

Book Reviews

Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression. JACQUES DERRIDA. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. 113 pages. Bibliography. ISBN 0-226-14336-8 hardcover.

Most archivists today understandably believe that archival institutions and programmes depend increasingly on strategic planning, financial resources, and technological know-how. With these practical preoccupations constantly pressing upon them, archivists can hardly justify setting aside time for philosophical reflection. If one is prepared to admit the proposition, however, that one of the most crucial features of any information technology from an archival standpoint is its inscriptive function, then some of the writings of the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), at least, begin to make a claim on the attention of archivists. *Archive Fever* is a translation of a lecture delivered by Derrida at an international colloquium on the history of psychiatry in 1994 and first published as *Mal d'archive*. Having long evinced an interest in the concept of archives, the philosopher of deconstruction now brings into sharper relief two issues which, under his gaze, turn out to be mutually implicating: the concept of archival science and the scientific claims of psychoanalysis. As he proceeds, Derrida returns to several earlier archives-related themes, including relations among the living and the dead, the roles of ordering, preservation, and registration, the rival patriarchal aspirations of archives and psychoanalysis to a place of ultimate authority, authenticity, originariness, and truth, and the differentiation of the natural (biological) from the artificial (technological or mediative).

In Derrida's work, the central presupposition of archives, namely the possibility of acts of writing, that is, the faithful deposition of the mind's content onto a durable material medium by a transcription of phoneticized symbols, undergoes extraordinarily detailed examination. His deconstruction of archives is consubstantial with his claim that Western philosophy has had an ontological stake in the enshrinement and preservation of a foundational phonocentric

principle. Accordingly, throughout its history Western philosophical practice has privileged thought, speech, and voice, which it construes as authentic, natural, and originary, and consigned what is commonly called writing to the subordinate status of a servile contrivance, a “prosthetic” device designed to simulate, repeat, and preserve the content of thought and to prolong the sound of speech – a forging, so to speak, of authentic identity, presence, and meaning.

A credible account of archives, then, requires the archiving of a concept of writing. But has *any* concept been well enough preserved to provide a secure starting point for a discussion of archives? Not even the familiar word “archive,” Derrida begins paradoxically, which tries to name a primary concept that intimates pristine preservation, certified authenticity, and originariness, has itself been well enough archived to serve as an authoritative point of departure. This archival limitation exists not simply because “archives” preserves its meaning poorly, but because, like all signs, linguistic and otherwise, its archive unexceptionally resonates with so much meaning as to suspend any pretence to a closed philological heritage. Only by forgetting, foreclosing on, this lack of a lack can the project of archiving, namely the preservation of identities and meanings, be underwritten.

In *Archive Fever* this general condition manifests itself as the spacing and timing that have since Plato marked (preserved) the difference between two identities: a natural psychic apparatus, an interior somatic space named *memory*, and an artificial documentary apparatus, a technological space of deposition, an extrasomatic site called *archives*. But where, Derrida asks, can the outside—archiving—be said to commence, with the unconscious, the conscious psyche, the furrowed brow, the wrinkled skin, the nervous tic, the utterance? Is the inscription written on paper simply the most visible, outermost layer of a “foliaceous stratification” of archives? Where does archiving, or inscribing, begin? To deal with these questions Derrida turns to the “archive” or “conservation drive,” and finds a condition he calls archive fever.

Derrida’s diagnosis of archive fever emerges from his encounter with the Freudian archive. To some, (and probably not only to archivists) any connection between the familiar idea of an archives as a repository for public records, manuscripts, hard copies and hard drives, files and directories, and Freud’s delineation of private memory as a problem of the individual mind’s interior inscription and preservation might seem obscure. In addition to his crucial “nonprinciple” of the death drive, and finitude, Freud’s resort to the language of material inscription and archival preservation to represent the internal dynamic of psychic life and memory strikes Derrida as particularly significant for considering the concept of archives. Whatever individuals finally externalize or publicize, according to Freud, serves as a screen for another, authentic, scene of “writing.” External signs are surface traces of texts which lie buried and forgotten, yet indelibly registered and preserved, in the interior memory, in the subconscious. In a child’s toy called “mystic writing pad” (*Der Wunderblock*),

the German-Jewish psychoanalyst finally found a mechanical model adequate to convey his concept of “memory-trace.” Children inscribe something on this multi-layered pad, lift the covering transparency and the inscription seems to disappear; yet permanent, though almost invisible, impressions or traces actually remain etched on the pad itself. This is the site of the true archive.

The apparent dichotomy between these two archival sciences, one of the inside, the other of the outside, one natural and the other artificial, one an immaterial repository of psychological memory, the other a “technical substrate” of archives is precisely what Derrida aims to deconstruct: an invisible private psyche, which psychoanalysts believe to be the source of repressed “truth,” and a materialized public deposition, which archivists similarly take for the site of “original,” “authentic” records. Derrida has previously examined the implications of Freud’s handling of the critical notions of memory, inscription, and trace, most notably in an essay called “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” In that essay and several others, and now particularly in *Archive Fever*, Derrida demonstrates that Freud’s use of the *Wunderblock* as a model for psychoanalytic memory, trace, and inscription, when juxtaposed with the concept of an archives, is problematical for the notions of inside-outside, natural-technological, original and copy. Where does the original inscription and where does the copy reside? Is the original inscription located in the writing seemingly impressed on the transparency, where direct contact with the writing instrument seems to have occurred? Or, as Freud seems to have claimed, is this first, public, impression actually a mere external trace of an original writing that remains “inside,” hidden from view underneath the transparency? Is the underpad the true archive, the repository of true memory? What is the status of the trace, the impression?

The viability of an authentic, original record inscription, then, has hinged on an authentic meaning-projecting self/being (“subjectile”), a juridico-historical matrix, a constituted “inside” making its stamp “outside.” In fact, Derrida argues, these are all traces. Neither texts buried in the interior subconscious and retrievable through psychoanalysis nor public documents stored in archives preserve authentic, immutable permanent records, that is, a foundational—provenancial—site of inscription. Freud’s merely analogical invocation of the relationship between subconscious and material inscriptions/traces provides Derrida with an opportunity to reiterate his longstanding insistence that there are nowhere and never have been any original records, any primary layers of inscriptive integrity: there are only traces leaving traces. This claim vitiates the topography of inside and outside, natural and artificial, living and dead, original and copy.

Derrida’s deconstruction of the archives-psychoanalysis difference implies something Derrida claimed in his earliest writings: that a “scene of writing” is already at work in thought and speech even before what historians describe as the invention of “writing.” This function Derrida calls “archiwriting,” or

“architrace.” Nothing, not even language and consciousness, makes its appearance as Being or Meaning outside this radically expansive and indeterminate notion of writing as the becoming time of space and the becoming space of time. All forms of expression—speech, film, thought, dance, poetry, painting, political discourse, writing, word processing, electronic mail, even athletics—is architracings. Thus, traces, which individuals leave behind—which leave them behind—permit the emergence of the evident or existent in/as history, but only as the twinkling of presence. The supposed self-sufficient constructions of history—identities and meanings—are nothing more or less than shadows, tenuous presences purchased through the endless deferral of obligations to tenebrous otherness. Under the economy of the architrace there is actually no presence, no “inside,” only difference. Though harbouring an archival or repetition compulsion, archiwriting always exceeds the legislative efforts of hermeneutic regimes to enforce closure on meanings and identities. The mutually subordinative relation of the psychoanalytic science of private memory and the technological science of public archives, then, recapitulates this perpetual endgame of inscription. A “general or interdisciplinary science of archives,” Derrida writes, would involve the “risk” of dealing simultaneously with the competing claims of these two aspiring sciences, each one constantly seeking to pre-empt (defer) the other’s authority to consign its content to the derivative status of a *sous-fonds* or subseries, to evade the other’s provenancial pretensions to order its identity and meaning. This is the undecidable fate of “writing” in general, a permanent condition which Derrida now names “archive fever.”

Those looking for immediately appropriable theoretical concepts, organizational tactics, technological strategies, or technical procedures for managing archives problems will not find this book helpful. Those who are interested in rethinking the concept of archives as a public space, as a regulative source of authority, as a strategic concept, and as a mediative technological principle, however, may find the treacherous work of reading (let alone summarizing) Derrida’s work worthwhile. Moreover, influenced to a significant degree by the recently-deceased French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida’s interest in the institutionalization of the concept of archives proceeds in part from a concern for the ethico-political implications and consequences of its deeply entrenched “archontic” principles—being, self/identity, and meaning—for such archival pretexts as accountability, history, justice, law, and responsibility.

Brien Brothman
Wrentham, Massachusetts