

## Letter to the Calgary Women's Literary Club from Rex Murphy, March 2019

I admire the scope of your topic - "The Role of Humour, Irony and Satire in Literature." It's a vast and engaging subject. But confining myself to some of your specific inquiries I'll first note that in the case of what I do and have been doing for too long a while, "yes" I do try to vest a lot of what I write or talk in the mixed categories of irony, humour, sarcasm, polemic and just verbal fun. My success or otherwise must be left to others for judgement. I obey Samuel Johnson's various dicta insisting that what is not interesting (i.e. lacking style) will not be read (or listened to.) There must be some delight or fun in the writing to entice the potential reader. Those various modes of satire and humour I've adverted to are the best channels to conduct such enticement.

I believe journalists should pay at least as much attention to how they write as what they write. The most certain way to achieve some skill is the sedulous study of other writers – all other fine writers, not just the best journalists. Journalism schools should at the very least spend a full half of any undergraduate programs introducing students to the best prose written – ever. No one writes a lead sentence, for example, better than the 17th century sage, Francis Bacon. Read the first line or lines of any of his classic essays and see how swiftly he engages attention: "What is truth, said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer." is surely the best first line in the history of essay writing. (There are many competitors.)

I could show samples from a hundred other writers, but I'll off just a few names of those I have studied and hoped to find some help from in my own far lesser efforts. And *this* sampling is confined to journalist-practitioners.

Malcom Muggeridge is arguably the best journalist-writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His biography is a manual of brilliant, satirical and descriptive prose. Flann O'Brien, Auberon Waugh, S. J. Perelman, Peter Simple are some other names of columnists/journalists whose writing, because they seek real achievement *as writing*, particularly in the modes of humour and satire, are great models. Ambrose Bierce the great American of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is another, his *Devil's Dictionary* a model of compressed elegance and wit. But besides journalists, there are the milestone writers of English Literature itself, obviously the prose masters, and - here I place strong emphasis – the great poets too, from

Shakespeare to Philip Larkin. Anyone playing with language should diligently absorb “the best that has been written” in the hope some of the genius of the greatest minds will, in some tiny osmosis, trickle back to the reader. Poetry is the ultimate fountain of style.

On the question of personal journalism – the “I” factor – which is a dominant mode these days, I am averse to it. Most personal journalism is a kind of lazy diary, or a modish means of trying to get readers to “identify” with the writer. Apart from truly great exponents of that art - they range from Montaigne through the great essayists right down to Muggeridge whom I’ve already mentioned. Day to day journalists, and I include myself in that category do not have the “high” style to convert mundane occurrence into readable and genuinely useful material.

Most of all I would say to your Literary Society that your own habits are best. I can guess from the names of others you’ve dealt with, and the very idea of having evenings to ramble through various alleys and uplands of literature, that you read for pleasure, find delight in language and words themselves. To enjoy what has been well written, and to understand some of art behind such writing is a wonderful pastime in itself.

Finally, in my own case, I am no Nabokov or Flann O’Brien, but I do try and have tried to throw a little delight to readers, by either artful description, designed irony, and sometimes hidden allusion. It’s play, and I like to play.

The very best wishes for your evening, and to Anita Madill I send a particular greeting: I truly hope it has not been painful working your way through some of my convulsions. It is a pleasure and an honour to be noticed and merely to be in the shadow of some of the real writers your group has previously settled on, gives me shivers of gratification.