THE INEFFABLE AND EXPERIENTIAL IN NARRATIVE NONFICTION

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Introduction

During the cultural explosion of the 1960’s, New Journalism was to the literary community what rock and roll was to music: rebellious, raucous, and controversial. Scions of New Journalism, including notables such as Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer, were, like rock stars, very public figures, appearing on television, befriending celebrities, and even staging symbolic campaigns for public office (Mailer for Mayor of New York in 1969, Thompson for Sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado in 1970). New Journalists competed with other entertainers not only in print, but also in the realm of mass media, casting themselves as iconoclasts of their day. In short, they became faux rock stars, with pens in place of guitars.

Though many of New Journalism’s practitioners differed from one another in both their approaches and the styles of their writing, all participate in the defining quality of the genre as a whole: applying fiction’s techniques to journalistic prose. Consequently, their work infused a popular medium with elements indicative of high art. This stylistic adaptation was supplemented by a belief that notions of objectivity in journalism were themselves fictions. New Journalists did not mask their personal dispositions, emotions, or convictions when covering a story. Prior conventions dictated that a journalist depict the world in a cut and dry manner through the guise of objectivity. New Journalists instead plunge into their story, showing off their personas and dispositions along the way. Consequently, every story exposes the very efforts of the writer constructing the story itself. One cannot be separated from the other. Just as quantum physics informs us that a particle in isolation behaves differently once in
observation, New Journalists operate in a universe that eschews objective certainties of a bygone era.

New Journalists interject their individual personas in their texts and craft a narrative that portrays the essence of a moment in time. That is not to say that New Journalism is necessarily inaccurate or intentionally distorts the truth. The writers of this movement simply shared an attitude that truth is comprised of much more than mere fact. But there is another point of convergence that resounds within this literary community. Borrowing more than just technique from the novelists before them, the practitioners of New Journalism also subscribe to the conviction that their contributions to literature are substantial and worthy of serious consideration.

Academics and cultural critics alike did indeed take notice of this movement, and, as with all other cultural developments, there were many detractors. In 1972, Jack Newfield, an assistant editor for the *Village Voice*, wrote, “To begin with, there is not that much new about the new journalism” (300). These words were written in direct response to cultural critic Michael J. Arlen’s diatribe “Notes on New Journalism,” which lambasts the movement, rejects its newness, and classifies Newfield, much to his chagrin, as what else but a “New Journalist,” of course. But Arlen also opines: “Defoe, Addison and Steele, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain were New Journalists” (245). Perhaps Newfield then, rather than objecting, should have been flattered to find himself in such fine company. Ironically, in his rebuttal to Arlen, Newfield reinforces one of the very same points made by the former, except that, in his harangue, Newfield also includes H.L. Mencken, Joseph Mitchell, and Ernest Hemingway as supposed New Journalists.
Denying that New Journalism is a genre, Newfield concludes, “It is a false category. There is only good writing and bad writing, smart ideas and dumb ideas, hard work and laziness” (299). In presenting New Journalism as a false idol, his rejection is nominal, an objection to the notion of a nascent Newness, and hence a simple acknowledgement of its lineage within a long-established belletristic tradition.

Instead of new, Newfield “suspect[s] it is nothing more profound than a lot of good writers coming along at the same time” (300). Newfield’s “good writing” definition would certainly apply to Twain, Hemingway, Mencken, and Crane, thus making them New Journalists, but the problem with this equation is that many a good writer is seldom if ever mistaken as a New Journalist. Clearly then, “good” will not suffice and Newfield’s simplistic outlook suffers some grave shortcomings. Arlen, citing the influence of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, characterizes New Journalism as the application of writing “in the manner of a personal autobiographical narrative” (245). Though more detailed than simply Newfield’s “good” assessment, Arlen’s assessment is nevertheless also inadequate. While the form of first-person narrative was utilized in some of the most widely read pieces of New Journalism, it was far from universal.

There is, however, something to be said concerning the prominence of first-person narratives in this field. The foremost element is that a first-person narrator implies an individual identity and hence a subjective voice. Stylistically, then, this technique directly conflicts with notions of objectivity, an age-old tenet of journalism. Even today, decades after New Journalism’s rise, the use of “I” in newspaper reporting is typically confined to editorials. The danger of first-person perspective is not only that it
compromises the virtue of reporting unprejudiced truth. It also provides writers the opportunity to craft themselves as characters, diverting the reader’s attention from the “story.” Thus the “I” appears indulgent in the least and solipsistic at the worst. Tom Wolfe, in his famous introduction to the anthology *The New Journalism*, declares, “A writer needs at least enough ego to believe that what he is doing as a writer is as important as what anyone he is writing about is doing and that therefore he shouldn’t compromise his own work” (51). This inverts the old journalistic dogma of objective fairness so that the work then trumps the subject. While the story is of obvious importance, the efforts of the writer observing, noting, and ultimately transmitting the story are of equal, if not, greater importance. For this reason the first-person narrative, in which the writer’s pursuit of the story is omnipresent, features in some of the most recognized and celebrated works of New Journalism (as well as “old” New Journalism). Arlen’s characterization of autobiographical intrusion as the defining feature of the genre is therefore understandable though inaccurate.

Where Michael J. Arlen and Jack Newfield struggle to find a sustainable definition for what is so old in the New, ironically, in their disagreement, they find common ground that affirms two key aspects of New Journalism. The first, and most complicating, is that writers commonly identified together as New Journalists are markedly different in style, as is evident in their lists of writers (how often does one see Daniel Defoe mentioned alongside Stephen Crane?). This can also be demonstrated in viewing contemporaneous authors. A brief examination of the work of Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Jimmy Breslin, and Gay Talese would testify to the marked
disparity of their styles. “New Journalism,” then, is a crippling term for the very same reason that postmodernism is: it signifies a cohesive literary school where there is none. And though New Journalists share in their utilization of fictive techniques as well as their attitudes towards objectivity, their individual efforts produce a diverse body of work lacking a uniform aesthetic. The adjective “new” then becomes a nebulous modifier, confounding as much as it elucidates, rather like the efforts of one attempting to navigate an unfamiliar room in the dark. The second component that Arlen and Newfield agree upon is that their beloved New Journalists of the past are not merely good writers; they are canonical ones. Set forth then is a tradition of New Journalism dating all the way back to seventeenth century England before crossing the Atlantic where it exists as a literary undercurrent of some of America’s most celebrated authors.

The two most iconic American novelists regularly identified as old New Journalists by both Arlen and Newfield are Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway. While these two scribes’ respective legacies may be based upon the superlative merits of their fiction, both Twain and Hemingway contributed greatly to nonfiction through the course of their careers, with the first-person narrative as their predominant mode of expression. Furthermore, first-person narrative nonfiction, as they practiced it, is carried forth in the tradition of such noted New Journalists as Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer. In focusing upon the form of first-person narrative nonfiction of Twain and Hemingway we can apply recent studies in the field to these past writers so that we come to a concrete understanding of the developments in the field. It is my intention to use the lens of contemporary criticism—specifically through the concepts of meta-discourse,
performance, and intertextuality as they apply to narrative nonfiction—to look back to
the literature of the past so that we can discern what is new and not so new in New
Journalism.

Though it may be convenient to simply label Twain and Hemingway New
Journalists, it does little in the way of advancing an understanding of their work within
this field and obscures the developments within this tradition. In the years immediately
following New Journalism’s arrival, much criticism in the academic community arose
that sought to examine and elucidate the modes and methodologies that were idiomatic to
this form of expression. While critics such as Arlen and Newfield had traced the genre to
a tradition in American letters, their efforts were largely superficial and failed to closely
examine the stylistic qualities of contemporary texts in relation to those of past writers
like Mark Twain. They labeled the tradition in passing, neglecting to depict this tradition
through a cohesive lens. If we are to deny that there is anything New, shouldn’t we at
least, then, comprehend the tradition of the Old?

In the years following the emergence of New Journalism some potent criticism
made advances in understanding New Journalism as a medium more experiential than
plain reportage. Tom Wolfe explains the experiential by asking, “Why should the reader
be expected to just lie flat and let these people come tromping through as if his mind
were a subway turnstile?” (17). Wolfe means, of course, that journalism may possess the
magic we so treasure in our literature to wholly seduce the reader, elucidating an
experience rather than just relaying an event’s facts. Similarly, David McHam writes, “If
there is any participation at all in New Journalism it is that of the reader” (114). In his
assessment of the experiential Tom Wolfe gets the ball rolling. In the work of critics such as Eric Anderson, Richard Poirier, and Masud Zavarzedah the experiential is more fully explored through their respective studies of the meta-discursive, authorial performance, and intertextuality. Analyzing the narrative nonfiction of Twain and Hemingway through these critical frameworks provides an understanding of the constants as well as developments of two of their chief torchbearers, the New Journalists Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer.

Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway use the text as a stage of authorial performance whereby they craft both a textual character as well as an extra-textual one, the public persona. Twain and Hemingway are of course two of the strongest personalities in this history of American letters. In their lifetimes they were more than literary personas; they were absolute celebrities. I intend to show how narrative nonfiction in both Twain’s, and later, Hemingway’s work becomes a self-reflexive space in which not only is the subject being depicted, but also the writer is observed in the act of depiction. In highlighting the writer’s individual efforts in composition, the text becomes a space of performance where the author crafts and promotes for himself a public persona that comes to life outside the text in the world. A sort of postmodern self-consciousness abounds in this literature, even in the pre-Modern figure of Twain. Essentially, the author performs within his own construction so that the text reveals itself in the very act of construction. Experientiality is enforced through the audience witnessing the author writing his actions as character, establishing narrative nonfiction as a space of authorial performance. In his study of Norman Mailer, Chris Anderson writes,
“Unable to word the wordless, Mailer more often tells the story of his effort to word the wordless; unable to describe the event itself, he describes himself in the act of description” (89). It is precisely in this failure—failure of language and the failure of the writer—where meta-discourse, performance, and intertextuality converge so that narrative nonfiction both redeems and repudiates the ineffable dimension of all experience that resists the powers of language.
Chapter 1: Theory

Among the critical approaches addressing New Journalism’s literary advances, the work of Chris Anderson provides an essential understanding of the genre through his examination of the role of meta-discourse. Anderson’s critical work in the field of narrative nonfiction and New Journalism is particularly instrumental in understanding the dynamics between author and audience. *Style As Argument* examines New Journalism in separate chapters focusing upon four individual authors: Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Joan Didion. In his introduction, Anderson affirms, “In contemporary nonfiction, as in all literature, style is best understood as a reflection and enactment of a content and a point of view…the principal theme of contemporary nonfiction is its own rhetorical dilemma” (4-5). Anderson understands style as its own truth, meaning that form’s function is to justify its content. If we are to understand the truth of narrative nonfiction, we must first understand the implications of its stylistic expression. Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, formerly a record of popular culture though now a historical document of the 1960’s, recurrently refers to the “Unspoken Thing,” a term used by the Merry Pranksters that alludes to an ecstatic communal consciousness. Anderson demonstrates how Wolfe translates this content into rhetoric, stating, “Language would translate the nonlinear into the linear, the simultaneous into the sequential, the infinite into the finite” (12).

The task for Wolfe, as writer, is to convey through words an experience that defies linguistic expression. Anderson couples this phenomenon with Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*, a seemingly odd pairing as the Merry Pranksters and the Mercury astronauts seem
far from kindred spirits. But according to Anderson, the ineffable arises in the overwhelmingly astounding risks a pilot makes in order to “push outside of the envelope, [to] take his plane beyond the edge of known experience” (13). So, too, does Wolfe seek to push beyond, to take his reader beyond the plane of the printed page and, through rhetoric, to replicate the experience so that form does not mirror or parallel function, but rather form equals function. Anderson sees Wolfe accomplishing this through various techniques, most notably, repetition. Wolfe repeatedly hammers his audience with the phrase “the Right Stuff” again and again so that it becomes self-defining. “To understand Wolfe we need to see him defining his subject as unattainable and then testing his powers against it,” Anderson astutely observes (16). In an ironic twist, if Wolfe’s powers are adequate, he will succeed only through replicating his inevitable failure. In this respect narrative nonfiction becomes a venue for a writer to explore the very possibilities and limitations afforded by his or her trade, and thus, meta-discursive.

Chris Anderson’s analysis of Wolfe’s literature demonstrates how the concept of ineffability begins to test the limits of language, but his critique of Norman Mailer introduces an altogether new dimension to the meta-discursive. Focusing upon Armies of the Night, he writes that “Mailer is constantly in the act of dramatizing and then analyzing the relationship between speaker and audience in real, concrete settings,” so that the drama of the text is also the text’s analysis of itself. Furthermore, Mailer, unlike Wolfe, makes himself the protagonist of his text. The most obvious repercussions of this are that Mailer, as both character and creator of the text, injects the personal struggle of the writer as the story’s central driving force. In the Mailer’s struggle he grapples with
the chaos of the world. Consequently, his efforts to attain order through language propel
the narrative of *Armies*. Regardless of the “story” being covered, the subject remains
rhetoric itself, the action, of Norman Mailer in the very act of composition.

In reviewing Anderson’s meta-discursive analysis it becomes apparent that the
thematic commonality of Wolfe’s subject has more to do with Tom Wolfe than it does
with ineffability. It is quite possible that the similarities in his various dialectic
ruminations are more idiomatic to Wolfe himself than his texts’ form. Of course all
authors have styles and tendencies that can be traced throughout their careers. But
another possibility is that a given subject becomes a justification of a preconceived
ideology which the author seeks to transmit to his audience. Regarding Wolfe then, the
question arises that, in his preoccupation with conveying what, by definition, defies
utterance, he uses his subject to justify his ends and not vice versa. Here arises what
Richard Poirier regards as the performance of the author. In *The Performing Self* Poirier
notes that the tools of language which “are supposed to be instruments of knowledge do
not offer clarification at all; they are part of what needs to be clarified” (11).
Consequently linguistic acts then always encompass “performances of some daring, the
very success of which transports him beyond the results of such acts, producing the
dissatisfactions which prompt the next” (12). What is thrilling about the narratives of
New Journalism lies in the depth and complexity of such layered prose complete with
tensions and anxieties that arise from documenting, acting within, and mythologizing an
event. “Entering history with words is already a kind of self-surrender,” Poirier notes,
“being in history, or especially being an historical personage, is a way also of being
recognizable, of playing a part already characterized” (7-8). Twain, Hemingway, Thompson, and Mailer each surrender themselves as writers but also enter into history. But it is a history they themselves compose. As New Journalists they perform in a way the novelist cannot, because their text becomes a living document with its roots in the earth of the real world. *Armies of Night* is both a history of the March on the Pentagon and a part of the history of the March on the Pentagon. Mailer performs both within history and beyond. The same may be said of Twain’s tales of the frontier, Hemingway’s experience at the Spanish bullfights or hunting in Africa, and even Hunter S. Thompson’s time with the Hell’s Angels and on the campaign trail. The writer’s performance is both investigative and historical, both metaphorical and actual.

In his introduction Poirier vaguely mentions performance as “any self-discovering, self-watching, [or] self-pleasuring” response of the author. While far-reaching, they each encapsulate a distinct authorial performance: the crafting of a first-person narrative necessitates self-watching; uncovering the story and relaying it through this perspective transfers knowledge to the reader through self-discovery; and finally, self-pleasuring involves the larger than life persona and swagger the authors assume in their writing. This last aspect of performance instills within the text a form of parody, which as Poirier notes, “treats writing as a performance, rather than as a codification of significances” (27). Performance of an author, like that of an actor, lends itself to parody because of the self-consciousness of a narrative where the author is also the hero. Of course, this is also one of the ethical dilemmas in such objective reporting. But, as Poirier notes, “the existent reality by which the world is governed is itself only an
alternate invention” so that these authors are liberated by a postmodern reality that permits the possibility of the world as one construction allowing for infinite alternatives.

In thinking of a text as reality or reality as a text, Masud Zavarzadeh’s studies prove crucial. In *The Mythopoeic Reality*, Zavarzadeh examines New Journalism through the binary opposition of the factual and fictional modes. Expounding on their differences, he writes: “the two modes differ according to the criterion of experiential verifiability, but they are quite similar from the more literary perspective of the scope of the narrative field of reference: both the fictional and the factual modes have only a single field of reference” (55). A novel’s referent is internal and leads to a self-contained world within the fiction. It is self-encapsulating. A history, on the other hand, inherently refers to a reality external and independent of the text. Consequently, Zavarzadeh writes that they are both “static narration systems” and he dubs them “mono-referential.” In contrast to this mode, are “bi-referential” works, which “respond to a more complex reality” that “explores more than a single circle of reference,” meaning that the reality of the text is itself more intricate due to being grounded in both fact and fiction (56). Therefore the text’s movement drifts “between allegedly antithetical poles of art and life” that include “the aesthetically justified truth of the fictional and the experientially valid truth of the factual.”

Zavarzadeh’s ideas are sometimes difficult to access because, in the fashion of much academic criticism, he either invents his own terms or redefines familiar ones in his argument. However he is instructive in this study because he shows that New Journalism does not simply introduce personality, subjectivity, or ego to reportage but instead
embodies an altogether muddled and complicating narrative form. The factual and the fictional modes conjoin in the bi-referential mode to form what he calls the “fictual,” “a zone of experience where the factual is not secure or unequivocal but seems preternaturally strange and eerie, and where the fictional seems not all that fictitious, remote and alien, but bears an uncanny resemblance to daily experience” (56).

Zavarzadeh also understands bi-referential as endowing a text with a “noninterpretive [sic] stance” because it insists on being accepted as one highly subjective understanding of reality (42). The noninterpretational approach in narrative nonfiction contradicts the view of the journalist as “a passive information-processing instrument” who writes “free from the intervention of his own consciousness.” The consequence then is that the writing supports “a local reaction and interpretation rather than a global history” (43). Reporters practicing traditional journalism are no different than so many tape recorders and television cameras. New Journalism’s personal quality becomes both its most obvious flaw but also its defense. The noninterpretational in Zavarzadeh’s understanding claims that, because narrative nonfiction is highly individual, critiquing or questioning its validity is like smearing an editorial for being opinionated.

Chris Anderson’s explication of the meta-discursive reveals narrative nonfiction as preoccupied with the efficacy of rhetoric. Consequently, the form is a self-conscious construction. Self-consciousness also proves fundamental in Poirier’s understanding of performance and Zavarzadeh’s intertextual framework. Using these various critical
lenses, we can look back to some narrative nonfiction of the past, thereby understanding the legacy from which New Journalism springs.
Chapter 2: Mark Twain

Mark Twain was an experienced writer of the fictual years before trying his hand at fiction. *Roughing It*, published in 1872, recounts Mark Twain’s years spent in the Western frontier in search of fame and fortune. Although it was his second book, succeeding the travelogue *Innocents Abroad* by three years, it details an earlier period than depicted by the prior work. Consequently, his sophomore effort was published as a prequel. In her introduction to the authoritative edition of the text, Harriet Elinor Smith describes two of the sources from which Twain originally culled his material: his older brother Orion’s travel memorandum for their initial journey west and Twain’s own columns from various frontier papers, which mark his initial forays into the profession of writing. As Smith notes, the events in *Roughing It* occurred between the years of 1861 and 1866, yet composition of the text did not begin until 1870. Twain would then have had to rely upon supplementary sources in writing this work, most notably frontier columns that he himself did not pen, for two main reasons. The first, and most obvious, is the amount of time that had passed between when the events occurred and when he set himself to the task of recording them. The second is that unlike his other nonfiction, including *Innocents Abroad*, he did not embark on his journey for the purposes of writing about it.

In constructing his narrative Twain creates an amalgam comprised of writings ranging from his own diaries of the time, his earliest columns, and his comic tall tales. These differing sources range from private scribblings void of professional intentions to purely commercial literary ventures. Of these latter writings, some were factual
reportage and others comic tall tales, rooted in exaggeration, artistic flourish, or just plain fiction, easily identifiable by the wit and roughhouse vernacular that would become his trademark. Intertextuality springs from these many layers that Twain utilizes, and, as is often the case, he competes with these sources, claiming superiority for himself and his text. Interwoven throughout the text, then, are both of Zavarzadeh’s mono-referential forms, the factual and fictional, which coalesce so that the bi-referential, or the fictual, results. Twain scholar Leland Krauth writes that “Roughing It is best understood as palimpsest. Over the actualities of his western life, recorded with varying authenticity in the letters and early writings, Twain inscribes a newer version” (41).

The text is unique in his body of work because it narrates Mark Twain’s genesis through the various failures of Sam Clemens. A direct consequence of this autobiographical focus is that Roughing It preoccupies itself with meta-discourse since the narrative entails Twain’s own creation, and the text itself performs as it forges Twain identity. The text is meta-discursive due to what Lee Clark Mitchell refers to as its “self-conscious examination of language itself” (77). Critic John Bassett interprets Roughing It’s “continually draw[ing] attention to language in general…as a specific verbal performance” (224). But this extends beyond just the verbal and includes a performance of self-discovery as a historical document. Roughing It functions as both narrative of the West and narrative of Twain’s life, bearing witness to his success as writer, despite, or more appropriately, on account of his various failures seeking his fortune. While spinning many a tall tale of his time in the frontier, Clemens’ tallest tale emerges in the failures that necessitate Twain’s success. Roughing It functions as a narrative of personal
discovery, but also, through its meta-discursive meditations, performative posturings, and
intertextuality, a space where Twain endorses his own distinction as a skilled raconteur.

Authorial performance appears in *Roughing It* as early as the “Prefatory.”

Although Twain refers to the book as “merely a personal narrative, and not a pretentious
history or a philosophical dissertation” enabling the reader to “while away an idle hour,”
he also affirms that it documents “information concerning an interesting episode in the
history of the Far West, about which *no books* have been written by persons who were on
the ground in person, and saw the happenings of the time with their own eyes” (emphasis
added). Here Twain sets the tone that continues throughout the remainder of the text
where he both affirms and denies his authorial purpose. *Roughing It* unfolds as both
trivial and essential, possesses moments of both comedy and pathos, and weaves a
narrative that is both fact and fiction. One critic reads the Prefatory (as well as the
concluding “Moral”) as “the voice of a practiced writer, conscious of, indeed self-
conscious about, his writing, his written text, and his audience” (Krauth 43). Another
notes that Twain’s Prefatory serves the purpose of claiming “that his books had no morals
or messages” and so “resisted interpretation” harking back to Zavarzadeh’s notion of
zero-interpretation (Bassett 222).

The plot of *Roughing It* opens with the image of a romantic Twain jealously
pinning over his brother Orion’s appointment as Secretary of Nevada Territory. Brooding
over the “long, strange journey he was going to make, and the curious world he was
going to explore,” Twain envisions Orion “among the mountains of the Far West” and
proceeds to list a litany of images including diverse wildlife, the scenic countryside, the
Indians, and the excitement of newfound fortune in the mining camps (1-2). He concludes his description with the words, “What I suffered in contemplating happiness, the pen cannot describe,” though describe he does for the remainder of the book (2). As Lee Clark Mitchell astutely affirms, “At other times, [Twain’s] pen now fully equal to the task, he discovers that western life shoves up against the limits of language itself, as if the region had an uncanny power to expose the discursive conventions structuring those very descriptions it elicits” (68).

In the opening paragraph the ineffable quality of the mythic West looms heavily over Twain’s head and he sets out to test his abilities against its limits. Juxtaposed as well is the immense power of language. Much of the text details the view of experience defying expression on the one hand, and the potency of language in the proper hands on the other, a tension that propels the narrative. In the third chapter Twain describes an earlier experience with a camel who devours his overcoat with ease but, upon ingesting Twain’s newspaper correspondence, the camel sickens. Twain confides, “at last he began to stumble on statements that not even a camel could swallow with impunity” (17). Examining this manuscript Twain finds it to be “one of the mildest and gentlest statements of fact that I ever laid before a trusting public,” which is a double-entendre, both warning of the danger of “facts” as well as a “trusting public.” Orion’s baggage for their westward wagon even includes “six pounds of Unabridged Dictionary” which, in their turbulent passage, ricochets around like a bullet fired in small space, leaving no passenger unscathed. While both anecdotes are comic, they each speak to the power of language.
Twain is a creature of habit, and, in the recurrent meta-discursive motif of *Roughing It*, he constantly displays awareness of the power of words while calling attention to his own performance. When he is conned into buying a untamed horse, the Genuine Mexican Plug, he is bucked and writes, “Pen cannot describe how I was jolted up. Imagination cannot conceive how disjointed I was” (161). The reason this experience is beyond description is, of course, due to the fact that this anecdote is pure fiction. Only the imagination could conceive of such a horse capable of “shoot[ing] [Twain] straight into the air a matter of three or four feet,” three successive times, “all in the space of three or four seconds” (160). In spite of the clear indulgence of the tale, the chapter closes with the assurance that whoever stumbles upon “real Mexican plug” will “hardly consider him exaggerated” (165). Later, when Twain’s party of three fail to find their shelter in a storm, they give up hope and await death. When they later find they were a few feet from salvation, Twain iterates, “I have scarcely exaggerated a detail of this curious and absurd adventure” (217).

Noteworthy is the fact that both these tall tales can be understood as cautionary of the west, warning of a greenhorn’s risk at the hands of cunning frontiersman or the unforgiving frontier itself. In these anecdotes Twain essentially highlights the fictual quality of *Roughing It*, wryly and self-consciously interpolating fabricated episodes within his proper history, winking at his audience while he gets one over on them. He closes an earlier anecdote with the words “I am not given to exaggeration, and when I say a thing I mean it,” and, for the remainder of the text, whenever such an assurance is proffered it typically heralds either a previous or successive fallacy (85). All the uses of
hyperbole in *Roughing It* are humorous and many are self-conscious as well. The text’s cognizance of itself, in conjunction with its claims concerning language, displays how *Roughing It* serves “as a kind of literary manifesto” where, as Bassett argues, “his [Twain’s] performative mode” and “comic devices” result in his “controlling the audience and subject matter” (223). In order for a text to be fictual both aspects of the mono-referential must coincide, both the factual and fictional. As the sum of two opposing parts, the fictual appears conceptually rooted in contradiction. In practice Twain deftly utilizes bi-referentiality, commanding his audience through both narrative structures.

Twain provides the reader with a “tell” on his bluffs and consequently his performance trains the audience to discern the distinction between fact and fiction for themselves. The text incorporates the tall tale in oral tradition when it introduces the story of Horace Greely’s time out west. Due to give a lecture, and “anxious to go through quick,” Greely beseeches the driver to hurry (131). The driver of course proceeds at such speed that it “jolted the buttons off Horace’s coat” and the anecdote tritely concludes, “‘Keep your seat, Horace, and I’ll get you there on time!’—and you bet he did, too, what was left of him!” (132). In the next two pages Twain encounters the very same story three more times and each subsequent retelling is verbatim. The fourth time around he interrupts the speaker and requests instead to hear “about young George Washington and his little hatchet for a change” (135). The fact that the story is retold word for word—something uncommon for one speaker but impossible for three distinct speakers—betrays the true nature of oral tradition, where a story’s flavor changes as it is
passed on. But here, too, Twain’s efforts are meta-discursive; he concerns himself with
the art of storytelling, so that the text becomes part manifesto, and he places himself as
authoritative voice. Having more to say about the art of storytelling, and unable to neatly
fit it within the confines of the chapter, Twain includes a concluding footnote:

And what makes that worn anecdote the more aggravating, is, that the adventure it
celebrates never occurred. If it were a good anecdote, that seeming demerit
would be its chiefest virtue, for creative power belongs to greatness; but what
ought to be done to a man who would wantonly contrive so flat a one as this? If I
were to suggest what ought to be done to him, I should be called extravagant—but
what does the thirteenth chapter of Daniel say? Aha! (136)

The biblical passage to which Twain refers is the tale of Susanna. Two men, lusting after
her and failing in their seduction, retaliate by claiming to have witnessed Susanna
committing adultery. Of course their fabrication is unearthed by the fact that they cannot
corroborate the location of her supposed crime. Fittingly (for Twain) the consequences
of their deficiency result in their capital punishment. Twain’s aversion to all things
biblical is well known. Here, though, the Bible is useful for upholding the value of a
good yarn, sacred indeed to Twain. Roughing It may possess the qualities of tall tale—
since Twain aligns creativity with greatness—but its teller is no slouch but an original.
Through the failures of the Horace Greely anecdote, Twain calls attention to his own
literary prowess, promoting his own authority.

The character of narrative nonfiction as a self-referential on writing is further
cemented in Twain’s reading of other texts throughout Roughing It. As early as the
fourth chapter Twain cites a *New York Times* account, ten years or so after Twain headed west via carriage, detailing the same journey by train. In this reading, Twain merely highlights the staggering technological advances which had occurred in the space of a few years. The *Times* article, immediately following his own narrative of the same journey, testifies to the contrast of his own experience. He restrains from commentary and instead juxtaposes the two accounts, allowing the reader to decipher the differences without instruction.

Twain would not be so forgiving of some of the other texts. In Twain’s commentary of his time spent in Utah and the Mormons, despite some initial comic sketches upon Brigham Young’s woes from his droves of wives, Twain’s real critique is directed at the Mormon Bible. He refers to the Mormon bible as “chloroform in print” and wittily opines that the miracle of it is “If Joseph Smith composed this book” he must have stayed awake (107). Twain cynically adds that “if [Smith], according to tradition, merely translated it from certain ancient and mysteriously-engraved plates of copper” then it is also a miracle “for the same reason,” staying awake (107). But his critique does not cease there. Twain attacks the diction, noticing the “author claimed to give his words and phrases the quaint, old-fashioned sound and structure of our King James” resulting in “mongrel; half modern glibness and half ancient simplicity and gravity.” In his reading, Twain claims that, sans the phrase “and it came to pass,” the Mormon Bible, “would have been only a pamphlet.”

Beyond his qualms with the diction, Twain’s reading questions the text’s validity. He assesses Joseph Smith’s “hefting” of the tablets in front of eight witness, half of
whom were related to him, while the other half all share the surname Whitmer: “And when I am far on the road to conviction, and eight men, be they grammatical or otherwise, come forward and tell me that they have seen the plates too; and not only seen those plates but ‘hefted’ them, I am convinced. I could not feel more satisfied and at rest if the entire Whitmer family had testified” (109). At the expense of Mormon doctrine, Twain is imparting words of wisdom, urging his audience to read between the lines, lest they get caught a sucker. Reading about the world will not suffice on its own; one must read the world itself. Accurate perception requires the acumen and perspicacity to judge each individual text as coexisting layers comprising reality.

On his excursion to the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, Twain describes a passenger, the Admiral, who “seldom read newspapers” and “when he did he never believed in anything they said. He read nothing, and believed in nothing, but ‘The Old Guard,’ a secession periodical published in New York” (425). In Twain’s description the Admiral carries around copies of “The Old Guard” subscribing to a reality found only in this periodical’s pages. When a piece of information was not there to support his argument, the Admiral of course “supplied it himself, out of bountiful fancy, inventing history, names, dates” and whatever else could support his claims. In his trademark southwestern humor, Twain exposes the Admiral as nothing more than a mountebank.

But the lesson beneath the comedy is of the dangers of basing all of one’s beliefs, one’s whole reading of reality, upon a single text, whether it’s the Mormon Bible, a secessionist periodical, or anything else. For Twain this is especially the case regarding a text that claims to possess all the truth and wisdom of the world. According to Bassett,
Twain, fashioning his narrative through failure, creates a text that could bear the motto, “Better to pretend to lie, and let truth leak out” (228). The text is intertextual partly because of its use of external sources as well as its bi-referentiality. But most provocatively Twain demonstrates the way that a text, as truth, performs within its description of the real world, and exposes Twain’s proposition that reality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

If *Roughing It* is a text that warns of the dangers of fabrication, while of course, indulging in quite a bit of fabrication itself, the text is highly self-conscious of itself as a text and thus a reminder to its audience of its construction—particularly in its inclusion of Twain’s feigned editorial blunders. Already noted are the instances of Twain’s claims such as “the pen cannot describe it” but he consistently calls attention to himself in the very act of composition, revealing the wizard behind the curtain. In the close of the eighteenth chapter, Twain includes a quote, and then, speaking of its effectiveness, writes “the quotation does not seem to fit—but no matter, let it stay, anyhow” because he likes it, has tried to fit it in without success, and now, the quote finally in place, Twain undergoes “at least a temporary respite from the wear and tear of trying to ‘lead up’ to this” quotation (124-125). Chapter 30 closes with the line, “There were two men—however, this chapter is long enough” and, on the adjacent page, the 31st chapter opens “There were two men in the company who caused me particular discomfort” (201).

The inclusion of these “errors” further adds to Twain’s performance in the text. The experiential in narrative nonfiction is partly due to the fact that the writer makes a character of himself; thus, in witnessing the world through his depiction, the audience
also engages with the world as narrator/author/character performs within the text. But through the act of composition an additional layer is added, so that the textual content’s composition is evident. Experientiality is transmitted through Twain’s reading of other texts, but further enhanced through his drawing attention to the act of writing, providing the reader with a glimpse of authorial decisions, unrefined and on the page. In a sense, Twain allows the audience to experience composition as readers through self-conscious performances, defying the typical exchange between author and audience. Furthermore, he does so through errors. Were the text to read perfectly this could not occur. Through apparent editorial oversights, Twain includes a tongue-in-cheek swipe at his faults, and, to a certain extent, parodies his own inadequacies.

Thematically, *Roughing It* complements the rhetoric of failure in detailing Twain’s personal narrative of becoming a writer, a subplot within the greater narrative of the West as the whole. After failing as a prospector, Chapter 42 opens with the single sentence inquiry, “What to do next?” (271). Twain then recounts his long history of professional failures: he gave up law after a week, finding it “so prosy and tiresome”; when remembering his apprenticeship for a blacksmith he writes, “the master turned me adrift in disgrace, and told me I would come to no good”; as a bookseller he found that “the customers bothered me so I could not read with any comfort”; at a drug store his “prescriptions were unlucky” and he sold more “stomach pumps than soda water” (271). Here he does admit to having been a “tolerable printer” and a “good average” steamboat pilot, but he dismisses both, the former for lack of availability, the latter on account of his pride. He does not want to return west without his fortune, or so he claims. In actuality
the Civil War had entirely shut down the Mississippi. Furthermore, aside from working as a printer and pilot, in actuality he never studied law, apprenticed for a blacksmith, sold books, nor worked at a pharmacy.

So begins his literary career, an odd career choice for one so convinced of the limits of expression. Twain remarks that Virginia’s *Daily Territorial Enterprise* steadily printed his letters, so that his “good opinion to the editors had steadily declined” (273). But of course it is these very letters to which he self-mockingly refers that earn him an offer of employment from the *Enterprise*. His first piece of editorial advice is that he writes with a voice of “unassailable certainty” so as to maintain authority over his readership (274). Twain then refers to his weakness of allowing “fancy” to “get the upper hand” when “there was a dearth of news.” In response, when he happens upon a “wretched old hay truck” he makes “affluent use of it. I multiplied it by sixteen, brought it into town from sixteen different directions, made sixteen separate items out of it” (275). In reference to a wagon passing through, he brags, “I put this wagon through an Indian fight that to this day has no parallel in history” (276). In the earlier episode of the Mexican Plug ineffability was portrayed as something so extravagant that it was beyond belief. Now instead the fantastic invites description while the ordinary fails to even warrant expression.

Twain later finds work for the *Weekly Occidental*, a “literary paper.” Of course, they require a novel, and hire one Mrs. F., described as “an able romanticist of the *ineffable* school,” which he defines as “a school whose heroes are all dainty and perfect” (339-340, emphasis added). The quality of being beyond description is not measured in
truth but in the form of expression. As an editor Twain finds that “all the world is a dull blank” and complains “only give the editor a subject, and his work is done,” but Twain finds the world around him insufficient of worthy subjects (378, original emphasis). Failing, he equates an editor’s collected work as rivaling the prodigious volumes of Dickens and Scott. From Twain’s inability to depict the mundane, from his failure to conjure subjects worth covering, arises a career in oratory, and, eventually, his fiction. Thus failure, whether in prospecting or journalism, is performed through Twain’s voice in the text. Clemens, in his pursuits West, finds Twain. As Leland Krauth notes, he “authoriz[es] himself as he authors his book” and in the end finds something far more valuable than gold (45).

In Roughing It Mark Twain establishes for himself an authoritative voice and explores the possibilities and limits of language, establishing his history as a part of this history of the West. All three critical lenses of meta-discourse, performance, and intertextuality converge in his narrative nonfiction.

“Old Time on the Mississippi” (1876) marks an important development in Twain’s nonfiction. He creates the parallel between the profession of writing and the duties of the steamboat pilot, the first profession of his adult life. In his efforts to memorize every nuance of the river, “The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book” (91). He expands the metaphor, observing that to the passenger it was a “dead language” whereas to the pilot, possessing a complete knowledge of the Mississippi, it was “an italicized passage,” a “legend of the largest capitals, with a string of shouting exclamation points at the end” (91-92). But in comprehension of language there is also
danger. For Twain the river loses its mystery: “All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had
gone out of the majestic river!” Twain later romanticizes a pilot’s life and claims to have
“loved the profession far better than any I have followed since” and praises the pilot’s
freedom (116). “Writers of all kinds are manacled servants of the public,” he complains.
“We write frank and fearlessly, but then we ‘modify’ before we print.” The river unfolds
as an ever changing, evolving text and the pilot is the prized possessor of its wisdom, an
“absolute monarch” in “sober truth and not by a fiction of words” (117). Having
mastered the language of the river, and having mastered language, Twain celebrates one,
laments the other. His application of literary language to understanding a pilot’s duties
equates the two. Through his narrative nonfiction Twain narrates the world of the text as
he once navigated the river, delivering his current audience to the destination of his
choice.
Chapter 3: Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway’s narrative nonfiction marks an important transition between Twain’s efforts and the later works of Mailer and Thompson. While, like Twain before him, Hemingway began his career as journalist, unlike Twain he first achieved fame as a novelist. Hemingway’s nonfiction sustains, rather than creates, an already famous persona. Like Roughing It’s “Prefatory,” where Twain claims his purpose is to create a text allowing one to pass the time, Hemingway also uses the foreword of Green Hills of Africa as a quasi-disclaimer for his reader:

Unlike many novels, none of the characters or incidents in this book is imaginary. Any one not finding sufficient love interest is at liberty, while reading it, to insert whatever love interest he or she may have at the time. The writer has attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month’s action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination.

In this passage Hemingway presents his text as entirely factual, but the inclusion of the phrase “unlike many novels” nevertheless affirms his text as a novel of sorts. For this reason Green Hills serves as a precursor to the later movement of New Journalism, when writers would express fact through fictive techniques, an intention that Hemingway makes quite clear in his Foreword. Roughing It presents the text as both a history of the West and a form of entertainment, where the former was typically factual, and the latter typically fictional. Green Hills on the other hand claims to consist entirely of historical fact portrayed through fiction’s mode of expression, so that it can be read as an
experiment in form. Whether one wishes to deem it narrative nonfiction, a nonfiction novel, a memoir, or, dare we say, a piece of New Journalism, Hemingway intends that it be measured and reconciled through the tradition of the novel. This intention becomes all too clear as, throughout his time in the African countryside, he recurrently espouses his convictions concerning writing. Preoccupied with the meta-discursive, he performs the role of writer, justifying and promoting his place in American letters. Hemingway locates *Green Hills* directly within a nexus of literary texts through intertextual means. While this work marks his return to nonfiction, it is by no means a return to journalism, but a stylistic exploration of the possibilities of prose. Despite his claim that the book is entirely true, its form is so utterly literary and novelistic that it can only be classified as bi-referential. *Green Hills of Africa* reads as part literary proclamation and part advertisement for himself, celebrating Hemingway’s authorship throughout.

In the opening chapter of *Green Hills of Africa* Ernest Hemingway famously writes, “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn…it’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since” (22). Thus begins the text’s entry to meta-discursive reflection. This insight concerning *Huck Finn* arises from Hemingway’s encounter with a man named Kandinsky who, upon meeting the writer, recognizes him by name and engages him in a conversation concerning nothing but literature. The colloquy resembles a Socratic dialogue with Hemingway in the role of the mentor of course. “We destroy them [writers] in many ways,” Hemingway says, blaming, “money, the first praise, the first attack” and also the influence of corrupting
organizations that “do their [writers’] thinking for them” (24). The focus moves inward, shifting from American writers at large to Hemingway himself: “I have a good life but I must write because if I do not write a certain amount I do not enjoy the rest of my life” (25). Hemingway’s nonprofessional pursuits are infamous. From deep-sea fishing to boxing, bullfighting to hunting, his adventures are almost as well known as his literature. Though he uses his experiences in these endeavors as material sources for his literature, he affirms literature is his central purpose, without which no activity could yield pleasure. Before the audience has even glimpsed the safari, Hemingway depicts the journey as part adventure, part literary odyssey with the purpose of fulfilling the greater quest that is his career. While the subject appears to be Hemingway hunting, it’s also Hemingway’s disseminating his hunting experience through language.

At the close of the opening chapter Ernest Hemingway preaches from atop the mountain. He sets the bar for “how far prose can be carried if any one is serious enough and has luck” enabling language to attain the “fourth and fifth dimension” beyond the plane of experience or comprehension (27). Of course he immediately follows with the assertion that writing that succeeds in reaching such heights is at once the singular ambition for a writer and also, in all likelihood, unattainable. While in his foreword he spoke of the challenge to “write an absolutely true book,” here he adds: “It is a prose that has never been written” requiring Kipling’s “talent” and Flaubert’s “discipline.” He finally concludes that the “writer must be intelligent and disinterested and above all must survive” (27). Later in the text, while hunting, Hemingway similarly asserts, “the impersonal state you shoot from” as necessary to the successful hunter (76). In the same
way that writing becomes a metaphor for traversing the Mississippi in Twain, so too does it parallel the act of hunting for Hemingway. Hemingway crafts himself in the roll of a sage, as though he alone possesses the ancient wisdom of the scripture. His claim of the requisite “disinterested” or “unaffected” state for success in writing and hunting is also perplexing. Since the text serves as a pulpit where he advances his views on his profession, he is as interested a party as imaginable.

The events of *Green Hills of Africa* occurred in 1933, though the book was published two years later. But this evidences a strange authorial posturing, since Hemingway’s voice in the narrative sounds like that of a wise and ancient elder despite the fact that he was only thirty-five years old at the time of publication. Like Twain before him, Hemingway’s meta-discourse results in the performance of the writer. Though his tone is predominantly somber and appears almost Talmudic in gravity, when Kandinsky later asks of the “concrete things that harm a writer,” Hemingway writes, “‘Politics, women, drink, money, ambition. And the lack of politics, women, drink, money, and ambition,’ I said profoundly” (28). He uses the text as a space to station himself alongside peers such as Pound, Joyce, and Stein, as well as his forebears such as Tolstoy and Twain. But he simultaneously conveys the pretension of this posture as well. Contrasting stylistically with Twain, “profoundly” appears without the use of italics, which would self-consciously point to his own pompousness. Twain’s vainglorious buffoonery reads as a joke in which the reader and narrator share. Hemingway instead blatantly portrays his own callousness while he conveys a tone that can be vaguely understood as either sarcasm towards his reader or scorn towards Kandinsky, perhaps
both. He reveals himself as performer, calling to question the gravity of the previous statements, and, like Twain (though without the humor), engages in a dose of self-mockery.

Twain’s construction of self often parallels the tall tale structure he uses so that we can indulge his own bumbling comedy of errors; Hemingway’s construction mirrors the epic and sweeping theme of the narrative within which he places himself. Through Hemingway’s heroics and his overt and overdone displays of masculinity, he replaces Twain’s comic failures with plain hubris. In *Fame Became of Him*, an examination of Hemingway’s public life, John Raeburn writes, “His self-portrayal as the stalwart hunter…remained one of the most vivid and dramatic elements of his personal fame,” revealing his construction of self as partly literary though also possessing extra-textual motivations that survive in the form of his legacy (53). Authorial performance both establishes and reinforces the mythology that encompasses the aura of his career.

Since the narrative does not begin at the safari’s outset but instead in media res, Hemingway and his party are competing against the clock, limited by resources such as money, supplies, and the amount of time left in the hunting season. Hemingway characterizes these circumstances as a perversion of the natural order of things:

The way to hunt is for as long as you live against as long as there is such and such an animal; just as the way to paint is as long as there is you and colors and canvas, and to write as long as you can live and there is pencil and paper or ink or any machine to do it with, or anything you care to write about, and you feel a fool, and you are a fool, to do it any other way. (12)
Hemingway then disdains “ornamental killing” as sacrilege. Killing for killing’s sake is characterized by Hemingway the hunter as windy prose is for Hemingway the writer: lazy and irresponsible. Errant shots are one and the same as superfluous words, and he equates hunting and the making of art, the same as painting or writing. Hemingway holds dearly to exactitude so that killing is justified “only when you wanted it more than you wanted not to kill it” (16). Later in the text, describing Hemingway’s work habits, his wife speaks of how “frightful” he is before he begins a new work, saying, “When he talks about never writing again I know he’s about to get started” (195). The moment his inability to express himself becomes insurmountable, he is ready to begin. Through equating writing and hunting, he shows his characteristic terseness as comparable to a marksman’s good shot. Discipline lies at the heart of both and amounts to success in each.

*Green Hills* enforces the fact that Ernest Hemingway’s comprehension of the world is grounded in linguistic utterance and construction. The text’s recurrent self-consciousness results in the audience sharing this experience of understanding, through reading instead of writing. But he complicates this when, speaking of revolutions, he writes, “It’s very hard to get anything true on anything you haven’t seen yourself because the ones that fail have such bad press and the winners always lie so” (193). Hemingway, who praises his own talents, now asserts the loss that remains in even his translation of experience into language. *Green Hills*, like *Roughing It*, is self-aware of the textual construction of itself but also of its own construction of reality. Hemingway first attests to the puissance of the concise word or phrase metaphorically pairing it with the hunter’s
bullet, only to later acknowledge the ineffectuality of language to comprehend the mystery of experience.
Chapter 4: Mailer

The legacy of Hemingway’s nonfiction resonates deeply in the nonfiction of Norman Mailer. Ernest Hemingway’s previous work of nonfiction, Death in the Afternoon, includes approximately one hundred pages of photographs that follow the main text and precede the glossary. He informs his audience earlier in the text that “a description in words cannot enable you to identify [a matador’s techniques] before you have seen them as a photograph can,” adding, “Instantaneous photography has been brought to such a point that it is silly to try and describe something that can be conveyed instantly, as well as studied, in a picture” (176). The anxiety concerning the efficacy of words in a media saturated society, where the image reigns supreme, manifests itself as integral to the development of narrative nonfiction as it occurs in Norman Mailer’s work.

“Superman Comes to the Supermarket” finds Mailer at the 1960 Democratic National Convention in the eye of the storm that was JFK and his media sensation. Mailer watches Kennedy’s entrance from his balcony like a paparazzo, competing with the television cameras to capture the story. The scene is pure spectacle. Mailer experiences déjà vu as the scene unfolds like dozens of musical comedies glimpsed before: “it was the war scene where the hero, the matinee idol, the movie star comes to the palace to claim the princess” (15). Media saturation infects public perception to the extent that it informs our interpretation of current events; we experience reality the way we mediate so many entertaining fantasies. JFK becomes not only the winner of the 1960 Democratic primary but also the knight in a fairytale. Mailer shows concern for his own tale and places himself in the ring with his literary hero by conjuring the scene like a
bullfight. The crowd’s joyous celebration in welcoming Kennedy’s is like “a matador being carried back to the city after a triumph in the plaza” (15). Like Hemingway, Mailer too first achieved fame through his fiction. But in his nonfiction Mailer conveys the understanding that he lives in a time altogether different from Hemingway’s where the writer competes with technology:

The iron and steel of the nineteenth century [gave] way to electronic circuits which communicated their messages into men, the unmistakable tendency of the new century seeming to be the creation of men as interchangeable as commodities, their extremes or personality singed out of existence by the psychic fields of force the communicators would impose. The loss of personality was a catastrophe to the future of the imagination . . . (15-16)

In Armies of the Night, his most widely read nonfiction, Mailer writes, “For want of a live Hemingway, he would be expected to serve as the poor man’s Papa” (200). Seeking to shape himself in the mold that his particular era requires, he competes to establish an authorial voice in the face of a technologically dominated era. He places himself in opposition to technology because of its dehumanizing effects. Tape recorders and television cameras relay information, but they have no powers of interpretation. Mailer asserts “the velocity of the observer as crucial to the measurement as any object observed” (ix). The distinctive authorial presence of Mailer’s work vies against the technological forces of blandness that he finds so debilitating to independent thought.

“Superman Comes to the Supermarket” concludes with a hypothetical vision of American slumber in the wee hours of election night, the fate of the nation undecided:
“no on indeed could know until then what had happened the night before, what had happened at three o’clock in the morning on that long dark night of America’s search for a security cheaper than her soul” (37). Recent events in the 2008 Democratic Primaries might lead one to reasonably couple this reference to some three o’clock in the morning executive call, a la Hillary’s infamous red phone commercial. Its source, however, proves literary, not with Hemingway, but with his peer, friend, and rival, F. Scott Fitzgerald. In *The Crack Up*, posthumously published notes, correspondence, and essays, Fitzgerald explains his failing mental health and writer’s block in the eponymously titled essay. Finding no resolve from his suffering, he confesses, “at three o’clock in the morning, a forgotten package has the same tragic importance as a death sentence, and the cure doesn’t work—and in the real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning, day after day” (75). Mailer borrows Fitzgerald’s confession, appropriating the weight of Fitzgerald’s personal malady as he reshapes it to fit a fractured America existing in the sixties.

*Armies of the Night*, which documents 1967’s March on the Pentagon, is Mailer’s most celebrated piece of nonfiction. The text is structurally separated into two books, “History as Novel” and “Novel as History.” The first section reads like a novel with Mailer as the protagonist, but with a twist. Despite a third-person narration he maintains a first-person perspective. Any of the events surrounding the March on the Pentagon that Mailer himself is not personally involved in are expunged from the history—the center is always Mailer (he refers to himself throughout as either Mailer, the Novelist, or the protagonist). The second section, Novel as History, speaks to the absence of a
perspective beyond Mailer’s, and then labors through the myriad, and, frankly, boring
details of the organizing committee’s efforts in the weeks leading up to the March. The
first book, Mailer’s story, is vivid and provocative; its counterpart, the “objective” story,
conforms to a mundane historical viewpoint. In its failure, the second book further
accentuates the magic of the first. But this bifurcated structure mimics the intertextuality
of history as it is written and as it occurs. Mailer presents each book to his audience
through one of the opposing poles that comprise bi-referentiality. The text as a whole is
fictual in that its form is novelistic. Certain facts are either elided or exaggerated to fit
the narrative, though the events it relays are historical. Mailer performs as author,
historian, and protagonist, documenting the history while also utilizing the text to
propagate his literary views in a text that is novel, history, and doctrine.

“From the outset, let us bring you news of your protagonist,” begins Armies
before introducing a cut and dry five-paragraph blurb from Time magazine (3). When the
Time article concludes, the chapter closes with the single line “Now we may leave Time
to find out what happened” (4). These two sentences, along with the Time article,
comprise the entire opening chapter. Armies of the Night presents itself not as the
alternative of Time’s coverage but as the antidote. When the protagonist fully enters the
scene he receives a phone call inviting him to the March. He hesitates to accept, not
because he is not sympathetic to the cause, but because he questions the value of the
endeavor. Deliberating, Mailer writes that, “One’s own literary work was the only
answer to the war in Vietnam,” and he laments “that he had not done any real writing in
months” since he instead was making movies (9). Mailer himself is infected by
technology and mass media and embarks on the weekend not with the War, LBJ, McNamara, or even his own writing on his mind, but with the cutting of his “cops and crooks” film where he serves as both an actor and director (10). He assumes both these roles in *Armies* too, performing as actor within a spectacle and as director shaping the history through his lens. During the actual March a film crew even captures Mailer’s arrest for a documentary—Mailer performs then for the very cameras that his text inveighs against.

Later in *Armies* Mailer writes: “There is no procurer, gambler, adventurer or romantic lover more greedy for experience in great gouts” than a novelist, revealing his motivation for new material (118). Chris Anderson comments that Mailer’s frequent reference to himself as “the Novelist” enforces Mailer’s vision of “the protest from the very beginning as inimical to his own interests” which, of course, is part of Mailer’s performance (105). Throughout the text he questions his utility as author juxtaposed by the futility of the protest. He then conveys an experience that he judges as an altogether failure, distracting him from his real work. This though is nothing more than a thinly veiled contradiction that presents itself in the performance of a narrator who informs the reader that the subsequent events are so worthless that he simply must chronicle them in a book.

The performance is immediately perceptible by the fact of Mailer’s third person narration of his own experiences in the text’s opening. His constant referring to himself as “the Novelist” further cements the performing role of the writer to remind the reader that this is not a journalistic endeavor. He lambasts reporters and gripes that the papers
“wrenched and garbled and twisted and broke one’s words and sentences until a good author always sounded like an incoherent, overcharged idiot” and concludes with the maxim “the more one might have to say in a sentence, the worse one would probably sound” in print (65). Though he cut his literary teeth in fiction, he possesses an editor’s acute sensitivity to the distortion of the facts. “So a great wall of miscomprehension was built over the years between a writer, and the audience reached by a newspaper” leaving Mailer to cut out the middleman. The text demonstrates journalistic integrity by expunging the journalist. Mailer establishes his character and persona by promoting his own voice, his own opinions, and his own superiority. To a certain extent, he sings a song of himself.

Mailer further performs as he documents history while also producing a document of that history. In *The Performing Self* Richard Poirier claims that “For Mailer the experience being recorded in the sentence is no more significant than is the experience of writing the sentence” (15-16). In replicating for the audience the experience of the construction of the very words upon the page *Armies* is experiential. But Mailer’s own awareness of his public and private self also add to the performance. Early on in the text he refers to having “learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image” (5). In his fame Mailer finds that “he had had nearly twenty years of misreporting about himself, and the seed of paranoia is the arrival of the conviction that the truth about oneself is never told” (141). Part of the narrative device of the text is to reclaim and reshape his public self. Of course even the dimmest of readers understands that the Mailer-on-Mailer narrative structure is not exactly the most impartial in this respect. But to his credit, Mailer depicts
his many flaws, ranging from mere impatience and petty callousness to his pathetic, drunken tirades that are not construed as vaingloriously redeeming in the least. By presenting himself as both luminary and brute, he recognizes both parts in himself, and resists external criticism, which harkens back to the notion of noninterpretational. But this, too, is a performance because of the obvious artifice in self-construction. Though Mailer may acknowledge himself as a bastard, he drafts precisely the bastard of his choosing.

As a notable in attendance at the March one of Mailer’s duties is oratory. Mailer contrasts public speaking (“an exercise from prepared texts”) with speaking-in-public (“improvised, impromptu, or dangerously written”) and equates the latter with writing (28). “One had to trick or seize or submit to the grace of each moment,” he warns and find where “consciousness and grace come together” in “occasions of some mystery” so that “with every phrase one [is] better or worse, close or less close to the existential promise of truth” (28-29). Mailer’s action is always mediated through how it relates and pertains to his writing. On the eve prior to the March, Mailer, along with Robert Lowell and Dwight Macdonald, is to give a speech at a church before an audience of young protestors. Mailer views the occasion as a competitive engagement instead of a collaborative one. Only he handicaps himself in showing up stone drunk, writing, “he may have felt like a matador in the flush of full competition, going out to do his work after the other torero has had a triumph, but for fact he was probably less close in essence now to the bullfighter than the bull” a comic inversion of Hemingway’s image (46).
When his time to speak arrives he opens with the words, “‘We are gathered here’—shades of Lincoln in hippieland” (40). Present are two Mailers: the actor within the scene who quotes Lincoln and the scribe who controls the actor, the stage, and audience all at once. His speech continues and states the purpose to “make a move on Saturday to invest the Pentagon and halt and slow down its workings” that “will be at once a symbolic act and a real act” revealing the true purpose for the occasion (47). Mailer reviles against “totalitarianese” and “technologese” which he characterizes as “language which succeeds in stripping itself of any moral content” (284). Even in his bumbling state, he presents himself as passionate and humane in contrast to the government’s cold rhetoric, concealing the atrocities beneath its statistics. In spite of his aimless rambling he presents the philosophical dilemma beneath the entire demonstration that Armies consistently returns to: the balance of power between the symbolic act and the real act, the efficacy of language in place of action.

When Mailer is later arrested he writes, “It felt like a victory, one hardly knew over what, perhaps over lack of imagination” of the military police who are “utterly uncomprehending” of anyone’s wish to be arrested. Not able to qualify success here, he later wonders what could have been accomplished had the protestors even been successful in their “siege” and “taken” the Pentagon. But he resignedly admits, “it was a battle conceived unlike any other, for in a symbolic war, victory had no tangible fruit” (199). In the absence of material gains, the protest’s symbolic status becomes central as a meta-discursive principle that informs the text’s self-conscious representation. While this tension was present in the previous texts, here Mailer inflates its status to epic
proportions. Military language abounds as the Pentagon is referred to as a “target” to be 
“taken.” Initially Mailer hesitates even to attend because he feels his writing takes 
priority. But both the protest and his writing qualify as symbolic acts. Therefore his 
questioning the protest extends to a greater meta-discursive debate over his own powers 
as author.

Mailer senses that in his era language is losing its potency, a daunting 
apprehension for a writer. He resignedly confesses that “As the power of communication 
grew larger” responsibility of communication “was for the pompous, and the public 
servants” (157). He separates himself (yes, even from the pompous) and concludes that 
“writers were born to discover wine” and not alter society (157). But the text contradicts 
this resolve entirely. In *Arms* he harangues “technologese” as immoral, and, his 
previous novel was the not so subtly titled *Why Are We In Vietnam?* The artistic ideal, as 
practiced by him, necessitates a certainly moral position. So Mailer repeats himself. He 
again lifts from the *Crack Up* and wonders “how much of Fitzgerald’s long dark night” 
came from a shared sense of national strife. Fitzgerald wrote these words in a moment of 
personal strife and refers to his own block. Mailer’s struggle is both personal and 
communal and he speaks to a “dark night” of an America divided.

Part of the text’s brilliance, and what makes it such a challenging read, derives 
from its ambiguousness. Much in the way that Twain was both comic jester and earnest 
historian, so, too, does Mailer have it both ways. Even more self-consciously than 
Twain, he acknowledges his dueling roles in the text: “is he [Mailer] finally comic, a 
ludicrous figure with mock-heroic associations; or he is not unheroic, and therefore
embedded somewhat tragically in the comic? Or is he both at once, and all at once?” (53). The answer of course escapes both Mailer and the audience. The fact that he is “a figure of monumental disproportions” serves to capture for his audience “the crazy house, the crazy mansion, of that historic moment” when the protestors aimed for a symbolic victory, and the government “reacted as if a symbolic wound could prove as mortal as any other combative rent” (53-54). Mailer himself is unable to read the situation with confidence. He is unsure of his footing within the narrative and only knows that, whether comic or tragic, the tale is absurd—Mailer himself, the March, the government, and the War especially—all absurd. How then are the readers, particularly those of later generations, to understand this moment in history? Mailer provides the answer in the opening transition between books one and two. “For the novel,” Mailer writes, “is, when it is good, the personification of a vision which will enable one to comprehend other visions better” (219). He acknowledges Armies as a private history within a public spectacle. Mailer can only teach us so much about the history of the March, but in the process he teaches us a great deal about the narrative that is history.
Chapter 5: Thompson

Despite their similar roles as public buffoons, Hunter S. Thompson quite possibly makes Norman Mailer appear as sober and reserved as a humorless teetotaler. Notorious for his excessive drug use and association with sixties counter culture, Hunter S. Thompson’s narrative nonfiction is today known as “gonzo journalism.”\(^1\) But just what is gonzo? Although now the term is applied to any writing that exhibits a wild, stream-of-consciousness style, it is mostly associated with Thompson, whose behavior is typically bizarre and unpredictable. In his writing he portrays himself as an untamed force of nature and “Gonzo” becomes his own sub-category of New Journalism, distinct from his peers. One cannot overlook the fact that narrative nonfiction, as practiced by Thompson, concerns itself with not just the velocity of the observer, but the chemical constitution as well. For this reason his first book, 1966’s *Hells Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, is so surprising on account of the sobriety of its tone (and its narrator). Even W. Ross Winterowd, who complains that in Thompson’s work “one learns a great deal about the author, very little about his subject,” maintains that Hell’s Angels “stands up very well” as a in-depth study (90-91).

In his introduction to the Modern Library edition of the text, Douglas Brinkley, Thompson’s biographer, editor of his letters, and literary executor, credits the first-person perspective as the “narrative conceit, combined with Thompson’s incorporation of

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\(^1\) In archived footage from Alex Gibney’s documentary *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, Thompson explains the term. After his piece “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” his friend sent him a note saying, “it was pure gonzo.” After great public response, Thompson felt he needed a word for what he was doing, so, liking the word, he used it.
scribbled notes, transcribed interviews, article excerpts, stream-of-consciousness,
telegrams, and verbatim telephone conversations, that sets him apart from the other New
Journalists” (xii). Although the term would not appear until several years afterwards,
Brinkley claims that *Hell’s Angels* “sound[s] Thompson’s first crack at Gonzo
Journalism” and thus the text is essential to understanding Thompson’s role in the
tradition and advances in the field of narrative nonfiction.

The first chapter of Hell’s Angels opens with a stream-of-consciousness run-on
paragraph that warns of “The Menace” (the Hell’s Angels) shooting down a California
highway “tense for action” (3). Immediately following this paragraph four stand-alone
quotes appear, looking like epigraphs on a cover page, only each subsequent quote is both
below and opposite the previous one, creating a zigzagging form. The various sources
for the first quotes include *True, The Man’s Magazine*; a San Francisco jailer; a charter
member of the Angel’s Birney Jarvis; and finally an anonymous Angel. They are all in
opposition, with some attributed to the press and some from the Angels themselves. This
format is used throughout the text and later expands to include a panoply of sources
including such heavyweights as Soren Kierkegaard and John Milton, publications such as
*Newsweek* and *The Detective*, colorful characters including a San Francisco drag queen,
public officials, cops, and judges, historical outlaws like Ma Barker and Bonnie Parker,
and finally, quotes from Angels themselves.

On occasions when Hunter S. Thompson quotes from mainstream media, whether
it is *Time, Newsweek*, or the *New York Times*, he does so in an effort to place himself in
opposition to the establishment. The second chapter of Hell’s Angels is titled “The
Making of the Menace” and chronicles the inaccurate portrayal of the Angels in the media. Discerning the differences between eyewitness accounts and articles on Angels activity, Thompson notes, “There is not much argument about the basic facts, but the disparities in emphasis and context are the difference between a headline and a filler in most big-city newspapers,” causing Thompson to ask, “Do the Hell’s Angels actually ‘take over a town’…or merely clog a main street and a few local taverns with drunken noice, thus flaying the sensibilities of various locals?” (31). In other words, are they a true media sensation or are they being sensationalized by the media?

In answering this question Thompson concerns himself with more than merely revealing irresponsible reporting. The narrative of Hell’s Angels divulges how journalistic misrepresentation becomes actuality: “If the Hell’s Angels Saga’ proved any one thing, it was the awesome power of the New York press establishment. The Hell’s Angels as they exist today were virtually created by Time, Newsweek, and The New York Times” (34). Essentially, the Hell’s Angels evolve into the public spectacle the press and public construe and ultimately desire. Thompson similarly categorizes the The Wild One as “an inspired piece of film journalism” that “told a story that was only beginning to happen and which was inevitably influenced by the film’ (63). Later in the text Thompson becomes immersed in the biker culture first hand, informing his understanding of the press reports. But he later assesses their reaction to these reports, writing that “after awhile I realized that if the outlaws were ever forced to choose between consistently bad and biased publicity or no publicity at all, they wouldn’t hesitate to choose the former” (168-169). In the previous texts we have seen intertextuality as one
specific understanding of the fractured “reality” that subjectivity negates. In this case the
texts of various media sources evolve from pure fallacy to actuality.

Thompson is not entirely disdainful of the press. He refers to the Times as “the
heavyweight champion of American journalism” and affirms, “On nine stories out of ten
the paper lives up to its presentation” (34). But even this beacon of the establishment
falls prey to what he calls “technical safeguards,” including the use of words like
“alleged” and phrases like “it was claimed” that he characterizes as essentially “printing a
story without taking legal responsibility for it.” Worst of all are crimes committed by a
bastion of the press:

The result was a piece of slothful, emotionally biased journalism, a bad hack job
that wouldn’t have raised an eyebrow or stirred a ripple had it appeared in most
American newspapers…but the Times is a heavyweight even when it’s wrong and
the effect of this article was to put the seal of respectability on a story that was, in
fact, a hysterical, politically motivated accident. (34-35; emphasis added)

Oddly, Thompson, whose gonzo journalism is known for its subjectivity, critiques the
bias of the Times in a stance that appears hypocritical. But it’s the kneejerk, emotional
bias to which he objects and not intellectual bias grounded in observation. Thompson
serves as reader for the audience, sifting through the articles, quoting them, and finally
calling the reader’s attention to their bogusness.

Hunter S. Thompson’s undermining comments on the media establishment are
juxtaposed next to his efforts to legitimatize his own authority on the topic. “My dealings
with the Angels lasted about a year, and never really ended,” he writes, adding, “I came
to know some of them well and most of them well enough to relax with,” so that he creates a scene of intimacy and first-knowledge that he alone accesses (43). To cover the story Thompson buys himself a bike, though not a Harley, which is an absolute necessity for any Angel. He also eschews their leather and denim wardrobe in favor of Bermuda shorts and a Butte sheepherder’s jacket. He rides, but in accord with his own fashion, dressing himself, both literally and figuratively, as neither outsider nor insider. But he also validates himself as authority, writing, “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” (45). Thompson’s narrative does not assert itself as an apologia on the behalf of the Hell’s Angels. He instead defends them against the falsities posited by the press, asserts himself as the sole arbiter of reality, and later unearths the truth behind the real menace.

To a certain extent Thompson’s fashioning himself as an insider acts as a performance of self that authorizes and authenticates the experience for his audience. Though Thompson as character is relatively tame in this text, particularly in comparison to the persona of his later works, he nevertheless hints at the caricature he later becomes. He references an instance in which he “blew out [his] back windows with a 12-guage shotgun” coupled with “six rounds from a .44 magnum” that he casually calls a “prolonged outburst of heavy firing, drunken laughter, and crashing glass” (47). While this seems in character to those of with any knowledge of his life, its relevance to the narrative is questionable. The description is tangential and does nothing but contribute to Thompson’s own image instead of the Angels’. The provisions he packs for a Fourth of
July camping trip with the Angels include “a sleeping bag and beer cooler in back, tape recorder in front, and under the driver’s seat an unloaded Luger” (105-106). Another mode of performance that he begins in *Hell’s Angels* and repeats throughout his career is his lying to the unwitting “civilians” that get caught in his maelstrom. When speaking with a gas station attendant who warns him of the Angels he retorts, “I told him I was a karate master and wanted to be in on the action” (118). In defense of Thompson’s self-parody, John Hellmann writes, “Since he presents his journalism as the disoriented persona’s vision and experience of events, Thompson is free to present journalistic material through the license of parody” (69). The audience beholds a narrator who presents himself as unreliable loon, but he’s more reliable than the *Times* showing that sometimes the jester just might know more than the king.

Thompson differs from predecessors such as Hemingway and Mailer because he embraces his status as a journalist. But for a journalist his text is altogether literary. In addition to incorporating quotes from writers ranging from Villon to Henry Miller, he constantly alludes to literary tradition. When he relays someone’s first account with the biker gang he first notes the town of the scene, Angels Camp, and cites it as the locus of Twain’s famous “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” framing a literary landscape. Thompson alludes to the story again less explicitly when he recounts a 1957 incident in the same town when “the American Motorcycle Association was staging a big race in conjunction with the annual frog-jumping contest” (156). In describing the Angels’ working class roots he refers to Oakland as possessing “the sort of charm that Chicago had for Sandburg” (235). Not all of Thompson’s references are canonical.
When the Angels threaten to break up anti-war protests on Berkeley’s campus Allen Ginsberg writes a six-page epistolary poem that Thompson includes in its entirety. When the Angels ride from Oakland to Sacramento for the funeral of one of their brethren Thompson writes, “This was not going to be any Jay Gatsby funeral; the Angels wanted a full-dress rally” (257). Intertextual references also penetrate beyond surface level observation. The ability to comprehend the world is augmented through literature:

> There are literary critics who insist that Ernest Hemingway was a tortured queer and that Mark Twain was haunted to the end of his days by a penchant for interracial buggery. It is a good way to stir up a temper in the academic quarterlies, but it won’t change a word of what either man wrote, nor alter the impact of their work on the world they were writing about. (82)

The world that Thompson constructs is informed by a comprehensive knowledge of American realism. He places himself in their tradition, rejecting academic distractions and elevating his authorial presence.

Beyond the literary references in the text is the brilliantly poetic closing to Hell’s Angels. Although John Hellmann claims that “the more we view Hell’s Angels” as “a source of information, the less we view [it] as an aesthetic object,” Thompson proves his text can be both elegant and informative (48). “Months later, when I rarely saw the Angels, I still had the legacy of the big machine,” he writes (261). But then he mentions his first riding accident and his subsequent resolve to “stop pushing [his] luck on curves” and to “always wear a helmet and try to keep within range of the nearest speed limit.” Lacking insurance and a valid license, he can only ride inconspicuously at night, “like a
werewolf.” But the night had other things in store: “There was no helmet on those
nights, no speed limit, and no cooling it down on the curves. The momentary freedom of
the park was like the one unlucky drink that shoves a wavering alcoholic off the wagon.”
With each gear shift, each curve, each acceleration the ride becomes greater than itself—it
becomes a metaphor for writing and an exploration to the great beyond. “But with the
throttle screwed on there is only the barest margin, and no room at all for mistakes. It has
to be done right…” he writes. For when done right he can render through language
where words fail:

The Edge…There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who
really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. The others—the
living—are those who pushed their control as far as they felt they could handle it,
and then pulled back, or slowed down, or did whatever they had to when it came
time to choose between Now and Later. But the edge is still Out there. Or maybe
it’s In. The association of motorcycles with LSD is no accident of publicity. They
are both a means to an end, to the place of definitions. (262-263)

His narrative closes with a metaphysical meditation that reaches beyond the material
experience that can be conveyed with language to a deeper, elemental truth. It closes not
with the Angels, and not even with Thompson himself, but with a meta-discursive
lament.
Conclusion

After the 1960’s and the publications of Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* and Hunter S. Thompson’s *Hell’s Angels*, the two authors became household names. In Mailer’s case this celebrity did not come at the expense of the serious consideration of his work in the academy, due to his reputation as a novelist and essayist. Even the severe criticism of his work in feminist circles testifies to the significance of his literature, acknowledging his contributions as worthy of protest. Hunter S. Thompson, however, continued to be regarded as a pop writer. This is partly due to his status as a journalist instead of a novelist, and partly due to the fact that his career was just beginning and therefore lacked that perspective that only the passage of time provides. But he was also far more integrated into popular culture. Though his reputation first spread because of his work for *The Nation*, he is most closely associated with *Rolling Stone*. He provided the inspiration for the Uncle Duke character in the Doonesbury comics and was even portrayed by Bill Murray in the parodic film *Where the Buffalo Roam* (which is essentially a parody of Thompson’s own self-parody).

But despite their differing reputations, both Thompson and Mailer are New Journalists who dared to cross the great cultural divide between high and low culture, pop art and “proper” art, much to the chagrin of many in the ivory tower. But the detractors are quick to forget that Twain, before being accepted as the first purely American voice in literature, was a pop figure who acquired the bulk of his wealth performing for the masses on lecture tours. And Hemingway’s legacy was glamorized in *Life*, not *The
There was a time Shakespeare was a pop artist too, but that’s hardly objectionable today.

Like Twain and Hemingway before them, Mailer and Thompson practiced a form of narrative nonfiction whose central narrative device lies in the strength of the author’s persona in the text. The strength of their personas and the first-person perspective would also become the focal point for many of the detractors of this literature, who dismiss it as first-person nonfiction and nothing more. Beneath the surface of a first-person point of view lies a literary tradition far more complex. Contemporary criticism reveals the utter literariness that Twain, Hemingway, Mailer, and Thompson all preoccupy themselves with in their nonfiction. In applying contemporary understandings of narrative nonfiction, we also bridge the divide between New Journalists and their predecessors. They each perform in the role of arbiter and authority over reality and, in their self-conscious constructions, mediate the actualities of world as they would any other text. They each convey their beliefs of literature—what it can accomplish and how it must be written—so that their nonfiction reveals each authors’ creed and his attempts to live by these standards.

Through the lenses of performance, meta-discourse, and intertextuality, narrative nonfiction always in the end refers back to language’s limitations and the writer’s attempts to transcend these limits. The action of the text—whether it’s the Twain’s success through comic failure, Hemingway’s epic safari, Mailer’s mock-heroic protest, or Thompson riding with the Angels—can only be understood as metaphors for expression. The limits of language press up against each author’s talent so that each aims for an
ethereal place beyond as in Hemingway’s fourth and fifth dimensions or Thompson’s The Edge.

In Norman Mailer’s introduction to Some Honorable Men, a collection of his writings on the political conventions from 1960-1972, he quotes from his own earlier work and includes this gem: “Writing is of use to the psyche only if the writer discovers something he did not know he knew in the act itself of writing” (viii). The brilliance of the experientiality of narrative nonfiction is that, because of its self-conscious construction, the reader is made to feel this self-discovery in complete unison with the author. Therefore, despite exaggerations of the truth, these writers preserve the truth of a moment. What remains is a body of work that continues to urge its reader, as Hunter S. Thompson so famously quipped, to “Buy the ticket, take the ride.”
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