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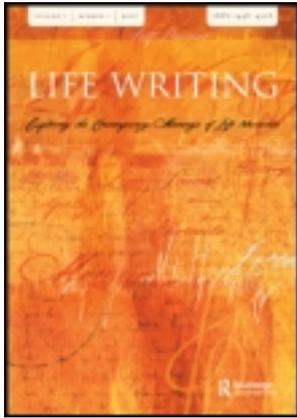


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The Epistolary Gift, the Editorial Third-Party, Counter-Epistolaria: Rethinking the Epistolarium

Liz Stanley

Rather than absence and loss as the basis of epistolarity, such exchanges mainly come about because of the ongoing social and relational bonds of relationship and connection between the writer/signatory and the addressee: in this context letters can be helpfully thought about around 'the system of the epistolary gift'. This argument is developed around examples, particularly the letters of South African feminist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855–1920). The editorial 'third-party' role in transcribing and transmuting manuscript or typescript letters into a (digital or paper) published form in 'an edition' of the letters of X or Y, is related to the epistolary gift in interesting and ontologically complex ways. These are explored generally as well as concerning the Schreiner letters. Counter-epistolaria, as forms of epistolarity that trouble one or more aspects of definitional characteristics of letters, are explored in relation to their gift dimensions. Examples of three such forms, open letters, draft letters and last letters, are explored, and their 'counter' dimensions used to interrogate some 'ordinary letters' by Schreiner, thereby pointing out that these, too, routinely trouble and 'counter', but do not overturn definitional aspects of the letter. Taking recognition of the epistolary gift, the editorial third-party, counter-epistolaria and 'ordinary letters' adds significantly to theorisation of the epistolarium in ways explored in the conclusion.

Keywords letters, epistolarium, gift, editorship, counter-epistolaria

Dear Reader

The letters and correspondences which people write (or type, or ...) are interesting, fascinating, because they provide privileged glimpses into the unfolding fabric of other people's lives; they are small epistolary insights into the mundane and ordinary, and sometimes also the dramatic and tragic aspects of quotidian living. In defining what 'a letter' and 'epistolarity' consist of, the

characteristics often invoked include that these are communications (whether in writing, text on a mobile phone screen, or other formats) which are authored, authorised and sent by a signatory to an addressee; they are part of a series of over-time exchanges; they occur when one party is no longer there face to face, with the letter providing metonymic traces of the absent person, the signatory, sent to the addressee; and in correspondence this becomes a responsive and mutual set of epistolary exchanges, with each addressee, when replying, becoming the author and signatory, so over-time reciprocal turn-taking is involved.¹

However, rather than letters necessarily being small variations on these definitional characteristics (as influentially proposed, for instance, by Altman), a more fundamental dimension of letter writing concerns their relational qualities. Relatedly, rather than separation and loss being the mainspring of the epistolary dynamis (Derrida, *The Post Card, The Gift of Death*, 'By Force of Mourning'), what will be argued here is that such exchanges come about because of the relationship and connection between the writer/signatory and the addressee, and that epistolarity can be helpfully thought about around 'the system of the gift'. This argument will be developed around examples, particularly the letters of South African feminist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855–1920).

Olive Schreiner is one of the key feminist theorists (Berkman; Burdett; McClintock; Stanley, *Imperialism*). My long-term engagement with her published and unpublished writings includes her letters, of which there are more than 4000 extant, located on three continents, in 20 or so archives and in about 40 major collections.² When first working on these, I intended to publish a new selection of Schreiner's letters because of problems with earlier editions, and to convey in this that Schreiner is social theorising in her letters, as well as her political essays and theoretical treatises (and her novels, indeed). More recently, this has become a project to publish the complete Schreiner letters, as well as to analyse the corpus of these letters in regard to both their substantive content and Schreiner's letter writing practices.

Engaging with this large body of Schreiner letters has fuelled my theorising 'the epistolarium' as a means of framing and analysing epistolarity generally, and whole corpuses of letters and correspondences in particular (Jolly & Stanley; Stanley, 'Epistolarium', 'Epistolary economy'). The initial influence on this was Derrida's ideas about the trace of 'the name' in explaining a key epistolary feature, the economy or dynamism or (equal or unequal) reciprocity that occurs in correspondences. For Derrida, this dynamism occurs because of separation and loss: epistolarity reproduces and sends something of the writing self (which he discusses in connection with the 'metaphysics of presence') to the absent other. Seriality and turn-taking arise from this, because once one letter has been written, its traces spread out through the reply, the response to this, a further reply and so on. However, following in-depth work on Schreiner's letters, various aspects of which are discussed below, I came to a different conclusion. While seriality and sequence are certainly important, they do not 'just happen' because of absence, and what gives rise to them needs exploring and conceptualising. The assumption that absence, loss and the trace can explain the basis of

epistolarity leaves some important questions unaddressed. Why does epistolarity occur on the scale and in the variety it does? If absence is the basis, how can all the other—and more plentiful—kinds of letter exchanges ('Dear Inland Revenue, I protest my tax assessment,' or 'No milk today, thank you') that exist be explained? In considering the questions, the gift basis of epistolary exchanges comes into view.

Concerning the Epistolary Gift

The epistolarium is a heuristic for thinking about letters and other epistolary activity. It is concerned with the epistolary output of a particular person (Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, Mohandas Gandhi, Virginia Woolf) or organisational entity (the German High Command in World War One), and considers the dialogical, perspectival, emergent and sequential aspects of this. It also incorporates (at least) four dimensions of their letters: (i) what now remains, someone's extant letters and other epistolary material; (ii) all their epistolary activity, all the letters they ever wrote including in some way those no longer extant; (iii) all their (extant or total) letter writing, and also all that of their correspondents in writing back to them (their correspondences in full); and their 'ur-letters', that is, the simulacra that are produced by editorially transcribing and publishing 'the letters of John Keats' or 'the correspondence of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West'. All four can be seen as 'the letters of ...' Heloise and Abelard, David Hume, Emily Dickinson and so on, but, ontologically speaking, they differ in important ways by encompassing different kinds of epistolary 'things'. There are obviously connections and overlaps between the four, but, for instance, what survives, and the total number of letters written by someone, are rarely coterminous and often wildly out of synch. The surviving 1305 published letters, compared with the 98,721 which Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson's letter-book briefly notes he wrote, brings this home dramatically (Cohen, *Letters, Selected Letters*).

My initial theorisation of the epistolarium could explain how and why someone's letter writing *continues*, and why it *stops*, with regard to particular correspondences and also overall (and this latter is not always because a letter writer dies). But regarding how and why it *starts*, it relied on Derridarean ideas about separation, that one party is no longer there, with epistolarity providing metonymic traces of the absent person and their relationship with the addressee. However, through my engagement with the Schreiner letters, it became clear that this was insufficient and, indeed, was in some respects just plain wrong—something more fundamental is going on than this.

Firstly, Schreiner's letters are part of a large, complex and interrelated system of writing and receiving, with the large majority of her correspondents engaged in multiple letter writing and long-term correspondences themselves. However, for many of these correspondents, their letters are the continuation of presence by other (epistolary) means, with the interrupted presence of these people in a sense 'joined' by letters that maintain the flow of contact, exchange, chatter and so

forth that would have taken place (in somewhat different ways) when present with each other face to face. For example, Schreiner sometimes wrote separately to Alice Greene, as well as to Greene's partner and Schreiner's best friend Betty Molteno. A gregarious former teacher at the Port Elizabeth School for Girls under Molteno's headship and an active Quaker, Greene pursued correspondences encompassing dozens of family members and friends (Barham). Schreiner's correspondence with Greene for nearly 30 years duration is very much of the interrupted presence kind, but it took on a different tone and content when Greene removed to England in 1907, and then reverted again when Schreiner removed there, too, in 1913. Many of the Schreiner network correspondences were not conducted in circumstances of separation other than humdrum ones, like a day away from home, fixing up a meeting for the next day, passing on information in advance of meeting, and so on. For people living in urban centres like Cape Town, Johannesburg or London during the years of Schreiner's maturity, the rapidity of postal collections and deliveries facilitated a different kind of epistolary exchange than had been possible with the lengthy temporal separations of writing and receiving/replying to a letter that had existed during her young womanhood in up-country areas of South Africa in the 1860s and 1870s (Rosenthal & Blum).

Secondly, these multiple, cross-hatching epistolary exchanges, occurring sometimes in circumstances of interrupted presence, sometimes during lengthier separations, inscribe an array of 'third-party' matters. Comments about and references to third-parties routinely feature in Schreiner's letters as in those of many others, including correspondence concerning friends shared in common with the addressee, the activities of public figures and so on. For example, writing to Karl Pearson in the mid-1880s, Schreiner's letters contain many references to friends and acquaintances in the Men and Women's Club both were involved in, to authors (Hammerling, Hardy) and public figures (W.T. Stead, Charles Dilke) they were acquainted with, and to major intellectual figures (Goethe, Schopenhauer). Across the Schreiner epistolarium more generally, third parties are routinely referred to in these correspondences, which are highly intertextual.

Thirdly, letters or parts of them were routinely circulated within the Schreiner letter-writing networks, involving Schreiner or her correspondents sending on all or part of letters received to other people, not the addressee and not explicitly intended as readers by the original letter writer. For instance, Alice Greene was regularly sent letters by family members that had been addressed to her sister and mother and passed around, while her letters were forwarded on to other family members by the people they were addressed to also. For example, on 11 January 1905 (UCT) Olive Schreiner sent a letter to Betty Molteno, to which she attached with a pin some torn-off sections of three letters she had received that day, to help keep Molteno in touch with the mutual friends concerned. But of course, friendship networks, including in their epistolary form are rarely entirely overlapping, and while third-party links provide a strong intertextual element of epistolary exchanges, these can also be disturbed or broken at particular points

in the network. For example, Schreiner's much-loved brother Will thoroughly disliked her closest friend Molteno and actively avoided any contact with her.

Fourthly, Schreiner's correspondences included both short-term and long-term letter exchanges. The longer-term ones included Schreiner's mother and her brother Will and sister Ettie, but not her other siblings; friends from her young womanhood on Havelock Ellis and Edwards Carpenter; her closer friendship with Eleanor Marx, ending when Marx killed herself in 1898; the long, intimate correspondence with the closest friends of her maturity, Molteno and Greene; and frequent letters to her husband Cronwright whenever they were apart. The evidence of the extant letters shows that their structural features changed as well as their rhetorical aspects over the lengthy period Schreiner wrote to these people. These changes are not a matter of 'early' and 'late' points in her letter-writing life, but concern instead the relational 'we' and how, at junctures, this was reconfigured textually because of the changing circumstances and the changing relationship between her and these correspondents. Schreiner's 1890s letters to her loved friend Mary Sauer, for instance, are lengthy, informal, packed, excited, frequent and written at 'high volume'. But after Schreiner's earlier 'not a marrying woman'-stance changed, they become shorter, less direct, more concerned with third parties, increasingly more about political life in South Africa, are intermittently written and then stop (or at least stop being kept by Sauer) when important political differences between them on race matters surfaced. In contrast, Schreiner's letters to Molteno change in opposite ways, with the very formal, early exchanges becoming informal, outgoing, revelatory and frequent, around their shared politics.

Fifthly, when Schreiner's correspondences ended, there were appropriate reasons traceable to particular circumstances, rather than this 'just happening' because of, for instance, laziness or lack of interest. For example, Schreiner's 'proper' letters to Miemie Murray, secretary of the Graaff-Reinet women's franchise group in South Africa, ended when Schreiner realised Murray could not grasp the principle which had led Schreiner to resign from the Cape Women's Enfranchisement League—that there should be a non-racial basis women's enfranchisement. Schreiner, however, continued to write and send presents to Murray's children and also short letters on inconsequential 'safe' topics to Murray herself, but letters on the franchise and other 'serious' matters ceased.

These broad characteristics of Schreiner's correspondences add up to a 'system of the letter', an epistolary system of exchanges having these distinctive qualities, including that many of them are not predicated upon absence but instead around interruptions of presence. They are strong features of Schreiner's letter writing, and they characterise many other correspondences too. Thinking about them raises interesting questions about the ontological basis of epistolary exchanges. What is it that letters and correspondence 'are', ontologically speaking, within this system of exchanges? Why should epistolary be seen as having built-in obligations about replying, and implicit rules about the relationship between the ending of a correspondence and the ending of a relationship? Responding to these questions starts with the notable reciprocity and turn-taking

of epistolary exchanges, which at a basic level entail giving and receiving, involving a gift being sent from A to B to signal their relational bond, and then with accrual ('I was interested you wrote that ...'; 'I have been involved in ...'; 'Tell me about ...') it is returned, so that there is indeed a relationship involved, rather than being just from one person to another with no return.

The founding figure in theorising 'the gift' is Marcel Mauss, which for him is located within 'the system of the gift'. This is not an economic system because it involves no market or bargaining, but a different, although still *systemic*, kind of exchange (Godelier; Mauss; Strathern; Weiner). Therein giving and receiving gifts is mutual, with turn-taking occurring in repeated temporally-separated acts of reciprocation. It is the *acts* of giving and receiving that are most important here: the *objects* are not the main point; it is instead that the giver thereby demonstrates certain things about their relationship with the recipient. The recipient is always a giver as well in the 'gift relationship', at different points in time, and also in passing on this or other gifts to third parties. Also, as Strathern points out, neither gifts nor the persons and relationships they stand for are category-neutral in gift exchanges, and gifts are goods produced in an 'actual economy' where production involves labour and relations of domination, including of gender. Who gives, and who receives, matters; and social and other hierarchies and inequalities inevitably structure gift relationships.

In the *epistolary* form of gift exchange, what is circulated are the letters sent and replied to, but, more particularly, it involves the circulation and symbolic gifting of relationships—the reciprocity of correspondences. There is the gift of the letter itself, but more importantly, there is what it metonymically stands for and symbolises about the ongoing social bond between writer-giver and addressee-receiver. This process is circulatory: its in-built extension to third-party relationships produces continuous flows and multifaceted networks, in which the hope or expectation of response comes to take on an obligatory and constraining character. Agreeing to participate, tacitly as well as explicitly, involves binding oneself to observance, so that delays that are seen as inappropriate will require explanation and expiation, while withdrawal without an acceptable reason will possibly bring anger, and precipitate or follow the end of the face-to-face relationship. Consequently, the letter as gift always has what Mauss describes as a 'burden' attached: its obligatory and constraining reciprocity. Both the gift and breaches to the process of giving and receiving and replying signify the state of the social relations involved, with delays or withdrawals giving rise to moral accounting and requiring excuses and legitimation.

Mauss's theorising of the gift relationship separates gift giving from a market and economic or other hierarchies and value, with the problems in this noted above. In specifically epistolary exchanges, production and exchange typically occur very close together, with the value involved being an affective and relational one that does not have market value in any simple sense. However, there are always potential inequalities involved, for the relationship may be a hierarchical one—reciprocity does not necessitate that 'exactly the same' is exchanged, nor that the parties will perceive exactly the same meaning in receiving

and giving. Also, market value can be assigned to the letter writing process (writing involves time and ‘time is money’), and also to the product in the form of ‘actual letters’ (including the letters of an Olive Schreiner, even more those of a Lewis Carroll or Virginia Woolf). These are often worth considerable amounts, and a flourishing market exists for buying and selling them. At the same time, the epistolary gift is not easily reduced to economic factors because of its strongly social and relational character, with most letters outwith such market activities.

These ideas about the gift relationship, then, provide helpful analytical tools for thinking about epistolarity, including its signatories, addressees and recipients, and its obligated and often unequal exchanges and turn-takings. In particular, the basis of the gift in demonstrating relation and connection, supplies that missing substance to the dynamis, the system of over-time repetitions, which Derridian ideas about the trace merely scratch the surface of. Also, contra Derrida on absence and the trace, and pro Mauss and other theorists of the gift exchange and the perpetuation of relationship, thinking about letters in terms of the gift relationship points out that such exchanges occur because they are the material expression of connection and continuing relationship—and this is, of course, the foundation of sociality and the social.

On the Editorial Third-Party

Most readers of letters read these in published edited collections or selections. If letters between a signatory and addressee are a form of gift-giving and relational exchange, how should the relationship between the later readers of published letters and their authors be understood? Should editorship perhaps be understood as a kind of continuation of epistolary gift exchanges, with published editions being an editorial gift to a present-day generation of readers as a different kind of addressee? Or is something else going on? Letters and correspondence, whether handwritten or typed, are transformed by editorial activity—which involves, for instance, transcription, the ‘tidying’ of mistakes, footnoting, and the provision of an editorial interpretive apparatus—to become a published version. What eventuates are ‘ur-versions’ of the originals—like them, but with significant ontological differences. Published versions of letters are simulacra, but *transmuted* into the different medium of (digital or paper) print, and also *translated* in various ways, mainly through their ‘bird-in-flight’ aspects being silently edited to produce a polished ‘correct’ version. Succinctly, reading an ‘actual letter’ and its published incarnation can seem like reading different things—and ontologically they *are* different. Of course, not all editors of published letters intervene and ‘tidy’ everything. However, most do so to some extent, as a perusal of the introductions or prefaces to published editions of letters will readily show.³ Those that do not ‘tidy’, but rather transcribe ‘warts and all’, are rare, even among online editions where publishing messy texts would be easier and largely cost-free.⁴

The practical editorial activities involved point to such ontological complexities. Transcribing, for instance, sounds simple and non-contentious, but it involves an editor rewriting, by transcribing and typing, the extant letters written by, for instance, Vincent van Gogh, John F. Kennedy, or Mohandas Gandhi, and thereby inhabiting the words, sentences and letters in a very close way indeed to produce the published simulacra. Editorially, I have spent many months of my life in exactly this: rewriting, warts and all, thousands of Schreiner's letters. This has also required me to read these letters in order to rewrite them in an accurate word-for-word and mistake-by-mistake way. As I checked the resultant transcriptions, so in my mind I also intoned the words as I re-read them. An editor, then, in effect acts as a proxy writer of the letters, albeit one removed in time and being from their original writer and her/his writing of them. An editor also acts as a proxy reader as well, taking on aspects of the addressee role by reading the letters, in fact doing so twice over: first to transcribe them, and then to check them. The complexities are precisely ontological because, in doing this, I-the-editor becomes both a kind of writer/signatory and a kind of addressee/reader of these letters, although of course this 'editorial I' is not 'really' either their writer or their intended recipient; while, as their proxy writer, I-the-editor 'sends' them to her or himself.⁵ The editor of large numbers of letters is then involved in an emergent and changing 'we' relationship and produces an ontologically complicated persona—the proxy writer/proxy addressee/editor-as-transcriber-reader. How should this be thought about and analytically understood?

I have come to understand the various activities involved in editorship as constituting a kind of third-party role, which, as noted earlier, is a strong feature of epistolary exchanges. I-the-editor is located in another, temporally-removed but still related system of epistolary exchanges to that existing between, in the case of my own editorship, Schreiner and her correspondents, and so have a proxy relationship to these because removed in time place and person. But at the same time, there is still connection and relation built into the editorial third-party role, in the form of an ethical and intellectual obligation to help perpetuate these exchanges across these very different systems of circulating letters, of then and of now. One result in my own case is that I experience the ontological situation sketched out here as an editorial 'dividuality', rather than individuality. Thus, there is 'I-the-editor', but also and at the same time this requires me engaging with and inhabiting the temporally and ontologically complicated 'We' of epistolary relationships, as these are reconfigured by the representation activities central to editorship. And—the point with which I started this section of the paper—there are knock-on effects for the readers of edited letters, and also for reviewers of and commentators on them, because they by and large engage with the product of these transformations and accruals made through editorship and its third-party dimensions, not the ('original') letters themselves.⁶ But what kind of epistolary gift relationship is involved here?

Firstly, editorship may be temporally-removed, but nevertheless it is still part of the epistolary gift relationship because of the reciprocal and obligated

exchanges it involves. Its third-party role begins with a moral or ethical bond, of wanting to continue the gift-giving, of passing it on to readers. The idea of the epistolarium acknowledges that an emergent epistolary ethics characterises epistolary exchanges more generally, and that the original third parties mentioned in letters were part of this, although at one remove. For instance, Schreiner quietly remonstrated with her friend Frederick Pethick-Lawrence's wife Emmeline, when she published a comment in one of Schreiner's letters to him about women's suffrage in Britain in a South African newspaper. This was for two reasons: content might be orally repeated but it was unacceptable to publish; and different strategies to the franchise needed to be adopted because of South African racism, but Pethick-Lawrence's press report had misrepresented this. There are also issues here concerning how such things should be best conveyed to present-day third-party readers—footnoting can be helpful, but it also imposes meanings and interpretations from the editor, while its absence might encourage a reader's misinterpretation of a letter. How far, then, is the provision of editorial information an extension of the gift—and at what point does it become an unwarrantable intrusion on readers actively engaging with letters, rather than the editor's interpretations of them?

Secondly, the editorial role and its rewriting (in the transcribing and typing sense) of letters mimics the activity involved in both writing and replying to a letter, and so reciprocates the gift but by writing and reading the letter again in a different time and place. Writing 'a reply' to a letter involves its original addressee (Dear Mr Gandhi) taking and re-using what was received, and then returning this (Dear Mr Gokali or Miss Molteno, from M.K. Gandhi) in a changed form that involves additions. In this sense, the epistolary gift is continually accruing new layers of relational exchanges with, for instance, Schreiner commenting on what her correspondents have written and adding to this her own concerns. However, re-writing in the editorial sense of transcription does not involve accrual in this immediate way of 'Dear Miss Molteno, you wrote this, I'm adding that ...' The mimetic character of editorial rewriting is not a simple iteration—it does not involve repetition of the thing itself, but rather entails a construction through which the palimpsest of the original letter can be glimpsed, but as through a glass darkly—as with the photographs shown of Lewis Carroll's 'real letters' being different from their tidied, 'corrected' and published incarnations (Cohen *Selected*).

Thirdly, the rewriting involved in this editorial mimesis and its creation of an epistolary palimpsest does perpetuate the system of the epistolary gift. By passing on its own particular addition or accrual, editing draws people, different people in the 'now' of re-reading, into the exchanges, with them becoming a new kind of third party. That is, editing and publishing a collection of letters acts as a gift of the letters from the editor (rather than the original letter writer) to a whole new set of recipients, who are not the original addressees nor the original third parties encompassed within them. 'Then' and 'now' consequently have a complicated relationship here, because 'an edition' is a kind of epistolary time capsule within which different temporalities and spatialities come up against

each other. And against this, extensive editorial intervention in ‘tidying’ mistakes and footnoting to explain everything and everyone acts as a kind of anti-gift. That is, by seeking to remove ‘time has passed, they did things differently there’, this style of editorship can overwrite what is most fascinating about letters, which is that they are of another time and place and provide small, often puzzling, but intriguing hints about this.

Regarding Counter-Epistolaria

Olive Schreiner’s letters are firmly within the system of epistolary gift, or rather, while they appear so, considering them in gift terms raises interesting questions. The starting point for discussion is that the Schreiner epistolarium includes sub-types of letters which are recognisably letters, but which also trouble some of the defining attributes of epistolarity, and so ‘counter’ is used here in a ‘questioning and troubling’ sense as not as ‘opposite to’. That is, I refer to them as ‘counter-epistolaria’ because they depart from, play with, counterfeit, refuse or otherwise flout some of these conventions but not others. The main kinds of counter-epistolaria I am interested in are fictional letters, false letters, third-party letters, open letters, unsent draft letters, lost letters, last letters and destroyed letters, and elsewhere discuss them all (Stanley *To The Letter*), while the focus here is on open letters, draft letters and last letters.

Open letters are a familiar epistolary form. They can be, for example, sent to a named person, such as ‘Dear Mary Daly, Yours Audre Lorde’ (Lorde), to an organisation, like ‘Dear Gas Board, the bill sent to me is wrong’, and to public persona such as ‘Dear Editor’. In the Christian Bible, Paul’s two pastoral letters to Timothy and one to Titus are a case in point. They mimic the familiar or personal letter, although the addressees (Timothy, Titus) are not the sole intended recipients—it is rather the membership of the local Christian churches that these men’s names stand for. The detailed prohibitions concerning women in the church contained in Timothy 1, the long list of Paul’s claims about his authority in Timothy 2, and specification of the duties of elders and bishops in Titus, show that these are instructional communications to be used in a public context and were probably read aloud. So while an addressee is named, the intended audience and ‘reader’ is primarily collective. These and other open letters are gifts in the usual sense of a letter, although they are not personalised, the inscription of a named addressee at their head being rather misleading. They call on membership of a wider epistolary community of communication and utterance and are actually gifts to the wider community; it is its membership which is ‘silently’ addressed, rather than the named addressee. But at the same time, the named addressee is not a cipher either: they act as an intermediary, and sometimes also a gate keeper because they can refuse the epistemological gift by not passing it on in the way intended.

Olive Schreiner wrote open letters, some published in newspapers and journals, with others read aloud on her behalf at public meetings. These are

‘open and shut’ cases of incontrovertibly open letters, and these ideas about their structural features are useful in thinking about splits between the named addressee and the intended recipient in Schreiner’s ‘ordinary letters’, particularly around a marked change in her letter-writing practices after her return from Europe to South Africa in late 1889. Schreiner wrote to her friend Havelock Ellis, commenting on what her move back meant, not only literally, but also what it represented about how she wanted to live her life:

... I turn with such a keen kind of relish to the external world ... I have the same kind of feelings to objective things that a person has to solid food who has been ill for months and begins to eat again; it is something quite different from ordinary hunger. My nature craves it ... (Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 25 April 1890, Texas)

This epiphany regarding ‘the external world’ went hand in hand with her rejection of the immersion in ‘the personal’ and emotionality, which for her characterised socialist and feminist circles in Britain at the time, with a precipitating factor being the suicide of her friend Amy Levy not long before she left.

After 1889, Schreiner reconfigured ‘the writing I’ in her letters, expressing it as a politically- and analytically-oriented authorial presence commentating primarily on public matters and curtaining private ones. This interesting epistolary persona is of a ‘writing I’ articulated in close relationship with the ‘we’ of her politically and ethically linked epistolary community, and so one which had strong if not explicitly articulated private elements too (Stanley & Salter). Moreover, this ‘writing I’ of Schreiner’s post-1889 epistolary authorial stance is a general one, not just reserved for letters to correspondents she was in agreement with, and it ‘does things’ to the ways she addresses disagreement, as with the earlier example concerning Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence unethically making public what was in a private letter to another person, albeit on public matters.

And what of the gift here? After 1889, Schreiner’s letters straddle the private/public divide. They are and are not personal letters; they are and are not public ones; and, in relation their intended recipients, both are and are not the addressees she names. Consequently pinning down whom the gift of her letters is directed to, and what kind of exchange they contribute to, is by no means straightforward. Re-reading her ‘ordinary’ letters using the counter-epistolaria aspects of open letters points out that there are different levels of addressee involved, or perhaps an addressee and a rather different set of intended recipients, and that this concerns the idea of ‘the far off future’ addressed by Schreiner in many of her published writings. Seeing Schreiner’s letters as an intended gift to that far-off community of the future makes more sense than does seeing them as personal or familiar letters, and different in kind from her open public letters.

The second example of counter-epistolaria for discussion is draft letters. Some draft letters are never intended to be sent, such as the ‘write it all out so as resolve and renew’ technique for personal therapy, or as templates to provide a

draft form of words to which someone can add personal details before sending to a public or political organisation. However, the letters focused on here are discarded earlier versions of eventually ‘sent letters’. These kinds of letters throw light on the conventions regarding what can be written and how it can be written, starting with the draft letters mathematician John Pell (1611–1685) wrote to his patron, Sir Charles Cavendish, also a mathematician (Malcolm & Steadall). Pell’s drafts provide interesting indications of what was seen as necessary and appropriate, thereby throwing light on the relationship between the unsent and unsendable on the one hand, and what is sent on the other. Such things are a usually ignored aspect of epistolarity, but are clearly critical to understanding what ‘a letter’ is for people, and also the epistolary ethics emergent between correspondents. Pell kept drafts when he made significant amendments to what he wrote Cavendish, and because of the English Civil War prevailing, none of Pell’s sent letters survive, apart from one partial exception, involving three interrelated pieces of writing. Pell’s draft dated 14 of July 1644 is the earlier amended version of his draft-letter dated 7 August 1644. This is a top or final version, although for reasons unknown it was not in fact sent. Then a further set of amendments were written on it, resulting in a letter which Pell *did* send, dated 10 August 1644, but this ‘survives’ not as the definitely sent letter but as his doubly re-drafted version. These multiple amendments upon amendments concern Pell writing ever more precisely to Cavendish about a complicated mathematical problem they were working on. In gift terms, then, what can be made of Pell’s ‘changing my mind because I want to write it better’ draftings?

On one level, a revised letter is a better kind of gift, because it involves more effort and thought on the part of the writer, and more attention to the addressee and their needs. But on another, if the sent letter is a gift from writer to addressee, then withholding a letter involves *taking something back* before it is given. Such a withholding is connected with perceptions of what is unseemly, what should not have been written, and can involve the realisation of mistakes confusions, and as with Pell’s drafts, embarrassment on the part of the writer, concerns about possible affront to the addressee, or the inadvertent mention of secret or taboo topics. But at a basic level, what is involved is a withholding: in an ontological sense, a withheld draft is a gift ungiven, retracted without the addressee’s awareness, and constitutes a kind of anti-gift.

Few of Olive Schreiner’s draft letters survive, and the evidence strongly suggests most of her letters were sent as they were first written, with the amendments made not extensive and their ‘bird in flight’ aspects remaining on the pages. There is, however, one occasion after 1889 where the unseemly in the sense outlined above—things that ought not to have been written because ‘not proper’—appears in a letter of hers which was in fact sent:

Dear Friend . . .

I’m so glad it has been such a good time with your brother, & I’m so thankful you are keeping well. . . .

As I sat writing a terrible blow has fallen on me. ((this is for you & Miss Greene only)) Cron came in & told me he had to leave for Cape Town tonight he has to go tonight. De Villiers the little attorney here is bringing an action against him for one thousand pounds damages for some thing Cron wrote about him to the Chief Sherrif [sic] in Cape Town. I think he will win the case. What Cron said about him may be true, but he can't prove it, & we shall have to pay as he ^I had to pay^ the £200 to de Beers in Kimberley. It will take every farthing we both have in the world & this little house too. Cron is going down to ask my brother Will's advice. Once I should have been crushed by this, but nothing seems to matter to me any more. Nothing matters, nothing matters ...

Don't please say one word to him or any one else about the case. Good bye dear ones. I love you both so much.

Olive

You see I couldn't leave him any more than a mother could leave her little child. He will always be in trouble. If we weather this something else will come soon. (23 July 1904, Olive Schreiner to Betty Molteno UCT)

This letter to Schreiner's closest friend Betty Molteno concerns the secret, or rather unspoken-of fact, of Schreiner's husband Cronwright's propensity for bull-headedly getting into troubles, often implicating her legally and, as in this case, also financially, after ignoring her advice that a venture he was planning would turn out badly. Schreiner's next letter to Molteno shows she greatly regretted sending this 23 July 1904 one. Its existence, however, enables some important things about 'the gift' in Schreiner's letter writing to be raised around ideas about draft letters and withholding.

The overall character of Schreiner's letters post-1889 seems one of withholding, of keeping mentions of personal relationships in a particular proportion to the external world of events, and her analytical concerns with imperialism, capitalism, exploitation, genocide, racism, misogyny and so on. It is difficult, analytically, to demonstrate absence and silence, of course. However, this 23 July 1904 letter shows that there was indeed at least one resounding silence. In addition, there are also textual clues in Schreiner's use of 'one', the formal third-person form in English, to remark on but not to detail silences, that there were others (Stanley 'Shadows Lying Across her Pages'). Her frequent use of 'one' and the word 'silence' itself, as in her frequent 'but great is silence' comment to close friends hints of the personal and intimate, and indicates that there was a more general withholding going on. Schreiner's gift of her letters was a carefully inscribed and delimited one. This provides a useful reminder that letters always involve inscriptions of rhetorical performances of self and other, are a theatre of textual usage and performative, and that the epistolary gift and anti-gift are complexly intertwined.

The third example of counter-epistolaria concerns last letters. Mauss argues that the 'pure gift', giving without receiving, is a logical impossibility because there is always the possibility of reciprocity. The last letter written by Mary, Queen of Scots, provides an interesting example.⁷ This was written at around 2am on 8 February 1587. Messengers had arrived and told Mary she was to be executed the next morning. The letter was written as well as signed by Mary, an

indication of its momentous import, her coming death, and also the co-equal status of its addressee, Henri III of France, her former brother-in-law. Ordinarily her letters were signed but not usually written by ‘the Queen’ as a public personage. Mary’s last letter takes the form of complaints with regard to the treatment of her majesty rather than her person, protests concerning matters of religion, dispositions regarding payments to her servants, warnings about the possible unsoundness (implicitly, in religious terms) of her son, and also placed a moral obligation on Henri to carry out these requests. It is busy, forceful, final; and like Emily Dickinson’s, there is no possibility of an ‘after’ proffered or hinted at—interestingly, not even a religious hereafter. Contra Mauss’ view, then, the last letter is a pure gift in epistolary terms and has no possibility of reciprocity.

So what do last letters help raise about ‘ordinary letters’ as written by Olive Schreiner? There are different kinds of last letters involving different forms of closure, many of them not involving a death. Also, as noted earlier, Schreiner’s ‘last’ letter to Miemie Murray in 1911 actually had an epistolary ‘after’ to it, because while the ‘real’ exchange between them ended, a muted and formalised kind of letter writing continued. However, Schreiner’s last letter to Jan Smuts in 1920 is different:

Oct 19th 1920

Dear Jan

Thank you for your kind words of welcome . . . I would like to have a long talk with you on the native question—not only South Africa’s great question, but the world’s great question.

Oct 28th 1920

Dear Jan

I began this but wasn’t able to finish it a week ago. Yesterday I read of the troubles in Port Elizabeth. I wish I knew you were taking as broad & sane a view on our native problem as you took on many European points when you were there. The next few years are going to determine the whole future of South Africa in 30 or 40 years time. As we sow we shall reap. We may crush the mass of our fellows in South Africa today, as Russia did for generations, but today the serf is in the Palace & where is the Czar? . . .

Jan dear, you are having your last throw; throw it right this time. You are such a wonderfully brilliant & gifted man, & yet there are sometimes things which a simple child might see which you don’t! You see close at hand—but you don’t see far enough . . .

Thine ever

Olive

This is the 20th century; the past is past never to return, even in South Africa. The day of princes, & of Bosses, is gone forever: one must meet the incoming tide & rise on it, or be swept away forever. (Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 19 and 28 October 1920, Pretoria)

This letter to Smuts is an ‘ordinary’ one and features Schreiner’s usual commentary on political topics and issues, usual disagreement with Smuts expressed in a frank but loving way, usual prodding him in less racist directions he

did not want to go. It contains no intimation that ‘it’s over’ and has a usual stirring exhortation at the end. Rather than content, what reveals it as ‘the last word’ is how it looks on the writing-paper, for while ordinarily Schreiner’s letter writing filled the available space, this letter leaves paper blank—there was no more to write. What Schreiner’s last letter to Smuts indicates in gift terms is that the social bonds which connected her in epistolary relationship with Smuts had been finally severed, and she was withdrawing from the system of the epistolary gift she had participated in for some 25 years with him. The gift was withdrawn, and although the act of doing so was a silent one, an absence from the page, it was also expressed with considerable textual force—the blank paper speaks volumes.

Very Sincerely, About Rethinking the Epistolarium

The three substantive topics discussed in this paper are all concerned with the gift-giving aspects of exchanges of letters, and together demonstrate their relational character. The idea of the epistolary gift expands the conceptual framework of the epistolarium by showing that connection and relation, rather than absence and loss, are the foundations of letter writing. Epistolary exchanges symbolise and are themselves exemplars of the social and relational bonds between people, rather than representing the rupture or demise of these, and also encompass many third parties as well as signatory and addressee. Editing collections of published letters rework in a complicated mimetic way important aspects of epistolary gift-giving, and draws in new third-party involvements in the shape of readers of such editions, while an overly-instructional editorial approach is in contradiction of one of the most fascinating characteristics of letters, their ‘bird in flight’ and ‘moment of writing’ characteristics.

Counter-epistolaria—sub-groups of letters which challenge some but not all of the conventions associated with epistolarity—raise interesting questions about the epistolary gift and its complexities and nuances. In addition, shifting the analytical gaze from counter-epistolaria in open letters, draft-letters and last letters and onto ‘ordinary letters’ which lie firmly within all the usual definitional characteristics of what ‘the letter’ is, brings a challenge. The Schreiner letters discussed are straight-forwardly ‘ordinary letters’, while using ideas from counter-epistolary forms of letter-writing to explore their gift dimensions leads to the conclusion that letters generally, not just counter-epistolaria, trouble and problematise the definitional conventions. It is not only Olive Schreiner’s letters that do this, so do other letters too.

Thinking about the gift and counter-gift aspects of ‘ordinary letters’ and not just variant forms is helpful in bringing under scrutiny the definitional aspects of what ‘the letter’ is usually taken to be. This discussion opened with reference to direct address from a signatory to an addressee, over-time exchanges, temporal and physical separation between signatory and addressee, and reciprocity and

turn-taking. Thinking about letters in terms of the gift, the epistolary system of the gift and its complicated fabric of over-time exchanges concerned with relationality and interrupted presence, puts a question mark against each of these. It is not only counter-epistolaria that trouble or depart from one or more of these characteristics, for letters more generally routinely trouble and traverse them, as the discussion of some of Schreiner's 'ordinary letters' has shown. Her 'ordinary letters' include letters directed to intended recipients who are not the addressee, which exert repeated silence and closure, which resist reciprocity, where the intent is not actually epistolary but instead a commitment to relationship and response concerning a wider audience outwith the letter.

There are contributions to rethinking and rebuilding the analytical tools provided by the heuristic of the epistolarium. In addition, rather than undermining attempts to define the letter, such complexities should be taken as convincing demonstration of the enormous flexibility and richness of the letter as a form, for through the engaging and inventive practices of letter writers it always exceeds attempts to definitionally contain it. *Vive la lettre!*

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Notes

- [1] Work on letters and epistolarity that has particularly influenced thinking in this paper includes Altman, Barton & Hall, Decker, Derrida Postcard, Goldsmith, Jolly, Montefiore & Hallett, Thomas & Znaniecki.
- [2] The Olive Schreiner Letters Project is researching and analysing, and will also involve publishing in full, in electronic transcriptions, the complete Schreiner letters. For details of the research team, analytical concerns, methodological approach and publications, see www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk
- [3] For instance, Cohen's *Selected* Lewis Carroll letters provides both photographs and transcripts of the 'same' part of letters, but with the transcriptions actually different, by tidying punctuation, replacing ampersands and generally 'correcting' the letter.
- [4] See for example the online letters of the Carlyles (<http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>); John Adams (<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/>); and Vincent van Gogh (<http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/>) (all accessed 10 November 2010).
- [5] This is very much a *collective* 'I-the-editor' and 'me', for it involves my project colleagues Helen Dampier and Andrea Salter doing the same too.
- [6] Providing jpegs do not remove but rather defer confrontation of the issues involved.
- [7] For a transcription and jpegs, see <http://www.nls.uk/mqs/trans1.html> (accessed 1 October 2009).

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