

“THE END OF A LONG JOURNEY”:  
MASTERY, ABANDONMENT, VACILLATION  
IN BETTY HIGDEN’S FLIGHT FROM/TO DEATH

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*Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens’ last completed novel, manifests its major characters’ struggle to secure or maintain the mastery over their lives and deaths. In this brief essay I’d like to focus on Betty Higden’s flight from/to death, and closely demonstrate how her mastery over her life and death is pursued through a process to acquire power to ‘give up’ herself autonomously; how her struggle to gain self-mastery is continually represented in a vacillating movement of coming and going, back and forth, or of being ‘gone’ and ‘back’ again.

In the chapter entitled “Strong of Purpose” Betty discloses to Rokesmith her firm decision to leave her present habitation. The “strong purpose” partly belongs to John Rokesmith who has decided to ‘bury’ John Harmon in order not to disturb the Boffins’ peace, but of course it belongs to this ‘brave old heroine’ who amazes Rokesmith with her energy. It is obviously her sense of the end of her life coming closer that brings her some relief, but, at the same time, hastens and urges her to move. In order not to be a burden to gentle Sloppy who can’t possibly slight her by any means, she chooses, by her own will, to give him up. Knowing well of the impossibility to persuade Sloppy to take the position of the subject of ‘giving up’; Betty herself abandons him. Significantly, this apparent act of forsaking comes,

without doubt, from her love of Sloppy, just as Lizzie’s love of Eugene Wrayburn urges her to try to abandon him. Love takes the form of forsaking.

But besides love, there is, for Betty’s decision to leave, another and no less significant incentive. It is to gain, as much as possible, self-mastery — over her body, and over life and death. In fact her decision is, in every way, oriented for independence and autonomy. It is noteworthy that Betty spontaneously chooses — not to say prefer — to give up her place and Sloppy by her own will, though, there is always not much to choose for the poor. She explains to Rokesmith, who obviously didn’t think her plan to be a wise one, the reason of her haste: “...I’d far sooner be upon my feet and tiring of myself out, than a sitting folding and folding by the fire. And I’ll tell you why. There’s deadness steals over me at times, that the kind of life favours and I don’t like.” (440)<sup>(1)</sup> Boffin also suggests that ‘giving him up’ is not the only choice and tries to persuade her to stay, but just in vain:

‘I shall be stronger, and keep the deadness off better, this way, than any way left open to me, sir.’

‘Don’t say than any way left open, you know,’ urged Mr. Boffin; ‘because there are ways without end. A house-keeper would be acceptable over yonder

at the Bower, for instance. Wouldn't you like to see the Bower, and know a retired literary man of the name of Wegg that lives there — *with* a wooden leg?'

Old Betty was proof even against this temptation and fell to adjusting her black bonnet and shawl. (448)

Thus she has her own way which she believes to be the best way to 'keep the deadness off.' And also staying home being old and dying would make it necessary for her to depend on Boffins' 'charity,' a situation which she dare not accept. She tells Roke-smith about her impossibility of dependence on others: "I've never took charity yet, nor yet has any one belonging to me. And it would be *forsaking myself* indeed, and forsaking of my children dead and gone, and forsaking of their children dead and gone, to set up a contradiction now at last." (441) [italics mine] Thus, according to her words, staying means forsaking herself. Because dependence on Boffins' would surely necessitate her to more or less give up her autonomy and self-control, and then her life would inevitably be a passive, retreated, and far more interiorized one. She forsakes her present habitation and Sloppy in order not to forsake herself. Thus by the act of forsaking she stays in the position of the subject of 'giving up,' also maintaining her self-mastery. The key to the mastery here, then, seems to be the autonomy and free-will to 'give up.'

Just before she leaves she seems to be optimistic about her plan. Her original plan was to spend the rest of her life independently as she wanted. She also thinks staying home would make it easier for her to succumb to the degenerating power of Death.

'I can still walk twenty mile if I am put to it. I'd far better be a walking than

a getting numbed and dreary. I'm a good fair knitter, and can make many little things to sell. The loan from your lady and gentleman of twenty shillings to fit out a basket with, would be a fortune for me. Trudging round the country and tiring of myself out, I shall keep the deadness off, and get my own bread by my own labour. and what more can I want?' (440-441)

She still seems to have much confidence in her mastery over herself — her body, her life and death. At this early stage of her fit-like 'deadness,' she still thinks her being able to keep its effect in abeyance if she constantly tries to vivify and en vigor herself. Betty's confidence in her self-mastery can be seen concisely but clearly in her original plan to keep in touch with the Boffins. After Boffin consents, though, of course, reluctantly, to her going, Boffin tells her that she must maintain some method of communication with them, for they 'must not lose sight of' her. Admitting the need, Betty, to alleviate their worry, says:

'Yes, my deary, but not through letter-writing, because letter-writing — indeed, writing of most sorts — hadn't much come up for such as me when I was young. *But I shall be to and fro.* No fear of my missing a chance of giving myself a sight of your reviving face. Besides,' said Betty, with logical good faith, 'I shall have a debt to pay off, by littles, and naturally that would bring me back, if nothing else would.' (442) [italics mine]

She shall 'be to and fro.' This is her belief in her free-will and self-mastery. She believes that she is able to go and come back again as she wants.

But after several chapters we find Betty far more weakened and wretched. As her

time of death draws closer, the threat of the deadness increases, its attack on her becoming more and more frequent, and its numbing effect on her consciousness and body more and more intense and threatening: "When she had spoken to the Secretary of that 'deadness that steals over me at time,' her fortitude had made too little of it. Oftener and oftener, it came stealing over her; darker and darker, like the shadow of advancing Death." (566) As the deadness comes oftener, she repeats a series of two states, i.e. the state of being 'gone,' followed by the state of 'return' of her consciousness. As the shadow of death deepens, she comes to vacillate between the death-like stupor and the awakening from it more and more frequently. For Betty, the most horrifying thing about this 'deadness' is that, in the false '*fort-da*' movement it induces, she is reduced to the wretched 'subject' of the deadly game, totally out of control of herself — her body and life.<sup>(2)</sup> So the main threat of the 'deadness' that horrifies her is that it deprives her of self-mastery and autonomy.

This threat of 'deadness' leads to another and the more fatal threat, the most deadly one for Betty, indeed, i.e. the threat of the workhouse. According to *The Companion to Our Mutual Friend*, "Workhouses were widely known as 'Poor Law Bastilles.' Their monotonous routine and prison-like discipline repelled the poor."<sup>(3)</sup> It was actually nothing more than a deposit of social vermins, a prison of paupers. It was a place of Death in more than one sense — both figuratively and literally for one like Betty Higden. First, once thrown into it, the workhouse deprives her of her hope of independent life. Her constant struggle for self-mastery and autonomy must be brought to an end. Deprived of her will to live on

her own, she is prevented from seeking to achieve her purpose of life — to live and die independently, which presupposes her self-mastery and autonomy as its necessary conditions. The workhouse forcibly ends her life; it represents Death to her. Secondly, because of its incredibly abominable medical conditions, it was literally a place of death. According to Stephen Gill's notes to *Our Mutual Friend*, the sick were almost abandoned there, left to die. And because of unsanitary condition of its wards, it was a hotbed of diseases:

The reports which were issued on the London workhouses from the Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses revealed a system that failed in its objects in every possible way. The commissioners attacked the classification whereby paupers were divided into three groupes: the able-bodied, the sick and the infirm. The 'infirm,' who received no medical attention and often lived like vegetables, were, they pointed out, sick and needed medical care. Their generalizations were buttressed by detailed accounts of quite incredible conditions: of thirty men using one lavatory for a week without a supply of water; of bed-ridden patients clinging to the habit of washing in their chamber-pots; of one towel shared by eight inmates of the women's syphilitic ward.<sup>(4)</sup>

The paupers seem to be 'sifted out' according to the level of animation. These three levels of animation correspond to the amount of what little life energy they still own, and also to the extent of mobility they can achieve. As one becomes sicker and weaker, he/she is numbed into an inanimate being, reduced to be a silenced and still life.

And in the same process, the patient will get more and more interiorized, assimilated to the interior furnishings, his/her life dissolved into '(portable) properties,' not necessarily in Wemmick's sense, but movable or immovable things or surroundings which can or cannot be exchanged with money. The 'bed-ridden' is the last stage of this interiorization, in which the sick has little self-mastery, a wretched life of total dependence; a life almost abandoned as if he/she were a material, inanimate thing. And it is this numbing influence of deadness which permeates the interior space of the dying invalid that she abominates and it necessitates her to quit her habitation and move on: "I'd far better be a walking than a getting numbed and dreary." (440) If she is caught by the hands of workhouse, it will violently and relentlessly end her life with an ending totally unsatisfactory to her. From this violently forced, unsatisfactory death, represented both metaphorically and metonymically by the workhouse, she desperately flees.

Her fear of loss of mastery over herself — her body and life — is at one with her fear of the workhouse, for it represents total abandonment of her self-mastery. Dickens' literary representation shows that the paupers were, literally, heaps of human dust; the bunch of social waste to be swept away:

Now, [Betty] would light upon the shameful spectacle of some desolate creature — or some wretched ragged groups of either sex, or of both sexes, with children among them, huddled together like the smaller vermin for a little warmth — lingering and lingering on a doorstep, while the appointed evader of the public trust did his dirty office of trying to weary them out and

so get red of them. (568)

It is still hopeful while they are left enough energy to 'move on.' Even more unbearable and inabominable reduction of humans to waste was widely known in those days:

Sometimes she would hear a newspaper read out, and would learn how the Register General cast up the units that had within the last week died of want and of exposure to the weather: for which that Recording Angel seemed to have a regular fixed place in his sum, as if they were its halfpence. (568)

The paupers were collectively given up, or abandoned. The very term of 'the units' suggests that the wanderers were, even while living, reduced to inanimate components that were statistically, or theoretically manageable:

The concept of the 'human unit' was the subject of some debate. William Farr (1804-83), compiler of abstracts in the office of the Registrar-General, wrote glowingly of its usefulness: 'the people of England ... appear diversified of all colour, form, character, passion, and the infinite individualities of life; by abstraction they are reduced to mere units undergoing changes as purely physical as the setting stars of astronomy or the decomposing atoms of chemistry.'<sup>(5)</sup>

They were dissoluted to 'the units' only to be 'cast up,' or reduced into a despised, almost ignoble figure as 'halfpence.' These reducing dismemberment and nullifying figuration are operations quite opposite, in their purposes and directions, to the project of articulation, one of the main themes of the novel, with which the major characters are engaged in different ways, and which is seemingly the significant method of revalu-

ation, revivification, and the key to the mastery over the self and the surroundings which is permeated through and through with deteriorating, dismembering power of the world. They are also an institutional reading which textualizes humans into readable surfaces only to abandon them. In order not to be gotten rid of as heap of dust, or not to be 'cast up' as one of the dead 'units,' or not to be abandoned as a small figure, she must move on. She shuns every possibility and every thing that may inhumanly give her up, and seeks her own way to give herself up most willingly and autonomously. Fleeing from the workhouse, she is obviously pointed for the mastery of her death — the crucial end/ing of her life.

As she is drawn closer to her death, more weakened and weary, she becomes more and more subject to the fits of 'deadness.' She is rapidly losing her self-control, both physically and spiritually. The increasing attacks of the 'deadness' which succumb her to a death-like numbness consequently add the threat of her being caught in the hands of workhouse. As her sense of deterioration of vigor and the loss of self-mastery becomes more acute, all the more desperately she struggles to re-vivify herself and restore to herself the key to self-mastery — the power to 'give up' at her will. So her physical feebleness, which is shown most distinct in the 'deadness,' multiplies her fear of workhouse as the narrator reports: "... the old abhorrence grew stronger on her as she grew weaker, and it found more sustaining food than she did in her wanderings." (568) And the shadow of workhouse, in its turn, multiplies the threat of the 'deadness.' The two representations of death, working synergically and multiplying each other, both increase her fear of losing mastery.

Her loss of mastery, under the attack

of the 'deadness' is described as a radical deprivation of consciousness, an enforced rupture in the continuity of her memory:

One day she was sitting in a market-place on a bench outside an inn, with her little wares for sale, when the deadness that she strove against came over her so heavily that the scene *departed* from before her eyes; when it *returned*, she found herself on the ground, her head supported by some good-natured market-women, and a little crowd about her.

'Are you better now, mother?' asked one of the women. 'Do you think you can do nicely now?'

'Have I been ill then?' asked old Betty.

'You have had a faint like,' was the answer, 'or a fit. It ain't that you've been a-struggling, mother, but you've been stiff and numbed.'

'Ah!' said Betty, recovering her memory. 'It's the numbness. Yes. It comes over me at times.'

Was it *gone*? the woman asked her.

'It's *gone* now,' said Betty. (569) [*italics mine*]

Here she is totally alienated from the subject of giving up, but reduced to a wretched 'subject' of the deadly movement of departure and return, disappearance and rediscovery of herself. This grim game of death is violently enforced upon her and she has absolutely no control over the false '*fort-da*' play of the 'deadness.' Now that she has come to be helplessly vacillating between the death-like stupor and awakened state, her consciousness resembles and is reduced to something like that wooden reel whimsically abandoned and restored, manipulated by a little child of one and a half, a grandson of Freud, in order to gain mastery over ab-

sence of Mother and loss of self-control.<sup>(6)</sup>

The frightening incidents of losing self-mastery such as this urge her to flee all the more desperately, as the narrator reports: "Old Betty Higden however tired, however footsore, would start up and be driven away by her awakened horror of falling into the hands of Charity." But as the dark shadow of the 'deadness' deepens, her 'strong purpose' of life emerges again, the more strengthened and persistent. The purpose was tersely described, at the relatively earlier stage of her journey, in these words: "Patiently to earn a spare bare living, and quietly to die, untouched by workhouse hands — this was her highest sublunary hope." (566) In fact, this is the desire of an autonomous, independent, and therefore in Betty's mind, respectable death. What was originally shunning away from being 'given up,' as she draws closer to her death, gradually becomes a more intentional, directed, though frightened and fatigued, search for a satisfactory timing of 'giving up' herself of her own accord. As the threat of Death — a wretched, miserable death in in-mastery of self and an abandoned, 'given up' state — increases, she seems to be attracted to a desperate quest for a favorable 'end' of her life, which is a struggle with the 'deadness' over the mastery. As she senses her time of death creeping up on her, what is left of her life-energy is stirred up against captivating hands of Death and culminates in her finishing run. She scampers away from an undesirable death and plunges into an assumedly desirable one. Then, what appeared to be a flight from Death at first turns out to be only a circumventive course toward it, always bound for its destination. Betty's journey is, thus, a process of mastery over her life and death.

As the chapter title "The End of a Long

Journey" suggests, her 'end' is the crucial moment for her mastery over her own life. First, we can see a gradual shift of mastery over the *fort-da*-play-like movement from the hands of the 'deadness' into those of Betty though it is caused, not intentionally but rather coincidentally, by meeting Lizzie; and gratuitously, by her sympathy and readiness to help Betty. Then, it is observable, in her conversation with Lizzie Hexam, that she is trying to gain mastery over her life at its ending, restoring to her, with the help of Lizzie, the autonomy to 'give up.' And, again, it is achieved, although less distinctly, in a '*fort-da*' movement of vacillation.

With her last strength left to her, Betty leans herself against a tree near the riverside where she has chosen for her death-bed, and prepares herself to die, when she collapses into her last fit of 'deadness.' While she is 'gone,' Lizzie finds her and leaves to fetch a bottle of brandy, and comes back again to nurse her. Here in her most worn out and wretched state, she becomes both the 'subject' to the deadening numbness and, even before she knows, a subject who moves Lizzie back and forth. What is happening here is a gradual glissement of mastery of back and forth movement, out of the hands of the 'deadness' into somewhere between the two women, their dialogic relation:

'I am safe here,' was her last benumbed thought. 'When I am found dead at the foot of the Cross, it will be by some of my own sort; some of the working people who work among the lights yonder. I cannot see the lighted windows now, but they are there. I am thankful for all.'

★ ★ ★

The darkness *gone*, and a face bending down.

‘It cannot be the boofer lady?’

‘I don’t understand what you say. Let me wet your lips again with this brandy. I have been away to fetch it. Did you think that I was long *gone*?’ (575) [italics mine]

The textual rupture with three asterisks represents the break in her memory, absence of her consciousness. The asterisks signify her total loss of self-mastery, just as they suggested Pip’s loss of self-mastery in *Great Expectations* when he heard that Joe and Biddy had just married. But in this chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, they also function as a sort of screen which, segregating Betty’s ‘death-bed’ scene from the rest of the chapter, seems to make it into an enclosure. Indeed, Betty’s death scene is almost exclusively made of her conversation with Lizzie, with little description of scenery, though the sky is sometimes only tersely and indifferently referred to as: “Your face is turned up to the sky ... You can see my face, here, between you and the sky?” (576) The result is the sense of serene interiority, a closure between two voices. The presence of two women are reduced to two countenances which are peculiarly transformed into something other than flesh. Here, their entire corporeality is sublimated into dialogical vocal entities, and even when their faces or eyes are referred to, they function as the silent sites of signification, i.e. as letters themselves:

A look of thankfulness and triumph lights the worn old face. The eyes, which have been darkly fixed upon the sky, turn with meaning in them towards the compassionate face from which the tears are dropping, and a smile is on the aged lips as they ask:

‘What is your name, my dear?’ (577)

As a consequence Betty’s death is represented through a series of questions and replies, producing a sense of vacillation, which, in its turn, gives rise to an illusionary movement of back and forth. Significantly, through this conversational vacillation, Lizzie helps Betty to articulate her own ‘will,’ for, as she has just returned from the ‘deadness,’ her mind has gone to pieces, and Lizzie has to repeat her ‘I don’t understand what you say’ a few times. And through the same process, Betty gradually regains her self-mastery. She seems to be waiting for a ripe timing to ‘give up’ herself. It is observable that she is trying to postpone her moment of death until all of her worldly concern is safely settled down by being given up to Lizzie’s hands. This is a necessary ‘giving up’ for her in order to die *will-ingly*.

‘...You can see my face, here, between you and the sky?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dare I lift you?’

‘*Not yet.*’

‘Not even lift your head to get it on my arm? I will do it by very gentle degrees. You shall hardly feel it.’

‘*Not yet. Paper. Letter.*’ (576) [italics mine]

Not until her ‘will’ is secured, is she ready to die. It concerns the letter Boffin gave her. In consigning it to Lizzie, Betty directs the way it is ‘given up’:

‘Will you send it, my dear?’

‘Will I send it to the writers? Is that your wish? Yes, certainly.’

‘You’ll not give it up to any one but them?’

‘No.’

‘As you must grow old in time, and come to your dying hour, my dear, you’ll not give it up to any one but

them?’

‘No. Most solemnly.’

‘Never to the Parish!’ with a convulsed struggle.

‘No. Most solemnly.’

‘Not let the Parish touch me, nor yet so much as look at me!’ with another struggle.

‘No. Faithfully.’ (576)

With Lizzie’s help, Betty gives up the letter most successfully. Betty is gaining control over ‘giving up’ the letter. Lizzie’s last reply assures Betty is not going to be inhumanly abandoned. Comforted, she gives up herself into Lizzie’s hands:

‘What is your name, my dear?’

‘My name is Lizzie Hexam.’

‘I must be sore disfigured. Are you afraid to kiss me?’

The answer is, the ready pressure of her lips upon the cold but smiling mouth.

‘Bless ye! *Now* lift me, my love.’

Lizzie Hexam very softly raised the weather-stained grey head, and lifted her as high as heaven. (577) [italics in the original]

This is *seemingly* a mastery over the moment of death. Betty dies of her own accord. The passage tells us that the triumph over death

does not mean perpetual resistance against death, which is impossible, but that it means to die actively one’s own satisfactory death, resisting and avoiding any sudden, unintentional death. Then it will also mean the mastery over one’s life, for, as the chapter title, “The End of a Long Journey” suggests, Betty’s ‘sublunary hope’ — the final goal in her life — only comes true at the end of her time.

I said ‘seemingly’ because this is the literary mastery by Dickens over the literal death. Lizzie’s lifting ‘her as high as heaven’ suggests the readers where Betty has ‘gone’ to, softening the sense of wretchedness and bereavement. Betty’s death is, as a matter of course, a literary one, in which the true threat of Death is completely castrated through literalization and dramatization. This death is a tamed one, from which the fear and cruelty are swept out. Even a slight sense of releasing pleasure or cathexis is lurking here in this dramatized death which fuses culmination and consumption into one. Through Betty’s literary final ‘*fort*’ movement to ‘give up’ herself, Dickens successfully demonstrates transformation of literal death into a literary one, sublimation of the unmanageable into an imaginable.

#### Notes

- (1) Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971) All references to *Our Mutual Friend* are to this edition.
- (2) For the ‘*fort-da*’ play, see Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 283-286.
- (3) Michael Cotsell, *The Companion to Our Mutual Friend* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 217.
- (4) Dickens, pp. 910-911.
- (5) Cotsell, p. 218.
- (6) Freud, pp. 284-285.



「長い旅路の果て」：ベティ・ヒグデンの死からの／  
死への逃走における統御，放棄，揺動

松本 靖彦

チャールズ・ディケンズ最後の完結した小説、『われら互いの友』の重要な登場人物たちは自分の生と死をどうにかして統御しようと奮闘しているのであるが、この小論ではベティ・ヒグデンの逃避行——死からの、そして死に向けての——に焦点を絞り、その旅が彼女が主体的に自分の意志で自分自身を放棄することを可能にするまでの過程となっていることを検証する。彼女が生においてであれ死の瞬間においてであれ主体性を保持することができるか否かの鍵は、彼女が（物理的な、あるいは抽象化された）「放棄」という行為、あるいは運動性の主体で有り得るか否か、という問題に収束する。実に彼女がスロッピーを「棄て」て、リジー・ヘクサム の両腕の中に自らを「放棄」するに至るまで、彼女の旅は主体的に統御された自己放棄を常に志向していて、彼女は常に、無情で不本意な死——ゴミ同然に放棄されるような忌まわしい死——を極力回避し、地上の生においての自らの希望——自分（の意志）で死ぬこと——の実現を目指して死にもの狂いの逃走を続ける。この自己統御獲得の過程は常に「往復」、「去来」といった運動性を通じて表象されている。リジーとの対話を通してベティは自己統御と自己放棄がみごとに融合した死を遂げる。彼女の劇的な死はディケンズによる現実の死の統御の試みでもあり、彼は現実には操作不可能なもの（文字どおりの死）を想像可能なもの（文学的な死）へと昇華させることに成功し、その結果「死」を飼い慣らしているのである。

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（1991年9月29日受理）