

Transcription poetry as a vehicle for documenting the lives of disabled people.

*Delivered at the Fifth International Disability Studies Conference
Lancaster University, September 2010.*

The work

For the past five years I have been developing a way of creating poems by editing the transcripts of oral history interviews with disabled people. This has led to two major commissions from Disability Arts Online and my current Leverhulme-funded residency at the Centre for Citizen Participation, Brunel University.

In 2003 I carried out a life history interview with Paddy Masefield, a major figure of the Disability Arts movement, who had recently been diagnosed as having terminal cancer and a life expectancy of six months. (The diagnosis was, fortunately, wrong.) Because of the urgent timescale, I carried out this work without funding, and without any planned outcomes other than producing a transcription recording Paddy's life and achievements.

In a happy coincidence, early in 2004 'Oral History' carried Krista Woodley's article: 'Let the Data Sing: Representing Discourse in Poetic Form'¹. This suggested using poetic devices as a way of creating more informative transcription. As I am primarily a writer rather than an oral historian, that led me to wonder whether poetic devices could be applied to transcriptions to create poetry.

I experimented on the transcription of my interview with Paddy, and created 'Paddy: A Life', a set of 32 poems describing Paddy's work in the theatre, acquisition of ME and subsequent career as a disability arts activist. More recently I have worked with artist Nancy Willis to produce 'The Explorer' a series of 23 poems based on Nancy's descriptions of her works and life. She has used these to make a short film, 'Transformations'.

This procedure of working with words that I did not create myself fits into a long artistic tradition. In particular, the incorporation of found materials was an important aspect of twentieth-century modernism, most strongly evident in visual art. Marcel Duchamp created 'readymades', exhibiting such items as a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, a snow shovel and, with the infamous 1917 'Fountain', a urinal.

Many artists used collage, starting with Braque and Picasso, who would frequently incorporate external printed materials into their drawings and paintings. The German Dadaist John Heartfield developed the technique of photomontage, showing that it was possible to use found images. He manipulated them strongly, to serve as anti-Nazi propaganda, but later artists such as Andy Warhol were to use photographs in something much more resembling their original form.

Picasso frequently used found materials, as in his delightful 1944 'Bull's Head', created from the saddle and handlebars of a bicycle. The Disability Arts version of this is Tony Heaton's 1995 'Great Britain from a Wheelchair', a map of Great Britain made from parts of two old NHS wheelchairs.

In 1953 the American neo-Dadaist Robert Rauschenberg demonstrated that use of external materials could be subtractive as well as additive when he erased a drawing by the celebrated abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning. A later canvas, the 1955-59 'Monogram', incorporated a stuffed goat. In the 1960s Pop Art drew heavily on found images, often from commercial art, using such sources as comic strips, flags, police photos and soup cans.

The use of found materials was slower to catch on in literature. In the 1920's T.S.Eliot was noted for his habit of including chunks of work from other writers, to the extent that 'The Waste Land' is followed by a set of notes giving his sources. But this is material that is already 'poetic', not true found material.

The Dadaists and the Surrealists created a number of techniques such as automatic writing and cutup, where existing texts are cut into pieces and rearranged. These are techniques aimed at dislocating the written text, rather than bringing out any truth in the source material.

One has to wait until after the second world war to find stronger use of true found materials. William Carlos Williams had in 1934 produced 'This is Just To Say', a lovely little poem which, interestingly, written as a note left on a refrigerator, takes the form of a found poem, even though it is not one. But real found elements do play an important part in Williams's epic 'Paterson', published in sections throughout the 40's, 50's and 60s. This brings in a variety of external materials, including excerpts from historical documents, newspaper articles, a surveyor's report and sections of his correspondence with fellow poets such as Marcia Nardi and Allen Ginsberg.

The Jewish objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff in 1965 produced 'Testimonies', a long book of poems based directly on court records from 1855-1915, subdivided according to geographical region and subject matter. The American poet and critic Aldon Lynn Nielsen has said about the sections titled 'Negroes', 'These sections, taken as a whole, constitute the most substantial consideration given to black life by a white poet during the modernist period, and for once they let that life speak for itself, in the form of dispassionately reported depositions.'²

I am not working from dispassionate depositions -quite the contrary - but it is my intention to let disabled people speak for themselves.

A later book by Reznikoff, the 1975 'Holocaust', used material from the Nuremberg trials and the trial of Adolf Eichmann. This is generally held to be less successful.

A common feature of most such work is that it starts from written sources. Reznikoff deliberately chose the very formal language of court testimony to provide dispassionate sources that would let the events speak for themselves. Such work also tends to bring together a collage of text from different sources.

The work I know that is closest to what I am doing is by a British poet, Graham Harthill, writer of the 2003 'Life-Lines; transcription poems from the Ledbury Poetry Festival'. These poems are based on conversations, both singly and in groups, with older people, including some with cognitive loss. (Harthill has worked for some years with people who are affected by Alzheimers.) He describes his working method as 'poetry as process: I listen and jot down notes, or try to remember what was said, or sometimes even tape-record it. Then I try to turn it into poetry.' This is evidently a more subjective form of transcription than the very full transcription of an oral history interview from which I like to start.

What does the introduction of poetic techniques add to a transcription? Let me take the example of repetition. Anyone who has read a full transcription of an interview will be aware that all but the most extremely precise of speakers repeat themselves. A question I asked in a recent interview transcribes as:

'So, what, what was, what was it like at home, tell me where you lived'

This sort of repetition is the kind of thing I would cut when making a 'cleaned up' transcription of the sort I would use for journalism, or writing a book. I edit out repetition, along with ums and ers and slips of the tongue and unfinished sentences and signs of speech impediment and non-meaning-bearing utterances like 'you know' and 'well' because they are superfluous, they are just noise, slowing things down and impeding communication. They are part of that gap between what Chomsky refers to as linguistic *competence*, the Platonic perfection of underlying syntax, and linguistic *performance*, the messy stuff that comes out of our mouths³.

But when it comes to turning transcription into poetry, it's a different matter. Repetition has always been an important part of verse, especially so when it is closest to song. Consider that extraordinary mediaeval survival The Lyke Wake Dirge;

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
Every nighte and alle,
Fire and fleet and candle-lighte,
And Christe receive thy saule.

Shakespeare uses repetition for a huge variety of purposes. It gives us Hamlet's indecision,

'To be or not to be',

Lear's anger at Cordelia,
'Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.'

and Othello's jealous torment,

'But yet the pity of it, Iago! O! Iago, the pity of it, Iago!'

Blake uses repetition for visionary intensity:

'Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the Night'

In 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', Tennyson uses repetition for onomatopoeia, summoning up the galloping hooves of the doomed cavalry:

'Half a league, half a league, half a league onwards'

And we can carry on all the way up to Bob Dylan:

'And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall'

where repetition is used to keep the listener waiting, and thereby emphasise the full statement once we get there.

As part of the present residency, I have been working with Jennifer Taylor, a member of Lambeth People First. The following excerpt comes from a section of the interview where Jennifer describes how she was hit by a car in childhood, the accident that left her learning disabled. She describes how her mother came running out.

And that's when she started
crying her eyes out.
And were kind of saying to me brother
where's Jennifer? Jennifer's dead.
Jennifer's dead. I wasn't dead,
just laying there, laying there.

An extraordinary change has taken place. A hesitant or tentative form of speech has been transmuted into a very potent form of poetry. As the above examples have demonstrated, repetition is capable of communicating a very wide range of emotions. In the lines I have just read it gives us first, the emotions of the frantic mother, then those of the victim, lying there like an observer while the life she has now left behind goes on around her, with the counterpoint of 'Jennifer's dead' and 'I wasn't dead' elegantly bridging the gap between the two. The great thing for me as a writer is that, because such repetitions are a feature of the transcription that can perfectly respectably be edited out, I have choice of whether to use them or not. The skill is to make the decision that tells the story rather than works against it.

This idea that converting transcription into poetry changes the emotional content potentially has great implications for Krista Woodley's argument that the forms of poetry can be used to aid analysis of the material. Specifically, I would caution that the use of poetic form introduces another level of decision making, and this is not value-free. I am happy to shape the material, make it say what I want to, but this is not necessarily appropriate behaviour for an academic researcher.

I have twice mentioned telling a story. Most of the skills I am applying to these transcriptions are not the conventional skills of lyric poetry, but the skills I have learnt from fifteen years as a radio and television scriptwriter. In particular that training has given me a grasp of structure, whether on the level of the individual line, the scene or the overall story arc. For example, I am at present working with two people who acquired their impairments suddenly - Jennifer Taylor from the car accident described above and Catriona Grant from a stroke in her forties. My opening question in both cases has not been 'How did it happen?', but 'Tell me about your childhood'. I want to know who this thing happened to. So you get a three act structure: once upon a time there was this person; then this thing happened to them, overturning their life; and then they went forward like this. Each poem is like a scene in that drama.

Division into lines gives timing, something I learnt a lot about when writing comedy. It allows one to control what emphasis is given to particular pieces of information. This is not necessarily the emphasis originally given by the speaker.

The other key skill from scriptwriting is characterisation. Each of these sets of poems has a single central character - the person I have interviewed, or the version of them that I create using their words. But the reader has to find out about them and care what happens to them. So when making choices about what parts of the transcription to use one of the things one has to consider is: does this build character? Although the poems are all in the first person, it is really important to remember that the person speaking is being described.

I like to make a very full transcript, with as little editing out as possible. It's worth distinguishing that from a full transcript made as an end result, an accurate document for researchers to use. For me the transcript is an *interim* stage. I want to maximise flexibility, give myself as much to work with as possible. When I wrote 'Paddy: A Life', I worked from a very 'clean' transcript with all the noise edited out. When I worked with Nancy Willis, I decided to explore using the ums and ers and hesitations, and kept them in while transcribing.

This proved very productive. For example the poem 'Self Portrait', discussing Nancy's picture of that name, and the events that provoked it, begins:

I think this might be the first time
that I'd done anything about
this little image here
of a tiny baby and

er one of the things I'd been..
probably had led to
the most difficult period of my life

That starts as a perfectly grammatical sentence until it gets to the phrase 'tiny baby', when it suddenly collapses into dislocation. An unfinished sentence, a pause, another unfinished sentence, a sentence that starts in the middle until the stanza suddenly comes back into focus with the phrase 'the most difficult period of my life'.

Nancy goes on to describe how, as a young woman, she became pregnant. Having, while still at school, been told erroneously that she would not live long into adult life, she felt that it would be irresponsible to bring a child into the world and then leave it an orphan, and therefore decided to have an abortion. While she had her legs up in the stirrups, a gung-ho gynaecologist said, 'why don't we just do the sterilisation while we're here?' And because she felt the situation was not going to change, she assented.

That is a shocking story, and precisely the sort of account that I want to put on record to show what disabled people's lives have been like. It needs to be recounted calmly, but not dispassionately. Nancy does not say what feelings these events left her with, but we don't need to be told. That fractured opening has already told us all we need.

What I am doing is creative, not academic. I am not trying to be impartial. My telling of these stories is to some extent a dramatisation, a quite strongly edited version of the original transcription. A by-product of the process is, however, a set of recordings and of full transcriptions, which will be placed in appropriate libraries including Brunel University Library (at least for this residency) and the British Library.

I am finding that this is an immensely valuable way of documenting the lives and experiences of disabled people. Its strength is an ability to deal in emotions, to make the reader really feel the truth of those experiences. But I would emphasise that the devices that are valuable to me in producing a literary work are potential dangers for the academic interviewer, particularly if adopted unconsciously. Story and characterisation and the timing of dialogue are immensely powerful tools. Words can have meaning in written form that was not there in speech.

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9/3/10