declares his passion by tossing vegetables over the wall to the feet of his beloved. Mrs. Nickleby is moved by this courtship, although Nicholas argues reasonably, "You know, there is no language of vegetables, which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment" (483). But the language of vegetables is perhaps no less reliable than the various other modes of rhetoric exemplified in the novel.

Bernard Bergonzi and others have pointed out that *Nicholas Nickleby*, more than Dickens's other novels, presents an atomistic universe, in which the characters, individually charged with great vitality, cannot convincingly relate to one another.⁷ Although this is partly the result of the failures in communication I have been discussing, I find Dickens's vision remains comic rather than otherwise, and not the bleak universe of "isolated individuals" that the scheme might otherwise suggest; because the communication, utterly unreliable as it is as a record of reality, is nonetheless satisfying to the individuals, who are thereby not lonely in their isolation. The characters in general exist not simply in themselves, but rather and most intensely as they are observed by others.⁸ Their relations with one another are not very complex or very deep; but they need each other as spectators for their very existence. As the novel is a self-conscious novel, turning the spotlight on the mimetic process itself, so its characters are self-conscious beings, acting themselves out for themselves and for each other, in order to discover themselves. To these beings life becomes intense and interesting, to themselves as to those who surround and observe them (including the reader), in proportion as they are self-conscious, self-dramatising, self-creating. "Real life," as Dickens had said in *Oliver Twist*, differs from the mimic life of the stage only in that there, in life, "we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on." In

Nickleby he follows through this vision of human beings as "busy actors," busy enacting themselves. And he similarly creates a whole series of roles for his spectators, who may be mere discrete observers of someone else's scene, or to varying degrees participants.

This vision is emphasised by Browne's illustrations, a set of compositions which typically divide a scene into actors and spectators. Nearly always there is a central theatrical character or group, striking their attitudes; and to back them up their necessary audience, without which the show cannot go on; and the audience too must play its part, as is marvellously realized in "The Great Bespeak for Miss Snevellici" (opp. 330). Here the point of view is the actor's, from the scenery before the footlights, looking out at the various members of the audience, who are themselves as good as a show, and conscious of being so. All the world's a stage, including the house beyond the footlights, where we spectators are located.

The Crummles company is of course the most prominent of the many strands of the novel dramatising the varied relations of life to art. In the hilarious parody of the conventions of melodrama, we are constantly shown how art improves on and exaggerates life to make it artful, and then how life is more artful still.

The actors are funny in the first instance because their poses are *unlike* life, visibly adopted, highly conventionalised. When Nicholas first sees the actors assembled in the theatre he is struck by their total transformation: "Here all the people were so much changed, that he scarcely knew them. False hair, false colour, false calves, false muscles—they had become different beings" (302). This is the Fielding-esque kind of comedy that resides in the exposure of affectation. But Dickens's comedy goes further, in demonstrating the high artfulness of natural behaviour. Nicholas is never so good an actor, in Crummles's eyes, as when he abandons his stage role and acts himself: when he takes his leave under the pressure of Kate's emergency, he exclaims "Oh! that I should have been fooling here!"

Accompanying these words with an impatient stamp upon the ground, he tore himself from the manager's detaining grasp, and darting rapidly down the street was out of sight in an instant.

'Dear me, dear me,' said Mr. Crummles, looking wistfully towards the point at which he had just disappeared; 'if he only acted like that, what a deal of money he'd draw!' (398)

But of course Nicholas does act like that, playing a role in the novel as theatrically and consistently as Mrs. Crummles plays her roles.

Although the thematic and metaphoric importance of the theatre passages in *Nicholas Nickleby* has been frequently noted and explored,⁹ the standard assumption still seems to be that Dickens made the main

plot of his novel melodramatic and theatrical by mistake: Saintsbury, writing for *The Cambridge History of English Literature* in 1916, was amazed "that Dickens, whose portrayals of the weakness of the stage and its population makes one of the most delightful features of the book, should (obviously without the least consciousness of what he was doing) have put beside the Crummleses and in fuller and more constant presence a stage-acting and stage-speaking hero in Nicholas; a stage-heroine in Kate; a stage-villain in Ralph."¹⁰ Michael Slater, in his more detailed and careful analysis of the theatricality of the novel, similarly assumes some loss of control in Dickens's simultaneous satire and exploitation of melodrama: "The very conventions that Dickens laughs at in his descriptions of the Crummleses' repertoire he calmly uses to jerk his own plot along."¹¹ And even J. Hillis Miller, who suggests a deliberate artistic relation between the burlesque and the central drama by calling the theatre scenes a parody of the main plot, says that Dickens thus reveals the fictive nature of his own novel "in spite of himself."¹²

But the parallels between the burlesque of the theatre passages and the straight melodrama of the main plot are too close to be accidental, and are surely deliberately emphasised as part of Dickens's more general and light-hearted consideration of the intricate borrowings of art from life and of life from art. When we read the list of the members of the Crummles company and the roles in which they are usually type-cast, we are surely meant to recognize some of the dramatic personae of Nicholas's own story. The "slim young gentleman with weak eyes, who played low-spirited lovers and sang tenor songs," if cast in a stage production of *Nicholas Nickleby*, would clearly play Smike (Crummles instantly recognizes Smike himself as a valuable dramatic type [p. 281].) This actor comes in "arm-in-arm with the comic countryman—a man with a turned-up nose, large mouth, broad face, and staring eyes"—John Browdie, in fact, who in the main plot is also Smike's supporter. Newman Noggs can similarly be recognized in the "inebriated elderly gentleman in the last depths of shabbiness" (293).

Dickens had a finely-tuned ear for stage rhetoric, and Nicholas too is perfectly able to enjoy the predictability of its rhythms. When the actor Lenville, jealous of his success, is trying to pick a quarrel with him, and exclaims, "Object of my scorn and hatred! . . . I hold ye in contempt," we hear that "Nicholas laughed in very unexpected enjoyment of this performance" (379). But his own performance is an exact duplicate when he denounces Ralph: "Your brother's widow and her orphan child spurn the shelter of your roof, and shun you with disgust and loathing . . . I leave you to the grave" (425). The vocabulary of

“scorn,” “spurn,” “disgust,” “loathing” is drawn from the same font. The very rhythms are the same: “I hold ye in contempt,” “I leave you to the grave.” Dickens doesn’t do such things by mistake. Are we, then, expected to laugh in enjoyment of Nicholas’s performance? Well, in a sense, I believe, we are, though laughter itself is not the only response Dickens is seeking. But he does expect us to *notice* the parallels, which after all, like the alternations between comic and tragic in the theatre, may not be as wildly inappropriate as they seem. Playing roles is what all the characters are doing all the time, as are perhaps people in life. Nicholas himself is conscious of this. Speaking of his most rousing heroic action in the novel, the thrashing of Squeers, he announces in stage terminology, “If the same scene were renewed before me now, I would take the same part” (251). Yes, Dickens does reveal the fictive nature of his own novel, but it is not in spite of himself.

There are many other parallels, in incident and action as well as rhetoric, that we are expected to recognize and savour. In the French play that Nicholas adapts for the Crummles company the villain, recognizable as a prototype for Ralph from the fact that he destroys his son, is roused to repentance by the powerful moral force of memory. “Just as you are raising the pistol to your head,” Nicholas tells Len-ville, who is to play the role, “a clock strikes—ten. . . You pause; . . . you recollect to have heard a clock strike ten in your infancy. The pistol falls from your hand—you are overcome—you burst into tears, and become a virtuous and exemplary character for ever afterwards” (301). Lenville is delighted with this sure “touch of nature.” But of course we can all recognize the conventionality of this old association trick. In Thackeray’s hilarious account of a French dramatisation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, which sounds rather like the novel as it might have been freely adapted and played by the Crummles company itself, there is a similarly sentimental turn of events, where memories of infancy cause a crucial movement in the plot: “A rush of early recollections floods the panting heart of the young boy. Can it be? Yes—no. . . . That conservatory, has he not played with the flowers there—played with his blessed mother at his side?”¹³ And Dickens unblushingly—unblushingly because deliberately—uses the same trick himself in the main plot. The villain Ralph comes closest to reforming when a comb that Kate drops triggers a train of youthful associations:

As the door of the vehicle was roughly closed, a comb fell from Kate’s hair, close at her uncle’s feet; and as 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

bore on some occasion of boyish grief of which every minutest 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 went back into his house, as a man who had seen a spirit from some world beyond the grave. (244)

Here indeed is a convincing “touch of nature.” George Wing, for instance, quotes this passage as evidence that Ralph is not merely the stock villain of melodrama,¹⁴ but that he has some moral complexity after all. It is curious in a way that Wing should choose this incident, which is shown up in the same novel as an utterly hackneyed device. But the fact is, it still works, and Dickens can triumphantly carry off both the device and the burlesque of it. He is sailing near the wind in thus exposing his own illusion, as Shakespeare does when he allows Cleopatra to imagine some squeaking Cleopatra boying her greatness. Both writers allow their characters to expose the illusion, so that the reader may consciously savour it *as* illusion.

Sometimes the straight melodramatic and the burlesque of it are juxtaposed even more closely. When Nicholas tells Mrs. Crummles of the villainous machinations of his “dastardly enemy,” she responds with her usual off-stage theatricality: “‘How?’ exclaimed Mrs. Crummles, with a tragic recoil. . . . ‘What mean you?’ ” (31). How are we to pick apart the melodrama that we are supposed to be moved by and the melodramatic exaggeration that we are supposed to laugh at? In a similar compound of tones, we have a scene in which Nicholas plays passionate outraged hero to the hilt, while the villain undercuts the act by drawing attention to its conventionality:

‘Let me have a word with you, sir,’ said Nicholas.

‘With me, Sir?’ retorted Sir Mulberry Hawk, eyeing him in disdainful surprise.

‘I said with you,’ replied Nicholas, speaking with great difficulty, for his passion choked him.

‘A mysterious stranger, upon my soul!’ exclaimed Sir Mulberry, raising his wine-glass to his lips, and looking round upon his friends. (414)

This is streaky bacon with a vengeance, an alternation of the serious and the parody so fast that they almost become simultaneous. Dickens himself might defend the realism of such alternations by suggesting that after all life is like that: men play the serious scenes in their lives with a self-conscious sincerity and dignity that may nevertheless be absurd and cliché-ridden to an uninvolved observer. But what seems to me interesting about the process is not its realism, drawing attention to the different genres in our conduct of the roles in our lives, but its art. It

requires the reader to be naive and sophisticated at the same time, sympathising with Nicholas's righteous indignation while recognizing that we are getting one more fine display of histrionics.

It is easy for the twentieth-century reader to assume that if the Crummles sections of the novel, which burlesque melodrama and vividly expose its threadbare conventions, are good, then logically the main plot, which unashamedly exploits the very same conventions, must be bad. But then we have become used to despising melodrama; and Dickens didn't. The best parodies imply the lasting respect for the work parodied; for imitation remains a sincere form of flattery. *Norzhanger Abbey*, which includes much cheerful burlesque of sensational novels in general and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in particular, also contain this sincere tribute from its hero: "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;—I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time" (chapter 14). Dickens has a similar basic respect for melodrama. And what is wrong with melodrama, after all?¹⁵ It is a medium with strict limitations, but then what medium isn't?—they all in some way tend to reduce life to the serious and the smirk. Melodrama is out of fashion in literary circles, but let us not suppose that it is dead. In comic books, animated cartoons, horror movies and television it flourishes as ever, and in forms that Dickens himself would probably have relished. In the recent stage adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, both the melodrama and the pathos were played to the hilt, and were highly successful. A conventional mode in which good and evil are separated and located in different opposed characters, who thereby become morally and psychologically simplified, is only a mode like other modes, and may be good or bad according to its kind.

Nicholas is not supposed to be complex or highly individualized. His role as hero is a simple one, and it would not be appropriate to complicate it by developing him psychologically. As Chesterton said, "Nicholas is what is called in theatricals a stick. But any stick is good enough to beat Squeers with."¹⁶ This seems to be not only an amusing *mot*, but strictly true: we don't *want* Nicholas to have complex motivation when he takes the cane to Squeers; if he did, we might begin to question our own motivation in enjoying such a scene so much:

'Stand back,' cried Squeers, brandishing his weapon.

'I have a long series of insults to avenge,' said Nicholas, flushed with passion; 'and my indignation is aggravated by the dastardly cruelties practised on helpless infancy in this foul den. Have a care; for if you do

raise the devil within me, the consequences shall fall heavily upon your own head!"

He had scarcely spoken, when Squeers, in a violent outbreak of wrath, and with a cry like the howl of a wild beast, spat upon him, and struck him a blow across the face with his instrument of torture, which raised up a bar of livid flesh as it was inflicted. Smarting with the agony of the blow, and concentrating into that one moment all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon him, wrested the weapon from his hand, and pinning him by the throat, beat the ruffian till he roared for mercy. (155)

Hurray! Let him tan the hide off the beastly schoolmaster! Of course the stagey rhetoric is perfectly recognizable and thoroughly conventional. No matter—we liked it as kids and let us enjoy it now. Dickens is allowing us the pure and simple pleasure of watching the good guy vigorously defeating the bad guy, and let us enjoy it. Yes, it is melodramatic. Yes, it is glorious. Children have been able to respond fully to such scenes—like the five-year-old correspondent who asked Dickens to be sure to mete out appropriate rewards for Nicholas and punishments for Squeers,¹⁷ or Minnie Thackeray, who at ten years old read *Nicholas Nickleby* over and over again.¹⁸ It would be a pity if we should lose the capacity to enjoy such simple and satisfying pleasures. If we did, we would surely be as “intolerably stupid” as the readers of novels that Henry Tilney envisages.

The simple appeal of the outright melodrama in *Nickleby* coexists with the more sophisticated pleasure afforded by the self-parody and artistic self-consciousness. Dickens's rather stern concern for verisimilitude in the Preface is qualified, fleshed out and parodied in the grand array of artists, both professional and amateur, and artifacts, both human and inanimate, in the novel. Reality and the art that renders it are not discrete and simple, but intricately and endlessly intermixed. The most scrupulous copying of nature has a tendency to take off from its subject and become the most independent of objects; the most natural and unstudied of people and their gestures are at once recognized as highly artful; the most highly conventional renderings are treasured as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. Like *Northanger Abbey*, *Nicholas Nickleby* is a youthful author's energetic and boisterous exploration of the powers and limitations of the conventions of his own art.

NOTES

1. I use the Oxford Illustrated Dickens as my text.

2. Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, Oxford World's Classics Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), Chapter VII, p. 109.
3. See Diana Neill, *A Short History of the English Novel* (New York: Collins Books, 1964), p. 186.
4. This passage appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* for November, 1837. *Nicholas Nickleby* began its serial run five months later, in April 1838.
5. *Dickens and Phiz* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 42.
6. See Steven Marcus on Miss La Creevy: "She understands that these people too have a despairing need to create themselves, to improvise some concrete image of their own aspirations, and her art serves their illusions of self-realization." *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), p. 115.
7. "Nicholas Nickleby," in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 71 ff. See also J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 90-92; and Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), 107 ff.
8. See Steven Marcus on the novel's theme of "the cultivation of the self through imitation," Marcus, p. 116.
9. Especially by Bernard Bergonzi, pp. 69 ff., Steven Marcus, pp. 100 ff., and Michael Slater in his introduction to the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).
10. *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1916), ed. Sir A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), XIII, 317.
11. Slater., p. 28. Compare Sylvère Monod: "In short, Dickens, however alive he was to the ridiculousness of the plays performed by Crummles' company in Portsmouth, made use in his novel procedures akin to theirs." *Dickens the Novelist*, translated by the author from *Dickens Romancier* of 1953 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 152.
12. Miller, p. 90.
13. "Dickens in France" (*Fraser's Magazine*, March, 1842), in *The Oxford Thackeray*, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), IV, p. 171.
14. "A Part to Tear a Cat In," *The Dickensian*, 64 (January, 1968), p. 16.
15. Bergonzi interestingly notes our stock hostility to melodrama, and suggests that we are in need of a critical theory of melodrama in reading *Nicholas Nickleby*.
16. *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906), p. 114.
17. See The Pilgrim Edition, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964), I, 466-7.
18. See Thackeray's essay, "On Charity and Humour" (1853): "All children ought to love him [Dickens]. I know two that do, and read his books ten times for once that they peruse the dismal preachments of their father. I know one who, when she is happy, reads *Nicholas Nickleby*; when she is unhappy, reads *Nicholas Nickleby* . . . and when she has finished the book, reads *Nicholas Nickleby* again." *The Oxford Thackeray*, X, 627.