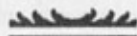


me. A substantial part of the last chapter was first published elsewhere in a different form. I thank the magazine editors who let me thereby again explore themes examined more fully here. I also want to mention right off the gratitude I feel day by day for the written and spoken words of Dr. William Carlos Williams. I'd have had a different life if I'd not known him, and as the reader will see, his lyrical statements run through the pages ahead, a leitmotif for me as I try to make sense of my own work and that of others. I thank, finally, my colleagues at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and those who are part of the community at *DoubleTake* magazine, which is published there, for the great privilege of being connected to them—and I dedicate this book to all of those individuals, with much affection.

FROM,
ROBERT COLES, DOING DOCUMENTARY WORK

one



The Work

Locations In Theory

The noun *document* goes back centuries in time. It is derived from the Latin *docere*, to teach, and was originally, of course, used to describe something that offered clues, or, better, proof, a piece of paper with words that attested evidence. In our time, a photograph or a recording or a film have also qualified as documents. In the early eighteenth century (1711), the word *document* became more active—a verb, whose meaning conveyed the act of furnishing such evidence; and eventually, as with the noun, the range of such activity expanded: first one documented with words on paper; later, one documented with photographs and a film crew. Interestingly, the verb would get used this way, too: “to construct or produce (as a movie or a novel) with authentic situations or events,” and “to portray realistically.” Here the creative or imaginative life is tempered by words such as “authentic” or “realistically,” which, are

nonetheless potentially subjective or elusive: a distance has been traveled from the documenting that has to do with words on paper (court records, school reports, letters, journals, and diaries) offered as proof that something happened in, say, a judge's chamber or a classroom. In the early nineteenth century (1802) the adjective *documentary* emerged—a description of evidence, naturally, but also as “relating to, or employing documentation in literature or art,” again an encounter of the factual or objective with the imaginative. In this century (1935) the noun *documentary* arrived, telling of a product, the “documentary presentation of a film or novel.” The one who did such work got a name in the 1940s—well, two names: *documentarian* (1943), and *documentarist* (1949). Just before those two words entered the language, and as if in anticipation of them, *documentarist* came into use (1939), “a specialist in documentation”—a person who furthered the tradition of old-fashioned documenting, as indicated by that word *documentation*, itself a bequest of the late nineteenth century (1884), and meant to refer to historical verification and substantiation.

This search through words for contemporary meaning helps bring into focus a twofold struggle: that of writers and photographers and filmmakers who attempt to ascertain what *is*, what can be noted, recorded, pictured; and that of presentation—how to elicit the interest of others, and how to provide a context, so that an incident, for instance, is connected to the conditions that informed and prompted its occurrence. Again and again, as I listen to my students compare their efforts with those undertaken by sociologists or anthropologists, by newspaper reporters and staff photographers responding to a day's event within the confines of a dispatch to be filed, by historians writing about a certain place and time or about those who commanded armies (or whole countries), I hear the connections those students make to the work of such individuals—yet, too, the distinctions made, the possible differences explored. Nor do

we in those discussions always arrive at clear-cut contrasts and mutually exclusive definitions. Often we settle for descriptive characterizations or demarcations of professional territory, unashamedly heavy with qualifications—a documentary effort in itself: an attempt that summons the narrative side of the verb *document*, as opposed to its more specific reference to the accumulation or designation of various items as firm proof of something.

Historians are, perhaps, our oldest professional observers of human affairs—or, perhaps, it is best to say that writers or essayists are such, since Thucydides certainly did not have any graduate professional training, was not certified by any academic institution as knowledgeable about the past or the unfolding present. Long before there were universities with departments of history, there obviously were writers who tried to discover for themselves and their potential readers what actually happened at particular times, in particular locations, and how (and why) what occurred did end up taking place. In so doing, those writers varied with respect to their passion for factual certainty and specificity, and with respect to their interest in discursive comment, in personal or moral (or even spiritual) reflection. Even when a historian doesn't intend to ruminate or ramble along byways, even when he or she means to stick to dates and numbers and descriptions based on “data,” on firsthand observations put down in ledgers, in letters, in communiqués, or in news reports or dispatches published in daily or weekly or monthly publications—there still remains the task of assembling information, choosing what matters, what might be (is to be) left out, what is to be discussed briefly or summarily, what is to be highlighted, considered in great detail. The issue, finally, becomes one of judgment, and thereby a subjective matter: an opinion of someone whose mind has taken in all that information, that documentation, and then given it the shape of sentences, of words used, with all their suggestive possibilities. Needless to say, even a history that insists on the primacy of statis-

tics, of such numbers as given us by computers, will have to confront the same challenge of emphasis, of interpretation, of choice, of presentation through words, whereby the person who fed "data" into a computer is now the one using a computer in a different way, pressing letters that turn into something that is said, asserted.

By the late sixteenth century (1593), some students of their fellow human beings began to make reference to a science of "anthropology." They were not interested in a chronology or an interpretation of events, but rather in sorting people out, by virtue of their appearance, their residence, or their habits and customs. There is, of course, a historical side to all this (inevitably quite speculative): the emergence over time of various human races out of the obscurity and outright mystery of the most ancient history, which precedes all recorded data and rests upon archeological artifacts as they, like today's computer printouts, get fitted into someone's narrative, a story of the development of those races over an indefinitely long span of time. The nineteenth-century physical anthropologists (and their kinfolk, archeologists) had the company of social or cultural anthropologists, who concentrated their energies on how various groups of people behaved. Charts were developed that conveyed "relationships," "interactions," authority held and wielded, submission accepted without question. Such patterns of activity, such hierarchies of influence, such diagrams that told of consanguinity, of belief or conviction, became a body of knowledge, a field of learning, given the ultimate institutional (social, political, cultural, economic) sanction of departmental status in today's colleges and universities.

So it has gone with sociology, a term that came upon us in the middle of the nineteenth century (1843). There is an obvious overlap between the work of cultural anthropologists and sociologists—though the former, by convention rather than theoretical necessity (the anthropology of anthropologists!) have usually chosen the pre-literate, pre-industrial world as the beneficiary of their close, usually

residential attention. In contrast, sociologists have given themselves over to a systematic (that word counts!) study of the way so-called groups of people come together and behave—a process of consolidation and, often, deterioration that might be called the rise and fall of classes and castes and regions and even nations. The connection of such inquiry to history as well as cultural anthropology is clear; and again, the role of the scholar's personal life is evident—his or her attitudes with respect to the attitudes of others under scrutiny, and his or her imaginative life as it gets expressed in the embrace of concepts, of generalizations, of hypotheses, which are collections of words meant to offer or convey an idea, a suggestive or organizing principle, a manner of looking at things, a gesture of interpretation, of coherence.

This move from concrete particulars to abstract pronouncement is crucial to science as we now commonly know it. It can be said, without animus, that careers are usually made in the social sciences as a consequence of one's willingness and capacity to move from the specific instance to the more general, the conceptual. Such a posture of formulation is not, however, always regarded as speculative (and thereby a close cousin—more anthropology!—to the imaginative). Instead, we hear of *science*: a systematic ordering of knowledge presumably based on the sifting and sorting of information, on the testing of hypotheses through experiments, through direct observation, though it is not unfair to say that, by and large, natural science and social science differ decidedly in the ability of their respective practitioners to perform tests that will definitively corroborate or dismiss various hypotheses. Still, social scientists aim for the general, hope to promulgate "laws" or postulates that give a sense of order and structure to what obtains in this world.

In contrast, journalists (who also document aspects of human behavior) respond to the particular, tell us the news—recent events that have occurred. Some journalists do so briefly, tersely, paying

attention only to factuality and chronology; others give themselves (or are given) more leeway—are both chroniclers and interpreters of the news. Even the most factual kind of journalism, of course, can be suggestive, poignant, arresting—art giving shape to the presentation of reality. On the other hand, an interpretive essay in a newspaper or magazine is usually presented to the reader as the response of the publication's editors, through a writer, to something that has happened or is now going on: events with all their ramifications. In certain magazines, however, journalists may become something else—essayists who regularly contemplate those events and fit them into the larger frames of reference that historians or social scientists pursue.

The essayist is himself or herself confined by the nature of a chosen medium, even as the journalist has to contend with the confines of a newspaper story—but an essay allows for more space, for a mix of literary and analytic sensibility, for that other mix of factuality and opinion, and for the particular writer's idiosyncratic approach to a given topic. The essay gives journalists or others writers discursive freedom, and gives novelists a chance to mull over factuality directly, rather than at the remove of their created fictional characters. The essay also allows social scientists a chance to abandon *their* created "characters" (the theories they construct) for the possibilities and challenges of an ordinary language meant to inform and persuade the "common reader," as opposed to one's professional colleagues. Such essayists offer what used to be called "social knowledge"—Henry James commenting on Italy's gifts or on his native America revisited, Dickens observing that same America as a visiting lecturer, and, closer to our time, the poet James Agee and the novelist George Orwell trying to understand what they had witnessed and felt in Alabama, Yorkshire, and Lancashire in 1936.

A close examination of what came of the last two of those writers once they'd finished their observations, and a close reading of what

they ultimately wrote about their experiences, helps clarify our thinking about the various ways observers can respond to what they have seen and heard and come to believe. It is no accident that both Agee and Orwell "failed" with respect to their respective missions, from the point of view of their assigning editors. *Fortune* magazine wanted Agee to do a strong piece of investigative magazine journalism. He was to spend a limited amount of time with a specific kind of people, in the company of a photographer, who was to capture pictures that would convey the (grim) reality of their lives. Instead, Agee turned his time in Alabama into a major moral and personal crisis. He lost sight of his magazine's interests and became excited and challenged by the commands and demands of both his aesthetic sensibility and his conscience. He stopped being interested in a limited, reasonably balanced, or even-handed discussion of a particular social and economic question facing the nation at the height of the Great Depression—the struggle for survival of a Southern agriculture heavily dependent on the relationship between the landowner and his tenant farmers. He turned, instead, to a different kind of language, a different way of seeing the world of central Alabama. He never even wrote the article for which he was commissioned. He quit the magazine that had sent him South, an assignment that enabled him to meet and get to know the world that had gotten him so aroused, so engaged. For several years he labored in both elation and despair with an enormously unwieldy manuscript, the result of a thorough reinterpretation of his position as an observer and a writer with regard to those he had encountered and tried to understand. The result, as we all know, was a book whose very title, Biblically connected (from the book of Ecclesiasticus), is exhortative and morally impassioned—a far cry from the tone of *Fortune* articles, not to mention those of so many other magazines. That book is deliberately rambling, lyrical, fiercely provocative, utterly idiosyncratic; it is also very long, at once detailed in its descriptive evocations of a kind of

daily life and long-winded in its attempt to assault the supposedly conventional mind of its reader—as if the central issue is not only the suffering and marginality of Dixie tenant farmers but the assumptions (moral and intellectual) of the presumably well-off and well educated people who had the spare change in 1941, the Depression still not licked, to go buy such a book.

Orwell's Wigan Pier book also conveys a strain of moral anxiety; of all ironies, the reader is offered a measured disavowal of the author from Victor Gollancz, the one who had sent him north from London in the first place, so that the New Left Book Club might publish yet another piece of extended muckraking journalism, this one about the life of coal miners. Instead, Orwell wrote with a novelist's capacity for (interest in) the complexities and ironies of a given observed life; and he gave a much broader context for his discussion than that expected (and wanted) by his sponsors, hence their need to disclaim, at least partially, what they did publish (out of their essential fair-mindedness—others might not have been so obliging). Orwell found his own relatively entitled world in many ways lacking compared to the one he had glimpsed up north. He turned on those whose company he ordinarily kept, the London intelligentsia, just as Agee could not resist taking one swipe after another at his (Harvard, Manhattan, literary) background. The "road" Orwell took as a consequence of his visit to Wigan turned out to be toward a land of personal, moral reflection, of storytelling narration, of social and political polemic, of combative and sometimes erratic digression, of vivid presentation of moments experienced, remembered, and considered to be of significance without recourse to the justifications of social theory, political practicality, even journalistic custom or convenience. He threw his writing, as it were, in the face of those who ended up perplexed, but actually a good deal more forgiving of him than he attempts to be of them.

Later on I will try to guess what it was that got these two writers

so intemperate, so angry, while on these particular missions; but here it is important to note their departure from ordinary journalism, from the conventional social essay, long or short. Both Agee and Orwell seem to know that they are in uncertain territory as they try to address their audience. They move back and forth from a posture of calm, even dry recitation of facts and figures to one of heated advocacy or derision. They also move from the third-person voice to that of the first person—a shift that tells a lot about their connection to the people being described, and about their intentions as writers. When they want to convey a kind of factuality (how cotton grows and is harvested, how miners do their work and the economic consequences of that work, coal production for a capitalist society), they can be impersonal, specific, exact, even statistical. When they want to get something off their chest, want to let others know how they reacted, on the spot, to something they had seen or heard, or how they ended up feeling later, when back on their own turf, about what they recalled, then the words "I" and "me" come to the fore, not to mention unconcealed sarcasm, even open contempt or rage toward certain others—though never, of course, are the targets of such emotions the tenant farmers or coal miners whom they have gotten to know, and that refusal of any criticism whatsoever obviously deserves our attention.

To be more abstract about both Agee and Orwell as social observers and writers (and about a kind of writing that combines reportage and reflection, delivered in a prose that is affecting, summoning, suggestively descriptive), certain polarities or tensions ought to be mentioned: the demands of reality as against those of art; the demands of objectivity as against those of subjectivity; a quantitative emphasis as against a qualitative one; the tone a first-person narrative offers as against one executed in the third person; a voice seeking to be contemplative, considered, as against one aiming for passionate persuasion, or advocacy, or denunciation; a dis-

tanced, analytic posture as against a morally engaged or partisan one; an inclination for the theoretical, as against the concrete, the practical; a narrative, rendered in personal or vernacular or even confessional language as against one replete with a technical or academic language.

Needless to say, a writer, a researcher, even, can move back and forth, draw upon one or another side of these various equations, or, again, polarities. As I well remember, when I submitted articles (they were not called "essays") to pediatric, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic journals, a word used, a single adjective, can raise the eyebrows of an editor or a "peer review" committee. When I wrote up my observations of migrant farm children for a journal read by physicians, and, especially, by my fellow psychiatrists, I tried to describe the various states of mind I observed in the children I met. In so doing, I called upon psychiatric and psychoanalytic terminology and wrote in the passive, third-person voice: "The defense mechanisms most frequently seen were . . ." and so it went! At one point, however, I inadvertently got myself and my editors into some trouble by using the word *poignant* to indicate the condition of some of the children: "In many of their drawings the children doing self-portraits refrained from putting land under themselves, a poignant denial of their very condition as young farm workers." I was discussing the use of one of the so-called defense mechanisms—now, when psychology fuels the American vernacular, a far better known maneuver of the mind than was the case back then (1966). I was dealing, really, with an irony, though I consciously restrained myself from using that word or its adjectival or adverbial versions, lest I introduce myself as an implicit commentator in a paper meant to be an account of "field research" done in the tradition of psychoanalytic child psychiatry—hence pages given over to accounts of "intra-psychic" conflict, and accounts, too, of the various "defense mechanisms" as they "were observed" (not as, actually, I stumbled into them!).

All went well, it seemed, until an editor's red pencil chanced upon that word, *poignant*: why was "it used," he wondered (not "Why did you use it")? I explained that I found it ironic, poignantly so, that children who put in long hours beside their parents harvesting crops (that is, working the land on their hands and knees, often, or stooped over) won't put that same land in their drawings or paintings of themselves. My editor friend (I knew him well, respected him) understood clearly what I was indicating, but noted that in this particular journal the word *poignant* would "stand out." I did not find that possibility especially worrisome, but he did. He pointed out that the word "in question" is a "subjective one"—my personal sense of something as opposed to a reaction of the child that I had "documented" through my "research." I remember being intrigued by the use of "documented"—a different use, surely, than the one Dorothea Lange, say, had in mind when she did her "documentary fieldwork" or "research" with migrant families during the 1930s. I also remember telling my editor friend that all of the "research" I had written up for this "paper" was "subjective"—an estimate or interpretation on my part of what I thought I had seen and heard happening in the lives of children, in their minds, rather than a chronicle of what happened independently of my mind (an account of the unfolding of an objective series of events).

True, "our discipline" is inescapably "subjective," I was told—yet "there are degrees." After all, I was tape-recording interviews and analyzing them for topics mentioned—"thematic analysis"; and I was collecting hundreds of children's drawings and paintings and putting all of them under a microscopic lens (my imagery!), that of, again, psychiatric and psychoanalytic perusal: "self-image," as reflected, for example, in the presence or absence of intact limbs, the manner in which facial features are presented (*if they are*), the character of clothing summoned, and again, the location the child chose for a self-portrait, or a picture of a parent, or too, a building: a

landscape under a full sky, with sun, with trees and flowers, or a landscape which shows dark clouds, few if any plants or trees, no flowers. I knew not to speak, in that regard, of a pastoral, let alone a bucolic, scene, or a bleak or grim one—florid language! But it seemed to me *poignant* that children who lived so intimately with the land seemed to want no part of it when they sketched themselves, or, perhaps, *poignant* that they showed themselves with literally no ground under them, and thus, by no big leap of the mind (so I felt), symbolically groundless, meaning adrift and vulnerable and without the ties to a specific location (a city, a town, a community) that most of us simply take for granted.

In the end I cut the word *poignant*, because an editor felt that the word had to do with *me*, my personal or subjective evaluation of what he called the “objective data” I had obtained, those drawings. He was, interestingly, not at all averse to any interpretations of those drawings I wanted to offer, so long as I made clear that such was my interest in a separate section devoted to that kind of activity. But to describe a proposed “mechanism of defense” casually as *poignant*, without discussing my reasons for so insisting, was more than this editor wanted to allow. Anyway, he kept repeating, the issue is the children, not me—*poignant* being a word that tells of my mind as it came to be moved, affected by what I’d seen. I missed seeing that word in print, but I wanted to have my article published, and at that point in my career it was such articles in such journals that would—well, would *make* that career. Of course, I could have chosen, then and there, to write up my experiences with (as opposed to my research among) migrant farm families in a magazine (rather than a journal) and in a first-person narrator’s voice, with emphasis on events, on anecdotes, on stories, and, yes, on ironies noted, on the *poignancy* of certain moments, certain situations, as I remembered them, making no mention of tape-recorded interviews with their “standard questions” posed and the answers to them “carefully

analyzed” (that adverb, so often used, can be all too self-serving!). In so doing, I would have “taken risks,” as I’ve heard folks say, by “writing for the public” rather than for “the profession”—and then I would be turning into a bit of a migrant myself: on the move. Location matters for those migrant families, as I gradually learned; they had to be at the right place (the crops just ready to be picked) at the right time (the grower has started recruiting willing farm laborers, field hands). And so with a writer’s career—a person tries to figure out when to write what for which publication, and how to do so, meaning with one kind of language or with quite another kind.

No doubt for some readers and scholars, no matter what I would write, no matter how abstract or technical or impersonal the language, I was still on very dubious ground throughout my stay with the migrant families I met in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere. They were a mere handful of souls, rather than a “sample of respondents.” I often asked them whatever came to my mind, so the questions varied from day to day, family to family. In contrast, I might have spent a lot of time trying to figure out which questions I’d be (uniformly!) asking, and why, and then arrived with them, and only them, in mind; or, better, with a questionnaire in hand, to be filled out either by them or by me, putting checks in boxes in accordance with what I had been told. Later a computer would be summoned and results tabulated, with scores or findings the eventual outcome: a “project” rather than a series of personal encounters or interviews. Each of these phrases places the individual doing the work in a location as surely as does a migration of a family from, say, Belle Glade, Florida, to the eastern shore of Maryland: a choice, in both instances, as to what will be harvested! Additionally, there is the matter of one’s purpose as a writer. If one submits a paper to a journal, one is furthering the cause of “science,” and (less eagerly or openly stated) one’s career. If I write an article for a newspaper or

a magazine on the same subject, but in a different voice and manner, with different shades of meaning put forth, then I am certainly furthering my writing career, and I may well be called a "participant observer" or an "advocate" by readers or colleagues, or by myself in what I say or imply about myself: someone who has become "involved" with those he has met, or (pejoratively) "over-involved"; one who worked alongside those he was getting to know (as a researcher and a writer) but (moving across the spectrum) one who began arguing on their behalf or doing things on their behalf (collecting money, going into court as a lawyer, setting up a clinic as a doctor, doing some teaching). Such a step need not be mentioned, of course, in the writing one does, nor need it *necessarily* become a force that gives shape to the nature of that writing. Nevertheless, I can imagine the driest writer of social science giving of himself or herself passionately to those once "studied," and I can, conversely, imagine a passionately eloquent essayist or journalist having little interest in working actively on behalf of those whose cause he or she has advocated.

Once more, the issue is that of location—how a particular writer or researcher decides to commit himself or herself with respect to those others being studied, watched, heard, made the subject of a writing initiative. It is possible to argue, surely, that the abstract polarity of observation-participation, like all the foregoing polarities, doesn't do justice to the nuances and subtleties of human involvements—that even the most austere detached social scientist (or insistently impartial journalist or essayist) will be touched or affected by the act of going somewhere, being with those who are later described, handed over to others through words (or pictures). In this century of the unconscious, that is, the very notion of detachment contends with our commonly held conviction that all the time the mind unwittingly responds to the world in ways that can make a difference in what we think and feel, and how we give expression

to our ideas. An observer of migrant workers may, for instance, quite readily refrain from using a word such as *poignant* in the articles he or she writes for scientific journals, yet keep amassing statistics that tell their own dramatic, even startling story of vulnerability and deprivation. By the same token, someone deeply and openly involved in the social and political struggle being waged by migrants may, once with pen in hand, or at a computer, veer a bit toward detachment, not out of a shift of opinion or commitment but in simple response to the imperatives of language as an instrument of communication. If I shout and scream (in response to the strong feelings churning inside me), if I write words that convey such an attitude, I may well be undoing my mission as an advocate or polemicist, one who wants to persuade or convince others. Besides, to write particular words or to take specific pictures is to stand at some remove from the entire range of what can be said or photographed, and to take such a step moves one at least a measure away from that full participatory zeal that some activists hold up for themselves and for others as ideal.

How well I remember, in that regard, some of those "soul sessions" of SNCC (the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) during the early and most dangerous and demanding years of the civil-rights struggle in the South. Again and again those young men and women warned one another (warned themselves) about the dangers of "doing a lot of thinking"—not the kind of remark a psychiatrist who had worked in an academic setting was used to hearing. I wanted to hear more, of course, even as I had already concluded, without hearing any explanation, that such an attitude was, in some way, "defensive." (We bring theory, inevitably, to our exploratory field work, however open-minded we try to be—not necessarily out of intention, but as a consequence of our mind's natural capacity to remember what it has learned or has considered to be true.) When one of SNCC's leaders decided to address the

matter, to take on reflection as against action, he did so this way: "You have to go stand up to those sheriffs, with guns in their holsters, and their hands on the guns, and you start doing a lot of thinking, 'sifting and sorting,' my mom used to say, and you're through, you're washed up, you're scared stiff. You think better of it—and that means you pull back. Let me tell you, I'm not accusing anyone [with those words, that description of what takes place]; I'm just remembering—from my life, from last month, when I was going to picket a courthouse, and I started thinking and thinking, and that was *it*: I never got there."

As those nearby listened and nodded I found myself not especially surprised: *of course* a person confronted with fear and danger doesn't spend a lot of time weighing matters, lest indecisiveness, at the very least, become the winner. Still, why did it matter so much for these youths to spell all that out—especially when, in a way, doing so only made for the very consciousness (self-consciousness) that they kept abjuring? But I was not respectful enough, I fear, of their capacity to consider in their own way what had come to my mind:

I suppose we're getting ourselves into trouble right now by talking about all this—saying we shouldn't do this kind of thing! Someone came by [the SNCC Atlanta office] the other day [April, 1964], and he said we should keep records, because we're making history, and afterwards, people will want to know what happened. I said, hey mister, you folks will be able to 'know'—you'll know by what we *did*. You start poking around, interviewing, you'll hear a lot of talk, a lot of agreement and disagreement—that's not history, that's people saying something. History is when you come together, when we're here, and we go there—to do what we believe is right, even if you can be shot dead, and it's noon and the sun is out and you're an American, killed for wanting to be able to vote.

There was so much more, a long and fiery oration of sorts, whose purport (again, irony!) was the futility and vanity of mere words, not to mention documentary evidence meant to chronicle and explain, to account for a particular historical moment. At that same meeting, however, another SNCC leader cautiously raised, yet again, the matter of such documentation, not on behalf of the particular historian who had visited the SNCC office (who was black) but on behalf of SNCC itself: "I think we shouldn't forget that one day we'll win this struggle, and then we'll want to look back and remember. We'll want to tell our kids and our grandchildren what happened—and you do forget. Hey, I'm twenty-eight, and I forget things already! So, if we kept some records, and they're *ours*, not someone else's, then that's not bad."

But what "records" did she have in mind? An intense discussion followed, one that (more irony!) I was tape-recording (as a long-standing member of the planning group then preparing for the Mississippi Summer Project, the effort to initiate voting registration in the Delta of that state with the help of hundreds of college students from across the land). At a certain moment the matter of "oral history" was broached—again, a professor's desire to do interviews. Now a discussion of that matter ensued. These young men and women were aware that a machine can both record what is going on and shape it. They knew the inhibitions that arise when one knows that one's words are going to last, so to speak, rather than disappear into the privacy, the complexity, the ambiguity of each person's memory. Suddenly, Bob Moses, our leader, looked at me, with my machine at my side. He smiled and asked: "Is this oral history?" I didn't know how to answer. I finally came up with "No." I was asked to explain myself. I spoke of the systematic stories, the life histories of individuals (in the tradition of, say, Oscar Lewis, the anthropologist) which at the time constituted oral history in my

mind. Well, what about my tape-recorded "material"—how to classify it? I said that I used such tapes to help me understand what I was hearing and seeing in connection with my work as a "participant observer," work mainly done with SNCC. Well, how *did* I use the tapes, and what would I do with them down the line: whose were they? (This was back a ways, chronologically, in the history of oral history, and, too, in the recent chronicle of self-consciousness that inevitably developed and led to the phrase "participant observation." Surely, though, for generations individuals have both taken part in a particular social or political struggle and stood far enough away to take some measure of what was happening, then share what they had concluded with others through writing, or, in this century, through photographs).

I found myself "defensive," perplexed, ingratiating. Whatever "they" wanted, I'd do; but I did feel I could "learn more" by being able to "listen a second time." But why not "just take notes"? one SNCC member asked. Why "hang on our every word"? another person wondered. Anyway, do I tape-record my patients' comments and go over *them* that closely? Is research any different in its requirements than therapy? What kind of research was I doing, anyway? Psychiatric? Sociological? Historical? All (or none) of the above? We weren't very systematic in our conversation. There were urgent practical matters to take up. I offered to stop tape-recording our talks (I only did so sometimes, never when major decisions of an especially sensitive kind were being made). No, I was told, I should continue—but the tapes ought to be the property of SNCC. I gladly assented. Meanwhile, before we put the matter to rest, I had to contend with some other tough questions about the nature of my work. Was I looking for certain "traits" in my SNCC colleagues, some "personality type" that fitted them all? Was I trying to be a "shrink" when I talked with them—despite my day-to-day work alongside them as a volunteer, like all the others who were offering their time and

energy in the hope of helping to make a difference? How *did* I think when I was talking with people? Was I interested in getting to know individuals, as fully as possible, or was I on the lookout for general statements or descriptions, for "data," as one youth put it with barely concealed derision?

To this day I think back to that long time with friends, with "brothers and sisters" in a struggle, but also with tough skeptics who were themselves rather knowing about so-called "methodological issues" in research, many of those young men and women having majored in one or the other of the social sciences, and not a few having taken philosophy courses—hence a discussion of the analytic as against the phenomenological mode of vision, and of how such distinctions apply to fieldwork. "A heavy time, our talk," Bob Moses described it—he who had been enrolled as a doctoral candidate in philosophy before coming south to work with SNCC, and, ultimately, to lead us all into that Mississippi Summer Project. It was Bob who pursued that "talk" most strenuously. He pointed out to me the tendency of many of us Americans of this century (and not only social scientists, but also essayists and journalists) to look for this or that "common denominator," to try to find conceptualizations that serve as umbrellas, or as probing and explanatory instruments. He commented, at one point, "In Europe there are 'phenomenologists'—they take each person as an individual, and try to do the best they can to get to know the person. Here, so many of you folks are trying to explain everything, everybody with these 'general laws'—you impose ideas on people. That's what a professor of mine said is wrong about a lot of social science—and the newspaper and magazine editors who take it so seriously: the 'rage,' he said, 'to reduce,' to simplify, to explain with a definition or conclusion that is supposed to include, to take care of, to account for everything."

Bob stopped talking just as (we thought) he seemed ready to

launch upon one of his carefully delivered lectures: the young philosopher back in the classroom. We waited a few seconds, then I responded with my agreement—though I added that a tentative (rather than reductive) analytic or categorical approach to the world's various human events offered its own suggestive possibilities: theories as speculations, rather than reifications, as ways of merely trying to sort things out rather than to banish the complexities of life through resort to distinctions that are fixed or dogmatic. But Bob, it turned out, had not stopped for good; he was thinking in his own inimitable way, and now we heard more:

I know, I know—but this is not a temperate, or, as you put it, 'tentative' age! We love explanations and we forget that they are—*that*; instead, we turn them into discoveries, conclusions that aren't really subject to disagreement, because so-and-so has handed down a *law*, a *rule*, a division of people, a formulation about society. We don't say: that's his opinion, his idea, and I have my own. We buy his words and *believe*; or we don't, and we turn to someone else, who suits our appetite better. It's the *appetite* I'm worried about! I guess I'm saying that these days that way of thinking—of exploring the world—is the only dish [of food] around. In Europe, phenomenology is on the menu, too! In America, a guy like you makes your reputation when you're here, studying us, if you come up with a bunch of psychological and sociological *ideas* about us: who we are, in our heads, and what our background is, and what 'ideology' we're pushing—and then you write your stuff up, and pretty soon it's news, and you write a book, and it's used in classrooms, and those poor students, they don't end up knowing *me*, and *Jim* [Foreman, another SNCC leader] and maybe *Bob Zellner* and *Dottie* [two other SNCC leaders, then husband and wife]; instead, they know about 'types' and 'problems' and 'beliefs'—anything to bunch folks together in any way the one doing the 'research'

(or the newspaper article or the magazine piece) can figure out, and the catchier the way it's done, the bigger the payoff.

I sit silent, troubled. I more than got his point, and I followed the line of argument readily, because I had heard him speak it before. I worry about a certain cynicism that comes across, and, ironically, I do in my mind exactly what Bob has alleged that people like me are wont to do: I conclude that he is exhausted and frightened by what will be going on, soon enough, in the summer ahead, and so he is lashing out a bit, targeting privileged outsiders as calculating or simple-minded, or both—unable or unwilling to try to fathom the variousness of the world they are approaching, the idiosyncratic and the peculiar, the ambiguous and the paradoxical and the inconsistent, the fatefully accidental nature of so much that occurs, the mere luck, good and bad, that gets so much going. Yet (I counter in that unspoken conversation with myself), it most certainly is hard to do justice to human particularity when one is trying to understand a social or political event. True, hundreds of individuals make up the SNCC cadres, but no matter the individuality of those men and women, they are united in certain ways that deserve mention (and analysis): the deeds they do together, the shared ideas and ideals they continually express. Anyway, I conclude, these modes of thinking and of expression are not mutually contradictory; they are alternative visions, or ways of looking and then sharing what has been observed with others.

We were interrupted by an important phone call, and soon enough these SNCC leaders would be on the road once more, driving through the long night from Atlanta to Jackson, Mississippi. Just before Bob left, though, he joked with me, through resort to travel imagery—and why not finish an argument by drawing upon the deed that was around the corner, an automobile journey, with the choice

of roads always a serious question, given the hostility of the South's state and local police? "You're trying to see the big picture, I guess," he said. "But we're the ones, each of us, who make up the picture." With that conjunction, "but," Bob drew more than a distinction—he drew a contrast, one he quickly underlined as genetic in nature:

Don't you see, that's been our story—the black story: everyone calls us something! It's so hard for any single one of us to be seen by you folks [white people], even the kindest of you, even our friends [among you] as a person, nothing more. That's where we are; that's where we're coming from; that's our 'place' in all this! You folks—can be yourselves! You can wander all over the map. You can be here and you can be there. You can go set up your tent wherever you think it'll do you good! That's great—for you! That's what it means to be white, and have a good education. You can look at things with a microscope or a telescope, and from way up in the mountains and down near the seashore, and when it's sunny and when it's raining cats and dogs, and then, later, when you write or you publish your photographs—you're not a *white* writer, or a *white* photographer. You're free of the biggest label of them all, the one that defines us every single minute of our lives! So, you can take all roads, and you can stop at any gas station or restaurant while on the way. Us—we're trying to get people to give us just a *little* break, to call us Mister or Missus, to let me go where I please without thinking I might get arrested, and even killed. So, it's location, man, location, for us: where we're at, and where you're at, and where we can go, and where you can go—that's why I favor stopping to look at one person, then the next, and not running all which ways to corral folks into someone's pen, some circle, with a fence around it.

What one thinks, he was reminding me, can depend upon who one is—the possibilities in life open and available, the limitations of life very much present (and threatening). I was struck by his

desire to locate me, locate himself, and then ironically, go further: make a general statement, a conceptualization of sorts, tied to the obvious reality, the constant shadow of racial experience. In a sense, Bob's plea for a new notion of individuality had foundered on the obvious imperative of racial awareness. No single black person can be altogether free of a tie that somewhat defines all who make up a people—even as the obverse holds, too, for whites insofar as they try to comprehend blacks: each of us, in so doing, is the "other," inescapably. Still, if Bob was trying to plead for particularity, even as he insisted upon an important general (racial) truth, I was asked to think twice about the basis of my support for an interpretive, a modestly theoretical and analytic stance for those of us who look at others in the hope of learning about how they live, what they uphold, and why they do various things, then make a "document" of what we have learned: the writing, the photography that mobilize language and visual intelligence (and talent) to the task of informing others. We take our stand, as it were, locate ourselves with respect to how we think, how we work, how we present our observations, by dint of our "orientation." But maybe we ought to go back further, realize (again, the irony) that even as a plea for individuality can stem from the awareness of being part of a general (a group) experience, so a plea on behalf of the value, the worth of generalities (theories) can depend upon specific privileges, unavailable to others as a consequence of race or, one can speculate, class, gender, nationality. (The ideological indoctrination of students and scholars in totalitarian states cuts off for many even the contemplation of various ideas).

Documentary work, then, can itself be documented—can be fitted into a grand scale of classifications or categories, or can be more cautiously regarded as a series of individual stories: so-and-so, and how it came that he or she did such-and-such work. (I am speaking here not only of motivational analysis, but of a person's complex life as it got connected with, say, politics, economics, or history

itself: Dorothea Lange, for example, the San Francisco portrait photographer of the well-to-do, chanced upon the desolate early-1930s world of the Great Depression, and with it a career that might otherwise never have materialized.) Put differently, where we locate ourselves with respect to our vantage point as documentarians will tell us not only about what (whom) we'll see, but who we, the viewers, are—the lives that enabled or encouraged us in one direction prevented us surely or sorely from pursuing another direction, as Bob Moses, in his challenging way, at once philosophical (abstract) and earthy (concrete), was at pains for me to know many years ago, in a conversational aside whose lack of pretentiousness in no way interfered with its telling import.

I remember discussing with Erik Erikson two years later, in 1966 (I taught in his Harvard College course at the time, and was a member of a seminar he was offering), the details of that relatively brief moment with my SNCC friends. Erikson was himself working on the subject of nonviolent social and political action, though not in connection with students taking on the segregationist South, but rather with Gandhi's challenge to imperial British rule. We sat in his Widener-library study and shared experiences, each of us trying to apply psychoanalytic thinking to historical events as they had unfolded in the early years of this century across the Pacific Ocean or here at home in the very decade that was then, for us, the present. I can still hear us, comparing notes and telling of our confusions, our apprehensions, the obstacles we'd encountered as we tried to talk with individuals who turned out to be, themselves, confused or apprehensive, or fearfully reluctant, or all too anxious that we hear from them so very much, to the point where we wondered what, in fact, we were hearing that meant all that much. At a certain point in the discussion, Erikson interrupted himself, changed tack, became ruminative rather than complaining, and, finally, turned confessional:

"Sometimes I have to distinguish between what I am hearing, and what I wanted to hear from the person, before I even met him!"

A knowing look came my way—and as I recall, I looked down at the floor, a tell-tale response on my part. Erikson didn't mean to incriminate himself or me; he was being "methodological"—pursuing psychoanalytic self-scrutiny in the tradition of the Freud who dared to examine frankly his own dreams, not to mention those of his patients, and also in the tradition of St. Augustine, who let little in the way of self-observation pass him by. Erikson was ready to amplify, to connect us not to sin but a modest kind of twentieth-century (psychiatric, psychoanalytic) virtue: "That's our job, to make sure where we stop and our patients start: their concerns as opposed to our sense of what their concerns 'really' are—or should be!"

Silence for both of us, as we each had our memories to share with ourselves, those in connection with our clinical work and those in connection with our "fieldwork," our documentary efforts to learn from others about what they were doing (or had seen others do), and our efforts to fit what we had learned (or surmised) into a presentation for others (or, more skeptically, a performance for others) that would obtain their interest (a matter of consent), and then (we hope, surely) their agreement (a matter of assent). Finally, I speak, tersely and a little anxiously. I say that we can at least offer *that* to this kind of research, this doing of documentary work: our willingness to put ourselves on the line in this way, our willingness to indicate that the documentarian, the listener and the one who sees, the witness, can be both a vehicle and an obstacle on a journey. More silence, and then I recite a clinical truism: that the analyst must constantly look within, hence the parallel need in "fieldwork" to take into account the person (ourselves) who is offering an account of others—it being so easy, in contrast, to read those oral histories, those personal essays, those theories, or even those statis-

tically laden reports, or to look at those photographs, with their titles and the terse or extended descriptions under them, or the film footage with its voices and visions, and forget (a negation of the whole point of documentary work) the person's life that preceded and now informs this time when he or she has become that listener, that witness.

I was, of course, repeating what I had heard my important and imposing teacher say. I was affirming what takes place all the time in human affairs: our connectedness (in this case as teacher and student), our membership (even if it be temporary) in whatever "community" we are trying to "study," and thus our ability, our inclination, our need to accommodate ourselves to one another, and our participation in what we aim to observe—our participation, obviously, as well, in what we thereafter document or give to others as a stimulus for *their* participation. In that last regard, needless to say, this chain of information sought, information offered, information sorted, and information presented goes a step further: the book reader, the museum visitor, the moviegoer is himself or herself receptive or resistant, willing to say yes, determined to say no, or interested in doing both (as a matter of firm, energized principle sometimes, rather than open-mindedness). The complexity of this amplification of the matter mounts, of course, as we take into consideration not only the individual documentarian and the individual respondent, but the larger world that bears down on both: the historical moment, with its cultural preoccupations, political shifts, and social fads and concerns—all of no small significance in determining (let us be frank) whether there will be any audience for a completed documentary project, or even whether such a project will ever be done.

Even as George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, wondered about the countless lives that go unnoticed, undocumented, so that their outcomes are unknown, we might wonder about the many documentary ideas

that never even get formulated, much less brought to the attention of editors, museum curators, owners of film houses—the times preclude this idea for the tape recorder, the camera, the film crew, or the person with writing goals (and ambitions) sitting with pen and paper, or at a computer. To be sure, some documentarians have taken on many "principalities and powers," even as Gandhi and those SNCC workers did—and, again, as Bob Moses once observed, "When you're weak, you're strong that way." He expanded with the obvious: that there are people ready to align themselves with the poor, with the marginal rather than the powerful; and so, to be a bit cynical, those living and working "at the bottom" have their potential audience, too—as SNCC's leaders quickly learned when they went to the fanciest colleges in America, talked with some of the luckiest and most favored and best-connected students in the country, and found in them a welcoming audience and, soon thereafter, a substantial pool of eager followers (though not leaders).

Speaking of theory, and of individuals who have challenged it (thereby establishing their own relationship to it, and even turning an oppositional stance into a theoretical position, that of the anti-theorist), I recall my college study of the poetry of William Carlos Williams, and my eventual good fortune in getting to know him, in accompanying him on his medical rounds and home visits. I recall his refrain, his cry of the heart, all through the long, lyrical examination of a city's, a country's social history that is his great poem, *Paterson*: "No ideas but in things." Williams was constantly on the observational prow, through those back alleys and supposedly dead-end streets, up those tenement-house stairs, where his often immigrant, almost invariably impoverished, even destitute patients lived in an America deeply troubled at the time (the 1930s) when he began work on that poem, and on his stories (published, first, as *Life Along the Passaic River*, his effort to tell of his doctoring life at the remove of fiction). I remember him taking notes after we left an apart-

ment—words heard, phrases used, incidents relayed, beliefs or convictions expressed, gestures and mannerisms noted. All the while, as we walked or drove, he would scorn those who tried to do too much with such information, or indeed with no such information, those who proceeded with their minds made up, or their minds conjuring something up, their minds at work on speculation, on distanced opinion, on surveys, polls, summary descriptions, or, as he once characterized a kind of research that might be journalistic or social-scientific, “Fly-by-night invasions or raids.”

Williams’s sarcasm could be intimidating, sometimes wrong-headed, but it was also brusquely confronting and provocative. “The thing itself,” he kept reminding himself, was his “subject”: how to describe people, places, customs, gesticulations, signs, waves of the hand, a smile or a frown, a withdrawal or an approach, the trembling of one person, the wide-eyed interest of another, and how to do so in a language that is itself worthy of those attended, a language that salutes them by drawing unashamedly from them, drawing upon the vernacular of a certain neighborhood oft visited over the decades of a doctor’s or a writer’s working life. But Williams wrote in Rutherford, in that delightfully comfortable, unpretentious Victorian clapboard home on Ridge Road; and he could be candidly forthcoming about the significance of even those few miles that separated him from—well, “them.” “I tell you,” he once tried hard to tell me, “there are days that I wonder what I’m doing in my study, of all places!” When my face seemed to indicate my answer—that he was writing there (and why not!), he continued as if I’d become a potential antagonist: “Don’t you see—that’s it: I’m not seeing *here*, I’m remembering. When I’m *there*, sitting with those folks, listening and talking—the flow of it!—I’m part of that life, and I’m near it in my head, too. The words are coming to me, and I have to push them away, because I’ve got to ask those medical questions and use my stethoscope. Back here, sitting near this typewriter—it’s different.

I’m a ‘writer.’ I’m a doctor living in Rutherford who is describing ‘a world elsewhere,’ as I said it [in Paterson], and it wasn’t a compliment to myself, and it wasn’t only the exhortation people think, something for all of us to do. ‘A world subject to my incursions’—get it? *Subject, incursions!* The lord and master to whom a world is ‘subject,’ and who makes his quickie ‘incursions.’ That’s a bigshot word [incursions] for a bigshot guy!”

Scorn turned to self-reproach. The writer’s effort to respond faithfully but also imaginatively to a scene he himself regularly joins as a visiting participant (house calls all day, often nonstop) prompts him to wonder (speaking of the imagination) how it might go were he writing in the very midst of things, with his eyes and ears, as he once put it, “bombarded,” his brain jogged by what *is*: the immediately audible and visible, rather than intermediation, modulation, intrusions, and too, the lapses and distortions of a mind now distanced yet struggling to encompass (find a direction toward, find the direction of the life in) that “world elsewhere.”

In his own fashion, Williams could become a kind of theorist, a feisty, no-nonsense, street-savvy one who knew in his bones that location made a huge difference, not only the location of a particular documentary project with respect to someone’s analytic scheme of things (it is *this*, it is *that*, it should go under some other name, be described as something different) but the very location of the person doing the project, and of course the reasons behind that location (racial or occupational or psychological, as Bob Moses and Erik Erikson reminded themselves and reminded us). “I stand here ironing,” Tillie Olsen has her worn and worried mother say at the start of her fine and well-known story by that title—a poor woman’s remembrance of a family’s hurt, precarious past; and so with Dr. Williams as he wondered about where to stand, as he tried to iron out his take on a life only down the road, it seemed, only as far away as yesterday’s doctoring. He faced the understandable worry

over what to say later, under different circumstances, about what happened then, there, with them: the matter of the specific location of oneself as documentarian amidst one's struggle to locate oneself as an observer and writer, as someone who saw and now wants to represent, in the sense of conveying or picturing, so that others will say or feel (Williams liked the expression) "I got it," or, better, "I'm really getting it."



two



The Person As Documentarian

Moral and Psychological Tensions

Some of the upbraiding Dr. Williams directed at himself, including his confessional moments in *Paterson* and in his somewhat autobiographical short fiction, was not only meant to serve an intellectual purpose—that of an anti-intellectualism, a broader adversarial position to stake out than one of skepticism with respect to theory. When this writing doctor tells us that he could be self-absorbed, all too indifferent to others even while treating them as a doctor and, later, writing about them in poems and stories, he is asking us to consider the vocational hazards of a certain kind of work—the moral and psychological questions that confront us explicitly or by implication as we who take stock of others also try to live our own lives with some self-respect.

Dr. Williams's persistent notion that he ought somehow to do some of his writing *in medias res* (as near as possible to the world he