Literature in Public: or, All About Us Is Noise

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Abstract

This article elaborates upon the contribution Trevor Ross’s Writing in Public makes to a new understanding of the history of free expression, the public function of literature within the eighteenth century. Those years witness a transition to modernity in which the boundaries of permissible speech and the accepted purpose of writing both are realigned to suit a vision of rational public deliberation and freedom of mind. A consequence of that new intellectual paradigm is the alienation of literature from its traditional role as an instrument of public persuasion; instead literature assumes a high-prestige role as a repository of national heritage, a domain for the cultivation of liberal self-actualization, a laboratory for the encounter with private life and the riskless exploration of norms and customs, and an illustrative counterweight to the coercive potential of propaganda.

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On a cold day in January 2009, the poet Elizabeth Alexander read into public memory these two stanzas, the opening of her “Praise Song for the Day”:

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other’s
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

The occasion was the Presidential inauguration of Barack Obama; Alexander was then the fourth poet given such place and voice. “Praise Song for the Day” unfolds gently away from the “thorn and din” of the noisy everyday towards higher stakes: “[S]ay it plain: that many have died for this day,” she writes, invoking the long harm of racial violence while gesturing towards a redemptive possible future anchored in “love,” a future “in which any thing can be made.”1 Alexander summons a vision of community that has a very long history in democracies—a people that is heterogeneously demarcated but gathered under the sign of “the public,” a social body sharing a contested heritage and a normative framework premised upon equality but nonetheless experienced asymmetrically. Within that notional American public lives the proleptic hope of “walking forward into [the] light” of true liberty,

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the hope of realizing in full the promises of autonomy and individual self-government so central to the vision of liberal democracy.

But why should a poet, practicing the craft of versification displayed in taut, formal three-line stanzas, be trusted with such an urgent message? “Say it plain,” Alexander exhorts. Yet poetry says nothing plain. Are we to imagine Alexander’s inaugural poem as ornamental to the substantive business of politics near at hand? Or does literature have a role to play in shaping a common vocabulary, eliciting shared and horizontal emotions, revealing the artistry of individual genius, or directing the common imagination at the everyday and the private? Or is a poem such as “Praise Song for the Day” an instrument of democratic consolidation—reflecting difference, modulating conflict, turning noise into concord? Or is the poem an emblem of the seemingly irresolvable inequities and incoherencies encoded in the DNA of liberal democracy? Put even more broadly, can we understand the Anglo-American history of freedom of speech without also acknowledging the special significance of literature in its origin story? Does a democratic public need literature? Did it ever?

On current evidence, circa 2020, the case for literature does not look especially strong. As a repository of received national heritage, literature is rightly perceived as exclusionary and limiting. As a fund of shared vocabulary or a site of sympathetic moral education, literature struggles to find readers at scale and hence may fail to deliver broad impact. The writer-as-genius remains a durable role in the cultural marketplace, insofar as s/he serves the needs of an upper-middlebrow literary prize economy. Literature (poiesis, or fictional representation in the broad, traditional sense) seems always in danger of being absorbed into the swelling monolith of Content, thus becoming eligible for curation, rebranding, remixing, and distribution within a low-friction and high-velocity global marketplace for high-quality information goods. The potential utility of literature in the Age of Amazon conflates consumer choice with social value. Insofar as there are customers, literature (delineated algorithmically or through more traditional methods) earns its value within the domain of prestigious, protectable speech. The “networked public sphere” within which information goods (including literary goods) are now distributed or dispatched to customers imposes a relentless and invisible discipline that re-describes individual autonomy as liberty of consumer choice, and reimagines public opinion as a jostling domain in which rivalrous factions, having aggregated their political preferences into a calcified group identity, seek to expand market share rather than seeking consensus.\(^2\)

An epochal transformation in media ecology (the emergence of radically new platforms, markets, institutions, social imaginaries, and behaviors) has recently inaugurated a recalibration of the conception of the public and a rethinking of the proper relation between speech, individual liberty, and democratic legitimacy. Within that ongoing recalibration, the public status of literature remains an open question.

Trevor Ross’s erudite and eloquent *Writing in Public: Literature and the Liberty of the Press in Eighteenth-Century Britain* describes a conceptual reimagining of the public function of writing within the transition to liberal modernity of which eighteenth-century England is often proposed as the exemplary case. Although evidence is chiefly obtained from legal cases and the public or professional commentary thereupon, at the heart of the book is an argument about the social function and public purpose of literature. That argument unfolds in rich and patient detail through a narrative of media segmentation, of innovative differentiation given formal recognition by the law as part of a systematic liberalization that witnesses the emergence of a recognizably modern public (29). In this account, during the very long eighteenth century, literature obtains a new illustrative social function alienated from transactional political utility. Where it would have once served as an instrument of moral reform or persuasion, or as a vehicle for the indoctrination of public opinion, by the end of the century, literature would occupy a distinctive but fluid status as the repository of national heritage, a domain for the cultivation of liberal self-actualization, a laboratory for the encounter with private life, the riskless exploration of norms and customs, and an illustrative counterweight to the coercive potential of propaganda. All of this is achieved, safely distant from the reach of the law, without the imperative to make something happen or the need to contribute to governance. Literature, for Ross, is finally also a mirror of an incoherent conception of the public within liberal democracy.

Within this broader transition, the boundaries of permissible speech are recalibrated to align with a vision of the public as increasingly self-governing, capable of judgment, and committed to “norms of discursive rationality, civility, and truthfulness” (222). In place of top-down content-based regulation, often at the direction of state actors, we see emerging a public culture within which agreed-upon restrictions on time, place, and manner provide the ground rules for civil public discourse. So too do we witness the valorization of “freedom of mind”—that is, the liberty of intrepid curiosity yoked to a confident assessment of the capacities of the rational public even in the face of tempting seditious libels and rhetorically powerful propaganda. Put another way, a capable public can tolerate a free press; an incapable public requires stricter control and gated access to dangerous information.

*Writing in Public* is so rich and suggestive that it seems churlish to challenge one of the methodological premises at the center of the book—namely that while Ross provides a cultural history of literature’s evolving status within the public sphere, his analysis remains deliberately distant from sustained engagement with influential literary works themselves. This feels like a lost opportunity to thicken the argument with supplemental evidence from the very literary culture here celebrated, an elaboration that would not require an overdetermined origin story—“Richardson invented modern subjectivity!” or its kin. Candidates for further attention within the arc of the book’s narrative include well-served heavyweights

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such as *Clarissa*, *Tristram Shandy*, or *The Prelude*, all of which thematize the social function of literary representation and propose a vision of literature alienated from direct political utility.

The monumental figure of Milton looms just outside the argument’s sustained notice, inviting our attention. *Areopagitica* famously proposes a confident vision of individual judgment and freedom of the mind, refuting pre-publication censorship but celebrating the imposition of sanctions for low-quality information: “[A]ny man’s intellectual offspring . . . if it prov’d a Monster, who denies, but that it was justly burnt, or sunk into the Sea.”

*Paradise Lost* reflects on the dangerous force of persuasive words, celebrates volition and individual autonomy, worries about popular judgment and self-enslavement, serves as an experiential laboratory for audacious and comprehensive intellectual discovery, models self-actualization through rigorous interpretive labor, and explores “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.” That statement will be no surprise to Ross or his readers. As has been well-documented, Milton’s status as the iconic English poet is cemented in the eighteenth century as an emblem of the national literary tradition, a paragon of idiosyncratic style and aesthetic excellence attributable to a still-emerging social imaginary. Within the eye of literary history, a work like *Paradise Lost* was traditionally proposed to be the last fading assertion of renaissance humanism, the epic displaying an integrated and comprehensive vision distant from the first flickerings of a nascent public sphere. But Ross provokes us to revisit that classification: is *Paradise Lost* instead the prototype work, and Milton the precursor aesthetic genius, of the public-inflected but depoliticized literary system that emerges in mature form by the end of the eighteenth century?

In the same vein, the emergence of a low-risk, norm-questioning domain (literature) should solicit radical experimentation by ambitious authors newly enfranchised with the right of authorial self-actualization. Within Ross’s schema, the path-breaking innovations of form (*Tristram Shandy*, *Lyrical Ballads*) and thematic focus (*Clarissa*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*) might be legible as the efflorescence of an eighteenth-century popular avant-garde. Yet if indeed literature operates at a safe distance from the law, free from the obligation to participate in governance and enabled by a renewed focus on individual style and the self-actualization of the genius, what explains the relative scarcity of writers who took up the freely available opportunity to pursue radical innovation?

Within the arc of the transition-and-segmentation argument so nimbly offered, Ross generously allows his primary sources to tell their story—the transformation of copyright, the emergence of the public domain, the redefinition of libel and the confident encounter with threat of seditious libel all emerge incrementally over time, in a mutually constitutive relation between the law, public opinion, and the market. Ross eschews a gaudy narrative of origins, a founding myth of liberal freedom of speech in which literature is the

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key to all mythologies. Yet the structural drivers of this epochal shift remain distant from view; the agents of this historical narrative are more often than not either jurists or the involved parties in specific cases. To what degree is it responsible to think about agency more assertively here? Is the emergence of liberty of the press—and the corresponding isolation of literature as a domain apart—contingent upon local circumstances (the motivation of booksellers) or is there a more systematic driver of this transformation (reflected belatedly in the law). The traditional candidate is of course liberal political philosophy. Ideas of self-government, individual liberty, and autonomy, fueled by market behaviors, demand expression in cultural forms wherein norms are reimagined, public and private are redefined, boundaries are challenged—all of which is later reflected in the belated formality of the law. But *Writing in Public*, while acknowledging the transition to modernity, resists that triumphal narrative.

Within the media segmentation that gives modern shape to concepts of intellectual property, the public domain, and libel and sedition (as well as the conception of the literary as a space apart), an underacknowledged driver of transition may be the maturing of dynamic market-based flows of capital, information goods, power, and social value into a modern mediasphere. Is the story of the public function of literature in eighteenth-century England *sui generis*, or can this powerful story of transition and segmentation inform our analysis of other, later paradigm shifts in shared ideas about the democratic value of speech and the constitution of the public?

Ross has provided us with a powerful example of the mutually constitutive relation between literature and law—generous in argument, eschewing grandiose pronouncements, richly textured and precise. The hero of this story, as it should be, is finally literature—at bottom Ross offers us a Wordsworthian conception of literature as the growth of the individual mind within the constitutional soil wherein it can take root and flourish. Ross reminds us, as Elizabeth Alexander does, that literature is that medium which summons us, when “all about us is noise,” to walk forward into a world in which “anything can be made,” a journey made for its own sake.