

HENRY JAMES AND *THE ASPERN PAPERS*: ARCHIVE, MEMORY, AND THE FAILURE OF BIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This paper examines *The Aspern Papers* by Henry James through the lens of archive theory, biographical ethics, and the complexities of memory preservation. It explores how the protagonist's obsessive pursuit of Aspern's documents represents the human desire to reconstruct the Romantic past in Gothic atmosphere of Venice, often at the expense of ethical considerations and lived experience. The analysis highlights the symbolic significance of Juliana Bordereau, not merely as a guardian of Aspern's legacy but as a living archive whose testimony remains undervalued. The paper connects James's themes to his personal decision to destroy his own letters, reflecting his scepticism toward biographical intrusions. Comparisons with *The Sense of the Past* and other Jamesian works illustrate recurring motifs of archival failure and the tension between material and immaterial memory, as well as the role of destruction – both literal, through the burning of documents, and metaphorical, through the erasure of identities – in shaping historical narrative. Finally, the discussion extends to the ethical responsibilities of archivists and biographers, questioning whether written records alone can ever truly encapsulate the essence of a life.

Keywords: Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, biography, archive, archaeology, Gothic Space

Article history:

Submitted: 02 April 2025

Reviewed: 04 April 2025

Accepted: 11 April 2025

Published: 30 June 2025



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Citation: Kvartuč, D. (2025). Henry James and *The Aspern papers*: Archive, memory, and the failure of biography. *English Studies at NBU*, 11(1), 109-122. <https://doi.org/10.33919/esnbu.25.1.6>

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The Aspern Papers are repeatedly included amongst the most renowned works of Henry James – a work that, like many other by the same author, straddles the boundary between the novella and the novel. It was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1888 and later appeared in the revised “New York” edition alongside James’s other works. At first glance, the plot does not significantly diverge from other Jamesian texts that explore American-European relations: an unnamed narrator, an American, arrives in Venice with the aim of obtaining personal documents, specifically the papers and letters of the great poet Jeffrey Aspern, intending to publish the author’s secret for the public and to pave the way for new readings of his works. Given that previous attempts by others to “steal” these documents have ended in failure, the narrator assumes a false identity, presenting himself as a potential tenant of the *palazzo* owned by Juliana Bordereau, the aged former lover of the elusive and deceased poet. The narrator also prepares to court her niece, Miss Tita (later renamed to Miss Tina), an unremarkable and somewhat naïve spinster. The unattainability of the documents is signalled early on, before the plot even unfolds, in Tina’s letter to the narrator – then addressed to him under his real name – and to his business associate, in which she denies the existence of any supplementary texts. Nevertheless, the narrator remains convinced that this denial is false, prompting him to embark on his “siege” of Venice.

The narrative continuously follows a kind of battle within the interior of the Venetian *palazzo*, thereby reaffirming James’s obsession with dense and confined spaces, an obsession that reaches its peak in works such as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Jolly Corner*. However, *The Aspern Papers* is distinctive not only due to its textual spatial configuration but also because of Henry James’s engagement with so-called biographical material and numerous archives containing, above all, personal texts of authors. On a metatextual level, it has long been established – ironically, through readings and interpretations of James’s personal documents – that the author sought to shield his life from public scrutiny, destroying his own texts, letters, and diaries (Meyers, 2021, p. 52). In this sense, it is unsurprising that the work concludes with the narrator’s failure to seize Aspern’s writings. What is surprising, however, is James’s inspiration for writing *The Aspern Papers*. In his notebook, the author refers to a well-known “rumour” that Claire Clairmont, Byron’s lover, had kept letters between Byron and Shelley in which her illegitimate child with the poet was mentioned. Essentially, this is a story of Byron’s

discreditation – a theme of defamation that James transforms into a fictional narrative (Brown, 1991, pp. 265-266), once again underscoring his stance on “biographies”. Since the work directly engages with the issue of uncovering personal documents from the past lives of the famous, this study will focus precisely on the process of revealing the past and the archaeological “excavation” that the protagonist conducts into the life of Jeffrey Aspern.

Space and Archival Desire: Venice as Gothic Scenography in *The Aspern Papers*

Before determining the true significance of Aspern’s documents and the archive in which they are kept, it is necessary to examine the space James chooses as the setting of his intrigue. In his preface, the author states that he envisioned his character Juliana Bordereau as a person belonging to Byron’s era – that is, to Italian post-Byronism – because (1) her fate of patiently awaiting death perfectly corresponds to almost every Venetian monument that bears witness to the fallen glory of antiquity and the Renaissance (James, 1922, pp. xii-xiii), and (2) it aligns with the previously mentioned letters between Byron and Shelley, as well as with the connotations of Venice presented in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, in which Byron laments the vanished heroic and artistic past, and in *Ode on Venice*, where the city is depicted as decayed and fallen (Mamoli Zorzi, 2011, p. 104).

The residence of Juliana Bordereau and Miss Tina, the *Palazzo Capello*, thus becomes a representation of the “typical” Venetian palace in literature – its atmosphere reflects a sense of quiet decay and unrealized potential; it carries the patina of time, yet still stands in its architectural grandeur, expressed through imposing balconies, pilasters, and arches. Its exterior, precisely because it is set within the Venetian urban landscape, can be interpreted as an image of a city whose past glories and struggles remain ever-present, yet whose life has faded – it exists firmly in relation to the past.

The gondola stopped, the old palace was there; it was a house of the class which in Venice carries even in extreme dilapidation the dignified name. “How charming! It’s grey and pink!” my companion exclaimed; and that is the most comprehensive description of it. It was not particularly old, only two or three centuries; and it had an air not so much of decay as of discouragement, as if it had rather missed its career. But its wide front, with a stone balcony from end to end of the *piano nobile* or most important floor, was architectural enough, with the aid of various pilasters

and arches; and the stucco with which in the intervals it had long ago been endued was rosy in the April afternoon (James, 1922, pp. 8-9).

Thus, from the very beginning, Venice appears through the lens of decay. Although the narrator does not directly focus his attention on the city, he cannot escape its presence, as Venice – a city on the brink of disappearance, submerged in water and insufficient light – shapes the entire plot through his monologue, that is, through the speech of someone well-versed in literature (Stoppani, 2009, p. 112). The motif of the deterioration of both exterior and interior spaces is further emphasized, as literature itself connotes Venice with “corrupt love,” a theme linked to Byron’s *Don Juan* and its eponymous libertine (Bysshe Stein, 1959, pp. 175-176), which serves as an emotional reflection of the narrator and his “failed love” with Tina.

Moreover, Henry James himself visited the actual (*sic!*) palace in 1887 before writing the work, and in a photograph taken by Coburn, he labelled it as *Juliana’s court*, thereby altering his own past through the text by introducing fiction into it (Brown, 1991, p. 271). This act of authorial obsession (in the Latin sense of *infatuare* – “to make a fool of”) is connected to both his and the narrator’s perception of space, which is always filtered through previously read literature; London is always perceived through the lens of Dickens; Tours, Touraine, and Paris through Balzac; while Venice is dedicated to Byron, Schiller, Shelley, Browning, and Ruskin (Mamoli Zorzi, 2011, p. 107). The narrator’s perception of space is, therefore, neither simple nor immediate but the result of a deeper intellectual processing of experiences. Fundamental spatial relationships such as “side by side,” “next to each other,” or “separate” do not arise from the direct perception of material in space (Cassirer, 2021, p. 38).

On the other hand, the narrator’s direct penetration into the interior of the *Palazzo Capello* is driven by the possibility of transforming the space into a mediator between himself and the deceased Aspern; seeking to draw closer to the poet, the narrator attempts to reach him through the people and objects that existed in the former’s present. This “archivist’s” invocation of the past is a frequent theme in James’s work, reaching its culmination in his unfinished novel *The Sense of the Past*, where the protagonist literally “travels through time.” However, in *The Aspern Papers*, James remains within an already firmly established Gothic atmosphere, though not as explicitly as in *The Portrait of a Lady* or his ghost stories.

The *Palazzo Capello* is, in a sense, abandoned, as there are no other inhabitants in its numerous chambers besides Juliana and Tina until the narrator's arrival; the distant corridors are covered in dust, as there is no reason to maintain spaces that no one uses. This neglect is never perceived negatively, as it aligns with the aforementioned Romantic connotations of Venice – a palace older than a century must bear the traces of abandonment, seen through the gaslight glow of the past. What unsettles the narrator is the impenetrability artificially created by Juliana at Tina's expense, weaving their habitus – marked by low economic and social capital – into a monastic life of seclusion and vows of silence. Nevertheless, the narrator breaks through this barrier, paying the exorbitant sum of one thousand francs at Juliana's demand. A sum that could have secured him accommodation in "better" Venetian palaces (James, 1922, p. 26), thus initiating his true search for the document. However, his anxiety over residing in a dilapidated Venetian palace ultimately leads him to overestimate his own social position while underestimating his opponent's ability to suspect him (Brylowski, 1969, p. 224).

By occupying the rooms, the narrator becomes part of Juliana's habitus, which, at first, amplifies his obsession with Aspern's papers through his dialogues with Tina. Juliana's niece is aware of the existence of such documents but does not know their exact location. Guessing – while fearing the consequences of Juliana's wrath – she directs the narrator toward what she believes to be the correct coordinates. Evoking Gothic spatiality, James thus constructs the most "elusive" space in the palace as the physical destination of the narrator's quest – Juliana's chambers. Although the narrator cannot be certain that the letters are there, he obsessively fixates on a particular piece of furniture: a neoclassical wardrobe, specifically in the Empire style. This spatial uncertainty especially provokes the narrator into a masochistic game of yearning (Bauer, 2016, p. 171).

Masochism is emphasized here because the protagonist consciously enters a diplomatic game with the personification of death itself – Juliana – who is presented as undead, a soul that should have already perished but instead haunts the abandoned palace, standing as a guardian over the Romantic papers (that is, as a grim reaper over remnants in a non-binary state of existence, given that they are physically manifested as text, yet remain "inactive" since no one "activates" them through reading). Here, the "siege of the castle," imagined as high walls surrounding the "spoils" and the

untouchability of the treasure's guardian, is at its most pronounced (Forde, 1970, p. 19). This is evident in Juliana's gaze – or rather, the absence of it in interactions – since her eyes, supposedly due to illness, are covered by green glasses, a veil, a shadow, or some other obscuring element (the English word *shade* prevents precise identification of the covering in the absence of a concrete description, which is the case here although the text hints at some kind of "curtain"), thus blocking a *tête-à-tête* interlocution. James frequently problematizes the act of "seeing" (e.g., the opera glasses in *The Princess Casamassima*, spectacles in *The Ambassadors*), but here, Gothic ominousness is most strongly emphasized through the "blind eyes of death," which both blind and astonish, the "gaslight," and the "hooded snakes" (Waldmeir, 1982, p. 263).

It was as if [Miss Tina] never peeped out of her aunt's apartment. I used to wonder what she did there week after week and year after year. I had never met so stiff a policy of seclusion; it was more than keeping quiet – it was like hunted creatures feigning death. The two ladies appeared to have no visitors whatever and no sort of contact with the world (James, 1922, p. 37).

Then came a check from the perception that we weren't really face to face, inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which served for her almost as a mask. I believed for the instant that she had put it on expressly, so that from underneath it she might take me all in without my getting at herself. At the same time it created a presumption of some ghastly death's head lurking behind it. The divine Juliana as a grinning skull – the vision hung there until it passed. Then it came to me that she *was* tremendously old – so old that death might take her at any moment, before I should have time to compass my end (James, 1922, pp. 21-22).

From all of the above, it is evident that barriers, boundaries, and walls permeate all relationships and contribute to the creation of the Gothic atmosphere of the space. At the same time, these boundaries are the only tangible aspect of Aspern's papers themselves – they protect from too firm a grasp, yet allow them to be "adored" and desired (Rosenberg, 2006, p. 262). However, not all barriers are impermeable. The only semi-interior space (in the manner of James's Parisian private courtyards of aristocrats and the *bourgeoisie* in *The Ambassadors*) in the novel is the palace garden. Its position – between nature and culture, indoors and outdoors – mirrors the contradiction of Venice

itself, caught between sea and land. The garden, in this sense, serves as a heterotopia that allows characters to break free from their usual behaviours. Tina, who is quiet and secretive in the darkened palace, expresses her emotions and yearning for the outside world more openly, while the narrator gains better control over his thoughts and actions (Bauer, 2016, p. 173). This moment is crucial, as it enables an emotional connection between the narrator and Tina. Furthermore, through Tina's textually invisible and inaudible conversations with Juliana, it allows for a gradual penetration toward the long-coveted documents. While in *The Ambassadors* semi-spaces are socially impenetrable and reinforce the secrecy of the characters, in *The Aspern Papers* they paradoxically enable the opening of a closed archive.

The Archive as a Sealed Tomb of Biographism and Memory

From the previous chapter, one might conclude that the archive is locked due to the internal Gothic atmosphere created by Juliana and the palace itself. However, equally contributing to this closure is the narrator himself and the meta-relationship between fiction and "reality" within the context in which the work was written. First, upon arriving at the palace, the narrator presents a business card with a false name – his *nom de guerre* – to Juliana Bordereau, thereby initiating a battle of wits and deception (Rosenberg, 2006, p. 260). This means his actions are also shrouded in secrecy, though not under the shadow of impending death, as in Juliana's case, but rather in the obsessive power of literary and scholarly Romantic yearning. For James, this desire aims to place dead poets on the dissection table – to capture them, suspend them in a critical cross-section (Hoeveler, 2008, p. 27), and then revive them as artistic artifacts – *objets d'art*. Through this lens, the narrator's goal in the novel is to transform the text about the author's life – a text open to multiple interpretations! – into an official biography edited by him. The result of this Romantic endeavour is thus a conventional hagiographic portrait of the poet, which will ultimately shut down further inquiry – an archive will be created. In order to achieve this, the narrator must symbolically place himself in Aspern's position (by reading the exclusive documents) precisely so that he can explain why he cannot truly occupy that sacred place (Davidson, 1988, p. 41) – that is, to define what makes the poet great and why it is he, the editor, who must write about him, despite his own inability to create such art.

James repeatedly signals to the reader that penetrating the archive is doomed from the outset. The first indication of this lies in the name Juliana Bordereau, whose surname, taken literally, refers to a detailed note or memorandum of accounts, an enumeration of documents, a detailed statement listing items or records. While the name might suggest the existence of the famous Aspern letter, it can also direct the reader to consider the margins of narration – something the protagonist, in his *infatuation*, fails to do (Scholl, 2013, pp. 85-86). The surname could symbolize “hard” textual records such as financial statements, contracts, minutes, or notes. The secrecy surrounding the papers would thus remain intact, as an alternative reading of Mrs. Bordereau’s motives still supports her strong interest in safeguarding the Empire-style cabinet.

Considering the historical inspiration behind the novel – letters from Byron and Shelley – the reader may recall that Byron’s real-life lover lived with her daughter, not a niece as in the novel. Additionally, Juliana and Tina’s lost American identity, erased through their assimilation into Venetian space and their sequestration in the *Palazzo Capello*, extends to their entire family history. All that is known is that they receive regular income from New York, managed by a lawyer. Consequently, Juliana’s desire to provide for Tina – by charging the narrator an exorbitant sum for his stay and later offering Aspern’s portrait for an equally outrageous price – can be interpreted as an expression of guilt for failing to secure her a financially stable life. The regular monetary transfers from America might suggest that Aspern himself ensured Tina’s future through his will (Korg, 1962, p. 379). In his obsessive pursuit of the archive – the container of Aspern’s identity and symbolic literary remains (González, 2008, p. 32) – the narrator unjustifiably disregards the “external” world of his art. He fails to acknowledge the hidden family dynamics embedded in the artifacts around him. This absurdity is most evident in his interactions – or lack thereof – with Juliana. Confronted with a woman who was at least partly the inspiration for Aspern’s work – someone with a past, memory, and poetry dedicated specifically to her – his perspective is fundamentally distorted. Juliana’s life was not lived as an ode to Aspern’s poetry (Hadley, 1997, p. 322); rather, the opposite is true. However, James describes the past as *palpable*, as something tangible (Bell, 1989, p. 125). It is no coincidence that the narrator focuses on obtaining a concrete physical object – the central piece of the archive – rather than engaging with the authorities who guard it.

Juliana stood there in her night-dress, by the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me; they were like the sudden drench, for a caught burglar, of a flood of gaslight; they made me horribly ashamed. I never shall forget her strange little bent white tottering figure, with its lifted head, her attitude, her expression; neither shall I forget the tone in which as I turned, looking at her, she hissed out passionately, furiously: "Ah you publishing scoundrel!" (...) and the next thing I knew she had fallen back with a quick spasm, as if death had descended on her, into Miss Tina's arms (James, 1922, p. 104).

The archaeology of the protagonist culminates in an episode of illness that overtakes Juliana Bordereau. The Empire-style cabinet is finally freed, out of sight from the archivist. But before the narrator can break into it, the relentless gaze of the panopticon focuses on the culprit. For the first time, the narrator sees Juliana's "extraordinary" eyes and the mouth that cries out, "Ah you publishing scoundrel!" Soon after, the guardian of the accounts and/or letters dies, sealing the fate of the *Palazzo Capello*. Now, the house without the archivist becomes a multi-layered sarcophagus, akin to that of a pharaoh, with the documents lying in a coffin within a coffin. The archaeologist can finally begin the excavation. The documents, still undiscovered, are also an *arkheion*, a repository of the most sacred, and, etymologically, *arkhe* – the place of the archon from which the law is spoken (Hewish, 2016, p. 255). In this sense, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator explicitly refers to Aspern, saying, "One doesn't defend one's god: one's god is in himself a defence" (James, 1922, p. 5). The yearning for the papers is thus concretized in the desire to reach the "god" himself. However, the following fundamental ambiguity of Derrida's concept of "archive fever" (*mal d'archive*) – the narrator's burning desire to create the definitive archive by incorporating the Aspern's papers – is countered by the opposite logic that calls for them to be burned and destroyed. After Juliana's death, Tina inherits Aspern's texts among other things. Aware of the narrator's "passion", she offers him marriage, believing it to be the only moral way for him to penetrate the tomb of her aunt/mother. But, due to his "pensive, awkward, grotesque" (James, 1922, p. 119) rejection of this offer, she withdraws it and burns the papers. In this way, Tina finally finds her own identity beyond the control of Juliana and the burden of Aspern's legacy, rising above childlike innocence (Currier Bell, 1981, pp. 283-284).

Regarding the burning of the letters, instead of solidifying the past, transforming Aspern's (whose name can be loosely retold as "ash" and "burn") manuscripts into ashes opens it up. The erased archive enables the creation of a different archive – one constituted by narrative appropriations, ambiguities, unanswered questions, and later re-examinations (Tsimpouki, 2018, pp. 167-168). Paradoxically, the destruction affirms the narrator's yearning because the desire for archiving would not exist without the radical finality, without the threat of oblivion. *Mal d'archive* would not be possible without the threat of death, aggression, and destruction (Savoy, 2010, p. 62). However, perhaps the narrator's greatest mistake is in misinterpreting the "finality" of the archive. The tragedy of the manuscript's death is exaggerated if one considers that the archive is a mechanism for storing and repeating information that comes from the outside – it exists only as an external system with a clear technical and physical foundation, serving as a tool for preserving memory, whereas true memory is an internal, spontaneous process (see Derrida, 1998, p. 11).

Thus, the neglect of Juliana as a source of "living" information is the only and true unspoken tragedy of the work. In other words, from the ashes of Aspern's archive, another archive is born – the archive of stories defined precisely by the absence of Aspern's papers (Tsimpouki, 2018, p. 167), since his hand could not record events after his death. A complete understanding of Aspern's papers requires the archive to be conceived in a way that transcends its status as a mere material object. Here, it is not about movement within narrative itself because there is no interiority: the archive is not present as the text the readers read, nor – what is especially significant and unique in James's oeuvre – do we witness its destruction. Any analytical discussion of Aspern's archive as content would be impossible. It remains an unclear object of desire, beyond the reach of the reader's imagination, let alone understanding. Whatever James's intentions, the death drive surrounding the archive remains outside representation; yet *mal d'archive* at the center of this story is shaped by the material co-substantiality of the archive and the body – the body as the corpse and the resurrected ghost of the author (Savoy, 2010, p. 66) in the figure of Juliana Bordereau.

The novel concludes with the complete defeat of the narrator, and the only thing left from his quest is Aspern's portrait, which Juliana had intended to charge him for. The final sentence of the novel, in classic Jamesian fashion, is ambiguous: "When I look at it [the

portrait] I can scarcely bear my loss – I mean of the precious papers” (James, 1922, p. 126). Two moments need to be highlighted here. James conceived the portrait based on the real portrait of Percy Shelley painted by Amelia Curran in 1819 in Rome. The portrait was once so famous that it attained a religious and iconic status as the ideal representation of Romantic creative power (Hoeveler, 2008, p. 27). The narrator’s loss is further emphasized by the fact that Aspern’s portrait symbolizes the unattainable presence of the great power of the artist. Therefore, the image here serves as a mere hint of a Romantic past and a reminder that it can only be grasped as a reconstruction (Bell, 1989, p. 127). However, the loss of the papers prevents a perfect reconstruction, but also signifies the narrator’s loss of his own social position through his sacrifice of Tina; his individual status in front of Juliana; and money. The destruction of the artifact is, in essence, the loss of identity (Church, 1990, p. 39). Similarly, in Pushkin’s *The Queen of the Spades*, the slight smile on the portrait further underscores the irony the work conveys (Norris Scales, 1991, pp. 489-490). This is not the first time that James’s central character allows the destruction of the present due to an obsession with the past. In *The Altar of the Dead* (as the culmination of his collection *Terminations*), the yearning projected onto the deceased causes the downfall of the main character and the final loss (Hewish, 2016, p. 257).

It should also be noted that pyromania is almost a constant element in James’s works, always at the expense of elusive objects with which the characters are particularly connected. Thus, in *The American*, Christopher Newman burns a letter that would compromise a family, stopping himself from exercising revenge; in *The Spoils of Ponyton*, Fleda receives a letter in which she is invited to choose any relic (again, an *objet d’art*) from Ponyton as her own, but when she arrives a few days later, she discovers that the estate has been consumed by fire; while in *The Wings of the Dove*, there is no arson, but a denial of the appropriation of an immoral document that permits taking someone else’s money. These endings of the novels ultimately mirror James’s personal life, specifically the moment in the autumn of 1909 when the author seized his private papers – 40 years of correspondence with contemporaries, manuscripts, old notebooks – and lit a bonfire in his garden: “The great Anglo-American archive perished that day” (Edel, author of the five-volume biography of James, according to Savoy, 2010, p. 63). His drastic action is not as surprising as it might seem at first, considering that James had warned of the fate of the “legacy” of another American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Indeed, Julian Hawthorne

was selling samples of his father's manuscripts to collectors, publishing excerpts from his private notebooks, displaying his letters to the public, and so on, meaning James's life "law" of destroying any biographical material was "established" as a preventive measure. Therefore, this novel is essentially a novel about the ethics of biography (Scharnhorst, 1990, pp. 211-212, 216) and the archaeological excavation of individuals.

Conclusion

The Aspern Papers is a novel that, at its core, challenges human aspirations and desires for the past while questioning the finality of identity. Moreover, it is a work that explores the failures of individuals in their attempts to immortalize certain historical moments and transforms them into textual records – the ultimate documents where answers are stored. It is crucial to emphasize the significance of Juliana Bordereau. She is a woman who left such a profound mark on Jeffrey Aspern's life that she became an inseparable part of his creative work; she is, in essence, the art recorded in Aspern's manuscript, a reconstruction of real life. However, what the narrator seeks to achieve is a reconstruction of a reconstruction, remaining blinded by his identification of the archive with authentic memory instead of viewing it as its supplement. Perhaps Juliana's "overlong" life signifies her waiting for archaeology to finally turn toward her – to convey memory through speech, without the mediation of documents.

In his later work, *The Sense of the Past*, Henry James will also portray the failures of Ralph Pendrel, who, as a historian, begins to experience fear and horror precisely because his knowledge – rooted in written texts – cannot surpass the history in which he suddenly finds himself through a bizarre journey through time. In this sense, biographies are not only ethically questionable and revealing but also fail to fulfil the very purpose for which they were written. Does this disqualify the need for creating archives? No, but it underscores the crucial role of those who preserve them. Specifically, Juliana Bordereau was an archivist, a historian, because it is her memory and experience that have been preserved – her history.

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