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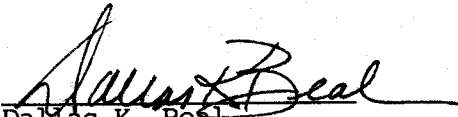
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# Hunter S. Thompson: A Ritual Reenactment of Deviant Behavior

JAMES N. STULL

Hunter S. Thompson grew up in "the stifling small-town atmosphere of Louisville, Kentucky."<sup>1</sup> His father was an insurance agent whose only amusement was going out to the track early in the morning to time the horses. As a teenager Thompson "rebelled," according to Timothy Crouse, by "knocking off" liquor stores and gas stations.<sup>2</sup> In one three-day period, Thompson and two friends robbed the same gas station three times. Thompson recalls standing by his apartment window – which overlooked the gas station – and watching the police investigate the burglaries while he and his friends drank beer. Thompson was also an accomplished shoplifter; he would go empty-handed, he explained, into a jewelry store and leave with a half dozen watches. Though Thompson was never arrested, Louisville authorities "managed to put him in jail for thirty days on a phony rape charge."<sup>3</sup> He was eighteen at the time, and very frightened by his brief period of incarceration. Though Thompson swore off a life of petty crime and decided to devote his life to writing, the articulation of a criminal (deviant) self, both real and metaphoric, would later become the cornerstone of his literary nonfiction.

Shortly after his release from jail, Thompson enlisted in the Air Force and became a sportswriter for the base newspaper. He was also writing for a number of civilian papers under the pen names of "Sebastian Owl" and "Thorne Stockton." When this was discovered, he was fired from the base newspaper and threatened with duty in Iceland. Because of Thompson's general inability to conform to Air Force life, he was discharged two years before his enlistment expired. At the time, Colonel Evans, of the Office of Information Services, made this assessment of Thompson:

This Airman, although talented, will not be guided by policy or personal advice and guidance. Sometimes his rebel and superior attitude seems to rub off on other airmen staff members. He has little consideration for military bearing or dress and seems to dislike the service and want[s] out as soon as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next two years, a series of similar dismissals occurred. Thompson was fired from three writing jobs: in Pennsylvania for wrecking his editor's car; in Middletown, New York for insulting an advertiser and kicking "a candy machine to death"; and at *Time* for his bad attitude.<sup>5</sup> Between 1959 and 1963, he worked in South Africa and the Caribbean as a journalist for the *National Observer* (and on occasion for the *New York Herald Tribune*). While this writing is generally more conventional than his later work, Thompson nonetheless reveals his liberal, if not radical, political beliefs and underscores his social marginality through an identification with disenfranchised others. When

Thompson found himself spending too much time rolling dice at the Domino Club, a club for foreign correspondents, he decided it was time to return to the United States. His departure from the *National Observer* was eventually precipitated by a disagreement with editors over coverage of the Free Speech Movement.

For a time, Thompson worked on a novel and lived in an apartment in San Francisco with his wife, Sandy. In that same year, 1964, Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*, asked him if he would do an article on the Hell's Angels for \$100. Thompson accepted, recalling later that the fee was enough to cover the following month's rent. The article was eventually expanded, of course, into *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, in which Thompson wrote sympathetically about, and even identified with, the notorious "outlaw" motorcycle gang.

In the ensuing three years, Thompson wrote for *Pageant*, *The Distant Drummer*, and *Scanlan's Monthly*, and later ran for Sheriff of Aspen County on the Freak Power Ticket. Thompson's tentative platform included plans to rip up city streets and replace them with sod and to restrict fishing and hunting to Aspen residents. Thompson also promised to limit his use of LSD to non-working hours. (He lost by only six votes.)

In 1970 he began his association with Jann Wenner, Editor and Publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine. The relationship proved to be a mutually beneficial one. The freshness and new energy Wenner was looking for, following his 1970 purge of editors and writers, was provided by Thompson. In turn, Wenner gave Thompson the creative latitude needed to develop the "Gonzo" style that now characterizes such works as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Curse of Lono*. Thompson became National Affairs Editor at *Rolling Stone* in 1970, and held the position until 1974. He continued his relationship with the magazine into the early 1980's. In more recent years, Thompson has worked in a massage parlor (doing research) and contributed a weekly column to the *San Francisco Examiner*.

In this brief biographical sketch, we can see that Thompson's "criminal" past, his early dismissal from the Air Force, as well as other problems he had keeping writing jobs, point more generally to his repudiation of authority and his refusal to conform to the behavioral dictates of a socially defined role, whether it be citizen of Louisville, enlisted airman, or journalist. Thompson is all too willing to identify himself in opposition to virtually any cultural norm – as an "outlaw" or "deviant" – and make a public record of his felonious past: "I took that fatal dive off the straight and narrow path so long ago that I can't remember when I first become [sic] a felon – but I have been one ever since, and it's way too late to change now. In the eyes of The Law, my whole life has been one long and sinful felony."<sup>6</sup> Although Thompson's "outlaw" status seems as much chosen as conferred, it is also, as this passage suggests, a confirmation of the title ascribed to him by the normative culture. As Erving Goffman points out, the deviant can never quite escape from his past: "What often results is not the acquisition of fully normal status, but a transformation of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having corrected a particular blemish."<sup>7</sup> Though Thompson has largely put an end to his criminal past, he still defines himself throughout his nonfiction as what he once was: a felon (i.e., outlaw, deviant). Therefore, we must first begin to interpret Thompson's work through this initial metaphor of the self, for his writings repeatedly dramatize his adversarial relationship to mainstream culture.

More specifically, in a number of works Thompson describes himself ambiguously as a fugitive on the lam, running from some undefined or questionably real authority. His flight is fueled by a paranoia that is both real and comically imagined, by a feeling of persecution that is dramatized and exaggerated for literary purposes. Thompson's story, as we shall see, is one of personal breakdown and recovery. Because he moves between the secluded and private world of his Woody Creek, Colorado home (and other symbolic sanctuaries) and the larger world outside, it is essential that we see his oeuvre not as a collection of individual works but as one ongoing saga of emergence and renewal, as a ritual enactment of deviant behavior in which the dynamic relation between putative outsider and the normative culture is chronicled and explored during a period of social crisis and change. In the following pages I will reconstruct the essential pieces of this personal, literary and cultural story.

To start with, Thompson's journalistic assignments might be rightfully understood as journeys that begin with the departure from the real and symbolic sanctuary of his Woody Creek home. Early in *The Curse of Lono*, Thompson explains to the reader, by way of a letter to illustrator Ralph Steadman, that "the time has come to kick ass, Ralph, even if it means coming briefly out of retirement and dealing, once again, with the public. I am also in need of a rest – for legal reasons – so I want this gig to be *easy*."<sup>8</sup> (He is assigned to cover the Honolulu Marathon for *Running* magazine.) Thompson's "gigs" (journalism assignments) are never easy, however, and in fact they are potentially dangerous, as he suggests in the opening pages of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Thompson leaves the "pastoral" and private retreat of Woody Creek and then comments on the public world of Washington, D.C.: "Life runs fast & mean in this town," he explains. "It's like living in an armed camp, a condition of constant fear."<sup>9</sup> Thompson's trepidation reveals (on a personal level) a dislike of socially defined and densely populated space and simultaneously establishes (on rhetorical and cultural levels) the central conflict of his writing: the deviant (outsider) confronting a brutal and at times punitive mainstream culture. His return to "civilization" (Washington, D.C.), he wryly notes, "was not mentioned by any of the society columnists."<sup>10</sup>

Though a prescribed story is assigned to Thompson, he generally rejects it in favor of a more spontaneous and less predictable alternative or he subverts the journalism occasion and redefines the assignment on his own idiosyncratic terms. For example, before Thompson and Oscar Acosta attend the National District Attorney's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, chronicled in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he discloses his plan to disrupt the event:

... our very *presence* would be an outrage. We would be attending the conference under false pretenses and dealing, from the start, with a crowd that was convened for the stated purpose of putting people like us in jail. We *were* the Menace – not in disguise, but stone-obvious drug abusers, with a flagrantly cranked-up act that we intended to push all the way to the limit<sup>11</sup>

Later in the motel bar, Thompson and Acosta talk to a district attorney from Georgia. They spin an elaborate and totally fictitious tale about depraved, Manson-like sex fiends and drug addicts from California who will soon be invading the South. By the time they conclude their story, the naive D.A. is in a state of utter fear and loathing. Though Thompson and Acosta are playfully "jiving" the Georgia D.A., their presence constitutes, nonetheless, a kind of deviant "noise," a calculated and profane articulation of self that

disrupts our typical interpretation of reality and replaces it, in this case, with a tale of semantic and symbolic disorder. In many respects, Thompson's "playful" antics are the equivalent, on a smaller and personal scale, of the guerrilla tactics and street theater staged by adversarial groups such as the Yippies. Though Thompson's articulation of a deviant self is certainly autobiographical, the product of an allegedly criminal past, the original appearance of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in two 1971 issues of *Rolling Stone* would also be appreciated by members of a youth culture who listened to psychedelic music and experimented increasingly with hallucinogenic drugs.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson is also sent to cover the Mint 400 motorcycle race. He is unable to see the race, however, because a cloud of dust hovers in the wake of the motorcycles. "The idea of trying to 'cover this race' in any conventional press-sense," Thompson explains, "was absurd: It was like trying to keep track of a swimming meet in an Olympic-sized pool filled with talcum powder instead of water."<sup>12</sup> Since he is such a vituperative critic of the conventional press, Thompson seems to suggest that mainstream journalism practices do not so much illuminate as obscure. Thompson retires to the hotel bar and, several pages later, asks himself: "Was I just roaming around these Mint Hotel escalators in a drug frenzy of some kind, or had I really come out here to Las Vegas to work on a story?"<sup>13</sup> As is often the case, Thompson is never quite sure what the story is. Over four-fifths of the way through *The Curse of Lono*, Thompson tells the reader, by way of a letter to Ralph Steadman, that he doesn't know what he is doing on the Kona Coast. Thompson's apparent insouciance is in part a rhetorical ploy, one example of the reportorial license both his editors and reading constituency expect: Thompson performing as the irresponsible journalist. Thompson's irresponsible behavior indeed appears to be unpremeditated and more spontaneous than other literary journalists on specific assignment. He is also re-enacting, however, a personal and symbolic drama, first scripted in his youth and adolescence, that reaffirms his deviant identity in an older self. Erik Erikson explains that every person "harbors a *negative identity* as the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable."<sup>14</sup> At times of personal or social crises, however, a person may not be able to control these "negative elements in a positive identity." Thompson, I would argue, periodically – and quite intentionally – invokes these negative elements of personal behavior in moments of adulthood and reinvents, in a positive and symbolically autobiographical way, a psychosocial deviant self. Much like Norman Mailer, for example, Thompson retains as a journalist and person much of the "innocence" and irreverence of youth, and his repeated anarchic behavior seems to be the metaphorical embodiment of childhood resentment against adult control and authority. This is repeatedly illustrated in his criticism of traditional – and authoritative – journalism practices.

Thompson challenges, for example, the arbitrary nature of conventional journalism forms (stories) and offers a more indeterminate reading of social and personal reality. The serendipitous nature of Thompson's journey suggests, for example, that the idea for an assignment is not so much prescribed as discovered. The story and its concomitant meanings are revealed in piecemeal fashion, as Thompson chronicles, often haphazardly, his picaresque encounters. Thompson's journalism may even be seen as a parodic quest for meaning. The epistemological assumptions that buttress conven-

tional journalism are largely inverted or ignored. For example, Thompson frequently illustrates his general disdain for conventional journalism practices: "So this article is not going to end the way I thought it would . . . and looking back at the lead I see that it didn't even start that way either. As for the middle, I can barely remember it."<sup>15</sup> More specifically, Thompson criticizes journalists for their continued use of the Pyramid Lead; he claims that five generations of journalists have clung to its "petrified tit." But it is not merely that Thompson questions such conventional ordering of facts; he questions the factual base of non-fiction writing itself. Much of the criticism Thompson has incurred centers on his apparently slipshod journalistic practices.

In his review of Theodore H. White's *The Making of the President 1972* and Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, for instance, Wayne C. Booth rates each journalist according to how well he establishes credibility with the reader. "How does he know what he says?" Booth asks. Well, Thompson gets an "F," because, "shit, man, his ethos ain't no fuckin' good."<sup>16</sup> Booth goes on to explain that since Thompson has admittedly lied so often, he won't believe anything Thompson says unless it is corroborated by another source. Thompson, however, does not build his story, as do John McPhee and Gay Talese, on a series of referential facts: that house-of-card journalism in which one "erroneous" fact may cause the whole structure to crack if not tumble. Thompson defamiliarizes, or estranges, our understanding of conventional journalism and exposes the institutional means by which more orthodox journalists make sense out of reality. He acknowledges the "fraudulent," or fictive, nature of his enterprise, while the more conventional journalists seldom recognize their arbitrary claims of objectivity. The subjective reality (or unreality) of Thompson's world is, paradoxically, predicated on the unreliability of the participant-narrator. While Thompson may resort to hyperbole and even make up stories – like the one he allegedly told the Georgia D.A. – we can count on him to be as "truthful" as other credible journalists. As John Hellmann explains, "Presenting journalistic events through the perceptions of this maddened, even hallucinating, persona, Thompson presents his black humorist vision of those actual events without violating their actuality."<sup>17</sup>

When Thompson is on an assignment, he is generally accompanied by an equally (un)reliable travelling partner: with Oscar Acosta in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, with Yail Bloor in "The Great Shark Hunt," with Ralph Steadman in "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," and with Gene Skinner in *The Curse of Lono*. This allows Thompson to divide his personality, as Jerome Klinkowitz points out, into "*mutually exclusive personae*":

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson travels as himself, but arrives under the credit-card pseudonym of Raoul Duke; much of the extravagant behavior is then attributed to Duke (Thompson's own nickname), whom Thompson can properly deplore. Acting and observing at the same time, Thompson also extends his persona to a third level: bringing along his attorney, identified on the dustjacket as Oscar Zeta Acosta, who in the book is made to perform the more outrageous acts which Thompson can amplify and extend by his own expressions of horror and disgust.<sup>18</sup>

Thompson's personal and contextual association with various sidekicks also invokes the pattern of male bonding found in much American popular culture and, as well, reaffirms his inclusion in an exclusively masculine world. Thompson and his partners' picaresque encounters reveal, not surprisingly, "the traditional American hero's reluctance to

become involved with females whom he encounters on his travels."<sup>19</sup> In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, for example, Oscar Acosta meets a mentally unstable young woman named Lucy and then brings her back to the hotel room. When her alleged psychosis is exacerbated by drugs they supply, Acosta and Thompson are quick to assume that she will be not merely a burden but also directly responsible for getting them in trouble with either the police or hotel management. In *The Curse of Lono*, as I have noted, Thompson is assigned to cover the Honolulu marathon. He reveals, after twenty-nine pages, that he is accompanied by his fiancée. She remains unnamed, however. When Thompson meets his old friend Gene Skinner, he leaves his fiancée at the hotel while they begin a series of wild and serendipitous adventures involving fishing, native "bashing," and, of course, drinking. Thompson's fiancée reappears only occasionally in the image of a contemporary Dame Van Winkle, who is either calling Thompson a "bastard" and a "drunken sot" or criticizing him for his irresponsible and callous behavior. Because Thompson so uniformly criticizes the people he encounters on his travels, and simultaneously cultivates a journalistic self who uses aggression and verbal insult as forms of survival, it seems hardly fair to identify his actions as intentionally sexist. Yet, these examples seem freighted with an unexpressed anxiety about the alleged role women play in domesticating men. At the very least, in reporting on subjects such as the Hell's Angels and national politics Thompson constructs and reaffirms, perhaps unintentionally, an exclusively male society. Many works of American literary journalism are, in fact, a celebration and affirmation of various masculine worlds: for example, Talese's study of the Bonanno mafia family, Wolfe's examination of the space program, Plimpton's forays into sport, and Herr's chronicle of marines in Vietnam. In exploring these worlds, Thompson and other literary journalists reaffirm their generic male identities and reinforce traditionally masculine gender roles by inadequately examining the ideological underpinnings of these exclusive male societies.

Thompson's exclusion of women and his eventual flight from society may reveal, as it did in the lives of some "Beat" writers, not merely a rejection of a crass material culture but also a refusal to accept certain adult responsibilities and an inability to have a traditional relationship with a member of the opposite sex. To be fair to Thompson, however, his symbolic (if not real) exclusion of women is at least in part a calculated rhetorical strategy underscoring his social marginality. Thompson seems to believe in the sovereignty of an imperial male self and adamantly spurns any pro-social "forces" which threaten his independence.

Throughout his work, in fact, Thompson repeatedly dramatizes the precarious existence of this autonomous self. It is often not clear, however, why he is affected and even victimized so severely when he leaves the sanctuary of his Colorado home and reenters society. Thompson often relies on superficial cultural observations to explain his behavior and personal transformation. He too readily suggests that American culture is merely a harsh and punitive one, based on and perverted by a predatory capitalist system. Thompson's deficiency as a cultural critic centers on his refusal to discuss adequately the causes of his personal behavior. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, for example, Raoul Duke [Thompson] says "I am tired. I'm scared. I'm crazy. This culture has beaten me down."<sup>20</sup> In "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," Thompson explains that he and Steadman are victims of "culture shock." And in *The Curse of Lono*

the Kona Coast weather, persistent wind and rain, is even advanced as an explanation for Thompson's anti-social behavior. In some instances, he more specifically acknowledges that he is changed by the people about whom he writes. Sixty-six pages into *Hell's Angels*, for example, Thompson explains that he has become "so involved in the outlaw scene that" he "was no longer sure whether" he "was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them."<sup>21</sup> By the conclusion of "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," Thompson's transformation and identification with the "other" is complete:

Huge Pontiac Ballbuster blowing through traffic on the expressway. A radio news bulletin says the National Guard is massacring students at Kent State and Nixon is still bombing Cambodia. The journalist is driving, ignoring his passenger who is now nearly naked after taking off most of his clothing, which he holds out the window, trying to wind-wash the Mace out of it. His eyes are bright red and his face and chest are soaked with beer he's been using to rinse the awful chemical off his flesh. The front of his woolen trousers is soaked with vomit; his body is racked with fits of coughing and wild choking sobs. The journalist rams the big car through traffic and into a spot in front of the terminal, then he reaches over to open the door on the passenger's side and shoves the Englishman out, snarling: "Bug off, you worthless faggot. You twisted pigfucker! [Crazed laughter.] If I weren't so sick I'd kick your ass all the way to Bowling Green - you scumsucking foreign geek. Mace is too good for you . . . We can do without your kind in Kentucky."<sup>22</sup>

Having used the first person throughout the piece, Thompson refers to himself as the "journalist" in the conclusion. This self-distancing is one of the few instances in which the disembodied voice of the narrator is distinctly separated from Thompson the social actor. Thompson acknowledges that his personal (core) self is threatened, even usurped, by an extrinsically determined social self and identifies the chauvinistic and potentially destructive dimensions of a culture that not only shapes his behavior but symbolically rejects him when his alter-ego and travelling partner, Ralph Steadman, is driven from society. Thompson seems unable, perhaps unwilling, to compromise his personal self and accept the self-alienation which occurs with being part of a larger social unit. Thompson's crises of self repeatedly underscore Richard Poirier's point about the difficulty of "organizing a self and a destiny for a self within the contexts that impose a self and a destiny."<sup>23</sup> Thompson suggests that the only alternative is to escape from this coercive social order. Thompson's picture of society is, in the end, an anti-cultural statement bolstered by a nihilistic despair. A stable sense of self - his ego identity - is neither created nor confirmed by his interaction with other social beings. In fact, the survival of self is predicated, paradoxically, upon his escape from society. Seemingly, the only healthy self is a solitary one.

While Thompson's journalistic and metaphorical selves teeter on the brink of absorption by mainstream culture, he also defines himself as a countercultural model, an emblematic figure who endorses and gives life to a repertoire of unorthodox practices and beliefs. Conservative journalists, public officials, and certain literary critics dislike Thompson or his work because he carefully disobeys social rules and assumptions of conventional journalism which define appropriate behavior and presume to signify how reality and truth are defined. Thompson, for example, scorns the Protestant work ethic by cultivating a commitment to live for the moment. Thompson, furthermore, challenges the limits of consciousness, as well as the limits of the law, with his use of drugs. Whether



inhabiting the physical space of his Woody Creek home or the psychic space of LSD, Thompson thrives in this marginal area that exists between civilization and anarchy. Thompson, as a romantic, feels most alive when the self exists precariously between ecstasy and annihilation, when he takes his body to the "Edge," as he calls it, through taking drugs or driving big, fast, powerful motorcycles. Thompson, for example, describes one motorcycle ride he took on a deserted stretch of highway:

with the throttle screwed on there is only the barest margin, and no room at all for mistakes. It has to be done right . . . and that's when the strange music starts, when you stretch your luck so far that fear becomes exhilaration and vibrates along your arms. You can barely see at a hundred; the tears blow back so fast that they vaporize before they get to your ears. The only sounds are wind and a dull roar floating back from the mufflers. You watch the white line and try to lean with it . . . howling through a turn to the right, then to the left and down the long hill to Pacifica . . . letting off now, watching for cops, but only until the next dark stretch and another few seconds on . . . The Edge . . . There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. The others – the living – are those who pushed their control as far as they felt they could handle it, and then pulled back, or slowed down, or did whatever they had to when it came time to choose between Now and Later.<sup>24</sup>

Thompson lives for today as if there will be no tomorrow, as the passage suggests. Thompson himself has said, on more than one occasion, that he had lived six or seven lives by the time he was twenty-seven and "with a sense of doom, a conviction that he should never have lived past thirty."<sup>25</sup> On a textual level, having lived six or seven lives has its correlative in the symbolic deaths and renewals Thompson experiences each time he reenters society and later retreats from it. Though Thompson's compulsion to destroy the self is the result of an excessive and irresponsible lifestyle, it is also, paradoxically, a mechanism of survival, a way of coping with and shielding himself from the normative culture. That is, the use of drugs breaks down control of reason and liberates social inhibitions while it erodes the ego boundaries that began with Thompson's contact with a punitive social order.

In "Autobiography as the Presentation of Self for Social Immortality," Irving Louis Horowitz explains that autobiographical writing is a "social injunction" – not merely a literary event – that gives instruction to others about "how one should conduct the 'good' and avoid the 'bad' influences of that society."<sup>26</sup> Thompson, however, cultivates a model of "otherness" and extols certain patterns of behavior and codes of dress – signs of identity – that society deems inappropriate or improper. In *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, for example, he explains that "my garb and general demeanor is not considered normal by Washington standards. Levis don't make it in this town . . . This is particularly true at high level press conferences, where any deviation from standard journalistic dress is considered rude and perhaps even dangerous."<sup>27</sup> He announces similarly that he was the only campaign reporter who was an "openly hostile Peace Freak . . . the only one who'd smoke grass on Nixon's big Greyhound press bus, and certainly the only one who habitually referred to the candidate as the 'dingbat.'"<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Thompson's annunciation of deviance does not necessarily discredit him as we might expect. In fact, it constitutes a unique identity peg, a self-acknowledged token of his stigma. That is, for example, in identifying "trademark fetishes," a "love for Wild Turkey bourbon, exotic cars, powerful handguns, the Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle, Dober-

man pinschers, drugs, extremely amplified music, and violent rhetoric,"<sup>29</sup> Thompson at once affirms a masculine identity and deliberately projects an image of self which affirms his deviant status.

More specifically, Thompson plays the trickster figure who mischievously disrupts the social order or shows his disdain for certain persons, while he underscores his role as deviant or putative outsider. Thompson thus enacts much of the playful and passive-aggressive posturing that characterized the behavior of the counterculture, most notably the Yippies. In *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, for example, Thompson writes that he lent his press badge to a stranger who later got obnoxiously drunk and disrupted the Muskie campaign train. On another occasion, he explains that he boarded a press bus and sat behind a conservative journalist, James Kilpatrick, and began mumbling about doing hits of acid until the journalist finally retreated to the back of the bus. Thompson not only plays the trickster but tacitly acknowledges his awareness of the role he is playing. The audience, of course, is familiar with Thompson's use of drugs and he plays to this awareness by projecting an image others have come to expect, if not fully understand. He no longer actually needs to use drugs, for he has internalized this role and wears the mask that represents the concept embraced by these shared acts. As performer, he underplays certain real-life activities, facts, and characteristics while underscoring others that are compatible with this "idealized" version of the self. The alleged spontaneity of Thompson's behavior undergoes, paradoxically, "a certain bureaucratization of the spirit." The "variable impulses" of Thompson's all-too-human self are redefined in social and literary terms in order that he "give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time."<sup>30</sup> In other words, while Thompson voluntarily offers symbols of his marginality, they may very well represent how the deviant has internalized the culture's perception of how he should dress and behave.

As outlaw and cultural outsider, Thompson characteristically emphasizes his feelings of paranoia and guilt, which generally increase (usually at the end of a story) when his behavior gets more frantic and unpredictable. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and "The Great Shark Hunt," for example, as well as in *The Curse of Lono*, Thompson sees himself as a fugitive pursued by a questionably real authority. Part of Thompson's fear and paranoia may be legitimate; there are, for instance, unpaid hotel bills, purported or actual trashings of hotel rooms, a questionable line of credit, and extravagant living expenses his sponsor may not cover. Thompson is not only burdened by paranoia and guilt but believes these responses must be transparent to others. At the conclusion of "The Great Shark Hunt," Thompson and Yail Bloor arrive at the Monterey Airport and are immediately asked, over the Public Address system, to report to the Immigration Desk. There they are met by "a small, muscular-looking cop in a white shirt and glasses."<sup>31</sup> Since the two have been drinking and taking illegal substances, Thompson refers to the cop as their "accuser," and acknowledges that their "gig" is up. As is usually the case, Thompson is not "caught"; in fact, he has not actually been pursued. The policeman intended only to help them make their connecting flight more quickly. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson even imagines that he and Oscar Acosta are brought to trial and charged for crimes they did not commit.

On one level, Thompson's paranoia accurately captures the feeling shared by many counterculture figures in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In addition, while Thomp-

son's feelings of paranoia, guilt and persecution may have originated in his criminal past, they are revealed here as a metaphor of self to be dramatized for literary purposes. Thompson, of course, is seldom chased and never apprehended by the law. Yet, the reader is led to believe that his capture is an imminent possibility. Frequently, as in "The Great Shark Hunt," the imagined chase occurs near the story's conclusion and functions as a climax to the piece. The reader wonders: will Thompson escape? These flights from authority also confirm his outsider status and simultaneously ritualize the manner in which deviants are disposed of. Thompson is not only a symbolic challenge or threat to the social order; he has also internalized the cultural process of social control by acting as both jury and judge to crimes that he may or may not have committed. The final punishment, of course, is expulsion from society, which Thompson himself fosters by his self-conscious acts of deviance. Thompson may not only be encoding allegedly autobiographical events in a recognizable storyline but also symbolically enacting the role of punishing and authoritative adult which is so often part of deviant personalities.

Thompson's personal breakdowns are often most tangibly dramatized as he attempts to complete an assignment. His representative deterioration is reflected in, and becomes part of, the storyline. Two-thirds of the way through "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" when all hell is breaking loose, Thompson loses control of narrative coherence and provides readers only bits and scraps from his notebook. "My notes and recollections from Derby Day," Thompson explains, "are somewhat scrambled."<sup>33</sup> Frequently, we learn of Thompson's desperate condition in an "Editor's Note." From *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*: "At this point in the chronology, Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely. The original manuscript is so splintered that we were forced to seek out the original tape recording and transcribe it verbatim."<sup>33</sup> Thompson suggests that the narrator self, like the actor self, is no longer in control. In fact, the insertion of an editorial note suggests that Thompson the author or person is no longer in control:

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

Due to circumstances beyond our control, the following was lashed together . . . from a six-pound bundle of documents, notebooks, memos, recordings and secretly taped phone conversations with Dr. Thompson during a month of erratic behavior in Washington, New York, Colorado, and Miami. . . . In the meantime, we have suspended his monthly retainer and canceled his credit cards. During one four-day period in Washington he destroyed two cars, cracked a wall in the Washington Hilton, purchased two French Horns at \$1,100 each and ran through a plate-glass door in a Turkish restaurant.<sup>34</sup>

On the one hand, Thompson identifies the personal and metaphorical breakdowns for dramatic reasons. He heightens the conflict between himself (as deviant) and mainstream culture and intensifies the reading experience by suggesting that his survival – at least his health – is literally doubtful. In addition, he makes readers aware that the enterprise has been both "salvaged" and subverted by his performance as "outlaw" journalist and "psychotic" cultural critic. Thompson often parodies journalistic writing, and thereby acknowledges the expendability of such endeavors, while he suggests, perhaps paradoxically, that writing is the final testament of selfhood. In the finishing process, for example, Thompson frequently asserts that the copy he is "pounding" out is at best spontaneous and unedited and at worst "the most desperate last-minute hamburger jobs in the history of journalism."<sup>35</sup> Thompson parodies the harried journalist working under deadline pressure and testifies to the "gibberish" produced under such

circumstances. Thereby he criticizes one of the constraints of mainstream journalism. He leads the reader to believe that his stories end simply because of editorial demands. Thompson finds himself inextricably caught up in a system he wishes to criticize and separate himself from. Thompson very self-consciously comments on the limitations of journalism, and in so doing is able to exercise a certain freedom within a medium that militates against creative indulgence. This helps to explain the frequent digressions, and his acknowledgement of those digressions, that punctuate Thompson's work. It is another way to press the limits of the form. "Jesus! Another tangent, and right up front, this time – the whole *lead*, in fact, completely fucked."<sup>36</sup> As Hellmann explains, Thompson keeps "nearly constant focus upon his narrator's consciousness; he never lets the reader forget that he is sitting at a desk in a definite place, composing the account while fully aware of the conditions under which he writes."<sup>37</sup> As we move toward the end of a text, we become increasingly aware that his writing is a verbal performance, a self-reflexive process rather than a codification of significance about a subject beyond the text. In fact, its "unique value is that it can elucidate its own expendability."<sup>38</sup>

After Thompson finishes an assignment, it is necessary for him to spend time recuperating in the isolation of his Woody Creek home or in some other symbolic sanctuary. At the end of *The Curse of Lono*, for example, Thompson explains that because of his erratic behavior – and because he has proclaimed himself to be the reincarnation of the Hawaiian God Lono – the natives decide to expel him from society. Thompson, imagining once again he is being chased – in this instance, by hired thugs – retreats to the mythic City of Refuge, where he lives in isolation and promises to write his life story. In identifying with Lono – the God of excess and abundance, an appropriate alter-ego – Thompson self-consciously parodies his status as a mythic figure.

On a social level, Thompson's escape from society, particularly in his earlier works, coincides with the counter-culture's rural retreat in the early 1970's. Moreover, it invokes the mythic American Adam who must free himself from the complications and injustices of an allegedly corrupt society in order to preserve and reaffirm an imperial male self. While Thompson's persona shares similar traits with other American heroes and anti-heroes, he parodies the myth of the American Adam and encodes his experiences in the form of quest narratives which have little, if any, meaning. Traditionally, the quester's physical journey represents a psychological search for identity. The circular pattern of the journey and narrative reflects an integrated world view and affirms an identifiable value system shared by a community of others. Thompson begins his journey in pursuit of the unknown – he doesn't know what the real story is – and returns home no more enlightened than when he left. Unlike the tight, circular structure of the traditional quest narrative, Thompson's work becomes more loose and fragmented as he attempts to bring it to a close. The erosion of the story-line coincides with Thompson's own breakdown. For Thompson, the quester's experience is not so much the means by which self-discovery takes place, in which identity is created or confirmed, as it is the means by which the personal and metaphorical selves are obviated or destroyed by a punitive and destructive social order.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), 334.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* (New York: Summit Books, 1979), 14.
- <sup>5</sup> Craig Vetter, "Playboy Interview: Hunter Thompson," *Playboy*, Nov. 1974, 75.
- <sup>6</sup> Thompson. *Great Shark Hunt*, 473.
- <sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 9.
- <sup>8</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Curse of Lono* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Popular Library, 1973), 24.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>11</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (New York: Popular Library, 1973), 109.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.
- <sup>14</sup> Erik Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1957), 20.
- <sup>15</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail*, 248.
- <sup>16</sup> Wayne C. Booth, "Loathing and Ignorance on the Campaign Trail: 1972," *Columbia Journalism Review* (Nov. 1973): 10.
- <sup>17</sup> John Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 69.
- <sup>18</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, *The Life of Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 39-40.
- <sup>19</sup> Hellmann, *Fables of Fact*, 71.
- <sup>20</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 84.
- <sup>21</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 66.
- <sup>22</sup> Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 38.

- 23 Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Language of Contemporary Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13.
- 24 Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 345.
- 25 Robert Sam Anson, "The Rolling Stone Sage: Part Two," *New Times*, 10 December, 1976, p. 24.
- 26 Irving Louis Horowitz, "Autobiography as the Presentation of Self for Social Mortality," *New Literary History* 9 (Autumn 1977): 173.
- 27 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail*, 42.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 29 Hellmann, *Fables of Fact*, 70.
- 30 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959), 56.
- 31 Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 447.
- 33 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 161.
- 34 Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 261.
- 35 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail*, 187.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 37 Hellmann, *Fables of Fact*, 87.
- 38 Poirier, *The Performing Self*, 43.