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Doug Underwood. *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. viii + 269 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89952-9.

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## Literary Journalism and Journalistic Literature

With *Journalism and the Novel*, Doug Underwood first and foremost wants to show how the journalistic and literary fields in the United States and England have traditionally been intertwined. In addition, he uses his analysis to make a passionate plea in favor of more scholarly attention for literary journalism. The result is a vividly written study that focuses on one side of this relation: the journalistic influence on literature.

A former political journalist, Underwood is currently a professor of communication at the University of Washington. He focuses his research on the relationship between journalism and literature, the connection between journalism and religion, and media ethics. In recent years he has published several articles and books about these issues. In this latest work, Underwood maps the development of the relationship between the journalistic and the literary domains from the eighteenth century to the present in three chapters, rounding off with an analysis of the difference in value that is ascribed to both forms of writing. By doing so, he adds another page to the existing literature about this subject, including Phyllis Frus's *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless* (1994), Johns Hartsock's *A History of American Literary Journalism* (2000), and Karen Roggekamp's *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century Newspapers and Fiction* (2005), to name just a few titles.

Already in the introduction it becomes clear that a historical inquiry of the relationship between journalism and literature is not Underwood's only objective. He criticizes academic literary research and implicitly challenges the literary canon for its static and exclusive nature with regard to journalism. "I cannot stress enough how the professionalization of the study of literature has shaped the literary canon, or the way competing scholarly methodologies have tended to frame the study of 'literary journalism' and 'journalistic literature.' ... Those

who assert that journalism (even 'literary' of highly creative journalism) should be considered 'art' have faced a daunting prospect in convincing many scholars in English and literary departments, with their taste for more recondite and highly literary forms of writing" (p. 12).

With this criticism he attempts to put literary journalism and the research of these forms of journalism on the literary and scholarly agenda. For this purpose, he has also added an appendix with an extensive list of writers who have partaken of both the journalistic and literary world, including, among many others, William Hazlitt, Walt Whitman, Nellie Bly, Langston Hughes, and Upton Sinclair. Through this list, Underwood tries to disclose texts that have been forgotten or neglected by scholars and critics for a long time. Underwood criticizes the neglect of the journalistic work in relation to the development of literature because he sees an important connection and reciprocal influence between journalism and literature with regard to form and operational routines. With *Journalism and the Novel*, Underwood tries to improve this situation by concentrating his study on the lives, poetics, and works of authors who operated around the frontiers of both domains.

As Underwood acknowledges, though, a key problem with his research is the way journalism, the novel, and literature in general should be defined—an unruly task, at best. Moreover, the meaning of these concepts has changed over time, which makes them even harder to pin down. Underwood thus gives broad demarcations of journalism and the novel. He does not define "literature" intrinsically; instead, he follows the opinion and judgment of the contemporary critical audience. This is a good possibility that has led to an interesting group of journalistic-literary figures, as Underwood calls them. The downside of this approach, in which the "thorny" issues with regard to defining "literature" are left aside, is that it is harder to distinguish what the elements of the

text are in which the literary merit lies (p. 21). As a result, this can endanger a precise analysis of the ways in which journalism has influenced literature.

After Underwood's important, but preliminary considerations, he analyzes the developments of the journalistic and literary world. He has divided the extensive period under scrutiny into three chapters. The first chapter covers the period between 1700 and 1875, the second delves into the period between 1850 and 1915, and the third focuses on the period from 1890 to the present. Underwood's analysis starts at the eighteenth century for in that century the novel arose as a literary genre and the foundation for a commercial press for the masses was laid as well. He covers each period by focusing on the lives and careers of several journalist-literary figures, like James Boswell, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and Joan Didion. Underwood makes clear that, especially in the centuries that preceded the twentieth century, journalism and literature were hardly distinguishable on a textual level and were viewed as belonging to the same domain. Moreover, he gives a vivid picture of the gradual emergence of a separate journalistic and literary domain. This development accelerated from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, due to cultural, institutional, and technological developments, like the invention of the telegraph, the improvement of the international infrastructure, and increasing professionalization. Thus, the broad outlines of his argument are clear and well described.

It is, however, when Underwood examines the relationship between journalism and literature, by zooming in on particular journalistic-literary figures and the ways they positioned themselves in both fields at different moments in time, that his analysis in some respect remains superficial. Although Underwood mentions the reciprocity of the influence between the literary and journalistic domains, he pictures mostly a direct and one-way line of influence of journalism on literature.

"The emphasis that the literary realists put upon personal experience, the need to continuously test notions of truth, and the practical benefits of any theory of hypothesis were imported directly from a pragmatic and empirically oriented newsroom ethic that had come to permeate journalism by the latter half of the nineteenth century. Journalists of this period were coming to side with science in the great debates of the age—science versus the Bible ...—and the press as an institution liked to believe that its methodologies were the product of science and the scientific method. In similar fashion, the

literary realists' rejection of dogmatic principles or fixed philosophical formulas reflected the spirit of a news business that saw itself dealing in the flux and flow of world events and in day-to-day truths that of necessity must be modified by changing circumstances" (p. 90).

These direct and uni-directional lines of influence Underwood pictures do not convey the far more complex and dynamic nature of cultural exchange. His analysis gives a good impression of the ways the two domains are entangled, but his argument downplays the reciprocity of the relation that he mentions earlier. For example, when Underwood discusses the development of the journalistic-literary figures Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, he argues that their literature is influenced by the developments that occurred in the press:

"The literary realists' embrace of simple, colloquial language that spurned romantic sentimentalism and the excesses of romantic expression were reflective of the stylistic and philosophical changes occurring within a press that increasingly operated by the credo of showing life as it was and the facts as they were. The technological and commercial pressures that were transforming newspaper writing—the coming of the telegraph, the presentation of the news—filtered into the forms of literature championed by Howells and Twain" (p. 95).

Representatives of the New Historicism, like Stephen Greenblatt, argue that different cultural domains maintain a dynamic relation with each other in which norms, values, and knowledge are "negotiated" (*Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* [1988]). Such negotiations always influence both sides, which leads to adaptation and assimilation of knowledge or norms. Many different domains maintain such relations with each other, for they are all part of a broader culture. By speaking of "directly imported" notions, conventions, and routines, Underwood tones down this act of negotiation and the many different relationships a domain maintains with other fields with regard to Howells and Twain, but in general as well (p. 90). Literature and journalism, for example, have always maintained a relation with science, philosophy, and politics, which was particularly strong before the twentieth century. In this respect, *Narrating the News* by Roggekamp provides a more nuanced picture, for she subtly conveys how both literary and journalistic conventions emerge as part of a broader cultural process of constant exchange of conventions and routines between the different domains.

Underwood discerns roughly two characteristics that

have influenced literature in his opinion: style and routine. He cements this argument with many examples. With regard to style, they are very plausible, but when he speaks of the influence of the “journalistic methodology,” referring to operational routines that underlie the actual texts, his argument tends to become problematic in my eyes:

“Their [the journalist-literary figures’] fiction tended to be based upon the same writing philosophy and skills as their journalism: a careful attention to external things, a strong interest in matters outside of self and one’s own psychology, a fascination with technical and occupational details, and a high level of competence in capturing the rhythms of human speech and the patterns in the way people live” (p. 139).

Skills like a keen observation are in my opinion not distinctive for journalists, especially in centuries in which both occupations were not as institutionally separated as today. I think it would have added another dimension if Underwood had examined the simultaneous emergence of certain mutual textual conventions in journalism and literature from a broader cultural perspective without focusing on one source of influence.

Underwood also integrates a more cultural-sociological perspective on the connection between journalism and literature—parts of his first three chapters and the whole last chapter are dedicated to it—in which

he shows what kind of strategic considerations authors made with regard to their position in the journalistic as well as the literary field. Underwood shows, for example, the struggle of Poe with his artistic aspirations, on the one hand, and his longing to reach a big audience through his journalistic work, on the other hand. Nevertheless, Underwood’s analysis would have benefited from a theoretical framework like that of the well-known cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory. By embedding his analysis in such a framework, he would have been able to reflect more on the general ways journalistic-literary figures position themselves, which would have added to the cogency of his analysis.

Underwood has given the research into the relation between journalism and literature an important impulse by pointing out how often people have participated and still participate in both the journalistic and literary fields, closely portraying the manner in which they positioned themselves in each field. By focusing on the lives and works of writers who worked both in journalism and literature, *Journalism and the Novel* promotes literary journalism and thereby shows some resemblance to anthologies of literary journalism by Norman Sims, for instance. Maybe in a follow-up article, Underwood could focus more on the dynamics between the literary and the journalistic fields, hopefully with the same amount of attention for the journalistic-literary figures and their work as he did in the work at hand.

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