1.1 The Complications of 'Literary Journalism'

Mapping out the theoretical terrain of literary texts most explicitly concerned with the representation of reality—a kind of nonfictional realism—is a complex endeavor. Any theory of such a genre must simultaneously acknowledge the texts' grounding in documentary authorial intention and experiential materiality, as well as the eventual product's very formal, textual character. This multidisciplinary complexity might have been one of the reasons that pushed Barbara Lounsberry to argue that such literature was "the great unexplored territory of contemporary criticism" in 1990.[1] The critical conversation around such texts has shifted noticeably in the thirty years since Lounsberry's book. Literary journalism has become established as a useful point of reference for issues of genre, in addition to assuming the status of an academic discipline in its own right. On the institutional level, this has led to an increase in scholarly work on literary journalism, while the emergence of literary journalism has imposed terminological unity on a rather fractured landscape, on the level of actual critical theory.

However, this unification has occurred in broadly general, predominantly formal, terms. The term "literary journalism" initially surfaced in the U.S. as a way of referring to a kind of journalism more akin to realist novels than to traditional news media.[2] The term can be traced back as far as 1907, to the anonymous "Confessions of 'a Literary Journalist,'" whose author draws a contrast

1 Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*, xi.

2 In 1905, Hutchins Hapgood, an early proponent of the idea of a more literary kind of journalism, suggested turning the journalistic interview into a form of autobiography. He found that a real character could be turned into a type representing a certain social class, which would make for vital literature. Thus, he fused Marxist ideas about literary realism with journalistic methods. However, he did not yet use the term literary journalism. Hapgood, "A New Form of Literature."

between the reporter's two conflicting tendencies towards "objective observation" and "subjective imagination,"[3] while confessing that he is "just telling the story as it appealed to me."[4] As an object of scholarly interest, literary journalism made its first major appearance in 1937 when Edwin Ford published *A Bibliography of American Literary Journalism*,[5] only to disappear once again from critical discourse for almost 50 years.[6] The term resurfaced in 1984, with the publication of *The Literary Journalists: The New Art of Personal Reportage*[7] by Norman Sims.[8] At that time, the term tapped into a multidisciplinary conversation that had been prompted by the proliferation of experimental journalistic texts in the 1960s and 1970s and by Tom Wolfe's bold proclamation of New Journalism.[9]

Following Sims' publication, literary journalism witnessed a surge in interest from researchers who sought to challenge Wolfe's claim to novelty and to trace the genre's history.[10] This development was supported by institutional efforts, such as the foundation of the *International Association of Literary Journalism Studies*, in 2006.[11] As a result, research interest has expanded and become more diverse since then. More recently, scholars have begun to explore literary journalism's diverse global histories and cultural peculiarities.[12]

---

3 Anonymous, "The Confessions of 'a Literary Journalist,'" 376; For a detailed history of American literary journalism, see Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*.

4 Anonymous, "The Confessions of 'a Literary Journalist,'" 371.

5 Ford, *A Bibliography of Literary Journalism in America*.

6 Roiland, "By Any Other Name: The Case for Literary Journalism," 66.

7 Sims, *The Literary Journalists: The New Art of Personal Reportage*.

8 Sims himself credits Sarah R. Shaber with the use of the term in 1980. Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, 11.

9 Roiland, "By Any Other Name: The Case for Literary Journalism."

10 Connery, "Discovering a Literary Form"; Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*; Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*; Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*.

11 International Association of Literary Journalism Studies, "About Us."

12 Bak and Reynolds, *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences*; Keeble and Tulloch, "Introduction: Mind the Gaps, On the Fuzzy Boundaries between the Literary and the Journalistic"; Keeble and Tulloch, *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Tradition*.

Hierarchical Distinctions and Blurred Boundaries

Despite the (global) notoriety it has attained, the meaning of the term "literary journalism" is still the subject of constant debate and the critical conversation about works that would qualify as literary journalism remains highly fragmented.[13] These disconnections are mainly due to the contradictory premises of literary journalism's twin components. While the qualifier "literary" refers to a rather broadly defined set of textual products, as well as specific formal features, "journalism" can at least signify both certain professional practices of knowledge production and the diverse forms of this knowledge's communication.

On the one hand, then, "literary journalism" gathers a diverse set of conflicting meanings; however, the binary compound "literary journalism" also insinuates a clear boundary between literature and journalism on the other. This is an assumption that has proven problematic in theories of genre. While the term seemed useful for drawing distinctions within the journalistic trade, as well as for studying it, scholars from other disciplines have either ignored or rejected it. During the 1970s and 1980s, shortly before "literary journalism" started to become widely used, a good portion of the critical analyses of New Journalism was based on concepts such as composition, documentary, or the essay. In their readings, scholars used the generic term "literary nonfiction," thereby renouncing any explicit affiliation with journalism.[14] However, other analyses from the same period seem to take issue with the term "literature." Phyllis Frus, for instance, explicitly avoids the term, arguing that honoring exclusively

> selected forms of journalism as literature emphasizes the line that separates the two modes, confirming the late-nineteenth-century notion of literature that arose specifically to exclude journalism and other factual narrative, defining literature as a collection of timeless works of universal value and appeal.[15]

13 Keeble, "Literary Journalism," 2018, 2; Wilson, "The Chronicler: George Packer's The Unwinding (2013)," para. 4.

14 See, i.e. Weber, *The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing*; Anderson, *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*; Anderson, *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy*; Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*.

15 Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless*, 5.

Other scholarly analyses—particularly those conducted from within the framework of literary studies—approached works of New Journalism as fiction and used terms such as "nonfiction novel,"[16] "documentary fiction,"[17] or "fables of fact."[18]

From a literary studies perspective, this indicates that criticism of "literary journalism", as a term, denotes a genre that is grounded in the problem of shifting definitions of "literature". Historically, these definitions are rife with value judgments and are frequently served to elevate literature above other forms of writing such as philosophy or history. It was Plato who first introduced the idea of different ways of speaking about the world, when he differentiated between reason and mimesis. Significantly, he imbued the distinction with an explicit value judgment. Preferring abstract analysis, Plato viewed the artful imitation of the world as a dangerous and irrational mirror.[19] Plato's student Aristotle, in his influential *Poetics,* inverts his teacher's valuation, using a slightly different taxonomy in which mimesis is elevated over ethics. For Aristotle, mimesis contains an internal logic and unity based on plot. As such, it is mainly concerned with probability and necessity. From this perspective, it stimulates reason because it provides extraordinary insights. Aristotle seems to suggest that mimesis need be neither precise nor true to fact, but is mainly bound to the causal chains expressed in plot. In his view, impossible or fictional events could even be preferable to the truth, on condition that they adhere to a probable or necessary logic.[20]

This elevation of probability or necessity over factual accuracy was also manifested in Aristotle's influential distinction between philosophy and poetry, on the one hand, and history on the other. While poetry is concerned with probability and necessity, according to Aristotle, history is bound to factuality. "Poetry," he argues, "is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals whereas those of history are singular."[21]

16 Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*; Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*.

17 Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*.

18 Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*.

19 Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 15–22.

20 Potolsky, 39–41.

21 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 17.

Aristotle's distinction strongly influenced debates on literary mimesis in a way that decisively shaped our understanding of literature and complicated its relationship with other modes of discourse, such as history or journalism. For instance, in the 16th century, Sir Philip Sidney elevated the poet over the philosopher and the historian precisely because he avoids explicit mimesis. Sidney viewed the poet as a kind of mediator who "nothing affirms, and therefore, never lieth."[22]

Roughly four hundred years later, in another line of separating reasoning, Austin Warren and René Wellek have argued that literature has its own truth, because it operates in a separate realm. They claimed that "art is substantively beautiful and adjectivally true (i.e., doesn't conflict with truth)."[23] In their view, literature, in contrast to history or philosophy, has a mainly presentational character, rather than a discursive one.[24]

Such distinctions were still dominant when the idea of "literary journalism" arrived upon the scene. In the 1970s, when works of what might be called literary journalism began to force their way into American culture, Northrop Frye still insisted on literature's distinctive quality. He associated literature with autonomy and freedom, while disparaging all other forms of writing as essentially instrumental. Frye argued that in "literature, questions of fact or truth are subordinated to the primary literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake."[25] However, by restricting the label of literature to fiction, Frye limited all other forms of text to instrumentality—that is, viewing them as tools—claiming these forms as "words used instrumentally to help human consciousness do or understand something else."[26]

Jürgen Habermas developed Frye's distinction even further shortly thereafter. The German philosopher delineated literature from philosophy, literary criticism, and the "normal (everyday) use of language."[27] Habermas argued that what he called the poetic function was dominant only in literature, whereas in other discourses, "the tools of rhetoric are subordinated to the discipline of a *distinct* form of argumentation."[28] In his argumentation, Habermas

22 Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or The Defence of Poesy*, 103.

23 Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 25.

24 Wellek and Warren, 26.

25 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 74.

26 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 74; For a more detailed analysis of this self-defining discourse in literary studies, see Winterowd, *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature*, 3–6.

27 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, 199.

28 Habermas, 209–210.

uses the term "fiction" as a synonym for "literature," while "philosophical" is used interchangeably with "discursive," "argumentative," and "scholarly."[29] Importantly, this blurring of lines between fiction and literature made a text's fictionality appear characteristic of its function and, hence, made the distinction between fiction and literature appear obsolete.

However, poststructuralist scholars like the French philosopher Jacques Derrida questioned such hierarchical binary distinctions at around the same time. They dramatically replaced such categorizations with a much more general dichotomy between written artefacts and factual experience. From a literary journalism studies perspective, this similarly reduced the difference between factual and fictional texts because poststructuralism was rather uninterested in questions of textual reference.[30]

Put generally, Derrida challenged Western philosophy's prevailing idea that there existed a truth independent of its representation in language. In Derrida's view, meaning was based on relations of infinite differences and, hence, was always in the process of becoming and was never fully realized until an impasse was encountered.[31] Indebted to Husserl's phenomenology and likely also Bakhtin's writings on dialogism,[32] Derrida's idea of realist representation entailed a wide and encompassing understanding of text and writing as "that which enables the sense and the truth-value of statements or propositions to be communicated from one context to the next."[33] Despite still-popular accusations of extreme relativism, scholars have shown that Derrida did not deny the existence of material reality. More importantly, he emphasized the inevitable differentiation and relationality inherent in our perception thereof.[34]

Still, like the binary distinctions that it sought to replace, poststructuralism's general line of argument was similarly incompatible with the reality of literary journalism. For in this view, all thought, language, and hence also argumentation could simply be seen as rhetorical. Of course, this does not mean

29 Sandler, "Habermas, Derrida, and the Genre Distinction between Fiction and Argument," 106.

30 Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 7.

31 Cuddon and Preston, "Post-Structuralism."

32 See i.e. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel"; Peiró Sempere, *The Influence of Mikhail Bakhtin on the Formation and Development of the Yale School of Deconstruction*.

33 Norris, "Truth in Derrida," 26; Marder, *The Event of the Thing: Derrida's Post-Deconstructive Realism*; Mooney, "Derrida's Empirical Realism."

34 Deutscher, *How to Read Derrida*, 34–36.

that all language should be regarded as fiction, but instead suggests that a potential distinction between fiction and nonfiction is necessarily only negotiated within a text itself. For example, Roland Barthes, another prominent poststructuralist critic, proclaimed the death of the author.[35]

However, poststructuralism certainly sharpened critical attention. Its ideas had wide ramifications for historical writing, a scientific discourse equally defined by its core referentiality to an existing material world. Most prominently, the American historian Hayden White showed how the distinguishing categorizations between different types of discourse, such as the one employed by Frye, idealized history as real when histories ought, instead, to be regarded as texts with narrative structures.[36] Histories, he argued, "ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that 'liken' the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture".[37] Essentially, White pointed out that historical events did not carry meaning in themselves, but that their meaning was constructed by the ways in which historians arranged them to form historical narratives.

So far, these challenges have gone largely unprocessed in scholarship about literary journalism; where they have been taken into consideration, they have contributed to a confusing blurring of boundaries. Informed by poststructuralism, the paradoxical idea of fact *as* fiction proved tempting for a time. In his analysis of New Journalism, for instance, John Hellmann understood artful prose generally as fiction.[38] Later, he used the term "postmodern journalism" to refer to New Journalism, which he argued sought to overcome realism's "inadequacies in the face of the fragmenting, changing world of the postmodern."[39] Leonora Flis observed a blurring of fact and fiction in the documentary novel in her study entitled *Factual Fictions*.[40]

This blurring has had consequences. Dorrit Cohn has argued that "the most pervasive and prominently problematic application of the word *fiction* in re-

35 Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

36 White, "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," 89.

37 White, 91.

38 Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*, 17–18.

39 Hellmann, "Postmodern Journalism," 52–53.

40 Flis, *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel*, 42.

cent decades has been to narrative discourse in general—historical, journalistic, and autobiographical—as well as to imaginative discourse."[41]

Against the Idealization of Literary Journalism

These theoretical complications have affected the discourse around literary journalism in quite specific ways. Most recent definitions restrict themselves to a combination of particular formal features, associated with literary realism, and a specific professional practice of research advocated by the reporter Tom Wolfe. In 1973, Wolfe boldly asserted that what he called New Journalism "would wipe out the novel as literature's main event" in the context of a debate on American realism.[42] As Tom Connery has shown, most early definitions of literary journalism refer back to Wolfe's definition that blends features of textual form and professional practice.[43] They are centered on a text's similarity to realist fiction on the basis of "intense" and "detailed" reporting.[44] Norman Sims, for example, revisiting Wolfe's list of characteristics from 1984, states that, apart from "immersion reporting, complicated structures in the prose, accuracy, voice, responsibility, and attention to the symbolic realities of a story," he would add "access, attention to ordinary lives, and the special qualities of a writer's connection to the subjects"[45] to the list of literary journalism's defining features.

Such definitions mainly seek to delineate literary journalism from news journalism and are not concerned with critical discourses in literary studies; however, in so doing, they also run the risk of idealizing the genre. This is because they regard journalistic texts that feature formal elements of narrative, such as a personal voice, scene descriptions, or dialogue—always in implicit contrast to news journalism—as exceptionally effective in revealing reality. In another foundational text, for instance, Mark Kramer elevated what Sims called "voice" above the other characteristics that he listed. He argues that the

41 Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 8.

42 Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 1973, 22.

43 Connery, "Discovering a Literary Form," 3–5.

44 Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 1973, 15.

45 Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, 12.

> defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer, the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person not representing, defending, or speaking on behalf of any institution, not a newspaper, corporation, government, ideology, field of study, chamber of commerce, or travel destination.[46]

Kramer seems to be ascribing a degree of objectivity superior to that of other kinds of journalism to literary journalism, one that is attained precisely by means of the writer's intensified subjectivity. In a more recent definition of what John Hartsock calls "narrative literary journalism," Hartsock states that this writing tried to "engage in a revelation for the reader about our phenomenal world, one that is conjured imaginatively by means of sensate experience reflected in language, a conjuring that can disrupt taken-for-granted cultural and personal assumptions."[47] He further argues that "narrative literary journalism more actively engages the imagination in the creation of meaning than either the summary lead, inverted pyramid model of journalism or the traditional feature story" and that its goal is "to recover more concretely the illusion of experience."[48] Similar to Aristotle's elevation of art over history and Kramer's promotion of personal voice, Hartsock makes the case that this more subjective kind of journalism is a "more natural way to tell the news."[49]

Other scholars have sought to evade such idealization by emphasizing literary journalism's textual character, albeit rather generally. Richard Lance Keeble, for example, proposes that all journalism be considered as "worthy of critical attention as *literature*."[50] Joshua Roiland suggests that rather than understanding the adjective "literary" as a value judgment or legitimating maneuver, we should take it as referring to "the use of rhetorical elements ranging from scene, character development, plot, dialogue, symbolism, voice, et cetera."[51]

However, I would argue that literary journalism's decisive aspect lies in its material referentiality that includes authorial agency. In one of very few specific critical analyses of these texts as literature, rather than journalism, Phyllis Frus makes an attempt to define the peculiar character of what she calls "journalistic narrative." In reading such texts, she argues, "we are … unable

46 Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists."
47 Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, 4–5.
48 Hartsock, 15.
49 Hartsock, 20–23.
50 Keeble, "Literary Journalism," 2018, 2.
51 Roiland, "By Any Other Name: The Case for Literary Journalism," 71.

to recover the event outside of textual evidence. All the materials of journalism—documents, personal testimony, or even memories—are communicable only in a form of secondary revision."[52] Literature, Frus explains, is produced by readers when they "read to discover how a text, through its style, 'makes' reality read its content through its form."[53] We cannot determine a journalistic narrative's credibility through a comparison of the narrative to the actual characters and events, due to the fundamental belatedness of any nonfictional narrative—it is always produced after the events narrated have occurred in reality. Instead, per Frus, we can only:

> compare versions to each other, and to other texts, for "truth" cannot be found in the connection between the word and its referent (because this is always deferred); nor can it be arrived at by comparing the plot to the story we already know to have existed. This is because the facts are not there before the narrative about them; … there are no descriptions of events apart from narratives.[54]

Rather than claim that nonfictional narratives are "true," Frus concludes that "all we ought to say about them is that their referents are material or historical, in contrast to imaginary or hypothetical."[55]

This is very much in line with Dorrit Cohn's categorization. Cohn herself avoids the term literature; instead, she suggests the category of referentiality as the central textual characteristic that distinguishes fiction from other narrative texts. Cohn uses the term "nonreferential narrative" to explain that "a work of fiction itself creates the world to which it refers by referring to it."[56] The category of "referential narrative," by contrast, refers to a world existing outside the text and denotes works of history or journalism. In such texts, she

---

52 Frus, 213; Apart from Frus's study Anderson, *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*; Winterowd, *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature*; Mosser, *The Participatory Journalism of Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didon: Creating New Reporting Styles*., all performed rhetorical analyses of works of literary journalism. However, none of them used the actual term "literary journalism."

53 Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless*, 5.

54 Frus, 214.

55 Frus, 214.

56 Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 13.

states, "the synchronous interplay of story and discourse is undergirded … by the logical and chronological priority of documented or observed events."[57]

Frus's observations also correspond to the concept of literature proposed by James Phelan. Phelan points to the shortcomings of structural narratology in his rhetorical poetics of narrative from 2017. He establishes a narratological paradigm that incorporates both fictional and nonfictional discourse by conceiving of narrative more broadly, as an event produced by a dialogical relationship between a narrator and an audience.[58] Phelan defines a literary nonfiction narrative—a category in which I would include what is meant by the term "literary journalism"—as a work which

> offers the reader a representation of actual people and events that is simultaneously responsible to their existence outside the textual world *and* shaped in the service of some underlying authorial purpose designed to give the people and events a thematic, affective, and ethical significance and force that would not be apparent without such shaping.[59]

As he explains, this understanding certainly entails a different relationship between freedom and constraint, as compared to a novel's narrative fiction. Phelan points out that authors of literary nonfiction are "free to shape the characters and events into his or her vision of their thematic, affective, and ethical significance within the limits imposed by the necessary responsibility to the extratextual existence of those characters and events."[60] The main consequence of this perspective is that the relationship between the textual representation of extratextual realities and the realities themselves are not necessarily that of a clear correspondence, but rather a "constant negotiation between the twin demands of referentiality and the communication of thematic, affective, and ethical significance."[61]

The actual blurring of fact and fiction in nonfictional narratives occurs in this negotiation or shaping. This is a central insight of postmodern literature after all and its challenging of realism's seamlessness can be found in what the Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon has called historiographic metafiction. In her analysis of the parallels between history-writing and literary fiction, Hutcheon

57 Cohn, 115.

58 Phelan, *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*, 5.

59 Phelan, 72.

60 Phelan, 72.

61 Phelan, 72.

states: "Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole."[62] Consequently, it is the author's function, not primarily the text's function, that deserves the most scrutiny in the analyses of both historical and journalistic writing.

It is the absence of explicit analyses based on this observation in theoretical discourses about literary journalism, that accounts for a good portion of the fuzziness surrounding literary journalism as the theoretical conceptualization of a genre. In light of the complications stemming from the term "literature," however, it is not my intention to redefine literary journalism as a genre. Instead, I view literary journalism in the same way as John Tulloch and Richard Lance Keeble, who argue—albeit for a slightly different reason—that:

> rather than a stable genre or family of genres, literary journalism defines a *field* where different traditions and practices of writing intersect, a disputed terrain within which various overlapping practices of writing—among them the journalistic column, the memoir, the sketch, the essay, travel narratives, life writing…—camp uneasily, disputing their neighbor's barricades and patching up temporary alliances.[63]

For the sake of textual analyses of literary journalism, then, it generally seems imperative to zoom in on specific practices that integrate material processes of knowledge production and this knowledge's communication with the processes' own geneses and conventional boundaries.

In literary journalism, the relevant practice is embodied by the writer or reporter. Although thinkers, such as Hutcheon, are right to emphasize facts' fictionality and the factuality of fiction, this central contrast cannot be fully resolved. However, the central agency of authors with regard to the negotiation of a text's factuality stakes out the area in which Phelan's negotiation of the demands of referentiality and communication might occur.

62 Hutcheon, "Telling Stories: Fiction and History," 239.

63 Keeble and Tulloch, "Introduction: Mind the Gaps, On the Fuzzy Boundaries between the Literary and the Journalistic," 7.