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Housing the past: Victorian houses in neo-Victorian fiction

Abstract. As argued, among others, by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), a house which has been inhabited over a period of time becomes a composite of its physical structure and the mental space created by its residents' thoughts, dreams and memories. This article analyses two contemporary novels in which houses as tangible manifestations of temporally remote experience provide a link to the Victorian past. Lauren Willig's *That Summer* (2014) and Kate Beaufoy's *Another Heartbeat in the House* (2015) represent the same type of neo-Victorian fiction: their plots are composed of two strands, one set in the modern age and the other in the nineteenth century, and in the course of each story parallels and convergences are revealed between the two ages and the two casts of characters. The article argues that both novels are also typical "romances of the archive" – as defined by Suzanne Keen (2001) – in which the material legacy of the past triggers a personally motivated inquiry, leading contemporary characters to uncover certain bygone mysteries, and, crucially, to recognise the past's continuing appeal and relevance.

Keywords: neo-Victorian fiction, the house in literature, romances of the archive, interaction between past and present, double plot.

In his seminal study *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard advances the concept of the house as a dwelling which transcends its material dimensions: "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (1994: 47). From his phenomenological perspective, it is the people who inhabit it that shape and reshape the identity of the house; effectively, it also becomes a mental construct capable of storing and integrating our "thoughts, memories and dreams" (1994: 6-7). The building is mentally and emotionally appropriated by its residents in the process of habitation, as they experience the house "in its reality and in its virtuality" (1994: 5). A key assumption behind his reflections is that the nebulous sphere of memories and imaginings intersects with a material entity.² For Joëlle Bahloul, the accretion

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2 As Joe Moran argues, although Bachelard refrains from describing specific dwellings, his oneiric house may in fact be linked to an identifiable kind of architecture – pre-modernist, non-urban, and capable of accommodating multifunctional spaces designed for a variety of people (2006: 29). Hence,

of memories is a key constitutive element of the house: “The domestic and family world makes up the woof of remembrance, of memory. The house is ‘inhabited’ by memory. Remembrance is moulded into the material and physical structures of the domestic space” (2012: 260).³ In her anthropological study of houses, Mary Douglas emphasises that a house has to be inhabited over a period of time to become a home, which she regards as a blend of space and time: “A home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions” (2012: 52). Implicit or explicit in all the reflections above is a view of the house as a composite of spatial and temporal dimensions, as well as of the meaning attributed to it by its residents.

Houses play a crucial role in the neo-Victorian novels⁴ by Lauren Willig and Kate Beaufoy. In Willig’s *That Summer* (2014)⁵ and Beaufoy’s *Another Heartbeat in the House* (2015)⁶ dilapidated Victorian mansions offer contemporary heroines a way of reaching out to the past. The experience of walking down the corridors, exploring the rooms and attics, examining objects and mementoes leads to the gradual revelation of the real-life stories stored within the confines of the Victorian walls. Importantly for the plots, this is a past that eventually turns out to resonate with the heroines’ present. However, the protagonists of Willig’s and Beaufoy’s novels are initially confronted with actual, material structures that mean nothing to them. To use Bachelard’s formulation, Herne Hill in *That Summer* and Lissaguirra in *Another Heartbeat in the House* at first appear to be no more than “inert boxes,” or “geometrical spaces,” with none of the transcendent dimension acquired in the process of being inhabited. The fact that, without physically changing from the perspective of the heroines, both houses evolve and alter their identities in the course of each story validates Bachelard’s claim about a house’s capacity for metamorphosing into a mental construct shaped by the experience of its residents.

Houses provide a material link to other people’s pasts. In the words of Joe Moran, houses “represent continuity and permanence: they often outlive us, and will probably have already housed people who are now dead” (2006: 33). This is precisely what the

his vision of the house would appear to include Victorian country houses such as those depicted in *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House*.

- 3 In his essay “Between memory and history: *les lieux de mémoire*” Pierre Nora contends that “[m]emory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (1989: 9); memory is anchored, “crystallizes and secretes itself” in “sites of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*) (1989: 7).
- 4 The term “neo-Victorian” is employed here in a broad and inclusive sense, to denote “contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era” (Hadley 2010: 4).
- 5 Born in New York, Lauren Willig is a full-time writer, the author of several historical novels. Cf. <https://laurenwillig.com/>
- 6 Kate Beaufoy is an Irish actress and a novelist. *Another Heartbeat in the House* is her second historical novel. Cf. <https://www.katebeaufoy.net/>

modern heroines in the two novels discover. As they are clearing out the old houses, they learn to relate objects to their proper historical context and see them for what they originally were, instead of treating them as mere curiosities.⁷ There is an explicit comment on the meaning of domestic objects, voiced by a Victorian artist in Willig's novel. In his medievalist paintings, Gavin Thorne tries to invest relics of the past with the meaning they once had for the people who used them: "To me, they were the possessions of the people who had them in the time when they were made. Putting them into the scene felt like ... well, like returning them to the time in which they belonged" (2014: 112). The modern heroines unwittingly re-enact his attitude. In each novel, the narrative alternates between the Victorian age and modern times; the tangible continuity of the nineteenth century, ensured by the survival of a Victorian mansion and its contents, helps create meaningful connections between the temporally remote stories.

This article analyses the process whereby in the two neo-Victorian novels the material, domestic relics of the Victorian age, attain significance in the eyes of the modern-day heroines. The Victorian houses begin to be perceived as spatio-temporal constructs, capable of forging connections between past and present. In each book, the duality of the temporal framework is constitutive of these processes: each house is gradually revealed to be a palimpsestic entity with a history stretching back over a hundred years and connecting different periods. As in Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (Bakhtin 1990: 84). In each novel, the Victorian house gives the modern-day protagonist access to the past by inspiring not only personal interest, but also amateur historical enquiry which ultimately yields tangible results. Hence, it is argued that *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House* may be analysed as instances of the type of fiction that Suzanne Keen termed "romances of the archive" (2003 [2001]) – novels whose plots are driven by archival research.

The house as a palimpsest

In Willig's and Beaufoy's novels alike, the process of retrieving the past originates in the materiality of the house. The "concreteness of the physical environment" functions as "an important fixing agent" (cf. Moran 2006: 40), however, not so much for the protagonists' own memories, as Bachelard claimed, as for other people's histories. On her arrival at Lissaguirra, the sight of different layers of wallpaper immediately alerts the heroine of *Another Heartbeat in the House* to the build-up of history within its walls:

7 Following Walter Benjamin, Moran points out that "the afterlife of material artefacts, once they have ceased to be useful as commodities, opens them up to concealed histories and involuntary memories" (2006: 33).

A patch of damp by the window had caused a strip of wallpaper to come away, revealing a layer of Amaranth purple paper, and beneath that another of Prussian blue. Edie picked at the edge but resisted the temptation to start pulling, because she knew that once she started she would not be able to stop. There was a word for it, she knew – a word for layers upon layers upon layers. Palimp-something. It would come to her later. (2015: loc. 596-601)

And, indeed, it soon does: the term is “palimpsest,” which, according to the dictionary definition she recalls, signifies “a layering of present experiences over faded pasts” (2015: loc. 620).

Although the notion of the palimpsest harks back to the practice of overwriting manuscripts on the same surface, it may be extended to apply, as the protagonist suggests here, to other entities which evolve by the accumulation of different strata. In his discussion of the significance of human and non-human dwellings, the anthropologist Tim Ingold draws an analogy between houses and natural habitats – he contends that houses are organic environments, capable of development. The inhabitants of a given house make it grow and change by “keeping it under repair, decorating it, or making structural alterations in response to their changing domestic circumstances.” Hence, he suggests that “[h]ouses [...] are living organisms. Like trees, they have life histories ...” (2012: 34). The old houses of Herne Hill and Lissaguirra have amassed material evidence of decades of habitation.⁸ Both heroines discover that apparently none of the inhabitants ever threw anything away. In each novel, the mundane task of clearing out a disused house causes the protagonist to embark on a compelling and riveting investigation of the layers of remote as well as more recent history. Indeed, the novels themselves are palimpsestic in the sense of staging a co-existence and interaction of two narratives. As Mark Llewellyn avers in his essay on neo-Victorian fiction,

The importance of the palimpsest lies not in its writing of new texts over old ones, but in the simultaneous existence of both narratives on the same page, occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another. For it is important to remember that, as the neo-Victorian text writes back to something in the nineteenth century, it does so in a manner that often aims to re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance of that earlier text to the here and now. (2008: 170-171)

8 Both Victorian mansions have Gothic features as well, with cluttered attics, nooks and crannies, which contain both treasures and detritus. Cf. Bachelard on the importance of such extra spaces within a house: “thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated” (1994: 8).

The plots of *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House* bear a striking resemblance to each other: in each novel, the heroine's encounter with the Victorian mansion is unexpected, unsolicited and unsought, but in hindsight it appears nearly supernaturally engineered, as if the dead wanted to be contacted and redeemed by the living. Indeed, the houses themselves seem to have a life of their own.

In Lauren Willig's *That Summer*, Julia, a young Englishwoman living in New York in 2009, finds out that "[s]omeone's left [her] a house [...] In England," as she casually puts it (2014: 1). Having been whisked away to the United States by her father at a very early age, she remembers neither the house nor the aunt who bequeathed it to her. Convinced that the house has nothing to do with her and is "just a house" (2014: 10), she perceives it as an unwanted gift she would rather renounce. The only value it has for her is its market value, so she travels to England determined to sell it at the first opportunity and return to New York. Things, however, turn out differently. In the course of the story, Julia discovers the relics of nearly two centuries accumulated in her house, a Pre-Raphaelite painting hidden away in a wardrobe, and a skeleton in the garden. Prompted by her findings, the heroine stumbles upon a Victorian story which proves to have a bearing on her own life. The past darkly glimpsed thanks to the objects she uncovers resonates personally with Julia when her own lineage emerges from the recesses of the house – it is quite plausible that she is descended from the people portrayed in the painting; indeed, the murdered man may have been her great-great-grandfather. Simultaneously, disjointed memories from her early childhood emerge. Thanks to the recollections awakened by the house, the traumas of her parents' split and her mother's death in a car accident are reconfigured in her perception, to be finally successfully confronted and overcome. Hence, towards the end of the novel, when the house has revealed some of its mysteries, Julia also feels that "the locked room in the back of her mind was open, the demons that had hounded her for so long banished" (2014: 318). The novel is open-ended, but it is likely that rather than sell the house, as she intended, Julia will keep it and make it her home, thus accepting her inheritance and her place in the filial history. From her point of view, Herne Hill has been transformed utterly, from an old decaying building to a space animated by the past and vibrant with prospects for the future.

Eddie, the heroine of Beaufoy's novel, travels to an abandoned Victorian house in Ireland for a similar reason: one of her relatives whom she unexpectedly met at a New Year's Eve party asked her to do him the favour of preparing his holiday house for sale, since he is too old to do it himself. The time is 1937, and English house owners are anxious to dispense with their property in Ireland. Eddie's task is clear: "Packing everything to go to auction and putting the house up for sale" (2015: loc. 396). However, as in the previous novel, the moment of arrival is concomitant with the forging of an emotional bond between the house and the heroine. Lissaguirra becomes personified in Eddie's eyes: "Eddie turned to the house, and smiled. It looked back at her with the merest

hint of challenge, waiting for her to make the first move. [...] The door swung open, and the house breathed out” (2015: loc. 547-551). The manuscripts and artefacts she discovers while preparing the property for sale reveal to her the richness of the human experience which the house has witnessed, and, consequently, make her anxious for it not to be demolished but, instead, to be offered a new lease of life: “Edie felt a great surge of love for the house. She wanted to protect it, to cocoon it...” (2015: loc. 2429). With her newly formed attachment to the house and a sense of responsibility for its survival, Edie eventually chooses suitable buyers – a young couple who appear to be genuinely impressed by the place and, unwittingly, intend to use it in accordance with the first owner’s wishes.

It will be clear from the synopses above that in each novel the protagonist’s project amounts to the restoration (or partial restoration) of an unknown past. *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House* represent the kind of neo-Victorian fiction which, in the words of Kate Mitchell, is “less concerned with *making sense* of the Victorian past, than with offering it as a cultural memory, to be re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood” (2010: 7). This view is consonant with Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s claim that a significant part of neo-Victorian fiction relies on the motif of anamnesis: the neo-Victorian novel “often revolves around the re(dis)covery of a personal and/or collective history and the restitution of a family inheritance through the reconstruction of fragmented, fabricated, or repressed memories: a retracing and piecing together of the protagonist’s roots” (2010: 34). This is exactly what happens in Willig’s novel: the mansion helps the protagonist reconnect both with her childhood and with her Victorian ancestry. But, to a degree, it is also true of Beaufoy’s story: the strong-minded, unconventional Edie appears to be a twentieth-century incarnation of the female Victorian writer who originally owned Lissaguirra; perhaps more importantly, she also happens to be precisely the kind of appreciative editor that the unpublished novelist waited for.

Possessed by the past

In A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* – which is arguably the best-known and paradigmatic neo-Victorian novel with a double plot featuring contemporary characters re-enacting, with a difference, a nineteenth-century story – the structure is underlain by serendipity, coincidence and uncanny correlations between the two strands of the plot.⁹ In *Possession*, comments Jackie Buxton, “Victorian fictions are somehow dictating contemporary realities” (1996: 210). From the moment Roland Michell, a contemporary literary scholar, chances upon unknown nineteenth-century manuscripts by the Victorian

9 A Kirkus reviewer invokes *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* – both of which alternate two plot strands – as *That Summer*’s “superior predecessors” (“*That Summer* by Lauren Willig,” 2014).

poet Randolph Ash, he is driven, or possessed, by the compulsion to pursue the opaque Victorian story. His research leads him to another Victorian poet, Christabel LaMotte, and subsequently to the contemporary specialist on LaMotte, Maud Bailey. As their joint quest becomes more and more compulsive and personally motivated, Roland's critical self-consciousness enables him to recognise his implication in a narrative of someone else's design: "Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their own plot or fate but that of those others" (2002: 421).

Whereas *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House* fall short of the self-consciousness and literary knowingness of Byatt's novel,¹⁰ they resemble it in forging ostensible correspondences between Victorian and modern-day characters and stories. Roland's primal discovery takes place in a library; Julia and Edie make theirs in Victorian houses. Relics of the past not only seem to await discovery, but also they appear to foreshadow the present intervention. Imogen Grantham, a Victorian ancestress of whose existence Julia was unaware until this moment, apparently wishes to communicate with Julia through her portrait. On seeing it, the contemporary heroine is struck by the life-like quality of the painting and the woman's resemblance to her mother and to herself:

... she found herself face-to-face with a woman on the wall.

For a second, the dark hair, the pale skin, the flowers, made Julia think of her mother, of that faded image in an old snapshot.

But there was nothing faded about this picture. Even dimmed with dust and neglect, there was a vibrancy about the painted image that drew the eye like a magnet. [...]

She looked, realized Julia, as lost as Julia felt. [...] She felt a kinship with this unknown woman, whoever she might be [...] Julia took a step forward, feeling as if, if she only got close enough, those lips might whisper secrets to her. (2014: 40)

Seized by a desire to discover the identity of the woman, Julia begins to appreciate the palimpsestic quality of her house. Rather than throwing away the relics of the past prior to sale, she is prepared to investigate them: "It could be interesting. It's like an archaeological dig, layers of history all crammed together" (2014: 69).

10 This is not to say that they are devoid of intertextual allusions. One of the characters in *Another Heartbeat in the House* is William Thackeray, who models Becky Sharp on Eliza Drury, the nineteenth-century heroine of Beaufoy's novel. The unhappy marriage of the Victorian heroine in *That Summer* brings to mind Dorothea's marriage to Mr Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

From his or her superior vantage point, the reader can already see much more than Julia: her sense of kinship with Imogen Grantham is not so mysterious after all, given that they are related. The book is deliberately structured in such a way as to highlight similarities in the lives of the heroines. The constant shifts between the nineteenth- and the twenty-first century stories underline the parallels so that Julia increasingly appears to be a contemporary embodiment of the woman in the portrait. The discovery of a hidden painting, in which that same woman is depicted as Iseult, intensifies Julia's curiosity about the Victorian story to such an extent that, like Roland and Maud in Byatt's novel, she becomes genuinely possessed by the desire to get to know the past.

A strikingly similar sense of narrative determinism may be detected in Beaufoy's novel. Among the miscellany of objects she is trying to sort out, Edie finds a chest with the initials E.D. Although they stand for Eliza Drury, the woman for whom the house was built in the 1840s, Edie's first association is with her own name. This association, in a sense, becomes legitimised as the story progresses. The memoirs she finds in the chest absorb Edie so much that the reading takes priority over her domestic chores. The veracity of the memoirs is corroborated by the other artefacts she finds in the house – Eliza's books, her other papers, her clothes and memorabilia.¹¹ Edie is very excited; as she says to her dog (her only companion in the secluded place), "we may have found ourselves a mystery to solve!" (2015: loc. 859). Indeed, it may well be the other way round – the mystery was waiting for her to solve it. Her immersion in the story and identification with Eliza Drury grow; towards the end of the novel, Edie puts on Eliza's clothes and is even mistaken for the ghost of the Victorian woman. The last section of Eliza's memoirs, uncannily, seems to describe Edie at the present moment: "The swans have re-emerged from the rushes. Perhaps, in years to come, somebody will sit upon this window seat and watch another pair glide past on the water. I like to think that some day someone will be happy here. I like to think that some day, there will be another heartbeat in this house" (2015: loc. 5455).¹² Edie is determined to fulfil the author's wishes and publish the captivating memoirs; as she explains to her superior at her London publishing house, "I

11 In fact, the written records and the other artefacts complement and authenticate each other. For instance, while perusing Eliza's manuscript, Edie finds references to the garments she has found in the house, while those that have not been mentioned yet await their turn in Eliza's story: "She felt her mouth go dry and her heart pitter-pat as she reached for her notebook and ran a finger along the listed items. There!

74: *A grey silk moiré evening dress.*

67: *A rose-pink sash with appliqué.*

She mentally reviewed the other garments she had found in the trunk – the riding habit, the cashmere robe, the dinner gown – and wondered what had happened to the green tabinet and the sprigged mousseline mentioned by the narrator." (2015: loc. 1160-1165)

12 The swans, which to both heroines seem mysteriously immune to the passage of time, may be an allusion to W.B. Yeats's "Wild Swans at Coole."

didn't ask to see [the manuscript] – it presented itself to me. But it was almost as if it was meant to come my way, as if it had been waiting for me to find it” (2015: loc. 5486).

Unquestionably, there is a degree of contrivance in the way the authors interweave the two strands of the plot so as to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Victorian and the modern stories and characters, as well as to make the twentieth- or twenty-first century story, respectively, a continuation and a variation – with a relatively happy ending – on the nineteenth-century narrative. Byatt used a similar strategy in *Possession* and chose to subtitle it a “romance,” thus overtly laying claim to some freedom from the principle of verisimilitude to which a novel supposedly adheres. One of the epigraphs in *Possession* quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne's assertion that a romance “has fairly a right to present [the truth of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.”

Romances of the house

Inspired by her reading of *Possession*, Suzanne Keen coined the term “romances of the archive” to designate stories propelled by archival research. One of the defining characteristics of the genre is the fact that the characters are professional or amateur researchers, and key scenes take place in “libraries or in other structures housing collections of papers and books” (2003: 3). Taking little notice of postmodern historiographic scepticism, the questers “unabashedly interpret the past through its material traces” and, more often than not, succeed in accessing it. The romance of the archive overlaps with the genres of adventure story and detective fiction: typically, the research becomes a thrilling, sensational quest for the truth, the resolution of a mystery, the discovery of new evidence. Crucial to Keen's definition of the romance of the archive is the protagonist's desire to “connect separate time periods, deeper and nearer pasts” (2003: 4), which, when carried over into the structure of the plot, results in coincidences and repetitions (2003: 39). In a mode which, with regard to mimetic standards, is closer to the romance than to the novel, such narratives employ a stock formula for happy endings: “characters are transformed, wrongs righted, disasters averted, villains exposed, crimes solved” (2003: 4). In contrast to historiographic metafiction, the focus has shifted from epistemological problems to the effects and consequences of the acquisition of knowledge about the past. As Keen has put it, “The history invoked by romances of the archive is predominantly a usable past” (2003: 5) – something is achieved, certain changes happen, the new evidence has a practical application. Among the palpable results are the awards awaiting the dedicated researchers – in *Possession*, these include “enhanced prestige, multiple job offers, cash, career changes, even better sex” (2003: 41). Stressing that in a romance of the archive the truth about the past is revealed thanks to its “material traces” (2003: 52), Keen points out that the results of the research may be material as well, in the form of some kind of “physical union of past and present, scholar and subject” (2003: 42).

To cite the example of *Possession* again, the contemporary heroine discovers her “corporeal or genetic tie” (2003: 42) to the Victorian poets she studies – she turns out to be their distant descendant, and simultaneously the inheritor of their manuscripts. Therefore, ultimately, the enhanced understanding of the past in a romance of the archive proves beneficial in many respects (2003: 54).

Manifestly, *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House* are typical representatives of the genre defined by Keen. In each, the traces of the past prompt amateur research, leading to the discovery, or partial discovery, of facts which change art history, or literary history, respectively, as well as transform the lives of the questers. In Willig’s novel, the twenty-first century heroine embarks on a private pursuit of the past after finding a Pre-Raphaelite portrait in her house, and in particular when soon afterwards she fortuitously chances upon a concealed painting of Tristan and Iseult, apparently by the same artist. Together with another researcher, an antiques dealer with whom she becomes romantically involved in the process, they study the manuscripts found in the house, search the internet, and consult art histories and library resources. As in a typical romance, the quest bears fruit – in their small way, Julia and Nick rewrite art history by discovering the identity of the artist – Gavin Thorne, a little-known Pre-Raphaelite painter.¹³ After a promising start to an artistic career, Thorne completely disappeared from the records. Thanks to Julia and Nick, more of his paintings are revealed, and his *Tristan and Iseult*, which the Tate Gallery wants to buy, is likely to attain its proper place among the masterpieces of Pre-Raphaelite art. Additionally, after a hundred and sixty years, the mystery of his disappearance is solved – he was murdered and buried in the grounds of Herne Hill. The reader, who is familiar with the Victorian plot in the novel, can appreciate that the contemporary characters correctly surmise the painter’s romantic affair with the lady of the house. As in *Possession*, a physical union between past and present is forged when Julia realises that she is a distant descendant of the painter and his model. This genetic legacy, in turn, revives her interest in art. After several years of unrewarding work in the financial sector, and currently unemployed and adrift, Julia is keen to return to university and do a PhD in art history. She notes another coincidence – Gavin and Imogen never managed to escape to America,¹⁴ but she has come back from there to take possession of her inheritance.

The Victorian mansions not only enable the heroines to vicariously experience other people’s lives, but also turn out to have direct relevance to their own. Julia in *That Summer*

13 Thorne is a fictitious figure, but Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais make an appearance in the novel as minor characters.

14 The relevant passage in the novel reads: “Julia found it ironic that they had been bound for New York. It was enough to make one wonder about karma. [...] it struck Julia strongly [...] that she had wound up where Gavin and Imogen had intended to be” (2014: 332).

discovers yet another, more recent painting, which invokes a suppressed memory in her mind, so that the two images immediately converge. She recollects that the painting was done by her mother and identifies the little girl in the painting as herself. More long-buried memories flash through her mind, which enables her to reinterpret the life-changing, traumatic experiences in her life. Julia realises that at the time of her death in a car accident her mother was coming back to her family instead of running away from it. This new understanding brings about a reconciliation with her father, and a belated appreciation of her mother, which in turn makes her ready to start a mature relationship. She at last begins to recollect her own visits to the house as a very young child; apparently, Herne Hill is not as alien to her as she initially supposed. The protagonist learns from the more remote past as well: finding out about the tragic end of Imogen and Gavin's affair, she is determined that her own romantic story should not end unhappily, which is why she attempts to and succeeds in resolving her disagreements with Nick. Because the traumas experienced by the female characters in the book are in fact intergenerational, the novel's dual perspective helps to "address [...] the past in order to deal with the present, being simultaneously retrospective and prospective," which is typical of much neo-Victorian fiction (cf. Kohlke & Gutleben 2011: 33).

Likewise, Edie in *Another Heartbeat in the House* is uniquely placed to appreciate the artefacts she finds in the forsaken house. Due to her expertise in literature, she can trace the connections between the personality of the manuscript's authoress and Becky Sharp in William Thackeray's most famous novel. While it is well known to his biographers that Thackeray travelled in Ireland, the discovery of his stay at Lissaguirra and his friendship with Eliza Drury will be Edie's contribution to literary history, as well as the revelation that through the ideas she shared and the advice she gave to Thackeray, Eliza to some degree co-authored *Vanity Fair*.¹⁵ And there are personal benefits awaiting Edie as well. She arrived in Ireland during a period of prolonged trauma in her own life, caused by the sudden death of her best friend Hilly, and exacerbated by a recent stint of rather frustrating editorial work, when she waited in vain for publishable material. In fact, she is not a complete stranger to the Irish house she is preparing for sale; during her present stay, she recollects holidaying at Lissaguirra as a teenager, together with Hilly. Towards the end of the story, Edie is ready to come to terms with her grief, as her happy adolescent reminiscences begin to dominate over the pain of her recent bereavement. Also, with the superb manuscript she chanced upon, she is looking forward to resuming her publishing work. As in *That Summer*, dealing with the past helps the

15 This, of course, is Beaufoy's fantasy. There are other literary references: Ian Fleming is Edie's eccentric, flamboyant friend, planning to become a writer of spy fiction; Beaufoy also acknowledges a debt to Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist ideas in the creation of Eliza Drury (Leonard 2015). There is an echo of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in Eliza's insistence that in order to write she must have her own house and must be financially independent.

modern-day character face up to her own past and future, whereas the history of the house, thanks to her, will go on.

Conclusion

Considering the decades of their histories, neither Herne Hill in *That Summer* nor Lissaguirra in *Another Heartbeat in the House* has any stable identity or unambiguous connotations. From the perspective of particular inhabitants, the meaning of the two Victorian dwellings fluctuates from a safe domestic space, an anchor for one's identity, to a place of exclusion or even a veritable domestic prison (as is the case of Imogen). Therefore, the chief value of the houses resides elsewhere – in their function as an empirical residue of the past, and a storage space for the human experience lived within their walls. That is why in each novel the reader encounters intimations that the house is a living entity, responsive to the lives lived within it. Thanks to their material existence, the Victorian dwellings testify to the reality of the past. As Julia in *That Summer* reflects, “It was too easy to manufacture memories, to stitch together bits of books and stories and convince herself that they were real. Only the solid, the physical, held any true security” (2014: 89). It is in recognition of this fact that the modern heroines in both novels are anxious to ensure the houses' survival. To refer to Suzanne Keen's analysis of the motif of archival research in a range of contemporary novels, it should be observed that both Herne Hill and Lissaguirra may be regarded as domestic archival spaces, offering those who wish to access the past a firm promise of success, in a mode reminiscent of romance. As historical novels, *That Summer* and *Another Heartbeat in the House*, like a substantial proportion of contemporary historical fiction, “demonstrat[e] a vivid awareness of the problematics involved in seeking and achieving historical knowledge, [but] remain nonetheless committed to the possibility and the value of striving for that knowledge. They are more concerned with the ways in which fiction *can* lay claim to the past, provisionally and partially, rather than the ways that it can not” (cf. Mitchell 2010: 3). The modern plots in Willig's and Beaufoy's novels have cautiously happy endings, with the protagonists thinking about the future with a degree of optimism. Equally optimistic is the other, implicit conclusion that each novel offers, namely that dedicated research leads to genuine knowledge of the past. Rather than being merely “geometric spaces,” the Victorian houses disclose to the modern questers the layers of the past contained within their materiality.

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