

The Archive as a Literary Genre: Some Theoretical Speculations

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This article emerges out of my rather duplicitous position as a research associate in the Department of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Manitoba. My position expired with the completion of the Dorothy Livesay Research Tool Project, and having laboured in this field for only one year, when I sat down to work on this study I wondered what I could write that could possibly be of interest to professional archivists. As a research associate I was neither archivist nor researcher, strictly speaking, but a bit of both. My duplicity was further complicated by the fact that I also happen to be a writer and therefore implicated to a certain extent on that side of the ledger. This study is somewhat experimental in method because it attempts to encompass this perhaps atypical perspective. Grounded in contemporary critical theory, it is an attempt to graph my thoughts on the function of the archive as a literary genre. I have cast the archive as an avant-garde literary mode that deconstructs traditional ideas of the book and the author. In focussing on this angle of the creative, subversive powers of the archive, I have for this occasion reserved its other side, namely, its support of, and participation in, the existing structures of power and authority.

Born in Winnipeg in 1909, Livesay studied at the University of Toronto and the Sorbonne. From her first publication, *Green Pitcher*, in 1928, she has been a prolific writer of journalism, literary criticism, short fiction and autobiography. While active in left wing politics in the 1930s, Livesay is best known as a poet. Twice a winner of the Governor General's Award, Livesay's major collection of poetry was published in 1972 as *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons*.

For a detailed description of the Dorothy Livesay Archives, see the 420 page finding aid, *The Papers of Dorothy Livesay*. This document comprises a complete container list to the papers, photographs, recordings, and books in the collection, as well as an exhaustive index and two appendices which list the Dorothy Livesay holdings housed in other libraries and subsequent acquisitions of Livesay holdings at the University of Manitoba. The finding aid also contains eight extensive essays by Pamela Banting and Kristjana Gunnars on Livesay's personal and professional papers, correspondence, poems, short stories, autobiographical fiction, plays, reviews, and essays. It is available from Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2 for \$6.30 (includes shipping).

When one enters the silent labyrinth of the archive, one encounters a radical surplus of the written over the spoken word. It is as if one were entering an ancient cave where pictographs had been incised on the cave walls. Speech has long since expired at the cave mouth. Those traces of speech which do survive the archive exist only in written transcript or on machine-inscribed audio tapes that reproduce the voice all right, but it is a textual voice, the voice of the absence of presence, that reaches the ear of the researcher. She, perhaps, stops and rewinds the tape, takes notes.

In this sense, the archive is the mirror opposite of the world outside its walls where the logocentric privileging of the spoken word informs the structures of our society. The act of hearing oneself speak, a certain ringing in the ears, serves as the basis for the constitution and affirmation of a metaphysical self, upon which in turn the logic of identity and sameness is elevated and that of difference and writing suppressed. The mirror world of the archive, like the maze of the pictographic cave, holds the tongue in suspense, mutes this ringing in the ears, and instead invites the gaze and the gesture (of writing). The archive operates not along the voice-ear axis but rather along that of the eye and the hand.

In the archive the text spills over in excess of the author. The text is beyond control. It perpetuates itself as if it were the very life tissue of the author. But the author herself is not wanted — dead or alive. Absence is the mark of her presence. Regardless of presumed intention, the researcher looks not for the essence, the uniform, the original, the definitive statement, but for the trace, the residual remainder, the inconsistent detail, the wild deviation from the usual response, the point where the correspondence falters, where documents have been lost, destroyed or otherwise concealed by the author or someone else. The trajectory of the researcher's desire is aimed at the wild card. Out of the necessities of the act of writing, s/he contradicts, qualifies, extrapolates, suppresses, inflates, banishes the author. The archive undermines the author as author-ity. The identity of the body attached to the writing slips away, is erased, in the proliferation of textual marks. The author becomes a chimera of her own signature.

This radical dispersal of the author (paradox of the archive that it poses as a collection while creating in actuality a diaspora) annuls her copyright. Neither the name nor the book is any longer her property. That is, the name no longer properly refers to the author of the book, nor does the book refer beyond itself to a totality of signifieds (meanings). Instead, in the archive, both the name and the book refer only to contiguous signifiers in an infinite chain of signifiers. The author loses her metaphorical correspondence with her books, and both she and they become metonymies within the text of the archive. The archive drinks them both in like rag paper brushed with fresh ink. Within the genre of the archive, the book as container is broken open, the covers taken off, and the boundaries between writings fall away.

The archival vault, the cave, the mirrored stage, then, becomes the theater of a generalized writing, of grammatology. In this theater, on this stage, the absent author continually advances and retreats from behind a treasure chest of masks. Daughter, mother, grandmother. Teacher, colleague, adviser. Friend, confidante, intimate, enemy. Wife, lover. World traveller and confined domestic. Simulations and dissimulations. In the archive, the secret vault of the diaries is unsealed to reveal the stripping away of masks, further masks, and the processes of mask construction. All of which, of course, are rehearsals for the death mask. In the archival vault, writing violently asserts its kinship with death.

The signature, which "authorizes" transactions in the absence of the signatory, subsumes the place of the author in the archive. Its graphic marks every letter. The riddle of the name, that rebus that poses itself somewhere between father and mother, is everywhere. "Dear Jove," she writes. "Dear Jeff." "Dearest Puss." "Yr obedient Pup," she signs a letter to her father. After marriage, there is the continual alternation between "Livesay" and "Macnair" as (im)proper names.

In the Livesay family correspondence, names appear as initials. This preference for initials over names creates a distancing and fictionalizing effect: those referred to border

on becoming characters in a drama rather than simply Mom and Dad and little sister Sophie. The deliberate “literariness” of the letters — their frequency, descriptive setting of scenes, inflation and dramatic excess, significant closures, the enclosure of letters to others which broadens the narrative context, a tone of philosophical musing — further amplifies the dramatic overtones. The family romance and the drama of writing become indistinguishable. Form and content blur into one. Life becomes art becomes life.

Over time, as she reads hundreds and hundreds of these letters, the researcher comes to know the loops, the dotted *i*'s and the *o*'s supplanted by *e*'s (Dorothy often signs as Dee) of the Other's signature almost as intimately as she knows her own. She discovers that the two of them have the same middle name. She pushes aside the curtains and trespasses for a while in the occult territory of the graphologist and the fortune teller.

The yellowing documents glide into the researcher's unconscious like Oriental screens and assume a new ambiance there. Her own unconscious is bracketed while she dreams the unconscious of another. All the energy expended by the author to integrate the psychic halves of herself through her writing is called into question as she is again split. Both author and researcher are “schizophrenized” in the archive.

In the case of Dorothy Livesay, the author has been her own archivist, actively collecting and preserving her own papers, those of her deceased parents and husband, her sister's letters, and others. She has also had a lively interest in the papers of other writers, most notably those of poets Raymond Knister and Isabella Valancy Crawford. The documentary and archival impulses of the author duplicate, shadow, those of the researcher.

The archive is always associated with the past, with the having written. As Roland Barthes notes, traditionally the author is conceived of as “the past of his own book.” The author is thought to exist “in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child.”¹ But only a child can confer parenthood. The father as father does not pre-exist the child. Nor does the author in any way precede or exceed the text. Really it is always the present tense in the archive. There all categories exist simultaneously. The hierarchy of published books over drafts and manuscripts, of drafts of a poem over notes or diary entries, of diary entries over laundry lists, is toppled if not actually reversed. All are encased in identical acid-free folders and boxes to protect against the ravages of time. In the archive the text is even now being written.

But the text, this tissue that operates in the continuous present, is not quite the same thing as the book. The book which is the *raison d'être* for the archive, is, as I have already mentioned, radically undone by being placed in the archival context. As Jacques Derrida writes, in a chapter called “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”:

The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing.²

1 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, comp. and trans. S. Heath (London, 1977), p. 145.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 18.

The archive deconstructs this totality and the purported correspondence between signifier and signified not only by exposing the complex web of multiple drafts and revisions such that the definitive version becomes questionable but also by unconcealing the sheer ratio of writing to actual publication. At an undetermined but nonetheless real (virtual) point, the signifier slips through the grasp of the signified, and the life becomes synonymous with the act of writing. Language is substituted for the person(a) of the author. Or, to return to our original terms of speech versus writing, a polyphonic textuality substitutes for the monological voice of the traditionally singular author. The dichotomy between the life and the art collapses.

The genre of the archive releases writing from the bondage/the binding of the book and inaugurates a veritable carnival of inscription.