

10-1-2011

# Literary Journalism and the Drama of Civic Life

John J. Pauly

Marquette University, john.pauly@marquette.edu

# Literary Journalism and the Drama of Civic Life

## Keynote address, IALJS, Brussels, Belgium

### May 13, 2011

John J. Pauly, Marquette University, U.S.A.

*In his keynote address last May at the seventh annual conference of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies in Brussels, Belgium, John J. Pauly discussed the important role literary journalism can play in the discussion about civic engagement. His address, given at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, is republished here in the belief by the editors that Pauly contributes important new insights to the study of literary journalism as both a literature and journalism.*

*Pauly is the provost of Marquette University in Milwaukee. Moreover, he is a noted literary journalism scholar and regarded as one of the founders of the discipline, having made substantial contributions to the field as an area of academic inquiry. His publication credits include articles in such journals as Critical Studies in Mass Communication, American Quarterly, and Communication Research, and he is the former editor of American Journalism., the journal of the American Journalism Historians Association*



*The address is followed with an appreciation by Richard Lance Keeble, a noted scholar of literary journalism in the United Kingdom.*

---

The sociologist Erving Goffman once observed that human beings construct their identities by finding someone to be normal against. Such has often seemed the case in literary journalism's relationship to conventional journalism. Like the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, the apparatus of everyday journalism took centuries to build. It required revolutions in cultural and political authority, the steady incorporation of each new technology of production and distribution, the creation of markets and the encouragement of the social relationships that sustain those markets, the invention of bureaucratic

structures of management and control, and the formation of professional aspirations that were at once political, moral, and literary. At the end of that history there emerged an institution that robustly and confidently claimed this truth about itself: that it was in the business of creating a model of public reality each day, and that it would be back tomorrow to tell you more. It is not surprising that such an institution would come to see itself as the norm against which all variant literary and political practices should be judged, or that it would defend its reality franchise with such vigor.

Times change. A number of the cathedrals of news are boarded up or in foreclosure, and the institution of journalism puzzles its way through a moment when the availability and demand for news have never been greater, but the business model for permanently sustaining news organizations remains in doubt. But that is the topic for another day.

This brief history of journalism as an institution remains relevant to us because literary journalism has often defined itself against the normative assertions of the larger news profession. For example, conventional journalism unapologetically celebrates a version of what the literary critic Hugh Kenner once called the “plain style” and disdains more complex narratives that it considers partisan, mannered, or inefficient. Literary journalism, in its own defense, bemoans traditional news organizations’ indifference to in-depth cultural reporting and nuanced, long-form writing. One of the great virtues of IALJS is that its scholarship has complicated the triumphal tale I just told you. Literary journalism scholars remind us that the system of relations built around the press has been more culturally specific and local than we might have thought; that writers and readers are more unruly in their tastes for reality than news organizations would prefer; and that even routine daily news regularly draws upon a wider array of literary devices than we sometimes think.

Today I want to pose an ethical question that has not been fully addressed in our scholarship: What role, if any, should literary journalism play in our shared civic life? By civic life, I mean not the formal structures of representation, adjudication, and regulation studied by political scientists, but the imagined commons in which our hopes for humane, peaceful, and equitable social relations dwell. This question is important in part because I believe that literary journalism can do important work on behalf of civic life, and in part because this is exactly the domain to which conventional journalism has laid claim. If our arguments on behalf of literary journalism are to be given full weight, we must grapple more directly with news journalism’s civic franchise.

The back story to this argument will be familiar to you, but let me briefly summarize its main themes. In its self-descriptions, journalism firmly attaches its purposes, methods of research, structures of work, and modes of expression to the cause of human liberty and self-governance. The profession styles itself as a watchdog against tyranny and corruption and as a nonpartisan witness to controversy. It adopts a method that it takes to be rigorous and open to public scrutiny, examining documents, gathering evidence from all parties, and questioning leaders. News organizations commit themselves to permanence and seriality, vowing to remain on the scene day after day in order to update their accounts of reality in the service of the public good. Finally, journalism strives for a mode of address suited to the everyday work of democracy, cultivating a brisk, plain-spoken style of writing that makes its accounts intelligible to the widest array of citizens.

We may fault journalists' inability to live up to these aspirations, we may note the limitations of the organizations that employ them, and we may even critique the ideological assumptions built into journalism's style of representing reality. But we must come to terms with this civic tradition, for it constitutes journalism's most powerful claim about itself. The late James Carey used to describe journalism as the imaginative form through which democracy talks to itself about itself. I believe that literary journalism ought to aspire to just such social purposes, but that it has not yet found an entirely satisfying way to do so. Sometimes our explanations can seem self-congratulatory and isolating, as when Mark Kramer praises the liberatory voice of the literary journalist as cutting through the "obfuscating generalities of creeds, countries, companies, bureaucracies, and experts," and finding truth in the "details of real lives." It is hard to know how journalism could help us stitch together the commons when it so comfortably imagines itself as the romantic opposition, standing at the edge of society's institutions.

**M**y own hope is that our studies help us resituate the craft, recognizing its deeper social and moral purposes, and that we come to think it important that literary journalism give voice to the drama of civic life. The historian of technology Lewis Mumford once argued in similar terms about the special value of the city as a "theater of social action." Cities contained and thereby gave shape to the activities of commerce, art, and politics, Mumford argued, making our experience of those institutions palpable and conversable. The Canadian journalism scholar Stuart Adam points us in a similar direction when he notes that modern life and journalism grew up side by side, and that journalists have mapped their work within the coordinates bequeathed by modernity, offering both political stories about the governance of the democratic state, and human interest stories about the community of citizens.

Adam's argument might lead literary journalists to resign themselves to working one side of that street, attending more closely to the details of lived social experience than to politics. But I continue to hope for a rapprochement. In my course on literary journalism, for example, one of my explicit goals is to demonstrate how it might help us understand the world's most difficult problems. I tell students that we can learn something important about prisons from Ted Conover, or war from David Finkel, or the forms of cultural memory from Jane Kramer, or the environment from John McPhee. In my class this spring, for the first time I fully recognized how often images of race have infused American literary journalism over the last half century, sometimes casually or in passing, but always complicating the journalist's effort to write in the voice of others. Carey used to urge us to think about journalism as a curriculum rather than a single course; the craft begins with simple techniques of interviewing and the inverted pyramid, but it cannot end there. Within that educational metaphor, literary journalism should surely be considered the capstone course of the curriculum, the far horizon where students glimpse what the profession at its best can accomplish.

So let me begin by exploring the reasons why literary and conventional journalism have sought to escape each other's company, and end with a couple of observations about what it will take to reconnect literary journalists to the needs and purposes of civic life, as I have defined it.

**T**his much is true: literary and conventional journalism both believe in the power of stories. Whatever else divides these siblings, this remains their striking family resemblance. And there is much to divide them, even in their understandings of journalism as an imaginative, storytelling profession. News journalists often believe that they are capable of writing longer, more literary stories . . . if—if they were given the license to do so, if they thought their readers (or editors) were interested, if they thought that such reporting added real value to what they are already doing, if they thought that the topic actually required such lengthy treatment. On all these questions, news journalists continue to express skepticism: isn't literary journalism just a needlessly wordy version of the feature writing and depth reporting that the best reporters already do? News reporters also tend to assign points for degree of technical difficulty, expressing particular admiration for stories written under severe deadline pressure or filed amid dangerous circumstances (a belief memorialized in A. J. Liebling's boast that he wrote better than anyone who wrote faster, and faster than anyone who wrote better). Literary journalists believe that human experience is revealed most compellingly and authoritatively through artful storytelling, and in the name of that principle they devote themselves wholeheartedly to narrative as an end in itself. They prize

interpretive skill over speed. The vast majority of our scholarship on literary journalism starts from this premise as well, documenting the variety and sophistication of reporters' narrative strategies, and expressing admiration for the dogged thoroughness of an Adrian LeBlanc when others might see only obsession.

Truth be told, conventional journalism's loyalty to story is divided. News reporters worship twin gods, information as well as story, and they choose to honor one or the other depending upon the occasion. Describing reporting as the gathering of "information" allows news journalists to claim factual authority and political importance for their work. Although literary journalists also gather information in the course of writing their stories, they almost never describe their work in terms of information (at least I have never heard or read of one doing so). Conventional journalism strategically invokes the term "information" as a self-description in order to emphasize its scientific, dispassionate character, especially when it finds itself the object of partisan critique. On the other hand, when conventional journalism wishes to emphasize its practitioners' artfulness and moral insight, it describes itself in terms of "story."

The deepest divisions between the two traditions occur over matters of culture. By culture I mean the symbolic practices by which groups articulate their sense of meaning and purpose and celebrate their identity. The most vigorous forms of literary journalism in the U.S. emerge as an effort to interpret late twentieth-century culture. We can understand the New Journalism of the 1960s in the U.S., for example, as a turn toward questions of culture and away from standard categories of news coverage that no longer adequately captured that era's sense of its own experience. Issues such as race, feminism, peace activism, rock music, drugs, campus revolution, and sexual liberation never fit the beat system. Shrewd editors and writers recognized that fact. When *Esquire* magazine realized, by the late 1950s, that television had undermined the advertising model that had sustained the general interest magazine, it turned to nonfiction. The editor, Harold Hayes, knew that he could not beat daily news organizations to press, but he hoped to fashion *Esquire* as a kind of high-level briefing paper on contemporary culture, betting that a more hip generation of readers would be willing to trade immediacy for interpretive flair. Thus *Esquire's* decision to hire William S. Burroughs, Jean Genet, John Sack, and Terry Southern to cover the August 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, a story that would not appear until the magazine's November issue.

This interest in cultural interpretation runs all through the work of the writers most identified with that period, such as Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thomp-

son, Joan Didion, John Gregory Dunne, Norman Mailer, and Gay Talese. Their interest in culture expressed itself in four ways. First, these writers freely adopted all the available forms of literary invention, emulating the dense textures of the novel, as many scholars have noted. Talese, for example, described the short story as his model for feature reporting. Second, they sought opportunities to give voice to cultural difference. Groups who had been objects of passing attention or scorn in the mainstream press came in for sympathetic interpretation: witness Dunne's account of California farmworkers, Thompson's of motorcycle gangs, or Wolfe's of the Merry Pranksters. Third, these writers often deliberately blurred the categories of high and low culture, most notably in Wolfe's writing. His famous "Tiny Mummies" parody of the *New Yorker*, satirizing the magazine's stodginess and self-satisfaction, so deranged William Shawn that the magazine hired a clipping service to gather all the information that it could about this literary pretender. Fourth, magazines like *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and *New York* encouraged more in-depth methods of reporting, achieving a level of engagement than was impossible through daily journalism and that over the years would come to resemble ethnography, as in the case of Thompson's reporting on the Hell's Angels.

This cultural turn energized the practice of literary journalism in the United States, opening nearly every domain of human experience to reporters and offering journalists a plausible alternative to newspaper work, making new styles of writing more available for emulation, and detaching the genre from the cosmopolitan stylistics of the *New Yorker*. This cultural turn has proved indispensable to the practice of literary journalism. Indeed, techniques that once seemed tentative and experimental now seem standard. By virtually every measure, we are living in a Golden Age of long-form reporting, in terms of the number of writers working in the genre, the range of topics being explored, and the quality of the work. Literary journalism has firmly secured its traditions over the last fifty years.

Everything comes at a price, of course. Literary journalism cannot be said to occupy the civic space that daily news once claimed as its own. Literary journalism's response to the speed, scale, multicultural complexity, and organizational density of the world in which we live is simply to apply its well-honed methods to whatever topic comes its way. Thus we have extraordinary individual works of reporting on virtually every domain of contemporary experience—sports, business, science, war, immigration, the environment, and much else—without much sense of how those works might make society as a whole available for analysis and conversation.

Conventional journalism had proposed a different pact with its readers, of course. Daily news historically described itself as a preferred account of

civic life, claiming that it encompassed the key features of society as a whole. Political parties, agencies of government, and organizations were the major players in that drama, and journalists needed to stay close to their sources in order to do their work. One need not endorse conventional journalism's system for producing reality; we know its limitations and contradictions all too well. The issue is whether literary journalism can in any meaningful way supplement that system of news. Can literary journalism sustain an alternative conception of civic life, or will it remain a somewhat idiosyncratic variation on the dominant forms of journalism? The British media scholar Anthony Smith once posed a similar question. He noted that the mass newspaper had sustained the illusion of a coherent social whole. Smith thought that such an illusion had real political value even when deep down we understood its fictitiousness. (And Carey, raised in the rituals of Catholicism, thought something rather similar.) Literary journalism, at least in the United States, has typically preferred the cultural to the civic. It discovers its most profound stories in humans' quest for meaning, rather than in the civic drama of news.

Let me admit that this argument may reflect an American perspective, not just in the political aspirations it imputes to journalism but in the opposition between literary and conventional journalism that it invokes. In a large, wealthy country such as the United States, with a long press history, the opportunities to specialize in one form or another, or to declare oneself normal against the other, are vast indeed. A smaller society with fewer opportunities for journalists, and literary traditions that less strenuously divide the factual from the fictional, might imagine journalism's relation to civic life differently.

With those caveats in mind, let us return to the question. What would it take for literary journalism to assert its relevance to public life? I believe that literary journalists will have to struggle more deeply with three problems in their current practice. These problems are both technical and theoretical. The first is the challenge of writing a decentered feature story. Literary journalism works within, and often significantly extends, the familiar conventions of feature writing. It builds its stories around individual personalities, allows itself a measure of narrative leisureliness, and imagines "human interest" as the source of its appeal. This person-centered approach deepens our engagement with subjects (and can even be considered humanistic in its orientation), but it may over-theorize the individual and under-theorize the group. Is it possible for literary journalism to describe a social field, in which individuals are not the entire focus but moments in a larger social process, in the way that cultural studies and sociology regularly attempt?



Second, literary journalism should probably pay more attention to organizational dynamics, given how much of the world's work is performed in such contexts. One can detect this absence in conventional journalism as well. Charles Peters, longtime publisher of *Washington Monthly* magazine, for years has argued that one of the major limitations of political journalism is reporters' lack of experience in the bureaucratic settings on which they report, making them more gullible and less understanding of organizational decision-making. There are certainly exceptions to this observation. Ted Conover's *Newjack*, an account of the work of correction officers in Sing-Sing prison, could be assigned in a class on organizational communication, to illustrate how members of a rules-based organization soften the edges of formal control. Even there, however, the focus remains on Conover's experience of becoming a corrections officer—a strategy necessitated by his choosing to disguise his identity in order to gain access to the system, thus making it harder for him to interview prisoners to understand their life as they see it. Indeed, journalists may report less on organizations because they are routinely denied access to many corporate and governmental settings, especially when they might be asking the organization to accommodate them for months at a time.

Third, group conflict is one of the most central and persistent facts of contemporary societies, but such conflicts are not much documented in American literary journalism. To be sure, the profession of journalism has a possessive investment in conflict, as many critics have noted. *Esquire* titled its anthology of work from the 1960s *Smiling through the Apocalypse*. But journalism's accounts of conflicts often center on events, and may not fully capture the group life behind the events. Even less common are stories that document the social processes that eventually resolve conflicts. Taken together, these instances point to a single problem: How could literary journalism report more effectively on group life? What stylistic or interpretive trade-offs would it have to make in order to do so?

I believe that literary journalism is capable of producing a more nuanced understanding of organizational life and group conflict, although some styles of literary journalism may find it more difficult to accommodate such purposes. This semester I taught, as I have for years, John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid*. That book admirably exemplifies the clarity of McPhee's voice, the depth of his background research, his subtle management of his persona in the story, and of course his remarkable organizational skills. It is a book about conflicts over the environment in which David Brower, long-time head of the Sierra Club, is pitted against three "opponents": a mining engineer, a real estate developer, and a dam builder. McPhee's method requires

him, in this case, to personify group political positions, with Brower always playing the role of staunch defender of the environment facing down his critics. This approach adds color to what might otherwise be abstract political views, but it carries its own risks. In the first and third sections of the book, sparks fly between Brower and his opponents, and McPhee, having instigated the encounters, can simply stand back and record them as they happen. In the second section, Brower and the developer get along too well, and McPhee must supply more of the drama himself with some skillful writing and juxtaposition. His portrayal of group conflict over the environment depended, in other words, on his success in arranging a dramatic encounter between two individuals. Such radical forms of synecdoche, letting the single instance stand for the whole, seem characteristic of all journalism. It is a literary habit of long standing in the daily press, and one that literary journalism cannot fully escape.

We might well resign ourselves to that fact, saying that we have discovered the limits of literary journalism as a mode of understanding and style of dramatic narrative. We could admit that journalism will always prefer to frame the action in scenes, simplify the *dramatis personae* involved in a conflict, focus on a few key symbols, and prize the representative quotation. At some level, these traits seem true of much human storytelling. And yet, if journalism deserves a special place in our conception of civic life (and not everyone believes that; a political scientist colleague of mine once referred to it as an epiphenomenon), should we expect it to say more about the group and organizational worlds in which we spend so much of our lives? Are not the power and reach of those worlds critical to the problems of civic life we now face?

One writer who has consistently attacked these issues has been Jane Kramer, who has written the “Letter from Europe” for the *New Yorker* for many years. Even when her stories feature a main character, they shift from one character to another in a way that simulates the feel of group life. Her 1970s stories about migrant workers in Europe, for example, capture the sense that families are involved in those migrations. In effect, she decenters the feature story in order to describe how individuals move into the roles of “migrant workers” without seeming to diminish them as individual actors. In *Whose Art Is It?*, her account of a controversial public art installation in the Bronx, she explicates the meanings that the different groups attach to the art work while still offering a rich profile of the artist, John Ahearn. Her book of essays on Germany—*The Politics of Memory*—explores the cultural controversies through which Germans try to discern their country’s future. Indeed, Kramer has even tried to profile cities, as she does with Berlin in *The Politics of Memory*, or with Zurich in *Europeans*, her 1980s collection of stories.

Kramer's ability to simulate the whole depends upon a particular stylistic invention. She uses direct quotation rather sparsely, and finds ways to incorporate the positions of her subjects into her own narrative voice in a way that retains their tone and import. She avoids bouncing back and forth between quotes from her individual actors in a way that would give the impression that the whole is nothing more than a messy aggregate of the parts. This method of authorial control can make her works resemble essays, even when she has produced the story using the same forms of reporting that other writers would. She willingly trades drama and immediacy for interpretive depth. One finds a similar tradeoff in the later work of Joan Didion, in which the severe compression of her diction creates a sense of social density.

I offer these comments not so much as a settled conclusion, but as an invitation for us all to go back and reread our favorite examples of literary journalism in a different way, in order to achieve more theoretical clarity about whether journalism, as a mode of understanding, is capable of portraying the life of groups and organizations with as much subtlety as it does individual characters and interpersonal relations. Perhaps all forms of journalism necessarily sacrifice some analysis for the sake of drama; that may be the price of creating a widely shared narrative of our common life. But we live these days in worlds of such organizational complexity that it would be interesting to see more examples of what literary journalism could make of that experience. Or perhaps that is just the way the world seems to a university provost. That is definitely a topic for another day.