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“Oral History and Emotions”

A life from the threshold: Feminism, Emotion and Oral History. Teresa Hortensi i Bosch

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*Plato already preferred the living oral speech,
capable of defending itself and of choosing its recipient,
to the dead letter of the written document,
which repeats without knowing, and ignores those to whom it speaks.
(Enaudeau 2000, 99)*

History is a form of knowledge that seeks to understand a reality that can no longer be directly observed and analyzed. Unlike traditional historical practice, which was mainly interested in establishing the veracity of documents as "irrefutable truths" of what happened, new historians are concerned with finding the relationship that emotions have with reality, which they consider as trace evidence of human activity. But this is no simple task: how can emotions be studied? Although the answer is susceptible to controversy, in this article I will highlight the value of emotions in the study of history since, perhaps this way, we will be able to approach traditional historical themes from a new perspective.

Due to the scarcity of sources available to address certain research questions, some scholars have resorted to interviews to answer them. Acknowledging the features of the interview has led to the development of a specific methodology for interviewing, analysis and interpretation known as Oral History. Its objective is to contribute to the understanding of social processes based on recorded testimonies directly provided by people who in some way intervened in certain historical situations and whose versions of what happened are not recorded in any other way (Castillo 2007).

My research,¹ which revolves around the testimony of Teresa Hortensi i Bosch, tries to give voice to a muted woman, silenced by both traditional historiography and by her most intimate circle. The exceptionality of Teresa Hortensi's life lies in its non-exceptionality for conventional historiography. I share Medina's view that in our research of the past it is extremely important to find perceptions of possible subjectivities that not only convey what power allowed them to feel but which are also capable of generating rebellion [Medina, 2012]. Rebellious against the patriarchal system is what relegated Teresa Hortensi to invisibility, and rebellions such as these alienated her from the public sphere, meaning that everything that she felt and lived through remained in the private sphere. This is so mainly for two reasons: because she is a woman and because she did not follow the rules.

In the following pages I aim to show, in the tradition of George Rudé,² that any life constructs history. That is, that any life is necessary for historical understanding, especially when it is a very poorly represented experience: that of a person who lived against the current. With this idea, I detach myself from mainstream classical conceptualisations of autobiography, usually advocated by male-dominated historiography, which argue that its relevance rests on its exceptionality.

Challenges and History: exclusion or representation

In terms of popularity or academic interest, Teresa Hortensi i Bosch does not respond to the concept of celebrity required to be the subject of a biography. However, through my research, I have tried to make her a more visible person, performing an inverted papyrus-flex exercise to

¹This paper is based on the final work of my Master's Degree in Women Studies and Citizenship, entitled *Teresa Hortensi i Bosch: Una biografia des del lllindar, entre catalanisme i feminisme*

²Paul Thompson, Lucienne Febvre and Carlo Ginzburg, among others.

rescue from oblivion women like her who have not been saints, queens or literary figures. That is, I intend to replace the concept of celebrity with the concept of visibility to include more diverse and complex human profiles, especially of women.

As we know, individuals cannot abstract themselves from their own context, even if they do not accept it or try to change it, as is the case of Teresa Hortensi i Bosch. Therefore, all biographies offer a common point of view to the protagonists' contemporaries (especially to those people with whom they share affective bonds of class, gender, nationality, religion, ideology, ...). But, at the same time, the result of rewriting an individual life, although integrated in that specific social context, will bear many differences with its contemporaries, however much they may appear familiar, since "individuals, while necessarily placing themselves within the frame of social norms, use them and to some extent modify them, making historical change possible" (Bolufer 2014, 93).

After all, the lives of the past (as well as those of the present) were really lived and felt, not just imagined, and history cannot give up the ethical responsibility of recovering them. I defend, therefore, "a historiographical practice that recognizes and cultivates its social vocation and is interested in connecting with the concerns of a broader and not exclusively academic public. In this endeavor, the biographical method is particularly appropriate, since a historical account with faces and names responds to the human need for identification and, especially, to the desire of many women to be represented, challenged or questioned by a history that also considers their experiences "(Bolufer 2014, 88).

The Discovery of the Intangible

From quite an early age, Teresa Hortensi i Bosch (1942-) clearly saw that marriage and motherhood would not lead her to happiness. Nuri Seras, her Argentine cousin, opened for her a

new vision of femininity unknown to her until that moment. She was an autonomous and independent woman who travelled alone and who had strong political views. Teresa was struck by the fact that she was the only woman with whom her father talked about politics. So, when Teresa saw that her sisters disappeared from her life as soon as they married, she decided to go to France and train as a nurse, something she did in December 1967. A few months after arriving in Paris, May 68 erupted. From that moment on, her life changed. She enjoyed levels of sexual freedom unthinkable in Francoist Spain. After living for a few years with a man from the Ivory Coast - her mother's constant nagging at the time was "at least get married, Teresa" - she met D. in a radical feminist group from Lyon, who became her partner and with whom she decided to start a new life in the country, in the French Pyrenees. Her happiness, detached from a society with which she disagreed, was truncated by gender imperatives when she had to go back to care for her sick mother. She was the youngest of three sisters and the only one who remained unmarried, that is why, after a lifetime going against the current, she had to return to Barcelona.

To present the life of Teresa Hortensi and Bosch, I must first explain how I met her. As Stanley argues, "biography, as a genre, cannot be separated in any way from the autobiography of those who produce it" (Stanley in Bolufer 2014, 105). That is why I now realise that it is impossible to disconnect your own life from the life of the person that you want to explain. Everything is connected, emotions are part of people's lives and condition their actions. You cannot do history work omitting feelings, even less so when there is a possibility of recovering them.

So, in July 2012, a newspaper article fell into my hands. It was an interview with a seventy-year-old woman who, with the excuse of being the oldest pupil at a bicycle-riding course,

explained in broad strokes parts of her life. Just the article title seemed irresistible: "Teresa Hortensi; "I said no to marriage, children and gossip".³

After reading the interview I began to contemplate the idea of meeting Teresa Hortensi, but it was not until two years later, when I contacted her through *Facebook*, that we agreed to meet. This is how the project to write her biography began. As I pointed out earlier, I understand that any biography implies the subjectivity of the biographical person but also that of the researcher. Therefore, throughout these pages, I intend to break with the neutral voice of the classical conception of biographical narrator to explain the motivations, historical and personal, that led me to write this life story. Authors like Enaudeau refer in their essays to this new perspective where subjectivity is not necessarily a problem: "The paradox is that to disrupt the phantoms of clairvoyance of an all-powerful reason, it is now necessary to appeal to the opacity of sensations or feelings, when it was thought that we had to fight against this very opacity "(Enaudeau 2000, 28). That is why, besides what I personally considered relevant to include in my research, I am interested in what Teresa Hortensi herself specifically chose from her experiences when she decided to share them with me. I understand that there is a double process at the time of writing the biography of a person who is alive: the subjective process of the protagonist and that of the person who writes it. And this is in addition to the subjectivity of the reader. Throughout the creation of Teresa Hortensi's life story I have been able to situate myself in all positions: during the interviews, I have been a reader and, at the time of writing, I have found myself as constructor of her history and re-structor of a life that is not mine but which is already part of my own biography.

³This article was published on page 72 of the back cover section of the print edition of *El Periódico* on July 4, 2012.

Both my interpretation and my inquiry, which will create a life for Teresa which may even duplicate it, are what will allow for representation, which will make other points of view and other ways of acting known. Thus, I argue that what we find in the history of the past, as with everyday aspects of the present, are not facts but interpretations. That is, readings and representations that are never innocent but which impose a stable form. To close this circle, this totum revolutum, this endless spiral of authorship, readings and receptions, Teresa will become a reader of her own life, reinterpreting my own representations. This has a significant impact at the time of writing the life of a person who is alive, since willingly or unwillingly, in the process of writing, I have kept in mind the look that the protagonist would cast at it.

My work has been a compilation of fragments and snippets of a life in which various subjectivities were at play. "In general, women's history has particularly striven to find some balance or productive tension between empathy and distance. And this is assuming that all knowledge is situated. Therefore, the historian's own experience [...] which he/she necessarily contributes to the analysis, is not a contamination that is possible or desirable to avoid "(Bolufer 2014, 107). Besides, the position I have adopted throughout my work, which considers the agents of the past as sources of knowledge for the present, requires emotional efforts to develop certain doses of empathy with our 'historical others' [Medina, 2012].

Liminality and Multiple Identities

I believe that personal identity does not arise from an intimate and essential stronghold from which our own individual emotions emanate, it is the result of a negotiation between individual and society. "Biography is a particularly appropriate way to meet the challenge of recognizing that the forces of individual life and those of collective life are inseparable and develop within each other"

(Burdíel 2014, 14). Teresa Hortensi i Bosch is fully aware of the problems arising from the appropriation of life by others. That is, from the cataloguing and taxonomies that prevail in our everyday lives, and from prejudices adapted to fit within the conceptions that individuals hold of each other in order to enjoy the false sense of tranquillity that comes with the recognition of 'normal' or stable activities.

"It seems that to know who you are people need to put a label on you, but then you are just that and you say, well, I am also this ... [...]. Then they seem satisfied because they feel they know who you are, but they don't know who I am! It seems as if they need some security [...] to build that person they have imagined, whom they have constructed based on that alone. If you are Catalan, you are automatically anti-Spanish, you do not want to hear Spanish being spoken ... you say, *osti*, well, you're the one saying that! "⁴

I understand that personal identity is built on the struggles between the individual and society, but also on the struggle or negotiation that takes place within the individual him/herself. In the following words, which are also part of the transcription of one of the interviews with Teresa Hortensi i Bosch, we can see this internal and external conflict taking place synchronously:

"Every important step I've taken, every jump into the void, because at the end it was, *osti*, it was a jump into the void, well, I took it alone, you know? They did not disapprove, but they did not accompany you either, you know? They did not even know why you did it. Or, yes, they knew, but ... [...]. I do not know what I should do, but what I did know was that I couldn't go where they were sending me for the sake of it, because I wasn't willing to do it. I thought: maybe I'm wrong, but what could I do if I was wrong, hey? It was a matter of let's see if there's something else, and if there isn't, then we'll see. So, it was a 'go see'. And at that point, every time I decided something I did feel a vacuum around me, you know? And this is something that has marked me. This is something that I see very closely related to the whole genre thing. And it is very much related to the kind of life that we had then."⁵

⁴Second interview with Teresa Hortensi i Bosch (13/11/2014).

⁵Fourth interview (28/12/2014).

This idea of conflict leads directly to the concept of 'liminality'. I discovered the term *liminality* in *Women's lives: the view from the Threshold*, by the feminist literary critic Carolyn G. Heilbrun.

Heilbrun accurately defines the situation in which Teresa Hortensi and Bosch found herself throughout her life by not following the conventions governing women's lives. According to Heilbrun's definition, "the word 'limen' means threshold, and to be in a state of 'liminality' means to stand on uncertain ground, leaving one condition or country or self to enter into another.

But the most prominent sign of 'liminality' is the lack of clarity about where one really belongs and what one should be doing or would want to be doing "⁶ (Heilbrun 1999, 3).

This vacuum that Teresa Hortensi i Bosch felt, this 'let's see', this continued position on the threshold is what shaped the life of an exceptional woman. That 'liminality' is what made her rethink other routes and other paths that were feared for being little travelled.

"My mistakes, my awkwardness, I never chose the easy way out, I opted for insecurity and risk ... and I wonder, why has nobody ever acknowledged this?"⁷

No one has ever recognized the merit of steadily standing on the threshold because it is not seen as a feat for a woman in patriarchal societies. In the words of Heilbrun, "There is no doubt that the immobile place, the conventional place of women, that place decreed by patriarchy and by male founders of religions, protected by women who fear anxiety, uncertainty and 'liminality', this place occupied by our mothers, will always be attractive to those who prefer to prevent than to regret. However, a life without danger, without any doubts about what the future holds, is not a life, it is a carefully structured drama, a play in which our roles are already written for us.

⁶My own translation.

⁷ Fourth interview (28/12/2014).

The threshold, on the other hand, is the place where, as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, over time, our own plans "(Heilbrun 1999, 102). So 'liminality' would be the position of moving from one state to another under unstable conditions, living outside the norms and expectations that society imposes on our behaviour and feelings, especially if you were born a woman. It would be a way of looking for alternatives to patriarchy. And Teresa Hortensi i Bosch's life is precisely about this. From her I learned, among many other things, that feeling one can also resist power.

Oral history allows us to rethink the categories with which an individual trajectory can be explained as both result and agency of a historical process. In fact, my last objective is not to illuminate passages of the past that have already been widely studied, but to observe closely, with a magnifying glass, a very small portion of the social structure in which historical processes are embedded. And in this way, formulate somewhat general hypotheses and categories but not for the sake of completeness. I would like to contribute, as Tavera states in the Introduction to the *Bibliographical Encyclopaedia*, to establishing this multitude of experiences that constitute the basis of historical memory (Tavera 2000), thus, opening the possibility of rethinking and flexibilising too rigid notions of experience and identity, of nation, class, race or gender.

Interviews: a co-creation space

Throughout the interviews, and whilst transcribing, we face many different situations. Interviews entail interaction between two individuals⁸ who are fully aware of the fact that they are creating a source. For this reason, it is important to analyse both the interview content and the interview methodology. Themes such as memory, subjectivity, emotions, the place where the

⁸I will not go into analysis of collective interview guidelines.

interview takes place, transcripts and narrative time, are all issues that must be kept in mind when we begin to collect the testimony of a person if we intend to use it for academic purposes.

We may find that when we try to contextualise certain narrated events they do not coincide with the dates given to us. We can also face situations in which the interviewee asks to stop the recorder to explain something that affects third parties which he/she does not want to involve. We can also find narratives of events altered by the very process of remembering. In this case, I agree with Thompson that "the discovery of distortion or suppression in a life story is not [...] purely negative; Even a lie is a form of communication [...]" [Thompson, 1988: 165].

I strongly believe that an interview should flow freely as opposed to becoming an extraordinary situation or string of questions. I think it is important to let the interviewee mark his/her own rhythm, even if it does not fit ours most times. I am aware that this is not always possible and that we must establish a social context and explain to the interviewee the reasons that lead us to conduct the interview, and at least formulate one initial question. Interviews should therefore be targeted but not controlled. In my case, each time I arrived at Teresa Hortensi i Bosch's house I proposed a theme⁹. And she never refused to tackle any issues. At times, she complained that it was too cold to suddenly delve into a given topic and said that she needed some way to engage with it first to be able select information. But it was not about having a conversation with her, my opinion was secondary and she was the one expected to do the talking. My job was, therefore, to try to make her feel comfortable enough to talk about her views on each subject.

Thompson and Fraser helped most in this respect.

⁹The biography of Teresa Hortensi i Bosch included in my research was constructed during five interviews lasting about four hours each which were fully transcribed and incorporated to my Masters Dissertation.

At first, without any knowledge of the methodology of the interviews, I thought that the success of my work depended on me carrying a questionnaire at each appointment to guide the interviews and lead the interviewee "to my terrain". But intuitively, I felt that this did not work with Teresa and me. On some occasion, when I had tried to redirect the interview, I lost track of the story or felt that maybe I was missing out on important things that she was trying to tell me. So, together we developed the interview format, we listened and we felt comfortable. And it was then that I read the following words of Fraser: "[Never] have I been armed with a questionnaire. [...] A questionnaire inhibits both interviewer and interviewee; the former, with a paper in front, has a visible power that the latter lacks, the power of a pre-formulated scheme. There is one person who knows (and knowledge is power) the course that the interview should take and the other (informant) who is in the dark. [...] The heart of a life story interview is a discovery and the life of the other is discovered by listening, and it is this journey into the unknown that excites me. "[Fraser, 2006: 66]. After so many hours shared with Teresa Hortensi i Bosch, I can say that this is also what excites me the most. And I think that I have been lucky having discovered aspects of it that I could not even imagine. In fact, this happened to me when Teresa Hortensi explained to me a passage from her life in the early eighties, when she was living alone and isolated in a small town in the south of France. In fact, it was a great surprise to me that Teresa Hortensi told me about Terra Lliure. I was completely unaware of her relationship with the Catalan independence organization, nor could I even foresee it, let alone include it in the initial question of the interview of that afternoon. But, without a doubt, what surprised me the most was the naturalness with which she dealt with the topic. Teresa Hortensi's experience with the armed organization Terra Lliure turned out to be somewhat uncomfortable. On the one hand, Teresa Hortensi felt that she was not Catalan enough to deserve

the respect of the members of the organization. On the other hand, the fact that Teresa Hortensi lived alone and isolated was also a reason for reprobation. With her behaviour, Teresa undermined or questioned the masculinity of the members of the organization; It bothered them that she did not appear to feel the typical female enraptured admiration expected by males for their heroic deeds. Although they were "highly committed leftists" they had prejudices towards Teresa and did not see with good eyes the fact that she lived alone there.

"The house bothered them a bit ... it was noticeable that men had little to do there, that it was a women's house, even though the two of us were not there at the time. It's not that you rejected them, but they were almost excluded, you didn't need them. On top of that, their typically masculine initiatives were annoying: "I'll cut out wood for you!" *Osti*, they cut wood and left everything in a mess, and the logs were too thick, and they left a fold of newspapers to burn and light the fire, I do not need it... you know? But they were very happy because they had cut wood, which was some of the strengths that you supposedly needed. Also without asking you about what you really needed. "This poor woman who is here alone, we will cut out some wood for her now, and you'll see how happy she'll be!" Also, they assumed that it was a house at their disposal because, of course, they were the Catalanists, those who did the hard work, and I was nothing.¹⁰

I understand that this type of interviews claim to cultivate links between interviewer and interviewee. On one occasion, I asked Teresa Hortensi i Bosch how she felt about the fact that someone was interviewing her. This was her response:

¹⁰Second interview.

"It's as if I'm explaining this to a friend who ... for example, like a friend I've known from the age of fifteen. Maybe if you were someone else I couldn't do it. This also depends a lot on you, I couldn't explain this to someone else."¹¹

In fact, Teresa Hortensi and I have worked on our relationship. From the first moment, there has been a reciprocal empathy. I feel that I have done a good job in the sense that I believe that Teresa Hortensi has never felt used for my academic purposes, and she has done an exceptional job in carrying out this exercise of reconstruction and reinterpretation of her life. I must thank her for always opening the doors of her house and her memory to me. The most important thing and what I value most about my work is the fact of having connected with the soul of Teresa Hortensi, a connection beyond reason; I have tried to empathize with her universe, and not just with the symptom. As De Waal says: "The idea of a 'pure reason' is 'pure fiction' [De Waal, 2013: 23].

At the same time a person is asked to conduct interviews about her/his life, she/he starts an internal research process (recalling and selecting information), searching for photographs, letters, anything that can support their narration or help them organize their memories. Therefore, Teresa Hortensi explained to me not only what she remembered having done but also what she remembered having felt at the time and what she thought she had done and felt at the time of the interview, all of which was illuminated by a vital auto-didacticism: "What I know is not things that have been explained to me but things that I have been figuring out by myself or things that I have remembered which I have later been reconstructing or which someone has told me about. Or things that I once thought were true, which I now question."¹²

¹¹Ibid.

¹²First interview (10/16/2014).

Time in people's lives takes on a multitude of dimensions and is subject to different ways of measuring and organizing. The narratives of interviewees, like the stories of Teresa Hortensi i Bosch, frequently jump in time, across relationships and in places, but not in an incoherent way, since she follows a guiding thread that leads on to another experience, person or place to give meaning to her narration. Often, the narrative jumps from the past to the present to draw comparisons and highlight differences before returning to the past again. "Our emotions decide, and then our reasoning power, as if it were an image consultant trying to devise plausible justifications" [De Waal, 2013: 23].

To make the interviewee feel comfortable and willing to actively engage with their past, present and future, it is essential to carefully choose the place where the interviews are conducted. In our case, I thought her home would be a quiet place and it turned out to be. I think she would feel comfortable there. Besides, it was the house where she has lived since she was born, so it is full of memories and objects that facilitate the autobiographical discourse. We cannot look at a person without paying attention to their surroundings, since their external environment will lead us to their inner universe. People, objects, and remembered events and feelings can transport you through the memory of places¹³ to pleasant or painful situations, or to all of them simultaneously.

Teresa Hortensi i Bosch is self-taught in political and social terms, self-exiled in the south of France, Catalanist and feminist by intuition and nurse by profession. Teresa's biography is situated on the threshold. Throughout her life, Teresa has continuously positioned herself in several places at once. It is time for us to reclaim "non-conventional" lives, those that stand out not for

¹³An interesting concept that emerged, which I will not develop here, is Teresa del Valle's *generic cronotopos*, associated with non-discursive forms of memory.

having achieved hegemonic parameters dictated by men, but having had the courage to face the fear of choosing.

I consider myself fortunate because I can talk to Teresa, she is alive, just as her memory which, like everything that is alive, is constantly changing, being remade, forgetting and incorporating content. Emotions undoubtedly influence the way we ask questions in our research and concern our methodology. The same happens to the person "subject/object" of study when she remembers, when she re-lives: emotions are there, even if we pretend to hide them behind the veil of reason or relegate them to the private sphere. "If we want to contribute to a history of emotions we will have to acknowledge that this entails historicising subjectivity and that this idea or category is a space for debate" (Medina, 2012: 171). Let us study 'the' and 'from' the threshold. Even though emotions are in a controversial space it is necessary to incorporate feelings as historical agents.