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Natalie Zemon Davis, Historian of Hope

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Natalie Zemon Davis has been the subject of many interviews in many languages: English, Dutch, Italian, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, Chinese, Korean... What, I wondered, would it be like to take those interviews as my historical material for this brief talk? As I read the ones I could in my limited set of languages I realized that they were rich in detail, full of insight into this remarkable historian—a treasure-trove... but of what exactly? What kind of source is an interview? Is there a theory of the interview that would be useful for my deliberations?

If you Google “theory of the interview” you mainly come up with advice about how to get a job. There are also one or two articles, full of the jargon of social science (structured versus unstructured interviews, realist versus pluralist interpretations) on how to “construct the data” obtained by a researcher (into prisoners, as one of the cases would have it). There was one article a film scholar referred me to by Paige Sarlin, who is writing an as yet unfinished book on media representations of interviews, which had a useful reminder that “an interview is never simply dyadic; it is always grounded in the triad of interviewer, interviewee, and a real or imagined audience”.¹ But helpful as her observations were for thinking the interview in general, it wasn’t quite what I was looking for to help me read this specific set of interviews.

I finally came up with something of a theory of my own which reflected, I think, my immersion in the sources, listening to the hints and signals they already seemed to contain. My major source turned out to be a set of interviews that the French historian Denis Crouzet conducted with Natalie in 2003, published first in France in 2004 and then in English translation in 2010. In French, the book’s title was *L’histoire tout feu tout flamme: Entretiens avec Denis Crouzet*; in English the title is *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*.² I realized as I read their terrific observations about living, writing, and making history that Natalie was at once the object and the subject of the historical investigation that these interviews represented. The

¹ Paige Sarlin, “Between We and Me: Filmed Interviews and the Politics of Personal Pronouns,” *Discourse* 39:3 (Fall 2017), 320. Her reminder is useful for us historians: “I argue that the significance of the interview derives from the ways in which it produces and represents social relations at the same time that it reifies individual identity and opinion... I also demonstrate how the interview is an ideological and aesthetic form that has emerged as a central device for the creation of content, one that circulates almost invisibly – delivering representations of personal experience and expression that articulate and reproduce the distinctions between the individual and society, and the private and public in ways that shape the very definition of what constitutes work and politics.” Paige Sarlin, “Interview-Work: The Genealogy of a Cultural Form,” <https://paigesarlin.info/work-in-progress/interview-work-the>.

² Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*, ed. Michael Wolfe, trans. Natalie Zemon Davis and Michael Wolfe (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2010).

interviewee, in other words, uses her own history to account for the history she writes. How does a professional historian tell her own history? How does she relate the lives of the others she investigates to her personal life story? What causal connections does she acknowledge or refuse?

There was another dimension, too, to my thinking about the interview: Since the notion of self-fashioning was a recurring theme in the conversations with Crouzet, I wondered if we could take the interview itself as an exercise in self-fashioning. Self-fashioning is, after all, exactly a process of constituting oneself as both the subject and the object of the story.³ “Self-fashioning,” Natalie tells Crouzet, about her rebellions against family influences, “was part of my own experience.”⁴ Here I wonder if we can hear her playing on the double meaning of the term—referring to her rebellious actions as she constituted her individuality as well as to the representation of self that is emerging in the interview. That representation has to do with *performance*, a crucial addition to her interpretive practice. Influenced by literary scholar-friends such as Rosalie Colie and Stephen Greenblatt, Natalie recounts: “I began to look not only at what was stated or declared in a text, but also at what was suggested through expression, through *performance*.”⁵ The interview, I want to suggest, is a form of performance of the self.

What do the interviews tell us about Natalie’s self-fashioning? Above all, it is as an historian that she presents herself. And as one who is unabashedly in love with her subject. As the titles of both the French and English versions reveal, she is “all fired up” for history, her “passion” for the past is at once hopelessly romantic and carefully disciplined.⁶ First the fire: On her initial visit to Lyon, she depicts a *coup de foudre*: “I immediately fell in love with France, the people, their way of living, and with their food.”⁷ From there it was a continuing “love affair with the archives.”⁸ The words “pleasure” and “excitement” to describe learning about the past come up again and again. She is “fascinated,” “delighted,” linked by “magic threads” to people long dead.⁹ When she is lonely, she finds consolation in the company of people from the past.¹⁰ The addition of gender to the tapestries she weaves is “a great enhancement of pleasure.”¹¹ She has a “penchant, an appetite for writing lives.” As a child fascinated by the stories history had to tell and then later, as a Smith undergraduate, drawn especially to French historians, the “joy of discovery... climaxed when I read Marc Bloch’s *Société féodale*.” Bloch becomes a lasting influence on her, a formative figure; she admires his beautiful writing style, his own tragic, heroic end, and she identifies with him: “he was Jewish, like me.”¹² The erotic dimension of history’s appeal, “this thirst for history” she calls it, is crucial to her self-representation: “Historical research has been for me an arena of joy and intellectual passion. I always feel a shiver of anticipation when I enter an archive or a rare book collection: What am I going to find?

³ “Since *The Return of Martin Guerre*, when I wrote the story of someone who played with his identity, I think I’ve acquired a sort of style, or at least a habitual way of perceiving situations and people, that is, of always looking for questions about self-fashioning, of fashioning one’s inner and outer self, and even of imposture.” *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ Judy Coffin and Rob Harding, “Politics, Progeny, and French History: An Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis,” *Radical History Review* 24 (Fall 1980), 121.

⁹ Davis, *A Passion for History*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Is the slave woman I'm looking for finally going to show up on the registers of a plantation? Might I even find her signature, left by her for some special reason and precious to me as a sign that she existed and really could write, as her lover claimed she could? What luck I've had to read so many interesting accounts, some moving me to laughter, others curdling my blood, some surprising, others familiar."¹³ These objects of love never fail to disappoint and they never fail to arrive.

Yet, as I mentioned before, for Natalie, eroticism is tamed by discipline. The gift of pleasure offered up by the past imposes "the obligation to recount their lives with responsibility—not recount them exactly as they would have done, but in being ever attentive to their statements and their claims."¹⁴ "My preferences and my needs, though present, *must not* [note the imperative here] determine my historical vision," she tells Crouzet when he suggests that her pleasure derives from some need to find "personal reassurance" in her objects of study.¹⁵ She refuses the notion that her subjects appeal to her because they resemble her in some way: "I want to stress *very strongly here* that good history-writing cannot be based on perceived resemblance." And, resisting the idea that she, Natalie, finds a fitting predecessor in the Jewish Glickl of Hamlin, she tells Crouzet that "one's personal goals *must not* (the imperative again) get in the way of one's role as a historian, but I don't think it happened here. I have *good evidence* to show that her love of storytelling was not only a Jewish trait, but a widespread interest in seventeenth-century Europe."¹⁶ So, Glickl was of her time, not of ours and it is up to the historian to respect that as she distinguishes between her 21st-century understanding and Glickl's.

The importance of "good evidence" and "responsibility" to it comes up again and again. If Natalie is in love with the past, she is also (in her words) "faithful" to it.¹⁷ Her love is disciplined by realism, by attention to the "sign-posts" that illuminate that road to the past. Encountering those who would describe the writing of history as a form of fiction or as only an imaginative game, she resists. "We must not abandon our practices of proof."¹⁸ "I must use my imagination—but it must be nourished by and tightly guided by the sources," she says of her need to fill in the silences in the historical record of her "trickster traveller," al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus.¹⁹ While she is sympathetic to Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to "provincialize history," she draws the line on the question of proof, making an important distinction between historical sources and historical proof. We need to multiply the sources, she says, but we have to agree on what constitutes proof. "We should have a common *goal* in regard to how we might accept a conclusion as established."²⁰ Only such commonality enables the critical conversations that keep history moving, open to its necessary interpretation and revision. It is in that way that, writing about al-Wazzan, she has found "common ground [established by]... the rules of my historian's craft with scholars from the Muslim world."²¹

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

There is no lack of sophisticated philosophy in Natalie's exchange with Crouzet and the tenacity with which she holds to a necessary tension between documents and their interpretation is nuanced and impressive. "I want my speculative jumps to start from a springboard of documentation."²² She says that a certain style of inquiry results from what "the evidence itself required of me."²³ But it is not a kind of mindless empiricism that she practises. Her approach is eclectic: Influenced by Marxism, she is "insistent on seeing things relationally;" she looks to anthropology not for prescriptions, but for suggestions about how to think about culture, symbols, and the play of difference.²⁴ "I want to push my research as far as I can in order to discover and understand the mental and affective worlds of persons and communities of the past. In approaching the traces and texts they've left me, I'm simultaneously helped and constrained by my own subjectivity and abilities. I want to hold on to the tension. The historian's work finally goes on in her head, but I want to always remember the existence outside of me of those traces from people of the past. I want to be a storyteller, not a cannibal."²⁵ She will not devour those people of the past for her own purposes, instead she wants to recount their stories in all of their difference from her, from us.

There is a politics in her choice to bring us the *menu peuple*, to make visible their experiences, their resistances, and especially their resilience. First, of course, she wants to rescue them from the margins (or, as Edward Thompson put it, 'the condescension') of orthodox history, find traces of them in those archives stuffed with information about rulers and their minions, make their lives appealing and colorful in their own terms. That writing she thinks of as a "mission," a service, a form of reparation for the long silence and invisibility they have endured. It's not kings and queens, she says, "it's the others who need me... I hope I have served them well."²⁶

But this reparative history has another dimension to it. The focus on the *menu peuple*, and especially on their resilience, offers a challenge to all totalizing visions of history whether it is economic determinism, Foucault's epistemes, or the invocation of evil as an explanation, even for what can be seen as demonic acts. "For me the idea that the final explanation for an event is absolute evil is *unacceptable*."²⁷ Instead, by focusing on people on the margins, she can identify "serious disagreements pushing at the edges of [reigning] paradigms or gnawing from within."²⁸ These may be lost or foreclosed options for alternative ways of living together or simply inventive ways of dealing with oppression and misrule; they may be dreams partially realized, deferred, or tragically disappointed. The point is they allow us to observe (and identify with) the human operations of hope. When Crouzet criticizes her work as "a very optimistic history" and worries that the pleasure she takes in it will lead her "astray," Natalie counters firmly that she prefers to think of what she writes as a "history of hope" rather than "optimistic history."²⁹ The difference is important, optimism is cheery faith in inevitably happy outcomes, hope has to do with belief in alternative possibilities. When Crouzet presses her to avow her own

²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

disenchantment about the disasters of our contemporary politics, she refuses. “My realism is still accompanied by hope...and hope can be nourished by a chastened realism.”³⁰

In one of the only moments of a genuinely universalist claim, Natalie ties her history of hope to the study of human resilience: “I am struck by human *resilience* and want to understand its sources.”³¹ “Even in a complex society with lots of prescriptions, there can be give in the way in which human beings manipulate the prescriptions. I’m interested in where the cracks, where the fault lines are in different societies that shake people up to change things...”³² In her firm belief in human resilience, she joins her great Humanist ancestors, especially Rabelais, Montaigne, and Marguerite de Navarre. “Whenever I have an idea about something happening in sixteenth-century France, or an interpretation of some event or expression, I run it by Rabelais and Montaigne.” When it’s about women, she turns to Marguerite. If she finds no “whiff” of what she’s looking for, she rethinks and rechecks what she’s doing.³³

I want to suggest that it’s not only that these interlocutors are good observers of their times, but that they share Natalie’s Humanist concerns. They provide her with wisdom, humor, and above all insight into the human condition at the heart of her own inquiry. “For me,” she writes, “the possibilities of the past invite a commitment to humanity and offer a ray of hope for the future.”³⁴ That ray of hope is leavened with humor. Explaining the moments of levity in her remarkable experiments—the conversation she constructs with her *Women on the Margins*, the imaginary dialogue between al-Wazzan and Rabelais—she says that she wanted to introduce “a moment of peace and laughter.”³⁵ These qualities provide hope with a certain comfort and consolation.

In her very first interview (with Judy Coffin and Rob Harding, published in 1980 in the *Radical History Review*), Natalie declared her ambition: “I want to be a historian of hope.” She also acknowledged that she wanted the questions she asked of the past to “be important for political and cultural reasons,” adding that “This is a residue from the political hopes of my youth.”³⁶ The word residue is important there—it makes no direct connection between her own personal history, the history she writes, and its contemporary political impact. Her love of the past is contingent neither on its reflections of her own biography nor on its direct relevance to the present. The past she offers us consists not of didactic lessons, but of profound insight into the human condition. It is there that the two strands of Natalie’s self-fashioning are joined in the interviews with Crouzet. Her own life story, as she tells it, is one of extraordinary resilience in the face of social, cultural, and political challenges. It is that same resilience that she looks for and finds in the objects of her study. That project, a history that documents the many forms of human resilience, earns her a place in the ranks of her great Humanist forebears. And it earns her our enduring gratitude for insisting that even in times of great darkness, the light of hope can continue to shine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³² *Ibid.*, 134.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

³⁶ *Ibid.*.

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