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The Journalism in Literary Journalism

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I'm sure that very few members of this audience missed Janet Malcolm's recent review¹ in the *New York Review of Books* of Thomas Kunkel's *Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of The New Yorker*,² the new biography of the masterly writer. Malcolm's most famous grand and arresting pronouncement about journalism is now a quarter-century old. It's the opening sentence of her book *The Journalist and the Murderer*: "Every journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse."³

I'll return to this in moment, but for now what's important is to note that Malcolm has pronounced again, by way of excusing Joseph Mitchell's habit of introducing fictional elements, like composite characters, into what was presented to *New Yorker* readers as nonfiction. Here's her new pronouncement:

Every writer of nonfiction who has struggled with the ditch and the bushes knows what Mitchell is talking about, but few of us have gone as far as Mitchell in bending actuality to our artistic will. This is not because we are more virtuous than Mitchell. It is because we are less gifted than Mitchell. The idea that reporters are constantly resisting the temptation to invent is a laughable one. Reporters don't invent because they don't know how to. This is why they are journalists rather than novelists or shortstory writers. They depend on the kindness of the strangers they actually meet for the characters in their stories. There are no fictional characters lurking in their imaginations.⁴

Whenever Janet Malcolm begins a statement about journalism with the word "every," one should count one's change. In the case of both passages I've

just quoted, she is really only talking about a tiny subculture within journalism, the one she belongs to: people who practice what's sometimes called "immersion journalism," entailing intimate negotiated relationships with subjects and a measure of literary aspiration. Neither of her pronouncements applies, for example, to wire-service reporters, bloggers and aggregators, opinion columnists, data journalists, statehouse correspondents, cartoonists, sportswriters, investigative reporters, essayists and critics, editorial writers, or members of the many other categories that together make up the vast numerical majority of practicing journalists. And even within Malcolm's small category, not every journalist-source relationship conforms to the seduction-and-abandonment model (sometimes it's the source who uses the possibility of access to seduce or corrupt the journalist), or to the invention model (more often than not, the subject is so well known as to make invention impossible).

Still, for a group that has chosen to use the term "literary journalism" in its title, Malcolm's latest pronouncement poses an interesting challenge: What is literary journalism anyway? Is Malcolm right, if you strip out her attention-getting exaggeration, in asserting that literary journalists, if not all journalists, are people who would prefer to write fiction but can't because they lack the imaginative capacity? How useful is it to think about nonfiction and fiction as a matched pair?

Probably the most fully articulated alternative view to Malcolm's of what literary journalism is has come from Tom Wolfe (though he doesn't use the term literary journalism), especially in two well-known essays, one in 1973 that was the introduction to an anthology called *The New Journalism*,⁵ the other in an article in *Harper's* magazine in 1989.⁶ In both cases, Wolfe, like Malcolm, discusses nonfiction in comparison to fiction, but, unlike Malcolm, he focuses on the deficiencies of fiction rather than those of nonfiction. The main deficiency, to Wolfe, is that fiction writers have abdicated their historic role as creators of intensively researched, realistic social portraiture, thus leaving a vacuum that journalists have filled by teaching themselves techniques historically associated with fiction, like third-person narration, dialogue, and intensely observed detail.

Wolfe himself has gone from writing nonfiction that was meant to replace fiction to writing the kind of fiction he believes in: broad tableaux informed by original reporting. He hasn't produced reportorial nonfiction in decades. But Wolfe has always stoutly insisted, in contrast to Malcolm, that journalists like his former self do not in fact work in a borderland between fiction and nonfiction—that when in his journalism he has used techniques of traditional fiction, like scenes, dialogue, characters, and even interior monologue, it has all been true, the hard-won reward of his reporting. After the publica-

tion of Wolfe's last book-length work of nonfiction, *The Right Stuff*,⁷ one of the pioneers of writing nonfiction that reads like fiction, John Hersey, by then somewhat grumpy about the work of the generation that succeeded his, went around and interviewed Wolfe's subjects, the first American astronauts, hoping to get them to say Wolfe had made things up—but they wouldn't.

To my mind, Wolfe's critique of contemporary fiction (other than his own) is not as devastating as he thinks it is, partly because his version of fiction's power is so particular to the work of a certain kind of social novelist. This is why his literary heroes are Balzac and Thackeray, rather than, let's say, Eliot or Tolstoy or Flaubert, also realistic nineteenth-century novelists but not primarily memorable for their detailed observations of social striving. Wolfe is projecting a contemporary magazine writer's preoccupation with elite power dynamics backward onto the history of fiction. Anyway, fiction has become somewhat more realistic over the time Wolfe has been complaining about its having abandoned realism. To give one example, when I stepped down as Washington correspondent of the *New Yorker* in 2003 to become dean of Columbia Journalism School, my replacement, very briefly, was the novelist Jonathan Franzen, who wanted the job as way of doing research for his novels. (A couple of moments from this adventure wound up in Franzen's celebrated 2010 novel *Freedom*.)

Let's now turn back to the point Malcolm raises: the idea of nonfiction as a poor substitute for fiction. Fiction's advantage is that—in the right hands, of course—it has access to a very rich suite of techniques and devices that give it great vividness, immediacy, and power, whose payoff is not just virtuosity of craft, but also profound psychological, philosophical, social, and even political insight. This advantage would make it seem only natural that, as Malcolm strongly implies, nobody with the ability to be a writer of fiction would choose instead to be a writer of nonfiction. So, by the Malcolm standard, nonfiction writers are properly understood as people who couldn't cut it in fiction. They're the dinner-theatre actors of the literary world. The best of them, like Mitchell, at least have enough pride not to get hung up on preachy newsroom bromides about maintaining strict factual accuracy.

Compared to all this, what can nonfiction offer? The most obvious weapon in its arsenal is verisimilitude. As Wolfe observes in his essays, it makes a story more powerful when its audience knows that it really happened—that's why movies so often claim to be "based on actual events." Some journalists, unfortunately, do have the power of imagination that Malcolm claims we lack, like the notorious fakers Janet Cooke and Stephen Glass, and there's a reason they chose to harness their fiction to the booster rocket of truth claims.

It's not just the power of fact that journalism has going for it; it's also

the power of inaccessible material. The best journalists have shown they can penetrate just about any location, high or low, in the social order, and satisfy our curiosity about what really goes on there. Novelists don't generally have this in the same measure; they are more imprisoned within their own experiences. One might even say that the greater the revelatory accomplishment of a work of nonfiction, the less artistically accomplished it has to be to succeed. Perhaps only Mitchell could have made us care about Joe Gould, a previously unnoted Greenwich Village eccentric, but just about anybody who was able to get the material could make us care about the observed daily details of President Obama's life.

But these are lesser advantages of nonfiction, compared to what I would argue is the fundamental one. Nonfiction is more than, literally, not-fiction. Nonfiction has a different central mission from fiction.

Journalism is a running account of the world. Its name comes from "journal," and journals were invented to provide such an account. Journalism can be descriptive, or prescriptive, or exhortatory, or explanatory, but it's necessarily connected to society as lived. Fiction is art. It aims to create its own self-contained world, which may look like the actual world, but which has its own rules and achieves its powerful effects on its own terms. Journalism is craft, or applied art. It is to fiction roughly as architecture is to painting. It must deal with a set of presented conditions and rules, which ought to inspire, rather than constrain, its practitioners. An artist in front of a canvas can choose whether to make the painting look like the world or not. An architect has aesthetic choices to make, but the building has to have running water and heat and keep the rain out. For a journalist, the equivalent is making a faithful representation of society. What Wolfe says the novel must do, nonfiction, not fiction, actually must do. The novel can do whatever it wants.

It ought be clarifying to think about even literary journalism in this way. Yes, literary journalism ought to be executed in memorable, stylish prose. Yes, literary journalists should train themselves in voice and structure and characterization and description. But these are techniques that make nonfiction look more like fiction than it really is. They tend to be overemphasized inside the small culture of magazines, publishing houses, interested scholars, and MFA programs—for which literary journalism is a vital category, because these institutions are usually focused on the first word in literary journalism, literary. (And inside the somewhat larger, but shrinking, culture of institutions focused on the second word, journalism, people too often recoil in horror when presented with the aesthetic term "literary.")

I am proposing, in other words, that nonfiction is not fiction for people who lack imagination. It has another premise. The word denotes a social

function, not a mode of expression. If we start there, perhaps we can understand it better.

I should confess that I, too, had an essentially literary conception of literary journalism during the first phase of my career. I wanted to be a writer, not an analyst of society. By luck or happenstance, I wound up spending my life moving back and forth between publications that were primarily interested in description or storytelling—the writing side of journalism—and publications that were primarily interested in analysis or explanation, the thinking side. In the former category, I would put *Texas Monthly* and the *New Yorker*, in the latter category the *Washington Monthly* and the *Atlantic*.

My editor at the *Atlantic*, William Whitworth, who had spent his early career at the *New Yorker* and regarded it in the way that a reformed drunk regards his old barroom, would not permit a profile to be published in his magazine unless it could be shown to have a larger point that the subject of the profile illustrated. My editor at the *New Yorker*, David Remnick, is a recovering Washington policy journalist who usually will not permit an article about an important topic to be published in his magazine unless it's expressed via a profile of a compelling person. It has been quite useful to me to be tugged first in one direction for a while, then in the other, but the overall tug over time has been away from a purely literary conception of my work.

Somewhere along the line, somewhat by accident, I began spending a lot of time around social scientists, so that today I regularly find myself as the only journalist in a room of social scientists. What first drew me there was a need to understand what the immediate story I was working on was about, what it represented. But I gradually began to think more systematically about applying social science methods in journalism.

In recent years, a number of the most interesting and inventive journalists have fruitfully explored the intersection of social science and journalism. Even Wolfe, though he never said so in his essays about nonfiction, used sociological concepts as the mainspring of much of his work—rubrics he invented, like “the right stuff” and “radical chic,” have had staying power not because they were narrative techniques, but because they were provocative ideas. And since Wolfe, journalists like Malcolm Gladwell and Michael Lewis (both of whom, like the leading New Journalists of the 1960s and 1970s, have many imitators), have, in very different ways, injected elements of social science into literary journalism.

If you want to set forth a method associated with this kind of work, it would not begin with finding a character to describe or a story to tell. It would begin with what social scientists would call a research question. How did this happen? What might cause that situation to change? What makes

people or institutions behave in a certain way? You can then continue on the social science analogy: What's your experimental design—meaning, what reporting mission can you devise that would answer your research question? You would develop a hypothesis, a possible answer to the research question, to test rigorously, and possibly to modify or abandon in favor of a better one if it doesn't prove out in your reporting. You would analyze your findings, and find a way to present them. You might call this set of practices epistemology journalism.

None of this would preclude telling a story in a literarily accomplished way. Indeed, in some cases the reader might not even notice the presence of the process I've just described, in the same way that a resident of a house doesn't notice the engineering elements that make it function properly. As the paint and the trim and the furniture, the obvious aspects of how one experiences a house, go on last, so the narrative and literary elements of nonfiction can come after the conceptual and analytic elements, but their underlying centrality means that merely looking for stories to tell just isn't a good basic description of what literary journalists do. Indeed, pure storytelling is—sorry, back to social-science jargon—uncorrelated with communicating the deep truth of a situation. Storytelling can explain, or it can deceive. The journalist's primary job is to get at the truth, and then, secondarily, to find a story to tell that communicates the truth. I would define literary journalism as journalism that accomplishes both the primary and secondary missions at a high level.

I want to conclude with a few words about what you might call the logistics of literary journalism. Let's return to the architecture analogy. Literary journalism of the kind I've been discussing requires resources, because it takes time and requires first-hand reporting, often conducted in faraway locations. And, at its best, it is also a more collaborative enterprise than is fiction writing, so it needs more of an institutional structure, and that costs money, too. An old Wolfe essay, "From Bauhaus to Our House,"⁸ made fun of architects whose reputation is based on drawn but not built work. Such architects, I'm sure, don't actually prefer that their work not be built—they just weren't able to find someone to pay for it.

The execution cost of journalism is a fraction of what it is in architecture, but it still poses a challenge. Before the internet, literary journalism generally followed a gatekeeper model: the limited number of magazines, newspapers, and book publishers who purveyed it were going concerns, so the challenge for a writer was to persuade them to accept your work. Today, the barrier to publication, at least online, is far lower, but so is much of the economic and institutional support that anointed writers, at least, of literary nonfiction, used to be able to take for granted. Many of the traditional gatekeeper institu-

tions are far more constrained than they used to be, and the proliferation of new publishers (who often describe themselves using the somewhat grating term “long-form journalism”) are constrained as a basic design principle.

There is a temptation to reason backward from resource constraints to the ideal form of the work. For literary nonfiction this would mean that memoirs would (it would be more accurate to say already do) take up a higher portion of the total production. Next in logistical ease of execution would come lapidary work about ordinary life that can be executed in one’s own backyard—what Whitworth, my old *Atlantic* editor, used to call “universe in a grain of sand journalism.” This kind of work, which is often excellent, also seems to be taking up more space in the world of literary journalism.

I am concerned that, in a spirit of making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, literary journalists and literary journalism scholars will begin to conceive of what is more easily possible as what is ideal. One can do this by focusing more and more on the “literary” in literary journalism, and less and less on the “journalism.” I think Malcolm slipped into this in her piece about Mitchell, and there are many other examples. For writers, it’s flattering to be told that it’s really much more about your talent than your reporting, so this view of our work can be quite seductive.

I’ve been arguing for a conception of literary journalism that treats its active engagement with the world as central. This kind of literary journalism isn’t just distinguished and memorable writing; it’s a valuable social artifact, because when done well it can lead readers to understand difficult, complex, inaccessible subjects that can otherwise play out outside the frame of active democracy. But just as there is a danger in understanding the value of literary journalism as residing only in how it is expressed, there is also a danger in proclaiming the necessity of reporting and assuming that the resources writers need to do it will somehow always magically appear.

Literary journalism needs money and strong institutions. It is not ideally done by a person alone in a garret. Thanks to people like you, the understanding of literary journalism as an important category of writing is increasing, but the means required to execute it well is not. Not every writer of literary journalism is in a position to try to do something about this problem, but those of us who are connected to institutional life can help, and we have an obligation to do so. In the last decade or so, a very loose and informal new support system for literary journalism, outside the traditional magazines and newspapers and book publishers, has begun to emerge. It resides in universities, nonprofit organizations old and new, writers’ colonies, struggling new publications, and elsewhere. Its continued growth is essential to the continued fulfillment of the potential of literary journalism. We should all make it

part of our work to nurture this system, as well as creating, analyzing, and teaching the writing it's meant to encourage.

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Notes

1. Janet Malcolm, "The Master Writer of the City," *New York Review of Books*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/apr/23/joseph-mitchell-master-writer-city/>.
2. Thomas Kunkel, *Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of The New Yorker* (New York: Random House, 2015).
3. Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3.
4. Malcolm, "Master Writer."
5. Tom Wolfe, "The New Journalism (1. The Feature Game; 2. Like a Novel; 3. Seizing the Power; Appendix)," in *The New Journalism*, eds. Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 3–52.
6. Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-footed Beast," *Harper's*, November 1989, 45–56.
7. Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).
8. Tom Wolfe, "From Bauhaus to Our House," *Harper's*, July 1981, 40–59. Republished as *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

