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TOM WOLFE

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# THE NEW JOURNALISM

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WITH AN ANTHOLOGY

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## 1. THE FEATURE GAME

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I doubt if many of the aces I will be extolling in this story went into journalism with the faintest notion of creating a “new” journalism, a “higher” journalism, or even a mildly improved variety. I know they never dreamed that anything they were going to write for newspapers or magazines would wreak such evil havoc in the literary world . . . causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century . . . Nevertheless, that is what has happened. Bellow, Barth, Updike—even the best of the lot, Philip Roth—the novelists are all out there right now ransacking the literary histories and sweating it out, wondering where they stand. Damn it all, Saul, the *Huns* have arrived . . .

God knows I didn’t have anything new in mind, much less anything literary, when I took my first newspaper job. I had a fierce and unnatural craving for something else entirely. Chicago, 1928, that was the general idea . . . Drunken reporters out on the ledge of the *News* peeing into the Chicago River at dawn . . . Nights down at the saloon listening to “Back of the Yards” being sung by a baritone who was only a lonely blind bulldyke with lumps of milk glass for eyes . . . Nights down at the detective bureau—it was always nighttime in my daydreams of the newspaper life. Reporters didn’t work during the day. I wanted the whole movie, nothing left out. . . .

I was aware of what had reduced me to this Student Prince Maudlin state of mind. All the same, I couldn’t help it. I had just spent five years in graduate school, a statement that may mean nothing to people who never served such a stretch; it is the explanation, nonetheless. I’m not sure I can give you the remotest idea of what graduate school is like. Nobody ever has. Millions of Americans now go to graduate schools, but just say the phrase—“graduate school”—and what picture leaps into the brain? No picture, not even a blur. Half the people I knew in graduate school were going to write a novel about it. I thought about it myself. No one ever wrote such a book, as far as I know. Everyone used to sniff the air. How morbid! How poisonous! Nothing else like it in the world! But the subject always defeated them. It defied literary exploitation. Such a novel would be a study of frustration, but a form of

frustration so exquisite, so ineffable, nobody could describe it. Try to imagine the worst part of the worst Antonioni movie you ever saw, or reading *Mr. Sammler's Planet* at one sitting, or just reading it, or being locked inside a Seaboard Railroad roomette, sixteen miles from Gainesville, Florida, heading north on the Miami-to-New York run, with no water and the radiator turning red in an amok psychotic overboil, and George McGovern sitting beside you telling you his philosophy of government. That will give you the general atmosphere.

In any case, by the time I received my doctorate in American studies in 1957 I was in the twisted grip of a disease of our times in which the sufferer experiences an overwhelming urge to join the "real world." So I started working for newspapers. In 1962, after a cup of coffee here and there, I arrived at the *New York Herald Tribune* . . . This must be the place! . . . I looked out across the city room of the *Herald Tribune*, 100 moldering yards south of Times Square, with a feeling of amazed bohemian bliss . . . Either this is the real world, Tom, or there is no real world . . . The place looked like the receiving bin at the Good Will . . . a promiscuous heap of junk . . . Wreckage and exhaustion everywhere . . . If somebody such as the city editor had a swivel chair, the universal joint would be broken, so that every time he got up, the seat would keel over as if stricken by a lateral stroke. All the intestines of the building were left showing in diverticulitic loops and lines—electrical conduits, water pipes, steam pipes, effluvium ducts, sprinkler systems, all of it dangling and grunting from the ceiling, the walls, the columns. The whole mess, from top to bottom, was painted over in an industrial sludge, Lead Gray, Subway Green, or that unbelievable dead red, that grim distemper of pigment and filth, that they paint the floor with in the tool and die works. On the ceiling were scalding banks of fluorescent lights, turning the atmosphere radium blue and burning bald spots in the crowns of the copy readers, who never moved. It was one big pie factory . . . A Landlord's Dream . . . There were no interior walls. The corporate hierarchy was not marked off into office spaces. The managing editor worked in a space that was as miserable and scabid as the lowest reporter's. Most newspapers were like that. This setup was instituted decades ago for practical reasons. But it was kept alive by a curious fact. On newspapers very few editorial employees at the bottom—namely, the reporters—had any ambition whatsoever to move up, to become city editors, managing editors, editors-in-chief, or any of the rest of it. Editors felt no threat from below. They needed no walls. Reporters didn't want much . . . merely to be *stars!* and of such minute wattage at that!

That was one thing they never wrote about in books on journalism or those comradely blind-bulldagger boots-upon-the-brass-rail swill-boar speakeasy

memoirs about newspaper days and children of the century . . . namely, the little curlicues of newspaper status competition . . . For example, at the desk behind mine in the *Herald Tribune* city room sat Charles Portis. Portis was the original laconic cutup. At one point he was asked onto a kind of *Meet the Press* show with Malcolm X, and Malcolm X made the mistake of giving the reporters a little lecture before they went on about how he didn't want to hear anybody calling him "Malcolm," because he was not a dining-car waiter—his name happened to be "Malcolm X." By the end of the show Malcolm X was furious. He was climbing the goddamned acoustical tiles. The original laconic cutup, Portis, had invariably and continually addressed him as "Mr. X" . . . "Now, Mr. X, let me ask you this . . ." Anyway, Portis had the desk behind mine. Down in a bullpen at the far end of the room was Jimmy Breslin. Over to one side sat Dick Schaap. We were all engaged in a form of newspaper competition that I have never known anybody to even talk about in public. Yet Schaap had quit as city editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, which was one of the legendary jobs in journalism—moved *down* the organizational chart, in other words—just to get in this secret game.

Everybody knows about one form of competition among newspaper reporters, the so-called *scoop* competition. Scoop reporters competed with their counterparts on other newspapers, or wire services, to see who could get a story first and write it fastest; the bigger the story—i.e., the more it had to do with the matters of power or catastrophe—the better. In short, they were concerned with the main business of the newspaper. But there was this other lot of reporters as well . . . They tended to be what is known as "feature writers." What they had in common was that they all regarded the newspaper as a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph. The idea was to get a job on a newspaper, keep body and soul together, pay the rent, get to know "the world," accumulate "experience," perhaps work some of the fat off your style—then, at some point, quit cold, say goodbye to journalism, move into a shack somewhere, work night and day for six months, and light up the sky with the final triumph. The final triumph was known as The Novel.

That was Someday, you understand . . . Meanwhile, these dreamboaters were in there banging away, in every place in America that had a newspaper, competing for a tiny crown the rest of the world wasn't even aware of: Best Feature Writer in Town. The "feature" was the newspaper term for a story that fell outside the category of hard news. It included everything from "brights," chuckly little items, often from the police beat . . . There was this out-of-towner who checked into a hotel in San Francisco last night, bent upon suicide, and he threw himself out of his fifth-story window—and fell nine feet and sprained his ankle. What he didn't know was—the hotel was on a steep

hill! . . . to "human interest stories," long and often hideously sentimental accounts of hitherto unknown souls beset by tragedy or unusual hobbies within the sheet's circulation area . . . In any case, feature stories gave a man a certain amount of room in which to write.

Unlike the scoop reporters, the feature writers did not openly acknowledge the existence of their competition, not even to one another. Nor was there any sort of scorecard. And yet everyone in the game knew precisely what was going on and went through the most mortifying sieges of envy, even resentment, or else surges of euphoria, depending on how the game was going. No one would ever admit to such a thing, and yet all felt it, almost daily. The feature writers' arena differed from the scoop reporters' in another way. Your competition was not necessarily working for another publication. You were just as likely to be competing with people on your own paper, which meant you were even less likely to talk about it.

So here was half the feature competition in New York, right in the same city room with me, because the *Herald Tribune* was like the main Tijuana bullring for feature writers . . . Portis, Breslin, Schaap . . . Schaap and Breslin had columns, which gave them more freedom, but I figured I could take the both of them. You had to be brave. Over at the *Times* there was Gay Talese and Robert Lipsyte. At the *Daily News* there was Michael Mok. (There were other contenders, too, on all the newspapers, including the *Herald Tribune*. I am only mentioning those I remember most clearly.) Mok I had been up against before, when I worked on the *Washington Post* and he worked on the *Washington Star*. Mok was tough competition, because, for one thing, he was willing to risk his hide on a feature story with the same wild courage he later showed in covering Vietnam and the Arab-Israel war for *Life*. Mok would do . . . eerie things. For example, the *News* sends Mok and a photographer out to do a feature on a fat man who is trying to lose weight by marooning himself on a sailboat anchored out in Long Island Sound ("I'm one of those guys, I walk past a delicatessen and breathe deep, and I gain ten pounds"). The motorboat they hire conks out about a mile from the fat man's sloop, with only four or five minutes to go before the deadline. This is March, but Mok dives in and starts swimming. The water is about 42 degrees. He swims until he's half dead, and the fat man has to fish him out with an oar. So Mok gets the story. He makes the deadline. There are pictures in the *News* of Mok swimming furiously through Long Island Sound in order to retrieve this great blob's diet saga for two million readers. If, instead, he had drowned, if he had ended up down with the oysters in the hepatic muck of the Sound, nobody would have put up a plaque for him. Editors save their tears for war correspondents. As for feature writers—the less said, the better. (Just the other day I saw one

of the *New York Times*'s grand panjandrum react with amazement to superlative praise for one of his paper's most popular writers, Israel Shenker, as follows: "But he's a *feature* writer!") No, if Mok had bought the oyster farm that afternoon, he wouldn't even have rated the quietest award in journalism, which is 30 seconds of silence at the Overseas Press Club dinner. Nevertheless, he dove into Long Island Sound in March! Such was the raging competition within our odd and tiny grotto!

At the same time everybody in the game had terrible dark moments during which he lost heart and told himself: "You're only kidding yourself, boy. This is just one more of your devious ways of postponing the decision to put it *all* on the line . . . and go into the shack . . . and write your novel." Your Novel! At this late date—partly due to the New Journalism itself—it's hard to explain what an American dream the idea of writing a novel was in the 1940s, the 1950s, and right into the early 1960s. The Novel was no mere literary form. It was a psychological phenomenon. It was a cortical fever. It belonged in the glossary to *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, somewhere between Narcissism and Obsessional Neuroses. In 1969 Seymour Krim wrote a strange confession for *Playboy* that began: "I was literally made, shaped, whetted and given a world with a purpose by the American realistic novel of the mid- to late-1930s. From the age of fourteen to seventeen, I gorged myself with the works of Thomas Wolfe (beginning with *Of Time and the River*, catching up with *Angel* and then keeping pace till BigTom's stunning end), Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, John O'Hara, James Cain, Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, Jerome Weidman, and William Saroyan, and knew in my pumping heart that I wanted to be such a novelist." The piece turned into a confession because first Krim admitted that the idea of being a novelist had been the overwhelming passion of his life, his spiritual calling, in fact, the Pacemaker that kept his ego ticking through all the miserable humiliations of his young manhood—then he faced up to the fact that he was now in his forties and had never written a novel and more than likely never would. Personally I was fascinated by the article, but why *Playboy* was running it, I didn't know, unless it was the magazine's monthly 10 cc. of literary penicillin . . . to hold down the gonococci and the spirochetes . . . I couldn't imagine anyone other than writers being interested in Krim's Complex. That, however, was where I was wrong.

After thinking it over, I realized that writers comprise but a fraction of the Americans who have experienced Krim's peculiar obsession. Not so long ago, I am willing to wager, half the people who went to work for publishing houses did so with the belief that their real destiny was to be novelists. Among people on what they call the creative side of advertising, those who actually dream

up the ads, the percentage must have reached 90 per cent. In 1955, in *The Exurbanites*, the late A. C. Spector depicted the well-paid Madison Avenue advertising genius as being a man who wouldn't read a novel without checking out the dust jacket blurb and the picture of the author on the back . . . and if that ego-flushed little bastard with the unbuttoned shirt and the wind rushing through his locks was younger than he was, he couldn't bear to open the goddamn book. Such was the grip of the damnable Novel. Likewise among people in television, public relations, the movies, on the English faculties of colleges and high schools, among framing shop clerks, convicts, unmarried sons living with Mom . . . a whole swarm of fantasizers out there steaming and proliferating in the ego mulches of America . . .

The Novel seemed like one of the last of those superstrokes, like finding gold or striking oil, through which an American could, overnight, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny. There were plenty of examples to feed the fantasy. In the 1930s all the novelists had seemed to be people who came blazing up into stardom from out of total obscurity. That seemed to be the nature of the beast. The biographical notes on the dust jackets of the novels were terrific. The author, you would be assured, was previously employed as a hod carrier (Steinbeck), a truck dispatcher (Cain), a bellboy (Wright), a Western Union boy (Saroyan), a dishwasher in a Greek restaurant in New York (Faulkner), a truck driver, logger, berry picker, spindle cleaner, crop duster pilot . . . There was no end to it . . . Some novelists had whole strings of these credentials . . . That way you knew you were getting the real goods . . .

By the 1950s The Novel had become a nationwide tournament. There was a magical assumption that the end of World War II in 1945 was the dawn of a new golden age of the American Novel, like the Hemingway-Dos Passos-Fitzgerald era after World War I. There was even a kind of Olympian club where the new golden boys met face-to-face every Sunday afternoon in New York, namely, the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street . . . Ah! There's Jones! There's Mailer! There's Styron! There's Baldwin! There's Willingham! In the flesh—right here in this room! The scene was strictly for novelists, people who were writing novels, and people who were paying court to The Novel. There was no room for a journalist unless he was there in the role of would-be novelist or simple courtier of the great. There was no such thing as a *literary* journalist working for popular magazines or newspapers. If a journalist aspired to literary status—then he had better have the sense and the courage to quit the popular press and try to get into the big league.

As for the little league of feature writers—two of the contestants, Portis and Breslin, actually went on to live out the fantasy. They wrote their novels. Portis did it in a way that was so much like the way it happens in the dream, it was

unbelievable. One day he suddenly quit as London correspondent for the *Herald Tribune*. That was generally regarded as a very choice job in the newspaper business. Portis quit cold one day; just like that, without a warning. He returned to the United States and moved into a fishing shack in Arkansas. In six months he wrote a beautiful little novel called *Norwood*. Then he wrote *True Grit*, which was a best seller. The reviews were terrific . . . He sold both books to the movies . . . He made a fortune . . . A *fishing shack*! In *Arkansas*! It was too goddamned perfect to be true, and yet there it was. Which is to say that the old dream, The Novel, has never died.

And yet in the early 1960s a curious new notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature statusphere. It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would . . . read like a novel. *Like* a novel, if you get the picture. This was the sincerest form of homage to The Novel and to those greats, the novelists, of course. Not even the journalists who pioneered in this direction doubted for a moment that the novelist was the reigning literary artist, now and forever. All they were asking for was the privilege of dressing up like him . . . until the day when they themselves would work up their nerve and go into the shack and try it for real . . . They were dreamers, all right, but one thing they never dreamed of. They never dreamed of the approaching irony. They never guessed for a minute that the work they would do over the next ten years, as journalists, would wipe out the novel as literature's main event.

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## 2. LIKE A NOVEL

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*What inna namea christ is this*—in the fall of 1962 I happened to pick up a copy of *Esquire* and read a story called “Joe Louis: the King as a Middle-aged Man.” The piece didn’t open like an ordinary magazine article at all. It opened with the tone and mood of a short story, with a rather intimate scene; or intimate by the standards of magazine journalism in 1962, in any case:

“‘Hi, sweetheart!’ Joe Louis called to his wife, spotting her waiting for him at the Los Angeles airport.

“She smiled, walked toward him, and was about to stretch up on her toes and kiss him—but suddenly stopped.

“‘Joe,’ she said, ‘where’s your tie?’

“‘Aw, sweetie,’ he said, shrugging, ‘I stayed out all night in New York and didn’t have time—’

“‘All night!’ she cut in. ‘When you’re out here all you do is sleep, sleep, sleep.’

“‘Sweetie,’ Joe Louis said, with a tired grin, ‘I’m an ole man.’

“‘Yes,’ she agreed, ‘but when you go to New York you try to be young again.’”

The story featured several scenes like that, showing the private life of a sports hero growing older, balder, sadder. It wound up with a scene in the home of Louis’s second wife, Rose Morgan. In this scene Rose Morgan is showing a film of the first Joe Louis-Billy Conn fight to a roomful of people, including her present husband.

“Rose seemed excited at seeing Joe at the top of his form, and every time a Louis punch would jolt Conn, she’d go, ‘Mummm’ (sock). ‘Mummm’ (sock). ‘Mummm.’

“Billy Conn was impressive through the middle rounds, but as the screen flashed Round 13, somebody said, ‘Here’s where Conn’s gonna make his mistake; he’s gonna try to slug it out with Joe Louis.’ Rose’s husband remained silent, sipping his Scotch.

“When the Louis combinations began to land, Rose went, ‘Mummmmm,

mummmmm,’ and then the pale body of Conn began to collapse against the canvas.

“Billy Conn slowly began to rise. The referee counted over him. Conn had one leg up, then two, then was standing—but the referee forced him back. It was too late.”

—and then, for the first time, from the back of the room, from out of the downy billows of the sofa, comes the voice of the present husband—*this Joe Louis crap again*—

“‘I thought Conn got up in time,’ he said, ‘but that referee wouldn’t let him go on.’

“Rose Morgan said nothing—just swallowed the rest of her drink.”

*What the hell is going on?* With a little reworking the whole article could have read like a short story. The passages in between the scenes, the expository passages, were conventional 1950s-style magazine journalism, but they could have been easily recast. The piece could have been turned into a non-fiction short story with very little effort. The really unique thing about it, however, was the reporting. This I frankly couldn’t comprehend at first. I really didn’t understand how anyone could manage to do reporting on things like the personal by-play between a man and his fourth wife at an airport and then follow it up with that amazing cakewalk down Memory Lane in his second wife’s living room. My instinctive, defensive reaction was that the man had piped it, as the saying went . . . winged it, made up the dialogue . . . Christ, maybe he made up whole scenes, the unscrupulous geek . . . The funny thing was, that was precisely the reaction that countless journalists and literary intellectuals would have over the next nine years as the New Journalism picked up momentum. *The bastards are making it up!* (I’m telling you, Ump, that’s a spitball he’s throwing . . . ) Really stylish reporting was something no one knew how to deal with, since no one was used to thinking of reporting as having an esthetic dimension.

At the time I hardly ever read magazines like *Esquire*. I wouldn’t have read the Joe Louis piece except that it was by Gay Talese. After all, Talese was a reporter for the *Times*. He was a player in my own feature game. What he had written for *Esquire* was so much better than what he was doing (or was allowed to do) for the *Times*, I had to check out what was going on.

Not long after that Jimmy Breslin started writing an extraordinary local column for my own paper, the *Herald Tribune*. Breslin came to the *Herald Tribune* in 1963 from out of nowhere, which is to say he had written a hundred or so articles for magazines like *True*, *Life*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Naturally he was virtually unknown. At that time knocking your brains out as a free-lance

writer for popular magazines was a guaranteed way to stay anonymous. Breslin caught the attention of the *Herald Tribune's* publisher, Jock Whitney, through his book about the New York Mets called *Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?* The *Herald Tribune* hired Breslin to do a "bright" local column to help offset some of the heavy lumber on the editorial page, paralyzing snoremongers like Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop. Newspaper columns had become a classic illustration of the theory that organizations tend to promote people up to their levels of incompetence. The usual practice was to give a man a column as a reward for outstanding service as a reporter. That way they could lose a good reporter and gain a bad writer. The archetypical newspaper columnist was Lippmann. For 35 years Lippmann seemed to do nothing more than ingest the *Times* every morning, turn it over in his ponderous cud for a few days, and then methodically egest it in the form of a drop of mush on the foreheads of several hundred thousand readers of other newspapers in the days thereafter. The only form of reporting that I remember Lippmann going for was the occasional red-carpet visit to a head of state, during which he had the opportunity of sitting on braided chairs in wainscoted offices and swallowing the exalted one's official lies in person instead of reading them in the *Times*. I don't mean to single out Lippmann, however. He was only doing what was expected of him . . .

In any case, Breslin made a revolutionary discovery. He made the discovery that it was feasible for a columnist to actually leave the building, go outside and do reporting on his own, genuine legwork. Breslin would go up to the city editor and ask what stories and assignments were coming up, choose one, go out, leave the building, cover the story as a reporter, and write about it in his column. If the story were big enough, his column would start on page one instead of inside. As obvious as this system may sound, it was unheard of among newspaper columnists, whether local or national. If possible, local columnists are even more pathetic. They usually start out full of juice, sounding like terrific boulevardiers and raconteurs, retailing in print all the marvelous *mots* and anecdotes they have been dribbling away over lunch for the past few years. After eight or ten weeks, however, they start to dry up. You can see the poor bastards floundering and gasping. They're dying of thirst. They're out of material. They start writing about funny things that happened around the house the other day, homey one-liners that the *Better Half* or the *Avon* lady got off, or some fascinating book or article that started them thinking, or else something they saw on the TV. Thank God for the TV! Without television shows to cannibalize, half of these people would be lost, utterly catatonic. Pretty soon you can almost see it, the tubercular blue of the 23-inch screen, radiating from their prose. Anytime you see a columnist trying to

squeeze material out of his house, articles, books, or the television set, you've got a starving soul on your hands . . . You should send him a basket . . .

But Breslin worked like a Turk. He would be out all day covering a story, come back in at 4 p.m. or so and sit down at a desk in the middle of the city room. It was quite a show. He was a good-looking Irishman with a lot of black hair and a great wrestler's gut. When he sat down at his typewriter he hunched himself over into a shape like a bowling ball. He would start drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes until vapor started drifting off his body. He looked like a bowling ball fueled with liquid oxygen. Thus fired up, he would start typing. I've never seen a man who could write so well against a daily deadline. I particularly remember one story he wrote about the sentencing, on a charge of extortion, of a Teamster boss named Anthony Provenzano. Early in the story Breslin set up the image of the sun coming through the moldering old windows of the Federal courthouse and exploding off Provenzano's diamond pinky ring:

"It did not seem like a bad morning at all. The boss, Tony Provenzano, who is one of the biggest men in the Teamsters Union, walked up and down the corridor outside of this Federal courtroom in Newark and he had a little smile on his face and he kept flicking a white cigarette holder around.

" 'Today is the kind of a day for fishing,' Tony was saying. 'We ought to go out and get some fluke.'

"Then he spread his legs a little and went at this big guy named Jack, who had on a gray suit. Tony stuck out his left hand so he could throw a hook at this guy Jack. The big diamond ring on Tony's pinky flashed in the light coming through the tall windows of the corridor. Then Tony shifted and hit Jack with a right hand on the shoulder.

" 'Always the shoulder,' one of the guys in the corridor laughed. 'Tony is always banging Jack on the shoulder.' "

The story went on in that vein with Provenzano's Jersey courtiers circling around him and fawning, while the sun explodes off his pinky ring. Inside the courtroom itself, however, Provenzano starts getting his. The judge starts lecturing him, and the sweat starts breaking out on Provenzano's upper lip. Then the judge sentences him to seven years, and Provenzano starts twisting his pinky ring finger with his right hand. Then Breslin wraps it up with a scene in a cafeteria where the young prosecutor who worked the case is eating fried scallops and fruit salad off a tray.

"Nothing on his hand flashed. The guy who sunk Tony Pro doesn't even have a diamond ring on his pinky."

Well—all right! Say what you will! There it was, a short story, complete with symbolism, in fact, and yet true-life, as they say, about something that

happened today, and you could pick it up on the newsstand by 11 tonight for a dime . . .

Breslin's work stirred up a certain vague resentment among both journalists and literati during the first year or two of his column—vague, because they never fully understood what he was doing . . . only that in some vile Low Rent way the man's output was *literary*. Among literary intellectuals you would hear Breslin referred to as “a cop who writes” or “Runyon on welfare.” These weren't even intelligent insults, however, because they dealt with Breslin's attitude, which seemed to be that of the cabdriver with his cap tilted over one eye. A crucial part of Breslin's work they didn't seem to be conscious of at all: namely, the reporting he did. Breslin made it a practice to arrive on the scene long before the main event in order to gather the off-camera material, the by-play in the make-up room, that would enable him to create character. It was part of his *modus operandi* to gather “novelistic” details, the rings, the perspiration, the jabs on the shoulder, and he did it more skillfully than most novelists.

Literary people were oblivious to this side of the New Journalism, because it is one of the unconscious assumptions of modern criticism that the raw material is simply “there.” It is the “given.” The idea is: Given such-and-such a body of material, what has the artist done with it? The crucial part that reporting plays in all story-telling, whether in novels, films, or non-fiction, is something that is not so much ignored as simply not comprehended. The modern notion of art is an essentially religious or magical one in which the artist is viewed as a holy beast who in some way, big or small, receives flashes from the godhead, which is known as creativity. The material is merely his clay, his palette . . . Even the obvious relationship between reporting and the major novels—one has only to think of Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and, in fact, Joyce—is something that literary historians deal with only in a biographical sense. It took the New Journalism to bring this strange matter of reporting into the foreground.

But these were all matters that came up later. I don't remember a soul talking about them at the time. I certainly didn't. In the spring of 1963 I made my own entry into this new arena, although without meaning to. I have already described (in the introduction to *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*) the odd circumstances under which I happened to write my first magazine article—“There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm). . . .”—in the form of what I thought was merely a memorandum to the managing editor of *Esquire*. This

article was by no means like a short story, despite the use of scenes and dialogue. I wasn't thinking about that at all. It is hard to say what it was like. It was a garage sale, that piece . . . vignettes, odds and ends of scholarship, bits of memoir, short bursts of sociology, apostrophes, epithets, moans, cackles, anything that came into my head, much of it thrown together in a rough and awkward way. That was its virtue. It showed me the possibility of there being something “new” in journalism. What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that—plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space . . . to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally. I am not laying all those gladiolas on that rather curious first article of mine, you understand. I'm only talking about what it suggested to me.

I soon had the chance to explore every possibility I could think of. The *Herald Tribune* assigned me split duties, like a utility infielder's. Two days a week I was supposed to work for the city desk as a general assignment reporter, as usual. The other three days I was supposed to turn out a weekly piece of about 1,500 words for the *Herald Tribune's* new Sunday supplement, which was called *New York*. At the same time, following the success of “There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm). . . .”—I was also cranking out stories for *Esquire*. This setup was crazy enough to begin with. I can remember flying to Las Vegas on my two regular days off from the *Herald Tribune* to do a story for *Esquire*—“Las Vegas!!!!”—and winding up sitting on the edge of a white satin bed in a Hog-Stomping Baroque suite in a hotel on the Strip—in the decor known as Hog-Stomping Baroque there are 400-pound cut-glass chandeliers in the bathrooms—and picking up the phone and dictating to the stenographic battery of the *Trib* city desk the last third of a story on demolition derbies in Long Island for *New York*—“Clean Fun at Riverhead”—hoping to finish in time to meet a psychiatrist in a black silk mohair suit with brass buttons and a shawl collar, no lapels, one of the only two psychiatrists in Las Vegas County at that time, to take me to see the casualties of the Strip in the state mental ward out Charleston Boulevard. What made it crazier was that the piece about the demolition derbies was the last one I wrote that came anywhere close to being 1,500 words. After that they started climbing to 3,000, 4,000, 5,000, 6,000 words. Like Pascal, I was sorry, but I didn't have time to write short ones. In nine months in the latter part of 1963 and first



it was a matter of personality, energy, drive, bravura . . . style, in a word . . . The standard non-fiction writer's voice was like the standard announcer's voice . . . a drag, a droning . . .

To avoid this I would try anything. For example, I wrote a story about Junior Johnson, a stock car racer from Ingle Hollow, North Carolina, who had learned to drive by running moonshine whiskey to Charlotte and other distribution points. "There ain't no harder work in the world than making whiskey," Junior would say. "I don't know of any other business that compels you to get up at all times of night and go outdoors in the snow and everything else and work. H'it's the hardest way in the world to make a living, and I don't think anybody'd do it unless they had to." Now, as long as Junior Johnson was explaining the corn liquor industry, there was no problem, because (a) dialogue tends to be naturally attractive, or involving, to the reader; and (b) Johnson's Ingle Hollow lingo was unusual. But then I had to take over the explanation myself, in order to compress into a few paragraphs information that had come from several interviews. So . . . I decided I would rather talk in Ingle Hollow accents myself, since that seemed to go over all right. There is no law that says the narrator has to speak in beige or even New York journalese. So I picked up the explanation myself, as follows: "Working mash wouldn't wait for a man. It started coming to a head when it got ready to and a man had to be there to take it off, out there in the woods, in the brush, in the brambles, in the muck, in the snow. Wouldn't it have been something if you could have just set it all up inside a good old shed with a corrugated metal roof and order those parts like you want them and not have to smuggle all that copper and all that sugar and all that everything out here in the woods and be a copper-smith and a plumber and a cooper and a carpenter and a pack horse and every other goddamned thing God ever saw in the world, all at once.

"And live decent hours—Junior and his brothers, about two o'clock in the morning they'd head out to the stash, the place where the liquor was hidden after it was made . . ."

I was feigning the tones of an Ingle Hollow moonshiner, in order to create the illusion of seeing the action through the eyes of someone who was actually on the scene and involved in it, rather than a beige narrator. I began to think of this device as the *downstage voice*, as if characters downstage from the protagonist himself were talking.

I would do the same thing with descriptions. Rather than just come on as the broadcaster describing the big parade, I would shift as quickly as possible into the eye sockets, as it were, of the people in the story. Often I would shift the point of view in the middle of a paragraph or even a sentence. I began a story on Baby Jane Holzer, entitled "The Girl of the Year," as follows:

"Bangs manes bouffant beehives Beatle caps butter faces brush-on lashes decal eyes puffy sweaters French thrust bras flailing leather blue jeans stretch pants stretch jeans honeydew bottoms eclair shanks elf boots ballerinas Knight slippers, hundreds of them, these flaming little buds, bobbing and screaming, rocketing around inside the Academy of Music Theater underneath that vast old moldering cherub dome up there—aren't they super-marvelous!

"'Aren't they super-marvelous!' says Baby Jane, and then: 'Hi, Isabel! Isabel! You want to sit backstage—with the Stones!'

"The show hasn't even started yet, the Rolling Stones aren't even on the stage, the place is full of a great shabby moldering dimness, and these flaming little buds.

"Girls are reeling this way and that way in the aisle and through their huge black decal eyes, sagging with Tiger Tongue Lick Me brush-on eyelashes and black appliqués, sagging like display-window Christmas trees, they keep staring at—her—Baby Jane—on the aisle."

The opening paragraph is a rush of Groovy clothes ending with the phrase "—aren't they super-marvelous!" With this phrase the point-of-view shifts to Baby Jane, and one is looking through her eyes at the young girls, "the flaming little buds," who are running around the theater. The description continues through Jane's eyes until the phrase "they keep staring at—her—Baby Jane," whereupon the point-of-view shifts to the young girls, and the reader is suddenly looking through *their* eyes at Baby Jane: "What the hell is this? She is gorgeous in the most outrageous way. Her hair rises up from her head in a huge hairy corona, a huge tan mane around a narrow face and two eyes opened—swock!—like umbrellas, with all that hair flowing down over a coat made of . . . zebra! Those motherless stripes! Oh, damn! Here she is with her friends, looking like some kind of queen bee for all flaming little buds everywhere."

In fact, three points-of-view are used in that rather short passage, the point-of-view of the subject (Baby Jane), the point-of-view of the people watching her (the "flaming little buds"), and my own. I switched back and forth between points-of-view continually, and often abruptly, in many articles I wrote in 1963, 1964, and 1965. Eventually a reviewer called me a "chameleon" who instantly took on the coloration of whomever he was writing about. He meant it negatively. I took it as a great compliment. A chameleon . . . but exactly!

Sometimes I used point-of-view in the Jamesian sense in which fiction writers understand it, entering directly into the mind of a character, experiencing the world through his central nervous system throughout a given scene. Writing about Phil Spector ("The First Tycoon of Teen"), I began the article not only inside his mind but with a virtual stream of consciousness. One of

the news magazines apparently regarded my Spector story as an improbable feat, because they interviewed him and asked him if he didn't think this passage was merely a fiction that appropriated his name. Spector said that, in fact, he found it quite accurate. This should have come as no surprise, since every detail in the passage was taken from a long interview with Spector about exactly how he had felt at the time:

"All these raindrops are *high* or something. They don't roll down the window, they come straight back, toward the tail, wobbling, like all those Mr. Cool snowheads walking on mattresses. The plane is taxiing out toward the runway to take off, and this stupid infarcted water wobbles, sideways, across the window. Phil Spector, 23 years old, the rock and roll magnate, producer of Philles Records, America's first teen-age tycoon, watches . . . this watery pathology . . . it is *sick, fatal*. He tightens his seat belt over his bowels . . . A hum rises inside the plane, a shot of air comes shooting through the vent over somebody's seat, some ass turns on a cone of light, there is a sign stuck out by the runway, a mad, cryptic, insane instruction to the pilot—Runway 4, Are Cylinder Laps Mainside DOWN?—and beyond, disoriented crop rows of sulphur blue lights, like the lights on top of a New Jersey toothpaste factory, only spreading on and on in sulphur blue rows over Los Angeles County. It is . . . disoriented. Schizoid raindrops. The plane breaks in two on takeoff and everybody in the front half comes rushing toward Phil Spector in a gush of bodies in a thick orange—*napalm!* No, it happens aloft; there is a long rip in the side of the plane, it just rips, he can see the top ripping, folding back in sick curds, like a sick Dali egg, and Phil Spector goes sailing through the rip, dark, freezing. And the engine, it is *ready*—

"Miss!"

“A stewardess is walking to the back to buckle herself in for the takeoff. The plane is moving, the jets are revving. Under a Lifebuoy blue skirt, her fireproof legs are clicking out of her Pinki-Kinki-Panti Fantasy—”

I had the feeling, rightly or wrongly, that I was doing things no one had ever done before in journalism. I used to try to imagine the feeling readers must have had upon finding all this carrying on and cutting up in a Sunday supplement. I liked that idea. I had no sense of being a part of any normal journalistic or literary environment. Later I read the English critic John Bayley's yearnings for an age when writers had Pushkin's sense of "looking at all things afresh," as if for the first time, without the constant intimidation of being aware of what other writers have already done. In the mid-1960s that was exactly the feeling I had.

I'm sure that others who were experimenting with magazine articles, such as Talese, began to feel the same way. They were moving beyond the conven-

tional limits of journalism, but not merely in terms of technique. The kind of reporting they were doing struck them as far more ambitious, too. It was more intense, more detailed, and certainly more time-consuming than anything that newspaper or magazine reporters, including investigative reporters, were accustomed to. They developed the habit of staying with the people they were writing about for days at a time, weeks in some cases. They had to gather all the material the conventional journalist was after—and then keep going. It seemed all-important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters. That was why it was so ironic when both the journalistic and literary old guards began to attack this new journalism as “impressionistic.” The most important things one attempted in terms of technique depended upon a depth of information that had never been demanded in newspaper work. Only through the most searching forms of reporting was it possible, in non-fiction, to use whole scenes, extended dialogue, point-of-view, and interior monologue. Eventually I, and others, would be accused of “entering people’s minds”. . . But exactly! I figured that was one more doorbell a reporter had to push.

Most of the people who eventually wrote about my style, however, tended to concentrate on certain mannerisms, the lavish use of dots, dashes, exclamation points, italics, and occasionally punctuation that never existed before . . . . . and of interjections, shouts, nonsense words, onomatopoeia, mimesis, pleonasms, the continual use of the historical present, and so on. This was natural enough, because many of these devices stood out even before one had read a word. The typography actually *looked* different. Referring to my use of italics and exclamation points, one critic observed, with scorn, that my work looked like something out of Queen Victoria's childhood diary. Queen Victoria's childhood diaries are, in fact, quite readable; even charming. One has only to compare them with the miles of official prose she laid on Palmerston, Wellington, Gladstone in letters and communiqués and on the English people in her proclamations to see the point I'm making. I found a great many pieces of punctuation and typography lying around dormant when I came along—and I must say I had a good time using them. I figured it was time someone violated what Orwell called "the Geneva conventions of the mind" . . . a protocol that had kept journalism and non-fiction generally (and novels) in such a tedious bind for so long. I found that things like exclamation points, italics, and abrupt shifts (dashes) and syncopations (dots) helped to give the

illusion not only of a person talking but of a person thinking. I used to enjoy using dots where they would be least expected, not at the end of a sentence but in the middle, creating the effect . . . of a skipped beat. It seemed to me the mind reacted—*first!* . . . in dots, dashes, and exclamation points, then rationalized, drew up a brief, with periods.

I soon found that people loved to parody my style. By 1966 the parodies began to come in a rush. I must say I read them all. I suppose it's because at the heart of every parody there is a little gold ball of tribute. Even hostile parodies admit from the start that the target has a distinct voice.

It is not very often that one comes across a new style, period. And if a new style were created not via the novel, or the short story, or poetry, but via journalism—I suppose that would seem extraordinary. It was probably that idea—more than any specific devices, such as using scenes and dialogue in a “novelistic” fashion—that began to give me very grand ideas about a new journalism. As I saw it, if a new literary style could originate in journalism, then it stood to reason that journalism could aspire to more than mere emulation of those aging giants, the novelists.

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### 3. SEIZING THE POWER

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I have no idea who coined the term “the New Journalism” or even when it was coined. Seymour Krim tells me that he first heard it used in 1965 when he was editor of *Nugget* and Pete Hamill called him and said he wanted to write an article called “The New Journalism” about people like Jimmy Breslin and Gay Talese. It was late in 1966 when you first started hearing people talk about “the New Journalism” in conversation, as best I can remember. I don't know for sure. . . . To tell the truth, I've never even liked the term. Any movement, group, party, program, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with “New” in it is just begging for trouble. The garbage barge of history is already full of them: the New Humanism, the New Poetry, the New Criticism, the New Conservatism, the New Frontier, il Stilo Novo . . . The World Tomorrow. . . . Nevertheless, the New Journalism was the term that caught on eventually. It was no “movement.” There were no manifestos, clubs, salons, cliques; not even a saloon where the faithful gathered, since there was no faith and no creed. At the time, the mid-Sixties, one was aware only that all of a sudden there was some sort of artistic excitement in journalism, and that was a new thing in itself.

I didn't know what history, if any, lay behind it. I wasn't interested in the long view just then. All I knew was what certain writers were doing at *Esquire*, Thomas B. Morgan, Brock Brower, Terry Southern and, above all, Gay Talese . . . even a couple of novelists were in on it, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, writing nonfiction for *Esquire* . . . and, of course, the writers for my own Sunday supplement, *New York*, chiefly Breslin, but also Robert Christgau, Doon Arbus, Gail Sheehy, Tom Gallagher, Robert Benton and David Newman. I was turning out articles as fast as I could write and checking out all these people to see what new spins they had come up with. I was completely wrapped up in this new excitement that was in the air. It was a regular little league they had going.

As a result I never had the slightest idea that any of it might have an impact on the literary world or, for that matter, any sphere outside the small world of feature journalism. I should have known better, however. By 1966 the New

Journalism had already been paid literary tribute in its cash forms: namely, bitterness, envy and resentment.

This had all come bursting forth during a curious episode known as *The New Yorker* affair. In April of 1965, in the New York *Herald Tribune's* Sunday magazine, *New York*, I had made what I fancied was some lighthearted fun of *The New Yorker* magazine with a two-part article entitled "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of The Walking Dead!" A very droll *sportif* performance, you understand. Without going into the whole beanball contest I can tell you that there were many good souls who did not consider this article either lighthearted or *sportif*. In fact, it caused a hulking furor. In the midst of it the kentucky colonels of both Journalism and Literature launched their first attack on this accursed Low Rent rabble at the door, these magazine writers working in the damnable new form. . . .

The longest attacks came in two fairly new but highly conservative periodicals. One was mounted by what had already become the major organ of traditional newspaper journalism in the United States, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and the other by the major organ of America's older literary essayists and "men of letters," *The New York Review of Books*. They presented lists of "errors" in my piece about *The New Yorker*, marvelous lists<sup>1</sup> as arcane and mystifying as a bill from the body shop—whereupon they concluded that *there* you had the damnable new genre, this "bastard form," this "Parajournalism," a tag they awarded not only to me and to my magazine *New York* and all its works but also to Breslin, Talese, Dick Schaap and, as long as they were up, *Esquire*.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not one accepted the lists, the strategy itself was revealing. My article on *The New Yorker* had not even been an example of the new genre; it used neither the reporting techniques nor the literary techniques; underneath a bit of red-flock *Police Gazette* rhetoric, it was a traditional critique, a needle, an attack, an "essay" of the old school. It had little or nothing to do with anything I had written before. It certainly had nothing to do with any other writer's work. And yet I think the journalists and literati who were so furious were sincere. I think they looked at the work a dozen or so writers, Breslin, Talese and myself among them, were doing for *New York* and *Esquire*, and they were baffled, dazzled. . . . This *can't* be right.

1. Prepared, in both instances, by *New Yorker* staff members, if one need edit.

2. The first of two *New York Review of Books* articles on "Parajournalism" (August, 1965) said: "The genre originated in *Esquire* but it now appears more flamboyantly in the New York *Herald Tribune*". . . "Dick Schaap is one of the *Trib's* parajournalists". . . "Another is Jimmy Breslin . . . the tough-guy-with-the-heart-of-schmaltz bard of the little man and the big celeb". . . Later the piece spoke of "Gay Talese, an *Esquire* alumnus who now parajournalizes mostly in *The Times*, in a more dignified way, of course". . . "But the king of the cats is, of course, Tom Wolfe, an *Esquire* alumnus who writes mostly for the *Trib's* Sunday magazine, *New York*, which is edited by a former *Esquire* editor, Clay Felker. . . ."

. . . These people must be piping it, winging it, making up the dialogue. . . . Christ, maybe they're making up whole scenes, the unscrupulous geeks (I'm telling you, Ump, those are *spitballs* they're throwing). They needed to believe, in short, that the new form was illegitimate . . . a "bastard form."

Why newspaper people were upset was no mystery. They were better than railroad men at resisting anything labeled new. The average newspaper editor's idea of a major innovation was the Cashword Puzzle. The literary opposition was more complex, however. Looking back on it one can see that what had happened was this: the sudden arrival of this new style of journalism, from out of nowhere, had caused a status panic in the literary community. Throughout the twentieth century literary people had grown used to a very stable and apparently eternal status structure. It was somewhat like a class structure on the eighteenth-century model in that there was a chance for you to compete but only with people of your own class. The literary upper class were the novelists; the occasional playwright or poet might be up there, too, but mainly it was the novelists. They were regarded as the only "creative" writers, the only literary artists. They had exclusive entry to the soul of man, the profound emotions, the eternal mysteries, and so forth and so on. . . . The middle class were the "men of letters," the literary essayists, the more authoritative critics; the occasional biographer, historian or cosmically inclined scientist also, but mainly the men of letters. Their province was analysis, "insights," the play of intellect. They were not in the same class with the novelists, as they well knew, but they *were* the reigning practitioners of nonfiction. . . . The lower class were the journalists, and they were so low down in the structure that they were barely noticed at all. They were regarded chiefly as day laborers who dug up slabs of raw information for writers of higher "sensibility" to make better use of. As for people who wrote for popular ("slick") magazines and Sunday supplements, your so-called free-lance writers—except for a few people on *The New Yorker*, they weren't even in the game. They were the lumpenproles.

And so all of a sudden, in the mid-Sixties, here comes a bunch of these lumpenproles, no less, a bunch of slick-magazine and Sunday-supplement writers with no literary credentials whatsoever in most cases—only they're using all the techniques of the novelists, even the most sophisticated ones—and on top of that they're helping themselves to the insights of the men of letters while they're at it—and at the same time they're still doing their low-life legwork, their "digging," their hustling, their damnable Locker Room Genre reporting—they're taking on *all* of these roles at the same time—in other words, they're ignoring literary class lines that have been almost a century in the making.

The panic hit the men of letters first. If the lumpenproles won their point,

if their new form achieved any sort of literary respectability, if it were somehow accepted as "creative," the men of letters stood to lose even their positions as the reigning practitioners of nonfiction. They would get bumped down to Lower Middle Class. (Appendix IV.) This was already beginning to happen. The first indication I had came in an article in the June, 1966, *Atlantic* by Dan Wakefield, entitled "The Personal Voice and the Impersonal Eye." The gist of the piece was that this was the first period in anybody's memory when people in the literary world were beginning to talk about nonfiction as a serious artistic form. Norman Podhoretz had written a piece in *Harper's* in 1958 claiming a similar status for the "discursive prose" of the late Fifties, essays by people like James Baldwin and Isaac Rosenfeld. But the excitement Wakefield was talking about had nothing to do with essays or any other traditional nonfiction. Quite the contrary; Wakefield attributed the new prestige of nonfiction to two books of an entirely different sort: *In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote, and a collection of magazine articles with a title in alliterative trochaic pentameter that I am sure would come to me if I dwelled upon it.

Capote's story of the life and death of two drifters who blew the heads off a wealthy farm family in Kansas ran as a serial in *The New Yorker* in the Fall of 1965 and came out in book form in February of 1966. It was a sensation—and a terrible jolt to all who expected the accursed New Journalism or Parajournalism to spin itself out like a fad. Here, after all, was not some obscure journalist, some free-lance writer, but a novelist of long standing . . . whose career had been in the doldrums . . . and who suddenly, with this one stroke, with this turn to the damnable new form of journalism, not only resuscitated his reputation but elevated it higher than ever before . . . and became a celebrity of the most amazing magnitude in the bargain. People of all sorts read *In Cold Blood*, people at every level of taste. Everybody was absorbed in it. Capote himself didn't call it journalism; far from it; he said he had invented a new literary genre, "the nonfiction novel." Nevertheless, his success gave the New Journalism, as it would soon be called, an overwhelming momentum.

Capote had spent five years researching his story and interviewing the killers in prison, and so on, a very meticulous and impressive job. But in 1966 you started seeing feats of reporting that were extraordinary, spectacular. (Appendix VI.) Here came a breed of journalists who somehow had the moxie to talk their way inside of any milieu, even closed societies, and hang on for dear life. A marvelous maniac named John Sack talked the Army into letting him join an infantry company at Fort Dix, M Company, 1st Advanced Infantry Training Brigade—not as a recruit but as a reporter—and go through training with them and then to Vietnam and into battle. The result was a book called *M*

(appearing first in *Esquire*), a nonfiction *Catch-22* and, for my money, still the finest book in any genre published about the war. George Plimpton went into training with a professional football team, the Detroit Lions, in the role of reporter playing rookie quarterback, rooming with the players, going through their workouts and finally playing quarterback for them in a preseason game—in order to write *Paper Lion*. Like Capote's book, *Paper Lion* was read by people at every level of taste and had perhaps the greatest literary impact of any writing about sports since Ring Lardner's short stories. But the all-time free-lance writer's Brass Stud Award went that year to an obscure California journalist named Hunter Thompson who "ran" with the Hell's Angels for eighteen months—as a reporter and not a member, which might have been safer—in order to write *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang*. The Angels wrote his last chapter for him by stomping him half to death in a roadhouse fifty miles from Santa Rosa. All through the book Thompson had been searching for the single psychological or sociological insight that would sum up all he had seen, the single golden *aperçu*; and as he lay sprawled there on the floor coughing up blood and teeth, the line he had been looking for came to him in a brilliant flash from out of the heart of darkness: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

At about the same time, 1966 and 1967, Joan Didion was writing those strange Gothic articles of hers about California that were eventually collected in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Rex Reed was writing his celebrity interviews—this was an old journalistic exercise, of course, but no one had ever quite so diligently addressed himself to the question of, "What is So-and-so *really* like?" (Simone Signoret, as I recall, turned out to have the neck, shoulders and upper back of a middle linebacker.) James Mills was pulling off some amazing reporting feats of his own for *Life* in pieces such as "The Panic in Needle Park," "The Detective," and "The Prosecutor." The writer-reporter team of Garry Wills and Ovid Demaris was doing a series of brilliant pieces for *Esquire*, culminating in "You All Know Me—I'm Jack Ruby!"

And then, early in 1968, another novelist turned to nonfiction, and with a success that in its own way was as spectacular as Capote's two years before. This was Norman Mailer writing a memoir about an anti-war demonstration he had become involved in, "The Steps of the Pentagon." The memoir, or autobiography (Appendix III), is an old genre of nonfiction, of course, but this piece was written soon enough after the event to have a journalistic impact. It took up an entire issue of *Harper's Magazine* and came out a few months later under the title of *The Armies of the Night*. Unlike Capote's book, Mailer's was not a popular success; but within the literary community and among intellectuals generally it couldn't have been a more tremendous *succès*

*d'estime*. At the time Mailer's reputation had been deteriorating in the wake of two inept novels called *An American Dream* (1965) and *Why Are We In Vietnam?* (1967). He was being categorized somewhat condescendingly as a journalist, because his nonfiction, chiefly in *Esquire*, was obviously his better work. *The Armies of the Night* changed all that in a flash. Like Capote, Mailer had a dread of the tag that had been put on him—"journalist"—and had subtitled his book "The Novel as History; History as the Novel." But the lesson was one that nobody in the literary world could miss. Here was another novelist who had turned to some form of accursed journalism, no matter what name you gave it, and had not only revived his reputation but raised it to a point higher than it had ever been in his life.

By 1969 no one in the literary world could simply dismiss this new journalism as an inferior genre. The situation was somewhat similar to the situation of the novel in England in the 1850's. It was yet to be canonized, sanctified and given a theology, but writers themselves could already feel the new Power flowing.

The similarity between the early days of the novel and the early days of the New Journalism is not merely coincidental. (Appendix I.) In both cases we are watching the same process. We are watching a group of writers coming along, working in a genre regarded as Lower Class (the novel before the 1850's, slick-magazine journalism before the 1960's), who discover the joys of detailed realism and its strange powers. Many of them seem to be in love with realism for its own sake; and never mind the "sacred callings" of literature. They seem to be saying: "Hey! Come here! This is the way people are living now—just the way I'm going to show you! It may astound you, disgust you, delight you or arouse your contempt or make you laugh. . . . Nevertheless, this is what it's like! It's *all* right here! You won't be bored! Take a look!"

As I hardly have to tell you, that is not exactly the way serious novelists regard the task of the novel today. In this decade, the Seventies, The Novel will be celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of its canonization as *the* spiritual genre. Novelists today keep using words like "myth," "fable" and "magic." (Appendix II.) That state of mind known as "the sacred office of the novelist" had originated in Europe in the 1870's and didn't take hold in the American literary world until after the Second World War. But it soon made up for lost time. What kind of novel should a sacred officer write? In 1948 Lionel Trilling presented the theory that the novel of social realism (which had flourished in America throughout the 1930's) was finished because the freight train of history had passed it by. The argument was that such novels were a product of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century at the height of capitalism. But now bourgeois society was breaking up, fragmenting.

A novelist could no longer portray a part of that society and hope to capture the *Zeitgeist*; all he would be left with was one of the broken pieces. The only hope was a new kind of novel (his candidate was the novel of ideas). This theory caught on among young novelists with an astonishing grip. Whole careers were altered. All those writers hanging out in the literary pubs in New York such as the White Horse Tavern rushed off to write every kind of novel you could imagine, so long as it wasn't the so-called "big novel" of manners and society. The next thing one knew, they were into novels of ideas, Freudian novels, surrealistic novels ("black comedy"), Kafkaesque novels and, more recently, the catatonic novel or novel of immobility, the sort that begins: "In order to get started, he went to live alone on an island and shot himself." (Opening line of a Robert Coover short story.)

As a result, by the Sixties, about the time I came to New York, the most serious, ambitious and, presumably, talented novelists had abandoned the richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of "the way we live now," in Trollope's phrase. (Appendix II.) There is no novelist who will be remembered as the novelist who captured the Sixties in America, or even in New York, in the sense that Thackeray was the chronicler of London in the 1840's and Balzac was the chronicler of Paris and all of France after the fall of the Empire. Balzac prided himself on being "the secretary of French society." Most serious American novelists would rather cut their wrists than be known as "the secretary of American society," and not merely because of ideological considerations. With fable, myth and the sacred office to think about—who wants such a menial role?

That was marvelous for journalists—I can tell you that. The Sixties was one of the most extraordinary decades in American history in terms of manners and morals. Manners and morals *were* the history of the Sixties. A hundred years from now when historians write about the 1960's in America (always assuming, to paraphrase Céline, that the Chinese will still give a damn about American history), they won't write about it as the decade of the war in Vietnam or of space exploration or of political assassinations . . . but as the decade when manners and morals, styles of living, attitudes toward the world changed the country more crucially than any political events . . . all the changes that were labeled, however clumsily, with such tags as "the generation gap," "the counter culture," "black consciousness," "sexual permissiveness," "the death of God," . . . the abandonment of proprieties, pieties, decorums connoted by "go-go funds," "fast money," swinger groovy hippie drop-out pop Beatles Andy Baby Jane Bernie Huey Eldridge LSD marathon encounter stone underground rip-off. . . . This whole side of American life that gushed

forth when postwar American affluence finally blew the lid off—all this novelists simply turned away from, gave up by default. That left a huge gap in American letters, a gap big enough to drive an ungainly Reo rig like the New Journalism through.

When I reached New York in the early Sixties, I couldn't believe the scene I saw spread out before me. New York was pandemonium with a big grin on. Among people with money—and they seemed to be multiplying like shad—it was the wildest, looniest time since the 1920's . . . a universe of creamy forty-five-year-old fashionable fatties with walnut-shell eyes out on the giblest slab wearing the hip-huggers and the minis and the Little Egypt eyes and the sideburns and the boots and the bells and the love beads, doing the Watusi and the Funky Broadway and jiggling and grinning and sweating and sweating and grinning and jiggling until the onset of dawn or saline depletion, whichever came first. . . . It was a hulking carnival. But what really amazed me was that as a writer I had it practically all to myself. As fast as I could possibly do it, I was turning out articles on this amazing spectacle that I saw bubbling and screaming right there in front of my wondering eyes—New York!—and all the while I just knew that some enterprising novelist was going to come along and do this whole marvelous scene with one gigantic daring bold stroke. It was so ready, so *ripe*—beckoning . . . but it never happened. To my great amazement New York simply remained the journalist's bonanza. For that matter, novelists seemed to shy away from the life of the great cities altogether. The thought of tackling such a subject seemed to terrify them, confuse them, make them doubt their own powers. And besides, it would have meant tackling social realism as well.

To my even greater amazement I had the same experience when I came upon 1960's California. This was the very incubator of new styles of living, and these styles were right there for all to see, ricocheting off every eyeball—and again a few amazed journalists working in the new form had it all to themselves, even the psychedelic movement, whose waves are still felt in every part of the country, in every grammar school even, like the intergalactic pulse. I wrote *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and then waited for the novels that I was sure would come pouring out of the psychedelic experience . . . but they never came forth, either. I learned later that publishers had been waiting, too. They had been practically crying for novels by the new writers who must be out there somewhere, the new writers who would do the big novels of the hippie life or campus life or radical movements or the war in Vietnam or dope or sex or black militancy or encounter groups or the whole whirlpool all at once. They waited, and all they got was the Prince of Alienation . . . sailing

off to Lonesome Island on his Tarot boat with his back turned and his Timeless cape on, reeking of camphor balls.

Amazing, as I say. If nothing else had done it, that would have. The—New Journalists—Parajournalists—had the whole crazed obscene uproarious Mammon-faced drug-soaked mau-mau lust-oozing Sixties in America all to themselves.

So the novelists had been kind enough to leave behind for our boys quite a nice little body of material: the whole of American society, in effect. It only remained to be seen if magazine writers could master the techniques, in nonfiction, that had given the novel of social realism such power. And here we come to a fine piece of irony. In abandoning social realism novelists also abandoned certain vital matters of technique. As a result, by 1969 it was obvious that these magazine writers—the very lumpenproles themselves!—had also gained a technical edge on novelists. It was marvelous. For journalists to take Technique away from the novelists—somehow it reminded me of Edmund Wilson's old exhortation in the early 1930's: Let's take communism away from the Communists.

If you follow the progress of the New Journalism closely through the 1960's, you see an interesting thing happening. You see journalists learning the techniques of realism—particularly of the sort found in Fielding, Smollett, Balzac, Dickens and Gogol—from scratch. By trial and error, by "instinct" rather than theory, journalists began to discover the devices that gave the realistic novel its unique power, variously known as its "immediacy," its "concrete reality," its "emotional involvement," its "gripping" or "absorbing" quality.

This extraordinary power was derived mainly from just four devices, they discovered. The basic one was scene-by-scene construction, telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative. Hence the sometimes extraordinary feats of reporting that the new journalists undertook: so that they could actually witness the scenes in other people's lives as they took place—and record the dialogue in full, which was device No. 2. Magazine writers, like the early novelists, learned by trial and error something that has since been demonstrated in academic studies: namely, that realistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device. It also establishes and defines character more quickly and effectively than any other single device. (Dickens has a way of fixing a character in your mind so that you have the feeling he has described every inch of his appearance—only to go back and discover that he actually took care of the physical description in two or three sentences; the rest he has

accomplished with dialogue.) Journalists were working on dialogue of the fullest, most completely revealing sort in the very moment when novelists were cutting back, using dialogue in more and more cryptic, fey and curiously abstract ways.

The third device was the so-called "third-person point of view," the technique of presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it. Journalists had often used the first-person point of view—"I was there"—just as autobiographers, memoirists and novelists had. (Appendix III.) This is very limiting for the journalist, however, since he can bring the reader inside the mind of only one character—himself—a point of view that often proves irrelevant to the story and irritating to the reader. Yet how could a journalist, writing nonfiction, accurately penetrate the thoughts of another person?

The answer proved to be marvelously simple: interview him about his thoughts and emotions, along with everything else. This was what I had done in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, what John Sack did in *M* and what Gay Talese did in *Honor Thy Father*.

The fourth device has always been the least understood. This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene. Symbolic of what? Symbolic, generally, of people's *status life*, using that term in the broad sense of the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be. The recording of such details is not mere embroidery in prose. It lies as close to the center of the power of realism as any other device in literature. It is the very essence of the "absorbing" power of Balzac, for example. Balzac barely used point of view at all in the refined sense that Henry James used it later on. And yet the reader comes away feeling that he has been even more completely "inside" Balzac's characters than James's. Why? Here is the sort of thing Balzac does over and over. Before introducing you to Monsieur and Madame Marneffe personally (in *Cousine Bette*) he brings you into their drawing room and conducts a social autopsy: "The furniture covered in faded cotton velvet, the plaster statuettes masquerading as Florentine bronzes, the clumsily carved painted chandelier with its candle rings of molded glass, the carpet, a bargain whose low price was explained too late by the quantity of cotton in it, which was now visible to the naked eye—everything in the room, to the very curtains (which would

have taught you that the handsome appearance of wool damask lasts for only three years)"—everything in the room begins to absorb one into the lives of a pair of down-at-the-heel social climbers, Monsieur and Madame Marneffe. Balzac piles up these details so relentlessly and at the same time so meticulously—there is scarcely a detail in the later Balzac that does not illuminate some point of status—that he triggers the reader's memories of his own status life, his own ambitions, insecurities, delights, disasters, plus the thousand and one small humiliations and the status coups of everyday life, and triggers them over and over until he creates an atmosphere as rich and involving as the Joycean use of point of view.

I am fascinated by the fact that experimenters in the physiology of the brain, still the great terra incognita of the sciences, seem to be heading toward the theory that the human mind or psyche does not have a discrete, internal existence. It is not a possession locked inside one's skull. During every moment of consciousness it is linked directly to external clues as to one's status in a social and not merely a physical sense and cannot develop or survive without them. If this turns out to be so, it could explain how novelists such as Balzac, Gogol, Dickens and Dostoevsky were able to be so "involving" without using point of view with the sophistication of Flaubert or James or Joyce. (Appendix V.)

I have never heard a journalist talk about the recording of status life in any way that showed he even thought of it as a separate device. It is simply something that journalists in the new form have gravitated toward. That rather elementary and joyous ambition to show the reader *real life*—"Come here! Look! This is the way people live these days! These are the things they do!"—leads to it naturally. In any case, the result is the same. While so many novelists abandon the task altogether—and at the same time give up two thirds of the power of dialogue—journalists continue to experiment with all the devices of realism, revving them up, trying to use them in a bigger way, with the full passion of innocents and discoverers.

Their innocence has kept them free. Even novelists who try the new form . . . suddenly relax and treat themselves to forbidden sweets. If they want to indulge a craving for Victorian rhetoric or for a Humphrey Clinkerism such as, "At this point the attentive reader may wonder how our hero could possibly . . ."—they go ahead and do it, as Mailer does in *The Armies Of The Night* with considerable charm. In this new journalism there are no sacerdotal rules; not yet in any case. . . . If the journalist wants to shift from third-person point of view to first-person point of view in the same scene, or in and out of different characters' points of view, or even from the narrator's omniscient voice to someone else's stream of consciousness—as occurs in *The Electric Kool-Aid*

*Acid Test*—he does it. For the gluttonous Goths there is still only the outlaw's rule regarding technique: take, use, improvise. The result is a form that is not merely *like a novel*. It consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose. And all the while, quite beyond matters of technique, it enjoys an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*. The disclaimers have been erased. The screen is gone. The writer is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved.

At this point, as I have already discovered, the student of literature tends to say: Even if I grant you that, what about the *higher* accomplishments of the great fiction writers? You haven't even mentioned the creation of character, much less such matters as psychological depth, a sense of history, the struggle of ideas, the moral consciousness of man, the great *themes* of EngLit, in short. To which I would say: I am talking about technique; as for the rest, from character to moral consciousness (whatever that may be), it depends upon the writer's experience and intellect, his insights, the quality of his emotions, his ability to see into others, his "genius," to use the customary word—and this remains so whether he is working in fiction or in journalism. My argument is that the genius of any writer—again, in fiction or in nonfiction—will be severely handicapped if he cannot master, or if he abandons, the techniques of realism. The psychological, moral, philosophical, emotional, poetic, visionary (one may supply the adjectives as needed) power of Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Mann, Faulkner, is made possible only by the fact that they first wired their work into the main circuit, which is realism.

Novelists have made a disastrous miscalculation over the past twenty years about the nature of realism. Their view of the matter is pretty well summed up by the editor of the *Partisan Review*, William Phillips: "In fact, realism is just another formal device, not a permanent method for dealing with experience." I suspect that precisely the opposite is true. If our friends the cognitive psychologists ever reach the point of knowing for sure, I think they will tell us something on this order: the introduction of realism into literature by people like Richardson, Fielding and Smollett was like the introduction of electricity into machine technology. It was *not* just another device. It raised the state of the art to a new magnitude. The effect of realism on the emotions was something that had never been conceived of before. No one was ever moved to tears by reading about the unhappy fates of heroes and heroines in Homer, Sophocles, Molière, Racine, Sydney, Spenser or Shakespeare. But even the impeccable Lord Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, had cried

—actually blubbered, boo-hooed, snuffled and sighed—over the death of Dickens' Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

One doesn't have to admire Dickens or any of the other writers who first demonstrated this power in order to appreciate the point. For writers to give up this unique power in the quest for a more sophisticated kind of fiction—it is as if an engineer were to set out to develop a more sophisticated machine technology by first of all discarding the principle of electricity. In any case, journalists now enjoy a tremendous technical advantage. They have all the juice. This is not to say they have made maximum use of it. The work done in journalism over the past ten years easily outdazzles the work done in fiction, but that is saying very little. All that one can say is that the material and the techniques are now available, and the time is right.

The status crisis that first hit literature's middle class, the essayists or "men of letters," has now hit the novelists themselves. Some have turned directly to nonfiction. Some, such as Gore Vidal, Herbert Gold, William Styron and Ronald Sukenick, have tried forms that land on a curious ground in between, part fiction and part nonfiction. Still others have begun to pay homage to the power of the New Journalism by putting real people, with their real names, into fictional situations. . . . They're all sweating bullets. . . . Actually I wouldn't say the novel is dead. It's the kind of comment that doesn't mean much in any case. It is only the prevailing fashions among novelists that are washed up. I think there is a tremendous future for a sort of novel that will be called the journalistic novel or perhaps documentary novel, novels of intense social realism based upon the same painstaking reporting that goes into the New Journalism. I see no reason why novelists who look down on Arthur Hailey's work couldn't do the same sort of reporting and research he does—and write it better, if they're able. There are certain areas of life that journalism still cannot move into easily, particularly for reasons of invasion of privacy, and it is in this margin that the novel will be able to grow in the future.

When we talk about the "rise" or "death" of literary genres, we are talking about status, mainly. The novel no longer has the supreme status it enjoyed for ninety years (1875–1965), but neither has the New Journalism won it for itself. The status of the New Journalism is not secured by any means. In some quarters the contempt for it is boundless . . . even breathtaking. . . . With any luck at all the new genre will never be sanctified, never be exalted, never given a theology. I probably shouldn't even go around talking it up the way I have in this piece. All I meant to say when I started out was that the New Journalism can no longer be ignored in an artistic sense. The rest I take back. . . . The hell with it. . . . Let chaos reign . . . louder music, more wine. . . . The hell with the standings. . . . The top rung is up for grabs. All the old

traditions are exhausted, and no new one is yet established. All bets are off! the odds are canceled! it's anybody's ball game! . . . the horses are all drugged! the track is glass! . . . and out of such glorious chaos may come, from the most unexpected source, in the most unexpected form, some nice new fat Star Streamer Rockets that will light up the sky.

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## APPENDIX

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### I. The Early Status of the Novel

When Truman Capote insisted that *In Cold Blood* was not journalism but a new literary genre he had invented, "the nonfiction novel," a flash went through my mind. It was the familiar "Aha!" flash. In this case: "Aha! the ever-clever Fielding dodge!" When Henry Fielding published his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*, in 1742, he kept protesting that his book was not a novel—it was a new literary genre he had invented, "the comic epic poem in prose." He made the same claim for *Tom Jones*. He compared his books to the *Margites*, which was believed to be a lost comic epic of ancient Greece (by Homer, some said). What he was doing, of course—and what Capote would be doing 223 years later—was trying to give his work the cachet of the reigning literary genre of his time, so that literary people would take it seriously. The reigning genre in Fielding's time was epic poetry and verse-drama of the classical sort. The status of the novel was so low—well, it was as low as the status of magazine journalism in 1965 when Capote started publishing *In Cold Blood* in *The New Yorker*.

Thanks to this initial "Aha!" flash, I began to notice a curious thing. The early days of this new journalism were beginning to look like an absolute rerun of the early days of the realistic novel in England. A slice of literary history was repeating itself. I don't mean repetition in the vague sense of "there's nothing new under the sun." I mean exact repetition, *déjà vu*, finicky details. . . . The very same objections that greeted the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were starting to greet the New Journalism. In each case the new form is seen as "superficial," "ephemeral," "mere entertainment," "morally irresponsible." Some of the arguments were so similar it was uncanny. For example, one day I'm on a panel with a critic, Pauline Kael, and she says that one of the worst defects of the New Journalism is that it's "non-critical." She explains that it merely gets people "excited," and "you are left not knowing how to feel about it except to be excited about it," which she considers morally enervating for young people, "because the same way

they go for movies that have intensity and excitement, they like writing that has intensity and excitement. But it leaves them no basis at all for evaluating the material, and ultimately it simply means that the writing has to go from one charge to the next." I listen to that and . . . all at once I can hear a critic from more than a century before, John Ruskin himself, and he is objecting that *novels* are morally enervating, especially for young people, because of the mindless "excitement": "It is not the badness of a novel that we should dread," he is saying, "but its overwrought interest . . . its excitement," which simply "increases the morbid thirst" for more and more excitement.

Underlying such an attitude is the assumption that it is the duty of serious literature to give moral instruction. The notion had flowered in the seventeenth century, when literature was regarded not merely as an art form but as a branch of religion or ethical philosophy, the branch that taught by examples instead of precepts. Literature should "require the exertion of thought," as Coleridge put it later in objecting to the novel. It should be deep, morally serious, cosmic, and not too easy to read. It should deal with eternal truths and characters of grandeur and stature whose lives brought one closer to serious issues, the soul of man and the inner meaning of life. Like the New Journalism today, novels—and especially the realistic novels of men like Fielding, Sterne and Smollett (and, later, Dickens and Balzac)—seemed to fail all the vital tests. They had low aims ("mere entertainment"). They dwelt on manners ("superficial") rather than the verities and the soul. And they were so damnably Low Rent . . . all this morbid curiosity about the lives of footmen, farm wenches, innkeepers, degenerate clergymen, valets, blacksmiths, clerks, petty thieves, music-hall conductors, philanderers and mistresses and other people who had neither stature nor grandeur. Dr. Johnson dismissed Fielding's novels by saying his characters were so "low life," you would think Fielding himself must be "an ostler." Ostlers were the people who cleaned out the stables, the lowest of the Low Rent.

I couldn't help but think of that quaint complaint from two centuries before as I started hearing the New Journalism dismissed as "zoot-suited prose" (John Leonard, editor of *The New York Times Book Review*) and "zippy prose about inconsequential people" (Renata Adler), people such as petty bureaucrats, Mafiosi, line soldiers in Vietnam, pimps, hustlers, doormen, socialites, shyster lawyers, surfers, bikers, hippies and other accursed Youth, evangelists, athletes, "arriviste Jews" (Renata Adler again), people, in other words, who have neither stature nor grandeur.

I don't object to the style of the New Journalism being called "zippy" or "zoot-suited." If these seem like negative qualities, one need only try to imagine their opposites. But I don't think anyone can support the charge that

the New Journalism has shirked the task of "evaluating the material." All the New Journalists I have mentioned in this piece customarily go to great lengths (even overboard in some cases) to analyze and evaluate their material, although seldom in a moralistic fashion. None of them simply provides "documentaries." Nor can it be claimed that they have written only about "inconsequential" people or subjects. The charge is meaningless, in any case; but to meet it on its own grounds, one need only mention Talese's book on *The New York Times* (*The Kingdom and the Power*), Mailer's books on political conventions and the moon shot, Joe McGinniss' book on Nixon's 1968 campaign (*The Selling of the President*), Adam Smith's book on Wall Street (*The Money Game*), Sack's, Breslin's and Michael Herr's (*Khesanh*) writing about the war in Vietnam, Gail Sheehy's book on the Black Panthers (*Panthermania*), a book on black-white confrontations called *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, Garry Wills on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference . . . in fact, I can't think of a "consequential" subject or issue (except possibly in the sciences) that has not been dealt with in the new genre.

## II. Myth vs. Realism in the Novel

The idea that the novel has a spiritual function of providing a mythic consciousness for the people is as popular within the literary community today as the same idea was with regard to poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England. In 1972 the novelist Chandler Brossard writes that "true and original fiction is vision, and fiction writers are visionaries. It is myth and magic, and the writers of it are magicians and shamans, mythmakers and mythologists." Mark J. Mirsky writes a manifesto for a new periodical called *Fiction*, devoted to reviving the art in the 1970's, and he says: "We simply cannot believe that people have tired of stories, that the ear of America has atrophied permanently and is now deaf to myth, fable, puzzle, paradox." "In the mythos," he says, quoting Thoreau, "a superhuman intelligence uses the unconscious thoughts of men as its hieroglyphics to address men unborn."

Nothing could have been further from the minds of the realists who established the novel as the reigning genre over a hundred years ago. As a matter of fact, they were turning their backs, with a kind of mucker's euphoria, on the idea of myth and fable, which had been the revered tradition of classical verse and French- and Italian-style court literature. It is hard to realize today just how drenched in realism the novel was at the outset—*réalisme pour le réalisme!*—all this is true to life! Defoe presents *Robinson Crusoe* as the actual memoir of a shipwrecked sailor. Richardson presents *Pamela* as the actual correspondence of a young lady in the clutches of a man who wants to make

her his mistress instead of his wife. In the town of Slough the villagers gather around the blacksmith as he reads the episodes of *Pamela* aloud—and on the day he reaches the part where she finally wins her battle and maneuvers her pursuer into marrying her, they run off cheering and ringing church bells. In the mid-nineteenth century critics routinely checked out novels for literal accuracy, as if it were understood that this was one of the product's advertising promises and the novelist had better make good on it. It was very much like the way moviegoers used to (and perhaps still do) monitor movies for anachronisms and write the studios letters saying, "If this movie is supposed to be about gangsters in the Thirties, then how come in the scene where the man's head is shot off with a deer rifle outside the Nightfish Aquarium there is a 1941 Plymouth parked along the curb, which you can tell by the butterfly shape of the grille and—" Novelists routinely accepted the unpleasant task of doing reporting, legwork, "digging," in order to *get it just right*. That was part of the process of writing novels. Dickens travels to three towns in Yorkshire using a false name and pretending to be looking for a school for the son of a widowed friend—in order to get inside the notorious Yorkshire boarding schools to gather material for *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Social realists like Dickens and Balzac seemed so often to delight in realism pure and simple that it was held against them throughout their careers. Neither was regarded as a literary *artist* in his own lifetime (Balzac was not even invited into the French Academy). From the 1860's on, literary people—novelists as well as critics, I should add—began to develop the following theory: Realism is a powerful device but is of trivial interest unless it is used to illumine a higher reality . . . the cosmic dimension . . . eternal values . . . the moral consciousness . . . a road that led them right back to the classical tradition by and by, to the idea that literature has a spiritual mission, that it "speaks to men unborn," that it is magic, fable, myth, the mythos. By the 1920's, in both France and England, the novel of social realism already seemed gauche.

Thanks in part to the Depression, which stimulated *the* great phase of social realism in the American novel, the European "mythic" vogue did not come into American literature until after the second World War. By now, however, it is going strong. Almost all "serious" American novelists today come out of the universities, and there they usually learn to look to such models as Beckett, Pinter, Kafka, Hesse, Borges, and, more recently, Zamyatin (or the Zamyatin of *We*, in any case). The upshot has been a puzzling sort of fiction—puzzling to those outside the fraternity—in which the characters have no background, no personal history, are identified with no social class, ethnic group or even nationality, and act out their fates in a locale that has no place name, often some timeless and elemental terrain such as forest, swamp, desert, mountain

or sea. They often speak, if they speak at all, in short and rather mechanical sentences that, again, betray no specific background, or else they use inexplicably archaic diction. They respond to inexplicable forces, are obsessed with inexplicable dreads, and often perform fantastical physical feats. What are such narrative devices typical of? Why . . . myth, fable, parable, legend.

I think that unconsciously the strategy of these Neo-fabulists has run as follows: "Realism has been taken over by the new journalists, with whom I am powerless to compete. Besides, realism is old hat. So what is left for me to do? Why, to return to those most elemental and pure forms of story-telling, the forms from which literature itself has sprung; namely, myth, fable, parable, and legend!"

Some of the Neo-Fabulists get right down to it. They write directly in the form and rhythms of the fable, the fairy tale and the old epic histories: John Barth ("Dunyazadiad"), Borges, John Gardner, James Purdy, James Reinbold ("Family Portrait"), Alan V. Hewat, and Gabriel García Márquez. The rest pay homage to Neo-Fabulism, if only by observing such conventions as No Background, No Place Name, No Dialogue and the Inexplicables.

There have been certain peculiarly modern problems with the neo-fable, however. For one thing, at its best the fable is not a printed story but one told out loud. The fable is "primordial" only in the sense that it predates print. The fable was never able to compete with the power of the realistic printed story and can't now. By giving up the devices of realism—such as realistic dialogue, status detail and point of view—the Neo-Fabulist becomes like the engineer who decides to give up electricity because it has "been done."

While myth, fable, etc., may have come first, they never stood a chance, once more sophisticated techniques were discovered as a printed literature developed.

### III. Is the New Journalism Really New?

This is usually only a rhetorical question that says: Of course it isn't. I have never seen anyone stick around for an answer. Nevertheless, I will try to provide one:

The question is very much like the question scholars once debated as to whether or not the realistic novel may be said to originate in the eighteenth century with Richardson and Fielding (or Defoe, Richardson and Fielding). There have been some convincing demonstrations of their indebtedness to Cervantes, Rabelais, the French *roman*, Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, and even to a line of little-known novelists such as Thomas Deloney, Francis Kirkman, Mary de la Rivière Manley and Eliza Haywood. And yet if

one actually reads these earlier novelists, one sees that they simply have not done what Richardson and Fielding did. They have not rendered character, language, milieu and manners with a detailed and "everyday" realism.

Likewise in the case of the New Journalism. The person who asks if the New Journalism is really new often supplies names of writers who he believes did it all years ago, decades ago, even centuries ago. Upon inspection one finds that these writers usually fall into one of four categories: (1) they weren't writing nonfiction at all—as in the case of Defoe; and Addison and Steele in the "Sir Roger de Coverley Papers"; (2) they were traditional essayists, doing very little reporting and using few if any of the techniques of the New Journalism—such as Murray Kempton, I. F. Stone, and Baldwin, in the often cited case of *The Fire Next Time*; (3) autobiographers; (4) Literary Gentlemen with a Seat in the Grandstand. The last two categories deserve some amplification:

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY.** The word autobiography dates back to the late eighteenth century. It is the one form of nonfiction that has always had most of the powers of the novel. The technical problem of point of view is solved from the outset, because the autobiographer presents every scene from the same point of view, i.e., his own. In the best autobiographies this works perfectly, because the protagonist—the author himself—was at the center of the action. He has not been a reporter; he has simply lived his story and presumably knows it in detail; the autobiographer, by convention, is allowed to present dialogue from the past in extended detail on the grounds that he was there and can recall it. The line runs from De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* to Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* to Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* to Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* and is as powerful a form today as it ever was.

Many reporters attempting to write the New Journalism use an autobiographical format—"I was there and this is how it affected me"—precisely because this does seem to solve so many technical problems. The New Journalism has often been characterized as "subjective" journalism for that very reason; e.g., Richard Schickel, in *Commentary*, defined it as "a form in which it is understood that the writer keeps himself in the foreground at all times." In fact, most of the best work in the form has been done in third-person narration with the writer keeping himself absolutely invisible, such as the work of Capote, Talese, the early Breslin, Sack, John Gregory Dunne, Joe McGinniss.

In the late 1960's the notion of "subjectivity" came up in quite another way. The term New Journalism began to be confused with "advocacy journalism."

With the rise of the New Left you began to see more and more journalists of the technically most old-fashioned sort, such as Jack Newfield of *The Village Voice*, calling themselves New Journalists. I think the attraction was the word *new*. "If I am a journalist of the New Left—then I must be a New Journalist." Fortunately this phase seems about over; even Newfield has abandoned the position. But I think it really came to an end about the third time Newfield grouped himself with Jimmy Breslin as Us Two New Journalists. This must have made Breslin's flesh crawl.

**THE LITERARY GENTLEMAN WITH A SEAT IN THE GRANDSTAND.** This is an ancient and honorable type of essayist whose work differs from the New Journalism in the crucial matter of reporting. He has usually not done nearly enough reporting, nor the right type of reporting, to use the devices the new genre depends on.

William Hazlitt is often mentioned as "someone who was doing your 'new' journalism 150 years ago," and Exhibit A is his famous essay "The Fight," concerning a bareknuckle prizefight between Bill Neate and the Gasman. What one finds in this piece is some vivid writing about the blows that were struck, the grimaces on the fighters' faces, and so on—and that is it. There is nothing that could not have been as easily observed (if perhaps not as well described) by any other Gentleman in the Grandstand, or in the crowd at ringside in this case. I am sure that Hazlitt would have been too much of a gentleman, or too diffident, to do the sort of reporting that would have enabled him to bring the reader not merely inside the ring but inside the point of view of the fighters themselves, which is to say inside their lives—by following them through their training, going to their homes, talking to their children, their wives, their friends, as, for example, Gay Talese did in a story on Floyd Patterson.

Some enterprising scholar could write quite a nice monograph on the subject of "The Seventeenth-Century Code of the Gentleman as Preserved Within the Literary Worlds of England and the United States." The hypothesis would be that the experience of the literary man as (quite literally) the houseguest of the aristocracy in the seventeenth century created certain *social* attitudes concerning literary behavior and that these attitudes have persisted to this day, have been preserved through revolutions, wars, depressions, bohémias, bell-bottoms and tank tops and convulsions of every sort, so that a certain *social* protocol is still in effect.

The genteel tradition in nonfiction is summed up in the phrase "the polite essay." Legwork, "digging," reporting, especially reporting of the Locker Room Genre, is . . . well, beneath one's dignity. It puts the writer in such an

awkward position. He not only has to enter the bailiwick of the people he is writing about, he also becomes a slave to their schedules. Reporting can be tedious, messy, physically dirty, boring, dangerous even. But worst of all, from the genteel point of view, is the continual posture of humiliation. The reporter starts out by presuming upon someone's privacy, asking questions he has no right to expect an answer to—and no sooner has he lowered himself that far than already he has become a supplicant with his cup out, waiting for information or for something to happen, hoping to be tolerated long enough to get what he needs, adapting his personality to the situation, being ingratiating, obliging, charming, whatever seems to be called for, enduring taunts, abuse, even the occasional roughing up in the eternal eagerness for “the story”—behavior that comes close to being servile or even beggarly.

The Literary Gentleman in the Grandstand neither presumes nor begs; nor, in many cases, does he even take out the beggar's cup, which is the notebook. He maintains a gentlemanly posture in the grandstand—like most of the novelists who wrote “socially conscious” nonfiction in the 1930's (e.g., John Dos Passos' “The Anacostia Flats”). They seldom used point-of-view or dialogue except in the most perfunctory way. They supply mainly “vivid description” plus sentiment. D. H. Lawrence's description of a Hopi snake dance in New Mexico is little more than that, despite the initiative he showed in getting there in the first place. He obviously regarded what he was doing as a secondary form of literature and employed none of the sophisticated devices he would have used in a scene in a short story.

After all the enthusiasm I had seen critics generate over James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—a book about poor folks in the Appalachians during the Depression—reading it was a great disappointment. He showed enterprise enough, going to the mountains and moving in briefly with a mountain family. Reading between the lines I would say his problem was extreme personal diffidence. His account abounds in “poetic” descriptions and is very short on dialogue. It uses no point of view other than his own. Reading between the lines you get a picture of a well-educated and extremely shy man . . . too polite, too diffident to ask personal questions of these humble folk or even draw them out. Even Mailer's work shows the same odd defect, the same reluctance to take out the notebook and cross the genteel line and head through the doors marked Keep Out. There is very little in either *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* or *Of a Fire on the Moon* that could not have been observed by any other Literary Gentleman in the Grandstand. Perhaps the most diffident soul of all has been Murray Kempton. Kempton has never been able to bring himself down from the grandstand. He is up there to this day, crocheting his weird imitation British Essays full of elegant and stupefying

tautologies such as: “Mrs. Jessie McNab Dennis, an assistant curator for Western European arts, had attended the hearing as an observer, since not only her sentiments about the project but her expression of them were not of an order of docility her Director would find serviceable in a witness.”

NOT HALF-BAD CANDIDATES. Nevertheless, one can go back into literary history and find examples of nonfiction written by reporters, and not autobiographers or literary gentlemen in the grandstand, showing many of the characteristics of the New Journalism. For a start, Boswell. One thing I like about Boswell is the way he would actually try to thrust Johnson into situations so that he could report on them, get the dialogue, dote on the manners; such as the time he tricked Johnson into going to dinner at the house of his literary enemy, John Wilkes. . . . Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*; descriptions of the everyday rounds of typical London figures, duns, beadles, coachmen, etc., written for the *Morning Chronicle* and other sheets, a form used fairly often by New Journalists today. . . . Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, remarkable chiefly for the fact that Mayhew was willing to search out the very lowest classes of people in the East End of London and for the skill with which he caught their language. . . . Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad*; unlike the autobiographical *Life on the Mississippi*, this was a case in which Twain set out as a reporter with the idea of recording scenes and dialogue. . . . Chekhov's curious book *A Journey to Sakhalin*; the great dramatist and short-story writer sets out, at the height of his fame, to a penal colony off Russia's Pacific coast in order to expose conditions thereon; uneven, didactic, full of essays and statistics, but it includes some notable scenes (especially “The Pigs”). . . . Stephen Crane's vignettes of the Bowery for the *New York Press*; mostly “vivid description,” however, and very little penetration of the lives of their characters; just warm-ups for novels. . . . John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*; parts of it anyway, especially the scene where the proles challenge the authority of the naval officer. . . . Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, a case in which, if I am not mistaken, Orwell went through the experience in order to write about it (i.e., he approached it as a reporter). . . . The “reportage” school of the 1930's, which was centered about the magazine *New Masses*; theoreticians such as Joseph North had in mind a new journalism as full-bodied as anything I've been talking about, but most of the work degenerated into propaganda of a not very complex sort; it amuses me that North complained that literary people were calling his boys' new journalism “a bastard form.” . . . Some (but not much) of Hemingway's “reportage” from the same period. . . . Several of John Hersey's articles in the early 1940's, such as a sketch called “Joe Is Home Now.” (*Life*, July 3, 1944);

here we start getting into the direct ancestry of the present-day New Journalism. . . . Hersey's *Hiroshima*; very novelistic, takes up a whole issue of *The New Yorker* in 1946, has great influence on other *New Yorker* writers, such as Truman Capote and Lillian Ross. . . . Capote's profile of Marlon Brando and his account of an American cultural-exchange troupe's trip to Russia; A. J. Liebling's profile of an old *National Enquirer* columnist called "Colonel Stingo"; Lillian Ross's famous evisceration of Ernest Hemingway ("How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?"). . . . Various writers for *True*, notably Al Stump, author of an extraordinary chronicle of the last days of Ty Cobb. . . . (And, as John F. Szwed and Carol Ann Parssinen of the University of Pennsylvania have pointed out to me, some of Lafcadio Hearn's pieces for Cincinnati newspapers in the 1870's; e.g., "Slow Starvation," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 15, 1874.)

A new journalism was in the works during the 1950's, and it might have grown out of the work at *The New Yorker* or *True* or both, except for one thing: during the 1950's the novel was burning its last bright flame as the holy of holies. The worship of the novel as a sacred form reaches a peak in that decade, then suddenly begins to tail off as it becomes apparent that there is to be no golden "Postwar Period" in the novel. By the early 1960's a more spectacular form of new journalism—more spectacular in terms of style—has begun in *Esquire* and, shortly thereafter, *New York*. But if anyone wants to maintain that the current tradition starts with *The New Yorker* and *True*, I will not contest the point. There were also a few free-lance writers such as the late Richard Gehman who at one time or another in the 1950's used most of the techniques I have talked about.

#### IV. The Man of Letters

Many American men of letters actually had hopes in the mid-1960's of ascending to the upper class of literature, on at least a par with the novelists, a notion that probably would have puzzled even the sophisticated reading public at the time. Its appreciation of the phrase "man of letters" was probably closer to that of T.S. Eliot who once called them "minds of the second order" (and made it worse by saying we *need* minds of the second order, to do the bookkeeping and help circulate the ideas of others) or that of Balzac, who once said that "the designation 'man of letters' is the cruelest insult one can offer to an author" (since it indicates his status is derived more from his literary associations than his talent as a writer). The man of letters is often a critic, sometimes a literary historian or theoretician, and invariably a homeopathic idea doctor who uses his literary essays as an occasion to comment on morals

and society. Nevertheless, the man of letters had once, for about twenty years, been the reigning literary figure.

This was in the period 1820-1840 in England following the decline of poetry, a decline in status quite similar to the current "death of the novel." This occurred in the very moment when the great British reviews were on the rise, starting with the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802. The reviews established many literary conventions that persist unchanged to this day, such as the role of the literary man as a dissenter and opponent of entrenched power and the use of the form known as the "review-article," in which the literary man uses the book under review as a stepping-off point for a nature walk through a more general subject. The reviews had considerable political influence, and their editors were celebrities. In 1831 Thomas Carlyle said that the reigning poet of the period, Byron, had told him that the poet was no longer the undisputed king of literature; he now had to share the throne with the man of letters. By 1840 Carlyle believed that the man of letters now had it all to himself. He delivered a famous series of lectures on the Hero; lecture No. 5 was on "our most important person," the Hero as Man of Letters. Ironically, it was in that very decade, 1840-1850, that a band of literary Visigoths emerged from out of nowhere and dethroned the man of letters as quickly as he had risen: viz., the realistic novelists.

In New York in the early 1960's, what with all the talk of "the death of the novel," the man of letters seemed to be on the rise again. There was considerable talk of creating a "cultural elite," based on what the local literati believed existed in London. Such hopes were dashed, of course, by the sudden emergence of yet another horde of Visigoths, the New Journalists.

#### V. The Physiology of Realism (A Prediction)

This note is not concerned with history but the near future. I have already referred to current studies in the physiology of the brain. Over the next several decades experimenters in this area will begin focusing on the as-yet-mysterious process that serves as a God principle for most writers and other artists: creativity. Part of what they will discover about the powers of the written word (I predict) will be this:

Print (as opposed to film or theater) is an indirect medium that does not so much "create" images or emotions as jog the reader's memories. For example, writers describing drunk scenes seldom try to describe the state of drunkenness itself. They count on the reader having been drunk at some time in his life. They as much as say, "So-and-so was drunk—and, well, you know what that's like." (With regard to more arcane highs, such as LSD or methe-

drine, the writer can make no such assumption—and this has stymied many writers.) For that matter, writers have a hard time even creating a picture of a human face. Detailed descriptions tend to defeat their own purpose, because they break up the face rather than create an image. Writers are much more likely to provide no more than a cartoon outline. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn will speak of “Big Ivan, a tall, scrawny sergeant with black eyes. The first time you saw him he scared the pants off you. . . .” Or: “There was a blank look on the Tartar’s hairless, crumpled face” . . . and that is the extent of facial description. The reader’s memory (if any) of such individuals is invited to fill in the rest.

Yet this basic operation—jogging the reader’s memory—has some unique and rather marvelous advantages. If students of the brain are correct so far, human memory seems to be made up of sets of meaningful data—as opposed to what the older mechanistic theory presumed: viz., that it is made up of random bits of meaningless or haphazard data that are then combined and given meaning by the mind. These memory sets often combine a complete image and an emotion. The power of a single image in a story or song to evoke a complex feeling is well known. I have always enjoyed the opening lines of a country and western song by Roger Miller called “King of the Road.” “Trailers for Sale or Rent,” it begins, “Room to Let Fifty Cents.” It is not the part about the trailers that I enjoy so much as the “Room to Let.” This is the sort of archaic wording that, in my experience, is found only in windows or on door frames in the oldest and most run-down section of a city. It immediately triggers in my memory a particular view of a particular street near Worcester Square in New Haven, Connecticut. The emotion it calls up is one of loneliness and deprivation but of a rather romantic sort (bohemian). One’s memory is apparently made up of millions of such sets, which work together on the Identikit principle. The most gifted writers are those who manipulate the memory sets of the reader in such a rich fashion that they create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader’s own real emotions. The events are merely taking place on the page, in print, but the emotions are real. Hence the unique feeling when one is “absorbed” in a certain book, “lost” in it.

Only certain specific devices can jog or trigger the memory in such a rich fashion however; the same four devices I have already mentioned: scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, point of view and the detailing of status life. Two of these devices, scenes and dialogue, can be handled better on film than in print. But the other two, point of view and the detailing of status life, work far better in print than on film. No film maker has ever successfully brought the audience inside the mind or central nervous system of a character—something that even bad novelists are able to accomplish as a matter of

routine. Film makers have tried everything. They have tried voice-over narration. They have tried making the camera the “eyes” of the protagonist, so that the only time you see him is when he stands in front of a mirror. The current fashion is “memory flashes,” quick cuts, sometimes in filtered tones, to memories of the past. None of it successfully puts you inside the skull of a character on film. (What came closest, for me, was the use of asides into the camera by Michael Caine in *Alfie*; they started out as comic bits, à la the movie *Tom Jones*, but ended up as rather moving moments, far more effective, strangely, than asides in a stage play.) Certain realistic novels are successful because they dwell so realistically, so effectively, on the mental life and emotional atmosphere of a particular character. These stories are almost always disasters when put on screen; e.g., *Tropic of Cancer* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The makers of such movies usually run up the flag of defeat by finally having someone, via voice-over or on screen, recite great chunks of the novel itself, as if in the hope that *this* will recapture the power of the goddamned book. The power, unfortunately for them, is completely wrapped up in the unique physiological relationship between written language and the memory.

The movies are almost as bad at dealing with status life. In print a writer can present a status detail and then nudge the reader to make sure he knows its significance, and it all seems very natural. In the opening scene of *Madame Bovary* Flaubert introduces Charles Bovary as a boy of fifteen on his first day at a boarding school. “He wore his hair cut straight across the forehead, *like a cantor in a village church*. . . .” My italics; here and throughout the passage Flaubert keeps nudging the reader to make sure the picture he is describing adds up to a country boy, a *rustaud*, who looks ridiculous to his schoolmates. The movies, of course, can present the same details but cannot point out the significance except through dialogue, which soon becomes very labored. As a result the movie rendition of status life is the broad stroke . . . the mansion, the servants, the Rolls, the bum, the switchboard operator with the “Bronx” accent. . . . Since the movie maker cannot nudge the viewer, he often ends up making his status points over-obvious visually . . . the mansion that is *too* big, the servants who are *too* formal. . . .

The first movie maker to deal successfully with point of view and status life will be the first giant in that field. Sad to say, the students of cognition may discover that technically and physiologically it is an impossible problem for film.

## VI. Reporting

There is no history of reporting, so far as I know. I doubt that it ever occurred to anyone, even in the journalism schools, that the subject might

have historical phases. The sort of reporting that one now finds in the New Journalism probably begins with the travel literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (and, as I say, with the singular figure of Boswell). Many of the travel writers seem to have been inspired by the success of autobiographies. Their idea was to create some autobiography for themselves by heading off to foreign places in search of color and adventure. Melville, for example, began his career in the travel & adventure vein with *Omoo* and *Typee*.

Historically the interesting thing is how seldom it occurred to writers of nonfiction that they could do this sort of reporting in anything other than autobiography. I am talking about the kind of comprehensive reporting that enables one to portray scenes, extensive dialogue, status life and emotional life, in addition to the usual data of the essay-narrative. In the nineteenth century novelists did much more of this sort of reporting than journalists. I have already cited the examples of Balzac and Dickens. The sort of research that Dostoevsky did for *The Possessed* is another example. One reason that nonfiction writers were slow to see the possibilities of this approach was that nonfiction, except for the autobiography, was seen as a didactic genre, at least in its highest expression. A writer seeking to teach a lesson usually was after no more content than it took to make his case appear solid. In *A Journey to Sakhalin* one can see Chekhov struggling against this convention and breaking free of it only in spots.

One of the greatest changes brought about by the new breed of journalists has been a reversal of this attitude—so that the proof of one's technical mastery as a writer becomes paramount and the demonstration of moral points becomes secondary. This passion for technical brilliance has lent them a strange sort of objectivity, an egotistical objectivity but an objectivity of sorts in any case.

When one moves from newspaper reporting to this new form of journalism, as I and many others did, one discovers that the basic reporting unit is no longer the datum, the piece of information, but the scene, since most of the sophisticated strategies of prose depend upon scenes. Therefore, your main problem as a reporter is, simply, managing to stay with whomever you are writing about long enough for the scenes to take place before your own eyes. There are no rules or craft secrets of reporting that will help a man pull this off; it is completely a test of his personality. Reporting never becomes any easier simply because you have done it many times. The initial problem is always to approach total strangers, move in on their lives in some fashion, ask questions you have no natural right to expect answers to, ask to see things you weren't meant to see, and so on. Many journalists find it so ungentlemanly,

so embarrassing, so terrifying even, that they are never able to master this essential first move. Murray Kempton and Jack Newfield are examples of two reporters hobbled by this fear. The only strangers Newfield apparently feels comfortable about approaching are people like this month's revolutionary macho of the century who has been previously assured that the reporter is friendly.

Reporters themselves tend to grossly overestimate the difficulty of getting close to the people they want to write about and staying with them. The sociologist Ned Polsky used to complain that criminologists studied criminals only in jail—where they lied their heads off in hopes of parole—on the assumption that of course they could never approach the criminal in his own habitat. Polsky contended, and proved in his own work, that criminals do not look upon themselves as criminals but merely as people hustling to make their way in the world and can be fairly easily approached as such. Furthermore, they often feel that their exploits deserve being preserved in literature. Gay Talese proved this theory to a great extent by penetrating a Mafia family and writing *Honor Thy Father* (although he steered clear of one key area, their criminal activities themselves).

Most good journalists who hope to get inside someone else's world and stay there awhile come on very softly and do not bombard their subjects with questions. In his extraordinary reporting feats with the sports world George Plimpton adopted the strategy of hanging back in the shadows with such diffidence and humility that *they* would finally ask him to f'r chrissake come on out and play. But, again, it is mainly a matter of one's own personality. If a reporter stays with a person or group long enough, they—reporter and subject—will develop a personal relationship of some sort, even if it is hostility. More often it will be friendship of some sort. For many reporters this presents a more formidable problem than penetrating the particular scene in the first place. They become stricken with a sense of guilt, responsibility, obligation. "I hold this man's reputation, his future, in my hands"—that becomes the frame of mind. They may begin to feel like voyeurs—"I have preyed upon this man's life, devoured it with my eyes, made no commitment myself, etc." People who become overly sensitive on this score should never take up the new style of journalism. They inevitably turn out second-rate work, biased in such banal ways that they embarrass even the subjects they think they are "protecting." A writer needs at least enough ego to believe that what he is doing as a writer is as important as what anyone he is writing about is doing and that therefore he shouldn't compromise his own work. If he doesn't believe that his own writing is one of the most important activities going on in contemporary civilization, then he ought to move on to something else he thinks is

... become a welfare eligibility worker or a clean-investment counselor for the Unitarian Church or a noise abatement surveyor. . . .

Assuming that this side of it isn't too overwhelming, Saturation Reporting, as I think of it, can be one of the most exhilarating trips, as they say, in the world. Often you feel as if you've put your whole central nervous system on red alert and turned it into a receiving set with your head panning the molten tableau like a radar dish, with you saying, "Come in, world," since you only want . . . all of it. . . . Some of the nicest times are when Pesky Danger rises, and the adrenaline flows, and the whole riot is on, and the shitfire rains from on high—and you discover that your set is still on! you're still combing the chaos for the details! the creamy stuff you can use! . . . Why, that horrible fiend who just threw the sapper bomb in the ballet master's lap—was that a mishar or a bandana he had around his neck? And where is that little ace who was right up there next to him, the one with no chin—I can probably get the filthy Tartar's name from him—and . . . "Get whitey! Get whitey! Get whitey!"—they've started that crap again and they're heading straight this way—but did you ever notice that Mongol women are louder than the men, and bigger?—huge, fat and horrible, like the Green Bay Packers, the filthy rhinos . . . and that one that's heading straight for me—Get whitey!—bleeding shitfire from her eyeballs—a 200-pound mongoloid porkchop Tartar—what the fuck is that she has stuck in her hair—why, it's a goddamned angel's food cake cutter . . . and as it all comes down, as the world comes to an end, with an angel's food cake cutter slicing through the temporal fossa of my very melon—the wires have gotten crossed . . . but in what a delicious way . . . one coming straight from the Terror Panic terminal but the other carrying the message to a panting world: Friends! Citizens! Magazine readers! What a *scene* this is going to make! So help me, this is the way people live now! This is the—(gork))))))))))

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## PART TWO

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# THE NEW JOURNALISM: AN ANTHOLOGY

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edited by Tom Wolfe  
and E. W. Johnson