

Authenticity in the Archive: Historical Encounters with ‘Pastness’

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Historical research necessitates an engagement with authenticity in a range of different forms, from the need for verifiable historical sources to the disputed possibility of gaining genuine knowledge of the past and the appropriateness and sincerity of our own intellectual response. It is the contention of this paper that a further mode of authenticity also demands analysis: that is the cultural value which has come to be placed on ‘pastness’. It is suggested that the affective intensity of encounters with ‘pastness’ has sustained the historical discipline in the face of the challenges of poststructuralism and might account for the resilience of historians in continuing with ‘business as usual’² despite the doubts which have been thrown upon the epistemic nature of their endeavour.

Let us turn first to authenticity as verifiability. Historical research depends upon authentic evidence, for documents originating where and when they say they did. At the most extreme end of the scale, we might think about deliberate forgeries such as Macpherson’s Ossian forgery of the eighteenth century or the Hitler diaries of the late twentieth. Any historical account based on face-value acceptance of such texts would clearly be worthless. Technological advances have made the detection of such fakes far easier. Yet questions of authenticity must also negotiate with the evidence contained *within* the document – is it truthful, accurate, representative? Beyond that, does it mean what we think it means? How can we approach its meaning, through layers of linguistic and cultural shifts? Is ‘meaning’ even a valid concept? Such considerations bear equally upon non-written sources. Visual codes, formalities and absences conspire against us.

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² Jenkins 2003:15

Annette Kuhn reminds us that even photographs from our own childhoods cannot be taken for straightforward evidence of ‘what happened’.³ An authentic historical response therefore entails a certain modesty of judgement a refusal to make grand claims or to push the evidence further than it will comfortably go. Beyond this, debates over the possibility of obtaining any level of ‘authentic knowledge’ about the past rage on.⁴ I do not wish to make a further intervention here, other than to highlight these arguments as an important site of assertions and counter-assertions on the subject of authenticity as it relates to facts, truth and knowledge.

Questions of authenticity in the sense of integrity and sincerity also bear upon the *types* of historical enquiry we might make or the ways in which we treat historical sources. Social history, or ‘people’s history’, is founded upon a sensitivity to the authenticity of lived experience. This carries an injunction to read sources against the grain, uncovering and piecing together fragments of lives, of experiences. Authenticity here is associated with the real, with the ordinary and with treating past lives with integrity – not mythologizing or sentimentalizing them. This impulse was most famously articulated by E.P. Thompson in his preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* where he explained his intention to ‘rescue’ the lives of ordinary people ‘from the enormous condescension of posterity’.⁵ There is of course a political edge to this. Michel-Rolph Trouillot insists upon the need to bear the wrongs of history forward; to continue the fight against injustice in our own time. He argues that we cannot be either true or false to a world in which we did not live but that what we know about the history of slavery or colonialism should ‘increase our ardor in the struggles against discrimination and oppression’ in the present because ‘No amount of historical research about the Holocaust and no amount of guilt about Germany’s past can serve as a substitute for marching in the streets against German skinheads today’.⁶

Dave Renton has discussed the difficulties facing the professional historian in trying to maintain both scholarly standards and a political response to the subject. He describes his experience of working on a public history project on Liverpool’s labour history. One of his co-authors was concerned that while the pamphlet had ‘a role in documenting the unwritten history of liverpool’s [sic] class struggle’, its main focus should be to produce

³ Kuhn 1999

⁴ see for instance Munslow 2009 and Corfield 2009

⁵ Thompson 1986:13

⁶ Trouillot 1995:150

‘something we can use in order to organise workers now’.⁷ Renton, on the other hand, ‘was more concerned to convey the totality of what happened.’ He felt this was a matter of ‘professional pride’ which depended upon allowing readers ‘access to a range of accounts’.⁸ Yet this did not diminish his political investment in the project. The crucial question here is who has the authority to speak for the past. Who is able to make an authentic response? The answer is not always the professional historian. Renton concludes by agreeing with Raphael Samuel that history should not be seen as ‘the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism contends, a historian’s ‘invention’. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands.’⁹ The implication here is that the researcher with a personal, political or social investment in their subject will approach the material in a more ‘authentic’ way than the dispassionate, critical historian.

The distinction between affective, sensory approaches to a living past and critical and dispassionate studies of historical events has generally been categorised as the distinction between ‘memory’ and ‘history’.¹⁰ The relationship between these two categories has been rather a troubled one which raises some difficulties with the concept of authenticity – whether it should be associated with facts and proof or with genuine experiences and sincere responses. On the one hand, scholars following the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs have seen history as bringing ‘authentic’, factual analysis to bear upon the myths and distortions of collective memory. Yet, more recently, memory has also been seen as a route to the unofficial, the silenced and, therefore, the ‘authentic’ history of oppressed peoples – minorities, women and the dispossessed. The tension between these two historical approaches is played out in Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*. Steedman unsettles the established narratives of working class experience she has learned as an historian by excavating the particularities of her own childhood and of her mother’s life. In places, Steedman finds that her memories do not fit with the historical ‘facts’. Yet, if these are ‘authentic’, first hand accounts, first person memories, with what authority can the historian correct them?

It seems to this author that the distinction between memory and history has served to obscure historians’ relationships with the past and allowed them to maintain the appearance of critical, dispassionate analysis in contrast to the altogether more affective,

⁷ Renton 2000/2001:52

⁸ Renton 2000/2001:53

⁹ Samuel 1994:8

¹⁰ see Halbwachs 1980, Nora 1996

sensory approaches associated with memory. At the root of this discussion is another 'authenticity': the value placed on heritage, ancestry and continuity in postmodern Western society. The past has a cultural cache, whereby antiquity can become an easy proxy for authenticity. From estate agents' brochures to vintage clothing boutiques, 'pastness' is sold to us as authenticity in material form.¹¹ In academic as in popular discourses, authentic cultural and personal identity is associated with inheritance, with memory, with history. The implicit claim is that a community (or indeed an individual), which loses its past also loses its identity, its authentic sense of self. The past thereby acquires an automatic association with authenticity, in and of itself. Given that historical research necessarily involves an engagement with the 'pastness' of its subjects, this is a form of authenticity, which should concern the historian rather more than current methodological and philosophical debates suggest.

Since Raphael Samuel's seminal *Theatres of Memory*, there has been an increasing interest in public history and in the emotional desire to connect with the past. In Britain, as in many other Western nations, the later twentieth century saw an exponential growth in what became known as the Heritage Industry. Commentators such as Robert Hewison were scathing, seeing this as a desperate and disingenuous search for meaning, for authenticity in a seemingly meaningless postmodern world. Desperate because associated with the sense that the past as a living memory was disappearing and must be caught and fixed before it did.¹² Disingenuous because this was a sanitised past of quaint interiors and 'traditional' community values, in which hardship, poverty and misery became little more than tourist attractions.¹³

Samuel defended popular interest in heritage and pastness from the 'hostility' of 'elitist' historians with their 'fetishization' of archives, of the written word, over physical traces of the past, arguing that this indicates 'an almost complete detachment from the material environment.'¹⁴ Whilst the present author agrees with Samuel's critique, she would like to suggest that the archive is not necessarily a retreat from the physical traces of the past; in fact, it could be seen as another way of encountering 'pastness', albeit in a form where affect and sensory pleasure can hide behind professional codes and disciplines. Fredric Jameson has analysed the ways in which postmodern culture constructs the aesthetic effect of 'pastness'. He finds that 'nostalgia films' and historical

¹¹ see Samuel 1994

¹² see Nora 1996

¹³ Hewison 1987

¹⁴ Samuel 1994:268-271

novels operate ‘a new connotation of “pastness” and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces “real” history’.¹⁵ 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)’.¹⁶ Whilst historical research distinguishes itself from ‘pop history’ by seeking out new sources, new perspectives, new interpretations rather than simply re-presenting existing 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, combine to produce an authentic experience of ‘doing history’ - of encountering the past and of being an historian.¹⁷

Achille Mbembe 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’.¹⁸ 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’.¹⁹ The same effect is noted in a far less reflective text: a 1969 handbook to archival research. This is rather a prosaic book, 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

¹⁵ Jameson 1991:20

¹⁶ Jameson 1991:25

¹⁷ Steedman 2001

¹⁸ Mbembe 2002:19

¹⁹ Mbembe 2002:20-21

materials'.²⁰ Here we return to the epistemological debate cited at the start of this paper. It is difficult to imagine such an uncomplicated statement of faith being made in today's academic climate. But whether we regard history as a way of gaining real insights into a knowable past, or as little more than a narrative fiction, it is undeniable that the practice of history can exercise a profoundly affective influence on researchers. 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 of affect and of physical proximity to traces of 'the past' that we may find an answer to Jenkins' consternation that historians have been able to set aside the crisis of poststructuralism and continue with 'business as usual'.

Contra Samuel, I would argue that it is the very physicality of archival records that gives them their 'talismanic importance'. Digital facsimiles just don't cut it. However much they may decry the vulgarity of the heritage industry, historians cannot remain unmoved by the experience of holding an object which has travelled through time. As Walter Benjamin wrote, 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'.²¹ It is this 'aura', which attracts and seduces us. Much of the power of archives comes from the authenticity they are seen to provide: the impression of an unmediated encounter with the past. A document in a museum display is experienced as a historic artefact, constructed and mediated by the present; a document in an archival folder appears to be raw material awaiting our analysis. We feel that in holding the paper, turning the page, we are repeating the experience of its original writer or reader. However, as Michael Lynch reminds us: 'the practices and struggles associated with composing, assembling and controlling access to documents play a substantive role in history as well as in the scholarly reconstruction of history'.²² The archive is shaped by the present, by its cultural assumptions and power structures. The selection, preservation and exclusion of material moulds the raw material of history; it shapes the stories which historians are able to write. Despite this, the illusion of authenticity, of a 'connection' with the past remains powerful - even to those who know they should know better.

²⁰ Brooks 1969:1

²¹ Benjamin 1999 [1955]:214

²² Lynch 1999:67

One of the clearest manifestations of the historians' search for a physical and affective encounter with the past can be seen in their ambivalent attitude to digital archives. Without doubt they have transformed the historical discipline and made it possible to pursue topics that might otherwise have seemed insurmountable. For instance, Linda Colley has described how her study of obscure 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.'²³ Renée M. Sentilles 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'.²⁴ 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 authenticity contained in that photograph and by the embodied 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. Indeed, one of the many pleasures of the seminar at which this paper was first given was Siv Gøril Brandtzæg's demonstration of how best to inhale the aroma of an eighteenth century novel!

The physical experience is also a consideration for records originally created in a digital format. For instance, the Barbara Castle Collection at the Bodleian Library includes two old IBM computers 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. As they admit, however, this

²³ Colley 2007: xxviii; xxvii

²⁴ Sentilles 2005:155

situation is complicated by the fact that most of the files were intended to be printed out and so would most likely have been viewed by their recipients (in the case of letters) or readership (for books, articles) as black type on white paper.²⁵ What is it about the experience of looking through another's eyes, of attempting to view the past in the way they viewed their present? Of course there are methodological considerations here: the closer we can get to the 'authentic experience', the deeper the insights we will gain and the better the history we can write. But that is not a good enough explanation. In fact, in the case of the Barbara Castle archive, far from enabling us 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 distance us from their contents. The pleasure of archival research is not just driven by an intellectual thirst for knowledge; it is an affective experience. And it is absolutely dependent on an encounter with an authentic, original document or artefact.

Jameson suggests that postmodernity is characterised by an a-historicity, in which 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.'²⁶ This is a particularly interesting connection because the older, Burkean notion of the sublime is associated with a confrontation with the unknowable, with the impossibility of knowledge.²⁷ In the context of historical practice, we could suggest that it is the difference - perhaps even the exoticism - of archival traces which conveys the impression of authentic 'pastness' and our awareness of the incomprehensible vastness of time which leads us towards the sublime. Yet it is the illusion of bridging that distance, of overcoming that difference which gives the archival encounter its intensity. The archive is the place where historians are both confronted with the alterity of the past and tempted by the impossible challenge of overcoming it.

In her collection of *Archive Stories*, 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

²⁵ Thomas 2008

²⁶ Jameson 1991:6

²⁷ Burke 1998 [1757]

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’.²⁸ Such sudden, piercing moments of recognition resonate with David Lowenthal’s description of the intensely personal, intensely affective experience of involuntary reverie; the Proustian journey into a remembered past: ‘Certain heightened recollections seem to bring the past not only to life, but into simultaneous existence with the present’.²⁹ The shocks of archival discovery, of realisation, of insight could be seen to be a form of reverie. Crucially, Lowenthal reminds us that ‘The most vividly remembered scenes and events are those that were for a time forgotten’.³⁰ This has resonances with Freud’s concept of the *unheimlich* or uncanny. For Freud, the unsettling nature of phantoms and coincidental repetitions is not their strangeness but their repressed familiarity.³¹ 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. Yet, crucially, this is a vicarious experience. We are not remembering our own past, but attempting the impossible task of resurrecting another’s.

While on an epistemological level the authenticity of such experiences is problematic to say the least, it is also clear that they do represent a genuine affective experience on the part of the researcher and one, which has profound implications for the ways in which they write history. What are we to make of all this? At the very least, we need to acknowledge that affective encounters with ‘pastness’ can and do shape the ways in which historical projects are conceived and approached. It is time to develop a far greater degree of reflexivity not only in relation to historians’ identification with the specific subjects of their research (as has now been the trend for several decades) but also with ‘pastness’ as it is inscribed in the rituals and aesthetics of the archive. In short, we need to grapple with the historical, methodological and emotional implications of ‘pastness’ as a cultural marker of supposed authenticity.

²⁸ Burton 2005:8

²⁹ Lowenthal 1985:203

³⁰ Lowenthal 1985:205

³¹ Freud 2003 [1919]

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