

Literary Journalism as a Discipline and Genre: The Politics and the Paradox

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Abstract: A paradox lies at the heart of literary journalism (otherwise termed creative nonfiction, long-form journalism, narrative journalism and, more recently, slow journalism and multi-platform immersive journalism). On the one hand, it has emerged since the 1970s as a distinct, theoretically rich field of study (with an international reach). On the other hand, its separateness as a discipline in higher education has, on many levels, impeded its growth and created debilitating epistemological disputes within the academic community and confusions (as well as hostility) among practicing journalists. This study will attempt to trace, briefly, the history of literary journalism both as a discipline (comparing it to that of English) and a genre and go on to tackle the genre's inherent elitism. In its final sections, the essay will argue, radically, that the parameters of both genre and discipline need to be erased for literary journalism to thrive.

Keywords: literary journalism – genre – discipline – politics – elitism



It is interesting to compare the history of English as a subject of study in universities with the history of literary journalism—and identify the crucial historical, political, and economic factors influencing both.

The emergence of the study of English essentially accompanied Britain's rise to pre-eminence as a global, imperial, capitalist power in the later part of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. The study was, in effect, one of the many manifestations of the cultural and ideological dominance of British imperial values at the time. Of note, one of the first recorded advocates of the teaching of English was Adam Smith (1703–1790), the eminent Scottish philosopher, economist, and author who laid the foundations of the classical free market economic theory. Indeed, “Smith's approach to English literature was in keeping with his theories about the need to develop a free market economy [to] serve the needs of an independent and competitive citizenry.”¹ Above all, he stressed that “training in literature served a specific utilitarian function for the sons of the middle class.”² Studying English literature “was a way to teach conduct, not as Renaissance humanists before him had as a measure of ‘polite learning’ for the sons of the aristocracy, but as a way to transcend class-based distinctions of refinement and to promote English citizenship.”³

English as an academic subject was also “institutionalised” in the U.K. in “Mechanics’ Institutes and working men’s colleges.”⁴ Some critics have even argued that “English was literally the ‘poor man’s Classics,’ a way of providing an education for those who would never attend public schools and Oxford or Cambridge.”⁵ The political aspects remained always to the fore: In the early days of the discipline, the stress was on solidarity between the social classes, national pride, and the cultivation of moral values. In effect, one of the main functions of English was to help “prevent . . . social unrest.”⁶

The English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1822–1886) was appointed Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, in 1845 and played an important role in the development of English.⁷ And from these British roots, the discipline spread in the latter half of the nineteenth century to North America, to European countries such as France and Germany, and to the colonies across the globe. The emergence of English has been associated with the decline in religion (with secular texts replacing biblical ones)—and this certainly created tensions, for instance, among Christian missionaries in India. In 1852–1853, a parliamentary select committee report called for the promotion of British material interests and Western knowledge in India.

Professorships, professional associations, subject specializations, the publication of academic journals and textbooks, the identification of a dominant literary canon and pedagogical principles, and the creation of working

definitions are among the crucial elements that go toward the formation of a distinct academic discipline. And all these were featured as English became embedded in curricula around the world.

The Emergence of Literary Journalism: Some Parallels with English

Let us now turn to the emergence of literary journalism—and perhaps identify some parallels. The publication of Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson's *The New Journalism: With an Anthology*⁸—bringing together the works of (largely white, male, and U.S.) journalists such as Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Barbara Goldsmith, Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, Gay Talese, and Hunter S. Thompson—in 1973 proved to be the seminal moment. Here was Wolfe, a practicing journo (how amazing!), reflecting on his practice, identifying various elements of the unique style he was promoting (the New Journalism, no less)—and being, at the same time, highly combative and confident. Its effect was rather like that of a small earthquake in the fertile ground of Western culture: The aftereffects are still being felt. The U.S. academic community and, to a much lesser extent, British academics were the first to respond—and a highly influential series of texts appeared, cementing the position of literary journalism as a distinct style. These included Sims,⁹ Sims and Kramer,¹⁰ Campbell,¹¹ Kerrane and Yagoda,¹² Hartsock,¹³ Treglown and Bennett,¹⁴ Applegate,¹⁵ Talese and Lounsbury,¹⁶ and Berner.¹⁷

How can we account for this extraordinary flowering of the literary journalism canon led by U.S. scholars (and with a few Brits in the background)? Susan Sontag reminds us of the importance of placing our understanding of artistic, literary styles in their historical and geographical context:

. . . the notion of style, generically considered, has a specific, historical meaning. It is not only that styles belong to a time and place; and that our perception of the style of a given work of art is always charged with an awareness of the work's historicity, its place in a chronology.¹⁸

In part, and in complex ways, it could be argued that the emerging awareness and celebration of literary journalism as a genre in the 1970s and 1980s were a manifestation of the political, cultural, and ideological power of the United States (as the leader of the Western, capitalist world in its confrontation with communist Soviet Union) at the time. As Edward Said commented:

So influential has been the discourse insisting on American specialness, altruism and opportunity, that imperialism in the United States as a word or ideology has turned up only rarely and recently in accounts of the United States culture, politics and history. But the connection between imperial politics and culture in North America, and in particular in the United States, is astonishingly direct.¹⁹

Later, in his seminal text *Culture and Imperialism*, Said was to expand on this idea:

The connection between imperial politics and culture is astonishingly direct. American attitudes to American “greatness,” to hierarchies of race, to the perils of *other* revolutions (the American revolution being considered unique and somehow unrepeatable anywhere else in the world) have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured the realities of empire, while apologists for overseas American interests have insisted on American innocence, doing good, fighting for freedom.²⁰

Moreover, there was a wealth of literary talent among the U.S. journalists whose work Wolfe and Johnson highlighted in their anthology. A range of prestigious journals—such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, the *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, and *New York* magazine—were on hand to provide outlets for their writings. In addition, there was an academic community with a long-standing tradition of journalism studies (taking in both practical and theoretical strands)—and a number of imaginative, highly intelligent, and risk-taking university lecturers determined to explore and expand on the ideas in Wolfe and Johnson’s inspirational text.²¹

Literary Journalism as a Discipline

Slowly and hesitantly, then, literary journalism (otherwise termed literary nonfiction or creative nonfiction) emerged as a discipline in the United States. Thomas B. Connery, currently emeritus professor of communication and journalism at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, and author of *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*,²² taught a course titled “Journalism and Literature” in a master’s program at Ohio State University in the early 1970s and, with others elsewhere, led modules in “New Journalism” in the early 1980s.²³

According to Norman Sims, author of the seminal 1984 text, *The Literary Journalists*:

I think you should look to the 1970s or 1980s in the U.S. for the true start of literary journalism as a discipline. The New Journalism made such a splash that lots of journalism departments started teaching courses on the subject in the seventies (as they will in the future on “fake news,” probably). It was certainly something in the air, not as important as standard news writing but important enough to inform students about. Not all the people teaching it loved it. My former colleague Larry Pinkham taught a course on New Journalism at Columbia University in the School of Journalism in the seventies; he had mixed feelings. Of course, most professors were older . . .

Those New Journalism courses faded away by the late seventies in

most cases as the New Journalism acquired a negative connotation. When I came to UMass Amherst in 1979, I proposed teaching a course in literary journalism. Larry Pinkham, who was then the department chair, as I remember, was encouraging. But I titled it something about the New Journalism. I later renamed the course as literary journalism and taught it in a couple different forms until I retired, but I would not say that it was a discipline at UMass. Close but not quite.

My anthology in 1984, *The Literary Journalists*, seems to have resulted in a lot of courses being taught because I argued that the New Journalism had not expired in the 1970s and was still being practiced by quality professionals who did not have the in-your-face attitude of folks like Tom Wolfe. (And Wolfe was still writing then.) I expanded the range beyond New Journalism to include people like Joe Mitchell. Complicated. But single courses do not a discipline make. Columbia had a course, as did Princeton (in the English department, taught by John McPhee) and many other universities.²⁴

In Britain, paradoxically, while a vast tradition of literary journalism dates back to Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), and a number of the early seminal texts on literary journalism were by British academics, it has been very slow to emerge as a discipline in British universities. As Jenny McKay, writing in 2011, commented:

What university courses in the U.K. don’t usually include at either the undergraduate or the postgraduate level is any serious consideration of journalism as a branch of literature. Among a few exceptions was a course taught at the University of Stirling until autumn 2009, one module in a master’s course at the University of Lincoln and the more recent master’s in literary journalism at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow.²⁵

Today, the situation is very different. Type “Journalism and Creative Writing” into the UCAS (U.K. university course database) and information on seventy-seven undergraduate courses appears; at postgraduate level there are thirteen programs. For “Magazine Journalism,” which incorporates feature/long-form/immersive writing, there are eleven undergraduate and eleven postgraduate programs.

The situation in Portugal remains bleak. Isabel Soares, of the Instituto Técnico de Lisboa, commented:

Here in Portugal, literary journalism is not (yet) an autonomous discipline. However, after a lot of effort by myself and colleagues it has been accepted at my institute as part of a program in investigative journalism. Students can also opt to develop a thesis in literary journalism. Thus, it has been mainly introduced at the postgraduate levels: in the Master’s in communication studies and Ph.D. in communication sciences.²⁶

In France, John Bak at Université de Lorraine and one of the founders of the IALJS, comments bluntly:

As for literary journalism as a discipline in France, it does not exist. Even literary journalism as a topic in France is difficult to talk about. Some colleagues work on “moocs” for their research, and I know two professors who do have research projects on French reportage from the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.²⁷

In Australia, Matthew Ricketson and Sue Joseph record the introduction of the program, *Contemporary Writing Practice: Creative Non-Fiction* at the University of Technology Sydney, in 1999, and the literary journalism course at RMIT, Melbourne, the following year.²⁸ The formation of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, at a conference in France in 2006, proved to be another pivotal moment as it helped inspire the development of both the study of the genre and its teaching as an academic discipline across the globe. According to David Abrahamson, of the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, Chicago: “What might be termed ‘Literary Journalism Studies’ started to feel like a legitimate academic discipline around 2010 or 2011 following the sixth annual IALJS conference in Brussels.”²⁹

The Waning of the U.S. Empire in Literary Journalism

In recent years, interestingly accompanying the waning of the U.S. empire and the disastrous interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Chad, Yemen, and elsewhere, the emphasis in literary journalism studies has been to try to break away from the U.S./U.K. grip and incorporate global perspectives.³⁰ Recent articles in *Literary Journalism Studies*, the journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, have included studies focusing on South Africa, France, Germany, Poland, Argentina, Australia, and Russia. Yet the influence of the dominant cultural (alongside the political) ideology persists. For instance, the publisher description of *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences*, of 2011, edited by John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds, reads as follows:

Though largely considered an Anglo-American phenomenon today, literary journalism has had a long and complex international history, one built on a combination of traditions and influences that are sometimes quite specific to a nation and at other times come from the blending of cultures across borders.³¹

Holland, Spain, China, Brazil, Finland, New Zealand, Slovenia, Australia, and Poland are among the countries examined. Yet the crucial opening, scene-setting section, exploring the theory of international literary journalism, is covered entirely by U.S. or U.K. academics.

Similar tensions appear in the texts on literary journalism I have jointly edited: The aim was to globalize the study, yet still vast tracks of the world lay beyond the gaze of literary journalism academics. In the introduction to the first volume of *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*,³² John Tulloch and I begin frankly:

Best to come clean at the outset: like Dr Faustus, the present collection makes bold and overreaching claims to a world-encompassing inclusiveness. But the claim to globalism can hardly be sustained in a selection of studies that explores the work of eleven European writers, six from the United States and Canada, one each from Latin America and India and a solitary essay on literary journalism in the Middle East.³³

The introduction to *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, Vol. 2,³⁴ again jointly edited with John Tulloch, begins with this quote from Rupert Hildyard, one of the contributors to the first volume, rightly warning that the “global tag . . . often conceals Anglo-American interests and hegemony,” and I conceded: “This new volume, indeed, has its fair share of chapters on US and UK writers,” though the gaze did spread “further afield—to Australia, Brazil, France, India, Ireland, and Portugal.”³⁵

The persisting power of the North American tradition was highlighted by Sue Joseph in an analysis of the contributions to the IALJS’s journal *Literary Journalism Studies* from the Spring 2009 (1, no. 1) through the Fall 2014 (6, no. 2) issues.³⁶ Of the seventy-three authors, the U.S. accounted for thirty-six (53.73%), Canada, eight (11.94%), Norway, four (5.97%), the U.K. and Netherlands, three (4.47% each), Australia, Portugal, and South Africa, two (2.98% each), with just a single paper from each of Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Cuba, Finland, Germany, and Ireland (1.49% each). Ricketson and Joseph comment: “The data shows that even in the most well-meaning and hopeful of enterprises, as the IALJS certainly is, an international association and its journal are still heavily weighted towards the country of publication, in this case, the US.”³⁷

Indeed, while a special issue of the *Australian Journalism Review* was titled: “Literary Journalism: Looking beyond the Anglo-American Tradition,” many of the contributors still framed their studies with references to the seminal U.S./U.K. texts. For instance, as I pointed out in my afterword to the issue, Christopher Kremmer:

examines three works of book-length narrative non-fiction by well-known Australian authors. They are Helen Garner’s *This House of Grief: The Story of a Murder Trial* (2014); *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1994) by Geraldine Brooks; and Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* (2003). He . . . begins his study referring to Tom Wolfe’s celebrated definition of

'new journalism' (1973). He cites the American Norman Sims (1984) on literary journalism as a hybrid form of narrative using literary techniques to convey deeper journalistic truths than is possible in brief expository news reports.³⁸

Elsewhere Kremmer refers to "criteria offered mainly by the Americans Lounsberry (1990), Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) and Kramer (1995)."³⁹ "And in his analysis of Garner's *This House of Grief*, Kremmer begins by acknowledging [her] debt to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*: 'Her desire to exercise her literary art on the canvas of the law suggests obvious parallels'.⁴⁰

I also in the afterword noted that Carolyn Rickett, while analyzing "Pamela Bone's writing about her cancer," highlighted "the work of two English journalists, John Diamond and Ruth Picardie, and the theories of the English academics Rosalind Coward and John Tulloch, in her important, opening, contextualising section. Rickett also quotes Bone herself who . . . cites the Americans Philip Roth and Susan Sontag (together with the Australian Doris Brett)" as writers who "reassure her about the value of writing about illness."⁴¹ Isabel Soares, in her "study of Portuguese literary journalism, acknowledges the importance of (all-male) Anglo-American practitioners such as Charles Dickens, W. T. Stead, Jack London, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, the theories of Americans such as John Hartsock, Thomas Connery, and Norman Sims—and the 'living' long-form journalism currently found in the *New Yorker*."⁴²

Similarly, McDonald and Davies highlight "the work of Anglo-American literary journalism theorists such as Bak and Reynolds (2011), Hartsock (2000), Keeble and Tulloch (2012) and Sims (1990)" in their analysis of four Melbourne journalists' 1880 reporting of Ned Kelly's "last stand."⁴³ McDonald and Davies also point to Tom Wolfe's essay that introduces the *New Journalism* anthology he coedited with E. W. Johnson, in which Wolfe describes the ways that "he and his fellow journalists, writing for magazines in North America in the 1960s and '70s, were inventing a new genre of accurate reporting that incorporated literary techniques to enhance the storytelling; specifically dialogue, scenes, point of view and telling detail."⁴⁴

Celebrating the Blur of Literary Journalism

While the emergence of literary journalism as a discipline has had its many positive aspects (the vital internationalizing impetus being still countered—as a result of complex, historically rooted political/cultural/economic factors—by the potency of the U.S.-led tradition), it has also had a number of negative consequences. Professionalism, academic administrations, and curriculum organization all normally require disciplinary clarity. And yet, literary journalism is at core a messy term. Indeed, it has in its

essence "a provisional quality" that captures "many of the uncertainties and contradictions of the writer's predicament" today.⁴⁵ As the British critic Mark Lawson observed: "We live in a culture of blur and hybrids."⁴⁶ Too much time is inevitably spent in an endless hagggle over definitions and terminology (since the underlying politics of professionalism require it) when really the blur of the discipline should be celebrated! John Tulloch and I argue:

. . . rather than a stable genre or family of genres, literary journalism defines a *field* where different traditions and practices of writing intersect, a disputed terrain within which various overlapping practices of writing—among them the journalistic column, the memoir, the sketch, the essay, travel narratives, life writing, "true crime" narratives, "popular" history, cultural reflection and other modes of writing—camp uneasily, disputing their neighbors' barricades and patching up temporary alliances.⁴⁷

Clearly literary journalism is the Big Brother in the epistemological Oceania. But with journalism academics duelling with literary studies colleagues, a number of upstart notions have appeared on the margins: creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, narrative journalism, long-form journalism, book-length journalism, even more recently, slow journalism—and so on. Increasingly, a tone of irritation is evident. Rickettson and Joseph highlight the "internecine, obscure turf war" over the definitions of literary journalism and conclude: "This debate has been trundling along for years and, frankly, is getting nowhere."⁴⁸

The obsession with genre definitions and disciplinary clarity has also meant, it could be argued, that literary journalism has been slow to embrace a vast range of potentially exciting perspectives. Politics, propaganda, cultural studies, psychology, humor studies, theories of ideology, history, narrative studies, political economy, computer/internet studies, fandom research, media ethics, sociology, ethnography, colonial and post-colonial studies, gender and race studies—all these have appeared in some guise in literary journalism research to date. But, I believe that without the disciplinary constraints the results from the cross-fertilization of ideas could be far more fruitful.

Literary Journalism's Uneasy Relationship with Practicing Journo

Bak appears to seek refuge from the "turf war" over genre definitions into the warm embrace of the discipline, proclaiming:

. . . we have to stop writing definitional manifestos that show by default that literary journalism lacks cohesion, take charge of the discipline ourselves, conduct the research that needs to be conducted, and wait for the rest to catch up with us. They will, eventually.⁴⁹

But this approach fails to acknowledge the many problematics (highlighted above) associated with the disciplinary. Most importantly, the stress on the academic discipline creates more problematics in literary journalism's uneasy relationship with the actual world of practicing journalists. I have been a journalist in the U.K. since 1970 and never once heard colleagues describe themselves as "literary journalists" or "creative-nonfiction writers." Most would find any discussion of the terms alienating: too abstract, academic, and irrelevant. George Orwell commented, in his 1946 essay "Why I Write":

The aesthetic motive is very feeble in a lot of writers, but even a pamphleteer [his, somewhat derogatory, word for journalists] or a writer of textbooks will have pet words and phrases which appeal to him for non-utilitarian reasons. . . . What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art.⁵⁰

More recently, the investigative journalist and broadcaster John Pilger has commented:

By giving priority to the writing, I have tried not always successfully to draw together the literary, the analytical and the historical. This is true of my films as well as my written work. The essence I've aimed for is humane and to give the widest possible audience a sense of how "things work" and perhaps to provide an antidote to the cliché and stereotype congested view that is the voice of authority's propaganda so often heard in parts of the media.⁵¹

But I would surmise Orwell and Pilger are the exceptions. Joseph, in her recent discussions with journalists in Australia, finds generally a reluctance to adopt the term "creative nonfiction"—or else hostility.⁵² Three of Joseph's favorite authors—David Marr, Helen Garner, and Chloe Hooper—went so far as to refuse to take part. Fairfax war reporter Paul McGeough, the first of Joseph's interviewees, is clearly uninterested in the debate. "I've never thought about it," he says. "Beyond journalist reporter, I've never tried to define myself."⁵³ Margaret Simons, who won the Walkley Award for Social Equity Journalism for her essay "Fallen Angels" in 2007, says she "hate[d]" the term creative nonfiction. She prefers such terms as "dirty journalism," or even "disinterested journalism."⁵⁴ The one person who seriously understands Joseph's question about defining creative nonfiction is fellow academic John Dale.⁵⁵

Tackling Literary Journalism's Inherent Elitism

At the heart of the literary journalism problematic is its inherent elitism which must be confronted head-on. Historically, as I have pointed out elsewhere, complex factors (cultural, ideological, political) lie behind journalism's low status in the broader culture.⁵⁶ Since their emergence in the early

seventeenth century in Europe's cities, particularly London, the "news media" (variously known as corantos, diurnals, gazettes, mercuries, and proceedings) have been associated with scandal, gossip, and "low" culture. During the 1720s, Grub Street came to be associated with an impoverished area of London where poor writers lived, just as the word "hack" came to be associated with writers and prostitutes—basically anything overused, hired out, or common.

On a basic level, journalism has provided writers with an income. Yet this very fact has reinforced journalism's position as a sub-literary genre. For literature is considered the fruit of "scholarship"—hence pure and disinterested and above market considerations, including those of being readable and accessible—while journalistic writing is viewed as distorted by the constraints of the market, tight deadlines, and word limits. All this has meant that journalism has long struggled to be considered a worthy academic discipline and genre worthy of special attention for its literary elements. Until quite recently the journalism of writers such as Dickens, George Sand, Oscar Wilde, Willa Cather, D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, Mahatma Gandhi, Marguerite Duras, Mary McCarthy, R. K. Narayan, and Angela Carter has not been worthy of attention by the academy. Moreover, writers themselves have often looked down on their journalism: George Orwell, as noted earlier, looked down on his journalism as "mere pamphleteering."

In the face of journalism's generally low cultural status, advocates of literary journalism have promoted it as a Higher Form of Journalism. As Tulloch and I wrote in the introduction to a collection of essays on literary journalism worldwide: "The addition of 'literary' to 'journalism' might be seen as dignifying the latter and giving it a modicum of cultural class."⁵⁷ For each national grouping of literary journalists there is a dominant canon: with a few writers (for instance, Svetlana Alexievich) and journals (say, the *New Yorker*) highlighted as being worthy of serious analysis, critique, and celebration. Alongside this, in the academy, literary journalism studies are somehow elevated above the more mundane activities of journalism academics. The latter busy themselves with teaching students how to bash out lively intros and well-structured stories to deadlines and to use the constantly changing media technologies while literary journalism colleagues ponder the deeper literary, ethical, epistemological issues buried in the texts.

The Radical Response 1: Democratizing the Genre

In response to the condescension of the academy toward journalism as a legitimate field for study, we should argue that, in fact, *all* journalism is worthy of attention as *literature*. So away with the canon, away even with

the notion of literary journalism as a separate genre! And away with all those tedious debates about what precisely constitutes literary journalism that have dulled so many conferences over the years. Immediately, the problem of academics confronting practicing journo's with a concept they feel uncomfortable with is solved. Their work becomes interesting—not because it falls within a specific genre (that needs careful explaining), but because of its inherent literary elements.

But, you argue, how can tabloid journalism be considered literature? Yet, let us take as an arbitrarily chosen extreme example, a day's edition of the *Sun* (October 5, 2017). This red-top, trashy U.K. tabloid was acquired by Rupert Murdoch in 1969, and its mix of titillation, sleaze, celebrity gossip, sports, and randy royals (together with extreme right politics) has helped it secure the largest daily newspaper circulation in the U.K. That day's main front-page headline simply uses the slogan from which letters disastrously fell off during the crucial keynote address of Prime Minister (PM) Theresa May to the Conservative Party conference: "BUI DING A C NTRY THA ORKS." The smaller headline above this (the strapline, in the jargon) jokes: "Things can only get letter" while the caption reads: "Words fail . . . after letters fall off slogan." All this is clever, humorous, slightly mocking punning. This tone continues in the copy as it reports (slightly scurrilously): "Referring to a missing letter 'F', shadow justice secretary Richard Burgon taunted: 'It's an F off to the country from Conservative Party Conference'."⁵⁸

Notice how the newspaper, fiercely loyal to the Conservative Party (and virulent in its hatred of the Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Party), is still able to joke about the PM's embarrassment. (Indeed, an accompanying photograph shows her looking rather glum and gormless.) Puns, after all, are important in newspapers, particularly the pops. They play with language and its many faceted meanings. Some can be forced (as here). But their contrivance is part of their appeal. And their humor contributes to the tabloid's overall hedonistic approach. No one (even the Pope, the Queen, the PM) can escape their barbed wit.

In many respects, the *Sun* here is playing the role of the modern-day court jester. During the Middle Ages, one of the most important roles at courts throughout Europe (and in India, Persia, and China) was occupied by the jesters whose function was to mock their employer. Rulers know they will always be mocked and attacked—but clever are those rulers who control the mockery. The court jester system did just that.⁵⁹ Today, the corporate media are clearly members of the U.K. "court," and their mockery of the system and its leaders provides a useful legitimizing function for the "democratic" state. John Fiske goes further and argues that the tabloids' witty approach carries a

necessary and "subversive" agenda critical of the state and the hypocrisies and pretensions of those who presume to be our moral guardians.⁶⁰

The Radical Response 2: Democratizing the Discipline

If then all journalism is to be seen as worthy of attention as literature, it follows that this democratizing impulse can be applied to literary journalism as a discipline. In other words, the fences separating the many specialisms in the academy need—as far as possible—to be pulled down: All journalism teachers need to see the creative, imaginative elements of the field. English, creative writing, and journalism programs too often operate completely separate from each other. Collaborations need to develop—with the ultimate aim of breaking down the disciplinary barriers.

Universities today are highly bureaucratized, in many ways inflexible institutions, and such changes are unlikely to happen for many years. Yet radical steps are already being taken—in Europe and North America—to form higher education institutions outside the increasingly market-driven, hyper-specialized public sector, based, instead, on cooperative, social justice, non-hierarchical, and ecological principles.⁶¹ Often in these universities, not only is the separation of disciplines being challenged but even that between student and teacher—with all participants being seen as "scholars." There's the Free University Brighton,⁶² the Manchester Social Science Centre,⁶³ Leicester Peoples University,⁶⁴ and the Ragged University Edinburgh.⁶⁵ In the U.S., there's Tampa Free Skool⁶⁶; in Canada, there's the Edmonton Free School⁶⁷; in Spain, there's Mondragon University.⁶⁸ And those are just a few examples. The Lincoln Social Science Centre, another progressive, higher-education institution, interestingly uses this self-description: "All classes are participative and collaborative in order to ground inquiry in the experiences and knowledges of the participants. . . . One key guiding principle of the Centre is that 'teachers' and 'students' have much to learn from each other."⁶⁹

Conclusions

Literary journalism studies have failed to give adequate attention to the subject as an academic discipline, concentrating too much on its development as a genre. Why did literary journalism as a discipline emerge in this country at this particular period and not earlier? How important are the political/economic factors? In France, there is a vast tradition of literary journalism in the industry and yet it is still to emerge as an academic discipline there. Why? With the emergence of literary journalism studies across the globe, to what extent does the U.S. canon remain influential? These are all fascinating questions around which, to date, there has been insufficient inquiry.

The development of the discipline has certainly been dogged by both

constant epistemological disputes in the academy and bewilderment in the industry. The radical solution promoted in this essay—to view all journalism (and not just the body text but also headlines, captions, and standfirsts) worth considering as literature—certainly has important pedagogical implications. During more than thirty years of teaching journalism, I have always asked my new students why they have chosen the subject. Virtually all come up with the same reply: “Because I like writing.” In other words, the creative/imaginative impulse lies behind the journalistic bug. And those creative/literary dimensions I’ve tried to incorporate in all my teaching (and writing on) practical journalism. Take, for instance, a conventional hard news story: There’s the conciseness and immediacy of the intro section (capturing the news value); the overall tone to consider, the use of quotations (to invest the coverage with a “human interest” element); the often subtle handling of attribution; perhaps the brief description of a person or place; the insertion, appropriately, of background, contextualizing information; the close attention to the specific style of the publication; and the clear structuring of the report. And so on. Isn’t all that creative! I’ve even highlighted the “kind of poetry” in the headlines of the *Sun*: One screamed, for instance “NITWIT HITS TWITTER WITH WRIT.”⁷⁰ In the October 5, 2017, edition considered above, a story about a factory worker whose boss penned a rhyme about her breast on her fortieth birthday card and won £10,000 compensation was headlined: “Titty ditty not so witty.”⁷¹

Breaking down the disciplinary boundaries in today’s hyper-specialized, higher-education environment is not going to be easy. But as indicated above, there are many initiatives outside the mainstream challenging the dominant academic ideologies. There is room for optimism.

Notes

- 1 Kijinski, “The Rise of English Studies in Britain,” 340.
- 2 Kijinski, 340.
- 3 Kijinski, 340.
- 4 Academy, “History of English as a Discipline,” para. 5.
- 5 Academy, para. 5.
- 6 Academy, para. 5.
- 7 Lucas, “The Birth of Eng Lit,” 29.
- 8 Wolfe and Johnson, *The New Journalism: With an Anthology*.

- 9 Sims, *The Literary Journalists*.
- 10 Sims and Kramer, *Literary Journalism: A New Collection*.
- 11 Campbell, *Journalism, Literature and Modernity*.
- 12 Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*.
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- ⁴⁷ Tulloch and Keeble, "Introduction: Mind the Gaps," 1:7.
- ⁴⁸ Ricketson and Joseph, "Literary Journalism: Looking Beyond," 27.
- ⁴⁹ Bak, introduction to *Literary Journalism across the Globe*, 19.
- ⁵⁰ Orwell, "Why I Write," 26, 28.
- ⁵¹ Pilger, in e-mail to Zollmann, 372, 372n8.
- ⁵² Joseph, *Behind the Text*.
- ⁵³ Joseph, 3, quoting Paul McGeough.
- ⁵⁴ Joseph, 132, quoting Margaret Simons. Martha Nandorfy, in her review of *Behind the Text*, comments wryly (and in parentheses) on Simons's comments: "(And I find myself wondering if such course titles might actually increase student enrolments [sic])." Nandorfy, "The Implications of Genre," 148.
- ⁵⁵ Joseph, 98.
- ⁵⁶ Keeble, "Introduction: On Journalism," *The Journalistic Imagination*, 1–14.
- ⁵⁷ Tulloch and Keeble, "Introduction: Mind the Gaps," 1:5.
- ⁵⁸ "Bui ding a C ntry Tha orks," 1.
- ⁵⁹ Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere*.
- ⁶⁰ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, xlv, 83–102.
- ⁶¹ Swain, "Could the Free University Movement Be the Great New Hope for Education?"
- ⁶² Matthews, "Altogether Now."
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- ⁶⁴ Social Science Centre Manchester.
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- ⁶⁶ Ragged University Edinburgh.
- ⁶⁷ Tampa Free Skool.
- ⁶⁸ Edmonton Free School.
- ⁶⁹ Mondragon Unibertsitatea.
- ⁷⁰ Lincoln Social Science Centre, para. 2.
- ⁷¹ Tulloch and Keeble, "Introduction: Mind the Gaps," 1:7, quoting Nick Parker, *Sun* [United Kingdom], May 20, 2011.
- ⁷² "Titty Ditty Not So Witty."