

Jonathan Boulter

Melancholy and the Archive

Trauma, History and Memory in the
Contemporary Novel

Melancholic Archive

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The concept of the archive must inevitably carry in itself, as does every concept, an unknowable weight.

—Derrida, *Archive Fever*

Keep watch over absent meaning.

—Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

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For Mitra Foroutan

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Introduction

In mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish.

—Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Thought cannot welcome that which it bears within itself and which sustains it, except by forgetting.

—Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

The archive always works, and a priori, against itself.

—Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*

Preamble

Melancholy and the Archive finds its impetus and inspiration in a series of frustrations. I have been a serious reader of Freud and Derrida for decades; their work, specifically that dealing with ideas of loss, memory, and mourning, has deeply informed my readings of a variety of modern and contemporary writers. It is safe to say that without *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *Archive Fever*, or *The Ear of the Other*, I (and of course others) would not have been able to begin to think carefully about the complex protocols of memory and trauma at work in contemporary writing. It is Freud who allows us to begin thinking about how loss, as such, may in fact be an event that defines the subject as subject: without the experience of radical separation from a prior state of narcissistic self-sufficiency (as he suggests in “Mourning and Melancholia”) the subject truly has no understanding of the intricacy and necessity of its own finitude. It is Derrida, following from Freud, who allows us to begin thinking about the subject precisely as a site, a topos, of loss. His work, in *The Ear of the Other*, *The Work of Mourning*, and *Specters of Marx* (among others) fashions an image, discomfiting perhaps, of the subject as always already inhabited by its own loss: the subject, in effect, becomes an archive, a site, where loss is maintained and nourished. From Freud and Derrida, thus, I have derived my key terms: melancholy and the archive. But, and here is where my frustration begins, a careful reader of Freud and Derrida will notice that these central terms

are never fully worked out or defined in their work. Freud makes it clear that his understanding of the relation between his key terms, mourning and melancholia, is troubled by the fact that he cannot understand how mourning or melancholia, as such, work. To be more precise, Freud admits that he cannot understand the economic mechanism by which the subject breaks free of his or her attachment to the lost object. Mourning works, if it does, if the subject is able to sever her attachment to the lost object: her narcissistic attachment to that lost object is directed elsewhere and thus mourning occurs. Freud, however, is puzzled about how this process works:

[N]ormal mourning, too, overcomes the loss of the object, and it, too, while it lasts, absorbs all the energies of the ego. Why, then, after it has run its course, is there no hint in its case of the economic condition for a phase of triumph? I find it impossible to answer this objection straight away. It also draws our attention to the fact that we do not even know the economic means by which mourning carries out its task. (Freud 1984, 264–5)

Earlier in his essay Freud has admitted that, in the case of melancholia, a similar (if pathological) process of severing attachment is at work: “We may imagine that the ego is occupied with analogous work during the course of a melancholia; in neither case have we any insight into the economics of the course of events” (262).

A similar process of mystification is at work in Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. If Freud is frustrated by the fact that he cannot understand—and thus define—his key terms, Derrida rather blithely admits that he will not offer a definition of the concept of the archive. His task, he maintains, is merely to offer an “impression”:

We have no concept, only an impression, a series of impressions associated with a word. To the rigor of the *concept*, I am opposing here the vagueness or the open imprecision, the relative indetermination of such a *notion*. “Archive” is only a *notion*, an impression associated with a word. (Derrida 1995, 29)

Derrida will offer a justification for his refusal to descend into definition, but even that justification—having to do with allowing the word to stand open to the possibility of the future—leaves the reader with some degree of puzzlement.¹

And here my task begins. *Melancholy and the Archive*, in some elaborate sense, is an attempt to understand what Freud claims not to understand

and what Derrida refuses to disclose. That is to say, I am attempting, via the work of some central contemporary writers, to understand how, first, the economies of mourning and melancholy work and, second, how these economies relate to a conception of the archive. A central element of my argument is that my fictional and theoretical texts have a crucial dialogical function; that is, I tend to read these authors—Auster, Mitchell, Saramago, and Murakami—not “through” theory but, in essence, “as” theory. It strikes me, and I make these specific arguments in the chapters to follow, that some of these novels stand as acute and uncanny commentary on critical lacunae in Freud or Derrida. The work of art, in my reading, becomes a thought experiment: it asks questions that the scientist and philosopher (can ask but) cannot answer: How does the subject respond to radical loss? How does the process of mourning and melancholy work, economically? What are the implications of the idea that the subject, *in loss*, becomes an archive *of loss*, a site where the memory of loss and trauma is maintained in a kind of crypt? What would this archive look like? These writers of fiction, I argue, give specific, if troubling, answers to these (and other) questions.

The Archive, Melancholy, Disaster

The archive, as traditionally conceived, is a location of knowledge, a place where history itself is housed, where the past is accommodated. The archive is intimately conjoined with cultural memory, with its preservation, perhaps even with its supplementation.² Thus, the archive, as Derrida argues in *Archive Fever*, is oriented to, just as it is defined by, a peculiar structure of temporality. We perhaps conceive of the archive as a response, material or affective, to the past, as working toward a preservation of what has been, but Derrida wishes to emphasize the degree to which the archive works authoritatively to mark out the space of beginnings and futurity. In his elaborate reading of Yosef Yerushalmi’s *Freud’s Moses* (and we need to remember that Derrida’s theory of the archive emerges out of a reading of another’s reading of the Freudian archive: his theory of the archive thus takes the form of what he might call a “dangerous supplement” to the thoughts of another), he draws our attention to the etymology of the word “archive,” noting that the term itself means a place of commandment and commencement. The archive thus operates to assert a kind of juridical control:

Arkhe, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. The name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle

according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given—nomological principle. (Derrida 1995, 1)

Note Derrida's insistence on what we could call the spatial claims of the archive: it is a place—*there, there*, he insists—of geographical, phenomenal, reality; it is a place from which the order of things—let us call it for now the order of history—is governed.³ I wish to highlight Derrida's emphasis on the spatial reality of the archive: it is a space, a site, a phenomenal presence just as it becomes a temporal and spectral entity. The archive in Auster, Mitchell, Saramago, and Murakami at times marks itself precisely in these material terms: we have libraries (Mitchell), cemeteries (Saramago, Murakami), underground bunkers (Auster), actual texts (Auster, Mitchell, Saramago), all of which function in a specific relation to some conception of the past.

The archive, for Derrida, marks a space of anxiety, precisely, an anxiety about the possibility of loss: the archive exists only as an anticipation (and we note the futurity of this concept) of the loss of history; as such, it works proleptically to preserve what will inevitably be lost. The temporal valence of the archive thus is precisely futural: "the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory" (11). Derrida speaks of the technical archive: "the archive . . . is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* . . . the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future" (16). It is precisely here, in the anxious relation to what *will be*, that the spectrality of the archive comes into play:

It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise. (Derrida 1995, 36)

[T]he structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent "in the flesh," neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met. (Derrida 1995, 84)

In Derrida's complex reading of Yerushalmi's reading of Freud—in this way setting *Archive Fever* up as a kind of archive of Yerushalmi and Freud—the specter of Freud is instantiated (like the *arkon*) as an authority, but a spectral authority, a phantom to which Yerushalmi (and Derrida) orient their own temporal positions of coming *after*: after the Father, indebted to the Father, working perhaps to assert their own archiving gesture of authority over the figure who cannot be effaced. This “impossible archaeology” (85) of return can only figure history within a logic of the spectral inasmuch as the origin is both past but uncannily, and insistently, always returning as the trace (of the trace). We note here how Derrida shifts from emphasizing—at least etymologically—the phenomenal reality of the archive (it is a *place, there*) to a reading that insists on its inevitable spectrality. The archive is neither present nor absent in time: it perhaps will never be present; it is no longer, or ever was, a material entity, neither present nor absent *in the flesh*.¹

I, too, wish to emphasize the spectral quality of the archive in what follows. And I begin by suggesting that while the subject in these fictional texts does move within and through the material archive—libraries, cemeteries, wells—he himself is continually marked as the archive: the subject, in other words, becomes the archive. And he becomes an archive specifically inasmuch as he becomes melancholic, in the Freudian sense of the term. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud attempts to come to an understanding of how the subject deals with trauma and loss. There are, he theorizes, two responses to loss, to the loss of a loved one, or the “loss of some abstraction that has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, or so on” (252). The first, and most healthy, is what he calls mourning. Mourning is a process by which the loss is comprehended and accepted, “worked through,” to use his terminology. Mourning is the “normal” way one must deal with trauma and loss, with what Freud beautifully terms the “economics of pain” (252). Precisely how the subject overcomes loss is, as we recall, not known by Freud. It is a difficult process—it is “work”—but eventually the subject accepts that the loved one, with whom the subject may have identified, is no longer here to make claims on the subject. Melancholia, on the other hand, is an abnormal response to loss and situates the subject in a continual position of narcissistic identification with the lost object. In other words, the melancholy subject cannot accept that her loved one is, in fact, gone and works pathologically “to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” (258). What this means is that the past—loss, trauma—continually works its way into the present moment because the subject cannot move past it. More troubling is the idea that the subject does not *wish* to allow loss to recede into history but desires continually to

maintain a connection to the traumatic moment. In some ways the subject maintains this pathological state—which may, in fact, not be so pathological after all—because the traumatic moment is important for her, may, in fact, have shaped who she is.⁵ In *The Ego and the Id*, in fact, Freud notes that melancholia may structure the ego itself: the incorporation of the lost object “has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and [. . .] makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its ‘character’” (368). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler glosses Freud’s notion: “[I]dentifications formed from unfinished grief are the modes in which the lost object is incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in and as the ego” (132). She suggests that Freud’s position toward melancholia has shifted—Butler suggests he “reverses” (133) his position—between “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923). She suggests that between these essays lies a reversal of Freud’s attitude toward the overcoming of grief: in the earlier essay, grief is overcome by breaking attachments to the lost object; in the later essay, Butler suggests, Freud leaves open the possibility that melancholia may itself be a way of overcoming grief precisely in that the subject lets the lost object go by identifying with it. Butler’s reading of Freud is intriguing, but I think she overstates matters here for the sake of strengthening her claims on melancholia’s centrality. Freud has not “reversed” positions here so much as widened his range, to borrow his own phrase (367). Melancholia, for Freud, is never a means to overcoming grief: mourning is always his favored means to work through loss. The identification and incorporation of the lost object is a kind of narcissistic sublimation of loss: Butler would have us believe that sublimation and mourning are identical categories.

We can here turn again briefly to Derrida and his reading of melancholia in *The Ear of the Other* to clarify Freud’s position on the centrality of the lost object to the melancholic subject. Here, drawing on the work of Freud, as well as Abraham and Torok, Derrida offers an image of melancholia that is uncannily fleshy; it is an image of history as a kind of viral, material presence, working its way into the body of the melancholy subject, who becomes, in its turn, a kind of cryptological archive; it is an image, I wish to suggest, particularly suited to a reading of certain of our authors:

Not having been taken back inside the self, digested, assimilated as in all “normal” mourning, the dead object remains like a living dead abscessed in a specific spot in the ego. It has its place, just like a crypt in a cemetery or temple, surrounded by walls and all the rest. The dead object is incorporated in this crypt—the term “incorporated” signaling precisely

that one has failed to digest or assimilate it totally, so that it remains there, forming a pocket in the mourning body. The incorporated dead, which one has not really managed to take upon oneself, continues to lodge there like something other and to ventrilocate through the “living.” (Derrida 1988, 57–8)

Here, in Derrida’s image of the encrypted, now archived, subject, history speaks; history, more precisely, speaks through the subject from within the subject, fashioning the subject as *subject to* history just as it becomes the *subject of* history. As crypt, as archive ventrilocated by history, the subject begins to offer itself as a site to be heard, to be read, to be interpreted. And as such, as speaking archive, the subject offers itself to the reader—the reader who becomes now a kind of tomb raider—to be analyzed, more precisely, psychoanalyzed.

Melancholy and the Archive is a form of cultural psychoanalysis in the sense that it offers a reading of texts that reflect symptomatically various cultures’ desires and anxieties about the role of the archive, of the subject as (uncanny) archive. I am using the notion of culture here to refer both to the national origins of the writers (American, English, Portuguese, Japanese) but also, crucially, to their place within a generalized global economy of melancholia (defined, via my reading of Freud’s topography of melancholia, as a kind of historical nostalgia for what *has been*, what has been *lost*). But I am intrigued to notice how the subject—the self; his/her interiority—is often placed under some kind of threat even as she pursues the ideal of the archive, pursues, that is, some measure by which to preserve her history, her historical consciousness. Contemporary novelists offer analyses of the phenomenal archive (houses, crypts, holes, vaults, open spaces) and thus reify the very object within which memory—and history—itself is continually erased. It is here that these authors confirm Derrida’s most troubling ideas about the archive: the archive is not the site of the preservation of the past, of history, of memory, but of the inevitable loss of these things. The archive thus is doubly inflected by loss: it is a response to loss—we build memorials to loss, to trauma; the subject remembers and, melancholically, becomes that loss—and it anticipates, perhaps creates, the conditions of future loss:

The archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of said memory. (Derrida 1995, 11)

My sense here is that this dynamic—a fascination with the idea of the real archive combined with an acute anxiety about how the self can respond ethically, really, to the demands of history—is the central trope in contemporary fiction, a trope, moreover, that urgently requires extended analysis.⁶

Disaster and the Archive

Derrida's sense that the archive takes place at the moment of the erasure of history—at the site where the archive loses its claims to maintaining history by reproducing history—is a crucial aspect to what follows in my analysis.⁷ A simple way to express this is to say that the archive—be it material or affective (the subject as archive)—is continually calling itself into question. The archive defines itself by interrogating what it is doing with and to history; the archive defines itself by interrogating the claims of history on the subject. This is to say that if the archive is defined by a doubly inflected loss—the loss in the past, the loss to come—then the archive is marked, if not defined, by its specific relation to the *disaster*. And here I turn to my third thinker, Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995) is a crucial text in the analyses that follow; crucial for its contribution to thinking about what remains after loss; crucial for its thinking about what loss does to the subject; crucial, precisely, for its thinking about how subjectivity or interiority is mapped out—indeed, it offers itself as a cartographic, archivic space—after trauma. Moreover, Blanchot's text compels us to begin thinking about the *writing* of the disaster—disaster's writing—in relation to the specific workings of textuality in these novels. We need to keep in mind that these texts do not merely thematize loss: often, that loss is figured precisely as part of the impetus to writing itself. Auster's characters are all writers, for instance, as are Saramago's Raimundo Silva (*The History of the Siege of Lisbon*) and Ricardo Reis (*The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*); Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* directly thematizes the relation of writing to the disaster (in fact, the central narrative, "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After," explicitly explores the relation between the disaster and its archiving in memory and story); Murakami's *Underground*, finally, is an overt attempt to represent the aftereffects of disaster in the archival form of the personal testimony. What I am interested in exploring here, with Blanchot, is his sense that the disaster produces some kind of shift—covert or otherwise—in the subject's sense of his or her interiority: the disaster, in Blanchot's sense, may in fact, rupture the subject's ability to stand in ethical relation to history, to the past. This is to say that the disaster fractures the archival possibility for the subject: he cannot any longer stand to history as witness or memorial, cannot, that is, become the workable archive, because

his interiority, his sense that there is a space for history, for the event of history, is no longer continuous or stable. I wish here to quote a passage from *The Writing of the Disaster* that plays a key role in my thinking about the various forms of post-traumatized subjectivities in *Melancholy and the Archive*.

Levinas speaks of the subjectivity of the subject. If one wishes to use this word—why? but why not?—one ought perhaps to speak of a *subjectivity without any subject*: the wounded space, the hurt of the dying, the already dead body which no one could ever own, or ever say of it, *I, my body*. (Blanchot 1995, 30)

It is my argument in what follows that this idea, subjectivity without any subject (*subjectivité sans sujet*), is particularly useful for thinking about the subject as he begins to negotiate a relationship to his memory, his history; specifically, as the subject negotiates a relationship to a disastrous history, to a past marked by loss and trauma, the subject becomes more than merely an individual reflecting on a particular kind of economy of tragic loss. The disaster, as I have said, produces some shift in the psyche, in the self, in the interiority of the subject, to the point where the subject finds himself to have become a trace of what he was, a cinder marking the passing of the disaster. We can see a variety of versions of this idea: Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, for instance, tracks and traces the passage of a single consciousness through a variety of temporary subjects. This core consciousness is a precise, and uncanny, version of the idea of subjectivity without any subject: the consciousness has those things that mark it as a subject—memory, emotion, history—but it cannot attach fully to the human, to *a* human. As such, it remains a free-floating consciousness searching for an anchored subject. In an altogether different register, Saramago will thematize the idea of subjectivity without any subject in his analysis of the figure of Ricardo Reis, a heteronym of another writer (Fernando Pessoa) who Saramago creates as a character and chooses to animate; Reis, however, is never fully present to himself as a subject: he is merely an assumed personality—twice assumed, actually—with no claim on his own experience. Murakami, again in another register, offers an analysis of Aum Shinrikyo cult members (*Underground*) that makes clear that the cult member is precisely another version of Blanchot's traumatized individual: the cult member is not fully present to her or himself but has given up his self to a consciousness that precedes and exceeds his own. How, Murakami asks, can we understand this peculiar entity of the cult member except as someone who has forfeited any claims to being responsible as a fully integrated subject?

All of these examples of subjectivity without any subject play out against the backdrop of history, all are formed as the subject enters into the space of the disastrous event. My question thus becomes: how can a radically decentered subject respond to history? What happens to history, to the event of the disastrous past, when it only produces a decentered subject? My real question is obviously this one: what happens to the real of history if it only produces shattered subjectivities incapable of responding to the past in any coherent way? And here I can turn, briefly, back to my quotation from Blanchot and note that this subjectivity without any subject is described as being a *wounded space* (*la place blessée*). This peculiar, traumatized, fractured sensibility becomes explicitly materialized, spatialized, in contemporary literature. If subjectivity—the self’s sense of what or who she is—is an immaterial process or function (call it mental or spiritual), what we find in these novels is a tendency to reify or materialize that process: subjectivity becomes material, becomes spatialized, becomes a wounded space, or a space of the wound. I am emphasizing this word *wound* (Blanchot’s adjective *blessée* follows from the French for wound, *blessure*), because the word means “trauma”: a traumatized space is one continually marked by its relation to the disaster that preceded it and provided its foundations and ground. A traumatized space, in other words, is always already a space of melancholy. We will see in what follows how subjectivity is materialized, finds its expression within, various spaces of melancholy, and we will attempt, as we observe how these spaces become archival, to make sense of the aporia at the heart of this process: the disaster produces a subject radically at ontological odds with itself; and yet that fractured subject, that subjectivity without any subject, becomes archival or projects an archival sensibility onto spaces surrounding him. How can the archive function in relation to damaged subjectivities? How can the archive be thought of as itself a damaged interiority?⁸

I want to begin to point to answers to these questions—questions more fully fleshed out in my chapters—by attempting to connect the Derridean reading of the archive with Blanchot’s understanding of the nature of the disaster. In some ways the simplest beginning point is to notice that the archive and the disaster have similar energies and temporalities. The disaster, as Blanchot writes in the first sentence of *The Writing of the Disaster*, “ruins everything” (1), but that ruination is not available to the subject, cannot be known:

There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of

disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. (Blanchot 1995, 1)

We might, given the contortions of Blanchot's thinking here, add his theory of the disaster to our list of initiatory frustrations: the disaster ruins everything, but cannot be known; the disaster has always already occurred, yet is always already out of reach; the disaster, he writes later, is the experience that "none can undergo" (120). My own reading of the Blanchotian disaster relates it to Derrida's idea of the impossible event: the impossible, he notes in texts as various as "Force of Law," "As If It Were Possible," or "Nietzsche and the Machine," is an event that is unquantifiable, undecidable, aporetically conflictual, yet (ethically) unavoidable. The impossible thus links up with concepts that Derrida considers "undeconstructible" like justice, hospitality, friendship. The disaster, inasmuch as it "occurs" in an impossible temporality—it has happened; it is always about to occur—and inasmuch as it impinges on every aspect of the subject—defines the subject as a post-traumatic subjectivity without any subject—is another idea or figure that cannot be avoided but forever remains at the limits of thought.

Derrida's own thinking about the archive, in many ways, is disastrous, in Blanchot's sense of the term. The archive, like the disaster, is situated in an aporetic, or at least double, temporality: it is about the preservation of the past, and yet its full ontology, its true ontology, is futural. Moreover, for Derrida, the archive's function is not preservative or conservative, but is a destructive, ruinous one: the archive, he writes, articulates itself on and as the very possibility of its own destruction. How does Derrida get to this idea? From Freud. Derrida, following a reading of Freud's notion of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, sees a similar economy of the death drive at work in the archive. If, as Freud maintains, the death drive—that drive he is forced to hypothesize given the human's inerrant taste for destruction—functions in the logic of repetition (we repeat unconsciously acts that are harmful to us or give displeasure), Derrida posits that this repetition feeds into the a priori desire for the archive. The archive, in other words, stands as a site of the repetition of the disaster of history. Thus, Derrida's most important observation:

If there is no archive without consignment in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or