Containing Dickens, Indexing Drood

The 39 Step Press (Dennis Duncan, Gill Partington, Adam Smyth)

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Now at last the core of his being, the creative machine that had persisted in throwing up ideas, visions and characters for thirty-six years, was stilled.

Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life.*

Cambridge, MA: On 22 October 1861, Ezra Abbot, assistant librarian of Harvard College began work on a new project to catalogue the library's collection using alphabetically-arranged cards, the first index of its type. Abbot had the support of the head librarian John Langdon Sibley, who provided funds for a workforce of women who, for an hourly rate of six cents, would to log the title, author and subject of every work onto 2 × 5 inch cards. A year later, with 35,762 cards written, a part of the catalogue was made accessible to the general public. And yet the end was still a long way off. The full catalogue would be another eight years in the making. At last, in 1870, the process reached its conclusion, and the modern card index had come fully into being.

Higham, Kent: On 8 June 1870, after an afternoon's work on his latest novel, Charles Dickens suffered a stroke in the dining room of his home at Gad's Hill Place. Fighting the fit that was overcoming him, he babbled to his housekeeper, his thoughts unspooling, words falling out of order: a sale at a neighbour's house, the actor William Macready, a toothache, shut the window, an urgent trip to London… 'Come and lie down,' she urged him. 'Yes, on the ground,' he replied, losing consciousness. Telegrams were sent, and family raced to be with Dickens in his final moments. Some would not make it in time. Around six o'clock the following evening Charles Dickens was declared dead. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* the novel he had been working on until his collapse, was left unconcluded. Of the projected twelve installments, only six had been completed.
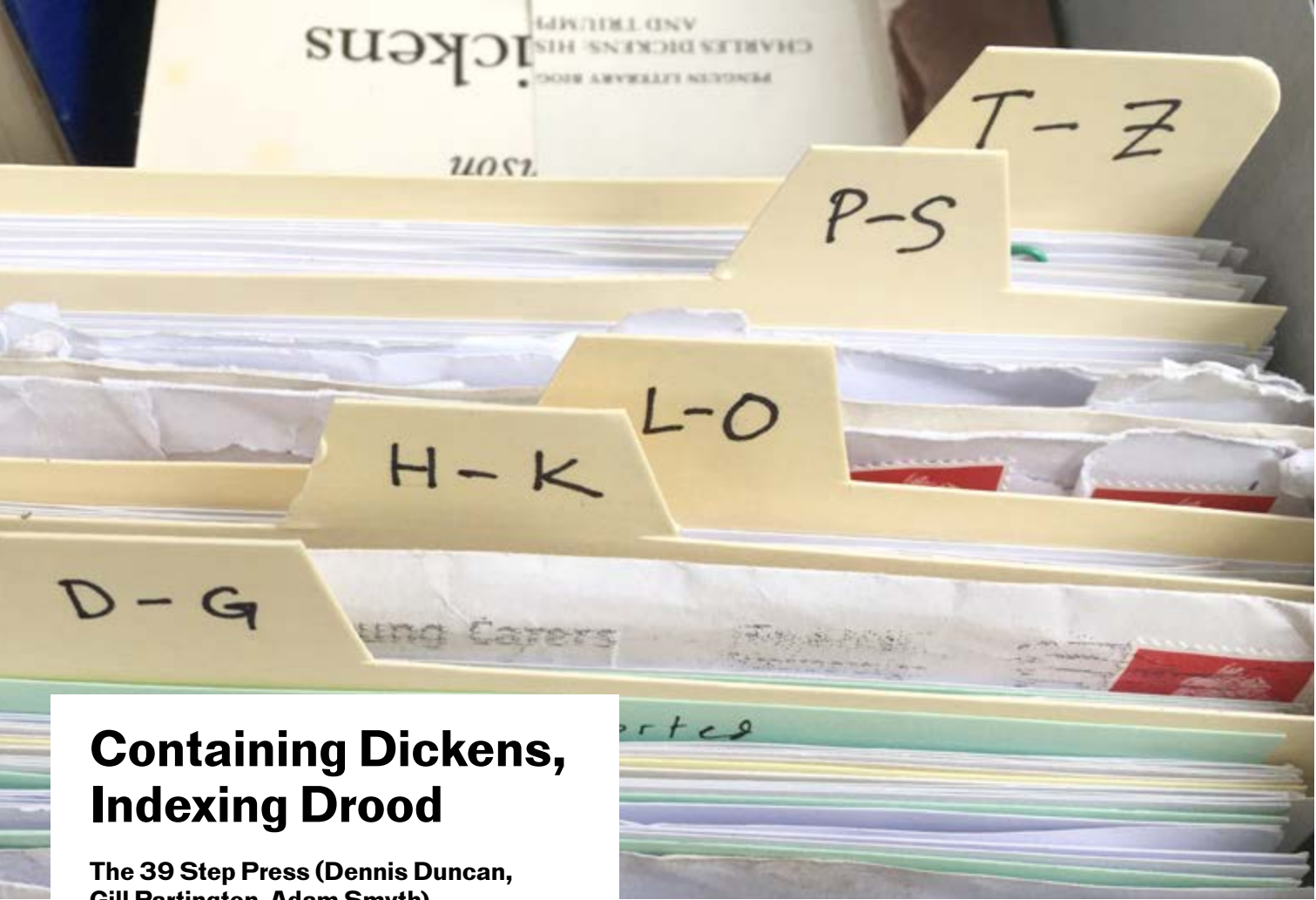
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July 2020: One hundred and fifty years have passed since Drood's disappearance and the birth of the card index. It is the first long, hot summer of Covid. In London, Oxford and Cambridge, the three members of the 39 Step Press receive an invitation to contribute to the 'Presence Project':

> Presence, distance, absence: these relationships have only been foregrounded by the political circumstances of our historical moment. To be present in the archive, to be present with the material text, to be found or lost, to survive, to bear witness.[1]

Surviving, testifying. The curious, juridical tone of the invitation continues with the list of items that contributors to the project must provide: a sample of dust, a sample of air, a handwriting sample, an incomplete draft… What is being asked of us sounds not so much like archival scholarship but like crime scene investigation. *Indexing Drood* will be an experiment in literary forensics.

Our collective contribution to the 'Presence Project' is in many ways not about presence at all, but its opposite. This is not through premeditation or perversity, although perhaps it was an inevitability anticipated by the project brief itself. The set of archive storage boxes we were given were a prompt of an intriguingly physical kind. They were ostensibly to house our work, but they were also a provocation. A series of empty spaces – stacked one inside the other, Russian Doll-style – they asked to be filled, but with what? What sort of artefacts or texts could displace the emptiness? Are some things more material, more *present* than others?

What shaped our response in the first instance, however, were not abstract mediations on plenitude

and absence, but logistics and practicalities. We embarked on the project in the midst of the second UK-wide lockdown, so immediately were forced to consider how we could work collectively but remotely. More presence and absence. Not only would we be unable to meet in person, but our usual working instrument – our Victorian wrought iron Model 4 printing press – was rendered inaccessible. What is a printing press collective to do without its printing press? While this imposed certain limitations, in another sense it presented itself as an opportunity. As untrained and self-taught printers, our work has always been a productive but sometimes awkward tussle with materials, shaped by the limitations of our technical abilities, as well as the quirks and flaws of our press itself. In a way this was another such manoeuvre or sidestep, rethinking the affordances of our equipment, or lack thereof. In place of an overall guiding principle or working method, the project has been led by such accidents and contingencies. It has also been guided by the materials and techniques available, limited largely to glue, scissors and computer printers. We initially decided to set a process in motion by choosing a book, or set of books, into which we could each make some kind of intervention through erasing, collaging and cutting up. We would then circulate these
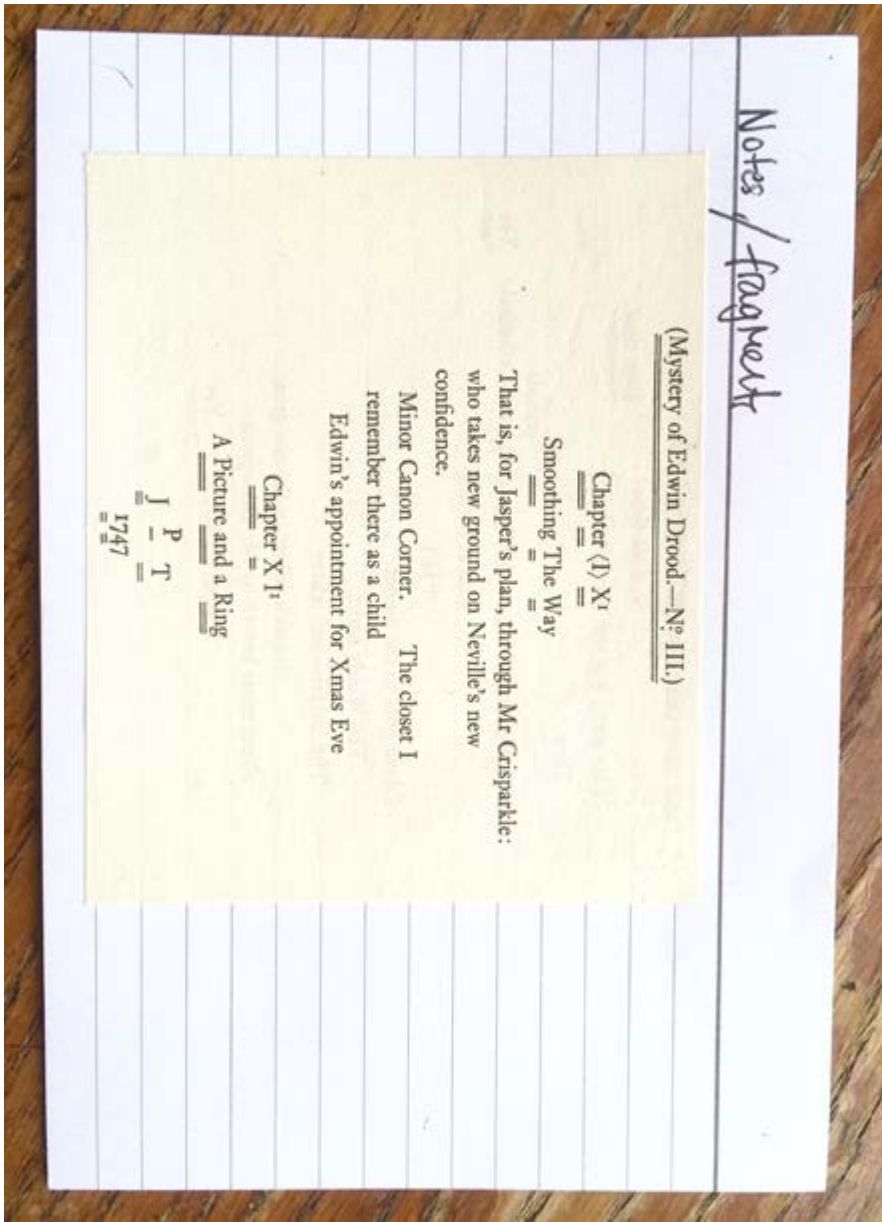
texts to each other for further intervention, setting up a kind of postal relay. Our chosen text, after discarding a few other possibilities, was *The Mystery*
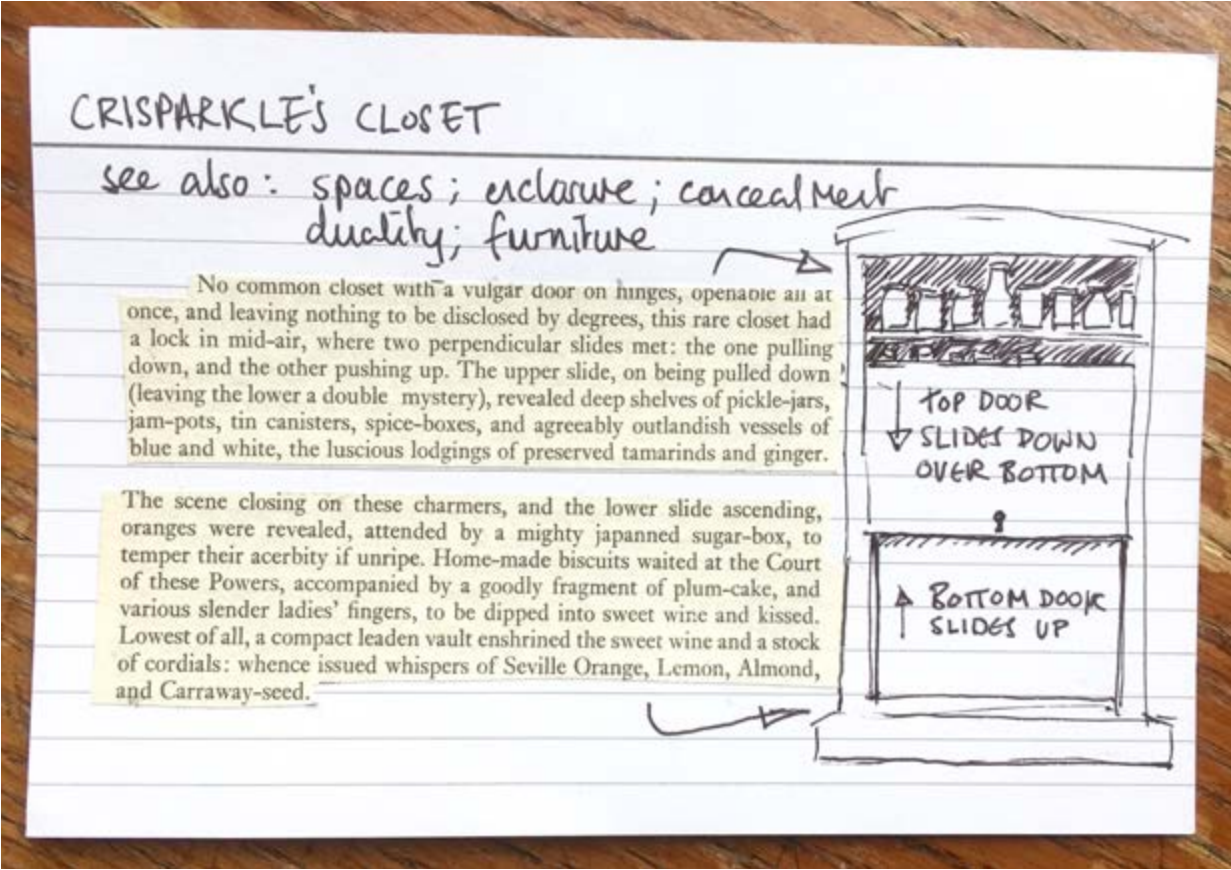
of Edwin Drood, a novel defined by absence, its second half missing, its murder-mystery plot unresolved, its multiple threads dangling. This empty space where the ending should be has come to be the guiding force of our project.

Like most of Dickens's novels, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was initially published in serial form, in this case monthly instalments from April to September 1870. When Dickens died in June of that year, he left only fragmentary notes indicating how the remainder of the narrative might unfold. Unanswered questions abound. Who is the mysterious Datchery, and why has he appeared in the quiet cathedral town of Cloisterham? What is the strange inscription in the cathedral crypt? Most of all, why did the eponymous Edwin Drood suddenly disappear? There are suggestions that he has been murdered by his fiery nemesis, Neville Landless, but suspicion also falls on the sinister, brooding figure of his opium-smoking uncle, John Jasper. Is Drood, in fact, still alive? We can never know, which is what has made this one of Dickens's most compelling works, and certainly the one with the most varied, febrile and sometimes bizarre afterlife. As Pete Orford has written, the existing half of *Drood* may be brief, but 'the non-existent half has been expanded to thousands of pages presented in letters to the national press, journal articles, monographs, novels, erotic fiction, not to mention movies, plays and musicals'.[2]

There have been all kinds of attempts to complete *Drood*, ranging from those that attempt to be as faithful as possible to those that spoof or reinvent the novel, playing fast and loose with its characters, even inventing new ones. As early as 1870 'Orpheus C. Kerr' transposed the story to the American south.[3] Gillian Vase expanded it far beyond Dickens's own intentions into a mammoth thousand-

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page triple-decker.[4] The self-professed spirit medium Thomas Powers James claimed that his published completion was dictated by Dickens himself from beyond the grave.[5] Almost as strange are the works that purport to solve the book's mystery by piecing together its clues, as if it were a real crime, and the characters real people. *The Decoding of Edwin Drood* by Charles Forstye was published not as literary criticism, for example, but in Gollancz's 'Detective Fiction' series.[6] Sherlock Holmes has been drafted in on more than one occasion to 'solve' the crime, and there has also been at least one mock trial – most notably in the early twentieth century, presided over by G.K. Chesterton – attempting to bring the murderer to justice in a courtroom.[7]
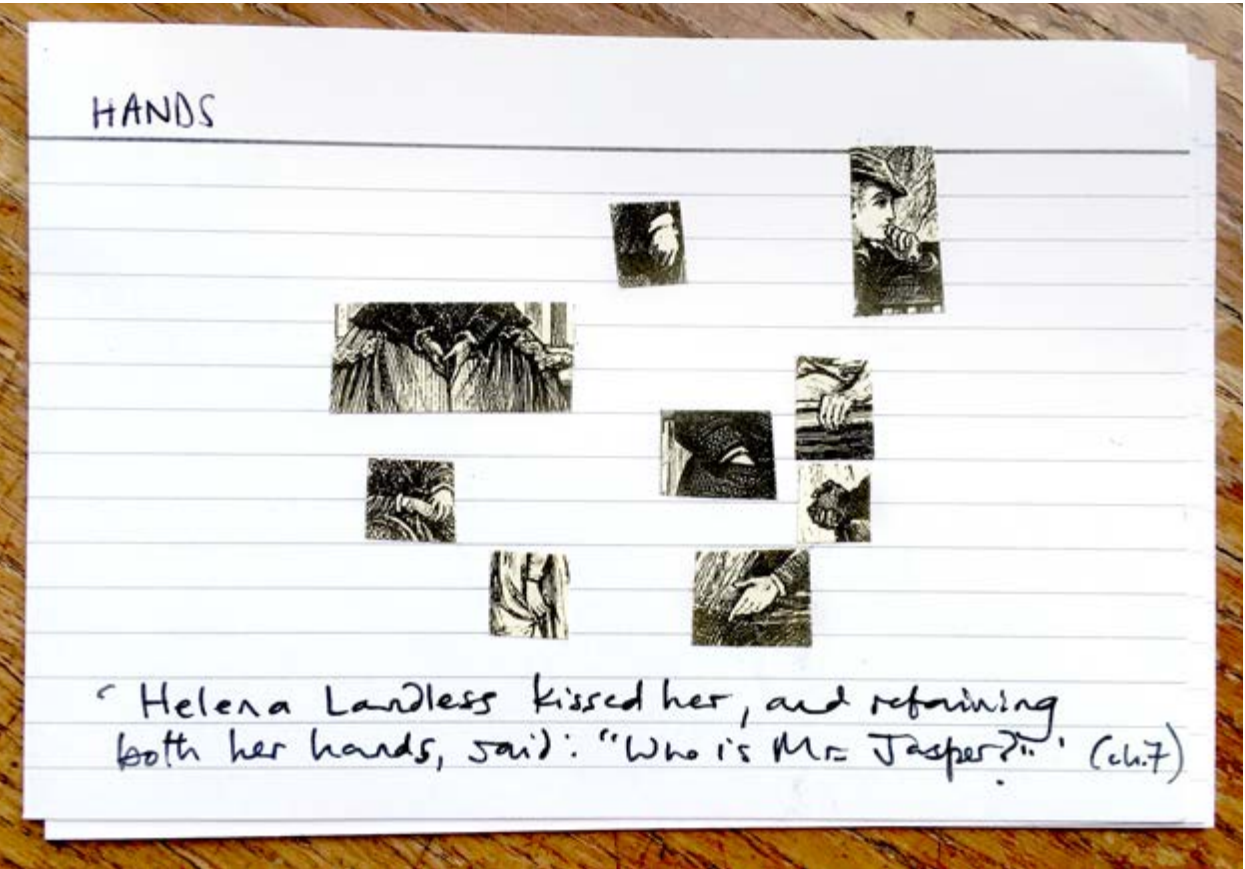
In settling on *Drood*, we found that we had not only chosen a source text, but stumbled into a realm of obsessives, amateur criminologists, conspiracy theorists and psychics. There have been factional disputes between 'the undertakers' (those who maintain that Edwin is dead) and 'resurrectionists' (those who believe that he is actually alive). There are those who think the whole narrative is a coded reference to the Indian Thugee worshippers of the goddess Kali, and those again who claim that Dickens didn't write the novel at all, insisting it is the work of Wilkie Collins.[8] There is, in other words, something wonderfully uncontained about the epitextual shadow-world that surrounds *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Not

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1. The Presence Project was set up and run by Kathryn James of Yale University. Our thanks to Kathryn for inviting us to participate.

2. Pete Orford, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood: Charles Dickens' Unfinished Novel & Our Endless Attempts to End It: Charles Dickens' Unfinished Novel and Our Endless Attempts to End It*, 1st edition (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2018).

3. Orpheus C. Kerr, *The Cloven Foot: Being an Adaptation of the English Novel 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' by Charles Dickens to American Scenes, Characters, Customs and Nomenclature* (New York: Carleton, 1870).

4. Gillian Vase, *A Great Mystery Solved: A Sequel to the Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 3 vols. (London: Remington and Co., 1878).

5. Thomas Power James, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood Complete* (Battleboro: T.P. James, 1874).

6. Charles Forsyte, *The Decoding of 'Edwin Drood'*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980).

7. See Orford, pp. 55–57.

8. Howard Duffield, 'John Jasper – Strangler', *The Bookman*, February 1930, 581–55.

9. 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood', BBC Radio 4 <www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000qjd4/episodes/guide> [accessed 4 February 2022].

10. For commonplace headings and this related tradition of information management, most widely practised around the time when scholars began, in the sixteenth century, advocating for the use of index cards, see Peter Beal, 'Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book', in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts: Papers of the Renaissance English Text Society, 1985–1991*, ed. W. Speed Hill (RETS, 1993), pp. 131–47, and Adam Smyth, 'Commonplace Book Culture: A List of Sixteen Traits', in Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (eds), *Women and Writing, c. 1340–c. 1650: The Domestication of Print Culture* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), pp. 90–110.

11. Markus Krajewski, 'Cards', in Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton (eds), *Information: A Historical Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 353–7, p. 353.

12. Krajewski, 'Cards', p. 354.

CRISPARKLE'S CLOSET

see also: spaces; enclosure; concealment duality; furniture

Notes / fragment

HANDS

"Helena Landless kissed her, and retaining both her hands, said: "Who is Mr Jasper?"' (ch.7)

Notes towards an interactive edition: Chapter titles in envelope

only does it transcend any single text or critical corpus, it exceeds the boundaries of literary critical discourse itself, spilling over into more outré and vulgar territory: true crime, whodunnit, pastiche, séances, zombie fanfiction. This is a *milieu* that has generated its own momentum and developed its own self-conscious, parodic, even camp spirit of excess. In addition to the many film and television adaptations of *Drood*, there has been a Broadway musical where the audience vote before the final act to decide who is the guilty party and how the show will end, and a BBC radio adaptation which solved the mystery by revealing that several of the major characters were gay.[9] Our project enters into this spirit of Droodism, playing with the tantalising idea of a total 'archive of *Drood*', one which would say everything, finally exhausting the book's possibilities.[10]

There were, nevertheless, several false starts in terms of the project's format. Firstly, we deliberated over whether we should each begin with a different edition, or the same one; whether we should have three different but related books – a biography of Dickens and a critical work, for example, alongside the novel. But the more practical issue was exactly how we would collaborate. We would necessarily be reliant on the postal service, but sending entire books to one another regularly began to seem an expensive and cumbersome way to work. It was at this point, having been sent a varied set of storage boxes, that we decided to invert

conventional logic, allowing the container to dictate the form rather than *vice versa*. What if we began with an index card box?
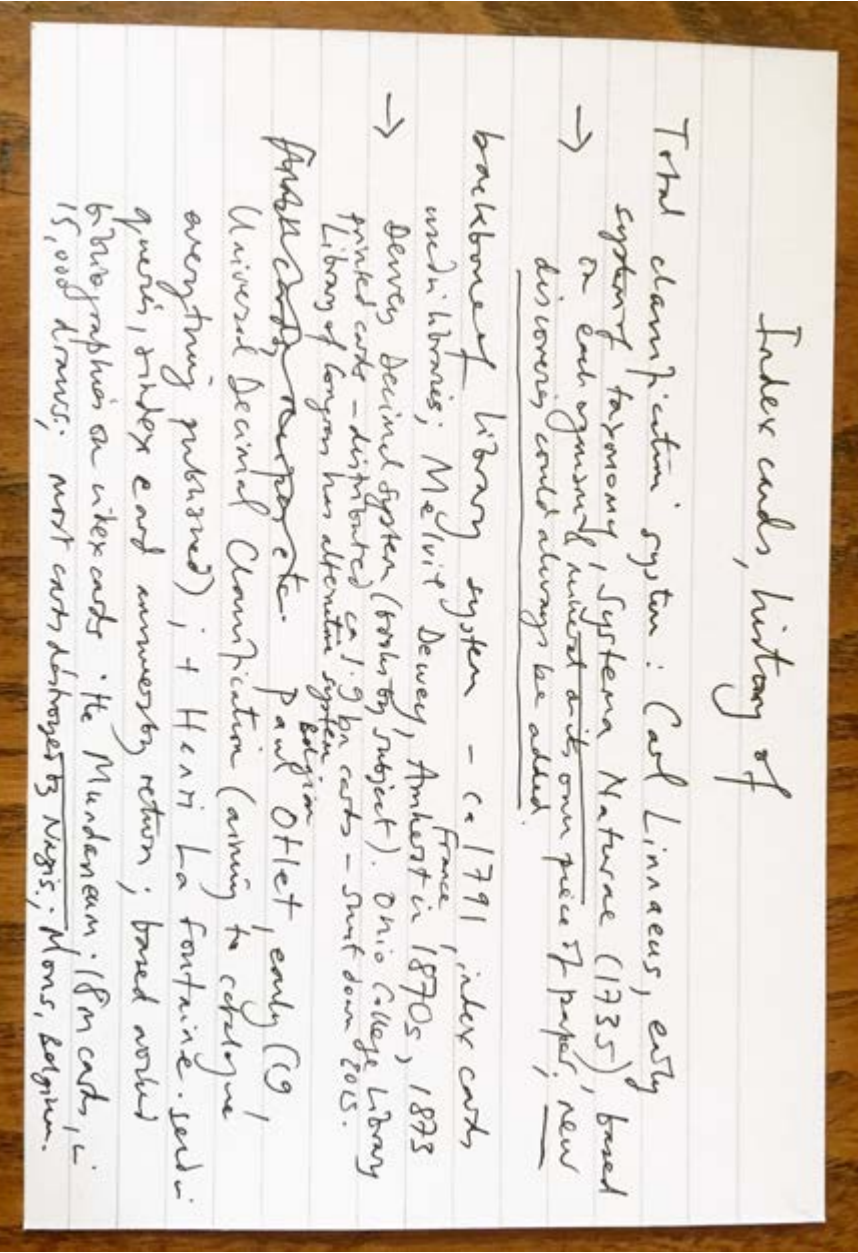
The project, then, would be to fill it, so that instead of intervening in Dickens's novel, we might disassemble and reassemble it in new ways, and in a new format? Perhaps, after all, the card index is the only appropriate form, the only one extensible enough to contain the expansive Droodian universe. What began to take shape was a kind of index to *Drood*. But what would this mean in practical terms? What would it look like? What lines of enquiry would be followed?

Our process went something like this. Without any prior discussion of what to look for, we each read and reread the novel and, as we read, kept next to us a pile of blank 6 × 4 inch index cards, making notes of anything that seemed significant. A note would take the form of a heading – rather in the manner of a thematic topic or *loci communes* in a commonplace book – and then, underneath, a specific example.[10] The notes were usually made in pen and ink, although some by Gill were produced on a computer printer; others were made from pages cut from the novels with scissors, and pasted on to the card with glue or even in one or two cases attached with paper clips. Many cards grew into hybrids of pen-and-ink and cut-out paper (see, for example, the entries for 'Hands' and 'Atmospheric Conditions').

Once we had accumulated a bundle of these cards – approximately ten – we posted them to another participant. Index cards thus served a double-function as both storage device, and as something like a postcard, moving through space, conveying information, arriving in our letter-boxes with the rest of the morning post. Upon receipt, we would add to these cards, writing in further notes under existing headings, while also producing fresh headings on new cards to circulate. A sense of quick expansion was palpable. The headings served to announce a line of investigation to be pursued. In this sense, they were productive, generative, but they also had a counter-function in serving to mark out limits – constructing a kind of corridor for enquiry. But any sense of the limits to our imaginative range was offset by the construction of further headings, and, crucially, cross-references which served to connect headings and to build a wider and yet also more enmeshed network of mobile information – a process which, in the words of Marcus Krajewski, 'enables the words and text modules stored on [index cards] to be combined and reordered'.[11] Thus, for instance, the card headed 'Imprinting, printing, marking' has 'c.f. Inscription, mysterious', taking the user to this different point in the archive; and the card titled 'Fruit' carries the important addendum 'c.f. "plum buns" (ch. 6)'.

Krajewski suggests with nice paradox that each index card is a 'finite, extendable information unit': finite, in the sense that it is physically restricted to two sides of a small paper card; but extendable via continuations across further cards (as, for example, 'Drood, Edwin – others named thus', with several cards numbered in sequence). These cross-references were in part the product of the archive's ability to hold separate entries, composed
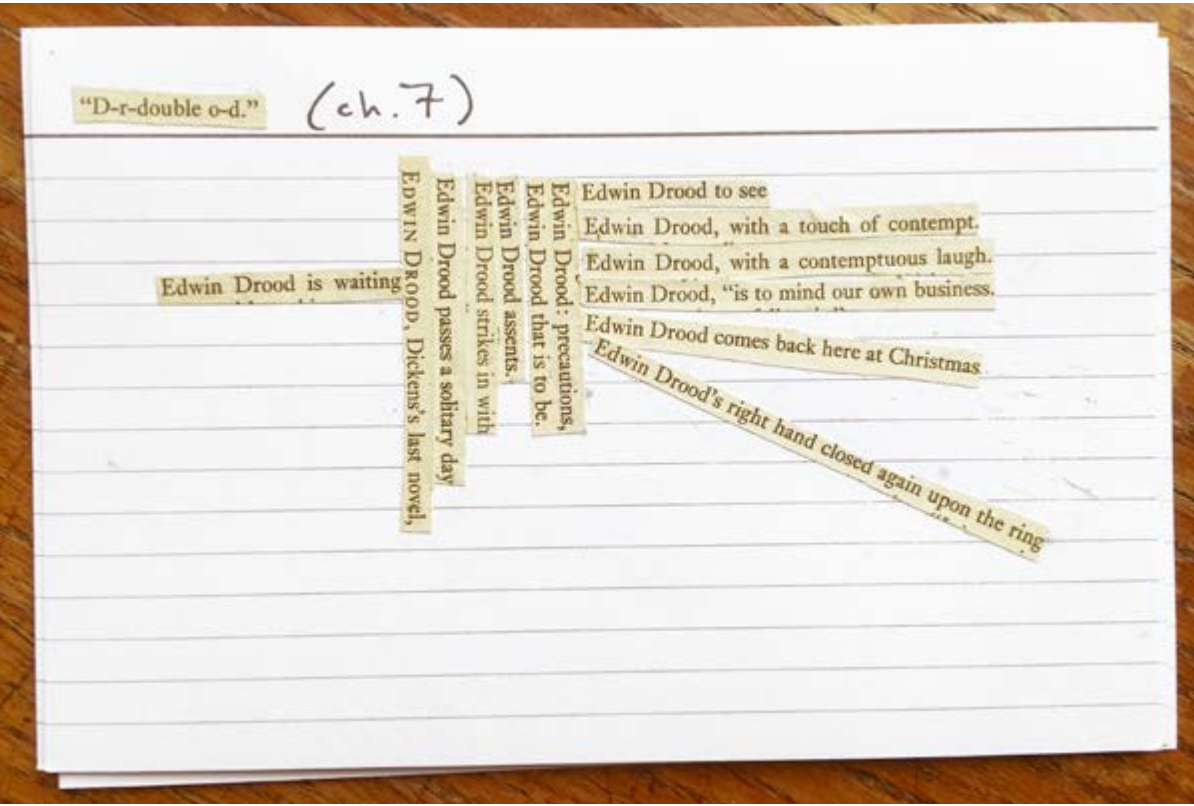
individually, next to each other, and so to produce new connections. The beauty and power of the index as it grew was that it itself proposed and enabled connections between separate entries which would not otherwise have been conceived: in this sense, the index became not only the product of our labours, but also an agent in that process of production – and an agent capable of surprise. We soon came to appreciate the sense of a powerful, latent torrent of information that the index was producing, and also the fact that the index (we might say) knew more than we ever could.

No card was ever finished, since it might always be augmented or connected to another, and the number in circulation grew and grew. Since we tended to respond to the delivery of new cards by working quite promptly, it was often the case – and this was a pleasing but unforeseen condition – that the cards were in circulation, somewhere in the hands of the Royal Mail, for the majority of the time. Their dominant state was movement: these were texts in motion.

Since we had had no prior discussion of topics to be noted, the nature of the headings that were constructed varied. Nonetheless, certain patterns emerged. Each of us tended to be drawn to headings that announced resonant categories that might attract further notations (that were, in other words, headings that combined inclusivity with a certain edge or bite), and also to notes that were self-reflexive in nature (that encouraged the collection of instances when the cards reflected on their own methods). Among the broadly resonant categories we might include topics such as 'On the unfinished art work'; 'Parents, missing'; 'Critical assessments of *Drood*'; 'Surfaces, in contrast to depths'; and 'Blanks, absences, elisions'. Among examples of the self-reflexive are 'Index cards, history'; 'Connections, tenuous'; and 'Twitter, *Drood*, Index Cards' (with a printed copy of a tweet related to *Indexing Drood*). Certain categories caught the imagination, while others remained stubs. The heading 'Notes towards an interactive edition of *Drood*' proved to be a

particularly rich seam, and accumulated (among other things) small pieces of origami made from pages of the novel by Adam's 11-year-old son, Ezra. Some headings seemed initially flippant or unpromising but emerged as useful ways of thinking about the novel – as, for instance, 'Brevity: paragraphs under 6 words', which brought forth into clarity something surprising about the text's sometimes laconic style.

When does a project like this end? In one sense, never: there are always more notes to be made, and to be slotted in place in the receptive box-container, not only because of *Drood*'s rich strangeness, but more fundamentally because a collaborative indexing project can always find more to connect. Nonetheless, and on a pragmatic level, a cut-off point had to be set, and we fixed on Monday 5 July 2021 as the day in which all the cards would be collected in one place, sorted into alphabetical order, and placed in a card index box. This meeting took place at Gill's house in Cambridge, following a lunch made by Sarah Pyke. (A side-note: Adam and Dennis travelled out that day by train from London but, in an apt but dispiriting moment of reversal, Dennis received a text message while on the train informing him of the need to self-isolate due to contact with someone who had subsequently tested positive for Covid-19. On his arrival at Cambridge Station, Dennis handed Adam all his cards and a bottle of red wine, crossed the platform, and promptly returned to London for ten days of confinement. This meant that for the duration of *Indexing Drood*, Gill, Adam and Dennis were never together in the same place at the same time. Even on the day of its completion, the 'Presence Project' declined to live up to its name.) The ongoing spirit of the project is sustained still by the openness of the archive to future augmentation: indeed, we request that, as a condition of consulting the archive, each future user will be asked to add their own note, either to an existing card, or as a new card.

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What does it mean, 'to enter into a state of Droodism'? A mode of receptivity, perhaps, poised somewhere between credulity and irony. An exercise in trying to maintain Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' even after the book is closed, or its narrative has run out of road? Conveniently, *Drood* was planned – always already – as a mystery novel. It's there in the title. Mystery was the intention before the unintended riddle of its curtailment, before its author collapsed and its mystery jumped the bounds of fictionality.

As a genre, the mystery novel legitimizes a certain type of engagement. Let us borrow a term from Rita Felski: 'suspicious reading'. But where Felski uses it pejoratively, a barb aimed at the Marxist or psychoanalytic schools of literary criticism, for the reader of mysteries, 'suspicious reading' is the only correct way to proceed. It is the game we play with the author: looking for clues, weighing up potential misdirections. Ironically, however, this suspicion is underwritten by trust. We have to believe that the riddle *has* a solution before we begin to suspect what it might be. For the committed Droodist – for *us* in this project – this was the interesting part: conjuring presence from absence. How to enter into a hermeneutics of suspicion, to believe that this mystery might be solved? Could we reach a stage – a state – where our indexing would feel meaningful, as though it led somewhere?

There is a well-known internet meme – 'Pepe Silvia' – that reproduces the cliché of the crazed detective, shirt crumpled, tie askew, wild-eyed and pale from exhaustion. Behind him is an evidence board, a mess of photographs, maps, correspondence, crosshatched with red thread to link non-adjacent documents. This, if you like, is the type of reading we have been performing – or simulating – on *Drood*: entropic, overabundant, one that tries to summon a prophetic clarity to make sense of its own disorder. One of the pleasures of this meme is that it produces a kind of thrill at its *matter* – the paper, drawing pins, string – the illusion of information being generated not just by the stationery but by its arrangement and interconnections.

Just so with our cards. Their shufflability – the generative power of putting two thoughts accidentally alongside each other so that their affinities begin to bristle – was responsible for the emergent thrill of the project. Krajewski, the guiding light of *Indexing Drood*'s material aspect, argues that the index card possesses certain traits which lend it a particularly modern potential: mobility, modularity, flexibility, updateability, combinability, among others. During the production of *Indexing Drood*, we felt the power of all of these. The capacity of the index card to both store (that is, to gather in one place, to accumulate) and also to disperse (as the cards were sent between the three compilers) emerged as important qualities. So too did the capacity of the index card to represent, and point towards, that which is absent: both Dickens's novel, and also the compilers producing the index, in the forms of Gill, Adam and Dennis. The way in which the card serves as a proxy for a presence which is missing was an important strand of *Indexing Drood*. 'A card always remains a pure reference and a relation to something else', writes Krajewski. '[I]t refers to something beyond itself.'[12]

One final vignette:

The scene is Neuilly-sur-Seine, an affluent suburb on the outskirts Paris. It is 7 October 1960, ninety years on from *Drood* and from Abbot's card file. Here Raymond Queneau, novelist, poet, publisher, is finalizing his sonnet sequence, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*. The work will consist of ten leaves, each with a sonnet printed on the recto side. The pages will be thick, closer to card than paper, and between the lines of each poem the page will be cut from fore-edge to spine. Readers, then, will be able to arrange the flaps to produce a poem that begins with, say, the first line of the third sonnet, then the second line of the eighth, the third line of the first, and so on. Krajewski might have remarked on the flaps' mobility, flexibility, combinability, but Queneau simply likens the work to a type of children's book: heads, bodies, legs. Then he adds that his book is also 'a sort of machine for producing poems'. These poems are limited in number, but that number is extremely large. Queneau calculates that a reader tackling one sonnet per minute and reading 24/7 would have nearly two hundred million years' of poetry to get through. Queneau, of course, has not 'written' each of these sonnets; he has simply built the machine. The book will contain far more poetry than Queneau could ever have composed himself, image he could never have imagined and never will. The machine knows more than its creator. Seated at his desk, Queneau smiles with relish. He has found the perfect epigraph for the book, a sentence from the British cyberneticist Alan Turing: 'Only a machine could appreciate a sonnet written by another machine'.

Now, after months of dispersed Droodery, we look upon our card index with a wild surmise, a dawning, credulous suspicion that what we have built is a machine that already understands Dickens's final novel on a deeper level than we ever could. That given time and an ideal reader – another machine, let us call it Edwin Droid – the index might know what we can only suspect: that Edwin wasn't murdered at all, that he simply vanished, became immaterial, transubstantiated into an array of textual characteristics, into *information* – hands and plum buns, atmospheric conditions and 'blanks, absences, elisions' – at the moment that Dickens breathed his last and, across the ocean, the card index fired up for the first time.