Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Literary Journalism

by

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**Introduction**

The notion of literary journalism was unfamiliar to me before taking the class. It turned out that many stories, articles, books, writings that I read before belong to the literary journalism genre. The genre is versatile and diverse and has many aspects. Perhaps I would just read a novel like E. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* or Orwell’s *The Spike* without knowing that the material belongs to the specific category of literary journalism. Moreover, taking the class not only allowed me to recognize the new for me literary style and get familiar with it, but also to improve reading and writing skills. And I had more practice in dealing with English, that I wouldn’t have otherwise. However, in the essay the definition of literary journalism will be addressed as well as some retrospective analysis of the class will take place. The analysed material will include works from The Art of Fact book as well as other course readings.

**Literary Journalism**

As the outstanding web resource intended for teachers and tutors *Purdue OWL* defines,

Literary journalism is the creative nonfiction form that comes closest to newspaper and magazine writing. It is fact-driven and requires research and, often, interviews. “ It also extends:

“Literary journalism is sometimes called ‘immersion journalism’ because it requires a closer, more active relationship to the subject and to the people the literary journalist is exploring. Like journalistic writing, the literary journalism piece should be well-researched, focus on a brief period of time, and concentrate on what is happening outside of the writer’s small circle of personal experience and feelings.”

Narration of the genre can include factual reporting and speculations about the reported events added by the author. Rhetorical questions and Interior monologue can often be found in literary journalism pieces. According to Richard Nordquist (2019), “"Among the shared characteristics of literary journalism are immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people ... and accuracy. Literary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.”

Max Reagan (2016) in his article posted at medium.com underlines, that the style is nothing new and that the “style can be traced back as early as the 1700’s with fiction writer and journalist Daniel Defoe being the earliest cited to use the conventions.”

**Analysis of the class readings.**

*W. Lowery.*

The Guardian in 2017 printed in a published review:

“They Can’t Kill Us All is Wesley Lowery’s memoir, compiled from the Washington Post reporter’s ‘messy notes’, which aspires to tell the story of Ferguson, Missouri where, in August 2014, weeks of protest and rioting broke out in the aftermath of the shooting of an unarmed black American, Michael Brown, by white police officer Darren Wilson. Its author came to public attention when he became the first journalist to be imprisoned – albeit for barely 20 minutes – for covering the arrest. He later played a key role in the Post’s Pulitzer prize-winning “fatal force” project, a database that, in the absence of comprehensive federal government data, assembled information on police shootings in 2015.”

In 2016 Dwight Garner said in his review in the New York Times: “The reporters who covered the civil-rights struggle in America in the 1950s and ’60s were said to be working the race beat. A new generation of reporters has risen to cover a grim and new-seeming iteration of that beat: police shootings of unarmed black men.”

Lowery’s “They Can’t Kill Us All” is an outstanding work that consists of observations and reporting of recent events. Cases of injustice caused by police forces against African-Americans are tracked and investigated by the author in order to let others know about injustice. The book appears to be an act of rebellion from a representative of *the* affected social group against corrupt forces, police, and *a* corrupted government that allows crimes to happen. A young author discovers and illuminates crimes conducted by authorities against African-Americans in the USA. Yes, the narration and the style catches attention because it is topical and illustrated vividly. However, as the text deals with publicizing information about real people, it might provoke them to crash on them, e.g. blamed cop or their friends could take a gun and shoot the journalist which will make matters worse.

I agree that the material presented by the author is interesting, bright, vivid and gives a brilliant opportunity to get familiar with the literary journalism genre and with the criminal situation in Baltimore*’s* social environment. Moreover, the point of view appears to me to be biased, and probably a matter of over-reacting. Yes crimes happen, but on a large scale they happen to representatives of any race and it is overestimation to state that it would be unjust to African-Americans while all other races and nations are treated by police much differently. According to the website mappingpoliceviolence.org in 2018 Police killed 1143 people where black people were 23% of the killed while being 13% of the population. I agree with Lowery that the occurrence of such crime *against* unarmed African-Americans is high. But that doesn’t include analysis of the global situation with police shots against criminals of other races. And if it included crime in groups of Chinese, Mexicans, etc, it would likely be less biased.

Probably the crime rate will depend on a society where it is measured, and indeed there might be correlations between race, employment, salary rate, education, etc. And response from the police to representatives of different strati could be different: for example, they would be less likely to shoot *a* guy with a suit and a briefcase than an inhabitant of a ghetto who looks otherwise.

On the other hand, it is necessary to understand that there exists a certain class of citizens who belong to a risky layer that could fight back to police while being arrested and due to the high risk of such arrests, it would be more likely to cause death to the arrestants in case their actions looked suspicious.It is also noticeable, that due to the availability of technologies to the author, the coverage of the events takes on a large scale with all these multimedia means and means of distribution that allows the author to reach a large audience and cause large-scale impact. On the negative side of such distribution is that it could cause extremist groups to act in a dangerous way. For example it could cause occurence of lynch-mob justice, when citizens will decide to punish an accused officer without the necessary judicial proceedings, based on feelings of hatred, revenge, etc.

Baltimore is known to have the highest crime rates in the US. And it is important for the public to know the situation. And the author gets the general public informed about the situation.

*From The Art of Fact*

Some of the writings in the book are short or fragmentary, and because of it cause difficulties in understanding the complete message that the author intended to deliver to the reader. But after looking closer and doing research on a specific event defined in a particular story, and after exploring many details about it, it turns out to be an exciting journey, to read and reconstruct the events observed in the book. Adding a solid and detailed contextual background helps to understand and imagine the message and the whole picture of what authors intended to deliver to the reader. However, some of the narrations in the books are more like a story in themselves and quite simple to read and understand without external research and exploration.

Reading *Marrakesh* imprinted in my mind and stayed with me ever since I read it for the first time. Today I found a fragment of it stated to be an example of literary journalism that is provided to be an example at the Purdue OWL:

“It is only because of this that the starved countries of Asia and Africa are accepted as tourist resorts. No one would think of running cheap trips to the Distressed Areas. But where the human beings have brown skins their poverty is simply not noticed. What does Morocco mean to a Frenchman? An orange-grove or a job in Government service. '' And even today I can feel like reading the story for the first time when the description almost made me smell the odour of the streets of the city due to vivid language and imagination.

Braidhurst school blog (2018) posts about it saying that a reader is instantly struck by impoverished setting: a dead body carried and flies around, decay - that is the scene. The narrator detaches from the scene as it follows from the tone of the narration which is due to Orwell’s matter-of-fact description. The reader is introduced to a key theme in the text, to loss of identity. Shocking and uncomfortable atmosphere appears to reader's imagination with persistent through the narration motive of death and decay. The atmosphere is unpleasant and that feeling is skillfully reinforced selection of words by the author. Orwell criticises imperialism and confronts the extreme poverty.

And Douglas (2012) adds about the opening paragraph underlining that its structure is striking and heightens the dramatic impact. The cloud of flies is memorable according to his review. And the powerful description depicts extreme poverty. According to his review the description creates cold a tone and emphasises particular details in a way it creates and intensifies reader's particular disgusting at the poverty.

Thomas March from New York University in his article *Orwell’s Marrakech* points out that Orwell is bothered by his own conscience. He argues that Orwell slaps a reader with the cruelty and meanness. He contraposes the “other” life in a way implying the meaning that readers must be blind if they want to enjoy their world. March states that that is the blindness that Orwell finds in himself and tries to deal with, and that he with his narration forces a reader “to experience meanness and squalor, as Orwell’s horror translates”(March, 1999) into readers horror.

Li Ling (2018) points out that Orwell in Marrakech without comments define six scenes in which he defines what he hears and sees. According to Ling Orwell draws readers attention to the fact that the colonized imperialism on all the disgusting depicted details. Ling expresses his opinion stating that Orwell syphatises to the “poor colonized people” honestly and blames the crimes of colonialism and imperialism.

However, to me Orwell’s *Marrakech* and Kapousintsski's *Another day of life* delivered a distinct impression of desolation and lack of order in abandoned location. Sometimes passing through a dirty street I recollect to what extent a city could get messed up because of lack of city services.

Rosemary Mahoney in *From Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age* introduces to the reader the issue of internal conflict and self identification that seems to be common in the stratum of immigrants. And the reader understands that there is a huge gap between what a person wants to appear or be like, and how it actually appears to others. A maintained identity of the protagonist consists of behaviour, appearance, and other factors.

In 1993 Brenda Maddiox in her article in the *Los Angeles Times* writes about Mahoney considering works of James Joyce. Saying that “he gave his archetypal Irish woman the last word.” And “Mahoney gives them an entire book.” She writes about Mahoney referring to her as to a fine reporter, who “balances her social portrait with plenty of evidence that the traditional Irish mother is still there, and traditional family values too.” According to Brenda, “It was a member of the powerful Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child who contributed the title of this book,'' the member referred to Ireland’s feminists: “Those women encourage whoredom in Kimmage!”. Moreover, due to the motive of changing identity her story appears to me to be intrinsically intertwined with the story *From the People of the Abyss* by J. London, where the protagonist uses various appearances in order to establish and maintain multiple identities which allows him to enter this or that social stratum as if he belongs to them.

Eric Arthur Blair, better known by his pen name George Orwell, in his *The Spike*, established traceable common grounds with C.Dickens’ narrations about extreme poverty and parishes and workhouses where groups of people have to work hard to earn their room and meal. Perhaps, Victor Frankel’s *Man's Search for Meaning* would be another modern excerpt describing how miserable and to what extreme extent limited human existence could be in certain situations. On a large scale, poverty is a major challenge and there are many programs to fight it. J. Rodden (2017) writes about Orwell: “Part of Orwell's problem was that he was not addressing a much wider audience, politically and culturally, than earlier in his career. His clear style implied a clear message. No reader needed to make a special effort to read Orwell's prose. But the plain style can mask a submerged complexity”.

Breandan Wilson in 1995 in his work *Orwell and the Uses of Anti-climax* underlines that Orwell tends to change directions, and that his method is profoundly dialectical, and involves unresolved contradictions between competing voices and perspectives. Willson states that “there is nothing plain about this.” Moreover, Wilson points out that Orwell wrote *The Spike* in 1931 “describing his confinement with almost fifty other tramps in an official hostel.” According to Wilson when on deserted road "Everything was so quiet and smelt so clean.” And then “one of the tramps comes up to Orwell with "a friendly smile," speaking "cordially ``''. Step by step Orwell draws a warm image with all its “ freedom, fresh air, countryside and comradeship” and then suddenly introduces a dramatic opposition which ruins the crafted illusion at once when in the final sentence of the essay. The tramp, repays Orwell's loan of some tobacco, and puts "four sodden, debauched, loathly cigarette ends into my hand." That development Wilson recognises as anti-climax. He writes: “our experience is not one of deflated suspense or the collapse of grandiose or pathetic expectations. Rather, in addition to our sense of a return to reality, we are left with unanswered questions and irreconcilable reactions.” According to B. Wilson, “the ugly truth re-emerges, conclusively destroying any illusions we had begun to entertain.”

To those who are unfamiliar with life of poor areas in the US, *Harlem on My Mind* by Lawrence Otis Graham provides an opportunity to improve their knowledge: It might be dangerous not to let a guy to talk at a public phone when they demand. Comparing Harlem’s narration with London’s *From the People of the Abyss* where East End of London is in the focus of the narration, it appears that Graham’s narration is contemporary and defining the situation that can be found nowadays while London’s narration is more like historical, as it doesn’t reflect the situation in a way it exists nowadays.

Mark A. Sackson in *New York Magazine* (October 18, 1993) in a rubrik “Letters” wrote his review titled “Ghetto Blaster: "In the two articles Lawrence Otis Graham has written for New York, he has revealed himself to be more of a social climber than an investigative reporter unearthing social injustice. ["Harlem on My Mind," September 27, and "Invisible Man," August 17, 1992]. His undercover reporting reads more like a gossip column, highlighting what people are wearing without missing a status-related detail. He continually allies himself with the affluent side of the street ( lest we forget that it is the side on which he lives). Furthermore, no matter how difficult the situation becomes, Graham is quick to remind us that Harvard Law School has prepared him to rise above adversity. I am sure that there are more worthy writers in the city who could better explore the dichotomy that exists between Harlem and other areas of Manhattan, or within Harlem itself, without making excessive references to prestigious backgrounds and successful careers. Perhaps for a follow-up article, Graham can donate his salary to a shelter, apply for welfare, and really live the life that the neighborhood offers for the majority of its inhabitants.” In the same column, many controversial readers reviews were published from readers living in New York and Manhattan. I am outraged that poor Lawrence Graham couldn't find a payphone in Harlem to call his accountant. And I'm glad he hid his charge cards and crisp twenties from his super. But why quote the Reverend Calvin Butt's advice to "reach out" to the unprivileged, when Lawrence himself continues to exploit these people in his undercover articles? Enough!"

The complexity of the situation at the Mexican border is observed in *Coyotes* by Ted Conover. I would say that it is an example fimmigration journalism.

*The Bronx Slave Market* story by Marvel Cooke shows how little the liberation does for the poor when all resources are in the hands of capitalist owners: even working the whole day would not be enough for more than saying two words of anger to the employer instead of getting $0.50 award. Author uses well constructed and catchy sentences.

*Watercress girl* by Mayhew addressed the issue of child labour and about children without childhood who have to work instead of having fun as would be right for their age. The topic of labour and especially child labour is closely associated in my mind with the situation about labour and child labour in the UK which I have read and heard about previously many times~~.~~

The issue of corruption and especially police corruption is observed in *If Christ Came to Chicago* by W.T. Stead, and with dramatic details. The narration sets the scene and tells the story about the arrest and the release. The title of the story implies a meaning that Chicago has become a city of sins.

Monroe’s *Brothers* reflects the quality of a man who is always looking for more work to somehow maintain living. Evidently, any work is good. And it is stressed by the author. The protagonist is happy to do work even for small wage. And it appears that working is beneficial to him not only because of wage, but also as it allows things to keep going. Probably it is peculiar to the American Dream, the belief that a hard- working man could benefit from their work and be prosperous and happy.

*Shadow of a Nation* by Gary Smith, shows the decay in spiritual life of aboriginal inhabitants of America. Native Americans have lost their context because of the invasion by white men. Their culture got broken and there is not much left of their traditions that got heavily modified by circumstances. All aspects of freedom which remained in disposal of Indians after white civilization expanded to their land is sports and alcohol. The drama is depicted by the author in a way it makes the reader to feel sorry for the fate of indigenious inhabitants of America and for harm caused to their culture by the civilization of white men.

In his *Snake Handling and Redemption*, Dennis Covington looks at the lives of fanatics who are very enthusiastic about their obsession. It is difficult for me to categorise the text to any but miscellaneous category of literary journalism. Probably it could be tagged religious reporting.

And *The Pine Barrens* by John McPhee raises ecological issues that tend to become topical nowadays due to technological revolution and its consequences expressed in enormous pollution of the environment by human beings. The story seems to belong to environmental reporting class of literary journalism. And the impact that humans cause to the nature is in the focus of the narration.

Svetlana Alexievich’s *Zinc Boys* story is about war but for me the most memorable excerpt was where she describes how military guys were getting citric acid from homes and then with added water they used to drink it “ to burn their stomachs”. The story belongs to category of war reporting. It still seems to belong to the war reporting genre.

Herr describes madness that has taken place in Vietnam War. It reminds me of the movie *Platoon* by Oliver Stone. It adds to my knowledge base about the tragic event that I previously got from other sources like movies and books. I classify the story as belonging to war reporting category. The latter is a common ground shared between all works which belong to it.

Buford narrates about the football fans situation. It is a disaster. The image of the situation and the defined scene is full of vivid details. The author uses them to draw the image of the football fans conflict in the minds of readers. The artistic use of detailed scenes makes the narration dramatic and memorable. The story seems to belong to massacre and crime category. And it is unique in the there are no other stories which would address similar conflicts at a modern city scene.

Mitchell introduces a circus character who has many issues in common life due to appearance. The subject selected by the writer is rare and draws readers attention. Bearded woman is a rare species to see, or read about and that makes the story outstanding. I would say that the story belongs to biographical category of literary journalism. The drama of a single life is presented here and in detail as if through the magnifying looking glass and that makes a memorable impression to the reader.

“Perhaps the shortest and certainly among the best is Michael Winerip's 800-word column from the New York Times in 1987, ""Holiday Pageant: The Importance of Being Bluebell,"" a gem of observation, selective quotation and sensitivity” (Publishers Weekly)

Gellhorn who is the third wife of American novelist Ernest Hemingway, seems to have borrowed the writing approach from her husband, as well as the subject to write about. And she succeeds, indeed in describing war scenes with dramatic details and vivid descriptions so that it won’t let the reader remain untouched.

However, the most exciting for me was the exploration of the plot of Drift by Morris Markey that allowed to roam through virtual streets using Google maps and find addresses and places and buildings mentioned in the story and picking up history and details about the events of days passed long time ago and at a continent separated by the ocean from the place where I reside.

Kirkus (2011) writes in a review of John Steinbeck’s *Once There Was a War*: “Steinbeck's war dispatches were memorable, not perhaps for their historical value as a record but because of the vivid personal angle, the human bits, the vitality of capturing the feel of the war as seen on a troopship, in an airbase in England, behind the lines, and so on.”

David Simon’s *Homicide* story imprinted in my memory as a strong advice to ask for a lawyer in case I ever got caught by cops for whatever reason. The story provides an overview of the diversity of possible outcomes of development of events while one is being under investigation: cop may help the arrestant, or may trick in a way so that the person under investigation will end up worse off in case they talk to cops or try to cooperate with them. In September 2008 The Guardian publishes review by Robin McKie where he says: “The real delight is the discovery of Simon's perfect ear for dialogue; his masterful construction and pacing; and his empathy for his occasionally brutal but nevertheless inspirational subjects. The end result is a journalistic tour de force.”

**Conclusion**

The course is comprised of works from different cultures and times. It allows to take an look on various aspects of literary journalism and study it from multiple perspectives. However, most of the stories did fall for me in war-reporting, crime or police related reporting and other reporting. And the latter category which includes but is not limited to *The Pine Barrens*, *Snake Handling* and *Redemption*, *Shadow of a Nation,* was the most interesting to read*.* Moreover, the former category provided more extensive examples of reporting styles. It is difficult to differentiate works more than that but they could also be classified as contemporary or historical reportings.My participation in the course allowed me to develop English writing skills and made me familiar with foreign cultures. I got familiar with the literary journalism genre, with methods and techniques for fast writing, and for thorough writing of detailed excerpts, as well as for reporting consecutive sequences of events of various types. And I am grateful for the provided opportunity to increase awareness in various aspects of writing and for the opportunity to study literary journalism during the timeline of the course.

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Russell: Thank you for your feedback. I attempted to incorporate it as I could and I made the summarizing/ paraphrasing in lieu of quotations and selected and highlighted it with the green color.

I have very few words from my own to add and that was the reason why I used so many questions initially. However, to paraphrase or summarize them was an easy one [task].

I have had a chance to get through English linguistics course in Russia which I somehow managed to get through, but I never had a chance to practice English in Native environment. That might make my use of it little bit specific. As mostly I am using it for technical purposes to communicate with remote developers.

Do you think I shall try to relocate to native English environment and take some courses there in order to improve the language? Or just remote [ via the internet] communications and reading technical articles will likely do the trick eventually?