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A Savage Journey to the Heart of Literary Freedom: Gonzo Journalism as a Vehicle for Social Criticism in the Literary Nonfiction of Hunter S. Thompson

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A Savage Journey to the Heart of Literary Freedom: Gonzo Journalism as a Vehicle for Social Criticism in the Literary Nonfiction of Hunter S. Thompson

Abstract

As a professional journalist Hunter S. Thompson made it his mission to expose and defy structures of American society which he believed inhibited the exercise of personal freedom and, consequently, made realizing the “American Dream” impossible. Through his unique voice and style of literary nonfiction known as “Gonzo Journalism” Thompson is able to debunk the myth of the American Dream by attacking false conceptions of it, thereby highlighting the failures of both these conceptions and the structures of society, politics, class, and authority which give rise to them. This thesis traces the genesis of Gonzo Journalism’s formal features and themes through Thompson’s adolescence and early professional career, ultimately arriving at a critical investigation of the finished product as a literary style of nonfiction which defies the conventional demands of objective journalism and therefore allows for a more personal, creative, and brutal social commentary. In this sense, Gonzo Journalism represents a form of “literary freedom” that is reflective of the “personal freedom” the American Dream necessitates. Through critical exegesis of Thompson’s most famous pieces of Gonzo Journalism, including but not limited to Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72, and “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” this thesis explores the relationship between personal freedom, literary freedom, and the American Dream motif in Thompson’s literary nonfiction. Ultimately I contend that Gonzo Journalism represents a means by which Thompson can both live the American Dream and identify, describe, and decry the societal failures which prevent others from doing so.

Keywords

Gonzo Journalism, Literary Freedom, Hunter S. Thompson, Social Criticism, American Dream

Disciplines

Community-Based Research | Critical and Cultural Studies | English Language and Literature | Journalism Studies

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English Honors Thesis

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Introduction

“And now for news of the incredibly erratic journalistic career of one H. Stockton Thompson”

Hunter S. Thompson, “Letter to his Mother,” February 5, 1957.

As a man, Hunter S. Thompson was as wild, unorthodox, and unpredictable as his writing. He was a social outlaw, a vicious drug fiend, a violent critic of contemporary society, and, above all, a passionate believer in the unlimited potential of the American experience. Seldom seen in public without a glass of Wild Turkey Whiskey and a Dunhill Cigarette, Thompson rose to prominence as one of the most aggressive and prolific of the “New Journalists.” Thompson’s contribution to the New Journalism movement was the creation of his unique style, “Gonzo Journalism,” which forsook the restrictive demands of objective journalism in an effort to achieve the literary freedom that honest social criticism necessitates. The principle focus of Thompson’s life’s work concerned what he considered to be the false promise of the “American Dream,” a subject that he repeatedly returned to in an effort to illuminate and debunk the poisonous myth of the Horatio Alger, “rags-to-riches” narrative.

Ultimately, Thompson’s conception of the “American Dream” was one of personal freedom and liberation from the constraints imposed by a confused and conservative society. He was the “freak-power” voice of the counter-culture and a chronicler of everything from outlaw motorcycle gangsters to American Presidents. Thompson’s writing represents one of the most brutally honest accounts of arguably the most turbulent period in American history, and continues the tradition of American writers, from Fitzgerald and Hemingway to Kerouac and Ginsberg, who documented the shortcomings of both American society and the respective

generations that constituted it. Born in the shadow of these aforementioned literary giants, Thompson represents an extension of the Beat aesthetic that lauded individual freedom. He both lionizes and embodies the figure of the outlaw in American society, for it is the outlaw who, in rejecting the restrictive structures of law, class, and authority, achieves the freedom necessary to make the “American Dream” reality. In this sense, Thompson’s alter-ego Raoul Duke is his generation’s answer to Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty, and, in the same way that Kerouac reinvented the form of the novel, Thompson changes the face of Journalism, transforming it into something wholly original and quintessentially his own.

This thesis will involve a thorough investigation of “Gonzo Journalism” as embodied in Hunter S. Thompson’s most famous and influential works, paying close attention to the ways in which the style operates as a vehicle for social criticism. Insofar as “Gonzo Journalism” forsakes any claims of objectivity and blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, the style affords Thompson the ability to create a more personal, unrestricted, and creative commentary. The style makes it possible for Thompson to transcend the limitations imposed by conventional journalism by allowing him to become an active and contributing character in the narrative. Consequently, “Gonzo Journalism” allows Thompson the freedom to interact with and influence the events and outcomes of the narrative, all of which culminate in an achieved “literary freedom” that is reflective of the “personal freedom” Thompson sought for himself in life. This freedom, both literary and personal, functions within his work to expose and defy the oppressive structures of society that he feels inhibit the exercise of personal freedom, and, consequently, the “American Dream.” The body of Thompson’s work, which will be examined here, constitutes an extensive, critical, and often hilarious social commentary that highlights the invaluable importance of freedom in our time.

The substance of this thesis will explore the creative style of literary journalism known as “Gonzo,” which was pioneered by Hunter S. Thompson in the early 1970’s and whose stylistic characteristics begin to appear in print throughout the 1960’s. However, no understanding, critical or otherwise, of Gonzo Journalism can possibly be attained without first turning a critical eye to Hunter S. Thompson’s condition in the 1950’s. Only by delving into the complex, burgeoning psyche of the man himself during his formative teenage years can we begin to justifiably dissect the work produced during Thompson’s professional career. I will then embark on a formal analysis of Thompson’s professional work as both a conventional features writer and a Gonzo Journalist, ultimately showing how Thompson’s life and work fuse to form an aesthetic of personal freedom that is, itself, representative of Thompson’s conception of the American Dream. His personal understanding of the American Dream was not the conventional “rags-to-riches” myth. In fact, Thompson came to regard anything conventional, from social norms to proper behavior, as contributing to personal stasis. Instead, Thompson’s American Dream demands individuality and freedom, both literary and personal.

Gonzo Journalism is quintessentially Thompson’s and is reflective of all the stark-raving, drug-fueled madness that characterized its progenitor. As a literary style gonzo is inexorably linked with the man who gave it life. Any attempt to divorce the substance of the prose from the biography and personality of Hunter S. Thompson can only succeed in further obscuring an already complicated literary form. For this reason, I open my thesis with a biographical account of Hunter S. Thompson’s formative years. In this first chapter I draw on several biographies as well as several of Thompson’s own letters, codified by historian Douglas Brinkley into the epistollic collection known as *The Proud Highway*, the first of three extensive volumes of Thompson’s letters. This is done in an effort to show the thematic origins of the creative lunacy

and tenacity of spirit, as well as the vicious animosity and seething resentment, that both begat and sustained gonzo journalism.

Chapter I: The Pursuit of Personal Freedom... Assuming the Role of Outlaw... Contempt for Authority... Disenchantment with the Conventional Press... Desire for Literary Freedom

Insofar as Gonzo Journalism represents a literary exercise of the personal freedom that Hunter S. Thompson desperately sought for himself in life, understanding Thompson's literary style of Gonzo Journalism demands an understanding of the man himself. To this end a study of Hunter S. Thompson's early life and experiences are absolutely essential, for it is during Thompson's early life that he develops his passion for personal freedom. Thompson saw himself as a cynical yet freedom-loving patriot, a "desperate southern gentleman," but this all came later. In the spring of his life Thompson was just another misbegotten, troublesome, and idealistic teenager, born of humble means in Louisville, Kentucky. Thompson's early life in the shadows of the Louisville elite, his admiration of the outlaw figure in society, and his loathing of systems of authority, all of which characterize his teenage years, furnished him with the attitudes and beliefs that catalyzed both the genesis of Gonzo Journalism and the spirit of discontentment embodied in Thompson's social criticism. For these reasons I begin, naturally enough, with Hunter S. Thompson the boy. In so doing I hope to substantiate Nick Nuttall's argument that understanding Thompson's upbringing "is a necessary prerequisite for understanding Thompson the man and supports the generally accepted notion that childhood is the determining factor in our later lives" (Nuttall 103).

Known both for his hooliganism and his infatuation with the written word, the teenage Thompson possessed many of the characteristics that later defined his professional and adult lives. Among the most substantial of these was an early fascination with the figure of the outlaw in American society and the personal freedom that such a figures represented. While the "outlaw

journalist” persona was still some years off, Thompson’s earliest writings, published in *The Spectator*, a journal released by Louisville’s “Athenaeum Literary Association” of which Thompson was a member, demonstrate his teenage attraction to alternative lifestyles that entailed freedom and adventure (Perry 15). Inspired by Marlon Brando’s character in the film *The Wild One*, for example, Thompson endeavored “to become a ‘Louisville outlaw’ with no use for anyone who chose security over adventure” (*Proud Highway* 4). Thompson expresses this sentiment in his 1955 essay “Security,” published in *The Spectator*, which associates security with complacency and stagnation. “A man is to be pitied,” he writes, “who lacked the courage to accept the challenge of freedom and depart from the cushion of security and see life as it is instead of living it second-hand” (“Security” 4-5). Thompson asks of the secure man: “What does he think when he sees his youthful dreams of adventure, accomplishment, travel and romance buried under the cloak of conformity?” (“Security” 4). Conformity was a toxic concept for Thompson and wholly antithetical to his conceptions of happiness and fulfillment, which demand individuality and personal autonomy. “Who is the happier man,” asks Thompson in the closing lines of “Security,” “he who has braved the storm of life and lived or he who has stayed securely on shore and merely existed” (5)?

The teenage Thompson likely regarded security with such fervid animosity because, compared to his schoolmates, he had none. His family lacked the wealth or connections that characterized many of his Louisville peers. Thompson nevertheless used his veracity and charm to climb the social ladder. The personal accounts of Hunter’s earliest friends and acquaintances evidence his tenacity. Paul Sermon, a fellow *Athenaeum Society* member, describes the club as “something that our fathers or even our grandfathers had been in. It was the oldest literary society, and it was a social group... mostly upper-middle-class, people with family ties and

things like that... (Wenner and Seymour 12). Thompson was able to gain access to privileged social circles such as the *Athenaeum* despite his class handicap because of his ability to win over a crowd. "He learned he could easily become a leader by verbal extravagance," writes Douglas Brinkley, the literary executor of Thompson's estate (Wenner and Seymour 9). "He could become cooler than the football quarterback... by being a wild-ass maverick ready to find the weaknesses in somebody and rip them to shreds" (Wenner and Seymour 9). Understanding this personality trait is invaluable for two primary reasons. First, it evidences where Thompson's early notion of the American Dream as the realization of the "Horatio Alger myth," the "rags-to-riches" narrative, comes from. Thompson believed he could make something of himself through his tenacity, despite the fact that he was poor and his friends were well-connected. Second, it suggests that the mannerisms that made Gonzo Journalism such a powerful vehicle for social criticism had been engrained in Thompson since boyhood. When this characteristic was channeled onto the page, Thompson was a ruthless and unsympathetic commentator, ravaging the subjects of his scorn.

President Richard Nixon, for example, one of his most frequent targets, is described as "a swine of a man" in Thompson's obituary of the President "He Was a Crook," "Swine" being an almost flattering description when juxtaposed with the vitriolic ramblings comprising *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*. Thompson pulls no punches in the piece when he writes, "If the right people had been in charge of Nixon's funeral, his casket would have been launched into one of those open sewage canals... his body should have been burned in a trash bin... but I have written worse things about Nixon, many times, and the record will show that I kicked him repeatedly long before he went down. I beat him like a mad dog with mange every time I got a chance, and I am proud of it. He was a scum" ("He Was a Crook" 241). To continue in this

vein, however, would be to get far ahead of ourselves. The digression nonetheless evidences Thompson's propensity to savagely yet comically attack those he loathed. Prior to being channeled onto the page this propensity often took the form of violent and criminal outbursts. When pacified, however, it manifest in the form of an attractive and magnifying confidence, which soon catapulted him to relevance among the Louisville Male School's upper echelon. "I was amazed at Hunter's networking ability," says high school friend Porter Bibb. "Most of the people that Hunter was close to and who brought him into their circle were very, very wealthy people, and Hunter didn't have a sou" (Wenner and Seymour 13).

In this sense the young Thompson embodied the literary figure of Nick Caraway, the protagonist of his favorite novel *The Great Gatsby*. Of all of Thompson's early literary inspirations F. Scott Fitzgerald was the most influential, with Porter Bibb claiming that he and Hunter "believed we were Fitzgerald incarnate" (Wenner and Seymour 12). Thompson even went so far as to repeatedly type, word for word, *The Great Gatsby* in an effort to "get the feel of how it is to write those words" (Wenner and Seymour 13). Many of the themes addressed in Fitzgerald's masterwork, including class, social status, the outlaw, American privilege, and, above all, the fruitless promise of the American Dream, later came to define Thompson's own literary nonfiction.

As popular as Thompson became in Louisville he did not fail to ostracize many with his aforementioned violent energy. This energy eventually enlivens his professional writing, but as a teenager the ferocious elements of his personality were not yet the impetus for his literary genius. Instead, Thompson's hooliganism and propensity for drink won him enemies among the ranks of both his own social circles and those of conventional authority. The alcoholism that characterized Thompson throughout his adult life began when he was an adolescent, and, owing

partly to his desire to fit the outlaw profile and partly to his chaotic spirit, Thompson drank often. Gerald Tyrrell, Thompson's neighbor and frequent partner in crime, remembers that the two first drank together in the spring of their sophomore years in high school and that Thompson "took to it like a duck to water" (Perry 10). Biographer Paul Perry notes, "From that point on, drinking had a place in almost everything that Hunter did" (10). Perry continues, "Hunter's passion for alcohol was well satiated at the Athenaeum"... where fellow members referred to him as "Dr. Hunto" because of his "near medical abilities to anesthetize himself with alcohol" and his tendency to "babble like an academic when he drank" (Perry 18). Perry recounts a story from fellow Athenaeum party-boy Ralston Steenrod, which begins with the club gathering at a house to complete an issue of the *Spectator*. An evening's worth of copious consumption left much of the work unfinished and only Thompson and Steenrod, the highest functioning drunks in the society, awake and writing. "We typed until daybreak," claims Steenrod, "finishing up other people's stories and editing much of the journal" (Perry 18). As a writer Hunter was known for his intoxicated bursts of erratic and spontaneous creativity in the "pre-dawn haze" of deadline day, but intoxication also has a formal function in Gonzo Journalism. When Thompson creates his alter-ego Raoul Duke, for example, it is Duke's intoxication that allows Thompson to make digressions, quickly change scenes, and embrace creative elements of the fantastic without compromising the "reality" of the narrative.

Thompson's drinking was complimented by a penchant for vandalism and criminality. From a young age he demonstrated little respect for the institutions of law and order, partly because he valued the exercise of total personal freedom and partly because he wanted to appear a rebel. In the late 60's and early 70's this preternatural abhorrence of authority manifests in the personage of Thompson's anti-hero alter-ego Raoul Duke, but in the middle 50's it was far less

constructive. Instead of concentrating his energy into prose, Thompson shoplifted, fired bullets from cars, and was alleged to be a member of a group of vandalizing delinquents known as “the Wreckers” (Wenner and Seymour 17). This unfortunate disposition of character frequently got the young outlaw into legal trouble, which perpetuated his distaste for authority and strengthened his affinity for freedom. In 1955, eleven days prior to his high school graduation date, Thompson and his friends Ralston Steenrod and Sam Stallings were arrested for mugging a stranger at Louisville’s Cherokee Park in an incident Perry describes as a “watershed for Hunter that propelled him out of the [Athenaeum] community” (Perry 19-20).

The charisma and wild charm that were instrumental in winning Thompson friendships among the Louisville elite could not make up for the lack of tangible legal or political connections that his lower-middle class situation did not offer. According to Porter Bibb, “In Louisville, if you have connections you’re untouchable” (Wenner and Seymour 14). Thompson was touchable, and he suffered for it. Stallings, whose father had “been the President of the Kentucky Bar Association,” was acquitted in the courts and Steenrod received no sentence, but Hunter was sentenced to sixty days confinement (Perry 20). “The other two guys got sprung by their fathers,” says Porter Bibb, “Nobody sprung Hunter. He was hung out to dry” (Wenner and Seymour 19). Thompson was forsaken in more ways than one, as shortly after his sentencing he was expelled by vote from the *Athenaeum*. The weeks and months following Hunter’s imprisonment had a substantial impact on both his writing and his philosophy concerning American life.

Thompson never officially graduated from the Louisville Male School. While his friends and, in some cases, accomplices prepared for college, Thompson sat in a jail cell. He was excommunicated from the *Athenaeum Society* on “charges of insufficient morals” by what then

friend T. Floyd Smith referred to as a “kangaroo court” (Perry 21). Ironically, in being expelled from the good-graces of the Louisville gentry, Thompson finally came to embody the role of outsider that he so admired. Believing that he had gotten a raw deal, “Hunter wrote his mother very philosophical letters from behind bars,” which “exude the desperation of a young man in jail looking for his freedom as well as contemplating how the rich get away with dastardly things and the poor don’t” (Wenner 19-20). This defining event of Thompson’s early life is, in part, what instilled him with the belief that the promise of Horatio Alger’s American Dream was a false one, only available to a privileged few. The theme of the “death of the American Dream,” which precisely addresses the falsity of the Horatio Alger myth and which Thompson first recognizes in a Louisville jail, appears in all his exercises in Gonzo Journalism. Believing the institution of objective journalism to be either incapable or unwilling to expose the corrupt institutions that had crippled the American Dream, Thompson the journalist embraces the role of the social critic in an effort to expose and defy these power structures. In his article “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” which many praise as the first piece of real Gonzo Journalism, Thompson bitterly criticizes the very Louisville elites that shunned him as a young man. For Thompson they were the problem incarnate... privilege run amok on bourbon and tradition. Nonetheless, nearly fifteen years separate the “Prince of Gonzo Journalism” from the poor boy lamenting his sad fate in a prison cell. During this time Thompson will hone his skill as both a social commentator and a writer, inventing Gonzo Journalism as a style that combats the conventions of the mainstream press whose members he believed operated as “sycophantic mouthpieces for the Rotary Club, the U.S. government, and the Eastern establishment” (*Proud Highway* xxiv). In other words, the very institutions of power that he felt threatened the American Dream.

While the history of Thompson's arrest, imprisonment, and abandonment as a teenager do much to explain his life-long desire for personal freedom and the bitterness with which he regarded those who were benefitted by the crooked reality of the American Dream, it would be a mistake to regard these happenings as the sole spring from which Thompson's creative impulses originated. Hunter was highly aware of the fate that might befall a teenage criminal. A month before his arrest Thompson drafted a poem entitled "The Night Watch," which demonstrates his fear of captivity and the loss of freedom. In "The Night Watch" Thompson laments the loss of the opportunities afforded to a free man:

"It was then my skin began to crawl and I thought, 'What I'd give to be free! /

Her face came back to me then like a flash, I remembered the touch of her lips. /

I remembered the beautiful gold of her hair, her sky-blue eyes and the touch of
her finger-tips. /

Then I cursed myself and tore my hair for I knew I'd been wrong from the start. /

I'd thrown away every chance I'd had and finally broken her heart. /

My grief was of that special kind that only comes to men when they reach /

the end of a lonesome road and see what they could have been." (5-6)

He acknowledges that the criminal was "wrong from the start" and had "thrown away every chance" he had, thereby preventing him from becoming "what he could have been" ("The Night Watch" 5-6). While the painful irony of "The Night Watch" could not have been lost on Thompson as he sat in a cell, the poem nonetheless presents a subject who takes personal accountability for the decisions that landed him in prison. This is characteristic of a man who

had yet to personally experience the unjust reality of American life. After his arrest Thompson's attitude concerning accountability changes dramatically. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a book wholly committed to the idea of the death of the American Dream, Thompson writes, "In a closed society where everybody's guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity" (72).

This conviction is born of Thompson's later life, but as a teenager he was less sure. His earliest work paints a picture of a confused and conflicted man. How was he to reconcile the claim made in the essay "Security," that "the only true courage" is that of "the kind which enables men to face the unknown regardless of the consequences," (5) with his very natural fear of the consequences of misbehavior evidenced in "The Night Watch?" Ultimately, Thompson finds his answer in the asylum of journalism. Writing offers Thompson a creative outlet for his wildest energies and impulses; a vehicle through which he may confront the enemies and glorify the outlaw heroes of his America without necessarily winding up behind bars. Of course, standing in the way of the absolute individual freedom Thompson wants to bring to his craft are the conventions of journalistic ethics and its demand for objectivity. In order to bypass these restrictive limitations Thompson will have to reinvent the form, which Gonzo Journalism achieves. In October 1957 Thompson sent a letter to a friend that evidences his early commitment to journalistic freedom. "Although I don't feel that it's at all necessary to tell you how I feel about the principle of individuality," he writes, "I know that I'm going to have to spend the rest of my life expressing it one way or another, and I think I'll accomplish more by expressing it on the keys of a typewriter than by letting it express itself in sudden outbursts of frustrated violence" (*Proud Highway* 70).

Thompson toiled in the dull fields of American press apprenticeship for nearly twelve years before he would make his breakthrough with Gonzo Journalism and for nearly eight years before he would experience any real substantive success in the discipline. Nevertheless, he was intent on making it as a writer. This conviction is expressed nicely in a letter Thompson wrote to fellow upstart writer and drinking buddy Rodger Richards in June of 1959 where he says: “As things stand now, I am going to be a writer. I’m not even sure that I’m going to be a good one or even a self-supporting one, but until the dark thumb of fate presses me to the dust and says ‘you are nothing,’ I will be a writer” (*Proud Highway* 165). Thompson’s aspirations, however, were to become a writer of serious fiction. His career in journalism started by chance during a brief tenure in the Air Force when he took a job as sports editor for the *Command Courier*, the official newspaper of Florida’s Eglin Air Force Base (Perry 25). Consistent with his earlier self, Thompson could not mask his distaste for the rigid authoritarian structure of the military and, after several incidents, was discharged honorably in the fall of 1957.

Despite the fact that Thompson was not long for the Air Force the experience was the impetus for his envoy into the world of journalism, his early professional years being marked by struggle and disappointment. His letters from this time give us insight into the trials and wavering convictions of the frequently despondent scribbler during his formative professional years. Shortly after being unjustly fired (by his own estimation) from a job reporting for the *Middletown Daily Record* in 1959, for example, Thompson drafted a letter to an old girlfriend that evidences his commitment to remain true to the principles of freedom and individuality, which eventually manifest in the literary style of Gonzo Journalism. “I’m *sans* salary,” he writes, “whether I was right or wrong. I’m convinced, of course, that to play a role or to adjust to fraud is wrong, and I damn well intend to keep right on living the way I think I should... I know

I'm right, but I sometimes wonder how important it is to be right – instead of comfortable” (*Proud Highway* 159). What is important to recognize here is that Hunter S. Thompson had many personas. There was the “Hunter-figure,” the Raoul Duke alter-ego who appears as the protagonist of his participatory literary journalism, and there was the real Hunter S. Thompson, wracked with doubt and periodically questioning the conviction expressed in “Security” that the man is to be pitied who sacrifices freedom for comfort. No study of Gonzo Journalism can be complete without recognizing these multiple personas, as gonzo journalism itself is an exercise of the former persona attempting to overcome the latter. “The carefree Thompson façade gets very tiresome at times,” he continues in the letter, “... I am no more than human and I know that anyone who insists on playing the great game on his own terms is bound to take an occasional beating” (*Proud Highway* 159-60). Whether it was at the hands of the *Middletown Daily Record*'s editor, Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, or Mayor Daley's Chicago Police during the '68 Democratic National Convention, Thompson took many beatings, always remaining steadfast in his pursuit of literary independence.

While Thompson was technically dismissed from the *Middletown Daily Record* for kicking and breaking a candy machine, his letter suggests that he was sacked for his reticence to conform to both professional and journalistic conventions. According to the *Record*'s Editor Thompson's work was good, but he was “a little anti-social” and “a little off beat,” to the point where the paper could not afford to keep him (*Proud Highway* 159). Thompson sardonically drafts his own epitaph in the letter which reads “he was right, dead right, as he hustled along (in his own off-beat way), but he's just as unemployed as if he had been wrong” (159). It became clear that Thompson would not be long for the world of conventional American journalism if he didn't forsake his uniquely personal style and demeanor, which was enough to disenchant him

from the entire institution of journalism proper. Thompson's frustrations culminated in the late summer of 1959 when he wrote William Dorviller, publisher of Puerto Rico's *San Juan Star*, to apply for the position of sports editor. Thompson saw the Caribbean job as an asylum, a place where he could experiment with literary freedom and exercise his off-beat disposition unmolested. The letter to Dorviller, which evidences both Thompson's contempt for conventional journalism and his idealized vision for the craft, is presented, in part, below:

At the moment I am unemployed, and will continue to be until I locate a worthwhile job, having been a sportswriter, sports editor, editorial trainee, and reporter – in that order – I have given up on American journalism. The decline of the American press has long been obvious, and my time is too valuable to waste in an effort to supply the 'man in the street' with his daily quota of clichés, gossip, and erotic tripe. There is another concept of journalism, which you may or may not be familiar with. It's engraved on a bronze plaque on the southeast corner of the Times Tower in New York City. (*Proud Highway* 177)

Thompson here references Joseph Pulitzer's "concept of journalism" as defined in an 1883 editorial Pulitzer drafted upon becoming publisher of the *New York World*. According to William Kennedy, writer and managing editor of the *San Juan Star*, Thompson agreed with Pulitzer's contention that journalism and, consequently, the journalist, "always be drastically independent" and "never afraid to attack wrong," sentiments which doubtlessly resonated with Thompson considering the premium he placed on personal freedom (Kennedy xv). Thompson's social commentary is likewise motivated, in part, by Pulitzer's assertion that journalism be "An institution that should always fight for progress and reform," which necessarily meant "opposing privileged classes and public plunderers" (Kennedy xv). Owing to his experiences in Louisville,

Thompson had already begun to foster an animosity for the privileged classes because of their propensity to maintain the corrupt reality that prohibited the actualization of the American Dream. This last point is absolutely crucial, for the “myth of the American Dream” becomes the thematic thread that weaves through the totality of Thompson’s writing. The idealized vision of drastically independent journalism Thompson describes eventually appears in the early Sixties in the form of New Journalism, a movement which is pioneered by writers like Thompson who preferred literary freedom to the rules of conventional journalism. In developing his unique style of Gonzo Journalism, the seeds of which he begins to sow throughout the early 1960’s and the fruit of which he begins to harvest in the early 1970’s, Thompson appropriates some key formal techniques of New Journalism and makes them his own. As this exploration of Thompson’s literary journalism marches into the turbulent decade of the Sixties one will see how the technical and formal devices and techniques of Gonzo Journalism, many of which are born of New Journalism, develop and function so as to enable a brand of social criticism quintessentially his own. Furthermore, an examination of the ways in which Thompson adopts and builds on the techniques of New Journalism will further evidence Thompson’s commitment to personal freedom and literary autonomy.

Chapter II: The Birth of Gonzo as Derivative of the New Journalism Movement... Origins of Gonzo Mechanics... How the Formal and Stylistic Devices Allow for Literary Freedom

“Gonzo Journalism... is a style of ‘reporting’ based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this.”

~ Hunter S. Thompson, *Jacket Copy of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (208)

“...the most important literature being written in America today is in nonfiction, in the form that has been tagged, however ungracefully, the New Journalism.”

~ Tom Wolfe, Preface to *the New Journalism*

In 1997 Matthew Hahn, interviewing Hunter S. Thompson for the *Atlantic Unbound*, observes in conversation that “the thing that people find most impressive about *The Proud Highway* [Thompson’s then recently released collection of early letters] is that from the age of seventeen or eighteen, you [Thompson] knew what you were going to do... people are impressed with your sense of destiny” (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 240). “I guess I found out early on that writing was a means of being effective,” Thompson replies, “I grew up thinking that, despite the obstacles presented by the swine, I would be successful no matter what I did” (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 240). His early conviction was consistent with the zeitgeist of American life in the 1950’s, which regarded with optimism the promise of the “Horatio Alger narrative,” the “rags-to-riches” success story that comprised the American Dream. Furthermore, Thompson’s early commitment to writing reflects an optimism that both he and the literary community of the 50’s shared regarding fiction’s potential as a means of actualizing the American Dream and

promoting social change. “It’s hard to explain,” Tom Wolfe writes in his *The New Journalism Anthology*, “what an American dream the idea of writing a novel was in the 1940’s, the 1950’s, and right into the 1960’s...the Novel seemed like one of the last of those superstrokes, like finding gold or striking oil, through which an American could, overnight, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny” (7-8). This sentiment explains why the waning years of the 1950’s find Thompson focused primarily on writing fiction. At the decade’s close he was working on his novel, *Prince Jellyfish*, and regarded journalism as a secondary profession, a job which simply provided a paycheck and “a means to support his writing habit” (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 205). In this respect Thompson was by no means alone. In fact, what Tom Wolfe describes as the purveying mentality of American writers in the late 1950’s suggests that a great many with literary aspirations believed journalism to be a temporary means to a more desirable end, writing serious fiction. Wolfe writes in *The New Journalism*:

What they all had in common was that they all regarded the newspaper as a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph. The idea was to get a job on a newspaper, keep body and soul together, pay the rent... accumulate ‘experience,’ perhaps work some of the fat off your style – then, at some point, quit cold, say goodbye to journalism, move into a shack somewhere, work night and day for six months, and light up the sky with the final triumph. The final triumph was known as The Novel. (5)

Of course, as America marches into the turbulent decade of the 1960’s things begin to change in nearly every facet of life. The 1960’s, the decade of the hippies, the Vietnam War, Kennedy, Nixon, and the acid culture, are marked by the introduction of new outlaws, new student protestors, new soldiers, and new kinds of politicians into American life. These new subjects,

unconventional by their natures, demanded an unconventional journalism, a New Journalism. It is during the early 1960's that "a curious new notion" begins to develop in the world of journalism; the idea that somewhere between the conventional realm of objective reportorial nonfiction and the creative realm of literary fiction dwelt a fresh style of reporting which was more equipped to chronicle the changing times. The product of this belief was the advent of New Journalism, a style which substantially influences Hunter S. Thompson's own style of Gonzo Journalism. The latter doesn't exist without the former, and by understanding how the defining formal and stylistic elements of the former come about and function in New Journalism narratives, one will see how Thompson, appropriating these formal breakthroughs through constant literary experimentation, is able to craft a style in Gonzo Journalism that is equipped to satisfy his own desire for personal and literary freedom as well as address the complex and ambiguous theme of the death of the American Dream.

To this point the origins of Hunter S. Thompson's association with the outlaw figure, passion for the principles of individuality and freedom, and discontentment with the nature of both the American press and American life, all of which manifest in the themes of Gonzo Journalism, have been considered. What has remained unmentioned, however, is how Gonzo Journalism comes about as a formal style. Gonzo Journalism is the product of a decade's worth of experimentation in the domain of features writing during a time in which new breeds of the outlaw figure Thompson so admired were exalted to prominence among the ranks a burgeoning American counterculture, and a new breed of journalism was being tested as a means of chronicling that counterculture. Thompson's foray into the discipline of features journalism begins rather pedestrianly, writing formally conventional pieces for American publications. Nonetheless, as the 1960's progress, changes in journalistic conventions on behalf of the New

Journalists, and social conventions on behalf of the counterculture, have a profound impact on Thompson's voice. Just as the hippie movement, the Vietnam War, and the Nixon presidency furnish Thompson with the subjects who embody the promise and failure of the American Dream, the New Journalism movement provides the formal and creative techniques necessary to execute his criticism effectively. This section will examine from a formal perspective examples of both full-bore Gonzo Journalism and Thompson's earlier, experimental features pieces in an effort to show how the formal devices of Gonzo Journalism, born of New Journalism, function. "I never intended Gonzo Journalism to be any more than just a differentiation of new journalism," said Thompson in 1996. "I kind of knew it wasn't that" (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 206). While Thompson is right in saying that the two styles are different, they are inexorably linked.

In late 1959 William Kennedy, Managing Editor of the *San Juan Star* asked Thompson to expand his notion of the "dry rot of the American press" into a three page feature which would run in the *Star's* inaugural issue. In lieu of the serious, objective piece that Kennedy expected, Thompson submitted a fictional one act play on the subject. This response is characteristic of a man who told *Spin Magazine* in 1993, "I've always had and still do have an ambition to write fiction. I've never had any real ambition within journalism, but events and fate and my own sense of fun keep taking me back..." (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 175). Much to Thompson's chagrin the play was rejected, with Kennedy writing back, "The writing shows you will say things well once you discover something new that's worth saying" (*Proud Highway* 190). Thompson's problem, however, was not that he didn't have something worth saying, but that he didn't yet have a means by which to say it. Conventional journalism, which Thompson regarded as "a batch of warmed-over clichés with barnyard over-tones," was itself regulated by rules

which, insofar as they prevented the exercise of literary freedom, reflected the systemic failures of American society that he intended to illuminate (*Proud Highway* 191-2). Because the realm of fiction was not subject to these limitations, Thompson naturally embraced the techniques of New Journalism which combined elements of creative, fiction writing with those of traditional, reportorial nonfiction.

Literary Journalism: Enlivening Journalistic Nonfiction with Fiction Aesthetics

As was indicated above, New Journalism was predicated on the idea that combining elements of the literary and creative with those of traditional journalistic nonfiction would produce a more effective commentary. In Wolfe's own words:

And yet in the early 1960's a curious new notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature stratosphere. It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would... read like a novel. (*The New Journalism* 9)

"The essence of Tom Wolfe's New Journalism," writes James E. Caron, "is that reporting can have an aesthetic dimension. Using techniques usually associated with novels and short stories, a writer can produce lively and interesting non-fiction without sacrificing accuracy" (1). These "techniques" of fiction writing made it possible, according to Wolfe, for New Journalism to "excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally" (15). Times were conducive for the emergence of such an unconventional style of journalism during the early 1960's, as the emergence of the new counterculture, LSD subculture, and the movement towards psychedelics, themselves unconventional, were met with little interest by novelists. Wolfe writes that, after

publishing *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a book-length piece of New Journalism which chronicled the cross-country voyage of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, “I waited for the novels that I was sure would come pouring out of the psychedelic experience... but they never came forth” (*The New Journalism* 30). Publishers, too, he writes, “had been practically crying for novels by the new writers who would do the big novels of the hippie life or campus life or radical movements or the war in Vietnam or dope...,” but they never came (30-1). What this meant was that the door was open for a new breed of writers. “New Journalists,” writes Wolfe, “had the whole crazed obscene uproarious... drug soaked... lust oozing Sixties in America all to themselves” (31).

Throughout the Sixties New Journalists, including Hunter Thompson, took to the streets from New York City to San Francisco, wherever the countercultural action was, in an effort to document the youth movement in their own off-beat ways. Along with Wolfe’s account of the Merry Pranksters, other writers began experimenting with creative nonfiction as a means of telling the true story of the Sixties. Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, for example, chronicled the often harsh reality of runaway youths, in late 1960’s San Francisco, who came West in pursuit of promise they never found. Norman Mailer, in *The Armies of the Night*, a book which is ostensibly focused on the 1967 march on the Pentagon, captures the spirit of discontentment and youth protest. Even Hunter S. Thompson himself, whose eighteen months riding with the Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang produced the book *Hell’s Angels*, aimed to present a snapshot of the then contemporary outlaw through the literary lens of New Journalism. What these writers have in common, besides the fact that they were social documentarians, is that they all were “able to master the techniques, in nonfiction, that had given the novel of social realism such power” (*The New Journalism* 31).

When Wolfe speaks of the power of realism he is speaking of literary devices which endowed the novel, and eventually the nonfiction narrative, with its “concrete reality, emotional involvement, and its gripping or absorbing quality” (*The New Journalism* 31). The New Journalists, and eventually Hunter S. Thompson, were able to affect their narratives with these qualities, through the use of devices that will be considered momentarily, without compromising the narrative’s truth. All good journalism demands truth, but New Journalism and Gonzo Journalism operate on the principle that “truth” and “objectivity” are not synonymous. Thompson himself despised the idea of “objective journalism,” writing in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* that “there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms” (48). This is because, in Thompson’s mind, “journalism” implies truth, and “objectivity” implies a manner of reporting which makes presenting the real truth impossible. Thompson was of the opinion that certain subjects, especially political subjects, were too fundamentally corrupt to be described truthfully with objective reporting. “There is no way to grasp what a shallow, contemptible, and hopelessly dishonest old hack Hubert Humphrey really is...,” writes Thompson in *Campaign Trail*. “The double-standard realities of campaign journalism, however, make it difficult for even the best of the “straight / objective” reporters to write what they actually think and feel about a candidate” (209). Truthful reporting demands presenting the subject clearly in its true light, which objectivity prevents. Thompson evidences this when writing of Richard Nixon, saying:

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. (“He Was a Crook” 243)

These excerpts indicate precisely why Thompson placed such a premium on literary freedom. They also suggest why he appropriated many techniques of the New Journalists, which allow the writer to enliven their nonfiction with creative and imaginative elements consistent with fiction writing. Once the line separating fact from fiction is sufficiently blurred, which Thompson achieves with pure Gonzo Journalism, he assumes the ability to vacillate between both, thereby allowing him to present, however subjectively, the true nature of his subjects. Thompson writes in the “Jacket Copy for Fear & Loathing,” contained within the Modern Library edition:

Gonzo Journalism... is a style of “reporting” based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism... Which is not to say that Fiction is necessarily “more true” than Journalism – but that both “fiction” and “journalism” are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end. (208)

This “end,” of course, is the impartation of truth.

The first of the aforementioned technical devices of New Journalism narratives, which I will refer to as the participatory perspective, involves the reappraisal and reconfiguration of the role of the narrator or speaker in a journalistic piece. Wolfe refers to it as the “third-person point of view,” which gives the impressions of “seeing the action through the eyes of someone who was actually on the scene and involved in it” (*The New Journalism* 17-8). In so doing, argues

Wolfe, the author is able to “give the reader the feeling of being inside the character’s mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it” (32). Thompson’s own use of the participatory perspective in Gonzo Journalism, which will be explained at length in the next section, expanded upon Wolfe’s application insofar as the journalist, i.e. Thompson himself, actually becomes the protagonist. Consequently, the reader experiences the narrative from the perspective of the writer, and instead of simply getting “the feeling of being inside the character’s mind,” they actually do experience the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist as they happen. This unique perspective allows Thompson to present creative and imaginative scenes in his nonfiction because the scenes can be passed off as products of the imagination. When combined with Thompson’s own contribution to the Gonzo narrative, the use of drugs and alcohol as a means of altering his protagonist’s perception, Thompson’s participatory perspective makes it possible to shift radically between scenes, both real and imagined.

The second is what Wolfe refers to as “scene-by-scene construction,” or “telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative” (*The New Journalism* 31). In Wolfean terms, this often meant shifting from the mind of one character to the other, allowing the writer to present the personal thoughts and feelings of other players in the narrative. Thompson, however, uses “scene-by-scene construction” differently. Because he is an active protagonist in his stories he doesn’t have to drop into the minds of other active characters. Instead, he uses his own character’s imagination, memory, and often paranoid hallucinations to shift radically from his ostensible subject to other topics. As his Gonzo style develops he uses drugs and alcohol, which allow him to make wild, imaginative, and sometimes fantastic digressions, as a means of constructing and moving from mad scene to mad scene. These digressions often function so as to blur the distinction between fact and fiction in

Thompson's Gonzo Journalism. Thompson achieves absolute literary freedom in this respect, for these forays into imaginative fiction allow him to essentially transform his nonfiction into an exercise of creative writing. The remainder of this chapter will examine how the aforementioned devices of New Journalism function and are transfigured in Hunter S. Thompson's early features writing and later Gonzo Journalism.

Participatory Journalism: Experimenting with Perspectives and Journalist as Character

In defiance of the conventionally held belief that "the narrator's own voice should be like a neutral background against which bits of color would stand out," Wolfe and other New Journalists began experimenting in the early 1960's with writing that provided the "illusion of seeing the action through the eyes of someone who was actually on the scene and involved in it" (*The New Journalism* 17-8). In this way, Wolfe argues, New Journalists were able to "give the full objective description, plus something the readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters" (21). Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* exemplifies this style throughout, but precisely in the following excerpt:

Then Allen Ginsberg was in front of the microphone with finger cymbals on each hand, dancing around with a beard down to his belly and chanting Hindu chants into the microphone booming out over California, U.S.A., *Hare Krishna hare krishna hare krishna hare krishna hare krishna* – what the mollyfrock is hairy krishna – who is this hairy freak – but you can't help yourself, you got to groove with this cat in spite of yourself... (173)

As far as narrative perspective is concerned Wolfe presents Ginsberg's actions from the viewpoint of someone who was actually there. His description of the event is objective at first,

consistent with traditional journalism insofar as it sets Ginsberg before a crowd and chronicles his speech and movements as they happened. Nonetheless, in true New Journalism form, Wolfe then puts the reader right into the mind of a character on the scene, establishing an emotional atmosphere of excitement and a feeling of being overwhelmed by the event. Of all of Hunter S. Thompson's pre-Gonzo works the one that comes closest to the Wolfean style shown above is his book *Hells Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*.

Thompson's assignment was similar to Wolfe's, documenting the Hell's Angels much in the same way Wolfe documented the Merry Pranksters. It should come as a surprise, then, that *Hell's Angels* somewhat appropriates Wolfe's style. For example, Thompson writes:

Among the hardest hit was Terry the Tramp, who immediately loaded up on LSD and spent the next twelve hours locked in the back of a panel truck, shrieking and crying under the gaze of some god he had almost forgotten, but who came down that night to the level of the treetops 'and just stared – man, he just looked at me, and I tell you I was scared like a little kid (215).

Like Wolfe, Thompson's description of Terry the Tramp begins objectively with a factual chronicle of how the drug-fueled night transpired. Then Thompson changes pace, bringing out the emotion of fear in the character while at the same time providing a creative account of an acid trip. Beyond the formal similarities, Thompson's *Hell's Angels* also emulates New Journalism in terms of the reportorial process. Thompson writes, "By the middle of summer I had become so involved in the outlaw scene that I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them. I found myself spending two or three days each week in Angel bars, in their homes, and on runs and parties" (*Hell's Angels* 66). Thompson's research process evidences Wolfe's claim that "they [the New Journalists] were

moving beyond the conventional limits of conventional journalism, but not merely in terms of technique. The kind of reporting they were doing struck them as far more ambitious... They developed the habit of staying with the people they were writing about for days and weeks at a time” (*The New Journalism* 21). Considering Thompson’s contempt for convention described in Chapter I, and his natural affinity for the kind of lifestyle the Hell’s Angels lived, it should come as no surprise that he would embrace this style of reporting

While *Hell’s Angels* was unconventional relative to the style and reporting process of traditional journalism, it was relatively conventional in terms of Wolfean New Journalism. Nevertheless, throughout the Sixties, Thompson begins experimenting with a perspective that was new even to the New Journalists. This device, which evidences Thompson’s commitment to developing a literary voice wholly his own, involved presenting the narrative not only through the eyes of a character on the scene, but by making himself that character. In several of Thompson’s experimental features pieces and every exercise in Gonzo Journalism he makes himself, or his alter-ego Raoul Duke, the main protagonist of his story. Unlike Wolfe who claims “I would write about myself in the third person, often as a troubled onlooker...,” Thompson writes about himself in the first person as a character who interacts with other characters and catalyzes the events of the narrative. Within the scope of participatory journalism, Gonzo Journalism distances itself from Wolfean New Journalism in this respect. “While both brands of non-fiction writing place the narrator on the scene,” writes Caron, “gonzo journalism insists upon the writer’s involvement with the events” (2).

Among Thompson’s early features piece where this tendency is most evident is “When the Beatniks Were Social Lions,” published in the *National Observer* in 1964. In the piece Thompson utilizes what Wolfe calls the “autobiographical format” of New Journalism, the “I

was there and this is how it affected me” (*The New Journalism* 42). “It was a good time to be [a Beatnik] in San Francisco,” he writes, “I know, because I was doing it...” (“When the Beatniks Were Social Lions” 460). Thompson then effectively removes himself from the narrative, but not before instigating the story’s action. “When the Beatniks Were Social Lions” uses the drunken *faux pas*’ of the fictional protagonist Willard as a metaphor for the social decline of the Beat Generation, and Thompson, as a character, sparks the narrative’s action by getting Willard drunk. “Willard arrived shortly before I packed up and left for the East,” he writes, “and, as a parting gesture, I left him a five-gallon jug of beer... among his neighbors were several others of the breed, mad drinkers and men of strange arts... The rest is history...” (“When the Beats Were Social Lions” 461-2). Since Willard’s drunken mad behavior is the story Thompson occupies two roles, the journalist who reports the news and the subject who creates it.

As Thompson becomes more comfortable experimenting with participatory journalism he begins to push the envelope further, allowing his own character to take more liberties. In “The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy,” published in *Scanlan’s Monthly* in 1970, for example, Thompson makes the story more about himself than Killy, his assigned subject. The narrative really focuses on the struggle of Thompson to write about Killy, whose role as a Chevrolet pitchman makes it near impossible for the journalist to maneuver the complex maze of public relations people who were there to protect his image. According to Bill Reynolds, “[Thompson] indulges in a little Gonzo journalism, which is to say he inserts himself into the story in an attempt to enliven a dull story about one of the grim realities of the modern world, namely, the sordid commoditization of heroes” (75). The story paints a picture of the conventional celebrity-salesman and the loathsome conventional press who pander to them in an effort not to displease the money-making establishment. “Throughout our numerous, distracted conversations, he

[Killy] was puzzled and dimly annoyed with the rambling style of my talk,” writes Thompson. “He seemed to feel that any journalist worthy of his profession would submit 10 very precise questions, write down 10 scripted Killy answers and then leave” (“The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy” 100). Thompson shows himself to be the antithesis of the aforementioned journalists by documenting, often humorously, his own character’s frustrations and anger. When one of Killy’s people says, “Naturally, I’d expect some play for Head Skis in your photo coverage...,” Thompson responds, “Fuck the skis. I couldn’t give a hoot in hell if he skis on metal bowls; all I want to do is talk to the man, in a decent human manner, and find out what he thinks about things” (“The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy” 103). Furthermore, as a means of satirizing the institution of big business which uses Killy’s image as a means of selling cars, Thompson the character briefly assumes Killy’s image as a means of mocking said institution. Thompson writes:

Meanwhile, slumped in a folding chair near the Killy exhibit, smoking a pipe and brooding on the spooks in this place, I am suddenly confronted by three young boys... and one of them asks me: “Are you Jean-Claude Killy?”... “That’s right,” I said... “What are you doing?” they asked... “Well,” I said finally, “I’m just sitting here smoking marijuana.” I held up my pipe. “This is what makes me ski so fast.” Their eyes swelled up like young grapefruits. They stared at me – waiting for a laugh, I think – then backed away. (96-7)

From a stylistic perspective this episode in the Killy piece evidences Gonzo Journalism’s tendency to problematize the conventional relationship between reporter and subject. By making himself the focus of his journalism “the ‘I’ of Thompson’s narrative acquires the three-dimensional solidity of any of the people he writes about” (Caron 2). This allows Thompson, in

Caron's words, "to become the hero of his own story," thereby allowing the Thompson "persona to displace the reporter's assignment" (Caron 2). Because Thompson's persona is always presented in the first person, the reader is able to witness Thompson's wild, often drug-fueled visions, and experience his subjective emotions. In this way the narrative may shift quickly from straight journalism to straight fiction without necessarily compromising the believability. "Since the 'I' feels and thinks about the events or people being covered is necessarily known only to the author," writes Caron, "imagination can replace memory as the only guide for those thoughts and feelings. When this license is also extended to what the persona does in between the 'newsworthy' events, gonzo journalism is well on its way to becoming pure fiction" (Caron 2). Insofar as Gonzo Journalism blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, the journalist assumes the ability to inject wholly subjective and imaginative scenes into his nonfiction account. Gonzo Journalism owes its effectiveness as a vehicle for social criticism to this quality, which will be considered in the following section.

Gonzo Fiction: Digression, Imagination, and the Fantastic as Scene-by-Scene Construction

The technique of using the faculties of memory and imagination, as well as wild, often drug-fueled forays into the realm of creativity, represent the point at which Gonzo Journalism becomes quintessentially Hunter S. Thompson's. Because of Thompson's willingness to use himself as a character, he is able to transcend what Wolfe considers to be the limitations of the first person perspective. "This [the use of the first person] is very limiting for the journalist," writes Wolfe, "since he can bring the reader inside the mind of only one character – himself – a point of view that often proves irrelevant to the story and irritating to the reader" (*The New Journalism* 32). Thompson, however, doesn't have to worry about his own character, what Caron calls the "I" of his journalism, becoming irrelevant to the story, because the "I" is the story. Because

Thompson is the protagonist and the reader is in the protagonist's mind, Thompson can use his faculties of memory and imagination as a digressive device. In a manner resembling the cinematic technique of jump-cutting, he effectively switches scenes with random abandon, sometimes frantically, in an effort to introduce new layers of meaning into the story. In "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy" Thompson uses his own memory as a device to take his reader on a seemingly unrelated journey, cutting from one scene, a seat in a car next to Killy, to another, the Chicago Police Department's beating of protesters during the '68 Democratic National Convention: "...Suddenly it registered: the Stockyards Amphitheatre. I was banging along the freeway... heading for that rotten slaughterhouse where Mayor Daley had buried the Democratic Party" (96). Thompson's frantic jump from his criticism of the business side of the money-making institution that is Jean-Claude Killy to the police brutality in Chicago serves to show that America is being attacked by tyrants on all fronts. Thompson also uses the protagonist's memory as a means of characterizing these tyrants, attributing imaginative images to the objects of his scorn. In "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," Thompson writes, "It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every derby I'd ever been to, I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whisky gentry – a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture" (31). Thompson's unique involvement as a character in the narrative allows him to use memory and imagination, devices too subjective for traditional journalism, to creatively condemn the enemies of his America.

Thompson further pushes the bounds of narrative subjectivity in the late Sixties with the creation of his semi-fictional alter-ego "Raoul Duke," who replaces the actual Thompson as the narrator in many of his most famous works. The reader witnesses the events of the narrative

through Duke's eyes, affording Thompson an incredible amount of literary freedom in executing his themes. For all intents and purposes Raoul Duke is Hunter S. Thompson, but the alias allows him to do and say things he otherwise could not. It is principally through the use of the "Raoul Duke" technique that Thompson is able to make his creative leaps from standard nonfiction to gonzo fiction mid-narrative, a quality on which Gonzo social criticism hinges.

Embracing the literary device of metafiction and continuing the tradition of writers such as Frederick Exley, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and John Hawkes, Thompson evokes Duke as a means of fictionalizing his nonfiction narratives. In a January 1970 letter to Jim Silberman of Random House Thompson describes the Raoul Duke approach and how it might be an effective means of approaching his book on "The Death of the American Dream" (the book which eventually became *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*). "There's the Raoul Duke approach," Thompson writes, "which is essentially a very contemporary novel with straight, factual journalism as a background" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 267). Thompson continues in the letter to describe the benefits of using a fictional version of himself as protagonist. "The Raoul Duke gimmick gives me far more leeway to improvise on reality, without distorting it, that I'd have without Duke" writes Thompson. "He can play the lead role in scenes I couldn't even use otherwise, because in the context of nonfiction I couldn't 'prove' them" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 267-8). What is interestingly missing from the letter is any indication that Thompson intended to endow Raoul Duke with what becomes his most defining characteristic, namely, his perpetual intoxication. Nonetheless, the Duke that appears as the protagonist of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is identified by his intoxication, which permits Duke, and consequently Thompson, to quickly vacillate between reality and fiction, thereby affording the writer more literary freedom than any other particular device.

Drugs and alcohol afford Thompson (or Duke) the freedom to report any number of invented, extravagant fantasies without compromising the integrity of the narrative because drugs and alcohol fundamentally alter one's perception. A reporter on drugs can truthfully and objectively claim, for example, that "Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman's neck..." or, "the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge," even if, in reality, such things never happened (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 24). Thompson experiments with this device in the first person in the late Sixties at about the time he begins to use Duke as a fictional character in his narratives. Initially, Duke appears as a character who interacts with Thompson, but not as the eyes through which the reader witnesses the story. When writing about his experiences at the bloody 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, for example, Thompson uses drugs to alter the perception of his narrator, thereby allowing him to creatively paint a monstrous picture of the police who were responsible for the event's violence. "I was stoned," reports Thompson. "Those bayonets suddenly looked nine feet tall and the trees above the park seemed to press down on us... A 500 pound cop with blue fangs stopped me at the hotel entrance and demanded to see my non-magnetic hotel press pass" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 116-7). Drugs give Thompson the creative privilege of describing the cop, who symbolizes the whole hippie head-bashing Chicago Police force, in a manner consistent with the ugliness of their behavior. In short, he is able to describe the Chicago Police in their true light, which supports Jason Mosser's claim that "Gonzo is also a mode of perception in the sense that the deliberate derangement of the senses through drugs and alcohol de-familiarizes reality, opening the door to paradoxically clearer perceptions" (87-8).

Ultimately, Thompson's tendency to characterize real subjects and present real situations with fictional descriptions is what makes Gonzo Journalism so gonzo. The journalist who may

justifiably pass creative writing off as nonfiction, who has discovered a journalistic device through which he can “de-familiarize reality” to the extent that the fantastic becomes real, has achieved absolute literary freedom. Thompson uses his fictitious yet “paradoxically clearer perceptions” to execute his social criticism effectively. As I have already suggested, the goal of good journalism, whether traditional or Gonzo, is to impart truth. Good social criticism, therefore, must be substantiated by true accounts. At the beginning of the 1970’s Thompson begins to direct his focus entirely towards his keystone theme of “the Death of the American Dream.” He attacks the American Dream motif in full Gonzo fashion, meaning that he forsakes objectivity for subjectivity and hard facts for creative fiction. Nonetheless, thanks to the aforementioned technical devices of Gonzo Journalism, Thompson is able to peel the veil back and show the flaws and weaknesses of an American society which seems to have fundamentally lost touch with the creed that once defined it. The following chapter will concern how Hunter S. Thompson uses the literary freedom Gonzo Journalism enables to illuminate the institutions and power structure which are responsible for the Death of the American Dream while, at the same time, achieving the freedom that living the American Dream necessitates.

Chapter III: Gonzo Journalism in Action: How Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo Journalism Represents and Exercise in Literary Freedom and How Gonzo Journalism Enables Thompson's Social Criticism concerning his Primary Theme of "The Death of the American Dream"

Hunter S. Thompson's upbringing, foray into the world of journalism, quintessential literary style of Gonzo Journalism, and belief in the absolute necessity of personal freedom, have been well documented. In this context, I want to address Thompson's most prominent and important theme, "the death of the American Dream." This theme binds all of Thompson's professional work. Here I investigate what constitutes the death of the American Dream in Thompson's Gonzo Journalism, the technical devices of Gonzo Journalism which drive his best criticism, and how the exercise of personal freedom and individuality enables one to experience Thompson's personal understanding of the American Dream.

While Hunter S. Thompson's teenage upbringing and early professional career evidence his discontentment and frustration with the conventions of American life and professional journalism, it is towards the end of the 1960's that Thompson ostensibly begins writing about the shortcomings of the American Dream. Following the success of *Hell's Angels*, Random House approached Thompson with an offer to write a book explicitly concerning the "Death of the American Dream," a subject which Thompson was passionate about, but which, in the early stages of his research, proved to be ambiguous and hard to focus. For months Thompson struggled with the concept of the "Death of the American Dream," often writing to Jim Silberman, his editor at Random House, for advice and suggestions on how to execute the project. Silberman, hoping to concentrate Thompson's research, suggested that he focus on "violence in America" and "violent people" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 101). This

suggestion proved to be the perfect jumping-off point for Thompson who, only weeks later, would confront first-hand the painfully violent reality of Mayor Daily's Chicago Police beating peaceful protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Thompson describes the event as "the American Dream clubbing itself to death," and used it as the impetus for the Gonzo criticism that was to follow (*Fear and Loathing in America* 117). Marty Beckman, in a 2003 interview, suggests exactly why the Chicago convention, and 1968 more broadly, had such a profound impact on the direction in which Thompson took his "death of the American Dream" theme. "Protests against the convention," says Beckman, "were met with unprecedented police brutality" (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 323). While Beckman is technically referring to the actual Democratic convention, his assessment is true on a deeper level. The protestors in Chicago, like the protesters who characterized the first half of the decade, stood in opposition not only of the '68 political convention, but conventions in general. 1968 represents the year where the tide of the Sixties changes. Those who stood in strict defiance of the *status quo*, both politically and socially, were met in '68 with unprecedented violence on many fronts. "It look less than three months," writes Thompson in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. "Martin Luther King was murdered in April, Bobby Kennedy in June... then Nixon was nominated in July, and in August the Democrats went to Chicago for the final act" (141).

These happenings, coupled with the impending collapse of the acid culture and the escalation of the War in Vietnam, provide excellent subject matter for Thompson to recreate journalistic writing and, in doing so, Gonzo Journalism was born. As he moves into the 1970's he begins to explicitly use Gonzo Journalism as a means to illustrate his "final loss of faith in whatever this country was supposed to stand for, all that bullshit in the history books" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 137). Ultimately, Thompson argues that the last bastion of hope for the

American Dream lies not in the traditional, “rags-to-riches” success story of Horatio Alger, or the false promise of the almighty dollar, but in the exercise of absolute personal freedom. In this respect, Thompson’s version of the American Dream represents a fusion of his life and work into a literary aesthetic of personal freedom. The three principle examples of Gonzo Journalism that Thompson writes in the early 1970’s, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*, all embody, in their own respective ways, what Thompson saw as contributing to the “Death of the American Dream.” By looking at examples of how the aforementioned technical devices of Gonzo Journalism function in these texts as a means of illuminating exactly what constituted the “Death of the American Dream,” this chapter demonstrates Thompson’s belief that the actualization of American Dream demanded personal freedom above all else.

“The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and Gross, Atavistic Tradition

Never once in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” does Thompson use the phrase “American Dream,” but insofar as the piece focuses on the class divide between the very rich and very poor, the poisonous tradition of old money, and the general unwillingness of wealthy Southern society to embrace progressive reform, the story is more about the “death of the American Dream” than its ostensible subject, the Kentucky Derby itself. Thompson’s story also represents a homecoming narrative, as he returns as a character to his hometown, his old friends, and his old crowd. His position as a one-time member of the culture he condemns affords Thompson a degree of omniscience in the piece, as his creatively violent accounts of what one should expect on Derby day in Louisville are continually substantiated by an even more violent and alarming reality. Joining Thompson as a character in the narrative is the English illustrator Ralph Steadman, whose role as outsider and stranger to the culture of the

Louisville gentry and the bizarre happenings at Churchill Downs provides Thompson's criticism with even more acerbic power. Like Virgil guiding Dante through the depths of Hell, Thompson maneuvers Steadman and the reader through the "drunken mob scene" that is the Kentucky Derby ("Kentucky Derby" 37).

The narrative begins with Thompson conversing in the airport bar with a stereotypical Derby-goer named "Jimbo." In the style of Gonzo Journalism, Thompson is the article's protagonist, affording him the privilege of participating in the story he is reporting. Thompson's character sparks the dialogue by ordering a margarita, to which Jimbo responds, "Naw, naw... what the hell kind of drink is that for Kentucky Derby time? What's wrong with you boy?... Look. I know this Derby Crowd... this is no town to be giving people the impression that you're some kind of faggot" ("Kentucky Derby" 24). Thompson uses the dialogue that he instigates to establish the aggressive emotional mood of the piece. Consequently, Jimbo's loud, patronizing demeanor, justifies Thompson's decision to lie to the man, imagining the following fantasy and presenting it as fact:

At the track. On Derby Day. The Black Panthers... Well... maybe I Shouldn't be telling you... But hell, everybody else seems to know. The Cops and the National Guard have been getting ready for six weeks. They have 20,000 troops on alert at Fort Knox... It's not just the Panthers. The FBI says busloads of white crazies are coming in from all over the country – to mix with the crowd and attack all at once, from every direction. (24-5)

Jimbo cries out, on the verge of tears, "The Kentucky Derby... Why? Why here? Don't they respect anything?... Oh... Jesus! What in the name of God is happening in this country" (25).

This exchange sets up Thompson's social criticism for the rest of the piece, as the gross reality of

the Kentucky Derby proves to be far more chaotic, violent, and riotous than the Black Panther fantasy. Leaving Jimbo at the bar, Thompson writes, “I felt a little guilty about jangling that poor bugger’s brains with that evil fantasy. But what the hell?... And he had, after all, come her once again to make a nineteenth-century ass of himself in the midst of some jaded, atavistic freakout with nothing to recommend it except a very saleable ‘tradition’” (26). Thompson’s criticism from this point on concerns this “tradition,” its reliance on money, and Louisville’s class divide.

In order to put a face to the “tradition” of the Derby Thompson vacillates between descriptions of the haves and the have-nots at the race. First he provides his unflattering description of the rich who, seated in grandstands and mingling in the clubhouse, are separated from the plebeians. Thompson describes the Louisville Gentry:

Pink faces with a stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and buttondown collars... burnt out early or maybe just not much to burn in the first place. Not much energy in these faces, not much *curiosity*. Suffering in silence, nowhere to go after thirty in this life, just hang on and humor the children... Bad DT’s and too many snarls at the bridge club. Going down with the stock market. Oh Jesus, the kid has wrecked the new car, wrapped it around the big stone pillar at the bottom of the driveway... Send him off to Yale, they can cure anything up there. (35)

This description illuminates, in part, what Thompson considered a corrupt conception of the American Dream that celebrated wealth and material gains above all else. An adamant believer that one could be a slave as much to money as anything else, Thompson’s condemnation of the lives of the rich shows how living under the shadow of “tradition” is unfulfilling and contributes

to stasis and complacency. The grim reality of the lives of the rich leave them with nothing to cleave to but tradition itself. This explains Jimbo's fear that Black Panthers and student protestors might descend on the Derby, an asylum for wealthy Southern whites who still wanted to make "nineteenth century" fools of themselves while wearing white linen suits. Meanwhile, the rabble would be fenced in down on the infield of Churchill Downs. Thompson pushes this theme with the inclusion of unattributed dialogue, such as the following, which evidences the degree to which the rich Derby crowd valued their 'tradition.' "Yale? Did you see today's paper? New Haven is under siege. Yale is swarming with Black Panthers... I tell you Colonel, the world has gone mad. Why, they tell me a goddamn woman jockey might ride in the Derby today" (35).

Furthermore, the inclusion of Ralph Steadman, a foreigner and Thompson's Sancho Panza in the piece, strategically allows the writer to condemn the culture's quintessentially American obsession with greed and excess. Thompson's history as a Louisville native and one-time member of the Derby culture prepares him for what he might see at the race, while Steadman's observations are fresh and necessarily honest. While in the Paddock Bar, for example, Steadman points out a particular face which he believes embodies Thompson's aforementioned description. "Jesus, look at the corruption in that face!," says Steadman, "Look at the madness, the fear, the greed" (35). Thompson looks and then quickly looks away. "The face he'd picked out to draw," he writes, "was the face of an old friend of mine, a prep school football star in the good old days with a sleek red Chevy convertible and a very quick hand, it was said, with the snaps of a 32 B brassiere" (36). It is worth noting here the freedom that Gonzo Journalism gives Thompson: Because he occupies the role of protagonist, he may admit (or invent) histories and personas of otherwise unknown characters. Thompson's familiarity

with this character's past is what enables his criticism of the poisonous influence of money, for it is only by comparing the unbecoming image of this man in the present with the one from his memory that Thompson recognizes the ugly transformative influence of tradition and old money. "But now, a dozen years later, I wouldn't have recognized him anywhere but here, where I should have expected to find him, in the Paddock bar on Derby Day... fat slanted eyes and a pimp's smile, blue silk suit and his friends looking like crooked bank tellers on a binge..." (36). Thompson's inability to recognize his friend also suggests that his own character is being transformed by being back in Louisville, a fear that is substantiated in the closing pages of the story. Perhaps owing to his familiarity with the Derby crowd, Thompson appears blind to some of the Derby's most unflattering characters. This calls into question the reliability of Thompson as both protagonist and journalist, and suggests that Steadman, perhaps, is the only truly trustworthy participant.

Having thoroughly demonstrated the unfulfilling effect that money and tradition have on the rich, Thompson then shifts to his descriptions of the less-privileged Derby crowd. In a not so subtle literary move Thompson and Steadman descend from the clubhouse of the rich and head for the infield. "To get there," writes Thompson, "we had to pass through many gates, each one a step down in status, then through a tunnel under the track. Emerging from the tunnel was such a culture shock that it took us a while to adjust" (36). Here in the infield, among the poor, Thompson makes his most obvious criticism of the material American Dream in the whole piece. In his "A Countercultural Gatsby" the critic Robert Sickles considers Thompson's Gonzo Journalism narratives in the light of the aforementioned "rags-to-riches," Horatio Alger myth. "Although the rags to riches myth is still pervasive in American culture," writes Sickles, "the means by which one makes the journey have radically changed. Hard work is seemingly no

longer a part of the formula for success; how you succeed matters not nearly so much as that you succeed” (62). Sickles’ article is primarily about *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and how gambling provides the illusion of instant gratification. Gambling, he contends, has reshaped the American Dream into something that can be achieved overnight. This perspective is precisely what drives the mad scene at the Kentucky Derby. Thompson writes:

Total chaos, no way to see the race, not even the track... nobody cares. Big lines at the outdoor betting windows, then stand back to watch winning numbers flash on the big board... Old blacks arguing about bets; “Hold on there, I’ll handle this” (Waving a pint of whiskey, fistful of dollar bills); girl riding piggyback, T-shirt says, “Stolen from Fort Lauderdale Jail.”... Far across the track the clubhouse looks like a postcard from the Kentucky Derby. (“The Kentucky Derby” 37)

Thompson’s mention that the clubhouse “looked like a postcard” emphasizes the class divide. The infield, filled with “thousands of raving, stumbling dunks, getting angrier and angrier as they lose more and more money,” is comprised of people who have bought into the myth that the American Dream can be won on a horserace (31). Of course, the vast majority of these people leave disappointed. Finally, when the race ends, Thompson describes the real “big winners” at the track, and, unsurprisingly, they prove to be the type of people one would see in the clubhouse or Paddock Bar. The winning owner, writes Thompson, “a dapper little man named Lehmann... had just won \$127,000 with a horse that cost him \$6,500 two years ago” (37). Thompson takes care to note that Lehmann “had just flown into Louisville that morning from Nepal, where he’d ‘bagged a record tiger’” (37). In the end, the rich get richer. The instant gratification of the American Dream proves to be a false one for everyone but those who already have money. Ultimately, Thompson’s sorry revelations concerning the harsh reality of the event, the “violence

in the parking lot; people being punched and trampled, pockets picked, children lost, bottle hurled,” combined with his brutal condemnation of the rich, proves to be comparable (if not worse) than the “evil fantasy” Thompson invents in the airport (37).

The narrative ends with Thompson having been wholly transformed by the Louisville crowd, changing into one of the deplorable figures he set out to denounce. When he looks in the mirror he sees “a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature... like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once proud mother’s family photo album. It was the face we had been looking for – and it was, of course, my own” (39). In the end, Thompson is unable to escape becoming like the subjects of his own critique. He ultimately proves to be as monstrous as those he has described. The final lines of the story bring Thompson’s transformation full-circle. When dropping Steadman off at the airport Thompson’s dialogue is reminiscent of Jimbo’s. “Bug off, you worthless faggot,” the transformed Thompson shouts. “Mace is too good for you... We can do without your kind in Kentucky” (40). The fact that Thompson, after criticizing the base Derby culture and the tradition that sustains it, comes to embody it himself; that is, he has become part of the culturally depraved mob, demonstrates the invaluable necessity of maintaining one’s own personal freedom and autonomy. The narrative warns against becoming absorbed in any culture at the expense of one’s individuality, a theme which Thompson returns to in *Fear in Loathing in Las Vegas* when documenting the shortcomings of the Sixties counterculture.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: The Demand for Individuality in Our Time

Thompson’s most famous work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, furthers his critique of greed and the material conception of the American Dream that he began in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved.” The

book, which represents the finished form of the book on “The Death of the American Dream” that Thompson had been working on since 1968, chronicles the misadventures of Raoul Duke and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, as they travel around Las Vegas in search of the American Dream. The novel is also an epitaph for the hippy / acid culture of the Sixties, which Thompson believed had dried up and died out with the end of the decade. Thompson’s notion of the “Death of the American Dream” is manifest in two primary occurrences in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. First is the collapse of the Acid Culture, and the second is the rise of Las Vegas and, consequently, the continuation of the false promise of instant wealth. In both cases, Thompson uses his Gonzo style to emphasize the necessity of individual autonomy and personal freedom if one is to actually find the American Dream. Duke, who is subject to the same failures as the drug-culture, never finds it.

Using Raoul Duke as a symbol for the late Acid Culture, Thompson presents the narrative itself as a metaphor for its collapse. Loaded up on heinous chemicals, Duke and Dr. Gonzo head towards Vegas with the hopes of realizing the classic, Horatio Alger conception of the American Dream. “But our trip was different,” writes Thompson. “It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country – but only for those with true grit. And we were chocked full of that” (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 18). In this respect Duke and Dr. Gonzo are symbolic of the Sixties counterculture that believed they could win “victory over the forces of Old and Evil” through their revolutionary spirit, motivated, in part, by psychedelic drugs (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 68). Unfortunately, Thompson’s criticism of Timothy Leary’s Acid Culture hinges on the realization that it, like Las Vegas, represented a false promise. Utilizing the Gonzo Journalism technique that allows the narrator to revert back

to memory as a means of introducing subjective material into his work, Thompson recalls visiting his neighbor, the “Good Acid Doctor,” during “the first curl of what would become the Great San Francisco Acid Wave” (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 63). After some minutes of listening to the man’s mindless humming, Thompson realizes the downside of acid dependence. “Forget LSD,” he writes, “Look what it’s done to that poor bastard” (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 65). Later in the narrative Thompson returns to this notion, showing the true consequences of the counterculture’s dependence on Leary’s myth that one could “buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit” (178). Thompson writes:

This was the fatal flaw in Tim Leary’s trip. He crashed around America selling ‘consciousness expansion’ without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying wait for all the people who took him too seriously... What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped to create... a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody – or at least some force – is tending the light at the end of the tunnel. (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 178-9)

It is precisely in this condemnation of Leary that Thompson suggests the absolute necessity of personal freedom and autonomy. “This is the same cruel and paradoxically benevolent bullshit that has kept the Catholic Church going for so many centuries,” he writes. “It is also the military ethic... a blind faith in some higher and wiser ‘authority’” (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 179). These entities represent good examples of the psychological phenomenon of groupthink, which entails the surrender of personal freedom to a higher authority, be it faith or discipline.

Thompson's sad lament over the death of the Sixties counterculture is complimented in the piece by the rise of Las Vegas and everything it represents. His creatively drug-fueled portrayal of the Circus-Circus Casino, which is described in the narrative as the "main nerve" of the American Dream, substantiate Sickles' argument that Las Vegas is the product of the American Dream becoming degraded into the illusion of instant gratification and the promise of an ever illusive a big-winner (62-3). "The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war," writes Thompson, "... so you're down on the main floor playing blackjack, and the stakes are getting high when suddenly you chance to look up, and there, right smack above your head is a half-naked fourteen year old girl being chased through the air by a snarling wolverine..." (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 46).

Thompson's subjective and imaginative description of the Casino, enabled by the Gonzo Journalism device of mediating perceptions of reality through drug use, evidences the inherent debauchery of a place like Las Vegas. Furthermore, owing to the bizarre reality that is Vegas, one never knows what elements of Thompson's portrayal are invented and what are real. This hallucinatory cityscape allows the writer to maintain complete literary control over the narrative while, at the same time, remaining trustworthy. Most surprising, however, is that "nobody seems to notice" the madness, as they are too absorbed in the "gambling action that runs twenty-four hours a day on the main floor" (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 46). Everyone in the Casino is too wired in to the fantasy to care, chasing the instant gratification of hitting it big. Thompson describes this phenomenon later in the narrative, writing:

Now off the escalator and into the casino, big crowds still tight around the crap tables. Who are these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're real. And, sweet

Jesus, there are a hell of a lot of them – still screaming around these desert city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (57)

Like in the Derby piece, Thompson suggests that these people are slaves to the false promise of a fruitless myth. Also like the Derby piece, Thompson gives the impression that the real winners in Vegas are the people who fix the game. The rich get richer. Thompson, conversing with his friend Bruce at the end of the book, describes the manager of the Circus-Circus as the “American Dream’s model”... someone who owns his own circus and has “a license to steal” (191).

Eventually Duke and Dr. Gonzo discover the tangible “American Dream,” that is, a physical building in Las Vegas once called “the American Dream,” but which was later renamed “The Old Psychiatrists Club.” Upon discovering it, however, they find that all that remains of the place is “a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds” (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 168). Much like Timothy Leary’s Acid Culture, the place had burned out some three years earlier. The physical “American Dream” symbolically represents the death of the conceptual “American Dream” that went down with the Sixties. Insofar as the building analogizes the failures of the counterculture, its sorry condition epitomizes the absolute necessity of personal freedom. One who is a slave to the false promise of the Horatio Alger, “rags-to-riches” myth propagated by Las Vegas, or the false promise of idealistic but misguided social movements, has little hope of actualizing the American Dream in our time. “There is no point in kidding ourselves, now, about Who has the Power,” writes Thompson in the Modern Library Jacket Copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. “In a nation ruled by swine, all pigs are upward-mobile – and the rest of us are fucked until we can put our acts together: Not necessarily

to Win, but mainly to keep from Losing Completely” (“Jacket Copy” 213). This goal is what Thompson pursues in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*.

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail: Freedom and Honesty on the Political Frontier

In a 2003 interview with *Razor* magazine, Thompson, when asked how to describe the American Dream now, says “You must have a naïve faith that right will prevail, that it could succeed” (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 307). This sentiment is essentially what motivates Thompson’s foray into political journalism, a field that he generally despised. That being said, there are few topics which Thompson’s Gonzo Journalism is better suited to chronicle, and Thompson himself was aware of this fact. He was also of the belief that an honest political campaign and an honest candidate might be able to save the American Dream, and that the number one priority in ’72 was finding someone who could beat Nixon. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* ’72 represents the point at which Thompson directed his passion for personal freedom and individuality onto the page in a domain that had historically been reserved for strictly objective writers. As a correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Thompson embraces absolute literary freedom, writing about the ’72 Campaign in his totally subjective, often fictitious, Gonzo style. Ultimately, Thompson rallies behind George McGovern, believing naively that right will prevail and McGovern, “the only candidate from either party worth voting for,” might actually triumph over Nixon. While Thompson was wrong, the result of his year-long literary experiment on the campaign trail arguably represents his most powerful and direct literary attacks.

Thompson’s attitude concerning the effectiveness of Gonzo Journalism in the political sphere can best be summarized by the following excerpt from his *Better than Sex: Confessions of a Political Junkie*:

There are a lot of ways to practice the art of journalism, and one of them is to use your art like a hammer to destroy the right people – who are almost always your enemies, for one reason or another, and who usually deserve to be crippled because they are wrong. This is a dangerous notion, and few professional journalists will endorse it – calling it “vengeful” and “primitive” and “perverse” regardless of how often they might do the same thing themselves. “That kind of stuff is opinion,” they say, and the reader is cheated if it’s not labeled as opinion... [H.L.] Mencken understood that politics – as used in journalism – was the art of controlling his environment, and he made no apologies for it. In my case, using what politely might be called “advocacy journalism,” I’ve used reporting as a weapon to affect political situations that bear down on my environment. (16-7)

Thompson’s weapon is on full display in *Campaign Trail*. Believing that four more years of a Nixon Presidency would wreak havoc on both his Country (his environment) and the already ill-fated American Dream, Thompson uses *Campaign Trail* as a vehicle by which to advocate for George McGovern while, at the same time, systematically crippling his competition. Thompson believed that McGovern was the only candidate in either party worth voting for because of his willingness to stand behind his principles and the fact that his platform was almost antithetical to Nixon’s. “For more than a year now, [McGovern’s] been saying all the right things,” Thompson writes. “He has been publicly opposed to the war in Vietnam since 1963; he’s for Amnesty Now... McGovern is the only major candidate... who invariably gives a straight answer when people raise these questions” (*Campaign Trail* 81-2). McGovern’s honesty sets him apart from the rest of the candidates in the elections, and in an effort to help him win the nomination

Thompson uses the personal and literary freedom afforded him by Gonzo Journalism to stomp the rest of the field.

Among the Candidates that Thompson frequently targets in the book is Maine Senator Ed Muskie, the one-time front-runner for the Democratic nomination. Thompson loathed Muskie, regarding him as yet another of the political old guard, and crippled the candidate with a series of quintessentially Gonzo journalistic attacks. For example, at one point in the book Thompson allows his press badge to fall into the hands of a wild, drunken “Boohoo” named Sheridan who boards Muskie's train on a whistle-stop tour through Florida. “The Boohoo,” according to the narrative, “terrorized the Muskie train all the way from Palm Beach, and he was wearing a press badge that said ‘Hunter S. Thompson – *Rolling Stone*’” (108). At one point “the Boohoo reached up from the track [at one of the stops] and got hold of Muskie’s pants-leg – waving an empty martini glass through the bars around the caboose platform with his other hand and screaming: ‘Get your lying ass back inside and make me another drink...’” (108). Recalling the Gonzo device whereby the narrator influences the events of the story, Thompson’s “Boohoo” violates the demands of conventional, objective political reporting to affect both the story and the political situation of the Florida primary.

Thompson would later claim that the incident with his press credentials was not malicious or intentional, but the same cannot be said about another report filed by Thompson concerning Muskie later in April of ’72. In the report, Thompson argued that the Maine Senator was addicted to an exotic drug called “Ibogaine,” which he claimed caused “the subject to experience visions, changes in perception of the environment and delusions or alterations of thinking” (*Campaign Trail* 151). Using Muskie’s “breakdown” on the platform of the “Sunshine Special” train during his whistle-stop tour as evidence (the breakdown instigated by Thompson’s

‘Boohoo’ grappling at his leg) Thompson writes, “There was no doubt about it: The Man from Maine had turned to massive doses of Ibogaine as a last resort” (152). Of course, Thompson invented the entire Ibogaine story, a creative lie that afforded him even more literary freedom, allowing him to enliven his political coverage with fantastic, imaginative elements such as the following: “It is entirely conceivable that Muskie’s brain was almost paralyzed by hallucinations at the time; that he looked out at the crowd and saw gila monsters instead of people and that his mind snapped completely when he felt something large and apparently viscous clawing at his legs” (*Campaign Trail* 152). Thompson’s lie, however hilarious, would never have satisfied the demands for objective journalism or journalistic ethics, but Thompson’s attack is motivated by his honest belief that “sending Muskie against Nixon would have been like sending a three-toed sloth out to seize turf from a wolverine” (*Campaign Trail* 159). Thompson’s willingness to influence the events of the narrative, as well as the events of a national Presidential Campaign, demonstrate his commitment to remaining wholly and absolutely free as both a writer and a man.

Nonetheless, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* isn’t all jokes and imagined fictions. For the most part, Thompson is a hard-hitting and serious, albeit opinionated and subjective journalist. As in the rest of his Gonzo Journalism, Thompson endeavors to reveal the oppressive power structures that limit freedom and cripple the American Dream. In some cases this demanded serious prose. At the Democratic Convention in Miami, for example, Thompson describes the emergence of the corrupt ABM (Anybody but McGovern) movement, as a happening “far too serious for the kind of random indulgence that Gonzo Journalism needs” (*Campaign Trail* 281). “The ABM Movement,” writes Thompson, “was a coalition of desperate losers, thrown together at the last moment by Big Labor chief George Meany...” all in an effort

to sneak a candidate in that was “acceptable to the Meany / Daley axis” (284). The movement was unsuccessful, but Thompson’s coverage of the attempt demonstrates his willingness to write about political subjects in a manner consistent with their corrupt natures:

The ABM Movement came together officially sometime in the middle of the week just before the convention, when it finally became apparent that massive fraud, treachery, or violence was the only way to prevent McGovern from getting the nomination... and what followed, once this fact was accepted by all parties involved, will hopefully go down in history as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the Democratic process. (*Campaign Trail* 284)

Thompson continues to describe the effort by the Democratic establishment to “possibly buy enough votes to deny McGovern a first-ballot victory” as resembling a “scene for the final hours of the Roman Empire: Everywhere you looked, some prominent politician was degrading himself in public” (284). The really despicable thing about the ABM Movement, according to Thompson, was that “it didn’t make much of a difference if He, She, or It [the nominee] couldn’t possibly beat Nixon in November... the only thing that mattered to the Meany / Daley crowd was keeping control of The Party; and this meant the nominee would have to be some loyal whore with more debts to Big Labor than he could ever hope to pay...” (284).

More than anything, Thompson’s foray into political journalism proved an assumption that he had had all along: the democratic process, the tangible means of actualizing the American Dream through politics, was ruled as much by money and corruption as anything else in America. Thompson begins to come to terms with this fact near the end of the Campaign season, realizing in September that “Richard Nixon will almost certainly be re-elected for another four years as President of the United States” (*Campaign Trail* 413). Several political mistakes by

McGovern, most significantly the selection of Senator Thomas Eagleton, a man with a history of mental-health issues, as running-mate, torpedoed his Campaign in the late-summer of '72.

Thompson's sad epitaph for the Campaign, which highlights what Thompson held to be the squandered potential of the American political mechanism, reads:

The tragedy of all this is that George McGovern, for all his mistakes and imprecise talk about "new politics" and "honesty in government," is one of the few men who've run for President of the United States in this century who really understands what a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race this country might have been, if we could have kept it out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Richard Nixon. McGovern made some stupid mistakes, but in context they seem almost frivolous compared to the things Richard Nixon does every day of his life, on purpose, as a matter of policy and a perfect expression of everything he stands for. (*Campaign Trail* 414)

Ultimately Thompson contends that the re-election of Nixon is the consequence of a fundamentally violent turn in the zeitgeist of America. "Nixon himself represents the dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character... He speaks to the Werewolf in us; the bully, the predatory shyster who turns into something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string-warts, on nights when the moon comes too close..." (417). Nixon's win in '72, like the cold reality of Vegas and the long-standing tradition of the Kentucky Derby, are all products of an American population that has fundamentally lost touch with the invaluable spirit of individuality and self-reliance that once seemed possible. The Sixties represented a moment in history where it seemed like collective energy might triumph over the *status quo*, yet the Derby remains unchanged, Vegas has only grown into the greed-based capital of the American West,

and Nixon won twice. McGovern himself, talking with Thompson in December of '72, attributed his loss to "running a sixties campaign in the seventies... when Nixon's election in '68 really signaled the end of all that" [the energetic protest of the Sixties] (*Campaign Trail* 478). Nixon's victory marks the end of a long decade that witnessed the end of many potential conceptions of the American Dream, all of which proved to represent false promises. That American Dream, the one born of the sixties counterculture, really was dead by the end of 1972. Nonetheless, Thompson's radical individuality and pursuit of both literary and personal freedom prove that there is still hope. Now that one knows what Gonzo Journalism is and how it enables Thompson's theme of the "death of the American Dream," we can finally conclude with an exploration of how Gonzo Journalism, and the freedom that it implies, allowed Hunter S. Thompson to experience a version of the American Dream for himself, for he did build himself up from nothing, creating a persona and literary aesthetic that remains original, outrageous, and particularly American.

Conclusion: Hunter S. Thompson's American Dream

Hunter S. Thompson's most prolific period of writing spans from 1968 to 1976, after which his Journalism became more sporadic. Burned out from a nearly perpetual literary trip that Thompson described as "riding on the top of a bullet train for eight years with no sleep and no wires to hang on to," Thompson became increasingly focused on maintaining a private, unique lifestyle at his home in Woody Creek, Colorado (*Fear and Loathing in America* xxiii). Owl Farm at Woody Creek was a special place for the writer, an asylum where he could be wholly free from the turbulent, mad, and increasingly conservative world outside. In the author's note to *Fear and Loathing in America*, the second published collection of his letters spanning from 1968-1976, Thompson writes about Owl Farm:

My main luxury in those years – a necessary luxury, in fact – was the ability to work in and out of my home base fortress in Woody Creek. It was a very important psychic anchor for me, a crucial grounding point where I always knew I had love, friends, and good neighbors. It was like my personal lighthouse that I could see from anywhere in the world – no matter where I was, or how weird & crazy & dangerous it got, everything would be okay if I could just make it home. When I made that hairpin turn up the hill onto Woody Creek Road, I knew I was safe. (xxv)

Thompson once described Woody Creek, in an interview with ABC News in 1992, as "my home, and my fortress" (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 167). The place meant so much to Thompson because it was the place where he could be himself... a king in his own castle, with peacocks roaming the grounds and the occasional shotgun blast echoing through the valley. After all, this is where, when the writing was done, "on fantastic Indian summer mornings in the Rockies," Thompson

would “leave his noisy black machine and sit naked on the porch for a while, in the sun” (“Jacket Copy” 215). Thompson built this all for himself with Gonzo Journalism and his unique literary voice. Coming from “rags-to-riches,” Hunter S. Thompson was a 20th Century Horatio Alger with a penchant for guns and a lust for drugs and alcohol.

What Thompson’s unconventional creation of Gonzo Journalism evidences above all else is Hunter S. Thompson’s commitment to his own freedom and individuality. The persona of “outlaw journalist” that he embraced suggests that, regardless of what Thompson was doing, he always did it his own way. As David Halberstam writes, “No one created Hunter other than Hunter. Somehow he found his voice, and he knew, before anyone else, that it was special” (*Fear and Loathing in America* xii). Thompson’s use of this voice represented a flat-out rejection of everything safe, stale and conventional about American Journalism. It furnished him with absolute literary freedom, which was itself a reflection of the personal freedom he so desired. His narratives, in all their Gonzo brilliance, are both a means of documenting the death of one American Dream while, at the same time, living another. Thompson hints at the freedom that Gonzo Journalism offers in an early chapter of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. “But what was the story?,” asks Raoul Duke. “Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism” (12). The story, it turned out, could be anything Thompson wanted it to be, and this was the real beauty of Gonzo Journalism. In this particular case the story became a book which catapulted Thompson into the realm of literary fame and celebrity.

Through Gonzo Journalism Thompson made something of himself from nothing. He satisfied the spirit of adventure chronicled in his teenage essay “Security,” writing about

everything from motorcycle-riding drug fiends to American Presidents. While often cynical and disenchanted with the gross reality of American life, Thompson nonetheless found meaning in his own adventures and the excitement inherent to the exercise of his own personal autonomy.

He writes in *Fear and Loathing in America*:

I came to know gunfire and panic and the sight of my own blood on the streets. I knew every airport in the county before they had metal-detectors & you could still smoke on planes. Pilots knew me by name and stewardesses took me home when my flights were grounded by snow. I made many new friends & many powerful enemies from coast to coast. I went without sleep for seventy or eighty hours at a time & often wrote five thousand words in one sitting. It was a brutal life, and I loved it. (xxiv)

Ultimately, Gonzo Journalism enabled Thompson to live the life he always wanted to live, crush the people he always wanted to crush, and to do it all in his own off-beat way. Writing, and the whole lifestyle that Gonzo Journalism catalyzed, offered him “a way to live out there where the *real* wind blows – to sleep late, have fun, get wild, drink whiskey and drive fast on empty streets with nothing in mind except falling in love and not getting arrested...” (*Generation of Swine* 11). This is Thompson’s American Dream.

Thompson cherished freedom to the very end, and his suicide in 2005 represents a final and absolute exercise of personal freedom, absolute choice. “This [the suicide] was an intellectual, pragmatic decision that he had contemplated for all of his life,” claims Douglas Brinkley, “This was an act of no regret” (Wenner and Seymour 432-3). Compiling the table of contents for *The Great Shark Hunt* in 1977, Thompson, himself, evidenced Brinkley’s claim. Putting the finishing touches on the memo that would open this first Collected Works, Thompson

remarks “When I finish, the only fitting exit will be right straight off this fucking Terrence... 28 stories below and at least 200 yards out in the air and across Fifth Avenue... the only way I can deal with this eerie situation at all is to make the conscious decision that I have already lived and finished this the life I had planned to live” (14). Thompson concludes by assuring his reader, “So if I decide to leap for The Fountain when I finish this memo, I want to make one thing perfectly clear – I would genuinely love to make that leap...” (14). Brinkley is right.

Thompson’s suicide was not an act of regret, but, fittingly, an act of freedom. In keeping with his keystone theme, Thompson’s death represented, in a sense, the death of one particular, wholly unique, drastically independent, and entirely original manifestation of the American Dream. When asked in an a 2003 interview with *Salon* magazine, “But in a way, haven’t you lived the American Dream?,” Thompson pauses, and then replies: “Goddammit...I haven’t thought about it that way. I suppose you can say that in a certain way I have” (*Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 321).

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