

Note from the Editor...

Narrative Literary Journalism's Resistance to the BIG IDEA

What I continue to find fascinating about a narrative literary journalism is its capacity, a capacity I believe is inherent, to resist coming to closure,¹ and specifically the kind of ideological closure that subscribes to the BIG IDEA. This is what I detected in Juan Pérez González's thoughtful, probing account in this issue of examples of a narrative literary journalism from Castro's Cuba in the 1980s. Moreover, I see this as part of a continuing pattern in countries long subject to authoritarian rule.



It is not difficult to detect the source of the resistance, although it is easy to overlook it because of its ubiquity. We detect it, for example, in that iconic video of the lone protester standing in front of an army tank in Tiananmen Square in 1989, as media sociologists have noted.² To the West, it represented heroic defiance by the individual. To the official Chinese media it represented, according to the spin they put on it, the humane restraint of the People's Liberation Army in not running the protester down. What is key here is "spin." Because beyond the socially constructed spin—official, scholarly, or otherwise—lies the individual "spin," as reader-response theory tells us, in which there always exists the possibility of a reader's individual and distinctive interpretation of, as well as resistance to, prevailing social constructions: Imagine the tank driver thinking, *I don't want to run over this guy*. Maybe there's a little truth to both positions, and the result is a kind of ethical complexity more suited to being explored in a literary journalism.

When I was younger and traveling through Prague during the communist period, I couldn't help but notice on the famous Charles Bridge over the Moldau the statues of saints Barbara, Margaret, and Elizabeth. What left an impression on me was that despite their being begrimed in black in that badly soot-polluted city, and despite the fact that this was an officially atheistic country, the city made it a point of carefully cleaning and painting the saints' carved inscriptions in gold leaf. One wonders if it was possibly a subtle form of resistance to the political BIG IDEA. Because why, in the end, would the communists want to care for such statues that represented a resistance to their IDEA? And in a failed society, what were the dangers posed by such statues committed to the religious life? What individual interpretations, amid food and energy shortages as the Soviet-dominated empire declined, could be drawn from and attached to these vestiges of an earlier era that the Czechs memorialized by painting the chiseled identities in gold leaf? After the religious experience had been

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banished to the ideological wilderness during the communist period, could the Underground Man or Woman, as a protest against an existential banality imposed by the State in the name of the BIG IDEA, begin to wonder what the State found so threatening? And personally take up the threat as an act of protest, and, more importantly, self-efficacy? One can turn to religion for many reasons, the bad and the good.

In a sense, the evidence of the world around them is what a few literary journalists—those committed to a journalism as storytelling—turned to in Castro's Cuba in the 1980s, at least as I see it. Because they detected in the details that not all was well in the workers' and peasants' paradise as prescribed by the BIG IDEA smoking a Cohiba. That evidence, or what Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes as "inconclusive present-day reality," one "open-ended" and "fluid" to interpretation,³ offers itself as a puzzle to be sorted out by the interpreting imagination of the literary journalist and by extension the reader's imagination focused on the suggestive possibilities of the details, not on the constricting construct of the BIG IDEA. And if journalists, literary or otherwise, were not concerned with pensions, government-subsidized apartments, and whatever else the state promised if only they promised to be good *apparatchiki*, then they were free to pick up on the disparity between the public relations and the reality.

I remember detecting this in Kiev in 1991. No sooner had I landed there than my host took me to a government butcher shop—literally through the back door in a back alley. To be slaughtered? Instead, a friend awaited him with a side of ribs for a *shashlik*, or barbecue, he and others were preparing for me at their dacha in the countryside. My host paid in *valuta*, hard currency, and we took off for the dacha in his little Lada, arriving to drink *samogon*—moonshine—made from sugar beets, eat Ukrainian barbecue, only for me (and others) to wake up the next morning with a puking, wrenching stomach, and a headache feeling like the weight of a hundred-pound anvil on the collapsing brow of my forehead. So I recall the aesthetics of my experience.

But that my host could so casually walk in the back door of a government butcher shop and get his *shashlik*, this at a time when government butcher shops and all food shops were reported to have shortages by a Western media shooting video of endless food lines at the front doors of the shops, was important for revealing one thing: the disparity between the public relations of the BIG IDEA and the reality of the people's paradise. The BIG IDEA was socially and morally bankrupt. The BIG IDEA had become irrelevant.

The literary in a narrative literary journalism fundamentally challenges the BIG IDEAS precisely because of the commitment to the inconclusive, open-ended, and fluid present-day reality of the particular, the distinctive, that in its open-endedness offers itself to individual interpretations that can trump social constructions. It recalls, once again, Sartre's observation that in the face of totalitarian oppression, one may be forced by the pain of the torturer to say "*oui*" to his demands, "Yes, I did it," but that in the privacy of one's unspoken consciousness one can always say "*non*."⁴ In that albeit severely limited range of personal motion and action, one has nonetheless asserted oneself in an efficacious and ultimately dignifying gesture. And so resistance extends outward according to the demands of the moment—some of them of course survival moments that require restraint.

What is uncanny is, as I indicated at the beginning, how much this has been detected by scholars elsewhere. The first time I ran into it was in Diana Kuprel's account of the Polish and to some extent Czech traditions of literary reportage, or reportage literature as it is variously called in Europe and elsewhere.⁵ As Kuprel notes, Polish readers would read Ryszard Kapuściński's dispatches on the third world as accounts in which they could see a mirror of interpretation held up to their own national experiences. After all, the differences between an authoritarian regime in Africa and an authoritarian government in Poland was one of degree. One can detect the phenomenon of the inconclusive and open-ended present's resistance to the BIG IDEA in the work of Svetlana Alexievich in the declining years of the Soviet Union. In her "Boys in Zinc," she challenges the official Soviet screed that its army was in Afghanistan to promote socialism among the benighted Afghans.⁶ One can detect the resistance as well in the Chinese version, as Charles A. Laughlin and Peiqin Chen, among others, note (indeed, it has been a chorus of others).⁷ For example, Liu Binyan went from being a Communist Party darling in China to a pariah never permitted to return home from exile because he pushed the boundaries too far in his personal selection of the details and ultimately interpretation, as a selection must inevitably imply.⁸ Sonja Merljak Zdvoc also sees this phenomenon in her native Slovenia during the Tito years of the Yugoslav federation.⁹ The issue is straightforward: Detailed *description* reflective more broadly of real-life social conditions—and by this I do not mean abstract descriptions, but rather sensual descriptions of distinctive, one-of-a-kind phenomenon, or the wart on one's nose so to speak—cannot be denied. If people lived without running water, they lived without running water, and a political ideology dedicated in principle to material wellbeing would have difficulty denying that circumstance lest the hypocrisy be *too* self-evident. People, after all, are only so stupid, and when the emperor dons his new clothes, the people can see through the transparency; they see it for the charade it is.

Now, as I think back about it, I ran into this phenomenon even earlier, in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* when I was an undergraduate in college.¹⁰ But then there was still earlier William Barrett's *Irrational Man* my senior year in high school¹¹ . . . Of course we are all exposed to influences differently, we all perceive differently, no matter how slight the differences.

This is what I detected in Pérez's account of literary journalism in Cuba under Castro. Why? Because there is always the potential for resistance in the distinctive details of inconclusive present-day reality that cannot be so conveniently co-opted by the BIG IDEA. Bearing this in mind, it is not too much to suggest that it is this quality that helps to make such a journalism literary, in the sense that it transcends, if even only momentarily, the prescriptions of the BIG IDEA, reminding us once again: It is all in the details, and we ignore them at our peril.

—John C. Hartsock

NOTES

1. I first explored the resistance to closure in *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 42.
2. See, for example, David Croteau and William Hoynes, *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press, 1997), 225–26.
3. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 39–40.
4. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1962), 243.
5. Diana Kuprel, “Literary Reportage: Between and Beyond Art and Fact,” *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Amsterdam and New York: J. Benjamins, 2004), 375–85.
6. Svetlana Alexievich, “Boys in Zinc,” trans. Arch Tait, *Granta* (Autumn 1990): 145–61. See, also, John C. Hartsock, “Literary Reportage: The ‘Other’ Literary Journalism,” *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, xlii (Spring/Summer 2009): 113–34.
7. Charles A. Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 7; Peiqin Chen, “Social Movements and Chinese Literary Reportage,” *Literary Journalism across the Globe*, eds. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 148.
8. Hartsock, *Genre*, 129.
9. Sonja Merljak Zdovc, “The Use of Novelistic Techniques in Slovene Journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 248–63.
10. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* and selections from *The House of the Dead*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classics, 1961).
11. Barrett.