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A Reporter Without Borders: Tennessee Williams's Literary "War" Journalism, 1928

Abstract:
Drawing on the discipline of border studies, the article examines the epistemological dilemmas with travelogues per literary journalism studies, given that they involve the simultaneous crossing of both physical (geopolitical frontiers) and conceptual (textual/genetic) borders. The article uses as its case study a travelogue written by American playwright Tennessee Williams during his Grand Tour through Europe in 1928 when he was just seventeen. A rare example of the playwright's flirtation with the genre of literary journalism at a time when objective journalism was establishing itself as the newsprint norm, the travelogue – published in ten installments in his high school newspaper in the months following the trip – offers a first glimpse in Williams scholarship not only into the playwright's artistic future but also his struggle with distancing factual from fictional representation. Read against his early letters and late memoirs that describe essentially the same content as the travel pieces, the article makes use of border studies methodologies to help negotiate the delicate divide that separates verifiable fact from allowable fiction in literary journalism.

Keywords:
Tennessee Williams, the Grand Tour, literary journalism, border studies, post-war Europe, journalism, travelogue

Resumo:
Alavancando-se nos denominados estudos de fronteira (border studies), este artigo examina os dilemas epistemológicos da literatura de viagens na intersecção do jornalismo literário uma vez que uma e outro implicam o cruzamento de fronteiras físicas (geopolíticas) e conceptuais (textuais e de género). Como estudo de caso, o artigo analisa os relatos de viagem escritos pelo dramturgo norte-americano Tennessee Williams durante o seu "Grand Tour" pela Europa em 1928 quando tinha apenas dezassete anos. Trata-se de um exemplo raro do encantamento do autor com o jornalismo literário numa época em que o jornalismo designado objetivo se estabelecia como norma na imprensa. Estes escritos de viagem, publicados em dez números no jornal da escola nos meses após o seu périplo europeu, oferecem uma janela de observação não só para o futuro artístico de Williams mas também para a sua luta em distanciar o factual da representação ficcional.

Confrontando tanto as suas primeiras cartas como as suas memórias mais tardias relativas a conteúdo de viagem, este artigo socorre-se de metodologias dos estudos de fronteira a fim de negociar a divisão delicada que separa o facto verificável da ficcionalização permitida no jornalismo literário.

Palavras-chave:
Tennessee Williams, o "Grande Tour", jornalismo literário, estudos de fronteira, Europa pós-guerra, jornalismo, diário de viagem

Travel writing and literary journalism are known distant cousins. Tom Wolfe even suggests that the "sort of reporting that one now finds in the New Journalism probably begins with the travel literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (Wolfe 1973: 50).[1] John C. Hartsock, a historian of the literary journalistic form, agrees that "boundaries can disappear between travelogue and narrative literary journalism," but is quick to warn against their indiscriminate conflation due to the "sheer volume" of travel writing as a distinct and separate genre (Hartsock 2000: 13). Taxonomic and epistemological questions aside, both writers accept the premise that travelogues are inherently autobiographical in nature and thus contain elements of a self-reflexive literary journalism that is similar to personal memoirs. "Many of the travel writers seem to have been inspired by the success of autobiographies" (Wolfe 1973: 50), Wolfe adds, with Hartsock concluding: "Perhaps more important than the issue of nomenclature is that American narrative literary journalism shares in common certain features with [...] autobiography and memoir [...]" (Hartsock 2000: 40). Not quite close enough to be siblings, travel writing and literary journalism can nonetheless claim a common ancestry, thus when studying one, the other should not entirely be neglected.

But not all travel books, or travels writers for that matter, are alike in what they reveal about themselves – or how. Literary journalistic travel writer Paul Theroux explains in *Riding the Iron Rooster* his theory on how a "[...] travel book reveal[s] more about the traveler than it d[oes] about the country" (Theroux 1988: 417). What determines a travelogue's autobiographical nature, he posits, involves the inevitable time-lag between the moments of intense observation and of annotation, that is, when the travel writer is confronted by a person or an event worth sharing with readers, and the time it takes finally to record that information on paper and, even later, in print. Theroux says he writes on trains precisely because the solitary environment and the lengthy amount of travel time facilitate his writing and his self-reflection (*idem*: 234). Much can happen, though, during that interim which could lead to the intrusion of false perceptions, imagined occurrences or even expurgated recollections (conscious or otherwise).

A travelogue writer thus draws inspiration from certain self-reflexive literary journalists in recording via immersion, and as close as possible to their time of passage/reference, not just

N.o 44 – 06/ 2021 | 51-71 – ISSN 2183-2242 | http:/dx.doi.org/10.21747/2183-2242/cad44a3

the people met or the events lived, but also the sensory and cognitive perceptions experienced, which become frequently more acute upon conscientious self-reflection. Slow journalism, as it were, to borrow a phrase from Susan Greenberg (2007, 2012). To record both internal and external stimuli as accurately as possible, Theroux "keep[s] a diary" when he travels (Theroux 1988: 84). That travel diary – half reporter's notebook, half analysand's psychography – becomes a hybrid text that melds the "fact" of the recorded event with the "fiction" of the diarist's inescapable subjectivism. Diaries are thus unexpurgated memoirs or letters to one's self, an unguarded urtext of words and thoughts that capture a time before the writerly "I" becomes the readerly "it."

In her article about how "travel accounts can be interpreted as literary journalism," entitled "*South*: Where Travel Meets Literary Journalism," Isabel Soares writes that, "when analyzing both literary journalism and travel writing from a theoretical standpoint, we are confronted with hybrid genres, hybrid because they borrow both from each other as well as from other nonfictional and fictional forms" (Soares 2009: 18). A "personal pilgrimage" (22) whose goal is objective secularism, a travelogue intersects with literary journalism at the point of "cultural revelation of the Other" (20). In other words, if the travel writer sets about on an outward journey across national borders to encounter, and ideally comprehend, the other within their specific sociopolitical context, a travelogue writer, if successful, equally journeys inward *during* those border crossings to encounter and learn something previously unknown about the self. As such, the literary journalistic travel writer's diary, and the final travelogue it renders, is as much a discovery of the other-in-the-self as it is an exegesis on that other.

Given its inherent hybridity – between nations' borders and print cultures, between objectified reality and totemic subjectivism, and even between journalistic facticity and literary aesthetics – the travelogue represents a brackish textual space that defies simplistic classification. To read a travelogue, then, and the travel writer's diaries from which it emerged, is to cross multiple frontiers simultaneously. One theoretical "passport" to help facilitate such crossings is *border studies*, a hermeneutic typically aligned with the physical and geopolitical borders that separate nations but which could also be applied to the *conceptual* borders that separate travelogues, diaries, letters and memoirs from literary journalism, if not facticity itself from the fictional embellishments that distinguish literary journalism from realist fiction, creative nonfiction and reportage literature.

To explore the various ramifications of these multiple border crossings in literary journalism, I will use as my case study the youthful travelogue of seventeen-year-old Thomas Lanier Williams, later known to the world as Tennessee Williams, a writer reputed for his casual and repeated migrations over the borderland between fiction and nonfiction. Like many celebrated American authors before him – Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Ernest Hemingway, just to name a few – Williams first thought it prudent to become a journalist to earn a living. In 1928, just before the start of his senior year in high school, and one year prior to his matriculation at the University of Missouri (whose School of Journalism rivalled that of Columbia University), Williams accompanied his grandfather on a Grand Tour of Europe.

Europe was still embroiled in its own border wars at the time, temporarily resolved by the Treaty of Versailles following World War I, and Williams considered the summer-long trip a great opportunity to develop his journalistic acumen.

Williams documented the trip through a travel diary he kept, as well as through a series of vivid (albeit embellished) letters he sent home to his family and to his girlfriend, Hazel Kramer, that complement the diary. A hybrid text of keen insights and clearly exaggerated persona and encounters with the other and with the self, the travel diary furnished the stories to a series of ten travel essays he wrote over the space of several months upon his return to St. Louis, as well as a key passage about his first brush with madness and spiritual regeneration that he reworked many years later into his *Memoirs* (1975). Studied together here for the first time in Williams scholarship, these travel pieces, and the letters and later memoirs into which they enjoyed a second life, represent the playwright's only flirtation with literary journalism, a genre he may have liminally understood given his vast reading. Not only does the travelogue reveal the young writer's fascination with the continent's various peoples, cultures, and histories, but it also documents Williams's early disciplinary border crossings between literature and journalism, a crossing that is mirrored in the disputed borders he traversed through a war-torn Europe currently enjoying an intermezzo before the start of the World War's second act.

Tennessee Williams's textual transvestitism: early cross-dressings of fact with fiction

From 6 July to early September 1928, Williams accompanied his maternal grandfather, Walter Dakin, on a European tour for parishioners of the pastor's Episcopal church in Clarksdale. During those few weeks, Europe left an indelible impression on the young writer. While the sights, sounds and smells of a reconstructed Europe fill most of the pages of his travelogue, Williams also paid close attention to the people he met, and frequently those he describes are European types that we encounter later in his plays. The combative Germans in Amsterdam were later incarnated as Herr and Frau Fahrenkopf in *The Night of the Iguana* (1961), who "*tuned in to the crackle and guttural voices of a German broadcast reporting the Battle of Britain*" (Williams 1972: 261, italics in the original). The "small [Gypsy] boys [who] pursued our bus, holding out their hands for coins" (Williams [1978] 2009: 229) in his essay "A Trip To Monte Carlo" resemble the Spanish "flock of black plucked little birds" who pursue Sebastian Venable "halfway up the white hill" before devouring parts of him in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) (Williams 1971: 261). Even the very "stout woman, dressed with gaudy splendor of a circus queen" who steps out of the "sumptuous lavender, Hispano-Suiza limousine" (Williams [1978] 2009: 230) could be any number of Williams's faded starlets, from Alexandra Del Lago in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1956) to Flora "Sissy" Goforth in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963). Many of Williams's later dramatis personae drew their first breaths here in these juvenile travel pieces.

But at this moment in time, the trip to Europe for Williams was synonymous with freedom, moral of course, but also textual, and he used the voyage to experiment with different types of narrative voice and audience. Writing a letter to his family aboard the *S.S. Homeric*, on 13

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July, he explains knowingly how international waters freed them from the long-arm of U.S. Prohibition, noting how the ship's saloon "never [has] a lack of customers" and how his grandfather also kept "his tongue pretty slick" with alcoholic beverages. The young Williams, too, "tried" his grandfather's cocktails – no doubt under the indulgent eye of the Reverend – but added, reassuringly to his puritanical mother, Edwina, that "he prefer[red] none to plain ginger-ale and Coca Cola" (Williams 2000: 15). Admitting to his mother a few days later that French champagne was "the only drink" that he liked also suggests that Williams continued trying several drinks, perhaps even an illicit absinthe at the café Napolitain, which he visited with his grandfather while in Paris (Williams [1978] 2009: 233). By contrast, Walter Dakin's own letters to his wife, Rosina, mentions enjoying the meals on the *Homeric*, visiting Napoleon's country house outside Paris, seeing the "the glorious Cathedral" in Rheims that "the Germans tried to ruin – did hurt it a lot" – but never a word of the alcohol consumed (Dakin 1928: box 60, folder 13, underlined in the original). Evinced by the saucy details that Williams could have, like his grandfather, very well left out of his letters home, Williams exploited the physical distance between Europe and St. Louis in order to explore the narrative distance between his family and himself. Facticity, Williams soon learned, resided equally in what was told – and in what was not.

Williams also confessed in his letters home not only to having unashamedly "imbibed" in "french champagne" but also to having seen scantily clad showgirls in the "notorious Parisian shows – The Folies Bergére and the Moulin Rouge" (Williams 2000: 16-17, all *sic*).[2] But relishing a drink in a French café or a "charmingly wicked show" at "Les Folies" (*idem*: 15) was only part of the fun. The real pleasure was in orchestrating its revelation or absence on paper, including the blushing details he refused to describe further to Hazel but promised to recount to her in detail in person upon his return (*idem*: 15). Williams was clearly smitten not just with the city's Lost Generation flair but also with its literary libertarianism. Thus, if in Versailles Williams discovered "a perfect wonder-land" (*idem*: 16), in "Gay Paree," as he boldly told his mother, he encountered excess where "you might as well leave all dispensable conventions behind" (*idem*: 14, 17) – and that he most certainly did (Bak 2014: 2-3).

These "dispensable conventions" to which Williams alludes in his letter also included those of journalism. Williams was already a published writer by the time he and his grandfather had left for Europe, and not only in his junior and high school literary magazines, but also in a national pulp magazine, *Weird Tales*. His short story, "The Vengeance of Nitocris," which he wrote during his junior year at University City High School, appeared in August 1928, and his grandfather purchased an advanced copy at a newsstand in Grand Central Station, just before embarking on their ship (Leverich 1995: 89). The published story, along with its $35 royalty, was proof enough that Williams knew his way around a literary text.

But perhaps more important evidence for demonstrating the conscious voice and developed persona evident in Williams's European letters, and travelogue, can be found in the publication a year earlier of his "journalistic" piece "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?" in the national magazine *Smart Set*. The epistolary essay opens with the following provocative

question: "Can a woman after marriage maintain the same attitude towards other men as she held before marriage?" (Williams [1978] 2009: 223). The male narrative voice (not Williams's, since the narrator presents himself as a married man, and Williams was only sixteen at the time he wrote this) recounts his own "unhappy marital experiences" in order to "present convincing answers" to the contrary. The persona here, a travelling salesman not unlike Williams's father Cornelius, describes "modern married life" and how he proposed marriage to "the flapper type" Bernice across a "glass-topped cafeteria table" (*ibidem*), the unromantic surroundings lending proof of her true love for him. It should be reiterated that the piece – which won Williams a third-prize award of $5, as well as a warning from his grandfather, in a letter dated 12 April 1927, not to publish in pulp magazines or at least to use a "non-de-plume" instead of his real name – was published in a magazine that was subtitled "True Stories from Real Life" (Leverich 1995: 81). One wonders how much of the narrative voice (and obvious fictionalization) here can be found in his European letters as well, where a specific reader was also targeted for shock-value.

Also around this time, just after the European tour, Williams discovered the power of nonfiction biography, writing to his grandfather on 22 November 1928:

> I have been reading a good number of biographies this year, which I am sure you will commend. Probably you remember how I picked up that vol¬ume of Ludwig's Napoleon on the boat and liked it so well that the owner had to ask me for it. I tried to get it at the library but it was out. Instead, I got a life of the Kaiser Wilhelm by the same author. Since then I have read several others of celebrated literary personages. I have one at home now about Shelly, whose poetry I am studying at school. His life is very inter¬esting. He seems to have been the wild, passionate and dissolute type of genius: which makes him very entertaining to read about. (Williams 2000: 24)

The now-published writer of fiction no doubt began seeing the power of narrative nonfiction, a lesson that would serve him well as he turned now to writing up his travelogue. Williams had "lost," and then "found" again, "the little diarys" (*idem*: 22, *sic*) he had written in Europe and began transforming from them one by one that autumn into the travel pieces that were published in his high school newspaper, *U. City Pep*. "I have just concluded an article on Pompeii this evening," he wrote his grandfather the following January, 1929, "which I will send to you as soon as it is published" (*idem*: 26).

By the time Williams had completed high school, he was well versed in the shadowy borderline that divides not only fact from fiction, but also Germany from France. Visiting a Europe which had just ended one war and would soon enter into another, Williams was cognizant of the horrors of the past, and perhaps even intuited those lurking on the horizon. As he ventured on a tour boat along the Rhine River, as contentious a geopolitical border as ever back in 1928,[3] Williams must have contemplated how a "good-natured and kindly" German people (*idem*: 20), whose "picturesque little [...] towns were stretched along the banks" that resembled "the land of fairy-tales" (*ibidem*), could have ever committed the atrocities he had just witnessed a few

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weeks earlier in Rheims. If Williams well understood the tension between conceptual borders that his letters and travelogue were indiscriminately crossing, as a young man of seventeen, and therefore ripe for the draft should the war fires rekindle, he no doubt also sensed well the political tension his physical border crossings engendered at each guarded checkpoint.[4]

Literary journalism and border ontologies

While the study of borders and frontiers, real or imagined, has been around for centuries, border studies is a fairly recent hermeneutic that developed from wide-ranging research on the U.S.-Mexico and Israel-Palestine border conflicts of the last half century. Conjoining the immersive work of geographers, political economists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers and, I would like to add, literary journalists, border studies is meant "to chronicle and understand how borders, and border cultures, societies, polities and economies, are not only changing due to major transformations in the global political economy, but also how borders often play key roles in these changes" (Wilson/Donnan 2012: 11). In their introduction to *A Companion to Border Studies* (2012), Wilson and Donnan provide a detailed summation of the field's goals and methodologies:

> Border studies have become significant themselves because scholars and policy-makers alike have recognized that most things that are important to the changing conditions of national and international political economy take place in borderlands – as they do in like measure almost everywhere else in each of our national states – but some of these things, for instance those related to migration, commerce, smuggling and security, may be found in borderlands in sharper relief. And some things of national importance can be most often and best found in borderlands. (*idem*: 1)

In terms of direct application to literary journalism studies, border studies can help scholars explore not only the socio-political reasonings behind a given country's print culture that makes it either conducive or hostile to genre-fluid textual border identities, but also, in a comparativist manner, the noncontingent notions of literary journalism or reportage literature that lie behind the borders of neighboring countries. Why, for instance, especially given their geographical proximity, does French *journalisme narratif* differ so significantly from German *literarische Reportage*, or, for that matter, the German form from Polish *reportaż*? While scholars of literary journalism have often focused on the variants in nations' print cultures between fiction and nonfiction, perhaps another way of looking at the problem would be through the various shared "borders" that conjoin neighboring nations. As Wilson and Donnan write,

> Once principally the focus of geography, the study of territorial, geophysical, political and cultural borders today has become a primary, abiding and growing interest across the scholarly disciplines, and is related to changing scholarly approaches to such key research subjects and objects as the state, nation, sovereignty, citizenship, migration and the overarching forces

> and practices of globalization. All of these approaches to borders and frontiers have been complicated by various attempts to understand and express identities, an effort often related to the investigation of hybridity [...]. (Wilson/Donnan 2012: 2)

Therefore, the "intersection of the metaphorical negotiations of borderlands of personal and group identity (in what has come to be known as 'border theory') with the geopolitical realization of international, state and other borders of polity, power, territory and sovereignty ('border studies') [...]" could be applied to the brackish frontier dividing fact from fiction in nonfiction studies, wherein literary journalism resides (Wilson/Donnan 2012: 2). In studying a travelogue, for instance, a textual scholar would look at the separate notions of literature and of journalism per the text, whereas a border studies approach would open up that inquiry to include: a psychological portrait of the author *and* of the implicit reader(s) (from the author's country, as well as from the nation temporarily hosting that author); an economic evaluation of the various elements implicated in the travelogue's production (not just print and marketing costs, but also the human costs involved in the book's reporting); a geographical profile of the author's footprints within the host country; a linguistic or stylistic analysis of the author's voice and the one he or she lends to the travelogue's many characters; or even a political assessment of crossing the border in the first place to write up that piece. "The current openness toward cross-disciplinary conversations in border studies, if not indeed a new approach and perspective," Wilson and Donnan add, suggests a willingness and readiness to engage global comparison and the work of other scholars [...]" (Wilson/Donnan 2012: 14).

Such "openness," however, is not meant to court disciplinary chaos, where anything and everything becomes academically acceptable. Nor should border studies, or literary journalism studies for that matter, be tunnel-visioned in its pursuit of a transcendental signifier, a universal "border theory" against which all border studies, physical or conceptual, are to be measured. Anssi Paasi, who finds such border theory "unattainable, and perhaps even undesirable" (Paasi 2011: 27), writes that the "power of borders for nationalism and national identity narratives is not a homogeneous phenomenon; rather it is crucially context dependent, and even the power and salience of the individual borders of a state can vary dramatically" (Paasi 2011: 23). Sarah Green agrees, suggesting that "borders do not independently exist as self-evident entities in the landscape, in that they are fashioned out of particular epistemologies that vary across time and space" (Green 2012: 580). That notion is equally valid for the borders between what constitutes both fiction and nonfiction:

> [...] it is also the case that once constructed (which includes all the various associated bordering practices, both formal and informal), borders can take on thing-like qualities, both in practice and in people's imaginations. That has, of course, given rise to a considerable focus, particularly within anthropology, on frontiers and borderlands, where widely diverse conditions provide a variety of spaces in which people, things, places and relations can take active roles in what goes on in such regions [...]. In that sense, borders are not only epistemological entities, they are also

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ontological ones – epistemologies made real, in a sense. (*ibidem*)

If, like the border line that separates fiction from nonfiction in many parts of the world, we "[t]hink of the area that separates them not as a border, a thin policed line, but as a 'borderland'" (Donnan/Wilson 2010: 6-7), or even as an "indexical, place-based notion of border" that shifts in terms of the perspective of those inside or outside it (Green 2012: 586), then we can begin conceptualizing travelogues (and perhaps literary journalism in general) less as a textual genre that defines two distinct places (the author's and the host nation's) and two distinct identities (the self and the other), and more as a textual space where fact and fiction dance in narratorial play together. In other words, border studies can allow us to recognize that the borderline which separates fact from fiction is as fluid as national borderlands, and even bears the fingerprint of human intervention in its making, which also means that they can shift and evolve as human relations between the two sides themselves evolve. As Green rightly notes, "that borderness can be multiple, even to the extent of some people recognizing a place or a thing as a border while others do not see anything except landscape, is a crucial aspect of what could be called 'borderness dynamics'" (*idem*: 581).

For Tennessee Williams, who, as noted earlier, regularly traversed that frontier between fact and fiction in his nonfiction writing (letters, essays, memoirs), border studies could help us determine what portions, if any, of his European travelogues from the summer of 1928 constitute a form of *pre-reportage* American literary journalism. While the degrees of fact relevant to fiction in them are difficult to discern when supporting evidence, in one way or another, in the letters or memoirs cannot be corroborated, border studies could help resolve that apparent quandary. As Green posits, our concerns become less oppositional (i.e., us vs. them, fact vs. fiction) and more relational (us *and* them, fact *and* fiction), both occupying the same borderland space in the text:

> What borders locate, in that sense, is stories so far, which might be moving along slowly, quickly or not at all, but which are always in one way or another relational, both in terms of the classificatory logic that makes borders visible as such, and in terms of the coming together of people, places, things and ideas in historically, politically, economically and spatially specific ways. (*idem*: 587)

Williams's European travelogue

Williams's ten travel pieces appeared in instalments in *U. City Pep* the following school year, from October 1928 to April 1929. Published out of the order in which Williams and his grandfather had actually journeyed (a significant detail in itself, one that raises questions about how memory serves to reshape or taint factual recollection), the travelogue collectively recounts and extrapolates upon the young writer's impressions of Paris on Bastille Day, of London from the air, and of the Europeans he encountered nearly a decade after the Armistice. From Paris, he and his grandfather's entourage voyaged to the south of France: Marseilles, Monte

Carlo, and Nice. From there, they continued on to Rome, Naples and the Sorrento Peninsula (a path Williams would repeatedly follow years later), before heading back north to Florence, Venice, then onto Milan, Montreux and Interlaken, Cologne, Amsterdam, and finally London and Stratford-upon-Avon – the fairly typical Grand Tour itinerary for Americans of the day.[5]

The ten essays that make up the travelogue are important in Williams's life for essentially two reasons: first, they provide clues into the observational skills (and vagabond restlessness) found in the mature Williams writings; and second, they reveal historical details about postwar Europe from a fresh and rare perspective, that of a precocious seventeen-year old whose knowledge of Europe and the Great War at the time were only budding at best. They are also important for literary journalism studies as they demonstrate a time when literary journalism was just approaching its first high watermark in U.S. print culture, and Williams, preparing to enter the School of Journalism at Mizzou, would soon be made to toe the line of objective journalism, which would push literary journalism to the margins of reportage publishing in the U.S. before the second wave, New Journalism, raised that watermark even higher. The "inevitable time-lag between the moment of observation and of annotation" here is a fairly short one from experience to letter/diary to travelogue, but it grew significantly when some of the stories were recounted years later in Williams's *Memoirs*.

The first piece, "A Day at the Olympics," chronologically covers the penultimate city Williams and his grandfather visited, Amsterdam. They arrived at the end of the Games of the IX Olympiad and only saw the equestrian events, which ran from 8 to 12 August, with show jumping being the final event. Williams first describes, with journalistic precision, the "enormous magnitude" of the city's infrastructure and all the stadiums built or modified to accommodate "the immense multitude of people, assembled from all parts of the world" (Williams [1978] 2009: 224). The detail in itself is not insignificant, nor is Williams's comment about the "greatness of their cost" during construction; when we consider that only ten years had passed between these Games and the endgame of World War I, we begin to understand a bit more of Williams's fascination with what he was experiencing (*ibidem*). With the 1920 Games having been held in Belgium, and the 1924 Games in France, there was a visible effort to invest money not only in the countries most torn apart by the war, but also in their peoples' interrelations. This reassembling of people from various nations previously at war had no doubt taken the young Williams by surprise.

Williams suggests as much in the following paragraph, when he describes the various nationalities sitting around him and their verbal disagreements about the event they were watching:

> The diversity of the nations represented among the spectators of the games on this day was indicated to us by the great variety of languages we heard spoken. Behind us were Germans, in front of us French. The motley of languages was such as to bring one in mind of the tower of Babel. We had programs with us but we were in some confusion as to the point in them at which we had entered. The French to the front of us and the Germans behind us both endeavored to

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> clear our perplexity. Both of them, however, disagreed and fell into violent argument which was settled only when an Englishman, annoyed by their shouting, showed that both of them were wrong and pointed out the right place to us all. (*ibidem*)

It is unclear if the hostilities vented during this argument were emblematic of nations still at war, emotionally speaking, and the sports venue simply replaced the erstwhile battlefield; or if they were meant to show how quickly warring nations could sit side by side in relative peace; or if indeed they were not an invention of the author all together (one wonders, for instance, what language the three parties spoke and, if it were not English – hardly the international lingua franca at the time – how Williams was able to understand them). Unwittingly, Williams is approaching here an early form of border theory in "seek[ing] answers to questions about how identity, territory and the state are interrelated in the formation of the self and of group identification" (Wilson/Donnan 2012: 3).

Whichever the case – be they at war or at warring sport – the irony of jingoistic nationalism was not entirely lost on the seventeen-year-old Williams, who intimated the dynamics of their conversation and the travesties of the war that had once torn them apart. His final anecdote in this piece about the horse named Miss America, who was "showing" her "contempt for royalty" by "stubbornly refus[ing] to stand before the royal box and present salutations to the queen," confirms to a certain extent that Williams was not entirely jejune to political commentary as well (Williams [1978] 2009: 225).

If Williams could only partly ingest Europe's intricate political machinery through his civics classes at University High School in St. Louis, he was at least capable of discerning the complexities of its human intercourse, a trait that would serve him well later in his career. In a letter to his parents, dated 10 August 1928, he speaks – perhaps naively, though not without interest – glowingly of the Germans as being more "good-natured and kindly than the people of the other nations" with whom they had come into contact (Williams 2000: 20). Unconsciously, Williams was already defending those deemed public enemy number one, which the Germans still largely were to the French and to the English a few months shy of the Armistice's tenth anniversary. Though the young Williams would soon grow politically radical in the coming decade, he never devalued personal integrity in the balance of human nature, where individual acts of kindness always outweighed gross indecencies toward the masses. And the scales of Williams's literary justice forever tipped in favor of those disenfranchised few or many – a border studies advocate, conceptually speaking, if ever there was one.

If the general theme of death and raised spirits permeates his second piece, "The Tomb of the Capuchins," the theme of war returns in his third piece, "A Flight over London." No doubt the novelty of flying for the young man overshadowed his interests in London's landmarks; he had, after all, already visited countless historical sites throughout Europe, recalling later in his Memoirs how he found "the endless walking about art galleries to be interesting for only a few minutes now and then" (Williams [1975] 2006: 21). So like any boy being forced to swallow history one museum visit at a time, including Shakespeare's grave and "various other reliquary

things" (Williams 1986: 271), it is understandable that he should not write much about how London rose up phoenix-like from its Zeppelin-reduced ashes, a metaphor he would make use of later in his play about D. H. Lawrence. At any rate, this piece is more about seeing London from above than from ground level, giving the young boy the impression of flying over London just as the Luftstreitkräfte had done the previous decade. For this reason, he begins the essay not in London but in one of its southern boroughs, Croydon, with its "famous Croydon Field" (Williams [1978] 2009: 226).

Though inaugurated in name in 1920, Croydon Aerodome had served during World War I as the airfield from which planes were dispatched to protect London from attacking Zeppelins. A decade later, Williams found himself among the spirits of the Royal Flying Corps:

> Scattered about the field were a great number of yellow hangars and before them were lined the planes flashing in the sun and filling the field with a terrific roar. It was during that exciting period when London was testing her air defenses by a series of mock bombardments and making the disturbing discovery that it was possible for her to be completely annihilated within a few nights. The planes upon the field were those which were to participate in the attack that night and were now undergoing a mechanical inspection. (*ibidem*)

The young Williams's description, though admittedly nontechnical, is nonetheless journalistically significant in terms of the airfield's documentation.

As for the plane itself, the details Williams's provides are also historically relevant, not just to the physical design of this early passenger plane, with its fourteen "wicker chairs," "seven on each side of the aisle," but also with its metaphysical impact on people not yet accustomed to flying:

> As we walked toward it, we saw another equally large plane coming to the ground. It was a trans-channel plane. When we saw the passengers stepping to earth, with such relief upon their faces as might be expected of lost souls who had been wandering in the regions of Erebus, we felt grateful that our flight was a short one and that we were not to be committed simultaneously to the perils of both sea and air. (*ibidem*)

Fear soon gives way to fascination, however, and Williams's account of experiencing flight in 1928 surely complements other historical accounts of being airborne for the first time:

> The five propellers, two of them the size of electric fans, flashed dazzlingly in the sun. The vibration became terrific. We felt ourselves palpitating in every joint and fiber of our beings. The plane started to move across the field, slowly at first, but accelerating rapidly to a furious rush. Half-way across the great field it speeds, and then there comes a slight bump, a barely perceptible tilt. You look down and you see the earth skimming lower and lower beneath you. Your breath leaves you for a moment in a gasp of exultation. You are UP! For the first time in your

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> life the earth has released you from its grip. The trees, the yellow-roofed hangars, the tall, iron fences scud beneath us; then the gleaming concrete road and the open fields. We look down and marvel at the dwindling objects. (*idem*: 227)

Williams's experiences with the War are evident in one other piece that he wrote, "A Tour of the Battle-fields in France," which would have been one of the first entries in his little travel diaries which, unfortunately, are no longer extant. While visiting Versailles, as noted earlier, Williams comments in a letter to his mother, dated 19 "Juillet" 1928, that they saw "the room" and even the "very table" on which "the peace treaty of the Great War was signed" (Williams 2000: 17). Mentioning the treaty was significant for Williams because his tour group had earlier visited the city of Rheims, which they had expected to find "grim with blackened ruins" but were surprised to find "bright and richly colored." The countryside, a once barren wasteland shorn of its trees and stripped of its poppy fields from constant bombardment, is here, only a decade later, "patched gaily with fields of variant yellow and green":

> [. . .] It seemed scarcely conceivable that this land just ten years before had been ravaged by war; that these fields of golden grain, sprinkled with the night crimson of poppies, were then a barren waste, over which desperate conflicts were waged. Here and there we see a shattered wall, the ruins of a farm house, or a clump of rusted wire. These things, which we would not have noticed had they not been pointed out by the guide, are the only scars of war left upon the land which a decade ago was in a state of almost complete devastation.
>
> We pass through a number of small villages whose tranquility is as perfect as if it had been undisturbed for centuries. We then climb among green hills, on our way to Belleau Woods. It is here that the traces of the war are most distinct. Our guide points out to us the bold summit of a ridge, telling us that before the war it had been thickly wooded. During the battle of Belleau Wood it had been a *dividing line between the Allies and the Germans* and had been completely stripped by the great artillery fire which swept across it. (Williams [1978] 2009: 231-32, emphasis added)

Like the War's front itself, shifting back and forth amongst the many advances and retreats, Williams's journalistic details are polished with literary details of which he could have only imagined, then and now.

When the tour group finally reaches Belleau Wood, the battle for which took place from 1 to 26 June 1918 and which was one of the bloodiest the American Marines fought during World War I (the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery alone contains the graves of 2,289 American soldiers killed in the battle), the "traces of the war [become] most distinct" to the young writer:

> The holes which the soldiers dug in the ground remain clearly visible. If one has any imaginativeness in his nature, he is sure to find it a rather thrilling sensation to step down into one of these deep, grass-grown holes, realizing that ten years ago the chill, aching body of a soldier crouched there through some long torturing night, clasping with stiff fingers the handle

> of his bayonet and waiting tensely for the enemy's attack. It is hard to imagine that these serene, verdant woods, silent except for the chirping of birds, were once filled with the thunder of a terrific battle and that bursting shells scattered fire over the tops of the trees; that this ground over which we walk, now carpeted with soft grass and many colored flowers, was deeply stained with the blood of dead and wounded soldiers. Nature seems to forget even more quickly than men. [. . .]
>
> When we have finished our walk through the battle-field, we are taken to the American cemetery near-by. It is a large, smooth field, containing a sparkling multitude of white marble crosses, each marking the grave of an American soldier. As we walk among them, each of us lays a few flowers that he has picked upon the hill at the foot of the cross of a soldier from his native state. (*ibidem*)

With a journalistic eye that might not have escaped France's literary war journalist Albert Londres or Ernest Hemingway, who had that previous spring just left Paris and the Café de Paix that Williams visits in another essay, "A Festival Night in Paris," the young writer sees at once his immediate surroundings and sagaciously gleans their underlying meanings. Questions over which details are entirely factual, and which extrapolated fiction for aesthetics' sake, become meaningless in this borderland of literary war journalism where the dead bear the final weight of the truth.

Williams's *Memoirs* and the borderland between genius and madness

Among the ten pieces Williams wrote for the *U. City Pep*, one experience which would haunt the young Williams forever even failed to make an appearance among them – his trip to Cologne on an open-decked boat travelling along the Rhine River. Itself a highly contested geopolitical border and *borderland*, the Rhine, separating the French Alsatian plane from the German Black Forest, had recently been retroceded to France through the Treaty of Versailles, though the Germans would take it back again, briefly, during World War II. Riding astride this physical border of the Rhine and passing by the Lorelei Rock (for which the swimming pool he frequented in St. Louis was named, a detail that could not have escaped him), Williams was also riding along the conceptual border between fiction and nonfiction. Though he describes the journey in his final letter home, Williams is less forthcoming with certain details than he was in his earlier letters. In writing to his parents on 10 August about the "kindly" Germans, Williams is able to hide his brief brush with madness, an event whose narrative details may be partly fictionalized but whose actual occurrence is undoubtedly factual, given its several recurrences throughout Williams's life (and life-writing), for which he would seek professional psychiatric help.

Years later in his *Memoirs* – a genre of documentary nonfiction frequently elided with literary journalism – Williams recounted this absent detail of his trip – "the most dreadful, the most nearly psychotic, crisis" that had convinced him he was growing "quite mad".[6] He describes having experienced a "phobia" attack in Paris "about the process of thought" and its "complex mystery of human life," and two more in Cologne and Amsterdam, where "a

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truly phenomenal thing happened": "[...] the hand of our Lord Jesus had touched my head with mercy and had exorcized from it the phobia that was driving me into madness" (Williams [1975] 2006: 20, 21). He writes about the mystical experience in great depth in his *Memoirs* and with an attention to introspective detail not found in any of the travel essays or in his European letters home:

> At least a month of the tour was enveloped for me by this phobia about the processes of thought, and the phobia grew and grew till I think I was within a hairsbreadth of going quite mad from it.
>
> We took a beautiful trip down the winding river Rhine, from a city in Northern Prussia to the city of Cologne.
>
> On either side of our open-decked river boat were densely forested hills of deep green and on many of them were medieval castles with towers.
>
> I noticed all this, even though I was going mad.
>
> The principal tourist attraction of Cologne was its ancient cathedral, the most beautiful cathedral I have seen in my life. It was Gothic, of course, and for a cathedral in Prussia, it was remarkably delicate and lyrical in design.
>
> My phobia about thought processes had reached its climax.
>
> We entered the cathedral, the interior of which was flooded with beautifully colored light coming through the great stained-glass windows.
>
> Breathless with panic, I knelt down to pray.
>
> I stayed kneeling and praying after the party had left.
>
> Then a truly phenomenal thing happened.
>
> Let me say that I am not predisposed to believe in miracles or in superstitions. But what happened was a miracle and one of a religious nature and I assure you that I am not bucking for sainthood when I tell you about it. It was as if an impalpable hand were placed upon my head, and at the instant of that touch, the phobia was lifted away as lightly as a snowflake though it had weighed on my head like a skull-breaking block of iron.
>
> At seventeen, I had no doubt at all that the hand of our Lord Jesus had touched my head with mercy and had exorcised from it the phobia that was driving me into madness.
>
> Grandfather was always terribly frightened for me when I escaped from his sight and from the party of ladies. He was not a scolder, he was never severe, but he said, when I got back, "My goodness, Tom, what a scare you gave us when we returned to the bus and you were missing. A lady said you'd run out of the cathedral and we'd find you at the hotel."
>
> For about a week after that I was marvelously well and for the first time I began to enjoy my first trip to Europe. I still found the endless walking about art galleries to be interesting for only a few moments now and then, and dreadfully tiring, physically, for the rest.
>
> But the phobia about "thought process" was completely exorcised for about a week and the physical fatigue began to disappear with it.
>
> The final high-point of the tour was Amsterdam, or, more specifically, the Olympic games, which were being performed in Amsterdam that year. It was the equestrian competition that our

party attended and it was at this equestrian event that my phobia had a brief and minor reprise.

Having thought it permanently exorcised by the "miracle" in the cathedral of Cologne, I was terribly troubled by its fresh, though relatively minor recurrence.

That night I went out alone on the streets of Amsterdam and this time a second "miracle" occurred to lift the terror away. It occurred through my composition of a little poem. It was not a good poem except perhaps for the last two lines, but allow me to quote it, since it comes back easily to mind.

Strangers pass me on the street
in endless throngs: their marching feet,
sound with a sameness in my ears
that dulls my senses, soothes my fears,
I hear their laughter and their sighs,
I look into their myriad eyes:
then all at once my hot woe
cools like a cinder dropped on snow.

That little bit of verse with its recognition of being one among many of my kind – a most important recognition, perhaps the most important of all, at least in the quest for balance of Mind – that *recognition of being a member of multiple humanity with its multiple needs, problems and emotions, not a unique creature but one, only one among the multitude of its fellows*, yes, I suspect it's the most important recognition for us all to reach now, under all circumstances but especially those of the present. The moment of recognition that my existence and my fate could dissolve as lightly as the cinder dropped in a great fall of snow restored to me, in quite a different fashion, the experience in the cathedral of Cologne. And I wonder if it was not a sequel to that experience, an advancement of it: first, the touch of the mystic hand upon the solitary anguished head, and then the gentle lesson or demonstration that the head, despite the climactic crisis which it contained, was still a single head on a street thronged with many. (*idem*: 20-22, emphasis added)

The passage is worth citing here in its entirety for two essential reasons: first, because it contains a compilation of the factual evidence first encountered in his early letters home and in his ten travelogues, thus serving to corroborate history and distill it from the fictional elements of those texts; and second, because it extrapolates on the role recollection plays for a literary journalist in determining for himself what *was* factual and what was a potentially (re) constructed memory. Stephen Dedalus-like here, straight from Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and experiencing his own epiphany that culminates in the composition of a poem, Williams complicates in many ways the nonfiction story he had presented early in "A Day at the Olympics" about this same equestrian event. Perhaps it was because Williams's phobia had "at this equestrian event [...] a brief and minor reprise" that he was able to focus on the heated conversation between the French and Germans over where in the program they were at the time of Williams's arrival in the stands. Perhaps he was not ready yet to share that

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phobia story with potential readers, just as he had left the story out of his letter home. Perhaps he was only ready to divulge the personal details decades later in his *Memoirs*. Or perhaps the story itself was pure fiction.[7] Traditional hermeneutics alone, as we have seen, cannot provide a definitive answer to these weighty questions.

Border studies, however, might help, in particular a psychological reading that probes the shadowy borderland region between genius and madness – an irreverent, if potentially refuted, extension of border studies application. The product of the phobic experience, a poem – one even less artistically refined than Stephen's villanelle – is Williams's only means to capture the mystical experience; prose, fiction and nonfiction alike fail him entirely. It matters little *if* the event actually took place or not, or in the manner that Williams describes it, because it produced art in the end, and for Williams that is the most important result from any border crossing. Since Williams is willing now, years later, to discuss the incident publicly in his *Memoirs* only after he himself had undergone psychoanalysis in 1957 for what he called his "blue devils," his term for the madness that later claimed his sister Rose, it seems irrelevant to debate whether or not the experience happened just as Williams recalled it. Border studies is all about *relational* truths, as Sarah Green noted earlier. The borderland between Williams's fact and fiction, like that between his genius and madness, is not a question of epistemology but of ontology – "epistemologies made real" (Green 2012: 580). Williams believed, or had convinced himself to believe, that the mystical experience had happened just as he recounts it. Why should it matter to us in the end whether that experience was factual or fictive?

The context to Williams's nonfiction borders, then, is interdependent with those of his fiction, such as the poem he writes based on the experience. Spiritual or not, as Williams claims to have become from this transcendental moment, he once again demonstrates his ability to negotiate madness through his writing, an outlet he felt that Rose was ultimately denied in life. Encroaching madness would be a borderland he would live in for the remainder of his life, and literary journalism and life-writing both helped him negotiate his way through the troubled terrain that divides them.

Conclusion

In addition to the red shawl that he and his grandfather bought home for his mother, Williams brought back from Europe the memories, fears, and impressions that would preoccupy him for the rest of his career, if not his life. As much as Williams was eager to take his Grand Tour and see up close many of Europe's famed sights, he was equally interested in meeting the people responsible for the world's worse war to date. For this reason, the travelogue is less about the sights and sounds of Europe and more about the people who populate its lands – and its borderlands. To a certain extent, the focus of these literary journalistic pieces would translate directly into the writer's later literary aesthetic. He repeatedly said that all of his plays began with a character, and the plot evolved organically from his probing into that character's psyche. As evidence of Williams's understanding of literary journalism, the travelogue is circumstantial at best; but the ten pieces do evince the literary journalist's passion in Williams

for scene development, dialogue, and literary aesthetics. Perhaps more importantly, they also contradict theories behind literary journalism's presumed swan song in America at a time when objective journalism was just beginning to assert itself.

These ten, high school newspaper travel pieces that recount Williams's 1928 European tour with his grandfather, then, exemplify his skills at observation, analysis, and engaging narrative, three skills he had hoped would serve him well when he left St. Louis the following year to attend the University of Missouri. While at Mizzou, though, Williams was exposed to a journalistic standard that ran diametrically opposed to the one he had practiced in his travelogue. In one course assignment that he was given, for example, Williams was asked to write an obituary of a local doctor, but Williams could not get the facts straight. The typed, two-page assignment (hand-written at the top of the first page is "corr. in class") begins: "Yesterday morning the city of Midland suffered a bitter and irreplaceable loss in the death of one of its oldest and most honored citizens, Dr. Robert Jansen, who had a distinguished resident of this city for more than half a century" (Williams, *c.* 1931: [1]). The piece goes on to list Dr. Jensen's life-achievements, which earned Williams sharp criticism from his teacher for his "editorialization" in using phrases such as "a most unhappy attack" or "one of Midland's less principled newspaper" (Williams, *c.* 1931: [2]). Tellingly of the potential (or lack of it) that Williams had for objective journalism's rigor for accuracy is the fact that, while Dr. Jansen was a real person and Williams describes having gone to the house to cover his death, it was actually the professor's wife who had died, an error that cost Williams dearly in his class assessment (Leverich 1995: 126). Williams could not keep the literary out of his journalistic text, even those as banal in tone and in style as obituaries. Williams was never admitted into the school's Journalism program proper – and that was just as well for him and for us.

A short time later, after his father had forbidden him from returning to Mizzou, Williams expressed in a letter to grandfather, dated the summer of 1932, his "disappointment" with the journalism program at Missouri, and how he was now considering applying to Columbia University's School of Journalism, perhaps more for its proximity to Broadway than for its academic reputation. "[B]ut that may be hitching my wagon to too high a star," he admits. In retrospect, Williams was trying to hitch his wagon to the wrong star altogether:

> I was somewhat disappointed in the Missouri School of Journalism. They do not give the student a chance to do the type of writing he is best fitted for, but stick him with whatever job suits them. I was compelled to report quotations on the poultry market and undertakers notices most of the time my last term, which was not very edifying work. (Williams 2000: 65)

For Williams, it was clear that he was not cut out for journalism, for he complains in the same letter about not having time for "personal writing" to "type off a few short stories" or produce a few poems (*ibidem*). Or even producing more literary journalism, for that matter. Like many of his literary journalistic American brethren at the time, Williams had simply become a *Reporter sans frontières – avant la lettre*.

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NOTES

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[1] This article is based on an earlier talk presented during the panel "Literary Journalism and War: Words Bloody and Banal – II" at the Eighth International Conference for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS-8), University of Tampere, May 2013. Portions first appeared in Bak 2013: 10-17, and in Bak 2014: 1-3.

[2] Walter Dakin just notes in his 17 July 1928 letter to his wife, "We enjoyed the 'Follies' one night – way ahead of New York" (Dakin 1928: box 60, folder 13).

[3] Alsace and parts of Lorraine, retroceded to France in 1919 after World War I, were ceded again to Germany in 1940 during World War II, only to be retroceded once more to France in 1945.

[4] In February 1941, Williams was classified as IV-F by his draft board due to his poor eyesight, the result of a childhood injury. He had already experienced problems with the board dating back to late 1940, and he would later encounter run-ins with the local police when he failed to produce his draft card upon request. See Leverich 1995: 394; Williams 2000: 281-82; and Williams 2006: 299.

[5] See Williams, 2000: 11-21 (especially letters of 5 and 10 August 1928, where he talks about Montreux, Sorrento, Milan and Cologne, since they do not appear among his travel pieces). See also Walter Dakin's letters and postcards home to his wife and daughter, held at the HRC (Dakin 1928: box 60, folder 13). See also Williams [1975] 2006: 19-23, and Leverich 1995; 89-96.

[6] Williams writes in his *Memoirs* that

> the high-school paper, at the suggestion of my English teacher, invited me to narrate my European travels, which I did in a series of sketches, none containing a reference to the miracles of Cologne and Amsterdam nor the crisis, but nevertheless giving me a certain position among the student body, not only as the most bashful boy in school but as the only one who had traveled abroad. (Williams [1975] 2006: 23)

[7] Williams did make one earlier mention of the experience, which does lend credence to the story's authenticity. On 19 March 1936, for example, he writes in his private notebook: "Oh my, what a blissful exhaustion! I haven't felt quite like this since that night in Cologne or Amsterdam – when the crowds on the street were like cool snow to the cinder of my individual 'woe'. Over seven years ago" (Williams 2006: 19). Other textual evidence also provide some support, since the Williams archives at the Harry Ransom Center contains a typed version of the poem, dated "Amsterdam, Holland, 1930" (Williams 1930: [1]) – the incorrect date, however, does suggest that Williams recomposed the poem from memory at some later date, perhaps even several years, like his notebook entry.

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