"Remember, the Angel May Write, but 'Tis the Devil that Must Print": Review of Matthew Pearl, *The Last Dickens*

Sneha Kar Chaudhuri
(West Bengal State University, India)

Matthew Pearl, *The Last Dickens*
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Matthew Pearl's riveting third historical novel is an emphatic reminder that, when it comes to crime and mystery, there is no better inspiration than the nineteenth-century, especially for a tale of trans-national trade and mercantile competition between Britain and its lost colony. As in his earlier best-selling *The Dante Club* (2003) and *The Poe Shadow* (2006), Pearl opts for an American rather than British setting but emphasises the close ties and cultural exchanges across the nineteenth-century Atlantic between established and emergent colonial powers, so that the novel may legitimately be described as 'neo-Victorian'. Whether in terms of its plot and setting, or themes and narrative techniques, Pearl's novel resurrects the bygone era, taking the British author Charles Dickens, re-imagined mostly during his American tours, as the pivot around which to weave a breathtaking tale of murder, suspense, deceit, betrayal and recovery. Much like the mystery narratives popularised by Victorian sensation novelists like Ellen Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins, this novel unfolds a gripping saga that intertwines nineteenth-century urban underworlds and domestic lives (though American as much as British), as well as fictional and real-life historical characters. At the same time, Pearl reduces some of the stylistic and thematic rough-edges of sensation fiction by – somewhat anachronistically – employing the razor-sharp inventiveness of the detective novels of the late-Victorian Arthur Conan Doyle, the first of which, *A Study in Scarlet*, was only published in 1887, seventeen years after the setting of *The Last Dickens* in 1870s Boston. Pearl's protagonist, the

dynamic publisher-cum-detective James Ripley Osgood, models himself as a quester-figure, along the lines of the archetypal gentleman-detective Sherlock Holmes. However, Osgood is not to be imagined as an amateur with no clear career path, like Doyle's hero, since Pearl's protagonist has a very definitive purpose, namely that of professional as well as personal self-advancement.

There are actually two heroes in this novel – Dickens and Osgood. The plot mainly concerns itself with Dickens's reading tour in America in 1867 and his untimely death before the completion of the serial publication of his last, supposedly unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). But rivalling this central thread is the story of one of Dickens's American publishers, J.R. Osgood of Fields, Osgood & Co., whose professional future depends on unravelling the mystery behind "the last Dickens" instalment of the title (p. 336). A host of real and invented characters surround them as friends and foes, including the diabolical Marcus Wakefield/Edward Trood (represented as Dickens's real-life inspiration behind Edwin Drood) and the actual last Dickens, that is, Francis/Frank Dickens, Charles Dickens's youngest son, serving in the Bengal police. In the penultimate "Historical Note" section, Pearl specifically identifies the significant historical markers fictionalised in his narrative, provides a full list of actual and invented characters, and emphasises that everything has been done "as accurately as possible […] incorporating many actual conversations and actions" (p. 353). Yet this overemphasis on the novel's historical-realist bent seems little more than a matter of convention, for Pearl hardly claims to be writing a biography or a historical account of Dickens's last days. Nor can he be concerned at libelling the heroicised Dickens in view of the numerous experimentally successful and often deliberately denigrating neo-Victorian novels already written about eminent Victorians, including A.S. Byatt's 'The Conjugial Angel' (1992), Howard Jacobson's *Peeping Tom* (1984), and Lynn Truss's *Tennyson's Gift* (2004) to name only a few.

Perhaps, Pearl is targeting a wider readership who, unlike neo-Victorian critics, finds it difficult to accept 'un-historical' historical novels, which would account for his choice of constructing a nineteenth-century universe modelled on the classic realist Victorian novel. Pearl's text elides narrative experimentation for a deliberately naive use of earlier devices of verisimilitude and fidelity to known facts. Generically a straightforward

mystery novel, Pearl's work nonetheless affords an overview – though still selective rather than panoramic –of the nineteenth-century come alive again, covering myriad activities and issues like the book trade, celebrity-worship, the opium trade, female emancipation and eccentricity, drug addiction and civil society, romantic love, family ties, friendships, the colonial police, law and order, and various types of nineteenth-century criminality. Thus, ranging from Chinese pirates and English opium-fiends to Turkish scoundrels and American "Bookaneers" (p. 39), the novel intrinsically links three countries and continents – North America, Britain, and colonial India. Pearl shows the brisk and fiercely competitive presence of a very active correspondence between people touched by British trade in various parts of the globe. The ease with which Turks, Bengalees, Chinese, and Americans gad about Britain, and in turn allow the British to penetrate and dominate their countries and provinces, presents a retrospectively prophetic vision of today's globalised world, linked through trade, crime, and (post-) colonialism, as well as the pursuit of capitalist ideals. Though set entirely in the nineteenth-century, *The Last Dickens*' cross-age similarity convincingly links the past and the contemporary eras in terms of their commercial and international transactions. In other words, the genealogy of contemporary globalisation is fictionally traced back to Victorian trading systems. So in this prominently 'neo-Victorian' narrative we find clear traces of a contemporary 'global village' melting national and cultural boundaries.

Another mainstay of the novel is a pervasive interest in nineteenth-century publishing history, reflecting professional relations between authors and their publishers, ruthless and cut-throat competition between honest and unscrupulous publishing houses, and the high risks taken to promote their books and garner profit. Here again, the author safely interconnects contemporary attitudes and marketing strategies, adopted by present-day corporate publishers to maximise profit and popularity, with analogous nineteenth-century book trade practices. The angel/devil binarism used to explain the author/publisher equation both reinstates and subverts the relation of the genius with the marketplace. The author, as seen in Dickens's case, is far from angelic and divine: he is perceived as "greedy and mercenary" (p. 87), is inwardly scared of his fanatic admirers (pp. 89 and 96), and proves a shrewd manipulator of other people's minds and emotions through his mesmeric and literary skills (pp. 90 and 111). Yet at the same time he is worshipped as the pre-eminent English author of his day, is

shown capable of inspiring and satisfying his readers, and of making his publishers rich and secure with élan and consistency. Hence he is referred to as "the dashing, carefree genius whose eyes seemed to penetrate through the world around him just like the novels that made him famous" (p. 90) and "the visiting Homer of the slums and back alleys" (p.103), while his American tour is described as " the most important affair in all American history" (p.105), and his novels are praised as "celebra[tions of] the family and the ideals of loyalty and forgiveness", with Dickens himself expected "to be an exemplar for the same" (p.130). Pearl convinces us of the human and vulnerable sides of an iconic and historically remote public figure. Moreover, his satirisation extends to Dickens's loyal friend and first biographer John Foster as "a more genuine Falstaffian figure" with "the face of a spoiled child" (p. 126). Partly in contrast, some publishers are also presented as veritable devils, like the American Harpers, who use every ploy under the sun to produce unauthorised and cheap pirated copies of Dickens's novels in America. However, Dickens's English publisher Frederic Chapman is virtually innocuous, and the legitimate American counterpart, represented by Osgood, is only covetous within lawful limits. Another offshoot of this issue is the repeated reference to the burgeoning rivalry between British and American lifestyles, business ethics, public morality, cultural practices and so forth. Hence we find several comparisons implied between the Old World and the New World: America is a 'beastly country" (p. 92) with "vulgar American states" (p. 94) and "greed[y] Yankee-doodle-dom" (p. 131), as well as "a land of experimentation [… where] Americans will throw away all constraints with the freedom of indulgence" (p. 324). In turn, the Americans criticise British acquisitiveness by referring to Dickens as "an old gentleman pirate [… with] grizzled imperial beard" (p. 86), while the American tax officers condemn British minds as "frozen" (p. 228). The clash between civilisations that is still alive between the mighty Americans and the conservative British is traced back to nineteenth-century national attitudes and international rivalries, for example as regards securing and controlling new (opium) markets and sources of revenue. Even if inadvertent, some readers may hear an uncanny echo of the debates surrounding pharmaceutical companies' monopolies of new 'superdrugs' and their exclusive production/distribution versus generic medications.

Not surprisingly, then, the murky and duplicitous world of the book traders is paralleled by the worldwide British opium dynasty, where fierce Chinese pirates, the Chandernagore-based Bengalee don (Baboo Maistree and his gang of opium thieves), violent and powerful Turks (Herman and Iman), and British opium-dealers (Uncle Nathan Trood, his nephew Edward Trood, and Opium Sal) contend for money and supremacy. In a mysterious whirlpool of events the two worlds collide, since Trood (disguised as Marcus Wakefield) and Osgood both have the same objective of discovering the end of Dickens's last novel. Pearl stresses the destructive and nefarious impact of British imperialism through his narration of the various public and private disasters wrought by the opium trade in different parts of the world. Both father and son, Charles and Frank Dickens, are shown implicitly opposing the exploitative nature of the trade and its damaging impact upon individual addicts and the imperial economy. Dickens tries his best either to heal opium addicts through mesmerism (as in Jack Rogers's case) or expose opium tycoons like Edward Trood through his last novel. Meanwhile in India, Frank, the self-righteous and daring policeman, unearths an opium-theft conspiracy between the police and the local businessmen in the service of the Empire. Pearl's highlighting of these nineteenth-century social problems seems to play to contemporary concerns about international drug trafficking and the widespread recreational drug use and addiction in today's developed as well as developing nations. The drug theme arguably reveals the typical double temporal consciousness at work in neo-Victorian literature, which cannot resist broaching contemporary problems under the guise of historical genealogical antecedents, interrogating the present in and through the fictional past.

Though these public spheres are largely dominated by self-seeking and ambitious men, the two women characters sketched in greater detail stand out for their dignity and self-reliance (Rebecca Sand) or their intrepid eccentricity (Louisa Parr Barton). Much like the formulaic presence of the female characters in sensation fiction, as either typical victims or secret aggressors, these women either assist men to reach their goals or disrupt and endanger their lives. In his "Historical Note", Pearl clarifies and justifies the inclusion of an imaginary character like Sand by making her symbolic of "the real achievements and challenges in a new class of single working women in mid- to late-nineteenth-century Boston as well as that of divorced women" (p. 354). Sand's interactions with Osgood, her remorse for her

much-maligned and murdered brother Daniel, her ability to resist her abusive husband, and her courage to pursue the Dickens issue beyond America, all speak volumes of her impeccable professionalism and determination as a self-willed New Woman. Yet at the novel's climax her vulnerability as Wakefield's romantic target and a damsel-in-distress, relying upon Osgood to save her, partly reinforces the reactionary gender stereotypes contested earlier.

Pearl employs an opposite technique for the presentation of Dickens's American stalker Jane Bigelow, depicted as the sinister and self-christened "incubus" Louisa Barton (p. 107). Initially, Barton appears to be a target of Dickens's Irish bodyguard Tom Branagan, since her alleged attack on Dickens in private becomes the only surviving clue to his last novel. In one of the most powerful and evocative scenes of Pearl's text, we find Sand interrogating the insane Barton about Dickens's confessions to her, from which Sand and Osgood manage to work out that the final instalments of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* were hidden by Dickens in Dr Webster's deserted and haunted laboratory in North Grove Street (pp. 310-311). Taking on an active role in solving the mind-boggling mystery, Barton seems to possess an uncanny authority, but her insanity is finally self-defeating, showing the traumatic impact of excessive freedom and mobility granted to hysterical and capricious women like her. Her devastating acts of abducting Dickens or attempting to commit suicide before him are abnormally transgressive and deeply unsettling. Sand, on the other hand, has a firm and rational control over her impulses. In his two main female characters, Pearl thus reinforces the nineteenth-century binary tropes of the sane woman/madwoman and angel/demon.

Divided into six successive instalments, Pearl's novel echoes Dickens's *Edwin Drood*, of which only six of the planned twelve instalments were published before the author's death. Much like nineteenth-century novel serialisations, each section ends on a cliff-hanger, only to be resolved with the publication of the subsequent section. With astute precision Pearl's finale brings together the diverse strands of his novel, even the parallel narration of Dickens's 1867 tour to America, his death in 1870, and the sleuthing activities of his son that initially seem somewhat tenuously connected. Similarly, the repeated timely intervention of the tea-merchant Marcus Wakefield to save Osgood and Sand, as well as the Falstaff Inn owner William Trood's narration of his lost son Eddie, seem wholly

unconnected, until the end reveals Wakefield as the long-lost Eddie himself, leading the life of a notorious opium-tycoon. In fact, the fictional afterlife that Pearl adds to Dickens's young victim Edwin Drood is both historically realistic and startling. While in Dickens's unfinished novel Drood was the innocent victim of his diabolical Uncle's machinations, in Pearl's neo-Victorian intertext Drood outwits and outdoes his corrupt uncle in crime to become the adult opium merchant who uses brute power and Machiavellian diplomacy to continue his uncle's monetary dominance. Even Dick Datchery, Dickens's inspector and harbinger of justice, is reduced to a petty "Bookaneer" named Jack Rogers, employed by Osgood's evil rivals to confound and mislead him in his literary mission, before a change of heart finds him assisting Osgood at the dangerous climax of the plot.

The latter is definitely well-conceived, ensuring an action-packed, thrilling and violent finale. The careful and precise details of the scene make it akin to a veritable Hollywood action drama complete with twists at every turn. Osgood's survival, despite the fierce pursuit of the gigantic Herman and the vicious Wakefield, is aided by both machine (the burning elevator) and man (the timely arrival of Jack Rogers) – in a sequence reminiscent of screen pot-boilers which lay readers will readily enjoy. Pearl's novel throughout appears to be a deliberately balanced combination of intellectual and popular elements: this is a novel equally entertaining for ordinary fans of crime thrillers and serious literary-minded scholars looking for thought-provoking literariness and erudition. While on the one hand, Pearl incorporates melodramatic encounters, breath-taking escapes, and happy endings for his central characters, on the other, he proves adept at weaving a web of intertextual, historical, economic, colonial and cross-cultural references that bind together his huge array of characters and multiple plots. *The Last Dickens* is a bona-fide 'neo-Victorian' novel that not only re-invents the nineteenth-century in retrospect, but also shows how the age remains disturbingly 'alive' in some very crucial aspects of our own 'postmodern' lives.