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FORM AND TRUTH IN LITERARY NONFICTION

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School
of The Ohio State University

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*****

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I. A THEORY OF LITERARY NONFICTION

What is a historical fact? A spent shell? A bombed-out building? A pile of shoes? A victory parade? A long march? Once it has been suffered it maintains itself in the mind of witness or victim, and if it is to reach anyone else it is transmitted in words or on film and it becomes an image, which, with other images, constitutes a judgment. I am well aware that some facts, for instance the Nazi extermination of the Jews, are so indisputably monstrous as to seem to stand alone. But history shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning, and it is the cultural authority from which they both derive that illuminates those facts so that they can be perceived.

—E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents"

What do we mean when we contend that a nonfiction narrative is literary? This question has become increasingly important in light of excellent writing by Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Michael Herr, and others, and in response to literary historians, such as Robert Scholes and David Lodge, who argue that our cultural aesthetic is demanding texts which define "reality" and "realism" in new ways. Critical attention to the New Journalism has succeeded in increasing our understanding and appreciation of particular works, but there remains a great deal of confusion about theoretical issues, such as the distinction between fact and fiction, the qualities of literary status in nonfiction, and the responsibilities of the author in turning history into art. Much of the confusion comes from terms like "nonfiction novel," grandiose assertions like, "There is no difference
between fiction and nonfiction," and simple-minded definitions of artistic nonfiction based on the use of techniques common in fiction. In this study I will argue that literary nonfiction is fundamentally different from fiction, in spite of their resemblances in structure or technique, and I will try to construct a theory of literary nonfiction which can do justice to both its factual status and its power as narrative discourse. This theory will also have implications for definitions of literature, of truth in narrative, and of the role of narrative technique in determining literary genres. I will begin by trying to sort out some differences among truth, facts, and fiction.

In "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" John Searle points out that the distinction we commonly make between factual and fictional statements is based, not on any characteristic of the statements themselves, but on our perception of the kind of statement being intended. Suppose a friend tells an amazing anecdote. If we believe it to be a joke or an invention, we look for a punchline or narrative flourishes; if we think it is a true story, we may formulate questions in our minds, asking for supplementary information. The proper response is indicated by the type of story we think we are being told, and that decision in turn is influenced by factors such as how well we know the storyteller, the social context, and antecedent conversation, as well as by properties of the story itself. We may not be sure what kind of story we are being told, in which case we prepare for a joke, so as to avoid being duped into treating invention as fact. In any event, we can never know purely on internal evidence whether the story is meant to be taken as true. Perhaps the teller is insane, in which
case he may intend his story to be taken seriously, though our inclination is to doubt it. In that doubt lies a clue to the difference between fiction and nonfiction. It would not make sense to "doubt" a work of fiction. When we claim that something is a "true story," we mean either that it is to be taken in a certain way, or that it can serve as an adequate representation of real events. The madman's tale is "true" in the first sense, but not in the second. The first distinction is between fact and fiction, the second between good and bad fact.

This difference is important because, as the example of the anecdote illustrates, different sorts of responses are appropriate for fiction and nonfiction. Moreover, the author is sole determinant of whether a text is fact or fiction, while the reader is sole determinant of whether a work is good or bad fact. I will use the terms "factual status" and "factual adequacy" to distinguish between these two different kinds of "truth." A fictional text has neither factual status nor factual adequacy; a nonfiction text has factual status, but we would have to resolve by debate the question of its factual adequacy. Status is either/or, a binary matter determined by "the illocutionary intentions of the author," while adequacy is a relative matter which every reader must finally determine for herself.

As long as we are talking about anecdotes, the problem remains relatively simple. Things become more complex when we start looking at longer stories, especially the complex, imaginative works of literary nonfiction which are the subject of this study. Our test case in this chapter will be Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A True Account of a
Multiple Murder and Its Consequences. In subtitle, Acknowledgements, and interviews Capote claimed that the book was "immaculately factual." He unquestionably wanted his book to have factual status, and most readers have taken In Cold Blood as nonfiction. However, there is a strong tendency among critics to talk about the book as a kind of novel. This tendency is based, oddly enough, on two very different evaluations of the book. Some critics argue that In Cold Blood is radically inaccurate, and so should be labeled "fiction," whereas others so admire its dramatic power that they want to grant it honorary status as a novel. In analyzing these two positions we may be able to clarify the notions of factual status and factual adequacy, and explain their usefulness in a theory of literary nonfiction.

Perhaps the most interesting reaction to the publication of In Cold Blood was Philip K. Tompkins' research into the events of the book. His article, "In Cold Fact," details the discrepancies he found, places where Capote deliberately or accidentally departed from the actual events so far as Tompkins could determine them. Though he is willing to grant Capote the benefit of every doubt, Tompkins concludes that at the very least Capote put his own observations into the mouths and minds of other characters, and at the worst he created a mixed-up, inaccurate portrait of the murderer Perry Smith:

For premeditated murder performed in coldblood, Capote substituted unpremeditated murder performed in a fit of insanity. Art triumphs over reality, fiction over nonfiction. By imparting conscience and compassion to Perry, Capote was able to convey qualities of inner sensitivity, poetry, and a final posture of contrition in his hero. The killer cries. He asks to have his hand held. He says, "I'm embraced by shame." He apologizes. It is a moving portrait but not, I submit, of the
man who actually was Perry Smith—the man who, in real life, told his friend Cullivan he was not sorry, the same man who would not play the hypocrite with Cullivan or his old friend Willie-Jay.3

If Capote did indeed "create" Perry Smith, that decision has important consequences for our evaluation of In Cold Blood, because critics have generally agreed that Smith is the protagonist of the book, and that one of Capote's central aims is indicated by the intended irony of the title: it is Smith rather than the Clutter family who is killed "in cold blood."4

If Capote's book were a novel, Tompkins' research would, of course, be impossible. Since it is nonfiction, however, competing accounts are relevant, perhaps in some cases even vital. How factually adequate is In Cold Blood, and how important is the answer to that question in deciding on the value of the book? Melvin J. Friedman believes that Capote "cheated," but that his doing so does not matter much: "Despite the convincing claims of unreliability . . . we must still believe in the essential authenticity and integrity of Capote's account."5 Unfortunately, Friedman does not go into detail about what constitutes "the essential authenticity and integrity" of the book, nor about how that may be preserved in the face of inaccuracies. If one believes, on the other hand, that Capote's "cheating" weakened his book (primarily through sentimentalizing his protagonist), what is the appropriate response? For Tompkins, it is to conclude that "Art triumphs over reality, fiction over nonfiction."

In the terms of our analysis, Tompkins reasons from factual inadequacy to fictional status. Ignoring Capote's intentions, Tompkins
decides to read all or part of *In Cold Blood* as fiction. This is the same move as labeling an exposed hoax, such as the "Hitler diaries," a fiction. We may not be much bothered by this, because of the common use of the word "fiction" to describe anything false. But for the purposes of literary criticism, do we really want a definition of fiction that includes discredited narratives of fact, such as lies, misguided histories, and unethical journalism? I would prefer Searle's more precise distinction between works intended to be read and evaluated as fiction, and works intended to be read and evaluated as fact. If we use Searle's definition, it follows that one can never move backward from the issue of factual adequacy to any determination of factual or fictional status. From this perspective it is easier to recognize that Tompkins is doing a disservice to "art" by relegating to it whatever errors Capote may have made. If Capote seriously misrepresented the character of Perry Smith, the result is not a triumph of "fiction over nonfiction," but of lying over truth-telling, or blindness over insight.⁶

There is more to Tompkins' argument, however, than confusion over the use of the word "fiction." Apparently undercutting his own investigations, Tompkins concludes that *In Cold Blood* is a "work of art" that will be enjoyed "for its own sake" long after the "discrepancies of fact" have been forgotten.⁷ Unlike Friedman, Tompkins believes that the book's inaccuracies are central, but like Friedman, Tompkins believes that the book is good enough to survive as literature, though metamorphosed into fiction. It may be easy to accept this claim, since *In Cold Blood* is a skillfully-constructed
narrative, and very much like many novels in its structure, style, and effects. However, I believe there is another kind of confusion involved here: this time it is not between factual status and factual adequacy, but between fictional status and literary merit.

In his study of literary nonfiction, *Fables of Fact*, John Hellmann argues that "The new journalist presents fact in fictional form, but it is fiction only in the more sophisticated and original sense of the word that has led Northrop Frye to apply it to 'any work of art in prose.'" Frye's use of the term is certainly "original," but it is also misleading. As Frye and Hellmann use "fiction," it becomes merely a synonym for literary prose, and leaves us without a way to distinguish between literary fiction and literary nonfiction. To quote Searle again, "the concept of literature is a different concept from that of fiction. Thus, for example, 'the Bible as literature' indicates a theologically neutral attitude, but 'the Bible as fiction' is tendentious." Hellmann is correct when he observes that "We think of the works of Capote, Mailer, Wolfe, Herr, Thompson, and other new journalists as members of a single genre, despite their being spread throughout the Library of Congress . . ." However, part of the reason we would group them together would be to separate them from novels, as nonfiction narratives of such power and complexity that they deserve the attention of literary critics.

Hellmann's argument for "The New Journalism as New Fiction," as he puts it in his subtitle, is based upon Frye's notion that texts have a "final direction," determined either by "relation to the external world" or by a "form" which finally "points to" itself. This model
suggests that a text must lose touch with the "external world" insofar as it develops an engaging form. It follows that good historical writing must either approach fiction or remain aesthetically displeasing in form. However, in recent years historiographers have increasingly focused upon the union of form and fact in good history:

... historiography is like the novel in being itself our experience of what it narrates. ... The experience of the past represented thus depends, in part, on the presentational skill of the historian and on his aesthetic judgment.12

... the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological ... 13

Recalling Searle's example, it may be useful to talk about "history as literature," but tendentious or even malicious to talk about "history as fiction." Novels and histories are both narratives and may share all sorts of technical similarities in their constructions of meaning. But comparison between the two should clarify our understanding of good writing of both kinds, rather than dissolve the distinction between them.

In The Mythopoeic Reality Mas'ud Zavarzadeh has taken the radical position that "the epistemological crisis of our 'age of suspicion'" has rendered the whole notion of fact versus fiction obsolete.14 According to Zavarzadeh, the "fictuality" of contemporary life has produced narratives which cannot be taken as either factual or fictional, but only as somehow both simultaneously. Like Hellmann, Zavarzadeh employs a model of narrative based on "direction" inward or outward, toward the self-contained world of the narrative or the
confusing, largely non-verbal world of real events. The appeal of his argument is that it explains the difficulty people have making decisions about factual adequacy. Every narrative is a version, and there are not always firm principles for judging all versions, nor enough information available to make satisfying decisions about representational accuracy. The modern reader in search of narrative truth cannot trust newspapers, must decide between competing historical accounts, and often ends up deciding that an account is more or less true, rather than just true or false. Zavarzadeh suggests that we will have to abandon the fact/fiction distinction in the face of increasingly complex modes of telling applied to an increasing amount of information. Perhaps he is right; perhaps someday we may. In the meantime, however, we commonly depend on distinguishing between fact and fiction, employing our "factual competence," as it were. When we are challenged by a narrative that presents itself as fact, but includes dialogue or events that we may doubt, our response ought to be to challenge the text and determine its worth, not throw up our hands and surrender. The main result of maintaining the fact/fiction distinction is that it gives us some common ground on which to conduct our collective search for the truth of our past, while it preserves the class of fiction for those works that are intended to be judged by standards appropriate to that category.  

At this level of generality it may not be clear exactly how factual status affects our interpretation of a text; in the chapters following I will provide more concrete examples. But for the moment I would like to stay with theoretical issues, and so I turn to the notion of
literary merit. What are the appropriate grounds upon which to settle the literary value of a nonfiction narrative? I will employ in the following discussion a "performance" definition of literature: "Literary texts are not defined as those of a certain shape or structure, but as those pieces of language used in a certain way by the community." Terms like "literary language" and "literary form" may serve to describe particular works, but do not signify any essential characteristics. Investigating the literary status of nonfiction texts is not a matter of identifying specific techniques or noting similarities to other literature. In a sense, whatever a critic discusses becomes literature, and what she ignores cannot be literature. However, in practice we can talk about what features or effects of a text persuade the community of critics to make it "perform" as literature.

The characteristic effect of literary nonfiction is a dual pleasure in specific truth-claims and vivid or profound patterns. The truth-claims are places where we feel that our world is being adequately represented to us. These representative details are linked into larger structures which hypothesize meaning. Ralph Rader has put it more eloquently:

... to the degree that any factual narrative is responded to as literature, its form may be analyzed as inherently the cause of an effect. And insofar as the form has the capacity to produce an effect, it will have raised human fact out of contingency and made it concretely present as a striking but inherently probable manifestation of complete and morally determinate human thought, character, or action, individual or collective.
It is important to recognize both the specific truth-claims and the patterns in which they are placed—hence the title of this study, "Form and Truth in Literary Nonfiction." I do not mean to suggest that the "truth" of a text can be artificially extracted from the "form," nor that the truth-claims are always general statements about the world, as themes in fiction. But for heuristic purposes the questions of factual adequacy and literary merit can often be separated in discussions of literary nonfiction, and so it is possible to talk about truth-claims as embodied, rendered, or "made concretely present" in particular narrative forms.

One of the consequences of factual status is that it brings into play certain epistemological principles, variously codified for the different purposes of journalism, history, and law. When we pick up a work of nonfiction, we have in mind questions about access to information, first- and second-hand sources, etc. If the text is clearly a piece of journalism, or clearly a history, or clearly a courtroom transcript, we can narrow the appropriate responses even farther. However, in the case of an ambitious, perhaps experimental text, we will not be able to decide ahead of time which epistemological principles are to be in force, unless we privilege certain conventions. This is exactly what John Hershey does when he applies to the work of Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, and Truman Capote the strict standards of journalism: "The writer of fiction must invent. The journalist must not invent." Hershey is entirely correct, as long as his assertion is intended only as a description of what constitutes conventional journalistic practice. However, conventions are made to
be challenged, in nonfiction as in fiction. As literary critics we have a special interest in innovation, and it makes more sense for us to begin reading with an open mind, discovering along the way which conventions will be adhered to and which ignored or tested by a particular text.

This does not mean that an author can get away with anything he pleases, or expect us to believe everything he says. I think that Capote damaged *In Cold Blood* by violating certain conventions of accurate presentation. But that belief is based on the conviction that Capote did not abide by his own rules, the principles which he indicates in his text to be in force. For instance, he employs an omniscient point of view, telling his story from the perspectives of a variety of characters, but never entering the narrative as a character or making explicit value judgments as a narrator. He strongly implies that one or more of his characters provide first-hand evidence for every event, and that words placed in quotation marks can be verified to virtually everyone's satisfaction. However, Tompkins found witnesses to dispute Capote's version of some of Smith's "exact words," including his final apology. A moving scene from the book appears not to have happened as Capote tells it:

During our telephone conversation, Mrs. Meier repeatedly told me that she never heard Perry cry; that on the day in question she was in her bedroom, not the kitchen; that she did not turn on the radio to drown out the sound of crying; that she did not hold Perry's hand; that she did not hear Perry say, "I'm embraced by shame." And finally—that she had never told such things to Capote. Mrs. Meier told me repeatedly and firmly, in her gentle way, that these things were not true.
Either Capote completely made up key scenes, or he transferred his own experiences to another character. In either case he violated the principles he set up for himself in this book, reducing his accomplishments considerably. However, this does not mean that Capote made up all of *In Cold Blood*, or that any nonfiction writer who made up scenes would be cheating, or that Capote must have intended me to read his book without regard to whether he made things up. Factual status is crucial to the experience of reading *In Cold Blood*, and we need to decide on its factual adequacy, not by *a priori* principles, but by the rules Capote indicates are in force in his book.\(^{20}\)

We might tentatively identify two different kinds of truth—accuracy and meaning—for which different principles are important. The former involves a kind of groundwork, a detailed and sufficiently neutral verbal representation of events, for which the goal is universal agreement or correspondence. The latter is much more nebulous, covering virtually everything one does with "the facts" once they have been given an accurate shape. In practice there is seldom any convenient way to distinguish a fact from its meaning, since facts are verbal models which always already participate in the infinite connotations of language. Moreover, facts can be variously broad, complex, and controversial, just as meanings can. Nevertheless, I want to advance a correspondence theory of accuracy, which I believe will be heuristically useful in talking about literary nonfiction.

We judge competition between nonfiction narratives to be important because we believe that two people witnessing the same event could eventually come up with some shared version of that event, a linguistic
model to which both would accede. There are so many variables in
play—differences in sensory acuteness, perspective and other
contextual factors, memory and conceptual skills, available vocabulary,
etc.—that it is a wonder people ever agree on a version of anything.
Fortunately, language is so flexible a tool that we end up agreeing
well enough on versions of just about everything, reserving the vast
field of differences to a secondary realm of the "subjective." In
the case of competition between Capote's and Tompkins' versions of
events in Kansas, accuracy has been our main concern. Capote did not
achieve the "immaculate" correspondence to events that he claimed.
However, it is the influence of his inaccuracies upon the meaning of
the book that is fatal. Not all mistakes or slantings or exaggerations
or other transformations of fact are damaging. But in the case of In
Cold Blood, the inventions concern the character of Perry Smith, and
his motivations are at the thematic and aesthetic heart of the book.
Capote's meaning is flawed by his inaccuracies. If Capote had not been
exposed by Tompkins, In Cold Blood would be a more important book.

This whole discussion of accuracy and competition runs counter to
the tradition of literary value as transcendent or a-contextual.
According to John M. Ellis, "literary texts are defined as those that
are used by the society in such a way that the text is not taken as
specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin." Whatever
other effects may be produced by literature, the most common
is persistence through time as, in Rader's words, a "complete"
experience that has "raised human fact out of contingency."
This apparent conflict between competition and literary value in nonfiction may be resolved by remembering that literary status is a contingent, not an absolute matter. Nonfiction narratives may become literature insofar as they are able to transcend their specific contexts, but they do not do so immediately. Re-phrasing Ellis, we might say that works of literary nonfiction are not limited in relevance to their origins. However, they must establish a certain epistemological dominance in regard to those origins before they can go on to transcend them. This dominance does not appear through any pre-determined formula; there may be all sorts of competing accounts or none, the text may be scrupulously accurate or wildly embellished, and the meaning may be very broad or very narrow. Literary nonfiction is as diverse a bag of books as is fiction. But in the exchange by which an author of nonfiction gains force through factual status, he must pay with the coin of factual adequacy, although he may specify how the payment is to be made.

Once again, we must remember that literature is a "family resemblance" notion, and members are certified over time. As Searle puts it, "the literary is continuous with the nonliterary. Not only is there no sharp boundary, but there is not much of a boundary at all." My goal here is not to argue that particular texts are literary, nor to describe the procedure by which a nonfiction narrative is accepted into the canon. It would be silly to state flatly that In Cold Blood will not be taught in a few years, and arrogant to declare that it ought not. The purpose of talking about literary merit in regard to nonfiction narratives is to identify characteristics shared
by texts which strike us as powerful, and to isolate the unique virtues of particular texts. As Ellis observes, "no descriptive critic should concede that he is avoiding the discussion of the value of works: he is already doing just that."²⁴

Just as inaccuracy is not necessarily fatal to a nonfiction text, so accuracy does not guarantee a work of literature—witness the tons of newsprint and pages of history that never tempt the literary critic to exercise his skills upon them. Moreover, there is not necessarily one best version of every event. Hunter Thompson's Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72 and Norman Mailer's St. George and the Godfather cover many of the same events and describe many of the same people, but the relative success of one does not detract from the other. They are competing accounts, but with different purposes and different forms. No single event can ever be drained of its meaning, any more than a careful presentation of that event in words will ensure a profound meaning. In order to understand a complex nonfiction narrative, it is essential to analyze the kinds of truth-claims being made and how they fit into the author's overall intentions.

The claim that every work of literary nonfiction must establish its factual adequacy does not imply that nonfiction narratives can be ranked by bulk of detail, profundity of theme, or the historical importance of their topics. Accuracy is just one important element of a work of literary nonfiction, and as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three below, there are all kinds of factual adequacies, some deliberately less accurate than others. Critics should no more privilege accuracy as the determinant of literary value, than they
should decide that a particular kind of mimesis or theme or style is the standard of value in fiction. In this study I am trying to strike a balance between the anarchy of absolute uniqueness and the totalitarianism of a single scale of value. My comparisons are always made for specific purposes, and in regard to specific aspects of the texts being compared. When I talk about one book as more accurate or profound than another, such a claim is intended to remain within a framework of generic values, in force for particular heuristic purposes. That is, relative accuracy, profundity, et al., is important within the context of similar purposes at work in two different narratives, but never as an absolute virtue or final test of value.

In discussing the importance of factual adequacy, I may have appeared to be subscribing to a very naive view of the relationship between language and experience. I may have made it sound as though accuracy was a simple thing which one could decide to achieve or ignore. Such was not my intention. I am aware that many theorists of narrative argue that there is an enormous gap between any event and any linguistic version of that event. Historiographers have been talking a lot about the unavoidable abstractions of their craft:

I have sought to suggest that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.

Though it makes use of things that have actually happened rather than inventions, history writing is merely another way of satisfying the rage for formal satisfaction.
There is no transcendent connection between space/time events and narratives of those events; all factual narratives are versions, "constructed, as all versions are, by someone in particular, on some occasion, for some purpose, and in accord with some relevant set of principles." 28

Recognizing that we are students of human constructions shaped by human purposes need not make us afraid to talk about truth. We make decisions every day based on our evaluations of competing versions of reality. Just because we are without absolute rules universally accepted for the construction of accurate or meaningful narrative, we do not have to conclude that therefore we cannot claim that one story is truer than another. We just have to be careful, look at specific cases, and make explicit the standards by which we are judging truth. Perhaps most importantly, we have to keep in mind the role of purpose in the construction of a particular narrative; the kind of truth being claimed will depend on exactly what achievements the author has intended.

So far I have done a lot more talking about truth than about form. This is partly because the study of the forms of fiction is readily applied to the forms of literary nonfiction. The vocabulary and assumptions I will be employing in the treatment of nonfiction narratives as coherent wholes will be familiar to the literary critic. I have not found it necessary to coin words to replace "character" or "point of view," although I am a little squeamish about using the term "plot." 29 As verbal constructs, nonfiction narratives employ many of the same techniques and depend upon many of the same conventions of
reading as fictional narratives. The main danger to avoid is privileging certain formal features or effects—innovation, vividness, thematic force, ambiguity, irony, etc.—just as I have argued we must avoid privileging particular epistemological conventions. Openness to a wide variety of texts is the freedom and the burden of the literary critic, and one of the things that may distinguish how she reads a nonfiction text from how it is read by a journalist or historian.

In the following chapters I will be trying to do justice to a number of nonfiction narratives, in the course of further exploring some of the issues raised above. Chapter Two examines the way technique and purpose are connected in three tape-recorded books. I will argue against the common practice of dividing literary nonfiction into sub-genres according to particular techniques, on the grounds that doing so in the cases of these three frequently lumped-together books obscures more than it reveals. In Chapter Three I take a closer look at the connections between accuracy and meaning, in the attempt to explain how four different texts assert their four very different sets of rules for factual adequacy. Chapter Four is about the role of the author in literary nonfiction, as historical personage, narrator, and character. Again using four very different works of literary nonfiction as examples, I try to show that simple divisions between categories like "personal journalism" and the omniscient "nonfiction novel" are not particularly useful, because authors have an enormous range of choices for situating themselves in their stories, as objective reporters, concerned narrators, sharply defined participants, or vaguely defined reader-surrogates, among many other possibilities.
In Chapter Five I return to the notion of factual status, testing its value against some works of historical fiction. I conclude with a few observations about literary status and nonfiction narrative, gathered from the practical criticism of twelve texts.

I have chosen to concentrate on recently published books—one from the Forties, a few from the Fifties, most from the Sixties and Seventies. This does not mean that I consider literary nonfiction to be something new under the sun. On the contrary, I would agree with Ronald Weber: "What happened in the sixties was a rather noisy revival of the tradition of literary nonfiction in American writing under the inspiration of Capote's well-publicized demonstration that documentary journalism could yield a work of art." In the wake of that "revival," however, there has been more than enough good writing from which to choose, and the rewards for successful nonfiction, of which no writer since Capote could fail to be aware, suggest that plenty of skill and innovation have gone into recent works. If I have succeeded in developing a useful methodology, it ought to work for older texts as well.

Part of the value of this study is that it strives for a shared understanding of the nature of texts which serve multiple functions in society. I do not wish to suggest chauvinistically that more of the world can be saved by nonfiction than by fiction, merely that the problems of finding a community truth make the study of literary nonfiction particularly exciting. Information increases as technology gathers in facts from farther and farther afield, and we will continue to look for authors who can find striking, enduring patterns for that
unwashed mass of facts. I think it is important to explore literary nonfiction in terms that recognize its success as both a useful model of reality and an aesthetically pleasing verbal pattern of human meanings.
Notes


2 George Plimpton, "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel," *The New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 16, 1966, p. 2. Capote's book is an especially useful place to begin this inquiry because it has been so widely read and discussed, and because Philip K. Tompkins' research provides a strong competing account of the book's events. It is unfortunate for critics that Capote encouraged confusion about his project by his claim to "a serious new art form: the 'nonfiction novel'" (Plimpton, p. 2). Many critics, including John Hollowell, Jack Newfield, and Ronald Weber, have pointed to a strong tradition of vivid factual writing, of which *In Cold Blood* is a powerful, but not particularly innovative, representative. But the problems brought on by his oxymoronic term, "nonfiction novel," have yet to be straightened out.

In support of this reading, critics most frequently point to the comment of the "young reporter from Oklahoma" (In Cold Blood (N.Y.: New American Library, 1965), p. 343).

Melvin Friedman, "Towards an Aesthetic: Truman Capote's Other Voices," in Malin, p. 168.

Whether the flaw is lying or blindness depends, of course, on whether Capote himself believed in his portrait of Smith. There is some evidence for both possibilities, but we do not need to know which is the case in order to question the factual adequacy of Capote's account.

Tompkins, p. 171.

John Hellmann, Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 17. I am indebted to Hellmann's book for excellent close readings of texts by Mailer, Thompson, and Herr, and I am sympathetic with his theoretical assumptions. But I have a problem with his two key terms, "fiction" and "contract." The idea of either a fictional or a journalistic "contract" being in force between author and reader is similar to the notion of factual versus fictional status; but when Hellmann talks about an author "violating" the journalistic "contract" (as on p. 18 and elsewhere), he is, in my terms, confusing factual status and factual adequacy.

Searle, p. 320.


Hellman, Chapter Two.


There are some instances in which the factual or fictional status of a text is problematic: anonymous works not clearly within particular genres or conventional contexts, hoaxes that may not have been intended to be revealed, and mixtures of fact and invention (such as composite-character stories) which the author has not clearly decided to present as either fact or fiction. Certainly there have been many books written with the intention of challenging various conventions of factual writing, but this is not the same as undermining the fact/fiction distinction itself. Part of the problem with Zavarzadeh's readings is that his texts depend on factual status, while he insists that they are subverting it. Both Zavarzadeh's
"bi-referentiality" and Hellmann's "final direction" confuse factual status with factual adequacy or accuracy.

One other thing about factual status: it is certainly possible to change the status of a work by giving it a new purpose, replacing the author's "illocutionary intention" with a new one supplied by the reader. This is what happens with "found poetry," with novels read as sociological documents, and with factual accounts read "as fiction," if such a process is actually possible. However, such readings are outside the scope of a rhetorical study such as this one, and logically posterior to the recovery of the author's original intentions.

16 John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1974), p. 42. I have found many of Ellis' formulations of basic critical assumptions very clear and helpful. Searle defines literature as "the name of a set of attitudes we take toward a stretch of discourse, not a name of an internal property of the stretch of discourse, though why we take the attitudes we do will of course be at least in part a function of the properties of the discourse . . ." (p. 320).


18 John Hershey, "The Legend on the License," *Yale Review*, 70, p. 25. Hershey is himself a distinguished author of literary nonfiction, in particular the scrupulous sort he espouses in this article. But his article's title points to the tautology of his argument: as long as
one wishes merely to be "licensed" as a journalist, one would do well to abide by the rules, or clearly indicate how and why they are being broken. However, if one is interested in stretching or questioning the conventions of journalism—if one is after a new kind of nonfiction narrative—one does not worry much about the "license."

19 Tompkins, p. 168. The scene in question is on p. 345 of In Cold Blood.

20 In talking about characters in nonfiction, Hellmann correctly observes that they are verbal constructs, but he rejects the role of correspondence or any epistemological principle, arguing that they depend for their power solely on "consistency of tone" (p. 30).

21 The following two statements are true in some sense: no linguistic version can fully capture space/time events, and every description of an event, no matter how subjective, is equally valid. We might call these the idealist and the democratic theories of truth. But we can recognize them without subscribing to them. For the purposes of this study, following everyday usage, I am going to talk about "agreement," "accuracy," "correspondence," "meaning," etc.

22 Ellis, p. 44.

23 Searle, p. 320.

24 Ellis, p. 93.

25 Zavarzadeh claims that all "nonfiction novels" share certain epistemological principles, binding them to "zero interpretation" of the events they describe. This is an extreme example of selecting one textual feature as especially literary or valued. But other critics
have privileged technical experimentation, honesty or personal
revelation, stylistic skill, etc.

26 Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation

27 Harold Toliver, Animate Illusions: Explorations of Narrative

28 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative

29 But see Zavarzadeh for a full-scale alternative vocabulary for
talking about literary nonfiction. And I will admit that it is
sometimes very strange to talk about a dead person, like Gary Gilmore,
in the critic's familiar narrative present.

30 When Hershey criticizes Mailer, et al., for "inventing," he is
speaking as a journalist, not as a literary critic. But a more subtle
example of dangerous assumptions is Ronald Weber's statement about the
limitations of nonfiction:

Our knowledge of nonfiction characters is never quite satisfying
enough. Likewise, the design or meaning that can be drawn from
the facts is never quite satisfying enough in literary terms... .
fiction can touch the reader in ways nonfiction never can
precisely . . . (p. 46)

I agree that nonfiction does not produce exactly the same effects as
fiction, but I cannot go along with Weber's other generalizations. I
suspect that either Weber is asking too much of nonfiction narratives,
or taking too much for granted in reading fiction.

31 Zavarzadeh structures his book by point of view, dividing his
chapters into discussions of "exegetical" (or third-person),
"testimonial" (or first-person), and "notational" (or tape-recorded) narratives. But he is not the only critic to make point of view the criterion for generic divisions.


33 I have in mind older texts such as Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland, Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Twain's Roughing It, and Hemingway's The Green Hills of Africa.
II. PURPOSE AND TECHNIQUE IN THE TAPE-RECORDED BOOK

Could I say something, is there such a thing?
Of course. It's just a journal of Ondine's life.
Oh, it's just my life that's all laugh.
--Andy Warhol, a

In preparing the interviews for publication, I have eliminated my questions and have selected, arranged, and organized their materials into coherent life stories. If one agrees with Henry James that life is all inclusion and confusion while art is all discrimination and selection, then these life histories have something of both art and life. I believe this in no way reduces the authenticity of the data or their usefulness for science.

--Oscar Lewis, The Children of Sanchez

Many critics, including Donald Pizer, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, and Ronald Weber, have talked about the tape-recorded book as a distinct sub-genre of literary nonfiction. Transcripts share a certain kind of factual adequacy, because we grant interchangeability to "the exact words," by an epistemological law of equality. Recognizing this, some authors have taken the journalist's quotation or the social scientist's field data to extreme lengths, producing entire books containing the exact words of their sources. But is this basic similarity enough to establish a sub-genre? Or are there important differences among tape-recorded books, differences that go deeper than a shared technique and that may be obscured by lumping such books together? In exploring this question I also hope to throw some light on the role of factual
status in shaping how we read, and on the question of how nonfiction narratives achieve literary status. The texts I will use as examples will be Andy Warhol's a, Studs Terkel's Working, and Oscar Lewis' The Children of Sanchez.

* * *

Yeah, Bobby, uh, yeah, this is, this is, this is a very weird day; this is a day of uh, twenty-four hours with Ondine and it's uh, on tape and so are you right now, and uh, I mean like uh, I can't uh, I had certain things planned like a visit to Gracie Mansion, and to uh, unwrap my grandmother and a few other things, but y'know, I'd, I'd...

Andy Warhol's a: A Novel is a transcription of every word and sound picked up by a tape recorder over the course of twenty-four hours. The book is divided into forty-eight chapters, each covering the contents of one thirty-minute tape. The main focus for the microphone is Ondine, otherwise known as Robert Oliva. The supporting cast includes Drella (Warhol), a dozen or so of their friends in the Velvet Underground, and various cab drivers, waiters, visitors, and passers-by who happen to get on the tape. Noises, half-words, stammerings, broken sentences, and even typographical errors made in transcription are all carefully preserved. Speakers are not always labeled, and frequently cannot be identified in the absence of visual clues. Private allusions are rarely explained. By Zavarzadeh's count, "practically one-third of the sentences are not understandable."³ In short, a is extremely difficult to follow, even on the most basic level of who is saying what to whom. For that reason I will say a little
more about the book's typographical and narrative idiosyncracies, before going on to discuss Warhol's intentions and relative success.

The twenty-four hours are broken into two stretches of eighteen and six, separated by an uncertain period of time. Editorial comments, in parentheses and italics, increase in length and complexity as the book goes on, from "(dial)" and "(cars honking)" in the first chapter, to "Tape speeds up to Munchkin chatter" and "Ondine makes a rather gremlin-like exclamation" near the end. The style of transcription also varies; for instance, whoever typed the later chapters makes liberal use of such dialect forms as "ya" for "you" and "gonna" for "going to." The text is laid out in a variety of formats, including: single columns of varying width and position, double columns, paragraphing for new speakers, running text entirely across the page in a solid block, using smaller type for background remarks, etc. Each pair of facing pages has its heading or tag line of from one to six words, taken from the text and reprinted on the top right. These headings are often funny, but there is no clear pattern to their selection.

We can figure out that a begins at a pay phone outside a "famous bakery which is very Jewish" (3), but many locations, including the final one, are harder to pin down. Nor can we be certain who is present in every scene. Speakers enter and depart regularly, but we cannot tell if they have been absent or simply unrecorded. a is full of such small uncertainties. The reader is teased by coherent passages, only to find herself lost again a page or a paragraph later. The confusion is further augmented by the fact that Ondine inhabits an
unusual world, a homosexual subculture with its own vocabulary, field of references, and esoteric interests, especially avant-garde art and a bewildering variety of drugs. The witty passages are the most accessible:

... I hadd go down in im
OX--OIYEAH
O--The gu-the guy he was with couldn't do it...
OX--Yeah, but you HAD to do it
O--Of Cour-ourse
OX--And if you are not there I have to do it (414)

... it's right on 3rd and Thompson, it's the, it's the most, Le Pompier.
DD--Do you know what that means in French?
O--It means, it means, pumper.
DD--It means cock sucker.
O--Oh, everything means cock sucker in French, Dodo. (309-310)

Duch--Just take one of those.
R--Oh.
Duch--And they're supposed to not make you frantic but they do.
R--Oh wowfi I, I, I want to be just completely concentrating like on the head.
Duch--Tell Rita to give you a poke.
R--I want to be the pin thinking about the number of angels. (208)

The reader cannot be sure that the characters in a are displaying their own particular vie quotidienne, because the microphone is obviously affecting their behavior:

... Oxydol went oN and he knew he was being ree-a-recorded, so he didn't care, you know, he mustn't of cared--this year this THIS should also be subtitled something about assholes ASSHOLES in breakfast or assholes for tea or assholes Alone ... (416-417)

I'm doing a 12 hour uhhhh a 12 hour novel.
(0) On me and my time.
What's interesting about Ondine?
The process of observation has certainly contaminated the "data" in a, but that does not matter to Warhol, for the simple reason that his aim is not to capture Ondine's life, but to experiment with narrative conventions. The choice of characters hardly matters, and the book's length is almost arbitrary, as we can see from the fact that Warhol extended the recording period several times. For all that a is a "slice of life," it is not primarily intended to be representationally engaging, but rather aesthetically self-conscious, discomforting, even distressing. 4

It is certainly possible for the critic to identify themes in a, to piece together coherent portraits of characters, and to perform all of the "naturalizing" functions (to use Roland Barthes' term) in which she is trained. But to do so is to fall for Warhol's intellectual joke, to prove his point that art is not a mirror, but an active, transforming pattern of behavior between artist and art consumer. The conventions of fiction are rules for that behavior. By faithfully representing life (or at least one aspect of life, the aural, translated into print), and presenting his "findings" in the context of "A Novel," Warhol points up the gap between life and "realistic" fiction. 5 He is de-familiarizing narrative, along the axis of the mundane. In this his project is similar to those of Beckett and Robbe-Grillet in their fiction. But the factual status of a means that we read it with a different kind of attention. Warhol is not merely suggesting that there can be other appropriate subjects for fiction. He throws our
painfully incoherent lives back in our faces. If any of our lives were more coherent, would they be as interesting? Are we even as well-formed in speech and action as we believe, based on the finely edited accounts of memory?

*a* strikes me as one of those aesthetic experiments that need to be made once, just so that the results can be recorded for literary history. As a type it is interesting, and Warhol's point is important. But the experience of the book is finally so unrewarding that the reader must force herself to push on to the end. In fact, there is no need to fit all the parts into the whole, for they all recapitulate virtually the same point, and the argument does not grow much stronger or deeper as the book goes on. Particular anecdotes are funny in themselves, and make more sense to a reader with some sense of what is going on in *a*. But reading *a* is finally a duty much more than a pleasure. Such is not the case for all tape-recorded books, of course; as I will argue below, *Working* and *The Children of Sanchez* produce very different effects from those of *a*. But given Warhol's artistic aims, *a* has to be a difficult, boring book. In contrast to every other author discussed in this study, Warhol is not trying to shape reality into meaningful patterns, but instead wants to emphasize the relatively meaningless quality of unshaped life. *a* is a one-trick pony, a long joke with one funny line: "Out of the garbage, into the Book" (451).

*        *        *        *
Studs Terkel's *Working* depends for its success on skillfully manipulating the narrative conventions that it exposes. It turns out that most of us would rather be entertained and enlightened than informed about the artificiality of our entertaining, enlightening experiences. *Working* is a much more heavily edited book than *a*; Terkel is not after raw life, but rather highly refined segments of experience. *Working* consists of one hundred and thirty-three short autobiographies, each designed to give us a sense of the speaker's life and values, and collectively designed to make us question our social attitudes toward employment and status. By convincing us that our lives are fundamentally similar to the lives of many other people in a variety of jobs, Terkel hopes to make us see that status roles divide and alienate us.

*Working* is a hefty seven-hundred-plus pages, but it is still only "the lean" from "hundreds of thousands of spoken words--perhaps millions" which Terkel recorded and transcribed. Some interviews never made it into the book, and those that did were edited into articulate, revealing dramatic monologues:

My first job was in a dog kennel, cleaning up the shit. It was just for a couple of days. My first real job was in a factory. I was hired to sweep the shit off the floor. They saw I was a good worker and made me a machine operator. I was eighteen and a conscientious objector. I told 'em at the factory I didn't want to do any war work, any kind of contract with any military institution. I tried to adhere to my politics and my morality. Since that time and through different jobs I've been led into compromises that have corrupted me. (571)

These first remarks of "Charlie Blossom" sound like the opening of a certain kind of contemporary novel. He follows literal shit with
figurative, begins his story at an appropriate place ("My first job"),
gives us a great deal of background in a few words, and creates some
suspense about the future course of his life. We are on familiar
narrative ground.

By editing out most of his questions and supplying us with
introductions and brief descriptive remarks about each character,
Terkel makes it even easier for us to identify with his narrators:

A lower middle class suburb south of Chicago. It is a
one-family brick dwelling with a two-car garage in the rear.
"This one next door is a contractor. The fella across the
street, he's an electrician. We have one that's an engineer for
Allis-Chalmers. We have two policemen that live here.
Everybody kind of minds their own business."

He is a forty-eight-year-old construction worker who has
been at it for twenty-two years. His wife works; his two
married children live elsewhere. He is considerably overweight
and his breathing is labored. "I'm a heavy equipment operator.
I run a crane."

There is a pecking order: apprentices; "dirt work"—sewers,
water mains, tunnels, roads; buildings; "soft jobs" for the
older or disabled. "They're supposed to be in the union at
least ten years and fifty-five years old." (49)

This introduction gives us what we lacked in a—a full context. In
fact, Terkel deliberately shapes his introductions with our stereotypes
in mind, keying in our preconceptions and prejudices so that they can
be called into question later on, while we are sympathizing with a
character. In this case, if we assume that "Hub Dillard" is a
blue-collar snob and fairly insensitive, after we are forced to change
our opinion, we end up looking at a whole range of people with new eyes:

That building we put up, a medical building. Well, that granite
was imported from Canada. It was really expensive. Well, I set
all this granite around there. So you do this and you don't
make a scratch on it. It's food for your soul that you know you
did it good. Where somebody walks by this building you can say, "Well, I did that." (54)

Another way Terkel makes it easier for us to situate his characters in a social framework is by grouping the stories around various topics, such as "The Sporting Life," "Communication," "Cleaning Up," "Watching," "The Commercial," and "Fathers and Sons." Book Four, "The Demon Lover," is about the automobile, and is subdivided into sections on the various jobs connected with cars. The longest of these sections, "The Making," contains interviews with six people who work in the same Ford plant, so that we have a variety of perspectives on the same job conditions. \textit{Working} is also unified by certain recurring concerns, including: the influence of the union, race relations, dreams for one's children, job status or the lack of it, boredom, taking the job home, and retirement. As often as these subjects arise, sometimes without any clear transition from another subject, one cannot mistake Terkel's directing influence. Sometimes the erased question is almost present on the page.\footnote{7}

As I have already indicated, what finally holds this fat, fragmented narrative together is a controlling theme: the struggle of individuals against an inhumane system. Terkel talks explicitly about this theme in his Introduction: "This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence--to the spirit as well as to the body" (xiii); "In all instances, there is felt more than a slight ache. In all instances, there dangles the impertinent question: Ought not there be an increment, earned though not yet received, from one's daily work--an acknowledgement of man's being?" (xv). This epic battle at
the heart of *Working*—the struggle for "acknowledgement"—is fought over and over on a variety of fields, in factory, office, and home. The struggle is not between classes—janitor and executive may be unknowing allies—nor even between people, finally. The system is the villain, and it corrupts everyone to some degree, destroying some people from within by impossible expectations.

Unfortunately, other people are won over to the system, either by temperamental fitness or by its rewards. Terkel's reaction to such seduction is part anger and part sadness. Some of the most poignant moments in *Working* are when the boss, the foreman, the company spy, the vicious policeman, and the sleazy salesman present their sides. It looks like impartiality on the surface, but we are seldom really in doubt about how we are supposed to feel about these people:

> I was on the freshman football team, baseball team, and basketball team. And I was president of the fraternity. Shows you can do it if you work hard enough. ("TV/Radio Executive," 514)

> The most stupid phrase anybody can use in business is loyalty. . . . It was much more difficult at first to lay off a guy. But if you live in a jungle, you become hard, unfortunately. ("Ex-President of Conglomerate; Consultant," 535)

> I'd love to go out on the college campus and grab some of these radicals. It's more or less a minority. When you apply logic and truth and philosophy, they cannot come back at you. You cannot fight truth. Who's being brutal? Before I make an arrest, I'll tell the guy, "You have a choice. You could be nice and we'll walk. If you become combative, I'm going to use physical force against you to compensate. In fact, I'm gonna have to break some bones. You forced the issue." ("Policeman," 188)
This use of people's own words to reveal their cruelties and weaknesses is very powerful, and made more so by the factual status of *Working*. These are not conveniently invented straw men. The fact that they are real makes us temper our anger with pity, for it is no good hating real people the way we hate villains in fiction. Terkel need not show us more sympathetic aspects of their characters in order to make us qualify our judgments. We cannot regard the "Policeman" or "Executive" in quite the same way we do an unsympathetic narrator in fiction, someone like Faulkner's Jason Compson. I do not mean to suggest that Terkel has not had a shaping hand in the presentation of his characters, or that he should not be held accountable when a character fails to emerge from the page. But the words of Terkel's real people have an authority or weight that we grant as we read, and that must be taken into account in any evaluation of *Working*.

The central struggle between the defenders of the system and the oppressed involves two completely different views of reality. The owners talk about how happy the slaves are in their extended family, while the slaves give the lie to that comfortable picture:

In the old days, when they fought for the union, they might have needed the union then. But now the company is just as good to them as the union is. We had a baseball meeting a couple of nights ago and the guys couldn't get over the way the company supported a banquet for them and the trophies and jackets. . . . A few years ago, it was hourly versus management—there was two sides of the world. Now it's more molded into one. It's not hourly and management; it's the company. . . . It's one big family now. ("General Foreman," 253)

It don't stop. It just goes and goes and goes. I bet there's men who have lived and died out there, never seen the end of that line. And they never will—because it's endless. . . .
When you go into Ford, first thing they try to do is break your spirit. ("Spot-Welder," 222, 225)

You can do twenty years of right and one hour of wrong and they'd string you. ("Stock Chaser," 241)

These voices from the same automobile plant are not even speaking the same language. What does a baseball banquet have to do with eight hours on an assembly line? One may be meant to compensate for the other, but the inherent absurdity of that equation is brought home to us by Terkel's juxtaposition. These passages are made more moving and thought-provoking by being placed in the context of longer interviews, so that we get a sense of the dominating influence of the job on the lives of everyone, foreman and welder alike. Banquets and reprimands are not minor matters. In fact, one of the points Terkel makes best throughout Working is that the pressure and forced associations of an eight-hour job ensure that there will be no small disagreements, no minor problems. We may think other people's problems are trivial, but they have the same opinion of ours, and everybody is wrong. The immediate cause may be status games, or boring repetition, or impossibly demanding activities, or another of the innate flaws in the system, but the result is pain and unhappiness, and we are wrong to write off that suffering as unavoidable.

The breadth of Terkel's book allows him to describe the influence of the system in our lives from "Cradle to the Grave," as one of his section titles describes it. For instance, a grade school teacher explains what she values in a young student:
Discipline is the keynote to learning. . . . When someone comes in and says, "Oh, your room is so quiet," I know I've been successful.

There is one little girl who stands out in my mind in all the years I've been teaching. She has become tall and lovely. Pam. She was not too bright, but she was sweet. She was never any trouble. She was special. I see her every once in a while. She's a checker at Treasure Island. She gives no trouble today, either. She has the same smile for everyone. ("Public School Teacher," 635)

This is what the system cherishes: "no trouble." This interview is wonderfully ironic and painful, even creepy. The teacher's favorite pupil may have been emotionally or mentally handicapped, but that does not matter, because she was "sweet" and "quiet." Pam has grown up to take her place, contentedly, in the system. She will not need intelligence or imagination or enthusiasm in her career, just "discipline" and "the same smile for everyone."

Besides giving us a wide variety of examples of how we are shaped by insidious and destructive social values, Terkel also provides a variety of opinions and beliefs. In the case above he follows this teacher with another, an "Alternative School Teacher" with very different pedagogical priorities. Elsewhere he interviews an ex-boss who has seen the error of his ways, and two policemen whose politics and sympathies are very different from those of the cop who finds himself forced to "break some bones." Terkel also includes a number of people who have opted out of or made their own terms with the system:

The company puts bread and butter on the table. I feed the family and with two teen-aged kids, there's a lot of wants. And we're paying for two cars. And I have brought home a forty-hour paycheck for Lord knows how long.

And that's why I work. And these other people when they settle down one of these days, they'll be what we call old-timers. He'll want to work. ("Utility Man" in the Ford plant, 235)
Stone's my life. I daydream all the time, most times it's stone. Oh, I'm gonna build me a stone cabin down on the Green River. ("Stonemason," 20)

I work all the way from two in the morning until two the next morning seven days a week. (Laughs.) I'm not a martyr. I'm one of the few people who was lucky in life to find out what he really wanted to do. I'm just havin' a ball, the time of my life. ("Organizer," 467)

Alternative ways of life are important, because Terkel does not want to say that the system cannot be beaten, merely that doing so requires cooperation and understanding. Not everyone can be self-employed, or find a calling as opposed to a job. But everyone can look for ways to make things easier and more humane, for themselves and their co-workers, and the system can be changed, little by little.

In Division Street: America, Hard Times, Working, and American Dreams: Lost and Found, Terkel has recorded cross-sections of American society talking about, respectively, a place, a time, an activity, and an idea. His larger aesthetic ambition is nothing less than the autobiography of America. In that ambition, and in his liberal values and naturalistic methods, Terkel places himself in the tradition of Whitman, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck. His use of ordinary people's words, carefully selected and arranged in order to make them come alive for us, often creates effects similar to those of such "low mimetic" fictions as USA and The Grapes of Wrath. Rather than following a few particular characters, Terkel presents a series of dramatic monologues, each providing some insight into a particular life and a particular job (in the case of Working). By the end we have, not merely vivid
individual portraits, but a collective portrait of ourselves at work. We come to realize that certain aspects of the human condition, painful experiences that we had thought unique to ourselves, are shared—are in fact fundamental parameters of human experience.

The system Terkel is questioning is not merely American capitalism, although much of the effectiveness of Working comes from our recognition of its peculiarly American personalities, language, and values. These people are eloquent, and yet they sound like us:

It'll be just day to day. Same thing as bowling. You bowl each frame, that's right. If you look ahead, you know what you're getting into. So why aggravate yourself? You know what we call bad stops. A mess to clean up in a certain alley. Why look ahead to it? The devil. As long as my health holds out, I want to work. ("Garbage Man," 152)

I'm human, I'm working for a living. They belittle me sometimes. They use a little profanity sometimes. I stop right there and I go get the manager. Nobody is gonna call me a (cups hand over mouth, whispers) b-i-t-c-h. These are a higher class of people, like as if I'm their housekeeper or maid. You don't even talk to a maid like this. ("Supermarket Checker," 378)

When it come to housework, I can't do it now. I can't stand it, cause it do somethin' to my mind. . . . They don't get on their knees, but they don't think nothin' about askin' a black woman. She says, "All you—you girls..." She stop. I say, "All you niggers, is that what you want to say?" She give me this stupid look. I say, "I'm glad you're tellin' me that there's more like me." (Laughs.) I told her, "You better give me my money and let me go, 'cause I'm gettin' angry." ("Domestic," 162, 163)

Terkel locates the down-home metaphors ("Same thing as bowling"), the inhibitions (whispering and spelling "bitch"), and the euphemisms ("girls"). He also captures ironies like the checker's "You don't even talk to a maid like this," and the maid's touchiness about far more subtle insults—everyone has someone above or below her in the pecking
order. There are many different voices, obviously, and many different kinds of eloquence. The stonemason talking about stone sounds very different from the hooker who says, "You become your job" (102), or the maid talking about housewives or "Charlie Blossom" about shit, or the fireman saying proudly, "The officer is the first one into the fire" (757).

The factual status of Working influences our opinion of how the characters sound. As we read, we recall that these are real people, and that Terkel's self-imposed limitations compel him to find, rather than manufacture, eloquence. His success makes us look at the people around us with new eyes. Because his focus is on work and the system, rather than on particular people, our sympathy for the characters is never an end in itself. We must be convinced that such intense moments as he records, the insights and self-revelations, are all around us, if only we would listen. Terkel wants to tell us about our world, not just the self-contained world of a few strangers. The kind of factual adequacy he wants to achieve depends on his convincing us that he has done justice to his topic, that he has presented it fairly and extensively, abiding by the rules of exact quotation. If we judge Working to be factually adequate, as well as eloquent, vivid, and insightful, then we can begin to talk about the book's claim to literary status. If we think Terkel cheated somehow, or slanted his account so as to disguise the true state of affairs, then Working is a lesser book, not only as social science, but as literature. This is the additional responsibility that accompanies factual status.
The limitations of Terkel's project may be obvious. There could never be a totally adequate account of anything as complex as working in America. Certainly Terkel's liberal biases have influenced his choices and arrangement of material. Moreover, it would be amazing if he succeeded in finding statements that were always as eloquent as those that someone might invent; we are compelled to take a great deal of dross with the gold. Even those times we become involved with a character, and wish for more of a particular voice, the end result may be to distract us from the book's central aim. These problems are a function partly of the factual status of Working, partly of Terkel's ambitions, and partly of his skill and/or luck. It would not do to say that every nonfiction narrative, or even every tape-recorded book, must be as limited as Terkel's. The liabilities of a are very different from those of Working. We will return to this question at the end of this chapter, after looking at one more example, a tape-recorded book different in structure, subject, and tone from both a and Working.

* * * *

Like Terkel, Oscar Lewis undertook an ambitious, multi-volume project, which included Life in a Mexican Village, Five Families, Pedro Martinez, The Children of Sanchez, A Death in the Sanchez Family, La Vida, and Four Men. Whereas Terkel began as an amateur sociologist, Lewis was trained as an anthropologist. His professional studies of poverty in Latin America were aimed at the elucidation of a theoretical framework or series of insights, a paradigm he called "the culture of
poverty." However, his theory has turned out to be much less important than his method, even among anthropologists. Lewis extended the procedure of letting the field data speak for itself about as far as it could be taken. Rather than organizing his material in expositional patterns, he employed narrative, editing and arranging his recorded data into coherent life-stories: "So now the text is the book, and interpretation and analysis take second place—so far as they take any place at all." Lewis' books are absorbing, shocking nonfiction narratives. They are about ways of life, exposed to us through particular lives. The Children of Sanchez consists of the autobiographies of four siblings, each divided into three parts, the whole sandwiched between the two halves of their father's own story. This family drama vividly communicates, through five individual accounts, "what it means to grow up in a one-room home in a slum tenement in the heart of a great Latin American city which is undergoing a process of rapid social and economic change."

Lewis obtained his materials in the same way Terkel did, through sympathetic listening, and he edited his own presence out of the final text even more thoroughly than did Terkel. Each account is a "coherent life story" (xxi), proceeding mainly in chronological order, though with a few gaps here and there, and relatively few markers for the passage of time. By breaking up each autobiography into three parts, Lewis enables us to more easily compare different accounts of the same events, and keep track roughly of what each sibling was doing at about the same time. He also provides us with a lengthy Introduction, containing details about the geography of Mexico City, family
relations, slang, politics, and other background matters. The average reader is even more distant from Lewis' characters than from Warhol's, but Lewis tries to make it easy for us to bridge that gap. He wants us to enter in imagination the lives of five poor, uneducated Mexicans, becoming as deeply involved as we can, so that by the end we can understand both their particular problems and the common humanity we all share. In this his aim is different from Terkel's—Lewis wants us to get a sense of whole persons, valued first for themselves and secondarily for what they can tell us about a way of life (though they cannot really be separated from their society). "The culture of poverty" is a different kind of controlling subject in _The Children of Sanchez_ from "the job" in _Working_. Lewis wants us to understand as much as possible about every aspect of his characters' lives, from the perspectives of their own memories and shaping language.

_The Children of Sanchez_ revolves around Jesus, the patriarch. He is enormously respected and loved by his children; they always consider his opinion of what they do, and in bad times they go back to him for support:

Every day that passed, my father grew more in my esteem, not because he helped me with my children, but because you really have to be quite a man to keep things together like he had. (Manuel, 345)

Although I haven't been able to show it, I not only love my father, I idolize him. . . . He still loves me with the same deep love, except that he doesn't show it any more because I don't deserve it. (Roberto, 65)

My father's presence was everything; it filled the house. With him there, I felt my home complete. (Consuelo, 132)
My other prayer was always that my father should never be taken from us. When his end comes, I don't want to be alive. When the wall falls, all the bricks fall with it. Then, none of us will be able to get up. (Marta, 317)

As Lewis points out in his Introduction, "there is a marked contrast between Jesus Sanchez and his children" (xxii), a generation gap that reflects important changes in Mexican culture. The children respect their father's values enormously, even though they do not take those values to heart in their own lives. When Jesus speaks, he is just a poor man who works hard—not too authoritative, not too permissive, generous but not expressive. When his children talk about him, however, he is larger than life, and his solid middle-class values seem like impossible ideals.

The lives of Manuel, Roberto, Consuelo, and Marta are simultaneously exciting and dingy. Knife fights, stealing and fencing, sex and marriage at a very young age, impossibly crowded living conditions, prison brutalities, irregular income, informal polygamy and a succession of stepmothers—experiences such as these are unusual enough to be titillating to a middle-class reader, but the narrator's own ho-hum attitude toward such commonplaces of life eventually replaces titillation with sadness:

My mother-in-law and her husband lived in one room and a kitchen on Piedad Street, No. 30. At that time all four of her children, with their families, were living with her: Delila and her baby, Faustino and his wife, Socorrito and her husband and their three children, and Paula and me...

The room had one bed, in which Faustino and his wife slept. The rest of us slept on pieces of cardboard and blankets or rags spread on the floor. (Manuel, 160)
I spent six days incommunicado in Police Station No. 6, here in Mexico City, in the Federal District; and, just the words Station No. 6 mean torture, understand, it's brutal punishment that very few can take. They took it out on me for six days, three beatings a day, see? a beating for breakfast, another one for dinner and another for supper, and for dessert, another beating in the middle of the night. (Roberto, 221)

As Lewis observes, "Certainly the lives of the poor are not dull" (xii). In this unstable environment, it is no wonder that those people and things that are reliable take on such importance. Besides Jesus, two other anchors for the Sanchez siblings are their maternal aunt, Guadalupe, and the apartment in the Casa Grande vecindad which their father holds onto although he seldom inhabits it. Happy memories are another form of security, and the children come back to those as regularly as they do to the apartment that is the closest they have to a home.

Insofar as sympathy and understanding do eventually replace titillation, it is largely because the Sanchez children are very self-aware. They are honest not only in recounting intimate details of their lives, but in offering their feelings and speculations in connection with those details:

To be sure, I was no angel. Knowing that it annoyed Roberto for the door to be open, I would open it. If he closed it, I would open it again and again, until we would fight. Roberto hated me so much that he would have killed me if he could.

Before Elena died, my troubles were not so great. I felt that I had everything, my father's love and Elena's. Though my brothers hit me, they did not do it all the time, and besides, their blows were not always hard. (Consuelo, 108-109, 101)
That is why girls do not confide in their mothers. If girls say they have a movie, they get a beating; if they ask for permission to go to the movies, they get screamed at and called sluts, prostitutes, shameless hussies. These words hurt and that's why, when a boy makes an offer, they accept. Many girls go off, not because they are hot, but to spite their fathers, mothers and brothers. (Marta, 151)

All five of the narrators talk with candor about sex, money, religion, and relatives. The kind and degree of openness varies—Manuel and Consuelo are relatively long-winded, Marta the most reticent—but they all manage to be fairly articulate about themselves.

They also have blind spots, however, and are not above rationalizing their own behavior or altering the facts of the past so as to present themselves in a better light. This kind of retrospective self-justification is a universal human trait, and its manifestation in the Sanchez children probably makes us more, rather than less, sympathetic. But it also means that we need to sort out the truth sometimes. This is another way in which the structure of The Children of Sanchez works well: "The independent versions of the same incidents given by the various family members provide a built-in check upon the reliability and validity of much of the data and thereby partially offset the subjectivity inherent in a single autobiography" (xi). As lay readers we are not much concerned with the "validity" of the "data," but we do care about who is telling the truth. The parallel narratives highlight controversial gaps in the family history, places where there are alternative versions staunchly defended. In a tape-recorded book we cannot count on an individual betraying himself,
as we might in reading a novel in which the author can control his characters so as to tell us whatever we need to know. The narrators of *The Children of Sanchez* are certainly "unreliable" at times, but we would have a hard time knowing when if we did not have the other siblings' stories for comparison. It is not always a matter of lying; we all edit our memories without realizing it, so as to go on living with ourselves. Manuel recalls buying a bed from Consuelo for fifty pesos, while Consuelo remembers selling it to him for a hundred pesos and only collecting fifty-five. In Manuel's version of a fight with his sisters, he "held them down on the bed, to keep them from moving, right?" (181); Marta claims that she "got him down on the bed and grabbed his balls and squeezed tight. . . . He was the one who gave up first" (296). Consuelo, who is more prudish and self-pitying than Manuel or Marta, recalls that "When Manuel finally stopped hitting us, Marta and I were black and blue all over; she was bleeding, my face was bruised, and I had a black eye" (261).

Through such minor discrepancies as these, as well as through the moments of honesty and self-awareness, we gradually develop fairly reliable character portraits. Manuel is a slick-talking dreamer, a born salesman but a rotten manager. Roberto is unambitious, highly emotional, and oddly moralistic for all that he drinks, fights, and steals. Consuelo is a romantic whose life is so ugly and whose middle-class desires are so misplaced that her profound self-pity is almost deserved. Marta rarely looks beyond survival—enough food for herself and her children, relatively few beatings—but loves her father with a blind devotion that occasionally lifts her out of her almost
animal existence. Manuel and Consuelo are most articulate, but also
most likely to use that articulateness to make themselves the heroes of
their stories. Roberto and Marta are often more appealing, because
their matter-of-fact accounts are not aimed at construing themselves as
tragic. Between the four of them we learn about an enormous variety of
experiences, including: dozens of different jobs, many romantic and
sexual relationships, life in the army, in the penitentiary, and as a
migrant worker in the United States, visits to Acapulco, Veracruz, and
the Chalma shrine, and all sorts of more mundane matters, such as going
to school, celebrating birthdays, and raising children. Such social
details are often fascinating, but they are finally interesting because
we are interested in the characters. The lives of the children of
Sanchez become important to us, and through that caring we begin to
care about the social conditions in which they are trapped. I doubt,
however, that the lay reader is as concerned about "the culture of
poverty" as Lewis would have liked. Even with the background he
provides in his Introduction, we are less interested in codes of
behavior or patterns of employment than we are in what will happen to
Manuel's "business," whether Marta will stay with Baltazar, and so
forth.

Because The Children of Sanchez is a retrospective narrative, it
achieves some closure simply by bringing events up to the narrative
present. But Lewis gains additional closure by returning to Jesus at
the end of the book. It is fitting that he get in the last word. It
is also somewhat discomforting to listen to this austere patriarch (as
he emerges in his children's accounts) talk about his sex life. It is
almost as if one's own father started to explain what he wanted in a
bed partner. Lewis brings the whole book into a different light by
demythologizing the father, while at the same time vividly
illustrating the real differences between father and children. Jesus
is simultaneously critical and protective, unflinchingly materialistic
and genuinely loving:

I love my sons and Consuelo but I can no longer treat them with
affection. They have made me spend a lot of money uselessly.
(486)

I want to leave them a room, that's my ambition; to build that
little house, one or two rooms or three so that each child will
have a home and so they can live there together. But they don't
want to help me. I asked God to give me the strength to keep
struggling so I won't go under soon and maybe finish that little
house. Just a modest place that they can't be thrown out of.
I'll put a fence around it and no one will bother them. It will
be a protection for them when I fall down and don't get up
again. (499)

The factual adequacy of The Children of Sanchez depends on our
being convinced that we have gotten a reliable picture of these
people's lives. This is very different from the way in which Terkel
must establish the factual adequacy of his account. We do not need to
feel that Lewis has given us every important aspect of life in the Casa
Grande, or that the Sanchez family might reasonably represent everyone
in "the culture of poverty." Such may be Lewis' aim as an
anthropologist, but as an author of literary nonfiction, he need only
convince us that we have the truth of his narrators' lives. Insofar as
he succeeds, and as those lives are engaging, The Children of Sanchez
achieves literary status. Though it is sometimes slow-moving,
sometimes awkward or repetitive, the book forces us to confront the lives of real people with an immediacy seldom encountered in print. The factual status of the book is essential to its power, and Lewis' decision to limit himself to his sources' own words is a powerful tactic. We sympathize and criticize freely, because the narrators are speaking only of what they know and believe, and yet telling us things we realize are slanted. They are simultaneously the sole authorities and the untrustworthy custodians of their own lives. As we listen to them speak, we come to understand something of how we all make beds we can lie in, edit memories so that we can live in them, and construct personae for those around us so that we can justify established patterns of behavior towards them. This general understanding comes through sympathy with people whose lives are very different from ours, a degree of sympathy we seldom achieve outside of fiction, but which Lewis convinces us it is possible, even important to achieve with real people.

* * * *

What do a, Working, and The Children of Sanchez have in common? They are all three, obviously, nonfiction narratives built from people talking about themselves. As such they seem to share a certain authority, which may perhaps be explained from a journalist's perspective by Edward J. Epstein:

Journalists, then, are caught in a dilemma. They can either serve as faithful messengers for some subterranean interest, or
they can recast the message into their own version of the story by adding, deleting, or altering material. The first alternative assures that the message will be accurately relayed to the intended audience, although the message itself might be false or misleading. The latter alternative, while lessening the source's control over the message, increases the risk of further distortion, since the journalist cannot be aware of the full context and circumstances surrounding the disclosure. In neither case can journalists be certain of either the truth or the intended purpose of what they publish. Such a dilemma cannot be remedied by superior newsmen or more intensive journalistic training. It arises not out of defects in the practice of journalism, but out of the source-reporter relationship which is part and parcel of the structure of modern journalism. 14

According to Epstein's paradigm, tape-recorded books represent an extreme surrender of "control over the message," with a compensating increase in "accuracy." What could possibly be more accurate than "the exact words"? But there is always the risk that the characters are lying or acting or just fooling themselves.

This may describe the average state of affairs in a piece of exact quotation from a newspaper, but in the case of literary nonfiction there is not necessarily an inversely proportional ratio between "accuracy" and the author's "control." There are all sorts of ways in which authors can use their sources' words to achieve their own effects, without a consequent decrease in the factual adequacy of what is being told. Terkel employs certain speakers for the unwitting self-exposure in their words, while Lewis juxtaposes alternative versions so as to help us see the real people and the real social conditions behind the biased accounts. In fact, we might say that an obvious characteristic of literary nonfiction is that its author's purpose is always successfully achieved—that he does not surrender
"control"—no matter how many of the actual words of his text may have been spoken by his characters. Recasting quotations is only one tool available to the nonfiction writer, and in the case of the tape-recorded book it is not employed.\textsuperscript{15}

Given that Warhol, Terkel, and Lewis have designed their narratives so as to achieve certain ends through the use of tape-recorded interviews, what basis can we find for talking about such works as a particular sub-genre? As I have shown, they have very different criteria for factual adequacy, very different structures, and very different effects. For Warhol "truth" resides in the simple presentation of the contents of his tapes; within the context of "A Novel," those tapes represent an interesting but determinedly tedious aesthetic point. The "truth" of Terkel's book lies in his success in convincing us that he has fairly represented working in America, which means both a sufficient scope and a sufficient variety of positions. This factual adequacy is brought home to us as a narrative experience through the vividness and honesty of his accounts, so that by the end of the book we feel that we have understood certain universal aspects of the human condition, through the particular lives of a variety of people more or less like ourselves in essence, though distant in living conditions. For Lewis the "truth" also resides in the shapes of particular lives, but those lives, rather than certain aspects of the human condition, are our focus and ultimate interest. We do not need balance or scope, in the sense of other sources, other poor or not so poor people in Mexico City. We simply need to feel that we understand these people, as distant from us as they are.
The different purposes of Warhol, Terkel, and Lewis produced three very different books. It is not the subject matter that determines these books' effects—one could theoretically write a tape-recorded book about the Velvet Underground that made the reader sympathize deeply with various real people, or a book about poverty in Mexico City that relied on interviews with dozens of people to provide a convincing spectrum of experiences. Just as obviously, the technique of relying heavily on transcription does not determine what a book will do with that transcription, what effects it will produce—aesthetic, thematic, or affective—or how it will be structured.

Another problem with identifying a genre or sub-genre on the basis of a narrative technique, is that the technique may be used in various degrees. For instance, there are many nonfiction narratives that depend heavily on quotation—In Cold Blood, for instance—and one could easily imagine a text which had huge blocks of transcription along with sections of description or authorial comment. In fact, there is a lot of variation in the kind and amount of "editorial" material in the three texts discussed in this chapter. Warhol sticks to the original chronology and the exact words. Lewis edits out his half of the interviews and reorganizes the "data" into "coherent life stories," supplemented by an introduction. Terkel picks and chooses between interviews, then edits the remaining materials and gives each narrator some accompanying background. At what point do we no longer have a tape-recorded book?16

It is certainly possible to talk about different points of view in nonfiction narrative, and under that heading to address the question of
lengthy quotation and the various uses to which authors can put such material. But it is no more or less useful to group all tape-recorded books together, than it is to make a sub-genre of all fiction that employs a first-person narrator—which is to say, there are certain limited uses for doing so, in the context of exploring how authors exploit narrative techniques for a variety of purposes. Warhol's aesthetic intentions required a strictly unedited version of daily events, anyone's daily events, but conveniently and comically the daily life of his friend Robert Oliva. Terkel's thematic aims were best served by showing us a variety of ordinary people talking about themselves with honesty, ardor, and a naturalistic eloquence. Lewis' intentions were two-fold: as a scientist he wanted to present field data that would support his theories about "the culture of poverty," but as an author of literary nonfiction he wanted to involve us in the lives of five particular people, perhaps so that we would do something for poor people, but more likely just because such an involvement increases our understanding of the world.

All three authors chose to write nonfiction because factual status was important to their works. They do not want their books read "as fiction," and if such a thing were possible the results would surely be more disappointing than if they were read as nonfiction. Neither do they want them read all in the same way, or for the same sorts of pleasure. The general category of literary nonfiction is potentially as broad as the whole range of literary fiction, which includes texts as diverse as Moby-Dick, Bleak House, Ulysses, and USA. There may be a great deal less literary nonfiction than fiction, and it may fall into
certain descriptive categories, of which there may be relatively few. But if such is the case, it is an empirical rather than a theoretical truth, and a more likely topic for a literary historian than for a theorist. Literary nonfiction is still a growth field for critics, and the temptation to label is almost irresistible, especially with something like tape-recorded books, of which there are so few. Any division of literary nonfiction into sub-genres, whether they are based on similarities in technique, subject matter, or final narrative intention, should be accompanied by an explanation of the uses for such a division, the purpose as well as the grounds for anatomizing.
Notes

1 Ronald Weber admits a "lack of discussion of the tape-recorded book" in his own survey of literary nonfiction, and acknowledges that Oscar Lewis' work in particular "merits study" (The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing (Athens, O.: Ohio U. Press, 1980), p. 3). In his excellent article, "Documentary Narrative as Art: William Manchester and Truman Capote," Donald Pizer says that tape-recorded books are "important," but also a "special kind" of documentary narrative that requires "separate discussion" (The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy, ed. Ronald Weber (N.Y.: Hastings House, 1974), p. 208). Mas'ud Zavarzadeh is the only critic I have found who gives extensive treatment to tape-recorded books. He devotes a chapter to what he calls "the notational nonfiction novel," which is a "narrative of absolute literalness" that has "no 'author' and many 'authors' at the same time" (The Mythopoetic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 181, 177). Zavarzadeh argues that the tape-recorded book represents "raw experience itself, not its codification according to an interpretive scheme . . . an unselective, total observation of the surface of experience" (pp. 177, 178). As will become obvious, I disagree with Zavarzadeh totally. I find that
Working and The Children of Sanchez are carefully structured according to "interpretive schemes," and that giving credit for the success of any nonfiction narrative entirely to the events it records is unfair to the author and leaves the critic with nothing to say. "Raw experience itself" seldom comes in words, and even when the experience is verbal, as with tape-recorded books, it is generally so incoherent as to be uninteresting. Zavarzadeh's description of tape-recorded books, and in fact of the "nonfiction novel" in general, makes them all sound like Warhol's a—flat, literal, nihilistic, fairly "raw."

Other critics make casual references to the "nonfiction novel" as a category of third-person documentary narrative, or to "personal journalism" as a sub-genre containing virtually all first-person nonfiction narratives. This is convenient, perhaps, but very sloppy. Tape-recorded books are first-person works, but hardly "personal journalism." A third-person book like Tom Wolfe's The Right Stuff may strike one as more "personal" or idiosyncratic than a first-person book like McPhee's Coming into the Country.

2 Andy Warhol, a: A Novel (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1968), p. 30. Further references to this edition are in parentheses in the text. In all quotations from a and the other primary texts discussed in this study, I will follow the example of other critics and minimize confusion by using unspaced dots (...) to represent the author's own ellipses, and spaced dots (... ) to represent my own.

3 Zavarzadeh, p. 204.

4 According to Zavarzadeh, one of the successes of a is that "The horror and boredom of contemporary experience is not talked about but
iconographically captured so the reader himself is bored, frustrated, confused in the very process of reading" (p. 205).

5 Consider Warhol's work in other media: an eight-hour movie of a person sleeping or a building, paintings of mundane objects such as soup cans, etc. Ondine seems to share Warhol's interests:

... I mean, I don't mind reading documentaries or Schwann catalogs or lists of one sort or another. I don't mind that. I really don't mind reading biographies if they're, you know, fairly well written, but I can't take reading novels or anything like that when they're... I just can't do it. (9)

This fascination with the concretely present, even when it is boring, and an accompanying frustration with the conventionally contrived, produce a "novel" that merely registers a progression of words and sounds.


7 This is the kind of thing one would discuss in a detailed examination of the factual adequacy of Working. Would these same issues have arisen on their own? How exactly has Terkel directed the interviews? In order for Working to succeed, we must believe that Terkel has not overly biased his account, but what exactly constitutes too great a bias is a matter for debate.

8 Consider the background information Terkel gives us for the "Car Salesman":

' His hair is styled, his dress is modish, and his mustache is well-trimmed Fu Manchu. In the apartment: a hi-fi set, a small TV set, several cassettes, a variety of sound, and a small poodle running about. Though he doesn't drink, he suggested to
his guest, who was reaching for Cutty Sark, Chivas Regal.
"Until a couple of months ago, I was a greaser. My hair was
slicked back. My wife insisted..." (She had worked as a
Playboy bunny.) (303)

Terkel has given us all sorts of social details which provide a
shortcut to pegging this speaker. Later Terkel helps us some more,
with the question, "How do you feel about Ralph Nader?" The
predictable answer is, "We could do without him. He's taken the choice
away from the people" (308-309). Is a Terkel an unwitting victim of
cliches, or is he trying to make use of stereotypes that are
unfortunately valid, as all stereotypes are to some degree? I am not
certain which is the case. Sometimes an interview presents a
surprising social anomaly, but far more often Terkel's characters fit
the stereotypes, until through self-revelation they begin to emerge as
individuals, when they complicate, rather than contradict, the cliches.

I think that Working is the best of the four, the most unified
and the most insightful.

J. H. M. Beattie, review of three works by Lewis (including
The Children of Sanchez), Current Anthropology, 8 (1967), p. 484. This
issue contains reviews by fourteen anthropologists and a reply by
Lewis. As fellow scientists, these reviewers ask some excellent
questions about Lewis' methodology, questions which bear on the factual
adequacy of The Children of Sanchez.

Oscar Lewis, The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a
to this edition are in parentheses in the text.
In his Introduction Lewis talks about the "need" for a universal literature which would improve our understanding of life in less-developed countries (xxiii). Much of the success of The Children of Sanchez is connected with the fact that it interests us in the lives of particular people, lives that are both intrinsically fascinating and representative of a larger group of people about which most of us know little and ought to know more. This dual knowledge is particularly accessible (as a literary achievement) to nonfiction narratives.

Of course, Lewis faced the problem of translation from "lower-class Mexican Spanish" into English: "I tried to capture the essential meaning and flavor of the language rather than to render a literal translation" (xxii). I frequently find his use of American slang bothersome. In general, style and tone are not the strong points of The Children of Sanchez, although there are some nice moments when Lewis translates literally a piece of Mexican slang: "Isn't it true that you sang on the buttocks of my woman?" (361). But I suspect that even this quote has been translated with more decorum than precision.


Of course, editing is always important and always unavoidable to some degree, as anyone who has ever transcribed an interview knows, and as a illustrates at length. Various forms of "cleaning up" interviews are widely practiced, and no doubt abuses have been committed in the interest of a neater presentation. The issue of exact quotation will arise again and again in the next two chapters, in discussions of accuracy and narrative voice.
Zavarzadeh considers parts of Terkel's books to be "nonfiction short stories," but argues that on balance there is too much of Terkel himself (and not enough of his sources) for his books to be considered "notational nonfiction novels," which is his term for literary tape-recorded books (208).
III. ACCURACY AND MEANING

Research, of course, is no substitute for wisdom. The sum of a million facts is not the truth.

—William Manchester, The Death of a President

Since accurate chronology soon showed itself as crucial to understanding motivation, every effort was made to get it right, and not for the sake of history alone. One understood one's characters better when the chronology was correct.

—Norman Mailer, The Executioner's Song

"This is important, goddammit! This is a true story!"

—Hunter Thompson, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

How are the effects of literary nonfiction wedded to (or divorced from) "the facts"? Put another way, how does nonfiction narrative construct powerful meanings from verifiable details or, alternatively, get away with altering details in the name of some larger truth? I have already broached this question in Chapter One, arguing against two extreme answers, viz., that literary nonfiction always adheres strictly to "the facts," and that it asserts complete independence from "the facts." But that still leaves a huge middle ground, which will be explored in this chapter. Every work of literary nonfiction must establish its factual adequacy by successfully describing real events, but there is no transcendent standard for what constitutes a truthful representation of reality. Whenever an author claims to be merely
reporting the story, or telling it like it is, or giving us the real truth, he is actually defending his own privileged standards of factual adequacy. Authors must clarify the rules by which they are reporting, and then demonstrate that those rules are useful for providing particular insights into our shared history. The four texts (and four different sets of rules) that we will look at in this chapter will be William Manchester's *The Death of a President,* Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song,* Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff,* and Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.*

* * *

*The Death of a President: November 20–November 25, 1963* is a minutely detailed account of the assassination and funeral of John F. Kennedy. The book is not primarily a biography, a crime story, or a chronicle of conventionally "historic" events, but rather the story of an American experience. Manchester indicates his particular focus by contrasting *The Death of a President* with its major competitor, the Warren report:

The Commission was conducting a criminal probe. I was exploring the full sweep of events during what were, in some respects, the most extraordinary hours in the history of our country. They were focusing upon the assassin of a President, I upon the Presidency itself.¹

Manchester's thesis is that Kennedy's character, the circumstances of his death and funeral, and the rapid communication of events during
that weekend combined to produce a national catharsis. *The Death of a President* is Manchester's attempt to re-enact that catharsis in the lives of a huge cast of characters, while simultaneously establishing an authoritative version of the actions of key figures during those few tense days. Through a wealth of detail and the manipulation of symbols in pursuit of an explanation for the impact of Kennedy's death, Manchester tries to go beyond the typical effects of historical writing to produce a work of literary nonfiction.

*The Death of a President* is, as Donald Pizer notes, "documentary narrative at its most documentary." Maps, charts, and a long list of sources testify to Manchester's precision and thoroughness. Tiny bits and pieces of information contribute to our sense of his accuracy and authority: "The assumption of most readers is that a researcher who knows the location of each TV set in the White House during late November, 1963, must know the vital facts concerning the assassination itself." Obviously Manchester means for us to judge his book by the strictest standards of journalistic accuracy. But he also wants his selection of details to bring the story to life, make it more absorbing than a typical history. To that end he employs vocabulary, imagery, and themes that enhance the significance of Kennedy's death; he concentrates on Jacqueline Kennedy's actions, as a focus of emotion for many observers; and he focuses much of the book around the dramatic conflict of Presidential succession.

In his Epilogue, "Legend," Manchester alludes to the tradition of the dying king and the passing of a golden age. He cites Siegfried, Roland, et al., as examples by which to understand "what happened to
the memory of John Kennedy after his burial" (623). This is only the
most explicit example of Manchester's attempts to create a portrait of
Kennedy that is simultaneously lifelike and larger-than-life. The term
"martyr" occurs many times, and there are several examples of
almost-magical events: the "Kennedy weather" that brings sun to the
speeches and rain to the funeral; the unexpectedly blooming Rose Garden
(554); the unprecedented truce between Eisenhower and Truman (592-593);
the impotence of alcohol and barbituates in the stress of that weekend
(349 and elsewhere); and the strange heaviness of the President's
coffin (539-540), to name just a few. Of course, Manchester offers
reasonable explanations: the "abrupt barometric drop" that produces
"an atavistic tension in people and animals" (444); the role of shock
and the power of hypnosis in creating bizarre effects; and the
instantaneous communication by television and radio, never before
available in national crisis, that turned America into "one enormous
emergency room, with the stricken world waiting outside" (189). But
these explanations serve to heighten our sense that something momentous
has occurred. It took depth of feeling to produce all that adrenalin,
and to make people stick by their televisions sets through a long,
lugubrious weekend. The loss and the reaction are real, so that even
if there are reasonable explanations for extraordinary behavior, we get
the sense that extraordinary things were happening.

Besides eerie events, a number of impressive tributes are recorded
by Manchester and serve to enhance Kennedy's importance:

Typically, a consul reported that an African native had walked
ten miles through the bush to say, "I have lost a friend and I
am so sorry." (498)
The headline of Rome's Il Giorno simply read: "Addio, John, Addio," and the taxi drivers of Rome parked an empty cab with a huge black wreath propped against it outside the American Embassy. (497)

Veneration is the only explanation for their endurance in that line. The bitter weather and the length of the wait discouraged all except those who felt an uncontrollable compulsion to stay. They knew how brief their time inside would be. They would be permitted a few moments to circle the coffin, to kneel quickly, and to leave flowers with two soldiers; that was all. Yet they would not turn back. By midnight a hundred thousand had passed through, and the line behind them was three miles long—three miles of shivering shoulders and frosting breaths. (563)

Even the tactless responses rebound to Kennedy's credit, as a person is admired for the enemies he makes as well as for his friends: "A man wearing a swastika was arrested in the state capital at Madison, Wisconsin, after he announced that he was 'celebrating Kennedy's death'" (410). When Nazis celebrate, then it is time for good people to mourn.

Yet another way Manchester gives Kennedy's death greater symbolic significance is by turning the assassination into the culmination of a battle between the forces of Good and Evil. The Death of a President gives Lee Harvey Oswald very little attention, no more than is necessary in order to present an accurate account of events. Besides not wanting to further the notoriety Oswald sought by the shooting, Manchester slights Oswald because little glory rebounds to the memory of Kennedy if he was merely shot by a punk for attention. Though careful to insist that Oswald was the lone gunman acting (consciously, anyway) only out of purely personal motivations, Manchester does what
he can to take spiritual responsibility for the assassination out of Oswald's hands:

Like Abe Zapruder and Jacqueline Kennedy, no one could credit the tragedy to a single assassin. The President was always described as a victim of "them," never of "him." The crime seemed too vast to be attributed to a single criminal. Ford's Theatre was remembered as the building in which one man shot Lincoln, but Dallas became the city where "they" killed Kennedy. (164)

Like Warren [Mike Mansfield] grasped the essence of the Dallas crime—"the bigotry, the hatred, prejudice, and the arrogance which converged in that moment of horror to strike him down" . . . (541)

"And the hell of it is," Ralph Dungan had said, "they'll blame it all on that twenty-four-year-old boy." (569)

In Oswald's place as villain Manchester inserts the American radical Right and its dark castle, Big D. In the Prologue we are given some background on the fatal Texas trip, including some of the warnings the government received. Texas is portrayed as almost another country, Lyndon Johnson's barbaric "fief," where politicians "were stalking one another with shivs" (3). Dallas is the heart of this violent, atavistic land:

Texas led the United States in homicide, and Big D led Texas. There were more murders in Dallas each month than in all England, and none of them could be traced to the underworld or to outsiders; they were the work of Dallas citizens. . . . In that third year of the Kennedy Presidency a kind of fever lay over Dallas County. Mad things happened. Huge billboards screamed "Impeach Earl Warren." Jewish stores were smeared with crude swastikas. Fanatical young matrons swayed in public to the chant, "Stevenson's going to die--his heart will stop, stop, stop, and he will burn, burn, burn!" (43-44)
President Kennedy's courage is proven by the fact that he ventures out in an open car in a city where another liberal was recently spit upon, and where citizens believe that "Colt made the .45 to even things out!" (44). Unfortunately, that was fatal courage. Even if Oswald acted alone, and assassination is ultimately impossible to prevent (as several experts attest in the book), that does not mean it was a coincidence that Kennedy died in Dallas. Manchester treats his death as a major battle in the larger war between Good and Evil, tolerance and prejudice, progress and regress. Even the Secret Service code names which Manchester chooses to use throughout the narrative emphasize heroic qualities such as Kennedy's stature as "Lancer," Jacqueline's delicacy as "Lace," the power of the White House as "Castle," etc.

Chief mourner and main object of interest for most of the country during those days in 1963, Jacqueline Kennedy is the heroine of The Death of a President. Her decision to stay with her husband's body, the combination of strength and sorrow that surrounded all her actions, and her natural beauty and delicacy make her both a natural object for pathos and the best argument for what was lost in the assassination—a man worthy of her. Besides chronicling her actions, Manchester tells us a great deal about her by recording her ceremonial decisions—choices about flowers, eulogies, bands, the grave site, etc.—and by quoting the tributes of other characters, either about her or about her husband and addressed to her:

DEAREST JACKIE:

Nothing I say can mitigate the shame and horror of this day. Your husband was the most brilliant, able and inspiring member
of my generation. He was the one man to whom this country could confide its destiny with confidence and hope. He animated everything he did with passion and gaiety and wit. To have known him and worked with and for him is the most fulfilling experience I have ever had or could imagine. . . (411)

Arthur Schlesinger's praise of John is also a compliment to Jacqueline, of course. She is the one woman capable of matching such an extraordinary man. De Gaulle is quoted as saying, "'She gave an example to the whole world of how to behave'" (611). This is perhaps the most direct and eloquent reaction to her behavior that weekend, but Manchester returns time and time again to the widow, recording the memories of many people, about how her hair looked at a certain moment, how she spoke at another, the bloodstains on her clothing, etc. The American public "saw no one but her. Her impact on them was tremendous; in her bearing they saw a confirmation of her gallantry . . ." (580). Although Manchester sometimes comes uncomfortably close to milking the image of the "gallant" widow for sentiment alone, his portrait of Jacqueline is very important to his overall purpose of re-enacting a time of intense, widely-shared loss. Many people's most vivid memories of those days include the widow, and the noble qualities she displayed remind us of what we lost with her.

The struggle of succession is another channel employed by Manchester to dramatize the nation's trauma. It is also the part of the book that has received the most criticism. Critics, editors, and even some of the book's characters who read the manuscript have objected to Manchester's handling of this topic, especially his unflattering portrait of Lyndon Johnson. The "Texas President"
elected by a "Texas bullet" is characterized as a schemer; as physically imposing though rather graceless; as frustrated, tactless, petty, vampiric, and opportunistic; as a "chameleon," "octopus," "cipher," "promoter," and "bulk." Occasionally Manchester insists that some action of Johnson or his aides was no doubt good for the country, but even then the tone is pitying or apologetic—given his limitations, Johnson probably did the best he could, the narrator implies, but no doubt Kennedy would have done much better.

Manchester claims to be a "realist," but his sympathies obviously lie with those Kennedy aides he calls the "loyalists," those who still thought of Kennedy as "the President," who put aside political responsibilities for the duty of mourning (like Antigone), and who felt they could no longer continue in government after the death of the best part of America. Manchester concentrates upon (and perhaps exaggerates) this conflict between "realists" and "loyalists" in order to emphasize the extreme loyalty Kennedy elicited, and also the unfortunate but inevitable decline of strength and ability in the White House after Kennedy's death. The loyalty points up Kennedy's qualities as a leader and as a man. The pale shadow that is Lydon Baines Johnson illustrates the nation's loss; "the ritualistic murder of the folk hero" which produces national "cohesion" (623-624) must be followed by a period of decay and retreat, and if such a period appears, it is evidence of important loss. The logic is circular, but makes symbolic sense. Johnson's tactless moments become magnified into signs of national decrepitude.
The archetypal story of the dying king is everywhere built into The Death of a President, so that by the end of the book's six days the reader is meant to feel as though he has gone through a ritual of mourning along with the characters. We have a strong sense of familiarity, since so many of the details are well known. This rehearsed quality makes unique events feel like a ceremony, and Manchester's obsessive cataloguing of details begins to resemble a litany. He never spends much time in any one character's mind, so that we are not tempted to begin caring about particular people very deeply. Depth of sorrow and shock are communicated by the erratic behavior of many people, and by having a variety of characters report on the behavior of key figures like Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy. The reader is always on the outside, observing; when we get into a character's mind, it is always through recollection:

Hubert Humphrey was behind Jacqueline Kennedy. "We went to the burial ground area of the President," the Senator observed afterward. "And how beautiful the site that was selected! I fail to find the words to adequately express it. But it seems to me as if he stands as a constant sentinel over the nation's capital. The President's grave is like an outpost for observation of the capital city.

The past-tense narration does not engage us with the story so much as it reports on the story. Obviously, this distancing style conflicts with Manchester's goal of making the reader sensually experience the events of those days in 1963. This is one aspect of the book's central problem, an inability to resolve its twin aims: re-enacting past events with vividness and symbolic resonance, and providing a respectable, authoritative history of six important days in American
history. Certainly historic events can be presented vividly and accurately, but Manchester's account has difficulty reconciling those two ends.

Part of the problem is his decision to be exhaustive. Although six hundred pages is a pretty fair condensation of "eighteen volumes of transcribed interviews . . . and twenty-seven portfolios of documents" (xi), The Death of a President is still full of details which are not intrinsically important nor crucial to any one of his themes. Donald Pizer argues that the effect of such "trivial" detail "is to diffuse the impact and blur the significance of the assassination." Manchester makes it clear in his Foreword and in several notes that he means his account to be, not merely a version, but the version of those few days, the primary source upon which all subsequent accounts will have to depend. Manchester also wants his work respected as absolutely accurate in all parts, so he steps forward at especially controversial moments in the narrative and explicitly argues for his reconstruction of events. Again, such breaks in the narrative conflict with his aim of vividly re-enacting the past; just as one is getting into the story, along comes an expositional segment:

Lee Oswald has been repeatedly identified here as the President's slayer. He is never "alleged" or "suspected" or "supposed" or "surmised"; he is the culprit. Some, intimidated by the fiction that only judges may don the black cap and condemn, may disapprove. . . . But enough is enough. The evidence pointing to his guilt is far more incriminating than that against Booth, let alone Judas Iscariot. He is the right man; there is nothing provisional about it. The mark of Cain was upon him. (278)
There is a note of defensiveness, even self-righteousness, in passages like the above. In taking up the challenge of explicit competition, Manchester may have done his narrative a disservice. *The Death of a President* would have been a more powerful book if there were less concern for getting the whole story in unimpeachable terms.

What makes this issue even more serious is the fact that Manchester's account is far from unimpeachable. Edward J. Epstein has offered a competing account, somewhat like Tompkins' challenge to *In Cold Blood*, alleging that Manchester made several important mistakes, and even tried to cover up or explain away with those that were noticed before the book's publication. Epstein had access to an earlier draft of the book, "Death of Lancer," which was "a mythopoeic melodrama organized around the theme of the struggle for power between two men, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson." Apparently Manchester was forced to tone down his book considerably before it was finally accepted for publication, and compensated for the missing material by going after a more exhaustive account. But the final version betrays both his original and his eventual intentions—it is neither fish nor fowl, neither vividly engaging nor authoritative and exhaustive.

The factual errors Epstein points out are not fatal in themselves. What makes them so important is that Manchester designed his book upon the premise that he was being utterly reliable. If he does not have every single detail correct, how can he justify including so many tiny facts which have significance only in the context of a thoroughly accurate account? By his apparent respect for even the smallest details, Manchester indicates that he is after a very precise, very
accurate and verifiable kind of truth. Those are the rules he selects, and when he does not play by them, the reader feels cheated.

_The Death of a President_ is interesting because Manchester tries to play by such strict epistemological rules, while simultaneously creating in the reader a vivid and symbolically engaging experience. He wants his history to be exhaustive and also moving, in much the same way that he wants to portray Kennedy as both a real historical person and a leader of heroic proportions. Just as it is difficult to magnify without sentimentalizing, so it is hard to tell a lively story without leaving out or altering many details. As Kenneth Burke puts it in one of his wonderful epigrams, "Atrophy of form follows hypertrophy of information." Manchester did not find a form that would successfully reconcile the bulk of information he wanted to contain with his goal of making history come alive and certain historical figures take their proper places as folk heroes.

In _The Death of a President_ factual adequacy is very close to our conventional notion of accuracy. All details are intended to be verifiable, and each is valuable for its historic significance. To alter anything would be to misrepresent the past. There is no larger truth in the book, even the truth of Kennedy's stature, that is presented as important enough to justify altering history. _The Death of a President_ therefore conveniently serves as one end on a spectrum of factual adequacy. Other works of literary nonfiction will be less concerned with accuracy, and more willing to extrapolate from or change the available facts.
We do not have to assume that accuracy is irreconcilable with an engaging story. On the contrary, the precisely selected detail presented in the proper context can be as effective in nonfiction as in fiction. The challenge is to find a form capable of discovering significant patterns in the available facts. If one credits the competing account offered by Epstein, one must conclude that Manchester did not find enough evidence for a feud between Johnson and Kennedy, or between the "realists" and the "loyalists," and so decided to manufacture conflict through a slanted account. Given the absolute respect for the truth that Manchester expresses throughout his narrative, and the apparent caution he employs at controversial moments, we cannot help but be disappointed in the factual inadequacy of The Death of a President. The book may contain more accurate details than any number of creditable histories, but its central thesis and much of its dramatic interest are based on a lie; the resulting narrative is disappointing, as is In Cold Blood, because the author broke his own rules in crucial places.

There are other flaws in The Death of a President, chief among them Manchester's sentimentality. Consider the book's final passage, a description of Jacqueline Kennedy's blood-stained clothes packed away "in an attic not far from 3017 N Street [her Washington residence]" (646). The box is opened by a hypothetical "intruder from some land so remote that the name, the date, and the photographs of the ensemble had not been published and republished until they had been graven upon his memory" (646). This convenient outsider makes bathetic suppositions about the owner of the clothes, and the book concludes, "He might even
wonder who had been to blame" (647). Thus Manchester returns at the end to the issue of blame, calling to mind the villains of his story—Dallas, Johnson, the radical Right, least of all poor dead Oswald—while he squeezes tears from old clothes. Not all of the book is this sentimental, of course. There are many fascinating passages with details of the assassination and various reactions to it. But as the book goes on, it becomes increasingly less dramatic and more sentimental, which is not surprising considering that the assassination is relatively early in the story and by the day of the funeral there is not much to record except eulogies of one sort or another.

It would be convenient to talk about Manchester's factual errors as an epistemological problem, and his sentimentality as an artistic problem, but in reality no such neat separation is possible. Both the cheating and the endless memorial tributes are the result of an aesthetic failure, the inability to find a successful form. None of Manchester's details, slanted or bathetic, is a flaw in itself, only in the context of the book as a whole. This is one important difference between how the literary critic and the historian approach a nonfiction text. Parts of The Death of a President would be bad history no matter what context they appeared in, because they would not accurately represent the particular truth of a particular historical moment. The literary critic is looking for the universal within the particular, however, and so must weigh altered details in the context of what has been gained in the exchange. The other three books we will look at in this chapter all contain "facts" which are either altered or not verifiable. Our procedure will be to examine each text as a whole,
working out the author's recommended epistemological standards, as it were, and evaluating the book's success in light of what it attempts. 9

* * * * *

Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* is an account of the last nine months of the life of Gary Gilmore. Mailer claims in the Afterword that "the story is as accurate as one can make it," 10 but this does not mean that *The Executioner's Song* is as well-documented or verifiable as *The Death of a President*. Mailer worked with interviews, recollections, and the printed sources that were available, including newspaper accounts and courtroom transcripts, to produce a profoundly moving book full of engaging characters. The reader is given insights into several communities, including small-town Utah, big-time checkbook journalism, and hard-time prison, as well as into the lives of many people about whom we come to care deeply. Along the way he made several fascinating decisions about what kinds of "facts" he would use and the way he would present those facts. After looking at the book's structure and Mailer's technical decisions about style and point of view, we will turn to a discussion of the book's factual adequacy and the particular connections it makes between accuracy and meaning.

*The Executioner's Song* is divided into two parts, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices." The first recounts the events of Gilmore's life from the time he comes to Utah on parole, through the murders he commits, his trial and conviction. The central narrative thread is the relationship between Gilmore and Nicole Baker, and Nicole's past is a
very important part of their story. Part Two contains the various appeals and legal maneuvers carried out on Gilmore's unwilling behalf, Larry Schiller's efforts to get Gilmore's story for posterity, and the last two months of Gilmore's life. The suspense of the second half of the book comes mostly from wondering how Gilmore will face death, whether Schiller will be able to get at the real Gary Gilmore before it is too late, and whether Nicole will be able to recover from her killing love for Gilmore. The Executioner's Song is a fat book, several hundred pages longer than The Death of a President, but it covers nine months rather than six days, and Mailer had a great deal of leeway in the selection of details. His instinct was much better than Manchester's—for all of its thousand-plus pages, there is no dead weight in The Executioner's Song. Mailer's primary narrative interest has always been character, and in this book he presents a large cast of real people with the vividness one associates with fictional characters: "... no one could invent characters better than Gilmore, Nicole, and Schiller, nor minor figures better than the dozens that move in and out of the book."11 By the end of the story we understand a great deal about particular human beings, particular communities, and how the particular institution of capital punishment returned to American life.

Mailer employs a strict third-person mode of narration. Almost every action in the book is presented through the eyes of a particular character, and generally accompanied by that character's response, so that we have the sense of one witness after another, always subjective, but also always verifiable. Moreover, although Gilmore is the center
of *The Executioner's Song*, his perspective on events is used very sparingly, only in a few crucial scenes for which there is no other witness (such as the shooting of Max Jensen). Our introduction to Gilmore is through the eyes of his cousin Brenda:

The prison sure cut his hair short. It would, Brenda judged, be heavy handsome brown hair when it grew out, but for now it stuck up hick style in the back. He kept pushing it down.

No matter, she liked his looks. In the half-light that came into the car as they drove through Salt Lake on the Interstate, the city sleeping on both sides of them, she decided that Gary was everything she expected in that department. A long, fine nose, good chin, thin well-shaped lips. He had character about his face. (25)

Gilmore's last moments are described through the eyes of several witnesses, among them his uncle Vern Damico and his lawyer Ron Stanger:

Then the Warden said, "Do you have anything you'd like to say?" and Gary looked up at the ceiling and hesitated, then said, "Let's do it" That was it. The most pronounced amount of courage, Vern decided, he'd ever seen, no quaver, no throatiness, right down the line. Gary had looked at Vern as he spoke.

The way Stanger heard it, it came out like Gary wanted to say something good and dignified and clever, but couldn't think of anything profound. The drugs had left him too dead. Rather than say nothing, he did his best to say it very clear, "Let's do it." (955)

By using a variety of perspectives, Mailer gets a more complex and perhaps more honest version of events. Was Gilmore brave or just tired? We cannot be certain, but we can make a decision based on what witnesses believed, and what we know about those witnesses and about Gilmore himself by the end of the book. Since there is no effort to keep the witnesses neutral—recollected details are almost always
accompanied by the subjective responses of the person who is remembering—we end up learning and caring about the witnesses as well.

By avoiding Gilmore's own perspective, Mailer also avoids the trap of sentimentality to which Capote fell prey. Capote made Perry Smith the protagonist of *In Cold Blood*, and depended upon Smith's recollections and his own opinion of Smith for creating sympathy with him. Mailer, in contrast, makes his protagonist a focus for the observations and opinions of dozens of other people, and so achieves a much more balanced portrait. Of course, he does lean heavily upon Gilmore's letters, but they are a kind of documentation, self-portraits deliberately constructed and so admissible as evidence of a particular circumscribed kind. Mailer admits that he used the letters to show Gilmore "at a level higher than his average" (1021), and even altered parts of them in order to produce that effect. Nevertheless, the letters are only one window among many that allow us to peep into Gilmore's mind. None is absolutely objective; none is sufficient by itself. But together they give us a fascinating, complex view of an interesting historical figure.

Mailer shifts his point of view frequently, and the text is broken up into short paragraphs divided by white space, partly in order to facilitate this shift in perspective:

When Vern met his lawyer, Bob Moody, on Monday morning, he thought he was a quiet, confident, intelligent man. Moody was well built, and half bald, and his eyeglasses looked competent. His way of talking was very carefully spoken. Vern noticed that when Bob Moody said something, he didn't have to repeat it. Assumed you understood. Vern saw him as in the category of upper class. Would belong to the country club and have an

To Moody, Vern Damico seemed a concerned relative, sincerely looking for the best deal he could shape up. He kept saying that he wanted Gary's wishes to be carried out. He wanted some kind of dignity retained for his nephew if possible. (623)

Two characters meet, and we get each one's impression of the other. The resulting true account is both very credible and very efficient: we learn about and become interested in both people through what each says about the other and through what each reveals about himself in his opinion of the other.

We have the additional benefit in trying to understand Gilmore of having professional witnesses give us their opinions. Vern's view of Gary is interesting, but journalist Barry Farrell's opinions tell us a great deal more:

Rereading the interviews and letters, Farrell began to mark the transcripts with different-colored inks to underline each separate motif in Gilmore's replies, and before he was done, he got twenty-seven different poses. Barry had begun to spot racist Gary and Country-and-Western Gary, poetic Gary, artist manque Gary, macho Gary, self-destructive Gary, Karma County Gary, Texas Gary, and Gary the killer Irishman. (806)

Mailer also uses Farrell to speculate about very deep motivations and fears in Gilmore. At one point Farrell thinks he has figured out a possible motive for the murders, in Gilmore's sexual attraction to children. But this comes too late for further interview questions:

Barry felt the woe of late discovery. He could not say a word about this now. It was too insubstantial. In fact, it was sheer speculation. If Gilmore was willing to execute himself for such a vice, assuming it was a vice—beware of understanding the man too quickly!—then let him at least die with the dignity
of his choice. In fact, how much could a word like dignity conceal? (855)

Farrell holds back, but Mailer feels no such compunction. He presents the evidence of Gilmore's child-fetish precisely as Farrell's speculations. Of course, we know by now that Farrell is a decent judge of men, and Mailer has been careful to include all sorts of details that support his thesis, so we give some credence to that thesis. But Mailer also maintains a strict kind of responsibility and reserve—"beware of understanding the man too quickly!" That injunction pervades The Executioner's Song, not only in regard to Gilmore, but in regard to all the characters. The shifting point of view Mailer employs helps considerably in deferring final judgments while providing the reader with a variety of immediate, subjective assessments.

Whereas the perspective shifts frequently in The Executioner's Song, the style is fairly consistent. The short paragraphs are matched by a spare, casual prose, well-suited to a variety of point-of-view characters and a fast-paced story. One gets the sense of a very relaxed progression, a straightforward and simple narrative like something out of Hemingway, but that effect is achieved through the same sort of care and skill that Hemingway put into his writing. As critics have noted, the prose is "slightly tuned to the idioms and rhythms" of particular characters, so that while we are in a character's mind, we get a feel for how he or she sounds. The narrative voice performs a "shift to the salient aspects of the characters' language":
When they came into V. J. motors, April said aloud, "Hey, that's a show for free." Gary and this fellow Val kept looking at car keys like old magicians studying old dried herbs, weird! She wandered around and the room distorted. Warp was in the atmosphere. So she sat down in a corner. That way you could hold the thing together. (224)

Exploring your feelings was an expensive procedure if you had to use unpaid office time to do it, but, from the outset, this job gave Moody more to think about than was customary. Most of his practice was domestic relations, personal injury work, local stores, stuff where he could deal with people. He liked to get out of the office. It was better to go on an investigative tour than get locked up in Probate and endless bookkeeping, so he usually enjoyed a criminal case if it came his way. Certainly, he had never found anything incompatible about being a criminal lawyer and a high member of the Mormon Church, and this case definitely gave him an agreeable tingle, but he could see that Gilmore was going to stretch many feelings. A lot of people would query the moral rights of what he was doing. (625)

April Baker's LSD flashback is stylistically different from Bob Moody's legal and ethical speculations. With all of the recollected thoughts and indirect quotations in The Executioner's Song, there is a lot of room for such shading. But overall the style remains fairly consistent, distinguished by syntactic and semantic simplicity. Using Gerard Genette's terms, what we generally have in The Executioner's Song is Mailer's narrative voice combined with a wide variety of characters' visions. 14

The style Mailer has chosen works very well for moving the reader through a thousand pages. We get a sense of progression, even when there is little action, because the straightforward prose is always going about its business, getting the story told. The flat, matter-of-fact quality of the style also helps Mailer's credibility, because the reader finds it easy to accept everything that comes along,
and there are very few explicit authorial comments along the way. Some critics, however, are disturbed by what John Hershey calls the "Mailerisms" in *The Executioner's Song*. Consider the following observation from the point of view of Brenda Nicol, Gary's cousin:

> Usually no matter what Gary might be feeling, he liked to seem the picture of relaxation. Today he was on the edge of his chair. It was like the air was being eaten by the nervousness he felt. She didn't want to think of his stomach. Shreds. She thought his goatee looked awful. (199)

Anyone familiar with Mailer's writing will recognize "the air was being eaten by the nervousness he felt" as typical of his thinking. What exactly is Brenda's contribution to this scene? It is unlikely that the figure of speech is hers, but did she just say that Gilmore was extremely nervous, and Mailer took it from there? We cannot know. Once we begin questioning, it is easy to continue: did she really say anything about his goatee? Did the scene take place on the day in which Mailer inserts it into the narrative? And so forth.

Hershey believes that the "Mailerisms" betray a degree of invention beyond just the skillful use of descriptive language. He contends that Mailer created his own Gary Gilmore through the successful manipulation and augmentation of his source material, and that the flat style aids him in this deception. He is not supported in this contention, however, by a competing account of Gilmore, homologous to those offered by Tompkins and Epstein of Perry Smith and Lyndon Johnson. All of Hershey's objections are based upon the sort of verbal license Mailer employs in the passage quoted above. I think the best way to address Hershey's claim that Mailer fictionalized his story is by asking the
question, what kind of factual adequacy is Mailer attempting in The Executioner's Song?

The main purpose of The Executioner's Song is to give us an honest, intimate portrait of Gary Gilmore. In the process Mailer also wants us to become intimate with Nicole and Schiller, because they are essential in helping us understand Gilmore as a person and as a phenomenon in American history. In subtitling his book "A True Life Novel" and having it classified as fiction, Mailer was indicating that he would employ some of the conventions of fiction in helping us get as profound a portrait of Gilmore as possible. One of the conventions he employed is that which bothers Hershey so much, which we might call "mimetic eloquence," the agreement between reader and author that realistic characters will be allowed to think (and sometimes even speak) in more eloquent terms than one generally finds in the real world. Most of us are pretty dull most of the time, but on the other hand we all have moments of wit and insight that pass by unappreciated. We grant fiction the right—in fact, we generally demand that it exercise the right—to be stylistically well-made. Mailer chose to employ that convention in The Executioner's Song. He is less concerned with accurately repeating pieces of interviews, than with giving us what he considers to be a truthful and vivid account of his characters. His skill in selection, organization, and verbal representation is such that he is able to make a mass of mostly verifiable details come alive.

I doubt Hershey wants to argue that Mailer has no right to give us his version of Gary Gilmore. What bothers him about The Executioner's Song is not that it may be biased or "heightened" in certain ways, but
that Mailer chose to tell the story from the perspectives of his sources, and so any slanting is in a sense warranted by particular people, rather than explicitly presented as Mailer's own version. A comparison with another of Mailer's nonfiction narratives may clarify this point. The portrait of Neil Armstrong that we get in Of a Fire on the Moon is certainly biased, even fanciful at times, and based as much on Mailer's prejudices as on actual information he has about Armstrong. However, that portrait is offered precisely as a subjective assessment, as a kind of "what-this-astronaut-means-to-me." This is very different from Mailer using Brenda to create a version of Gilmore that fits Mailer's theories about him.

I think that Mailer was justified in using his sources in this way because as far as I can tell he was fair to them, faithfully representing them in the bulk of detail and constructing his portrait of Gilmore out of available materials, rather than forcing the materials to fit his image. Again, I must return to the idea of competing accounts. In the absence of any strong challenge to Mailer's facts, The Executioner's Song stands up as a factually adequate version of Gilmore's last nine months. There is no absolute rule for deciding fairness, of course. My own decision is based upon consideration of the book as a whole, and careful judgments about the way Mailer treated his characters. In order to support my contention that The Executioner's Song is fundamentally just—and therefore, by the standards Mailer has agreed upon, truthful—I want to look at one particular aspect of the book, the picture we get of Utah County and its people.
The first scene in *The Executioner's Song* is Brenda's memory of her adventures with Gary in their grandmother's apple orchard. Gary did not live in Utah for long, but the place had an enormous impact on his mother, who grew up there, and of course it was Utah to which he came for his brief stint of freedom and his death. The desert and the mountains are mentioned several times in Part One, along with an ominous reference to Utah State prison, which Gilmore and Brenda pass on the Interstate. Even more ominous is the feeling we get that this place to which Gilmore has come is totally unsuited to him. Much of the reason is because eighteen years of incarceration have left him crippled for life in the outside world; but from prison to small-town Utah is about as extreme a transition as he could make:

For one thing, Gary wasn't coming into an average community. He would be entering a Mormon stronghold. Things were rough enough for a man just out of prison without having to deal with people who thought drinking coffee and tea was sinful.

Nonsense, said Brenda. None of their friends were that observing. She and Johnny hardly qualified as a typical straitlaced Utah County couple.

Yes, said Johnny, but think of the atmosphere. All those super-clean BYU kids getting ready to go out as missionaries. Walking on the street could make you feel you were at a church supper. There had, said Johnny, to be tension. (21)

We gradually realize that Brenda and Johnny are both right, that Utah county is in fact a divided community. On one side of the figurative tracks are the educated, observing, white-collar or upwardly-mobile Mormons, and on the other uneducated, less fundamentalist, blue-collar or unemployed Westerners.
This social division is not absolute, of course. Brenda, for instance, has been married three times and is definitely working class, but she is also a Mormon and fairly settled. Pete Galovan is a bizarre character, an earnest and hard-working Mormon whose mind slipped along the way and who finds himself censured by the church, deserted by his wife, and employed in a laboring position without much chance of getting ahead. Nevertheless, the class divisions in Utah are very strong and closely associated with standing in the Mormon Church. Most of the lawyers, judges, and correction officials we meet—including Stanger, Moody, Snyder, Esplin, Warden Smith, Probation Officer Court, Assistant Attorney General Dorius, Prosecutor Wooton, and Chaplain Campbell—are upstanding Mormons. So are Gilmore's victims. Perhaps the murders and the avenging execution were not battles in the war between proletariat and bourgeoisie, but neither was it a coincidence that Utah was the place that brought execution back into American life. In order to understand Gilmore's stand and the state's reaction to it, it is necessary to understand the kingdom of Deseret, the Mormon theocracy in the heart of America.

Nicole's history is a sad, painful, at times surreal journey through the underside of the American dream. She was molested repeatedly at the age of eleven by her father's best friend, committed to the "nuthouse" at thirteen, married at fourteen, and already through three husbands and dozens of lovers while raising two children when she meets Gilmore at the age of nineteen. Our first glimpse of her is through the eyes of Brenda, to whom she is just "another girl who pops a kid before she's fifteen and lives on the government ever after. One
more poverty-stricken welfare witch" (74). But as we begin to get Nicole's story through her own memories, we grow increasingly sympathetic to her, especially since she seems aware of her own lack of direction, but unable to do anything about it:

While Nicole wasn't afraid of [Gilmore], she was scared. It was the thought of getting mixed up with another loser. Somebody who didn't think enough of himself to make something of himself. She felt it was bad to float through life. You might have to pay too much the next time around. (87)

As we discover, Nicole has already paid an awful lot this time around. Her relationship with Gilmore is only the latest chapter in a long series of mistakes. They are a perfect couple, equally fated to suffer, though it is Gilmore's fate to make others suffer as well:

She knew what it was like to be in prison. Felt as if she had lived there too. Prison was wanting to breathe when somebody else had a finger up your nose. Soon as they took it out, the air got you crazy. Prison was being married too young and having kids. (100)

Gary hit her. It was the first time, and he hit her hard. She didn't feel the pain so much as the shock and then the disappointment. It always ended the same way. They hit you when they felt like it.

Soon enough, he apologized. He kept apologizing. But it did no good. She had been hit so fucking many times. (158)

In extreme contrast to the "courtship" of Gary and Nicole, the history of Max and Colleen Jensen is a paradigm of good Mormon dating habits:

On their second date they went to hear a speaker on Sunday night meeting in church, a Fireside. On their third date, they saw South Pacific put on at the college. Afterward, she got him to
go to a dance. He didn't care for them usually, but this was a nice slow one with foxtrots and waltzes, nothing exhibitionistic. She teased him because he didn't like to dance. Hadn't he been told in Sunday School how their ancestors danced their way across the plains when that was their only entertainment? (214-215)

He never raised his voice and neither did she. If, occasionally, she felt like speaking sharply, she wouldn't. They had decided right from the beginning that they would never leave each other without kissing good-bye. Nor would they go to bed with personal problems unsolved. If they were mad at each other, they would stay up to talk it out. They were not going to sleep even one night being mad at each other.

Of course, they also had fun. Stuff like shaving-cream fights. Throwing glasses of water at each other. (217)

What could be less like the sullen, night-long scenes between Gary and Nicole, or their pleasant memories of taking their clothes off in public places? Ironically, Max Jensen was on his way to becoming a lawyer, one of the Mormon aristocracy, when he was murdered by Gilmore while working at a summer job in a gas station.

Mailer designs the biographies of each of his characters so that they read like autobiographies; we have the sense that each person is speaking for himself or telling her own story. As related by Colleen Jensen, her conservative romance is presented in a sympathetic light. We are better able to understand these people who may be as distant from us in different ways as are Gary and Nicole. At the same time, the weaknesses of each character are betrayed by his or her own words, which makes the criticism seem much fairer. Imagine this story as told exclusively through the vision of a much more assertive narrator—in the manner, say, of Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, or Mailer himself in some of his other documentary narratives. We could not sympathize with
such a wide variety of people as we do in *The Executioner's Song* if the
narrator had not appeared to be standing back and letting his
characters speak for themselves.

Of course, they are not actually speaking for themselves. Mailer
is generally re-casting their words, and always selecting what goes
into his story. None of his main characters is from the Mormon upper
class. By creating sympathy for Gary and Nicole, and giving us the
experiences of Utah liberals like Shirley Pedler ("In Utah, belonging
to the ACLU was like being a Bolshevik"--751), Mailer encourages us to
think critically of the Mormon theocracy. But he does so by using
facts, by presenting various characters' views (as explicitly
subjective), and by the accumulated self-portraits of good Mormons, who
reveal themselves, not as fanatics, but as a very strict breed, a kind
of Old Testament tribe living in the American desert. People like
Tamera Smith, Bob Moody, and Earl Dorius are not evil or crazy, but
they are certainly allied in a distinct community, with values very
different from those of Gilmore, Nicole, Schiller, Pedler, Judge Willis
Ritter, and a whole bunch of the rest of us. Since one of those shared
beliefs is in an eye for an eye and a life for a life, Utah County
becomes an important locale in American history.

Gilmore decided to have his ashes scattered over "a number of
places in Spanish Fork and Springville and Provo" (994). In death he
attains a kind of freedom he seldom or never had in life. He remembers
Utah as "where his loving memories were" (993). This is less a sign of
reconciliation than an indication of just how few loving memories there
were in Gilmore's life. But his mother remains bitter, and in
recording her bitterness Mailer is talking at the end about blame, as Manchester did at the end of *The Death of a President*:

"Get out," Bessie said, "you people have killed my son."
"What do you mean, Bessie," stammered Doug, "I didn't even know him."
"You people in Utah killed my son."
He did not say, "I'm from Oregon."

"Mountain, you can go to hell," said Bessie to herself. "You're not mine anymore." (976)

Bessie Gilmore understands that Utah doesn't end at the border of Idaho or Colorado, nor even at the limits of the Mormon influence. Mailer is careful to show that Bessie is not being entirely fair (Doug Hiblar is being charitable, after all), but he also wants us to appreciate her insight. Rather than the imaginary scene and coy rhetorical question Manchester uses to create emotion and steer his readers' opinions, Mailer's scene is real, complex, and rooted in the characters and events he has been carefully detailing for a thousand pages.

Utah helped Gilmore get himself executed, and his death was the first in a series that seems likely to continue for some time. It is important for us to understand both the man and the community. Mailer creates understanding through his characters, using their experiences, rather than exposition and commentary by the narrator, to explore historical events. In the process he demonstrates enormous respect for the facts: "Since accurate chronology soon showed itself as crucial to understanding motivation, every effort was made to get it right, and not for the sake of history alone. One understood one's characters better when the chronology was correct" (1020). The factual adequacy
of *The Executioner's Song* depends to a great extent on accuracy, but it is a slightly different kind of accuracy than that sought by Manchester. Mailer is after subjective responses, and he is willing to re-cast his characters' words extensively in pursuit of what he considers to be their genuine feelings. He is both more and less arrogant than Manchester—more, because he has no qualms about trying to put his characters' thoughts into better words, and less, because he tries to tell his story within the limitations of what his characters witnessed, without speaking out directly as narrator to resolve difficult issues.

*The Executioner's Song* is an enormously ambitious and, I think, enormously successful book. In this discussion of its factual adequacy I have merely begun the process of explaining its power. There is a great deal more to be said about such topics as Gilmore's personality, the relationship between Gilmore and Nicole, Schiller's efforts to get the story, and the world of appellate maneuvering. Because *The Executioner's Song* is a work of literary nonfiction, such discussions will have implications beyond understanding the book itself, about the nature of our society. Mailer's narrative form succeeds as both engaging literature and detailed, responsible history. Not all literary nonfiction aspires to this particular combination, as we shall discover in discussing the next two works. But Mailer set himself strict standards for factual adequacy, as though saying to himself, as he records Schiller saying, "'you can't generalize, you can't make it up, you can't embroider" (833). *The Executioner's Song* is a true story without being merely "the facts," history brought to life for us
through intelligence and the skilled use of language and narrative technique.

* * * * *

In the opening remarks to his anthology, *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe talks about the "huge gap in American letters" left by fiction writers, who have collectively "abandoned the richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social tableau, manners and morals." Wolfe's thesis is that the New Journalism arose to fill that gap, recapitulating the early growth of the novel. Journalists learned "by trial and error" the methods of the novelist, four techniques in particular, and used them to create a kind of hybrid writing. However, both fiction and nonfiction have developed in many directions in the last twenty years, and Wolfe's semi-theoretical observations are now chiefly interesting for the insight they provide into his own writing. It is always "manners and morals" that interest Wolfe; he is a kind of cultural anthropologist whose theories are laid out in narrative:

... the consistent subject of Wolfe's reports on celebrities and subcultures has been the human need to perceive and create patterns in a fragmenting society, and his consistent theme has been the complex and often problematical relationship of those patterns to reality.

*The Right Stuff* is about the American subculture of "fighter jocks" and test pilots, the "pyramid of the Brotherhood of the Right Stuff." This inter-service military community is scattered throughout the
United States in "rat-shack kingdoms" like Edwards Air Force Base, Patuxent River Naval Air Station, and Cape Canaveral—"those bleached, sandy, bare-boned stretches where the land that any sane man wants runs out...and the government takes it over for the testing of hot and dangerous machines." Wolfe adopts the Mercury program as his "plot" for exploring this far-flung but tightly-knit subculture. In his view, the invention of the "astronaut" was a profound event in the history of the Brotherhood, changing the community through outside pressures. An analogue might be the encroachment of European society on Native American culture. As horses became central and war chiefs gained status, so in the early Sixties test pilots began to be selected for the most prestigious jobs not on the basis of piloting skills, but for the qualities of being a good "test subject." The previously orderly caste system was scrambled. Eventually order was restored from within, but in the process of compromise certain pleasures were lost or diluted, and a kind of golden age had passed. The Right Stuff is not a history of the Mercury program as an American event, nor the biographical account of the lives of particular people. It is a comic nostalgia trip, an effort to bring back the shared values, language, and behavior of a fascinating American subculture. It is important to distinguish Wolfe's aims from those of other possible books about the same events, because Wolfe is so often faulted for not doing what he never intended to do. In order to explain Wolfe's intention, I will talk about the roles of Pete Conrad, Chuck Yeager, Muroc/Edwards A. F. B., and a couple of the book's made-up characters.
Yeager and Conrad are important characters in The Right Stuff, even though neither is a Mercury astronaut. Yeager occupies the top of the pyramid at the beginning of the book, and Conrad is up there at the end. Chapters One through Four and Fifteen are focused on these two, with little or no mention of the Mercury program and the "Original Seven" astronauts whose flights are chronicled in the intervening chapters. If Wolfe were mainly writing a history of the Mercury program, such attention to outsiders would be odd. We might wonder if Pete Conrad played such an important role because he was the only astronaut that was willing to talk to Wolfe about his experiences. But it happens that Wolfe is interested in the Mercury program within a certain historical context, and so Conrad and Yeager are very important, because they provide clues to what happened to the community of test pilots over a period of years.

The book opens with one of its two most dramatic scenes: Jane Conrad is waiting for word of her husband, after the news has gotten around that there has been a crash at Patuxent. After we learn that it was a different pilot, we accompany Pete in his grisly investigation of the accident. Through Pete and Jane we learn about the "protocol," which is a one-word summary for a detailed network of behavior. Pilots, commanding officers, and even wives are strictly bound by this network. The pressure of adhering to it eventually causes Jane to experience nightmares and hallucinations. We become interested in her life, and to a lesser degree in Pete's, but he appears in only the next two chapters, and she is never again on stage for more than a few paragraphs. Chapter One is not about the Conrads, but rather about the
"unwritten protocol" and what it means to be a test pilot and a test pilot's wife. The Conrads function as examples; nearly any other couple would have done as well, as long as they went through the cycle of death that all test pilots experienced. Jane's hallucinations are a particularly extreme reaction to her situation, but for all we know, there may be many wives who have such hallucinations. Wolfe is more interested in her fear as typical than as exceptional.

Chapter Two, entitled "The Right Stuff," is about the protocol from the point of view of the pilots themselves. Wolfe employs pilots' jargon and his own talent for reifying neologisms to build up a portrait of the "fighter jock life": "recovery and arrest," "the pyramid of the Right Stuff," "hassling," "Flying & Drinking and Drinking & Driving," "chattering," etc. Chapter Three is about Yeager, "the ace of all the aces." His actions, particularly the story of breaking the sound barrier in the X-1, exemplify the code of the Right Stuff. The fact that he is ineligible for and uninterested in the Mercury program is a sign that something funny is happening, that the engineers and politicians are beginning to mess with the sacred statutes of the Brotherhood.

In his discussion of pilots and piloting Wolfe does not spend much time qualifying or specifying. His main concern is accurately recording, not historic details, but "manners and morals." Wolfe's "protagonist" is just as often an anonymous or composite character, such as "the neophyte" (25), "some eager jock" (31), "the young pilot" (32), or "that slim young man over there in uniform" (39). Conrad is almost as useful for the stories he tells about other people as for his
own experiences, and virtually every anecdote becomes a classic case of some behavior or another—"the Halo Effect" or "the Hickory Kid" or "the Monkeypod Life." Conrad has a sense of humor, and his rebellions against the doctors at Lovelace Clinic are very funny. But they are all re-cast into Wolfe's style, so that the character of Conrad becomes secondary to Wolfe's point about how such behavior fits into the pilot code or causes a certain reaction in the hierarchy. Wolfe is a very skilled comic writer, so the stories generally work well. But what they succeed in doing is giving us a general picture of what life was like at this stage of competition in the pyramid:

The White Smocks gave each of them a test tube and said they wanted a sperm count. **What do you mean?** Place your sperm in the tube. **How?** Through ejaculation. **Just like that?** Masturbation is the customary procedure. **What?** The best results seem to be obtained through fantasization, accompanied by masturbation, followed by ejaculation. **Where, fir chrissake?** Use the bathroom. A couple of the boys said things such as, "Well, okay, I'll do it if you send a nurse in with me—to help me along if I get stuck." The White Smocks looked at them as if they were schoolboys making obscene noises. This got the pilots' back up, and couple of them refused, flat out. But by and by they gave in, and so now you had the ennobling prospect of half a dozen test pilots padding off one by one to the head in their skivvies to jack off for the Lovelace clinic, Project Mercury, and America's battle for the heavens. (90)

Word of the Enema Bag Showdown spread rapidly among the other candidates, and they were delighted to hear about it. Practically all of them had wanted to do something of the sort. It wasn't just that the testing procedures were unpleasant; the entire atmosphere of the testing constituted an affront. There was something...decidedly out of joint about it. Pilots and doctors were natural enemies, of course, at least as pilots saw it. The flight surgeon was pretty much kept in his place in the service. His only real purpose was to tend to pilots and keep 'em flying. He was an attendant to the pilots' vital stuff. In fact, flight surgeons were encouraged to fly backseat with fighter pilots from time to time, so as to understand what stresses and righteous stuff the job entailed. Regardless of
how much he thought of himself, no flight surgeon dared position himself above the pilots in his squadron in the way he conducted himself before them: i.e., it was hard for him to be a consummate panjandrum, the way the typical civilian doctor was. (94-95)

This is unmistakeable Wolfe, and there is no suggestion that Conrad supplied very many of the ideas, much less the wording. Wolfe, the observing sociologist, is telling stories about those crazy "White Smocks" and the poor pilots.

Chuck Yeager is an almost mythic figure. Breaking the sound barrier with a broken arm (in Chapter Three) or surviving a crash in the desert with one eye burned shut (in Chapter Fifteen), Yeager is everything the test pilot aspires to be. For most of The Right Stuff he serves as a kind of distant commentator, one of the "True Brothers" at Edwards, mocking the "spam in a can" Project Mercury and marveling at how the rest of the country is taken in by the astronauts posing as pilots. Yeager is described from the outside even more than Conrad—the stories about Yeager have the feel of well-worn anecdotes that Wolfe has polished up and inserted into his story. Did Yeager have any doubts? Any complex feelings? Any individual characteristics apart from his superiority at Flying & Drinking and Drinking & Driving? We never find out, mainly because Wolfe is not interested in Yeager as a particular individual, but rather in Yeager as hero, archetype, model, "the ace of aces." All we need to know about him is what his brother pilots knew—his accomplishments: "Yeager had flown the X-1 at straight pay, $283 a month. The Blue Suit!—that was enough
for him. The Blue Suit had brought him everything he had in this
world, and he asked for nothing else" (414).

Muroc/Edwards is used by Wolfe in much the same way that he uses
Yeager. Certain details--Pancho's Fly Inn, the dry lake beds, the
orange X-1--are selected and invested with a magical quality:

Yeager didn't go to Pancho's and knock back a few because two
days later the big test was coming up. Nor did he knock back a
few because it was the weekend. No, he knocked back a few
because night had come and he was a pilot at Muroc. In keeping
with the military tradition of Flying & Drinking, that was what
you did, for no other reason than that the sun had gone down.
You went to Pancho's and knocked back a few and listened to the
screen doors banging and to other aviators torturing the piano
and the nation's repertoire of Familiar Favorites and to
lonesome mouse-turd strangers wandering in through the banging
doors and to Pancho classifying the whole bunch of them as old
bastards and miserable peckerwoods. That was what you did if
you were a pilot at Muroc and the sun went down. (53-54)

Muroc in the good old days is the "Dome of the World," a place where
men with the Right Stuff can prove it one on one with hot planes. At
the same time, however, Muroc is just like any number of other
bases--we get a look at Patuxent and later at Cape Canaveral--in the
general configuration of life. Muroc/Edwards is special precisely
because it is archetypal, just like all other air bases but more so.
What pilots do at Muroc is what they do everywhere, and they all do it,
with only slight variations, in this case Pancho's Fly Inn as the
gathering place.

Most of The Right Stuff is not set at Muroc, or about Conrad or
Yeager, but rather about the "Original Seven" Mercury astronauts and
their flights out of Canaveral. Nevertheless, the opening chapters are
designed to do more than simply give us background for the rest of the
story. In order for us to understand what was really involved in those early rocket flights, we need to understand the pilot mentality and the kind of challenge posed to it by the "quick and dirty," "Spam in a can" capsule approach to space exploration. In order to understand what was happening on the ground, at the astronauts' homes and in ticker-tape parades, we need to know something of the pilot ego and the "Military Wife's Compact." But the pilot life is not there for the story of Mercury as much as the Mercury story is there for the insight it provides into the pilot life. Once Wolfe has explained things to us, sketched out the pattern of "manners and morals" in the test pilot community, then we are prepared to understand all the later jokes: Grissom "screwing the pooch," a wealth of "goodies" descending on the astronauts, Schirra's "operational" flight, the importance of Cooper's manual landing, etc. Wolfe's intention is to have us understand the in-jokes, the shared fears, all the common aspects of the test pilots' lives. Individual differences in personality or between flights are exploited only in order to illustrate by contrast various paradigms of the "fighter jock" life or the "ziggurat" of the Right Stuff. The events of Project Mercury give Wolfe a plot, a way to incorporate his observations about test pilots into a narrative structure. Since Mercury also brought about a change in the way pilots competed on the "pyramid," it was a perfect choice for Wolfe's story.

Since his primary interest is not in details of who, what, when, or where, but of how a sub-culture behaves, Wolfe feels free to employ various liberties of generalization, abstraction, collectivization, and even invention. I have already described how he uses jargon and
neologisms to standardize his characters' actions, and how many of his references are to such entities as "the boys" (12), "every wife" (13), "the rocket pilots at Edwards" (74), "the press in America" (121), "most military people" (346), etc. Another way that he captures the shared experiences of the pilots is by inventing representative characters, like "'Herb Snout! Kar Kastle! Listen! We're damned glad to have you folks here, just damned glad, goddamn it!'" (357), and "the Hardiest Cracker, the Aboriginal Grit," whose presence enlivens life at the Cape:

And for the fellows, it was pure heaven. None of this altered the Edwards-style perfection of their lives. It merely added something new and marvelous to the ineffable contrasts of this astronaut business. Within hours after lunch at the White House or waterskiing in Hyannis Port you could be back at the Cape, back Drinking & Driving in that marvelous Low Rent rat-shack terrain, back in your Corvette spinning out on the shoulders of those hardtack Baptist roadways and pulling into the all-night diner for a little coffee to stabilize the system for the proficiency runs ahead. And if you had switched to your Ban-Lon shirts and your go-to-hell pants, they might not even recognize you in there, which would be all the better, and you could just sit there and drink coffee and have a couple of cigarettes and listen to the two policemen in the next booth with the Dawn Patrol radio sets in their pockets, and a little voice packed in static would be coming out of the radios saying, "Thirty-one, thirty-one [garble, garble]...man named Virgil Wiley refuses to return to his room at the Rio Banana," and the policemen would look at each other as if to say, "Well, shit, is that anything to have to rise up from over a plate of french fries and death balls for?"—and then they'd sigh and start getting up and buckling on their gunbelts, and about the time they would head out the door, in would come the Hardiest Cracker, the Aboriginal Grit, an old guy drunk as a monkey and ricocheting off the doorway and sliding in bowlegged over a counter stool and saying to the waitress:

"How you doing?"

And she says, "So-so, how you doing?"

"I ain't doing any more," he says. "'Tis dragging in the mud and it won't come up"—and since this doesn't get a rise out of her, he says it again: "'Tis dragging in the mud and it won't come up," and she just clamps a burglar-proof look of
aloofness across her face—and all this was bound to make you smile, because here you were, listening to the merry midnight small talk of the hardiest hardtack crackers of the most Low Rent stretch of the Cape, and just twelve hours ago you were leaning across a table in the White House, straining to catch the tiny shiny pearls of tinytalk from the most famous small talker in the world—and somehow you belonged and thrived in both worlds. Oh, yes, it was the perfect balance of the legendary Edwards, the fabled Muroc, in the original Chuck Yeager and Pancho Barnes days...now brought forward into the billion-volt limitless budget future. (274-275)

I have quoted this passage at length because it illustrates so many of the devices Wolfe employs, including jargon ("proficiency runs"), neologism ("Low Rent rat-shack terrain"), made-up characters, nostalgic references to community heroes, and generalization of the experiences of the astronauts ("the fellows"). Together it all adds up to an inside joke, a laugh from within the anonymity of the "Ban-Lon shirts" and "go-to-hell pants."

What kind of factual adequacy is Wolfe after in The Right Stuff? Clearly it is something very different from that achieved by Manchester and Mailer, because Wolfe has a much more cavalier attitude toward precise historic details, and he certainly is not interested in recovering character through careful recording of individual behavior. He makes use of transcripts from the Mercury flights, and plainly he has done a great deal of research, but that research has not been selectively transmitted onto the page so much as it has been used by Wolfe to form a general idea, which he then gives us in lively narrative form. In order for The Right Stuff to be a factually adequate account, it must convince us that we have been given the true parameters of the test pilot's life, and something of how the Mercury
program fit into that life. If Wolfe lost himself in his own fancies, and test pilots do not behave as he has them behaving, then The Right Stuff is a considerably lesser accomplishment. If he has misrepresented particular astronauts, the book does not thereby suffer greatly, but if he has misrepresented The Astronaut, then he has failed.

The fact that Wolfe is writing in a comic, even satiric mode, makes it still less important that he concentrate on getting the historic details correct. We grant satire the right to exaggerate and otherwise take liberties with events, in the recognition that the effects of such liberties will tell us something we would not otherwise know. In this case, Wolfe gives us a piece of history in a new light. He puts some of the glamour back into the dry-as-dust space program, even while he tarnishes the highly polished images of certain all-American heroes.23 If one were interested in the precise historic details of Project Mercury, one would not want to rely on Wolfe's account, but if one wanted to get a sense of what it was like then, The Right Stuff would be a useful historical document, within strict limitations. We have the right to expect that in those places where Wolfe changed or slanted events, he did so to make his account more readable, his picture of the code of the Right Stuff sharper, and the historic ironies a little plainer. Such is the trade-off Wolfe leads us to expect in his book, the set of epistemological rules by which he is playing.

The literary status of The Right Stuff depends upon its ability to make us laugh, its success as an engrossing narrative, and the way in which it makes us look at our past (and the way we reconstruct the past) in a new light, as a kind of sanctification process. In order to
accomplish those effects, it depends heavily on its factual status. If
the book were just a novel about pilots, it would not be nearly as
important. The humor would be clever, but surely not as effective.
Wolfe has us believing that he has neatly represented and ridiculed the
behavior of real people in real historical situations. Nor would the
narrator's consistent tone of amazement work very well if he were
merely recounting made-up events. To the degree that Wolfe's
exclamation marks, italics, capitalizing, etc. succeed, it is largely
because he is telling a true story, and his narrator is just as amused
and impressed by events as the reader. Even the made-up characters
work better because we picture them as interacting with real people
(the astronauts and their wives), rather than just popping up in a
fictional narrative.

At the end of The Right Stuff Wolfe returns to Yeager and Edwards,
describing a bad crash on the exact day that the government cancels the
X-20 program (which would have been real space flight, according to the
True Brothers). The tone is sad, and the narrator seems very
nostalgic: "And Yeager never again sought to set a record in the sky
over the high desert" (431). At about the same time the Mercury
astronauts receive the Iven C. Kincheloe Award, "the big one within the
flight test fraternity" (434). But this long-awaited peer recognition
is accompanied by a lessening of interest among the general public, and
the removal of "the mantle of Cold Warrior of the Heavens" (436). By
now the reader is initiated into the "flight test fraternity," as an
adjunct member at least. To the degree that we understand the ironies
and the emotions associated with the Kincheloe Award and the end of the
X-20, The Right Stuff has succeeded. We know a little more about our past and our present, and we are better able to understand how communities take shape around the awful dangers and tremendous rewards of the Right Stuff.

* * *

Hunter Thompson's Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is very different from the other three books discussed in this chapter. For one thing, the Mint 400 off-road race and the National Conference of District Attorneys Seminar on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs are hardly historic events of the same sort as Kennedy's assassination, Gilmore's execution, and the first American space flights. Thompson is not giving us any sort of history, even general or satiric. The verifiable details of his book are not only few and far between, but also fairly unimportant in themselves, outside the narrative of Raoul Duke's "Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream." Another difference is in the importance of the author as a character in his own story. Manchester, Mailer, and Wolfe certainly make themselves strongly felt as authorial presences, but Thompson puts himself, or at least an avatar of himself, center stage for his whole book. Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is not autobiography, however, any more than it is history. Rather, it is a species of social commentary which makes use of real people, places, and events to tell a story about American values and journalistic conventions.
The book is divided into two parts. In the first Duke is sent to Las Vegas to report on the Mint 400, but soon discovers that he cannot find anything worth saying about it, at least by conventional methods. His attitude gradually shifts, from "an obligation to cover the story, for good or ill," to the belief that "The important thing is to cover this story on its own terms," to the realization that "This is not even the story I was supposed to be working on." What Duke eventually finds himself reporting on is the American dream, and its "vortex," its "main nerve" is in the Circus-Circus Casino (45-50). Trapeze artists swing back and forth above a huge room full of oblivious gamblers. The whole scene is manic kitsch: "The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war" (46). Duke's accomplice Gonzo gets "the Fear," not from drugs (though he is stoned), but because the whole scene is stranger than any drug-induced hallucination, and all the scarier because it does not go away: "No, this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted" (47).

In Part Two Duke and Gonzo get themselves into a hilarious conversation about the American dream, which a waitress and cook recall as the name of a nightclub. Reporter and attorney track down this "lead," until they find the address on "Paradise Street." It turns out to be "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds" (168). This time the dream turns out to be empty, and we get the sense that in Las Vegas, apotheosis of the Horatio Alger success story, there is no middle ground between vacant lot and frenzied, nonstop "entertainment," between being "blacklisted on the
Strip" (156) and being subjected to all-out hospitality. Spend or die, that is the veiled threat behind the colors, flesh, lights, free drinks, and other decadent attractions of Las Vegas. Even risque behavior in this town has to take certain conventional forms; drinking and shouting are cheerfully condoned, while marijuana and vagrancy are ruthlessly punished. It is wonderfully fitting that the district attorneys have chosen Las Vegas for their gathering, because they are the defenders of exactly those American values that built this city out of the desert: conformity, law and order (Las Vegas segregates, institutionalizes, and thereby sanitizes sinful behavior), and glorification of the basest pleasures. In short, Sin City is the best place to discover everything that is wrong about the American Dream.

The character of Raoul Duke is, as John Hellmann notes, a very flexible tool. As the author's "self-caricature who is extremely disoriented," Duke is often at the mercy of events, in a drug-induced separate reality, or caught up in a rage, while Thompson stands at some distance, making us alternately laugh at Duke and sympathize with him. Hellmann's thesis is that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is structured as a parody of the American quest-romance, and its hero Duke has "a dual nature that embodies the innocent idealism and compulsive violence also found in America's national character." Duke is by turns pitiful, insightful, violent, peace-loving, brave, cowardly, cruel, and kind. Such a wide range of behavior is well-suited to Thompson's thematic concern with schizophrenia and competing versions of reality. Duke, whose "primitive Christian instincts have made [him] a criminal" (87), is part of a generation that experienced "a fantastic universal
sense that whatever we were doing was **right**, that we were winning," and also the complete collapse of that dream: "So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back" (68). Having felt both omnipotent and totally impotent, how could Duke (and by implication his generation) avoid the conclusion that life is fundamentally schizophrenic?

One important manifestation of this schizophrenia is Duke's fascination with handguns, reckless driving, and vicious dogs. His drug-induced hallucinations tend toward the violent and reptilian, and both he and Gonzo do a lot of gun- and knife-waving. This is the "compulsive violence" that Hellmann talks about, and it strikes us as incongruous in someone who looks back sadly to the demise of the Sixties' revolution. Nevertheless, Thompson makes it clear that Duke's violence is limited to the defensive, a product of paranoia, and that it pales by comparison with the real threats out there. Duke acknowledges almost routinely the violence associated with "A gold mine like Vegas [which] breeds its own army, like any other gold mine" (155):

...and after that we drank off a pot of watery "Golden West" coffee and watched four boozed-up cowboy types kick a faggot half to death between the pinball machines.

"The action never stops in this town," said my attorney . . . (135)

It is no use fighting back unless you have the firepower to make it stick—thus Duke's armament. Thompson puts this cynicism in perspective by several times having Duke read news stories about the
real violence out there in the world: "Reading the front page made me feel a lot better. Against that heinous background, my crimes were pale and meaningless. I was a relatively respectable citizen--a multiple felon, perhaps, but certainly not dangerous" (74). Duke is fond of alluding to the Nazis and Charlie Manson, boogie-men whose existence almost justifies the wildest paranoia.

Duke and Gonzo are not alone in their fears. They string along a district attorney from Georgia with stories of drugs, witchcraft, and human sacrifice: "'Naw!' he said. 'That's science fiction stuff!' 'Not where we operate,' said my attorney. 'Hell, in Malibu alone, these goddamn Satan-worshippers kill six or eight people every day!" (146). The D. A. and an eavesdropping bartender prove remarkably easy to convince, not only of incredible crimes, but of massive police retaliation: "'Cut their goddamn heads off,' I said. 'Every one of them. That's what we're doing in California'" (149). The shadow of Charlie Manson across this hilarious scene makes the reader's laughter a little nervous: "'They'll turn up somewhere, pretty soon,' I said. 'And let's hope we'll be ready for them'" (148-149). No one is immune; even paranoiacs have real enemies. Manson's "science fiction stuff" would never have been predicted by sane, reasonable people. Duke and Gonzo are having their fun gulling the greenhorn, pushing their tall tale just a little beyond the credible. But exactly when does one stop believing? Or, in the reader's case, when does one stop laughing?

An inevitable corollary to the schizophrenic nature of life is that there can be no such thing as objective reporting. The journalistic apparatus actually disguises reality by converting it into standardized
"stories." Duke's first assignment points up the absurdity of this procedure, as reporters scurry around in "an incredible dustcloud" (38) trying to catch glimpses of the Mint 400. Duke finally gives up, and never does find out who won the race. He wonders if the other reporters have "fulfilled their responsibilities" (83), but he knows that he is onto something else, perhaps the same story deep down, but certainly not much like anything any other journalist is going to bring back. His story is aggressively personal, flagrantly drug-altered, and in the end much "truer" than all those others. The real meaning of the Mint 400 can just as easily be found back in town, in the sickness at the heart of the American dream: "The realities were already fixed; the illness was understood to be terminal, and the energies of the Movement were long since aggressively dissipated by the rush to self-preservation" (180). Duke himself is infected by this malaise. At the end of the book he has fled to Colorado, taking his own retreat into the "self-preservation" of drugs: "I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger...a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident" (204). The reporter is the story, and all the news is bad.28

Again, there is a lot of distance between protagonist and author. Thompson uses Duke to illustrate the difficulty of sorting out reality, the danger of being either too innocent or too cynical, and the ease with which a fugitive from "the Movement" can slip into escapism and "self-preservation." Since the mode of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is parody, the actions of the central character are naturally extravagant and funny. But what makes the book work is its factual
status, the claim that all this really happened. Thompson and Duke are, on some level, the same person, more closely allied than the novelist and his hero. But exactly how closely? How much of the book is "true"? And exactly what kind of "truth" is Thompson after?

Obviously it would be very difficult to verify many of the details in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Who would trouble to construct a competing account of Thompson's activities in Las Vegas? Even if one could dig up the particular policemen, bartenders, maids, rental car employees, etc., they could only confirm the bare bones of the story. What about the hallucinations, the scenes with no one but Duke and Gonzo, the fantasies and imagined conversations that are not even offered as potentially verifiable? Clearly, the factual adequacy of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas depends to an even lesser degree than that of The Right Stuff on accurately recording the progress of real events. Thompson's story is aggressively subjective—he virtually dares us to doubt that he is telling the truth. In fact, much of the pleasure of his book is connected with uncertainty, with wondering, "Did this really happen?" Like the gullible district attorney, we are off-balance, uncertain, afraid both of being lied to and of refusing to accept what turns out to be true, either of which would make us look foolish.

The factual adequacy of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas has very little to do with how well Thompson gets us to accept his version of specific events, and a great deal to do with how well he convinces us that he understands psychedelics, Las Vegas, district attorneys, and the American dream. Thompson's reliability is determined almost
entirely by our impression of his intelligence and understanding as the implied author. In this *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is very like a novel—the reader does not much trouble herself with weighing the specific truth-claims, but rather with gauging the author's general understanding and the appropriateness of particular details—but this does not mean that we read the book as a novel. Its factual status is central to its humor, its social commentary, and our judgment of it as a narrative whole. We are offered this story as nonfiction, and it is precisely our perception of this claim that makes the story so outrageous. If we read it as a novel, or if we are not convinced that many of its scenes are close to what actually happened, the book fails to do more than mildly amuse. However, if we accept, at least tentatively, that Thompson merely took some liberties in the presentation of his adventures in Las Vegas, then the book is a hilarious and insightful look at American society.

The most obvious liberty the book takes is in recording exact dialogue and minute details with the immediacy and precision generally considered beyond the reach of nonfiction, for the simple reason that memory is imperfect. Thompson does not have much use for indirect quotation or summarized events. He writes the story as if it were happening in front of him:

Lucy smiled bashfully. There was no more hostility in her. I dropped the Mace can and stood up. We obviously had a serious case on our hands. I hadn't counted on this: Finding my attorney whacked on acid and locked into some kind of preternatural courtship.

"Well," I said, "I guess they've brought the car around by now. Let's get the stuff out of the trunk."
He nodded eagerly. "Absolutely, let's get the stuff." he smiled at Lucy. "We'll be right back. Don't answer the phone if it rings."

She grinned and made the one-finger Jesus freak sign. "God bless," she said.

My attorney pulled on a pair of elephant-leg pants and a glaze-black shirt, then we hurried out of the room. I could see he was having trouble getting oriented, but I refused to humor him.

"Well..." I said. "What are your plans?"

"Plans?"

There is nothing in this scene that is necessarily beyond precise recall, especially if Thompson was taking notes along the way. But in texture and style it feels like very few nonfiction narratives. Thompson has probably sacrificed accuracy in order to achieve this kind of immediacy, and no doubt he re-phrased a few things along the way to make the dialogue wittier. The conversation is probably an agglomerate of how he remembers it and how he would have liked it to have gone. But in this particular book even extensive revision is appropriate. Thompson is not claiming to be accurately recording history, as Manchester, Mailer, and Wolfe are. He is telling us about what happened to him in Las Vegas, and turning his adventures into an engaging, challenging narrative, structured by parody and certain thematic concerns as well as by the order of actual events.

A little Thompson goes a long way, and Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is a short book. The reader is tossed into this strange world with no preparation, subjected to "the crucifixion of a gorilla" (190), "doom-struck craziness" (85), and all manner of "dangerous drugs," and then flung back out into the "real" world with new and slightly more paranoid eyes. What happened to the American dream? What happened to
us? What are the connections between personal decisions and the larger political and social movements? ("Uppers are no longer stylish. Methedrine is almost as rare, on the 1971 market, as pure acid or DMT. 'Consciousness Expansion' went out with LBJ...and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon"—202.) Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas evokes these questions in the course of a hilarious, vivid narrative. So far Thompson's prognosis has been confirmed, and his true story has only gotten truer.

* * * *

Turning to the general relation between factual adequacy and accuracy, it might be useful to set a few broad parameters. For one thing, there is no fixed ratio between truthfulness and any bulk of details. As Manchester says in his introductory remarks, "The sum of a million facts is not the truth" (xii). One of the first lessons of information theory is that truth depends precisely on the elimination and selection of data, as much as on their accumulation. For another, there is no kind of fact that has a privileged intimacy with truth. There are facts that we can virtually all agree upon well enough, but when it comes to recording human behavior and investigating motivation—that is, when we get down to almost all the interesting situations—we find ourselves falling back upon dogma for our selection of a particular version. Accuracy may be democratic, but truth is anarchic. We cannot decide ahead of time what kinds of facts will be acceptable unless we are willing to acknowledge that we are proceeding
with closed minds. Of course, everyone closes his mind to some things, but as readers trying to understand particular narratives, it behooves us to remain open to the kinds of causal (or other) connections being asserted by the author, at least until we get around to deciding on the factual adequacy of a particular work. After we have finished reading, we can judge the truthfulness of Manchester's attaching blame to Dallas citizens, or Mailer finding a kind of dignity in Gilmore's behavior, or Wolfe describing the average test pilot as an egomaniac, or Thompson finding in Las Vegas unmistakable symptoms of the cancer at the core of America. Finally, there is no particular style that is especially suited to conveying truth. At this historical moment the "plain style" enjoys a place of honor as particularly useful for "just telling the truth." But this is fashion and wishful thinking—the plain style can be used to lie, and some complex truths require a complex prose. Mailer's dense, allusive, metaphor-laden prose in *Of a Fire on the Moon* is very different from Wolfe's breezy, jargon-loaded style in *The Right Stuff*. But neither is inherently better for talking about astronauts, and neither book is more truthful merely because of its style.29

It comes down to a matter of individual judgment, which is to say hard work. The factual adequacy of a documentary narrative can no more be neatly summarized and universally agreed upon than can the literary status of any work of fiction. In the evaluation of literary nonfiction, truth and quality are interrelated, even inseparable. In the preceding discussions I do not pretend to have settled the factual adequacy of my four examples. Rather, I have tried to discover the grounds upon which to settle the issue, the particular kinds of factual
adequacy that each author is trying to achieve. Since the most common standard for truth in narrative is accuracy, or the restriction to universally verifiable details, I have chosen four books in which the authors take up four different positions in regard to verifiability. I do not want to suggest that there is a neat spectrum, along one continuous axis, and that any text can always be situated with respect to any other as to which is more accurate. On the contrary, there are different kinds of truths, many of them difficult to compare. Is Manchester's portrayal of Johnson more accurate than Mailer's of Gilmore, or Wolfe's of Glenn, or Thompson's of his attorney? We could argue those comparisons, but we would have to agree that each author was trying to do something different, creating characters for particular reasons, and so it is not surprising that they emerge as very different creatures.

There are plenty of narrative conventions that we use as shortcuts to agreement. But as Duke discovers, and as Mailer's portrayal of Larry Schiller is intended to illustrate, the rules of good journalism are not merely flexible, but flimsy. They can be easily broken without the reader's ever knowing, and they are unsuited to handle all sorts of heavy-duty truths about the world. This is where literary nonfiction comes in. Manchester, Mailer, et al., are searching for narrative forms that will allow them to tell us complex and important things about our world. They want to represent general truths through the selection and shaping of particular details. The result may seem to be "the ordering of a meaningful world, and the defining of a relationship to it," or it may feel more like "a noninterpretive narrative
registering life without imposing an ordering design on it." But in either case (or more commonly somewhere in between), insofar as it succeeds, a work of literary nonfiction will have told us something of what is going on in our world, and how our lives may be affected or illuminated by what other real people have done with theirs.
Notes


3 Pizer, pp. 210-211


5 Consider, for example, the following in an early description of Dallas: "O'Donnell had a surfeit of facts about . . . the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School and its many clinics in an institution named—a knell—Parkland Memorial Hospital" (43).


7 Epstein, p. 124.


9 The Death of a President is in my opinion the least literary of all the texts I will be discussing in this study. Nevertheless, I have
included it because it is useful as an example for exploring the relationship between accuracy and truth. I do not want to suggest that this chapter will contrast "history" with "fiction," or that insofar as Manchester has tried to write history, he has failed to be literary. On the contrary, if his book were better history, it might very well be more literary as well. But the kind of history Manchester tried to write was contentious without being willing to offend anyone openly, and played favorites while claiming to be absolutely objective. The flaw was not in setting accuracy as a goal, but in failing to be true to the principles Manchester himself set forth for the book, including accuracy.


15 John Hershey, "The Legend on the License," *Yale Review*, 70, p. 18. Hershey raises some interesting points about Mailer's method, but I am not at all convinced by his claims of Mailer's unreliability.

16 Gilmore is a kind of exception to this practice; his story is told less by himself than by all the people around him. But as I have
indicated, there are important advantages to handling his portrait in this way.


21 Once again, see John Hershey's comments in "The Legend on the License." He finds lots of factual errors that Wolfe made. The Right Stuff would probably be a better book without those mistakes, but they are not fatal. Hershey calls Wolfe to task for being a bad journalist, but fails to convince me that The Right Stuff is a bad book or that I should read it as fiction.

22 Note, for example, how Wolfe telescopes some of the flights, while presenting others at greater length. Shepard's is a joke about how the engineers forgot to include facilities for urinating in the capsule, Grissom's a lesson about "screwing the pooch," Cooper's the chance for the astronauts to prove themselves as pilots in a manual landing, and so forth.
I do not agree with Weber that Wolfe "strips space exploration of a sense of new-world mystery" (Literature of Fact, p. 175). My impression is that he does a good job of communicating the real mystery involved, as well as the way in which rehearsal was designed to take all the surprise out of the flights.

Hunter Thompson, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (N.Y.: Fawcett, 1971), pp. 4, 57, 84. Further references to this edition are in parentheses in the text.

Hellmann, p. 69.

Hellmann, p. 70.

This moment in the book is reminiscent of the final passage in The Great Gatsby, but bleaker. Both visions are of the promise of America, and for Duke the only promise is Nixon and barbituates.

Note the epigraph to Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: "'He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.'—Dr. Johnson." This is what Duke is trying to do, and what he argues that the majority of Americans are doing in the Seventies. Thompson's inclusion of himself, or at least his avatar Duke, in this general drift, is one of the best things about Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Duke likes some of the things about Las Vegas; other things that he does not like are simply not his style, which runs to different methods of "self-preservation."

I might add that there is no particular rhetorical stance, such as objectivity, commitment, honesty, or sensitivity, that guarantees truth-telling, but that is the topic of Chapter Four.
IV. A RHETORIC OF LITERARY NONFICTION

To write an intimate history of an event which places its focus on a central figure who is not central to the event, is to inspire immediate questions about the competence of the historian. Or, indeed, his honorable motive. The figure he has selected may be convenient to him rather than critical to the history.

—Norman Mailer, The Armies of the Night

Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony: I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. I went there behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did.

—Michael Herr, Dispatches

Point of view is a central concern in reading any work of literary nonfiction, for the simple reason that we hold authors of documentary narratives legally and "historically" (as it were), as well as aesthetically, responsible for what they write. The journalist or historian must establish his authority over his materials, which inevitably means asserting his right to events in the public domain, and demonstrating that he has taken into account rules of evidence, such as first- and second-hand, exact quotation, and printed sources. In Chapter Three I looked at some of the ways authors have made use of verifiable facts to establish the authority of their versions of real events. In this chapter I want to focus on the role of author as narrator and/or character. How does a writer build himself into, or
keep himself out of, what he hopes will be a convincing and meaningful
version of real events?

Recent studies of point of view in fiction have demonstrated that
broad categories such as first- and third-person, limited and
omniscient, mask an enormous range of important variations in
 technique.¹ How is the first-person narration of Fear and Loathing
in Las Vegas like that of The Children of Sanchez or The Armies of the
Night? What do the third-person narrators of The Right Stuff and
Hiroshima have in common with each other? Complicating things even
further in any discussion of nonfiction narrative is the fact that the
flesh-and-blood author has a given role in events, as actor, reporter,
researcher, or whatever, and readers are likely to find out something
about that role and use the information in evaluating the author's
choice of point of view. This is what has happened when a critic
complains that Capote disguised his presence in In Cold Blood, or that
Terkel effaced his side of the conversations in Working. The novelist
knows everything about his story, and chooses what and how to tell us.
The author of documentary narrative knows some things, and must
convince us that what he knows is sufficient and important. His
decisions about point of view will be crucial for integrating
information from various sources into a coherent, engaging whole.

Another real-world limitation on the author of nonfiction is that
his characters have some control over how they are depicted. The right
to one's own life story, like other rights, is both legally protected
and legally restricted. There is a vague moment, determined by various
complex social factors, at which private business becomes public
concern. Of course, authors obtain releases, exclusive rights, and so forth, but unless such matters are explicitly introduced in the text (as in *The Executioner's Song*), we are not much interested. We would rather discover how an author goes about establishing his authority over his materials by skillfully telling a true story. If any part of that story is "sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural"² to be controversial—that is, if the story is at all interesting—the author is going to have to back up his details with information about his sources, and perhaps tell us something about himself if some of the controversial conclusions are his own.

The four texts I will be discussing in this chapter are John Hershey's *Hiroshima*, Joseph Wambaugh's *The Onion Field*, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. They represent four different choices about the author's role in his narrative, in rough progression from a very limited to a very obtrusive presence. This ordering does not, however, correspond to a movement from objectivity to subjectivity, or history to autobiography. Both Hershey and Mailer have written about important historic events, and both have tried to capture subjective responses to those events, as well as something of the larger historical context. The difference is that Hershey found that he could best tell his story by using the traditional journalistic conventions of the invisible recorder, while Mailer decided that he had to include himself in his story in several specific, personal ways.
It might seem natural to include in this chapter, at one end of the spectrum of authorial involvement, an autobiography. But I have not done so, primarily because I am interested in discovering how authors lay claim to events in the public domain. The autobiographer is assumed to have authority over his facts, because he is after all telling his own story. This does not mean we believe everything he says, of course. Even autobiographers must achieve their own kinds of factual adequacy. But they do so within the freedoms and limitations of a particular genre, and I decided that I could not do justice to that genre within the scope of this study. I have learned a great deal from the relatively large body of criticism of this particular branch of nonfiction narrative, and my hope is that this inquiry may return the favor by making some contribution to the study of autobiography, as well as to a larger, unified theory of literary nonfiction.3

* * *

John Hershey's Hiroshima juxtaposes the personal accounts of six survivors of the atomic bombing and a larger scientific and statistical framework. The result is a moving, scary story that strictly adheres to the conventional rules of good journalism. The book's narrator is fairly unobtrusive, though obviously touched by the events he is recording, and careful to present both sides of the central moral question, "the ethics of using the bomb."4 First published in The New Yorker in 1946, Hiroshima antedates the New Journalism by some twenty years, and its literary status is achieved
without any of the technical experimentation that characterized the nonfiction writing of Wolfe, Thompson, et al. In fact, it is precisely Hershey's conventional methods that make his book useful for the purposes of this chapter: Hiroshima is an excellent example of a powerful documentary narrative in which the author strives to limit his presence to the role of sympathetic narrator.

There are six main characters in Hiroshima, six people whose lives Hershey traces through the bombing and its aftermath. They represent a fair cross-section of society, including two women and four men (one a German native), and a variety of occupations, incomes, and educations. They tell their story in four parts: "A Noiseless Flash" (just before, during, and just after the blast); "The Fire' (the rest of that day); "Details Are Being Investigated" (the first night and the next ten days); and "Panic Grass and Feverfew" (up to a year after the bombing). Part One records the minute details of a few moments, while the following sections include an increasing amount of summary and telescoping of events. The number of statistics and later-discovered facts interpolated into the narrative also increases along the way, as Hershey supplements his sources' stories with background information. The book ends with excerpts from several documents, attempts by various survivors to understand what they have experienced and to pass judgment on it.

The flat, matter-of-fact tone of the first sentences of Hiroshima establishes Hershey's stance toward his materials:

At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department of the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat
Hershey goes on to describe the position of each of his six protagonists, and then doubles back to recount how each spent the morning and survived the blast. There are many details, but few adjectives and very little dialogue. Each character's thoughts are recorded at some point, but there is no attempt to simulate stream-of-consciousness or any extended train of thought. The narrative concentrates on what actually happened, within the limitations of the characters' memories. The prose is vivid but very restrained:

Altogether, Miss Sasaki was left two days and two nights under the piece of propped-up roofing with her crushed leg and her two unpleasant comrades. Her only diversion was when men came to the factory air-raid shelters, which she could see from under one corner of her shelter, and hauled corpses up out of them with ropes. Her leg became discolored, swollen, and putrid. All that time, she went without food and water. (72)

Each character's vision is recorded in the voice of a sympathetic reporter. The dominant mode is understatement, as though the narrator were being careful not to exaggerate or sentimentalize scenes that are already horrible almost beyond imagining:

He saw a uniform. Thinking there was just one soldier, he approached with the water. When he had penetrated the bushes, he saw there were about twenty men, and they were all in exactly the same nightmarish state: their faces were wholly burned, their eyesockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks. (They must have had their faces upturned when the bomb went off; perhaps they were anti-aircraft personnel.) Their mouths were mere swollen, pus-covered wounds,
which they could not bear to stretch enough to admit the spout of the teapot. So Father Kleinsorge got a large piece of grass and drew out the stem so as to make a straw, and gave them all water to drink that way. (68)

In this passage Father Kleinsorge's memory is supplemented by the narrator's supposition ("They must have had their faces upturned . . ."), and the adjectives "nightmarish" and "mere" function as intensifiers. But the overall effect is of understated and careful reporting.

So Hershey continues, throughout the narrative. A summary near the end parallels the opening passage, matter-of-factly tabulating each character's condition:

A year after the bomb was dropped, Miss Sasaki was a cripple; Mrs. Nakamura was destitute; Father Kleinsorge was back in the hospital; Dr. Sasaki was not capable of the work he once could do; Dr. Fujii had lost the thirty-room hospital it took him many years to acquire, and had no prospects of rebuilding it; Mr. Tanimoto's church had been ruined and he no longer had his exceptional vitality. The lives of these six people, who were among the luckiest in Hiroshima, would never be the same. (114)

Obviously we are supposed to be moved by this account, and stimulated to thought about the consequences of atomic warfare. But Hershey seems to be telling us that he will not take any cheap shots, that he will not engage in melodrama or sentimentality in order to command our attention. This decision succeeds, and in fact the whole narrative is engaging and important, largely because of the intrinsic importance of his topic. This is something that could not be said of a novel, but is certainly true of nonfiction: our perception of the historical significance of events, as it were, influences our opinion of the
literary status of a nonfiction account and our evaluation of the technical choices made by the author. This does not mean that one could not successfully write a very different book about Hiroshima, one which was less restrained or more experimental. It just means that we have a greater respect for Hershey's restraint, his attitude of deference toward the facts, because we understand how potentially controversial and susceptible to manipulation his story might be.

This deference is not the same as lack of concern. Both Hershey's involvement and his tact may be seen in the way he handles the moral question of using the atomic bomb. Two of the protagonists feel "'Shikata ga nai . . . Da ist nichts zu machen. There's nothing to be done about it!'" (117)—the bomb might actually have saved lives in the long run. One survivor emerges with "a hatred for Americans that nothing could possibly erase" (117). Hershey also excerpts a report from the Jesuit community in Hiroshima to Rome: "'The crux of the matter is whether total war in its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose'" (117-118). Taken together these various opinions do not represent a profound philosophical appraisal of the atomic bomb, but they do capture several important responses, and this is what Hershey is after in Hiroshima. He wants to tell us what it was like to survive, and that of course includes the feelings toward America and the bomb with which the survivors emerged. The narrator does not overtly take any position; rather, he lets the suffering of his characters, presented vividly but calmly, argue for the horrors of using nuclear weapons.
The most engaging character in the book is Toshio Nakamura, the son of one of Hershey's six protagonists. His observations illustrate both the suffering and the strength of the survivors, as when he matter-of-factly relates his family's situation to a friend on a passing boat:

"Hello, Toshio!"
"Are you all safe?"
"Yes. What about you?"
"Yes, we're all right. My sisters are vomiting, but I'm fine." (70)

Hershey chooses Toshio to have the last word in the book, from a school essay he wrote for the anniversary of the bombing:

"We went to the park. A whirlwind came. At night a gas tank burned and I saw the reflection in the river. We stayed in the park one night. Next day I went to Taiko Bridge and met my girl friends Kikuki and Murakami. They were looking for their mothers. But Kikuki's mother was wounded and Murakami's mother, alas, was dead." (118)

As Hershey uses it, Toshio's description is both very moving and wonderfully ironic. Toshio sees the bombing as a kind of adventure, as any child would, but this is a deadly adventure that left his friends orphaned. Toshio is young and resilient, but he is also one of the very luckiest people in Hiroshima. Hershey selects that one old-fashioned word, "alas," to convey, almost in an aside, whole worlds of pain and hope. As Ronald Weber notes, Toshio's words "conclude the work characteristically: close to the details of character and deeply understated, yet profoundly saddening."5
The task which Hershey has set himself is challenging, not only because he has tried to convey a massive disaster in a short narrative, and the sufferings of tens of thousands through the lives of a few, but also because his characters are so culturally distant from us. He does not refrain from making occasional generalizations about Japanese culture, as when he talks about the quiet patience of the wounded; but such remarks are very much in passing and unobtrusive:

All day, people poured into Asano Park. This private estate was far enough away from the explosion so that its bamboos, pines, laurel, and maples were still alive, and the green place invited refugees—partly because they believed that if the Americans came back, they would bomb only buildings; partly because the foliage seemed a center of coolness and life, and the estate's exquisitely precise rock gardens, with their quiet pools and arcing bridges, were very Japanese, normal, secure; and also partly (according to some who were there) because of an irresistible, atavistic urge to hide under leaves. (47)

The reader gets a feeling for Japanese values, but does not sense that the American Hershey is being presumptuous in his generalizations. He is careful to add that the oddest of his proposed reasons for the flight to Asano Park, the "urge to hide under leaves," is "according to some who were there." This caution is evident everywhere, in his treatment both of individuals and of the Japanese culture as a whole. We sense that, above all, Hershey is not going to presume on his knowledge of his sources.

For the purposes of this chapter, Hiroshima serves as a kind of norm or control. Hershey takes very few liberties with his source materials, and in particular restricts his own role in the text to sympathetic reporter. He does not feel the need to "heighten" any of
his characters by dramatically staging (and liberally reconstructing) their experiences. Nor does he insert himself into the story as a character, in order to warrant or explain his version. The restraint with which he has treated his source materials exempts him from having to augment the authority of the narrative by inserting himself and describing his own connections to his characters. He is just doing good journalism, as it were, the kind of thing he faults Capote, Mailer, and Wolfe for not doing, in his *Yale Review* article.\(^6\) We are to assume that Hershey has nowhere invented anything or even extrapolated upon his materials. The character of the reporter is unimportant, except insofar as he has been a good recorder and a competent writer.

Because the Hiroshima bombing was such an important historic event with moral implications for the actions of a great many people, and because the suffering involved was so tremendous as to make ridiculous any attempt to do justice to it except in microcosm, Hershey's highly conservative approach strikes us as fitting. Again, if the events he describes were not so intrinsically important, the book would be just another piece of good journalism, rather than a work of literary nonfiction that compels the attention of critics as well as historians. Understatement and a flat, naturalistic style perfectly suit the story Hershey has to tell.\(^7\) Of course, there are other factors involved in the success of *Hiroshima*. For one thing, the structure of the narrative, concentrating on the moment of the bombing as perceived by six people, and then opening gradually and increasingly to cover a wider circle of events, helps us to sense both the impact of
the bombing and the ways in which that impact was diffused by time. Hershey wants us to understand how one instant turned the world upside down for a whole city, a simultaneous trauma the likes of which had never been experienced. But he also wants us to observe how people naturally recover from such a disaster, and in particular how the Japanese went about rebuilding and recuperating, even in the face of lingering radiation sickness and the stigma of losing a war. He does not want the rebuilding to excuse the killing—my guess would be that Hershey deplores the bombing, but that opinion is necessarily based upon indirect evidence. Fairness is perhaps the prime characteristic of the ethos of Hershey’s narrator, even more evident than empathy and humility. He does not want to convince us that he has captured the meaning of the bombing, or that his story is the one authoritative version of events. He only wants us to believe that he has objectively and sensitively recorded the experiences of a few people “who were among the luckiest in Hiroshima” (114), and that through them we might see more clearly what exactly will happen if we call down the atom on our enemies, or they upon us.

* * * * *

Joseph Wambaugh’s The Onion Field is the story of the four principals in a sensational California murder case. Like Hiroshima, The Onion Field is a third-person narrative limited almost exclusively to the vision of its various sources, augmented occasionally by background information. However, in The Onion Field we get a much
stronger sense of the implied author, partly through his brief appearance as a character in the story, but mainly through his selection of sources and details, the liberties he takes in dramatically reconstructing events, and the way in which he structures his story in order to emphasize the plight of his protagonist. By vividly re-creating events in the lives of his four main characters, Wambaugh hopes to make the reader feel certain injustices in our criminal system, rather than just considering them intellectually. He is interested in creating "rounded," engaging characters, but unlike Mailer in The Executioner's Song, he is not interested in character as an end in itself. Rather, he wants us to know his people so that we may know more about certain kinds of people, especially policemen, lawyers, and criminals. Our sense of the narrator is that he is concerned with, even dedicated to, particular causes, and is trying to enlist us in his crusade, not by force of exposition, however, but by the persuasions of narrative.

The Onion Field begins with two pages in italics, about an unnamed "gardener" who is involved in prosecution:

   The gardener was a thief. That's the thing that bothered him most. The trials didn't bother him so much anymore. It was strange how much he used to fear the trials, but not now. He just went to court and testified when he was told, then went back to his gardening. For a while they feared the trials would continue clear into the new decade. But now they assured him it was almost over, and 1970 was still eight weeks away.8

There are seven more "gardener" sections, each very short, inserted between early chapters in the main narrative. We gradually learn that these sections are flash-forwards, and that the gardener is Karl
Hettinger, ex-police officer whose partner was murdered in an onion field near Bakersfield, California, by two small-time hoods who had impulsively kidnapped the detectives. The interpolated sections, set in the narrative present of 1969, pique our curiosity about how the shooting or some other event has radically altered Hettinger's life. Very early on Wambaugh is indicating who will be our main pole of sympathy, whose fate will be linked most closely to the central themes of the narrative.

The first four chapters in the main narrative introduce, respectively, officers Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger and ex-cons Gregory Powell and Jimmy Smith. The biographies are juxtaposed with the actions of all four on the night in which they will come together:

It was Ian Campbell's turn to drive on the ninth day of the partnership: Saturday, March 9, 1963. . . . There were two other young men driving toward Hollywood that night in a maroon Ford coupe, who had begun a partnership on exactly the same day as Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger. . . . "I didn't really mature until I was thirty-three years old," Rusty Powell often admitted, but by then his eldest son, Gregory, was already twelve years old, and had attended a dozen different schools before moving to Cadillac, Michigan. (36-37)

These excerpts from the beginning of Chapter Three illustrate the way in which Wambaugh begins with the policemen, first introduces the killers (in the process pointing up one of the ironic coincidences that brought them all together), and then moves into Powell's biography. By the time the kidnapping actually takes place, in Chapter Six, we understand that Powell is acting out of his unfailing instinct as a loser, and that Smith is going to find himself dragged into another hopeless situation. We know less about the officers, although if we
have any information about the case from other sources, or if we have begun to make out the situation from clues in the text, we know that Campbell is going to be killed and that Hettinger will survive to go through the ordeal of witness at a murder trial. The first half of the book ends with the capture of Powell and Smith, after Hettinger's escape through the onion fields. Although this concludes the "action" scenes in *The Onion Field*, Wambaugh has only set the stage for his real story.

The second half of the book chronicles "six and one-half years of court proceedings" (412), the longest case in California history, a real-life *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce*. There are actually several separate trials, necessitated by Supreme Court rulings and defense maneuvers. In this part we meet a number of important characters, including detective Pierce Brooks, defense lawyers Charles Maple and Irving Kanarek, and prosecutors Philip Halpin and Sheldon Brown. Besides being actors in the drama and sources of information, Brooks and Halpin have the additional roles of being spokesmen for Wambaugh. They comment on the legal absurdities of the trial, while Hettinger's physical and emotional sufferings illustrate the real human cost of those absurdities. Wambaugh draws heavily on courtroom transcripts and Jimmy Smith's diary, selecting representative moments from the seemingly endless trial while simultaneously keeping track of the lives of Hettinger, Powell, and Smith outside the courtroom.

The two killers become jailhouse lawyers and work out a deal to spare Smith the death penalty. Wambaugh gives us a view of prison life, including several ludicrous escape attempts, but the best views
of Powell and Smith come from the courtroom transcripts. After
convincing the judge to let him act as his own lawyer, Powell puts his
mother on the stand:

"While I was attempting to take care of the three younger
children, did you receive any disciplinary reports about me from
school?"
"I never received one. I only had a visitation from the
head of the school as to why you wanted taken off the honor roll
as a patrol boy."
"Just a minute, I'm sorry," said Schulman, "but I have to
object to that hearsay testimony."
"This isn't hearsay," said Ethel Powell. "This was said to
me direct. I'm repeating what I heard."
"Mrs. Powell," said the judge, "may I suggest that Mr.
Schulman's objection is directed to the court."
"Was I engaged in a lot of sports and so forth?" asked Greg.
"Yes. Oh gosh, you got a lot of ribbons too. Blue
ribbons. Yes, we had a wonderful track meet in which you did
very well."
"Did you go to the track meet?"
"I sure did. My husband and my father and mother did too.
Gee, I know your father was happy. You took part in two
things. You could've had top honors in both of them if you'd
taken his advice. Which you didn't do. One was a throwing
thing."
"Softball. I took second."
"I thought you got a blue ribbon."
"I did in the relay."
Schulman was now holding his head, tapping his tablet with a
pencil. (290-291)

This hilarious exchange gives us insight into Powell's character—how
much those exact ribbons still mean to him!—and underscores the abuses
to which the legal system is prone. The prosecutor must concern
himself seriously with what a defendant's mother recalls being told by
a principal about school patrol duty. What does this have to do with
deciding how to punish a man for cold-blooded murder? Powell's only
chance lies in endless diversions of this sort, and he shows in this
exchange that he has learned well the lessons taught him by the master of the stall tactic, attorney Irving Kanarek.

Jimmy Smith's diary is mentioned both in the prefatory Note to the Reader and in the narrative itself. This is presumably the source for many of Wambaugh's lengthy scenes between Powell and Smith, most of them described from Smith's perspective. Powell learns quickly, but he is still and always will be a loser, incapable of living outside of prison, and bound to lead others in after him. Smith comes across as a whiner and boot-licker, the perfect follower for Powell's brand of leadership. Like Powell, he becomes disenchanted with his lawyer:

"I don't want him to ever say anything to me as long as I am in this courtroom anymore. I don't want him to have anything to say to me. No time," said Jimmy Smith, and folded his arms and turned away from his elderly attorney, who shook his white head and shrugged helplessly. (255)

Besides using the transcripts and dramatized scenes between the two killers, Wambaugh makes use of other characters' opinions, as in a detective's comment on Smith's testimony:

"Was there any conversation between you and Gregory Powell, whispered or otherwise, that let you know that he was going to shoot one of the officers or both of them?"

The answer, Pierce Brooks was to say, was pure Jimmy Smith in its evasiveness.

"In my mind, no sir. I'm positive that I had no thought in my mind. Right now. That I can remember." (268)

This scene is sad and funny, and Smith indicts himself with his own words. But Wambaugh adds the character generalization, with Detective Brooks as warrant. (Notice that Brooks was not necessarily present at
the time. It may even be that Wambaugh was the one to tell him and elicit the response, much later.)

While the stories of Powell and Smith are comical, as well as painful for what they reveal about the legal system in America, the real heart of The Onion Field is the story of Karl Hettinger. Official departmental policy condemns him for his actions that night, particularly surrendering his gun when Powell had the drop on his partner. The peer pressure combines with self-generated guilt and a native inability to work through his feelings, with the result that Hettinger is almost destroyed physically and emotionally. By Chapter Eighteen the main narrative has caught up to the "gardener" sections, and Hettinger is just about at the bottom. It has become his trial, a test of his credibility as a witness, and the defense lawyers attack his character in court. He has been fired from the police force for kleptomania, and he suffers from impotence, dizzy spells, insomnia, sudden crying fits, suicidal depression, and other psychosomatic ailments. After the last trial--and after the death penalty has been abolished, and we get the sense that Smith and Powell have come home at last--he begins to improve. He takes a new job managing a nursery owned by a friend. But that does not mean his life will be the same as it was before:

Karl Hettinger was destined to face his devils. He could never escape irony. The friend's acreage was near Bakersfield, just a few miles from a place where onions grow so thick you can smell them from the Maricopa Highway. Just a few miles from that place where a policeman ran through the fields one cold and bitter night under a late and lonely moon near the foot of the Techapi Mountains, near a place called Wheeler Ridge, near a place they marked with a blood red arrow. (424)
Just as Wambaugh used Brooks to comment on Smith, so he uses various friends of Hettinger to comment on the detective's life. Many scenes between Hettinger and friends, and also between Hettinger and his wife, are dramatically presented: "'You're too strong and stubborn for your own good,' Wittick said. 'If you were weaker you'd let us help you. The strongest scrambler needs a pit crew, sweetheart'" (389). In order to clarify the shabby treatment Hettinger received from the police force, Wambaugh introduces "a young red-faced vice officer at Wilshire Station" (223), whose name is never given, but who feels strongly that Hettinger has been wronged and who collects evidence toward his vindication: "He would one day try to record what he knew about police life, but for now he seethed in silence. He kept his newspaper clippings in his pocket. He could not stand and dispute the captain. He lacked that kind of courage and he knew it" (229). This officer is obviously Wambaugh himself, who has recorded "what he knew about police life" in several novels as well as in The Onion Field. Wambaugh uses himself as a character only in this one chapter, as an expert on "certain fundamental truths about policemen" (223). Just like Wolfe's pilots in The Right Stuff, Wambaugh's policemen believe "that there is always a step that should have been taken, would have been taken, if the sufferer had been alert, cautious, brave, aggressive—in short, if he'd been like a prototype policeman" (223). Hettinger is victimized by this attitude. Although his actions were no different from those of dozens of other officers in similar situations, that one time things went wrong and an officer died. The sympathy that ought to have been shown in the face of extreme misfortune is replaced
by contempt, and that is matched by the self-contempt Hettinger feels, irrationally, as a good cop whose partner was killed while he survived.

There is obviously plenty of pathos in Hettinger's story, and Wambaugh does not hesitate to exploit that potential. But the cause of his suffering that Wambaugh is most interested in displaying is not the actual murder, the psychosomatic devastation of guilt, or the shabby behavior of police department officials. Rather, he is concerned with putting vividly before us some of the abuses to which the American legal system is prey. The greatest danger is the tendency of the system to become self-contained and entirely self-reflexive. This tendency is exploited masterfully by Irving Kanarek, whose goal is not to win a trial, but to create grounds for appeal by any means possible. Appeals take time and money, and witnesses die or move away. Meanwhile the trial drags on. Prosecutor Halpin is Wambaugh's main mouthpiece for commenting on the absurdities of the system:

"Nobody cares about the case anymore," Halpin complained to his superiors. "Each new judge is mildly amused at my frustration. There's no concept of what's gone before. No one cares now that a cop was killed so brutally. Pat McCormack's talking about leaving to become a court commissioner. I'll be left alone then. For the duration!"

"Don't let Kanarek bother you so much," was the stock reply. "It's not Kanarek, damnit. It's the system that indulges him! Hundreds of these killers'll win their freedom one day after all the witnesses and judges and prosecutors either die, or disappear, or give up!"

"Listen, Phil, after it's over..."

"Sometimes I get a crazy feeling that it'll never be over. There's no finality in the law itself. This is a war of attrition in no man's land, and the obstructionists are winning. Judge Peracca almost died. Do you know how many judges have sat on this case? How many people have been involved? Are we going to be able to drag these civilian witnesses back if and when we ever get to trial?"
"Phil, you're overwrought. You'll..."
"The American system of justice is the laughingstock of the entire English speaking world and totally incomprehensible to the rest of the world!" (375)

The whole thing is too much for Halpin: "He not only walked off the case, but he resigned from the District Attorney's office and vowed never to enter a courtroom again" (378). He is just one of the many victims of this case. As his successor observes at the time of the last trial, "Hettinger was a broken man, anyone could see that. Campbell was so forgotten he may as well never have lived" (405). This is what happens when the courtroom becomes self-contained; kidnapping, taunting, four slugs fired point-blank into the chest of a wounded man, a chase through onion fields in the dark—these realities become lost in a world of jargon and special rules:

Deemed to have sat down. Deemed to have been silenced. It suddenly struck [Halpin]. They had all gone over the brink into madness. The physical fact was meaningless, only the words mattered. A man need not sit if it was deemed that he sat. He need not speak if it was deemed that he spoke. Lawyers could stipulate to anything. They could deem that lie was truth, that fantasy was real.

They made movies and wrote books about courtroom drama. It was all a hoax. There was no drama. Not in a real courtroom. It was all a cruel joke and an incredibly silly thing to devote one's life to. (382, 383)

This is exactly what Wambaugh wants to get across to his readers, and he makes Halpin's frustration an integral part of his story. The Onion Field is Wambaugh's attempt to make sure that Ian Campbell is not "so forgotten he may as well never have lived"—that people go on caring "that a cop was killed so brutally."
Wambaugh has been able to select scenes for his story from a period of many years (including the years before the murder, discussed especially in the first four biographical chapters). He has apparently had two key sources, Hettinger and Smith, whose points of view are used often, especially in recalling the fatal night. *The Onion Field* is by and large a conservative account, a version of events that sticks closely to its source materials. But unlike Hershey, Wambaugh has taken a position in his story, defining himself as more than a reporter, and establishing a clear relationship between himself as implied author and each of his sources. He is an ex-police officer, like Hettinger, and he is obviously on very good terms with other law enforcement officials such as Halpin and Brooks. They provide him with appropriate comments on courtroom events, even when they were not present at the time. For instance, Halpin's comments on "Deemed to have been silenced" are included as his reaction after the fact, when he heard about what happened in court. Many of Detective Brooks' sage observations are explicitly (though quietly) after the fact. In this way Wambaugh is able to limit his presence as a character, and make his thematic concerns seem widely shared, rather than merely his particular complaints.

Hettinger's situation is so pitiable that Wambaugh does not need to do much more than record the details. But since he has Hettinger's confidence, he is able to write passages of interior monologue and include private scenes, as between Hettinger and his family members, in order to increase our sympathy. By alternating the main narrative with the "gardener" sections, and by closely following Hettinger's life up
to the moment of his new job, after the last trial, Wambaugh tries to
make us identify with the man who has been at the focus of several
injustices, and thereby gain a real understanding of those injustices.
We have no doubt where Wambaugh stands on the issues of police
intolerance of failure, courtroom stall tactics, the need for certain
kinds of counseling services, the way prison makes convicts dependent,
etc. By making Hettinger his hero, and also by showing Powell and
Smith as dangerous punks, perhaps deserving of pity, but not of
freedom, Wambaugh tries to arouse the reader's indignation and break
through the public's apathy toward the criminal justice system.

Both Hershey and Wambaugh are reporters, and each is interested in
recounting the precise details of certain past events. But Wambaugh is
much more of an advocate, for certain people and for certain thematic
positions. This advocacy is manifested in several ways, including:
his appearance as a character and a kind of expert witness (the "young
red-faced vice officer"); his extensive use of particular characters as
mouthpieces for his own views; and perhaps most importantly, his method
of dramatic reconstruction of events in great detail, which succeeds in
engaging the reader with his story and allows him to influence the
reader's opinions of key characters. The Onion Field is much more
detailed than Hiroshima, particularly in its use of dialogue and
interior monologue. Perhaps Hershey did not feel free to re-create
liberally the thoughts and words of his characters, or perhaps his
restraint was based entirely on aesthetic reasons. But Wambaugh
determined that he needed to take some liberties, not, so far as we can
tell, of invention, but of reconstruction. Making us understand his
caracters required the dramatic engagement of narrative detail.

Emmanuel McFadden had been working an especially long shift. He
was supposed to work twelve hours from noon to midnight with a
forty-five minute break at 6:00 p.m. It was a hard day and his
khakis were sweat soaked. But somehow he was preoccupied when
midnight came, and it was twenty past midnight when he unhooked
the disc and drove the tractor back toward the barn so that it
could be gassed up and taken over by his brother James.
Sometimes he got caught up in the sound of the Cat's engine, and
the hiss of the disc slicing furrows, and he would dream that it
was his farm, and he would plow his earth gladly at midnight.

One day Byrne asked the defendant, "How do you really feel about
those kids, Greg?"
"What kids?" asked Greg.
"Campbell's kids," said Byrne. "And about Mrs. Campbell?"
"To tell you the honest truth, Mr. Byrne, I feel nothing."
"Nothing?"
"Nothing about them. Any of them. But I will send them
money if I ever make any. Because I said I would."
There it was, Byrne thought. The sociopathic personality.

The final chapter in The Onion Field returns to the topic of the
first chapter, Ian Campbell. In the last scene in particular we can
see Wambaugh's methods clearly. He wants us to remember Campbell, not
only as a victim but also as a man, and so recalls him to the reader by
reconstructing a moment between his daughter and his mother:

"Don't you think it would be nice to play the bagpipes, Grandma
Chrissie? Don't you like the idea?"
"I like the idea, Valerie," said Chrissie Campbell finally,
taking careful measured breaths until it all stopped. She
turned, calm now, only a little pale, and held the child's face
in her hands and smiled. And like another child's face of years
past, the brooding look vanished and the face became lighted and
the eyes went more to the blue.
"Yes, darling," said Chrissie. "I think that's a lovely
idea." (427)
In Valerie's playing the bagpipes, in Campbell's friends' preserving his memory by repairing an old watch and suggesting the name "Ian" to prospective mothers, this good man will continue to exist. The Onion Field is Wambaugh's own memorial, a moving plea not to forget the living or the dead.

* * *

The jump from Wambaugh's advocacy and brief appearance in The Onion Field, to Mailer's use of himself as the central character in The Armies of the Night, raises all sorts of interesting issues. Mailer wants to treat explicitly questions about the author's role that Wambaugh deliberately avoided. One is tempted to make quick genre distinctions (as Zavarzadeh does, between the "exegetical" and the "testimonial" nonfiction novels), or quick value judgments, such as that Mailer's meta-narrative commentary inherently makes his book more sophisticated and valuable than Wambaugh's. But I think this is a temptation to be resisted, in favor of a clear description of what the two authors are attempting by their various methods. It suits Mailer's purposes in The Armies of the Night to assure us that he is aware of a kind of narrative Heisenberg principle, and that he is entirely conscious of the epistemological implications of what he is doing:

So the novelist working in secret collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study—at the greatest advantage—our own horizon. Of course, the tower is crooked, and the telescopes warped, but the instruments of all sciences—history so much as physics—are always constructed in small or large error; what supports the use of them now is that
our intimacy with the master builder of the tower, and the lens grinder of the telescope (yes, even the machinist of the barrels) has given some advantage for correcting the error of the instruments and the imbalance of his tower.\textsuperscript{11}

In short, the reason why Mailer has to be the hero of his own history is that we can better weigh his version if we know more about his particular interests and biases:

Clearly Mailer intends \textit{Armies} as an antidote to the inevitable distortions of the traditional press, especially in the coverage of New Left politics and mass demonstrations. Like so much of the new journalism, Mailer's book is an explicit attack on the "objectivity" and impersonality of the conventional media.\textsuperscript{12}

This is very neat, but it turns out to be only part of the story. We are not absorbed in the first three-fourths of \textit{The Armies of the Night} merely because we know that such attention will help us evaluate the last eighty pages. Mailer designs his experiment in history-writing so as to engage the reader throughout, and make her feel the reality of past events, as well as their thematic implications.

\textit{The Armies of the Night} is divided into two parts: "History as a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon" and "The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon." Book I details Mailer's experiences, thoughts, and feelings in connection with the 1967 protest march, whereas Book II is a more conventional journalistic version of events, recounting the planning, execution, and various strategies of the march from its original conception to the last days in jail of the last protesters. Book II opens with the passage quoted above, in which Mailer describes Book I as a "tower" for better seeing the events to be described in Book II. However, a few chapters later Mailer stops
himself: "...the conceit one is writing a history must be relinquished" (283). It turns out that "the Novelist" is not merely writing a conventional history with accompanying autobiographical sketch, but rather a different kind of history:

"...an explanation of the mystery of the events at the Pentagon cannot be developed by the methods of history—only by the instincts of the novelist. The reasons are several, but reduce to one[:]...the history is interior: the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry. So these limits are now relinquished. (284)

"Objectivity" is only one of the conventions that Mailer is disdaining. Rather than insist that he is expanding the horizons of historical writing, Mailer is willing to back off and call his work a "collective novel." Of course, this is a rhetorical strategy, and in no way intended to make the reader stop believing that what she is reading is true. On the contrary, Mailer works hard to establish his trustworthiness as a reporter, and strives for a kind of factual adequacy that can stand up to any competing account.

Book I is divided into four parts, each with its own mood and Mailer-avatar to match. "Thursday Evening" is given over mainly to "the Beast," "an absolute egomaniac" (24), and a fairly cranky, unpredictable ally. The *Armies of the Night* begins with a *Time* version of Mailer's behavior, which we then leave "in order to find out what happened" (14). We are introduced to our protagonist as a celebrity, a gambler, an oddball believer in the telephone's malevolent psychic effects, and a supporter of liberal causes who carefully calculates his
moves to avoid "put[ting] in time with losers" (18). This is not the most flattering introduction in the history of first-person narrators, but it gets worse. The climax of "Thursday Evening" is a frantic, alcohol-fueled performance by "the Beast" at a fund-raising rally. "Mailer" the character alternately deplores and admires his own performance, and through his reflections we begin to get a picture of him as combative, competitive, strong-minded, imaginative, and—perhaps most importantly—at least as hard on himself as he is on other people. "Mailer" is constantly monitoring himself, and in retrospective narrative Mailer the implied author subjects that self-consciousness to even more analysis and reflection. "Mailer" may be offensive, but he is at the very least brutally honest. This is the impression we are intended to take away with us from "Thursday Evening": above all we must not consider the reporter and hero of this story to be sanctimonious or blind.

In "Friday Afternoon" "the Beast" is replaced by "the Citizen." Nursing a hangover, "Mailer" observes a small and relatively subdued protest, a kind of preliminary to the main event. If Part I might be characterized by "Mailer" "roaring off into obscenity" (60), Part II is typified by his "modest" speech at the Department of Justice, for which "the applause was pleasant" (94-95). The tone of "Friday Afternoon" is entirely subdued. "Mailer," our "comic hero," is still "an egotist of the most startling misproportions," but he is also "in command of a detachment classical in severity (for he was a novelist and so in need of studying every last lineament of the fine, the noble, the frantic, and the foolish in others and in himself)" (67-68). The enforced quiet
of the hangover and the profound commitment "Mailer" perceives on the faces of the protesters inspire in him "a deep modesty" and reflections about the consequences of protest actions. We still get a sense of unflinching self-assessment, but now it is accompanied by more of an outward focus, as "the Historian" begins to report on his companions in the protest: "But Mailer could feel no sense of belonging to any of these people. They were much too nice and much too principled for him" (83). There is irony here, of course; Mailer is going to tell us exactly how "nice" and "principled" they are, and let us weigh their faults with their strengths.

"Saturday Matinee" is the most outwardly-directed of the four parts of Book I. There is relatively little reflection by "Mailer" (which is to say, still a fair amount) and a great deal of description and quotation. This is the main event, the rally and the march itself, at least the part of it that Mailer witnessed. As "a notable" Mailer is in the front ranks, and gets himself arrested fairly early. But we still have time to witness some of the first day's events, including an "exorcism" of the evil spirits inhabiting the Pentagon. In such descriptions we still have "Mailer's" active mind and the distinctive style of Parts I and II:

Now, here, after several years of the blandest reports from the religious explorers of LSD, vague Tibetan lama goody-goodness auras of religiosity being the only publicly announced or even rumored fruit from all trips back to the buried Atlantis of LSD, now suddenly an entire generation of acid-heads seemed to have said goodbye to easy visions of heaven, no, now the witches were here, and rites of exorcism, and black terrors of the night--hippies being murdered. Yes, the hippies had gone from Tibet to Christ to the Middle Ages, now they were Revolutionary Alchemists. Well, thought Mailer, that was all right, he was a Left Conservative himself. "Out, demons, out! Out, demons, out!" (143)
"Saturday Night and All of Sunday" is the longest section of Book I. It begins with Mailer's arrest and continues until his release, the end of his participation in the march. This section is again fairly quiet, after the excitement of the arrest, and it includes lengthy passages of reflection about the meaning of the march and the nature of political protest in America. If Thoreau on civil disobedience is stirring, "Mailer" on that topic is profoundly honest and realistic, appealing to our sense of ourselves as both selfish and selfless creatures, materialists and idealists, hedonists and sometimes even stoics. "Mailer" has not metamorphosed into an entirely passive character—at one point he finds himself in a hilarious stand-off with a Nazi fellow prisoner: "two philosophical monomaniacs with the same flaw—they could not help it, they were counterpunchers" (163). But more typical of "Saturday Night and All of Sunday" is "Mailer's" construction of a "ladder of moral challenges" (219) that may be either an incisive psychological insight or a brilliant rationalization. Other, more extravagant speculations focus on small-town America, world communism, and the idea that "Americans needed the war or they would lose their Christ" (212). He does not finally emerge with a cynical attitude, however, but with a "clean sense of himself, with a skin of compassion at such a rare moment for all" (238). This is partly just the effect of being released from jail, but it is also something else, something more important—a sign of the value of the march itself.

"Mailer" has earlier explained his first principle as "a good working amateur philospher": "If it made you feel good, it was good"
"If it feels bad, it is bad" (37). In The Armies of the Night Mailer's goal is to make us feel the march on the Pentagon, as well as narrative reporting can enable us, so that we can judge the moral value of the march for ourselves. For Mailer, "the existential promise of truth" lies in the conviction, "it feels true" (41). This is exactly the reaction he hopes to provoke in the reader. Regardless of whether we agree with "Mailer" about the war in Vietnam, the New Left, the encroachment of "technology land," or any of his more off-the-wall notions, he still wants us to emerge with the sense that he has given us the "feel" of the 1967 march. Since only individuals have feelings, Mailer has chosen to present events through the eyes and mind of one person, "Mailer," "the Novelist." If he has been honest, then we ought to be able to correlate "Mailer's" mind to our own, much as we figure out over time our own tastes in relation to those of a particular movie or book reviewer, and so come to recognize when we will share that reviewer's opinion and when we will disagree. Thus the importance of "Mailer's" buoyant mood at the end of Book I: this is the best, the strongest, almost the only indisputable evidence that something important has been accomplished in those few days. "Mailer" has already debated the march's value from several perspectives. But now, for a moment, there is an end to debate, and the protagonist surrenders himself to the conviction of his senses. Precisely in order to confirm or deny this intuition of the march's value, Mailer turns from his own experiences to "a veritable precis of a collective novel . . . to elucidate the mysterious character of that quintessentially American event" (241).
Book II is only one-third as long as Book I, but it covers the entire march, from the early stages of planning through to the last protesters still incarcerated and refusing to cooperate with the jailers. Book II relies heavily on "newspaper accounts, eyewitness reports, and . . . a general style of historical writing" (284), at least for its first half. But when the negotiations and preliminaries have been completed, and we have arrived "at the front line, at the six inches of no-man's-land across which troops and demonstrators—in the closest use yet of this word—confront each other" (283), then Mailer begins to expand on his conventional journalistic approach. He speculates freely on the thoughts and emotions of participants, and returns again to the effort of discovering and communicating the "interior" history of the march. Quotations from leftist newspapers are useful in this regard, because they generally include reactions to events, as well as descriptions of what happened.

Mailer sums up the march as a "rite of passage," an experience which left the protesters "forever different in the morning than they had been before the night" (312). If earlier the demonstration had been characterized as "an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years" (57), by the end of the book a certain kind of value is strongly asserted. But that value is personal, individual, and only indirectly political. The 1967 march on the Pentagon may not have saved America's soul, or even had much to do with Johnson's resignation or our retreat from the Vietnam War. But if Mailer is correct, the march accomplished an important goal: it gave some Americans a "clean sense" of themselves, a little
extra courage, a little knowledge of their own strength and a shared vision. In the face of "technology land" and growing totalitarianism, that is no small achievement.

In the preceding discussion of The Armies of the Night I have distinguished between Mailer-as-character and Mailer-as-implied-author by using quotation marks to distinguish the former. This is not mere fastidiousness; "Mailer" is not Mailer, although there are important connections between them. In order to write a particular kind of historical narrative, Mailer constructed a protagonist, a "comic hero" whose actions could be verified by competing accounts, and whose interior states could be used to involve the reader in the story and explore the various meanings of that weekend in 1967. The Armies of the Night was written in a flurry of activity and published very soon after the march, but the interval was enough for Mailer to digest his experiences and work out a narrative form for presenting them. This form centers around "the Novelist," whose most important characteristics are honesty, sensitivity, and imagination. But he is also a participant, and so an important part of the history is his transformation from the bellowing "Beast" of Part I to the man who feels at the end a "clean sense of himself." Perhaps even more important is the connection between the cynical observer of Book I ("in command of a detachment classic in severity"), and "the Historian" of Book II who concludes his report with the imagined prayers of the last imprisoned protesters:

The prayers are as Catholic as they are Quaker, and no one will know if they were ever made, for the men who might have made
them were perhaps too far out on fever and shivering and thirst to recollect, and there are places no history can reach. But if the end of the March took place in the isolation in which these last pacifists suffered naked in freezing cells, and gave up prayers for penance, then who was to say they were not saints? And who to say that the sins of American were not by their witness a tithe removed? (319)

Book I is not merely a warrant for Book II; rather, the personal reactions and transformations recorded in the former are extended and confirmed by the events of the latter. By creating a portrait of "Mailer" in Book I, as a cynical, egotistical, but rigorously honest man, Mailer succeeds in warranting not only the accuracy of the events recorded in Book II, but also the depth of meaning extracted from those events. If "Mailer" was stirred by the march, then it must have been a moving experience indeed. And if such profound, painful events as the protesters experienced could have come out of the potentially internecine squabbling in which the march was born (as recorded in the early chapters of Book II), then perhaps the protest was a significant event in American history, and "Mailer's" feelings were duplicated many times over.

If historical writing is "like the novel in being itself our experience of what it narrates," then we might describe Mailer's aim as the recovery or representation of interior as well as exterior "events" of the 1967 march. This is indeed beyond "the clearly demarcated limits" of conventional "historic inquiry" (284), but it is not therefore fiction or autobiography. In recognition of the fact that feelings and thoughts are individual first, and collective only in a very secondary sense, Mailer chose to reproduce a historical event through the perspective of one person. The logical next step is to
investigate the details of the rest of the march, in order to suggest connections between "Mailer's" experiences and those of everyone else. This is where Book II comes in, and its modest length (one-third that of Book I) demonstrates Mailer's recognition of the historian's limitations in recovering other people's thoughts and feelings.

One consequence of Mailer's decision to report the march on the Pentagon from his own point of view (or, in our terms, that of his protagonist "Mailer") is that the reader is confronted with broad generalizations that may be unfair. The famous passage about the marshals ("they had the kind of faces which belong to the bad guys in a Western"—171) is one example of "Mailer's" willingness to sum up a mass of different people in terms more vivid than balanced: "One did not have to look for who would work in the concentration camps and the liquidation centers . . . one could enlist half the Marshals outside this bus, simple, honest, hard-working government law-enforcement agents, yeah!" (172). In Book II "Mailer" as journalist turns the protest into a psychic class struggle:

Standing against them, the demonstrators were not only sons of the middle class of course, but sons who had departed the middle class, they were rebels and radicals and young revolutionaries; yet they were unbloodied, they felt secretly weak, they did not know if they were the simple equal, man for man, of these soldiers, and so when this vanguard confronted soldiers now, and were able to stare them in the eye, they were, in effect, saying silently, "I will steal your elan, and your brawn, and the very animal of your charm because I am morally right and you are wrong and the balance of existence is such that the meat of your life is now attached to my spirit, I am stealing your balls." (288)

There are many such passages, in which individuals or groups are summarily treated. This would be fine in a novel, but we tend to
expect nonfiction to be more cautious or respectful—and this is
exactly what Mailer refuses to do. 15

The Armies of the Night is a kind of participatory history, a
description of events accompanied by intellectual and emotional
reactions to those events. Moreover, Mailer has tried to capture his
immediate reactions, or at least simulate those of "Mailer," so that
the effect is of an active mind. Watching "Mailer" work his way
through an idea or a metaphor, respond to a challenge, or debate both
sides of a complicated question is fascinating. He may end up in a
very strange place, having lost the reader's assent somewhere along the
way, but getting there is at least half the fun:

... a night journey on a bus was one of the few times when
everything ambitious, wild, overconceived, hopeless, garish, and
suffocatingly technical in American life nonetheless came
together long enough to give the citizens a little peace, for
maybe it was only when they were on the move that Americans
could feel anchored in their memories. Was anything more
agreeable than these small hills moving by in the dark like
animals? Yes, it was on a journey that the tender memories of
the past (and the more sorrowful) shifted somewhere in the seat
of their unconscious repose, and warmed the blood, warmed the
heart, warmed something at best of that cold anxious center
where was inspired so much of the American fever, yes, tender
memories which did not have to rise to the mind, but drifted
like lights (boudoir lights? harbor lights?) on the warm river
of the journey. (196-197)

Sometimes we feel that he is dead on, and sometimes we just cannot buy
it, but "Mailer's" "hit-and-miss amateur working philosophy" 16 is
never dull, never the "sound-as-brickwork-logic of the next step" (202)
favored by would-be revolutionaries, or the mechanical thinking of
"technology land."
The Armies of the Night is full of verifiable details and information about Mailer's life, but it is not autobiography. The march on the Pentagon and what it felt like (and therein what it meant) are the center of the book. Mailer uses his "comic hero" to explore the march, selecting details of his life and thoughts for what they will contribute to understanding the events of that weekend:

... most of what we get from this presumably self-centered, egotistic and self-revealing writer are anecdotes about his public performances. Even these prove to be not confessions so much as self-creations after the event, presentations of a self he makes up for his own as much as for the reader's inspection.17

I do not fully agree with Richard Poirier here; in The Armies of the Night we get a lot more of "Mailer's" thinking processes than "anecdotes about his public performances." But his general point is very well taken. Despite the reputation (which he himself encourages and maintains) for being "an egotist of the most startling misproportions" (68), Mailer's real focus is always outward, into the world, the nature of truth, the varieties of sensual experience. Because he is fundamentally an individualist (the conservative part of being a "Left Conservative"), he believes that the world can only be explored by individual minds and hearts. Collective sight almost always leads to blindness. So he chooses an unmistakeable protagonist, a mind we could never confuse with any other, in the hopes that we will be at least challenged, if not persuaded. "Mailer," "a simple of a hero and a marvel of a fool, with more than average gifts of objectivity," is the tool by which Mailer breaks down our guard and
slips through "a discovery of what the March on the Pentagon had finally meant, and what had been won, and what had been lost" (241).

For "Mailer" the ending comes with a flight back to New York and that "clean sense of himself." But upon reflection he discovers a wider meaning, a sense of anticipation. The season is Advent, but what is coming is not yet clear:

Brood on the country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child—no one knows if legitimate—and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin—it will go on: no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what?—the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? (320)

Demonstrations are labor pains, and "Mailer" shares with many other Americans the belief that something new is about to be born, something that will either reflect the beliefs of people in the same way that the march on the Pentagon expressed the will of the protesters, or else will be a response to such muscle-flexing, a crackdown of massive proportions. From the vantage point of fifteen or more years, such an ominous feeling seems juvenile—how could we have taken ourselves so seriously? But that distant mood was no less real just because its promise was not borne out, or at least not dramatically fulfilled. Mailer's goal was to reproduce what it felt like then, rather than to put together an account of the march that would fit neatly into future histories of the Sixties. The primary significance of that weekend in 1967 lies in the effect it had on the participants, not in whatever
political gains might have been made. The Armies of the Night succeeds insofar as it gives us a vivid, intellectually challenging account of what it felt like to be there, in the mind of "Mailer," working through his own experiences and trying to re-create and make sense of the experiences of his fellow participants.

* * *

Michael Herr's Dispatches is a lyrical, fragmented account of the author's experiences as a correspondent in Vietnam in the late 1960's. His method is anecdotal: he accumulates "war stories," epiphanic moments that may be as short as a sentence or as long as the whole eighty-page chapter on Khe Sanh. Herr's protagonist disdains the official briefings and interviews with high-ranking officials, in favor of life with the soldier in the field:

Some journalists talked about no-story operations, but I never went on one. Even when an operation never got off the ground, there was always the airstrip. Those were the same journalists who would ask us what the fuck we ever found to talk to grunts about, who said they never heard a grunt talk about anything except cars, football and chone. But they all had a story, and in the war they were driven to tell it.18

His mission is to re-tell their stories, because they have become part of his own: "... I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did" (20).

Dispatches is not a history of the Vietnam War, or even of Herr's involvement in the war. Most of his stories are unverifiable and
dislocated in time—there are relatively few names and dates. One gets
the feeling that these events are happening over and over to many men,
from one of whom Herr got the words or image for the record. Each
incident emerges in vivid relief, the language of its telling
foregrounded by the isolation. Many of the stories recapitulate a
central motif, the "recurring journey from innocence to
experience." The combination of a lavish style, intensely
emotional moments, and the fragmented "plot" of Dispatches creates the
impression that such scenes live on in the minds of those who were
there, spoiling some people, driving others crazy, and letting off the
lucky ones with just a few nightmares. It is finally the effects of
the war, the spiritual "reponse-to-impact," that Herr is interested
in. Thus, he is more likely to describe a soldier's words and actions
after a battle than to give us details of the battle itself. Each "war
story" is a kind of grisly souvenir, like the snapshots and anatomical
debris that many soldiers collect. As John Hellmann puts it, "Herr
makes the necessity of exploring and ordering the events in Vietnam,
not the events themselves, his true subject."20

The first chapter, "Breathing In," includes an account of Herr's
experiences upon arriving in Vietnam, but they are scattered among
other anecdotes accumulated throughout his "tour." The chapter ends
with a dream he had in 1975, long after he had left the country (though
not the war) behind. The first character we meet in the book is an
"information officer" for "the Mission," whose job is to go around
telling people about a successful operation, the removal of an entire
forest for the purpose of "denying the enemy valuable resources and cover":

And if in the months following that operation incidences of enemy activity in the larger area of War Zone C had increased "significantly," and American losses had doubled and then doubled again, none of it was happening in any damn Bo Ho Woods, you better believe it . . . (4)

This is an official war story, half lie and half confusion, the version of the war that Herr wants to expose. "The Mission" speaks in a euphemistic jargon, as when shell-shock becomes "acute environmental reaction" (91). For contrast Herr gives us our second character, a third-tour "long range recon patroller" or "Lurp," "a good killer, one of our best" (6). His experiences in Vietnam have left him totally unfit for life in the United States. He speaks a different language from the "information officer":

But what a story he told me, as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it:
"Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened."
I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone as dumb as I was. (6)

"One-pointed and resonant"—that's the kind of story Herr is after. In the title of another chapter he calls such epiphanies "Illumination Rounds," deadly flashes of light disappearing into the darkness and briefly exposing an otherwise hidden realm of experience. Helmet slogans become names for particular people or whole attitudes toward life: "TIME IS ON MY SIDE," "Pray For War," "Day Tripper," "the Avenger." Sometimes the eloquence is painful:
Like a black paratrooper with the 101st who glided by and said, "I been scaled man, I'm smooth now," and went on, into my past and I hope his future, leaving me to wonder not what he meant (that was easy), but where he'd been to get his language. (28)

A lot of what you heard, you heard all the time, men on tape, deceitful and counterarticulate, and some of it was low enough, guys whose range seemed to stop at "Git some, git some, harharhar!" But once in a while you'd hear something fresh, and a couple of times you'd even hear something high, like the corpsman at Khe Sanh who said, "If it ain't the fucking incoming it's the fucking outgoing. Only difference is who gets the fucking grease, and that ain't no fucking difference at all." (30)

Post-combat reactions recorded by Herr range from the embarrassing ("One afternoon when I mistook a bloody nose for a headwound, and I didn't have to wonder anymore how I'd behave if I ever got hit"--31), to the traumatic (a survivor of Dak To slobbers out a cigarette--"I couldn't spit for a week up there,' he said, 'and now I can't fucking stop'"--23), to an obsessive preoccupation like that of Herr's colleague Tim Page: "He began talking more and more about the war, often coming close to tears when he remembered how happy he and all of us had been there" (248). Each time the survivor must work through his experiences, give them some kind of shape and sense. But there is no sure protection against memory:

... Plant you now, dig you later: information printed on the eye, stored in the brain, coded over skin and transmitted by blood, maybe what they meant by "blood consciousness." And transmitted over and over without letup on increasingly powerful frequencies until you either received it or blocked it out one last time, informational Death of a Thousand Cuts, each cut so precise and subtle you don't even feel them accumulating, you just get up one morning and your ass falls off. (251)
Being in Vietnam was only "half an act"; the other half is working through the memories and, for a writer like Herr, finding an appropriate language and structure for them.

*Dispatches* moves by bits and pieces of words, sentences, images, sensations, emotions. The structure is associational rather than chronological. In the narrative logic of the book such fragments must be preserved as discrete, isolated and magnified so as to be better studied. What holds this collage together is the mind of the first-person narrator, whom we come to know partly through his experiences, but mainly through his style and sympathies in the presentation of other people's accounts: "Herr tells us almost nothing of his past, nor does he tell us anything of his appearance or character not intrinsically related to the experience he is reporting at that moment." As a narrative tool, Herr's protagonist is much less differentiated, as it were, than "Mailer" in *The Armies of the Night*. Just as Herr's soldiers, for all their vividly individual characteristics, come to seem like The Soldier, so Herr's narrator strives to merge with the reader, to be Everyman at the war. This aim of Herr's can be detected in his extensive use of the second person, along with the past or past subjunctive tense used to create the sense of a repeated action:

> On operations you'd see men clustering around the charmed grunt . . . (57)

Between what contact did to you and how tired you got, between the farout things you saw or heard and what you personally lost out of all that got blown away, the war made a place for you that was all yours. (64)
Sometimes you'd step from the bunker, all sense of time passing having left you, and find it dark out. The far side of the hills around the bowl of the base was glimmering, but you could never see the source of the light, and it had the look of a city at night approached from a great distance. (131)

They didn't always know what to think about you or what to say to you, they'd sometimes call you "Sir" until you had to beg them to stop, they'd sense the insanity of your position as terrified volunteer-reporter and it would seize them with the giggles and even respect. (206)

The part of the book in which the narrator-protagonist is drawn most clearly in his individual configurations is the chapter "Colleagues," about some of Herr's fellow correspondents, notably Sean Flynn, Dana Stone, and Tim Page. They were members of a certain clique within the huge and diverse press corps: "There was no way of thinking about 'who we were' because we were all so different, but where we were alike we were really alike" (224). The most intriguing thing they share is a love-hate relationship with the war:

... Flynn's playing was done only on the most earnest level. He wasn't much different from the rest; he was deeply fascinated by war, by this war, but he admitted it, knew where he stood in it, and he behaved as though it was nothing to be ashamed of. It gave him a vision of Vietnam that was profound, black and definitive, a knowledge of its wildness that very few of his detractors would have understood. (195)

We were serious enough about what we were doing over there, but we were also enchanted by it (not even the most uncomplicated farmboy pfc can go through a war without finding some use for it) ... (225)

Friendships were made directly, with none of the clutter that had once seemed so necessary, and once they were made they outvalued all but your oldest, most special friendships. (225)
"I mean, you know that, it just can't be done!" We both shrugged and laughed, and Page looked very thoughtful for a moment. "The very idea!" he said. "Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody glamour out of bloody war!" (249)

The rush is addicting—those good bad times won't leave you alone. But even in "Colleagues," where "Herr" interacts with his friends and reflects on his strange position as witness to a war, he does not single himself out: "I don't want to make anything out of this and I certainly don't want sympathy... as those things go I paid little enough, almost nothing" (244). We are not told exactly what he paid; too many personal details would distract us from the other people, who are the real heroes of Dispatches. Most of the time "Herr" is just one of "us," the one who happens to have brought back these stories and recorded them honestly in brilliant language: "A few extreme cases felt that the experience there had been a glorious one, while most of us felt that it had been merely wonderful. I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods" (244).

Herr refers several times to war movies and westerns, the images of battle that most Americans carry around in their heads. These stylized patterns bear almost no relation to what is really going on: "'This ain't the fucking movies over here, you know'" (22). Nevertheless, every powerful script, "from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy" (20), has some reality, and it takes time for one script to replace another. Herr does not just want to make the obvious point that real war is different from the movies. Rather, he is admitting that all narrative is selective, even stylized,
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like memory itself. Dispatches is a thoroughly re-worked account of the Vietnam War, months of Herr's experiences squeezed for their vital word-juices and refined to a bittersweet essence. Herr is doing his own job of stylization on the war. The most real place in the book is the made-up "LZ Loon." Part of the reason why we are told so much about the other correspondents is because they are central to Herr's particular version of Vietnam in the Sixties: "Because who but a correspondent could talk the kind of mythical war you wanted to hear described?" (225).

This "mythical war" is what Herr gives us, in language more appropriate to myth than to standard journalism. His style is flashy, intense, an attempt to reproduce the best of what he heard in a flood like the monologue of a speed freak:

. . . an infatuation like that with violence wouldn't go unrequited for very long, it would come and put its wild mouth all over you. "Quakin' and Shakin'," they called it, great balls of fire, Contact. Then it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plow it with your whole body, get as close to it as you can without being in it yet or of it, guess who's flying around about an inch above your head? Pucker and submit, it's the ground. (63)

Herr uses the second person to make such scenes vivid, but it is his choice of first-person narration in general that allows him to go beyond whatever he might get from his sources, and re-cast his experiences in the most poetic language he can achieve. The goal is not elucidation of character or precise recording of historic events, but rather the vivid and aesthetically pleasing rendition of intense moments. Dispatches is a kind of prose lyric, with the added element
of factual status. The book excerpts well, as it were, because it is full of beautiful "lines," linguistically satisfying renditions of "one-pointed and resonant" stories. Herr's undifferentiated first-person narrator renders powerful experiences in a vivid, eloquent language, without diverting attention from the experience or the language to the speaker himself.

Dispatches is a very odd sort of narrative, a memoir structured by association rather than chronology or character development, and told in a prose that is as beautiful as Herr can make it within the framework of Vietnam's "native" language. The narrator has a mission, which he must accomplish for his own health and our information: he has to tell what he has seen, what he remembers. His story is explicitly personal—it is not a history—but not about himself. The truth of Dispatches is the truth of memory, warranted not by verifiability, but by vividness. You may be as responsible for what you read as for what you do:

It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war. (3)

And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there. (260)

*       *       *

*       *       *
If there is one lesson to be learned from the preceding analyses, it is that authors of nonfiction are far from determined in their choices of point of view. Hershey got his main story at second hand, so it is natural that he tell it from the third person. But much of Herr's book consists of second-hand accounts, which he chose to record as they came to a narrator-character. Hershey might just as well have chosen to write a different kind of book, including his reactions to the ruins of Hiroshima and encounters with survivors. The result would have been a very different book from *Hiroshima*, but such a book could theoretically have been written out of the same historical materials that Hershey employs. Similarly with *The Armies of the Night*—Mailer was not determined in his choice of a dual narrative, telling first the narrator's own story and then the story of the march as a whole. He could have written a very different book by making it entirely first person or entirely third person. In fact, the choice of "person" is only one variable. "Mailer" and "Herr" have very little in common as literary constructions. Imagine a poetic account of the march on the Pentagon, told by an assertive but undifferentiated narrator, or "Mailer's" version of Khe Sanh. Both "Herr" and "Mailer" are useful tools, comic heroes of a sort, but very different in conception and in their structural roles.

Serving as a warrant for controversial events is only one possible function of an author-character in a documentary narrative. All four of the authors discussed in this chapter want to be considered knowledgeable, sympathetic, and insightful, but they did not all choose to introduce themselves and make specific cases for their sterling
qualities as reporters. Hershey felt that there was no need for him to enter his story anywhere except as a very limited narrator/journalist, passing on the "message," to use Edward J. Epstein's term, of his characters without taking a very active role in the interpretation of that message. Hiroshima succeeds because Hershey makes us believe that this kind of restraint is appropriate to his story. Wambaugh chooses to construct The Onion Field with considerably more dramatic license, employing his research and his convictions about certain moral issues in manipulating the reader's emotions and beliefs. He decided to introduce himself in his narrative in a limited role, in order to establish some authority as implied author and make it easier for the reader to accept his conclusions about his characters. Mailer decided that the meaning of the 1967 march on the Pentagon could best be communicated by getting the reader interested in a particular participant, demonstrating how that participant was affected, and then using his idiosyncratic perspective to address the question of the march's significance to a wider population. The Armies of the Night is a very personal book, but the person it is about, "Mailer," is a creation of the author that is used to explore the meaning of certain events. Dispatches is even more private in a sense, in that it is about one person's war experiences rather than an entire historic event; but it is also less personal in another sense, because "Herr" is much less of a focus for the reader's interest than "Mailer." The meaning of the events Herr records lies in the power with which they can be rendered into eloquent language, while still communicating the "feel" of a particular place and time.
All four authors want their stories to be believed, but the particular kind of belief (or factual adequacy) varies, and so does the kind of narration. Mailer's narrator is often obnoxious, but always imaginative and honest. Wambaugh's is ironical, compassionate, and fired up about certain issues. Hershey's is fair, reasonable, and sympathetic. Herr's is burnt out, a little guilt-ridden by his fascination with war, and full of contempt for euphemism. There is no one rhetorical stance or set of features in the narrator that is especially suited for telling a true story. Different characteristics are central in each of our texts because the four narrators serve different functions. Point of view is as flexible an element of literary nonfiction as style or the choice of details. If the author has succeeded, we will conclude that we know everything we need to know about the author and his relationship to his characters. This does not mean that we will not be curious and want to know more, just as we are sometimes curious about the future course of fictional characters' lives, wishing there was a sequel to a good novel. In the case of nonfiction we may indeed find out more, by reading that Gregory Powell is coming up for parole, or that Nicole Baker is a happily married fundamentalist Christian. But if the author has found a successful form for his materials, the reader will feel that she knows enough, and that the narrator has taken the proper role in his story, as reporter and/or participant.

The particular status of the nonfiction narrator, and the nature of literary nonfiction in general, might be clarified by a brief look at Barbara Herrnstein Smith's theoretical distinction between "natural"
and "fictive" utterances. "Natural discourse" consists of "the verbal acts of real persons on particular occasions in response to particular sets of circumstances," and "fictive discourse" includes imitations of various kinds of "natural discourse." This model enables Smith to talk about the traditional notion of mimesis in a different way: "we may conceive of an artwork not as the imitation, in some different 'matter,' of the 'form' of particular objects or events already existing in nature, but as the creation of a fictive member of a certain class of natural objects or events." It follows from this that "interpretation" of a fictive text consists of "the construing of a particular set of conditions, a context, that could plausibly occasion an utterance of that form . . ." In contrast, "A natural utterance cannot be exclusively identified or described independent of its context, nor can its meaning be understood independent of that context."

According to Smith's distinction, the texts we have been examining are all "natural discourses." In each case we have a real person on a particular occasion responding to particular circumstances, giving us, in the narrative instances with which we are concerned, a version of those circumstances. I have already agreed with Smith that the meaning of a work of literary nonfiction cannot be divorced from its context, but I have also maintained that it is not specifically limited to that context. Real events do not come equipped with meaning; any account of or statement about real events must construct and assert a meaning. When a work is after a complex meaning, the author will likely have built into it "a particular set of conditions, a context," that uses
narrative techniques to guide the reader. Literary nonfiction benefits from "interpretation" just as fiction does. And one of the most important tasks for the critic of literary nonfiction is to examine the role of the author vis-a-vis his story, a role that will always be crucial partly because his work is a "natural" utterance. The author of documentary narrative is always a real person with some real relationship to his characters, but it is also always necessary for him to choose what he will show us of that relationship, and demonstrate why and how it is important. Literary nonfiction is born out of the circumstances of its origin into the wide world, and carries enough of its context along with it to survive, just as we select bits and pieces of our past to take with us in maintaining a personal style. The imagination and narrative skill that go into literary nonfiction may be our best effort to understand who we are and to shape what we will be.
Notes


2 This is Norman Mailer's list, from *The Armies of the Night* (N.Y.: New American Library, 1968), p. 284.


whole method is rooted in dominance rather than diffidence . . . " (p. 66), whereas Zavarzadeh describes Hershey as "a scribe, not an interpreter," who presents events without "aesthetic reordering or symbolic interpretation of the observed" (The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 95, 100). Both critics are partially right. Hershey carefully and cautiously organizes his materials so as to create the impression that he has tampered with them as little as possible. The apparent contradiction between Weber's and Zavarzadeh's readings is mainly due to different critical approaches, but it is nevertheless an indication of the need for more critical dialogue about nonfiction narrative. I think that Hiroshima, and indeed all literary nonfiction, lies somewhere in the middle ground between "absolute control" and "a noninterpretive narrative registering life without imposing an ordering design" (Zavarzadeh, p. 61).

6 "The Legend on the License," Yale Review, 20, pp. 1-25. For a response to this article, see Chapter Three above.

7 In fact, on the few occasions when Hershey's narrator does make an explicit comment, it falls flat. Such passages as the final sentence of "A Noiseless Flash"—"There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books"—strike me as being among the worst in the book.

Wambaugh uses Smith's diary against him, in a kind of indirect expose quotation. This is exactly the opposite of what Capote does in quoting Perry Smith, or Mailer in using Gilmore's letters "to show him at a level higher than his average" (The Executioner's Song (N.Y.: Warner, 1979), p. 1021)—further evidence of the freedom of the author in shaping history.

The Onion Field is dedicated to the Campbell and Hettinger children, an unmistakable sign of Wambaugh's loyalties. But the book may in the end have been too loving and respectful of its heroes. The killers emerge more vividly and realistically, while the portrait of Hettinger in particular often verges on sentimentality.

Mailer, The Armies of the Night, p. 47. Further references are in parentheses in the text.

John Hollowell, Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 92. One problem with Hollowell's reading of The Armies of the Night is that his thematic approach ends up treating the book as just "like so much of the new journalism," and many of the book's strengths are lost in the neat summary of themes. Mailer's writing is particularly vulnerable to thematic approaches—critics' favorites include sex, violence, dialectics, Manicheanism, and the dangers of technology—because he is interested in ideas. But that interest does not always lead to narratives structured in support of particular ideas, as so many critics assume.

Actually, he later served out the last few days of his sentence, after losing an appeal.

15 Mailer does acknowledge in the case of his description of the U. S. Marshals that "it was a great deal to read on the evidence before him" (174), and elsewhere he adds similar qualifications. I do not mean to suggest that he is imperious, just that he is definitely not safe. An interesting test of the peculiar appeal (?) of Mailer is to ask people how they feel about his writing, and notice how often the negative responses come back as attacks on Mailer personally, or are based on an emotional repugnance rather than an aesthetic criticism. In my experience this test works even with well-trained formalists.


19 Hellmann, p. 134.

20 Hellmann, p. 128.

21 Hellmann, p. 132.


Smith, p. 27.

Smith, p. 20.

Smith, p. 21. One important problem with Smith's model is that it ignores the historical development of artistic narrative, and fiction in particular, as a separate class of discourse with its own conventions and contexts. The connections between a novel and the kind of biographical or historical "natural" utterance it "imitates" may not be important enough to work out.
V. THE USES OF HISTORY, THE MARGINS OF ART

If I have followed an actual case, are these, then, actual persons? Here I would avoid the modern novelist's conventional disclaimer, which no one fully believes in any case. I follow known events. Some scenes are, however, total interpolations, and some of my personages have no correspondence to persons in the case in question. This will be recognized as the method of the historical novel.

—Meyer Levin, Compulsion

I am thus led to the proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative.

But it is a novelist's proposition, I can see that very well. It is in my interest to claim that there is no difference between what I do and what everyone else does. I claim as I pull everyone else over to my side of the mirror that there is nothing between the given universe and our attempt to mediate it, there is no real power, only some hope that we might deny our own contingency.

—E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents"

Is factual status really such a clear-cut thing? Do authors always decide to write either fiction or nonfiction, and then ask us to take it as the appropriate kind of narrative? Even if I have made a convincing case that the twelve texts examined so far in this study are nonfiction, strive for factual adequacy, and need to be judged by standards different from those applicable to fiction, that is not proof that all texts fall neatly on one side or the other of the fact/fiction border, or that various "mixed intentions," as it were, could not result in a hybrid text. If there is in fact a boundary of some sort
between fact and fiction, in contrast to the neat binary model which I have adopted from John Searle, then a logical place to look for it is among works of historical fiction. I want to talk briefly about four historical novels—Ragtime, Compulsion, The Public Burning, and The Confessions of Nat Turner—in order to define further some of the strengths and limitations of my approach to literary nonfiction. At the end of this chapter I will turn to another boundary of sorts, that between the literary and the non-literary, in order to make a few assertions about nonfiction and the canon.

* * *

E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime weaves together the lives of three fictional families and various historical personages, including Harry Houdini, Commander Peary, Emma Goldman, Evelyn Nesbit, John J. McGraw, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Sigmund Freud, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, and Pancho Villa. Although he includes a wealth of accurate historical details, Doctorow does not hesitate to involve his real characters in made-up scenes. Besides the creation of engaging characters and a dramatically satisfying story, Doctorow's aims include the reconstruction of a historical period and an indirect criticism of how we select details from the past to construct collective versions of history. As Barbara Foley puts it, Doctorow "is utilizing the reader's encyclopedic knowledge that a historical Freud, Jung, Goldman, and Nesbit did in fact exist in order to pose an open challenge to the
reader's pre-conceived notions about what historical 'truth' actually is.¹ Doctorow's serious thematic intentions are achieved primarily through two methods. One is his use of a highly ironic narrator who selects historical details for what they tell us about the early years of the century and the ways in which we have edited our social memory:

In the paper was the news of Teddy Roosevelt's African safari. The great conservationist had bagged seventeen lions, eleven elephants, twenty-one rhinos, eight hippos, nine giraffes, forty-seven gazelles, twenty-nine zebras, and kudu, wildebeest, impala, eland, waterbuck, wart hog and bushbuck beyond number.²

The other way Doctorow teaches us about history is by having fictional characters and events exemplify aspects of the period. Father joins Peary in the "race to the pole"; Little Brother falls in love and has an affair with the surprisingly "liberated" Evelyn Nesbit; and Tateh participates in a textile strike supported by Big Bill Haywood. Such events not only form part of the plot of the novel and of the reader's image of each fictional character, but also teach the reader something about the times, and support Doctorow's assertions about our ignorance of what really happened "back then."

If we read Ragtime as a novel that wants to make certain specific truth-claims about our past, how is that different from reading nonfiction? Obviously, Doctorow has taken all sorts of liberties that we associate with fiction. But I have already argued that such liberties, including even the invention of characters, do not determine that a text must be fiction. What is the difference between The Right Stuff, with its mixture of historical facts and inventions like "the Hardesty Cracker," and Ragtime, with its mixture of historical details
and the lives of three representative families? According to my model, that difference cannot be merely quantitative—one has a preponderance of facts, the other of fictions—but rather must lie in the author's intentions and the reader's responses to those intentions. Moreover, our perception of intention cannot be based merely on the label attached to the book—I have already argued that *The Executioner's Song* is a work of nonfiction, despite its Library of Congress designation as fiction. So how do we know to read *Ragtime* as fiction, and what is actually involved in that decision?

I am not particularly interested in how a reader first decides that what she is reading is fiction or nonfiction, the effect of labels and contextual clues in shaping early expectations, etc. Rather, I wonder about how she decides to take the book finally, with a view to critical analysis. What sorts of questions are appropriate to ask of *Ragtime*? Does it assert a kind of factual adequacy, a set of standards by which to judge its truth as a version of our past? If so, I cannot distinguish those standards from the rules of fiction. I do not see that Doctorow has imposed on himself any limitations in his use of history. He selects from the past in order to construct a vivid story that will also make certain assertions about the world, and some of those assertions have to do with what happened in our past. But his method is that of fiction. He wants us to wonder about which of his scenes are invented and which accurately recorded, but the wondering, not the finding out, is his end. Again, to quote Foley, "Doctorow treats with equal aplomb facts that are 'true' and those that are 'created,' thus calling into question our concept of factuality and,
indeed, of history itself."³ But this questioning is done through the method of indirect thematic assertion in a mimetic fiction, rather than through the construction of a genuine alternative history. As Doctorow admits in his essay "False Documents," it is in his interest as a novelist to deny the fact/fiction distinction, because any doubt he throws on our ability to sort out the two increases the relative status of fiction as a method of self-understanding.⁴ But he does not offer Ragtime as a history, nor indicate that we are to judge it by any standard of factual adequacy; and I doubt that many readers have been tempted to read it as nonfiction.

Ragtime is a useful example for talking about factual status because even though the reader does not have to think about the factual adequacy of every scene, she does have to think about history. Doctorow's intelligent critique of certain events and attitudes in America's past makes his novel relevant to a discussion of how we construct meaningful patterns from available records. As a historical novelist, he uses facts in his attempt to construct a satisfying story. But this is finally different, it seems to me, from finding patterns in the available facts. This is a subtle distinction, between use of and service to the facts, and no doubt dangerous. I would hesitate to say that all nonfiction narratives serve "the facts" better than Ragtime does. But I would claim that Ragtime is not an attempt to find universal meanings in the specific events of our past, which is to say, it is not literary nonfiction.

I have come uncomfortably close, in the preceding discussion, to falling back on the argument that we do not read Ragtime as nonfiction,
therefore it is fiction. This is not totally spurious, but neither is it particularly helpful. Perhaps Doctorow's novel is simply a poor example, so clearly a work of fiction that it is not really on the hypothetical boundary with nonfiction. I want to turn to three other works which I think are fundamentally different from *Ragtime*, more problematic (for different reasons) and therefore potentially more challenging. I want to begin by arguing that Meyer Levin's *Compulsion*, a self-proclaimed "historical novel," is actually better understood and more usefully analyzed as a work of literary nonfiction.

*Compulsion* is a thirty-years-after account of the Leopold-Loeb case, with the names of key figures and certain other details changed, and Levin's Freudian theories about motivation used in the imaginative re-creation of unrecorded scenes. As he says in his Foreword, "This will be recognized as the method of the historical novel." Levin was actually involved in the case, a classmate of the murderers, and a cub reporter for a Chicago paper, just like Sid in *Compulsion*. The framework of motivations that Levin offers for the actions of Artie Strauss and Judd Steiner is presented partly through his representation of their thoughts during private scenes between them, and partly through explicit speculation by Sid, who is the first-person narrator of most of the book. Judd is unquestionably the protagonist of *Compulsion*, and it is the occasion of his coming up for parole that prompts the narrator to reconstruct the events of his crime. Sid is very sympathetic to Judd, and in fact we are given many clues to suggest that the scenes described from Judd's point of view are
actually imaginative reconstructions by Sid based on his knowledge of Judd. The reader gets a sense of being on the inside, of following the thoughts and actions of the murderers, but at the same time of another presence, the narrator's, choosing which scenes will be attempted and just how far into Judd's mind the re-creation will reach.

Part One, "The Crime of Our Century," begins in the middle of the story, and by flashback and forward progression covers the history of the murderers' friendship, their planning and execution of the crime, and events prior to their confessions. Part Two, "The Trial of the Century," consists mostly of courtroom scenes and Sid's discussions with other characters in his attempt to understand the dynamics of the murder. Insofar as *Compulsion* records a true story, the second part is more fully verifiable than the first, which contains a fair amount of educated guessing and dramatic reconstruction on Levin's part. If the book is read as a novel, the caution which dominates Sid's approach to the murderers is rather frustrating. Why tell the story partly through their eyes, even dipping into their heads, and yet force us to piece together their real feelings and desires at the key moments? Near the end of the book Sid recounts one of his own wartime experiences, in which he came close to committing rape and murder, and also a conversation with Willie Weiss, a psychologist who offers his own coherent theory for the actions of Judd and Artie. Sid's tone is always sympathetic, his inclinations away from judgment and toward mercy. But he is driven to try to understand, and he sees the crime as a test for the larger question of free will versus behaviorist determinism. Sid's reservations make a great deal of sense if Levin is
telling a true story; if the book is fictional, however, I am not interested in what such reservations tell me about Sid as a character, nor do I understand how they contribute to the book's intended effects. Simply put, Compulsion works much better as a true story than as a novel. The limitations Levin puts on his "information" and its use serve as a fair standard of factual adequacy, and the narrator's stance toward this "motiveless" crime, which "was the first to show us how the victim can be chosen at random," is much more satisfying if he is trying to make sense of real events rather than constructing events with a free hand.

What does this mean in terms of my model? Am I guilty of reasoning backward in some way from factual adequacy to factual status, or, worse, artistic weakness to factual status? Perhaps, but I do not think so. My perception of Levin's intention is that he meant to reconstruct a set of real events with both accuracy and dramatic power, and determined that his best chance to do so was by way of changed names, some made-up characters, and an attempt to get inside the heads of the murderers, within the general limitations of what he knew of their personalities and actions. I am interested in discovering exactly when Levin is telling "the truth." Perhaps if he had written Compulsion in the Sixties instead of the Fifties, he would have cut even closer to the precise truth, found a form which could incorporate greater accuracy. Distance in time increases legal immunity, and the achievements of one author (such as Capote) license the efforts of those who follow. I do not think Levin gains anything from having his book labeled as fiction, except a kind of protection from various objections. By claiming only that his version of events is "poetically
valid" rather than "literally correct," he is potentially surrendering the effects available to the author of nonfiction. But for some readers, including myself, that surrender never actually takes place. I evaluate the book as nonfiction, and Levin's factual changes as what I think he meant them to be—convenient shortcuts for getting at the truth of certain real events.

If Levin's book is treated as nonfiction (as I believe he wants it read, and cannot help reading it myself), its literary status will largely depend on how well his analyses of the murderers' psyches stand up. As a detailed account of a famous crime Compulsion will always be absorbing, but for it to have enduring literary merit we must be convinced that Levin has adequately reconstructed the actions and emotions of his characters. It is not just a matter of consistency, but of genuine correspondence. If a historian succeeded in discovering that Levin had changed key events in his characters' lives, or seriously misrepresented their personalities (as Capote does Perry Smith's), the effect would be to lessen seriously the power of Compulsion for me. I cannot imagine a corresponding discovery in the case of Ragtime—in fact, I might feel that I preferred Doctorow's Goldman and Nesbit to history's. Such a distinction would finally be based on my sense that Levin is trying to find a meaningful pattern in the events of the past, while Doctorow is creating interesting meanings by the use of certain past events. Levin's strong and specific truth-claims entail certain risks and earn certain rewards unlike any ventured by Doctorow's novel.
The experience of reading *Compulsion* led me to the conclusion that Levin was really writing nonfiction, despite the book's label. This is not a case of reasoning backward from the text's factual adequacy to its factual status, but rather of determining factual status by looking at the text as well as the context. If I did not know that Levin was associated with Leopold and Loeb very much as Sid is with Steiner and Straus in *Compulsion*, I might not have decided that the book was a true story. On the other hand, contextual information was not enough. I was forced to examine the text itself in order to determine Levin's illocutionary intentions. This is analogous to deciding from the details of an anecdote whether it is going to be a joke or a true story, in a situation when either might be appropriate. Having made that determination, I would not ask why Levin had his murderers choose a particular child, or leave his body in a particular place (key details in unraveling motivation); however, I would ask questions like whether the scenes between Judd and Rose actually took place as Levin describes them, and if not, how he changed them.

Once again, perhaps the example was too easy, and Levin was so obviously forced to mis-label his true story that no one has any doubt about his real intentions. Perhaps we are drawing closer to some gray area between fact and fiction, but have not yet actually entered it. Both of my two remaining examples are about specific historical events (the Rosenberg execution and the Turner Rebellion); both authors take care to transmit historical details, but also take liberties with the facts. My critical approach would be challenged by a text that was neither fiction nor nonfiction, either because the author had some
alternative intention, or because readers did not find the dichotomy applicable or useful.

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* is a satirical re-telling of the Rosenberg trial and execution. All of the characters are real people, except Uncle Sam, who is a cross between Captain Marvel and Pecos Bill. Coover's story is heavily laden (some have said burdened) with historical details, but it also contains all sorts of exaggerations and inventions. The actual execution takes place in Times Square, in the middle of a combined circus, variety show, and political rally. Half of the chapters are narrated in the third person and recount events taking place across the country and the world in connection with America's battle against the Phantom (communism). The other half of the book is narrated by Vice-President Richard Nixon, a pitiful, wrong-headed, but not wholly unsympathetic clown, struggling to do the right thing and put himself in the White House. Portions of *The Public Burning* are in the form of poems, songs, and stage scenes, sometimes original, sometimes the re-casting of actual quotations. Although it is far from an accurate account of the Rosenbergs' execution, *The Public Burning* is a truthful version of both specific events (like the progress of the Korean War and the Supreme Court's decisions) and more general American attitudes of the time. Is this witty black comedy a species of nonfiction, kin to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*?

My reactions to the book are fascination with the historical details and amusement at the wonderfully exuberant language:
But Justice Hugo Black, dissenting from the 6-2 majority opinion and doubting the Court even had the right to vacate the stay of a fellow Justice in the first place ("...so far as I can tell, the Court's action here is unprecedented..."), argues crabily that "it is not amiss to point out that this Court has never affirmed the fairness of the trial!" ... Justice William Douglas, facing possible impeachment, insists bluntly that "the cold truth is that the death sentence may not be imposed for what the Rosenbergs did unless the jury so recommends," but before he's even had a chance to get it all out, Manny Bloch is on his feet, asking for more time to rewrite the clemency appeal, arguing that the doubts of three Justices (Frankfurter has snuck out unnoticed for the time being) is "a matter which is appropriate for consideration on a petition of mercy."

Yippee! I'm wild and wooly and fulla fleas, ain't never been curried below the knees, so if you wish to avoid foreign collision you had better abandon the ocean, women and children first! For we hold these truths to be self-evident: that God helps them what helps themselves, it's a mere matter of marchin'; that idleness is emptiness and he who lives on hope will die with his foot in his mouth; that no nation was ever ruind by trade; and that nothin' is sartin but death, taxes, God's glown' Covenant, enlightened self-interest, certain unalienated rights, and woods, woods, woods, as far as the world extends!"

For a reader like me, to whom the Rosenberg case is almost as distant as the era of ragtime, the details Coover provides are provocative. I feel that I am recovering an important part of American history. Of course, this is history biased in favor of the Rosenbergs and dressed with the fantastic trappings of an elaborate satire, but history nevertheless. The question is, does Coover merely use history as Doctorow does, or serve it as Levin does?

There is much more invention in The Public Burning than in any nonfiction text we have looked at. The characters of Richard Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg, as well as the entirely fictional Uncle Sam, are not supposed to be realistic depictions, but rather the conveniently flat
characters of satire. Their behavior is slapstick, pathetic, or noble depending on Coover's thematic needs at the moment, rather than on the demands of consistent mimetic characterization. None of the nonfiction texts we have examined is as thematically organized, as clearly a satire rather than an action, to use Sheldon Sacks' terms. Satires have frequently been problematic for critics; the classic example is Gulliver's Travels, which has been read alternately as satire, romance, and even novel. There is a vaguely defined sense in which satires are already closer to nonfiction than are actions. According to the model I have been using, however, nonfiction texts may be more or less thematically structured, more or less concerned with capturing the details of character and action, more or less interested in stylistic brilliance and aesthetic form, etc. In other words, one could almost speak of a "nonfiction satire," with the stipulation that the author has selected historical details to support his attack, rather than inventing characters, story, and fictional setting. I have no doubt that The Public Burning is a satire, but I am not sure that settles the question of whether it is fiction, nonfiction, or something in between.

Once again, the test seems to be, what kinds of questions are appropriate to ask of this book? Should one inquire into competing accounts and the adequacy of Coover's version of the trial and execution? One cannot ask whether Coover has done justice to Nixon, the Rosenbergs, Justice Douglas, et al., because it is clear that such was not his intention. But has he done justice to the events of that time, the patterns of American culture that he was trying to capture?
One way to pose the issue is to ask whether Coover has presented the meaning of certain historic events, or just adapted a particular historic event to depict certain general truths about American life? My sense is that the latter is more correct, and that Coover's method is finally fictional. He feels free to make up or change details as he sees fit, in order to bring out those fears and weaknesses that got the Rosenbergs killed. He wants his book judged, not as a history, but as a novel that makes interesting claims upon the reader's sensibilities. The Public Burning sits very near to the line between fiction and nonfiction, and I can easily imagine a counter-argument in favor of reading the book as a particularly liberal kind of nonfiction. But I would not inquire into the book's factual adequacy, and the only factual revelations that might damage the book for me have already been ruled out of my world-view, as competing accounts support Coover's version in all its key assertions. If it is fiction, it is a very rare and interesting specimen, designed to satisfy readers who are interested in information about a specific historical event.

William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner is a history of "the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American negro slavery."12 Narrated entirely in the first person by Styron's "Turner," the book begins with the rebel in his cell awaiting execution, and through recollection and the device of "confessing" to an appointed recorder, he ends up telling his life story. Styron is obviously far removed in time and sensibility from his protagonist, and the available details are scant, so he has chosen to take great liberties in the depiction of Turner. Chief among these is the
psychological reconstruction of an elaborate web of motivations and fears. The Confessions of Nat Turner is not a standard biography, but is it fiction?

In his Author's Note Styron explains the line he is walking between fact and extrapolation:

During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery. . . . Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history.13

This declaration of intentions might serve as evidence that Stryon is writing a kind of nonfiction, a vivid attempt to "re-create a man and his era" by extensive backing and filling in the enormous gaps left by the historical record. That is, The Confessions of Nat Turner might be a nonfiction narrative whose factual adequacy has very little to do with accuracy about specific events, and a great deal to do with accuracy about details of slavery at that time and how a particular human consciousness might respond to bondage. But how is this different from the "'historical novel' in conventional terms"? It sounds to me as though Styron wants something more, some kind of factual status which will add power to his "meditation on history," and which he can perhaps achieve by convincing us that he is telling a true
story, not merely making one up around a convenient historical situation (as Shakespeare did in many history plays, say).

I believe that there is an enormous difference between Styron's project and those of Levin and Mailer (in *The Executioner's Song*). All three authors admit to altering "the facts" in order to tell their stories, but they also claim to be getting at the truth of a particular situation and particular minds and hearts. However, Levin and Mailer had a great deal more information to work with than did Styron. In fact, the disparity is so great as to suggest that different sorts of narratives resulted. Styron did not have enough details to build a nonfiction narrative; instead, he made an imaginative leap in the direction of a particular historical "man and his era," a leap triggered by certain compelling facts from the past that Styron preserved in his novel. Whereas Mailer's and Levin's books are labeled fiction for strategical reasons, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is, like *The Public Burning* and *Ragtime*, genuinely a novel. The notions of factual adequacy and competing accounts are not particularly relevant in trying to understand Styron's book, mainly because he did not begin with enough information to make such terms meaningful.

But the question is not settled as easily as that. What makes this text an interesting example for talking about the border between fiction and nonfiction is that it has received a strong negative response based on its claims to a kind of factual status. It turns out that, as sparse as the "known facts" about Turner are, Styron has managed to "depart from" them at several key places. For instance, the real Turner was married, but separated from his wife, who worked on a
different farm. Styron's "Turner" has never been married, is in fact almost entirely celibate, and feeds his sexual imagination upon the faces and forms of white women exclusively. Most of the other changes Styron wrought in his material—such as altering the structure of Nat's family by getting rid of his father and grandmother and deleting his earlier escape attempt—are fairly minor. But Styron also took bits and pieces of historical fact and used them to construct motivations and behaviors which are in fundamental conflict with available historical knowledge. In a volume of essays analyzing Styron's use of history, ten black writers conclude that he preserved racist stereotypes and "re-created" a version of history that has been thoroughly discredited: "If this is Styron's (and white America's) 'meditation on history,' let the record show that this is meditation mired in misinterpretation, and that this is history that many of us black people reject."14

If Styron was just writing a novel, what does it matter whether he fudged on the facts? I do not think the issue is simply that his historical inaccuracies contributed to the book's racism. There is something else involved, something to do with our relationship to history and certain responsibilities toward the past:

We are not quibbling here over footnotes in scholarly journals. We are objecting to something more insidious, more dangerous. We are objecting to a deliberate attempt to steal the meaning of a man's life. And that attempt must be condemned in the name of a man whose name has been illicitly appropriated for a dubious literary adventure.15

In taking seriously Styron's claim that he is trying to understand through imaginative re-creation a particular person and a particular
set of events, Hamilton, Bennet, et al., may be performing as the ideal readers of The Confessions of Nat Turner. But they have available a competing account, not only of specific events, but of a whole range of Black experience, and the result is that Styron's book fails utterly as a kind of nonfiction.

How should the book be evaluated? As fiction, context-free and at play in the fields of history? Or as nonfiction of an unusual but potentially powerful kind, with claims to factual status and the accompanying need to assert some sort of factual adequacy? Is it possible for some people to read The Confessions of Nat Turner as fiction and others to read it as nonfiction? If not, who is making inappropriate comments: the Black writers in Clarke's book, or "the white literary establishment" which has "hailed" Styron's book as an important "cultural and social document"? This seems to me to be a crucial issue, because this study is based upon the assumption that every narrative must be read as either fiction or nonfiction, depending on its author's illocutionary intention. The first step in settling this question ought to be to decide what Styron's intentions are. Does he want to tell a true story or a made-up one?

I am inclined to give Styron the benefit of the doubt, which in this case means trusting that he meant to write fiction, and offered his book as a "meditation on history" in order to evoke a certain kind of serious response. If I believed that Styron intended his book to be nonfiction, and altered a significant number of the few available historical facts in order to get at the truth of Nat Turner and his rebellion, then I would have to also conclude that Styron was seriously
schizophrenic or else visionary beyond my limited understanding. He used history, as Doctorow and many other novelists have, in order to tell a story of his own conception and create an original character.

At the same time, however, I believe that objections to Styron's historical inaccuracies are far from irrelevant. I think it is important to consider his view of history within the context of reading *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as fiction. "Extrinsic" issues, such as the appropriation of historical figures and a white author's use of a first-person black protagonist, may be vital in evaluating a novel like Styron's. Just as we must weigh the uses of invention in nonfiction, so we must decide whether an author is successful in his use of historical details in fiction. Even if there is a significant theoretical difference between fiction and nonfiction, as I have argued, it does not imply that fiction is somehow entirely made up or entirely context-free. Novelists have responsibilities too. In my opinion both *In Cold Blood* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* have serious flaws connected with the artistic realizations of their protagonists, but those flaws are fundamentally different in kind, related to the basic difference between nonfiction and fiction.

What is the lesson to be learned from looking at historical fiction? From my perspective it is that the binary model of factual versus fictional status is not automatic just because it is simple. There are all sorts of potential purposes, attitudes toward history, uses of fact, and uses of invention, only a few of which have been examined in this study. I am more interested in establishing some common ground and discussing the usefulness of the notion of factual
status, than in asserting that a particular work is factual or fictional. As experiment continues, and authors of narrative find new ways to challenge readers' expectations, no doubt we will have to refine our working definitions of fact, truth, and meaning. At this historical moment, however, I am convinced that we can still talk profitably about fiction and nonfiction, about how authors try to give us our past in meaningful patterns, and about how readers employ various epistemological conventions in determining the value of a documentary narrative.

* * *

Nonfiction narratives inhabit the margins of literature. Even with the massive expansion of the canon that has taken place in the last twenty years or so, literary critics are automatically assumed to have jurisdiction over all fiction, but must make an explicit case for their consideration of nonfiction, as well as for its literary merit. Everyone agrees that some documentary narratives "deserve" to be taught in literature classes, and most acknowledge a wealth of recent nonfiction works that are especially interesting in their uses of narrative technique and factual status. But, as I hope I have demonstrated by my selection of texts for this study, there is an enormous variety of potentially literary nonfiction. Can we identify criteria for evaluation that will enable us to select works that belong in the canon, rather than letting the "test of time" take that responsibility off our hands?
Journalism and history represent the events of the past in order to make them fit into the larger scheme of our collective self-understanding. We are always writing our record, leaving behind us pieces of a kind of super-history, the sum of all possible versions of past space-time events on the planet. When a piece of that history stands alone, as, in Ralph Rader's terms, "a striking but inherently probable manifestation of complete and morally determinate human thought, character, or action, individual or collective," then it becomes a candidate for literary status. There is no one way to ensure such consideration, no best method for bringing real events home to us with a force that we rarely feel in reading history or journalism. We sense that force stirring, we look for its sources, and we find a well-made artifact of words. As we study a work of literary nonfiction, we increasingly understand how the form of the telling created particular effects upon us. We have a tendency to talk about the text as a coherent whole, and as a product of intelligence and sensitivity. Somewhere along the way a consensus forms among interested, empowered readers, and a true story becomes literature. There is a successful interaction, a synergistic relationship between author and reader. They convince each other about the world, as it were. All communication depends on understanding, but literature is a kind of communication in which understanding promotes respect and encourages further understanding.

The particular kinds of understanding are so various that it would be foolish to try to catalogue them. Just to be suggestive I might mention how Oscar Lewis educates us about the effects of poverty, or
Wambaugh about the abuses of our court system; how much fun Wolfe and Thompson have with some of our cherished institutions; how Terkel and Herr help us hear the poetry in common speech; and how Mailer and Hershey make us examine the consequences of being an American. The only test for literary merit is to listen carefully to a text and then talk back to it. If the resulting dialogue is lively, we have grounds for canonization.

This study is not primarily a survey of literary nonfiction nor a collection of interpretations of particular books. Rather, it is an examination of particular issues relevant to the study of literary nonfiction. My approach has been anarchic in, I hope, a healthy way. I began with the aim of questioning certain critical generalizations about the powers and limitations of nonfiction narrative. I had hoped to replace what I considered misguided precepts with my own pithy, closely reasoned, and brilliantly phrased definitions and distinctions. It turns out, unfortunately, that I have not found much more than a couple of terms, factual status and factual adequacy, and a lot of good writing that stubbornly refuses to be arrayed in a convenient taxonomy. Some literary nonfiction is like journalism, some like history, some like one kind of novel or another. Documentary narratives have all sorts of different roots in our shared reality, and raise an amazing variety of fruits out of that soil. The author of nonfiction is no more limited ahead of time in the kind of book he will write than is the novelist. But once he has decided to write a certain kind of nonfiction, an author will have to take into account particular assumptions on the part of the reader, and stick to the epistemological
rules by which he has agreed to play. After that it is up to the reader to figure out exactly what he is trying to tell us about our world, and how significant his message is.

We are long accustomed to talking about the "truths" of fiction, but the quotation marks still remain, in our heads if not always on the page. If Hayden White is correct that we want "to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary," then it is also the case that we want those events to be true in the strictest sense of the word. We want to be able to agree that certain things happened, that they were important, that they carried or created certain meanings which we can share. What a ridiculous dream we are dreaming. Perfect truth is as "imaginary" as perfect coherence or closure. Nevertheless, as long as there is such a thing as human society, there will be a need for the tale of the tribe, a story we can tell about ourselves that takes us out of ourselves. At this historical moment the dominant mode for that tale is literary nonfiction, and it behooves us to pay close attention to those stories that are going around about us. We are liable to find ourselves asking, "Is that a true story?"
Notes

1 Barbara Foley, "From USA to Ragtime: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction," American Literature, 50, p. 95.
3 Foley, p. 97.
6 Levin, p. 35.
7 Levin, p. x.
8 This does not mean that Compulsion is necessarily a better book than Ragtime, just that they need to be evaluated by different standards.
10 At least one critic thinks that "Nixon" "steals the show" as a mimetically interesting character (Richard Anderson, Robert Coover (N.P.: Twayne, 1981), p. 123), but I do not think Coover's characters are meant to be rigorously mimetic. For instance, Coover could have made the reader more sympathetic to the Rosenbergs as victims, but he did not do so because it would have taken attention away from those American qualities embodied in "Nixon" and Uncle Sam, and clashed with
the rest of Coover's fabulist methods. Of course, flat characters are not in themselves evidence of fiction or nonfiction, but they are at least circumstantial evidence of apologue.

11 See Fiction and the Shape of Belief (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1966), especially Chapter One, which contains many excellent reminders for the genre critic.


13 Styron, p. vii.


15 Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Nat's Last White Man," in Clarke, p. 5.

16 Mike Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner," in Clarke, p. 79.


18 I am indebted to Wayne C. Booth for his comments in Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1979) on the role of understanding in the life of a literary critic. Criticism and narrative have to be read and understood in different ways, of course, but a good job of either requires a great deal of understanding.

19 There are, of course, extrinsic reasons why nonfiction texts are made to perform as literature. Political motivations may prompt a
critic to explore a nonfiction text that represents a particular sub-culture or exposes a particular ideology. Authors of fiction or poetry frequently find their nonfiction writing respected as literature by association. But such texts seldom remain in the canon unless they reward the close attention literary status brings to bear on them.

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