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Aspern's Archive

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I had the good fortune recently to visit the De Young Museum in San Francisco, where I came across a remarkable sculptural installation by Cornelia Parker: entitled *Anti-Mass* and fabricated of charcoal and wire, it consists of two hundred fragments of charred wood more or less suspended from the ceiling and arranged into a cube of approximately thirteen feet. The sculpture bears witness to a particular kind of American violence, for it is constructed from the charred remains of a Southern Baptist church destroyed by arsonists. Simple in concept and execution, the installation has a complex eloquence that elicits a variety of responses. For one thing, it is incredibly beautiful: the textures of the charred wood draw the eye to material particularities, the result of physics and chemistry, which in turn summon a fresh understanding of the after-life of debris and the aesthetic potential of the “found object.” Cornelia Parker has spoken of the “forensic fascination” that guides her art (*Institute*): “I resurrect things that have been killed off. . . . My work is all about the potential of materials, even when it looks like they’ve lost all possibilities” (*ARTseenSOHO*). The historical referent of *Anti-Mass* is of course bi-focal: referring punctually to a particular act of destruction, the immediate historical event serves as a synecdoche, amplified by the variations of the textures of blackness, for the entire African-American experience. Encountering this installation when I did, on the eve of Barack Obama’s securing of the Democratic presidential nomination, both Parker’s work and her words brought an immediate and urgent specificity to the hope in human potential, even, as she says “when it looks like they’ve lost all possibilities.” I was struck also by what I would call the formal temporality of this object: by suspending the objects in mid-air, Parker seems to capture, in ways reminiscent of photography, the event as it happens and thus to gain an immediacy that refuses the constraints of the grammatical preterite. Both formally and politically, then, *Anti-Mass* articulates itself in the progressive. At the same time, however, the arbitrary decision to arrange the materials in an enormous cube recalls us to the formal methods of art-making, of selection, framing, detachment, coherence, boundaries. Taken together, these two aspects of Parker’s design—the literal suspension of objects in mid-air that gives history the illusion of

immediacy and the figurative “suspension” of time in the cubic confinement—raise most profoundly for me the status of the art work as archive.

In one of his last books, *Mal d'archive*, Jacques Derrida observes of both the new archival technology and the old that material practices determine “the very institution of the archivable event,” and, even more radically, that “archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives” (18). Underlying the materiality of external forms, protocols, and institutional practices is Derrida’s conviction that the Freudian unconscious is conceptualized structurally as an archive, which means that “the theory of psychoanalysis becomes a theory of the archive, and not only a theory of memory” (19). Because both the archive and the unconscious are governed by the repetition compulsion, which is in turn linked to the death drive, the archive as institution must be conceptualized not only as a sort of public repository but also as a national unconscious and is governed by an insuperable paradox. The death drive, Derrida asserts, “seems not only to be an-archic . . . it is above all *anarchivic*. It will always have been archive-destroying, by silent vocation” (10). This silent vocation Derrida specifies as the pulsion “to burn the archive and to incite amnesia, thus refuting the economic principle of the archive, aiming to ruin the archive as accumulation and capitalization of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place” (12, emphasis mine). Yet, the destruction drive is finally contradicted by the conservation drive, what we would call here the *archive drive*. It is precisely this internal contradiction that Derrida terms *mal d'archive*, translated ineptly, though poetically, as “archive fever.” Derrida concludes, “there would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression. Above all, . . . beyond or within this simple limit called finiteness or finitude, there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive” (19).

From the point of view of Derrida’s *Mal d'archive*, Parker’s installation acquires fuller resonance. As an essentially archival act of witness to a national trauma, *Anti-Mass* is, common-sensically, an attempt at conservation, preservation, and the rescue of debris from the vicissitudes of time and history. At the same time, what it conserves is violence itself—politically necessary, aesthetically eloquent, of course, but there is a fruitful tension, even a contradiction, between the impulse to conserve and the “suspension” in time and space of destruction. The protocols of design and conservation, too, are subject to physical and chemical limits: if the debris, caught in conflagration, points to its past as a building and to a community, it also points to the future of its inevitable disintegration. It is supremely, to borrow another of Derrida’s neologisms, “archiviolithic” (10). As such, then, it may be said to literalize, or possibly to allegorize, that very paradox of archive fever that Derrida has conceptualized, as an intervention suspended between the archive drive—giving expression to the historical unconscious and exteriorizing it in form—and the all-subsuming death drive. To put this another way, Parker’s archive incarnates in at least one semiotic register that which it necessarily misunderstands as solely an external referent. It partakes of the “reality,” which is to say the Lacanian real, that it renders intelligible. It is important, too, that on at least three levels, Parker’s work is governed by the logics of repetition. It recycles debris to present, to make present, and to represent an incendiary act and repeats formally that incendiary act. But repetition has another temporal, or

historical, dimension: *Anti-Mass* is not Parker's first installation of this sort. Six years earlier, in 1999, Parker assembled a similar work, this time of fragments of charred wood where the larger fragments hang low and diminish in size as they rise toward the ceiling, conveying with even greater immediacy the transformation of substance into smoke and vapor. This extraordinary work, which "hangs" in the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, is entitled *Hanging Fire*.

Cornelia Parker's repeated return to the archiving of debris, or what she calls her "forensic fascination" has much to teach us about what I would call Henry James's forensic poetics. If her talent for a kind of literalizing performative is manifest in her appropriation of James's ubiquitous figure for conversational suppression or self-censoring—whereby hanging fire is acted out and physically performed through a playful shift of register from discourse to objects—her obsession with pyromania and her formal forensics are congruent with James's recurring attempts to build a narrative on the after-life of arson or his attempts to archive the destruction of the archive. James's recurring fictional scenes of burning the archive (most notably at the conclusions of *The American*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, and *The Wings of the Dove*) might usefully be understood as an unconscious impulse to write what you know or to give expression to a fundamental drive. They have their counterpart in a climactic scene in the biography. Leon Edel writes that in the autumn of 1909, when James was ill and depressed, "he gathered his private papers—forty years of letters from his contemporaries, manuscripts, scenarios, old notebooks—and piled them on a rubbish fire in his garden. . . . He was ruthless. A great Anglo-American literary archive perished on that day" (436–37).

James's act relegated all biographical narrative to the speculative and the unprovable on matters that have increased exponentially in critical obsession, particularly James's sexuality. If we can hear Edel's pungent bitterness and resentment in this passage, we can also see the validity of Derrida's pronouncement on the archivable event. Given Derrida's position that archival practices and protocols determine the meaning of the archived event, one could argue that the entire queer project on James, turning as it does on indeterminacy, both results from and requires James's archival conflagration, the destruction of "evidence," and the subsequent *absence* that is simultaneously central to the biographical project and resonant with James's fictional poetics. The triumph of the death drive over the conservation drive, then, is precisely what has engineered the rise of Queer James, along perhaps with earlier critical schools. It has also made possible the recent turn to the supplement of biographical fiction like that of Colm Tóibín's 2004 *The Master*, which seeks to present a gay James that has no archival support and that may have never existed. Melancholy, it would seem, begets melancholy. In classic Freudian terms, we might know what we have lost, without ever being able to grasp the *thing* that continues to cast its shadow. Our only recourse is to turn to the compensatory archive of the fiction itself, where scenes of pyromania accrue greater mystery and poignancy in the trajectory of James's career.

Burning the archive or the collection is invariably for James the culmination of narrative, and in every case except "The Aspern Papers," it is ironic, astonishing, entirely unanticipated. In the other fictions, fire serves, arguably, as a kind of purification that enables closure to coincide with transcendence, as burning is sacrificial and frees the protagonists from morally dubious encumbrances. As the terminus of

emplotment, fire solicits an entirely retrospective point of view by which it emerges as ethically necessary and fortunate. In these narratives, burning the archive emerges as coherent with preceding action, leaving little in the way of troubling residue. It also comes to signify, oddly, the origin and the ground of moral argument by which the end of the story serves as the beginning of spiritual redemption.

The case of “The Aspern Papers” is entirely other. Its exceptional status in James’s tales of pyromania troubles the conventional notion of the archive’s function or utility and illuminates the conflicting drives that Derrida has conceptualized as *mal d’archive*. The great symptom of this malaise is that the destruction of Aspern’s archive comes as no surprise. Rather, the incendiary end is anticipated—even, it seems, rather queerly desired—from an early point in the narrative. While it is important to distinguish between the desire of the *narrative* for this end from that of the *narrator*, at certain moments their destructive desires seem to coincide. This complex, contradictory, and shifting matrix of desire, then, thoroughly reorients point of view, in the larger sense of the term, away from James’s customary practice around incendiary closure. Rather than retrospective, it is here *prospective*, both apprehensive and anticipatory of this fiery end. The consequence is not only a problematization of desire in narrative but also a complication of the temporality of the archive and its ontological status.

“The Aspern Papers” recounts the misadventures of an anonymous editor who tries to get his hands on the letters of Jeffrey Aspern, a fictional American poet of the early nineteenth century of great importance in the emerging American canon. These papers consist primarily, we gather, of love letters written to Juliana Bordereau, an expatriate American who has survived into the late nineteenth century and who lives, barely and in extreme decrepitude, with her niece, Miss Tita Bordereau, in a crumbling Venetian palace. It is tempting to say that James’s plot turns from a remote tale of burning passion, historically remote and accessible only through the Aspern archive, toward a passion for burning, but James’s figuration of archive and motive dismantle this simple temporal opposition. The narrator’s friends mock his obsession: “One would think you expected to find in them the answer to the riddle of the universe” (277). If the narrator’s desire for illumination is excessive, he adheres nonetheless to a thoroughly conventional, that is to say romantic, episteme of the archive’s deployment. Aspern himself is an idealized national subject and the object of the narrator’s love: “at a period when our native land was nude and crude and provincial . . . when literature was lonely there and art and form almost impossible, he had found the means to live and write like one of the first . . . to feel, understand, and express everything” (311). A pioneer, an original genius, and a national hero, “Jeffrey Aspern” is a figurative projection of the canonical imaginary, the ideological construction of the author that Barthes and Foucault would so rigorously deconstruct. In keeping with this construction, the narrator is far less invested in the problematics of text than in the aura of celebrity: The object of his desire is less hermeneutic than erotic, manifested as the craving for presence, for somatic contact. Contact itself is the possibility offered not only by Aspern’s archive, but also by the bodily presence of Juliana Bordereau. “Every one of Aspern’s contemporaries had . . . passed away; we had not been able to look into a single pair of eyes into which his had looked or to feel a transmitted contact in any aged hand that his had touched. Most dead of all did poor Miss Bordereau appear, and yet she alone had survived” (279). Although James’s figurative strategy

is to align Juliana Bordereau with the paper archive as historical residue—from the narrator's perspective, she is a "terrible relic" (291) who holds the "sacred relics" (306) in her grasp—it is significant that Juliana conceals her eyes behind a disfiguring mask or eye-shade and that she refuses to shake the narrator's hand. Juliana, it seems, has cannily intuited the narrator's desire for the illusion of presence, and she thwarts it at every turn, keeping her body and her archive behind a *cordon sanitaire*. The narrator, in turn, comforts himself that if the papers are inaccessible, they are nonetheless in proximity: "After all they were under my hand—they had not escaped me yet; and they made my life continuous, in a fashion, with the illustrious life they had touched at the other end" (306).

James's reiterated stress upon the hand as the primary signifier of what the narrator terms transmitted contact and a life continuous with the object of desire reveal much about the contours of editorial *assujettissement*, the mediating role of women in relations between men, and the essential, bodily form of the ego's morphological imaginary. When this subject is conjugated with the figuration of both Juliana and her archive as "relics," a larger economy of the archive, crucial to James's emplotment, emerges into clarity. This economy, like Derrida's model of *mal d'archive*, is rife with contradiction: suspended between life and death, between the impulse to conserve and the death drive. This contradiction is resolvable only in one direction: although the narrator stubbornly persists in his belief that "some esoteric knowledge had rubbed off on [Juliana]" (306), this knowledge is not what he imagines it to be. Rather, the knowledge that the *narrative* desires to demonstrate is that the archive is bent on destruction. Consider the irony in the following: when the narrator first encounters Juliana, "my heart beat fast as if the miracle of resurrection had taken place for my benefit" (290). At this moment, "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 or ever have been since." This sentence, appearing early as it does, marks the climax of the narrative and gauges precisely the temporal dimensions of its turn. *Assujettissement* and its attendant illusions are divided temporally between never had been before and never have been since. For this moment collapses in the realization that "there was a ghastly death's-head lurking behind [Juliana's mask]. The divine Juliana as a grinning skull—the vision hung there" (291). James's temporal measurements and his gothic figuration have the effect of *reversing* the narrator's initial *méconnaissance* of the miracle of resurrection. It is not that Juliana brings Aspern into presence; rather, she reveals that she has joined him in death. Neither resurrection nor revenant, Aspern, through Juliana's mediation, recedes into lost time, into the realm of dead relics, and the illusion of "presence" overscored by an epiphanic absence.

The narrator, bound as he is to the conventional episteme of the archive, must disavow this painful knowledge. Such disavowal is, however, incomplete, for, immediately following this scene, he begins to be haunted by a premonition: "I had perfectly considered the possibility that she would destroy her papers on the day she should feel her end really approach. I believed that she would cling to them till then and I think I had an idea that she read Aspern's letters over every night or at least pressed them to her withered lips" (299). In the long remainder of the tale, as the prospect of burning the archive becomes increasingly compelling, James's writing registers important shifts in the temporality of the predicate. Narrative temporality is some-

what like that of “The Beast in the Jungle,” wherein we wait and wait for something to happen, only to learn that it *has* happened. The Aspern narrative moves from the grammar of the future, or depending on context, the conditional—“she would cling to them” and then “she would destroy them”—to the midpoint, where the narrator is convinced, in the preterite, that “she had annihilated the papers” (343), to the future anterior, “when I should really have learned that the papers had been reduced to ashes” (368–69), to the perverse desire of the subjunctive preterite, “I only wish to heaven that she had destroyed them” (373), and finally to the finality of the preterite in Miss Tita’s confession: “I burnt them last night, one by one, in the kitchen. It took a long time—there were so many” (381).

The temporal staging of James’s narrative is broadly prospective of the archival fire, and the perverse mingling of fascination and fear that attends this prospect results in a grammar of motives that undermines linear progression. The effect of this grammar is to position the archive and its destruction as the *object* of perverse human action. A fuller account of the object-status of the archive would require more thorough attention to the turns of James’s plot, wherein the narrator’s archival desire is exquisitely manipulated by Juliana to extract cash and by her successor, Miss Tita, to secure the narrator’s hand in marriage. Attending to the “outside” of narrative events and the mere object-status of the Aspern’s archive has been the sole preoccupation of most prior readings of “The Aspern Papers,” in which lessons are drawn about the ethical shortcomings of editorial projects and the priority of actual human (i.e., heterosexual) love over what the narrator comes to see, fleetingly and indecisively, at one point, as “crumpled scraps” (378). Much remains to be said about the queer contours of desire in this tale—the archive as fetish object, central to the identity of this odd and unplaceable bachelor, who recoils from heterosexual contract as a “preposterous” price, “for a bundle of tattered papers, to marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman” (377).

A fuller grasp of “The Aspern Papers” requires that we conceptualize the archive in ways other than its mere object status. This is not a matter of moving inside the narrative, at least not in any empirical manner, for there is no inside: no archive is present, either as object or as text that we read, nor, significantly and for the only time in James’s writing, do we attend the spectacle of its destruction. Any analytical project on the Aspern’s archive as content would be impossible. It is the obscure object of desire, the recessive *objet a*, beyond our imagining, let alone our grasp. Following Derrida, and the fictional example of archival immolation with which I began, I suggest that there is nonetheless *something* that is situated within Aspern’s archive, to which we ought to attend in order to unpack the richer resonance of the tale. There is something, that is, that wills its own destruction, that is soldered to the death drive. Whatever James’s intentions were, the death drive remains beyond representation; yet the *mal d’archive* at the center of this narrative is figured forth as the material consubstantiality of the archive with the body, the body as both corpse and resurrected revenant, with the hand that wrote, the hand that caresses, the hand that burns. James’s rhetoric ensures that there is no arbitrary frontier to be drawn between the dead and the living, the archive as artifact and the unconscious drives, the contradictory mix of preservation and destruction. The archive is, it would seem,

always already superannuated. It reduces *itself* to ashes, not as a matter of will, but as a function of the drive.

In 1938, Virginia Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth, "Let's leave the letters till we're both dead. That's [sic] my plan. I don't [sic] keep or destroy but collect miscellaneous bundles of odds and ends, and let posterity, if there is one, burn or not" (272). Jamesians have attempted, under successive schools of biographical practice and critical theory, to account for "Henry James." Yet that very "Henry James" remains recalcitrant, beyond our grasp. We have learned the lessons of the death of the author, yet we all remain, to one degree or another, entirely in the grip of the author's aura. If the narrator of "The Aspern Papers" is a negative example, and the tale itself a cautionary one, what have we learned from them? Despite the spate of revisionist biographies and speculative fictions, despite the richness of the life after the life, Henry James recedes behind the flames of his own spectacular bonfire, his own adherence to the rigors of the death drive. Perhaps this, finally, is the lesson of James's own *mal d'archive*: like Flaubert's Bouvard et Pécuchet, "we move like locusts across the pastures of knowledge, for the vanished historical world described in detail, classified according to our current and replaceable taxonomies, ceases to convey meaning" (Brooks 114, 108).

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