Afterlives of Abandoned Work: Creative Debris in the Archive. Matthew Harle. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. x, 251 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-3942-4

AMY MARSHALL FURNESS
Art Gallery of Ontario

Afterlives of Abandoned Work considers the archival remnants of a diverse array of creative endeavours that have ultimately, for various reasons, gone unrealized. From the perspective of literary studies, this is both fertile and challenging territory, and it offers readers much to consider about the nature of texts and intertextuality, the potential of the unfinished work, and the relationships between text, archive, and reader. For a reader with an archival background, the chosen case studies are complex and compelling; the book's shortcomings have to do with its author's failure to engage with the literature of archival studies or the practice of archival work.

The author, Matthew Harle, is described by his publisher as a writer and archive curator, currently engaged at the Barbican Centre as a post-doctoral research fellow. His publication history suggests that his academic background is centred on film, but he has worked with the archives of a variety of creative producers, including visual artists and theorists. The term *archive curator* can mean "archivist," but the contemporary elasticity of both curator and archive must be acknowledged. Without wanting to be rigid or exclusive about professional designations, I see little evidence in Harle's book that he has worked as

an archivist or engaged thoughtfully with archival theory.[1] This background is no reason to dismiss his ideas, but it may serve to diminish the relevance of *Afterlives* for an archival readership.

The book presents a series of case studies framed by an explication of Harle's ideas about the nature of unfinished work and its manifestation in archival collections. These case studies – of the abandoned utopian settlement of Llano Del Rio, futuristic city planning proposals for post-war London, Harold Pinter's unsuccessful efforts to adapt Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* for the screen, and Muriel Spark and B.S. Johnson's unpursued ideas for novels – represent an interesting variety of unrealized projects in a range of creative forms. Their common characteristic, according to the author's definition, is that as unfinished work, they have been left in a "rudimentary or embryonic form" (p. 6). The aim of the book is to establish the terms for critical engagement with unfinished works:

> simply that the creative act of *unmaking* and *unfinishing*, and the remains of this process, might be considered within their own formal boundaries, or at least compared with other works that resemble a similar form. As a consequence, it hopes to demonstrate that abandoned work can be freed from the normative criteria of completion. (p. 10)

In other words, Harle sets out to establish a framework for understanding unfinished works according to their own terms, rather than as works that are defined by their incompleteness. It is a tricky manoeuvre, given Harle's starting point in literary studies, and I would argue that his analysis suffers from his incomplete effort to engage thoughtfully with archives.

Harle's methodological approach is to treat each of his subjects as a text according to the terms and methods of literary studies. This approach is not new to the field of archival studies, where scholars such as Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil have done much to recognize the importance of involving the contexts and histories of archival fonds in any literary analysis, developing an interpretive framework for writers' archives that makes sense of the many

1 In fact, Harle does cite a few of Terry Cook's writings, which is a good beginning. Surprisingly, he also invokes the Dutch Manual, which he blames for what he perceives as a tendency on the part of archival institutions to suppress the evidence of unfinished work by eliminating drafts of official documents (p. 31). As a criticism of contemporary archival practice, this concern is misplaced, to say the least.

authorial roles at play.[2] Arguably, there would be additional dimensions to consider in analyzing the archives of utopian settlements or urban planning endeavours, given the social, bureaucratic, and technical facets of such complex projects. In approaching these projects as if they had the same dimensions as a literary text, Harle remains vague about important contextual aspects, such as legal and bureaucratic constraints and the physical environment. His effort to expand the idea of abandoned work beyond the literary sphere is weaker as a result.

Whether the archival records of an unfinished or abandoned work are essentially different from the records of a "finished" work is a question worth exploring, and the answer may change depending on the form or genre of work under consideration. A city, for example, is constantly evolving. Would the archival records of Llano Del Rio be different in kind if the settlement had never been built, or if it had somehow persisted and become a contemporary municipality or part thereof? The narrative of the project would be different, but the same ideals and visions would be recorded in the archives, still full of imaginary potential. Arguably, the ruins of the built and abandoned settlement are the elements that make this case intriguing.

A distinguishing characteristic of the archives of unfinished works, as Harle observes, is that the archives become the primary means of knowing about these works. In his example, the volume of material related to Pinter's Proust project represents the bulk of Pinter's archive and is almost inversely proportional to the degree of public or critical awareness of the work: "In terms of its sheer expanse and the apparent inability to locate a textual centre, the unfinished project can generate more material than most because by its very nature, without a completed text, there is a natural spread of focus into an exclusively discursive surround" (p. 129). The difference may be perceptual and subjective, however: in reviewing the online finding aid to the Pinter archives at the British Library, I did not perceive a preponderance of Proust-related material.

Harle indicates that he is not really interested in archives. He visits archives out of necessity, he writes, "because it is where the records of social and cultural projects happen to finish up, but also as a deliberate strategy to counter the critical nuisance of abandoned work that has been published by an editor or – worse – has been continued by someone else" (p. 11). This statement may

2 See, for example, Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, "Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives," *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009): 25–39.

be tongue in cheek, but it also sounds peevish. He also refers to the "tedium of archival paraphernalia, excessively long 'finding-aids' and the furtive glances of over-protective reading room staff" (p. 12), conveying an impatient and perhaps egocentric view of archival access and research – albeit one that must sometimes ring true for researchers.

Harle's attitude might have something to do with negative experiences along his own particular research journey. The records of Llano del Rio's founder, Job Harriman, have been acquired by the Huntington Library, a pre-eminent private research institution.[3] The Huntington's exclusive access policies accommodate Harle's post-doctoral research on the Llano records but make it difficult for amateur historians of the colony to access the collection as "qualified" independent researchers. The expert amateurs have amassed their own archive of the settlement, which they share with Harle in a spirit of enthusiasm and openness. Frustrated by the situation, Harle makes negative generalizations about "official" archives. However, the Huntington's policies are at odds with the principle of equitable access identified, for example, in the Society of American Archivists' Code of Ethics and are not characteristic of archival institutions as a whole.[4] It may be that the experience contributes to Harle's apparent lack of curiosity about archival ideas and methods and their effect on the object of his study.

Ultimately, I think Harle understands the importance of archives on an instinctual level. He allows that unfinished works are best experienced in their archival context, acknowledging that publishing or otherwise distributing them risks "canonization or fetishization"; in contrast, the archive allows the indeterminacy and disruptive nature of these texts to survive indefinitely (p. 202). The idea of archives existing in a persistent state of becoming is not new; it comes from Jacques Derrida by way of Verne Harris and has been absorbed into mainstream archival discourse. But it is a concept that continues to resonate – and perhaps it represents a good direction for Harle if he chooses to continue exploring the nature of archives in a future publication.

An example from the visual arts would have been an instructive addition to the book. Harle is most in his element when tackling unfinished literary works

3 The ideological contrast between the socialist utopian settlement of Llano and the opulence of Henry Huntington's estate, where the records are housed, is made more stark by the roughly contemporary origins of the two, and the irony is not lost on Harle.

4 "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," Society of American Archivists, accessed 20 March 2019, https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics.

and films, where the demarcation of "finished" status is generally clear-cut and defined by publication or distribution of the work. In a visual arts context, the finished and the unfinished are sometimes hard to differentiate: a sketch by a canonical artist may be reproduced and exhibited as a work of art according to terms related to curatorial judgment and the machinations of the art market. Harle touches on this when he quotes famous curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist on the attraction of the unfinished artwork, but he does not explore this direction in a case study.

I have a few final comments on editorial aspects of the book. It is poorly edited, with the result that some of Harle's incisive analysis is confined by opaque, convoluted sentences that are unnecessarily difficult to read. In terms of information design, the publisher's approach to image captions limits a book that aims to treat creative work in a variety of media. Images are labelled only with figure numbers, and the captions are minimally descriptive and compiled in a list of illustrations at the front of the book. The result for the reader is that the images seem to interrupt the flow of the text but are devoid of any helpful context from the author.