

## ***The Limits of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution***

by **BRIEN BROTHMAN\***

But she couldn't leave it alone. She retrieved the photo from the dustbin and hid it, taking it out in secret and staring at it, fascinated. The woman did look exactly like her. And now Eve, an evil little look of defiance on her face, extended her tattooed arm to the woman in the photo and said, "Immortality for you, Eva. You're coming with me into the twenty-first century."

*Emily Prager*<sup>1</sup>

The problematic character of temporal achievement must be transcended without transcending its distinctive and unrepeatable quality, lest the very effort at salvaging what is most precious result in its perishing.

*George Allan*<sup>2</sup>

It is as though institutions existed precisely to create boundaries between the real and the unreal, to assure docility, paradoxically, through the assumption of unreality.

*Barbara Johnson*<sup>3</sup>

Henceforth, we must not only ask what is the "essence" of history, the historicity of history, but what is the "history" of "essence."

*Jacques Derrida*<sup>4</sup>

Archivists are engaged in the practice of deciding how and what is to be saved for, bequeathed to, our children. Is archiving not a gesture of reaching out, of sending, of receiving, of communication? What will our children, the post-present generation, read of/receive from us? What documents—what images, sounds, and texts; in other words, what signs—will we choose to represent us? What decisions will represent us in our absence? How shall we nullify our silence in discourses to come, assert the solidarity between the living and the dead, secure a place for the dead in the social order? Whom will these preserved texts speak for or to? Is Helen Samuels' well-known question, "Who Controls the Past?" not another form of the question, "Who Controls the Present?" or, perhaps, "Who Controls the Future?"

The fundamental question posed by this essay is the question of the limit. What are the limits of the concept of archiving? Is to archive to give future generations our transmittal slips? Is to archive inevitably to give future (and past) generations—or perhaps even ourselves—the archival slip? How in our practice and in our writing are the limits of archives constituted? To what extent is it possible for one generation to give another its words, its terms?

The text that follows has a rather long history. It started out as a review of several essays brought together—or rather stitched together—into a volume called *Reading the Archive. On Texts and Institutions*, edited by two professors of French, Janie Vanpée and E.S. Burt, and published in 1990 as part of the Yale French Studies series.<sup>5</sup> It was then transformed into a conference paper for the Society of American Archivists' meeting in Montreal in the fall of 1992. The title of the session was "Archival Theory and the Myth of Reality." What follows is a modified version of that paper.

As things have evolved, only one of the articles in *Reading the Archive*, Jacques Derrida's "Send-offs," receives my attention here, and even it "merely" serves as a point of entry, as a launching pad, for a brief inquiry into the relationship between Derridean deconstruction and archives. Indeed, one might wonder at times whether the present text is a "book review" (of *Reading the Archive*), a "review article" of several writings relating to deconstruction, or an "article" *per se*. Bound up in the very history of this piece is a question that emerges in its pages: what distinguishes one writer's "work" or "text" from another's? What separates one province of provenance from another? What is text and what is review or commentary? Where—at what point—does the distinctiveness that demarcates originality (single point of origin, creativity, uniqueness, difference, otherness/identity) and derivativeness (copy, duplication, repetition, sameness, otherness/identity) emerge? In other words, what is it that determines the inside and outside of "archives"?

Beginning with a brief consideration of the SAA session title phrase "the Myth of Reality," I then turn to the word "archive" as it has been treated in the works of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, in whose writing the term "archive" assumes some prominence. What is interesting to me is Derrida's critical treatment of the term "archive" in his contribution to *Reading the Archive* and in fragments of his own monographs, which persistently puts into question much of the philosophy of communication, history, meaning, and being that grounds archival practice. In the final section, I go on to contest more directly the boundaries along which history and archives, fiction and history, fiction and archives, myth and archives, and myth and reality meet.

By way of introduction, then, I want briefly to play with the SAA session phrase "the Myth of Reality," for it challenges one of the tacit assumptions of the opening paragraph: that archives give us access to a real picture of the past. I also turn to this phrase in order to illustrate the problematical nature—deconstructionists would use the term "undecidability"—of phrases such as this.

If it is accepted as true—as the phrase "myth of reality" seems to suggest—that reality *is* a myth, then we are forced to acknowledge that myth *is* a reality, at least a cultural reality. Indeed, if it is myth that is real, then the content of myth must be, in some sense, true. If this is the case, however, reality can be characterized as both mythical (that is, true, as I have suggested) and also untrue (as people commonly believe).

It can also be inferred from the phrase "myth of reality," however, that myth is only one aspect of reality, a mere portion which fails to exhaust fully the significance of reality. Indeed, perhaps there is something real or true of myth. Finally, the "myth of reality" may suggest a timeless origin, a non-linear permanence, a simultaneity; that is, it may also denote the discovery of origins, a founding story or pushing-off point, an authoritative grounding that can indefinitely support—and without which there could not be—subsequent accounts of the reality of identities, that is, the reality of reality. Here, myth serves to ground reality.

After pursuing this line of questioning for awhile, one might finally come to wonder how myth and reality differ from each other. Perhaps they never, after all, entirely succeed in establishing semantic autonomy, instead possessing each other, cancelling out one another's predominance, infecting one another with their respective identities, forever deferring to each other.

Let us reformulate this musing in order to bring it a little closer to our own archival world. If the content of truth is knowledge, does it make sense to say—is it possible to say—that knowledge (e.g., historical knowledge) is mythical? Surely, our archives, with their strategies, methodologies, guiding principles, and devotional technologies of preservation and conservation, not to mention their techniques of organization and retrieval, empower archivists to overcome the mythical limits, that is, the limits of the myth, and to write or produce history that bears some coincidental relation to what is true and has been real, some reference to things past, things that have been, that existed, that were present in the past. Do archives, moreover, not serve precisely to make accessible to us a reality about the way we—or is it they—were, or rather are? Do archives not provide sustenance for historical realism?

Yet what sense of loss (a highly developed sense in archival culture) does speaking of the myth of archive and the myth of history evoke? Perhaps the pursuit of the distinction between myth and history is, after all, a sojourn that takes us nowhere or everywhere, to no time and to all time. The question of *is*, the quest for truth, is what makes it difficult ever to escape this interminable play between myth and reality. Myth and reality, myth and history, history and fiction, truth and fiction, myth and archives or the archive—all are oppositional dyads that have governed the course of Western thought, and marked the limits of the history of Western writing.

Historian William McNeill has distinguished among Truth, truths, and myth. Though he concedes, reluctantly one senses, that however desirable, absolute truth is “an unattainable goal,” he nevertheless persists in salvaging some vestige of truth for historians: he invents the notion of *mythistory*, which he describes as

truths that historians achieve when they bend their minds as critically and carefully as they can to the task of making their account of public affairs credible as well as intelligible to an audience that shares enough of their particular outlook and assumptions to accept what they say.<sup>6</sup>

McNeill's neo-logistic “mythistory” attests to the necessity and the difficulty of resolving the problem of the epistemological limits of history and, by implication, of archives. In other words, what is it possible for historians to say about reality? What makes it possible for them to say anything? What are the limits of and the relations among historical discourse, mythical or fictional truth, and archival practice? Perhaps it is as historians approach the glorious brink of documented truth that their interpretations inevitably fall away towards myth. Perhaps it is as archivists approach the capacity of/for complete documentation that history's limit will have been reached.

The limits with which this paper is concerned involve what it is possible to say about the archival institution. Those limits along which I shall travel are the borders of possibility, the limits of recorded communication—that is, telecommunication. The journey will straddle the region of liminality, lingering at the threshold that marks off the preservation and transmission of archives from archival discourses. In so doing, the paper will implicitly destabilize—disturb—terms such as “archive” and “history” by problematizing that which regulates what lies inside and outside each of them. Indeed, this is deconstruction's strategy: to disturb without toppling; to grasp where and how discourses and concepts live by putting them under the threat of decomposition. In support of his own project of philosophical “reconstruction,” American philosopher John Dewey once cited approvingly the renowned British geneticist, C.D. Darlington, who had once called for a “Ministry of Disturbance, a regulated source of annoy-

ance, a destroyer of routine—an underminer of complacency.”<sup>8</sup> This is precisely how Derridean deconstruction has sometimes been described. Derrida himself has invoked the term *solicit*, derived from the Latin term denoting a shaking or disturbing of omnipresent structures, to describe his deconstructive reading practice.<sup>9</sup>

The collection of essays gathered together in *Reading the Archive* is largely intended for individuals interested in the reading of text. Doubtless, few archivists would easily agree either that the reading of texts—or, as some might prefer, the writing of texts—captures the essence of their professional interest or practice, or that archives consist of a collection or string of text(s). Some archivists—most archivists, I suspect—would prefer, or even insist, that I drop the several allusions I have already made to “texts,” and that I refer instead to data, documents, files, films, information, photographs, and records, or use other kindred terms. Their discomfort with the term “text” would not be misplaced. Nevertheless, it can be argued that archives embodies the acquisition/collection and presentation, as well as the writing and reading, of texts. Those who have kept abreast of some of the recent exchanges among literary theorists, philosophers, and intellectual historians are aware that “text,” or “textuality,” is a loaded term around which has swirled considerable controversy. Though what is at issue in this important debate cannot be pursued here, at least not directly, its claims are worth working through—even if only to be dismissed later.

Though primarily aimed at individuals in comparative literature, literary history, literary theory, and philosophy—perhaps because of this—these essays offer fresh vantages from which archivists can view the concepts, categories, and materials with which they think and act, read and write, the borders of their habitat.

In *Reading the Archive*, the term “archive” stretches out over terrain that is sometimes recognizable and at other times probably strange to archivists: the archive as edifice; the archive as text; the archive as record; the archive as institution; the archive as university; the archive as scene of dissimulation or manipulation; the archive as discourse; the archive as professional paradigm (knowledge).

Finally, or so we would like to believe, there is the archive as sign. The term “archive,” however, is not quite archival, for it fails to preserve its own integrity. This very term, this very sign—which seems to epitomize, as it tenders promises of the preservation of primordality and primariness, origin and source, authority and identity, intention and meaning, durability and permanence—itself meanders and is promiscuous in licencing a multiplicity of meanings and readings. The term refers both to action and to things; it behaves as a noun and as a verb. Moreover, archive(s) (singular and plural), as a noun can be translated as place, space, institution, information (data)—record as well as knowledge or limits of discursivity (Foucault). Thus, archive is a final resting place, but this place is actually quite restless. Not so final is the place of the final word, that is, the word of the final place. The archive as the site of raw material for historians, the word processors of final words (custodial archivists, of course, talk of processing files), of dead letters is perhaps—in Simon Schama’s wonderfully ambiguous sense—a site of dead certainties.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the various contributions to *Reading the Archive* elide empirical critique, never showing any *signs* of striving for, or at least converging towards, an essential conception of archives, save one very general, ultimately amorphous notion: “archive” involves the preservation and transmission of meaning and knowledge. This area of agreement, however, also turns out to be indeterminate: there is ample room for difference and divergence of meaning. Sometimes the authors use the term without much precision, ignoring, oblivious or positively refusing to yield to, the compulsion to delineate clear, comfortable, unproblematical demarcations between what counts as literature and what counts as history, as archives and as history, as knowledge as history and knowledge as archives, as texts and as archives—in fact repudiating epistemological topographies *per se*. Finally, some of the pieces omit the term “archive” entirely. As one

moves from essay to essay, then, no single consistent use of the term “archive” emerges. Indeed, in keeping with deconstructive practice, attempts to distil a single meaning merely fuel the ongoing questioning process to which these essays share a common commitment. The very project of describing the limits of a single meaning is continuously thwarted. Like the ardent desire of Italo Calvino’s Mr. Palomar, as he stands at the ocean’s edge, to follow the course of a single, separate wave,<sup>11</sup> the extraction of a single meaning of archive here would only be apparent, amounting to a momentary ephemeral triumph of empirical reconciliation of unreconcilable meanings. Beneath the patina of conventional characterizations of the “archive” are forces subversive of any ostensive pretention. In addition, the archive is shaped and reshaped, through action or inaction, by difference, by what “its” texts and discourse must continually exclude, neglect, postpone, or repress.<sup>12</sup> Institutional negations co-habit with institutional acts of creation. Preservation entails a creative act of destruction.

How is it possible, however, for the archive to be simultaneously an embodiment of knowledge-creation and preservation? What violence is involved, in other words, in the act of transmission? (Is archiving not, after all, a form of correspondence?) Yet, at the same time, does preservation not intrinsically carry within it the seeds of destruction? Does it not disturb—appropriate—the past, making it (a) present, a material “presentness,” and achieve perdurable effects that destroy finiteness?<sup>13</sup> Is not the presiding effect of archival transmission the restoration—that is, destruction—of presence? Is not the archival mission of anamnesis finally an elusive, not to say an impossible one?

This article can be characterized as an essay, an experiment. It is a form of what Marshall McLuhan once termed “iconic prose” in a letter to scientific management guru Peter Drucker. McLuhan defined iconic prose as the kind of prose that is a probe rather than a package; it forces the reader to manipulate the language for himself, rather than merely being pro or con. Interspersed among the essays in *Reading the Archive*, which deal largely with the literary archive, are allusions to archives as those who read this journal habitually think of them. Thus, Derrida’s essay is one of two or three in the collection the analysis of which include—but go far beyond—allusions to what archivists usually conceive “archive” to mean. In concentrating on these minority aspects of the collection, however, it is important to recognize that one is performing an act of defiance, implicitly striving to find refuge in the necessary comfort of familiar, stable meanings. Beyond this choice, however, no concerted effort is made to impose a precise meaning on the sign “archive.” The ambiguity engendered by its indefinite, variable usage or status is tolerated; its shifting or unsettled boundaries are respected and even promoted. (In fact, readers may sense that I have already been allowing any consistent meaning of “archive” to slip from my pen.) In this manner, my own essay simultaneously engages in performance and analysis,<sup>14</sup> both commenting on and reproducing the antithematics that may be discerned at play within and among the essays in the collection. Inevitably, the limits will be erased even as they are written.

Jacques Derrida’s “Sendoffs” (Coup d’envoi) is the opening essay of *Reading the Archive*. It launches us toward the problem of destinations, objectives, goals, missions, correspondence, and institutions. Communication, the sender(transmitter)-receiver system as conventionally understood, describes an interstitial ontological distance, a space inhabited by intention, meaning, and motivation. It is this space, moreover, that is the site of what Derrida calls the “instituting act”<sup>15</sup>—what social theorists commonly term the site of agency. It is the place where onto-theological signatures appear in the existential, identity-laden discourse of western civilization. All discourses, or to put it more vernacularly, bodies of knowledge, purport to preserve and to transmit—to archive. It is this closed, well-defined originary space, containing the hermeneutic dynamic of “destining” individuals and institutions, which has sustained Western philosophy, or should we say “writing.” Derrida problematizes this space (indeed, Derrida is out to challenge the concept of space, which establishes selfhood and otherness, identity and

difference, that is, geometries or structures of identity) by posing a series of questions: "What of destination? What does 'to destine' mean? What is 'to destine'?" Pursuing this line of questioning into an ontological corner, he asks: "What happens to the question 'what is'?"<sup>16</sup>

To examine the instituting act, which always has its "end" or "ends,"<sup>17</sup> its project of totalization, Derrida describes a four-year College programme or "orientation."<sup>18</sup> For him, the term "orientation" connotes a kind of blind spot or exclusionary presupposition which, if exposed, would undermine the structured reality being invoked, the myth of the ultimate signifier of meaningfulness.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the college's *topoi* would include philosophy of language, poetics, pragmatics, semiotics, and *technology of communication*. All of these elements of the *topoi* have claimed their particular, exclusive destinations, and all of them form part of a "course" leading towards aspects of the philosophical questioning that has preoccupied Derrida in some of his earlier deconstructive readings. All of these matters fall under—fall prey to—the "Languages of Destination" and the "Destinations of Language." The twinning and inversion of the two terms is already an aporetic, deconstructive move. Each term tends to deflect—to frustrate, to mitigate—the coming to full significance—to destination—of the other. Neither language nor destination ever allows the other to reach a final resting-place, to secure a claim of semantic purity. Language never arrives at a final destination because this is the destiny of language/text. Language/text never arrives—period. Nor is it possible, however, for destinations to have a verifiable, fixed location or identity—to blossom into full, self-possessed meaning. Destining, or transmitting, must resort to language and is bound, therefore, *towards* language's fate: the impossibility of closure. Thus, language sets limits on the possibility of destinations, including the destination of language.

*Envoi* and destination actually form central motifs in one of Derrida's major works, *La Carte Postale de Socrate à Freud et au delà (The Postcard)*, which appeared in 1980.<sup>20</sup> Whereas earlier works, such as *Of Grammatology*, had pursued the classic problem of the origin(s) of language and offered readings of Rousseau and the nineteenth-century linguist, Ferdinand De Saussure (which problematized the notions of history and philosophy, and where *Writing and Difference* had deconstructed the ethical positions and ontological presuppositions of a number of other philosophers), *The Postcard* engaged in a more overtly personal, self-conscious linguistic demonstration the intended effect of which was to frustrate the ontological and epistemological foundations upon which our writing and reading, our communicating habits, rest.

*The Postcard* contains a long series of dated postcard-length messages spanning the period between 3 June 1977 and 30 August 1979. This "historical" correspondence, which does not include any recognizable replies, covers some 270 pages. It is never clear to whom these messages are destined—an other, a lover, himself (the conscious/sub-conscious)? This is partly due, of course, to Derrida's intention to deconstruct the ontological loci (origin and destination) in/of communication. Nor is it a simple matter to distinguish between those passages that refer to actual events in Derrida's life—or to earlier moments of contemplation—and those that amount to a sort of reverie. Is this history or literature?

Right at the outset, Derrida declares himself inimical to the principle of archive, the place of preservation, of accumulation, of safeguarding:

Today, the seventh of September nineteen seventy-nine, there are only *envois* from which whatever was spared or if you prefer "saved" (I already hear murmured "registered", as is said for a kind of receipt) will have been due, yes, due to a very strange principle of selection, and which for my part, even today, I consider questionable, as, moreover, the grate, the filter, and the economy of sorting can be on every occasion, especially if they destine for preservation, not to say for the archive. In a word, I rigorously do not approve of this principle, I denounce it ceaselessly, and in this respect reconciliation is impossible.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout *The Postcard* Derrida characterizes the archive as a “relay station,” a guard post, a listening post, a “facteur de la vérité” (factor of truth). Moreover, the French term “facteur” is itself open to manifold translations, including agent, factor, and letter carrier, a node in a postal system; it is a site for the preservation and transmission of meaning, of intention, of identity and being. Yet, despite the archive—because of the archive—nothing, no presence, ever arrives at its destination: for Derrida, “[t]he first catastrophe is the ignoble archive which rots everything, the descendance [*sic*] into which everything tumbles...” Archives form part of—or simply are—a huge postal system which goes by the name of western civilization, a system the constituent destinations of which are unreachable and, therefore, for all intents and purposes, possess only a tenuous identity, or rather no identity at all. In trying to understand the history of this postal system, moreover, Derrida realizes that this project, the history of communication, that is, of telecommunications, is doomed. Ultimately, it would merely repeat or reproduce the history of the West; it would rehearse the entire corpus of Western writing. Indeed, the entire history of Western civilization could be characterized as “the post-age,” an age of assumed identities and destinations.<sup>22</sup>

Want to write and first to reassemble an enormous library on the *courrier*, the postal institutions, the techniques and mores of telecommunication, the networks and epochs of telecommunication throughout history - but the “library” and the “history” themselves are precisely “posts”, sites of passage or of relay among others, stases, moments or effects of *restance*, and also particular representations, narrower and narrower, shorter and shorter sequences, proportionally, of the Great Telematic Network, the *worldwide connection*. What would our correspondence be, and its secret, the indecipherable, in the terrifying archive?<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Derrida renounces this postal history project. He concedes or proclaims the impossibility, the absurdity, of gathering material for and writing a history of communication. This history cannot be a history of the postal system, because the question of the very possibility of history itself, of all the concepts of history, of tradition, of transmission or interruptions is bound up with or is identical to such a project.<sup>24</sup> To write history is to write about the history of communication, which is also to write the history of history, that is, the history of writing, which is also to write about the communication of history, which is also ...

Drawing on Freud, and more particularly on French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s reading of Freud, Derrida continues to embroider on the ego, the self, the identity that writes and sends,<sup>25</sup> that is received or destined, or perhaps that is written and sent in the great network of history. Derrida explores the metaphysical presupposition of writing as an absolutely authorial act. Can language sustain this pretention? Who is actually writing or written in the letter, the correspondence? Who determines and who is determined by the composition? What happens to the identity that is supposedly wrapped up in the message placed in an envelope, which then leaves the “author’s” *hand* (his writing) as it is deposited into, acquired by, the postal system? Indeed, Derrida describes the experience of “horror” at the moment of the encounter of interiority and exteriority that occurs when proprietary meaning—to lapse into a tautology for a moment—is about to be sealed in an envelope and entrusted to the custody of the “destinal” or postal system:

You who know, tell me the truth, tell me your secret. In truth, what does to destine mean? I am rereading before sealing (which I have a horror of, almost never do, it is as if I wanted to control, hold back, or filter what I have to tell you, to give in a bit to accursed literature), and I recall that already in the car, one day, you had said to me, or I had said, yes, the only couple in the world. Keep us, I am drawing us, here, and I call you by your name.<sup>26</sup>

How meaningful is it to speak of names, of sending or arriving or destination, of sender and receiver, of self and other? To concretize this ontological problem, Derrida turns to the dead letter office. What happens when a letter, a piece of correspondence, bears no destination or sender address?

I saw an inscription barely erased on a wall in Virginia, in Charlottesville; "Dead Letter Office. - Letters or parcels which cannot be delivered, from defect of address or other cause, are sent to the Division of dead letters and dead parcels post. They are carefully examined on both front and back for the name and address of the sender; if these are found, they are returned to the sender. If the sender's address is lacking, they are kept for a period, after which dead letters are destroyed while dead parcels are sold at auction." "A period... after which"... how do they count with time? I will never understand? Either they do not count, or they have no calculating "principle," and this amounts to the same thing. "Division of dead letters" is a stroke of genius. Myself, I say "division" of living letters.<sup>27</sup>

While Derrida's intention is to deconstruct the postal or archival system, he is also keenly alert to the possibility that deconstructive practice itself can assume the status/identity of identity, "history," or "discourse," that is, hegemony.<sup>28</sup> The entire corpus of his work is marked by a sustained effort to escape what he concedes is an inevitable fate: an address<sup>29</sup> in the postal system. Thus, the deconstructive project exists alongside the compulsion to place itself continually under challenge, lest it take the form of another ossified totalization or hierarchical domination of knowledge and its mode of transmission. In *Reading the Archive*, for example, Derrida aims for a "contract"—a "social contract," an instituting act—that, contrary to the customary contract or institution aspiring to knowledge, impossibly aiming to account for everything, to eliminate the possibility of meanings unforeseen by and subversive of the institution, deliberately invokes (institutes?) an insubordinate clause the function of which is to inhibit the fulfilment of the ontological terms (ends, destination) of the instituting act. This again includes any move that would seek to institute deconstruction.<sup>30</sup>

Through his inclusion of the "technology of communication" (as one of the languages of destination/as one of the destinations of language), Derrida recognizes the existence of languages (media) other than texts. As a result, this part of Derrida's programme intersects most conspicuously with issues that have recently preoccupied some archivists: "technology of telecommunications." Technology of communication, he writes, includes "modes of archiving, the mass media and computer science, telematics, robotics, and biotechnologies."<sup>31</sup> Here he also opens up "the meaning" of language to the point where it encompasses "values" that recognizably *inform*—in both senses of this term—the archival constituency:

"Language" - the word is understood here in its most open sense, beyond the limits of the linguistic and the discursive proper, in their oral and graphic form. The values of "information," "communication," "emission," and "transmission" will be included here, certainly, in *all* their forms, yet they will not exhaust it. That is to say directly that, under the title of "language," the study of all "destinal" significations or operations (destining, sending, emitting, transmitting, addressing, giving, receiving, etc.) can and should traverse *all* the College's field of activity.<sup>32</sup>

Derrida's framing of "archive" within his "orientation" programme is suggestive. While archival scholarship has traditionally demonstrated an understandable interest in the technology of communicating media throughout its history, whether papyrus or paper, quipu or computer, and has recently begun to confront the impact of changing, increasingly multimodal media of communication on archival acquisition and appraisal, the archive itself as a form of communication, as a communication device or medium, as a "destinal" institution in the postal system, has heretofore remained rather obscure to archivists. Nevertheless, this point merits serious consideration. Archives continually strive to find a comfortable, determinate, mediate position, a ground, a presence of the present, a settlement between the past of the present and the future of the present: another form of communication, of destining. All of its strategies, tactics, techniques, and technologies—whether they concern appraisal, description standards, conservation, or retrieval—amount to the devising of a communication apparatus, a destining institution, a medium of transmission of knowledge of/about the past/present. The archival institution is fully committed to the hermeneutic project of sending a "gift of presence—the 'present'

which tradition makes to us ... the philosophy of meaning—of the transmission, communication, preservation, enrichment and nourishing of meaning.”<sup>33</sup> It is the contract to which archives are signatories. Like history, however, archives are also inevitably engaged in a tango of diachrony and synchronicity, time and space, presence and absence, genesis and structure, tradition and force, preservation and creation.

Derrida’s treatment of archives and the destining institution of Western history sets the stage for more focused studies of the archive in the essays of *Reading the Archive* that follow. He sends us on our way. Our destination is the archive that subverts and contests the limits—the limits of the possibilities—of its contractual, discursive, institutional identities. I now wish to pursue this notion of the limits of limits, that is, the limits of “destinal” institutions, by bringing out the transgressive relations between the archival institution and the institution that produces history.

In a review of Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Souvenirs Pieux* and *Archives du Nord* some years ago, I noted that her archival sources formed an integral part of the genealogical story that she was telling. The archival footnotes had been transplanted, as it were, from their usual marginal location to the centre of the body and incorporated into the text. The sources themselves played a part in the plot.<sup>34</sup> This act of inclusiveness assigns an entirely revolutionary status to archives. Such an operation served to repatriate the sources, which by convention are deported to the end (foot) of the entire text, invariably alienating the archive from the body. The footnote, separated though not severed from the text, dangles from the body of the text. Yet the footnotes are the result of the author’s operation of an *uncategorical* exclusion, apparently discouraging or repressing, always half-heartedly and with limited success, an interruption, a diversion from another perhaps less, perhaps more important story.

The space that separates the footnote from the text, the marginal location of the citation, is one of many “places of rupture” in texts to which deconstruction is especially drawn.<sup>35</sup> Deconstruction, Derrida explains, is usually already at work, in the work, “not at the centre but in an excentric [*sic*] centre, in a corner whose eccentricity assures [*sic*] the solid concentration of the system, participating in the construction of what it at the same time threatens to deconstruct.”<sup>36</sup> The placement of the footnote serves to obscure, in Derrida’s words, the endless and useless “bibliographical research, source studies... the process of cross-referencing and grafting to the point that it is revealed that there is no ‘inside’ the text.”<sup>37</sup> There is no such thing, in other words, as *the* book. The book is never a pure presence, never a “gift of presence.” Nothing is stand-alone. Nothing is “stand-present.” Again Derrida writes,

There is writing without a book, in which, each time, at every moment, the marking tip proceeds without a past upon the virgin sheet; but there is also, *simultaneously*, an infinite number of booklets enclosing and fitting inside other booklets, which are only able to issue forth by grafting, sampling, quotations, epigraphs, references, etc. Literature voids itself in its limitlessness.<sup>38</sup>

Books embody the cohesiveness of historical or historiographical—is there really a difference?—work. The unity of the text, its totality—we could with a few modifications also be talking about files—with its beginning and its ending are *embodied* in the neat, logical, symmetrical presentation of the pages of books produced by historians. The nicely concealed stitching of the pages—the text—contrives to perpetrate the appearance of seamlessness, and participates in the covering up of the evidence of an antecedent *story* of travels, of wanderings and meanderings, through the archives. Try as historical works might to refer only to themselves and to the absoluteness of their own beginning and ending, the sewing nevertheless reveals the fragments, preserves the patchwork, betrays the irrepressible plenitude of the archives that it should conceal.<sup>39</sup> Although texts are usually reduced to the form of a book, the text is never totally captured therein.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the topography of history-book discourse, the placement of footnotes and references at the foot or at the end, the bookcover's imperial pretension to define the domain of its discourse, also provides evidence of the discontinuity between "past" reality and historical narrative. Those historians, according to one scholar, who wish to create the greatest impression of continuity between text and reality, try to eliminate the tell-tale scars of the surgeon-historian's stitching which marks the separation of text and sources.<sup>41</sup> Calling too much attention to the sources might remind readers that the reality being constructed in the historical text is simply based on other texts.<sup>42</sup> Thus does deconstruction seek out and disturb archives, books, and any other binding sights of knowledge and communication.

Archivists are accomplices to the staging of objectivity. They play a role in the creation of what Roland Barthes has called the "reality effect." For Barthes, the practice of "objective" history is rooted in the belief that historical fact exists outside linguistic experience and that historical writing is a "pure and simple 'copy' of another existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the 'real'." This 'real' for which our civilization has such a taste, Barthes says, is evident in the emergence of the private diary, documentary literature, the historical museum, the exhibition of ancient objects, and above all the massive development of photography.<sup>43</sup> Of course, archives could easily have been included in this inventory of instruments of truth and realism.

It is also important to examine the secondary status of historical practice in the archives. In an article titled "Orders of Value,"<sup>44</sup> I recently claimed that the notion of the history of the record must not stop at the portals of archives; archives must themselves be considered part of the history-making process. Archives do not merely make the telling of the stories possible; archives/archival practice is, or ought to be, considered part of the narrative of history. Like historians, archivists are also playing with time, seeking to master it. The archivist's calling is to "control the past," to cooperate with the historian in what Anthony Kemp has called "temporal colonization," which—to return to a point I made earlier—"is both a possession and a destruction."<sup>45</sup>

There is a wonderful passage in A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* describing an episode of control and possession, which, with little effort of the imagination, can be transposed to archival practice. In this novel about the power of desire—the pleasure principle<sup>46</sup>—in life, including historical scholarship, one of its principal characters, Professor Cropper, a renowned scholar of literary history, is presenting a slide-illustrated lecture on his life's obsession (possession), the fictional nineteenth-century poet Randolph Ash:

The finale of Cropper's lecture was a product of his passion. The truth was, he had come to love the bright transparencies of the thing he had acquired, almost as much as the things themselves. When he thought of Ash's snuffbox, he thought, not of the weight of it in his hand, the cold metal warming in his own dry palm, but also now of the enamelled cover magnified on the screen. Ash had never seen such gilded birds of Paradise, such blooming grapes, such deep red roses, though all their colours had been fresher in his time. He had never seen the sheen on the pearly rim as the light touched it through Cropper's projector. ... At the end of the lecture, Cropper would take out Ash's large gold watch, and check with it his own perfect timing. ... He had given up his naive practice of publicly claiming the watch, with a little joke about continuity, Ash's time and Cropper's.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, after reading this passage, one is left to wonder whether Cropper possesses Ash<sup>48</sup> or whether in this episode—and throughout the book—there is a thanatocratic "presence": is it the departed Ash who has taken possession of Cropper and the other, competing, scholars/researchers also interested in Ash?

The above passage dramatizes the transfigurative power of the heritage professions. Unfortunately, the effects of archival practice—embodying desire and (or of) destination—on the cultural process in general, and on history book-making in particular, have gone largely unexamined.

Despite the arguably pivotal mediating effect of archives in the historiographical process (and of history in the practice of archives), there has been a curious failure on the part of most historians—and cultural historians are particularly conspicuous here—to include archives within their purview.<sup>49</sup> Especially in light of the considerable accommodation that some novelists and literary scholars have extended to the political and cultural function of “documents” and “archives” in the socio-historical settings that they have constructed, can this omission be mere coincidence? Or, as I have already intimated, is this exclusion a peculiar form of *disciplinary* repression or blindness? Thus, the consignment of discussion of sources in historical discourse to “introductions,” “prefaces,” and *postscripts*, and the institutional convention that dispatches references to the foot of the page or the back of the text, are reproduced on a larger scale in the pretermission of archives from cultural and other histories.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this omission constitutes a blindness of insight. Without this blindness, this blinding light of knowledge, this “orientation,” without, that is, the distancing, the spacing, between archives and history, without the construction of mutually-exclusionary limits—the places of rupture—empowering each of these two discourses, the differentiation between the archival object (the record or document, the artefact) and the historical object (the book, the article, knowledge) begins to break down; archives and history begin to transgress each other, pollute each other. Indeed, in a recent book review in *Archivaria*, Canadian historian Susan Mann wondered whether the National Archives and the National Library ought not to be moved closer together, noting that the traditional distinctions between fact and fiction, literature and history—she might have added between archives and history and myth and reality—had become “decidedly blurred.”<sup>51</sup>

For the last few pages, I have been peering through, or rather peering at, the porousness of the boundary between archives and history. I have been playing fast and loose with discursive identities or limits, which Foucault might have agreed to include among his “unities of discourse.”<sup>52</sup> I have been dwelling on the edges of historical texts, in the region of the archival presence/absence. As deconstructionists might say, in asking the questions that have been asked we approach the limit of the limit: each of the traditional categorical distinctions—history and archives, books and records, literature and history, and myth and reality—places strain on the other. Working at the margins of archives is history, while at the margins of history, is archives. Archives and history, each occupying an “excentric” position within the putative domain of the other’s practice, serve to cancel out the purity of each other’s intentions, each other’s object(ivity), each other’s contract, each other’s words.<sup>53</sup>

We have been trying, then, to work through a question posed by Derrida toward the end of *The Postcard*:

What happens when acts or performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc..) make up part of the objects they designate? When they could give themselves as an example of that very thing about which they speak or write?<sup>54</sup>

The archival record, in other words, does indeed capture the “very act and deed”: that act and deed, however, is nothing more and nothing less than the act and deed of writing, that is preserving, the play of or about language.<sup>55</sup>

Asking what is the practical point of Derrida’s “work” and Kaplan’s essay—and our reading of them—for what we call the archival community, is making a demand that a destination be prescribed—preserved—for archives. Rather than addressing the classical archival problem of preserving communication in its “out-thereness,” some of these essays beckon us to raise up the archive itself as a (an artefact of) communication, as a text for the reading, a contract to be deconstructed. This suggestion, moreover, opens up a series of fundamental aporetic terms that relentlessly press upon the limits that would claim to determine what lies inside and what lies outside the term, the concept, “archives”: What is worthwhile to preserve in/about archives? What differentiates working in/for archives: archives as discipline/profession, as medium/message, as knowledge/ignorance, as preservation/creation, as discourse/silence, as space/time, as

communication/history—and finally, archives as origin/repetition. In other words, do institutions create archives, or do archives create institutions? Indeed, does archiving records merely serve, in each instance, to preserve the identity of archives? Or do archival identities/limits change as new forms and new content arrive? Do archives preserve texts, or do texts preserve archives? Derrida might comment, of course, that first we must ask, and keep on asking, “what is ‘as’?”—“as” being a term of metaphoricity, of displacement, of deferral.

Perhaps, however, it is archivists who will have the “final word,” a final question, for Jacques Derrida: Does he wish to donate his papers to the archives? Derrida might answer that he is prepared to donate them, but that the name Derrida, the signature, will never arrive at a destination, that is, will never satisfy the archival mission to transmit and preserve signatures. In other words, in our chosen words, he might ask how many record groups or manuscript groups or fonds we were intending to create for “his” records, since there is no one present “Jacques Derrida” in any of these documents. Derrida continually derides the traditional metaphysics of identity, of presence, of name-calling. The works (the *oeuvre*) associated with the name supposedly engage in the working out of the law of the name. Yet the name—with each of its works ostensibly standing as an example, a repetition, of the name—belies the treacherousness of the ascription of identity in the law of the name, the law of language and writing, the law of history, as well as the law of the archive, of its “own” name, that is, its “own” signature. What is archiving but the effort of giving and receiving the archival slip?

I close with Derrida’s rhetorical question: “Is life not on the line”?<sup>56</sup> Signed, on the (dotted) line,<sup>57</sup> Brien Brothman, National Archives of Canada.

### Notes

- \* Paper originally presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Montreal, 17 September 1992.
- 1 Emily Prager, *Eve’s Tattoo* (New York, 1992), p. 10.
  - 2 George Allan, *The Importances of the Past. A Meditation on the Authority of Tradition* (Albany, 1986), p. 156. Personal yet scholarly, Allan offers an uncommonly eloquent, often moving, philosophical apology for the possibility and necessity of historical knowledge for human existence.
  - 3 Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987), p. 3.
  - 4 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Alan Bass, trans. (Chicago, 1981), p. 59.
  - 5 E.S. Burt and Janie Vanpée, eds., “Reading the Archive. On Texts and Institutions,” *Yale French Studies* no. 77 (New Haven, 1990).
  - 6 William McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986), p. 19. Paul Bové similarly writes that “‘truths’ are relative to the frames of reference which contain them.” Paul Bové, *Mastering Discourse. The Politics of Intellectual Culture* (Durham, 1992), p. 8. See also George Allan’s struggle to reconcile myth and history in *The Importances of the Past*, p. 128f. Of course, in recent years a growing number of historians have been attempting to re-establish and redefine some epistemological terrain solid enough to reinstate and sustain the value of historical practice. A cursory examination of articles appearing in the *American Historical Review* over the last five years makes the point. See also Bryan Palmer, *Descent Into Discourse. The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); Roger Chartier, *Cultural History. Between Practices and Representations* (New York, 1988), especially chapter 2, “On the Relation of Philosophy and History.”; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988).
  - 7 Another concept that attempts to mediate between myth and reality or myth and history, fact and fiction, is “mystory.” Mystory aims to propose a new relationship between myth and history, popular thought and scientific analysis, orality and literacy, texts and videography. See Gregory Ulmer, *Teleteory. Grammatology in the Age of Video* (New York, 1989), passim. The phrase “fictional truth” is taken from Michael Riffaterre’s recent work, *Fictional Truth*.
  - 8 C.D. Darlington, cited by John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, 1948), p. xvii.

- 9 Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass, trans. (Chicago, 1967), p. 6.  
Reading Jacques Derrida's writing requires one to surrender oneself to complete relaxation. (Drawing on Nietzsche, Derrida sometimes refers to play, dance, and laughter.) This, however, requires an enormous effort. As Derrida himself has surmised about his readers, as they go about trying to decipher his writing, they are undoubtedly responding to an impossible demand that Western (i.e., literate) culture has made upon language: that it do the work of explaining and differentiating things clearly and completely, that a single structure of meaning—an identity—arise from texts in order to dominate the reader and exclude any other possibilities. Hence, the aim of interpretation can be said to amount to extinguishing the very possibility of interpretation; that is, interpretations implicitly work to dissipate the concept of interpretation, and, therefore, subjects who interpret. Interpretations, in other words, work to establish objects, to invoke an independent external reality.
- 10 Here I am, of course, drawing on the recent work of Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties. Unwarranted Speculations*. The text of this book is undeterred and underdetermined by the traditional genre distinctions between literature and history, truth and fiction, and reflects the ambiguity of his title. We are uncertain whether the title refers to the conventional meaning of incontrovertible fact, or whether the title intends the opposite—that certainty about the past is impossible, that certainty about the past is always dead.
- 11 Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar* (New York, 1985), p. 1.
- 12 All of these terms are interrelated, some taken directly from the vocabulary of deconstruction, others closely related to its project. Nietzsche, for example, writes of the necessity, of the inevitability of forgetfulness for memory or remembering—preservation: "To close the doors and windows of consciousness for a time; to remain undisturbed by the noise and struggle of our underworld of utility organs working with and against each other; a little quietness, a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness, to make room for new things, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for regulation, foresight, premeditation... —that is the purpose of active forgetfulness, which is like a doorkeeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose and etiquette: so that it will be immediately obvious that there will be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, *no present*, without forgetfulness." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, 1969), pp. 57-58.
- 13 This idea harkens back to Plato's *Phaedrus*. The Egyptians mistrusted writing as a material alienation, an inadequate, illusory compensation for the limits of reminiscence. In effect, material conservation's very power renders it a powerless, alienating tool for the preservation of the original source of action.
- 14 Derridean deconstruction has been described as "a textual practice more than a theory." Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance* (Bloomington, 1986), p. 29. Historian Dominick La Capra has likened deconstruction to a "reading technology." Dominick La Capra, "Intellectual History and Critical Theory," in *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca, 1989), p. 180.
- 15 Derrida, "Sendoffs," p. 18.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 25.  
Elsewhere, Derrida also speaks of "ends": "... an end cannot be stated, eschatology is not possible, except through violence. This infinite passage through violence is what is called history." Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 130. For a reading of the meaning of "end" that differs from Derrida's while conceding the impossibility of differing with him, see Frank Kermode, "Endings, Continued," in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York, 1989), p. 92.
- 18 "Sendoffs" is actually a translated reprint of Derrida's contribution to a "Rapport présenté à M. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Ministre d'État, Ministre de la Recherche et de l'Industrie," dated 30 September 1982. This report was published in *Collège International de Philosophie: Science, Interscience, Arts*. Derrida is one of the founding members of the Collège international de philosophie.
- 19 Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, p. 213.
- 20 Translated as *The Postcard. From Plato to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago, 1978). In writing about "envoi" and "destination," Derrida is undoubtedly drawing directly on Martin Heidegger, for whom "destining" and "sending" are important concepts: *The Question Concerning Technology*, William Lovitt, trans. (New York, 1977), p. 24.  
Interestingly, Alan Bass, who translated *The Postcard*, misses one of the crucial turns of the term *envoi*. It contains the possibility of "en voi," en route, or on the way, a notion Heidegger stresses in his philosophy. Here, Derrida urges his readers to refrain from searching for start-points and end-points in his writing-meaning, and to experience the language as it goes on its way.
- 21 Derrida, *The Postcard*, pp. 7-8.

- 22 See Gregory Ulmer, "The Post-Age," *Diacritics* (Fall 1991), pp. 39-57.
- 23 Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 27.
- 24 Ibid., p. 66. See also Derrida, *Dissemination*, Barbara Johnson, trans. (Chicago, 1981), p. 215. On this same question of the ontology of writing and history, see Pat Bigelow, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing* (Tallahassee, 1987), p. 87.
- 25 See, for example, his "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, passim.
- 26 Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 117.
- 27 Ibid., p. 124.
- 28 Michel Foucault's inquiry has delved extensively into the conditions that characterize the "Will to Truth," the emergence and shaping of bodies of knowledge. See in particular his essay, "Discourse and Knowledge," which appears as an appendix to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972). For a summary of the self-reflective aspect of Derrida's deconstruction project, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror. Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 164-75.
- 29 Derrida refers to "all the addressees who are found on the Western way, the relays, the porters, the readers, the copyists, the archivists, the guardians, the professors, the writers, the facteurs right?" *The Postcard*, p. 28.
- 30 Derrida, "Sendoffs," p. 17.  
An interesting hermeneutic counterpoint to Derrida's rendering of the "contract" is Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," in Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany, 1989), p. 35.  
Derrida is very conscious of the vulnerability of deconstruction to its own ruses and strategy. He never tries to deny that this is the case. To posit the possibility that deconstruction can escape its own workings would be to claim that it is possible for writing to escape metaphysics. Deconstruction constantly attempts to undermine metaphysics, but Derrida affirms the impossibility of ever doing so. Deconstruction is a never-ended project.
- 31 Derrida, "Sendoffs," p. 32.
- 32 Ibid., p. 29.
- 33 John D. Caputo, "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique," in Michelfelder and Palmer, eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany, 1989), p. 262.  
Derrida has recently explored in some detail the notion of the gift and the act of giving in language. See *Donner le Temps. La Fausse Monnaie, I* (Paris, 1991). Again, Derrida plays with the French sign *présent*, which like the English "present" has a double meaning, referring both to the notions of giving and of time. Derrida shows how these two apparently unrelated senses are actually intricately intertwined.
- 34 Brien Brothman, review of *Archives du Nord* and *Souvenirs Pieux*, by Margeurite Yourcenar, in *Archivaria* 20 (Summer 1985), pp. 195-96.
- 35 Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, p. 33. Both Barthes and Derrida attempt to disrupt the hierarchical and controlling efforts implicit in the design and spatial design, font choices, and intellectual structures of traditional scholarly texts: Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970); and Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris, 1974).
- 36 Derrida cited in Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York, 1992), p. 81.
- 37 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 205.
- 38 Ibid., p. 223. On the problem of writing erasing itself, see Johnson, "Erasing Panama: Mallarmé and the Text of History," *A World of Difference*, pp. 66 and passim.
- 39 Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, p. 74. See Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Paris, 1972), pp. 11-12.
- 40 Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, p. 222. Derrida challenges the integrity of books in *Positions*, p. 11f.
- 41 Lionel Gossman, "History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification," in *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge Mass., 1990), p. 250.
- 42 During the early modern period, when the difference between documentary fact and fictional truth, between analysis and narrative, was only beginning to be worked out, it was not unknown for historians to be criticized for calling attention to the sources from which they were citing. See George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History. Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France* (Urbana, 1970), p. 33.
- 43 Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," in *The Rustle of Language*, Richard Howard, trans. (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 138-39. On the "reality effect," see also Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 206.
- 44 Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), p. 91.

- 45 Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past. A Study of the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (Oxford, 1991), p. 158. Of course, the language of archival science/practice is replete with language of conquest, control and possession: words such as "control," "custody," and "strategy." In reference to the relationship between archivists and the past, Barbara Craig has distinguished between two opposing "ethical" attitudes: "control" and "respect": "The Acts of the Appraisers: The Context, the Plan and the Record," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), p. 177. One of the major points of Kemp's book, however, is that the ethos of "control," "possession," and other forms of "destruction" are traceable to the dawn of the early modern period of history and intrinsic to the modern stance towards the past. Paul Ricoeur, however, offers a more benign view of our relationship of "appropriation" with the past. He develops two key hermeneutic concepts, distanciation and appropriation, which shape this relationship: "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics. II* (Evanston, 1991), pp. 105-24.
- 46 The category of desire in post-structuralist theories of communication and writing is an important one. Throughout *The Postcard*, for example, Derrida constantly refers to the "P.P.," which stands at once for the "Postal Principle" as well as the "Pleasure Principle" and the "Platonic Principle." The archival or postal or "destinal" system is a desiring system. In *Du côté de chez Swann*, for example, Marcel Proust concatenates the sexual and intellectual modes of desire:
- ...la passion de la vérité, mais d'une vérité, elle aussi, interposée entre lui et sa maîtresse, ne recevant sa lumière que d'elle, vérité tout individuelle qui avait pour son objet unique, d'un prix infini et presque d'une beauté, les actions d'Odette, ses relations, ses projets, son passé ... cette curiosité qu'il sentait s'éveiller en lui à l'égard des moindres occupations d'une femme, c'était celle qu'il avait eue autrefois pour l'histoire. Et tout ce dont il aurait eu honte jusqu'ici, espionner devant une fenêtre, qui sait? demain [sic] peut-être, faire parler habilement les indifférents, soudoyer les domestiques, écouter aux portes, ne lui semblait plus, aussi bien que le déchiffrement des textes, la comparaison des témoignages et l'interprétation des monuments, que des méthodes d'investigation scientifiques d'une véritable valeur intellectuelle et appropriées à la recherche de la vérité.
- Marcel Proust, cited in Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan. Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 49. See also, p. 169f.
- Secret Nation*, a film made by the Newfoundland film company, Black Spot Inc., in 1991 and directed by Michael Jones, explores the themes that are also prominent in Byatt's novel. Though most explicitly concerned with the politics of Newfoundland's entry into Confederation, this film interweaves with this theme of power the role of (sexual) desire in the control of the past as professor, graduate student, and archivist become entangled in a series of seductions revolving around access to research notes (archives) and archival records. It is the archives, the site of communion with temporal otherness, which is the ultimate seducer. (My thanks go to Paulette Dozois, National Archives of Canada, and Bert Riggs, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, for sharing their knowledge of this film with me.)
- 47 A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London, 1990), p. 382.
- 48 Of course the name "Ash" symbolizes human finiteness or mortality.
- 49 The historical interest of archivists in the practice of archives has been limited to producing histories that serve as instruments for improving or sanctifying practice through the "invention of tradition." There is virtually no scholarly literature extant that conducts any critical socio-historical analysis of the evolution of archives. None of the writing that I have seen on the history of archives includes or places archives within the larger framework of historical discourse. Discourse on the history of archives, in other words, has signally failed to transcend its own analytical categories, its own terms of practice. Archival histories, to the extent that they exist, largely remain internal histories, or scientific discourses, conducted without the tools of socio-historical analysis.
- 50 At the same time, the bibliographies that follow works of scholarship always give pride of place to the "archival sources," which by convention precede the "secondary literature."
- 51 Susan Mann, review of *Possession: A Romance*, by A.S. Byatt, in *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), p. 218. The history of the emergence of the distinction between historical and literary, or factual and fictional approaches to the past began around the sixteenth century: Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History. Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca, 1987); D.R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England. Erudition, Ideology, and 'The Light of Truth' from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto, 1990).
- Roberto Gonzalez Echeverria, on the other hand, observes that "the most persistent characteristics of books that have been called novels in the modern era is that they always pretend not to be literature. The desire not to be literary ... is the most tenacious element in the novel." The novel draws on the power of origins and reality available in the archives: *Myth and Archive. A Theory of Latin American Narrative*

(Cambridge, 1990), pp. 7, 13, and 92. On the relation between documented history and narrativity, see also Doris Summer, "Irresistible Romance: the Foundational Fictions of Latin America," in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990), pp. 76f.

- 52 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 28-29 and ch. 1, passim.
- 53 The notion of purity is related to Derrida's interest in our assumptions about authorship and proprietorship. For Derrida, the phrase "proper name" refers not only to the names that identify individuals but to all language. In other words, like signatures, all words purport to stand for a pure essence, identity; our presentation for all words in language is the proper name, a signature of identity. Moreover, quotation marks—around the word "archives," for example—are clothespins affirming purity, the pure, the proper, the provenancial, name. (In French the word for proper, *propre*, also means clean. In a sense, all words are assumed to be clean, pure, that is, proper names.)
- Derrida challenges all of this ontological pretension to purity, to cleanliness, to the proper. In *Signéponge/Signsponge*, a work in which he turns to the signature of the French poet, Francis Ponge, Derrida exploits the space that separates and joins the poet's name/signature and the French term for sponge, *éponge*—thus, the title, *Signéponge*. For Derrida, the sponge is an intermediate state, retaining at once clean and dirty water. In addition, "it loses as easily as it recovers its form, which is neither proper nor improper, neither simply a thing, nor simply vegetal, nor simply animal ...[T]he sponge is, above all else writing": Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, Richard Rand, trans. (New York, 1984), pp. 64, 70-72, and passim.
- 54 Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 417. Hayden White has similarly observed that "every discourse is always as much about the discourse itself as about the objects that make up its subject matter": *Topics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), p. 4. See also Barbara Johnson, "Erasing Panama," p. 64.
- 55 The phrase "very act and deed" is taken from Hugh Taylor's article "'My Very Act and Deed': Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Affairs," *American Archivist* 51, no. 4 (Fall 1988), pp. 456-69. Though only implicit, this article makes hermeneutical assumptions about the relationships between text, reading, and action.
- Those interested in hermeneutics would be well served by two books: John M. Connally and Thomas Keutner, eds., *Hermeneutics versus Science? Three German Views* (Notre Dame, 1988). This book presents an excellent introductory summary of the history and concepts of hermeneutics, and reprints articles by Wolfgang Stegmüller, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Ernst Konrad Specht. The second title is Paul Ricoeur's, *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, passim.
- Among archivists only Richard Brown, as far as I know, has tried to place archival practice in an explicitly hermeneutical framework. In his writing, Brown challenges us to reconceptualize archival practice, whether this involves acquisition or appraisal or selection, as a reading/interpretive practice. Brown offers a strong critique of the unstated hermeneutic assumptions in current approaches to archival practice, and then offers his own approach, which is influenced by his reading of Hayden White and Gadamer: Richard Brown, "Records Acquisition Strategy and its Theoretical Foundations: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 34-56.
- 56 Jacques, Derrida, "Otobiographies. The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," in Avital Ronell, trans. *The Ear of the Other*, (Lincoln, 1985), p. 4.
- 57 See Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, pp. 207-26.