

Jacob Rollinson 

Triviality, Materiality and Synchronicity in the Lessing Archive

Over the summer of 2019, I was on a work placement in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing at UEA. My task was to catalogue and describe the correspondence of Doris Lessing. I was developing the online catalogue of the set of boxes called ‘The 2008 Deposit’, making it accessible and searchable for researchers. The 2008 Deposit (unlike the 2013 Deposit, which arrived after Lessing’s death that year) is not under embargo by its copyright holders, so its contents are at least theoretically available for interested parties to use for teaching, research or the generation otherwise of their own academic-economic product. My task was to facilitate this.

Within the 2008 Deposit, two series are notable. The first is the A–Z Correspondence. These boxes cover 1943 to 2007. They have been sorted alphabetically, by correspondent. I created approximately 1,200 files in the online catalogue of this series. The vast majority of these entries were incomplete. The description of Lessing’s correspondence remains an ongoing task, and once my placement finished, somebody else will have picked up where I left off.

The second notable series is the Whitehorn Letters, contained in two boxes. They were written between 1944 and 1949 by Doris Lessing to John Whitehorn and Coll MacDonald, two of three RAF airmen with whom Lessing was intimate at the time (the third was Leonard Smith, ‘Smithie’ – the University of Sussex got his letters). These letters have been transcribed. If you visit the archive, you can access these searchable transcriptions.

I described the contents of these two series into the catalogue using searchable terms, so that somebody could navigate the archive without having to physically remove letters from the boxes until they knew they would find something useful.

I was anticipating a researcher. My descriptive choices corresponded to the terms, I guessed, an imaginary Lessing researcher might be looking for. Communism. Feminism. Sufism. Afghanistan. Zimbabwe.

And, wherever I came across them, the names of authors: D. H. Lawrence; Virginia Woolf; Edith Sitwell. Marcel Proust. These names and categories, chosen by me because of their presence in the archive materials, are now searchable.

This is the catalogue, the online presence of the archive. It is incomplete and under construction. In that sense, it remains half imaginary. I spent a lot of time daydreaming at work, and I liked to imagine what the archive could become. I visualised matrices connecting material artefacts to their virtual reproductions and delineating the categories and concepts contained therein, and linking these categories and concepts to related categories and concepts in accordance with an ordered hierarchy. Daydreaming, I visualised a complex yet exquisitely patterned systemisation of knowledge – none of the details of course, only the appearance, an image conditioned by my consumption of science fiction and my perfect ignorance of maths: I visualised a self-consuming fractal torus of pure psychedelic energy.

An exaggeration, of course. But the point I hope to illustrate is this: there is the offline archive, the online archive and a whole host of imaginary archives. Although the offline archive remains inviolably static, its online presence, the catalogue, is mouldable, in accordance with the paradigms and precepts of these imaginary archives.

Naturally, this is a problem. Testing the search function of the catalogue, I searched for ‘Proust’. There were many references in the descriptions. Most of the results came from the Whitehorn Letters. I decided to make a list of the authors to whom Lessing alludes in the Whitehorn Letters alone:

Aristophanes; Jane Austen; Honoré de Balzac; Arnold Bennett; Laurence Binyon; Henry Bordeaux; Elizabeth Bowen; Lord Byron; Demetrios Capetanakis; Charles Dickens; John Dos Passos; T. S. Eliot; Ronald Firbank; John Ford; E. M. Forster; Stella Gibbons; Stefan George; Ivan Goncharov; Robert Graves; Graham Greene; José-Maria de Heredia; Friedrich Hölderlin; James Joyce; John Keats; Sidney Keyes; Arthur Koestler; Charles Lamb; D. H. Lawrence; Rosamund Lehmann; Alun Lewis; Stéphane Mallarmé; Guy de Maupassant; Marcel Proust; Arthur Rimbaud; George William Russell; Madame de Sevigne; Upton Sinclair; William Soroyan; William Thakeray; William Thurber; Leo Tolstoy; John Webster; Virginia Woolf; W. B. Yeats.¹

After I’d made this list, I wondered whether it was useful. I wondered where it would go. Such a list might accompany the series description

of the Whitehorn Letters, for instance, but not the 2008 Deposit, because the Whitehorn Letters constituted a small enough dataset for this kind of metadata to remain useful. I pondered the problem of canonicity. Should I extend this list to include authors of non-literary works, self-help books, popular fiction, journal articles? To what extent was I reinforcing a canonical straightjacket? What was the difference between reinforcing a canonical straightjacket and maintaining data integrity?

Looking at the list, I thought about university education. I recalled the fact that the content of student essays is routinely scanned using computer programs designed to detect plagiarism. I considered the exciting next phases in the integration of data analysis and literary criticism. I wondered how many of the students I taught would go on to earn a living engaged in the activity of search-engine optimisation, writing copy that corresponds to searchable terms in order to improve website traffic for paying clients. Writing for robots. I know intelligent people who do this. They have English literature degrees. They insert specific phrases into text that will be read exclusively by automatons that have no regard for the style or message or syntactic coherence of the copy they read. These people used to be poets. Perhaps they still are.

Looking at the list, I recalled the satirical journals recorded by Anna Wulf in her *Black Notebook*, sending up the Modernists, making jejune references to Proust, Stendhal and Dostoevsky. *Must read Stendhal*.

If you search the online catalogue of the 2008 Deposit, you can judge for yourself how jejune are the younger Lessing's literary references. Especially in the Whitehorn Letters. Some of these references are detailed criticisms; some are recommendations; some favoured few authors – and yes, these include Stendhal, Proust and Dostoevsky – had their works, their themes, their characters' names, encoded into the private language of the correspondence. In the item labelled DL/WHI/011, Lessing elaborates on the complexities of her continuing marital infidelity with reference to the works and theories of Proust, Balzac, Dos Passos and Thurber, in the space of two paragraphs.

Not only for their allusivity, the Whitehorn Letters have a novelistic appeal. They are candid, vivid, sometimes brutal. They are filled with a youthful brio that can look, at a distance, like arrogance. Like all personal correspondence, they are far less sympathetic in paraphrase than in full textual reality. Many of them were written while *half-tight*, or between attending to the needs of the infant Peter Lessing. They relate funny and sad stories that expose the repressive reality of Britain's colonial ambitions in Southern Rhodesia, and the absurdity of the intellectual resistance to that tyranny allying itself with the tyrannical USSR.

The Whitehorn Letters are also attractive because they refer to seminal material. Their place in the continuum that encompasses *The Grass is Singing* and *The Golden Notebook* is clear. If you look, and not even that carefully, you will find hints of familiar characters in there, in an earlier, less consciously disguised form. It is tempting to say: *you must read the Whitehorn Letters*. You will *never understand* the Black Notebook – or the Red Notebook, for that matter – unless you read the Whitehorn Letters.

This is another problem. Documents like these are attractive because they hold the illusion of originary authority. They promise a glimpse of the truth that the elaborate façade of fiction apparently hides. However, being performative, contingent, allusive, stylised, otherwise fictive in their own ways, the Whitehorn Letters will never fulfil their promise of truth; but they remain attractive.

Their allure illustrates one of the ways we might conceptualise the archive – one of the ‘imaginary archives’ mentioned above – as a site of secular pilgrimage. One might say, as I did, behind my work terminal in the archive office: *The 2008 Deposit awaits you, Lessing scholars; it awaits the schema that you carry within you and against which you mean to measure the world; and where the archive authenticates your schema, you will feel the thrill of affirmation that is sometimes mistaken for discovery*. All of which my listing of Stendhal and Proust and Dostoevsky, my moulding of the metadata, has been intended to facilitate, to guide, to control.

Problematic, as stated. But this problem goes beyond the issue of canonisation.

I will admit, in my task as amanuensis, I started to feel possessive of the data I was working with. I started to worry about the moral probity of these Lessing researchers, for whom I was so diligently preparing the metadata. I came to fear that the very authenticity of the Whitehorn Letters might lead them astray. That some fundamentalist among them might embark on a reading of *The Golden Notebook* that identified the origins of every component part of every character in the real people found in the Whitehorn Letters; that pursued every plot device to its origin in real-life events.

There would be a special irony in such a bloody-minded positivist *solving* of this novel in particular, since its gift lies in its demonstration that the evasions and reiterations and reframings of fiction correspond to the evasions and reiterations and reframings of any consciousness that is alive to the historical forces and moral exigencies at work upon it. Lived experience is fictive. In affirming lived experience, fiction derives value.

I want to believe this. I want to be free from the nostalgic pursuit of the numinous, the butterflies on the veld. I certainly did want that, daydreaming behind my work terminal in the archive office. But what is the archive for, if not the pursuit of origins?

Daydreaming at work, I pondered creative ways of engaging with the collection that escaped the gravitational pull of origins and authenticity. Occasionally, I came across items that did seem to exemplify the fictive nature of lived experience. This highly personal value judgement could not be communicated in the online catalogue, since it was not useful. At least, I felt, not useful for the purposes of anybody's research but my own. This judgement derived from the way textual authority was subverted by accidents of material production. It was trivial. Likewise, the exemplary items I discovered were not useful or important, in a scholarly sense, like the Whitehorn Letters. They were trivial, fragmentary, disconnected.

I present three.

HARPER C/3/105 was a 1998 letter from Doris Lessing to editor Terry Karten, turning down an invitation to attend an unnamed award ceremony in New York when there was no certainty that she would win the award. She included a thank-you note to read out in case she did win. Following the note, which wasn't expected to be read out loud, Lessing finished: 'Writing all that makes me feel as if in fact I have won it, and I am feeling quite a little glow of triumph!'

The letter had evidently been used as the basis of a fax. It was never physically delivered. It had been typed on the back of some recycled paper: a single page of a proof for an unknown book. That single page was the opening of a chapter titled "Three Significant Modes of Human Organisation and Learning". An anonymous proofreader had attached a note for the editor. 'Take over,' it said.

Reading this, I considered modes of human organisation and learning. I was compelled to list all the parties sending or receiving messages in this document. I knew such a list was senseless; this document was a set of instructions unmoored from their referents. It was itself a discarded byproduct of facsimile communication. Undelivered thrice over.

I suspected, in a moment of clarity, that it was haunted.

I remembered once encountering a piece of stone whose striations resembled a landscape painting more beautiful than any I had seen of human manufacture. This document reminded me of that: it gave the illusion of an intelligence operating behind the arbitrary forces of chance – but here the intelligence had sculpted a piece of conceptual art out of ephemera. It was a one-liner joke, a slice of absurdity. *Ceci n'est pas un fax.*

It wasn't aiming for belly laughs, but it wanted something from me. Even just the dry acknowledgement due a bad pun, a dad joke: the huff, the *heh*.

Heh, I said.

I had a page in my pilgrim's passport stamped.

In ALT/002 Lessing refused to provide a review of her friend Lisa Alther's novel, *Five Minutes in Heaven*. She stated that it was not her kind of book. There was nothing to soften the blow of rejection; at the end of the letter she asked for forgiveness – or she said, simply, 'forgive me', which was not quite the same thing.

In a handwritten postscript she criticised Alther's work. She stated that the book was 'second rate' and noted its 'items of lesbianism'. Her statement was unvarnished, unmeasured, unkind. Who was it for? Surely this was not sent to Alther. Was this a message for posterity? For me?

I checked the back.

This archive item was a carbon copy of Lessing's original letter. It had been typed onto recycled scrap paper. The paper in this case was a first-pass proof of Sherwin B Nuland's *How We Die*.

In this passage, an unnamed narrator – a doctor, it seems, specialising in end-of-life care – described the consequences of deceiving a patient into undergoing a life-extending operation. The patient would never have accepted the operation if she'd known she would suffer so much afterwards, and for the duration of what remained of her life. The patient died no longer trusting her doctor.

I did not note this in the online catalogue. It was irrelevant. I recorded it in a private journal of omens. I worked. Working, I waited for more instructions.

JONAT/3/040 was an obscure 1997 letter about an editorial dispute. Lessing was angry with her editor at Harper Collins for reasons we can never concretely know; she took special offence at the tone – that of a 'stern but kind headmaster' – with which he'd addressed her. Lessing was upset. She wanted to have a chat with her agent Jonathan Clowes as soon as possible.

This letter, too, was a carbon copy on recycled paper. This letter, too, was a page of the first-pass proof of Sherwin B Nuland's *How We Die*. The back described the physical and mental decline of a man named Phil, who was suffering from some terminal neurological condition. He became incapable of communicating the correct words, or noticing that he had communicated the wrong words, or controlling his bladder or bowels, or noticing that he couldn't control his bladder or bowels, or noticing that he was a human at all.

I did not record the connection between ALT/002 and JONAT/3/040 into the catalogue. This did not diminish the thrill of affirmation I felt in connecting these two items, in perceiving again the illusion of intelligence behind the arbitrary patterns of chance.

This time I understood that the intelligence was malevolent. Something to do with its sense of humour. Daydreaming, I saw the designs of slow decay underlying the fragile web of human connections. Behind the strip lights of the office, the temperature-controlled storage rooms in which I spent my peaceable working days, was another imaginary archive. A crypt.

I shivered. I had another page in my pilgrim's passport stamped.

Then this useless moment passed, and I returned to my otherwise productive working day.

Note

1 J. Rollinson, Personal notes (2019), destroyed.