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Writing with New Journalism and Portraiture: The making of a portrait

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To explain broader social phenomena through human perspectives, sociologists closely analyse their qualitative data. As individuals' actions and embeddedness into society may be subject to inquiry, biographical and narrative approaches can enable access to the other's world, its social and material contexts. Yet sensitivity is seldom evident when communicating research findings. Traditionally researchers address a uniform, neutral academic readership, one at odds with current reality. Just as the researcher seeks to understand the interviewee, similar effort is needed to accommodate the reader. Good communication needs to consider complexity and address the human experience through multi-faceted but meaningful lenses. It requires creative thinking. I suggest that New Journalism and Portraiture, in combination, provide a good starting point for communicating the human experience and its surrounding conditions: New Journalism as it introduces devices from fiction into the field; Portraiture because it encourages the writer to bring creative aspects into the text. The article explores the considerations around writing up such a text from biographical research and demonstrates how this can be done.

Keywords: Biography, New Journalism, Portraiture, Teacher, Natural science

Introduction

"Thomas rushes. He zig-zag's between the physical obstacles that now block his passage along what used to be a traditional school corridor, transformed into a space for learning with explicit 'thinking hubs'. Children and school bags clutter an annoying collection of pillows, provided to encourage students to lounge and reflect on their learning. It is not that he is busy, but that the corridor leading to his teaching room in physics unsettles him. He is disconcerted by the untidiness, the students that flutter around and the

> *disappearance of the school's traditional discipline that always existed during lunch break. But the atmosphere is genuinely friendly, too, and most of the kids know him. They do not greet him overtly, and he doesn't say hello either. However, he smiles wryly and nods to the nearest children in a way that implies familiarity!"*

This is the beginning of a 2000-word portrait of a natural science teacher in a Danish school, here called Thomas[1]. Drawing on knowledge from my research and professional experience of the 'grand divide' between the humanities and natural sciences (Høyen & Rasmusen, 2020), I wondered how to write a presentation of a physics teacher that would 'speak to' a possibly humanities-oriented group of readers within and beyond the University. I looked for a method to guide me in presenting Thomas's life, perspectives, and thoughts about the world, based on a biographical interview, ethnographic observations, and findings from more distant academic disciplines. In this article, I particularly describe how I work with traditional qualitative perspectives, taking inspiration from New Journalism and Portraiture to write up the 'portrait'. In doing so, I suggest a way of writing differently within academia that may encourage greater take-up of the messages we as academics wish to disseminate.

To illustrate how I work, I draw on excerpts from a full portrait written to illuminate an individual teacher's perspective. I had interviewed eight teachers with similar backgrounds but here decide to focus on one, Thomas, so that I could give his story the attention that the findings of an in-depth biographical interview deserve. I chose Thomas's story as he verbalizes his position and point of view very clearly explaining how, despite his scientific expertise, he ended up as a teacher in a public school. In retelling his story, I reject traditional ideas of representation but instead follow Bourdieu's idea of a realist construction (1996b): crafting a portrait to communicate how the reproduction of knowledge takes place in everyday meetings between a teacher and students, where underlying social conditions are hidden influences, and where the nature of the school and the education system in general also shape the discourse. The daily work

[1] The portrait is presented at length in Danish, elsewhere (Høyen, 2021).

with students adapted alongside changes in the relative positions of the teaching profession and schooling in society.

Through the article, I use excerpts from the finished portrait to demonstrate and discuss the making of a portrait. Initially, I introduce the aim of this specific portrait and its context. Then, I reflect on how the portrait-writing draws inspiration from New Journalism and Portraiture, before describing how the portrait is actually made. Finally, I discuss post-academic writing in relation my work and in more general terms.

The portrait and its context

In general, I study people's understandings of nature, to identify views on nature at the beginning of the 21st century so as to address current challenges of environmental issues and climate change. These challenges also drive me to find ways to demonstrate how humans have different views on the relationship between humankind and nature and to provide insights into those different ways of living through a sociological lens. One strand of this work focusses on how views on nature are transmitted from one generation to the next and a central institution for this is, of course, the school. Therefore, I am interested in analysing aspects of teachers and their lives, especially teachers who teach explicitly nature-related subjects such as biology, geography, physics, and maths. Previously, I have examined different generations of teachers (Høyen, 2016) as well as newly educated teachers (Høyen & Rasmusen, 2020), to establish their views on nature alongside their ideas around 'being' a teacher. After years of interviewing such teachers, I found that younger teachers often give up teaching nature-related subjects as they feel that they lack sufficient qualifications within the subject itself. Furthermore, research identifies that attracting teachers within natural science subjects is hard (See, 2020, ATV, 2014) and that many teachers leave their job within a few years (AE 2016). Another question that often surfaces – in my research and in public debates, too – is teachers' subject knowledge: What kinds of knowledge of nature do teachers hold? Following an explorative path of inquiry, I decided to interview teachers in the public school who entered their job without general teaching qualifications but held a degree in an academic subject. Later, as part of their teaching job and through a special programme, these teachers gained the required teaching qualifications. This is a relatively new group within compulsory education: graduates enabled to teach due to a generalised teacher shortage,

especially evident within nature-related subjects. Their enablement also served other aspects of the political agenda, allowing the government to provide more teachers and at the same time refute the overproduction of university-educated Masters while meeting a demand to raise subject knowledge in schools. I wanted to see how subject-skilled teachers with a university background differed from teachers having general teaching qualifications. In this context, I set out to interview teachers with an MA degree in natural science, focusing on their life stories. One of these interviews was with Thomas:

> *"Thomas, a male teacher, is 58 years old. He works as a schoolteacher in a medium-sized school in a larger city in the provinces. Although Thomas works as a teacher, if we want to draw on the connotations which follow when talking about teachers, things get complicated. He undertook no ordinary teacher training but is educated in biology at university. Several years later, he completed a supplementary course in educational and didactical thinking, which qualified him as a teacher in the Danish Folk School (elementary and lower secondary). Currently, his main subject is physics which is not seen as a subject that belongs within traditional, general education. His only interest at work is his subject and his students, not cooperating with parents or general educational matters. Hence, Thomas is not a typical member of the teaching profession".*

In accordance with my previous research, that is informed by Bourdieu, I address teaching as part of a field within the social space. I take a broad analytical approach, moving beyond the interview to include ethnographic observations, studying social as well as material roots related to teaching, and turning to the literature to further broaden an understanding of being a teacher in a specific socio-economic position (Bourdieu, 1977). Thomas's story, and the rich social and material information he described provided an opportunity and scope to try another way of 'writing up' in place of the established life history tradition that simply sets an individual story in its broader context (Goodson, 2001).

Communication is not simply about clarity but also a consideration of what the reader of the portrait needs to know. Recognising that some contemporary readers of

Thomas's portrait may take the right to an education for granted, I am careful to make it clear that this was not the case in the past:

> *"It was not written in the stars that Thomas should end up being a teacher. Gaining an education was not anticipated with a family background like his back in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, a mix of being the youngest child in his parents' house and the changing times, in general, opened the possibility that something could happen. A slight economic change in his parents' income and the idea that emerged in society that everybody should have the possibility to enter higher education contributed to Thomas being the first in his family to get the Upper Secondary School Leaving Examination."*

In line with a Bourdieusian perspective, I also have to consider the position of Thomas's subject, natural science, in contemporary society in general and in school in particular. Today in the public discourse, natural sciences, and technology, dominate other areas of knowledge. One of the arguments for this relates to the debate in Western societies about how to secure the welfare states of the future. For answers, politicians look increasingly for support from the Knowledge Society which prioritises the oft-called 'STEM' disciplines. Consequently, both private and public funding for research and school development projects frequently favour the STEM area, deeming the Arts as unnecessary except for a few cultural and language related areas. In debates many claim natural science to be the 'proper' type of science, with qualitative research deemed 'hopelessly subjective' (Johansson, Risberg & Hamberg, 2003). This point of view is of course challenged by qualitative researchers like me, but nevertheless I often hear it stated publicly and particularly by official voices. Traditional perspectives are resistant to challenge!

Historically, schools have been a place for common education and here humanity-based subjects have dominated while subjects within science, with few exceptions, were relegated to more practical applications (Larsen, 2010). It is only within the last 20 years that questions about the common educational aspects of the natural sciences have been put forward (Sjøberg, 1998). Increasingly, among some social groups, teachers find that parents question whether the natural sciences are necessary for today's students. Other

tensions also divide teachers in the two subject groups (Høyen & Rasmusen, 2020). As well as the differences between the subjects themselves there are more practical issues like different physical locations in school buildings, teaching resource needs and timetabling issues. But these are trivial problems given the urgency of addressing questions relating to views on nature in the current environmental and climate crises. There is a clear need for better understanding between those in the Natural Sciences and their peers in the Arts and Humanities and I hope to contribute to this understanding by offering insights into different social positions and by offering a method of writing portraits that enables perspectives from these positions to be shared.

Communicating to a reader

To transform a story into a life history (Goodson, 2001), a common practice among biographical and narrative researchers, was not enough. I also needed to consider how the readers of the portrait would understand the underlying narrative as between the teller and listener, a divide exists – likewise between the writer and reader. From scholars on narratives, we know that the teller shapes her story with consideration to the listener whether this is an actual or imagined one (Rankin, 2002) and I want to do this for my reader. The oral raconteur can be attentive to reactions from her audience and mould the content, but as a writer, I cannot do this. As soon as a story is put into words, it parts from its author, and there is no means to adjust this later to fit the preferences of the receiver as with oral storytelling (Ong, 2002). I had to find the best possible way to overcome this divide.

In biographical research texts the reader is rarely discussed, although some work exists (Bourdieu, 1987, 1996). Within disciplines where the audience plays a central part, like rhetorics and dramaturgy, considering the audience is a foundational and possibly taken-for-granted consideration (Ede, 1984). In contrast, the academic tradition generally prescribes clear and credible arguments where the audience is only implicitly present and is seen to be a 'homogeneous' educated readership. However, academic readers differ too, and there have been recurrent heated debates about subjectivity in research and the extent to which personal experiences even count as proper research. There are those who, following Lyotard (1984), argue that in postmodernity the focus should be small narratives rather than grand narratives such as Science with a capital 'S'. Individual

stories collected through interviews and the subsequent portraits are essentially small narratives in the literary sense expressing values and meaning within a specific social context; The portrait's strength lies in the detail that enables the reader to see that views are not homogeneous but varied. When that is acknowledged, it potentially becomes easier to accept the unfamiliar and unknown and to recognise that our personal perspective is just that. This understanding should raise an awareness that others live differently in the world but may have something to say that is relevant to one's own life and this, in turn, may lead to an acceptance that perspectives do differ not least according to different social positions. If from reading my portraits, even a single reader broadens his or her understanding, I will have succeeded in communicating. Therefore, I write my presentations as portraits and make crafting these to engage with readers a major consideration.

Do I know my readers? I have not analysed who they are in depth to choose the most persuasive arguments, and they will likely be a mixed group with their own perspectives, but different from the people I write portraits about. On several occasions, however, I have met possible future readers, directly as listeners to presentations and indirectly through texts (Larsen, 2005). Such contact has provided insight into possible reactions and informed my search for a way of writing my portraits that ensures a receptive reader where many are neither keen on nature (Christensen, 2009) or the natural sciences (De Haro, 2020; Rokos et al., 2013). Most of the readers will have experienced schooling in their own childhood, and possibly know a contemporary school, too, should they have young children who currently attend one. So, when shaping the text, I can build on this knowledge and offer a lens to help the reader reflect upon, recognise, and accept, new ideas – and then move forward, hopefully with fewer barriers. Hence, the first lines of Thomas's portrait (at the start of this article) make no mention of nature or natural science – deliberately leaving ideas that may be unpopular until later. Such considerations continue throughout the text.

Of course, I cannot convince the reader of anything if he or she does not want that to be so. But by finding a starting point close to the readers' world for each portrait and allowing the portraitee's wider views to unfold at a pace that supports reader assimilation, I may encourage change. In this way, I can establish a dialogue in Buber's sense (Buber,

1947), shaping a text so that it opens the reader's mind to hear – in this specific case – the point of view of a teacher in the natural sciences.

Wondering how to achieve this, I found a solution through a combination of two different ways of writing: *New Journalism* (that originated from journalists working in American newspapers and magazines during the 1960s) and *Portraiture* (that emerged from alternative academic writing and teaching practices in the 1980s). Although Portraiture arose within action-oriented community projects with a focus on common growth through participation, both ways of working are author-driven: it is the writer who, like the artist, composes the text and chooses which aspects should be highlighted, or not. It is, therefore, the author who should take on the additional considerations needed to write in step with the potential audience.

I will now move on to describe and explain each of these non-traditional approaches to academic writing before I show, and further discuss, their actual use in the making of a portrait.

New Journalism

Being an academic within sociology I admit to having rather superficial ideas of what journalism actually is. At my university, the journalists are mainly associated with communication, presenting university matters and excerpts of research to the public. As universities are continually forced to act as quasi-commercial enterprises, they need to communicate with their customers – future students and external funding bodies. Doing such work, journalists and communication departments are generally reporting the opinions of management or promoting other people's research rather than publishing in their own right. However, I became acquainted with another form of journalism in a collection of *American Portraits* edited by a Danish journalist (Nilsson, 2013). I was impressed by the level of detail, in the work of writers like Guy Talese and Susan Orlean – the accuracy, the atmospheric descriptions and insights into people's lives their writing provided – all summed up in the book's subtitle, *About the art of describing a human*. This was exactly what I was aiming to do myself: I, too, wanted to 'describe' a human. Therefore, I saw the potential to use similar techniques when 'writing up' research, and how this might allow me to address a broader public than the customary academic reader. I was keen to try to present my work in a similar manner.

This alternative form of journalism is known by several labels: New, Literary, and sometimes Narrative or Immersion Journalism, New Journalism being the most used label. It was very visible from the 1960s to the 80s. Its adherents wrote stories from parts of society hidden or alien to their readers, both geographically and socially, adopting a detailed, narrative and even dramaturgical style, to offer lengthy stories based on observations and interviews that notably built on facts and the protagonists' perspectives. Typical examples include the American race day culture (Wolfe, 1965), the culture of silence around the American-Italian mafia (Talese, 1971), being a competitor in a sport with Italian origins that only accepted immigrants having Irish roots see (Talese, 1951 according to Lounsberry, 2003), and life as seen through the eyes of a 10-year-old American boy (Orlean, 1992).

I found this way of writing, merging the subjective perspective of an interviewee and observation, inspiring, especially the ambition to report on hidden parts of society or from areas that escape the dominant discourse. I wanted to explore if it is possible to transfer such ideas into an academic tradition like sociology? Traditionally, sociologists seek to understand society's underlying structure, and in doing so, create descriptions that are distanced from the subjects, aiming at generalisation. However, it is recognised that micro-actions between people profoundly impact these structures.

In some ways the type of writing embodied in New Journalism, resembles that of the early Chicago School of sociology and uses similar methods. Perhaps because one of the school's founding fathers, Robert Park, in addition to studying philosophy, had also worked as a journalist for some years, and applied this approach to university studies as well as to his teaching (Baker, 1973).

Among scholars, whether the practices of New Journalism and the former Chicago School are similar or not is a contested topic. Comparing Goffman's work, which also dates back to the 1960s, with New Journalism, Sommer sees a difference, claiming that Goffman is interested in the universal while the journalists value the specific (Sommer, 1975). In contrast, Meisenheider compares their methods and foci and sees the two as very similar, suggesting that both perspectives aim to uncover the essential elements of what they study, and neither includes much theory (Meisenhelder, 1977). For my part, I find a comparison between the two less important. As in all areas, some texts are brilliant in the way they shed light on interesting sociological phenomena, some texts

are less so. Some pieces last, perhaps due to the author's fame, while other almost forgotten pieces are rediscovered, and with today's eyes, turn out to be really inspiring as they throw new light on contemporary matters. To me, anything that inspires research to gain new insight and knowledge is valuable, so both practices are important. However, I accept to some extent Sommer's claim that sociology values the universal, ideas that can be applied in other cases. What definitely differs, though, is the readers. The sociologist writes for peers, seeking to analyse and describe matters of general sociological interest such as how people meet, relate, and reproduce cultural traits, whereas the journalist writes to tell a story to a more general public.

As already stated, what attracted me to New Journalism is the intention to 'describe a human'. Like journalists, I have 'hung out' in specific places related to the interviewee's world, observed not just the interviewee but also his surroundings, the people around him, and how they interacted. Writing up the text and using a few dramaturgical strategies, I can help the reader understand new worlds by making these fit within the well-known world they already inhabit, then guiding their gaze to see through my protagonists' eyes. The following example from Thomas's portrait borrows his words to describe a 'hero' figure that influenced his desire to teach natural science. In a formal account it might have been enough just to say that Thomas's desire to teach was triggered by presenters he watched on TV. This more dramaturgical approach fleshes out the description of the person who influenced him most, briefly portraying him as eccentric in both dress and behaviour but also informative, and most likely audience aware – an engaging character and a natural scientist breaking new ground, a worthy idol!

> *"Two people, in particular, were almost idols to Thomas, becoming role models for his teaching. He came across both of them by watching TV in childhood. One arrived immaculately clad in a suit with a dickie bow and spectacles with inch-thick glasses. At one moment he might stand still, explaining something, and the next minute swiftly turn about and rush into the swamp behind, catching insects. He was fun to watch and what an orator he was! He communicated aspects of natural science long before anybody had considered doing so in popular terms. "I almost kneel before him, even*

> *today, if he appears on TV". Thomas smiles wryly. "Actually, I carry him in my heart. My students, of course, have no knowledge of any of this"."*

The excerpt shows how, in the portrait of Thomas, I aim to put forward his perspective as a teacher and indirectly his relation to his students. Thomas is not afraid to make fun of himself when he talks about his emotional attachment to what he sees as heroes of communication from his childhood – very aware that these two men, although immensely knowledgeable, would hardly 'burn through' the media today. Such a paragraph is aimed at communicating Thomas's superiority within his subject which can only be understood by readers of his age group. To kneel, however – an utterance Thomas actually made – is widely understood.

It is worth noting that portraits are not intended to be full texts in themselves and stand alone. Normally, they will be embedded within a larger, overarching and more traditional academic text, that enables the writer to add analysis, comments and references to a broader literature. The portraits serve as data, providing the perspective of a social agent who will be one of many. There is a precedent for using multiple layers of analysis within a single text in the work of other scholars, for example, Bourdieu (1999).

Portraiture

I now want to explain how I incorporate Portraiture in my writing but first I discuss and set aside the concept of the Pen Portrait, a simpler and more commonplace element often used in qualitative research, which when used in sociology, is a brief description written to introduce an informant to the reader. However, it seems that pen portraits – although widely used especially in marketing and in health studies to provide short descriptions of people – lack a clear academic definition and, consequently, specific methodological guidance. When teaching students, I use the metaphor of the 'Maggi cube', seeing the pen portrait as a condensed source of all that is needed to achieve an intended outcome; in research, to justify the later and more abstract, sociological analysis and discussion. Pen portraits seem at first glance to be mere descriptions but writing them is far from simple. They should encapsulate the essence of the first meeting between the researcher and participant and capture the atmosphere in which this takes place but also anticipate aspects relevant to later analysis al even though these may only be identified later when

studies are inductive. Consequently, pen portraits start the writing process but are redone at the end, acknowledging the difference between 'context of discovery' and 'context of justification' (Popper, 2002), and, drawing inspiration from phenomenological analysis, reflect on shared experiences and awareness of space and place.

Now, I turn to Portraiture, the second aspect of writing relevant to making a portrait, and here I draw ideas from a sociologist, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. Inspired by a desire to incorporate creative and artistic items into her work she and a colleague, a trained artist Jessica Davis, developed this method. Previously, Lawrence-Lightfoot's work focussed on writing portraits of schools that examined the cultures in which they were embedded (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2008). Davis was involved in cooperative explorations in local communities. This was action-oriented and more similar to art-based research, using artistic processes to capture the subjectivity of the human experience. Together they duo-authored a methodological book, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, each in turn describing how to work with portraits in academic work (Lawrence-Lightfoot et al., 1997). They explored the elements of writing portraits co-operatively, arguing that a portrait spans aspects of aesthetics and empiricism.

For me, New Journalism had sparked ideas of how to write narrative accounts of individual subjects, and trying this out, I found that learning to craft them could result in better pen portraits. But how and why became clear when I read about Portraiture.

Lawrence-Lightfoot examined her personal experiences of being painted by a skilled artist and reflected on how the finished portrait captured her essence in ways that she had not anticipated (Lawrence-Lightfoot et al., 1997, 2005). From this she put forward a methodology for writing detailed word portraits that is academically sound. Furthermore, in her methodological exploration she questions what makes a film or literature – even works that describes specific rather than universal issues – have general relevance. For example, how can Pontoppidan's *Lucky Per* (1898-1904), a Danish 'coming of age' novel describing a specific young man's difficulty in adapting to cultural and religious norms, have a broader importance or appeal? It can because the novel touches on common human themes and does so through descriptions of atmosphere, background, and especially human relations that even if subjective seem to apply to all of us. Just as a good painting can capture an essence, an ambience, an embedded truth, even though it portrays a single

person or phenomenon, so, too, can a written portrait. Therefore, it makes sense that the researcher should not only consider the larger history when interpreting a small story – one that relates to a single case – but also when writing a text to communicate their findings.

As mentioned earlier, teachers in nature-related subjects are often perceived differently to those in cultural and language-based subjects. As scientists, they are representatives of a sector that holds a dominant position in society. In schools, their specialist teaching rooms are often physically separate resulting in limited contact with other colleagues. For historical reasons, they do not contribute significantly to the school's general education making them even more isolated. Thomas is aware of this, and his views are captured in the portrait:

> *"Why don't we consider natural science to be part of general education? That is something, Thomas often wonders about. It is a matter of course in school that the students learn about literature and history but nothing about natural sciences. We certainly could claim that nature is as important for the general education as culture is, but this is not the case today. For Thomas this is a huge dilemma. On the one hand natural science, and technology as well, have never been so widespread and embedded in most aspects of our existence, at society level as well as in everyday life. On the other hand, most people know less and less about natural science and technology. Even a simple understanding of physics and chemistry has been excluded from our lives."*

It is partly because of such reflections, that I wish to address teachers' professional lives in a broad sense. By fully considering the detail of his everyday life, I am able to redress the science teacher's isolation by presenting Thomas as one who daily considers his options about how best to practice his profession, just like every other teacher. Therefore, I draw out the similarities between the science teacher and his colleagues in the cultural and language subjects making him appear part of the larger group. In this way, his story – one that is grounded in a specific social and historical context – contributes to familiarising readers with the issues that many teachers struggle with.

I weave Thomas's own words into his portrait to achieve authenticity. Some relate to facts; others express his reflections on significant moments in his lived experience. Drawing on literature and established sources such as professional journals, I deepen the description beyond what Thomas actually told me. Later, based on his/her own experiences, I hope that the reader will assemble his/her own connections.

My making of the portrait

Having described the two inspirations for how I work with portraits – New Journalism and Portraiture – let's consider how I actually made Thomas's portrait. We have seen that I interviewed eight teachers. I had visited each of their schools, describing its geographical location, history and demography, and the social characteristics of the catchment. I then considered my options: Which interviewee reflected in depth on being a teacher with a university degree within natural science? Which interviewee best voiced considerations about the school subject itself and in relation to the role of teacher? Who would best fit my purpose of expressing views on nature? These were not questions I had asked in advance but ones that arose when I viewed all my interview material. I selected Thomas's story, but I could have chosen differently. The other seven interviews were not discarded; on the contrary, insights from them provided a background for the crafting of Thomas's portrait. In many ways, Thomas typified his generation, people from his social class and their educational choices, their concerns about how to educate students within the natural sciences. This was a key reason for choosing to tell *his* story.

Using the transcript of the interview with Thomas, I began to 'paint' (verbally) the scenery around the interview. It took place in a specific location in a part of Denmark with specific historical roots. On the one hand, this was a medieval town that, due to a convenient geographical location, occupied a significant position in merchant trading, home and abroad, whose specialised craft professions later developed into minor industries. On the other hand, it was a town that became central to the building of the social democratic welfare state, which certainly had its bearings on the city. These particularities did not influence Thomas directly but affected the atmosphere around the school and its students through the parents, their social positions and cultural values, attitudes towards education and the possibilities in the nearby labour market.

I then considered my ethnographic observations of Thomas's workplace, using them to supplement my description of the area. I had taken lots of photos that enabled me to remember and reflect on this unique place and compare it to the contexts of the other interviews. Such comparison provoked me to reflect on the significance of the social backgrounds of Thomas's students' and consider how their everyday physical surroundings, would influence the students' and their families' daily lives. Other teachers I have interviewed worked in city schools where historic buildings made it impossible to escape the weight of society's traditional institutions such as the church and the state. Not so, this place. The school was one of the very few public institutions at the border between the town's industrial area and the surrounding rural area. The atmosphere around Thomas's school was carefully planned to ensure traffic safety for everybody and to encourage social mobility, not for the individual but the collective. This aim was also mirrored in the school building: the school was – like others built in that period – made from solid materials crafted explicitly for young children's needs, and later rebuilt to support new ideas of learning (see also work from McLeod & Rasmussen, 2021). As with other interviews, I had spent hours in Thomas's school before actually meeting Thomas. I observed empty corridors and areas during class hours, as well as how these places became populated with students between classes. I witnessed a child breaking his arm and saw how well-prepared the staff were to deal with this. I studied pictures and posters about this-and-that, saw how even the floor had an educational purpose in pictorially depicting Danish history, how footprints were painted in the dining area to nudge children to remember to dispose of their waste properly, and how children were encouraged to do group work outside class … and much more.

When I actually met Thomas – we had agreed to meet at the school's entrance even though I had already spent hours at the premises – we went off to his room. My observations now changed to focus on Thomas and his relations to his social and physical surroundings, and we had chatted while walking to the place for the interview. A teacher's room is rare in Danish schools. It is classes that have rooms not teachers, but traditionally some natural science subjects are an exception, as safety regulations must be met. And being a physics teacher, Thomas shared a room with colleagues teaching the same subject but, in many ways, he had his 'own' room for he was seen as 'the boss' in the sense of

the ‘go to’ for any subject-related matter in the school’s small group of natural science teachers.

I had started the interview with a broad request for Thomas to tell me about his life but due to a previous written invitation to participate in my project, he already knew that I was interested particularly in his life as a natural scientist and schoolteacher. At intervals, I prompted him to describe elements from his everyday life, science as a subject, his encounters with teaching, of students and their backgrounds, his future expectations and his relationship with other teachers and the school in general. I later transcribed the interview, turning the life story into a history (after Goodson, 2001), paying attention to turning points in Thomas’s life (after Denzin, 1995) as well as his use of language (Bruner, 2004). When writing up, and inspired by New Journalism and Portraiture, I paid interest to both process and product considering my process to be similar to a painter’s work which, initially, puts a background on the canvas, then makes rough sketches, possibly using a palette which captures the atmosphere around the motif. The painter may make various attempts to capture the essence of the motif. These may – or may not – greatly alter, or even erase, the initial work. My process was a parallel one. The school as an institution and the protagonist’s social conditions serve as background. The ethnographic observation serves as lighter shades and my imagination provides further texture as I reflect on things I do not know precisely. For example, in relation to Thomas, I found myself wondering, ‘If I opened a drawer in Thomas’s teaching room, how would it be organised?’ although I never actually looked into any drawers. Thinking like this enabled my thoughts to become clearer. As I have interviewed many teachers from similar backgrounds about comparable topics, I have a feel for what I need, and this familiarity provides depth to the portrait even though extraneous material will not be mentioned directly. Altogether, I aim to write a full portrait which delineates a life seen from the interviewee’s perspective but, at the same time, this is written with the reader in mind: a reader who at the outset has little interest in teachers of natural science.

Coming to an end of the portrait, Thomas reflects on his life by looking back on his earlier experiences:

> *“Thomas acknowledges that he, as the years have passed, has become a more nuanced man, and that he today has found hidden sides of himself. He even*

experiences having poetic and philosophical thoughts. Maybe it is because he has become older, but also because he, from being a teacher – not too long ago – suddenly understood how he himself had experienced his childhood. His memories from his schooldays were that things were not always easy. The explanation was the simple one that Thomas was a gifted child. It is only recently that we have started to talk about this phenomenon in the ordinary school system and acknowledge that such children are present in schools – hence Thomas's challenges were not recognized when he was at school. For Thomas this was a discovery that made things fall into place and made room for new thoughts. For example, now he dares to question the idea that being interested in a natural science subject should automatically exclude one from the discussion of the aims for general education."

Viewed overall, this is not a portrait constructed as an ideal type following a Weber-perspective (Rosenberg, 2016), a 'fictionalisation' (Breen, 2017) or a creative ethnography (Richardson, 2002). It is a carefully constructed portrait made from a biographical interview and an analysis of the interviewee's position within his profession as a teacher. When creating the portrait, I have used Thomas's own story, the social and material structures within which the story sits, setting the story in his work context, the contemporary society, school and the teaching profession, of which he is part. All together this is a construction of a text with the aim of communicating Thomas's position and dispositions in the social space, his work as a teacher within the teaching profession itself.

I will finish my description of the making of the portrait with the last words from the portrait of Thomas. These sentences end the portrait but, in reality, they were never said as they appear here. They were small utterances among the biographical tellings, surfacing between my questions, Thomas's answers, and mutual reflections during the interview. I chose to end the portrait by showcasing the tension Thomas faces existentially between the all-to-well-known social position of his primary family and his later professional position. A division anyone who has climbed the social ladder knows only too well.

"Today Thomas thrives being a university educated teacher in the public school. He enjoys his subject, loves to communicate about it, and he has good

> *colleagues he discusses things with and is happy to help if anyone ask him to. The only thing which is a bit sad has to do with his family. When, at special occasions, he meets up with his siblings – they haven't anything to talk about anymore really ...”*

Post-academic writing?

Now, I want to consider how writing a portrait the way described above is an example of post-academic writing. On the one hand, it is written in ordinary rather than non-academic words and can be understood by broader audiences, as Badley (2019) identifies. Furthermore, a portrait, and definitely the portrait quoted in this article, is not a view from nowhere but from a specific person's perspective. On the other hand, from a sociological perspective, understanding the social world can never claim to be neutral but positioned according to societal power structures. For Thomas, this is about being a child born in a petit bourgeoise family at the brink of the breakthrough of the welfare state around 1960 with increased support for education and consequently free admission to the university with no consideration of later employability for anyone who wanted to study. This is also about his choice of profession, for his master's in science was followed by a year-long attempt to enter daycare and public schools. For the first, he was rejected for his lack of knowledge about how to work with children, at a time when the early-years area strived to professionalise and did not welcome other or alternative perspectives. For the second, he was rejected for his lack of knowledge about teaching. Both daycare pedagogues and public-school teachers have strong historical roots and a strong tradition, and fight for their exclusive right to define their field within the teaching profession. That certainly does not include anyone who has not passed the profession's formal teacher education. Nor, thirdly, were the publics schools particularly sympathetic to the natural sciences despite their status within contemporary social discourse. Altogether, Thomas faced a three-fold battle for the right to belong. In my view, and from a sociological perspective, it is precisely conflicts like these that Post-academic writing should address. Tensions within the social space need to be examined from both broad and subjective perspectives to be better understood and to enable positive change to occur.

Julia Cameron, a teacher of creative writing, raises relevant issues in her popular book on spirituality and creativity (Cameron, 1992). She reminds her readers that in order

to connect with the world, people must pay attention, something that researchers, in my experience, often pass over. As academics, we consider ethical claims, analyse through theory, apply methods to get data, talk about methodology, ontology, and epistemology, etc., which is all good and right. But do we really pay attention when doing research? Do we continually ask: What is important here? What does not count? What is unthinkable, and why? We should continuously pay attention to what we study, especially when humans are involved. Sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) or ethnographic imagination (Atkinson, 1990) might help us partly achieve this, but we need to learn to pay attention in the moment where things occur, or surface, and describe these for others carefully, to convey a person's perspective in a way that attracts readers and is therefore read.

When reading "his" portrait, Thomas was happy, feeling that I had managed to capture and express the spirit of *his* story!

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Who am I? Once a civil engineer, then business graduate who finally joined the humanities and sociology. Steeped in Bourdieu, I later embraced biographical and narrative research methods and more creative ways to introduce individuals and their lifestyles to a general audience. Experimenting with ideas from journalism and the broader arts I try to communicate clearly across academic boundaries, to encourage those in other fields to pay attention to the needs and warnings of those from other disciplines or no discipline at all, so that we can learn to live sustainably.