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Talk given at the 'Out of the Box and Dusted Down: Foraging and Findings' Seminar

Lavery, Carl

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Lavery, Carl. Out of the Box and Dusted Down: Foraging and Findings. A collective event to welcome Honorary Departmental Fellow Barbara Cavanagh and introduce the International Theatre Collection. Foyer, Parry Williams Building, 12th May 2009, 6pm.

“Le hazard, qui m’a fait tomber entre les mains Les Lettres que je me hasarde de metre au jour, est trop singulier pour ne point en faire part à mes Lecteurs’.

‘The stroke of chance, which dropped this book of letters into my lap, is so extraordinary that I am unable to withhold [the stories it speaks about from] my readers’ (my translation).

The lines which I have just read, and clumsily translated, are from the Editor’s Avertissement or preface to this book, *Verités à l’ordre du jour: Lettres à Madame de B. sur les spectacles*. The book is a second edition and was published in 1798, four years after the execution of Maximillien Robespierre and one year before Napoleon Boneparte staged the coup d’etat of the 18 Brumaire against the French Republic and installed himself as Emperor.

I was attracted to this object from the Cavanagh collection for two reasons, both of which are, if you would kindly indulge me, do with personal taste alone, with what the French might grandly call *une sensibilité intime*. On the one hand, I was drawn to the style and structure of the narrative that, like so many eighteenth century novels (Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* immediately comes to mind), is based on a playful and fictional conceit. Here the editor introduces the supposedly found letters of Madame de B, a noblewoman who, from the safe distance of the provinces (as well as the safe space of fiction) is able to criticize the state of French theatre during the Revolution without fear of consequence. I have always found textual strategies like this hard to resist – I like their cleverness, the way they wear their fictional lie, their capacity for seduction; how they entice me in. This was no exception.

My second reason for talking about the book derives from the words (or rather the sense) of the passage I have just cited. It seems to me that chance, *le hasard*, is one of the great gifts of the archive. The archive harbours chance, gives it a home, so to

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speak, and by doing so, allows it to work its productively disruptive magic. For me, the miracle of the archive occurs when I find myself distracted from the task at hand – the writing of the monograph; the research for the article - and start to wonder, in the same that I used to when bored by the prattling of my comprehensive teachers, about the other documents and objects that sometime lie enticingly, just there, on open access shelves; or, if I am really lucky, within the pages of the document I am supposed to be working on. In this book, for instance, I was delighted to discover the notes of an anonymous reader, etched in black ink, with an elegant hand, on a transparent text as thin as cigarette paper.

Discoveries like this - in archives like this - work in the way that Gaston Bachelard says that ‘supposedly’ inert matter always does, if we have time and inclination enough to embark on the intimate journey it invites us to take. Archived material is not dead material; rather, it is best seen as a catalyst – a live or animistic catalyst – for an experiment in reverie, imagination and, most importantly, perhaps, in memory.

When I picked up **this** book and read the opening lines in the quiet of my office, I was suddenly and unexpectedly, as if that is by chance, *par le hasard*, transported back to a series of remembered times and places which co-existed in my mind in a flood of shipwrecked chronology.

I remembered working in the archives in Caen on a dismal Wednesday afternoon in February in 1989 and finding a batch of disturbing images of unfortunate women who had been tarred and feathered for taking German soldiers as lovers during the Occupation of France in the 1940s. I remain haunted by one image. In it, the victim is seated on a stool on a makeshift wooden stage and appears to be laughing in some sort of abject –or mad – complicity with her tormentors, the mocking crowd that surrounds her.

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I recalled working on the ground floor in the new *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris in 2002 and thinking of how W.G. Sebald, an ex-colleague of mine, despised it for its insidious bureaucracy and futile attempt to control nature via the construction of an artificial garden, sheltered from the elements by a glass roof.

I remembered, too, working in the archive de l'Arsenal in the Marais area of Paris on a project for the Strindberg expert, Michael Robinson in 2003, and enjoying what can only be called a sense of *jouissance* as the silence of my fellow readers heightened the soft scrape of a delicate hand turning the pages of falling paper, one leaf after the other. The slowness and heaviness of the July afternoon electrified the atmosphere. It gave me goose bumps on the nape of my neck.

I remembered images – dream images – from Alain Resnais's 1956 film *Toute la mémoire du monde* which transformed the old *bibliothèque nationale* in Paris, the one on the rue de Richelieu in the first arrondissement, into an sort of mnemonic labyrinth, a house dense with memory in which the corridors, along with every vertiginous nook and cranny, seemed to broadcast the speech of objects on a strange, almost metaphysical frequency. I think too of how Walter Benjamin researched his great unfinished book, *The Arcade Projects (Das Passagen-Werk)* in the austere reading rooms of the old *bibliothèque* and how W.G. Sebald had hung a portrait of Benjamin on his office door in the University of East Anglia, alongside one of the Austrian novelist and playwright Thomas Bernhard

This, for me, then, is what the archive does. The objects within it are always more than mere knowledge; they resist my greedy desire to appropriate and to raid them for information. On the contrary, they seem, when I am sufficiently sensitive to the play of chance, to weave a dream veil, and through that weaving to open up the possibility of encountering forgotten people and places who strangely seem to have always been waiting there, just for me, on the far shore of time, on the other side of memory.

So to return to the very start of this paper:

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