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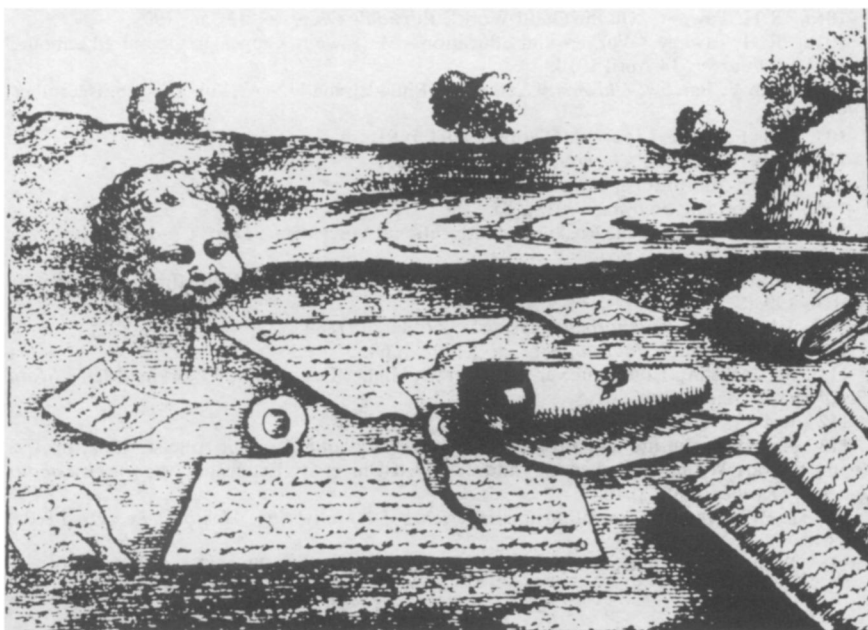


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The Peculiarities of Oral History*

by *Alessandro Portelli*



From *Pronosticatio* by Paracelsus, 1536.

'Yes', said Mrs Oliver, 'and then when they come to talk about it a long time afterwards, they've got the solution for it which they've made up themselves. That isn't awfully helpful, is it?' 'It is helpful,' said Poirot, . . . 'It is important to know certain facts which have lingered in people's memories although they may not know exactly what the fact was, why it happened or what led to it. But they might easily know something that we do not know and that we have no means of learning. So there have been memories leading to theories . . .'

Agatha Christie, *Elephants Can Remember*

His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter, and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm.

Washington Irving, *Rip Van Winkle*

A spectre is haunting the halls of the Academy: the spectre of 'oral history'. The Italian intellectual community, always suspicious of news from outside (and yet so

*The expression 'oral history' is open to criticism, in that it may be taken to imply that historical research may be based entirely upon oral sources. A more correct expression would be 'the use of oral sources in history'. For the sake of brevity, I will here use 'oral history' as the term which has entered common use.

subservient to ‘foreign discoveries’) – and even more wary of those who suggest *going* outside – has hastened to cut oral history down to size before even trying to understand what it is and how to use it. The method used has been that of charging oral history with pretensions it does not have, in order to set the academicians’ minds at ease by refuting them. For instance *La Repubblica*, the most intellectually and internationally oriented of Italian dailies rushes to dismiss ‘descriptions “from below” and the artificial packages of “oral history” where things are supposed to move and talk by themselves’, without even stopping to notice that it is not things, but people, that are expected to move and talk in oral history (albeit people normally considered as no more than ‘things’).¹

There seems to be a fear that once the floodgates of orality are opened, writing (and rationality along with it) may be swept out as if by a spontaneous uncontrollable mass of fluid, irrational material. But this attitude blinds us to the fact that our awe of writing has distorted our perception of language and communication to the point where we no longer understand either orality or the nature of writing itself.² As a matter of fact, written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have common characteristics as well as autonomous and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other); therefore, they require different and specific interpretative instruments. But the undervaluing and the overvaluing of oral sources end up by cancelling out *specific* qualities, turning them either into mere supports for traditional written sources or into an illusory cure for all ills. These notes will attempt to suggest some of the ways in which oral history is intrinsically different.

* * *

Oral sources are *oral* sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published. (One Italian exception is the Istituto Ernesto De Martino, a Milan-based militant research organisation, which has been publishing ‘sound archives’ on records for at least 12 years, without anyone in the cultural establishment noticing.)³ Occasionally – as seems to be the case with the Columbia University Oral History Program, in New York – tapes are actually destroyed: a symbolic case of the destruction of the spoken word. The transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies reduction and manipulation. The differing efficacy of recordings as compared to transcripts for classroom purposes, for instance, can only be appreciated by direct experience. More important is the fact that expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations. (This is why I believe it is unnecessary to give excessive attention to the quest for new and closer methods of transcription. The most literal translation is hardly ever the best; a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention, and the same may be true for the transcription of oral sources.)

The disregard of the orality of oral sources has a direct bearing on interpretative theory. The first aspect which is usually stressed is the origin of oral sources – in that they give us information about illiterate peoples or social groups whose history is either absent or distorted in the written record. Another aspect concerns content: the daily life and material culture of these peoples or groups. However, these are not specific to oral sources: emigrants’ letters, for instance, have the same origin and content, but are

In the search for a distinguishing factor we must therefore turn to *form*. We hardly

need repeat here that writing reduces language to segmentary traits only – letters, syllables, words, phrases. But language is also composed of another set of traits, which cannot be reduced within a single segment, but are also bearers of meaning. For instance, it has been shown that the tonal range, volume range, and rhythm of popular speech carry many class connotations which are not reproducible in writing (unless it be, inadequately and partially, in the form of musical notation).⁵ The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be detected in the transcript but can only be described, approximately.

In order to make the transcript readable it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks, which are always the more or less arbitrary addition of the transcriber. Punctuation indicates pauses distributed according to grammatical rules: each mark has a conventional place, meaning and length. These hardly ever coincide with the rhythms and pauses of the speaking subject, and therefore end up by confining speech within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow. The exact length and position of the pause has an important function in the understanding of the meaning of speech: regular grammatical pauses tend to organise what is said around a basically expository and referential pattern, whereas pauses of irregular length and position accentuate the emotional content; very heavy rhythmic pauses (often nearly metric) recall the style of epic narratives.⁶ Most interviews switch from one type of rhythm to another, thus expressing variations in the narrator's attitude towards his or her material. Of course, this can only be perceived by listening, not by reading.

A similar point can be made concerning the velocity of speech and its changes during the interview. There are no basic interpretative rules: slowing down may mean greater emphasis as well as greater difficulty, and acceleration may show a wish to glide over certain points, as well as greater familiarity and ease. In all these cases, the analysis of changes in velocity must be combined with rhythm analysis. Changes are, however, the norm in speech, while regularity is the 'presumed' norm in reading, where variations are introduced by the reader rather than the text itself.

This is not a question of philological purity. Traits which cannot be reduced to segments are the site (not unique, but very important) of essential narrative functions: the emotional function, the narrator's participation in the story, the way the story affects the narrator. This often involves attitudes which the speaker would not be able (or willing) to express otherwise, or elements which are not fully within his or her control. By abolishing these traits, we flatten the emotional content of speech down to the presumed equanimity and objectivity of the written document. This is even more true when folk informants are involved: they may be poor in vocabulary but are generally richer in the range of tone, volume, and intonation, as compared to middle-class speakers⁷ who have learned to imitate in speech the dullness of writing.

* * *

Oral sources are *narrative* sources. Therefore the analysis of oral history materials must avail itself of some of the general categories developed in the theory of literature. (Of course here I am discussing primarily the testimony given in free interviews, rather than more formally organised materials such as songs or proverbs – where the question of form however is even more essential.) For example, some narratives contain substantial shifts in the 'velocity' of narration: that is substantial variations in the ratio between the duration of the events described and the duration of the narration.⁸ An informant may recount in a few words events which lasted a long time,

or may dwell at length on brief episodes. These oscillations are significant, although we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation: a narrator may dwell on an episode which seems innocuous to distract attention from more delicate points, or to attract attention to it. In all cases there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning the narrator has in mind. The same applies to other categories among those elaborated by Gerard Genette (see note 8), such as 'distance' or 'perspective', which define the position of the narrator towards the story.

Oral sources from non-ruling classes are linked to the tradition of the folk narrative. In this tradition, distinctions between narrative genres are perceived differently than in the written tradition of the educated classes.⁹ Since writing has absorbed most of the functions of certification, official testimony and educational process, oral narration in a literate society finds it less necessary to establish a rigorous distinction between 'factual' and 'artistic' narrative, between 'events' and feelings and imagination. The perception of an account as 'true' is relevant as much to legend as to personal experience and historical memory; and as there are no oral forms specifically destined to transmit historical information,¹⁰ historical, 'poetical' and legendary narrative often become inextricably mixed up. The result is narratives where the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns him or her and what concerns the group, becomes quite thin, and personal 'truth' may coincide with collective 'imagination'.

Each of these factors can be revealed by formal and stylistic factors. The greater or lesser presence of formalised materials (proverbs, songs, formulaic language, stereotypes) can be a witness to a greater or lesser presence of the collective viewpoint within the individual narrator's tale. The shifts between standard 'correct' language and dialect are often a sign of the kind of control which the speaker has over the materials of the narrative. For instance, a typical recurring structure is that in which the standard language is used overall, while dialect crops up in digressions or single episodes: this may show a more personal involvement of the narrator or (as is the case when dialect coincides with a more formulaic or standardised account) the intrusion of collective memory. On the other hand, standard language may emerge in a dialect narrative for terms or themes more closely linked with the public sphere, such as 'politics'; and this may mean a more or less conscious degree of estrangement,¹¹ as well as a process of 'conquest' of a more 'educated' form of expression beginning with participation in politics. Conversely, the dialectisation of technical terms of political speech may be an important sign of the vitality of traditional culture, and of the way in which the speaker endeavours to enlarge the expressive range of his or her tradition.

* * *

The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no factual interest; interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events, and they always cast new light on unexplored sides of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes. From this point of view, the only problem posed by oral sources is that of their credibility (to which I will return below).

But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure (unless it be literary ones) is the speaker's subjectivity; and therefore, if the research is broad and articulated enough, a cross-section of the subjectivity of a social group or class. They tell us not just what

people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know of, for instance, the material cost of a given strike to the workers involved; but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs. Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, we might say that oral sources (above all, oral sources from the non-hegemonic classes) are a very useful integration of other sources as far as the *fabula* – or story – goes: that is, the logical and causal sequence of events; but what makes them unique and necessary is their *plot* – the way in which the narrator arranges materials in order to tell the story.¹² The organisation of the narrative (subject to rules which are mostly the result of collective elaboration) reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationship to their own history.

Subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible 'facts'. What the informant believes is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened. For instance, over half of the workers interviewed in the industrial town of Terni tell the story of their postwar strikes placing the killing of a worker by the police in 1953 rather than, as it really happened, in 1949; they also shift it from one context to another (from a peace demonstration to the urban guerrilla struggle which followed mass layoffs at the local steelworks). This obviously does not cast doubt on the actual chronology; but it does force us to rearrange our interpretation of events in order to recognise the collective processes of symbolisation and myth-making in the Terni working class – which sees those years as one uninterrupted struggle expressed by a unifying symbol (the dead comrade), rather than as a succession of separate events. Or again: an ageing former leader of Terni's Communist Party, tired and ill, recounts as historical truth a daydream of his, in which he sees himself on the verge of overturning the CP's postwar policy of working towards a 'progressive democracy' in alliance with bourgeois forces rather than pushing on from anti-fascist resistance to socialism. Of course, he never did play such a role, although it does symbolise the resistance which the so-called 'Salerno policy' met with inside the party. What his testimony makes us feel is the psychological cost of this policy for many militant workers, how it caused their need and desire for revolution to be buried within the collective unconscious.¹³ When we find the same story told by a different person in a different part of the country, we understand that the old comrade's fantasy in Terni is not just a chance occurrence. It is rather part of a burgeoning legendary complex, in which are told as true events that at least part of the working class wishes had happened. The 'senile ramblings' of a sick old worker then can reveal as much about his class and party as the lengthy and lucid written memoirs of some of the more respected and official leaders.¹⁴

* * *

The credibility of oral sources is a *different* credibility. The examples I have given above show how the importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in. Therefore there are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of historical philological criticism that apply to every document, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'untrue' statements are still psychologically 'true', and that these previous 'errors' sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts.

Of course, this does not imply acceptance of the dominant prejudice which sees

factual credibility as a monopoly of written sources. The official police report on the death of the Terni worker discussed above begins with these revealing words: 'According to verbal information taken . . . ' This is a typical opening formula (in the technical sense) of such official documents, and it shows how many *written* sources are only an uncontrolled transmission of lost *oral* sources. A large part of the written documents which are granted an automatic certificate of credibility by historians are the result of similar processes, carried out with nothing resembling scientific criteria and nearly always with a heavy class bias. For example, this manipulation is inherent in the transcription of trial records (in Italian procedure at least, which accords no legal value to the tape recorder or even to shorthand): what goes on record is not the words of the witnesses, but a version of their testimony translated into legal jargon literally dictated by the judge to the clerk. (The judiciary's fear of the tape recorder is equalled only by the similar prejudice of many historians.) The distortion inherent in such a procedure is beyond assessment, especially when the speakers are not members of the hegemonic class and express themselves in a language twice removed from that of court records. And yet, many historians who turn up their noses at oral sources accept these legal transcripts without blinking. In a lesser measure (thanks to the lesser class distance and the frequent use of shorthand) this applies to parliamentary records, newspaper interviews, minutes of meetings and conventions, which together form the chief sources for much traditional history, including labour history.

A strange by-product of this prejudice is the insistence that oral sources are distant from events and therefore undergo distortions deriving from faulty memory. Now, by definition, the only act contemporary with the act of writing is writing itself. There is always a greater or lesser lapse of time between the event and the written record, if only the time necessary to put it down in writing (unless of course we are talking about contracts, wills, treaties, etc, where the writing *is* the event). In fact, historians have often used *written* sources which were written long after the actual events. And indeed if lack of distance is a requisite, this ought to include physical distance as well – that is, only a direct participant ought to be considered reliable, and only at the moment of the event. But it so happens that such evidence can only be taken with a tape recorder, as happened with interviews recorded during the housing struggles in Rome in the 1970s, where the words of squatters and police were recorded *at the time* of the evictions.¹⁵

It is true however that most oral testimony refers to more or less distant events. It is nevertheless not clear why a worker's account of a sit-in strike or a partisan account of an episode of the anti-fascist resistance should be less credible than the accounts by eminent political leaders of the postwar period or even of the fascist era which are enjoying a remarkable publishing success in Italy. This is not so much the consequence of direct class prejudice, as of the 'holiness' of the written word. An excellent American historian, for instance, was ironical about the usefulness of collecting Earl Browder's oral memories of the fifties; but he admitted that if Browder (who was a Secretary of the U.S. Communist Party in the 30s and 40s) had written memoirs concerning the same period, he would have had to consider them reliable until proved otherwise. Yet the time span between the events and the narration would be the same. Writing hides its dependence on time by presenting us with an immutable text (as the Latin tag has it, 'scripta manent' – writings endure), thus giving the illusion that since no modifications are possible in the future of the text, no modifications can have taken place in its past history or in its prehistory. But what is written is first experienced or seen, and is subject to distortions even before it is set down on paper. Therefore the reservations applying to oral sources ought to be extended to written material as well.

The originally oral interviews with political leaders and intellectuals which are increasingly being turned out in book form by the Italian publishing industry are usually revised before printing and checked with notes and documents. The oral narrators of the non-hegemonic classes often resort to similar aids. On the one hand they belong to a tradition which has been forced, because of its lack of access to writing, to develop techniques for memory which have in large part atrophied in those who give greater importance to writing and reading.¹⁶ (For instance they may still use formalised narration and meter; identify and characterise people by means of nicknames and kinship; date events in relation to agricultural cycles; retain the very habit of repeating and listening to oral narrations.) Folk informants often speak from within a collective tradition which passes on detailed descriptions of events preceding their birth, but which remain remarkably compact from one source to another.¹⁷ These stories are part of a collective tradition which preserves the memory of the group's history beyond the range of the lives of individual members. On the other hand, we ought not to consider our sources as entirely innocent of writing. Perhaps the case of the old Genzano farmworkers' league leader, who in addition to remembering his own experiences very clearly had done research on his own in local archives, may be atypical. But the majority of informants know how to read, read newspapers, have read books, listen regularly to radio and TV (which both belong to the same culture as produces the written word). They have listened to speeches by people who read – politicians, trade unionists, priests. They keep diaries, letters, old newspapers and documents. For several centuries now, in spite of mass illiteracy, writing and orality have not existed in separate worlds. While a great deal of written memory is but a thin veneer on an underlying orality, even illiterate persons are saturated with written culture. The most common cultural condition for people in the non-hegemonic classes in a country like Italy is somewhere in between, in a fluid state of transition from orality to writing and sometimes back.

The fact remains however that today's narrator is not the same person as took part in the distant events which he or she is now relating. Nor is age the only difference. There may have been changes in personal subjective consciousness as well as in social standing and economic condition, which may induce modifications, affecting at least the judgement of events and the 'colouring' of the story. For instance, several people are reticent when it comes to describing forms of struggle approaching sabotage. This does not mean that they don't remember them clearly, but that there has been a change in their political opinions or in the line of their party, whereby actions considered legitimate and even normal or necessary in the past are today viewed as unacceptable and are literally cast out of the tradition. In these cases, the most precious information may lie in what the informants hide (and in the fact that they hide it), rather than in what they tell.

However, informants are usually quite capable of reconstructing their past attitudes even when they no longer coincide with present ones. This is the case with the Terni factory workers who admit that violent personal reprisals against the executives responsible for the 1953 mass layoffs may have been counterproductive, but yet reconstruct with great lucidity why they seemed useful and sensible at the time. It is also the case with one of the most important oral testimonies of our time, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Here the narrator describes how his mind worked before he reached a new awareness, and then judges his own past self with his present political and religious consciousness. If the interview is conducted skilfully and its purposes are clear to the informant, it is not impossible for him or her to make a

distinction between present self and past self, and to objectify the past self as other than the present one, other than now. In these cases (Malcolm X again is typical) irony is the major narrative technique used: two different ethical (or political) and narrative standards interfere and overlap, and their tension shapes the narrative.¹⁸

We may however come across narrators whose consciousness seems to have been arrested at the climactic moment of their personal experience – certain resistance fighters for example, or many World War I veterans, perhaps some student militants of 1968. Often they are wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were part, and their account takes on the cadences and the wording of epic. Thus an ironical style or an epic one implies a differing historical perspective which ought to be considered in our interpretation of the testimony.

* * *

Oral sources are *not objective*. This of course applies to every source, although the holiness of writing sometimes leads us to forget it. But the inherent non-objectivity of oral sources lies in specific intrinsic characteristics, the most important being that they are *artificial, variable, partial*.

Alex Haley's introduction to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* shows that the shift in Malcolm's narrative approach did not happen spontaneously but was stimulated by the interviewer, who led the dialogue away from the exclusively public, official image that Malcolm was trying to project of himself and of the Nation of Islam.¹⁹ This illustrates how oral sources are always the result of a relationship, a common project in which both the informant and the researcher are involved, together. (This is one reason why I think the historian ought to conduct most interviews in person, rather than through professional interviewers; and why oral research is best carried out in teamwork.) Written documents are fixed; they exist whether we are aware of them or not. Oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence. The condition for the existence of the written source is its *emission*; for oral sources it is their *transmission*. These differences are similar to those described by Jakobson and Bogatyrev between the creative processes of folklore and literature.²⁰

The content of the oral source depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, stimuli, dialogue, personal relationship of mutual trust or detachment. It is the researcher who decides that there will be an interview. Researchers often introduce specific distortions: informants tell them what they believe they want to be told (it is interesting to see what the informants think is wanted and expected, that is what the informants think the historian is). On the other hand, rigidly structured interviews exclude elements whose existence and relevance were previously unknown to the researcher and are not contemplated in the question schedule; therefore such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference.

The first requirement, therefore, is that the researcher 'accept' the informant and give priority to what he or she wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wishes to hear. (Any questions lurking unanswered may be reserved for a later interview.) Communication always works both ways, the interviewee is always – though perhaps quietly – studying the interviewer as well as being studied. The historian might as well recognise this fact and work with it, rather than try to eliminate it for the sake of an impossible (and perhaps undesirable) neutrality. Thus, the result is the product of both the informant and the researcher; therefore when (as is often the case) oral interviews

in book form are arranged in such a way as to exclude the researcher's voice, a subtle distortion takes place: the transcript gives the informant's answers, but not the questions they are answering, and therefore gives the impression that a given speaker would *always* say the same things, no matter what the circumstances – in other words, the impression that a speaking person is as fixed as a written document. When the researcher's voice is cut out, the informant's voice is distorted.

In fact, oral testimony will never be the same twice. This is a characteristic of all oral communication: not even the most expert folk singer will deliver the same song twice in exactly the same fashion. This is even more true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements during an interview. It is therefore often worth the trouble interviewing the same informant more than once. The relationship between researcher and informant changes as they get to know and trust each other better. Attitudes change too: what has been called 'revolutionary vigilance' (keeping certain things from an interviewer who comes from another class and may make uncontrolled use of them) is attenuated; and the opposite attitude, a consequence of class subordination (telling only what the informant thinks may be relevant from the researcher's point of view rather than his or her own) gives way to more independent behaviour.

The fact that interviews with the same informant may be usefully continued leads us to the problem of the inherent incompleteness of oral sources. It is impossible to exhaust the *entire* historical memory of a single informant; so the data extracted from the interviews will always be the result of a selection produced by the mutual relationship. Oral historical research therefore always has the unfinished nature of a work in progress. This makes it different from historical research as we are accustomed to conceive it, with its ideal goal of reading through *all* existing sources, documents, archives, and pertinent literature. In order to go through all the possible oral sources for the Terni strikes of 1949-53, the researcher would have to interview at least 100,000 people. Any sample would only be as reliable as the sampling methods used; and on the other hand could never guarantee us against leaving out 'quality' informants whose testimony alone might be worth more than ten statistically selected ones.

But the unfinishedness, the partiality of oral sources infects all other sources. Given that no research can be considered complete any longer unless it includes oral sources (where available of course), and that oral sources are inexhaustible, oral history passes on its own partial, incomplete quality to all historical research.

* * *

Oral history is not the point where the working class speaks for itself. The contrary statement of course is not without foundation; the recounting of a strike through the words and memories of workers rather than those of the police and the company-dominated press obviously helps (though not automatically) to correct a distortion implicit in the traditional sources. Oral sources therefore are a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for a history of the non-hegemonic classes, while they are less necessary for the history of the ruling class who have had control over writing and therefore entrusted most of their collective memory to written records.

Nevertheless, the control of the historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian: it is the historian who selects the people who are to speak; who asks the questions and thus contributes to the shaping of the testimony; who gives the

testimony its final published form (if only in terms of montage and transcription). Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in the abstract, but speaks *to* the historian, and *with* the historian (and, inasmuch as the material is published, *through* the historian). Things may indeed be more the other way round: the historian speaking through the workers' testimony, ventriloquising a discourse which is not theirs. So far from disappearing in the objectivity of the sources, the historian remains important at least as a partner in the dialogue, often as a 'stage director' of the interview, as an 'organiser' of the testimony – and organisation, as the old radical saying goes, is not technical, it is political. Instead of finding sources, the historian at least partly 'makes' them; though other people's words may be used it is still his or her discourse. Far from becoming a mere mouthpiece of the working class the historian may amplify a personal contribution.²¹

While the written document is usually invoked to prove that the account is a reliable description of actual events, oral sources involve the entire account in their own subjectivity. Alongside the first person narration of the informant is the first person of the historian, without whom there would be no source. In fact both the discourse of the informant and that of the historian are in narrative form, which brings them closer together than is the case with most other first-hand sources. Informants are historians, after a fashion; and the historian is, somehow, a part of the source.

The traditional writer of history presents himself (or, less often, herself) in the role of what literary theory would call an 'omniscient narrator': he gives a third-person account of events of which he was not a part, and which he dominates entirely and from above, impartial and detached, never appearing himself in the narrative except to give comments aside on the development of events, after the manner of some nineteenth-century novelists. Oral history changes the manner of writing history much in the same way as the modern novel transformed literary fiction; and the major change is that the narrator, from the outside of the narration, is pulled inside and becomes a part of it.

This is not just a grammatical shift from the third to the first person, but a whole new narrative attitude: the narrator is now one of the characters and the telling of the story is now part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political involvement than the traditional development of the external narrator. Radical history-writing is not a matter of ideology, of subjective sides-taking on the historians' part, or of what kind of sources they use. It is rather inherent in the historian's presence in the story being told, in the assumption of responsibility which inscribes him or her in the account and reveals historiography as an autonomous *act* of narration. Political choices become less visible and vocal, but more basic. The myth that the historian as a subject might disappear overwhelmed by the working-class sources, was part of a view of political militancy as the annihilation of subjective roles into the all-encompassing one of the fulltime militant, as absorption into an abstract working class. This resulted in an ironical similarity to the traditional attitude which saw the historian as not subjectively involved in what he (or she) was writing. Of course oral history seemed to be custom-made for this end, in that oral historians led others to speak rather than speaking themselves. But what actually happens is the opposite: the historian is less and less of a go-between from the working class to the reader, and more and more of a protagonist. If others speak instead, it is still the historian who makes them speak; and the 'floor', whether admittedly or not, is still the historian's.

In the writing of history, as in literature, the act of focussing on the function of the narrator causes the fragmentation of this function. In a novel like Joseph Conrad's

Lord Jim, the character/narrator Marlow can recount only what he himself has seen and heard; in order to narrate 'the whole story' he is forced to take several other 'informants' into his tale. The same thing happens to the historian working with oral sources: on entering the story and explicitly declaring control over it, he or she must on that very account allow the sources to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse. Thus, oral history is told from a multitude of 'circumscribed points of view': the impartiality claimed by traditional historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator (where partiality stands both for taking sides and for unfinishedness). The partiality of oral history is both political *and* narrative: it can never be told without taking sides, since the 'sides' exist inside the account.

Of course, historian and sources are not the same 'side', whatever the historian's personal history may be. The confrontation of these two different partialities – confrontation as conflict, and confrontation as the search for unity – is not the least element of interest in historical work based on oral sources.

1 *La Repubblica*, 3 October, 1978.

2 Eric A Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Harvard University Press 1963.

3 See Franco Coggiola, 'L'attività dell' Istituto Ernesto De Martino' in Diego Carpitella (ed.), *L'Etnomusicologia in Italia*, Palermo 1975.

4 See for instance Luisa Passerini, 'Sull' utilità e il danno delle fonti orali per la storia', intro. to Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale. Vita quotidiana e cultura materiale delle classi subalterne*, Turin 1978.

5 Giovanna Marini, 'Musica popolare e parlato popolare urbano', in Circolo Gianni Bosio (ed.), *I Giorni Cantati*, Milan 1978. See also Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Styles and Culture*, Washington D.C. 1968.

6 See Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, also Walter J Ong, 'African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics', *New Literary History*, vol. 8 no. 3, Spring 1977, pp 411-29; Dennis Tedlock, 'Towards an Oral Poetics', same volume, pp 506-19.

7 See William Labov, 'The Logic of non-standard English', in Louis Kampf-Paul Lauter (ed.), *The Politics of Literature*, New York 1970, pp 194-239.

8 Here as elsewhere in this paper, I am using these terms as defined and used by Gerard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris 1972.

9 Dan Ben-Amos, 'Catégories Analytiques et Genres Populaires', *Poétique*, vol. 19, 1974, pp 268-93.

10 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, Penguin ed. 1961, 1973.

11 For instance, a Communist Party militant interviewed in Rome described the situation of his community and family mainly in dialect, but shifted briefly to standard Italian whenever he had to reaffirm his fidelity to the party line and the line's inevitability. The language shift showed that though he accepted it as inevitable he still saw the party line as something quite different from his own experience and tradition. His recurring idiom was 'There's nothing you can do about it'. A transcript of the interview is published in Circolo Gianni Bosio (ed.), *I Giorni Cantati*.

12 Boris Tomacevskij's essay on plot construction, in Tzvean Todorov (ed.), *Théorie de la Littérature*, Paris 1965.

13 See Alessandro Portelli and Valentino Paparelli, 'Terni: materiali per una storia operaia' in *Giorni Cantati*, bulletin of the Circolo Gianni Bosio, vol. 10, March 1977, 18-36.

14 Nathan Wachtel shows a similar phenomenon for folk reconstructions of the Spanish conquest in Mexico and Peru, which he partly explains by the distance in time (which does not apply to events within the informant's memory, as in Terni): 'Are these distortions arbitrary and mere fruits of fancy, or do they rather respond to a certain logic? And then, what logic is it? Why one interpretation rather than another?' *La Vision des Vaincus*, Paris 1971. From the Italian translation, *La Visione dei Vinti*, Turin 1977, p. 47.

15 On the time span between the event and the writing on the event see Genette as in note 8. The housing struggle recordings are partly published in the record *Roma. La borgata e la lotta per la casa* edited by Alessandro Portelli, Milan, Istituto Ernesto De Martino, Archivi Sonori SdL/AS/10.

16 Paul Thompson tells about the members of a social psychology convention, who, asked after a few days, were not able to remember the topics discussed there. Scholars used to reading and writing have a tendency to forget how to listen. Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale*, p 36.

17 See Alfredo Martini-Antonello Cuzzaniti, 'Il 1898 a Genzano', *I Giorni Cantati*, vol. 10, March 1977, pp 3-16.

18 See the definition of irony in George Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*, ch. 5

19 Of course Haley was only aiming to replace politics with 'human interest'. It was Malcolm X's unrelenting political tension which made his personal story the most politically relevant part of the book.

20 Roman Jakobson and Piotr Bogatyrev, 'Le folklore, forme spécifique de création' in *Questions de Poétique*, Paris 1973, pp 59-72.

21 To this all-important purpose, a historian working with oral testimony collected by someone else is virtually working with a *written* source: a source he may not ask questions of, a source he may not influence and change, a source 'written' on the tape (the Italian 'inciso' or carved gives fully this sense of unchangeability).

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