

Pulverulence

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Dust has become source of great contemporary fascination for artists, critics and historians, a powerful quasi-object, or magic substance, something to conjure with. I want to focus on the magic of dust, by considering, in a literal way, the nature of various kinds of magical dust. I will move swiftly, elliptically, yet all the same, I trust, irresistibly, to the suggestion that, like all magical objects or substances, dust is ultimately a figuring not just of the possibility of magic, but also of the operations of magical thinking itself.

Much of the magical power of dust seems to come from the fact that it is reversible. Dust is simultaneously dispersive – it is a broadcasting – and concentrating, a making elementary, or simplification. To dust means to cover with dust, or to make dusty, as when a cook dusts with flour or icing-sugar; but it can also mean to clear of dust, this phrase being in use from as early as 1587, when George Gascoigne refers to a youth who ‘curried was and dusted slicke and trimme’ (Gascoigne 1587, 180). This makes a quibble possible in the lament of Guidarius and Arviragus for Imogen in *Cymbeline*: ‘Golden lads and girls all must/Like chimney-sweepers, come to dust’ – in which the dusting can be both the relapse into and the clearing away of dust. Oddly, one of the few other words of which this is true is to ‘skin’, which means both to cover with skin and to deprive of it – oddly, because there is an affinity between skin and dust, and not just because of the charnel-house canard that most house-dust is made up of human skin (it is not), but because of the tendency for dust to form skins, veils or integuments as it falls.

Dust is, of course, the unmistakable emblem of death, decay and dissolution. But it is also, under certain circumstances, powerfully generative. A widespread belief among the upholders of spontaneous generation was that ticks, mites, fleas and flies (those dust-like creatures), sprang up where drops of sweat fell on to dust. Les Murray’s poem ‘Feb’ seems to recall this sense of the wound-up potency of dust, in its suggestion that late summer

waits for the raw eel-perfume
of the first real rain's pheromones, the magic rain-on-dust

sexual scent of Time itself, philtre of all native beings (Murray 1991, 306)

An incident in the Finnish *Kalevala* shows the extra surge of transformative power than can be produced by grinding things down to their finest and most undifferentiated form. The wizard Lemminkainen, finding his way blocked by a fire-breathing eagle, reaches into his pockets for some chicken feathers he has previously gathered:

Searches in his pouch of leather,
Quickly takes the magic feathers,
Feathers from the hazel-chickens,
Rubs them into finest powder,
Rubs them with his magic fingers
Whence a flight of birds arises,
Hazel-chickens from the feathers,
Large the bevy of the young birds.
Quick the wizard, Lemminkainen,
Drives them to the eagle's fire-mouth,
Thus to satisfy his hunger (Anon 1889, Rune XXVI, 428)

One would have thought that the feathers alone ought to have been enough for a competent wizard, but even wizards have to obey magical laws, and here in particular the law of the reversibility of extremes, according to which the possibility of a sudden change of form depends upon first grinding all recognisable form out of the magical residue.

Dust, in the form of pollen, for example, is also fertilising. It may be that the idea of fairy dust derives from this association, via the close affinity (though it is quite recent, not going back very much earlier than the sixteenth century) between fairies and winged insects, especially bees, who are commonly laden with pollen, but more especially butterflies, the figure of the soul for the Greeks, for whom the word *psyche* meant soul as well as butterfly, which do not carry pollen, but whose talc of wing-scales may remind us of it. Dust can therefore also be regenerative. In William Tennant's mock-heroic romance 'Anster Fair', a fairy uses magic dust to regrow the nose of Melvil, which has been gored off by an angry bull

from a vial silver-bright,
Pour'd out upon his palm a powder small and white;

And to his mouth up-lifting it, he blows
The magic dust on Melvil 's blemish'd face,
When (such its power) behold another nose

Sprouts out upon the scarr'd and skinless place,
 And to th'astonish'd moon, fair-jutting, shows,
 Its supplemental elegance and grace (Tennant 1838, 26)

Reports circulated in May 2008 that a 'pixie dust' formed of powdered cells scraped from the lining of a pig's bladder, enabled Ohio man Lee Spievak to grow back the finger he had severed in an accident (Clout 2008) - claims that have since turned out to be without foundation.

Dust is amorphous, without form and almost void. But this very fact allows it to be thought of as metamorphic, with the same general capacity to assume any form as stem cells, the epithets of which – 'pluripotent', and 'totipotent' – seem equally well to apply to dust. The folk-atomism underlying this form of material imagination follows a magical or homeopathic logic of more-in-less, in which the maximally-comminuted form of the powder, in which all form is apparently decomposed, concentrates an elementary power of animation. The grinding of grain and meal to form different kinds of uniform but metamorphic substances encourages a strong association between flour and dust, and the participation of flour in the creation of mimic forms and creatures, in the bread and cakes that are so often associated with resurrection.

Powder of Sympathy

Dust can get everywhere, insinuating itself into every crevice. This makes it a medium of transformation and exchange. Almost without qualities itself, dust has the quality of qualitylessness, the virtual virtue of transmitting the virtues of other substances. It is both a terminal and a mediate matter, inert, but sometimes, for that very reason, omnivalent. In Hebrew magic, dust collected from an ant-heap and hung up inside a written charm in a workshop was believed to ensure the industry and prosperity of the business (Thompson 1908, 33). Basil Valentine recommended many forms of drying and powdering to extract and concentrate the virtue of medicinal substances, for example in this recipe for a powder to heal snakebite, formed on the principle of like curing like

Take a living Toad, dry him first at the Sun, then in a covered Pot well luted, bring him to ashes, pound him, and lay the powder on venomous bitings, or such accidents, and you shall see one Venome attracting the other; and the reason is, because by burning or calcination, the vertue of the Toad is

opened, and rendered effectually powerful to attract its like
Poyson. (Valentine 1660, 48)

The most extraordinary episode in the material imagination of particulates is the case of the ‘powder of sympathy’ whose effects were enthusiastically brought to notice by Sir Kenelm Digby. Digby, whose father had actually been executed for his alleged part in the Gunpowder Plot, revived the idea of a magical cure for wounds that had first been proposed by Paracelsus. But where Paracelsus had prescribed an ointment, having as its principal active ingredient moss from the skull of a man who had died violently, plumped out with boar's and bear's fat, burnt worms, dried boar's brain, red sandal-wood and mummy, Digby's remedy was a powder, consisting essentially of ‘green vitriol’, or ferrous sulphate – FeSO_4 . In a discourse before a learned assembly in Montpellier, Digby explained the process whereby the powder was applied, not to the wound, but to its efficient cause, or some associated property. He describes how he gave relief to the victim of a wound by dipping a bandage still impregnated his blood into a basin in which the powder of sympathy had been dissolved. The magical logic seems to have been that the soothing and salutary effect on the bandage was conveyed by the powder to its original. Just as dust and powder can transmit poison and contamination, so they can also convey care and cure. (Digby 1658).

Digby's concoction recalls and is given credibility by alchemical beliefs about the ‘powder of projection’, an alternative form of, or name for, the transmuting substance of the philosopher's stone. The Scottish alchemist Alexander Seton is reputed to have had a blackish powder which he used to turn other substances into gold, and to have bequeathed the residue of his supply to his assistant Sendivogus, whose career, however, ended in disgrace when, having run out of the sovereign substance, and not knowing the secret of its manufacture, he was driven to the expedient of gilding coins (Spence 1920, 322-3). Again, a mirroring or inverse logic seems to be at work: dust, that indeterminate substance or condition of matter, into which all matter can dissolve, then becomes a substance with the determinate power of indetermination, that can transmute anything into anything else, including, of course, a stone into dust, and dust into stone.

The dust formed of previously hard substances is often believed to retain the force or properties of their originals, particularly in the case of stones and jewels. Albertus Magnus reported that the stone ‘Mephis’ ‘being broken into powder, and droonke with water, maketh insensibilitie of torture’ (Scot 1584, 295). This means that certain forms of dust are full of peril. In the case of diamond dust, the softness of the powder seems to preserve a memory of the hardness of its original, hence, perhaps, the many stories of

its potency as a means of murder. There is a story that Paracelsus died of diamond dust poisoning; and Thomas Overbury was imprisoned in the Tower by the machinations of the Countess of Essex, who is said to have arranged for diamond dust to be added to his food (Kunz 1913, 154-6)

Diabolic powder

Powders, potions and pastes of various kinds often feature in the fantasies about witches and sorcerers that proliferated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Reports of the Salem witch trials included the claim that a young woman called Margaret Rule was tormented by the application of devilish powders:

there was a whitish Powder to us invisible somtimes cast upon the Eyes of this Young Woman, whereby her Eyes would be extreemly incommoded, but one time some of this Powder was fallen actually Visible upon her Cheek, from whence the People in the Room wiped it with their Handkerchiefs, and somtimes the Young Woman would also be so bitterly scorched with the unseen Sulphur thrown upon her, that very sensible Blisters would be raised upon her Skin (Calef 1700, 6)

One early eighteenth-century compendium of witchcraft reported of the witches' sabbath that '[t]o prevent ever telling Tales out of this School, there is a Past made at the Sabbath, of black Millet, and the Powder of the Liver of some unbaptiz'd Child which is dried; then mingling this Powder with the abovemention'd Past, it has the Virtue of Taciturnity to that Perfection, that whoever eats of it will never confess' (Bordelon 1711, 298). A similar substance could also be used to an opposite end. Albertus Magnus advised that: 'To make a Virgin or Woman tell all that she has done, take a Pigeon's Heart, and a Frogs Head, and after having dry'd them, it reduc'd into Powder on her Stomach whilst asleep 'twill make her own whatever is in her Thoughts; and when she has told all, it must be taken away, for fear she awake' (Bordelon 1711, 35).

It was regularly alleged that such diabolic powders were produced by grinding the bones of corpses, especially the corpses of babies, as having a special efficacy. Reduction to powder was a common feature of the magical practice among tribal peoples of ingesting the body parts of slain enemies in order to take on their strength: one ethnographic text records that 'the Caribs of the upper Pomerion would cut out the heart of the person slain, dry it over the fire, powder it, and then mix the powder in their drink' (Roth

1915, 158). Nineteenth-century folklorists reported the popularity in Egypt and neighbouring countries of remedies involving ‘mummy’, fragments of human bodies, supposed to have been embalmed thousands of years, pounded very fine in a mortar, and sometimes placed on the roof of a house to be activated by the dew (Hanauer 1907, 297). Contemporary fears of the toxic power of particulate matter – in radioactive fall-out, industrial poisons like asbestos dust, the anthrax powder mailed in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the recent scandal over the poisoning of powdered milk in China – all perhaps recall these potent, diabolic powders.

Unsurprisingly, there is also folk belief in powders that are proof against the power of witches. One nineteenth-century report writes of a Scottish man known as ‘Old Tam’ who ‘carried in his pouch a kind of white stuff, which he called “witch powder” and if any of the cattle in the neighborhood got bewitched, he would blow, with a quill, some of the powder into their eyes, for the purpose of breaking the witch-spell’ (Wanless 1873, 88). Some of these beliefs survive in reduced form in children’s folklore, in the effects of ‘itching powder’, as well as in superstitions about sneezing, which can signify both the insidious incursion of the evil one, and a lucky expulsion of the sally (hence the blessing of the sneezer, and the buried sense of snuff as a kind of magical prophylactic).

Dustling

Dust is a temporal, even a temporised and temporising kind of matter. It is, as Hopkins marvellously says of the hour-glass, ‘mined with a motion’ (Hopkins 1970, 52), veined or infiltrated with the motion or notion of mind. Dust signifies the irresistible progress of time, wearing everything inexorably away. In religious evocations of dust, the word is governed by a logic of approximation, which identifies the incipient with the ultimate, so that ‘dust’ means, not that final flour or powder to which beings may be reduced, but the dusty destination of things, the aspiration of all matter towards its last destitution. Because dust is this asymptotic approach to leastness, it becomes a temporal measure, which makes the use of sand in hour-glasses doubly appropriate, as the fall of dust ticks off the fall into dust, for example in George Herbert’s ‘Church-monuments’, in which ‘flesh is but the glasse, which holds the dust/That measures all our time; which also shall/Be crumbled into dust’ (Herbert 2007, 236).

Dust is the ultimate mixed body, the dissolution and dislimning of every distinct form. To become dusty is to begin to be drawn into the indistinction of pure, or perhaps rather, impure, matter. The anxiety about

keeping the cremated ashes of loved ones free from commixture and contamination is a negative expression of this principle. Dust is in one sense the image of the embodiment of the passage of matter into more indistinct form, and thus prompts the mind to further divisions of it, as in Nathaniel Fairfax's remark that 'Gods Almightyness is within the least *punctum physicum*, or dustling of body' (Fairfax 1674, 60). Dust is matter in motion towards even finer, drier dust. The dying man in James Russell Lowell's poem 'Extreme Unction' refers to his heart as a 'fruitless husk which dustward dries' (Lowell 1890, 7.203).

Dust is temporally reversible, because it is both at the beginning and the end of things: precisely because it is a material *ne plus ultra*, there is only one way to go for matter that has gone all the way down into dust, so dust will always seem instinct with the form it so conspicuously and seemingly irreversibly lacks. The stories of pharaohs' mummies crumbling into dust at the opening of Egyptian tombs encodes the possibility of a kind of pleat or syncopation of time, that would make the state of dust a kind of temporal potential that can be elastically compressed in things, ready to be released suddenly, rather than through slow, erosive unloosing.

Subtle Body

Much of the power of dust may derive from the fact that it is what might be called quasichoate. It instances the condition of the subtle body, a body that is as diffuse or scattered as it is possible to be while yet maintaining a minimal or even imaginary cohesion. Evacuated of the vital moisture, juice or serum that Aristotle and many others believed to be necessary for a being's coherence to be maintained, the parched dust for that reason seems to thirst after being, to be stirred and charged by a straining after contour and concretion. Dust, in all its allotropes, powder, sand, grit, rarely appears as pure, or uniform dissolution, but borrows the suggestion of form, gathering into clumps or clouds. Joseph Glanvill reasoned that 'a man would be loth to admit a congeries of Atomes, be they never so small or subtil, to be a Spirit, no more than he would admit the Powder of some crass Body to be a Spirit, which was so palpably a Body before. For *magis* and *minus non variant speciem*, as that Scholastick Maxim has it' (Glanvill 1688, 222)— but in fact the reduction to 'a congeries of atoms' has often been thought to have just these inspiriting or conjurative powers.

Dust may be thought of not just as primary matter, but also as a kind of anti-matter, the matrix or negative of form. Dust is in one sense, evacuated of air, the gaps between the particles reduced to their minimum — hence its muffling, choking effects. At the same time, dust is characterised by a

maximum of what might be called internal exposure, in which the ratio of the surface area of particles to their internal mass is extremely high. The availability of such a large surface area for chemical reactions accounts for the effectiveness of powders in forming solutions and suspensions. And, because they have no inside, because they are all a kind of internal exposure, dust-like substances can give contours or clarifying outlines to other things. Thus, itself formless, edgeless, dust can both dissolve form and disclose it, like the snow that, in the right, refraining degree, can give to things a magical new clarity of outline, but, passing beyond that point, can also erase every landmark beneath its featureless drifts and dunes.

Dust is attracted to other objects by static electricity, but is also itself a kind of strange attractor, which reveals forms in movements of eddy and turbulence. Dusting for fingerprints reveals the otherwise invisible traces of human presence and action. The gold-panner's sluice riddles out the gold-dust from the silt in which it is suspended, and the Hoover uses filters to separate the dust from the air in which it is inmixed. But dust can also itself be a kind of riddle or filter, which simplifies and separates out forms through its selective attentions. The Italian artist Claudio Parmiggiani, whose work has been evocatively discussed by Georges Didi-Huberman (2001), fills sealed rooms with smoke, allows the soot to settle in sheets and films, and then removes the fittings and furniture, leaving behind their sculpted outlines. We strive with dustpan and Hoover to separate ourselves from our dust, but here the dust is a way of separating objects from their silhouettes, just as the incandescent cinders turned the bodies of the Pompeians into their own inverted images or moulds. The soot effects a fall-out photography, a soft, spectral frottage, or finger-painting of the space.

The disclosive power of dust has connections with the divinatory practices which employ apparently chaotic or quasichotic forms to lift the veil of time – reading the future in dispositions of sand, cinders, moles and freckles, tea-leaves and flocks of birds. Supernatural beings are also often picked out from backgrounds of swirl and drift, of temporarily massed and rippling multiplicities. Fairies and other elemental entities are thought to inhabit the next-to-nothing bodies of wind, blizzard or storm. We might think of the vortical bodies of dust-devils, the Italian witches who were known as 'knots of wind', and the Irish Sidhe who are said to become visible in the gyrations of leaves. Divinity has the physiology of air and of the pulveriform or particulate matter that cousins it. Zeus appears to Danae in the form of a shower of gold; Dracula transports himself in the form of a mist, a power he shares with Satan; foam-formed Aphrodite's name announces her as an emanation of spray and spindrift. And the sky is strewn with the pointillist body-abstracts of mythical gods, heroes and heroines – Orion, Andromeda, Perseus.

Dream Dust

Dust is the occasion or receptacle of magical fantasy. But, in a telling inversion, it can also be the cause of it, for dusts and powders have a particular prominence in the history of opiates and intoxicants. The sleeping draughts of Victorian melodrama and sensation novels and the Mickey Finn of the gangster thriller alike are normally represented not as a liquid, or as a capsule, but rather as a finely-ground powder, that is then poured into a drink to form a potion.

The idea of magic or pixie dust probably cooperates closely with the idea that sleep is heralded by the smarting or itching eyes caused by the sandman, who brings sleep by flinging or blowing sand into the eyes, like Ole Lukøje (Ollie Shuteye) in Denmark; indeed, an alternative name for the sandman was the 'dustman' (Rose 1996, 93). The gritty residue round the eyes on waking that is commonly called 'sleep' is also sometimes thought of as the evidence of the sandman's attentions (Avis and Pyles 1981, 80). Since dust can block or modify vision, magic dust is sometimes used to confer invisibility, or to cloak one's appearance, as at the beginning of Milton's *Comus*, where the woodland wizard uses magic dust to transform his appearance when he hears the approach of a luckless virgin 'When once her eye/Hath met the virtue of this magic dust/I shall appear some harmless villager' (Milton 1998, 51).

Dust is the bearer of sleep, vision and intoxication, a notion which hangs around some of the contemporary street and slang names of opiates and other drugs, like the 'magic dust', 'angel dust' and 'monkey dust' that are all names for the hallucinogenic PCP. Dust is associated with the power of delusive spots, of dozing, dizziness and dazzle. It is a magical mixture of lightness and weight: though dust will eventually settle, it seems to do so tardily and reluctantly, as though possessed of an indwelling, Aristotelian quality of positive or intrinsic levity. Like the flying ointment of seventeenth-century belief, there is something intrinsically airborne about magical dusts and powders, which therefore seem capable of lifting the spirit into the mid-air or suspensive time-out-of-time of dream and delusion – which are often accompanied by the sensations of flight which are also a kind of image of the dream itself. The principal function of the fairy dust that Tinkerbell scatters in *Peter Pan* is to allow the children to shed their mortal gravity and give them the power of flight.

In its first appearances, 'stardust' originally referred to the dust-like appearance of crowds of stars that are so minute as not to be distinguishable

by the most powerful telescopes – the first usage in this sense being recorded in 1843: ‘in their faintest aspect they dwindle to points so minute as appropriately to be denominated *star-dust*. Beyond this, no stars are distinctly visible, but only streaks or patches of milky light’, wrote one popular astronomer (Olmsted 1853, 377). But then the metaphor is transferred to the idea that there might be a dust that comes from the stars, and to the recognition that all of our constituent matter has ultimately derived from such cosmic matter. From here in turn comes the idea of a special, powerful stuff of illusion, often associated with the glamour of show-business – in the phrase ‘to have stardust in one’s eyes’, which does not seem to appear in English until the 1920s. There is a reference in 1872 – the proof of God’s existence is not ‘made of metaphysic star-dust, like the solar system of nebulae, but inborn’, writes C.A. Bartol (Bartol 1872, 357-8) that suggests a movement towards this idea of ideality in the word ‘star-dust’. When Joni Mitchell sings ‘We are star-dust, we are golden, and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden’, she convokes the cosmic, the primal and the visionary.

In its close association with fairy gold, dust is an internal figure for magic, or the imagination of magic, itself. Fairy dust is both magic, and the drab residue of glamour when illusion ebbs. In his poem ‘The Shadow-Hunted’, W.C. Bennett evokes the spirit of the unillusioned striver after truth:

Lo, the shows of wealth, far glistening,
Luring poms, before thee burn;
Filmless eyes are thine, look through them;
Fairy gold, to dust they turn (Bennett 1862, 456)

All of these associations make dust a riddling kind of ‘thinking thing’ (Connor 2008), an image of imagination itself, a magical precipitate of the act of magical thought. It is not surprising that it should resemble the forms of ‘lyric substance’ that Daniel Tiffany has analysed in the shifting meteorologies of haze, hail, sleet and blizzard in which the mind may glimpse or figure itself. In a critical review of the arguments for ‘panpsychism’, the idea that, if it is impossible to say at what point in the plenum of things mind supervenes upon matter, or diminishes to nothing in it, then the whole of matter must be in some sense possessed of mind, or even in fact formed of it, William James reasons that the primary state of mind must in fact be identical with the most elementary state of matter:

If evolution is to work smoothly, consciousness in some shape must have been present at the very origin of things. Accordingly we find that the more clear-sighted evolutionary philosophers are beginning to posit it there. Each atom of the

nebula, they suppose, must have had an aboriginal atom of consciousness linked with it; and, just as the material atoms have formed bodies and brains by massing themselves together, so the mental atoms, by an analogous process of aggregation, have fused into those larger consciousnesses which we know in ourselves and suppose to exist in our fellow-animals. (James 1890, I.149)

For James, there was only one way in which to conceive the essential form of the mind-stuff of which the cosmos would be composed – namely, as ‘mind-dust’. Perhaps all dust harbours the intimation of this minimal condition of mind.

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