

# Chapter 4

## The Counter-Coriolis Effect

### *Contemporary Literary Journalism in a Shrinking World*

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I MUST CONFESS that with this essay, I hope to start an argument, to present more questions than answers, to offer a provocation. If, dear reader, you will permit a moment's digression, it might be helpful if I shared an aside or two suggesting just how modest my goals are.

Early in my career in the academy, one of my mentors made what I thought then—and still believe today—to be a telling observation about scholarship. He said that even though all of the scholarly effort attempts actually to create new knowledge, perhaps as little as 10 percent of what is produced results in something truly valuable: concepts that other scholars might build on, ideas that are incorporated into the canon, knowledge that proves to be of actual value. At the other end of the value scale, he said, there is the vast mass of the scholarly product, perhaps as much as 80 percent of the total output, which—though it may count as an item on a vita or may be part of a tenure or promotion portfolio—is actually of quite modest value. At very best, it will be cited infrequently by later scholars; much more likely, not at all.

And then, he said, there is the remaining 10 percent, below the upper 10 and above the lower 80. The work here will probably not end up in anyone's canon. It will not be celebrated fifty, or even five, years from now. But it does, at a minimum, raise interesting arguments and pose useful questions that may be of service to others, though the actual conclusions themselves may not be of the highest order. With respect to this essay, I can say with some confidence that it will not be regarded as a candidate for the top 10 percent. And if I am lucky, it will not find its place in the lower 80. It is therefore my hope that, fortune willing, it will be allowed to rest comfortably in the middle range. As I have already confessed, I am here to start an argument.

## Literary Journalism Goes Global

The title of this essay, with its invention of a presumed “Counter-Coriolis Effect,” is an obvious conceit. With all due deference to Monsieur Coriolis, I have unabashedly appropriated the name of a phenomenon in the geophysical world to describe one whose existence I will hypothesize in the world of arts and letters.<sup>1</sup> It is, of course, an imaginary construct, but one I hope might have some heuristic purpose. First, however, a bit of context might be helpful.

Despite the economic turmoil and discontinuities of recent times, it is likely that Thomas L. Friedman, author of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and *The World Is Flat*, is correct.<sup>2</sup> For much of the world today, the primary reality for the foreseeable future will continue to be globalization, in all its forms: political, social, cultural, and economic. The world is most certainly shrinking.<sup>3</sup>

If this is true, then the question arises: What, if any, might be the journalistic dimensions of this phenomenon? Is there, in effect, a journalistic aspect to globalization? And if, at least for the sake of argument, one posits that such a journalistic dimension exists, what then would be the role of literary journalism in the consideration of journalism as a whole? Following this axis of inquiry leads one to examine literary journalism in a relatively novel light: one that allows us to consider the genre from what might be termed a deliberately geopolitical perspective.

This attempt may not actually be as strange as it sounds. Literary journalism, after all, most certainly has the potential for profound long-term, even world-historical effects. I doubt there is much disagreement on this point, simply because there are so many apt examples: *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and the emergence of a global environmental awareness;<sup>4</sup> John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* and the ban-the-bomb movement in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere;<sup>5</sup> and more recently the dispatches by Seymour Hirsch about Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and the changing tide of public opinion about the American misadventure in that country.<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind, it seems fairly safe to posit that literary journalism can both shape and reflect larger social, cultural, and political currents—at the regional level, at the national level, and perhaps even at the international level. And it is in consideration of these larger currents that one peculiar aspect seems to be evident. Simply for taxonomic purposes, it can arguably be given a name: the Counter-Coriolis Effect.

As we all might possibly remember from our grammar school geography class, the Coriolis Effect, in its simplest possible interpretation, says that

geophysical phenomena—ocean currents, global winds, and so on—tend to deflect to the right in the Northern Hemisphere and to the left in the Southern Hemisphere. As a starting point for this discussion, then, let us posit, in literary journalism, the existence of a Counter-Coriolis Effect. The claim is that some evidence can be found for the argument that in the Northern Hemisphere (that is, the North, or the developed world), there is a tendency generally for much literary journalism to represent views from the left side of the political spectrum; the authors' perspectives can often be characterized as progressive, secular, reformist, and critical of existing institutions. In the South (or the developing world), however, a fair amount of literary journalism tends to perceive reality from a rightist point of view. The perspective is often conservative, traditionalist, and self-critical. The resulting question, of course, remains: Is this indeed the case, and if so, why? And finally, could this bear on the possibility that literary journalism in all its forms might contribute to an emerging global conversation?

### Literary Journalism and Geopolitics

I freely confess that there are many problems with my thesis. Some of the difficulties arise from what can be called the Micro-to-Macro Fallacy. Projecting inferences drawn from the examination of the particular to reach conclusions about a larger generality almost by definition presents causal problems. Any certainty becomes more than a little elusive. Nevertheless, rather than argue for the absolute truth of my premise, there might instead be value in simply having a conversation, just to see where it leads. As we embark, we might find inspiration in Jay Rosen's *What Are Journalists For?*, which artfully addresses the underlying questions of purpose.<sup>7</sup> Why does journalism exist? Why does it exist in the manner it does? My hope is that our conversation can illuminate some of these issues, as well as perhaps the very purposes of literary journalism.

Let us begin with an examination of the developed world—the North, the industrial West. Allow me to suggest a few names, in addition to those already mentioned, of contemporary literary journalists of some prominence. My list would include Sally Tisdale from *Harper's Magazine*,<sup>8</sup> Frank Rich of the *New York Times*,<sup>9</sup> Ian Frazier from the *New Yorker*,<sup>10</sup> as well as Charlie LeDuff of the *Detroit News*<sup>11</sup> and William Langewiesche of *Vanity Fair*.<sup>12</sup> Also from the *New Yorker*, Katherine Boo certainly qualifies,<sup>13</sup> as does one of my favorites, the brief yet powerful political essays of Hendrik Hertzberg.<sup>14</sup> All these authors write from a progressivist perspective. One of the reasons for this is that, at least in American journalism and the press in the United Kingdom, there

has long been a reformist impulse. Indeed, the implicit goal of the profession to some is, in the oft-quoted words of Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley, to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."<sup>15</sup>

On the other side of the coin, in the developing world, the South, there are writers who clearly produce nonfiction work of the highest literary quality, but they have often not been on the left. Authors of great acclaim, masters such as V. S. Naipaul,<sup>16</sup> Derek Walcott,<sup>17</sup> and Mario Vargas Llosa<sup>18</sup> come to mind, all of whom have rarely, if ever, manifested this reformist perspective. If only for purely descriptive purposes, this is the Counter-Coriolis Effect in action.

The interesting questions, of course, lie in the realm of the reasons and rationale behind the phenomenon. In the case of the North, what animates the reformist impulse on the part of journalists? A number of factors must be at play. First, there is a demand for it in the sense that it is desired by their readers—and therefore also by their editors.<sup>19</sup> Second, it is politically and culturally permissible; in the absence of censorship, the writers are allowed the necessary independence. And lastly, there is a certain self-sustaining and self-fulfilling quality to it. If one writes in the hope of trying to right wrongs or to make the world a better place, and if it is possible that what one writes might be acted upon, then the possibility of actual improvement—of, in a word, progress—is, I suspect, the most powerful motivation of all.

In contrast, I suspect that much of the contemporary literary journalism in the South, in the developing world, bears a special burden, a significant portion of which is derived from the ongoing struggle to come to grips with the harsh realities of postcolonialism. Why, in the absence of the former oppressors, does so much human potential still remain unrealized? The result is a genre of literary journalism in the South that is quite self-critical, driven in part by a bleaker view of human nature and of the prospects for progress itself.

And yet, as we are so often told, the world is becoming a smaller place—connected by transportation and, more important, information technology in ways it has never been before. "Hot, flat, and crowded," in the words of Thomas Friedman.<sup>20</sup> To attempt a sociocultural prediction about the twenty-first century that perhaps even a physicist such as Coriolis might appreciate, I am confident that not only will change continue to be a constant, but also the rate of change itself will continue to accelerate. It is possible that one conceivable outcome will be something we can all applaud. The social and economic disparities between North and South will decrease over time, and as a probable byproduct, what I have—admittedly half in jest—called the

Counter-Coriolis Effect will diminish in force. As a result, the place of literary journalism in this shrinking world might grow to be a notably laudable one. And I would argue that it is quite an uplifting prospect to imagine the possibility that there will be an important role for long-form narrative nonfiction in the much-needed and far-reaching global conversation that awaits us all.

## NOTES

1. Gaspard-Gustave de Coriolis (1792–1843), a mathematician and physicist, published his most influential work, *Du calcul de l'effet des machines* (Calculation of the Effect of Machines), in 1829. Although he did pioneer the study of kinetic energy in rotating systems, his name was not associated with the now famous geophysical effect until early in the twentieth century.

2. Thomas Friedman is a widely traveled foreign affairs columnist for the *New York Times*. As noted, two of his books explicating his ideas on globalization are *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999) and *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005).

3. There are, of course, those who dissent from the notion of the inevitability of globalization. Two of the better known are Walden Bello, *Deglobalization: Ideas for a New World Economy* (New York: Zed Books, 2002); and Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

4. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962) is often cited as one of the seminal texts of a new environmentalist awareness which emerged in the mid-twentieth century.

5. *Hiroshima* was originally published as a magazine article, filling much of the August 31, 1946, issue of the *New Yorker*. It appeared shortly thereafter in book form: John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946). It is interesting to note that in a survey ranking the one hundred most influential works of twentieth-century American journalism, *Hiroshima* is rated number one, and *Silent Spring* is number two. See [www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/Top%20100%20page.htm](http://www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/Top%20100%20page.htm).

6. With his exposure of conditions at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Seymour Hersh was reprising his highly influential report on atrocities in Vietnam almost thirty-five years earlier. See both Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), and *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1970).

7. See Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

8. Sallie Tisdale has an uncanny ability to obscure the line, to wonderful effect, between the personal and the public in her nonfiction work. Two commendable examples are *Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Medical Miracles and Other Disasters* (Washington, D.C.: Beard Books, 2002).

9. Frank Rich, a longtime cultural and political critic at the *New York Times*, was perhaps the most persistently harsh reviewer of the policies of the administration of President George W. Bush. See his book *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

10. Ian Frazier's subject terrain is often the less traveled regions of the United States, as well as the less fortunate people who live there. See his *Great Plains* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), and *On the Rez* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000).

11. Charlie LeDuff writes of the travails of the American working class. See his *Us Guys: The True and Twisted Mind of the American Man* (New York: Penguin, 2006), and *Work and Other Sins: Life in New York City and Thereabouts* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

12. William Langewiesche produced the definitive account of New York City's "ground zero." See his *American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).

13. Katherine Boo is a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*. Information on her articles is available at [www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/katherine\\_boo/search?contributorName=katherine%20boo](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/katherine_boo/search?contributorName=katherine%20boo).

14. A longtime staff writer at the *New Yorker*, Hendrik Hertzberg has often written the lead item focusing on contemporary public affairs in the publication's "Talk of the Town" section. For a collection of these essays, see Hendrik Hertzberg, *Politics: Observations and Arguments, 1966–2004* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

15. Finley Peter Dunne (1867–1936) wrote a nationally syndicated newspaper column using the satirical voice of fictional "Mr. Dooley," an outspoken and somewhat caustic first-generation Irish American bar owner. For more details on the "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" quote, see [www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2852](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2852). For an interesting biography of Dunne, see Charles Fanning, *Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley: The Chicago Years* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1978).

16. V. S. Naipaul's illiberal and seeringly self-critical voice has been manifest in a number of his works, including *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); *India: A Wounded Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); and a collection of his nonfiction short stories, *The Return of Eva Peron, with The Killings in Trinidad* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

17. See Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).

18. See Mario Vargas Llosa, *A Fish in the Water: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

19. It might be worth noting in passing that one of the very interesting yet underresearched areas in literary journalism studies is the role that "the market" plays as a factor in cultural production. The economic interrelationships between reader, text, publication, editor, and author are certainly ripe for further investigation.

20. The phrase is appropriated from the title of Thomas Friedman's *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution, and How It Can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).