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'From Oral History to Narrative Research'

Oral History: the problem

Despite the increasing tendencies to proclaim the inter/disciplinarity of fields of research, the lack of boundaries can create conceptual difficulties because of the impact on what kind of questions one asks of one's material, and to whom the answers might be of interest. On the one hand, institutions create communities of shared interests but Phd research can pivot between inclusion and exclusion to accepted research terrains, or the 'home' we left behind in our search for new ways of thinking about problems. What follows below is a consideration of reconciling Oral History with Narrative Research, in which the former is characterized as a method for gathering information about the past for History, while the latter is more concerned with the construction of narrative forms within, but not exclusively, social science research (Andrews et al. 2008; Hyvärinen 2006). In Britain Oral History is particularly associated with 'history from below' as espoused by Raphael Samuel, and Paul Thompson whose *The Voice of the Past* (1988) has been a standard text for historians interested in using oral sources. In common with Narrative Research, British oral history work is used to 'treat narratives as modes of resistance to existing structures of power' (Andrews et al, 2008 p. 4) but the truth claims of narratives remains a problematic issue. Whereas historians may use other sources for verification, the emphasis in Narrative Research is more about personal, cultural, or social meanings and the diverse 'truths' that can emerge in individual story telling. Although life histories contain 'facts', they sit more comfortably as 'narratives of experience' (Squire 2008).

In my attempt to reflect on the experience and meaning of recording artists' life histories for a public oral history archive held at The British Library, the question of whether I was being told the 'truth' was less an issue for me personally than it was for my sense of responsibility towards the archive. However, what does 'truth' mean in life history work, especially with artists for whom imaginative and creative constructions permeate their thinking and working lives?

Conscious of taking part in an 'oral history project', the participants were respectful of certain 'facts' of their careers but, like the chronicle, the C.V. does not constitute a personal narrative of experience, or 'thematic biography'. The archive's concern with factual accuracy, was I felt, missing the point: life histories as occasions for making sense of the past from the vantage point of the present, narratives of experience with which listeners can engage and expand their sense of the world and its meanings. However, as Joan W. Scott has pointed out, therein lies another danger: the privileging of experience as 'incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation- as a foundation on which the analysis is based' (Scott 1991 p. 777).

Reconstruction and Construction

The privileged status of oral history interviews comes from their position as testimony, as zero-degree of separation from events in the past. The fallibility of memory has been used to challenge, or problematize reliance on such testimony as historical evidence (Thompson 1988; Tuchman 1996) reinforcing History's opposition to fiction. Although historians have explored histories-as-text in order to demonstrate its textual constructed-ness (Thompson 1988; White 1973; White 1978; White 1987), the positive intersection between history and fiction and how this occurs has remained largely unexplored except for the work of Alessandro Portelli. In *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* (Portelli 1991) explores the significance of a misremembered date in order to show how memory functions as meaning-making in the present about the past. Portelli's interviewees provide a coherent emplotment of the events that led to the death of Trastulli but one that signified what the shooting meant to them and the community of workers in the past seen through the prism of the present. Concluding his investigation, Portelli notes:

...if oral sources had given us "accurate," "reliable," factual *reconstructions* of the death

of Luigi Trastulli, we would know much less about it. Beyond the event as such, the

real and significant historical fact which these narratives highlight is the memory itself. (p. 26) (emphasis added)

Portelli's provides a compelling example of how testimony as narrative is subject to Ricoeur's conception of configuration from the 'prefigured' elements demonstrating the narrators competence as story tellers of politically important events in Italian history. The

term 'reconstruction' indicates the positivist character ('factual') of conventional historical accounts; historians are involved in reconstructing past events into meaningful accounts. Testimony, however, even as a narrative, functions as a trace of the past because it is never complete, is always partial, awaiting the 'historian' to use the trace in order to create (another) plot. Even for as sensitive a researcher as Portelli, his interviewees' stories function as his 'data'.

Ricoeur locates the reality principle of historical texts as a form of debt, which historians pay to the dead. Reconstruction, therefore, has at its root an ethical responsibility to assemble the traces of 'what was one day 'real' because historians 'know themselves to be bound by a debt to people from earlier times, to the dead' (1988, p. 100). It is this ethical imperative that binds historians to the documents, or traces:

As soon as the idea of a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom

something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning. In its epistemological naiveté, positivism at least preserved the significance of the document, namely that it functions as a trace left by the past...(1988, p.119).

Ricoeur notes the institutional character of documents as a 'proof' or 'warrant' that 'nourish [history's] claim to be based on facts', commenting also on the expansion of documents to include 'anything that can inform a scholar' (1988, p.117). Oral testimony functions as such a document but my focus here is to untangle the testimony itself as a narrative construction, or in Ricoeur's terminology, a *configuration* (emplotment) that makes sense of the various elements and is an operation common to both History and fiction; both open 'the kingdom of as if' (1984, p. 64). Although at this stage Ricoeur sets aside the distinction between the "imaginary" of fiction, and the "real" of historical narratives, it is to situate emplotment as the paradigmatic function of *configuration* 'without regard for the differences that concern truth claims of the two classes of narrative' i.e. historical and fictional. Even false testimony still arises from a real situation in which something happened, and 'To the extent that historians perform the historiographical operation well they give a substitute representation of the past. A well made substitute is faithful to the available evidence and so deserves to be called true even though it is always amendable or reformable' (Dauenhauer 2005).

In order to understand, and untangle the various threads that unite oral history, narrative, and fiction, Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988) has been particularly important for me because through its engagement with the representation of temporality in narratives, it considers history and fiction as the two principal narrative modes in Western culture, distinguished by their different registers of what is 'real' - rather than focusing on the instrumentality of 'truth'. By complicating the concept of mimesis, Ricoeur is able to do justice to the complex referentiality of texts, their truth-claims, and their reception. Mimesis, for Ricoeur, draws on the Aristotelian tradition in which mimesis is 'a fundamental expression of human experience in the world' (Kelly 1998 vol. 3, p. 233) rather than the suspicion of mimesis within the Platonic tradition which could be seen to drive positivist interpretations of narratives (Josselson 2004). Ricoeur's tripartite conception of mimesis (mimesis 1, 2, and 3) provides a framework, or 'hermeneutic circle', within which one can grasp the mimetic correspondences of history and fiction: *prefiguration* as the competence needed to understand the world and actions; *configuration* as the work of emplotment; while the work of *refiguration* marks the 'intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader' (Ricoeur 1984 p.71). Under mimesis3, narratives create 'worlds' and it is as such that oral history narratives of experience might be better understood.

Recapitulation and Reconstruction

Ricoeur has posed the fundamental question for historians and narrative researchers working with oral history documents: 'How are we to interpret history's claim when it constructs a narrative, to reconstruct something from the past? What authorizes us to think of this construction as a reconstruction?' Rather than focusing on the principle of truth, Ricoeur proposes an exploration of 'reality' and 'unreality in narration' (1988, p. 5). This reframing of the problem collapses the opposition of truth versus untruth, and allows one rather to understand oral histories as both reconstructions of historical events and narrative constructions.

The historian in Ricoeur's formulation is a specific kind of scholar, a professional, academic researcher rather than the oral history witness whose testament becomes a trace ('data') for use by the

academic historian. Clearly, though, witnesses too feel a debt that their accounts seek to repay. But in what ways is an oral history interview a trace of the past? Traces are by their nature incomplete whereas oral histories are attempts to provide a more complete account in the form of a story. Through the use of descriptive passages, narrators *construct* stories in order to *reconstruct* events. They too become historians, not just in terms of their recollection of past events in order to feed the historian, but as creators of meaning about those events (Portelli 1991). Oral history offers the opportunity, and narrative provides the means whereby individual interviewees become historians.

The term 'oral history' seems to cover both the history that is told, as well as the History that is then written from the oral sources; a double interpretative operation in which the narrator recapitulates 'the told in the telling' while the historian reconstructs the told in his/her telling. Narrative is therefore the fundamental core of oral history and in order to understand the meaning of its accounts, attention needs to be paid to its configuration, which, as is the case with Portelli's respondents, will draw on a variety of already-told versions; for Ricoeur the interplay between sedimentation (tradition) and innovation (1984 p. 68-9). In oral history, therefore, a construction is always, a *reconstruction*, forever subject to retellings, or more accurately, *reconfiguration* since reconstructions provide the occasion of thinking again, or thinking differently about past events. As Ricoeur so aptly states, the individual in interpreting his/her life 'appears as both a reader and the writer of [his/her] own life', and 'the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful and fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told' (1988, p.246). So, rather than assuming the interview/recording stands with the final authority of a historical document, the accounts should rather be understood as situated within a particular context, achieved in and for a specific moment or function which changes each time the story is told.

This point is reiterated by the psychologist Jerome Bruner (Bruner 1987) in his suggestion that 'stories are made and not found' but he extends it to account for ways in which:

the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with

them

become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience

itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative

up to the present but directing it into the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not "how it was"

but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold' (1987, p. 708).

This instability is an anxiety in oral history but a productive problematic in narrative research as Bruner suggests. Telling the same story twice, not only alerts researchers to their significance but provides resources for understanding how stories are reconfigured but allows one to explore the possible conditions and the forms of their reconstruction, as in the thrice told story by the master weaver Peter Collingwood of the events surrounding a joint exhibition with the ceramic artist Hans Coper (1920-1981) held in 1968.

Three versions of the story exist: an illustrated, written lecture (April 2003), an audio recording (May 2003), and a video film (October 2007), the latter two both conducted by me. Further, it is likely that Peter would have recounted this story elsewhere because Coper, an influential figure was famously reticent and shy, but someone whom Peter knew and greatly respected.

On opening night we saw the catalogue for first time. It was well-designed but there were NO PRICES or any HINT that everything was for sale!! A year's worth of work, and then no prospect of a return. "Right", said Hans, immediately and furiously, "I'll take all my stuff and sell it on the street outside." Eventually we calmed down and a notice appeared saying INQUIRIES AT DESK. But I found subsequently that I only got orders by hanging around the exhibition almost every single day!! [Lecture, April 2003]. (Collingwood 2003)

<p>Audio May 2003</p> <p>And we went there on the day of the opening and we were shown this very handsome catalogue they'd produced. And immediately we saw there wasn't a mention of a price or that anything was for sale. So Hans blew up and said "Right, I'll take everything out and sell it on the pavement outside". Because the V&A's view was that, "It's not our position to put a value on your work. If</p>	<p>Video October 2007</p> <p><i>Were you able to sell work from that exhibition?</i></p> <p>Well, the V&A didn't think we should [laughs] because when we got there on the opening night we saw this rather nice catalogue, we said "Well where is the slip that gives the prices?" They said, "Well you know the V&A can't give prices on things like this". So Hans Coper was furious. He said, "I'll take everything out of here onto the</p>
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we say this hanging is worth 50 quid, it would be like us saying, us putting a valuation on it and we're not in the business of doing that".	pavement outside and sell it to the public out here". But he didn't.
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Certain features are present in all three versions above: the catalogue, the lack of sale prices, Coper's fury and threat. The lecture provides a succinct recapitulation of the complete event, which resulted in the notice ('INQUIRIES AT DESK') and the need for Peter to take care of sales himself ('!!!'). Emphasis is provided by key phrases in upper case capitals and exclamation marks (which the audio and video transcripts here do not provideⁱⁱ). The subsequent tellings are lengthier mainly because they offered more time (the audio recording amounts to 13 hours, the video to 4 1/2 hours) but each of the narratives responds to the specificity of its context. The lecture must be to the point but as a public performance contain some drama as well as providing a particular memory of Coper, possibly unique to Collingwood. The audio recording (the 'oral history') provides a 'thick description' of which this is only a short section, but it includes the Museum's reasons for not providing a price-list. In the video, undertaken for an archive of craftspeople, I found I had to insert a question so that Collingwood could tell this part of the story since we both knew that it was important: as a Coper story, as an exhibition story, as Museum story, as well as a story of collaboration and solidarity between two master artist-craftsmen (the shift from 'Hans' to 'we'). For the video, I am an interviewer rather than an oral historian. However, the meaning of the narratives, a leitmotiv throughout all three accounts, is the financial pressure: 'A year's worth of work, and then no prospect of a return'; 'NO PRICES or any HINT that everything was for sale!!!' The audio version has: 'immediately we saw there wasn't a mention of a price or that anything was for sale'; in the video 'we said, "Well where is the slip that gives the prices?"' The audio version is the least dramatic in that it forms part of much lengthier description of the gallery space, the design, the architect, the V&A personnel. The lecture and the filmed version, however, provide a more 'entertaining' version with more reported speech, destined for a larger audience as opposed to one oral history researcher.

Conclusion

What do the above differences mean to an oral historian? Is the lengthier audio version 'better' than the others? In a

straightforward sense, it is because it explains more but what it explains is Collingwood, even though it also provides a description of the exhibition. However, the meaning of the story is not the exhibition, but a story about both Coper and Collingwood's resourcefulness in dealing with financial difficulties. From the above excerpts, it would seem that oral history has no claim to privilege here since the story is told elsewhere. However, the fact that the audio recording was a life history, is important in understanding that it answers the question 'Who?' and 'the identity of this "who"... must be a narrative identity' (Ricoeur 1988, p. 246). It is not sufficient, therefore, to treat oral history as a transparent account of the past but to examine its function as a particular form of narrative construction and reconstruction in which a subject (the self) begins to emerge. Rather than using individuals as objects of research, Narrative Research provides the means of seeing them as subjects. In conclusion, as Squire suggests:

By focusing on narrative, we are able to investigate not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; [and] the mechanisms by which they are consumed... (Squire, 2008)

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i This paper will concentrate on *Time and Narrative v.3* although the earlier two volumes also address time, narrative and mimesis. The successive, developmental aspect of the 3 volumes (in fact all of Ricoeur's work) provides a parallel 'emplotment' of the themes that preoccupy his thinking, aspects also explored in *Memory, History and Forgetting* (2004) but not a text I use in this paper.

ii A paradox in oral history research is the reliance on transcripts. It is possible that eventually multimedia presentations may change this restriction.