



John C. Hartsock. Photo: Tony DeRado

# Expanding the Horizons of Literary Journalism

*Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*

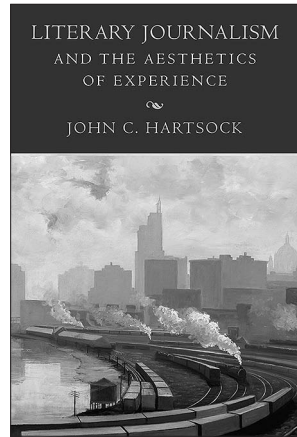
by John C. Hartsock. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. Paperback, 195 pp., \$27.95

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Since the publication of his seminal and award-winning *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*, in 2000, John C. Hartsock has been pondering. That first volume, as he indicates in his introduction (5), raised more questions than he could then answer. In a range of journals (such as *Genre*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *DoubleTake*) and book chapters over the years he has been grappling with the underlying issues and theories. This new and densely argued text is the fruit of all that reflection. And it succeeds wonderfully in opening up the literary journalism debate to completely original and exciting new fields of inquiry.

Writers over the centuries have tended to look down on their literary journalism. Indeed, since their emergence in the early seventeenth century in Europe's cities, particularly London, the "news media" (variously known as corantos, diurnals, gazettes, proceedings, and mercuries) have been associated with scandal, gossip, and "low" culture. While the term journalist emerged in France in the 1830s to refer to writers on periodicals (distinguishing them from writers of literature), the identification of journalism largely with newspapers and mass culture has had a profound impact on the sensibilities of men and women of letters. George Orwell, considered by many as one of the greatest UK journalists of the last century, constantly looked down on his journalism as "mere pamphleteering" and a lesser form of literature. On a basic level, journalism has provided writers with an income. Yet this very fact has reinforced journalism's position as a subliterary genre. For while literature is often seen as the fruit of "scholarship" and "inspiration"—hence pure, disinterested, and above market considerations—journalistic writing is viewed as distorted by the constraints of the market, tight deadlines, or word limits.

In contrast, Hartsock's text—which draws on an eclectic range of theorists, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Victor Shklovsky—argues strongly that literary journalism (which he prefers to call "narra-descriptive journalism") is the *superior* genre (53). Fiction, he



says, exists in a “sovereign world” independent of phenomena. “In that sovereignty we detect a narrative closure” (55). Documentary or nonfiction narratives can never be “sovereign” in the same way. Their conclusions can only be temporary. To support this view, he cites, for example, John Hersey, who forty years following the first publication of *Hiroshima* added a new chapter after returning to Japan to find out what had happened to the survivors of the nuclear bomb attack. “When you finish reading a work of narra-descriptive journalism, you know at some level of consciousness or subconsciousness that of course the story does not end, people’s lives go on, and that disrupts ‘the illusion of the complete process,’ as Jaus said of history” (56).

Hartsock’s critique of the conventional inverted pyramid model of news is particularly original. It represents, he says, “a reversal of the complication-resolution litmus test of traditional narrative because of the emphasis in the lead on the resolution—the “breaking news”—before the story examines the complication that led to the resolution” (11). A more narrative approach engages readers imaginatively in the aesthetics of experience and the search for understanding, meaning, and insight. It begins the moment a narrative mystery or complication is posed. Hartsock even draws on the research into how the brain investigates the world by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists to suggest that the understanding of “story” as narrative “empowers the reader imaginatively” (18). He continues:

Associating itself with science effectively legitimized the “objective” model as the professionally correct model. But given what science is telling us, one must conclude that the “objective” model was not “scientific” despite the claims because it is not how the mind naturally inquires into the world. . . . the critical hegemony of “objective” journalism was constructed on a false premise (21).

Hartsock devotes a chapter to a fascinating analysis of the New Journalists Tom Wolfe, Sara Davidson, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Hunter Thompson, and Michael Herr, where he combines close attention to the texts with some broad-sweep generalizations. The New Journalists, he argues, “challenged nothing less than the shibboleth of the ‘American Dream’: that mythic ambition—and concoction—that promises a happy ending” (61). Coming in the 1960s at a time of social and political crisis in the United States (with the civil rights movement, assassinations, the drug culture, and Vietnam War protests), “The New Journalism would uncover a growing psychic dread underlying the triumphalism” (69).

Perhaps more than any other work, Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, he argues, is about the symbolic birth of the mythic American Dream. On the day before the night of the murders, “exemplary sixteen-year-old Nancy Clutter bakes a cherry pie, the wholesomeness of which is another American mythic trope” (72). Hartsock continues (with his typical wit): “[L]ike that staple persona of American myth, Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, Nancy Clutter could almost be expected to launch into ‘Somewhere over the rainbow’—coincidentally also in Dorothy’s Kansas.”

Significantly, Capote focuses on the murderers, as Dostoevsky did in *Crime and Punishment*. “But unlike in the Russian *Crime and Punishment*, where there is redemption in the end, there is none in the American version” (73). But Hartsock is highly critical of Capote for inventing certain scenes: “[W]e detect Capote’s inability

to resist his own mythmaking, and here in the effort to destroy a secular myth, it is done at the cost of building another false myth to create a false narrative unity" (ibid).

The whole notion of "subversive" politics and culture in advanced capitalist societies is problematic: to a certain extent those societies are strong since they are able to incorporate and appropriate such subversion. Capitalism, after all, carries its own self-critique as a dynamic form of legitimation. As Daniel Hallin outlined in his seminal study of Vietnam War coverage (1986), the dominant ideological sphere of consensus can incorporate serious critique (which Hallin defines as "legitimate controversy"). Hartsock here stresses the subversive role of the antimythical New Journalism, and yet that role would have been worth interrogating and problematizing far more.

Hartsock certainly over the years has expanded the horizons of literary journalism scholarship with his writings on Russian journalists. Here he takes a close look at the work of Anna Politkovskaya (whom he defines as an "expository polemicist") and Svetlana Alexievich ("a narra-descriptive journalist") (85). In another section, he examines in detail the literary reportage of Egon Erwin Kisch ("a Prague journalist of Jewish origin, writing mostly in German" (99), tracing its influence on writers as diverse as Frenchman Henri Barbusse, American communist Michael Gold, Bertolt Brecht, Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukacs and the Chinese poet Emi Siao (103).

In a chapter toward the end of the book, Hartsock looks critically at some examples of more recent literary journalism: for instance, an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, another in the *Sacramento Bee*, and detects "problems of narrative summary" in all of them. It is perhaps strange to see listed here Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List* (*Schindler's Ark* in the United Kingdom), since this is unmistakably a work of fiction. His suggestion, then, that Keneally could have improved the work by interviewing a particular source "as part of the reporter's 'immersion' process" (144) seems all the more inappropriate.

While Hartsock is a former editor of *Literary Journalism Studies*, the journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, it is striking how little reference he makes to the many contributions to that journal, which have significantly expanded the international focus and theoretical reach of the discipline. Significantly, he stresses that he writes as an American scholar and adds, intriguingly: "I say that in all humility and certainly not triumph" (7). There is, indeed, a heavy American emphasis in this text (reinforced by the beautiful and striking reproduction on the front cover of Hanssen's 1936 painting of a train yard in Minnesota). It might then have been good to end on a high, celebrating some of the wonderful contemporary manifestations of literary journalism across the globe.

Yet, in conclusion, the many insights in this rich, challenging, and often complex book will still make it a central text for international researchers for many years to come.