Between

Drawing the (Un)finished Line in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

Saverio Tomaiuolo

Abstract

Studies devoted to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* have tended, in some cases, to dismiss it as a great albeit incomplete novel, whereas others have pushed forward, rather than backward, the speculations raised by this text, with a series of hypotheses regarding the disclosure of the mystery, and its possible epilogue. Notwithstanding the status of Dickens's last novel as an unfinished text, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* features a closed narrative structure and may be studied as a finished text. Charles Allston Collins's sketched wrapper design and Luke Fildes's wrapper and illustrations reflect the novel's mixture of symbolic and realistic elements and feature a complete visualisation of its main themes. In this respect, these visual texts may be also analysed and "read" as original and independent, rather than derivative, works. Finally, the mystery the title alludes to suggests the actual impossibility of disclosing all of the novel's (and illustrations') enigmas and encapsulates a paradigm of unsolvability that is central to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Keywords

Charles Allston Collins; Charles Dickens; Luke Fildes; *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; Victorian illustrations

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Charles Dickens's relationship with illustrations and illustrators was based on a series of collaborations, contrasts, friendships, misunderstandings, misreadings, deaths, and afterlives, which began with his first novel *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) and ended with the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). In a sort of narrative and visual circle the first novel by Dickens was the work of a dead illustrator and of a surviving writer, and the last one of a dead writer and of a surviving illustrator. Notwithstanding the status of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as an unfinished manuscript which has inspired an endless number of hypotheses on its development and conclusion, this novel features, as it were, a closed narrative structure and may be studied as a finished text. Charles Allston Collins's wrapper and Luke Fildes's illustrations reflect the novel's mixture of symbolic and realistic elements, and feature a complete visualisation of its main themes. Finally, the mystery the title alludes to (that is, Edwin Drood's disappearance) suggests the actual impossibility of solving all of the novel's enigmas, and encapsulates a paradigm of unsolvability that is central to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, intended here as a narrative and as a visual text.

Symbolically, Dickens was born as a novelist on 20 April 1836 with the suicide of Robert Seymour, the first illustrator of *The Pickwick Papers*. In February 1836 Edward Chapman (of Chapman & Hall) was informed by Robert Seymour of his project to illustrate the adventures of a fictional «Club of Cockney Sportsmen», to be published – as Chapman and Seymour agreed – in shilling monthly numbers, so as to be available to a larger number of readers. Dickens seemed the best choice because of his style, which mixed journalism and narrative fiction, as presented in *Sketches by Boz* (1836). However, business worries and anxieties (added to what was probably depression) and the tense relationship between writer and illustrator lead to a tragic conclusion: in the back garden of his Islington residence, in Liverpool Street, on 20 April 1836 Seymour took his own life, just before the second number of *The Pickwick Papers* was being published. Dickens was now solely in control of his novel and after having excluded

George Cruikshank (who had illustrated *Sketches by Boz*) because he was too busy, and after having agreed with Chapman & Hall that the third number of *The Pickwick Papers* should consist of only two illustrations and thirty-two pages of letterpress – reversing the number of images and written pages – he accepted William Hall's suggestion to employ Robert William Buss. The problem was that Buss was not an expert in the process of etching and, despite his attempts to learn it in a couple of weeks, the results were unsatisfying. Although Buss's etchings *The Cricket-Match* and *The Fat Boy Awake on this Occasion Only* were attached to the third number, they were soon suppressed and replaced by those drawn by Hablot K. Browne («Phiz»), who was chosen as the definitive illustrator. The serialisation of *The Pickwick Papers* generated – in Catherine J. Golden's words – «an unprecedented publishing boom and established a formula for publishing fiction: an instalment accompanied by illustrations came out independently in a part issue or as a feature in a monthly or weekly periodical»; then, after the completion of serials, «publishers bound up the parts along with the illustrations into a simple printed edition» (Golden 2017: 2). Finally, the whole package was bound by a coloured wrapper, usually green, which was exactly the same for each number, except for the issue date. With a few exceptions, Dickens's novels appeared in monthly instalments of thirty-two pages with two illustrations (advertisements were put before and after them) that preceded the printed texts. The two plates were printed and attached in front of the written text; accordingly, readers *first* saw illustrations and *then* texts. This aspect is a further demonstration of the relevance of images (and of Dickens's use of them), since «Victorian serials often spoke to the eye, with illustrated wrappers and images playing a rich – even primary – signifying role for readers» (Leighton and Surrige 2018: 9)[1]. In this respect, Dickens's *oeuvre* cannot be dissociated from its visual rendering, since written words and illustrations inform (and sometimes even complement) each other. Like novels or short stories, illustrations may be «read like texts» in Peter Wagner's words (Wagner 1996: 17), and approached not just as derivative or secondary visual products but rather, in intermedial terms, as being in dialogue with their source. Illustrations and images accompanying written texts (including in Dickens's case also wrapper designs) are thus *connected* to the descriptions they refer to and,

[1] According to John Harvey, «author and artist worked for a public which did not easily imagine what it read, and so found illustrations a valuable aid» (Harvey 1970: 3).

at the same time, *isolated* from them, and likely to be subjected to specific analyses.

Thirty-three years after *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* came back, as it were, to where it all started, likewise, his relationship with the illustration process similarly testified to difficulties and procrastinations. The setting of his childish memories and of many events recounted in *The Pickwick Papers*, Rochester – where he decided to live during his last years in Gad's Hill Place – was turned into the fictional town of Cloisterham in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Burdened by serious health issues (lameness, giddiness, inability to raise his hand to his head etc…), in 1869 doctors advised Dickens to cancel his final reading tour before its conclusion, cutting the seventy-seven performances that he had planned. After a short pause, he was allowed to deliver a short farewell series of readings that concluded on 15 March 1869 in London, and on 1 April of the same year the first instalment of what was to be his last novel came out. Dickens was well aware that his end was approaching, to the point that he added a clause to the contract with his publisher Chapman & Hall for repaying part of the anticipated money in case he died, or could not complete his novel. This is one of the reasons why *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is (unsurprisingly) shorter than his previous works, and it is composed of only twelve monthly numbers – instead of the usual twenty – of which Dickens could complete only six before his death on 9 June 1870. The publication of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* ushered endless debates on its remaining plot and epilogue (and a plethora or spurious endings and continuations)[2], although direct and indirect testimonies – including his son Charles Dickens Jr., his daughter Kate Dickens, his friend and biographer John Forster and the two illustrators Charles Allston Collins and Luke Fildes – agreed that the Cloisterham Cathedral choirmaster John Jasper was the murderer of Edwin Drood by means of a necktie (burying his nephew's body in quicklime inside the Cathedral crypt to accelerate the process of decomposition). As for the other characters, namely Rosa Bud (or «Rosebud»), Stony Durdles, the small boy known as Deputy, Reverend Septimus Crisparkle, Mr. Hiram Grewgious, Mr. Thomas Sapsea, Neville Landless and his twin sister Helena, Dick Datchery, Tartar, and Princess Puffer, their destiny has been uncertain and only partially foreseeable. Kate Dickens gave another possible hint at the narrative organisation of the novel's epilogue in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in June 1906, where she recalled her father's words on

[2] For an investigation of the solutions to the mystery, see Orford 2018b.

the originality of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which according to Dickens did not lie in the mystery but in the psychological description of John Jasper. The novel's villain at the end of the novel would confess his crime in his prison cell in the third person, as if it were told by another. This is confirmed by Luke Fildes's son in his memories of his father, according to whom Dickens had the intention to visit Maidstone jail and to bring his illustrator with him (Fildes 1968: 10), in order to visualise the setting of Jasper's final confession and to help him create an illustration that could surpass Cruikshank's famous plate *Fagin in the Condemned Cell* in *Oliver Twist* (1837).

The Mystery of Edwin Drood has been initially dismissed, in some cases, as a great albeit incomplete narrative or worse as a failure[3], whereas in other cases critics have been prone to push forward, rather than backward, the speculations raised by this text, focusing on the disclosure of the mystery, and on the possible epilogue. Nevertheless, an analytically productive way to appraise Dickens's novel (as well as its illustrations) does not lie in approaching it as a fragment, but as a closed textual unity and as a completed piece that can be scanned through the instruments of critical reading. This approach is supported by the peculiar way in which Dickens has unknowingly (un)finished his novel, since the last chapter returns cyclically to its opening by having Jasper coming back to the same opium den with which the narration started. Partially dismantling and dismissing Droodist debates on the evolution of (and solution to) *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Gerhard Joseph writes that, whatever may have been the novelist's intentions, the chapter that he left «allows us to make meaning of both Dickens's novel and life *as if* what we have […] is all there», so as «to read that chapter as an ending of a finished manuscript rather than as the exact middle» (Joseph 1996: 172). The title of this unfinished novel is to be interpreted as assertive rather than inquisitive, despite its author's hesitations over it. Dickens's initial uncertainty is testified by the presence of seventeen working titles – which have confounded and sometimes mislead readers and critics – such as *Flight and Pursuit*, *Dead or Alive?*, *One Object in Life*, *The Loss of Edwyn [sic] Drood*, or *The Disappearance Edwyn [sic] Drood*. In line with its final title, Dickens's novel, as well as the complete evolution of its plot, should remain a mystery forever. As a closed textual unity, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* words and illustrations leave intact the enigma

[3] Wilkie Collins was extremely critical against *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, defining it «the melancholy work of a worn-out brain» (Collins 1890: 3).

the title alludes to, since – through their specific style and semiotic density – they both construct a written and visual narrative that opens itself to multiple readings.

Our Mutual Friend – Dickens's last completed novel – was published in 1864, with illustrations by Marcus Stone, who later decided to devote his energies to painting instead of producing black-and-white drawings. Dickens, who was in need of an illustrator for his soon-to-be new novel, excluded «Phiz», who in 1867 had been stuck by paralysis, and decided to engage his son-in-law Charles Allston Collins, Wilkie Collins's brother, who had married his daughter Kate in 1860. Dickens's main idea was to move away from having caricatural illustrations and to opt for a more realistic and darker approach to the visualisation of his text. This is indicative of Dickens's search for a new figurative language that was different from the one that characterised his previous novels. Notwithstanding his previously negative views on the pre-Raphaelites – expressed in a vehement attack against John Everett Millais's *Christ in the House of his Parents* (1849-1850), published in the June 1850 number of *Household Words* – Dickens's attitude towards these artists changed, to the point that he would employ an unofficial member of the Brotherhood to give visual form to his unfinished novel. Weakly by constitution, his son-in-law had become famous for his painting *Convent Thoughts* (1851) and had already experimented with realistic subjects (focusing on social issues) in *Drink* – a drawing once thought to be by John Everett Millais, but recently attributed to Collins – inspired by George Cruikshank's series of etching entitled *The Bottle* (1847). For this reason, Dickens hired him for the wrapper design and illustrations of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, as confirmed by a letter dated 14 September 1869 to Chapman & Hall. However, after having sketched the wrapper design and some illustrations, Charles Collins was forced to abandon the project due to his ill health, which would lead to his premature death in 1874. Before starting his work on the wrapper design for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Collins was given by Dickens's publisher (upon the writer's advice) the original wrapper for *The Pickwick Papers*, which reproduced the typical Wheel-of-Fortune Design that would appear in almost all of Dickens's serialised novels. For the creation of his wrapper design, Collins took inspiration from Hablot Browne's model, and followed Dickens's indications, which were deliberately vague and approximate, so as to preserve the mystery of the storyplot. In Cuming J. Walters's opinion, «[what] Collins knew or did not knew we shall never learn. Dickens, having decided on a mystification, would not be likely to tell the artist all about it and ask to give the secret away on the wrapper». Therefore, Dickens «would aim at as much

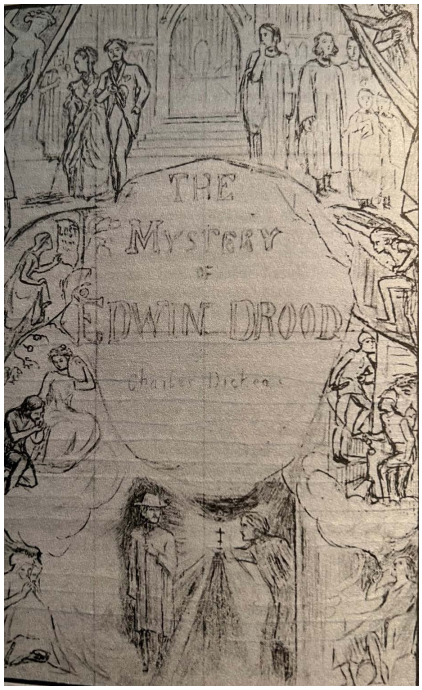

Fig. 1

concealment as possible, and, where revelation was unavoidable, would make the revealing obscure and delusive» (Walters 1912: 226). Collins's design has been an object of debate for many critics, and its visual opacity may be compared to the textual opacity of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. This is the first example of the ambivalence and complexity in the visual translation of an unfinished novel dealing with a mystery. There have been speculations regarding Collins's wrapper: as it stands, it is probably one of the most reliable sources for the eventual development of Dickens's novel, and even its allusiveness as a rough but engaging sketch is in line with the nature of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as an ambivalent and inherently mysterious text. At the same time, «[the] sparseness of detail in Collins's much discussed sketch for the wrapper, together with the angularity of its lines», as Jane R. Cohen argues, «suggests [Collins's] hesitation as well as his ill health» (Cohen 1980: 213)[4].

The textual "reading" of Collins's wrapper design should be counter-clockwise, beginning from the top and then moving from the upper left downwards (Fig. 1). In the top left-hand side, an allegorical female figure

[4] For an analysis of Collins's and Fildes's wrapper designs and illustrations, see Dickens 1972: 238-43, Dickens 2002: 294-8, and Tomaiuolo 2015.

stands for Love, whereas its specular image on the right-hand side of the page (with a dagger) is a male figure standing for Murder, Hate, Death or Vengeance; in Fildes's wrapper, this latter image will acquire feminine traits, recalling the traditional representations of Lady Macbeth with dagger in hand[5]. The couple sketched on the top left probably represents Edwin and Rosa, pensively watched by a character, who may be identified as Jasper, on the right. Moving downwards, there is another (presumably allegorical) female figure who stares at a notice regarding Edwin's loss, surrounded by a branch of roses. On the left, there is a woman (Rosa or Helena) and her light haired suitor, identified by many critics with Tartar; he wears a moustache, so he can be neither Edwin (who in the novel does not have a moustache) nor Jasper (who is dark-haired). On the left corner we can see Princess Puffer. The light-bearer on the right of the central tableaux – probably set in the Cloisterham Cathedral crypt – has been identified as Jasper, whereas the illuminated figure may be interpreted as a resurrected Edwin as the product of a hallucination generated by guilt (a fact that may recall, again, *Macbeth*), as Neville or even as Helena Landless disguised as Datchery. The figure is putting his/her fingers in the upper buttons of his/her coat, searching for what is perhaps Edwin's wedding ring, which had resisted the corrosive effects of the lime, and which will be one of the clues through which Edwin's body would be recognised. On the right-hand corner of the wrapper there is another opium smoker, who has masculine traits. Moving upwards to the right-hand side we can notice a winding staircase, with local policemen pursuing somebody. The top figure pointing to Jasper is probably Jasper himself, who confesses his own crime as if told by another, as reported by Kate Dickens. This is confirmed by a letter written by Dickens's son-in-law (and illustrator) in May 1871, addressed to a theatrical impresario, in which Charles Allston Collins explains that «the figures hurrying up the spiral staircase» are led by Jasper, «who points unconsciously to his own figure in the drawing at the head of the title» (qtd. in Dickens 1972: 238).

After Collins's dismissal, Dickens found himself facing the same problems that he had to face when he was working on *The Pickwick Papers*. In his search for a new illustrator none other than his old Pre-Raphaelite enemy Millais helped him. After having seen Luke Fildes's illustration for Victor Hugo's *L'homme qui rit* (1869) (entitled *Houseless and Hungry*, which depict-

[5] On the influence of *Macbeth* (1605-1608), see Duffield 1934, Collins 1965, and Jacobson 1986.

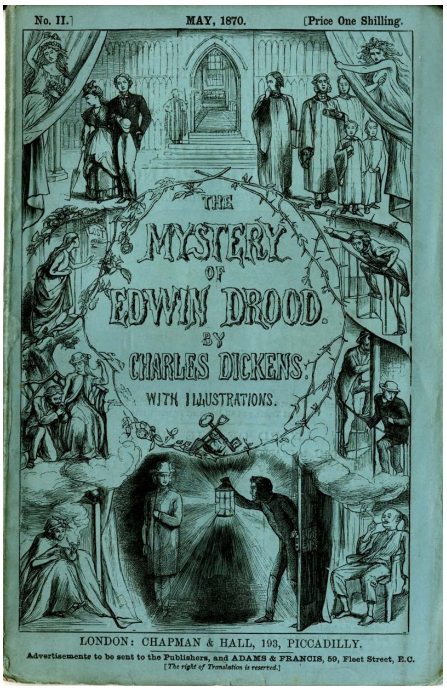

Fig. 2

ed some vagrants awaiting admission to a workhouse) on the first issue of *The Graphic*, published on December the 4th 1870, Millais realised that the peculiar graphic style of Fildes – based as it was on realistic representation and on the prevalence of dark hues – could fit in with the mood of Dickens's novel-in-progress, and immediately brought with him a copy of the weekly to the writer's residence at number 5 Hyde Park Place, exclaiming «I've got him!». In order to test Fildes's capacity, Dickens (via his publisher Chapman & Hall) requested that he prepared a couple of drawings from *David Copperfield*. Satisfied by the result, Dickens found in Fildes a perfect visual intermediary for the style that he decided to adopt in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which was, at the same time, realistic and allusive, visually detailed and symbolic. Fildes's first task was therefore to complete Collins's sketched wrapper design (Fig. 2). Although Fildes' figures are more neatly drawn, the identity of some of them still remains difficult to associate with a specific character, contributing to enhance the paradigm of mystery that characterises Dickens's novel. The single branch of roses surrounding the female figure looking at the loss notice on the left in Collins's wrapper now has expanded to the whole central section of the design (a subtle wordplay with the name of the main female character, Rosa Bud). The spade, the key and the dinner bundle that appear just upon the lower tableaux – which were not in Collins's original sketch – evidently belong to Durdles, who

is now given a central role in Edwin Drood's disappearance, and in the eventual resolution of the mystery. One of the main changes is represented by the pursuing figures on the right-hand side, who were depicted as policemen by Collins, and who now wear plain clothes, probably because the chronology of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* excluded the presence of an official police force at the time the story is set. The significance of particulars in Fildes's (and Collins's) wrapper design may be studied according to Mieke Bal's reflections on the value of visual details, especially in the case of those (seemingly minor) elements that activate further hermeneutic suggestions. Fildes's and Collins's dissemination of emblematic objects (the dagger, the spiral staircase, the roses, etc.) that often seem to be "out of place" represents, as Mieke Bal suggests, a «contradiction that tears open the work, the monstrous element that reveals the flaws and disparities and, because it provokes astonishment, offers never-ending possibilities for the understanding of these works» (Bal 2004: 1289). The ambiguous and even misleading nature of the details included in the wrapper designs for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* does not only enhance the mystery of Dickens's unfinished novel but becomes «the basis for a quite different understanding» (Bryson 2001: 3) of the wrapper as visual textual unities that are specific and individual elements that can be "read".

Like Marcus Stone, Fildes was an academic painter trained at South Kensington and the Royal Academy and was distant from the Hogarthian style of Cruikshank, since he was involved in the so-called «social realist movement». Whereas earlier illustrators such as Cruikshank or Phiz were caricaturists interested in the comic grotesque – an element that finds a narrative homologue in Dickens's early novels – the artists of the Sixties «created a new visual idiom, a complicated and sometimes challenging way of showing in black and white which embraced a variety of subjects, themes and styles» (Goldman and Cooke 2012: 2). These various styles, which reflected the relationship between mid-to-late Victorian literary trends and figurative art, ranged from the neo-medievalism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to the idyllic imagery of George John Pinwell, from the domestic settings of John Everett Millais to the social realism of Luke Fildes and the classicism of Frederic Leighton. The definition «Victorian Social Realism» refers to a specific group of British artists that included, among others, Luke Fildes, Frank Holl and Hubert von Herkomer, who in the 1870s «provided documentary illustrations from the lives of the poor, especially in London» (Treuherz 1987: 9), and whose works appeared mainly on the pages of *The Graphic*. Influenced by the first wave of Victorian realists such as Richard Redgrave (see for instance *The Sempstress*, 1841,

Fig. 3

and *The Outcaust*, 1851) and George F. Watts (*The Irish Famine*, 1849-1850, and *Found Drowned*, 1849-1850), these artists focused on working class life and subjects, reconfiguring the lesson of the Pre-Raphaelites on the value of minute details and accurate observation to develop a renewed realistic figurative style. Wood engraving was the prevalent mode of reproducing illustrations during the mid-to-late Victorian age, with the firm of the Denziel brothers as its most important representatives. With the aim to provide more precise and satisfying illustrations, Fildes decided to introduce a new method in the wood-engraving process: in order to avoid the problems related to the transition from paper to woodblocks (which resulted in poor visual quality), he decided to photograph his drawings, enabling them to be more easily reproduced on woodblocks by wood engravers and successively compared to the final result in illustrations, before being printed.

Fildes's wood-engraved illustrations for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* reflect not only Dickens's darker narrative approach in his last novel (where comic elements are lessened, with the sole exception of auctioneer-turned-Mayor Mr. Sapsea) but also its deliberate ambiguity. In this sense, Fildes's illustrations may be described as «iconotexts» because – as Peter Wagner puts it – «they integrate the semantic (denotative and connotative) meaning of the written texts that are iconically depicted, urging the "reader" to make sense with both verbal and iconic signs in one artifact» (Wagner 1996: 16). Like all visual texts, his illustrations (and wrapper design) must be aligned with interpretation rather than simply with «perception», in contrast with what Mieke Bal has described as the «visual essentialism»

of traditional art history (Bal 2005), which tended to treat artifacts as works appealing only to the eye rather than to textual analysis. *In the Court*, the first illustration that accompanied *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (Fig. 3) is set in a London opium den, and its description is inspired by a real visit during which Dickens was at Shadwell, accompanied by some friends and by a member of the police. The man on the right who has just pierced together his «scattered consciousness» (after taking opium) and who is «supporting his trembling frame upon his arms» (Dickens 2002: 9) is John Jasper. His figure and clothing are in contrast with the mass of the drugged people sleeping in the bed (on the left), which include the Lascar, a Chinaman and a haggard woman, although they cannot be easily identified. In the corresponding section of the novel Jasper has not been introduced yet, and therefore this image reflects the allusive quality of Dickens's text, raising questions rather than answers. The Lascar's imaginary knife (a weapon that was already introduced in the right-hand upper section of Collins's and Fildes's wrappers) anticipates proleptically and alludes to the murder that will take place in the novel:

> Slowly loosening his grasp as he listens to the incoherent jargon with an attentive frown, he turns to the Lascar and fairly drags him forth upon the floor. As he falls, the Lascar starts into a half-risen attitude, glares with his eyes, lashes about him fiercely with his arms, and draws a phantom knife. It then becomes apparent that the woman has taken possession of this knife, for safety's sake; for, she too starting up, and restraining and expostulating with him, the knife is visible in her dress, not in his, when they drowsily drop back, side by side (Dickens 2002:10).

The difficulty, or rather the impossibility, to understand what it is taking place at the beginning of the novel (and in its illustrations) – as well as the mystery that it is going to unfold – is enhanced by the presence of the expression «Unintelligible!» (Dickens 2002: 10), pronounced by Jasper with reference to the sentences spoken by the opium woman. This first panel is therefore perfectly readable and at the same time allusive and «unintelligible», explicit and mysterious, like the novel itself, enhancing the polysemic quality of Dickens's novel (and of its visual transposition). Since Dickens and Fildes may be considered as the creators of two different narrative and visual texts, the illustrations to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* cannot be treated as a «homogeneous site of ideological and semiological coherence» but become «a space of dispersion and sedimentation in which conflicting

Fig. 4

possibilities work in parallel with – or, in certain cases, against – authorial cl/aims and objectives» (Mermoz 1989: 502).

The necessity to approach *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as a finished text that includes a series of internal cross-references is confirmed by the fact that Fildes's illustrations replicate the same setting from different perspectives and in different moments. For instance, the novel's last illustration (included in the number published posthumously in September 1870, three months after Dickens's death) returns to the first plate, mirroring its opening. *Sleeping It Off* (Fig. 4) is set in the same opium den of *In the Court*, but this time it is Jasper who is unconsciously lying on a bed, with Princess Puffer trying to decypher his mysterious and «unintelligible» words; the crime has been already committed (Edwin Drood has been presumably strangled, and his body buried in quicklime). The Lascar's imaginary knife presented in *In the Court* – a symbol of murderous violence – has turned into a brutal reality in Jasper's case. The light from the candle contributes to enhance the darkness of the room, and may be visually associated with the two candles illuminating Jasper in another illustration entitled *At the Piano*, where a candle is put in front of him. In both cases, Jasper is put – alternatively – in darkness or in light as if to replicate his psychological duality. As Philip V. Allingham writes, «Dickens's untimely death resulted in the illustrations coming full circle, so that the novel visually breaks off where it began, with the sordid opium den of Princess Puffer and her respectable customer with the hidden life, choirmaster John Jasper» (Allingham 2022).

Fig. 5

In the second plate of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* we move from the enclosed space of *In the Court* to an open garden. The prevalence of darkness of the previous illustration is counterbalanced by the light that dominates *Under the Trees* (Fig. 5). The confusion and «unintelligible» nature of the figures in *In the Court* is narratively and figuratively juxtaposed to the visual neatness, and by the clarity of intent exemplified by Edwin Drood and Rosa Bud's decision to break off their engagement. Fildes has taken some liberties in the figurative representation of characters (Rosa appears serious and meditative, whereas in Dickens's text she is coquettish) and of the setting (the scene in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is set in autumn; on the contrary Fildes uses a spring backdrop). These as well as other changes are not to be considered as misreadings of Dickens's source text, but should be approached within the framework of translation theory, because illustrations may be studied as a creative form of textual transposition. The transition from a system of signs (the novel) into another (the illustrations) translates «the verbal texts into visual terms. Like all translations, they approximate the source, critique it, supplement it, and employ a different vocabulary in another language […] what the source text expresses» (Patten 2011: 292).

The garden in the Nun's House featured in *Under the Trees* reappears in another illustration, entitled *Jasper's Sacrifices* (Fig. 6), which offers a detailed visual representation of Jasper's morbid feelings and obsession, and of his «mad» love for Rosa:

Fig. 6

> Rosa, even when my dear boy was affianced to you, I loved you *madly*;… even when I thought his happiness in having you for his wife was certain, I loved you *madly*;… even when I strove to make him more ardently devoted to you, I loved you madly;… even when he gave me the picture of your lovely face so carelessly traduced by him, which I feigned to hang always in my sight for his sake, but worshipped in torment for years, I loved you *madly*;… in the distasteful work of the day, in the wakeful misery of the night, girded by sordid realities, or wandering through Paradises and Hells of visions into which I rushed, carrying your image in my arms, I loved you *madly* (Dickens 2002: 214, my emphasis).

Also in this case the setting (the garden in Miss Twinkleton's boarding school) is reintroduced, but the situation is totally altered. However, Fildes chooses to use a different visual style, in particular because he dramatises Jasper's morbid feelings, whereas in *Under the Trees* Edwin and Rosa seem to be "fixed" in their decision. In this emotionally charged scene, characters have theatrical poses, according to a figurative language that may be interpreted in light of Fildes's interest in drawing *en plein air*, using live models in real places. The symbolic title of chapter 19 ("Shadow on the Sun-Dial") is also alluded to in this illustration, which presents a sundial on the left. Compared to clocks, sundials are traditionally associated to idyllic setting; on the contrary, in this case their function is different. As Steve Dillon states, in this plate «Jasper seems to cast a thick shadow onto

the grass to the left of him, and Rosa leaves that side of the empty bench. He stands directly between the sundial and the empty part of the bench, as if literally embodying his shadow qualities». The garden, which was «no doubt charming in sunlight» in the illustration *Under the Trees*, has become here «close and claustrophobic» (Dillon 2002: 72). The bench that was previously occupied by Edwin in the second illustration is now ominously empty. The absence of Jasper's nephew is counterbalanced by Rosa, who retreats on hearing Jasper's words and on seeing him approaching her. The scene presented in this illustration corresponds to a specific paragraph of the novel, in which Jasper refers to his own «sacrifice»; the title of Fildes's illustration is to be intended as a reference to Jasper's devotion to Rosa (towards whom he has sacrificed everything) as well as to his sacrificial killing of Edwin Drood:

> «Reckon up nothing at this moment, angel, but the sacrifices that I lay at those dear feet, which I could fall down among the vilest ashes and kiss, and put upon my head as a poor savage might. There is my fidelity to my dear boy after death. Tread upon it!».
>
> With an action of his hands, as though he cast down something precious.
>
> «There is the inexpiable offence against my adoration of you. Spurn it! […]»
>
> «I love you, love you, love you! If you were to cast me off now – but you will not – you would never be rid of me. No one should come between us. I would pursue you to the death» (Dickens 2002: 217-9).

In Fildes's plate, Jaspers's gesture and his empty arms seem to offer Rosa the ghostly body of Edwin as a token of his contorted feelings in a sort of pagan ritual. This is just an example of the capacity of visual texts to integrate and enrich literary texts, since novels «are "thickened" – that is, rendered narratologically far more complex – by the presence of illustrations» (Leighton and Surrige 2018: 19).

Jasper's study is included in various illustrations, which offer a specific indication of the villain's nature. *On Dangerous Ground* (Fig. 7) presents Jasper as an apparently amiable host, who tries to mediate between Edwin and Neville after their argument, caused by Neville's interest in Rosa and by Edwin's sharp commentary on Neville's racial origin. However, Jasper's real intent is to lead them to a more violent confrontation, using as an excuse Rosa's unfinished picture, drawn by Edwin, that hangs in his room. In this, as well as in other cases, the role and nature of Jasper as

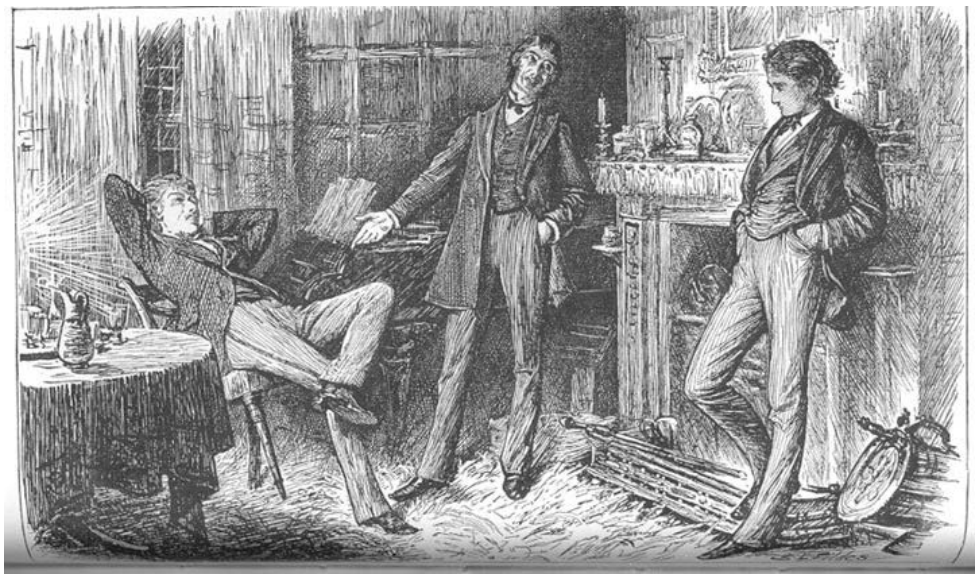

Fig. 7

a plot-maker makes him a sort of updated Dickensian version of Shakespeare's Jago, the villainous plot-maker in *Othello*. Therefore in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* John Jasper is «inventing a plot and writing a book about a murder that has not yet taken place. As a character […] he is writing a variorum version of the novel in which he appears, attempting to control its plot and define some of its characters» (Tracy 2006: 29). In this illustration, Jasper is standing between Edwin (on the left) and Neville (on the right), looking at the latter and gesturing towards the former. His attitude shows that he is in full control of what is taking place, and indicates his capacity at mesmerising people. Jasper's ability was already introduced in chapter 7 ("More Confidence than One"), in which Rosa had confessed to Helena that she was terrified by Jasper's mesmeric looks: «He hauns my thoughts, like a dreadful ghost […]. He has made a slave of me *with his looks*» (Dickens 2002: 70, my emphasis). Jasper's mesmeric look may be connected to Dickens's interest in mesmerism, and in particular in the experiments conducted by his friend Dr. John Elliotson. Dickens himself tried to cure the wife of an acquanitance, who suffered from a nervous disorder, via animal magnetism. As Paul Schlicke contends, «Jasper's powers over Edwin and Neville are evidently a form of mesmerism, reflecting Dickens's keen interest in that subject» (Schlicke 2011: 401).

Jasper's description in chapter 8 ("Daggers Drawn") and in its corresponding illustration (*On Dangerous Ground*) is certainly different from the one included in *Mr. Grewgious Has His Suspicions* (Fig. 8). This plate translates in visual terms a specific paragraph in chapter 15 ("Impeached"),

Fig. 8

which recounts Jasper's meeting with Grewgious, who informs him of Edwin and Rosa's decision to break off their engagement, and of the uselessness of Jasper's crime. The scene is set, again, in Jasper's study. Before swooning in front of Grewgious, Edwin's presumed murderer is depicted as «a ghastly figure», which lifts «its outspread hands towards its head» and turns «with a writhing action from him» (Dickens 2002: 176):

> Mr. Grewgious heard a terrible shriek, and so no ghastly figure, sitting or standing; sew nothing but a heap of torn and miry clothes upon the floor. Not changing his action even then, he opened and shut the palms of his hands as he warmed them, and looked down at it (Dickens 2002: 176).

The title of Fildes's illustration (*Mr. Grewgious Has His Suspicions*) is revealing because it implies that the «angular» and detached Grewgious suspects Jasper. The lawyer's meditative gesture (he is in front of the fireplace, warming his hands) indicates that he is intent on studying and understanding Jasper's suspicious reaction to his words. The choirmaster's body, lying on the floor, is almost inhuman (he is described as a «heap of torn and miry clothes») and recalls the shapeless opium smokers presented in the first illustration. Dickens certainly approved the choice of Fildes's title, which points at Grewgious's suspects on Japer, although the novelist was often elusive with his illustrators. In an interesting memorial document that shows the ambivalent relationship between life and fiction,

Fig. 9

Fildes recalled his first meeting with Dickens, during which the great Victorian novelist appeared to him as a sort of vision. When approached by the twenty-five years old painter, Dickens greeted him courteously: «He was dressed in dark clothes; I cannot quite recall the cut of the coat, but it was loose and unbuttoned, – *a black silk neckerchief was loosely tied with hanging hands round his throat*» (qtd. in Kitton 2015: 208, my emphasis). The reference to Dickens's neckerchief is important, in particular in light of another episode also recalled by Fildes. During the composition of the fourth number of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens asked Fildes to prepare an illustration featuring Jasper who mounted the gatehouse steps with a murderous expression and with a *neckerchief wound twice around his throat*; at this point Fildes asked the reasons for this choice, since Jasper – in Fildes's illustrations – used to wear a small back tie. At this point, Dickens with some reluctance revealed that Japer would use his black scarf to strangle Edwin, a scarf that is similar to the one that Dickens himself was wearing during his first meeting with Fildes. Dissuaded by Fildes, Dickens finally decided to put aside his idea for this illustration.

The social context in which the events of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* take place is also relevant. *At the Piano* (the third illustration, which accompanies chapter 7) (Fig. 9) features Jasper playing the piano, surrounded by almost all the protagonists of the narrative, who belong to different social classes. In this illustration Fildes adopts a series a shifting "focalisations" that can be studied and interpreted in narratological terms, demonstrating that

visual texts include narrative strategies that are analogous to those included in literary texts, and may be accordingly "read" (Bryson 2001: 12). From the position of Jasper's head viewers can infer that he is fixing Rosa, who is singing. Dickens's description – which focuses on his morbid attraction to her, to the point that she bursts out crying – is a narrative commentary on Fildes's visual text and, as it were, integrates it, confirming the peculiar nature of mid-to-late nineteenth-century illustrations as "bimodal texts", in Lorraine Jansen Kooistra's definition (Kooistra 1995, Kooistra 2011):

> Mr. Jasper was seated at the piano as they came into his drawing-room, and was accompanying Miss Rosebud while she sang. 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 […]. 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!» (Dickens 2002: 66).

The dark-haired and tall Helena Landless, who is looking at Jasper, is next to Rosa; on the left, Neville Landless leans against the piano, probably contemplating Rosa. A distracted and absent-minded Edwin, on the right, is nervously playing with Miss Twinkleton's fan (she is sitting next to him). Edwin's posture and attitude suggest his lack of sentimental attachment to Rosa, whereas Neville's interest in Rosa prefigures his feelings. On the right-hand corner Reverend Crisparkle – another character who could be an alternative contender of Rosa's affection – watches the scene. In this plate Fildes is subtly introducing the love triangle involving Neville, Rosa and Jasper. By offering another depiction of Jasper (who is in contrast with the one included in the first illustration) Fildes implies that the degraded Jasper of *In the Court* is also a lover of music, and therefore possesses a double personality. Jasper's mysterious and elusive nature is figuratively conveyed through his peculiar position, since viewers cannot look at his face.

Durdles Cautions Mr. Sapsea Against Boasting (plate number 6) (Fig. 10) is another illustration that describes the social context of the events, and features the comic character of Mr. Thomas Sapsea (Dickens's only tribute to the satirical caricatures of his first novels), as well as Stony Durdles, a

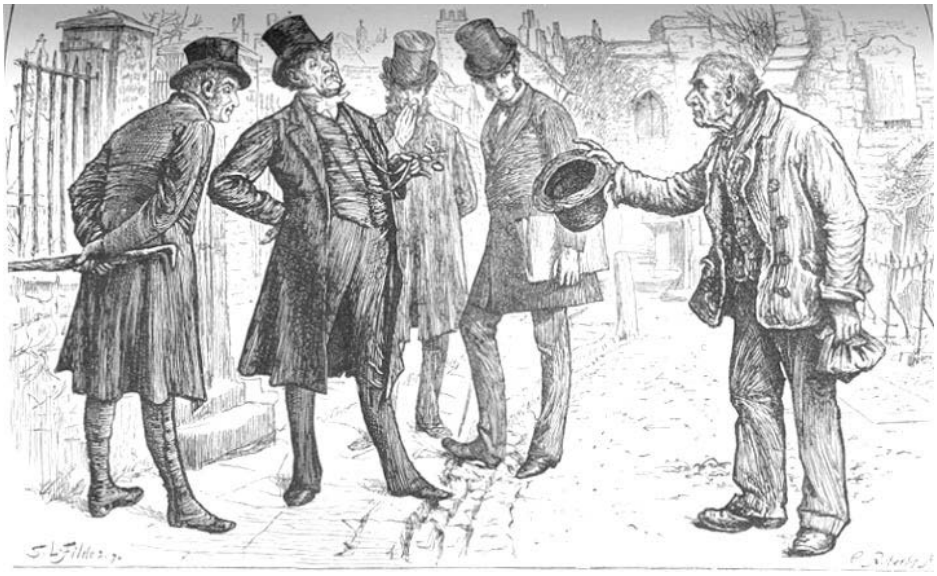

Fig. 10

stonemason and Cloisterham's undertaker, who will unknowingly play a major role in Edwin's murder. These characters represent two socially antithetical classes, namely the rising businessman and the proletariat.

> Durdles with his dinner-bundle in his hand, is indeed beheld slouching towards them. Slouching nearer, and perceiving the Dean, he pulls off his hat, and is slouching away with it under his arm, when Mr. Sapsea stops him.
>
> «Mind you take care of my friend», is the injunction Mr. Sapsea lays upon him.
>
> «What friend o' yourn is dead?» asks Durdles. «No orders has come in for any friend o' yourn».
>
> «I mean my live friend there».
>
> «O! him?» says Durdles. «He can take care of himself, can Mister Jarsper».
>
> «But do you take care of him too», says Sapsea.
>
> Whom Durdles (there being command in his tone) surlily surveys from head to foot.
>
> «With submission to his Reverence the Dean, if you'll mind what concerns you, Mr. Sapsea, Durdles he'll mind what concerns him».
>
> «You're out of temper», says Mr. Sapsea, winking to the company to observe how smoothly he will manage him. «My friend concerns me, and Mr. Jasper is my friend. And you are my friend».
>
> «Don't you get into a bad habit of boasting», retorts Durdles, with a grave cautionary nod. «It'll grow upon you» (Dickens 2002: 129).

Despite their difference in social status – exemplified by Dickens's dialogues – the Cloisterham auctioner and the stonemason share many traits: first and foremost they have an interest in graves and tombs (in a comic episode in the fourth chapter, Sapsea described to Jasper his ideas for the inscription and for the grave that he intends for his late wife Ethelinda) and they tend to talk about themselves in the third person. Mr. Sapsea is the epitome of self-esteem (based as he is on Sir Posdnap, a pompous man of the upper middle classes introduced in *Our Mutual Friend*); on the contrary, Durdles is a much more mysterious figure; he is «a little misty as to his own identity» (Dickens 2002: 41). Jasper has just interviewed him on a tour of the crypts of Cloisterham Cathedral and on the corrosive effects of quicklime (in which Edwin's body would be presumably buried). Pete Orford comments on the presence of this and other comic episodes (and characters) in a gloomy novel such as *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, arguing that its tragic tone «needs balance just as much as the subsequent theories of enthusiasts and academics alike care, and should, complement one another. By acknowledging the light as well as the dark, the incidental as well as the fundamental, we can hope to better understand Dickens's final wok and its hold on our imagination» (Orford 2018a: 311). In this illustration Jasper symbolically stands between social respectability, education and self-conceit (Mr. Sapsea, along with the Dean and Mr. Tope) and popular wisdom (Durdles). He is a member of Cloisterham society – notice his position and posture – but wants to exploit Durdles's knowledge of the Cathedral crypts (the choirmaster is carefully watching him).

Rosa Bud's unfinished portrait (drawn by Edwin Drood), which stands on the chimneypiece of Japer's study, becomes the occasion for Edwin and Neville's confrontation in chapter 8, and represents an important element in the study of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and of its illustrations.

> There, the first object visible, when he adds the light of a lamp to that of the fire, is the portrait over the chimneypiece. It is not an object calculated to improve the understanding between the two young men, as rather awkwardly reviving the subject of their difference. Accordingly, they both glance at it consciously, but say nothing. Jasper, however (who would appear from his conduct to have gained but an imperfect clue to the cause of their late high words), directly calls attention to it.
>
> «You recognise that picture, Mr. Neville?» shading the lamp to throw the light upon it.

> «I recognise it, but it is far from flattering the original».
>
> «O, you are hard upon it! It was done by Ned, who made me a present of It».
>
> «I am sorry for that, Mr. Drood». Neville apologises, with a real intention to apologise; «if I had known I was in the artist's presence – »
>
> «O, a joke, sir, a mere joke», Edwin cuts in, with a provoking yawn. «A little humouring of Pussy's points! I'm going to paint her gravely, one of these days, if she's good» (Dickens 2002: 75).

Alongside Jasper, Rosa Bud is one of the most enigmatic characters in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, since her unfinished characterisation and destiny remain open to discussions, hypotheses and speculations. If on the one hand she looks meditative and weak, on the other she is assertive and far from innocent, as Edwin's sexually allusive nickname «Pussy» implies. Fildes has captured her ambivalence in his illustrations, which often contrast with Dickens's descriptions (see *Jasper's Sacrifices* or *Under the Trees*, in which she is far more serious than her fictional counterpart). Rosa Bud's unfinished sketch epitomises her elusive nature which, like Dickens's novel, will remain forever a mystery. The fact that Dickens does not offer a detailed "ekphrasic" description of Rosa's portrait seems to imply that its descriptive absence can turn into a further reservoir of multiple meanings. With respect to Rosa Bud's sketchy portrait, Steven Connor concludes that «[the] unfinished picture is closer to its unfinished original than a finished one could ever be» (Connor 1993: 95)[6]. Readers will never understand who Rosa Bud – or «Rosebud», as she is sometimes called in the novel – really is, and for this reason Dickens's novel could be alternatively re-entitled *The Mystery of Rosa Bud*. Likewise, cinema viewers will never understand the real meaning of Charles Foster Kane's whispered reference to another enigmatic «Rosebud» at the end of Orson Welles's movie *Citizen Kane* (1941).

Although it remains unfinished, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* represents a fitting conclusion of Dickens's life and career, a work that returns to Dickens's origins as a novelist, and as a person. The words included in one of the final paragraphs of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, in which the narrator describes a brilliant morning that «shines on the old city», with its «antiquities and ruins» that are «surpassingly beautiful, with a lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air» (Dickens

[6] Even in Jasper's mind «[the] image of Rosebud […] and the real Rosebud are not quite the same, but Jasper's desire to verify his dream will not, it seems, stop even at murder to fuse the inner and the outer realities» (Michell 1966: 235).

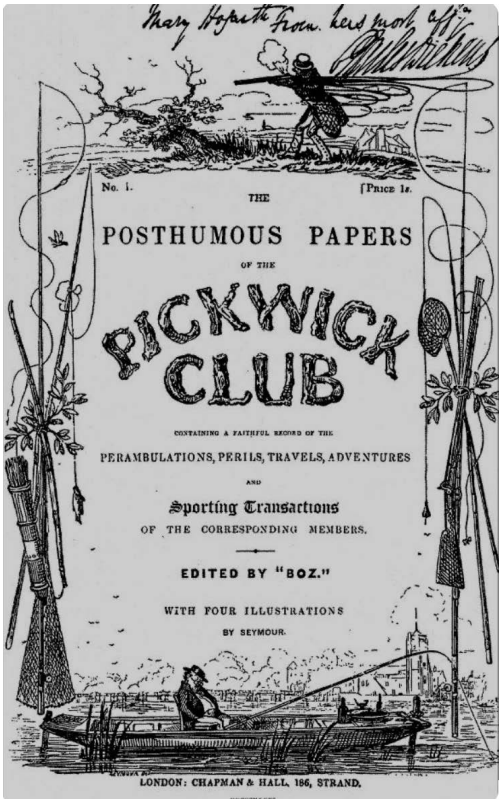
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Fig. 11

Fig. 12

2002: 279) are a gloomier recapitulation of the second chapter of *The Pickwick Papers*, a text that included many scenes and events set in Rochester. In *The Pickwick Papers* «[that] punctual servant of all work, the sun, had just risen, and begun to strike a light on the morning of the thirteenth of May, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven» (Dickens 1999: 6). Robert Seymour's cover-design for *The Pickwick Papers* originally featured a dreaming fisherman (probably Pickwick) on a boat near London's Putney Bridge (Fig. 11), which provided, as Jeremy Tambling puts it, «a frequent Dickensian motif: a text being dreamed while the protagonist sleeps» (Tambling 2018: 93). As indicated, after Seymour's premature death Robert William Buss was unsuccessfully engaged by Chapman & Hall to provide illustrations for Dickens's novel, and then dismissed in favour of «Phiz». However, more than forty years after *The Pickwick Papers*, it was Buss himself who painted one of the most famous representations of Dickens, entitled *Dickens's Dream* (1875) (Fig. 12). Copied from John Watkins's 1863 photograph and partially based on Luke Fildes's *The Empty Chair* (1870), in Buss's painting the writer is sitting in his study at Gad's Hill Place. Like the protagonist of Seymour's cover for *The Pickwick Papers*, in Buss's painting Dickens is sleeping and dreaming, and is surrounded by many of the characters that he has invented. Buss died in the same year in which he started painting *Dickens's Dream*, and his own work of art was left unfinished like *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and like Fildes's illustrations, closing the circle of creation and opening the panorama of future readings of Dickens's last and lasting masterpiece.

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