

Kicking the Canon in the Breeches

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An appreciation of Professor Nancy Roberts's keynote address, "Firing the Canon," IALJS, Toronto, May 2012

If you trust Google, the secret of delivering a successful keynote address is simple. Start with an icebreaking joke and stud your talk with anecdotes. Tell them a story, particularly one with some element of "problem, struggle and solution." Liven up your gathering of burnt-out salarymen with analogies from the sports field. And don't forget those social media friendly quotes—ensure your points can be readily committed to a tweetable 140 characters or a texter's rapid moving thumb. (Plagiarism alert—my heartfelt thanks to those smarties at <http://www.heinzmarketing.com/2011/10/six-tips-for-more-successful-keynote-presentations/>)

What's missing? At least three ingredients: passion, scholarship . . . and imagination. Professor Nancy Roberts's keynote address in Toronto had all three.

With a smile on her face and fire in her belly, Roberts happily set out to deliver a kick in the pants to a smug tradition of scholarship that has excluded a variety of groups from more than marginal consideration within the body of work construed to be "literary journalism." Did she mean us? She surely did. What were we to make, for example, of the fact that one staple of our reading lists, Tom Wolfe's *New Journalism*, contains just two contributions from women journalists?

It got worse. Roberts succeeded in making most of her audience a mite uncomfortable about what work, and whose, they have disregarded as apt objects of study. And the problem was much more than the exclusion of women, bad enough in itself.

Her grand narrative was the need to recover and properly value what had been lost, forgotten, defeated, regarded as of little worth. Or as W. H. Auden would write:

History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.
("Spain," 1937)

But not on Professor Roberts's watch.

Her intellectual starting point was an analogy with the study of material folk culture. She posed the question of what constituted the equivalent of material folk culture for literary journalism—that is, the “overlooked, commonplace source that’s considered ‘functional’ or ‘utilitarian,’ rather than an ‘intentional’ work of art” such as painting, or music.

Rather than an “icebreaker” this was an icicle through the carapace of academic self-regard.

One issue, of course, was the term “literary” that we have conspired to yoke to “journalism.” Apart from the la-di-da, high status, sacred grove connotations of “literary” and its fuzzy imprecision is the suspicion that the naming of the field may have something to do with conferring some “class” on the macho bohemian rogues (journalistic myth) or commercially driven male drudges (academic myth) who inhabit it.

In other words a PR scam to make the long-form journalism we love a respectable academic subject of study.

Discuss.

Playing the status game involved focusing attention on books from recognised publishers and established periodicals. For Roberts, escaping it demanded the exploration of a whole range of non-elite sources, such as,

household magazines and newspapers; letters, memoirs, and diaries; epistolary journalism; religious tracts; travel writing; and social movement, muck-raking and African American periodicals.

She argued that women’s magazines were not regarded as a serious literary form, while specialist magazines (many aimed at women) were also written out of the canon.

Publication itself raised issues of exclusion. What was the status of unpublished writing? Letters? Diaries? Both forms much used by those groups—women, ethnic minorities, working-class people—invisible in the conventional canon.

The place of “epistolary journalism” is now well established. But Professor Roberts argued strongly for the admission to the canon of *unpublished* letters, diaries and other forms of intimate writing. Quoting examples from

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she suggested that, rather than being regarded simply as an historical source, their literary qualities should be valued, particularly in regard to women writers:

Women's letters present a particularly rich lode of material with literary journalism potential. While historically, both men and women wrote letters, epistolary journalism was a more common (and often sole literary) outlet for women. Many anthologies of letters have been recently published and of course the possibilities for original, archival research are practically limitless. Increasingly, historical institutions are digitizing their collections of letters to make them available online.

More controversial still was Professor Roberts's argument that huge resources for the study of literary journalism in the US might lurk within the innumerable tracts of nineteenth and twentieth century evangelical Christian organizations and religious newspapers:

Why are these potentially rich sources for literary journalism overlooked? The answer may lie in the longstanding blind eye that many journalists—and by extension, historians of journalism—cast toward religious institutions in general. Too often, scholarship is mistakenly equated with proselytizing. Yet religion is a longstanding, central force with considerable impact on society and has surely inspired works of literary journalism.

This was a brilliant and combative performance, adept in identifying key areas for continuing scholarly argument. A number of questions clamor for attention.

First, if one needs a canon, what are the criteria for inclusion, beyond personal interest? Her self-evident, admirable relish at the limitless vistas of un-researched tracts, sermons, and emails raised the issue as to whether there were any meaningful criteria for *exclusion*, and any way in which some definable boundaries could be placed to the field.

Second, the status of unpublished letters does raise some intriguing problems. How far can one go in discarding the distinction between published and non-published forms of written communication without reducing the canon to a dead letter? Perhaps this is what it deserves. But does this risk reducing the field to incoherence?

Surely letters are primarily a form of one-to-one, or family-to-family, communication? A form which preceded journalism and out of which journalism grew—the roots of which are readily perceptible in the use of the term “correspondent.” Is it pettifogging to argue that they are a fascinating study in their own right but easy in principle to distinguish from journalism? They are not published to an anonymous audience of readers. They do not constitute part of the public sphere. Letters written for publication are, of course, a dif-

ferent matter, as are, for example, the letters sent by paid writers to merchants in medieval Europe about business conditions. Professor Roberts also cites the case of emails. Again, not journalism. But a blog is—just as much as a newspaper column.

Third, the status of tracts and religious newspapers raises more issues. With an enlightenment hat on, this could seem quite a depressing prospect. Surely one great achievement of Victorian journalism was to liberate itself from the form of the propagandizing tract?

Religion has, of course, inspired some memorable works of literary journalism—but more often from the perspective of the questing or skeptical writer rather than the believer. George Orwell and Simone de Beauvoir rather than Hannah More and Billy Graham. Are we to dismiss the issues involved in anchoring journalism to an explicit, organized belief system, to produce what might be argued to be a form of faith advertising? If you take the position that all journalism is driven by ideology anyway, and one should not distinguish between the different forms they take, whether (name your faith) or free-market capitalism, then do we embrace all belief systems as well as established religions, including the collected works of L. Ron Hubbard? How far do we go in saying No to the Enlightenment and its celebration of the free, skeptical intelligence?

Such arguments will run and run. But Professor Roberts's passion, scholarship and commitment was reminiscent in its ardor and combativeness of another engaged scholar, the great English social historian and peace activist, Professor Edward Thompson. He opens his finest work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, with a call for history written "from the bottom up":

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'Utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties. (E. P. Thompson, 1963)

What good luck to be a student of Professor Roberts at the University at Albany of the State University of New York! And how fortunate were the delegates at the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies in Toronto on 17 May 2012.

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