Biographical Desire and the Archives of Living Authors

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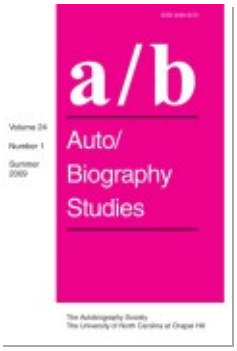

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By Robert McGill

The existence of publicly accessible archives dedicated to the materials of individual living authors complicates biographical inquiry in ways that have gone largely unexamined, not least because the creation of such archives is a recent phenomenon. As Kirsten MacLeod observes, when Harry Ransom created his Humanities Collection at the University of Texas in 1957, his belief "that people did not have to be dead . . . to be worthy of inclusion in the collections of a major research institution" was "[c]ontroversial and indeed eccentric and certainly non-traditional" (132). To tell a comprehensive story about why these archives have become ever more common would require a volume in itself. Not least, one might point to the growth of the mass media, the rise of literary celebrity, and changing attitudes toward privacy, a result of which has been that authors are frequently called upon to discuss publicly and write about their lives as well as their art. Another has been an increase in biographies of living authors and in "authorialist" critical paradigms that attend to the lives of people who write books (Benedetti 10). For critics invested in these approaches to literature, it is tempting to treat authors' archives as potential sources of biographical revelations. Letters, manuscripts, and other materials in archives offer a manner of intimacy with the authors who once possessed them and may still have authority over their use. At the same time, archives effect a manner of death for authors, insofar as they consolidate the formation of textual figures who become substitute objects of investigation, apparently static and confined to the page.

This substitution occurs with any literary archives, but when the embodied author associated with them is still alive, she or he has the potential to irrupt in the research process as a subject who has legal rights over archival materials and personal preferences about their use. Such interventions are not surprising in a culture where there is much at stake in the management of literary texts. Authors have a variety of possible motives in creating public archives from financial gain to increased academic interest in their published work and the elevation of their literary reputations. They may be eager to influence what is known or said about them. In contrast, biographers

and other scholars commonly desire a free hand in conducting and publishing their research, even while recognizing that compromises must sometimes be made in order to gain authorial cooperation with their research. Consequently, archives can become sites of conflict. Scholars claim that authors are restricting their freedom of academic inquiry while authors insist on their right to privacy and to control the dissemination of their intellectual property.[1]

In general, living authors' archives facilitate a rewarding symbiosis between authors and critics: authors gain cultural if not economic capital from donating or selling materials, and critics are given an interesting set of materials to study. At the individual level, though, irreconcilable interests between particular authors and critics suggest that archives can become the locus of a zero-sum game in which one party wins at the expense of the other. Accordingly, research into the archives of living authors is imbued with cultural and economic imperatives, legal issues, and, not least, interpersonal dynamics. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook observe that archives have always "been about power—about maintaining power, about the power of the present to control what is, and will be, known about the past" (3). I wish to examine the power relationships that develop between living authors and scholars with regard to the authors' archives and the ways in which these relationships are bound up with desire.

The presence of scholars' desire in the course of archival study has been occasionally remarked upon: for instance, Kathleen Garay and Christl Verduyn acknowledge the "lengthy, sometimes lifelong attachment" that archival researchers can have "to the unpublished legacy of their research subject" (5), and MacLeod observes that archives "can bring out intense feelings and enthusiasms in the academic—fannish enthusiasms even" (133). However, the archival scholar's desire is seldom discussed extensively in academic texts.[2] When it does receive attention, it is usually recognized as a desire for knowledge, for an intimacy with textual material, or for an intimacy with the past. Less often observed is the desire for living authors that archival study cultivates. It would be implausible to claim that the widespread desire for intimacy with authors evident in contemporary literary culture as a whole is not shared by scholars, and especially by scholars using archives, which seem to offer a unique proximity to authors' lives. If this desire is not uncommon in archival scholarship, then it is worth investigating how it comes to influence the directions that such scholarship takes.

This investigation requires attention to the cultural and legal contexts of current critical inquiry as well as to the psychodynamics of the scholar-author relationship that emerge in direct interactions as well as in archival criticism and biography. Taking up Freud's

conception of melancholia, I will argue that critics' desire is bound up with a melancholic sense of loss created by living authors' absence from the archives. This absence is both mitigated and underscored by the immanency of the author function in the archives, which presents an attractive but not entirely satisfactory substitute love object. Given this situation, biographical scholars manifest an ambivalent desire not only to prod living authors into acknowledging them but also to reject authors in favor of incorporating the author function.

To delineate the tensions between authors and scholars that archival research can create, I will focus on JoAnn McCaig's account of her dealings with the Canadian writer Alice Munro, which McCaig provides in her 2002 book *Reading in: Alice Munro's Archives*. Munro garnered immediate acclaim in Canada with her first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which won a 1968 Governor General's Award, and since the late 1970s she has regularly published her stories in *The New Yorker*, gaining renown as one of the world's preeminent authors of short fiction. McCaig's doctoral research focused on investigating Munro's archives at the University of Calgary, and for the sake of a preliminary article related to this subject, McCaig gained the author's permission to quote from unpublished letters held there. Then, while McCaig was still working on a book emerging from her research, the article was used by another author, John Metcalf, to make claims of his own in an essay for the *National Post*, a Canadian newspaper. Part of Metcalf's argument—namely, that in achieving literary renown, Munro had been better served by her American agent than by a Canadian mentor—disturbed Munro sufficiently for her to write a letter to the *National Post* in which she referred to McCaig's previously published article as "riddled with bizarre assumptions and . . . written with blatant disregard for fact" (qtd. in McCaig x). Moreover, she prohibited McCaig from quoting her unpublished writing any further. Consequently McCaig faced the challenge of significantly altering her manuscript, already submitted to a publisher, by removing extensive discussions of Munro's correspondence. In the preface to her revised, published volume, McCaig describes the frustrations and emotions she experienced. Indeed, she depicts herself as a kind of flustered lover who has been rebuked by Munro and who remains ostensibly loyal to the object of her scholarly love despite the fact that her feelings go unrequited. For a critic such as McCaig to admit to such interpersonal affect with regard to her object of study does nothing to diminish her research, but her admission confirms that scholars do not act merely as disinterested mediators in the relationship between authors and the reading public. Rather, they may also be lovers themselves, enjoying a privileged

access to authors in archives before offering up to their own readers what they have found there.

If McCaig should feel especially spurned by Munro, it may be because previously she felt a special devotion to her. Munro's fiction can inspire a fierce critical loyalty that involves a sense of intimacy with the author, if also a respectful—and tantalizing—sense of distance from her. Not least among the reasons for this intimacy is the fact that much of Munro's fiction has the sheen of the autobiographical to it, insofar as often it focuses on characters who have personal histories similar to that of their author: for example, they may have grown up in rural southern Ontario, married and divorced someone from a family wealthier than their own, or raised children in British Columbia. Accordingly, a reader might claim to know a great deal about Munro by virtue of having identified certain characteristics shared by her protagonists. At the same time, critical fidelity to Munro is no doubt also stoked by her well-known desire for privacy. This desire makes her both a more sympathetic figure to critics—insofar as she seems even more like the ordinary, reserved protagonists of her stories—and a greater object of curiosity.

Munro is no hermetic figure like Thomas Pynchon or J. D. Salinger, but neither has she always accepted enthusiastically the public aspects of authorship. Instead, she has developed a reputation for being reluctant to give interviews or public readings. As early as a 1979 magazine interview, she explained why she does not embark on lecture tours or accept many writer-in-residence positions: "You have to be available to people, that's part of the job. . . . You have to give a lot and after a while no matter how hard you try not to, you play a role. You have an Alice Munro character that you play, and you've found out that people accept it. I wind up feeling like a total fraud" (qtd. in Knelman 22). The obvious irony here is that even as Munro explains her dissatisfaction with maintaining a public persona, ineluctably she is engaged in the performance of one. As an author in a literary culture that commonly seeks out and discusses details of writers' lives, she cannot avoid having a persona; rather, she can only choose the persona of the publicity-shy author. Notably, it was in the same year as this interview that Munro first donated archival materials to the University of Calgary. Just when it was becoming more difficult for readers to attain an audience with Alice Munro the person, Munro's archives apparently began to provide another form of proximity to her.

I say "apparently" because the figure with whom researchers gain intimacy in the archives is, of course, not a living person but the author function: what Michel Foucault calls "a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts

to undergo" (110). This figure is a reified composite of the implied authors associated with the literary texts authored by "Alice Munro" and of the versions of Munro found in paratexts such as the interview quoted above. In other words, such a figure also incorporates, as Wayne Booth puts it, the "public myth, a kind of super-author, often quite different from and only vaguely related to" the composite implied author (431). As this figure emerges from the accretion of archival texts, as well as from other paratexts, it becomes a substitute for the authorial body. And while archives may seem impoverished because they are haunted by the absence of that body, in turn they make the author's published texts seem suddenly incomplete, requiring a supplementary reading of archival materials in order to be fully appreciated.

Often Munro's own fiction suggests as much: characters in her stories are repeatedly writers who find themselves unable to contain their descriptions within narrative. For instance, at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del Jordan recalls her desire to be encyclopedic in writing about her hometown and remembers that "no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting" (249). The notion that life overwhelms the narrative impulse also arises in Munro's short fiction "Differently" when Georgia's creative writing instructor chastises her for including too many details in her stories. She goes on to write a leaner narrative that the instructor praises, but "Georgia herself thought that is was a fake. She made a long list of all the things that had been left out and handed it in as an appendix to the story" (216). Although Munro's narrators imagine producing a totalizing literature, as when Almeda Roth in "Meneseteung" dreams of writing "one very great poem that will contain everything," ultimately they fail (70). In contrast, archives such as Munro's promise to hold the remainder, the excess that authors have been unable to incorporate into their stories. According to this line of reasoning, archival texts are appendices to authors' published texts, raw materials requiring biographers and other scholars to turn them into further narratives.

In that sense, archives enact what Pamela Banting calls a "diaspora," moving documents into the public domain where they might be made into stories by the world at large (120). Through archives, living authors disseminate textual aspects of themselves, putting them into the hands of others and thus ensuring, paradoxically, their own immortality, if only in the form of the author function. Critics assume a further role by deciding the place of archival texts in an author's corpus and in relation to the author's life, thus adjudicating their

value and canonicity. In that respect, critics take up another abdicated role of the author, who has made merely a preliminary value judgment by keeping the texts and allowing them to be included in the archives. For critics, then, what Helen Freshwater calls archives' "allure of the lost and the innocent" can also be the allure of apparently expectant, thankful texts yielding their secrets, offering themselves for transformation into narrative (734).

The problems begin for critics when the still-living author reappears to intervene in their work. At that moment, it becomes clear that an apparent scholar-author love relationship is in fact a love triangle in which the living author and scholar each claim a privileged relationship to the author function. Accordingly, one might view the conflict over archives as resulting from the question of which party—author or scholar—will have control over shaping the author function's portrait. In that light, authors who participate in the production of literary archives are in fact engaged in a kind of literary creation, with the archives standing as a text that—following Henry Berger's description of diaries—one might call the authors' "authanatography" (583). Berger claims that the aim of producing such texts is "to write one's own epitaph; to shape the death mask that will control the future by representing the deceased as he or she wishes to be remembered" (583). With regard to Alice Munro's archives, McCaig notes that just such choices about self-representation seem to have been made; for instance, the archives contain only materials that Munro has deemed to be relevant to her writing, and there are no rejection letters in evidence (57). It would appear that although living authors' archives may not be properly considered autobiography, they constitute at least an anticipatory framework for biography, circumscribing the kind of "discoveries" that biographers will be able to make. But of course, scholars have their own preferences about what they investigate.

In exploring the "allure" of archives, Freshwater has noted the expectation that they will allow scholars to be "reunited with the lost past" and to experience "the fulfilment of [their] deepest desires for wholeness and completion" (738). These desires take on a special shape when the archives under investigation are those of living authors, who as love objects can appear to be more potentially reachable than much of "the lost past," but who also might be eager to avoid direct intrusions into their private space. In that respect, biographical research in the archives has the attraction of allowing researchers to circumvent the delicacies of interpersonal contact while engaging with the documentary remnants of the author's life. McCaig characterizes her own research into Munro's archives as involving a love relationship, although she is notably ambiguous as to the precise identity of

the love object. She observes: "A work of extensive scholarship, if properly done, is a labour of love. It is conceived in a spirit of passionate admiration and interest, propelled by a profound intellectual and emotional engagement, and sustained in deepening understanding and respect. 'Love' is not too strong a word to describe the impulse that inspires a scholar to devote many years of research to the work or life of an author" (xvi). An obvious appeal of archives for scholars who hold these feelings is the intimacy with the "work or life" of an author that seems attainable. Catherine Hobbs goes so far as to claim that an individual's archives offer "glimpses of the [person's] inner soul as well as its outer manifestation in public activities" (126). A complication, though, is that archives also mark the absence of the person who has created the documents. They survive as her or his traces, and it is through them that a manner of love relationship can develop.

Accordingly, the *jouissance* of archival research is a Lacanian *jouissance* of dissatisfaction. For scholars, archives are an *objet petit a*: the concrete thing that masquerades as the irrecoverable Other, thus meeting but not satisfying a desire for that Other. The inevitable insufficiency of archives in playing this role leaves scholars wanting something more. Enacting what Freshwater calls a "continual, if unconscious, refusal to remember that the archive does not contain the complete record of the past that it promises," scholars may let archives take them down a path toward an ever-receding horizon that promises but never actualizes direct union with embodied authors (739). That path is frustrating, but frustration is also one of its pleasures. Judith Butler observes that in a Lacanian model of desire, "desire is never fulfilled, for its fulfillment would entail a full return to that primary pleasure [of unity with the Other], and that return would dissolve the very subject which is the condition of desire itself" ("Desire" 381). The implication of this assertion in the case of archival research is that scholars' sense of lack not only propels the quest for knowledge about authors but also confirms scholars' identity as desiring subjects.

At the same time, critics can evince a desire not merely to know about authors but to become versions of them. If Freshwater is right that for scholars, the substitutive character of archives provides "a temporary satiation of the quest for full identity and narcissistic unity," then for researchers studying the archives of a living author, that satiation—however temporary and ultimately unsatisfactory—is obtained through a melancholic incorporation of the author function figured therein (738). This incorporation promises to bring them into a closer intimacy with their objects of study than they might achieve even through interpersonal contact. In this process of incorporation, critics come to adopt the same ideals and attitudes that they detect in

the authorial figure they extrapolate from textual material. For example, just before McCaig remarks of Munro's archives that "Munro was very careful to include only documents pertaining to the business of writing," she notes of her own book: "This is not a biography of the woman but a study of the writer's career as it unfolds within a particular place and time" (xiii). In mirroring the priorities that she has imputed to Munro, McCaig is performing an act analogous to that of the Freudian melancholic ego, which incorporates the attributes of the lost love object and says to the id, "Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object" (Butler, *Gender* 79). If this act of incorporation were wholly successful, the sense of loss driving the critic's archival desire would evaporate. But the inevitable incompleteness of archival records, along with the chasm between the author function and living author, leaves scholars ambivalently desirous: they are caught between a wish for intimacy with the absent author and a conflicting wish for the author to *stay* absent from the archives, thus allowing scholars to commune with and configure the author function as they please.

However, a living author's intervention in a critic's research need not shatter the critic's incorporation of the author function. Rather, it may serve to bolster that incorporation, especially if the living author acts in ways that, in the eyes of the critic, distinguish the living author from the author function. In that regard, there is a particularly striking moment in McCaig's introduction when she identifies herself with the titular protagonist of Munro's book *The Beggar Maid* (published in Canada as *Who Do You Think You Are?*), a character who, a biographical critic might argue, has affinities with Munro. McCaig writes: "[O]ne of the biggest challenges for me in the production of this study has been granting the author function to myself, to find my own way, given my gender, of 'Wrestling' with that 'fine Woman,' the archive. I am, after all, not an eminent man of letters, but a mere slip of a girl barely out of college. Like my subject, Alice Munro, I have had to wrestle with the lies, secrets, and silence that are my cultural inheritance, and have had to grant myself the authority to speak. . . . The real 'beggar maid' in this study is not Alice Munro, but me" (17–18). In referring to archival study as "Wrestling with a Fine Woman," McCaig is deploying a phrase used by a seventeenth-century marquis to describe archival research (qtd. in McCaig 17). By using this trope, implicitly she rehearses its conflation of archives and a human being, as well as its erotic connotations, implicitly suggesting that not merely the archive but Munro herself is a "Fine Woman," and that McCaig has been engaged in a metaphorical dalliance with her. Simultaneously, the trope of "wrestling" carries the connotation of an antagonism with Munro, as does McCaig's opposition of herself to "an eminent man of letters"—i.e.,

a powerful literary figure whose closest analogue here in terms of authority, if not of gender, is Alice Munro. McCaig both identifies herself with a figural "beggar maid" created by Munro and distances the living, eminent Munro from that figure.

Given McCaig's frustrations with the living Alice Munro who has publicly dismissed her work, the term "Fine Woman" is also laden with irony. Indeed, it may have seemed bizarre to McCaig that the same woman who taught her about the struggle to find an authorial voice should have appeared in the flesh to block her from producing, as she puts it, "the book I wanted to publish" (ix). In such a situation, suddenly the author is not the love object but the obstacle, hampering the critic's desire for intimacy with the author function. How, McCaig might wonder, could the living Munro object to the work of a female scholar when the fiction of Alice Munro with which McCaig fell in love seems to condemn a stifling private domain while celebrating the virtues of independent female inquiry? In such instances, a critical disenchantment with living authors must be inevitable. The author function begins to seem an unsatisfying figure, too, a mere echo of the living author, who is not simply an inert textual composite, but who, like the scholar, has changing intentions and desires, and who claims authority over archival texts.

It is for that reason, I would argue, that studying the archives of living authors can involve a hope precisely for the author to intervene in the researcher's investigation, thus not only proving her or his own existence and the validity of the scholar's desire, but expressing affect around the scholar—even if it is antagonistic affect. Otherwise the critic is apt to search out expressions of such affect from the archives themselves, as McCaig admits to doing when she claims to have wondered about Munro's collection: "is the archive playing with me?" (15). To scholars it might seem as though archives enact a kind of flirtation with them, drawing them into biographical inquiry while also keeping them at bay. McCaig appears to suggest a frustration with such flirtation in the case of Munro's archival documents by stating in response to the author's prohibition on publication: "the availability of these documents to researchers implied that scholarly inquiry and publication were not only anticipated but welcomed" (xi). The use of the passive voice here might imply a continued conflation of the living Munro with a passive, inviting author function to which McCaig has imputed an amorous sort of affect.

In order to undo that conflation and thereby enact a more complete incorporation of the author function in opposition to the living author, scholars may have an impulse to trigger an authorial intervention in their work. D. W. Winnicott describes a similar process with regard to children: viewing the love object, the child has a sense of

omnipotence and attacks the object, expecting to destroy it. But if the child is to make a successful transition beyond a mere instrumental approach to the love object, the object must return and respond. As Winnicott puts it: "A subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you,' and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: 'Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*.' Here fantasy begins for the individual. The subject can now *use* the object that has survived. . . . [I]t is the destruction of the object that places the object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control" (120–21). The archival scholar also tries to destroy the love object with the ambivalent hope that the author will emerge to assure the scholar that no, the death of the author has not been absolute, that *jouissance* will still have its frustrations, and that the author still claims authority over her or his texts so that the scholar's incorporation of the author function cannot be a complete, identity-dissolving one.

This process of the author's destruction and return need not occur only in the case of archival research, and it need not transpire in such a direct, confrontational way as in the case of McCaig and Munro. Just as Winnicott suggests that for the child the process of destruction is located in fantasy, no doubt for critics the process often involves a fantasy of authors reading and responding to their published research. This possibility must hold for critics both pleasure and fear. The living author has the power to affirm the scholar's intimacy with the author function and to challenge it. Either way, for critics an attractive consequence is that their fantastic encounters with a spectral author—one who is a strange mixture of textual immanence and psycho-biological absence—are transformed into a relationship involving clearly drawn lines that demarcate the living author's preferences and affect.

In that regard, it would appear an important aspect of McCaig's book that, McCaig having been rejected by Munro, her book should then narrate the story of that rejection. This thus declares her distance from the living author while asserting her fidelity to the author function. McCaig claims, "Despite the difficulties and countless revisions, despite my sense of 'rejection' and 'betrayal' in this 'love' affair, I find that my admiration for Munro's work, and for the tenacity with which she struggled to produce it, remains undiminished" (xvi). McCaig is notably silent here about what she thinks of the embodied, present-day Munro. But if critics in McCaig's position suffer the apparent defeat of being unable to quote from an author's archives, they often achieve a victory insofar as they manage to draw out the

author, perhaps even prompting the author to produce more texts that can be analyzed. For instance, as a consequence of her conflict with Munro, McCaig is able to quote from at least one of Munro's letters; ironically, it is the one from Munro to the *National Post* in which Munro criticizes McCaig's research. McCaig's willingness to include in her book a record of Munro's rejection of her distinguishes her further from the very author who, McCaig observes, included none of her own rejection letters in her archival accessions.

A similar process occurred more hyperbolically in the case of Ian Hamilton's biographical pursuit of J. D. Salinger, which is documented in Hamilton's 1988 book *In Search of J. D. Salinger*. Because Hamilton knew that in Salinger's eyes he was "working for the enemy," he decided to make Salinger his "quarry" and shape his biography of the author precisely as the story of his quest to find out information about the man (3, 4). Hamilton seemed to fail in this quest insofar as he lost a subsequent court battle over his right to quote from Salinger's unpublished letters, but the case represented a victory for him in that it forced the reclusive Salinger to produce an affidavit—what Hamilton calls Salinger's "first autobiographical statement for two decades" (199–200)—from which Hamilton *could* quote. Indeed, Hamilton goes about analyzing the affidavit's rhetoric as though it were a literary text, taking Salinger to task for its uninspired phrasings (199). Salinger also had to endure a deposition with Hamilton's attorneys, and Hamilton includes in his book his lawyer's description of Salinger's appearance and demeanor (201). Additionally, he quotes from the deposition transcript, in which Salinger was required to answer questions about—among other things—what he had been writing for the last twenty years (202). Perhaps with a tinge of satisfaction, Hamilton notes the irony: in the process of defending his privacy, Salinger had to become much more open to public scrutiny than he had been in decades. And in what Hamilton presents as a lamentation but which might be read as tongue-in-cheek crowing, he concludes, "I can't rejoice that, whatever happens, my name and J. D. Salinger's will be linked in perpetuity as those of litigants or foes" (212). It seems slightly disingenuous for Hamilton to assert his regret when earlier he has claimed to have set out precisely as Salinger's adversary and when the precedent-establishing court case has earned him a place in literary history that even a revealing biography might not have secured.

As for McCaig, if she has felt betrayed by Munro, she also commits her own betrayal in the very guise of fidelity. Of her research into Munro's archives, she declares, "Because my purpose is not an exposé of Munro nor of anyone associated with her, I have refrained from discussing certain documents overlooked by the author and the

archivists" (xiii). In one fell swoop McCaig can claim to have been discreet and respectful of Munro by ignoring "certain documents" while also betraying the fact that these documents exist, potentially prompting other archival scholars to search for them and perhaps causing University of Calgary archivists, if not Munro herself, to re-examine the entire collection in search of the texts in question. McCaig not only reaches out once more potentially to provoke the living author into action, she also seems to be asserting her own power to read the archives, her right to disseminate her findings, and her intimacy with the author function, irrespective of the wishes of the living author.

The desire to betray the living author is not one that lacks ambivalence, though. Critics face legal, ethical, and perhaps psychological demands to be faithful to authors. It would not be surprising, then, if critics were apprehensive about "exposing" their research subjects, even as they also desire the prerogative to depict them however they choose. For instance, McCaig offers a telling moment when she describes her angry reaction to an apparent representation of Munro by another Canadian author, Audrey Thomas, in the short story "Initram." McCaig recalls: "I was unsettled by 'Initram'; I was almost offended by it. The story did things that stories are not supposed to do. First, it was autobiography masquerading as fiction—no, worse, it was *unauthorized biography* of Munro by her friend Thomas. . . . Second, it presented an author I held in high esteem in an unflattering light, violating the unfashionably humanist but nonetheless persistent view of the author as a uniquely gifted and admirable individual" (3). McCaig's sense of affront might be read as a displacement of her anxieties about her own representations of Munro. There may even be a sense in which Thomas has intruded on McCaig's territory and perhaps outmanoeuvred her because she has written fiction, thus releasing herself from the obligation to be so strictly referential—or faithful to the "real" Munro—as McCaig must be in her non-fiction, especially when Munro has already disparaged that writing as a kind of fiction in its "blatant disregard for fact." But then, inevitably, as an archival scholar writes narratives about an author, she or he does many of the same things that authors of fiction do to their models for characters. As Banting observes: "Out of the necessities of the act of writing, s/he contradicts, qualifies, extrapolates, suppresses, inflates, banishes the author" (120). In this manner, too, then, the scholar acts unfaithfully to the living author while faithfully incorporating the author function.

Lest I seem overly detached in my assessment of critics' archival desire, I should conclude by confessing my own implication in the subject matter. First, as a master's student long ago, studying the

fiction of Alice Munro, I wrote her to ask for an interview. She sent back a short, handwritten note, politely declining and claiming that she simply received too many requests to accommodate everyone; she had to protect her writing time. For my part, I was both disappointed and relieved, disappointed to have been rejected but relieved that I would not risk having to sacrifice my notion of her as shy, dedicated to her art, and almost otherworldly—a notion that I had developed in the course of reading her fiction and paratexts, and that her self-distancing note helped to support. In fact, by writing back to me, she had given me what seemed to be an even greater prize than an interview: not just words but written words in a letter addressed especially to me, a not-so-distant cousin to her short stories, which sometimes also seemed to speak to me personally. A few years later, I did meet Alice Munro in person, more or less by chance, at a bookstore in a small Ontario town, and our conversation has remained memorable for me, but the recollection of her words then does not carry the cachet of the letter. A memory cannot be photocopied, held, or deposited in an archive, and a living person can seldom match comprehensively the attractiveness of the author function—charming and accessible and replete with stories—as a loving reader has constructed it.

The tragic turn of this story is that I cherished Munro's letter sufficiently to have stored it in a secure and special place—so special, in fact, that I have since forgotten where I put it. Several times I have searched through folders, binders, and envelopes to find it but with no success. That spectral trace of Alice Munro is now an even more spectral presence in my own rambling private archives. If I have a sense that I am always going to be looking for this unintended *billet-doux*, I take it to be metaphorical of my own impossible desire for intimacy with the author. And at the same time, my personal archives now have more value—to me, at least—insofar as they have literally incorporated a trace of Munro. Meanwhile, in writing this article, I have had to confront a certain temptation to share it with McCaig or Munro; at some level there is a desire for approval, or, perhaps, disapproval. I want both to align myself with these authors and to distance myself from them. There is also an anxiety about the decorousness of taking up this essay's line of inquiry, with its speculations about people's desires and psychic workings.

I think it is important to acknowledge such impulses and self-doubt. Critics' concomitant devotion to living authors and desire to distinguish themselves from them are not perversions of archival scholarship but a necessary part of it. Biographical desire seems inescapable in the current age when authors are objects of public interest and when there are so many psycho-social, economic, and

legal pressures exerting themselves on the creation and use of living authors' archives. How could critics avoid such desire entirely when it is inextricably connected to other desires that accumulate around cultural capital, personal legacy, and privacy—including, not least, the desire to enjoy privileged glimpses into the private spheres of others? Indeed, the conflicts between authors and critics that result may fuel important archival scholarship in the same way that, according to Adam Phillips's reading of Freud, biographers' relationships to their subjects involve "a heady brew of Oedipal triumph and sibling rivalry" (90). Scholarship may have a transferential component, but it need not be hobbled by it. Attention to biographical desire for living authors as it is expressed in archival research may help to shed light on the place of the author in contemporary culture as well as on the collective needs that archival research expresses or fulfils.

These matters will grow more pressing, and conflicts between authors and critics will grow more common as technology complicates issues of copyright, as conventions of privacy continue to evolve, and as ever greater amounts of authorial paratexts enter the public domain. Moreover, if biographical inquiry into living authors and their work is going to intensify, increasingly scholars will have to accept that the "observer effect" of physics applies to literary criticism, too: agents who investigate phenomena are inseparable from those phenomena and must account for their own involvement in them. Archival scholars in particular cannot study a living author without affecting the life and even the writing of that person. Living authors read criticism and respond to it, they give interviews or refuse to give them, they defend or relinquish their right to privacy, they create archives in anticipation of critical interest, they support themselves through selling archival materials in a market made buoyant by biographical desire, and they destroy materials that they do not want critics to view. Jonathan Franzen observes of these last actions, "I . . . don't see how you resist the temptation to select material that suggests the most flattering possible narratives. And not just select but actively create!" (qtd. in Donadio 15). With increasing regularity, one must accept as untrue Carolyn Steedman's assertion that "the Historian who goes to the Archive must always be an unintended reader, will always read that which was never intended for his or her eyes" (75). Critical work is not just commentary upon literary culture; it also shapes it. Accordingly, while Mary Lindemann believes that "archival work ought to be confrontational," in fact often it cannot help but be so (152). In that sense, archival study of living authors' work is not merely textual criticism but a form of anthropology and even of personal psychology. Scholars in those latter fields have long attended to their own implication in their

object of study. Critics working with living authors' archives may well need to follow suit.

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Notes

1. Perhaps the most contentious example of such a confrontation has arisen over the question of authors' copyright with regard to unpublished materials. In the United States, *Salinger v. Random House* (1986) established that authors have a right to refuse publication of their texts—even short excerpts or paraphrases—if the texts have a potential publication value. Scholars have complained about this decision, declaring that it impinges unduly upon what has been called the public's "right to information" (Rubio 67). With an eye to changing the status quo, some critics have suggested that archival institutions alter their policies and accept materials only if authors agree to release them fully into the public domain. For instance, McCaig states: "[I]t is problematic for me to think that repositories are spending public money to acquire literary archives, while their contractual arrangements with the authors create severe limitations on the academic freedom of inquiry of researchers. In short, if an author dislikes a scholar's methodology, analysis, or conclusions, then the researcher's freedom to publish his or her findings is severely compromised" (xvi). But changes to acquisition policies would not necessarily play into the hands of scholars. As Michael Moir observes, a system in which authors could not control the use of their archival materials would lead to fewer authors donating materials in the first place. Moir argues that although the current enforcement of restrictions complicates present-day use, it achieves "the goal of preservation that will ensure the availability of significant cultural assets for future generations of researchers" (Panofsky and Moir 29).

2. For two exceptions, see Freshwater and Lindemann. Meanwhile, Janet Malcolm's *In the Freud Archives* provides an account of the tangled lines of filial and paternal affect that can develop around archives, and novels such as Martha Cooley's *The Archivist* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* dramatize such affect. However, none of these texts focuses on archives involving living authors.

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