Chapter 5
Introduction to the Letters

Turning to the archival material included in the second part of this book, there are, firstly, copies of 23 brief letters from David Bohm to his former girlfriend, Hanna Loewy, 12 of which were written in 1950 before Bohm went to Brazil. One (also brief) letter from Hanna to Bohm survives, not included here, dated June 7, 1950, telling Bohm that although she loves him she does not want to marry him. A letter from Bohm specifically replying to this June 7 letter explains that he has completed his book, Quantum Theory (Bohm 1989). Loewy was the daughter of Lilly, who had married Erich Kahler, a Jewish intellectual and writer on social philosophy who had fled Nazi Europe. Bohm had lived as a lodger in Kahler's house while he was in Princeton, which was then renowned as a centre of intellectual life, attracting visitors that included Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and Jacob Bronowski.[1] The folder numbers in the Birkbeck archives are C37-40 and C97. Here, they are letters 1–12 (1950) in Chap. 14, and letters 13–23 (1951–53) in Chap. 15. Also, two letters from David Bohm to Lilly Kahler from December 1953 are included as letters 24 and 25 in Chap. 15 (folder number C96 in the Birkbeck archives). It seems that the C37-40 material was obtained by Bohm himself, probably when he needed evidence to back his application for an American passport, whereas C96 and C97 were obtained by David Peat.

Next, there are copies of 30 letters to Bohm's friend and fellow physicist Melba Phillips (two of which are incomplete). Phillips, like Bohm, had been a student of Oppenheimer, and also refused to testify under the McCarthy witch-hunt. In her case, it was the McCarran internal security commission, whereas with Bohm it was the

[1] Peat (1996), pp. 84–5.

C. Talbot (ed.), *David Bohm: Causality and Chance, Letters to Three Women*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55492-1_5

House Un-American Activities Committee, HUAC. She was sacked from Brooklyn College in 1952 and, although a talented physicist who co-authored a textbook that is still in use, remained unemployed for five years. Melba died in 2004, so I spoke to Melba's niece, Ellen Vinson (Wolfe 2015), but unfortunately she has no knowledge of any material relating to David Bohm, including the originals of these letters. The folder numbers in the Birkbeck archives are C46-49, and they are included here as letters 26–55 in Chaps. 16–19.

Finally, there are photocopies of 68 letters (10 of which are incomplete, plus five loose pages from missing letters) from Bohm to Miriam Yevick, a mathematician who was married to physicist George Yevick but had a personal relationship with Bohm. Yevick had fled from Nazi Europe with her family at the age of 15, which she has detailed in her book (Yevick 2012). She obtained a PhD in Mathematics at MIT in 1947, the first woman to obtain this qualification.

These photocopies were obtained by David Peat from originals held by Yevick. Peat explains how his wife persuaded Miriam to stuff letters and documents into plastic bags and accompany her to a photocopying shop. After a while, Miriam said "That's enough", and took the bags back (Peat 2005). Consequently, only a part of this valuable material is available, sometimes with poor quality copies.[2] Repeated emails from me, attempting to obtain access to Miriam Yevick's letters, have met with no reply. Only one letter from Miriam Yevick to Bohm is in the archives, and it is not included here. It is from late 1951, mainly of a personal character, but also explaining a mathematical point (on a "strong law" in probability theory). Additionally, there is one letter to George Yevick, probably from early 1952, on Bohm's ideas about the "ether" or "substratum". The folder numbers in the Birkbeck archives for the Yevick letters are C115-126, and they are included here as Letters 56–124 in Chaps. 20–33.

It is hard to make sense of the development of Bohm's ideas just from reading through all the letters. Scientific and philosophical issues such as quantum theory, statistical mechanics, causality and determinism are juxtaposed with personal concerns about the possibility of sexual relationships in Brazil and problems of repeated diarrhoea and sickness. Mixed up with philosophical discussions of the qualitative infinity of levels, one finds endless political analysis from a pro-Soviet viewpoint, not to mention the agonies of suffering from severe depression. In order to give some assistance to the reader (hopefully!), I have outlined some themes, giving appropriate references to the letters in each case. The themes are Philosophy, Mathematics, Development of the Causal Approach to Quantum Mechanics, Probability and Statistical Mechanics, Feminism, Politics, Soviet Physics and Philosophy and Psychological Issues.

[2] See Figs. 9.1–9.3 in Chap. 9 for an example.

References

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