Charles Allston Collins: Artistic Talent and Literary Genius

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Abstract:

The main concern of this research paper will be to present a contextualised account of Charles Allston Collins's literary and artistic career of which few scholars have previously taken note. The research paper therefore establishes the limits of and evaluates a remarkable canon that has not been the subject of any major study, pinpointing its strengths and weaknesses and using them to explore aspects of mid-Victorian print culture and the concept of authorship, which have been recognised as significant but expressed in a particularly acute form in Collins's case. It demonstrates how central Charles Allston Collins was to the famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and to the almost equally famous circle of Charles Dickens and the 'young men', whom he mentored in journalism and fiction. The paper also argues that he took on a specific cultural and aesthetic stance distinguishable from each group.

الموهبة الفنية والعبقرية الأدبية لتشارلز ألستن كولنز

الخلاصة:

يعنى هذا البحث بشكل رئيس بوصف سياق السيرة الأدبية والفنية لتشارلز ألستن كولنز والتي لم يشر لها من قبل باحثون اخرون. ولذلك فالبحث اطر أعمال هذا الكاتب البارز ويظهر قيمتها التي لم تكن موضوع بحث لأي دراسة سابقة، فيشير الى مواطن القوة والضعف فيها ويفيد من ذلك في استكشاف ثقافة النشر في أواسط العصر الفيكتوري إضافة الى مفهوم التأليف الذي كان يعتبر مهما وقد عبر عنه بشكل ثاقب في حالة كولنز. ويظهر البحث كيف كان تشارلز ألستن كولنز ذو أهمية مركزية في رابطة ما قبل الرفائيلية الشهيرة والى حلقة تشارلز ديكنز و "الشباب" ذات الشهرة المماثلة والتي كان من مستشاريها في الصحافة والقصة، وتبين الدراسة انه اتخذ موقفا جماليا وثقافيا مميزا حيال كل من تلك المجموعات.

Charles Allston Collins: Artistic Talent and Literary Genius

Introduction:

This is the first academic study to focus on Charles Allston Collins's artistic and literary life: his books and paintings. It illuminates these lesser-known works and provides new insights into Collins's artistic and literary career, placing him in a more central role and highlighting his importance to the cultural tone of one of the period's most important periodicals, *All the Year Round*. In doing so it seeks to throw light on the importance of developing a critical vocabulary for discussing painting and writing. This research draws attention to Collins's remarkable ideals as an artist, further highlighting his importance to the wider history of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of young artists that radically changed British Art in the nineteenth century.

Collins's art and writings deserve something more than this perpetual anonymity and are worthy of sustained scrutiny/attention/interpretation. Little has so far been written on Collins's work, and nothing whatsoever which takes it as a primary point of focus. Apart from a single chapter in S. M. E. Ellis's *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu, and others* (London: Constable and Co., 1931), which apart from stressing that Collins was 'distinguished alike as artist and author', a gentle, shy and sensitive person perhaps unfairly consigned to oblivion, has little to say of an analytical nature.[1]

[1] S. M. E. Ellis's *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu, and others* (London: Constable and Co., 1931), p. 54.

This research uses the limited space available to focus on hitherto neglected material rather than works frequently discussed by many of writers and critics, yet the absence of any serious discussion of Collins's literary and artistic life outside of the Victorian era itself remains an unfortunate omission. Victorian fiction has been read and analysed from a wide range of critical perspectives in the past century. But as there has not been any response to Charles Collins's works this will be an intriguing challenge to be met in this study. Even if his works themselves were to be considered of negligible value, his anomalous position as an important minor member of both the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' in the 1850s and of the circle of younger writers—sometimes referred to as 'Mr Dickens's "Young Men"'—who grew up around Dickens's hugely successful and influential weekly magazine *All the Year Round* in the 1860s, would mark him out for attention.[2] His experiences in moving between these two almost antithetical groupings gave him rather unique insight into a series of artistic transactions, all of which he appears to have narrated with sensitivity and a sense of (self) satire. This study therefore seeks to open an enquiry into a most unusual Victorian aesthete and to rescue Collins from what Guillory has called the 'canons of the non-canonical'.[3]

Charles Collins: a close associate of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Collins was strongly associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, although not an official member of it, and he in fact preceded the Pre-Raphaelite painters in exhibiting at the Royal Academy. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the 'PRB' was founded in 1848 whereas Collins

[2]See Peter David Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).
[3]John Guillory, 'Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate', *ELH,* 54 (1987), 483-527 (p. 484).

started exhibiting his paintings in the Royal Academy in 1847. He continued to do so until 1855. Some of his paintings are considered to be masterpieces, such as *Berengaria's Alarm* (1850), *Convent Thoughts* (1851), *May, in the Regent's Park* (1852), and *The Good Harvest of 1854* (1855). His current perceived 'value' as an artist is very much on the ascendant with his *Thoughts with which a Christian Child should be taught to look on the works of God*, recently changing hands for £371,250.

Colin Gleadell, a regular contributor to *The Daily Telegraph*'s weekly Art Sales pages, who has been concerned with the ups and downs of the global art market for 29 years, announced the sale on 5 July 2016:

> The Victorian market is far from dead and buried. Last week, Christie's scored a record for Lord Leighton when his dashing takes on music and romance, 'Golden Hours' - 100 years with a branch of the Glyndebourne Christie family - sold for a record £3.3m at Christie's, albeit at the low end of the pre-sale estimate. There was somewhat more competition, more of an auction one might say, at Gorringes in Sussex when a composition of a young girl intently scrutinising arrangements of flowers by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Charles Allston Collins turned up. Although it was recognised by the auctioneers as by Collins, it had an estimate of just £3,000 to £5,000 because so little by Collins has been on the market. There was no telling how much it was worth until the day when several bidders pursued it to £100,000, leaving two to combat it over £200,000 before it fell to [a] private UK buyer who bought it for £371,250. 'It was easily the most pre-Raphaelite painting on the market this year,' said the Victorian art expert and gallery owner, Rupert Maas. Its title – 'Thoughts with which a Christian Child should be taught to look on the works of God' - betrays the artist's debt to Ruskin's ideals at a

> time, when Collins was closely involved with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, though not a brother himself. The painting, which not been seen in public since 1852, was being sold by a recently widowed lady who works in a supermarket.[4]

The importance of Collins's paintings lies not solely in their artistic merits, but also in their relative conceptual position among those created by Hunt and John Everett Millais, who was also a close acquaintance and correspondent of Collins's. Earnestness and devotion to artistic truth of vision were qualities that marked out Collins's graphic art.

Charles Collins will easily be identified by Victorian scholars as a literary or artistic figure who is 'known of' rather than 'known': who is adjacent to or tangential in the lives and output of famous writers—specifically those of his brother, Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), his father-in-law, Charles Dickens (1812-1870), or even his artist wife, Kate Perugini (1839-1929), or father, the painter William Collins (1788-1847). To this extent, the study will be built on the premise that Collins is a minor writer whose value has unfortunately or unjustly been obscured. It will argue that his work deserves to be more central to our understanding of mid-Victorian culture than it has been. This research has been throughout motivated by a fundamental curiosity not about Collins as a representative of a canonically under-represented group, but as a creative individual in the marketplace, who is fascinating because of his unrepresentativeness, and in the apparent oddity of his artistic trajectory. This in itself, and a desire to understand the dynamics behind the pattern it traces, has

[4]Colin Gleadell, 'Market News: the Victorian Era flourishes', *The Telegraph*, (2016), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/art/market-news-the-victorian-era-flourishes/> [accessed 21 January 2017].

determined the critical approach, which therefore has been more culturally materialist and psycho-biographical than ideologically motivated.

The earliest obituaries of Collins are contained in two accounts in *The Graphic*, and *The Birmingham Daily Post*, both published in April 1873, just a few days after his death. Both obituaries mention his work as a painter and a writer, but are vague as to the reasons for his relatively unusual change from one to the other. The *Graphic* simply asserts 'he abandoned the practice of an art which he had only followed out of respect to his father's desire, and took to literature, a pursuit which was much more congenial to him'. In fact Collins's renunciation of painting was a complex and intensely personal act, outlined in an extraordinary twenty-page letter written from Collins to Holman Hunt. Perhaps the most interesting observation in the *Graphic* obituary is the paradox that 'though [Collins's] health was so broken, he mixed a good deal in society, and seemed to enjoy life wonderfully'[5]—a puzzle that the *Birmingham Daily Post* similarly dwelt upon:

> But he had been a wreck in health for years, though he enjoyed life and the world of London wonderfully to the last [. . .] No strong and healthy man ever seemed to cling more to life—he seemed to enjoy the perception of its opportunities of happiness for those who were more able to enjoy it than himself. Mr. Collins began his career as a painter, and would probably have taken a high place in art but for his extreme fastidiousness and his declining health [. . .] He had a singularly fine and dainty sense of humour, and a rare delicacy of feeling and perception, without corresponding power, or rather, perhaps, with a degree of [. . .] power limited by bodily weakness.[6]

[5] *The Graphic*, 3 May 1873, p. 412.
[6] Birmingham Daily Post, 12 April 1873.

Swapping the brush for the quill pen

In 1856 Collins decided to forsake painting for literature. From 13 February 1858 to 1 February 1870, Collins worked assiduously as a writer, publishing six books, including three novels, between 1859 and 1866, along with numerous shorter pieces, as well as an unknown quantity of art criticism. He was known to have contributed more than 171 articles to seven of the most notable periodicals of the mid-Victorian era: *Household Words*, *All the Year Round*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Tinsley's Magazine*, and *Harper's Weekly*, as well as to the less mainstream *Warne's Christmas Annual*. Much of his writing appeared first in Dickens's *All the Year Round* and some was later republished in three books of non-fiction, as *A New Sentimental Journey* (1859), *The Eyewitness* (1860), and *A Cruise upon Wheels* (1862).[7] *A Cruise upon Wheels* has been described as a 'minor classic and most humorous odyssey of Fudge and Pinchbold, the two Londoners who travelled along the post roads of France in a horsed cabriole, meeting with divers strange and laughable adventures. This story was a favourite of the neglected genius'.[8] He also wrote three novels: *The Bar Sinister* (1864), where again the scene is mostly laid in France; *Strathcairn* (1864), a remarkable and delicately told story of frustrated love and resulting suicide, with picturesque scenic descriptions of the Highlands; and *At the Bar* (1866), a tragic tale of poisoning, with a long account of the accused woman's trial for a crime she did not commit. John Sutherland believes that Collins's abilities as a novelist are best represented in *The Bar Sinister*, which he finds a psychologically intricate and resonant narrative.

[7] I am grateful to *DJO* from which all Collins's essays in *HW* and *AYR* have been downloaded.
[8] Ellis, 'Charles Allston Collins', p. 68.

It tells the story of a man who loves the natural daughter of the woman whose unintentional bigamy was the ruin of his elder brother.[9] Of *At the Bar*, Catherine Peters notes that its account of the struggle of a mismatched young married couple 'exposed to privations and troubles of the most harassing and miserable kind which their bringing-up and earlier habits had in no sort fitted them to undergo' seems to be based on his own experiences, which 'shifts' when he becomes the husband of Dickens's elder daughter Katey, whom he had married on 17 July1860.[10]

Until relatively recently, the above brief outline represented the extent of Collins's known literary output. However, as reported by the antiquarian book dealer and independent scholar, Dr Jeremy Parrott, the number of articles published by Charles Collins in *All the Year Round* may perhaps be augmented by as many as 90 new articles. In December 2014, Parrott bought a rare deluxe edition of the first twenty bi-annual volumes of *All the Year Round* with gilt edges and scarlet Morocco-grained cloth and was astonished

> as I unpacked this set, volume by volume, and opened them to find, page after page, throughout the entire 20 volumes, pencilled in the margins, the names of all the contributors. When I showed some of the volumes to John Drew, founder of *Dickens Journals Online*, he likened the experience to deciphering the Rosetta Stone – a moment of utter revelation.[11]

Parrott also reveals that there are several pieces of writing that 'were conjectured to be by Dickens (e.g. "Temperate Temperance") [which can be] clearly shown not to be his work—that piece is actually by

[9] John Sutherland, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction*(California: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 139.
[10]Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: Mandarin Paperback, 1992), p. 231.
[11] Jeremy Parrott, 'The Skeleton out of the Closet: Authorship Identification in Dickens's *All the Year Round*', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48 (2015), 557-568 (p. 560).

Charles Collins'.[12] Indeed,'several items attributed to Wilkie Collins are now revealed to have been written by other hands, principally, but not exclusively, his underrated brother, Charles'.[13] Parrott's find is therefore very much grist to the scholarly mill. Charles Collins turns out to be, by quantity if nothing else, one of the most prolific contributors to *All the Year Round*, and this is possibly due to his ability to imitate the quaint but supposedly inimitable humour of its famous editor. Although the pencilled entries indicate Dickens was not involved as co-author, they seem to have been written with a certain amount of knowledge of the interests of the journal's famous 'Conductor', and may have been written at Dickens's request.

By 13 February 1858, Collins was beginning to drift into Dickens's *Household Words* circle. His first article was entitled 'My First Patron', which was a panoramic reminiscence of his previous profession. After publishing nine articles in *Household Words*, he began contributing a regular column to *All the Year Round* on 25 June 1859, under the guise of 'Our Eye-Witness'. In her biography of Katey Dickens, Lucinda Hawksley has recently noted how:

> [these] articles suggest a man of greater personality than his friends' diary entries ever record and he seems to have enjoyed his Eye-Witness job, but he still yearned to be taken seriously as a novelist. It was true that his salary from journalism was much needed, and it seems that Collins could not be half-hearted about anything, having abandoned his art entirely when the desire to write came upon him, so that he could devote himself to a new muse. He had also suffered several setbacks in his artistic career, finding the seated position he needed to adopt at his easel made him feel ill, as well as experiencing financial problems. He did not necessarily suffer more knocks than

[12] Parrott, 'The Skeleton out of the Closet: Authorship Identification',p. 565.
[13] Parrott, 'The Skeleton out of the Closet: Authorship Identification',p. 565.

> any other artist, but he was a deeply sensitive man who took even mild criticism to heart.[14]

This brief account of Collins's motivation will be queried and refined in due course. During his career as 'Our Eye-Witness', Collins was sent on a variety of reporting commissions to cover new and exciting events. The first account he filed was of a visit to a sensational London show, the so-called 'Talking Fish', for whom Collins immediately felt pity, when he reported that the fish turned out to be a captive seal, made to bark mournfully in reply to his keeper's instructions. Collins's lifelong empathy for animals comes across on several occasions. Millais told his son on one occasion that 'Charley's kind heart had led him to give up fishing because he had realised it was cruel'.[15]

Charles Collins in the Eyes of his Contemporaries

While Collins has not previously been taken as a critical subject, he was often written *about*, during his lifetime and after his death, as an invalid. However, contemporaries left tributes, written and graphic. William Holman Hunt sketched a rare portrait of his friend and confidante, as he lay dead, quoting from Collins's own *A New Sentimental Journey*:

> It is a pleasant thought, at any rate; for surely of all the ingredients in the horror which death inspires, there is not one that has a larger share to make it terrible than the bitter thought that we are forgotten [. . .]

[14] Lucinda Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favorite Daughter: The Life, Loves, and Art of Katey Dickens Perugini* (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2013), pp. 179, 181.
[15] Cited in Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favorite Daughter*, p. 154.

> Think of this sometimes, and go, once, now and then, and stand beside his grave. You shall not come away the worse. [16]

There is something distinctly elegiac in this, like the ending of Thomas Gray's famous *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* 'whose ideological resonance has always been perceived as related in an especially intimate way to its canonicity'.[17] Hunt's quotation of Collins's own remarks about the terror of being forgotten and the command to visit graves has a similar ambivalence, in that his epitaph for 'poor' Collins seems effectively to foreclose any possibility of his early canonicity/fame.

Only one day after Collins's death, Wilkie wrote as follows to the publisher George Smith, 10 April 1873:

> I am sure you will be sorry to hear the sad news which this letter must contain. My brother's sufferings are at an end. After a few days only of serious illness, he died last night – without pain and without consciousness. If you can spare room for a paragraph in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, I send you the bare particulars of his career on the next leaf. Died April 9th 1873, aged 45. Disease, internal tumour. Contributor to 'All The Year Round' and to other Periodical Journals. Author of 'A Cruise Upon Wheels', 'The Eye-Witness', 'The Bar-Sinister', and other works. Was the second son of the late William Collins R. A. Began life as a painter, and exhibited pictures at the Royal Academy. Married the youngest daughter of the late Charles Dickens—who survives him.[18]

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[16]Charles Allston Collins, *A New Sentimental Journey* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), p. 45.

[17] John Guillory,*Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 85.

[18] William Baker, and William M. Clarke, *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, 2 Vols(London: Macmillan Press, 1999), I, pp. 364-365.

From childhood there was therefore a strong attachment between the two brothers and, though dissimilar in temperament, or perhaps because of it, Wilkie and Charley remained close friends in adult life. Collins, whose own comparative anxiety was inherent in his character, seems never to have been in the least jealous of his elder brother's success. Wilkie performed the last service to his brother's memory in writing a surprisingly brief article on his brother for Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography*. In it he said 'The last years of his life were years of broken health and acute suffering, borne with a patience and courage known only to those nearest and dearest to him'. Wilkie might have been writing part of his own epitaph.

It has been noticed that the Collins brothers were close, and though Wilkie was too short-sighted ever to be good at games and Charley was always timid, they enjoyed making and sailing model boats, flying kites and skating.[19] It became clear while still a child that Charley's talents lay rather in painting than writing. Holman Hunt's later portrait of him as a model young artist, striking to look at, but self-absorbed, is important:

> Charles Collins was the son of William Collins, R.A., the younger of two brothers, the elder being Wilkie, who became the novelist. Charles had, while still a child, shown a talent which had induced Sir David Wilkie, a great friend of his parents, to declare that he must be a painter. I had known him at the British Museum. He was then a remarkable looking boy with statuesquely formed features, of aquiline type, and strong blue eyes. The characteristic that marked him out to casual observers was his brilliant bushy red hair, which was not of golden splendour, but yet had an attractive beauty in it. He had also a comely figure. While still a youth he imparted to me his discomfort at

[19] Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 52.

> the striking character of his locks, and was anxious to find out any means of lessening their vividness.[20]

He travelled and toured as a young man, in particular with Millais, with whom he visited Scotland in 1854, on an eventful walking and fishing tour. Millais made sketches of Collins's scrapes, some later published, but it has not previously been realised that Collins was 'sketching' too, and drew on this episode, and on later visits to Millais after his marriage to 'Effie' Gray, in his 1864 novel, *Strathcairn*, in which Scottish Catholicism and faith is pictured as part of a reactionary medievalism.

Another issue connected with Collins's deep religious state led Wilkie to ask his close friends not to criticise him since this might badly affect his health: 'Blackberry pudding' was hugely in favour with Millais, Hunt says, and

> on one occasion Millais ridiculed Collins for refusing the dainty dish, taking the despised portion in addition to his own, so that the pudding when it returned to the kitchen bore no trace of want of appreciation. On their return to sitting-room Millais bantered their abstemious friend, Collins, on his self-denial, saying. 'You know you like blackberry pudding as much as I do, and it is this preposterous rule of supererogation which you have adopted in your high-churchism which made you go without it. I have no doubt you will think it necessary to have a scourge and take the discipline for having had dinner at all.' Hunt recalls that Millais was so persistent in his attacks on poor Charley, and 'his appeals to me to second him, that when

[20] William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), I, pp. 271.

these became troublesome I turned away from the fire and took up a recently commenced design at a side table'.[21]

Collins also seems to have been widely welcomed by the Thackeray circle, with the cconversationalist Blanche Warre Cornish (1844-1922) describing him in the most glowing terms: he is a 'delightful humourist' with chiselled features and searching blue eyes, 'who always remained grave while others, and especially very young people, roared at his utterances. His delicate humour appealed in a higher way to the lovers of literature'.[22] Cornish's memoirs indicate that Collins won her over entirely — even his fastidious sensitiveness is turned into a virtue and it is very interesting to read such a glowing female account of someone about whom even his closest male friends' diaries record feelings of irritation and scorn, mingled with puzzled admiration.[23]

Several weeks after Collins's death, Holman Hunt wrote a slightly self-centred letter about the friend he had known since adolescence:

> One of my confessors is gone. Charles A. Collins, who had often listened to me [scrape] and was in many respect [*sic*] a good rein to me, being timid and therefore sure to put on the curb, and who was one of the men I valued in life as thoroughly fearing and loving God through all of his rather eccentric changes in faith. He might now be a better advisor but must not be so. In this world it is evident that the Father would rather we stumbled that walked leading strings forever.[24]

On 4 March 1867, Dickens replied to a letter from Georgina Hogarth in which he explained his private view of Collins's poor health:

[21] Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 Vols, I, pp. 288-9.
[22] Cited in Lucinda Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favourite Daughter*, p. 170.
[23]Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favourite Daughter*, p. 170.
[24] Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favourite Daughter*, p. 243.

> It seems to me that nothing is more likely than that all Charley Collins's miseries do really originate in that diffused gout. It stimulates all sorts of disorders, and unquestionably is his inheritance. I am afraid, therefore, that Gad's [Hill] may not do him permanent good.[25]

This letter indicates that Collins's cancer had not yet been diagnosed. Dickens was by this stage convinced that his son-in-law would never be well, and probably did not have long to live, and the state of Collins's health was similarly a constant worry to Wilkie and Harriet. 'He generally refused to borrow money from Wilkie, but Harriet regularly subsidised him'.[26]

Paul Lewis's note on the data explains how inheritances of various kinds were needed to supplement Collins's earnings:

> Charles married Kate Dickens on 17 July 1860 the day before this account was opened. Prior to that he had banked through his mother's account. During the early years they were kept afloat by payments from Charles's mother and, later, Kate's father. Charles's mother Harriet died on 19 March 1868 and on her death half of his late father's property and half of her small property passed to him in 1868/69. Kate's father died on 9 June 1870 and she inherited in 1870/71 and in 1871/72. Charles died on 9 April 1873 leaving between £10,000 and £16,000. Although he left all his property to Kate, some investments inherited from his father may have passed to his brother Wilkie. Kate remarried on 4 June 1874 to Carlo Perugini and this account is closed on 9 June. (though in fact they had secretly married earlier on 11 September 1873). Kate died on 9 May 1929 leaving £5693-19s-8d. Income and expenditure in 1868/69, 1870/71

[25] *Letters of Charles Dickens,* XI, p. 325.
[26] Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 280.

> and 1871/72 includes inherited capital which was encashed and reinvested. Inherited capital which was not reinvested does not appear in the accounts.[27]

In addition, the regular payments from 'Mrs C' (Harriet Collins) between 1860 and her death also seem to be an important element of his income.

Periodically, friends and relatives feared the worst for Collins's deteriorating health. In June 1867, Dickens wrote to Kate's godfather, Macready: 'Katie's husband is still ill, and I begin to doubt his ever recovering'. Nevertheless, 'Wilkie Collins refused to believe that his brother's illness was life-threatening [. . .] For several years, Wilkie's friend had been trying to get him to take Collins's illness seriously, but he refused to believe how ill his brother was'.[28] In June, Collins's doctor could not discover the reasons behind his suffering and he was advised to consult another doctor.[29] On 7 July 1868 Dickens wrote to J. T. Fields:

> Charley Collins is—I say emphatically—dying. Only last night I thought it was all over. He is reduced to that state of weakness, and is so racked and worn by a horrible strange vomiting, that if he were to faint—as he must at last—I do not think he could be revived. My man came into my room yesterday morning to say 'Mr. Collins, Sir, he is that bad, and he looks that awful, and Mrs. Collins called me to him just now, that brought down by his dreadful sickness. As it has turned me over Sir.' And last night we all felt (except Katie before whom we say nothing) that he might be dead in half an hour.[30]

By the late 1860s, it was tacitly agreed that Collins was never going to be able to make an adequate living by his own efforts, though Wilkie did his

[27]Information supplied by Paul Lewis and quoted with kind permission.
[28]Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favorite Daughter*, p. 216.
[29]Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favourite Daughter*, pp. 216-17.
[30]*Letters of Charles Dickens*, XII, pp. 149-150.

best to help by introducing him to publishers and magazine editors.[31]

By 1872, Collins had become bedridden. By now, the extended family knew that what 'he was suffering from was cancer of the stomach'. He would never get any better, they realised; the stark reality was that he would continue to deteriorate until the extremely painful end came.[32] Katey's aunt and surrogate mother, Georgina Hogarth, thought that no one could have seen Collins's death as anything but a merciful release.[33] For Wilkie, it was the sad end of a life largely vitiated by self-doubt:'it was in the modest and sensitive nature of the man to underrate his own success. His ideal was a high one'.[34]

Holman Hunt reported that in his last months 'I frequently saw my friend Charles Collins', finding him 'always philosophical, yet as perplexed as ever to make up his mind as to which of any two courses he should adopt'. Hunt continues,

> One morning he, in the company of Millais, came over to me while I was at work [. H]e was more feeble in his gait than [usual]. I went out with him and Millais to the landing, and stood watching them as they descended. It was the last time I was ever to see him alive, for in a few days I was standing by his bedside drawing his portrait as he lay dead. This I gave to his brother Wilkie, who in the end left it to me. On his bed lay the canvas, taken off the strainer, with the admirably executed background painted at Worcester Park Farm. For the last few years he had not touched a brush, being entirely disenchanted with the pursuit of painting, yet his delicacy of handling and his rendering of tone and tint had been exquisite. Certain errors of proportion marred his picture 'Convent Thoughts' or it would have

[31]See Chapter 4, p. 168 when Wilkie writes to Smith Elder, the publisher of Charley's *The Bar Sinister*.
[32] Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favorite Daughter*, p. 236.
[33] See, for examples, Georgina's letter to Mrs James T. Fields of 12 May 1873. San Marino, The Huntington Library, A.L.S., **FI** 2713.
[34] Wilkie's account of Collins's death in Oxford *DNB*.

been a typical work of unforgettable account despite its puerile leading idea.[35]

This is more than damning with faint praise, for the 'leading idea' of the painting deserves more attention than this dismissal. Indeed, the extent to which the religious asceticism of Collins's early painting survives in any recognisable way in his fiction and journalism also forms one of a number of important research questions that his unusual artistic trajectory throws up.

Charles Collins is buried in Brompton Cemetery, that 'most melancholy necropolis', as Ellis calls it, 'where the dead lie packed like sardines and where to read a memorial stone one has often to read upon a dozen other graves before reaching the desolate "resting" place'. A single flat granite slab, on which are recorded his name and the dates of his birth and death, covers his grave. There is no text or inscription to record who he was, his familial relations, or what he did: 'inadequate recognition in death as in life'.[36]

Conclusion:

The substantive conclusion one comes to it is that, with artists for godfathers and pictures for presents and rewards, both Collins's sons but particularly Charley were being groomed for an artistic career. This research has for the first time attempted to show how central Charles Allston Collins actually was in relation to the famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and in relation to the almost equally famous circle of Charles Dickens and the 'young men' whom he mentored in journalism and fiction. He eventually stood between them, on partly if not wholly his own terms.

[35]Hunt, The Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, vol. 2, pp. 312-14.
[36] Ellis, 'Charles Allston Collins', pp. 72-3.

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