Reading Other People's Mail

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This article is about passion and prurience, about those who write love letters and the scholars who subsequently wish to read them. Focusing on the secret eight year relationship between Australian writers Marjorie Barnard (1897–1987) and Frank Dalby Davison (1893–1970), it examines some of the practical and textual difficulties that the scholar confronts in attempting to trace an intimate relationship through the fragments of correspondence which survive in public collections. It confronts some of the interpretive limits that time and distance impose upon individual letters, as well as suggesting some new reading strategies for literary correspondence.

WHO WRITES WHAT TO WHOM? Who burns their letters? Who keeps them? And why do we want to read them? These are some of the questions that presented themselves to me when I sought to recover details of the relationship between writers Marjorie Barnard and Frank Dalby Davison. Having previously examined Barnard's collaboration with Flora Eldershaw and their links to Davison in the realm of literature and politics,[1] I was now shifting my focus towards what happened under the covers, rather than between them. The letter that got me thinking in this direction went like this:

> [. . .] I was deeply in love with him—I think I still am, but it is all now so confused with pain that I know I don't want to see him again. We were lovers for eight years. I didn't come between him & Kay, that was over and finished before. I don't think I had any bearing on that situation. I loved him from the first time I saw him. He was in love with someone else then and the bottom had fallen out of things [. . .] He turned more & more to me. He could talk to me—about the woman he loved. It hurt, but I could hide it, & he didn't look very closely anyway...Then Frank wanted to make love to me but I found that hard to come at, because I loved him and he didn't pretend to love me, and there hadn't been anyone else. But the hour came when I couldn't stand out against myself [. . .] I think he was a bit in love with me even, he liked my body very much [. . .] I kept a place for us at Kings Cross, we had every Monday evening together [. . .] Eight years is a long time for something like that to last. A couple of times he decided to finish with me, I swallowed my misery & did nothing & he came back. In 1942 I knew things were coming to an end. I still saw him but never alone, nothing said [...] I was, as he said, very naive, I found it hard to believe that there was nothing left of our friendship.[2]

Marjorie Barnard concludes this account of her relationship with Davison with a firm injunction to her friend Jean Devanny to 'Read this, dear Jean, and forget it. It is not a thing to remember'. But do people write of such events in order to have them 'forgotten' or do they write to share the memory? In preserving the letter is a secret trust violated or a memory perpetuated? How secret or sacred can anything be once it has been circulated in letter form? Should a scholar feel squeamish about revealing its contents?

We do not live in squeamish times, so the fact that such an obviously private letter from Barnard to Devanny is now published comes as no surprise. Living as we do in the age of disclosure, our sense of others' privacy, of their right to determine the degree to which they will be exposed, has been systematically eroded by the public's 'right to know'. Nevertheless, this growing prurience nestles quite happily alongside changes in the nature of letters themselves. As we know, the eighteenth century witnessed a shrinking in the letter's public nature and function, so that by the twentieth century the days when each fresh item of correspondence would be shared aloud around the table were long gone. Modern letter writers, no longer anticipating that wider audience, dropped into a more intimate mode of address, frequently indulging in the exchange of more salacious information. As Virginia Woolf observed, it was from its very indiscretion that the modern letter derived its most immediate interest and value. Countering the accusation that the telephone had killed the art of correspondence, she asserted that the modern letter was not dead 'but so much alive as to be quite unprintable'.[3]

Unprintable or not, such letters prove highly readable; the more intimate the revelation, the more gratifying its consumption. But what protocols govern such indulgence? What motivations prompt the reading of other people's mail, whether openly or surreptitiously? Curiosity? Voyeurism? Schadenfreude? People have remarked upon the paradoxical pleasure of the original letter reader, paradoxical because the pleasure is predicated upon the absence of the loved one who writes.[4] But what of the pleasure of those who read at one further remove, we who form the dubious and perhaps unanticipated third corner of a triangle of writer, recipient and interloper? Do we resemble the unnamed narrator of Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*, a scholar who frankly admits there is 'no baseness' he would not commit in the pursuit of Jeffrey Aspern's letters? Coming to Venice in the hope of extracting Aspern's love letters from their recipient, the aged Miss Bordereau, he is prepared to capitalise on any eventuality:

> Then it came to me that she *was* tremendously old—so old that death might take her at any moment, before I should have time to compass my end. The next thought was a correction to that; it lighted up the situation. She would die next week, she would die tomorrow—then I could pounce on her possessions and ransack her drawers.[5]

I neither pounce nor ransack, so why do I pursue love letters? Quite simply, when tracing episodes such as Barnard's relationship with Davison, a married man, and his continuing passion for the children's writer and illustrator, Pixie O'Harris, one finds that the conventional published sources give out little, for in them such secrets are often written over and written out. For example, in her 1983 autobiography, *Was It Yesterday?*, Pixie O'Harris deftly reduces her association with Davison to a mere footnote to her publishing history. 'About this time', she writes of 1934, 'I became acquainted with Frank Dalby Davison who lived nearby. Later I illustrated his book, *Children of the Dark People*'.[6] A few things had slipped Pixie's mind, I would suggest, because her published representation of events provides a stark contrast to Barnard's account from 1935, given in a letter to critic and confidante, Nettie Palmer:

> Then recently Frank fell in love with someone else — a married woman — and her husband, wanting to be free himself, welcomed Frank at first, then, dreading the scandal, the double divorce and what not 'crawled back'. And the lady began to think too — about Frank's poverty, her social position, her children. She returned to her husband and they joined in 'blackguarding' Frank. Kay [his wife] meanwhile was 'no martyr but fighting tooth and nail'.[7]

As Barnard's letter illustrates, correspondence obviously functions as an important supplement to biography by providing information, opinions and

attitudes which, in an instance like this, can change quite dramatically how we interpret a situation. But while that particular letter from Barnard has survived, we are not always so lucky. When dealing with collections of letters, we are inevitably confronted by what we might call the 'fissured archive'. What survives of anyone's letters will be but a fraction of the total, and their survival will be dependent, more often than not, on accident rather than design. While various contemporary writers are ensuring their place in Australian letters by lodging their papers in public collections with unseemly zeal, the lure of posterity has not always offered the same incentive to earlier generations. Scholars must contend with those periods 'when literary property was not greatly prized nor very energetically protected, when notions of Fame were very different from our own'.[8] They must also do battle with differing senses of propriety, with those who honoured suppression over candour, and decency over drama. Inevitably crucial sets of letters are not preserved or preserved in their entirety. There is, for example, only one extant letter, a mere four lines, between Barnard and Eldershaw who each destroyed parts of their mutual correspondence over a number of years. Barnard was so perturbed at the thought of others stockpiling her letters that Nettie Palmer's admission that she kept her letters was, she asserted, 'enough to scuttle me as a correspondent'.[9] Frank Dalby Davison too was chary at such exposure, burning his courtship letters to his second wife, Marie, specifically 'to keep literary people from ever "messing with" [them]'.[10] These combined actions or accidents have ensured that the search for the love letters of this group is a barren one for the most part, as only the fraying edges of what might have been remain to be read. So that is the first problem: the letters that have not survived.

Then there are the ones that have. Even those letters may not always be what they seem, as elements of manipulation can easily enter the field. Where personal reputations are at stake, a little sleight of hand or cutting and pasting is not out of the question. In the Pixie O'Harris Papers in the National Library of Australia, there exist two versions of the one letter from Frank Dalby Davison to Pixie, the original and an edited copy presumably made by Pixie. The original concludes thus:

> Our friendship seems to thrive on a basis of correspondence, doesn't it? Perhaps we should have kept at something like that from the beginning. Touch wood?!
>
> I am very glad to know you are happier than you were in respect of other relationships, and to know that the little girls are well.
>
> Yours, F. D. D.

In the retyped version, however, the general import of the note has altered considerably as all evidence of intimacy is removed. It reads quite chastely:

> Our friendship seems to thrive on a basis of correspondence, doesn't it?
>
> I am very glad to know that the little girls are well.
>
> Yours, F. D. D.[11]

The obvious question is why retype rather than destroy the letter outright as probably happened with other more explicit notes between the two? Well, there are personal reputations and then there are professional ones and the balance of this letter, as with the others that survive between the two, is fulsome in its praise of Pixie's writing. So one can speculate that when it comes to placing peer approval on record, the claims of ego may sometimes outweigh those of absolute propriety. Whatever the motivations here, the result is the same; a partial account preserved, demonstrating again how, as readers and critics, we are left all too often with an archive that resembles a fishing net: the few threads (and an occasional judicious mending) held taut over pockets of nothingness. But it is those significant absences that fire the imagination. As Maud Bailey laments in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, there is always 'something the biographers don't have access to, the real thing, the crucial thing . . . There are always letters that were destroyed. *The* letters, usually'.[12]

The fact that scholars are never playing with a full hand means that they are condemned to live with two further problems when judging the letters that survive. Firstly, the missing letters—quite possibly of a different and more intimate complexion—may be precisely those which will undermine their most precious theories. And secondly, those which remain will only ever mirror the fragmented and contradictory nature of the subject itself. After all, letters do not give unmediated access to the writing self but offer instead discrete instances of self-representation. They are occasions for the projection of what we might call 'ideal selves', fleeting—or flirting—masks adopted according to the demands of recipient and circumstance. If we take one of Barnard's early letters to 'Mr Davison', for example, where she praises two stories he has sent her, graciously accepts his criticism of one of hers, and slips in the following vignette of her recent activities:

> Went to the choral concert in the Great Hall at the University last night. It was very fine, especially Brahms lovely, intricate Gypsy songs. Afterwards I climbed the tower in the dark, up among the bells and got out on the roof. It was good to lean my head against the stone and look at something big. The University always looks so unreal at night with the lawns unnaturally green under the

> electric light and the shadows falling with a sort of inevitable rightness that just doesn't happen.[13]

It is impossible not to contrast the familiar image of Barnard in her wire-rimmed spectacles with the image here of a sensitive, restless, and ever-so-slightly mysterious woman, offering her culture and her learning to a handsome, gifted, if troubled man whose formal education ended at the age of twelve. And offering she is too, for the letter concludes with the startling direct statement that 'I want your friendship very much'. This is a rather different Barnard from the one who in letters to Nettie Palmer claims that she is a 'dull dog' socially.[14] Similarly, the Frank Davison who writes anxiously, if manfully, to Vance Palmer of his nervous breakdowns, is not the same one who writes six pages to Pixie O'Harris in seductive praise of her latest children's book. Honest and intimate expressions of the self? Or personal dramas performed in 'a series of private theaters for an audience of one'.[15]

Keeping these questions in mind, how does one read these 'performances'? Can these letters be read for plot, for autobiographical revelation? Perhaps, but one would clearly be missing key sources because, as noted already, there are major gaps. Only a handful of relatively insignificant letters remain from Barnard to Davison and Davison to Pixie O'Harris, none it seems from Pixie to Frank or Frank to Marjorie. So tracing the bare outline of these relationships would leave one largely dependent upon letters from Barnard and Davison to other parties, chiefly Nettie and Vance Palmer. But it is worth following that path, at least momentarily. One could begin with Barnard's anticipation of their first meeting in 1934 ('Am to meet F. D. Davison on Monday . . . I shall have to wear my best hat which is a pity as it depresses one'), then follow their growing intimacy and Marjorie's increasing involvement in the marital strife that follows Frank's passion for Pixie ('I am sinking even deeper into the Davison's affairs'). From there one could read on through intermittent accounts of Frank and Marjorie's many joint literary activities, their political differences, and Marjorie's passionate admiration for Frank's literary ability. Interspersed are letters over the years from Frank to Pixie asking her to agree to meet with him ('. . .will you let me know when we can have a little time together'). And so it goes on till the breakdown of Davison and Barnard's relationship in 1942 and Davison's divorce and remarriage in 1944. Placing these scattered letters to various recipients in sequence like this produces some interesting effects, after all it is a slightly unnatural way to read them. For one thing, it imposes an alien continuity on the letters, forcing an orderly, seamless narrative from what were once scattered and discontinuous fragments. The pace of revelation becomes a dizzying one for in reading them this way one is not subject to the same delays and hesitations that marked

these letters' original composition and receipt. Instead, it is possible to skip from one letter to the next untroubled by the days or weeks of silence their dates represent and unmoved by the breathless hurry the poor handwriting may imply. Moreover, altered senses of temporality and loss of suspense are not the only consequences of this sequential ordering. Placed in such a context, individual letters also take on new significances, for placed together 'the *correspondence* has a plot of which the *letters* themselves could not be aware, as the letters of a word cannot know the word they spell'.[16] In other words, from the artful interlacing of these individual letters emerge unexpected patterns of response and ironies of juxtaposition. We can see how once Barnard becomes intimately involved with Davison, she stops writing to Nettie in great detail about his domestic affairs and focuses instead on his state of health and his writing. The more intense the attachment to him, the more sympathetic her accounts of his creative labours:

> Have you read the ms of Davison's new book 'Blue Coast Caravan' [. . .] The book as a whole is good, I think, and has some really beautiful passages—lovely natural patterns [. . .] Although Blue Coast Caravan is not another 'Man Shy' it is still, in a way, I think, an advance. He's getting more control over his own literary powers, can tap, more at will, his own springs and hasn't destroyed anything in the process of learning.[17]

While it is possible to use these letters to sketch the outlines of these relationships, filling in those outlines is a more difficult and dicey proposition. Adam Phillips describes lovers as 'notoriously frantic epistemologists, second only to paranoiacs (and analysts) as readers of signs and wonders'.[18] That may be so, but how more desperate then is the scholar following in their footsteps attempting to draw meaning and make conclusions. Unlike the original recipients, scholarly readers lack the shared context that would guarantee full comprehension of so many details in these letters. As Derrida says in *The Post Card*, 'it's not that you are absent or present when I write to you but that I am not there myself when you are reading'.[19] And so scholars must learn to live with ambiguity, with the details they cannot pin down, and with the inevitability of error in a field where the distance between writer and scholarly reader grows daily, luring one further and further into speculation and inference. To give some examples: I recall the friend writing a biography of Eleanor Dark who believed she had at last uncovered a none too secret lover for quiet, conventional Eleanor, a man who seemed to be going just everywhere with her quite openly. Fortuitously, a further note revealed that the name Eleanor bandied about so freely was not that of another man but the family car. On another occasion, I claimed the Eldershaw family's favourite dog, Laddie, as a hitherto unmentioned brother of Flora's, that is,

until he began to round up the sheep. But beyond the unidentifiable names and references there is a further sticking point with this kind of correspondence, for however articulate an individual letter or sequence of letters may be, they cannot tell us what they do not know. No amount of reading or juxtapositioning will open the silences and discover the self-censorship and repression which was obviously practised by these correspondents on matters of the heart. After all, how straightforward can you be when writing to a straight-laced pair like the Palmers who were apt to circulate certain letters received and when you worry that your note might fall into other hands. It follows that in such circumstances correspondents like Barnard and Davison are likely to practise certain forms of conscious and unconscious subterfuge. And so one must contend with ellipsis, code, and impenetrable innuendo. I am thinking here particularly of some of the letters between Barnard and Davison, and between Barnard and Nettie Palmer. Despite being listed as 'restricted' on the catalogue at the National Library (a sure fire way to raise a scholar's interest), the few letters that survive from Barnard to Davison dating from the period of their involvement are, on the surface at least, models of propriety, letters that could easily be left lying around the Davison home. When Barnard on board ship writes of how at night 'the engine throbs [. . .] all over my body, now in my right hip, now in the back of my head and sometimes ticklingly in the soles of my feet',[20] she is only writing of the engine, is she not? And when she tells Davison that her holiday in the country 'makes me happy in an aching sort of way—with gaps' and that she 'read [Marcel] Aurousseau's "Beyond the Pyranees" [sic] and looked at the view, layering the two things in my mind with a third that is always there',[21] it is again scarcely compromising. Her letters to Nettie Palmer betray a similar obliquity and a peculiar preciousness that is perhaps the product of a stifled desire to tell what she cannot bring herself to tell, a paradoxical impulse to reveal that something has been concealed. Consider this description of relations between Flora Eldershaw, Davison and herself:

> We see a good deal of Frank. By some happy & unexpected *chemical process* we have become a group. I'm *secretly* amazed & happy to find myself where I am.[22]

Surely those references to chemistry and secrecy deserve a second glance. Then there is Barnard's earlier description of Kay Davison seeking advice from her on her marital woes, a visit that almost certainly coincided with Marjorie's own growing passion for Davison:

> Kay is coming here to lunch next Thursday, on purpose, I suspect, to tell me her troubles. *This is dreadful*—search desperately as I may I seem to have nothing to give anybody. I'm a *disappointing confidante* anyway. I seldom get all hot & *urge people to fight for their rights*.[23]

What is the real source of dread here? Does the description of Marjorie as 'a disappointing confidante' not point to the things she herself is unable to confide to others? And why, indeed, would she of all people urge Kay to fight for her rights as a wife? The unconscious is surely struggling here to make itself heard. When Barnard does finally reveal her involvement to Vance Palmer, not surprisingly, it is in a form that says everything—and nothing:

> Perhaps you already know what has happened. You see deeper than other people because I think there is so much less of yourself obscuring your vision & I at least would be willing for you to know what I should hate to have anyone else touch. Frank. I'd pick up my chin and go through but there isn't any other side. The necessity of keeping silent and still is a sort of protection.[24]

Shifting from the sexual to the textual side of things, however, the letters are rather more forthcoming. Certainly the matrix of these letters can be used to recover some understanding of the role these personal attachments played in the professional domain to which these writers belonged. We know from Barnard's and Davison's letters to Nettie Palmer that their initial encounter was prompted by admiration for each other's published work. Within a few short months they were exchanging manuscripts for comment, and casual opinion soon gave way to formal editorial advice when Barnard's help was enlisted on the troubled manuscript of Davison's *Blue Coast Caravan.* While Barnard sweated over the manuscript, Davison sweated over her opinion. 'No word from Marjorie', he confided rather theatrically to Nettie Palmer. 'She is coming up to dinner next week. I called her up on the 'phone this morning to make arrangements. Reference to the ms was avoided. The suspense grows exciting'.[25] Barnard's criticism in this instance was hard hitting ('seven pages packed with necessarily brutal comment') and Davison it seems returned the compliment with a similar level of damning honesty on Barnard's writing. 'Have been wrestling with some short stories', she relates to Nettie, 'but they continue bad. Frank declares that they are "beautifully done", but that every time I write one I "leave life poorer than I found it". I ought to commit suicide after that'.[26] Obviously the engagement of minds as well as emotions here proved a fruitful one as the effort each expended on the other clearly exceeds that which could reasonably have been expected from a mere colleague (and competitor). Similar influences and debts could be traced on the political front.[27]

People have argued that over the years Davison benefited more from the arrangement than Barnard, gaining not simply a woman willing to participate in an affair without the conventional guarantees of marriage and respectability, but an enviable level of informed and partisan support for his creativity, public

and private endorsement of his talent, and a convenient social set-up through which to showcase his growing fame.[28] But perhaps one should not underestimate the secret satisfaction Barnard may have derived from knowing herself to be desired, however conditionally, by a man she judged to be highly desirable nor the complex ways in which this intimacy may have fed her fiction, contributing particularly to the production of her highly successful short stories in *The Persimmon Tree* and elsewhere. Going back to the letters again, this time to read them against that later Barnard fiction, it is possible to trace what we might call a pattern of 'dress-rehearsals'. As noted already, in many of her letters to others, Barnard avoided telling the whole truth, instead she used selective facts to create acceptable fictions, smoothing out her accounts of events and intimacies to satisfy the demands of discretion. The act of story-telling, of re-presenting had already begun as the letters traversed the delicate path between life, consequences, and fiction. Take the account of a meeting between herself and Davison from a letter to Nettie Palmer in 1935:

> We met at a P.E.N. luncheon and went around afterwards and had a look at Harvey's one man show at the Macquarie Galleries [. . .] The exhibition was, but for us, quite deserted and the lofty pale-walled rooms were full of the sort of tranquility that makes even a train passing outside sound dramatic—like the sound of a galloping horse on a dark still night in the country. So we sat down in front of a picture of three melons leaning, in ineffable peace, against a pink wall, and talked of the Art of Letters with the innocent garrulity of people who each feel assured that the other knows no more than he. Frank I think, was glad to redress the balance with abstractions.[29]

Compare that scene, with another taken from the story, 'It's Dangerous to Pause', written in the mid to late 1940s:

> It happened next afternoon that they were alone in the high tranquil rooms of a little gallery looking out on a quiet street, an old porticoed building and a jacaranda tree across the way [. . .] it was like being inside a bubble floating in still air. Rhonda couldn't remember now whose exhibition it had been though she had once been enthusiastic about the man, but she could recapture the feeling of the pictures. Most of them were still lifes and the artist used a palette of subdued but clear colours that had, upon her at least, a curiously harmonious effect like the unassailable rightness of long remembered and familiar poetry. There was one picture of melons and a sunlit wall, nothing else, that had this quality so strongly that it seemed to shed a light of its own coming not from any insistence but from an inner quality.
>
> The room put its peace upon them and they were content to sit and talk, time mattering not at all. Everything went right that day. She had brought Len to the one place where they could become effortlessly intimate. He told her something about his life, more about his feelings, hinted at the disappointment of his

> marriage. She had a pre-view of Chloe, hard, worldly, thirsty for success. Rhonda and Len had in common the frustration of their marriages. They communicated their feelings to one another with every refinement of reticence, all the delicacy of unfinished sentences, of little silences and faint praises.[30]

What emerges is a pattern of conscious and unconscious retextualising of events previously presented in correspondence, with the letters forming the first stage in the fiction-making process, and the stories marrying the realms of memory, narrative, and suggestibility. Not all instances are as explicit as the one cited here; others tend to be more ephemeral, but equally resonant. For example, in a range of stories in *The Persimmon Tree* dealing with the attendant risks and humiliations of adulterous liaisons, small fragments of the original representation of Frank and Pixie's affair and the marital strife that followed are revived, revised, and recreated.

In pursuing this connection between letters and stories, another twist occurred to me. If letters could become stories, is it possible that the reverse may happen and stories take the place of letters, especially letters that cannot be written? Consider this episode. In 1944 Marjorie Barnard took the unusual step of submitting a very old 'M. Barnard Eldershaw' story, 'The Broken Threshold' along with one of her own for possible inclusion in Vance Palmer's edition of *Coast to Coast*. Interestingly, when Palmer decides against publishing the story, Barnard confesses that 'I'm relieved on the whole that you don't want 'Broken threshold' — there were various reasons for submitting it, none of them literary'.[31] What might those other 'reasons' be? Why that story and why attempt to publish it then? One possible interpretation is that in 1944 Barnard and Davison are no longer in direct communication, no more letters move between the two. Davison has recently divorced and will shortly remarry. Whatever else he might be doing, Barnard knows Davison will read *Coast to Coast*, after all, he submitted his own story, 'The Road to Yesterday' to it.[32] 'The Broken Threshold' is an account of a forty-something spinster who has loved and lost, foregoing, as she puts it, 'what women want, a husband, a home, a baby'. Perhaps in publishing it Barnard was hoping to send a tribute to memory, a muted reminder that—as the story says—it was not only 'the young, the beautiful and the elegant [who] loved'?[33]

In the end, reading these letters is like being the proverbial eavesdropper on a telephone call, inferring from the overheard fragments of information, those portions of the conversation to which one is not privy. I read between the lines, but this partial, disconnected dialogue leaves me unable to clarify so many details of the relations between the Marjorie, Frank and Pixie, scenarios I can picture but not pin down. For example, it would appear at

one stage Davison dined fairly regularly at Barnard's, and Barnard makes quite of point of mentioning that she was introduced to Davison's father:

> Met Davison père after the meeting. Frank was so anxious that I should make a good impression that I was rather intimidated.[34]

Davison tries to persuade Barnard's mother to surrender a photo of Barnard that he wanted and later, when Barnard and her mother take a cruise to Cairns, he farewells Barnard at the dock with chocolates and flowers. Is it possible that these various actions combined with her intimate knowledge of the state of Davison's marriage never brought Barnard to expect that one day Davison would indeed divorce—and marry her? After all, in an early letter to him she speaks of the pleasure she gained from seeing her name and his coupled together in the dedication in Vance Palmer's *Sea and Spinifex*.[35] Another sticking point: years after his apparent dismissal, Davison is still in correspondence with Pixie O'Harris, seemingly familiar with her movements and her work, and requesting further meetings:

> Will you drop me a line telling me when I can see you again? Could we meet at the same place one afternoon soon?[. . .] I don't know what we will do but on past showing we won't find each other's company boring.[36]

Was Barnard aware of these continued meetings? Did she, passing her days quietly writing at home, imagine her lover did likewise? Or was she forced to turn a blind eye, having already witnessed first hand his indifference to his wife's voluble jealousy? We will probably never know. Finally, piecing together the potentially hectic round of female company Davison kept, should I seek some alternative interpretations of his famed nervous condition?

Clearly my work on this topic is shaped by what I do not know and will never know, for ultimately it is the material losses, the absences and the subtle silences which structure my reading of these letters. But perhaps this is only in character, for after all, love letters by their very nature embody loss, for they are a form of writing that strives to make absent bodies present: as though the heaping up of words or the spilling out of narrative can draw out the loved one and produce the illusion of full presence. But as Anne Carson laments, this 'absence from the syntax of my life is not a fact to be changed by written words'.[37]

Endnotes

1. For further details about the writing careers of Frank Dalby Davison, Marjorie Barnard, and her collaborator Flora Eldershaw, see Louise Rorabacher, *Frank Dalby*

Davison, Twayne, Boston, 1979; Maryanne Dever, 'Finding "M. Barnard Eldershaw"', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, pp. 65–75; and Maryanne Dever, 'The Case for Flora Eldershaw', *Hecate*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1989, pp. 38–48.

2. Barnard to Jean Devanny, 1/1/47, JC JD/CORR (P)/16. Published in Carole Ferrier (ed.), *As Good As A Yarn With You: Letters Between Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw and Eleanor Dark*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 156–57.
3. Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Letters' *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, Hogarth, London, 1966, p. 262.
4. Joy Hooton, 'Life-Lines in Stormy Seas: Some Recent Collections of Women's Diaries and Letters', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1993, p. 10.
5. Henry James, 'The Aspern Papers', *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. xii, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1922, p. 24.
6. Pixie O'Harris, *Was it Yesterday?*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1983, p. 39.
7. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 22/3/35, Palmer Papers NLA MSS 1174/1/4622-7. Permission to reproduce the work of M. Barnard courtesy of the copyright owner Alan Alford, c/- Curtis Brown (Aust) Pty Ltd, Sydney.
8. Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography*, Pimlico, London, 1993, p. 2. For an interesting discussion of how the relations of gender and power also dictate what is preserved in any period, see Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 6ff.
9. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 9/4/35, NLA MSS 1174/1/4642. Sensitivity to Barnard's feelings on this matter possibly caused Helen and Aileen Palmer to consider not including Barnard's letters among their parents' correspondence when it was lodged with the National Library. See Aileen Palmer to Helen Palmer, 28/6/65, Helen G. Palmer Papers NLA MSS 6083, Box 2.
10. Quoted in Louise Rorabacher, *Frank Dalby Davison*, Twayne's, Boston, 1979, p. 138.
11. Both copies are undated, headed simply 'Thursday'. Pixie O'Harris Papers NLA MSS 4800. I would like to thank the Frank Dalby Davison Estate and the National Library for permission to quote from Davison's correspondence.
12. A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Vintage, London, 1990, p. 89.
13. Barnard to Davison, 19/9/34, Davison Papers NLA MSS 1945/1/23.
14. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 1/3/33, NLA MSS 1174/1/4210.
15. Catharine Stimpson, 'The Female Sociograph: The Theater of Virginia Woolf's Letters', Domna Stanton (ed.), *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 169.
16. Daniel Karlin (ed.), *Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett: The Courtship Correspondence 1845–1846*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, p. xii. A similar point is made by Olaf Stapledon to his fiancé, Agnes Miller, in a letter from France on 4 July 1916: "If all our letters were to be read through on end, alternately yours and mine, what a lot they would tell that we had not in mind to tell at the time of writing. They would tell of all sorts of changes and fluctuations and gradual evolvings that we knew nothing of at the time." From Robert Crossley (ed.), *Talking Across the World: The Love Letters of Olaf Stapledon and Agnes Miller, 1913–1919*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1987, p.xx. Again, Anaïs Nin remarked that "If all my letters were put together they would reveal startling contradictions". Quoted in Gunther Stuhlmann (ed.), *A Literate Passion: Letters of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, 1932–53*, Allison & Busby, London, 1992, p. xix.
17. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 26/2/35, NLA MSS 1174/1/4606.

18. Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 41.
19. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, Trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 123.
20. Barnard to Davison, 31/8/39, NLA MSS 1945/1/115:94.
21. Barnard to Davison, 9/9/36, NLA MSS 1945/1/115.
22. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 31/7/37, NLA MSS 1174/1/5292. Emphasis added.
23. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 28/4/35, NLA MSS 1174/1/4655–6. Emphasis added.
24. Barnard to Vance Palmer, 14/7/38, NLA MSS 1174/1/5363–66.
25. Davison to Nettie Palmer, c. March 1935, NLA MSS 1174/1/4554.
26. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 20/11/36, NLA MSS 1174/1/5169.
27. For a detailed discussion of the political writing of Barnard and Davison, see Robert Darby, 'While Freedom Lives: Political Preoccupations in the Writing of Marjorie Barnard and Frank Dalby Davison, 1935–47', unpublished PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, 1989.
28. See, for example, Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles At Home: Australian Women Writers 1925–1945*, Sirius Books, Sydney, 1981, and Carole Ferrier's introduction to *As Good As A Yarn With You*.
29. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 9/4/35, NLA MSS 1174/1/4642.
30. Marjorie Barnard, 'It's Dangerous to Pause', in *But Not For Love: Stories of Marjorie Barnard and M. Barnard Eldershaw*, ed. Robert Darby, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 220–21.
31. Barnard to Vance Palmer, 5/10/44, NLA MSS 1174/1/6641.
32. Frank Dalby Davison, 'The Road to Yesterday', in *Coast to Coast: Australian Stories 1944*, ed. Vance Palmer, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1945, pp. 220–51.
33. M. Barnard Eldershaw, 'The Broken Threshold', in Darby, op. cit., p. 43.
34. Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 16/1/37, NLA MSS 1174/1/5218.
35. The original letter from Barnard has not survived, but Davison paraphrases her comments in a letter to Vance Palmer in December 1934, NLA MSS 1174/1/4535.
36. Davison to Pixie O'Harris, 22/11/38, NLA MSS 4800.
37. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1986, p. 52.