

# Dickens's Death

Takashi TERAUCHI

Charles Dickens lived from 1812 to 1870. By 1857 he had been looked upon as 'a very Joseph in all that regards morality, chastity, and decorum' (*Letters* 8: 745), but for the subsequent 13 years he lived a very different life from the one he had done so far; he, though having Ellen Ternan as his mistress, denied the fact to the public: he lived a great sinner, and died without any public confession. Could he have taken no notice of his sin in life at all? That would be impossible, because he, who was essentially a man of a gentle Christian mind as he had written 'the children's New Testament' in 1846, lost the mind for a time but recovered it in 1860. In the present essay, it will be revealed that he was so severely afflicted with his sin that he denied his own existence himself.

## Victorian Temper—self-denial and an obsession with death

The ideas of self-denial and an obsession with death may be counted among the characteristics of the Victorian temper (Buckley91; Houghton 276-77; Milward75); Dickens was one of the Victorian writers who displayed such characteristics.

The historical background of the compound word 'self-denial' is as follows. The word itself appeared in the 17th century, but the concept of 'denying oneself' is almost as old as the history of human beings, because a man, who is an imperfect being, is often required to deny and renew himself. Saul (or Paul) of Tarsus, for example, converted from a persecutor of the early Christian Church into an apostle of Christ Jesus after being hit by a light from heaven: Saul ultimately denied and regenerated himself (*Letters* 4: xii, 573 & n.; Dickens, *The Life ...* 121-23). Thomas à Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ* or *De Imitatione Christi* (c. 1418) in which he instructed 'the Christian how to seek perfection by following Christ,' emphasizing the idea of 'denying oneself' particularly in Bk. 3, Chs. 32 and 56, and Bk. 4, Ch. 15 (Cross 692); the *Imitation* was first translated into English in 1503 (Kempis 25).

The idea of 'denying oneself' was expressed in the compound word 'self-denial' in the 17th century. *OED* finds the first example in 1642; in the 18th century John Wesley (1703-1791), who was '*homo unius libri*,' i.e., 'a man of one book' to 'study (comparatively) no book but the Bible,' and who was also inspired by Kempis's *Imitation*, preached 'Self-Denial' on the basis of Luke 9: 23 (Sugden, I, 21; Curnock V, 117; Sugden, I, 263; II, 147; Curnock I, 15; Sugden II, 280-95); his associate George Whitefield (1714-70), too, delivered 'The Extent and Reasonableness of Self-Denial.'

Also in the 19th century the idea of self-denial was emphasized; John Henry Newman (1801-90), one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement during 1833-45, preached a sermon on 'The Duty of Self-denial,' and another leader, Edward B. Pusey, (1800-82) discoursed on 'the simplicity and self-denial of his daily life' (Liddon, Vol. II, Ch. XXIII). Augustus W. N. Pugin (1812-52), who was 'never a candidate for personal honour' (*DNB*), was a man of self-denial; George Eliot, who read *Imitation* in 1844, used the word 'self-denial' three times in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) and had long excerpts from *Imitation* in Bk. 4, Ch. 3 of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) (Haight 66; Karl 45; Kempis 130, 85-6, 168, 117, 91).

The ultimate reach of the concept of 'self-denial' is death, and a fear of death was released by the New Testament: 'If any man come to me, and hate not [...] his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 15: 9), 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil. 1: 21), 'If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him' and 'we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (I John 2: 15, 3: 16). So the followers of Jesus Christ were not afraid of death: Kempis, who sought Christian perfection, wrote in 'A Meditation on Death' in the *Imitation*, 'Had you a good conscience, death would hold no terrors for you. [...]. If it is dreadful to die, it is perhaps more dangerous to live long' (Kempis 57-8), and John Wesley, who tried to spread scriptural holiness across the land, preached, 'Now, "herein perceive we the love of God, in that He laid down His life for us" (I John iii. 16). "We ought," then, as the Apostle justly infers, "to lay down our lives for the brethren"' (Sugden, I, 293).

Against such situations Victorian people had an obsession with death, and writers often made mention of it. Thomas Carlyle wrote in *Chartism* (1839), 'Nakedness, hunger, distress of all kinds, death itself have been cheerfully suffered, when the heart was right' (Carlyle, *Selected* .. 177), and in *Past and Present* (1843), '*Il faut payer de sa vie*. Why was our life given us, if not that we should manfully give it?' (Carlyle, *Past* .. 174). Alfred Tennyson wrote poems like *Mariana* (1830), *A Farewell* (?1837) and *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850). Christina Rossetti created a poem called 'After Death' (1849). John Everett Millais painted the drowned woman 'Ophelia' (1852), inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. John Ruskin wrote, 'The Soldier's profession is to defend it. The Pastor's to teach it. The Physician's to keep it in health. [...]. And the duty of all these men is, on due occasion, to die for it' in *Unto This Last* (1860) (Ruskin 128).

As stated above, some Victorians showed a disposition for 'self-denial' and 'an obsession with death'; Dickens certainly had much interest in the idea of 'self-denial,' which we can know from the fact that he made frequent use of the word both in his works and letters: Prof. Matsuoka's hyper-concordance gives 37 hits for 'self-denial' (try

'dickens-all') and the CD-Rom edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens* 25 hits. As for 'an obsession with death,' we can intuit this in Dickens from his letters of 1848 and 1856: 'as I have quite made up my mind never to grow old myself' and 'I have always felt of myself that I must, please God, die in harness [...]. As to repose -- for some men there's no such thing in this life' (*Letters* 5: 239; *Letters* 8: 89; *Forster* 2: 197-98; M. Dickens, *CD* 164).

### **In the years 1865-1868—his self-denial and obsession with death**

After the year 1865 Dickens gradually was changing the ideas of his self-denial and obsession with death into a realization. This will be discussed below.

Dickens, as was already mentioned elsewhere, went through 'conversion' in the sense of 'a spiritual change from sinfulness, ungodliness, or worldliness to love of God and pursuit of holiness' (*OED*) not publicly but privately by September 1860, so now it will be enough to say that the reaction in his mind was a result of his recurrent self-denial originating in his earnest introspection.

In around mid-1862 Dickens sent Ellen Ternan to France with her mother Mrs. Ternan due to her pregnancy. It is no doubt that Ellen Ternan bore him a 'son,' and he 'died in infancy' in 1862 or 1863, because Dickens's daughter Mrs. Kate Perugini and his sixth son Sir Henry accepted this as a fact in 1923 and 1928 respectively (Storey 94, 142-43; Tomalin 135-49, 152).

Dickens must have wished Ellen to settle in France forever the way he sent his sons to migrate to India and Australia, but she returned to London in June 1865, which, it is sure, irritated Dickens, because she was placed in public notice. If his private life came out he would be an object of insult and contempt; or if Ellen was pregnant in future he might be an Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*, which he had read in 1859, or a Faust in Charles François Gounod's new opera *Faust*, which he had seen in Paris on 31 January 1863 (*Letters* 10: xiii & n., 205 & n., 215 & n., 261 & n.). Such concerns and anxieties obsessed Dickens more seriously from June 1865 onwards.

Besides, the formidable illness of his foot broke out in February 1865; his heart disease was caused by the Staplehurst railway accident in June, for which he, while travelling from London to Higham, often and suddenly fell into 'a paroxysm of fear,' trembled 'all over,' clutched 'the arms of the railway carriage, large beads of perspiration standing on his face,' and suffered 'agonies of terror' (M. Dickens, *CD* 158, *My Father* 129-30). Thus the year 1865 was the opening of his grave afflictions.

At the beginning of 1866 Dickens's beloved daughter Kate and her husband Charles Collins had been both ill in bed at Gad's Hill; Dickens wrote on 2 February that Charley

would 'never be strong' and Kate was 'rather delicate—about the chest and heart' (*Letters* 11: 150); they both remained unrecovered even in December (*Letters* 11: 150, 281). Kate's unhappiness was a burden on Dickens; she had disliked and left his dismal home by her marriage in 1860 (Storey 105).

As to Dickens, he too had been afflicted with 'a decided change' in his health for some time at the beginning of the year; he wrote on 9 February, 'I have got a prescription of iron, quinine and digitalis' for 'degeneration of some functions of the heart' (*Letters* 11: 155). Still in March he had '[w]ant of muscular power in the heart,' and had been 'unwell' enough that on 7 March his doctor gave him 'the strict injunction' to cancel his engagements of the 12th and the 15th, but he would not, stating, 'I wouldn't mind him!' (*Letters* 11: 168-69). Certainly, Dickens saw doctors, but in vain; he had no intention of obeying their directions.

Dickens, though under such bad condition, had to earn money; he had written back on 11 March 1861, 'I am [...] chained in life, by the enormous drags upon me which are already added to the charges of my own large family'; as of 1866 he had to support not only his family, but his late brother Alfred's family, his sister Letitia, the Charles Collinses, Catherine and Ellen Ternan; in short, his 'expenses' were 'so enormous' (*Letters* 11: 366).

He had the idea of selling himself 'out and out' to 'some Demon of the Mitchell circle' on 2 February 1866, and 'sold' himself eventually on 8 March to 'the Powers of Evil,' viz., Chappell & Co., for 30 readings at £50 a night (*Letters* 11: 168-71). In this way he resumed, on 10 April, readings which he had stopped since the London series of 1863, knowing that the Demon would consume his body.

As early as 13 April he was 'tired,' stuck to his 'tonic,' and could 'not sleep'; and was 'very tired' on the 27th (*Letters* 11: 183-84, 193); on 11 May he suffered 'headache and brow neuralgia, sure signs of excess of nervous power wasted over-night' (*Letters* 11: 199n.). On 12 June he managed to finish the Chappell tour, earning £1,500.

On 6 September he wrote to his doctor, 'I have been bothered for weeks -- months -- at intervals with distention and flatulency, and disagreeable pains in the pit of the stomach and chest,' and saw him on the 30th (*Letters* 11: 242, 249; cf. W. H. Bowen 138-40). Thus in 1866 he sold himself to the Demon.

From January 15 to May 13, 1867 Dickens had the second provincial Chappell tour of 52 readings. In the meantime, on the night of 9 May, he 'could hardly undress for bed' for being 'so tired'; though under such a serious condition, he began to think of an American tour (*Letters* 11: 366).

In addition to the American tour, he also began to negotiate with the Chappells on

'Farewell Nights in England' on 9 October 1867 (*Letters* 11: 451). 'Farewell!' To what? To this world. Because he meant to earn no more after the readings in spite of the necessity of enormous expenses. At around this time his self-denial and obsession with death, we could suppose, had already become a reality within him.

He sailed for America on 9 November, and wrote to Forster on the 18th from Halifax, Nova Scotia, 'I told the Chappells that when I got back to England, I would have a series of farewell readings in town and country; and then read No More' (*Letters* 11: 479; emphases added). He contracted '£80 a night, 100 series,' probably gazing at his own future death (*Letters* 11: 484).

He fell into discomfort and uneasiness upon arriving in Boston on 19 November 1867, because 'American newspapers had dredged up the story of the separation of a decade earlier and the role in it of a young mistress' (Schlicke 18).

He cancelled a reading tour of February 1868 to the West of America; one of the reasons was that the Chicago papers were eager to publish stories on the topic of Dickens's separation, including gossip about his youngest brother Augustus's misbehavior. Augustus had deserted his wife Harriet Lovell after her having gone blind in 1850, had decamped to Amboy, IL, USA, in 1857 with Bertha Phillips, had lived as 'Mr & Mrs Dickens,' then had moved with her to Chicago, IL, and had died there in 1866. Actually, Bertha Phillips lived in Chicago in 1868 with her children (three of whom survived), and was to die on Christmas Day 1868 from an overdose of morphine taken for neuralgia. Against these circumstances, the *Chicago Tribune* reprinted the 'Violated Letter' on 19 February 68 (*Letters* 5: 445n.; *Letters* 9: 159 & n.; *Letters* 11: 484n.; *Letters* 12: 62 & nn., 274n.; Schlicke 18).

Dickens could barely finish the American Readings, earning the net of nearly £20,000, which was a recompense for not only the reading work but also the American catarrh, swollen feet, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and great fatigue; he left New York on 2 April 1868, and arrived at Liverpool on 1 May (*Letters* 11: 525, 528; *Letters* 12: ix, xi, 12, etc.).

Edward Dickens, his youngest child, sailed on around 26 September 1868 to Australia to be an emigrant, and his ninth child Henry went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in October. Now, Dickens's duty and responsibility to all his sons had been accomplished; in fact, 'duty and responsibility' was one of his values; he, concerning 'duty,' had written in the letter he handed over to Edward right before his departure, 'You cannot show your affection for him [Dickens] so well, or make him so happy, as by doing your duty' (*Letters* 12: 188).

Now he could devote himself to the Farewell Readings, the first of which he began in

London on 6 October 1868, and went on his provincial tour, what he called a 'heavy spell of work,' on the 9th.

In around mid-October he started to think of a reading of the Sikes and Nancy murder scene from *Oliver Twist* (*Letters* 12: 203), the reading in which he had felt 'something so horrible' when trying alone back in 1863 (*Letters* 10: 250), and the reading about which his eldest son Charley, who found him rehearsing in the meadow of Gad's Hill, said to him, caring about his failing health, 'The finest thing I have ever heard, but don't do it' (CD, Jr., 'Reminiscences' 28-29; Adrian, *Georgina* .. 120; Storey 126). Dickens took exhaustion and fatigue far from rest despite doctors' directions.

He wrote on 25 October that he was heavily tired out 'like Mariana' (*Letters* 12: 208). It was back in 1842 that he had become familiar with the short poem 'Mariana' by Tennyson, and back in 1843 that he echoed it in the description of the deserted schoolhouse in Stave II of *A Christmas Carol* (*Letters* 3: 306-07 & nn., 460-61n.). The first six stanzas of the poem ends with 'I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!' and the last with 'I am aweary, aweary, / Oh God, that I were dead!' Those days Dickens, it seems, shared Mariana's desire, remembering the poem and staring at his own future death.

### **In 1869—'suicidal'**

He started the readings in London on 5 January; one of them was *Sikes and Nancy*, by which he froze the spectators, then made them come to life, and raised them to boiling-point with the ending (*Letters* 12: xiv and n, 274-75). It might be considered that he was satisfied with the result, but it would be more probable that he was wishing to 'die in harness.'

On 15 February his foot 'ha[d] turned lame again' (*Letters* 12: 293 & n). On the 16th two doctors Sir Henry Thompson and Frank Beard drew up for him the certificate: 'Mr. C. D. is suffering from inflammation of the foot (caused by over-exertion), and that we have forbidden his appearance on the platform this evening' (Dolby 382).

On the 19th he could 'not stand,' but got off, though not yet well, to Edinburgh on the 20th for the reading at Glasgow on the 22nd (*Letters* 12: 294-95 & n.). Back to Edinburgh on the 23rd, he consulted Dr. James Syme, who warned him against over-fatigue in the readings and denounced 'Thompson's diagnosis of gout' (*Letters* 12: 296, 301). Dickens read there on the 24th, and was back at Glasgow on the 25th for the night's reading. Within the day, back again at Edinburgh, he wrote to W. H. Wills, "'Business" here is *tremendous!*' At night, however, '[b]oth feet were tired [...] and ached in bed' (*Letters* 12: 298). Shortly before the reading of the 26th, he wrote to

Alexander Russel, editor of the *Scotsman*, 'the Oliver Twist murder driving all the breath out of my body' (*Letters* 12: 300), and he, after finishing one of the night's two readings, went to his retiring-room 'with difficulty,' being 'forced to lie on the sofa' to 'regain strength sufficient to utter a word' (Dolby 385; *Letters* 12: 298n).

The supper of February 26 he took at the Edinburgh hotel with Dolby; then and there he was fixing the remaining reading tour with Dolby, making 'Murder' take precedence of everything else; it was when Dolby suggested not to give the 'Murder' so often that Dickens bounded up, threw his knife and fork on his plate, smashing it to atoms, and exclaimed, 'Dolby! your infernal caution will be your ruin one of these days!' He, saying so, was crying, and sobbing, 'Forgive me, Dolby! [...] I know you are right' (Dolby 386-88; *Letters* 12: 300n). He really 'would listen to no remonstrance in respect of' the murder reading (Dolby 344); he was sure to resent 'any suggestion from anybody else that his health was falling, or that he was undertaking anything beyond his strength'; in short, 'nothing could stop him' (CD, Jr., 'Reminiscences' 28-30).

It is probable that he was 'in sackcloth and ashes' as he had written in *David Copperfield*, Ch. 20 and its variations in *Hard Times*, Bk. 3, Ch. 6 and *Great Expectations*, Ch. 21, and that he wore 'next his skin sackcloth covered with dirt and vermin,' and 'flogged his back to punish himself' in Thomas a Becket's manner of life, as he had written in Ch. 12 of *A Child's History of England* in 1851-53.

The reading of the murder scene, Wilkie Collins saw, 'did more to kill Dickens than all his other work put together' (Robinson 243). Philip Collins thought of the efforts he made for the reading as 'foolish' and 'even suicidal' (Collins 471). Dickens was 'fully aware of the terrible malady by which he was threatened,' and he knew, too, that the Murder Reading was 'madness' or 'worse than madness' (Dolby 416, 442). True, Dickens's wish was to 'die in harness'; on 30 March, though after performing 12 readings in London and the province from 2 to 30 March, he got ready for his death: he made a 'great burning of papers' and destroyed 'everything not wanted' (*Letters* 12: 321).

He gave 8 readings from 31 March to 13 April, and on the morning of the 15th he wrote at Leeds, 'The foot was bad all the way, and was exceedingly inflamed and swollen when we arrived, and still is.' On 17 and 18 April he had been 'extremely giddy, extremely uncertain of [his] footing.' On 21 April he wrote, 'My weakness and deadness are all on the left side, and if I don't look at anything I try to touch with my left hand, I don't know where it is.' On 22 April his doctor Beard rushed to Preston, forced him to cancel his readings of the day, which was the 73rd performance, and took him back to London within the day (*Letters* 12: xv, 336, 338-41 & nn., 710-11; McManus

99, etc.). This was a natural effect of his selling himself 'out and out' to the 'Demon' which he could expect.

On 25 April Dickens wrote to his solicitor Ouvry that his sudden lying by from work was 'a precautionary measure on the part of the doctors, and not a remedial one.' But the editor of *the Letters of CD* noted that it was written 'in a shaky hand, obviously affected by his illness; rest of letter firm and clear; probably, therefore not written at same time.' The 'rest of letter' was a rewriting of his will: 'I want a new draft of a will (as short as possible) thus' (*Letters* 12: 344 & n). His obsession with death was quite a reality.

On 26 April the leading physician Thomas Watson and Dickens's doctor Beard published a certificate:

Mr. Charles Dickens has been seriously unwell, through great exhaustion and fatigue of body and mind, consequent upon his public Readings and long and frequent railway journeys. In our judgement, Mr. Dickens will not be able with safety to himself to resume his Readings for several months to come.

(*Letters* 12: 341n; Dolby 413)

On the same day, Georgina wrote that he was 'still hoping that he might be allowed to go through with the London Readings' though the two doctors said 'NO!' adding that he 'would hear of no compromise (quite wisely--I think). Nothing but an entire cessation of work and that AT ONCE!' (*Letters* 12: 345n). Clearly he had no wish to live; his spirit was occupied by a feeling of self-denial.

Dickens described himself on 28 April and 3 May respectively: 'in a quite brilliant condition already' and 'I am in a brilliant condition, thank God. Rest and a little care immediately *unshook* the railway shaking' (*Letters* 12: 345, 348).

On 12 May he made up his 'last Will and Testament' by revoking all his former Wills and Codicils, to which another date of '2 June 1870' was to be added later. He was steadily walking towards his own death.

Around the end of May he expressed his wish for Dr. Thomas Watson's sanction to fulfill some of the reading engagements, and got his consent for twelve Readings in London the next year (Forster 2: 363-64).

At the beginning of June, amazingly enough, 'all traces of his illness had disappeared' from him, so he entertained Mr. and Mrs. James Thomas Fields and two others at Gad's Hill Place for a week (Dolby 421).

In mid-July he got 'the idea of a story,' viz., the germ of *Edwin Drood*; about which he



wrote in a letter of 6 August' (*Letters* 12: 377 and n., 389-90).

On 8 August he, who himself had had 'some distressing indications' that he was not yet as well as he had hoped he had been, was reminded of the caution given 'by the Doctors to add nothing, this summer and autumn, to the pressure of [his] own affairs' (*Letters* 12: 391).

On 20 August he began to consult with Frederic Chapman about the agreement for *Edwin Drood*, was getting to work on 'a new book' at around the end of September, and completed, on 27 November, Chs. 6-9, which was only a product of 'a severe labour' or an accumulation of 'a hard day's work' (*Letters* 12: xii, 398 and n, 416, 422, 425, 445 and n.; Dolby 436).

On 18 December he was 'really very hard pressed,' so he declined to attend a meeting in Birmingham (*Letters* 12: 453). On the 22nd he rehearsed the readings for the final twelve, though tied up with 'Writings, Editings, Birmingham correspondence, and other botherations' (*Letters* 12: 454-55, 457). On the 24th he was home to Gad's Hill Place to spend Christmas holidays, being 'not well' and 'confined to his bed' for the whole of Christmas day due to the pain in his left foot; he, however, managed to appear at dinner (Adrian, *Georgina* .. 129; Storey 129; Dolby 441). On the 27th he was getting up his Readings (*Letters* 12: 457).

*The New York Times* reprinted the 'Violated Letter' under the heading 'Why Charles Dickens Separated from His Wife—His Own Statement' on 28 September 1869 as a reproduction from the *Boston Folio*, although it is unclear why they reprinted it at that time and whether Dickens caught it. What matters is that he was never disengaged from the 'Letter' nor from that kind of gossip or scandal. Thus in 1869 he was resolutely stepping forward to self-denial.

### **In 1870—'Yes, on the ground'**

He went to the Birmingham and Midland Institute to give a speech at the prize-giving as its President on 6 January. There, he became so severely shaken that he saw his doctor Beard. Beard was afraid that Dickens might 'die' of the Readings (CD, Jr., 'Reminiscences' 30), so he decided to attend him at the Readings with his eldest son Charley (*Letters* 12: xxiv, 453, 462; Dolby 443).

On the night of 11 January when his twelve Farewell Readings started, his pulse was a normal 72, rising to more than 100 on the later nights, and to 112 when he read the *Sikes and Nancy* scenes on the 21st. By the 23rd he had had his left hand, which had been sporadically swollen and painful the previous December, in a sling (*Letters* 12: 340; Forster 2: 409, 411). Just before the third reading of the murder scene on 15

February, he whispered to Charles Kent, 'I shall tear myself to pieces'; really his pulse got higher to 124 by the end of the reading, so he had to be supported to his retiring room and laid on a sofa for fully ten minutes before being able to say something rational (Kent 87; Dolby 444; Collins 470-71; Fitzsimons 176-77). Throughout February his hand pain did not leave (Forster 2: 411; McManus 101).

On 1 March his pulse rose to 124 after *Copperfield*, and to 120 in his fourth and last reading of the murder scene on the 8th (Forster 2: 410).

At one night of the final readings, Dickens, being unable to pronounce 'Pickwick' correctly, did 'Pickwick,' 'Picksnick, and Picnic, and Peckwicks and all sorts of names except the right' (CD, Jr., 'Reminiscences' 30).

He could barely accomplish the final readings, with his pulse rising to 110 on 15 March, when he gave the address: 'Ladies and Gentlemen,--[...]; but from these garish lights I vanish now for evermore, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell' (Dolby 449; emphases added). There could be read in the address some implication that 'I would work or live no more.'

On 21 March he could read only the right-hand half of the letters over the shop doors, which was a recurrence of what he had experienced in the summer of 1865 in Paris. On 29 March he was attacked by 'a sudden violent rush' of his 'uneasiness and hemorrhage' (*Letters* 12: 502).

During April he had been well; he did 'a very hard work' on *Edwin Drood* whose No. 1 had been published on 31 March. He presided at the newsvendors on 5 April; and spoke at the Royal Academy banquet on 30 April, paying tribute to his late close friend Daniel Maclise, who had died just five days earlier (*Letters* 12: xxiv, 512; Forster 2: 411; Page 138).

At the beginning of May he was seized by 'a sharp attack' in his foot, and was troubled during the month by 'a mere bag of pain which refuse[d] to be carried about'; so he cancelled many engagements.

On 23 May he dined with the Lehmanns and John Forster in Hyde Park Place, and spoke of Mark Lemon, who had just died a sudden death some time before 8 o'clock in the morning of the same day at age 60 (McCarthy, see Patrick Leary's posting of 18 Oct 2009; *DNB*, 'Mark Lemon' 334; Adrian, *Mark* .. 204, 206; cf., Forster 2: 413 and Acroyd 1132); he also talked of the other friends who had died in the past few years, saying, 'And none beyond his sixtieth year; very few even fifty.' It was no good, Forster suggested, to talk of it, but Dickens, aged 58, replied, 'We shall not think of it the less' (Forster 2: 413). Dickens had been perfectly obsessed with death; his daughter Kate 'always' said to Storey that he 'would not have desired to live and grow old' (Storey

137-38).

Among Dickens's friends who had died during the past several years were William Thackeray (d. 1863, at age 52), Nathaniel Hawthorne (d. 1864 at 60), Elizabeth Gaskell (d. 1865 at 55), Clarkson Stanfield (d. 1867 at 74), William Bradbury (d. 1869 at 69), Daniel Maclise (d. 25 April 1870 at 64), and so forth. In addition, Dickens's benefactor and father-in-law George Hogarth died in February 1870 at 87; as for Frederick Evans, who had been broken with on 22 July 1858 by Dickens and had become Dickens's son Charley's father-in-law on 19 November 1861, he was to die on 25 June 1870 at 63, viz., 16 days after Dickens's death.

He, who was at Gad's Hill by 30 May, was 'hard at work on *Edwin Drood* with 'an appearance of fatigue and weariness about him very unlike his usual air' (M. Dickens, *My father* 135). On around May 2 and someday between May 31 and June 2, it appears, he visited Ellen Ternan (*Letters* 12: 517 & n.; Tomalin 194). The visits, however, would have had no meaning but duty, responsibility and compunction.

On 2 June he made a last revision of his last will and codicil. On the 3rd he ordered a patent electric chain band across his right foot to relieve the pain, and was to receive it on the 8th (*Letters* 12: 541 and n., 543, 548).

On 4 June Kate visited Gad's Hill Place to get his advice about whether to go on the stage or not, and found him wearied and much changed. He, on the following night, took her to inspect the newly completed conservatory, and said, 'It is positively the last improvement' of Gad's Hill Place. He began to talk of his own affairs, of how he stood in the world, and of how he hoped that *Edwin Drood* might prove a success, saying, 'if, please God, I live to finish it. [...]. I say *if*; because you know, my dear child, I have not been strong lately.' She was 'startled by his grave voice.' He went on saying 'many things that he had scarcely ever mentioned' to her before, and 'troubled' her a great deal by 'the manner in which he dwelt upon those years that were gone by, and never, beyond the one mention of "Edwin Drood," looked to the future. He spoke as though his life were over and there was nothing left,' adding that he wished that 'he had been "a better father—a better man"' (all emphases added; Storey 132-34; Perugini 652).

To Dickens, who had been improving himself together with the improvement of Gad's Hill Place, the very 'last improvement' of the Place meant the last of his own 'improvements': he concluded all his improvements by the confession of his sins which would have been included in the 'many things' he spoke as if he were the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale on the pillory, wishing that he had been 'a better father—a better man.' As for Dimmesdale, Dickens knew him through a reading of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in 1851 (*Letters* 6: 453; McCarthy, see my posting of 30 April 2009).

Dickens was a wholly penitent Christian man within himself. All the preparation for his death had been finished.

On 8 June at six he joined Georgina for dinner with his eyes full of tears, alarmed her with 'his colour and a change in his expression,' and replied to her concerned words with "Yes, very ill for the last hour," to her calling the doctor with "No," and to her "Come and lie down" with "Yes-on the ground"; and then he suffered a stroke and lost consciousness (Adrian, *Georgina* .. 136; emphases added). He, without regaining consciousness, died at almost the same time after a whole day, five years to the day after the Staplehurst crash or to the day when Ellen returned from France to London.

The words which he uttered at his last moment definitely show that he wished not for life but death; in this sense his death could be said to have been suicide: he actualized his obsession with death and denied his own existence himself.

### **A hypothesis concerning Dickens's death**

As stated above, Dickens chose death himself, about which a hypothesis may be suggested.

In the Victorian era opium and laudanum were popular as a sedative or pain-killer; opium is a 'drug made from juice of the opium poppy and smoked or eaten or used in medicines as sedative' (*POD*), and laudanum a 'tincture of opium' (*POD*). The bottle of laudanum had a label of 'Poison' warning owing to causing death by its overdose.

Dickens displayed a large interest in opium and laudanum, which he often described in works like *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Edwin Drood*, etc. He described a laudanum bottle, too, like the 'bottle' in 'she [i.e., Stephen's drunk wife] laid her insensate grasp upon the bottle that had swift and certain death in it' (*Hard Times*; Bk. 1, Ch. 13); the 'bottle' was clearly 'a laudanum bottle' because Dickens referred to it as 'Poison bottle' in his 'Working Plans' (CD, *Hard Times* 69, 230).

Wilkie Collins, Dickens's close friend, who was a sufferer from rheumatic gout, 'took large quantities of opium a day, and consumed sufficient laudanum at night to kill six men' (Clarke 121-23; Storey 214); to his habitual use of it Dickens referred in his letters (*Letters* 7: 158n.; *Letters* 10: 5, 142 & n.; *Letters* 12: 187n., 211).

Laudanum was used for suicide as well; Dickens wrote in 1849, 'I don't know whether he [i.e., Thomas Powell's] took Laudanum enough to kill himself' (*Letters* 5: 631 & n.; see also *Letters* 4: 575nn.); Mr. Merdle, one of the characters in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), committed suicide with laudanum and a penknife (Bk. 2, Ch. 25); Magdalen in Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862) was to buy, for her own contemplated suicide, the

'Laudanum bottle' labelled 'POISON,' which Dickens mentioned in his letter to Collins (*Letters* 10: 140 & n.); Obenreizer, in the dramatic version of *No Thoroughfare* by Dickens and Wilkie Collins in 1867, put 'the phial of laudanum' in his breast-pocket, and committed suicide by the laudanum at the denouement. <sup>1</sup>

Dickens created characters like John Jasper and the Princess Puffer in his final novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; the former, a secret opium addict, says, 'I have been taking opium for a pain—an agony—that sometimes overcomes me' (Ch. II); the latter, a keeper of a London opium den, takes 'opium' as a 'medicine' for her 'weakly' lungs (Ch. XXIII).

Dickens himself had been a gout patient since February 1865 although he persistently denied it (Storey 126-27; W. H. Bowen 141, 144, 145; *Letters* 12: xvii). He too took laudanum: he, before going on the American tour in November 1867, ordered the pharmaceutical chemist Thomas Hills 'Laudanum' (*Letters* 11: 448 & n.), and he, when in Portland, America, had 'some laudanum' on the night of 28 March 1868 to escape from the affliction of American catarrh, insomnia, no appetite and no taste, with good effect; he also got a good night's rest by laudanum when in the pain of 'a Neuralgic foot' on the night of 11 May 1870, though attended by the side effect that it hung about him 'very heavily' on the next day (*Letters* 12: 85, 524).

Frank Beard was Dickens's doctor from 1859 and Wilkie Collins's from 1861 (*Letters* 1: 40n.; Clarke 2; Gasson 15); Beard 'prescribed laudanum' for Collins's gout, so it is probable that he prescribed it for Dickens.

Dickens passed all day in the Chalet on 8 June 1870 to write the unfinished novel of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and finished writing the last Chapter XXIII 'The Dawn Again,' near the end of which he inserted the words 'the Resurrection and the Life,' which had formed part of Sydney Carton's dying wish (*TTC*, Bk. 3, Ch. 15). And on the same day, he was 'in excellent spirits and was very eager to finish the novel' in coming to Georgina perhaps for lunch (Storey 135; Forster 2: 414-15), returning afterwards to his desk 'much against his usual custom' (Forster 2: 414-15); before dinner he wrote at least four letters, one of which he addressed to Mr. Charles Kent, writing, 'I hope I may be ready for you at 3 o'clock' in London next day, adding the enigmatic words, 'If I can't be—why, then I shan't be.' And he, who was 'late in leaving' the Chalet, joined Georgina for dinner at six with his eyes 'full of tears,' saying, 'Yes, very ill for the last hour,' and he, declining to call a doctor, collapsed on his left side (Forster 2: 367, 415; Adrian, *Georgina* .. 136). The fact is that he asked for no doctor either 'for the last hour' or at the dinner time.

He, who had 'Neuralgic' foot, 'weakly' heart, and a deep wound in his heart like

Sydney Carton, might have been a secret opium (or laudanum) addict like John Jasper, who had been 'taking opium for an agony,' and might have been using 'opium' as a 'medicine' for his 'weakly' heart like the Princess Puffer; if so, it could be explained that his sudden recovery of strength at the beginning of June 1869, as touched on above, was due to it.

The cause of his death was announced 'apoplexy' officially by Beard, who had regarded 'an attack of paralysis of his left side' on 19 April 69 as 'possibly of apoplexy' (Forster 2: 363); of Georgina, Forster, Charley, Mary, Kate, Henry and Dolby, none of them did refer to the diagnosis.<sup>2</sup> If he had died of apoplexy, he would have said of a violent headache immediately before his falling into a swoon. Or if so, could he have uttered some clear words like 'Yes, very ill for the last hour' or have walked to the kitchen from the Chalet?

Dickens might have taken too much laudanum an hour before the dinner, wishing to be released forever from his remorse and compunction.

If it should have been so, it would not have been announced for the sake of Dickens's honour, as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's wife Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall's suicide in 1862 by laudanum was ruled accidental by the coroner as 'under the law at the time suicide was both illegal and immoral and would have brought a scandal on the family as well,' and as 'suicide would bar Siddal from a Christian burial'.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

1 See <[http://home.earthlink.net/~bsabatini/Inimitable-Boz/etexts/No\\_Thoroughfare\\_correct\\_first\\_ed.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~bsabatini/Inimitable-Boz/etexts/No_Thoroughfare_correct_first_ed.html)>.

2 The archive of *the Guardian* 10 June 1870 says: 'Mr Frank Beard, Mr Dickens's regular medical attendant, was at once telegraphed for, and arrived the same evening at Gadshill. He saw at once that Mr Dickens had been seized with apoplexy, and that the case was hopeless.' See <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jun/10/archives-charles-dickens>>.

See also McManus 99.

References checked on the cause of Dickens's death are, Adrian's *Georgina Hogarth* [...], Charles Dickens Jr.'s 'Reminiscences [...]' Dolby's *Charles Dickens* [...], Mamie Dickens's *My Father* [...] and *Charles Dickens, Storey's Dickens and Daughter*, Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*, and Henry F. Dickens's *The Recollections* [...] and *Memories of my Father*.

3 See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Siddal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Siddal)>.

#### Conclusion

Charles Dickens tried to be an earnest Christian man, but he committed a high sin

by denying to the public the fact that he made Ellen Ternan his mistress, although some people were aware of it. Owing to the denial he had placed himself under the unrest and fear that his lies might be publicly disclosed at any time.

Things incited his inner feeling of self-denial, and led him to undergo his spiritual conversion by September 1860, and to set about his individual 'self-improvement.'

In around mid-1862 he sent Ellen to France due to her pregnancy; she bore him a son, who soon died.

The year 1865 changed Dickens's situation greatly; his diseases of foot and heart began, and Ellen returned to London where she would be easily noticed.

Dickens resumed his public readings under bad condition to cover his enormous expenses in April 1866. He, however exhausted, almost always took no rest despite doctors' directions and friends' advice, and wasted and wearied himself. He began to negotiate his Farewell readings in October 1867; by 'Farewell' he meant 'Farewell to this life': his self-denial and obsession with death had changed into a reality inside him.

He went on an American tour in November 1867 regardless of his poor health, and returned in May 1868. He launched the Farewell Readings in October, and soon thought of the very wearing reading of the Sikes and Nancy murder scene in around mid-October. He would have shared Mariana's desire for death at the end of October. He never stopped exhausting and wasting himself more by adding the murder scene to his repertoire from January 1869 on: he, who had recovered a sober Christian mind, had thought, it appears, of being 'in sackcloth and ashes' and of Thomas a Becket's manner of life, 'flogging him to punish himself' by February 1869.

He was forced to stop his reading tour in April 1869 by his doctor; at the latest by then he had almost finished the preparation for his own death by rewriting his will.

He began the twelve Farewell Readings in January 1870; his doctor was afraid that he might die of them. He wasted and wasted his failing body as if he wished to 'die in harness' or as if he tried to realize his own feeling of 'self-denial.'

He could barely finish the Farewell Readings in March, saying Farewell to the public with gratitude; he made a last revision of his last will and codicil on 2 June.

He finished his 'self-improvement' by confessing all his sins, almost certainly, to Kate, like Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale on the pillory, in the conservatory, an object of 'the last improvement of Gad's Hill Place,' on the midnight of 5 June.

Dickens fell unconscious wishing not for life but for death on 8 June 1870, and died the next day: he, too much troubled by his remorse, denied his own existence himself: he committed suicide.

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