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The “assisted autobiography”:

Collaboration in Theodore Zeldin’s life writing

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Contents

Introduction

Theodore Zeldin has been labelled in many different ways. One journalist describes him as an "author, historian, philosopher, management consultant, Oxford don and all-round brainbox".[1] Like most of Zeldin's readers, though, she does not describe him as a biographer or a writer of lives; yet it is the life stories of ordinary individuals which form the basis of three of his most significant projects: his books *The French* and *An Intimate History of Humanity*, and his the web-based Oxford Muse Portrait Database. I would like to examine Zeldin as a life writer, and specifically as a writer of collaborative autobiographies. Here, "collaborative autobiography" means an autobiographical text which is written either by somebody other than the autobiographical subject, or by the autobiographical subject in collaboration with another person. These texts are usually based upon a recorded conversation between two people.

[1] Susan Flockhart, 'Could this man's musings change your life?', *Sunday Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland), 27 May 2001, p. 7

The idea of collaboration between individuals is central to Zeldin's vision. An underlying theme in his books is the idea that human beings can achieve more for themselves by changing the way they talk to one another: his book, *Conversation*, encourages its readers to become more open with each other, and in the process to transform the way in which families, lovers, and businesses function.[2] Collaboration, for Zeldin, is a process by which individuals make new discoveries. He argues that "the unit which creates movement is the meeting of two people, and the force behind change is the encounter of two people and their intermingling, and the production of ideas which they would not have had if they had not met."[3] Indeed, he even suggests that this kind of collaboration between individuals is what life is fundamentally about: "life is a search for *people*, for individuals".[4]

[2] Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life* (1988; London: Harvill Press, 1998)
[3] Theodore Zeldin, 'The Camera at Work' (talk delivered at Starr Auditorium, Tate Modern, London, July 2003), <http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/zeldin.htm> [accessed 10/09/2006]
[4] ibid.

We will consider how these ideas about collaboration are employed in Zeldin's life writing; but we will also address the notion, popular with critics of the genre, that multiple authorship in autobiography can create tensions which manifest themselves in the texts. Philippe Lejeune comments on the fact that, historically, many collaborative autobiographies would involve a member of the ruling class collaborating with a subject of a lower social class. Lejeune sees the process of writing these autobiographies as an imposition, because the "network of communication of the printed work (...) is in the hands of the ruling classes and serves to promote their values and their ideology. Their autobiographical narratives (...) are the place where a collective identity is elaborated, reproduced, and transformed, the *pattern of life* appropriate to the ruling classes".[5] In Zeldin's writing, class is no longer the issue; but the question of imposition remains. In Lejeune's examples, the identity of the autobiographical subject is assimilated into a pattern invented for and understood by the ruling classes; in Zeldin's case, the pattern

[5] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 198

is his own invention, and the life stories of his subjects are incorporated into a philosophical argument that develops across the body of his works. Their identities, as we understand them, are thus conditioned by Zeldin's own values, and this factor is central to our understanding of the joint authorship of his texts. To what degree are Zeldin's subjects left free to tell their own stories? Who is the author of these texts? Are they autobiographies, biographies, or something else? These questions might easily be asked about any collaborative autobiography, but the problem is arguably more complex in Zeldin's case than in other examples of the form. To understand the problem fully, we must first examine the duality inherent in Zeldin's description of the "assisted autobiography".

The "assisted autobiography"

In the opening chapter of *The French*, Zeldin discusses his experience of meeting ordinary French people in an attempt to learn more about them:

> When I invited them to speak their autobiographies, I sometimes got the changeless patter that people offer strangers, like advertising handouts, which they may even believe themselves through frequent repetition; but a surprising number were interested in exploring themselves, and responded to unexpected and personal questions with real efforts to work out what they felt most deeply. There is a new self consciousness which is giving rise to a new literary genre, the assisted autobiography, in which authors act as midwives to help those who want to tell their story.[6]

Crucially, this paragraph merges two very distinct ideas about collaboration, and Zeldin's failure to distinguish between the two could be said to form a central feature of his texts.

First, there is the sense of collaboration as a simple division of labour: one person "speak[s]" his autobiography, and the other person writes it down. His metaphor of a

[6] Theodore Zeldin, *The French* (1983; Harvill Press, 1997), p. 9

midwife helping to deliver the story gives the sense that the writer assists, but does not influence, the process of telling the story. Although Zeldin acknowledges that the writers of such autobiographies are "authors", he also claims that the story *belongs* emphatically to the autobiographical subject.

Second, there is the sense of collaboration as a process by which new ideas are formed, so that both collaborators find their understanding of the world changing through stimulating and surprising conversation. He introduces the idea of people "*exploring* themselves", in an attempt to "*work out* what they felt most deeply".[7] These words suggest that something *new* is being created, that people are not merely revealing something already existing inside them, but altering their sense of who they are. This duality will be addressed in the Chapter 2 and 3, which focus on the role that conversation plays in producing autobiographical meaning.

[7] ibid. (my emphasis)

The texts

Zeldin's books and his Oxford Muse project represent two emphatically different approaches to collaborative autobiography. *The French* and *An Intimate History of Humanity* both incorporate individual life stories into works that attempt to address the successes and failures of humanity in general. *The French* focuses on members of one nation, but even here Zeldin acknowledges that his real interests are further reaching than this.[8] Similarly, the goal of *An Intimate History of Humanity*, he writes, is "to show how, today, it is possible for individuals to form a fresh view both of their own personal history and of humanity's whole record of cruelty, misunderstanding and joy".[9] The connection that Zeldin suggests between the individual and the collective forms the keynote of both books. Instead of telling people's life stories in isolation, these works incorporate them into wider narratives whose main theme is the ways in which human

[8] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 8
[9] Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (1994; London: Vintage, 1998), p. vii

beings can free themselves from limiting ways of viewing the world, and thus enrich their lives. While this study will focus on the autobiographical aspect of the books, it will be important to remain aware of Zeldin's constant emphasis on the connection between the individual and the collective.

The life writing in *The French* and *An Intimate History of Humanity* is a hybrid form, borrowing traits from autobiography and from biography. What makes it autobiographical in flavour is the sense that we are reading subjective life stories, informed predominantly by the exercise of memory, rather than by historical research. Factual details such as dates and names are less important, in this writing, than our sense of how the individuals *feel* about their experiences. What makes it biographical is the fact that the books are written in the third person, with Zeldin as narrator. This achieves the kind of distance between writer and subject that we find in biography, where the writer has the ability to analyse and evaluate, even to disagree with, his subject.

This hybridity is central to our understanding of Zeldin's books as collaborative texts. In a crude sense, our distinction between the autobiographical and biographical elements of his life writing can be aligned with the two models of collaboration, outlined above. On the one hand, these individuals are expressing themselves, giving a subjective account of their life that is conditioned by autobiographical memory. On the other hand, they are being written about and evaluated as biographical subjects, and there is the sense that the writer of these lives can introduce new, previously unconsidered, ideas about them.

The two books are not anthologies of unconnected life stories. Instead, there is a sense of continuity between the narratives, and that continuity is provided by the presence of Zeldin, the writer and narrator. This is most notable in the case of *The French*, where Zeldin writes thematically on subjects such as humour, national identity, and marriage, often writing about several different autobiographical subjects within one chapter. There is thus the sense that he is using his subjects as sources, borrowing

what information he needs in order to shape his argument. *An Intimate History of Humanity* follows a slightly different formula. Within one chapter we will normally find, first, the life story of one individual, followed by a more collective account of humanity's experience in a particular area. The chapters have titles such as 'How respect has become more desirable than power', where the title applies equally to the individual life story and the collective account that follows.[10] In both books, there is the sense that these life stories are being crafted into an overall argument – Zeldin is using the autobiographies he has heard for his own ends, rather than letting them speak for themselves. The fourth chapter examines this authorial conflict, addressing the question of whose story is actually being told in these works.

While the "assisted autobiography" is central to the Oxford Muse project, it is used in a radically different way. The Oxford Muse is a charitable foundation formed by

[10] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, pp. 131-146

Zeldin in 2001.[11] The Muse Portrait Database is only one aspect of a project whose principal aim is to give people "new kinds of opportunities to discover what (...) they could achieve by collaboration with people they never imagined they had much in common with".[12] Although two books have been published, *Guide to an Unknown City* and *Guide to an Unknown University*, both based on the inhabitants of Oxford, the portraits are mainly published on the Internet. Where possible, I have taken my examples from the second book, *Guide to an Unknown University*, because it is in print and therefore widely available for reference. On some occasions, when my argument necessitated it, I have referred to portraits which are now only widely available online.

Although Zeldin is the project's founder, the portraits have been written by a range of volunteers, described as "muses who helped to make portraits through recorded

[11] Anonymous, 'What is the Muse?', Oxford Muse Website,
< http://www.oxfordmuse.com/contact/whatmuse.htm>, [accessed 10/09/2006]
[12] Anonymous, 'The First Outline of the Aims of the Oxford Muse 2001'
<http://www.oxfordmuse.com.museideas/museaims.htm> [accessed 02/05/2006]

conversations".[13] In an article entitled 'The Art of Making Portraits', Zeldin refers to the different kinds of portrait produced by the Oxford Muse:

> There are three kinds of portrait here. Some are self-portraits written by an individual, after a period of thought which could sometimes last for weeks or even months. Some are portraits in which a person had a conversation (or several) with a muse, which was then transcribed; together, they modified and edited the text, and produced the final version when they were satisfied with it. A few, exceptionally, are written in the third person after a conversation, though we prefer to let people speak in their own voice.[14]

The most emphatic difference between this project and Zeldin's books, then, is that the majority of portraits are written in the first person, giving the impression that they have only one author. These texts thus resemble ghostwritten autobiographies in that they obscure their status as collaborative texts: the illusion is that the subject is speaking to us directly; the collaborator is hidden. The Oxford Muse portraits, therefore, present different kinds of problems from the life writing in Zeldin's books. Significantly, though,

[13] Roman Krznaric, Christopher Whalen and Theodore Zeldin (eds), *The Oxford Muse: Guide to an Unknown University* (Oxford: The Oxford Muse, 2006), p. vi
[14] Theodore Zeldin, 'The Art of Making Portraits'
< http://www.oxfordmuse.com/selfportrait/makeportraits.htm> [accessed 01/08/2006]

because the project has a range of contributors, we find some examples that deviate from Zeldin's preferred model, quoted above. These examples illustrate the many different ways in which an oral autobiography can be transformed into a written text. The fifth chapter will examine these different approaches in order to elucidate our understanding of the very specific way in which Zeldin approaches his own life writing.

Conversation and collaboration

Lejeune distinguishes between two kinds of dictated autobiography: "the productions of 'ghostwriters' and the taped autobiography of common people".[1] The distinction is important, he suggests, because of the ways in which these types of writing either refer to or obscure their status as collaborations. Whereas, in the former, the existence of the ghostwriter is usually concealed, in the latter the writer "appears like a mediator between two worlds, almost like an explorer", so that the collaborative nature of the text forms part of the work's appeal: "The admission of collaboration was a last resource in the case of the ghostwriters; it becomes here an essential piece of the system".[2] In *The French* and *An Intimate History of Humanity*, Zeldin clearly takes on the role of mediator, delving into other people's lives and reporting his findings. This is perhaps most emphatically the case in *The French*, which is presented as a guide book

[1] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 186
[2] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 196

helping foreigners to understand the French people. Chapter titles such as 'How to interpret their regional accents' and 'How to eat properly' are used only half seriously, since the underlying argument of this book is that it is *not* possible to reduce a whole nation to a system in this way.[3] At the same time, there remains the sense of Zeldin as an explorer in a foreign country, seeking to *explain* this unfamiliar race to the people back home.

As we noted in the introduction, however, Zeldin's writing on collaboration allows for two very different approaches to collaborative autobiography. The notion of the writer as explorer can be aligned with the idea that the collaborator is helping his subjects to unmask themselves, revealing the truth inside. But there is also the idea that, through meaningful conversation, the collaborator can influence a subject's opinion of himself, or at least influence what the subject says about himself. We will also examine, then, the idea that conversation can *create* ideas as well as revealing them. In both models,

[3] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 11; p. 289

the collaborator performs two significant roles: that of interviewer, and that of writer. Most studies of this kind of dictated autobiography have concentrated on the latter of these roles. But in Zeldin's case, the role of conversation in producing or revealing meaning is of utmost importance, and we must remain aware of this throughout the study.

Unmasking

The idea that the right questions can *unmask* a person is a familiar one. The metaphor of unmasking is frequently found in the realm of journalism, where the mark of a good journalist is his ability to penetrate to the inner truth of a person. A good example of this is the rhetoric surrounding the BBC television series, *Face to Face*. When the series was first broadcast, between 1959 and 1962, the direct interviewing technique of John Freeman was unfamiliar for television viewers. Joan Bakewell, in her introduction to a book anthologising the most celebrated of Freeman's interviews, writes that the series

"tried to unmask for the first time on screen the private faces of public figures, to peel off their protective layers and expose what was hidden underneath".[4] Anthony Clare, in his interview with Freeman, uses the same metaphor, saying that the aim was "to take the mask off public figures and show what lay beneath."[5] Freeman himself, explaining his famous interrogative style of interviewing, admits that he thought to himself, "Let's see what he's really like".[6] He then says of his interview with Otto Klemperer that he knew "that I was sitting on a gold-mine and that it only required a little bit more skill to get it all out".[7] Both comments reiterate this notion that a person's true identity is hidden beneath the surface, and can be retrieved if you ask the right questions.

In many ways, journalists like Freeman make similar claims to those of biographers: both are claiming to be revealing previously hidden information. Chris Heath's auto/biographical book, *Feel: Robbie Williams*, epitomises the connection between

[4] John Freeman, *Face to Face with John Freeman: Interviews from the BBC TV Series*, introduced by Joan Bakewell (London: BBC Books, 1989), p. 6
[5] Freeman, *Face to Face with John Freeman*, p. 11
[6] Freeman, *Face to Face with John Freeman*, p. 14
[7] Freeman, *Face to Face with John Freeman*, p. 18

journalism and biography.[8] It is a piece of life writing following two narrative threads. The first is Heath's autobiographical story, as the writer follows the pop star around, observing and reporting on his behaviour on tour, in the studio, and in his home. The second is Williams' own autobiographical narrative, revealed gradually to Heath through conversation. Significantly, the main quality referred to in the promotion of this book has been its honesty:

> When Chris Heath's groundbreaking book with Robbie Williams was first published it became an instantaneous bestseller. But its honesty, humour and intelligence took the public and media by surprise. In a world of pampered images and deceptive celebrity *Feel* has a unique wit and energy and a shockingly honest edge.[9]

In this book, the honesty achieved through the interplay between writer and subject is of utmost importance. Just like the exclusive magazine interview, part of the appeal of the work is that Williams is speaking about issues previously undiscussed. But an

[8] Chris Heath, *Feel: Robbie Williams* (2004; London: Ebury Press, 2005)
[9] Heath, *Feel* (back cover)

equally important aspect is the fact that Heath, the author of this book, was *there*, observing Williams and making him speak.

Like Heath, Zeldin enforces the idea that he is accessing exclusive material, encouraging his subjects to reveal what they have revealed to nobody else. In *The French*, for example, he begins his account of the life of Brigitte Bardot by referring to the "several misunderstandings" that have influenced people's perception of her.[10] He thus prefaces her life story with the idea that *this* narrative will give us the previously unheard truth. Many of his subjects express the idea that they are revealing more to Zeldin than they do to others. One of his subjects tells him: "In my shop, I am a shopkeeper. With you, I am me."[11] Zeldin himself writes, "In most meetings, pride or caution still forbids one to say what one feels most deeply."[12] In a strong sense, his books are all about encouraging people to speak the truth about themselves in a way in

[10] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 135
[11] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 27
[12] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 11

which they are normally inhibited from doing. In a talk on the art of portraiture delivered at the Tate Modern, Zeldin suggests that "the world is about trying to find out who other people *are*". The portraits that he wants people to create for the Oxford Muse are truly new, he suggests, "because the portraits you have in museums (...) are about the outward appearances of people, and what you are obviously seeking is the *inside* of people". [13] Zeldin's language is similar to that used in reference to Freeman's *Face to Face*. He even employs the same metaphor of the masks that people wear, suggesting that "people try to *conceal* their insides and wear masks to protect themselves against the staring and the looking and inspection of others."[14] Like Freeman, then, Zeldin maintains faith in the idea that we can reach the truth about a person by penetrating beneath the surface, by removing his mask and showing what is underneath.

[13] Zeldin, 'The Camera at Work'
[14] ibid.

Inventing

As we have noted, Zeldin's writing on collaboration contains a significant duality. The Oxford Muse website gives a description of the effect that its work has had on people:

> We quickly found that people want to be heard, that they know very little about their neighbours, let alone other communities, and that they value having to reflect on and express what is most important in their lives.[15]

As well as the idea that, through collaboration with a writer, ordinary people can express themselves, or make themselves heard, there is also the notion that the process compels them to reflect upon their lives in a new way, making new discoveries about themselves. The collaborator thus becomes more than just an explorer, bringing back his findings to exhibit at home. He also plays a part in the formation of autobiographical meaning, since his contributions to the conversation influence the story that is told. In Zeldin's books, we find a number of references suggesting that the

[15] Anonymous, 'Portrait of a City' <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/projects/projects.htm#1> [accessed 05/08/2006]

subjects are being encouraged to think about themselves in new ways. The account of his conversations with Rémy Pech are a good example of this.

> The essence of the south, for him, is friendliness, sociability, people talk to each other. I told him that I had been to a popular restaurant in Toulouse the night before, where people sit at long tables to be served by a fat matron and her daughter, and that hardly anyone had uttered a word. Yes, he replied, perhaps this vision of universal friendliness existed only in his imagination.[16]

This is a simple example where we find the subject's understanding of the world he lives in being altered by Zeldin's contributions to the conversation, which force him to think more carefully about a particular issue. Pech also comments on the openness that Zeldin encourages: "I am not in fact someone who opens himself out to everybody. For example, Estebe is one of my best friends, I have known him for seven years, and today is the first time I have spoken to him about personal matters."[17] Estebe is another of Zeldin's autobiographical subjects. Here, then, we have the sense that

[16] Zeldin, *The French*, pp. 19-20
[17] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 20

Zeldin's entry into this community has influenced the way that its members interact with each other: for the first time, these "best friends" have had an intimate conversation.

In a recent television documentary about the lives of two single mothers, one of the subjects made a comment about the impact that the making of the documentary had had on her sense of identity: "You're being filmed all the time and you're being asked questions that (...) you don't really think about unless somebody brings it up, and it sort of put things into perspective for me and made me realise that my life's not really going anywhere."[18] In this case, the subject recognised that the very process of being interviewed by the film-maker had altered her ideas about herself – the questions she was being asked were causing her to state opinions about herself that had not previously been felt. In the case of Zeldin's Oxford Muse project, the *nature* of the questions asked is a significant factor influencing what statements are made by the

[18] James Cohen (director), 'Cutting Edge: Pram-Face' (television documentary), broadcast 14 August 2006, Channel 4

autobiographical subject. A document distributed to potential contributors to the project lists possible questions to ask, which are designed to encourage people to think about themselves in a new way (see Appendix). If we examine these questions, we notice that many of them are loaded in some way, designed to elicit a particular kind of answer. For example: "In what areas do you wish you were more knowledgeable?" On the one hand, the subject might have already, independently, felt a desire to be more knowledgeable in a particular area, so that his answer to the question would be a *revelation* of previously held views. On the other hand, this question might introduce a *new* concept to the subject, who had previously never thought about the issue. Other questions are even more problematic. "Do you feel you do enough for others?" is a closed question, essentially limiting the individual's answer to "yes" or "no". Moreover, the word "enough", it might be argued, encourages a negative response. Individuals might describe what they *do* for others, but few are likely to feel that to be enough: there is always more that could be done. This is one of numerous questions designed

to make individuals represent their lives as incomplete or unfulfilled in some way: Zeldin's own life writing, as we shall see later, privileges the future by emphasising the fact that his subjects' lives are unfinished. The important point here is that the question introduces new ideas, helping to alter people's ideas about themselves.

Significantly, the majority of the Oxford Muse portraits obscure their collaborative nature, presenting instead a continuous narrative with no interruptions. In Peter Sipthorp's portrait, for example, the statement that "I haven't got any enemies" is presented at the start of a new paragraph, as if it were uttered spontaneously.[19] Yet, when we examine the Oxford Muse guideline questions (see Appendix), we find: "Who are your enemies? How do you cope with them? With whom do you wish you could be reconciled? Who are your allies?" Much of Zeldin's writing, as we have seen, acknowledges that the questions asked can profoundly influence the nature of the autobiographical narrative that is produced. Yet in the Oxford Muse portraits we find

[19] Peter Sipthorp, in conversation with Jion Sheibani, 'Why a college porter writes poetry', in *Oxford Muse: Guide to an Unknown University*, ed. by Krznaric, Whalen and Zeldin, pp. 315-320 (p. 319)

that, in the transition from recorded conversation to written text, the influence that the collaborator can have on the production of autobiographical meaning is obscured. We will now consider the relationship between orality and literacy in these texts, examining the extent to which the residue of the narratives' oral origins is retained by the finished, written products.

Orality and literacy

In his article on African American dictated autobiographies, Mark Sanders suggests that a central feature of such texts is the conflict between orality and literacy. Using the work of Walter Ong on oral and written communication, Sanders reminds us that the "act of oral communication (...) by its very nature is one entirely different from a literary or written act, and perhaps one embodying nuances entirely irreconcilable to those of the literary process."[1] For Sanders, the tensions between orality and literacy generate "essential meaning for dictated texts".[2] One of his examples is *All God's Dangers*, an autobiography produced in collaboration between the subject, Nate Shaw, and the writer, Theodore Rosengarten. In this book, Sanders suggests, Rosengarten's desire for "a 'coherent' life history, a progression from birth to old age unified through

[1] Mark A. Sanders, 'Theorizing the Collaborative Self: The Dynamics of Contour and Content in the Dictated Autobiography', *New Literary History* 25 (1994) 445-458 (p. 447)
[2] Sanders, 'Theorizing the Collaborative Self', p. 448

continuity in events and themes" conflicts with the non-linear way in which Nate Shaw delivered his oral narrative.[3] Sanders' application of Ong's work to the realm of dictated autobiography is useful, but only some of his ideas are applicable to the texts which concern us here. For one thing, Zeldin's writing does not have the same insistence on a linear, chronological narrative, so that on many occasions we find the narratives being delivered thematically rather than chronologically. In another sense, however, Zeldin's language is markedly literary, and it is here that we realise the extent to which he has *crafted* the life stories that he tells, fitting them into a structure which enforces his philosophical argument.

Sanders outlines Ong's observations on the main differences between oral and literary narratives:

> He sees oral narratives as being "aggregate" rather than "analytic," relying on repetition and "clusters" of events and themes in order to recall and reorganize memory. So too, oral narratives tend to be more "additive" than "subordinative," relying heavily on coordinating

[3] ibid.

> conjunctions to link independent phrases and thoughts, thus constructing these clusters of events and meanings. In stark contrast, literary thought tends to place concepts and events in relative (and therefore analytic) association, implying a development or progression of ideas.[4]

In the Oxford Muse Portrait Database, we find many examples which are emphatically literary rather than oral in form. As we have noted, the majority of the Oxford Muse portraits give the illusion of being monologues, delivered without the assistance or interruption of a collaborator. These are the opening paragraphs of Anthony Smith's self-portrait, produced "In conversation with Theodore Zeldin":

> I have had four or five quite different jobs in the course of my life, so people think I am rather dilettante, even though I have been in this one for sixteen years; but my life, examined from inside as it were, feels as if it based [sic] upon an unrelenting consistency.
>
> I adore institutions. All kinds of institutions, academic, business, cultural, professional.[5]

[4] Sanders, 'Theorizing the Collaborative Self', p. 447
[5] Anthony Smith, in conversation with Theodore Zeldin, 'How the President of an Oxford college views his life at the head of public institutions' <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/selfportrait/portrait31.htm> [accessed 22/05/2006]

If we consider Sanders' distinction between oral and literary thought, Smith's words can be aligned emphatically with the latter. The idea of the "unrelenting consistency", Smith's love of institutions, provides a sense of narrative logic, whereby the rest of Smith's material is organised around this theme. One of the most striking features of the self-portrait is that it appears to be premeditated, so that – rather than simply transcribing the oral conversation between Smith and Zeldin – the writer (who might be either – or both – of the collaborators) has evidently transformed that initial conversation into something new. We cannot *hear* Smith's voice: to read his self-portrait is, in many respects, like reading an essay.

Other portraits, by contrast, combine the literary and the oral, so that – while the transition from recorded conversation to written text has clearly involved a transformation – the finished text nevertheless retains the residue of orality. Peter Sipthorp's self-portrait, produced "In conversation with Jion Sheibani", is typical of the Oxford Muse portraits in that, like Anthony Smith's account, it obscures the role of the

collaborator, presenting the narrative as an uninterrupted monologue. However, it also uses language which is conventionally associated with oral communication, such as colloquialisms, contractions, and repetition:

> The saddest thing in my life occurred in my first marriage. I had two severely handicapped children. One died at nine. And the other died at 23. They were, as it were, completely handicapped. So they'd got no... life, whatsoever... They couldn't see, they couldn't hear, they couldn't move, they couldn't... they'd got no sense and as far as anybody could tell they'd got no mentality as such.[6]

These words resemble speech in many respects. Contractions such as "couldn't" and "they'd" are not normally used in literary writing. Moreover, the dots, denoting pauses, give the sense that these words have not been planned carefully: it is as though Sipthorp is pausing for thought. After the third pause ("they couldn't... they'd got no sense") he abandons the sentence and starts a new one. The piece does not resemble a literary autobiography: instead, we can imagine the subject speaking to us. Sipthorp organises his material thematically, dealing first with the sad aspects of his life before

[6] Sipthorp and Sheibani, 'Why a college porter writes poetry', p. 316

moving on to "the joys."[7] Yet the narrative also seems more spontaneous than Smith's. "We must get onto the joys because there have been plenty of those as well,"[8] says Sipthorp, so that the shift from one theme to the next seems to occur at an arbitrary moment rather than as the result of a carefully developed argument. It is never revealed to us whether or not these words are a direct transcription of what Sipthorp actually said in his conversation with Sheibani, but what is important is that, structurally and stylistically, this appears to be the case.

It is helpful to compare this collaborative portrait with a genuine self-portrait, "written by an individual, after a period of thought".[9] Perhaps surprisingly, the language in many of these self-portraits *does* resemble speech. Rebecca Clayton, for example, after discussing her favourite kind of coffee, writes, "Stupid isn't it, I guess,

[7] Sipthorp and Sheibani, 'Why a college porter writes poetry', p. 317
[8] ibid.
[9] Zeldin, 'The Art of Making Portraits'

how I think that's a significant part of me?"[10] In this case, though, the oral features such as contractions and non-standard dialect (the use of "I guess" to mean "I suppose") have a rhetorical function, giving us a sense of familiarity with the subject. Whereas the pauses in Sipthorp's portrait give the impression of somebody struggling to choose the right words, the structure of Clayton's piece seems premeditated: Clayton is in control of her words. The traces of orality in Clayton's writing develop our understanding of Sipthorp's portrait, because they remind us that the illusion of speech in these pieces is an illusion: they are written texts, not speech. In his discussion of collaboration in black autobiographies, Albert E. Stone suggests that the semblance of orality is a central feature of these works: "The reader almost always *hears* a voice".[11] Stone goes on to explore the prefatory sections of these works, in which the writers of the texts make their claims of authenticity. Significantly, this claim usually rests not on

[10] Rebecca Clayton, 'How to live in doubt, in rebellion and in an imagined world', in *Oxford Muse: Guide to an Unknown University*, ed. by Krznaric, Whalen and Zeldin, pp. 321-327 (p. 321)
[11] Albert Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 234

the fact that the writer has quoted the *words* of his subject, but on the notion that he has successfully captured the *voice*. In other words, these ghostwriters place more emphasis on *seeming* authentic than on actually being so.[12] Stone's observations develop our understanding of the problematic relationship between speech and writing in the dictated autobiography: the point at which the Muse portraits seem most emphatically to recall their oral origins could also be the moment of greatest artifice, when the writers mimic spoken language in order to heighten our sense of authenticity.

Zeldin's own language, it should be noted, is distinctly literary. Consider, for example, the following sentence from *An Intimate History of Humanity*:

> At work she is wholly reliable, taking endless care with every detail; but in her own home those qualities have never been sufficient.[13]

[12] Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*, p. 235
[13] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 1

These words have the same sense of narrative logic as the Anthony Smith passage quoted above. The symmetry in "At work (...); but in her own home (...)" gives the sense that these words have been crafted in a way that spoken words rarely are. It is striking that Zeldin rarely quotes his subjects directly, preferring instead to describe their recollections in his own words. When he does quote his subjects, he usually does so very selectively, quoting only short sentences or phrases, often as part of a much longer sentence of his own:

> Her oldest friend is a hairdresser, who began very modestly and gradually built up a business which was the largest and most fashionable salon in the city: 'She was a real boss.'[14]

So, although his life writing is based on oral conversations with his subjects, in his books Zeldin's usual approach is to translate his subjects' statements into his own, literary, language. A fundamental difference between Zeldin's books and the Oxford

[14] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 184

Muse portraits is that, in the former, the subjects' words are clearly mediated by Zeldin's authorial vision, while in the latter we often have the sense that the subjects are speaking to us directly. While this seems to indicate a shift in Zeldin's approach, whereby his later work asks the writer to make himself invisible, it should be noted that this is an illusion: these are still collaborative works, and the writer still influences the final text. In the chapters that follow, we will examine the question of precisely whose attitude is being expressed in these texts. First, we will consider the specific way in which the subjects are quoted, developing our observations above about Zeldin's tendency to paraphrase rather than to quote directly. Then we will consider the ways in which Zeldin imposes his own authorship on the works, using language and structure to express himself while maintaining the illusion of letting his subjects speak for themselves. Finally, we will look at some of the Oxford Muse portraits which deviate from Zeldin's model by presenting their accounts in the third person. By comparing

these deviant portraits with Zeldin's own writing, we can better understand the very specific way in which he employs collaboration in his life writing.

The conflict between writer and subject

As Lejeune has famously noted, in a conventional autobiography, the implicit understanding is that the author, narrator, and subject of the work are the same person.[1] This also means, of course, that when an opinion is expressed within the work, it seems reasonable to assume that the opinion is that of the subject. Ghostwritten autobiographies recreate this illusion, because our understanding is that the writer, who is not the autobiographical subject, nevertheless writes *for* the subject, taking on his voice and representing his opinions. Those Oxford Muse portraits which obscure the role of the collaborator are examples of this kind of writing. Zeldin's books are different because, while they claim to tell people's autobiographies, they are written in the third person. The distance that this achieves means that it is possible for Zeldin, the author and narrator, to express his own views as well as those of his subjects. In

[1] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 5

this chapter, then, we will examine the interplay between these two figures: narrator, and autobiographical subject.

Quotation, paraphrasing, focalisation

Zeldin generally employs three methods for expressing the views of his autobiographical subjects.

The first, most infrequent method, is direct quotation. As we have noted, Zeldin only usually quotes directly as part of a longer sentence in which he might describe his own views or elaborate on those of his subject. Nevertheless, direct quotation makes it easy to identify whose views are being expressed, because it seems reasonable to assume that these words were actually uttered by the person they are attributed to. One subject, Thérèse, says, "I have always refused to think that there are any obstacles

in my way just because I am a woman."[2] The use of quotation marks indicates that these are her own words.

The second method for expressing opinions is paraphrasing, where Zeldin writes about his subjects in the third person, reporting information they have given him, using his own words. Zeldin uses this method more frequently, although often in combination with direct quotation. For example: "She began dancing at the age of twelve. Till then she had been unhappy, which she explains by saying, 'I have no roots.'"[3] The use of the third person here shows clearly that Zeldin is talking about somebody else's experiences, although – as we shall see – this does not necessarily mean that he is not also expressing himself, through his choice of vocabulary.

The third method is focalisation, where Zeldin writes *as if he were* his subject. When he writes, "Television should not show people carrying guns as though it was a normal thing to do", he is expressing the opinion of his subject, Lydie Rosier, rather

[2] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 150
[3] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 396

than his own.[4] Nevertheless, we do not feel the same sense of distance between narrator and subject as we do when he paraphrases, as in the example quoted above. Zeldin's use of focalisation is significant because, linguistically, it implies synonymy between the narrator and the autobiographical subject.

In these examples, it is clear that Zeldin is either giving information about his subjects, or expressing their opinions. Other occasions, however, are more ambiguous. Consider the following statements in *The French* about Philippe Bouvard's gambling:

> For many years his recreation was gambling, and it was as obsessive as his search for success in his work; it was 'an inherited vice' from his family, who were always playing cards. He gambled more and more as he got richer. He has brought it under control now, though he is still fascinated by it. Like ambition, it is a game in which it is impossible to win the final prize.[5]

This paragraph contains a mixture of direct quotation, reported facts, and opinion or analysis. The quoted words, "an inherited vice", we can assume to be Bouvard's.

[4] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 22
[5] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 55

Similarly, the factual details – that Bouvard gambled more as he got richer, but is now controlling his addiction – are reported in Zeldin's words, but apparently based on information supplied by Bouvard. The problematic sentence is the last one: "Like ambition, it is a game in which it is impossible to win the final prize." Whose opinion is Zeldin expressing here? Earlier, we examined the ways in which the collaborator (in this case, Zeldin) can influence a subject's statements about himself by asking suggestive questions. This sentence poses numerous problems, not only because Zeldin conceals whose opinion is being expressed, but also because he does not show us the circumstances in which the opinion was uttered – if, indeed, it was uttered at all. The illusion, then, is that Zeldin and Bouvard feel the same way about gambling, as though they have emerged from their collaboration with exactly the same opinion on the subject.

Language

Because he chooses to paraphrase in the third person rather than quoting extensively, Zeldin's choice of words is very important. He writes that Stéphane, one of his subjects in *The French*, "has *freed himself* from the need to choose between his father and his mother".[6] The factual information we are being given here is that Stéphane now maintains contact with both of his parents rather than just one of them. Zeldin's vocabulary, though, both influences our understanding of this particular life story, and helps to enforce the sense of a link between all of the life stories being told in the book. In this case, Zeldin's language encourages us to consider Stéphane's life story in the context of Zeldin's ideas about slavery, which is an important theme in his writing. *An Intimate History of Humanity* contains an entire chapter on the subject, and Zeldin's central idea is that, despite the abolition of slavery in most countries, people are still

[6] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 128 (my emphasis)

allowing themselves to be restricted as though they were slaves. Juliette, the subject of the chapter, believes that "My life is finished".[7] Writes Zeldin, "Juliette is not a slave: nobody owns her. (...) But to think one's life is finished, or that it is a failure, is to suffer from the same sort of despair which afflicted people in the days when the world believed it could not do without slaves."[8] Zeldin frequently makes this kind of connection between the present and the past, suggesting that our "imaginations are inhabited by ghosts".[9] The idea that people are still being haunted by the history of slavery resonates across his works: many of his subjects are presented as being trapped in a particular way of life, or of thinking. The significance of Stéphane, for Zeldin, is that he has forced himself out of a conventional way of thinking. The phrase "has freed himself" is significant for two reasons. First, the word "freed" subtly enforces this sense of slavery; second, the active verb "has freed himself" (rather than

[7] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 6
[8] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 7
[9] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. vii

"is free" or "has been freed") gives us the sense that Stéphane has taken control of his life, making a conscious decision to stop being a slave. So Zeldin's vocabulary encourages us to see Stéphane's life in a particular way. His ideas about slavery, conversation, and collective memory resonate across his works, and his vocabulary establishes a continuity between these separate life stories.

There are particular words that recur throughout Zeldin's writing, binding the life stories together and enforcing a sense of continuity between them. One such example is the word "intermediary". In *The French*, the "super-friendly, lame policeman, Francis" has "never given anyone a parking fine", a situation that is approved by the duke "because he sees himself as an intermediary between the townsfolk and the Paris technocrats".[10] In *An Intimate History of Humanity*, we are told that Cyril Collard believes that "[t]o be fully alive (...) means (...) to be 'a part of history' through the

[10] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 168

intermediary of the love of another person."[11] Zeldin's chapter on intermediaries in *An Intimate History of Humanity* expands on the views he expresses elsewhere, examining "why so few people have thought of themselves as intermediaries, even when that is what they were".[12] This gives us the sense that Zeldin is introducing his vocabulary to the rest of the world, encouraging people to see themselves in new ways which, crucially, fit in with his own philosophical views. At one point he suggests of the "desire to be an intermediary" that "quite a few of my characters share it."[13] However, he does not tell us whether the term "intermediary" was first used by his subjects, or by himself. The word is employed by Zeldin in a very specific way, and the way in which it recurs in many of the life stories we read gives even more of a sense that these autobiographical subjects are not speaking for themselves: they have been incorporated into Zeldin's argument.

[11] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, pp. 127-128
[12] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 154
[13] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 51

By writing in the third person, using his distinct vocabulary, Zeldin asserts his authorship of these life stories, so that the subjects are made to speak not for themselves, but for his cause. Their lives are taken out of context and placed in a new one.

Structure

Structure is a key tool through which Zeldin asserts his authorship. We have noted that he only quotes briefly from his subjects, and this means that he is rearranging the material at his disposal. In *The French* this is particularly notable because, within one chapter, Zeldin will often move from subject to subject, quoting brief phrases from each one, rather than telling a cohesive, sustained life story of any individual. Here is a passage from a chapter entitled 'How Children Deal with their Parents':

> Michèle once found her children, at the age of six, playing at 'making love' with their friends (...). She decided she had no right to interfere. That was partly because she had grown up in a tradition of active juvenile sex, except that in those days it was done secretly. A

> technician says that as a boy 'I would rather have chopped myself into slices of sausages than talk about masturbation. We never discussed it, even among friends.' Now he has a son of fourteen and a daughter of ten. He speaks freely to them about sex, telling them it is quite normal to have sexual impulses. (...) Among themselves, at home, the family are not worried by nakedness. But this kind of behaviour is probably still that of a minority. *Pudeur* still rules. A forty-six-year-old chicken farmer confesses it took him about ten years of marriage before he could talk freely about sex with his wife: she says the women in the village do not even talk about taking the pill; their daughter adds she would certainly be shocked to see her parents naked (...). Parents who claim they have told their children all there is to know about sex are often disconcerted to find their children denying it.[14]

This passage is, perhaps, characteristic of the way in which Zeldin treats his subjects' stories in *The French*. Rather than telling an entire life story, he borrows what details are relevant to the chapter, grouping together several lives under a single theme. The story that we see unfolding here is not that of an individual's life; instead, we are being told a collective story about people's relationships with their children. Even within this brief passage, we also find Zeldin's characteristic shift from the individual to the collective. We note that he begins by citing the opinions of three individuals: Michèle, the technician, and the chicken farmer. He then remains with the chicken farmer and

[14] Zeldin, *The French*, pp. 107-108

expands his scope to include his wife and daughter. Finally, he makes a general statement, not quoting any individual but apparently speaking for a whole group of parents. Despite inviting people to "speak their autobiographies",[15] showing an interest in the differences between individuals, Zeldin's conclusions often make generalisations that obscure these differences. In spite of the variety of feelings on display here, he seems to be saying, people are basically afflicted by the same problem. What we are left with after reading this passage is not the sense of having got to know any individual person, but the general notion that there is a degree of discomfort between parents and children, who are not as open as they could be with each other about sex.

In *The French*, then, we have the emphatic sense that Zeldin's subjects are not really speaking for themselves: instead, they are being used as sources, which are moulded into Zeldin's argument. Indeed, he suggests in *The French* that "[o]ne of the attractions for a historian of writing about the present is that he can create new

[15] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 9

sources."[16] It is clear, then, that he is thinking of himself predominantly as a historian rather than as a biographer or a ghostwriter. In *An Intimate History of Humanity*, this is still the case, but in a slightly different sense. In this book, Zeldin does usually focus on one individual in each chapter, giving us a more sustained narrative. For example, the fourth chapter focuses on Colette, a tax inspector. He appears to tell her life chronologically, beginning "At the beginning of her career" and ending with what her life is like now. But this telling of her life story is conditioned by the theme of Zeldin's chapter, 'How some people have acquired an immunity to loneliness': "At the beginning of her career Colette used to be frightened", whereas now, her career "is not frightening any more because she has learnt to find interesting nooks in the corridors."[17] The narrative that unfolds, then, is the story of Colette's fear, focussing on one specific aspect of the subject's life. As in many of the chapters in this book, immediately following the passage about Colette is a detailed account of "the history of

[16] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 8
[17] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, pp.55-56

loneliness".[18] Whereas Colette's life story takes up just five pages, the history of loneliness is given eleven. Thus, although Colette's "autobiography" begins the chapter, her story is overshadowed by the collective history that follows. Like the parents mentioned in the passage of *The French* quoted above, she is not really telling her own story, because her material has been reassimilated into a chapter which is not solely about her. Most striking of all, on many occasions in this book the two sections of each chapter do not seem to marry up neatly: the life stories that we read are not always strictly relevant to the collective historical passages that follow them. Colette's story seems to be about more than just her fear of loneliness. It is also about her ambition, her pride, and many other things. As in *The French*, Colette's story has been taken out of its original context and quoted as a source in order to support Zeldin's more general argument.

[18] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 59

The structure of Zeldin's life stories, and in particular his use of chronology, are very important. In 'The Art of Biography', Virginia Woolf suggests that "Many of the old chapter headings – life at college, marriage, career – are shown to be very arbitrary and artificial distinctions".[19] Traditionally, biographical works have focussed on these areas, as though, cumulatively, they portray the *making* of the biographical subject. In Zeldin's writing, those "old chapter headings" are used to very specific effect, in that they are described, but shown to have been inadequate or unfulfilling in some way. His description of Colette's career is a good example of this.

The fact that his subjects are usually described as frustrated or dissatisfied is an intrinsic part of Zeldin's rhetoric. One subject "is better off now, but he is not happier",[20] while another regards his divorce as "a failure".[21] Patricia, in *An Intimate History of Humanity*, is looking for "a man whom she can admire", but has not found

[19] Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', in *Collected Essays* vol. IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 221-8 (p. 226)
[20] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 19
[21] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 33

one yet,[22] while "Florence is about fifteen years younger, but she has not quite found a solution either".[23] The important thing to remember about the structure of autobiographies is that, usually, they must leave the story incomplete, because by their very nature they cannot describe the subject's death. Zeldin's accounts play on this fact, emphasising in each case that, in the future, his subjects will have a chance to make their lives better. In *The French*, he writes of one subject: "He regrets that he was never able to have any real communication with his father, and hopes to do better with his own child."[24] This sentence conveys concisely Zeldin's attitude to the past, present and future. Here, the past is described only because it is relevant to the subject's present tense self: he regrets what happened in the past; it is still relevant to who he is today. At the end of the sentence, we are shown how the problem (an event from his past which causes frustration in the present) might be resolved, or at least

[22] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 110
[23] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 114
[24] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 102

avoided, in the future. The internal structure of this sentence seems to echo the structures of Zeldin's chapters, which begin with a frustrated individual before going on to show, by drawing on mankind's collective history, a possible alternative. His chapters frequently end with speculation about the future:

> Maya is already free in one respect: she is free of the illusion that she has no illusions. But in her desire to be an intermediary (...) is she a victim of another illusion when she imagines that it is possible to establish more intimate communication between the myriad stars of which humanity is composed, and which at present barely tolerate each other? To get beyond despair at humanity's inability ever to agree requires new ways of thinking, and in particular new images. A start can be made with ideas about loneliness, to which I now turn.[25]

Zeldin thus ends his account of Maya's life by posing a question about her future: will she be successful in establishing "more intimate communication" with people, and is her desire to do so a mistake? It is here that we see most profoundly why Zeldin prefers living sources to dead ones: in these books he insists emphatically that his subjects' lives are not over, even if they believe the opposite. What is equally striking about this

[25] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 51

paragraph, though, is the way in which the individual (here, Maya) blends into Zeldin's overall argument. He jumps swiftly from writing about Maya to posing questions about "humanity" in general, before introducing his next chapter, on loneliness. Although some attention has been paid to Maya's future, the real concern here is the collective future of humankind. Significantly, Zeldin's histories of ideas follow the same pattern as his autobiographies. On religions, he writes: "Their history is unfinished."[26] So, just as, in the individual life stories, Zeldin places great emphasis on the unwritten future of his subjects' lives, an even greater emphasis is placed on mankind's *collective* future.

It should be noted that these observations on the way in which Zeldin asserts his authorship do not really apply to the Oxford Muse portraits, where there is a far stronger sense of individuals speaking for themselves. Indeed, in the following chapter we will be seeing that the freedom that is given to Muse contributors has resulted in some interesting alternatives to Zeldin's own model of collaborative autobiography.

[26] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 16

Nevertheless, we must remain aware that these portraits, many of which are collaborations which conceal their multiple authorship, are conditioned by Zeldin's overall vision. Many of them find their structure in the guideline questions (see Appendix), answering either all or some of them in sequence. As we noted in our chapter on 'Orality and Literacy', to translate an oral narrative into written form is also, inevitably, a transformation. The difference in the case of the Oxford Muse is that the autobiographical subjects retain a degree of authorial control even at the stage of writing: "together, they modified and edited the text".[27] The subjects of Zeldin's books, it should be remembered, have no control over the actual *writing* of their lives at all.

[27] Zeldin, 'The Art of Making Portraits'

The story of the story

We can distinguish between dictated autobiographies which openly refer to their collaborative status, and those which attempt to conceal it. Sometimes, as Stone teaches us, the collaborative element of an autobiography is addressed in some kind of prefatory section and ignored during the rest of the text.[1] The bodies of these texts thus maintain the illusion of having only one author. As we have noted, the majority of Oxford Muse portraits, following Zeldin's guidelines, fit into this category. Occasionally, however, these texts remind us that they are the result of a conversation. A portrait entitled 'Why an educated Russian works as a cleaner in Oxford' is one such example, generally giving the impression of a monologue but referring to the questions asked when there is a particular need to take issue with them:

[1] Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*, p. 234

> In what domains do you wish to lead? Etc." [sic] These are questions for a younger person. She reads, listens to music, goes to the cinema – she wants a quiet life after what she has lived through in Russia. For her these questions don't apply.[2]

In this case, the subject is commenting on the nature of the question she has been asked, suggesting that it is not relevant to her life. Another portrait, 'How polio has and has not coloured a professor's life', is presented in the form of a transcribed interview, in which each question is printed, followed by its answer, in a sequential fashion.[3] These portraits thus show us two ways in which a collaborative autobiography might refer to the conversation which produced it: first, by making reference to the conversation only when there is a special need to do so; second, by producing a text which resembles a conversation, with a "question and answer" format. But even this second example does not adequately represent the oral conversation in written form. What are not represented in this written text are the paralinguistic features of

[2] 'A', in conversation with Sophie Lewis, 'Why an educated Russian works as a cleaner in Oxford' <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/selfportrait/portrait1.htm> [accessed 01/08/2006]
[3] Alison Brading, in conversation with John Reed, 'How polio has and has not coloured a professor's life', in *Oxford Muse: Guide to an Unknown University*, ed. by Krznaric, Whalen and Zeldin, pp. 64-75

conversation: silences, coughs, hand gestures. Moreover, the individuals' experience of *having* a conversation is not discussed.

As Paul John Eakin notes, some pieces of life writing foreground what he calls "the story of the story", so that the texts narrate not only an individual's life story, but also the process by which that story was discovered by the writer.[4] In many of these texts, the nature of the conversation between writer and subject is of central importance to the book. Eakin suggests that such texts "offer not only the autobiography of the self but the biography *and* the autobiography of the other".[5] In these texts there are two autobiographical subjects, rather than one, and our understanding of each is conditioned by the relationship between the two as represented in the text.

[4] Eakin, Paul John, 'Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story', in *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*, ed. by G. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg (Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 63-81 (p. 65)
[5] Eakin, 'Relational Selves, Relational Lives', p. 70

Zeldin and "the story of the story"

Does Zeldin tell the story of the story? Works which do can usually be identified by the prevalence of first person references in a narrative that is supposed to be about somebody else. At the beginning of *The French*, Zeldin gives a first person account of how he made contact with his subjects, concluding that "[t]he characters in this book are (...) not a 'scientifically selected sample' but people whom I happen to have got to know."[6] Similarly, in the opening chapter of *An Intimate History of Humanity* he gives an account of how he came to start work on the book. He was interested predominantly in women, he writes: "Their clash with old mentalities is the impasse which dwarfs all other impasses; and thinking about how it might be resolved first started me on this book."[7] These first person sections are significant because they suggest that what follows will be – to some extent, at least – Zeldin's subjective

[6] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 10
[7] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 19

account. He even suggests as much himself. *The French* is not "a comprehensive survey of the French nation", he tells us. It is only "my own particular vision or experience of it".[8]

Zeldin's use of the first person is far more frequent in *The French* than in *An Intimate History of Humanity*. When he uses it, it is usually to supplement statements made by his autobiographical subjects. For example, he discusses Paule Bourrel's attitude towards clothes:

> She does not like to buy clothes with famous brand names, to show off: 'I find nine-tenths of fashion ridiculous. I don't worry about it, except for its general lines; I wouldn't wear shorts if dresses were all down to the ground. I don't like exaggeration, but prefer classic clothes.' (I saw her three times in the course of one day: she wore a different outfit on each occasion, variations on the theme of elegant understatement; she is carefully made up, her hair artfully tinted.)[9]

The first person account, in parentheses, supplements the information given by Bourrel. Although he does not directly contradict her statement, Zeldin's account gives additional

[8] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 8
[9] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 88

information that tempers our understanding of what she has said. The fact that she changed her outfit several times on one day suggests that Paule thinks very carefully about the clothes she wears, whereas her own statements might give us the impression that she does not.

At other points in *The French*, the first person is used to indicate explicitly that Zeldin is giving his own opinion: for example, "I believe that nothing separates people more than their sense of humour".[10] At such moments, our narrator suddenly becomes visible; but these occasions are rare. Normally, the narrator is invisible, presenting the illusion that the only opinions being expressed are those of his subjects.

The French occasionally refers to the fact that its narratives are based on conversations between Zeldin and his subjects. For example, he gives an account of his conversation with Claude Sicre: "Sicre's conversation is like a series of rapid explosions; one expects him to burst into flames from the sheer heat of his eloquence and

[10] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 4

exuberance; but everything he says is crystal clear and perfectly, logically ordered."[11] In this case, although Zeldin refers to Sicre's conversation, he does so in the present tense, as though he is describing what Sicre is *always* like. He appears to be describing an indisputable truth about Sicre, rather than his own experience of encountering this person. Only very rarely does he describe a specific event, such as when he is talking to the cartoonist, Georges Wolinski, whose "little daughter trips into the room, saying she has a message for him".[12]

In *The French*, such details, which enable us to visualise Zeldin talking to his subjects, are rare; in *An Intimate History of Humanity*, they hardly feature at all. His later book obeys a more formulaic structure, whereby each life story is followed by a more collective account of humanity's ideas. My own experience of reading both books is that I lose the sense of Zeldin's subjects as real people: what I remember most vividly are the ideas that Zeldin derives from these stories, so that the subjects

[11] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 14
[12] Zeldin, *The French*, pp. 67-68

themselves become disembodied voices, difficult to visualise. Zeldin's assisted autobiographies are fundamentally about ideas: they narrate their subjects' inner lives without showing their relevance to the physical world. Consider the language used to describe Pierre Amiel's life. We are told that "Pierre wanted to be a writer", and that "What he likes above all else is peace, perhaps because his youth was often filled by sadness".[13] His life is narrated in abstract terms, referring to "peace" and "sadness" but not really painting a visual image of this man. The absence of memorable visual imagery, I suggest, is owing to two factors. The first is the brevity of the narratives. A book-length autobiography has room to narrate individual, memorable moments. In the two pages devoted to Pierre Amiel (Zeldin then moves on to his daughter and her family), the author must capture the essential details. For Zeldin, the essential details are abstract ideas, and above all the fact that "his life has been a series of

[13] Zeldin, *The French*, pp. 79-80

disappointments."[14] The second factor is that Zeldin is not, on these occasions, narrating the story of the story. It is striking that, when he does, the level of distinctive visual imagery is instantly heightened. Of Pierre Bourrel, Zeldin writes:

> His main hobby is cooking: he rolled up his sleeves like a surgeon preparing for an operation, and produced a grilled wild rabbit that he had shot himself with saupiquet.[15]

Suddenly, we can visualise this person, and this shift is caused by Zeldin's description of a single, isolated event that occurred during his encounter with Bourrel. Telling the story of the story, it seems, makes the autobiographical subjects easier to visualise, so that we can imagine them as real people rather than as disembodied voices. The fact that Zeldin rarely does so therefore affects his life writing in a significant way.

[14] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 79
[15] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 85

Duncan Brown's encounters

Duncan Brown's contributions to the Oxford Muse project deviate from Zeldin's guidelines. This is immediately evident in the portraits' signatures: "Kate Raworth: As encountered by Duncan Brown" suggests that this will not be a so-called self-portrait, presented "in conversation with" a collaborator, but instead will express Brown's experience of meeting Raworth.[16] As well as representing Raworth's own ideas about herself, the portrait also expresses Brown's perception of her, reminding us of Eakin's ideas, quoted above. The most striking feature of Brown's portrait is the sense that all identity is relational: the recognition that Brown and Raworth live in a connected world. The opening sentence is a good example of this:

[16] Duncan Brown, 'Adventures in becoming a Muse: Kate Raworth: As encountered by Duncan Brown' <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/selfportrait/portrait19.htm> [accessed 22/05/2006]

> A few days after I talk to her for the first time, there is a party at Roman's and Kate's house. I go outside to have a cigarette and Roman joins me and we sit looking at the stars and smoking.[17]

These sentences instantly divorce this piece of writing from many of the Oxford Muse contributions, because they describe the context of the conversation, making it possible to visualise the people involved. The presence of Roman is particularly significant. The subject of the portrait is Brown's encounter with Raworth, but Roman exists on the periphery of the narrative. He comes and goes during their conversation: "three hours later, Roman comes in and drinks off the last glass without a word."[18] The existence of this third person is important because it shows that the conversation does not occur in a vacuum. Roman is, in fact, another Oxford Muse contributor, whose own self-portrait appears in the database, and even refers to "Kate, with whom I live".[19] Unlike the portrait of Alison Brading, which represents a straightforward dialogue with questions

[17] ibid.
[18] ibid.
[19] Roman Krznaric, 'How the search for understanding differs from the search for knowledge' <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/selfportrait/portrait26.htm> [accessed 18/08/2006]

and answers, Brown's account stresses the relational element of conversation, through which individuals connect themselves to other individuals, who are themselves already part of a larger network.

The portrait conveys a strong sense of space: "A little kitchen at the back of the house has pots hanging from a rack she'd found the other day; a washerwoman's mangle stands in the workshop area at the back."[20] These physical details make the entire encounter easier to visualise, and the fact that Brown chooses to mention them indicates that they are an important part of his experience, perhaps as important as the words Raworth speaks. Indeed, he is conscious of the fact that Raworth's conversation is about more than words. "It occurs to me that eating alone with another person is a remarkably intimate thing to do", he writes. "There is silence and crockery on the

[20] Duncan Brown, 'Adventures in becoming a Muse'

tape."[21] In other respects, Brown shows that the nature of this conversation is a significant concern. As soon as they start talking, he encounters problems:

> As we begin to talk, about self-image, photographs of oneself that look like another person, I find useful facts or evidence thin on the ground, and feel confronted with the elastic sociability that she extends, not fixing the conversation to statements that are discussed, but to concepts. My idea of interview technique has fallen apart (...)[22]

He is much happier with their second conversation, when "everything is more relaxed; still dynamic but less jumpy. We laugh a lot more and have sillier, less centralised conversations that are welcome."[23] Brown thus acknowledges that what we glean from a conversation can be influenced by the circumstances, the non-semantic content of the dialogue.

Brown's portrait of Raworth is compelling in its own right. But his other contribution to the Oxford Muse project complicates our observations. It is another third person

[21] ibid.
[22] ibid.
[23] ibid.

description of an encounter, but this time Brown's subject is himself. "He considered writing this document on his own," the narrator tells us, "but he thought he'd have no perspective. So I'm tempering him, making sure he doesn't get carried away, rant or use it as a confessional viaduct."[24] Whereas Zeldin distinguishes between genuine self-portraits and those produced through collaboration, here it is as though Brown wishes to *simulate* a collaboration in order to achieve the kind of distance that he feels to be necessary to portray himself accurately. He also seems to be suggesting that a self-portrait is just as much of an *encounter* as a collaborative portrait, since he is interrogating himself and possibly making new observations.

Our understanding of Brown's third person self-portrait, and how it relates to our observations on Zeldin's writing, can be furthered by considering once again the work of Philippe Lejeune. For Lejeune, the significance of autobiographies that are written in the third person (of which Brown's self-portrait is an example) is that they expose "the

[24] Duncan Brown, 'Why I am a liar and would like to be a poet who writes about rage and violence' <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/selfportrait/portrait11.htm> [accessed 22/05/2006]

multiplicity of postures usually hidden by the pronoun 'I'."[25] His theories arise from the basic notion of the autobiographical pact, whereby autobiographies present the illusion that their protagonist, narrator and author are the same person.[26] In a conventional autobiographical work, the first person ("I") signifies all three figures, and "functions according to a logic of self-referential evidence which in general masks its complexity, its figurative and indirect character for the speaker and listener."[27] Lejeune's idea of the "multiplicity of postures" usually signified by the first person is extremely important. Even in a conventional autobiography, the writer of the story is not the person who appears in it. For one thing, he is a later version of himself, with knowledge and experience that the protagonist of his story cannot have. For another, he is performing a different function, playing the role of writer.

[25] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 44
[26] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 5
[27] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 35

Brown's self-portrait seems to acknowledge the inherent multiplicity involved in writing autobiography. The use of the third person, as in the examples cited by Lejeune, establishes a distance between the narrator and the subject of the autobiography. In Brown's case, one of the consequences of this is that it enables the narrator and the protagonist to have differing opinions or approaches: "He orders black coffee, and I wonder if that's entirely necessary – he seems pretty edgy as it is. I notice his hands are shaking."[28] Later, we are told that "he can be very frustrating to talk to."[29] These examples simulate an encounter between two people, as though Brown is imagining what another person might think of him. It could be suggested that this is, in itself, a form of collaboration – between two different versions of the same person. Brown uses the conflicting aspects of his own personality (this critical narrator, even if he *seems* like another person, is nevertheless generated by Brown's imagination) to *temper* his self-portrait, engaging himself in conversation in order to reach a more

[28] ibid.
[29] ibid.

accurate sense of who he really is. Brown's self-portrait, then, *pretends* to do what Zeldin's books actually do. The use of the third person, we have noted, establishes a distance between narrator and protagonist, enabling the subject of the autobiography to be criticised or contradicted. While Brown's self-portrait invents a narrator for this purpose, in Zeldin's books this invention is not necessary. Zeldin, who rarely makes himself visible to us, is nevertheless constantly present, tempering the stories told by his subjects, pointing out their limitations and suggesting alternative ways of thinking. The fact that he chooses to hide himself, paraphrasing his subjects rather than describing his own experience of meeting them makes his writing less transparent than Brown's, which is openly subjective. Apart from on rare occasions, discussed above, Zeldin presents the illusion that he and his subjects are of the same mind.

Zeldin's theoretical writing, as we have seen, recognises that the particular circumstances of a conversation can influence its outcome: by asking a person

questions that he has never been asked before, it is possible for that person to alter his own ideas about himself. But his own life writing, like the majority of Oxford Muse portraits, obscures the fact that conversation can influence meaning as well as just revealing it. A compelling alternative to Zeldin's model is provided by Duncan Brown's "encounters", where the encounter between two people becomes a significant theme of the text. Collaboration, in Brown's texts, is not just a process by which a narrative is revealed, but is actually a source of narrative in itself.

Conclusion: "the world's memory"

At the beginning of this study we identified Zeldin's claim to be helping individuals to speak for themselves, to tell *their* autobiographies. That claim, as we have seen, is not satisfied by his books, in which Zeldin exerts his power as author and incorporates his subjects' stories into his own historical and philosophical arguments. We have seen two different ways in which the presence of a collaborator, who converses with the autobiographical subject and then writes down his findings, can influence or distort the story that is told. First, his conversation with the subject can create meaning as well as revealing it, determining the nature of the narrative that unfolds by asking particular kinds of questions. Second, the act of writing down a narrative that was delivered orally is necessarily a process of transformation. We have observed the different ways in which the Oxford Muse portraits retain the residue of orality, and concluded that the semblance of speech in these works is an illusion. Zeldin's own writing is markedly

literary in nature, and he makes little use of direct quotation, so that we are unable to "hear" these individuals' voices.

I have suggested that Zeldin uses his subjects' life stories as historical sources, taking segments of them and applying them to his argument rather than allowing them to stand alone. In *An Intimate History of Humanity*, as well as beginning each chapter with the life story of an individual whom he has met, Zeldin peppers the historical sections of the book with other brief life stories of significant historical figures. These are people about whom lengthy studies have been written, yet Zeldin reduces their lives to one or two paragraphs. Pliny the Elder, he writes, "died as a result of getting too close to Mount Vesuvius, whose eruption he wanted to witness: he knew he was a parasite, because observing nature is a good way to learn how to recognise parasites."[1] Samuel Johnson "never discovered the value of being contradicted."[2] Benvenuto Cellini

[1] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 11
[2] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, pp. 38-39

"confused individuality with selfishness and megalomania",[3] while for St Anthony, "[b]eing alone seemed to be a cure."[4] Thus, the lives of these famous people are reduced to lessons, which are presented here in order to justify Zeldin's own way of thinking. These life stories initially seem very different from the more sustained narratives of ordinary people which open his chapters, but in reality both are executed in the same way. In every case, Zeldin has the last word, and what we remember most vividly is his philosophical argument. The autobiographical subjects are not real to us.

At the heart of this problem is Zeldin's unique way of thinking about memory. Earlier we distinguished the autobiographical from the biographical by saying that the former is characterised by the exercise of memory, while the latter is often constructed from historical research. In these books, Zeldin merges the two, so that memory becomes something that is not individual, but collective: he writes of "[t]he world's

[3] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 66
[4] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 62

memory".[5] In Zeldin's account, the mind contains not just its own, autobiographical memories, but also the residue of past civilisations:

> The mind is a refuge for ideas dating from many different centuries, just as the cells of the body are of different ages, renewing themselves or decaying at varying speeds. Instead of explaining the peculiarity of individuals by pointing to their family or childhood, I take a longer view: I show how they pay attention to – or ignore – the experience of previous, more distant generations (...)[6]

We have seen an example of this attitude in Zeldin's writing about slavery, where he suggests that the people who make metaphorical slaves of themselves are in fact haunted by the memory of their ancestors' real slavery. Thus, the past is relevant because it still exists in the present: "I am writing about what will not lie still, about the past which is alive in people's minds today".[7]

These ideas about memory and history are central to our understanding of Zeldin's writing, which is best understood if we think of it as containing two different kinds of

[5] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 31
[6] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. vii
[7] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. viii

story. On the one hand, there are the individual life stories of the people he has met. On the other, there are the stories of entire civilisations. In *The French*, the life stories of ordinary people are juxtaposed with the story of Occitanie,[8] or of attitudes towards marriage.[9] *An Intimate History of Humanity* gives us the history of loneliness, of conversation, of love, alongside individual histories. Crucially, though, for Zeldin these are all part of the same story, because the collective memory which interests him so much holds the key to the futures of the individuals he portrays: "To discover in what direction one wishes to go, one needs to acquire memories with a new shape, memories which point into the future, and which have direct relevance to one's present preoccupations."[10] His role, then, is not really that of an assistant, helping people to reveal what is inside them, but that of a teacher, helping them to shape their future: "I am searching for the gaps people have not spotted, for the clues they have missed."[11]

[8] Zeldin, *The French*, p. 22
[9] Zeldin, *The French*, pp. 113-114
[10] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 50
[11] Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 13

The fact that he writes his books in the third person is of utmost importance. In a sense, the narratives are like case histories, with Zeldin as detective or healer, poring over people's memories in order to locate the source of their frustrations.

Despite being based on the same set of ideas, the Oxford Muse project is an altogether different endeavour. In his description of the Muse portraits, Zeldin emphatically privileges those which are written in the first person, so that the model portrait is a kind of monologue written in the first person, thus giving the illusion of having only one author. In *Conversation*, Zeldin places emphasis on the element of *discovery* involved in the interaction between two people: "When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought."[12] Surprisingly, his favourite portraits actually obscure the role of collaboration. By contrast, Duncan Brown's writing foregrounds the story of the story and offers not a monologue but a description of an

[12] Zeldin, *Conversation*, p. 9

encounter between two people. In many ways, this is more faithful to Zeldin's ideas than any of the other Oxford Muse portraits. What is most refreshing about Brown's pieces is that we can visualise not only his subject, but also himself. We are made aware of his own feelings of inadequacy, his uncertainty about how to behave, and his doubts about the value of his own conversation. Zeldin rarely tells us anything about himself, and always seems in control. He thus appears in his books less as a real person than as a kind of omniscient narrator, presiding over his characters, whose minds he can read and whose futures he can anticipate. Part of his power is derived from the fact that he is always slightly hidden, emerging only occasionally to deliver a sentence in the first person before retreating again into third person anonymity.

As we noted earlier, the division of labour in Zeldin's model of collaborative autobiography is more complicated than his rhetoric suggests. In fact, the collaborator is both interrogator and writer, but the image of the "muse" or "midwife", *assisting* the process of narration, blurs the boundary between the two by suggesting that they are

one and the same thing. We began by noting the different labels that have been applied to Zeldin, and remarking on the fact that he is rarely (if ever) discussed as a writer of lives. Here we have placed Zeldin's writing for the first time in the context of collaborative autobiography; yet, in some ways, what we are left with is the sense that he is not a writer of lives at all, or at least not a writer of collaborative autobiographies. His roles as "author, historian, philosopher" – and, crucially, "futurologist"[13] – interfere with his attempt to help people "speak their autobiographies", so that what we have here are not people's autobiographies at all, but something quite different.

[13] Daniel Snowman, 'Theodore Zeldin', *History Today*, 49.7 (July 1999), 26-28

Appendix: Guideline Questions Distributed to Oxford Muse Contributors

How have your priorities changed over the years? What used to be the most important, exciting or sad, in the past? And now? And what might your priorities be in the future?

What have been the most decisive, enjoyable or difficult conversations you have had? What would you like to talk about at work more, and less?

In what ways do you feel limited or favoured by your background, origins, experience?

What brings feelings of loneliness on in you? Have you any remedies?

What have you learned about the different varieties of love in the course of your life?

How have your tastes changed? How do you cultivate each of your five senses? What is your sixth sense?

How have your opinions and behaviour changed with regard to the way the two sexes treat one another?

How much have you been motivated by the search for power, money, respect, or something else?

In what domains do you wish to lead? In what others do you prefer to follow? Has your work satisfied these desires and has it created other frustrations?

Have your fears diminished, increased or changed with the passing years?

In what areas do you wish you were more knowledgeable? What do you like learning and dislike learning?

Who are your enemies? How do you cope with them? With whom do you wish you could be reconciled? Who are your allies?

What challenges, thoughts or people do you run away from? Are your methods of escaping satisfactory? In what ways do you wish to become more courageous?

Do you feel you do enough for others? What are the limits of your compassion?

In what parts of the world, and in what kinds of company, do you feel at home? Are you becoming more or less tolerant of difference, and why?

In what ways has travel made you a more interesting person, and what is there it could still do for you?

What do you think of your spending habits? What do you need that money cannot buy?

How have you made friendships? Do you have enough friends? What other kinds would you like? What do you expect from friends and do you get it?

How do you think about the future? How do you feel about its uncertainties? Are you rational, emotional or superstitious about the future?

How much of your life do you think you have wasted? How much of each day is wasted time? What alternatives have you?

What are the best and worst moments you have spent with your parents?

If you are a parent, what has been the most satisfying and what has there been missing in your family life? What mistakes have you made?

How did you choose the work you do or the directions you have taken in your life? Have your expectations been realised? Is it possible for you to make another choice now?

What do you need to do to make your life feel complete? Whom would you like to meet? Where else do you want to live?

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