

The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences

Liz Stanley

University of Newcastle, UK

Why don't I (do I?) write letters? I do write 'a diary, of a kind'; and, while I used to worry about not keeping 'a proper diary', this has evolved into something I'm comfortable with, fieldwork notebooks that I write rigorously at important research junctures. However, perhaps emails serve the same purpose for me that letters used to? Or is it that my letters were never very important, being 'mainly business', or that I am, oh horror, locked into 'personal' writings rather than interpersonal ones? But then, what about my public writing, the articles and book chapters and books that I produce for publication purposes and always with an audience in mind? Could these perhaps be seen as equivalent to the public letters Olive Schreiner occasionally wrote, together with thousands of her 'familiar letters'? Certainly, both were part of her shared epistolary construction of a sensibility and a way of life. And to whom is the particular set of thoughts in this article addressed? In it, am 'I' eliciting a response from 'you' (whoever you are), and to what genre does this way of writing belong? Also, if my papers survive my death and its aftermath, how might this particular communication fare among the rest of the things I've written? If someone should read it a hundred years on, how might they understand it and postulate my intended readers? Then there is the question of how to sign what I've written here – 'me' signals wrongly that I'm the only intended reader, but 'Liz Stanley' suggests that it is entirely for an unknown other or others, while 'Liz' inappropriately indicates familiar knowledge of its readers, and there is no word for 'both me and you'. But all these matters are very interesting and I hope other people think so too.

DEAR READER, SOME OPENING REMARKS ON THE EPISTOLARY FORM¹

This article discusses ideas concerning the following: whether or not letters are a genre of writing; the epistolary practices that their writers and readers engage in; the strategies and structures that characterize collections of letters; and the place of the epistolary form among the

Address for correspondence: Liz Stanley, Sociology, Claremont Bridge Building, University of Newcastle, Newcastle NE1 7RU, UK; Email: liz.stanley@newcastle.ac.uk

‘documents of life’.² As Ken Plummer points out, over the last twenty years there has been ‘a major cultural boom in life story and auto/biographical work’, including a large growth in social science interest in life story and life history methods and narrative approaches.³ He also comments that some ‘documents of life’ have been seen as problematic and either ignored or treated as marginal, with diaries receiving scant attention and letters even less.⁴ Plummer’s observations about the perceived characteristics of letters can perhaps help explain why:

... many insights can be gained from the study of letters, yet ... social scientists are likely to remain suspicious of their value on a number of scores ... every letter speaks not just of the writer’s world, but also of the writer’s perceptions of the recipient. The kind of story told shifts with the person who will read it. ... A further problem with letters concerns ... the ‘dross rate’. ... Letters are not generally focused enough to be of analytic interest – they contain far too much material that strays from the researcher’s concern.⁵

In contrast, the disciplines of history and literature have had a long-standing interest in letters, although until relatively recently this has been for the characteristics Plummer disavows letters having – useful facts, which permit seeing letters as referential of someone’s life and providing ‘evidence’ about events or people. However, literary studies have subsequently been greatly influenced by poststructuralist ideas broadly conceived, redirecting attention away from presumptions (or disavowals) of facticity and towards the issues surrounding textuality.⁶ There have been similar shifts in the social sciences, of which the narrative turn is one indication, but with significant differences concerning the areas these ideas have impacted on.⁷

This article discusses conceptual and theoretical aspects of ‘a letter’ and ‘a correspondence’ and through this reworks Plummer’s comments, for the features of letters he perceives as problems are the very things I find interesting and deserving sustained attention as analytical problematics. First, letters are *dialogical*. They are not one person writing or speaking about their life, but a communication or exchange between one person and another or others. Thus conceptual ideas about the dialogical are especially pertinent in thinking about the structural properties that develop around the unfolding communication between letter writers and readers, for an important feature of correspondences, rather than one-off letters, is their turn-taking and reciprocity.⁸ Secondly, letters are *perspectival*. Their ‘point’ is not that they contain fixed material from one viewpoint, nor that their content is directly referential, but that their structure

and content changes according to the particular recipient and the passing of time.⁹ Letters fascinatingly take on the perspective of the 'moment' as this develops within a letter or a sequence of letters, and may utilize a particular 'voice' adopted by the writer or a particular 'tone' rhetorically employed, such as humorous extravagance, strict formality or a particular 'persona' playfully adopted.¹⁰ And thirdly, letters have strongly *emergent* properties. They are not occasioned, structured or their content filled by researcher-determined concerns. Instead, they have their own preoccupations and conventions and indeed their own epistolary ethics; and these aspects are likely to change according to particular correspondences and their development over time.

These three features of letters are interesting and analytically engaging not least because they are dimensions of all social interaction. They are not, however, defining characteristics of 'a letter' or 'a correspondence' as a supposedly distinct genre. Definitional components and whether the epistolary form is a separate genre are not a focus for discussion herein.¹¹ This is not to imply that definitional questions do not have considerable analytical interest, and certainly contemplating them is essential as a starting point. It is, however, to propose that all writing genres contain internal distinctions, exist on a spectrum from the most to the least like the genre 'norm', and are characterized by their intertextuality, all of which suggests that remaining within the framework of genre conventions can be unnecessarily limiting.¹²

I NEED TO TELL YOU: SOME ASPECTS OF EDITING OLIVE SCHREINER'S LETTERS

My work in progress concerns some thousands of unpublished archived letters by Olive Schreiner written between 1889 and her death in 1920 from within an 'epistolary community', or rather a number of overlapping epistolary communities;¹³ and it has the aim of publishing a new edition of her letters.¹⁴ Reflecting upon this editorial work throws into relief important matters concerning collections of letters in general which can usefully be sketched out here.

In Schreiner's case, referring to 'a collection' of her letters is a misnomer, or rather refers to the product of editorial activity rather than her letters as such. These letters are deposited in a large number of archive locations, because of the vagaries of time and the workings of the market in selling and buying such memorabilia, although the explicit intentions of a few of Schreiner's correspondents or their heirs have been involved.¹⁵ As a result, not only editorial work with

publication in mind, but also reading across the archival sources and the published editions that currently exist, involves creating ‘a collection’ out of something – ‘the remaining Olive Schreiner letters’ – actually characterized by its fragmentary and dispersed character.¹⁶ This is in fact more like the (many more) letters originally written and sent by Schreiner, for these were of course dispersed across time and space and between different people and intended to be read as one-off letters to them, not as ‘a correspondence’ in its entirety and even less as ‘an epistolarium’, the entirety of someone’s epistolary endeavour.

Relatedly, there is a complex and now largely unknowable relationship between Schreiner’s letters that survive and those that have not, many of which were deliberately destroyed. Crucial information – like the overall shape (number and names of her correspondents), relative density (of letters per correspondent), temporal coverage (distribution of letters to her correspondents over time), and these matters concerning their letters to her – are now unrecoverable. Moreover, there are complex ethical issues surrounding using, as well as publishing, the surviving letters, because Schreiner requested their return from her correspondents and was both directly and indirectly responsible for burning them *en masse*, and most likely would have overseen or wanted her heirs to oversee destroying the rest.¹⁷

Indicating something about ‘an epistolarium’ both is and is not analytically important. When starting work on the Schreiner letters, I also commenced constructing a database of all letters that survived, on the premise that this, together with some fairly detailed clues¹⁸ about the shape and density, if not temporal coverage, of much of those destroyed, would enable the boundaries of the Schreiner epistolarium to be marked and some generalizations about the whole permitted. But this now seems to me flawed in an epistemological sense, because it is so ‘out of sync’ with the fragmentary nature of the epistolarium as such, with the database’s realistic function being to show what is archived where.¹⁹ Overall, what remains adds up to a ‘something’ that in Schreiner’s case, like most other letter writers, is not the epistolarium in the full sense, but simply what remains. Even if an epistolarium in this sense exists and has been archived, its dimensions are unlikely to have been fully realized by the writer and certainly not by their individual correspondents, and also it would be different in kind from the quintessentially fragmentary and dispersed nature of letter writing and receiving. However, the paradox remains: while letter writing is characterized by fragmentation and dispersal, nonetheless understanding the remaining fragments requires some kind of overview; and this constitutes an albeit provisional attempt to

comprehend an entirety that never actually existed in the form of 'a whole' or 'a collection'.

There are always issues involved in choosing which letters to include in a published collection, for the selection of some letters entails the deselection of many more.²⁰ Schreiner, for instance, wrote around 12–15,000 letters; and while 'only' 5,000 or so are now archived, it is unlikely that the totality of these could be published, so choices have to be made.²¹ The two existing general collections are (differently) problematic, and so one possibility would have been to provide a new 'whole life' edition of letters selected across Schreiner's life. However, for all its problems, there *is* a collection covering the years up to the end of 1899, so another possibility was to cover the period from then to Schreiner's death in 1920. However, my edition of Schreiner's letters is planned to start in 1889, when, aged 34 and already famous, she returned to South Africa from Europe, because this was clearly a watershed, an epiphany, and one which she not only wrote about in her letters at the time but which also changed her use of the epistolary form itself.²² This provides a clear rationale for structuring the collection and also for a preliminary selection of letters; and while many letters and a significant period of Schreiner's life occurred earlier, it retains the possibility of another collection at some future point in time, focused on her letters pre-1889.

These issues concerning selection are not about 'are these interesting letters or not'²³ – or rather, even this can be highly consequential for readers. In the past Schreiner's letters were subject to a style of editing which excised passages because deemed 'uninteresting', in some cases reducing letters to single lines or a few sentences, in more of them excising what the editor judged to be 'mundane' and 'unimportant', with the result highly significant for how Schreiner is presented as a woman, a writer and a public figure.²⁴ More common is the editorial activity of (usually) 'silently correcting' mistakes and omissions, standardizing spellings, replacing shorthand forms and otherwise intervening to produce a standard published text. In Schreiner's case, in a large number of instances this has changed the meaning of what she wrote in significant ways, in at least some instances inverting the meaning as she wrote it.²⁵ In general, the intention of such editorial interventions has been (presumably) to do credit to the writerly skills of the letter writer and to produce a published version thought to better represent them than the 'flawed' epistolary originals. But the result actually misrepresents someone's letters, with attendant consequences for understanding them as a person.

Important though these things are, two features of Schreiner's letters have editorially exercised me more.²⁶ At a seemingly mundane level, the first concerns what transcriptions should 'look like' on the printed page. Schreiner repeatedly, indeed typically, utilized space on the letter page in a distinctive way.²⁷ Thus her letters can have multiple 'ends', one at or near the bottom of its last sheet, another at the end of the PS or a continuation on another sheet, and a perhaps final one down the sides of the first page. Some of these may have signatures, others not; occasionally an ending, or at least an additional piece of writing, may appear on a separate sheet or the envelope. However, even transcribed in the order Schreiner is likely to have written them, this still produces a different sense of meaning and thought-processes from seeing the original manuscript letters; and in turn, this has consequences for how her letters like and unlike this are read in relation to each other. The second involves Schreiner's handwriting, which is notoriously difficult to read. But while this is a truism, it is not always true to the same extent and on some epistolary occasions it is not true at all. These variations are more than happenstance and largely derive from the material circumstances of Schreiner's letter writing: her handwriting is most difficult to read when sprawling and seemingly wild; and while this was often because she wrote while semi-recumbent due to her asthma, it was also because she typically wrote letters in batches in snatched periods of time and did so 'at full pelt'. There are, however, some letters where, from specific content or hints, or the visible pressure of Schreiner's pen in writing, there are indications of emotion strongly felt. Whether and how to attempt to represent these matters in transcription raises practical issues; one is the extent to which it is possible to transcribe such things; the other is that as an editor I became aware of what these 'added up to' only when my research was already underway, and I had passed over various examples without realizing their import and so had neither attempted to represent them in transcriptions nor recorded their existence.²⁸

Certainly, recent styles of editing seek to reproduce as many features of manuscript originals of letters as possible, including mistakes, insertions and crossings out, emphases and super-emphases and so on, because these are at least potentially important in interpretation and understanding.²⁹ I have considerable sympathy with this and have moved closer to it over the period of working on Schreiner's letters. However, two notes of caution need sounding. First, if the aim is to represent individual letters with total verisimilitude, rather than provide an editorial interpretation of either the whole or of currents within a correspondence, then why not make

use of computer technologies, scanning equipment and DVDs to reproduce and make available the originals?³⁰ A Borgesian world of an archive coterminous with life itself looms, with significant implications for epistolary scholarship. Secondly, the editorial companion of complete transcription is an equally complete approach to contextualizing, repairing the epistolary gaps, silences and ellipses for present-day readers. In effect, this de-temporalizes and de-historicizes letters, thereby 'removing' some of the things that characterize the epistolary form. Regarding Schreiner's letters, there are attractions here because the editor's view of meaning prevails, but the extent of this interpretational work begs serious scholarly questions, resulting in my 'light touch' editorial approach, providing such information only when important for understanding a letter or series of them.

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN: SOME RESULTING THOUGHTS ABOUT THE EPISTOLARY FORM

Fundamentally, a letter is a material document of some kind (paper, words on a screen or taking other forms³¹) that signals its epistolary purpose through its form or structure by being addressed to one person and signed by another (Dear A, Yours Z'), although neither the signatory (or writer) nor the addressee (or reader) need necessarily be singular.³² A letter originates from an 'I' (or a number of them) who signs the letter and in doing so guarantees its authenticity, in the sense of the writer being the source of this epistolary document.³³ A letter, then, is that which signals an 'epistolary intent', and the epistolary or letter form can be easily recognized and distinguished from other kinds of writing, because of existing in a social context with shared and largely stable conventions governing its form. However, the convention that a letter is dated is precisely that, a feature that changes culturally and historically.³⁴

'Open letters' published in books or newspapers/magazines occupy a space between being 'public' writings and 'private' letters, with interesting examples provided by those published within a feminist political frame.³⁵ Like the biblical New Testament Epistles, open letters are usually didactic, written by someone with a high status if not a pre-eminent position in relation to a particular community, with the community collectively being addressed.³⁶ Open letters trade on values and meanings shared in common; but although having communicative purpose, they are not directly responded to because they are pronouncements to be read but not to be answered by writing back. 'Letters to the editor' of newspapers have similar but also

dissimilar characteristics, being written by diverse individuals, few if any of whom will know each other or the newspaper editor concerned; and while in a formal sense such letters are addressed to an editor, a real individual, they are actually addressed to 'the public', to a collectivity of addressees. Newspaper letter pages also frequently witness an emergent collectivity of correspondents concerned with particular topics: through their letters, members of the public join (or help construct) a community of utterance by using this public medium for expressing private but presumptively interpersonally shared views.

Letters are always 'in the present tense', not literally in terms of verb tenses but by being written at a particular point in time which influences their content, even if not explicitly. Letters are strongly marked by their quotidian present. At the same time, all letters are 'dead letters' that in a sense never arrive: the letter that was written and sent is rather different from the one that arrives and is read because changed by its travels in time and space, from the there and then of writing to the here and now of reading.³⁷ Letters also do things with and to time: when a letter is read, its reader of course knows that time has passed and the 'moment' of its writing has gone; but at the same time, the present tense of the letter recurs – or rather occurs – not only in its first reading but subsequent ones too. Letters thereby share some of the temporal complexities of photographs: they not only hold memory but also always represent the moment of their production, and have a similar 'flies in amber' quality. This 'present tense' aspect of a letter persists – the self that writes is in a sense always writing, even after the death of the writer and addressee; and their addressee is 'always listening' too.³⁸ An interesting example is provided by penfriend letters written to and from prisoners on death row in US prisons in the 1990s.³⁹ These were, almost by definition, time-limited correspondences between strangers who became epistolary friends. Even more than other letters, they constitute a theatre for the construction and performance of self in which the distance of time, space and the absence of face-to-face contact enables rather than disables communication between the penfriends. When a relationship is confined to the epistolary, everything that needs to be known is presented within such exchanges, sometimes in response to inquiries from the other party, but often through describing the broader context in which more specific material is presented. Herein, there is no wider or pre-existing interpersonal context of things known in common that can be drawn on, so textuality is all.⁴⁰

The temporal slipperiness of the epistolary connects with its characteristics of metonymy and a simulcrum of presence.⁴¹ Metonymy

involves substituting an attribute or characteristic for the whole or entirety, referring here to how letters seemingly take on some of the qualities or characteristics of the writer; they involve a simulacrum of presence by 'standing for' or conjuring up the writer: their characteristic phrases or mistakes, their hand having folded the paper and sealed the envelope, or their coffee stains marking the page, all referentially signal 'that person'. A letter exists because of the absence of the writer and the distance (literal or figurative) between them and the addressee; but the materiality and meaning of letters also conjure up something of the being of the writer. And in doing so, letters have similar effects concerning the relationship between the correspondents – they signify the relationship itself.⁴² Indeed, they often do so in ways that are more than symbolic (by being an exchange between them) or descriptive (by evoking times and places shared), because correspondents also often incorporate words and phrases in letters sent to them with their replies.

Letters disturb binary distinctions: between speaking and writing and private and public, as well as between here and there, now and then, and presence and absence. They are conversation-like but not actually conversations; and while they involve turn taking, these exchanges have a relatively fixed form that talk does not. Letters traverse private and public, having the qualities of both and occupying a 'middle space' in which 'private' letters may be both written and read in public situations.⁴³ And another breach of the public/private distinction occurs with regard to formal letters, because while these are written and intended as private to the transaction involved, it is common knowledge that other people (secretaries, administrators) may read them and indeed be involved in writing the reply, although signed by the original addressee.⁴⁴ Thus in 1914, Olive Schreiner wrote to Lloyd George as British Prime Minister, protesting the outbreak of war and requesting a private meeting; her letter was opened by his secretary (and lover) Frances Stevenson, with his reply in agreement coming from and signed by Stevenson; and while the meeting was in camera between him and Schreiner, it was also described in letters from Schreiner to her brother Will, who was shortly to become the South African Commissioner in London.

The relationship between 'a letter' and 'a correspondence' is on one level simple, with the latter consisting of a series of letters in which the parties involved take turns in being writer/signatory and addressee/reader. A correspondence is an exchange persisting over time, while a letter can be written, sent and read as a one-off occurrence.⁴⁵ However, not all exchanges of letters are 'correspondences' and there may be no intention that these should persist once the

purpose of the exchange is completed (thus, for instance, my exchanges with the UK's Inland Revenue). Nonetheless, what may start out as merely exchanges of letters can become a correspondence without prior intent on either side, with an interesting example being the semi-fictional letters between Helene Hanff and bookshop manager Frank Doel in *84 Charing Cross Road*.⁴⁶ Conversely, once lively correspondences can dwindle into perfunctory exchanges.

Some correspondences are characterized by being formulated in the interlocutory voice, a quality frequently noted about Madame de Sévigné's letters to her married daughter Madame de Grignan; while the correspondence between Ellen Terry and George Bernard Shaw, and the love letters between Sybil Thorndyke's parents, have a similar questioning tone to them.⁴⁷ Correspondences also typically exist in parallel with, rather than being an extension or echo of, a face-to-face relationship. And while suggesting that a correspondence has 'a life of its own' is too strong a claim, apart from in exceptional circumstances where a relationship is confined to the epistolary, letter exchanges can express an important dimension absent from face-to-face encounters. Thus Harold Nicholson and Vita Sackville-West, for instance, often wrote each other letters even though living in the same house.⁴⁸ In addition, the epistolary domain of a correspondence develops its own conventions and ethical dimensions over time, and while a correspondence involves reciprocity in writing and reading letters, this need not necessarily be equal.⁴⁹ A usually important aspect of this concerns reciprocity in the exchanges, particularly regarding temporal delays; thus, for example, in the later correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle there are increasingly long intervals between letters, literally 'papered over' in the eventual replies.⁵⁰ Correspondences also involve an 'I' and 'You' (whether singular or plural) and are strongly relational in their structuring, and over the time a correspondence persists an epistolary ethics will, usually tacitly, emerge.

Most published collections of letters, indeed most archived letters, will have originated as part of a correspondence, but with one side remaining: because of the presumed importance of one of the letter writers (because a public figure or having personal significance for either the addressee or the person who kept the letters); or perhaps because of the content of these letters (such as concerning a momentous time in someone's life, or the circumstances of writing, for example, wartime or emigration). In all cases, the loss of the 'other side' of the correspondence influences readers' understandings of the remaining letters, for these were a part of something, and not the whole. However, the 'other side' is not always seen as interesting

or adding anything – a ‘great letter-writer’ and ‘great letters’ effect is sometimes at work. For instance, Keats’s letters are described as great letters, particularly but not exclusively because so much of them are about poetry; but if those to him by his brothers George and Tom or by Fanny Brawne had survived/been published, even though ‘ordinary letters’, these would have immeasurably increased understanding of Keats himself. Indeed, the importance of some correspondences is precisely that they are composed entirely by ‘ordinary letters’.⁵¹

Having sketched out some basic characteristics of a letter and a correspondence, I now look in more detail at the dialogical, perspectival and emergent features of the epistolary form.

FOR YOUR FURTHER INTEREST: CONCERNING THE DIALOGICAL ASPECTS OF LETTERS

As indicated earlier, until relatively recently letters have been used mainly as a resource and treated as referential of a person’s life and its historical and relational context, with the focus on content and its recording of factual information. Thus, for example, Cronwright-Schreiner’s main interest in Olive Schreiner’s letters in 1924 was to ‘prove’ his interpretation of her character and conduct, editing them to demonstrate this. However, over the last two decades or so, the emphasis has been on the performative, textual and rhetorical aspects of letters, and that they inscribe ‘a world’, emanate from a particular epistolary community, and have their own characteristic features. Here Draznin’s 1992 edition of Schreiner’s complete correspondence with Havelock Ellis is, in contrast with Cronwright-Schreiner’s edition, concerned to show developments and changes in the epistolary relationship as fully and transparently as possible. For my part, editorial aims include not only textual scrupulousness and editorial transparency, but also wanting to indicate that Schreiner’s letters have both a distinctive ‘tone’ or rhetorical voice and at the same time are tailored for particular correspondents (as contemplating all the letters written on any particular day demonstrates).⁵² As part of the increased concern with textuality, greater attention has also been given to the ways that letters in a correspondence construct, not just reflect, a relationship, develop a discourse for articulating this, and can have a complex relationship to the strictly referential. Thus, for instance, there are issues in interpreting the emotional dynamics of Schreiner’s actual relationship with Mary Sauer, in spite (or because) of the more than 130 and often lengthy extant letters that Schreiner sent to her: was this an emotional

friendship? Could it have been a sexual relationship? Could it have become sexual but with Schreiner retreating? Or something else entirely? The letters are often passionate, seductive – but this does not necessarily mean their face-to-face encounters were like this.

The ‘textual turn’ is very much to be welcomed for freeing up work on the epistolary form from a ‘repositories of facts and if not then deficient’ way of thinking about letters and correspondences. However, at the same time as their textuality, letters also have an ‘obstinate referentiality’,⁵³ their engagement with the ‘actual course of things’,⁵⁴ for letters do not exist in a textual vacuum. An important aspect here is that letters are predicated on the existence of a community of utterance not confined to the correspondents, nor of them plus other people in the contexts of writing and reading, but involve a social world known in common that is not delineated in detail and largely taken for granted.⁵⁵

Thus letter writing is located *in* actual things: letters written will include messages passed on by third parties; they are written at a desk or a table in a room, perhaps with other people present; using paper and pens or computers of particular style and cost; they are delivered by a postal service or alternative means;⁵⁶ they are read in a specific time and place; other people may be present during this; and a letter’s content in whole or part may be conveyed to them. Letters are also, perhaps prototypically, *about* actual things as well: daily life; the past, present and future of the relationship between the writer and addressee; familiar and public events; people known in common; and so on. Such things have a material, social, temporal and spatial reality, and they are ‘real in their consequences’, including their impact on the epistolary exchange.⁵⁷ What is required, consequently, is an analytic approach that is fully responsive to the epistemological, conceptual and theoretical issues sketched out earlier concerning textual matters, and which at the same time recognizes the referentiality that characterizes letters and pays due attention to the ways this is textually mediated and maintained over time.⁵⁸

As well as these broad dialogical characteristics of letters and correspondences, there are more specific aspects worth noting. Letters, for instance, involve a performance of self by the writer, but one tempered by recognizing that the addressee is not just a mute audience for this, but also a ‘(writing) self in waiting’. Letters are also ‘a gift’ from A to B and vice versa, for the writer and reader roles are interchangeable, there is the presumption of response, and they involve mutual metonymy in bestowing a part of one’s self to the other person. At the same time as these relational aspects, letters are also strongly metonymic of the *particular* writer, being a kind of proxy for them,

such that their letters may not only be carefully kept over long periods of time (sometimes in difficult circumstances), but also given back as 'a set' at epiphanous moments.⁵⁹ In addition, many intertextualities appear in letters, including cross-references to the writer's and also the reader's previous letters, elliptical remarks indicating shared knowledge about people, events and meanings, and also sometimes by using or parodying other genres of writing.

As noted earlier, their strong dialogical features have encouraged seeing letters as conversations on paper. However, this should be resisted, for while exchanges of letters share some of the characteristics of conversations, there are also crucial differences and the conversation analogy detracts attention from their distinctively epistolary features. Thus, while there is turn taking in epistolary exchanges, this always entails temporal and spatial interruptions between the writing and the reading of a letter; there is no face work involved; writing is actually different from speaking; and anyway the content of each 'turn' takes a relatively stable form and is not nearly so available for ongoing qualification and revision as talk.⁶⁰ There are also ways in which letters are definitely a very writerly form of communication. In their manuscript originals they are clearly a form in flight – they contain mistakes, crossings out, there are intimations of things there is no time or space to include, other responsibilities which make demands on the writer's time, as well as unconventional ways of filling the writing space, characteristic forms of punctuation (or its absence), distinctive turns of phrase, and particular forms of address or signature.

As well as temporal and spatial interruptions helping to characterize the epistolary form, in a more profound way these interruptions impact on letters to the extent they are 'always unfinished', in a number of senses. Any particular letter is part of a sequence in a correspondence; consequently, there are always things not present in any one letter, with an incremental and fragmented emplotment existing across a series concerning what happened before. These 'gaps' concern things that need not be written and can be assumed, concerning contextual and cultural knowledge, about relationships and shared events, leading to letters that are often highly elliptical, with few or no clues even in a collection as to the meaning or import of important matters. This includes, for example, in correspondences involving women factory workers in Lowell and their kin in *Farm to factory*, what relationship some people had to each other and what they did for a living.⁶¹ Thus the temptation for editors to fill such 'gaps' on the grounds that readers will want to know and editors should provide this as part of their expertise. However, as commented

earlier, ‘finishing’ letters like this betrays the fundamentally unfinished nature of the fragmented epistolary form.

Letters (almost) always presume a response, and an ‘after’ as well as a ‘before’ is ordinarily taken into account in an epistolary exchange.⁶² While their then/there and now/here references and metonymic features reify presence around a simulacrum of the writer, the paradox is that this is produced only by the person’s actual absence. Indeed, paradox is at the heart of epistolary matters: the ‘real’ message of letters is not quite what is written; letters ‘stand for’ the writer, but only in their absence; the writer is not the ‘actual person’ but an epistolary version or emanation of them; what they write about is not the world as it is but that which is represented; and the moment of writing is conveyed to the reader but only after it has gone by.

ALSO REGARDING THEIR PERSPECTIVAL ASPECTS

All exchanges of letters involve the textual construction and maintenance of a distinctive ‘world’, one with internal defining features, consistencies and typical inconsistencies, characteristic modes of expression and things known in common that need not be written about. This is more obviously so regarding a long-term sustained correspondence between two (or more) people; however, it can also characterize the epistolary output of the writer of many letters to a large number of people, even if none of these involves a sustained correspondence. Regarding Schreiner’s letters, although there are some significant differences in the form as well as content of letters to different correspondents, there are also patterns of just these kinds. For instance, although Schreiner uses ‘I’ in her letters, she does so in ways that collectivize this by removing it from the personal realm of emotions and confidences to that of public concerns shared with her habitual correspondents, shifting into ‘we’ usages; and in fact it is her occasional use of the apparently removed and general form of ‘one’ that actually signals emotional or other intensities of feeling.

An economy of exchange and reciprocity is involved in long-term epistolary exchanges, with mutuality built in and giving rise to a processual dynamics in which there are distinctive (to the particular correspondence) interpretations of time and its passing (‘by the time you receive this, I will ...’) and space and its separations (here I am ... there you are ...). This dynamism induces correspondents to write even when ‘there’s nothing to write about’, a marked feature of some of Schreiner’s long-term correspondences, including with her mother

and close friend Betty Molteno, although interestingly not with others she was close to, like her brother Will and sister-in-law Fan, indicating perhaps degrees of closeness, perhaps more subtle distinctions concerning who could be taken for granted.⁶³ Frequently such dynamics are self-sustaining, although there are likely to be changes over time to the form as well as content of epistolary exchanges. Thus the Henry Adams and Thomas Carlyle correspondence, for instance, changed considerably over the years that their epistolary friendship existed, with the temporal spaces between letters increasing markedly.⁶⁴ A Schreiner example here concerns her correspondence with Molteno, which changed dramatically after the death of Molteno's partner and Schreiner's close friend Alice Greene.⁶⁵ Another involves her correspondence with Mary Sauer, which was very intensive in the initial years of their friendship, continued in a lower key, and then in effect terminated around a political breach, never explicitly addressed, around Sauer's support for her politician husband's part in developing discriminatory 'race' legislation.

The perspectival dimensions of epistolary matters importantly include the relationship between the epistolary 'world' and its exchanges, and wider social life and its interpersonal dynamics. For inveterate letter writers, their letter writing takes place within a community of correspondents that can involve, for instance, family members living at a distance,⁶⁶ friends living in different places, correspondents who have never or rarely been met face to face; and it gives rise to a collective 'We', as well as an 'I' and a 'You', including by encompassing a number of letter writers who are epistolarily connected with more than one member of the network. For instance, the 'Five of Hearts' epistolary circle that included Henry Adams had a strong collective sense of this kind, and most of its members were part of other epistolary circles too.⁶⁷ The letters to and by women working in Lowell (USA) factories between the 1830s and 1860s provide an interesting contrast.⁶⁸ These trade on knowledge about the social world shared in common between the correspondents and are strongly relational in character; consequently, they are often highly elliptical, opaque to present-day readers because they contain content that would have been known at the time but seems mysterious nearly 200 years on. Among other things, this suggests that letters do different jobs of communicative work and that not all 'good letters', as recipients perceive this, are necessarily tailored to the interests and concerns of the recipients: these particular letters concern the writer and family events, conveyed to the addressee and through them a wider family network; and that they were kept safely over a long period of time suggests they were highly valued.

Concerning Olive Schreiner's correspondences, although these involved people who were interconnected and various of whom conducted extensive correspondences themselves, there is little sense from what survives of a shared collective 'we' as compared with the 'five of hearts' epistolary circle. However, a more tacit form of this involved a sub-set of her correspondents. Schreiner was linked with Betty Molteno, Alice Greene, Will and Fan Schreiner, Eleanor Marx, Edward Carpenter, Anna Purcell and Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, for instance, but not various others in her epistolary circle, through their feminist, socialist and anti-imperialist convictions.⁶⁹ These exchanges involved not only passing on news and keeping in touch, but the construction of a sensibility that was ethical as much as political, concerning the nature of the ethically 'good life' and the proper relationship between these people's personal conduct and public events.

There is also an important material aspect to the perspectival dimensions of epistolary exchanges. The epistolary form has been and continues to be shaped by the socio-economic order and changing communication technologies, not least because such developments also include those (like income, time, transportation systems) that facilitate or inhibit face-to-face contact.⁷⁰ The impact on the epistolary form of postal services, the laying of telegraph wires, development of telecommunications and other forms of distance communication, and computer technology and digital cameras and webcams as well as email, has been widely recognized as extremely consequential, even if not yet explored in any depth with regard to particular correspondences over time.⁷¹ Schreiner, born in 1855, belonged to a generation for whom telegrams were a 'last resort' in times of urgency, and the telephone had little impact on their modes of communication. More important changes for them concerned how quickly letters moved around within South Africa, with the ox wagon giving way to horse transport and then the railway, and how quickly they were delivered to people in another continent, with increasingly swift and reliable steam shipping. These things helped change people's experience of time and impacted on their understanding of and feelings about physical separation and sense of distance. Thus, for example, in the 1870s when, one after the other, the small children of one of Schreiner's older sisters died, she was only able to write loving letters of condolence well after these sad events; but in 1912 when her sister Ettie was dying, Schreiner not only wrote weekly and sometimes daily letters to her but also, receiving a telegram about Ettie's death, was able to reach Cape Town in time for her funeral.

AND THE EMERGENT PROPERTIES OF LETTERS

Thus far discussion may seem to have presumed that the features commented on mark out the epistolary as a distinct genre of writing. Against this, it should be emphasized that letter writing and correspondences involve a theatre of usage, for although there are indeed conventions about the form that letters take, these provide a loose shape rather than being determining, and the letter-writing practices that result are performative and emergent and often play with 'other' genres or indeed shade into these.⁷² In relation to Schreiner's correspondences, it is not so much that these are part of a genre of letter writing shared with other letter writers across cultural differences and historical divisions, as it is that they have personally characteristic features: her letters could have been written by no one else, providing the distinctiveness of the Schreiner epistolarium. However, these things are discernible in a sense only 'at the end'; they were not invariant properties of her letters from the very first, but rather developed over time and in response to circumstances and events in the wider context as well as 'the epistolary world' within her correspondences.

There is certainly an historically fairly stable genre object, 'the letter', with specific recognizable rhetorical features, including a salutation to an addressee, greetings and excuses, other usually descriptive content, closing material, a closure, and a signature. 'The letter' is a public and known form and all the examples referred to herein are recognizably 'the same kind' of thing, even though written sometimes hundreds of years apart, on different continents, by people of different class, gender and 'race' backgrounds, and in very different personal and political contexts.⁷³ However, these conventions provide a shape, rather than hard and fast requirements,⁷⁴ and adherence to the rhetorical conventions can be combined with features typical of the writer and/or the correspondence, specific and characteristic usages, and with significant differences in content and practice evolving over time. Here the importance of letter-writing *practices* needs to be acknowledged and that these are indeed emergent, relational and change over time.

The conventions, then, are best understood as providing a flexible space or framework within which form can be subverted by individual practice. This includes reworking salutations and signatures to amuse, seduce, impress, or offend the recipient, and by skilled letter writers producing outlaw versions. Moreover, the existence of conventions means that points of potential resistance are built-in at the juncture; practice is evaluated against these, so that actual letters

rarely reach the rhetorical ideal – they are too long, too short, too late, not interesting or amusing enough. In addition, the epistolary form is porous to other kinds of writing, so that, for example, letters can be written in the form of a phone call or conversation or a job reference; Christmas cards can be sent in the form of a family or otherwise collective letter; and advertisements and charitable requests can be personalized and signed as though a familiar letter.

This porous quality is such that the epistolary form has been recognized as the source of various other genres. In Britain, banknotes originated as letters promising to ‘pay the bearer on demand’ its worth in gold coinage; patents originated as letters laying claim to originating the object or process that the letter referred to; and scholarly articles originated in letters circulated between members of what became the Royal Society.⁷⁵ News journals and newspapers developed out of letters from ‘our correspondent’, as within the ‘republic of letters’ in eighteenth-century France, and in India by the ‘newswriters’ acting as tolerated espionage at all Indian courts.⁷⁶ Also some organizational records, such as job references, stockholders’ reports and curricula vitae, originated in epistolary versions. In the case of job references, the increased use of forms for these notwithstanding, most are still written in the form of a letter; stockholders’ reports may sometimes lack salutations and other opening materials but are invariably signed by a chairperson and accompanied by signed reports from accountants, the signatory thereby guaranteeing the authenticity of these materials; and while curricula vitae are now highly formalized, they are usually accompanied by a signed letter of intent.⁷⁷

DRAWING TO A CLOSE NOW, WITH THE EPISTOLARIUM

The idea of the epistolarium can be thought about in (at least) three related ways, with rather different epistemological complexities and consequentialities: as an epistolary record that remains for *post hoc* scrutiny; as ‘a collection’ of the entirety of the surviving correspondences that a particular letter writer was involved in; and as the ‘ur-letters’ produced in transcribing, editing and publishing actual letters (or rather versions of them). In discussing these, almost everything commented on here has reverberations for epistolary ethics, which are by no means confined to the exchanges between letter writers and their addressees but infuse all aspects of the epistolarium.⁷⁸

First, on one level an epistolarium is simply the full number of someone’s letters that have become part of the public archival record,

someone's surviving letters made available for *post hoc* scrutiny. But even confining thinking to this level, a question with major analytical reverberations almost immediately arises: by what means and with what consequences for the nature of the epistolarium have these (usually) private documents entered the public domain? For instance, the letters Schreiner wrote to Frederick Pethick-Lawrence entered the public domain for a Cape Town display during centenary celebrations of her birth in 1955, but only in the form of typescripts, with the originals destroyed either at the time or later. In addition, it is clear from the content of these that some letters in the sequence had not been made available for typing, presumably selected out by Pethick-Lawrence himself. These are likely to include letters deemed too trivial or mundane to be interesting, as well as those deemed too contentious regarding events and persons, concerning either Fred or probably Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence.⁷⁹ These two evaluations often underpin selections, and also destructions, of letters held in private and 'familiar' hands: there may be little awareness that the ordinary can be important and interesting, while reputations may be over-guarded on affective grounds.

Where archiving is involved, the strategies that have been followed significantly impact on the shape and also the order of the epistolarium.⁸⁰ These matters circumscribe even if they do not entirely govern how the present-day reader reads and comprehends — archiving processes and those of sedimentation within archive collections are often hidden but always consequential.⁸¹ This includes what can be known about the relationship between the epistolarium that now exists and the total epistolary output of a particular letter writer. In the case of Olive Schreiner, as suggested earlier, it is possible to make 'guesstimates' about this. However, where entire correspondences have been destroyed, nothing can be known about, not just their informational content, but equally or more importantly the characteristic features of these, thereby inhibiting comprehension of the epistolarium in another sense, that of the totality of the letters someone wrote and the correspondences they engaged in. And where little or nothing can be known about such 'vanished' correspondences, then there are important implications for evaluating any claims made about 'the letters' and, even more so, concerning their relationship to 'the life'.

Thinking at a more conceptual level about what kind of a record is formed by an epistolarium, there are important epistemological aspects of the *post hoc* public availability of what was originally *ad hoc* and private.⁸² Passing time brings not only temporal disjunctures between then and its relevancies and those of now, but also

disjunctures of knowledge and understanding: there are certainly significant differences between what an outsider *now* looks for in and understands by the letters in an epistolarium, compared with what their recipients *then* did, although the precise dimensions of such differences are not fully recoverable. A useful example here concerns William Wordsworth's letters, described even by fans of his poetry as sometimes prosy and boring. A perhaps apocryphal story is that Wordsworth wrote them deliberately so to prevent trophy hunters from selling them, but equally plausibly this was his letter style and people who knew him well read beneath their surface.⁸³ Another example is that after 1889 Olive Schreiner habitually wrote only letters that engaged with the external world. This is not to say that 'private' dimensions are entirely absent, but that these are present in particular ways, keeping emotional expressions in check and never discussing other people's character or conduct. As a consequence, there are considerable limits to how far it is possible now to understand the epiphanous moments when personal matters *are* invoked, both for Schreiner in writing and the recipients in reading these letters.

There are additional epistemological reverberations concerning the epistolarium as 'a collection'. Thus, for instance, should Janet Flanner's *New Yorker* letters and Schreiner's open letters to newspapers be considered part of the epistolarium? If so, then in Schreiner's case why not her novels and allegories, because these too have autobiographical dimensions? Where is the boundary of the epistolarium and what kind of definitional apparatus is used in drawing it? An original correspondence may have had one, two or more contributors in the original exchanges. Where only one side survives or has been focused on, there are implications for understanding the whole, leaving aside whether the other letters in the correspondence still exist or the likely impact of these for comprehending the other (set/s of) letters. Thus, reading the letters Vita Sackville-West wrote to Virginia Woolf,⁸⁴ Woolf comes into view as more sexual and seductive; they also suggest how consequential the political differences revealed around the publication of *Three guineas* were for the relationship. There are also important considerations here concerning time. The shape, content and meaning of letter collections assume different proportions when located temporally and in connection with everything else in the writer's life. Thus in relation to Schreiner, putting her letters to Mary Sauer in the context of her developing ideas about politics, labour and 'race', but also her to-ing and fro-ing of feelings about whether to marry or not, gives a very different feeling to them. Similarly, reading Virginia Woolf's letters with those of Leonard

Woolf across the same periods of time suggests a very grounded and politically enmeshed pattern to Woolf's life outside, or alongside, her writing.⁸⁵

Letters, I suggested earlier, are characterized by temporal and spatial interruptions, are always 'unfinished' in the sense of containing gaps, ellipses and mistakes, and also presume a response and thus an 'after'. Collections of letters, however, are often incomplete in the more ordinary sense of there being things missing or destroyed, constituting larger or smaller gaps in those originally written. In addition, 'life' goes on beyond the limits of letters, in the social and relational context from which they emanate and with which they are concerned, and significant amounts (in both quantitative and evaluative senses) of this are not represented (in any sense of the word) in a collection of letters, let alone individual letters within it. However, what remains is still 'a collection' and provides the record of an individual (where only one 'side' of a correspondence survives) or a shared epistolary life; and it also constitutes 'a narrative', in two senses. One, it charts the overall trajectory of the epistolary events – it has a chronological or sequential form (the basic definition of what a narrative is); and two, what remains provides the only epistolary narrative that, because of time's passing and vagaries, is now possible. For Olive Schreiner, although there is little sense that her letters had any deliberately crafted purpose other than 'keeping in touch' and maintaining relationships, nonetheless an overall narrative structure is still discernible. For all their diversity (of correspondents and communicative purposes, and changes over time in their content and tone), they have three large internal consistencies: (i) in the concerns articulated, including the importance of maintaining the relationship, Schreiner's (and usually also the addressee's) involvement with the external world and its events, political and social injustices and how best to respond to these, and the everyday; (ii) the means by which she does this, including taking at least equal responsibility for the epistolary exchanges and reciprocity in these, and being responsive to each correspondent; and (iii) an emergent ethics about what it is appropriate and seemly for her letters to contain.⁸⁶

A third set of epistemological concerns arise concerning the 'ur-letters' produced in transcribing, editing and publishing letters. Thus, for example, editorial work on Woolf's published letters is largely transparent and extensively indicated in the text, together with copious notes on persons and places.⁸⁷ But the results are in effect translations from manuscript to a published printed form and are actually alternative (or even competing) versions from the originals,

produced by editorial activity that cannot be completely fully indicated.⁸⁸ A considerable amount of editorial activity goes into transcribing and presenting a set of letters for publication even when – indeed, especially when – the intention is to be as faithful to the originals as possible. However, such things as the kind of envelope and how it is addressed, the writing paper used, how the letter looks on the page, handwriting and its indications of circumstance of writing or mood, cannot be transcribed. And while mistakes, excisions and insertions can certainly be indicated in transcribing practices, publishers often see these as unnecessarily cluttering a text and preventing a wider readership, unless the letters involved are by someone recognized as ‘significant’ and therefore likely to sell regardless. Also many editors, unlike the editors of Woolf’s letters, carry out the ‘silent corrections’ indicated earlier, producing a more standardized and uniform epistolary version than exists in the originals.

The epistemological consequences of the ur-letters produced by editorial work are compounded when the results are considered together, that is, within a published collection. As noted earlier, only rarely can all surviving letters be published, and therefore decisions have to be made about what is selected and deselected.⁸⁹ And while in general shortening individual letters to remove what is ‘boring’ or ‘irrelevant’ is now considered bad practice, some editors still do so to give a particular interpretation through their selections.⁹⁰ The more usual editorial strategy, as with the shorter Elizabeth Gaskell letters subtitled ‘a portrait in letters’ and described as ‘a biography largely in her own words’, is one of selecting whole letters, in this instance suggesting an interesting relationship between the selection and the epistolarium in providing insights into Gaskell’s life.⁹¹

The result of the various activities involved in publishing a collection of letters is to produce a kind of palimpsest: the original letters are there, but in shadowy half-erased form and having an ambiguous relationship with their transcribed and printed versions. These are not quite the same as the manuscripts but not entirely different either.⁹² There seems no way out of this unless the entire epistolarium is published in camera form. However, in addition to constraining every reader to be their own researcher (and editor), this would still not dissolve time and the fact that the social world and the ‘actual course of things’, of which the epistolary exchange is but one representational version, has gone and there is no way it can be resurrected ‘as it was’ for present-day consumption. My own preference is to make editorial activity as transparent as possible, for reasons connected with the arguments sketched out above, and because this makes apparent to

readers that the project is one of editorial translation and interpretation rather than resurrection.

YOURS SINCERELY, ABOUT TWO MATTERS, WITH A SIGNATURE

Collections of letters have had a bad press, to an extent because of the later nineteenth-century tradition of publishing the 'life and letters of a great man', perhaps prototypically represented by Charles Kingsley.⁹³ These beg hefty questions about what was the then-presumption of a straightforwardly referential relationship between letters and lives. Such questions have been asked insistently over the last decade or so, perhaps to the point where it is now necessary to emphasize that, however troublesome and ambiguous it is, there is indeed a connection between lives actually lived and the letters written thereof. Letters are written by a living person located in a material and social context, and their correspondence involves other people similarly located.⁹⁴ And sometimes loosely but often very directly, letters and correspondences describe or invoke aspects of this context and the place of these people within it. It is important to emphasize this, along with giving due appreciation to their textual and rhetorical features, for ultimately letters matter because they are connected with real lives. The letters of the famous and not so famous are published and analytically scrutinized because they are 'letters from the life'; and it is this life and its accomplishments, implied in the letter writer's signature, which gives importance and interest to them.⁹⁵

This is by no means to lose sight of the textual and rhetorical dimensions of letters and to re-submerge these within an approach that pillages letters for 'facts about the life' and perceives importance only insofar as they serve this purpose. While in the past this has been the main basis for a social science interest in letters, social scientists interested in 'the documents of life' need now to rethink the value of the epistolary form. Letters are not only a neglected source but also a deeply fascinating kind of writing, still one of the most prevalent of life writings, and among its other fascinations the epistolary form combines the textual and the referential and frequently acts as a barometer of social changes impacting on the interpersonal dynamics of epistolary and other relationships.⁹⁶

As an editor and analyst of letters, the importance of the epistolary form for me lies in the fact that letters are a form in flight. They do not contain evidence of 'the real person', but are rather traces of this person in a particular representational epistolary guise and as expressed at successive points in time and to a variety of people; and all these features of letters are conceptually and analytically

fascinating. As someone with a strong interest in 'the life', letters can be refracted back and forth across other representational versions of 'a life', in photographs, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs and biographies (including those of other people and not just the particular letter writer), thereby piecing together a kaleidoscopic image of them.⁹⁷ And as a reader of letters, their interest and enjoyment for me lies especially in the witness that letters give to the emergent 'voice' of the letter writer, their characteristic turns of phrase and concerns, their rhetorical style in relation to different correspondents, and how all these things develop and change over time.

P.S.

I have referred extensively to my work in progress on the Olive Schreiner letters. However, my analytic and readerly interest in the epistolary form is by no means confined to this and there are three related projects, also ongoing, of relevance to the present discussion. One involves reading and thinking about published collections and selections and their relationship to the whole. The second concerns correspondences between two (or more) people, part of which has been drawn on herein. The third concerns developments in computer and electronic communications media, particularly email and text messaging, and their impact on the epistolary form conceived broadly. About these parallel projects, I note with some concern that my work on Schreiner's letters spawns side projects that take over for lengthy periods of time. Indeed, this present discussion stems from such a side project, concerning how to conceptualize the epistolary form.

NOTES

1 And, dear anonymous referees, my thanks to you for helpful comments.

2 These are the naturally occurring forms of life writing, or rather life representing because they include more than just written texts. Writing on epistolary matters that has particularly influenced discussion here includes: Altman, 1982; Andrews, 1990; Barton and Hall, 1999; Decker, 1998; Derrida, 1986; Earle, 1999; Gilroy and Verhoeven, 2000; Goldsmith, 1989; Goodman, 1994; Jacobus, 1986; Jolly, 2001; Kauffman, 1992; MacArthur, 1990; Montefiore and Hallett, 2002; Porter, 1986; Redford, 1986; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927; Warner, 1990.

3 Plummer, 2001: ix. As this indicates, I am discussing epistolary matters from a – hopefully wide-ranging – social science base.

4 Plummer, 2001: 74. Comments on letters in Roberts's (2002: 62–63) introductory text are similarly perfunctory; indeed discussion of all naturally occurring life writings gets only half a dozen pages. Interestingly, while

Biography contains articles and reviews concerning most forms of life writings, a ten year (1994 to end 2003, volumes 17 to 26) scan reveals little in the way of work on or extensively using letters. Similarly, overviewing *Auto/Biography* from its first issue as a BSA Study Group newsletter in October 1992 to now reveals a similar absence. My own interests lie in diaries and letters, and the auto/biographical form itself.

5 Plummer, 2001: 54–55.

6 See, for example, Jacobus, 1986.

7 My own work is located at the borders of sociology, literature, philosophy and history; among other things, Stanley (1992) emphasizes that ideas associated with poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstructionism long predate these colonizing developments.

8 This presumes letters are always sent; however, as Roper (2001) indicates, this is not so.

9 As McDermott (2000) interestingly shows, following computer analysis of three groups of Emily Dickenson letters.

10 Thus it seems Henry Adams was awkward ‘in life’, but easy in epistolary incarnation; see Decker (1998, Chapter 5) for an interesting discussion.

11 See Jolly’s (2001) entries on ‘Letters: General Survey’, ‘War Letters’ and ‘Women’s Letters’, which provide succinct summaries of defining aspects. A caution comes from Goodman (1988), that restricting the form can prevent seeing experiments for what they are.

12 I made the same point in Stanley (1992) and indeed coined the term to challenge genre distinctions. Ironically, while the term is now widely cited by others, this is as a shorthand for ‘biography and autobiography’ rather than to dispute such distinctions.

13 On Schreiner and her writings, see, Stanley 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2002d. My grateful thanks to the ESRC for a Research Fellowship (R000271029) to work on Schreiner’s letters, and the British Academy for travel fund support. Schreiner’s first extant letter dates from the 1860s. In 1889, she returned to South Africa from Europe, an epiphany for her in a number of respects, importantly including how she used the epistolary form. These communities centred on her family, her closest friends from feminist and socialist circles in Britain, and feminists and political fellow travellers in South Africa.

14 There are three existing collections. Cronwright-Schreiner (1924b) bowdlerizes by editorial omission from particular letters, by selecting out whole important letters, indeed whole correspondences, and also sometimes by creating ‘a letter’ by stitching together passages from a number of originals then destroyed (some correspondents kept copies). Rive (1987) focuses on Schreiner’s letter writing up to 1899; this also has problems concerning the balance of selections, omission of entire correspondences, and crucial editorial elisions of, for instance, Schreiner’s feminist and socialist involvements. Draznin’s (1992) edition of the correspondence between Schreiner and Havelock Ellis is exemplary.

15 The main collections are in several archives in South Africa, with two in the UK and one in the USA (Stanley, 2002a, has details). Small numbers of her letters are in many other archives as well.

16 As Goldsmith (1989) suggests, letters always have a fragmentary character. Huff (2000) makes a similar point about many diaries, although assuming too readily that this referentially indicates the actual identity of the writer.

17 As a result, such collections are literally 'against her (legal) will'. While all Schreiner scholars, myself included, have cursed Cronwright-Schreiner's 1922 mass burning of her correspondences, clearly Schreiner herself would have approved this, and disapproved the edited collections including his.

18 From some of Schreiner's letters at the time, and also in Cronwright-Schreiner's diary entries while writing his biography of Schreiner and compiling *The letters* (Cronwright-Schreiner, 1924a; 1924b).

19 With a similar strategy utilized in editing the Kate Field letters, selecting in about half those extant and providing a detailed chronological list and location for the rest; see Field (1996).

20 Although only a minority have 'selection' in their titles, most are precisely this.

21 Contemplating this for Lewis Carroll (1979; 1982) indicates the radical break that exists between the epistolarium in the full sense (in his case, well over 98,000 letters are indicated by his notated letter-books), the remaining letters (several thousand), and what has been published in the popularly available selected letters (about 350). While the scale of his epistolary project is out of the ordinary, the epistemological issues arising from these disjunctures are general ones.

22 Stanley, 2002b.

23 Brogan's editorial introduction to Arthur Ransome's (1998) letters indicates that the most important criteria for his selection was that letters 'earn their keep' by containing particularly interesting content.

24 Thus Brogan's collection of Ransome (1998) letters involves the editorial use of short extracts from those seen as otherwise uninteresting but on grounds the reader is not fully informed about.

25 While this is mainly Cronwright-Schreiner (1924b), it is not unknown in Rive's 1987 edition.

26 Not because they are not crucial, but because it has been fairly easy to make decisions about them.

27 Having worked on other letters, this seems to me widespread; Huff (2000) also notes it as a common feature of manuscript diaries, an observation I support from my past research.

28 Neither feature is confined to Schreiner's letters. Thus, for instance, Arthur Ransome's (1998) drawings pepper the pages of letters like punctuation and their place on the page and in the letter is significant; however, apart from some reproduced examples, these are largely absent from the edited letters.

29 The Mark Twain Letters project has opted for a 'plain text' editorial style, registering all the fine detail in transcriptions, including envelopes, by using a complex typographical code referencing such detail; see Clemens, 1988.

30 The archival response is in general unlikely to support this, or at least not without a high cost being attached.

31 The transfer from speech to writing or other representational media is consequential, for it builds in the expectation that a letter will be reread, as well as read, and that its form and detail will come under scrutiny in a way that ordinary talk does not. Thus the 'anxiety' about arrival, content, length and so on

that Hallett (2002) proposes is fundamental to the form (although I see this as a function of the particular letters researched by her).

32 But contemplate here Chesler's (1997) open letters to 'a young feminist' or the 'Letters from Paris' by Janet Flanner (a cross between an open letter and an essay) published in the *New Yorker* magazine (see Pearl, 2002). Neither presupposes a reply; but this can be very different regarding letters to the editor of a newspaper, where often actual responses *are* published.

33 Thus the possibility of forgery, as in the so-called 'Casket Letters' that provided the justification for executing Mary Queen of Scots. But (semi-)fictional letters (e.g., Sagan, 1987) do not break this guarantee any more than epistolary novels do, because the reader is always in on the 'secret':

34 Thus in *c.* AD 100 Roman Britain, letters to and from Vindolanda inhabitants were not dated at all (Birley, 1999); in Victorian London with its several posts a day, a day and time or just a time were fairly common; whereas in the UK now a day, date and year is more usual.

35 Regarding Chesler (1997), these open letters are in a way 'semi-private' although appearing in the public realm of a book, because 'belonging' to the political community of US feminists. The 'real' public letter herein appears in the Acknowledgements, addressed by Chesler to various named others; while the 'letters' are actually short themed essays couched in an epistolary form. On letters in the feminist community, see Jolly, 1995; 2002.

36 Schreiner too published a number of influential open letters; see Stanley, 2002a.

37 Importantly discussed by Derrida, 1986.

38 A frequent comment made about Madame de Sévigné's letters to her married daughter Madame de Grignan, including by Goldsmith, 1984.

39 An epistolary exchange participated in as well as researched by Janet Maybin (1999; 2002). This is perhaps an extreme example, but see also Hanff, 1970.

40 This is not to deny the public knowledge that both 'ends' of these pen-friendships draw on, around imprisonment, class and 'race' issues concerning criminal justice, also ethical convictions concerning the death penalty in the USA; it is rather that these and other emergent features necessarily take place within the correspondence alone.

41 See Baudrillard, 1981; Stanley, 2000.

42 This is sometimes literally so. Thus Maybin's (1999; 2003) death row pen-friends. In more ordinary terms, thus with the Schreiner sisters Katie and Alice never seeing their birth family again after marriage and removal to a different area of South Africa.

43 Stimpson uses the 'sociograph' to characterize the Woolf correspondences, inscribing 'social worlds that she needed and wanted . . . an autobiography of the self with others, a citizen/denizen of relationships' (Stimpson, 1984: 168); clearly, however, the term indicates a dimension of all correspondences.

44 Thus the *c.* AD 100 Vindolanda letters were mainly written by scribes but signed by the addressor, including the earliest letter featuring a woman's writing (Birley, 1999: 34–36).

45 Stimpson (1984) proposes that 'good' letters and correspondences need to be self-reflexive; this seems overly narrow restrictive, and class/time specific.

46 Hanff, 1970.

47 Madame de Sévigné, 1955; Goldsmith, 1984; St John, 1931; Casson, 1984.

48 Nicholson, 1992.

49 Thus the wartime letters between my parents, with my non-writing mother's letters mainly consisting of an envelope and a sheet of notepaper inside with just her name and a (X) kiss on it.

50 Emerson and Carlyle, 1964.

51 See Thompson, 1987. An interesting example of 'ordinary letters' concerns the recently published letters and diaries of the contralto Kathleen Ferrier (2003); these may not change how her singing is viewed, but they certainly suggest something about the relationship between an extraordinary voice and the otherwise 'ordinary' life of its possessor.

52 Stimpson (1984) sees this as crucial.

53 I owe the phrase to Monica Pearl at the 'Lives and Letters' Conference at the University of Kent in autumn 2001.

54 Broughton, 2000.

55 This can be illusionary, as witnessed by the seismic tremors in the friendship group when Woolf (1937) published *Three guineas*.

56 Kell, 1999.

57 Hall, 1999.

58 The Vindolanda letters provide excellent examples, being immersed in the practical aspects of communicative exchanges (Birley, 1999).

59 Schreiner destroyed most of the letters her many correspondents had written to her; however, before leaving South Africa for Europe in 1913, she returned the letters her sister-in-law Fan had sent her when engaged to Schreiner's favourite brother Will, because they signified Fan's 'tender self forgetting spirit'.

60 Thus the frequent resistance of people to interview transcripts: what works and is acceptable as talk takes on very different qualities when translated to paper.

61 Dublin, 1993.

62 Even fictional collections generally have this characteristic, as with the fictional letters to Sarah Bernhardt in the Père Lachaise cemetery (Sagan, 1987). In this respect, an exception is Emily Dickinson's last letter, written as she was dying, to her Norcross cousins: 'Little Cousins, Called Back. Emily' (quoted in Decker 1998: 173–74). As this letter indicates, there are also 'last letters' – in the event of a death, the end of an affair, etcetera.

63 Few letters from Schreiner's correspondents have survived, so it is not possible to say whether this also occurred at the other 'end' of these exchanges, although the remaining letters by her mother suggest it did.

64 Emerson and Carlyle, 1964.

65 Molteno, Schreiner's closest friend over many years, then radically changed the way she lived and the circles she moved within. This was imposed on Schreiner; she found it difficult to grasp the extent of the emotional withdrawal involved, in her very last letters still hoping that Molteno might return to South Africa and live somewhere near her.

66 Or exceptionally, as with Nicholson and Sackville-West, under the same roof.

67 Adams, 1947.

68 Dublin, 1993. Some of these correspondences were deliberately initiated and sustained between family members who had not been previously close before; these are 'familiar letters', but where emotional closeness was of little concern to the correspondents.

69 This is not a matter of emotional closeness, for Schreiner's letters to her sister Ettie are immensely loving and affectionate, while she and Ettie did not agree about many political matters; however, they did about 'race' matters and for Schreiner this became an indication of people's other political views.

70 Henwood *et al.*, 2001 and Kennedy, 2003.

71 Decker, 1998: 229–41; Yates, 1999; and contributors to Zuern, 2003.

72 And vice versa, as with epistolary novels, fictional letters.

73 Is this perhaps an artefact of Western thinking and its 'translation' of what is actually unlike into 'the same, more or less'? The Epistles, with their seventeenth-century translation into English at a point when the letter form was already fairly stable, should perhaps be seen in such terms.

74 While model letter books and published exemplars existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were used by many, it is also clear that, no matter how unaccustomed to writing people were, their letters both traded on and also departed from the tacit rules; see Austin's (1999) fascinating discussion of letter writing in a Cornish community in the 1790s.

75 Bazerman, 1999.

76 See Goodman (1994) and Bayly (1996) respectively for some interesting and contentious takes on this.

77 Resignations almost invariably take the form of a signed letter. As Decker (1998) suggests, while electronic records are replacing many of the things letters were formerly used for, there are legal or other formal circumstances in which only a paper record with an addressee and a signatory will do.

78 For an interesting discussion of emergent epistolary ethics in the context of emigration, see Gerber, 2000.

79 As Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence was dead when the typescripts were made, this was not by her. Stanley (2002d) concerns how disagreements were handled in some of these letters.

80 In some Schreiner archives, letters have been separated from their envelopes so that dating is extremely difficult or impossible; in some collections, groups of her correspondences have been amalgamated by date order; while in others, the order the letters were in (at donation or sale) is not a temporal one but presumably had significance for the original correspondent.

81 See Hill (1993), and also Grigg (1991) and Hinding (1993) on how archiving impacts on significant aspects of how collections are understood by users.

82 When Janet Flanner's private letters to her lover were opened because of censorship regulations, she found this highly intrusive, although used to her *New Yorker* letters being read by thousands of people; see Pearl, 2002.

83 Wordsworth, 1984.

84 Sackville-West, 1984.

85 L. Woolf, 1989; and V. Woolf, 1976; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980.

86 Stanley (2000a) argues that an ethics of writing characterizes her intellectual project more widely.

87 Woolf, 1976; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980.

88 For instance, the Vindolanda letters of c. AD 100 are on wooden tablets covered in wax and sometimes feature a number of different handwritings.

89 However, computer technology and Web developments may change this, particularly where there are no copyright considerations.

90 Brogan on Ransome (1998) provides an alternative, by writing a narrative around the letters published in their entirety, stitching these together with passages picked from the letters not published in full. The result gives an overall impression of the writer's epistolary concerns and activities that is not 'true' to the originals, although closely mirroring editorial concerns.

91 Chapple and Pollard, 1966; Chapple, 1980. This issue arises concerning every published edition of letters; among other matters, it raises how to reference such collections, under the name of the letter writer or that of the editor/s. Herein, published letters are referenced under the name of the letter writer, and correspondences under the editor/s.

92 Usually. However, sometimes editorial intervention goes so far as to produce 'a letter' which is almost unrecognizable when compared with the original, of which various Schreiner letters as edited by Cronwright-Schreiner are cases in point.

93 Kingsley, 1883.

94 With regard to the writer's end of this, and also concerning their presumption of a reading audience, fictional letters have a similar materiality.

95 As witnessed by circumstances when letters are found to be forgeries, as with Mary Queen of Scots and the 'Casket Letters'.

96 The basis of the first sustained sociological use of letters, by Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927.

97 Stanley, 1987; 1992.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

LIZ STANLEY is Research Chair of Sociology at the University of Newcastle. She is currently in the process of completing a new edition of Olive Schreiner’s letters, as well as having a wider interest in theorizing auto/biography. Relevant publications include articles on the Schreiner letters and also *Mourning becomes . . . Post/memory; Commemoration and the concentration camps of the South African War* (2005, in press; Manchester University Press and Rutgers University Press).