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Between Aura and Access: Artefactuality, Institutionality, and the Allure of the Archival

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Abstract: This article analyses narratives inspired by the institutional emergence of the literary archive. It focuses in particular on what historian Arlette Farge has described as the "allure of the archives": the elusive immediacy of encounters with artefactual remnants of the past. Key to this experience is what has often been described as the ability of archival objects to conjure up the presence of their creators – a process that at the same time paradoxically depends on the uniqueness and fundamental 'unapproachability' of the artefact. Through regulating and restricting access to documents, the archive thus maintains their distance and simultaneously makes them available for acts of reverential consumption. Focusing on such forms of gatekeeping and consecration, the article reads Henry James's novella "The Aspern Papers" (1888) and Martha Cooley's novel *The Archivist* (1998) to enquire how the literary archive – both as an idea and as an institution – has shaped ways of thinking about the relationship between physical absence and auratic presence.

Introduction

In his book *Riding with Rilke*, a blend of Kerouacian memoir and research diary, Canadian literary scholar Ted Bishop recalls how, after a day of tedious work in the British Library's manuscript reading room, he chanced upon a special object:

> I opened the next manila envelope and slid out a single sheet. […] I found myself reading a letter I had read in print dozens of times before. […] I was holding Virginia Woolf's suicide note. I lost any bodily sense, felt I was spinning into a vortex, a connection that collapsed the intervening decades. This note wasn't a record of an event – this was the event itself. (2005/2007: 34–35)

Bishop is struck by the affective immediacy of his encounter with the note, but he also recognises the impropriety of his intruding into a scene of domestic tragedy

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through handling a document of an "unbearably personal" nature (2005/2007: 35). Such reflections on the ethics of privacy are quickly cast aside, however, when he turns to contemplate the power of material objects to resuscitate the past. Dealt something of a physical blow (an "archival jolt"), Bishop begins to look upon archival work no longer as monotonous drudgery, but as a way of arriving at an "assurance that we have connected with something real" (2005/2007: 36). More than the historical fact of Woolf's suicide, what strikes him is its physical evidence in the form of the handwritten message, which – written before and read after the event – effaces the boundary between reality and representation. The potential of epiphanic experience thus resides not in the knowledge of content (the actual text of the note, "read in print dozens of times before"), but in the unmediated sensory contact with its concrete materiality.

The occasion that Bishop describes illustrates well what French historian Arlette Farge has called the "allure of the archives" (1989/2013): the elusive immediacy of encounters with artefactual remnants of the past. Key to this experience is the ability of archival objects to conjure up the presence of their creators: It is handling the actual sheet rather than consulting a printed version of the note that allows Bishop to come into touch with Woolf through her archival traces. This process of presentification at the same time paradoxically depends on the uniqueness and fundamental unavailability of archival matter. After all, Bishop comes across the note by accident, and his further access to it is subject to institutional supervision. As an auratic object, the literary artefact remains "essentially distant" (Benjamin 1936/1969: 243), however close it may be physically. Through regulating and restricting access to documents, the archive maintains their numinous distance and simultaneously makes them available for acts of philological, affective, and reverential consumption.

In what follows, I will illustrate this larger argument with the help of two texts, Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" (1888) and Martha Cooley's *The Archivist* (1998). James's novella is set in a pre-archival era in which posthumous papers are still largely in the hands of private entities (individuals rather than institutions). They figure as literary (and literal) relics whose appeal is inversely proportional to their availability: The eponymous papers become auratic – to James's protagonist as well as to his readers – precisely because they never surface in the text itself, neither as material nor as textual objects. Covering a similar tension between visibility and absence, Cooley's novel deals more directly with the institutional framework of the modern literary archive – choosing as one of its key themes the moral qualms of a professional archivist who illicitly pries into a collection of T.S. Eliot letters it is his task to protect from the curious gaze of the scholarly public. Reading these two texts side by side, I will compare different ways of describing the relationship between archival objects and the individuals

that handle them. Concerned with characters at once enthralled by literary manuscripts and haunted by the possibility of their destruction, both James and Cooley point toward the tension between aura and access that is at the heart of the allure of the archival – and that has remained one of its persistent features throughout the transition from private collections to public institutions.

Archive, Aura, Access

Before turning to these fictional meditations on archival matter, it is worth looking in more general terms at the archive as an institution and the archival artefact as a material and symbolic object. As Marlene Manoff observed fifteen years ago, the term 'archive' "has become a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts" (2004: 10). This semantic diversification was the legacy most directly of poststructuralist theories of language and history, which assigned special importance to the interrogation of the relationship between archives, memory, and representation. This entailed a turn away from the traditional notion of archives as physical repositories of raw historical data and toward an understanding of the 'archive' as a significantly more capacious concept no longer restricted to the literal meaning of the term. In a 1994 lecture on "Archive Fever", Jacques Derrida noted that "[n]othing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'" (1995: 57). The irony, of course, was that Derrida's own highly metaphorical use of the term (his main focus in "Archive Fever" is the history of psychoanalysis) and the wide reception of his text crucially contributed to such conceptual uncertainty. Michel Foucault had similarly broadened the term before Derrida. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), he developed an understanding of the archive concept that was mainly defined through the negation of more conventional ideas. Using the term 'archive', Foucault explains, he means neither "the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity; nor [...] the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation" (1969/1972: 128–129). To him, the archive instead is something infinitely larger than a storehouse of documents: "It is *the general system of the formation and the transformation of statements*" (1969/1972: 130; original emphasis). Such a comprehensive approach for Foucault requires the development of an 'archaeological' method that, like his notion of the archive, is profoundly non-material, aiming "to dispense with 'things'" and "[t]o 'depresentify' them" (1969/1972: 48).

Such ambitious extensions of the term 'archive' have not gone unchallenged. British historian Carolyn Steedman (2001/2002: 1–16), for example, has re-

sponded with a staunchly non-metaphorical understanding of the word that takes into view precisely those institutions that Derrida and Foucault explicitly exclude from their definitions. Where Foucault had argued for a reorientation from things to discourses, what Steedman emphasises is precisely the thingliness – what she calls the "dust" – of the historical record. Where Derrida's allusive associationism discovers ever new shades of meaning in the term, Steedman highlights "the *ordinariness*, the unremarkable nature of archives", and the intellectual and physical labour required to make them speak (2001/2002: 9; original emphasis). While this critique helpfully gestures toward the actualities of the archive (matter and institutions), Steedman's emphasis on the quotidian quality of the archival fails to account for descriptions of the "archival jolt" one encounters in Bishop and elsewhere. To make sense of these, it may be more useful to consider British poet (and librarian) Philip Larkin's distinction between different reasons for the importance of archival material. Larkin describes "the meaningful value" of literary manuscripts (their ability "to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer's life and work"), but also their "magical value", an energy that revolves around the immediacy of touch and the presence of their creators ("this is the paper he wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination") (1979/1983: 99). Larkin's idea of the latter also informs Farge's description of the "allure of the archives" – an attraction that rests not on their "ordinariness", but on the extraordinary power of "the found object" to grant "the privilege of 'touching the real'" (1989/2013: 11). Physical presence and sensory contact – "the tactile and direct approach to the material, the feel of touching traces of the past" – to Farge is a crucial component of this kind of power; it is what turns the archival artefact into "a living document" (1989/2013: 15). Behind this vitalization of dead matter is a belief in the ability of objects to conjure up the past. Phenomenological accounts like Farge's or Larkin's testify to the survival of an animistic view of materiality in a modern age more commonly seen as dominated by secularist impulses. Fostered by the formation of modern institutions (the autograph and rare books market, the archive, the museum, the library), the aura of the archival at the same time hearkens back to what philosopher Charles Taylor has described as an essentially pre-modern "enchanted world" – a mental universe in which specific selected "objects" were identified as symbolically significant "loci of spiritual power" (2007: 32).

Such mechanisms of enchantment are also at the core of Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' of the work of art (to which I have already alluded above), only that for him it provides a way of speaking about a modernity that witnesses a diminution of auratic power. Whether that of an artwork or that of a literary manuscript, the "aura" of an object appears "as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (1936/1969: 222). If to Benjamin this idea of the

importance of the "[u]napproachability" (1936/1969: 243) of the auratic object primarily refers to its symbolic qualities (it is its metaphysical meaning that remains impossible to grasp), there is also a more literal sense in which the work of art or the archival artefact hover between proximity and distance. In the institutional settings in which viewers (or users) encounter them as "charged objects" (Taylor 2007: 39), they are both put on display and systematically removed from direct contact (the presence of the museum guard, the impenetrability of the display case, the crackling touch of protective wrappers). The archive, as Max Saunders has pointed out, is a space that mediates between access and denials of access:

> It is not only that one needs specialized knowledge to get into the archive. Even when one is inside, a whole series of barriers and controls are placed between the archived object and the person trying to access it: closed stacks, special boxes trussed up with twine, librarians, curators, conservationists, microfilmed copies, supervision, special book-rests and gloves and the like. (2011: 169)

Unapproachability is an impression created by such physical barriers, but it also results from the material absence of archival documents either lost or dispersed. Steedman has described this experience of the archive's inability to capture and preserve everything as "the archival sublime" – an idea of that which will never become graspable, which "cannot be found, for it was never there in the first place" (2011: 333, 340). The yearning to relate to it – what Derrida calls "archive fever" and what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in a different context, has termed "the desire for presence" (2004: 124) – is nevertheless real, depending as it does on the distance and potential irrecoverability of that which is being desired. As in the case of pre-modern cult objects, the enchantment with the "living document" stems from such moments of singularity and unavailability – at the same time that the artefact itself contains within itself the promise of the "*presentification* of the past", or "the possibility of 'speaking' to the dead or 'touching' the objects of their worlds" (Gumbrecht 2004: 123). It is this potential that Larkin describes as the "magical value" of literary remains and that Bishop experienced at first hand in the British Library. It takes centre stage as well in the two texts to which I now turn – texts that are crucially concerned with questions of access and its limitations as well as with the archival artefact as a medium for retrieving the past.

The "Esoteric Knowledge" of Artefactuality

What Gumbrecht calls "the desire for presence" surfaces at a key point in James's 1908 "Preface" to "The Aspern Papers", in which he speaks of a past that can be reactivated, "a palpable imaginable *visitable* past" that relates to "a world we may

reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our table" (1908/1984: 1177; original emphasis). Likening the past to a tangible material artefact, James goes on to explain that in the novella he aimed at "the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone" but nevertheless still rife with "the precious element of closeness" (1908/1984: 1177). This "poetry of the thing" – capturing what is "lost" through a sense of physical proximity – is precisely the aura of the object that opens up the possibility of an immediate contact with the past. "The Aspern Papers" is an extended meditation on the psychological and phenomenological effects of such "charged objects" on the people on whom they act. In the novella, an unnamed literary editor tells the story of his attempt to recover intimate letters written by his idol, the fictional American poet Jeffrey Aspern, which he (the narrator) assumes are in the possession of his former mistress Juliana Bordereau, now an aged spinster living with her niece Tita in a dilapidated Venetian *palazzo*.[1] The narrator becomes an incognito lodger with the two women and acquaints himself with them, going so far as to court the niece to gain access to the hallowed papers. But even though he comes progressively closer to them as the story unfolds, not even Juliana's eventual death allows him to lay his hands on them.

"The Aspern Papers" has often been read against the background of a Derridean notion of the archive.[2] My focus here is on the actual – rather than the metaphorical – reality of the eponymous papers and on the ways in which it affects the characters in the story. A leitmotiv that resurfaces throughout the novella is the narrator's obsession with the living touch, with the idea of being able to get in contact with Aspern through those with whom he himself had once interacted. Reflecting on his previous Aspern-related research, undertaken in collaboration with his "fellow-worshipper" John Cumnor (James 1888/1999: 230),[3] the narrator juxtaposes the heuristic value of documents with that of contemporary eye-witnesses: Where the former are nothing but "phantoms and dust, the mere echoes of echoes", the latter figure as "living source[s] of information that had lingered on into our time" (1888/1999: 231). James thus at least initially suggests that objects

1 On the non-fictional background of James's characters and plot (Lord Byron, his former mistress Claire Clairmont, the Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley letters in her possession, and the American devotee Captain Silsbee's quest to retrieve them), see Edel (1963: 155–157); James (1987: 33–34). For his narrative, James altered the names, transferred the setting from Florence to Venice, and turned Byron/Shelley into the American Aspern.

2 See, for example, Savoy 2010; Tsimpouki 2018.

3 Quotations from "The Aspern Papers" are from the text of the first English book edition, published in 1888 (James introduced several textual changes upon republishing the story as part of the New York Edition of his writings in 1908, for which he also wrote the "Preface" from which I quote above). On the genesis, publication, and subsequent revisions of the text, see Brown (1991).

are dead matter that fails to afford a connection with "the thing outlived and lost and gone". People, by contrast, appear as in closer communication with the past, and it is them whom the narrator-protagonist accordingly seeks to approach, driven by a longing for contact that only increases during his first personal interview with Juliana Bordereau:

> [A]s the door of the room closed behind me I was really face to face with the Juliana of some of Aspern's most exquisite and most renowned lyrics. I grew used to her afterward, though never completely; but as she sat there before me my heart beat as fast as if the miracle of resurrection had taken place for my benefit. Her presence seemed somehow to contain his, and I felt nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever had been before [...]. (1888/1999: 241)

What seems to be a successful revival of the past turns out to go not nearly far enough for the narrator. Although he describes himself as the overawed witness of a "resurrection", he is in fact a doubting Thomas whose faith relies on the evidence of the sensory touch. Merely looking at Juliana is soon no longer sufficient; he quickly begins to feel "an irresistible desire to hold [...] the hand that Jeffrey Aspern had pressed" (1888/1999: 246).

The moment of sublime contact with the object of the narrator's desire is at the same time accompanied by an awareness of Juliana's corporeal decay, which betokens her diminishing ability to function as a viable medium for communicating with the past. Where upon first laying eyes on her the narrator feels that she effects Aspern's return from the dead, in the further course of the meeting she begins to transform into a gothic revenant: "a terrible relic", "too strange, too literally resurgent" (1888/1999: 241). James at this point makes clear that his use of the word 'relic' – a key term throughout the novella – blurs the boundary between the figurative and the literal. Envisioning Juliana as a relic implies that she already is among the dead, a shift in the narrator's perception that entails a collapse of his prior distinction between mute inanimate matter and bodies as "living source".[4] Regarded as a relic, Juliana herself becomes an archival object. But even as the narrator comes closer to her over the course of their first encounter, she remains fundamentally illegible, removed from his immediate grasp. "[W]e were not really face to face", he admits, "inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible

4 There is a larger tendency in James's work to deconstruct this dichotomy. As Bill Brown suggests, James's fictions create "an object culture" that dispenses with "distinguishing between the animate and inanimate, subject and object, the human and non-human" (2008: 293). Reading "The Aspern Papers" from a similar perspective, Thomas J. Otten has noted how, in the text, "acts of touching (or reading) bodies and reading (or touching) papers [...] come to be confused with each other" (2006: 94).

green shade which, for her, served almost as a mask" (1888/1999: 241). Behind this "mask", the narrator imagines "a ghastly death's-head lurking", "[t]he divine Juliana as a grinning skull" (1888/1999: 241–242). But although in the context of this Jacobean vision the old woman quite literally becomes a relic, she ultimately features as a mere corpse – a fleeting physical shell rather than a miraculously 'incorrupt' saintly body insusceptible to material decomposition. Since Juliana, as a secular relic, fails to offer a reliable way of establishing contact with Aspern, the narrator increasingly comes to concentrate on the papers as the more abiding material evidence of the past.

Human remains in many religious traditions are not the only category of artefacts that qualify as relics. In the Christian context, as Robert Wiśniewski explains, "the word *reliquiae* covered an entire spectrum of objects, from entire bodies to ashes, to strips of cloth which touched the tombs of saints" (2019: 3). Using the religious term and applying it to profane literary bodies and objects, James explores the full semantic range of the metaphor to provide an account of the "magical value" that the narrator ascribes to Aspern's manuscripts.[5] The link between Juliana as a living and the papers as a material relic is established when the narrator fantasises that "she read Aspern's letters over every night or at least pressed them to her withered lips" (1888/1999: 249). The image alludes to the practice of kissing relics, a physical expression of veneration that has existed since the early days of Christianity (Penn 2005: 78–79). James at a later point in the story reveals that Juliana is in fact a Catholic, but he here already hints at her denominational identity. Envisioning such a ritual of devotion externalises the narrator's own physical attachment to the objects of his desire. With Juliana transformed from idol to worshipper herself, the papers take the place of the relic. The narrator desperately seeks to possess himself of the documents, but his desire is only heightened by their persistent unapproachability. The physical contact he craves has transformed into potential mediums those who *have* been granted the privilege: Juliana is privy to the "esoteric knowledge" that resides in the papers, and some of this secret intelligence "had rubbed off on" her niece as well (James 1888/1999: 255). James's phrase is again reminiscent of the relic phenomenon, in this case the mechanism by which contact relics are created. The image once more diminishes the distance between bodies and things: Through their handling of the papers, Juliana and Tita have themselves been turned into objects handled by Aspern.

5 Edwin Sill Fussell has described this as James's predilection for "[s]acred seculars or secular sacreds", his tendency to "refe[r] to ordinary, diurnal, worldly, secular objects, events, emotions, [and] behaviors […] in the language of religious belief and practice" (1993: 37).

As the plot progresses, Juliana's health gradually deteriorates, which leaves the narrator worrying that she may destroy the papers before dying. Driven by an overpowering "desire" to get "nearer to the tormenting treasure" (James 1888/1999: 301, 302), he clandestinely enters her room – a violation that does not long remain undetected. In the climactic moment of the story, he is confronted by a ghostly Juliana, who denounces him as a "publishing scoundrel" before collapsing to the floor (1888/1999: 303). The narrator leaves Venice and on his return a fortnight later learns that she has indeed died in the meantime. Tita Bordereau confesses that she has inherited the papers and effectively offers them to the narrator in exchange for him marrying her – a proposal that leads him to realise that this proposed bargain "was the price" he would have to pay in order to be able to consummate his imaginary union with Aspern through his material remains (1888/1999: 315). The narrator initially had a different kind of transaction in mind, aiming to bribe Juliana into selling the papers. Contrasting the ritual and affective value of the manuscripts with their exchange value as commodities, James returns to the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Like relics, literary papers after all do not just have a "magical" or auratic value, but also a more tangibly economic one.[6] Although in his campaign to acquire the venerated papers the narrator himself resorts to the logic of the market, he is repeatedly appalled by what he perceives as a striking discrepancy between Juliana and Tita's custodianship of the sacred objects and their commercial mindset. "[I]t had begun to act on my nerves", he complains, "that with these women so associated with Aspern the pecuniary question should constantly come back" (1888/1999: 249). It is only later in the story that he acknowledges that it was his own lack of economic disinterestedness that had occasioned Juliana's mercantile turn. He "had descended on her one day and taught her to calculate", and she, in turn, "[l]ike all persons who achieve the miracle of changing their point of view when they are old", "had been intensely converted" (1888/1999: 284).

If James here once again employs religious language to speak about secular transactions, he elsewhere inverted the relationship between these two spheres when thinking of actual relics in terms of an actual economy. Fifteen years before "The Aspern Papers" was first published, James had written about his first-hand experience of relic worship during a sojourn in Italy. In Milan Cathedral, he had witnessed an "exhibition" of the remains of Charles Borromeo, whose "shrivelled mortality" could be seen "unveiled", James remembered with a note of sarcasm, "for the modest sum of five francs" (1872: 333):

6 See Geary on the medieval trade in and circulation of relics as a "sacred prestige commodity" (1986: 187).

> The performance in question was impressive, certainly, but as great grotesqueness is impressive. The little sacristan, having secured his audience, whipped on a white tunic over his frock, lighted a couple of extra candles, and proceeded to remove from above the altar, by means of a crank, a sort of sliding shutter, just as you may see a shop-boy do of a morning at his master's window. (1872: 333)

The religious and the theatrical, the sacred and the profane, are closely intertwined here, with James further intensifying the contrast in his subsequent description of the corporeal relic itself:

> The black, mummified corpse of the saint is stretched out in a glass coffin, clad in his mouldering canonicals, mitred, crosiered, and gloved, and glittering with votive jewels. It is an extraordinary mixture of death and life; the desiccated clay, the ashen rags, the hideous little black mask and skull, and the living, glowing, twinkling splendor of diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires. (1872: 333)

To the younger James, this moment of revelation is ultimately little more than a "sublimely ridiculous" (1872: 333) instance of bathos: The sacristan – the archivist of the bones – merely features as a "shop-boy", the sacred relic – reduced to its bare empirics – is nothing but a "mummified corpse". James himself figures in this episode as the self-consciously critical Protestant bystander who sees only the material (physical decay) where believers perceive the symbolic (saintly presence).[7] The 1872 account is reminiscent of the scene in "The Aspern Papers" in which Juliana Bordereau appears to the narrator as a skull, only that in the later text this leads to a replacement of her as a corporeal relic with the papers as contact relics. Where the travel sketch is dominated by a detached satirical tone, in the novella James approaches the phenomenology of relic worship in a more complex fashion (albeit in a *prima facie* secular context). If his scepticism remains to the extent that James exposes the narrator as a character both naively credulous and economically duplicitous, he also provides a more richly ambiguous account of the psychological effect the papers produce on his protagonist.

The final transaction hinted at in the novella – the narrator's potential access to the Aspern relics at the cost of his marriage to Juliana Bordereau's niece – not only mixes the sacred and the profane, it also conflates the realms of the professional and the private. Tita's offer illustrates that the narrator's investment in the

7 For a more general context to James's passage, see Jenny Franchot's discussion of how Roman Catholicism appeared to antebellum Protestant tourists in Italy, to whom "[t]he Catholic past and present, graphically displayed in bone reliquaries and sarcophagi, loomed as an uncanny challenge to Protestantism's anticorporeal aspirations" (1994: 23). The irony of the contrast between these two worldviews is increased in James's travel sketch by the fact that the relics in question are those of Borromeo, a key figure of the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

papers has effectively been an intimate rather than a public affair. Although he repeatedly describes himself through reference to his status as Aspern's literary biographer and editor, this professional self-characterisation is undercut by the fact that he is essentially acting as an amateur devotee attempting to get access to literary manuscripts kept in private hands. Where in the case of Borromeo's tomb James as a curious tourist could rely on a gatekeeping professional (the sacristan) and a clearly-defined condition for access (the "five francs" he readily pays to witness the unveiling of the shrine), in "The Aspern Papers" the narrator's desire for intimate knowledge and somatic contact is continuously denied by the absence of the kind of institutional protocol whose presence James both critiqued and implicitly admired in the Catholic Church's management of relics. Unable to appeal to established archival procedures to argue for access to Aspern's literary remains, the protagonist himself is caught in an intermediary position half-way between professional concern and private desire. The sincerity of his solemn invocation of "the responsibilities of an editor" (James 1888/1999: 232) is repeatedly called into question over the course of the narrative, as the imperative of extending knowledge collides with the ethics of respect for privacy.[8] If the narrator, characterised more by personal curiosity than by scholarly disinterestedness, represents the frustrated reader from whom this "esoteric knowledge" is constantly withheld, Juliana functions as the archivist who sternly regulates access to the papers, "patrol[ling] the line between the past and the appropriative designs of the present" (Rawlings 2005: 19).

After Juliana's death, her niece takes over the role of determining the conditions under which the narrator may reduce his distance from the objects of his desire. Ironically enough, it is precisely at the moment at which he receives the ultimate confirmation of the existence of the papers and is offered a direct path toward access that he becomes disillusioned with them. The gendered custodianship of the papers here becomes a crucial element of the narrative's institutional setup. It allows James to explore the complex affective economies of the archival encounter through conflating the narrator's quasi-homoerotic desire for Aspern's epistolary remains with his aversion for their female gatekeepers. Tita's marriage proposal leads to an abrupt shift in valuation that affects both the symbolic and the material status of the papers. In the wake of this climactic moment of disenchantment, the documents are suddenly reduced to their mere thingliness: The transcendental "sacred relics" that open up the possibility of immediate access to

8 On James's stance on the publication of intimate correspondence and on the politics of literary biography (his own included), see Hamilton (1992: 209–221); Stougaard-Nielsen (2012); Anesko (2016).

the dead Aspern suddenly shrink into what as artefacts they materially are, "a bundle of tattered papers", "crumpled scraps" on which the narrator realises he has "already spent more money than [he] could afford" (James 1888/1999: 316, 317). James's language here swings back to the profane; the sacred economy of the papers becomes replaced by its secular counterpart. Rather than presenting the moral of a protagonist purged of his previous superstitions, however, James decides to complicate matters further by having the narrator lapse once again into his old obsession. The devaluation of the papers turns out to be the result merely of a temporary change of mind. The narrator is soon driven again by "a passionate appreciation of Miss Bordereau's papers", which to him are "now more precious than ever" (1888/1999: 319). Motivated by a new "ferocity" in his "desire to possess them" (1888/1999: 319), he returns to Tita to declare his assent to the condition she has pronounced – only to learn that he has come too late. Adhering to her aunt's deathbed injunction, Tita has burned the papers the previous night, removing them permanently from the narrator's grasp. This, however, does not so much destroy their aura as intensify his infatuation with them. As incinerated matter they have reached the status of ultimate unapproachability, haunting the protagonist with a sense of the "archival sublime" even beyond the confines of the narrative he tells.

Gatekeeping and Archival Institutionality

Questions of availability and access are also at the heart of Martha Cooley's *The Archivist*, another narrative about literary papers and the practices of curation and consumption they engender. The novel, mainly set in the mid-1980s, centres on its protagonist and first-person narrator Matthias Lane, archivist in the special collections department of an unnamed American research university. Where James writes about the remains of the fictitious Aspern, Cooley constructs her narrative around a collection of unpublished letters by T.S. Eliot. Like James's, however, her text takes its cue from actual historical documents. The letters in question – more than a thousand of them, written by Eliot to his one-time intimate friend Emily Hale during and after his estrangement from his first wife – are kept at Princeton University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, where – as in Cooley's novel – they were removed from public view until January 2020, in accordance with a fifty-year embargo after Hale's death (she donated them, against Eliot's wishes, in 1956) ("T. S. Eliot Letters to Emily Hale, 1930–1956: Finding Aid" 2008). Both in "The Aspern Papers" and in the historical events on which *The Archivist* is in part based, female figures regulate access to male writers' intimate – and potentially compromising – correspondence.

Although Hale decided to make Eliot's papers available where Juliana Bordereau jealously guards her treasure as a private possession, questions of privacy and legitimate access are at the centre of both texts.

The crucial difference between the two narratives is that James's novella revolves around an amateur devotee in search of literary manuscripts in the hands of a private owner, whereas Cooley's novel, a century later, is set against the background of the modern literary archive – an institutional environment that had emerged over the course of the twentieth century in the context of the professionalisation and academisation of literary studies, but also as the more immediate result of an increasing recognition of the need to collect and preserve literary manuscripts and other ephemeral artefacts in a systematic fashion so as to facilitate philological and biographical research.[9] A professionally trained rather than a lay archivist, Cooley's Matthias Lane is prone to reflect on the implications of his identity as the "keeper of countless objects of desire" (Cooley 1998/1999: 5). His main task is the implementation of a firmly defined set of rules: "Now and then some unscrupulous researcher will ask for a 'quick look' at items that remain under lock and key until a specified date. [...] With such researchers I assume a weary, antagonized look as I explain that certain bequests arrive with clear restrictions on accessibility. Violating those limits is a form of grave-robbing" (1998/1999: 6–7). Where to James's narrator the experience of Juliana's presence makes him the witness of "the miracle of resurrection", in Lane's image it is the literary manuscripts themselves that are lifted from the earth. "The Aspern Papers" is concerned with the spectre of "grave-robbing" as well, but with James the image assumes a more literal form, with Juliana worrying that the narrator, assuming that she will have the papers buried with herself, might go to the extreme of "violating" her "tomb" to recover them (James 1888/1999: 314). To Lane – if not to James's narrator – the ethical requirements of his profession seem clear; his honour code as an archivist indicates the limits of permissible action. Where Juliana removes Aspern's papers from the narrator's access to protect her own privacy from invasion, with Lane there is a more detached rationale behind the imperative of protection. He is the custodian of "objects of desire", but the desire in question is not his, but that of curious readers imploring him to reveal artefacts otherwise hidden from view. Lane eloquently reflects on his role as a preserver of distance:

> As an archivist I have power over other people. I control access to materials they desire. Of course this power has limits. I can't arbitrarily bar from the library someone who is entitled

9 On the intellectual and institutional (pre-)history of the literary archive, see Schöttker (2016) and Lütteken (2018).

> to use it, nor can I prevent materials from entering the collection simply because I don't like their authors or content. Libraries have rules, which librarians follow so that readers can find what they seek. A good archivist serves the reader best by maintaining, throughout the search, a balance between empathy and distance. It is important, I've discovered, to be neither too close to nor too distant from a reader's desire. (Cooley 1998/1999: 246)

Reconstructing the etymology of the word 'archive', Derrida has written in similar terms about the role and function of the archivist. The term, he explains, derives "from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (1995: 9). These "archons" – the ancestors of modern-day archivists like Lane – were "first of all the documents' guardians" (1995: 10). The occupational identity that Lane himself describes in the above passage is thus based on a dialectical tension between access and restriction that has characterised the institution of the archive from the very beginning. Negotiating between these two conflicting demands is "the prerogative [...] of a coterie of privileged insiders" (Voss and Werner 1999: i). Belonging to this elite, Lane is acutely aware both of the privileges and of the obligations that such membership entails.

In the novel, his professional ethics is put to the test with the appearance of Roberta Spire, an inquisitive graduate student in the university's creative writing programme who tangibly demonstrates an individual "reader's desire" for access. Fascinated by the Hale bequest, she strikes up a friendship with Lane in the hope of being able to circumvent the restrictions placed on the collection. Where "The Aspern Papers" portraits a male enthusiast courting a female gatekeeper figure, Cooley presents the exact obverse of this dynamic. Just like James's narrator-protagonist, Spire wants to pry into the secrets of the absent literary papers; just like him, she craves physical proximity to them. If in James the concealment of proto-archival matter figures as the result of a longing for privacy and domesticity that is consistently coded as female, in Cooley's novel restricted access conversely emerges as the male protagonist's professionally justified frustration of female curiosity. When Spire eventually does come closer to the Hale correspondence, it is almost by chance. The library board has decided to launch an outreach scheme designed to attract graduate students to library and archival work, and Spire, in the context of this initiative, gets entrusted with ordering and inventorying the envelopes of the Eliot letters. In the scene in which she is seen immersed in this task, Cooley offers a powerful image of the absence of their actual content: "Massed on the table", Lane observes, "the envelopes made a curious impression: each was empty, but collectively they represented several volumes of letters" (1998/1999: 256). In both James and Cooley, characters as well as readers experience successive moments of suspense and deferral, revelation and concealment. The envelopes of the Eliot letters – like the chests and drawers in which James's

narrator conjectures the Aspern papers lie hidden – are symbols of the unavailability of that which they enclose.

To Lane, the Eliot correspondence itself has in fact been accessible, but only in his capacity as a professional archivist. Aware of the existence of the bequest and worrying about its non-accessioned state, he took on the task of cataloguing the letters directly after assuming his post in the mid-1960s:

> [T]he correspondence had arrived at the library [...] in five identical grey cardboard boxes tightly bound with white string. My predecessor – by all accounts a highly disorganized man – evidently failed to decide what to do with this gift from Miss Hale. He simply dumped the lot into one large carton, where they lay jumbled for eight years. (Cooley 1998/1999: 16–17)

When Lane started working on the bequest, the collection was "completely disorganized"; "the airmail correspondence, written on pale blue onionskin, [...] wadded in a corner of the box" (1998/1999: 268). Restoring order and salvaging documents from damage and potential destruction, Lane legitimates his intervention through recourse to an ethics of archival care. Similar concerns of professional safeguarding are raised in James's novella, especially when the narrator points toward the disparity between the sacredness of Aspern's papers and the inadequacy of the receptacles that contain them. At a late point in the story, he learns that the literary artefacts had been stored in Juliana Bordereau's room, in "a small, low trunk", "a queer, superannuated coffer" from which "the colour" had been "much rubbed off" (James 1888/1999: 295). Shortly before her death, Juliana had removed the papers from this box to store them in a place at once safer and more intimate: "in her bed", "[b]etween the mattresses" (1888/1999: 310). The supreme symbol of the one-time physical union between Juliana and Aspern, from a conservationist point of view this choice appears as the supreme sacrilege. The narrator had long feared that the papers were hidden in some such dangerous place. While from his point of view they should be kept in "massive cabinets" or "chests with iron bands", he assumes that Juliana "had consigned her relics to her bedroom, to some battered box that was shoved under the bed, to the drawer of some lame dressing-table" (1888/1999: 291).

If "The Aspern Papers" is a story about literary manuscripts treated as relics, it is also a detective fiction about the discovery of their potential reliquaries. As Cynthia Hahn has pointed out, relics are often imagined to operate "through a sort of contagion" that diffuses their "divine qualities through touch [and] through sight" (2017: 13). The reliquary works "to control such contagion by initiating a teasing game of hide-and-seek" (2017: 13) – through intimating the presence of the relic while at the same time protecting it from damaging forms of profane consumption. Like Lane, James's narrator wants to transfer the paper relics to a safe environment in which they are valued and preserved in accordance

with their historical significance and affective energy. Horrified by the idea that Aspern's papers "languished behind the peevish little lock" of a "rickety [...] tall old secretary", he is at the same time thrilled that there might be nothing more than "a simple panel" that stands between him and "the goal of [his] hopes" (James 1888/1999: 292). In James's narrator-protagonist – as in Lane – there is an impulse to protect the treasured archival artefacts from the risk of profanation, theft, or destruction. Upon cataloguing the Eliot letters, Lane arranges for the material to be deposited in safe storage cabinets. Toward the end of the novel, he decides to remove the items even further from potential circulation, proposing "to change the locks on all the cabinets containing sequestered materials, and to prohibit access to them – even by librarians – until they bec[o]me available to the public" (Cooley 1998/1999: 324). Explaining in detail how he treats the Eliot letters with the custodial care that his professional logic demands, Lane describes one of the key arguments behind the legitimation of the modern archive – the idea that the imperative to preserve fragile documents justifies taking them out of private hands and depositing them in an institutional environment that provides the conditions necessary for their material survival.

The supreme irony in Cooley's case is that Lane, for all his vaunted professionalism, has in fact read the letters. Cataloguing the collection required him to peek at "[d]ates, salutations, and closings" – morsels of knowledge sufficiently captivating for him to cast aside all of his "inhibitions (so sturdy after years of maintaining an ethic which seemed utterly natural, and which I never dreamed I'd violate!)" (1998/1999: 269). Unlike in "The Aspern Papers", in *The Archivist* there is thus a taste of the "esoteric knowledge" the forbidden papers contain, though only for the narrator and not for the reader, as Lane does not impart any information about the content of the letters other than that it is of a private nature. But there is yet another, even greater transgression twenty years later, one that takes place in the novel's present tense: To the sin of illicit knowledge Lane ultimately adds the sacrilege of destruction. His final initiative to remove the correspondence permanently from public view – the new locks he orders for the cabinets – only serves as a cover-up for an act of desecration: his burning of the letters. Justifying his decision, Lane paradoxically emphasises the very ethics of privacy he himself had violated when reading the correspondence:

> An archivist serves the reader's desire. Yet what of the writer's – is it of no consequence?
>
> After reading T. S. Eliot's letters to Emily Hale, I found myself reflecting long and hard on this question. My own training, of course, had taught me to privilege the reader's curiosity over all other considerations. Wasn't the writer's hunger for privacy always less compelling than the reader's appetite – voracious, insatiable – for more words? Eliot is already dead, I reminded myself. And by the time the bequest is opened, everyone who'd ever been close to him will also be dead. So whom could the letters possibly hurt? (1998/1999: 322)

Lane fails to be convinced by such arguments, however, and instead draws a firm distinction between literary works and private documents. The only thing that he decides neither to read nor to destroy are half a dozen manuscript poems by Eliot contained in the correspondence – which, as far as Lane is concerned, is "all that mattered" (1998/1999: 323) in the whole collection. Lane's professional "training" here is not only indicative of post-war archival methodology but also displays traces of early- to mid-century literary theoretical debates. In its implicit advocacy of close-reading and its championing of the immanence of textual meaning, his immolation of Eliot's private correspondence provides a material expression – an "objective correlative" – for the New Criticism's rejection of a nineteenth-century fixation on authorial biography, the critical paradigm embodied by James's narrator.

Although throughout the novel Lane highlights his detached professionalism and describes even his destruction of the letters as motivated by an ethical imperative, he is ultimately as much driven by personal motives as James's protagonist is in seeking the papers and as Juliana is in withholding them from circulation. The difference is that Lane's position as an archivist allows him to satisfy his desire for knowledge and physical proximity. But burning the letters to him is also a private act of expiation. Like Eliot's first wife Vivienne Haigh-Wood, Lane's wife was committed to an asylum and spent her final years confined, like Eliot's letters, in an institutional environment that screened her from the outside world. For twenty years after her death, Lane had failed to destroy the intimate journal that his wife had kept during her life in seclusion and which in her suicide note she mandated should be kept away from him. His burning of Eliot's letters thus represents a surrogate *auto-da-fé*. If in his initial self-characterization as a conscientious professional Lane appears as the "perfect stereotype image of an archivist" (Wolff 2018: 129), his twin transgressions – textual knowledge and material obliteration – complicate this impression. Ultimately, however, his destruction of the correspondence sees him again "acting as a gatekeeper, controlling access to a collection" (Schmuland 1999: 42), faithful to his role as *archon*.

Conclusion

Both Cooley's novel and James's novella conclude with climactic moments of document burning – ritual acts of incineration that are committed with utmost devotion. Tita Bordereau confesses that she has "destroyed the papers [...] one by one" (James 1888/1999: 320), and Lane burns the thousand or so items of the Eliot correspondence "in very small batches – just a few letters at a time" (Cooley 1998/

1999: 323). As archivist figures, Juliana, Tita, and Lane feature as custodians of the literary past whose prioritisation of privacy ultimately drives them into the destruction rather than the preservation of the artefacts in their care. Their ceremonial cremations of the respective manuscripts put a final barrier between the texts' inquisitive reader figures and their attempts at resurrecting the past through acts of "grave-robbing". If through their final destruction the documents at the centre of both texts – the objects of desire that motivate the characters in them – are permanently removed from access, this in turn ultimately increases their allure. What drives both narratives is the absence of the archival artefacts and the simultaneous fascination with conjuring up their presence through acts of imagination that recover – in James's words – if not itself "the thing outlived and lost and gone", then at least its "poetry".

Given these similarities, the difference between James's private late-nineteenth-century archival economy and the institutional setting of Cooley's novel (and of Bishop's memoir, for that matter) is not as pronounced as one might assume. The comparison does not, at any rate, suggest a clear trajectory from lay to professional or from private to institutional ownership of literary manuscripts. Although in James there is perhaps a stronger sense of the "cult value" (Benjamin 1936/1969: 243) of the papers – and a more consistently applied language of religious metaphor –, both texts illustrate an understanding of literary artefacts as objects that grant insight into the past and whose auratic power derives in large part from the interplay between the experience of their proximity and distance. The persistence of the kind of fascination that both texts describe points toward a connection between the profane and the sacred – between secular forms of curation and historical interpretation, on the one hand, and quasi-religious practices of reverence and consumption, on the other. Whether in the case of the epistemological positivism and professed disinterestedness of nineteenth-century literary biography or in that of the bureaucratised organization of the modern literary archive, James's and Cooley's texts demonstrate that professionalisation and rationalisation have hardly resulted in a disenchantment with the material. The allure of artefacts – the obsession with their "magical value" – has survived intact into secular modernity, as has the desire of writers to chronicle its archival pathology.

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