Svetlana Alexievich, July 2, 2016. Image by Tomaz Silva/Agência Brasil (WikiMedia Commons).

Teaching LJ . . .

Svetlana Alexievich and the Polyphonic Translation Model of Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich's books, like literary journalism itself, defy definition. However, her longform, polyphonic "translations" of her sources' stories are powerful accounts of some of the twentieth century's most horrific events, including the fall of the Soviet Union, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Chernobyl catastrophe. The works, which she calls "novels," push the boundaries of what can be defined as journalism due to the fact that they are often written from the point of view of her subjects but in the author's own elegant prose. They are also in many ways the opposite of literary journalism, which often privileges the voice of the author and relies on anecdotes or images that may or may not be indicative of the larger whole. As such, Alexievich's techniques, this essay argues, should be taught as an alternative that can help students avoid some of the ego-driven pitfalls of literary journalism. Instead, if students look at each source they interview as a facet of a narrative prism, that prism will not be dependent on one source or story. Even if Alexievich's techniques prove beyond the ability and resources of student journalists to fully understand, exposure to her work will shore up students' journalistic skills and maybe even teach them to listen.

Keywords: literary journalism – Soviet Union – journalism – pedagogy – Svetlana Alexievich

"She interviews hundreds of people. Lets them tell their stories through her. Soldiers. Nurses. Nuclear Technicians. She doesn't speak for them, but she uses her talent and way with words to let them speak for themselves. It's not easy, and she's one of the few who can do it without screwing it up."[1] This pronouncement, followed by the phrases Nobel Laureate and Cold War documentarian, produces blank stares from a normally enthusiastic group of budding literary journalists.[2] Yet, it is necessary to press on because the work of Belarusian literary journalist and historian Svetlana Alexievich embodies an issue of primary importance to the instructor of literary journalism: the responsibility and difficulties of telling the stories of those who cannot tell the stories themselves.

Whether it is a language barrier, a class barrier, or simply a lack of platform, the lives of others often need telling by someone who is not intimately familiar with their lives, communities, and milieux. This often comes as a shock to Generation Z students[3] who commonly insist that journalists should tell only their *own* stories and not dare to speak for anyone else. In part a noble idea rooted in an aversion to cultural appropriation, the notion also stems from a self-centered belief that first-person journalism is more literary and more real and more valid than any other form of nonfiction writing.

When confronted with the notion that banning reporters from writing about anything but their own lives and communities would likely produce thousands of articles about petty problems but few if any multi-faceted stories about the residents of Ugandan slums, intersectional narratives about the Hong Kong protests, histories featuring sources who are no longer living, many students tend to quiet down. Moreover, they already know some stories require the perspective of multiple sources across class, race, and ethnic lines. At this point in the semester, the students in the literary journalism class have read Tom Junod's "The Falling Man"[4] and Alex Perry's "The True Story of the White Island Eruption,"[5] both of which are stories that contain the perspectives of multiple sources, though those perspectives are presented in the third person rather than the first.

How, however, can a writer do this? How can a writer bring to light and life the lives of people radically different from the writer's self? This is where Alexievich's work can be highly instructive. The Cold War might be distant history to the students, and their initial reaction might be to recoil, but they do come around once they have been presented with captivating passages from Alexievich's work and given some context. It is especially effective to start with her account of Chernobyl, because younger students know of the disaster through countless YouTube videos and Instagram accounts that document journeys into the exclusion zone. Once students have a taste for

her prose, however, the now-distant fall of the Soviet Union becomes vivid and real: "Pretty soon, I'll be decomposing into phosphorous, calcium, and so on. Who else will you find to tell you the truth? All that's left are the archives. Pieces of paper. And the truth is . . . I worked at an archive myself, I can tell you firsthand: paper lies even more than people do."[6]

Alexievich earned the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 for her books chronicling dark events in the Soviet Union, from World War II to the Soviet-Afghan War to the Chernobyl catastrophe. The selection of Alexievich and her work marked a rare case of a person winning the literary prize for reportage.[7] Given the dearth of English translations of her work and the relative rarity of any literary journalism being taught in many universities, the announcement may have been the first time many readers had ever heard of her. While her previous lack of fame was unfortunate, her rise to worldwide prominence came at a crucial time, especially as an army of sophisticated propagandists infected worldwide media with the fiction of Soviet innocence. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his supporters were some of the few people who did not approve of the Nobel committee's choice.[8] However, first-time readers of her work not only discovered her uncompromisingly detailed accounts of the failure of the great Soviet experiment, they were also treated to a specific style of polyphonic literary journalism rarely seen—one that can and should be held as a model for avoiding some of the pitfalls of some forms of literary journalism.

This is not to say that Alexievich's techniques should or could replace the conventions of much literary journalism. There are several reasons why her methods might be difficult for literary journalists to apply. One reason is that conducting dozens, possibly hundreds, of interviews is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and costly. It is simply beyond the budget of most publications, especially student publications. Another stumbling block is that it requires an enormous amount of self-discipline for the author not to project him or herself into the subject's story and change it to better match what the author *wants* the story to say.

However, scaled-down versions of Alexievich's techniques, where students interview five to six sources and present the sources' stories in the sources' voices, are within reach. In the literary journalism classroom, students are instructed to think of each source and voice as a different side of a prism, and each should be an equal facet of the narrative. The results have been mixed, but there are usually a few students eager to do the required legwork. Moreover, the discussions of how to go about this work often focus on neglected journalistic skills, such as listening to and having empathy for the subject.

Yet, if a student is to hold up Alexievich as a model, it is helpful to ar-

ticulate what precisely she does, what her books are—among them *Zinky Boys* (1989), *Voices from Chernoby*l (1997), and S*econdhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013)—and why they work so well. This has been, for many critics, a challenge as elusive as defining literary journalism itself. Students, once they grasp what is different about her approach, relish this challenge. Discussions of her work often crystalize some of the more esoteric problems of voice and perspective in nonfiction. Contrasting Alexievich's writing with the nonfiction work of Truman Capote or Tom Wolfe tends not to diminish any of the authors, but rather illustrates the particular genius of each one.

Students must ask: Are her books journalism? Nonfiction? History? Oral history?

What distinguishes Alexievich's work from that of many U.S. literary journalists (and other cultures as well), is not just her polyphonic or multi-voiced journalism, but the way in which her own authorial perspective is subsumed in favor of the perspective of the subject's perspective. Her meticulously factual prose reads as though it is the voice of the interviewed subject, not the journalist's. She is "translating"—or perhaps, more accurately, "ghost-writing" the raw interviews into her own elegant prose. In this way, she gives voice to the voiceless, allowing her own gifts to be used by those who cannot speak as beautifully themselves. A Russian soldier's experience of the Afghan War comes alive in his brutal words: "Fear is more human than bravery, you're scared and you're sorry, at least for yourself, but you force your fear back into your subconscious. Well, I admit it. I had the greatest respect for the Afghan people, even while I was shooting and killing them."[9]

Students tend to delight in such honesty, and they crave the ability to tease such a pronouncement from their own sources. They want to know how Alexievich does it, and suddenly become engaged in the specifics of technique. Alexievich's descriptions of her processes have been sparse but consistent. She does dozens, if not hundreds, of interviews with many witnesses to whatever crisis about which she is writing.[10] In her books, her often humble subjects speak with consistent grace and style. For example, in *Voices from Chernoby*l, an account by the wife of a fireman named Lyudmilla Ignatenko, who watched her husband Vasily die from radiation sickness, reads:

> On the very first day in the dormitory, they measured me with a dosimeter. My clothes, bag, purse, shoes—they were all "hot." And they took that all away from me right there. Even my underwear. The only thing they left was my money.
>
> He started to change; every day I met a brand-new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his tongue, his cheeks—at first there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers—as

white film . . . the colour of his face . . . his body . . . blue, red, grey-brown. And it's all so very mine!"[11]

In a later passage, chemical engineer Ivan Nikolaevich Zhykhov speaks of the astounding folly he encountered during the haphazard cleanup:

> We dug up the diseased top layer of soil, loaded it into cars and took it to waste burial sites. I thought that a waste burial site was a complex, engineered construction, but it turned out to be an ordinary pit. We picked up the earth and rolled it, like big rugs. We'd pick up the whole green mass of it, with grass, flowers, roots. It was work for madmen.[12]

The fact that the words themselves are not the subjects' own can and does provoke discomfort from journalists. An audience member at a panel discussion expressed concerns about Alexievich's use of the perspective of her sources, as well as what he observed as the obviousness of the two passages from *Voices of Chernobyl*, from two different sources, having been written by the same writer.

Students generally do not notice the consistency of the prose, until it is pointed out to them. Even when it has been pointed out, they tend to praise the elegance and effectiveness and do not see a problem with it, until they attempt to replicate the technique. Questions such as:

"Am I allowed to change the source's words?"

"What if the source doesn't like the way I write it?"

"How can I be accurate if I wasn't there?"

Answering these questions usually leads to complex ethical discussions, the kind that are a cornerstone of the literary journalism classroom.

The resulting conclusion is most often that there is real potential for abuse using this translation technique, but there is potential for abuse in many other areas of journalism as well. Bad journalists routinely cherry-pick facts to back up their theses, put thoughts into the heads of their sources and edit quotes in misleading ways. The solution is, in these cases, the same as for those using Alexievich's translation technique. Train journalists in ethics and demand they not engage in malfeasance.

Concretely defining the technique proves even more difficult. There is something fictive and illusory in presenting prose that did not come from the source's mouth as the source's voice, because it pushes against the boundaries of what journalism is. Language translators can manipulate word choice in the same way, and there is much scholarly debate as to if or when a translation is not the same as the original. The risk in employing Alexievich's technique is, in fact, less of a risk than translation, because the subject has the language skills to fact check the journalist's work. Yet, if executed with discipline and a

lack of bias, it can work much as translation does when a person cannot speak a language. But is translation the right word? At this stage, students can start to look for and read similar translations in their own language publications, seeing how the authorial technique can vary even when the basic premise remains the same.

The ghost-writing/translation technique is not unknown in U.S. journalism. Studs Terkel, the late chronicler of U.S. life, employed a similar method to create his oral histories of grand topics such as urban life in *Division Street* and the Great Depression in *Hard Times*.[13] Much like Alexievich, Terkel was hailed for giving voice to marginalized communities and populations. Unlike Alexievich, he more deftly created an illusion that his subjects were speaking for themselves. He did, however, field criticism for indulging in primitivism by letting their poor grammar and regional accents exist in what was still his prose.[14]

Even as they are often compared, the way the two authors' works read is remarkably different. In his preface to an interview with Alexievich for LitHub.com, John Freeman summed it up:

> Unlike Studs Terkel, whose oral histories of American life arrange themselves like transcribed radio interviews, Alexievich's books are strange creations. They never ask the reader to imagine their subjects are representative individuals. When she won the Nobel in 2015, Alexievich described them as novels—which is a fair comparison given the meticulous arrangement required to create such clear and evocative pastiche. Whatever they are, her books are as eerie and beautiful as overheard voices on a crowded train car traveling through the night.[15]

At the other end of the spectrum, polyphonic ghost-writing also remains a common practice in U.S. women's magazines such as *Marie Claire* or *Cosmopolitan*, and thus can be a familiar structure to some students, though the prose style and subject matter can vary wildly. *Marie Claire* leans heavily on direct quotes when telling the stories of women who successfully run for office,[16] while the magazine's regular feature telling the stories of reunions between exes, that is, people who were previously married, is decidedly not literary. "In spite of all the 'Miss Independent' and 'Girl Power' books I had read—and was planning to write someday—I fell in love. Fast and furious."[17] Recently, *Cosmopolitan* reached toward the literary when writer Anna Louie Sussman tells the story of a young woman from Texas who self-performs an abortion during the COVID-19 pandemic: "They try to tell you, 'We're going to help you do this, we're going to help you do that.' I've had friends say they told them that too. But once the baby was there, there was no help. So I was just scared, just thinking, *I'm really going to have to give birth*."[18]

As with Alexievich's work, these writers seek to elevate each individual source's narrative, sans authorial commentary. However, this technique must be employed with care and caveats, especially in terms of the multiplicity of sources. The more sources a writer includes in the story "translation" of sources' voices, the more journalistically sound the story becomes.

Multi-sourced narratives are inoculated against a single narrative or single perception bearing the weight of an argument. If one of a writer's sources turns out to be wrong, whether via deception, delusion, or mistake, it simply becomes an example of the chaos of a situation, if there are dozens of other, accurate voices shoring up the thesis. In a less multi-voiced story, such as the disastrous *Rolling Stone* exposé of rape culture at the University of Virginia,[19] a bad source destroys the credibility of the thesis.

Even in a small-scale classroom situation, students notice the contradictions between their sources and wonder if they should include them. They push back against the notion of writing down anything that they perceive to be incorrect, even when reminded that the source being incorrect can be an essential part of the story. They push back against making their sources look like fools or liars, rightfully fearing backlash. They push back at annotating the work, fearing it will ruin the narrative. The real breakthrough comes when the students realize that the solutions do not come easily, the facts are not always apparent, and sometimes they must write the truth even if it hurts the source.

The translation process also requires an authorial distance. One that is often the opposite of the approach of some U.S. literary journalists, who thrive on self-insertion and advancing their own points of view. This kind of author-centered journalism is not necessarily a bad thing, and it has given some of the greatest literary journalism. Classic works that do the opposite of what Alexievich does, such as Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"[20] and Joan Didion's *The White Album*[21] unfold their stories so the reader sees the subject through the author's eyes, observing everything the author observes and most times absorbing the author's brilliant perceptions of the subject. Even more extreme examples can be found in the works of Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer, as they take their readers on a journey through their own consciousness,[22] a journey that often completely subsumes whatever subject about which they are writing. When presented with these contrasts, one group of students concluded that Talese and Didion write about their subjects, Thompson and Mailer write about themselves through their subject, and Alexievich writes about the Soviet Union.

This can then lead into a discussion about the popularity of author-centered journalism and how it has led to some spectacular journalistic disasters

in which authors have been accused of advancing their own perceptions over facts or, worse, becoming fiction writers. *Grantland* writer Caleb Hannan allowed his own transphobia to shift the focus of his feature away from his subject's business dealings and toward his subject's gender identity, leading to the subject's suicide.[23] Stephen Glass's fabulist escapades at the *New Republic* are the stuff of legend,[24] and even *Esquire*'s well-respected Tom Junod was rightfully called out for his fictional lead in a Michael Stipe profile.[25] Still, U.S. editors like *Grantland*'s Bill Simmons and *Esquire*'s David M. Granger, heavily influenced by the New Journalism, often seemed to operate under the incorrect assumption that if the author's point of view is not the center of the story, then the story is not literary. Alexievich, on the other hand, speaks of her ability to listen to her sources and articulate their point of view as a core element of her work.[26]

These lessons have proved invaluable and should be a part of literary journalism pedagogy even if producing large scale works using Alexievich's translation technique is beyond most students' capabilities. Teaching them to value more than one voice, teaching them to privilege the source's voice over their own, and, above all, teaching them to listen, will only make all their writing stronger.

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Notes

[1] Author's in-class description to students. "Screwing it up," in this case, means the journalist projecting his or her own thoughts onto the subject as the journalist speaks for the source. What Alexievich does is a kind of high-end ghost writing, one that takes extraordinary sensitivity and self-restraint.

[2] The classroom scenes in this reconstruction are from my own memory, and the more esoteric conclusions mine, usually gently pushed onto the students by me.

[3] Generation Z is a term applied to people born from 1997 forward, as defined and named by the U.S. Pew Research Center. Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," para. 5.

[4] Junod, "The Falling Man," 176–99.

[5] Perry, "The True Story of the White Island Eruption."

[6] Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 171.

[7] "Nobel Prize in Literature 2015," All Nobel Prizes in Literature, *The Nobel Prize*. Accessed December 16, 2020. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature.

[8] Charnysh, "Belarus, Ukraine, Russia React to Alexievich's Nobel Prize."

[9] Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 20.

[10] Lucic, "A Conversation with Svetlana Alexievich," para. 8.

[11] Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 12.

[12] Alexievich, 161.

[13] Terkel, *Division Street*; Terkel, *Hard Times*.

[14] Tonguette, "The Greatest Thing about Studs Terkel," para. 27–28.

[15] Freeman, "How the Writer Listens," para. 3.

[16] Adler and Ortiz, "How I Did It."

[17] Goad, "Three Women on Why They Got Back with Their Ex," para. 4.

[18] Sussman, "I Did My Own Abortion," para. 5 (emphasis in original).

[19] Cornel, Coll, and Kravitz, "Rolling Stone and UVA."

[20] Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold."

[21] Didion, *The White Album*.

[22] As editor Bill Reynolds wrote to me, "Talese and Didion are keen, even fearsome observers. They tend to fade into the woodwork and let the characters do the work. They do the sculpting of the material, for sure, but those stories aren't really about them—are they? I can see what you mean when you're talking about Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer—the story was always about them or how they were making the reader quite aware that it was their consciousness through which the reader was seeing this filtered reality." Email message, August 14, 2020.

[23] Simmons, "The Dr. V Story: A Letter from the Editor."

[24] Glass, "Hack Heaven."

[25] Billboard, Staff, "Writer Comes Clean on Fake Stipe Profile."

[26] Freeman, "How the Writer Listens," para. 1.

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