

‘Ambiguous input: archivists and writers’

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INTRO

- Extent to which writers depositing their papers into an archive could/ should play a role in description of own collection. Focus on interaction between records creator and archivist in description of personal papers, look at potential for participatory description as beneficial a)practically b)creatively. Looking at relationships that are forged between archivists and writers as record-creators, I consider the ways in which outcomes of these relationships can be utilised, through creative cataloguing that could reflect the creation of the record itself.
- Starting point: cataloguing papers of living artist. Provided considerable background material - CV, an inventory, and a bibliography- which formed the basis of my catalogue record.
- Practically, the material provided was extremely helpful, stopped me doing extensive research from scratch. But-the core of the description of this artist’s catalogue record created by artist himself. If sources are thoroughly referenced, this isn’t problematic. And in practical terms- no real alternative: researching from scratch is not a practical or desirable option.
- But it struck me that the depositor had, in fact, considerable input into the processing of his own collection, through provision of supporting material. Descriptions the depositor supplied, of his life and of his work, provided basis of my own description. I referenced sources, but ultimately was absorbing and re-presenting the artists’ own words as my own, presenting this ‘neutral’ voice of the catalogue which was, in fact, this combination of the artists’ own words with mine.
- Of course, in many ways the depositor/creator is the person best placed to describe their own work & life. But maybe an opportunity here for a more direct approach, for reflective or creative catalogue that acknowledges that the depositor has input, and that makes space for this. Given level of depositor input in the material I used, I thought that there may be opportunity to take a step further, by allowing depositor to describe material themselves. In a sense this is using catalogue as a means of almost direct communication between the record creator/depositor and the researcher.

- So this was starting point for research: I looked at precedents & plausability for this, to define whether depositor input & description is a valid & valuable enterprise.
- One thing to define before I begin- why focus on writers papers? Can see personal writing as the space where self-identity plays out- inherently creative and performative, whether the audience is an external reader or simply oneself. But with writers= this is intensified & amplified. Possible to see writers (and artists) as especially in tune with creative impulse, with capacity to create narratives that can shape external reactions. Catherine Hobbs supports this, says '*writers, debatably more than others, are aware of selecting their expressions, consciously fictionalising lives, creating a persona, playing powerfully with language and structure*'.¹ In this sense, see writers papers as particularly likely to capture creative spark.

TWO. Can depositing writer be trusted to describe own papers?

Possible to discern an element of wariness about writer's craft. Through development of literature, imagination honoured as source of creativity and delight, but simultaneously - imagination that distorts and falsifies reality. Imagination=nemesis of truth and fact!

- You can say that *performance* occurs in act of writing: Sometimes intentional, such as in fictional work, work that adopts tone, persona, narrator. Or this performative quality can be unintentional. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson say that (in autobiography) '*The narrator of necessity tells his story to someone [...] Sometimes, as in a diary, that someone might even be another version of himself*'.² Reader is implied, and their presence shapes the formation of the text.
- So seemingly personal items of writing (diaries, memos, notes to self) seem to offer archival researchers tantalising glimpses→ psyche of a writer. Tendency to read these items as somehow inherently truthful, because lack obvious retrospection & editorial/ narrative decision making. But- mistake to assume that these personal writings tell 'truth', or that they necessarily open a window into writers' private and personal realm. In literary fiction-often

¹ Catherine Hobbs, 'The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals', *Archivaria* 52 (2001), p.133

² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.68

see diaries, letters, newspapers as framing devices around tall tale, gives air of authority & authenticity (Wuthering Heights, Dracula, epistolary novels). You could argue that real-life letters and diaries could be treated with the scepticism/ wariness that we treat their obviously fictional counterparts. Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil have written about this narrative tendency in relation to personal archives: *'the capacity of a writer's own archive to reveal character and intention [...] is constrained by the writer's own efforts to conceal and edit the self'*.³ Maybe linked with tendency to see personal papers as less 'reliable' than organisational & corporate records. So: we should not necessarily take writers' texts at face value.

- This is especially the case because awareness of posterity, or of potential archival value, can shape both a writers' text and record-keeping practice. In many ways, this enacts as practical acknowledgement of the needs of archivist. So writer Alasdair Gray → Judy Dicken; since depositing his papers into an archive, he 'has kept the preliminary work for my books more carefully, listing and dating items to make them more valuable to library and more useful to scholars'.⁴ Grevel Lindop, writer who deposits his papers in the John Rylands, told me he has become more scrupulous about the dating and arrangement of his records and drafts.
- This practical attitude- in digital record keeping too, residual uncertainty about security of digital records. Grevel said he now *'makes a point of printing out interesting emails. If I get email from someone that I think is significant in some way, I'll print it out, because I don't entirely trust software long-term, rather have it on paper'*.⁵ (Here, making records more valuable and complete=not necessarily equate to financial or monetary value. Instead, process of depositing one's papers in archive encourages greater archival awareness, desire to be helpful, make items easier to use, for archivist & researcher)
- Value is in literary legacy too. Writers may edit own papers with posterity in mind. Novelist Ronlyn Domingue-preoccupation with own legacy. *'With arrogant hope, I thought about my*

³ Douglas, Jennifer and MacNeil, Heather, 'Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives', *Archivaria* 67 (2009), p.25

⁴ Judy Dicken, 'Twentieth-century literary archives: collecting policies and research initiatives' in *New Directions in Archival Research*, eds. by Margaret Procter and C.P Lewis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies, 2000) pp. 49-82, (p.70)

⁵ From interview with Grevel Lindop, writer, on 14th June 2012, in answer to question 'Does having your papers in an archive change the way that you work or write?'

*literary legacy as I wrote [...] I had the future in mind [...] What if I "make it"?*⁶ Domingue says 'already begun the process to expunge my own collection', burning early drafts, letters, journals. In many ways, editing process natural & normal; not unusual for people to dispose of things embarrassing or even damaging to reputation. But-for a repository eventually taking in work of writer like Domingue- papers have already undergone form of appraisal, weeding and editing, with writer considering version of herself she wishes to present. Creates further filters between initial act of writing & eventual act of research. So researchers thinking they may find some untouched, undiscovered gem in archival records of writer should consider distorting effects of urge to self-edit. Louise Bernard, 'Unpacking the Archive': *'a writer's archive [...] has been culled, edited and self-consciously constructed (or reconstructed) long before it is subjected to the orderly processes of "best archival practice"'*⁷. Judy Dicken: *"an archive, based primarily on what the writer chooses to deposit, may present a body of writing composed with as much aplomb, and with the public as much in mind, as if it were a book for publication"*⁸.

- With all this in mind, we could consider methods which allow more direct practice between archivist & writer, and therefore between writer & eventual researcher, as a means of making story-telling layers more apparent. Writers are naturally, inextricably involved in shaping their legacy. Whether we're open about it or not, conscious of it or not, there is a story-telling element at work. Better to make this apparent. Makes sense that shouldn't be shut out of this legacy-making process once this legacy comes to be more formally documented in archive. Level of collaboration and input, made explicit to the user, could strip back interpretative duties of archivist & allow writer to make statement of their own intent.

THREE. Opportunities from working with creative people. Ways of involving/ inviting them into the process and capturing this involvement.

⁶ Ronlyn Domingue, 'The Burning Fate of a Writer's Archive', *The Nervous Breakdown*, 4th April 2011 <<http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/rdomingue/2011/04/the-burning-fate-of-a-writers-archive/>>

⁷ Louise Bernard, 'Unpacking the Archive', *The Yale Review* 99:4 (2011): 93-107. (p.98)

⁸ Judy Dicken, 'Twentieth-century literary archives: collecting policies and research initiatives' in *New Directions in Archival Research*, eds. by Margaret Procter and C.P Lewis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies, 2000) pp. 49-82, p.74

- At present can see wariness about handing over too much archival tasks (description & arrangement) to depositor. Practical reasons: actively pursuing input can open up dialogue → disturb impartiality of archival mission & complicating cataloguing process. Spoke to archivists who cautiously welcomed depositor input where initiated by archivist to fill gap in knowledge. For example, if there are dates or correspondents to clarify.
- So depositor input seen as useful. But desire for distance, to preserve autonomy of archival process.
- But there are ways that this relationship can be managed, so that depositor can be invited into process, to benefit of both archivist & researcher.
- Talk about elements of archivist/depositor relationship that can be usefully captured in the catalogue.
- At the early stages: talking is important. Social geographers Ashmore, Craggs & Neate write about period spent working in home of journalist & writer Derek Ingram, sorting and cataloguing his papers (not in *formal* sense of archive). They see talking & socialising with record creator/depositor as crucial to any meaningful understanding of personal, creative papers. Domestic space gives dynamic to understanding of the papers: preserves the context of their use. They describe how *'papers in files relate to photographs on display, letters on display relate to events detailed in newspaper accounts stowed in filing cabinets.'*⁹ Physical & intellectual cross references throughout domestic space, mapping relationships between items. And the meaning of these items is enhanced by their proximity to each other, with context illuminating content. Your belongings trigger your stories; for the geographers, process of sorting Ingram's archive was enhanced & made possible by social element of talking & 'working with' in the home. Assessment/appraisal of records provoked through conversation, anecdotes & stories. This physical & social context is ultimately fragile, is destroyed as soon as papers are removed to the physical archive.

⁹ Paul Ashmore, Ruth Craggs and Hannah Neate, 'Working-with: talking and sorting in personal archives', *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012), p.85

- This bond between writer, papers & home is talked about by author Graham Swift. He says- experience of selling his papers to the British Library was *'curiously akin to donating your body to medical science while still alive'*, with *'an element of feeling like I was selling the family silver'*.¹⁰ These metaphors hint at closeness between creator & record, a bond which I think is intensified by creative impulse that compels writer to write. So for Swift, transferral of personal papers from home to archive is like jettisoning some part of self.
- (Which is probably why BL carries out 'enhanced curation', capturing items *in situ*, within this context).
- So it makes sense that this talking/working should be done at the early stages, before transferral into the archive, while this context is preserved.
- Catherine Hobbs touches on this. Says archivist should work closely with depositor/writer to capture & document creative intent. Document more personal, meaningful representation of their papers in archival description. Says 'archivists may be able to bring scholarship closer to authorial intention by working with living writers and creatively transferring the understanding they gain to the wider scholarly community'.¹¹
- BUT she sees this as part of archivists' task. So typical description would include subjective & personal, but still embedded in archivists' voice. Model description:
'Amabile composed this long poem, first by placing fragments of paper into a box whenever a thought entered his head [...] It was only later that he noted the thoughts were lines for a poem. He found that the lines grouped themselves relatively easily into stanzas, leading him to say that they were almost like physical biological organisms'
This information is so useful to researchers. It's gathered through acquisition & appraisal, with the details emerging naturally through discussion. Through discussion, the depositor's relationship with their papers emerges; Hobbs suggests through early stages of archival

¹⁰ Maeve Kennedy, 'Graham Swift joins angling partner Ted Hughes in British Library archive', *The Guardian*, 10th March 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/mar/10/grahamswift-tedhughes>> [accessed 13th July 2012]

¹¹ Catherine Hobbs, 'The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals', *Archivaria* 52 (2001)

process, signs of creative intent reveal themselves. Anecdotal info: tells research details about creative process that could be gleaned through documents alone.

- BUT it's interesting that this personal, anecdotal material distanced through third person, archivist voice, rather than directly quoting or indeed written by the depositor. This adds a filter. It's maybe not too much of a stretch for the writer's *self* description to be reproduced directly in catalogue. If this authorial intent is something to strive for, then this seems more straightforward means of achieving this. Means archivist role would be more mediatory, acting as link between researcher & depositor. Perhaps more fulfilling research experience for researcher. So the records creator (who is, after all, subject of research) takes foreground.
- (What about the risk that the archivist might disappear altogether in this kind of project? If their role is in arrangement and processing, as far as the researcher can tell, they've pretty much disappeared! Is there an argument against this? So could argue that Hobb's way is more straightforward. But could have a combination: quote the writer in quotation marks, that flags up the presence of the archivist as 'narrator'. Also putting into archivist's own words effectively doubles amount of work done)

FOUR- CONCLUSION

So: should depositing writers describe their own papers?

- I think that they can certainly be incorporated into the process, should they be interested in doing so.
- Impetus of this can come from archivist. Document 'talking and working with' stages, and utilise findings within description. Easiest way= to record conversations and incorporate direct quotes into description. (Recording of domestic space and socialisation can also be captured through photographing the work space, like the British Library are doing). This can give a full picture of the creative process and bring closer link between researcher and creator.

- Creative potential too. Thinking of project with John Latham papers at University of the Arts. Catalogue available online: routes into the collection are through Latham's own theories & art work. Latham - theory that 'the characteristics of people in a social setting' could be paralleled with characters from a Dostoyevsky novel. So- researcher comes to the archive website, chooses 'brother' whose characteristics most meet their research needs or style. So through description and intellectual arrangement of archive, you can follow creative way into the collection, in a fashion which marries with Latham's own theories and beliefs, and which actually helps the researcher to understand these theories. Space for description in catalogue used more imaginatively; re-imagined as a place to introduce the researcher to the work in a different way. No effort here to represent archive in impartial, neutral way- takes partiality to an extreme by imposing explicitly interpretive layers on catalogue. It forces user into recognition of artificiality of archive. The user sees that the archive is a thing consciously shaped and created by collaboration, interpretation and understanding of a series of participants: record creator; archivist and researcher.
- John Latham was deceased when this project carried out; but I think it does show how description & representation of a collection can be used to elucidate theories & ideas inherent in the archive of a creative person. So for artists you could base archive around colour, for writers, rhyme, or theoretical themes they explore. Creative possibilities of presenting the work in a way that marries with the beliefs of the writer/creator; to bring researcher closer to their intent.
- To end on a practical precedent, on the flip side to this creative approach. If nothing else, involving writer in description has practical benefits. Yale University Library, where Christine Weideman implements 'accessioning as processing'. As she describes it, donors who created the materials are asked to write all or some of the series descriptions. *'The donors who created the materials often have excellent insights into what the material documents and how they can and should be used with other materials in the collection. This is an example of engaging donors in the work we do and relieving us of some of the burden in the one core function with which donors can actively help us'*. Delegating description in this way allows for speedier processing, with the task of description of the archive could be shifted, entirely or in part, off the archivists' shoulders. But this has positive impact on the researcher too. Serves interests of speed and efficiency, with happy side effect of revealing writers' own

views of the researchability of the collection, as well as something of intention and thinking behind creation of the record. Weideman sees these descriptions as primarily functional & practical, but there is potential for them to be as personal & creative as the writer wishes.

- A freer approach to the cataloguing process, achieved through a spirit of collaboration between archivist and depositor, could enhance the research value of a collection. By allowing the writer to describe their own papers, self-editing is acknowledged, biases and prejudices become part of the process, and can have positive impact on the understanding of the collection itself, with the catalogue coming to reflect the intent and meaning of the depositor, and with this transmitted, in turn, to the researcher.