Romance in the Archive

Carolyn Steedman

University of Warwick

The argument is - I'll give it to you now - because twenty minutes isn't long enough for a lovely, discursive working-out of things - ; the argument is, that something we need to know about archives is the people in them; the inhabitants and users of archives. The way archives *are*, is to do with their inhabitants, temporary and permanent; the living and the dead.

Also, my title: really, I need two prepositions for this: *in* the Archive, and *of* the Archive. I devised this title in the days when I thought that I was going to talk about a series of modern novels - *romances* in the strictly generic meaning of the word - set in archives and among archivists. I will talk about some of them - though not at any great length. Anyway, `Romance In/Of the Archive' was an ugly title, signalling a postmodernist *stylistic* intention that I didn't really have. So `Romance in the Archive' it is. This is about archives - The Archive - as a category of being, and a category of thought in the modern era - or Right Now - and the implications thereof for social theory, social thought; and yes - of course - for social history.

Archives, and `the archive' now have the widest range of meanings and potential meanings attached to them, than at any point since the inauguration of European and North American state archives in the early nineteenth century. There is, for a

start, Jacques Derrida's compelling philosophy of the archive in *Mal d'archive* (1995) in which the *arke* of the Greek city state is named as the place where things begin, where power originates, with power's workings inextricably and for all time, bound up with the authority of beginnings, origins, and starting points. Those who make their way through *Archive Fever* will discover how very much the modern allure of the archive is to do with a Freudian romance, of finding all the lost things and names, whatever they may be: things gone astray, mislaid, forgotten, wasted. They will also discover a very great deal about what *they* are doing, when they sit down with pencil in hand (always, always, a pencil! never a pen!) before the first folder of documents called up to the British Library Manuscript Reading Room, or in the uneasy graciousness of the space set aside for you in some country house or other, where a box of letters and jottings for a novel, old newspaper clippings and a disappointingly blank appointment diary, may allow you some new access to whoever it is you're pursuing.

Meanwhile, now, far away from the philosophical shores of the archive, and even further from that entirely imaginary country house muniment room, the education system has extended the meaning of `archive'. A class of eight year olds, set to do a local history project, will learn to call the tape-recordings of older people who used to work at the bottle factory, little bits and pieces of memorabilia, post-cards and photocopies of a ration book, and their own drawing of how they imagine the bottle factory to have been in 1955 - an Archive. A bundle of your own love letters, a record sleeve, and the bus ticket that took you to the first, momentous, encounter, all make up your own, personal archive. The historian Antoinette Burton stretches the

parameters of what some professional historians might construe as `history', and the `historical archive', in her book *Dwelling in the Archive* (2003). `What counts as an archive?' she asks at the beginning. ` Can private memories of home serve as evidence of political history? What do we make of the histories that domestic interiors, once concrete now perhaps crumbling or even disappeared, have the capacity to yield?' The academic reviewers' response has been to label her work `a challenge to academic disciplinary regulation'. The archives Burton uses include unpublished family history and published autobiographical tracts and fiction.

The colonial archive has been much scrutinized as a source of *imperial* power, though that is not particularly what Burton does in *Dwelling in the Archive*. Rather - the reviewers again - she makes a feminist Foucauldian critique of institutional knowledges and their mode of production as technologies of *male* social power. In earlier work on colonial archives, the eloquence of silence - the effacement of so many of subjects of colonial power - was particularly emphasised. This kind of sad and ineffable loss had been the rhetorical mode of European social history from the early nineteenth-century. After the moment of *The Making of the English Working Class*, social historians increasingly emphasised loss and absence in the archives: the echoing silences of material in record offices and repositories; the absence of so many names from the lists of church and state they consult in order to write their histories. Work on and in the colonial archive has achieved a heightened form of this rhetoric (and - of course - a great deal more than rhetoric). Benedict Anderson suggests that historians have been up to this for a very long time indeed. He is brilliant - and brilliantly funny - on the way in which, after Jules Michelet - after the

mid nineteenth-century - `the silence of the dead was no obstacle to the exhumation of their deepest desires', and how historians found themselves able speak on behalf of the dead, and to interpret the words and the acts they themselves had not understood. His comments made it very clear that resurrectionist historians create the past that they purports to restore, in Michelet's case attributing feelings beliefs and desires that he acknowledged were not actually experienced by those he restored to life.

The Archive has allure; the Archive is alluring; though I do not think we know just yet what exactly that allure *is*. Whatever it might be, the allure of the archive for the novelist has not been in the informal sense I just mentioned, which was established (in the UK at least) through the school curriculum in history and creative writing. José Saramago, in *All the Names* (1997), and Ismail Kadere, in *The Palace of Dreams* (1981), and most recently, Travis Holland, in *The Archivist's Story* (2007) have explored the more sinister implications of the historical proposition that public archives were a first building block of the modern nation state and national identity. Their interest is in registration, naming, cataloguing and archivisation as aspects of totalitarianism. All three novelists describe the character of an archivist, made through authority, rigid job specification, personal timidity - and the tragedy of believing that an archive contains everything there is to know or that might be knowable. Martha Cooley's *The Archivist* (1998) has as its hero the `grey-mustached warden of the obscure Mason Room', the papers he presides over `housed in a guest wing of the main (university) library'. His archive and its `objects of desire' (particularly for graduate students of literature) is `among the finest anywhere' says

Matthias Lane; `and I am its guardian'. Being North American, and hero of an archival romance quite different from the Freudian one (this is, in fact, a true Romance in the Archive), we should not expect him to express political principle or political analysis, as Saramago's and Kadere's and Holland's do. But self-characterisation as `the unavoidable keeper of countless objects of desire' is interesting for those who have worked on literary papers (the object of desire in this case, is a collection of T. S Eliot's letters) in special collections rooms of university libraries, on both sides of the Atlantic. Régine Robert has discussed this literary fascination with archives and archivists as a function of modern memory in *La Mémoire saturée* (2003). And behind all this contemporary interest in archive and their gate-keepers, probably lies Michel Foucault's poetics of these places and spaces and regimes: the way in which he briefly flashed before us their magical quality. The magic is the way in which archives reflect and `show us quite simply, and in shadow, what all those in the foreground are looking at'.

My book *Dust* was about the historian's archival romance. I mean romance in the general sense, and as an aspect - a long-enduring one - of European Romanticism. Jules Michelet, whose extraordinary accounts of communing with the dead, making them live again, in the Archives Nationales and in the lonely nights in which he wrote his histories of France, was the first historian-child of the Romantic movement. It was by reading Michelet that I first understood history-*writing* in generic terms, as a form of magical realism, with the historian's contribution not the mountains that move, the girls that fly, the rivers that run backwards, but the everyday and fantastic act of making the dead walk and talk. Seeing the very particular things that

historians have taken away from archives, and the particular kinds of narrative forms they have produced from their material, may be a way of understanding all the other things that might be done, and that might be written, out of the archive.

Then there is romance in another meaning, in an earlier sense, as in chivalric romance, as in the sense of the quest: endurance of all kinds of trial and tribulation, in pursuit of some goal or grail. Bonnie Smith has written well and engagingly about nineteenth-century historians, each of them seeing the documents they were in pursuit of as so many sleeping princesses, waiting for the historian/knight to awaken and release them. *The Gender of History* also forces its readers to confront the idea that there may be differences between men's and women's archival romance. In this way perhaps, the historian is made more aware of what kind of social and psychological practice going to the archives actually is. You can find traces of the romance of endurance and quest in the Prefaces and Introductions to many modern works of history. The *form* the romance takes in these works is in the number of archivists thanked, the number of remote and obscure repositories visited, the length and detail of entries under the Primary Sources heading in the Bibliography; the hint of difficult journeys, uncomfortable beds, terrible food, loneliness ... in the Archive.

Finding things: the idea of *finding things*: loss, the search for what has been lost, the dream of finding it, and of plenitude. This powerfully informing idea of Western modernity is connected to nostalgia, and to the idea of `the might-have-been', a structure of feeling and cognition that has been most tellingly explored, in film and literary studies. Jean Laplanche's *Life and Death in Psycho-analysis* deals with the

task of psycho-analysis in finding that which cannot be found (what is it that cannot be found? : Something that has happened, is now gone, and is no more). It cannot be found partly, because the very search for it alters it as an object, as the search goes on. Laplanche comments on the search, revealed in psycho-analytic practice, for the lost object. He discusses the way in which, through the processes of displacement and repression, the object sought is bound to be `not the lost [one], but a substitute'.

I want to bring these observations about the archive and about finding things in archives up against the peculiar - uncanny, even - feature of archival practice (or just plain being in an archive, and doing something there). This is the strangeness, the peculiarity of all these novels and cultural practices of the archive: that whatever it is you find, it is not Nothing. If you are a historian or just plain old historically inclined, what you take away from the archive is the Nothing made into a something. I would suggest that history-writing is the formal development of this principle, in that it accounts for the names that are not on the list, and all the many other absences and silences in the documents and records consulted. There is no Nothing in the Archive. I am interested above all in understanding the cultural activity of historical research (and to a lesser extent) historical writing, as formative of this way of thinking and feeling. It has something to do with both formal and informal imaginings of the historical past: as a thing gone and irretrievable, and yet of course, existing, with absence - or gone-ness - as its very condition. We could formalise this individual, visceral sense of pastness, by paying some attention to Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*: to the philosopher paying attention to the ways in which historians have narrativised absence into presence, and into time.

All of this to say that we need to take all these uses and imaginings of the archive into account, when we're trying to decide what the Archive *is*. And another novelist's conclusion as my own. Justin Cartwright's *The Song Before It Is Sung* (2007) is about the pursuit of archival material concerning the Holocaust by a historian. Conrad Senior is a former student of the Oxford philosopher Elya Mendel, who has bequeathed him his papers so that he can explore the doomed friendship between him, Mendel, and Axel von Gottberg, who was hanged in 1944 for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. So this novel is based on Isaiah Berlin's friendship with the real-life Adam von Trott zu Solz. The historian writes a history of the ideas that underpinned the Holocaust in an exploration of the relationship between the Jewish academic and the aristocratic Nazi. - But only after he has found what he is looking for: documentary (film) evidence of von Gottberg's hanging. It is the most terrifying moment of archival retrieval I have ever read. It takes the character Conrad senior six months to recover from that watching. Then, the book complete, Cartwright has a `Postscript', in which his Conrad reflects on what he has found and what he has written, thus: `One day as he tried fitfully to read a book by W. G. Sebald, he came across a striking passage:

> *It does not seem to me that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces between which the living can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, and that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision.*

The Archive is one of those spaces where the dead are, but do not see you. We

have to take account of them. And that's no Romance; no fairy-story.

Romance in the Archive: **some notes to the presentation.**

For the inauguration of European state archives, Le Goff, Jacques (1992), *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press); Michelet, Jules [1835] (1971), `Rapport au Ministre de l'Instruction Publique sur les Bibliothèques et Archives des Départements du Sud-Ouest de la France', Oeuvres Complètes(Paris: Flammarion), Vol. 4, pp. 536-63; Pomian, K. (1992),`Les Archives', in Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire, sous la direction de Pierre Nora,* Vol. 3, *Les France. 3. De l'archive à l'emblème*, Paris: Gallimard, pp.163-233; Levine, Philippa (1986), *The Amateur and the Professional. Antiquaries, Historians and Archeologists in Victorian Britain, 1838-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Derrida, Jacques (1995), `Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25:2, pp. 9-63. Derrida, Jacques (1995), *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*, Paris: Editions Galilée. Derrida, Jacques (1996), *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression,* trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For a not entirely serious account of `real' Archive Fever, see Steedman, Carolyn (1992), *Dust*, Manchester: University of Manchester Press, pp. 17-37.

Burton, Antionette (2003), *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, New York: Oxford University Press; Burton, Antionette ed. (2006), *Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Durham SC: Duke University Press.

Dirks, Nicholas (1992), `Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive', in N. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Bayley, Christopher (1996), *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Chatterjee, Indrani, `Testing the Local Against the Colonial Archive', *History Workshop,* 44 (1997), 215-224; Stoler, Ann L. 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science*, 2:1-2 (2002), pp.87-109; Hamilton, Carolyn et al, eds (2002) *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht & London: Kluwer Academic).

Anderson, Benedict ([1983], 1991), *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso), p. 198.

Saramago, José [1997] (1999), *All the Names*, trans. Margaret Jill Costa (London: Harvill); Kadara, Ismail [1981] (1990), *The Palace of Dreams. A Novel written in Albanian and translated from the French of Joseph Vironi by Barbara Bray* (London: Harvill); Holland, Travis (2004), *The Archivist's Story* (London: Bloomsbury); Cooley, Martha (1998), *The Archivist. A Novel* (London: Abacus).

Robert, Régine (2003), *La Mémoire saturée*, Paris: Stock. See in particular pp. 102-4 for `L'archiviste dans le roman', in the section `Le Sédiment de l'Archive'.

Foucault, Michel [1966] (1973), *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), New York: Vintage, p.15; Antoinette Burton discusses Foucault's magic in Burton, Antoinette (2001),`Thinking Beyond the Boundaries: Empire, Feminism and the Dominions of History', *Social History* 26:1, pp. 60-71.

Smith, Bonnie (1998), *The Gender of History. Men, Women and Archival Practice*, (Cambridge MASS: Harvard University Press).

Laplanche, Jean (1976), *Life and Death in Psycho-analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press); Jacques Rancière (1992, 1998), *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge*, Foreword by Hadyn White, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press; Ricoeur, Paul (1983), *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

Cartwright, Justin (2007), *The Song Before It Is Sung* (London: Bloomsbury.); W. G. Sebald (2002) *Austerlitz* (London: Penguin).