Kobe University Brussels European Centre
Opening Symposium

Roles of Culture on the Foundation of European Integration

Literary Journalism in Europe: Alternative Voices Narrating History

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1. Roles of Culture in European Integration

In 2006 a learned society devoted to the study of literary journalism or narrative journalism – the International Association for Literary Journalism studies – was created, under the aegis of John Bak, an American Professor at the University of Nancy, in France. The organization promotes the study, teaching, and researching of literary journalism across the world. Since its creation the organization has been growing and attracting academics from all countries and continents. Often referred to as an Anglo-Saxon genre, literary journalism is also gaining momentum in France, where the newspaper *Le Monde* recently devoted a whole issue of its literary supplement to what the French call *reportage*.[1] This "slow journalism," tentatively defined by Greenberg as "essays, reportage and other non-fiction writing that takes its time to find things out, notices stories that others miss, and communicates it all to the highest standards,"[2] is coming back into favour.

The revival of literary journalism in Europe is far from accidental: it goes against the global trend of fast news production or *churnalism*, to use Nick Davies's apt term. In our fast-moving world the face of journalism has completely changed. 24-hour rolling news television channels have mushroomed, the internet has dwarfed the traditional newspapers, the free press is flourishing, and news aggregators churn out streams of releases, while citizens turn into news producers by frantically tweeting comments, blogging their impressions, leaking juicy titbits, or even starting revolutions, as recent events have shown in Tunisia and Egypt. But whereas journalists hardly have any time to lead investigations, check facts, verify sources, long haul journalism is a saving grace for readers who have an appetite for true and well-researched stories.

[1] *Cahier du Monde* n° 20305, 7 mai 2010, 1, 6-7.
[2] Susan Greenberg, "Slow Journalism," *Prospect* 131, 25 February 2007.

In our information-saturated jungle literary journalism might be looked on as an archaic practice harking back to bygone days. Yet *reportage*, as is it is called in the French tradition, is still vibrant and offers opportunities for innovative experimentation. According to Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, editor-in-chief of *XXI*, a brand-new French magazine devoted to literary journalism, readers are particularly eager to peruse accurate stories written by eyewitnesses, i.e. journalists that take time to go to places and talk to people. In so doing, they transfer essential, first-hand experience that is unique at many different levels. Well-thought-out accounts that bespeak what actually happened, i.e. the event as it was perceived – *la chose vue* – inevitably appeal to readers seeking the truth.

My contention is that the renewed interest for literary journalism offers a very fertile terrain of for a cross-cultural approach of Europe at a time when frontiers are constantly renegotiated. Europe is in the limelight whenever multiculturalism is under discussion: German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently claimed that, "Multi-Kulti Ist Tot," while British Prime Minister David Cameron is accused of scapegoating immigrants, blaming them for Britain's economic hardships. European boundaries have been redrawn, but they have always been permeable for reporters who bring back stories from north and south, east and west, and also from up and down society. They look at events from different angles and produce alternative narratives that challenge dominant media or historical discourses. Literary journalists are writing history: not mainstream history; rather, they address the question of the representation of reality from a different perspective. *Reportage* is journalism in action; it implies that writers travel, discover new cultures, observe different mores, and transfer that information to potential readers.

Norman Sims, from the University of Massachusetts, at Amherst, US, has pioneered research in literary journalism and published a number of anthologies on the art of nonfiction. Sims draws an interesting parallel between literary journalism and "cultural history," as defined by James W. Carey, i.e. a discipline "not concerned merely with events but with the thought within them" or with "the study of consciousness in the past" ("The Problem and the Promise," 7). Here lies the essence of literary journalism: it is concerned with facts, but more subtly with a certain awareness of past history. It is essential to "connect the works produced to the culture and context of their time," Sims adds (8). In the pages that follow, I will show how different journalistic traditions – Anglo-Saxon and French – converged and eventually yielded various models of reportage to depict the important cultural changes that have shaped Europe. Second, I postulate that literary journalism allows for alternative and personal voices to narrate history in their own terms.

2. Literary Journalism: What's In a Name

A distinctive feature of literary journalism is that the voice of its authors is clearly expressed in the narratives. Subjectivity, Yagoda argues, is inevitable with "the reporter at the forefront." Yet it must be avoided in the profession, as objectivity is a requirement of high-standard journalism. But literary journalists have a distinctive personality: they collect information and then rearrange it into narratives. In nonfiction writing, Yagoda insists, the personal voice is essential and does not pervert reality; on the contrary, "violation can lead to inspiration" (16). In so doing, the writer provides his reader with that special feel or extra little bit of soul, which is absent from objective journalism. Likewise, Matthew Strecher claims that, "the objective event that once lay outside our experience becomes something internal to us, and in processing its realit*ies* (plural, not singular) we rewrite and reconstitute that story into a subjective one with which we can deal" (131). In other words, Strecher highlights the creative part in the process of reconstruction of events and the importance of our phenomenological perception of facts.

Attempts at theorizing the genre have usually established literary journalism as a hybrid form. It is "journalism as literature" or journalism that reads like a novel, as Tom Wolfe formulated it. It shares similarities with investigative journalism, *grand reportage*, or travel writing, or even stunt journalism; literary journalists also covet the same objects as do anthropologists, historians, and sociologists. There exist several contact zones between these disciplines: observing and reporting are common techniques shared by all of them, yet the "humanistic approach" and artistic quality characterise literary journalism (Sims, *True Stories* XVIII). *Hiroshima* (1946) by John Hersey is one of the best examples of such journalism: his *reportage* was based on interviews with survivors who told him about their horrible experiences in the aftermath of the atomic bomb. Hersey's faithful account and observations revealed the true horror of the disaster to the world.

Norman Sims defines literary journalism using the following criteria: "immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people … and accuracy" (6). But most importantly, Sims adds, "literary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered" (7). I would venture to say that he renewed interest for such a tradition is not surprising given that reality is increasingly difficult to apprehend in our virtual world.

The heydays of American literary journalism were in the nineteenth century, and then again in the 1960s with Tom Wolfe's *New Journalism* (1973). The radical social changes brought about by the counterculture made reality so much stranger than fiction. Hence journalists had to develop new techniques to make sense of a world that traditional methods failed to grasp (Weingarten 6, Hollowell 5). Realism was the order of the day, and reportage at the time combined investigation and literary craftsmanship. Scene-by-scene reporting, extensive dialogues, details revealing social status, and different points of views were the four pillars of Wolfe's new journalism. But as Wolfe himself admitted, the precursors of literary journalism were not the American muckrakers but, rather, Victorian social reporters (Kerrane 17). The common theme, or universal appeal to literary journalism, is the awareness of cultural changes and challenges, and the willingness to articulate concerns inherent to these changes and challenges.

Even though this introduction is based on American scholarship and that some sort of "American exceptionalism" (Boynton) may have been attached to literary journalism, the genre is not just the prerogative of the United States. As Sims explains, literary journalism "appears in other cultures with variations in form" (Sims, *LJS*, 7) and "examinations of literary journalism from several countries suggest they follow their own cultural pathways," probably with more insistence on the "social usefulness" of these reportages (8). Indeed, experts across Europe have been exploring and theorising creative nonfiction, such as Richard Keeble in Britain, or Marie-Ève Thérenty and Myriam Boucharenc in France. Thérenty asserts that the professional and poetic divorce between literature and journalism happened in the nineteenth century, and that it is essentially through reportage that writers managed to free themselves from the restrictive formatting of traditional journalism (12). In France, Albert Londres (1884-1932) and Joseph Kessel (1898-1979) both penned *grands reportages* that were unquestionably breaking new grounds in the profession.

In a fascinating article on Japanese literary journalism, Matthew Strecher draws our attention to the incredibly rich heritage that harks back to *kawaraban*, i.e. "news ballads" or "clay-tile editions" which were so called because they were contraband news carved into soft clay and hence easily disposable as reporting current events was forbidden at that time by the Tokugawa government (123). Strecher explains that a distinct form of "subjective" reportage seceded from traditional, objective journalism in the late nineteenth century, namely with Fukuchi Gen'ichirō's coverage of the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877 (124). According to Strecher, it was quite normal for many writers in pre-war Japan to work as reporters. Kunikida Doppo's *Aite tsūshin* (communiqué to a beloved

brother; 1894-95) and Tayama Katai's publications on the Russo-Japanese war, are good examples of this powerful literary journalism.

But it is World War II, Strecher expounds, that urged some of Japan's most prominent writers to do reportage, sometimes verging on propaganda, but often taking risks when discussing taboo subjects, as did Ibuse Masuji with *Hana no machi* (City of Flowers, 1942) and Ishikawa Tatsuzō with *Ikite iru heitai* (Living Soldiers, 1946). Strecher also singles out Okamura Akihiko and Kaikō Takeshi for their reportages in Vietnam, which clearly show their willingness to "step outside of orthodox reporting" (Strecher, 125). Literary journalism, Strecher further speculates, runs parallel to Japan's historical events and it really thrived in the 1960s, when the country was shaken by major conflicts and scandals which constituted inspirational material for writers who were also enjoying new freedom of expression. More recently, the Sakakibara incident (in which a juvenile criminal murdered and mutilated a child) triggered countless responses, namely by Itō Yoshiro, Murakami Ryū, Takami Kōshun, or Koruda Akira.

3. A Cross-Cultural Approach to Journalism

Europe was an abiding source of inspiration for American writers, because of the many conflicts and instability in the first half of the twentieth century. By way of illustration, Sims states that Hemingway and Dos Passos were given "a chance to blend travel and reporting into a new genre," one that would give readers an opportunity to experience what actually happened in Europe and Russia after World War I (*True Stories* 20). These literary giants witnessed historical moments that became the subjects of their work. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that British authors Charles Dickens and George Orwell inspired American literary journalists in the first place (13). In *The Art of Fact,* Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda include Daniel Defoe as a pioneer of the genre, as well as British writers Norman Lewis, Piers Paul Read, John Simpson, and James Fenton, whose writings "illustrate the legacy of George Orwell" (19). British literary reportage has a distinct tradition, but Orwell is a universal model. Kerrane and Yagoda also highlight the variety of subjects covered by literary journalists, i.e. war reporting, sports writing, postcolonial reportage, crime narratives, urban tales, social parables.

Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett convincingly argue that literary journalism in Britain may be more than "journalism as literature." In *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower*, they posit that literary

journalism and literary scholarship are not two mutually exclusive categories (IX). Indeed, they stipulate that the study of English literature started in Grub Street (a term used to refer to the poor working district of journalists in London, which later came to refer to the whole profession), not in the academia, whose main concern was for biblical and ancient texts. Victorian journalists played an important part in the dissemination of literature; in fact, journalism and literature were closely connected and several authors were wearing two hats, for instance Samuel T. Coleridge, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, and Virginia Woolf. Despite its supposedly lower craftsmanship, journalism must be given credit for its contribution to literary developments. Kate Campbell, for her part, persuasively makes the case for an outright rehabilitation of journalism and opposes its disparaging "sequestration from literature." (3)

The overlapping between journalism and literature is also a phenomenon put forward by Richard Keeble in his *Journalistic Imagination*, even though the former has always been seen as 'low' while the latter was regarded as a 'high' form of writing (2, 7). However, it was common practice in the past century to change roles, in spite of the fact that journalism was associated with mass culture and that the very term "journalist" – borrowed from French – was derogatory. In addition, Grub Street, the location where poor writers were working in derelict tenements and filthy conditions did not help improve the reputation of journalism. The early eighteenth century was favourable for journalism in Britain, but it also helped some reporters thrive as writers of literature. For John Tulloch, British journalism is not held in high esteem as much as American journalism is, mainly because journalists have lacked the "creative control" supported by the First Amendment of the US Constitution (quoted by Tulloch, in Keeble 59-60).

Orwell, admittedly the greatest British literary journalist, was politically committed and devoted to his craft; he also empathized with his subjects, convinced that human experience was essential to the stories he published in *Tribune* (106, 113). The "downwardly mobile reporter," Kerrane explains, produces narratives that are faithful and truthful renditions of reality because of the "complete immersion in the world of the story" (18). Direct experience and personal voice infuse Orwell's nonfiction writing; as a result, his books – *Down and Out in Paris and London, The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Homage to Catalonia* – are received as documentaries (19). Today, Ian Jack, former editor-in-chief of British reportage magazine *Granta*, is also accurately documenting his country starting from incidents and tragedies that affect the lives of common people. In *The Country Formerly Known as Great Britain* (2009) Jack magnifies such "micro-histories" to reveal the realities of anonymous people who nevertheless directly suffer from political decisions taken at a much

higher level. By zeroing in on their lives, Jack provides readers with a broader picture and allows them to make their own judgements with full knowledge of the facts.

Presumably, the literariness of the French press is a historical fact, according to Thérenty (27). Yet in the nineteenth century, and more specifically under the Second Empire, French journalism was increasingly influenced by its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, which gave precedence to information rather than style, and was keen to emphasise the "sensationalism of *fait divers*" (Boucharenc 24). Nonetheless, reportage was already entrenched in the Anglo-Saxon press, while it was trying to define itself in France. French literary journalism finally materialised by reconciling information and style, i.e. by both absorbing and differentiating itself from the Anglo-Saxon tradition (27). Intriguingly, the very term *reportage* comes from English and was first used in France by Stendhal in *Promenades dans Rome*, published in 1829 (71).

The aftermath of the war was a particular moment that offered a sense of possibility and opened new avenues for expression (Boucharenc 27-29). There was a growing fascination for foreign, not local, events, and most French papers and magazines devoted lots of column inches to reportage. In the early 1920s collections of *grands reportages* were even launched by major publishing houses (31). The boundaries between literature and journalism became blurred. Reality mattered in the interwar period, and fiction was no longer highly rated. This type of literature met the demands of modernity, and the craving for truth (40, 38).

Reportage developed as an independent genre dealing with the news and presenting a personal representation of the world (46). The first example of French literary reportage is Pierre Giffard's *Le Sieur de Va-Parout* (1880); a few years later, Jules Huret published several *reportages* based on his numerous travels: *De New York à la Nouvelle-Orléans* (1904), *De San Francisco au Canada* (1905), *De Hambourg aux marches de Pologne* (1908). But accourding to Boucharenc, the heydays of literary journalism in France were between the two world wars. A case in point is Henri Béraud who published *Ce que j'ai vu à Moscou* (1925), *Ce que j'ai vu à Berlin* (1926), *Ce que j'ai vu à Rome* (1928) (10). But it is war reporting that typically offered a foundation for the development of reportage (Thérenty 297). The innovative feature is undoubtedly the authenticity of the events: reporters are on the field to witness and deliver faithful accounts of their experiences. Thérenty asserts that, "absolute objectivity is predicated on subjectivity." (317)

4. Literary Journalism and European Integration

Whether the practice of nonfiction writing contributed to the birth of a longstanding tradition that fosters European integration is difficult to say. Narrative journalism has certainly facilitated exchanges between cultures as nonfiction writers share similar concerns, be they social or racial issues, the conditions of the downtrodden, the victims of conflicts or catastrophes, or the unfair treatment of minorities. Reporting implies that journalists cross borders: Hemingway and Dos Passos wrote about the Spanish war from Spain; Steinbeck, together with photographer Robert Capa, published *A Russian Journal* (1948); Londres spent considerable time in Southern Europe, Turkey, the Soviet Union, Japan, India and China; Kessel went to Afghanistan, Africa, and Israel; the highly controversial Kapuscinski travelled extensively through Africa and Latin America; Orwell lived with the poor in France and went to the front in Spain. In that febrile atmosphere and occasionally dark circumstances of intercultural contacts lies the creative ferment of literary journalism; hence its amazing potential to understand the roles of cultures, as well as to draw new cartographies and suture the past to the present.

I am convinced that in this rhizomatic network of mutual influences, common concerns, and similar strategies to tell true stories, there exists a galvanising force that favours solidarity and coherence. Sensory observations and complex analyses by eyewitnesses result in reports that indicate a sense of urgency. This common grounding points out the convergences of the many forms of literary *reportage*, regardless of the divergent traditions and subjects explored. This vast intercultural corpus provides a patchwork of experiences; in all instances literary journalists seem to share an interest for people in the margin, for those who find themselves eclipsed by dominant figures or overshadowed by the magnitude of major events.

5. Alternative voices Narrating History

Victorian reporters in Britain denounced the horrendous living conditions of the downtrodden. They used their literary talent to craft harrowing accounts of the dregs of society. Most important was their political commitment and moral dedication to the outcasts. Henry Mayhew paid special attention to the forgotten poor, and his narratives scrutinised what was later called the "history from below," i.e. the history of the forgotten poor. Britain went through an industrial revolution

that did not percolate on its lower working classes who lived in appalling conditions. Such problems were central to literary reportage.

According to Linda Hutcheon, "literature and history were considered branches of the same tree." They have always been "porous genres" (Hutcheon 105, 106; also mentioned in Strecher). But with the advent of postmodern theory, these disciplines that "shared many similar beliefs about the possibility of writing factually about observable reality" were separated (Hutcheon 105). We might be tempted to conceive of literary journalism as the missing link between history and literature, or between history and journalism, for that matter. Hutcheon even goes back to Aristotle to explain that "the historian could speak only of what has happened, of the particulars of the past; the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals. Freed of the linear succession of history writing, the poet's plot could have different unities." (106) In short, we may contemplate the idea that literary journalism does what history cannot, i.e. engage in a creative relation with the past. John Hartsock suggests that literary journalism emerged as a response to "objectified styles in the modern paper" and, consequently, "attempted to engage readers' subjectivities by means of the journalist's own subjectivity" (246-47). But the literariness of literary journalism should also be taken into account.

Thérenty stipulates that journalists watch and examine the world (23). They are historiographers writing history without hindsight (107). Literary journalism is experiential writing that provides accounts about the relation between an individual and his/her nation expressed in a personal voice (203). The genre subtly subsumes the primacy of facts and literary quality. In this respect, *reportage* dovetails "fact, sensation, and writing" – *fait, sensation, et écriture* (204) and champions the subjectivity of the writer. Nevertheless, Thérenty believes that French reportage had its own specificities and differed from the Anglo-Saxon model (269), which tends to promote feats.

Strecher argues that "the role of the literary journalist – that is the writer of subjective, nonfiction *reportage*, as it were – is frequently to offer the other side, sometimes to tell the accused's side of the story, other times to put a human face on the various participants." (131) To illustrate this, Strecher comments on The Great Kantō earthquake which took place on September, 1, 1923, and which yielded countless stories that offered "microcosmic perspectives to an event simply too massive." In other words, the "literary reportage" of events of great magnitude implies that it is the contours of these events of "epic proportions" that are finally approached.

Literary journalism is not new; but its recent revival is clear evidence "that reporters, are after all, writers" (*True Stories* XVII). There is obviously a long and rich tradition of literary journalism across cultures, and there is a readership for the particular talent thriving in *reportage*. Literary journalists are telling "another story", maybe not exactly stories from below but, rather, they are telling stories from within. They see through the cracks of history; they watch through the chinks in the backdrop of historical events.

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