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Who Cares Who Killed Edwin Drood? Or, On the Whole, I'd Rather Be in Philadelphia

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AN Italian novel of 1989 by Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini entitled *The D. Case: The Truth about the Mystery of Edwin Drood* takes place at an International Conference in Rome (sponsored by the Japanese), a Forum on the Completion of Unfinished or Fragmentary Works in Music and Literature—such works as Schubert's *Eighth Symphony*, Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, Puccini's *Turandot*, Livy's *On the Condition of the City*, and Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym.*[1] One of the books on the agenda is of course *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and among the participants assembled to complete Charles Dickens's unfinished novel are such world-class detectives as Lew Archer, Father Brown, Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Maigret, Philip Marlowe, Hercule Poirot, Nero Wolfe, and, from the pages of Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's nemesis, Porfiry Petrovich. In the story's format, the individual chapters of Dickens's novel alternate with chapters in which the assembled company of sleuths debates the implications of the chapter of *Drood* that has just been read to them, implications that will lead to an apt conclusion. (COMPLETENESS IS ALL, the title of the Conference affirms.)

[1] Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, *The D. Case: The Truth about the Mystery of Edwin Drood*, trans. Gregory Dowling (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

Even as early as the commentary on the first chapter of *Drood,* two schools of thought emerge among the deliberators. The narrator calls the first the Porfiry Petrovich school, or the *Porfirians,* those who already consider *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* less a detective novel than a psychological thriller pre figuring, say, Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment* (hence *Porfirians*). The other school, which the narrator calls the Agatha Christie school, or the *Agathists,* claims that the novel's detective story intention is crystal clear from the beginning and that the conventions of that genre demand a surprise ending, i.e., an ending that swerves away from the extant work's manifest implication that it is John Jasper who has murdered Drood. The Porfirians thus don't really care *who* killed Edwin Drood, *who*dunnit, since the unfinished text, with its primary interest in the characterization of John Jasper, leaves no doubt from the first that he is the murderer; the Agathists, with their primary interest in the manipulation of plot, put whodunnit at the very forefront of their emphasis: precisely because John Jasper is the obvious suspect of their conventional detective plot, he probably did not murder Edwin Drood—someone else did, or Drood is still alive and may well end up marrying Rosa Budd after all.

The first half of the title of this essay, "Who Cares Who Killed Edwin Drood?" would seem to put me firmly in the camp of the Porfirians, and, to put my cards on the table at the outset, so I am. I do believe Jasper killed Drood for all the reasons that have been advanced in the literature by fellow Porfirians, and I will eventually concentrate upon the evidence in chapters 1 and 22, upon the very beginning and the very end of what we have, to allude to that opinion in passing. I say "in passing" since, as a Porfirian, I do not think that the text is overly concerned with whodunnit. Most of the external and internal evidence, it seems to me, points to Jasper, and, as K. J. Fielding says, "Dickens took his relations with his readers far too seriously to mislead them unfairly."[2] An Agathist, of course, might well reply that Fielding's "unfairly" does rather

[2] K. J. Fielding, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 246.

beg the question: if the reader thinks Dickens an Agathist, it would have been entirely "fair" of him to puzzle the reader, to have the evidence rest on small, unsuspected details in the quest for whodunnit.

Whichever party one favors, the matter is not at all simple or clear-cut—beginning with the binary implications of my dismissive title. As students of detective fiction will realize, that title alludes to a notorious detective-fiction-bashing essay, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" (and its companion piece, "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?") by the ever-so-prickly Edmund Wilson.[3] In those essays Wilson makes a distinction similar to the one between Porfirians and Agathists, or, better, he takes an evaluative position vis-à-vis such a distinction. That is, he rather scathingly defines the limitations of the conventional English detective fiction that the Agathists of Fruttero and Lucentini represent. Wilson's title thus epitomizes his essay's denigration of such novels as Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, with their repetitive plots, country house settings, stock characters, and gimmicky surprise endings. However ingenious those plots turn out to be, they render such twentieth-century books a species of subliterature, according to Wilson. It is only when we return to earlier writers like Poe with their "ratiocinative intensity"—or like Dickens, where the main emphasis within a detective plot is upon "social and moral significance," upon the complexities of human character ("Why Do People Read," p. 236)—that we approach the realm of serious literature rather than the formulaic entertainment distinctly inferior to it. In short, Wilson assumes that a writerly and readerly interest in the mechanics of plotting (the concerns of the Agathists) is of significantly lesser aesthetic value than the interest in moral and psychological issues (the concerns of the Porfirians).

Now even if an analytic separation of plot and character has a pedigree that goes back at least as far as Aristotle's *Poetics*, contemporary narrative theory tends to think of such an easy

[3] Edmund Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" and "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" in his *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York: Noonday Press, 1967), pp. 257–65, 231–37.

division as naive, if not totally irrelevant, ground for novelistic description and evaluation. Yet for purposes of thinking about what Dickens, in his own words, seemed to intend for a completed *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the Porfirian/Agathist distinction and Edmund Wilson's inferable evaluation thereof may serve as a useful starting point for the discussion of what is and what is not formulaic and repetitive in Dickens's art and life. For, as I will eventually argue, since *Drood* is the last, repeated thing in his art, it provides some allegorical language for the last speechless moments of his life.

One must confront two authoritative statements in dealing with the structure Dickens apparently had in mind for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, both of them based upon the memory of his friend John Forster. If Forster's recollections in his *Life of Charles Dickens* are accurate, the "first fancy for the tale" was expressed in a Dickens letter of mid-July 1869: "What would you think of the idea of a story beginning in this way?—Two people, boy and girl, or very young, going apart from one another, pledged to be married after many years—at the end of the book. The interest to arise out of the tracing of their separate ways, and the impossibility of telling what will be done with that impending fate."[4] While doubts have certainly been cast upon Forster's trustworthiness about the significance of this "first fancy" for the completed *Edwin Drood*,[5] enough of this fancy remains in the relationship of Edwin and Rosa to substantiate it as one possible key to the novel's structure and conclusion. If this "boy and girl" romance was Dickens's first fancy for his new book—and I shall be returning to the notion of the artist's journey as a succession of "fancies" toward the "real" of his personal end—then it was soon either subordinated to or superseded by other concerns. *Drood* was much in

[4] John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872–74), III, 425.

[5] Preface to *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, et al., 8 vols. to date (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–), I, xv; see also Felix Aylmer, *The Drood Case* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), p. 201.

Dickens's thoughts at the end of July 1869, and by the beginning of August his ideas had evolved further. He writes to Forster on 6 August:

> I laid aside the fancy I told you of, and have a very curious and new idea for my new story. . . . [It is] to be that of the murder of a nephew by his uncle; the *originality* of which was to consist in the review of the murderer's career by himself at the close, when its temptations were to be dwelt upon as if, not he the culprit, but some other man were the tempted. The last chapters were to be written in the condemned cell, to which the wickedness, all elaborately elicited from him as if told to another, had brought him. (*Life*, III, 425–26 [emphasis added])

If we follow Dickens's journey from the first "fancy" for his story to the second, we can see that this journey may be described as a movement from an emphasis upon the fancies of plot to an emphasis upon a fanciful characterization, precisely the sort of imaginative progress that Wilson's discrimination would seem to value. In the first "boy-girl" fancy the interest is indeed in the three-step convention of many a popular romance: boy and girl meet, boy and girl part, boy and girl reunite. That formula does contain the Victorian twist of having Edwin and Rosa engaged at birth, their parting in the half of the novel we actually have, and their conceivable reuniting at novel's end. Such a plot would of course imply that Edwin has disappeared rather than been murdered, and if that was indeed Dickens's "first fancy," then Edwin's disappearance would bear a family resemblance to the disappearance of John Harmon in *Our Mutual Friend*, the novel Dickens had finished in 1865 just before beginning work on *Edwin Drood*. In the main plot of that novel, Harmon, a "boy" betrothed at an early age by a father's will to a "girl," Bella Wilfer, manages to disappear for the better part of the novel into the guise of another personality, John Rokesmith, in order to avoid a merely mercenary marriage to Bella. And like the presumably happy end of Edwin and Rosa after they had gone their separate ways for a while in Dickens's initial fancy, John Harmon and Bella Wilfer end up together in a happy marriage despite rather than because of the contractual arrangements of their fathers.

Such a conceivable near-repetition of plot pattern from one novel to the next suggests a truism of Dickens's career—that the plotting of his novels contains a high degree of iteration, even of the formulaic "Agathist" kind that Wilson disparages as subliterary.

And what of the "second," or Porfirian, fancy that Dickens came to, the one that stresses less the mystery of Edwin's fate than the mysterious psychology of his apparent murderer, John Jasper? It is the latter element that arguably gives the novel whatever claim to originality and freshness it may put forth. We have not only Forster's account of what was intended as truly original but also the account of Dickens's daughter Kate:

> . . . it was [not] upon the Mystery alone that [my father] relied for the interest and originality of his idea. The originality was to be shown, as he tells us, in what we may call the psychological description the murderer gives us of his temptations, temperament, and character, as if told by another. . . . [For] he was as deeply fascinated by and absorbed in the study of the criminal Jasper, as in the dark and sinister crime that has given the book its title.[6]

What is thus "truly original" in the novel is neither its major and subordinate mysteries (is Edwin Drood dead or alive and, if dead, who killed him? who is Dick Datchery? what does Princess Puffer know?) nor its romance plot (with whom will Rosa Budd end up, Edwin or Neville or Tartar?). It is rather the character and perverse motivation of John Jasper—and that is why Wilson points to Dickens's mysteries (i.e., *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood*) as superior to run-of-the-mill twentieth-century detective fiction.

So much has by now been written about Jasper that one does not feel the need to go into great detail about his idiosyncrasies, about what makes him "original." The main line of the argument has again been set forth by Wilson, this time in "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" (1929), where Wilson calls attention to Jasper's "dual consciousness," a kind of Jekyll-and-Hyde schizophrenia that makes it possible for him to thrive as

[6] Kate Perugini, "*Edwin Drood*, and the Last Days of Charles Dickens," *Pall Mall Magazine* (June 1906), 643–54.

a respectable choirmaster in Cloisterham by day and to indulge his illicit passions among the opium dens of London by night; both to express a strange, inordinate affection for his "dear boy" and to plan his murder. In Jasper, Dickens is thus able "to explore the deep entanglement and conflict of the bad and the good in one man."[7] It is precisely such a schizoid state that would lead (to repeat Dickens's words to Forster) to "the review of the murderer's career by himself at the close, when its temptations were to be dwelt upon *as if, not he the cuprit, but some other man, were the tempted"* (emphasis added). What the ultimate cause of that "dual consciousness" might have been we do not have enough information to know: Wilson suggests a combination of Howard Duffield's Thugee thesis (before the novel's opening Jasper had been corrupted by the Indian cult of the Thugs) and Aubrey Boyd's notion of some kind of mesmeristic atmosphere that pervades the novel. Whatever the etiology, Wilson's "dual consciousness" explanation has been the jumping-off point for a good many of the more interesting accounts of Jasper in subsequent Droodiana.

Philip Collins, for instance, will have none of Wilson's thesis, arguing that while Jasper may lead a double life, this does not mean he possesses a dual consciousness.[8] Under opium Jasper may be more loquacious but he is hardly less wicked than the "respectable" cathedral organist and choirmaster he normally pretends to be. A garden-variety hypocrite à la the Pecksniff of *Martin Chuzzlewit,* he seems for Collins no more a divided personality than any other Dickens villain who takes pains to avoid being suspected or caught. Where, then, asks Collins, does Edmund Wilson find the complexity, the "good" to mix with the "bad," in this murderer who kills the cousin he merely *professes* to love? There is no good in the wholeheartedly "Wicked Man," as the "keynote" of Dickens's number plan for the novel assures us.[9]

Still, if the likes of Edmund Wilson and Philip Collins di-

[7] Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," in his *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 81.

[8] See *Dickens and Crime* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964).

[9] Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 220. Further references to this work appear in the text.

verge in their assessment, these critics are at one in recognizing the gallery of murderers to which Jasper belongs and within which he is the climactic and most fully developed example. According to the last chapter of Collins's *Dickens and Crime*, Jasper clearly extends the lineage that Collins in an earlier chapter had been tracing from Bill Sikes to Barnaby Rudge to Jonas Chuzzlewit and Bradley Headstone. What distinguishes Jasper is that he "is still more intelligent, more complex psychologically, more respectable, and more ambiguous in his relation to society, than his predecessors" (Collins, pp. 296–97). For his part, Wilson also sees Jasper as standing in the line of previous Dickens villains, not simple ones like Quilp of *Old Curiosity Shop* who are all but "innocent" in the all-pervasiveness of their wickedness, but rather skulking figures with black looks and ravaged faces—self-tortured souls like Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* who are enraged, tormented, and confused about their own motivations and whose twisted behavior arises out of their social yearnings. Bradley, according to Wilson, is the first Dickens murderer to exhibit any complexity of character and the first to present himself as a member of respectable Victorian society.[10] Like the John Jasper to come, Bradley leads a double life, going about his duties as Headmaster after having decided to destroy Eugene Wrayburn out of sexual jealousy, just as Jasper leads *his* double life of a respectable choirmaster planning to murder Edwin out of *his* jealous passion for Rosa Budd.

Here then is the point of my juxtaposition of Wilson and Collins: whatever their differences, they agree that John Jasper bears a family resemblance to a whole line of earlier villains but especially to the character of Bradley Headstone in the novel that immediately preceded *Drood*. And if we return at this juncture to Wilson's denigrative point in "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" about the repetitive quality of the modern mystery plot as against the originality and depth of characterization in such earlier detective fictions as *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, we can see that even Dickens's characterization is

[10] See "The Two Scrooges," p. 68.

not all that "original," that it repeats with variations some earlier instances of villainy both within and without his work.

In this context Dickens is on the level of *both* plot and characterization expressive of a point that several theorists of the novel have made about the widening circle of such repetitions in the novel form. A generic subset of the "same-but-different" principle that structures all narrative,[11] "any novel is a complex tissue of repetitions," says J. Hillis Miller, "and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions. In each case there are repetitions making up the structure of the work within itself, as well as repetitions determining its multiple relations to what is outside it: the author's mind or his life; other works by the same author; psychological, social, or historical reality; other works by other authors," etc.[12] And in complementary fashion Peter Brooks, following the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, has argued that the repetition within the narrative desire that drives the novel is always both a courting of the end of things and a putting-off of that end.[13] Through such psychic oscillations writer and reader attempt to control vicariously, within the ends of their shared "fancies," the "real" deaths to come for both of them that is beyond such control. For "men, like [novelists], rush 'into the middest,' *in media res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*," says Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*, "and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to [novels]."[14] What we seek in narrative repetition leading to the composure of an ending is an illusion of mastery, a control over death that is denied us in our actual lives.

It is in light of such a notion of Dickensian repetitive-

[11] See Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), p. 240.

[12] J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 2–3.

[13] Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), 280–300; rpt. in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 90–112.

[14] *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 7.

ness—both with respect to detective plot and characterization (to fuse the emphasis of Agathists and Porfirians)—that I should like to return to the issue of how *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* ends. What I claim as original in my treatment is the argument that the novel comes to a satisfactory close with what we now have in chapter 22: there is not, nor need there be, any more. Whatever Dickens's intention may have been had he lived to write further, the fact that the last extant chapter of *Drood* is the last thing in both his art and his life encourages us not merely to speculate about what might have come textually thereafter—as has been the general tendency of Droodians of both an Agathist and a Porfirian persuasion—but it also allows us to make meaning of both Dickens's novel and life *as if* what we have up to the end of chapter 22 is all there imaginatively is; it allows us to read that chapter as an ending of a *finished* manuscript rather than as the exact middle it has been for most previous readers.

For one thing, if a repetition compulsion is indeed the motor of narrative desire that Miller and Brooks have posited, then the beginning and end of the extant *Mystery of Edwin Drood* demonstrate that iterative impulse to perfection: the last completed chapter provides a direct narrative echo of the opening chapter: we move, that is, from Jasper's first opium dream in "The Dawn" of chapter 1 to his second and final opium dream in "The Dawn Again" of chapter 22. Because the beginnings and endings of many poems and novels operate on the principles of narrative cyclicality or "framing," a version of repetition,[15] one may read into the cyclicality of the two opium dreams a kind of retrospective allegory on the repetitive nature of Dickens's art and life, both of imagination all compact.

As always, the end is in the beginning, or they are in some significant sense reversible; they inhabit each other. On the level of plot (if there were any doubt about his murderous intent, unelaborated as that intent may as yet be), Jasper's

[15] See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 124, 148–50; and Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 13.

bizarre vision in the brilliant opening words of the novel retrospectively erases all doubt for such Porfirians as I:

> An ancient English Cathedral town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here! The well-known massive grey tower square of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe, it is set up by the Sultan's orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colors, and infinite in number and attendants. Still, the Cathedral tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. (p. 1)

A good deal has been said in the critical literature about this provocative opening passage, which fuses Jasper's two worlds, the respectable cathedral town and the hallucinatory environs of the London opium den. The images of Oriental revelry, for instance, have been read as foreshadowing the exotic Eastern strain so mysteriously woven throughout the texture of the existing narrative in general and as referring perhaps to Jasper's earliest Eastern experiences in particular. E.D.H. Johnson, for one, claims that this introductory passage not only indicates as succinctly as possible Jasper's schizophrenic "dual nature" but also provides "almost all the available clues for resolving the mystery."[16] But I should like instead to concentrate upon a penchant for hyperbolic repetitiveness that the passage suggests in the imagination of the dreamer: the robbers are to be impaled not altogether but "one by one"; ten thousand scimitars flash while thirty thousand dancing girls strew flowers; the colors caparisoning the elephants are "countless," their number and attendants "infinite." What we get is the dreamer's passion for reiteration, for numerical expansiveness, for going over the same ground again and again; and that ground, the orgiastic impaling of Turkish robbers time and again on a spike, is quite horrific, is in touch with a murderous instinct

[16] *Charles Dickens: An Introduction to His Novels* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 165.

that supplies Jasper with sadistic pleasure and that will eventually lead, we may assume, to his own death.

If we jump now to the conclusion in chapter 22 of the existent text, we can see that Jasper once again gives himself over to such hallucinations of compulsiveness, of doing the same destructive thing in "fancy" over and over until some transformative, Hamlet-like leap into the "real," into action, may be achieved. Supposing, Jasper asks Princess Puffer, he had something in mind, something he were going to do but had not quite determined to do, something he might or might not do? Should he rehearse it in his fancy, when he is lying in the opium den? Princess Puffer, the malign muse of his dream state, nods her head: yes, "over and over again," she prods him. "Just like me! I did it over and over again," he replies; "I have done it hundreds of thousands of times in this room. . . . It was a journey, a difficult and dangerous journey. That was the subject in my mind. A hazardous and perilous journey, over abysses where a slip would be destruction." And shortly thereafter: "I did it, here, hundreds of thousands of times. What do I say? I did it millions and billions of times. I did it so often, and through such vast expanses of time, that when it was really done, it seemed not worth the doing, it was done so soon." And when Jasper arrives at the end of his long journey, when the journey of "fancy" comes to be "real" at last, "poor, mean, miserable thing" that it is, "it is so short that it seems unreal for the first time" (pp. 206–8).

Now, while such a dream is just a mite "unintelligible," as Jasper says of such opium states in both chapters 1 and 22, it rather obviously intimates a violent act—shall we say the oft-contemplated and finally accomplished murder of his nephew? And if so, it firmly suggests an ending, since it solves the major Agathist mystery of Edwin Drood—is Drood dead or alive, and if dead who killed him? Other readers have been tempted to go further, to elaborate upon this or that aspect of the novel, but I am not so tempted, at least in part because this final dream of Jasper's not only supplies the ending for this novel but also provides, I would suggest, Dickens's closing comments on the meaning of life at the very moment that his own life is coming to its end.

For one way of thinking of Dickens's career is precisely as a series of repetitive acts that mark an aesthetic journey, of doing the same "fanciful" thing over and over again, the writing of novel after novel, with plots and characters that at least in part repeat each other, that work variations upon certain personal obsessions, some of them quite violent and even murderous. With respect to the genesis of *Drood* in particular, the novelist's journey echoes the murderer's—and I am hardly the first reader to identify Dickens and John Jasper—when Dickens says in his words to Forster alluded to above that he moves from a "first fancy," the Edwin-Rosa Budd romance, to a "second fancy," the schizoid psychology of the murderer. Extrapolating such a progress to the career of Dickens as a whole, we can see that it too is a series of fancies, of repetitive moves, that lead to the only "real" thing, toward the end, toward death itself. Ideally, for the artist that journey should not be too easy, must not be too short, must have a series of retarding detours, must have an expansively elaborated middle to separate beginning from end, must have lots of digressions from an all-too-brief and uninteresting linear path. "It has been too short and easy," says Jasper; "I must have a better vision than this; this is the poorest of all. No struggle, no consciousness of peril, no entreaty" (p. 208). As Peter Brooks tells us about the vagaries of narrative desire, there is a "danger of reaching the end [of narrative] too quickly, of achieving the im-proper death. . . . The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative" (*Reading for the Plot*, p. 104).

And when one reaches the end of the dream of art and life, what does one see? "Look at it! Look what a poor, mean, miserable thing it is!" says Jasper; "*that* must be real. It's over!" (p. 208). On the whole, the endings of nineteenth-century novels are "poor, mean, miserable things," especially the endings of Dickens's works. When Henry James in *The Art of Fiction* "denounced the endings of nineteenth-century novels as a 'distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks'"

(Torgovnik, p. 37), surely he must have had the likes of Dickens in mind.

And what of the close of life itself rather than the close of art, the close of the naturalized "real" rather than of the merely "fanciful": actual lives are usually a lot messier and rarely end with the kind of pointed epiphany, the sense of thrilled finality, we get in even the most horrific kind of art—say Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!" or Lear's "Pray you undo this button. . . . Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" or Hamlet's "The rest is silence." And that is also why we find—or invent—closing epigrams for our heroes in life, either their tragic or comic "death sentences" (in Garrett Stewart's wonderful pun).[17] At either generic extreme, such sentences—say, Goethe's "More light! More light!" or my own comic favorite, Oscar Wilde's "Either that wallpaper has to go or I do"—are masterful of the end for us helpless, tongue-tied souls who will probably rise to no polished terminal eloquence. Such words intimate a self-possession, a measure of grace and wit and comprehension at the last extremity—and even beyond, should we indeed believe that W. C. Fields turns fitfully in his grave, grousing throughout eternity that on the whole, he'd rather be in Philadelphia.

If we accept the retrospective approximations of the biographers, Charles Dickens certainly did not come to a linguistically graceful close: his end came suddenly and unexpectedly and awkwardly, as many deaths do, *in medias res*. To be sure, he was ill, too exhausted to write much: Wilkie Collins petulantly assures us that *Drood* was "Dickens's last laboured effort, the melancholy work of a worn-out brain"; Bernard Shaw that it was the "gesture by a man already three-quarters dead."[18] On 8 June 1870 Dickens spent all day working on the novel. At dinner he confessed that he had been feeling ill. Then suddenly he rose and fell to the floor. Georgina Hogarth, his sister-in-law and the only member of the family staying at Gad's Hill, sent for the children and (apparently) Ellen Ternan. While Dickens lived through the night and all the next day, he

[17] See *Death Sentences* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984).

[18] As quoted in Fielding, pp. 246–47, 242.

never recovered consciousness and died on the evening of 9 June.

No final *mot*, no summing up, no bracing valedictory comments of any sort, just an anticlimactic dying fall, not even a *tale* told by an idiot without signification, just an apoplectic stroke and then a petering-out absent all meaning—even should the biographers, who end with the stately funeral at Westminster Abbey, assure us otherwise.[19] What is before the beginning and beyond the end of narrative is by definition unnarratable, and to the extent that we speculate about the end and what is beyond it we are creating another "fancy," a naturalization of the "real" that can only be caught by inadequate language. Such foreclosure is one of our major frustrations with all narrative and with the novel in particular, as D. A. Miller has told us in *Narrative and Its Discontents.*[20] Whatever can be thought, says Nietzsche, must certainly be a fiction—and such fictionality is surely the case with our constructed images of what happens at and beyond the promised end. More specifically, the moment of death in Dickens's short, fifty-eight-year life is unnarratable, unreadable, "unintelligible," as are all deaths. And that is why, in my own illusory attempt at a mastery of a death that I owe, I have gone to the final chapter of Dickens's final work for the compensation of art, for an allegorical hint from the words of John Jasper as to what might have been "real," rather than an oft-repeated "fancy," for Dickens at the very last—even if it must be such a melancholy hint as the cryptic, paradoxical death sentence that I imagine for John Jasper, and for his creator: "When it comes to be real at last, it is so short that it seems unreal for the first time." *Ars longa, vita brevis*, indeed.

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[19] See, for example, Fred Kaplan, *Dickens: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), pp. 555–56.

[20] See *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981).