CHAPTER 9

OUR FAMOUS FRIEND: ANALYSING CHARLES DICKENS AS A PIONEERING (LITERARY) CELEBRITY IN MATTHEW PEARL'S *THE LAST DICKENS* (2009)

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It is widely known that Charles Dickens' relationship with the United States of America, though originally genial, soon became strained. While he initially delighted in the attention that he received when visiting America for the first time in 1842, claiming that "[t]here was never a King or Emperor upon the Earth so cheered, […] and waited on by public bodies and deputations of all kinds" (Dickens 1974, 43), Dickens soon tired of the public's intrusions in his privacy and the blatant pirating of his works. Disappointed, Dickens claimed that the young nation was not "the republic of [his] imagination" (1974, 156); Americans, in turn, resented Dickens' defence of copyright laws and insisted that he owed his fame precisely to their free circulation of literature (Bonham-Carter 1978, 79; Allingham 2017). The hostility stemming from his first visit, nevertheless, waned in time: once the tension generated by his critical view of the United States in works such as *American Notes* (1842) and the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) had subsided, his popularity soon rebounded. Dickens even began to consider another visit to the country in the 1850s; his plans, however, only materialised in 1867, when he returned to America on a last reading tour.

While a number of recent neo-Victorian works of fiction have portrayed Charles Dickens as a character,[1] few have explored his connection with American audiences and, by extension, the unprecedented degree of fame he faced in the nation. An eloquent example, however, is that of American author Matthew Pearl's novel *The Last Dickens* (2009). Set in 1870, the novel recounts publisher James R. Osgood's search for the lost manuscript of Dickens' unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), after the early death of the author. The narrative, however, also features flashbacks

recreating Dickens' 1867 tour of America, and Pearl explores through this subplot the ways in which the author crafted and maintained his public image before an ambivalent public.

Through my analysis, I seek to argue that Pearl depicts Dickens as a man capable of navigating the turbid currents of stardom, exalting his relevance as one of the earliest modern literary celebrities. *The Last Dickens,* therefore, can be located within a nascent tradition of intertextual neo-Victorian fiction that deconstructs and brings Dickens' persona closer to contemporary readers: it is, then, essential that we contextualise the current status of Dickensian representations before analysing Pearl's novel and the construction of literary stardom in it.

Dickens Represented: An Overview

Nearly 150 years after his passing, Charles Dickens (1812-1870) continues to exert great influence over the Anglophone literary and social panoramas. In his lifetime, Dickens achieved unprecedented success as a public figure, crafting a vast body of literary work, evincing a keen consciousness of marketing fundamentals (such as copyright), and pioneering modern discourses on celebrity. In the words of Ian Duncan, Dickens managed to reconcile "a fierce concentration of functions—not just speaker, but journal editor, public speaker and advocate for the rights of authors—in a famous public name, identifying itself proudly in the midst of the marketplace" (1992, 192). To this day, none of Dickens' novels has gone out of print (Buzbee 2011, 384), a fact that encapsulates the status he retains in the 21st century. The celebrations held to honour his 200th anniversary—ranging from a commemorative service at Westminster Abbey, where he is buried, to a 'readathon' that visited sixty-six countries (BBC News 2012, online)—further testify to the immeasurable reach of his public persona as an obvious world icon.

Given the extraordinary cultural standing that Dickens continues to enjoy today, it is little wonder that his figure has been reinterpreted in numerous literary and audiovisual texts over the past few decades, in line with a rekindled interest in exploring the lives of famous authors through fiction. As Julia Novak and Sandra Mayer note, "[t]he frequently proclaimed 'rebirth of the author' has given rise to fictional re-writings of authors' lives in the past thirty years, which testify to an on-going fascination of authorship" (2014, 25). This fascination, furthermore, appears to have been strengthened by the ease with which many authors can be accessed in today's "'meet-the-author' culture" (Todd 1996, 100). Encouraged by these trends, numerous writers of biographies and/or biofictions[2] have devoted special attention to Victorian authors, "tak[ing] advantage of the reputational capital and 'star potential' of Victorian literary

brand names that are shaped by, and evoke, the close association of the subject's life and work" (Novak & Mayer 2014, 26). Dickens' prominence in these recreations is hardly surprising if we consider what he has come to signify: as Georges Letissier remarks, "from many regards, Dickens is the emblematic figure of Victorian fiction, if not the Victorian era. As one might expect, many post-Victorian novels are written *after*, or *against* him" (2004, 113, original emphasis). In short, his resurgence as a character in neo-Victorian texts stems from new representational trends alongside his emblematic status as a symbol of Victorian England or, as Mary Hammond notes, of Englishness at large (2015, 137).

While various neo-Victorian works recreating Dickens have been analysed in academic articles (Laird 2012; Parey 2008), most of the research produced so far has concentrated on the so-called 'work vs life' topos or, as Novak and Mayer note, "the question of how the subject's life relates to his or her work" (2014, 25). A dichotomy which, given Dickens' traditional, family-oriented reputation, inevitably concerns the moral dimension of his persona. The focus, then, has been on determining whether these portrayals exalt or defy Dickens' moral prowess—a psychological deconstruction labelled 'Dickens bashing' in the case of texts that "ignore all the good of Dickens' work for social reform […] in favour of personal attacks" (Bowles 2017, online) or, conversely, 'Fallen Dickens' when such texts tackle "hidden, unsavoury details of his biography" without wholly denigrating him (Laird 2012, 23). As a consequence of this paradoxical emphasis on both hagiography and demythologisation, many academics have overlooked other aspects of the author's ground-breaking persona, leaving numerous uncharted areas within the field of Dickensian representations. In the present article, I shall explore one of these overlooked areas, examining Pearl's exploration of Dickens as a pioneering literary celebrity.

Recreating Dickens' Association with the United States of America

In order to properly analyse how Dickens set new trends in the construction of literary celebrity, it is essential that we first understand the degree of fame he enjoyed in America—an aspect that Pearl explores in detail in his novel. While the focus of the present article is on Pearl's reimagining of Dickens, it must be understood that the episodes recounted are based on real events, as Pearl himself remarks in the historical note accompanying the novel (455-456). From the outset of his Dickens' retrospective subplot, Pearl emphasises the author's complicated relationship with the United States at the time of his second visit in 1867. Upon arriving in Boston, where the tour was meant to begin, Dickens finds

himself facing a multitude of "pressmen [who] roamed the wharves in packs […] to describe the novelist's first steps back on American soil for the morning editions" (112). The narrator then goes on to describe Dickens as feeling "equally pleased and discomfited" (113) at the prospect, a mélange of feelings that characterises his attitude throughout the tour. When Dickens finally arrives at his hotel, the Parker House, he is quick to confide his feelings to his manager, George Dolby:

> 'These people have not in the least changed in the last twenty-five years,' he was saying, falling into a sombre attitude. 'They are doing already what they were doing all those years ago, making me some object of novelty to gaze upon! Dolby, I should have kept my word [about not coming back to the States].' (114)

Through his words, readers are given an insight into Dickens' ambivalent relationship with his American audience, displaying how his annoyance flares within minutes. The narrator further contextualises the author's words, reminding readers that "[t]he last time Dickens had come, in 1842, he had planted himself in the middle of a public row by calling for American publishers […] to stop the free reproduction of English books" and how, as a result, Dickens had been "accused of coming to the country only to increase his wealth" (114). The opening paragraphs, then, set the mood for a narrative marked by conflicting feelings on the side of both Dickens and his readership, enabling us to comprehend the public scrutiny to which he was exposed.

While the tensions underlying Dickens' tour are stressed from the start, the narrator is also quick to emphasise that the author remains widely popular with Americans. They form queues stretching "over a mile and a half" (111) to purchase tickets for the tour and when Dickens walks around Boston, he comes across Dickensian memorabilia such as "Little Nell Cigars" and "a Christmas Game of Dickens (for Young and Old)".[3] This episode clearly underscores his position as one of the earliest cases of fetishistic mass merchandising—excepting the use of buttons to commemorate George Washington's presidency, instances of promotional merchandise had been scarce up to that point in America (Smithson 2016, online).

The appreciation shown by his admirers, however, soon borders on the dangerous. When Tom Branagan—the only fictional member of Dickens' entourage in the novel—escorts Dickens to the Parker House, he is startled by "[the fans'] persistence", witnessing how "[a] young woman yanked out a piece of fringe from Dickens' heavy grey and black shawl" or how "a man excited to touch the novelist took the opportunity to pull a clump of fur from his coat" (121). A parallel can easily be drawn between Dickens and modern celebrities with massive public appeal such as The Beatles or, to

provide a current example, Beyoncé—Dickens was followed wherever he went and in this way the gap between literary celebrity and pop stardom was bridged.

As noted earlier, nevertheless, American audiences did not always worship the author. Throughout the novel, Pearl shows Dickens disagreeing on numerous issues with the American press, often a source of criticism or gossip. The morning following Dickens' tumultuous arrival, he and his entourage take a look at the pages of *Harper's Weekly*, which feature "a cartoon showing in grotesque caricature the figures of Dickens and Dolby barring the door of a room labelled 'Parker House' against hordes of Americans on the other side" (122).[4] Exasperated, Dickens sarcastically enquires, critiquing their attack on his privacy and referencing the quarrel over the copyright issue: "Didn't I come here to do just that: hide, then sneak out from my hole long enough to collect my profit?" (122). Another key area of conflict between Dickens and his American admirers is that of his separation from his wife Catherine Dickens in 1858. For instance, a policeman at one of his readings jokes that Dickens "doesn't know if he's married" and accuses him of "carrying on with his wife's sister" (151) in allusion to Georgina Hogarth, also a member of Dickens' household. Similarly, an article called 'Dickensiana' remarks that Dickens "does not live with his wife" and likes to give "nice parties" to "several people largely of the female persuasion" (134). Given this myriad of examples, it is little wonder that, nearing the end of his tour, Dickens claims never to have "known less of [himself] in all [his] life than in these United States of America" (280). Pearl, then, vividly captures Dickens' ability to ignite American passions and, in so doing, chronicles the English author's struggles to assimilate fame abroad.

Dickens as a Pioneer of Modern (Celebrity) Life

While Dickens is shown to struggle with the attention bestowed on him, Pearl also highlights the strategies by which he built and maintained his public persona in the United States, portraying him as a pioneer in the handling of stardom—literary and otherwise. Even though, as Tom Mole remarks, Romantic authors such as Lord Byron contributed to shaping a form of celebrity premised on "branded identity" (2007, 16), Dickens exploits his own cult of personality on a much larger scale. For instance, he is shown to be keenly aware of his physical appearance, to the extent that he is said to have a stylist—Henry Scott—who "would dress the novelist and adjust his hair into the perfect image of a younger man seen in so many photos in the windows of so many bookstores" (Pearl 118). His fixation upon looks is further stressed by his reluctance to disclose his health issues,[5] which worsened as the tour progressed; indeed, "[w]ord had spread of

Dickens' illnesses since the author landed in America" (260). In Albany, attendees are informed that "Mr Charles Dickens begs indulgence for a severe cold but hopes its effects may not be perceptible after a few minutes' reading" (265); the narrator, then, goes on to note that "[t]the first clause was composed by Dolby and a doctor, the second [minimising the gravity of the situation] was the Chief's [Dickens']" (265). Furthermore, he is said to hide the severe swelling he suffered in his foot with "painful bandaging" so that the pressmen would not "telegraph England about the extent of his maladies" (291). Pearl's recreation, in short, highlights Dickens' crafting of a specific appearance before his public; a means of further protecting his personal brand.

Dickens' image-making techniques, nevertheless, transcend his control over his physical appearance: throughout the novel, Pearl also chronicles the strategies he uses to maintain his moral standing. As the tour progresses, the rumours regarding Dickens' marital situation threaten to stain his "Carol philosophy", a term Dickens himself used to designate "the optimism, social criticism and [conservative] ideology of home that characterised [his] writing" (Ostry 2002, 105). Aware of the need to salvage his family-oriented repute, Dickens sends Ellen Ternan—his mistress—a coded message to discourage her from joining him on tour, writing that he is "[s]afe and well, expect letter full of hope" (Pearl 117).[6] Dickens' mysterious code is fully revealed in a later scene from the main storyline. When James R. Osgood and his assistant Rebecca Sands visit Louisa Barton—a former Dickens-crazed stalker whom they suspect might have clues relevant to their search—, she reveals the two possible messages: "'[a]ll well' means to come. 'Safe and well' means not to come" (397). Dickens' choice not to invite Ternan is contextualised by the narrator earlier on in the story:

> The crowds awaiting Dickens upon their arrival suggested there would be nothing quiet about a twenty-six-year-old actress [Ternan] joining Dickens, the married father of eight grown children whose mother had moved away from the family estate in England ten years earlier. Dickens would not want the extra scrutiny. (118)

Pearl, again, uses biographical data to highlight Dickens' fabrication of an image consistent with the values of his literary production; this time seeking to divert attention from an extramarital affair.[7] In so doing, he further emphasises Dickens' brand-building skills, which led him to become the first modern celebrity of a marked moral character.

Last but not least, Pearl's narrative also illuminates the trendsetting nature of Dickens' tour as a means of self-promotion, showing how he laid unprecedented emphasis on performing his works live. As Tomalin observes, "[Dickens] saw readings as a way of strengthening what he felt to

be almost a personal friendship with his readers" (2011, 195) through extensive touring, then, Dickens sought a livelier way to connect with his readership, inaugurating a form of self-advertising that would later be adopted by mainstream acts such as The Rolling Stones or Madonna. Dickens was also careful to select his most renowned works and to adapt them for oral delivery, evincing deep knowledge of live performances. As Tomalin again remarks:

> The readings were never taken directly from his books, but rather from scripts he had adapted carefully to allow him to impersonate his favourite characters and offer highlights of the narrative. […] [The novels] were filleted, reworked and reshaped, brought much closer to simple dramas, with the emphasis always on humour and pathos. (2011, 355)

Dickens' habit of tailoring his readings is perfectly illustrated in Pearl's novel: one night, cries are heard near Dickens' room and Tom rushes to see if the author is safe. He then realises that Dickens is rehearsing an excerpt from his readings: "'Ah, yes,' Dickens replied, laughing and then coughing. 'I was just practicing a new short reading I've made—very different from the others. I have adapted and cut about the text with great care'" (227). The passage in question corresponds to the well-known scene from *Oliver Twist* in which Sikes murders Nancy, a reading that Dickens was known to perform with exceptional intensity: "Dickens acted this out step by step with vigour and violence that all brought out the inevitability of death. Tom felt a chill through his body as he seemed to watch the honest prostitute die before his eyes" (227). Emphasis is also placed on Dickens' awareness of props and stage directions when arranging his performances. As the narrator remarks, Dickens and his crew carefully arrange the stage before the first reading at Tremont Temple, Boston:

> Dickens was testing the best place on the stage from which to read. Henry Scott was tiptoeing around him like a ballerina laying out Dickens's water and books on the reading table. George Allison was meticulously arranging gas burners that would throw just the right light on to just the right places on Dickens's face. (128)

Dickens'—and his entourage's—command of stage directions no doubt stemmed from their familiarity with the theatre, yet they also employ their know-how to bring Dickens' works closer to readers, enabling them "to come to know him as a person as had never happened before in the history of literature" (152). Pearl's narrative, then, underscores Dickens' pioneering command of marketing tools that are now commonplace, emphasising how, aside from being a literary sensation, he became the first fully-fledged pop act both in his native England and on a transatlantic scale.

Deconstructing Dickens the Celebrity: Conclusions

Over 200 years since his birth, Charles Dickens continues to enjoy a ubiquitous presence in the literary canon. While his works have clearly stood the test of time, Dickens' persistent popularity also stems from his pioneering handling of stardom; an aspect that Pearl chronicles in great detail in *The Last Dickens*. Drawing extensively on biographical information, Pearl illuminates Dickens' association with an ambivalent American audience and the strategies by which he navigated fame. In so doing, he provides readers with numerous glimpses into a man who, despite his struggles, manages to build a game-changing example of celebrity etiquette. The novel heralds Dickens as a key precursor of present-day celebrities and blurs the barrier between past and present, thus proving that, at heart, Dickens remains very much our contemporary.

Notes

[1] Examples include Lewis Buzbee's *The Haunting of Charles* Dickens (2011), Carmen A. Deedy and Randall Wright's *The Cheshire Cheese Cat: A Dickens of a Tale* (2011), Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2014) and J.C. Briggs' *Charles Dickens and Superintendent Jones Investigate* saga (consisting so far of 3 books; 2014-).
[2] The term "biofiction" is used to designate "literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure", rather than an entirely fictional account of somebody's life (see Lackley 2016, 3).
[3] Little Nell cigars are reported to have been sold in Boston (Granqvist 1995, 161); likewise, an advert published in *Harper's Weekly* described "a 'Christmas Game of Dickens,' suitable for young and old" (in Marling 2000, 137).
[4] The original vignette can be viewed here: <http://xl8.link/Dickens> (accessed 09 November 2017).
[5] Including a cold that would last the whole of the tour, insomnia and lameness (Tomalin 2011, 367).
[6] Dickens' decision was made particularly at the behest of James T. Fields, Dickens' American publisher (Tomalin 2011, 365).
[7] For more information on the Ellen Ternan episode and its presence in contemporary press, see Leary (2013).

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