Neo-Victorian Archive Novels: Heuristic Obsessions and the Reimagined Past

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Abstract
Starting from a preliminary critical survey of the archival discourse as intrinsic to the novel's development, the article argues that Neo-Victorian fiction is permeated by an archival imagination as constitutive of its engagement with the past and cultural memory, and investigates the most significant aspects of this archival turn. In "romances of the archive" (S.Keen) like *Flaubert's Parro*t (1984) *Chatterton* (1987 *Possession(1990), Ever After* (1992), *The Dark Clue* (2001), and *The Chemistry of Tears* (2013) the very idea of the archive in its broader conception entails an sense of the historical past as not only discoverable and tangibly preserved through archival research, but as affecting the present. While conceiving the archive as primarily a repository of textual objects, and hence mainly focussing on the trope of the manuscript and other archival finds, the article points to the status of the modernist and postmodernist text as archive, and to the heuristic obsession of neo-Victorian fiction, which invites both pleasure reading and intellectual commitment through the fictional device of the *imagined* access to the "archive" of the "real" Victorian past.

Keywords: neo-Victorian narrative, manuscripts, retrieval, postmodernism.

Archives and Literature: History and Cultural Memory

In the opening paragraph of the final, revelatory section of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), the famous novelist Briony Tallis pays one last visit to the archives of the Imperial War Museum Library, where she had been researching her work of a lifetime: the novel that the reader has been reading thus far. The fact that this should happen on the day she is diagnosed with vascular dementia, which will soon obliterate her memory, makes this detail all the more significant: an historical archive that symbolizes British national pride is the locus which seals the confession of the protagonist-

as-author, in what is one of the most important contemporary contributions to the tradition of the English novel. Significantly, *Atonement* testifies to the power of what Geoff Dyer calls McEwan's command of strong emotions "anchored in a historical setting thoroughly authenticated by his archival imagination" (Dyer 2001). Dyer's syntagm ("archival imagination") is worth quoting in these introductory remarks, as it both provokes further questioning and foregrounds an intuition: can the archival turn of the contemporary novel be considered in terms of an "archival imagination"? And how is this composite, critically-inflected imagination to be considered in the context of the resurgent interest of the novel in history-grounded narratives, and, specifically, in the Victorian age and the phenomenon of "neo-Victorianism"? The following pages will attempt to address this theme, starting from a brief overview of a range of theoretical issues which shape the relationship between archives and literature, before turning to the inherently archival dimension of neo-Victorian fiction, and finally focusing on some defining tropes and motives in a number of "archive novels" that engage with Victorian culture.

As "both a physical site […] and an imaginative site, a conceptual space whose boundaries are forever changing" (Voss and Werner 1999: i), the archive metonymically provides a physical link with the past (via papers, manuscripts, notebooks, journals, and other objects) that at the same time outreaches its spatial location to seep into the cultural imaginary. Contemporary literature in English displays a fascination with the archive – as both setting and conceptual frame – that foregrounds the necessary encounter between historical and literary forms of textuality, and testifies to the inherently morphing, conceptual, expansive idea of the archive in the cultural imagination. This idea was most influentially defined – as is well known – by Foucault's and Derrida's theorizing of the archive more as an abstract discursive formation than as a concrete institutional entity, which fostered further assessments of the functions of the archive across disciplines and as a crucial nexus of culture and power in different political situations.

In a postmodern perspective, the archive is itself conceived as a discourse, an entity that is at once a site of power and a tool for the preservation and transmission of knowledge. Much recent criticism on the archive has tended to focus on a number of essential

relations which traverse the domains of preservation and loss, historiography and memory, public rhetorics and private narratives, heritage, memory, and spectrality. Bearing in mind (without being intimidated by) Derrida's statement that "nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'" (Derrida 1999: 4 fn.1), and at the same time trying to avoid what Marlene Manoff rightly describes as the "inflation" of the term as "a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts" (Manoff 2004: 10), it ought to be remembered that "the truth claims of archival material" (Manoff 2004: 14) remain a core feature of the literary representation of the archive. The lure of hidden and retrievable truth lurking at the heart of the archive remains a powerful literary trope, and it is significant that most of the best literature featuring archival research, from the seminal *The Name of the Rose* (1981) to *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), and *Possession* (1990) to Martha Cooley's *The Archivist* (1998), has, in fact, been produced in the aftermath of poststructuralist and postmodernist dismantlings of the reliability of historical documentation. Such contestations of "truth", however, are never neutral, in much the same way that no narrative of the historical past can be neutral, but is necessarily inflected by the concerns of the present.

While the prominence of the archive in the contemporary literary imagination is mainly signalled by the diegetic presence of numerous researchers, archivists, curators and literary quests, it is worth pointing out that the "literary" novel itself has increasingly come to entail the existence of a metanarrative and metacritical archival feat – one which invites both pleasurable reading and intellectual commitment in its epistemological drive and engagement with cultural memory, through the granting of *imagined* access to the archive of the *real* past.

The archival turn of contemporary Anglophone literature might best be appreciated by considering the role that "the archive" played in what Marlene Manoff defines as the British *zeitgeist* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where it "anchors explorations of national identity and provides the evidence for establishing the meaning of the past" (Manoff 2004: 14). We might also look to Thomas Richards' well known study of the imperial archive (1993) and its attendant attempt to trace the crucial role of archives in shaping those relations between knowledge, information, and power that sustained the administration of the British Empire. Suzanne

Keen has also emphasized the British post-imperial preoccupation with history and heritage in her excellent *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction*.

Within the broader range of contributory factors to the cultural significance of the archive, the problem of its inherent authenticity holds a strong literary appeal in the era (or in the aftermath) of postmodern scepticism: indeed, interestingly, the presence of archives in contemporary fiction often signals a metanarrative strain, pointing to the self-conscious role of the contemporary neo-historical novel as always already part of a seamless process of historical reflection. In general, these "historical reconstructions" – in which narratives are formed by reference to more or less fictionalized archival sources – work not only to preserve formal complexity and heterogeneity, but also to foster a degree of verisimilitude. A valuable example of this trend is, I would argue, Joseph O'Connor's 2002 *Star of the Sea,* a masterful neo-Victorian dramatization of a chapter in the history of the Irish Famine that makes explicit use of various archival sources, national and imperial, textual and iconic. A readerly and writerly text at the same time, to use Barthes' terminology, the novel pays homage to the tradition of the Victorian well-made novel (even featuring a cameo appearance of Dickens), while using the heterotopia of the ship as a kind of archive, where all of the various characters and historical eras meet. The writing develops into a polyphony of styles, registers, voices, geographies and heritages that seems to contain the nation at an ideal level, with a cumulative Bachtinian effect that strengthens the persuasiveness of the historical reconstruction.

However, the starting point for a consideration of the role of the archive in contemporary fiction (and for the present analysis of neo-Victorian archival imagination) is that the literary text itself, to some extent, is intrinsically archival – in so far as it not only incorporates different sources and references which can be considered "documentary", but furthermore, is constituted by a multitude of genetic textual remains, an accretion of paratexts, intertexts and successive versions. This is clearly visible in the modernist *opus maximus*, where *The Waste Land*, the *Cantos* and *Ulysses* speak for themselves; but it is also readily in evidence in the palympsestic structure of novels such as *Possession*, which conflates pastiche, imitation, and fictional epistolarity; and can be seen even

in the postmodernist search for the past that is conducted, *en abyme*, through the problematic tension between historiography, memory, criticism and fiction in works such as Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and Swift's *Ever After*. Of course, this perspective also highlights the range and scope of intertextuality and the practice of appropriation – specifically, the manner in which postmodernist, postcolonial, and neo-Victorian fictions have thrived on rewritings and reprisals of characters, stories, and master plots taken from the canon, which leads to the production of an archive of revived and reimagined literary material.

The conceptual and institutional roles of archives have thus come to permeate the cultural imagination to the extent that they have inspired a specific genre of literary fiction which can conveniently be labelled as "archive fiction", and which is often embedded or implicated in historical fiction. Recent critical studies have identified common features and conceptual engagements, as well as similar definitions. In 2001, Suzanne Keen was the first to identify the "Romances of the Archive" as a proliferating model in late-twentieth-century fiction in English: this is a genre "saturated with representations of archival research" (Keen 2001: 28), which imagines documentary research as a postmodern romance that "makes an adventure out of the intellectual quest" (*ibid.*: 30). Keen focuses in particular on the genre's fascination with imperial history (which often verges on nostalgia), and champions the role of archives "as alternatives to history, as verifications of the core values of heritage, and as places stocked with infinite hidden stories" (*ibid.*: 14). In 2010, Marco Codebò proposed the notion of the "archival novel" (or "archival fiction") as defined by its self-reflexive discursivity. "In archival fiction", Codebò writes in his introduction,

> it is the very act of creating a record, i.e. putting notes, memos, and/or oral reports on paper according to certain procedures guaranteed by the archive, that validates a work; […] an archival novel weaves this dual process of record creation and verification into the fabric of the text, thus functioning as a record all the while narrating the unfolding of its own archivization. (Codebò 2010: 25)

This practice sounds rather familiar in the context of neo-Victorianism, and in fact can be traced back to those nineteenth-

century novels which made use of the trope of documentary collation and compilation made so popular by, for example, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, or the novels of Wilkie Collins.

Another notion of "archive fiction" was recently provided by Max Saunders, who specifically addresses the popularity of "fictions about the archive" (Saunders 2011: 169). Pointing to the ambivalence of the archive as something potentially open but also often closed, he suggests that its centrality in the modernist and postmodernist literary imagination lies in the presence of different fictional archives in the work of many great authors such as Gide, Joyce, Nabokov, and Proust, among others (*ibid.*: 186). Saunders captures two essential constituents of "archive fictions": firstly, the idea that the archive has a fostering, even generative role as something that brings stories into being (as in the case of *Possession)*; and, secondly, the way in which the element of secrecy embedded in the archive tends simultaneously to disclose the creative bond that the archive has with literature: "So if the archive leads to secrets in these literary works, it is literature that lets one understand what the archive means. This is to propose a more dynamic, dialectical relationship between archive and truth: a relationship mediated by the imagination, by art, by fictions" (*ibid.*: 173).

Neo-Victorianism and the Archive

In this article, I would like to examine the relevance of the archive to the cultural enterprise of the neo-Victorian novel – specifically in light of the potential exerted by a literary form which both re-creates and preserves a world in the act of narrating it. While several of the critics I refer to (Keen, Kaplan, Hadley, Kholke) have invoked the notion and the vocabulary of the archive in their assessments of neo-Victorian fiction, a more comprehensive reflection on the various aspects of this genre's archival dimension has not yet been attempted. This is what I would like to initiate in this contribution. A brief survey of some of the defining traits of this wide-ranging project will enable me to establish neo-Victorian fiction's archival focus as both political and intrinsically metaliterary. The resurgent interest in the Victorians which has characterized British and Anglophone fiction since the mid-1960s has been variously designated as neo-, retro-, and faux- Victorian,

but the critical assessment of this ever-growing category seems to have recently consolidated under the aegis of "neo-". While a seminal study by Dana Schiller assessed the neo-Victorian as comprising "texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and 'new' Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions" (Schiller 1997: 558), Ann Heillman and Mark Llewellyn have more recently defined a neo-Victorian text as an imaginative re-engagement with the period that is concurrently marked by the "self-analytic drive that accompanies 'neo-Victorianism'" (Heillman and Llewellyn 2010: 6, 5). This literary output, then, "must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (*ibid.*: 4; emphasis original). Neo-Victorian fiction is generally distinguished from the historical fictions published in the twentieth or twentieth-first century that happen to have a Victorian setting or are rewrites of Victorian works, as rather "texts about the metahistorical and metacultural ramifications of such historical engagement" (*ibid.*: 6).

Following on from this work, Alan Robinson writes that "the Victorian era projected by neo-Victorian fiction and its academic commentators seems largely constructed in our own image, in its uncanny anticipation of contemporary obsessions" (Robinson 2011: 120). In fact, two defining and interrelated features of neo-Victorian fiction ought to be mentioned in this light: firstly, that this fiction is underpinned by (and relies upon) a scholarly awareness of cultural theory that constitutes a nexus of creative and critical agendas (also a tenet of the contemporary novel at large). Secondly, that *all* neo-Victorian fictions draw from historical and scholarly research that may not be confined to existing publications, but extends to various archival sources (that is to say, this characteristic is not limited to the genre's "research novels" (Gilmour 2002) and "romances of the archive" (Keen 2001)).

In fact, the contiguity between critical and creative production – the combination of critical statements and fictional revisitations – actually constitutes an archival construct, textual and trans-textual, accessible and progressive, that is becoming more and more conspicuous with the increasing number of neo-Victorian

novels being published in the Anglophone market. This trend was indirectly epitomised by Cora Kaplan when she considered the example not only of contemporary critical engagements with *Jane Eyre* as a master text, but also of its proliferating creative spin-offs of "imitation, prequel, sequel adaptation and pastiche", as a "bulging archive" (Kaplan 2007: 31), an ongoing accretion of literary sedimentations, references and intertextualities. Thus, the dimension of belatedness, posterity, inheritance, indebtedness (this consequent "aftering", to use Anne Humpherys' interesting coinage (2004: 442)) brought on by neo-Victorianism's impulse to return to the fascination and richness of Victorian literature and culture, has come to configure this literary heritage as a sort of as-yet-unexhausted archive to interrogate and explore in search of events, figures, details, and unknown or notorious materials and meanings. This is a textual archive which thus becomes a metonymy of "history" itself: as Kate Mitchell, remarks, neo-Victorian fiction expands history,

> beyond textual, representational apparatuses, to include other, non-textual modes of memory and retrieval. These include oral histories, geographies, cartographies, paintings, photographs and bodies, all of which join diaries, letters, poems, novels and historical archives as means through which aspects of the past can be remembered and, often, repeated. (Mitchell 2009: 7)

Evidently, such a notion of neo-Victorian fiction as actively engaged in the retrieval and construction of cultural memory partakes of the nature and scope of the archive. Overall, the historicity of the best neo-Victorian writing is sustained by archival research as a sort of critical and inspirational *a priori*, and very often features archival settings or quests; what is more, it conveys a general sense that the narrative itself can be approached as a repertoire of rediscovered and/or recreated historical characters and moments from the past. In particular, neo-Victorian "archive novels" tend to deploy (in Louisa Hadley's words) "a common concern", that is:

> the way in which the Victorian past is mediated to the present through its textual remains. This concern is most evident in the recurring plot in which a twentieth-century figure encounters *the textual archive of the nineteenth century*, usually uncovering some hitherto unknown information about the Victorian past. (Hadley 2010: 117; emphasis mine)

This is the case in the two best known neo-Victorian archive novels – as in the so-called "critical template" (Keen 2001: 34) offered by A.S. Byatt's Possession *Possession* and Graham Swift's *Ever After* – as well as Peter Carey's *The Chemistry of Tears*; however, often even those novels which are entirely set in the nineteenth century incorporate contemporary perspectives, along the lines of John Fowles's seminal *French Lieutenant's Woman* (as per Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*, and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*).

An overview of the archival dimension of neo-Victorianism should finally dwell on the fact that, while this production is in keeping with the gender, class, and racial politics of postcolonialism, of queer literature and, more generally, of contemporary cultural politics – that is, always keen on retracing marginalized or occluded voices and stories – its most distinguishing traits remain inbuilt in its literary perspective, which valorizes the stylistic and narrative poetics of Victorian literature. If one considers two seminal texts such as Fowles's *The French Lieutenent's Woman* (1969) and Byatt's *Possession*, or a tour de force of postmodernist pastiche such as Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989), it appears that neo-Victorianism has deep and solid roots in the revision and creative reviving of Victorian literature and genres such as the sensation novel, the detective novel, the Gothic novel – and so on – and that it is this focus on literature, rather than more broadly on culture, which remains pivotal. As Marie Louise Kholke brilliantly puts it, this is a fictional output which has been "generating different kinds of conceptual archives, be they fictional or factual, to act as conduit of and to the nineteenth-century past for current and future generations" (Kholke 2008: 13).

These "different kinds of conceptual archives" are thus, I would argue, a sort of cultural premise that the reader is made to acknowledge when approaching neo-Victorian texts – not unlike other contemporary historical novels, but in a more specific way – given the resurgence of the formal and stylistic characteristics of the Victorian novel, which mostly coincide with the realist mode and the role of a controlling narrative voice.

Finally, this conception can be further illuminated by the impressive proliferation of accessible Victorian archives. The increasing prominence of this historical period in the contemporary imagination owes much to adaptation through other media, notably

cinema, television (from period drama to serials and feature films), graphic novels, and video games, all of which ultimately produce a growing transmedial archive which ensures a kind of ghostly afterlife (Thomas 2000: 305).

The Melancholic Spectrality of Neo-Victorian Archival Fictions

Building as it does on the crucial nexus between archival search and desire, A. S. Byatt's *Possession* epitomizes the romance-of-the-archive trope identified by Keen. Perhaps the richest and most complex of the tropes that feature in neo-Victorian fiction (and in fiction that addresses the nineteenth century) is that of the artist's secret papers as the object of a scholarly and existential quest[1]. This is the most explicitly "metaliterary" of these forms of archival quests, and can be traced back to the archetypal model of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888). This model has been openly represented in a number of novels and novellas published since the 1950s, ranging from Saul Bellow's short story "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" (1954), David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), and Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), to Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession.* Other relevant cases include Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002), an ironic rewriting of *The Aspern Papers*; Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2001), which is concerned with the boundaries between fiction and biography; Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), with its focus on memory, loss, and family trauma; and James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* (2001), whose protagonist Walter Hartwright (the hero of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*) researches the mystery of J. M. W. Turner's life through the literary convention of the "Life and Letters" mode (Hadley 2010: 36, passim).

In all these novels, the discovery of private papers – either searched for or casually found – always relates to existing archives, academic or private, and implies a "possession" that can prove either destructive or restorative. While they indirectly recall the time-honoured motif of the retrieved manuscript, which is a hallmark of the modern novel, these papers configure variations of the "authorising manuscript" trope (Saunders: 177), which in

[1] For an expanded analysis of this theme, see R. Gefter Wondrich 2009.

contemporary writing almost invariably works as a "distancing device" (*ibid.*: 177) that allows the writer to multiply the textual spaces of utterance, expanding and deepening their resonance. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that contemporary historical fiction, and neo-Victorianism as part of it, should have made an inventive and frequent use of the trope of the artist's papers/manuscripts/epistolary material, and most notably so in the increasingly prominent genre of biofictions. The "biographilia"[2] that characterizes neo-Victorianism and the postmodern historical novel builds on the appropriation and adaptation of the "original" in the twinned senses of history and narrative, acknowledging historical referents and reviving them from a contemporary critical stance. And the archival quest is often the component of biographical narratives that raises questions of authenticity, truth, and interpretation. Among the aforementioned titles, in *The Dark Clue* – which can be read as a neo-Victorian sequel to one of the most popular mid-Victorian novels, *The Woman in White* – these themes are further complicated by intertextuality and the contamination of genres (the sensation novel, biofiction, the detective story etc.), while in *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Chatterton*, and *The Chemistry of Tears*, they are also foregrounded by the postmodern trope of the forgery of letters and manuscripts. The incorporation of a whole archive of Victorian literature is perhaps the most impressive trait of Byatt's *Possession*, which, in its recreation of Victorian poetry and correspondence, displays an extraordinary mastery of pastiche, foregrounding and reaffirming the interplay of creativity and homage as a form of post-authenticity, as opposed to postmodern incredulity[3].

Conversely, the presence of fictive and often forged documents in these novels recalls the previously mentioned dialectical relationship between archives, truth-seeking, and imagination. This is an aspect which Max Saunders considers as "an important component of autobiografiction" (2011: 177), that combination of fictionalization and life-writing which clearly borders on autobiography, biography, biofiction, and the historical novel. Saunders interestingly connects

[2] "Biography's triumphal moment in the twenty-first century" (Kaplan 2007: 37).

[3] Byatt's novella "The Conjugial Angel", which reproduces extracts from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, should also be mentioned in the context of this archival incorporation of the Victorian literary canon.

the presence of fictional manuscripts with the complex and composite use of life-writing, suggesting, Pater-style, that "something works of autobiografiction tend to do" is "to aspire to the condition of the archive" (ivi). This is a productive standpoint from which to survey the wider issue of the archival interests of contemporary literature: this "fictionality at the heart of the archive" (*ibid.*: 182) is more than a mere extension of postmodern scepticism, but rather something that sustains the ambivalence, the complexity, and the relative novelty of neo-Victorianism, especially in its growing interest for biofictions. Moreover, papers – in the form of letters, diaries, and notes – all claim a contiguity with the genre of biography and its attendant fictional form of biofiction, both of which inherently entail the question of reaching the truth about the past. As mentioned, the archetypal narrative for these novels remains Henry James's *The Aspen Papers* (1888), whose "publishing scoundrel" protagonist delights "in a palpable imaginable visitable past" (James 1984: 31) – which is ultimately a dramatization of the impossibility of appropriating the artist though his or her fetishization, and of ever possessing the past.

This theme recalls the question of the *value* of manuscripts, as adduced by Suzanne Keen in a recent contribution (Keen 2014). In *Possession*, for instance, the predatory politics of American academies and private collectors (as satirically depicted and exaggerated in the character of the grave-robber Mortimer Cropper) are seen to pose serious threats to the conservation of British literary heritage. The impoverishment of the Thatcher years was also followed by the problematic expansion and displacement of literary heritage through the phenomena of digital archiving, which is itself one of the reasons for the upturn in the number of romances of the archive in the last decades of the twentieth century[4].

As textual traces of the past, the papers thus emblematize both its writerliness and the interconnectedness of memory and writing, while, conversely retaining that objectual, material

[4] As Keen remarks, a recent upturn in the number of American romances of the archive has rehabilitated the figure of the American research quester, and the uniqueness (the aura?) of the original manuscript is emphasised rather than flattened in the midst of the digital revolution (Keen 2013: 116).

status which triggers the intellectual and libidinal covetousness of their collectors. This attitude is at the root of what we might call the "romancing" of the archive, that narrative re-investment in collecting which has widely and adroitly exploited the trope of detection, as I will soon discuss. And the theme of intellectual adventurousness also reveals what historian Carolyn Steedman calls "the romance *in* the archive", the heightened state of tension, awareness and intent that takes place within the archive and which is related to desire, loss and nostalgia, but also to the very "idea of finding things: loss, the search for what has been lost, the dream of finding it, and of plenitude" (Steedman: 6; emphasis original) – a dream which Keen sees realized in the canonical romances of the archive.

Significantly, the search and retrieval of "literary remains"[5] is central to the narrative and thematic structure of two of the best neo-Victorian novels to date, *Possession* and *Ever After*, which each adopt the device of the dual plot wherein the late twentieth century academic protagonists learn that they are the descendants of their Victorian predecessors and ancestor: respectively through Christabel La Motte's and Randolph Henry Ash's love letters and poems, and Matthew Pearce's notebooks, which testify to a mid-century spiritual crisis induced by the breakthrough of Darwinism. The archival search thus turns into a cultural quest, in which the act of reading becomes a paramount metaphor for the attempt at reaching for, interpreting, and even reviving the past. This even entails a process in which the act of writing and reading is sensorially revived for the reader: the unmediated perception of the material, textual trace becomes a conduit to the affective dimension of the intellectual adventure that is the archival search. Thus Randolph Ash urges Christabel La Motte to continue her correspondence, foregrounding the seduction and the erotic lure intrinsic to epistolarity: "Only write to me, write to me, I love to see the hop and skip and sudden starts of your ink" (Byatt 1990: 147). These traces are, in fact, spectral in their evocation of past existences which are aesthetically and emotionally revived – as in *Ever After*, where Bill Unwin, reading his ancestor's notebooks, realizes that "when I

[5] Often found in contemporary criticism, this syntagm is in fact a quote from James's *The Aspern Papers* (James 1984: 51).

open their pages, I open, I touch the pages that he once touched. I occupy, as it were, his phantom skin" (Swift 1992: 46).

The objectual quality of the papers as material traces also points to the status of the fetish, and, indirectly, to the archive itself as fetish. The unfinished, endless quality of historical research configures the "open" status of the archive, which can be at once public and private, open and hermetic, and can become something more than an identifiable source of knowledge: a space of desire, something referring to our idea of what was and is no more, but that also continues to exist in the present as the source and origin, the authority and the power of knowledge (Derrida, Foucault). As Dominic La Capra writes,

> when it is fetishized, the archive is more than the repository of traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing in itself – an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing or other inscriptions. (La Capra 1985: 92)

A semi-parodic or satiric example of such a fetishized repository in *Possession* is the Women's Archive at Lincoln University, curated by Maud Bailey: this is a sort of auratic space of devotion and preservation, defined by a spatial allusiveness to the semantics of boundaries and borders which are central to the intellectual satire of the novel. In *Ever After* the textual archive is far less extensive, but equally central to the complex narrative embeddedness of the novel, as Matthew Pearce's notebooks reveal the epistemological and moral crisis of a nineteenth-century man to a contemporary character who is able to make sense of his own existential displacement through the hermeneutic experience of reading them. But while Bill Unwin's connection with his ancestor is personal and existential, the notebooks as historical documents are ultimately handed over to the Oxbridge academic Michael Potter, who, despite his self-centredness, sees them as testimony of the mid-Victorian crisis of ideas, and thus claims a space for them within a national historical narrative. The heuristic lure attached to such archival remains in their material, objectual status, is a crucial theme in these fictions that connect the motif of fetishization to "the aesthetic pleasure we continue to take in invoking the Victorian" (Kaplan 2007: 11). When Roland Mitchell comes across two unpublished drafts of a letter by Randolph Henry Ash in the London Library, he becomes

possessed by their mystery and refuses to return them to their unacknowledged archive, keeping them for himself instead: "It was suddenly quite impossible to put these living words back into page 300 of Vico and return them to Safe 5". (Byatt 1990: 11). The bond that the textual relic establishes with the past holds an important aesthetic dimension; as Kym Brindle puts it, "[n]ovelists emphasise a seductive material allure for this type of archival discovery" (Brindle 2014: 7), which, I would add, is redoubled in the reader's response to the heuristic tension of the narrative. For instance, in James Wilson's *The Dark Clue*, the protagonist is admitted to a private archive where he hopes to discover letters mentioning Turner, and subsequently finds himself totally immersed in the world evoked by those traces, with the reader acting as spectator to the mise-en-scène of his experience:

> It must have been a full minute before I finally mastered myself, and reached into the nearest drawer (still, I must confess, with the uneasy sense that I was trespassing), and took out a thick sheaf of papers. The next moment my anxiety vanished – or rather, it was temporarily dulled, as diversion may dull a toothache, by more urgent emotions, for there, in my hand, was a note from Leigh Hunt; and another from Lord Alvanley. […] It was my firm intention merely to cast my eye over each page in turn, and to pause only when I saw a direct reference to Turner, but after two minutes I had been waylaid into reading and relishing every word. (Wilson 2001: 304-5)

The strange pull exerted by the archival finds is also dramatized in Peter Carey's *The Chemistry of Tears*, where Catherine Gehrig becomes utterly fascinated by the notebooks she steals from the Museum annex; meanwhile, in *The Dark Clue*, it is the biographical search which intoxicates the protagonist to the extent that, haunted by his biographee, he undergoes a sort of mimetic identification with Turner's dark side, as realized through his uncovering of traces, documents, letters, and testimonies in visits to a number of private houses that are themselves figured as archives of sorts.

Much like the epistolary or textual remains of the past, a range of other archived or retrieved material traces such as collectibles, objects, fossils, dolls, paintings, and photographs (especially in *Possession*)[6] tend to be related to the biographical drive that

[6] See the previous reference to Kate Mitchell's consideration of historical texts and their inclusion of "non-textual modes of memory and retrieval".

generally sustains these novels, often functioning as objects of desire (erotic, intellectual, epistemological). To mention just a few textual occurrences: in *Chatterton* the protagonist is surprised when licking the dust he has wiped off the Chatterton portrait, and in *Ever After* a clock with the inscription "Amor vincit Omnia" is inherited by Bill Unwin from Matthew Pearce's father– a symbol for the genealogical thread of the novel. In *The Dark Clue*, it is a painting, "The Bay of Baiae", which will provide Marian Halcombe with an epiphany about Turner's mystery, the real "dark clue" to his life, as well as an insight about her own repressed – and utterly destructive – desire for her brother in law.

In these neo-Victorian fictions, thus, the presence of these archival objects of desire metonymically testifies that there can be no imaginative and vital relationship with the past – a bringing back to life of the historical past – without the retrieval made possible by the *experience of reading* the material, textual, and objectual traces of that past, no matter how elusive or inconclusive. This principle is brilliantly at work in Peter Carey's *The Chemistry of Tears*, in which three forms of archival and material traces of the past are blended together in what is by now the recognizable pattern of dual diegetic and historical planes, the nineteenth century "resurrected" in the present. These are: the museum (and, interestingly, the annex to the museum, which together amount to an archive); the artefact from the past as a recognizable cultural object (an automaton); and a set of nineteenth-century private notebooks which are appropriated by the protagonist. It tells the story of a forty-something English horologist, Catherine Gehring, who is devastated by the death of her lover of thirteen years, and cannot share her grief with anyone. In an attempt to alleviate her mourning, her supervisor at the fictive Swinburne Museum, Henry Croft, assigns her the task of bringing back to life a Victorian automaton, a mechanical duck. In the chests containing the various parts of the automaton, Catherine finds a pile of ancient bound notebooks, written by a mid-nineteenth-century Englishman, Henry Brandling, who had commissioned a German clockmaker to build the automaton to amuse and divert his ailing son. Catherine reads the first-person narrative of the notebooks, is utterly intrigued, and finally succeeds in bringing the mechanical toy back to life and in rescuing her own self from the annihilation of grief.

The Chemistry of Tears ingeniously places the objectual and archival relic of the past at the centre of a network of cultural institutions and intellectual fields that comprise technology and science, curatorial concerns, and, lastly but no less significantly, the "lacrimae rerum" theme, the tears of things, the dynamic of loss that inheres in our perception of any object (Schwenger 2006: 175). Once more, the dual plot stages the act of reading the Victorians by the contemporary subject as a dynamic of discovery, retrieval, robbing, possession, and identification, which entails a contentious sense of custody, represented in this case first by the notebooks, then by the object which will become a "thing". The neo-Victorian trope of the haunting identification that arises between the contemporary quester and the nineteenth-century character is thus renovated by Carey through the medium of textual and material traces combined. And it is noteworthy that the whole narrative should oscillate between the institutional but inaccessible spaces of the museum annex and its archives, and the privacy of Catherine's apartment, where she secretly treasures the notebooks she has subtracted from the Swinburne Museum (to which they are finally returned, with the reconstructed automaton). The archival repository is thus the ideal source, "frame", and setting of the narrative, and it is even expanded by the mysteries concealed in its remains. While the notebooks are ultimately proven to have been forged by a brilliant young assistant, foregrounding Sanders' idea of the "fictionality at the heart of the archive", the automaton is finally restored to its original splendour, having disclosed inner elements of secrecy and beauty.

Carey's fascinating, brooding novel allows me to conclude by briefly dwelling on two last defining traits of neo-Victorian archive fiction: the trope and theme of detection, and the Freudian combination of mourning and melancholia. When the plot and the romance have thickened in *Possession*, Maud Bailey makes an oft-quoted statement: "Literary critics make natural detectives" (Byatt 1990: 258). The obsession for detecting and a heuristic drive explicitly underscore all these fictions, and point to the epistemological anxiety that is shared by the contemporary and nineteenth-century characters. *The Dark Clue*, a neo-Victorian sequel to *The Woman in White,* is subtitled "A Story of Suspense", and its protagonists are amateur sleuths, as in Collins's seminal detective and sensation novel. Their biographical obsession leads to the uncovering of

sexual abuse and double lives in early Victorian society, while in *The Tears of Things* the reconstructive task which Catherine undertakes (to piece together the automaton, its creator's personal papers, and her own emotional life) unfolds in a crescendo of intuitions, revelations, and obscure references which create a masterly effect of suspense. In all these narratives, moreover, the reader is involved in the hermeneutic effort and in connecting with a past that is revived through archival discoveries: much as in detective fiction, he or she shares in the controlling role of the narrator. Carey's novel is a story of loss, mourning, and melancholia, and finally of the recovery of a form of awareness. The loss of the loved one is also the loss of the loved object, as symbolized by a scene in which Catherine remembers treasuring her beloved's body like a proper object. The uncanniness of the automaton, brought back to the glory of its mechanical life by two human stories of grief, eerily signals the spectral nature of the archive, suggestively defined by Derrida: "[T]he structure of the archive is spectral. It is a spectral a priori: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh', neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met" (Derrida 1995: 84). The eyes of the past can never be met, but they can still look at us in eerie ways, as Carey's swan, resurrected from the secrets of a London archive, seems to suggest:

> We stood in awe and, no matter how many hundred hours we had worked on it, this swan was never, not for a moment, familiar, but uncanny, sinuous, lithe, supple, twisting, winding, graceful. As it twisted to look into one's eyes, its own stayed darkest ebony until, at that point where the sun caught the black wood, they blazed. (Carey 2012: 261-2)

It is thus in the context of the ambitious, critical and creative engagements of neo-Victorian fiction with the cultural past that its archival feat should be appraised. These novels are not exclusively framed within postmodernist modes of historical representation; rather, they "remain committed to the attempt to recover the past, even as they accept the limitations of such a project" (Hadley 2010: 55). The history of the archive is at the same time a history of preservation and of loss: the archive itself materializes the persistence of the desire for the past and the inevitable loss of history – the anxiety around what has or will inevitably disappear. Archival research in this literature is thus at the same time a mode, a metaphor, and a metonymy of a

seemingly vital cultural project. A literature that comes "after" knows that, in Julian Barnes's words, "what happened to the truth is not recorded" (Barnes 1984: 65). But it also knows that the truth claims of the archive of the past are there to stay.

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