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The ordinariness of the archive

THOMAS OSBORNE

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the notion of the archive is of some value for those interested in the history of the human sciences. Above all, the archive is a means of generating ethical and epistemological credibility. The article goes on to suggest that there are three aspects to modern archival reason: a principle of publicity whereby archival information is made available to some or other kind of public; a principle of singularity according to which archival reason focuses upon questions of detail; and a principle of mundanity, whereby the privileged focus of archival reason is said to be the commonplace dimension of everyday life.

Key words archive, credibility, Foucault, memory, public, Tocqueville

Is there a place for the concept of the archive in the gamut of today's end-of-millennium reflections on memory, history and the status of the past?¹ The answer is surely yes. Whether as notion, impression, concept or anti-concept, the image of the archive is a useful focal point for bringing together issues of representation, interpretation and reason with questions of identity, evidence and authenticity; in other words, just those issues that tend to concern those who work on those kinds of problems that typically characterize the history and historiography of the human and cultural sciences. Of course, an affirmative answer such as this does raise many further questions, but that may be the point of the answer.

The notion of the archive is useful precisely because it enables us to oscillate between literalism and idealism. Even Derrida starts his discussion by reflecting that the archive is first of all a literal place; a domicile, an address,

a residence (Derrida, 1995: 1–2). There are places called archives: libraries, centres of storage, record offices and so forth. But even such literalism might quickly move us on to a somewhat more ideal, or generalized, plane. For instance, one could pose the question of the archive in terms not too dissimilar from the notion of a space of ‘objective knowledge’; that is, in Karl Popper’s particular sense of that term, as a ‘third world’ beyond both the physical world of things and objects and the world of subjective experience or the ‘knowing subject’; ‘theories published in journals and books and stored in libraries’ (Popper, 1972: 73, and Chapter 3 *passim*; also Hacking, 1975: 184–5). The distinguishing feature of this third world, for Popper, is that it is *autonomous*; it produces its own effects, resembling, Popper claims, most closely ‘Frege’s objective contents of thought’ (1972: 106).

One might imagine, indeed, a sociological history of such places of storage, deposition, testimony and administration; a history that would also be a history of the relevant agents of the archive. It would be a history of at least two kinds of people – archivists and historians – who tend to inhabit such dry, dark, forbidding places. Such agents of the archive should not necessarily be seen in the terms of liberal historiography; that is, as conscientious, unassuming agents of culture as opposed to power. Archives are not only for fusty antiquarians, for those who espouse forms of historiography disconnected from everyday life, those historians described by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*: ‘Here is snow, here life has grown silent; the last crows whose cries are audible here are called “wheretofore!”, “in vain!”, “nada!”’ (Nietzsche, 1969: 157). Our historical sociology of the archive would do better to see things more in the technological terms of the sociology of power. For those who work in the historical disciplines, the archive is akin to the laboratory of the natural scientist. Perhaps the archive is even akin to what Bruno Latour would call a *centre of calculation* (Latour, 1988: 72–5); except that what goes on there is less likely to be calculation as such than a certain art of deposition, preservation and – for both the archivist and the historian, if more so the latter – interpretation. A *centre of interpretation*, then; that is what the archive is. Our modern, apparently liberal, societies have others; courts of law, psychotherapeutic encounters, departments of the humanities and so forth. And no doubt the centres of interpretation that characterize a society can themselves be used as items of interpretation; as symptoms of some of the leading characteristics of that society itself. Anyone writing a history of the centres of interpretation of our own society would have to give some considerable attention to the archive, for – reverting again to Latour’s language – it represents a kind of ‘obligatory passage point’ for all the others; the archive is the place in the network through which all the other points must pass (cf. *ibid.*: 43–9). This has not always been the case of course, but that might be precisely one of the findings of our sociological history. Pre-modern societies organized their relations to the past in different ways; through oral

forms, story-telling, mythologies, druidic incantations (Le Goff, 1992: 56–7; de Certeau, 1974; Goody, 1977). Ancient societies added calendars, writing and lists. Modern western societies, totalitarian or liberal, add the archive.

But if the notion of the archive might be gainfully employed to refer to a real history in this way, surely what makes the notion really useful is its very elasticity; that it goes beyond such a literal reference, or that it can be used to do so. At the other extreme, one might consider a much more *abstract* notion of the archive; that of Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault insisted that the archive was not an empirical concept, ‘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’ (Foucault, 1972: 129). Rather the archive is a functional concept, expressive of the historical a priori of thought in a culture; ‘the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events’, even if the archive is not amorphous but discriminating; ‘far from being only that which ensures that we exist in the midst of preserved discourses, it is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration’ (Foucault, 1972: 129).

It is not that Foucault’s concept of the archive is necessarily inadequate to the ambitious project of his archaeology of knowledge. But, for more general usage, Foucault’s treatment in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* situates the ideality of the archive in what is perhaps too abstract a space; that of the statement. The archive, he emphasizes, is ‘*the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*’ (ibid.: 130). In other words it has a completely virtual existence and none of the connotations of the happy literalism that we have been considering. But somewhere between such a virtual, functional notion of the archive and the more actualist notions, we might see the archive as a principle of *credibility*.² Obviously there are real places called archives, and obviously there might be real and effective histories of such places; just as alternatively one can think of the archive, in the manner of the early Foucault, in a very abstract way. But to think of the archive as a principle of credibility is to situate oneself more pragmatically somewhere between these two extremes of literalism and abstraction. As a principle of credibility the archive does need to exist as a real place, but, more than this, it functions as a sort of bottom-line resource in the carving-out of claims to disciplinarity. To take the most obvious example, the discipline of history, for instance, in whatever form, places a premium on archival credibility. One can write about the past in many ways, but unless one is unable to generate archival credibility, one is not *really* doing history. The status of such principles of credibility is at once epistemological and ethical: *epistemological* credibility because the archive is a site for particular kinds of knowledge, particular styles of reasoning that are associated with it; and *ethical* credibility because knowledge of the archive is a sign of status, of authority, of a certain right to

speak, a certain kind of author-function. Just as for the anthropologist the notion of fieldwork represents both a form of truth and knowledge and a certain ethical authority, a certain right to speak, so the archive confers similar rights on those – whoever they are – who seek to generate credibility on its basis.

But what is this credibility a credibility *of*? If someone with ‘street credibility’ is someone who can handle his or her moral luck in the cut-throat conditions of the outside world, what would ‘archival credibility’ be? It would be a credibility that referred not to the streets but to providence; a form of *providential* credibility. Indeed it would confer a sort of expertise of providence, the right to make statements about the past, about history, about change, about fate and, by extension, if in a deliberately delimited way, about the future; the right not necessarily to predict the workings of providence, still less to dictate to them, but to a certain kind of providential *seriousness*.

Finally, if there is a certain kind of *modernity* – which is to say not necessarily the sociological norm but the leading-edge or principle of directionality – that we can attach to the spirit of the archive, we could do worse than to suggest that this lies in at least three principles of archival reason: the principles of publicity, singularity and mundanity. These, then, are the spirits of the archive.

1

Is there an ethic of the archive? The person who speaks from the archive is the person who mediates between the secrets or obscurities of the archive and some or other kind of public. To be sure, if the existence of an archive always presumes the existence of a public, this is not necessarily the same thing as the *general* public. After all, many archives today are restricted; the prefaces of books are full of acknowledgements to those who have control over access to private archives. But if many archives are kept deliberately secret, they are there only to be *used* by some or other constituency, even if this constituency or public has only a kind of virtual existence somewhere in the future. In other words, one aspect of the modernity of the archive is that it should ultimately relate to some kind of *public memory*. To see that this is so one has only to contrast this state of affairs with that which existed prior the emergence of archives in their modern form. In fact the earliest archives were tied not to liberal but to sovereign forms of power; for example, to what Le Goff has called *royal memory*:

Kings constitute memory-institutions: archives, libraries, museums. Zimri-Lum (c. 1782/1789 BC) made of his palace in Mari, where numerous tablets have been found, an archival centre. In Ras-Shamra in Syria,

the excavation of the building of the royal archives of Ougarit has made it possible to locate the archival depots in the palace: diplomatic, financial, and administrative archives. (Le Goff, 1992: 60)

Before the invention of the modern notion of the public, archives nearly always take this sovereign, non-public form. Even in what historians think of as the early part of the modern period, the first archives were centralized expressions of enlightened despotism: Peter the Great at St Petersburg in 1720 and Maria Theresa at Vienna in 1749. In France the revolutionaries in 1790 ordered the creation of the National Archives; but the key date for the emergence of the really modern kind of archival spirit is surely 25 July 1794, the date of a decree opening up those archives to the public. England's Public Record Office dates from 1838.

A key aspect of the publicity effect of the archive relates to what could be called its necessary indeterminacy. This sort of archivalism does not, or does not any longer, serve a *direct* political or state function; hence to bring its secrets to light needs a careful, meticulous expertise. One might say that insofar as it seeks to be 'modern' or enlightened, the archive does not present an instrumental relation to the world; so although it may have, or have had, many performative functions it is not only and essentially performative. The archive is there to serve memory, to be useful, but its *ultimate* ends are necessarily indeterminate. It is deposited for many purposes; but one of its potentialities is that it awaits a constituency or public whose limits are of necessity unknown. Needless to say, across that gap between the archive and its motivating interests there is a perpetual agonism. There are all sorts of moral and ethical difficulties that are likely to get in the way of a smooth passage between performative intentions and the ultimate constituency of the archive. It is never a matter of just revealing a given truth that is to be found there. So it would be a mistake ever to think that there could be an archive without a *politics* of the archive. Perhaps this can be seen best not from the domain of history and historiography but from that of literature. Jacqueline Rose has written a chapter on 'the archive' as it relates to the work of Sylvia Plath, a chapter that is, as Irving Velody has separately concluded, less a piece of literary criticism than a general reflection on the philosophy of the archive itself (Rose, 1992). The point about Plath is that the archive that relates to her is so obviously *not* an innocent matter. The arguments over Plath's legacy since her suicide have led to claim and counter-claim over the status of the writings that she left behind her, with different sides blaming one another for all the negativity that is at stake. But as Rose shows, negativity and ambivalence are actually at the heart of Plath's very own work; the agonism over the archive is, then, but an ordinary – which is to say inevitable – reflection of this. Such agonism is internal to the very principle of the archive, at least in Plath's case. But in fact Rose's argument, as she herself insists, is not just about Plath but about language itself:

What can be seen from looking at the archive of her writing [is that] in direct proportion to the extent that Plath writes of psychic conflict and subjectivity in the body of her writing, as *theme*, so the content of that writing is duplicated, can be rediscovered at its most intense and problematic, in the frame that surrounds and most literally, most physically, constitutes her work – frame meaning here not her own enunciation but the editing, publication and presentation of her writing. (Rose, 1992: 69–70)

The case of Plath only dramatizes in an extreme way what is at stake with the modern idea of the archive as such: that archives have beginnings but not origins, that they are both controlled by gatekeepers and worked upon, are never innocent but yet still oriented towards a space of public contestation, towards a never-ceasing politics; oriented – one is tempted to say dialogically – towards some or other kind of recipient, the future.

A further way of appreciating this indeterminacy of the modern archive – if it were not too loaded a term, the notion of a ‘liberal’ archive might be apposite – is by taking as a case-study that sort of example where what is involved is precisely a kind of transition from secrecy to publicity: the opening-up of the archive to become a public possession (Shentalinsky, 1995). The ex-totalitarian societies are full of archives waiting to be opened up. Here we learn of the importance of texts which were once, so to speak, a product precisely of the *performative* intentions of the archive. The KGB, for example, did not surely expect their files to be someday available to any general public. Yet the irony lies precisely in the fact that a certain *innocence* is conferred by this performative intention; making such archives all the more valuable for the scrutiny of a later public; an irony, that is, precisely because although such an archive was originally designed for a particular, secret purpose, it can thus be used all the better to provide something like objective evidence for those that follow. The KGB case-files studied by Shentalinsky were marked both ‘highly confidential’ yet also – and crucially for the subsequent workings of the gaze of a later public memory – ‘to be kept indefinitely’ (ibid.: 6). The apparatuses of surveillance and control deposited their writings for – in principle – an eternity. Hence the extraordinary pathos of totalitarian archives when they come to light and meet the modern public gaze. Everything is kept. It is a pathos of ordinary existence. The records on the arrest of Isaac Babel document the way in which he was stripped ‘of each last item that still linked him to everyday life’ (ibid.: 23). Now everyday life becomes the property of the archive: ‘toothpaste, shaving cream, a bath sponge and, it is recorded in the receipt stitched into his case-file, “the thong from an old pair of sandals”’ (ibid.: 23). But the archive is also an instrument of power in that it is capable of producing huge amounts of information for itself. This indeed is one of the unintended consequences of totalitarian kinds

of archive. Babel's torturers wanted something very specific from him: a confession. But they leave us with an archive that allows us to see into something of Babel himself and his work. On being asked why he had been arrested Babel had declared that it was because of his own inability to write. His arrest soon changed that; it turned him once again into a writer.

The historian Boris Souvarine, looking back over his meetings with Babel in Paris, recollected the following conversation: 'So you think there are valuable literary works in your country that cannot be published because of political conditions?' 'Yes', replied Babel. 'They're in the GPU [archives of the secret police].' 'How do you mean?' 'Whenever an educated person is arrested and finds himself in a prison cell, he is given a pencil and a piece of paper. "Write!" they tell him.' (ibid.: 27–8)³

With the totalitarian archive, the archivist and the historian are essentially the same person; there is no gap between their functions. One might suggest that if there is such a thing as a 'liberal' notion of the archive then this would consist not least in its status as a depository of information and documentation on whatever theme is then ripe for the dissection of *others* in their own way. With the liberal kind of archive there is always some other who can come along to re-interpret things. With the KGB archives, this occurs insofar as they are opened up. For we know these things about Babel and the others only insofar as these archives have been converted from their original performative role and made, albeit in a limited way, public. Here the archive, the archivist and the historian – or the critic or the journalist or whoever comes along to interpret the archives – are not the same person in ethical and epistemological terms. This distinction between keepers and interpreters broadly corresponds to that of primary and secondary sources, which has been said to be the foundation of today's liberal kind of historiographical reason (Collingwood, 1946: 278–81). But it corresponds to it only indirectly, as it were at one remove, because *both* archivist and historian aspire to an expertise of the primary source – a consideration which serves to relativize the force of this supposedly founding distinction itself (Cousins, 1987: 131). The point, however, is not exactly *where* the line is drawn but only that *some* kind of line should be held to exist, that it should be 'up for grabs' for negotiation; that there should be an ethics and politics of the line itself. Hence one might say that the distinction between the primary and secondary sources is that on which the very status of the archive turns. The archive is like a raw material, which is not the same as saying that it is an ordinary material or an unworked-upon material; rather it is what has been made *available*, what has been thus presented to us, a kind of gift, which is to say also – for future constituencies, future publics – a kind of debt.

In epistemological terms, this debt is typically repaid, according to the logic of archival reason, by a scrupulous attention to singularity. Although it is no doubt the historian who makes the noisiest claim to the expertise of providence that derives from the archive, it is not just a question of history or of the historiographical disciplines per se. There is rather a family of disciplines that surround the archive; and perhaps their prototype, as Michel Foucault suggested in a work that might be a useful source for any more ambitious reflections on the topic, is clinical medicine, a discipline which, as he said, lies at the heart of the epistemological structure of all the so-called human sciences (Foucault, 1973: 198; cf. Forrester, 1996). Clinical medicine was, for Foucault, the paradigm-case of all those areas of study that had transgressed the Aristotelian injunction against a knowledge of the 'individual fact'; areas of study that were localizing, individualizing, diagnostic, historical, concerned with the question of the 'case' in all its singularity and complexity.

Archival reason is a form of reason that is devoted to the *detail*. Hence the disciplines closest to the ideality of the archive are surely those that Carlo Ginzburg has labelled the conjectural sciences; those concerned with an evidential paradigm focused on individuality and the particular event. These disciplines – which include for Ginzburg medicine, philology and art history – are devoted not to scientific rationalism but to an ideographic attention to bodies, deposits, traces, signs, or clues that require expert interpretation, which is to say, differentiation (Ginzburg, 1986). For such disciplines the idea of the case-history, the individual event, is closely tied to the existence of a finite deposit of materials, an archive, from which such cases are drawn and which gives them epistemological support. On the one hand, there is the archive itself – a collection of materials, clues and cases that can be brought together, sometimes seemingly almost at random, in one location – and then, on the other, there is the whole process of scrutiny, interpretation and, one is tempted to say, after Ginzburg, *divination*; that epistemological work that brings the archive into a relation to providence. In the clinical disciplines, this is the doctor's speech that relates to the history of the case and to its prognosis, and in history it is the work of a certain placement of the past in relation to the present, a disposal of the past in a particular place, not a prognosis as such but the establishment of that sense of orientation of the present with the past that all empirical history is about. In either instance, in fact, there is something like a *clinical* logic at work; a disposal of the facts in a particular way so as to produce a particular picture of things in a one-off singularity. And in each case, such a singularity is produced only through the labours of an aesthetic of perception; a fine, discriminating gaze that is able to isolate, on the basis of experience and example, items of significance out of a mass of detail.

No doubt there are no details that are necessarily excluded by the archive. There can be archives *of* just about anything. But it also seems to be the case that archival reason does tend to privilege certain kinds of truth as against others; or rather, archival reason tends to problematize a certain kind of reality as being basic to its struggle for truth. This is the principle of the explanatory relevance of the mundane. It is not that archival reason necessarily seeks out the obscure detail or the uninteresting fact, but that for such kinds of reason the true field of explanation lies with the realm of the mundane, with everyday life, with the microphysical element in life and power. The principle of mundanity should not be limited to the realm of 'lower' or ordinary life, the lives of so-called ordinary people. Certainly that is how the discipline of social history has tended to interpret matters, but it need not be restricted to such a reference. The motto of archival reason in this context is that 'power is ordinary'. Do not begin with great transhistorical laws and do not begin with the acts and pronouncements of the powerful themselves – or at least look at these as things to be explained, not as principles of explanation – but look behind the scenes of power at its everyday workings and machinations, wherever you may find them. The mundane can be anywhere; in the obscure files of a ministry of state, in the estate records of an aristocratic family, in the files stored in the basement of a foundling hospital, in the deeds stored in a local library, in the inquisition register of a medieval village, or in the minutes of early working men's associations. So it is not just a question of a romantic focus upon the powerless. What is at stake here, in fact, is a distinctive way of making visible the question of power itself. If royal memory was a memory of the sovereign and great acts, then archival memory in its modern forms is a memory – even when it focuses on the great and the powerful themselves – of everyday detail; a style of memory that contains within itself the assumption that the everyday is a particularly revealing level on which to pose the question of memory.

Take two texts that illustrate the principle of mundane relevance particularly starkly. The one embodies the image of the archive as a domain concerned with questions of mundane administration; the other celebrates archival reason through a sort of aesthetic archaeology of it. First, there is Tocqueville's classic analysis in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (Tocqueville, 1966). This text is still used as a key resource for inaugurating students at some universities into the discipline of history. In some ways this is odd because it is not really a history book; or at least its pertinence to us today is not surely one of history (Furet, 1981: 141; White, 1973: 227). Not least of its relevance comes, rather, from its circumstances and its thesis. For Tocqueville's great work was first of all a work of the archive. Tocqueville worked in 1853–4 in the archives of Touraine; he had gone to the prefectorial archives at Tours in order to go over

the records of the pre-revolutionary intendants there. He used other archives too – public documents, minutes of the meetings of the Estates and provincial assemblies, the *cahiers* drawn up by the three orders of state, and other state records (Tocqueville, 1966: 24–5; cf. Herr, 1962). But this archival perspective was not particularly aimed at getting nearer to some kind of primary truth about the past. Archival consciousness is not necessarily antiquarian consciousness. Rather, Tocqueville's excursion into the past was motivated by his concern with the present (Furet, 1981: 132). It was designed, of course, to give him a particular kind of purchase upon providence. And what the archives showed was that, beneath the heady world of revolutionary activity, ordinary life carried on in much the same way as it had done under the *ancien régime*.

The more closely I studied these documents, the more I was struck by the innumerable resemblances between the France of that period and nineteenth-century France. . . . It would seem, in fact, that the peculiarities of our modern social system are deeply rooted in the ancient soil of France. (Tocqueville, 1966: 26)

But the point is itself a historical one; which is to say that Tocqueville's thesis was not the antiquarian suggestion that there is a transhistorical primacy to ordinary life, but rather that the ordinary was itself invented by the administrative regulations of the *ancien régime* and was then furthered by the Revolution. Hence Tocqueville's concern, expressed in *Democracy in America*, to replace both the aristocratic models of history, which focused on the big events and the big actors, and the democratic forms of history, which reduced everything to general causes, with a different kind – we might associate it with the rationality of the archive itself – which would focus not on the dramatic singularities of great events or on the anonymities of general laws but on the perspective and continuities of something like ordinary or everyday life, work, administration and power wherever it was to be found.

So it is not just that archives happen to be rather ordinary places or that they give access to the everyday and the mundane. Rather the everyday – or if one prefers, that we can *see* the import of the everyday – is itself an effect of archivality. Archives produce a certain kind of relevant information; the ongoing mundane facts.

In the archives [says Tocqueville] I found (as indeed I had expected) a living memorial spirit of the old regime, the ways men thought and felt, their habits and their prejudices. For in them everyone expressed his views with total frankness and voiced his inmost thoughts. Thus I had access to a mine of information which was not available to contemporaries, since these archives were kept rigorously secret. (ibid.: 25)

In any case, what we have here is not an arid archival empiricism but a kind of implicit philosophy of the archive, which is to say, a philosophy of

ordinariness and of the everyday, even when one is looking apparently at the very heart of power itself; that, in any case, the place of power may be not confined to the big world of sovereigns and politics or to the realm of overarching theories, but be in the interstices of life itself, where the ordinary and everyday are played out. Would there be a discipline of history without the historian's willingness to pursue, whatever his or her empirical topic, the obscure, the hidden, the singular and the apparently mundane, even if as a result of his or her labours the mundane becomes privileged as the most extraordinary and revealing side of things there is?

The second text pushes this question of archival power a little further. Michel Foucault's 'The Life of Infamous Men' considers the archive as a kind of mnemotechnological invention. The text is about the powers that are exerted over the commonplaces of ordinary life. As Gilles Deleuze has claimed, this text is in fact a *chef d'oeuvre* and is in many ways more interesting than the more staple Foucauldian shibboleths devoted to sexuality, surveillance, Panopticons and the like (Deleuze, 1989). It is a sort of miniature archaeology of archival reason. For Foucault, what infamous really means is originally *unfamous*; so we are talking about the commonplace lives of the hitherto unknown. Foucault's 'infamous men' begin life as unfamous, as ordinary, but become fantastic – infamous – through the archive. From the end of the 17th century, Foucault argues, religious notions of confession began to give way to another mechanism – one recalls Tocqueville's analysis here in fact – for holding power over the lives of subjects, namely 'an administrative and no longer a religious arrangement: a mechanism of registration and no longer a pardon. . . . And everything thus said is registered in writing, accumulates and constitutes dossiers and archives' (Foucault, 1979: 89). It is not that everyday life did not pre-exist this moment, but that the ordinary now has a new visibility, a stage for its operations; and the ordinary must be recounted, verbalized, scripted. 'All those things which make up the ordinary, the unimportant detail, the obscurity, the days without glory, the common life, can and must be said – better written' (ibid.: 86). Again, it is as if administrative power produces rather than merely reflects this mutation; a new concern for the infamy of the unfamous, the secret infamies of everyday, obscure existence:

. . . that they should belong to the billions of existences which are destined to pass away without a trace; that there should be in their misfortunes, in their passions, in those loves and in those hatreds, something grey and ordinary besides what is usually estimated as being worthy of what is recounted. (ibid.: 79)

And, rather as in the case of Babel alluded to earlier, there is a kind of *reversibility* about the archive; these obscure existences come to tell a story; perhaps, as Foucault says, the testimony of writing is even in a perverse way a kind of ironic compensation for being a victim of power (ibid.: 81).

It is important to emphasize that Foucault regards the archive as an effect of sovereignty. Not the overarching, singular sovereignty of what in *Discipline and Punish* he had called sovereign power, but a sort of multiple sovereignty over singularity itself, over the ordinary and the everyday; the sovereignty of the human sciences, of the institutions of justice, of the police, of medicine or psychiatry. Perhaps that is the secret of the archive even today; that it requires a re-animation through the workings of a certain kind of sovereignty, which is to say the sovereignty of clinical and historical expertise itself. And one might say that the particular – *clinical* – effects we get from archival histories stem from the fact that the sovereign gaze of the historian, the reader of the archives, re-animates the discourses he or she discovers in the archives, giving them an aura of a certain rarity, a kind of extraordinary ordinariness. And a historian's credibility will relate not least to the extent to which he or she is a virtuoso not just of the archive – no historian wants to be a mere 'archivist' – but of a fine, aesthetic sensibility; bringing forth this hitherto unseen world of the everyday, the extraordinary, the ordinary beyond politics and theory.

Foucault's aim in these reflections was not to deconstruct the idea of the archive, nor to offer up a critique of it. Most of his work is actually better read as an oblique kind of celebration of archival reason, even if he was perhaps tempted by the desire to push such forms of reason towards ends that were different from those used in more established forms of history-writing. In any case, outside of all concerns for critique, I hope to have shown in this article what kind of an accomplishment – at once ethical and epistemological – is represented by these spirits of the archive. We should conclude, however, by saying that what is at stake here is not only an intellectual or epistemological achievement; it also provides a kind of moral comfort. Foucault compared his archive of infamous men with the stories of Chekhov. The American philosopher Stanley Cavell, much of whose philosophy is oriented to this very question of the commonplace and the ordinary, would certainly agree with such a comparison. For Cavell, the concern with the mundane has moral effects. He suggests that the category of the ordinary is an aspect of the Freudian uncanny. He observes that 'The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us' (Cavell, 1994: 171). A more comprehensive analysis than can be offered here might pursue this thought. We might understand the valorization of ordinariness that is so integral to archival reason as an exercise in *repetition*; providing a sort of moral comfort in the face of the threat of melancholy induced by scepticism. Indeed, the disciplines of the archive are haunted by a sort of perpetual scepticism that is particularly evident in the discipline of history. On the one hand the archive gives us the empirical truth; its very presence assures us of the reality of the past. On the other hand all history discloses the relative character of our present values; the very activity of history is

liable to invoke the shades of scepticism. But, likewise, the very activity of history itself serves to keep the implications of such scepticism at bay. As Cavell insists, that the world exists is not something that is to be known so much as something to be acknowledged; and what is to be acknowledged is something like objectivity itself, that the world is separate from us, that it always escapes us; 'the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone' (ibid.: 172). What could better describe the historian's task as he or she labours daily in the archives, recovering, repeating, acknowledging the everyday life, the ordinariness, of a past that is gone but always to be regained?

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NOTES

- 1 For Cliff Davies and Pat Thompson, with apologies.
- 2 I am grateful to William Sewell for emphasizing this aspect of the archive at an ESRC conference organized by Patrick Joyce at the University of Manchester, September 1998, where some of these remarks were first presented.
- 3 One might add the case of Mandelstam here as well. His poem about the Ukraine famine, 'A Cold Spring', had never been written down until it was transcribed from his own lips by the thugs in the Lubyanka.

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