ON ARCHIVISTS AND THEIR VIRTUES

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Preface

David Hartung was a graduate student in library science when he enrolled in the first seminar in archives administration offered at the University of Minnesota (through the department of history during spring quarter, 1976). Although he had worked with rare books and knew a little about manuscripts, this seminar was his first exposure to the concerns and problems of archivists. He had the fortune--or misfortune--to enroll in a class in which many of the members were experienced archivists eager to discuss what archivists do, and why, and who they are. Hartung became involved personally in that complex question of what Herman Kahn called the divided heart*, archivists' own ambiguity about the nature and value of their work. This essay is his response to the questioning and perplexity he observed; it is a gift to us from one who has understood our contradictory impulses and our identity crisis.

Students of sociology of the professions have observed that groups that are becoming professions tend to be serious, if not grim, about their work. Thus while we should applaud the increasing professionalization of modern archives and manuscripts work, we should not forget to provide time and occasions to consider ultimates. David Hartung's essay does not discuss standards for conservation or sources for documenting ethnicity. Rather, it provides an occasion to analyze, in prose risen to poetry, the nature of our mission and our condition.

As poetry, it deserves to be read in a tranquil moment.

-- Andrea Hinding

Prologue: The Starry Messenger of the Twentieth Century

Hundreds of thousands of miles across space from us, an American space vehicle called Pioneer 10 is engaged in an ambitious journey of infinite duration. Unlike most space vehicles it is not just an information gatherer, it is an information carrier; it bears the first message ever written by man for examination by possible nonterrestrial intelligent beings.

The message is etched on a six-inch by nine-inch gold anodized aluminum plate and is attached to the antenna support structure of Pioneer 10. The expected erosion rate in interstellar space is sufficiently small that this message should remain intact for hundreds of millions of years, and probably for a much longer period of time. It is, consequently, the artifact of mankind with the longest expected lifetime. It is an archive with some leverage on permanence.

Written in the language of science, the message intends to
communicate the locale, epoch, and nature of the builders of the spacecraft. Since several millennia may intervene between now and the time the message is intercepted, I should like to examine it briefly and use it as an index to the work of the archivist—and more importantly, to the identity of the archivist. Here are its essential elements: a nude man, a nude woman, the position of the earth in relation to fourteen pulsating stars, the position of the earth in our solar system with the spacecraft trajectory indicated, and the difference in energy between the two basic states of the hydrogen atom. With the exception of the man and the woman, the elements of the message are represented schematically. The message has been reproduced at the beginning of this essay, so that both my objectivity and subjectivity may be called into question.

Two elements of the message deserve explication. Pulsating stars, called pulsars, are Las Vegas writ large; in the dark and deserted regions of space they glow frenetically and make a lot of noise. In more scientific terms, they are rapidly rotating neutron stars produced in catastrophic stellar explosions; they are natural and regular sources of cosmic radio emission. Pulsars function as cosmic clocks, running down at largely known rates. They are represented on the message because a scientifically sophisticated civilization should be able to determine the position of the earth ("Where was it ever possible to see these fourteen pulsars arrayed in such a relative position?") and the time the message was sent ("When was it possible to see these pulsars in this position?"). Hydrogen is shown in its two states because it is the most abundant atom in our galaxy.

These markings, like those on the cave walls of Altamira and Lascaux, signify an identity. We are male and female. We live on the third planet from the star that is the center of our solar system. We have some idea of our position in space and time in the galaxy that contains our solar system. We recognize that we have an atomic structure. Despite the countless things the message did not say, I should like to extend its enterprising archival spirit to my concern about the identity of the archivist, about those characteristics that unite and persist in a person so that he or she asserts, "I am an archivist."

As the prologue implies, an identity is a curious thing; it presumably denotes something about us, but it is often incomplete
or misleading. Thus the archivist contends with many forces--subtle ones, at that--in attempting to communicate his or her identity. One of these is definition.

In answer to the question "What is an archivist?" we may engage in 1) tautology - "An archivist is an archivist"; 2) simile - "An archivist is like a fisherman, casting his net over an ocean of knowledge"; 3) metaphor - "The archivist is the curator of the transcript of human experience"; 4) hyperbole - "The archivist is the star of stars in the galaxy of historiography"; 5) downright perverseness - "An archivist is a history student with moderate brain damage."

We live in a time when the latter category--perverseness--is universally indulged. Self-deprecation is rampant, and so the mythology of the archivist as the failed something-or-other proliferates. Even the late Herman Kahn*, a person loved and respected by archivists, has given credence to this mythology by pointing at "the divided heart of the archivist."

Divided heart. Think of the connotations. A devastating silence at a convention of historians when the question is asked "Is anyone here an archivist?" Fudging about one's vocation in a conversation with a college chum "Well, I'm at the Historical Society now, working on a project...". Skulking out of the back door of the local archives at quitting time, hoping desperately for an unobserved exit. These divided heart scenarios can amuse us, but they portray a flinching which does a disservice to the men and women who are archivists.

I do not wish to indict anyone here, because librarians (uh, yes, I'm a librarian) are more or less in the throes of an identity struggle themselves, with the same sense of the perverse holding the field. There is a one-liner which goes something like "My father used to be a librarian, but then he got a job." I almost always laugh at this, but each time I do, I hate myself. And each time the archivist hears the one about the brain-damaged historian, isn't there a touch of resentment in the laughter it provokes? Let us dispel this mythology of the failed profession and its symbol, the divided heart, by giving them the silent treatment. Some ideas deserve to be starved.

Although simile, metaphor, and hyperbole all reside in the province of analogy, they deserve consideration in building definitions because of their immense power to persuade. The task
is to construct an analogy that is both sensible and creditable. Who isn't overwhelmed by the title "Curator of the Transcript of Human Experience"? It contains an element of truth, but it tilts towards the pretentious. Simplicity; that's the key.

Let us predicate something about the archivist. An archivist works with the records of men, women, and organizations that tell us something about the progress and development of human history. We're getting close, I believe. It's a least common denominator, to be sure, but it's a manageable one. Our definition then reads "An archivist is a person who works with the records of men, women, and organizations that tell us something about the progress and development of human history."

I should like now to say something about the characteristics that unite and persist in the archivist, that support the definition we have spelled out above. The only archivists I've ever known are the persons I've met as fellow students, professors, and guest speakers in our seminar, so what I record here is drawn from the ten weeks we have spent together; it is not a desideratum. On the gold anodized aluminum plate of my spacecraft I would etch the following: capability, common sense, courage, foresight, good humor, imagination, and skepticism (benign). As you can see, the librarian in me has portrayed the virtues in an alphabetical, not a hierarchical, scheme. I have done this because each archivist harbors these virtues in different proportions, and to rank them can only reflect my world view. But I should say something about "benign skepticism."

Benign skepticism permits the archivist to deal with uncertainty without somehow being overwhelmed by it. In each decision the archivist makes, uncertainty is inevitably present; the spectre of truth looms large, "Is this right?" Benign skepticism allows the archivist to say "Given what I know, this seems to be the right thing to do." What more can be asked? The only court of inquiry with jurisdiction over the work of the archivist is in the brain of the archivist. We do not have to accommodate eternal things, but ourselves.

With the identity and virtues of the archivist asserted, I should like to invoke the spirit of Pioneer 10, the stary messenger of our century, which like each of us is a frail vessel of history: enterprising, resolute, outward bound.