A Gritty State of Things

The Mysteries of Dickens's Last Novel

> […] he held all these horses in his hand, and could have drove 'em his own way, I haven't a doubt; but he was fetched off the box head-foremost, and now they have got their legs over the traces, and are all dragging and pulling their own ways.
>
> (Inspector Bucket, *Bleak House*, ch. 54)

Henry James's famous dictum about the "loose baggy monsters" produced by the Victorian writers in his preface to *The Tragic Muse* is still occasionally cited when the close organisation of the master's own novels is to receive emphasis. Today, when even students of English show some reluctance to tackle the great tales of the nineteenth century, few would want to argue that the denigratory metaphor did not contain some truth. At the same time we are increasingly becoming aware of the various narrative innovations which the writers of that period introduced, or at least attempted. The large vessels, which are so abundant in information, equally comprise some close structuring, which at times borders on the intricate. In this context, W. M. Thackeray will presumably first come to mind, whose reversal of the narrative situation in *The History of Henry Esmond* or the intriguing meta-fictional closure of *The Newcomes* may strike present-day readers as an anticipation of post-modern novelistic experimentation. To what extent Charles Dickens was affected by this trend towards narrative innovation is shown by the binary structure of *Bleak House*, which had obviously been planned at an early stage of the novel's gestation, or the intended enigma about the main figure's identity in *Our Mutual Friend*. Another example, which may even have had some impact on Dickens's writing, is offered by the novel *The Moonstone* (1868), written by his friend and occasional collaborator Wilkie Collins, where the actual circumstances of the disappearance of the titular jewel are only gradually discovered in the course

of a narrative that is carried forward through a wide range of individual recollections.

It has been contended that this novel is shaped by a single thematic issue which merely finds expression in a variety of different statements. In D. A. Miller's view the master voice of a repressive social system asserts itself throughout every part of the narrative.[1] Yet the polyphonic structure of the *Moonstone* cannot be argued away on the basis of a Foucauldian reading. In fact the juxtaposition of a multiplicity of diverse and differing views as mediated by a set of highly individualised characters must be regarded as the hallmark of the novel. The very conception of the work and the technical finesse through which it is realised mark the essential difference between Collins's achievement and the endless number of detective novels, which are so often claimed to descend from it. Although the genesis of *The Moonstone* dates from a period in which the paradigmatic model of the detective novel was beginning to take shape, its relationship to that genre is at best a tenuous one. Nor is it arguable – pace T. S. Eliot's classical estimate in his *Selected Essays* – that Charles Dickens's novels might be regarded as antecedents in that line of literary development.

It is safe to admit that some features of *The Moonstone*, a work of literature that Charles Dickens came to fault, although he had initially approved of its composition, may have exerted an influence on the fragmentary *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Conversely, the traits that might seem reminiscent of the earlier work bear only a slight similarity to it. While the hero of Collins's set of narratives commits a transgression under the influence of a drug that has been secretly administered to him, the probable perpetrator in the later novel is an inveterate opium addict. The loss of a highly valuable object causes considerable concern in *The Moonstone*, whereas a young man goes missing in the other work and is believed to have fallen victim to a crime. In each case no immediate conclusion is reached about the circumstances of the disappearance, whereas more than one person is suspected of having been instrumental to it. The eventual unravelling of the series of events that led to the theft of the diamond is said to have taken Dickens completely by surprise (CDL, XI, p. 385, note) and has been regarded as sensational by contemporary as well as later readers. His own work, on the other hand, contains so many anticipatory references to the actual event and its presumable disclosure that the apprehension of the perpetrator in the finished novel would hardly have seemed sensational to the reader unless the author had drastically reversed

the plot. There is no sufficient evidence extant that would corroberate an assumption of this kind. Nevertheless, attempts to work out a different, even outlandish denouement are legion.

It may be appropriate at this point to recall earlier novels of Charles Dickens in which an act of violence is treated as an apparently inexplicable issue. Though some suspicion must point to Mademoiselle Hortense after the lawyer Tulkinghorn has been murdered in *Bleak House*, she is by no means the only person to be suspected. In fact Trooper George, who also bore the victim a grudge and is known to be in possession of firearms, is even briefly arrested by the police, whereas Lady Dedlock, who had every reason to wish the lawyer removed, seems to accept guilt through her flight. Years have to pass before the secret of the murders at the Warren is finally discovered in *Barnaby Rudge*. There are more "mysteries" to be found in Dickens's tales, just as the indication of a "mystery" would by no means have counted as an innovative title in English fiction. Had Dickens known about the later, originally American usage of the word, he might well have decided to avoid it for the title of his last novel.

The basic error of the numerous critics who have advanced fanciful continuations to the fragmentary *Mystery of Edwin Drood* is to have treated it as a work of crime fiction. The very wording of the title, which comes so close to the nomenclature of this so very popular school of writing, is doubtless to blame for the misconstruction. Yet the misreading goes further than that. *Edwin Drood*, in common with all other writings of Charles Dickens, contains any number of anticipatory references or markers which may or may not forecast a particular turn of events. As we have seen, proleptic indicators are frequently not pursued any further in his works. What they indicate in a wider sense is the vastly prolific imagination of Dickens; in many cases they may also prove his uncertainty on a particular issue, or even a temporary wavering about the direction in which his narration ought to proceed. This is not to say that the author did not intentionally raise suspense among his readers. His mode of leaving a situation undecided or of prolonging the long expected termination of a strand of action amounts to a practice he was doubtless quite conscious of. Nevertheless, this narrative procedure differs essentially from a strategy of writers of crime fiction that consists in the planned insertion of veritable or false clues. In a work of this construction, the former lend support to the surprise ending, which may prove unexpected but should not border on the bizarre. The latter, on the other hand, are intended to

mislead the recipient of the tale. Though we do not know and cannot foresee the conclusion that Dickens would have reached for his last novel, we may say with some certitude that the *Mystery of Edwin Drood* would not have followed this specific narrative technique. What some critics have misapprehended as deliberate attempts of confusing the reader should rather be conceived as instances of the author's imaginative fecundity.

In contrast with several other novels of Dickens, a considerable amount of information about the genesis of *Edwin Drood* is extant. Rather than question the statements that have come down to us forthwith, as is so very often done, it seems preferable to list the evidence first. John Forster, who was not always in Dickens's confidence, has nevertheless left a pertinent summary in his *Life*. According to him, the initial idea that the author conveyed to him by letter would have concerned

> two people, boy and girl, or very young, going apart from one another, pledged to be married after many years – at the end of the book. The interest to arise out of the tracing of their separate ways, and the impossibility of telling what will be done with that impending fate. (Forster, p. 807; CDL, XII, p. 377)

The fact that this (in any case rather traditional) motif appears verbatim in the *Book of Memoranda*[2] and would hence date from an earlier period does not necessarily invalidate Forster's assertion. What seems more striking is that he should not have remembered its earlier employment in *Our Mutual Friend*, where John Harmon and Bella Wilfer have been similarly contracted by a capricious father. Conversely, he seems right to suggest that the idea left its traces on the plot of the novel.

More relevant would have been a slightly later plan, which Forster describes at some length. According to him, Dickens had afterwards struck on a new idea – "not a communicable idea (or the interest of the book would be gone), but a very strong one, though difficult to work". The "later design", as Forster puts it, would have involved "the murder of a nephew by his uncle –

> the originality of which was to consist in the review of the murderer's career by himself at the close, when its temptations were to be dwelt upon as if, not he the culprit, but some other man were the tempted. The last chapters were to be written in the condemned cell, to which his wickedness, all elaborately elicited from him as if told of another, had brought him. Discovery by the murderer of the utter needlessness of the murder for its object, was to follow hard upon commission of the deed; but all discovery of the murderer was to be baffled till towards the close, when, by means of a gold ring which had resisted the corrosive effects of the lime into which he had

thrown the body, not only the person murdered was to be identified but the locality of the crime and the man who committed it.

(Forster, pp. 807f.; CDL, XII, pp. 389f.)

Forster adds some further details concerning the fates of the other leading characters, which may have been speculative rather than definite. The main plot itself comprises several points which correlate to substantial elements in the text. It would seem beyond doubt that John Jasper, and not the title figure, was to be the central character in the narrative. This dark, even sinister person, who is shown to lead a double life, reacts strikingly to the information that his nephew Edwin Drood and Rosa Bud, to whom he himself is passionately attached, had broken off their engagement shortly before Edwin's disappearance. His interest in a tomb, and above all in the lime heap of the stone mason Durdles, would point to a means of disposing of a dead body; a motif which, it may be remembered, Dickens had already used in *Great Expectations*, where the grim Dolge Orlick predicts he "won't have a bone of [Pip], left on earth" after slaying him (GE, III, ch. 14, p. 422). Finally, a precious ring is indeed held by Edwin Drood on the night of his disappearance, which the murderer may have overlooked when he stripped his victim of incriminating articles.

It has been argued that the account might have been made up by Forster on the strength of the extant text. Yet there exists further evidence that would corroborate the claim that the consciousness of Jasper was to provide the main interest of the tale. Kate Perugini, a daughter of the author, asserted this opinion without reserve, emphasising her father's fascination with the criminal mind and his "strange insight into the tragic secrets of the human heart". Charles Dickens, the eldest son, avowed to have heard his father "conclusively" assert that Edwin Drood was indeed murdered, and Luke Fildes, the illustrator of the novel, recollecting a specific stipulation of the author, testified the same.[3]

As so often, Dickens seems to have sought inspiration from various names and titles before entering on the theme or design of action the new book might be concerned with. The earliest notes jotted down comprise a number of differently spelt names and a variety of key notes or catchy titles, most of which express the notions of loss, disappearance, flight and pursuit. It would seem that "The Mystery of Edwin Drood", which appears here for the first time, was initially not more than a working title which the author had become used to before the actual composition commenced. It may have appealed to him through its ambiguity. And

he had employed other imprecise titles before that were not modified as misnomers. That he should have preferred the final wording over variants like "Edwin Drood in hiding" or "Dead? Or alive?", which also appear among the list, would seem to support rather than contradict the view that Edwin Drood did not survive an attempt on his life.

While these deliberations might indicate that Dickens was at this stage still undecided about the course of events the narrative was to pursue, the number plans, noted down at a later stage while the writing was in progress, leave little doubt about the fate of the eponymous figure. Thus the notes for chapter 2 contain the entry "Uncle and Nephew. Murder very far off", those for chapter 7 include "Jasper lays his ground", and chapter 12, which focuses on John Jasper's ways of gaining relevant information about the burial places in and around the cathedral from the stone mason Durdles, is prefigured through the direction "Lay the ground for the manner of the Murder, to come out at last". The text of the chapter itself dwells in several instances on the "unaccountable" behaviour of Jasper, whose face at one point is said to express a "sense of destructive power". He is also specifically warned of the dangers of quicklime – "quick enough to eat your bones", as Durdles (ED, ch. 2, p. 104) points out no less crudely than Orlick. Every one of these details would seem to support Forster's summary. Dickens would have had to change his design for *Edwin Drood* completely, had he eventually decided to let the young man escape the destruction that is evidently prepared for him.

Critics often resort to possible sources whose influence might have determined Dickens or will try to trace distinctive motifs in *Edwin Drood* to an earlier appearance in one of his writings. Yet what conclusion could be drawn from the fact that a character is falsely believed to have drowned in *Dombey and Son* or again in *Our Mutual Friend* ? Or that the stalking of Jasper by the demonic opium woman has an antecedent in James Carker's pursuit by the witchlike Mrs Brown? Would the dramatic transformation in the stature of Old Martin or the unmasking of the hypocritical Pecksniff in the denouement of *Martin Chuzzlewit* suggest that Dickens must have employed the same or similar features again or, on the other hand, must have purposely refrained from doing so? In connection with this attention is sometimes drawn to a "true story" by Robert Lytton accepted for publication in the author's magazine *All the Year Round* half a year before the first issue of *Edwin Drood* came out, but eventually shortened at Dickens's behest (CDL, XII, p. 471). 'The

Disappearance of John Ackland', in which the murder of a man, whose remains have been hidden in an ice house, is detected when his watch is taken to a watchmaker for repair, undoubtedly bears some resemblance to the later novel. On the other hand, the idea for the disposal of Edwin Drood's body might rather have derived from another American murder case, in which Dickens had taken considerable interest during his last tour of the United States. He saw to it that an account of the gruesome affair was published in *All the Year Round* (CDL, XI, p. 474, and XII, pp. 9, 12f.). In this case, John White Webster, a Boston professor, had attempted to dispose of his victim by burning the remains. The dead man's ashes could be identified through his false teeth that had resisted combustion. The incriminating watch had been thrown into the river. 'The Killing of Dr Parkman' (*All the Year Round*, 14 December 1867) must count as yet another instance in which Charles Dickens's fascination with the criminal mind comes out very strongly. However, and this is usually overlooked, these two stories are by no means the only titles in *All the Year Round* in which cases of murder, even involving attempts to hide the body of the victim, are related. Doubtless, readers of Dickens's journal were attracted by grisly tales, as their present-day successors still are.

Conversely, attention has also been drawn to the melodramatic narrative 'No Thoroughfare' published in the Christmas supplement of *All the Year Round* for 1867, which Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins had written together.[4] Here the unsuspecting hero is led to his doom in the snowbound Swiss mountains, but rescued only just in time by his resolute love, mirroring Lizzie Hexam's intervention in *Our Mutual Friend*. The story, which also had considerable success in an adaptation on the London stage, may doubtless still have weighed on Dickens's mind.[5] What seems more interesting about the text is, however, the figure of the villain, who closely resembles the scheming choir-master John Jasper in the narrative that was still to be written.

Writers who take a sceptical view of John Forster's version of Dickens's plan for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* will often adduce the illustration for the wrapper of the monthly issues of the novel. The drawing consists in a decorative arrangement of diverse vignettes that would seem to forecast characteristic frames in the novel. They include a young couple departing from a church, and the figures of opium smokers, obviously related to Jasper's habit of furtively resorting to a London opium den for his gratification. More important would be a nocturnal scene at the bottom

of the page, where a man entering a vault or cellar – possibly Jasper – is dumbstruck by the solemn appearance of a young man. It has been conjectured that the apparition may be Edwin Drood, who has somehow survived a murderous attempt by Jasper and is now claiming retribution for his sufferings. The drawing leaves no doubt that Jasper, if he be the man, is deeply shocked by the sight of the uncanny visitor. Conversely, the latter might equally be a person who has disguised himself to act the part of the murdered youth. Given Jasper's clouded mind, the scene might even represent a nightmare or hallucination in which the perpretator is haunted by his victim, as Bill Sikes or Jonas Chuzzlewit are troubled by spectres stirred up by their evil conscience. One small detail, the positioning of the left hand, which the apparition extends over his right side, might require further explanation. Edwin is said to go on clutching the ring which he had failed to show Rosa at their last meeting, but used his right hand to do so (ED, ch. 13). In any case, neither Jasper nor Edwin Drood's friends and possible avengers would have known that he kept the tell-tale object in his breast pocket. On the other hand, the confrontation need not foretell a specific scene. We might do best to comprehend the drawing as an allegorical representation: truth will come out at last!

Another instance, often cited by critics, is more easily discounted. Reference is here made to an emendation in the text, which is thought to indicate that the author decided to reverse the plot of the novel at a fairly advanced stage. Chapter 14, 'When Shall These Three Meet Again?', a title inspired by *Macbeth*, and presumably recalling the stormy night when King Duncan is murdered, describes the last movements of Neville Landless, Edwin Drood, and John Jasper before the fateful Christmas dinner at the latter's home. Edwin Drood, still under the impression of his departure from Rosa, passes the hours in a wistful mood. He is to embark on a journey to Egypt, leaving the sights of the cathedral city far behind: "He will soon be far away, and may never see them again, he thinks. Poor youth! Poor youth!" The manuscript version of the last words read differently: "Poor youth! He little, little knows how near a cause he has for thinking so. Poor youth" (ED, ch. 14, p. 125).

Admittedly, the original and more extended variant of the authorial comment sounds more ominous. But would the later reading really modify the importance of the insertion, especially as the passage is followed by Edwin's unsought encounter with an old woman, the London opium dealer, who worries the young man through a fateful prophesy? We

may also remember the occurrence of similar words of warning in other works of Dickens, which may be, but are not always, fulfilled. One of the many instances of such an anticipation we have noted in *Dombey and Son*, when John Carker observes the doings of young Walter Gay with much concern – "as if he read some fate upon his face, mournfully at variance with its present brightness" (DS, ch. 6). Conversely, the various forebodings and narratorial anticipations of the murder of Tigg Montague prove true in the end (MC, chs. 42, 44, 47). Yet all things considered, Dickens may also have struck out the particular sentence in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* for stylistic reasons.

Narratorial interventions of this consequence are infrequent in *Edwin Drood*. On the other hand, the narrative contains a fair number of less overt pointers that would seem to imply an impending danger for Edwin Drood. Thus Jasper conveys and repeats a vaguely defined warning to him, which the nephew shrugs off lightly (ED, ch. 2). Depreciating his forthcoming voyage to Egypt, which (as in the case of James Harthouse in *Hard Times*, ch. 30) seems to have been motivated by boredom rather than by genuine interest, Rosa Bud expresses the hope that he will not be "buried in the Pyramids" (ED, ch. 3, p. 22); unlike the tresspassing nuns of the old "Nuns' House" who are believed to have been walled up alive for yielding to their natural instincts. Edwin Drood's misgivings about a happy present or future (ED, ch. 3, p. 23) seem to concern him rather than his fiancée, whereas his certainty of Jasper's deep attachment to him is so often and so excessively articulated that even an unobservant reader must perceive the implied paradox. While these markers derive their significance from the irony attached to the statement, a highlighted passage in chapter 13 expresses the impending doom more directly. At his final meeting with Rosa Bud, Edwin resolves to keep the ring that was intended for their betrothal a secret. The fateful significance of this token has already been alluded to when her guardian, the lawyer Hiram Grewgious, solemnly charged him "by the living and by the dead" to return it to him in case he and Rosa should become doubtful about their bond (ED, ch. 11, p. 98). Edwin's decision is approved in a momentous statement of the narrator:

> Among the mighty store of wonderful chains that are for ever forging, day and night, in the vast iron-works of time and circumstance, there was one chain forged in the moment of that small conclusion, riveted to the foundations of heaven and earth, and gifted with invincible force to hold and drag. (ED, ch. 13, p. 118)

There is no further mention of the ring in the following narration, covering the gloomy hours the restless young man passes before the Christmas dinner at Jasper's house, after which he will be heard of no more. A visit to a jeweller, whose offer of jewelry he declines, explaining that he only wears a shirt pin and chain beside his watch, advances the matter further though. There is a particular reason why these objects should receive such a measure of attention here. They will be found in a weir after his disappearance and are easily identified by Jasper as well as by the jeweller. The unsettling encounter with the old woman, whose ominous prediction would seem to have been gleaned from utterances made by Jasper in an opium dream, represents one more step towards the impending doom. "Poor youth!"

As one would expect, the novel abounds in direct or indirect references that bring out the unbalanced and sinister personality of John Jasper. He is shown to lead a double life, exchanging his respectable presence in the old cathedral town with regular visits to a disreputable London opium den.[6] He seems to be possessively attached to his nephew, and does indeed exhibit a complete and seemingly self-denying devotion to him, while hiding a passionate regard for Rosa Bud. Edwin's fiancée has, however, become sensible of his underhand affection and abhors him for it. His forever watchful observation of their doings indicates a growing bent for intrigues against the young people. That a design on a person's life is taking shape in his mind is shown by his nocturnal tour through the precincts of the cathedral. He is evidently keen to gather information concerning the burial of bodies from the gruff stone mason Durdles, whom he plies with brandy to overcome his initial mistrust. It even seems as if he managed to make copies of the keys to the tombs kept by Durdles, when the mason falls into a stupor. As indicated, a working note for chapter 12 marks these activities as a foreshadowing of the manner in which Edwin Drood will be murdered and buried. Jasper's avowed desire to make friendship between his nephew and Neville Landless, whom he has deliberately incited against each other before, rings false. The invitation to a dinner on Christmas Eve, which both of them attend with some foreboding, leaves little doubt that he hopes for a violent altercation between them that will incriminate Neville Landless.

The conduct of that young man, a native of Ceylon, is doubtless conducive to such suspicions. He himself admits to a violent and aggressive temper, has been narrowly prevented from attacking Edwin Drood physi-

cally, and seems disinclined to put up with what he regards as his snobbish arrogance. All the more, as he has become attracted to Rosa and begun to resent Edwin's obvious interest in his own sister Helena. There seems to be no apparent reason why he should carry a heavy walking stick on an invitation to a house which is so very close to his own habitat. As one might expect, this object will be construed as a murder weapon by the people of Cloisterham, who have regarded him with mistrust from the moment of his arrival. Even the Minor Canon Crisparkle's dear old mother has always had her doubts about him. In the end, Septimus Crisparkle seems to be the only person left to believe in Neville's innocence. But then the generous, outgoing, and basically naive Minor Canon equally cannot bring himself to question Jasper, who has conducted himself strangely in this affair.

While these circumstances are eagerly seized by Jasper to raise suspicion against Neville Landless, the narrative is pervaded by indications of his own involvement in the disappearance of his nephew. After all, the novel opens with a fantastic oriental dream, which incites one of the customers of an opium den to acts of violent aggression. The man is Jasper. He hurries back to the cathedral town where he holds the post of a choirmaster arriving just in time for the evening service. The opening prayer that is customarily intoned tells of "The Wicked Man", who could still save his soul by turning from iniquity to a righteous life. As the entry in the working notes indicates, this was to introduce the "key note" of the narrative (ED, p. 220). Could Dickens have intended to let Jasper repent of his crime towards the end and thus regain salvation? Or is the citation meant ironically? Jasper does indeed turn from the iniquity of the den to the sacredness of the house of god, but will return to evil again. The solemnly intoned key note would then reflect the dual nature or divided consciousness of the choirmaster. The next chapter shows him at home entertaining his nephew Edwin Drood, whom he watches as so often with looks of "intentness and intensity" (ED, ch. 2, p. 7). It is in this context, after having overcome a slight fit, that he expresses a deep dissatisfaction with the dreary way of life in the service of the Church he has become committed to. He would wish to be capable of "carving [demons] out of his heart" (ED, ch. 2, p. 11). Why this startling confession should hold a "warning" to Edwin remains to be seen. The latter certainly believes him to be stable, generous and extremely reliable, except that his loving attachment seems almost uncomfortable at times. Rosa Bud, on the other

hand, is fearful of Jasper's clandestine attentions, imagines herself to be spellbound by him, and has begun to abhor him. But she never confides her fears to Edwin, who remains entirely ignorant of his uncle's intrigue (cf. ED, ch. 19, p. 171).

The nightly tour through the precincts of the cathedral also carries various dark overtones. Jasper leaves his house secretly, endeavouring to evade attention, "unaccountably" it would seem (ED, ch. 12). The stone mason wonders at his intense watchfulness and at the fierce aggressiveness with which he assails "Deputy", a grotesque beggar boy who has molested them. Yet unlike Mr Grewgious, who has come to regard Jasper with some suspicion, Durdles's mind is too clouded to draw conclusions from his so very "unaccountable" behaviour.

Much has been made of the ominous black scarf that Jasper wears round his neck at the Christmas Service, where he has once again distinguished himself as a vocalist (ED, ch. 14). Even Edmund Wilson subscribed to the theory that the scarf must bear the significance of a thuggee garment, prefiguring the ritualistic slaughter of a human victim. Yet there seems to be little reason for the connection of Jasper with an obsolescent Indian cult. It would seem more likely that the scarf was dropped by the murderer when he disposed of his victim, thus providing evidence for his apprehension. Conversely, the impressive item, which is indeed mentioned twice, might constitute nothing more than an abortive marker which Dickens, as in so many cases, failed to take up again.

Indications of Jasper's evil intentions against his nephew become even more apparent after the latter's disappearance. When Grewgious informs him about the dissolution of Edwin Drood's engagement to Rosa Bud, the choirmaster falls into fit that lays him to the ground, a ghastly figure (ED, ch. 15, p. 138). Having recovered from his fainting, Jasper pretends to have found an explanation for what he would now regard as an abrupt departure. Edwin Drood may have absconded out of delicacy to avoid being questioned about the breakup. The working notes speak specifically of "Jasper's artful use of the communication on his recovery" (ED, p. 227). While such a display of thoughtfulness may distract attention from his excessive reaction to the entirely unexpected news, it will also make Jasper's subsequent reversal of attitude more credible. The retrieval of Edwin's watch and jewellery from a weir is generally held to point towards foul play, and Jasper now eagerly presses for the apprehension of Neville Landless. His avowal, firmly stated to the credulous Minor

Canon, that he will not rest until the murderer is brought to justice, might seem to confirm his righteousness in the matter.

At this point the often assumed mesmeric power of Jasper will have to be considered. On several occasions his eyes are indeed said to assume a fixed expression, or appear to be filmed over. Yet these symptoms may derive from the taking of opium, to which he even admits on one occasion, rather than be indicative of a specific psychic disposition. They may also have been inserted as an attribute that would point to the insidiousness of the man, as James Carker's gleaming teeth do in *Dombey and Son*. It would certainly go too far to trace the eventual finding of Edwin Drood's jewellery in a weir by Crisparkle to any willed influence on his part. The Minor Canon, it is true, finds himself drawn by some invisible power to the upper part of the river, yet this inexplicable compulsion might be conceived as an intervention of Providence rather than as a conjuring trick. It might equally serve as a reflection of his innate goodness that is activated by anything foul or untoward.

That the repeated references to Jasper's eyes mainly fulfil a characterising function is supported by their cessation at a later stage of the narrative, when the figure may seem well-established. In this connection, a closer study of the characterisation of Jasper will have to be undertaken. He is described as "a dark man of some six-and-twenty, with thick lustrous, well-arranged black hair and whisker. He looks older than he is, as dark men often do" (ED, ch. 2, p. 6).

Jasper's voice, face, and figure are said to be appealing, yet there is a certain sombreness about him, and his features often assume an intent and watchful expression. A comparison with the appearance of the villainous Jules Obenreizer in 'No Thoroughfare' reveals a noticeable similarity between the two dark figures, both of whom are also accomplished musicians. The description of Obenreizer is more extensive and more pointed:

> A blackhaired young man of a dark complexion, through whose swarthy skin no red glow ever shone. When colour would have come into another cheek, a hardly discernible heat would come into his, as if the machinery for bringing up the ardent blood were there, but the machinery were dry. He was robustly made, well proportioned, and had handsome features. Many would have perceived that some surface change in him would have set them more at their ease with him, without being able to define what change. If his lips could have been made much thicker, and his neck much thinner, they would have found their want supplied. But the great Obenreizer peculiarity was that a certain nameless film would come over his eyes – apparently by the action

of his own will – which would impenetrably veil, not only from those tellers of tales, but from his face at large, every expression save one of attention.[7]

It may be arguable to regard this strange peculiarity as an anticipation of Jasper's specific attribute. However, little would be gained through such an inference. What we may assume with some justification is that Dickens intended to bring out the aggressive potential of the character by lending him the stereotypical features of the melodramatic villain as he appeared in the narrative and dramatic literature of the day.[8] Quite different from the introduction of other murderous figures in Dickens's novels – Jonas Chuzzlewit is a crude, cowardly brute, Bradley Headstone an earnest, self-conscious young man, Rigaud a picturesque, even parodic bandit – John Jasper enters the tale as a figure of darkness. It would seem as if the author had attempted to fathom the criminal mind along the contours of a template. While Charles Dickens would hardly have reasoned thus, it may still be assumed that he resorted to the traditional character type for an inspiration towards an exploration of human deviance. Some great composers come to mind here, who have raised the most soul-searching music from the figures of stage villains.

In the dramatic scene of Jasper's passionate declaration of love to the horrified Rosa, the specific opacity of his eyes is no longer indicated. It may be sufficient to foreground him as a dark figure, shadowing the sun dial against which he is leaning – "setting, as it were, his black mark upon the very face of day" (ED, ch. 19, p. 170). The girl appears spellbound by him, yielding to the "fascination of repulsion" (ED, ch. 20, p. 175). Her abhorrence of the man notwithstanding, she may be unconsciously responding to his sexual advances. Jasper's fervent pleading is reminiscent of Bradley Headstone's passionate outburst; his attempt to blackmail her by threatening to bring Neville Landless to the gallows, on the other hand, reminds of Pecksniff's menacing Mary Graham to harm young Martin Chuzzlewit unless she proves malleable. It must not be overlooked that the excited man goes to the extent of admitting he might even have obliterated Edwin Drood to gain her love:

> I have made my confession that my love is mad. It is so mad that, had the ties between me and my dear lost boy been one silken thread less strong, I might have swept even him from your side when you favored him. (ED, ch. 19, p. 171)

Has the otherwise ever so cautious, calculating man not realised that these words come close to an admission of involvement in the disappear-

ance of Edwin Drood? In fact Rosa, who is deeply worried, only stops short of this conclusion because she is ignorant of the "criminal intellect" (ED, ch. 20, p. 175). Hiram Grewgious, on the other hand, has had his suspicions about Edwin's uncle for some time, and may in fact have engaged a detective to investigate into his affairs. Such an action would be very much in accordance with his so very orderly mind that abhors the notion of "leaving one fact or one figure with any incompleteness or obscurity attaching to it" (ED, ch. 11, p. 89). Jasper's attempt to use coercion against Rosa must confirm his adverse opinion. From now on the suspect will be pursued by nemesis, as represented by the mysterious Dick Datchery, who is introduced at an advanced stage of the narrative only, Deputy, the vicious boy who resents Jasper's one-time attack on him, and by the opium woman, who has followed her customer to Cloisterham to establish his true identity. Only the ever so trustful Septimus Crisparkle still refuses to think ill of him, as do the solid, settled people of the old cathedral town.

By this time an interval of half a year has passed since that fateful Christmas Eve. The disappearance of Edwin Drood no longer occupies the minds of the inhabitants of "drowsy" Cloisterham to the extent it did before. While it seems improbable that he will ever return, one tends to let the matter rest. After all, his body would have reached a state of decomposition in case of his demise that would no longer allow its identification. John Jasper certainly seems to imagine that he may now openly declare his passionate attachment to Rosa Bud and feels free to make a visit to the London opium den, which he has avoided after Edwin Drood went missing. But the trip turns out to have been a fatal error on his part. The opium woman, who has overheard him anticipating an act of violence in his sleep during his former calls, is now able to ascertain his respectable position and fiercely determined to follow his steps.

This is the point where the text breaks off, opening the way for a variety of conjectures that all claim to have discovered the secret behind the disappearance of Edwin Drood. Many of these constructions focus on the figure of Dick Datchery, who mystifies the people of Cloisterham as strangers usually do upon their arrival in a small town. Critical readers of the novel have derived from his conduct that he must be a plain-clothes man who has been employed to make an enquiry into Jasper's doings. Compared to little Deputy, who only has a small part to play as an informant, or the resentful opium woman, who may have gained more than an

awareness of Jasper's implication in Drood's disappearance and is apparently planning to use it against him, Datchery is probably Jasper's most dangerous pursuer. Yet what precisely is his brief, how much does he know, and above all, who is he? Characteristically, he does not introduce himself at the hotel upon arriving, but directs the attendant to the name tag in his hat, as if this was a way of authenticating his identity (ED, ch. 18, p. 160). The numerous allusions to his thickly grown white (or, at times, grey) hair, which he himself often seems to be forgetful about, make it fairly obvious that he has disguised himself. Contrary views that would claim that Dickens would never have employed such a ruse, are wide of the mark. A similar disguise, amounting to an "oakum-coloured head and whisker" (OMF, II, chs. 12–13) it should be remembered, was worn by John Harmon on extracting information from Rogue Ridinghood; and Inspector Bucket assumed the appearance of a "very respectable old gentleman, with grey hair, wearing spectacles" (BH, ch. 24) when he arrested the unfortunate Gridley.

Conversely, Datchery's wearing a disguise need not indicate that he is an individual who would otherwise be recognised in Cloisterham. The wig may have been chosen to make him look older, in fact a man of an advanced age whose wish to retire to the sleepy old town might not seem so unusual. Datchery has often been identified as Grewgious' clerk Bazzard, a dissatisfied young man, whose mind is clearly set on higher aims than a career in the legal business. His bent for creative writing and the theatre might qualify him for a mission in which he has to act the part of a genial elder, whose inquisitiveness must not arouse suspicion. The information he is to receive from the opium woman and from Durdles, the mason, both of whom he has already approached, should contain convincing proof to Grewgious that Jasper is indeed responsible for Edwin Drood's disappearance.

On the other hand, there is no apparent reason why Dickens should not have introduced an entirely new character even at this stage. In this case Datchery might eventually have disclosed himself as a professional detective. Tartar, a former seafarer who disappears from view after having taken Rosa Bud on a memorable boating trip up the Thames, has also been brought forward as a candidate. Even Helena Landless, evidently possessed of considerable courage and resolution, has been claimed as the person behind Datchery; a view which cannot be entirely discredited despite its blatant improbability. Whereas the assumption that Edwin

Drood, having survived an attempt on his life, should now furtively be trying to ascertain the circumstances of the murderous attack (as John Harmon did in *Our Mutual Friend*) can hardly be seriously considered. Would he really settle so close to his uncle, who must recognise him sooner or later, his assumed garb notwithstanding; and why should he be so startled by the opium woman's recollection of having received alms from a young man by the name of Edwin on that fatal evening? (ED, ch. 23, p. 212). Above all, is it really conceivable that a raw and careless youth should have changed so drastically in the course of a few months.[9] It is true that illness or a serious injury (which Edwin may have received) often exert a maturing influence on a young man in Dickens's novels. Nevertheless, neither Pip Pirrip nor Martin Chuzzlewit or Eugene Wrayburn could be imagined acting the part of an "old Buffer" as convincingly as the "real" Datchery, or the person posing as Datchery, does.

The identity of the stranger is certainly not a central issue though, since Jasper could evidently not be proven guilty unless Edwin Drood's remains were to be found. This is where tangible evidence gained from Durdles would prove relevant. Jasper may have thrown the body of the young man into the lime or could have buried it in one of the tombs to which the mason holds the keys. Yet what remained of the corpse could no longer be used for identification, were it not for the ring that Grewgious held so very high, that he charged Edwin "by the living and the dead" to return it to him if anything should go amiss.

Whereas passages of this tenor are very much in harmony with a narration centring on a dark event, the novel also abounds in carnivalesque scenes. As one would expect, digressions of this kind often contain a further significance. The prolonged duologue between Crisparkle and the overbearing philanthropist Luke Honeythunder, while yielding comic relief, also serves to set the genuine religiousness of the clergyman against the pseudo-Christianity of the evangelical or sectarian humbug. On the other hand, the extensive scenes in which Thomas Sapsea, the mayor of Cloisterham, shines forth as the epitome of provincial fatuousness, evidently fulfil a function in the plot. The issue of Mrs Sapsea's tomb, which the bereaved husband treats with immense self-regard, may have suggested a place where a body could be hidden to the polite listener, the choirmaster at his most attentive.

The outsize figure of the pompous bourgeois must have occupied Dickens's mind to a considerable extent, as is shown by a disdainful entry

in the number plans and a fragmentary narrative found among the author's papers after his death in which the local worthy takes credit for an intervention of his in an entirely commonplace incident. John Forster, who included the 'Sapsea Fragment' in his *Life of Dickens*, assumed that it might have been intended to suspend the outcome of the tale while adding further substance to the narration (Forster, p. 810). There is, however, no way of ascertaining whether the author had done the brief piece as a mere five-finger exercise or whether he had at some point meant to integrate it into the novel. It had best be regarded as one of the very many instances in which his exuberant imagination had to be reined in to prevent a story from running out of control. It should be obvious, however, that the narrative excursions into the stifling atmosphere of Cloisterham cannot be dismissed as entirely expendable. While Jasper's iniquity admits of no extenuation, the oppressive environment to which he takes such exception must feature strongly in the tale.

On the strength of the structuring of the preceding novels it may be assumed that Dickens's design for *Edwin Drood* foresaw a linking or juxtaposing of diverse elements, even such that the cursory reader might have comprehended as entirely differentiated or even self-contained. Sapsea's obtuseness and inability to look beyond his own narrow sphere might have formed a considerable obstruction to Mr Grewgious' proceedings, while Honeythunder's sanctimonious self-righteousness could have further incriminated Neville Landless, thus delaying Jasper's conviction. Conversely, it would strain our imagination to connect these two representatives of public opinion with a lady by the name of Billickin, at whose Bloomsbury boarding house the fugitive Rosa Bud has been accommodated. What may be inferred is that this place of refuge, where the girl is watched over by the Billickin and the genteel Miss Twinkleton, must offer a challenge to Tartar which the dauntless seafarer will doubtless overcome.

What of Tartar, whose Christian name Dickens may have reserved for a later occasion and whose vigour and love of enterprise would so eminently qualify him for a further role than that of the lover of Rosa? As the numerous, if largely abortive attempts to identify him as Dick Datchery show, readers of the novel have inclined to assign an active part in the incrimination of Jasper to him. There is certainly no lack of motivation on his part to engage in such an undertaking. Tartar has struck up a friendship with Neville Landless, whose innocence he would certainly want to

prove, and must equally wish to protect Rosa, whose champion he has become, from further harassment. One may conjecture that the master-mariner was to muster a band of avengers sworn to the apprehension of the murderer of Edwin Drood. A force of this kind might embrace Datchery, whose investigations could supply the basis for active steps towards this goal, Neville Landless, if it should be deemed advisable to set him up against the burghers of Cloisterham, who were so eager to condemn him outright, Septimus Crisparkle, unless exempted by his priestly office, and presumably Helena Landless, whose great resolve and firmness have already been asserted. Laying emphasis on the "slumbering gleam of fire" (ED, ch. 7, p. 54) in her dark eyes, the narrator may have anticipated her active engagement in the events that were to follow.

Charles Dickens may have considered various approaches that such a group might take to bring Jasper to book. He might be confronted with overwhelming evidence that had been gathered against him, as Jonas Chuzzlewit is; he might equally be led into a trap involving a letter ostensibly written by an accidental witness of the deed to exact money from him – a ruse in which the opium woman might be expected to participate. For a more dramatic turn of events, he would have to be lured to the location where he disposed of the corpse of the slain youth. Here an awe-inspiring personage dressed like the young man on that fateful evening might rise before him, affirming the evocative scene on the monthly wrapper of the serial. Whatever such strategy were employed, it must lead to an admission of guilt by Jasper. As foretold in Forster's recollections of the genesis of the novel, the confession might have been extended or resumed to cover the murderer's progress in detail. It might indeed have taken the form of a thought report, revealing the workings of a disordered, criminal mind. In a retrospective account, Jasper might have recalled the oppressive atmosphere of the small cathedral town, his deep frustration and increasing affection for Rosa Bud, coupled with an awareness of her inaccessibility. At which point his ambivalent relationship with his nephew might have been revealed.

The strong impact of the drug-induced vision in chapter 1 that the reader apprehends as an overture to the forthcoming narration must not let us forget that John Jasper's ways are otherwise mediated through a detached narrator, observed from the outside as it were, throughout the extant text; whereas the thoughts and emotions of some of the other characters, such as Rosa Bud or Grewgious, are directly or at times indi-

rectly related. For this reason, the change of the narrative situation from a mainly authorial to a first person narration focussing on the central character could doubtless have opened up a new dimension in the text. After all, an interior monologue in which the condemned man revealed his innermost cravings, fears, and concerns must have clarified several of the more substantial discrepancies in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Why does Jasper, even if he were uncertain about Edwin Drood's fate, refrain from proposing marriage to Rosa when he so aggressively declares his ungovernable passion to her? Was he inhibited from committing himself honourably by some deep-lying iniquity which he can only bring himself to reveal in the death cell? Will he now, and this might perhaps have been the "incommunicable idea" that had occurred to Dickens, make a clean breast of his excessive bonding to Edwin Drood that had conflicted with an equally indomitable desire for Rosa? Seen from this perspective, the deeply unsettled man might have laboured against a dilemma that only the extinction of one object of his infatuation could resolve. Hence Jasper would not have killed out of jealousy or to remove a rival that stood in his way. The deed he had enacted in the form of a journey ever so often during his opium trances would have amounted to an act of liberation. Jasper must murder to escape from an emotional entanglement his disordered mind could no longer sustain. However perverted such a motivation might seem, it would correspond with his extreme dismay at Edwin's disappearance, which impresses the people of Cloisterham so favourably. His excitement on that occasion admits of no doubt. Jasper's grief is genuine, as is his obsessive wish to project the guilt that now clings to him onto another person.

It must be conceded at this point that the argument advanced here rests mainly on John Forster's testimony and on the narrative texture of the fragment. It cannot claim to be more than a proposition. One may still wonder, though, why none of the many writers who have suggested solutions to the mystery have troubled themselves to consider the narratological aspect of *Edwin Drood*.

We have maintained the opinion that a return of Edwin Drood, who had survived the attack on his life, would be highly improbable, given the background, the circumstances, and consequences of his disappearance. It would certainly have been inconsistent with the drift of the narration up to the point where the text breaks off. Conversely, this is not to say that Dickens may not have given it a thought while the narrative was taking

shape. Perhaps, but that is now mere speculation, Edwin was to survive in the mind of his murderer, who could not erase the horror of his deed from his memory. As indicated, the illustration on the monthly wrapper might indeed suggest a haunting of this kind. On the other hand, the picture might also point into an entirely different direction. And we do not know what, if any, hints Dickens had passed on to the artist.

With Edwin Drood finally laid at rest, one might still want to ascertain what possible careers Dickens would have had in mind for the other leading figures. After all, the closure of a Dickensian novel usually offers an outlook on what the future held in store for the main characters. And there is no indication that the author had meant to wind up his last work in a less traditional way. After the dark atmosphere of the chapters dealing with Jasper's confession and punishment a change to a more cheerful tone in the narration might in fact be expected. Yet the fragmentary text contains little material from which individual stories might be construed. Given Rosa Bud's emphatically registered response to the attentions of Tartar, it would not seem improbable that this prototypical lady in distress was to be coupled with her hero, who would certainly not have flinched from any danger that might threaten her. Neville Landless is more difficult to position. He admits to being attracted to Rosa, who remains unattainable for him. In addition, the tuition that he receives from Crisparkle, while raising his status, would hardly qualify him for any professional career. When last seen, he is in a despondent mood and possibly suffering from a lingering illness. Some commentators have hence concluded that he must conveniently expire towards the end, clearing the ground for a happy foursome of the remaining figures. Is it really to be assumed though that the feisty youth, whose temperamental outbursts have bemused the Minor Canon at the beginning of their acquaintance, should dwindle into a loser who meekly succumbs to his demise as poor Smike does in *Nicholas Nickleby*? John Forster thought otherwise. The outcome that he tentatively envisioned would have involved a violent death, presumably at the hands of John Jasper, whom Neville Landless helped to convict (Forster, p. 808).

While a dramatic turn of this consequence would tie in better with the active nature of the young man from India, the option to let him survive might in the end have counted for more. What after all was to happen to Helena Landless, who is said to be in psychical unison with her twin-brother? Forster also suggests that she was to marry Septimus Crisparkle,

a solution that finds some tenuous support in the text. Her admiration for the sympathetically portrayed man is indeed noted. And there is some slight indication that he in turn might take a personal interest in his protégée, who is yet so different from what the good Canon may have so far encountered in the opposite sex. Septimus Crisparkle is cast as a muscular Christian, who may in the end prove a match for the intriguer, but hardly has the makings of a fighter. Conversely, would the fiery-looking, ever so resolute girl, whom the narrator describes as untamed and gipsy-like, fit the role of a clergyman's wife, who was required to lend spiritual as well as physical support to her husband? Was the wild beauty to be metamorphosed into a Dame Durden, wielding a set of keys? Would she, like Esther Summerson, have cheerfully shouldered the task of maintaining a household; which Helena must have shared with Crisparkle's mother, a neat and punctilious but narrow-minded lady, whom the narrator likens to a Dresden shepherdess?

Much thought has recently been given to the oriental discourse in *Edwin Drood*.[10] The novel is pervaded by references to Eastern culture to such an extent that it seems legitimate to conceive of an oriental theme acting as one of its components. At the same time, such a postulate ought not to imply that every allusion to an oriental name or object must be subsumed under one and the same heading. There is hence no need to establish close connections between the opium den that may prove the undoing of Jasper, the Indian background of the Landless twins, and the fragrant delicacies so neatly stored in Mr Tartar's locker (ED, ch. 21). What we may take for granted is that Dickens took a greater interest in Eastern affairs after the Suez Canal was opened in 1869; it is also quite possible that he was in his last years beginning to develop a more sympathetic attitude towards the nations of the East than he had formerly professed.

Hitherto the novelist had certainly evinced little interest in the orient. The abominable treatment that Major Bagstock's "dark" servant receives from his master is comically treated in *Dombey and Son*, and young David Copperfield's romantic notion of an Englishman's exalted station in India is amiably dismissed as a boyhood fancy (DC, ch. 16). The inventor Daniel Doyce finds that his work can win the recognition in an exotic country which it was denied at home; yet nothing is said about that enlightened realm, except that it is populated by Arabs (LD, II, ch. 34). In the case of Pip Pirrip we are at least told that the trading branch where he finds employment is located in Cairo. Yet that is all that the narrator of

Great Expectations ever discloses about his employment in Egypt. Whereas Arthur Clennam's extensive residence in China has alienated him from his homeland, next to nothing emerges about the impact the foreign culture might have made on him. It is left to Flora Finching to wonder inanely about his affairs with Chinese ladies.

In this regard a noticeable change becomes evident in *Edwin Drood*. The bizarre oriental imagery that Jasper envisions in his opium trances, unlike David's childish imaginings, is a serious matter, and the Indian background that is held to have exerted a formative influence on the Landless twins is by no means lightly treated. It remains questionable though whether Dickens had meant his last novel to address the challenge of the orient and speculate on the repercussions that the extension of British rule over a large part of the world might involve. What may safely be argued is that the *Mystery of Edwin Drood* reflects an awareness of the cultural significance of the East that may in certain instances have left its mark on a turn of action or the setting of a specific scene. Thus Jasper's opium addiction, which appears to have a deteriorative effect on his mind, is shown to produce symptoms of aberration that feed on an oriental imagery. There is no reason though to construe this deviation as an abandonment of his occidental make-up.

This does not account for the future of the Landlesses though, those incomers from the East who have ruffled the provincial tranquillity of Cloisterham to a considerable extent. Assuming that the sleepy town was to maintain its central position in the finale of *Edwin Drood* – and where else should the excellent Minor Canon find his place but in the precincts of the cathedral? – the author must have found a way of accommodating the other characters within this ambience. This might have worked for Rosa and Tartar, if they were to be paired off in the end. After all, the former seaman has already retired from active service and may wish to set up house and start a family with his loving partner in secluded surroundings. What of Neville and Helena Landless though, unless she was to marry Crisparkle after all? May we not rather expect them to depart from the scene into which they have so conspicuously intruded to find their fortune in a world of their own? This would admittedly leave Crisparkle unattached as he had been before, but might count as a suitable prospect for the good man; as it has been for Tom Pinch.

The orient, it would seem, has beckoned, but its call has not been heeded. And so the scene closes in again on the silent old cathedral town

whose citizens are so averse to any change in their settled lives that would go beyond the yearly cycle of the seasons.

Dickens may have reasoned along these lines while his work on *Edwin Drood* was in progress. At the same time, various options must have floated through his mind, more imaginative and presumably more convincing than the course that has just been suggested. Recalling our introductory study of Charles Dickens's way of writing, we feel entitled to assume that what we have defined as a first mode of composition would become active at this stage. Now the author would bring his judgement to bear on what his imagination had envisioned in so many forms and shapes. He would seek to impose control over this creative abundance and work out connections and relationships. In considering which structural alterations, configurational variations or thematic reversals should be preferred, the need for consistency would always have to be taken into account. It must by no means be ignored when new proposals for the conclusion of this baffling fragment are put forth; and there is after all no reason to think that the future will not see further excursions into this challenging field.[11]

To call for such discipline may not seem a helpful proposition to those who are still engaged in trying to find a clue to the mystery of *Edwin Drood*. It may, however, serve to reduce the number of possible continuations and ramifications that the fragmentary text might still be supposed to suggest. Charles Dickens has left us a most imaginative, highly evocative text, abundant in significance and appeal, that only he could have completed to our lasting satisfaction. It must also be borne in mind that the fragment contains a fair number of more or less isolated references and openings that would presumably have proved abortive. An attempt to read a new interpretation into a single one of these items would in all probability have to fail. Thus it would seem that nothing was to be made of the horrible shriek that Durdles remembers having heard a year earlier (ED, ch. 12, p. 107). We may equally take it for granted that the stone mason's indication of a tomb that held the remains of Jasper's brother-in-law in the public graveyard (ED, ch. 5, p. 33) would not have been revived at a later stage, since the extant text includes no further information about the choirmaster's, or for that matter his nephew's, family connections – unless this was to have been drastically changed in the numbers that were still to come. Yet to argue thus would go beyond heuristic conjecture. And this, after all, is what we have persistently tried to avoid.