Editor's Note

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The critical and creative contributions to this special issue all share a focus on the performativity of criminality in various ways. The re-enactment of nineteenth-century figurations of crime on today's stage, screen, and page highlights significant shifts in interpretation, condemnation and/or valorisation of the criminal according to prevailing historical contexts. In some cases crime is reconfigured as a theatrical masquerade, through which to voice justifiable social critique and political dissent, whether against a persistently homophobic culture, the spread of an Orwellian surveillance society, or the ready market for the manifold forms of gratuitous violence. In other instances, crime becomes linked to desperate attempts at self-realisation in the face of a cannibalistic commodity culture, where individual life is reduced to one more exploitable and disposable resource, caught in the alienating logic of excessive consumption. And always there is the dramatic potential of crime per se, as an act that – however privately or secretly committed – produces an after-life on the public stage via processes of detection, reporting, prosecution and punishment, not least within the scopic and linguistic drama of the courtroom setting. William Roughead, one of the great nineteenth and early twentieth-century reporters of real-life crime in the UK and avid consumer of its fictional manifestations, recalled that "what appealed to me was the human element, the *dramatic quality* of the facts; so that each case, howsoever in itself horrid and repellent, became merely an abstract problem, inviting investigation and calling for treatment" (cited in Whittington-Egan 1991: 7, emphasis added).

Surprisingly, in contrast to critical essays on theatre, musical, graphic novel, film, and television, the response to this special issue's Call for Papers elicited virtually no theoretical treatments of crime fiction or non-fiction historical crime, confounding editorial expectations regarding this prolific area of neo-Victorian output. (Only the creative contributions comment on both genres.) Historians and theorists of crime regularly return to the nineteenth century as a fulcrum point, at which the popular press – and the literature and arts it inspired – not only elevated crime to the status of a bloody mass spectator sport and cause célèbre, but also that of a grotesque mirror held up to society. Hence the study of crime lends itself to

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retrospective readings of the consciousness of the age, its prevalent ideologies (of gender, class, race, etc.), and processes of cultural signification through which one might "[re-]trace the contours of politics and society" – of course, always depending "on what one is looking for" (Strange 1999: 680).[1]

Most neo-Victorian crime writers revisit the favourite thematic haunts of Victorian sensation novels: illegitimacy, misappropriated legacies, stolen treasures, assumed identities, fraud, deception, conspiracy, crimes of passion, murder, blackmail, and false imprisonment. These provide ample scope for the exploration of all manner of criminalities, far beyond the predictable re-workings and sequels of Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper stories. Again like their nineteenth-century literary forbears, many neo-Victorian fictions sport glamorous and hardened villains in equal measure and sometimes within the same guise as protagonists, as for instance in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) or Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night* (2006). Moriarty-type masters of complicated intrigues and moral monsters vie with relentless pursuers of justice, often just as prepared to resort to unorthodox and illegal means to accomplish their retribution. As in a darkened séance, the conjured up period settings cast a quaint gas-lit glow over dubious proceedings, denied to the prosaic knife slayings, gang violence, and organised crime that have become part of the everyday postmodern fabric of most 'civilised' cities and societies. Yet there is more at work here than distraction and escapism from current societal evils. Neo-Victorian crime narratives also draw attention to the extent to which the legacies of nineteenth-century thought continue to inform present-day socio-cultural constructions of criminality and the means adopted to combat and control it – evident not least in periodic demands in the UK tabloid press to 'bring back hanging' for particularly vicious offences.

Several dominant trends, often interlinking, can be discerned in neo-Victorian crime fiction: re-visions of real-life crimes; the psychologisation of criminality, especially explorations of the mind of the serial killer; the afterlife of literary detectives; and the creation of new kinds of sleuths or sleuthing partnerships. To this may be added a further development: the fictional criminalisation of eminent nineteenth-century figures or else their inadvertent entanglement (living or dead) in criminal plots, sometimes inspired by or resulting from their work.

Typical neo-Victorian narratives based on true crime include adaptations of the Lizzie Borden story, such as Angela Carter's 'The Fall River Axe Murders' (in *Black Venus*, 1985),[2] as well as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001), and Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* (2005).[3] All of these propose alternative motives and much more sympathetic interpretations for the alleged acts of the accused/convicted. Such writing critiques how many perpetrators were not given a real voice in judicial proceedings and how they were as much victims of oppressive social systems, which should be held at least partly accountable for their actions.[4] This subgenre lends itself especially well to postcolonial literary politics of representing marginalised lives and voices. However, if we identify the rise of the neo-Victorian phenomenon proper with only the final decades of the twentieth century, we will inevitably overlook much earlier, highly inventive work in this area, such as Robert Graves' *They Hanged My Saintly Billy* (1957), about the life and crimes of the reputed poisoner Dr William Palmer, executed in 1856.

Doctors and/or early psychologists, such as Simon Jordan in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, become important characters in neo-Victorian fiction. Seeking to render the illegibility of crime 'readable' by their penetrative art, they apply – sometimes anachronistically – later psychoanalytical and profiling methods to nineteenth-century subjects, especially serial killers. Some of the best known exemplars of this strain include Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1994) and his sequel *The Angel of Darkness* (1997), as well as David Pirie's *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes* series, starting with *The Patient's Eyes* (2001) and two accompanying television films for BBC2 (2000 and 2001), also scripted by Pirie. Occasionally, a similar effect is produced by omniscient narration, combined with the killer's own musings about a traumatic upbringing, as in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994). Sometimes reduced to the level of banality, this psychologising tendency extends even to the unlikeliest of neo-Victorian niches, such as erotic graphic novels. In a subplot of Solano Lopez and Barreiro's *The Young Witches, Book Two: London Babylon* (1995-6), for instance, Robert Louis Stevenson is treated by Sigmund Freud for his cocaine and sex addiction, the 'talking cure' revealing the writer to be none other than Jack the Ripper, his violence against women a perverted re-enactment of his mother's rejection of him as a child.[5]

Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven Percent Solution* (1974), later adapted for cinema, combines a Freudian connection with a resurrection of Sherlock Holmes, another embodiment of acute psychological insight. This sort of Holmes-based sequel or appropriation probably constitutes the most obvious 'afterlife' of nineteenth-century emergent detective fiction.[6] Similarly, Edgar Allen Poe's C. Auguste Dupin ghosts Matthew Pearl's *The Poe Shadow* (2006), while Wilkie Collins' Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe from *The Woman in White* (1859) are revived as investigators in James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* (2001). There are numerous imaginative variations on Conan Doyle's detective-doctor duo or Collins' cross-gender and cross-class alliance. Adapted from Maureen Jennings' historical mysteries, the Canadian television series *The Murdoch Mysteries* (Citytv 2008), for instance, sees Detective William Murdoch join forces with the pathologist Dr. Julia Ogden to solve crimes in 1890s Toronto. Similar male-female alliances occur in some of C.S. Harris' Sebastian St. Cyr mysteries, L.M. Jackson's Sarah Tanner series, and Deanna Raybourn's series about Lady Julia Grey and the private investigator Nicholas Brisbane, as well as the lighter, more straightforward historical crime fiction of Anne Perry's Thomas and Charlotte Pitt novels or Emily Brightwell's Mrs Jeffries series, the latter involving a Miss Marplesque housekeeper to a Victorian police inspector, supported by a veritable army of fellow servant-sleuths. Other writers challenge reader expectations in different ways: Nene Adams' Gaslight series adds the twist of a lesbian romance between investigators, while Jenny White's first book in the Kamil Pasha series, *The Sultan's Seal* (2006), creates a cross-national sleuthing alliance between the Turkish protagonist and the British Ambassador's daughter in nineteenth-century Istanbul. Jason Goodwin's series about the Sultan's eunuch detective Yashim Togalu, begun with *The Janissary Tree* (2006), creates a similar cross-cultural alliance between the protagonist and the Polish ambassador to the Ottoman court.

Such alternative nineteenth-century settings to the British and North American metropolises that tend to dominate neo-Victorian crime fiction are among the most interesting developments in the genre, which invite further critical attention. Nor are they exclusive to writers in English, as evidenced by Boris Akunin's extensive Erast Fadorin series, set in Imperial Russia, or much earlier work that could arguably already be termed neo-Victorian, such as the Austrian writer Joseph Roth's *Die Geschichte von der 1002.*

Nacht, translated as *The String of Pearls* (1939), set in 1857 Vienna. This feature might also be linked to the as yet unexplored role of racial discourse in neo-Victorian crime – or its absence therefrom – in comparison to the prominence of race in nineteenth-century configurations of the criminal as atavistic 'Other'.

Finally, neo-Victorian crime narratives are increasingly replicating a trend from biographical fiction set in the nineteenth century: that of deflating culturally eminent figures, though in this case through association with criminality rather than the comic subversion or revelations of less than admirable private lives.[7] In Pearl's already cited *The Poe Shadow*, investigations into Poe's suspicious death and his artistic legacy incite murderous rivalry as to who can claim to have served as the inspiration for his character Dupin. Meanwhile Andrew Taylor's *The American Boy* (2003) situates the child Edgar Allen Poe himself at the heart of a macabre tangle of sex, money, and murder, which his British schoolmaster Thomas Shield seeks to unravel. In Pearl's earlier *The Dante Club* (2003), a whole range of literary worthies, working on a translation of *The Divine Comedy*, become embroiled in Boston serial killings that duplicate scenes from Dante's Inferno, apparently intended to taunt them in their endeavour. Again, literary practice precipitates criminal acts. Likewise, in Pearl's latest neo-Victorian offering, *The Last Dickens* (2009), the stolen later installments of Dickens' unfinished *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* (1870) provoke murder and mayhem among literary competitors. Dan Simmons' *Drood* (2009) goes one step further: a secret manuscript confession by Wilkie Collins, unsealed after more than a century, imputes that Dickens' penchant for reenacting the most violent scenes of his novels on stage (discussed in Benjamin Poore's final essay in this issue) might have far darker antecedents than ever suspected. Arguably, this sort of neo-Victorian crime fiction reflects our own time's prevalent celebrity culture and exposure journalism as much as any concern with re-imaging the nineteenth-century per se.

Having succumbed to the admittedly self-indulgent temptation to sketch out some of the directions that another special issue dedicated to neo-Victorian crime fiction might take in the future, it is time to return to the issue at hand and the razor swinging widely for the kill, inspired by Sweeney Todd and his ilk. To cite William Roughhead once more: "But I linger overlong before the curtain; let the bell be rung forth-with and the performance begin." (cited in Whittington-Egan 1991: 9)

Notes

1. Carolyn Strange's 'Murder and Meanings in U.S. Historiography', a review of three studies of real-life and fictional crime focused mainly on the nineteenth century, provides an insightful overview of the divergent theoretical approaches to the subject, much of which is equally applicable to British contexts. It also includes a brief discussion of the escaped slave Margaret Garner's infanticide, the real-life crime at the heart of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which resonates in interesting ways with Lucy Sussex's 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' in this issue.
2. The Lizzie Borden case has also featured as the basis of novels by Evan Hunter and Elizabeth Engstrom, and an extensive range of ballets, operas, musicals, songs, comics, films, and television adaptations, some dating back as far as the mid-twentieth century, as well as a number of true crime studies. See the comprehensive Wikipedia entry on Lizzie Borden, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lizzie_Borden.
3. Strictly speaking, of course, most of Barnes' novel takes place in Edwardian times, but in so far as the novel about Arthur Conan Doyle's intervention in the case of George Edalji explores the persistence of Victorian racial prejudice into the twentieth-century, it may be described as neo-Victorian in focus.
4. It seems no coincidence that Carey's earlier *Jack Maggs* (1997) should have re-imagined the life of one of Victorian fiction's most memorable literary criminals, Magwitch from Dicken's *Great Expectations* (1860-1).
5. In the graphic novel, Stevenson's crime is juxtaposed against his own character Dr Jekyll/Hyde's involvement in white slavery, staffing a high-class brothel with drugged young women, sex-crazed by his 'elexir'. Combining forces with Sherlock Holmes, Freud proves less effective in curtailing this crime, with both men ending up being taken prisoner themselves.
6. See, e.g. Grobius Shortling, 'Sir Arthur Conan Doyle & Sherlock Holmes (Canon and Pastiche)', 2005, viewed 10 February 2009, http://www.mysterylist.com/holmes.htm.
7. Prominent examples of neo-Victorian fictional biography include Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983); Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990) about the Brownings; A.S. Byatt's novella 'The Conjugial Angel' (in *Angels and Insects* 1992) and Lynn Truss' *Tennyson's Gift* (1996) about Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Colm Tóibín's *Master* (2004) and David Loge's *Author, Author* (2004) about Henry James.

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