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THE TASTE OF AN ARCHIVE AND THE SMELL OF BLOOD.
TWO LEVELS OF THE HISTORIAN'S FIELD-WORK

Elle vient d'arriver; on lui demande une carte qu'elle n'a pas. On lui dit alors de retourner sur ses pas, dans l'autre pièce, pour faire établir un laissez-passer pour la journée. [...] Elle demande alors tout bas où se placer. Le président exaspéré lui donne l'ordre de se mettre où elle en a envie, sauf au premier rang réservé aux manuscrits les plus anciens. Elle obéit, choisit, pose son sac, cherche une feuille, s'assoit. Le président la rappelle immédiatement et toutes les têtes de la salle se lèvent en même temps. [...] Elle fait certainement exprès, de marteler le parquet avec ses hauts talons démodés, coincés à chaque instant entre deux lattes mal ajustées. [...] Quand mettront-ils sur le plancher une moquette avalant silencieusement les pas? Même de vilaine couleur et la qualité moyenne, cela soulagerait sûrement tout le monde¹. [She has just come; they ask her to show the card that she does not possess. So she has to follow her way back and in another room obtain an entrance card for one day. [...] She asks, lowering her voice, where she may take her seat. The man in charge, annoyed, tells her to sit down where she pleases, except for the first row, reserved for ancient manuscripts. Obediently, she chooses a seat, puts her bag on the desk, finds a piece of paper, and sits down. The man in charge immediately calls her back and all the readers move their heads up. [...] No doubt, out of malice, she stumps heavily across the parquet floor in her unfashionable high heels, so that they get between the badly adjusted boards. [...] When will they cover them with a carpet that would muffle the steps? Even if its colour be the most ugly and quality poor, it would relieve everybody.] These words strike us as odd in a book which is probably the most magnificent eulogy of the historian's

¹ A. F a r g e, *Le goût de l'archive*, Paris 1989, pp. 61, 63.

work on archival sources and at the same time an insightful expert analysis of eighteenth century court records. *Le goût de l'archive* by Arlette Farge was not, however, meant to be merely a methodological guide compiled from the standpoint of an experienced and recognized researcher who with the aplomb (and foresight) of an expert wants to share the secrets of his craft with novices. It rather resembles a report on a vivisection performed on a historian caught red-handed in his archive. A vivisection which is all the more interesting for being performed on the researcher best known to the author, that is herself. Hence its personal tone, its detailed analysis of individual types of behaviour and research procedures, but also its ironical distance that can only be accepted in a scholar who is conscious of his contribution to his discipline and at the same time observes the principle of objectivity (a principle, of course, unattainable, but which serves as the ethical basis for the scholarly craft).

Farge says again: *Dans les salles d'archives, les chuchotements rient la surface du silence, les yeux se perdent et l'histoire se décide. La connaissance et l'incertitude mêlées sont ordonnées dans une ritualisation exigeante où la couleur des fiches, l'austérité des archivistes et l'odeur des manuscrits servent de balises à un monde toujours initiatique. Au-delà du mode d'emploi, toujours ubuesque, se trouve l'archive*². [In the rooms of the archive, its apparent silence is ruffled by whispers, your sight gets lost, and history acquires its form. Knowledge mingled with uncertainty are set in an exigent ritualization, where the colour of the index cards, the archivists' strictness and the smell of manuscripts serve as sea-marks in our navigation to the world which continually unveils its secrets. Beyond its normal practical routine, always "ubuesque", is found the archive.]

Since there is a reference to King Ubu, has the text anything in common with historiography? — one might ask, relegating Arlette Farge's reflections to the domain of literature. This would, however, affect our understanding of the way history is practised, and as a result, created. History does not arise behind the writing-desk. A historian, when he takes up research, leaves his study, and, like an anthropologist-empiricist, goes to the "sites of events", and regardless of inconveniences, collects the scraps

² *Ibidem*, pp. 66–67.

of the past at the source. His first destination is precisely the archive. Much has been written about the great significance of source studies for the professional identity of historians; as a result source findings have become a kind of fetish. Any attempt to break this connection, and undermine the epistemological value of archival materials, invariably encounters resistance on the part of a majority of the historical milieu.

“The archives in Lyon, France, are housed in an old convent on a hill overlooking the city”, say Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob. “It is reached by walking up some three hundred stone steps. For the practical realist — even one equipped with a laptop computer — the climb is worth the effort; the relativist might not bother. Historians find more than dust in archives and libraries; the records there offer a glimpse of a world that has disappeared. Assuming a tolerance for a degree of indeterminacy, scholars in the practical realist camp are encouraged to get out of bed in the morning and head for the archives, because there they can uncover evidence, touch lives long past, and «see» patterns in events that otherwise might remain inexplicable”³. Although the sources, says Jerzy Topolski, do not ensure us an access to the past reality, it is impossible to conduct serious historical research without them. Their role is not merely confined to being part of the construction of a historical narration: “the sources not only let us know the facts, due to them we come closer to the past, which is an extremely important aspect of researchers’ work”⁴.

So we can regard the archive as a kind of inter-zone where the present and the past come closest to one another. Hence it is quite natural that the historian chooses it as the place of his research; moreover — this choice seems to be the only rational one. Historians, especially those preoccupied with earlier times, spend long hours in archives, a behaviour considered to be an indispensable step leading to professional mastery. However, the only testimony of this are the footnotes referring to the sources in their fi-

³ J. Appleby, L. Hunt, M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*. New York-London 1994, p. 251.

⁴ J. Topolski, *Czy historyk ma dostęp do przeszłej rzeczywistości? Problem źródeł historycznych (Is the Past Reality Accessible to the Historian? The Problem of Historical Sources)*, in: *Historia: o jeden świat za daleko? (History: a Distant World)*, ed. E. Domańska, Poznań 1997, pp. 68–69.

nal works. The archive is to remain a transparent area — a simple storehouse where in a given collection, under a given call number, on a given card, you can find a given piece of information.

Its neutrality, however, is a fiction — just as it is the case with an anthropologist's observations, whose results cannot but be influenced by the conditions of his field-work. Anthropologists more and more often draw attention to this fact and try to take it into account in the procedures of research⁵; historians rather tend to ignore it, and tacitly assume that they can completely free themselves of the charge that the conditions of their archival research influence its results. An archive, however, is a total institution which imposes on the historian a number of strict norms, which are completely different from those that rule *extra muros*. A historian must immerse himself in the world of an archive just as an anthropologist does in the world of an alien culture; like the latter, he must accept the complicated strategy by which to acquire his knowledge; at the same time he enters into interactions which must influence the material he collects.

The historian's field-work in the archive is faced with various limitations in his access to the sources and the way he can use them, which are sometimes hard to understand. In this respect the archive imposes on him a strict discipline, composed of practical study of palaeography and tiresome copying of old texts on index-cards. What he gets in return is the overwhelming impression of the "authenticity" of source material and his sensual contact with the past. The smell of the old leather book covers, the roughness of the paper, the line of the writing, assure the historian he is in contact with the witness of events he wants to know about.

It cannot be questioned that a historian conducts his field-work among the archival materials and not among the employees and guests of the archive, and these materials are his best informants. It would, however, be wrong to think that it is exclusively the content of the document that makes a historian use it as a source

⁵ See e.g. P. Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things. The Senses in Anthropology*, Philadelphia 1989; *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. J. Okely, H. Callaway, London–New York 1992; C. Blanckaert, *Histoires du terrain. Entre savoirs et savoir-faire*, in: *Le terrain des sciences humaines. Instructions et enquêtes (XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles)*, ed. idem, Paris–Montréal 1996, pp. 9–56.

for the issue under his examination. He takes into account also other criteria, and is less rationalistic in the strategy of his choice than is suggested by the dry lists of sources placed at the end of his work. In fact, in the archive a historian comes up against a real, material existence of the written records of the past. His itinerary across the sea of archival materials is marked — on a par with call numbers — by the discolouring of paper, dog-eared pages, blots and inexplicable underlining, dried corpses of insects of species a historian would never suspect existed, divergent pagination, strings driven by a slovenly archivist precisely where the researcher expects to find the most interesting information, damaged margins and torn cards. Even of more importance is his following of the line of writing — legible and careful, it sometimes turns into hurried scribbling with run-out ink, letters distorted by a badly sharpened pen; crossed out words, corrections, additions and drawings in the margins create an illusion of proximity to the writer who died centuries ago; as a result scholars take over his way of looking at the text they read.

Historians rarely admit they let themselves be carried by such an unconstrained drift through the archive, where the choice of the sources they look over and the way they understand them are determined by their personal aesthetic criteria, their state of mind, or simply by chance. However, what they frequently invoke is “intuition” in their archival inquiries, which seems to be rather an awkward *ex post* explanation of the strategy of research that goes beyond the simple principles of retaining objectivity in choosing the scope of source inquiry.

Here let us quote the testimony of another historian, concerning the interaction between an archive as a place of work and the subject of the researcher’s interest. Stanisław G r o d z i s k i, a Polish historian of law and legal culture, begins one of the chapters of his book *W obronie czci niewieściej (In Defence of Women’s Honour)* in the following way: “Looking out of the window of the archival room you see the courtyard of Wawel Castle, crossed by a long queue formed by a crowd of school children. The continual chatter of their voices does not, however, obstruct our work. It is worse on days when the chambers of the castle are shut for the visitors; although the courtyard is empty, still, from time to time — like an irregular series of shots — we can

hear the energetic beating of carpets”⁶. This description is not, however, a melancholy complaint about the conditions of work in the already non-existent archival room in Wawel Castle. In the next paragraph Grodziski contrasts it with a long quotation from his source: the court records of a witchcraft trial that he discovered in the archival collections. Although the trial seemed rather grotesque, nevertheless in Poland of the middle of the 18th century any accusation of witchcraft could have a tragic end. By juxtaposing it with the description of a “chattering” Wawel courtyard, the author shows a dissonance between the reality surrounding his archival work and the world in which he gets immersed while studying the sources. This can be felt most acutely when studying court records which carry very detailed descriptions of human suffering, humiliation, pain and death. We all remember the sober remark that historians are like werewolves — they are attracted by the smell of human blood.

Court records are the favourite source of historical anthropology. Michael Kunze said: “From this transcript of their trial, long-forgotten men and women are brought back to life; they talk about themselves, their joys, their fears, and their distresses. [...] My “heroes” speak for themselves; they tell us what they felt and thought; what they put their faith in, and what inspired their doubts; they tell us of their remedies for poverty and sickness; they tell us how they played and laughed, suffered and dreamed”⁷. This discloses to us another level of the historian’s field-work, where his research procedures are consciously adapted from those applied by anthropologists. However, this adaptation, of course, has its limits, since — as Carlo Ginzburg said: “since historians are unable to converse with the peasants of the sixteenth century (and, in any case, there is no guarantee that they would understand them), they must depend almost entirely on written sources”⁸.

Historical field-work, so understood, takes place, quite naturally, in the historian’s mind. This is the work of his imagination

⁶ S. Grodziski, *W obronie czci niewieściej. Szkice z dziejów kultury prawnej* (In Defence of Women’s Honour. Essays in the History of Legal Culture), 2nd ed., Kraków 2000, p. 99.

⁷ M. Kunze, *Highroad to the Stake. A Tale of Witchcraft*, Chicago–London 1987, pp. IX, X–XI.

⁸ C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, London 1992, p. XV.

that allows him to create, or to “recreate” the past in a way so complete and convincing that he is ready to engage his authority in its defence. In this way he becomes a witness to this “recreated” past, that is its participant, armed with scholarly methods of observation. The legitimacy and cognitive consequences of such a posture of a researcher have been many times the subject of critical analysis⁹. I should only like to dwell on the ethical problems connected with the relationship between the methods of historical anthropology and emotions aroused by this (imagined) participation of a historian in the past reality. Anthropologists noticed long ago that field-work poses many ethical questions connected with the researcher’s participation in the community under his analysis, and with the ways he uses the information acquired during his observations and interviews. Moreover, those ethical problems — as it turned out — leave their imprint also on the cognitive aspect of his field-work. How can he explain his aim and tasks to the community under his analysis? To what extent can he use data concerning his informants’ private lives? What interactions with them can he enter? In what way does his emotional engagement affect the value of his observations? And, consequently, what degree of empathy is at all permissible in his work?

History usually leaves such questions aside and stresses that the chronological distance between the researcher and the object of his interest is insurmountable, hence any interaction is out of the question. This, however, is wrong. A historian need not necessarily have to deal with documents “smelling of blood” and shocking, in order to get emotionally engaged. His long-lasting contact with the heroes of his detailed research in any kind of written sources suffices to place him in the situation of an anthropologist conducting his field-work.

Still, one might argue that the historian does not deal with real persons. Especially in his study of the lower social strata through the prism of court records, so popular in historical anthropology, the records at his disposal are so dispersed and fragmentary, that he is not able to verify them or confront them with one another. So he moves not among the “real” life-stories, but among various products of memory and fantasy which are gener-

⁹ The last important voice in that discussion: E. Domańska, *op. cit.*, pp. 155–161.

ally the only mentions that concern a given person. In such a case, however, the historian's responsibility is even greater than in the critical "reconstruction" of a historical personage. By resurrecting from oblivion a person whose only emblem is some narrative, we give this person a unique opportunity of historical existence. This was the case of a clog maker, Louis-Francois Pinagot, commemorated in the famous experiment of Alain Corbin¹⁰.

It is in historical anthropology rather than in any other field of historical research that *A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations toward Past Generations*, formulated a few years ago by Antoon De Baets and published in "History & Theory"¹¹, should find its application. Among our duties towards the dead De Baets mentions respect for their right of privacy. What he means is both bodily immunity (in accordance with the principle *requiescat in pace* — a remark especially applicable in archaeology), and responsibility for the popularization of information about the dead person, acquired with the aid of historical methods. Thus respect for the privacy and for the right of personal dignity and reputation of the objects of their research becomes for historians a serious problem, if they want to analyse archival documents of censurable character and retain their critical attitude to their objects. A possible solution, especially valuable in the study of court sources, can be found in dejudicialization. This means that the historian resigns from his position of a judge and allows himself to infringe the object's privacy and his right to retain a good name, on condition, however, that the infringement of privacy would not mean its invasion, and harm done to the good name would not mean defamation, and both these acts and his historical analysis would not personally affect the dead person's descendants or relatives. What De Baets proposes in such a case is to apply a test of proportion, that is to consider whether the benefit coming from revealing some information in the name of social or scholarly interest surpasses

¹⁰ A. Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot. Sur les traces d'un inconnu 1798-1876*, Paris 1998, p. 8. [English transl.: *The Life of an Unknown. The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*, New York 2001].

¹¹ A. De Baets, *A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations toward Past Generations*, "History and Theory", vol. 43, issue 4, 2004, pp. 130-164.

the damage resulting from infringing the dead persons' right of privacy; and *vice versa* — whether the protection of the privacy of the object of research would not entail a disproportionate loss to the freedom of scholarly research.

Although observing the right of privacy is an essential problem for the historian with an anthropological bent, while he conducts his imaginary field-work, he cannot forget his other obligations towards the past generations. This is above all respect for the last will of the deceased and for their right to be bewailed in a suitable funeral ceremony. A historian, naturally, need not get engaged personally in these arrangements, but he should treat them with respect. What he is responsible for is the preservation of the memory of the dead and saving from oblivion not only the fact that they existed but also the distinctive features of their personality. And it is his moral duty to endow with historical existence those condemned to oblivion by their contemporaries, and to restore the good name of those who were deprived of it as a result of injustice, belied evidence or crimes against humanity.

To sum up, we must distinguish two levels in the historian's field-work. The first is an archive — the place where a historian conducts his time- and labour-consuming source research. The reality of an archive and the material form of its documents is not without influence on the strategy by which he acquires his knowledge, and consequently, on the material he collects. Another level of the historian's field-work is what takes place in his mind. This is the work of his imagination that allows him to create, or "recreate" the past — and it is especially resourceful if he applies the research procedures of anthropology. A historian who has found himself in the position of an anthropologist conducting his field-work, faces a great number of ethical problems which find their reflection also in the epistemological aspect of his research.

To end with, we should pose a question, which, so far, at least in my opinion, must remain unanswered: are those two levels of the historian's field-work in any way interconnected? Is the way history is "recreated" influenced by the conditions of source research and the material form of archival documents? And what conclusions can be drawn from this fact for the practical work of a historian?

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)