Imagining the Archives

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Key-words: *Washington Irving, "The Mutability of Literature", Shakespeare, archive, dust*

Washington Irving's "The Mutability of Literature," first published in serial form as part of a book titled *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819–1820), examines the notion of the archive and our sense of the past. This short tale represents a past that is seen from the standpoint of a present that is constantly being revised in light of new knowledge and context. As Jacques Derrida observes, the archive is at once a place of memory, of forgetting, and of anticipation of the future (Mansour 2007: 43). "The Mutability of Literature" illustrates Derrida's observation as well as Robert Connors's intuition that the "archive is where storage meets dreams" (Gaillett 2010: 30). Irving singles out great poets as those who are destined to illumine the ages.

The tale opens with the fictional first person narrator, Geoffrey Crayon, visiting Westminster Abbey where he is about to be absorbed into an oneiric world:

> There are certain half-dreaming moods of mind in which we naturally steal away from noise and glare, and seek some quiet haunt where we may indulge our reveries and build our air castles undisturbed. In such a mood I was loitering about the old gray cloisters of Westminster Abbey, enjoying that luxury of wandering thought which one is apt to dignify with the name of reflection; when suddenly an interruption of madcap boys from Westminster School, playing at football, broke in upon the monastic stillness of the place, making the vaulted passages and mouldering tombs echo with their merriment (Irving 1939: 134).

Seeking to escape the noise of the boisterous children, Crayon asks a verger for admission to the library. As Crayon and the verger climb a staircase, the laughter of the schoolboys fades and dies away altogether, framing a movement towards contemplation. As he regards the volumes that lie unread in the library, Crayon laments their neglect:

> How much, thought I, has each of these volumes, now thrust aside with such indifference, cost some aching head! how many weary days! how many sleepless nights! How have their authors buried themselves in the solitude of cells and cloisters, shut themselves up from the face of man and the still more blessed face of nature, and devoted themselves to painful research and intense reflection! And all for what? To

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„Philologica Jassyensia", Anul VIII, Nr. 2 (16), 2012, p. 293–297

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> occupy an inch of dusty shelf – to have the title of their works read now and then in a future age by some drowsy churchmen or casual straggler like myself; and in another age to be lost even to remembrance (Irving 1939: 136).

Crayon is about to discover that to browse through archives is to reanimate the dead and to encounter the ghostly presence of authors and of their fictional characters. The task of an archival researcher, according to Elizabeth Betsy Birmingham, is to become a co-author of the dead to help them continue their stories (Birmingham 2010: 144).

As he examines a quarto from the Elizabethan era, Crayon suddenly has a humorous and unexpected brush with the fantastic: "I accidentally loosened the clasps; when, to my utter astonishment, the little book gave two or three yawns like one awakening from a deep sleep, then a husky hem, and at length began to talk" (Irving 1939: 136). The thick quarto is covered in spider webs. It speaks hoarsely, in speech that Crayon finds "quaint and obsolete" (Irving 1939: 137), for he is as distant from the period of the quarto as we are from the time of Irving's tale. Crayon explains to the quarto that books were no longer laboriously hand-created but were being mass-produced thanks to the printing press.

Crayon's description of the exponential availability of books anticipates today's mammoth libraries and the vast proliferation of web-based texts. In a famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Walter Benjamin notes that the changing conditions under which works of art are created and viewed have had profound cultural and social implications. Benjamin observes that the sacred and magical dimensions of early art have been superseded by artistic forms that undermine the authenticity of art. Although it was always possible to imitate works of art, the mass reproduction by the printing press, lithography, and photography have made the original art work irrelevant. Benjamin claims that the new forms of art, film in particular, detach objects from the domain of tradition. Film employs montage, slow motion, close-ups, and pan-outs to isolate objects and to present them in new and unforeseen contexts (Benjamin 1968b: 220–227, 238–239).

The quarto is, of course, ignorant of these developments. It is chagrined to learn that most of his famous contemporaries had become mere historical footnotes. It is astonished to learn of the success of Shakespeare whom it deemed, much like Ben Jonson, "a poor half-educated varlet that knew little of Latin and nothing of Greek" (Irving 1939: 143). Crayon explains how Shakespeare has lifted his contemporaries and their age into prominence:

> There rise authors now and then who seem proof against the mutability of language because they have rooted themselves in the unchanging principles of human nature. They are like gigantic trees that we sometimes see on the banks of a stream; which by their vast and deep roots, penetrating through the mere surface and laying hold on the very foundations of the earth, preserve the soil around them from being swept away by the ever-flowing current, and hold up many a neighboring plant, and perhaps worthless weed to perpetuity. Such is the case with Shakespeare, whom we behold defying the encroachments of time, retaining in modern use the language and literature of his day, and giving duration to many an indifferent author, merely from having flourished in his vicinity. But even he, I grieve to say, is gradually assuming the tint of age, and his whole form is overrun by a profusion of commentators, who,

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> like clambering vines and creepers, almost bury the noble plant that upholds them (Irving 1939: 143–144).

Today, nearly three centuries after Irving wrote these words, the number of bibliographical entries in the World Shakespeare Bibliography has soared to 131,800 entries, truly "a profusion of commentators"! The work of Shakespeare continues to be perpetuated in new varieties of English, in other languages, and in novel social contexts. As Walter Benjamin observes, a book interacts dynamically with the life of its reader and changes upon rereading (Benjamin 1968a: 60, 67), and such is the case with the books of Shakespeare.

The quarto, unable to see beyond the confines of its time, remains incredulous that Shakespeare could have defined his age: "mighty well! And so you would persuade me that the literature of an age is to be perpetuated by a vagabond deer-stealer! By a man without learning; by a poet, forsooth – a poet!" (Irving 1939: 144). Coated in dust, the quarto wheezes as it laughs. From his privileged historical vantage point, Crayon knows what the quarto cannot know, namely, that Shakespeare wrought the miracle expressed by his own words, "That in black ink my love may still shine bright" (Shakespeare 1962: 180). As Crayon tells the quarto,

> Cast a look back over the long reach of literary history. What vast valleys of dunes filled with monkish legends and academical controversies! what bogs of theological speculations! what dreary wastes of metaphysics! Here and there only do we behold the heaven-illuminated bards, elevated like beacons on their widely separate heights, to transmit the pure light of poetical intelligence from age to age (Irving 1939: 145).

For Carolyn Steedman, author of a magisterial study about archival research, dust serves as a metaphor for the circularity and eternal return of the archive, the exploration of which unsettles the dreams of the dead (Steedman 2002: 164, 167). History, according to Steedman, is not an inert collection of objects but a process of imagining, remembering, and ordering, one that privileges or excludes voices and perspectives (Steedman 2002: 67–68). Steedman notes the two opposite connotations of the verb 'to dust' which can mean both 'to remove' and 'to sprinkle or coat' (Steedman 2002: 160–161). Research stirs up and rearranges the dust of memories in new configurations that alter our sense of the past. Steedman uses the rag rug, fashioned out of excess or discarded bits of cloth, as a metaphor for research that emerges from the detritus of lives refashioned by memory, giving objects new meaning as they are transformed by imagination and nostalgia (Steedman 2002: 135–136). Knowledge is recombined in strange and novel ways that, as David Gold observes, resemble a jigsaw puzzle that changes depending on how the pieces are fit together (Gold 2010: 15).

Lynée Lewis Gaillett highlights the difficulty of writing about the distant past, noting that one must corroborate claims made both by researchers and archival sources, as well as contextualize any findings within the histories of that time (Gaillet 2010: 35). With the passage of time, the historical and social context needed to understand artifacts and texts becomes clouded. New authors and research interests displace older ones.

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María Carla Sánchez reflects on the archive as a place of privilege. While she was researching the Panic of 1837, a homeless man asked her for spare change as she left a library. The incident caused Sánchez to wonder whether her research on that period might illumine present day conditions in the United States, whether the past informs the present, and whether research engages us more deeply with the present (Sánchez 2007: 59–66). Perhaps archival research is at once an act of evasion and involvement for it immerses us in the present through the past.

In Irving's tale, the narrator's dream reveals the archive to be a crypt where past voices are reincarnated, rather than a repository of the intellectual endeavors of dead authors. Paul J. Voss and Marta L. Werner explain how archives at once classify knowledge and subvert their own system of classification:

> The archive is both a physical site – an institutional space enclosed by protective walls – and an imaginative site – a conceptual space whose boundaries are forever changing. Although etymologically linked to public, historical space, the archive also has links to the essentially private, hermetic spaces of the cloister, carrel, *almarie*… The archive preserves and reserves, protects and patrols, regulates and represses… the archive's dream of perfect order is disturbed by the nightmare of its random, heterogeneous, and often unruly elements (Voss, Werner 1999: i–ii).

The archive confines, but never quite, for the imagination overflows institutional and canonical limitations. Francisco de Quevedo (1984: 337) describes thus the predicament and privilege of thinkers whose work moulders in archives: "Polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado" ("They will turn into dust, but dust in love"). Quevedo's famous line concisely expresses the intuition of Irving that the thought of great poets lives on, despite neglect, as a kind of radiant star-dust.

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Abstract

In Washington Irving's "The Mutability of Literature," the narrator, Geoffrey Crayon, daydreams while visiting the archive in Westminster Abbey. He imagines that an Elizabethan book, printed as a quarto, suddenly comes to life. The quarto speaks to him as a voice from another age, prompting Crayon to meditate on the process of inclusion and exclusion that characterizes the canon. His meditation reveals the archive to be a crypt where past voices are reincarnated, rather than a repository of the intellectual endeavors of dead authors. Crayon discovers that to browse through archives is to reanimate the dead and to encounter the ghostly presence of authors and of their fictional characters.

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