

The 2011 Keynote: An Appreciation

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John J. Pauly's keynote at the annual conference of the IALJS, in Brussels this past May, amounted to a powerful and elegantly argued case for literary journalism as a moral and political pursuit at the heart of civic life. Focusing particularly on the United States, Pauly stressed that literary journalism had typically preferred the cultural to the civic: "It discovers its most profound stories in humans' quest for meaning rather than in the civic drama of news." In addition, Pauly contended that literary journalism was most confident when building stories around individual personalities—with "human interest" the source of its constant and enduring appeal.

Having identified the principal characteristics of literary journalism, Pauly moved on to call for a new set of priorities. Firstly, he suggested that it might direct its attention more at describing "a social field in which individuals are not the entire focus but moments in a larger social process, in the way that cultural studies and sociology regularly attempt." Literary journalists (as well as "conventional journalists") should also aim to highlight more organizational dynamics "given how much of the world's work is performed in such contexts." Finally, Pauly raised this crucial question: How could literary journalism report more effectively on group life and group conflict?

Pauly's field of literary journalism is not entirely barren since he is able to refer to a number of writers who are already capturing the essential drama of civic life: for instance, Ted Conover in *Newjack*, his account of the work of correction officers in Sing Sing prison; Jane Kramer, whose "Letter from Europe" over many years for the *New Yorker*, while often shifting from one character to another, manage to "stimulate the feel of group life"; and Joan Didion, whose later work created "a sense of social density."

John J. Pauly's critique of the "human interest" bias of literary journalism (and it could be extended to the mainstream media in general) struck me as particularly important and timely. Indeed, the hyper-personalization of the media serves an ideological function—over-simplifying enormously complex histories and diverting attention from other important social, political, geostrategic, religious, and environmental factors. As Colin Sparks argues: "The popular conception of the personal becomes the explanatory framework within which the social order is presented as transparent."¹ The media fail to convey the "social totality" comprising "complex mediations of institutional structures, economic relations and so on." And Steve Chibnall suggests that the personalization of politics and the media is "perhaps the most pervasive product of the cultural fetishism of modern society."² Issues are increasingly defined and presented in terms of personalities "catering for the public desire for identification fostered by the entertainment media."

Let us take just one example to highlight the relevance of Pauly's critique. Ian Jack, a columnist in the London-based *Guardian*, is rightly seen by many as an outstanding literary journalist. Yet in his recent profile of the celebrated English journalist Chapman Pincher³, now 97 years old, he highlighted, in typical elegant prose, Pincher's close links to the intelligence services—and his tendency to leak information, disinformation, and lies on behalf of the spooks into the media. But by focusing on just Pincher, Jack failed to highlight the close political and institutional links between the intelligence services and Fleet Street—with many journalists working far too closely with the spooks.⁴

I also found Pauly's emphasis on the need for literary journalists to move beyond the human interest to focus on organizational structures and group dynamics extremely pertinent. In my keynote to the association's 2009 conference in Chicago, I looked at George Orwell's war reporting as an example of literary journalism. But take a look again at his 1933 *Down and Out in Paris and London*, that extraordinary postmodernist *mélange* of fiction, autobiography, "human interest" character descriptions, social observation, eyewitness reporting, participatory journalism, and political polemic. (Indeed, should not more literary journalism be aiming at that eclectic mix of genres?)

While working as a *plongeur* in a Paris hotel, Orwell observes with a brilliantly acute eye the “elaborate caste system” operating there. He writes:

Our staff, amounting to about a hundred and ten, had their prestige graded as accurately as that of soldiers, and a cook or waiter was as much above a plongeur as a captain above a private. Highest of all came the manager, who could sack anybody, even the cooks . . . below the manager came the maître d’hôtel. He did not serve at table, unless to a lord or someone of that kind, but directed the other waiters and helped with the catering. . . . A little below the head waiter came the head cook, drawing about five thousand francs a month. . . . Then came the chef du personnel; he drew only fifteen hundred francs a month, but he wore a black coat and did no manual work and he could sack plongeurs and fine waiters.⁵

And so on until Orwell arrives at his fellow *plongeurs*: “We of the cafeteria were the very dregs of the hotel, despised and *tutoied* by everyone.” In a few paragraphs, hasn’t Orwell highlighted “organizational complexity” as sought by Pauly?

There are a lot more contemporary examples to celebrate. The German Günter Wallraff, who is best seen as both an investigative and literary journalist, went undercover (with the pseudonym, Hans Essler) to work for the tabloid *Bild Zeitung* in Hannover to explore its organizational structures and many unethical practices.⁶ And most famously Wallraff posed as a Turkish guest worker to expose mistreatment at the hands of employers, landlords, and various authorities.⁷

In the United States, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) highlights the plight of people in low-paid jobs—and the social and political factors impacting on poverty in the U.S.⁸ Here in the U.K., journalist Polly Toynbee similarly went undercover, working as a hospital porter in a National Health Service hospital, a dinner lady in a primary school, a nursery assistant, a call-center employee, a cake factory worker, and a homecare assistant (during which time she contracted salmonella). Out of these experiences came *Hard Work: Life in Low-Paid Britain* (2003).⁹

Finally, the *Washington Post*’s Rajiv Chandraeskan captures all the surreal craziness of life in Baghdad’s Green Zone (and beyond) in his award-winning *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2007).¹⁰ Like Orwell’s *Down and Out*, it weaves together a vast tapestry of different genres: there’s historical background, eyewitness reporting, colorful descriptions of U.S. officials and Iraqi locals, short narrative sections heavy with symbolism—and a vital investigative edge.

Perhaps I am suggesting here that one way of achieving Pauly’s ambition of creating a literary journalism more sensitive to organizational and group complexities is to highlight the challenges of investigative (and often under-

cover) work for our students and the ways in which literary techniques can help add both color and moral urgency to these reports.

One of Pauly's central arguments is built around his stress on the differences between "conventional journalism" and "literary journalism." The former, he says, "unapologetically celebrates a version of what the literary critic Hugh Kenner once called 'the plain style' and disdains more complex narratives that it considers partisan, mannered, or inefficient." Elsewhere, he says, "literary and conventional journalism have sought to escape each other's company" while "there is much to divide them, even in their understandings of journalism as an imaginative, storytelling profession."

My own emphasis would rather be on stressing all journalism as a literary form. Journalism and literature are too often seen as separate fields (one "low," the other "high"). While complex factors (historical, cultural, ideological, political) lie behind journalism's low literary—and academic—status, is there not a danger of literary journalism advocates formulating another hierarchical order of journalistic value? At the top would be "literary journalists" and beneath them "conventional journalists."

But how can such oppositions be maintained in the teaching context? When I am running workshops on news or investigative reporting I want to be able to tell my students that there are opportunities there for the journalistic imagination to flower—through the use of descriptive color, deep background details, fascinating dialog, scene setting, insightful analysis, eyewitness evidence, and so on.

Pauly at one point acknowledges this, commenting that "even routine daily news regularly draws upon a wider array of literary devices than we sometimes think." Let us build on that observation—and encourage all our journalism students to explore the literary dimensions of journalism—not just those hived off into "literary journalism" programs.

NOTES

1. Colin Sparks, "Popular Journalism: Theories and Practice," in *Journalism and Popular Culture*, ed. Dahlgren, Peter, Sparks, Colin (London: Sage, 1992), 24-44.
2. Steve Chibnall, *Law and Order News* (London: Tavistock, 1977).

3. Ian Jack, "Chapman Pincher Was Fleet Street's Spycatcher. His Secret? A Good Lunch," *Guardian*, 1 July 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentis-free/2011/jul/01/ian-jack-chapman-pincher-fleet-street>; accessed 2 July 2011.

4. Richard Keeble, "Hacks and Spooks—Close Encounters of a Strange Kind: A Critical History of the Links Between Mainstream Journalists and the Intelligence Services in the U.K.," in *The Political; Economy of Media and Power*, ed. Klaehn, Jeffrey (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 87-111.

5. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Gollancz, 1933; reissued by Penguin, 1966 and regularly reissued).

6. Günter Wallraff, *Der Aufmacher* (The Lead Story), (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1977).

7. Günter Wallraff, *Lowest of the Low* (London: Methuen, 1988).

8. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

9. Polly Toynbee, *Hard Work: Life in Low-Paid Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

10. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).



