

The revival of narrative in
History and the History Classroom

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More years ago than I care to count, when I was a sprig of a fellow and convinced that I knew it all, and if only folk would stop a minute and listen to me, the world might well get straight, I was running a conference for history teachers and came by a problem. In those unregenerate days we were mainly men, a fairly rough and casual lot, prone to laugh at most things and very cynical; in this group there was one odd colleague, a lady with a slight accent and rather more pronounced ways who kept asking me for a slot on the timetable for telling us all about story telling. Story telling! Good grief, that was for babies, Joyce Grenfell stuff, not for us who tackled serious matters with big fat difficult lads - I puzzled how to protect my colleagues from this dangerous lady, and managed to do so until the Friday, when she found a spare half hour, and I had no excuses left. So I opened the bar, gave the lads a stiff drink, and we all giggled mightily at the prospect. We trooped in, prepared for a big laugh, and within thirty seconds we were entranced, delighted, joining in, putty in her hands. 'That woman is a genius', I confided several drinks later, and, my courage improved, I approached her and apologised for my stupidity: I had been looking at a greatly gifted teacher, with much to give, and with my bad eyes I had seen a clown. With great good humour and not a trace of triumph, she agreed to teach me how to do it.

Freda Saxey taught me many things about story telling, about eye-contact, about movement and gesture, about the shaping of a story, about the importance of characterisation by voices, and I practised these assiduously until I became quite good at it, and my goodness it was very enjoyable. I learned more about teaching through the business of telling stories than in any other way, and the pleasure of the event was remarkable - somewhere between Dickens and Max Miller is about the mark of it. I recall one summer's day returning to a school I had not visited

for some time, and I was observed through the open windows - 'Ere, Miss, this Mr, Dr, oh, you know - it's Julius Caesar back again', and all the children cheered. Poor teacher - but she didn't seem to mind. All very delightful for all concerned, but with fairly typical perversity I had discovered the power of story just at the moment when academic historians were consigning it to the lowest depths of hell. All of my colleagues were plodding through Annales with a dictionary of sociological French to hand, reading conterfactual analyses from America, logging parish registers onto computers, applying Marx like billy-ho and pondering on Freudian explanations of the odd little-ways of the great and the good and conveniently dead. One Third Programme broadcast on the homosexual dreams of poor old Laud had me worried for weeks. Models were erected then deconstructed, and by the time post-deconstructionalism came in I was frankly lost - History had turned into the quaintly daft or the frankly boring, and the only point on which everybody agreed was that story-telling was a bad thing.

In some ways those who attacked narrative were taking a very simple-minded position: because story was an essentially literary art it was too much invention, it was a perversion of the truth. This feeling had a long history in itself, we must remember that it was way back in 1931 that Herbert Butterfield had defied the Whigs and identified a sequence of biases in the great narrative historians that smacked of liberal conspiracy. What seems so odd in all this is that the opponents of story in history were all perfectly agreed that one could never get at 'truth' anyway and were using models and interpretations and analyses that put an equally powerful set of reins on the subject matter. Many of the more advanced in this school poured scorn on research techniques themselves, on 'empiricism', with an equal zest. Could it be that they felt more justification in presenting a biased view than the old masters, and if so, where did they find this justification, other than in an ideological commitment that had little to do with the craft of history itself? One thing was certain, they hated narrative, and along with Levi-Strauss denounced it as 'fraudulent'.

No wonder I turned my coat collar up as I slipped in at the back doors

of schools to indulge my secret vice of story-telling, and no wonder that my colleagues, when they caught me at it clicked their tongues and cast their eyes to heaven. I was at such a loss that I even applied for a job in Coventry, anxious to make it a free-will move. They didn't even want me there. But hope was round the corner, and from the strangest quarter, for it was one who danced in his time to many a modern tune who, in Past and Present of all places, announced the revival of narrative. There was some immediate response, some of it well reasoned, but on the whole, it seems, Lawrence Stone's announcement held its own: story was back again.

It is one of the problems we have to face in schooling that the teachers of History are trained in one school of thought and go on busily teaching it for all their days, when the historians themselves have changed their minds and are going full pelt in a different direction. We have here in England teachers who slash away at children's essays, commenting 'more analysis, less story' whilst those children who survive to become University students find themselves surrounded by story-makers. What a surprise for them to find events, moments, places and even people taking the front of the stage, whilst tedious old trends, movements and explanations of an ideological or more mathematical kind get stuffed into the bin!

It is for far higher flyers in the world of historiography and philosophy of history to explain all this effectively, but I wish to put forward a humble and simple suggestion at this stage, for it will govern much of the rest of what I want to say. I believe those who mounted the grand attack on narrative did so for many reasons, most of them perfectly valid, but there was an underlying theme to their attacks that barely broke water: as committed theorists, as indeed, explainers, they disliked narrative because it was the supreme form of explanation, the most powerful way of presenting the past as a coherent understandable entity. Those who chose the narrative form were not silly school teachers, historical novelists, simple-minded nationalists or narrow minded antiquarians: no, they were people with messages (maybe messages we now reject, that is our right) people who could put their messages over with

the power of story, and succeed. In this sense there is little difference between Macaulay and A. J. P. Taylor: here are people who want to make sense of the past in the strongest way possible, via narrative. The success of the theoretical analysts, it must be said, pales by comparison. So what is it about narrative that makes it so powerful, how does it work? Of course much of it is purely magical, utterly inexplicable, we just know it works. I have just been preparing a lecture on William the Silent, and my memory is in a state of wild confusion, but one thing sticks: when he decided at one moment early in his life to have an economy drive he sacked 28 of his cooks. It is strange, it is different, it appeals to one's sense of humour, all sorts of things, but the most important is that suddenly, for a moment the man is there: we are calling up ghosts, and that is big magic. Yes, yes, yes, I know one could do a comparative study of the number of domestics employed by North German Princes in the sixteenth century, but God forbid, for here we have something that smacks of a real man, an extravagant moment, something that happened, not an average, nor a symbol, nor a political statement.

There are many philosophers of history who are so delighted with their distinction between the past and History (which they repeat ad nauseam, as if it were something new) that they topple over into the position of proclaiming that the past never speaks for itself, but is always 'constructed' by Historians in their typically 'provisional' manner. Yes, I do understand what they mean, and allow the importance of their primary distinction, but I can never agree that the past does not speak for itself. Read this letter from Lord Leicester to his daughter, condoling on the loss of her husband in the Civil War, read it and I defy anyone to proclaim that it is not a voice from the past, speaking clearly and effectively to us in our present:

'...And your reason will assure you, that besides the vanity of bemoaning that which hath no remedy, you offend him whom you loved, if you hurt that person whom he loved. Remember how apprehensive he was of your dangers, and how sorry for anything which troubled you: imagine that he sees how you afflict and hurt yourself; you will then believe, that though he looks

upon it without any perturbation, for that cannot be admitted, by that blessed condition wherein he is, yet he may censure you, and think you forgetful of the friendship that was between you, if you pursue not his desires in being careful of yourself, who was so dear unto him... I know you lived happily, and so as nobody but yourself could measure the contentment of it. I rejoiced at it, and did thank God for making me one of the means to procure it for you. That is now past, and I will not flatter you so much as to say, I think you can ever be so happy in this life again: but this comfort you owe me, that I may see you bear this change and your misfortunes patiently... I doubt not but your eyes are full of tears, and not the emptier for those they shed. God comfort you, and let us join in prayer to Him, that He will be pleased to give His grace to you, to your mother, and to myself, that all of us may resign and submit ourselves cheerfully to His pleasure. So nothing shall be able to make us unhappy in this life, nor hinder us from being happy in that which is eternal; ...that you may find the comforts best and most necessary for you, is and shall ever be the constant prayer of your father that loves you dearly.

Oxford, 19th October 1643'

Further, I would claim that it is those occasions when the past speaks for itself, in words, in pictures, in views (Tintern Abbey, whatever) that are the high points of our experience of the past, and are the real induction to History. I cannot imagine being attracted to my subject initially by an Historiographical debate, I do know that it was rembling around the medieval cathedral and castle of Lincoln as a young child that switched me into the business of exploring the past, of becoming an historian. And those places still have voices for me.

I would like to continue in this vein, for the reality of history, the importance of what really happened and the feelings that are aroused in us by knowing these things, the very credibility of it all, these are important constituents of what makes a history story so radically different from what some people call a 'fictive act'. Yet I don't

think it is our business at this moment to engage too much in the description of that feeling-tone of history, now we must face up to the issue of what story does to history, how it shapes what comes to us out of the past, the artistry of the craft.

There are two aspects of the 'literary' side of narrative to which I wish to make reference: what Hayden White has called 'emplotment', and a related matter, the signals for recognition that a story maker embeds in his story in order to make it work more thoroughly. Both are essentially literary devices, and I don't see why historians should feel guilty about this: is there anything wrong with literary work, is it in some way sinful, deceptive, sneak? Is literature more sneaky than the application of theory? Well, it works better, and so the theoreticians may well feel it is more sneaky: but there are some of us who would claim that without art there can be no meaning, and I think there are a lot of us, in fact. The important caveat here is that we are dealing with real, rather than with invented materials, and we work under a structure of rules that bring us to the bar of judgement from time to time. Peter Geyl's introduction to The Revolt of the Netherlands (you see I am working away at my subject) brings Motley, a great nineteenth century story teller to the bar, and finds him guilty: he wanted one picture to emerge, and so he failed to check the alternatives and now we all know he was wrong. Interestingly, Geyl, who is quite scathing about this failure, confesses that he does not want to, nor can he demolish a great book, which, flawed as it is, will be great for all time. But rules are rules, and historians work under their own set which are totally different from the set under which novelists work. We are sharing skills, but doing an essentially different job.

As soon as Aristotle tells us that stories have beginnings, middles and ends we realise that a story fixes its materials in a special way, an expected way, an acceptable format. This is not, of course the way things happen, for time and change are continuous, if madly irregular processes. If we wish to take a part of history and show it, we must act as an experimenter, or as a cameraman, understanding

what we are doing. The experimenter knows that he is destroying what he is working on at the same time as examining it, and that his intervention in the process is changing that process, yet he can only have two choices - to experiment or give up. Heisenberg's uncertainty theory has lived with me, a non scientist absolute, since I first heard of it: you can know a particle's position but not its speed, you can know its speed but not its position (maybe I got that wrong, but the point is clear, I hope). The photographer knows that in stilling the action into a frame he is in fact rejecting all the other possible frames and focusses, but he must choose in the end. Form is a necessity with which we must learn to live, and our form in story is the plot.

A part of the plot is the depiction of character and motivation, two important explainers that dominate story. This involves highlighting one or several characters as against the whole body of participants - there are in effect far too many with whom to cope. Here, of course is where the narrator is open to the greatest threat of mistake - suppose he chooses the wrong man or men, suppose he highlights and undervalues people in such a way as to give a wrong picture? Well, of course, he often does, the essence of the matter is to do the choosing and the highlighting according to the evidence as it is best seen, one may do no more. There are, after all, endless versions of the same patch of history, and the validity of the version is partially in the artistry of its presentation, but much more (for us historians) in the reasons for the choosing, and how those reasons are shown in the story itself. For story must show not just a version of history, but some understanding of why that version has been arrived at, why it might be seen by the receiver as credible, plausible, food for thought.

One 'reasonable version', especially in the context of schooling, is the relevance of the story to stated needs. When I choose to tell the story of Francis, pop singing leader of the gilded youth of his town, super-sensitive and utterly revolted by the thought, least of all the sight of leprous beggard, then I am talking to children who can under-

stand and reflect effectively upon his story. When he hides in a pit from his father's wrath, is thrashed, abused and 'kept-in' for his seemingly feckless ways with money, children know they are hearing a truth. And when he stands before the Bishop, and strips naked so that even the breeches his father bought him may be given back, then they glory too in this wonderful revenge.

There is yet more to be said about the manipulation that is involved in emplotting: clearly there are story types that may be easily recognised, equally clearly there are story clues and cues which may lull the receiver into belief more readily than if they are ignored. It doesn't take much for the story teller to indicate, or for the listener to recognise that this is a 'wicked uncle about to get his comeupance'-type, and similarly it is easy to see what is going on when the story is spun out at one stage or rushed at a gabble at another. The literary devices involved in cueing the listener or reader are well known and easily practised, but more importantly they are clearly a necessary part of story itself: repetition for example is an almost essential feature of build-up, where the reader/listener begins to get the feeling that something is going to happen, and grows ever more certain of what it is to be. The shaping of the story, the cueing of responses and the delighted recognition on the part of the receiver of the story serve as a cover for the explanation of the content of the story. The story's pretence of reality makes its message easier to accept.

This process of cueing and recognition reminds us strongly of Hexter's presentation of 'the second record' at work: when the reader/listener responds with recognition ('I know, I know', 'I see, I see', 'Yes, something similar happened to me') he is drawing on his own knowledge of human behaviour and the ways things tend to fall out in order to make a larger sense of what is being presented. He is fitting it into a personal framework, certainly, but the process of fitting it in is more than one of pairing up individual concrete items of behaviour with universals, or more properly with generally received notions of universals (I do not propose to get inveigled here into a discussion on the validity of the idea of universals, nor with discussions of

Jungian collective unconscious - we must keep some sense of proportion!) It may seem, using Hexter's notion that children are in fact the least able to work in this way, in that their experience of the world has been slim. I think, on the contrary that children have a great pool of experience on which to draw (an awful lot of what is going to impinge upon us in terms of human behaviour has already happened to us quite early on) and they are rather more concerned to think about their experiences and make sense of them than an adult who may have come to his own terms with the world. Very young children know a lot about anger, and puzzle their heads about it in a way we don't, and when they recognise anger in a story this provides a safe area in which to brood on the subject.

Stories are very much the dreamtime for children, in that all sorts of nastinesses and inexplicable things may be examined without any personal threat - how else could the extraordinary (and to adults seemingly inappropriate) goings on of folktales as mediated by people like the brothers Grimm have lasted, and remain popular? Stories are a safe ground for mental debate, and as they formalise and explain they provide solace and comfort. Indeed they make their own special contribution to the developing second record: some pretty odd types of human behaviour can be first introduced to children in the Tom Tiddler's Ground of story.

Of course, Bruno Bettelheim has discussed such matters in some depth in his The Uses of Enchantment, with its important message that children are not just wide-eyed pretty innocents listening to grisly tales, but confused, guilt-ridden souls, searching to make sense of a baffling world and of their own plainly nasty instincts. Why do adults scream at children 'Stop shouting', it doesn't make sense. Nor does it make sense that sometimes the child feels so cross with those he loves and needs he would like to kill them. But Jack the Giant Killer does make a kind of sense for the time being, it does fit all the disparate pieces together in a most comforting and entertaining manner. Where I cannot agree with Bettelheim is in his strange assertion that it is only fantasy that will work in this way, that real stories offer

no assistance to the child. This strange suggestion grows from an addiction to Freudian explanation, so that at one point we find Bettelheim castigating Perrault for moralising Little Red Riding Hood whilst at the same time confidently asserting that young children see the handing on of the little red cap from grandmother to Red Riding Hood as the ritual transition of sexual attraction.

Of course children don't work at this sophisticated level of understanding. They can say to themselves 'these night-time anxieties of the prince in the story are very like mine, I wonder what will happen next?' but little more, unless some teaching takes place, whereby an adult leads the child to understand the metaphor and build the analogy. What is clear, however, is that if we are in the business of getting children comfort and self understanding through story, the more real, the more true the story the better it will work. Red Riding Hood is obviously untrue, but something that is told as having really happened, with full belief on both sides is worth thinking about. That is why young children so often stop the story teller quite early on with the simple but important question, 'did this really happen?'

We must also remember that if stories are to work in the way suggested, adding to the 'second record', explaining complexities and comforting anxieties, then we need lots of them. The bland assumption that learning is an event that takes place in a moment of time is the most dangerous of all misconceptions about education. We know that it will take a long time, with many trials before Jimmy can make a cup of tea, simple though that action seems to us. Practice is regarded as essential in learning languages and music, repetition, trying again, essaying, experiment, these are accepted features. Similarly with story, children need lots of them, regularly, all through education (don't you still read novels, watch films, tell jokes in the bar?) if they are going to serve their purpose.

Often the border-line between truth and fiction is hard to seek, and it is true, if perhaps embarrassing to some historians, that History and Fiction may often share objectives, especially in education. But I must repeat here that we are dealing with materials, however carefully shaped, that come to us from the past, not uniquely from our

imaginations, and that the rules about truth seeking and truth keeping are obvious to all historians, who know that they must be kept. Why play about and give Becket Anglo-Saxon parents when we know they were of Norman extraction? The beautiful thing about the story of Becket is that we know so much, we have no need to invent a thing, merely to shape, to see it for children. We know that he blushed when deeply moved, the record (seven mighty volumes of records in the Rolls Series!) tells us so; it is our job to be a seer for the children and show him colouring up at the entry of the knights.

This is not just important for the historians, a keeping of faith in the profession, it is equally important for the children, for the commonest question from children when a story is being told is 'is this true?' They have had the fairies and the Father Christmas fiasco, up to their ears, they now want to get it clear; we tell them not to romance, not to 'tell stories', well we have a moral duty in their eyes too. The special quality of a History story is indeed that tension between reality and imagination, the dynamic of understanding between the present observer and the past observed. Not to break faith with the past as we find it and can manage it, yet to show it as lively and comprehensibly as our imagination may serve, this is our joint aim. For people need the past in special and deeply significant ways: a recent book on the subject, David Lowenthal's The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge, 1985) reminds us that the word nostalgia really means homesickness, and we need to return to our roots constantly for refreshment, comfort, puzzled discourse and learning.

Stories don't tell you things, they tell you about things, and it is for that that we turn to them with an eye to learn. Story transcends the whole of human behaviour, for the past is everything, and somewhere in it may be found whatever you need. I guess the first educational act in human history was a cave-man telling his children something about what happened before they were born, and we have gone on doing it ever since, because it is an inescapably powerful relationship. I am privileged to watch teachers at work regularly, and I often watch their work by looking at the children, noting the varying levels of

concentration and response. However lost a class may be, when the 'story voice' is found by a teacher, ears prick up all round. It is like magic, no, dash it all, it is magic.

MITGLIEDERBEITRAG

Der Mitgliederbeitrag für das laufende Jahr beträgt den internationalen Gegenwert von DM 40,--, für Institute und Verbände: DM 60,--. Der Kassierer unserer Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft, Kollege Prof. Dr. Boris Schneider (Stapferstr. 11, CH-8006 Zürich) bittet alle Mitglieder, die für 1987 noch nicht gezahlt haben, um Überweisung auf das Postscheckkonto

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