

# *Drood* and the Dust of Delight

[Steven Connor](#)

A talk given at Dickens Day, Birkbeck College, 13 October 2007.

References are to the Everyman edition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Dent, 1996).

## Against the Grain

The light I may have to throw on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* will not help in any way towards a solution of the mystery. I have no new witnesses to call, suspects to indict, or perpetrators to denounce. I will neither seek nor be able to reillumine the light that failed. This will be because my concern will not be with light, or even, despite my title, all that much with delight as with the light, but with lightness, with *n'avoir-pas-dupois*.

For, as so often in recent years, I have found myself reading *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* with an eye less to characters and events as to the elements of which they are made, by which I mean, in something like a literal sense, their physical composition and that of the world in which they move. There is something undoubtedly reductive in insisting on training so bony a light on the spreading human scene enacted in a novel, as though one were to watch a performance of *Hamlet* through a pair of X-ray spectacles. But if this is so, then I think it is a reductiveness to which Dickens himself is occasionally strongly drawn in his last novel. I would like to repeat and amplify here a proposal that I find I first made in the introduction to an edition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* that I wrote in 1996, that this is Dickens's dustiest novel, the one in which he is most drawn to processes of grinding, abrasion, pestling and pulverisation which result in the production of various grades of finely-sieved, granular substances. Among the different grades of substances named or implied in the novel (and let us not forget that 'grading' itself includes as one of its meanings the grinding or grating that produces such states of matter) are powder, grit, sand, ash and lime. Totters-up of hills of beans and dancing angels may be won over by the statistics which show that *Drood* does indeed have an unusually high frequency of words denoting such substances, when compared with other novels. Only four novels (*Bleak House*, *Dombey and Son*, *Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend*, if you must know) have more appearances of the words 'dust' or 'dusty'.

When one considers how little there is of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, it is clear that it is in fact the most concentratedly dusty of all Dickens's novels; there are just over three times as many mentions of dust in *Our Mutual Friend*, for instance (43 as opposed to 12), but it is four times as long. And no other Dickens novel has so many references to grit or grittiness. The epitome of this is Durdles, who is permanently 'covered from head to foot with old mortar, lime, and stone grit' (122).

If I am reading the novel against the grain, then I can at least call to my defence the fact that this is precisely the process which seems to preoccupy Dickens. Jasper complains that 'the cramped monotony of my life grinds me away by the grain' (15). Later on, Jasper will apply this operation to Neville – intending to 'to wear his daily life out grain by grain' (Dickens 1996, 225). Bazzard's lowly position as manservant 'rubs against the grain' (214), according to Grewgious, who remarks of himself 'I am a hard man in the grain' (Dickens 1996, 113) - though, as we know, in this novel, the harder they come, the finer they grind. Grewgious himself has been introduced to us as 'an arid, sandy man, who, if he had been put into a grinding-mill, looked as if he would have ground immediately into high-grade snuff' (Dickens 1996, 79). Grinding, milling, erosion and abrasion are everywhere in this novel. Jasper describes himself as 'a poor monotonous chorister and grinder of music' (Dickens 1996, 16). Luke Honeythunder's pugilistic philanthropy includes the preparation of 'a moral little Mill somewhere on the rural circuit' (175). Billickin cattily regrets that she does not 'possess the Mill I have heard of, in which old single ladies could be ground up young' (237). Allied to the granular condition, if perhaps in a slightly moister register, is 'the gelatinous state, in which there was no flavour or solidity, and very little resistance' (54), into which Mrs Crisparkle is pummelled by the oratorical onslaughts of Luke Honeythunder.

I claim Durdles as a recruit to my necroscopic cause. At one end of his career, Dickens has Sam Weller scornfully mock the possibility of seeing through walls, being possessed only of a pair of eyes, rather than 'a pair o' patent double million magnifyin' gas microscopes of hextra power'. But here, at the far end of his career, Dickens provides Durdles with a mode of extra-sensory, or at least inframural perception that seems even better than X-ray:

'I take my hammer, and I tap.' (Here he strikes the pavement, and the attentive Deputy skirmishes at a rather wider range, as supposing that his head may be in requisition.) 'I tap, tap, tap. Solid! I go on tapping. Solid still! Tap again. Holloa! Hollow! Tap again, persevering. Solid in hollow! Tap, tap, tap, to try it better.

Solid in hollow; and inside solid, hollow again! There you are! Old  
'un crumbled away in stone coffin, in vault!' (43)

Durdles's acute ear for reverberation allows him to divine, not just cavities within the solid wall, but rather what may be called a chord of dissolution formed by the gradient running from solid to insubstantial. At the core of this geology is not vacancy, but the gratinate remains of what has crumbled away. A moment later, Durdles reminds us how much of such dissolution may lie behind solid appearance:

'Six foot inside that wall is Mrs Sapsea.'

'Not really Mrs Sapsea?'

'Say Mrs Sapsea. Her wall's thicker, but say Mrs. Sapsea. Durdles taps, that wall represented by that hammer, and says, after good sounding: "Something betwixt us!" Sure enough, some rubbish has been left in that same six-foot space by Durdles's men!' (43)

At times, this novel gives us not so much Dickens the anatomist, as Dickens the atomist, interested in the ultimate, indivisible, indifferent states of matter of which everything is composed. Like Democritus, the originator of the atomist hypothesis, surely the greatest feat of scientific deduction ever achieved, Dickens seems at times to accord with the Democritean axiom 'There are atoms, and the spaces between them. All the rest is opinion.' Democritus is said to have visited Athens when Plato and Aristotle were both in residence, cooking up the hallucinogenic doctrines about the material world that would keep Europe colourfully asleep for 2000 years, but left without making himself known.

Like Durdles, Dickens seems peculiarly sensitive in this novel to the tendency of things to revert to their particulate conditions, and to the striking contrast between that which is, as Mr Sapsea claims he is, 'sound, sir, at the core' (118), and that which is riddled, sifted, or crumbled. The atomist perspective requires both a microscopic reduction in scale and a prodigiously macroscopic escalation of number. Such a perspective is perhaps in evidence in Jasper's recalling to the Princess Puffer of his pre-enactments of the crime: 'I did it here hundreds of thousands of times. What do I say? I did it millions and billions of times' (245). We can find this tendency to multiplicative division in the account of the meagre Twelfth Cake on display in the greengrocer's doorway – 'such a very poor little Twelfth Cake, that one would rather call it a Twenty-fourth Cake, or a Forty-eighth Cake' (143).

Sometimes, the morselised condition is achieved by more violent, less slowly erosive means. Durdles's account of the process of decomposition emphasises its suddenness:

'Durdles come upon the old chap,' in reference to a buried magnate of ancient time and high degree, 'by striking right into the coffin with his pick. The old chap gave Durdles a look with his open eyes, as much as to say, "Is your name Durdles? Why, my man, I've been waiting for you a devil of a time!" And then he turned to powder.' (36)

The boisterous wind that blows into Cloisterham on the night of Drood's disappearance is described as 'blowing out many of the lamps (in some instances shattering the frames too, and bringing the glass rattling to the ground' (154). Its destructive dispersals are anticipated by the fate of Neville's goblet, which 'he dashes ... down under the grate, with such force that the broken splinters fly out again in a shower' (72).

There are modes of motion appropriate to pulverisation – where the solid condition allows for determinate, vectorial motion, the shattered or particulate condition is expressed and anticipated in tremblings, quakings and oscillations. Jasper's 'scattered consciousness' is accompanied by a 'trembling frame' (3), while the impending thunderstorm has the odd effect on the housemaids in the Nuns' House that 'they have felt their own knees all of a tremble all day long' (205). Along with trembling, there is abundant 'flickering' (150), 'chattering and clattering' (6), 'rippling' (9), 'rattling', 'fluttering' and, most suggestive of all, 'stirring'.

It is not just solid matter that is susceptible to this pulverisation. It can happen to thoughts - the novel begins with an instance of what is called 'scattered consciousness' (3) – and to words, as in the ill-overheard conversation between Crisparkle and Neville, in which the shattering effect is brought about by echoes, which both multiply and sunder the discourse:

The echoes were favourable at those points, but as the two approach, the sound of their talking becomes confused again. The word 'confidence,' shattered by the echoes, but still capable of being pieced together, is uttered by Mr. Crisparkle. As they draw still nearer, this fragment of a reply is heard: 'Not deserved yet, but shall be, sir.' As they turn away again, Jasper again hears his own name, in connection with the words from Mr Crisparkle:

'Remember that I said I answered for you confidently.' Then the sound of their talk becomes confused again. (124)

.A similar shredding of voice is effected by the Princess Puffer's cough, which is described as 'rending' (150), and which is aptly imaged in the condition of her own lungs, which she assures Jasper are 'wore away to cabbage-nets' (242). Cloisterham is characterised by the thickness of its echoes. Even in London, echoes seem to be associated with the action of grinding, in the form of a sonic percussion: 'There was music playing here and there, but it did not enliven the case. No barrel-organ mended the matter, and no big drum beat dull care away. Like the chapel bells that were also going here and there, they only seemed to evoke echoes from brick surfaces, and dust from everything' (209).

There is a number of allotropic or accessory functions of dust which the novel also addresses, of which I will take note of three: amalgamation; aspiration and evaporation.

## Amalgamation

Just as the ultimate particles of which things are composed have no intrinsic qualities, gaining them only when they are aggregated together, so the dust that sifts and swirls through this novel seems to have as its primary quality simply that of entering into composition with things. Dust scatters, but it also gathers. Reduction to the condition of dust, ash, soot and grit, allows for easy dispersal and consequently of combination with other substances.

Milling, we may say, is associated with mulling, an association that seems somehow to have insinuated itself into the novel, in which Jasper's mulling of wine, described by Dickens as 'mixing and compounding' (68), and therefore associated with the mixing of the opium, is prominent. The Oxford English Dictionary informs us sternly that 'Quite inadmissible is the notion, which appears in all recent Dicts., that mulled ale is a corruption of *molddale* (MOULD *sb.*) a funeral banquet', though there do seem to be other connections between mulling and mould – for example in the fact that *mull* is also a name for a form of mould, or fine soil, and in the dialectal term *moul*, which means to grow mouldy. The Deputy, who spends his time accelerating the process of erosion by hurling stones, both at living persons, and at other stones, uses the term in a different sense, when he cries 'Mulled agin!' (39) whenever he misses his target. The editor of the Everyman *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* informs us that 'A mull

is a miss, mistake, or muddle, often used in sporting slang. It is derived from the dialectal word mull, meaning to grind, crush or pulverise, with the influence of analogous terms like *muddle*, *mell* and *meddle*' (263) Had his hand not been sagely stayed by his General Editor, the author of these words might well have pursued these chains of association into even more obscure recesses of the novel – taking note, for example, of the mutation of milling and mulling into mauling, in the account of the philanthropists' fighting code, that allows them to 'stamp upon [their victim], gouge him, and maul him behind his back without mercy' (176), or lingering, for example, on the term 'moddley-coddley' used twice by Edwin Drood (11, 140) himself of the fussy attentions of his uncle, in which, we may surmise, there is more of meddling or moiling than of mollification, not to say the 'mauling' which is said to be among the operations of the pugilistic philanthropists (175). No doubt our assiduous editor must have been disappointed to find no reference in the novel to Mulligatawny soup, though in no other Dickens novel is its appearance more likely. In fact, far from having anything to do with mulling or mingling, its name comes from the Tamil *milagu-tannir*, 'pepper-water' (Drood complains that the dust of London is like 'Cayenne pepper', 106). Still it will be cheering to some to know that a 'mulligan' is a late nineteenth-century American name for a stew made with odds and ends.

The novel presents us with many permutations of the idea of permeation. Rosa feels that there is nowhere we she can be safe from the influence of Jasper, 'the solid walls of the old convent being powerless to keep out his ghostly following of her' (207). The story of the fight between Neville and Edwin propagates with the same disdain for walls:

By what means the news that there had been a quarrel between the two young men overnight, involving even some kind of onslaught by Mr. Neville upon Edwin Drood, got into Miss Twinkleton's establishment before breakfast, it is impossible to say. Whether it was brought in by the birds of the air, or came blowing in with the very air itself, when the casement windows were set open; whether the baker brought it kneaded into the bread, or the milkman delivered it as part of the adulteration of his milk; or the housemaids, beating the dust out of their mats against the gateposts, received it in exchange deposited on the mats by the town atmosphere; certain it is that the news permeated every gable of the old building before Miss Twinkleton was down. (76)

Sound and odour are particularly subject to this kind of permeation, as for example, when Edwin Drood finds that the premonitory words of Princess Puffer ‘are in the rising wind, in the angry sky, in the troubled water, in the flickering lights. There is some solemn echo of them even in the Cathedral chime’ (151).

But perhaps the most important of the ways in which substances are first dissolved and then remingled is through the action of eating. This association is evoked early in the novel:

An ancient city, Cloisterham, and no meet dwelling-place for any one with hankerings after the noisy world. A monotonous, silent city, deriving an earthy flavour throughout from its Cathedral crypt, and so abounding in vestiges of monastic graves, that the Cloisterham children grow small salad in the dust of abbots and abbesses, and make dirt-pies of nuns and friars; while every ploughman in its outlying fields renders to once puissant Lord Treasurers, Archbishops, Bishops, and such-like, the attention which the Ogre in the story-book desired to render to his unbidden visitor, and grinds their bones to make his bread. (18)

This pattern of association linking dissolution with ingestion appears also in the reference to the icing-sugar, or ‘Dust of Delight’ left on Rosa’s lips after her consumption of her ‘Lumps of Delight’ (25). It also takes in the surprisingly abundant sweetmeats and other comestibles that make an appearance in the novel. Such references, for example to the ‘currants, raisins, spices, candied peel and moist sugar’ that appear in the Cloisterham shops at Christmas, are meant to suggest ‘lavish profusion’ (143). But profusion is hard to keep apart from diffusion, interfusion and confusion too – spilling over spills into spilling into. The young ladies who we are told ‘sipped and crumbled’ (133) at the wine and cake provided by Miss Twinkleton before the Christmas recess are uncomfortably recalling the ‘Old ‘un crumbled away’ in Durdles’s enactment – this allowing a grey drift from the transitive condition of the verb ‘crumbled’ to an ‘intransitive’. The reference connects with quite a few other mentions of crumbs through the novel, which add to the sequence of particulate forms of matter, and include the ‘crumbs in the beds’ of the Nun’s House (132), the ‘tears of crumb’ wept by the demoralised loaf of bread in *The Tilted Wagon* (156) and even in the ‘crumbs of comfort’ Jasper claims to find in the account of Edwin’s disappearance – ‘I shall be glad to pick up your crumbs,’ said Mr. Grewgious, dryly (166). The idea of diffusive sweetness is there in parodic fashion too in the name of Luke Honeythunder (though I think I would have

preferred Dickens's first idea, which was 'Honeyblast' – Jacobsen 1986, 15), whose 'gunpowderous' (53) philanthropy is thereby represented as a kind of explosion of oppressive and unwished-for 'sweetness'. When Rosa is offered 'a nice jumble of all meals' (211) by Grewgious after her flight to London, it both suggests overflowing abundance and makes for a dark association with the principle of over-associativeness that accompanies eating and ingestion in the novel.

We have already encountered such a toothsome medley in the magical closet of pickles and preserves maintained in Minor Canon Corner. Effecting a harmonising of sweet and sour, the closet is a factory of 'saccharine transfiguration', in which taste, odour and sound are miraculously confectioned: 'There was a crowning air upon this closet of closets, of having been for ages hummed through by the Cathedral bell and organ, until those venerable bees had made sublimated honey of everything in store' (93). And yet this sublimation is answered and undone by the very inclusiveness of its associations: the cabinet of gustatory and olfactory wonders recalls the 'earthy flavour' of the Cathedral too much for the associations to be quite comfortable, or even, to be candid, entirely legible – even down to its containing 'a double mystery' (92). Handel presides over the whole, but, at the bottom, there is, ominously, 'a compact leaden vault' (93).

This uncomfortable overspill between the pleasurable synaesthetic spilling of the Minor Canon Corner Wunderkammer and the interfusion of the senses characteristic of the Cathedral becomes manifest in the conversation between Durdles and Jasper as they ascend the tower. Here, too, odour and sound permeate each other, but the whole now has a mortuary fragrance:

The odour from the wicker bottle (which has somehow passed into Durdles's keeping) soon intimates that the cork has been taken out; but this is not ascertainable through the sense of sight, since neither can descry the other. And yet, in talking, they turn to one another, as though their faces could commune together.

'This is good stuff, Mister Jarsper!'

'It is very good stuff, I hope.--I bought it on purpose.'

'They don't show, you see, the old uns don't, Mister Jarsper!'

'It would be a more confused world than it is, if they could.'

'Well, it would lead towards a mixing of things,' Durdles acquiesces: pausing on the remark, as if the idea of ghosts had not previously presented itself to him in a merely inconvenient light, domestically or chronologically. 'But do you think there may be



Ghosts of other things, though not of men and women?  
 'What things? Flower-beds and watering-pots? horses and  
 harness?'  
 'No. Sounds.'  
 'What sounds?'  
 'Cries.'  
 'What cries do you mean? Chairs to mend?'  
 'No. I mean screeches.' (126)

Everything in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, it seems, is subject to the propagative commixture characteristic of particulate substances; everything gets everywhere, and everywhere is liable to get mixed up with everywhere else. There is one, valiant, but fragile, countermanding of this, in the intricate system of 'stowage' practised in Tartar's maritime eyrie:

Stuffed, dried, repolished, or otherwise preserved, according to their kind; birds, fishes, reptiles, arms, articles of dress, shells, seaweeds, grasses, or memorials of coral reef; each was displayed in its especial place, and each could have been displayed in no better place. Paint and varnish seemed to be kept somewhere out of sight, in constant readiness to obliterate stray finger-marks wherever any might become perceptible in Mr. Tartar's chambers. No man-of-war was ever kept more spick and span from careless touch. (222-3)

## Aspiration

Most readers are apt to take away from the novel a sense of Cloisterham as brooding, grave, weighed down by decay and fatigue. The weightiness of Durdles's keys (38) and the oddly obsessive concern with the inappropriate heaviness of Neville's walking stick (144-5) belongs to this pattern of associations, as does the gradual building of suspicions against Neville, forming a 'cumulative weight' (169) and, in a slightly different register, Luke Honeythunder's characterisation as a 'Heavy-Weight' contender in philanthropy (174). Neville's remark to Helena on the night of their dinner with Jasper, 'What a strange dead weight there is in the air', seems to characterise the experience of the novel, as does Durdles's growl 'We're a heavy lot' (196). The novel seems to want to persuade us, and even itself, that it is drawing out, from 'the vast iron-works of time and circumstance' chains of connection that are

‘rivetted to the foundations of heaven and earth, and gifted with invincible force to hold and drag’ (141)

But the swirling immanence of ‘brittle dust’ through the novel draws attention away from these putative foundations, enforcing an awareness of an insistent lightness of being. Gravity is mined through with levity, like the massive walls of Cloisterham that are in fact honeycombed with cavities. Perhaps because Edwin Drood is to have been murdered by being flung from the top of the Cathedral tower, the novel is characterised by an insistent pattern of references to twinned levitations and declensions. The very first words of the novel plummet from the vision of ‘spike of rusty iron in the air’ to the realisation that it may be ‘so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead’ (3). This oscillation is even to be found in the details of the Crisparkles’ marvellous closet, which ‘had a lock in mid-air, where two perpendicular slides met; the one falling down, and the other pushing up’ (92). Once again, there is a resemblance between the magical reversibility of up and down of the cabinet, whose lower leaf can be lifted above its upper and vice versa, and that of the Cathedral tower, in the Irish logic that allows Durdles at once to lose and to gain weight during its ascent and descent:

As aeronauts lighten the load they carry, when they wish to rise, similarly Durdles has lightened the wicker bottle in coming up. Snatches of sleep surprise him on his legs, and stop him in his talk. A mild fit of calenture seizes him, in which he deems that the ground so far below, is on a level with the tower, and would as lief walk off the tower into the air as not. Such is his state when they begin to come down. And as aeronauts make themselves heavier when they wish to descend, similarly Durdles charges himself with more liquid from the wicker bottle, that he may come down the better. (128)

Gravity and levity change places too in Crisparkle’s evocation of his boyhood rescue by the diminutive Tartar: ‘imagine Mr. Tartar, when he was the smallest of juniors, diving for me, catching me, a big heavy senior, by the hair of the head, and striking out for the shore with me like a water-giant!’ (218). A similar imponderability arises from the cute joke about Rosa’s negligible travelling bag: ‘Joe... handed in the very little bag after her, as though it were some enormous trunk, hundredweights heavy, which she must on no account endeavour to lift’ (208).

To be sure, there are, as so often in Dickens, safety, lucidity and repose to be found in high places, chief among these being the refuge that Rosa finds in Tartar's 'garden in the air' (221). But height and lightness are also oddly characteristic of Cloisterham, whether in the loftiness of Sapsea – 'Mr Sapsea may "go up" with an address. Rise, Sir Thomas Sapsea!' (118) – and seems to arise naturally from the 'gritty state of things' that prevails in both country and city.

## Evaporation

The lightness of powdery or particulate matter is apprehensible as a result of its capacity to be stirred or lifted by air. Dust can easily become airborne, as fog, or smoke, or a 'half fire and half smoke state of mind' (113). We are subtly reminded of this association between air and particulate matter by Mr Sapsea's regret that, since the passing of the docile Ethelinda, he has been 'wasting my conversation on the desert air' (34). The gritty state of things is therefore closely compounded with the various forms of 'unaccountable wind' (105) that gust and drift through the novel.

The ease with which dust can be lifted by and into the air also brings about a close association between aspiration and respiration. This seems to be the point of the odd exchange between Datchery and Princess Puffer about Jasper, in the final chapter of the novel that Dickens completed:

'Sings in the choir.'  
 'Spire?'  
 'Choir.' (226)

As one might expect in such an adulterated atmosphere, breathing is frequently strained, impeded or asthmatic. Jasper's first singing appearance in the novel prompts the observation from Mr Tope that "Mr. Jasper's breathing was so remarkably short ... when he came in, that it distressed him mightily to get his notes out'. This associates Jasper with the Princess Puffer and the cough that shreds her words: 'My lungs is weakly; my lungs is dreffle bad. Poor me, poor me, my cough is rattling dry!' (150). The Princess Puffer's cough is matched by the 'choking' of Edwin (106) and the 'sneezing, wheezing' of the London clerks in the astringent London fog (110). Rosa experiences a similar constriction when assailed by Jasper, as her 'panting breathing comes and goes as if it would choke her' (202).

Breath, like dust, is represented in the novel as a form of community of being. The ‘secret of mixing’ (5) opium seems to involve an intimate transaction of breath, giving another layer of reference to the Princess Puffer’s name, as she blows at the pipe and ‘bubbling at it, inhales much of its contents’ (5), before passing it across to Jasper. This respiratory traffic is also suggested in the narrator’s reference to ‘the innate shrinking of dust with the breath of life in it from dust out of which the breath of life has passed’ (125), a statement which recalls but lacks the grim zest of Durdles’s account of the rigours of his occupation: ‘“And if it's bitter cold for you, up in the chancel, with a lot of live breath smoking out about you, what the bitterness is to Durdles, down in the crypt among the earthy damp there, and the dead breath of the old 'uns,” returns that individual, “Durdles leaves you to judge’ (37). For Durdles, it is not a matter of an antipathy between the breathing and the unbreathing, but between living and dead breath.

The airiest character in the novel is Billickin, who arrives in the novel ‘with the air of having been expressly brought-to for the purpose, from an accumulation of several swoons’ (228). Her speech is as pneumatic as her demeanour: ‘“I am as well,” said Mrs. Billickin, becoming aspirational with excess of faintness, “as I hever ham” ’ (228). She is preoccupied by the upper reaches of her house, especially by the condition of her roof-slates, which WILL rattle loose at that elevation in windy weather’ (229), though she finds the ascent trying: ‘She made various genteel pauses on the stairs for breath, and clutched at her heart in the drawing-room as if it had very nearly got loose, and she had caught it in the act of taking wing’ (230). It comes as no surprise to hear that the rooms of her house, she so gaseous herself, have gas-pipes, fitted over rather than under the joists, to save expense (229).

The airy condition of things in the novel may even be hinted at in Neville and Helena’s name, to which Grewgious draws attention with his question: ‘What is the Landlesses? An estate? A villa? A farm?’ (109), as though trying out answers to a riddle. As it happens, the word ‘landless’ does feature in a nursery-rhyme riddle that was current in the nineteenth century, though it can be found in Latin versions as early as the 8th and 10th centuries (Orme 1995, 85)

White bird featherless, flew from Paradise  
 Pitched on Parsonage wall.  
 Along came Lord Landless, took it up handles,  
 And Rode away horseless, to the King’s white hall.  
 [Rode away teethless, And never let him fall] (Sheppard 421)

The answer here is ‘snow settling, then evaporating into the air’.

If the presiding state of matter in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is indeed dust, and its smithereen cousins, then we can say that even this ultimate condition is only proximate, that dust is itself matter tending to the condition of air or the immaterial. It is next-door-but-one to the ‘next Degree to Nothing’ that, according to Robert Boyle, the air is (Boyle 2000, 132).

## Suspension

What, it may be asked, does all this concern with lightness, dissolution, permeation, add to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, or add up to in it?

I began by saying that I was deliberately seeking to see the novel in Mr Venus’s ‘bony light’ – to dissect it out into a kind of diagram. The elements of this diagram are not hard to detect or assemble. So the problem is not that this structure is buried too deeply, or distributed in too complex or cryptic a fashion through the novel. It is rather, that it seems to yield itself up so readily to this kind of inspection. It is the opposite of superficiality; rather than suffering from a lack of depth, what we have of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* seems to suffer rather from a lack of surface, a deficit of circumstance. We don’t have enough of the novel, and yet what we have is too much. It is not at all that the novel is all imagery and symbol, or lacks stabilising plot or incident. Indeed, I find it easy to agree with my illustrious predecessor as the editor of an Everyman edition of the novel, G.K. Chesterton, that this novel is, if anything, awkwardly overburdened with plot, a saturation that ironically makes its unfinished nature even more intolerable: ‘The only one of Dickens’s novels that he did not finish was the only one that really needed finishing... Dickens, having had far too little plot in the stories he had to tell previously, had far too much plot in the story he never told’ (Chesterton 1915, vii). There is far more story than we could possibly need in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and, for that very reason, not nearly enough.

It is tempting to try to find in a kind of thematics of the material, an analysis of the world of Drood, rather than the actions performed in it, a kind of compensation for this shortfall. But the conditions of that world remain insistent, but arbitrary, as detailed and perplexing as data relating to the conditions obtaining on some uninhabited planet. It is hard to make out a logic in this system of material relations that connects with the other kinds of logic

in the novel – affective, dramatic, ethical, even political. The novel insists on its rather perverse and arbitrary physics just as it insists on its plot, but without having had time to evolve a system that would mediate the two orders, the one having to do with character, motive, action and event, the other having to do with matter, process and relation. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens's material imagination and his moral-aesthetic imagination interlock, but do not interact; correlate but do not communicate. They answer, but do not enter into one another. Perhaps it is appropriate that a novel so suffused by forms of matter that themselves apt to form aerial suspensions should itself have been left, like dust, hanging in the air.

## References

Boyle, Robert (2000). *The General History of the Air* (1692), in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, Vol. 12. London: Pickering and Chatto.

Chesterton, G.K., ed. (1915) *The Mystery of Edwin Drood and Master Humphrey's Clock*. London: Dent.

Jacobsen, Wendy S. (1986). *A Companion to The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Orme, Nicholas (1995). 'The Culture of Children in Medieval England.' *Past and Present*, 124, 48-98.

Sheppard, E. (1855). 'White Bird Featherless.' *Notes and Queries*, 11.292 (June 2), 421.