

The Hoax, Uncanny Identity, and Literary Journalism

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The blurring of boundaries between the literary journalist and real-life subject can result in the former being the victim of a hoax by the latter, a consequence of an uncanny aesthetic in literary journalism.

“Once more, in order to arrive at an understanding of what seems so simple in normal phenomena, we shall have to turn to the field of pathology with its distortions and exaggerations.”—Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”¹

The coalescence of literary journalism as a genre in the late twentieth century gave rise to a particular manifestation of the “uncanny,” experienced by writers and readers alike. In what follows I explore the role of the uncanny—the peculiar disquiet Sigmund Freud associated with that which is simultaneously alien and familiar²—in works of literary journalism about hoaxes, by examining three book-length examples from the genre: Emmanuel Carrère’s work, *The Adversary: A True Story of Monstrous Deception*,³ Janet Malcolm’s *The Journalist and the Murderer*,⁴ and Matthew Finkel’s *True Story: Memoir, Murder, and Mea Culpa*.⁵ These authors all draw explicit parallels between their work and the hoaxes perpetrated by their protagonists—parallels that suggest a blurring of the boundary between author and real-life subject, and between phenomenal reality and imaginative interpretation.

To varying degrees, these writers are all fascinated by something in their subjects that is simultaneously familiar and alien—something that can be de-

scribed as their uncanny “double.” In his article “‘My Story Is Always Escaping into Other People’: Subjectivity, Objectivity, and the Double in American Literary Journalism,” Robert Alexander argues that examples abound of literary journalists identifying with their subject/doubles, and he explores the phenomenon as a means for helping to determine what, in fact, may make such work literary.⁶ By looking at works in which the authors explicitly address their relationships to their subjects, I explore the idea that literary journalism about hoaxes creates an uncanny effect by leaving readers uncertain as to where facts end and interpretation begins. I further argue that the identification of the author with his subject or double—and the limits of this identification—is one root of that uncertainty. These dynamics are especially clear in the works I examine because the authors are identifying with known frauds, intentionally raising questions about journalism’s relationship to a verifiable or external reality. But these extreme cases have potential implications for literary journalism more generally.

Few experiences rival finding yourself the victim of a con or hoax, which not only triggers discomfort, but also is a *psychological* crime in its manipulation of identity. Con games implant needling uncertainty in their victims, once they discover they are victims, about their judgment of character that is not easily overcome. Indeed, the victim’s ability to distinguish between the real and the invented is thrown in doubt; all relationships become suspect, all meetings fraught. Even the victim’s own self-image seems to waver like a mirage.

A literary parallel to this scenario has emerged in the development of literary nonfiction. Take the example in 2006 of the James Frey debacle, in which the best-selling memoirist and Oprah Book Club hero was discovered to have zealously embellished his story of drug addiction and recovery.⁷ Like all scandals, Frey’s public excoriation—spearheaded by a righteously indignant Winfrey—served to delineate social and professional norms. But the reading public’s hysterical response suggested there was something more at stake, perhaps because, I will argue, a familiar character had morphed before them into an unplaceable, illusory figure, planting a nagging anxiety that was difficult to identify.

I would suggest that this disquieting experience is best described as “uncanny,” a strange quality of feeling that is notoriously difficult to define or to sum up in one facile example.⁸ The most influential work on the topic, Freud’s famous essay, is a catalog of often contradictory examples of events and objects that produce the feeling: automata; severed limbs that move on their own; death and the apparent return of the dead; confrontation with one’s double; repetition of something unusual and unintended; the folkloric

evil eye.⁹ As these examples suggest, the uncanny is often associated with, “an experience of liminality,” and that which blurs boundaries we hold dear, like those of life and death, human and non-human.¹⁰ Freud adapts Schelling’s claim that “everything is *unheimlich* [uncanny] that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light,”¹¹ concluding that the basis of the uncanny is either long-surmounted primal belief, such as fear of ghosts or phantoms, or the result of a long-repressed childhood trauma, such as the fear of losing one’s eyes.¹² Drawing from Freud, Nicholas Royle provides a good partial introduction to the concept:

The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one’s sense of oneself (of one’s so-called ‘personality’ or ‘sexuality’, for example) seems strangely questionable. . . . But the uncanny is not simply an experience of strangeness or alienation. More specifically, it is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar.¹³

Thus the description applies well to identity hoaxes and con games: They leave us with that disturbing sense that something, or someone, both is and isn’t what we had thought. By drawing parallels between these hoaxes and the work of literary journalists, the works discussed below allow us to explore the idea that the relationship between the writer and his subject—which again is inherent to all literary journalism—may be predicated on its own kind of identity fraud, one that contributes to the works’ unsettling effects. As the Frey scandal suggests, readers’ awareness of these behind-the-scenes tensions may vary, but their hidden nature just makes them more disturbing—and even insidious—when they come to light.

A STATE OF LIMBO

The degree to which a reporter resembles a con man is not a settled matter. In 1989, Janet Malcolm sparked heated debate among journalists in a pair of articles (and subsequent book) that examined the dark underbelly of the journalist/subject relationship.¹⁴ Malcolm argued that all journalists feign sympathy for their subjects—effectively seducing them—in order to steal their stories, only to betray them by writing their own versions of these accounts. Many journalists disputed her claim. But while the topic has been debated to some extent within the professional sphere, it has received less attention from journalism scholars.¹⁵

Works of literary journalism provide an interesting way to explore this relationship, because the subject/journalist interaction behind these works is often more prolonged and intimate than in conventional “inverted pyramid”

news stories, and literary journalists have freedom to address the issue explicitly in their writing. The degree to which their findings are applicable to the practice of conventional “objective” news reporting is less clear, but they hint at the little-explored trickiness of subjectivity at work in all journalism. So it is especially unfortunate that, as Jan Whitt argues in her recent work, *Settling the Borderland, Other Voices in Literary Journalism*,¹⁶ literary journalism makes scholars of literature and journalism studies mutually nervous, partly because they simply don’t know where to place it, and partly because it seems to embrace aspects of each that have been unacknowledged until recently. Borrowing Freud’s language, literary journalism foregrounds much that has long “remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”¹⁷

But while its uneasy home in the academy lends the study of literary journalism its own uncanniness, my real concern is the contemporary phenomenon of the uncanny aesthetic generated by the writing and the reading of literary journalism.

The rise of objectivity as journalism’s defining principle throughout much of the twentieth century exiled the subjectivity that necessarily infuses all writing to a kind of haunting, unacknowledged state. As Michael Schudson has pointed out, the rise of objectivity in the 1920s occurred at precisely the time when it was increasingly recognized as impossible, in part because of the growing cultural penetration of psychological analysis, including that of Freud.¹⁸ However unattainable, objectivity as a journalistic ideal publicly negated the inevitability of subjectivity, which was only acknowledged when egregious breaches of the objectivity code forced the profession to respond to an aghast public. In its own way, objectivity was a kind of con.

In a sense, as argued elsewhere, forms of literary journalism sprang up to confront the problem of subjectivity as an alternative to facts-only news in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁹ Writers including Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis, and Theodore Dreiser embraced their own perspective as storytellers and played it up in their writing. Similarly, the New Journalists in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized their own subjectivity, arguing that their literary approach captured more truth than a dry, “objective” journalism. Writers such as Joan Didion and John McPhee allowed their own subjectivities to show without sacrificing strict reportorial standards. But as has been much documented by their critics, techniques used by some of the most celebrated New Journalists are difficult to reconcile with their claims (or those of their publishers) to factual accuracy.

This conjures a new ghost; while interpretation of phenomenal reality and creative or imaginative invention once blurred somewhat harmoniously, now they are expected to remain separate, the fine line between the two often

seen by audiences as a fortified wall. But, as Freud observes, “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.”²⁰ Writers are plagued by the ever-present temptation to cross that line, and audiences are haunted by the possibility that they might. It is for this reason, as I have suggested, that in their explorations of identity hoaxes some journalists draw parallels between their own literary endeavors and the deception perpetrated by their subjects.

THE ADVERSARY

One of the many strategies contemporary literary journalists have adopted to reduce tension between their own subjectivity and accuracy is to appear to be completely transparent about the reporting and writing process. Abandoning all pretense of omniscience in favor of a reflexive first-person account, the writer mulls his or her relationship to the subject, and tries to expose personal biases toward the material, allowing the reader to interpret the “facts.”²¹ Emmanuel Carrère adopts this technique in his disconcerting work, *The Adversary: A True Story of Monstrous Deception*.²² Published in French in 2000, it is the account of Jean-Claude Romand, a celebrated and beloved medical researcher, who appears to live the perfect life until a house fire kills his family, leaving him in a coma as the sole survivor. His friends rally to his bedside, especially when they learn that Romand’s wife and two small children had been murdered before the fire. Miles away, his parents are found shot dead as well.

Friends pray Romand will never wake to learn of his ruined life. But their compassion changes from shock to horror and then to fear when they discover that Romand himself committed the crimes. Never having suspected a thing, his friends and family are horrified to discover they have lived for years with a kind of specter, an invented shell of a man capable of killing his wife and children.

Investigations reveal that since he missed a final exam in his first year of medical school almost twenty years before, Romand’s entire life has been a fabrication. Rather than working at the World Health Organization, as his family believed, he had driven aimlessly around the country, squandering the life savings of friends who had trusted him to invest on their behalf. Romand had contemplated revealing his deception many times but had balked, fearing that to do so would be to reveal himself as void, a non-person. “Shedding the skin of Dr. Romand would mean ending up without any skin, more than naked: flayed.”²³

Romand survives, of course. Carrère begins a correspondence with Romand, interviews his friends and surviving family members, and pores over court transcripts. But even after Romand is effectively unmasked and his

deceptions revealed in a trial that results in a life sentence, Carrère still finds it difficult to peel away the contrived layers of Romand's personality. Like Carrère, the psychologists who examine a suddenly pious Romand in prison are struck by his inability to stop performing. Just as he had once imitated a lauded physician, Romand now constructs what they call a "narcissistic narrative" in which, "the character of the respected researcher has been replaced by the no-less-gratifying character of the serious criminal on the road to mystical redemption."²⁴ His reactions to questions and therapy seem mechanical, devoid of sincerity. Freud names manifestations of insanity and automata as bearers of uncanny effects²⁵; Romand, in a sense, has qualities of both. He is clearly alive, but involved in a strangely robotic cycle of self-invention that continues after his conviction.

Carrère suspects there is nothing truly human beneath the charade: "A lie usually serves to conceal a truth, something shameful, perhaps, but real. His concealed nothing. Behind the false Dr. Romand there was no real Jean-Claude Romand."²⁶ Telling the story of this mechanized man proves a great challenge to Carrère; while he musters some sympathy for the murderer, he has difficulty seeing enough of himself reflected in Romand to portray him accurately. In order to capture Romand's character as honestly and accurately as possible, the author must find enough of himself in his subject so that interpretation and external reality align. In one of several letters between them that Carrère includes in the book, he tells Romand that he has abandoned the project due to

a difficulty that is obviously much greater for you [Romand] than for me [Carrère] and that is at stake in the psychological and spiritual work in which you are engaged: this lack of access to yourself, this voice that has never stopped growing in place of the person in you who must say "I." Clearly, I am not the one who will say "I" on your behalf, but in writing about you, I still need to say—in my own name and without hiding behind a more or less imaginary witness or patchwork of information intended to be objective—what speaks to me in your life and resonates in mine. Well, I cannot. Words slip away from me; the "I" sounds false.²⁷

Jacques Lacan claims the ego can only define itself as an "I" once it is able to see itself reflected in a mirror; at the mirror stage, a separation, a loss of connection with all other objects, facilitates the self-understanding of oneself as a unique individual, separate from the rest of the world. While it is a loss of oneness with the world, it is that very loss that allows us to perceive ourselves as bounded subjects and therefore, as Mladen Dolar observes, makes "it possible to deal with a coherent reality."²⁸ Whether one subscribes to a Lacanian interpretation or to another theory of identity formation, it is

precisely this sense of Romand as unique, self-contained, and separate from the rest of the world that he either appears to lack or have only in stunted form. As such, he occupies a space between his own subjectivity and all other objects, a liminal space Dolan identifies as the Lacanian uncanny.

To complicate matters, Romand is Carrère's subject; but in psychoanalytic terms, Romand is the *object* to Carrère's subject, insofar as Carrère is the one telling the story. Again, as noted elsewhere, all literary journalism attempts to narrow the gap between the writer/subject and the object about which he is writing.²⁹ At the same time, the writer must maintain enough separation from the object to be able to document him. In his letter Carrère seems to suggest that the journalist must pass through a kind of distorted version of the mirror-phase in order to create a character out of a living person; he can say "I" through a character only if he can see himself reflected in the object on whom that character is based. If that object is as ill-defined as Romand, this is impossible; for Romand, like all ghosts, casts no reflection. This throws into question the writer's own subjectivity; his identity as a subject separate from the object he writes about is thwarted if he cannot see his own reflection in the person about whom he is writing.

Ultimately, Carrère's work survives. The writer recovers from his short-lived self-doubt and decides to focus the book on his own literary and ethical difficulty with Romand's story, thereby partially side-stepping the problem of not being able to completely understand who his subject/object is. He intersperses segments of Romand's story with anecdotes of his own, at times drawing explicit parallels between his own life and Romand's. He, too, knows the loneliness of sitting alone all day, fearing that he will simply cease to exist; he understands the compulsion to lie for attention for he, too, did so as a child. But the similarity between the two men is most uncannily evident in the parallel between Carrère's trying to locate a character in his work, and Romand's struggle to find one in his life. When Carrère admits he cannot find the "true" Romand with whom to identify, he is actually naming the most profound thing they have in common: neither can find the true Romand—and by implication Carrère therefore cannot find himself. In this sense, Romand truly *is* Carrère's double. Searching for the same elusive character and finding only absence where there should be a subject, both men are forced to create something to fill the space. While Romand initially has "trouble separating himself from the character he had played all those years,"³⁰ his psychiatrists note that he gradually creates a new character for himself, that of a born-again, repentant murderer.

Carrère, upstanding journalist that he is, cannot invent, but he refuses to accept that the newly devout Romand is sincere. The appearance of one's

double always thwarts subjectivity because the double occupies the space between one's self and the Other in what constitutes the uncanny; my double is frighteningly similar to myself, yet he is not myself.³¹ One can only imagine that this effect is even more unsettling when one's double turns out to be a mentally ill murderer (death and insanity both being sources of the uncanny),³² who behaves like something of an (uncanny) automaton,³³ and whose true personality is ghostly and ill-defined (also uncanny).³⁴ As Dolar concludes, "In the end, the relation gets so unbearable that the subject [in the form of the author], in a final showdown, kills his double."³⁵ Carrère attempts to vanquish his double by rejecting the repentant character Romand has proffered and instead documenting his own path toward trying to grasp his subject's true character. He finally concludes that the void within Romand is at times overtaken by a deceiving Other, an evil force Carrère refers to as "the Adversary"—*L'Adversaire*—a French biblical reference to Satan.³⁶ It is this "liar inside him" that blinds Romand to the true horrors of his acts,³⁷ and Carrère makes it clear that whatever else he and his subject/object may have in common, this is not something that they share.

But Carrère remains haunted by the concern that, despite his attempts to be transparent and resist being taken in by his subject/object, he may have facilitated the madman's ongoing identity hoax. Romand's team of psychiatrists report that their patient, "does not have access to his own truth but reconstructs it with the aid of the interpretations held out to him by the psychiatrists, the judge, the media."³⁸ A reporter accuses Carrère of providing just such an interpretation for Romand's use, adding, "He must be thrilled that you're writing a book on him! That's what he's dreamed about his whole life."³⁹ Indeed, by converting the real-life character Jean-Claude Romand into a literary one, Carrère worries he has simply provided his subject/object with affirmation and attention, the precise reactions that motivated Romand's original lethal charade. This concern reverberates in the book's final sentence, "I thought that writing this story could either be a crime or a prayer."⁴⁰ It's as though the object—the indecipherable Other Carrère attempts to translate for the reader—ultimately hijacked the book for his own purposes. Or, since the Other proved too persistently familiar, it's as though Carrère had wrestled with his own double and may have lost after all; Carrère suspects he has simply become a conduit for Romand's diabolical story.

This narrows the gap between Romand and the reader, because the reader is left with the possibility that he—along with Carrère—have *both* been had. Yes, as Carrère documents, his sneaking suspicion that Romand may have used him is deeply disturbing. But the reader is further unsettled by a sneaking suspicion that this, too, could have been the effect that Carrère was

trying to create. In all other ways *The Adversary* appears carefully crafted to generate the most disturbing possible effects; why not this, too? The author's blurring of the boundary between the two subjects—the author/subject and the subject/object—leaves the reader in doubt as to where he stands in relation to each, questioning whether he, too, has been made victim or accomplice in an elaborate con.

THE JOURNALIST AND THE MURDERER

In her 1990 book, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm argues that the object “subjected” to the journalist’s pen is the real victim of the journalistic identity hoax,⁴¹ which of course has much larger ramifications for literary journalism in general, not just with the three books discussed here which focus on the subject of hoaxes. On the surface, one of the two characters at the heart of her book bears an unsettling resemblance to Jean-Claude Romand: Jeffrey MacDonald, an attractive, successful, and seemingly content military doctor, is convicted of the apparently motiveless murder of his pregnant wife and two small children. Unlike Romand, MacDonald insisted—and still insists today—that he was wrongly convicted, a possibility that Malcolm leaves open. The reader, like Malcolm, is never certain whether MacDonald himself is a fraud or not. The same cannot be said for Joe McGinniss, one-time friend of MacDonald and author of *Fatal Vision*, a true crime work depicting MacDonald as a cold-blooded psychopath.⁴² McGinniss is the second major character in Malcolm’s book. Malcolm uses McGinniss’s portrayal—and betrayal—of his subject as a lens to explore the perils of the writer/subject relationship inherent in all literary journalism.

Malcolm traces the origin of McGinniss’s—and of all journalists—deception of their subjects to the interview stage. McGinniss approaches MacDonald about writing his story early in the trial process, and MacDonald complies eagerly, convinced the resulting work will exonerate him. McGinniss receives complete access to the accused during the trial, living with MacDonald and his lawyers while they mount their defense. In an unconventional move intended to circumvent questions of attorney/client privilege, he is even made an official member of MacDonald’s defense team. As Malcolm recounts it, the two men, similar in temperament and proclivities, become close friends, and throughout the trial McGinniss continually asserts his faith in MacDonald’s innocence. The two correspond regularly even after MacDonald is sentenced to life in prison, with McGinniss all the while professing his friendship and support for MacDonald in a series of obsequiously sympathetic letters, which Malcolm excerpts.

The publication of the book four years later shocks and horrifies MacDonald: McGinniss has portrayed him as a narcissistic monster who mur-

dered his family in cold blood. Serving a life sentence in prison does not stop MacDonald from promptly suing McGinniss for libel. Even more remarkably, five out of six jury members in the libel suit find the writer deliberately and unforgivably deceptive. The trial ends in a hung jury, but the eerie fact remains that most jurors found a convicted murderer more sympathetic and trustworthy than the journalist who wrote about him.

While McGinniss's misrepresentation of his own stance during the interview process was an egregious case, Malcolm points out in her book that most journalists conceal their opinions to some degree in order to keep their subjects talking. During the libel trial, the defense calls various "expert" witnesses, including famed journalists Joseph Wambaugh and William F. Buckley, to testify about what degree of misrepresentation is permissible. Both argue that gaining a subject's trust during the interview stage is absolutely vital, and that alienating him by expressing a contrary opinion would be counterproductive. Wambaugh argues that in order to preserve a piece of writing, which he sees as a living thing, he must not suffocate it by cutting off the flow of information that will infuse it with its life force. The jury finds their arguments reprehensible, little more than defenses for outright lying.

Malcolm, too, condemns McGinniss in no uncertain terms, but agrees with the defense that all journalists are guilty of a degree of deception in their relationship to their subjects. Her book's opening lines summarize the problem:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction writing learns—when the book appears—*his* hard lesson.⁴³

In other words, Malcolm believes all journalists commit a kind of double identity fraud in which they misrepresent themselves to their subjects in the interview stage, then misrepresent their subjects to the world when they sit down to write. Malcolm, an experienced journalist herself, sees all subjects—even those who have experienced the con before—as powerless to resist the compulsion to tell journalists their stories, partly because they are flattered, but ultimately because they want to confess to a fully attentive listener. For their part, journalists appear to provide a sympathetic ear, but are really playing on their subject's weakness in order to get a story. What may be seen as narrowing the gulf between the self and the Other, Malcolm understands as

a much more insidious, exploitative enterprise. Subjects are invariably taken in, perhaps because the confession stage provides immediate gratification. But the relationship later takes on a more maleficent character:

The journalistic encounter seems to have the same regressive effect on a subject as the psychoanalytic encounter. The subject becomes a kind of child of the writer, regarding him as a permissive, all-accepting, all-forgiving mother, and expecting that the book will be written by her. Of course, the book is written by the strict, all-noticing, unforgiving father.⁴⁴

In the act of creating a new character for his subject/object, the writer denies him the affirmation of his subjectivity that he had anticipated from the relationship: The subject expects to find his mirror-image in the account, but instead has the unsettling experience of seeing himself supplanted by someone who bears a similar outward resemblance, but lacks the much more nuanced qualities he associates with his own sense of self. This is a new kind of doubling; now the character that emerges in the finished work acts as the subject's uncanny double. Few experiences could better produce an uncanny feeling than confronting a character that shares your name but feels horribly underrepresentative of your essential qualities, for this has aspects of doubling *and* triggers "feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one's sense of oneself . . . seems strangely questionable."⁴⁵

To a degree a subject always feels the character named after him is a kind of double, but in the MacDonald/McGinniss case, Malcolm documents how this can turn grotesque if an author goes too far in his interpretation of a subject's character. She contends that it is not just the often deceptive nature of the writer/subject relationship, but also the inherently reductive process of converting living people into characters on a page that inevitably produces a disparity between the complexity of subjects and the necessarily simplistic characters based on them. "Literary characters are drawn with much broader and blunter strokes, are much simpler, more generic (or, as they used to say, mythic) creatures than real people,"⁴⁶ which means journalists do a lot of picking and choosing of which traits to emphasize and which to exclude. What they cannot do is invent outright.⁴⁷ In her view, the temptation to do so may be greatest when the real-life subject turns out to be uninteresting; the journalist's job is easiest and the product the highest quality when the real-life subject is already as intriguing and, in a sense, over-the-top, as any full-blown literary character:

For while the novelist, when casting about for a hero or a heroine, has all of human nature to choose from, the journalist must limit his protagonists to a small group of people of a certain rare, exhibitionistic, self-fabulizing nature, who have already done the work on themselves that the novelist does on his

imaginary characters—who, in short, present themselves as ready-made literary figures.⁴⁸

Malcolm contends that McGinniss discovers only too late that his subject is *not* one of these “ready-made literary figures.” MacDonald may have been a convicted murderer, but in real life he just seemed boring and inarticulate; as Malcolm notes, “a murderer shouldn’t sound like an accountant.”⁴⁹ She speculates that it was both hard for McGinniss to imagine the man committing the murders, and hard to idealize him as the victim of an unjust trial.

Malcolm agrees with Carrère that the degree to which the new character actually resembles the living person depends on the writer’s ability to see himself reflected in the subject/object: “This is the writer’s identification with and affection for the subject, without which the transformation [from life to literature] cannot take place.”⁵⁰ In this sense, as we saw in the discussion of *The Adversary* above, the writer’s subject/object operates as *the writer’s* double. The journalist’s attraction to even the less savory aspects of a subject’s life is predictable, because, as Dolar observes, the double “realizes the subject’s hidden or repressed desires so that he [the double] does things he [the author] would never dare to do or that his conscience wouldn’t let him do.”⁵¹ While Carrère looked into his subject and found a void, leading him to posit a mystical explanation for his character’s madness, Malcolm argues that where McGinniss was hoping to find a double worthy of literary representation, he simply found a bore.

So what happens when a writer, searching for his double, finds nothing to which he can relate—or perhaps sees a small piece of himself in his subject, but is bored stiff by that reflection? According to Malcolm, the first option is to abandon the subject and find a better one; but McGinniss, realizing only too late that MacDonald was ill-suited for full literary treatment, succumbed to the temptation to invent a more interesting character. In effect, when MacDonald turns out to be an unworthy double for McGinniss, the author creates a character that functions as *MacDonald’s* evil double. In the book he finally writes, McGinniss supplies motive, psychological diagnosis, and an entire cartoonish interpretation of MacDonald’s character as that of a psychopath. To great uncanny effect, Malcolm describes the moment when an unsuspecting MacDonald, having agreed to promote a book he believed would exonerate him, confronts his evil double for the first time:

His [MacDonald’s] assignment was an appearance on the television show “60 Minutes,” and it was during the taping of the show in prison that the fact of McGinniss’s duplicity was brought home to him. As Mike Wallace—who had received an advance copy of *Fatal Vision* . . . read out loud to MacDonald pas-

sages in which he was portrayed as a psychopathic killer, the camera recorded his look of shock and utter discomposure.⁵²

When the two adversaries ultimately settle out of court with McGinniss handing over a hefty sum, his book, an unacceptably subjective work of journalism/fiction based on manipulation and false friendship, had already become a best-seller. The inarticulate, stubbornly un-representable MacDonald still languishes in jail. While MacDonald's actions may have been morally reprehensible, in a writerly sleight of hand, McGinniss successfully exchanged MacDonald's identity for another, and sold it to the world.

But from another perspective, did he? While Malcolm has created a villain of McGinniss, the reader is left uncertain as to who the true villain is; we don't really know if McGinniss's characterization of MacDonald was, in fact, incorrect; perhaps MacDonald *is* a lying psychopath. Likewise, we are suspicious of Malcolm's damning portrayal of McGinniss. She has intentionally recreated a milder version of McGinniss's deception in her own book, which she acknowledges: McGinniss is her victim just as MacDonald was his. All the parties involved—MacDonald, McGinniss, and Malcolm—are, to a certain extent, interchangeable in their guilt.

By calling attention to the identity play in which all journalists are involved—and repeatedly pointing out her own place in it—Malcolm would concede that she's involved in a self-defeating attempt to exonerate herself. She has adopted her own falsely grandiose character, that of the Morally Upstanding Journalist. In the book's afterword she confesses that

the "I" character in journalism is almost pure invention. Unlike the "I" of autobiography, who is meant to be seen as a representation of the writer, the "I" of journalism is connected to the writer only in a tenuous way—the way, say, that Superman is connected to Clark Kent. The journalistic "I" is an over-reliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation, like the chorus of Greek tragedy.⁵³

In other words, even the writer's *own* character within his work is part invention, so while his first-person narration may suggest he's being transparent about his intentions and biases, upon closer examination he's always portraying himself as better—or more humble, or more conscientious in the practice of his craft—than he is. Little wonder that these journalists see themselves in their impostor subjects then, and little wonder that perpetrators of identity hoaxes intrigue them. Both put forth idealized versions of themselves in hopes that the world will buy them.

But where does this cautionary tale leave the reader? Here Malcolm, who *is* really writing for other journalists, simply reiterates almost as an af-

terthought that even though it may be highly subjective, readers should remember that literary journalism is not fiction. After wading through an entire book dedicated to rooting out the levels of misrepresentation between author and subject, the reader finds little comfort. As illustrated by the jury's rejection of McGinniss's defense, readers often have little respect for arguments justifying what they see as journalistic deceit. Perhaps their resistance is due to a recognition—be it conscious or subconscious—that by bearing witness to the performance and financially supporting it, they are somehow implicated in the journalist's own identity fraud.

Again, we recall that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced,”⁵⁴ and when uncertainty arises about the identity of one's self and others.⁵⁵ As the works of both Carrère and Malcolm suggest, in the process of rendering these idealized versions of real people, literary journalism thrives in the uncanny realm between phenomenal reality and imaginative interpretation, object and subject. If, as Wambaugh claims, a book is a living thing born of the writer's labor, a work of literary journalism is a strange mix of living parts, taken from life, and fused together with mirage-like joints and ghostly ligaments that waver in and out of view. A creature that has all the appearance of life, indeed that purports to be fully human, may reveal itself under pressure to be an assemblage of human features that don't quite match up. Yet even in cases where readers discover that a work claiming to be journalism is more invention than reality, once established in their minds, one can speculate, it can never really be laid to rest. As Malcolm notes, even debunked portrayals live on in the public imagination.⁵⁶ If not fully alive, these works are most certainly un-dead.

TRUE STORY: MEMOIR, MURDER, *MEA CULPA*

Matthew Finkel's 2005 book, *True Story; Memoir, Murder, and Mea Culpa*,⁵⁷ explores his own journalistic hoax: assigned to a story about child slavery in Africa for *The New York Times Magazine* (where, at thirty-two, he was already a star reporter), Finkel adopts the point of view of a young boy he invented; a composite character constructed from other children's stories.⁵⁸ He gives the character one child's name, but submits a photograph of another child for publication, a deception that ultimately leads him to be caught and fired. After fleeing to his Montana home in disgrace, he receives a phone call from an Oregon reporter and braces himself for questions about his dismissal. Instead, he is asked about “the murders.”

It seems a man named Christian Longo stands accused of a murder remarkably similar to those already described in the books discussed above: a young, apparently devoted husband, Longo was now awaiting trial for killing

his wife and three young children. Closer examination revealed that a series of financial disasters led him to a series of well-concealed crimes: forging checks, selling stolen goods, impersonating others, and stealing a car. Finally, the prosecution claimed, Longo—much like the murderer in *The Adversary*—had become desperate when he sensed he could no longer keep up false appearances. Rather than be discovered, he had committed an unthinkable crime. Guilty or not, Longo was found several weeks after the murders living happily under an assumed name in Cancún. He had chosen to impersonate a writer he admired, unaware that the journalist had recently fallen from grace for a transgression of his own: Matthew Finkel of *The New York Times*.

The revelation is uncanny to a near-stultifying degree; it's as though Finkel's evil double has quite literally appeared. But Finkel recovers quickly, recognizing that he's been handed his own salvation: a ready-made literary character, a pathological embodiment of his own faults who can help him resurrect his career. He immediately contacts Longo, who is awaiting trial in Oregon. It turns out that Longo was a long-time fan of Finkel's work, and is an aspiring writer himself. Sympathetic to Finkel's disgrace, he agrees to tell his life story.

Finkel intersperses chapters about the forces that led to his own deceit with those on Longo's downward spiral, as revealed to him in weekly letters and phone calls. The book documents their growing friendship, with each drawn to the other as to his own reflection. Isolated because of their respective misdeeds, and self-absorbed to a near-pathological degree, they are thrilled to tell their stories—Longo to Finkel, and Finkel to us. From the outset it is clear that the standard writer/subject relationship as described by Janet Malcolm has been replaced by something else. While the writer usually chooses his subject, thereby gaining the upper hand in the relationship, there is a sense in this case that by drawing himself to Finkel's attention so irresistibly, Longo has chosen Finkel. For his part, Finkel has been badly burned by professional arrogance and is determined to adopt a more collaborative, humble stance toward his subject/object. Eager to use Longo to explore and atone for his journalistic sins, Finkel becomes the primary confessor, with Longo adopting the writer's typical role of overly sympathetic confidante.

Longo is supposedly confessing, too; his letters—some included in the book—recount events leading to the murders with the earnestness and verbosity of an amateur literary journalist. While Longo appears to be both assisting Finkel with his book and performing the normal subject role, Finkel becomes increasingly doubtful of Longo's honesty, despite their pact to be completely truthful with one another. Determined to stave off accusations of professional misconduct given his past sins, Finkel redoubles his efforts to verify everything Longo tells him. While many details are impossible to

prove, Finkel is careful to point out to the reader all unverifiable aspects of Longo's account.

But beyond simply wondering if his subject is a mythomaniac (which he later proves to be) Finkel begins to question Longo's motives in assisting him so meticulously with the project. While his cooperation seems driven by the narcissism and need for attention that Janet Malcolm claims all subjects feel toward journalists, his behavior in one respect strikes Finkel as especially odd: Longo is strangely delighted to hear that Finkel has fact-checked his stories fastidiously and provides all possible assistance with contacts and dates so that he can research everything twice over; it's as though Longo wants confirmation that his story is airtight. Despite his nagging suspicions, Finkel is caught up in his project and his own growing dependency on Longo's friendship. It is not until the eve of Longo's trial that Finkel realizes he's been used: Longo has stitched together a story, grounded in verifiable fact, and used Finkel to audition it before its official performance on the witness stand. In a literal version of what Carrère had feared in his publication of Jean-Claude Romand's story, Finkel realizes he has facilitated Longo's construction of a false character for himself, one that might just help him get away with murder.

This disquieting revelation comes as Finkel discovers he truly is dealing with a monster; while he had suspected Longo's guilt from the beginning, Longo had never confessed to the murders, steadfastly avoiding all discussion of the night his family died. At the trial, Finkel becomes convinced of Longo's guilt, and ultimately Longo does confess to two of the four murders, but only after accusing his dead wife of the other two. The jury finds him guilty of all four murders and sentences him to death. Further confirming Finkel's suspicion that his subject is a pathological liar, Longo writes him several letters after the conviction, each with a different account of his role in the killings. Horrified, Finkel begins to sever ties with the now-convicted murderer.

Conveniently and predictably, the break comes at the point when Finkel must sit down to create a character; distance from his too-invasive object at that moment is vital for his work. And Longo has most certainly come too close; even more so than in *The Adversary* and *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Finkel's book documents a role reversal between the writer and his subject and a complete blurring of the separation between them. While we recall that literary journalism is often predicated on a stage in which the writer's subjectivity identifies something of himself within his subject/object, in nearly all cases the journalist triumphs in the encounter. He wins by appropriating part of the subject/object's identity to create a character that supplants the

original, while still resembling it to varying degrees. While the writer's own subjectivity may be threatened in some cases—as Carrère sensed when he suspected he had become an unwitting conduit for his subject's story—usually his domination of the object is both assured and hidden, thereby easing the reader's disquiet about whose story is really being told.

But Finkel's book produces a greater anxiety, for here the merging of the writer's subjectivity with the subject/object is both more explicit and more mysterious. Faced with his own monstrous *doppelgänger*, it is strangely appropriate that Finkel, who thinks he is using Longo, discovers Longo has been using him. Having deceived the world by inventing a hybrid character and passing it off as real, Finkel finds that a real-life monster has sought him out to revisit the same deceit upon him. Despite his absolute certainty about Longo's dishonesty, Finkel feels compelled to retell his story because he needs it as a vehicle for his own confession. Longo senses his desperation and seems to delight in complicating matters by ultimately presenting Finkel with a series of obvious lies to choose from, challenging the writer to reassert his own subjectivity by choosing which to appropriate for his own "true" book. Utterly defeated in this task, Finkel relays them all to the reader as further evidence of Longo's dishonesty. But it has the effect of forcing the reader to further doubt not only the believability of all of Longo's stories, but also those of Finkel himself.

And yet, Finkel, like McGinniss, has written a page-turner in which his controlled rendering of verifiable and non-verifiable facts ultimately does serve his purpose. He apologizes to the world and tells a great story—and, whether he was manipulated by Longo or not, he turns him into a terrifically terrifying character very similar to that created by Joe McGinniss and later debunked by Janet Malcolm. The comparison raises the possibility that Finkel may have been tempted—as he had been before—to fabricate in order to create such a perfect character, such an ideal reflection of himself. The reader cannot know to what degree Longo-the-character genuinely resembles Longo-the-man; what is certain, however, is that Finkel is guilty of creating a grandiose, overly redemptive character for himself, one of Malcolm's Supermen. By bearing witness to this character's confession, we readers, like Finkel with Longo, may be complicit in the creation of just one more idealized, part-real, part-fake creature. But none of this suspicion about where the subject and object diverge, where reality and imagination intertwine, prevents the reader, helplessly enthralled, from believing every word of Finkel's book—despite its being written by a defrocked journalist, a confessed liar.

The Adversary and *The Journalist and the Murderer* are similarly enthralling. Like all ghosts, the subjective nature of our nonfiction stares us in the

face most of the time, and we hardly know it's there. Or we do know it's there, but we are helpless to resist its power.⁵⁹ Octave Mannoni's formulation, "I know very well, but all the same . . . I believe," is, as Dolar observes, "at the basis of this fabrication of the uncanny."⁶⁰ Many perceptive readers might earnestly agree that all works of journalism are highly subjective—*of course*, they know it's not all true! And yet . . . they believe every word, which is why when a character is wrenched from them, as in the case of James Frey's own former self dissolving to reveal an unfathomable creature in its place, one that casts no reflection, they respond with justifiable horror. Public outrage results only when the monster reveals itself; readers look into the hole left by the absence of their beloved character and find it filled with something they can't quite identify, at once familiar and horribly misshapen. They have a fleeting suspicion they have helped to give life to this monstrous project by reading and believing in it.

More frightening still, as if in a flash, the monster, a product of the Object/subject encounter, opens its eyes and stares back. If the reader can't discern between the realm of reality and the imagined—for this monster exists between those realms—then all knowledge comes into question, including the reader's own sense of self.



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Endnotes

¹Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 1914, 82.

²Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 1919, 217-256.

³Emmanuel Carrère, *The Adversary: A True Story of Monstrous Deception*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Picador, 2000).

⁴Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

⁵Michael Finkel, *True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

⁶Robert Alexander, "'My Story Is Always Escaping into Other People': Subjectivity, Objectivity, and the Double in American Literary Journalism," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 57-66.

⁷The offending work was James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (Anchor, 2005).

⁸See the introduction to Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny*, for an excellent overview of the concept and the difficulty in charting it; he explains, "Freud's essay demonstrates . . . that the uncanny is destined to elude mastery, it is what cannot be pinned down or controlled." Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15-16.

⁹Freud, "The 'Uncanny'."

¹⁰Royle, *Uncanny*, 2.

¹¹Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 200.

¹²*Ibid.*, 226.

¹³Royle, *Uncanny*, 1.

¹⁴See, for example, Martin Gottlieb's piece, "Dangerous Liaisons: Journalists and Their Sources," in the *Columbia Journalism Review* 28, no. 2 (July 1989): 3, in which he interviews a number of well-known journalists about their reactions to Malcolm's articles, including David Halberstam, Mike Wallace, and Barbara Walters. The responses run the gamut from complete agreement to outraged rejection of her argument.

¹⁵Two exceptions to this neglect are Alexander's "'My Story Is Always Escaping into Other People': Subjectivity, Objectivity, and the Double in American Literary Journalism," and Kathy Roberts Forde's *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson 5, New Yorker and the First Amendment*, Library Ed. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), in which she uses that case as a lens to explore evolving legal interpretations of the writer/subject relationship.

¹⁶Jan Whitt, *Settling the Borderland: Other Voices in Literary Journalism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008).

¹⁷Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 200.

¹⁸Scholars disagree as to the precise timing of the emergence of objectivity as journalism's most sacred tenet. Some journalism historians, such as Richard L. Kaplan in *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), finds objectivity's roots in a changing political culture and argues that this political development arose as early as the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, Schudson effectively traces the *preconditions* for objectivity's development from the commercialization of the press in the 1830s through the rise of a self-identified profession of reporting in the 1890s. However, he identifies the 1920s and 1930s as the decades when objectivity in the modern sense was born, when the rise of psychoanalysis and the public relations industry, as well as the proliferation of war propaganda, fostered an increasing distrust of "facts" among journalists and the

general public. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

¹⁹John Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

²⁰Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 221.

²¹James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is perhaps the most famous example of this approach. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1941).

²²Carrère, *The Adversary*.

²³*Ibid.*, 114.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 159.

²⁵Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 201.

²⁶Carrère, *Adversary*, 82-83.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 178.

²⁸Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny," *October* 58 (Autumn 1991): 13.

²⁹Hartsock, *History of American Literary Journalism*.

³⁰Carrère, *Adversary*, 155.

³¹Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night," 11-13

³²Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 218, 201.

³³*Ibid.*, 201.

³⁴Royle, *Uncanny*, 1.

³⁵Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night," 11.

³⁶Carrère, *Adversary*, 18, 191.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 191.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 159.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 191.

⁴¹Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*.

⁴²Joe McGinniss, *Fatal Vision* (New York: New American Library, 1984).

⁴³Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 3.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁵Royle, *The Uncanny*, 1.

⁴⁶Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*, 122.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

⁵¹Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night," 11.

⁵²Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*, 31.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 159-160. Of course, in his discussion of Wordsworth, Paul de Man would likely quibble with whether an autobiographer can be any more honest, as reflected in de Man's essay, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN*, 94.5 (Dec. 1979): 919-930.

⁵⁴Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 221.

⁵⁵Royle, *Uncanny*, 1.

⁵⁶Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*, 151-152.

⁵⁷Finkel, *True Story*.

⁵⁸Michael Finkel, "Is Youssouf a Male Slave?," *New York Times Magazine* (Nov. 18, 2001):

⁵⁹John Carey refers to this phenomenon as “willed credulity” in his chapter, “Reportage, Literature, and Willed Credulity,” in *New Media Language*, ed. Jean Atchinson and Diana M. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 57-64

⁶⁰Dolar, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night,” 22.