BEATING FOUCAULT TO THE PUNCH: DICKENS, DEATH, LIMIT EXPERIENCE AND THE PLEASURE OF KILLING NANCY

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> *The housebreaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired, flashed across his mind;* and he beat it *twice* upon the upturned face *that almost touched his own.*
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> She staggered and fell, but raising herself on her knees, *she drew from her bosom a white handkerchief . . . and holding it up towards Heaven, breathed one prayer, for mercy to her Maker.*
>
> It *was a ghastly figure to look upon. The murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club,* and *struck her* down!!
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> The bright sun burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory. *Through costly-coloured glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice,* it shed *its equal ray.* It lighted up *the room* where *the murdered woman lay.* It did. He tried to shut it out, but *it would stream in.* If the sight had been a *ghastly* one in the *dull morning,* what was it, *now,* in all that *brilliant light*!!!
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> He had not moved; he had been afraid to stir. There had been a moan and motion of the hand; and, with terror added to rage, he had struck and struck again. Once he threw a rug over it; but it was worse to *fancy* the *eyes,* and imagine them moving towards him, than to see them glaring upward, as if *watching the reflection of the pool of gore that quivered and danced in the sunlight on the ceiling.* He had plucked it off again. And there was the body—mere flesh and blood, no more—but *such* flesh, *and so much blood*!!!
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> He struck a light, kindled a fire, and thrust the club into it. There was hair upon the end, which shrunk into a light cinder, and whirled up the chimney. Even that frightened him; but he held the weapon till it broke, and then piled it on the coals to burn away, and smoulder into ashes. He washed himself, and rubbed his clothes; there were spots upon them that would not be removed, but he cut the pieces out, and burnt them. *How those stains were dispersed about the room! The very feet of his dog were bloody!!!!* (Dickens 243-44)

Dickens's public readings of *Sikes and Nancy* were "the end." For many they were "the end" because they were:

a) disturbing and horrifying
b) tasteless and sensational
c) unnecessary and foolhardy; and
d) all of the above.

But while there were detractors about the merits of performing such a violent dramatic extract, there were next to no detractors about the skill of its performance. Most

concurred with the assessment of one reviewer that it was "a masterpiece of reading, quite unparalleled in its way [which proves that] Mr. Dickens is the greatest reader of the greatest writer of the age."[1] Technical virtuousity aside, however, it is my belief that Dickens's *Sikes and Nancy* readings were unparalleled for quite another reason and that reason is that they provide one of the clearest examples in the history of English literature of an author's direct engagement with and/or plunge into the realm of philosophical extremity known today as "limit experience."

What is "limit experience"? There is no concise textbook definition of limit experience. The Existential philosopher Karl Jaspers spoke of a "limit-situation" (Grenzsituation) which was basically a situation occurring at the limit of one's existence where one can be sure of nothing. As Jaspers put it: "What [limit-situations] have in common is that . . . there is nothing firm or stable, no indubitable absolute, no enduring support for experience or thought. Everything is in flux, in restless movement of question and answer; everything is relative, finite, split into opposites—nothing is whole, absolute, essential" (qtd Bruns 304). But while Jaspers believed that in a limit-situation there is no firm ground and that everything is stripped from the subject, he nonetheless maintained that the subject would still retain its "ownmost" being. Writers after Jaspers came to dispute this notion. Maurice Blanchot in particular claimed that a limit-situation contained no existential "ownmost" consolation, as he states: "The self has never been the subject of this experience. The 'I' will never arrive at it, nor will the individual, this particle of dust that I am, nor even the self of us all that is supposed to represent absolute self-consciousness. . . . We speak as though this were an experience, and yet we can never say we have undergone it" (qtd Bruns 129-30). For Blanchot in a true limit-situation the subject is essentially without relation to itself. Limit experience for Blanchot is then "the affirmation of a self that accepts being entirely outside itself, delivered over and boldly entrusted to the strangeness of the outside" (qtd Bruns 130).

The writer, however, who influenced Foucault the most regarding limit experience was George Bataille. Foucault is said to have formulated his own ideas concerning limit experience through reading Georges Bataille's work, in particular Bataille's 1943 text *Inner Experience*. This work, to put it bluntly, is not an easy read. In essence it is a fragmentary series of highly introspective, gnomic reflections on the nature of experience. Couched in quasi-mystical terms, it attempts to question traditional Judeo-Christian notions of experience whereby subjects stand in relation to a transcendent God. For the atheist Bataille, such notions are unacceptable: "Dogmatic presuppositions have provided experience with undue limits: he who already knows cannot go beyond a known horizon" (3). Accordingly Bataille seeks to define a space where a subject can experience "ecstasy" or "rapture" (3) through a transgression of the subject's own limits, as opposed to the limits defined by morality, religion, or discourse. The governing principle of this state of rapture is what Bataille calls "non-knowledge" (3) because as he puts it: "experience is . . . the putting into question . . . of that which a man knows of being" (4). Bataille's thought parallels Jaspers's thought as both see the limit experience as a space beyond absolutes. Bataille writes it is "an experience laid bare, free of ties,

[1] Extract from a contemporary Dublin paper cited in Collins, Introduction, *Sikes and Nancy and Other Public Readings* 230.

even of an origin . . . a place of bewilderment, of nonsense" (3). But while Jaspers believes that one's "ownmost" being is preserved in a limit experience, Bataille like Blanchot believes that the subject is essentially absent from the experience as the subject can only attain ecstasy through a sudden negation of itself. In a state of limit experience the subject reaches not only rapture but what Bataille calls "sovereignty."[2] This state is neatly described by Derrida "as having no identity, as expanding itself without reserve, as losing itself, its memory of self, its interiority" (qtd Boldt xxiii). Limit experience as it involves both divine impossibility and a dissolution of self is an oxymoronic state, as Bataille states: "the mind moves in a strange world where anguish and ecstasy coexist" (xxxii). It should also be added that Bataille believes that access to the rapturous moment of sovereignty is best gained through "intoxication, eroticism, laughter, sacrifice in its various forms, and poetic outpouring" (qtd Boldt xxvii).

Taking his lead from Bataille, Foucault has defined limit experience as a state of concomitant self-destruction and self-fulfilment; a shattering, paradoxical state of what he calls "suffering-pleasure"; an experience of "untamed exteriority" which heralds truth; an experience that revels in exploring the depths of irrational aspects of human existence; a transformative mystical experience which produces a "changed" subject (qtd Miller 30). Foucault also believed like Bataille that a transgression of the subject's own limits was the only means of achieving ecstasy: "Transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating" (Foucault 30). But importantly, Foucault felt that transgression should not be thought of in negative terms:

> Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations. . . . Transgression is neither violence in a divided world . . . nor a victory over limits . . . and exactly for this reason its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise. Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. (35)

What is so interesting about Foucault is that in his own life he "deliberately" sought out limit experience (Miller 30). He was fascinated by life episodes which could potentially invoke "a sacrifice, an actual sacrifice of life." Such episodes were intrinsically tied up with notions of personal metamorphosis as they signified "a voluntary obliteration that does not have to be represented in books because it takes place in the very existence of the writer" (qtd Miller 30). In his biography of Foucault entitled appropriately enough *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, academic James Miller intimates that Foucault died as a direct result of his need to practice limit experience. Admittedly this biography is not the last word on Foucault and there are other less

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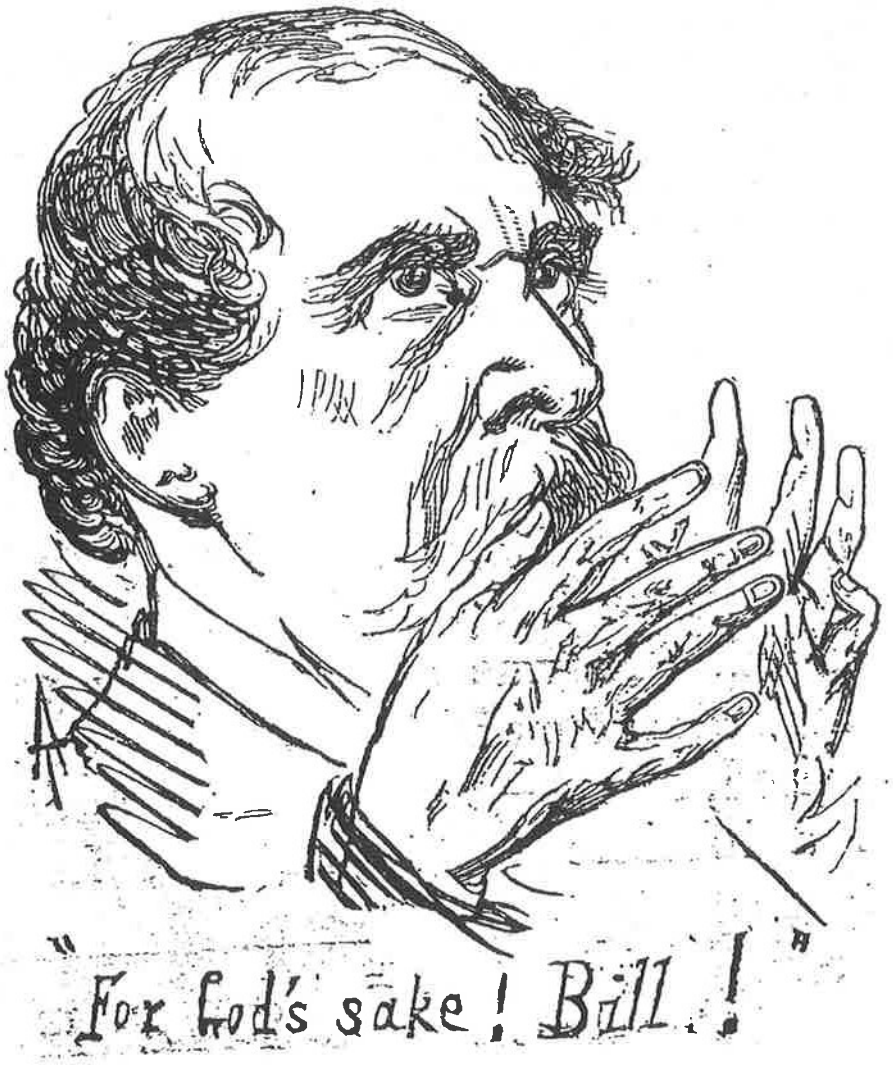
[2] "The unknown demands . . . sovereignty without partition" (Bataille 5).

flagrant, if not to say conservative, biographical views concerning his death, but there appears to be quite plausible evidence to back up his suggestions. Foucault's long-time lover Defert is on record as saying that Foucault "took AIDS very seriously. . . . When he went to San Francisco for the last time, he took it as a *limit experience*" (qtd 29). As going to San Francisco entailed a series of successive engagements in academia and in homosexual bath houses, one can readily surmise that Foucault was courting death; but as deadly as academia can be I would hasten to add that the limit experience was in all probability sought not in the cloistered environs of lecture theatres but rather in the doubtlessly more exciting and stimulating environs of the bath houses.

So what do gay bath houses and AIDS have to do with Dickens? Not a lot; but the potential relation between limit experience and death has considerable relevance to Dickens. There is a general consensus that Dickens's insistence on performing the "Sikes and Nancy" readings played a major role in contributing to his death. Dickens's son, Charley; Dickens's manager, George Dolby; Dickens's friend and fellow novelist, Wilkie Collins; and Dickens's best friend and later biographer, John Forster, all believed that the final readings of "Sikes and Nancy" killed Dickens. Charley remembers how Dickens's doctor Frank Beard pointedly said: "I have had some steps put up against the side of the platform, Charley. You must be there every night, and if you see your father falter in the least, you must run up and catch him and bring him off with me, or, by Heaven, he'll die before them all" (qtd Ackroyd 1063). George Dolby claimed: "That the frequency with which he persisted in giving this Reading was affecting him seriously, nobody could judge better than myself, living and travelling with him as I was, day after day and week after week" (qtd Fitzsimons 163). Wilkie Collins maintained that this Reading "did more to kill Dickens than all his work put together" (qtd Philip Collins 471). Finally, John Forster states in his biography of Dickens: "there will be no presumption in believing that life might yet have been for some time prolonged if these readings could have been stopped" (409).

As most commentators have remarked, the Sikes and Nancy reading or the "Murder" as it came to be called, quite literally obsessed Dickens. Edmund Wilson states: "Certainly the murder of Nancy had taken on something of the nature of an obsessive hallucination" (86). And Philip Collins writes: "Clearly his attachment to this piece went far beyond the understandable satisfaction of a professional performer in being able to create such an impression and win such acclaim for his talents" (470). Indeed, contemporary testimonials relating to Dickens's actions at the time of these readings make the epithet "obsessive" seem mild. Despite everyone's advice it seems, which included that of Dickens's family, his entourage and esteemed members of the medical profession who feared quite rightly for the effect of the "Murder" in relation to Dickens's health, Dickens "would listen to no remonstrance in respect of it" (Dickens 229). Come hell or high water, Dickens would not give up the "Murder" from his repertoire. As his manager George Dolby wrote: "The horrible perfection to which he brought it, acted as a charm to him and made him the more determined to go on with it come what might" (qtd Fitzsimons 159). He so identified with it in fact "that he admitted to having a vague sensation of being 'wanted' as he walked about the streets" (qtd Fitzsimons 154) and at one stage claimed the morning after a reading that "the crime being completely off my mind, and the blood spilled, I am (like many of my

fellow-criminals) in a highly edifying state today" (qtd Fitzsimons 154). His letters at the time were also peppered with phrases like: "I am murdering Nancy . . . My preparations for a certain murder . . . I commit the murder again . . . I have a great deal of murdering before me" (qtd Ackroyd 1039). After readings, he was also known to jokingly refer to his "murderous instincts" which apparently so disturbed friends who came to see him in his dressing room after one reading that a number of them turned down Dickens's invitation to have supper with him and could not find the words to congratulate him (Fitzsimons 160). Such reactions did not faze Dickens, because he genuinely believed that audiences had a "horror of me after seeing the murder" (qtd Ackroyd 1039).



Charles Dickens as Nancy in *Sikes and Nancy* (*Tinsley's Magazine*)

At the end of a typical Sikes and Nancy reading, Dickens's pulse rate, which was normally 72, would shoot as high as 124 (Forster 410), and "he would often have to lie on a sofa, quite unable to speak a word, for an interval of ten minutes before gathering his strength and staggering back to the platform to read another item" (Collins 470). On one particular occasion, in Edinburgh, Dickens became so vehement during a reading that he "drove all the breath out of his body" and upon leaving the platform "fell into the arms" of Dolby and Scott, his valet, who had to support him into his dressing room (Fitzsimons 161). Added to this, on the same night, during supper, when Dolby suggested that Dickens ease up on the readings of Sikes and Nancy as the success of the tour was assured regardless of what Dickens chose to read, Dickens apparently "jumped up from his chair in a paroxysm of rage . . . [then] threw his knife and fork down on his plate with such force that he shattered it, and shouted: 'Dolby, your infernal caution will be your ruin one of these days'" (Fitzsimons 161).

Just what was Dickens's motivation for committing the "Murder" as many as four times a week when firstly, his doctors had advised him against it owing to his fragile state of health, and secondly, his Farewell Season of 1868-1869 readings was not only half completed but a clear financial success when he introduced the reading to his repertoire? The two recorded reasons that Dickens gave amounted to this. In the first place he felt that he needed a powerful novelty to ensure that the Chappels, the agents of the Farewell tour, would would not lose any of their investment in the tour,[3] and in the second place he claimed to John Forster that he wanted to leave behind him "the recollection of something very passionate and dramatic, done with simple means, if the art would justify the theme" (qtd Forster 358). Certainly these reasons appear quite plausible, but Dickens's own actions suggest that he had a much larger vested interest in the readings than his impresarios, and that his concerns about creating passion and drama were not simply focused on the need to achieve posterity as his posterity was already well assured.

Unsurprisingly a number of biographers and critics have speculated on the real reasons as to why Dickens needed to keep committing the "Murder." Fred Kaplan in his biography of Dickens writes: "In repeatedly murdering her, he expressed himself with displaced violence against the horrible women of his life, his mother and his wife" (538). Raymund Fitzsimons says: "The 'Murder' Reading had become for him a means of expressing all the things he raged against in his mind, and as the ferocious blows rained down on the imaginary upturned face of Nancy, he was perhaps symbolically enacting his bitterness for his wife and his guilt over Ellen Ternan" (Fitzsimons 173). Peter Ackroyd in his biography conjectures: "Can we not see [the condition of Dickens's childhood] revived here? But, on this occasion, only the horror and hatred which he had once felt. Killing his mother. Killing his sister" (Ackroyd 1031). Speculatively speaking then, it is quite a mixed bag: rage against his mother, his sister, his wife and guilt over his clandestine affair with the actress Ellen Ternan. But while one can easily come up with this rather reductive biographical line of reasoning, there is

[3] "He was beset by a misgiving, that, for a success large enough to repay Messrs Chappell's liberality, the enterprise would require a new excitement to carry him over the old ground" (Forster 357).

another fact about the "Murder" which deserves to be mentioned. Dickens was not simply the perpetrator of the "Murder," he was also in every respect the victim, for as he put it at the time of the readings, he was currently being "nightly murdered by Mr W. Sikes" (qtd Ackroyd 1031). Dickens then, in his "Sikes and Nancy" readings is a conflation of man and woman: murderer and victim. As a result he cannot simply be regarded as a misogynist who gets a sexual thrill out of simulating the murder of a young prostitute on stage. Rather, he is a man who is driven by erotic sado-masochistic impulses—and a man who in the truest sense of the word can be labelled a "Switch."

What's a "switch"? A switch according to what many regard as the current bible of sadomasochism *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns* is "a person who enjoys taking either side in SM role or physical play; i.e. top or bottom, dom or sub" (Devon and Miller 238). Owing to this variable orientation, a switch is said to have "the best of both worlds" (4). But while Dickens in S&M parlance is obviously a switch, he is an interesting variation on the switch theme because he is in a position whereby he personifies both the verb/top and the noun/bottom in his own person. Therefore, to state the obvious, he doesn't act out his S&M inclinations with a partner. Accordingly, Dickens during his "Sikes and Nancy" readings can be viewed as a man seeking the ultimate in terms of erotic power.

At this point, one might think that, yes, Dickens is seeking power by acting as the perpetrator of his murder but how could he be seeking power as the victim of his murder? He is seeking erotic power and achieving it because power is essentially a very fluid term in the world of S&M. The thing about subs in S&M culture is that they generally get what they want. Because pure sado-masochism is essentially consensual, subs are always in charge as they have the capacity to say "no" to any act that displeases them. So while the submissive may appear to be in a position of helplessness and vulnerability, in reality they aren't. As Philip Miller and Molly Devon put it:

> The submissive obeys only because she chooses to. There is nothing compelling her obedience except her resolve. The submissive is, therefore, empowering the dominant by her decision. We call a consensual empowerment of the dominant by the submissive a power exchange. Just as she gave her consent, she can take it away at any time. Power in S&M flows from the bottom up. (2)

While the female pronoun that is employed in this quotation might be a bit dubious, Philip and Molly justify this by stating that in their relationship he's the dom and she's the sub and it's their book so they'll do what they want (2).

But getting back to Dickens and erotic power. Dickens *chooses* both roles in "Sikes and Nancy." He makes a choice to murder and be murdered. Both choices (as they are *choices*) are then powerful acts, but while one might choose to murder no one chooses to be murdered—that is except Dickens. Dickens in fact chooses total self-destruction. In this way, he takes S&M to its very limits—the kind of limits that Foucault and others such as the Marquis de Sade explored in entirely different personal ways.

Dickens, of course, had been warned by many people that if he kept reading his murder story he might, at the very least, seriously impair his health but Dickens *chose* to keep reading it. Incredibly, even when he had finished his Farewell Reading Tour Dickens could not give up the "Murder" performance. As Philip Collins writes: "It is reported . . . that a day or two before his death he was discovered in the grounds [of his house] at Gad's Hill re-enacting the murder of Nancy" (471). As a consequence Dickens valued the telling and limit experience of the story over and above life itself. In such a way then he effectively mapped out his own death, but this death can in no way be thought of as negative; rather it is in the Foucauldian sense of transgression and limit experience, both highly liberating and transformative.

Limit experience is not unique to French writers. Certainly it has been practised throughout history. From time immemorial, people have sought out metamorphic experiences of "voluntary obliteration" but not everyone has taken such experiences to their absolute limit. Today pop stars appear to have cornered the market in terms of limit experience and indeed perhaps popularity is a natural precursor to taking on a limit attitude. Maybe when one has experienced everything life has to offer by way of approbation and power over others there is only one place left to go and that place is to the limits of one's own identity. Perhaps this is why limit experience is not just pleasurable but painful, as it essentially involves a rupture or tearing of individual integrity, and it is only through this anguished sacrifice that one may "open out" to the power of the unknown. In this respect it is fascinating to note that just before Dickens gave his final performance of Sikes and Nancy, he whispered to a friend on his way to the platform: "I shall tear myself to pieces" (qtd Collins 471).

Returning to the possible link between popularity and limit experience, there is no question that Dickens was one of the most popular men of his age, so if there can be said to be a major "pop star" of the Victorian era it may well be Dickens. Who else in the Victorian period comes close to Dickens in terms of garnering almost universal public approbation? There are of course major contenders—Queen Victoria being one of them—but I would like to suggest that there is really only one other "pop star" that comes close to Dickens and that is the inanimate but vastly successful creation called Punch. If there is anyone in the Victorian era other than Dickens that could command an audience, that person or puppet must be Punch and, to make matters more interesting, Punch was also an experienced practitioner if not to say a devotee of limit experience. In a nutshell, Punch like Dickens and Foucault relished crossing thresholds. In his show he continuously crossed the discontinuous line between two absolute limits—life and death. In fact Punch is a transgressor in every sense of the word. In the course of his performance Punch:

1. strikes a dog called Toby
2. kills Toby's master
3. kills his child
4. kills his wife Judy
5. kills his doctor
6. bashes a servant
7. bashes a blindman

8. kills his hangman; and
9. kills the Devil.

How's that for crossing limits! With a record like Punch's most people would be hounded out of town but Punch was universally popular: as Bernard Blackmantle put it in 1826, Punch's opening tune always served to "act with talismanic power upon the locomotive faculties of all the peripatetics within hearing, attracting everybody to the travelling stage, young and old, gentle and simple; all the crowd seem as if magic chained them to the spot." Blackmantle also noted that when Punch appeared "nothing is heard but one deafening shout of clamorous approbation" (qtd Leach 50-51).

How is it that the extremely transgressive Punch could act as a charm upon all who came into his orbit? Could it be that Punch by transgressing so many limits in a climate of laughter ultimately strikes a chord with audiences who all identify at some level with a profound need to get beyond themselves? Do the audiences feel a vicarious sense of sovereignty through watching the exploits of Punch? Could one even go one step further and suggest that Dickens might have indeed identified with Punch? After all, Sikes bludgeons Nancy, just as Judy is bludgeoned, and there is even a dog at Sikes's side that is all too reminiscent of Toby. While I would like to suggest that Dickens identified with Punch, he did not, I believe, identify with Punch's cruelty—because Punch's exploits are not by any means erotic in the sense of sado-masochistic, as there is nothing consensual about them. His victims are just that—victims—whereas Dickens's victim Nancy is, in the readings at least, a consenting party as she is essentially a dramatisation of a masochistic side of Dickens. At the same time, I feel that Dickens did not identify with Punch's ability to engender limit experience through laughter as Dickens's own limit experience was a deeply serious undertaking. Quite simply he only identified with Punch's ability to cross limits. Punch's limit experience as such accords with Foucault's belief that a truly transformative limit experience is never anti-social as it should "open the way for a transformation, a metamorphosis, that is not simply individual but has a character accessible to others" (qtd Miller 32).

According to Foucault's biographer, Miller, aside from Foucault's ideas concerning limit experience one of "the most startling and farfetched of Foucault's apparent convictions [is that] a man's manner of dying . . . may reveal, in a flash, as it were, the 'lyrical core' of his life—*the* key to a writer's 'personal poetic attitude'" (19). As the cause of Foucault's death amounts to the bald solidity of the acronym AIDS, Miller naturally enough has the justified temerity to suggest that AIDS may have been Foucault's "deliberately chosen apotheosis." Miller asks: "Does his conceivable embrace of a death-dealing 'disease of love' reveal, as he implied that it would, the 'lyrical core' of his life—*the* key to his 'personal poetic attitude'?" (29) In exactly the same spirit, I would like to ask: Does Dickens's embrace of an uninhibited exploration of sado-masochistic eroticism via the "Sikes and Nancy" public readings reveal the "lyrical core" of his life—*the* key to his "personal poetic attitude"?

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