

Note from the Editor...

From my perspective, the collection of articles on Norwegian literary reportage in this issue accomplishes two things. First, and obviously, it provides a clear demonstration of that country's tradition in this genre. Perhaps the tradition has not been as brash, boisterous, and swaggering as the American New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, it is there.



Second, the Norwegian experience provides evidence supporting a supposition that has been very much a part of this journal's mission since the first issue in 2009: that literary journalism, literary reportage, reportage literature, the New Journalism, and whatever other variations, cultural and linguistic, have been practiced but not adequately recognized in countries small and large.

The Norwegian tradition, like the American, precedes the New Journalism. To some extent the New Journalism of some forty to fifty years ago helped to awaken or reawaken interest in a supra-genre (given again the host of cultural and linguistic versions and variants) that had long existed in some form. Nonetheless, there is a tradition in Norway extending back into the nineteenth century, much like the American and Russian, among others.¹ I use it as a prod to ask what other traditions are out there that deserve study? Part of the issue we confront is the continuing need to look beyond the disciplinary blinders we impose on ourselves—for example, that literature is composed of the trinity of three genres, fiction, poetry, and drama. Or, consider traditional journalism studies which long ago associated itself with the social sciences, and that it must be “objective.” In its referentiality, literary journalism/reportage, et al., does not make a claim to scientific objectivity, given the heightened subjectivity in the discourse reflected in the “shaping consciousness” of the journalist, as Ronald Weber so concisely expressed it.² Because it did not make such a claim, the genre(s) where literature and journalism meet could only be relegated further to the disciplinary margins.

To be sure, we cannot equate one-on-one Norwegian literary reportage and its variants with other traditions such as the American. What readers will discover is that there are similarities but also very much differences in content and critical perspectives. It comes back to culture and language, and the exchange between the two. Those differences and perspectives are important to recognize because their examination helps scholars in the field see just how fragile can be our certitudes. But examining the frailties—and differences of view point—can only make the field of inquiry more robust as we learn to appreciate more thoroughly its nuances.

I would make a further observation. I have watched over the years the growing perception that before a modern narrative literary journalism emerged or began

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emerging in the (especially late) nineteenth century, its forerunners included in no small measure, and perhaps in very large measure, travelogue and travel writing—as long as the dominant modalities were narrative and descriptive. We see this again as Jo Bech-Karlsen in the first article draws an approximate boundary between the modern Norwegian phenomenon and earlier narra-descriptive travelogue and travel writing. Charles A. Laughlin dedicated an entire chapter in his *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* to the subject of travelogue/travel writing's role as a progenitor of Chinese reportage literature.³ Isabel Soares intimated this in her “*South: Where Travel Meets Literary Journalism*,” in the first issue of this journal in 2009 when discussing the work of a Portuguese author.⁴ Katrina J. Quinn did so similarly in her article in vol. 3, no. 1 when discussing an example of epistolary journalism from nineteenth-century America that was also travelogue or travel writing.⁵ We detect it indirectly in a compromise made in Keven Kerrane and Ken Yagoda's rich anthology *The Art of Fact*, when travelogue is consciously excluded but nonetheless exceptions are made.⁶ Exceptions, of course, reveal the tenuousness of the discrete generic boundaries we attempt to create. The first time, if I recall correctly, I detected this relationship between narrative literary journalism and travelogue/travel writing in English was in examining accounts of exploration and discovery from the sixteenth century, as well as accounts that came later.⁷

Thus scholars in different times and places mutually detect evidence of a fundamental relationship between travelogue/travel writing and narrative literary journalism. Does this mean that they are one and same? No, I think that would be overreaching. Certainly, they can have in common what I have liked to characterize as “the common sense-appeal of the shared common senses,”⁸ even if the shared sense-appeals may elicit slightly varying responses, and sometimes not so slightly varying.

But somehow it would be unjust and even morally suspect to characterize *Hiroshima* as travelogue or travel writing given the sheer terrifying magnitude of the event and its (literally) existential dimensions. Nor, of course, need all travelogue be narra-descriptive in its modalities by invoking the common sense-appeal of the shared common senses. One can have narrative summary—a rote recitation of landmarks along the way on the journey without the lush reconstruction of evocative rhetorical appeal to the senses.

What then do we have? I have long believed that when one comes to genre classification it is a mistake to too earnestly emphasize discrete categories: Here you have fiction, here you have poetry, here you have drama, here you have journalism, here you have history, etc. This is because the Linnaean classification of the material world does not work so well when imposed on the fluidity of language. It is not that classification is not useful, but that such classification is approximate at best and runs the risk of ignoring nuance. Perhaps we would do better to view genres as having different functions. As I have long suggested, “Travel narratives, on their face, belong to a topical genre. The kind of literary journalism under discussion here, on the other hand, is fundamentally a modal genre, that of narrative,” to which today I would add with strong emphasis the descriptive. “It depends upon if they are approached as topical or modal genres.”⁸ The same can be said of the topical genre of crime writing,

as well as other topical genres. All of which means, of course, that they can overlap with a modal genre. It depends on whether one approaches such works topically or modally.

There were undoubtedly practical reasons not to open up the Kerrane and Yagoda anthology to an extensive collection of narra-descriptive travelogue and travel writing (and I recognize that travelogue and travel writing can mean different things in other languages and cultures; I only present them as I know them as a native speaker of Amglish). The sheer volume of narra-descriptive travelogue would likely overwhelm and overshadow those compelling examples that make no such topical claim (for example, *Hiroshima*). And as we know a narrative literary journalism has long had to live in the at-times overwhelming shadows of other genres perceived (erroneously, I think) as more culturally central to discourse. The danger would be if we viewed travelogue and travel writing, a topical genre, as one and the same as a narrative literary journalism. The compelling *Hiroshimas* of the world would be overwhelmed.

There is, however, another reason why travelogue and a narrative literary journalism cannot be so discretely separated. When we keep a narrative account we keep a journal or journalism. When we travel, in all the meanings such a term can evoke, we journey. And the common Latin root for these in English is the diurnal, or the passage or journey of the day. After all, the Latin for journalist is *diurnarius*. Thus John Hersey's *Hiroshima* is a journal or journalism of a journey (consisting in that instance of a number of days) in all its existential meaning. We see it in Gunnar Larsen's Norwegian murder account discussed in this issue. We see it in the controversial *Bookseller of Kabul* by Norwegian Åsne Seierstad.

It would stretch the imagination to characterize all such works as travelogue and travel writing, especially given the versions of travelogue and travel writing that are frivolous and designed for the professional tourist who has no desire to mix their subjectivities with the cultural Other, a prerequisite for a compelling narrative literary journalism in my view. Look at some of the travel slicks, or feature stories in travel sections of newspapers, which invariably present the formula of living the illusion of escape sensationalized with some modest danger posing as an existential danger ("As I cast my fly for the elusive mountain trout, I slipped on a slippery stream stone and plunged into the icy alpine waters much to my embarrassment and peals of laughter of my wife." When a St. Bernard shows up with a flagon of brandy, our hero has the happy ending of an epiphany that, as edelweiss waves to the summer alpine breeze and goat bells tinkle to the tune of "The Sound of Music," encourages you to plunk down \$2,000 for a ticket to the Swiss Alps). *Hiroshima* was not frivolous and designed for tourists. Nor were Larsen's and Seirstad's accounts. But we can say that they are all (including the frivolous) about taking journeys, real or imagined. It is just that some are more compelling, even profound, such as the existential journey of atom bomb victims seeking to survive. Or the existential journey of murderers to the gallows. Camus (*The Stranger*) and Capote would have something to say about that. As would Norwegian Gunar Larsen reporting the suicide of one of the killers (the other would go to prison, which presumably poses its own unique existential quandary). After all,

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in the face of death, as William Barrett observed, life has an ultimate value.⁹

Undoubtedly there is a close association between literary journalism that is narra-descriptive, and travelogue/travel writing that is narra-descriptive. And as efforts continue to explore the origins of modern literary reportage or journalism (in all their variations), the accounts of journeys will likely continue to be one major progenitor as well as, at times, example.

But then that is what our excerpts by Knut Hamsun are about. Hamsun is probably better known outside Norway as the author of the existential, and indeed nihilistic, novel *Hunger* (1890), and is considered one of the founders of literary modernism. But he was also a practitioner of a narra-descriptive journalism that is at the same time a narra-descriptive travelogue, in this case his 1904 *In Wonderland*. While it reflects its era, replete with the kind of value judgments one finds in turn-of-the-twentieth-century European Orientalism, at the least it is also an early proto-literary reportage. It includes a fascinating trip to the Baku oil fields where the Nobel brothers, including the eponymous Alfred, made their fortunes. Such is where narrative meets the descriptive, or a journalism of the journey through time and space.

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NOTES

1. John C. Hartsock, "Literary Reportage: The 'Other' Literary Journalism," in *Literary Journalism Across the Globe*, ed. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 23–46.
2. Ronald Weber, "Some Sort of Artistic Excitement," in *The Reporter as Artist*, ed. Ronald Weber (New York: Hastings House, 1974), 20.
3. Charles A Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), chapter 1.
4. Isabel Soares, "South: Where Travel Meets Literary Journalism," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 17–30.
5. Katrina J. Quinn, "Exploring an Early Version of Literary Journalism: Nineteenth-century Epistolary Journalism," *Literary Journalism Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 33–51.
6. Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, eds., *The Art of Fact* (New York: Scribner's, 1997), 14.
7. John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 102, 120–21, 128–31.
8. *Ibid.*, 71.
9. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), 124.