

Presidential Address, SEA Convention 2001

ACHING IN THE ARCHIVE

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Three years ago I was invited to take part in a symposium at Rutgers, at which historian Jan Lewis prefaced her remarks with a confession—a moment of soul-baring, expressing her values, trepidations, transgressions. Myra Jehlin who was in the audience observed that we were living in the age of the confessional introduction. The demand to be self-conscious—to historicize one’s position—has given rise to a literature introduced by spectacles of personal exposure. I commented at the time that the problem with academic secular confession resembled that of religious confession: few persons are sufficiently lurid enough sinners for such confessions to be interesting. Michael Warner, also in the audience, proposed that we should all begin our books with faux confessions—prefaces that laid out wholly imaginary, contradictory, and stupifying values. The proposal has its attractions: one can only stand so much earnest fretting whether publishing one’s scholarship in print makes once complicit in arboreal xenocide. But in the intervening years I’ve become convinced that fancifulness isn’t what’s needed in the exposure of our interests and pathologies. No—rather what is needed is a truer and stranger exploration. Indeed, it seems to me that the power of fields of scholarship may be a function of the potency of the mysterious impulses that drive their explorations and explanations. As one who has taken part in the recent archival turn of early American studies, I began to wonder about the interest that has been driving it. So I’ve decided to do Jan Lewis one better; instead prefacing an inquiry with a confession, I’ll make a confession the inquiry. I’ll spill my guts and see if I can read an augury in the entrails.

There are moments when one falls victim to one’s profoundest pathologies. One of mine took place in the check-out counter of the Piggly Wiggly. Approaching the register, my eye caught the headline of a tabloid newspaper. Usually I am indifferent to the sensations blurted in the National Inquirer. So what if Bigfoot stole someone’s wife. Face found on Mars? Who cares? Goatsuckers, saucers, abductions, Atlantis, Nostradamus—grist for Chris Carter and the X-files script writers—not me. But there it was, calling to me in 48 point bold:

LOST GOSPEL FOUND IN POMPEII?

It was the subheading that got me: “Scientists Decode Charred Scrolls.” The image of carbonized papyrus awoke some drowsing recollection. Hadn’t there been an incinerated library discovered beneath Vesuvius? What were they uncovering? Could it be the lost Gospel of the Hebrews, or maybe the gnostic “Gospel of the Ebionites?” Pompeii was so near Rome—so near Mark. You don’t suppose they could have found the protogospel—the long supposed

collection of the sayings of Jesus that scholars designate Q. Maybe the tabloid editors were using Gospel loosely. When did that volcano erupt burying Herculaneum and Pompeii? Was it before Bishop Papias in 100 AD began his five-volume Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord, collecting the sayings of Jesus from every surviving ear-witness of the Apostolic testimony.¹ They too were lost, only a handful of extracts surviving² To rescue even one volume of the five from the volcanic fire would be a revelation.

By the time I reached the register my sweating fist had a copy clenched in it. I thrust money at the check-out woman. There in my van in the parking lot, still clutching a bag of groceries, I poured over the newsprint. Instantly I discovered that (a) the scrolls in question had been dug up two and a half centuries ago, in 1752, in Herculaneum, not Pompeii (b) that the bulk of the 1,500 charred documents that can be read were the literary remains of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara, with nary a word of the Hebrew or Christian scriptures in the mix, and that (c) David Blank, a professor from UCLA, was leading a project to decipher the undecipherable items and translate the library.³ You might think that I was disappointed that Villa of the Papyri had not offered up the lost logos. But no, my pathology is of a rare and singularly hopeful cast.

If Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, burying a library whose major philosophical holdings date from 60 B.C. to the time of burial, maybe certain of the heretofore unreadable charred scrolls might include the lost philosophical treasure of treasures.⁴ I'm not referring merely to Aristotle's treatise on comedy, but the whole of the Peripatetic collection of the Aristotle's works. Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor, had willed them to Neleus sometime before 284 B.C. Neleus's heirs buried these books resisting the appeals of the libraries at Alexandria and Pergamon to transfer them into the keeping of scholars. In the first century they were exhumed and sold to a bibliophile, Apeillicon of Teos,

¹ Book III, Chapter 39 of Eusebius Pamphilus, Church History, describes the project of this friend of Polycarp. Papias in his introduction explained his distrust of the written gospel tradition and his predilection for the spoken tradition: "If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders,-what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice."

² A WWW edition of the fragments may be found at http://biblestudy.churches.net/CCEL/FATHERS2/ANF01/ANF0143.HTM#P3500_597457. Papias's chiliastic inclinations may have accounted for the suppression of his works in the 3rd century.

³ The homepage of the Philodemus project is <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/classics/Philodemus/philhome.htm>.

⁴ The standard reference for searchers after classical literature is The Database of Ancient Books, a cd-rom inventory of 7052 literary works known to have been written in ancient Greece and Rome. The record extends from 400 B. C. to 800 C.E. "[I]ncluded are those texts from Herculaneum which are sufficiently well preserved for an identification to be proposed and magical texts from PGM and Supplementum Magicum. A start has been made to include also early Greek and Latin codices up to AD 800."

who backed the Greek Dictator, Athenion, who lost Athens to Sulla in 86 B.C. Aristotle's library came to Rome as part of Sulla's booty. Upon Sulla's death, they came into the hands of his spendthrift, meglomaniacal son, Faustus, who sold off every possession, library included, to clear himself of debt.⁵ At that juncture they disappear from the record. Somewhere in Italy in just those years when the Villa of Papyri was collecting texts, Aristotle's works went on the market.

Why are lost masterworks so alluring? How does one explain the strange way their legends stick in the memory? I'm sure that many of you carry around some of these tales—the story of Ralph Ellison losing the typescript of Junteenth, his second novel, in a house fire—the account of Poe's trunk of manuscripts seized by his last landlord—the mystery of the disappearance of the fair copy of Phillis Wheatley's second collection of poems before it could be printed. There is difference, however, between casually recalling the odd tale about lost literary treasure and pathological fascination. For a "searcher" every notice of lostness takes up permanent residence in memory, obtruding regularly into recollection, speculation, desire. Furthermore, the memory does not store these notices with any propriety; they are intermingled with accounts of works that almost came to be, but didn't, such as Milton's "Arthur," or compositions that were purposely destroyed—the clutch of Eugene O'Neill unperformed plays consigned to the fire of which "Long Days Journey into Night" is the sole survivor—or works whose absence have tempted forgers, such as the lost 116 pages of the book of Lehi opening the book of Mormon that animated the remarkable efforts of the arch-forged of the 1980s, Mark Chapman.

Being a searcher, I wonder about the impetus of the compulsion. One thing is certain: mine is not an oedipal yearning. I don't discover my true identity by recovering a misplaced inheritance, a literary patrimony or (not matrimony). Yet we should not discount or underestimate the force of this psychic plot. In the reading rooms of every historical society and archive in North America genealogists outnumber academic researchers, and many of the academic researchers are, truth be known, cultural genealogists searching out legacies.

When genealogists—familial or cultural—explain their quest for heritage two quite different ideas are put forward: rootedness and recognition. Those who seek rootedness find themselves at loose ends in the fluid, mobile, and virtual post-modern world and seek to fix themselves in an enduring community that binds present to past and living to dead. Those who seek recognition find that the received story about who and what are meaningful has no place for them and has become too fixed and obdurate. They wish to dissolve the received history and its concretized canon so it can include other lineages. Whether searching for fixity or dissolving it, cultural genealogists

⁵ The story of the disposition of Aristotle's writings is told in chapters 6 and 11 of Luciano Canfora, The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World, trans. Martin Ryle (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1990).

underwrite identity by ancestry. There is an ancient maxim that says, all talk of ancestry is selective. What, then, if your hunger to find is promiscuous?

An obsession with searching resembles the pathology of collecting. There is an objective element to it—a form—a sense of a total work.⁶ One suspects what is lost, seeks it, finds it, and incorporates it with the found and known. It makes history more whole and more rich. Sometimes finding and collecting are one and the same, as in the creation of great libraries and archives. Sometimes they accomplish more than just the satisfaction of knowing. Consider the story of one of the greatest of the searchers, Sir Robert Bruce Cotton. He lived in England from 1571-1631, though as his middle name suggests, he had familial connections with Scotland. He was born in Huntingdonshire. At Westminster School he fell under the spell of William Camden, the historian.⁷ He went to Jesus College Cambridge, graduated in 1585, formed with his teacher the first recorded English association, the Antiquarian Society in 1590,⁸ and began his heroic effort to find every remaining document of pre-Norman England. It was he who located the sole surviving manuscript of Beowulf, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the two contemporary exemplifications of the Magna Carta, the Anglo-Saxon charters. His library, though it numbered only a 1000 volumes, is reckoned “the most important collection of manuscripts ever assembled in Britain by a private individual.” During the reign of Elizabeth it was consulted concerning precedents for diplomatic protocol. James the I, who knighted Cotton, consulted him about traditional means of securing revenue. When Charles I came to the throne, enamored of executive rule despite parliament, Cotton and his library became principle obstacles. Elected as a member of parliament from Old Sarum, Cotton became the point man for anti-royalism. His library stood as a public testimony against absolute monarchical rule. The vision of an ancient Germanic republicanism opposed to the rule of crown prerogative exfoliated from the library. The political opposition—Sir Edward Coke, Selden, Pym, Wentworth—met in it. It became so great a challenge that Cotton was jailed for treason, the library closed, then confiscated by the crown.⁹

Many applications could be drawn from this tale. One that ties Cotton importantly into the stream of American political history is that he was the man whose library enabled precedents to be determined in Common Law jurisprudence. But for a searcher this isn't enough: perhaps more and stranger connections can be found. Something like this: among the many figures who

⁶ There is an element of vanity in the work as well. As with collecting, the more promiscuous and global the searching, the more Faustian the project. The will to power is quite conspicuously involved in such enterprises.

⁷ DNB.

⁸ The primacy of this association is discussed in Peter Clark, British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 26.

⁹ Kevin Sharpe, Sir Robert Cotton, 1586-1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979).

haunted Cotton's library during the 1610s was a military adventurer recuperating from having his genitals blown off by a misloaded pistol dropped into his lap. This charismatic fellow was a writer as well as a soldier, and his dynamic, no-nonsense prose, particularly in The General Historie of Virginia so captivated Cotton's fancy that he encouraged Captain John Smith to publish an account of the whole of his life. This Smith did in The True Travels (1630) acknowledging Cotton's role in the first paragraphs of the introduction.¹⁰ Smith, while in the library, imbibed Cotton's republicanism. Each successive book about America through the 1610s and '20s advanced an increasingly radical political and economic egalitarianism. Cotton's vision of primitive Saxon liberty was transmuted to Smith's dream of American futurity.¹¹ Smith also emulated Cotton in gathering a library, kept in a "trunk bound with iron barres", whose disposition was the final matter treated in Smith's last will and testament.

Robert Beverly, a Virginian fascinated with his country's early history, would have given much to have obtained the contents of Smith's chest, for he at the end of the 17th-century and in the midst of a political struggle against the prerogative, was Cotton-like gathering a library of documents treating the establishment of government and law in the colony. Beverly used his collection to supply the first important history of the colony and the first correct edition of its laws. Beverly's books and papers came into the hands of John Mercer, the compiler of the greatest 18th-century edition of the Laws of Virginia and political opponent of Governor Dinwiddie. Mercer's collection in turn came into the hands of another Virginian antiquarian and lawyer—a man who shared Cotton's fantasy of a Saxon heritage of individual rights and Cotton's vision of the utility of a library, Thomas Jefferson. Viewing Jefferson as an heir of Robert Bruce Cotton explains why the president insisted that Anglo-Saxon be part of the curriculum of the University of Virginia. It also suggests the vision that gave rise to the Library of Congress.

The tale of Cotton and his American heirs is interesting for it illustrates how close the formation of the archive is to the framing of a history. But the narrative underwriting the tale I've told—the history of liberty as a ramifying resistance to centralized authority—is an old story. And the story lends interest to this connecting of Cotton to Smith to Jefferson. My genealogy fulfills a desire to make the history of liberty more exciting and unexpected. We see in this process the way narratives renovate themselves by predicating their own revision, instructing searches, directing one's findings.

Under this historical dispensation great expectation surrounds certain works known to be lost that for various reasons promise great revisionary power. One thinks of what might be revealed about the emergence of Elizabethan tragedy if we had Thomas Kydd's 1589 "Hamlet," or of medieval

¹⁰ The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith, Ed. Philip L. Barbour, The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580-1631), 3 Vols. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1986). 3:141.

¹¹ An insight supplied by that assiduous searcher, J. A. Leo Lemay, The American Dream of Captain John Smith (Charlottesville: U Press of Virginia, 1991), 192-94

court forms if we had Chaucer's "The Book of the Lion." But these revelations would pale beside that which would occur if we could recover that Anglo-Saxon legend cycle that caused Alcuin to ask saga-smitten monks "Is Ingeld greater than Christ?" We can thank Sir Robert Bruce Cotton for the one text that briefly mentions Ingeld, "Beowulf," in which he becomes Hrothgar's son-in-law. What vision of heroism did Ingeld present that could eclipse the sacrifice of Christ in the imaginations of Germanic monks?

Early Americanists have their own lost treasures. Chief among these is the lost Wheatley collection which Skip Gates is convinced lies in some manuscript collection in the American Philosophical Society. What do scholars wish to find there? A poet somehow jarred free of the politeness and neoclassicism of her earlier work by the travails of life as a freedwoman? A voice more troubled and distinctive—more romantic? Will it, if found, answer the historical imperative to find agency at the origin of African-American literature? Or will it be less of the same, like Shakespeare's newly attributed play, "Edward III."

Sometimes when one finds what one has been searching for, it exceeds one's most hopeful anticipations. Such was the case with the greatest literary find for early Americanists of the 1990s—the Milcah Martha Moore Commonplace book, discovered in 1995 by Kathy Blecki and Karin Wulf in the Edward Wanton Smith papers at Haverford College. This manuscript contained two items avidly sought by early American searchers: Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson's journal of her travel in England, and sixteen new poems of Susanna Wright. It also contained a bonus sixty-two verses by the Quaker moralist, Hannah Griffitts. When news came of the discovery of the Wright poems, I experienced a strange mixture of envy, curiosity, elation, and trepidation. Pattie Cowell and Loretta Treese must have had similar feelings. We had been searching for these legendary verses for a decade. Composed from the 1720s until the 1770s, Wright's poems had circulated in manuscript, cherished by the literati of the middle colonies. Girls in the Quaker School in Philadelphia learned their letters from them. Yet a scant half dozen survived.

Born in England in 1697, Susanna Wright came to Pennsylvania in her teens and moved with her parents and brother to the Susquehanna frontier in 1727. A brilliant, educated, and energetic woman, she found in the unformed society of the frontier an opportunity to project her talents. She ran a public house, practiced medicine, served as secretary to the Lancaster magistrate, periodically interpreted in treaty negotiations between Pennsylvania and the Natives, probably supplied her friend Benjamin Franklin the first hand account of the Paxton massacres employed in his pamphlets, and gained a reputation as a fiery stump speaker at election time. She had a particular interest in horticulture and was reputedly the first person to eat an eggplant in the western hemisphere. She corresponded with several figures in the international natural history network, pioneered silk culture, and wove a piece of cloth that Franklin presented to Queen Charlotte. She was a watercolorist and probably designed Wright's Ferry Mansion and the Samuel

Blunden House in Columbia, Pennsylvania. She was known above all for her writings. When Karin Wulf and Cathy Blecki sent me the transcript of the poems, I could scarcely credit how artful the blending of spiritual and intellectual concerns were. Wright was a religious poet on the level of a Watts or Edward Young. What verse from 18th-century America can approach the grim wisdom and certitude of her meditation of 1761, "My Own Birth Day"?

Were few & Evil stil'd the Patriarchs Days,
Extended to a Length of Years unknown
In this luxurious Age whose swift Decays
Allow to few so many as my own.
And what are they?—a Vision all the past,
A Bubble on the Waters shining Face,
What yet remain 'till the first transient Blast
Shall leave no more Remembrance of their Place.
Still few & evil, as the Days of old,
Are those allotted to the Race of Man,
And three score Years in sounding Numbers told,
Where's the Amount?—A Shadow & a Span.—
Look back through this long Tide of rolling Years
Since early Reason gave Reflection Birth,
Recall each sad Occasion of thy Tears,
Then say can Happiness be found on Earth?
Pass former Stokes—the recent only name!
A Brother whom no healing Art could save,
In Life's full Prime unnerv'd his manly Frame
From wasting Pains took Refuge in the Grave.—
A Sister who long causeless Anguish knew,
A tender Parent & a patient Wife,
Calmly she bore the bitter Lot she drew,
And clos'd her Sorrows with her Close of Life.
A darling Child, all lovely, all admir'd,
Snatch'd from our Arms in Youths engaging Bloom
A Lazur turn'd e'er his short Date expir'd,
And laid a piteous Object in the Tomb
Your Memory from my breast shall never stray
Should years to Patriarchal Age extend,
Thro' Glooms of Night, thro' social Hours of Day
The starting Tear stands ready to descend.—
But tho' I mourn, not without Hope I mourn,
Dear kindred Shades! Tho' all unknown yr. Place
Tho' to these Eyes you never must return,
You're safe in the Infinitude of Space.—¹²

¹²Susanna Wright, "My own Birth Day.—August 4th 1761," *Milcah Martha Moore's Book; A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America*, eds. Catherine La Courreye Blecki & Karin A. Wulf (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 147-49.

Wright surprises because she reveals a sensibility more austere and wise than her seekers anticipated or even desired. Though she will find her place in the anthologies of the 21st century because of her proto-feminist verses—"Anna Boylens Letter to King Henry the 8th" and "To Eliza Norris—at Fairhill," the truly uncanny aspect of her work is her virtuoso articulation of what she calls the "intellectual soul."¹³

The peculiarity of Wright's genius confronts us with the great problem of the exploration of the archive—the discovery of what we were not looking for and what we have difficulty understanding. Certain things we find we can't recognize. They don't suit the reigning explanations of the past, so they get shunted aside, ignored. In effect they don't quite get found. Or we don't realize, coming upon them, that they were lost. There is a four hundred page apocalyptic disquisition by Governor Arthur Dobbs of North Carolina in the Southern Historical Society Collection. The language and symbolism are so recondite that none of the dozen persons who accessed the microfilm in the past twenty years has felt compelled to redeem it from neglect. Even when a person makes an effort to put one of these prodigies into public view, the reading public, even the community of scholars, may be nonplused. I think about the disastrous sales of Robert Micklus's edition of Dr. Alexander Hamilton's The History of the Tuesday Club, that thousand plus page satire of world history, imperial politics, and Anglo-American manners in the form of a proceedings of an Annapolis Gentleman's Club. When published in 1990, it fit no story, image, or political agenda about early America.¹⁴ It died in the market place. Fortunately new markets can be made, new stories created, and new categories of understanding advanced. Labeling is crucial to creating new histories. A decade later we know Hamilton's History as the masterwork of the Anglo-American culture of literary sociability.

New labels, new histories. This maxim leads me to a final observation about searching. We often identify being lost with scarcity. But what of finding treasure amidst profusion? The colonial era—the early modern period—was not one characterized by a poverty of literary comment about discovery, settlement, civility, political self-definition, ideology, cultural difference and syncretism. Quite the opposite: multitudes of Europeans wrote about America and multitudes of settlers wrote about themselves and the world. The National Index of American Imprints (The Short-Title Evans) lists almost 49,000 entries. Lemay's Calendar of American Poetry published in Colonial Newspapers and Magazines . . . Through 1765 has 2,091 entries. The surviving corpus of manuscripts is so large it has never been adequately described. (One wonders what order of magnitude we'd reach, if we added Ibero-American, Franco-American, German American, Native American, and Dutch colonial writings into the heap.) Yet for a long time scholars seemed to have forgotten this, fixating on a canonical few texts by Smith, Bradford, Winthrop, Bradstreet, Mather,

¹³Susanna Wright, "A Meditation," Milcah Martha Moore's Book, 119.

¹⁴Alexander Hamilton, The History of the Ancient and Honourable Tuesday Club, 3 Vols., Robert Micklus, ed. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1990).

Rowlandson, Taylor, Edwards, Byrd, Franklin, Wheatley, the Founders, Freneau, Barlow, Crevecoeur, and Charles Brockden Brown. Until quite recently the standard anthologies of American literature represented the period from 1700 to 1765 by a work written in the 1780s—Franklin’s memoirs—supplemented by a sprinkling of Edwards, excerpts from Byrd’s *Histories of the Dividing Line*, and Cooke’s “The Sot-Weed Factor.” No other era of American literature was quite so lost—or promised more bounty for a searcher. Even that skeletal canon poses mysteries. What was the manuscript novel by Charles Brockden Brown that Elihu Hubbard Smith shipped to England for William Cowper to read? Can any stranger scene be imagined than Cowper, during his final descent into insanity, pouring over some weird fantasy by Brown?

Many searchers now explore early American writing. Each week brings news of discoveries and recoveries to the editorial desk of Early American Literature. Yet for all the ferment and creativity, a surprising number of submissions to the journal perform the old history—the old connect the dots game between the fifteen great names—or add Bartram and Equiano to the lists and do the same. I don’t know about you, but even the most stuck-in-a-rut classic rock station has a broader play list than this, a richer sense of pop music history.

Music history—even pop music history—suggests how to search and what to do with findings. The great compilers of historical reissues, the great redeemers of lost masterworks, the renovators of one’s ears possess an aesthetic engagement, and nurture many more potentialities of aesthetic sense, than literary searchers and historians. How many literary historians let themselves be instructed how to write by what they find. Yet think about how Andrew Manze and Fabio Bondi, scholar-violinists, used their research into the archive of 17th and early 18th-century scores to reconceive the sound of baroque violin playing, revealing the sonic splendor of the works of Heinrich Biber, Pandolfo Meali, Guisseppi Tartini. Or I think of the current Exotica and Lounge Music revivals, engineered by generation Xers who discovered a strange beauty in old Les Baxter sound tracks and Martin Denny tiki tour albums of the 1950’s and ‘60s. Or the working class DJ’s in the north of England who collected all of the soul and r & b releases of the 60s and early 70s and culled from the vast sea of non hits an extraordinary revisionist canon of neglected masterworks known as “northern soul.”

Every time I surf the Readex microfiche of Early American Imprints, I hope that I’ll encounter something wonderful. If I keep my taste open enough, I will. Have you ever heard of this item: in 1725 Roger Wolcott, a man who would become governor of Connecticut, and the father and grandfather of governors, published an epic poem on John Winthrop, Jr.’s agency in securing the Connecticut charter from Charles II. It is over two-thousand lines long, contains a grimly Miltonic portrayal of the Pequot War, is composed in the form of an elaborately ventriloquized dialogue between Winthrop and the King, and reflects the political anxiety of the charter crisis of the 1710s. Ethnogenesis, politics, Anglo-Native war, mythopoesis, epic theatricalism. I like the sound of it.

As for the lost Gospel of the Hebrews—I have a theory . . .

