Belligerence, Booty, and Boosterism:

ON ETHICS AND ARTS JOURNALISM

BY CARLIN ROMANO

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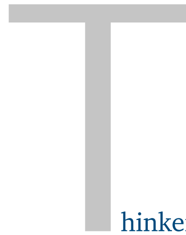

hinkers and pontificators on journalistic ethics—a twain that sometimes meet—typically ignore arts coverage, the neon sheep of journalism that includes both reporting and criticism of the arts. The reasons divide into the sociological and philosophical.

Sociologically, those who mull journalistic ethics split into three groups, none of which primarily draws its intellectual energy or job credentials from the world of arts journalism. The first might be called the "Emeriti"—former high-ranking journalists who gravitate to industry-connected think tanks such as The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, or fellowship programs like the Nieman at Harvard. Usually they're former editors-in-chief who come from backgrounds in "hard news" reporting: the journalism that covers presidents, legislatures, police, and crime rather than directors, orchestras, actors, or artistic failure. Most of their ethical expertise comes not from philosophical or scholarly study of ethics and its traditions (though the wise among them bone up), but from seat-of-the-pants experience acquired while rising to the ultimate responsibility of making ethical calls from the top down.

Since virtually no arts reporters or critics rise to the administrative top of American journalistic organizations—the industry would be shocked if, notwithstanding their Pulitzer Prizes, book critic Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* or *Washington Post* music critic Tim Page were named executive editors of their papers—virtually no one who ends up a journalism-ethics pundit by this route focuses much on the arts.

A second group of ethics experts might be called the "Peripateti." Like their Greek namesakes, they get around. They advise media organizations on ethical issues, and often organize workshops for newspapers and TV stations. This group is typified by Michael Josephson and his California-based ethics institute. The raison d'être and often the business of the Peripateti is to enlighten working journalists about ethics, usually in onsite visits that stir dollops of Kant and utilitarianism with case-studies of ethical dilemmas taken from everyday practice. Since most journalists are not arts journalists, little quality time goes to *arts* journalism.

Finally, there are the "Professori," university intellectuals who may, like N.Y.U.'s Jay Rosen, boast some reporting experience, or may not. Almost uniformly, and happily, they cast issues of journalistic ethics against the big picture of political philosophy, against journalism's place in the state and its relation to democracy. Those interests naturally lead them to the same territory covered by the Emeriti and the Peripateti—privacy vs. the public's right to know, the proper (if any) uses of journalistic deception, and other traditional cubbyholes of the field. Among the Professori, too, the ethics of arts journalism suffers from the lack of an academic jobs program geared to arts journalists.

So much for the sociological incubi that constrain the subject. Philosophically, further obstacles loom. The notions, principles, and concerns that emerge from these three groups aren't easily adaptable to arts journalism. Consider the way experts in journalistic ethics talk about their field.

In *The Virtuous Journalist* (Oxford University Press, 1987), a widely-used text over the past decade, authors Stephen Klaidman and Tom

Beauchamp express confidence that, in unpacking their virtue-based ethics, they can draw on "a common core of consistent and widely shared moral beliefs that save us from purely subjective preferences." Indeed, they title their chapters with the moral virtues they urge: "Reaching for Truth," "Avoiding Bias," "Avoiding Harm," "Serving the Public," "Maintaining Trust," "Escaping Manipulation," and "Inviting Criticism and Being Accountable." In doing so, they expect that consensus will enable them to deliver sensible views on their big targets—"freedom, morality, rules of duty, virtue, competence and fairness"—and the journalistic corollaries that follow from them: "not to libel, not to invade privacy, to publish as fact only what can be confirmed, to be tasteful, and so on."

A more recent volume in the field indicates that the territory hasn't changed much. In *Media Ethics,* edited by Matthew Kiernan (Routledge, 1998), philosopher Andrew Belsey lists "the virtues associated with ethical journalism" as "accuracy, honesty, truth, objectivity, fairness, balance, respect for the autonomy of ordinary people"—a good fit with the Klaidman/Beauchamp criteria, though Belsey adds a few controversial concepts.

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In fact, almost all approaches to journalistic ethics over the past twenty years share a strategy that trains largely on the activities of the street-level mainstream reporter or editor (rather than on those of the owner, publisher, or dance critic), largely accepts the goals and imperatives of mainstream news organizations (rather than questions the ethics, for instance, of giving sports more coverage than foreign news), and largely accepts and operates with the industry's own murky ethical concepts, such as "conflict of interest."

Occasionally, a contrary voice is heard. In his against-the-grain study, *Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest* (Westview, 1998), Jeremy Iggers notes how the issues in one handbook of journalism ethics, published by three experts in the field, are "largely the same ones that have dominated the institutional conversation for decades: accuracy and fairness, conflicts of interest, deception, plagiarism, and source/reporter relationships." Iggers asks: "Could it be that an increasingly irrelevant conversation within journalism about professional ethics distorts priorities and diverts the attention of both journalists and the public from the more serious institutional failures of the news media to fulfill their responsibilities?"

Iggers' advocacy of a less top-down, less ideologically narrow, less corporate slant on journalism ethics is a *cri de coeur* worth hearing—a few echoes of it will resound further on. Yet his vinegary tone only confirms the static feel of journalism ethics, where the examples come and go but the old theme songs play on and on. This inertia feeds on a general exclusion from the ethics "module" of examples from arts journalism. For when one takes a few staple concepts of journalism ethics and attempts to apply them to arts journalism, their awkwardness quickly becomes apparent.

First, set aside for the moment reporting about the arts, which most resembles mainstream political or general-assignment reporting. Concentrate instead on the newspaper critic who regularly reviews, evaulates, and comments on art, literature, theater, dance, or music. Let's begin with the virtue of accuracy.

The classical music critic who mixes up Avery Fisher Hall with Carnegie Hall in his review, or a Rachmaninoff piano concerto with one by Tchaikovsky, will likely suffer the same dressing-down and sanction as a political reporter who messes up facts about the candidates he covers on his beat. But the more typical kinds of descriptions written by critics covering artistic events expose the philosophical intertwining of notions of "fact" and "evaluation" far more than those much sparer, more clichéd descriptions that form the lingua franca of political writers. The classical music critic who deems the sound of the woodwinds

in the Philadelphia Orchestra "thin" in a particular symphony, or who finds the conception of a new opera "uninspired," or a violist's playing "clinical" in her debut recital, is unlikely to get called on the carpet for inaccuracy. Neither is the theater critic who derides a supposedly cutting-edge troupe's performance as "tired," or a book critic who judges a first novel "derivative."

In all these cases, an artist bent on attacking the critic's ethics by charging "inaccuracy" would likely have to settle for a letter—make that an e-mail—to the editor. Exactly what counts as the "truth" of the artworks and situations described would be considered too uncertain, too amorphous, too interwoven with the critic's own aesthetic, to sustain an ethics charge about it for inaccuracy. One could argue that the core obligation of getting the names of the concert venues correct puts the virtue of accuracy in arts criticism on all fours with mainstream news reporting, but the attenuated scope of the accuracy standard is plain.

The standard journalistic virtue of avoiding a "conflict of interest" also quickly runs aground on the subtleties of arts criticism. Again, crude cases analogous to mainstream journalistic corruption permit some congruence with ordinary journalistic ethics. The theater critic bribed by the playwright to write a rave on opening night will be bounced. But the very understanding of a critic's tasks and duties—characteristically left murky in the harried environment of newspapers—upsets greater isomorphism with the kinds of virtues Klaidman and Beauchamp extol.

The word "criticism" evolved from the Greek *krinein,* which meant to separate, to cut apart, and—metaphorically—to distinguish. The most influential explanation of the cultural critic's role in the Anglo-American tradition remains Matthew Arnold's famous view in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864): its task is "simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world," and by "making this known, to create a current of fresh and true ideas." Criticism, according to Arnold, prepares audiences for important new art, "the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon."

Most elevated ideals for the critic since Arnold maintain this utopian combination of expertise, taste, and leadership, and while most articulations specifically concern the literary critic, ambitious critics of the other arts have assumed the job description as well. By the heyday of Northrop Frye after World War II, the critic ranked as "the pioneer of education and the shaper of cultural tradition." If, for Frye, the literary critic sees the triumphs of his art as "phenomena to be explained in terms of a conceptual framework which criticism alone possesses," then we should expect critics of the other arts to do no less. The critic necessarily becomes a philosopher, historian, and public relations whiz, on the level of Edwin Denby in dance, Arthur Danto in art, or Eric Bentley in theater. No wonder that the scholar of criticism Wesley Shrum, Jr., in his *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art* (Princeton, 1996), concludes, "Critics are not objective referees of the best and worst, standing outside of the art world and judging its output, but participants in a stream of discourse that defines the cultural hierarchy."

Arts criticism might be seen as the submerged part of an iceberg—arts journalism—that threatens the smooth sailing of the good ship Journalistic Ethics.

Today, in late 1990s America, Maurice Berger, editor of an alarmist anthology entitled *The Crisis of Criticism* (The New Press, 1998), bemoans the supposed loss of authority by critics in determining cultural quality (Berger sees the job as now done by "sales records, gross receipts, top-ten lists, Nielsen ratings" and other indexes "of consumer interest and satisfaction"). Yet he

acknowledges that it is the critic who "often supports or analyzes culture against the grain of popular tastes, indifference, or hostility. In the best of circumstances, the critic serves as a kind of aesthetic mentor, introducing an audience to challenging, little-known, or obscure works or offering insights that might make a work more accessible, engaging, profound or relevant."

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Calling for a revival of forceful criticism in his introduction to the volume, Berger concludes that the "strongest criticism today…is capable of engaging, guiding, directing and influencing culture, even stimulating new forms of practice and expression. The strongest criticism serves as a dynamic critical force, rather than as an act of boosterism. The strongest criticism uses language and rhetoric not merely for descriptive purposes but as means of inspiration, provocation, emotional connection, and experimentation."

Now let that closing crescendo of encomia to criticism subside, and recall the Klaidman/Beauchamp virtues of journalism. Suddenly, they're not so obvious, not so consensual. "Reaching for Truth"? Whose truth—the naturalist playwright's or that of the avant-garde theater critic, committed to smothering conventional realism on stage? "Avoiding Bias"? Could any critic beckon toward an Arnoldian promised land if not biased toward some version of the better, the new, the next? Mencken defined criticism as itself "prejudice made plausible."

"Avoiding Harm"? Isn't it the obligation of the critic to trash the unutterably meretricious and draw blood when necessary? To fire off lines like Dorothy Parker's "Theodore Dreiser/Ought to write nicer," or Yeats' judgment that Wilfred Owen was "all blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick," or Carlyle's that Swinburne was "a man standing up to his neck in a cesspool, and adding to its content"? Should Stravinsky have apologized for harming Leonard Bernstein when he called him "a musical department store," or Twain withdrawn his acid judgment on Henry James: "Once you've put one of his books down, you simply can't pick it up again"? Do we hope or believe that turn-of-the-century music critic James Huneker burned twice in hell for his famous double whammy: "After a week of Richard Strauss at Stuttgart one begins to entertain a profound respect for the originality of Richard Wagner"?

Belligerence, like the policeman's nightstick, seems part of the critic's assigned equipment. If we recall Belsey's virtues associated with ethical journalism—"accuracy, honesty, truth, objectivity, fairness, balance, respect for the autonomy of ordinary people"—they need, at the very least, to be wholly reconsidered and re-understood when ethical journalism comprises criticism as well. Criticism thus shakes up the standard conceptual architecture of journalistic ethics. Making room for it in journalistic ethics suggests that a Ciceronian virtue like integrity—being true to oneself—might matter more than the Klaidman/ Beauchamp virtues. The great critic might be one with a character, as Seneca put it, that could "not only act rightly but could not act without acting rightly"—at least according to his or her own lights.

Criticism also helps reveal, because the complexity of the psychology behind it is so obvious, how a core concept of mainstream journalistic ethics—conflict of interest—is philosophically worthless as a moral touchstone. As Dewey might have said, conflicts of interest, like coincidences of interest, occur every time a human agent encounters a problem in his environment. The political reporter may resent Clinton because Clinton is the same age and has gotten further in life, but if the reporter has—dare we say it—integrity, then he won't let that interest affect his copy. The theater critic may remember that the lead actor in tonight's opening snubbed her at a private party, but—if she has integrity—her interest in retribution will not affect her evaluation.

What journalists, like many professionals, condemn are not really conflicts of interest but inappropriate judgments—judgments made according to inappropriate criteria. It's not as snappy and familiar a phrase as "conflict of

interest," but it's a more accurate one that fits the crime. Making journalistic ethics encompass activities outside its normal ambit—such as arts journalism—can lead to an inspection of some of its standard equipment as well.

Conceptually speaking, arts criticism might be seen as the submerged part of an iceberg—arts journalism—that threatens the smooth voyage of the good ship "Journalistic Ethics." It's a philosophical stem-shredder that awaits this ever-growing pedagogic liner should it venture past such familiar ports as obligations to "Deep Throat" and the sins of Janet Cooke. A variety of floating objects, conceptually speaking, should also trouble. Among them:

1.) How does one fold the endless booty that arts critics receive—books, tickets, CDs, catalogues—into the standard theories of journalistic ethics? While different media organizations handle their booty differently—giving leftovers to charity, selling them to staff, allowing employees to hawk their booty as extra perks—the ethical lay of the land, industry-wide, is an anarchic mess.

2.) Setting aside the activity of criticism to look at arts *reporting,* how does the arts reporter assigned to a beat—say, covering a local orchestra or theater company vital to the community—weigh the wish of almost all in the community, perhaps including newspaper bosses, that such institutions flourish? How does he factor that attitude—what might be called "atmospheric boosterism"—into his obligation to report damaging news about the institution? Political and general assignment reporters, typically operating in an environment adversarial or neutral toward local officials or organizations, rarely face this problem.

3.) How—to echo Jeremy Iggers' point that journalistic ethics ought to assess the corporate agendas of media organizations and not just the activities of its plebs—should one evaluate the decision of newspapers to produce lots of insipid movie copy to support and construct sections stuffed with movie ads, but little dance copy because the dance companies are broke?

4.) How, finally, in a world where art is always both art and commerce, can the arts journalist do justice to both?

John Merrill, the grand old man of academe when it comes to mixing philosophy, journalism, and ethics, once described journalistic ethics as "a swampland of philosophical speculation where eerie mists of judgment hang low over a boggy terrain"—an image Iggers caustically recalls. In line with that metaphor, the ethics of arts journalism remains even more forbidding: an *unexplored* swampland where the mist practically touches the water, eliminating almost all visibility.

Whether the "journalistic ethics business" sends any boats out to map the shoreline may depend on whether the sociology of the business, sketched above, ever changes. If it does, one imagines that concepts such as intellectual integrity, aesthetic coherence and philosophical scope will loom larger than old standbys (however worthy) like accuracy, balance and promissory obligation (as in protecting sources). A journalistic ethics sensitive to such values might radically alter journalistic habits even beyond arts coverage. In the meantime, critics, if not arts reporters, might wisely do some reconnaissance on their own. Critics already know the immortal attacks on them by writers and artists from Robert Burns ("Cut-throat bandits in the paths of fame") to Shelley ("A most stupid and malignant race") to Brendan Behan ("Eunuchs in a harem"). By taking time to articulate an ethics of arts journalism, they might better live up to Saint-Beuve's image of critics as intellectual leaders whose watches are "five minutes ahead of other people's watches," or François Mauriac's lusher ideal of the critic: "The sorcerer who makes some hidden spring gush forth unexpectedly under our feet."