Note from the Editor . . .

Has Europa gone . . . Gonzo?

"Why would I *not*?" I mused, as I surveyed what had come across my desk. There it was, something of what had been a puzzle for me—some evidence of a tradition in literary journalism I had long either guessed at, surmised, or pipe-dreamed about. Having studied my own national literature in literary journalism, I was often left to speculate: Surely there must be more beyond my own national boundaries with which I had long circumscribed my scholarly world? Because I often recall an important object lesson, how what was called the *New* Journalism in the 1960s and early 1970s was in fact hardly new. I understand, of course, why so many, such as Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote, believed that it was (although in fairness to Wolfe, he did acknowledge a 1930s version—dismissively, as if it were only a Neanderthal-like proto-literary journalism). Otherwise, there was no reason to believe that there had been a literary journalism prior to the 1960s.

That was one reason why I had speculated in recent years about the possibilities of the genre's international practice. Just because we may not know about it doesn't mean it's not out there, somewhere. Slowly, I began to find scattered evidence—Victor Hugo's account, for example, of the flight of King Louis Phillippe, Turgenev's hunting sketches, the international proletarian (and tendentious) writer's movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

Then on my desk landed Bernhard Poerksen's article on the Gonzo version of literary journalism published in the German magazine *Tempo* in the 1980s and 1990s (see page 9). Imagine a magazine that sends out a reporter to take lessons on how to be a dominatrix. Or a writer who locks himself up in a basement for a week and insists on no contact with the world in order to understand the nature of solitary confinement. Then there was the editor who offered her services as a surrogate mother in order to demonstrate "how unborn life is bartered in Germany." And clearly this stuff was "over the top."

Next, Maria Lassila-Merisalo's examination of Finnish reporter Esa Kero's literary reportage, also published in the 1980s, showed up. To provide an advance story for prospective summer vacationers about vacation hot spots in Finland, Kero goes over the top when during his travels he focuses on (or revels in) the bars he stops at in the declining, dreary Finnish winter. Similarly, his article "Bangkok," republished here (see page 31), is a bit over the top when he writes in first person about his personal encounters in the houses of prostitution in Bangkok—at the expense of his *machismo*. "Over the top"—that metaphoric leap into the outrageous and absurd born of the trenches on the Western Front—is what I've come to expect of Gonzo.

Then there is Arnon Grunberg of the Netherlands. He is one of Holland's most distinguished novelists who clearly is also a literary reporter in his account of visiting the Dutch army in Afghanistan (see page 49). His

capacity to go beyond the conventional "objective" approach of journalism to detect the ironies, paradoxes, and ultimately absurdities of human experience—such as a Burger King in a war zone—takes us over the top in challenging the safety of journalistic convention (and I imagine with a sense of wonder, while nibbling at my Whopper, *Oh, look . . . there goes another whizz-bang"*—democratic capitalism insinuating itself into the battlefield; but then it always has).

All of which left me with this thought: Had Europa gone . . . Gonzo?

Of course, these are only three examples (although, see my discussion later in this note about Ruth Palmer's examination of Emmanuel Carrère's *The Adversary*—France, at least, gets a supporting role). Yet, these examples leave one to speculate about what others may lie out there that have yet to be acknowledged. Either because journalism convention has for so long dominated, emphasizing "Just the facts, ma'am. Just the facts," while all hell was breaking loose around an empathetically oblivious journalist. Or, because the canon of literary genres—fiction, poetry, and drama—have for too long excluded consideration of literary journalism and its Gonzo variant from serious study in the literature academy. *J'accuse*, as Zola said.

So, why would I not want to dedicate an issue to some aspect of Gonzo, however it may be configured, in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands (with France having a supporting role)?

The concept of Gonzo as reflected in our special issue is more complex than first meets the eye, however. Of course, by invoking it we invoke the late Hunter S. Thompson, long credited as the founder of Gonzo journalism, a journalism that self-consciously goes over the top in challenging sacred conventions, and in the challenge lies a journalistic end in itself. For Thompson it was often drug-induced, and I'm not suggesting that is the case with the examples in this issue, although with the German magazine *Tempo* drugs did play a role in at least one of its articles. And Thompson is indeed acknowledged as one influence on *Tempo.*

But as a reflection of just how complex the understanding of Gonzo gets, I did notice that there can be a tendency to conflate Gonzo as New Journalism, instead of as one part of the larger genre as is usually the case in the United States. We see this conflation with *Tempo*. And there is no doubt that Kero has strong Gonzo qualities—after all, he abjures conventional punctuation. It's equally clear that Grunberg seeks out the absurd, as he reveals in an interview with Frank Harbers (see page 72). In other words, it appears at least from this evidence that notions of the New Journalism that traveled across the ocean to an eager audience in Europe reflected the gorgeous outrageousness of Thompson "going over the top" (and I imagine a lean, rabid, younger Hunter, under the influence, flinging himself over the top into the machinegun bullets, then being shot out of a cannon, which of course happened with his ashes after he was cremated).

But to take such a position would be to repeat the same mistake early critics of the New Journalism made when they said it was new: Just because we may not know that it exists, doesn't mean it's not out there, somewhere, in some fashion.

In reality, such outrageous challenges to convention have long been a part of human inquiry—whether journalistic or literary. It might be truer to say that "Gonzo" simply helped to provide a re-articulation of an old tradition that must indeed be tribal in origins—the need to play the "mischief," as Lassila-Merisalo so astutely observes of Kero, that naughty "Finnish" (substitute whatever nationality you want here) boy who embraced the whore house (what nationality of men hasn't?), then told all of Finland about it—again at the expense of his *machismo*. Therein, curiously, lies its universality.

Instead of Thompson's Gonzo being the origin of the species, Gonzo is in fact part of something larger: a resistance to cant, to bureaucratism, to the comfort of the structured (read: "restrictive") social code, accumulating the irrational and the absurd in its creaking joints until they burst out in what Mikhail Bakhtin characterized as the carnival of the grotesque in his discussion of Rabelais, and which indeed is still reflected in the ontological outrageousness of *Carnivale* in Rio. Consider *The Big Room* by Edwin Estlin Cummings (otherwise known as the lower-cased American poet e.e. cummings), published in 1922. It is a picaresque account of a French military prison during World War I, where, for example, Cummings and his fellow inmates surreptitiously dump pails of inmate urine on the warden's prized roses. As Sartre observed, you can always silently say "*Non*" in the face of the totalitarian oppression as a fundamental assertion of your dignity. Just don't tell your warden.

But such Gonzo is of course equally part of an "Old" World tradition. There are, for example, the French "physiologies" of the early nineteenth century, both fictional and journalistic, and some in between, in which the *flâneur*, the strolling, cynical observer, challenged social pretense. The rest of Europe would copy the French model. Before that there was *Tristram Shandy* (fiction), and Ned Ward of London (journalism). There is the entire tradition of the *picaro*—the rascal, the rogue—emerging out of Spain and sweeping the Continent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And Rabelais's Gargantua pissing on Paris. There are the medieval "Songs from Beuern"—the *Carmina Burana* of drunken, lusting monks. Then, still earlier, the Saxon god Puck, the Scandinavian trickster Loki, the Greek Pan and his satyrs. And there is the legend of Europa who was seduced by Zeus in the form of a white bull. To which one might respond, "Yeah, right . . . what *cannabis* was she smoking?" (I imagine this is how it started: *"But Daddy, I swear it was a big white bull who said he was Zeus."* So, she was banished from Tyre, and followed the currents to the land that would bear her name, in search of her god.) In any event, all were perceived as mischiefs because the tribe understood that cultural convention inevitably would be upended by what it could not comprehend—and control. Thus, those naughty, lusting Bavarian (or were they Tyrolean?) monks. Or the Dutch army sergeant who goes into battle with a pair of his girlfriend's panties in his pocket. They are saying "*Non*" or "*Nein*" or "*No*" in confronting the inevitable, all-consuming demands (totalitarian in their finality) of mortal existence, because they understand at whatever level of consciousness the tragic implications of the Cosmic comedy, and the carnival of the grotesque.

Hunter Thompson, in reality, was just one more devotee of this rich

storytelling tradition that goes back to before the written record. As were the efforts at *Tempo*, and the work of Kero and Grunberg. So that what we have here in this issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* is an effort to try to understand the phenomenon—on European terms. To be sure, there have been transnational influences. But they are influences that precede national boundaries, once you trace them back. At the least, they are trans-tribal.

So, has Europa gone Gonzo? Perhaps. But more important, Gonzo is merely an acknowledgment of what was always there. And as Grunberg notes, he's never heard of Gonzo. Nor had Kero heard of the New Journalsim. Instead, they are and were responding to something deeper, something that has always existed in our DNA, our desire to sometimes simply say, as Thompson might have said, "The system is . . . [*insert your metaphorical Gonzo expletive of choice here*]." Simply, we have a need, at least culturally, to account in language for what cannot be accounted for rationally—that eviscerating rational world divided into the seemingly discrete categories of the social scientist; how convenient life would be, indeed, if that were truly the case.

Hence why we need literary journalism, this confrontation between our phenomenal world—the stone that Johnson kicked to refute Berkeley—and the world of language in the attempt to capture the aesthetics of experience.

One of the rewards of editing this journal is to see how rapidly it has become accepted. For example, Poerksen takes note of how the concept of the New Journalism was not only a manner of writing, but also a cultural way of looking at the world, and in doing so he cites "Recovering the Peculiar Life and Times of Tom Hedley" from our first issue. Similarly, Palmer picks up on the theme of the "uncanny" in literary journalism, a subject introduced again in that first inaugural issue. Palmer takes it in a new direction in her article, "The Hoax, Uncanny Identity, and Literary Journalism" (see page 81). What I sense is a wonderful critical ferment among scholars now that there is a place for the scholarship of literary journalism.

Moreover, it's a place where we can discover other traditions. Even in the case of Palmer's article we can add to the international flavor of this issue's discussion because of her examination of Carrère's *Adversary*. I remember several years ago a French colleague telling me that there was not a French tradition of literary journalism. Perhaps there is not one recognized by the journalism and literature academies. But like so much literary journalism, Carrère's work reflects another reality. Once again, just because we are not aware, doesn't mean it's not out there, somewhere.

At the same time we must be cautious as scholars and not let our imaginations run *too* wild, choosing what we wish to believe in advance of the evidence. Instead, we must let it accumulate and see where it will take us. In that, we have something in common with journalists, literary or otherwise.

— *John C. Hartsock*