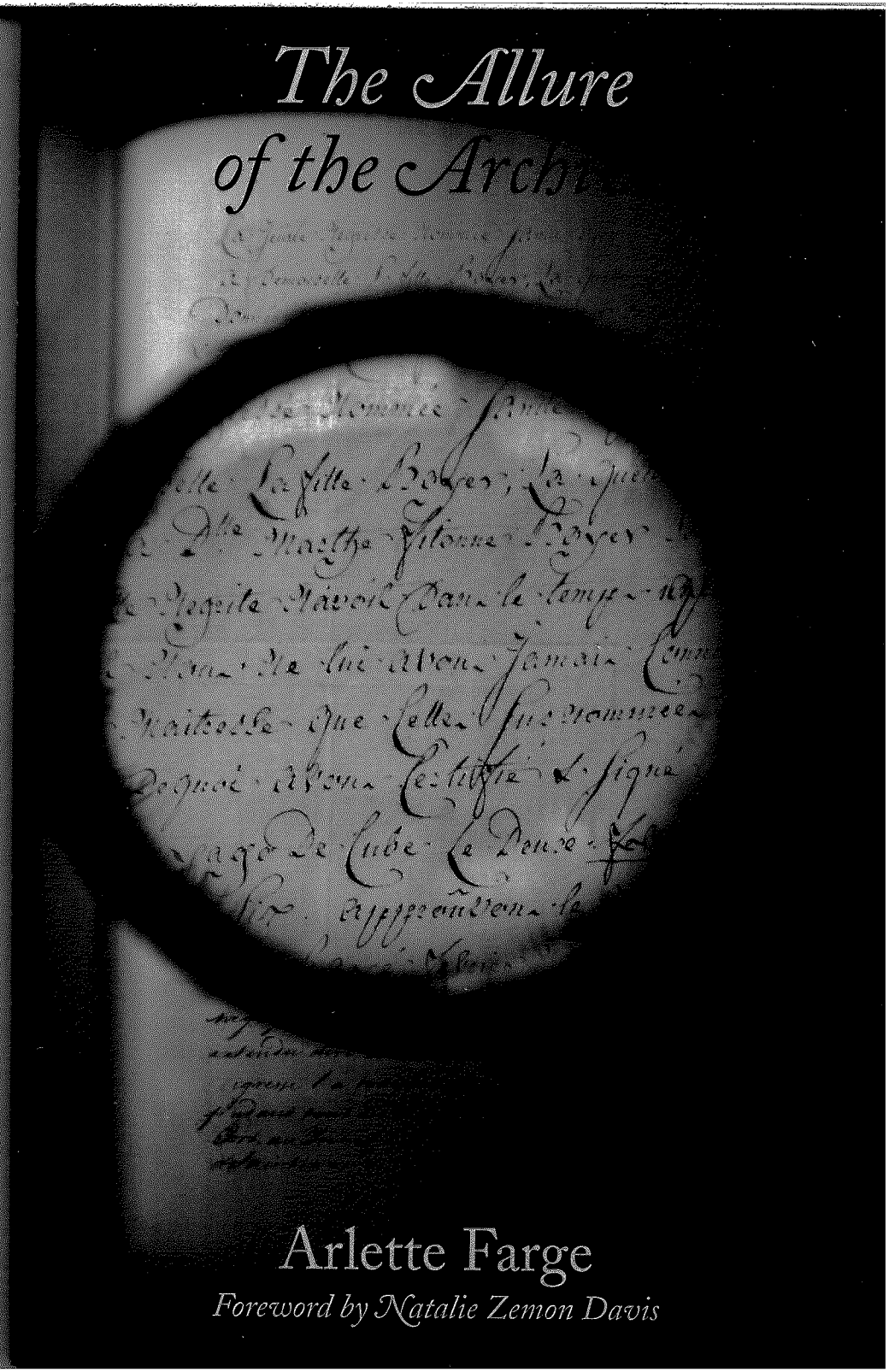
The Allure of the Archives



Arlette Farge

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Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton

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Traces by the Thousands

Whether it's summer or winter, you freeze. Your hands grow stiff as you try to decipher the document, and every touch of its parchment or rag paper stains your fingers with cold dust. The writing, no matter how meticulous, how regular, is barely legible to untrained eyes. It sits before you on the

reading room table, most often a worn-out looking bundle tied together with a cloth ribbon, its corners eaten away by time and rodents. It is precious (infinitely so) and damaged; you handle it cautiously out of fear that a slight tear could become definitive. You can tell at a glance whether a bundle has been opened even once since it was first stored. An intact bundle is easily recognizable. Not by its level of deterioration—after all, it may have been subjected to damp cellars and floods, wars and disasters, frosts and fires—but by a uniform layer of stiff dust that cannot be blown or brushed off, a scaly hide hardened by the years. Gently, you begin undoing the cloth ribbon that corsets it around the waist, revealing a pale line where the cloth had rested for so long.

Each judicial archive has its particular characteristics. This book deals almost exclusively with those of the eighteenth century, which are stored in the French National Archives, the Library of the Arsenal, and the National Library. My work as a historian has been founded upon these collections.[1]

The archives of the eighteenth century have little in common with the illuminated medieval manuscripts that preceded them. There is nothing decorative about them. They were simply one of the modes of civil and criminal administration under the monarchy, and time has preserved them as a trace of its passage. Like today, yet so unlike today, the police took statements and filled out logbooks. Superintendents and

police inspectors sent notes and reports to their superiors. Suspects were interrogated, and witnesses gave their accounts to clerks, who then transcribed their words without any punctuation, following the custom of the time. The eighteenth-century judicial archives are simply the accumulation, loose sheet after loose sheet, of criminal complaints, trials, interrogations, case summaries, and sentencings. Crimes both large and small can be found here, as well as countless police reports and case summaries that describe in detail the population that they doggedly attempted to monitor and control. Usually these were collected and bundled together in chronological order, month by month. But every once in a while, they were bound together in registers or stacked in the gray cardboard boxes that contain criminal records, arranged by name and year. An archive presupposes an archivist, a hand that collects and classifies, and even if the judicial archives are the most "brutally" preserved of the archival and library collections—which is to say that they were mostly preserved in their raw form, unbound and without folders, collected and tied together with string like bales of hay—these documents were still in a sense readied for later use.

There was, of course, their immediate use: The eighteenth-century police needed them in order to function properly. But could anyone at the time have anticipated that more than two centuries later, a historian would decide to use these documents as witnesses once again, privileging them over the more familiar and accessible printed sources?

The judicial archive is quite different from printed documents and texts, "relations,"[2] letters, newspapers, or even autobiographies. Its material form makes it harder to grasp. It is excessive and overwhelming, like a spring tide, an avalanche, or a flood. This comparison with natural and unpredictable forces is not arbitrary. When working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning . . . you feel immersed in something vast, oceanic. This analogy to the ocean can be found in the archive itself. The archival inventories are subdivided into *fonds*,[a] the name given to collections of documents, which are grouped together either because they are similar in subject, or because they were donated by a particular individual. These numerous and ample archival *fonds*, stored in library basements, bring to mind the hulking masses of rock in the Atlantic, called *basses*, that are visible only twice a year, during the lowest tides. The technical definition of these archival *fonds* in no way detracts from their mysteriousness or their depth: "Groupings of documents, whatever their form or their format, that were compiled organically, automatically, through the activities of a person or institution, public or private, and whose preservation in the archives respects this grouping and refrains from breaking it up."[3]

Archivists and archive staff do not lose their bearings in this ocean. They talk about the archives in terms of how many kilometers they span, of thousands of linear meters of

shelves. This is another form of gigantism, or maybe it's just a clever way of coming to grips with the archives, of taming them while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of ever taking full possession of them. These metric metaphors lead to a contradiction: stacked on shelves, measured in kilometers like roads, the archive seems infinite, perhaps even indecipherable. Can you read a highway, even if it is made of paper?[4]

Unsettling and colossal, the archive grabs hold of the reader. With a sudden harshness it opens onto a hidden world where rejects, wretches, and ne'er-do-wells play their parts in an unstable and living society. As soon as you begin to read, you are struck by an impression of reality that no printed text, no matter how unfamiliar, can give. Any printed document was intentionally produced for public viewing and meant to be understood by a wide audience. Printed texts seek to make an announcement and create a certain belief, to modify the state of things by advancing a particular narrative or commentary. They have been ordered and structured according to systems that are more or less easily discernable, and whatever form they might have taken, they have been brought into existence to be convincing and to change what people think. Official, fictional, polemical, and clandestine printed texts were circulated at a brisk pace during the Enlightenment, crossing social boundaries, often pursued by the royal authorities and the censorship service.[5] But whether its message was direct or masked, a printed

document was charged with intention; its simplest and most obvious goal was to be read by others.

This is nothing like the judicial archives, which are the rough traces of lives that never asked to be told in the way they were, but were one day obliged to do so when confronted with the harsh reality of the police and repression. Whether they were victims, accusers, suspects, or delinquents, none of these individuals ever imagined that they would be in the situation of having to explain, file a complaint, or justify themselves in front of the unsympathetic police. Their words were recorded right after the events had transpired, and even if they were strategic at the time, they did not follow from the same mental premeditation as the printed word. People spoke of things that would have remained unsaid if a destabilizing social event had not occurred. In this sense, their words reveal things that ordinarily went unspoken. After a brief disorderly incident, these individuals suddenly needed to explain, describe, or comment on how "this" came to happen in the midst of their everyday lives, in their neighborhood or their workplace, on a street corner or inside a tenement stairwell. Characters begin to emerge out of these short sequences of events that describe an injury, a fight, or a theft. We can make out a long limping procession of baroque silhouettes whose habits and faults are suddenly brought to our attention, whose good intentions and ways of life are outlined.

The archival document is a tear in the fabric of time, an unplanned glimpse offered into an unexpected event. In it,

everything is focused on a few instants in the lives of ordinary people, people who were rarely visited by history, unless they happened to form a mob and make what would later be called history. The archive was not compiled with an eye toward history. It describes, in everyday language, the derisory and the tragic in the same tone, for what was important above all for the administration was first to find out who was responsible and then to figure out how best to punish them. Questions are followed by answers, and each complaint, each deposition, is a scene that puts into words that which ordinarily would not have been thought worth discussing, much less being written down. The poor did not write, or wrote very little, about their own lives. The judicial archives are the domain of the petty crime and, rarely, of the serious felony. They deal more with small incidents than assassinations, and each page reveals details of the lives of the city's poorest inhabitants.

Archives of this type have sometimes been compared to *brèves*, the short items in newspapers that describe miscellaneous and strange news of the world. But a document from the judicial archives is not a *brève*. It was not created to surprise, titillate, or inform, but to better serve the police's constant need for surveillance and punishment. It is the accumulation of spoken words (fabricated or not, true or false, their importance is elsewhere) whose authors, constrained by the course of events, never intended to be authors. In this sense the archive forces the reader to engage with it. It

captivates you, producing the sensation of having finally caught hold of the real, instead of looking through a "narrative of" or "discourse on" the real.

This gives rise to the naive but profound feeling of tearing away a veil, of crossing through the opaqueness of knowledge and, as if after a long and uncertain voyage, finally gaining access to the essence of beings and things. The archive lays things bare, and in a few crowded lines you can find not only the inaccessible but also the living. Scraps of lives dredged up from the depths wash up on shore before your eyes. Their clarity and credibility are blinding. Archival discoveries are a manna that fully justify their name: *sources*,[b] as refreshing as wellsprings.

Police interrogations and testimonies seem to accomplish something uniquely miraculous. They appear to have the ability to reattach the past to the present. When exploring these sources you can find yourself thinking that you are no longer working with the dead—although history remains first and foremost an encounter with death. The material is so vivid that it calls both for emotional engagement and for reflection. It is a rare and precious feeling to suddenly come upon so many forgotten lives, haphazard and full, juxtaposing and entangling the close with the distant, the departed.

It could be argued that the discovery of an autobiography or a private diary can have a similar effect, but there is still a significant difference. Even the most intimate personal

notebook, abandoned in the corner of an attic and only discovered several centuries later, nonetheless presupposes that whoever wrote it was in some fundamental way looking for it to be discovered, in the belief that the events of his or her life called for a written record.[6] There is none of this in the archives. The witness, the neighbor, the thief, the traitor, and the rebel never wanted to leave any written record, much less the one they ended up leaving. Their words, acts, and thoughts were recorded for an altogether different reason. This changes everything, not only the content of what was written, but also the relationship we have to it, particularly our feeling of being in contact with the real. This feeling is insistent and stubborn, perhaps even invasive.

One Morning in the Library of the Arsenal

I feel cloth under my fingers, an uncommon coarse softness for hands long since accustomed to the archive's chill. I slip the cloth out from between two pieces of paper. The fabric is white and solid, covered in beautiful firm handwriting. It's a letter, the work of a prisoner in the Bastille, many years into a long sentence. He is writing his wife a pleading and affectionate letter. His dirty clothes were being sent to the laundry, and he took advantage of the occasion to sneak out a message. Nervous about the outcome, he begs the laundrywoman to please stitch a tiny blue cross on a pair of his cleaned stockings. This sign would reassure him that his cloth note reached his wife. That this piece of cloth now sits

in the prison archives says of itself that no small blue cross was ever stitched into the prisoner's cleaned stockings . . .[7]

I come across a slightly swollen file, open it delicately, and find a small pouch of coarse fabric pinned to the top of a page, bulging with the outlines of objects that I cannot immediately identify. A letter from a country doctor accompanies the pouch. He is writing to the Royal Society of Medicine to report that he knows a young girl, sincere and virtuous, whose breasts discharge handfuls of seeds each month. The attached bag is the proof.

I face the decision of whether or not to open something that has not seen the light of day in two centuries. I open it delicately, withdrawing the thick pin from the two large holes it has poked in the slightly rust-stained twill. This way I will be able to close the pouch neatly by fitting the pin back into the holes, just as it was before. A few seeds escape and rain down on the yellowed document, as golden as they were on their first day, a brief burst of sunshine. What if these really came from the woman in the bloom of youth whom the doctor so trusted? Puns aside, this feeling reflects the surprising power of these seeds, still intact, as real as they are immaterial, meant to be both the fruit of a body and a scientific explanation for menstruation.[8]

These two objects discovered accidentally while consulting the documents communicate the feeling of reality better than anything else can. Not to mention the playing cards, whose backs sometimes served to scrawl calculations or note down

an address, or the doodles and scribbles in the margins of case summaries, traces of a distracted clerk's daydreaming or an inspector's clumsy quill. It is as if some material traces had returned from this departed world, traces of moments that were the most private and least often expressed. Moments when people were taken by surprise, or pained, or at least feigned being so. The archive preserves these moments at random, chaotically. Each time, the person who reads, touches, or discovers them is at first struck by a feeling of certainty. The spoken word, the found object, the trace left behind become faces of the real. As if the proof of what the past was like finally lay there before you, definitive and close. As if, in unfolding the document, you gained the privilege of "touching the real." And if this is the case, what's the point of scholarly debate, why come up with new words to explain what is already there on these sheets of paper (or between them)?

These overwhelming feelings never last; they are like mirages in the desert. No matter how much the real seems to be there, visible and tangible, it reveals nothing more than its physical presence, and it is naive to believe that this is its essence. This can make the "return from the archives"[9] difficult. The physical pleasure of finding a trace of the past is succeeded by doubt mixed with the powerless feeling of not knowing what to do with it.

Yes, the cloth letter is moving, and no doubt quite a few museums would be happy to put it under glass and on

display. But its importance is elsewhere. Its importance lies in the interpretation of its presence, in the search for its complex meaning, in framing its "reality" within systems of symbols—systems for which history attempts to be the grammar. The sun-colored seeds and the playing cards are at the same time everything and nothing. Everything, because they can be astonishing and defy reason. Nothing, because they are just raw traces, which on their own can draw attention only to themselves. Their story takes shape only when you ask a specific type of question of them, not when you first discover them, no matter how happy the discovery might have been. Nevertheless, you never forget the color of the seeds once you have seen them, or the words on the cloth . . .

Of course, wheat does not often pop up in the archives. Once surprise has passed, the monotony of the collected events overtakes the discoveries, and a vague weariness begins to weigh you down. It's true that no two complaints are the same, no two fights bother the neighbors in the same way, but the case summaries all have the same format, and the interrogations, at first glance, all share the same structure. The same is true of the charge sheets, the lists of witnesses, and the sentences handed down. Between one sentence of temporary banishment and another of three years in the galleys, many crooks were led away, having had only a few instants to plead guilty or to claim that they were never in the place where the sergeant arrested them.

The big volumes containing lists of delinquents and prisoners are unwieldy—you must brace them against a wooden stand to consult them—and they are laconic. Thousands of unknown names live on in their endless columns. On rare occasions the names are accompanied by scraps of information, and at first it is difficult to know what to make of them. Far from the precision found in today's equivalent registers, they offer the rough shape of a record keeping and monitoring system that was only just coming into existence. They consist of long, tiresome lists, usually written by a single clerk. Sometimes the lists are interrupted, for reasons that we will never know, and never resumed, despite titles promising long chronological spans. These problems with the condition of the judicial archives are not easily resolved, and these lists are more helpful for a quantitative history than a history of *mentalités*.[c]

According to archival lore, one veteran of the archives, striving to stave off boredom, slipped a ring on each of her fingers, just to be able to watch the light play on them as her hands flipped through these endless tall pages over and over again. She hoped by this means to keep alert when consulting these documents that, while undeniably opaque, are never silent.

More so than any text or novel, the archive collects characters. Its unusual population of men and women, whose names, when revealed, in no way lift their anonymity, can leave the reader feeling isolated. The archive imposes a

startling contradiction: as it immerses and invades the reader, its vastness gives rise to a feeling of solitude. This solitude teems with so many "living" beings that it seems impossible to take them all into account, to write all their histories. Traces by the thousands . . . the dream of every researcher—think for instance of historians of antiquity. Yet while the judicial archive's abundance is seductive, at the same time it keeps the reader at arm's length.

What exactly does it mean to make use of these countless sources? How can we rescue from oblivion these lives that were never made note of even when they were alive (or if they were recognized it was only in order to punish them)? If we believed that history should be a full-fledged resurrection of the past, the task would be simply impossible. And yet, this clamoring population of the archive seems like a plea. Faced with it, you feel alone, like an individual confronting a crowd. Alone, and more than a little fascinated. You feel both the power of the contents of the archive and the impossibility of deciphering them. You realize that it is an illusion to imagine that one could ever actually reconstruct the past.

There is a tension here, even a conflict. The passion for gathering everything and reading it in full tempts us to revel in the archives' spectacular richness and limitless contents. But, logically, we know that for a document to take on meaning it must be questioned pointedly. The decision to write history from the archives comes from somewhere

between passion and reason. Each vies with the other, without ever quite overwhelming or stifling its rival. They do not become one and the same, but they eventually work side by side, to the point that you are no longer conscious of the necessary distinction between them.

Imagine for a moment a document laid out on the library table, placed there by the reading room staff in the state in which it was originally compiled and organized, ready to be consulted by hand. This is by far the most common presentation; mechanical reproduction has moved forward slowly in France. Eighteenth-century manuscripts are too fragile to be photocopied, and modern technology can capture them only through the medium of microfilms or microfiches, which are sometimes necessary but hard on the eyes. Consulting a document by leafing through it, going over it backward and forward, becomes impossible with this unfeeling photographic technology, which perceptibly changes the act of reading and with it the reader's interpretation. These systems of reproduction are useful for preservation, and undoubtedly allow for new and fruitful ways of questioning the texts, but they can cause you to forget the tactile and direct approach to the material, the feel of touching traces of the past. An archival manuscript is a living document; microfilm reproduction, while sometimes unavoidable, can drain the life out of it.

Reading the archive is one thing; finding a way to hold on to it is quite another. It may surprise the uninitiated to

learn that the hours spent in the library consulting the documents are often hours spent recopying them word for word. In the evening, after this strange and banal exercise is finished, you find yourself questioning the value of this industrious and obsessive activity. Is it lost time or the utopian dream that you could actually recover a time that has been lost? This task is reminiscent of childhood autumns and primary school, spent surrounded by dead leaves, recopying corrected dictations that the schoolteacher has judged inadequate the first time around. But it is also something else, something difficult to define. It lies in a gray area between the childhood process of learning to write and the mature exercise of studious Benedictines, whose lives were dedicated to the transcription of texts. In the digital age this act of copying can seem quite foolish. Maybe it is. It's true that there is certainly something foolish about always recopying the entirety of a document, instead of just taking notes or summarizing its main theme. And it would indeed be foolish, stubborn, maybe even pridefully obsessive . . . if this exact recopying of words did not feel somehow necessary, an exclusive and privileged way of entering into the world of the document, as both accomplice and outsider.

You can try reasoning with yourself, arguing that you can know Diderot very well without ever feeling the need to recopy his books. And yet, standing over an archival manuscript there is a feeling of urgency, an urgency to let the jolting current of spoken words course through your pencil,

into the back and forth of questions and answers, into the anarchy of words. This flow of words can also sweep you off into unexpected directions, taking you to a place poised somewhere between the familiar and the exotic.

The allure of the archives passes through this slow and unrewarding artisanal task of recopying texts, section after section, without changing the format, the grammar, or even the punctuation. Without giving it too much thought. Thinking about it constantly. As if the hand, through this task, could make it possible for the mind to be simultaneously an accomplice and a stranger to this past time and to these men and women describing their experiences. As if the hand, by reproducing the written syllables, archaic words, and syntax of a century long past, could insert itself into that time more boldly than thoughtful notes ever could. Note taking, after all, necessarily implies prior decisions about what is important, and what is archival surplus to be left aside. The task of recopying, by contrast, comes to feel so essential that it is indistinguishable from the rest of the work. An archival document recopied by hand onto a blank page is a fragment of a past time that you have succeeded in taming. Later, you will draw out the themes and formulate interpretations. Recopying is time-consuming, it cramps your shoulder and stiffens your neck. But it is through this action that meaning is discovered.