

**Worlds unto Themselves:
Review of Carina Burman, *The Streets of Babylon*;
Elaine di Rollo, *The Peachgrowers' Almanac*;
and George Mann, *The Affinity Bridge***

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**Carina Burman, *The Streets of Babylon: A London Mystery*
from the Swedish by Sarah Death (trans.)
London & New York: Marion Boyars, 2008**

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**Elaine di Rollo, *The Peachgrowers' Almanac*
London: Chatto & Windus, 2008**

ISBN: 978-0-7011-8178-9 (HB) £ 16.99 / (CAN) \$ 42.50

**George Mann, *The Affinity Bridge: A Newbury & Hobbes Investigation*
London: Snowbooks, 2008**

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Many neo-Victorian novels revel in the exotic, as writers recast the nineteenth century into an alternately repressive and hedonistic, sinister and thrilling, profound and degraded wonderland, bursting with new kinds of knowledge, sexual experimentation, and technological breakthroughs. In different ways, Carina Burman's *The Streets of Babylon*, Elaine di Rollo's *The Peachgrowers' Almanac*, and George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* all fall into this category. Not coincidentally, each writer focuses his or her action around a crucial juncture in Victorian history, with Burman opting for the Great Exhibition of 1851, di Rollo for the period immediately before

and after the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and Mann for the threshold year of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the gateway to post-Victorian modernity (though in Mann's novel the monarch's life is artificially extended). Hence the crises in protagonists' private lives resonate with defining events in public history, capturing both the excitement of dramatic change and the excesses of Britain's pursuit of power, destiny, and futurity.

The Streets of Babylon is perhaps the most light-hearted of the three re-visions of 'the greatest empire on earth'. The *Swedish Book Review*, cited on the front cover, praises the novel's "sheer exuberant cheek", amply evident in the cover design of two lace-edged bloomers with satin ribbon ties. The title of Burman's novel seems a deliberate anachronistic play on W.T. Stead's *The Maiden Tribute of Babylon* (1885), itself part of a common nineteenth-century trend to depict the metropolis as a sinful latter-day Babylon. Vividly rendered period detail – not surprising in view of Burman's professional expertise in nineteenth-century literature as Assistant Professor at Uppsala University – combines with favourite neo-Victorian tropes of London slums, prostitution, closeted homosexuals, cross-dressing, domestic abuse, and secret fraternities dedicated to debauchery, in a plot converging on white slavery and ritual sex killings. Burman lets her twenty-first-century, time-travelling readers enter this Alice-in-Wonderland world via an appropriate 'outsider' narrator and guide: the foreign visitor, celebrated Swedish authoress of sensation fiction, and incredibly named Euthanasia Bondeson. One cannot help but wonder whether the heroine's name is intended as a parodic pun on the neo-Victorian genre's serial 'mercy-killings' of our nineteenth-century forebears, resurrected over and over again only to be compassionately 'put down' for their backwardness in such things as sexual liberation, women's rights, racial equality, and other present-day liberal ideals.

The middle-aged, unconventional Euthanasia arrives in London accompanied by her purported niece, the beautiful Agnes, intending to visit the Great Exhibition and to find time to finish writing her latest novel, uninterrupted by ardent enthusiasts of her work. Euthanasia is attracted by both the city's vitality and its anonymity, and the early sections of the novel seem dedicated to the celebration of the metropolis itself as an exuberant spectacle in which to lose oneself, metaphorically and literally. As one character remarks, "London is a whole world in itself" (p. 42). Implicitly, Burman invites readers to share Euthanasia and Agnes' excitement at

Victorian London's beckoning otherness, so different to their own known world(s): "Agnes was as thrilled as a child, wanting to go out and explore at once.... I could understand her impatience. That longing for the unknown can still, after forty years, take a claw-like grip on my stomach regions." (p. 11) London's otherness is underlined by its eroticisation as sexually ambiguous, transgressive, and seductive, at one point likened to a molly, a cross-dressing woman, "or even a man who desires other men" (p. 127).

At the same time, Burman distances her readers via the narrator's hyperbolic idealism, which frequently jars with acerbically ironic, twenty-first-century inflected undertones. Thus, Euthanasia initially describes the Crystal Palace as "a shrine to the peaceful intercourse of people, a hothouse for culture and industry and a station for the railway trains of human encounter" (p. 12), while shortly afterwards she reflects on British habits of refreshment in much more prosaic terms of trade protectionism and profits: "Perhaps the explanation for this interminable tea drinking is the possession of so many colonies, whose economy one wishes to support." (p. 13) Later Euthanasia muses on Hiram Powers' Greek slave, wondering whether the statue is intended as a purely aesthetic object or "meant to serve as a reminder of the indignation of subjugated peoples. For she could surely not be a reference to slavery in America?" (p. 22) All too conveniently, Powers' statue, which reminds Euthanasia of Agnes, also foreshadows the central plot development.

What might be termed ironic 'artificial' or pretended innocence in Burman's writing results in the narrator's voice occasionally approaching parody, as when Euthanasia pauses in her paeans of "reverential awe" on the Crystal Palace to notes, "But I am doubtless becoming tedious" (p. 15). This probably constitutes an intentional effect, aimed at undercutting present-day readers' nostalgic investments in a glorified past. In much the same way, on a visit to Spitalfields, Euthanasia's fantasy of London as an impressive, reincarnated Imperial Rome abruptly disintegrates: "I saw another metropolis.... My boot stepped down onto the streets of Babylon, and through its thin leather sole I could feel the whole city vibrating with poverty, want and vice.... perfidy and decay." (p. 44) When shortly afterwards Agnes disappears without a trace during a visit to the British Museum, the magical city once more reveals itself as an omnivorous predator of the vulnerable.

Euthanasia's search for Agnes is assisted by two admirers of her novels, selected with evident present-day political correctness: Professor Devindra Sivaramakrishnan, an anglicised Indian and permanent resident of England, since being sent to school there as a boy; and Owain Evans, a Chief Inspector with Scotland Yard, from Welsh working-class background and a secret homosexual to boot. In a caricature of postcolonial 'writing back' from the periphery to the centre of Empire, all the main marginalities are thus represented and given privileged voice: gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. In contrast, the middle and upper class, white, heterosexual Englishmen serve as the villains of the piece, none more so than the pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Edmund Chambers, with (again anachronistic) echoes of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1890-1): "He was like a work of art, just as beautiful and just as unreal.... He was as beautiful, not as a young god, but as a portrait." (pp. 23-24)¹ More positively, however, Burman's method can be read as a parody of neo-Victorian reader's conditioned expectations regarding political correctness and intertextuality, which her novel simultaneously mocks and satisfies.

The Streets of Babylon refuses to take itself wholly seriously, as in Euthanasia's metafictional remark that (neo-)Victorian crime and police detection might prove "a productive and saleable subject for the *lighter* sort of novel" (p. 38, emphasis added). So too, when she pronounces *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to be "compelling, but altogether too old-fashioned in its passions. I find it hard to believe it will have anything to say to later, less romantic generations" (p. 198). Burman's neo-Victorian novel, of course, plays to just such dismissed romantic tendencies in a disillusioned postmodern age, a seeming desire for old-fashioned passions, or at least passions made to appear more vital and exciting by their 'old-worldly' context. Later, interviewing prostitutes about a possible sighting of the missing Agnes, Euthanasia admits her growing curiosity about the "erotic variations" of the girls' services and their punter's tastes, ingeniously remarking that "[i]n any case, I could not write about such things. My readers would never buy such risqué books" (p. 113). Yet it is partly the promise of that same element of imagined sexual depravity in Burman's fiction that keeps her readers reading, in spite of Euthanasia's warning admission that "[l]iterary sex can be so trying" (p. 149). Indeed, actual sex is suggested and anticipated, but never depicted outright, and the same applies to the "orgies of violence" (p. 191) alluded to. Through her protagonist,

Burman implicitly condemns the exploitative potential of representing the latter and its after-effects. Musing on the bodies of young women in the morgue, “their dignity and honour intact” until exposed to the dispassionate gaze of strangers to “dr[a]w their detective conclusions” from, Euthanasia concludes that “[t]he mortuary attendants were procurers for dead whores” (p. 131) – implying that some neo-Victorian writers may likewise be pandering to readers’ basest desires.

Yet the narrator’s own reaction to scenes of destitution and vice evinces similar equivocal motivations. Euthanasia’s descriptions of her unladylike walks through London’s night-time streets resemble the neo-Victorian project per se, underpinned with a potent mix of prurient attraction, the self-affirming moral superiority of being appalled, and the desire to bear outraged witness to the nineteenth century’s underbelly of sin and corruption.

I have [...] seen a good deal of destitution, but from the outside. Yet I still want to see those wretches over and over again, to encounter people who are suffering and tormented. Of course I want to do good works – and perhaps have done, on occasion – but there is more to my appetite for slums than that. I am disgusted but fascinated. I am filled with righteous indignation and the desire to help – and with the writer’s unpalatable urge to note it all down. (p. 30)

As Euthanasia tells Agnes, “You should have seen it!” (p. 30) During the riotous mad-cap investigations that follow Agnes’ vanishing, interspersed with (albeit rather dreadful) extracts of the narrator’s fictional productions, the scopic imperative arguably functions more in terms of voyeurism than witnessing. Burman’s novel mines the sensational strain to the utmost and includes some lively set pieces, such as Euthanasia’s discovery of a cupboard full of homoerotic pictures in the parlour of George Amis, Owain’s rector friend cum amateur photographer, having picked the cabinet lock out of curiosity as to what sort of spirits a clergyman might keep secreted away. Though restored to its original appearance, the cupboard later bursts open to disgorge a stream of compromising pictures, at which point the heroine succumbs to a simulated swooning fit (p. 93). Burman’s protagonist, then, literally enacts the twenty-first-century reader’s desire to

‘unpick’ the Victorians’ dissimulations of extreme respectability, while calling into question the witnessing function through her vulgar and inquisitive performance of seeing/un-seeing.

Gender expectations are repeatedly subverted, though not necessarily in expected ways. Burman humorously evokes the platitude that ‘behind every great man there is a woman’, when much of Chambers’ later paintings turn out to be artworks created or completed by his sister-in-law, Ruby Holiday (whose appearance recalls Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal). Ruby demonstrates little sense of sisterhood and solidarity, quite prepared to sacrifice other women to ensure her own economic profit and artistic ‘freedom’. Her betrayal of her kind is suitably punished by the furious, cross-dressing, rapier-wielding Euthanasia, not above a bit of torture to extract crucial information, just as she later inflames the gathering crowd during Sir Edmund’s arrest, so as to force the villain, terrified at the mob’s “many-headed howl of vengeance” (p. 264), to reveal Agnes’ and the other missing girls’ whereabouts.

Meanwhile, the real nature of Euthanasia’s attachment to her companion is never made wholly clear. In spite of her attraction to men – at one point sharing a passionate kiss with Devindra – there are hints of possible lesbianism scattered throughout the text, including Euthanasia’s evident sympathy with those of ‘Greek’ inclinations and Owain’s suggestive conclusion that “We are birds of a feather, you and I” (p. 222). She makes repeated references to ‘my’ Agnes, and upon being reunited with her ‘niece’, describes how “[t]hat night, Agnes’s head rested on my breast once more” (p. 283). She also proves highly susceptible to Ruby Holiday’s physical beauty: “She was wearing the thinnest and most revealing of nightgowns, and I could well understand her brother-in-law having succumbed to inappropriate desires.” (p. 219) Combined with her self-description citing Terentius, “I am a human being, and nothing human is alien to me” (p. 270), and the surprising claim from a self-professed spinster that “Art is like sex – as surprising and bewitching every time” (p. 164), the novel hints not only at lesbian sexual experience but potential bisexuality on Euthanasia’s part. Yet readers fed on Sarah Waters novels and other neo-Victorian lesbian fiction will be disappointed. Barnum teases her readers, only to leave their curiosity unsatisfied. In the end, Euthanasia’s fierce attachment to Agnes, eventually revealed as a Magdalene previously rescued from a life of vice in the Stockholm slums, may simply re-enact the

spiritual sisterhood of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) between the titular heroine and the fallen Marian Erle.

There are some minor quibbles with Burman's neo-Victorian offering, such as the historical accuracy of Owain's claim to work "in the violent crime section" (p. 39), when there appears to have been no such dedicated central unit until the establishment of the Flying Squad in 1919-20. In terms of setting, heroine, and melodramatic style, Euthanasia's own writing reads closer to the superseded Gothic novel than the sensation fiction emerging in the 1860s, in spite of implications of her being a trailblazer in this later genre, admired greatly by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins whom she meets at a literary soirée. Some intertextual allusions, like Owain's rooftop chase after a villain that echoes the end of Dickens' Bill Sikes, are too self-consciously stagey and predictable, producing recognition but garnering no great applause for the cleverness of their recycling. Nonetheless, Burman's lively pace and exuberant, if at times unlikely characters maintain reader interest. Like a neo-Victorian Great Exhibition, Burman's text displays the manifold Victoriana that readers expect from this kind of literary entertainment. *The Streets of Babylon* finally resembles nothing so much as the fantastic Diorama admired by its protagonist: "We sat in comfort, while before us the sights moved as if travelling past us in a boat. It was all simply unbelievable." (p. 56) But it is no less rollicking fun for that.

The trope of the triumph of sisterhood is developed more fully in Elaine di Rollo's *The Peachgrowers' Almanac*, currently being republished in paperback by Vintage under the far less appealing title *A Proper Education for Girls*. Constructed in alternating chapters narrated by the separated Alice and Lilian Talbot, the final chapter of the novel reunites them after their individual trials and tribulations. While playing on notions of victim feminism through motifs of paternal tyranny, domestic confinement, social disgrace, forced marriage, banishment, hysteria, and threatened clitoridectomy, the novel stages the heroines' active resistance to male oppression, not least through their final dramatic airborne escape from the patriarchal home – even if, unlike in the case of Charlotte Brontë's madwoman in the attic, this does not involve the conflagration of the master's house.

Alice, the 'ugly' sister of this neo-Victorian fairytale of ingenious female protagonists battling male monsters, has overtones of Jane Eyre,

forcibly repressing her rebellious nature into the mould of compliant daughter and helpmeet to a domineering patriarch, who prizes material possessions more than his female offspring. Having retired to the country upon the death of his only infant son, the self-made industrialist Mr Talbot proceeds to compensate his loss by the “relentless accumulation of ancient and modern artefacts from all corners of the known world”, creating his own version of the Great Exhibition – “a Collection that embodied and quantified progress” (p. 4), only rivalled by the British Museum. Yet Talbot’s belief in progress clearly does not extend to women. Only while part of the medical wonder of being born triplets (prior to their sister Emily’s infant death) were Lilian and Alice cherished as “the most prized curiosities in their father’s entire museum” (p. 5). Since then, having ‘fallen’ and betrayed the ideal of Victorian womanhood, the beautiful Lilian was peremptorily pressured into marriage with a would-be missionary (financially recompensed for his sacrifice in wedding a Magdalene) and exiled to India in disgrace. Talbot sees his remaining daughter’s purpose not in propagating future generations of great Englishmen but in servicing his great Collection, remarking callously that “[s]urplus women are seldom granted such opportunities” (p. 9). If Burman treats white slavery, di Rollo depicts the slavery of female servitude and dependency. Alice seems condemned to a life of drudgery as her father’s curator cum housekeeper, longing for news of her sister in faraway dominions of the Empire, where Britain appears to rule as absolutely as her father does at home.

“Progress”, Mr Talbot pronounces at one point, “can only be understood with reference to the past” (p. 5). In typically feminist fashion, di Rollo appropriates his words to represent women’s struggle against oppressive nineteenth-century gender and sexual politics, out of which the modern women rights movement grew. Yet opting to focus on such all-time favourite tropes of neo-Victorian fiction can prove difficult for writers nowadays, who risk merely re-covering already well-trodden ground. Compared to innovative work on the subject in neo-Victorian classics such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990), the subject nowadays affords a much restricted scope for radical subversion and social critique. For instance, Di Rollo’s recapitulation, via the sinister Dr Cattermole’s pontification, of Victorian medical discourses on female hysteria and nymphomania, as well as debates surrounding the

potential adverse effects of women's education on the 'uterine economy', reads highly predictably and adds nothing new to feminist investigations of the repressive gender bias of nineteenth-century cultural ideologies. Di Rollo's parody lacks bite. That the novel nonetheless manages to rise to the challenge of the topic may be attributed to its privileging of the sisterhood theme. This still remains a comparatively under-explored subject of neo-Victorian fiction, which, apart from novels dealing with lesbianism, continues to concentrate on heterosexual rather than woman-woman relationships.

Although di Rollo's novel does depict Alice and Lilian's fraught relationships with father, husband, and male lovers, past or pending, sisterhood – or more accurately 'twinhood' – constitutes the primary bond that defines the women. Alice's days are "measured by those activities they had always undertaken together: watering the peach tree, tending the orchids, supervising the cleaning of the Collection", as she reflects that even none of her aunts, though sisters themselves,

could know what it was like to have a sister who had shared *everything* – every moment of life, every pleasure, every disappointment, every unhappiness. It had seemed as though even their thoughts were alike, their feelings in sympathy at all times, often with hardly a word passing between them. (pp. 16-17)

Paradoxically, this idealisation of sisterhood as spiritual affinity is simultaneously one of the novel's strengths and weaknesses, hardly compatible with the fairytale patterns that run through the text. (The fortified, claustrophobic Talbot household, which "*no one* is permitted to leave" without Talbot's "express permission" [p. 35], resembles a Rapunzel's tower, or a version of Bluebeard's castle, where women's souls are metaphorically murdered.) More typically, fairytales of sisters revolve around competition, jealousy, and spite. At times, Alice's meek acceptance of her own worthlessness, her utter lack of envy at Lilian's beauty and successful escape from the ogre's castle are hard to credit. Novels such as Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), which problematise woman-woman relationships as likely to prove just as unequal, exploitative, and sometimes downright vicious as heterosexual relations, achieve a level

of psychological complexity curiously lacking in *The Peachgrowers' Almanac*.

The title of di Rollo's novel alludes to the Talbot household conservatory, which ironically replicates the Victorian separate spheres ideology, representing a feminine space of "vulnerable greenness" that Alice suspects deeply disturbs her utilitarian father (p. 11). It offers Alice, her grandmother and elderly aunts a welcome retreat, and though originally a "man-made jungle" has been successfully "colonised" with feminine furniture and accessories (p. 11). The conservatory gone wild epitomises feminised 'nature' in contrast to masculine science, logic, and art embodied in Talbot's Collection, as made evident in a dinner conversation between Alice and her father. In words suggestive of twenty-first century ecological concerns, Alice reminds him: "The natural world provides inspiration for the direction of our own progress [...] Even without their medicinal properties plants have much to offer us. Some of men's finest creations mimic their processes and structures." (p. 28) She stresses that Joseph Paxton's design for the Crystal Palace – of similar design to that of the Talbot conservatory – was based on "Amazonian lily-pads" (p. 29), to which her father caustically remarks, "That's as may be, but civilisation is man's triumph over nature." (p. 29) Yet in the exotic climes of India, Lilian finds it much easier to adjust to the extremes of wilderness and weather than her wool-suited husband Selwyn Fraser or the British troops in their heavy military uniforms, so ill fitted to the natural environment. Travelling through Bengal and exploring the countryside on her own in defiance of Selwyn's admonitions about propriety, Lilian recalls her father's house and how "she had felt as imprisoned and constrained as the very plants that she grew" there (p. 45). Like her one-time charges, she thrives in the Asian heat that only makes Selwyn dwindle and sicken. Appropriately, Lilian not only uses the language of flowers to send her sister a coded message via a botanical painting, but the end of the novel sees the hot house plants burst through the conservatory floors and glass walls. Nature triumphs over man, just as the women throw off their patriarchal fetters.

The conservatory is also identified with the sisters' dead mother, since it is dominated by a giant peach tree of the kind first sown and tended by her. On the one hand, the tree functions as an emotional focus of (be)longing and wish fulfilment, like the magical hazel tree growing on the mother's grave that grants the daughter's wishes in 'Aschenputtel', the

German version of the Cinderella fairytale. Arriving at her new home in Kushpur, Lilian gives “a cry of pleasure” (p. 52) to find a bowl of peaches waiting for her and eagerly breathes in the scent of the fruit: “She closed her eyes and, for a moment, [...] she was Home: back Home with Alice, in the glorious summer heat of the hot house beside their mother’s peach tree, its branches bowed beneath the weight of its numberless glowing fruits.” (p. 53) When Lilian literally returns home at the end of the novel, she grinds peach kernels into a paste mixed with sugar, so as to make a poisonous cake to dispose of the villainous Dr Cattermole, who threatens her beloved sister and was instrumental in the death of Lilian’s illegitimate child and in arranging her subsequent marriage to Selwyn. On the other hand, the tree acts as a symbol for Alice herself and her artificial confinement. When the photographer Mr Blake, employed to record Talbot’s Collection for posterity, first meets Alice, the sun “illuminate[s] a fine layer of hairs that covered her cheeks and upper lip like the down of a peach” (p. 19).

The arrival of Blake at the Talbot household heralds the beginning of its final disintegration, perhaps because he is initiated into the conservatory’s female space, as Alice has set up a photographic studio in the temperate section. The heavily built, angular, and masculine Alice with her “breastless, waistless and hipless body that no amount of corsetry and couture could mould or conceal” (p. 15) admittedly makes for an unlikely Eve and an even less credible source of temptation (peach replacing apple). Nonetheless the conservatory also furnishes a metaphorical Garden of Eden for di Rollo to stage a second fall – or more accurately a third, since the reader later discovers that Lilian was seduced there by a visiting botanist, expanding Talbot’s orchid collection. Alice’s memory of their glimpsed love-making “on the ferns beneath the warm sprinklers” reads more like the viewpoint of a twenty-first-century observer, to whom Victorian sex appears comically cumbersome:

Even as Alice watched Mr Hunter’s naked buttocks rising and falling rhythmically between her sister’s knees she had found herself wondering how on earth the two of them had managed to sustain their enthusiasm as they went through the laborious motions of removing so many layers of complicated clothing. (p. 164)

An insomniac and ether-addict, Blake cuts a rather less inspired figure of Adam than his precursor. Besides frequenting prostitutes and “rogering” his former employer Cattermole’s neglected wife (p. 32), Blake, like the Reverend Amis in Burnam’s novel, has taken to supplementing his medical and botanical photography with pictures of the pornographic variety at Cattermole’s instigation. Nevertheless, attraction blossoms after Blake comes to Alice’s rescue when, trying out the resident inventor Mr Bellows’ flying machine, she crashes and injures herself. Following Blake’s later attempts to confess his indiscretions, only to find them already known, Alice ‘proposes’ to him, blackmailing him into an instrumental marriage to effect her own escape from her father. Talbot, however, grows increasingly suspicious about the nature of their relationship and is eventually persuaded by Cattermole that his daughter needs to be “saved” (p. 236) from her unruly and unfeminine tendencies via an experimental clitoridectomy.

Meanwhile in India, Lilian too becomes progressively masculinised in her husband’s eyes, taking to wearing trousers under her skirts and a man’s ‘topi’, smoking a ‘hookah’, and carrying a gun with which she becomes rapidly proficient. At one point, she reflects on the freedom “from the expectations and restrictions of womanhood” (p. 263) afforded by cross-dressing – a common, by now even stereotypical trope for gender and/or sexual liberation in neo-Victorian fiction, featuring in novels such as Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and James Buxton’s *Pity* (1997). When Lilian re-encounters Tom Hunter, the lover who deserted her, di Rollo’s free-thinking New Woman is not above swinging a punch in a public market. Later, she pretends to make peace with Hunter, leading him on to anticipate a resumption of their former relationship, while extracting as much of his knowledge of India as possible to arm herself for any eventuality. One of the novel’s finest comic scenes is the tea party in the bush rudely interrupted by a man-eating tiger, summarily dispatched by Lilian during its attack on Selwyn. While her panicked husband whimpers on the ground, Lilian poses triumphantly for a photo shoot above the vanquished brute – a prophetic image, as Selwyn dies only a few weeks later from lockjaw. The widowed Lilian finds herself once again the target of predatory males, avidly competing for her hand and body, while summarily dismissing New Woman debates and Lilian’s own desires. The disillusioned Lilian resists renewed self-sacrifice in marriage, opting for sisterhood instead; imaginatively reconfiguring the Lady of Shalott motif,

she mentally promises Alice, “*I’ll save you from the shadows. What use are men, when they bring us only pain and unhappiness? [...] And they talk such nonsense too*” (p. 146, original emphases). Reminiscent of Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’ (1979), where the heroine is rescued not by men, as in the Bluebeard fairytale, but her tiger-shooting, gun-toting mother, Alice’s rescue will be effected by her female sister-saviour.

The Indian sections of the novel, however, also prove the most disappointing because least self-conscious. As might be expected, Di Rollo depicts British imperialist arrogance in asserting the East India Company’s right to annexe personal fortunes and land-grab via the so-called Doctrine of Lapse, in cases where indigenous rulers had no direct heir. As Hunter queries acerbically, “who could deny the advantages of high taxation, land appropriation, military occupation and the opportunity to work on railway construction?” (p. 72) Like her former lover, Lilian loathes her compatriots’ hypocrisy and sympathises with the oppressed; indeed her fellow Englishmen and women regard her as increasingly at risk of ‘going native’. Yet this also constitutes the limit of the novel’s postcolonial engagement. Hardly any ‘natives’ are fully realised as characters, and Lilian’s friendly relationship with her ‘sircar’ Harshad, from whom she avidly learns Hindi, local customs and beliefs, calls to mind Rule 4 of Miriam Burstein’s ironic ‘Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels’: “All heroes and heroines are Instinctively Admired by members of Oppressed Populations.”² The single indigenous activity depicted in detail is the Churuk Pooja festival, a brutal and barbarous spectacle by European standards, of which even the open-minded Lilian remarks, “How disgusting, and yet, how fascinating” (p. 159).

Meanwhile the Indian Mutiny, or India’s first War of Independence, and its apotheosis of violence are dealt with in a mere eighteen pages. Di Rollo includes a memorable scene of Indian savagery, when Lilian discovers four of her female acquaintances in the midst of taking tea, only that “their heads had been cut from their shoulders and placed in their laps” (p. 275). Yet the novel includes no representation whatever of British retaliatory barbarity. The Mutiny serves as little more than background filler and a convenient metaphor for female rebellion and struggles for self-liberation, much as Charlotte Brontë appropriated the slavery trope to figure female oppression in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Inevitably, this comes across as rather superficial writing, especially for readers familiar with other neo-

Victorian renderings of the events, such as Julian Rathbone's recent *The Mutiny* (2007). Even earlier, unexpectedly comic treatments, such as J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) or George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975), afford infinitely more complex and multi-faceted historicised perspectives.

This fault is exacerbated by the final scenes in India, which revert to the fairytale mode. Fleeing the massacres with a wounded Hunter, Lilian discovers an unlooked-for fairy godmother in Ravindra – “call me Ravi” (p. 292) – Yashodhar Bhagirath Rana, the Oxford-educated Maharajah of Bhandarapur, an as yet independent (imaginary) principality. Lilian becomes Ravi's welcome guest, painting the fanatical gardener's beloved English vegetables and advising him on their propagation, and presumably having her return trip to England and her rescue mission of Alice financed by him. The vegetable fixated Ravi supplies a fine counterpoint to the demented collector Talbot, but he is at best a likeable caricature of Indianness. The section nonetheless ends on a high note with Hunter left behind in Ravi's walled garden, a “Rapunzel-like” (p. 299) prisoner servicing the Maharajah's botanical obsessions in a neat inversion of the motifs of the Talbot conservatory, female confinement, and desertion.

Like the non-representation of the Indian perspective, literary intertextuality proves somewhat problematic, not quite managing the balance between innovative deployment and genuine recognisability.³ Is Alice intended as an Alice in Wonderland figure, with the Queen of Hearts' ‘off with her head’ replaced by Cattermole's ‘off with her clitoris’? If so, the adapted Wonderland roles of other characters are left unclear. Strains of Christina Rossetti's ‘Goblin Market’ (1862) may be discerned in Alice's sensuous memory of harvesting peaches with Lilian, when the sisters “fed one another with slices of the sweet, silken flesh” (p. 182). Accused of being “neither a man nor woman” (p. 169), “a freak of nature” more fit for a circus or “a museum of *grotesques*” (p. 168), and due to be exhibited as an unsexed female at her father's “Evening of Gentlemen's Experiments, Enlightenment and Amusement” (p. 183), the aviator Alice bears traces of Angela Carter's sexually ambiguous, winged circus aerialiste Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus* (1984), previously on show in Madame Schreck's Museum of Female Monsters. Yet the novel is finally inconclusive as to the author's intentions regarding any such intertextual readings.

The ending of di Rollo's comic debut returns us to the Thornfieldesque rooftops of the Talbot Great House. The would-be rescuer and hero Blake is ironically reduced to the helpmeet of women, assisting the sisters in readying Mr Bellows' flying contraption. Early on in the novel, Alice had encouraged her father to attend a talk on "aeronautical machines", asking, "What greater symbol is there of man's dominion over the heavens, as well as the earth than a flying machine?" (p. 6) Now the glider becomes the appropriated symbol of women's dominion instead, at least over themselves and the elements that would frustrate their desires. The book's closing image is of sisters literally 'flying high' beyond glass walls and ceilings of any kind – "and all that lay before them were the stars" (p. 344). Yet readers might be left wondering at the note of triumphant optimism, questioning how far gender equality has really progressed since Victorian women's flight from hearth and home. One cannot help wondering what will happen when the sisters come back down to earth, or what sort of freedom they hope to find in their planned return to nineteenth-century India, hardly a gender-liberated or egalitarian realm.

In George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* Empire-building is a more serious business, resisting comic subversions or uplifting escapes from the protagonists' duties as imperial subjects. That his steampunk fantasy should evince a gloomier hue than Burman or di Rollo's light-hearted neo-Victorian romps is hardly surprising, since Mann figures the indefinite perpetuation of Victoria's reign beyond 1901, with the monarch kept alive via sinister medical technology. Although she makes only brief appearances in the novel, the Queen is perhaps the most memorable of Mann's cast of characters, a master manipulator and intelligence chief ruling her lands with an iron glove. If not exactly suggesting a reign of terror, the Queen certainly ensures that the interests of the realm take precedence over any ethical considerations, human rights, or civil liberties, calling to mind the democratic shortfalls in our present-day societies, perceiving themselves under permanent threat. Hidden from public view, confined to her wheelchair, and connected to a variety of life-sustaining tubes, Victoria appears a strange combination of Miss Havisham and the megalomaniac Dr Arliss Loveless of *Wild Wild West* (Warner Brothers 1999). Yet the fragility of her physical frame also symbolises the "thin veneer of Empire" (pp. 10-11) and civilisation which, not only in the colonies but also at home, is constantly in danger of disintegration.

Underneath the surface of imperial splendour and prosperity lurk all manner of Gothic terrors. Some of these, for all their supernatural cast, resonate strongly with present-day anxieties. The degenerative viral plague that stalks the streets of London in 1901, reducing victims to cannibalistic “[r]evenants” (p. 26) or zombie-like “walking cadavers” (p. 27) with vampire and werewolf overtones, evokes twenty-first-century apocalyptic fears of the uncontrollable spread of natural epidemics and/or man-made diseases in a globalised world economy. “Some projections suggested that up to fifty percent of the population could succumb to the illness: if not killed by the virus itself, then taken by one of the rampaging monsters it created. [...] the worst was probably still to come.” (p. 73) Similarly, the growth of “artificial intelligence” (p. 88) via clockwork automatons, employed as servants, pilots, and even assassins, clearly touches on concerns about the ethical development and use of unmanned military technology, and, more generally, of the continuing loss of jobs and the replacement of people through processes of automatisisation. (Here, Mann plays fast and loose with anachronism, the term ‘artificial intelligence’, according to the OED, only having been coined in the 1950s; so too as regards “immune system” [p. 236], first employed in the late 1940s.) The titular ‘affinity bridge’, a device linking human brains to clockwork circuitry, and the novel’s near-miraculous life-extending technologies summon up current scientific explorations into the expansion of human consciousness and developments in artificial life, bioengineering, nanotechnology, and so-called ‘cyberception’, as well as the ethical debates surrounding such research. The fascination for the search for the source of life, and the implicit concomitant quest for immortality, become most apparent in a scene where the protagonists gaze in wonder into an automaton’s “mechanical brain” (p. 102):

It was like seeing human thought processes in action, like some sort of bizarre window into the human soul. [...] it could be argued that the human brain was the same as this incredible device, a series of clockwork switches and cogs rendered flesh and blood. [...] they were looking deep into the very fabric of its being. (p. 103)

Even the exponential growth in air travel in Mann's turn of the century world and the major airship disaster, which becomes the focus of the protagonists' criminal investigations, resound with vociferous current debates about the environmental impacts of inordinate business travel, the package holiday industry, and continued airport expansions, and concerns about short-cuts taken with air traffic safety, under pressures to reduce costs in cut-throat competitive markets.

All this interweaving of Mann's alternative Victorian world and our own is arguably deliberate, one of steampunk's attractions, of course, residing in the comparative freedom from the constraints of verisimilitude that most writers of historical fiction labour under. Mann offers his readers a heady mix of standard neo-Victorian fare reinvigorated by weird and wonderful innovations, commingling séances, lunatic asylums, New Women, high society scandal, and serial killings in Whitechapel (albeit strangulations rather than Ripper-style knifings) with steam-powered carriages, 'ground trains', mass produced dirigibles, brass androids, Taser-like walking sticks, and spectral 'glowing' policemen. The author's intention to play with readers' assumptions is repeatedly evident, as when Mann has his protagonist Sir Maurice Newbury, anthropologist and agent to the Queen, dismiss spiritualism as buffoonery, only to reveal himself as a serious dabbler and believer in the occult. Or when his new assistant, the feisty Miss Veronica Hobbes, though quite prepared to kick in doors and fight assailants off with hot pokers, appears to prefer to do so in long skirts, and not even divided ones at that – no cross-dressing for Mann's heroine. Indeed, she proves curiously old-fashioned to Maurice's eyes in her aversion to the new mechanised modes of public transport: "Veronica was such a forward-thinking woman, and put such great stock in the liberation of the fairer sex, but in other ways she had yet to accept the tide of progress that was currently washing through the Empire." (p. 169) Yet when she politely opens a door for Newbury, inviting him, "After you, Sir Maurice" (p. 75), Mann's hero "shook his head, taking the door from her and ushering her inside. 'Come now, Miss Hobbes, let's do things properly.'" (p. 75) If it seems difficult to imagine a woman author writing this scene, feminist readers, whose teeth have been set on edge by Mann's/Newbury's gender politics, will be unsettled once more when the epilogue reveals Hobbes to be not so much Newbury's assistant as his protector and supervisor, reporting on him and his work directly to the Queen.

In *The Affinity Bridge*, as in *The Streets of Babylon* and *The Peachgrowers' Almanac*, the villains invariably prove to be those individuals who dedicate their lives to so-called progress. Ironically, Newbury himself could be classed among them, perhaps accounting for Queen Victoria's fears that he might succumb to the "dark arts" (p. 349). (Another reason might be his opium-addiction, which has traces of Sherlock Holmes' cocaine habit.) "Industry and technology were revolutionising the world, an unstoppable force as certain as life and death, and in Newbury's view the only option was to embrace it wholeheartedly, or else be left behind." (p. 169) It seems doubly ironic, then, that during the automaton attack at his office, Newbury should end up defending himself with ancient weaponry, using axe and flail to ward off his attackers.

The villain of the novel is identified early on by Mann's investigative duo. Mr Chapman, the owner-manager of *Chapman and Villiers*, the company that manufactures both the airships and automatons, claims to have "an overriding desire to aid progress" (p. 89); he intends his "marvellous machines" (p. 91) to 'free' workers from repetitive chores, "leaving more time for education and other, more profitable enterprises" (p. 90). Veronica queries the anticipated benefits, when "many of them will be left destitute with no hope of finding other work", but Chapman insists "we can't allow it to halt progress" (p. 90) – an early indication of the true value he places on individual lives. Meanwhile his partner Villiers, a scientist banished from France for unspecified ethical transgressions, conducts immoral experiments in the pursuit of ever greater knowledge. Newbury's friend Sir Charles Bainbridge, Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard, fittingly remarks that such self-styled philanthropists' investment in progress is "not about changing the world" but rather "about wielding power" (p. 291). The malfunctioning Frankensteinian creations produced by the villainous duo, which would relegate consciousness to a disposable "by-product of the human organism" (p. 302), dramatise the need for an ethical science and scientists' accountability to their wider community.

At the same time they warn of the element of unpredictability and potentials for abuse and misapplication in even the most seemingly noble advances in human knowledge and capabilities. Admittedly, this may constitute a more serious reading of Mann's fast-paced detective adventure than the author intended. Yet it also links Mann's work firmly to the concerns of a science fiction and futuristic fantasy tradition dating back to

the nineteenth-century, epitomised by works such as Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870) and H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and *The Invisible Man* (1897). Like Verne and Wells, Mann is interested in the links between "genius" and "a certain amorality that is sometime difficult to judge", and between genius and madness: "Both states of mind demand a disconnection from reality, from the real, physical world, an ability to lose oneself in thought." (p. 334)

Mann's return to an alternative Victorian age suggests progress and its benefits may finally be 'all in the mind', a matter of perception and always necessarily retrospective interpretation. Even when future impacts are correctly anticipated, they tend to be too easily disregarded. In much this way, Veronica's sister, the prescient Amelia, declared 'mad' on account of the seizures that accompany her visions, repeatedly foretells that "It's all in their heads" (p. 248). Veronica, however, does not pass on the message, which might have sped up the discovery of the synthesis of human brain and mechanical engineering that underlies the automatons' success. (Aficionados of *Dr Who* will likely have guessed the secret early on; the automatons are just that little bit too reminiscent of brass versions of steel Cybermen.) In a more sinister final twist on the ethics of progress, Queen Victoria instructs Veronica to retain "at least a handful of [the affinity bridges] in working order", since "[o]ne never knows when the technology may prove useful" (p. 350).

The one expected element strangely missing from Mann's plot is the environmental theme that steampunk, for all its fascination with often destructive technology, tends to engage with. Mann's text only includes a few vague allusions: a reference to the spread of pollution, "[t]he fumes of the passing ground trains and steam-powered carriages" beginning "to stain the white walls" of the upper stories of the elegant Georgian terrace where Veronica lives (p. 169), and the mysterious Fixer's medical compound "derived from a rare flower [...] discovered out in the Congo last year" (p. 236), a very up-to-date endorsement of protecting biodiversity. The novel's other underdeveloped strand consists of racial politics, implicit in Chapman and Villiers' sourcing of human brains from the 'subspecies' or underclass of the imperial metropolis. There is, however, one memorable aside, about "a coterie of local noblemen [...] keen to see as many revenants removed from the streets as possible", who, vigilante-style, resort to the expedient solution of "round[ing] up the revenants like animals, forcing them onto the

airships and shipping them off to Ireland” to be dumped in the countryside (p. 335). The Irish, it seems, are as dispensable to ‘noble’ Englishmen as London’s poor are to Chapman and Villiers. The wondrous world of Mann’s creation is not equally wonderful for all.

The lingering sense of wonder that imbues *The Streets of Babylon*, *The Peachgrowers’ Almanac*, and *The Affinity Bridge* is perhaps intended as a reflection of our own twenty-first century’s unmitigated fascination with a world that, like our own, thrived on rapid change, self-transformation, and constant reinvention with all their attendant risks. Probably only Burman and Mann’s worlds lend themselves readily to serialisation. Burman’s Euthanasia continues her travels through the nineteenth century in *Vit som marmor* (*White as Marble*, 2006, not yet translated), investigating a murder in the Scandinavian community in Rome. Mann’s Maurice and Veronica are due back to our bookshelves later this year in *The Osiris Ritual*.

Notes

1. Wilde’s novel is evoked again later on, during a soirée attended by the beautiful and great: “Suddenly it was as if I were viewing the whole company in a mirror. Where I had recently perceived virtue, I now sensed vice; where facial features had appeared noble, they now looked distorted and dissolute.” (p. 153)
2. Miriam Burstein, ‘Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels’, The Little Professor blog, 15 March 2006, viewed 12 March 2009, http://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2006/03/rules_for_writi.html.
3. Di Rollo’s only outright homage relates to Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust* (1934) in the Acknowledgements section.