

## Touching the void: affective history and the impossible

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## **Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible**

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### **Abstract**

This essay attempts to answer postmodernist frustration with the persistence of History. It argues for the importance of understanding the appeal of historical work, its pleasures. Without such an understanding, theory and research will continue to talk at cross purposes, the one insisting that the past is unknowable; the other unable to ignore the vitality of its sources. The contention of this essay is that historical research is an affective experience of such intensity that it has been able to withstand the challenges of post-structuralism and postmodernism and so continue with 'business as usual' (Jenkins 2003, 15). While the intensity of the archival encounter is not often admitted in print, it continues to motivate the efforts of individual historians. The abstractions of theory cannot intrude upon the physical experience of holding a piece of the past. It demands our attention. But the intellectual consequences of the physicality of the archival encounter need to be effectively theorised: what is the role of touching and feeling in the pursuit of *knowing*? The archive is the place where historians can literally touch the past, but in doing so are simultaneously made aware of its unreachability. In a maddening paradox, concrete presence conveys unfathomable absence. In the archive, researchers are both confronted with the absolute alterity of the past and tempted by the challenge of trying to overcome it. It is suggested that this impossibility underpins the powerful attraction of the historical endeavour.

**Keywords:** affective history, archives, distance, impossibility, touch, time

All I saw were bundles and bundles of documents, tied in dirty grey parcels, and on tables round the walls an indescribable litter of parchments and papers [...] the whole floor was powdered fine with the dust of broken seals. [...] Here was the actual past, of which I had read unimaginatively in books. I could touch it and peer into it and savour its musty, faint but vivid perfume. Curiosity gripped me [...] I could only hear the whispering voices of men and women who, after the silence of centuries, had found a listener and were trying to speak. And gradually I learnt to attune my unaccustomed ears.

(Bryant 1969, 36)

Arthur Bryant may have been more nostalgic and less reflexively rigorous than most historians, but his excitement at encountering such a treasure trove of archival riches would be understood by many. This essay suggests that being able to 'touch', 'peer into' and 'savour' the 'perfume' of archival documents is a powerful affective experience, which deserves far greater analysis than it has received up to now. The epistemic consequences of feeling oneself to be in direct, *physical* contact with 'the past' at the same time as being unavoidably aware of its absence need to be unpicked and understood. Such a study might go some way towards answering Keith Jenkins' lament that 'no matter how many "differing interpretations" they may admit to, most mainstream historians still continue to strive for "real historical knowledge", for objectivity, for the evidentially-based synoptic account and for truth-at-the-end-of-inquiry' (2003, 3). It might also provide a useful underpinning for Alun Munslow's observation that 'while most historians know they construct the past, they really want it to be a reconstruction' (2007, 623).

The frustration of both writers is palpable. Yet neither addresses the reasons behind this situation: *Why* do historians feel the desire to reconstruct the past? *What* gives them the impression that this might be possible? And – if we accept that some have managed to free themselves of positivist ‘delusions’ - *why* do they continue to pursue a past they know to be unreachable and unrepresentable?

There is much more going on here than the professional protectionism against which Jenkins rails so convincingly. There is a deeply affective side to historical work which might not be readily admitted in print but which animates discussions amongst colleagues and sends historians dashing to archives, pencils sharpened, digital cameras charged, minds racing. The contention of this essay is that historical research is an affective experience of such intensity that it has been able to withstand the challenges of post-structuralism and postmodernism and so continue with ‘business as usual’ (Jenkins 2003, 15). Without an open and frank discussion of this affective dimension, theory and research will continue to talk at cross purposes, the one insisting that the past is unknowable, the other unable to ignore the vitality of its sources. In order to understand the persistence of History, we need to understand the *appeal* of historical work, its pleasures.

Since Raphael Samuel's seminal *Theatres of Memory* (1994), there has been an increasing interest in public history and nostalgia. A recent addition to this field is Jerome de Groot's *Consuming History* (2008) which examines the way in which popular media encourage empathetic engagement with ‘history’ (with

inverted commas firmly in place). Whilst de Groot discusses the impact of popular historians, from David Starkey to Linda Colley, his attention is fixed solely on their presentation within the media and their reception by the public. He does not attempt to engage with the historians' own interest in the past. They are not, it seems, subject to the emotional responses to history which de Groot identifies in their audience.

This approach is not unusual. Much as they study the construction, dynamics and persistence of 'collective memory', historians seem to be embarrassed to turn their attention to their own relationship with the past. The ways in which the fruits of historians' efforts are to be presented and understood have been discussed ad infinitum, however, the desire to study the past at all has largely been tactfully ignored. Despite – or perhaps because of – popular engagement with historical research, an admission that historians are excited by the past seems to leave them dangerously open to charges of sentimentalism. A discreet but sturdy barrier has been erected between 'memory' and 'history' on the grounds that the first is affective and sensory, the second critical and dispassionate (for example see Halbwachs 1980, Nora 1996 and more recently Landsberg 2004). As Mark Salber Phillips (2008, 58) has recognised, 'if sentiment designates the area of human experience we have worked hardest to historicize, it also names the kind of historicization we are most careful to disavow.' Salber Phillips is here responding to the turn towards 'sentimental history', in the sense of 'not just acknowledging the importance of the emotions, but also recognizing their central role in social communication and moral judgement' (53). This is, he argues, the underlying

impulse behind recent histories of everyday life as well as of studies of trauma, from the Holocaust to Vietnam. Similarly, Vanessa Agnew (2007) has looked at 'history's affective turn', particularly with regard to historical re-enactment, and found that it is a type of historical representation which 'is less concerned with events, processes or structures than with the individual's physical and psychological experience' (310). Although Agnew is primarily looking at forms of 'public history' – museums, historical fiction, reality TV – she is also interested in the epistemological implications of re-enactment for academic history.

It is clear that the role of emotion in historical study is becoming both more apparent and more effectively theorised. But it is not this turn to sentiment or emotion that is my concern here. Instead, I am interested in the affective nature of the historical research process and in the historian's responses to 'pastness', to the otherness of historical distance.

As Patricia Ticiento Clough (2007) and Brian Massumi (2002) have each discussed, the Spinozian sense of affect is far more than a synonym for 'emotion'. It involves body and mind, reason and passion. It poises us in a liminal state 'prior to the distinction between activity and passivity' (Massumi 2002, 32) and 'proposes a correspondence between the power to act and the power to be affected [which] applies equally to the mind and the body' (Ticiento Clough 2007, x). Such openness to being affected, combined with the power to act, to think, seems perfectly suited to the research process, which Jonathan Walker (2002, 191) has described as involving 'an altered

state of consciousness, a simultaneous expansion of the imagination and an obsessively reductive concentration on sources'. And, as we will see, even sedentary, archival research has a powerful corporeal component. Yet, the bodily experience of 'doing history' has been rather neglected. Samuel (1994, 268-271) defended popular interest in heritage from the 'hostility' of 'elitist' historians with their 'fetishization' of archives, of the written word, over physical traces of the past, arguing that this indicated 'an almost complete detachment from the material environment'. Fifteen years after these words were written, materiality and physicality seem to be emerging as areas of historical interest. Much of this work has focussed on (re)enactment, on bodily practices and on place.

On one level an encounter with *the actual place* where something happened can produce intellectual insights, allowing us to join up the dots and make connections which may not have been possible in the abstract. For instance, Renée M. Sentilles (2005) describes the impact of her journey to East Texas in search of the archival traces of Adah Isaac Menken. Travelling through the landscape allowed her to 'understand' Menken's story in a way that hadn't been possible before. She now felt able 'both to picture her life and to understand why legends of her Texas birth persisted despite all evidence' (145). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2002) explain how 'the location authenticates the narrative, embodies it, makes it real, to the point where it threatens to re-engulf those who come to tell and to listen'. They have described how their receptions of their parents' memories of escaping the Nazis in their hometown of Czernovitz were completely changed by being

in the place: 'On site, their memories gained relief, dimensionality, texture and color. [...] And as we walked about this landscape of memory, the streets became animated with the presence of people from that past [...], conjured up by recollection and narration, by our being there, by our presence and witnessing' (271-2). Yet, the attempt at reenactment can also serve to highlight the very difference between past and present; the ultimate impossibility of a satisfactory reenactment. The unity of place emphasises the sheer impossibility of achieving a unity in time. This theme has been explored by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) who notes that the physical traces of the past ('A castle, a fort, a battlefield') 'embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hand [...]. We imagine the lives under the mortar, but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?' (29-30).

Work on place and (re)enactment has strong links to public memory, to living history, to 'heritage' but some exciting historical work is also trying to theorise the affective nature of place and (re)enactment in terms of historical research (see for instance Mattfeld 2008; Agnew 2007). Whilst acknowledging the great value of these studies, the point I would like to make is that it is not only new, physical historical methods that raise questions of historical affect. On the contrary, affect is intrinsic to that most established of historical practices, archival research. The archive is not necessarily a retreat from the physical traces of the past; in fact, it could be seen as another way encountering and indeed of handling 'pastness', albeit in a form where affect and sensory pleasure can hide behind professional codes and disciplines.



The thrill of chasing a paper trail, the quickening sensation of uncovering a key piece of evidence, of confirming or unsettling a narrative will be familiar to any historian. Yet, as Carolyn Steedman (2001, 145) acknowledges, the power associated with the archive can be a form of obfuscation. Although 'There is a story put about that the authority comes from the documents themselves and the historian's obeisance to the limits they impose', in fact the historian's authority derives from '*having been there* (the train to the distant city, the call number, the bundle opened, the dust...)'. This authority is institutionalised in 'the conventional rhetoric of history-writing, which always asserts (th[r]ough the footnotes, through the casual reference to PT S2/1/1 ... ) that you *know* because you have been there' (original emphases). Thomas Osborne (1999, 53-4) highlights the need 'to generate archival credibility' in order to prove that one is '*really* doing history' (original emphasis). He distinguishes two forms of credibility: epistemological - because the archive is associated with a particular kind of knowledge, reasoning and discourse; and ethical – because 'the archive is a sign of status, of authority, of a certain right to speak, a certain kind of author-function.' There are pleasures associated with a successful negotiation of these codes. Bradley (1999) describes her 'first self-conscious encounter with the archive' as 'at one and the same time legitimating [her] claim to be included in the fraternity/sorority, demonstrating [her] membership by partaking of one of its characteristic activities, and enjoying the privileges of occupying one of its habitations' (109-10).

Achille Mbembe (2002 19) paints a powerful picture of the archive as a physical entity, constructed through the building itself ('its motifs and columns [...] the labyrinth of corridors') and through the 'rituals' and 'discipline' of the research process, conducted in 'half-light and austerity'. Mbembe highlights the 'religious', 'quasi-mystical' atmosphere of the archive, the place where 'fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred'. He also emphasises that this 'material nature' becomes 'inscribed in the universe of the senses' and that the sensual experience of the archive 'does away with doubt'; the evidence we find there therefore 'acquires the status of proof' (20-21). The same effect is noted in a far less reflective text: a 1969 handbook to archival research (Brooks 1969). This is rather a prosaic work, mainly intended to convey information on how to conduct a research project, advising readers, for instance, to contact the archive in advance of their visit. The introduction, however, contains an important insight into the attractions of the archive. Its author explains that 'There is a fascination about handwritten papers from other days, a feeling of genuineness, a personal touch about them that brings one close to the people who produced them.' Moreover, he assures us, 'This sense of reality is more than a superficial impression' indeed, it is the basis for 'the faith that historians have in "original" source materials' (1). While such uncomplicated statements of faith are not often made in today's academic climate, the connection Brooks draws between the sensory experience of the archive and the historians' faith in their sources suggests that it is in precisely this area that we may find an answer to Jenkins' (2003) frustration that historians have been able to set aside the crisis of post-structuralism and continue with 'business as usual'. The idea that a *feeling* of genuineness can

*bring one close* to the authors of historical texts seems to persist in more or less overt forms.

One wonderfully frank exploration of the connection between the aesthetic of the archive, the physicality of its records and the historian's intellectual response comes from Deborah A Symonds (1999) She begins her account with a rather confessional exploration of 'the empirical experience of the archive, record office, and library' (164). In Symonds' case this became a very physical experience indeed as she found herself locked in Edinburgh University Library. But it was not the library itself, with its glass walls, 'slanting light and utter silence' which she 'was sorry to leave'; it was the card catalogue and the sense of absorption in her work. Symonds goes on to describe working in the Historical Search Room at Register House in Edinburgh. She describes in great details the architecture, the look, feel and smell of the place, yet although this clearly has a great impact on the nature of her research experience, she comments that the most striking thing was the speed with which she forgot all this 'once [her] books were delivered.' It is not just the content of these books which entrances her; it is their tangible, physical presence:

At the risk of arrant romantization, I am inclined to argue that historians must hold the original documents of whatever they study, look at the paper and smell everything. Only by coming face to face with surviving documents, seals, letters, maps, accounts, and receipts can one, I believe, fully weigh the meaning of terms like intention, falsification, and truth. (165)

There are intellectual, epistemological consequences here. Symonds' faith in the accounts with which she is dealing is profoundly affected by the way they look, smell and *feel*. She is unwilling to give up 'the product of hard work done to confirm, corroborate and make connections' in the archive for 'the densely layered abstraction of what is called theory these days' (173-4). This is a bold admission which needs to be taken seriously. The abstractions of theory cannot intrude upon the physical experience of holding a piece of the past. It demands our attention. But what is the role of touching and feeling in the pursuit of *knowing*? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) notes 'that a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions' and insists that 'both are irreducibly phenomenological' (17-21). The twin words of Kosofsky Sedgwick's title *Touching, Feeling* each contain this duality of texture and emotion within themselves. While questions of emotions - of personal investments in and identifications with - the objects of historical research have become topics of professional debate over recent decades, the other half of the equation - the sensations and textures of archival work - has remained firmly in the realm of individual experience.

Contra Samuel (1994), I would argue that it is the very physicality of archival records that gives them their 'talismanic importance'. In Walter Benjamin's words, an original object derives its authority from its material 'presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (1999 [1955], 214). In her collection of *Archive Stories* (2005), Antoinette Burton explored the intensely affective relationship of the historian to the

archive. While considerations of solitude, surveillance and exhaustion play their part, she also describes the way in which some colleagues 'wax rapturous about the capacity of archival discoveries to bring one into contact with the past.' One such historian described finding a priest's collar in a Jansenist archive, 'folded and secreted inside layers of powder'. She drew historical conclusions from this but also found its material presence 'a breathtaking and amazing thing' and added that the power of this discovery 'had everything to do with finding it there, in the archive' (8). It is this 'presence' which attracts and seduces us – digital facsimiles just don't cut it.

The rather ambivalent response to digital records is clear indicator of the extent to which the archival endeavour is predicated on an encounter with physical artefacts. Without doubt, digitization has transformed the historical discipline and made it possible to pursue topics that might otherwise have seemed insurmountable. For instance, Linda Colley (2007, xxviii) has described how her study of eighteenth century travel writer, Elizabeth Marsh, was made possible through 'manuscript and library catalogues, online documents and genealogical websites [...] to an extent that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago.' This does not, however, mean that the historical discipline is ready to substitute the convenience of digital archives for the sensory experience of the real thing. Colley is clearly also thrilled by the experience of reading 'an Indian travel journal written in [Marsh's] hand, and an early manuscript version of her book on Morocco' (xxvii). Sentilles (2005) is similarly enthusiastic about the new possibilities opened up by web-based research, yet concludes that digital records 'never send me on flights of

imagination like paging through original newspapers or getting the dust of two centuries under my nails.' She finds an internet photograph of her subject 'impersonal and uninteresting in a way that can never be said about an original carte-de-visite in the palm of my hand – especially if I find a bend in the corner or words scrawled on the back' (155). In the case of 'words scrawled on the back', there is clearly a matter of knowledge, of evidence, at stake. Yet Sentilles suggests that there is more to it than this, she is moved by the sense of reality contained in that photograph and by the physical experience of holding it, of fingering the crease. It would be a rare scholar indeed who does not distinguish between the experience of viewing a facsimile of an eighteenth century document online and holding it in his or her hands.

The embodied experience is also a consideration for records originally created in a digital format. For instance, the Barbara Castle Collection at the Bodleian includes two old IBM machines and a collection of Amstrad 3" and 3.5" disks. The archivists have transposed the files to pdfs but are also concerned that the 'authentic' experience of looking at the green text on a black screen should be preserved for those researchers who want to view the material through Castle's eyes (Thomas 2008). There is much more going on here than an intellectual thirst for knowledge, the archivists are aware that some researchers may want a physical encounter with the Castle artefacts, to attempt a bodily re-enactment of her experience. It is not clear that they will gain any greater insights from doing so – in fact, far from enabling them to enter the mindset of a woman using the best available technology of the time,

the rather archaic appearance of these documents seems likely to create distance between the researcher and their contents. This example suggests that archival research is in large part an affective experience. And it is absolutely dependent on an encounter with an original document or artefact.

While historians are becoming more and more willing to discuss their personal, familial and political investments in their research topics, the investment in *studying the past at all* is just as important. This is partly about the choice of topic in the first place. We may approach something not because of any clear personal involvement but simply because something about it resonates with us. Keith Jenkins (2003) makes this point very well, counselling that the ways in which individuals 'experience "the past" [...] - say some aspect of "Europe" in the thirteenth or the eighteenth century' is through finding that they prefer particular accounts, particular historiographical interpretations over others:

[...] something connects. But what? And all I can say is that something in one's life, something in one's experiences, something ultimately undecideable to do with one's mood(s), disposition(s), dream(s), imagination, makes one like this rather than that; decide this way rather than that way. (57)

Sheila Fitzpatrick (2009 forthcoming) provides an interesting and useful analysis of the place of emotions in historical research. In preparing to write a biography of her late husband, she was concerned about the impacts of taking on a project about which she could not and had no intention of trying to

be objective. Yet, when she came to think about this more deeply, she realised that alongside her theoretical position of being 'against political bias, subjectivity, and moralizing and in favour of objectivity' her work had always contained 'a strong subjective response to the things I studied'. She describes this as 'a feeling of emotional *knowing*' and concludes that history is always likely to involve an emotional response. Emotions govern both our choices of topic and the way in which we approach research and for some historians, a 'stance of objectivity' may be part of that approach, 'it may be that 'they think and write better that way' and use an apparent objectivity as 'a kind of historian's super-ego'.

Such a striving for objectivity can itself have emotional and affective qualities. Paul White has looked at claims that emotions were exorcised from the scientific discipline in the nineteenth century and replaced by an anti-emotional objectivity. He argues that 'The control of emotion within the experimental setting could itself be described as a highly affective process', dependent on 'aspiring intellects and racking passions, with nerves strung, and hearts thumping to the utmost of physical endurance' (White 2006, 118 quoting Gamgee 1882, 7-8). This attempt to remove or control the self in the search for objectivity is particularly associated with 'the *affects* of aesceticism' (White 2009 forthcoming. Emphasis in original). Even on the strength of more conventional accounts, White suggests, 'we would have to regard objectivity as an emotion, for it is described over and over again in emotional terms: an aspiration, a wishing, a striving, a ferocious devotion, a desire, a passion, a drive, an anxiety, a fear, a feeling - above all - of restraint' (ibid).



The issue which Fitzpatrick raises of the historians' 'feeling of emotional *knowing*' (my emphasis) is important and raises the question of how this knowing comes about. What impact does the process of research have upon our investment in our projects? Is this purely an emotional response or does it have affective qualities? What is the role of touching, of texture? Does *holding* a handwritten letter make us feel differently about its writer? More than that, does it make us *think* and '*know*' differently? Sentilles (2005) is clear that it does:

After a few weeks of reading through private letters, I came to know Menken in a personal way I did not even try to describe in the book. I could eventually tell with a glance whether the letter would be emotional, flirtatious, or prim, before I began to decipher the spidery script. And it was these ephemeral and, to me, fascinating details that fuelled my interest and kept it burning through all the slow, painful, and numerous stages of writing, revising, cutting, and rewriting. (155)

Symonds (1999) similarly credits her response to physical documents in the archive with her ability to sympathise with the stories contained therein (173-4). She feels that she can bring herself close enough to judge 'intention, falsification, and truth' through physically handling archival traces (165). This aspect of the research process is deeply under-explored. Jonathan Walker (2006, following Ginzburg and Prosperi), has acknowledged the contingent nature of archival research by advocating the presentation of historical

research as a journey through the archives, complete with all its 'Itineraries, Detours and Dead-Ends'. This is an important move towards acknowledging the sensory experience of research. However, Walker's account is of an intellectual journey through the documents he uncovers; it does not delve into the excitement of archival discovery or of engaging with the 'pastness' of the past.

One recent work which has attempted to analyse the affects associated with 'historical experience' is Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005), critiqued by Ewa Domanska (2009). Ankersmit is particularly interested in intense moments when the barriers between past and present seem to dissolve. For instance, he examines Huizinga's description of the 'historical sensation' of 'connecting with the past' on viewing a little-known seventeenth century painting of a family moving house. It is not the quality of the painting which attracts him, nor even the possibility of increasing his knowledge of its subject matter. It is a sudden, unexpected, intensely affective response. Ankersmit's use of the term 'historical experience' for such moments as these is rather complicated. He distinguishes between the 'objective historical experience' of people in the past and the 'subjective historical experience' of people looking back at (what they imagine to be) the past (264). Yet, despite this distinction (which in any case is collapsed in the *sublime* historical experience), the implicit correspondences drawn between subjective and objective experiences is a difficult one to maintain. Huizinga's own term 'historical sensation' is much less problematic. In the episode quoted by Ankersmit (126), Huizinga is not having the *experience* of a

seventeenth century family moving house, or even of a second class artist painting them doing so; in themselves these would, after all, be rather unremarkable experiences. Instead, he is having the *sensation* of a connection with the past, something which is remarkable because – for all its immediacy – it carries an air of the magical, the mystical, the impossible. The researcher using the Barbara Castle archive via her Amstrad is probably attempting the same thing.

The use of Huizinga's 'historical sensation' rather than Ankersmit's 'historical experience' has the further advantage of acknowledging the physicality of such experiences. Ankersmit traces the use of this term to Huizinga's mentor Van Deijssel and explores the implication of reciprocity which it contains:

Sensation is, so to say, a mutual embrace of subject and object in which each gives itself completely and unreservedly to the other, without any reluctance [...] Moreover, unlike the eye, the sense of touch really *adapts* itself to what it experiences. Think again of feeling the form of a vase that we hold in our hands: We then feel the vase's form because our own hands take on the very same form as the vase's. We are *formed* by what we perceive, what we perceive leaves its indelible traces on us. (130-1. Emphasis in original).

There are clear echoes here of the work of Ticiento Clough and Kosofsky Sedgwick (cited above), whereby affect 'proposes a correspondence between the power to act and the power to be affected [which] applies equally to the mind and the body' (Ticiento Clough 2007, x). The reciprocity of sensation, of

touch, perhaps goes some way to explain Symond's confidence that in holding her sources she is able to understand them. They are touching her, just as she is touching them; as Ankersmit would have it, they 'give themselves' to her. Ankersmit goes on to highlight another aspect of Van Deijssel's account of sensation – 'the disruption of temporal continuity and of the normal sequence of before, now, and afterward. The sensation therefore produces in us the conviction that its content is a repetition of something that has happened in precisely this same way maybe centuries ago' (132).

Frederic Jameson's (1991) discussion of the postmodern experience of 'pastness' is useful here. He finds that 'nostalgia films' and historical novels operate 'a new connotation of "pastness" and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history' (20). His argument is that we are caught in a self-referential circle, cut off from the referent of the actual past. Therefore 'the historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes pop history)' (25). Whilst historical research distinguishes itself from 'pop history' by seeking out new sources, new perspectives, new interpretations rather than simply re-presenting well-known narratives, it is worth considering the extent to which the archive offers historians a similar experience of 'pastness'. The rituals and aesthetics of the archive with its gatekeepers, call numbers, folders and *dust*, memorably described by Carolyn Steedman (2001), combine to produce an experience of 'doing history' - of encountering the past and of being an historian. We could suggest that it is the difference – exoticism, even - of archival traces (the

yellowed pages, the alien script) which conveys the impression of 'pastness', of irreversible temporal distance. Yet it is the illusion of overcoming that difference, of bridging that distance which gives the archival encounter its intensity.

Significantly, like Ankersmit, Jameson uses the concept of the sublime in this context. An authentic relationship to the past has been replaced by affective, personal encounters with 'pastness': a 'whole new emotional groundtone' of 'intensities' which can 'best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime'. Such 'intensities' could be applied to Huizinga's 'historical sensation', Flaubert's 'frisson historique' and Machiavelli's perception of conversing with the dead and being 'received by them lovingly'. (Pieters 2005, 89, 21). We might also think of Walter Benjamin's description of the past 'as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (1999 [1955], 247). These examples suggest that the intense experience of pastness is not a distinctively postmodern phenomenon. There are of course questions to be asked here about the ways in which historical sensations are felt by different individuals, in different ages and different cultures. This would be a fascinating piece of work but is far beyond the reach of this essay. Such a study should also ask whether historical sensation is magnified or diminished by greater temporal and cultural distance between subject and object. This is about more than the possibility of empathy, identification or comprehension; it is about the state of feeling oneself (on whatever basis) in communion with the past. Whilst I would

hesitate to offer any interpretation of what is really going on here, there are a number of discourses we might use to explore it further.

First, we might look at work in memory studies. As has already been indicated, the line between history and collective memory is thinner than it might appear; some historical work could also be seen as an attempt to recover *individual* memory. David Lowenthal's (1985, 203) description of the intensely personal, intensely affective experience of involuntary Proustian reverie is a useful starting point - this is the journey into a remembered past, where 'Certain heightened recollections seem to bring the past not only to life, but into simultaneous existence with the present'. Mark Salber Phillips (2008, 56) suggests that in the recent turn to what he calls 'sentimental history' the key is in creating 'a sense of simple immediacy – a presence so convincing that it seems to be in no need of mediation.' This is a history which wants to know not so much "what happened?" as "what did it feel like to be there?" Similarly, Ankersmit's sudden, piercing sensations of recognition in which temporal distinctions seem to collapse have a connection with Proustian reverie, as do moments of archival discovery, of insight which bring an instant surge of narrative explanation. Yet, this is a vicarious experience. We are not remembering our own past, but attempting the impossible task of resurrecting another's. It could perhaps be seen as striving towards 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg 2004).

Another discourse which seems to lend itself to this inquiry is that of psychoanalysis. Lowenthal reminds us that 'The most vividly remembered

scenes and events are those that were for a time forgotten' (205). This has resonances with Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* or uncanny. For Freud (2003 [1919]), the unsettling nature of phantoms and coincidental repetitions is not their strangeness but their repressed familiarity. The shock of archival discovery comes with an intense jolt of recognition – whether it be a handwritten note, a lost photograph or a peculiarly fitting fact. It is a profoundly uncanny experience, which speaks of repetition, revisitation and re-enactment. Significantly, Ankersmit compares the 'historical experience' with *déjà vu*, with all its connotations of the return of the familiar (132). Similarly, Benjamin (quoted above) speaks of the past appearing as an image to be *recognised* at a particular moment by the present. Theories of trauma could be of use here, exploring the ways in which the past makes itself felt in absence as well as in presence. A psychoanalytic approach could also follow Karl Figlio (2003) in attributing 'the urge for historical knowledge' to a 'wish to go back, to get to and be at the beginning'. He associates this urge with an Oedipal complex, manifested in 'phantasies of pre-empting beginnings', which 'becomes a form of incestuous relationship between the present and the past' (152; 153; 162).

In his article on 'The Desire for the Past' (1999), Nicholas Watson suggested another discourse again: mysticism. This was inspired by his work into medieval visionaries and he recommends a new form of history in which 'we explicitly set out to learn from the past how our desire for it can be used' (60). Watson compares the medieval writers' love for Christ with his own love for the past. Reading his work, one senses that this was neither immediately

obvious nor comfortable for Watson; he describes being 'slowly but surely swept away' by Julian of Norwich's 'refusal to admit the separation between desire and reason' although it challenged everything his historicist training and 'educated masculine identity' was founded upon. He came to appreciate that 'bodies also think, minds also feel' and felt that he and Julian 'had come to mirror one another across the hermeneutic gap hidden in [Karl F.] Morrison's signature phrase, "I am you"' (94-5).

The link between psychoanalysis, mysticism and history has been usefully excavated by Rhodri Hayward (2007) who shows how visionary and mystical faith experiences were organised into and explained away by psychoanalytic models in the nineteenth century. Crucially, Hayward emphasises the overlap between the growth of the historical discipline and of psychoanalysis at this time: both insisted on chronology, on coherent narratives of the past and on the importance of historical explanation. This marked a new and hegemonic understanding of the human condition, according to which the past shapes who we are. The inability to account for the past or – more worryingly – to maintain clear boundaries between past and present thus became a mark of madness, as dramatised in the many novels listed by Hayward in which the historian suffers mental breakdown as the past refuses to be contained.

Given the regularity with which the past is described as 'other', a postcolonial approach might also be considered. Perhaps the past is not only a *foreign* country; it is an *Oriental* country. In a recent *London Review of Book* article, Eamon Duffy (2009) picks up on Keith Thomas' description of his latest work



as “retrospective ethnography” which approaches the early modern past “in the same way an anthropologist might approach some exotic society” (18). This is perhaps only a particularly explicit instance of a far more frequent attitude. For instance, to return to the question of identification, highlighted above, it is worth highlighting that historians do not identify with people they believe to *be* like them; they identify with those they believe to *have been* like them. The ‘like’ here is qualified; the key is in the distance and the difference which (as good historians) we know to separate their mentality from our own. We have seen Symonds’ ‘sympathy’ for the object of her research. She notes Adam Smith’s observation that it is possible ‘even to sympathise with the dead’ but does not address Smith’s explanation that we sympathise with the dead *for being dead*. This not a simple extension of the principle of moral sympathy *even* to the dead; is a qualitatively different mode of sympathy, with clear implications for the historian:

The tribute of our fellow-feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we pay to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune. (Smith 1991 [1976], 13)

Smith’s sympathy for the dead arises from ‘our consciousness of that change’ they have undergone, and ‘our joining to that change’ through lodging ‘our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case.’ And, as with colonial discourse, the historical

imagination could be seen to be underpinned by an unacknowledged fear of 'the other'. Smith argued that our sympathy with the dead is the source of 'one of the most important principles in human nature, the dread of death' (13). Even when studying periods that are close in time and culture to our own, the fact of their being past, being dead makes them unequivocally different, 'other', exotic. It seems likely that this effect would only be heightened by greater temporal and cultural difference, although this requires further study.

Just as Said's Orientalists saw themselves as heroes 'rescuing the Orient from [...] obscurity, alienation and strangeness' (Said 2003 [1978], 121), so social historians have attempted to 'rescue' the lives of ordinary people 'from the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson 1986, 13). This could perhaps be described as *necessary* Orientalism. The historical subaltern is not only prevented from speaking, she is categorically unable to do so. Even the speaking subjects of oral history are speaking *of* the past, *from* the present. Like Bhuaneswari Bhaduri's suicide, examined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, 307-8), the past can only leave traces to be gathered, interpreted, mediated. Nicholas Watson (1999) describes the potential 'violence' of historical interpretation; only by 'acknowledging that the other remains other, however carefully it is understood', can this be avoided. Watson is influenced by Karl F. Morrison's fascinating exploration of the 'hermeneutics of empathy' (1988), which makes clear that empathy must involve both 'amorous' and 'malevolent' elements, the attempt to fuse with another necessarily involves the recognition that this is impossible. The paradoxical phrase 'I am you', which he takes as his starting point, also

includes its opposite: 'I am not you'. There is an irreconcilable tension here and it is only through acknowledging and embracing that tension that empathy can take place. Only by accepting the 'hermeneutic gap' separating subject and object 'can empathy aspire to a union that does not involve coercion or solipsism' (Watson, 74-5).

The methods of New Historicism provide an interesting point of comparison. It is both concerned with the otherness of the past and open about its fascination with that otherness. Lawrence Venuti is clear about his attempt to use the hermeneutic gap to exoticise the present. His approach is characterised 'by its effort to preserve the historical difference of its objects, by the capacity of this difference to deliver a judgment on the present' (1989, 265). In particular, he looks at the way in which nostalgic city comedies from the seventeenth century are able to deliver a progressive political message to the present: 'Historicizing the texts simultaneously judges the postmodern present by showing how its dominant ideologies are interrogated in a past when they are still emergent' (266). Venuti's approach could be seen to attempt a postcolonial relationship to the past, which refuses to adopt a privileged temporal position. It also follows Jenkins' injunction to open out the radical possibilities of historical interpretation so to serve progressive ends in the present and future (see Jenkins 2003). Yet New Historicism is also underpinned by the unsatisfiable desire for contact with the past which I have examined throughout this paper. As Stephen Greenblatt explains:

I began with the desire to speak with the dead. [...] If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them. [...] This desire is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum. (1988, 1)

Such reticence is (if anything) even more marked in the historical profession. As Jonathan Walker has said: 'No respectable academic historian would ever describe their task in terms of learning to love the dead (even I wouldn't, and I'm far from respectable)' (2002, 187). If more historians were willing to cross the line of respectability, we might begin, as Nicholas Watson wrote a decade ago, the work of 'systematizing the role that desire plays in historical scholarship' (1999, 60-1). Such desire does not have to be regressive, nostalgic, empiricist. In fact, it seems highly likely that it is in large part connected to at least a tacit acknowledgement of the unreachability and alterity of the past. We might conclude with Karl Figlio that:

Living in history and thinking historically forces us to acknowledge that, in the very moment of grasping the past, it is utterly unreachable. And just as fundamentally does the historical mind repudiate this impossibility, making it, instead, just a matter of time. (2003, 158)

I have tried to argue that Figlio's 'grasping' is more than just a metaphor. The archive is the place where historians can literally touch the past, but in doing

so are simultaneously made aware of its unreachability. In a maddening paradox, concrete presence conveys unfathomable absence. It is this irresolvable tension which drives the historical discipline and which determines its affective character. In the archive, researchers are both confronted with the absolute alterity of the past and tempted by the challenge of trying to overcome it.

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