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“Billy walked and I rode”: John and William Bartram Roam the World Over

Laurence Machet & Lee Schweninger

“He fancied it was right and requisite, as well for the support of his own honour as for the service of his country, that he should make a knight-errant of himself, roaming the world over...”¹

In 1765 American-born naturalist John Bartram (1699-1777) –through the influence of his patron and friend, London merchant Peter Collinson– received a royal appointment to explore and chart the land that Great Britain had recently acquired from Spain (essentially present-day Florida). John promptly sent a letter to his son William (1739-1823), cajoling the twenty-six year old into accompanying him on this journey of exploration: “as thee wrote to me last winter & seemed so very desirous to go there: now thee hath A fair opertunity so pray let me know as soon as possible.”²

Nothing seemed to predestine the relatively uneducated son of a Quaker farmer born in 1699 near Philadelphia to become the most famous American botanist of the period and have one of his children, William, follow in his footsteps. Yet, from somewhat humble beginnings, the Bartrams, father and son, achieve what might be called heroic stature. What lay before them was literally an unmapped country and figuratively an essentially unmapped field of study, the relatively new science of botany.³ They were pioneers in their field, and as pioneers they had to face the dangers of disease, wild beasts, and the occasional hostility of Native Americans.⁴ Travel was difficult and expensive; roads were often mere trails if they existed at all; and camping gear was

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- 1 Cervantes Miguel de, *Don Quixote* (1605), trans. John Ormsby, 1922, chapter one, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/996/pg996-images.html>, accessed August 19, 2015.
 - 2 Letter from Bartram, John to Bartram William, 7 June 1765, in *The Correspondence of John Bartram, 1734-1777*, Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley (Eds), Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1992, p. 652.
 - 3 Carl Linnaeus published *Species Plantarum*, the book which marks the beginnings of modern botanical nomenclature in 1753, exactly the time John and Billy were exploring the Catskill Mountains and searching for and discovering species new to them.
 - 4 John Bartram’s father, William, Sr., had been killed by Indians in 1711.

heavy and cumbersome. Despite all obstacles, however, John Bartram became a competent and esteemed botanist, deemed by Carl Linnaeus, for example, as “the greatest natural botanist in the world.”⁵ Later, of course, John’s son William became an even more accomplished artist and better-known writer, as well as a botanist in his own right. Throughout his career as traveler and botanist, however, the son remained cognizant of his father’s importance and legacy, and he acknowledges his debt to him.

Reading the Bartram’s published travel accounts as well as several posthumously published letters, we make a multi-fold argument in this paper. In the footsteps of several recent autobiography theorists, we maintain that in the Bartrams’ autobiographical travel accounts, as in any other autobiographical writing, the “self” or the “I” of the narrative is “a construct, a persona, not the person,”⁶ and this hypothesis allows us to maintain that the two authors construct personas in their respective travel accounts (as well as in other writings, including personal letters). Taken this way, one can argue that John Bartram renders his son William as a sort of sidekick through sometimes humorous accounts on what are very much the father’s exploratory journeys, at first through the Catskills and later through the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Similarly, this method allows us to suggest that William presents a persona in his own first-person travel account, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* (1791)⁷, a presentation which enables him to describe himself as a self-sufficient, fully competent traveler in his own right as he ultimately travels independently from his father. William certainly becomes the heroic traveler he describes, but at the same time, by his own telling, the man presented in this travel account never actually loses sight of his father. Thus by combining a somewhat literary analysis of these historical documents we explore the two naturalists’ relationships with each other in terms of principal and sidekick, mentor and mentee, father and son, as well as fellow botanists. This combination of methods ultimately allows us to argue that on a certain level the motif of the sidekick is present in these naturalists’ autobiographical travel accounts

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- 5 Duyker Edward, *Nature’s Argonaut. Daniel Solander 1733-1782*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 1988, p. 66.
 - 6 Barros Carolyn A., *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1998, p. 20. See also Jay Paul, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984; Morris John, *Versions of the Self*, New York, Basic Books, Inc. 1966; Olney James, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972; Sayre Robert, *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964; Spacks Patricia Meyer, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976; and Sprinker Michael, *Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.
 - 7 Bartram William, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida*, Philadelphia, 1791. Rpt. *Travels*, Francis Harper (Ed.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958. This edition hereafter referred to as *Travels*.

and that the two authors of these accounts create literary personas, personas which relish humor, irony, and perhaps occasional hyperbole. In this sense, they thus profit from and contribute to the tradition of literary and cultural side-kicks. Our own exploration, we argue, can help readers appreciate the special relationship between father and son and provide a fuller understanding of their interdependence than has been articulated to date. It also allows us to appreciate anew the respective contributions the Bartrams have made to American history, to botany, and to letters.

In the context of autobiography, it has become a commonplace to argue that the "self" described is necessarily a construct, a representation. The writer makes choices concerning what aspects of a life to include, what to emphasize, and what to leave out altogether. These decisions alone suggest the creation of a persona. In *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation* Carolyn A. Barros, writes that "the construction of... autobiography is clearly a conscious act"⁸. Further, she stipulates, "when Morris speaks of a 'version' of the self, he is assuming that the self of autobiography is a form, a rendering, an account of the self that can take many shapes, or when Spacks posits the self as 'imagined,' or 'imaged,' she is indicating, again, that the self appears in autobiography as a creation. When Olney contends that Carl Jung's 'metaphor of self' is myth, he is arguing that Jung both saw his life and inscribed that life in *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* as myth."⁹ When Sprinker speaks of 'fictions of the self,' he is explaining how the self of a text is an 'articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time'¹⁰. Such self-conscious constructions of the self are not limited to autobiographical writing, of course.

Readers see similar tendencies and characteristics among writers in other genres as well. Even in a private correspondence or diary accounts of travel experiences, one can argue, the author creates a persona. In the context of early American writing generally, according to David Shields, "private societies [such as societies for the promotion of practical knowledge] were instrumental in the formation of the public sphere, and their modes of discourse necessary to the creation of public opinion."¹¹ A fine instance of such early American constructions is evident in the writings of the well-known Benjamin Franklin, John Bartram's American contemporary, friend and correspondent. Franklin biographer Jeff Osborne suggests that once written, "the self is rendered textual" and is thus read by a public "which judges it according to the specific

8 Barros Carolyn A., *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation*, p. 19.

9 See Jung Carl & Jaffé Aniela, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1963.

10 Barros Carolyn A., *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation*, p. 20.

11 Shields David S., *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p. xv.

set of social codes available to it.” In this context, then, “Franklin’s recognition that the self functions as print allowed him the coincident insight into the function of the self in the public eye.”¹² (emphasis ours). In this sense, the private self necessarily becomes –or is simultaneously– a public self. According to Stephanie Volmer, “in the eighteenth century [letters] bridged the public and private spheres of knowledge. There was an implicit assumption that letters would be exchanged and shared within one’s epistolary community... [L]etters were frequently excerpted and published in periodicals.”¹³ Hence –in addition to sharing and exchanging knowledge– letter writers knew full well that there was a need for creating a persona, a character they were willing to present to the scrutiny of a public eye.

Scholars have made similar assertions in reference to the writings of John Bartram, who was aware that his letters to Peter Collinson were often either read before the Royal Society in London –the attendance of which grew large after the 1740s¹⁴– or circulated among the London merchant’s circle of friends. In an essay in which he highlights issues of Quaker literary self-representation, James Peacock writes that John Bartram’s writings, especially his letters, advertise “a traditional Quaker problem: the imperfect transmission of the self and its spiritual ideas through the debased language of man.” Bartram’s correspondence with Collinson, Peacock continues, provides “fascinating insights into John Bartram as a Quaker, a botanist, and most importantly an American keen to define himself in amicable opposition to his English counterpart [Collinson].”¹⁵ (our emphasis). What is perhaps most interesting in our context here is the attribution of self-awareness on Bartram’s part in his defining a self. In our own explorations of the self-representations of John and William Bartram, it is that constructed self, that persona, which we are investigating. Thus we are, in a sense, interested in the intersection of literary and historical writing, arguing for their underlying similarities. According to Jacques Derrida, for example, “In both expression and indicative communication the difference between reality and representation, between the true and the imaginary, and between simple presence and repe-

12 Osborne Jeff, “Benjamin Franklin and the Rhetoric of Virtuous Self-Fashioning in Eighteenth-Century America”. *Literature and History* 17.2 (2008): p. 14-30, (19).

13 Volmer Stephanie “Taste, ‘Curiosity,’ and the Letters of John Bartram and Peter Collinson”, in *America’s Curious Botanist: A Tercentennial Reappraisal of John Bartram*. Nancy E. Hoffmann and John C. Van Horne (Eds.), Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 2004: p. 67-76, (69).

14 Stearns, Raymond Phineas, *Science in the British Colonies of America*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1970, p. 96.

15 Peacock James, “Who was John Bartram? Literary and Epistolary Representations of the Quaker”, in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* 9.1 (April 2005): p. 29-44. Rpt. electronically 2007: [http://repository.keele.ac.uk:8080/intralibrary/open_virtual_file_path/i8477n165423t/9.1Peacock\[1\].pdf](http://repository.keele.ac.uk:8080/intralibrary/open_virtual_file_path/i8477n165423t/9.1Peacock[1].pdf), 3, 12. Accessed August 19, 2015.

tion has always already begun to be effaced."¹⁶ In our context, we argue that this overlap helps readers of Bartram appreciate the reciprocal relationship between the Bartrams' writings and their historical moment.

In arguing the effacement of difference between historical and literary creations, we are ready to look at specific aspects of the general definition of sidekick, most particularly the notion of sidekick as underling who learns from the hero and at the same time acquires or possesses qualities or characteristics that complement that hero's. The sidekick serves to highlight a specific aspect of his counterpart, and can ultimately in some ways even overshadow or out perform him. On their first recorded journey together, we see John depict his son William as an underling who accompanies the father on excursions into the wilds, and—according to historian and Bartram biographer Francis Harper, for example—William "seems to have had a very humble part as his father's assistant on the present journey."¹⁷ Despite a somewhat unequal pairing and the father's initially representing the boy as thoroughly a pupil, the father is at the same time careful to include hints that his son is nevertheless a faithful, competent companion who definitely has promise. But it was perhaps the first of several exploratory excursions that laid the groundwork for Billy to become William, the author of *Travels*, mentioned above, one of the most important and widely read travel accounts by a naturalist-botanist in eighteenth-century America. We maintain here, however, that William's later success and renown as travel writer and artist, and even his career as botanist and gardener, remain very much dependent upon the father's earlier tutelage; that is, William repeatedly represents himself in large measure as the product of his apprenticeship with his father.

During the eighteenth century, botany became a favorite pastime of members of the British gentry and nobility; these men were fascinated by the exotic discoveries made in the colonies and displayed in published works such writers as Mark Catesby. John Bartram's own interest in botany, which he turned into a profitable seed business, may have had its origins in his religious background, Quakers being educated to recognize plants. Indeed, Friends founder George Fox (1624-91) is said to have advocated that all Quaker schools should provide education in plants: "Fox, in conjunction with Penn and others wanted to establish a school in London replete with a botanical garden. He subsequently bequeathed a plot of land to the Friends' meeting in Philadelphia for this purpose."¹⁸ Meanwhile, in 1733, the British cloth merchant Peter Collinson,

16 Derrida Jacques, "Speech and Phenomena" [La Voix et le phénomène, 1967], in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Peggy Kamuf (Ed.), New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 6-30 (11).

17 Bartram, John, *Diary of a Journey through the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida from July 1st 1765 to April 10, 1766*, Rpt. American Philosophical Society, New Series; p. 33, part 1 (December 1942), annotated by Francis Harper, p. 81. This edition hereafter referred to as *Diary*.

18 Greaves Richard L., "The Early Quakers as Advocates of Educational Reform" in *Quaker*

an amateur botanist and Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS), started a correspondence with John Bartram who was to supply him with plants and seeds for his own garden. In these contexts, then, the historical Bartrams became important contributors to the era's interest in botany.

Whatever the genesis of John Bartram's interest in and knowledge of plants, his plant collecting for Collinson necessitated a correspondence, and that correspondence soon outgrew the merely friendly exchange of letters between two fellow Quakers. Collinson became a sort of middleman for Bartram, who ended up providing specimens for the British gentry, as well as for nurserymen and scientists in Great Britain. In spite of his geographical isolation, John Bartram found himself at the center of a cultural and scientific network that enabled him to finance his botanical expeditions, accounts of which he then sent to Peter Collinson and/or published, most often through Collinson's connections. John Bartram's son William in turn engaged in the same activities as his father, ultimately producing the book *Travels*, a detailed account of his four-year long exploration of the Southeastern colonies.

When examining the accounts by John and William Bartram alongside each other, one cannot help but notice the differences in approach to both travel itself and to the method of recounting that travel. It has been repeatedly argued that for John, exploratory travels that kept him away from his large family and home were dictated not only by his acknowledged passion for botany,¹⁹ but first and foremost by economic necessity. His very pragmatic concerns, at odds with the image of the hero he at times endeavored to construct, are evident throughout his letters to Collinson but are also very much apparent in the no-nonsense, matter-of-fact style of his travel narratives themselves. Bartram scholar William Scheick, writes that John

Bartram's weak formal education left him ill –equipped for written expression, and in fact he never did learn to spell, to compose well– structured sentences, to range in vocabulary, or to devise a conscious stylistic manner. Even several of his friends and correspondents who highly regarded his knowledge –Peter Collinson and Peter Kalm, for example– explicitly criticized Bartram's apparent limitations as a writer.²⁰

Keenly self-aware of his plain style and awkward grammar, John Bartram turned this apparent deficiency into an asset, posing as a spokesperson for nature. He repeatedly presents himself as the heroic and often solitary explorer who refuses civilization's artifices in order to be closer to truth. Indeed, as he

History, 58:1 (Spring 1969): p. 22-30 (28).

19 John Bartram writes that "...ye Botanick fire set me in such a flame as is not to be quenched until death..." Letter from John Bartram to Templeman, July 6th 1761 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 525).

20 Scheick William J., "Telling a Wonder: Dialectic in the Writings of John Bartram", in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 107.2 (April 1, 1983): p. 235-248 (235).

writes to Collinson in 1754, "Good grammar and good spelling, may please those that are more taken with a fine superficial flourish than real truth; but my chief aim was to inform my readers of the true, real, distinguishing characters of each genus, and where, and how, each species differed from one another, of the same genus."²¹

By asserting that he maintains his simple writing style for the sake of exactitude, he also creates the persona of the objective scientist. This creation is apparent in his diaries, especially in *Diary of a Journey through the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida from July 1st 1765 to April 10, 1766*, sections of which were published in London in 1769. His entries systematically start with a daily temperature reading followed by additional remarks on the weather and geological and botanical surveys: "Thermometer 77. Lovely clear morning. Walked out of donahoos Creek to search for fossils with billy..."²². But in spite of the terse style, mention of the obstacles encountered, as if merely in passing, enables the reader to picture John Bartram as an almost heroic figure: the rocks he and Billy have to climb are "of very large dimensions," with "great cavities"; he and Billy kill "a Mocasine snake," i.e. a poisonous and thus dangerous viper, and at midday, the storm and thunder rage²³. This narrative pattern repeats itself over and over, and it enables John Bartram to create the persona of the devoted and fearless scientist working tirelessly for the advancement of knowledge, albeit with the assistance of a faithful apprentice-companion, his son Billy.

As early as 1742, John Bartram recounts for his friends in Britain the dangers he typically faced on his trips, and he complains about the absence of an assistant by his side:

I can't find one that will bear the fatigue to accompany me on my peregrinations. Therefore, consequently, thee may suppose I am often exposed to solitary and difficult traveling beyond our inhabitants, and often under dangerous circumstances, in passing over rivers, climbing over mountains and precipices amongst the rattlesnakes and often obliged to follow the track or path of wild beasts for my guide through these desolate and gloomy thickets.²⁴

The self-representation he indulges in here, in addition to that of the scientist, is that of the solitary hero fending for himself in the wilderness. He does however acknowledge that he would welcome an assistant to face the same throes he faces, and he ultimately finds just such an assistant in the person of

21 Letter from John Bartram to Peter Collinson, 3rd November 1754 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 374-375).

22 Bartram John, *Diary*, p. 18.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Letter from John Bartram to Alexander Calcott, 26th May 1742 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 324).

his son, whom he had already convinced to accompany him on his first trip to the Catskill mountains, mentioned above, in September 1753. On this initial trip, documented both in the published *Journal through the Catskill Mountains with Billy*²⁵ and in a lengthy letter to Collinson, fourteen-year-old Billy helped his father collect seeds and samples of plants. John mentions that he instructs him in the process and places himself in the position of mentor: "I took this road to show my son ye broken mountainous desolate part of ye country where we took ye first perticular notice of ye alder with A silver color on ye branches of ye North river."²⁶ At one point the father notes that he regrets that his gifted son should not have "brought his box of paints with him"²⁷ to draw their discoveries. William was in fact already a skilled draftsman and painter, whose works later charmed John's correspondents in London. According to Collinson, "Billy's elegant drawings are admired by all that see them."²⁸ The son's artistic ability in this particular context helped to fill a gap in his father's skill set, and John used it both as a complement to the parcels he sent to his overseas clients²⁹ and ultimately as a means of securing a living for William.³⁰ In his *Diary*, John thus first presents Billy as an underling who accompanies his father on his excursions into the wilds, but at the same time, the father appears to be very careful to present a picture of his son as a faithful support, as one who has great potential, and as one who will ultimately gain competence. Billy's role is simultaneously multifold in that he is also called upon to make up for the father's shortcomings. Thus, historically there is record of John's awareness of his son's artistic promise; at the same time, literarily, as it were, the author acknowledges that the assistant has useful talents that the principal lacks.

Throughout John's corpus of writings, the father offers varied accounts of his son's roles. Billy serves as a young apprentice, but later he takes on a different role. As noted above, in 1765 William went to Florida with his father, who had been appointed Botanist to King George III. William was involved in a rather unsuccessful business venture on the Cape Fear River

25 Bartram John, *Journal through the Catskill Mountains with Billy*, Bartram Family Papers (Collection 36), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

26 Letter from John Bartram to Peter Collinson, undated but probably fall 1753 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 359).

27 Letter from John Bartram to Peter Collinson, probably fall 1753 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 357).

28 Letter from Peter Collinson to John Bartram, 28th May 1766 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 476).

29 "Wee are much obliged to Billey for giving us so perfect an Idea of this Glorious Hibiscus as it grows in Carolina." Letter from Peter Collinson to John Bartram, 29th February 1768 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 699).

30 "He (Peter Collinson) proposed that I should engage thy son to make drawings of all your land Tortoises." Letter from John Fothergill to John Bartram, 29th October 1768 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 707).

in North Carolina. We know that on that journey John did not always keep the scientific diary-travel account himself. Quite often Billy substituted for his father, either collecting specimens for him or writing the journal entries when his father was too weak to do so.³¹ The entry for 23 October 1765, for example, reads as follows: "I am so very weak can hardly stand without reeling. Billy is gone over to ye island to gather seeds & specimens."³²

From somewhat humble beginnings, then, one can see that Billy acquires the fundamentals to become William the full-fledged traveler, botanist, and writer in his own right. In 1773, almost a decade after the first trip to Florida, he embarks on his own journey to the Southeast and subsequently publishes a detailed account. William decides to make his solo trip after a failed venture as a planter, this time in Florida, where he had decided to remain after his first journey there with his father in 1765-66. As John recalls, "I have left my son Billy in Florida. Nothing will do with him now but he will be a planter upon St Johns River about 24 mile from Augustine & 6 from ye fort of Picolata."³³ After that new failure, William pondered his destiny and wrote in the summer of 1772 that he was determined "to retreat within myself to the only business I was born for, and which I am only good for (if I am entitled to use that phrase for anything)."³⁴ That business was botany and the drawing of plants, which, as early as 1755, John had identified as his son's "darling delight(s)."³⁵ Strangely enough, despite having noticed that his son's calling seemed to be similar to his own and even though the father took him as a companion on his trips, John Bartram does not seem to have encouraged that passion, replying to William in July 1772: "We are surprised at thy wild notion of going to Augustine."³⁶ One wonders if John the hero was worried that his apprentice son would become the better and more renowned writer, illustrator, and even botanist than himself. William, as his father might correctly have surmised, was about to become an independent hero in his own right.

Dwelling more on John Bartram's possible reasons for not promoting his son's talent would be futile, but one cannot help but emphasize that when William did indeed embark on his own four-year-long exploratory journey

31 Francis Harper notes a difference in handwriting for the entry of December 4, for example. (Bartram John, *Diary*, p. 26).

32 Bartram John, *ibid.*, p. 34.

33 Letter from John Bartram to Peter Collinson, June 1766 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 668).

34 "William Bartram's Common Place Book and Original MS. Notes of William Bartram circa 1760-1800, Philadelphia, Pa", in Smith Berkeley Edmund and Dorothy (Eds.), *The Life and Travels of John Bartram: From Lake Ontario to the River St. John*, Tallahassee, University Press of Florida, 1982.

35 Letter from John Bartram to Peter Collinson, 28th August 1755 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 387).

36 Letter from John Bartram to William Bartram, 15th July 1772 (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 749).

to the Southeast, he did so alone, albeit with the occasional help of Native American guides. The travel account he produced is much more elaborate and polished than his father's diaries. Though he returned from his journey in January 1777, William published his book only in 1791, a delay which allowed him to revise and refine his writing. William's written account of his travels thus differs substantially from his father's. *Travels* contains numerous paintings or engravings of plants and animals, making it a much more desirable object for European readers. In addition, William's narrative, a few examples of which we elaborate upon below, proved much more sensational, with a real and consistent attempt on the author's part to picture himself as an epic figure, a lone romantic hero, exploring the American wilderness and fending for himself against certain dangers of the wilds. As Pamela Regis states in *Describing Early America*, "Individual action, represented in *Travels* through narrative, is both external, as Bartram moves through the world, and internal, as he experiences his own actions."³⁷ Indeed, William gives himself center stage through the exuberant reactions to the landscapes that meet his eyes, and those descriptions and narrated episodes are just as important a part of his narrative as factual descriptions of plants, animals, and people.

Because of the sophistication and scope of his *Travels* in comparison with the limitations and style of his father's writings, critics consider that William Bartram outdid his father both in terms of writing and discovery. We maintain, however, that despite his critical success, William is always finishing the business he and his father started when they made their first Florida expedition; William can thus be seen to remain indebted to his father, in his narrative itself and in his life decisions, literally walking in his father's footsteps. It may well be true that William possessed "a talent for literary expression far superior to that of his practical father," as Harper maintains,³⁸ and the son William does present a fully articulated persona, a metaphor for the inscribed self, in his book *Travels*. But William's trip to Florida, sponsored by John Fothergill, a member of John's vast social network in Britain, was a reenactment, on a grander scale, of the trip John had undertaken with his son ten years before. In a way the Fothergill/William Bartram relationship mirrors the relationship between Peter Collinson and John Bartram. In the course of his narrative, William refers to his father a dozen times, writing at one point that "recollecting many subjects of natural history, which I had observed [...] some years ago with my father, John Bartram, that were interesting, and not taken notice of by any traveller; and [...] having reason to think that very many curious subjects had escaped our researches: I now formed the resolution of travelling into East Florida" (35-36). William retraced much of the

37 Regis Pamela, *Describing Early America: Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and the Influence of Natural History*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 41.

38 Bartram John, *Diary*, note by Harper Francis, p. 81.

trip he had taken with his father, especially the exploration of the Altamaha River. Indeed he frequently alludes to that first trip and references his father in the course of his own narrative.³⁹ Retracing his father's footsteps, however, was not only literal but also figurative. William eventually returned to his father's home, and after his father's death in September 1777, the son became an associate in the management of the father's botanical garden and the seed business. The garden itself became a place attracting a new generation of botanists like Benjamin Smith Barton, mirroring what it had been in John's time, when the likes of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur visited it.⁴⁰

A few specific examples from the writings of John and William will serve to demonstrate how father and son present personas, how their writings actually speak to each other, and finally how William perhaps outshines his mentor father but never quite loses sight of him. The first example comes from an early experience on a journey to the Catskill Mountains.

As early as 1753, the father "was pleased indeed to be able to include his 'little botanist,' his son Billy, in his plans for a trip to the Catskills" (Berkeley 148). At the time "little billy" was fourteen years old and still had much to learn from his internationally renowned father.⁴¹ In a letter John wrote to Collinson, during this early excursion, we read that Billy almost kicked a rattlesnake that he mistook for a large toadstool. Here is the father's account of the incident:

Billy saw A great black rattle snake quailed [coiled] up thought at first sight it had been A great mushroom was going to kick it but found his error before he came too near it & called out a rattle snake I cut A stick & claped my handkerchief about one end of it presenting it to ye snakes mough but he would not stir I then took my hat & held it near his mouth he slided his head over his quoil & seemed to smell at my hat then drew his head back again I then pushed him out of his quoil & he crept away...⁴²

Compare William's account of the same occurrence written two decades later:

Again, when in my youth, attending my father on a journey to the Catskill Mountains... having nearly ascended the peak of Giliad, being youthful and vigorous in the pursuit of botanical and novel objects, I had gained the summit of a steep rocky precipice, a-head of our guide, when just entering a shady vale, I saw at the root of a small shrub, a singular and beautiful appearance, which I remember to have instantly apprehended to be a large kind of Fungus which we call Jews ears, and was just drawing back my foot to kick it over, when at the instant, my father being near, cried out, a rattle snake my son, and jerked me back, which probably saved my life; I had never before seen one...⁴³

39 His father had ten years earlier noticed "curious shrubs." Bartram John, *Diary*, p. 31.

40 Crèvecoeur narrates his visit to John Bartram in late spring of 1765. See "Letter XI", Hector St. John, *The Letters of An American Farmer*, 1782.

41 Josephine Herbst, *New Green World*, New York, Hastings House, 1954, p. 25.

42 Bartram John, undated letter to Peter Collinson, Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 361.

43 Bartram William, *Travels*, p. 169.

Obviously there are marked differences between two accounts. We want particularly to stress that in father's version Billy himself recognizes his mistake, whereas in William's own (later) record, it is the father who identifies the danger and "saves" the son's life. It is possible, of course, to attribute the differences to faulty memory, but in that case everything either of the travelers writes becomes suspect in the same way. Alternatively, then, John's account can be seen as an intentional attempt to represent his son as a worthy, reliable and wise-for-his-age companion, deserving of recognition for his early skills as a naturalist. The father praises the son to his readers, specifically to his benefactor Collinson and the latter's London friends. In contrast, in William's version, written about twenty years after the incident itself, the son wants to present the father as heroic, saving the boy's life, acknowledging his debt to his father and thereby embracing his own status as an underling.

Another passage worth looking at more closely in our context is the reference to the snake in the last sentence in William's account above: "I had never before seen one." William might be referring to having never before seen a "black" rattlesnake. According to John's account, however, the two of them had actually just seen and teased a rattlesnake, albeit a "yellow one." John describes the moment:

We descended down toward ye river & low lands of ye minisinks in which way my son spied A large rattle snake quailed up in ye compass of ones hat we dismounted & cut A stick to try to anger him drawing him out at length but he ofered to run away from us... I wished my son had brought his box of paints with him... to have drawn him in his greatest beauty for he was A yellow one such as Catesby drew.⁴⁴

Color and size might differ from species to species, but the behaviors and shapes of rattlesnakes are similar, and their rattles are unmistakable. So again, we see the possibility here that William is creating his persona as that of an innocent boy relying on his father, and very much a novice in the wild. This rendition of himself in the face of rattlesnakes stands in stark contrast to the presentation of himself as an adult and experienced naturalist, as is evident from his several other accounts of encounters with rattlesnakes. In one instance, posing as a reluctant hero, he recounts how his interpreter invited him to rid the Indian camp where he was staying of a rattler. He even pictures himself as having greater ability to deal with the American wilderness than its Indigenous inhabitants. In his account, his act of heroism elicits their gratitude:

Being armed with a lightwood knot, I approached the reptile, who instantly collected himself in a vast coil (their attitude of defence) I cast my missile weapon at him, which luckily taking his head dispatched him instantly, and laid

⁴⁴ Bartram John, undated letter to Peter Collinson. (Bartram John, *Correspondence*, p. 361)

him trembling at my feet; I took out my knife, severed his head from his body, then turning about, the Indians complimented me with every demonstration of satisfaction and approbation for my heroism, and friendship for them.⁴⁵

That William continued to follow in his father's footsteps in his subsequent explorations is evident throughout his own trip to the South, which he eventually reports in *Travels*. According to Ernest Earnest, "John Bartram could not have written the *Travels*, but his explorations with his son laid the groundwork for it, and there is evidence that William made his later journey with his father's journal before him."⁴⁶ Another characteristic of a sidekick is the possibility of using the hero as a model for action. An especially pertinent instance of William's debt in this context is his description of his rediscovery and report of what he named the Franklin tree, *Franklinia alatamaha*. In John Bartram's initial brief description of the Franklin Tree that father and son discover on the banks of the Alatamaha River in Georgia, we can note the relatively awkward syntax and the sparseness of his prose:

...the tree generally very tall straight, and pretty close together at twenty to one hundred yards distance... And exceeding tall grass, very thick like a meadow... generally covered the ground. Unless in ponds, thickets of brush, or some sand hills interspersed toward the river, or where small palmettos grew, which generally is between the swamps and higher piney ground, though it commonly grows in the moister piney soil.⁴⁷

William's (later) accounts are much more elaborate. He offers lengthy and detailed descriptions of the plant, recounts how he found it, mentions what it looks like, and then provides a painting and a minute account of its flowers (an option not available to John because they saw the tree in winter without flowers):

I had the opportunity of observing the new flowering shrub, resembling the *Gordonia*, in perfect bloom, as well as bearing ripe fruit. It is a flowering tree, of the first order for beauty and fragrance of blossoms: the tree grows fifteen or twenty feet high, branching alternately; the leaves are oblong, broadest towards their extremities, and terminate with an acute point, which is generally a little reflexed; they are slightly serrated, attenuate downwards and sessile, or have very short petioles [...] the flowers are very large, expand themselves perfectly, are of a snow-white colour, and ornamented with a crown or tassel of gold coloured refulgent stamina in their centre...⁴⁸

He follows this long description with a reference to his father and to himself as his father's "attendant":

⁴⁵ Bartram William, *Travels*, p. 165.

⁴⁶ Earnest Ernest, "Review of *Diary of a Journey through the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida*, by John Bartram", in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 67.4 (1943), p. 415-17 (p. 416).

⁴⁷ Cruickshank Helen G., *John and William Bartram's America: Selections from the Writings of the Philadelphia Naturalists*, New York, Devin-Adair, 1957, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Bartram William, *Travels*, p. 295.

This very curious tree was first taken notice of, about ten or twelve years ago, at this place, when I attended my father (John Bartram) on a botanical excursion; but, it being then late in the autumn, we could form no opinion to what class or tribe it belonged.⁴⁹ (our emphasis).

In the rattlesnake episode recounted above, William presents his father as the hero and life saver, and in the account of the Franklin tree, he gives his father credit for one of the duos most significant and original botanical discoveries, and, according to Lawrence Hetrick, “William’s paintings of it in bloom were a memorial to his father.”⁵⁰

Dessin de *Franklinia Alatomaha* (Arbre de Franklin). William Bartram, *Travels*.

In the context of the newly gained American independence, moreover, William’s insistence on the originality and beauty of that specific tree and of the American flora in general, as well as his emphasis on the magnificence and power of the fauna, and on the achievements of American naturalists like his father acquires political value. We thus have multi-layered meaning in this very interesting development between father and son, hero and sidekick, in that the son –for all his talent and adventurousness, all his own heroism– retains a narrative respect for his hero father who broke new ground. William attributes much to the father –even though he simultaneously presents himself as quite the adventurer and naturalist himself in what has become a free country.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 295-296.

50 Hetrick Lawrence, “The Origins, Goals, and Outcomes of John Bartram’s Journey on the St. John’s River, 1765-1766” in *America’s Curious Botanist: A Tercentennial Reappraisal of John Bartram*, Nancy E. Hoffmann and John C. Van Horne (Eds.), Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 2004, p. 127-36 (p. 127).

As another instance of the differences between the styles of father and son, we turn to what is perhaps the most striking example of William's presenting himself as a hero in his own right. We refer to the well-known passage in which William Bartram recounts the story of his encounter with alligators. Without human companions in the Okefinokee Swamp of Georgia, William does heroic battle with dragon-like wild beasts. Regardless of the accuracy or veracity of Bartram's descriptions of these ferocious creatures and of the account of his being attacked by several at once, the descriptions are exceedingly lively and engaging.

Les alligators de la rivière St John. William Bartram, *Travels*.

The veracity of William's account is perhaps not as important in our context as the fact that it exists at all. Also important are the differences between William's descriptions and his father's. John offers a very matter-of-fact diary-entry account of seeing alligators: "saw four or five alligators which soon dived into the river before we came near them" (*Diary*, 3 September 1765). The alligators William reports seeing and doing battle with are not nearly so shy. Indeed, as he sets up his camp, William notices the alligators gathering threateningly along the shore:

The evening was temperately cool and calm. The crocodiles began to roar and appear in uncommon numbers along the shores and in the river. [...] From this open, high situation, I had a free prospect of the river, which was a matter of no trivial consideration to me, having good reason to dread the subtle attacks of the alleigators, who were crowding about my harbour.⁵¹

William then describes a fight between two rivals. Here is a segment of the description of what he witnesses from the shore:

Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder. When immediately from

51 Bartram William, *Travels*, p. 75.

the opposite coast of the lagoon, emerges from the deep his rival champion. They suddenly dart upon each other. The boiling surface of the lake marks their rapid course, and a terrific conflict commences. They now sink to the bottom folded together in horrid wreaths...⁵²

William acknowledges the possibility of an attack and thereby alerts the reader to the danger, yet he nevertheless sets out in his canoe to do some late afternoon fishing. As he paddles “with all [his] might”⁵³ he is overtaken by aggressive alligators and this now-famous description ensues:

I was attacked on all sides, several endeavouring to upset the canoe. My situation now became precarious to the last degree: two very large ones attacked me closely, at the same instant, rushing up with their heads and part of their bodies above the water, roaring terribly and belching floods of water over me. They struck their jaws together so close to my ears, as almost to stun me, and I expected every moment to be dragged out of the boat and instantly devoured, but I applied my weapons so effectually about me, though at random, that I was so successful as to beat them off a little; when finding that they designed to renew the battle, I made for the shore, as the only means left me for my preservation...⁵⁴

Bartram’s rhetoric in this passage is extremely sophisticated on several levels. His account inscribes itself in the controversy that was raging at the time between the old and the new world about the so-called degenerate character of American wildlife. Countering Buffon and De Pauw’s allegations that the American continent only produced weak and misshapen species,⁵⁵ William Bartram here goes to great lengths to show that nothing is weak or degenerate in the alligators he depicts. He first offers a hint of danger as the alligators gather; he then seems to forget (and let the reader forget) his own danger, to witness the epic battle between two gators. Having offered his reader a harrowing account of the reptile’s boldness, aggressiveness, fierceness, and strength, he offers the description of his own encounter and battle. The juxtaposition makes his encounter all the more heroic, of course. Moreover, there is a marked difference in style between the description of the fight between rivals and the subsequent attack on his canoe. In the former, William strings together a series of simple declarative sentences as if to suggest grammatically that the combatants are indeed fierce, but they are only reptiles. In the latter, in contrast, his sentences are much more typical of his style in general: longer, more complex sentences, rich in adverbs (as opposed to adjectives only) and with subordinating and coordinating conjunctions. The grammatical complexity suggests the actual complexity and precariousness of the man’s situation vis-à-vis the beasts.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

54 *Ibid.*

55 « C’est sans doute un spectacle grand et terrible de voir une moitié de ce globe tellement disgraciée par la nature que tout y était ou dégénéré, ou monstrueux. » De Pauw Cornelius, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, t. I, iv, Berlin, 1770, https://archive.org/stream/recherchesphilos17701pauw/recherchesphilos17701pauw_djvu.txt, accessed 21 August 2015.

William hints at his own awareness and consciousness of his style when at day's end, in relative peace and quiet in his camp, by the fireside, he acknowledges, at least implicitly, that his account is carefully constructed, written and rewritten: "I was revising the notes of my past day's journey"⁵⁶. He is then interrupted by the arrival of "two very large bears"⁵⁷. The description of another encounter with wild beasts ensues.

In many such episodes in the wilds, though perhaps none so harrowing nor vividly described as the one of battle with alligators, William Bartram recounts his excursions. He often succeeds in representing himself –sometimes in great and engaging detail– as heroically encountering and ultimately overcoming the vicissitudes of nature, whether in the form of wild beasts or inclement weather. If the father's earlier excursions in nature seem to be somewhat diminished by the grandeur of William's accounts, it is important to remember that William often refers to his father and those earlier excursions. It is also important to note that at the end of four years of travel, William returns not to a farm in Florida, nor to a business enterprise on the Cape Fear River in North Carolina, but to his father's estate and gardens outside Philadelphia. Part III of *Travels* ends with this: "arrived at my father's house on the banks of the river Schuylkill, within four miles of the city"⁵⁸. Here again the son is walking in his father's footsteps; he essentially spends the rest of his life tending his father's garden. It is also here that William spends nearly fifteen years writing and revising the *Travels*, the book in which he both honors the accomplishments of his father, acknowledges his debt to him, but also extols his own powers, skills, and daring, which in some ways transcend those attributed to his father, the esteemed John Bartram.

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Abstract

In this essay the authors make a two-fold argument. In the footsteps of several recent autobiography theorists, they argue, first, that in any autobiographical travel account the "self" or the "I" of the narrative is a construct, and this hypothesis allows them, second, to maintain that

⁵⁶ Bartram William, *Travels*, p. 79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

the constructed personas and resultant “characters” in the respective travel accounts of John and William Bartram render John’s son William a sort of sidekick on what is very much the father’s exploratory journey through the American Southeast.

Keywords

Sidekicks, exploration, Bartram, narration.

Résumé

L’argument des auteurs de cet essai est double. Tout d’abord, s’appuyant sur plusieurs études récentes, ils soutiennent que dans tout récit de voyage autobiographique le « moi » ou le « je » est une construction. Cette hypothèse leur permet, dans un deuxième temps, d’avancer que les personnages qui en découlent et qui sont représentés dans les récits respectifs de John et William Bartram font de William, le fils de John, une sorte de faire-valoir de son père lors de l’exploration par ce dernier du sud-est de l’Amérique.

Mots-clés

Faire-valoir, explorateur, Bartram, narration.