Stopping Time:
Suicide as a Means of Resistance in *Nicholas Nickleby*

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I

Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* is a typical story of the triumph of good over evil. All of the hardships Nicholas experiences originally arise from his conflict with his greedy uncle Ralph, which occurs immediately during their first meeting. In the end, while Nicholas becomes rich and marries a beautiful woman, Ralph hangs himself after realizing that Smike, whose death he indirectly hastens, was in fact his own son. The villain's miserable end seems fitting retribution for his malicious acts.

Nonetheless, Ralph is not without some tenderness. Despite a series of wicked designs against his brother's family, he sometimes becomes introspective, and wonders what his life would be like if Kate were with him. In such moments, gold, his raison d'être, loses "its lustre in his eyes" (384). During such temporary softening, he appears to be a corrigible person like Mr. Dombey. However, despite an inner voice that urges him toward kindness, Ralph, as John Carey asserts, refuses to attune himself to the "harmonious" world in which "goodwill and intention" prevail (Carey xxvi). Unlike Mr. Dombey, he never "become[s] a better man" (730).

The narrator tells us that Ralph commits suicide in a mood of "frenzy, hatred, and despair" (753), but the keenest thought passing through his mind is not one of despair. Certainly, the revelation about

Smike's parentage shocks him so greatly that he imagines what life he might have led if Smike had been with him, regretting his past malicious acts for a moment. But such softening is ultimately only "a drop of calm water in a stormy maddening ocean" (751). Just before committing suicide, he cries out:

> 'Lie on!' cried the usurer, 'with your iron tongue! Ring merrily for births that make expectants writhe, and marriages that are made in hell, and toll ruefully for the dead whose shoes are worn already! Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming in of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me! Throw me on a dunghill, and let me rot there, to infect the air!' (753)

It seems strange that he swears neither at Nicholas nor at the Cheeryble Brothers, who forced him into a predicament, but at the bell. Interestingly, Ralph also refers to the time when he first appears in the novel. He finds his watch has stopped and asks Newman Noggs the time. Moreover, in the next chapter, Ralph takes out the watch again and winds it up soon after reading the letter which informs him of his brother's death. That Ralph first appears and dies in such close proximity to a mention of time seems to suggest that time is among the significant factors in *Nickleby*. As far as I know, few studies have focused on Dickens's treatment of time in this novel.[1] In this essay I

[1] Patricia Marks's "Time in *Nicholas Nickleby*" is one of a few attempts to discuss this theme. She notes that Ralph, who is governed by horological time, is finally defeated by the good characters who are attuned to the cycle of nature (Marks 26).

would like to examine the representation of time in the novel and compare Ralph's and the Cheeryble Brothers' attitude toward time, which I believe will elucidate the meaning of Ralph's last words.

II

First, consider the description of the streets of London in this novel. Unlike in *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens's first published book, focusing on the everyday life of Londoners is not his main concern in *Nickleby*. Yet Dickens often inserts small, sketch-like portraits of them, which are in fact highly significant in considering characters' attitude towards time.

Through Ralph's introduction, Kate finds a job as a milliner at Mantalini's, which recalls a passage from "The Streets – Morning" in *Sketches by Boz*. In it, Boz comments that a milliner is "the hardest worked, the worst paid, and too often, the most used class of the community" (*SB* 54). Deprived of freedom, the girls are hurried to their work, "pouring into the city" (*SB* 53). Similarly, in *Nickleby*, Kate sees milliners miserably traversing the street with "unhealthy looks and feeble gait" (204) on her first day of work, and because of this she holds a gloomy view of her new occupation from the start. In describing commuters such as milliners in this novel, Dickens also uses the metaphor of water, refering to London as the place where "the giant currents of life" (43) come together. More dynamically, in the opening of chapter 32, in which Nicholas and Smike return to London after leaving Vincent Crummles's company, the hustle and bustle of the streets are portrayed as evoking streams:

> They rattled on through the noisy, bustling, crowded streets of London, now displaying long double rows of brightly-burning lamps … illuminated besides with the brilliant flood that streamed from the windows of the shops, where sparkling jewellery, silks and velvets of the richest colours, the most inviting delicacies, and most sumptuous articles of luxurious ornament, succeeded each other in rich and glittering profusion. Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on, jostling each other in the crowd and hurrying forward, scarcely seeming to notice the riches that surrounded them on every side; while vehicles of all shapes and makes, mingled up together in one moving mass, like running water, lent their ceaseless roar to swell the noise and tumult. (390)

Citing this passage, J. Hillis Miller notes that the world of *Nickleby* is "an inextricable jumble of objects and people … without order and direction" (Miller 89). But the image of water also presents another perspective. Although the streets are so noisy and animated that the stream of people appears entirely unmanageable, Dickens here does not depict London as a place of utter chaos, since the streams gradually mingle into "one moving mass, like running water." In discussing commuters in *Sketches by Boz*, Amanpal Garcha points out that Dickens attempts to depict the inhabitants of London as the controlled ones, rather than stress the complete unmanageability of the lower-middle class (Garcha 120). Garcha's view seems applicable

to *Nickleby* as well. Unlike the mob in *A Tale of Two Cities*, whose anger and cruelty Dickens describes through flood imagery, the Londoners in *Nickleby* do not have a riotous nature.

Of course, as can be seen in the dejected commuters, Londoners are not willingly submitting to the flow. They are forced to do so since those who do not enter the stream must lead a miserable life; Dickens depicts this as a counterpoint in this scene. Apart from lower-middle class commuters, there are people who are not engaged in labour, such as "the squalid ballad-singer" and "half-naked shivering figures" in the street. In the ever-moving city street, they stop to gaze wistfully at articles in shop windows, which seems to them "an iron wall." There is no doubt that a miserable death awaits them, and Dickens concludes the portrait of the great city as follows: "[l]ife and death [go] hand in hand" (391), recalling Holbein's *Dance of Death*.[2] After all, those who cannot adapt to the violent stream are not allowed to survive in London. Such descriptions of the city's ruthlessness recalls a sketch titled "Our Neighbour," in which Dickens portraits a young man and his mother, who come to the urban city in pursuit of work. Saying that "they [close crowded streets] have killed me" (*SB* 47), the young man dies from overwork. Considering that "close crowded streets" are compared to flowing water in *Sketches*, his death can be seen as a kind of drowning in turbulent water. To survive in London, there is no choice but to be hurried to walk along with the rapidly moving human stream.

As with the city crowds, the good characters around Nicholas

[2] That the narrator has Holbein's paintings in mind is shown through the observation that the jumbled street seems to "flit by in motley dance like the fantastic groups of the old Dutch painter" (391). Michael Hollington considers *Dance of Death* the "master-image" of the city (Hollington 66).

are about to be swallowed by the flood. By depicting their crisis, Dickens attempts to generalize the tragedies that have befallen them. Regarding Kate's descent to a milliner as a result of Ralph's evil design, the narrator comments that this is "a thing of everyday" (128). Nicholas, too, thinks in despair that a tragedy befalls people so frequently that it only "add[s] one small and unimportant unit to swell the great amount" (653) when he discovers that Madeline Bray, his future wife, has decided to accept Arthur Gride's proposal in order to save her father. By stressing that tragedies such as these happen daily in London, Dickens depicts future blight as inevitable, and makes the reader conscious of the cruel flow of the world.

The text invites us to relate the violent stream of London to the flow of time there. Using running water as metaphor, Dickens vividly clarifies the rapid mobility and changefulness of London during the 1830s. The lower-middle class workforce contributed to the development of the nation so greatly that the human stream in a sense ran toward a bright future for England. As time does not stop or go back, however, the stream does not allow people to defy their destiny. The violent flow of water also symbolizes the cruelty of time, to which the Nicklebys are repeatedly exposed.

III

Unlike the ordinary people in *Nickleby*, Ralph Nickleby adapts well to the flow of time in London without being swallowed by the whirl of activity around him. Dickens stresses how successfully Ralph does business through the description of the way he walks down the street. He is hurrying, not hurried like others: he walks on and on,

“elbowing the passengers aside.” With his heart beating “only as a piece of cunning mechanism” (128), he almost seems an embodiment of the ruthless flood.

Despite his deportment, Ralph is in fact detached from the centre of the giant current. It is his residence that first shows that he separates himself from the people in the stream. Golden Square, where Ralph has lived for years in spite of its inconveniences, is described as follows:

> On a summer’s night, windows are thrown open, and groups of swarthy mustached men are seen by the passer-by, lounging at the casements, and smoking fearfully. Sounds of gruff voices practising vocal music invade the evening’s silence; and the fumes of choice tobacco scent the air. There, snuff and cigars, and German pipes and flutes, and violins, and violoncellos, divide the supremacy between them. It is the region of song and smoke. Street bands are on their mettle in Golden Square; and itinerant glee-singers quaver involuntarily as they raise their voices within its boundaries. (22)

Merry and animatedin their appearance, the residents in Golden Square are, unlike the people in the busy streets, unengaged in any economic activities. According to the narrator, the square is not the place “adapted to the transaction of business” (22). Indeed it has stayed stagnant since the square went “down in the world.” Time has in a sense stopped in this region.

Although Mark Ford notes that Ralph lives here to "disguise the nefarious nature of his business dealings" (Ford xxi), he actually makes "little pains to conceal his true character from the world in general" (536). In this sense, he seems like a Quilp rather than a Pecksniffian kind of hypocrite who disguises his "nefarious nature." Besides, Golden Square is not an appropriate place for pretending to be an honest businessman. Even if street bands temporarily make it merry, its desolate state leaves such an ominous impression on people that "[n]o man thinks of walking" there (23).[3] Rather, what Ralph has in common with Golden Square is his attitude toward time and its flow in this place.

Throughout the novel, Ralph remains as he is. His father's early poverty and the sudden inheritance from his uncle lead him to conclude that "there [i]s nothing like money" (19), whereas his brother recognizes the importance of living frugally. With this as his motto, Ralph begins usury in his school days, basing his approach on "one golden sentence": the amount of interest remains the same, but must always be paid on Saturday regardless of whether the loan contrasted on Monday or Friday. Although this seems simple and fair, Ralph in fact establishes this system so that he can extort interest from borrowers no matter what their circumstances may be. After launching this usury business, he continues to adopt "the same principle in all [the] transactions" (19). Thus, he begins nurturing his greedy nature at an early stage of life, and does not change at all as he ages.

[3] This description of Golden Square seems to have left a deep impression on Dickens's contemporaries. An article in *Figaro in London* states that Dickens tells the reader of a "hitherto unmolested portion of the metropolis" and reported its actual state, in which "the stagnant dullness" prevailed. (*Figaro* 61)

In regard to his daily life, his regularity is particularly conspicuous. He keeps a "regular and constant habit … in all that appertain[s] to the daily pursuit of riches" (717). In this way, his regularity reflects his aversion to change. As the narrator says, speculation, his main business, is "a round game" (20), which may put him in danger of losing all his wealth.[4] The turbulence of speculation fever, of which Nicholas's father becomes a victim, is similar to the bustle of the streets in that life and death coexist in it. Despite such a principle, Ralph hopes, as Joseph Childers notes, that money "always circulates in essentially one direction – his" (Childers 50). In order to avoid being manipulated by a cruel principle of speculation, he keeps the same daily habits with which he made his fortune. Hoping his wealth will last forever, he even ignores his death: "among all the wily plots and calculation of the old man, there should not be one word or figure denoting thought of death or of the grave" (128). Evidently he hopes to maintain the present state he has established. Therefore, it can be observed that continuing his habits invariably amidst the rapidly moving city is, in a sense, an attempt to "stop time" around him. He is not an embodiment of contemporary London, but instead a figure who refuses to flow along within it. Viewed in this light, Golden Square, the place at which time seems to stand still, is a suitable district for Ralph. Symbolically, as long as he is in the square, he is protected from the turbulence of the centre of the great city. The unchanged nature of this place represents his attitude toward time.

[4] John Bowen observes that "*Nickleby* presents a highly mobile economic system, in which wealth can be directly obtained through entrepreneurial activity … and where the fear of destitution is ever-present" (Bowen 111).

For this reason, it is important that Ralph finds his watch has stopped working and winds it up again in the opening chapters. That his watch has stopped symbolizes the fact that his avaricious nature has remained unchanged since his childhood. Furthermore, given that he has forgotten about his brother for years, time has also essentially "stopped" between Ralph and his family. However the news of his brother's death leads to the arrival of Nicholas, who gradually discloses his uncle's evil designs, and eventually leads him to ruin. In this context, the countdown towards his destruction starts as soon as his watch begins to work again. Through casual, but repeated descriptions of Ralph's watch, Dickens implies that Ralph's absolute position will collapse and that the violent flow of time will swallow him up.

IV

So far we have considered the ruthless flow of life in London and Ralph's egoistic, "time-stopped" world, both of settings in which the Nicklebys get into difficult predicaments. Their hardships continue until Nicholas begins to work for the Cheeryble Brothers. Under their protection, Nicholas establishes ideal circumstances and finally buys back his old house. Although they achive their prosperity through their struggles in the city, the brothers maintain a spirit of charity without allowing the evil effects of capitalism to contaminate them. It seems that they are too good to be true, but they no doubt represent Dickens's ideal.

The brothers, however, resemble Ralph in some respects. Like his residence in Golden Square, their counting-house is also located

outside the centre of the city:

> It is so quiet that you can almost hear the ticking of your own watch when you stop to cool in its refreshing atmosphere. There is a distant hum – of coaches, not of insects – but no other sound disturbs the stillness of the square. (446)

Like Golden Square, it is a "retired spot" (446), which means the brothers and Tim Linkinwater, their long-term clerk, have nothing to do with the bustle of the main streets. As Stephen Marcus puts it, they build "a fortress against the world" (Marcus 111).[5] Additionally, their main business is the trade with Germany, and they have no dealings in London over the course of the novel, except for a non-profitable one with Madeline, which they do out of good will. Although self-made men, who feel proud of their success in London, they are in fact detached from the city.

Another commonality between Ralph and the new acquaintances of Nicholas is their reluctance to change. Linkinwater makes much more of punctuality than any other character, which reveals his faithfulness to his unchanging schedule: "Punctual as the counting-house dial, which he maintained to be the best time-keeper in London … the old clerk performed the minutest actions of the day" (447). In another scene, he turns down the brothers' kind offer to relieve him of some of his duties, saying:

[5] Marcus finds the brothers unconvincing, because Dickens does not "create a social reality for the Cheerybles to work against comparable to the material out of which they made their fortunes and with which the novel teems" (Marcus 113).

> ‘It’s forty-four year … next May, since I first kept the books of Cheeryble Brothers. I’ve opened the safe every morning all that time (Sundays excepted) as the clock struck nine, and gone over the house every night at half-past ten (except on Foreign Post nights, and then twenty minutes before twelve) to see the doors fastened and the fires out. I’ve never slept out of the back-attic one single night.… I have slept in that room … for four-and-forty year; and if it wasn’t inconvenient, and didn’t interfere with business, I should request leave to die there.’ (434)

Here, it becomes clear that he is intensely proud of his position as a clerk. Indeed, he refuses to become a partner in the firm, persisting in “the punctual and regular discharge of his clerky duties” (774).

Although they make such an offer to Linkinwater, the brothers also do not want to change the circumstances around them either. In reply to Linkinwater’s mention of his death in this context, they impulsively respond, “Damn you, Tim Linkinwater, how dare you talk about dying?” (434). In addition, what delights the brothers most is the illusion that Linkinwater becomes younger year by year. On his birthday, Brother Charles jokes about him, “I believe that Tim Linkinwater 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” (450). Of course, this is said in jest, but these remarks reflect the brothers’ wish that their circumstances could stay the same forever. Thus, they have much in common with Ralph,

even though Dickens depictes them as an antithesis to him.

Their isolation does not mean that they are attempting to "stop" time around them. What they really desire is the preservation of the arcadia they have established. On observing Nicholas at work, Linkinwater soon becomes satisfied with his performance. This is not because of his competence, but because of his penmanship, which is quite like Linkinwater's own. Nothing pleases him more than the prospect of his account books continuing to be kept in the same manner after his death: "the business will go on when I'm dead as well as it did when I was alive – just the same" (449). The brothers also share these feelings with him. When the novel reaches a denouement with Nicholas's marriage to Madeline, and his nephew Frank's to Kate, Brother Charles feels fully satisfied, wondering if "two handsomer or finer young fellows [can] scarcely stand side by side than those on whom he look[s] with so much pleasure." No doubt he is assured that the firm will be secure as long as these young men remain "close and firm" (757) like him and the Brother Ned. By marriage, Nicholas and Frank become related. The structure of the firm and its spirit are well positioned to continue under the so-called "new Cheeryble Brothers." Unlike Ralph's "time-stopped world," the Cheerybles' world functions according to the circular time in which the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is repeated.

Regarding this point, Marks asserts that the Cheeryble Brothers personify the natural time cycle, which is contrary to the horological time of the city.[6] Certainly, like all creatures in nature, the brothers

[6] In explaining this view, Marks points out that Dickens often uses solar metaphor, which she notes "confirm[s] Cheerybles' connection with the natural time cycle" (Marks 24).

and Linkinwater find the promise of rebirth in the prospect of turning their business over Nicholas and Frank. Nonetheless, the life prepared for these new men will not simply repeat that of their predecessors. The brothers, despite the fortune they have built, have not fulfilled all their hopes, for their own marriages were never materialized. For this reason, it is of great significance for them to unite Nicholas with Madeline, the daughter of the Brother Charles's former fiancée. As Jerome Meckier points out, she is central to "the Brother's desire to repair the past" (Meckier 140). At the end of the novel, the domestic happiness which the brothers failed to achieve is realized in the next generation. While the members of the Cheerybles' world live according to a circular time that closely resembles natural cycles, their circumstances improve with each generation.

V

In *Nickleby*, both Ralph and the Cheeryble Brothers build a "fortress" to protect them from the centre of London. While the worlds of Nicholas and Cheeryble Brothers become firmer as time progresses, Ralph's time runs out when his evil designs are exposed. After Nicholas foils his plot against Madeline, he loses ten thousand pounds. Moreover, for fear that further involvement with him may have adverse effects, his accomplices break off relations with him. As his maxim, "[t]ime is money" (579) suggests, there is no way for him to stop a headwind blowing against him once he loses his money. On his way home from the brothers' office, where he hears the revelation about Smike, he is haunted by "one black, gloomy mass" (749) which later turns out to be the shadow of death. Hurried to walk by the

shadow, he becomes worn out just as the people in the human stream become greatly exhausted by its rapid movement. Once his "time-stopped" world collapses, he is at the mercy of the violent flood, which swallows and drowns him.

Ralph commits suicide in the room where Smike used to live, a perfect situation that shows how his miserable end serves as a means of retribution. Indeed, it is the very thing logically required of him. He has to die a miserable death, otherwise, his death will not serve as the adequate punishment for his false deeds. Still, he does not meekly follow fate. Shortly before committing suicide, he recollects a body of a man who had cut his throat. The more deeply this corpse becomes emblazoned in his mind, the more assured Ralph feels that the man's death was a kind of revenge on others: "Then came before him the pale and trembling relatives who had told their tale upon the inquest – the shriek of women – the silent dread of men – the consternation and disquiet…" (752). There is no explanation of what made the man kill himself, but Ralph no doubt identifies himself with him, imagining that his own body's appalling appearance will have a fearful effect on his enemies. Thus, Ralph's suicide serves as a means of resistance against Nicholas and the Cheeryble Brothers, who bring him to bay.

Bearing in mind what I have discussed above, let us reconsider Ralph's last words. As stated previously, he swears at the toll of the bell, which can be heard on the occasions of births, marriages and deaths. This curse is seemingly irrelevant to Nicholas, but he refers to these events in another scene: "… births, deaths, marriages, and every event which is of interest to most men, had … no interest to me"

(694). In this context, Ralph stirs up further hatred toward Nicholas, guessing that Nicholas has brought about his bankrupcy. These three events are a part of the natural cycle, which will be repeated in Nicholas's family from generation to generation. Affirming such a cycle is a "lie," Ralph regards time as a linear process which brings "this cursed world to its end." He even expresses the hope to be thrown away on a "dunghill" and rot there, which is a total rejection of the notion of rebirth. Thus, his curse of time is actually directed at Nicholas.

Moreover, Ralph's suicide represents more than just a denial of the cyclical world. If he did not kill himself, the only choice left for him would be either to follow the Cheeryble Brothers' proposal that he should escape from England or submit to arrest on charges related to his past deeds. The longer he is detained on earth, the more strongly fear and regret would prey on him. By maintaining a passionately evil stance toward Nicholas, however, he resists the typical course of a villain. Therefore, by cursing time, he declaratively resist the flow of violent stream which is coming. By killing himself, he permanently stops time before it swallows him up.

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