

Archives and History : A Sextet*

The Archive and the Uncanny

My first archive and special collections room was a cold, windowless basement storage chamber lined with three-foot deep shelves built by my father in our Edmonton home. It smelled pleasantly of soap, freshly sawn lumber, and ginger root. On one wall were shelves of preserved pickles, beets, apple sauce, and jam—my mother’s garden bounty—and on another wall was a metal shelving system with two decades worth of *Life* magazines, the *National Geographic*, and boxes of old school assignments. Another shadowy crevasse of the room held two enormous brown steamer trunks and one blue metal one: these held my parents’ “special collections” of memorabilia from the Old Country—old suits, wall hangings, and a secret photo of my father’s Chinese family; books, boots, and feather comforters filled with the furniture polish smell of my mother’s native Berlin. The aura of preservation.

The smaller blue metal trunk was off-limits because it had been left by a family friend from Czechoslovakia. He had boarded with us, left to find work up North—Fort McMurray was the place for men like him—but would eventually return for his suitcase. So I was told. Eight years passed and we heard no word from him. When I was twelve, I discovered the key to this suitcase in a kitchen cupboard. I thought of the shadowy identity of the Czech friend, and how he had never returned. Surely, I imagined, the puzzle of his disappearance would be revealed in this piece of luggage by my own ingenious sleuthing. Convincing my mother of the necessity of opening this case, I was finally allowed to pry open the bent metal top. Inside was a bundle of books, including a Modern Library first edition of *The Basic*

Writings of Sigmund Freud, along with several other first editions of Freud's work; *Hamlet* and *Henry IV*; Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; Poe's *Collected Stories*. More books on psychoanalysis and other titles in the uncanny canon. Yet the oddest book in this collection—at least to my twelve-year-old mind—was one titled *Ten Easy Steps to Relaxation*. It was a self-help book from the 1950's with line drawings of a man trying to sleep on his back, with pillows carefully arranged under his neck, lower back, knees, feet, and elbows. I knew that this was somehow a picture of the mysterious Czech friend who would never return. "Yes," my mother said, when I showed her the curious drawing. "He was a restless man, who could never sleep. So he read all the time. He was just like your grandfather." This did not explain to me much about the pillows positioned in the picture, but it did create a certain restlessness in me. I took the stack of books from this special collection to my room and began that night to read them, or try to, looking for more clues to the disappearance of the Czech boarder. —G.D.

Family Archives

Both my parents were born in Vancouver and have lived here virtually all their lives. In most of the world, this would not be remarkable, but in Vancouver, the native-born senior citizen is a *rara avis* indeed. My mother is particularly unusual in that both her parents were born in British Columbia—her mother in Vancouver and her father on Vancouver Island. Only recently (and of course belatedly) have I come to realize that they remember a British Columbia that has almost vanished.

One thing they remember is a surprising amount of Chinook. Most people associate the old trading language of the West Coast with the fur trade, but long after the beaver and sea otter lost their value, Chinook words were still part of everyday speech. My father (whose parents had come from opposite ends of the earth—his mother from Chile, his father from Norway) grew up in the poorest part of Vancouver. To get out of the city in the summer, he and his mother would go up the Fraser Valley to pick hops. Most of the other pickers were Native people from throughout the province; Chinook was the one language they had in common. At the end of the day, the boss would shout to the pickers, "Iskum kanaway hop"—something like "It's time for everyone to bring in the hops." My father used this phrase long after he had left the hop fields behind. When as children we were slow or distracted, he would say, "Iskum kanaway hop" and we would hurry along.

My mother also remembers the Chinook expressions of her childhood. Her father used to say, “I have a tum tum that . . .” meaning, “I think that . . .” Her Vancouver-born aunts called their friends “tillicums” and sometimes used “klahowya” for hello.

Last week, when I visited my parents, I took some materials about Chinook that I had found on an Oregon museum website. To my parents, all the information on it was just common knowledge. Talking about Chinook reminded them of a local song that was popular when they were young. The refrain went like this: “There’s mowitch on the hillside / And salmon in the bay / And it’s hiyu tenas mossum / When the daylight fades away.” “Mowitch” means “deer,” and “hiyu tenas mossum” means “we’re all sleepy” or “time to turn in.”

I felt that I ought to be recording them. What if no one else remembers this song? My parents hardly want to be considered museum pieces, but they have been here a long time, and they remember a lot. I am not sure how to begin organizing their memories, but what they know is a precious archive of how life used to be, out here on the edge of the country. —S.F.

Language, said Heidegger, is the house of being, and he may be right, but whatever the case, it is certainly true to call language a house of memory, which is to say a house of oblivion, a house in which things of every sort can be called to mind or allowed to lapse into nothingness. Language is, in other words, an archive, a word as well as a concept that English borrowed from French, which borrowed it from Latin, which borrowed it from Greek, where it originally referred to the public building that housed records and documents. Words in use never stay still, and in a typical metonymic shift—reinforced by a telling grammatical drift into the plural—the word *archive* has come to refer also to the building’s contents. Archives, that is, are both the container and the contained; like languages, they are the houses of what we recall and what we forget, and the things themselves. What they do not hold, or cannot, is no less important than what they do or can hold. If possession is nine points of the law, then forgetting is nine points of the archive.

We cannot live except by forgetting, any more than we can sense some stimuli except by ignoring others; just imagine if you could sense every thing in its own thisness all the time, from the smallest flutter in your lungs to every single point of light entering your eyes. History—a word whose journey

into English followed the same path as archive, only earlier, and which originally meant inquiry—works like our perceptual apparatus, whose seeing is enabled by our blindnesses, by focussing on one thing or set of things to the exclusion of others. That is why there can be no one history, only histories, and these can never be complete, ever.

Between getting it all in and leaving it all out, the possibilities are endless.
—I.H.

When I began to work in archives, I quickly learnt that in addition to logging long hours over boxes of letters and diaries, a substantial chunk of time needed to be set aside each day to talk to archivists—or rather to listen to them free-associate about possible connections between people and events, about papers waiting to be released, and about researchers they had encountered. I invariably came away from these encounters with several pages of notes scribbled at furious speed, enough for half a dozen new research projects in addition to the one I was already engaged in. I was also often in a state of panic at the prospect that only a fraction of this knowledge and these hunches would ever be recorded, and that indeed the only way to become party to it was to follow archivists around the place and quiz them whenever they had the time to answer my questions. It was probably one of the archivists at the National Archives of Canada who first suggested I speak to the historian Pierre Savard, then director of the Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française at the University of Ottawa. I did and we became fast friends. One of the joys of meeting with Pierre was his irrepressible intellectual curiosity, and our conversations ritually began with his propping up his face between his hands and asking, “And what have you found now?” To a casual onlooker, we must have looked like a pair of gossiping sophomores, and indeed I have not known anyone else for whom the pursuit of knowledge was quite such a delicious and exhilarating business. He also delighted in the many comic moments of our profession. At a symposium in Vienna, Pierre’s eyebrows shot up in alarm as the moderator—a gentleman of the old school—introduced me as “still charming after all these years,” but he also undertook some rapid research in cultural *mores* by glancing round the room and comparing the reactions of North Americans and Europeans (a brilliant repartee covering all bases occurred to me 24 hours later). But Pierre Savard was a lot more than an accomplished *causeur*. I remember the great courtesy but also utter lack of hesitation with

which he pursued a line of thought he knew to be right when members of the audience at a conference on “Le Romantisme au Québec” found his material unduly critical, even unpatriotic. This was a man for whom personal honour and professional integrity were one and the same thing, and he was unable to understand that this might not be the case for everyone. Pierre Savard died suddenly in 1998, and many of us miss him terribly. — E.-M.K.

Six years ago, I travelled to the National Archives in Ottawa to look through some recently deposited manuscripts by a writer then just reaching mid-career. I was the second person ever to request the box, and the first actually to open most of its folders. A rough key to the contents had been typed up by the archivists, but, as with most such material, the actual holdings did not correspond to the brief descriptions provided.

I meant to look at drafts of poems and essays but found myself flipping through highly personal pages, ranging from vitriolic letters of two ex-wives to crayon drawings by a young daughter to accompany a letter thanking her father for a poem and asking when she would see him again. How, I asked myself, could he have donated these things? I could concede putting your ex-wives’ harping on display to wreak petty vengeance, but couldn’t figure how anyone could part with his own child’s writing. Given public hunger for biographical minutiae, he might have imagined a future when his biographer might reconcile guarded details of a life lived with what had been put to paper. But I couldn’t shake the uncomfortable deliberateness of the donation of these items, and the feeling that I shouldn’t be reading them.

In “These Poems, She Said,” Robert Bringhurst has a woman’s voice deride “the poems of a man / who would leave his wife and child because / they made noise in his study.” His poem brilliantly and unflinchingly interrogates the difficult collision, even in its own making, of the aesthetic and the lived, and notes the steep price of confusing appreciation for real feeling. This staid reticence to engage with the human world informs the discomfort I felt as I turned those pages. Some moments should not be contained in poems or manuscripts because those enclosures, rather than sustaining lived time, actually dissolve it into beautiful and lifeless craft; there are some betrayals, however lovely, for which a poem could not make up. The grave and imposing grid of the archive, as it squares experience with written history, might be a fine and pleasant place for scholars intent

on building careers, but its floors of shelved fonds mark a tragic deadening no one really deserves. Some boxes are better left not so much closed as unopened. — K.M.

Depuis une quarantaine d'années au Canada se sont opérés dans de multiples secteurs du quotidien des événements qui ont chamboulé aussi bien l'environnement que l'imagination des citoyens, l'un des plus importants étant, pour les francophones du moins, la manifestation d'une différence fondamentale entre les communautés canadiennes-françaises du pays. Que ce soit dans la sphère sociale, culturelle, ou politique, des moments d'émoi ont annoncé puis suivi des périodes de rupture et de transformations radicales, sans précédent. Sans elles, sans la création de grands organismes comme la CBC/Société Radio-Canada, le Canada Council/Conseil des arts du Canada, ou sans l'instauration par le gouvernement Trudeau du bilinguisme pancanadien, dans quel état seraient nos institutions et que serait le Canada d'aujourd'hui? Ces événements, et bien d'autres encore, ont façonné nos deux littératures nationales, les auteurs (hommes et femmes) qui les font et les institutions qui les gèrent. De la même façon, alors que le Québec des années 1960 prenait ses distances face à la francophonie canadienne du temps, les autres communautés francophones, loin de disparaître, ont su créer leurs propres institutions littéraires dont les maisons d'édition sont parmi les plus visibles. C'est ainsi que de décennie en décennie, de nouveaux auteurs (poètes, essayistes, dramaturges, romanciers) seront à même de mieux reconnaître leurs talents et de les développer.

À présent, entre les cinq régions du pays se dressent encore des frontières mais aussi, fort heureusement, de nombreux ponts. La traduction en est un qu'empruntent les citoyens, les auteurs et les éditeurs, francophones comme anglophones, pour se manifester les uns aux autres et s'enrichir mutuellement. La découverte par les auditeurs de l'émission *Canada Reads* au printemps 2003 de *Prochain épisode* d'Hubert Aquin, roman publié en 1965, n'est-elle pas d'ailleurs un exemple éloquent de ce type de partage et d'enrichissement? — A-M. R.

* *Although all of CL's current editors will be involved in the production of the upcoming 45th anniversary issue of the journal, we use this collective editorial as an opportunity to speak as a team before three of us, Iain Higgins, Alain-*

Michel Rocheleau and Eva-Marie Kröller, step down later this year. Iain, who came on board as poetry editor in 1995, has overseen special issues on "Poetry and Poetics" and on "Nature/Culture." He wrote editorials in which the creative and the scholarly were inseparable companions, and he was proof-reader non-pareil. Alain-Michel, in charge of all aspects of CL's publication of francophone writing since 1996, asserted the presence of the latter in everything from the journal's style-sheet to painstaking accuracy in historical facts. Bringing the rigorous scholarship of a true "Lavalien" to our work, he edited issues on "Gay and Lesbian Writing" and "Drama." The journal has been immeasurably enriched by their presence, as have their fellow editors. Two of Iain's own poems appear in this issue, as well as a review essay by Alain-Michel. —E.-M. K.

This year, William H. New, editor of CL from 1977 to 1995, retired from the University of British Columbia. We dedicate this issue to him.

