

The story of the dust

'My dear Mr Boffin, everything wears to rags,' said Mortimer, with a light laugh.

'I won't go so far as to say everything,' returned Mr Boffin, on whom his manner seemed to grate, 'because there's some things that I never found among the dust.'

(Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, Chapter 34)

THERE ARE MANY DUSTS. Indeed, there emerges something that may be called Dust Studies. There is the dust Karl Marx noted as the most noxious and damaging of all the consequences of industrialisation, that rose in great clouds as the rag-pickers worked in the first stages of paper-making;¹ there is the malignant, eternal dust of the Archive. And there is the novel that seems to be most concerned with Dust, Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*.² We are moderns – or something like that – inheritors of biological accounts of the composition of things from the early twentieth century; and so we are bound to think that the text of the novel can't be – is bound not to be – quite candid about what's in the Dustheap. We think there must be something really nasty – something excremental – in the Heaps, somewhere. As Stephen Gill points out in his 1971 edition of the novel, there have been persistent attempts to find shit of some sort in the Harmon dustyard, that lies between Kings Cross and the Holloway Road.³ But Dickens's sociology of dust was even more extensive and accurate than the

one Gill points to in that Penguin edition, and all the Dustheaps in *Our Mutual Friend* are contained within the parameters of Henry Mayhew's account of 1851 (reissued in the four-volume edition of *London Labour and the London Poor* of 1861–62).⁴ In both editions, Mayhew is very clear that 'dust and rubbish accumulate in houses from a variety of causes, but principally from the residuum of fires, the white ashes and cinders, or small fragments of unconsumed coke, giving rise to by far the greater quantity'.⁵

He was clear as well, about the value of the product, before and after sifting; about methods of collection, storage and processing; about the labour process of the dustyards and the sub-contracting and putting-out by which it was organised, and about the family economy that the process maintained among many workers. He philogised the peculiar language of the dust trade (reading these passages from Mayhew is like being present at the birth of speech, as if in a kind of space in which gesture creates language, some Rousseau-esque realm of immediacy and plenitude, where if a woman sifts, she is a 'sifter' and if a man shovels the dust to fill her sieve, he is a 'filler-in').⁶ And at the end of it all, he concluded briskly that 'A dust heap, therefore may be briefly said to be composed of the following things', and he went on to itemise brieze or cinders, sold to brickmakers; rags, bones and old metal, sold to marine store dealers; old tin kettles and the like, sold for japan-work (the corners of trunks, for example); old bricks and oyster shells sold to builders for sinking foundations and forming roads; old shoes, used as the in-filling between sole and insole in new ones; money and jewellery, 'kept, or sold to Jews' – and the item 'soil', which is what has probably given rise to some of the excremental confusion.

'Soil' – Mayhew is insistent on this point – is nothing to do with night soil, but is rather the name for the fine dust sold to farmers as 'manure of land of a particular quality'. This fine dust could be used to break up marshy or heathy land, and was in demand in the

1840s among agriculturalists no longer reclaiming land for crops, but turning what they already possessed into pasturage. It is not excremental nor decaying vegetable matter, but rather, a very fine powdered cinder.⁷ The siting of dung-hills in the same yards as dust-heaps, which was common in the early century, *may* have continued after 1848 and the Nuisances Removal and Disease Prevention Act of that year (11 & 12 Vict. c.123), but not for long, and Mayhew did not find them contiguous in summer of 1850. He told his readers that dustmen may also happen to be night soil collectors; their master may also have contracted with a parish for the cleaning of cesspits, and with individuals for household collection; but that was work done under a different contract, at a different time, and was part of a quite separate economy. Dustmen, scavengers, nightsoil men and sweeps, all belong to distinct systems, and separate economies. No shit.

Of course, the pigs rooting in the North London yards that Mayhew visited in the summer of 1850 suggest that the divisions of rubbish were not as strict as the ones he laid down, though the point he was probably making through them was that a dustyard bore strict comparison with a farmyard, where a nice fat household pig could be kept going for free on what fell out in the normal way of business. There is the Golden Dustman's – Mr Boffin's – fragment of a memory, of Old John Harmon bringing many 'a bone and feather and whatnot' to Mr Venus, that also serve to blur the strict categorisation Dickens was working with.

And then there's the Inner Temple; and there 'Mr Boffin in Consultation', for he has 'frequently heard tell of the Temple as a spot where lawyer's dust is contracted for' (136). In the course of the meeting, he describes how feelings for poor Little John Harmon, last seen by him and Mrs Boffin when the child was but seven years old, have faded over the years. The young solicitor responds ('with a light laugh', the narrative voice notes):

'My dear Mr Boffin, everything wears to rags,' ...

'I won't go so far as to say everything,' returned Mr Boffin, on whom his manner seemed to grate, 'because there's some things I never found among the dust.'

'Dust' is one of those curious words that in its verb form, bifurcates in meaning, performs an action of perfect circularity, and arrives to denote its very opposite. If you 'dust', you can remove something, or you can put something there. Viz.: you cleanse a place – usually a room in a house – *of* dust, in a meaning that seems to have been established at the same time as that of its opposite action, which is to sprinkle something with a small portion of powdery matter, as in 'to make dusty' (1530), or later, 'to strew as dust' (1790). 'Dust' is established as a culinary term by the 1780s (to dust toast, or the surface of a pie, with nutmeg, or cinnamon, or sugar). The earlier, opposite, verb of removal – as in dusting a room – is established at the end of the sixteenth century, at the same time as the noun consolidates its meaning as 'a minute particle of dry matter'. The 'dry' is important, for the late sixteenth century inherited the meaning of dust as that which is first solid matter, but comes to be so pulverised or comminuted as to make it able to rise in a cloud.

What is there to say about strange semantic circularities like these? – except perhaps, that they were most strikingly discussed by Sigmund Freud in his essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919), in a kind of psycho-philology already noted, in which the word for the utterly strange 'leads back to what is known of old and long familiar', where the *unheimlich* finally coincides with its opposite, the *heimlich*, the most familiar of things: a woman's body ... 'the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning'.⁸ (All of this *must* be about narrative, and here with Freud – in the translation of Freud – the distinct possibility of a fairy-tale.) Yes, to be sure: the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* do coincide; but not without a

little labour on the part of the philologist-cum-psychoanalyst. Whilst 'dust' on the other hand, *verb transitive*, just does it for you, all at once: to remove dust; to sprinkle with dust.

In writing up his forays into the dust yards of North London, Henry Mayhew was dismissive of the new 'zymotic theorists' who saw danger lurking in the Heaps, and in the clouds that rose from them as they were worked. Indeed, he noted the healthy, rubicund appearance of the hill-men and hill-women, the fillers-in, the sifters, the carriers-off, and all the children 'helping' among the heaps.⁹ Such insouciance about dust could not have lasted much beyond the 1860s, and Dickens's repetition of it. The suspicion of dust, that Kate Flint explores in her recent "The Mote Within the Eyes"¹⁰ is most intense in the 1880s and 1890s, but originates twenty years earlier, and for good reason, as we have seen.¹⁰

We have thus already explored one category of Dust, which knows no end, and which cannot be dispersed, as harbourer of the anthrax infection (which also knows no end, and cannot be dispersed). We have seen Jules Michelet breath in this Dust to find himself able to speak on behalf of the dead, and to interpret the words and the acts they themselves had not understood. Dust allowed him a perception of time as a kind of seamless duration in which past and future could not be sundered. In his journal, Michelet recorded amazement at perpetuity itself, at the marvellous continuity of things that brought him the gift of experiencing history.¹¹ Turning this sense perception to deliberate narrative purpose, he wrote to give the People shape and form (historical existence; a new life) through depiction of their revolutionary struggles. The narrative of Dust – the dust he inhaled in order to perform this task – was intimately tied to the French Revolution and its nineteenth-century reverberations. We may see Michelet as an extraordinarily vocal narrator of Dust, but not the only one. The seventh verse of the *Marseillaise* describes how:

Nous entrerons dans la carrière
Quand nos âinés ne seront plus
Nous y trouverons leur poussière
Et la trace de leurs vertus¹²

(We will enter on our career [the career of the citizen and the revolutionary]/When our elders are no more/We will find there their dust – *leur poussière* – /And the trace of their virtues)

There is a pun on *carrière*, which is both 'career' and 'quarry'. In the Revolutionary period, the Paris quarries were filled in with the bones of the dead to form the Catacombs. All the nineteenth-century revolutions which followed on from 1789 added their shrines to this underground realm of dust, which indeed the Catacombs may be called, for it is more common in French literary language to use *poussière* for the remains of dead bodies, rather than *os* (bones).

Michelet's breathing in of the dust of the dead thus has a double meaning, or rather, a literalness, that does not pertain in English. And the Catacombs were often visited as a tourist attraction (as were the Morgue and the sewers). In nineteenth-century Paris, then, we could say that the spectacle of dust thus existed, created by the Revolution (which also created the national archives and the duty of the state to provide them for the public).¹³

Michelet thus enacted some of the more material dimensions of the Revolutionary order, at the same time as dust actually began to be flushed out of the street by the new, Haussmannian sewer system.¹⁴ Dickens remarks on this newer, cleaner Paris, where 'nothing is wasted' in Chapter 12 of *Our Mutual Friend*, by way of contrast with London, and London's 'mysterious paper currency which circulates ... when the wind blows'. But he attributes the cleanliness of the Parisian streets to 'human ants [who] creep out of holes and pick up every scrap', to leave – 'nothing but dust', rather than to the regularly placed spigots that pushed Seine water

through the streets. Dickens's ants, by the way, pick up every scrap, and leave – dust. Dust, you see, will always do this: be both there and not there; what is left and what is gone.

Michelet was unaware of the precise components of his Dust, and yet he breathed it in, restored the dead to the light of day, and gave them justice by bringing them before the tribunal of History. This History was what Michelet himself wrote, out of the notes and the handfuls of dust he carried away from the Archive. This writing was also an idea, of the total justice of a narrative that incorporated the past and the 'when it shall have been', that is, when the dead have spoken and (Michelet's central interest as a historian) France has been made. Yet it is not his history of the French nation for which Michelet is now remembered. What promotes the bright, interested question 'Was he *mad*?' when you tell people that you are reading him, are all the volumes that do not seem to be works of history, to the modern, professional, historical eye: work on the sea, on birds, on women and witches, on mountains, insects, love ...¹⁵ These were the texts, an admixture of physiology and lyricism, that entertained Roland Barthes in the early 1950s. They will probably continue to be marked as odd, though in the nineteenth-century development of the modern practice of history, they were not so *very* strange.

As History, as a form of narrative and as a modern academic discipline, came to be formulated, it bore much resemblance to the life-sciences, where the task was also to think about the past – think pastness – about the imperishability of matter, through all the stages of growth and decay, to think these matters through to the point of recognition that 'within the system of nature existing as it is, we cannot admit that an atom of any kind can ever be destroyed'.¹⁶ *Nothing goes away*. Physiology, in serious and popular ways, was conceived as a form of history, a connection exemplified by the American chemist and physiologist George William Draper,

who followed his *Human Physiology* of 1856, with a *History of the Intellectual Development of Europe* in 1863. Here he sought to provide evidence for a concluding remark from his earlier work, that 'the history of men and of nations is only a chapter of physiology'.¹⁷ Draper's panegyrics to the ever-moving, ever-changing sea and sky in this second work, his descriptions of the constant yielding of mountains to frost and rain, the passing of all things from form to form, suggest that Michelet's volumes on similar topics should not be read solely under the interpretive banner of Romantic lyricism, but as a form of history. They also make it very plain how Michelet *knew* that the unconsidered dead were to be found in the Archives Nationales; how he *knew* that the material presence of their dust, the atomistic remains of the toils and tribulations, the growth and decay of the animal body, was literally what might carry them, through his inhalation and his writing of History, into a new life. He knew that they were 'not capable of loss of existence'.¹⁸

This is what Dust is about; this is what Dust *is*: what it means and what it is. It is not about rubbish, nor about the discarded; it is not about a surplus, left over from something else: *it is not about Waste*. Indeed, Dust is the opposite thing to Waste, or at least, the opposite principle to Waste. It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone. Nothing *can be* destroyed. The fundamental lessons of physiology, of cell-theory, and of neurology were to do with this ceaseless making and unmaking, the movement and transmutation of one thing into another. Nothing goes away. Indeed, the death of the material body was but 'a final restoration of the compounds of the Human Organism to the Inorganic Universe', and the beginning of a new 'Life of the Soul'. 'If there is a point in natural philosophy which may be regarded as finally settled', wrote Draper, 'it is the imperishability of the chemical elements and the everlasting duration of force ... we cannot admit that an atom of any kind can ever be destroyed'.¹⁹

Involvement in the everyday Dusty Trades, far away from the physiologist's laboratory, allowed access to this philosophy of indestructibility – what we may come to recognise as the Philosophy of Dust. In 1863 the trade association of master paper-makers mounted a campaign against the taxes on imported rags. One of their campaigning pamphlets, *The Rag Tax. The Paper Makers' Grievance and How to Redress It, for Private Circulation* (1863) outlined a grand system of the world, in which the waste of an industrial civilisation was caught in the same great cycle as was cultural production:

Civilisation invents various and abundant clothing – the wear of clothing terminates in the production of rags – Rags are transmuted into Paper – Paper supplies the incessant Press, and the various activities of the Press sustain and extend Civilisation.²⁰

This was a self-congratulatory description, for the Paper Makers went on to assert that where 'society is most civilised there will be most Rags for the Paper Maker, and most demand for his Paper ... the Continent makes more Rags than it makes Paper ... England makes proportionately much more Paper than the Continent, and [yet] does not get enough of its own Rags.'

These are nineteenth-century conclusions, about the imperishability of matter and the import of physiology for all sorts of imaginings, both philosophical and every-day. In *Strange Dislocations*, I was particularly interested in the complex history – of thought, of common imaginings – that led Sigmund Freud to muse (again, in 'The Uncanny') on the way in which 'biology [had] not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every human being, or whether it is only a regular but perhaps unavoidable event in life.'²¹ Now, having breathed in the Dust, *knowing about it*, in a way that was not really possible in a period of attention to its opposite, Waste, the implications of this imperishability – this *not-going-away-ness* – of Dust for narrative, force themselves forward.

Cultural historians and commentators have been convinced by the idea of Waste. How could we not all be so convinced, when we pay attention to the nineteenth century, and its multifarious discourse on loss, mishap, mislaying, squandering, spending, ridding and surplus (perhaps above all, surplus, and its enthralling metonym, 'excess')? It is difficult to avoid the net of the Victorian imagination in this regard, with its multifarious discourse on what gets left over; outside, outwith the system (whatever that system might happen to be). And we are certainly under the net here with Henry Mayhew. After the *Morning Chronicle* survey was over he began his next publishing venture, the original *London Labour and the London Poor*, the one published in weekly parts between August 1851 and February 1852.²² His readers were presented in alternate weeks with a sociology and history of prostitution and an account of the London sewer system. These analogies and connections are our taken-for-granted of mid-nineteenth social perception: that there were things and people done away with: put away, or put outside. Our understanding of all sorts of plot – fictional plots and social plots – our understanding of *how things happened* indeed, is bound up with this understanding: that there is sequence, event, movement; things fall away, are abandoned, get lost. Something emerges, which is a story. You can take this story from sewage systems, and systems of prostitution, and plans for the social incorporation or dispersal of surplus women and destitute children; but you can't take it from Dust. Dust – the Philosophy of Dust – speaks of the opposite of waste and dispersal; of a grand circularity, of nothing ever, ever going away. There were complex, articulate and well-understood languages developed to express this knowledge, a few of which I have mentioned. And I suggest that Dust is another way of seeing what Franco Moretti described as the nineteenth-century solution to the violent ruptures of the late eighteenth century, a solution found in narrative. He points to 'the centrality of

history in nineteenth-century culture and ... science as well; and ... the centrality of *narrative* within the domain of literature'. He thinks that the reason for this is that narrative and history 'do not retreat before the onslaught of events, but demonstrate the possibility of giving them order and meaning'. The *Bildungsroman*, the novel of development, was in his view, the particular response to such an onslaught, with its extraordinary attempt to make time, sequence and linearity into a circle; to create harmony out of discordant, non-sequential, meaningless events.²³ To recognise and deal with the understanding that nothing goes away: to deal with Dust. And we have already noted History's solution, which is a more extraordinary one than achieved in the nineteenth-century novel. Historians, writing the narrative that has no end, certainly make endings, but as we are still in it, the great, slow moving Everything, in which nothing has gone away and never shall, you can produce only an Ending, which is a different thing indeed, from an End.²⁴ Michelet's solution to the constraints placed on him by History's narrative was to write in the future perfect, from the perspective of the 'when it shall have been'. This was an attempt to appropriate the perspective allowed to the novelist, to be the story-teller who has it all, the whole story, *there* and palpable, time ready to be made a circle, delivered up in parts to the reader, who doesn't know it yet.

Now we should look out these occasions when Dust is dealt with as an opposite principle, or philosophy, to Waste. Historians will be most interested in people *knowing* about these things, being conscious of the opposing principles of Waste and Dust and the spaces in between. So we will ponder overt statements about the plot of *Our Mutual Friend*, and the difference between them and the way the story actually works. The Mounds are probably meant to make the story. Dickens certainly tidies up and concludes his narrative as the final remnants of the Heaps are carted away from the yard. But it is the river that does it: the great open sewer of the

Thames is what makes everything happen, moves the plot towards its conclusion, and makes the story.



It is impossible to discover when Mayhew went to visit the North London Dustheaps. Certainly not for the *Morning Chronicle* survey, and they are not mentioned in the weekly parts issue of *London Labour* of 1851–52, when the topics are sewage waste and prostitution. But there are internal references in the 1862 edition that show it to be written in 1850 – probably high summer, as the pigs appear full grown and rooting nicely, unaware of their autumn fate. It happened, there are traces of the visit. So though there were things that Mr Boffin ‘never found among the dust’, that doesn’t mean they weren’t – aren’t – there to be found. Boffin was wrong on this score; but then, isn’t Boffin’s being wrong part of the story?

Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume 1* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, [1867] 1976), pp. 592–3.
- 2 References in the text are to the 1971 Penguin edition of *Our Mutual Friend*.
- 3 The most contemplative attempt is still Harvey Peter Sucksmith’s, in ‘The Dust-Heaps in *Our Mutual Friend*’, *Essays in Criticism*, 23 (1973), 206–12. But see also John Sutherland, ‘What Is Jo Sweeping?’, in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Puzzles in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 90–8.
- 4 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (New York, Dover Publications, [1861–62] 1968), 2, pp. 166–79.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 6 Bertrand Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew. Representing and Communicating the Poor* (London, Rivers Oram, 1996), pp. 45–59. When Mayhew expressed a desire to write a history of the people ‘in their own words’ he was not behaving as an oral historian *avant la lettre*; rather, the