



Writing Method

Rob Beeston

Most papers on research methodology, like most courses, are notoriously flat. And whilst boredom from the start is clearly a fundamental block, the implications for social science reach much further. Question: if the prospect of methodology deadens its practitioners what does it do to its subjects? Within this question are a hundred issues that any primer on research methods would quickly bullet point, as there are an even greater number of conceptual tools that any practitioner (well versed in primers) would set to work. But methodology is apt to miss the irony of this, because methodology is imperious like this; its reflections endless and its travels so diaphanous it returns each time with further examples of why it's imperialism must not lose sight of the sea. Notwithstanding a further reflection might method better appreciate the view if it stopped stepping back and committed itself there and then to writing more forwardly of what it saw? Might it resist its urge to withdraw and lean forward instead to write? Even when it writes about writing? Might it write well and resolve at a stroke some of the recurrent conundrums that distract methodology from writing?

The problem of method is never more acute than upon first entering the field to find it not only in tact but having been so for years. All ears if a little fingers and thumbs this moment of method is magnificent, an embodiment of the naivety and nostalgia against which a good deal of subsequent method is judged. Inevitably this moment doesn't last and is at any rate immediately charged with making sense and proving its worth beyond these first flushes of truth. To the empiricist with the bravura of his new world to report and to the theoretician with her pre-conscious ideas to compose the gathering need to word the world comes as a quickly sobering recall. It might be a jolt but this moment is hardly a surprise. It's what the methodologist has most recently lived for and what he read all those books for and the demands it makes now will rewrite every one and method will never be the same again. And so methodology takes the world to task until it begins very soon to add the reservations it inherits about its self to those it brings back and which multiply now on every word. It quickly learns to circumnavigate these quickening sands, stepping back before treading too boldly forward until at some learned point (when the books begin to join up) it finds the ways and means to do both at once. Eventually method's gaining confidence recalls the moment when either empirically or theoretically it first saw the world, that which it has all the while remembered, somewhere, as magnificent and whose intractability it now sets more ably within its sights. And so it recovers a sense of purpose and renews its ethical breadth. Its

original ambitions are transfigured because matured becoming thereafter less alienated as technique first catches up with and then emboldens this inchoate sense of the world. And after much writing just ahead of each thought, and ideally in mind of this time before method, it sits finally back having done good work by adding the grit of another piece of the world. And then, as a point of note first and foremost, it compares its various considerable achievements with certain other ways of organising the world, those perhaps that don't think of themselves methodologically, or even as methodical, maybe those that put madness before method and only mention method at all because clearly something has happened and they have somehow arrived, or maybe those proceedings that are clearly methodological in nature and even in discipline but less so in territory like the various laws of form. Methodology aspires to neither of these but as a point of note first and foremost (and wary of the next response) it sees by comparison how much it sounds like itself, even, and in particular, when it doubts the sound of its own voice.

The methods of social science distinguish themselves by virtue of amongst other things their conceptual machineries, their modal innovations, their theoretical terminologies, and the historicity they sign and date upon each. Conceptually method has seen and heard the world in various ways and in a process both admirable and unfathomable has variably borrowed and improvised the tools, debates, and literatures with which it registers itself as methodology. The seasoned practitioner (she who long ago read the primer and perhaps now writes others) is in the valuable and (to the student) enviable position of being able to make fast moves with method by touching base with and either delving into or wisely bouncing off the concepts and gauntlets which signpost the field. It is a testament to its history that methodology has long registered its most pressing problems and its proudest achievements not only within a conceptual literature of its own but (and here is the cross-cultural evidence) along the lines of many other arts and literatures, including those inspirations to which it often defers. The vocabularies are different across the generic divides (which is the point about cross-culturalism) but across many varied terrains move methodology's most pressing issues; those it variably dislocates between the inside and out, universal and particular, one and many, self and group, and the various economies of generality and restriction; the terms of each just the one eternal pairing of another dozen tangents, some particular to social science, others astutely borrowed and often-as-not traced back but all informing method in some way or other. The tensions between these vast and shifting oppositions prove their worth, ultimately, in the daily search for that enigmatic conception which, in a space beyond both ink and interference, will fully express the dynamic relation; that which endlessly, unfathomably, and sublimely powers the social world. To this end, methods indebted from Aristotle to Wittgenstein head out along a thousand different paths to an even greater number of ends in pursuit of that vast best space where the unthought is thought and summoned to unconceal the world. And if not to unconceal it as such then to say that without it the world is lost to method and method is less than moral, barely able to conceive of the violence it does and the good that it doesn't.

Despite their various allusions towards the spaces of literature geometries like those of the inside out are prized less for their literary qualities than for either their conceptual clarity or the promise of it once integrated with the rest of methodology's machinery. The risks of trading something like a literary eloquence for the more defensible clarity

of thought are well established and make in turn their own characteristic mark on methodology's list of concerns. Pragmatism raises the distinct possibility that the vast expanse between inside and out could quite legitimately be lost just as easily as it once made sense. And so method has at some point to confront the further possibility that what is left in the wake of its clarifications is occasionally anaemic, easily cumbersome, and at worst, and as Rehn (2002) notes it *ephemera*, downright ugly. On an almost quarterly basis methodology proposes various solutions to this quite familiar problem. In all its guises (violence, distance, impropriety) the basic problem of ugliness fronts first and foremost an urgent call to prettiness, a face less dour, more gesturally aware. So a method this conscious of its ungainliness defers to *aesthetics* to make amends for its flaws. But the question of aesthetics is as false here as anywhere, at least short-thrift because it risks not so much pronouncing the arrival of something that is already unnamed within good method but diverting fluency from its less affected practice. There are more impartial questions of methodological dexterity than those that self-consciously invoke the aesthetic; more impartial because as a matter of course, that is, by their very apperceptive nature, they work already with fugues and arabesques and not just the suddenly imperative designation of them, which is to say, the aesthetic is an effect not a mode whose greatest exponents are likely to find its embellishment vulgar. As another potential distraction 'performance method' falls easily out of this push towards dexterity in recompense for the earlier privations of clarity. And whilst performance has its merits, its vanities add another layer of preciousness to method when performance per se, that is, word and world walking hand in hand, comes less ostentatiously and more intimately (like the aesthetic) through good method itself.

Traditional methods aren't known for either their aesthetic value or their high performance. So critical method has become inseparable from theory and philosophy. And these it reads not only out of erudition but pragmatism also. If the aesthetic and the dynamic are generally imperative then philosophy has a thousand ideas on how to go about it. The void between word and world and the invitation then to glance self with group and to prick the page with the unsaid is pleased when in amongst the annals it alights upon a pair of terms or a set of ideas (perhaps a catalogue of a thousand) that are dynamic to the core and so will likely survive first extraction then liberal re-distribution. But such is the benevolent spirit and the inherited industriousness of method that the citation itself is quite traditionally co-opted and because we're now firmly on methodology's turf eternally defended. What this does to the source is less the concern in the end than how it translates into method. And when this facet of method anticipates the end of metaphysics as an in-road at last to the *world worlding* it is, ironically, method more than world that turns. When this method assigns libidinal economics to ventilate the body its humours are all too easily bled dry by talk of *libidinal economics*. Where various poesies are indeed more dextrous and perhaps less corrupt really only method cares. And still the world turns. Method holds its ideal-sublime up to the disciplinary light, often in awe, occasionally in fear, typically with more than an ounce of worry but always an arm's length (stylistically not reflexively) to get a better look and assure itself of rigour. Out of a sense of integrity and in the absence of God method-as-method often struggles and always worries. Dissatisfied with words in the face of the world, profoundly unconvinced that somewhere soon is the mouth of the dumbfounded (ecstasy) or the voice of the under-represented (violence), this method looks beyond words: simple, patient, curved, words as words in no uncertain terms: to aesthetics and

performances and philosophies and all manner of extra medias and modes to turn the inside out at last and behold the world in a way its words alone never quite could. And so method crafts whole machineries to think the unthought and catch a glimpse of the world. Meantime, writers splash a dash of blood in their ink, just a little, and round on the kind of words that take almost for granted what less worldly words spend whole theses lamenting.

In the pursuit of the unthought method makes the most of its many resources. It delves systematically into its past out of both indebtedness and progress and it signs and dates the trajectories accordingly. This historicism is something that method quite rightly rarely leaves home without. But the manner with which it routinely equates citation with clumsiness is an encumbrance the vitalities within could often do without. Interrupting writing with a kaleidoscope of names and dates is less the problem than the ease with which this particular self-discipline inadvertently machines an overly conceptual prose. And whilst this disserves the current field with words that ring true little further than the page its greatest disservice by far is to the past because not only is this type of reverence prone to evacuation it becomes quickly a collective effort: firstly the fetishism of certain texts and then, sometime later, a declaration of their end by virtue of a time which is post-, that is, the ironisation of what just before was revered. Maybe fear is behind this need on the one hand to revere the past and on the other to outmode it; a morbid fear that a past without inverted commas is less the surgical light of modernity's scrupulousness than a sepia-yellow that taints all who linger in it with naivety, even necromancy. Maybe there are other fears even deeper and given the candid approbations of such charges maybe these are more latent than conscious. But whatever the reasons method tends to either pick over the past as if it were fragments pieced back together out of little more than reverence or toss it out with time altogether, with a nod maybe but often as not to prove method well-read, its function now to urgently move on. The past as legacy however, its insights set forth more naturally and generatively, literarily, that is, neither going to waste nor getting in the way, is written less often. This past is as unlikely to amputate Irigaray on page 68 as it is to outmode *Elemental Passions* (1982) altogether.

Good writing is a bonus where methodology is concerned. Given a wealth of either good ideas, trenchant history, or commendable ethics the actual writing of each can at best be excused and at least forgiven for the greater good of the rigours of method. And yet many of methodology's most conceptual problems (sublimity for example) are beset by language and to the extent that such conundrums are nothing of the sort until words intrude return always to language; which is to say, a prejudice toward the written word would stand more roundly accused if writing wasn't what methodology was ultimately about. As it stands the written word of method begs certain questions of methodology's practitioners. Broadly speaking these are questions of how practitioners of various kinds (but all wielding pens) regard themselves. More manageably is the question of ambition. And more acutely still of resignation. Can a researcher justifiably resign himself to writing unworldly words by claiming to be a researcher not a writer? Can she justify diluting her efforts still further by deflecting writing into aesthetics, performances, and historiographies; each at times perfectly adept but needing to be written in the end only now to greater distraction? I ask these condescending questions of those methodologies whose multi-medias simply don't convince. Of those that clearly do I ask others: does

an effective multi-modal method liberate writing? Does it open research to those who can't, won't, or don't want to write and will clearly never feel the full scrape of the nib? Does it lift the emphasis from writing and put it...where exactly? Or are these stylised moves that methodically un-block the nib just writing as it was meant? Except now they've become too self-conscious (or reflexive or recursive) to write naturally as such? If method at every step and out of concern for its tread listens neurotically for the sound of its own voice then what, ironically, becomes of the ring of its truth?

Methodology often looks to literature thinking it lacks something when in fact it has everything except the permission to write. And when it's not looking at literature directly it often prefers those philosophers who do. In fact it admires any grip on the world that still lets it turn because therein lies the answer to many of methodology's most pressing concerns and the colourful truth of some of its grandest concepts. And yet it still ties itself in knots because it can't seem to do the same and the nearest it gets is set to fail because the unspeakable so said is largely self-fulfilling. The newcomer to methodology could be forgiven for thinking absence is a law unto itself with no need of justification beyond the vagaries of ethics. This is in part at least because along the way the origins of absence have become largely obscured, often vacated, and, ultimately, transcribed with a only questionable feel for the world that makes them turn both empirically and theoretically. The crux of the matter lies in that very basic but very modern question 'why absent method?' A question that answers something of itself when put more equivocally and less methodologically: why turn the inside out and make the world a mindful place? Why do the reverse and make the mind as big as the world? Why turn the particulars of action into a universe of relations: a little portable cosmogeny (Boulez, 1986), a celestial ball game (Serres, 1982), an internal astronomy (Genet, 1949), or a spark in the black (Xenakis, 1996)? Why pitch this very particular kind of universalism, even essentialism, into the ruins of post-modernism? The much-misunderstood best bet for an active post-structuralism? Why pass between the multiple and the monad and put the life back in contradiction? Why pass from the one to the many on the peripheries of vision? Why just look when you can see? Or hear when you can listen? Why over-expose the sublime with an over-wrought sense of rigour? And then lament the loss? Why sweat it out indoors with piles and piles of books when many of these very words, impressive in their largesse, depend quite explicitly upon far wilder weathers for their pages to blow about? Heidegger (1959) has it that the world is darkening, Serres (1990) that no one goes outside anymore, so why put *An Introduction to Metaphysics* and *The Natural Contract* under the desk-light of method?

When a question becomes a pre-occupation its original spark is easily and gradually lost. The question 'why absent method?' has for so long and in so many ways been asked by social science that its registers have to varying degrees become stylistically compromised, self-consciously embellished, and awkwardly expressed, arriving ultimately at a variably staid state of Otherness that doesn't really remember why, too busy as it is conceptualising how. And if methodology is ugly it is often because it has long since lost the distinction between self-serving and world-turning prose. More specifically it has lost the will to tell when one should inherit the other. Instead methodology becomes technology, which in and of its self (and as Heidegger, 1977, rather brutishly said) is not very pretty. What is pretty though is the turn of the world that in spite of too much method still turns heads. And on a daily basis (like dawn) this

remains the root and proof of methodology's most promising geometries. The enigmas of universal and particular, inside and out, and monad and many will with enough morning continue to give method its unprecedented access to violence. But with only the gentlest of nudges, that is, granted certain permissions, there is also this more redolent world of the ecstatic. 'To write well' is the summary answer to the oft forgotten question 'why absent thought?' Why exactly more than routinely? Because with ugliness averted, its vowels more rounded and its knots cut short, theory might be nudged back to the intimacy where much of it and at least the best of it began, sharing its insides with others. Because finding words that turn naturally with the world – just a few in the right place to let the point finish itself – might find the universal always already at work within the particular and in as many different ways as there are stories to be told. Because if Otherness came home, if it were unconcealed right here, say, in the universe of a particular relation or the fear in the eye that is politics by another name, then method might not need to travel so far. Because if something more literate was to animate representation (and all it takes is a nod, the occasional shift in pitch) then better writing almost by itself might save the labours of so many self-defences; more rounded writing that snags fewer threads and ties fewer knots, those threads and knots that are nothing of the sort in various places beyond method. This method, quite naturally and less neurotically, might be able already to imagine how others live, needing to apologise less because its reach would be no longer so short. As it is and as Serres (1982) says in *Genesis*, the multiple has perhaps been thought but it hasn't been sounded.

The question 'why?' absent method has long been lost to the more pragmatic 'how?' But ironically, and by virtue of so much machinery, the pragmatic has become the least practicable of all: the performative, the reflexive, the recursive, aesthetic, and peripatetic. Almost everything in fact that distracts from the original question and the wideness of its eye, a question that on closer inspection (why *absent method*?) is not about method at all. Closer, rounder, it asks after that full and foreboding sense of the world the best of methods apprehend, that method 'absents from'. If method was less concerned with its own insecurities and if as a result it resisted the urge to innovate ever more ways of reassuring itself that its worst fear is not coming true, then its worst fear might not come true and the world might have more of a chance at being more roundly written. And if method was better written then absence might do what it says and avail its self of what too much method by definition cannot. Maybe literariness per se has no place in social science. But if some of its lessons were learned, or more likely some of its permissions granted, then absence in general might have something to say besides that it just is and how duty-bound we are to somehow factor it in. If the virtues of ethics, design, analysis, and theory didn't automatically excuse how each is actually written then the violences and ecstasies so beloved of method might emerge to an extent and with a degree of redolence that less literate concerns can ill conceive let alone do justice to: secrecy, lies, maybe the fear in the eyes, the many violences that method is concerned to reveal but less equipped to slip behind; and desire, excess, and their auras of sex and power, the various ecstasies whose heights inspire method and whose movements it rushes to write out but which its moderations typically miss. If method is ugly in many ways it is ugliest of all when it satisfies itself but fulfils few of its promises. In this there is little reward for the labours of method, save more method.

A critique of the various methods that supplement writing as if writing had failed returns, naturally, to writing. No doubt writing is as difficult as method and just as far from a resolution. But if the problems of language that beset much of method have their roots in a lack of permission then method's energies and even some of its ethical commitments run the risk of being routinely misplaced. It would over-stretch the point to say as literature sometimes has that language is the only subject. But there is nevertheless a permission to speak in this that methodology doesn't have. As it stands methodology rarely regards writing as within its remit or well-written prose this deliberately within its scope. And when it does dwell on this it steps back to ask what writing means to method instead of what it is to lean forward and write. Methodology inhibits this writing not by having too many other ambitions or by being too precious. On the contrary: it embraces literature often and is all too aware of the vitalities of language, philosophical issues of writing and difference finding themselves easily alongside empirical ones of inscribing the sublime. Rather it inhibits this permission by relentlessly stepping back into the meaning of writing instead of leaning forward, pen in hand, to write better method. Methodology borrows everything from literature it seems except the permission to write. So by the time literature's most diaphanous silences, sonorities, and wounded presences have been brought back they sound distinctly like method, which wouldn't be a problem if methodology didn't then lament the loss and lose writing not just to the knot but to the tools, machineries, and anxieties that routinely swipe at its hulk, returning at some point, inevitably, to a logocentric analysis of the ultimate impossibility of writing. (And still the writer writes.) Accordingly the permission to write is writing-praxis only insofar as the hyphen is an active and daily bridge but not if 'writing-praxis' is another retreat from the practice of writing; which is to say, discussions of writing must be careful, no different in fact to the writing of writing. Writing like this begets not a revolution and ideally not even a discussion, just the setting forth of a simple solitary permission.

Writing is undoubtedly difficult and full of just as many pitfalls and spirals as method. And as with method so it should be. But there is a difference between writing's hard labour and the artistic aura with which methodology cloaks it as a means to discount it in all but subject-hood so it can get back to proper method (pen in hand). This difference between sweat and lustre is crucial because methodology's elevation of writing ensures its most telluric labours are kept far removed from those of method when otherwise they might be cultivated together from the start in pre-empt of such a drift. As it is writing is what you do if you have ambitions either outside of social science or scandalously within it. Methodology tends to think anything more resonant than its standard prose as lustrous as art but sonority is actually far more prosaic than its accusations of poetry admit. Perhaps if poetry had been less evacuated by post-methodology then better writing might be less alienated by the alignment in the first and journals less inclined to use the love of words as either a stick or a summary dismissal. But as it stands, *poesy* has long blown the idea of better writing out of all proportion and the spectre of the poet worries methodology's sense of integrity at the first suggestion of it. The aureole that casts writing in this bright-darkness affirms for students and practitioners alike the earliest privations of Methodology 101 when in fact all that writing needs to re-pitch its horizons is a few new words and to be less neurotic about knots. Its blood and sweat might then be more directed, writing still about aesthetics and performance but with a permission to write well about them rather than machining or

book-ending them. The will-to-write and write well is no more poetry than post-methodology. It is rather an occasional shift in pitch and an accent from the start. The geographies and even some of the vocabularies are there already in the becoming of inside out. And whilst literature has much for method to admire it has more to fear from the blank page than method's rich reserve of dislocations is ever likely to.

Methodology is imperious. It is apt to enrol the notion of better writing for itself and do everything in the world with it other than let it go into method and write a little better. It is apt along this way to take the notion of better writing (a deliberately solitary phrase) towards deconstruction et al and further the critique of method. Likewise it is apt to ask if better writing has escaped method by this point or if it has fallen back into the same trap of adding more to method with its talk of absence. It is apt then to seize quite critically upon this negotiated reference to absencing method, thinking this phrase's saving grace is an epilogue that writes coolly, defiantly, and radically on anything but method in order to cut the knot and complete the argument and be at last the last of method so it can go out and kindle the world. And so arrives an after-, an against-, or a critical methodology that talks about methodology without talking about methodology and concludes with the novel as the only plausible answer. Methodology is imperious like this: apt to make more of better writing than its solitude warrants, to do everything under the sun with better writing other than write just a little better. And still the writer writes. In fact there is no break, scandal, or call for papers, just more of the same with a permission to write. There is no radical strategy to cut the knot of escape's impossibility, chiefly because there is no need of escape in the first other than that which (like proper escapology; literature maybe) is convinced of proximity. And there is no deconstruction besides that which precedes itself with the sonority from whence it came (like Derrida in *Of Grammatology*). Such a method might well react to so much late-modernity, to its fictions and reflections and its games, moves, and knots and its endless steps back, its spirals into ironies with their questions crossed out and their tongues thrust coolly in their cheeks. It might react to each of these refusals and more. But more pointedly is the will to lean forward and write, and to align itself with writing even when it writes (which it surely will) about what writing means when it comes to practicing method.

references

- Boulez, P. (1986) *Orientalisms*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Derrida, J. (1967/1974) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Genet, J. (1949/1971) *The Thief's Journal*. London: Penguin.
- Heidegger, M. (1959/1987) *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. London: Yale University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. London: Harper Torchbooks.
- Irigaray, L. (1982/1992) *Elemental Passions*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Rehn, A. (2002) 'Pretty Ugly: Notes on the Moral Economy of Method', *ephemera*, 2(1): 43-52 [www.ephemeraweb.org].
- Serres, M. (1982/1995) *Genesis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Serres, M. (1990/1995) *The Natural Contract*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Xenakis, I. (1996) in B.A. Varga, *Conversations with Iannis Xenakis*. London: Faber and Faber.

the author

Dr Robert Beeston lives in Sheffield. He is currently completing his first novel.
Address: c/o ephemera