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Archive Madness: The Anarchic imperative of Peter Mather's *The Wort Papers*

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At work Thomas (Wort) was known to his associates as a determined implementor of innovations. . . . His colleagues new him as an implement of progress and wished to share in the future he envisaged, some from fear, others for want of alternatives. (2)

Ah, the worts . . . St John's Wort is indigenous to Asia and Europe. In Australia it is probably a garden escape (20)

(I should have paid more heed to natural history. I would then be finding my present situation quite interesting and watch the fauna and spend less time scribbling). The people I mixed with in those days knew fascinating things about flowers and animals, earth and sky. Some were fascinated and sought to know more, and were sparing with axe, gun and plough; the others did what people have always done. (117)

For those unfamiliar with Peter Mathers, he was born in England in 1931 and passed away in Melbourne in November 2004. He began his literary career as an author but later became a playwright. He attended Sydney Technical College, where he studied agriculture. His first writing appeared in the early 1960s. His first novel *Trap* (1966), won the Miles Franklin Prize, in somewhat controversial circumstances, Patrick White having withdrawn his nomination. Nevertheless, the novel heralded a new literary force in Australian literature. His second novel, *The Wort Papers* (1972), ranged across the country in rural settings from the Kimberley to dairy country in northern New South Wales, and further established his reputation as a stylistic innovator and satirist. A collection of short stories, *A Change for the Better* (1984), was described as 'ribald, intense, iconoclastic, cheeky, dramatic and a lot of fun.' Mathers wrote radio plays, articles and published many stories in magazines, journals and newspapers. His work has been championed by Peter Pierce, amongst others. His papers are held by the State Library of Victoria.

This paper seeks to create a dialogue between Mather's *The Wort Papers* and Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995/1996). The epigraphs point to several concerns that operate within Peter Mather's *The Wort Papers*. The novel interrogates the interrelationship between innovation, improvement, tradition and escape. The interrelationship is metonymic of the ways in which Australia is constructed – a place viewed as one of opportunity and growth; a place anxious about its lack of and an insistence on tradition; and a place that offers a potential of getting lost, or removing oneself from the world. Innovation, improvement, tradition and escape are also key elements in the making of the archive. *The Wort Papers* captures the problematic dynamic between the archival, that which is subject to the rules, processes and laws of the archive, and the anarchival, that which

resists and subverts the archive. In the final analysis the novel comes down on the side of the anarchival and its disorderly productivity.

In his 2007 publication, *A Culture of Improvement: Technology and the Western Millennium*, Robert Friedel presents a wide ranging account of modernity's scientific and technological revolution, providing an account of how, from about 1000ME to the present, that revolution is driven by a largely unquestioning belief in the utopian promise of progress. Friedel asserts that 'by the culture of improvement I mean the ascendancy of values and beliefs permeating all levels of society that "things could be done better"' (2). Nevertheless, improvement is, as Friedel points out, contingent in so far as there are no absolute measures of what constitutes improvement. Thus, Friedel is careful to show that at moments within this revolution questioning and critique do arise, never more so than in the last half of the 20th Century. Not too far away from the critique of the culture of improvement there remains the idea that 'things could be done better' or at least differently. Friedel is convincingly outlines the historical change in the nature of technology that comes to vindicate the observation that technological development, as it moves from singular and individual efforts to more collective and institutional production, becomes less marked by the ephemeral and more underscored by a material sustainability. To a degree, and as the epigraphs from *The Wort Papers* suggest, Peter Mather's the novel both critiques the belief in "improvement" and also questions the relationship between the ephemeral and the sustainable.

To return to Friedel for a moment. Curiously but importantly, Friedel is careful to acknowledge in the preface that:

We historians . . . are ultimately dependent on those in the past that have left us evidence of their thoughts, words, and deeds. We also depend on those who intervene between ourselves and our sources – the collectors, the record-keepers, clerks, bureaucrats, archivists, and librarians – gatherers and preservers of the evidence of what has gone on before us. (vii)

The acknowledgement is curious because thereafter there is no chapter or direct reference to the library as a key to his assessment of the culture of improvement to which his critique contributes and extends. It can be argued that Friedel's acknowledgement points to a synchronous occlusion of and dependence on the archive, which can be seen as symptomatic not only of a certain madness but also of a problematic very much related to the archive and one of its many its functions, that is as a technology of improvement. This occlusion then provides a productive space in which to insert a playful interrelationship between Peter Mather's *The Wort Papers* and Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.

In relation to the idea of improvement, how are we to read the record, the archive, the library? Clearly for Friedel the archive is the repository from which improvement (or otherwise) can be discerned and following Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, we are aware, of the double constitution of the archive in that it exhibits both ontological and nomological aspects:

(in) the word "archive" – and with the archive of so familiar a word. *Arkhe*, we recall, the names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principle in one: the principle according to nature or history, there where things commence – . . . ontological principle – but also the principle according to the

law, there where men and gods (sic) *command*, there where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given – nomological principle. (1)

Governed by principles of being and law the archive is a repository for the future, a reference point against which improvement can be measured. In one sense it is always bound to the future and an orderly unfolding of the family history or the history of the household, and by inference society as well. In the case of Mather's *The Wort Papers*, we encounter the unfolding of the family history of the Wort family, we read of their experience at the Kimberely Station, Orebul Downs, and their later experience at Uppersass, but whether it is orderly is another question, particularly as they are associated with "garden escapees," creating an unpredictability that makes difficult the assessment of the future.

The trouble with the future of course is that while it is felt to promise the new the improved and the ideal, it also houses endings, conclusions, death and perhaps the need for escape. In his consideration of the fact of Freud's house becoming museum, not surprisingly for Derrida the death drive, the aggressive, destructive drive is powerfully operative in the archive, which, without leaving any trace, functions as an "anarchivic" force. The death drive 'will always have been archive-destroying, by silent vocation.' And perhaps in the case of *The Wort Papers*, remembering that it presents as a family record the anarchivic exhibits a seditious and anarchic influence.

Against the influence of the anarchivic and to ensure some sense of the future, one of the archive's function is the delivery of "truth" through the production of "pure" objects, or at least this is the ideal purpose and trajectory of the archivist and the archive, that is to set a standard. However, one of the processes that undermine this objective ideal is that of categorisation. It is at this point an object may acquiesce to or may resist archiving. The object itself may be indeterminate. Peter Mather's *The Wort Papers* is a case in point, but if I reflect briefly on my own situation and the context of the time of the novel's publication in 1972 then the possibility of the archive is thrown into question. At the time of publication, I would have been in my final year at Salisbury East High School facing the draft ballot the following year; but 1972 was also the year a Labor Government was elected, and with the whirlwind entry of Whitlam and Barnard into government marked by extraordinary legislative and regulatory changes the archive and the future became unsettled. However a settling influence would have been the release of 1942 Cabinet papers allowing the recollection of another Labor Government led by the iconic war time, Labor leader John Curtin who is credited with transforming Australia through his pursuit of the American Alliance, which by 1972 was under pressure because of the Vietnam War. Heady times. In a sense no-one knew what to expect. And with the publication of the Wort Papers the OzLit reading public didn't quite know what we were getting. This was probably also the case for the publishers, for whom the manuscript appears to be everything and its opposites. The fly-leaf notes indicate:

The Wort Papers is the bizarre and comic creation of an extraordinarily inventive mind (so we do not quite know what to do with Peter Mather's work)(my parentheses). It is an epic account of the Australian experience: gazetteer, family history, roll of honour (and of ignominy), bestiary and documentary; a ribald, ironic *tour de force*.

Clearly *The Wort Papers* presents the publisher with a category problem thus upsetting the nomological aspect of the archive. We should be grateful then to marketing department (I assume it is a marketing solution) and arguably such a department's assumption and

transformation of the role of archion. Hence I should give the text's full title: *The Wort Papers: A Novel*. Unfortunately, the qualifier is a transparent strategy and no known librarian or archivist worth their salt would fall for that, except, of course, the listed categories of gazette, family history, documentary do not necessarily help, nor do the plethora of subtitles throughout the text, such as 'A tale for Children,' 'A Chapter for Tots,' 'A Chapter for Herbal-Minded Children,' 'Finally, a Chapter for Children who Appreciate Fine-Wrought Prose . . .,' and '(Conclusion of Children's and Adolescents' Tales).'

In 1986 I presented a paper on Peter Mathers at the Townsville Conference (it would have been nice if this coincided with the election of the Hawke Governments the synchronicity was out by 3 years, if only Hayden could have held out for 3 more years of opposition). I had commenced my doctorate in 1982 initially looking at irony in Australian and Indian fiction. In terms of doctorates that was a monstrous mistake, but given the archival nature of the doctorate one had to begin somewhere. By 1983 (the actual year of the election of the Hawke government, described by Hayden as a victory that could have been won by aa drover's dog'), I had refined my topic to a consideration of the Picaresque in Australian and Indian Fiction. In this moment, a category problem seemed to be resolved. I argued that *The Wort Papers* and Peter Mather's other novel *Trap* could be read in terms of the Picaresque, a proto-novelistic form that wanders between the grandness of the epic and the ordinariness of the quotidian. However, this may have been an interpretive rather than an archival solution, but in that moment it appeared that by invoking the origins of the form of the modern novel I had found the ontological and nomological underpinnings of the doctoral project. However, given the presence of anarchival within narrative such ontological and nomological underpinnings may be more contingent than absolute, and this seems to be borne out by the narrative style deployed in the novel.

Stylistic Anarchivism

Stylistically, the narrative structure of *The Wort Papers* is, as already mentioned, digressive and chaotic. It challenges the archive and arguably operates within an anarchival economy in so far as it demands and confounds interpretation. This probably true of most narratives because generally narrative operates in an interpretive economy, that is to say the text creates and enters into a contested but consensualising space. This is not to say that there is a necessarily agreed upon interpretation, but following Bakhtin, and as pointed out earlier, the archive works toward the monological.

However, from the outset we know something is amiss with *The Wort Papers*. The cover notes point to a genre/category problem, which is resolved by telling us it is a novel. This is reflected in the text itself with the novel's narrator, a somewhat mysterious presence called Matters and his description of his discovery that he likens to a draft novel he has encountered previously. In a telegram to Thomas Wort, he signals:

I ONCE READ FIRST DRAFT OF A SHORT NOVEL STOP WHAT I COULD FOLLOW WAS VERY GOOD BUT AUTHORS DEROGATORY MARGIN NOTES BETTER STOP I AFTERWARDS DECIDED HE HAD WRITTEN A NOVEL WITH DEROG MARGIN NOTES AND WHY NOT STOP PAGES STREAKED WITH BLACK LINES AND ERASURES WITH FANTASTIC PALIMPSEST AND LEGIBLE UNDERLYING WORDS STOP WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE SOMETHING SIMILAR RECENTLY UNEARTHED NEAR VILLAGE OF UPPERSASS STOP REGARDS MATTERS. (11)

It could be argued that Matters is referring to Mather's *Trap*, an equally anarchic text. And while the 'derog margin notes' feature, the narrative stylistically is characterised and driven by digression and extensive parenthetical asides, not to mention occasional ambiguous non-attributable extradiagetic commentary. In recounting Thomas' encounters with an Afghan (sic) cameleer at Orebul Downs, we get the following:

The cameleer galloped off in the direction he had come from.

Which was ultimately, Afghanistan, a country in Asia, bounded on the North by Turkestan, on the East by Peshwar, and Sind, on the South by Baluchstan, and on the West by the Persian highlands, all in all an area of about 240,000 to 260,000 sq. miles, depending on political conditions and the state surveyors, for if they are Afghans they tend to expand the frontiers, if they are foreigners they tend to reduce them, which is at least deplorable practice for any reduction in square mileage means a diminution of land available for breeding and grazing of camels which are exceeding numerous in such trade centres as Herat and Kandahar. . . . Britain has twice intervened martially, and on the first occasion a force of three thousand officers and men were treacherously murdered in the Khyber Pass, resulting in mosaic retribution, reparations and Victorian satisfaction. The wily Russian lurks to the North, China is not far off, Persia but a verb away and India sends songs little diminished by terrain, if not enhanced.
(77)

(If I may add parenthetically, this was one of my first introductions to the history of Afghanistan and its curious geopolitical significance to the West). The narrative is continually disrupted by these disquisitions, designed to signal the presence of other histories, which, although residing within the archive, tend to be marginalised yet remain a source of anarchic influence. I would recommend the passage devoted to breeds of cattle (cows feature significantly in the narrative), culminating in a celebration of Australia's own breed the Illawarra Shorthorn (98-99), which everyone knows about, well maybe not, given the celebratory status of the Merino.

Narrative, Origin, the Anarchival

Narrative either resists the archive or is elemental to the anarchival at work within the archive. Narrative drives towards its own ending/end but often in something of a messy trajectory. It is for this reason, arguably, that the preferred objects of literary archive are the manuscript, the diary and the letter. Singularly and collectively, the manuscript, the diary and the letter are perceived to not only stand in as a point/law of origin through a projected representation of the author but also provide metonymic links to the author. In so doing they ascribe to the author the role of an archon, and not only in the authority that the position holds, but also in the close alignment of author and archivist. Thus the manuscript, diary and letter are assigned greater authority, value and truth than the published work. And this is important in so far as such valuations are necessary and productive for the literary field and the authority it possesses.

The Wort Papers

I do not want to suggest that Mathers' work is unarchivable; I would not be able to write about it if it were. In the case of both *Trap* and *The Wort Papers* we find extraordinarily disciplined works marked by a sustained presentation of apparent "chaotic" structures. As a

consequence they perform an important role in relation to the literary canonical terms in so far they are singularly marginal but persistent presences (in a sense you will not find them but will always find them – well that is my hope). What is important about both texts is that they interrogate the relationship between two economies - the recorded and the interpretive, and the archival and its processes of identifying and shaping of preferred/pure literary object. What we encounter is what Derrida argues is already present in the archive, that is, the tension between archival and anarchival forces; the tension between law and outlawry; the tension between capture and escape. If I invoke my earlier paper, and another theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the novels narrate the tension between the monological and dialogic, that is, as stated earlier, a seditious and anarchic influence, undermining an accrediting process that goes to the stabilisation and reduction of competing archival authority, which, in accord with Derrida's reading of the archive, ensures 'a place of consignment . . . a technique of repetition' (after the scientific method) and of external oversight, that is a necessary to a 'certain exteriority' (11). So far I have examined the way in which Mather's text questions yet remains subject to processes of categorisation. As such the problematic nature of the text reveals rather than occludes the necessity of a certain distance or exteriority that underscores the authority of the archive and the archon. However, the story itself invites analysis that challenges canonical readings of representations and narratives of Australia.

Deconstructing the Bush Myth

A critical factor in *The Wort Papers*' archival life is its relentless questioning of the bush myth, exemplified by a section of the novel entitled 'journeys and Employers (& obligatory bushfire)' (29). Both Thomas Wort and Percy Wort represent the conflicted nature of European perceptions of the Australian landscape, particularly in relation to a desired, imagined productivity (The Worts are garden escapees). Embedded in the story of the bushy or the battler is not only the story of survival but also the story of aspiration. It is this latter element that helps idealise the figure of the battlers and their drive to improve not only their own circumstance but also that of the country. However, *The Wort Papers* displays a deep suspicion of such an ideal, tellingly accounted for in the Wort's experience of Orebul Downs Station:

A fellow-mourner afterwards described Orebul Downs: Terrain sunbaked in Summer, sometimes frozen in Winter, bathed in minimal rain, where hateful grasses grew sparsely among stones, . . . salt patches . . . (that) salted beef on the hoof, where sheep grew steely wool so magnetized it could not be removed. (56)

And to underscore the anxiety around settlement and belonging we are informed, somewhat ironically, that 'Orebul Downs was founded fifty years ago, it is steeped in history and tradition, ...' (65). History or rather the sense of the historical is diminished as a foundation for any meaningful and sustained tradition. This jaundiced view is reinforced by Percy on his visit to the Kimberley some years later: '[s]imply to see what was there. The Kimberley had not changed much since my father's trip. He made it sound rather dull and uneventful. When I got there, I realized the strength of his understatements' (53). This lack of change points to a lack of improvement and to a continuing lack of understanding.

Importantly the fortunes of the Wort Family, in accordance with dominant tropes within Australian literature, are measured in the itinerant life/ peregrinations of Thomas, sometimes singularly, sometimes as the family collective. Finally, 'at Uppersass, the Worts gained altitude, their own farm (give or take a mortgage or two), a sense of community and the

dignity of near-poverty' (152). Survival rather than aspiration becomes the measure of the Worts' success, altitude being geographical rather than social. As with the archive, for the Worts the more things change the more things remain the same. The Worts, in spite of an itinerant lifestyle and its promise of improvement, experience a form of entrapment rather than release. If they are garden escapees it is uncertain if they escape to anything positive or productive. And this is further reinforced in Thomas' decision to go to the city and anticipating his parents' reaction, again asserting the anarchivic, in terms of junk, over the archivic privileging of agricultural subsistence:

I decided not to tell Mum and Dad. They would want me to return to the farm, to recharge my batteries. To be reborn, away from the dreadful city. To put my agricultural high school expertise to proper use. To cease frittering in the city. To return to a sound basic agricultural subsistence. To rejoin the pastoral symphony of moos, oinks, clucks and earthings. All of which I liked. Loved, even. But not as a definite future. Alternated with factory, warehouse and junkyard, yes. Junkyards gave me hope, for I could cope with scrap and rubbish, I would endure. (159 -60)

In Thomas' view junkyards, rubbish and scrap appear to be a temporary but productive release for some subscription to a bucolic ideal. It points to the possibility that it is the discarded, outcast, and largely hidden aspect of the everyday that might be the most rewarding.

The subterranean/unconscious

I have argued that the anarchival within the archival is hidden, not invisible so much as occluded. It might also be thought of subterranean, which generally points in the direction of the unconscious. And this is not inappropriate given that institutions founded on a "law" establish practices that, if viewed from a certain perspective, are marked by fetish and fixation.

The Wort Papers plays with images of the subterranean. Thomas is advised that his media company Mediums Ltd should merge with a mining company, to which he declares, 'To hell with mining ! . . . Nowadays everything's to do with mining. I don't want to be owned by a mine. Miners leave holes' (3). Significantly, the world is dominated by multinational media and resource companies, and that perhaps they are connected symbolically in their difference. On the one hand, media companies function in relation to the archive as an autopoietic process. Media companies are a type of self-generating archive. On the other hand resource companies, increasingly efficient at extraction, produce as by-products holes, shafts, pits etc., a subterranean and an unpredictable world in which the anarchivic resides and from which it emerges.

Holes and graves are not the only signs of the subterranean. It is noted in the narrative, possibly by Thomas, possibly by Matters, possibly by Percy, that '[c]aves have so far featured several times in this series of recollections. (Caves of recollections joined with one another by passages sometimes long and narrow)' (152). Caves have punctuated narrative linkages. Holes, graves and caves are places of consignment, places where things are put, where alternate realities are created, symbolically linking to the unconscious, linking to the anarchivic.

Conclusion

The hole, the grave, the cave are important anarchival sites. Derrida reminds us that:

The meaning of the "Archive," its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *Arkheion*: initially a house or domicile, an address, the residence of superior magistrates, the Archons, those who commanded. . . . On account of their publicly recognised authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house . . . that official documents are filed.

The Wort Papers explores alternatives not only in term of objects but also in terms of places of consignment, and importantly signalling the maintenance of "histories" that are otherwise excluded from the interpretive and distributive powers of the archive, thus providing another productive element within the archive. Whereas Friedel looks to the archive to drive, to orderly unfold the narrative of cultural improvement, he could just as well look to the anarchival as another mode of productivity, a less orderly, more playful form of investment allowing an unorthodox narrativisation of cultural change. The anarchival may indeed be the driver of survival and sustainability. Thomas Wort is aware of his brother, Percy's entrepreneurial spirit. Thomas notes, albeit parenthetically:

(My bro is keen on caves and I have reason to think he has at least six in the mountains. Difficult but not impossible of access, each one contains drums of water, food, fuel and clothing but no firearms. He plans to sell them on war eve. Bro is a positive thinker). (109)

The Wort Papers is a successful narrative, if one is to allow such an assertion. The narrative resists 'domiciliation . . . house arrest,' and plays well with and against Derrida's *Archive Fever*, and probably with and against other theoretical critiques.

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