



Fragile Pages of Grey Ashes Inoperative archives in Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*

Marija Cetinić

To cite this article: Marija Cetinić (2010) Fragile Pages of Grey Ashes Inoperative archives in Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, *European Journal of English Studies*, 14:1, 75-87, DOI: [10.1080/13825571003588544](https://doi.org/10.1080/13825571003588544)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825571003588544>



Published online: 07 Apr 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 114



Citing articles: 1 [View citing articles ↗](#)

Marija Cetinić

FRAGILE PAGES OF GREY ASHES

Inoperative archives in Dubravka

Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional*

Surrender and David Markson's

Wittgenstein's Mistress

*This essay begins with a consideration of the burning of the National and University Library in Sarajevo in 1992, drawing from a description of this event the problem of how to think of remainder and dispersal as the modalities of a common distribution. Posing the question of how to read an archive that is distributed through its vanishing, the article turns to two texts that have this question, but little else, in common. Evoking the contingent connections between two novels that would only uncommonly be read together, Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, I ask how such texts might be drawn together at a site that is nothing other than the remainder of a dispersal. Attempting to engage that question formally, through its own practice of writing, the essay concludes by theorizing a comparative methodology that moves away from models of address, reconstruction, commemoration, or mourning and toward a circulation of texts and memory that is meant to produce relations in an affective rather than hermeneutic manner.*

Keywords archive; affect; trauma; distribution; Dubravka Ugrešić; *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*; David Markson; *Wittgenstein's Mistress*

25 August 1992, cinders

'A city', writes Jean-Luc Nancy, 'does not have to be identified by anything other than a name, which indicates a place, the place of a *mêlée*, a crossing and a stop, a knot and an exchange, a gathering, a disjunction, a circulation, a radiating' (Nancy, 2000: 145). The proper name of a city – *Sarajevo*, for example – is a specific, fragile gathering of contingencies, 'a mixture of syllables stirred on the brink of a semantic identity that is both gently and obstinately deferred' (146). The death of a city, then, is an attempt to totalize the potentiality of that semantic identity. For a city to be reduced to a target its presence must be made measurable 'by the yardstick of the "national" or the "state," a body-symbol set up precisely in order to create body and

symbol where there had only been place and passage' (146). In writing what he calls a 'Eulogy for the M \acute{e} lée' addressed to Sarajevo in 1993, Nancy marks the attempted erasure of relations in a besieged city 'identified purely and simply as a target' (145), while insisting that some *sense* of the city remains: 'Sense is . . . not the 'signified' or the 'message': it is *that something like the transmission of a 'message' should be possible*. It is the relation as such, and nothing else' (Nancy, 1997: 118). If its potential futures were violently exposed in the destruction of the city, the ruins of Sarajevo still *figure*. They figure the potential of figuration as potential, however devastated the material conditions of possibility.

On 25 August 1992, Serbian nationalist forces fired incendiary grenades from across the Miljacka River targeting 'Vijećnica', the National and University Library in Sarajevo. The library burned for three days, destroying the almost 1.5 million volumes of the collection, including more than 155,000 rare books and manuscripts; the country's national archives; deposit copies of newspapers, periodicals and books published in Bosnia; and the collections of the University of Sarajevo. Dr Kemal Bakaršić, librarian of Bosnia's National Museum, described the scene:

All over the city sheets of burned paper, fragile pages of grey ashes, floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page you could feel its heat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the heat dissipated, the pages melted to dust in your hand.

(Bakaršić, 1994: x)

The disaster unfolds through a series of abstract distributions wherein the levelling force of violence has subtracted from the burning archive its codified attachments and systems of belonging. The affective force and residual material of that subtraction circulate across the city as weather conditions: an atmospheric, egalitarian scattering of material traces that bears witness to the conflict at hand through the very antagonism between the scorching heat and the floating snow. Bakaršić notes the saturation of the site: the library is dispersed *all* over the city. The wreckage, that is, *is* the form of dispersal, of floating, dissipation, melting. The wreckage is configured as transmissibility itself, the transmission not of the meaning of the event, not of the symptoms of the event, not of any content at all, but of a practice of future memory without a subject, of transmissibility as such. It is a mode of distribution singular to that August of 1992 in Sarajevo, one marked in particular by a logic of disappearance. As the page becomes a kind of energy in transit, a heat, Bakaršić tracks its process of dissolution from a contingent, ephemeral legibility to the almost complete illegibility of dust.

If the unsettled residual materials of the violent scene of the burning of Sarajevo's library are constitutively *materials dispersed*, then what is preserved in that sharing out? We might turn here to Jacques Derrida's delineation of the potentiality of 'cinder' as that substance that tends toward its own disappearance:

I understand that cinder is nothing that can be in the world, nothing that remains as an entity. It is the being, rather, that there is – this is a name of the being that

there is there but which, giving itself, is nothing, remains beyond everything that is, remains unpronounceable in order to make possible although it is nothing.

(Derrida, 1991: 73)

The dirty black snow, for example, a kind of winter cinder, figures in Bakaršić's account as an ephemeral crystallization of the atmospheric conditions at hand, a condensation that falls, and in falling that indexes both the brutal reduction to ash of the library and the future potentiality that inheres through the trace of that falling. The cinder signals the past in its fragility, while its circulation activates a persistent relation to the future, the movement of memory: 'A cinder is a very fragile entity that falls to dust, that crumbles and disperses. But cinders also name the resilience and the intractability of what is most delicate and most vulnerable' (Lukacher, 1991: 2). As the trace of a burning in and of literature that persists, as the trace of a burning in and of the materials of a building that housed literature, the cinder is nothing except the potential to say afterward, to gather afterward, to write: 'What remains in the destruction of the archive always returns to the surface, to the skin, as a skin, a remainder etched onto the skin, a book' (Lippit, 2000: 5).

How might we approach the potential of this scene – the future of its memory – through a book, through writing? If the scene is a scene of distribution, then how might we redistribute this floating snow, this melting dust? To remember 25 August 1992 is to attend to a dispersal of memory that is *given* by the event itself. It is given, yet as Nancy insists, it nonetheless 'remains for us to think this totality of dispersion' (2000: 156). And to think dispersion in the specificity of the destroyed library would mean to attend also to the consequences for the book, for the literary, for reading. What is particularly compelling in Bakaršić's description is the way he precisely continues *to read* the materials of the ruins of the library. And that practice of reading involves itself in devastation; the floating, fragile pages of grey ashes have been violently disorganized, circulating in new and unforeseen conjunctions provoked by a disaster that has burned the archival systems of organization and rendered texts barely legible. This essay attends to such potential conjunctions through the reading of two texts whose relations are precarious. The fragility of their encounter is an attempt to remember the *sense* of that dispersal of books as cinders and to enact the potential of that sharing out in the present. What follows in an experiment, an attempt to render this fragility formally, through a practice of reading responsive to the *contingent* connections between two texts. Both Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1996) and David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), ask what it might mean to register, to narrate, and to archive a crisis when the archive itself is in crisis. If it is books that have burned, then what sort of *literary crisis* could bear the remains of that burning?

Dispersal one: practices of departure

In Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, a place is only that from which one departs. A dissident from the former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić left Croatia in 1993.¹ Her narrative is infected with both the necessity of and the desire for departure; it is held in suspension between a country that has broken and a city

experienced only as a provisional site – one that permits a sufficient geographic distance from which to recognize that some other place has been left, that places *are* what is left. Place is not the broken point *a* of former Yugoslavia, nor is it the unstable point *b* of Berlin – the two locales in which the novel ‘takes place’. These spaces are bound and ruptured by a wound in time, one that divides 1996 by 1942, folding subjects and cities into the fractional remainder. The indeterminate angle between these temporal-geometric loci marks the inclination of Ugrešić’s text. It leans *away* from genre, in its fractured use of fractured genres: almost a diary, almost an autobiography, almost a citation, almost a novel. It leans *away* from characters, placing Nabokov and Brodsky on the same plane as a ‘Richard’ or a walrus or an angel. Characters do not bear agency ‘but simply emerge as nodal points, subjectivities irrupt[ing] from the convergence of affective flows’ (Bennett, 2005: 83). In a narrative site that seems to leave itself, that hovers in this interstice, subjectivity too is a kind of affective leaning, or even perhaps, a leaving: ‘the subject is graspable only in the passage between telling/told, between “here” and “somewhere else”, and in this double scene the very condition of cultural knowledge is the alienation of the subject’ (Bhabha, 1994: 150). What practice of departure could unravel webs of leaving into the kind of string that sews up skin, that threads bodies across space?

If place is only that which is experienced upon departure, a kind of cartographic displacement, then a site is a citation: ‘an address without home’ (Kamuf, 2005: 31). Or, in national terms, a nation is only a discursive effect, a writing *over* of difference, of heterogeneity, of ‘the conceptual ambivalence of modern society’ (Bhabha, 1994: 146). In Bhabha’s account, the production of the nation as a coherent national narrative requires that ‘the scraps, patches and rags of daily life’ (Bhabha, 1994: 145) be repeatedly reabsorbed and reterritorialized. War exposes the precariousness of the nation; ‘the barred Nation *It/Self* . . . becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference’ (Bhabha, 1994: 148). War is the exposure of the brokenness that precedes place; nation is a collection of these ruins. The radical shattering produced by war, the unassimilable pieces of ruins, always exceed the attempt of any national narrative to reabsorb and rename such fragmentation. Maps fail; or, through their covering over of scarred territories, the points and lines of cartography are themselves scarred. Maps produce a *topography of woundedness*: ‘Because soon the minefield will be covered in grass, new houses will spring on top of ruins, everything will be grown over, it will disappear and shift once again into dream’ (Ugrešić, 1996: 195). In Ugrešić’s novel, every topographical elevation is a hill under which ‘pulsate 26 million cubic metres of rubble from the ruins of Berlin, collected and dragged here after the Second World War’ (159–60). Every mapped plane is an absorption: ‘the map, like good blotting-paper, absorbs a strong sense of loss’ (99). Hence the warning: ‘That is why one has to tread carefully in Berlin streets; without thinking, the walker could step on someone’s roof. The asphalt is only a thin crust covering human bones’ (161).

The Berlin of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, then, is place as mapped over:

86. ‘Berlin is hard to describe,’ wrote Viktor Shkolovsky long ago.
‘That’s because in Berlin there’s more of what there’s not than what there is,’
says Bojana.

‘That’s because Berlin is a non-place,’ says Richard.

87. Berlin is a museum city . . .

‘All of us here are museum exhibits . . . ’ says Zoran.

88. Berlin is an archaeological find. Layers of time pile one over the other, the scars heal with difficulty, the seams are visible. It’s as though some invisible, confused archaeologist had been leaving the wrong labels everywhere: it is often hard to say what came first, and what later.

That’s because Berlin is a before-and-after place,’ says Richard.

(Ugrešić, 1996: 221)

Ugrešić rejects mapping as a practice of cancellation or reduction, cutting across the determinacy of the map with the indeterminacy of leaving. Diagrammatical drawings can never erase the traces of their infractions; the seams remain visible. And it is in these seams of the map, where the wound interrupts the grass hill, where the ruins interrupt the museum, that subjectivity *leaves*.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender begins with a scene in a museum: an exhibit of a glass case containing all of the items found in the stomach of a dead walrus:

a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a beer-bottle opener, a woman’s bracelet (probably silver), a hair grip, a wooden pencil, a child’s plastic water pistol, a plastic knife, sunglasses, a little chain, a spring (small), a rubber ring, a parachute (child’s toy), a steel chain about 18 ins in length, four nails (large), a green plastic car, a metal comb, a plastic badge, a small doll, a beer can (Pilsner, half-pint), a box of matches, a baby’s shoe, a compass, a small car key, four coins, a knife with a wooden handle, a baby’s dummy, a bunch of keys (5), a padlock, a little plastic bag containing needles and thread.

(Ugrešić, 1996: xi)

The exposure of the walrus’s insides leaves the visitor unable to resist the ‘thought that with time the objects have acquired some subtler, secret connection. Caught up in this thought, the visitor then tries to establish semantic coordinates, to reconstruct the historical context . . . , and so on and so forth’ (1996: xi). The impenetrable transparency of glass, of display, both blocks and elicits a desire to retrieve the objects, to reorganize them, to stitch them together with the ‘little plastic bag containing needles and thread’ in conjunction with the ‘wooden pencil’, and perhaps the ‘compass’.

The glass display solicits an attachment to the object that its casing simultaneously interdicts. Again: ‘the visitor then tries to establish semantic coordinates, to reconstruct the historical context’ (Ugrešić, 1996: xi). The partition between viewer and object is the mechanism by which the archive imposes its own semantic coordinates upon a collection while soliciting our desire to reorder that collection on our own terms. It is the structure of desire itself that is on display.

Even if the structural casing of the archival display dissolves, even if ‘bits and pieces’ are apparently possessed, not by the museum but by the subject, a partition

remains in place – the object retains a strangeness that resists any effort to catalogue its significance:

I arrange my bits and pieces, some I have brought with me, without really knowing why, some I found here, all random and meaningless. A little feather I picked up while walking in the park gleams in front of me, a sentence I read somewhere rings in my head, an old yellowing photograph looks at me, the outline of a gesture I saw somewhere accompanies me, and I don't know what it means or who made it, the ball containing the guardian angel shines before me with its plastic glow.

(Ugrešić, 1996: 9)

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, this gleam, ring, gaze, or glow registers the resistance of the traumatic artefact to any semantic coordinates. In fact, this insubstantial fringe secreted by the artefact reveals the artefact as nothing *but* the failure of semantic coordinates, the excess that both exposes and defamiliarizes the reification of the object as token, as commemorative souvenir. Ugrešić's novel is a critique of the archive, but it is also continually engaged in the process of exposing its own implication in the violence of archiving – of reordering, according to its own imperatives, the memorial material that had been claimed by nations and institutions. The novel opens with a set of instructions for reading:

The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way.

If the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between them, let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord.

(Ugrešić, 1996: xi)

There is an assumption here on the part of the narrator that time will heal all wounds, whether historical or narrative. But the narrative that follows resists the kind of *accord* upon which these instructions depend. What the instructions do not recognize, is that the illusion of connection that might emerge to cover over the traumatic isolation of these elements, cannot ever *overwrite* the excessive glow of a plastic angel. Thus:

The collection turns every gain or acquisition into a cipher of loss and dispossession. Striving toward a totality which is blocked by virtue of the interminability of the drive to accumulation, the archive undercuts every order it seeks to found.

(Comay, 2002: 14)

It is precisely the shared unworking of connections, their dispersal, that is constitutive of the novel; and it is in that sense that a novel is not really possible, not really finished, without accord.

This *practice of departure* as archiving in Ugrešić's text wants to resist the pull of return, of relocation. In other words, Ugrešić recognizes the fever of the museum, its returns of all remains to a particular code or ordering: the closure of distribution. Even a cutting up into little pieces, a severing of the homogeneity of the blue of water on a map, insists on a re-mapping:

Sissel buys maps of the world, cuts the seas out of the maps, cuts those seas up into little pieces, then sticks the pieces together again to form one surface. As she does so, Sissel follows her own inner sense of geography.

(Ugrešić, 1996: 98)

This internal ordering mechanism ultimately fails as an act of defiance against cartographic totalization because all these 'cuts' somehow leave the subject intact. In reterritorializing, on the level of subjective re-collection, the geographic totality she has just taken apart, Ugrešić's proxy only reconstitutes the archive as autobiography, as an 'inner sense' that would hold out against non-sense.

The text at once indulges in and exposes the self-indulgence of such an autobiographical redistribution. Autobiography is critiqued as a memorial operation that only reconstitutes a privative archive, quaint in its faith in the recuperative power of subjective integrity:

A photograph is a reduction of the endless and unmanageable world to a little rectangle. A photograph is our measure of the world. A photograph is also a memory. Remembering means reducing the world to little rectangles. Arranging the little rectangles in an album is autobiography.

(Ugrešić, 1996: 27)

The emergent accord between reader and text, between unorganized fragments and semantic coordinates that Ugrešić gestures to earlier is exposed as a false harmony that negates difference in the name of a generic community:

Autobiography is a serious and sad genre. It is as though somewhere deep within us there was an encoded assumption about the genre, and both the author and the reader submit to it: they harmonize the rhythm of their pulse, their heartbeat, slow down their breathing, together lower their blood pressure.

(Ugrešić, 1996: 29)

If the archival display offers an illusion of transparency that belies the shadow cast by its institutional frame, then the autobiography's promise of affective communion presupposes organized identities and cloaks the necessary failures of communication implicit in radical loss.

Again, it is the structure of desire implicit in such a generic law that the text *exhibits*. The pathos of this critique is that recognizing the insufficiency of replacing the institutional archive with the private record as the locus of memorial value hardly obviates the compulsion to repeat this substitution. The honesty of Ugrešić's text is

that it acknowledges the sadness of that compulsion, continually falling into it and signalling its failure as it falls.

Dispersal two: sad facts

In David Markson's post-apocalyptic non-narrative, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, the museum is the locus of affective inclination, of subjectivity approaching its leavings. This is a novel in which 'somebody . . . woke up one Wednesday or Thursday to discover that there was apparently not one other person left in the world' (Markson, 1988: 230). Not one other person, but portraits and proper names, indexical traces of habitation, texts for nothing. In the ruins of what appears to be the end of history, an unnamed someone wakes up in an archive, sending messages to no one:

In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.
 Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say. Or
 in the National Gallery.
 Naturally they could only say that when I was in Paris or in London. Somebody is
 living in the Metropolitan Museum, being what they would say when I was still in
 New York.
 Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages.
 (Markson, 1988: 7)

Here, the museum cannot reabsorb the catastrophe into organized artefacts; here, the unearthing of ruins cannot be covered over with monuments. So that 'here' is all wreckage, archive outside in, contents and context unbound. The radical gap between site and citation undoes the museum's hold over its artefacts. Incommensurable objects that have been held together by coherent historical chronologies, by placement on a particular shelf or under a particular heading, come apart. The museum's taxonomic mappings are ruptured by an excess of ruins, a disaster that the museum cannot, even in its belated narrative, write over. So though museums do indeed survive Markson's apocalypse, they have been undone. And it is here where Markson's narrator, the only person left, the person *as left*, is housed.

The undoing of the archive collapses its boundaries, its distinction as a site of collection from the world it would collect. Travelling, the one who is left remains left among museums, the world as a memory of the museum that had once remembered the world:

What I had planned to do next was to take an ordinary rowboat across, and then
 drive on into Europe through Yugoslavia.
 Possibly I mean Yugoslavia. In any case on that side of the channel where there
 are monuments to the soldiers who died there in the first World War.
 On the side where Troy is, one can find a monument where Achilles was buried,
 so much longer ago.
 Well, they say it is where Achilles was buried.
 Still, I find it extraordinary that young men died there in a war that long ago, and
 then died in the same place three thousand years after that.
 (Markson, 1988: 8–9)

After maps, at the edge of memory, geography and history are set adrift as rumour, so that ‘the same place’ finds itself divided by a body of water. It is not so much the *topography of woundedness* that is at stake here, but rather the *traumatic topology* of the museum. The inside and the outside of the archive implicate and unfold each other, exposing citation to an instability that collapses discrepant sites and renders history a series of imprecise iterations: ‘Possibly I mean Yugoslavia’; ‘Still, I find it extraordinary that young men died’ (8). There is a defamiliarization of the archive at work in Markson’s writing – a productive unworking and exposure of the geo-historical record – that opens the museum to a sense of its own wonder. It is an unworking that can maintain itself in its own potential, in its tension, only through the registration of its proximity to despair: ‘Still, how I nearly felt, in the midst of all that looking. Looking in desperation, as I have said’ (188).

Markson’s narrator in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* disperses spheres across the remains of architectural landmarks:

Once, from the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome, for no reason except that I had come upon a Volkswagen van full of them, I let hundreds and hundreds of tennis balls bounce one after the other to the bottom, every which way possible.

Watching how they struck tiny irregularities or worn spots in the stone, and changed direction, or guessing how far across the piazza down below each one of them would go.

(Markson, 1988: 12–13)

Instead of collecting the found object, deciphering its strangeness by hypothesizing the context of the tennis balls’ abandonment, she simply lets them fall. On the order of writing, such dispersal over a textual plane leaves every sentence profoundly isolated. Sentences themselves split into component parts, rupturing their propositional consistency. Facts, in such an unstable grammatical milieu, are torn from their moorings in logic. In severing the intersubjective ties of ‘consensus’ upon which they depend for verification, Markson has ‘made facts sad’ (Wallace, 1990: 226):

Well, doubtless [Willem de Kooning] would have found it agreeable to have been descended from Vincent Van Gogh as well, even if he was born less than fifteen years after Van Gogh shot himself.

I am not quite certain how the second part of that sentence is connected to the beginning part, actually.

(Markson, 1988: 138)

There is a slippage of logical subordination here – a rift in the hypotactic interdependence of propositional language – that seems to reveal an ontological fissure, an infection of ontology by linguistic indeterminacy. The indeterminate delay of ‘less’ than 15 years, its uncertain relation to desire (‘he would have found it agreeable’) and to kinship, delays and unsettles the binding of a proper name to a constitutive biography. Delay itself slips out of all relational order, achieving a positivity that undermines any primary clause, any epistemological foundation premised upon the concept of origin. ‘After’ the end of the world, at the limit of the

possibility of the archive, the temporal order upon which historicity itself is founded falls away, eroding the ground of facticity that the belated archivist would attempt to re-establish. In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, facts burn, and we miss them:

Now and again, things burn. I do not mean only when I have set fire to them myself, but out of natural happenstance. And so bits and pieces of residue will sometimes be wafted great distances, or to astonishing heights.

(Markson, 1988: 29)

There are states of disappearance and departure, rituals of disintegration that dissipate the archive into thin air, gradually:

Will the house that I am dismantling become the second house on this beach that I have burned to the ground?

Granting that I am burning that house board by board, and that it will be quite some time before I have dismantled it fully enough to be able to consider it as having been burned to the ground.

(Markson, 1988: 79)

Markson's narrator engages in a practice of unworking, a literal dismantling of anything that might fix memory into a static figure, including the book:

One winter, I read almost all of the ancient Greek plays. As a matter of fact I read them out loud. And throughout, finishing the reverse side of each page would tear it from the book and drop it into my fire.

Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides, I turned into smoke.

(Markson, 1988: 16)

To burn the archive is to burn facts, to burn a history to which one cannot lay claim, but what is the future of this burning? The burning of the archive is interminable, because 'in the archive, or towards it, language becomes atomic-microscopic, deconstructed, splitting incessantly into near imperceptibility' (Lippit, 2000: 4). To feel an archive fever 'is to burn with a passion' (Derrida, 1995: 91), but the interminability of the archive also leaves one exhausted, all passion spent: 'Although even just to see some floating ash again would be agreeable, too. Even if one would hardly go to the trouble to name some floating ash, on the other hand' (Markson 239).

After the burning of names, one is left to name the remainders of that burning. But to be unable to carry out that injunction – to find oneself tired, sick to death of designation – is, perhaps paradoxically, to endow the trace with a positive potential, to leave it within its potentiality, open upon the indetermination of a future.

Traumatic intertextuality

From two texts in crisis, about crisis, about the crisis of the archive, we have attempted to produce an intertextual crisis. Reading in the inoperative archive, it

should come as no surprise that connections between texts are *in crisis*, that the texts that we read are overly proximate and utterly incommensurable. We would not find these two texts on the same shelf of a library that has not burned. One is ‘Croatian’; the other is ‘American’. One emerges from the dissolution of a socialist state; the other in the midst of the consolidation of American power. One is fixated upon the relations of objects; the other broods on linguistic indeterminacy and the fragility of propositional logic. One is a novel obsessed with the endgame of history; the other is situated *after* that endgame seems to be over. These are texts held apart by the categorical determinacy of the archive, by numbers and letters subjected to disciplinary imperatives. In an archive that has burned, the coordinates of the collection are disarrayed and unmapped. Their associations are dispersed, redistributed and the tracing of this uncollected redistribution operates as a *traumatic intertextuality*.

Among the contingent conjunctions of an archive in a state of emergency, texts that had seemed geographically dis severed might fall together. Texts that might have seemed to share no common contextual ground might be revealed as mutually engaged with discrepant aspects of a larger historico-political context in which they share. If Ugrešić’s text interrogates the emergence of the new nationalism after Yugoslavia, and if Markson’s ‘post-historical’ text prefigures the levelling force of globalization, we might ask after the manner in which these are mutually constitutive.² Both of these texts defamiliarize and interrogate the so-called end of history, addressing themselves to discrepant poles of this problematic. They find themselves in a ‘state of searching’ through the archive of geographical and aesthetic categories that *used* to mean something, a state of searching among meanings that are bereft of their ties to historical foundations.

The production of contingent connections between texts is what Cesare Casarino calls philopoesis: a love of literature that sustains the potential of texts not by interpreting them, but by offering them as gifts to one another. In the practice of philopoesis, the offering of one text to another is superfluous, because ‘both are perfect – that is, perfectly finished and perfectly finite’ (Casarino, 2002: 92). And yet such a superfluous offering is productive because ‘both delimit each other’s perfection and materialize the other’s limit as potentiality’ (92). The contingent contact of texts ‘surrounds the perfect text with a halo as a superfluous gift of potentiality’ (92). But for Casarino, such a productive work of love is also and at once a practice of unworking – it is a ‘love of words as unspent potentials’, a love of ‘that which remains unmade’ in any making (Casarino, 2002: 79).

A practice of reading that exposes intertextuality as unworking, at once constitutive of and suspending textuality itself, also exposes intertextuality as traumatic – as a limit and a delimitation of non-identity:

What is shared on this extreme and difficult limit is not communion, not the completed identity of all in one, nor any kind of completed identity. What is shared therefore is not the annulment of sharing, but sharing itself, and consequently everyone’s nonidentity, each one’s nonidentity to himself and to others, and the nonidentity of the work to itself, and finally the nonidentity of literature to literature itself.

(Nancy, 1991: 66)

To practice reading as traumatic intertextuality is to re-circulate the trauma of the text as the gift of its non-identity – the gift of its incomplete sharing. Such a gift is the gift of contingency as community: the disorganization of books in an *inoperative archive*.

The dispersal of fragile pages of grey ashes across Sarajevo is not a monument to the burning of an archive, but an unworking of the monument, a questioning of the monument's capacity to transmit meaning through a dominant narrative: 'A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 176).

When a library burns, can we read in such a way that we archive the *sense* of the disaster without violating the fragility of what it disperses? Floating paper around a burning archive. The glow of a cinder. These are potentials, but they are potentials devastating in the loss of potentiality that they expose.

This disintegration of potentiality is a feeling that circulates, a quietness at the limit of books: 'Every sensation is a question, even if the only answer is silence' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 196).

Notes

- 1 Ugrešić left Croatia during the war, amid sharp criticisms for her anti-nationalist and anti-war position. She currently resides in Amsterdam.
- 2 'Post-historical' is a reference to Francis Fukuyama's contentious claim that Western liberal democracy marks the end of history as such. See Fukuyama (1992). For a critique of Fukuyama's position, see Derrida (1994).

References

- Bakaršić, Kemal (1994). 'The Libraries of Sarajevo and the Book that Saved Our Lives.' *The New Combat* August. 1 Feb. 2009 <http://newcombat.net/article_thelibraries.html>.
- Bennett, Jill (2005). *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Casarino, Cesare (2002). 'Philopoesis: A Theoretico-Methodological Manifesto.' *boundary 2* 29.4: 65–96.
- Comay, Rebecca (2002). 'Introduction.' *Lost in the Archives*. Ed. Rebecca Comay. Alphabet City No. 8. Toronto: Alphabet City Media. 12–15.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1986). *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1989). *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1986). *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1994). *What is Philosophy?*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia UP.

- Derrida, Jacques (1991). *Cinders*. Trans. Ned Lukacher. Lincoln, NB: U of Nebraska P.
- Jacques Derrida (1994). *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge.
- Jacques Derrida (1995). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Kamuf, Peggy (2005). *A Book of Addresses*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.
- Lippit, Akira Mizuta (2000). 'The Shadow Archive: From Light to Cinder.' *Tympanum* 4. 1 Feb. 2009. <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/complit/tympanum/4/lippit.html>> .
- Lukacher, Ned (1991). 'Introduction: Mourning Becomes Telepathy.' *Cinders*. Trans. Ned Lukacher. Lincoln, NB: U of Nebraska P. 1–18.
- Markson, David (1988). *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Chicago, IL: Dalkey Archive.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (1991). *The Inoperative Community*. Trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (1997). *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000). *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.
- Ugrešić, Dubravka (2002). *Muzej Bezuvjetne Predaje*. Zagreb: Konzor.
- Wallace, David Foster (1990). 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.' *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2: 216–39.

Marija Cetinić is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. Her article, 'Sympathetic Conditions: Towards a New Ontology of Trauma', is forthcoming in *Discourse*. She is writing a dissertation on sadness in contemporary American and post-Yugoslav experimental fiction. Address: Comparative Literature Department, University of Southern California, 3501 Trousdale Parkway, Taper Hall of Humanities #161, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0353, USA. [email: cetinic@usc.edu]
