

Entrepreneurship and being: the case of the Shaws

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Our paper takes the case of John and Elizabeth Shaw, early nineteenth-century English hardware factors. The sources are almost 200 hundred letters written by the Shaws and their circle. Using these, two readings of the Shaws' experiences of creating a business are presented. The first is couched within a narrative structure of plotted stages and finds the Shaws starting, struggling to, and ultimately succeeding in creating a successful business. Here, their actions within a nascent industrialized economy can be described as entrepreneurial – they successfully pursued opportunity through founding an enterprise within economically and technologically auspicious environments. The second, more phenomenological reading, opens up for consideration the questionableness of their experience of 'being in business'. Here the Shaws' understanding of themselves (as conveyed in personal letters) brings into question the academic tendency to emplot their story as one of the staged growth and profitability. Specifically, it resists attempts to ascribe to their experience entrepreneurial status, not simply because they did not think of themselves as entrepreneurs, but because the appearance of the business for the Shaws was woven with their lives in ways that belie the narrative direction and coherence that concepts like entrepreneurship give to it.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; Heidegger; history; England; Victorian industrialization; organization

1. Introduction

Our subjects are John and Elizabeth Shaw, an early nineteenth-century husband and wife involved in the creation and growth of *John Shaw and Sons*. They traded in ironmongery, initially in the Midlands and north of England, before internationalizing. Neither John nor Elizabeth identified themselves as engaged in entrepreneurial activity, though their traits (diligence, persistence, boldness) and experiences (creating and running new ventures, merging home and business life) merged with wider institutional conditions (new technology, emerging markets) to realize a successful, long-lived group of businesses. Their story can be read as a classic tale of venture creation and growth. The Shaws' experience of this success is given ongoing expression in their letters, from which personal and expressive testimony of ordinary lives we find conditions that disrupt any straight telling of this story of growth. Out of this disruption, concepts like 'entrepreneur' and 'business' emerge in an equivocal, febrile light.

Our study is not trait based. Any isolation of an agent with requisite entrepreneurial characteristics knowledgeably organizing resources in the service of aims becomes, through an historical reading, a more contested, institutionally bound identity. Nor is our study structure based. Understanding the entrepreneur as a conduit of wider environmental forces (such as raw material availability or macro-economic monetary supply) eschews

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the idiosyncratic and personal quality of agency conveyed in any analysis of letters. This seemingly places our study within a broadly configured narrative approach, in which the traits of agents and the weight of institutional forces are understood together, each manifesting the other within relational conditions that play out over time as an entrepreneurial story.

Stories are integral to the human condition as the means by which experience is made meaningful; they gather and arrange the comparisons by which things and events become things and events of significance in everyday lives. Narrative studies use stories, placing them in the context of wider systems, weaving description and explanation into an emplotted sequence of experience, meaning and justification. Yet although our study does create a narrative around the Shaws, it does not end there. It continues to critique narrative accounts. Just as trait and structural approaches to entrepreneurship invoke the specificity and unity of an entity (an entrepreneurial type or institutional condition), so narrative approaches invoke a specificity and unity in the entrepreneurial story itself, insofar as beginning, middle and end are plotted, a self that stops and environment that starts are related, and generic structures (a story about rags-to-riches achievement, say) are distilled. There is typically a teleological drive to narrative studies that impute a unifying direction to the detail of human lives; the question remains whether such a drive is actually experienced.

In a first reading of the Shaws' letters, our narrative account identifies events experienced by these (proto) entrepreneurs in forming a venture undergoing periods of struggle and growth within wider market and environmental conditions. To understand the Shaws using narrative analysis in this way invokes assumptions, making John especially (with Elizabeth becoming a kind of sustaining backdrop) appear as an opportunity-finding individual set within an evolving environment of material and psycho-social constraints and wider institutional settings with which he deals more or less successfully over time. Though this narrative gives us analytic grip over events in the early nineteenth century, a 'venture', a technological 'opportunity', or an emerging market, were as distinct 'things' little more than hints and shadows in a fast-emerging industrial landscape. Moreover, even where these were readily identified, the letters find that Shaw is experiencing this 'venture creation and growth' quite differently from that typically imputed to entrepreneurs by narrative studies.

So what we do with the Shaws is to provide a narrative analysis of their story, and then upset it, we provide a second reading, suggesting both readings are plausible, and legitimate. A clear story from relatively humble origins, through challenge to success and the creation of legacy, is possible. The letters provide us with insights into the kinds of agency and institutional structure prevalent throughout the founding and growing of a substantial business, and obvious links can be made to current understandings of entrepreneurial venture creation. But the letters also show how experiences significant for the Shaws become concealed by the teleological power of this narrative – powerful because it draws so much from the current twenty-first century concerns with commercial growth and flourishing, and because of the strength of the concepts and generic structures underpinning it, both those used in entrepreneurship studies and narrative analysis. The emplotting of struggle and growth makes the story satisfying, but what does such ordering of knowledge occlude as it also reveals? Would another approach be equally revealing because of its refusal to rely on such strong narrative drive and conceptualization?

2. Understanding entrepreneurs with narrative

Narrative approaches to the study of organizational phenomena acknowledge them as time-bound and sequentially shaped. Organizations occupy an identifiable historical passage of time and can be historicized: placed against wider backgrounds of tradition, values and events.

Organization is also a process of human engagement involving an interplay of events, things and themes whose status is always evolving in potentially interesting ways. Narratives fix organizational experience within a conceptual ordering (sequences of cause and effect and determining factorial combinations within limited, temporal passages), lending the world a cleanliness that aids understanding without sticking it fast. Rather than begin or end with either the self or institutional environment, narratives investigate the relational condition that is prior and primary to either of them, showing, for example, the co-determination of business structures and agental values or how the significance of any organizational vision for the future is of little value without the alchemy of personal remembering as to why such vision matters.

In understanding that aspect of organizational life denoted as entrepreneurial, narrative analysis typically finds entrepreneurs as selves-in-context for whom resources and opportunities arise because of the relational conditions through which self-expression and institutional constraint are made possible (Low and Abrahamson 1997). Narrative studies are adept at presenting and analysing new ventures or opportunity pursuit in ways privileging neither agent nor context, instead bringing the two into a kind of perpetual dance (Baker, Miner, and Eesley 2003; Down 2006; Down and Warren 2008) involving multiple agents and interpenetrating organizational and institutional conditions. Understood from a narrative perspective, entrepreneurs are in the business of continually (re)negotiating the constraints they experience in order to expose themselves to as many and as varied a set of opportunities as the conditions they encounter allow (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001). Thus, the entrepreneur is considered reflexive as well as rational; identity, thoughts and actions are continually and inevitably organized within institutional and material settings in an unending ebb and flow of sequenced enabling and constraint (Sarason and Dillard 2006). The entrepreneur might be distinguished from other actors in business because they are arranged as an often unique conjunction of opportunity and individuality, yet this distinctiveness is only ever experienced against what Johannisson (2011) calls an 'organizing context'. It is from within this context of public agreement on what counts as 'being significant' that the entrepreneur innovates. Narratives show this, staying with the events and experiences of being entrepreneurial rather than retreating hastily into theorized statements of cause and effect (Dodd 2002; Sarasvathy 2004). In entrepreneurial narrative studies, opportunities are neither discovered nor are they entirely constructed but exist as a co-creation of material and technological possibility coupled to an often collectively configured experience of discovery and bricolage (Baker and Nelson 2005; Hargardon and Douglas 2001). There is in narratives a willingness to return to, and remain with, the prosaics of lived process (Steyaert 2007), something acknowledged by entrepreneurial agents themselves, for whom stories function as a means of making sense of their business to themselves, as well as persuading others of its viability. Not only does good storytelling allow entrepreneurs to demonstrate what Baron and Markman (2003) call the social competence of face-to-face interaction in order to secure resources (Martens, Jennings, and Jennings 2007), it demands of the entrepreneur a sensitivity to wider influences of story traffic (O'Connor 2002, 52) in which the entrepreneur is often a lost and insignificant figure proceeding 'as if' they were more substantial (Gartner, Bird, and Starr 1992). Thus to study entrepreneurial activity using narratives is to find plotlines and isolate significant events in ways that resonate with those being studied; it is less an imposition on the phenomena than working with already existing means of making sense (Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007; Sarasvathy 2004).

3. Phenomenology

We want to consider whether narrative analyses really do provide richly contextualized, temporally sensitive, cases of entrepreneurial experience. To begin, we turn to the tradition

in which studies of live, everyday experience have received their fullest expression, phenomenology. Phenomenology (from *phenomena*, meaning appearance), notably Heidegger's ([1969] 1972, 58–59) version, attains a near-documentary perspective on ordinary life through descriptions of what he calls our thrownness. Our experience of the world begins not as something entire, but from within, it appears as (potential) equipment-for-us, which we use and restlessly refine in our practical concern for survival and flourishing (Haar 1993; Held 2007; Polkinghorne 1988). This equipmental condition goes largely unnoticed within everyday activities; things are ready to hand. Trains are taken without thought for fragility of energy supplies by which they move; money is earned and spent without thought for the promissory structures by which it bears value; newspapers are read without thought for the etymology of words.

It is only when things frustrate our interests because of breakdowns – engines catch fire, inflation erodes currency values, words are misprinted – that we attend to our thrown, equipmental condition. The readiness to hand of things is replaced by their becoming present, visible as objects of inquiry whereby we seek the recovery of readiness through the use of fixes, alterations and replacements. It is through this making present of things in inquiry and fixing that we develop and use theoretical knowledge, allowing us to better understand the nature of things as isolate-faceted entities, and their possible utility. So theory becomes a second-order relationship with things and events. Theories – associated say with combustion, money supply or language use – emerging from equipmental frustration are fixed in expectation of resolution and are warranted by a sense of the world becoming something amenable once more to our practical endeavour. There is, though, ontological separation here; no matter how closely we theorize things we will only understand its readiness-to-hand *in use*. For example, in perceiving a coin we might recognize its being a made from metal alloy, we can ascribe it a colour, feel its weight, read the symbols embossed on its face, but in no way understand its readiness-to-hand, which is experienced only within relational conditions of exchange. The coin is tossed idly to a beggar, or placed guardedly in a money box, both of which only make sense against an entire backdrop of personally located experience of collective money use. The coin can only be encountered (understanding arising from use) from within the entire gamut of often invisible (habitual) conditions by which such use is constituted.

To understand the entrepreneurial experience phenomenologically, then, is to appreciate readiness to hand, as much as it is the theoretical distillation of that experience in concepts that identify phenomena as discrete, substantive things and events. We are prone to understanding things substantively, we identify what is present, e.g. the bodily figure of the entrepreneur him or herself, to which is added the presence of a mind, cognitive powers and traits. Or we identify specific structures (markets) or material things (technology, resources) that again have properties. Heidegger suggests an alternative raft of questions investigating the nature of being itself, the experience of being entrepreneurial. This begins with an awareness of the equipmental condition, how entrepreneurs find themselves thrown.

Heidegger ([1951] 1968, 34), however, finds that there is more to thrown-ness than equipmentality. As well as being ready to hand (or frustrating such readiness) things and events can also appear in *ek-statis*, beyond their either being equipment or present as theoretically configured subjects of analysis (Haar 1993, 23). This appearance is occasional, occurring when things and events are found to 'open up in possibility' where possibility is less something predictable (albeit as a range, ranked by probability and filtered by desirability) than an opening out, without precedent (Heidegger [1988] 1999, 209–210). This appearance, being relational, involves what Heidegger calls hesitation; rather than habitually coerce the world into some kind of pragmatic alignment the human

being becomes reticent, content to await the happening of being without compelling or even expecting it. Through hesitation, we understand the world shimmers, often ambiguously (Heidegger 1962, 102–104). We also appreciate how when we question the world we can do so pragmatically, theoretically *and* simply as an expression of our own being-there, and the latter stops at a resolute curiosity; questions are posed not simply to better confine the world to our interests but because they are indicative of life itself (Introna 2009; Safranski 1999, 120–125; Cooper 2005). In hesitation, we may transcend momentarily our equipmental condition and hold onto an awareness of the world as something uncanny, and of our self as essentially free (encountering possibility in what is concealed and in whose withdrawing wake the world appears) (Held 1996; Staehler 2007). This understanding of self as a being that is thrown into existing structures and yet finds leeway in incompleteness (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 145SZ) is a condition of care. Care describes experiences in which a sense of distinct subject meeting the world of objects dissolves, and instead being appears stretched out beyond the moment towards an unmarked, vague sense of the future configured by nothing more than potential.

4. Narrative, emplotment and teleology

We have, then, three conditions of understanding: making things present in theoretical analysis; investigating equipmentality; investigating care. Narrative entrepreneurial studies share with phenomenological approaches a beginning from within the settings in which entrepreneurially implicated agents find themselves. Narratives place the entrepreneur and narrative studies evoke such placing. However, this placing can take different forms. Much narrative analysis concentrates on what we have called the pragmatic condition of equipmentality and its knowledgeable recovery and transformation. As theorists like O'Connor (2002), Hjorth and Steyaert (2004) and Sarasvathy (2004) attest, what often marks a life as entrepreneurial is a questioning relationship with equipment. The entrepreneur is able to imaginatively engage with equipmental relations in ways that upset established uses or suggest new ones (see Bergland 2007; Cope 2005; Hjorth, Jones, and Gartner 2008). To follow through the previous examples of human relationships with trains, money and print, but from within the lifetime of the Shaws': freight might be carried by train rather than cart or canal; bills of exchange might be traded as equivalents to money and print can be extended to commercial advertisements. Narrative studies show how entrepreneurs can disrupt readiness to hand, finding opportunities in encouraging others to rethink what is typically concealed in their equipmentality. Narratives typically do this by enlisting a form of teleological reasoning; explaining the historical emergence of patterns in events and norms through reference to outcomes and settlements, ascribing purposefulness, intent or design to phenomena.

Narratives are rendered teleological through emplotting. Using the imposition of (temporal) order, plots are deliberately constructed arrangements of events and characters (Watson 2009). Nor is this emplotting incidental, rather 'it is emplotment that gives significance' (Somers 1994, 616). It is through emplotment that meaning and identities are made and the evaluative bases for acting apparently formed; they take on narrative structures by which sequences of events might be compared and made sense of (Pentland 1999). Entrepreneurial plots are no exception, having a 'typical structure ... directed at "explicit lessons" about what was done or not done' (Gartner 2007, 61). Within such plots, what becomes distinct about entrepreneurs is their capacity to cope with or create moments of breakdown in everyday human activities and to respond imaginatively with new ideas or new, better tools (Johansson 2004).

For example, Czarniawska's (2009) narrative analysis of the entrepreneurial role of the Webbs, Bernard-Shaw and Wallas in the emergence of the London School of Economics and Political Science shows how, in the context of growing unease concerning Britain's role in its empire, the creation of the first University dedicated to social science might provide the professionally educated administrators and business people with the explanatory ideas and expertise to compensate for such qualms. The entrepreneurs are important in the story, but not controlling; they are subject to wider institutional forces by which their initial insights are skewed, re-directed even, to arrive at a school fit for the purpose of settling the policy and commercial elite in new social and political realities. The frame of entrepreneur-in-context is also developed in Hamilton's (2006a) use of the narrative structures of 'reversal' (a change of fortune such as a new regulation, new technology, accident) 'recognition' (insight from learning episodes) and 'suffering' (struggle to raise finance, long hours) to make sense of the creation and running of small family businesses. Narrative studies make present the continual conversation of agents and situations, isolating repeated patterns and identifying deeper structural conditions into which agents find themselves thrown.

Following Heidegger, however, whilst investigations might begin by using narrative understandings of entrepreneurial life as one of thrownness and its pragmatic enhancement, we might bring into question first the readiness to make things present (categorical subjects of observation) rather than continuing to describe equipmentality, and second, whether we can look beyond equipmentality by considering whether entrepreneurs might experience moments of hesitation and undecidedness in which the objects of being in business become lost. On both counts, there is a merging of agent and structure that resists plotted endings or identified narrative structures. Whilst narrative theorists might argue that narratives avoid rigid abstractions because they accept the 'destabilizing dimensions of time, space and relationality', we find emplotting offers a counter re-stabilization manifest in concerns with equipmental recovery (Somers 1994, 606; Nelson 2007, 16). Narratives can foreclose on understanding the actual experience of being entrepreneurial, as well as eschew the latency and propensity experienced when things are understood *ek-statis*, beyond being equipment, being met in moments of hesitancy. This foreclosing often emerges from straightforward instrumentalism. The identification of specific contexts and aims can confine analysis within blunt literalism of making present, a belief that it is possible to glean 'what is really being said' (Gartner 2007, 614). Moreover, there is a tendency towards a form of structured theoretical reduction of narratives into generic plots of the kind advanced by Booker (2005), for whom, evidently, all stories can be distilled into seven basic plots. With such structuring, the influence of phenomenal experience becomes discounted in favour of the analysis itself. An entrepreneurial story is not about being in the world but presented as a quest for recognition and attainment; or a passage from rags to riches; or an overcoming of monsters or tragedy.

Emplotted through narrative structures, and delineated with a discernible and dominating beginning, middle and end, narratives can foreclose on the very undecidedness by which the creation of and sustaining of organizational conditions are made possible, especially its entrepreneurial aspects. Narratives can elucidate deeper structure from the experience of everyday organizational life, give it form, but this thrown-ness of everyday life is beyond such structuring. A turn to unemplottedness and a consequent questioning of the purposeful confinement of entrepreneurial experience are, then, potentially significant, as we ask with what epistemological framing might we appreciate entrepreneurial being equipmentally, and, in addition, whether this equipmentality exhausts the experience of being-in-business?

5. Sources and methods

We use here data from two collections of letters – epistolaria – between members of the inter-related Shaw and Wilkinson families. The Shaw–Wilkinson collection, comprising 50 letters dated between 1799 and 1831, is held in Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies. The collection covers multiple generations and relationships. This archive also holds extensive business records relating to John Shaw. The second collection comprises approximately 150 letters between multiple members and generations of the Shaw family and is held in the Library of the University of Birmingham. This collection includes 108 letters between husband and wife John and Elizabeth Shaw (nee Wilkinson), John Shaw being a hardware factor operating from the town of Wolverhampton. Of these 108 letters, 39 are from John to Elizabeth, covering the period 1810–1839, and 69 from Elizabeth to John, covering the period 1811–1836. Both epistolaria comprise private letters between family members. The letters were handwritten but are available in transcriptions undertaken by the respective libraries. In many cases both versions were read.

We read the letters apart and together. Guided by these close readings, and mindful that the narrative structures with which we were familiar were potentially both helpful and a hindrance, we felt the codifications necessary for formal methods of textual analysis inappropriate. In reading letters, we came to think of them as having particular qualities as a source. First, the intimate, private epistolary form provides evidence that cannot easily be read simply as statements of fact. Instead, we must recognize letters as a correspondence in which addresser and addressee alternate in conversation, actively work out sense together. Letters disrupt the presumption of sole agency; they emerge from a relational condition primary to, and at the base of, emerging distinctions and identities. In part, they are an extended situation in which roles are built, morals enacted, assertions made, abilities displayed, yet unlike what Alvesson (2003) calls a localist and romantic understanding of interviews; this creation of meaning involves researchers at some historical distance. Moreover, the letters are conversations without the purposeful influence of questions. Correspondence also exists in the relationship between researchers and the epistolaria, as we read the words of strangers and read into the letters meanings that make them less strange. In both relational conditions, there is the possibility of sympathy with the construction of narrative identity; thus the potential of the letters is intriguing if not always obvious. Yet as much as letters articulate and reveal an identity or meaning they just as readily conceal it, and as an on-going expression (without expectation of finality) of everyday being they reveal an emergent, processual being-with-the-world in which things and events have tenuous hold. Letters are not fixing accounts, and disrupt our expectations for such, and so offer rich possibilities for phenomenological investigation.

Second, letters have important temporal dimensions. Sometimes, they overlap in the time/space in which they are written, sent, received, read and answered, but they are largely produced in a temporal sequence: I speak, you speak in answering response. In this, they are temporally limited in a way that might correspond to the arcs of narratives. But retrospectively the order of epistolaria is more apparent than real, discernible only to the later reader who has the luxury of coming to the set whole and complete. For the addresser/addressee, the epistolarium is always unfolding, immanent, coming into being in step with the coming into being of the lived life – always incomplete and hence latent, pushing towards unknown and undecided possibility as much as to resolution; corresponding is punctuated with pauses, silences, that are full of propensity as one awaits the next letter, the final letter? The letters narrate – that is *tell* – from one moment to the next, but they are not of themselves a narrative. They are radically open and uncertain.

If collected and stored further complicating relationships to time emerge. The epistolarium becomes a resource for remembering. Time becomes a series of swirling eddies that loop backwards and forwards. This stitching together – always in the absence of conclusion – has also a particular spatiality. Letters are a product of separation. They open up a space through which to make oneself present to those you are distanced from – an opening up *performed* across time as well as space – but which relies on absence for its presence, the letter is the condition of being there projected from within absence, both in terms of what has been and cannot be undone (the irreversible departure of the admitted and unadmitted past), and the absence of what is to come (the possibility of future meetings, or continued absences or expectations unformed by things or events).

Third, letters are written. For Van Manen (1990) and Hochschild (1998), following Gadamer ([1960] 1989, 392), writing fosters, potentially, an externalizing of experience such that, by distancing us from the everyday, things and events become isolated and so stare back at us, affording us a glimpse of the organized conditioning that elicits appropriate, pragmatic behaviours but which often passes unnoticed; writing can hint at the base conditions out of which we live (Bleicher 1980). Understanding circulates through letters, each constituting beginning and end in an ongoing circulation by which understanding arises from the continued application of pen, thought, memory, expectation and eye in the expression of meaning. Writing, and encountering writing, by reading are both ordinary yet potentially exposing. This is notably so in personal letters, in which the other's absence is often intimately felt, as is the sense of things and events having passed, or coming to the fore, as phenomenal appearances to be heard, written and read about. The Shaws' letters are not so much 'about' things and events, as part of them, the language of writing and reading, is continuing to open out possibilities and conceal others. Letters are often animated by curiosity, by suggestion, by hesitation, by reflection or by declamatory urgency. They are expressive as much as they are descriptive, and through this thicket of nuance they excite movement between things and events and common understandings in a way that belies attempts to fix the content or even grammar.

Finally, with letters, there is a sense of handling things of worth. Using letters can elicit in researchers an awareness of facts (from *erga*, deeds or works) in which meanings can endure, or dissolve much like sand dunes being shaped by moving wind and tide. Theoretically understood life is a feint construct, and the data, though they speak to us researchers, are clearly not there for us. The intimacy and sense of thinking about a life being led conveyed by letters, especially personal letters, found us suspicious that perhaps what we (think we) know – our concepts like 'entrepreneur' and our theories about entrepreneurs – gets in the way. A kind of unshackling ensues a willingness to move to and fro, both within the letters from the said to and unsaid, and beyond the letters, hearing what is being said or unsaid in the contexts of larger historical processes, personal biographies, none of which subsumes continuing acts of interpretation and judgement.

Bringing these qualities of letters together promotes a refusal to quickly pronounce upon things or to propositionally constrain them, coupled to a willingness to be simply struck by them akin to Heidegger's hesitancy in the face of our inevitable tendency to conceptualize. So our use of the letters has not been subject to formal methods of content or discourse analysis. Instead, in empathy with the thrown-ness of the Shaws, we sought to find our own thrown-ness in relation to the data, to develop a lived engagement with them marked, as were the Shaws' lives, by concern and perhaps even hesitancy. Hence two readings: first a use of basic narrative structures (indications of struggle for example) and established story lines (voyage, rags to riches), and then a second reading that plays against the first, evocative of phenomenological method. Combined, these readings cannot

be aimed narrowly at theory building, the generation of hypotheses or the testing of either. Rather, we seek to explore emergent possibilities in meaning as they opened up in reading and discussing.

We hear significance in the letters, finding resonance between a small moment being recounted and, say, its larger historical setting, before then moving back to an account of another thing or event, and so towards another larger setting, perhaps this time economic, or familial. The phenomenological experiences of Shaw are not *there* to be recovered, but they may in some sense be (re)imagined as what Gadamar calls horizons of understanding merge; those of the Shaws, we the researchers. What matters then are not preoccupations with validity and replicability or the completeness of true accounts, but the resonance of any account. In attending to this, we are minded of the four qualities identified by Polkinghorne (1988) of vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance, as well as Canetti's (1979) identification of writing as having the capacity for transformation, such that the upshot of our analysis and written paper is one of evoking and preserving the questionability of a world, rather than tying it off.

6. An entrepreneurial narrative

Here is one telling of the Shaws' 'story'. John Shaw was born in the village of Penn, Staffordshire, in the year 1782, son of John Shaw, farmer, and Elizabeth Shaw, nee Edwards. Britain was already launched on what came to be known as the Industrial Revolution. This was a series of complex transformations taking place: in the conditions of agricultural production; in national demographics; in the institutional systems of political economy; in communication and transportation systems; in the interlocking realms of international diplomacy, trade and colonization; in the technology of production and so in its organization; in the provision and circulation of finance; in cultures of consumption and the material world they produced; and in patterns of urbanization and social structure. As these transformations worked themselves through, reversals, and hence opportunity for 'entrepreneurship', were radically opened and re-ordered.

It was into this everyday condition of possibility that John Shaw was thrown. Little is known of his early life, but by 1800 John had been apprenticed to a Mr Sparrow of Wolverhampton, for whom he worked as a commercial traveller. By 1805, he had established himself as a hardware factor, distributing the metal-wares made in Wolverhampton and the surrounding Black Country. The recognition that he might set up in business on his own account, carrying the full burden of the commercial risks of owning a venture, reflected perhaps a strong sense of independence. Partners in business were to be treated with caution, Shaw once declared that he had 'a very great objection to partnerships unless some very great advantages are held out' (Shaw MSS/9: 12 November 1812). One potential partnership, with employee Henry Crane, did hold 'great advantages', for their alliance was to last from 1815 to 1848. This partnership found its most directly entrepreneurial expression in the establishment in Calcutta in 1834 of T.E. Thompson and Co. For a relatively small domestic factoring business, Shaw and Crane were being decidedly entrepreneurial: exercising judgement and boldness to exploit opportunities and realize commercial gain through the ongoing organization of business ventures.

However adventurous or visionary though, Shaw's businesses grew and found solid and orthodox organizational foundations. Obstacles were overcome; this was hard but ultimately rewarding work. The 'struggle' brought about a successful ending. John died in 1858, aged 76, a prosperous Victorian merchant and industrialist; his family installed in a country pile, and the firm he had founded, John Shaw and Sons, extended into manufacture

as well as factoring and run by sons Thomas Wilkinson Shaw and Edward Dethick Shaw. By 1889, when the firm became a public limited liability company, the family had created a complex engineering-focused group that retained independence until acquired by James Neill PLC in 1970. The Shaws' work ethic, a willingness to wait for and then seize opportunities, demonstrated insightful awareness both of the prevailing equipmental conditions in which people lived and of how these might be improved upon, or practiced differently.

Yet to read the Shaws' letters as sources to construct accounts of business success following biographically and historically neat narratives in which evolving sequences of temporally located events make sense of the industrious organization of the Shaws within the wider institutional setting of an irresistible industrialization is to confine lives without further investigation of what this distillation might avoid. The experiences evoked in the letters resist such easy narrative structure. The easy narrative for Shaw is a plot line from low beginning to a pillar of society, but the lives of the Shaws' are far more than plot, even if what lies outside is ordinary, emotional, incidental and hesitant open experience to which there is no immediate coherence.

7. Hearing the Shaws

The realization that John Shaw's life can be told again comes at a basic level. Shaw was not alone, ever, as prior to Elizabeth there are his parents, and other members of his family. As letters are read and allowed to ebb and flow, the emplotted tale about a single man arriving upon the world and ultimately making good disappears underground in places, and in others becomes estuarine in its hints, declamations, closings-off, laments and hopes. We are not abandoning analysis here, only unemplotting it, so we might document concerns that appear quick and fast before dissolving without trace, like bars and spits of land concealing themselves again as tides change, or which persist as nagging currents without calm. These have no real order, either chronological or psychically hierarchical, but they can be grouped, following Heidegger's stretched-out condition of thrown-ness, as either pragmatic concerns, or as care.

Reading the letters, there is an urge to surface concerns, experiences and emotions other than those focused on boldness or decision; experiences and emotions that emerge through the patterning of lives as they were lived and where the quotidian is marbled with thoughtful poise. Throughout much of his career, John continued with the commercial travelling he had commenced as a young apprentice. He typically undertook two selling journeys a year, each one lasting upwards of 2 months. Working life was a constant round of travel and visits to customers. Evenings were spent completing orders and accounts and writing letters. Elizabeth, too, often found herself away from home when John was not out on the road, tending to her parents, siblings and their commercial interests in Lancashire. In addition, holidays were taken in Skipton, Buxton, Aberystwyth and elsewhere, and spoken of fondly, always within the context of the travelling to which they were inured. When at home, John would spend the day working at the nearby warehouse, processing orders, payments and despatches, but at the same time playing a major role in the care of those children left with him, often for several weeks at a time whilst Elizabeth was away. Elizabeth combined childcare and domestic oversight with business involvement, liaising with partners, meeting customers and suppliers, dealing with finance, and passing information, intelligence and encouragement to John out on the road. The focus within the letters shifts in mirror play between the domestic (home and family) and the commercial (the firm). There was little to distinguish one from the other, nor the man from the woman;

both were both. In token of this, and even its complication, Henry Crane, John's business partner, was a frequent visitor to the Shaw home, whether or not John was present, indicating the deep sociability of this relationship. After one visit by Crane to Shaw's home, Elizabeth wrote to her absent husband how 'I like him [Crane] very well. There seems something cheerful and open about him . . . he is rather boyish – business seems to be his hobbyhorse' (Shaw MSS/43: 31 March 1815). Business was marriage and marriage was business, just as each was mother and father, carer and provider. Family and business were inextricably enjoined (Hamilton 2006b).

John and Elizabeth's worked in environments that were coped with rather than controlled. Uncertainty lay not simply in the unpredictability of events – an urban fire, an outbreak of cholera, industrial unrest, a banking collapse – but equally the persistence of ordinary doubts and the demands of preserving flexibility. Husbanding his resources, be they his physical strength or the goodwill of partners, customers or bankers, confronted John, reticent, sometimes lacking confidence, with tasks he did not enjoy. One feels sure he would have found the task too much for him without Elizabeth. Even as a young man John spoke of his desire to leave trade as though it were something he had been thrown up against, something difficult, something which confronted him.

We might read the letters from his mother here. Shaw first showed little of the character that was to mark out his business career, displaying a definite aversion to his work. His mother's letters urged him on in terms that help us to understand his later motivations; a mix of ambition, Christian virtue and a powerful sense of frustration. She, who had 'such an opinion of Industry that I think no person of either sex can be good if not Industrious', balked at John's frustrations with travelling: 'pluck up your spirits; put on a proper degree of modest assurance; and be what I hope to see you; an active tradesman and a noble virtuous character' (Wilkinson and Shaw MSS/29: 15 June 1801). Shaw responded, yet in witnessing this striving his mother did not relent, driven by a pressing sense of genealogical inheritance:

you much hurt me to find your reluctance to travelling still continues; for goodness sake what are you made of; you are no Edwards [her maiden name]; remember on this your first journey in a 'new way to you' you will stamp your chariskter [sic; character] for a trade's man. (Shaw and Wilkinson MSS/30: 30 August 1801)

Deep impulses and feelings of social constraint lay beneath these admonitions

my advice is to be warm in the pursuit of business . . . you will say I know nothing about [sic] it, but this much I know, that if nature had form'd me of the other sex I would have made a handsome competency [living] ere now. (Shaw and Wilkinson MSS/34: 27 February 1802)

The sense of the status and standing of the family name being at stake fuses with a reluctance to disappoint; finding 'advantage' through business was filial duty. Yet reading the letters was as much an impulse towards domestic contentment as a sense of family duty that appears. It was home

one thing however is pleasing and consoling to the mind amidst all these vexations – that home loses nothing of its fond attracting charms and endearments from absence – but on the other hand perhaps becomes more sweet, more enjoyed and more highly prized (Shaw MSS/19: 8 February 1822)

in which John delighted and through which the Shaws flourished.

Pragmatics – everyday coping activities of lives thrown into living with things – were to the fore in the letters, and business remained part of this unfolding ordinariness. The turning of the days and months and years make their presence immediate in the noticing of seasons, e.g. through the weather experienced on *that* day – a sudden summer

downpour whilst attending chapel on a visit to Liverpool, through the growing family and the physical growing of the children, through the growing of garden crops and through the unending cycles of trade. It was through these materialities that John and Elisabeth built and dwelt in an attempt to live a good life.

Other materialities constantly surfaced. Being, in the most urgent, corporeal sense, impressed itself bodily through colds caught riding on the outside of coaches, through pregnancies that are difficult and anxious, through childhood illnesses that disturb domestic calm, and always through death of parents, children, friends, and neighbours. Mortality was ever present to these deeply religious people. Life itself held little except as an interregnum before the 'final bourne' of heaven was attained.

Here, if one remained within the letters, is narrative plot, where voyage-oriented metaphors served to reinforce conceptions of journey and direction towards an afterlife, but where, also, experience rightly intrudes. There is always something to be done. This sociable materiality might take the form of dinner with a valued customer and his family, followed by music and singing, or of a barrel of oysters given as gift to a family member, or of a carpet from Kidderminster or a German harmonium as tokens of provision and solicitude within the domestic realm and family economy or, most powerfully, manifest itself as a deep and powerful physical longing for that which is removed: the security of home or, particularly, a husband's body

Oh my dear John, I lay in bed thinking how I shall enjoy clasping you to my bosom calling you by all those names my affection can invent. I think of it till I almost imagine it a reality . . . I feel as if I never should be satisfied with kissing and embracing you so you must prepare yourself for it. Nay I even talk of eating you – but at this rate I shall frighten you so I had better hold my tongue till I have you safe here. (Shaw MSS/48b: 16 April 1816)

In the face of this exchange, of what concern is profit maximization, the realization of planned outcomes via stipulated means, or a calculus of efficiency and effectiveness? In such ordinary expression everything was at stake. Is it, then, at root, deeply felt company – spousal, filial, sibling – that animates the experiences of being in business?

Things changed. Time elapsed. Though inevitable, John and Elizabeth sometimes experienced such elapses as unexpected and unsettling. Experience and memory gathered, actions generated outcomes – expanding family, expanding business – but these were always thrown back against the distance from past/passed experiences and actions. Instead of becoming inalienable moments linked in a steady trek, mapped and plotted, from outset to destination, memories were unstable and fluid, serving as much to express distance and alienation from earlier selves and others as they confirmed and settled events as historical fact. Even as young man, John wrote to Elizabeth to observe:

[H]ow soon the time slips away – who would think it is now two years since I first addressed a letter to you and I believe it is two years this very day . . . and what a short time it appears – a portion of time – now a never-to-be-recalled portion of time – that has brought us two years nearer to Eternity – and perhaps such another space of time may not be allowed us. (Shaw MSS/10: 25 December 1812)

Memories have little 'narrative' structure here but instead elicit the bemusement of inexorable loss, the ever-slipping frontiers of past and future out of which the possibility of 'not being' became itself a source of possibility. The allowance of time to their son John was lamentably short, dying as he did in India whilst engaged in the family business. Was the sadness tempered by continuing business, both a distraction and a justification for ensuring the death was not in vain?

John and Elisabeth expressed surprise at the distances created and conversely looked little to future plans and objectives for consolation: 'I suppose there is a wonderful

attraction in the plantation at Buxton where you and I used to roam and tell soft tales five and twenty years ago. I should hardly know the place again I suppose'. This sense of loss persisted for Shaw. Late in the afternoon on Sunday 22 April 1832, we find him at his home in Wolverhampton writing to Elisabeth – 'My dear Liz' – then visiting her family at Colne. His thoughts as he did so were weaving backwards and forwards over and through his led life. It was a moment of remembering through being, and being through remembering:

I got yours [letter] of this day week on Monday last at the top of which I find a calculation of the years we have been married which appears quite correct although I was not aware it was nineteen years past – how quickly has time flown and should we be spared for another such period I suppose it will not appear to have been much longer. I much fear we neither of us sufficiently grateful and thankful for the protection and success we have so abundantly enjoyed during so long a period and hope and trust we may be more so for the future. (Shaw MSS/35: 22 April 1832)

Here they seem aware of the lived edge, precarious and exposed, within a present always hastening to an often-ignored past of habitual security that taints any expectations of a future still absent and though latent with possibility without direction. This moment of realization occurs from within experience, it is unmediated by knowledge or conceptual summary, an expression of what appeared to them as a date was noticed, a sense of having been thrown into and leading a life that had been rewarding but which could never have been taken for granted. John changes register awhile, reflecting on the merging of marriage, protection and success in the thrall of which the pragmatic experience of doing well (in business and relationships) softens into the realization that it had perhaps been taken for granted, not appreciated as something in itself. The noticing catches at and stills John for a moment; care settling through him like fine sediment. The letter's reminiscence is governed by a sense of reverential thanks or care, an almost placid acceptance of fate that reads very much askance to more forthright assessments of business life.

8. Conclusions: reading the Shaws

The letters afford us a sense of the Shaws' business potential and the distinctive capabilities of which their success speaks, yet the more we seek to narrate and thus theorize on these conditions the more the Shaws, their being-there amid things which they find notable but over which they have little sense of prospect or control, is placed in a derivative role. The organization of John Shaw's partnership might be conceptually understood through logics of disinterested, rationalized optimization; he and Crane are contractually and strategically structured to pursue 'advantage' through 'adventure'. A narrative might present an ordered array of things and plotted relations between these things. This is not wrong but remains a one-sided account of Shaw's business life, one whose subjective unity makes it appear natural, harmless and correct, when what the letters reveal and conceal, and so suggest, is so much more latent, not least a perpetual presence of absence. John and Elizabeth Shaw and others associated with them, their parents, siblings, children and business partners wrote as many letters as they did because they were often apart, a sense of absence most acutely felt by John and Elizabeth. Elizabeth estimated in 1823 that she and John had been separated for 4 years of the first 10 years of their marriage, so the letters were not merely expressive of selves and relationships but also highly constitutive (Shaw MSS/58: 11 January 1823). They came into being, to some extent, through these exchanges and grew to understand this on writing, reading and reasoning about their letters. Though often written late in the evening after a day's business or childcare, lit by candle, the letters, typically several pages

long, gesture and reach for that which remains always beyond reason; they can be urgent, tender, mundane, longing, prosaic but are always meaningful. They evoke an intimacy that extends beyond the sequential ordering of instrumental life. They are occasions when the Shaws mustered themselves differently, gathering what it was to be alive in company. These experiences are both everyday but out of the ordinary: they are considered, even habitual; experience is *thought* about, and the parsing of affairs into sequential moments becomes subsumed by a more open, enveloping consideration of human experience without the necessity of end points and instrumental control.

Within the interplay of presence–absence, what Cooper (2009) calls the distance, the relational double stances between and of John and Elizabeth and between them and their family, their business, partners, things and events can come room for play, projection, creation, depths of honesty, the eliciting of emotion, a felt and warranted duty to care (because this is what love means). In the process personae – son, wife, suitor, father, lover, helpmeet, adventurer, investor, worker, companion – emerge, dissolve and re-emerge in new times and contexts. We read this texturing of the Shaws' life, expressed and constituted through letters, with an open-ended regard for their subtlety. In the letters, we have testimony to something more profound than the permeability of the borders between the public and the private and even self and the world 'out there' as equipment for our purposes as agents; we witness the fluidity of selves and their moving, tender negotiation within the lived experience of marriage and partnership.

From this regard comes an emergence, enmeshing, falling away and reconfiguration of being, experience, action, memory, materiality and relationships that situate and organize – should we still wish to locate and define it at all – the Shaws' 'entrepreneurial' experience. 'Entrepreneurship' was not John Shaw's isolated experience but was instead organized and made meaningful relationally – e.g. by and through the provision for a family, or by a collective sense of work as an expression of partnership where Elizabeth was as much a part of business as John, a not wholly unusual union (Vickery 1993), or even and most basically through love. The letters find the Shaws translating experiences of being in business to themselves and others in a welter of emotions and reactions: fear, doubt, uncertainty and trepidation; elation, adventure, satisfaction and fulfilment; duty, sentiment and obligation; weariness, anxiety and disgust. The letters are thus expressive of questionability and *care* as well as of equipmentality; they provide a kind residue of human consideration of experience that is neither only pragmatic problem-solving nor retrospective sense-making, but a hearing, without prejudice, of what things and events are saying; patterning took place via repetitions and constancies rather than any satisfyingly complete narratives. Sense was often made in the moment, and these moments were always imbricated with awareness of the past and emerging potentialities of the future. The business is founded variously at the behest of John's genealogically concerned mother, in the wake of John's growing sense of personal independence, out of a maturing solicitude between Elizabeth and John, under the isomorphic impress of Victorian industrialization. The letters allows us to consider other expressions of meaning, in all their interpenetrating, tentative and hesitant irreducibility (Hulme 1924, 185). And just as soon as we reach after these understandings of how and why the Shaws created and sustained business organizations, these understandings might dissolve as we read new letters, or re-read ones already read; as John noted to Elizabeth; 'I so often am building castles in the air which frequently vanish and leave a dreary road behind' (Shaw MSS/7: 20 December 1811). So too are we as researchers.

The letters show how the writing itself can be part of this consideration; they change the writer. The memory and thought are not distilled into fixed states of affairs, they are not consistent nor are they repositories of known and unmoving events but remain

provocative, unreliable, plangent and moving. For us, in encountering the letters, we must encounter their sheer resistance to explanation, if by explanation is meant an unfolding – *ex plans* – of a biographical life, historically set within organized structures. The letters belie the intellectual conceit of narratives that find in human lives something with plot. Any attempt to supplement them with theory, to reach after propositional structures, with the data deemed exhausted, becomes a strain, an imposition.

So we have read the Shaws' letters in two ways. First, in making the familiar world of equipment visible, articulating it in stories that then suggest alternative uses, the letters narrate how John Shaw is representing our instrumental condition in order to better orient ourselves to equipment. There is an invitation to recover an improved state of equipmentality, organizational success being the passing of novelty back into habit. Shaw's enterprise brings hitherto 'unnoticed' opportunities to the fore; it encourages others to recognize how life might be otherwise, potentially better, through which struggle he finds success. In this reading, we place ourselves within the narrative tradition of studying entrepreneurship.

The second reading moves away from understanding the individual John Shaw through the logic of pragmatic questioning and the recovery and settlement of equipmental relations. In this reading, we find in the pragmatics of living expressions of what Heidegger calls 'care', a persistent lingering with things marked by thoughts that do not succumb to the restlessness of instrumental action or the solitary authorship and design of what we academics might conceptualize as a proto-entrepreneurial figure. An altogether different sense of value emerges, demanding we suspend our concern and solicitude for things as means for our projects awhile and simply dwell with them.

In the epistolaria, we find both phenomenological experiences: equipmentality and care. Working historically, on the cusp of conceptual 'tightening', affords insight into the habits, problems and conditions of appearances in which 'being in business for and by oneself' are organized. To attempt to make sense of this is to take historical analysis outside of an explicit narrative frame. Using letters helps conveying as they do the often fragile nature of the Shaws' experience in which business judgement is informed by curiosity, empathy, fate and even struggle as much, as readily, as it is by the identification and pursuit of opportunity and the organization of resources. The appearance of the Shaws' business becomes that of lives whose existence continually renews them as they are pulled into an open future. Those lives are gone, but they also linger and evoke, and with greater depth and resonance than the equipmental and organizational fixing transiently achieved through their 'entrepreneurship'. In such appearance lies the possibility of deviation and conceptual fragility that affords both the Shaws and ourselves a relationship to things couched in a language of possibility and care rather than definition, and it is in this language, we suggest, that we might begin to arrive at a phenomenology of being in business.

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