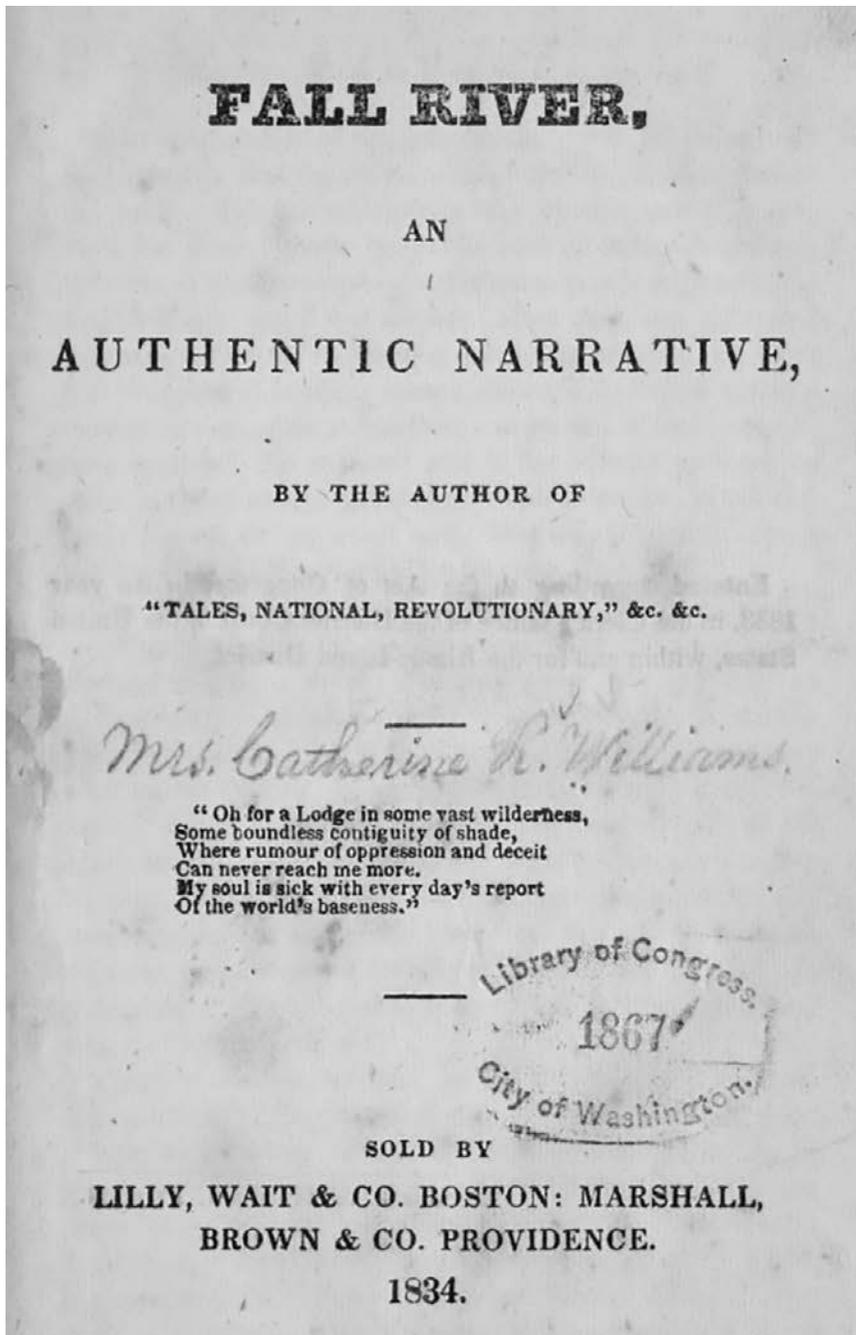


Nineteenth-century Women Writers and the Sentimental Roots of Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Tracing the origins of literary journalism in the nineteenth century can be a daunting task because, as Norman Sims writes, the trail of literary journalism “vanishes into a maze of local publications.” And yet it is widely accepted that the trail indeed begins there, in a time when distinctions between literature and journalism were not as clearly defined as they are today. Eventually, however, forces such as the rise of the ideal of objectivity in journalism, the shift from sentimentalism to realism in literature, and the institutionalization of both fields ensured that the two would, by the end of the century, be wrenched apart. And yet, amidst this fracturing, the hybrid genre of literary journalism was simultaneously being born. Sims points to the journalistic sketch as the origin of literary journalism in the nineteenth century, and in so doing privileges realism in his creation story. But, as this study illustrates, the story goes back a bit further, into the height of sentimentalism and a time before literature and journalism became distinct genres. This inquiry revisits this origin story with a particular eye to the role that women, writing in the sentimental mode, played in the creation of literary journalism.

Keywords: nineteenth century – literary journalism – women writers – sentimentalism – Rebecca Harding Davis – Margaret Fuller – Nellie Bly – Fanny Fern – Harriet Beecher Stowe – Catherine Williams – literary history



The title page of Catherine Williams's *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative* (1834). Sourced from archive.org. Public domain.

“Looking for literary journalism in the nineteenth century seems daunting,” writes Norman Sims in his 2007 history of literary journalism, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, “but it was incubating and would emerge in the large-circulation urban newspapers at the end of the century.”¹ The task is daunting, Sims notes, because the trail of literary journalism “vanishes into a maze of local publications.”² This challenge opens Sims’s chapter on nineteenth-century newspaper sketches, to which Sims points as the origin of literary journalism, and with broad brush strokes he describes a transition from the often fanciful newspaper sketch to the kind of realist literary journalism readers might recognize today. While Sims’s assertion is correct that the roots of literary journalism lie in the nineteenth century, his origin story only hints at a much more complicated set of circumstances that both set the stage for what would become literary journalism and ensured that its significance for readers and scholars would be obscured for much of the twentieth century.

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a tumultuous time in the history of both literature and journalism, a period in which the two forms, which had up to that point been considered synonymous, would become, first, distinct from and, eventually, at odds with, one another. A variety of circumstances, including the enshrining of the ideal of objectivity in journalism, the decline of romanticism and sentimentalism, and the rise of realism, led to this breach. And, even as literature and journalism were wrenched apart, literary journalism, a hybrid form that Thomas B. Connery calls “a third way to tell a story,”³ emerged. While Sims points to the *sketch* as the seed that spawned literary journalism, his choice of examples of writers of the form—Washington Irving, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, George Ade, and others⁴—misses important contributions by women and writers of color who used the sketch and other journalistic styles of the time to perform what John C. Hartsock identifies as one of the main features of literary journalism, narrowing the gap between the subjectivities of reader and subject.⁵

From the New Journalism to the Ideal of Objectivity

The nineteenth century saw the evolution of journalism in the United States from the partisan press model, which held sway in the early decades of the 1800s, through the advent of the penny presses, which opened the door for sensational or yellow journalism and the so-called new journalism, through to the rise of a professionalized, objective journalism. While each shift proved dramatic, none was more so than the move toward an ideal of objectivity, a transition that happened relatively quickly and one that was deeply embedded in an overall swing in U.S. culture toward a modern

epistemology that saw reason and science as the bedrock of all knowledge. After over a hundred years of this kind of thinking manifest in U.S. national news media, it can be difficult to imagine a time before objectivity’s reign, a time when the hard distinctions between fact and fiction, journalism and literature, were not nearly as important as they are today.

Kathy Roberts Forde and Katherine A. Foss note that “while writers and readers certainly understood news and fiction to be different genres, they generally did not insist on a firm line of demarcation between the two as categories either of public communication or of authorship.”⁶ In their essay, Forde and Foss survey nineteenth-century journalism trade publications in an effort to get a sense of the changing culture around journalism at the fin de siècle. But it wasn’t just that nineteenth-century readers were less concerned with the difference between fact and fiction; even the cleavage between literature and journalism would have been a foreign concept to them. Forde and Foss note that, in 1886, the *Journalist*, one of the most prominent trade publications, “identified itself as the first trade publication for not only ‘newspaper-men’ but also ‘the twin professions of literature and journalism.’”⁷ The understanding here is that literature and journalism were “socially recognized modes of cultural expression and bureaucratized production sharing the same parentage and DNA.”⁸

Much of the newspaper writing that Forde and Foss discuss was part of the nineteenth century’s new journalism movement, not to be confused with the twentieth century’s New Journalism, which rose to prominence in the 1960s. The nineteenth century new journalism, though often sensational in nature, adhered to what is sometimes called a “story” model of journalism, emphasizing elements of narrative over the transmission of facts, and it stood in contrast to the emerging “information” model, which strove for and idealized objectivity.⁹ While sensationalism was not new in nineteenth-century newspapers, near the end of the nineteenth century, sensationalism merged with the story model and the new journalism was born. It became the dominant newspaper form, and it enjoyed literary status.

Matthew Arnold coined the phrase “new journalism” in 1887 as a not altogether favorable description of the kind of writing emerging from urban newspapers and particularly Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and its competitors the *New York Sun* and *New York Journal*. Arnold commented that this new journalism “has much to recommend it; it is full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, generous instincts; its one great fault is that it is *feather-brained*.”¹⁰ Though Arnold targeted an entire emerging brand of journalism, his particular target was W. T. Stead, early practitioner of investigative journalism, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and author of *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894), among other books. Chapter two of Stead’s *If Christ Came*

to *Chicago*, “Maggie Darling,” which tells the tale of a Chicago prostitute, is paradigmatic of the kind of journalism Arnold criticized. The subject matter is bawdy enough, but Stead dares to give voice to Maggie Darling. After she has made an effort to reform but is discovered as a former prostitute and sent out of the respectable house she had been working in, she tells Stead, “And now it is no use. No use, never any more, I have taken dope, I drink. I’m lost. I’m only a _____. I shall never by anything else. I’m far worse than I ever was, and am going to the devil as fast as I can.”¹¹ In his introduction to “Maggie Darling,” Jeff Sharlet, editor of *Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, and Other Essays on American Belief*, writes that Stead’s new journalism offered “contact with the realness of things” and notes that, at least in a literary sense, this brand of “sensationalism would prove revolutionary.”¹²

Karen Roggenkamp points out “new journalism was much more closely tied to American fiction than scholars have traditionally recognized or than most readers would assume today.”¹³ Roggenkamp notes, as others have, that many aspiring authors got their start in journalism. “A natural and fluid connection existed between literature and journalism in terms of style and profession . . . the pages of the newspaper contained within them a particular literary aesthetic,”¹⁴ Roggenkamp writes. Roggenkamp traces the roots of the new journalism to the advent of the penny press, so-called because innovations in printing technology as well as an increase in advertising revenue allowed publishers to sell their newspapers for a fraction of the price of other contemporary newspapers. As a result, the penny papers were aimed at a wider audience, including the lower classes who were all but excluded from the more expensive papers. In the penny papers, nonfictional news items could be printed alongside fictional stories, poetry, jokes, trivia, recipes, advice, and sermons, and it was for the readers to determine the genres of the pieces they were reading—or not. Roggenkamp posits, “readers of penny papers did not draw fundamental distinctions between the ‘journalistic’ and the ‘literary.’”¹⁵ While evidence of this amalgamation can be found in practically any nineteenth-century newspaper chosen at random, the front page of the November 4, 1868, issue of the *Raftsmen’s Journal*, published in Clearfield, Pennsylvania, provides a good example. There, readers would find poetry, fiction, vignettes, advice, jokes, and religious affirmations.¹⁶

The trends that started in the penny presses of the early nineteenth century carried through to the new journalism of the 1890s, embodied perhaps most fully in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. Roggenkamp notes that “the paper teemed with stories that read nearly like fiction, with vivid characters, evocative settings, narrative presence, and descriptive language.”¹⁷ Thus, the *World* was known for the human-interest story which, according to George

Juergens, “becomes at its best more than a device to please the masses and takes on many of the characteristics of literature.”¹⁸

Pulitzer’s influence extended beyond the *World* to other urban publications, but competition was already brewing. In 1896, Adolph Ochs bought the *New York Times*, and, as Forde and Foss write, Ochs “differentiated his journalism from that of the yellow journals by vigorously promoting an objective-voiced, fact-centered form of news report that focused on business news and public affairs.”¹⁹ Whereas the penny papers democratized information by making it accessible to all, Ochs’s *Times* aimed to be the choice paper of the elite. Ultimately, the *Times* rose to prominence and became the most respected newspaper in the country, and with it, the objective brand of journalism it touted became the benchmark to which other newspapers aspired.

Another side effect of the trend toward objectivity in American journalism of the late nineteenth century, which will come to bear more significantly in the latter half of this study, is the association of masculinity and journalism. As Forde and Foss note, “Underlying the preoccupation with scientific thinking and facts at the turn of the century—and the concurrent development of a bureaucratic organization of newspaper production—was the widespread sense that masculinity was in crisis.”²⁰ The project to recover masculinity from the genteel and sentimental journalism that dominated most of the nineteenth century gave us the trope of the intrepid (male) reporter who would risk life and limb to report the news. This masculinizing of the role of reporter resulted also in a masculinizing of the news report itself and contributed greatly to the institution of the objective ideal as the gold standard of news reporting.

This shift was palpable in the trade publications from the era. Forde and Foss note, “In the last few years of the nineteenth century, a line of demarcation between journalism and literature emerged.”²¹ The trade publications became obsessed with defining news against the “fluidity among expressive forms” that “had characterized the preceding decades.”²² But the rise of the ideal of objectivity is only a part of the story of how literature and journalism came to be understood as necessarily disparate forms. Fully understanding this cleavage requires looking also at the rise of realism against the previously dominant romanticism and sentimentalism at the end of the nineteenth century.

From Sentimentalism to Realism

Much has been written about the perfect storm of cultural shifts that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century that led to the ascendancy of realism both as a major literary mode, but even more broadly as an epistemological lens through which all life was viewed. In his book *Journalism and Realism*, Connery surveys the landscape, pointing to

industrialization and urbanization, westward expansion and immigration, the rise of the consumer culture, and major technological innovations including the telegraph and photography.²³ These, combined with a greater reliance on the scientific method and observable fact, paved the way for realism to take hold. And, Connery writes, “throughout the nineteenth century a tension existed between the real and ideal,” and journalism “provided the place where a realism-idealism discourse would be ongoing.”²⁴ In short, while realism was rising to prominence in nearly every aspect of American life, the newspapers and magazines of the time provided the most prominent stages on which this transition was performed.

The newspaper of the early to mid-nineteenth century embodied the ideals of romanticism. In the diversity of genres—the intermingling of poetry and news stories, for example—or the sentimental language employed across genres, or the ambiguity of fact, there was little emphasis on what Roggenkamp, borrowing from Stephen Crane, calls “the real thing.”²⁵ And, even as popular interest turned toward the real thing, the romantic strain could still be found in the large urban newspapers. As late as 1897, with the Spanish-American War on the horizon, William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* produced what Roggenkamp calls “one of the greatest romances of the late nineteenth century.”²⁶ By combining elements of romance fiction with actual events, the *Journal* presented the story of Evangelina Cisneros, a young Cuban woman imprisoned in Cuba on charges of conspiracy to assassinate a Spanish official. But to Hearst’s *Journal*, Cisneros was the perfect damsel-in-distress, and he dispatched reporter Karl Decker (pen name Charles Duval) to rescue her and bring her to the United States. For months, the reading public was entranced by the story of Cisneros’s rescue, which, as it turns out, was in many ways a sensationalized fabrication.

However, as Forde and Foss note, “By the 1880s and 1890s, realism had displaced idealism as the dominant mode of American thought and cultural expression. . . . A fascination with experience and facts infused American society and culture, a product of the new faith in, and fervor for, the scientific method and related scientific discoveries.”²⁷ Connery identifies this shift by way of contrast when he describes the more “realistic” sketches of Crane or Upton Sinclair that would proliferate toward the end of the century, and then notes that “during much of the first half of the century such representations would have been unusual or subsumed in a romantic and idealized context.”²⁸

The relationship between the rise of realism and the fates of journalism and literature are complicated. In some respects, and as Connery argues in *Journalism and Realism*, the decline of sentimentalism was good both for journalism as a profession and, ultimately, for the genre that would become

literary journalism. That is, journalism shifted, but so did literature and, for a while at least, it seemed they were moving the same direction. It is widely accepted that, among the markers of realism’s influence on literature, starker and sparer prose came to dominate for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Likewise, journalism adopted a more basic prose style that, although it has in some ways gone out of fashion in literature, remains in journalism. Forde and Foss write, “The friendly, intimate, first-person narrator that characterized many forms of print expression in the previous era—the narrator who addressed the reader as ‘friend’ and self-consciously attempted to cultivate moral and social values in the reading audience—was now a relic.”²⁹ They seem to be referring to the voice often found, among other places, in nineteenth-century newspaper vignettes, short prose stories that often include a moral lesson; the stories purport to be true but offer no concrete evidence of their factuality. For example, a piece reprinted in the *Raftsmen’s Journal* begins, “There is a story about an English geologist now ‘going the rounds’. . .” and concludes “The moral for geologists is evident. . . .”³⁰ These vignettes, which read more like folk tales than reportage, went out of fashion by the end of the nineteenth century, replaced, in large part, by the kind of sketches to which Connery refers.

Even as literature and journalism shared in the shift toward realism, however, this similar path led to some of the early problems that would eventually grow into a full-blown rift. On one hand, the fact that realistic fiction and narrative newspaper writing looked similar led to a sense of competition between the two. Roggenkamp writes, “The emphasis placed on documenting life and producing works that could almost stand alone as fact meant that the fictions that realists produced could be virtually indistinguishable from the stories newspaper reporters created.”³¹ Forde and Foss add, “As the objective narrator became the preferred narrative perspective across journalism and literature, and as a preference for the ‘fact’ and the ‘real’ defined both expressive forms, it might have seemed that journalism and literature were more alike than ever before in American print culture.”³² And yet there was a major difference, at least as far as fiction writers were concerned. Journalists’ work, as opposed to being timeless as literature is presumed to be, was first and foremost timely. As Phyllis Frus notes in the preface of her book, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, the contemporary notion of literature as “a privileged realm of works embodying timeless truth and transcendent virtues”—a conception of literature she ascribes to Raymond Williams—“developed its current meaning by the end of the nineteenth century.”³³ Journalism, in the 1890s, might have shared realist literature’s emphasis on depicting real life using sparse prose, but by its nature—concerned with the presumed ephemera of day-to-day life—could not be literature.

Here, too, the distinction that would become much more important in the twentieth century between highbrow and lowbrow begins to become visible. As realism came to replace romantic idealism, so did the notion that progress depended on an ordered society. The newspaper, which dominated most of the nineteenth century with its hodgepodge of genres, mixing fact, fiction, and poetry, flew in the face of this ordering. “What had been a broadly democratic concept of culture in the early nineteenth century, a sense that the arts were for the appreciation of a broad range of social classes, both high and low, became the crabbed notion that artistic expression was the province of the intellectually and socially elite,”³⁴ write Forde and Foss. This new hierarchal view led to major changes in the press itself, but also, and more broadly, across literary genres, so that journalism could no longer be considered on par with what was coming to be considered highbrow literature. And, within journalism, the more personal and less overtly factual style that had dominated—and that would eventually emerge as literary journalism—was the lowest of the low.

As with the rise of objectivity, this shift too was highly gendered. The sentimental style, which came to be rejected in both literature and journalism, was associated with feminine tastes, whereas the new terser and more “realistic” style that came to dominate was considered more masculine. Sari Edelstein writes, “Cultural commentators repeatedly associated factuality and truth with masculinity and sentiment with women.”³⁵ Even within journalism itself, the notion that a reporter would embellish a news story with “literary” detail came to be frowned upon in favor of the more objective, disembodied narrator. It is clear that while journalism was the victim of prejudice from the literary, the concept of *literary* was held to be deeply suspect by journalists. This notion accounts for the migration of literary journalism from newspapers to magazines, which had already come to be associated with feminine tastes. Edelstein notes, “As the field of journalism evolved, an emphasis on hard-nosed reportage and masculine grit consigned most female journalists to the society pages and other specialized realms.”³⁶

In concert with the above shifts—the rise of objectivity and the move from sentimentalism to realism—the institutionalization of both journalism and literature dealt the final blow to the hybridized notion of the two. That is, as journalism sought to distinguish itself from literature and to move from a trade to a profession, journalism programs began to spring up at colleges and universities around the country. In 1902, Joseph Pulitzer endowed the School of Journalism at Columbia University, which opened in 1912, four years after the University of Missouri created the nation’s first journalism school. Betty Houchin Winfield writes “that 1908 marks a watershed year for

a modern, professionalized mass media, originating after the fits and starts of late nineteenth-century state press associations’ educational efforts and culminating with formalized university education in journalism.”³⁷ Likewise, the end of the nineteenth century also saw the creation of English departments at a number of colleges and universities. Forde and Foss write, “The emergence and growth of journalism higher education in the twentieth century, as well as the continued professionalization of the academic discipline of literary studies . . . contributed to the ultimate separation of journalism and literature as distinct and different forms of public expression, professions in the print marketplace, and academic disciplines.”³⁸

The rise of an ideal of objectivity in journalism, the shift from sentimentalism to realism, and the professionalization of both journalism and literary studies, led to an almost irreconcilable rupture between literature and journalism, which had previously been considered two sides of the same coin. According to W. Joseph Campbell, “Eighteen ninety-seven was the year when American journalism came face-to-face with a choice among three rival and incompatible versions, or paradigms, for the profession’s future.”³⁹ To the two paradigms already noted—the new journalism, which Campbell sometimes refers to interchangeably as “yellow journalism,” and the objective model, often ascribed to the reemerging *New York Times*—Campbell adds a third that he describes as “non-journalistic, even anti-journalistic.”⁴⁰ This is the “literary approach pursued by Lincoln Steffens,”⁴¹ or what would come to be known as literary journalism. Ultimately, as Campbell notes and as history has shown, the *Times* model of “objective” journalism would win the day, and with it the fates of literature and journalism would be dramatically cleaved. And yet, midst this fracturing, a hybrid genre was simultaneously being born, literary journalism. Sims points to the journalistic sketch as the origin of literary journalism in the nineteenth century, and in so doing privileges realism in his creation story. But, the story goes back a bit further, into the height of sentimentalism, back to a time before literature and journalism became distinct genres. The next section will revisit this origin story with a particular eye to the role that women played in the creation of literary journalism.

Women Writers and the Emergence of Literary Journalism

The farther one goes back into the nineteenth century, the less contemporary definitions of literary journalism seem to hold. Scholars of literary journalism often expend large quantities of words defining the field and delineating its qualities, particularly for what is “literary” about literary journalism. For example, Sims offers a list of characteristics that a story must possess in order to be considered literary journalism: “immersion reporting,

complicated structures in the prose, accuracy, voice, responsibility, and attention to the symbolic realities of a story . . . access, attention to ordinary lives, and the social qualities of a writer's connection to the subjects."⁴² Others insist that works of literary journalism must be timely and verifiably accurate. All agree that literary journalism must be nonfictional. But a genre that has existed for over a hundred years, and one that has mutated as standards of both literature and journalism have changed, is difficult to pin down—a reality that most scholars of literary journalism acknowledge. And it is precisely this reality that makes Hartsock's criterion of literary journalism preferable over others. Hartsock writes that the common thread that connects twentieth-century literary journalists to their predecessors is "the writers' subjectivity and the motivation to narrow the distance between subject and object."⁴³ That is, journalism is literary when it goes beyond reporting the news to purposefully portraying subjects in such a way that they can be more fully understood by readers. In the nineteenth century, before the descriptors *literature* and *journalism* were codified as distinct entities, the lines between fact and fiction were often blurred, and yet scholars of literary journalism agree that therein lie the roots of the genre. Using Hartsock's criterion allows us to see those roots free of presentism and to understand the ways in which the genre materialized in the twentieth century.

With this criterion in mind, it is surprising that other scholars of the genre have failed to notice that consistently, and for a number of reasons that will be explored, women writers—journalists and novelists—of the nineteenth century figure prominently among the forerunners of literary journalism. The reasons these writers' role may have been obscured are tied to the very forces that led to the subjugation of women as writers and of journalism as a literary form. Edelstein writes, "In spite of the fact that the distinctions between these discourses were not consistent or clear-cut, cultural commentators repeatedly associated factuality and truth with masculinity and sentiment with women, and the preference for 'fact' and 'real science' over sentiment worked to suppress the significance of women's political voice."⁴⁴

As her book's title suggests, Edelstein positions nineteenth-century women's writing "between the novel and the news." Edelstein's project is a complicated one, which says much about the shifting natures of literature and journalism in the nineteenth century. In her introduction, she writes, "American women's writing emerged through a dynamic, often critical, relationship with mainstream journalism."⁴⁵ She notes that because of this relationship, the female literary tradition is "deeply attentive to the politics of truth discourses, suspicious of objectivity, and invested in spreading alternative kinds of news."⁴⁶ For example, Edelstein describes Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in*

the Iron Mills as a "strange and unclassifiable kind of art that forces readers to inhabit a position of edifying uncertainty."⁴⁷ The work "evades mainstream journalism and challenges the reflexive ways in which readers make sense of the world."⁴⁸ That is, though it is typically read as a work of fiction, *Life in the Iron Mills* fits perfectly Hartsock's criterion of literary journalism.

At the fin de siècle, a scientific, "objective" understanding of the world began to take hold in literature. Meanwhile, sentimentalism, which had been the popular form for most of the nineteenth century but was on the decline, reasserted itself as a truer means of understanding reality. That is, the tail end of the nineteenth century was marked by a battle over how to best represent reality. Roggenkamp notes, "Somewhat paradoxically, medievalism, with its 'romantic' literary sheen, served as part of the broader push toward 'the real thing' in American culture."⁴⁹ Romantic writing called on readers to look beyond the triviality of everyday life for the deeper truths embedded therein. The new journalism, in many ways, was an attempt to bridge these modes by presenting stories that were true in the sense that they were drawn from real life, but told in a sentimental style. And certainly some woman journalists, such as Nellie Bly, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller, operated within this mode in their journalism. But the new journalism moment in the nineteenth century was short-lived, and other writers, not typically considered part of the new journalism—such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Catherine Williams—also used this method of telling true stories in sentimental novels.

As Edelstein points out, women writers were working against the prevailing winds that would ultimately dictate the relationship between literature and journalism precisely by standing between the two forms. Neither literature nor journalism was telling the story that these women wanted to tell in the way they wanted to tell it, and so they forged their own way, which proved to be revolutionary both in terms of subject matter and style. As literature moved away from sentimentalism, and as journalism moved toward an ideal of objectivity, women like Davis, Fuller, Bly, Fern, Stowe, and Williams—among others—used sentimentalism against the objective ideal to tell the stories of those people whose stories had been untold: mill workers, slaves, the mentally ill, and, above all, women. Indeed, this hybridization of genres proved productive for women writers in the nineteenth century. Judith Fetterley observes, "Writers who wished to avoid . . . conceptual dependency or who wished to experiment with artistic form might well have chosen to work in genres less formalized, less pretentious, and less predetermined, and therefore more open, fluid, and malleable to their uses."⁵⁰ Because considering each writer and her work is beyond the scope of this study, what follows

is a thematic survey to build the case that, in their newspaper columns and novels, the writers used elements of journalism and sentimentalism to bridge the gap between the subjectivities of their subjects and readers.⁵¹

As the “sibling rivalry,”⁵² as Mark Canada calls it, between literature and journalism was ramping up, women writers were inventing a hybrid genre—simultaneously sentimental and subjective—that, for the next century, would stand in the gap between the two. Hybridization is indeed one of the elements that marked women’s journalism in the nineteenth century. Though other writers were experimenting with forms that filled the rapidly opening space between literature and journalism, because of the way their roles were changing in society, women writers were particularly adept at hybridization. Discussing the relationship between Fanny Fern’s various writings, Claire C. Pettengill notes that “Fern’s columns and novels, fiction and nonfiction, often blur generic distinctions; what is striking about Fern’s works, from a generic perspective, is how ‘porous’ they are.”⁵³

Further, Roggenkamp sees Bly’s famous journalistic stunt—in which she attempted to beat the fictional record for circumnavigating the globe in Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*—as a competition not just against Verne but against the elevated status of fiction. Roggenkamp writes, “Pulitzer [Bly’s editor at the *New York World*] anticipated that the race around the world and against time would become a race against the very idea of fictionality as well; the newspaper, if successful, would emerge as the superior medium for a revision of Verne’s romance.”⁵⁴ Finally, in their introduction to a collection of Margaret Fuller’s dispatches from Italy, Larry J. Reynolds and Susan Belasco Smith note that Fuller’s work represented a “new eclectic genre . . . overfull, excessive, extravagant in the original sense of the term.”⁵⁵ Her dis-



Portrait of Nellie Bly by H. J. Myers, circa 1890. Sourced from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection. Public domain.

patches, they write, “wander far outside the boundaries of conventional travel writing and take on the qualities of the history, the sermon, the political manifesto, the historical romance, and especially the diary.”⁵⁶ In each case, these are women journalists working against the emergence of what would become contemporary journalistic conventions using the sentimentalism of old to create something new.

But it wasn’t just those writing for newspapers who occupied this middle ground between journalism and literature, fact and fiction. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is, of course, a novel, but when challenged over the veracity of the events she described, Stowe published a follow-up book in which she compiled first-hand accounts to affirm her novel’s truth. She called it *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story Is Founded*. In the first chapter, Stowe defends the factuality of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “This work, more, perhaps, than any other work of fiction that ever was written, has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents,—of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered,—grouped together with reference to a general result, in the same manner that the mosaic artist groups his fragments of various stones into one general picture.”⁵⁷ She calls *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “a mosaic of facts.”⁵⁸ The purpose of *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is to provide the sources of those facts and her method, as she writes at the end of the first chapter, is to “proceed along the course of the story, from the first page onward, and develop, as far as possible, the incidents by which different parts were suggested.”⁵⁹

Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*, published first in the *Atlantic Monthly*, is today considered a short story or novella, but might better be understood, as Sharon M. Harris writes, as “a startlingly new experiment in literature and a pioneering document in American literature’s transition from romanticism to realism.”⁶⁰ It is, in short, a hybrid work the legacy of which would influence American literature as a whole, and literary journalism specifically. Harris argues that Davis was intentional about this hybridization in *Life in the Iron Mills*, “Davis is herself questioning the old forms and creating a new genre in American literature.”⁶¹

One final, much less read example of the hybrid nature of nineteenth-century women’s writing is Williams’s *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative*, published in 1833. *Fall River* tells the true story of Sarah Maria Cornell, a factory worker who was seduced, raped, and ultimately killed by a Methodist minister, Ephraim Avery. Williams’s account is an effort to set the record straight, as it were. Avery was found not guilty of the murder, and the press sensationalized the story with the effect of ultimately dehumanizing Cornell. To tell the story, Williams employs many novelistic features, as well as some

journalistic qualities. Edelstein writes, “In its mix of first-person narration and actual correspondence, *Fall River* is both emphatic about its authenticity and laced with sentimentality.”⁶² Williams, much like Stowe, affirms the factuality of her account, writing in her preface, “With respect to embellishment in this book, no person acquainted with the facts, who has seen it, pretends to say there is any.”⁶³ The women writers highlighted here indeed used hybrid styles, but they did so, again, to narrow the subjectivities between their subjects and their readers. Stowe writes in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that the reason she wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was “to bring this subject of slavery, as a moral and religious question, before the minds of all those who profess to be followers of Christ, in this country.”⁶⁴ Of Fern, Pettengill writes that in her novels and columns Fern was engaged in a project “to ‘subjectivize’ both women’s consciousness and the culture’s consciousness of women.”⁶⁵

Harris contrasts this impetus, so evident in Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*, with the work of Davis’s male contemporaries, who also operated in a kind of hybrid, proto-literary journalistic style. She writes, “both [Jacob] Riis and Stephen Crane wrote from ‘a curiously asocial perspective’”; Davis, however, “does not allow readers the distance of a ‘vicarious’ experience.”⁶⁶ In fact, early in her story, as Davis paints the picture of a smoky mill town, she offers an invitation to the reader, “This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story.”⁶⁷ The invitation to “come down with me” to hear the story of life in the iron mills is an invitation to the reader to join her subjectivity with those of the characters in Davis’s story.

Similarly, Fuller, who lived abroad and sent her dispatches to the *New York Daily Tribune* from Europe, imagined her readers as a kind of community. Annamaria Formichella Elsdén notes that Fuller’s “translocation to Italy ignited in her a camaraderie with the Italian people . . . in addition, the epistolary nature of her dispatches invited a certain intimacy between herself and her readers.”⁶⁸ Elsdén ascribes to Fuller a “vision of a literary and political collective,”⁶⁹ which she tried to accomplish through her dispatches. Katrina J. Quinn calls this “epistolary journalism” and defines it as “a form that assimilates traditions of journalistic writing and the discursive functionality of personal correspondence.”⁷⁰ She further notes that this form “corresponds significantly to contemporary scholars’ expectations for literary journalism.”⁷¹ It also corresponds with the rise of the epistolary novel in the nineteenth century. And indeed, Fuller often signed off from her columns as if she were writing to a dear friend, often promising more letters to follow or offering a kind of blessing or benediction, as in her January 1, 1848, dispatch, which she

concludes, “To these, the heart of my country, a Happy New Year . . . something of true love must be in these lines—receive them kindly, my friends; it is, by itself, some merit for printed words to be sincere.”⁷²

Though sentimentalism was on the wane as the nineteenth century progressed toward the twentieth, these women writers, experimenting with hybrid styles to give voice to their (and their subject’s) hybrid lives, used elements of romanticism and sentimentalism to great effect in narrowing the gap between the subjectivities of their readers and subjects. In the remaining years of the nineteenth century other writers—women and men—would employ the rising realism to similar aims, but they, and the genre of literary journalism that was emerging, are indebted to the work of women, who include Rebecca Harding Davis, Margaret Fuller, Nellie Bly, Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Catherine Williams. Some of these women’s works have been forgotten, or only recently remembered. Others are caricatured. Most are hardly considered at all in the context of literary studies. Yet, exceptional as they are, they are not exceptions; they are representative of a larger trend in the mid- to late-nineteenth century that merits further study. Here I follow Barbara Friedman and her co-authors in encouraging scholars to “rethink our finding”; to ask, “If we’ve found this exception, might there be others? Might common sense be wrong?”⁷³ These scholars caution against the “add women and stir”⁷⁴ approach to integrating women’s experiences into the study of media history. They continue, “We need to resist the common historical urge to understand people as slices or snapshots of achievement. This is especially true of how we historicize successful women and minorities, because we do tend to think of them as exceptions.”⁷⁵ The woman writers discussed here represent a growing movement that would lead not just to the further integration of women into the newsroom in the twentieth century, but, along with their male counterparts, to the birth of the genre we call literary journalism.

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Notes

- ¹ Sims, *True Stories*, 44.
- ² *Ibid.*, 43.
- ³ Connery, "A Third Way to Tell the Story," 3–20.
- ⁴ Sims, *True Stories*, 44.
- ⁵ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 198.
- ⁶ Forde and Foss, "'The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,'" 128–29.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*

- ⁹ Ibid. 132–38.
- ¹⁰ Arnold, “Up to Easter,” 638 (emphasis in the original); see also Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 95.
- ¹¹ Stead, “Maggie Darling,” 67–68.
- ¹² Sharlet, “‘1894,’ introduction to ‘Maggie Darling,’” 52.
- ¹³ Roggenkamp, introduction to *Narrating the News*, xiv.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 18.
- ¹⁶ Cordell, Mullen, and Fitzgerald, “A ‘Stunning’ Love Letter to Viral Texts.”
- ¹⁷ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 29.
- ¹⁸ Juergens, “Sensationalism,” 85.
- ¹⁹ Forde and Foss, “The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,” 138.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 134.
- ²¹ Ibid., 136.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Connery, *Journalism and Realism*, 8.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 7.
- ²⁵ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 20.
- ²⁶ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 90.
- ²⁷ Forde and Foss, “The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,” 129.
- ²⁸ Connery, “Searching for the Real and Actual,” *Journalism and Realism*, 13.
- ²⁹ Forde and Foss, “The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,” 131.
- ³⁰ Cordell, Mullen, and Fitzgerald, “A ‘Stunning’ Love Letter.”
- ³¹ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 24.
- ³² Forde and Foss, “The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,” 138.
- ³³ Frus, preface to *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, x; see also Williams, “Literature,” in *Marxism and Literature*.
- ³⁴ Forde and Foss, “The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,” 127.
- ³⁵ Edelstein, *Between the Novel and the News*, 64.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 111.
- ³⁷ Winfield, ed., “Emerging Professionalism and Modernity,” 1.
- ³⁸ Forde and Foss, “The Facts—the Color!—the Facts,” 140.
- ³⁹ Campbell, introduction to *The Year That Defined American Journalism*, 5.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Sims, *True Stories*, 12.
- ⁴³ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 198.
- ⁴⁴ Edelstein, *Between the Novel and the News*, 64.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 104.
- ⁵⁰ Fetterley, ed., introduction to *Provisions*, 15.
- ⁵¹ For further exploration of these writers’ works, see Fitzgerald, “Setting the Record Straight.”
- ⁵² Canada, “A Sibling Rivalry in American Letters,” 1–7.
- ⁵³ Pettengill, “Against Novels,” 61–91.
- ⁵⁴ Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 26.
- ⁵⁵ Reynolds and Smith, introduction to *These Sad but Glorious Days*, by Margaret Fuller, 8.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 5.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Harris, “Rebecca Harding Davis: From Romanticism to Realism,” 4.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 6.
- ⁶² Edelstein, *Between the Novel and the News*, 49.
- ⁶³ Williams, *Fall River*, viii.
- ⁶⁴ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, iii–iv.
- ⁶⁵ Pettengill, “Against Novels,” 85.
- ⁶⁶ Harris, “Rebecca Harding Davis,” 9.
- ⁶⁷ Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills*, 13.
- ⁶⁸ Elsdon, “Margaret Fuller’s Tribune Dispatches,” 33.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ Quinn, “Exploring an Early Version of Literary Journalism,” 33.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 33–34.
- ⁷² Fuller, *These Sad but Glorious Days*, 166.
- ⁷³ Friedman, et al. “Stirred, Not Yet Shaken.” 162.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 160.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 162.