



Poet David Tucker in his New Jersey newsroom

(photo by Keith Meyers/*New York Times*)

MacLeish in McLuhan's World

Poetry and Journalism

By Bill Knight

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Before poet and journalist Archibald MacLeish commented on the intersection of Poetry and Journalism in a lecture at the University of Minnesota 50 years ago this fall, journalism and poetry had seemed antagonistic or alien to each other for centuries.

In Oscar Wilde's memorable quip about the two writing disciplines, he was addressing literature generally but could have been focusing on poetry in particular, having two characters in *The Critic as Artist* (1890) say, "The difference between literature and journalism? Journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read."

In today's "wired world" – seemingly expected in some ways by media scholar Marshall McLuhan – the relationship and ties are more measured.

MacLeish's lecture remains significant because it was by someone accomplished in both fields. MacLeish was a poet who twice won a Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and a competent journalist for *Fortune* and *The New Republic* magazines (who also was a lawyer, Librarian of Congress, war-time propagandist, professor and playwright – his *J.B.* also won a Pulitzer). So the Illinois native brought some appreciation and experience to explain the two methods of writing about truth.

A "modernist" poet in his youth – once writing that "a poem should not mean, but be" – he changed as he became involved in civic life and came to believe that it was appropriate – maybe inevitable –



MacLeish

for poets to engage the world. So in a *Paris Review* interview in 1974, MacLeish said, “What matters ... is the truth of the feeling – the feel of the truth.”

A tenet of the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics is “Seek truth and report it fully.”

There are differences between journalism and poetry, MacLeish conceded, “but are they really as manifest as all that? Poetry is an art – or should be. But is journalism the opposite of art?”

“The [remark] that the magazine article or newspaper story has become a more effective form than the novel may or may not be right, but the recognition that the newspaper story or the magazine article is capable of a form comparable to the great form of fiction is as just as it is belated.

“You cannot distinguish journalism from poetry merely by saying one is an art and the other isn’t.”

Separation of the two – like college curricula often differentiate between creative writing and journalism – “means that the journalist selects events,” MacLeish said, “– for obviously selection is necessary if a story is to have a beginning and an end – events that have befallen, actions acted, objects seen, sounds heard, whereas the poet must spin his chronicle out of himself like a spider. Is it so different?”



Journalism tends to be dispassionate and objective; poetry turns to emotional significance apart from the event itself.

“Poetry may take liberties with ... materials ... which history and journalism are not free to take,” MacLeish said. “But it neither will nor can disguise their origins in experience.”

What distinguishes poetry from journalism, aside from obvious distinctions of form – uses of words, patterns of words, sequences of words – is not a difference in kind but a difference in focus. Journalism is concerned with the look of the world; poetry with the feel of the world.

“Though we are provided with more facts than any previous generation,” MacLeish continued, “we are not necessarily possessed of more knowledge of those facts. We are deluged with facts, but we have lost, or are losing, our human ability to feel them. But ... the poem has lost its power in men’s minds. We know with the head now, by the facts, by the abstractions.”

An Associated Press reporter for decades, W. Dale Nelson in his 2007 book *Gin Before Breakfast: The Dilemma of the Poet in the Newsroom* also wrote and published poetry throughout his writing career, and developed an appreciation and curiosity about both.



Nelson

Nelson’s book offers short profiles of key poets who also were journalists, and says the language of journalism affected their poetry, but each discipline remains distinctive.

“The journalist has to get it right,” writes Nelson. “That is what he works at. That is his trade. Not so – or not *necessarily* so – the poet.

“Newspaper stories tell us about names and titles, distances and populations, fatality totals and investigations,” he writes. “Poems tell us about ourselves.”

Journalism’s deadlines can make depth or beauty difficult, writes Nelson, who acknowledges the demands of the work

“The journalist writes on the job, and if he or she wants to write poetry or fiction, goes home and writes some more.”

In *Beginning Again* (1964), British literary figure Leonard Woolf wrote, “When you write for a paper, you write for a moment in time. You write it for consumption with the kipper or eggs and bacon at the breakfast table. Literature is written not with the eggs and bacon but in the mold of eternity.”

The word journalism, of course, is derived from *jour*, French for day. Journalism is of the day – for the day. Its life is about immediacy; it’s short by design. An effective poem may survive years – millennia. As Ezra Pound wrote in *ABC of Reading* (1934), “Literature is news that stays news.”

Journalism is mainly explicit and plain; poetry mostly is implicit and suggestive.

Still, a poem should not be dismissed as what earlier generations called “a fancy” – as opposed to the sober facts of practical people.

“Constructions of the imagination are not ‘fancies’ and never were,” MacLeish said. “[And] ‘facts’ are not what our grandfathers supposed them to be when science picked ‘facts’ out of life like grits out of porridge.

“Are [good poems] not as substantial as our ‘facts’? Are they not as real as murder or the World Series or [a] governor . . . , to say nothing of our China policy or a Dow Jones average? Has anyone ever met a Dow Jones average on a Sunday afternoon?

“I am not suggesting that the facts of journalism are insubstantial,” MacLeish added. “I am merely suggesting that there is no such difference between the ‘facts’ of journalism and the ‘fancies’ of poetry.”

Writing poetry requires a selection and ordering of words, phrases and thoughts – as do history and journalism, MacLeish said.

Nelson says, “The poet is engaged in word management. Like the journalist, they manage the words in ways that are vastly, *but not entirely*, different.”

What is different is the media variety that’s developed in the five decades since MacLeish delivered his remarks. Marshall McLuhan saw changing media’s effects.

McLuhan was a Canadian scholar who taught at Cambridge, St. Louis University, Fordham and the University of Toronto, and studied the impact of media apart from their content.

In 1964’s *Understanding Media*, McLuhan said that a medium and its characteristics can affect its audience apart from its substance: “The medium is the message.” In a sequel of sorts, *The Media is the Massage*, McLuhan held that messages themselves could be influenced by their delivery systems.

He also envisioned the individualistic print-dominated culture would be replaced by a more “electronic interdependent” culture. Today, besides the Internet’s World Wide Web blending text, moving pictures and broadcast mass media, the modern “Our Town” is built on MySpace and YouTube.

In his 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, McLuhan linked communication technology with perception and socialization, and wrote that when media heighten some sense at the expense of others, “what had appeared lucid . . . may suddenly become opaque, and what had been vague . . . will become translucent.”

Arguably, some poetry makes superficial knowledge less sure, and some journalism can make a confusing situation clearer.



McLuhan

McLuhan also distinguished between media that are “hot” and “cool.” Hot media, he said, are low in audience participation due to specificity and definition (i.e., print); cool media are high in audience participation because of less definition and more vague content (i.e., television).

Journalism for the most part is associated with a hot medium: it’s generally one-way, delivering specifics for passive consumption. Poetry could be considered a product of cool media because its audience often must engage and fill in missing details.

Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in *The American Conversation and the Language of Journalism* (1994) writes that “journalism is ... active, plain. The most valued quality ... is clarity.” But a working newspaperman who’s an award-winning poet says that does not mean journalism and poetry compete as much as complement each other.

David Tucker – an assistant managing editor at the New Jersey *Star-Ledger* and prize-winning author of the poetry collection *Late for Work* (2006) – said, “They complement each other; they can and do overlap. Poetry is often as plain-spoken as good journalism and in general poets strive for clarity and precision even more, I think, than you will find in the newspaper. Robert Frost wrote clear, simple, precise poetry using the same everyday language journalists use, but it goes beyond the newspaper story because it is also musical, because of the stealthy sense of meter, cadence, line breaks and a thousand other devices poets use. And under that simple surface there are complex, dark things going on.”

The author of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman – who worked as a typographer, then journalist at several New York newspapers in the 1830s, ‘40s and ‘50s – simultaneously worked as a poet and journalist.

“*Leaves of Grass* is the best piece of reporting to come out of the 19th century,” said Tucker. “It’s a reporter’s poem in many ways and anyone who doesn’t take that into account is missing one of the joys of the poem. It’s a densely reported chronicle of the soul of the country as it was in Whitman’s time, using many reportorial devices of the day and its persona carries the same swaggering, boisterous, passionate and irreverent attitude we expect from our reporters.

“Another example: Wilfrid Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ has to be one of the best pieces of front-line war reporting of the last century,” he continued. “It is a visceral, haunting – and even after all these years – utterly shocking account of a gas attack.”

Poet and former UPI reporter Michael Bugeja in *Editor & Publisher* magazine in 2000 commented, “We become poets not as fiction and prose writers or journalists – to earn a living. Poets do not earn livings. Sometimes, though, they earn their lives.”

Another example – especially of one “earning his life” – according to Nelson, is John Greenleaf Whittier in the 19th century, a New England newspaper editor, poet and abolitionist Quaker recalled for “Barbara Frietchie,” but also for anti-slavery verses that saw poetry and journalism merge.

Nelson writes: “Whittier the editorialist and Whittier the poet had come together triumphantly.”

Over the centuries, poems about the press or about reporters range from idolization to cynicism.



Tucker



Whitman

“In general I think poets and journalists are both sentimentalized and loathed,” Tucker said. “When it comes right down to it, many readers are ambivalent about poets and reporters [alike] because they don’t spare our feelings – or their own – in the search for truth. A great reporter’s first loyalty is to the story, wherever it takes us – as a poet’s is to the poem – not to a boss or institution, or an accepted stereotype.”

He continued, “Reporters, who may be egomaniacs or wimps or drunks outside of the newsroom, learn to sublimate their ego and their private opinions to get the story. They get out of the way and let the facts tell it. Poets give themselves to their work with the same passion. Keats’ idea of negative capability – losing oneself in the poem – is the same thing that happens to a reporter in search of the story.

“Another thing they have in common: Many readers have little idea how much work goes into a good [news] story or poem.”

Besides Whitman, there are other journalist poets whose writings span the genres, Tucker says.

“The former Poet Laureate Donald Hall still writes for newspapers and has done works of in-depth reporting on everything from baseball to rural life and profiles,” he said. “His writing style often uses the same sort of simple declarative sentence that newspapers prize.”

Finally, Tucker told *Editor & Publisher* magazine, the days “go by in a blur. Journalists are trying to slow it down for the reader. Poets are trying to stop it forever, if they can.”

In *The Journey Home* (1977), poet and essayist Edward Abbey made an observation about poetry and science that, re-worded slightly, anticipated what we have with MacLeish in McLuhan’s world: “Any good poet ... must begin with the journalistic view of the world; and any journalist worth listening to must be something of a poet, must possess the ability to communicate ... his sense of love and wonder at what his work discovers.”

These disciplines need not be considered like oil and water, but oil and vinegar – a dressing to sample the world.

A sampling of lines of poetry about journalism

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“City Editor Looking for News” David Tucker (2006)

Former poet laureate Robert Pinsky says Tucker writes “with a reporter’s respect for information and a poet’s awareness of the undisclosed.”

“What did Nick the Crumb say before he died?
What noise/did his fist make when he begged Little
Pete/ not to whack him with a power saw? Did it go
thub like a biscuit/ against a wall or *sklack* like a



Anderson

seashell cracking open?/ Did he say his mother's name? Has anybody even talked/ to his friggin' mother? Is she broke or sick and abandoned?/ Is she dying of a broken heart? Do I have to think/ of these things all by myself? How about a story/ on which female commissioner the mayor is screwing?/ How do we get that? Or what about the rumor/ that he's taking bribes off the gay architect from Parsippany?/ Write me something about the bums/ living under the bridge at Second and Callowhill./ Go sleep in the cardboard sleep shacks./ wear some Bible verses on your chest – go dirty and drunk./ Tell me what it's like..."

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" Wilfred Owen (1917)

"Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,/ knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed/ through sludge,/ till on the haunting flares we turned our backs/ and towards our distant rest began to trudge./ Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots/ but limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;/ drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots/ of disappointed shells that dropped behind."



Greeley

"Skimming" Terry Anderson (1999)

"We skim the world, alighting/ here and there to taste a war,/ disaster, famine; sip at people's pain,/ or all too seldom, happiness,/ looking for rare vintages,/ then resume erratic flight,/ like careless bees, or some would say/ a swarm of banded, garish wasps..."

"Foreign Correspondent" Joel Brouwer (1999)

"...He once believed his job was only to see,/ to be a third eye for those of us hungry for more/ than a meager pair can provide. He would haunt/ the world, its cardboard slums and firefights,/ its brambled clearings where hooded men/ dump bones on moonless nights, snapping fact/ after fact for our review. But he soon learned/ the ropes: skip the fill-flash/ and the starving man's eyes sink back/ into poignant shadow. The beggar with one coin/ in his cup has more punch than the crippled with ten..."

"The Press" James Montgomery (1842)

"'The Press! – What is the Press?' I cried;/ when thus a wondrous voice replied:/ 'In me all human knowledge dwells;/ the oracle of oracles,/ past, present, future, I reveal,/ or in oblivion's silence seal;/ what I preserve can perish never,/ what I forego is lost forever'."



Byron

"Ode to The Press" Horace Greeley (19th century)

"...the voice of the Press – on the startled ear breaking/ in giant-born prowess, like Pallas of old;/ 'twas the flash of Intelligence, gloriously waking/ a glow on the cheek of the noble and bold."

"The Press" J.G. Saxe (1855)

"Who would not be an editor? To write/ the magic *we* of such enormous might;/ to be so great beyond the common span/ it takes the plural to express the man."



“To the Reader” George Crabbe (1785)

“I sing of News, and all those vapid sheets/ the rattling hawker vends through gaping streets;/ whate’er their name, whate’er the time they fly,/ damp from the press, to charm the reader’s eye...”

“The Uncelestial City” Humbert Wolfe (1930)

“You cannot hope/to bribe or twist,/ thank God! The/British journalist./ But, seeing what/ the man will do/ unbribed, there’s/ no occasion to.”

“English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” Lord Byron (1809)

“A would-be satirist, a hired buffoon,/ a monthly scribbler of some low lampoon,/ condemn’d to drudge, the meanest of the mean, and furbish falsehoods for a magazine.”

Marquis

From “Columnists and Calumnists” Harold Ickes (1939)

“Wouldst know what’s right and what is wrong?/ Why birdies sing at break of dawn?/ Ask the columnist.

“Does milk come from the Milky Way?/ Why do dogs bark and asses bray?/ Ask the columnists.

“Who pronounce decrees of fate,/ and supervise affairs of State?/ Who? The columnists.”

“The Bigelow Papers” James Russell Lowell (1848)

“I do believe with all my soul/ in the great Press’s freedom,/ to point the people to the goal/ an’ in the traces lead ‘em.”

“archy interviews a pharaoh” Don Marquis (1927)

“boss i went/ and interviewed the mummy/ of the egyptian pharaoh/ in the metropolitan museum/ as you bade me to do. What ho/ my regal leatherface/ says i/ greetings/ little scatter footed/ scarab/ says he

“kingly has been/ says i/ what was your ambition/ when you had any

“insignificant/ and journalistic insect/ says the royal crackling/ in my tender prime/ i was too dignified/ to have anything as vulgar/ as ambition.”

“The Dailies” Carl Sandburg (pre World War I)

“I am on the streets all the time, day and night./ I am rushed to the hands of the people, the mob, demos./ High power motorcars take me with speed to the hands of the millions./ I am out in the rain and sun where men work: I am the daily newspaper. Books? They stand clean and dreaming on shelves in houses./ I am dirty and always fighting. The people want me.”



Sandburg