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The Rhetoric of Mystery in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

In a momentous scene early on in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Charles Dickens has Mr Jasper, lay precentor, choirmaster and music teacher, accompany his student Miss Rosebud on the piano: “It was a consequence of his playing the accompaniment without notes, and of her being a heedless little creature very apt to go wrong, that he followed her lips most attentively, with his eyes as well as hands; carefully and softly hinting the key-note from time to time.”¹ What initially appears a harmonious pastime, “hinting the key-note” quickly turns oppressive, producing jarring discord:

As Jasper watched the pretty lips, and ever and again hinted the one note, as though it were a low whisper from himself, the voice became less steady, until all at once the singer broke into a burst of tears, and shrieked out, with her hands over her eyes: ‘I can’t bear this! I am frightened! Take me away!’ (ED, 92)

As an early indication of Jasper’s obsessive desire for Rosebud, this passage plays a key part (pun intended) in outlining the plot of the mystery, but, equally important, it simultaneously suggests the author’s growing unease with his own rhetorical and authorial strategies. “Hinting the key-note” is too close to Dickens’s own description of his art for comfort. “Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing our tune,” he had told the readers of *Hard Times* at the start of a chapter entitled “The Key-note,”²

¹ Charles Dickens: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Arthur J. Cox (ed.): Harmondsworth: 1983, 92. Further references to this edition, abbreviated ED, will hereafter be given in the text.

² Charles Dickens: *Hard Times*. David Craig (ed.): Harmondsworth: 1984, 65. Further references to this edition, abbreviated HT, will hereafter be given in the text.

and as late as in his number plans for chapter one of *Edwin Drood*, he reminds himself to “Touch the key note.” (ED, 284)

In addition, “carefully and softly hinting” the key-note matches Dickens’s advice in an 1859 letter to his fellow crime writer Wilkie Collins:

I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself – to show, by a backward light, what everything has been working to – but only to *suggest*, until the fulfillment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which ways all art is but a little imitation.³

As Mr Jasper, in diabolic counterpoint to the ways of Providence, for most of the finished part of *Edwin Drood* carefully and by suggestion directs unsuspecting males towards his own sinister ends (the ladies resist him more consistently), so – the comparison seems to imply – the narrator’s ventriloquism (eerily similar to Jasper hinting the key-note “as though it were a low whisper from himself” (ED, 92) may have a less than beneficial effect on the readers.⁴ Indeed, they may feel the author’s guidance to be quite as oppressive as poor Rosebud finds Jasper’s accompaniment. At the very least, no reader wants to suffer the authorial distrust of being treated like “a heedless little creature very apt to go wrong.” (ED, 92)

For many readers, *Hard Times* is the Dickensian novel in which this authorial pressure is the most clearly felt and most often resisted. The realistic novel, like all authoritative discourse, argues Pierre Bourdieu, is delivered under “liturgical conditions”.⁵ Seldom is this as obvious as in *Hard Times*, in which Dickens like a preacher hammers home his didactic and social message, a message presented in a series of uncompromising black and white dichotomies. Indeed, the novel is based on a particular text within the Anglican church year as given in *The Book of Common Prayer*, and uses a plethora of homiletic strategies to convince and persuade the reader.⁶

³ As cited in John Beer: “*Edwin Drood* and the Mystery of Apartness”. *Dickens Studies Annual* 13 (1984), 143–191 (172).

⁴ See Beer: “Mystery of Apartness”, 172 for further instances of how “Jasper’s actions appear like a dark parody of the novelist’s art.”

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Trans. Gino Raymond, Matthew Adamson. Oxford: 1992, 105.

⁶ The 15th Sunday after Trinity to be exact, with its Gospel reading on God and Mammon taken from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6). See my two articles: “The Homiletics of *Hard Times*”. Åke Bergvall, Yvonne Leffler, Conny Mithander (eds.): *Berättelse i förvandling*. Karlstad: 2000, 107–131, and “Realism and Rhetoric in

When the author some 15 years later begins to write *Edwin Drood*, it is as if that earlier novel is haunting him, not as an example to be emulated but as a strategy to react against, even to reject. On the surface the two novels have several features in common, not least their engagement in social issues, such as industrialism, education, and the empire. *Hard Times* is Dickens's acknowledged industrial, or condition-of-England novel, while *Edwin Drood* has recently been designated his "condition-of-England-in-the-age-of-empire novel".⁷ Furthermore, as we shall see, *Edwin Drood* also features a guiding subtext from *The Book of Common Prayer*. Another similarity is that neither novel starts with a narrator. Unlike all other Dickens novels, in which a first or third person narrator has the first word, both begin abruptly with the voice of a key protagonist.

But the voices we overhear at the start of the two novels also highlight their profound differences. In *Hard Times* we listen to a public and assertive oration, and we soon find out that Mr Gradgrind, school master and budding politician, is the speaker:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these little boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir! (HT, 47)

In *Edwin Drood* the voice we overhear is personal and questioning, and it takes some time and effort to figure out that the interior monologue belongs to Mr Jasper:

An ancient English Cathedral Town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here? The well-known grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What IS the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe, it is set up by the Sultan's orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in a long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colors, and infinite in number and attendants. Still,

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*". Danuta Fjellestad, Elizabeth Kella (eds.): *Realism and Its Discontents*. Karlskrona: 2003, 136–154.

⁷ Tom Dolin: "Race and the Social Plot in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*". Shearer West (ed.): *The Victorians and Race*. Aldershot: 1996, 84–100 (85).

the Cathedral tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility. (ED, 37)

These initial paragraphs contain the germ of the novels to follow: both contain an embedded outline of the plot,⁸ but, more important for my present purposes, both speak of different authorial and rhetorical strategies. Where the earlier novel immediately highlights one of the governing dichotomies (“Facts” as against “Fancy”) and introduces the primary authorial metaphor of the sower (“Plant nothing else”) with its parabolic connotations, the latter immediately establishes what I would term a rhetoric of mystery, even mystification. The novel opens with a series of tantalizing questions (“How can [...]?”, “What IS [...]?”) that can leave the first-time reader in a mental state not unlike that of the speaker, “whose scattered consciousness has thus fantastically pieced itself together” (ED, 37), and who thrice exclaims “unintelligible!” (ED, 39)

The literary style at the beginning of *Edwin Drood* seems an extension of the opium haze that envelopes the speaker, Mr Jasper, and which also figures prominently in the illustration on the cover of the monthly installments of the story, in which opium fumes emanating from smokers in the bottom left and right corners rise towards and encircle the illustrated highlights from the novel. The opium-induced vision that opens the novel is significant in terms of plot and character development, but it also seems to reinforce the author’s confession to his friend and biographer John Forster on 6 August 1869 that he had “a very curious and new idea for my new story. Not a communicable idea (or the interest of the book would be gone), but a very strong one, though difficult to work.”⁹ What Dickens really means with an “idea” that is “very curious” and “strong” but which nevertheless is not “communicable” is of course debatable, but I believe he provides a clue when he goes on to say that he does not want to risk losing the

⁸ For the beginning of *Hard Times*, see David Lodge: *Language of Fiction*, 2nd ed. London: 1984, 147, and my articles in note 6; for the opening of *Edwin Drood*, see Kathleen Wales: “Dickens and Interior Monologue: The Opening of *Edwin Drood* Reconsidered”. *Language and Style* 17:3 (1984): 234–250. Both novels, according to Harvey Peter Sucksmith (*The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens*. Oxford: 1970), belong to a relatively small number of Dickens novels that have “satisfactory” openings (84). Sucksmith then elaborates on “the subtle structural relevance” of the opening of *Edwin Drood* (85).

⁹ As cited in Beer: “Mystery of Apartness”, 144.

readers' interest. It is as if he is saying that rather than "communicating" a heavy-handed message (as in *Hard Times*) he will this time use a different strategy, however "difficult to work".

This new strategy, I believe, is evident not only in the opium haze of chapter one, but also when the story gets down to business with what looks like a more ordinary continuation. Chapter two begins just outside Cloisterham Cathedral with an ornithological observation that soon slides into metaphor:

Whosoever has observed that sedate and clerical bird, the rook, may perhaps have noticed that when he wings his way homeward towards nightfall, in a sedate and clerical company, two rooks will suddenly detach themselves from the rest, will retrace their flight for some distance, and will there poise and linger; conveying to mere men the fancy that it is of some occult importance to the body politic, that this artful couple should pretend to have renounced connection with it. (ED, 40)

The first thing the readers encounter is the ecclesiastical-sounding word "whosoever". It may fit the "clerical" context but the aviary continuation makes us unsure whether it should be read ironically. This interpretative uncertainty becomes even more problematic if we realize that "whosoever" is used in the Athanasian creed,¹⁰ recited during the same Morning Prayer as "the intoned words, 'WHEN THE WICKED MAN – '" (ED, 40) that conclude chapter one. Furthermore, both truncated texts from *The Book of Common Prayer* continue with words of salvation that are pointedly omitted in Dickens's text.¹¹ Whether ignorant or not of this context, the reader is invited to "fancy"¹² the "importance" of the behavior of the "clerical" rooks, a metaphor, however, that is immediately turned on its head by being metamorphosed into two "venerable persons of rook-like aspect". (ED, 40) Are the rooks clerics or are the clerics rooks? Who is imitating whom? And are the rooks actually present in Cloisterham, or are they only figments of the shared imagination of narrator and reader? The substitution of the comparative poles collapses not only the metaphor but the ability of "mere men" to "fancy [...] some occult importance" (ED, 40) in the actions of ei-

¹⁰ The allusion is pointed out in Wendy S. Jacobson: *The Companion to "The Mystery of Edwin Drood"*. London: 1986, 32.

¹¹ "When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive," and "Whosoever will be saved."

¹² Through its association with Jasper's opium-induced visions in chapter one, harboring a "fancy" becomes in itself a questionable activity in this novel.

ther rooks or clerics. As first-time readers we seem none the wiser, especially if we keep in mind the drug-related connotations of “fancy” from chapter one.

Then follows a vaguely ominous description of (and implied comparison between) the waning of the year and the ruinous state of Cloisterham, over which a Virginia creeper “has showered its deep-red leaves,” while “a wintry shudder goes [...] through the giant elm trees as they shed a gust of tears. Their fallen leaves lie strewn thickly about.” (ED, 40) Again we are invited to make comparisons between the natural and the human world, reinforced this time by a faint but pointed allusion to the fallen angels of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, who lay “Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks / of Vallombrosa” (Book 1, lines 302–303).¹³ Cloisterham’s fallen leaves, however, “seek sanctuary within the low arched Cathedral door,” and are “resisted” and “cast forth” not by some Miltonic God but by two men coming out of the Cathedral, one locking the door with “a goodly key” and the other flitting away with a folio music book. The whole passage seems fraught with “occult importance,” but of an elusive kind that readers do not have any “goodly key” to immediately unlock.

We are further confused by the ensuing, unIntroduced conversation:

‘Mr Jasper was that, Tope?’

‘Yes, Mr Dean.’

‘He has stayed late.’

‘Yes, Mr Dean. I have stayed for him, your Reverence. He has been took a little poorly.’

‘Say “taken,” Tope – to the Dean,’ the younger rook interposes in a low tone with this touch of correction, as who should say: ‘You may offer bad grammar to the laity, or the humbler clergy, not to the Dean.’ (ED, 40–41)

The chapter has so far introduced two “rook-like” persons, and then two persons leaving the Cathedral. We may be forgiven for not instantly sorting out the *three* persons conversing with each other, and how they relate to the two earlier couples. Only gradually does it become apparent that the two “rooks” are the Dean and Mr Crisparkle, and that the Mr Jasper they are discussing with Tope, Chief Verger and owner of the goodly key, is the person flitting away with a music book.

¹³ *The Complete English Poetry of John Milton*. Garden City: 1963. The Miltonian allusion is reiterated when Dickens describes a floor being “strewn with the autumnal leaves fallen from the elm trees” at the beginning of chapter 14 (ED, 171), in which the (supposed) murder of Edwin Drood takes place.

My point is very simple. Whereas Dickens in *Hard Times* treats his reader like “a little creature very apt to go wrong,” here he makes the reading process arduous and without clear pointers, at times almost deceptive, in order that the reader may be treated like an adult, i. e., a fully responsible moral agent.

An important part of Dickens’s strategy in *Edwin Drood* is to undercut initial appearances and to blur apparent dichotomies. The conversation quoted above is a good example of the former. The reader is here introduced to Mr Crisparkle, “the younger rook,” who is portrayed as a pedant prone to outward show and the maintaining of social rank. Those well-read in Dickens are already predisposed to suspect “venerable persons of rook-like aspect” to be little more than humbugs and cheats. In short, we are encouraged to distrust Crisparkle. But of course he turns out to be one of the heroes of the book, if with foibles of his own. Another example is Mr Grewgious, who is not so much presented as repeatedly presenting himself as a perfectly “Angular man” devoid of imagination and deeper emotions (e. g. in ED, 141). Again, he is revealed to be something more than what is suggested by his initial appearance: “there was something dreamy (for so literal a man) in the way in which he now shook his right forefinger at the live coals in the grate.” (ED, 143)

Mr Grewgious also exemplifies the second characteristic of this novel: the blurring or even collapsing of dichotomies. With *Hard Times* in mind this becomes especially significant. The earlier novel insistently and systematically separates people, places and ideas into dualistic categories, such as fact/fancy, head/heart, art/nature, or mechanical/natural time (where the first item of each dichotomy together constitute “Mammon”, i. e., the “bad” side and the second “God”, i. e., the “good” side).¹⁴ To hold the novel together Dickens in addition uses another overriding geometrical dichotomy. In the first two chapters he establishes two poles by presenting Mr Gradgrind and his school as “square”, while Sissy Jupe and the Circus are “round”. This dichotomy is then implemented throughout the book, with Mr Bounderby and Coketown joining the “squares”, and Mr Sleary, Stephen Blackpool and all other “good” characters the “rounds”. To ensure that the reader does not miss the point, Dickens places the novel’s dénoue-

¹⁴ This is where the governing text from *The Book of Common Prayer* (i. e., the Gospel reading from Matthew 6) comes in, with its message of choosing between God and Mammon. Here we also find the source of the novel’s three book headings, “Sowing”, “Reaping”, and “Garnering” (cf. Matthew 6: 26), as well as the chapter headings “The One Thing Needful”, and “Another Thing Needful”.

ment within the circle of the Circus, where a now reformed (and thus “round”) Mr Gradgrind in vain tries to persuade Bitzer, model pupil and therefore arch square, to let Mr Gradgrind’s son Tom off the hook. And the same geometrical symbol is connected to the dying Stephen Blackpool two chapters earlier, as he gazes at a star from the bottom of an old mine shaft that is surrounded by “a large ring” (HT, 286) of onlookers.¹⁵

Coming to *Edwin Drood* directly from *Hard Times*, one cannot but register that the Cathedral tower within the first few lines of the novel is described as “square”, a detail that is then pointedly repeated towards the end of the chapter, and again used in chapter two as a distinguishing feature that seems to implicate not just the Cathedral itself but all of Cloisterham, which in chapter three is described as “a monotonous, silent city, deriving an earthly flavor throughout, from its Cathedral crypt.” (ED, 51) And since the “ancient *English* Cathedral town” (ED, 37; emphasis added) is immediately contrasted to opium-induced *oriental* fancy centering on violence and sexuality, we must be forgiven for expecting clusters of opposing metaphors similar to the ones found in the earlier novel: east vs. west, foreign vs. English, fancy vs. fact, etc. The rhetoric of the novel, however, sets up these dichotomies, only to pull the rug from under the reader’s preconceived notions by subverting them.¹⁶

This subversion is especially noteworthy in the case of the binary pair square/round. We have already seen the example of the “Angular” Mr Grewgious, initially presented (much like a Mr Gradgrind) as “an arid, sandy man” (ED, 109) living in “two irregular *quadrangles*, called Staple Inn.” (ED, 133; emphasis added) However, despite himself thinking “the speculations of an Angular man” to be “probably erroneous on so globular a topic” as love (ED, 142), Mr Grewgious nevertheless ends up presenting Edwin Drood with the prototypical circular emblem, a momentous ring that carries a history of his own buried passion. And unlike Mr Gradgrind, who admonishes his daughter to “never wonder” (HT, 89; also the title of a chapter), Mr Grewgious ends his musings with a series of reiterated “I

¹⁵ The ring (with its synonyms “circle” and “wheel”) is mentioned five times in the chapter, while the following chapter (before moving on to the circus) begins by relating how “the ring formed round the Old Hell Shaft was broken.” (HT, 292) For those of a Jungian persuasion, a star seen from the bottom of a circular pit would create an image of the mandala.

¹⁶ Dolin draws the same conclusion in the context of race and empire: “The Orient has found its way to England, [...] [which is] already profoundly orientalized. Many of the virtuous characters in the novel also participate in the confusion of English and un-English, private and public, domestic and imperial.” (“Race and Social Plot”, 94–95)

wonder”. (ED, 146) He is thus revealed to possess a “round” character hidden behind an “angular” exterior. An example of the opposite process can be found in Mr Honeythunder, professional philanthropist and public speaker (favorite bugbears of Dickens’s), whose initial presentation abounds in circular expressions: “in the circles of the Fancy”, “the rural circuit”, “Rounds”, “magic circle”, “circulars”, etc. (ED, 202–203) However, as even his oxymoronic name suggests, his “circularity” is almost immediately contradicted by repeated references to his “squaring his arms” and his “platform” manners (ED, 202–203), once combined into the “platform folding of his arms”. (ED, 204) At one point Mr Honeythunder is simultaneously “turning his chair half round [...], and squaring his arms.” (ED, 203) Here the two categories cancel each other out completely, thereby losing their ability to differentiate. Unlike *Hard Times*, this novel does not allow the reader to slip into any easy association of character and predetermined geometric category.

The breakdown of these dichotomies becomes critical with the main character, Mr Jasper. He straddles the binaries throughout the novel, being associated with both the “square” English Cathedral town and the “fancy” of the oriental opium den. He is no unifying connection, however, but is torn apart by unresolved tensions. Furthermore, the dichotomies from *Hard Times* have for him been transformed from “good” and “bad” into all bad. The “squareness” of Cloisterham is as detrimental to him as Coketown is to Stephen Blackpool or Louisa Gradgrind, but this has been compounded by corresponding “circular” evils: he is “a poor monotonous chorister and grinder of music” doing his “daily drudging round”. (ED, 48–49) The music that normally functions as a metaphor of concord has for him become a “mechanical harmony” (ED, 264), while the “fancy” that in *Hard Times* becomes shorthand for all the novel’s positive forces, is in its circular repetitiveness an opium-driven curse leading Jasper towards murder: “I did it [the murder], here [the opium den], hundreds of thousands of times. What do I say? I did it millions and billions of times. I did it so often, and through such vast expanses of time, that when it was really done, it seemed not worth the doing, it was done so soon.” (ED, 269)

The “Anglican” subtexts from *The Book of Common Prayer* referred to above are made problematic through Jasper’s predicament. In *Hard Times*, biblical subtexts highlight the novel’s moral and political message. The Prayer Book, which follows the rhythm of both the Church year and the natural year (especially evident in the texts about sowing and harvesting), goes hand in hand with the novel’s controlling dichotomies, in particular with its endorsement of circularity. In *Edwin Drood* it is precisely the deadening monotony of having to participate in the “daily drudging round”

of Anglican ritual that is the problem. So if Jasper's chanting of the Morning Prayer at the end of chapter one really is Dickens's intended "key-note", as the author's number plans seem to indicate, then it is with many-layered irony that we are told that on the day of the presumed murder of Edwin Drood "Mr Jasper is in beautiful voice [...]. He has never sung difficult music with such skill and harmony, as this day's Anthem." (ED, 180) This indeed is to "hint the key-note" of the novel so softly as to be almost inaudible. Nevertheless, as he had done on every morning and evening for most of his adult life, so also this day Jasper must have intoned "When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive."¹⁷

In its own way, this verse from the Prayer Book is as important to *Edwin Drood* as the passage on God and Mammon to *Hard Times*. And the verse has a direct bearing on the issue of Dickens's changing authorial strategies. The dualism of the earlier novel has in *Edwin Drood* been *internalized*. Judith Prescott Flynn correctly points out that *Edwin Drood* is the final result of "Dickens's growing awareness of evil as intrinsic rather than extrinsic to human nature."¹⁸ Already in 1906 Kate Perugini, Dickens's daughter, wrote about how her father's final novel revealed "his strange insight into the tragic secrets of the human heart."¹⁹ Ever since Edmund Wilson's influential article "Dickens: The Two Scrooges"²⁰ critics have elaborated on these "tragic secrets" by stressing the divided nature of the novel's characters in general and the split personality of Jasper in particular.²¹ Jasper may be a murderer, but we are not allowed the comfortable assurance of simply pinning him down, Sherlock Holmes style, as the perpetrator in a whodunit. David Faulkner, furthermore, has shown how Jasper and Crisparkle, the novel's culprit and hero respectively, function not so much as opposites as

¹⁷ i. e., the lines from The Order for Morning Prayer that Dickens has Jasper intone at the end of chapter one.

¹⁸ Judith Prescott Flynn: "Fugitive and Cloistered Virtue". *English Studies in Canada* 9:3 (1983), 312–324 (312).

¹⁹ As cited in Joseph H. O'Mealy: "'Some Stray Sort of Ambition ...': John Jasper's Great Expectations". *Dickens Quarterly* 2:4 (1985), 129–136 (129).

²⁰ First published in Edmund Wilson: *The Wound and the Bow*. Boston: 1941.

²¹ For more recent examples, see O'Mealy: "Stray Sort of Ambition", 130–131, Beer: "Mystery of Apartness", 148–149, and Wales: "Dickens and Interior Monologue", 241–244.

doubles (as the similarities between their lustrous names already indicate),²² i. e., we are not allowed to sort them into “good” and “bad” categories in any simple or naïve way. In fact, for all the talk of *Edwin Drood* being one of the first detective novels, rather than comparing it to the work of Conan Doyle we would be closer to the mark discussing it in conjunction with another near contemporary, that investigator of the divided human psyche (and admirer of Dickens), Dostoyevsky.²³ For all their dissimilarities, both are exploring the predicament of living in a world not devoid of spirituality but in which old certainties and easily distinguishable categories are no longer on hand for either protagonist or reader.

²² See David Faulkner: “The Confidence Man: Empire and the Deconstruction of Muscular Christianity in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*”. Donald E. Hall (ed.): *Muscular Christianity*. Cambridge: 1994, 175–193 (182–183).

²³ Especially intriguing titles in this context are *The Double* (1846) and of course *Crime and Punishment* (1866). While *Crime and Punishment* was first published four years before *Edwin Drood*, Dickens could not have read it since an English translation did not appear until 1886.