

Provocations on the pleasures of archived paper

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Digital formats are often popularly imagined to spell the 'end' of paper. In this essay I pose a series of questions about the importance of materiality for how researchers understand and work with archived paper documents. Drawing examples from research among literary papers and personal correspondence, I highlight the ways in which paper traditionally 'disappears' from the researcher's view and ask whether the conditions of the digital turn may in fact provide for a return to 'thinking through paper'.

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1. Paper impinges

In 2012, when perfumer Geza Schoen set out with publisher Gerhard Steidl and designer Karl Lagerfeld to create *Paper Passion* – a 'perfume for booklovers'¹ – he sought 'the right balance between the smell of paper as such and an enjoyable perfumistic [*sic*] aesthetic'.² While seemingly novel, the idea behind *Paper Passion* was not altogether new. Across the Atlantic in Brooklyn, another company had been producing a scent called *In the Library* since 2005. *In the Library* drew its inspiration from the 'warm woody slightly sweet smell' of a 1927 first edition.³ Evidence that a market for these products exists might be found on a blogsite written by a woman known only as 'Victoria' that is dedicated to 'perfume and other fragrant pleasures'.⁴ In a post entitled 'Perfume Library: The Smell of Books' Victoria described the pleasure of living with her overspilling bookshelves and she wrote:

I will not describe the thrill of finding a great book that moves and inspires me. Instead, I will talk of the rarely mentioned aspect, but the one that bibliophiles find irresistible – the smell of books. It encompasses such an interesting range, from the inky bitterness of freshly printed pages to the vanilla sweetness of old volumes. I have a crumbling 19th century French poetry compilation that I cannot even leaf through for fear of it falling apart. I only lift it and sniff it gingerly – it smells of iris root and cedarwood shavings. No matter how careful I am, the tiny yellow flakes cling to my fingers and I carry this scent with me like a fine perfume.⁵

She continues on to identify those elements in commercially produced perfumes that 'transport' her to this same world of 'yellowing pages'. What is of interest to me in

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these phenomena is less the question of perfume *per se* than the ways in which perfume is offered as an affective trigger capable of reconnecting people to what Gerhard Steidl termed the ‘gloriosensuality’⁶ [*sic*] of books but, more particularly, of paper. Perfume promises to do so, moreover, at the precise moment when books and paper as we know them apparently threaten to disappear, thus lending a note of urgency or nostalgia to the enterprise. Indeed, while Victoria experienced the literal de-materialisation of her flaking nineteenth-century poetry book, Steidl talked of producing his finely packaged perfume tribute to books and paper just as ‘many in the industry are turning against them’.⁷ While the digital revolution is nowhere named, it is everywhere implied in these scented dreams of an intact, tangible – and sometimes friable – world of paper folds and formats.

And yet, there is a growing consensus that the advent of digital technologies has not altogether spelled the end of paper.⁸ Rather than the digital forever cancelling out or superseding paper and paper formats, a culture of co-existence has emerged as anyone who has ever printed a born-digital document understands. We are witnessing not the death of paper, so much as paper’s long afterlife. Our investments in paper have always been multiple and they remain deep. As Derrida elaborated in *Paper Machine*:

if we hold to paper, and will do for a long time to come, if it gets hold of us bodily, and through every sense, and through every fantasy, this is because its economy has always been more than that of a medium (of a straightforward means of communication, the supposed neutrality of support) ...⁹

Nevertheless, it is clear that we *have* entered a new cultural economy – a new cultural order – and one that demands that we think anew about what paper has meant and what paper will mean. In what follows, I offer a series of provocations for the archival researcher.

2. Now you see it, now you don’t

I have previously conducted research on the archived correspondence of Greta Garbo,¹⁰ and so was drawn to a small news item carried by global media outlets in late 2005: two letters and two postcards written by Garbo were announced as missing – presumed stolen – from the Military Archives of Sweden.¹¹ The documents had been written by Garbo to her close friend Vera Schmiterlöw after the actress moved to Hollywood in the 1920s. The matter was placed in the hands of the police but it appears the items have not been recovered. Why does this case interest me? It is not solely for the fact that a cache of letters I may have wanted to consult has disappeared. Indeed, copies of the documents are available. What interests me is how this theft and its reporting operate as instances of what I call ‘heightened materiality’: paradoxical moments when the actual or threatened disappearance of archived documents makes their distinctive material embodiment suddenly apparent to us.

Another example would be the use of weighing machines in certain rare book and manuscript collections as a means of both deterring and detecting acts of theft. Such machines achieve this by discerning minute weight variations in materials before and after they are issued, variations resulting from the removal of leaves or parts of leaves from books and folders. In this way, security devices such as the scale or ‘balance’ cannot help but bring the embodied dimensions of such materials to the fore. This is exemplified in Wilkie’s advice on the required sensitivity for such scales:

In weighing manuscript folders and most books, a scale that weighs in the hundredths of a gram (0.00) up to 4500 gm (about 10 lb) should be adequate; one less sensitive may prove inadequate because it will not be able to detect the removal of small pieces of material, such as a signature from a letter or a bookplate.¹²

It is further evidenced in his concerns regarding the substitutions that can accompany an act of theft:

The most vulnerable collections to such swapping procedures appear to be modern manuscripts. If they are recent enough, it is possible to obtain paper that is nearly identical to what is to be stolen, substitute it, and not alter the weight of the folder significantly.¹³

These instances focus our attention on the folder or fonds as just so many finely calibrated leaves or sheets.

It is not only theft but also destruction and deterioration that I can use to instantiate my claim to the existence – and significance – of such moments of ‘heightened materiality’. Think of the shock that followed the 2013 events in Timbuktu¹⁴ or the catastrophic 2009 collapse of the building housing Cologne’s historical archives. In the latter instance, volunteers pulled more than 9000 documents out of the rubble. Eberhard Illner, a former long-time department director in those archives, characterised the loss in the following manner: ‘These are fragile papers that are now ground to dust.’¹⁵ Despite his dire assessments, it is estimated that 85% of the archive’s materials were subsequently recovered. They survived, however, in severely compromised states: ‘[a]part from mechanic damage like deformation, shredding or tearing, damage by water and, as a result, by mould occurred – even where the damage is seemingly minor, the entire archive material is covered by a fine concrete dust that has to be removed sheet by sheet’.¹⁶

The scale of such a recovery and restoration operation with its focus on the deformation and scarring of individual archived documents throws into high relief not only the materiality of these documents but also in turn their vulnerability, something known only too well to those in the field of document conservation. Conservators dwell in the realm of the tangible, tasked as they are with assessing, remedying and preventing ‘serious and often irreversible mechanical or chemical damage’¹⁷ to records in their care. While the Cologne episode places conservators in the context of disaster recovery or the ‘atypical disruption of routine activities’,¹⁸ the more regular aspects of their work often entail dealing with the impact of those seemingly innocent tools the rest of us deploy in our own daily rituals for managing and manipulating paper: metal clips and pins, rubber bands, ink and marker pens, adhesive tape and post-it notes, all of which have the potential to cause physical damage to valuable documents. Conservator Jan Paris’s confession (albeit a sheepish one) that she had been trained to view researchers as ‘adversaries’ or ‘destroyers’¹⁹ for their potential to overlook – and thus fail to respect – the fragile physical nature of the paper documents entrusted to them in fact provides a compelling insight; namely, the overwhelming tendency of so many researchers to experience paper as something that simply disappears before our eyes or slips from our conscious apprehension. In engaging with this issue, I was struck by Pellegram’s exploration of paper in the context of office work where it was ‘everywhere’:

The workers do not think much about paper, however. They are continually holding it, reading the words upon it, crinkling it up into tight balls and throwing it into plastic bins, putting it in piles and putting it away for safe keeping, but its importance is lost on them.

It is so much a part of mundane existence, as necessary for their work as air for their lungs, that they pay it virtually no attention. It is simply there for them, the unnoticed complement to their thoughts.²⁰

While archival researchers generally neither crinkle nor throw the documents they encounter, I would suggest that more often than not paper remains ‘the unnoticed complement to *their* thoughts’. After all, dominant practices for literary and historical research conducted within archival collections privilege the texts found on documents and pay considerably less heed to the material supports for those words and markings, as though papers and pages can be understood as neutral containers or platforms for the transmission of such texts. Allusions to the ‘sensual’ possibilities of the materials with which we work are rare.²¹ Indeed, researchers are encouraged to transcribe the words they find in documents and then to let the possibilities of the page itself fall from view while they subject the words alone to their interpretive gaze. Alberto Manguel alluded to this particular reading tendency when he described how ‘[t]he page leads an underhand existence ... Its brittle being, barely corporeal in its two dimensions, is dimly perceived by our eyes as they follow the track of the words.’²² But I want to ask what is lost to us as researchers when physical documents are rendered transparent and lose their ‘bodies’ in this way, when their materiality is obscured, ‘disappeared’ or simply not seen?

3. Paper weight

In *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, Leah Price investigates the ways in which books must be understood not only in terms of their use as reading matter but also their use as furniture or decorative items, fashion accessories, trophies and tools. She makes the case that if we are to understand and effectively historicise what a book is and what it can do we need to ‘get physical’ with the ‘book-object’.²³ But what would a parallel material account of the archived page look like? Bonnie Mak has recently made the case for scrutinising the individual manuscript and print page on the grounds that ‘the page is an expressive space for text, space and image; it is a cultural artefact; it is a technological device’.²⁴ Like Price, she works from the premise that meaning and materiality are inseparable, arguing that we must attend to ‘the matter’ and ‘the mattering’ of the page.²⁵ She writes:

[t]o matter is not only to be of importance, to signify, to mean, but also to claim a certain physical space, to have a particular presence, to be uniquely embodied.²⁶

Mak thus reminds us of the ways in which the architecture of the page – its size, shape, colour and texture, the layout of the text on a page, the presence of blank spaces – is far from incidental: it is integral to how meaning is embodied in a page and entangled in how it ‘transmits ideas’.²⁷ But too often these are the very elements that as researchers we bracket in the drive to strip the manuscript page of its precious words. We fail, in Mak’s terms, to note paper’s *presence*. The physical conditions of the paper documents we encounter in our research generally impinge on our investigations only when some aspect challenges and confounds our wishes or expectations: the corner of the page where the all-important text is torn away, the tissue-thin page that we scarcely dare handle, or the folded or curled page that will not sit flat for our investigations. We are supported in our indifference to the embodied nature of archived documents by

practices of archival description that traditionally focus on the scope, scale and information content of collections, while giving only the most perfunctory account of the physical state of a fonds: metres of shelf space, numbers of boxes or folders, numbers of pages. As researchers, we remain oblivious to the fact that these documents are so often delivered to us swathed in protective layers of yet more (generally acid-free) paper. But what if we took seriously the thing that is paper by looking at it rather than always overlooking it or looking through it? And what if we asked ourselves what work the paper is doing if it is not simply the neutral platform or container for words?

My concern for the cultivation of some form of ‘material literacy’²⁸ came through an encounter with a set of papers that threw into high relief the methodological blindspot or lacunae in our fixation with words and with transcription. The episode in question concerns the correspondence from Greta Garbo to Mercedes de Acosta held at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, letters that had been trumpeted in the world’s press as ‘revealing nothing’²⁹ of the nature of the relationship between these two women when they were first opened to the public in April 2000. Unlike those among de Acosta’s correspondents who were fastidious in their choice of writing materials,³⁰ as the librarian looking over my shoulder at the scrappy nature of much of what constitutes this correspondence interjected, ‘you get the feeling that’s what she thought Mercedes was worth’.³¹

Yet, as I have argued elsewhere,³² given the brief and often elliptical nature of much of what Garbo writes, it is through the paper preserved first by de Acosta and subsequently by the Rosenbach that the much-debated (and often-disputed) emotional content of this relationship, and in particular, its lop-sided intensity, can be unravelled. What I confronted in de Acosta’s files is the result of her obsessive assembling, ordering and preserving of an unfolding paper trail left by Garbo. It is a rather scrappy correspondence as Garbo rarely resorted to formal notepaper: most of her letters to de Acosta are written on torn-off sheets from lined exercise books. De Acosta not only retained letters and telegrams from Garbo, but it appears she also cut out and kept the handwritten mailing labels from parcels: in short, any paper Garbo’s hand could be presumed to have touched, including a traced outline of her foot that was sent so that she might buy Garbo some slippers. In this context, the blank florist’s card she has preserved is not a mute document but a voluble one, one that makes legible the power of paper itself to evidence the special relationship she understood she shared with the star. After their brief affair, Garbo spent decades limiting, if not outright refusing, contact with de Acosta, so it is this body of papers that gave their often tense and attenuated relationship a continuing material form. While she had the paper, in some sense de Acosta ‘had’ Garbo or a tangible connection with her. Even as she surrendered the letters to the Museum she was still expressing concern that the material always ‘be respected and protected from the eyes of vulgar people’.³³ This was a precious body and de Acosta was heavily invested in its care and preservation. Thus, I had to recognise that, rather than in the written text of this correspondence, the pressure of desire – and the intimate connection between these two women – found its expression in the accumulated weight of paper.

More confronting – and no less weighty – are the papers of Australian writer Eve Langley. Where Langley is remembered at all these days, it is likely to be as much for her unconventional later life as it is for her early success as a poet and novelist. The publication of her prize-winning novel *The Pea Pickers* in 1942 was followed by decades of instability and a growing identification with Oscar Wilde (she eventually changed her name to Oscar Wilde by deed poll). While she published a second novel,³⁴ the vast majority of her later writing remains unpublished. It is recorded that she sent

over 4000 pages of ‘single-spaced typescript on rose-coloured paper’ to her publisher in Sydney³⁵ and this work now rests unpublished in the Mitchell Library. Already it should be apparent that in tackling Langley one has no choice but to tackle paper. It is tempting in the face of reams of scribbled pages, mouldy notebooks and recycled cereal packets, to dismiss this collection as evidence of a mental illness that manifested itself in bouts of compulsive writing or graphomania (followed by uncritical hoarding of the results). But to do so would mean sidestepping the plangent possibilities of what Amelie Hastie termed ‘materials in disarray’.³⁶ those elements of the historical record that come to us in frankly disorderly states. Further and critically, it would mean overlooking evidence that Langley in her practice as a writer was consistently drawn not just to the production of words, but to their arrangement on the page and to the ways in which those pages then circulated – legacies deriving in part, perhaps, from time spent as a printer’s devil in her youth and later as a book repairer for a public library.³⁷ The very pressure of words and the challenge of how to arrange or contain them upon the page is evident in a notebook compiled from borrowing records of the Auckland Public Libraries where Langley scribbles between the date stamps and across the conventionally blank reverse pages, reconstituting the small bound official pages as a record – not just of reading – but also of her writing. Langley further records here experience of the power of words on the page when she describes an attempt to capture her impressions of a river – ‘scraps of discovery’ – in some brief lines of verse:

The pages were lit by this. I could see the amber of the river water and the light on the amber ... On the pages of the book this [shine?] enchanted me. What a peculiar power there was in words! What splendid visions and colored [*sic*] pictures lay behind them. How they colored a plain page of paper and made me feel the power of god, this was my only happiness. The small crooked print, praising the river ...³⁸

This ‘peculiar power’, moreover, resonates for her across the decades. Handling once more the page on which she had penned a poem about her sister’s youthful romance, she recalls:

I wrote this in 1925 and stuck it on Blue’s spike on which she kept all her writings and letters on her desk ... [The poem’s] unkind, and I hate it even now, but there it lies on an old rounded palette like page of lined paper, and there let it lie, part of an old summer day when she sat, young, pale, beautiful and wrote to a golden lover, and aroused in me a strange ancient anguish of hatred because, I suppose, there was so much to do about their love affair and not enough common sense.³⁹

In this instance, it is the sheet of paper as much as the poem that embodies for Langley the memory of an ambivalent moment long gone. And this, for me, is the striking quality of Langley as a writer and as an obsessive auto-archivist: the way the page is always present to her. To ignore or, more particularly, to refuse the messy materiality of this archive is to refuse to join Langley in her work of ‘thinking through paper’.

4. Propinquity

Any push for material literacy necessarily invites consideration of the productivity of proximity – that is, how papers might come to matter – and to mean – as a condition of their being together. In seeking to understand ‘orders of personal meaning’ on authors’ virtual desktops, Catherine Hobbs suggested that we are ‘inclined to see

proximity and grouping together as indicating meaning'. That is, we are inclined to infer meaning or connection via proximity. But in so doing, we generally naturalise the very proximity through which we read that meaning. Interestingly, Hobbs went on to note that some of the dilemmas confronting archivists in their efforts to find relationships among authors' digital files and folders stem from the way these same issues were never satisfactorily teased out 'in the realm of paper'.⁴⁰ While Hobbs is referring here to larger debates concerning 'original order' as an organising principle within fonds,⁴¹ the issue of proximity or connection that is core to those debates arguably exists for researchers working at the level of individual pages or papers. For example, architectural scientist Susan Yee described the day she came across a 'little parchment bag full of paper squares of different colors and different sizes' in the Le Corbusier archive in Paris.⁴² On investigation, these shapes revealed themselves to be part of a system the celebrated architect used to design the internal floor plans of buildings: different colours represented different possible purposes for spaces (meeting rooms, public areas etc.) and the shapes were able to be fiddled with upon the surface of the plans until a satisfactory configuration of rooms was arrived at. Yee confessed that she 'fiddled with them too'. In learning to place the coloured shapes upon the plan in this way, Yee was engaging with the very mechanics of paper and while there may be fewer opportunities for such tactile play in more traditional fonds, nevertheless, the question of how one piece of paper – judiciously positioned – may extend the expressive or documentary possibilities of another is one worth considering.

Take the example of a contemporary Australian author whose donated papers contained 'vast amounts of content on fluoro coloured post-it notes, which were left adhered to the multiple pages of the collection and protruded outside of the text block of the notebooks and folders'.⁴³ This presented a dilemma in terms of conservation and presentation: the glue from the post-it notes would damage the pages underneath and for this reason they should be removed. In any case, if the post-its were simply left, the glue would eventually lose its efficacy and the notes would drift free from their assigned places. Anyone seeking to study these manuscripts would invariably want to engage with the pages in conjunction with the post-its, so the question was how, in the process of resolving the conservation issue, could the integrity of this textual arrangement – paper-on-paper – be preserved? The solution was found in an overlay system that saw the post-it notes repositioned inside an archival quality document sleeve that could then be placed directly on top of the pages from which they had been removed to recreate the initial layered disposition. Thus, the original supplemented *mise en page* remained available as a field of engagement for researchers, but interestingly, I would argue, in a way that effectively denaturalises the relations of proximity and brings the fundamentals of the original layering operation – paper-on-paper and text-over-text – to the fore once again. At stake here is the idea of how, through recognising what we might term 'paper relations', one might engage with the manuscript *mise en page* as a work of physical and not simply intellectual composition.

5. End paper

There is no question that digitisation is rapidly changing the ways in which archives are made and the forms in which archival documents are organised, distributed and used. These same technologies, however, do not herald the end of our concerns with materiality as it is clear that the 'digital turn' neither deprives nor relieves us of the need to think about paper. After all, as Paul Eggert pointed out, '[w]hether the textual

carrier be the physical page, a computational capacity, or the sound waves that transmit orally declaimed verse, there is always a material condition of the existence of a text'.⁴⁴ If anything, digitisation's promise of new conditions of materiality offers us a unique opportunity or vantage point from which to tackle questions of materiality that were never fully explored or successfully resolved in relation to traditional analogue sources but which persist in relation to digital forms and formats. Just as I have argued that archived documents may never be more fully visible or present to us than at the moment when they threaten to – or do – physically disappear, in the face of the transformative potential of the digital is it also possible that we might unravel as never before what is distinctive about the physical embodiment of the documents we possess? In the words of Derrida, 'by carrying us beyond paper, the adventures of technology grant us a sort of future anterior; they liberate our reading for a retrospective exploration of the past resources of paper'.⁴⁵ In short, any 'thinking through the archive' that digitisation sponsors should engage us equally in 'thinking through paper' with a renewed sensitivity to the work that paper does.

Endnotes

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