

“Who do you think I am?”:

The Opportunities of Self-Representation in the
Work of Three American Journalists

By

Luke Schmerberg

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Dedicated to Susan Nenadic

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the work of three authors: A.J. Liebling, Hunter S. Thompson, and Jim Harrison. I am specifically concerned with their non-fiction essays, one that were published in magazines such as *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New Yorker*. The common thread between these authors is that they are all concerned with the act of self-presentation in their journalism. They all create an authorial persona in their works through their use of the first person narrative technique, where they make themselves actors in their work. They use the opportunities that self-presentation allows them in different ways, and accomplish different things however.

The first author I will discuss is A. J. Liebling. He undergoes the task of journalistic self-presentation mainly by humbling himself. He takes care to show his audience at *The New Yorker* that he is an everyman character, one who they can relate to. Professor Richard Bailey proposed the term “bonhomous” to describe the persona that Liebling is trying to create, and he hit that nail right on the head; I am indebted to him for that term (Bailey, 3/16/05). He does this to make his experiences in Europe seem familiar to New Yorkers, in the same way that he felt about journalism as a young man.

The next author I will discuss is Hunter S. Thompson. The character that he creates in his journalism is not humble, nor is it someone that anyone not wearing a straitjacket could relate to. He tries hard to present his character as excessive and unreliable. He does this so he can later drop out of his narrative voice and tell the reader the whole truth without seeming corny or possibly being unbelievable.

Jim Harrison, the last author I consider, works with the problem of being corny, sentimental, and sensational as well. However, unlike Thompson, what he attempts to create is a persona who revels in sentiment. Harrison’s huge appetites and powerful emotions help show his need to feel sensational experience. He constructs a persona that enables him to share his love for sensation and sentiment with his readers.

To conclude, I would like to show that the self-presentation that these authors do connects them and their work, even if such links would not be readily apparent when one first reads their names. Each author aspires to do unique things with their self-presentation however, and that shows the incredible possibilities for the act of self-representation in journalism. Finally, I will propose some places in which this analysis of self-representation can be taken. I will look specifically at the ways that the type of readings that arise out of Liebling, Thompson, and Harrison can be applied to other journalists.

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Short Titles

- JBD - Harrison, Jim. *Just Before Dark*. Livingston, MT: Clark City Press, 1991.
- LTJ - ---. *Letters to Yesenin and Returning to Earth*. Los Angeles: Center Press, 1979.
- OTS - ---. *Off to the Side*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002.
- TRTC - ---. *The Raw and the Cooked: Adventures of a Roving Gourmand*. New York: Grove Press, 2001.
- RBL - ---. "A Really Big Lunch: Thirty-Seven Courses and Thirteen Wines." *The New Yorker* 6 Sept. 2004, 78-82.
- WLF - ---. *The Woman Lit by Fireflies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- JEL - Liebling, A.J. *Just Enough Liebling*. New York: North Point Press, 2004.
- LA - ---. *Liebling Abroad*. New York: Playboy Press, 1984.
- FLLV - Thompson, Hunter, S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and Other American Stories*. New York: The Modern Library, 1996.
- HR - ---. *Hey Rube: Blood Sport, the Bush Doctrine, and the Downward Spiral of Dumbness – Modern History from the Sports Desk*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- EKAT - Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Bantam, 1999.
- TNJ - ---. *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Introduction

The three authors I have chosen to analyze in this paper may not be connected in a particularly self-evident way. Their work spans across six decades, appears in journals of various repute, and deals with subjects that are not necessarily connected. At this point, it may be helpful to show the process I underwent in choosing these three authors. I hope that this gesture, as clichéd as it may be, will allow me to set up an productive discussion about the way that the authors are connected, their self-representation, and show what I plan to do with this. I would also be remiss if I did not discuss the events of the night of February 20th, 2005 in Woody Creek, Colorado. Hunter S. Thompson took his own life that night, and while it did not change everything in the world of Thompson studies, probably because such a world does not exist yet, it did, as Thompson himself would say make “the ride” get “a little heavier than what you had in mind” (FLLV, 89).

When I came to Professor Richard W. Bailey in September of 2004, I knew that I wanted to write on the work of Jim Harrison. His unique place as a masculine auteur of Michigan held special interest for me, as did his work with what I considered to be a neglected and underappreciated form – the novella. I had only encountered Harrison’s fiction, and was initially suspicious of Professor Bailey’s insistence that I work with his journalism. In one of the preliminary emails he sent to me when we were discussing the project, he let me know, “Of course you probably want to look at the fiction, but I think in the long-run [his] journalism is what will endure, and he certainly creates a persona” (Bailey, 9/28/04). That one sentence contained all the key terms to send the project in the direction it did.

Once I decided to take Professor Bailey’s advice, and work with Harrison’s journalism, the idea of his authorial persona was, as Bailey indicated, one of the first

things that I noticed in his work. His collection of columns, *The Raw and the Cooked*, was the first piece of journalism I read, and the main concern that arose in me after reading it was the person that appeared in all of the essays called "Jim Harrison," whose adventures and ideas shaped the story that he told.

Professor Bailey then directed me to the work of other journalists who came before Harrison, but worked in much the same format and wrote with the same kind of personal focus. He was particularly adamant about the value that A.J. Liebling would have to my work, and after being told more than once, I looked at some Liebling. After Professor Bailey gave me his copy of *Just Enough Liebling*, I finally saw how the same concerns that were present in Harrison dominated Liebling's work as well. The appetites of these men, the concerns or lack thereof with their mortality, and the way that their appetites for storytelling start at the table but extend beyond made them apparent contrasts to one another.

With two authors now in tow, fast forward to the last week before the winter recess, and the submission of my first thirty-page draft. I was in the Hatcher Graduate Library, and was passing by the shelves holding newly arrived books on my way to the drinking fountain. A small, red volume with silver writing on the spine stood out, and I picked up the book: *Hey Rube* by Hunter S. Thompson, a collection of columns he wrote for ESPN.com. As a reader of ESPN.com myself, I had noticed that Thompson was a columnist there, and I found his presence on the website initially confounding, and his writing to be not my cup of acid-laced tea. When I found this collection of his columns however, I began to notice that there was a method to the seeming madness of the high priest of Gonzo's work at ESPN.com. His attempts at proving that the apocalypse was coming because the Denver Broncos knocked Miami quarterback Jay Fiedler out of a

NFL game seemed to be a little on the extreme side, but his ideas about the fate of the nation immediately following the September 11th attacks were a compelling and unique perspective on the psychology of paranoia from someone who would later publish a book called "The Kingdom of Fear." He certainly had some delicious one-liners at the expense of the president and others. On the strength of his columns, that I found rather fortuitously, I wound up placing Thompson centrally in my draft that I submitted that next week.

After waiting several weeks for the University of Michigan library system to track down one of the various "missing" copies of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that I had put on reserve, I gave up on the wayward volumes ever returning, and bought my own little hardbound copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and Other American Stories*. The Thompson that I encountered in those pages was a different man from the old, grumpy sports columnist I was used to from ESPN.com. The vitality and manic energy of the work grabbed me from the first sentence, and I read from 8pm to 2am that night, scribbling frantically in my notebook, and then marking up my nice new book as I found too much of importance to my project to stop to write down on a separate page. The humor was there in spades, as was the paranoia, but the social commentary was sharpened to a razor's edge, and the knife that cut through the layers of American culture to find the American Dream was Thompson himself. It was at this point that the true goal of the project came clear. The true force of these authors lies in the narrative voice that they use, where they become characters in their own stories.

By making themselves characters, there are many opportunities open to the authors. Liebling uses his character to identify with the audience. He is reporting on a somewhat alien concept to a *New Yorker* reader, the front lines of World War Two. For

the reader to truly understand and experience the battlefield, they have to view it in terms and in a framework that they understand. He creates a persona that is a bonhomous, an everyman, a person that his readers can relate to, who they can see reflecting their concerns and experiences. He does so in an attempt to make his later descriptions of war seem to be things that ordinary readers can identify with. By giving his readers a persona in the field who they can believe sees things in a way similar to theirs, Libeling enhances the ability of his journalism to affect his readers by using the technique of self-presentation.

Hunter S. Thompson exploits one of the consequences of a focus on self-representation to very intriguing ends in his semi-journalistic work *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The consequence that Thompson sees arising from a type of journalism where the author is not an idle observer, but is instead a character in the story, is that the author can change the action around him. The possibility of changing the action means that Thompson creates a paradox where he places the reader's ability to trust what he says in doubt. He creates a persona who seems to be beyond the realm of reality to fully exploit this paradox. When it appears that he has created a narrative persona that is totally out of control, he then decides to drop his narrative voice for his story to be truly believable.

Harrison has no such manipulative goals with his journalism. He creates a character that is not intending to be a mistrusted figure. He is also careful not to create a character that every reader will relate to. The character he creates is one who stresses the importance of the sensual in life. This is a concern that Thompson deals with throughout his work, and he creates his journalistic persona to emphasize the way in which he wants

the reader to see his own life as an exercise in living out a sentimental and sensational life.

These authors all accomplish different things with their use of first-person journalism. The opportunities that self-representation affords them are varied and they recognize the variety that is open to them. The choices that they make when they construct themselves for the reader show the variety that this journalism affords writers, and it is this very variety that connects them. By doing different things with the opportunities of self-representation available to them, these journalists show the greatly persuasive power of the authorial persona in journalism. They create stories where they are the story as much as the things they see. Reading these authors together, one gets to see that they do not have to be tied together by style or attitude to adhere to a similar philosophy. They may even have differences of opinion on most everything; as an example, Harrison does not think highly of Thompson, a man whose gun he took from him “in Key West after he ruined a beach picnic by shooting dead jellyfish” (TRTC, 123). What is important about the work of these authors is not whether or not they had their picnic ruined or whether or not they ruined someone’s picnic. What is important about their work is that they all want to show themselves to be a certain person. The creation of that persona allows them to do many things with their writing, and is an engaging process to watch them undertake.

Recent events, however, have made this work much more problematic. Hunter S. Thompson died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at his home in Woody Creek, Colorado on February 20th, 2005, less than a month before I had to submit this work. The circumstances surrounding his death are still somewhat unclear, although his son Juan Thompson gave an interview in which he said that his father “did not do this in a moment

of fear, desperation or despair . . . I've known for many, many years that this is how Hunter would go . . . There was just no question that when the time came he would choose to do it himself" (Kass, screens 2,3).

More information regarding Thompson's last days will need to come forth before a judgment can truly be made about what Thompson's suicide, and particularly the fact that it seemed to be the only way he could see himself dying, means to his work, and the persona he created in works such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. His son claims, "The idea of Hunter lying in a hospital bed with tubes, gasping for breath, is so contrary to his whole life and purpose and drive" (Kass, screen 3). If that is true, that Thompson was unable to conceive of himself being tamed by the forces of old age, perhaps the Dr. Duke persona in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is much closer to the real Thompson than I believe it to be. Also, his decision to take control over his own death is interesting, given that his Dr. Duke persona spends so much time in his works out of control of his own life due to his drug use. More details about Thompson's death will be necessary before anyone can draw a conclusion about what the act reflects about his wild-man Dr. Duke persona.

Another consequence of Thompson's recent passing has been a great upswing in the interest paid to his work, and an outpouring of articles and columns by writers of all stripes eulogizing him. I will discuss obituaries written by noted journalists Tom Wolfe and David Halberstam, but they were only two of the multitudes who wrote on Thompson's passing. ESPN.com ran twelve separate columns by writers ranging from venerated CBS News correspondent and Thompson neighbor Ed Bradley to a journalistic newcomer, ESPN's Eric Neel, who identifies himself as a member of "a generation of us now who've been fueled by Hunter's rhythms" (Neel, screen 2). That generation will

respond to Thompson's death in various ways over time. The future responses and readings that will come can only help bring more criticism to an area where critical work is currently rather sparse. The expansion in the field of Thompson studies, and the possibilities of future readings of other authors in the same way that I read Thompson in this paper will be discussed in more detail in my conclusion.

I would like to note at this time one of the difficulties posed by writing on Thompson. His ideas of capitalization, use of italics, punctuation, and in general, the conventions of sentence structure could be called “non-standard.” He shares this tendency with Tom Wolfe, another author I quote in this work. In addition, Liebling and Harrison use languages other than English in their work, and usually italicize those words. Unless otherwise noted, all the italics, capitalization, and punctuation in quoted passages are direct transcriptions of the original author’s intent. Any words or ellipses in brackets are my own additions.

I

“The war enlisted me and filled my proxy life for four years [. . .] I grew up in it, transferring in fantasy from the cuirassiers, when I saw cavalry wouldn’t do, to the heroic poilus, defenders of Verdun [. . .] It is more vivid to me, even now, than the following World War; that is because I saw it through the eyes of the correspondents who knew how to use their imaginations.”

A.J. Liebling
“Paris the First”

The First World War that Liebling saw as a young man was so vivid to him because of how he saw it: as a reader. His claim is particularly interesting when one considers that Liebling was himself a war correspondent in Europe and North Africa during that "following World War" (JEL, 33). Such a focus on the ability of correspondents to bring the reader close into the work underlies Liebling's primary concern in his own journalism, both on the war and otherwise. Liebling considers it the job of a journalist to connect to his audience. He loves the work of the "correspondents who knew how to use their imaginations" when writing on World War One because they allow a boy in Far Rockaway, New York to "[serve] a brief period as an officer of heroic Senegalese" (JEL, 33).

The sense of wonder that he felt upon reading the war journalism of the First World War is reflected in the concerns that are present in own work. He is interested in conveying scenes to the people back home that they would not be able to see without him there. A good example is when he beds down for the night with the army in Tunisia: "If there is any way you can get colder than you do when you sleep in a bedding roll on the ground in a tent in southern Tunisian two hours before dawn, I don't know about it" (LA, 198). His incredulity with the cold is palpable, as is the exact position of the author in the reader's mind. Liebling in a bedroll on the desert sands, trying to squeeze out a precious few hours of sleep provides a very compelling visual; one can almost hear the tent flapping in a stiff breeze.

What makes the story about sleeping on the ground in Tunisia luminous for understanding Liebling's journalism is the intense emphasis he places on his own personal experience. Throughout his journalism, Liebling will work to create a persona

who might not always be prominent in shaping the action, but who is always present. His presence is essential to his task as a journalist. Just as Liebling could see himself in a cavalry charge as a boy, he wants the reader to see him lying on the cold, hard sand, and to identify with him in the way that he identified with the correspondents he read as a boy. His desire for identification with the audience extends beyond his war journalism, and is truly the main feature of the authorial persona he creates. He presents himself as a new kind of everyman, a bonhomous. The process of defining that universal persona, however, is not a simple task.

Liebling finds himself in a very interesting position with regards to his role as an author. He is writing non-fiction for a magazine in an era when the novel is the dominant literary genre in the country – both in terms of prestige and in the goals of authors. He is writing in a middle-brow magazine, one that does not have the respectability or the readership of elite intellectual journals or novels. Tom Wolfe describes the mentality that a feature writer like Liebling would find himself in this time before the rise of *The New Journalism* elevated the prestige of non-fiction: “You’re only kidding yourself, boy. This is just one more of your devious ways of postponing the decision to put it *all* on the line . . . and go into the shack . . . and write your novel” (TNJ, 7). David Remnick notes this exact inkling on the part of Liebling in his introduction to *Just Enough Liebling*: “Like many novice reporters, he had literary ambitions [. . .] over the years, he began and abandoned many short stories and longer pieces” (Remnick, xiii). Even Liebling initially views the novel as the ultimate destination for a writer of merit, and the writer eventually gets there after cutting his teeth on the kind of journalism that Liebling eventually made his life’s work.

Liebling has another quandary of genre to deal with. The journalism he writes is about his experiences, and sometimes carries a hint of memoir with it, a genre that Bruss describes as “occupy[ing] a place in between literary and extra-literary orders” (Bruss, 7). It is a place of limited respectability. This is not an entirely limiting thing, however. Being a place of limited literary respectability, it is a place with limited pretense. This allows Liebling to attempt in some ways to control and define his audience himself. Liebling is writing for an audience that he claims to be “some pretty literate people all over the country [. . . who] had an effect on public opinion disproportionate to the[ir] number” (LA, 28-9). However, he makes that claim in an attempt to weasel an interview with a French general, who is wary of *The New Yorker’s* “relatively small circulation for a national magazine,” casting doubt on whether or not this is a correct evaluation of *New Yorker* readers (LA, 28). The fact of the matter is that Liebling is writing for a venue that finds itself appealing to a wide spectrum of people who may be “pretty literate,” but who also are in the mood for entertainment, and their appreciation of Liebling’s “literary and extra-literary work” show signs that his audience belongs to a mixed cultural background.

Liebling is very concerned with making his mixed audience identify with his authorial persona. It is that concern with creating a character that has universal appeal that leads Liebling, a man who came from a wealthy upbringing, to portray himself as a man who was more common, and therefore more relatable, than he actually was. He has to downplay his own qualifications on several occasions to appeal to a mass audience. One of the elements of Liebling’s life that he must direct attention away from is the quality of his studies.

Liebling manages to create a bonhomous persona by downplaying his own intelligence. He does not go so far as to undercut his authority, but the details that he reveals about himself are chosen with an eye toward humility. A good example of this behavior is when he describes his experience as a student at the Sorbonne in Paris. When Liebling arrives at the Sorbonne he presents himself as a man who is not going to concern himself with the conventions of a school education. He describes the year he spent at the Sorbonne as "one long cut without fear of retribution" (JEL, 42). He gets his education not from the college he is in, "the Ecole des Chartes, which," as he dismissively notes, "forms medievalists," but he instead goes out to learn from "the bookshops of the Rue Bonparte" and "the Restaurant des Beaux-Arts" (JEL, 42). Liebling's flippant attitude toward what is most likely one of the best educations one could receive shows that while he is educated in elite institutions (Remnick notes in his introduction to *Just Enough Liebling* that he enjoyed a "semi-successful run at Dartmouth," and was half-heartedly enrolled in "Columbia's journalism school" before going to Paris), he does not think that an expensive education with a nice-looking degree makes him a qualified writer (Remnick, xiii). This sentiment would match up with the "pretty literate" people reading *The New Yorker*. They read Liebling not because he is writing for an academic journal, but because he is writing for a popular magazine, one that while it may have a background in literary matters, like Liebling's own education, it is not published to advance the state of American literature. Liebling recognizes that this is not the goal of his magazine, and enjoys that fact; it allows him to get down into the alleys and trenches and show his readers things that they might not see otherwise, all told from his point of view, which he strives to make more universal.

Liebling continues deprecating his intelligence and talents when he talks about the way in which he wound up at the Sorbonne. He makes his time spent there appear to be nothing out of the ordinary, and not a thing that he sought out himself. He tells the reader that the money and the opportunity to go study in Paris just fell into his lap as an attempt to make his excursion seem like something that anyone could handle. Remnick describes Liebling's time in Paris by telling how Liebling's father pulled him out of a job as a reporter, and sent him off to "take a year to 'study' in Paris," where he did "study (lightly) at the Sorbonne" (Remnick, xiv). That is an excellent characterization of Liebling's trip to the city of lights and his "long cut" at the Sorbonne, starting with the fact that he left at his father's insistence.

Liebling describes his departure for Paris by telling the reader a story that makes it appear that he simply fell into the year at the Sorbonne. He describes himself as working "as a reporter in Providence, Rhode Island" before he goes to Paris (JEL, 43). Despite viewing Rhode Island as a form of "exile," he does not violently reject the newspaperman's life (LA, 26). It is Liebling's father who nudges him in the direction of Paris, by reminding him, "You used to talk about wanting to go to Europe for a year of study. You are getting so interested in what you are doing that if you don't go now you never will" (JEL, 43). It is then not Liebling that makes the arrangements to ship out, but it is Liebling's father who books him passage "on the old *Carolina* for late in the summer, when the off-season rates would be in effect" (JEL, 43). There is no urgency in Liebling's voice or in his actions when it comes to departing for France. His destination is certainly set down immediately, but he does not go in the peak season; he instead "continue[s] to work on the Providence paper until the rates changed" (JEL, 43-44). His

passage on a liner reveals the casual, almost vacation-like nature of his trip to Paris. The fact that he has to wait until the end of the summer to leave also stresses the fact that it is his sometimes thrifty father who is paying for the trip and who is the main force behind placing Liebling in France. There is nothing in Liebling's writing about his journey that indicates there is anything pulling Liebling away from Providence greater than the fact that his father has presented him with the opportunity, and possibly a desire to eat well. By reinforcing the fact that he stayed in America for a while before departing to France, Liebling maintains a distance from the excitement that he must feel to be freed from the "exile" of Providence, and study at the Sorbonne. He makes himself appear less enthusiastic and more humble about the great fortune that he enjoys when he is given a year in Paris to make the trip seem to be something that is a regular occurrence, one that his readers could engage in themselves.

He downplays the great fortune his father has given him by sending him to Paris and paying for his expenses in his essay "Just Enough Money." He also describes the type of study that he undertakes at the Sorbonne in this essay, and shows how that privileged education was less important to him than the set of experiences that were open to all people in Paris at that time. He opens the essay by describing the requirements to be a good food writer. He claims that the first is "a good appetite" and the second is "to put in your time as an apprentice feeder when you have enough money to pay the check but not enough to produce indifference to the size of the total" (JEL, 35). The qualifications for Liebling's job are not that hard to achieve, and are open to all. While not everyone could be admitted for study into the Sorbonne, Columbia, or Dartmouth, anyone can go to "the Restaurant des Beaux-Artes," which is the place where Liebling

says, "I did my early research," and sit down to eat (JEL, 42). He achieves his education as a food writer not at a school, but in a restaurant; he makes no claims in "Just Enough Money" to any superior skills of writing ability. He only believes that he has fulfilled the conditions of appetite and food experience that he has set out for all good food writers.

Liebling's claim that a food writer must have ample, but not excessive financial means, is particularly interesting when considering Liebling's self-presentation as a modest and universally relatable man. He makes sure to say that a good "apprentice feeder" must be able to survive on three day's worth of money "with a reasonable, but not certain, prospect of reinforcements thereafter" (JEL, 35). A situation like this will eliminate a man "who will stint himself when he can see three days ahead" as one "who has no vocation" and also disregards "as manic, the fellow who will spend the lot on one great feast and then live on fried potatoes" (JEL, 35). Liebling considers the proper behavior under such financial constraints is to for a man to "compose his meals to obtain an appreciable amount of pleasure from each" (JEL, 35). It is essential that a man not have unlimited means during his time as an apprentice feeder. If he does, he will be able to always buy what he wants, when he wants, and will not gain the skills of assessing pleasure that Liebling believes a somewhat restrained financial outlook puts on a man. Liebling brings himself down to the level of his readers in this passage, and continues to stress the benefits of a plainer monetary situation for a person like himself as an attempt to present himself as a bonhomous who his audience can better relate to.

Liebling describes the mistakes that a richer man would find himself making when learning to eat in detail:

There is small likelihood that a rich man will frequent modest restaurants even at the beginning of his gustatory career; he will patronize restaurants, sometimes good, where the prices are high and the repertory is limited to dishes for which it is conventionally permissible to charge high prices. From this list, he will order the dishes that in his limited experience he has already found agreeable. Later, when his habits are formed, he will distrust the originality that he has never been constrained to develop. A diet based chiefly on game birds and oysters becomes a habit as easily as a diet of jelly doughnuts and hamburgers (JEL, 38).

In this passage, Liebling is lifting up the man of plain, ordinary means and denigrating the rich eater. The man who is constrained by budget develops a sense of originality in choosing his dishes. If one is not constrained, Liebling does not believe that a sense of dietary adventure and originality, two things he values highly, are cultivated. By calling expensive restaurants "sometimes good," he immediately makes "modest restaurants" appear to be good more often than merely sometimes. Most effectively, he compares a rich, Continental diet of "game birds and oysters" to the poor, bland, Americanized dependency on "jelly doughnuts and hamburgers." The reader of Liebling's work may not dine on game food and shellfish, but they are most likely familiar with doughnuts and burgers. Liebling connects the foreign and luxurious to the everyday and common in this passage. The reader who has a donut habit gets to feel as if Liebling has elevated his lifestyle to a level similar to the great eaters of France, while someone who abstains from American gastrointestinal depravity gets to feel superior to the people who are trapped in habits of either donuts and oysters at the same time. Liebling presents his opinion on the valor of varied, modest restaurants over rich, repetitive ones to make his reader feel as if

they have a right and a place in a high cultural discourse that they might not have had. Also, by comparing basic American foodstuffs to French *haute cuisine*, Liebling allows his readers to identify with a world they do not personally experience.

While the presentation of his ideas on the value of a modest food budget mainly used Liebling's persona as a voice making observations, there is a part of "Just Enough Money" where Liebling himself figures very strongly in the action. The story he tells about getting money to go to Paris from his father is profoundly interesting, and is designed to present Liebling as a man who, while he may be privileged, does not revel in his privilege as much as he could, thus making him appear more universal, and a person his audience can relate to.

The story of Liebling's departure for Paris begins with his father suggesting the trip and handling the son's travel arrangements. When Liebling hears that his father wants to send him to study in Paris, he says he had "sensed my father's generous intention," and is fairly sure that his trip will be on the old man's dime (JEL, 43). However, he is not so sure in his father's generosity that he is above a little attempt at convincing him:

I told him that I didn't feel I should go, since I was indeed thinking of getting married. 'The girl is ten years older than I am,' I said, 'and Mother might think she is kind of fast, because she is being kept by a cotton broker from Memphis, Tennessee, who only comes North once in a while. But you are a man of the world, and you understand that a woman can't always help herself' (JEL, 43).

It is in the wake of this fantasy that Liebling's father gets him passage and arranges for "a letter of credit on the Irving Trust for two thousand dollars" to support him while abroad

(JEL, 43). Liebling claims that he deceives his father in initially arranging the manner of his visit to Europe, but he does not stop there.

When he arrives in Paris, he lasts a week before he realizes that he “had spent more than half of the paternal fellowship that was intended to last me all year,” both over the summer in Rhode Island, and in the hotel he selects in Paris, a luxury number “off the Champs-Élysées” (JEL, 44). However, his father comes to his rescue, but not until Liebling comes to him, admits his mistake, and resigns himself to doing “the only honorable thing for me to do – go back to work, get married, and settle down” (JEL, 44). The specter of the cotton broker’s woman prompts the elder Liebling to arrange for money to be wired to his son at a monthly interval, and delivers the cautionary note that “When a young man gets tangled up with that kind of women, they can ruin his whole life” (JEL, 44). Liebling has now told his readers that he lied to his father twice, who was generous enough to suggest a trip to Europe in the first place, in an attempt to get more money out of him. Why would he want to do that? Why would he tell his readers such a story, one that could easily lead the reader to view him as a spoiled little rich boy, when a great deal of his journalism relies on his readers being able to connect with his persona?

The answer comes when Liebling ruminates on the lie he tells about going back to the cotton broker’s woman once he is out of money. He concludes, “I am sure my father knew that I wanted to stay on, and that there was no girl to worry about. But he also understood that I couldn’t simply beg; for pride’s sake, I had to offer a fake quid pro quo and pretend to myself that he believed me” (JEL, 45). This quote reveals a great deal about the character that Liebling wants to present to his readers. Here is a man who is of

wealthy origins, who knows that his father can arrange for things to be made right when he makes mistakes, and whose father cares enough for him to do so. This is not a position that his readers might find themselves in. However since he wants to tell the story of how he became a good food writer, he must somehow deal with the fact that his father paid for him to spend a year of leisure in France. He cannot simply ignore that fact, nor can he merely thank his father for his magnanimity: both of those options make him appear to be a man who is not like his reader, who either thinks nothing of a great gift such as a year of study abroad or who has a father who is able and willing to support his son in spite of his rather expensive mistakes.

The man that he presents instead is one who is privileged, but is too “proud” to call upon that privilege at a whim. He feels the need to do something to obtain his father’s generosity. The choice of work he does to earn that is also revealing: he tells his father a story. Liebling views the act of creating a good story as something that is worth a reward. In this case, he claims to have made up a story to win his father’s support. Whether or not he actually came up with the story or merely took his father’s money is rather unimportant. What is important to note about the story Liebling tells about getting the money to study in France is that he wants his readers to think that he felt a need to work in some form for it, even though he could have skipped the hogwash story he told his father, since he claims he lied despite his father knowing it all along. When one notes the emphasis Liebling places on earning his money, even if he wins it by telling a lie, one can see how much he wants to conceal his wealthy upbringings and present himself as a man who works for his privilege, even if barely so. He still wants to present the reader with the incredible opportunity he receives to study in Paris, despite its subsidized nature,

to gain authority as a Francophile and food journalist. However, by showing that he sees himself as required to do some work for his allowance, Liebling makes himself appear to be a man who a regular working reader can relate to.

He creates the universal appeal from the very beginning of his time in Europe, starting when he describes his experiences on the way to the airport. In this scene, taken from "Toward Paris, 1939," Liebling is describing the trials he undergoes to catch a Paris-bound plane. In this essay he appeals to both New Yorkers and those from other places who wish they were; he is very aware of the fact that *The New Yorker* is, in his words, a magazine that "had always considered London and Paris, although not Newark or Chicago, within its sphere of inaction" (LA, 20). Liebling's audience is made up of people who either live in New York, or as Bailey comments, may not physically be in New York, but still "read *The New Yorker* so they can be part of the ambience that thinks Newark is less interesting than Paris" (Bailey, 3/16/05). To appeal to that group of readers, he presents his tale through the eyes of a born and bred New Yorker, one who is lost once he leaves Manhattan. This endears him to the audience of *The New Yorker* who will nod knowingly when they read his gentle ribbing at the surrounding hinterlands. He also presents his tale in a fashion that mocks Liebling and makes him appear to be rather bumbling and bonhomous.

Liebling starts the long paragraph about his trip to the airport by setting the scene. Back in the days he is describing, the planes "still left from a yacht-club setting at Port Washington, Long Island" (LA, 22). His friend volunteers to take him out to the plane, and Liebling says that because "passengers were supposed to be at the plane with their luggage at eight o'clock," Liebling's friend picks him up at what Liebling describes as

“an hour I had never experienced sober” (Liebling, LA, 22). By inserting some self-deprecating humor from the very beginning, Liebling is softening what comes, and could be seen as a rather sharp and snobby criticism of his trip into the country from a lifelong New Yorker. This humor is one more instance where Liebling downplays or denigrates himself, this time comically, in an attempt to make his work appeal to a larger spectrum of readers.

The humor continues when Liebling describes the way in which they set off into the unfamiliar territory of Long Island. He is not sure where they are going, but he assumes that the terrain they are heading toward is in “the direction of Long Island because the sun was rising over it” (Liebling, LA, 22). His assumption proves to be wrong, and he winds up north of the city in Westchester County. They frantically turn around, Liebling “[begins] to curse, which I do well,” and he barely makes the plane. Liebling’s unfamiliarity with the terrain so close to New York City is another way he humorously belittles himself.

It is hard to believe that the average person reading *The New Yorker*, is so unfamiliar with the alien shape that Liebling “[takes] to be a cow,” out in the wild regions of the country populated by “coyotes and Republicans,” as Liebling fears they are headed (LA, 22). There, the reader can have a good laugh at the expense of the highfalutin New Yorker, but still know that they belong to a group of people who are not terribly concerned with the wild places of America. This is a place where Liebling very skillfully uses both the “literary and extra-literary” appeal of memoir to his advantage: creating a persona who is both high-brown and bonhomous at the same time (Bruss, 7). Therefore, at the same time as he is appealing to the sentiments of someone who believes that there

is not much out there in Long Island, he is creating a persona that he mocks very easily, so he can appeal to a broader spectrum of readers.

Liebling tells the story of his inability to get to the plane on his first attempt as a way to humanize his departure. He continues humanizing his unique experience as a reporter in Paris when he describes the situation regarding his placement there. He presents his assignment from *The New Yorker* as something that most reasonably competent readers could talk themselves into thinking they could handle. The sense of the possibility of shared experience between the readers and his persona is another way Liebling humanizes himself to connect with his audience. When he first talks about winning *The New Yorker* assignment to cover Paris, he says that he got it because he “spent several man-hours of barroom time impressing St. Clair McKelway, then managing editor, with my profound knowledge of France” (LA, 20-1). By stressing that he was able to convince his editor over drinks that he was the man to send to France, Liebling hints that he might not have been the most qualified, but instead the best-connected man for the job. When one considers that he was unable to find his way off of Manhattan properly to catch a plane, it certainly adds credence to that thought – one might want a man who is a little surer of his bearings before one pays for him to cross an entire ocean.

Liebling also emphasizes his luck at being given the Paris placement due to the unfortunate events surrounding the departure of his predecessor on the Paris beat for *The New Yorker*. He says that the previous correspondent, Janet Flanner, had to leave Paris because “unfortunately for everybody but me, Miss Flanner’s mother in California got sick and Miss Flanner notified the office that she wanted to come home” (LA, 20).

Liebling makes sure to note that not only was the situation that sent him to Paris almost totally accidental, it was viewed by almost everyone as unfortunate. This is not because they were regretting Liebling's presence in France, but still, Liebling entered *New Yorker* service in Paris under somewhat less than ideal circumstances for the other parties involved. This makes his rather enviable position at *The New Yorker's* Paris desk look like something that came about by circumstance, and if most people were simply in the right place at the right time, they could somehow aspire to being in Europe like Liebling. This is similar to the way he approaches his departure to Paris and the Sorbonne as a young man. In each case he goes to Europe due to the actions of others. Because he always presents himself as heading off due to other people's actions, Liebling allows the audience to believe he is an everyman character, a person like them, in spite of his position at the Paris desk of *The New Yorker*.

Liebling also makes his position appear to be something that other people could handle when he talks about his credentials to cover Europe at his old job. Before he came to New York, he says he was "in exile as a reporter on the *Providence Journal and Bulletin*" in Rhode Island (LA, 26). He tells the reader that at the Providence paper he "was given all the assignments bearing on European affairs because they knew I had been in Paris" (LA, 26). The time that he had spent in Paris was the time he was there as a young man at the Sorbonne. As one can see from the descriptions Liebling gave earlier about his time at the Sorbonne, that experience did not necessarily prepare him to cover European affairs. Affairs dealing with booksellers and restaurants, possibly, but not much more since his whole education in Paris was as an "apprentice feeder" (JEL, 35). He does tell a good story about his time in Paris, and certainly could tell the editors in

Providence that he was qualified for the position. His mere familiarity with the Continent and the strength of his Paris stories likely won him that job in Providence. Granted, the Providence *Journal* is not *The New Yorker*. However, Liebling came to both assignments to cover Europe in much the same way: through his personality and not his qualifications. Liebling inserts these details about the assignments that he wins in Europe as a way to set the stage for the work that will follow. By presenting himself as a man who does not have vastly different qualifications from his readership as is evidenced in his stories about how he won his positions in Europe and even how he got to Paris, Liebling is readying the reader to connect all the better with the work that he will present.

The connections that Liebling's persona forms with the reader are put to the test when he describes a situation that most people reading *The New Yorker* have little or no first-hand experience with: war. Liebling's war journalism is designed to bring the experience of a battlefield to the reader in terms that they can understand. One of the best examples of this is the very first piece in the collections *Liebling Abroad* and *The Road Back to Paris*: "The Shape of War." In this piece, Liebling does not attempt to describe a certain battle, a certain action, or even a certain war. He is not writing "The Shape of the European and North African Theaters in the Second Great War," but he is generalizing his reporting to cover the shape of war as a whole. He does not attempt to give details as to who is from where, and what they are doing. The descriptions that he gives are about things that a *New Yorker* reader can comprehend: trenches being "owned," soldiers as doormen, and guns firing not shells, but noises. These scenes are presented in such a way that a state-side reader could see the events in terms and images they could understand and relate to.

Liebling opens the essay in a trench somewhere in North Africa, and immediately goes to work representing the scene as one that the average *New Yorker* reader could relate to. He walks down the trench and comes to speak with the “proprietor” of the trench about the possibilities of a dive bombing attack (LA, 9). By describing the soldier as the “proprietor” of the trench, Liebling is casting these men into the roles of civilian shop-keepers that readers would encounter every day in delis, haberdasheries, and grocery stores in their neighborhoods. “Proprietor” immediately connotes a sense of ownership and mastery over the trench that would otherwise require a description of the soldier’s rank, armament, and other military details. By using civilian language that a reader can relate to, Liebling is making this soldier and his trench something that everyday people can understand without needing to comprehend military jargon, even if they would not be able to pick out “two parallel slit trenches in the dead looking land between Gafsa and Sened Station” from a couple of holes in the ground (LA, 9).

Another instance in “The Shape of War” where Liebling presents the war through his particular eyes comes when he begins to question some soldiers he finds resting in their jeep. When he asks for information about their outfit, they respond with: “Sorry, sir, but you got any identification?” (LA, 11). Liebling says that the man “reminded me of a stage doorman” (LA, 11). A stage doorman at a New York playhouse is probably the last thing that a soldier in a jeep in the midst of the North African theater resembles. The difference in smell and dust coverage alone must be astronomical. However, Liebling chooses to see this man as a stage doorman. The perceptions that he has are shaped by his experience walking around the streets of New York City, visiting places that his readers would be familiar with, even if they did not frequent them themselves.

By continuing to view the battlefield through the eyes of a city-dweller, one in this case who is familiar with the theater, Liebling is creating a persona to whom other people can relate.

When Liebling describes something that people in New York could not possibly ever relate to, the experience of being shelled, he still perceives it and reports it in a fashion that an everyday *New Yorker* reader could understand. When he gets close to some Allied guns that are shelling Axis troops, he describes the sensory experience of being around the huge guns: "All the shots we heard were going out, 'boom-scream,' and none were coming in, 'scream-boom,' so we were unworried" (LA, 12). By using onomatopoeia, he is able to give the reader who has never experienced battle a sensory cue that connects them to the events on the battlefield. Onomatopoeia also makes Liebling appear universal as well, because even a simple reader could read the difference between "boom-scream" and "scream-boom" and comprehend the concept of a shell going out or coming in. In this passage, Liebling is able to take the deadly serious act of dodging shells while firing back at the enemy and turn it into something that even a child could understand. This is just one event in a series within "The Shape of War" that make it clear Liebling is attempting to describe not the actions of World War Two in a particular field of battle; he makes it clear that "Soldiers seldom[,] and war correspondents never" know where a battle actually is (LA, 10). He is instead attempting to cast events that a regular reader would have no frame of reference for in a light that they would understand, so as to give them a sense of how the war would affect them.

This attempt to humanize the war works because he has created a persona that stresses his commonality and ability to relate to the readers of *The New Yorker*. The

payoff for denigrating and mocking himself is that he eventually humanizes himself as well. The humanity that the bonhomous Liebling shares with his readers allows him to describe scenes that his readers could not readily understand and still get some of the same feeling of “[doing] a turn with our gallant allies” as Liebling himself did, through the papers he read as a youth (JEL, 33).

II

“Screech off across the desert and *cover the story*. But what *was* the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo journalism.”

Hunter S. Thompson
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

If Hunter S. Thompson isn't sure what he's supposed to be reporting on in his genre-bending journalistic drug trip that is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he certainly does not let it dampen his enthusiasm for the project. He speaks of his "obligation to cover the story, for good or ill" in a way that shows it to be no obligation at all (FLLV, 4). He delights in being a member of the press, almost as much as he likes being in the center of his story. He runs wild across the desert, first to report on the Mint 400 motorcycle race, then the District Attorney's Convention on Dangerous Drugs, and winds up rejecting both of those assignments for a shot at finding the American Dream somewhere in the Nevada desert.

The manic enthusiasm that fuels his adventures across the Las Vegas desert is also present in the "Hey Rube" columns he wrote for ESPN.com from late 2000 until his recent death. He is similarly uncertain about his purpose in the column as well; he says in the introduction to a collection of the columns, "It was not at all clear to me when I first started writing this *Hey, Rube* column [. . .] that it was actually a week-to-week calendar/record/diary of what it was like to be alive and suffering in the first disastrous days of the George W. Bush Administration" (HR, xx).

Thompson's mixed sense of purpose and sometimes incomprehensible narrative do not mean that his work is inconsistent in every way, however. Throughout his work, Thompson works hard to present a comprehensive picture of a character that in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* he calls Raoul Duke. That person is himself. Thompson's first person narrative style places his actions at the center of the events that he reports on. In his article, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," he does not only claim that the Derby is full of debauchery, but claims to throw himself into the debauchery

wholeheartedly, telling the artist *Scanalan's* magazine has sent to work with him that to complete their assignment they should "just try to relax and get drunk" (FLLV, 275). Las Vegas might be a scary place, but the true sense of fear and loathing that Thompson reports on comes before he even arrives in town, in the first sentence of the book: "somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold [...] the sky was full of huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car" (FLLV, 3). By throwing himself completely into the surroundings he finds himself in, Thompson creates the story by his involvement in the events around him.

While he creates a story, he is also creating a picture of himself. Thompson does not so much place himself into his work as he filters his work through himself. The lens that he brings to bear on the events he reports on is a deliberate construction, one which is a part of his other deliberate construction, his narrative persona. The man that he shows to the reader is a complete, consistent, fully formed person, from his early days covering the Kentucky Derby to his wild, frenzied adventure into "The Heart of the American Dream," as he subtitles *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and up until his death, in the columns he wrote for ESPN.com. This person, however is filled with problems.

First and foremost is that the man that Thompson describes would have a hard time surviving one of his adventures, let alone the long series of insane excursions he talks about undertaking over his journalistic career. By necessity, Thompson has to be a liar, because if he was telling the truth about his actions, he would not live to tell it. The fact that he lies to well and so prevalently gives rise to a second problem: can, and should, a reader trust Thompson? It makes sense that they should not trust him when it comes to him describing himself. Some exaggeration and creative license can be allowed

to protect his privacy, but what about when he wants to make a larger point? If he can't be counted on to tell the truth about what he did on a certain day at a certain time, how can he be counted on the find and then report on the nature of the American Dream?

To answer these questions, one first has to look at the way that Thompson presents himself in his works. He is a man who at times seems out of control, and on the edge of madness. However, he still wants the reader to think of him as a professional journalist, one who has reasons for what he is doing. He creates a character that is almost reliable, and is totally unique in journalism. Pulitzer Prize winner David Halberstam said in an obituary for Thompson published in the space where Thompson's usual ESPN.com column would be that

He was, of course, an American original -- *sui generis*, which for the benefit of the engineers in the audience means he was one of a kind, and he was not a journalist whom I thought young would-be journalists should emulate. There was room for only one Hunter Thompson aboard the Ark (Halberstam, screen 2).

The narrative voice that Thompson creates in his journalism is one where the structure that he creates to view the world is intrinsically linked to his sense of self. He wants the reader to believe that the perceptions that he presents throughout his works are unique to him. He is an author that definitely describes in the way that Barthes suggests in *S/Z* when he says "to describe is thus to place the empty frame which the author always carries with him [. . .] before a collection or continuum of objects which could not be put into words without this obsessive operation" (Barthes, 54). Thompson is certainly obsessed with defining the world in his own particular way. He carries the frame of himself as he goes throughout his life and deploys it very strategically. He uses this

frame to shape his story and his audience, but he also realizes the limitations of that frame. In fact, when he sees the shortcomings of his own frame of reference and steps outside of it, in the most important chapter in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.,” Thompson shows how he is very aware of the persona that he creates, and manipulates his character to suit his ends masterfully.

The character that Thompson creates is one who lives in a world of insane habits and behaviors. This character is described by Tom Wolfe in his *Wall Street Journal* obituary for Thompson as being “one long barbaric yawp, to use Whitman’s term, of the drug-fueled freedom from and mockery of all conventional properties” (Wolfe, 2005, screen 4). While Thompson may fly in the face of convention however, he does not fly in the face of logic. He always has a reason for acting the way he does, and sees his actions, even the ones others would find ludicrous, as defensible.

One place where the barbarism and also the odd logic in Thompson’s character shines through is in his love of violence and guns; in the wake of the September eleventh attacks, he declares: “I live out here in the mountains with a flag waving on my porch and loud Wagner music blaring out of my speakers. I feel lucky and I have plenty of ammunition” (HR, 93). Thompson listens to the cataclysmic music¹ of Wagner while he “shoot[s] into the dark at anything that moves. Sooner or later I will hit something Evil, and feel no guilt” (HR, 93). The picture he presents of himself in this story is that of a man who realizes that the fat is in the fire, so he constructs a perfectly consistent situation: Wagner and violence. The logic that he uses to support his brutish vision of a

¹ Thanks to Richard Bailey, for clarifying what Wagner means to Thompson here, and providing the phrase “cataclysmic music.”

man attempting to defend himself in a terrorized United States makes perfect sense to the mind that is framing the events.

It is the same mind that, thirty years earlier, considered two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers . . . and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether, and two dozen amyls perhaps a little too much for two men to consume on one weekend's trip to Vegas, but justifies its presence in the trunk of his rental car by saying, "once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can" (FLLV, 4). The rationality in Thompson's approach to what most people would consider patently insane subjects, such as shooting blindly into the night, and buying a car-load of illegal drugs, is the first hallmark of Thompson's literary persona. Thompson the character may be outlandish, he may consume enough hallucinogenic substances to believe that the face of a hotel receptionist "was *changing*: swelling, pulsing [. . .] horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out, the face of a Moray Eel!" (FLLV, 23-4). He may be at various times, "in the depths of an ether binge," an "acid freak," or "the village drunkard in some early Irish novel," but he is never an idiot (FLLV, 4, 24, 45). These states that he finds himself in may make him unreliable as a narrator at times, but he makes sure that he never lets anything undermine his authority as a reporter. It is establishing his authority to tell these tales that he finds himself involved in that gives him the authority to make bold claims regarding the downfall of western civilization at the Kentucky Derby or the destruction of the American Dream in the Las Vegas desert.

There are several ways that Thompson invests himself with the appropriate literary authority to be a believable reporter. The first is through by establishing himself as a journalist who is actually, despite lots of drug-hazed evidence to the contrary, acutely concerned with maintaining a certain degree of professionalism. The first sentence in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where he describes himself to the audience is when he tells them that he is “after all, a professional journalist” (FLLV, 4). In the midst of all the insanity that goes on around him, Thompson stays oddly focused on the fact that he is not going to Las Vegas as a tourist, but instead he is going there on an assignment. He and his attorney decide to go see a Guy Lombardo show, even though they consider him to be “a fucking corpse,” and despise his music (FLLV, 43). When discussing why they should go to the Tropicana to see Lombardo they ask themselves: “Why are we out here? To entertain ourselves or to *do the job?*” and conclude that they are in Vegas “to do the job of course” (FLLV, 43). They might not make it to the Tropicana, as an ether binge sidetracks them at the Circus Circus, but nevertheless, Thompson views himself, and wants the audience to view him, as a professional journalist who is in Las Vegas on assignment.

The professionalism that he brings to his assignments, even in the midst of his drug trips on the side, can be seen in the way that Thompson represents the moments where his memory fails him. These moments occur with some regularity, but Thompson has a similar, professional response to each situation. The first instance where his memory fails him is on his trip to the Kentucky Derby in “The Kentucky Derby is Decedent and Depraved,” an essay that predates *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by a little more than a year. After spending few days examining the scene around the Derby,

the Saturday has come, Derby Day itself. The only problem is that Thompson and his co-worker, illustrator Ralph Stedman, have found themselves “in a sea of drunken horrors,” and as a result, Thompson admits, “my recollections from Derby Day are somewhat scrambled” (FLLV, 275). Despite his drunken stupor, Thompson still manages to respond in as professional a manner as possible, and he still upholds his responsibilities by taking notes. These notes enable him to look back on his day and decipher his actions: “now, looking at the big red notebook I carried all through that scene, I see more or less what happened” (FLLV, 275). From these notes, Thompson constructs a narrative that takes him and Stedman from the press box to the grandstands at the Derby, back to the clubhouse bar, out to the “billiard room of the Pendennis club in downtown Louisville on Saturday night,” and back to Thompson’s hotel where Stedman wakes him at “ten thirty Monday morning” (FLLV, 280). The fact that Thompson is able to track the movements of the two rabble-rousers to a specific bar, and include many side details, such as which horse actually won the race, which horses he and Stedman bet on, and the precise moments in the race when both of their horses fell out of the running, indicates that Thompson was able to take excellent, professional notes in the face of what he presents to be insurmountable intoxication. It is also the case that Thompson’s ability to reconstruct the events of the Kentucky Derby is a clear indication that he is lying about how much he drank on Derby Day.

Thompson’s ability to reconstruct a story out of his notes in the absence of memories is a recurring theme in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as well. After his attorney has fled town, sticking him with a room service bill that ran “between \$29 and \$36 per hour, for forty-eight consecutive hours,” and Thompson still maintains his aura

of professionalism (FLLV, 69). Instead of just rushing off into the night and leaving the monstrous bill behind him, he gets more room service, and spends the night with “two club sandwiches, two quarts of milk, a pot of coffee and a fifth of Bacardi Anejo. Rum will be necessary to get through this night – to polish these notes, this shameful diary” (FLLV, 72). He maintains his devotion to the story, in spite of overwhelming pressure to flee, in the form of a destroyed hotel room, where his attorney has “ripped the bathroom door open” and an insurmountable bill that he cannot pay, and stays in Las Vegas, finishing the story (FLLV, 61). He still is a gonzo journalist, working with stiff drink by his side, but he is a journalist nevertheless, and his devotion to creating a story to come home with is more important than immediately fleeing Las Vegas and saving his skin from the prosecution that he is sure awaits him. He takes “a pocketful of keno cards and cocktail napkins, all covered with scribbled notes” and despite his initial claim that “memories of this night are extremely hazy” constructs an elaborate, lucid narrative to describe the actions of Drs. Duke and Gonzo (FLLV, 41). This narrative manages to span twenty pages, and includes the epic confrontation where Thompson’s attorney asks him to “throw that fuckin radio into the tub with me,” at a very precise moment in the song “White Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane (FLLV, 60). Once again, the level of detail that Thompson is able to draw from such supposedly sparse notes is incredible. This is an indication that his professional instincts would not allow him to lose control as much as he claims he did, and as much as he did lose control, the same sense of professionalism inspired him to create a narrative to fill in what his mind has lost.

Even when the editors of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* claim that “Dr. Duke [Thompson] appears to have broken down completely,” he still keeps enough notes and

tape recordings that the editors can “transcribe [the events] verbatim” (FLLV, 161). The tapes and notes that Thompson leaves behind even in the absence of not only his memory, but his sanity, are reconstructed into the “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.” chapter. The tapes and notes that exist are the primary source material that Thompson interprets to create secondary material like the narrative for most of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.,” he reverts to the primary source material in an attempt to present a completely true narrative, but there will more on that to come.

The best evidence of Thompson’s faith in his own professionalism is that documents like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” actually exist. If Thompson were actually to engage in the amount of self-destructive behavior that he hints at in the text, he would most likely not have lived to see the manuscript through to completion. That fact is always in the back of the reader’s mind: this is a story in which the events have already happened, and Thompson has been able to remember or re-create them into a functional narrative. The simple existence of the work highlights what is an underlying theme in all of Thompson’s work, and that is his odd sense of professional dedication, even in the face of all the possible (sometimes self-inflicted) obstacles to the contrary.

The persona that Thompson presents to the audience places a great emphasis on the logic that underlies his seemingly random and insane decisions. The man that he presents to the audience is one who may claim to not be in control of his memory due to the various drugs that are flowing through his system, but he is also a man that is out of control precisely because he wants to be, and is aware of the consequences of his actions. The actions that Thompson undertakes have some sort of logic behind them, one that can

be defended. If someone were to ask him why he shot two peacocks in the middle of the night on his ranch, he would claim that he “heard the lock on my gas tank rattling, so I rushed outside with a shotgun and fired both barrels into the darkness. Poachers! I thought” (HR, 92). Thompson’s responses to situations may seem out of the ordinary or even insane to the casual observer, but to Thompson, they make perfect sense, and are logically defensible. By creating a persona who is logically consistent and right, Thompson gives himself the authority to make broader, more outlandish claims. The logic that he uses arises from his professional qualifications, which extend beyond just being able to create stories for missing portions of his memory.

When he and his attorney pick up a hitchhiker on the road to Vegas, one of the first things he says to him is to introduce himself as “a doctor of journalism” (FLLV, 19). This viewpoint is supported by the editors of the book, when they identify Thompson as “Dr. Duke,” in the opening to “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.” (FLLV, 161). The credible Doctor Duke, however, calls his own doctoral status into doubt on the last page of the book, when he goes to a pharmacy to get some amyls. When asked if he has any authority as a doctor, he produces an “Ecclesiastical Discount card – which identifies me as a Doctor of Divinity, a certified Minister of the Church of the New Truth” (FLLV, 203). He gets the amyls, but in exchange for the drugs, he has bargained away his status as a doctor of journalism. If he can be a doctor of journalism to the hitchhiker and doctor of divinity to the pharmacist, how can he be counted on to truly be either one? This is an especially pertinent question when his credentials as a “Minister of the Church of the New Truth” seem to be shady at best.

When he is describing the problematic relationship between himself and the truth, one phrase sticks from Thompson's ramblings about the purported truth and falsehood of his story. When talking with his attorney about his poor choices in clients, Thompson tells him, "I warned you about dealing with junkies on credit – especially when they're *guilty*" (FLLV, 125). This is supposed to be a warning to his attorney about not taking on guilty clients who can't pay him back, but it also applies to Thompson as a narrator.

He is warning the reader to be careful when dealing with a junkie – Thompson's actions in the book certainly make him prime junkie material. He also stresses the danger of junkies using credit, and also sings the glories of getting credit himself when picking up his rented white Cadillac: "I handled the whole transaction with a credit card that I later learned was 'canceled'" and describes himself as checking into the Flamingo "with a handful of *credit cards!*" (FLLV, 104, 108). When it comes to the measure of guilt or innocence, Thompson spends a great portion of the book playing the role of penitent sinner. When confronted with certain arrest by a highway patrol officer who sees him with a beer in his hand, he declares "Yeah, I know. I'm guilty. I understand that. I knew it was a crime but I did it anyway" (FLLV, 92). He makes sure that the readers will see that he wants to both warn his attorney and his reader in the passage to be careful about trusting guilty junkies on credit.

The unreliable nature of Thompson's character is an interesting construction. He is at once attempting to establish himself as a reliable narrator who takes excellent notes; who manages to maintain his professional integrity in the face of many hallucinogenic temptations to abandon any sense of responsibility. However, he also introduces conflict into the portrait he paints of a reliable narrator by first claiming to be far more under the

influence of drugs than is physically possible. He lies about his drug use, and he also lies about his credentials as a doctor of journalism and of divinity. He also comes out and tells the reader that they cannot trust the type of man that he describes himself as. Why would he want to create any uncertainty about his ability to tell a story truthfully?

Thompson deliberately creates ambiguity about his ability to tell the truth because he has a plan to make one part of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* more important than the rest of the book, and it is essential to him that the reader can believe him when it comes to that point. The place where he believes he must be seen as truthful is in the chapter "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd." It is in this chapter where he actually comes to the point he sets out to arrive at in the subtitle of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and completes his "Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream" (FLLV, 1).

Thompson has been searching for the American Dream throughout his trip to the desert. His quest for the American Dream will take him up and down the Las Vegas strip, and out to the broken-down desert outside the glittering city. In looking for the American Dream, Thompson will find it necessary to step outside his narrative voice at the moment where he almost gets it. The act of stepping out of the narrative voice at the precise moment that he does has profound implications for just what Thompson thinks his own authorial persona is doing in the text. Before he gets to that moment, however, Thompson has several false starts on his quest to find the heart of the American Dream.

Thompson has, on several instances, found some possible manifestations of the American Dream. He finds it in the "caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas" who sit around crap tables "at four-thirty on a Sunday morning [. . .] still humping the American Dream, that vision of the big winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn

chaos of a stale Vegas casino” (FLLV, 57). However, when he tries to capture that dream, betting some money himself, he loses, and concludes that the American Dream is not in the big winner. He comes to the conclusion that Vegas, and the dream of hitting it big is impossible. He claims that the mantra of Vegas is really, “Learn to *enjoy* losing” (FLLV, 57). The American Dream can’t be full of the losing that accompanies a Vegas casino, so Thompson tries to find it on the road.

The next place that Thompson looks for the American Dream is in the car he picks up from the airport in exchange for his red Chevrolet. He picks the epitome of American automotive style and power, a “White Cadillac Convertible” (FLLV, 104). He views this car as one manifestation of the American Dream; this is evidenced by the way that he goes about picking it up from the rental booth, and the dramatic scene that Thompson makes out of his procurement of the Cadillac. He rolls up to the “VIP car-rental booth” and tells the clerk that the Chevy gives him “the feeling that people are putting me down – especially in gas stations when I have to get out and open the hood *manually*” (FLLV, 104). The clerk’s response is to offer Thompson “one of our Mercedes 600 Towne-Cruiser Specials,” an offer that Thompson responds to angrily by saying, “Do I look like a goddamn Nazi? I’ll have a natural *American* car, or nothing at all!” (FLLV, 104). Thompson does not receive just any American car, but what he gets is “a *superior machine*” in his Cadillac convertible, one where “everything [is] automatic,” and when it gets rolling, it drives like “pure smooth hell” (FLLV, 104-5). Thompson gives the impression to the clerk that he would like to have the power and prestige of a luxury automobile, one where every luxury is taken care of, one that signifies he is at the top of his game, that he has achieved the American Dream. The car has to be an

American car, because Thompson is trying to see if this is where that Dream is. He can't accept a German car because his car means more than just luxury. The American Cadillac is one possible manifestation of the American Dream that Thompson is experimenting with.

One person who would notably think that is at the District Attorney's Conference. When Thompson pulls up to the Flamingo hotel to confirm his reservation a few pages later, he parks "in a VIP parking slot," enters the lobby, and comes face to face with "about two hundred vacationing cops" (FLLV, 106). One officer in particular is having trouble checking in, as he is on the "late list," and Thompson does not make it easier on him (FLLV, 107). He cuts in line with the authority "of a man who *knows* he has a reservation," and easily getting his reservation processed (FLLV, 108). Once he has embarrassed the cop who can't get his reservation filled, he then has the nerve to tell the bag boy to get the bags from "that white Cadillac convertible [. . .] that we could all see parked just outside the front door" (FLLV, 108). Thompson presents this scene as a way to show that there is a whole slice of America, one that is exemplified by the cop in the hotel lobby, which thinks a white Cadillac convertible, parked in a VIP spot, is the highlight of the American Dream. By making sure that everyone involved with this episode can see Thompson's convertible parked outside, he hammers home the point that the people in the lobby take notice of the car. They do this because they feel that one way that the American Dream can be summed up is to be in command of such a wonderful, expensive automobile as the one Thompson is driving. Of particular importance is that the policeman who can't check into his room is "from some small town in Michigan" (FLLV, 106). It is very unlikely that Thompson would know that

about the officer, but that fact that he inserted this detail, real or fake, is very important. The cop is from Michigan, the place of origin of the Cadillac and arguably, American car culture. This fact causes him to be particularly affected by Thompson's display of the Cadillac, and also makes him seem even more alien to Thompson.

The hitchhiker that Thompson and Dr. Gonzo pick up on their way to Vegas also thinks that the convertible is his American Dream. When the two adventurers pull up and pick him up in a different car, though still a convertible, he gets excited, exclaiming, "Hot damn! I never rode in a convertible before!" (FLLV, 5). This car is not the white Cadillac, but the convertible is still a manifestation of the American Dream in automobile form.

Despite what the cops at the conference and the hitchhiker might think, Thompson does not really think that the Cadillac and the life it represents is the American Dream. He presents the first inklings of his suspicion of the Cadillac life when he picks up the car and describes it as "ten grand worth of gimmicks and high-priced Special Effects" (FLLV, 104). He notices not only that "the dashboard was full of esoteric lights & dials & meters" but also that these were things "that I would never understand" (FLLV, 104). Thompson can appreciate the car for what others think of it, and he can use it as a tool to make himself superior to them. He enjoys flashing it in front of the policemen who value it so highly. He likes the fancy buttons and smooth ride; however, he doesn't truly appreciate it. All the bells and whistles, and "gimmicks and high-priced Special Effects" aren't enough to make the Cadillac convertible a proper expression of the American Dream for Thompson. He first lets this become apparent when he discusses his unfamiliarity with the car, but it continues later on.

Thompson again reveals his distrust of the convertible form of the American Dream when he is talking about the hitchhiker. He feels “vaguely haunted by our hitchhiker’s remark about how he’d ‘never rode in a convertible before’” (FLLV, 17). He doesn’t like the way that the hitchhiker’s remark makes him “feel like King Farouk” and considers having his attorney “pull into the next airport and arrange some kind of simple, common-law contract whereby we could just *give* the car to this unfortunate bastard” (FLLV, 17). He doesn’t go through with the idea, as he and his attorney freakout on acid and scare the hitchhiker into running off back into the desert from where he came, but he seems ready to go through with it and abandon the car. His treatment of his next rental convertible certainly gives credibility to his idea of rejecting the convertible and giving it to the hitchhiker.

Thompson extends his distaste for the Cadillac, and the American Dream that it represents, in the penultimate chapter: “End of the Road . . . Death of the Whale . . . Soaking Sweats in the Airport.” “The Whale” is what he calls the Cadillac now, as time has come to turn it in. The once “*superior machine*” that Thompson was driving is a distant memory. By now, when he attempts to put the top up, it fails to work, since “something is wrong with the motor,” that works the top; Thompson speculates that it might have something to do with the “generator light [that] had been on, fiery red, ever since I’d driven the thing into Lake Mead on a water test” (FLLV, 196). He has managed, over the course of a few days, to get the car to a point where “every circuit was totally fucked. Nothing worked. Not even the headlights,” and to add insult to injury, “the top was jammed about halfway up” (FLLV, 196). Raoul Duke and his lawyer have reduced this piece of one man’s American Dream to what Thompson can only call a

“goddamn junker” (FLLV, 196). Thompson’s ire at the Cadillac is so great that he berates the company that made it, scowling, “To hell with this garbage from Detroit. They shouldn’t be allowed to get away with it” (FLLV, 196). Thompson has found that the cop’s view of the American Dream, won’t hold up to his rigorous testing. If the American Dream can’t handle a water test in Lake Mead, it is not up to Hunter Thompson’s specifications. He makes his claims about the car failing the water test so matter-of-factly, and condemns the car for failing the test so violently. He does this to show that the Hunter Thompson character is so far out of the ordinary that he will trash a common idea of the American Dream, and if it does not hold up to his impossible specifications, then it is worthless to him. These dead-ends on the road to the American Dream lead Thompson to go out of Las Vegas, and into the most important and interesting chapter of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.”

“Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.” is the chapter where Thompson and his attorney zero in on the American Dream, and even track it to a particular place. It is also in this chapter where the tenuous narrative that Thompson has balanced all the way through *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* finally breaks down. In this chapter, Thompson abandons whatever narrative he had been constructing, and attempts to present a journalistically pure, or more accurate, portrayal of events. He does this by dropping the narrative voice he has used throughout the book, and telling the story through direct quotes from Raoul Duke and his attorney. However, in this moment where he apparently steps out of his narrative to tell the story without interference from the crazed interpretation of the Thompson character, he actually reveals a great deal about his persona in the text. This is because “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.” is the place in *Fear*

and Loathing in Las Vegas where Thompson the author steps back to examine the actions of Thompson the character. In this moment of reflection, Thompson actually comes to a conclusion about the American Dream that he has been chasing across the desert in Vegas, and finds that it is died before he ever got to write this chapter. Because he has already established himself as a committed, professional journalist, the reader can now step back and admire the work that he does in this chapter as a simple professional observer. This is the closest that Thompson comes to removing the frame that Barthes describes from the event he witnesses, and therefore, the closest to a sense of unadulterated truth.

Thompson opens "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd." by stopping the voice of the narrator, and letting another voice take over the text. Thompson indicates this shift in voice by opening the chapter with an "EDITOR'S NOTE:" and then including a section written in italics, in the voice of his "editor" (FLLV, 161). This section tells the reader that "Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely; the original manuscript is so splintered that we were forced to seek out the original tape recording and transcribe it verbatim" (FLLV, 161). Thompson distances himself from what follows even further by having the editors say "we made no attempt to edit the section, and Dr. Duke refused even to read it. There was no way to reach him" (FLLV, 161). This is the point in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where Thompson formally divorces himself from the Raoul Duke persona that he has spent the previous hundred-fifty pages reveling in. The ambiguous relationship between Duke and Thompson is finally resolved when Thompson says that Duke lost control, he "broke down on Paradise Blvd.," and that there is no way to contact him.

By breaking the relationship between the author and the narrator, Thompson creates an interesting relationship between himself and the pursuit of truth in this passage. By claiming that the editors had transcribed the tapes that he had created “in the interest of journalistic purity,” Thompson is saying that the intervention of an author upon the actual happenings of the world leads to an impure presentation of the events (FLLV, 161). If Thompson himself is an impure medium through which to view the events that occurred when Dr. Duke and his attorney descended on the plains of Las Vegas from the West, then he throws into doubt the entirety of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, except for the pure account that Thompson’s editors compile in “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.” Thompson therefore looks at this chapter as a space that is free from the interference of his own insane interventions, and it is in this chapter that he finally writes what he considers to be the truth at the heart of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

This truth does not come easy, however, like most of the book. The story that Thompson creates in “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.” is almost impossible to follow. What is clear is that he and his attorney are getting closer to the American Dream. The editor claims that there was “a feeling – shared by both Duke and his attorney – that the American Dream would have to be sought out somewhere far beyond the dreary confines of the District Attorney’s Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs” (FLLV, 161). This leads to a scene out in the desert, where Thompson and his attorney pull the Whale into “Terry’s Taco Stand, USA,” and get tacos, “five for a buck” (FLLV, 164).

Thompson destroys the usual narrative, and instead, presents the story as if it was a transcription of a dramatic scene. He attempts to deny creating the events that happened by representing them as dialogue pulled from the audiotapes he was supposedly

keeping, as a journalist on assignment would. They have a conversation with the waitress, who asks the short-order cook an occasional question, but the waitress and the attorney dominate the tape time. The point of the attorney's line of questions that he fires at the waitress is designed to find "the American Dream [. . .] we were told it was somewhere in this area" (FLLV, 164).

Thompson has been searching for the American Dream all book, and by this point, the character that is identified in the transcripts as Duke appears to be getting weary of the search. It is the attorney who asks where the American Dream is, while the only thing that Duke says for nearly two pages is to tell the waitress "yes" when she asks if he wants sugar with his coffee, and then to ask her "where is the casino?" in the little town that he and his attorney have found themselves in (FLLV, 164). He is apparently giving up on his quest for the American Dream, and has resigned himself to chasing after it in the same way that the used-car salesmen from Dallas are: sitting around a casino in the early hours of morning. However, when his attorney asks the waitress where the American Dream is, something unexpected happens. This odd request, the location of the American Dream, warrants an even odder response from the people working at Terry's Taco Stand. They not only believe that the American Dream is a place, but they know where it is.

They direct him to a place they call "the Old Psychiatrist's Club," located on the "Paradise Boulevard" that is mentioned in the chapter's title (FLLV, 165). Thompson perks up, asks "what kind of place is it?" and then has a lengthy exchange getting directions there from the cook and waitress (FLLV, 165). In response to Thompson's question, however, the cook and the waitress can only be vague. They say that it was "a

discotheque place [. . .] but the only people who hang out there is a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers and all that stuff' (FLLV, 165). The place is so far off the beaten path, both in terms of location and in lifestyle, that Thompson begins to think that it might be the place where his American Dream can be found. Thompson and his attorney then set off after the American Dream at the Old Psychiatrist's club, but unfortunately for the narrative, the good doctors run into more problems.

The editors say that the tapes from that part of the adventures were impossible to transcribe due to some viscous liquid encrusted behind the heads. There is a certain consistency in the garbled sounds however, indicating that almost two hours later Dr. Duke and his attorney finally located what was left of the 'Old Psychiatrist's Club' – a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago' (FLLV, 168).

The fact that the American Dream "burned down about three years ago" is very important to Thompson. When this was first published in late 1971, many things that happened about three years prior could all have killed Thompson's ideal of the American Dream. 1968 was the year that Richard Nixon was elected president. 1969 marked the tragedy at Altamont Speedway, where the Hell's Angels killed a young man during a free Rolling Stones concert. In their ways, both of these events can be seen as emblematic of the death of the innocent era of radical youth culture that Thompson was a part of in late 1960's California. The love that Thompson feels for the drug culture of 1960's San Francisco comes through earlier in the book as well.

Earlier in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson launches into a lengthy dream episode where he reminisces about the drug culture of San Francisco in the 1960's. He looks at this time and place as "the energy of a whole generation [came] to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands" (FLLV, 67). He looks back on those days and talks of how he was always "absolutely certain that no matter which way I went I would come to a place where people were just as high and wild as I was," which gave him a feeling that "there was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning" (FLLV, 67-8). This moment is where Thompson sees his American Dream in action. The ability for all people to be as freakish as they can be is what Thompson sees as the American Dream. He lived it during those days in San Francisco, and in retrospect, thinks that those times were "the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back" (FLLV, 68).

There is more evidence to support the idea that Thompson views the period of the late 1960's in San Francisco as his own American Dream. He talks about living during this time "down the hill from Dr. ----- on ----- Road" where a footnote explains that the names were "deleted at insistence of publisher's lawyer" (FLLV, 63). There are many people that could have lived up the street from Thompson, but the doctor is most likely Timothy Leary, as Thompson describes his neighbor as "a former acid guru," and says that he "stopped by the Good Doctor's house with the idea of asking him [. . .] what sort of advice he might have for a neighbor with a healthy curiosity about LSD" (FLLV, 68). The fact that the American Dream in Las Vegas is located at a club that belongs to an "old pharmacist" and is a place where drugs are part and parcel of everyday life makes comparisons to Leary and what Thompson calls "the Great San Francisco Acid Wave"

inevitable (FLLV, 68). The question is therefore, why does Thompson tell the story of his adventures on Paradise Boulevard in the odd, disjointed style that he does choose to use, and why does he tie the events of Las Vegas, 1971 back to San Francisco, 1968?

Thompson steps outside the narrative voice in this chapter to get to the truth. Thompson's views on truth in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* are confusing and scattered across the map. At various points in the narrative, he is both believable and professional, and later he is a rambling liar. By breaking away from his narrative voice in "Breakdown in Paradise Blvd." he creates a space that is outside of the problems with the truth that go throughout the rest of the book.

By stepping outside of his narrative voice in "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd." Thompson makes sure that what he says about the American Dream and its presence in late 1960's San Francisco is true. He mentions it early in the book to place the image firmly in his reader's mind. When he returns to it later, it is at the burned out Pharmacist's Club on Paradise Boulevard, and he returns there with a newfound credibility, gained by stepping outside his narrative voice. This chapter of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* shows that Thompson is not only aware of the limitations that his fantastic authorial persona places on his writing. He is very comfortable with the fact that his persona makes it impossible for the reader to believe what he wants to say. It is only when he gets to the goal of his entire journalistic project in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, when he completes his "Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream," that he feels the need to tell the whole truth.

By showing how he was able to recreate very detailed scenes only from his notes in the past, Thompson stresses the integrity of his notes. This makes the reconstructed

chapter appear to be even more reliable. "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd." is the one part of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that could be considered primary source material of Thompson's trip. The entire persona of Dr. Duke is indeed constructed to make him appear to be a man who takes excellent, accurate notes, but is outrageous and unreliable when it comes time to report on those notes. The entire book is therefore constructed to give extra credibility to the chapter where Dr. Duke steps aside, and Thompson actually finds the American Dream that he has been looking for out in Las Vegas.

While he might want the reader to think that he wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* under the influence of any number of drugs, he wants the reader to know that he still knows how to differentiate between hallucination and reality when it comes time to explore the actual truth that Hunter S. Thompson himself believes is to be found out in the desert. By switching to the voice of the Editor when it comes time to describe the Old Psychiatrist's Club, Thompson gives the drug-addled ramblings of earlier a much greater credibility, and accomplishes what he set out to do all along and *cover the story*.

The truth of the chapter "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd." is made more evident due to the contrast of narrative voices. This is an instance where Thompson's carefully constructed narrative voice proves very helpful to him. By first establishing that the narrator of the book is a corrupt and unbelievable person, he subverts any questions that might be in the reader's mind regarding the truth of the chapter without the voice in it. Because he already establishes that his character is not a man that can be trusted, the reader can easily believe that the editors have to intervene for the sake of journalistic integrity. Therefore, when he tells the story of finding the wreckage of the American

Dream, in the voice of the editor, it makes it very easy for the reader to believe what the editor is saying.

Through the careful construction of his narrative persona in his work, most notably in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S. Thompson proves himself to have a powerful command over how he presents himself. He uses the reader's expectations to his advantage, and creates a persona who is at once believable and unbelievable. The persona he creates is his great achievement in his crazy road journal, and the subtle way he writes the truth in "Breakdown in Paradise Blvd." is a great credit to a man whose work Halberstam describes by saying

if you could get through the outer protective layers of the stuff that he used to camouflage what he really cared about, then you could pick up the real stuff, partially hidden away in there. It was always real, always quite well thought out, and almost always, I think, very good (Halberstam, screen 3).

III

“The novelist who refuses sentiment refuses the full spectrum of human behavior, and then he just dries up. Irony is always scratching your tired ass, whatever way you look at it, I would rather give full vent to all human loves and disappointments, and take a chance on being corny, than die a smartass.”

Jim Harrison -
1990 interview with Wendy Smith

Throughout his various works, Jim Harrison preaches a gospel of sentiment and sensation. The speaker of his poems, the characters in his fiction, and the man he describes in his non-fiction are saved by and lauded for their ability to enjoy the world around them. Clare, the heroine in his novella "The Woman Lit by Fireflies" is a perfect introductory example. She needs to get away from her husband, a man who insists on listening to "a tape called *Tracking the Blues* which contained no black music, but rather the witless drone of a weekly financial lectures sent from New York City," in the car, derides her purchase of a case of wine by saying "here goes three shares of General Motors," and is called an "asshole" by his grown daughter (WLF, 177, 181, 178). As she begins suffering from a migraine while driving back to Michigan through Iowa, she insists on pulling over, and while her husband is "in his brokerage trance," talking on the car phone, she hops the fence at a rest stop, and runs "off down between two corn rows, toward the interior whatever that might be" (WLF, 182, 184).

What she finds in the cornfield is not clear until that night. As she roams through the corn, she gradually loses herself in the sensations that surround her, stripping off her clothes to bathe in "a steady gout of water from a bad fitting" in an irrigation pipe and letting "the breeze dry her off" (WLF, 228). She goes to bed and loses herself in the sensation of the earth: "sinking into the ground . . . with her body giving itself up to the bed of leaves and grass" (WLF, 237). The climax of the story is her redemption through the power of sensation. It comes when she wakes in the night to find "countless thousands of fireflies" around her, which she later observes "stayed just outside and within and above the thicket" where she was sleeping (WLF, 239). When she sees the fireflies dancing around the place where she lay, "quite suddenly she [feels] blessed"

(WLF, 239). The fireflies give Clare their blessing after she has given up the manufactured, highway driving life with her broker husband and returned to the earthy sensations and sentiments of the cornfield.

A similar redemption through the powers of sensation and sentiment is experienced by the speaker of Harrison's poem "22" from the *Letters to Yesenin* Series. The speaker is addressing the dead Russian poet, and complains of being stuck in a world that is "somber like biographies / of artists written by joyless people" (LTY, 32). To combat the somber nature of the world, the speaker engages in a listing of "off the wall extravagancies" that help him through: "mariachi music . . . air smelling of ginger . . . a roll tasting like zinc . . . water with a dulcet roar" (LTY, 32). To avoid being trapped in a joyless place, like other intellectuals, the speaker delights in the sensory details of the world around him. He describes lush, sensuous details of taste, smell, and sound. These sensations allow the speaker to "imagin[e] his deathless lines" that he writes to Yesenin (LTY, 32). The sensual details of life therefore function as a remedy to a joyless life and as a spark for the speaker's creativity in this poem.

When mentioning the terms "sensation," and "sentiment," I am aware that I am using what might be considered loaded terminology. I would like to define the concept of sentiment and sensation in Harrison's work by showing what Harrison thinks the opposition to sentiment and sensation is. In an essay called "The Sporting Life," Harrison remarks, "man at play in America has John Calvin tapping him on the shoulder and telling him to please be serious. For beginners, you have to learn to tell John to fuck off" (JBD, 141). Harrison views sensation and sentiment as the opposition to John Calvin. These are the things that a person experiences when they are "at play," and when

they are acting in a way that the preacher of restraint, John Calvin, would find abominable. Sensational is just that, the experience of sensations, and sentimental is the experience of feelings or sentiments that come along with those sensations. I will try to link the terms whenever possible, as Harrison believes that the experience of feeling is best appreciated when the feelings are generated by sensory and not necessarily mental experience. Harrison wants the reader to see many things that provoke the sensational and sentimental, and one can see them in some of the chapter titles for the section of his memoirs, *Off to the Side*, called, "Seven Obsessions, in particular: "Alcohol," "Stripping," "Hunting, Fishing (and Dogs)," and "Nature and Natives" (OTS, 73, 87, 100, 155). Alcohol and stripping are pleasures of social sensory excess, while hunting, fishing, and nature are pleasures of a more private, natural power. Harrison will delight in both the social, excessive forms of pleasure, and the private, natural ones as well. They both fall under the category of sentimental and sensational for Harrison, and he creates his persona to enjoy all of the sensation and sentiment he can.

The earlier examples of Harrison's fiction are places where he is able to show how much emphasis he places on the power and worth of sentiment and sensation. He maintains the same attitude toward the value of sensation throughout his non-fiction as well. While in his fiction, Harrison is able to create characters and speakers out of thin air that fit into his scheme where sensation is of the highest value, in his non-fiction, he has to work with real people. He is able to describe real people and still maintain a commitment to the power and worth of sentiment, however. He accomplishes this by choosing the main character in almost all of his non-fiction very cleverly. The person who comes up in Harrison's varied essays is himself.

The person that Harrison describes and creates in his non-fiction is one who places a very high value on sensation, even from his earliest days. Harrison opens his memoirs, *Off to the Side*, by describing the way his parents met “in 1933 at the River Gardens, a dance hall just north of Big Rapids, Michigan,” and how as a child he was “somewhat embarrassed to hear the story of [my] parents’ probably feverish collision on a summer evening early in the Great Depression” (OTS, 7). By opening his memoirs with this story, Harrison sets the stage for the life that will follow, one that is prone to dance hall excesses of drink and womanizing himself. He speculates that his parents met in what was “probably” a “feverish collision” in an attempt to show the importance of sentiment to him as well. He fills in the empty space in the story of his parents’ meeting with a description that makes the meeting of “Norma Olivia Walgren” and “Winfield Sprague Harrison” seem to be filled with amorous intent to the point of a fever or frenzy (OTS, 7). He makes it clear that he is imagining their fevered reaction, however, so what he speculates about his parents can be said to actually reveal more about him.

He constructs a person who is naturally disposed toward thinking of the sensations surrounding events, even as a young boy. The embarrassment that he feels regarding their meeting shows that even at a young age he was able to imagine the feelings and sensations that affect people, even if they were new and embarrassing to him. Harrison wants his readers to believe his is pre-disposed toward noticing the sentimental and sensational in life, because he will continue to focus on it throughout his non-fiction work.

Another example from Harrison’s early life where he describes himself as a person wholly concerned with sensations is when he discusses his blind left eye. He was

born with two functional eyes, but lost the use of his left one. It was not a disease or accident that took his sight, however, Harrison says it was “a neighbor girl” who “shoved a broken bottle in my face” (OTS, 18). He does describe the act as “violent,” but he does not focus on the violence of the act itself, or on its long-term psychological consequences (OTS, 18). He dismisses any mental ramifications caused by the shock of the attack by saying: “trauma is trauma, but much of the time for a child it can be leavened because there are fewer neurotic reasons to hold onto it” (OTS, 18). Instead of worrying about what losing his eye in a violent exchange did to his psyche, Harrison instead presents the experience of living with one blind eye in strictly sensational terms. He describes the occasional problems he has with the world around him in terms of physical experience: “I’d get blindsided in football, I knock over grocery displays in abrupt left turns, also run walking partners into buildings” (OTS, 18). Conspicuously absent from the symptoms Harrison describes resulting from his blindness is any kind of change in his mental state.

He also describes the advantages that having a blind eye can bring, and they are all advances in his powers of sensation. Because his left eye is not totally blind, when he looks at the moon with his good eye closed, he says that he sees “a concentrated but foggy light, quite beautiful in its way, and the practice immediately emphasizes the sounds one might hear, nighthawks, coyotes, a whippoorwill . . .” (OTS, 19). Not only does he view his hearing as being more advanced as a result of his lost sight, but he actually claims to experience a transubstantiation of sensory experience: “You have the idea you can actually hear color, and between hearing and smell you construct a world that is further decorated by tasting and toughing the night air” (OTS, 19). While Harrison has lost certain sensations on one side of his body due his blindness there, he does not

spend his time dwelling on the lost sight, but he instead creates opportunities for new sensations in the wake of losing half his sight. This is not an example of his terminal optimism; at various points in his life he falls into depressions that he describes as “paralyzing” (OTS, 180). What it is an example of is the emphasis he wants to place on the sensational things in the world. Harrison wants his readers to see him as a man who is so involved in the sensory experiences of the world around him that he does not bother to stop and lament the ones he has lost due to this violent, normally traumatic experience. Instead of falling into a trap of regret and suffering, he finds ways through his sensations to make his injury seem far from a disability. He presents his blindness in one eye in terms of sensations; first when he says the experiences of physically running into things are the only real negative consequences of the act, and secondly when he interprets his injury as an opportunity for sensations that are out of the ordinary. By presenting his experience of having a blind left eye in such a way, Harrison shows that even from an early age, he places more emphasis on the outward, the physical, and the sensational than the internal and mental.

Harrison’s emphasis on the physical and the value of sentiment and sensation continues in his food writing. “The 10,000 Calorie Diet” is not the typical piece of journalism that one might find in a magazine devoted to food, where one could expect recipes that say how long to cook the given arrangement of ingredients to produce something that looks like the food in the picture on the overleaf. To be sure, any chef would find the recipes that Harrison describes in “The 10,000 Calorie Diet” interesting from a pure culinary sense, although the strength of his food journalism is not his recipes. Harrison unapologetically strays from what the reader could see as the normal mission of

a food journalist: to provide the reader with pictures of food to eat and prepare on their own. What he does instead is to present an account of the sensations and pleasures he gets from the food he eats. This is how he views his food journalism, as a way to expose the way that his persona values sentiment and sensation.

Even if one were to look at “The 10,000 Calorie Diet” and attempt to work with the food he describes, his meals certainly stretch the boundaries of what the average chef could prepare, and some might say they stretch the bounds of good taste as well. The one meal he describes in detail is for a cassoulet, a type of stew made with goose confit.

Harrison makes sure to instruct the reader making their own confit that one “must wait at least twenty-nine days for the confit to cure,” and while “it is no fun to butcher your own geese . . . supermarket birds are far too lean” (TRTC, 8). No measurements are given, and the instructions, beyond killing the geese on the first day of the month and eating them on the first of the next, consist mainly of the precaution that one must “buy fat geese from a fat farmwife,” because the skinny farmwife obviously does not know how to spoil her geese properly (TRTC, 8).

Harrison goes out of his way to provoke the reader’s sentiments in his description of the cassoulet. He forces the reader to come face to face with the possibility that they are going to have to kill their own geese, and justifies the necessity of butchery in terms of sentiment: firstly, the birds one buys at a supermarket will not produce the necessary sensations and pleasures once they are cooked. Secondly, Harrison says “neither is it fun to live a life where all the dirty work, the realities, are left to someone else by virtue of our purchasing power” (TRTC, 8). Cast in this light, Harrison is a man who views a meal not just as a chance to eat some good things, but also to connect with an experience that

he otherwise would not be able to. Harrison is a man who is concerned not just with the experience of the finished dish, but also with the values of sensation and sentiment that the preparation of the dish provokes.

The presence of Harrison's sentimental persona in "The 10,000 Calorie Diet," extends to a discussion of the net results that one will experience for following such a plan of eating. Harrison does not see the obvious consequence of gaining weight in medical terms, but instead in sentimental ones. He says that if one is to follow a diet prescribing a five-figure daily caloric intake, "women are now likely to tweak at your ears, tug at your wattles, back up to you like a sleepy truck to a loading platform" (TRTC, 9). The weight gain that results from eating in the way Harrison describes is not seen by Harrison as having bad effects on his health. Instead, his persona totally disregards negative health consequences in the face of beneficial results of sensation, namely that women will now play with him more.

This type of description, where the ins and outs of the meal and the dietary conditions involved are less important than the sensation response that Harrison has to it is the norm for Harrison's food essays. The point of a Harrison food essay, as typified by "The 10,000 Calorie Diet," is rarely to impart some particular piece of knowledge about the best way to marinade salmon for the grill, how to keep the tops of muffins nice and fluffy, or discuss how his eating affects his health. Instead, Harrison sees eating, an experience grounded in the senses, as an opportunity to speak to the reader about the value that he places on sensation and pleasure. The persona that arises from his sensational description of food allows him to claim that he does what he says is good in

the interview with Wendy Smith, and “give full vent to all human loves and disappointments, including the loves that arise at the table (Smith, 97).

Another of Harrison’s essays that deserves special mention is his recent contribution to *The New Yorker*, “A Really Big Lunch.” This essay was published in the 2004 “Food Issue,” and describes the really big lunch hosted by Harrison’s friend Gérard Oberlé, in Burgandy, France. The essay details all thirty-seven of the courses that made up the really big lunch, from the very first sip of “a clear soup made from poultry, diced vegetables and crayfish,” through the middle-of-the-pack “poached eel with chicken wingtips and testicles in a pool of tarragon butter” and finishes up with the “grand ring-shaped cake, a savarin, flamed with old Havana rum and served with preserved pineapple” (RBL, 81). From this decadent starting point, Harrison launches off into a discussion of his own idea of moderation, the value of friendship, and indeed of the temporality of life, all based around his really big lunch. In this essay, Harrison finds many opportunities to talk about sensation and sentiment, and he portrays his valuable friendships and experiences as ones that are formed with other people who place a similar value of sentiment and sensation as he does.

Harrison takes up the concept of moderation, as he opens the essay, and introduces the reader to the idea of a thirty-seven course lunch. He confronts the imaginary moralists, who upon hearing that Harrison “and eleven other diners shared a thirty-seven-course lunch that likely cost as much as a Volvo,” would, in Harrison’s estimation, “let their minds run in tiny aghast circles of condemnation” (RBL, 78). Harrison comes up with a rather logical and straightforward answer, and replies by saying, “none of us twelve disciples of gourmandize wanted a new Volvo. We wanted

only lunch, and since lunch lasted approximately eleven hours we saved money by not having to buy dinner. The defense rests" (RBL, 78). Harrison does not want the sensible, and restrained in life, represented by a dependable Volvo with an excellent crash-test rating. For his money, Harrison prefers the sensations of good food and friendship that the really big lunch affords him. By including this comment about the price of the lunch, Harrison is hitting the readers of *The New Yorker*, where "A Really Big Lunch" is published, close to home. His readers most likely belong to the same socio-economic group as the average Volvo owner, or would like to imagine they do by reading *The New Yorker*. Harrison is therefore casting his reader on the side of the moralists, and Harrison places himself on the side of the sensationalists. Harrison does not want to necessarily connect with his audience in *The New Yorker* like Liebling does. What he wants to do is present himself as a man who indulges in and loves the sensational in life. By placing himself in opposition to his readers, who most likely would like to identify with Harrison and feel committed to the qualities of sensation, Harrison stresses that his persona goes beyond them, and places a higher value on sensation and sentiment than does ordinary society.

He also stresses the fact that he places more value on sensation and sentiment than usual by showing the subculture of excess that he interacts with, and the ways in which his friends also value the sensational and sentimental. Harrison spends time in "A Really Big Lunch" discussing the merits of his friend, the "man of unquestionable genius," Gérard Oberlé (RBL, 79). Harrison recounts an incident where he visited Oberlé, and finds that he has prepared a "chicken in half-mourning," which is a bird that "has been honored by so many truffle slices, slid under its skin, that it appears to be wearing black,"

a dish that obviously requires no small amount of time, effort, and funding to prepare (Harrison, RBL, 80). Harrison tells Oberlé “Gérard, you shouldn’t have,” to which Oberlé responds “I’m a bachelor, I have no heirs” (Harrison, RBL, 80). This simple sentiment is at the heart of what Harrison values in friendship. The fact that Oberlé would be willing to prepare such a fantastic dish for his friend is a sign that what connects Harrison to his friend is the experience of shared sensation. Harrison wants to create a persona where he relates to Oberlé on the basis of food to show the value that he places on sensation. Harrison views Oberlé as a person who shares the proper view of the importance of sentiment and sensation with him; it takes quite a man to place eating on a plane of importance with the possibility of having heirs. Harrison’s description of his friendship with Oberlé helps to show that Harrison is a man who places the highest value on sensation, as he picks as his friend a man who shares that view.

He continues to create his persona of sentiment with the help of Oberlé in a piece in *The Raw and the Cooked* titled “Wild Creatures: A Correspondence with Gérard Oberlé,” a collection of letters that the two men send back and forth to one another. When Harrison is describing to Oberlé the drive from his home in northern Michigan to his home on the Mexican border in Arizona, he highlights the food that he encounters on the drive. He does not talk about the “four-and-a-half-day trip down” in terms of miles covered or time spent in the car, but instead complains of “a floating diorama of bad food” that he encounters along the road, and expresses his regret that American roadside food is not more like “that pleasant lunch we had at a truck stop (*routier*) in Brittany” (RBL, 221). By boiling down more than four days of driving into “bad food,” Harrison provides a profound example of the importance that he places on the sensational. He

includes a memory of an experience of good eating that he shared with Oberlé to once again remind the reader of the friendship that he has with him, and how it is based at least partly on their similar appreciation for food.

In the same letter to Oberlé, Harrison begins to develop his persona into a person who has a bit more complex relation to sensation. However, he does not do this to deemphasize the value that he places on it. Rather, he emphasizes the need and desire of his persona to feel things in a highly sensational manner. He describes to Oberlé a hunt he was on with his dogs where he was having a poor go of it. He decries his mental state as an author, saying, "Writers are generally poor hunters because they are constantly listening to their minds instead of paying attention. How I'd love to see even a cow without my mind announcing 'cow'" (TRTC, 222). With this regret, Harrison claims that he might not be able to feel sentimentally and sensationally quite as well as he would like. However, it is not that he therefore considers sentiment to be any less important to his persona. His persona is one of a man who is desperate to take even a mundane, simple sensory experience, that of seeing a cow, and boil it down to its basic, instinctive nature. Harrison therefore presents himself as a man who wants desperately to feel the natural world in all its sensory glory, although his mind, instead of being something which allows him to clarify his thoughts, instead deadens his perceptions.

The problem Harrison experiences where his mind gets in the way of the senses and sentiments that he wants to feel is a very interesting one. If he wants to present himself as a person who is always going to be in touch with his sensations and sentiments, the better to connect with "the full spectrum of human behavior" and not "die a smartass," how does he reconcile his tendency to over-think the world around him?

He reconciles his need for sensation with his intellectual nature by setting the natural, sensational world in opposition to the intellectual, over-thought world. He finds ways to look at civilization with a more immediately sensational eye. An example is when he finds himself in a Hollywood meeting, a necessary consequence of his work as a screenwriter. He describes the experience of going to Hollywood as “being stuck on a shuddering elevator, always caught between one floor or another, always in transit up or down” (OTS, 253). Harrison presents his time in Hollywood as a kind of mechanical nightmare, never in one place, never getting out of a tiny box, never able to experience anything. It is very telling, then, that his reaction is to re-imagine the situation of a Hollywood meeting in a more sensational and natural sense: “there’s certainly an element of stalking in a New York or Los Angeles meeting” (OTS, 106). He views himself and the others sitting around a table discussing movies as moving through the woods, engaged in the act of “stalking” one another. He wants the reader to see him as a man who even in the most unnatural location for a writer from northern Michigan still engages in the act of stalking, which involves giving total attention to the senses. By taking this perspective into his Hollywood meetings, Harrison is presenting himself as a man who is dependent on his ability to sense and experience things in a natural, sentimental way.

He also responds to Hollywood in sentimental ways when he manages to escape from it. The escape valve from the pressures he builds up in his meetings is usually always nature. On his first trip to Los Angeles, he makes it a habit to run to “the UCLA Botanical Gardens,” which act as his “California *querencia*, a place to stand at full strength” (OTS, 253). He goes to the closest thing to nature he can find in Los Angeles, and uses it not just as a break from the Hollywood grind, but as a place to gather

“strength.” To Harrison, the sensational and natural world is a place where he is able to go and become strong again, where he can draw power from the sensations around him and reset his bearings.

The experience of regaining a sense of oneself by returning to the sensations of nature is also present in Harrison’s descriptions of his actions once he leaves Hollywood for his home. He says that when he leaves Los Angeles in “Return of the Native, or Lighten Up,” he will “reenter the vast dank forest of the Upper Peninsula” (TRTC, 112). He presents the Upper Peninsula as a place where he goes when he is suffering from the affects of Hollywood. In his essay “Back Home,” he describes a trip to his cabin, and talks of the way that his feelings of “distraught [. . .] left me when I crossed the Mackinac Bridge into the Upper Peninsula” (TRTC, 150). The Upper Peninsula has a great power for Harrison’s persona. It is a place where not many people go, and the reader has to rely on what Harrison says about his own little place set off from the rest of the country, at least symbolically, by that five-mile, elevated stretch of I-75. The reader can therefore accept it when Harrison claims to “give up” many things when he crosses the Straits of Mackinac, including “abandoning what I thought was my personality, a tiresome collection of rehearsals” (TRTC, 154). With this claim, Harrison presents an interesting situation to his reader. He is trying to construct a persona that places natural sentiment and sensation at the heart of his value system. However, when he enters the place where he feels natural sensations the most profoundly, it is there that he abandons the “collection of rehearsals” that make up his personality. How does he expect the reader to interpret his act of character creation, then, when by getting to the focal point of his natural sensation he abandons the personality he has been collecting and constructing?

The short answer to that question is that the personality that he abandons is the collection of characteristics that he creates for everyday society. He is letting the reader see the real construction of his persona, the one that is in the natural world. For a more in-depth analysis of the distinction he makes between his public, literary persona and that of his natural self, however, it is time to turn to the way in which Harrison deals with the construction of fear in his persona, and return to the apparent conundrum of abandoning his personality at the end of that discussion.

The way in which Harrison deals with danger and his fears of the natural world shows his love for the sentimental. As he explains when he tells the story regarding his blinding as a young man, he presents himself as a person who is rather unconcerned with and unaffected by trauma. However, he is not fearless. When telling the story of a stag hunt he was a member of while in Normandy, he describes his sense of wonder at the man who braves the horns of the beast to kill it with a ceremonial silver dagger: "I've always been interested in this primitive form of courage, never having felt much of it in my own bones" (JBD, 94). He provides many examples throughout his various adventures where he is worried or afraid, and they are usually where he lacks "this primitive form of courage."

One of these comes in his essay "Ice Fishing, the Moronic Sport." When going ice fishing on Good Harbor Bay, he follows his companions out to their shanty, and is very careful to "follow [his friend] Bruce's footprints as he weighs nearly 300 and I wanted to feel safe" (JBD, 79). He continually expresses his concern over the ice breaking up underneath him in this essay, including a passage when he compares walking on the ice to sleeping on a bed where underneath "Lon Chaney [is] . . . turning into a

man-wolf hybrid” (JBD, 80). His fear over falling through the ice is only one of the various worries he expresses, however.

In “Night Games,” Harrison reveals that he is not necessarily afraid of the dark, but he does say that one of the things that he “will do for a little fright” is to “use night;” one of his favorite after dark activities is “night fishing” (JBD, 124). He claims that he becomes “a night creature” when he is out fishing after dark in Yellowstone, surrounded by “imaginary grizzlies” (JBD, 127). He also calls himself a “night creature” when he is stuck “in a boat with a broken-down motor out in Lake Okeechobee” (JBD, 127). The peculiar relationship he has with the night and courage raises several questions about the persona that Harrison is trying to present to his readers. What does it mean for Harrison to become a “night creature?” Why does he connect his transformation into this creature with the experience of fear?

The questions of how Harrison is affected by fear are made even more interesting when one looks at the way Harrison talks about the act of worrying about his diet. He is a grand eater, as one who eats a “thirty-seven-course lunch” must be (RBL, 79). While he might love the dark and still be worried about it, he certainly is not worried about the food that he also loves. In “A Really Big Lunch,” Harrison describes a moment that he describes as “halftime” in the meal, where he goes outside and notes that his “feet seemed to sink farther [into the grass] than usual” (RBL, 81). In a moment of conscience, he wonders if the type of eating he practices “might not be a wise choice in the late autumn of my life. Perhaps I should fax the menu to my cardiologist in the States before proceeding?” (RBL, 81). Upon some brief reflection however, Harrison “soon realize[s] that” worrying about what the meal was doing to the walls of his arteries “was one of the

ten million insincere impulses I've had in my life" (RBL, 81). He returns for the next service, and his eleven-hour lunch adventure continues.

Harrison presents himself as possessing a very similar attitude toward the possible dangers of his diet in his essay on ice fishing. He tells the reader, "most varieties of Great lakes fish have close to ten parts to the million [of DDT], which is above the legal allowable limit for shipping. I eat all the fish anyway because I am young and fat and reckless and love the forms of danger connected with eating" (JBD, 79). This proclamation comes immediately before Harrison shares with the reader his worries about falling through the ice and Lon Chaney coming up to get him from the hole he is fishing out of. By placing his discussion about the possible dangers of DDT contamination, ones that are real and that he ignores, so close to the possible dangers of falling into Good Harbor Bay, ones that are mostly imagined and that he worries about, Harrison is driving home the point that he makes with the remark at the end of that quote: "[I] love the forms of danger connected with eating." He wants the reader to see him not as a man who is simply not concerned with the dangers of heart attack or DDT poisoning, but a man who likes to feel the sensation of danger that comes with eating.

His emphasis on the pleasures produced by natural sensations, even fear, reveals just why he has such a complex relationship to fear and courage. Harrison creates a persona who occasionally lacks courage and feels fear, and he does so for very important reasons. He feels the need for his audience to see the places where human sensations and emotions come out, and fear is one of the best places for that. By showing moments where he fears falling through the ice or what is out there in the dark, and showing that he is not only unconcerned with, but actively attempting to encourage "the forms of danger

connected with eating," he shows himself to be a man who is drawn to the sense of natural sensation and sentiment in fear. This is why he also stresses how much he likes the dangers of eating: the perils of food are the most sensual of all the dangers. In the experience of dangerous eating, Harrison feels the emotions and senses of fear on top of the pleasure that he experiences by eating. The ways in which Harrison shows himself experiencing fear reveal his desire to elevate the sensational in life.

Returning to "Night Games," Harrison has a similar relation to the fears that he feels regarding the night. He says that he goes out into the night "to get that familiar jolt of awe and wonderment" (JBD, 124). What he is after, therefore, when he turns himself into a "night creature," is the sensation of "awe and wonderment" that night gives him. Becoming a night creature means opening up himself to the possibility that there is a grizzly hidden in the marsh to his right, and knowing that he lacks the primitive courage that one needs to stare down a bear in the moonlight, particularly when the moon looks like nothing more than "a concentrated but foggy light" in one of his eyes (OTS, 18). When he goes out into the night he is doing what he is trying to do throughout his journalism, and that is get at an experience of pure sensation and emotion.

When closing "Night Games," he briefly considers the value of the awe that can be caused by good culture, to determine if he might not need to go out and scare himself after dark to get that same sensation. He decides, "There is a very particular 'I don't care' abandonment mixed with the raising of the hairs on the neck that Matthew Arnold described as the test of good poetry. This contrasts with dipping smelt off creeks emptying into Lake Michigan" (JBD, 127). In this moment, Harrison is looking for a possible remedy to the problem he had noted before, where his mind is unable to see a

cow without his mind telling him that it's a "cow," and thinking of all the various things that go into the concept of "cow" (TRTC, 222). He looks to see if his mind can bring some of that previous sensation out, and create a sense of true sensation in him.

However, he is unable to truly appreciate the sensation that comes from good poetry, saying that the abandonment caused by poetry still makes him think "I don't care." It is only the natural and sensational in the world that allows him to truly feel connected with his desire for sensation and sentiment. By showing that his persona, as literary as the persona of an author must be, values the chill he gets from night fishing more than the chills he gets from good poetry, Harrison shows himself to be more concerned with cultivating a feeling of sensational rather than intellectual pleasure.

This echoes the concern he expressed at the end of "Back Home," when he sees himself "abandoning what I thought was my personality" upon arriving in the Upper Peninsula (TRTC, 154). He does not want the reader to think that the persona he has been presenting to them in all his essays so far is different from the way that he actually is. Instead, he wants the reader to see that the way he presents himself in his essays is the way that he actually is, or would like to be. When he leaves behind his personality as society sees it in Mackinac City, Harrison is leaving behind the part of him that would try to cultivate the proper intellectual sense of the "raising of the hairs on the neck that Matthew Arnold described as the test of good poetry" (JBD, 127). By claiming that such an emotion actually fills him with "I don't care," Harrison is establishing the Upper Peninsula as a place where he can truly be himself and experience the emotion and sensation that he craves (JBD, 127). He welcomes the reader into such a world by giving them the pleasure of witnessing it. What he is doing is telling the reader that the man he

is below the bridge really is a troll, and once he is in the Upper Peninsula, once he is experiencing the sentiments and sensations of nature, he is truly himself. Because he lets the reader see that side of him, he is welcoming the reader into himself through his act of character creation.

Harrison attempts to create a persona who revels in sentiment and sensation. He is unabashedly open about his appetites for thirty-seven-course meals and 10,000 calorie days. He values his friends for their abilities to share the same appetites and concerns as him. He runs from the world of Hollywood to the actual woods, and lets the personality he constructs for the world fall by the wayside. He never lets the persona he creates for his reader drop, however. He presents himself to the reader as a man who needs the natural, sensuous, and sentimental in life. He creates a person who does not fall into the trap of placing too much value on irony, who certainly will not die a smartass. By doing so, he invites his readers into a world of lush forests and lush language, a place where a man who one interviewer described as “more like a bodybuilder than the author [. . . and] the Guggenheim Fellow that he is” can still walk out in a thunderstorm “for four hours, with time out for weeping” (Auer, 105; TRTC, 149).

Conclusion

The authors in this work all create a persona in their work. They do so to different ends and different extents. Thompson forces himself into the work, while Liebling and Harrison both work around the periphery of their journalism. This is an especially telling part of Harrison's personality; it is no mistake that he titled his memoirs *Off to the Side*. The different amounts of authorial interaction help reveal the different goals that these three authors have for inserting their own presence into their work.

Liebling wants to humanize a very difficult subject, World War Two, for his middle-brow readership at *The New Yorker*. For him, the decision to insert himself into his journalism is one of identification. He spends a great deal of time when he tells the stories of his own life downplaying himself and making himself appear to be just an average Joe, not an Abbot Joseph Liebling. What he accomplishes by presenting himself as a man of average abilities and concerns is making it easier for his readers to see things through his own eyes. Once he has persuaded his readers that he is a bonhomous man that they can identify with, he presents the war in that voice. Because he has convinced his readers to trust his viewpoint, he is able to accomplish his goal as a journalist, to bring the war home to the people reading *The New Yorker* as a correspondent they can imagine alongside.

Thompson does not want people to identify with him, for anyone trying to emulate the actions that he describes undertaking would certainly drop dead after a few days, if not hours. What he wants to do instead is present himself as a man that his readers cannot identify with, and cannot be sure if he knows exactly what he is even saying. He blurs the line between truth and fiction, as well as hallucination and reality,

and creates a character who is seemingly incapable of giving an account of events that can be fully described by any one of those four words. What this allows him to do is step back, and reject the voice of his persona. By writing "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd." in such a fashion as he does, he is able to endow it with the power of truth that is missing from the rest of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This makes the truths he reveals in that chapter seem all the more real, because the reader is used to an unreliable persona telling the story up to that point.

Harrison wants the reader to get lost in his feelings of sensation and see the value in the phrase "I am one with my sentimentality" (TRTC, 145). He writes sentimental fiction and poetry to show the value of a life lived in full appreciation of the senses, but to truly show how valuable he considers the natural expression of these emotions to be, he creates a persona in his journalism who lives in them fully. By telling stories where he places high values on the sensual experiences of food, fear, and the natural world, Harrison is offering up his own life as evidence for the value of sensation and sentiment.

These authors are not alone in the realm of journalistic self-representation. They were preceded by many great writers, and more continue to do work in the same vein as the three of them today. In closing, I would like to see the ways in which one could perform a reading of other authors based on the conclusions drawn from this work and these three authors. Such readings are usually difficult due to the lack of critical material in this field, but more articles and criticisms, aside from this, are being written that offer interesting ways to frame a discussion of authors based on a reading from this work.

One of those new pieces of critical work will be Robert Boynton's upcoming *The New New Journalism: Conversations on Craft With America's Best Nonfiction Writers*. I

looked at an excerpt from Boynton's book, which was published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education Review* on March 5th, 2005, only two weeks before I submitted this work. As is the case with much of my material, I have Professor Bailey to thank for alerting me to this excellent article. The editors note that the full volume "will be published by Vintage next week," meaning that it should be available now, just after I have finished my work (Boynton, B11). If the excerpt in the *Chronicle Review* is any indication, Boynton should do a great service helping to close "the 30-year gap," he sees "between the end of what was considered the New Journalism and the contemporary writers who were my focus" (Boynton, B10). He has already raised the question in my mind of one author in particular who might be connected to this project in interesting ways: the outdoor journalist Jon Krakauer.

Krakauer is one of the "New New Journalists" mentioned by Boynton. He has written mainly outdoor adventure journalism. This is the first place in which the work I have done could be applied to his journalism. The natural and sensational are always great liberating and strengthening forces for Harrison. The work that Krakauer does about the natural places at the edges of the world, whether on Mt. Everest or in the middle of Alaska, could be analyzed with an eye toward his perception of the natural sensations of the world. If he values them as much as Harrison, one could begin to see a trend across natural experiences in journalism. If not, possibly the act of going and climbing the mountain could be seen to alter the author's perceptions of it, and weaken its power to evoke a sentimental response.

There is another way to read Krakauer in light of the conclusions drawn from this work. Thompson's journalism deals with the problem of the author's presence altering

the actual events of the story he is attempting to report on. The ability of the author to change the events of a story gains deadly importance if one is to consider Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, a book which recounts the May 1996 tragedy on Mt. Everest where nine climbers died in a freak storm. Krakauer was on the mountain as a climber and as a reporter that day, and the question can be raised: what if he took more of an active role in his story? Could he have possibly prevented some of the deaths that day? What does it mean that he is the one who tells the story, one where he does not make mistakes, returns to camp on time, and lives to tell the tale? These questions are similar to the ones raised about Thompson's character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, although the stakes, human lives, are much higher in Krakauer's account. This morbid fact makes the possibility of a reading of *Into Thin Air* with the same eye for possible authorial alteration as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* a very compelling and necessary possibility.

Such a reading of *Into Thin Air* would not be easy, however, given the highly contentious nature of the book, and the writing that has followed in its wake. In his introduction, Krakauer is very forthcoming with the fact that "the staggering unreliability of the human mind at high altitude made the research problematic" (Krakauer, xvi). In this way, the memories of the summit push are as questionable as the memories of the ether binge for Thompson. However, unlike *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, where Thompson is allowed free reign with his interpretations of the truth, Krakauer's work has come under fire.

Another climber on Everest, Russian Anatoli Boukreev, wrote a book of his own, *The Climb*, which was released seven months after *Into Thin Air*. Bourkreev was a guide on Everest, and it was his duty to care for the climbers his company was escorting up the

mountain. In Krakauer's book, he decries Boukreev's maverick attitude, saying "[Boukreev] raced down ahead of the group [of clients] – which in fact had been his pattern throughout the entire expedition" (Krakauer, 219). By not staying to help his clients, Boukreev placed their lives into profound danger, at least in Krakauer's eyes. Boukreev responded in *The Climb* by attempting to discredit both the validity of Krakauer's remembrances of certain events and his skills as a climber. He makes sure to emphasize that Krakauer was in a "debilitated conditio[n]" on Everest, and at various times "collapsed," events that Krakauer omits from his own account of his actions (Boukreev, 171, 156). He also emphasizes not the maverick attitude that Krakauer perceives, but instead his courage and strength as a climber that made him an expertly qualified guide. The debate between the two has spilled over from their own books, as well.

An article was published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* within eight months of *The Climb* titled "Why Books Err So Often," and one of the books it considered to err was Krakauer's. The author, Steve Weinberg, summarizes the debate between Krakauer and Boukreev and concludes that "Boukreev's rebuttals . . . cannot be dismissed out of hand" (Weinberg, 54). The presence of Krakauer's book in an article titled "Why Books Err So Often" implicitly places *Into Thin Air* in a position where its validity must be questioned. Krakauer responded by inserting a postscript into later editions of *Into Thin Air*, but the debate became less contentious when Boukreev died climbing in the Himalayas two months after his book was published.

What the debate surrounding *Into Thin Air* represents for this project is a place where the author's presentation of the facts was questioned, and a public discourse was

opened about a person's private, hazy, recollections. With the death of one of the protagonists in the dispute, the case slowly lost importance and attention. This type of inquiry into the truth of a published report based on muddled recollections makes a comparison to Thompson's memories possible and interesting. The way that the discussion of the truth or falsehood played out in various books and journals makes it very easy to trace the evolution of an argument for the authority of an author to tell a particular story, and the ways in which the authors counter one another's claims reveals a great deal about the way in which literary society views authority and truth. I regret that the possibilities of exploring *Into Thin Air* did not occur to me before seeing the Boynton article for the first time, literally seven days before this work was completed and submitted, despite having been familiar with the book first as an article in *Outside* magazine, and later buying a first-run copy. The possibilities of exploring *Into Thin Air* are one direction that one could go, building on the work in this essay.

That analysis will be left for another day, and possibly another scholar. I hope that this work can provoke some questions in the realm of journalism and the relation of authors to their subjects. It is also my hope I have succeeded in not only provoking, but helping to answer those questions with regard to the three authors included in the work. These are all men who write themselves into their stories, not just for the sake of style or taste, but because they view their own presence in their journalism as essential to telling part of the story. The opportunities that arise from their decision are truly varied, and the different ways that these authors approach those opportunities makes for compelling, engaging journalism.

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