

Research, Narrative and Fiction: Conference Story

Jonathan Wyatt

University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the discussion concerning the value and validity of fiction, and arts-based approaches more broadly, as research. I offer this contribution through a narrative: Conference Story. The narrative involves its characters, in an Oxford pub, debating the merits and otherwise of Peter Clough's (2002) book, Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research. The form, fictional narrative, performs and personifies this discussion. The article considers Clough's purposes in undertaking and presenting his research in this form, the philosophical position(s) that underpin(s) it, the extent to which his narratives are indeed research, and how such research might be judged. Key Words: Fiction, Narrative, Arts-Based Research, Performance, Paradigm, and Criteria

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the discussion concerning the value and validity of fiction, and arts-based approaches more broadly, as research (see Clough, 2002; Piantinida, McMahon, & Garman, 2003; Slattery, 2000; Winter, Buck, & Sobiechowska, 1999). I offer this contribution through a narrative: *Conference Story*. A group of four people, drinking in an Oxford pub on the first night of a conference, pass the time in (somewhat unlikely, perhaps) debate concerning the merits and otherwise of a single piece of work, Peter Clough's powerful, controversial book concerning the place of fiction in educational research (Clough, 2002). In one sense this narrative is an extended, alternative book review, though it seeks to go beyond that.

In his book Clough argues the philosophical and theoretical case for fiction as both research method and research representation. He illustrates his argument with five short fictions of his own. Each story is set in Clough's research milieu, the UK comprehensive school system. The tales' main protagonists include adolescents, their families, teachers, and head teachers. Clough alternates between telling the stories in the first and third persons. Each story is titled with the name of its central character.

Of the five stories *Lolly: the final word* is the boldest; it is, according to the author, "a complete fiction" (p.78). The narrator (Clough himself, one assumes) is confronted in his own home by Lolly, the enraged older brother of the teenage protagonist of a previous research story (*Molly*), the first of the five stories in the book. In Lolly's story we are told that, two years after he left school, younger brother Molly has been killed in a joy-riding accident. Lolly challenges Clough regarding the ethics of having written a story about his younger brother.

“What were you doing? What did you want? Eh? What did you want from my brother? ‘Cos you certainly got it. A rich story, was it? A rich piece of research? How your audiences must have loved those tales!”

He turned from the window and faced into the room. “You killed that boy. Mm? Do you think he’d have been pissing about like that if he hadn’t had you for an audience? D’you think so?” (Clough, 2002, p.58)

It is a raw, unforgiving tale, full of menace. Clough explains that the validity of the story (as research) rests on the premise that the events it describes *could* have happened. The purpose of the story is to confront the ethical issues involved in undertaking educational research; *Lolly* is about “roosters come home indeed, worms turned, as a rough justice asserts the subtle materialism of ethic” (p.78).

There is a considerable body of ethnographic research presented as fiction (see Sparkes, 2002, for a review of this literature). Sparkes proposes a continuum between two genres: creative non-fiction and creative fiction. At the creative non-fiction end of the continuum authors rework “factual” data into fictional form. The content is dramatised using a range of literary techniques in order to draw readers closer into the emotional worlds of the research subject(s), and/or for ethical reasons, to protect confidentiality (see Diversi, 1998 and Barone, 2000 for examples and discussion of creative non-fiction). Creative fiction, by contrast, may be only loosely based upon “facts,” “real” events and “actual” people. Angrosino (1998), for instance, notes that his narratives, though based on fieldwork, include events that never happened and people that did not exist. Authors of creative non-fiction place emphasis on the re-creation, through the fictional form, of scenes or experiences that they have either had or observed: Creative fiction writers lay store on imagination and the invention of scenes that they may not have witnessed, but that could have happened.

Clough’s work falls primarily (though not entirely) towards the creative fiction end of the continuum. There would be a number of other examples of such work, within either category, that I could have chosen to critique. What is distinctive about his book and why, therefore, I have chosen in effect to use it as a touchstone, is the unique combination of the power of the stories and the epistemological and ontological stance that he takes to justify his approach, about which more follows in *Conference Story*.

In *Conference Story* one of the characters in the pub is Clough himself. I need to say that I have never met him; in his stories he gives occasional clues as to his physical appearance, but I have largely created him from my own imagination (and offer full apologies if my representation of him in any way offends). The other characters are imaginary too; my narrator (a middle-aged schoolteacher struggling with his Masters thesis, confronted – and privately intrigued – by a different frame of reference), Jean (also a student, young, enthusiastic and optimistic), and Lanky One (slightly bland, and who bears a passing resemblance to me).

I say that these characters are created from my own imagination, but in a sense they are part of me. They are some of my *selves* (Aronsson, 2004; Harré, 2001), or, in psychoanalytic terms, embodiments of my *internal objects* (Balint, 1985; Klein, 1975; Winnicott, 1975). I am drawn to Clough’s book but, like my narrator, I am also troubled by it. I read and re-read it (both tenses apply); I find it elusive. I find myself both drawn into, and uneasy with, his arguments. So, yes, I represent “myself” as the reasonable,

positive, thoughtful Lanky One, but I identify strongly with the narrator. He is also me, in all his defensiveness and doubt. Nor, is he simply “wrong”; his challenges have validity.

Conference Story is a search for understanding, a struggle not only to engage with the complexity of the discussion about the place of fiction in social science research, but to do so in such a way that it puts “mobility, action, and agency back into play” (Conquergood, 1998, p.31). The story embodies and performs the debate. It falls perhaps within the tradition of “performance as a method of critical response” (Alexander, 2005, p.415), an “enactment” which sets itself up to be judged (as does Clough) on more than its scholarly merits. Does it engage? Is it evocative? Does it offer possibilities for transformation?

The story’s (fictional) form raises questions about the very matters its content tackles, the same questions that one could, and I do, ask about Clough’s fiction. The narrative problematises the nature of truth: To what extent could *Conference Story* be said to be “true”? Is it “real”? Can fiction (re)present truth? Can it (re)present research data truthfully? Is the analysis of the issues more or less convincing because it is presented in a fictional wrap? As a colleague commented after reading *Conference Story*, enfolding analytical strands within a creative account is problematic: “Is the artistry constrained and the science thinned? Or is the conceit enlivened and the science thickened?” (Tim Bond, personal communication, March 2005.)

I use footnotes in the story in order, as far as possible, not to intrude.

Conference Story

Pubs in Oxford (even in Oxford) become lively, sometimes risky, though not always in the obvious, visceral, violent sense.

I like conference season. It takes me away from anxiety about my still unfinished Masters’ thesis (a study of rural middle England’s youth) and gets my publication count up. I’ve come into this research game late, a middle-aged schoolteacher looking for inspiration. Not so jaded that I don’t mind putting the work into this, mind. But I’ve been at it for too long now, it has to be said. Four years, even part-time, is more than enough. Presenting a paper at a conference in Oxford, albeit a “Congress of Qualitative Inquiry,” and even if it is hosted by the newer, other place,¹ looks good on the *curriculum vitae*. This is not to say that I have illusions about my future career, Masters or not. Surprisingly (to me), the conference accepted my tentative paper about the researcher’s influence on the researched. This reflexive account was a departure for me. I’m a traditionalist at heart, at home with the analysis of survey results. Many sociology teachers would be, I expect.

I was seated, this late summer evening in 2003, in a pub. I was in one of a row of small wooden tables, with a group of fellow conference delegates whom I hadn’t met until a couple of hours previously. At conference registration earlier in the day, the young volunteer had told me that there would, as it was first night, be a party leaving for town at 7pm. I had hung around the hotel lobby, full of delegates carrying standard issue shoulder bags, and tagged along.

The tall window behind me, stretching the width of the wall, gave the impression of being almost on the busy, early-evening pavement itself, full mostly of workers

¹ There are two universities in Oxford; the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University

heading home, and the occasional cluster of young people gathered, it seemed, simply to stand. In the pub long-armed fans swept round above us, silently circulating stale summer air. As I looked ahead I could see, incongruously, a guitar hanging above the counter. Intrigued, I noticed that it was attached via a pulley to a rope fixed to the main door. This amused me: Standing at a particular spot at the bar, I pondered, a very tall man risked hailing his friend, entering the pub and simultaneously receiving a mysterious blow to the head. It made for potentially good, sadistic, entertainment from where I was sat.

That was one (minor) risk, but there were others. There always are; it depends where your “edges” are at a given time. I hadn’t felt easy, as a stranger to this part of town, walking the street earlier. I’d noticed the group of late adolescent boys loitering, hoods up, on the railings by the park, and had walked briskly past. I see enough of these during the school term to know not to be fully trusting of their intentions. However, this story is about risk of an intellectual kind. “Intellectual” does not quite capture it. Spiritual? No. Too much. Emotional? Well, maybe. Before this incident I would never have thought to write about it, would not even have thought writing a *story* a worthwhile activity, but now things are different. Not radically, you understand, but certainly different.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Pint in hand and sitting back in my window seat, I surveyed my fellow conference companions. A young woman to my left round the table; earnest face, dark hair, examining her Guinness, a pint too, I noticed. A fellow middle-aged man opposite, but tall: He seemed to be folded into the chair, one ankle up on his leg, as if trying to restrict the space he occupied. Not quite tall enough for the suspended guitar trick, I mused. And then I glanced at the man to my right. I recognised him, I thought. Black leather jacket pulled tight around him, dark green cords, greying hair, fifties. A slight figure. I couldn’t place him initially. And then he asked the young woman for a light and I remembered, it was the Sheffield accent. He had addressed a conference I attended the previous summer. Into telling stories, presenting “research” as fiction (about the kind of lads I passed in the street earlier, the ones I struggle with every day of the week – 11E on Thursday afternoons came to mind). Peter Clough. I had had trouble with his presentation, though it had interested me too. I had wondered where the data was. Where was the evidence? I lean towards thinking with Walford that “if people want to write fiction they have every right to do so, but not every right to call it research.”² As he says, when you research a phenomenon then you at least have to *attempt* to represent that which you actually observe. (At this stage, I have to say that my paper for this congress was probably not research; just, well, like Walford says, a “simple description of aspects of my experience”³.)

And now Prof. Clough sat next to me. Our table was quiet. I introduced myself. He wasn’t forthcoming, it has to be said; replied, in his northern twang, that he was pleased to meet me. I wanted to ask him about his book. I’d read it. Like his talk, it had left me troubled. Previous notions of truth, data, representation, and scholarship, all had been challenged. At the time I had put my discomfort to one side.

² Walford, 2004, p.411

³ Walford, 2004, p.415

“That book you wrote. *Narratives and Fictions*⁴. Can I ask you please? I know that it probably sounds naïve. I’ve looked at some of it, but can you tell me from your point of view exactly what it’s about?”

He looked up at me, held my gaze for a moment then lowered his eyes to examine his glass. I couldn’t read his expression.

“First night at a conference, first conversation, and you open with this?” He laughed. Not dismissive. Reticent, perhaps. “Do we want to talk shop? I mean I don’t mind, but maybe...” And trailed off. I looked for encouragement from others. The young woman and the lanky man had lifted their heads and were listening. I took this as encouragement, and so, it seemed, did Clough.

“Ok,” he continued. “What’s your question exactly? You’ve not read it and want me to summarise it for you or you have read it, didn’t get it, and want me to explain?” Not irritated, more indulgent; as if talking to a student. Which I am, of course.

“Well, I’ve dipped into it, but I haven’t read it all I have to confess, but I’ve heard about it, and listened to you talk about it at that conference.” I didn’t want to own fully either my interest or my skepticism. Not at that stage.

“Ok, then. Let’s start from scratch.”

He seemed to be warming to the task.

“You don’t actually have to read a book to know what it’s about, of course. You just need to look at the reviews for that. Have you seen them?”

I nodded, risking a truthful response. I’d read a couple⁵.

“One way of describing the book,” he continued “is that it invites you to travel with me. I begin the journey by explaining to you where I am going; that I wish to show you how researchers can aspire to be like Wallace Stevens’ ‘man with the blue guitar’ who does not just ‘play things as they are,’ but ‘plays a tune beyond us, yet ourselves’⁶. I go on to introduce you to five people, who may or may not be ‘real,’ and walk you through episodes in their lives; and, through these, I show you something of who I am too. I tell you about the people afterwards, where I ‘met’ them and how they are significant. And then we climb a technically-demanding route where I explain why this is a valid and productive approach to research.”

“I put it more formally in the book: I place stories within educational research traditions, I offer you examples, and explain some of the processes involved in their creation.”⁷

“The five stories are the core of the book, the research. My purpose is to present research ‘reports’ about data that would not normally be seen. They are troubling, tragic at times. I’m aiming to confuse what I see as the arbitrary distinctions between the researcher and those researched, between so-called ‘objective’ data and imagination, between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’. As with any research it is both moral and political.”

Here was my question, though: *How* are these fictions research? (This was, in part, what had disturbed me when I read it; that and how affected I was.) Asking him was going to sound dumb, I suspected, but I decided to take the risk. I needed to know.

⁴ Clough, 2002

⁵ e.g., Badley, 2003; Walsh, 2003

⁶ Stevens, 1965

⁷ Clough, 2002, p.12

I got another gaze from Clough. Lanky One, sitting on Clough's other side, was listening to us intently now. Clough seemed to inspect his hands.

"You'll know the background as well as I do, I expect..."

"But I don't think I do. Not fully." The earnest young woman on my left, Guinness glass now emptied. "I'm sorry to butt in. I'm interested; please go on." An early-thesis student, probably, judging by her enthusiasm. I sighed wistfully.

Clough glanced at her and smiled. "My take on the question of how it's research is the focus of the end of the book. I ascribe to, have faith in, you could say, a phenomenological perspective on the world. From this point of view, the traditional scientific, binary, foundational, positivist and post-positivist, assumptions about subject/object and fact/fiction become problematised. From a phenomenological perspective, language creates reality; it does not merely describe it. Even a traditional positivist research text, in that sense, is fiction. The original Latin word 'fictio' refers to the process of making: we all 'make,' whatever we write⁸. As someone once said, I don't remember who,

'No portrait in the world, whether on the stage or in the physics lab, is a mirror of reality. Selection and construal always occur.'⁹

The stories – my research reports, if you like – are drawn from a range of sources including my imagination. *Lolly: the final word* didn't happen, nor did *Bev*, but..."

Lanky One spoke across Clough. He'd stretched his legs in front of him as much as he could. He looked serious. Mid-forties, I'd guess.

"Can I just go back a stage? Because I have both read your book and read about it." (I felt, suddenly, competitive.) "One thing that's confused me is that in the book you place your text clearly as part of the 'postmodern ethnographic project'¹⁰ whilst, as you've said to us, locating your rationale for such research firmly within phenomenology. When I've looked at writing about research paradigms these two, postmodernism and phenomenology, are often identified, explicitly or implicitly, as belonging within different paradigms. What's more, one author who reviewed your book commented that your first two chapters are 'healthily and uncontroversially constructivist'¹¹: constructivism and postmodernism are placed separately by some. I mean, everyone would agree that you are neither positivist nor post-positivist, but Crotty¹² draws a distinction between interpretivism on the one hand, and postmodernism on the other. He places phenomenology in the former. And given that you see research as (urgently) political and moral, both generally and in this book,¹³ I could argue that your use of fiction as research falls within a critical theory paradigm as well. When I look at Lincoln and Guba's classifications I would situate you in both their constructivist and critical theorist¹⁴ camps. Critical theory is where they would put you as a postmodernist¹⁵ but I'd bet that they would site phenomenology within constructivism, though there is a range of

⁸ Barone & Eisner, 1997; Winter et al. 1999

⁹ Barone & Eisner, 1997, p.89

¹⁰ Clough, 2002, p.9

¹¹ Badley, 2003, p.442

¹² Crotty, 1998

¹³ See Clough, 2002, p.86; Clough, 2004, p.422; Clough & Nutbrown, 2002

¹⁴ Lincoln & Guba, 2000

¹⁵ Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.109

political takes on phenomenology¹⁶. It's equally difficult to locate you within Habermas's taxonomy: you're clearly not empirical analytic, but are you historical/hermeneutic (which phenomenology is often associated with) or critical, which is where postmodern seems to belong? And similarly, into which paradigm would Denzin and Lincoln fit you? Constructivist? Marxist?¹⁷"

The evening was closing in. Outside, I could sense the street coming alive, crowds of young revelers sweeping past the window in each direction. Inside the bar there was standing room only. Our fellow conference delegates were merged in with the general public; it was just the four of us now. Smoke floated unpleasantly.

I wondered what Clough would make of Lanky One's challenge.

Clough began, "These philosophical issues are slippery. I take the point that there is much to debate about phenomenology. For instance, both Husserl's claim that an object has an *essence*, which can be discovered if we are rigorous in *bracketing*, and his encouragement to strive toward *phenomenological reduction* in order to capture *pure phenomenon*,¹⁸ do not sit easily with either a postmodern or constructivist view. Phenomenological reduction is not achievable either¹⁹. Heidegger's view of humans being fundamentally interpretive beings, inescapably embedded in our culture,²⁰ and Gadamer's notion of our task being to aim for a *fusion of horizons*²¹ (our object's horizon and ours as subjects), are more convincing phenomenological perspectives and more consistent with postmodernism and poststructuralism."

"I don't think that we will ever reach a point at which we could settle this. However, and this might seem a cop-out, I'd argue against drawing such clear distinctions between paradigms anyway. In the current climate, paradigms run into one another; categories are fluid; boundaries shift, a process equivalent, as Lincoln and Guba note, to Geertz's 'blurring of genres'²²."

Lanky One seemed satisfied: He nodded thoughtfully and said thank you, that's interesting. Was he stumped? Probably not. But I was.

Clough offered to buy a round. I saw him struggle with four empty glasses as he worked his way through to the bar. The alcohol, the warmth of the night, and the thronging of people served to create in me a sense of disorientation. I needed air. I told the girl and Lanky One that I'd be back shortly and left, gently palming people aside, muttering excuse me's as I went. Outside, I leant against the wall running down the side of the pub, away from the crowds on the main street. I breathed deeply and held my hands to my face, rubbing my palms into my eyes. Two young men in hoods walked past, stopping briefly to glance into the pub windows before heading for the empty playground at the end of the street. I thought I recognised one as a member of the group that I had walked past earlier, though it was difficult to be sure. The way he walked, bandy legged, in a roll from side to side and with hands thrust deep in baggy pockets...that lad in my Sociology class, year 11, who'd left just a few weeks ago. That's whom he reminded me of. Not pleasant. Michael. I was pleased Michael had left. I could never do anything with

¹⁶ Crotty, 1998; Thompson, 1990

¹⁷ Denzin & Lincoln, 2000

¹⁸ Husserl, 1982

¹⁹ See Streubert & Carpenter, 1999

²⁰ See Heidegger, 2002; Reason & Rowan, 1981

²¹ See Thompson, 1990

²² Lincoln & Guba, 2000

him, the way, when he was present (which wasn't often), he simply sat at the back of the class doodling. Whatever I said met with only a couple of words. He'd been in court recently, I'd heard, charged with robbery. I found it hard to imagine him having the energy, though I had noticed, it is true, what I took to be anger behind his mask of indifference.

My thoughts returned to Clough and the boys like Michael, amongst others, that he had written about. I considered how Clough's work was "transgressive," as he'd been implying; that the poststructural, postmodern (I know that the two are not interchangeable²³) lens challenged received notions of "truth". I had been moved by his stories and they had stayed with me longer than a thousand and one other research texts; had made me ponder the effects of government policy, the endless stream of bureaucratic initiatives upon teachers; how these, taken with the relentless emotional pressures upon them, could lead to good, committed teachers like "Rob" destroying their careers. (Rob was the central character in one of Clough's stories who, under profound, cumulative stress, strikes a student.) I even noticed myself feeling angry. But, differently now perhaps, I still wondered about how this could be research and, even if I could accept that it was, how good was it? How would I know?

Clough would have been served by now.

On the way back to our table I rescued two glasses from the tray that Clough was deftly maneuvering past those standing. Not much had spilt. There had been a possibility, carrying that many, that he might have drenched someone in beer and provoked a confrontation.

"If I go back to where we were just now, what troubles me is," I began, as Clough settled back into his seat "if we accept that your fictions are research, Professor Clough," he interrupted, lifting his hand, to invite me to call him by his first name. "Peter, thank you, is it good quality research? If they are good stories, which I accept they are, does that make them good research?"

There was silence. I had surprised myself with this question. It implied a certain acceptance that I didn't immediately recognise.

The young woman next to me, Jean, she told me, was the first to respond.

"There's debate about criteria for evaluating this kind of work. I'm presenting a paper on it at the conference, in fact."

Her confidence impressed me, and I envied her both this and her youth.

"You can't simply," she continued, "take positivist criteria, like validity and generalisability, and apply them to poststructural research like Professor Clough's²⁴. It does a different task so needs different criteria for evaluating it. A number of authors in the literature cite whether we *learn* from a text as being central to judging the quality of such transgressive research²⁵. When Bochner, for instance, labels the phrase 'alternative ethnography' 'artful-science' as Brady²⁶ calls it, ethnography that engages in relationships, that fully acknowledges the involvement of the researcher;²⁷ a misnomer and suggests that it should be re-named *alterative* ethnography he is implying that such

²³ e.g., see Crotty, 1998

²⁴ See Lincoln, 1995

²⁵ e.g. Abma, 2002; Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000;

²⁶ Brady, 1991

²⁷ Bochner & Ellis, 1999

research should be about transformation²⁸. Good research has an impact upon us; it changes us.”

“There are other criteria which these authors variously identify: Does it engage me²⁹? Is it well written and does it have aesthetic merit³⁰? Are its goals worthwhile³¹? Does it seem “true” and to express a reality³²? Have ethics been considered and permission appropriately sought³³? Is it reflexive, in the sense that we have a clear picture of how the author came to write the text³⁴ (although some writers see reflexivity as being problematic³⁵)? Does it pay attention to the detail, does it convey concern for people’s emotional experience, is it complex, does the author articulate his or her own emotional experience, and does the story describe development from one emotional place to another³⁶?”

“Some of the literature argues that good research has political impact. Denzin calls for a ‘new ethics of writing’ where research texts can be presented in ways that we as readers can make use of them³⁷, where authors are ‘committed not just to describing the world but to changing it.’³⁸ And, Peter, you exhort researchers to see their task as a matter of political and moral urgency³⁹. There are echoes in both Denzin and Peter of bell hooks,” a pseudonym the significance of which I have never quite grasped, “whose challenge to us, amongst much else, is to develop and make use of an ‘interrelated analysis of oppression.’⁴⁰ It’s about changing the world, in an incremental, local, particular sense.”

She seemed to stop, but added,

“There’s more, of course, but that’s as good a place to start as any.”

She’d done her homework, I’ll say that. Clough coughed, rubbed his hands though the pub was sweltering, looked at the young woman briefly, but stayed silent. Lanky One opined.

“I read the book at a single sitting, in a café one cold February morning. I was captivated.”

He looked directly at me. “Despite what you said earlier you’ve read it too, haven’t you? Go on, admit it.” He smiled his enquiry at me. I nodded, sheepishly. “And I imagine it must have had an impact upon you or you wouldn’t be so interested.”

Turning towards Clough, “I was shocked by the tragedy of Bev and the bleakness of Klaus. Rob’s story; his career, his respect for himself both as a teacher and as a man, how suddenly they all collapsed. I identify with aspects of the young teacher in Molly’s story; how being an inexperienced teacher myself twenty years ago was such a struggle and how I found it so difficult to step into the role. I hold with me the picture of Lolly,

²⁸ Bochner, 2000

²⁹ Ellis, 2000

³⁰ Abma, 2002; Ellis, 2000; Richardson, 2000

³¹ Ellis, 2000

³² Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000

³³ Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2000

³⁴ Richardson, 2000

³⁵ e.g., Macbeth, 2001

³⁶ Bochner, 2000

³⁷ Denzin, 1999, p.568. See also Denzin, 2003.

³⁸ Denzin, 2000, p.258

³⁹ Clough, 2002; Clough, 2004

⁴⁰ Valdivia, 2002, p.444

Molly's older brother, standing over you, Peter, in your room at home. I feel his anger, the threat that he carried and, beneath both, his grief. I know that it *could* have happened. I'm a trainer and psychotherapist now, and haven't worked in schools for over fifteen years, but the pictures that you paint are vivid. I felt that I got to know something of you and your values, had a picture of you too, from the stories. It's interesting to see you here, unusual circumstances though they are; you're not that different from how I imagined.

"So, if I think about the criteria that you've outlined, Jean, then I've learned from your stories, Peter, and I am moved by them: I am not quite the same person as I was before I read them. The stories are satisfying and well crafted. They are clearly political; issues of injustice are poignantly addressed, comments obliquely made about the impact of education policies upon everyday school life. The ethical issues are intricate, as Lolly's story testifies, and I remain uncertain about how we manage them in doing this kind of research, but you acknowledge the dilemmas."

I glanced at Clough, to catch him basking in this praise. His face was difficult to read. He closed his eyes for a moment before turning to look at Lanky One.

"I don't think it's my place to comment on what you've just said. But thank you. In the book I suggest criteria although I say that evaluation is impossible from a philosophical point of view. We can only aspire to *verify*, not *validate*⁴¹. And the pertaining questions are: 'Is the research object directed? Does it seek to know those objects better? What does it use to do this, and does it reveal the value which prompts and maintains it'⁴²?"

I pondered these questions silently, attempting to grasp exactly what he meant. The focus of the stories is squarely upon the "objects;" Molly, Lolly, Bev, et al., and upon the cultures which they inhabit, although the narrator's thoughts and feelings are offered and mediate the tales. The stories probe, they don't simply skim over their objects en route elsewhere. The device that he uses is the fictional narrative. It galled me to admit it, but I could see that his narratives revealed "true" data. Through the fiction we see "spaces in between"⁴³.

Jean leant forward, animatedly,

"There is another angle, too." Hands moving, involved, passionate. "There's literature about how we should judge work like Professor Clough's not only as experimental or even post-experimental,⁴⁴ but as, specifically, *arts-based* research. These authors identify some criteria that correspond with what I was saying earlier, such as whether a text has the capacity to rattle and disturb,⁴⁵ but they raise other issues to consider: the presence in a text of playfulness, mystery, ambiguity, subtlety and nuance; the responsibility it places upon us as readers to work with it;⁴⁶ its use of contextualised language, its promotion of empathy, the personal signature of the writer⁴⁷."

"I think that all those features are present in your book, except one, or at least I think that one is arguable: the personal signature of the author. It links with what I referred to earlier about reflexivity. If I take the book as a whole I am confident about

⁴¹ Clough, 2002, p.94

⁴² Clough, 2002, p.94

⁴³ Wyatt, 2001, p.81

⁴⁴ Denzin & Lincoln, 2000.

⁴⁵ Barone, 1997

⁴⁶ Barone, 1997

⁴⁷ Barone & Eisner, 1997

your authorial voice. I feel that I can trust it. I think that your narrator is reliable. However, we know that the stories were originally published separately, with no commentary or explanation and, in those circumstances, how would we be meant to judge, in the sense that Richardson uses reflexivity,⁴⁸ the process through which the texts came to be written? And how could I know that the narrator of the stories is you?”

Clough, sharp as flint, responded,

“But how do you experience them? What meanings do you derive? How do you come to trust me, trust my narrator?⁴⁹”

Her voice firm, “Because your narrator voice seems authentic. But you place great responsibility upon me as the reader: these are writerly texts, not readerly ones, which some would criticise you for⁵⁰.”

She moved on, earnestly.

“It’s problematic for researchers, though, when we look at it the other way around as well. If we are to aspire to writing such research texts and claim them to be *art*, then why should we feel the need to wrap them up in commentary? It’s a point that I know you allude to⁵¹. But why give in to the demand to ‘explain’ your work? Piirto, who’s a novelist as well as a qualitative researcher, takes the high artistic ground that if a work is art it should be able to stand on its own. It shouldn’t need the padding of social science around it. We should ‘respect the domain’⁵² of art. But by so doing we stand open to the criticism of lacking reflexivity.”

Lanky One stepped in.

“I think that it’s a dilemma we have to live with in the ‘seventh moment’⁵³. Some research is published as art, without commentary, Patricia Clough’s poetry, for example⁵⁴. And I do have to agree with Piirto that it is tiresome to read papers that have the ‘art’ followed by the traditional social science discussion, particularly when the art is not especially good⁵⁵. Sometimes it works well;⁵⁶ so much depends upon how both the art and the commentary are done. I have to say, Peter, that, whilst I found the other chapters interesting, a part of me wishes I had only the stories. Their impact might be greater still, I believe.”

Our glasses were empty. We sat for a moment, not talking, thinking. My focus shifted towards getting back to the hotel, giving myself time to reflect. We thanked each other for a stimulating evening and stood up to leave. We exited the door, avoiding problems with the guitar, and I stopped outside to wait for the others. The two hoody-wearing young men were outside still, kicking stones against the brick wall opposite. I hoped they wouldn’t follow.

As we walked I distracted myself by thinking about these past hours. We’d covered considerable ground; what Clough was intending to do through his research, his

⁴⁸ Richardson, 2000

⁴⁹ Clough, 2003

⁵⁰ e.g. Walford, 2004

⁵¹ Clough, 2002, p.18

⁵² Piirto, 2002, p.444

⁵³ Denzin & Lincoln, 2000

⁵⁴ Clough, 2000

⁵⁵ See Gray, 2004 and Walford, 2004 for examples of this in the opinion of Lanky One.

⁵⁶ See Gannon, 2004 for an example of this – in Lanky One’s view.

philosophical positioning, whether or not it even was research, and we'd talked about how we might judge it, weigh up its merits or otherwise.

I decided that I was looking forward to delivering my paper to the conference. It was maybe better, more interesting, and more like research, than I had thought.

Perhaps, when I got home, I would have a stab at telling my story of rural youth in middle England through fiction.

Secretly.

At least at first.

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Author Note

Jonathan Wyatt works in staff development and training at the University of Oxford and for the National Health Service as a counsellor of adults based in a medical centre. He is working towards an EdD at the University of Bristol in narrative and life story research.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jonathan Wyatt Oxford Learning Institute, University of Oxford, Littlegate House, 16/7 St Ebbes St, Oxford, OX1 1PT; Telephone: 01865 286821; Fax: 01865 286801; Email: jonathan.wyatt@learning.ox.ac.uk

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