

## Introduction and Literature Review

Hunter S. Thompson was a big, chaotic, fiery mass of a writer. His personality, writing, behavior, and stature all attest to this truth. The tall, lanky figure with mirrored shades, cigarette holder, machine-gun speech, and widespread notoriety spent his days being larger than life. Though a handful of scholars have written of Thompson's talent and importance, his lifestyle and celebrity has overshadowed his work in the eyes of most of the critical world. With this thesis I intend to add to the voices of Thompson scholars by providing a detailed definition of gonzo journalism.

If attempting to determine Thompson's role in literature by searching scholarly journals, one will find have trouble finding his name. And even more trouble finding him treated seriously. You'll find him many times alongside Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer as an example of that newfangled New Journalism.

One reason Thompson hasn't shown up in journals much is his association with New Journalism. In a 1989 survey of critical literature about New Journalism, James Stull<sup>1</sup> found only sixteen scholarly works that address the genre. Since then, little has been added. New Journalism's general omission from critical consideration in literary journals may exist simply because the genre is only forty years old, a baby in the eyes of academia. It is also regarded as something of a bastard child, somewhere between fiction and journalism. New Journalists are notorious for blending fact and fiction, writing through overt subjectivity, and even instigating events they report on. These factors make it difficult to point out exactly where journalism ends

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<sup>1</sup> Stull, James N. "New Journalism: Surveying the Critical Literature." *North Dakota Quarterly* 57 (1989), 164-74.

and fiction begins.

To further complicate the matter, New Journalists do not write in the same manner as one another. Only some invent facts. Only some go into extensive, wordy descriptions of their subjects. This makes the genre and its writers difficult to label, hard to define. The vast spectrum of style found under the rubric of New Journalism is illustrated in the many labels in the genre: creative nonfiction, the nonfiction novel, literary journalism, participatory journalism, artistic nonfiction, documentary fiction, novelistic journalism, and, of course, gonzo journalism, of which Thompson is the best known—and possibly only—practitioner. The muddiness of the genre’s definition is one of the main issues dealt with by scholars of New Journalism, as well as the key obstacle preventing serious analysis.

### Is It New? Is It Journalism?

Critics have been searching for one all-encompassing, universal definition or formula for what constitutes a work of New Journalism. James Caron<sup>2</sup> compares two very different writers, Hunter Thompson and Tom Wolfe, and says their writing styles are similar to a point, but then branch off. The deciding factor for him is the amount of writer participation in the action. While Wolfe is obviously in the scene, he rarely jumps right into the middle of the action. On the other hand, diving into the action and even *creating* the story is central to Thompson’s style (2-3). Wolfe describes subcultures he encounters such as the Merry Pranksters (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), Black Panthers (“Radical Chic”), and astronauts (*The Right Stuff*) with his remarkably witty wordplay, but he remains distant. On the other hand, Thompson rode with the

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<sup>2</sup> Caron, James. “Hunter S. Thompson’s ‘Gonzo’ Journalism and Tall Tale Tradition in America.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 8 (1985), 1-16.

Hell's Angels for a year before they stomped him and left him in the middle of nowhere<sup>3</sup>. One observes. The other invades.

This point is amplified by David Hamilton<sup>4</sup> in a short memoir of his time in South America in the early 60s, where he met Thompson. Hamilton says Thompson, not yet the famous gonzo journalist he would become, spoke of writers as actors shaping the unfolding events surrounding them. He also says Thompson wanted to be a part of the action, not just an outside observer (382). In the years to come, this is exactly how Thompson developed as a writer.

While Caron hints at a solution to the debate (admitting that not all writers who seem to fall under the New Journalism category are the same), David Eason<sup>5</sup> finishes it off. For him, there are two kinds of New Journalism: realists and modernists. The realists (the safer group, headed by Wolfe) are concerned with intense observation and the accurate reportage of what was observed. They assume there exists a conventional, shared context between the writer and reader. On the other hand, the modernists, such as Norman Mailer and Thompson, believe there can be no single frame of reference and focus on breaking down that notion, which they see as a false assumption (192).

To Eason, the realist uses images to share what s/he sees in the real world. The modernist does not believe one can break through images to get to the truth. Eason says the realist article "assures its readers that traditional ways of making sense still apply in society," while modernists, "describe the image-world as a realm that blurs traditional distinctions between fantasy and reality" (194). So the realists, simply relating what they observe, pose no

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Hunter. *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*. New York: Ballantine, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, David. "In an Innertube, On the Amazon." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29 (1990), 372-92.

<sup>5</sup> Eason, David. "The New Journalism and the Image-World." *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Norman Sims. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. 191-205.

threat to the accepted forms of knowledge and communication. “Modernists,” however, plunge straight into the gray area between reality and image. To illustrate the illusory nature of objective reality, Eason cites Mailer’s descriptions of the 60s counterculture as a mixture of reality and comic books and Thompson’s images of Las Vegas as a never-ending “neon nightmare” (195). By dividing the New Journalists into more than one category, Eason takes it upon himself to formally relieve critics of the pressure of trying to create a single checklist or all-encompassing yet detailed definition of the genre.

Citing Dickens, Gogol, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Joyce, and Tolstoy, Tom Wolfe<sup>6</sup> writes of an “obvious relationship” between New Journalism and “the major novels,” in preparation as well as the finished product (14). He adds that New Journalists use literary devices that novelists have been using for hundreds of years. Similarly, Thomas Connery<sup>7</sup> treats the New Journalists as examples of Literary Journalism, introducing several of them side by side with Crane, Twain, Baldwin, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Agee.

Thompson is often neglected even by critics of New Journalism because, as we know from Caron and Eason, he has little in common with writers like Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion. Thompson is more involved with his story and takes more than occasional liberties with the truth, whereas most New Journalists simply report in great detail, adding a degree of personal involvement and individual voice to an otherwise objective story.

### The Gonzo One: Pissed On and Praised

The scant critical literature on Thompson himself is often quite negative. One essay by Louis

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<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, Tom. *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Connery, Thomas B (ed.). *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representing Writers in an Emerging Genre*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992.

Menand, “Life in the Stone Age,”<sup>8</sup> is particularly dismissive. While Menand admits Thompson has some “astute analysis,” he calls him a “hack” and “essentially a writer for teenage boys.” He says Thompson’s “Fear and Loathing” is really just Holden Caulfield’s “fear of growing up.” He believes Thompson’s primary goal in writing is to maintain his public image and that Thompson is the only person still living in 1972. Thompson, Menand argues, is the perfect writer for a generation of people who are the only ones who care about themselves (43). Besides the sparse scholarly articles, there are plenty of book reviews, but two paragraphs praising Thompson’s page-turning style lacks the insight of the critic’s eye.

James Stull (1991)<sup>9</sup> argues that Thompson implies to the reader that he is not objective by means of exaggeration and digressions (91). If we accept this as true, such an admission of falsity paradoxically both adds and detracts from his journalistic integrity. Thompson makes part of the story up, but admits that he does. Stull—I imagine—would argue that other journalists do not so honestly disclose their respective biases or other exercises in truth-stretching. Similarly, John Hellmann (1986)<sup>10</sup> echoes poststructuralist critics like Masud Zavarzadeh and Robert Siegle, saying the difference between traditional and New Journalism is not so much fact versus fiction as disguised perception versus admitted perception. They own up to their subjectivity, freeing themselves from “naïve assumptions” about human objectivity (52-3). This point is echoed by Daniel Grassian,<sup>11</sup> but he adds that Thompson uses his subjectivity as a deconstructionist critique of the modern world (101-2).

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<sup>8</sup> Published in *The New Republic* 204 (1991), 38-44.

<sup>9</sup> Stull, James N. “Hunter S. Thompson: A Ritual Reenactment of Deviant Behavior.” *Connecticut Review* 13 (1991), 87-99.

<sup>10</sup> Hellmann, John. “Postmodern Journalism.” *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*. Larry McCaffery (ed.). New York: Greenwood, 1986: 51-61.

<sup>11</sup> Grassian, Daniel. “The Half-Baked Cultural Detective: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as Postmodern Noir.” *Popular Culture Review* 11 (2000), 99-111.

Hellmann (1981)<sup>12</sup> points out that Thompson's persona is not so much a full person as a flattened, two-dimensional collection of images (69). Hellmann notes his frequent references to his alcohol and drug binges and the commodities he adores: Wild Turkey brand whiskey, the Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle, and Doberman Pinschers for example (70). It is through this caricature, though, that Thompson exaggerates others into caricatures themselves (such as the bulldog-faced vacationing cops in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, all dressed in the same quote-unquote casual clothes; a vacation uniform).

Stull (1991) feels that Thompson continually depicts himself as a deviant and a felon. From his drug use to reckless driving to his brief allegiance with the Hell's Angels (before getting stomped), Thompson constantly parades his status as an outlaw, even in his retreats to Woody Creek to escape the regulations of the normal world (89). The outlaw figure is fuller, but still a stock character. Matt Johnson<sup>13</sup> points out how Thompson's love for deviancy is reflected in his sports coverage as well as in his lifestyle. He sides with Muhammed Ali for being politically outspoken (as well as being a spectacular boxer) (70) and against Vince Lombardi for refusing to take risks in his coaching of what Thompson calls, despite their Super Bowl win, one of the most boring football teams of all time: the 1973 Miami Dolphins (67).

Wolfe has yet another take on Thompson's persona. He says Thompson "usually casts himself as a frantic loser, inept and half-psychotic" (172). While this is still a two-dimensional character, when considered alongside the active, take charge, outlaw, gonzo über-protagonist that Thompson writes as, we begin to see the complexity of this persona.

When he is not lashing out on the American promise that failed us, Thompson is either creating chaos or rushing on his way out *to* create chaos. He either whoops it up or writes about

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<sup>12</sup> Hellmann, John. *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, Matt. "Above the Fear and Loathing (Briefly): Hunter S. Thompson and Professional Athletics." *Aethelon* 18 (2000-2001) 65-72.

the increased restrictions on whooping it up. When Wolfe throws the “frantic loser” description into the mix, things change. We get a hint of Thompson’s recurrent theme of failing at journalism, specifically the part he plays as a failed journalist. This is a theme I will return to later.

The issue of person versus persona is one of the two most common themes in the critical literature on Thompson’s work. The other consists of attempts to connect Thompson with some kind of literary tradition. Caron emphasizes Hunter Thompson’s indebtedness to Mark Twain, saying that Thompson’s gonzo writing essentially constitutes a continuation of the tall tale tradition. He argues that Thompson and Twain share a fondness for exaggeration bordering on absurdity, citing Twain’s gambler who would follow a bug to Mexico if he had a bet on it in “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” and Thompson’s hundred mile an hour hairpin turn while being pulled over on the highway in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (3). He also compares Twain’s narrator, Simon Wheeler, remembering the jumping frog story to Thompson’s use of news articles about real-life horror (5), a letter from a running magazine giving him an assignment (7), and even his title of Dr. Hunter Thompson (3) to show how the narrating persona can make imagined events seem more likely to have actually occurred. He also relates Thompson to Wheeler in their shared inability to remember how the story goes (4). John Hellmann (1981) echoes this when he describes an occasional tendency for New Journalists to write about the difficulty they have in writing a particular piece of work, citing Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. “Thompson,” he writes, “by focusing on his...proximity to the events, makes those events far more formidable and his own...powers correspondingly weaker” (89).

Caron concludes that both the tall tale and the gonzo story rely on the reader being an

outsider, unfamiliar with the world that is being written about. Twain's tall tales always relied on someone being a "fish," while Thompson often writes about outlaw activities or exotic locations (9). It should be pointed out that this article deals specifically with *The Curse of Lono* which takes place in Hawaii. (Caron is writing from the University of Hawaii at Manoa.) While Hellmann (1981) agrees with this comparison, he also says Thompson is more similar in style to black humorists or fabulists like Kurt Vonnegut or Ishmael Reed than to New Journalists like Tom Wolfe or Truman Capote (67-8).

Three other critics make connections between Thompson and previous generations of writers. Grassian sees Thompson as an extension of the "Hard Boiled Detective Hero" of noir fiction. Citing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he says both the protagonist and the setting go beyond the modernism of noir fiction and into hyper-reality and postmodernism (100-1). While the old detectives were "threatened by *external* social disillusion or collapse," Thompson's threat is internal (104). He also contrasts Thompson and the detectives through an analysis of their emotions. Thompson, he argues, does not share the hidden romanticism of the detectives, just "aggression and fright, fear and loathing" (107).

Edward Parkinson<sup>14</sup> compares *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to *Hamlet*. Though his paralleling of Duke with Hamlet, the American Dream with the ghost of the elder Hamlet, and Nixon as Claudius technically works, his reading lacks a goal. It is simply a juxtaposition.

Robert Sickels,<sup>15</sup> writing from Reno, uses Thompson's frequent allusions to F. Scott Fitzgerald as a framework for showing that Las Vegas, "once considered gaudy and cheap," has now taken over the country, culturally (63). He places Thompson and Fitzgerald in the same

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<sup>14</sup> Parkinson, Edward. "Hunting for the Truth: Fear and Loathing in the State of Denmark." *Critical Mass* 3 (1993), 27-36.

<sup>15</sup> Sickels, Robert. "A Counterculture Gatsby: Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the Death of the American Dream, and the Rise of Las Vegas, USA." *Popular Culture Review* 11 (2000), 61-73.

category of disillusioned social critics, as each lost faith in the counterculture of their times. Naturally, the article is filled with language about the death of the American Dream.

Similarly, Delia Falconer<sup>16</sup> points out the differences between Thompson's values and a once shared system of guidelines for morality and ethics. She describes a shift in morality in literature from Horatio Alger's clear-cut, idealized morals to Hunter Thompson's any-means-necessary "shark ethic" of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which Raoul Duke "ironically invokes" Alger to defend his "bloody-minded action" (116-7). In Falconer's opinion, Thompson depicts the square, middle-American idea of morality as outdated and militaristically homogenous, unlike the ideal system of individualized morals.

Finally, Thomas Barone<sup>17</sup> uses Thompson's first true gonzo article, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,"<sup>18</sup> to exhibit how important the use of dialogue is in New Journalism. He points out how the grammar, spelling, and subjects of what the Kentuckian "Jimbo" says clue us in to his character (41-3).

### The Current Study

The critical attention Thompson has received has been mostly disappointing. Though there are a few strong, insightful studies (most notably, the works of Hellmann, Caron, and Stull), the majority of the scholarship is flat or dismissive. The articles I have mentioned rarely, if ever, cite specific passages or quote Thompson's work as evidence of the critics' claims, relying mostly on generalizations.

The critics who take Thompson seriously have identified him as a New Journalist and

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<sup>16</sup> Falconer, Delia. "From Alger to Edge-Work: Mapping the Shark Ethic in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*." *Antithesis* 6 (1993), 111-25.

<sup>17</sup> Barone, Thomas E. "Effectively Critiquing the Experienced Curriculum: Clues from the 'New Journalism.'" *Curriculum Inquiry* 10 (1980), 29-53.

<sup>18</sup> Originally published in *Scanlan's Monthly* 1:4, June 1970, 1-12.

linked both him and the genre to several authors and literary movements, but rarely with more than a sentence or two, implying that the connection is obvious. For the most part, the critical field has just gotten past the obstacle of trying to figure out exactly what New Journalism is and accepted that it comes in more than one flavor. They have identified Thompson as an active, full-on participant in his stories and one of the core figures of New Journalism. The problem is, Thompson is *not*, in fact, a New Journalist.

David Eason takes a step in the right direction when he splits New Journalism into two groups, admitting that not all the journalists of that generation are the same. However, he does not go far enough. He still lumps Thompson and Mailer together as “modernists.” But Mailer does not share Thompson’s writing structure, his level of participation, or his sense of self deprecation. Neither do Wolfe, Capote, Didion, or other New Journalists. Thompson would be shackled by this New Journalism classification, as it does not fully encompass the varied aspects of his writing. What the New Journalists share with Thompson and his gonzo journalism is the fact that they are published in newspapers and magazines and do not follow the dull tradition of news reportage. To be blunt, gonzo and New Journalism are different beasts. To pigeonhole Thompson with the New Journalists is, frankly, lazy scholarship.

The critical field is overdue for an in-depth definition of Thompson and gonzo journalism. In this study I will attempt to do just that: define gonzo journalism and its main practitioner, Hunter Thompson. I will do so by determining his place in the flow chart of literary history, which in turn I will do by making connections between him and earlier literary figures who have been accepted into the canon. While I will make connections between Thompson and other writers, I will do so with specific examples of technique and style. I will include writers such as Stephen Crane, Jonathan Swift, Frank Norris, Robert Burton, John Dos Passos, and

James Agee. I will also connect Thompson with such pillars of literary history as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. I will make connections based on voice, tone, structure, themes, approach, persona, and literary devices.

The connections I will make will be based on close readings of the texts and analysis of Thompson's proverbial bag of tricks. This study will thus end up looking like a rhetorical analysis.<sup>19</sup> I will examine devices such as fragmented sentences, choice of curse words, and an episodic, seemingly tangential structure. My analysis will be based on four of the five classical canons of rhetoric: *inventio*, *pronuntiatio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*. The fifth, *memoria*, is solely concerned with oral rhetoric so is outside the bounds of this project.<sup>20</sup> However, I will gently replace these terms so they apply to the written word rather than oration. I will analyze Thompson in terms of approach, voice, structure, and style (respectively).

I will explore the exaggerated persona Thompson wrote for himself, his fictional alter-ego, *Rolling Stone* Sports Editor Raoul Duke. This persona becomes, I will argue, an instrument of rhetorical technique, a combination of prism and safety net for Thompson's work. Through this persona, Thompson can paint a portrait of someone who never existed or something that never happened in order to provide an image of what is going wrong in America—as Picasso called it, “A lie that makes us realize the truth.”

A large segment of this study is an analysis of the structure of a particularly complicated article, the June section of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. This article bobs and weaves even more than the usual Thompson piece and thus presents an opportunity to demonstrate how Thompson's writing works. In the end, this is what I want to do. I want to

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<sup>19</sup> It should be pointed out that a less thorough, though accurate, analysis of Thompson's style was performed in Bruce-Novoa's “Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail,” a 1979 combined analysis of Thompson and Oscar Zeta Acosta.

<sup>20</sup> Corbett, Edward P.J. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

define gonzo journalism by showing how it works.

### A Note on the Texts

Most of the material from Hunter Thompson used here is from three of his most prominent works. *The Great Shark Hunt* (1979) is a collection of articles dating from 1962 to 1978, pooled from newspapers and magazines such as *The National Observer*, *Playboy*, and, of course, *Rolling Stone*. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) was originally published as a two-part article in *Rolling Stone* numbers 95 and 96 (November 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of 1971). *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (1973) was also originally a series of *Rolling Stone* articles, published between January 6<sup>th</sup> and November 9<sup>th</sup> of 1972 (numbers 99-121) before it was expanded for book form. Throughout the rest of this study, these three works will be referred to as *GSH*, *Las Vegas*, and *Campaign Trail*, respectively.

### **Thompson's Approach: The American Dream, the Camera Eye, and Thou**

*Inventio* is “a systemized way of turning up or generating ideas on some subject.”<sup>21</sup> It is the frame, the angle of the argument. Does one appeal to *logos* or *pathos*? Does one focus on the pros or the cons? This term can be altered and put in terms of a writer's approach. In the field of journalism we could ask, does one write a hard, cut and dried treatment or a soft human interest story? In Thompson's case, we might ask if he fulfills the technical assignment at all, since he often runs away with the assignment and brings back an entirely different beast.

Viewed as the work of a conventional journalist, one could argue that Hunter Thompson's articles are failures. If we assume the goal of journalism to be representing what has occurred, Thompson's assignments in his most famous piece, *Las Vegas*, are to cover the

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<sup>21</sup> Corbett, 25

Mint 400 motorcycle race, complete with standings and a play-by-play, and to provide full coverage of the events of the National Conference of District Attorneys' Seminar on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. Instead, Thompson's articles focus on his wandering through the location of the event and the ugliness he finds there—and, yes, sometimes his consumption of drugs and alcohol. In each case the final product differs vastly from the assignment he is given. Thompson's approach, though, turns out to be far more valuable.

According to the unused jacket copy for *Las Vegas*,<sup>22</sup> in 1971, *Sports Illustrated* hired Thompson to cover the Mint 400. The idea was for him to go to the Mint hotel, watch the cyclists take off, wait for the race to end, and say who won and placed. The magazine wanted 250 words. Instead, Thompson gave them an article of 2500 words about his adventure in Sin City, which was “aggressively rejected” (105-6).

### The Preferred Assignment: The Hunt for the American Dream

Part I of *Las Vegas* (i.e., the Mint 400 section) details an absurd amount of drug use, sleep deprivation, fleeing from a massive hotel bill, and a 400-pound Samoan on acid begging to be electrocuted in the bath tub by a tape player blasting “White Rabbit.” Besides an account of the first rows of bikers taking off from the starting line, the Mint 400 appears only as an uncoverable story, a looming specter foretelling Doom and Failure—not to mention an unpaid check.

In Part II of *Las Vegas*, the seminar Thompson is to cover for *Rolling Stone* lasts four days. The only details provided in the final article are of the opening day speech: a P.A. system that causes an echo, an overview of the look of the police and D.A.'s present, and four sentences from the opening speaker. The rest of the actual seminar coverage is devoted to Thompson (as

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<sup>22</sup> Thompson, “Jacket Copy for *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*.” Printed in GSH, 105-11.

his persona, Raoul Duke) and Dr. Gonzo's incredulous remarks and sudden exits, except for a brief statement that the law enforcement community is far behind the times when it comes to knowledge of the drug culture (137-45). The rest of Part II is about drugs, politics, sociology, and a dangerously innocent girl who unknowingly takes acid with them. None of these subjects are the ones assigned.

The tidbits Thompson loses here in his coverage are not terribly important. Thirty-five years later, few are interested in who won the Mint 400. Yet *Las Vegas* remains widely taught in college-level English classes across the country (including mine). What Thompson does report on—through his caricatures of himself, his attorney, innocent youths, the police, gung-ho sports fiends, and a public made up of generally paranoid and fearful people—is a sort of social State of the Union, a diagnosis of the current state of the American Dream. He also dwells on the many roadblocks and barbs that impede his search for knowledge.

Thompson's Las Vegas is a nation divided. On one side are the upholders of Rules and Tradition: macho police officers resembling high school football coaches who bring their small-town wives to Las Vegas to catch Sinatra and win forty dollars in blackjack. The other side has survivors of the failed Drug Culture of the sixties: disillusioned anti-authoritarians who still attempt to have fun but end up terrorizing the locals who stumble upon their "bad craziness." When the Drug Culture intrudes upon the Rule Culture's turf, the representatives of the Drug Culture take one of two courses. They may passively point out the Rule team's sheltered lifestyle, as when Duke says, "the whole [drug enforcement] program had apparently been set up by people who had been in a Second stupor since 1964" (144). The other option is to actively scare the law-abiders in public, such as in the scene in which Dr. Gonzo leans out of the car window and bellows (between bouts of vomiting) offers of heroin and threats at a car full of

vacationing police—Rule folk (151-2).

This division, or rather stratification, is the framework for Thompson’s analysis of the American Dream. The American Dream, we learn quickly, is Duke’s real assignment for this article. Motorcycles be damned. Thompson sets up a dichotomy of the American Dream: the good and evil, light and dark sides of it.

Duke and Gonzo present themselves as the good side. Individualistic, they live according to their own rules, governed by an ethics system that transcends the law of men. Their entire lifestyle is a thumbed nose to the Rules. We see this in *Las Vegas* most obviously from the hyperbolic use of illegal drugs. While the regulated, normal world has set up a billboard outside Vegas that says,

“DON’T GAMBLE WITH MARIJUANA!  
IN NEVADA POSSESSION—20 YEARS  
SALE—LIFE!” (42),

Duke and Gonzo spend the entire trip on pot, acid, amyls, cocaine, ether, reds, blues, mescaline, and adrenochrome. They also drive at dangerous speeds (3), trash their hotel room (187-8), and disrupt the safe, stable worldview of a Georgian D.A. (145-9).

Despite the appalling number of crimes Duke and Gonzo commit during their jaunt in Vegas, most of them are victimless. The worst things they do are make a mess, heckle Debbie Reynolds (44), and terrify vacationing cops. Even when they actually cause damage Duke and Gonzo are engaged in a crazed, physical debate with the police, Las Vegas, and those who can put them behind bars: the dark side of the American Dream.

The dark side, to Thompson, is defined by greed and hunger for power. He finds it in Las Vegas. The casinos survive because they take advantage of the weak. When Duke and Gonzo

stumble into the Circus-Circus they appear to be viciously drunk because they are high on ether, substance he says creates a “severance of all connection between the body and the brain. Which is interesting, because the brain continues to function more or less normally...you can actually watch your self behaving in this terrible way, but you cant control it. A total body drug. The mind recoils horror, unable to communicate with the spinal column.” “Ether is the perfect drug for Las Vegas,” he continues. “In this town they love a drunk. Fresh meat” (45-6). The weak-minded drunk will keep on playing and keep losing, until the direst cases must pay with pounds of flesh for their foolishness.

The poor slob will also be desperate for an ego boost. Being powerless, the average American thirsts for any shred of acknowledgement he or she can get. Our friend, Joe American, shuffles his way into the casino and is suddenly confronted with a carnie barker: “Stand in front of this fantastic machine, my friend [naturally, they’re buddies], and for just 99¢ your likeness will appear, two hundred feet tall, on a screen above downtown Las Vegas. Ninety-nine cents more for a voice message. ‘Say whatever you want, fella. They’ll hear you, don’t worry about that. Remember you’ll be two hundred feet tall’” (47). What poor soul, fresh from losing half his savings at blackjack, could resist such a sudden rush of power, of foolish self esteem?

The 200-foot likeness is an example of the ego hustle, but Thompson gives the clearest critique of Vegas when he explores the highest and lowest points on the Las Vegas social structure. “The ‘high side’ of Vegas is probably the most closed society west of Sicily,” he writes. “In an economy where Tom Jones can make \$75,000 a week for two shows a night at Caesar’s, the palace guard is indispensable” (155). Thompson shows us an elitist quality in the Vegas power structure, with the supremely wealthy at the top. The structure is based on money and the influence it buys. Thompson continues, “A gold mine like Vegas breeds its own army,

like any other gold mine. Hired muscle tends to accumulate in fast layers around money/power poles...and big money, in Vegas, is synonymous with the Power to protect it” (155-6).

The people in charge of Las Vegas, as we see, are well-trained in how to influence, how to control their world. In a town where anything can be bought, the small-town loser is nothing but a target. Take your thirty dollars from the slots and have a good night watching Wayne Newton. Have a great time. Stick around a while, we’ll get it back. The house always wins.

Thompson juxtaposes the Power Players of Vegas with the losers. We move from the Strip to North Vegas. “North Vegas,” he says, “is where you go when you’ve fucked up once too often on the Strip, and when you’re not even welcome in the cut-rate downtown places around Casino Center.” He calls it “a slum and a graveyard” and says it is “where you go if you’re a hooker turning forty” or “a pimp with bad credit at the Sands.” Whatever the details, it is the place for people who are “finished in all the right places” (155).

The waitress Duke and Gonzo encounter in North Vegas is just as shabby and broken as one expects. “Passively hostile,” she becomes an image of run-down weariness:

She was a big woman. Not fat, but large in every way, long sinewy arms and a brawler’s jawbone. A burned-out caricature of Jane Russell: big head of dark hair, face slashed with lipstick and a 48 Double-E chest that was probably spectacular twenty years ago when she might have been a Mama for the Hell’s Angels chapter in Berdoo...but now she was strapped up in a giant pink elastic brassiere that showed like a bandage through the sweaty white rayon of her uniform. (158)

She’s “sweaty,” tired. She’s no longer “spectacular,” but now stuck in a uniform. The life has been sucked out of her. The bandage image reinforces the broken, run-down impression we get of this waitress.

The scene in North Vegas is just sad. Wasted lives and broken people. It is the effect, the consequences of a town like Las Vegas. It is what the Power Players, the wolves that Vegas is named for, leave when they're done gnawing at the bones. It is also hidden. A vacationing low-roller will not encounter the shells that used to be people. He will only see the vibrant and classy, the beautiful people. Greedy, deceptive, and mean—Vegas is the dark side.

Duke and Gonzo do eventually find their self-assigned topic. After some confusion over whether or not the American Dream ever existed, they learn that it is an old club that was formerly known as The Psychiatrist's Club. The editor's note at the end of the chapter informs us that the Psychiatrist's Club "burned down three years ago" (164-8). Writing in 1971, Thompson says the American Dream was destroyed in 1968, the year that saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy; the Tet Offensive in Vietnam; the riots, protests, and madness at the Mexico City Olympics; the election of Richard Nixon; and the Chicago Democratic National Convention. In changing his assignment from covering a motorcycle race to searching for the American Dream, Thompson illustrates a loss of innocence, a shattered people.

But, as Thompson says, "this seems to be getting heavy."<sup>23</sup> The madness and chaos in *Las Vegas* notwithstanding, the focus of much of Thompson's work is the process of trying to write the article instead of the assigned story.

### No Wisdom, No Truth

In "The Great Shark Hunt,"<sup>24</sup> Thompson is assigned to cover a fishing tournament. The final product is almost entirely about Thompson wandering around Cozumel, skipping out on hotel

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<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *Campaign Trail*, 222.

<sup>24</sup> Originally published in *Playboy*, December 1974, 183+. Reprinted in *GSH*, 421-52.

bills, and trying to write the article under adverse conditions. It begins with descriptions of “vicious mosquitoes and sand fleas,” “a cheap foul-smelling oil” to keep the bugs away, and “the only [hotel room] full of light and music and movement” (421). He then goes into his expectations for the week: “visions of heavy sport on the high seas, *mano a mano* with giant sailfish and world-record marlin” (423). Surely an idyllic scene, much better than the hellish swarm of insects he sits in the midst of in the article’s opening.

Thompson says he arrives in Cozumel on Monday (424) and finally lets us in on his assignment: “I had come down to Cozumel—officially, at least—to cover not just a fishing tournament, but a *scene*: I’d explained to the editor that big-time sport fishing attracts a certain kind of people and it was the behavior of these people—not the fishing—that interested me” (425). Never mind, for the moment, that he tells us that he *really* went to reclaim a hidden stash of MDA (423-4).

After background information on a couple of the competitors and some drug-induced mischief he writes, “By Friday night, it was clear that the story was not only a dry hole but maybe even a dry socket” (433). The only reporting of the days’ events are his comment that it is “rat-bastard tedium” (433) and that Frank Oliver won the tournament by one fish (435). He continues, “I’d spent a week on this goddamn wretched story and I still didn’t have the flimsiest notion of what deep-sea fishing *felt like*” (436). A week surrounded by fishermen in a big fishing tournament and he has no idea what it’s like. He has no knowledge to report, so he tries to catch a shark himself—and ends up with a feeling of “absolute and visceral aversion” to the whole mess (436-8).

The last two-fifths of the article follows Thompson and Yail Bloor as they take the remaining drugs while flying back into the country to avoid arrest at customs. While this is an

entertaining story, it further illustrates the failure to complete the assignment. Thompson learns and reports *nothing* about the fishing scene. So he tells us about everything else, about attempting to write the article.

Thompson also laments his difficulties with journalism in the May chapter of *Campaign Trail*. After coming out of the limbo of watching candidates eat lunch with voters, Thompson gives up. “This is the thirteenth lead I’ve written for this goddamn mess,” he says, “and they are getting progressively worse...which hardly matters now, because we are down to the deadline again and it will not be long before the Mojo Wire [the early fax machine Thompson and *Rolling Stone* used] starts beeping and the phone starts ringing and those thugs out in San Francisco will be screaming for Copy. Words! Wisdom! Gibberish!” (184).

He knows that time is up, and he knows the article is doomed. He has three hours before the presses start rolling “and the paper is ready to go except for five blank pages in the middle. The ‘center-spread,’ a massive feature story” (184). He is slotted to provide “A Definitive Profile of George McGovern,” but is hopelessly out of juice. He mourns, “This room reeks of failure once again” (185). It is not just this article, but all of them that are almost impossible to complete. The stress, routine, and tedium of the campaign leave him drained and unable to get the job done. Someone like Tom Wolfe, in contrast, tends to stay on task.

At one point Thompson writes what someone is telling *Rolling Stone* over the phone: “What the hell are you guys worried about? He’s up there cranking out a page every three minutes...What?...No, it won’t make much sense, but I guarantee you we’ll have plenty of words” (186). It is obvious that the deadline has arrived and the head office is rabid with impatience.

If we take Thompson’s articles about trying to write articles a step further, we see that his

difficulty indicates something deeply wrong in his world. His difficulty in writing the article can represent a deeper difficulty in getting to the capital-t Truth of his subject. He cannot get to the core of his subject because something stands between him and that core. It can be the police, press agents, the Secret Service, or Nixon himself, but it is always something from the other side. The rule-based side. The side populated by those in power and the people Thompson called, in the post-9/11 world, “flag suckers.” The ones who believe in order for order’s sake. When they see an “outlaw journalist” coming, they bar the gates to him. They can always give a tidy press release to the straight reporters.

A casual survey of the reoccurring antagonists of Thompson’s journalism bear out the difficulty of an outsider getting a close look at the inner workings of the system. Richard Nixon is widely known to have been so paranoid that he kept tape recordings of phone conversations, even the tapes that would have gotten him impeached in the Watergate hearings. This paranoia is underlined when, in *Campaign Trail*, Thompson illustrates Nixon’s reclusiveness with a sighting in an Oakland BART station:

Nixon emerged from a nearby subway tunnel, waved briefly at the crowd, and was ushered into the control room with a dozen or so local Republican dignitaries. Two certified harmless photographers were allowed inside to take pictures of The President shaking hands and making small talk with the engineers. His pithy remarks were broadcast out to the press mob in the hallway by means of loudspeakers. (401)

When Thompson asks another reporter if this is normal for Nixon coverage he replies, “Hell, this is *accessible!* We can actually *see* him!” (401).

Another long-term target for Thompson is the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention. One of the saddest and most bald-faced instances of abuse of political power in the

nation's history, the Convention crystallized the feeling that the government is a closed-door group, for approved members only. In a collection of letters, *Fear and Loathing in America*, Thompson recalls learning this grim lesson in Chicago:

I'd showed the [press] badge and kept walking, but one of the cops grabbed my arm.

"That's not a press badge," he said. I held it under his face. "What the hell do you think it is?" I asked...and I was still looking at the snarl on his face when I felt my stomach punched back against my spine; he used his club like a spear, holding it with both hands and hitting me right above the belt. (113)

He juxtaposes the madness and violence that occurred during the convention with the bitter, assaulted crowd chanting, "The Whole World Is Watching" (115).

Thompson's antagonists—including his final nemesis, George W. Bush, who runs a notoriously tight-lipped administration with as minimal amount of press contact as possible—would never allow a self-proclaimed outlaw with an axe to grind into their inner sanctums. They are also the ones with the power and authority to get as close to the Truth as possible. That they keep it from the rest of us shows how greedy and mean the world has become. They are the perfect subject for a Truth-seeking outlaw journalist.

### How to Gonzo, the H-S-T Way

Those who lionize Thompson and those who deride him point to the same central reason: his approach to journalism. His method can be most clearly seen in the abandoned jacket cover for *Las Vegas*: "My ideas was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication—without editing. That way, I felt, the eye & mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera" (106).

This “camera” function of the reporter is a direct echo of what John Dos Passos called “The Camera Eye” in his *U.S.A. Trilogy*.<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*,<sup>26</sup> E.L. Doctorow writes that the sections labeled “The Camera Eye” “implicate the narrator in the narrative, serving to underscore his moral commitment to the act of writing” (x). To be brief, the “Camera Eye” sections in Dos Passos are entirely subjective, within the mind of whoever’s “camera” it is, be it a passenger in a car (“...looking at their two faces in the jiggly light of the four-wheeled cab and Her big trunks thumping on the roof and He reciting *Othello*...”) or a dead sailor (“...everything was very kind and grave and very sorry and frigates and the blue Mediterranean and islands and when I was dead I began to cry...”) (21, 117).

The “Camera Eye” sections are contrasted with the objective tone of the narration and the “Newsreel” sections. The storyline whizzes by, often not even pausing long enough for a paragraph break during conversation, leaving the characters as blurry images of people, dimples in the road of the narrative. It is the narrative, for Dos Passos, that matters—not the characters. The “Newsreel” segments also keep us grounded in the “larger world” and away from the inner world of the characters’ deepest thoughts. The only deep characterization we get is of important figures such as Thomas Edison (“The Electrical Wizard”) or Eugene V. Debs (“Lover of Mankind”). The only insight into anyone’s thoughts are the “Camera Eye” sequences.

In Thompson’s work as well, the “camera eye” method puts someone’s inner thoughts and literal stream of consciousness right into the story. A fine example of this device can be found at the beginning of *Las Vegas*. When Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo pick up the hitchhiker, Duke begins to worry about staying calm around the boy. “This same lonely desert,” he thinks, “was the last known home of the Manson family. Will he make that grim connection when my

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<sup>25</sup> Douglas Brinkley notes on page 27 of *The Proud Highway* that Thompson read Dos Passos in 1956 and that it “shows in the style of [a] letter to [a] friend at Yale.”

<sup>26</sup> 2000 Mariner Books edition.

attorney starts screaming about bats and huge manta rays coming down on the car?” His thoughts continue until he’s sure the hitchhiker will “report us at once to some kind of outback nazi law enforcement agency, and they’ll run us down like dogs.” Thompson, as Duke, then writes, “Jesus! Did I *say* that? Or just think it? Was I talking? Did they hear me?” (5).

While Dos Passos’ “Camera Eye” marks the division between objectivity and subjectivity, Thompson’s “camera eye” unifies them. The author writing at home, the persona doing the talking, and the character all blend into one for a second. The narrative is no longer the voice of an outsider—not even the protagonist recalling his adventures—but suddenly spans the distance between plot point and narration. The words on the page are Duke’s thoughts, and he knows that we are reading them. For a brief instant, Duke’s psyche boils up into the narration. Meanwhile, he’s in the back of a convertible doing a hundred in the desert.

Later in *Las Vegas*, Hunter Thompson goes so far as to invade his own story. Raoul Duke receives a telegram at the Mint hotel that is addressed to Hunter S. Thompson, sent from Dr. Gonzo in L.A. Duke must somehow explain his and Thompson’s relationship. Instead, he makes up a story about journalists using code when sending telegrams and blames Western Union for switching the names. “It was actually *from* Thompson, not *to* him,” he fibs (76-8).

When one of Thompson’s narratives unfolds, we are reminded at all times that we are reading through the filter of someone else’s mind, experience, and psyche. Thompson’s version of the “camera eye” reminds that are we reading through his eyes.

One can sum up the presence of Thompson in his work by saying he is a participatory journalist; he is in the middle of the action of his story. As subjective as James Agee may be, as central as Tom Wolfe is, and as “embedded” as Geraldo Rivera was in Iraq, the only major journalist who truly shares this component of Thompson’s work is Stephen Crane.

Stephen Crane was on the *Commodore* when it sank on a filibustering mission in 1897. As we see in “Stephen Crane’s Own Story,”<sup>27</sup> he was not merely an embedded journalist. He was one of the few survivors of the *Commodore*. He climbed into the lifeboat with the captain, engineer, and oiler. He helped bail with buckets (879) and helped row the lifeboat (883). When he writes an account of his story, Crane is not characterizing a subculture he observes, like Wolfe. He is not glorifying the role of the journalist, like Geraldo. He is not trying to be something he’s not (like Mailer, for instance, in “The White Negro”). He is providing his account of what happened to him when he got involved with a certain group.

In *Hell’s Angels*, Thompson does not try to be a biker. He is a geek who was somehow allowed to enter their little world. Likewise, Crane does not try to be a filibusterer. He is on the mission, but in his depersonalized version, “The Open Boat,” he calls himself “the correspondent.” He acknowledges his role in the story. Both Crane and Thompson admit they are journalists who, by a stroke of luck, got involved with interesting people and both report on the unusual, frightening experiences they have. While reporting on the outlaw activities of filibusters and bikers, Crane was in a shipwreck and Thompson got stomped in a bar. Obviously, Crane did not want to see his boat sink and Thompson did not seek out a beating, but both were in the wrong place at the wrong time—and wrote successful works about their unfortunate experiences.

Indeed, one could go so far as to call what Thompson did participatory journalism if “gonzo” didn’t have such a nice ring to it. In the unused jacket copy for *Las Vegas*, Thompson even says, “[Tom] Wolfe’s problem is he’s too crusty to *participate* in his stories. The people he feels comfortable with are dull as stale dogshit, and the people who seem to fascinate him as a

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<sup>27</sup> Originally published in *The New York Press*, January 7, 1897. Reprinted in *Stephen Crane: Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1996. 875-84.

writer are so weird that they make him nervous” (108). Thompson is not merely present during he story; he makes himself the story. One way he does this is through the Raoul Duke device.

### **Thompson’s Voice: Writing Through Gonzo**

*Pronuntiatio* is, in a word, delivery. In the oratorical sense, this means volume, tone, and pitch of voice, as well as physical attributes such as stance, gestures, and facial expressions.<sup>28</sup> It is the way the message is conveyed. The means. For our purposes, since writers cannot shout or whisper their words to us, it means the voice. How does Thompson deliver his stories to us? I will go a step further and examine what role he plays in his articles. Thompson’s voice is complicated. He uses his Raoul Duke persona to blend reality and fiction. Though the use of alter egos is not new, the Raoul Duke device opens up deep rhetorical labyrinths.

Thompson is obviously not the first writer to employ a persona for his stories. It is a device as old as the fictionalized memoir. Whether for stylistic purposes or to prevent libel suits, the alter ego, the persona is far from unique to Thompson’s Raoul Duke. The closest kin to Duke can be found in a minor character in Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Unreliable Reporter**

Not terribly far into the story of the Man of La Mancha—at the beginning of Chapter 9, to be exact—Cervantes introduces us to Cide Hamete Benengeli. We are told at the end of Chapter 8 (while Don Quixote is attacking monks just after he is defeated by a windmill) that the author “could find no more exploits of Don Quixote than those related here” (105). The next chapter begins with Cervantes relating his trip to a silk market, where he finds some books written in

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<sup>28</sup> Corbett, 27-8.

<sup>29</sup> I am using the 2001 Signet New Classic edition.

Arabic. Cervantes grabs a nearby Arab, the aforementioned Benengeli, whom he asks to translate the books. Benengeli translates some marginalia and Cervantes realizes that he has found the lost tales of his hero, Don Quixote. The rest of the book, he says, is taken from Benengeli's translations into Spanish (106-9).

There are two reasons I liken Benengeli to Raoul Duke. Firstly, *Don Quixote* purports itself to be a factual account of actual events. Secondly Cervantes implies that Benengeli cannot be trusted as a translator. "Nevertheless," he writes, "if any objection can be raised against the truth of this history, it can only be because its author was an Arab, for those of that nation are much inclined to lying" (109). So the translator, the one entrusted to deliver the Truth to Cervantes, is a liar. This is the classic untrustworthy narrator. To be plain, Cervantes is making up a story, telling us it is true, inventing a third party to act as intermediary, and telling us the fictional third party is dishonest.

Shifting back to Thompson, we have another invented intermediary, Duke, whose filter we are also subject to. The two noted components of Benengeli are twisted by Thompson. Instead of a novel, a piece of fiction, Thompson uses Duke in journalism, the supposed bastion of objective Truth. Also, instead of Cervantes calling his device a liar, Duke says his creator is incompetent.

In his Muhammad Ali interview article, "Last Tango in Vegas,"<sup>30</sup> Duke must step in after just a few pages of rambling to take control. He begins, "This story is badly bogged down, and I think I know the reason: Dr. Thompson has been on it so long—in the belly of the beast, as it were—that he has lost all functional contact with his sense of humor; and where I come from they call that condition 'insanity.'" (551).

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<sup>30</sup> Two-part article originally published in *Rolling Stone* 264, May 5, 1974, 40-6 and 265, May 18, 1974, 62-8, 98-101. Reprinted in *GSH*, 547-59 and 559-89.

Duke's role is further muddled in an article from August of 1973, "Memo from the Sports Desk & Rude Notes from a Decompression Chamber in Miami."<sup>31</sup> It begins with an almost stream-of-consciousness style of mental wandering from Thompson about Nixon, the Watergate hearings, and resentment over not being on Nixon's list of White House enemies. Duke steps in with a memo to the editor stating his unease with Thompson's plan to report on Watergate after he has spent four months in a decompression chamber after a SCUBA diving accident "resulted in a near-fatal case of the Bends" (238-41).

Duke's memo calls Thompson "dangerously unstable," as well as deluded in thinking he is still *Rolling Stone's* National Affairs Editor (242). The memo continues with an air of worry and warning. The doctor at the decompression clinic calls Thompson a monster. Duke says Thompson must be flown back to Woody Creek, Colorado, "under guard if necessary," though he tells of rumors that Ralph Mankiewicz (advisor to George McGovern, Nixon's opponent in the 1972 election) is stocking up on cases of Wild Turkey in the Capitol (243). The entire memo is darkly ominous, though unspecific. The vagueness increases the memo's dangerous, ill-boding tone. Raoul Duke, the fictional creation of Hunter S. Thompson, is warning the real-life editors (and readers) of *Rolling Stone* of Thompson's madness, paranoia, and mental strain, which leaves him unfit to do his job as a journalist.

All of which is made up by Thompson, of course.

It is important to remember that this blurry Raoul Duke/Hunter Thompson debacle is merely a fictional device. An analogue can be found in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>32</sup> Between the Knight's and Miller's Tales Chaucer inserts a few key disclaimers. First, Chaucer says that the

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<sup>31</sup> Originally published in *Rolling Stone* 140, August 2, 1973, 8-10. Reprinted in *GSH*, 238-48.

<sup>32</sup> Citations from the Riverside version of the *Tales*.

Miller was so drunk “that unnethe his hors he sat” (3121). The Miller also admits to being soused: “I knowe it by my soun./And therefore if that I mysspeke or seye,/Wyte it the ale of Southwerk” (3138-40). So we have a drunk demanding to have his story told. Anyone who has been in a bar a few times knows that when a drunk guy says, “You’ve gotta hear this one!” that it’s going to be dirty.

Chaucer also apologizes to the reader for the impending bawdiness of the Miller’s Tale. He calls it a “cherles tale” (3169) and warns, “And therefore every gentil wight I preye,/For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye/Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce/Hir tales alle, be they better or werse” (3171-4). He would edit it for content if he could, but alas, he has a journalistic duty to report the Tales verbatim. “Blameth nat me,” he says, “if ye chese amys./The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this” (3181-2).

Of course, just as with Cervantes’ translator, just as with Thompson’s friend Duke, the Miller and his habits are made up. There is no Miller, no Benengeli, and no Duke. However, when we read Thompson’s articles that employ Raoul Duke, we are pressed to see him as flesh and blood. He is an outside force, Thompson’s friend and colleague, who must apologize and make up for Thompson’s shortcomings. “Thompson is a churl,” he might say. “I’m sorry to report it, I mean no wrong, but the man cannot write this article and I have to take over.”

Never mind that Duke is nothing more than ink. Never mind that Thompson wrote the whole thing as two people, sometimes three. He would on occasion invent Editor’s Notes, either about Thompson’s failure as a journalist or an explanation for an unusual format, such as in chapter 9 of the second part of *Las Vegas*, when the “editor” explains, “At this point in the chronology, Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely; the original manuscript is so splintered that we were forced to seek out the original tape recording and transcribe it verbatim”

(161). Fake. Made up. Pretend.

The Duke-Thompson spectrum is a tricky game invented by Thompson, one which he became caught up in himself. It meshes reality with fiction, people with characters. It is not simply within the confines of the pages that this occurs. Thompson comments on the Duke persona taking over people's expectations of him in the 1978 BBC documentary, *Fear and Loathing on the Road to Hollywood*.<sup>33</sup> "The myth has taken over. And I find myself, uh, you know, an appendage. I'm no longer necessary, I'm in the way. It'd be much better if I died. Then people could take the myth and make films."

If it were fiction, I believe Cervantes would be pleased.

#### Hunter Thompson Plays the Fool...Sometimes...<sup>34</sup>

Leaving Duke out of this mess for now, Thompson himself fills a classic literary role. He is the Fool figure. He is the court jester. The Fool is traditionally the only one who is able to outright insult the king and live. He also has close access to the king, being part of his court. Thompson made a career out of insulting the king. From Nixon to Reagan to Bush to Bush, Thompson spared no barb against powerful persons of whom he disapproved.

A fine example of this can be found in his obituary for Richard Nixon, "He Was a Crook."<sup>35</sup> While other reporters and public figures were praising Nixon for his trade relations with China and ending combat in Vietnam, among other feats, Thompson writes, "Nixon was so crooked that he needed servants to help him screw his pants on every morning" (42).

The other ingredient that makes up the Fool figure is his proximity to the king. Thompson has a way of getting in close with shrouded public figures. For instance, in "Last

<sup>33</sup> *Fear and Loathing on the Road to Hollywood*. Nigel Finch, prod., Philip Bonham-Carter, cin. BBC 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Immense apologies to The Main Ingredient.

<sup>35</sup> *Rolling Stone* 684, June 16, 1994, 42-44, 119.

Tango in Vegas: Fear and Loathing in the Far Room”<sup>36</sup> he gets as close as any journalist can get to Muhammad Ali—on his hotel bed.

Thompson says Ali has a “ring of moats” surrounding him, each a level of public persona (563). Only after one gets past these moats does one get access to the real Ali. After days of phone calls, runarounds, and red tape, Thompson finally skips a ring or two. He steps right into Ali’s hotel room, lights two cigarettes, and pops open a beer, “not realizing or even thinking about the gross transgressions I was committing by smoking *and* drinking in the presence of The Champ. (Conrad [Ali’s executive spokesman] told me later that *nobody* smokes or drinks in the same room with Muhammad Ali—and Jesus Christ! Not—of all places—in the sacred privacy of *his own bedroom at midnight...*)” He is, in a word, “in.” “Everybody else in the room,” he continues, “was obviously relaxed and getting a wonderful boot out of this bizarre spectacle—which was *me*” (567).

One of Thompson’s most repeated stories is his private car ride with Nixon in early 1968. As he tells it in *Campaign Trail*, “I was the only one in the press corps that evening who claimed to be as seriously addicted to pro football as Nixon himself.” He adds, “I was also the only out-front, openly hostile Peace Freak; the only one wearing Levis and a ski jacket, the only one (no, there was *one* other) who’d smoked grass on Nixon’s big Greyhound press bus, and certainly the only one who habitually referred to the candidate as ‘the Dingbat’” (60).

The other journalists were “pleading for two or three weeks for even a five-minute interview,” but the seat went to Thompson. Despite being openly hostile to candidate Nixon’s politics and one of his most outspoken critics, Thompson got as close as one can get to a serious politician. Of course, it was because Nixon wanted to “ride with somebody who can talk *football*” and the other reporters—politics nuts, obviously—were “hopeless” (59). But

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<sup>36</sup> The second part of the two-part article cited above

Thompson, the Fool, was still the only one who his future nemesis could relax with. He was the only one who could gain access.

### On the Subject of Subjectivity

The final component of Thompson's delivery is its subjectivity. This is the primary attribute of Thompson's writing that has garnered him the most exclusionary, unaccepting criticism. A journalist, the argument goes, should tell the Truth, always. True journalists cannot go around exaggerating this and downplaying that just because that's how it seemed to happen (to them). They cannot let their emotions get in the way of the facts. Thompson has a clear rebuttal and manifesto in the Nixon obituary:

Some people will say that words like *scum* and *rotten* are wrong for Objective Journalism—which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful. (44)

His personal politics notwithstanding, Thompson states here the need for this style of journalism, for subjective reporting. There is more to Truth than facts. We must remember interpretation, ideology, and emotion; gut instincts and violent reactions; first impressions and compassion.

James Agee, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,<sup>37</sup> is almost as direct as Thompson about writing subjectively. “[I]t is in these terms I would tell you,” he says, “at all leisure, and in all detail, whatever is to tell: of where I am; of what I perceive” (52). He does not say he will tell us

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<sup>37</sup> From the 1960 Cambridge: Riverside Press edition.

what happens. He does not even say it will be what he sees. It will be what he perceives. What happens is true. What one sees is objective (or, if this is impossible, as close to objective as we can come). But what one perceives is subjective.

One reason *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is famous is Walker Evans' photos of the tenant farmers and their environment. The book begins with dozens of stark images of hard-lined faces and old barns. The reader is dropped into the world of Agee's South, the South that he and Evans see. Instead of the generalized, distanced description of what a generic tenant farmer family is like that was assigned, Agee delivers an emotionally thorough portrait of three families' homes, routines, and lives. (Altering the assignment—as discussed earlier—is something else Agee and Thompson share.) He tells us how many rooms each house has, how big the rooms are, how many dogs the families have, and how many children have been lost. We know that Mr. Ricketts only has two suits (273), the Grudgers' storeroom smells of sackcloth (185), and that one “young man had the asthma so badly the fits of it nearly killed him” (36).

These details go far beyond an overview of a demographic. These are intimate pieces of people's lives that make them who they are. Agee takes his description to the final step and outright depicts and distinguishes the families. They are disadvantaged, poor, sad, “inconceivably lonely, sorrowful, and remote” (53). They are no longer blips of data on a spreadsheet or tally form. They are flesh and blood, human to the core. Agee brings them to life so we can understand them, meet them, and know them.

Through these subjective texts we know Agee, we know the three families, and we know Hunter Thompson. Through Thompson we get to know Richard Nixon, Sonny Barger, Muhammad Ali's managers, and the terrified souls who hurriedly step out of the way of all of them. We know how the Chicago Democratic National Convention hurt us all, and how

Thompson couldn't talk to his friends about taking a police baton in the stomach during a celebration of Democracy without starting to cry. This cannot be done objectively. A person's depression and impotent ire over the crummy life he or she is allotted through accident of birth cannot be expressed in statistics. A four-paragraph article about a fight between biker gangs cannot let us know why someone would turn his back on "normal" society and become a Hell's Angel. For this, we need the subjective, the participatory, the gonzo.

### **The Thompson Structure: Writing through Digressions**

*Dispositio* is Latin for "arrangement" or "organization."<sup>38</sup> It is the order into which one puts the components of one's argument. How one structures the text. A chief component of Thompson's writing structure is its episodic, tangential, rambling feel. This is especially evident in what is held in some circles to be the pinnacle of campaign coverage, Thompson's *Campaign Trail*. Thompson followed the 1972 presidential campaign from December of 1971 until Election Day, recording his observations and his mental state all throughout the year. The end result is an illustration of the tedium, cabin fever, frustration, and disillusion that one discovers while living a campaign.

The entire year of coverage seems to tumble and shift dramatically. A pivotal point in Thompson's coverage is his article from the month of June, the beginning of the final decline in Thompson's mental state throughout the campaign. It is also the best example of this tangential structure. After this article, the mimesis of the book becomes so powerful that it is almost painful to read. We can feel the mental strain that Thompson must have been under while writing it.

Of the thirty pages in the June chapter (not counting photographs), most of them are

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<sup>38</sup> Corbett, 25.

dedicated to establishing an atmosphere rather than providing a detailed play by play of the events. Instead of giving explicit details on the setting or characters, Thompson adds to the tone, the environment of the campaign. He writes about the hotels he stays in, bets in the press pool, and another reporting assignment, among other things. Though not explicitly connected to the campaign, these descriptions give the reader contexts for Thompson's commentary on life with the pols.

The June article is episodic, made up of twenty sections. Most of these episodes are explicitly introduced and marked off from their surroundings as separate parts. Each episode adds another layer of atmosphere to the coverage. They build upon one another to form a web of disenchantment and frustration with the assignment. While some episodes seem to stray from the topic, in actuality they all fit together. Here are two ways of organizing the episodes, chronologically and functionally.

#### Chronology:

1. Villon quote – frames the article
2. Dehumanization, hopelessness, and fingernails
3. Tangent 1: the Vincent Black Shadow
4. “Jesus! Another tangent...” and Frank Mankiewicz
5. Tangent 2: Big Toe daydream
6. Time out—“this seems to be getting heavy”
7. Tangent 3: bad hotels
8. More motorcycles
9. Villon explained, self-commentary

10. Politics itself is the enemy
11. How McGovern became a shoe-in candidate
12. Hubert Humphrey and midnight trips to Vegas
13. Press pool gambling
14. Flashback: Thompson meets McGovern
15. What George says goes
16. McGovern wins California
17. Analysis of McGovern's campaign
18. A ruined article
19. A reluctant vote for a Democrat
20. Local story about ravens

If we look at the episodes in terms of their function, we see that they can be split into two groups. One provides plotline, the story, and action. The other adds to the context, orientation, and tone of the article. The context episodes outnumber the action episodes four to one. A rough division sets them like this:

Storyline/Action: 11 (McGovern as shoe-in), 12 (Humphrey rumor), 16 (McGovern wins), 17 (campaign analysis).

Context/Tone: 1-10 (Villon-politics as the enemy), 13-15 (gambling-obey George), 18-20 (ruined article-ravens).

The following is an extended analysis of these episodes and their relation to the article as a whole.

### Setting the Mood: Tone and Tangents

The article begins with a quotation from a poem by Francois Villon: “In my own country I am in a far-off land./I am strong but have no force or power/I win all yet remain a loser/At break of day I say goodnight/When I lie down I have a great fear of falling” (219). This quotation is the text’s abstract; it serves as a frame for the article. Like Villon, Thompson feels like a powerless stranger. The seemingly endless tedium of a national political campaign routine has caught up with Thompson and left him weary and psychologically drained, symbolized by the “fear of falling” whenever the subject, the voice, the “I” lies down. His nerves are jangled and threadbare.

Thompson is used to being at the center of his world. In the rest of the book, as well as most of Thompson’s work, he is the focus of all attention. The topics of his articles before *Campaign Trail* range from his near-victory in a campaign for Sheriff of Aspen to exaggerations of his drug binges and adventures in Las Vegas while he was supposed to cover a motorcycle race and police convention. He is used to being the eye of the storm, but when covering a presidential campaign he must relinquish his position as focal point to the candidate to the end political process itself. He knows he is “strong but” he has “no force or power” in this realm. This mentality is further supported by the first line of the quotation. Thompson is indeed in his “own country,” but his surroundings and daily life are alien to him. The campaign trail is, to Thompson, “a far-off land.”

The next episode is the first we see of Thompson’s actual article. There is no transition between the quotation and this second episode, but it is clear that we are moving from a quotation to the meat of the article. The quote is italicized and attributed to Villon. After a gap, the article proper begins.

This second episode revolves around dehumanization and the hopelessness that comes from Thompson knowing he is nowhere near completion (a cruel feeling similar being on page three of twenty). It could possibly be broken into smaller episodes, but the images and themes are related enough to warrant inclusion.

The first paragraph points out a journalistic rule: “When you start stealing from your own work you’re in bad trouble” (219). After six months of following McGovern, Thompson fears the repetition that must be apparent in his work. He complains of “growing extremely weary of writing constantly about politics” (219) and begins to discuss the metaphorical effect it is having on him.

Thompson says his brain is becoming a “steam-vat and [his] body is turning to wax and bad flab” (219). He complains of impotence and fingernails that grow at an alarming rate and are beginning to resemble claws. Only halfway into a mammoth, semi-colon peppered sentence, he has likened himself to a sort of automaton or Golem with the steam-vat and wax images, lost a vital part of being alive by being impotent, and made himself bestial by giving himself claws. The sentence concludes with Thompson sneaking away every night at dusk to cut his claws with thick toenail clippers. He must do this secretly. He is thus like a werewolf: the night brings an animal quality to him. He tries to control the beast by clipping his claws, but it is in vain.

Of his nocturnal grooming, Thompson says, “People are starting to notice, I think, but fuck them. I am beginning to notice some of *their* problems, too” (220). Here we see the paranoia and lashing out that comes from extreme stress. His reactionary “but fuck them” is more evidence of his emerging bestial side. He is practically snarling at his fellow reporters. His reaction to what he imagines as threatening attention is an implicit threat of his own. Thompson writes about all sorts of drugs being used openly in the press pool. He alleges the

others are using “Reds, Quaaludes, Valiums....speed, booze, Maalox, and other strange medications with fearsome regularity” (220). Even if he is making it up, this laundry list of drugs and the use of words like “fearsome” add a sense of stress and unease to the campaign. It is not only Thompson who is having psychological issues with this assignment; it is everyone with a press pass.

This episode ends with a note that the campaign is only “only” halfway over. The word “only” is important, indicating an anticipation for the campaign to be over so that Thompson can get back to his normal life. He links his weariness with the assignment with the third episode by giving a brief summary of his upcoming busy schedule: “As soon as I finish this goddamn thing I have to rush off to New York for the June 20<sup>th</sup> primary, then back to Washington...and after that Miami for the Democratic Convention” (220). On noting a break in the campaign calendar after the Convention, Thompson points out that he will not have a break because he will be test driving a motorcycle called the Vincent Black Shadow, which is the subject of episode three.

I am calling the Black Shadow episode Tangent One. Thompson spends approximately three quarters of a page talking about the Black Shadow, comparing it with the Honda 750. He quotes the Honda company as saying, “You meet the nicest people on a Honda” (221) and immediately says that he and *Rolling Stone* have nothing to do with nice people. Nice people, he says, do not have the stomach for Thompson and the magazine. He continues dismissing “nice people” until he slams into episode four.

The fourth episode is a comment on Tangent One. “Jesus!,” he says, “Another tangent, and right up front this time—the whole *lead*, in fact, completely fucked” (221). He admits to not even having an article for the previous deadline. This commentary on Tangent One and

subsequent commentary on his performance as a journalist reinforce the reader's understanding of Thompson's mental strain due to this assignment. Tangent One, in turn, acts not on its own, but only as a function of episode four. Tangent One could be about anything, as long as it showed (as it does here) that Thompson would rather write about anything than the campaign. Going off on a tangent would be pointless without Thompson pointing it out and giving an implicit apology and explicit explanation for Tangent One. This explanation begins episode five, or Tangent Two.

Thompson explains that the reason he is distracted from his work is McGovern's advisor, Frank Mankiewicz. Tangent Two consists of a fantasy Thompson has of cutting off Mankiewicz' big toes, forcing him to stumble around, unable to walk on his own. He sees a threat to his mental well-being and wishes to cripple it. Beyond the scope of Thompson's personal life, we can see Mankiewicz as a representative of the political process in general. He runs the campaign, the most deceptive part of the political world. A campaign manager's job is to deceive the public into thinking that his or her candidate is the only viable choice, no matter how far from the truth that argument lies.

Tangent Two stands out because of its beginning. Episode four ends with, "Missed the deadline, no article, no wisdom, no excuse...Except one: Yes, I was savagely and expertly duped by one of the oldest con trips in politics." (221). Tangent Two begins with, "By Frank Mankiewicz, of all people" (221). This last part begins a new paragraph and a new episode. The episode begins with a fragment. This fragmented beginning parallels the fragmentation of the entire article. It is like a jigsaw puzzle, with the episodes adding up to form a larger picture of Thompson's claustrophobic rage.

Tangent Two is by far the most violent image in the article. Mankiewicz stumbles

around the office, grabbing soda machines and coworkers in order to remain upright. This adds to the dystopian air of anger and fear hovering over this article. A journalist snaps and disfigures a high-ranking official, the man keeping the show running. By attacking Mankiewicz, the ringleader and propagator of the McGovern campaign—and, as such, Thompson’s misery—Thompson seeks to cripple the source of his frustration.

Tangent Two further adds to the ugly feeling of the article by closing with another bestial image. With no big toes, Thompson writes, Mankiewicz would have to move around with the aid of “*a complex tripod mechanism, five or six retractable aluminum rods strapped to each arm, moving around like a spider instead of a human*” (222). Not only is the spider an animal, it is also quite nasty.

Spiders are deceivers. They build webs that are almost invisible, unseen until one is caught up in them. By then it is too late. This could be seen as a metaphor for the web of lies a stereotypical politician spins. Spiders are also predators. They eat anything that they ensnare. But they do not simply eat their prey. Spiders entangle their catch and suck the juices out of it until there is nothing left but a shell. It is a gradual, cruel death that leaves the victim empty inside. They are literally bloodsuckers. The connection to politicians is obvious. A cynic would say politicians do just this to their constituents in order to further their careers and lifestyles. Not only is Mankiewicz an animal, he is a spider. Not only is he a spider, he is a mechanical spider, lacking the soul of even the nastiest of creatures. Quite a condemnation for an advisor to a dark horse candidate.

But it is not Mankiewicz per se whom Thompson wants to disfigure. Thompson has a vendetta against politics in general. Mankiewicz is merely a symbol of the enemy.

Here Thompson steps back from his nightmarish daydream. “Ah,” he says, “this seems to be getting heavy” (222). This is the beginning of episode six. One of the shortest episodes (it is only one paragraph long), this segment merely pulls Thompson out of one angry tirade and sets him up for another. It is more utilitarian than orientating. He explains that his bile rises every time that he tries to write. He decides to cleanse his mind of these harsh feelings (in his words, “take the weight off my spleen” [222]). This is the set up for episode seven, or Tangent Three. One could debate whether this counts as an entire episode or merely the end of Tangent Two, a transition to Tangent Three. I would respond by pointing out this transitional paragraph is about Thompson’s mind, not Mankiewicz’ toes, and is therefore a rhetorical entity in itself. As we shall now see, it would also be inappropriate to label it part of the next episode, as that episode is about hotel rooms. Yes, hotel rooms. It is another tangent.

Tangent Three (episode seven) describes another reason for Thompson’s frustration. While Thompson covers the campaign, he stays in hotels. Some of them are less than fabulous, notably the ones in Los Angeles and Milwaukee. Thompson gives little detail as to exactly what was wrong with these places, but he does call the Milwaukee Sheraton-Schroeder “the worst hotel in America.” The three details about the Milwaukee hotel that Thompson does manage to mention are the lack of a pool, “rumors of a military-style S&M gallery in the basement,” and their loss of his IBM typewriter (222-3).

These three tangents have a methodological point in common. Each progresses by following the same formula. From episode two through episode seven, Thompson begins by commenting on himself and/or his writing. Then he jumps into a tangent. He draws back and comments on the tangent before plunging into another one. Specifically, he begins by talking about his fingernails and attitude towards his assignment. Then he transitions into talking about

the Vincent Black Shadow by saying the little free time he has coming up must be spent test driving it. From the Black Shadow, he overtly comments on the departure (“Jesus! Another tangent...”) and offers an excuse for his writing and mentality, tackling both his writing and himself. He says this excuse is a trick (no details have yet been given about this trick) by Frank Maniewicz and starts his tangent on Mankiewicz’ big toes. The commentary on this tangent comes abruptly after the spider image: “Ah...but this seems to be getting heavy. Very harsh and demented language” (222). Once again, he offers an explanation for his writing and mindset, which brings us to the hotels.

Commentary, tangent, commentary, tangent, commentary, tangent. This is where we left off, so let’s jump back in.

Thompson finishes his account of the Milwaukee hotel with the lost typewriter. He says he will not pay the IBM company because he has a receipt. The paragraph ends and the next one begins with, “But first things first. We were talking about motorcycles” (223). Episode eight returns to Tangent One, describing the speed and power of the Vincent Black Shadow in an attempt to delay his inevitable return to the discussion of politics.

Episode nine has Thompson apparently revealing the meaning behind the Villon quotation that begins the article. He says he took it from his book, *Hell’s Angels*, hence the problem of repeating oneself. But when Thompson tries to explain its presence here, he fails. “There has to be a reason,” he says. “And there is, in fact—but I doubt if I’m up to explaining it right now” (225). He then says he has a contract that says he has to describe what happened in the California primary to validate the expenses *Rolling Stone* has paid in order to stick Thompson in the press pool in the first place. He returns to self-commentary, what one might call meta-non-fiction.

We are still very much in the realm of tone, feeling, and setting the scene. Seven pages into the article, nothing has happened. There is no information on the primary except that it occurred. So far, Thompson has given us escapist tangents about motorcycles, showing he does not want to write about politics. There is self-criticism for an inability to turn in an article about the events unfolding along the campaign trail. Add to this images setting a tone of ugliness, predation, paranoia, and stress. Thompson is on the verge, however, of straight coverage—call it plot. Episode nine is an indication that the plot is approaching. He mentions his contract and assignment, so presumably the fulfillment of both is at hand.

Instead, Thompson writes, “How long, O Lord, how long? Where will it end?” (225). He finishes episode nine saying all he wanted from this job was “enough money to get out of the country and live for a year or two in peaceful squalor in a house with a big screen porch looking down on an empty white beach, with a good rich coral reef a few hundred yards out in the surf and *no neighbors*” (225). All along, we find, Thompson has been more interested in getting away from everybody for a while, not covering a political horserace. In addition to the anger, stress, weariness, and frustration, we can add indifference to the list of factors contributing to Thompson’s coverage. He has a very different goal in mind, one that does not involve the White House.

Episode ten begins with Thompson referring to a book reviewer who had called him a misanthrope. He says—and this is where the disagreement could occur over this episode’s role—that it is politics that made him a misanthrope. He tells a story of being promised a cushy job as Governor of American Samoa by Democratic bigwig Larry O’Brien in 1964 or ’65. Needless to say, he did not receive this position, and he says he has harbored ill feelings for the

Democratic Party ever since. He had hoped to watch Ed Muskie win the nomination and lose the election to Nixon so his nemesis, the Democratic Party, would suffer humiliation for months on end in every newspaper in the country.

So the frame of the story gets another layer. Not only does Thompson hate this assignment for all the previously noted reasons, but also because of a personal vendetta. The episode ends, however, however, with Thompson shocked to find himself supporting the apparent candidate, George McGovern. He is now torn between his vendetta and his hopes for the country.

If we look at the article separately from the rest of the book, this is the end of Thompson's setting of tone. He will briefly dip back into it later, but at this point we have all the lenses needed to understand Thompson's coverage of the California primary as he views it and the normal coverage can commence. If, however, we look at the book as a whole, this last section (and the chapter as a whole) marks the revelation of Thompson's main conflict.

Thompson pits himself against politics. Our two foes face off in a test of endurance. Either Thompson cracks and has a mental breakdown or he pushes through and conquers his arch-nemesis, satirizing the ugly process the entire time. If this is true, the line from Villon saying Thompson has "no force or power" is negated, as he can beat his enemy, politics in general, by simply surviving it, as one would win against a natural disaster.

Personally, I lean towards seeing this in terms of the book as a whole, as this chapter marks the beginning of Thompson's descent which leaves him, by the end of the book, mentally drained and emotionally unstable. However, it is perfectly appropriate to view the article as its own text, as it was published by itself in *Rolling Stone*. For now, it is simplest to keep thinking of the article as its own separate entity. From this point of view, episodes eleven and twelve are

straight coverage.

Wait, We Have a Campaign to Cover!

Episode eleven is exactly the kind of thing an editor would be looking for in campaign coverage.

Thompson briefly summarizes how George McGovern became the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination. All he really says is that McGovern has done well for a “one-issue candidate” (that issue being Vietnam).

This episode could be seen to set the mood more than provide a play by play, as it is made up of soft verbs (“has done pretty well”) and does not include physical action (228). However, considering the context of the assignment for this article—Thompson must cover the California primary—this episode fits under straight coverage. Thompson delivers political analysis and bases it in the language of a race: who is leading at that time versus who is leading at this time. He says McGovern “was dismissed as a ‘one-issue candidate’” and that “he has branched out since then.” The episode is a short but vital one. McGovern makes progress. The plot is furthered.

The next episode is the opposite of episode eleven. Whereas eleven has a plot point hidden in what would otherwise be orienting language, twelve is full of action, but does not further the plot. In the end, though, it is an exciting story and has to do with the primary, so it falls under the general umbrella of the assignment.

Episode twelve follows Thompson as he chases down a rumor about Hubert Humphrey. Supposedly, Humphrey has a plane on standby to fly to Las Vegas, pick up hundreds of thousands of dollars from a vaguely defined, illegal source, and bring it back to California so that Humphrey’s team can pay for a last-minute media blitz. Except for episode sixteen, it has the

most action among all twenty episodes in the article. It reads like a spy novel. This episode also affects the course of future storyline. The primary might have gone to Humphrey if he had gotten that money. As exciting as this is, Thompson returns to the drudgery of his mundane life covering the campaign.

### Back to Tone

Episode thirteen brings us back to the tone-setting side of the article. It is a “behind the scenes” episode, showing the press pool playing poker and betting on who will win which primary and by how many points. The relaxed atmosphere of a card game and casual gambling about the future of the country undercuts the Fear and Loathing that overflows from the remainder of the article.

This episode also acts as a transition into episode fourteen. Thompson tries to get the twenty dollars he won in a bet with another reporter on delegate numbers. The reporter tells him McGovern has not won the nomination just yet and sends Thompson on his way. Episode fourteen arrives as Thompson compares the press pool following McGovern in June with the two other reporters and himself who covered him in the February New Hampshire primary.

Episode fourteen continues to enhance the atmosphere with camera eye-like snapshots of the early days of the campaign, when McGovern could not even afford to provide complimentary beer for the press, and when Thompson was the only one of the three journalists present who recognized the Senator at his own event. He contrasts this with how McGovern is seen in June in episode fifteen. Fifteen consists of merely Thompson saying that everybody pays attention to McGovern at the time of the article, and whatever McGovern says goes, another contribution to the context/tone category.

Okay, Okay, Storyline!

Episode sixteen returns to the storyline, and it marks the first time McGovern's victory in California is mentioned. It also includes an analysis of exactly why he won, as well as a play-by-play of what the candidate's team was doing while waiting for the results to come in. Here we have another episode based on action and suspense: "The first returns showed Humphrey well ahead," he writes, "and just before I was thrown out I heard Bill Dougherty...saying: 'We're gonna get zinged tonight, folks'" (246).

The function of this episode is clear. Thompson was supposed to write an article covering the California primary and he gives an account of the action leading up to McGovern's final six-point victory. It also marks the end of the normal campaign story.

Episode seventeen is a one-page analysis of McGovern's campaign as being on the defensive. Thompson says this is not the position to be in, but McGovern has been in just this position for a month. It is highly descriptive and almost completely lacks any action. Thompson reports that talk of Humphrey keeping McGovern on the defensive by accusing him of being a radical liberal, but this is not enough to warrant designating episode seventeen as being plot-based.

It is important to point out here that episodes eleven and twelve would be seen as adding to the tone and atmosphere, not plot, if one views this article as a piece of the book as a whole. If the central conflict in the book is—as I believe—the conflict between Thompson and political journalism, eleven and twelve merely provide background information to aid the reader in seeing how the battle is going. Similarly, episodes eighteen, nineteen, and twenty can either be seen as

the article's coda or as a mere addition to the jaded mood of the book as a whole.

### Atmosphere Revisited: The End of the Article

Episode eighteen begins with Thompson saying he feels tired, sick, and numb and continues into criticism of the article he is finishing. "So this is not going to end the way I thought it would," Thompson says, "and looking back at the lead I see that it didn't even start that way either. As for the middle, I can barely remember it" (248). Just as in the beginning of the article, we see Thompson criticizing himself and his writing, glancing around the hotel room before saying that his brain and arms are too numb to continue any analysis or journalism.

Episode nineteen registers a brief note of wonder that McGovern's team has brought the "useless bankrupt hulk" that is the Democratic Party back to a position where they may take the White House (250). The rest of the party, it seems, will have nothing to do with McGovern, as the episode ends with a news report saying Wilbur Mills would not run alongside McGovern if he were asked. This episode serves to show a growing gap between McGovern and the rest of the party. As a black horse candidate, he has usurped the throne from old party figures like Humphrey and Muskie. "Even if McGovern wins the Democratic nomination," Thompson writes, "the Party machinery won't be of much use to him, except as a vehicle" (250). This adds a sense of hopelessness to the mix. It is tone-setting with a distinct lack of action and short on aspects of plot.

The final episode (twenty), consists of one news item from Miami Beach. Ravens turn up in Miami Beach in alarmingly large numbers. Thompson quotes a report, saying tourists complain of "horrible croaking sounds" and that the ravens' droppings "smell like dead fish" (251).

The raven is a classic symbol of doom. It is hard to imagine someone mentioning ravens without channeling Edgar Allen Poe and his famous poem, which leaves the protagonist cowering in the corner while the raven mockingly tells him, “Nevermore.” Here the raven is disturbing people and killing nature in Miami, the city where both conventions are to be held. Following episode nineteen’s endnote of hopelessness, the raven image adds to the depression and ugliness—the Fear and Loathing—of this article’s conclusion.

If we see “June” comprising an article, its last three episodes act as a coda. The main action is over—McGovern wins California—so the remainder consists of living (un)happily ever after. If June is a chapter in a book, these episodes orient the reader towards doom and thus set up the remaining seven months of coverage before inauguration.

### But How Does It All Relate?

The structure of this coverage seems to be based on the rhetorical use of deliberate digression. This device is found in Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*.<sup>39</sup> Instead of a tangent, when Burton branches away from the main topic, it is referred to as a digression. For instance, after describing the nature of diseases, but before entering the topic of melancholy, Burton goes on a “Digression of Anatomy.” Like Thompson, Burton highlights his tangent. He says, “I hold it not impertinent to make a brief digression of the anatomy of the body...” (168). He later includes similar digressions on the nature of spirits and devils; the force of imagination; and the misery of scholars. These digressions are indirectly related to the overall topic and are deliberately and explicitly pointed out by the author, remarkably similarly to the way Thompson structures this article.

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<sup>39</sup> Citation from Vol. 1 of the 1973 AMS Press edition.

Jonathan Swift works in tangents in his *A Tale of a Tub*.<sup>40</sup> He also calls them digressions and points them out explicitly, like Burton. The first of these, “A Digression concerning Criticks,” has a sense of self-criticism similar to Thompson’s. While Thompson loudly shouts, “Jesus! Another tangent,” Swift draws a breath, takes his time, and slowly ruminates, “Tho’ I have been hitherto as cautious as I could, upon all occasions, most nicely to follow the rules and methods of writing, laid down by the example of our illustrious *moderns*; yet has the unhappy shortness of my memory led me into an error, from which I must immediately extricate my self, before I can decently pursue my principal subject” (53). He points out the digression, confesses that he knows he shouldn’t digress, but ultimately feels he must in order to explain himself fully. Though Swift is more proper than Thompson, the two writers share a sense of self deprecation. They put themselves down for not writing as one “should,” i.e., following the expected or traditional rhetorical form.

Swift’s apologetic tone is particularly ironic when it borders his satire on criticism. He moves from characterizing critics as petty by defining one as “*a discoverer and collector of writers faults*” [*sic*] (55) to belittling them by likening them to rats, wasps, and dogs (63-4). Swift describes critics in terms of grosser animals, ones who feed on garbage. Similarly, Thompson repeats again and again that he cannot write an effective article while grossly lashing out at political journalism and the politicians responsible for it. Thompson’s self-critique and digressive structure have deeper roots in literary tradition than one would first imagine.

#### Newsreels and Headlines: Reminders of the Day

As we can see, Hunter S. Thompson’s article for June of 1972 is a tangled web. Each strand, each episode brings new fear, paranoia, and weariness. In *Campaign Trail* he does this with his

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<sup>40</sup> From the 1979 edition by Robert Folkenflik, combining “A Tale of a Tub” with “The Battle of the Books.”

own anecdotes and daydreams. In other works, he complicates his structure by borrowing again from John Dos Passos and bringing in headlines.

In *Las Vegas*, as Thompson readies himself to leave the hotel without paying his ludicrously massive bill, he tries to appear calm by reading the newspaper. The stories are of a murder by overdose, increased drug use among soldiers in Vietnam, military interrogators torturing Vietnamese prisoners, and someone with “over 100,000 pills” shooting from his rooftop “for no apparent reason.” Thompson reacts to the newspaper with relief. “Against that heinous background,” he says, “my crimes were pale and meaningless.” However, he loses his calm again when he reads an article about Muhammad Ali being sentenced to five years “for *refusing* to kill ‘slopes’” (72-4). Later in the book, after Duke buys some liquor and ether and considers going back for laughing gas, he picks up another paper. The only story he reads is of a man who pulled out his own eyes while on PCP (100-2).

Like his tangents in the June article, Thompson uses the news stories to extend the mood of the story. It gives context for the state of society at that moment. While he is engaged in illegal activity, the country has demonized drug use and linked it to violence. They are also still punishing individuals who had chosen to protest the Vietnam War, such as Ali. Considering Thompson is on the same side as these poor souls, we understand that his worries increase.

Thompson uses other news stories in several articles. For instance, in his Watergate article, “Fear and Loathing in Limbo: The Scum Also Rises,”<sup>41</sup> he quotes from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Star-News* to quickly summarize the events of Watergate, namely Nixon’s resignation, Ford’s pardoning of Nixon, and an expectation of his

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<sup>41</sup> Originally published in *Rolling Stone* 171, October 10, 1974, 28-36, 49-52. Reprinted in *GSH*, 299-339.

return to politics (331-3). In “Jimmy Carter and the Great Leap of Faith,”<sup>42</sup> Thompson quotes an AP article about a 42-year-old widow and mother who refuses to explain why she will not marry Elvis (“This is the Sabbath day and I don’t like to talk about things like this on the Lord’s day”) to frame Carter’s firm belief in Christianity (461-2).

Like Thompson, Dos Passos uses news articles in *The U.S.A. Trilogy* with his “Newsreels.” Dos Passos’ “Newsreels” provide historical and social context for the story, from “EMPEROR NICHOLAS II FACING REVOLT OF EMPIRE GRANTS SUBJECTS LIBERTY” (46) to “Bombs were dropped somewhat indiscriminately over localities possessing no military importance” (237). As Duke becomes paranoid when he reads of drug abuse and hefty prison sentences while engaged in illegal activities, the John and Jane Does that Dos Passos writes about in his trilogy become even more universal when set against headlines of wars and elections, events that affect everyone.

So Thompson’s digressions and use of headlines do not seem so strange after all when seen in the contexts of literary history and rhetorical technique. It is an unusual tactic to be purposefully unclear, but in order to get so many ideas, contexts, and tone-setting factors in one article, it seems almost necessary.

### **The Style of Hunter Thompson: Punctuation, Percussiveness, and Pigfuckers**

*Elocutio*, or style, is the vastest component of rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> Does one use a comma or period? How about a fragment? How quickly and smoothly should it be paced? Which is a more appalling insult? Thompson weaves a complex tapestry of semi-stream of consciousness and verbal abuse that shocks the sensitive, fires up the political, confuses the unprepared, and sends

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<sup>42</sup> Originally published as “Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’76: Third Rate Romance, Low Rent Rendezvous” in *Rolling Stone* 214, June 3, 1976, 54-64, 84-88.

<sup>43</sup> Corbett, 26.

the rest of us into fits of giggles.

### Commas and Dashes, Ellipses and Fragments: A Broken Language

I begin with the most basic aspect of style: punctuation. Though there is a lot of fudge room, the rules and uses of punctuation are solidly agreed upon among writers of Standard American English and are more or less well-known to even a novice writer. Thompson plays with his punctuation to reflect the rapid-fire pace and interconnectedness of his thoughts.

He writes many, many fragmented sentences. For instance, a casual flip-through of *Las Vegas* landed me on the story of a friend of Duke/Thompson's. This young man is described as "an out-front *drifter*—a straight Road Person." Thompson relates, "He was standing on a street-corner near the Circus-Circus, watching the multi-color fountain, when the cop-cruiser pulled up." At this point there is a paragraph break. The next paragraph begins, "Wham. Straight to jail. No phone call, no lawyer, no charge" (173). Here Thompson's fragmented sentences illustrate the suddenness of the drifter's arrest. It comes out of nowhere: "Wham." The use of onomatopoeia helps illustrate the surprise of the arrest as well. It further adds a tone of violence to the event. "Wham" is the sound of a car collision or someone hitting someone else with a flat object—a two-by-four or a metal tray. Like a truck or a surprise attack, "wham" is not expected—and it hurts.

Thompson has taken this fragmentation further, giving a single word an entire paragraph. In *Las Vegas*, Duke at one point daydreams about attempting to explain why he has a "*loaded, unregistered, concealed, and maybe hot .357 Magnum*" in his possession. After thinking up an elaborate story for it, he imagines asking the officer, "*So that's why I have this weapon, officer. Can you believe that?*" The next paragraph is simply the word, "No" (71).

The italics in the above quoted material are in the original. The two paragraphs of daydream are set in italics to offset it from the rest of the story. (The rest of the story, after all, is purportedly true.) Thompson also uses extensive italics in *Campaign Trail* during his daydream about chopping off Mankiewicz's big toes—another jaunt into the realm of fantasy. The only other times Thompson uses extensive italics in the book (he often uses them for emphasis) is when quoting someone as a chapter introduction and in the “Editor’s Note” noted earlier, in the section on Approach.

These other two uses of italics are standard. Introductory quotations and asides from the editors are always italicized. But a daydream is usually treated with a simple “I thought” or “he imagined” in place of “he said” or “I replied.” By changing the typeface, Thompson creates the same effect as a cloudy frame around the action during a dream sequence on a sitcom. It is reminiscent of wavy lines, a glissando on a harp, or other common methods to distinguish between reality and the Land of Imagination. By employing this device, no explanatory language is necessary. We simply understand that Duke’s panicked jabbering to the police is happening only in his mind.

Thompson’s punctuation is largely used to mimic his machine-gun voice and to recreate thought processes. In both cases, the punctuation serves not only as dividers of thoughts, but also as pacesetters. For instance, when Duke speaks to Gonzo on a payphone in the desert in *Las Vegas*, Thompson sets the pace differently for speech with different purposes. When he furiously berates Gonzo for ditching him at the hotel, Duke recalls that Dr. Gonzo has made hotel arrangements and that things are under more control than he thought. When Gonzo asks Duke, “What the hell are you doing out there in the middle of the fucking desert?” Thompson writes,

“Suddenly I remembered. Yes. The telegram. It was all very clear” (95). The sentences are short and incomplete. Their brevity makes them zoom by, just as thought after thought is being fired off by Duke’s synapses. Thompson’s pacing places us in the passenger seat of Duke’s mind. (If I were cute, I would say we’re riding on his train of thought—but I’m not.)

The opposite of this fast-paced, almost instinctual form of thought is the slow, methodical pondering of a situation. We find this just before Duke makes the phone call to Gonzo, as he meditates on the direness of his predicament. As he sees it, he can either continue to LA (against the express order of a CHP officer not to) or stay in the town, where he was just spotted by the hitchhiker whom the duo terrify at the beginning of the story. “Either way,” he thinks, “it was horrible—and if these righteous outback predators got their stories together...and they would; it was inevitable in a town this small...that would cash my check all around. I’d be lucky to leave town alive. A ball of tar and feathers dragged onto the prison bus by angry natives...” (74).

The double-hyphen, semicolon, and ellipses all contribute to a stop-start, clunky, yet calculating pace. We can sense Duke’s brain pause to consider new information. Yes, there is a danger in both alternatives. Yes, the cop and hitchhiker would get their stories together. The paragraph concludes with the ellipsis following “angry natives.” The next paragraph is Duke deciding to call Gonzo to seek advice and give him a dose of abuse for contributing to the trouble he is in. This ellipsis marks the moment that passes while Duke decides to make the phone call. The thought process is mapped out and recreated.

Thompson does this often, but another example of punctuation and pacing used to reflect the thought process can be found in “The Great Shark Hunt.” When Thompson first lands in Cozumel, “a whole gaggle of public-relations specialists” greet him and offer their services:

What could they do for me? What did I *want*? What could they do to make my life

pleasant?

Carry my bags?

Well...why not?

To where?

Well...I paused, sensing an unexpected opening that could lead almost anywhere.... (424)

The paragraph breaks serve to mark the pace of his side of the conversation, but they also show the consideration given to each step of the dialogue. Thompson could very well string them all along in one paragraph. Instead he treats them as distinct sections, steps of decision making. Again, the ellipses serve to mark the passage of time while Thompson thinks about the situation presented to him.

Thompson's use of punctuation in general makes his writing transparent. We see the inner workings of his brain as it moves from point to point. Call it mimesis. This is similar to the structure of the June 1972 article in *Campaign Trail*. Whereas there the tangents and material presented set the context for Thompson's weariness, here the pacing illustrates the cogs of Thompson's mind as they turn towards decision.

### Mugs and Further Nastiness: A Wicked Tongue, Even For a Fun Hog

Aside from punctuation, Thompson's style is defined by his sense of humor. Thompson will address the reader directly sometimes; something similar to a comic mugging to the camera. For example, in "The Great Shark Hunt," Thompson briefly comments on the Mexican drug market: "There is a lot of PCP on the drug market these days; anybody who wants to put a horse into a coma can buy it pretty easily from...well...why blow that, eh?" (426). Besides implicitly

pointing out his drug use, Thompson adds a dose of comic relief to an otherwise frustrating story (his continued inability to discover what makes the fishing scene tick).

There is a self-commentary bordering on self-mockery to these mugs. Consider when Duke drives away from the Mint hotel in *Las Vegas*. Heading for his car full of stolen goods, running away from an astronomical and unpaid room service bill, Duke is called by the valet: “MISTER DUKE! Wait!” Duke thinks, “Well...why not? Many fine books have been written from prison” (75). He knows he’s doomed and lets it happen. But not without letting us know he knows how much trouble he’s in—and not without a quick mug to the reader.

It circles back to the subjectivity of his work. We know at all times that we are reading the thoughts of Hunter S. Thompson. The usual attempt at objectivity in journalism is missing, unwanted, shattered. This subjectivity pops up in his style like a boggle-eyed “oh dear” from Charlie Chaplin or Harrison Ford—two kings of the mug.

This form of the aside goes beyond a simple breaking of the fourth wall. Thompson knows we are reading his work, and we know that he knows. He talks to us. He shows an awareness of his audience, but also of his public persona. He is an outlaw, a troublemaker. Sometimes his mischief gets the best of him. And that’s when the mug comes out.

(I include this component under the Style section rather than Approach because it stems more from his punctuation and word choice than his topics and themes.)

Getting back to more concretely stylistic aspects of Thompson’s work, a common theme in his writing is the use of bestial or otherwise grim imagery. This is most noticeable in *Las Vegas*, but

appears throughout his career. Thompson calls Watergate an octopus<sup>44</sup> and describes himself in terms of claw growth.<sup>45</sup> He says many would like to “dash out Oscar [Zeta Acosta]’s teeth with a ball-peen hammer”<sup>46</sup> and that Nixon’s face is “a greasy death mask.”<sup>47</sup> But *Las Vegas* is the richest single text for bestial and otherwise nasty images.

First of all, there are two of the most well known scenes: the opening drive through the desert and the acid trip in the hotel bar. The first supplies the line, “We can’t stop *here*. This is bat country!” (18). The second features Duke’s hallucination that turns the desk clerk into a moray eel and the other bar denizens into giant reptiles who bite each other’s necks and soak the carpet with blood (24).

So far we have an octopus, claws, bats, and reptiles. We also have the above mentioned comparison of Frank Mankiewicz to a spider. These are predators. Bloodsuckers. Cold-blooded, amorphous, nocturnal sneakers through the darkness. Add to the mix blood, a death mask, and dental violence. Keep in mind that the entire time Duke and Gonzo are in Vegas, they are terrified, often screaming. He paints a portrait of a nasty, mean, vindictive world full of killers and animals. (Not the most inappropriate set of images for one who writes about bikers, sports, Las Vegas, and politics.) Thompson is constantly in a world of greed and violence. His subjects look out for themselves and do whatever it takes to get what they want, so of course they are depicted as less than human.

As an extended example, allow me to indulge myself with one of Thompson’s favorite insults: pigfucker. “Pigfucker” is nasty. A pigfucker is committing an amazingly unnatural act,

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<sup>44</sup> “Fear and Loathing in Washington: The Boys in the Bag,” 287. Originally published as “Fear and Loathing in Washington: It Was a Nice Place. They Were Principled People, Generally” in *Rolling Stone* 164, July 4, 1974, 42-47. Reprinted in *GSH*, 282-99.

<sup>45</sup> *Campaign Trail*, 220.

<sup>46</sup> “The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat: Fear and Loathing in the Graveyard of the Weird,” 508. originally published in *Rolling Stone* 254, December 15, 1977, 48-59. Reprinted in *GSH*, 495-516.

<sup>47</sup> “Fear and Loathing in Limbo,” 318.

more unnatural than a motherfucker—at least a motherfucker stays within the same species.

“Pigfucker” defies nature so strongly that it is hard not to get a mental image. That person is so low and vile that he goes home and has sex with a pig. It goes beyond insult. It is accusation and disgust. At least “motherfucker” can be used as a term of respect. Shaft, for instance, is a “bad motherfucker.” But a “pigfucker” can never be redeemed.

By calling someone a pigfucker, Thompson is inventing new obscenity. The old words have been so recontextualized that they have lost their power. One can call someone a bitch, bastard, asshole, or prick on basic cable. With the exception, maybe, of “cunt,” all the old obscene words have been overused to the point where they have become obsolete. “Pigfucker” is so obscene that it grabs the reader’s attention and focuses it on the recipient of the insult. “Wow,” the reader thinks, “that guy must be just rotten!”

Thompson, when we get down to it, is revamping naturalism. His language is harsh and full of words like “scream,” “blood,” and “banshee.” Scary, grim words. The words of an ugly world. While Agee treats tenant farmers with utmost respect and Wolfe makes cartoons out of the Merry Pranksters and art critics, Thompson takes away all sympathy from his subjects and makes them hideous beasts.

I say he is revamping naturalism because they share his bestial outlook on humanity. Consider the scene in Frank Norris’ *McTeague*<sup>48</sup> when the titular hulk stands over the sleeping Trina. She is “unconscious and helpless and very pretty...absolutely without defense.” Norris describes McTeague’s reaction to the sleeping beauty in his office: “Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that were in him so close to the surface leapt to life, shouting and clamoring.” McTeague asks himself, “What was this perverse, vicious thing that lived within him, knitted to his flesh?” Norris calls this instinctual, carnal desire “the foul stream

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<sup>48</sup> I am using the 2003 Signet Classics edition

of hereditary evil, like a sewer” (23-5).

Thompson treats many of his subjects with no less vileness. They are selfish, nasty, ugly, horrors disguised as people. Creeps and monsters. In the car in the beginning of *Las Vegas* he asks, “Had we deteriorated to the level of *dumb beasts*?” (8). It could not be put more overtly and succinctly. Thompson writes about people who have, indeed, become mere beasts. They are the source of his Fear and Loathing.

### **Meta-Journalism: In the Wake of Gonzo**

Hunter Thompson has been immortalized beyond his own work. He is the inspiration for Uncle Duke in the daily comic strip *Doonesbury* and the outlaw journalist Spider Jerusalem in the early 2000s monthly comic book *Transmetropolitan*. He is portrayed by Bill Murray in the movie *Where the Buffalo Roam* and by Johnny Depp in the film adaptation of *Las Vegas*. Drawings, printings, and tattoos of the gonzo fist are a calling card, a password among those who continue to live outside the boundaries of the mainstream culture. Despite the attention and praise for Thompson among the gonzo subculture, it is hard to find someone writing like him these days. The closest we come in any well-known sense is what I would call meta-journalism, journalism about journalism.

### **Reporters Reporting on Reporters’ Reporting**

Meta-journalism can be seen in two forms. First, there is what has become the standard form of news, especially on the cable news channels such as Fox News and CNN. Reporters now often highlight their role in the story. Consider the “imbedded journalists” in Iraq. Little is gained in terms of information by sending the reporters into the field with soldiers. Anything classified

remains classified in the ranks and news of any major advances or other events are delivered to a press pool by high ranking officers or Defense Department officials. Meanwhile, imbedded journalists—in full khaki civvies, for camouflage—live with soldiers somewhere back from the front lines to give the impression that they are knee-deep in action.

It is the *impression* of danger that imbedded journalists put forward. While anywhere in a war zone is surely dangerous for soldiers and anyone associated with them, the reporters play up their own experiences as more exciting than they actually are. While many journalists have been kidnapped, held hostage, and killed in Iraq, the Defense Department and the news networks would never allow civilian reporters to fully endanger themselves just for a story—which is why they are kept away from the front lines of combat.

Tactics such as imbedded journalism only focus attention on the reporter instead of the actual story. People do not watch the news to see how Geraldo Rivera is doing. They watch to see what events are taking place in the world today. Yet despite the imbedded journalist's proximity to the action, the only advantages this brings are interviews with soldiers about missing their families and hoping the campaign goes well; and, in the off chance that the combat comes close to the imbedded journalist's camp, close footage of explosions. Neither of these seems enough to warrant tossing reporters in with soldiers. The act is superfluous. The end result is either banal *pathos* or actual danger and death for the reporters involved.

Back in the studio, reporters such as Bill O'Reilly, Tucker Carlson, and Anderson Cooper place the emphasis on their commentary, again highlighting the reporter's role in the news stories. One chief problem is that the commentary lacks insight. Two sides argue in bumper stickers and placards. There is no analysis or explanation behind the commentary, simply a diehard intolerance for anything the "other side" has to say. Comedy Central's media satire

series *The Daily Show* parodies this trend in news coverage with mock roundtable debates that devolve into childish name-calling and correspondents in exaggerated imbedded journalist costumes who keep the focus on them, not the story. *The Daily Show* looks more similar to regular news coverage than one would hope.

The other form of meta-journalism is members of the media talking about the media. Al Franken and Michael Moore are now the most prominent voices on the liberal side. Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh similarly represent the conservatives. The liberals argue that the media is too conservative and the conservatives argue the media is too liberal. While this ombudsman-like duty is important to any news organization, books such as *Rush Limbaugh is a Big, Fat Idiot* and *How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must)* are little more than cheerleaders for their corresponding audiences.

One could easily point out that Hunter Thompson is guilty of focusing on himself and writing about his own perception of the media. He does have some extreme beliefs and clings to many grudges. However, I would argue, Thompson is a commentator, not a reporter. He routinely ditches his assignment and instead critiques the government, public figures, or general trends in society. In his own work, Thompson mocks his lack of professionalism.

In “Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl,”<sup>49</sup> he points out the fact that he is a “professional” sportswriter five times—four times within a page of each other. First, he imagines a leech is crawling up his spine. He warns of the possible upcoming danger: “as a professional sportswriter I knew that if the bugger ever reached my medulla I was done for.” Second, he notes “journalistic responsibility” and sets a plan for writing the article. Third, he points out that Nixon’s Attorney General, John Mitchell, “was a pro...and so, alas, was I. Or at least I had a fistful of press badges that said I was.” Here Thompson puts his professionalism in

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<sup>49</sup> Originally published in *Rolling Stone* 155, February 28, 1974, 28-38, 42-52. Reprinted in *GSH*, 46-77.

doubt. All he has to prove it are press badges. His detractors can simply say he merely writes about taking drugs for a music magazine and his credibility and professionalism are out the window. Finally, immediately after citing his press badges as proof of professionalism, Thompson snaps back into the action of writing the article: “And it was this bedrock sense of professionalism, I think, that quickly solved my problem” (48-9).

This overemphasis of the fact that he is a professional is a put-on. The Fool tells us he is a courtier. Meanwhile, regular reporters practically scream, “I am a journalist! I am in the field of danger! This is exciting, isn’t it? And I’m part of the excitement!” Thompson became a celebrity because of his outlandish lifestyle, social and political commentary, and complex, amusing, self-referential style of reporting. Straight reporters become celebrities because they demand it. As Paris Hilton is said to be famous for being famous, reporters have become authoritative celebrities because they are deemed authoritative celebrities.

### **Conclusion: He Was an Outlaw**

This analysis highlights some problems with the scholarship surrounding Hunter S. Thompson. Not only does Thompson not fit the New Journalistic mold; he goes out of his way to defy classification. This is why scholars have had trouble pinning him.

Defiance is an apt term for Thompson. He defies his editors’ choice of assignments. He defies core standards of journalism and rhetoric such as appearing reliable and staying on topic. Finally, he defies critics’ attempts to place him in a genre. Does he belong with the New Journalists or fabulists? Is he a realist or a naturalist? Does he write tall tales or postmodern noir? The truth is, Thompson is all of these. More accurately, he *uses* all of these. He frequently cites F. Scott Fitzgerald and Horatio Alger as influences. He writes in the tradition of

realism, but borrows tools from tall tales, naturalism, and Enlightenment essays, among other traditions, and brings it all together as gonzo.

While “gonzo” might be the best genre to file Thompson under, and the most commonly employed to do so, it seems a shame to do so. “Gonzo,” while an almost onomatopoeic hint at what to expect, is something of an “Other” category. “Well, he’s not quite this one, not quite that one...oh, let’s just toss him over there.” The term also carries an implied inferiority. “Gonzo” sounds unprepared, strung together, and madcap. Thompson himself has expressed an uneasiness with the term. “I never really was entirely comfortable with the word ‘gonzo,’” he says in an interview<sup>50</sup>. “It was not mine originally.”

Thompson’s term was “outlaw journalism.” This is much more appealing than gonzo. “Gonzo” might as well be replaced with “wacky.” But outlaws have made a decision to break the rules. Thompson’s writing spits in the face of journalistic tradition and does so much more than the New Journalists. Tom Wolfe covers the assigned topic. Norman Mailer sticks to the straight, dry, traditional voice. But Thompson wears his heart on his sleeve like James Agee. He depicts people as ugly beasts like Frank Norris. He includes tongue-in-cheek self deprecation like Jonathan Swift. He digresses into background information like Robert Burton. None of these attributes would be accepted by a straight-laced editor—and none would be attempted by the New Journalists.

Thompson’s work is aggressively genre-bending and iconoclastic. It is thus similar to the films of Wes Anderson and Jim Jarmusch, the comics of Evan Dorkin and Walt Kelly, and the music of Ween, Tom Waits, and Mr. Bungle. In a way, Thompson has more in common with

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<sup>50</sup> Interview. “A Fearsome Outlook: Hunter S. Thompson on the State of the Nation and Such Things As Lies and Truth.” Matt Nelson. Borders Books website. <http://www.bordersstores.com/features/feature.jsp?file=thompsonhunters>

these artists than he does with New Journalists. This is not to say that New Journalism did not innovate or redefine journalism. I merely submit that Thompson did so *more*. He went beyond New Journalism. He broke the rules of the rule breakers.

Hunter S. Thompson is an outlaw journalist. This term is far more accurate than New Journalism, gonzo journalism, or a bastardized faux-genre like nonfiction novel or documentary fiction. It is nobler and truer. Hopefully, this study has defined outlaw journalism more clearly.

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