

Unending Dickens: Droodian Absences

Joachim Frenk

(Saarland University, Germany)

Abstract

As often noted, Dickens's novels are filled with a multitude of Victorian material objects; neo-Victorian spin-offs of Dickens's work not only have to come to terms with his representation of these objects but also those that persist as absences or traces. This essay deals with the ways the absence of the eponymous character in Dickens's last novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) is presented, and considers how two recent neo-Victorian Dickens spin-offs, Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009) and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009), seek to come to terms with Dickens's last fragment. Both Edwin Drood and the author himself, who died before he could finish the manuscript, are conspicuously absent from *Edwin Drood*, and these two absences have given rise to endless speculations and critical debates about the text's possible and intended endings. Both neo-Victorian spin-offs address the *Drood* debate and its absences, and cater to the cultural desire to resurrect the dead Dickens while finishing (off) his novel – which is of course impossible to begin with. In doing so, they also address contemporary debates and concerns in their striving to offer acceptable and/or marketable endings.

Keywords: absence, death of the author, Charles Dickens, *Drood*, *The Last Dickens*, material objects, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, neo-Victorianism, Matthew Pearl, Dan Simmons.

The Victorians were living in a material world full of new and curious things, and they produced textual worlds in order to come to terms with this plenitude. However, it is clear that for many, the material and textual wor(l)ds were not legible in a satisfactory way (see Cunningham 1994: 4-80). The increasingly mass-produced Victorian things, on spectacular display, say, at the Crystal Palace in 1851, were, on the one hand, triumphantly celebrated and viewed with cultural discomfort on the other. Both responses are evident in the literature of the time (see Mersmann 2001). In many instances, the material intricacies in the textual manoeuvres of Victorian literature, itself a commodity on an increasingly mass-oriented market, predated the insights of recent Theory (with a capital 'T'). Kurt

Tetzeli reminds us of the Victorians' theoretical sophistication before Theory:

Being fascinated and attracted by the material allure of things and being driven to assemble them, the rare as well as the common, the precious as well as the ordinary, the exotic as well as the homely [... the Victorians] supplemented their fascination and compulsion with a thorough scepticism, an incisive criticism. It did not need a Karl Marx or a Sigmund Freud to tell a Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot or James about the motives, appearances or effects of reification and objectification, idolization and fetishization. (Tetzeli von Rosador 2001: 116-117)¹

However, in Umberto Eco's historical fiction *The Name of the Rose* (1980), Brother William of Baskerville, a medieval Victorian, hints that "signs and the signs of things are used only when we are lacking things" (Eco 1996: 28). It is therefore evident that, no matter how materially sophisticated the Victorians were, their unease with their material culture is substantiated by their signifying activities – or, sometimes, the conspicuous lacking of these. With this in mind, we can add another term to Tetzeli's list of things the object-obsessed Victorians knew about well before twentieth- and twenty-first-century Theory: absences – material objects under erasure, spectacles of the void. Visible and palpable as they were, in Victorian literature material objects went missing in a number of ways. There are, for instance, the absences which are a constitutive feature of the emerging crime novel: pieces of evidence, sometimes the corpse of the victim, and of course, the absence and enigma of the perpetrator that keeps the genre going. And, more than a hundred years before the death of the author was announced, the author's absence in Dickens's last novel gave rise to intricate cultural negotiations.

It has been observed that "Dickens's novels are necessary reading for the historian of things, which are often brilliantly – and poetically – described" (Briggs 1990: 19). Indeed, Dickens's material minutiae, the *realia* of all areas of the Victorian world and its views, are hallmarks of his fantastically realistic style. The absences inscribed into Dickens's texts, subtractions, as it were, from fictional worlds teeming with minutely noted

material objects, have proven intriguing over the last one and a half centuries – to readers, to critics and, more recently, to the writers of neo-Victorian or, more specifically, neo-Dickensian novels. Therefore, if it does not want to treat the Victorian age as a mere cardboard prop, neo-Victorian literature has to come to terms with both the material plenitude of Victorian literature and its other, the circumscribed absences, which in the focus of this essay are Dickensian absences. How, then, do Dickens spin-offs of the new millennium intertextually revise the absent presence of the inimitable's texts and of the age that neo-Victorianism is dialectically bound to?

The central absence in the Dickens canon is arguably the mystery of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Dickens's famously unfinished last novel. In the following, I will read Dickens's novel together with and against the rewritings of the mystery in two recent spin-offs, both of which are novels published in 2009, and both of which were written by Americans: Dan Simmons's *Drood* and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens*.² I am interested in the unending discussions surrounding the absent Edwin Drood in the unfinished *Edwin Drood* and in the material fictional worlds that have been written into existence surrounding these towering absences. The things and the spectacles that make up for these absences are main topics in the two spin-offs, which are both well aware of the cultural history of the endings suggested for Dickens's endless last novel and, in the concomitant process of *unending*, both the text and the author – who turns into another absence. In discussing these material matters, it will be productive to look at the spectacular endings proposed by the spin-offs.

Subverting the Christmas philosophy that was his established trademark, Dickens confronts us with the disappearance of Edwin Drood on Christmas Eve. In the carefully balanced structure as gothic-mystery-romance-thriller, Dickens's last novel hinges on an absence that runs counter to the celebrated presence of the saviour Jesus Christ. Edwin Drood tantalisingly vanishes in chapter 14 of the published 23 chapters, never to appear again. John Jasper announces to Canon Crisparkle that his nephew is missing. The intense search for Edwin Drood unfolds in Dickensian style:

With the earliest light of the next morning, men were at work upon the river, and other men – most of whom volunteered for the service – were examining the banks. All the live-long day the search went on; upon the river, with barge and pole,

and drag and net; upon the muddy and rushy shore, with jack-boots, hatchet, spade, rope, dogs, and all imaginable appliances. Even at night, the river was specked with lanterns, and lurid with fires; far-off creeks, into which the tide washed as it changed, had their knots of watchers, listening to the lapping of the stream, and looking out for any burden it might bear; remote shingly causeways near the sea, and lonely points off which there was a race of water, had their unwonted flaring cressets and rough-coated figures when the next day dawned; but no trace of Edwin Drood revisited the light of the sun. (Dickens 2002: 172-173)

Typically, Dickens crams a multitude of material objects and activities into this paragraph: “jack-boots, hatchet, spade, rope, dogs”. The objects of the search change from the accelerating list of bi- and monosyllables into a generalising polysyllabic term that gestures towards the hopelessness of the imagined search employing “all imaginable appliances”. The spacious banks of the Thames become the stage of a busy spectacle which circles around an absence that is ever deeper inscribed into the text. The detailed and vivacious Dickens-style here underlines the fact that the prime object of the search itself is not to be found. Canon Crisparkle, the muscular Christian, will later jump into the icy weir and find Edwin Drood’s watch and shirt-pin. Both objects also emphasise, through their very presence, and in accordance with the developing conventions of the crime novel, the mysterious absence of their owner (Dickens 2002: 182).

The context of the publication of this search for Edwin Drood added another absence. Those who held the novel’s fourth monthly instalment of July 1870 in their hands as they were reading the above passage already knew that the mystery of Edwin Drood would never be solved. Next to the absence of the eponymous character, the forthcoming absence of the author is arguably also inscribed into the unfinished manuscript by the author himself. Dickens died on 9 June 1870 after having suffered a stroke on the eighth. The absence of the author was painfully felt by the readers of his ongoing last novel, of which only the first three instalments had by then been published. With hindsight, many critics – first and foremost John Forster, Dickens’s friend and biographer – saw intimations of the author’s own death in the last words he wrote:

Of the sentences he was then writing, the last of his long life of literature [...] the reader will observe with a painful interest, not alone its evidence of minute labour at this fast-closing hour of time with him, but the direction his thoughts had taken. (Forster 1908: 521)

Indeed the final description of the English cathedral town in early summer seems to invite such a biographical reading:

A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with the lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields [...] penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthy odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life. The cold stone tombs of centuries ago grow warm, and flecks of brightness dart into the sternest marble corners of the building, fluttering there like wings. (Dickens 2002: 270)

Just before the novel ends, Cloisterham – its spatial setup clearly recognisable as Rochester, Dickens's childhood home – is an enticing ensemble of ancient buildings, spread out around the cathedral, and the town is suffused with light and warmth and pleasant smells and sounds. This presence of the Resurrection and the Life, both capitalised, contrasts with the novel's beginning, where Cloisterham is spiritually more than half-dead. In the first chapters, the cathedral, the prime object representing the spirit of Cloisterham, is a necropolis (albeit a fascinating one, as for instance Durdles demonstrates in chapter 12), and the community upholding it is largely spiritually empty and bored by meaningless ecclesiastical routine. When Dickens wrote his last pages on 8 June 1870, probably knowing that he was terminally ill, he was sitting in the little Swiss Châlet in his own garden, looking out into the Kentish countryside, the garden of England, which in the novel he imaginatively turned into the Garden of Eden. The optimistic and consoling tone of this carefully crafted passage has been taken to indicate Dickens's final willingness to let go, both of his writing and of his life. Here are the *last* last words Dickens ever wrote:

Mrs. Tope's care has spread a very neat, clean breakfast ready for her lodger. Before sitting down to it, he [Dick Datchery] opens his corner-cupboard door; takes his bit of chalk from its shelf; adds one thick line to the score, extending from the top of the cupboard door to the bottom; and then falls to with an appetite. (Dickens 2002: 272)

At this point in the manuscript, there follows a spiralling flourish, of the kind Dickens always used to mark the endings of chapters. The signified of Datchery's chalk line will always remain an absence. Shortly after he had written these last words in the present tense, Dickens went to dinner and suffered the stroke from which he would die the next day without having regained consciousness.

David Paroissien praises *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as one of Dickens's most impressive achievements, and he sees part of its greatness in its unfinished character:

[D]iminutive in comparison with the panoramic novels of his maturity, Dickens's last fragment nevertheless carries the signature of his greatest fiction. What an accomplishment, one might exclaim, what wholeness when so much is missing, what totality hinted at and yet unfulfilled [...]. (Paroissien 2002: xxxiii)

However, both the reading public and the majority of critics have been far less content with "Dickens's last fragment", far less able to let it be as it is. Due to its incomplete, fragmentary character, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* has given rise to endless discussions about the ending the novel would have had if Dickens had lived to finish it. Speculations about the projected ending ran wild directly after Dickens's death. The attempts to solve the mystery, based mostly on the working notes left behind by Dickens and the vignettes on the cover of the monthly instalments, soon began adding to the mystery instead of solving it. The spectacular speculations about the ending – actually, about the entire second half of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* – continued long after the early 1870s. On 7 January 1914, allegedly in order to reach an authoritative solution to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* – and in order to create attention for itself – the London branch of the Dickens

Fellowship organised a show trial. G. K. Chesterton acted as the judge, and George Bernard Shaw acted as the foreman of the jury. The tongue-in-cheek exercise ended with the jury finding John Jasper guilty, despite the absence of any evidence, and Chesterton committing everybody to prison for contempt of court, except himself (*Trial of John Jasper* 1914: 78-79). The discussion about the ending of Dickens's last novel has gone on ever since.³

In an essay on the implications of the search for a *Drood*-ending, Steven Connor argues that for a long time, critics have been in a theoretical cul-de-sac when discussing Edwin Drood:

[I]n solving the mystery of Edwin Drood, one is also providing a solution to the mystery of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. It is a doubling in which every attempt to project a conclusion for the novel participates in some degree. The novel can now never be finished, but, just for this reason, it can never be left alone either. Of course, because of this compulsive need to finish Dickens's unfinished work, the mystery has generated its own history, of continuations, hypothesised and actualised solutions, of revelations, disclosures and decodings. The very fact that the novel does not supply us with enough is the reason that it comes to us burdened with such a huge freight of supplementarity. [...] The fragmentary condition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can never be self-sufficient, will always call for the reconstructive participation of its future readers. Resisting and soliciting the sense of an ending which it both withholds and demands, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is thus both lifted unnaturally out of history and immoderately exposed to it. (Connor 1993: 85-86)

What is at stake for many participants of the *Drood*-discussion is the life and death of two figures which have by now both become fictional. The discussion about the ending of Dickens's last novel has not been content with focusing on the text and the death or survival of the main character; it has also reached out to the existence, or the haunting authorial spectre, of Dickens himself.

The view of Dickens's texts as the only objects where the author is to be re-membered is inscribed into Charles Dickens's last will and testament: "I conjure my friends on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial, or testimonial whatever. I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works" (qtd. in Slater 2009: 618). Dickens wanted to be remembered through his works only – a request that was of course thoroughly ignored as soon as the Dickens-hagiography set in. Yet, in a way Dickens's wish came true for his last novel. In the process of its serial publication, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* became Dickens's first textual memorial. Of the projected twelve instalments, only six were published: three while Dickens was still alive, and three after his death – an almost uncanny symmetry. The last three instalments of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* came to be seen (and venerated) as Dickens's last messages to his readers, objects of memory gesturing towards one closure that had come once and for all, and towards another closure that would never come.

The quest for an ending of *Edwin Drood* has become a matter of life and death not only within the text, but also on the paratextual level, and in extension, it has become a matter of life and death of the author. Ending *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* has more often than not also meant *unending* Dickens – the absent author is sought in his absent text. The popular cultural desire to speak with the dead, with the dead Dickens, has never ceased. And again, Dickens seems to have pre-scribed this. After he had noted down the title *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens wrote underneath it: "Dead? Or Alive?" (qtd. in Slater 2009: 603).

Over the decades, the Drood-debate seems to have acquired the status of a sometimes trivial, sometimes dangerous pursuit. The novel itself can be read as satirising the game of Drood- and Dickens-obsessed fact-gathering and clue-hunting: "The apprehension of dying suddenly, and leaving one fact or one figure with any incompleteness or obscurity attaching to it, would have stretched Mr Grewgious stone dead any day" (Dickens 2002: 114). In his biography of Dickens, Michael Slater refuses to discuss the implications of the ending of *Edwin Drood* and deals with it and Dickens's death separately (Slater 2009: 603-613). By contrast, in quasi neo-Victorian fashion, Peter Ackroyd, feeling the ending of his monumental Dickens-biography and possibly his own ending as Dickens's biographer

nigh, imagines Dickens back to life when he discusses *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*:

And then I was sitting next to Dickens in the carriage of an underground train which was travelling somewhere in Essex. I saw him in profile, and he did indeed seem very old with his white beard and long white hair. It was not so much an image of him, however, as an image of old age imbued with all the characteristics of Dickens. [...] And in my dream he was now standing on the platform as the automatic doors began to close and now, for the first time, he looked straight at me. And, when he smiled, I knew that it truly was Charles Dickens. That, in some sense, he had not died. I never saw him again. (Ackroyd 1990: 1060)

The claim that, in more senses than one, Dickens is not dead has become quite common; like so many other figures of the contested and undead canon, he is regularly brought to life in all kinds of texts of contemporary (more or less) popular culture. The current cultural product of choice is evidently neither the continuation nor the sequel; it is the spin-off that uses the Dickensian/Droodian pretext to create a new fiction out of well- or lesser-known material.

The advertising headline on the cover of Dan Simmons's *Drood* is "Charles Dickens took one last secret to his grave" – the book announces that it is as much about the dead Dickens as it is about his last novel. As a neo-Victorian re-imagining of Dickens's last years, Simmons's *Drood* is a strange book which, next to the gothic, the gruesome and the gory, offers an enormous amount of well-researched Dickens material and other Victoriana. Time and again, Simmons is willing to let go of the thriller formula to enlarge on, for instance, the literary merits of *Our Mutual Friend* in comparison with *The Woman in White* or Dickens's personal circumstances after his separation from his wife in 1858. On the level of the main plot, *Drood* gets its thrills not from the absence of Dickens but from the absence of the mysterious figure Drood, a ghoulish phantom in dark apparel whom Dickens claims he first met (and briefly talked to) during the 1865 Staplehurst rail disaster, which constitutes the sensational opening of the novel. Drood is "cadaverously thin, almost shocking pale, and stared at the

writer form dark-shadowed eyes set deep under a pale, high brow that melded into a pale, bald scalp” (Simmons 2009: 13). Clearly, Drood owes his appearance partly to the figure of the vampire, which has been all the pop-cultural rage in the nineties and noughties. At the site of the disaster, Dickens observes that all the injured persons Drood takes care of after the accident die; he decides to search for Drood, who is not to be found by the police and whom Dickens even suspects of being a cannibal.⁴

In his quest, which also leads him to the shabby opium dens in the East End that are so vividly described in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens enlists the services of the narrator of *Drood*: Wilkie Collins, Dickens’s opium- and women-addicted friend and rival novelist. The increasingly paranoid and pathologically envious Collins is an unreliable homodiegetic narrator/focaliser *par excellence*. The prime topics of this 771-page novel (which in length imitates a Dickens novel) are Collins’s deteriorating state of mind, his ever more idiosyncratic behaviour and his opium visions while he pursues both Dickens and Drood – and, helped by Dickens, writes *The Woman in White*. In the novel, when Dickens is absent from England because he is on his last reading tour in the United States, Collins tries to live Dickens’s life: he takes over most of Dickens’s writing and editorial responsibilities and lives most of the time either at Dickens’s place in the offices of *All the Year Round* or even in Dickens’s home Gad’s Hill (Simmons 2009: 411). Collins acquires the status of a Dickens *Doppelgänger* in the absence of his hated friend. But although the bulk of the novel is about the life and opinions and sinister inner life of Wilkie Collins, the marketing of the text focuses on the presence and ultimate absence of Charles Dickens. Throughout the text, there are dozens of intertextual references to Dickens’s *Edwin Drood*, often in the form of locations, names, characters or phrases which the reader can only decode if s/he knows *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* rather well.

A terrifying and vague figure half English, half Egyptian, Drood is a master of magnetism and mesmerism (of the kind Dickens strove to be). As a lord of the underworld, Drood lives in London’s repulsively fascinating “Undertown”, in the city’s dark other space. The long way down into Drood’s realm in the tenebrous sewers is described in thrilling material detail set to portray another London ‘down there’: “We walked between the dark headstones and sagging sepulchres, passing under the dead trees and down uneven paving stones on narrow lanes between ancient vaults”

(Simmons 2009: 96). Dickens's and Collins's descent into Undertown is an adventure story in its own right. The materiality of Drood's realm is an intertextual pastiche, as the text itself, through the discerning Dickens, repeatedly insists: "Haven't you read your Mayhew?" (Simmons 2009: 118) The entrance is at "Saint Ghastly Grim", described by Dickens in *The Uncommercial Traveller* in the twenty-third chapter, 'The City of the Absent' (Simmons 2009: 96; Dickens 2000: 262-263). The dark dungeons as hallmarks of the gothic novel are as evident as the orientalising exoticism that offers well-known visual markers of occidental constructs, for instance of China:

[In] a heavier cloud of opium [...] sitting cross-legged in a Buddha posture atop a backless wooden couch set on a stone bier so that his Oriental eyes were the same height as ours – was a Chinaman who looked as ancient and mummified as those forms on the shelves behind us and ahead of us. (Simmons 2009: 109)

The popular discourse about Egypt is also part of the fictional parcel: "Indeed, these might be Egyptian mummies we were walking past, lying there in rotted robes and tatters" (Simmons 2009: 108). Every strange and foreign thing seems to be down there, in the novel's intertextual entrails of its generically regressive underworld.

Only Drood is not really there. In the end, it turns out that Drood has always been an absence. Shortly before his death, Dickens confesses that Drood and his kingdom in the London sewers were just a prank, a fiction he tested on the easily agitated and laudanum-stimulated imagination of his friend Collins – the world down there dissolves again:

'There is, of course, no Drood... no Egyptian Temple in Undertown...' [...]

[...] 'Are you trying to tell me that the gondola and those men who took you away were mere phantasms?'

'No,' said Dickens. 'They were my gardeners, Gowen and Smythe. And the 'gondola,' as you call it, was a mere Thames river barque with the roughest wooden adornments

‘painted and hammered on fore and aft.’ (Simmons 2009: 716-717)⁵

Dickens could not foresee at the time that, for Collins, Drood would turn into an obsession, a figure that embodies all of Collins’s nagging self-doubts and his envy of Dickens’s overpowering genius, which will secure Dickens’s victory in their writers’ contest for a literary afterlife. The exuberant materiality of *Undertown*, the horrific spectacle of Drood’s world, is largely a fiction created by the narrator, the product of Collins’s drug-addled mind.

Yet eventually, the spectral figure of Drood comes to haunt Collins, who is convinced that Drood has unleashed a scarab into his body which is eating its way through Collins’s head towards his eyes. Writing on his deathbed and meditating on his own imminent absence, Collins imagines confronting his nemesis Drood one last time.

Several figures will be in the room with me and gliding closer as – perhaps – I still strive to write, but my hand will be nerveless, my writing finished forever, and the pen will achieve only vague scratches and blobs. Drood will be here of course. [...] But, Reader [...], Dickens will not be there among them. *Dickens is not there*. (Simmons 2009: 771)

Dickens is not dead; he is an absence. For Collins, only Dickens could have unravelled the tantalising Drood mystery. As an author, Collins, writing himself to death, remains the victim of his own fictions. He pens the last word: “Unintelligible” – a word that appears repeatedly both in this novel and in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The spin-off emphasises its dependence on its pre-text by quoting it at the very end while at the same time adding to the pre-text’s unintelligibility.

In Matthew Pearl’s *The Last Dickens*, Charles Dickens is dead to begin with. The plot is set in June 1870, shortly after Charles Dickens’s death. Dickens’s third son Frank is an officer of the British army in India, hunting opium thieves. The setting quickly changes to Boston to introduce the main plot: an office boy who is to collect the last three instalments of *Edwin Drood* in the harbour to bring them to the offices of Dickens’s American publisher, Fields, Osgood & Co., is hunted to death by a foreign-

looking killer with the misleadingly German name ‘Herman’ – an oriental, as will later turn out. To find out more and, if possible, to find the missing manuscript pages, publisher James R. Osgood and the office boy’s sister Rebecca Sand, a bookkeeper, travel to England to visit the Dickens-and-*Drood*-locations in and around London. Even while on ship crossing the Atlantic, Osgood ruminates on the implications of Dickens’s last plot:

The looming question lurked at the end of the existing pages: Was Edwin, the young hero, murdered? Or was he in hiding, waiting to return triumphantly? Of course, there was no thinking of Drood’s disappearance without thinking of Dickens’s death. The two were welded together for all time now. Would learning more about one ease the sad reality of the other? This was the momentum of Osgood’s thoughts as he roamed the deck when he lost his balance on a slippery board and, before he could grab the railing, fell down hard on his back. (Pearl 2010: 95-96)

A material object, a slippery board, prepared by the ruthless killer in search of Dickens’s manuscript ending, illustrates the great danger the hero is in – he is speculating on slippery ground. *The Last Dickens* insists that asking questions about the absence of Edwin Drood and about Dickens’s death can be lethal. From the beginning, the quest for Dickens’s text is a matter of life and death, set in what not always seems to be a conscious opting for the melodramatic mode.

Soon, it appears that Dickens has indeed completed his last novel and that it exists as a transatlantic text, written partly in England and partly in the USA. As Tom Branagan, a helper figure, remarks:

‘What if he wrote the second half of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* first, and then the first half once he was back here [in England]?’

‘What if he wrote the book *backwards*? What if he wrote the ending first?’ Osgood asked rhetorically.

‘Yet none of our efforts,’ interrupted Rebecca, ‘have suggested where the rest of the book would be stored if he really did write it.’ (Pearl 2010: 352)

Here is the generically indispensable need for immediate action that keeps this page-turner going: if the hero and his friends can find the missing second half of the manuscript, and if they can publish it before it falls into the hands of the notorious manuscript thieves of New York, the bookaneers, their publishing house can survive against their fierce competitor Harper.

In the course of *The Last Dickens*, Dickens is brought back from the dead, although he is never present. The novel even presents us with two Dickenses: in India, Frank Dickens protects the interests of the Empire in the international opium trade, and Charles Dickens is brought back to life in flashbacks. Remembering his first American reading tour on his second one in 1867, Dickens offers the decisive hint towards the intertextual network that will lead to yet another solution to the mystery of *Edwin Drood*, which involves the absent presence of two other canonical writers:

‘Then I spoke to Poe of – yes, I can recall exactly, as if it were yesterday – of William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, a work we both admired. [...] I told Poe what I knew about its strange construction – that Godwin had written the hunting down of Caleb first. Only later did he decide how to account for it, and he wrote the first half of the book afterwards. Poe said that he himself wrote his stories of ratiocination backwards. He wanted more than anything for me to see him as a common spirit [...].’ (Pearl 2010: 266-267)

It turns out that Dickens had heard about a murder committed by opium dealers to protect their trade secrets. He wrote the thinly fictionalised second half of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* before the first half as a revelation of this murder and in order to expose that opium trade network. Osgood finds the material object proving the theory, the manuscript with the second half of *Edwin Drood*, in Boston’s Harvard Medical College, the site of a famous American murder Dickens had been interested in. Predictably, when Osgood finds the manuscript, “it [is] as though he had, for a few more seconds, kept Charles Dickens alive” (Pearl 2010: 404). The authoritative text turns the author’s absence into a presence.

The oriental killer who follows Osgood and his romance interest works for the head of the opium network, whose real name is Edward Trood. Trood is a man who as a boy lived next to Dickens’s residence Gad’s

Hill and who now seeks to avoid public exposure at all costs. Trood and Osgood sum up what is at stake when in a final confrontation Trood, holding a pistol to the neck of Rebecca, demands that Osgood burns Dickens's just recovered manuscript ending:

‘From samples of Dickens’s handwriting I will have my men create six instalments of the finest literary forgery ever attempted [...] There is only one problem. We must be rid of Dickens’s real ending before I can forge my own.’

‘For me, this would have been my finest publication [...] Only conceive what a treasure it would have made! Not only to have rescued my firm from our rivals but to have done proper justice to Mr. Dickens’s very last work and restore it to the reading public. But for you, the ending of *Drood* is even more. It’s your life. Isn’t it? These last six instalments could destroy you, since all eyes around would have been on their every word.’ (Pearl 2010: 430-431)

Both hero and villain explain the implications of their respective plans more to the readers than to each other; such illustrative declamations are familiar in melodrama, where the Manichean distinction between good and evil needs to be acted out to the last. As we are led to expect from such a melodramatic final setup, *The Last Dickens* is finally unable to flout the Victorian conventions it employs.⁶ The villain and his henchman will die in a final conflagration, the publisher-hero and his beloved will end up unharmed. Formula fiction triumphs.

But before the happy ending, the formulaic hero has to prove his mettle in an extended action sequence in which, assisted by Rebecca, he eliminates both the first henchman, Herman, and then the criminal mastermind Trood himself. Interestingly, in the final showdown, *The Last Dickens* stages a clash not only between the new-world hero and his oriental hunter, but also between two material objects. Hunted through Boston by the oriental killer, Osgood flees into the Sears Building. Osgood is a man of the new world, both geographically and in terms of his spirit of modernity; he admires the building’s new elevator (as does the narrative voice) and enters it on his flight:

The Sears Elevator was what they called a moving parlour. The car had a domed ceiling with skylights and a chandelier elegantly suspended from it. The gas apparatus connected to the chandelier was concealed by a lightweight tube (Pearl 2010: 426).

The elevator is a modern luxury item. Its knowledge and appreciation distinguish Osgood from the villain, which for the moment turns him into a kind of neo-Victorian James Bond. Through the elevator door, Osgood manages to wrench away from the killer (who uses the stairs) the latter's characteristic accessory, his dangerous walking stick – its head adorned with a monstrous “pure gold idol, a head of a Kylin with onyx for eyes – the Kylin, a mythological horned beast” (Pearl 2010: 347). Osgood uses this walking stick to calculatedly damage the elevator: “[He] took the walking stick and pounded it again and again until the valve dented and then broke – the walking stick cracked, decapitating the monstrous golden visage” (Pearl 2010: 427). The walking stick loses its evil head, and the readers do not even need to realise the Freudian connotations of this analogy to know that this will prove fatal for Osgood's hunter. The expectation generated is immediately satisfied: “Herman, curled up in a stupor in the shaft and trying to crawl away from the burning steam, looked above him just long enough to see the car before it smashed on to him” (Pearl 2010: 428). At its thrilling climax, the novel establishes a hierarchy between two luxury objects which it both destroys in a spectacular act of conspicuous consumption. The modern American elevator becomes the weapon that kills the villain, and the old-fashioned orientalist walking stick – which is also a weapon – is destroyed while being used as a mere tool to this end. Melodramatically, both the henchman and his master Trood die in the metaphorical hell of the burning elevator shaft. The text's order of things predestines Osgood to triumph in the end.

As to Dickens, he is unended at the end of *The Last Dickens*, too; his absence is once more turned into a textual presence. But this neo-Victorian ending of *Edwin Drood* is written in Dickens's own version of shorthand, which is indecipherable to everyone but a handful of specialists. The manuscript is sent to London and allegedly lost at sea – actually, it vanishes in a safe in the Chapman and Hall offices, which means that it is absent only in the eyes of the public. Chapman and Hall can thus keep the Drood

mystery alive and profitable and still have the option to make an enormous profit from this literary treasure if need be. The missing part of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* remains absent, but it does exist, which is a fantasy of many Dickens enthusiasts since June 1870.

As material objects, the books *Drood* and *The Last Dickens* look very much alike, although they have different publishers. There is a silhouette-like figure of a Victorian gentleman (coming towards us vs. walking away from us) surrounded by the obligatory London fog; there is a bluish tint, picturing obscure lighting, and there is a night-time setting; there are the books' titles in fonts that imitate handwriting; there is even, on both covers, the framing device of an arch – a rather rough arch for *Drood*, and a classical one for *The Last Dickens*. It is obviously the prime function of the cover designs to guarantee a high marketability of these neo-Victorian texts that seek to procure a high-pop status through their Dickensian pre- and subtexts. What the publishers' streamlined cover designs erase, though, is the novels' specificity: though they look very much alike, they are not.

The return of the Drood debate to the realm of popular culture is by no means a new phenomenon. It is interesting, though, to see how contemporary adaptations seek to fit the old debate to the cultural needs of the twenty-first century. The neo-Victorian unendings of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and the attendant unendings of Dickens will probably soon go transmedial: Hollywood director Guillermo del Toro is planning to direct *Drood*, the film, and perhaps Simmons's thriller will be relegated to "the book of the film"-status ('Drood,' IMDb). And all these texts point back towards Dickens's fragment – which calls for the filling of a void that will never be possible, for all sorts of material resurrections that can never be. The novel's fragmentary character seems to make sure that every thing and every body in and around *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, including the author, is at the same time present and absent, there and not there. And this is exactly the state of things Dickens's novel announces at its very beginning:

An ancient English Cathedral town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here! The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that

intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe, it is set up by the Sultan's orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colors, and infinite in number and attendants. Still, the Cathedral tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some vague period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility. (Dickens 2002: 7)

The disoriented reader does not know at first that this is one of John Jasper's opium visions. S/he cannot answer the first questions of the narrative voice since the text offers no referential framework to separate what is fictionally taken to be 'really there' from what is mere fiction. As will soon turn out, the only thing that we are asked to acknowledge as being really present is the spiky old bedstead in the Princess Puffer's opium den. In these shabby surroundings, John Jasper's imagination is running wild in a Freudian scenario which in its over-explicitness verges on satire. Neither the sumptuous oriental setting with its sexualised and violent images nor the deceptively plausible English Cathedral town with the overpowering materiality of the massive cathedral tower are actually there. What is presented in this quasi modernist beginning are projections of a drugged mind that can no longer distinguish between what is there and what is not, the metafictional implication of course being that the two 'drugs', opium and literary fiction, are analogous in their effects.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood presents us with an elusive narrative voice which conjures up, and lets itself be dragged into, an opium vision, a voice which seems to enjoy constantly shifting presences and absences. From the discordant opium vision of the first paragraph that leaves the reader disoriented, Dickens's last novel keeps imaginatively collapsing upon itself to undermine any sense of completion. Its first half is there, its second is not. Now you see it, now you don't. Every material presence may turn out

to be an absence after all. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* resembles a Victorian Rorschach test of the reader's literary imagination: since one half of the folded double page we are asked to describe is not there, we are tempted to imagine it into existence, spectacle, materiality and all – which is exactly what both neo-Victorian spin-offs analysed here set out to do. And this is, perhaps, a fitting point on which to – end?

Notes

1. The critical debate on Victorian material culture is too extensive to discuss it in detail here. For publications that discuss and revise Tetzeli's thesis from different angles, see e.g. Peter Melville Logan's *Victorian Fetishism* (2009), Victoria Mills's *Victorian Fiction and the Material Imagination* (2008), and Mark W. Turner's "'Telling of my weekly doings": The Material Culture of the Victorian Novel' (2004). For a history of materialist philosophy, see Richard C. Vitzthum's *Materialism* (2006).
2. For a recent discussion of a postmodern pop-culture version of Dickens's novel, see Marc Napolitano, "'This garish parish called the music hall": Rupert Holmes's *Drood* as Dickensian Adaptation' (2010).
3. The best known text playing with the missing ending of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in postmodern fashion is Carlo Fruttero's and Franco Lucentini's *The D. Case: Or The Truth About The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* (1992).
4. Cannibalism, an important element in the Dickens universe, is mentioned repeatedly in *Drood*. On Dickens and cannibalism, see Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (1994).
5. Whether this conversation between Dickens and Collins actually takes place is uncertain, though. At this point, Collins has repeatedly shown himself to be a completely unreliable narrator; only shortly before, he has imagined another conversation, at the end of which he shoots Dickens (Simmons 2009: 707).
6. In his novel, Dickens also employs melodramatic devices and scenes. In contrast to Pearl, however, Dickens is effortlessly able to drop the melodramatic mode when he no longer needs it. For instance when Edwin's absence is announced to Neville Landless by John Jasper, the emotionally overwrought dialogue is melodramatic:

"What is all this, sir? What is the matter? I feel as if
I had lost my senses!" cried Neville. [...]
'Where is my nephew?' asked Mr. Jasper, wildly.

‘Where is your nephew?’ repeated Neville, ‘Why do you ask me?’

‘I ask you,’ retorted Jasper, ‘because you were the last person in his company, and he is not to be found.’

‘Not to be found!’ cried Neville, aghast.”

(Dickens 2002: 169-170)

The melodramatic excess of emotion here accentuates Edwin’s scandalous absence.

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Dickens*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.
- Briggs, Asa. *Victorian Things*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.
- Connor, Steven. ‘Dead? Or Alive? *Edwin Drood* and the Work of Mourning’, *The Dickensian*, 89 (1993), 85-102.
- Cunningham, Valentine. *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (ed. David Paroissien. London: Penguin, 2002.
- *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers: 1859-70*. The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’s Journalism (eds. Michael Slater and John Drew). Vol. 4. London: Dent, 2000.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. London: Minerva, 1996.
- Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. New York: The National Library Company, 1908.
- Fruttero, Carlo, and Franco Lucentini. *The D. Case: Or The Truth About The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* (trans. Gregory Dowling). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
- IMBd. ‘Drood,’ The Internet Movie Database, accessed 3 February 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1290396/>.
- Melville Logan, Peter. *Victorian Fetishism: Intellectuals and Primitives*. Albany: State University of New York, 2009.
- Mersmann, Arndt. ‘A True Test and a Living Picture’: *Repräsentationen der Londoner Weltausstellung von 1851*. Trier: WVT, 2001.
- Mills, Victoria (ed.). *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Special Issue: *Victorian Fiction and the Material Imagination*, 6 (2008).
- Napolitano, Marc. “‘This garish parish called the music hall’”: Rupert Holmes’s *Drood* as Dickensian Adaptation’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3:2 (2010), 118-144.

-
- Paroissien, David. 'Introduction', in David Paroissien (ed.), *Charles Dickens: The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. London: Penguin, 2002, xiii-xxxvi.
- Pearl, Matthew. *The Last Dickens* [2009]. London: Vintage, 2010.
- Simmons, Dan. *Drood*. London: Quercus, 2009.
- Slater, Michael. *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Stone, Harry. *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1994.
- Tetzeli von Rosador, Kurt. 'Editorial', in Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (ed.), *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, Special Issue: *Anything Shows: Victorian Material Culture*, 8:2 (2001), 115-120.
- Trial of John Jasper, Lay Precentor of Cloisterham Cathedral in the County of Kent, for the Murder of Edwin Drood Engineer. Heard by Mr. Justice Gilbert Keith Chesterton sitting with a special jury, in the King's Hall, Covent Garden, W.C., on Wednesday, the 7th January, 1914*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1914.
- Turner, Mark W. "'Telling of my weekly doings": The Material Culture of the Victorian Novel', in Frances O'Gorman (ed.), *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, 113-133.
- Vitzthum, Richard C. *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006.