

# Twenty-Three Archival Aphorisms

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## 1. What is an archive?

An archive, as it is generally understood, is a repository, a storehouse, a depot, in which the personal, the contextual, the draft, the original, the first attempt is kept, and on occasion, unveiled. The term 'archive' stems from the Greek *arkhē*, meaning origin or beginning, but also from *arkheion*, meaning house or public office, specifically the residence of the superior magistrates, citizens who held the right to make or represent the law. It was in their home, in their archive, that official documents were filed.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The archive is of the origin.

Archives work to protect and retain the past for the future, to house records of foundations and sources, to hold on to a history lost and a time past. As Derrida writes, we 'have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.'<sup>2</sup> And so we suffer from archive fever, we burn with a passion, and it is a passion for the origin. The archive is the source – archive as place of origins, archive as original content – and in entering the archive we presume to travel back in time to first truths and first principles. In archival work we look to overtures, to preambles, outlines, and sketches.

## 3. The archive is not of the origin.

But in our desire for the origin, we desperately fracture it; the archive can only ever offer origins in the plural, as each first draft reveals an earlier step, a letter, a note, a scribble. The archaeology of the archive appears to present an inexorable progression from seed to gestation to birth, but in fact it reveals a multiplicity of traces that destabilise both single origin and linear progression. The archive is always a mess.

## 4. The archive does not present, but shapes and changes.

The archive, Derrida has stressed, never passively presents information, but performatively creates meaning, because the choices of inclusion and exclusion, the mode of archiving, labelling, sorting, and addressing all shape and change the content. As Derrida writes, 'every archive [...] is at once *institutive* and *conservative*.

Revolutionary and traditional';<sup>3</sup> that is, 'archivisation produces as much as it records the event.'<sup>4</sup> The content of the official archive changes the published works and writes a different history of the texts. The archive is thus a supplement to the published body of work which adds to it, explains it, grounds it, and wholly alters it, pointing to the supposed inadequacy of reading the published texts in isolation. It grounds the 'final' texts in 'original' drafts and early letters and works to seal it in place of authorial intention, contextual explanations and historical events. The archive alters.

#### 5. The archive is personal.

Boston College contains Brian O'Nolan's old crutches from a broken leg, his typewriter with the paint rubbed off, the hat, the coat, a handmade St Brigid's cross in a box without commentary or explanation. It contains passport photos and business cards for Brian O'Nolan, Myles na gCopaleen and Lord Nolan of Santry. It holds O'Nolan's original, personal, very own dandruff.

#### 6. The archive is impersonal.

This is not the archive O'Nolan presented. This is an archive his wife, Evelyn O'Nolan, presented to the Special Collections in Southern University Illinois, Carbondale and an archive which the O'Nolan family sold to Boston College after her death. This is (perhaps) not the archive O'Nolan would have wished it would be, nor in the place he would have preferred.

#### 7. The archive is never one person's archive.

'I feel sure you will understand the muddled state of my mind after illness, death, worry, and all this new work.'<sup>5</sup>

Boston's Brian O'Nolan archive is also Evelyn O'Nolan's archive; that is, the 'archive of the author's wife.' Her archive is a scene of survival in the aftermath, of letters to publishers and agents regarding royalties, translations, distribution, permissions, editions, collections. Her archive reveals someone living on through the works of a deceased author/husband and depending on their sales for income. Her archive shows the legacy of work left to her, and the difficulty of mourning, detaching, and starting anew.

#### 8. The archive will always create more archives of questions. Why was this included? What was left out?

Did Evelyn and Brian ever correspond? Where are the notes for his research on Augustine? Does the lack of royalties for a Sexton Blake novel mean O'Nolan didn't write any, or did they get filed elsewhere? Archival absence is not conclusive proof.

**9. An archive provides legitimacy, authority, and evidence of serious, scholarly work. The archive helps the text and the author live on.**

Official archives fuel scholarly research and fire up the research machine. Academics visit, they find new information, they publish. People read the papers, buy the original novels. They research. They visit the archive, they find new information, they publish. People read the papers, buy the original novels. There's money in marginalia.

**10. Archives stultify speculative, theoretical engagement.**

Archives don't necessarily fuel all scholarly research. They are most closely aligned with empirical, historical, contextual research, and prioritise a return to the author. There's an obsession with marginalia.

**11. The archive is all about survival. The archive pays.**

'You say you have been left short of money and what I now have to say is dependent on this: I asked about the papers you have been corresponding with the University of Illinois about. The professional view is that if they bulk large enough then you ought to think in terms of a five-figure payment. If Illinois don't play, then there are other American universities that might.'<sup>6</sup>

**12. The archive of an author is an author's archive. The archive is a place of romance.**

The archives show inspirations, quotations on cigarette packs, jottings in foreign diaries in pencil and pen, scrapbooks of articles with the points of censored publication angrily marked in red. They contain childhood photos and university medals, school reports, a library, and art. They contain signatures and secrets and dreams.

**13. The archive of an author is not an author's archive. The archive is not a place of romance.**

'If they are interested, I would want £1,000 advance. It [*The Third Policeman*] is a substantial work and the last one. If Macmillan do not want it, or if they think £1,000 is too much, then offer it to other publishers. Please give it to whatever publisher pays the *highest amount*, but I shall not be satisfied with less than £1,000.'<sup>7</sup>

'The minimum sum I would consider for the foregoing is £250, and if I should decide to include also (against my judgement) a thick file of correspondence about the book with agents and publishers, the minimum price would be £300.'<sup>8</sup>

The archives contain letters regarding royalties, letters chasing payment, letters complaining and appealing and begging. It is tax returns and copyright forms and contracts. It is the remnants of bartering and negotiating and old deals.

#### 14. The archive is of the family.

'Brian, I thought you were looking quite well, so for goodness sake take care of yourself – if the uisge [*sic*] beatha is injuring you, you'd be far better off to make that cold inflexible decision – NO MORE – and stick with it. Countless people have done it – they may go through hell for a week or so, but in the end it's well worth it. It might be a bit different if you were on your own, but you do have the additional incentive of making things a bit easier for Evelyn.'<sup>9</sup>

#### 15. The archive is mysterious.

'Ay, queer fellow, when are you going to pass it on?'

- A woman of no importance.'<sup>10</sup>

#### 16. The archive is funny and playful.

'I no this addresses noone .. nohow ... nowhere for, F O'B – B. O'N of @ swm 2 bds is but the residue of an amalgam my delusion once compounded, even of the living and the dead:

Patraic O'Conaire  
& Ditto Ø " olum.'<sup>11</sup>

#### 17. The archive is intrusive and potentially damaging.

'I confirm telling you that I am more distressed than I can politely express to think that my letters to O'Nolan would be seen by anyone but him. I find myself obliged to affirm that the tone of the correspondence between O'Nolan and myself was low, that the language used, on both sides, was unsuitable, and I fear that, in many cases, there may be references which, if made public, would be hurtful to people now living or to their families and the possibility of there being defamatory statements cannot be discounted.'<sup>12</sup>

**18. The archive is somewhat chaotic and rather random.**

'We thank you for your letter of the 15<sup>th</sup> instant and we regret to note that you find our Woodpecker Cider over-sweet for your taste; we, in fact, find this medium-sweet blend most acceptable to the public in general.'<sup>13</sup>

**19. The archive is an absolute delight.**

'Your ref: Balls/XX

To furnishing:

Spare endings, for Novel 'At Swim 2 Birds' 2, @ 6d each, net, 0.1.0.

Specification of above:

Two specifically selected pathological (schizophrenic) anecdotes of literary interest, from private case-book.'<sup>14</sup>

**20. The archive is a crushing disappointment.**

'He [St. Augustine] was an African (Numidin) and what I have yet failed to be certain about is whether he was a nigger. I hope he was, or at least some class of a coon.'<sup>15</sup>

**21. The archive is of the aftermath.**

'I wonder what yer man thinks about my getting it [*The Third Policeman*] published! He always said it needed to be rewritten, but he wouldn't do it. I don't know how I am going to meet him again – no doubt he will raise his voice!'<sup>16</sup>

**22. The archive is a kaleidoscope. It fragments and breaks perspective and texts into repeated images of marginal difference.**

**23. What exactly is *The Dalkey Archive*?<sup>17</sup>**

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Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keeffe (O'Nolan's publisher), 1 November 1966, Series 7, Flann O'Brien Papers, MS1997-27, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, US. Hereafter referred to as BC.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy O'Keeffe to Evelyn O'Nolan, 17 June 1966, Series 7, BC.

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn O'Nolan to Mark Hamilton of A. M. Heath (O'Nolan's literary agent), 31 October 1966, Series 7, BC.

<sup>8</sup> Brian O'Nolan to unnamed American literary agent requesting Irish manuscripts, 8 March 1965, ID: 1/4/MSS 051, Special Collections, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, US. Hereafter cited as SIUC.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. Gearoid O'Nolan to Brian O'Nolan, 16 September 1963, Brian O'Nolan papers, 1914-66, SIUC.

<sup>10</sup> 'A Woman of no importance' to Brian O'Nolan (presumed), undated, SIUC.

<sup>11</sup> 'A Person' to Brian O'Nolan, 2 May 1939, SIUC.

<sup>12</sup> Niall Montgomery to Kenneth W. Duckett, Curator, Special Collections, SIUC, 9 November 1970, SIUC. Montgomery was one of O'Nolan's closest friends, and the two left behind many letters containing commentaries on life and work that are expressed with playful insults and casual expletives.

<sup>13</sup> General Manager (signature illegible) of Bulmers Cider to Brian Nolan [sic], 16 February 1961, SIUC.

<sup>14</sup> 'Michael Byrne' (Niall Sheridan?) to Brian O'Nolan, undated, SIUC.

<sup>15</sup> Brian O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keeffe, 4 November 1962, SIUC.

<sup>16</sup> Evelyn O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keeffe, 20 September 1976, Series 7, BC.

<sup>17</sup> I attempt to answer this in my book *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury/Continuum, 2014).