
Travels with a Donkey: further adventures in social research

ANNE PIRRIE

*Faculty of Education, Health and Social Sciences,
University of the West of Scotland, Ayr, United Kingdom*

GALE MACLEOD

Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT This article is intended as a contribution to the debate on the epistemology of educational research. The latter is construed as an ethical project that brings with it a distinctive set of power relations, and entails a degree of self-effacement on the part of the researcher, a subordination of the self to the internal logic of the task in hand. The conditions within the academy that inhibit the development of these qualities are briefly outlined, as is the status of the academic as an awkward hybrid between *animal laborens* and *homo faber*. The authors build upon earlier work that drew upon ethnographic research on walking and a comparative anthropology of the line in order to develop a new approach to understanding the relation between movement, knowledge, description and measurement in social research. They bring into dialogue the notion of wayfaring elaborated by the anthropologist Tim Ingold and Richard Sennett's socio-cultural exploration of the realm of the craftsman. By drawing extensively on Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van*, they begin to open up perspectives for further debate on the literary turn in social research.

But we are all travellers in what John Bunyan calls the wilderness of this world – all, too, travellers with a donkey: and the best that we find in our travels is an honest friend. He is a fortunate voyager who finds many. We travel, indeed, to find them. They are the end and the reward of life. They keep us worthy of ourselves; and when we are alone, we are only nearer to the absent. (R.L. Stevenson, Preface to *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* [1879/1982])

Introduction

Impulsive people often have cause to regret their actions. This is an early intimation that this article is about power, albeit rather obliquely. More specifically, it is about power and educational research, and about how the former sometimes needs to be relinquished in the interests of good work in respect of the latter. We recently asserted that a piece of writing was (merely) 'the first step towards a conceptualisation of the social researcher as journeyman, wayfarer, fellow traveller or craftsman' (Pirrie & Macleod, 2010). This grandiloquent gesture has certainly provided a strong incentive to get going with our project – a series of reflections on the epistemology of educational research – even although it is not entirely clear how it will turn out. Failure to do so might have made us look foolish and would have certainly damaged our pride. (We hesitate to use the word 'reputation' in a professional context as it may presume too much.)

This article follows on from an earlier one (Pirrie & Macleod, 2010) that drew upon ethnographic research on walking and a comparative anthropology of the line (Ingold, 2007) in order to develop a new approach to understanding the relation between movement, knowledge,

description and measurement in social research. The aim of the current article is to continue with our explorations by further investigating the connections between the notion of wayfaring elaborated by the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000, 2007) and Richard Sennett's socio-cultural exploration of craftsmanship (2008).

Wayfaring and Craftsmanship

Exploring the notions of craftsmanship and wayfaring seemed like a natural starting point for us, as not knowing how a particular endeavour might turn out seems to be central to both. In some respects, the craftsman is the ideal companion of the wayfarer, who is also one who 'knows as he goes' (Ingold, 2000, pp. 229-230). As it is for the wayfarer, who is constantly on the move, the starting point for the craftsman is bodily practice, whether this is playing the cello, throwing a javelin or writing a book (Sennett, 2008). For the craftsman, just as for the wayfarer, 'wherever he is, and so long as life goes on, there is somewhere further he can go' (Ingold, 2007, p. 77). The craftsman, again like the wayfarer, is 'more open to oddity and particularity' (Sennett, 2008, p. 247). He is able to develop the capacity to sustain repetition for long periods without succumbing to boredom. This is what generates the small epiphanies 'that turn the lock in a practice that has jammed' (2008, p. 38). The craftsman refuses to work (only) by the book, and shares with the wayfarer a capacity not only to dwell in the present, but also to look to the future and to the past. Practice for the craftsman is what travelling is for the wayfarer. That is to say that wayfaring and craftsmanship are not transitional activities between one place and another, or from one stage of expertise to another; rather, they are ways of being. In this respect, the craftsman differs from the journeyman, whose compass Sennett considers is limited to working from examples, displaying 'managerial competence' and providing 'evidence of his trustworthiness as a future leader' (2008, p. 58).

The notion of the journeyman brings to mind the conscientious research assistant who has a sound grasp of research methods and a projected career path. For this individual, tenure, itself a form of grasping, is an end point rather than a beginning or a becoming. As Ingold (2007) has pointed out, the wayfarer's way of being in the world differs fundamentally from that of the traveller. For the latter, the primary orientation is the destination. To paraphrase R.L. Stevenson, the traveller is far more interested in arriving than in travelling hopefully. For the craftsman and the wayfarer on the other hand, the true success is to labour (1881/1900).

We shall also explore 'the ethical way to take pride in one's work' (Sennett, 2008, p. 296), and argue that this is achieved partly through the exercise of craftsmanship and partly through paying attention to the journey. We have begun to examine how this relates to the practices of craftsmanship and wayfaring, and through the process of analogy will extend this to the practice of social science. The reflections of Alan Bennett, one of Britain's best-loved playwrights, on his craft may provide some clue as to what the apparently diverse practices of craftsmanship and wayfaring have in common. Bennett mulls over his brief biography of Miss Shepherd, *The Lady in the Van* (1999), and wonders:

at the bold life she has had and how it contrasts with my own timid way of going on – living, as Camus said, slightly the opposite of expressing. And I see how the location of Miss Shepherd and the van in front but to the side of where I write is the location of most of the stuff I write about: *that too is to the side and never what faces me.* (p. 88, emphasis added)

Sennett (2008) suggests that 'the most dignified person we can become' is one who is proud of her work rather than proud of herself. He believes that this is achieved through 'staged reflection', and through continuous and profoundly respectful engagement with other people (p. 296). Bennett's compassionate account of his relationship with Miss Shepherd exemplifies such engagement with consummate good grace. It also demonstrates how 'we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them' (Weil, 1951, p. 96).

Sennett takes the view that the good craftsman 'understands the importance of the sketch – that is, not quite knowing what you are about when you begin' (Sennett, 2008, p. 262). This certainly applied to Alan Bennett, who found himself involved in 'run-ins' and skirmishes with Miss Shepherd over a fifteen-year period. He had no idea at the outset that his engagement would extend over such a long period. Moreover, in Sennett's view, the craftsman (as indeed his

companion the wayfarer) 'places positive value on contingency and constraint' (2008, p. 262). He makes a virtue out of what Bennett considered an omission by attending to what lies to the side rather than to what is directly in front.

We shall consider this line of argument in relation to the process of social research. As well as being 'more open to oddity and particularity' (p. 247) (and, in the case of Alan Bennett and Miss Shepherd, to spectacular eccentricity), this entails shifting the focus of attention towards a person's 'becoming' rather than limiting attention 'to terms of cause and effect' (Sennett, 2008, p. 247). As we shall see from our exploration of *The Lady in the Van*, there are occasions on which the impact of considerations of cause and effect is greatest when they come *after* a careful and respectful recounting of encounter. In short, the best stories are sometimes told backwards.

Inhabitant and Occupant Knowledge

We shall also further explore the distinction between 'inhabitant' and 'occupant' knowledge elaborated by Ingold (2007) by examining their analogues in craftsmanship and apprenticeship. Inhabitant knowledge is the knowledge that we build up as we go along. It is part of our way of being in the world, and to acknowledge as much signals a willingness to surrender spurious mastery of a field. Occupant knowledge, on the other hand, is associated with a form of dominion: it comes with mastery of a particular territory. For example, if I say 'I am a social scientist', the implication is that I have mastered a particular field, or have a thorough grounding in a particular discipline. I have marked out (or 'mapped out') my territory, and I know roughly where it begins and where it ends. I feel (more or less) secure in my field, and thus 'empowered'. What we attempt to do in this article is to bring two dualistic sets of notions, each comprising a way of being and a form of knowledge, into dialogue with two contrasting types of working procedure in order to challenge traditional notions of power in educational research. So on the one hand we have craftsmanship and inhabitant knowledge, and on the other apprenticeship and occupant knowledge. The craftsman works with a sketch, the apprentice or journeyman with a blueprint. The sketch is to inhabitant knowledge what the blueprint is to occupant knowledge.

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett compares two very different houses in 1920s Vienna, one built by Wittgenstein and the other by his contemporary Adolf Loos (pp. 254-263). The story of the construction of these two houses tells us a great deal about what distinguishes the craftsman from the apprentice, the journeyman or the dilettante. Wittgenstein's house 'was framed in terms of getting something generically right' (Sennett, 2008, p. 255), and he was able to use his family fortune to create what he himself described as 'the foundations of all possible buildings' (quoted in Sennett, 2008, p. 254). Yet the minute and costly adjustments to the building that were undertaken in a vain attempt to satisfy his architectural obsessions ended in failure. Blueprint thinking let him down. In 1940, he wrote in a note to himself that the house 'lacks health', and that although it had 'good manners', it 'lacked primordial life' (quoted again in Sennett, 2008, p. 254). Loos, on the other hand, did not have a vast fortune at his disposal, and was forced to work within constraints during the construction of the Villa Moller. The informal sketch best represents his working procedure. As Sennett explains, 'when the foundations were not laid as specified, he could not afford to dig them up and start again' (p. 258). Instead, Loos had to accommodate mistakes that occurred along the way, and the result was a much more inviting prospect than Wittgenstein's sterile box. As Sennett explains:

Getting things in perfect shape can mean removing the traces, erasing the evidence, of a work in progress. Once this evidence is eliminated, the object appears pristine. Perfection of this cleaned-up sort is a static condition; the object does not hint at the narrative of its making. (p. 258)

The sketch and the blueprint are emblematic of two radically different ways of thinking and of living one's life. As we shall see, they have their analogues in fundamentally different conceptions of the process of social research. We shall consider the case of social (and sociable) research in education to explore one of the central arguments put forward in Richard Sennett's masterful book *The Craftsman* (2008) - namely, 'that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making' (p. 7).

To what extent do the circumstances of labour that prevail in higher education privilege occupant over inhabitant knowledge? Do they drive thinking and feeling out of making? In order to

answer these questions, we need to move beyond the comfort zone of conventional social science practice, to engage in the art of the parable rather than to dwell on the art of the possible.[1] We shall do this by considering Alan Bennett's account of *The Lady in the Van* (1999), which is surely one of the most remarkable and scintillating examples of a 'method of the exercise of intelligence which consists of looking' (Weil, 1951, p. 96).

Incentives in the Academy

With the insouciance of wayfarers who do not mind retracing their steps, let us return briefly to our starting point. This provides the framework for much of what follows, and will serve to demonstrate, at least in part, how power 'saturates educational practice, research and theory' (Watts, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, we shall argue that this is ultimately to the detriment of the academy and the individuals working within it.

We begin with an elegant and characteristically self-effacing discussion by a legal philosopher who addresses the place of incentives and reasons in academic life. This may strike the reader as something of a digression. However, we believe that this minor parabolic flourish is necessary if we are to understand how academics in general and social researchers in particular are primed for blueprint thinking and occupant knowledge and taught to abjure sketchbook thinking and inhabitant knowledge.

Following the line of argument set out by the late Neil MacCormick (2008, pp. 5-12), failure to get on with the business of writing this article would perhaps have undermined the value of what had gone before. It is possible that the critical reception of the first article might have been impaired if the second had failed to materialise. If this were to have happened, our professional pride would have been dented, and it would have been even harder for us to get up and start all over again. Murdoch (1970/2001) argued that 'the development of consciousness in human beings is inseparably connected with the use of metaphor', that these are not 'peripheral decorations', but rather 'fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition' (p. 76). So try to imagine what would happen if you were to serve up a stylish entrée, only then to explain to your bemused guests that you had just been too tired and dispirited to prepare the main course. Your guests would be left feeling hungry and seriously short-changed. Moreover, you would rapidly gain a reputation for being a totally inadequate host, even if you had prepared nutritious if slightly dull meals for friends and family for half a lifetime. The fragility of a person's reputation and the susceptibility of character to corrosion (Sennett, 1998) are food for thought indeed. However, they are not themes that we can address in any depth in this article. It will suffice to note Sennett's observation that 'in the goldsmith's case, the good skills that established the master goldsmith's authority were inseparable from his ethics, and that 'this ethical imperative appeared in the very technological activity, the assay, that gave goldsmithing its economic value' (Sennett, 2008, p. 61).

Our focus hitherto has been on the personal and professional incentives of an individual working within a large community of practice that involves colleagues who are teachers, researchers or administrators in universities (or a combination of all three). However, as MacCormick (2008) points out, the reputation of the individual is at least partly dependent upon the reputation of the whole; and the reputation of the whole can promote or limit the scholarly motivation of the individual (p. 6). Then there are the members of the education policy community; the representatives of government bodies and grant-giving authorities; and the many people encountered in the course of particular empirical research projects - the research subjects, as it were. We owe the latter a great debt for giving us something to write about in the first place; and we are indebted to the former for commissioning and/or funding the research.

It is within the broad context outlined above that the sociologist Steve Fuller has observed that 'academics appear to be worried about at least three things: receiving due credit for their work, protecting their work from debasement and, most subtly, justifying the need for their work' (Fuller, 2005, p. 137). This is a rather bleak view of a notoriously stubborn species. However, academics do appear to be partly driven by external incentives, such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK and the irresistible rise of Total Quality Management (TQM) in education. They are also constantly beset by the spectre of professional failure. Indeed, researchers working in higher education institutions operate with failure rates (e.g. in respect of grant

applications and peer-reviewed publications) that would result in their colleagues in medicine or nursing being struck off their respective professional registers. It is perhaps not surprising that the morale and motivation of those working in the academy are subject to extreme fluctuation. Furthermore, Fuller suggests that part of their insecurity derives from the fact that they concede that 'intellectuals ... can reduce complex academic arguments to their key points and then provide a context for them that conveys a significance that attracts a much wider audience than academics normally manage' (2005, p. 137). As we saw above, academics are beholden to any number of benefactors, both within and beyond the academy. We shall attempt to argue that this has a profound impact on the nature of their interaction with the subject matter, and their capacity to exercise their ethical imagination. In order to achieve this, we shall endeavour to do what literature generally does better than social science – namely, make something happen in the hearts and minds of our readers.

Travels with a Donkey in Academia

We might describe the social researcher as a kind of awkward hybrid of *animal laborens* and *homo faber*. This draws on a distinction between two different modes of labour first identified by the philosopher Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958). Richard Sennett, one of Arendt's former students, offers an extended critique of this distinction, which, as he points out, rests on the presumed superiority of the latter, of 'man as maker', as 'the judge of material labor and practice', over the former, the 'drudge condemned to routine' (Sennett, 2008, p. 6). In his guise as *animal laborens*, the academic is disempowered. He is little more than a beast of burden, 'something cheap, small and hardy', if not quite as asinine as the donkey that was Robert Louis Stevenson's inconstant companion on his travels in the Cévennes.

There are, of course, some academics who are as stubborn and manipulative as Stevenson's donkey Modestine, whose very name evokes a virtue that is not common in academic life. Whatever their individual dispositions, academics are all to some extent driven by external incentives, carrots and sticks, and seemingly absorbed in the task at hand. In Fuller's admittedly rather jaded view of the species, this involves 'laborious data gathering embellished with great swathes of jargon' (Fuller, 2005, p. 137). In the case of applied research in education, for example, the task in hand might be finalising a grant application; negotiating consent to undertake a research project; or designing and piloting research instruments such as questionnaires and interview schedules. Many researchers must attempt to reconcile these activities with teaching and administrative responsibilities.

As *homo faber*, on the other hand, the social researcher is expected to turn into the donkey driver, and to exercise some degree of skill and judgement. It is ironic that this type of *homo faber* is conjured into existence by a series of performance criteria and external drivers, such as the RAE and performance targets relating to income generation. According to Arendt, what makes *homo faber* different from (and by implication superior to) his alter ego *homo laborens* is that he stops just doing and begins to ask why. However, as the analogy with Stevenson's travels with a donkey in the Cévennes suggests, the outcome of this exchange can be unpredictable, and the mind prey to misgivings:

As long as I was within sight of the windows, a secret shame and the fear of some laughable defeat withheld me from tampering with Modestine. She tripped along upon her four small hoofs with a sober daintiness of gait; from time to time she shook her ears or her tail; and she looked so small under the bundle that my mind misgave me. We got across the ford without difficulty – there was no doubt about the matter, she was docility itself – and once on the other bank, where the road begins to mount through pine-woods, I took in my right hand the unhallowed staff, and with a quaking spirit applied it to the donkey. Modestine brisked up her pace for perhaps three steps, and then relapsed into her former minuet.

To stop just doing and start asking why is one of the hallmarks of what is generally referred to in the research literature as 'reflexivity'. The very word underlines the validity of the observation that 'it seems ... impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to metaphor, since the concepts themselves are deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance' (Murdoch, 1970/2001, p. 75).

There is an extensive literature on the notion of reflexivity in social research, to which we cannot attempt to do justice in this short article (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). It is part of the thick scrub and undergrowth that sociable wayfarers graze against as they walk. With specific reference to research in education, Gewirtz & Cribb (2006) consider that 'general reflexivity about values' is a defining feature of what they describe as 'methodological rigour'. 'Rigour' has achieved talismanic status in social science research, and is widely considered to be an auxiliary virtue that is a sine qua non for successful practice in this field. Gewirtz & Cribb (2006) suggest that 'general reflexivity' (as opposed to ethical reflexivity, upon which they adumbrate at some length) 'typically involves reflections on the identity of the researcher as a way of indicating the socially-constructed nature of the research process and the partiality and contingency of the research account' (p. 154). This is the point at which *animal laborens* and *homo faber* become one, just as they do when they are exercising craftsmanship and practising a technique. Sennett describes this in broad terms 'as a cultural issue rather than as a mindless procedure' (2008, p. 8).

As intimated above, the hybrid status of the social researcher can give rise to deep-seated professional dissatisfaction and, perhaps even more importantly, to an enduring sense that there is no place for *homo ludens* in the academy (Pirrie, 1997), or, for that matter, for meanderings in the Cévennes. Yet even in an environment where aspirations for quality are sacrificed to performance indicators and targets, there are many social researchers who demonstrate the skill, commitment and judgement that Sennett considers the hallmark of the craftsman. In his view, craftsmanship 'names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett, 2008, p. 9). It is to this enduring impulse and its manifold consequences that we now turn our attention.

Taking Pride in One's Work

Like Sennett, the legal philosopher Neil MacCormick was also concerned with the desire to do a job well for its own sake, irrespective of the various external incentives that might apply. As he has pointed out, there are also strong incentives to do good work that do not have direct regard to others or to the common good of a particular academic community, although it certainly is the case that 'whatever enhances the common good is also good for oneself, but not in an instrumental way' (MacCormick, 2008, p. 6).

Part of what motivates and animates us as educational researchers is the desire to say something new about the business of conducting social research, or at the very least to cast new light on some dimension of that enterprise that has never been properly grasped. Striving to be the ladies in the vanguard may or may not be a worthwhile endeavour, and it may or may not get at some kind of 'truth' – that is for the reader to decide. And if the text is not engaging and no new insights are apparent, why would the reader persist? To make something happen in the hearts and minds of the reader is reason enough to persist, and to try to make the writing interesting. This is an intuitive process, carried forward in small uncertain steps and governed by the obscure laws of perfectionism to which so many writers fall prey. In an essay entitled 'Why I Write', George Orwell described the process in the following terms:

Writing a book is a long exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's personality. (1946/2004, p. 10)

This quotation from Orwell illustrates several of the themes addressed in Sennett's (2008) *The Craftsman* - namely, that skills have their origins in bodily practice and that this can entail physical suffering; that 'resistance and ambiguity' (Sennett, 2008, p. 10) are inevitable and can be instructive; and that the ethical project entails the progressive effacement of the self. We shall return to this theme below when we consider the example of Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van*.

MacCormick (2008) observes that 'the truth is important for its own sake; and the truth about practical thinking is also useful'. If we consider the case of educational research, then this is certainly not to imply that there is a gap in the market for yet another handbook on methods. The

key point is his observation that understanding the truth 'can help other people (as well as the author) to make a better job of the practice of living' (2008, p. 6, emphasis added). To put it in the terms elaborated by Sennett (2008), we have begun to explore why people, in this case those employed by universities and other research institutions, work hard and take pride in what they do. By asking this question, we are forging a link between a particularistic appraisal of an individual's motives (including any incentives) for undertaking a particular act (such as writing an article or cooking a meal for friends) and a critical-rational explanation that goes beyond personal biography and addresses the adequacy of justifying reasons: for example, the argument that 'pride in one's work lies at the heart of craftsmanship as the reward for skill and commitment' (Sennett, 2008, p. 294). The robustness of this argument does not turn on whether or not a particular craftsman is motivated by financial gain, whether or not she takes pride in her work and is able to communicate her tacit knowledge to her apprentices and journeymen. Indeed, it does not address the question of motivation at all, let alone her level of knowledge and skill, her sense of self-worth or her effectiveness as a communicator. What is under discussion is a universal conception of pride in one's work. The point here is that one can argue with Sennett in a way that one cannot with biography. The effacement of the self becomes part of this wider project.

Making Social Science Matter

So how are we to bring this to bear on the project of making social science matter? Flyvbjerg (2001) puts forward a conception of social science research that is based upon the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*. This involves focusing both upon the actor level (i.e. the historical-biographical dimension) and upon the structural level (for example, a critical-rational appraisal of public planning policy or the legislative framework for young people with special educational needs). Agency is analysed in relation to structure and structure in terms of agency. Phronetic social science is built upon the creative tension between agency and structure, between historical-biographical and critical-rational appraisal.

The key point to bear in mind about the forms of historical-biographical appraisal common in educational research - for example, those involved in delineating the 'trajectory' of a young person permanently excluded from school (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009, 2010) - is that they inevitably involve interpretation and conjecture. There is always a degree of uncertainty, however rigorously one has pursued the facts of the case, and perhaps even more importantly, however rigorously *one has been seen to do so*, and to have acted in accordance with the canon of social science research methods.

We shall return to the themes of uncertainty and personal biography when we consider Alan Bennett's highly entertaining and profoundly humane account of his encounters with Miss Shepherd, an elderly eccentric who for many years occupied a dilapidated van parked across the road from his home in Camden Town (Bennett, 1999). We saw from the example of the two very different houses built by Wittgenstein and Loos what might happen to social research when intuitive wayfaring practice collides with a relentless striving for quality.

The question of how the obsessive energy that is the hallmark of craftsmanship can be harnessed productively is a prevailing theme in *The Craftsman* (Sennett, 2008, pp. 243ff). Sennett describes how one of the hallmarks of obsession is 'the relentless pursuit of excellence as a badge of distinction' (2008, p. 245). He goes on to suggest that 'the badge of distinction can lead toward increasing social isolation and disconnection as well as to claims of superiority' (2008, p. 245). Sennett distinguishes between the 'sociable' and the 'anti-social' expert and sets this distinction in the context of a broader discussion of the role of civic and religious rituals that were features of the guild system and the progressive weakening of professional organisations in the last century (2008, pp. 246ff). He draws on the example of an experienced medical practitioner to conclude that dealing with uncertainty, focusing on a person's becoming and 'treating others as whole persons in time is one mark of sociable expertise' (p. 247). It is this ability to engage fully in the present, and yet to be able to look back as well as forward in time, that is of particular relevance here. We return to this theme below.

This exploration of Sennett's writing on expertise and craftsmanship and the example from Bennett lead us to consider the role of 'auxiliary virtues' in our lives in general and in the process of social research in particular. MacCormick defines these as 'not ends in themselves, but dispositions

of character that incline one towards worthwhile objectives, and help to make them attainable' (2008, p. x). The auxiliary virtues under consideration here are vital to the success of any research endeavour. However, one would be hard pressed to locate them in the index of a standard textbook on research methods, where technique is generally divorced from practice. The auxiliary virtues identified by MacCormick are 'integrity and independence of mind, self-knowledge, courage, reasonableness (or prudence), technological competence, considerateness for others, politeness, self-respect without selfishness, diligence and a will to hard work, along with patience in the face of adversity and ill-luck' (2008, p. x). As we shall see, many of these auxiliary virtues are made manifest in Alan Bennett's lively account of his relationship with Miss Shepherd, *The Lady in the Van* (Bennett, 1999).

(Re)-telling Tales

If we were to tell the story of Miss Shepherd the wrong way round, as it were, basing our account on a series of semi-structured interviews with fictitious service providers, and taking a few small liberties with minor details, then it might read something like this:

Mary Elizabeth Grace Shepherd was born on the 15th of September 1915, the first child of Arthur and Ethel Shepherd, of Bromley, Kent. She attended St Mildred's Primary School in Beachy Hill before completing her secondary education at St Martha's School in Bromley, Kent. She was a shy and withdrawn child who attended church regularly, and she was an exceptionally talented musician. After leaving school in 1929, she worked in a drapery in Bromley High Street before leaving for Paris in 1935, aged just 20, to study piano under Cortot, who told her that she should have a concert career. Her decision to become a nun put an end to her musical career, and she returned to England in 1937 to take orders in St Appolonia's Convent, Gloucester Road, London NW1. Her mental health deteriorated rapidly upon her return to England, and she left the order in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of war. During the war she became an ambulance driver in London. She returned home to live with her mother. However, the relationship between the two women, which had always been strained, broke down entirely. Her younger brother George returned after the war to discover that his sister had been subjecting their mother to sustained physical and mental abuse. He had her committed to a mental hospital in Hayward's Heath in February 1948. She appears to have left London in 1952, to have adopted an itinerant lifestyle and to have become increasingly eccentric. The turning point in her life came when, through no fault of her own, a motorcyclist crashed into the side of her van, and she left the scene of the accident without giving her name or address. The motorcyclist subsequently died, and Miss Shepherd refused to engage with service providers as she was aware that she had committed a criminal offence by leaving the scene of the accident. There are no records of contact with service providers between 1954, when she had treatment for an in-grown toenail in St Albans, and 1965, when she purchased a Bedford van (registration number OLU 246) in the town. The garage owner reported that she paid in cash, and was dressed in ill-assorted and rather foul-smelling clothes. She first came to the attention of the playwright Alan Bennett in 1970, when he provided assistance in moving the van following an obstruction order. After a series of incidents of physical and verbal harassment, she and Mr Bennett came to an arrangement and the van was moved into his driveway. This took place in August 1971, and the van remained parked in the playwright's driveway until Miss Shepherd's death on the 27th of April, 1979. She is buried in the Islington St Pancras Cemetery ...

The reality is that such an account, even if it were factually accurate, buries Miss Shepherd long before her funeral in Our Lady of Hal and her interment in Islington St Pancras Cemetery. Why? Part of the answer lies in the distinction drawn by Ingold (2007) between the trace and the connector, which are first cousins to the sketch and the blueprint. He describes the connector as 'a line in a hurry', as opposed to a line that is 'intrinsically dynamic', 'active and authentic', one that gestures more eloquently at a complex reality. The connector (blueprint), unlike 'the active line on a walk' (sketch), 'wants to get from one location to another, and then to another, but has little time to do so' (Ingold, 2007, p 73). The appearance of this line, says the artist Paul Klee (1961), is 'the quintessence of the static' (p. 109). It is more like a series of appointments – or events recounted in chronological order – than a walk.

When an account such as the one above is reconstructed by a social researcher on the basis of field notes and the transcripts of interviews, 'every successive destination is already fixed prior to setting out, and each segment of the line is pre-determined by the point it connects' (Ingold, p. 73). So we have, or at least we aspire to have, although not necessarily in Miss Shepherd's case, the following information: date of birth; date of admission to primary school; special educational needs; English as an additional language; free school meal entitlement; attainment and achievement in secondary school; career aspirations; tertiary education; mental health status; engagement with service providers and significant others (health and social workers, police, Mr Bennett), etc.

These are what we call data. They are given to us, partly as a reward for good behaviour, for going out to look for them. They are our 'findings'. Yet they are as insubstantial as a partially completed dot-to-dot puzzle. They quickly turn to ash. *Homo faber* should ask why this is the case. The answer can be expressed in terms used by Simone Weil (1951) to describe the search for God:

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Men cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern their falsity. (p. 112)

The above example suggests that the social researcher should resist getting caught up in the heat of the chase. As Weil (1952/1963) puts it:

We must not want to find ... [lest] we become dependent on the object of our efforts ... it is only effort without desire [that] infallibly contains a reward ... *By pulling at the bunch we make all the grapes fall to the ground.* (p. 106, emphasis added)

Leaving Traces

The opening lines of *The Lady in the Van* suggest a rather different way of telling a story:

I ran into a snake this afternoon,' Miss Shepherd said. 'It was coming up Parkway. It was a long, grey snake – a boa constrictor possibly. It looked poisonous. It was keeping close to the wall and it seemed to know its way. I've a feeling it may have been heading for the van.' I was relieved that on this occasion she didn't demand that I ring the police, as she regularly did if anything out of the ordinary occurred. ... She brought her mug over and I made her a drink, which she took back to the van. 'I thought I'd better tell you,' she said, 'just to be on the safe side. I've had some close shaves with snakes.' (Bennett, 1999, p. 7)

This is a story that seems to know its way, but is quite content to inhabit the present. Bennett's admission of (temporary) relief betokens some degree of shared history. Miss Shepherd's previous close shaves with snakes suggest a mysterious past. The arresting appearance of the poisonous boa constrictor also suggests a darker side to what seems a cosy domestic arrangement. The mention of the police intimates the many fracas to come. Finally, the very mention of 'the safe side' serves to suggest that there might not be one ...

Miss Shepherd is as arresting in her physical presence as she is in speech and gesture. She is tall and long-limbed, and the hand signals executed during one of many enforced movements of her van are 'done with such boneless grace that this section of the Highway Code might have been choreographed by Petipa with Ulanova at the wheel' (Bennett, 1999, p. 11). She has a line of striking headgear: a black railwayman's hat worn at a jaunty angle; a Charlie Brown pitcher's hat; and, in the summer of 1977 'an octagonal straw table mat, tied on with a chiffon scarf and a bit of cardboard for the peak' (1999, p. 31).

Bennett's masterful narrative, the epitome of literary craftsmanship, conceals as it reveals and reveals as it conceals. He focuses both upon the actor level (i.e. the historical-biographical dimension) and upon the structural level, in the manner proposed by Flyvbjerg (2001). For example, there is a passage early in the book in which Bennett describes the social milieu in London NW1 in the mid-to-late 1960s. The depth of social analysis, which even runs to a comparison of the lexicons of the 1960s and the 1980s, merits a lengthy quotation:

In those days the street was still a bit of a mixture. Its large semi-detached villas had originally been built to house the Victorian middle class, then it had gone down in the world, and, though

it had never decayed, many of the villas degenerated into rooming-houses and so were among the earliest candidates for what is now called 'gentrification' [1989] but which was then called 'knocking through'. ... What made the social set-up funny was the disparity between the style in which the new arrivals found themselves able to live and their progressive opinions: guilt, put simply, which today's gentrifiers are said famously not to feel (or 'not to have a problem about'). We did have a problem, though I'm not sure we were any better for it. There was a gap between our social position and our social obligations. It was in this gap that Miss Shepherd (in her van) was able to live. (Bennett, 1999, pp. 12-13)

There is a stark contrast between Bennett's account and the one prepared by our diligent research assistant. This presents a factual account of events, arranged largely in chronological order. Although it has good manners, to borrow Wittgenstein's phrase, the first account of Miss Shepherd lacks the primordial life she so clearly epitomises. There is no attempt in Bennett's account to erase the traces of a work in progress. Indeed, the sublime richness of this short text resides in the fact that it bears the hallmarks of its making. In sum, *The Lady in the Van* is a carefully crafted demonstration of the auxiliary virtues identified by MacCormick (2008), and it makes a strong case for the place of practical reason in social research:

integrity and independence of mind, self-knowledge, courage, reasonableness (or prudence), technological competence, considerateness for others, politeness, self-respect without selfishness, diligence and a will to hard work, along with patience in the face of adversity and ill-luck. (MacCormick, 2008, p. x)

Conclusion

The exasperated reader might well ask what the implications of all this are for the practice of educational research. After all, Weil's observation that 'we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them' (Weil, 1951, p. 96) is unlikely to impress those who commission research. Nor is it a viable option for those conducting government-funded research projects within a particular time frame. The 'so what?' question is difficult to answer precisely because one of our conclusions is that it is necessary to move beyond the practice of educational researchers towards a more reflective, 'philosophical' approach, rather than the other way around.

One of the implications of our wayfaring and transgression is that we should foreground inhabitant rather than occupant knowledge. That is to say, we should attend to what we might call the 'primordial life' of a research project. We might try asking different questions. For example, 'What does this research project know?' rather than 'What do we know about this research project?' Moreover, we need to resist the temptation to clean up, to get things into perfect shape, to remove all traces of a work in progress. Such an approach entails relinquishing power, surrendering mastery of the material. However, this may be necessary in order to access deeper levels of interpretation, and to reinstate the auxiliary virtues referred to above.

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Note

- [1] The literary critic J. Hillis Miller describes parables in the following terms: 'A parable is a way to do things with words. It is a speech act. In the case of the parables of Jesus, however, the performative makes something happen in the hearts and minds of his hearers, but this happening is a knowledge of a state of affairs already existing, the Kingdom of Heaven and the way to get there' (1990, p. 135). See also Franz Kafka's in *Erzählungen aus dem Nachlaß 1904-1924*.

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ANNE PIRRIE is an explorer who is currently Reader in Education at the University of the West of Scotland. She has wide-ranging research interests, including the epistemology of research in the social sciences. She and Gale Macleod have just completed a study of young people permanently excluded from special schools and pupil referral units (DCSF-RR163). *Correspondence:* Dr Anne Pirrie, Faculty of Education, Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, Beech Grove, Ayr KA8 0SR, United Kingdom (anne.pirrie@uws.ac.uk).

GALE MACLEOD is a lecturer in primary education at the Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Gale worked for 15 years with young people described as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and has been researching in this area for 10

years. She is particularly interested in young people's experiences and also in developing interdisciplinary collaborations for research in this area.