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The Literature Archive of the Future
Statements and Perspectives
Edited by Sandra Richter



Wallstein

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WALLSTEIN VERLAG

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Sandra Richter

The Archive Paradox, or: How to Archive Disruptive Energy

*Nine Hypotheses About Literature
in a Literature Archive*¹

When the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey was considering the establishment of an archive for literature in 1889, there was an appetite for manuscripts, private collections, and libraries, but little more than that.² Today, a whole cosmos of archives exists. Each archive must try to find its special place in it. The location and mission of the German Literature Archive (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach – DLA Marbach) were set out by its sponsor association, the Deutsche Schillergesellschaft (German Schiller Association) – with more than a nod to Dilthey’s ideas: the focus of the German Literature Archive lies in collecting, researching, and promoting understanding of literature. What is understood by the term ›literature‹ is – also following Dilthey – very broad: literature means texts that are considered literature – whether they are given expression through writing or illustration, or in moving images or sound. The German Literature Archive even – in the spirit of Dilthey once more – collects philosophy, which has a considerable influence on the public sphere and on literature. Where the German Literature Archive goes beyond Dilthey’s vision is in its collection of scholarly papers, especially those of scholars in German Studies and Philology, to round out the picture.

- 1 This article is the expanded English version of the German text by the same author: »Das Archivparadoxon oder Wie man disruptive Energie archiviert. Acht Thesen zur Literatur im Literaturarchiv« in: Sandra Richter (ed.), #LiteraturArchivDerZukunft, Marbach a.N.: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2021, pp. 11–15. Translation of the original German text by Madeleine Brook.
- 2 Wilhelm Dilthey, »Archive für Literatur«, in: Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970, pp. 1–16; Dilthey: »Archive der Literatur in ihrer Bedeutung für das Studium der Geschichte der Philosophie«, in: Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959, pp. 555–75.

The holdings of the German Literature Archive do not represent a closed collection; the German Literature Archive's collections have the potential to continue expanding forever or for as long as literature exists. That gives rein to a special dynamic, especially for the object of the collections: new literature is challenged to prove itself against the established literature of the past, to take up new subjects and ideas, to formulate controversial questions, to find ambitious and challenging aesthetic forms, and to discover innovative media. In short: literature that takes itself seriously as literature is potentially disruptive. It destroys or reconfigures the old in order to create something new. In contrast, archives aim to do the opposite: to capture disruptive energies, to pin them down, record and file them, and make them fit into established classification systems. It is a tension that is not easily resolved. Nevertheless, it is vital for the donors of holdings as well as their recipients, not to mention the users of archives, to acknowledge this in order to be able to enter into conversation at all. Let me outline the format and conditions for this conversation in nine hypotheses:

1. *From literature to literary heritage.* An archive for literature is confronted with special challenges. In many cases, a decision has to be made about what can be considered cultural or literary heritage and thus what must be archived. For example, the question must be asked which contemporary literature is so consistent, yet so distinctive, so topical and yet simultaneously so ahead of its time that it can continue to be relevant into the future. The act of archiving into the future necessitates conscious and continuous engagement with the literary canon, as well as an ongoing discussion of the criteria for what should be archived—and what should not.³
2. *The potency of the archive in the literature industry.* An archive this ambitious must have its finger on the pulse of literature, engage in exchange with authors, establish trust, and react with sensitivity to the needs of unusual talent. Such people do not wish to hand over their literary estates to an anonymous institution. The knowledge that their work will be kept alive, even after their own death, is critical.⁴ A literature archive is therefore not simply an institution for posterity; rather, through its policies on collection, solicitation of holdings, and events, the archive is also an influential force in the

3 Caroline Jessen, »Der Kanon im Archiv. Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte an der Schnittstelle von Archiv, Erinnerung und Forschung«, in: *Naharaim* 7,1-2 (2013), pp. 202-16.

4 See Kai Sina / Carlos Spoerhase (eds.), *Nachlassbewusstsein. Literatur, Archiv, Philologie 1750-2000*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017.