

LJS

Literary Journalism Studies

Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 2010

Special issue

EUROPA GOES . . .
GONZO?

The Journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies

On the Cover



Classicists, formalists, and otherists may be offended, but in the spirit of Gonzo our cover was mischievously inspired by the painting “The Abduction of Europa,” painted by Noël-Nicolas Coypel, 1726-1727. This detail from the larger painting shows Europa astride her abductor, the god Zeus, who appears in the form of a white bull. Sound Gonzo? Then read further and discover a side to European journalism you may not have known, and ponder: Has Gonzo abducted Europa?

The painting is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The image is in the public domain, and the cover qualifies as parody.

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Contents

<i>Information for Contributors</i>	4
<i>Note from the Editor</i>	5

SPECIAL ISSUE

HAS EUROPA GONE . . . GONZO?

Germany

The Milieu of a Magazine: <i>Tempo</i> as an Exponent of German New Journalism	by <i>Bernhard Poerksen</i>	9
---	-----------------------------	---

Finland

Bangkok	by <i>Esa Kero</i>	31
Exploring the “reality boundary” of Esa Kero	by <i>Maria Lassila-Merisalo</i>	39

The Netherlands

Onder de Soldaten (Among Soldiers)	by <i>Arnon Grunberg</i>	49
Between Fact and Fiction: Arnon Grunberg on His Literary Journalism	an interview by <i>Frank Harbers</i>	74

The Hoax, Uncanny Identity, and Literary Journalism	by <i>Ruth Palmer</i>	85
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BOOK REVIEWS	107
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<i>Mission Statement</i>	132
<i>International Association for Literary Journalism Studies</i>	133

2 *Literary Journalism Studies*

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LITERARY JOURNALISM STUDIES invites submission of original scholarly articles on literary journalism, which is also known as narrative journalism, literary reportage, reportage literature, New Journalism, and the nonfiction novel, as well as literary and narrative nonfiction that emphasizes cultural revelation. The journal has an international focus and seeks submissions on the theory, history, and pedagogy of literary journalism throughout the world. All disciplinary approaches are welcome. Submissions should be informed with an awareness of the existing scholarship and should be between 3,000 and 8,000 words in length, including notes. To encourage international dialogue, the journal is open to publishing on occasion short examples or excerpts of previously published literary journalism accompanied by a scholarly gloss about or an interview with the writer who is not widely known outside his or her country. The example or excerpt must be translated into English. The scholarly gloss or interview should generally be between 1,500 and 2,500 words long and indicate why the example is important in the context of its national culture. Together, both the text and the gloss generally should not exceed 8,000 words in length. The contributor is responsible for obtaining all copyright permissions, including from the publisher, author and translator as necessary. The journal is also willing to consider publication of exclusive excerpts of narrative literary journalism accepted for publication by major publishers.

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Note from the Editor . . .



HAS EUROPA GONE . . . GONZO?

“Why would I *not*?” I mused, as I surveyed what had come across my desk. There it was, something of what had been a puzzle for me—some evidence of a tradition in literary journalism I had long either guessed at, surmised, or pipe-dreamed about. Having studied my own national literature in literary journalism, I was often left to speculate: Surely there must be more beyond my own national boundaries with which I had long circumscribed my scholarly world? Because I often recall an important object lesson, how what was called the *New Journalism* in the 1960s and early 1970s was in fact hardly new. I understand, of course, why so many, such as Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote, believed that it was (although in fairness to Wolfe, he did acknowledge a 1930s version—dismissively, as if it were only a Neanderthal-like proto-literary journalism). Otherwise, there was no reason to believe that there had been a literary journalism prior to the 1960s.

That was one reason why I had speculated in recent years about the possibilities of the genre’s international practice. Just because we may not know about it doesn’t mean it’s not out there, somewhere. Slowly, I began to find scattered evidence—Victor Hugo’s account, for example, of the flight of King Louis Phillippe, Turgenev’s hunting sketches, the international proletarian (and tendentious) writer’s movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

Then on my desk landed Bernhard Poerksen’s article on the Gonzo version of literary journalism published in the German magazine *Tempo* in the 1980s and 1990s (see page 9). Imagine a magazine that sends out a reporter to take lessons on how to be a dominatrix. Or a writer who locks himself up in a basement for a week and insists on no contact with the world in order to understand the nature of solitary confinement. Then there was the editor who offered her services as a surrogate mother in order to demonstrate “how unborn life is bartered in Germany.” And clearly this stuff was “over the top.”

Next, Maria Lassila-Merisalo’s examination of Finnish reporter Esa Kero’s literary reportage, also published in the 1980s, showed up. To provide an advance story for prospective summer vacationers about vacation hot spots in Finland, Kero goes over the top when during his travels he focuses on (or revels in) the bars he stops at in the declining, dreary Finnish winter. Similarly, his article “Bangkok,” republished here (see page 31), is a bit over the top when he writes in first person about his personal encounters in the houses of prostitution in Bangkok—at the expense of his *machismo*. “Over the top”—that metaphoric leap into the outrageous and absurd born of the trenches on the Western Front—is what I’ve come to expect of Gonzo.

Then there is Arnon Grunberg of the Netherlands. He is one of Holland’s most distinguished novelists who clearly is also a literary reporter in his account of visiting the Dutch army in Afghanistan (see page 49). His

capacity to go beyond the conventional “objective” approach of journalism to detect the ironies, paradoxes, and ultimately absurdities of human experience—such as a Burger King in a war zone—takes us over the top in challenging the safety of journalistic convention (and I imagine with a sense of wonder, while nibbling at my Whopper, *Oh, look . . . there goes another whizzbang*—democratic capitalism insinuating itself into the battlefield; but then it always has).

All of which left me with this thought: Had Europa gone . . . Gonzo?

Of course, these are only three examples (although, see my discussion later in this note about Ruth Palmer’s examination of Emmanuel Carrère’s *The Adversary*—France, at least, gets a supporting role). Yet, these examples leave one to speculate about what others may lie out there that have yet to be acknowledged. Either because journalism convention has for so long dominated, emphasizing “Just the facts, ma’am. Just the facts,” while all hell was breaking loose around an empathetically oblivious journalist. Or, because the canon of literary genres—fiction, poetry, and drama—have for too long excluded consideration of literary journalism and its Gonzo variant from serious study in the literature academy. *J’accuse*, as Zola said.

So, why would I not want to dedicate an issue to some aspect of Gonzo, however it may be configured, in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands (with France having a supporting role)?

The concept of Gonzo as reflected in our special issue is more complex than first meets the eye, however. Of course, by invoking it we invoke the late Hunter S. Thompson, long credited as the founder of Gonzo journalism, a journalism that self-consciously goes over the top in challenging sacred conventions, and in the challenge lies a journalistic end in itself. For Thompson it was often drug-induced, and I’m not suggesting that is the case with the examples in this issue, although with the German magazine *Tempo* drugs did play a role in at least one of its articles. And Thompson is indeed acknowledged as one influence on *Tempo*.

But as a reflection of just how complex the understanding of Gonzo gets, I did notice that there can be a tendency to conflate Gonzo as New Journalism, instead of as one part of the larger genre as is usually the case in the United States. We see this conflation with *Tempo*. And there is no doubt that Kero has strong Gonzo qualities—after all, he abjures conventional punctuation. It’s equally clear that Grunberg seeks out the absurd, as he reveals in an interview with Frank Harbers (see page 72). In other words, it appears at least from this evidence that notions of the New Journalism that traveled across the ocean to an eager audience in Europe reflected the gorgeous outrageousness of Thompson “going over the top” (and I imagine a lean, rabid, younger Hunter, under the influence, flinging himself over the top into the machinegun bullets, then being shot out of a cannon, which of course happened with his ashes after he was cremated).

But to take such a position would be to repeat the same mistake early critics of the New Journalism made when they said it was new: Just because we may not know that it exists, doesn’t mean it’s not out there, somewhere, in some fashion.

In reality, such outrageous challenges to convention have long been a part of human inquiry—whether journalistic or literary. It might be truer to say that “Gonzo” simply helped to provide a re-articulation of an old tradition that must indeed be tribal in origins—the need to play the “mischief,” as Las-sila-Merisalo so astutely observes of Kero, that naughty “Finnish” (substitute whatever nationality you want here) boy who embraced the whore house (what nationality of men hasn’t?), then told all of Finland about it—again at the expense of his *machismo*. Therein, curiously, lies its universality.

Instead of Thompson’s Gonzo being the origin of the species, Gonzo is in fact part of something larger: a resistance to cant, to bureaucratism, to the comfort of the structured (read: “restrictive”) social code, accumulating the irrational and the absurd in its creaking joints until they burst out in what Mikhail Bakhtin characterized as the carnival of the grotesque in his discussion of Rabelais, and which indeed is still reflected in the ontological outrageousness of *Carnivale* in Rio. Consider *The Big Room* by Edwin Estlin Cummings (otherwise known as the lower-cased American poet e.e. cum-mings), published in 1922. It is a picaresque account of a French military prison during World War I, where, for example, Cummings and his fellow inmates surreptitiously dump pails of inmate urine on the warden’s prized roses. As Sartre observed, you can always silently say “*Non*” in the face of the totalitarian oppression as a fundamental assertion of your dignity. Just don’t tell your warden.

But such Gonzo is of course equally part of an “Old” World tradition. There are, for example, the French “physiologies” of the early nineteenth century, both fictional and journalistic, and some in between, in which the *flâneur*, the strolling, cynical observer, challenged social pretense. The rest of Europe would copy the French model. Before that there was *Tristram Shandy* (fiction), and Ned Ward of London (journalism). There is the entire tradition of the *pícaro*—the rascal, the rogue—emerging out of Spain and sweeping the Continent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And Rabelais’s Gargantua pissing on Paris. There are the medieval “Songs from Beuern”—the *Carmina Burana* of drunken, lusty monks. Then, still earlier, the Saxon god Puck, the Scandinavian trickster Loki, the Greek Pan and his satyrs. And there is the legend of Europa who was seduced by Zeus in the form of a white bull. To which one might respond, “Yeah, right . . . what *cannabis* was she smoking?” (I imagine this is how it started: “*But Daddy, I swear it was a big white bull who said he was Zeus.*” So, she was banished from Tyre, and followed the currents to the land that would bear her name, in search of her god.) In any event, all were perceived as mischiefs because the tribe understood that cultural convention inevitably would be upended by what it could not comprehend—and control. Thus, those naughty, lusty Bavarian (or were they Tyrolean?) monks. Or the Dutch army sergeant who goes into battle with a pair of his girlfriend’s panties in his pocket. They are saying “*Non*” or “*Nein*” or “*No*” in confronting the inevitable, all-consuming demands (totalitarian in their finality) of mortal existence, because they understand at whatever level of consciousness the tragic implications of the Cosmic comedy, and the carnival of the grotesque.

Hunter Thompson, in reality, was just one more devotee of this rich

storytelling tradition that goes back to before the written record. As were the efforts at *Tempo*, and the work of Kero and Grunberg. So that what we have here in this issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* is an effort to try to understand the phenomenon—on European terms. To be sure, there have been transnational influences. But they are influences that precede national boundaries, once you trace them back. At the least, they are trans-tribal.

So, has Europa gone Gonzo? Perhaps. But more important, Gonzo is merely an acknowledgment of what was always there. And as Grunberg notes, he's never heard of Gonzo. Nor had Kero heard of the New Journalism. Instead, they are and were responding to something deeper, something that has always existed in our DNA, our desire to sometimes simply say, as Thompson might have said, "The system is . . . [*insert your metaphorical Gonzo expletive of choice here*]." Simply, we have a need, at least culturally, to account in language for what cannot be accounted for rationally—that eviscerating rational world divided into the seemingly discrete categories of the social scientist; how convenient life would be, indeed, if that were truly the case.

Hence why we need literary journalism, this confrontation between our phenomenal world—the stone that Johnson kicked to refute Berkeley—and the world of language in the attempt to capture the aesthetics of experience.

One of the rewards of editing this journal is to see how rapidly it has become accepted. For example, Poerksen takes note of how the concept of the New Journalism was not only a manner of writing, but also a cultural way of looking at the world, and in doing so he cites "Recovering the Peculiar Life and Times of Tom Hedley" from our first issue. Similarly, Palmer picks up on the theme of the "uncanny" in literary journalism, a subject introduced again in that first inaugural issue. Palmer takes it in a new direction in her article, "The Hoax, Uncanny Identity, and Literary Journalism" (see page 81). What I sense is a wonderful critical ferment among scholars now that there is a place for the scholarship of literary journalism.

Moreover, it's a place where we can discover other traditions. Even in the case of Palmer's article we can add to the international flavor of this issue's discussion because of her examination of Carrère's *Adversary*. I remember several years ago a French colleague telling me that there was not a French tradition of literary journalism. Perhaps there is not one recognized by the journalism and literature academies. But like so much literary journalism, Carrère's work reflects another reality. Once again, just because we are not aware, doesn't mean it's not out there, somewhere.

At the same time we must be cautious as scholars and not let our imaginations run *too* wild, choosing what we wish to believe in advance of the evidence. Instead, we must let it accumulate and see where it will take us. In that, we have something in common with journalists, literary or otherwise.

—JOHN C. HARTSOCK

The Milieu of a Magazine: *Tempo* as an Exponent of German New Journalism

Bernhard Poerksen
University of Tübingen, Germany

From 1986 to 1996 the magazine Tempo was a central organ of German-language New Journalism. Its history and its objectives reveal essential features of the German version.

There are always key stories that explain the culture of a publication. Some are true, some not, and some vacillate between truth and falsehood. One example of the latter is an episode reported by Christian Kracht in which one does not know whether it is an intentionally invented anecdote or a mildly scandalous self-revelation. The place of action is New Delhi where Kracht—having already become a well-known writer in the German-speaking world—is working as the special India correspondent for the magazine *Der Spiegel*, the central news magazine of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the late summer of 1997 Mother Teresa died and Kracht received the news from one of his assistants. According to the report he filed with the magazine, he said he received the news “sitting on his terrace in New Delhi, enjoying a cup of Orange Pekoe tea,”¹ and that he felt bothered and annoyed and had therefore decided not to inform the chief editor’s office. Obviously, this did not pass unnoticed and the India correspondent was sacked due to his irresponsible lack of respect for the conventions of topic selection and the rules of the game of news journalism.

“Today I am furious” [at himself], Kracht is quoted as saying, “about this clumsy attempt [on his part] to play a trick on that great news magazine.”²

The episode is a key story in several respects—quite apart from the question of its factual substance. Foremost, its truth status is insecure, and it

illustrates central features of the German-language New Journalism at the magazine *Tempo*: radical subjectivity ready to abandon classical thematic relevance, and the dominant presence of the author, i.e., the journalistic Ego.

The protagonist of the story who was so keen—as he affirmed—to conceal “the wretched death of Mother Teresa,”³ had been, for a considerable length of time, one of the best-known writers for *Tempo*, which was a major magazine, if not the major magazine, for introducing an *irreverent* New Journalism style into German journalism practice in the 1980s. It would bear many of the hallmarks of that American New Journalism variant known as Gonzo journalism. Thus, when one takes a closer look at the years during which Kracht was training to become a journalist, he, in a sense, appears to be the product of *Tempo*, and the subjective journalism it promoted—with all the risks and side effects relating to the credibility and the appeal to seriousness of the profession as a whole. He worked as a trainee and finally as a consultant in the chief editorial office of *Tempo* where he published his prize-winning reportage, and where he wrote the bestseller *Faserland* (1995), his first literary book, a work of fiction, on the office computer.

The magazine to which he owed his journalistic training existed from 1986 to 1996 and for a decade was—above all in the eyes of its makers—the central organ of German-language New Journalism, or at least of the irreverent variety. The reconstruction of its editorial program, and in particular the description of the techniques of presentation primarily used by the magazine, reveal that this German variant may be understood as a kind of applied, practice-oriented media criticism: here the hierarchies of the classical news reporting business were playfully varied and challenged, unveiling the ironies implicit to the ambition of traditional journalism practice.

After providing an outline of the magazine’s history, this examination will explore the philosophy—the cultural mindset and program—that drove the magazine.⁴ The examination then builds on that critical groundwork, examining those features or consequences that distinguished *Tempo* as an exponent of an irreverent New Journalism.⁵

While New Journalism is an American term, it remains unclear how it worked its way into the German language. It would be all too easy to conclude that because of the terminology’s American origins, the New Journalism was another American import, like corn flakes, to Germany. However, that would be an erroneous assumption because the German version is very much a home-grown variant. To be sure, there were undoubtedly transatlantic influences. After all, the American New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, because it was so controversial, could not help but be noted in

the other Western democracies at a time of Cold War when the United States loomed so large to its allies as the champion of democratic capitalism. This would have been especially true in a divided country like Germany. But in acknowledging the transatlantic influences, one should also note that those influences can travel in both directions. Only recently has the important influence of German literary reportage on the proletarian writers' movement in the U.S. during the 1930s been acknowledged.⁶ What we see, then, is that the example of the American may well have contributed some to the revitalizing of the German, just as the German helped to revitalize the American in the 1930s. In the case of *Tempo* it was a revitalization that is a result most importantly of the compelling historical and cultural circumstances prevalent at the time in Germany, Western Europe more widely, and even in the United States.

History and Concept

The basic history of the magazine *Tempo* has been explored elsewhere.⁷ But for those unfamiliar with its roots, especially outside Germany, a historical outline is necessary for understanding the kind of cultural mindset that created it. The specific roots of the magazine are to be found in Austria, more precisely in Vienna. In the 1980s, the young journalists Markus Peichl and Michael Hopp, together with the art director Lo Breier made the magazine *Wiener*, which focused on the city and its cultural scene, a success story. Starting publication in 1982, they had increased circulation figures to over 80,000 copies by 1985, thus arousing the attention and interest of publishers and magazine journalists in the Federal Republic of Germany for a glossy magazine directed toward consumerist young adults. The photographic style, which was informed by the aesthetics of advertising, and the irreverent and radically subjective kind of journalism, attracted attention, incited controversies, and was eagerly and frequently copied.⁸ After negotiations with various parties, Peichl, chief editor of the *Wiener*, and Austrian publisher Hans Schmid finally managed to win Hamburg publisher Thomas Ganske (Jahreszeiten-Verlag) over to the project. Under the enormous pressure of time, and keeping a watchful eye on possible competitors, a team of editors and an editorial office were organized and the art director Lo Breier was lured to Hamburg. At the end of 1985 a pilot issue of *Tempo* was produced, and in the last week in January 1986 the first issue appeared with a print run of 400,000, despite the fact that there had been no readership research and no extended test phase. The goal was to produce a general-interest illustrated magazine for a relatively narrow target group, and to sever all the local ties with the original *Wiener* magazine. As Peichl recalled in a 1989 interview: "We

do general interest for a special public that moves in a critical [politically] alternative, and Green spectrum, but rejects the stick-in-the-mud, streamlined thinking of the Old Left.”⁹ In doing so, Peichl and his co-editors were repudiating the leftist literary reportage promoted by the German journalist Egon Erwin Kisch that became the model for so much of this kind of writing during the 1920s and 1930s in the international proletarian writers’ movement. But in the repudiation also lay a rediscovery of that tradition, one in which the polemics of a sanctimonious ideology were rejected—and often challenged.

Primarily twenty to thirty year olds were projected as buyers of the periodical—un-ideological, successful, and engagé, ecologically interested but without a fixed worldview, not really at home anywhere, and always strangely ambivalent in their commentaries on the status quo. *Tempo* attempted to position itself as the journal and organ of self-exploration for a “generation of contradictions,” a generation, as its inventor Peichl formulated, that knows “no truth” and “no ideal,” and simultaneously and ironically “far too many” institutionalized truths and ideals of which they had become sceptical.¹⁰ The magazine lacked a definable identity, at least by the standards of conventional journalism practice. Presumably such a specification of a target group is nothing more than the “assertion of a generation,”¹¹ or the unconscious, if not conscious, transfer of postmodern thought to the world experience of intelligent and career-oriented young professionals and educated adults. It is remarkable that, in this case, a magazine was developed not according to the current practice of focusing primarily on the advertising market, but based on a diagnosis of the times carried out by a chief editor who was just twenty-eight years old.

The response by the established media during the first few years was huge by any reckoning—and negative as a rule: *Tempo* was considered to preach arbitrariness and consumerism, to be apolitical, infantile, and simply downright stupid.¹² However, the criticism of the established media and the malice displayed by journalists in the more established media probably only resulted in strengthening the cohesion of *Tempo*’s editorial team. They all believed themselves, with considerable self-assurance, to be the avant-garde. Photographers like Wolfgang Tillmanns, and authors, copywriters, and trend researchers (like Christian Kracht, Otmar Jenner, and Matthias Horx), some of whom became well known and even famous later on, had their first work printed in the magazine. For many years, *Tempo* attracted a generation of young writers who were able to develop their exclusive personal style within the magazine’s milieu. They succeeded in transforming their personal experience of the world into an illustrated magazine, and giving themselves a voice.

The “generation of contradictions” for whom the magazine was intended was certainly present in the editorial office.

Whether the concept of the magazine that was so massively supported financially by publisher Thomas Ganske really proved its mettle in economic terms is difficult to determine. It is impossible to recover precise data about advertising revenue; the published readership data are scarce and offer little substance. Moreover, the circulation can no longer be reconstructed exactly: Often the statistics that were distributed officially did not correspond with the correct figures, as several former editors confirm.¹³

When Thomas Ganske announced on 11 April 1996, to a horrified editorial team in the middle of the production phase for the May issue, that production would cease immediately due to continuing losses he was no longer prepared to carry, a momentous experiment came to an end. The experiment consisted in the self-defeating attempt to break with an apparently omnipotent tradition of an advertising-supported information journalism.

That is the basic history, one that consisted of an attempt to challenge the established media by employing a contradictory mixture of programmatic reflections, and novel presentation techniques. These will now be examined in detail.

Enemy Image and Self-image; Morality and Coolness

The editorial program of the magazine *Tempo* was characterized by a specific conception of the journalism to be practiced, a robust separation from the established media, and a clearly defined image of what the journal opposed. Particular criticism was aimed at the so-called “68ers,” who had gone out on to the streets of Berlin, Paris, and Berkeley to oppose the war in Vietnam and advocate for a better world. Theirs was fundamentally a utopian impulse. This kind of open clamoring for moral concerns was ridiculed and rejected by *Tempo*. One suspected the “one-time 68ers” of operating in the “corridors of intellectual power.”¹⁴ They were declared to be “fanatical life-cultural peasants,”¹⁵ a German idiomatic expression that means the equivalent of “cultural idiots.” They were criticized in a spirit of moral outrage that was, however, articulated only indirectly. As Peichl notes:

What were we really up against when we began to brew the concept for our magazine? What and who decided at that time about the culture industry, the media, the universities, the schools—in brief: what were people thinking? It was the encrusted remnants of the 68ers [who decided]. They had gorged themselves solid and fat. They controlled all the switches of power but they no longer moved anything. They had degenerated into a status-quo community, and together with them their ideals had become rigid. Solidarity, engagement, authenticity, inwardness, idealism, and morality—everything

only served to secure their own position and consequently became hollow and hollower. Our generation, the *zeitgeist* generation, could not do anything with these concepts because the 68ers had destroyed them. We had never rejected their original meaning but we had to fight their perversion. The only suitable method was rigorous silence, conscious anti-intellectualism, and an excessive [preoccupation with] formalism in the sense of embracing consumerism, fashion, luxury, body consciousness, and design. When content dies, form must revitalize it. When inwardness wastes away, outwardness must protect it. Therefore, the emblems of the *zeitgeist*—hedonism, aestheticism, and individualism—were unquestionably rebellious, unquestionably moral, and unquestionably ideological.¹⁶

This position provided the reason for the magazine's existence. Intentionally, it was not a statement calling for an openly articulated utopia as the 68ers had wanted.¹⁷ In other words, the emphasis was on a state of mind or an attitude for dealing with the world, not on an end result.

The emphasis at *Tempo* on the state of mind as opposed to utopian ambition is reflected in one of the few explicit political statements *Tempo* makes, in which the magazine adopts as its own, in an editorial, the quotes of demonstrators in the French student revolt of the year 1986. Once again students had taken to the streets in protest. A utopia is something, as one anonymous student said, that comes down to "what one has in one's head, what one carries in one's heart, not on a banner like a board in front of one's head." Another formulation in the same editorial was even more explicit:

It's an attitude. . . . I can demonstrate this attitude with regard to concrete things but apart from that it's nobody else's business. Only by keeping one's shitty utopias to oneself will you make it impossible for so-called democrats to steal them, will you prevent others from undertaking political action with or against them. Only in this way can you remain unpredictable, only in this way will you remain strong.¹⁸

Praise for the Surface; the Philosophy of Everyday Culture

A central feature of the content design of the magazine *Tempo* was the lack of respect for the rigid division between lowbrow and highbrow culture, between trivial entertainment culture and the sophisticated culture of high-class education. Upon examination, the separation of the superficial from the profound, and of ordinary everyday culture from the sophisticated culture of high-class education and learning, did not seem relevant to the presentation of the topics—rather one tried to cultivate the "fun with the trivial"¹⁹ that performed an observation of everyday culture that would help to decipher contemporary moods and to advance towards an enlightening *description* of the actual present while not providing a moral nostrum.

In the pages of *Tempo* one could find, for example, short stories on ciga-

rette lighters and fast food, features or articles on German Gummi bears, essays on pre-prime-time television serials, articles about trends in cigarette advertising, as well as texts about the aesthetics of gym shoes.²⁰ By treating them as serious topics for discussion, they served as a cultural provocation. These attempts to observe daily life succeeded in encouraging early forms and patterns of pop journalism, which is a form of journalism that attributes semiotic qualities to everyday culture and is thus able to derive illuminating diagnoses of the times from the arrangement of the materials of popular culture.²¹

Aesthetics as Ethics: Morality and Brand Awareness

Part of the program of many *Tempo* authors was an equation that announced *aesthetics equals ethics*. Thus the external appearance of persons is correlated with their forms of behavior; the secrets of their character seem correspondingly to be coded in clothes consisting of articles with superior brand names as well as the stylistically adequate adjustment to a given situation. Such a provocative identification of appearance and attitude is probably due to the intensive reading of the works of American author Bret Easton Ellis, who is cited in numerous *Tempo* texts, by part of the editing team.²²

I shall quote just two contrasting examples where aesthetics equal ethics. In a large-scale “Lexikon der neuen rechten Subkulturen” [Lexicon of new right-wing cultures], Neonazis with previous convictions for pertinent offences are presented and belittled primarily with reference to their cultural rituals. The outcome of the criticism of their style leads unequivocally to a political assessment, but one by means of indirection:

Neonazis are the last product of the 80s. They maintain a subculture consisting in a virtually multicultural stylistic muddle. Unscrupulously they plunder the subcultures of the 70s and the 80s. They tinker their group Egos together according to the maxim: if others manage to do their own thing, why can't we too? *Anything goes*, from the infantry drill of the DDR [East German] army, to indulging in sloppy sentimentality with regard to a mythical Teutonic past. They hardly ever construct their Nazi image with the help of an ideology but primarily from makeshift set pieces, from quotations and quotations of quotations. The extreme Right of our time is no longer capable of shoring up power. Therefore its hatred is certainly ugly but it remains harmless and without danger.²³

In the second example, one where the emphasis is clearly on description, former *Tempo* reporter Christian Kracht offers a positive assessment of the achievements of Uwe Timm, a German novelist, by interweaving an analysis of the shoes of this author in a page-long text with the critical review of a book by Timm that had just been published:

I saw you once, and that was at the main railway station of Frankfurt am Main. You were standing there, watching what was going on, eating chocolate with nuts, stuffing it into your mouth one candy after the other. Your shoes struck me at the time. They were nut-brown and slightly chafed on the sides. Solid lace-up shoes, probably English and probably twenty years old. And then I thought: whoever wears such shoes has the right to claim of himself that he has understood quite a few things. Then I read your new book *Kopffäger—Bericht aus dem Inneren des Landes* [“Headhunters—report from the inner country”] and while reading it I kept switching back and forth in my head between your shoes and your book, between what I knew about you and what I was reading of your work. When I had finished reading it had become clear to me: you have control of yourself and your language. Like hardly any other author in Germany, you wield power over the word. You are aware of what associations words and sentences may elicit. . . . Sometimes you manage to raise memories in the reader by means of a single precisely placed word. Then the time of childhood returns, or a smell or a view that one enjoyed once at the age of nine. And if it has at all ever been possible to infer the creative qualities of a writer from his shoes then it was in your case. You have style. You are no Thorsten Becker who wears new-wave idiot glasses, [and] a black writer’s shirt together with jackboots. You do not wear dungarees either like Bodo Kirchoff.²⁴

In such provocations, where the style makes the man, aesthetics provide the basis for ethical points of view.

The philosophy of the program that drove the magazine, the way aesthetics became the basis for ethics, provides the intellectual and cultural milieu—as well as a critical groundwork—for understanding *Tempo’s* place in the German New Journalism. From that milieu one can detect specific features that emerged that in turn help to characterize *Tempo’s* contribution to the genre. These include how the journal consistently broke taboos, served as a cultural irritant, engaged in social—and not-so-social—intervention, and how its journalists became participants in their own stories. There is one further feature or consequence, too, that reveals just how fragile was the German New Journalism (although no *irreverent* New Journalism is immune to this): It could easily slip into outright fabrication and forgery.

Provocation and the Breaking of Taboos

The provocative gesturing that was systematically displayed by the editorial team of *Tempo* could only result in the planned breaking of taboos as well as in verbal aggression: in a programmatic statement, the journalist and writer Maxim Biller declared enmity itself to be a knowledge-enhancing category.²⁵ Correspondingly, his column in *Tempo* was entitled: “100 lines of hatred.” His contrarian attitude is reflected, for example, in the following. At a time when the former Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker had

reached the peak of his public reputation, one could read the following lead text entitled “The Saint”: “he is inflatable, washable, wonderful. He delivers nice speeches, has a nice smile, and does not hurt a fly. Everybody loves Richard von Weizsäcker. Except Maxim Biller.”²⁶ Among still other examples, the author used the publication of his short essays and glosses in book form to attack the highly regarded journalist Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, who wrote about the filmmaker Woody Allen.

Biller was not the only representative of such wilfully practiced abusive criticism. Purposeful sallies against and infringements of taboos can also be found in numerous other texts. One could read stories in *Tempo* that dealt with the assumed or factual sex lives of well-known politicians, chief editors, and publishers. However, you could also read highly serious accounts that testified once again to a sort of hidden moral rigor. When the former *Spiegel*-editor Christian Schultz-Gerstein was found dead in his apartment in March 1987, the May issue of *Tempo* carried an article whose massive re-writing by chief editor Peichl effectively delayed its delivery for as much as two weeks. The article’s author was Jochen Siemens. The title of his media-critical parable was “The Slow Death of a Journalist.” The tale revealed how Schultz-Gerstein, a brilliantly eloquent moralist, built himself a successful career, then fell out with an omnipotent editor because of a love affair, then went into a decline because of a mixture of unprofessional passion and job-conditioned alcoholism, and finally took his own life. “His story,” according to the text’s introduction, “is a story of the power and the powerlessness of journalism.”²⁷

It requires moral rigor for a journalist to admit just how powerless his profession can be.

Irritation as Editorial Program; Modification of the Conventional

Examining the various issues of the magazine and analysing the mixture presented by each particular issue in the overall context of the magazine’s total history makes one realize that a principle of irritating and attention-generating presentation is at work here: it is the modification of the conventional, which can be found to apply in equal measure to the language, the images, and the content. This kind of distancing alienation arises through the provocative combination of styles, the combining of what was previously separate, and the disappointment of expectations that might create an aesthetically pleasing effect. In concrete terms this means the juxtaposition of tough investigative stories with fashion editorials in one and the same issue; the playful use of the aesthetics of advertising in the domain of social photography, and generally in the visual style of the magazine; the use of different font sizes and unusual image sections in one and the same text²⁸; lifting the boundary between sensationalist tabloid journalism and quality

journalism by means of an intelligent and serious debate about the traditional variety of topics in tabloid journalism; the attempt to generate friction by subjecting politicians to a rigorous test of their lifestyles, and questioning fashion designers and comic authors about genuine political topics.

“Aesthetics and information, lifestyle and politics, form and spirit,” the former *Tempo* editor Oliver Hergesell writes in a review:

[A]ll of that was inseparable. Investigative stories should look good, fashion editorials were presented cleverly. *Tempo* turned fun into seriousness and vice versa. Suspense arose from contradictions: next to the dioxin revelation stood a report about the aristocracy, [Herbert] Wehner’s reckonings appear next to a chronicle of punk.²⁹ Both prudence and banality were legitimate. . . .³⁰

Variants Shaping Linguistic Form

Tom Wolfe, the American protagonist of New Journalism, identified in an interview four central techniques of writing that are applied within this framework of news reporting:

The first technique is to build scene upon scene. In other words, telling the whole story through a sequence of scenes instead of simple historical narration. The second technique is to use genuine dialogues—the more the better. The third and least understood technique consists in using status details. This implies mentioning pieces of clothing, describing forms of behavior or the treatment of children or service personnel—everything that indicates where people think their place in society is or what social position they hope to attain. The fourth technique is the use of the point of view, i.e. the depiction of the scenes as seen through a particular pair of eyes.³¹

All these classical techniques of writing placed within the framework of journalistic reporting can be shown to exist in a panopticon of different forms. In *Tempo* there were reportages and portraits, interviews and conversations, essays and columns, commentaries and glosses, reviews, and feuilletonistic reflections that betray the literary ambitions of the authors. Among the rather unconventional media genres—and this is also a specific feature of the American New Journalism³²—are narrative, dramatically shaped interviews, mixed forms comprising of conversations and reportages, quotations, and atmospheric sketches.³³

Intervening Journalism; Experiment and Disclosure

Tempo demonstrably uses a form of news reporting that one might call “intervening journalism.”³⁴ This is certainly something new—something which was unusual in German journalism. Its characteristic is undercover investigation; the procedure is of an experimental kind. The point of departure is a hypothesis that one seeks to corroborate through personal involvement or intervention, and that one then markets in the form of a revelatory story as spectacularly as possible.

As an example, two female members on the magazine's staff "prove" that it is in many cases impossible to obtain attractive residences on the housing market without granting sexual favors in return; they go out and pretend to be looking for a suitable dwelling and report the corresponding sexual solicitations.³⁵ In another example, a team of journalist researchers smuggle pistols and fake explosives on board several airliners—and want to show in this way how easy it is to seize and even blow up such an airliner.³⁶ In still another, a female editor under false pretences offers her services as a surrogate mother in order to disclose "how unborn life is bartered in Germany."³⁷

In these examples, the "intervening" journalists produce the result whose existence they presuppose by masquerading and shamming to enable them to perform a reality check. In the course of the investigations the very reality is created that one wishes to reveal—and the story that is subsequently written usually takes the form of a sort of step-by-step verification.

A public outcry occurred from one investigative account that was published under the title "42 Years after Auschwitz: How We Found Eight Building Sites for an AIDS Camp."³⁸ The *Tempo* journalists pretended to be employees of an investment society. They rented a Mercedes Benz car and searched in ten different communities for sites on which to build "a closed institution for HIV-infected persons" together with a labor camp with patrol guards and an electric fence.³⁹ The newly drawn-up construction plan, which the journalists submitted together with pretentiously decorated visiting cards, was essentially identical with the layout of the concentration camp Sachsenhausen; and the journalists "merely used contemporary concepts for the old installations."⁴⁰ The lure consisted in investment money and 700 jobs for nurses, doctors, and patrol guards. The result of this undercover investigation was that in eight out of ten cases the responsible burgomasters and managing directors of the communities not only expressed interest, but even volunteered to add to the project of planned internment by offering their very own special proposals.

No less spectacular, and driven by the same intention to unmask ideologically controlled thinking, was an action that took place in East Germany. In the spring of 1988 *Tempo* editors faked a complete issue of *Neues Deutschland*, then still the main publication of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei), the dominating communist party.⁴¹ The new "glasnost course-of-action," people could read there, was on its way to conquering the masses—and there was also a photograph showing Erich Honecker and Mikhail Gorbachev exchanging an intense fraternal kiss. It was further reported that freedom of the press would finally be realized. Then followed a text that announced the dismantling of the nuclear power plants of the DDR as well as an ideas competition for the refashioning of the Berlin Wall. The proposals ranged from "blowing

it up” to the “model Christo” (total wrapping of the object with sackcloth and strings by the internationally-renowned artist). In the same vein was announced both a radical reform of the justice-administering authorities of the DDR, and the abolition of the STASI, the notorious police spy organisation of the DDR. Some 6,000 copies of this special issue of the “party” organ, which showed complete reform in its content and was deceptively genuine in its graphic appearance, were successfully smuggled into the DDR by *Tempo* staff and distributed there. Of course, East German authorities were furious. But the attack on the reality of political totalitarianism was entirely consistent with the magazine’s program for challenging abstract utopian totalizations.

From Observer to Participant; Variants of Identification

One of the star authors of the magazine *Tempo*, Helge Timmerberg, described in a portrait of the American Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson the change of role that is so characteristic for the pattern of news reporting in many forms of New Journalism. The apparently neutral observer turns into the participant, participating in the events that he describes, putting himself at risk, and identifying himself.⁴² Self-experience functions as a filter for perception of the world. A quotation from the portrait by Helge Timmerberg:

His name is Thompson. Hunter S. Thompson. The “S” stands for Stockton and the rest for pioneer work in journalism. . . . The man invented “New Journalism”.⁴³ He named his style “gonzo.” An Italian word and it means “crazy.” A “Gonzo-journalist” is someone who finds it too laborious in a through-and-through crazy world to pretend that the reporter is the only sane human being far and wide, [or] to pretend that he has never pissed into his trousers when stoned, that he has never fucked a whore when his topic was prostitution, that he has never grabbed the chocolate from his little sister when he was reporting on violence against women.⁴⁴

There are numerous specimens of this in *Tempo*—unmistakably stylized and hero-worshipping—where the reporter changes role by relinquishing the neutral observation post of the classic information model of journalism in favor of direct, quasi-unmediated participation. The author Tom Kummer, for example, investigated the horrors of solitary confinement by having himself locked up for a week in the basement of the editorial office building and insisted on a total ban on contact for that period. The account was subsequently published in *Tempo*.⁴⁵ A trainee, the daughter of a well-known politician and therefore publishing under a pseudonym, undertook three days of instruction with a prostitute to train as a dominatrix, and then wrote a leading story on the subject.⁴⁶ An editor, infected with the AIDS virus, whose work was supported by several chief editors in a very moving way, wrote a diary from February 1992 until his death.⁴⁷ The columnist Peter Glaser composed

a literary reportage in the form of a walking tour of the city experienced as a visit to a strange, foreign, but nevertheless familiar world. After only a few paragraphs the reader becomes aware that the author is describing a drug trip experience:

Where did we stop? Somewhere. I think Harry, Hermann and I had each swallowed a pill before we tumbled out of Harry's apartment into this vast GGG-space millions of years ago. I mean GehsteigGassenGegendRaum [PavementLaneRegionSpace]. I said pill and meant LSD, the trip. *It's only all, but we psychedelike it* [Glaser's original English text].⁴⁸

In an example of participation by editor Christian Kracht, he appears in a photograph in the issue of April 1995, which shows him with a Chinese Kalashnikov machine gun. In his first-person reportage he describes how a native takes him to a village on the Afghan-Pakistani border, where they find an arms factory. Kracht acquires a few Chinese grenades, learns how to fire guns, throws hand grenades around, blows up a rocky hill—and writes:

That day I tried out a few other weapons that I had never before in my life fired: Uzis and Kalashnikovs, and of course the M 16, and I realized that firing arms is like eating potato chips because one never gets enough of it.⁴⁹

Other authors, protagonists of pop literature, who published in *Tempo* in its final phase, chose less spectacular and risky themes and topics for their reports of private personal experiences. Personal conditions and feelings became central; vanity became increasingly dominant. Eckhart Nickel reported, for instance, how he felt driving through Germany in a yellow Porsche sports car. The result of his journey: an inflamed in-grown toenail in his big toe.⁵⁰ In another issue he wrote about his visit to the barber's and how a fundamental question arose which he calls, "his dilemma." The text starts with the following:

My hair is too long and that is nothing new because ever since the magical day on which my mother stopped cutting my hair I keep being confronted by the same question: hair off, or let hair grow? That is my dilemma. Every time I have my hair washed at the barber's, the same kinds of thoughts keep torturing me: should I have all my hair cut off? That would certainly be a mistake, for with long hair I'd probably be happier. But if I leave it long, I shall go away from the salon and think that short hair would change my life.⁵¹

What reveals itself in these examples is a tension between the writer's empathetic subjectivity and the relevance of the contents. One might consider the following extreme values reflecting that tension: The subjective way of description deals with a topic that is of extraordinary relevance, or, by contrast it deals with content that is of interest only to the author, and functions only as the justification for egocentrism. It becomes a kind of writing

for the sake of purely private experiences and self-indulgence. Subjective journalism is then no longer a method of presentation and no longer just a form of presentation, but at the same time it is the central message: The author knows only himself, as it were; everything that might lead beyond him appears to be fundamentally uninteresting—to him.

However, between these two extreme poles another possibility exists, a sort of intermediate form. Contents that may superficially appear ego-centric may, at least at a second glance, assume particular relevance—and will be read probably for that very reason. The *Tempo* editor Helge Timmerberg would primarily report on himself by describing an unhappy love affair, analysing his personal experiences with cocaine, and telling of his difficulties with tax fraud investigators and his own fears of failure. Nevertheless, his texts, which have since appeared in book form, possess an explosive quality that makes them range far beyond the person behind their author.⁵² Thus the question posed is why are there stories (on the surface) that seem to deal only with one single journalist but that prove nevertheless to be of interest to numerous readers. One possible answer may be that what the texts deal with possesses a specific form of actuality. It is not necessarily the actuality of the day, not (necessarily) the actuality of the calendar, but it is rather distinguished by an archetypal *actuality*. This means that the texts that satisfy this sort of archetypal actuality deal with a single concrete individual and his or her peculiar and private experiences at one level, but in a more subtle and cryptic way they also deal with encounters with the unknown, with the strange; they deal with winners and losers and with the possibilities of a quite different, a possibly wilder life that cannot be pressed into the habitual journalistic and cultural frameworks. Archetypal actuality means, therefore, asking fundamental questions of human existence. In the case of *Tempo*, they are posed from a purely self-centred perspective as the only honest perspective one can take in a devalued world.

Radical Subjectivity; Between Fact and Fiction

A subjective literary journalism is not only in danger of falling victim to thematic irrelevance but always runs the additional risk of fictionalising the contents themselves. After all, that has always been one of the risks of Gonzo journalism. At *Tempo*, the researched material was processed and fashioned with much greater freedom when compared to typical news journalism. The problem of a more subjective writing style is that it acquires a sort of dynamic of its own and begins to pre-structure events. It might finally produce a brilliantly stylized rendering of what happened that is entertaining and attractive but has lost sight of the facts. This danger was increased by an epistemologically naive criticism of objectivity, which was widespread among

the editorial team of *Tempo*. This form of criticism proceeded from the naive opposition of (clearly unachievable) objectivity and (clearly given and thus inevitable) subjectivity. It simply contrasts absolute truth and an individual's construction of reality, and claims implicitly the status of certainty for its own position. Consequently, Helge Timmerberg propounds the thesis that the irreverent German "New Journalism" is another term for "de-simulation" and "actually only means not to behave in a mendacious, corrupt, and scheming world as if the reporter came from another planet."⁵³ He adds:

Whatever they say in the orthodox schools for journalism is false. Do not get involved, they say. You do not exist. Your thoughts, hopes, dreams, desires, faults, failures, fears, visions . . . forget about them. All you are is a cordless microphone, a sort of medium. Don't get involved. And don't involve *us*. No word about internal affairs—the way we talk about stories when nobody else is listening. This is no business of the readers. Journalism is a savage business, dirty anyway, of course also corrupt.⁵⁴

In an interview given years later, he says tersely:

New Journalism is honest due to its extreme subjectivity. . . . Traditional journalism insists on a kind of objectivity that does not exist. Journalists are human beings. Human beings have opinions. Human beings have antipathies. Human beings have sometimes had a very unsatisfactory breakfast. There are no objective human beings, and therefore there can be no objective journalism. There are those who admit this; there are others who don't.⁵⁵

Peichl, the first chief editor of *Tempo*, summarily transforms this criticism of the ideal of objectivity, which is typical of all the different varieties of New Journalism, into a journalistic strategy by writing under the title "Chimeras everywhere, everywhere chimeras":

Our success irritates the critics: *Tempo* is accused of producing artificial trends, of preaching only appearance and not reality. What kind of reality, please? . . . Is there really anyone out there still who believes that there is one and only one reality? Every magazine produces pseudo-worlds and pseudo-realities. Only we should be prohibited from doing so?⁵⁶

The consequence of this insight into the plurality of the "real" is later formulated more exactly in another programmatic statement. Peichl speaks about the "fascination of the fictitious":

As everything had lost its value anyway, as all the values and all the truths had been de-truthed in society, the borders of reality had to be put to the test by the magazine *Tempo*. It was necessary to escape the farce of seriousness by experimenting earnestly with not-taking-oneself-seriously; it was necessary to reveal the fictional mechanisms of *all* media by employing them with tongue in cheek. . . .⁵⁷

Given the role played by subjectivity in the pose of self-interest, it should come as no surprise that some authors have consciously or unconsciously misunderstood this form of journalism and felt justified in abandoning fact-based research altogether. One case of such a risky borderline crossing between fact and fiction—and thus between journalistic investigation and fictional fashioning—is the career of the author Tom Kummer, which began in the editorial offices of the magazine *Tempo*, and which was terminated by the supplement of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that exposed him as a forger. He was responsible in 2000 for one of the biggest forgery scandals in German-language journalism because he invented numerous interviews with prominent people. The ambivalence of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* chief editor's attitude and treatment of this brilliant writer and a less than-rigorous investigator illustrates the risks of a subjective journalism that sacrifices accurate rendering of facts for the "good story" whenever it seems opportune and profitable. In 1990 Kummer had already been exposed as a forger by the editorial office of *Tempo*. An extraordinarily thrilling reportage concerning a group of young devil's worshippers turned out to be a product of montage and plagiarism. One of the readers informed the chief editor, submitting photocopies of the original texts as material pieces of evidence that the author had copied from a book by Richard Ford. The editor, however, refrained from sacking Kummer because he did not want to lose the services of this highly talented writer.

Then came the second instance. In 2000 the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had to investigate interviews Kummer claimed to have conducted in the U.S., mainly about the glitz and glamor world of Hollywood. In them, boxer Mike Tyson reflected on Nietzsche and the *Übermensch*, Pamela Anderson of *Bay Watch* contemplated sex appeal and body cult; John McEnroe had bouts of anger and a penchant for abstract painting. Moreover, Courtney Love recited to Kummer's microphone sentences of curiously confused poetry: "There are seagulls on the Riviera that sip iced gin and tonic. This is something we ought to talk about." At another place: "I deceive so authentically, I am beyond deception." Various Hollywood reporters working for big newspapers suddenly found themselves challenged by their editors because they had to cope with why a certain Tom Kummer managed to supply such exceptional interviews although they themselves were—as usual—only able to deliver the customary ready-made wares of PR agents. The answer proved to be quite simple: Kummer had never conducted these interviews. He had forged them. The conversations of the supposed master interviewer had essentially been generated at his desk in his home. Some portions were copied from books and articles, others were free inventions. Everything was assembled in new dialogues. When the case became public in 2000, both the chief editors of

the supplement lost their jobs, Kummer was pilloried as a forger—and tried to justify his work essentially as an artistically conceived form of “borderline journalism.”⁵⁸

Writing Is Living: Theory and Practice

Tempo's former chief editor Markus Peichl described the working atmosphere in the editorial office of the magazine with the following words:

I do think that we were quite a good team, that we understood each other on a certain level, and that we experienced things together that go beyond what one usually calls work . . . the way we treated each other, the mutual respect, the belief that we were strong enough to conquer the world, but that we were still pinned with our backs to the wall . . . the celebrations, the parties; while we did not dance at the edge of the volcano but occasionally did on tables and windowsills. . . . The naiveté and unjadedness of other generations was denied to us, but the power that one can only feel when one creates something totally one's own, something totally different, this power we had succeeded in snatching with all our might at least for a few years.⁵⁹

What Peichl is doing then is defining journalism, at least implicitly, as a form of life, as the ecstasy of creative work in a community of people who are like-minded at least in principle. Such a view of one's profession is based on the particular relationship between author and text. The text cannot be separated from its author: writing is living and living is writing—this is the programmatic equation that was followed at *Tempo*. Author and text stand in a relationship of identity and consequently of mutual affirmation. The fact is, however, that the kind of professionalism that vacillates between genuine interest and basic task accomplishment can also form a useful layer of protection that could pose a threat to the cultural program. It was one that had not appeared plausible to anyone working for *Tempo* during the first few years because the routine appeared to be a synonym for philistinism, a threat to one's own creativity and to the constantly required effort to think in novel and unpredictable ways. “The leap to professionalism,” said former editor Oliver Hergesell in an essay, “was never accomplished. Our true selves showed themselves in the issues of the first two years, when we advanced at full throttle, when doubts and nuances were practically never articulated and if then only for the sake of creating credibility. All professionalism deprived *Tempo* of energy because it was the very ill-adjustedness that was the source of our power.”⁶⁰ The title of his essay published shortly after *Tempo* ceased publication was “Collective Self-incineration” and focused on the basic problem of creative innovation and rebellious gesturing: they refused to be institutionalized and could not be stabilized permanently if they wanted to remain authentic; they had to proceed largely without plan and deadline. For this reason, the pressure to be innovative inevitably would have hit its

existential limits. Institutionalized rebellion, even if only in the form of a magazine, is an oxymoron.

Journalism and Literature: New Journalism in the German-Language World

From time to time the thesis has been advanced that the New Journalism is a through-and-through American phenomenon, implying that there were not other variants in other languages besides English, at least that could be taken seriously.⁶¹ But the example at hand illustrates that this must be rejected when one looks at the long-term effects of the commercially unsuccessful but otherwise formative magazine *Tempo*. For many authors in Germany the “*Tempo* years,” to quote a book by the writer Maxim Biller, were of decisive importance in resurrecting and revitalizing a journalistic genre and liberating it from the naiveté, as noted, of the Old Left ideology. Moreover, the programmatic approach of such a subjective journalism has long since not only profited individual professionals, but infiltrated established newspapers and what are known as German quality media (*Spiegel*, *Stern*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, *Die Zeit*, etc.), even inspiring diverse colleagues who were in no way connected with the original team of editors. Florian Illies, for instance, adapts the *Tempo*-program most successfully in his essayistic writings. His portraits of generations have all become bestsellers.⁶² A large number of former editors are now active in the book market and have published collections of articles, short stories, novels, or scripts for the theatre, demonstrating that they have made their way from journalism onto the literary scene.⁶³

In March 1991, Gundolph Freyermuth, on the pages of *Tempo*, provided an assessment of the magazine’s contribution:

Sometimes magazines, for brief historical moments, turn into the mouthpieces of a dispersed avant-garde community whose interests, claims, and desires make up the future. Then these magazines seem to consist of more than just paper. Anecdotes and myths begin to grow concerning them, and their names are still quoted with awe even after decades. They help to accomplish the self-understanding of a generation, and they secure the continuation of the public debate with other means.⁶⁴

In 2006, ten years after *Tempo* ceased publication, the editorial team met again in order to produce, to great public attention, just one single issue of *Tempo* and thus to revive again, if only for a moment, the old spirit of an individualistic rebellion that shaped this German-language variant of New Journalism. This re-edition and new edition was widely debated in the press. What became clear in the articles was that *Tempo* had become a myth. So, while it may no longer exist, it still remains in the German consciousness.

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Endnotes

¹ Sabine Kobes, "Lümmel mit Lebensart," *Gala*, 15 November 2001, 82.

² Cited after Kobes, 82.

³ Joachim Bessing, Christian Kracht, Eckhart Nickel, Alexander v. Schönburg and Benjamin v. Stuckrad-Barre, *Tristesse Royale. Das popkulturelle Quintett* (München: List, 2001), 184.

⁴ There is one school of thought that the New Journalism was solely an approach to a kind of journalistic writing different from the dominant mainstream models. But there is another school that says that the New Journalism, while acknowledging the writing as a part of it, reflected more broadly an attitude, a way of looking at the world that in turn became reflected in a journal, and not just in the writing but in the program or presentation as well. This can be seen, for example, in Bill Reynolds's "Recovering the Peculiar Life and Times of Tom Hedley and of Canadian New Journalism," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1.1 (Spring 2009): 89.

⁵ I wish to thank John C. Hartsock for his helpful comments.

⁶ John C. Hartsock, "Literary Reportage: The 'Other' Literary Journalism," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, xlii (Spring/Summer 2009): 116, 123-134.

⁷ The following analyses are—if not otherwise stated—based on interviews with the different chief editors of the magazine. The reader may furthermore take note that this article is the version of a text published earlier in a book edited by Joan Bleicher and myself (entitled *Grenzgänger. Formen des New Journalism* [2004, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften]), which I have revised, updated, and adapted for *Literary Journalism Studies*. All the quotations illustrating the editorial program and the general approach of the magazine makers have been translated into English from the original German. See Bernhard Poerksen: "Die Tempojahre," 307-36.

⁸ *Tempo* influenced, for instance, the following magazines: *Max*, *Magazin der Süddeutschen Zeitung*, *Zeit-Magazin*, *Spiegel-Reporter*, *Park Avenue*, the German edition of *Vanity Fair*.

⁹ Wolfgang Timpe, "Zur Sache, Peichl," *neue medien*, vol. 3, 1989, 18.

¹⁰ Markus Peichl, interview by Andreas Hentschel, "Tempo (1986-1996). Eine Dekade aus der Perspektive eines populären Zeitgeistmagazins" (Master's thesis, University of Augsburg, 2000), appendix 15.

¹¹ Michael Hopp, interview by Andreas Hentschel, appendix 2.

¹² See, for example, Willi Winkler, "Abgefeiert," *Die Zeit*, 10 February 1989, 53.

¹³ Hentschel, 29-30.

¹⁴Claudius Seidl, "Wir und '68," *Tempo*, April 1988, 53.

¹⁵Maxim Biller, "Wir und '68," *Tempo*, April 1988, 54.

¹⁶Markus Peichl, "Die Dame vom *Spiegel* oder warum ich *Tempo* machte," *Merian Extra: Der Verlag*, no precise details on year of publication in issue no. 60.

¹⁷To be sure, there were others on occasion who engaged in what might be considered New Journalism. For those outside Germany perhaps the most notable—and notorious—was Günter Wallraff. But the difference is that *Tempo* was an institutional influence, not unlike the way *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *New York* magazines were in the U.S. during the period of the American New Journalism. Also, in Germany, Wallraff is viewed more as an investigative journalist, although investigative journalism and New Journalism need not be mutually exclusive. But what definitively sets Wallraff apart from the *Tempo* program is that he is of the previous generation, of the 68ers, who believed, if not explicitly then implicitly, in social utopias. He was a social "do-gooder" with a program to improve the lot of workers, among others. That is a charge that could never be levelled against the American Hunter S. Thompson, who was undoubtedly the most notorious of the irreverent American New Journalists practicing what was called Gonzo" journalism. In many ways Wallraff comes closer to the proletarian reportage of Egon Erwin Kisch and the Old Left that *Tempo* so thoroughly rejected.

¹⁸Cited after Markus Peichl, "Alle reden vom Wetter. . .," *Tempo*, January 1987, 3.

¹⁹Markus Peichl, "Die Dame vom Spiegel oder warum ich *Tempo* machte," *Merian Extra: Der Verlag*, no precise details on year of publication in issue no. 61.

²⁰For this kind of feuilletonistic consideration of everyday culture, refer especially to the columns by Peter Glaser, which have also been published as a collection in book form: Peter Glaser, *Glaser's heile Welt. Peter Glaser über Neues im Westen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1988).

²¹See Dirk Frank, "Generation Tristesse. Zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Journalismus in der jüngeren Pöpliteratur. "In: Joan Bleicher and Bernhard Poerksen, "*Grenzgänger. Formen des New Journalism*," Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), 267-303.

²²Of particular impact here was probably the Bret Easton Ellis novel *American Psycho* (1991).

²³Bernd Schwer, "Lumpensammler," *Tempo*, March 1992, 3.

²⁴Christian Kracht, "Wie die Schuhe, so der Dichter," *Tempo*, December 1991, 128. Bodo Kirckhoff and Thorsten Becker are German novelists.

²⁵Maxim Biller, "Feige das Land, schlapp die Literatur," *Die Zeit*, April 2000, 47-49.

²⁶Maxim Biller, "Der Heilige," *Tempo*, August 1986, 46.

²⁷Jochen Siemens, "Der langsame Tod eines Journalisten," *Tempo*, May 1987, 92.

²⁸Hentschel, 39.

²⁹Herbert Wehner was a German politician, a prominent member of the Left.

³⁰Oliver Hergesell, "Kollektive Selbstverbrennung," *Die Woche*, 14 June 1996, 22-23.

³¹Brant Newborn, "Meine Absicht war es immer, ins zentrale Nervensystem eines Menschen hineinzuschlüpfen," Tom Wolfe, prominentester Vertreter des New Journalism, über den Einsturz gesellschaftlicher Formen und die Verwischung der Grenzen zwischen Literatur und Berichterstattung, *Die Weltwoche*, 28 January 1988, 46. This, of course, is a translation from Wolfe's 1973 seminal essay, "The New Journalism." See Tom Wolfe, "The New Journalism," in *The New Journalism: With an Anthology*, edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (New York: Harper, 1973), 46-49.

³²Hannes Haas and Gianluca Wallisch, "Literarischer Journalismus oder journalistische Literatur? Ein Beitrag zu Konzept, Vertretern und Philosophie des 'New Journalism,'" *Publizistik*, vol. 36, 1991, 298-314, 304.

³³The writer Maxim Biller has made particularly frequent use of this form of presentation; a collection of pertinent texts may be found in: Maxim Biller, *Die Tempojahre* (München: dtv, 1991).

³⁴Andreas Hentschel was the first to use this concept, as far as I know; however, he does not really make it explicit: Hentschel, 47.

³⁵Andrea Höhne and Claudia Josefus, "Der Immobilienstrich," *Tempo*, July 1990, 28-33.

³⁶Michael Helberg, Claudia Kaiser and Roger Lindner, "Gesprengt," *Tempo*, September 1989, 44-49.

³⁷Susanne Schneider, "Ich war Leihmutter," *Tempo*, October 1988, 45.

³⁸Susanne Schneider, "42 Jahre nach Auschwitz: So fanden wir acht Bauplätze für ein Aids-Lager," *Tempo*, August 1987, 40-45.

³⁹Ibid., 41.

⁴⁰Ibid., 44.

⁴¹About this action see: Hentschel, 47ff. and Markus Peichl, "Geht doch rüber . . .," *Tempo*, April 1987, 3.

⁴²In the Gonzo journalism, e.g., of Hunter S. Thompson the actions of the author become the dominant events. See also: Hannes Haas and Gianluca Wallisch, "Literarischer Journalismus oder journalistische Literatur? Ein Beitrag zu Konzept, Vertretern und Philosophie des 'New Journalism,'" *Publizistik*, vol. 36, 1991, 304.

⁴³Of course, Timmerberg is mistaken here in characterizing Thompson as the inventor of New Journalism. Moreover, Thompson is erroneously credited with being the one to name his kind of journalism as Gonzo.

⁴⁴Helge Timmerberg, "Hart, härter, Hunter," *Tempo*, April 1988, 38.

⁴⁵Tom Kummer, "Der Selbstversuch," *Tempo*, July 1989, 58-59.

⁴⁶Monika Fischer, "Ich war Domina," *Tempo*, August 1988, 48-54.

⁴⁷"Das Aids-Tagebuch," *Tempo*, February 1992, 34-38.

⁴⁸Peter Glaser, "Willkommen im Crazy Age!," *Tempo*, August 1990, 44.

⁴⁹Christian Kracht, "Ballern wie blöd," *Tempo*, April 1995, 66.

⁵⁰Eckhart Nickel (1995): "Ich, das Porschloch," *Tempo*, May 1995, 82.

⁵¹Eckhart Nickel (1996): "Einen perfekten Haarschnitt, bitte," *Tempo*, February 1996, 86.

⁵²For a summary see Helge Timmerberg, *Tiger fressen keine Yogis. Stories von unterwegs* (Münster: Solibro, 2001).

⁵³Helge Timmerberg, "Das Glück des Süchtigen. Helge Timmerberg über Gonzo-Journalismus," *Medium Magazin*, vol. 2, 1988, 19.

⁵⁴Ibid., 18, Emphasis in original text.

⁵⁵Helge Timmerberg, "Hunter S. Thompson warf mit Äxten um sich," *Der Tagespiegel*, 10 February 2002, no. 17673, 34.

⁵⁶Markus Peichl, "Schimäre ist alles, alles ist Schimäre," *Tempo*, February 1988, 3.

⁵⁷Markus Peichl, "Die Dame vom Spiegel oder warum ich Tempo machte," *Merian Extra: Der Verlag*, Emphasis in original text, no precise details on year of publication in issue 61.

⁵⁸For this case see also Bernhard Pörksen, *Die Beobachtung des Beobachters* (Konstanz: UVK, 2006), 205ff.

⁵⁹Peichl n.d., 63; emphasis in original text.

⁶⁰Oliver Hergesell, "Kollektive Selbstverbrennung," *Die Woche*, 14 June 1996, 23.

⁶¹Hannes Haas and Gianluca Wallisch, "Literarischer Journalismus oder journalistische Literatur? Ein Beitrag zu Konzept, Vertretern und Philosophie des 'New Journalism,'" *Publizistik*, vol. 36, 1991, 310; Gianluca Wallisch, "Kreative Wirklichkeit," *message*, vol. 2., 2000, 89.

⁶²Florian Illies, *Generation Golf zwei* (Munich: Blessing, 2003).

⁶³See Ralf Hohlfeld, "Der schnelle Marsch durch die Institutionen. Formen des New Journalism in etablierten Medien—Zur Diffusion eines innovativen Journalismuskonzeptes" in Joan Bleicher and Bernhard Pörksen, *Grenzgänger. Formen des New Journalism* (2004, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), 337-360.

⁶⁴Gundolf Freyermuth, "Traumschläger," *Tempo*, March 1991, 86. (One conspicuous example in the English-language media would be the *Spectator* and *Tatler* essays by Addison and Steele in the early eighteenth century).

Esa Kero— “BANGKOK”

Esa Kero, born in 1951, is a Finnish journalist and author. In the 1980s he was one of the practitioners of the Finnish variant of Gonzo journalism. One example is “Bangkok,” originally published in 1986 in the *Monthly Supplement* of *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest newspaper in Finland. Today Kero has retired from the newspaper business, and now writes books from his home province of Punkaharju. The translation maintains the ideosyncracies of Kero’s punctuation, for which he was known. “Bangkok” is followed with a critical examination by Maria Lassila-Merisalo, a scholar of Finnish literary journalism. Reprinted by permission.

Translated by David Hackston
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I wanted to see the canals of Bangkok, on the first night, in a taxi. I made my way down to the dark shore, where the driver asked me sullenly, “why would you want to see nothing?”

This is my final night. How small the world has become! The youngest son of the Turvala cottage*—the one with the red roof, the fields nothing but rocks and marshland—now here.

I should be in Calcutta, but the Indian Embassy in Helsinki did its best to make sure I didn’t get a visa, and now I’m lying on a cheap bed in Bangkok, waiting.

If I were still a member of the church and still believed strongly in something, I might say that this was God’s will, but I’m not that crude.

But this can’t be a mere coincidence. There have been far too many coincidences between Helsinki and this bed.

*The name of Kero’s childhood home in Punkaharju, Southern Savonia, Finland.

The fan on the desk is humming. I take a swig of beer, and wish that I could smoke a cigarette, draw on it calmly and collect my thoughts . . .

Two weeks have passed. Endless humidity; the drone of the “very cool” setting of the air-conditioning unit in my hotel room; exhaust fumes from the street; traffic chaos, apparent chaos. Three-wheeled tuk-tuks and one-and-a-half-million motorcyclists.

Around me a city that it’s impossible to comprehend.

Stains on my bedspread—sperm, undoubtedly.

That I should have had to travel here, thousands of kilometres away, in order to make sense of even a fraction of my own journey, its meaninglessness, its daily pretence. The great Finnish lie.

No. Allow me to vent these matters in some semblance of an order, the order in which they bubble into my mind. This is one jigsaw puzzle that doesn’t form any tangible picture . . .

A small beggar boy on the red-hot street, no bigger than a monkey is sitting with a plastic cup—not so much sitting as lying, almost dead. I walk past. People. Beautiful, well-dressed people all around. Three hours go by, and I walk back down along the same stretch of Sura Wong Street. The boy is still lying in the same position. Is he dead? No more so than I.

I eat well, this time at an Indian restaurant. Our host is very friendly. I leave a thirty-baht tip.

To the little boy lying in the street I gave nothing.

And yet, the little boy with his plastic cup does not appear in the dreams I dream there in my air-conditioned hotel room. What we have seen and experienced has taken us so far. But what use are these sights and experiences? Maybe I should have tilled those rocky fields after all, sat on the steps of the Turvala cottage wondering when the swallows will arrive, perhaps the very same swallows that sit along the electricity cables in Bangkok, in their millions, side by side as far as the eye can see.

The idea of going to the slums of the Khlong Toei district worried me; I wanted to forget all about our trip but I couldn’t—this too was something I simply had to see. Over a million people live in slums here; that’s one in every five citizens of Bangkok.

I stepped gingerly between the low-roofed buildings—some might call them shacks—as one might walk along duckboards. Real duckboards will be needed again once the monsoon season arrives.

The slum was not how I had imagined it. You could almost call it cosy; the people were friendly, invited us in; flowers in the windows and all around a great sense of warmth that I find it impossible to define. It is hard to define this slum in any terms whatsoever . . .

That being said, everything was utterly different to the way it had been

described in the accounts of a certain missionary. Of course, there is no plumbing system. There is disease; perhaps there is crime; people drink a lot. It could be anywhere

A merchant trader, who is also a member of the district's twenty-strong "assembly", explains that many people here have jobs—temporary jobs, that is—but that life goes on nonetheless. Apparently there is no worm so small that it will not try to crawl forwards.

The state is doing its best—how on earth do I know this?—to get rid of the slums. It has built enormous concrete apartment blocks, where it re-houses people living in the slum districts. Good God, how vividly those new houses in all their hideousness remind me of . . . But perhaps at least they have good plumbing.

Can I dare believe my eyes any longer? All I can see around me is goodness, goodness in people. The missionary told me that in these places people are killed like flies, there is crime, prostitution. . . .

We are walking along the side streets at night and end up going off with a couple of strangers.

"Let me show you something shocking!" says a pimp we meet in the restaurant at around half past two in the morning.

That's precisely what we wanted to see.

He takes us to the "Chicken Farm", a brothel. Along a side street, into a courtyard and a dark corridor, up the stairs to the upper floors of a house that looks like an old hotel.

The head pimp summons the girls and lines them up for us, all twenty or so girls working that particular shift.

"Please, take your pick."

The girls look at us eagerly. This is a world away from the wild red-light districts of Paris, where, of course, there are "real people" too.

Upon first coming here, Finnish men are full of illusions, and this is the place where those illusions are dispelled. But we don't talk about that back in macho Finland. In Finland people talk about prices and sex.

The youngest of the girls is wearing a white skirt; she is the prettiest and the most obviously nervous. Perhaps she senses that, if anyone is selected, it will be her. And if the man doesn't understand properly, it'll hurt.

The other girls are already old hands. One of them has terrible scars across her face, and is otherwise not at the more beautiful end of the scale. She looks at me as though she really wanted it too.

We sit on the edge of a bed and watch. A cockroach runs along the wall of room 126. There on the edge of the bed everything seems somehow strangely natural. Why shouldn't life be like this?

We drink beer. A young boy brings me a beer. He is available too, and presumably so is the head pimp, though he is a slightly older man.

“Of course,” he says. “Straight away, if you like.”

One of the boys is very beautiful.

It almost feels as though we were in North Karelia[†]—nobody is pressuring us, nobody is worried about what we might want here. The head pimp sits next to us on the edge of the bed as though he were a farmer whose fields just happen to be of the living kind.

He tells us about the clients and what they ask for. Some of their wishes sound rather strange, but this doesn’t seem to bother him all that much—that’s what life is like when it has the possibility to exist. Otherwise those wishes would be locked up in chunks of terraced housing.

We visit another “chicken farm”, which appears to be almost exclusively for Thai men. The girls here are perhaps a bit past their prime, but they are oh so warm, such wonderful people. People.

“What was supposed to shock me?” I ask our pimp once we’re back in the taxi.

He smiles. He wasn’t born yesterday. He’s seen the world, went out on the streets at sixteen (so late?!) for the gratification of men and women alike, but he isn’t bitter in the least. On the contrary.

In any case, he too is rather pretty.

He lies to us just as much as is necessary and tells us that he knows a woman who can get him a plane ticket to Switzerland any time he wants, but that he has no desire to go there any more:

“I’ve already seen that world. I’m happy with what I’ve got.”

He has his own “hotel”—goodness only knows whether it is actually his or not, but that doesn’t really matter. Be that as it may, he’s the one I am paying for this bed, this bed and these services—and from that sum he will take whatever broker’s fee he deems appropriate.

The desk fan whirrs, and from downstairs we can make out the rattle of passing tuk-tuks, the sound of footsteps and Thai music. Smells waft up from the street, the thick reek of fried meat.

A few hundred kilometres away a war is raging and hundreds of thousands of refugees are huddled together in tents trying to sleep.

“I almost know what it is you want,” said the pimp the first time we met, when we were left alone for a moment. He didn’t know precisely what I wanted, but I guided him in the right direction.

I didn’t ask about the price, as I guessed this would be inappropriate. We both understood the rules of the game.

When, as we had agreed, I first arrived at his hotel around midday, stone

[†]A region in Finland.

cold sober, I cannot say that I was nervous or even excited. I kept thinking that I was now taking a step forward in my life, which was now to remould and reshape itself over and over, searching and pursuing.

There was nobody else in the hotel lobby. The pimp smiled at me and shook my hand, said there was nothing to worry about—in half an hour She would be here.

I climbed the staircase up to my room, took off my shoes and lay down on the bed to wait. I assumed that this was the moment when all my illusions would be shattered, my dreams crushed, my desires stripped away. I knew in advance that this was going to happen. I would breathe deeply and feel the touch of that brown skin against my hand.

There are so many ways of doing things. Just like in the sex club where a few dozen girls danced like performing dogs for the tourists—shooting bananas into the air, masturbating. Their final number was always called “romantic”.

You could do it in a Japanese nightclub, where the girls cost at least a thousand Finnish marks. An old Japanese businessman is sitting at a table drinking “the best cognac” straight from the bottle. He goes up on the stage and sings a few songs with the orchestra, songs so sorrowful that I didn’t know such music could exist. He has his arms around two very beautiful young women, and they belong to him, him and nobody else! But it’s hard to believe that such sorrowful songs can really exist; compared to those songs, the most melancholic of Finnish tangos sound like a wedding waltz.

We paid a few hundred baht for two small glasses of beer each, admission to the club, and permission to touch with our fingertips only. We weren’t even being ripped off.

Then again, you could do it like we did on our first night in Bangkok. Our Thai friend Virabat, whose friendliness and hospitality are beyond words, asked us whether we would be interested in a massage. Well, after such a long flight a soak in a spa might be just what the doctor ordered.

At that he and his beautiful girlfriend Lek led us in front of a large building. And it was then, upon seeing a few dozen Thai girls waiting for clients behind an enormous glass window, that we knew what this was all about.

Virabat negotiated a price for me and we stepped inside. The whole operation immediately assumed comical proportions. It was one minute before the massage parlor was due to close for the evening, and there were only three official masseuses on offer—apparently. No matter, I was sober and I was left with the least attractive of them, if I may call her that.

We took the lift upstairs, stepped into a private washroom. Clothes off and into the bathtub. The brute of a woman even took my glasses off. She then proceeded to wash me like a baby, though she did pay somewhat excessive attention to certain areas. Boing! You guessed it.

I found it all very amusing; I laughed out loud and wiped tears from my eyes. Here I am, sitting in a bath in my birthday suit, with soap commercials blaring from the nearby television. Then on to the rubber mattress for the massage. This the girl did with her body using the so-called “slide technique”.

After that, I rinsed off and moved over to the circular bed for the dry massage. Nothing more interesting than that happened, though anything would have been possible. The girl massaging me, who every now and then would stop to adjust the television, didn’t really do it for me. And I may as well admit it: I came right there on the mattress.

At about two o’clock that same night, after my hair had dried and the show places in Patpong[‡] had closed, we were sitting in a small bar that wasn’t going to rip us off. We found ourselves sitting at the same table as a sometime pimp and DJ from a local girl bar. His face was covered in scars and his expression was one of anger. He was drunk. The only really angry person I met on this entire trip.

I was pretty drunk too, and I can’t quite remember what we were talking about, but sometimes you can simply trust your intuition and compassionate warmth. When I’m drunk, I can be quite endearing, human even.

By the time morning came he had shaken my hand and given a smile. Even his scars seemed to have disappeared. He told me about how miserable his life was, watching tourists fritter away more money in a single evening than he earns in a year—legitimately, at least. It’s hard to find the words to describe such levels of debauchery.

The man had spent a year working in a hotel where “towel heads”—oil sheikhs, that is—spent their holidays. He found their frivolous use of money unbearable.

“Ten thousand baht in a single day,” he explains.

“What about the Americans during the Vietnam war?” I ask.

He proceeds to tell me stories about the Americans that, in their sheer horror, seem unfathomable.

“Soldiers! Think about it, murderers out on holiday with their dollars!”

I see. Was everything about sex? Was that what all those trips to Bangkok were really about?

Of course, there are plenty of temples here, wat wat wat.[§] We visited them, too. We drove along the canals of Bangkok in a little boat, for hours at a time. We visited the Chinese market district, a place where it is impossible to name half the products on sale, particularly the foodstuffs.

We ate well every day: Thai food (a dish called Mai Aou Pak Chee or

[‡]The red light district in Bangkok.

[§]A wat is a Buddhist temple.

“whatever you do, don’t use that green leaf or I’m likely to throw up”), Chinese food, Indian, Japanese, and the occasional peppered steak with French fries.

We met lots of regular people too, and they talked about perfectly normal matters: a fish researcher, an architect, a nurse, a transvestite, a civil servant. . . .

“Why is it that people only come here to write articles about the sex trade or the slums instead of writing about us normal people?” asked Mr An, a young man living in a terraced house, a soldier who was just about to be deployed to the front at the border, a man who in the line of duty had been forced to shoot “a dozen or so” spies disguised as immigrant boat people.

We visited a crocodile farm and watched a brown man riding through Bangkok’s rush-hour traffic on the back of an elephant.

And yet, not one of those gilded temples was able to make a greater impression on me than that seedy hotel room on our last night, that hard bed, and the wait for a real, living person.

This is now the most important matter in my life; after this I can move on again. Everything happens the way it does because it simply could not happen any other way. I didn’t decide to come here. I had to come here.

Each and every one of us wanders by ourselves, seeking light and comfort, suffering. I am like the lamp hanging above the bed; I burn for a while, then I am extinguished and changed for a new one. That’s all there is to it.

The first time it happened, I was ashamed of my greasy, deathly pale body; faced with such beauty I wanted to leave my shirt on. It was truly pathetic.

Finns live the same way they cross the street: clumsily or in a hurry. Here in Thailand people go with the flow.

The door opens and She is there.

On that last evening I am slightly drunk. It occurs to me that this might not be entirely appropriate but that it might just release me from my inhibitions and allow me to access pleasure all the more profoundly. But it doesn’t help.

I look at her dark eyes and she smiles. Now everything seems real again. Everything is right here, right now!

“I want to make you happy,” she says.

And You certainly tried Your best, but it isn’t going to work. I caress her beautiful face, a face that seems so perfect to me; I close my eyes, open them again, delicately kiss her lips, but I feel nothing. I look at the desk fan.

And yet I like her immensely. After that first time it felt good to get out into the street; I went to a bar, ordered a bottle of beer and felt that I was something.

For once I had proved that I could do things too. Haha! Now I can

forget about it all, once and for all, dismiss it as nothing but another way for people to satisfy themselves. What nonsense—the greatest deceit that we can tell our children, the whole world.

But a moment later I realised that I missed her, I yearned for her smile and for the kind of words that nobody—at least, nobody important to me—had ever spoken. My God, all of a sudden I wanted to own her.

I started to dream about her.

Then one morning, like a dog with its tail between its legs, I walked over to the pimp's place and ordered Her again.

"She'll be happy—she liked you," the pimp said.

Those words rang in my head for a long time—someone was happy because of me, what politeness. No! They only want my money, I told myself. And it's only right: I have plenty of money and I'm not saving it for anything. Haha! I could have bought a good sofa bed for the cost of those visits, but I'd rather lie on my Superlon mattress and remember, move on, a little at a time.

Life is like a bridge: cross it, but don't build a house on it. Nothing here is permanent, not even Her. Don't let people's gossip lead you astray.

The fan drones away and she is asleep, her head on my chest. Suddenly she wakes and asks: "What are you thinking about?"

"I don't know." The best answer I've ever given.

We get dressed and she leaves. She understands and we shake hands. It is the last time I see her.

Back downstairs I have a long talk with the pimp. He tells me that I could save that beautiful face if I wanted to—with money.

"She still trusts people; everything is possible," he says. "I was lucky when I was young."

I walk out into the street, my thoughts a blur. On the other hand, I feel almost enlightened; I know what I think and what I will do, how I will move on. And then I see something on the street. Woe, the scorpion in me!

Exploring the Reality Boundary of Esa Kero

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“BANGKOK” was to me truthful fiction. If one picks up the mere facts from the story, as “facts” are generally understood, the result would pale in comparison with Peter’s draught of fish. I do remember that I didn’t use any notes when I was writing the story. I had taken notes, of course, but I didn’t use them. And, more importantly, I had two tapes of voices. Recollections. I wrote the whole story at once, and changed nothing afterwards, just corrected a few words. Spelling and grammar are something I’ve never wanted to learn.—A good fact can be changed into fiction with a comma.—The most essential thing is, though, that fiction must never intentionally run over fact.¹

Such is how the Finnish journalist Esa Kero thinks back about writing the article “Bangkok” twenty-five years ago. It raises several questions. What is “truthful fiction” and how does it relate to the “reality boundary” Norman Sims asked for in the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* when it comes to the writing of literary journalism?² And why does Kero play down the journalistic credibility of his story by claiming that there are not too many facts in it? If Kero calls “Bangkok” a truthful fiction, can we even call it a piece of literary journalism? Yes, I would suggest, because, on closer examination what we discover is that he is playing mischief with our expectations. While he may appear to engage in fiction in the conventional sense—if we mean by fiction scene-by-scene description, for example—he then is very much a practitioner of the literature of fact. And when it comes

to the shortage of facts, that only refers to Kero's view of facts; he sees them as statistics, numbers, and other hard data, undeniable and unambiguous details, something that he gives less value to than does traditional news journalism. Part of understanding his mischievous and ironic nature is to also to understand that he was, in his time, whether witting or not, very much a postmodern journalist, the kind that would be unlikely today in Finland.

In order to understand such stories like "Bangkok" by Kero it is first important to look at the context in which he wrote them. The 1980s were "the wild decade" in Finnish journalism; the cultural atmosphere was free and liberated after the narrow-minded 1970s. There was an upswing in the economy, and urban culture was making its way to Helsinki, the capital. Gonzo had landed in Finland, and some wild journalistic experiments can be found in, for instance, the numerous little punk magazines that were published all around the country at the time.

For thirty years, from 1977 to 2007, Kero worked for *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest newspaper in the Nordic countries. It is fair to say that when he published "Bangkok," he introduced a whole new world to many of the readers of the *Monthly Supplement* of *Helsingin Sanomat*. As he says at the beginning of the story, he along with the photographer Tapio Vanhatalo wanted to go to India but had not been able to get press visas. Bangkok sounded fascinating as well, so that ended up as their destination. At that time Thailand was not even mentioned in the charts that presented the most popular holiday destinations among Finns.³ Things have changed since then; databases by Statistics Finland show that Thailand has been the most popular long-distance holiday destination for several years now, and among the ten most popular vacation destinations in total. Back in 1985, however, the story "Bangkok" did not depict an environment that was familiar to its readers, but one that was rather exotic and strange.

Prostitution was something exotic to Finnish readers as well. At the end of the twentieth century many Finns believed that there was hardly any prostitution in Finland.⁴ This was not really the case; prostitution existed, but it was well hidden. Street prostitution increased significantly at the beginning of the 1990s, due to, among other reasons, the deep recession and the collapse of the neighboring Soviet Union and its consequences.⁵ But in 1985 prostitution was very much a hidden phenomenon in Finland. Yet Bangkok has long been well-known for prostitution and sex tourism; research from the 1990s shows that 70 percent of tourists who travelled to Thailand were men, and many of them travelled with the intent to buy sex.⁶

One would imagine that a story that tells about a man who travels to Bangkok to engage the services of prostitutes would have at least a slightly swagging tone to his voice. As Kero writes: "Upon first coming here, Finn-

ish men are full of illusions, and this is the place where those illusions are dispelled. But we don't talk about that back in macho Finland. In Finland people talk about prices and sex." Certainly sex and prices for sex are two of the ultimate measures for objectifying women. In "Bangkok," however, Kero does not do that. He writes a story that is so bluntly honest it may leave readers—male and female—uncomfortable with his subjective revelations: Since when were men supposed to have feelings for prostitutes? This becomes the ultimate cultural revelation.

His strength as a journalist at the time lay in his capacity to assimilate into his topic; he has identified himself effortlessly as an expert of Russian street fashion, or a member of a Finnish pensioner group on its spa trip to Romania. He would adopt the language and report the way of thinking of those he wrote about in a style that would create humorous insights and yet remain respectful of those he depicted. "Bangkok," however, goes even beyond these because Kero concentrates more on his inner thoughts than his perceptions of others, or rather on how *he* feels about others. In this sense the story is perched between literary journalism and memoir, the boundaries between which are often porous anyway.⁷ Most important for the literary journalism side, it becomes a revelation of a Finnish man's sexual desires and sensitivities.

There is a related reason why Kero's story is an important one in the context of Finnish literary journalism. I would claim that "Bangkok" could not be found in a Finnish magazine today. The narration is far too subjective. As a reflection of that, Kero engages in free association, which can be detected in the fact that "Bangkok" is not written in chronological order. But it does reveal a great deal about Finnish literary journalism in the 1980s.

A heightened subjectivity has long been noted as a ubiquitous feature of literary journalism. Kero does not try to disguise this in "Bangkok," nor for that matter in many of his other stories. On the contrary, he often emphasizes it. He makes sure that the reader realizes that his story is merely one interpretation of the reality he describes. One consequence is that Kero poses a challenging case when it comes to the reality boundary of literary journalism. He is probably the most obvious example of a postmodern journalist in Finland, should one be named—and analogies have long been drawn between late twentieth-century literary nonfiction and postmodernist writing.⁸ "Bangkok" includes several features that have been identified as characteristics of postmodernist writing. First of all, it is a fragmentary text by nature. Again, it does not present the events of the journey in chronological order, but "in an order in which they bubble into his mind," as he writes. The same section shows a hint of self-reflexive or meta-factual⁹ nonfiction that tells the story of its own becoming: "Allow me to vent these matters in some semblance

of an order.” When the narrator addresses the readers in the second-person plural, he is addressing them directly, and makes clear that he recognizes the act of “telling a story” and his own role as the narrator who has the power as well as the responsibility to choose those events to share with his readers and in which order. These examples demonstrate the idea that no narrative can be a natural “master” or omniscient narrative, and that all narratives are constructions, and thereby inherently limited interpretations of the world.¹⁰

One could even argue that Kero’s stories approach a panfictional point of view towards the world; in other words, it’s as if he thought that all representations of the world were equally fictional, which is still another postmodern feature.¹¹ However, as Kero himself stated in the citation at the beginning, “fiction must never intentionally run over fact.” Thus, by his own acknowledgment he does intend to separate fact from fiction.

Kero also questions the genre the story represents—journalism and its conventions—which is another typical feature of postmodernism as well. For instance, when he says that “the state is doing its best—how on earth do I know this?—to get rid of the slums,” he makes ironic an expression that is typical of a faux omniscient narrator used in foreign correspondents’ stories, as well as one that emphasizes that journalists depend on their “official” sources, and in many cases have no choice but to trust them—regardless of whether they are trustworthy or not. This further example of self-reflexivity unveils the journalistic work process and thereby emphasizes the artefactual nature of the text—in other words, it shows that the text, as well as all other texts, is a result of numerous choices made by the author. Stories don’t write themselves; instead, they are always constructions, made by people. There is another kind of an example of an “official” source in “a certain missionary” who described the slum of Khlong Toei as something very different from what Kero saw and experienced. It is mentioned in the text that Kero and the missionary have had a conversation, but the missionary is left anonymous, the anonymity only pushing both of them further away from the subjectivities of men who hire prostitutes, as well as of the prostitutes themselves.

It could also be argued that Kero’s reluctance towards obeying grammar is another postmodernist expression, one that gets to the nature of postmodernist thinking in which language is fluid. Kero’s description of his work process in “Bangkok” seems rather amateurish from today’s point of view, knowing that the *Monthly Supplement of Helsingin Sanomat* has one of the highest editing standards in Finnish press, and that the story processes are much more complicated.¹² Then again, Kero is a distinguished journalist and most likely well aware of the grammar and the ways he is breaking the rules—is this yet another example of his mischievous nature? Kero relates an anecdote to this effect. He recalls one of his teachers, in what is the Finnish equivalent of high school, making a remark on one of his youthful essays: “Esa, you

have your own punctuation rules. Some kind of a logic there is to them. I'm going to correct them here just because the Matriculation Examination Board doesn't understand cuneiform, either." In the translation of "Bangkok," such problematic grammar has been left intact. If it is confusing to the reader in English, it was equally confusing to the Finnish as well.

Still, Kero will insist we have to respect the "reality boundary" of the facts of phenomenal experience. This is another place where the mischief-maker in him is revealed, and it can be detected in another text by him. In a work of reportage, "On the Way to the Land of Bars!," published in 1991, he tells the reader at the beginning that the story is not going to be truthful:

Most of us take our annual vacation in the summer when the lakes glitter and thousands of flowers display their color . . . oh, well. We did our test trip in April, so that You, Dear Readers, would have a pretty trip package ready in time before the holidays begin. The circumstances were lousy, sleet and cold. It really took imagination to see the sea looming through the sixty centimeter thick ice. Therefore, a part of this story was necessarily stimulated and imagined to correspond with the summery settings. Or do you think that one single motorist would take the Road of Poem and Border¹³ on a summer day if I told everything the way it really happened?¹⁴

How should the reader interpret this? If the narrator starts the story by admitting that it is not true, what does this do to the story's credibility? Readers could be forgiven at this point if they stopped reading because they thought they were going to read journalism. But then readers discover the point of the journey is to stop at every bar along the way and drink beer. This is the "test" trip the author is taking on behalf of the reader. Where the narrator does use his imagination is, moreover, easy to detect. And here one can see that he does not violate the reality boundary because he engages in a judicious choice of description. For example: "At Purnujärvi we stop. We take a swim in the bright waters of the public beach of Hiidenjärvi lake." A careful reader realizes that what they see is thick ice instead of bright water, since they are travelling in April, and therefore they definitely don't take a swim. But that is as far as the narrator goes in fabricating; he has not, for instance, placed bikini-clad young women on the beach. Alongside the text there are several pictures that reveal the real circumstances; there is snow on the ground, and people wear warm clothes. Kero, of course, is playing the ironist again by playing with and upsetting our expectations.

There is a difference between a story like this that openly pretends not to be true (because the reader can decipher the fabricated parts), and a story that claims to be true but on later occasion proves to be false, such as any number of fictionalized articles revealed to be fakes in the United States like those of Jayson Blair of *The New York Times* in 2003.

When discussing the reality boundary in “Bangkok,” one should also take into account whether the narrator is or is not engaging in free indirect discourse, or rather is serving as a ventriloquist for actors, as in the case of fiction. Dorrit Cohn notes that one of the crucial differences between factual and fictional representation is that in factual stories the discourses of the narrator and the actors of the story are conducted separately and can be identified as such. Her claim is that free indirect discourse cannot be used in nonfiction.¹⁵ Even the distinguished scholar Phyllis Frus has noted that “free indirect discourse is always imagined, whether by a fictional character or a historical one,”¹⁶ but as Markku Lehtimäki reminds us, imagining and speculating on other people’s thoughts is a common and human way of interpreting and making sense of life.¹⁷ Moreover, according to Lehtimäki, there should be a distinction between free indirect speech, which can indeed be reported in a nonfictional text, and free indirect thoughts, which are far more problematic when it comes to the epistemological nature of nonfiction.¹⁸ Those problematic free indirect thoughts can be found in, for instance, several sections of Norman Mailer’s book *The Executioner’s Song* where the narrator presents people’s thoughts.¹⁹ Mailer later admitted to the partial fabrication of those scenes.²⁰ Kero is revealing in this regard: “The youngest of the girls is wearing a white skirt; she is the prettiest and the most obviously nervous. Perhaps she senses that, if anyone is selected, it will be her. And if the man doesn’t understand properly, it’ll hurt.”

The first sentence is clearly an interpretation made by the narrator. It is “his opinion” that the youngest girl is the prettiest and looks the most nervous. In the next sentence “perhaps” is the key qualifier. It demonstrates that what follows is a matter of speculation instead of claimed fact. But in being forthright about his speculation, Kero remains factual. That is the paradox.

At the heart of Kero lies linguistic and existential ambiguity, or the willingness to let such ambiguities tease us with possibilities of meaning. This can be detected in the last sentence of “Bangkok”: “Woe, the scorpion in me!” According to Kero, the editor of the story had asked if he could leave it out because he couldn’t understand it. “Take it or leave it,” he had responded to the editor. Apparently the editor left it, but what the scorpion refers to remains a mystery.

While still working at *Helsingin Sanomat*, Kero took up writing books. He has written several books for the publishing house Building Information, Ltd. about nostalgic Finnish buildings, such as, barns, guest houses, playhouses, outhouses, and village schools. Lately, Kero has also written about birds. The books consist of photographs and Kero’s texts in which nonfiction and fiction intertwine. In leaving daily journalism behind, he has retreated to the region of his childhood home, living just a few kilometers away

from the place that he mentions in the beginning of “Bangkok,” the Turvala estate in Punkaharju.

Things have changed at *Helsingin Sanomat* as well. It is still Finland's major newspaper today, and its monthly supplement includes remarkable examples of Finnish narrative journalism. But as a journalist who works there stated, although the 1980s were a time of narcissistic first-person narrators and other features that he today finds rather amusing and unprofessional, he said he misses the spontaneity of the processes and the roughness of the texts. He mentioned Esa Kero as an example of what was missed most.²¹ Nor is he the only one. Although only anecdotal, a pseudonymous “Willa” has written in a web conversation what might capture best Kero's influence and impact: “Esa Kero was for decades the one journalist in *Helsingin Sanomat* whose stories you just had to read, and they often made women (and men too, a couple have confessed) cry. He just has his own way of writing.”²²

In today's *Monthly Supplement* of *Helsingin Sanomat*, it is unlikely that a journalist could get away with the kind of reporting Kero did, his unconventional use of language, the subjective style, and the ambiguities that begged for interpretation. It is not worth a story nowadays if someone goes someplace and experiences things from his or her strongly affirmed subjective point of view. Whereas the outcome may be polished and richer with facts, something gets lost in the process, the authenticity of contingency, of those experiences in life that tease us with possibilities of meaning. That's what makes such writing literary. And if anything, the reader is likely to feel that such ambiguities are never entirely decipherable, and for that reason are extremely honest and factual.

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Endnotes

¹Esa Kero, email message to author, 15 January 2010.

²Norman Sims, "The Problem and the Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1(2009), 11.

³*Suomalaisten lomatoimukset ja lomamatkailu vuonna 1985*. (Finnish holiday customs and holiday travelling.) A report. Finnish Tourist Board A55(1986), 43.

⁴Anne-Maria Marttila, *Tavoitteena tasa-arvo. Suomalainen keskustelu rajat ylittävistä prostituutiosta*. (Aiming at gender equality. The Finnish debate on transnational prostitution.) Reports of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2009), 37.

⁵The rapid passage from communism to a market economy resulted in, e.g., high unemployment rates, increases in prices and weaker social security. That led Russians to search for new means for survival, one of which was prostitution. Travelling abroad was easier after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and prostitutes extended their area of operation to Finland, among other neighboring countries. Anne-Maria Marttila, 11.

⁶Erik Cohen, *Thai Tourism: Hill Tribes, Islands and Open-Ended Prostitution*. Studies in Contemporary Thailand No. 4. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996), 297.

⁷John Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 162.

⁸See John Hellmann, "Postmodern Journalism", in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Larry McCaffery (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 53; and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1976), 227.

⁹Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, 123.

¹⁰Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge 1988), 13.

¹¹See, e.g., Marie-Laure Ryan, "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality," *Narrative* 5 (1997): 165-67.

¹²Maria Lassila-Merisalo, "Faktaan ja fiktion rajamailla. Kaunokirjallisen journalismin poetiikka suomalaisissa aikakauslehdissä" ("On the borderline of fact and fiction. The poetics of literary journalism in Finnish magazines"). (Ph.D. diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2009), 12.

¹³The "Road of Poem and Border" is the oldest sightseeing road in Finland. It follows the Russian border in eastern Finland, and refers to the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, the poems of which were collected in Carelia in the areas where the road runs.

¹⁴Esa Kero, "Matkalle baarien maahan!" ("On the way to the land of bars!"), *The Monthly Supplement of Helsingin Sanomat*, May 1991, 18.

¹⁵Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 25.

¹⁶Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

¹⁷Markku Lehtimäki, "Elämäkertamuodon itsereflektio: fiktiiviset ja visuaaliset keinot Edmund Morrisin Reagan-biografiassa *Dutch*" ("The Self-reflection of the Biography Form: The Fictional and the Visual Devices in the Reagan-Biography *Dutch* by Edmund Morris," in *Merkkejä ja symboleja. Esseitä kirjallisuudesta ja sen tutkimuksesta*, ed. Markku Lehtimäki (Tampere: Tampere University Press 2002), 258.

¹⁸Markku Lehtimäki, *The Poetics of Norman Mailer's Nonfiction: Self-Reflexivity, Literary Form and the Rhetoric of Narrative* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2005), 273.

¹⁹For instance, in a section where the narrator describes in detail the thoughts of April, Nicole Baker's sister; Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (New York, Vintage 1998 [1979]), 220.

²⁰Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 210.

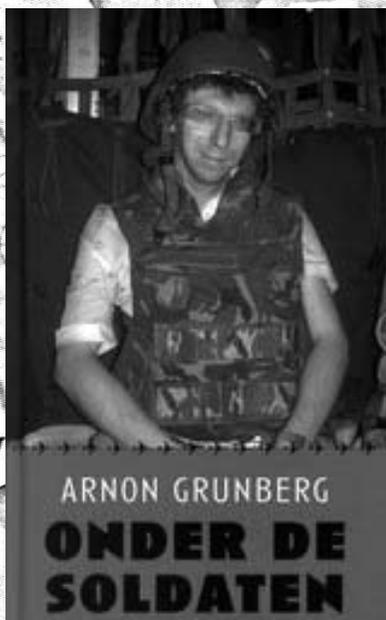
²¹Jouni K. Kemppainen, interview, 7 February 2008.

²²Willa (pseudonym), comment on "Juice Leskinen," Eppu-keskustelu, comment posted October 10, 2007, <http://www.eppunormaali.net/keskustelu/YaBB.pl?num=1164445720/45> (accessed 1 February 2010).

Arnon Grunberg

Onder de Soldaten

Among Soldiers



ARNON GRUNBERG
**ONDER DE
SOLDATEN**

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ARNON GRUNBERG, 39, likes to note in his biography that he got kicked out of high school at the age of 17. That apparently set him on his course in life so that today he is an esteemed Dutch novelist and narrative journalist. For his fiction, he has received some of the most distinguished literary awards in his country. In 1994 at the age of twenty-three he published *Blue Mondays*. It became a best seller in Europe and has been translated into thirteen languages.



It was also honored with the Anton Wachter prize for the best debut novel. The following decade Grunberg's literary oeuvre grew rapidly with bestsellers like the *Asylum Seeker*, *The Jewish Messiah*, and *Tirza*. The latter was awarded the Libris Literatuur prize for best novel in 2006, and made Grunberg one of the most honored and successful contemporary of Dutch novelists. In 2009 his stature was confirmed when, at a very early age, Grunberg was awarded the Constantijn Huygens prize for his complete works.

But that is only the one side to Grunberg. Because he is also a narrative journalist in the true sense of what "narrative" means. Between 1995 and 2006 he wrote many columns about his life while traveling around the world. Since then his reportage has appeared regularly in the highly respected Rotterdam newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, entitled "Grunberg Among the People." He has explored subjects ranging from the war in Iraq to his experiences as a chambermaid in Germany. His work has also been published in *Salon*, *Culture+Travel*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Booksforum*, and *The Literary Review*. He has been a featured author and speaker at many writer's conferences and festivals, including the PEN World Voices Festival in New York City in 2007 and 2008.

Grunberg's journalistic approach and his style make his stories some of the best examples of contemporary Dutch literary journalism. His three-part Afghanistan series, which also appeared in *NRC Handelsblad*, was compiled and published in Dutch in a private printing commissioned by Grunberg and distributed to the Dutch army. It is republished here in English in an abridged form. An interview with Grunberg follows.

Frank Harbers
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Previous page: Background photo by Cynthia Bakker. Book cover, private printing by Arnon Grunberg. Photo, above, by Keke Keukelaar. The text of Among Soldiers and the photos are reprinted by permission.

AMONG SOLDIERS

by Arnon Grunberg

translated from the Dutch
by Sam Garrett

1

“**T**he future we saw as belonging to us, a thing contested by no one, the war as a tempestuous prelude to happiness, and happiness itself as a part of our character,” wrote Isaac Babel in one of his stories about the Soviet-Polish War of 1920. War, that tempestuous prelude to happiness, had eluded me so far. The wrong time, the wrong place, the same old story. Yet fate is pliable.

At 1:30 on a midsummer Tuesday afternoon, I made my way to Eindhoven airbase, from where I would fly to Kabul. Then to Kandahar. And perhaps on to Tarin Kowt, depending on the security situation, as the defense department put it.

The “security situation”: a term open to interpretation.

I was not going as a soldier, not even as a spiritual adviser; after having been declared unfit for duty at the age of eighteen, that would have been too much to hope for. A psychiatrist had written a letter, and a few weeks later I was notified that the Kingdom of the Netherlands would not call upon me, not even in times of war.

I was traveling as an “embedded journalist.” What “embedded” meant was as yet unclear, and calling me a “journalist” was rather dubious. But, like “security situation,” “journalist” is a term open to interpretation.

Captain Cynthia, a spokeswoman for the defense department, met me in the departure hall at the airbase. She would be traveling with me to the finish, to Afghanistan and back.

There were fewer family members out to wave goodbye than I’d expect-

ed. I was spared the tearful separations. If it hadn't been for the uniforms, you'd have thought we were waiting to board a charter for Majorca.

One little boy of about seven was dressed like a soldier and toting a plastic machinegun. He was more interested in his machinegun than in his family members. He had probably grown accustomed to it by now, having an absentee father.

I wondered how that went, the last evening with one's family. Were there soldiers without a home front, soldiers who left behind nothing but an empty apartment and a birdcage? The neighbor lady who comes by once a day to feed the canary. The smaller the home front, the easier it was to face death. At least theoretically.

After half an hour, the outbound soldiers—army, air force, and military police—separated themselves from those to be left behind. The men and women in desert-colored uniforms walked with me to the check-in desk. Those military personnel in uniforms more suited to service in the rainforest remained behind. I was the only person in line not in uniform. No, not the only one. A young man in civilian dress, a journalist for the regional broadcaster in Overijssel Province, was going to Afghanistan as well. "I'm planning to talk mostly to soldiers from Overijssel," he told me. "What's your angle?"

My angle. That I was going along to experience that tempestuous prelude to happiness seemed better left unsaid. "The person behind the soldier," I mumbled. That always worked, the person behind.

The boarding area where we found ourselves was no different from boarding areas at other airports. Normal airports, from which people left on holiday. War, though, is a kind of holiday as well. As one soldier in Afghanistan would tell me later: "It sounds weird, but I relax here."

"With us it's just like with Ryanair," Captain Cynthia said. "The first one in gets the best seat."

I ended up beside a real Dutch soldier, Tinus, who after an hour's silence asked: "What are you going to do in Afghanistan?"

"I'm going to try to understand the mission," I whispered, whereupon Sergeant Jordy, sitting in the row in front of us, joined in the conversation.

The sergeant held up a wedge of cheese, as though it were the spoils of war.

"Why are you taking cheese to Afghanistan?" I asked.

"Because I love cheese," the sergeant said. "I've got enough with me for the first few weeks, and after that they're going to send me more from Holland. I told everyone, my girlfriend, my family, my friends: 'Just send cheese.' In Afghanistan it melts, but that doesn't matter; it's vacuum-packed anyway. You just put it in a refrigerator and it gets hard again. After that all it needs is a good whack and it's back in shape."

“Have you been to Afghanistan before?” I inquired.

“Twice,” the sergeant said, “but this time I brought a cheese-slicer.” He grinned triumphantly. Then, as though relating confidential information, he said: “Once they find out you have cheese, everyone wants a piece. But if you let them cut the cheese with a pocketknife, it’s gone before you know it. This time I brought a cheese-slicer, so everyone gets a thin slice, you know what I mean? So this time they won’t eat all my cheese right in front of me.”

I felt a fondness for this Sergeant Jordy, who would not enter Afghanistan unprepared. For the first time on the trip I sensed that my hunch had been right. I was going to find out something about the happiness that had eluded me all these years.

A few hours later, Captain Cynthia arranged for me to sit beside Lieutenant-Colonel Nico. An army marches on more than cheese-slicers alone. Lieutenant-Colonel Nico is a tall, athletically-built man of around forty, but you could only mistake him for a gym teacher if you didn’t look carefully. He commands a tank battalion. He was going to Afghanistan, however, without his tanks. The men of the “PRTs” are recruited from within the tank battalions. PRT stands for Provincial Reconstruction Team. The army exists by virtue of abbreviation. Rarely have I picked up as many abbreviations as during my stay in Afghanistan. “Lupa” is a lunch packet, “detco” a detachment commander. The amount of time that saves is staggering. From now on, happiness would be just plain “hap.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Nico had always been an idealist, and that hadn’t changed. He had originally joined the army because the Russians were coming. Within two hours, he and his tanks could be at the former East German border. He had aerial photos to show where each tank was to be positioned. Everything was laid out, down to the last square inch. But the Russians never showed up.

Lieutenant-Colonel Nico speaks of tanks with such sincere affection that I began loving them as well. I discovered that a tank can be as much a thing of beauty as a well-written novel.

Nico said: “If it hadn’t been for that cabinet crisis, maybe we’d be going to Iraq right now. When you’ve been training all the time, at some point you want to find out how good you are at the real thing. When you write all the time, at some point you want to find out what your book does to an audience, right?”

I nodded in complete understanding. That was certainly something I wanted to find out, and I could imagine that he wanted to find that out as well. No more practicing anymore, time for the real thing at last. Maybe that’s the problem with literature: it never becomes the real thing. At least not entirely.

“But don’t you find it a pity that you’re being sent to Afghanistan to talk?” I asked.

Lieutenant-Colonel Nico had told me that the PRTs would mostly talk to the Afghans. Talk till they were blue in the face. Reconstruction is a matter of endless conversation. Of gaining the people’s confidence, or, as the official phrase goes: “winning hearts and minds.” For a person who has seen the beauty in a tank, who had actually convinced me that a tank is more beautiful than the Virgin Mary, that could not be an easy assignment.

But the lieutenant-colonel kept a stiff upper lip. He and his men were looking forward to the mission, even without their tanks.

“And what about Srebrenica?” I asked, because I didn’t want the conversation to peter out, not yet. I wanted to go on, on with the tanks across the plains of Germany. “Is that still a trauma?”

The lieutenant-colonel shook his head. “Not for these boys,” he said. If there’s one thing they have no intention of being, it’s cowards. Back before seatbelts were mandatory, scads of people were killed in traffic accidents. Everyone thought that was normal. Would a fireman refuse to go into a burning building just because there’s a chance that he might not come out alive?”

Now I knew why he didn’t look like a gym teacher. Everywhere the lieutenant-colonel turned, he saw death creeping up on him. He was braced for the ambush. That’s how he’d looked at me as well, like an ambush.

“Did your wife take you to the airport?” I asked.

“No,” the lieutenant-colonel said. “That’s always a bad idea. I have a buddy who’s in the army too. When he goes, I take him to the airport. When I go, he takes me. I say goodbye to my family at home. It’s not fair to them to do that, to drag them along to the airport like that.”

I nodded, thinking about the little boy dressed up like a soldier who had been running around the departure hall.

“It’s getting dark,” Nico said. “It goes pretty quickly now. I’m going to catch a few winks.”

I wondered whether the lieutenant-colonel really would catch a few winks, and if he did whether he would dream about Afghanistan, or still about the plains of Germany. And about his tanks, which would be at the former East German border within two hours. Not as a maneuver this time, but the real thing. Maybe the Russians would show up anyway. You can never tell. Anything is possible. The world may smell of the abattoir, but the air-force KDC-10 smelled of cheese.

“I’m going to try to catch a little sleep too,” I whispered.

I went back to my seat. Sergeant Jordy had his eyes closed. In his left hand he was clutching an iPod.

We landed in the middle of the night at Sharyah. The United Arab Emirates. The desert, a foretaste of Afghanistan, where they'd told us the heat could get up close to fifty degrees centigrade.

Our carry-on bags had to stay onboard. We left the plane in reasonably orderly fashion, but still a bit rowdy, like a class of schoolchildren.

The airport at Sharyah: two coffee bars with three pieces of lemon pie in the display cooler. One shop selling perfume, cigarettes, alcohol, and a few dates tucked away in a wooden box meant to look like the Koran. A local souvenir, amid the bottles of Chanel and Christian Dior.

The two TVs in the corner of the coffee bars were showing skiing and bobsledding, probably to make up for the lack of air conditioning.

I didn't get much chance to fraternize with the soldiers. They were hanging out together in little cliques, but I didn't see Sergeant Jordy anywhere.

Then it was time to get back on the plane. The flight to Kabul would take a good two hours. . . . In flight, one soldier took a raisin bun out of a bag and began eating it dreamily. For a moment I had a vision of his wife in the kitchen that morning, smearing butter on it. "Take a few raisin buns along with you," she'd said. "You probably can't get them in Afghanistan."

Someone else was passing out cinnamon candy. The steward, a soldier as well, came by with omelets. The boy across the aisle from me was flipping through a magazine that featured pictures of motorcycles, and women in states of partial undress. He had at least ten of those magazines with him, and he leafed through them nervously. I had the impression that the motorcycles were what interested him.

By the time we began our approach I had become initiated into the world of motorcycles. Kabul at last. More than twenty-four hours earlier I had left New York, and now I was longing to get to my destination. To the war, of which I hoped to catch at least a glimpse.

Through the clouds we saw the city, just as they'd said we would, lying in a sort of bowl. Nothing but mountains around Kabul. And we circled on over Kabul, we circled and circled, and then we left Kabul behind. The visibility was too poor to land. We were going back to Sharyah. A desert too, but then different.

At this point I was introduced to the term "spastic moment." Some of the soldiers were experiencing a spastic moment. But, generally speaking, everyone took it fairly well.

One soldier said: "The army is about waiting. First you wait for a war, then you wait till you get there, then you wait to see action, then you wait again for them to send you home."

I had always thought that making movies was about waiting, but making movies, it seemed, was nothing compared to the army.

Sharyah again. Even hotter than a few hours ago. The same three slices of lemon pie in the display case. . . .

I was assigned to a room with Dennis from Special Units. We lay beside each other like brothers. Like brothers we shared the Internet in the room, we both had our laptops with us. To stay in contact with the home front.

Dennis did enter the bathroom without knocking though, while I was taking a shower, but I could see that waging war and knocking on doors did not mix. I dried myself hurriedly while Dennis took a pee. In order not to have the situation escalate unduly, I asked: "What's Special Units going to do in Afghanistan, anyway?"

"We're going to protect the PRTs," he said, then flushed. . .

In the hotel lobby, I saw Sergeant Jordy sitting in an armchair. He waved me over.

"What are you doing in the army, anyway?" I asked. "What made you sign up?"

"Have you ever seen *Apocalypse Now*? The movie?"

Had I ever.

"Do you remember what Martin Sheen says at the start? 'I'm here a week now, waiting for a mission, getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room, I get weaker. And every minute Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger.' That's why I joined the army."

A member of the *Apocalypse Now* sect, you didn't run into them very often anymore. But I was a member as well, and had no trouble following his lead.

"And do you remember what Martin Sheen says before that? 'When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle.'"

That, I realized for the first time, was probably the essence of that tempestuous prelude. The jungle that calls, the jungle that won't let go.

"Sergeant," I asked, "would you let me look at your cheese-slicer?"

At 9:30 that evening we gathered in front of the Millennium Hotel for roll call. . . .

When their name was called out, some of the soldiers shouted: "Present." With a roll to that "r" that made me feel jealous. Others simply said "Present." Others still went for "Present, Sir!" The occasional soldier shouted "yeah," which one of them abbreviated even further to "yo." I myself answered "Yes," for I felt that shouting "Present, Sir!" would make it pretentious. . . .

Standing behind me, a little to one side, was Dennis from Special Units, with whom I had just shared a room for seven hours. And more than sim-

ply a room: a bed, and toothpaste as well. He had even said: “You need a toothbrush? Take this one.” The letter from the Ministry of Defense had stated that I would be issued a flak jacket and a helmet, but that I would be responsible for my own personal hygiene. But my own personal hygiene was still on board the plane.

The rest of the group was used to this, to living without their own personal hygiene; for them, the world was a huge campground.

I had always seen life as a strictly individual pastime. Even within a family, a company, or a social club, one lived alone and largely for one’s self. But now that I found myself within the ranks of this modern-day foreign legion, the time had come to modify that view. Here there existed a form of interdependence that could not simply be broken off. Lying beside Dennis, I had realized that I would have to find someone to worry about. So that someone would worry about me in turn.

The ride out to the airport. Sharyah by night. Through the windows of the bus, a few soldiers took pictures of brightly-lit restaurants. There was some whispering about tent dresses. The Arab in his natural habitat.

War was a form of tourism. Active tourism. At a certain point one began taking part. At a certain point one intervened.

In front of the duty-free shop at the airport I met two F-16 pilots. One of them was called “T-Band.” That wasn’t his real name. . . . T-Band explained, F-16 pilots always have nicknames in order to prevent mix-ups in the air. There are countless Marks, but only one T-Band. Why they called him T-Band was something he preferred not to go into. In Afghanistan I was to meet an air force cadet by the name of Midget. He was about my height.

T-Band’s colleague had a real name embroidered on his uniform: Martin.

Martin had attended the technical university at Wageningen, but eventually became bored with biochemistry and signed up with the air force. He had never regretted it. One time he went back to visit Wageningen. After the F-16, a laboratory made him feel claustrophobic. It smelled bad, too.

In an F-16, he explained, one was subject to huge gravitational forces, so they put you beforehand into a kind of gigantic spin-dryer, to help you acclimatize. You had to show them that you wouldn’t pass out.

I had once read a book about a little boy whose abusive parents put him in the spin-dryer all the time.

“Yeah,” Martin said, “and you can’t use the ejector seat too often either. It’s bad for your spinal column. It presses you together like a pat of butter. Bailing out with the ejector seat makes you shrink. You’re about an inch shorter.”

Was that why there were so few female F-16 pilots? A shrunken womb might not have enough space for a fetus to grow.

For the rest, they told me that the Balkan war had been a holiday for the F-16 pilots. They had been stationed in Northern Italy, and flew missions every once in a while. A loop over former Yugoslavia, then back to Northern Italy.

“I went there on holiday once,” I said. “Northern Italy. It’s lovely.”

The F-16 guys were different from the rest. Maybe it was because they flew alone all the time, or because they had to take shrinkage into account. They weren’t particularly tall to start with.

A few other soldiers came and joined us. It was time to change the subject. “During the Vietnam War,” I said, “there were tens of thousands of prostitutes working in Saigon. What about you guys? You’re away from home for a long time, aren’t you? Are there any kicks to be had in Afghanistan?”

Before anyone could answer, a defense ministry spokesman said: “Our bingo evenings are very entertaining.”

Once again, my image of war was in need of revamping. After the bombardment, bingo games?

T-Band walked away. When he was on the ground, he walked as though the G-forces were holding him down.

At the coffee bar, I ordered another espresso. Soldiers were standing around, talking about their future. One of them said: “I’d rather shoot one too many by mistake than one too few.”

When I turned around, they lowered their voices. And that was what survival was all about: making sure you weren’t the one too many.

2

Early in the morning, just when everyone had stopped thinking it would ever happen, there it was: Kabul International Airport. A civilian airport that serves primarily as an airbase. Even though I see an Austrian Airlines plane there as well. For the businessmen, I figure. You can get rich quick in Afghanistan, and you can lose your life there as well, but then all things have their price. War provides opportunities for those who are fast on their feet.

An officer points at a little windowless Red Cross plane taking off from the other side of the runway. “Strange flights,” he says, “probably CIA.”

Our arrival hall, where coffee is served, is a tent for Dutch military personnel. I decide that the best thing to do is follow everyone else. It seems they’re getting ready to pass out our gear.

I move into line. . . . A soldier comes over to me. “Do you have a gun with you?” he asks.

“No.”

“So why are you standing in line for ammunition?”

“That’s a good question,” I reply.

“My name’s Fons,” he says. “I’m in charge of the press here in Kabul. Come along with me. We’ll get you a flak jacket and a helmet.”

I tell Fons that “small” would probably be my size in helmets, my size in anything as a matter of fact, but small turns out to be too small for my head. The mediums have all been taken, so I get a large. The flak jacket weighs more than the rest of my baggage put together, and I have the tendency to drag a lot along with me. . . .

“I’ll check to see what we’re going to do with you.”

In the shadow of a tent I wait to see what will be done with me. All around me, soldiers who have no idea either.

“Is that always the way it goes,” I ask them, “not knowing what’s going to happen? Is that normal?”

“Oh, very normal,” a girl says. “You shouldn’t even want to know”. . . .

Fons comes back. Now he knows what they’re going to do with me. “In half an hour you’re flying out with the first group to Kandahar. You’re going with the Canadians.”

He shakes my hand.

“Have a wonderful time in Kandahar,” Fons says, an ironic lilt in his voice.

“You mean you’re not going along?” I ask.

“I’ve been to Kandahar already,” he says. “I’m staying in Kabul.”

The others have already put on their flak jackets and helmets. For me, it’s still too early and too hot for that. I drag the flak jacket along behind me like a dear, dead pet.

After a twenty-minute wait, the first group can go on board. We’re flying out in a Canadian Hercules. Someone says to me: “The Hercules is the workhorse of the air force.” I look at the workhorse with interest and also with a kind of awe.

The Canadian crew collects the soldiers’ weapons. No one’s allowed on board with a loaded gun. Then a Canadian pilot gives a short speech in front of the plane. He explains that during takeoff we will probably have to make a “low-flying tactical maneuver.” He finishes his introduction with the words: “Think of us for your future needs.”

Now the time has really come for the flak jackets. We’re about to board. Inside, the Hercules looks as though it’s still under construction. Our baggage is lying in a huge pile at the back. The pile is bound together with rope.

The Canadians hand out earplugs. . . . The pilot starts the engines.

A soldier next to me points to my earplugs. “I do a lot of flying,” I say. “I don’t need them.”

“Roll them up and stuff them in your ears,” he shouts. “You’re in a Hercules now.”

I stuff the plugs in my ears.

In *Apocalypse Now*, one of the soldiers on board a helicopter sat on his helmet to keep from getting his balls shot off. I hold my helmet close to my crotch, but a Canadian signals to me to put it on. Ilse, the female air force member sitting next to me, helps me with the chin straps.

Someone passes around a bag of brightly colored licorice. . . .

The only thing you can see in the Hercules is soldiers, other soldiers. I smell them, I feel them.

Right after takeoff, the tactical maneuvers begin. Not long after that the vomiting begins. First I see one soldier clutching an air-distress bag, later I see more. The tactical maneuvers seem endless. The mood in the Hercules is a little tense, but it’s not clear to me whether that’s because of the vomiting or because everyone secretly thinks we’ll never get out of here alive.

Later, during the landing, someone tells me that the Hercules has been shooting off flares. The magnesium-fired flares are used to fool heat-seeking missiles. “But,” one Dutch soldier says after we’re on the ground, “that doesn’t necessarily mean anyone was shooting at us. They keep the transport Hercules very highly tuned. They’ll start shooting flares if someone on the ground is welding his car.”

So let’s leave it at that: just as we flew over, an Afghan started welding his car.

As soon as we reach cruising altitude, the tactical maneuvers stop and we’re allowed to remove our helmets. I put mine down close to my crotch again. Around me, I see some of the soldiers still holding bags up to their mouths. . . .

Finally, my first steps on the tarmac at Kandahar Air Field, commonly referred as “KAF,” which is how I’ll refer to it: KAF. A storm of sand and dust that envelops everything in a deep fog. Intense heat. Tents, containers, something in the distance that looks like a watchtower.

Everyone is herded onto a bus. I follow the others, waiting for the right moment to finally shed my flak jacket.

We drive, but there is nothing along the way to indicate where we’re going. One tent looks like the other. One container is identical to all the rest. The occasional stretch of barbed wire and a sign: “Restricted Area. Stay out.” And, through it all, a relentless storm of dust. I have arrived at a camp, I tell myself. This is a camp.

Everyone is herded off the bus. Someone, I can’t remember who, tells us that it’s important to consume a lot fluids here, and to start doing so right away. Bottles of water are handed out. I see a big poster with two words on it: “Heat Kills.”

In a few minutes, they announce, we will receive our official welcome and a safety briefing.

We are led to a tent. . . . Colonel Henk, the commander, extends us his official greetings. Then a soldier gives a talk about safety. He has a laptop with him, and a video projector.

“To start with,” the safety man says, “around here we live on Zulu time”. . . .

Zulu time, as it turns out, is American army time. In the summer, that’s two hours earlier than Dutch time.

If central command orders a bombardment for 17:00 hours, of course, you can’t have people running around asking whether that’s Afghan time or Pakistani time or Teheran time. One plane, one bomb, one time of day: Zulu time.

“But,” the man continues, “we also have different nationalities here at the camp. The Canadians, for example, live on local time, which is four-and-a-half hours later than Dutch time. So if you agree to meet someone, you need to ask: “Is that local time, or Zulu time?”. . . . We live, think, and dream in Zulu time.”

The words “Zulu time” appear on the wall. For a moment I have the feeling that I’ve ended up in a remake of Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*.

The man continues: “Air-raid alert. Sometimes there are little rockets fired at the camp, nothing to really worry about, but inconvenient. When the air-raid siren goes off, put on your flak jacket and helmet and get to the nearest bunker. If there’s no bunker around, don’t start running around the camp like a chicken with its head cut off, just crawl under a bed. Don’t think this is silly—I’m not going to do this’—because if you do there is a chance that you will return to the Netherlands like this.”

A photo is beamed on the wall of an honor guard and a coffin being lifted from a plane at Eindhoven airbase.

I wonder how I’ll ever find a bunker in this desert. Where the hell are the bunkers?

Later that same day a soldier tells me: “If you hear the sirens, you’ve lived through it. What it’s all about are the minutes just before the siren goes off.”

So the big question is: How do you recognize the minutes just before the siren goes off?

At the end or only sort of believe in it. To me, it’s become clear that belief is not a prerequisite. One goes because one is sent, and that is what professional honor is all about. . . .

“Don’t take food from the mess tent back to your own tent. That’s not allowed. Food draws mice, and the mice draw snakes.”

Somehow the safety man at this camp makes me think of the Old Testament.

The safety briefing continues, but the press is now allowed to leave the tent.

Outside, the temperature is close to 45 degrees centigrade. The sandstorm still hasn't subsided. Through the clouds of sand I see a man approaching. He introduces himself as Major Erwin. "Welcome to KAF," he says. "I'm here for the press."

I'm not exactly sure why there should be two majors for the press. But I catch on soon enough: Major Erwin is army, and Major Robert is air force. The Dutch military organization consists of at least two competing armed forces.

When Major Robert goes off for a moment, Major Erwin says: "The problem with the air force is that they can't march and they don't abide by the dress code."

Once Major Erwin has left, Major Robert tells me a joke about a men's room, an air force crewman, and an infantryman, a joke I won't repeat here, but one in which the foot soldier gets the short end of the stick.

I hop in Major Robert's jeep for a tour of the camp.

"This," Major Robert says, "is the boardwalk." An attempt has been made in wood to imitate Coney Island in miniature. Unfortunately, the construction has never been finished. Along the boardwalk are little shops where you can buy souvenirs, there is a tailor, and a Burger King in the back of a truck. There is a Pizza Hut and a Tim Hortons where you can buy iced cappuccino and doughnuts. The doughnuts, however, are sold out.

That day the headline in a Canadian armed forces paper reads: "Canadian troops at KAF suffer under doughnut dearth."

We stop at the PX, the American army store. A barrack full of commodities, with two cash registers.

"Go in and check it out," shouts Major Robert, who gets more enthusiastic all the time. "It's not expensive."

It is definitely not expensive, and seeing as my backpack is still in Kabul, and won't be leaving Kabul for the time being, I buy a hat, a towel, slippers and a set of thermal underwear. Even though the package says that soldiers aren't allowed to wear the underwear beneath their uniforms—because they're inflammable. I also buy a pair of short pants with "Army" printed on them. The shorts, in fact, are meant only for American army personnel, but at the register I pretend to be American.

The shorts I have just purchased are part of the American army's leisure uniform. To Major Erwin's annoyance, the Dutch army has no leisure uniform. Which is why, in the heat of the day, one sees our officers knocking about the camp in Philips Sport Vereniging t-shirts.

Major Robert is waiting beside the jeep. . . . We drive up to a gate on the

hillside, the place where the Afghans who work at the camp are admitted. They have to turn in their IDs at the gate, and are given a one-day pass for KAF in return.

“The Afghani trucks,” Major Robert says, “we call ‘jingle trucks’, because they’re all done up inside like a Christmas tree.”

The trucks look like they’re about to breathe their last.

“We also have to make sure,” Major Robert says, “that no bombs are smuggled into the camp. . . .” A group of Dutch soldiers is sitting in a jeep at the top of the hill. This afternoon it’s their turn to check the incoming Afghans.

The soldiers aren’t talking much. They’re watching the camp, the Afghans who come in, the Afghans who go back out again. From the vantage of this hilltop, the Afghans somehow do look a little less human than us. It is impossible, I realize, to see at a glance which Afghans can be trusted and which ones cannot. All the more important, therefore, to keep a good eye on them from behind your machinegun. See here the classic dilemma of all occupational forces: how do we know who’s on our side?

“Everything okay?” I ask.

One of the soldiers nods. They’re not particularly talkative.

“Ever have any problems?” I inquire.

The soldier shakes his head slowly. “Sometimes we have to fire a warning shot. Bullets—a lot of times that’s the only language these guys understand.”

Major Robert sniffs. “Do you smell that?” he asks. “The wind has shifted. That’s the ‘shit pit.’”

The shit pit is a pond where the camp’s sewage runs to be purified. The story goes that one of the Rumanian soldiers once swam through the shit pit for two hundred dollars.

“Time to eat,” Major Robert says, rubbing his hands in anticipation. He takes another look at the workers. “A primitive people, but lovely, the Afghans,” he says. “And everything is tomorrow. Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. When it comes right down to it, though, they get the work done.”

There are a number of mess halls, but only the British soldiers have a dining hall to themselves. The food in all of them is catered by KBR, a subsidiary of the Halliburton concern. KBR also sees to the sanitary facilities.

Whenever you enter the mess tent, after the ritual washing of hands—which feels to me like something from the Old Testament as well—you have to sign in. A military identification code is required.

“What should I write down?” I ask, concerned.

“Anything you feel like,” Major Robert says. “I always write down the number of days I have left to go in this place.”

In the dining tent I become acquainted with the camp's non-Afghan civilian personnel. Most of them are Americans, who do this in order to put together a little nest egg. A year's cooking in Afghanistan doesn't pay badly.

Tonight is stir-fry night at KAF. "This is the best food I've eaten here in three months," Major Robert says. His grin widens. "Last week," he says, "in the other mess tent, a rocket landed in the salad bowl. You should try eating over there. If the siren goes off during a meal, everyone gets up and runs to the bunker. But by the time you get back there's a chance that dinner's over. That's why the Rumanians don't stop eating when the siren goes off."

I look at the Rumanian soldiers at the next table. They eat as though their lives depend on it. Hurriedly, yet with a certain fondness for their food.

"Have you ever been to Kandahar, the city?" I ask the major.

"We never leave the camp," he says. "That's much too dangerous."

After dinner I amble over to the Dutch Corner, a sort of café where you can play ping pong and table soccer, and where you can buy a glass of Pakistani peach juice for an extremely reasonable price. Coffee and tea are free for the taking.

There I meet Sergeant Wouter. He's twenty-seven years old, he serves in Lieutenant-Colonel Nico's tank battalion, and he met his girlfriend while on maneuvers in Germany.

Sergeant Wouter teaches me some army lingo. "Peppi" is nice, great, cool. As in: that's a pretty peppi holster you've got there.

"TIC" stands for Troops in Contact. "Which means," Wouter says, "that we're either shooting at them or they're shooting at us. Today, for example, there were a couple of TICs. You have two kinds of TICs; TICs that we provoke, and TICs that they provoke."

Then one has the euphemisms: "'He experienced a moment of relative discomfort' means: he was badly wounded during a mortar attack. Up for a game of table soccer?"

We go over to visit the Canadians, who have a kind of makeshift café as well, although without the Pakistani peach juice. But then they have coffee with vanilla flavoring.

Private Marieke and Adjutant Harry go along.

Private Marieke sleeps in the same big tent as the male soldiers. It's never a problem, she says, but "the special forces guys make stupid jokes, and they steal from each other. Pillows, blankets, that kind of stuff."

After two games of table soccer I ask Wouter: "You guys are away from home for a long time, and there are plenty of fine-looking young female soldiers around here. Does anything beautiful ever blossom forth?"

The sergeant rocks back on his heels, then leans toward me again. For a moment I think he's going to punch me in the nose, but he simply leans on the table-soccer table and says: "We're all men. When a woman comes by

we all look, and we all have our feelings, but that's why we've been given two good hands. Or, to be more accurate: one."

I have the feeling that I have found happiness here at Kandahar Air Field. . . .

Major Erwin has loaned me a mat to put on top of the filthy mattress until my sleeping bag arrives from Kabul. Hoping that Captain Cynthia, who sleeps across from me, won't suddenly come into the tent, I undress. Then I wriggle into my thermal underwear, put on my slippers and head for the shower. The shower is a five-minute walk from my tent.

There are, Major Robert told me, good showers and bad showers, just as there are good toilets and bad toilets. A camp like this has laws of its own.

In passing, my thermal underwear draws a great deal of laughter from the soldiers who are still sitting in front of their tents, talking or playing cards.

I locate the good showers, but the cubicles are packed. In front of each shower hangs a curtain that must once have been white. A similar curtain hangs in front of the toilets. After a bit of searching I find a vacant shower and quickly undress. I put my underwear, glasses and a towel on a little wooden bench.

Under the shower, it soon becomes clear why we're not supposed to shower barefoot around here. The men's showers at KAF are one huge sperm bank.

Three minutes later, I've had enough. I stick my hand through the curtain to grab my towel. Someone else pulls on the towel as well. I pull harder. It doesn't help. So I step out of the shower.

A naked soldier asks me: "Would you mind very much drying yourself with your own towel?"

"No, not at all," I reply.

My own towel has fallen on the floor.

I dry myself in a hurry. The dressing room is so small that you can't help bumping up against other people. "Excuse me," I mumble again and again.

Half-naked and half-wet, I flee to my tent. After walking for fifteen minutes, though, I realize that I've lost my way. . . . At last I see a soldier. He's sitting outside, staring at the stars. . . .

"Could you point me towards the boardwalk?" I ask.

3

Later the next morning I buy a dozen muffins at Tim Hortons to hand out to passing officers and soldiers. Friendship starts with handing out the right treat at the right moment.

When all the muffins are finished I run into Rik, corporal first class, and Michel, a sergeant. Michel is in his thirties, Rik is about twenty.

“We’re going to the PX,” Michel says. “Want to go along?”

I go along. Trudging through the dust. Occasionally a jeep goes by in the opposite direction.

“It’s like, totally war around here,” Michel says. “That’s what the Americans told me.”

I say nothing. The heat and the effort call for silence. . . .

I pull my cap down a little over my eyes. To lighten things up a bit, I ask: “Do you have a girlfriend, Rik?”

Rik hasn’t talked to anyone for a long time, it seems. “My girlfriend is older than me,” he says. “She’s had her IUD taken out. As soon as I get back we’re going to get started. Who knows, maybe it’ll be bingo right away.”

We trudge on through the sand. I listen. That’s my task around here. Maybe that’s always been my task.

At the PX, Sergeant Michel shops around for a pair of panties for his girlfriend in Hungary.

“How do you know her size?” the corporal asks.

The sergeant blushes. “Don’t laugh, guys,” he says, “but I’ve got something with me.” From the breast pocket of his uniform he pulls out an article of underclothing. A pair of Eastern Bloc panties.

“She gave them to me,” the sergeant says, more embarrassed than proud, “and I carry them around with me in case something happens.”

“How old is this Hungarian babe?” Rik wants to know.

“Twenty,” the sergeant says, sounding hesitant. For a camp in Afghanistan, this place has an extremely wide assortment of women’s underwear.

“Jesus Christ,” the corporal says, “are you, like, a card-carrying pederast?”

That evening, as I’m making a phone call in front of my tent, I hear something go whistling overhead—followed a few seconds later by a modest explosion, not very far away.

This must be a rocket attack. This is what I’ve heard them talk about so often in the last few days. Just to be sure, I wait for the siren, for confirmation. One can be mistaken, after all, even at a time like this.

Thirty seconds later the siren wails.

The bunker seems too far away, I decide to go into my own tent. If I remember correctly, this is when I need to put on my flak jacket.

Major Erwin comes rushing into the tent right behind me. He seems ready to throw himself on top of me. It wouldn’t make a favorable impression, of course, to send a journalist back to Holland in a coffin. Still, I’m

grateful to Major Erwin for not throwing himself on top of me. First he slaps the helmet on my head, then takes it off again and helps me into my flak jacket before slapping the helmet back on again.

“Now get under your bed!” the major shouts.

There’s no room under my bed, so I lie down on my bed.

Listening to the air-raid siren I’m overcome by a mad joy, an excitement the likes of which I have never felt before.

They want to kill me, therefore I am.

After a little less than half an hour, the all-clear sign is given. The rocket attack is over. At least for this evening. I’m allowed to get out of bed again and take off my flak jacket and helmet. . . .

The rocket came down fairly close to the Dutch Corner. One soldier was hit in the back of the neck with a rifle while he was diving for cover. Other than that there are no dead or wounded.

Corporal Rik and Sergeant Michel are seated at a table in the Dutch Corner. Rik is drinking cola.

I sit down across from him. “Were you scared?” I ask.

“Well, you can’t really pick up a rocket and throw it back,” the corporal says.

It was a silly question, I have to admit. The kind of thing they ask on current affairs programs. “Tell us, what’s been going on here?” And: “Were you scared?”. . .

“Michel,” I say, “does anything ever happen around here? I mean, some of the female soldiers are pretty good-looking. Things happen, don’t they?”

“Sure, all kinds of things happen,” the sergeant says. “In the bunkers. In the offices, at night. Off in the dark somewhere, in the back of a jeep.”

So one never knew whether a bunker was occupied or not.

I heard a female soldier at another table say: “You know what I’m really longing for? To be on Crete, four months from now.”

Dutch soldiers on their way back to the Netherlands are obliged to first spend a few days on Crete, to get accustomed to civilian life. A group of Dutch marines once came back from a mission in Asia, and the first thing they did when they got to Holland was wreck two cafés. Ever since then, soldiers who have been on a mission abroad are given a few days to cool down after the fighting. At first they made them do that in the barracks in Holland, but because that seemed a bit silly—sending soldiers back to the Netherlands and then keeping them locked up for three days in the barracks—they now do it on a subtropical island.

Someone introduces me to the chaplain. His name is Adriaan. Adriaan is a humanist. The Dutch army is the only one in the world that also has humanists as chaplains.

Adriaan studied philosophy. “I was planning to become a student counselor,” he said, “but then I saw this ad. ‘The army never stops; we’re looking for someone who’ll help us stop and think about that.’ That sounded good to me. I applied for the job and I got it.”

We’re sitting beside each other, the chaplain and I. Like two old buddies. The rocket attack seems like it was days ago. In another lifetime.

“Do you like it here at KAF?” I ask.

The chaplain nods. . . .

Colonel Henk had told me that he refuses to attend the humanist services. Colonel Henk belongs to the Dutch Reformed Church; humanists aren’t his cup of tea. He goes to the services held by the Canadian chaplain. But, of course, chaplains don’t take such things personally.

“Do you know how to shoot a gun as well?” I ask Adriaan.

“I had to learn. When I went along with the convoy to Tarin Kowt, I was armed. But if the chaplain has to start shooting, you know things are pretty much lost.”

The man who stops and thinks about the army that never stops goes back to his tent.

I catch sight of Sergeant Wouter. Now that I’m feeling a little more at home here, I’ve started talking to people as though I’ve known them for years. I walk over to Wouter. The sergeant is a bit disoriented. He was only about forty feet away from the rocket when it exploded.

“I’m not going to tell my girlfriend about this,” he says. “There’s no sense in doing that. She’ll hear about it later anyway. You shouldn’t either. Tell people about things like this.”

The two of us go to look at where the rocket hit. The remains of the projectile have already been removed. They do that fast at KAF. “Did you know,” the sergeant says, “that the CIA probably had something to do with the September 11 attacks? I saw a DVD about it once. I don’t believe everything they say, but strange things happened that day. Did you know that one of the planes didn’t even have windows?”

I’ve noticed a certain animosity towards the Americans among other military personnel as well. Even among the officers. Allies, the Americans, but competitors, too, it seems. And, well, isn’t that a lesson of history? Today’s ally may be tomorrow’s enemy.

Darkness has come. I don’t know what time it is according to Zulu Time. All I know is that it’s time for me to go to bed. My baggage has arrived from Kabul. I have my own sleeping bag at last. At KAF more than in other places, luxury is in the details.

Major Robert comes in. He’s turning in as well. “You know what’s weird?”

he says. "We've never had a rocket attack on a Tuesday before."

That evening I do not walk to the showers in my thermal underwear. . . .

The next day, not far from the PX, is a shop that says: "Massage and Day Shop Beauty Salon."

Soldiers can get a massage here. But, in principle, so can the civilian personnel working for KBR.

I announce to Captain Cynthia that I would like a massage. That, as it turns out, is something Dutch soldiers don't do very often.

She says that she and Major Robert will wait for me outside.

I enter the massage parlor. A plain waiting room in a plain Quonset hut. There is a plant. A desk. A price list on the wall.

A dark-haired young man in civilian dress asks in middling English how he can be of assistance.

I look at the price list and, thinking of Captain Cynthia and Major Robert waiting for me outside, decide to go for the simple, thirty-minute back massage.

"We'll be with you in a moment," the young man says.

I take a seat. A black female American soldier comes in. She goes to the back right away. She has an appointment.

"Where are you from?" I ask the young man.

"Tashkent," he says.

That, if I remember correctly, is a city in Uzbekistan.

"And what's your name?"

"Roman."

He doesn't seem particularly eager to talk.

"Why did you come to Afghanistan?"

"To earn money," he says.

"How long have you been here?"

"A long time."

The masseuse comes to get me. She leads me to a table separated from the others by a curtain. I hear voices coming from the other side.

The masseuse makes it clear that I am to take off all my clothes, except for my underpants.

I can't make out her name. I am able to figure out that she comes from Kirghizia. That says nothing to me at all. Kirghizia.

She massages intensely. I almost doze off. Music is coming from a transistor radio on a stool. An American army station, I presume, is keeping the hits right on coming for the men and women of the armed forces.

A lot of soldiers stay here for months on end, without ever leaving the camp. What they get to see of Afghanistan is KAF. In a situation like that, a

massage parlor like this one is always useful. People need to relax. Especially when you've been staring death in the eye.

I'm a bit disconcerted by the fact that the woman from Kirghizia keeps edging my underpants down a little, but then none of this is completely new to me. Besides, there's a war on.

A poster on the wall says that it is strictly forbidden to sexually solicit the masseuse and/or ask the masseuse out for a date. Then, without warning, the massage is over. Still slick with oil, I wriggle into my clothes. . . . Outside in the shade, Captain Cynthia and Major Robert are waiting. "It's another scorcher today," Major Robert says.

A "scorcher" means that the temperature is up to almost fifty degrees Celsius.

Some Dutch soldiers sunbathe almost naked in front of their tents during the hottest hours of the day. Neither skin cancer nor sunstroke can daunt them. To them, KAF is a summer's day at the beach. With rocket attacks at night in lieu of fireworks.

Down by the boardwalk I run into Klaus. He's a truck driver, but he works for the army. He often goes to Tarin Kowt with the convoys. Klaus walks along with me for a while. . . .

"If you ask me, we're just a little too chummy with the Americans," Klaus says.

He's having a hard time deciding between the Pizza Hut and the Burger King. He goes for the Burger King.

"We're here more to protect the oil than to help the people," he explains.

What oil? I should have asked, but even that question seems superfluous to me.

After Klaus has left, I go over to the man behind the counter at the Burger King. He's somewhere around forty, I think. It's hard to tell. He's sweating heavily. And he smells strongly of frying food.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"India," he says.

"And when will you be going home?"

I have to repeat the question.

"Home," the Indian says. "Not good."

KAF is better than home. That probably goes for a lot of the people here. Feeling guilty, I order French fries from the Indian at the Burger King.

KAF has a lawyer as well. In fact, it has a few of them. I hadn't expected to find a lawyer in the army. After a little looking around, I find him drinking coffee in front of his tent.

His name is Nils. He looks like the archetype of the perpetual student.

The lawyers here advise the military personnel, for example, on whether they're allowed to open fire. If there's enough time for that, of course. Sometimes there's no time for that. . . .

"And what about the suicide attacks?"

"We try to keep the other traffic at a distance. That goes for the convoys, for example, but also for traffic here at the gates. We use flashing lights, screaming, waving, honking. After that we begin with warning shots. Then we aim at their tires. And finally, possibly, at the driver. There are situations in which it might turn out that we've had to shoot someone who is unarmed. That's an extremely shitty situation. Some family might be left without a father and a breadwinner. We don't have any special budgetary allotments for that, but we would try to come up with some way to help the family. For example, by hiring the mother to work here in the kitchen."

Nils has things to do.

The temptation to play God, I understand, is born of pure necessity.

I go looking for Captain Cynthia. She's in one of the air-force tents, where unauthorized individuals like myself are not allowed to go.

They let me in anyway.

In the tent, a group of air force personnel is watching a DVD. They are hanging around on a couch, slouching in chairs. The tent has been darkened.

Sometimes an army base looks very like a college dormitory.

But I didn't come here to spend time in a college dormitory. I go back to my home base. The boardwalk. The Burger King, Tim Hortons, the shops with souvenirs about which no one knows whether they were made in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, or maybe even plain old Pakistan. The tailors who, for next to nothing, will embroider your name on your clothing.

Uncle Fester is sitting on a bench. He's in the air force. He also served in Iraq. That's where he got the name Uncle Fester.

Uncle Fester is bald and heavysset. We arrived at KAF on the same plane.

"Was the Hercules a bad ride for you, too?" I ask. "Did it make you throw up?"

"Not me," he says. "If it had, you would have noticed. When I throw up, this huge blast of vomit comes flying out. I could audition for a part in *The Exorcist*. One of those little bags isn't enough for me."

"Yeah," I say. And, after a brief silence. "Do you like it here?"

"It sounds weird," he says, "but this is where I relax." Uncle Fester sits staring into space. "There is one little thing, though, that does get a bit tiring sometimes."

“What’s that?” I ask.

“The army is one big sewing circle. Sometimes they act just like a bunch of old ladies.” Uncle Fester runs his hand over his bald head. “You know what you should write about? Defense department underwear. Our underpants are issued by the defense department. But women who wear underpants like that turn me off right away. No matter how pretty they are”. . . .

My last experience at KAF is a church service. When I come in with Captain Cynthia, the church is almost deserted.

A little group of American soldiers is busy preparing a service. They sing a few hymns.

Then they stand around in a circle. They hold hands and begin praying. They want Captain Cynthia and me to join the circle, too. The invitation is a friendly one, and not the kind you could refuse.

I hold Captain Cynthia’s hand and that of an American soldier I’ve never seen before.

Most of the American soldiers here are black.

After standing there like that for five minutes, we’re allowed to sit down.

To my surprise, standing around in the circle with the soldiers was moving. Despite the sweaty palms.

The church gradually fills.

More hymns are sung.

The man leading the service—Is he really a minister?—says: “Before we continue with the service. . . . I need to tell you that, should anything happen, the church has two emergency exits. One on either side.” He spreads his arms like a stewardess in a plane.

We fly back to Kabul aboard a Dutch Hercules. This time no one vomits. . . . After a sleepless night—without a sleeping bag, nights in Kabul are awfully cold—we walk in the early morning light to the KDC-10 that will take us back to Eindhoven by way of Sharyah and Crete.

Suddenly, from the back of the crowd, Major Robert comes rushing by. He passes everyone. He looks like he’s competing in the world championship race walking. Major Robert: a man with a mission.

“I know where the best seats are,” he says. “With extra leg room.” And without turning around he shouts to Captain Cynthia and me: “You guys have little bodies, you don’t need it.”

At Eindhoven airbase my baggage is checked for opium. My girlfriend is waiting for me.

“You know how you looked when you came walking up to me?” she says. “Invincible.”

It's a word that never crossed my mind while I was in Afghanistan.

Literary prizes, good reviews, satisfactory sales figures, it had been great, but none of it had ever made me feel invincible.

I had to go to Afghanistan in order to feel that.

Maybe that's the reason why Kurt Vonnegut, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, wrote: "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers."

People will always find new and different reasons for going to war, and some of those reasons are undoubtedly legitimate. But in the end it's about that overpowering feeling that comes sneaking up on you, out of nowhere: the brutish and joyful realization that you exist. Without ambiguity, without reserve, without pesky doubts.

And, right on its heels, comes that fleeting glimpse of invincibility.

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Between Fact and Fiction: Arnon Grunberg on His Literary Journalism

In 2009 Arnon Grunberg was invited to speak at the fiftieth anniversary of the Dutch Society of Editors in Chief. On the occasion he spoke about the relation between propaganda and journalism. He criticized contemporary journalism for its commercially driven, superficial culture, focusing only on scandals and hype, and he connected this form of journalism to propaganda. Grunberg's position was striking in two ways. First, his invitation to speak at such an event is remarkable, for he is known as an esteemed Dutch novelist who has received some of the top literary awards in Holland for his work.

Second, he draws attention to what he sees as the problematic relation between journalism and truth, knowledge and reality, and points out that dominant contemporary journalistic practice is neither the only nor the naturally privileged way to represent reality. This theme links up to his own journalistic work, which is often characterized as literary journalism, and thus is situated at the outer corners of the contemporary journalistic domain. Much like literary journalism, "reportage" refers in Dutch to a textual genre which not only states the facts but also tries to convey the experience of a certain event by using different narrative strategies, like portraying atmosphere, representing dialogue, and building tension. It is a genre that is often situated on the border of journalism and literature. For purposes of clarification, it will be called "literary reportage" in this interview. Grunberg's journalistic approach and his style make these stories one of the best examples of contemporary Dutch literary journalism. His literary journalism is reminiscent of the American New Journalism that heavily indulged irony. And yet, his is entirely homegrown because he is not familiar with the American movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In the following interview Grunberg discusses his views on the relation between literature and journalism, and fiction and reality.

—*Frank Harbers*

INTERVIEW

Conducted and translated by
 Frank Harbers
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FH: What makes literary reportage interesting and different from fiction?

AG: What makes literary reportage interesting are the restrictions; with fiction anything is—or seems—possible. When I write a literary reportage, I find it important to do justice to the reality—whatever we may mean by that—I am conveying. Moreover, I think that every writer should occasionally bathe him- or herself in so-called reality. It seems a fairytale to me that imagination doesn't need to be nourished.

FH: How then does your journalistic work relate to your literary work?

AG: I think I value my novels more. But I certainly do not regard my literary reportage as just some work on the side.

FH: Did the NRC Handelsblad give you specific directions for your stories or did you have complete freedom while writing your reportage?

AG: They have never given me any directions. Only once they asked me to delete the word “undercover” because officially NRC reporters can't go undercover.

FH: Does literary journalism have an added value compared to “mainstream” journalism?

AG: Hmm, do you want me to be immodest? I don't think literary journalism inherently has an added value, but my literary journalism does. Otherwise I wouldn't keep on doing it. For starters, I subsidize my literary journalism. I am able to spend a disproportionate amount of time and money (think only of the cost of my protection in, for example, Iraq) on my literary reportage, considering the (lack of) economic return. Not a lot of newspapers or magazines in the Netherlands—and not only in the Netherlands—can afford to assign a reporter or a different staff member for such a long period. Besides

that, it seems to me that mainstream journalism necessarily applies a strict definition of what is news. It is newsworthy when a roadside bomb explodes in Afghanistan, but it isn't newsworthy when a soldier chooses a pair of panties for his girlfriend. I do consider that news. Also, the added value resides in the way it is written down, but I am not saying that style should stretch the truth.

FH: Could you elaborate a little on the way you finance such costly reportage?

AG: Obviously, a trip to Iraq belongs to the category of reportage that is the most expensive. Expensive for me, because I spent money on protection for the period that I am not embedded with the military; on my last trip this was half of my entire stay. I get 350 Euros for the short articles I write everyday for *NRC Handelsblad*. Let's say I write 25 of these stories during my trip, and later on also a larger article for 1,200 Euros. On my protection and protected transportation I already spent around 17,000 US dollars. The idea is that I "sell" my articles beforehand to a Dutch newspaper and later on to other papers and magazines in other countries. That way I sometimes manage to break even. Successfully selling my articles to other countries turns out better sometimes than others, and at the moment it's obviously not the best time for magazines and newspapers.

Therefore, I have to say that "Arnon Grunberg the novelist" sponsors "Arnon Grunberg the journalist"; it is impossible to reach a different conclusion. And if you take into account the time and energy I spend on my reportage, this financial support is very generous. Although I am not obligated to justify this financial aid, I believe it can be justified, because in the long run these journeys will benefit "Arnon Grunberg the novelist." They are the novelist's oxygen mask.

FH: From your literary journalism I get the feeling that you are not a big supporter of the standard human interest story. In what aspect, then, resides the news value of, for example, the soldier who is choosing a pair of panties for his girlfriend? And what kind of influence does the way of writing it down have on that news value?

AG: I don't need to tell the average human interest story again. It still seems odd to have to argue that my pieces have an added value compared to other articles, but as a novelist I am inclined to say: they are just written better. This issue is connected to the truth claim a journalistic article constitutes: a literary journalist shows the nature of something, based on anecdotal evidence—but that is clear to everyone involved. I suspect that the average journalist has an idea about what news is and he can only write something down if it complies with certain criteria. I consider everything that happens in my presence and that is interesting to me as newsworthy, and I suspect that this highly

subjective way of “newsgathering” amounts to something that might come closer to “truth” or “reality” in this case, than traditional journalism. The fact that my journalistic methods incite irritation with some readers, considering certain letters sent to NRC, could have something to do with the generally accepted ideas about “news.”

About the way of writing it down, I can only repeat what I have said before. What I experience has its effect on me, which I hope to convey to the reader. One of the means I employ to reach this goal is through style. What is style, you could ask, but I think that’s clear. The average news report also uses style. The question is if this style is always effective. By saying this I do not in the least argue that the whole newspaper should only be filled with stories like mine.

FH: Do you have journalistic role models or journalists (from the past or the present) that you admire, and have they influenced your journalistic style or approach?

AG: Literary writers are my role models. In my first reportage I mention Isaak Babel. Babel is a role model, another one is J.M. Coetzee. In my literary reportage I have only been guided by novelists.

FH: Literature is most often associated with fiction, journalism with reality. With regards to literary journalism people often refer to a “higher” truth. In your opinion, does something like literary truth exist, and how does this kind of truth relate to journalistic truth?

AG: I think that a novel, one way or the other, has to search for a higher truth. How that truth is related to journalistic truth seems simple to me. Journalistic truth revolves around the command: Do not invent.

I remember a discussion with a war correspondent who had worked in the Balkans. He said that you would talk to people there with such complicated names that he made up the names. I can understand this. But still I have something against it. I think that you can’t do that. In that case you write: “I couldn’t understand the name of the man on the bus and for that reason I didn’t dare to repeat my question.”

That a journalist writes about himself in a story can be tremendously vain, but it can also do reality more justice.

FH: Are there any differences in your work routines when you are writing literary reportage or fictional literature?

AG: Of course, even something as trivial as story length makes a difference. But more importantly, I think the people that I talked to for my reportage have to be able to recognize themselves in those literary reportages, and they have to think: “Yes, that’s the way it was.” I find it an aesthetical and ethical obligation to do those people justice. A novel—I might apply a somewhat old-fashioned distinction between fiction and nonfiction—is something iso-

lated. It is of course not disconnected from reality, but a novel does not claim to be—and that gives it its power—a truthful reflection of that reality. As I said, a novel pursues a higher truth.

FH: Could you elaborate on that a little—what kind of truth do we have to think of? Is that kind of truth also in some way important for literary journalism?

AG: I want to prevent [myself from] sounding too pretentious, but the point is to show how people live, how they behave, and so on. Literature occupies itself with the study of humankind, as well as, roughly speaking, sociology, philosophy, and economics. It has privileges that a scientific discipline doesn't have and also other pretensions. But it should ultimately pursue the truth—please do not take this as an argument for realism in the narrow-minded sense of that word; quite the contrary.

As far as I'm concerned, literary journalism pursues the same, but other rules apply.

FH: What is possible in your journalistic work that you are not able to do in your literary work?

AG: I can test my imagination and myself against reality, against real-life experience. I can fantasize about how it would be to walk through Baghdad, but to actually be walking there is something totally different—how trivial that may sound. I have sometimes done research for my novels as well, by the way, without writing reportage about those experiences. For my novel *Tirza* [Grunberg's 2006 novel in which the protagonist travels through Namibia], I went to Namibia three times.

FH: How did your experience as a novelist help you as a journalist? Did this experience interfere with your journalistic activities, or the other way around?

AG: Irrespective of whether you are writing journalistic pieces, a letter, or a novel, it helps if you can write—and I think I can. A journalistic story is a story as well. A story does not mean it is made up, but it does mean that you tell a story—or a part of a story, but as far as I'm concerned that actually still is a story.

You can describe, down to the smallest detail, an officer of the American army who welcomes the press at Guantánamo Bay, but you can also convey what he is saying—the choice of which details you deem important and which not are choices that a novelist has to make as well.

FH: What was the biggest challenge in the switch from the work of a literary writer to doing journalism?

AG: It was an excursion, not a switch. The biggest challenge was to expose myself to people and environments to which I am not normally exposed. I

believe that an important part of the work also has to do with the way a writer acts in a strange environment. When he sees himself as a celebrity, it is bound to fail. Such an attitude excludes, so far as I am concerned, a real interest for the people you talk to.

Furthermore, I don't think you can afford to already have a story in mind. You surrender yourself to what you experience and see. That is the best guarantee to observe in the best possible way.

FH: You often write about the war and its effects. What do you find so appealing about this subject?

AG: I don't want to psychologize myself, nor society. In the West we are obsessively occupied with violence and war, even though we haven't been involved in war for a long time. We do send soldiers to war, but with that, war still doesn't draw nearer to us. With all due respect for the victims, even 9/11 wasn't a war.

We occupy ourselves with war, but we want to keep it far away from us in every way possible. I think it therefore justified to ask what that war entails.

FH: Do you have the feeling that after your literary reportage about Afghanistan and Iraq you have experienced war like Isaak Babel described in his stories [Babel was a Russian writer who wrote short stories about his experiences in the Russian Revolution and Civil War, and who Grunberg quotes in his Afghanistan reportage], or would you characterize your experiences with war rather as those from an interested outsider?

AG: No, Babel might have been an outsider, but he was enlisted. Not me. Not yet. I have asked myself, though, whether I would learn much more if I would stay two years. The same goes for cleaning hotel rooms: You can do it for three weeks, three years, or your whole life; I think the "profit" of staying longer is negligible.

FH: In your reportage series about the ISAF-mission in Uruzgan [the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, is supervised by NATO to support the Afghan government in securing Afghanistan from the Taliban, and developing a stable democracy] you describe how a soldier based his choice to enlist on the movie Apocalypse Now and you use this movie occasionally as a frame of reference. Are fiction and reality not as clearly distinguished as a lot of people like to think?

AG: What we see of war are often movies about war. It is obviously not something new that soldiers imitate such movies, but it is still nice to show how that works. You need a frame of reference, even when you are in a war zone for the first time, and when it concerns me that frame is the war film. Much more even than, for example, CNN; I do not watch TV often. So you

order things you see by asking questions and by paying attention closely, but also by relating your experiences to war films. The funny thing is that it turns out that soldiers, at least some of them, do the same thing. With that, fiction and reality can still be separated from each other, but some kind of interaction does take place: reality influences fiction, fiction influences reality.

FH: Can we live without a (provisional) distinction between fiction and reality?

AG: Doubt and skepticism about what constitutes reality are very healthy, but denying the distinction between fiction and reality just like that points to an attitude that results from a lack of skepticism and doubt. Reality offers a few “truths,” which leave not a lot of room for skepticism. Go and stand on a rail track for instance, and wait for the train to come.

FH: Sometimes it seems as though the public only accepts the truth claim of an account if it is filmed by accident and shows a shaking camera (for example, the Zapruder film of the murder of JFK), or if it is written with stylistic imperfections. Would you agree with the postulation that we live in an era in which some kind of “authenticity or reality hype” is prevalent?

AG: There is, in my opinion, an odd need for “genuineness.” As if imitation couldn’t be real or authentic. People clearly haven’t thought this through. Maybe you have to conclude that there are too many silly and bad imitations. This skepticism that borders on paranoia seems to me a reaction to the loss of certainties with regards to what is real and what isn’t. You can’t reason your way out of this paranoia, because it offers in its own way the comfort of absolute certainty about reality. Journalists and editors are not without blame. For too long they have thought that they could determine what is “news”—they were the feudal lords who thought the feudal era would never end.

The paranoia about what is real and what is genuine, which manifests itself in different ways, is a reaction to this behavior of these “feudal lords,” but is obviously also fostered and exploited by movements which think they might profit from this radical, navel-gazing, and self-convinced skepticism of many people nowadays.

FH: What then does the notion “authentic” entail for you?

AG: It is a defective concept. Maybe nice for critics: “an authentic writer’s voice,” “an original novel”. I wouldn’t know how the distinction “authentic-non-authentic” could be helpful to me (or whomever). You might be able to point out what is “new” about a text, but “new” is a relative notion, and “new” isn’t always better.

Of course, as a journalist you sometimes have the feeling that someone is lying to you. As I have argued before, lies can say more about someone than

when that person speaks the truth. But that is not connected to authenticity. People can talk really sensibly about a certain subject. However, there are also many people who can't talk sensibly about themselves. Or they don't want to; it was never taught to them. That doesn't make these people non-authentic. At the most these people are, in most cases, of less interest to me. The "art" is to seduce people to talk sensibly, especially about themselves. That "seduction" is an important part of writing a literary reportage and is made or broken by the attitude the "journalist" adopts.

FH: In your literary reportage you reflect a lot on your role as observer or reporter, and on the whole journalistic process. Do you think that is a typical characteristic of literary journalism?

AG: I don't know. I think you sometimes have to accept that your presence influences a situation. When I was in Afghanistan for the first time and the camp was besieged with a bunch of missiles, I would think it nuts not to write how I reacted to that. I think that you have to watch out for the idea that you have experienced something very special. It is special because I am not normally besieged with a bunch of missiles. Had I been in the position in which I was regularly besieged with missiles, then the absence of the bombardment would have been special and worthwhile.

Sometimes you have to use yourself as the measure of things, but at the same time you have to correct yourself afterwards by acknowledging: I am not the measure of things.

FH: Both in your literary fiction and journalistic work you like to use the perspective of the outsider. Why?

AG: The one who observes is the outsider. If you participate, you are not looking, and it's also the other way around. It can be a painful position, but as far as I'm concerned it is the most honest position for a novelist as well as a journalist. In addition to that, the outsider for the novelist is usually more interesting than the one who thinks he belongs to an exclusive group by birthright. People who do not belong but who actually do want to belong, or people who did belong but as a result of mistakes or unfortunate coincidences were kicked out, are of interest to me.

FH: How did the army react to your articles about Uruzgan—you are not all-out positive about the mission, and you characterize it regularly as a form of active tourism, or even as neo-colonialism.

AG: Well, the soldiers, especially the high ranking officers, are usually no fools. They honestly know what they are doing over there. I got a couple of friends out of it. The Dutch Department of Defense has distributed a collection of the first couple of literary reportages to their personnel.

The Department of Defense did try to keep an interview with a general out of the newspaper. But I have justly pushed through the interview: The general knew with whom he was talking, there was a spokeswoman present. If the defense department isn't happy with what their own generals are saying they should adopt a different personnel policy.

In addition to that, my articles were published in the Cultural Supplement of the *NRC*, or in the art section. That is fine with me. But it is also a conscious choice of the newspaper to disarm the stories a little beforehand. It's as if they are trying to suggest that the articles in the foreign affairs section, mostly written by reporters located in Rotterdam, are closer to reality.

FH: You are sometimes characterized as a writer who likes to play with the relation between reality and fiction. Max Pam [a well-known Dutch literary critic] asks in a review of Chambermaids and Soldiers [a compilation of Grunberg's literary reportage] how accurate your descriptions are. Can you imagine that readers, taking into account your reputation as a writer, take your journalistic work with a grain of salt?

*AG: I would much regret that. I try as hard as I can to make the descriptions as accurate as possible. Of course you can say: "Okay, but an American lieutenant doesn't read *NRC*." No. He could have read a few of those pieces on Salon.com, but okay, let's assume he doesn't read those either. This summer I spent some time with ten families in a suburb of Utrecht. Those families were able to read what I wrote about them in the newspaper. They also knew I visited them to write about them, and afterwards they could react on my visit and the stories I wrote about it by email. Nine out of ten of the families have reacted in approval. I was called a sourpuss by one family, but being a sourpuss is not the same as being a liar or an inventor. Only one family refused to answer the questions, because they were disappointed with my story in the newspaper. But I doubt if that is because they think I lied.*

I would think it sad, no, appalling, if readers would believe that I visited Iraq or Guantánamo Bay to make up things. That the reality has its absurd aspects is not my fault. The fact that I see those aspects only speaks for my capacity to observe.

FH: In your article about David Lynch's "Interview Project" [The Interview Project consists of a 121-part documentary series featuring three- to five-minute portraits of ordinary Americans from all over the country] you call reality "an exercise in persuasiveness." What means do you employ to convince your readers of the truthfulness of your literary journalism?

AG: I select without violating reality. I select certain details but I don't have a specific agenda—that's at least the illusion I have—I make this reservation because you have to distrust yourself as well. I feel the need to investigate

how things work, to answer the question: What kind of family am I visiting? And you'll probably get a different answer to that question if you stay more than one night with that family. And the account changes as you are writing a piece of 400 words for the daily paper or a piece of 2,000 words in the weekly cultural supplement of a newspaper. But that doesn't change the first task—that you need to do the people justice who were friendly enough to welcome you in their home—to talk to you, to take you along in their lives, temporarily or not. It also has to be a readable and if possible an exciting story, but that doesn't mean you can lie.

Ultimately, what is at stake for me is what I described in *Chambermaids and Soldiers*: "I want to know how people do it, live." I write reportage to learn something, to get to know something that I didn't know before. It is on that learning process, on that getting to know something, that I report.

FH: Your answer suggests that your reportages are important experiences for yourself. Can they be seen as a form of anthropological (self-)examination?

AG: Yes. As long as the word "self" remains between quotes, and a footnote is added, saying: the anthropologist is a novelist.



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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 Dolar 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.

Book reviews . . .

Thomas B. Connery
Book Review Editor

- The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*
by Rebecca Skloot
. . . reviewed by Douglas Whynott 108
- Sizwe's Test: A Young Man's Journey Through Africa's AIDS Epidemic*
by Jonny Steinberg
. . . reviewed by Nick Nuttall 111
- To Tell the Truth: Practice and Craft in Narrative Nonfiction*
by Connie D. Griffin
. . . reviewed by Patsy Sims 114
- Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing*
by Alfredo Cramerotti
. . . reviewed by Isabelle Meuret 117
- The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity*
by Doug Cumming
. . . reviewed by Ginger Carter Miller 120
- Down to the Crossroads—On the Trail of the 2008 US Election*
by Guy Rundle
. . . reviewed by Kayt Davies 123
- Ancient Gonzo Wisdom: Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson*
edited by Anita Thompson
. . . reviewed by Jason Mosser 126
- J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland. Essays 1898-1908*
edited by Nicholas Grene
. . . reviewed by Giulia Bruna 129
-

In Search of the Real “HeLa”

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

by Rebecca Skloot, New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010, Hardcover, 368 pages, \$26.

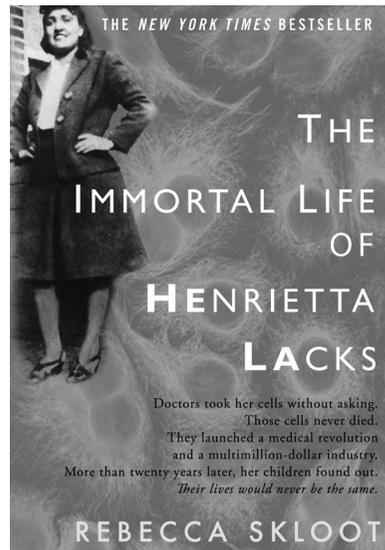
Reviewed by Douglas Whyntott, Emerson College, U.S.A.

I always find it interesting and instructive to read a first book by an author, and especially a first book of literary journalism. Part of the pleasure is in watching the writer make her choices. How will she structure the narrative, what ways will she attempt to draw the reader in, how heavily might she rely on suspense? What sort of transitions will she make? And importantly, for someone writing literary journalism or narrative nonfiction, how will she depart from the factual and expository narrative to develop the human, novelistic story that gives literary journalism its identity?

One such book is the recently published scientific narrative, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot, an American writer. In this book, her first, Skloot tells the story of a famous line of cultured cancer cells, the “HeLa” line, named after its donor, Henrietta Lacks. HeLa cells were the first ever to be successfully cultured in a laboratory, when in 1951 a doctor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, during an examination of Henrietta Lacks for cervical cancer, cut off a small section of her tumor and placed it in a Petri dish. Researchers had been trying for years to grow human cells successfully under laboratory conditions, but none had survived more than a few days. The cells of Henrietta Lacks not only survived but did so astoundingly, and soon the HeLa line was distributed to researchers working with various diseases. Jonas Salk was among the first to use them. In 1951 Salk announced that he had developed a polio vaccine but couldn’t offer it until after testing—ultimately the vaccine was tested using HeLa cells. The rest of that story, with the tens of thousands of lives saved, is one of the most famous in medicine. The infant field of virology was born.

Skloot writes:

The discovery of HeLa cells was an epiphany for researchers of all kinds, because Henrietta’s cells allowed them to perform experiments that would have been impos-



sible with a living human. They cut HeLa cells apart and exposed them to endless toxins, radiation, and infections. They bombarded them with drugs, hoping to find one that would kill malignant cells without destroying normal ones. They studied immune suppression and cancer growth by injecting HeLa into rats with weakened immune systems, who developed malignant tumors much like Henrietta's. And if the cells died in the process, it didn't matter—scientists could just go back to their eternally growing HeLa stock and start over again.

She continues, in a key paragraph that indicates this book is not just a science story but something more, something literary and artistic: "But there were no news stories about the birth of the amazing HeLa cell line and how they might help stop cancer. In [George] Gey's one appearance on television, he didn't mention Henrietta or her cells by name, so the general public knew nothing about HeLa. Even if they had known, they probably wouldn't have paid it much mind" (58).

A fine and important story of a great historical moment in medical science. Skloot could have focused on that story alone and likely written a fine book. But she decided not to do that; she decided to go further and tell of Henrietta Lacks and her family, to tell not only of how the woman lived and died but what life has been like for her husband and offspring. The human story, the one that makes this book a form of literary journalism.

She found resistance in various ways. The Lacks family foremost did not want much to do with Rebecca Skloot when she came calling. The Lacks family is poor and black, and Skloot is white, so some differences are obvious, but Skloot didn't at the time know the deeper reasons for their reluctance. Yet she kept pushing. Sometimes she called one of the Lacks sons every day, and was told that they would not talk to her. She kept calling though, and kept talking to whomever she could.

Skloot also met resistance from the editorial front. She writes of this in the prologue. By then Skloot had gotten to know members of the Lacks family and become close to Henrietta Lacks' daughter Deborah Lacks. Skloot writes that an editor ordered her to take the Lacks family out of the book. It must have been difficult for Skloot, an unpublished writer, to have resisted the demands of an editor who held a key to publication. But Skloot did resist. Deborah Lacks, a religious woman who believed that her mother's spirit lived on in those cells, and who came to believe that Henrietta had guided Skloot her way, would weigh in on this decision. When the editor who insisted on the removal of the family was injured in a mysterious accident, Deborah said, "that's what happens when you piss Henrietta off."

Actually it would have been impossible for Rebecca Skloot not to write about the progenitor of the HeLa line, as she also accounts in the prologue of the book. As a high school student sitting in a biology class, totally lost in the terminology of cell division, Skloot listened to the teacher describe mitosis as a beautiful dance, but also add that things could go wrong, that an enzyme could misfire or a protein could activate incorrectly and the result could be cancer. He said we know these things from studying cells in culture and told briefly about Henrietta Lacks, saying, as he erased the board, that she was a black woman. Skloot was stricken with interest and followed the teacher to his office. What about the woman, she wanted know? Who was she? Nobody knows anything about her, the teacher said.

An interest seems to have grown into an obsession, the kind that can fuel a book. After an undergraduate degree in biology and while working on a graduate degree in creative writing, Skloot funded her research trips to Baltimore and the small tobacco town Henrietta Lacks was born in, (and her trips to interview scientists), by means of student loans and credit cards.

By writing about the family of Henrietta Lacks, Skloot writes about her own quest to find them, as well as the result of knowing them. Though her book is not a memoir her quest is part of the narrative line, and ultimately that leads into spiritual realms, given the religious interpretation of the Lacks family upon the role of the HeLa cell line. One sees the cells as a form of angel, the divine infused into human form. At one point in her travels Skloot, an atheist, holds a Bible and reads aloud from it on the bidding of a Lacks cousin, who says to her, “And when the Lord chooses an angel to do his work, you never know what they are going to come back looking like.” It could almost be a scene out of a Flannery O’Connor short story, a moment of grace.

Skloot is fundamentally a science journalist and the science story is well told. Some of the scientists come off as heroic, particularly George Gey. He started the program that led to the cell line, didn’t charge any money for the cells he distributed (though others would) and once he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, gave his own body up to research while still alive. Other researchers don’t come off quite so well. When Deborah Lacks seeks to know something about her mother, who she doesn’t remember, she goes to one scientist for information. He has directed a study of the Lacks blood for its genetic makeup, but he doesn’t explain much to Deborah. Instead he hands her a copy of his book on genetics and tells her to read it. A slow reader, Deborah gets a dictionary and tries to understand the book’s elevated language. She comes upon another book, a scientific treatise on the HeLa line, only to stop—and have a nervous breakdown—after encountering a photograph of her mother’s autopsy.

Yet ultimately Deborah Lacks talks to Skloot, writer on the prowl, writer on a quest to understand, (I think it’s possible to say the primary theme of this book is understanding; the word is used again and again, and it is what the characters are seeking, and Skloot is delivering). Ultimately the quests of these two women converge and they become reporter/researchers in partnership. Off they go to find medical records, and Deborah greets people, in stores, in gas stations, along the way: “Hi, my name’s Deborah and this is my reporter, you probably heard of us, my mama’s in history with the cells, and we just found this picture of my sister!”

Their trail leads to Johns Hopkins. A young researcher who believes that the Lacks family has been treated poorly, that they should be entitled to some of the proceeds from sales of their mother’s cell lines, (they would like most of all to have health insurance), invites Skloot and two of Henrietta Lacks’ children to come and see the HeLa cells at the university hospital in Baltimore.

The researcher, whose name is Christoph Lengauer, says, “Her cells are how it all started. . . . Once there is a cure for cancer, it’s definitely largely because of your mother’s cells” (269).

“Amen,” Deborah says. They look at the cells through a microscope, and at

one point Christoph calls out to them—the cell is dividing right before their eyes! Mitosis! The beautiful dance! (269)

“‘Lord have mercy,’ Deborah says, and her brother Zachariyya, who has had a very difficult life, says, “‘If those our mother’s cells . . . how come they ain’t black even though she was black?’” (267)

Cells don’t have color under the microscope, Lengauer says. Afterwards, as they leave, when Deborah puts an arm around Skloot’s shoulder she proclaims, “‘Girl, you just witnessed a miracle’” (269).

Such are the rewards, first book and all, a book of literary journalism, multiple in form and intent and meaning.

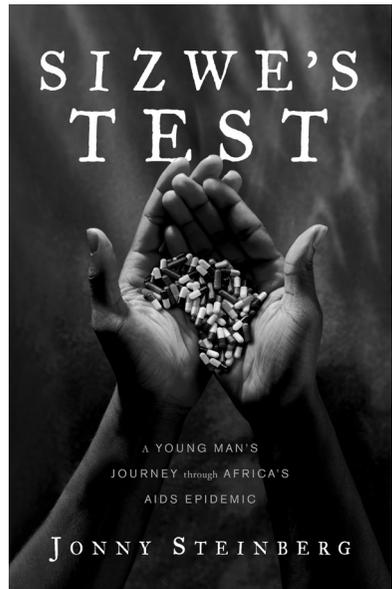
Trying to Survive AIDS in South Africa

Sizwe’s Test: A Young Man’s Journey Through Africa’s Aids Epidemic

by Jonny Steinberg. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Hardback, 349 pp., \$26.

Reviewed by Nick Nuttall, University of Lincoln School of Journalism, UK.

In many respects AIDS and South Africa is an old story. Most of us are aware of the terrible toll it has taken on men, women and children in sub-Saharan Africa. So it’s with a certain amount of smugness we read of the inadequate response of the South African government under Thabo Mbeki to HIV and AIDS. I have in front of me a *Guardian* newspaper article dated 7 October 2001 headlined: “Aids Toll Soars as Mbeki Looks the Other Way.” The intro reads: “At the Entabeni clinic in Izingolweni, near Durban, another father is convinced that his family is bewitched. ‘It’s happening more and more,’ he says. ‘People think you’ve got a nice house or beautiful children. They are jealous and they put a curse on you. That’s what’s happened to us.’ In fact, this father has full-blown Aids. So do his wife and six-year-old daughter, who is dying. His twin babies, six months old, are both HIV-positive.”



Back then such stories highlighted the gulf between a “Western” understanding

of AIDS and that of the Black population of South Africa. Or at least so we thought. But with typical Western hubris nothing could have been further from the truth. And it is this truth that Jonny Steinberg, a white South African award-winning journalist, attempts to uncover in *Sizwe's Test*, his account of how AIDS was confronted and treated in the rural district of Lusikisiki in Eastern Cape province. Steinberg doesn't fall into the "bewitched" trap but the hypothesis that drives his narrative proves to be equally slippery: "When people die en masse within walking distance of treatment, my inclination is to believe that there must be a mistake somewhere, a miscalibration between institutions and people" (2).

Steinberg's exploration of this "miscalibration" is episodic rather than strictly chronological and he deploys character as his narrative driver. So we have a number of possible protagonists in this story. First, there is Sizwe Magadla, the Sizwe of the title. He is a young man aged twenty-nine who owns his own spaza shop—a kind of rural supermarket—in Ithanga, one of the three dozen or so villages that make up the district of Lusikisiki. His shop gives him a certain social cachet. He's like a local celebrity and like celebs everywhere his comings and goings are the stuff of gossip. One of the recurring themes of the book is the persistent questioning of Sizwe by the author about why he won't test to see if he's HIV-positive, hence the book's title. And one of Sizwe's excuses is that everyone will know if he does and this could harm his status and by implication his business in the village.

Then there is Dr. Hermann Reuter, the Médecins Sans Frontières medic in charge of the antiretroviral program in Lusikisiki. He is rationality writ large and is a recurring antidote to the more fanciful explanations for their plight offered by many of the villagers. He seems to be trusted and feared in equal measure by those he treats at the clinic. As a white South African he is mistrusted: "They thought Dr. Hermann had come to destroy the people with his needle and his blood test" (146). But as a doctor he won over all but the most entrenched sceptics. When Reuter finally left the district in October 2006, some two thousand people gathered in the community hall in Lusikisiki. He was draped in the traditional clothes of the Mpondo and enticed into dancing with the native girls.

Lastly, we have the ubiquitous figure of Jonny Steinberg himself, donning literary, journalistic and proselytising hats turn by turn about. He becomes a repository of native folk lore, western rationalism, personal memoir and ultimately a people's history. Steinberg offers the reader two weapons-grade history lessons. The first tells the story of the great flu epidemic of 1918, which Sizwe's grandmother still spoke about. Flu inoculation kits were distributed throughout Transkei and Ciskei territories. But as it is perfectly natural for a people to assume that the face of their oppressors will not suddenly become the face of their benefactors, the kits were treated with hostility and suspicion. The long needle of the white man was described as a "device of the Europeans to finish off the Native races of South Africa, and as it had not been quite successful, they were sending out men with poison to complete the work of extermination" (149). Such cultural baggage is not easily discarded. Oral cultures can be powerfully assimilative and Sizwe, clearly an intelligent man capable of understanding the fears of his fellow villagers, tells Steinberg with a note of ex-

asperation: “Hermann comes to Lusikisiki. Nobody has HIV. He tells the nurses to prick and suddenly everybody has HIV. Where does the HIV come from? It comes from the pricking. It doesn’t surprise me” (156).

The second story takes us back to a more recent post-colonialist scenario. South Africa’s president, Thabo Mbeki, believed established medical science on AIDS had been blinded by the racism of its practitioners. Mbeki supported a group of dissident scientists who questioned whether HIV was the primary cause of the AIDS epidemic and wove a complicated *casus belli* composed of pharmaceutical companies peddling expensive drugs, endemic black poverty, anti-imperialism and an entrenched nativism. So—the drugs were toxic and the West was dumping poisons on Africa.

These two historical glimpses clearly identify Steinberg’s territory but we have to get there first. So Steinberg begins by rehearsing the “bewitched” scenario of the *Guardian* article mentioned above. Sizwe tells us about his friend Jake who died soon after testing positive. But this is clearly Sizwe articulating the beliefs of others: “The whole village thought his uncle had bewitched him. Jake had money and could be generous with people. His uncle had no money and could not be generous. He was jealous. And the rash in his crotch—it is a common means of witchcraft. The jealous one slips the *Muthi* [medicine] into Jake’s girlfriend’s food. The next time Jake has sex with her, he gets the poison” (26).

Set against such arguments the reader is always taken back to the rationality of the Médecins Sans Frontières doctor, Hermann Reuter. Rather than rehearse the simple nostrum of refrain or take precautions, Reuter, according to Steinberg, offers a cogent reason for what he considers to be the high-level sexual activity of typical Black youths, by implication the main reason for the pandemic nature of AIDS and HIV in South Africa. They have become deracinated—divorced from their land and their family, and “when one cannot give expression to one’s manhood by becoming a household patriarch or careerist, the whole of manhood becomes endowed in sexual performance. It is made to do too much work; it is a source of anxiety” (80).

Episodic in structure, *Sizwe’s Test* is the kind of story where statistics, heavy background and official “positions” are endemic. So a straightforward beginning-middle-and-end narrative may not be ideal. But despite this, the chronological drive of much literary journalism is perhaps too often absent here. This absence would seem to be connected to the lack of a central protagonist. In book-length literary journalism there is the perennial dilemma of the ego—the “I” issue. Truman Capote faced this problem with *In Cold Blood*. He quickly saw that the detached tone he sought could only be realized if the author was absent. Steinberg’s presence ironically often dilutes some of the emotional highpoints of the narrative.

A more serious issue, from a literary journalism perspective at least, is Steinberg’s use of the interior monologue. No quibble with attempts at communicating complex emotions but invading people’s interior life, their personal dreamscape, if you like, seems a trick too far. Steinberg mentions that he used a tape recorder but it’s one thing to transcribe conversation and quite another to ascribe emotion unsourced. Reuter, for example, “senses my irritation,” “makes an extravagant performance,” and “has dedicated his life to health-care activism, moving from place to place, bury-

ing body and soul in work.” Such examples seem to be so subjective as to bring into question their veracity. This may be a niggle but the risk of interior monologue segueing imperceptibly into “making things up” is very real. A work of fiction of course can accommodate any kind of analysis—it is ego personified—but literary journalism is on dangerous territory when it pursues what Norman Mailer called the “factoid” rather than the verifiable fact.

One last cavil. The Sizwe of the title is not the character’s real name. Should we accept this pseudonym at the heart of a fact-based story? Steinberg is aware of this seeming contradiction but knows he doesn’t have a story without Sizwe. Can we live with a pseudonym, however? If yes, what is our assurance that he exists? We have to trust the author. Should we do so? Who knows? But in the hands of Jonny Steinberg the answer, on the evidence of this book, would appear to be yes.

Steinberg suggests that AIDS ought to be understood as a “metaphor that describes the fate of the men of Sizwe’s generation. Their fate is to fail to procreate as patriarchs do. AIDS represents this failure as a disease” (252). *Sizwe’s Test* provides one of the most coherent and believable accounts of how and why HIV and AIDS became the modern plague of southern Africa. In the process it lays bare many of the myths beloved of the West and at the same time offers valid and cogent explanations for their origins. “Lest we forget” might be this book’s most fitting epitaph.

Teaching Narrative Nonfiction

To Tell the Truth: Practice and Craft in Narrative Nonfiction

by Connie D. Griffin. Longman, 2009. Paperback, 322 pp., \$48.

Reviewed by Patsy Sims, Goucher College, U.S.A.

Twenty-five years ago when I first taught literary journalism, I compiled my own teaching materials after a search for a good textbook or an anthology turned up nothing. And for the next few years, that’s what I continued to use until I discovered Norman Sims’s classic anthology *The Literary Journalists*, which became a staple—and an excellent one—for me and many others who taught literary journalism in those early years. In 1995, Sims (no relation) and Mark Kramer followed with *Literary Journalism: A Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, and good anthologies and collections of narrative nonfiction have been appearing regularly ever since.

Textbooks, however, have not been as numerous—or as good. Jon Franklin’s *Writing for Story*, first published in 1986, continues to be a favorite with writers and teachers alike, as do the various texts by Lee Gutkind and Philip Gerard. Still, there is room, and a need, for more substantial texts, and Connie Griffin has set that as her mission.

In the preface of *To Tell the Truth*, she writes of the need for a “comprehensive” textbook that both addresses the craft of narrative nonfiction and engages in analytical discussions of craft. I insert the quotation marks here because frankly the word gave me pause, after having read any number of disappointing review copies that failed to live up to their own equally ambitious goals. Unlike many of her predecessors, however, Griffin delivers with a first-rate book that takes the reader, in considerable depth, from the generating of ideas, through writing and revision, to ways to avoid plagiarism and lawsuits.

In fact, by the end of the book, it is impressive to look back at how much Griffin has managed to fit into 322 pages: Nine chapters, each with a lengthy discussion of some aspect of narrative nonfiction, essays on process and craft by well-known writers, still more selections of exemplary writing that serve as teaching models, and numerous exercises and practice strategies. The ultimate goal, says Griffin, is to demonstrate to writers that fact and creativity can be skillfully, and artfully, integrated.

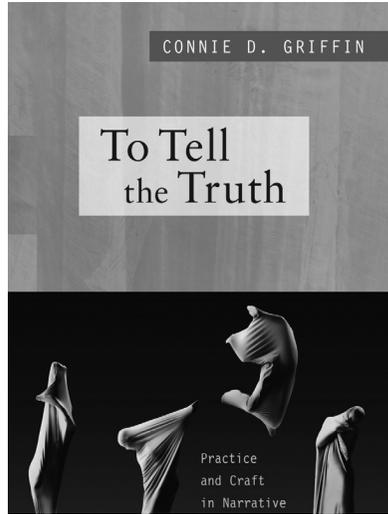
An assistant professor at Commonwealth College (the honors college of the University of Massachusetts Amherst), Griffin has written and taught both journalism and creative writing, and it is the blending of these two approaches to teaching that sets her book apart. Unlike many narrative nonfiction texts, she focuses as much on the creative process as she does on research and reporting, and includes such unexpected topics as the value of keeping a journal, writing workshops, and how to respond to the other members’ work.

Like many others, Griffin sees narrative nonfiction as falling into the categories of memoir, the essay (and its many variations), and literary journalism, though, she says, the lines between those forms are sometimes blurred in ways that are one of the genre’s greatest strengths.

“The memoir, for instance, may incorporate literary elements often associated with the essay, such as meditation and reflection,” she illustrates, “or, the essay in its various guises, may incorporate a strong sense of narrative persona, thus bringing elements often associated with memoir to bear on the essay. Literary journalism and the essay are frequently interchangeable, but there are a few distinctions that tend to tilt the scale in one direction or another.”

Overall, she defines narrative, or creative, nonfiction (she uses the terms interchangeably) as writing that is based on real people, places, and events, and that has a special concern for language. It also tends to be more personal and informal than other forms of nonfiction. Because of its reliance on scene-setting, imagery, and characterization as much as it does expository, analysis, and reflection, she devotes considerable attention to use of tools most often identified with fiction.

Still other areas explored by Griffin are the importance of research to memoir and the essay, the development of a narrative persona, finding theme and meaning in



your writing, and the need to establish a regular writing routine. Although the book tends to focus more on the writing of essays and memoir, there is a great deal here that the literary journalist will find helpful, especially the chapter on the role and uses of scenes and another on developing rounded characters through the use of detail, dialogue, and action.

While Griffin's own analysis is excellent, her bringing together of a rich mix of essays and commentary on craft by a range of writers makes the book especially valuable. There are familiar standbys like Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook" and Phillip Lopate's "Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character," as well as lesser known (at least to me), but no less useful essays, such as Michael Pearson's "Researching Your Own Life" and "Saying Good-Bye to 'Once Upon a Time'" in which Laura Wexler reminds us there is seldom a single version of any one story or event.

The book also includes examples of exemplary narrative that Griffin often uses to discuss elements of craft. Thus, Madeleine Blais's "Serviam" becomes a vehicle for exploring beginnings and endings and the shaping of story, while Alfred Lubrano's "Bricklayer's Boy" serves as an example of a writer's effective use of detail to bring a character to life.

As the book's title would suggest, Griffin does not shy away from the thorny issue of memory, imagination, accuracy, and sticking to the facts. "While most narrative writers would agree that their task is not simply to capture the facts, but to make something of those facts, there is a great deal of disagreement about where to draw the line in 'making something' of the facts," she writes.

In the ensuing discussion, Griffin includes the views of a range of writers, from memoirists who discuss how they deal with their imperfect memories to literary journalists like Philip Gerard, who takes the firm position, "You're stuck with what really happened—you can't make it up."

Griffin sees the hard line as a challenge, but not a roadblock for the writer trying to integrate fact and creativity. "This doesn't stop creative nonfiction writers from being as metaphorical as any poet," she insists, "as adept with dramatic action as any fiction writer, as nimble with dialogue as any playwright."

She ends the discussion with this observation by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, editors of *In Short* and *In Brief Short Takes on the Personal*: "Nonfiction writers often admit that the places where they were tempted to invent can, if they stick with the scrupulously factual, end up yielding the deepest genuine insight and best writing."

The book's final chapter focuses on research, including advice on preparing for interviews, a brief discussion of the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics, the availability of public records, and definitions for such legal terms as libel, slander, and invasion of privacy. An appendix also provides a brief discussion of plagiarism, along with examples of proper documentation and advice on note-taking. There are also an index and biographical sketches of the writers whose work is included in the various chapters.

Journalism as an Aesthetic

Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing

by Alfredo Cramerotti. Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2009. Paperback, 138 pp., \$35.

Reviewed by Isabelle Meuret, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

In this second volume of the series *Büchs'n'Books—Art and Knowledge Production in Context*, Alfredo Cramerotti addresses the crossover of art and journalism in contemporary culture, and how their coalescence questions the essence and ethics of journalism. In our increasingly mediated world, where producing and distributing news have become part of a mass-marketed process, artists offer an alternative approach to reality using documents, photos, interviews and reportage. The author argues that by taking over journalistic tools artists turn the spotlight on topics and events that are silenced in mainstream media. *Aesthetic Journalism* is an invitation to explore how the apprehension of reality and the search for truth might fall within the province of art, rather than traditional journalism.



In this pedagogical book, the author calls for a reevaluation of the potential of journalistic techniques used for artistic purposes and suggests that they help raise relevant questions and open up perspectives. Cramerotti does not present aesthetics and journalism as mutually exclusive. Rather, he emphasizes their commonalities and fruitful interactions. While aesthetics is at the forefront of his work, there emerges a compelling dialogue between both practices. Because contemporary artists increasingly use journalistic tools as forms of cultural expression, it is worth examining the artifacts they produce at a time when traditional journalism is foiled in its attempt at producing truth.

Alfredo Cramerotti's versatility shows in the number of subjects he tackles. His expertise as an artist, theorist, and curator leads him to explore a number of cultural practices including, albeit briefly, literary journalism. One of the great merits of *Aesthetic Journalism* is that it brings together two disciplines that are in constant evolution and the object of all attention. Both fields are overlapping and even blending, blurring the lines between art and information. Hence the subtitle—*How to Inform without Informing*—which points to the author's argument that the process of learning and knowing can follow other routes than those marked out by mainstream media. This seminal book proposes a timely discussion of the nature of art and journalism, at a watershed moment in the development of knowledge production and consumption.

The aestheticization of information is not a new phenomenon. Photojournalists who worked in the United States for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Depression are a case in point, and Cramerotti's tribute to artists like Walker Evans, whose documentation work on sharecroppers in the Dust Bowl and photographs of commuters taken unawares on the New York subway, are evidence thereof. Yet the way news is currently being produced and distributed to large audiences eager for "infotainment" questions these dangerous acquaintances. Technologies have made it possible to transform and renegotiate reality by digitally modifying pictures, editing or even doctoring documents. But what is new is the breakdown of trust in the media. As a result, artists strike back and use investigative techniques to probe rather than truncate reality. The crisis of confidence is turned into a crisis of conscience as the mirror of the world is turned back to the viewers, who are urged to look beyond the surface of forged narratives.

The topicality of *Aesthetic Journalism* is also reinforced by the rich illustrations of works by contemporary artists who appropriately use art as a means to pass on political, cultural or social messages. The examples presented in Chapter 2 illuminate Cramerotti's arguments, namely *Western Deep*, a documentary by British artist Steve McQueen, which makes the audience experience physically the descent into a South African mine. In such documentaries, Cramerotti explains, art becomes "an expansion of (and in some cases an alternative to) mass-media journalism" (32). These examples support Cramerotti's premise that aesthetic journalism is concerned with the production of an effect, the striking of the right cord, rather than the comprehension of facts. Indeed, he insists that "art is not about delivering information; it is about questioning that information" or, to put it differently, "where journalism attempts to give answers, art strives to raise questions" (29-30).

It may be the case that some might find *Aesthetic Journalism* too ambitious, as it purports to delineate what aesthetic journalism is, and yet it leaves the reader with a blurred image of the concept. Indeed, Cramerotti notes that journalism can be aesthetic, provided we define "aesthetics [as] the process in which we open our sensibility to the diversity of the forms of nature (and manmade environment), and convert them into tangible experience." Therefore, it is not "a state of contemplation. It is rather the capacity of an art form to put our sensibility in motion, and convert what we feel about nature and the human race into a concrete (visual, oral, bodily) experience" (21). Yet while art can make us dream for change and hope for political action, we would be mistaken to dehumanize mainstream journalism. Art is not vying with journalism to produce the absolute truth, but it is difficult to resist the conclusion that they are not aiming for the same target. Aesthetics may also be the art of illusion, and that aspect is hardly questioned by the author. More definitions of aesthetics—the philosophy of beauty or that which appeals to our senses—would have enriched the discussion.

The interdisciplinarity of the book is another of its assets, as Cramerotti does not limit himself to visual arts but also addresses film and nonfiction writing. Therefore, any reader with an interest in aesthetics will draw substantial information from *Aesthetic Journalism*. Also, the volume's architecture makes it a good candidate for pedagogical use. It is organized in eight chapters, all of which end with suggestions for further reading. Chapter 1 presents the author's methodology, while most definitions of "aesthetic journalism" are to be found in Chapter 2 ("What is Aesthetic

Journalism”). The author makes clear that while mainstream broadcast and printed news produce a certain type of corporate-led information, “art tends to use investigative methods in order to achieve a certain amount of knowledge about a problem, situation, individual or historical narrative.” This, he says, constitutes “an attempt to construct an alternative to such mainstream apparatuses” (21).

The other chapters develop in a sequence of five Ws and one H. Chapter 3 (“Where Is Aesthetic Journalism?”) widens the scope of art and focuses on the advertising industry. Chapter 4 (“When Did Aesthetic Journalism Develop?”) emphasizes the role played by visual art, theatre, cinema and literature in collecting and distributing important information at certain moments in history, and under some political regimes. The author also highlights the emergence of art as a journalistic form in the 1990s, above all thanks to trailblazing events like the exhibition *Documenta X* in Kassel (1997). Chapter 5 (“How Shall We Read Aesthetic Journalism?”) points to possible readings of aesthetic journalism and offers a more theoretical understanding of the notion, buttressed with references to Foucault, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School. Chapter 6 (“Who Produces Aesthetic Journalism Today? From Which Position?”), and Chapter 7 (“Why Is Aesthetic Journalism Relevant, Now and in Perspective?”), deal respectively with institutionalization and the relativity of the notion of time in both art and journalism. The last chapter lists an extensive bibliography ranging from philosophy to art criticism to sociology.

Aesthetic Journalism, given its structure, organization, and vignettes with definitions and references to major theoreticians, is a comprehensive handbook for students and researchers interested in the rapprochement between these two disciplines. I would not recommend it as a book on literary journalism *per se*, even though the author makes relevant connections with nonfiction writing to clarify his argument. For instance, Ryszard Kapuściński’s work is evoked as a good example of journalism aware of its own limitations and pretense to truth, while David Foster Wallace’s essay “Host” (2005) is cited for its sound criticism of journalism respectability. Cramerotti conflates literary journalism and aesthetic journalism since they share similar concerns, namely with regards to subjectivity and objectivity. So, while the book is not about nonfiction writing, it certainly opens a few avenues worth exploring.

Cramerotti is well aware that journalism is news-making, i.e. the result of a negotiation between several parties (source, journalists, power, public, etc.). But he fails to insist on the enormous pressure journalists are subject to, which gives them neither time nor space to produce quality news. Similarly, I would also relativize the elasticity of time, which is not the privilege of artists. There is a general sense of urgency, due to economical factors and the demands to produce fast news. But not all information is corporate-led and the product of mainstream media. Also, the author reckons that “to bring the investigative tradition back to a societal or political function, implies more than changing the site of reportage from press or TV to the art exhibition.” (29) In the end, what matters is the power of the artists to scrutinize reality and to foreground issues that are eclipsed by mainstream media. Such visibility is the lifeblood of aesthetic journalism. Cramerotti undoubtedly succeeds in drawing our attention to the potential of aesthetic journalism. His cogent study is a source of inspiration and an inexhaustible mine of references on the topic.

The Southern Press: Bound by Geography

The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity

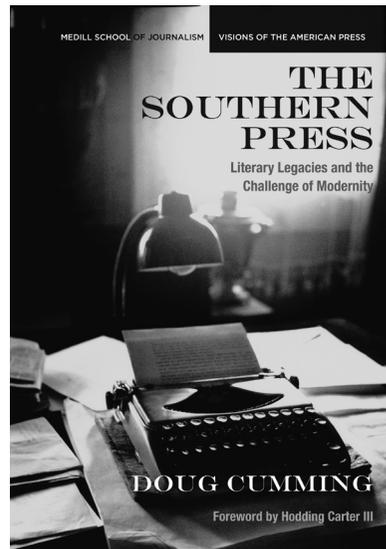
by Doug Cumming. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 2009. Paperback, 317 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by Ginger Carter Miller, Georgia College & State University, U.S.A.

In the forward of *The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity*, Southern journalist Hodding Carter III (son of legendary southern journalist Hodding Carter, II,) wrote, “The South has historically turned out ferociously engaged editors, tenacious reporters, and elegant writers by the wagonload, more than any other region of America.” But those reporters and editors, he adds, never quite got their due while still living and writing in the South. “Many of the South’s finest journalists had to flee ‘north toward home’ to find newspapers and magazines willing to publish their voices. Suffice it to say that at one time or another over the past one hundred years they ran virtually every great paper, magazine, and news organization.”

This is the motivation and history that Doug Cumming, who has long lived in the South, chronicles in a book that clearly places him among the elegant writers of that region. Cumming traces the history of southern journalism since the nineteenth century to today. In the book’s eight chapters, Cumming, once reported for Southern papers including the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Raleigh Times* and the *Raleigh News and Observer*, and southern magazines including *Southpoint*, mixes the historical facts with his own journalistic past that “glimmered with something inside me I had forgotten” (xvi). In an interview, Cumming was quoted as saying, “All of these parts of myself were there: nineteenth-century American history, Southern history, Southern literature, the civil rights movement,” he said. “My heroes growing up were journalists like Ralph McGill and Gene Patterson, both editors of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Then I realized that New Journalism, which is a love of mine, was part of this because some of the seminal figures in New Journalism are Southerners.”

Throughout the book, published by the Northwestern University Press as part of the Medill School of Journalism’s series, *Visions of the American Press*, Cumming portrays the southern journalist as possessing a sort of “manifest destiny” to



be published in the best publications in the country. Cumming calls this “the deepest riddle of a journalistic tradition that braids literary aspiration with the realism of facts” (248).

To discuss the book, then, it’s important to first discuss Cumming’s use of the term “Southern press.” The term is misleading, because Cumming is not talking about specific newspapers and magazines per se, or what most people consider the press, but he is referring to the actual corps of journalists who filled the slots and desks at these institutions in the south. By Cumming’s interpretation, the southern press is a group of people with a specific mindset, something akin to a “southern press corps,” a group of journalists bound by their geographic location and their desire to communicate, in newspapers and magazines, with an audience much larger in scope.

It is important to note that Cumming’s book is not a dictionary or encyclopedic-style examination of the southern press and its editors and reporters; nor is it an all-inclusive compendium of the work of the southern press. But it certainly is a who’s who of the men and woman who wrote from, in, and about the South. The book critically delves into the work of reporters and editors including some personal favorites that include Henry W. Grady, Lafcadio Hearn, Ralph Emerson McGill, Joel Chandler Harris, and H. L. Mencken, noting each journalist’s contribution to the history of the field of journalism as a whole, as well as in the South.

In fact, according to an article from the Washington and Lee University, where Cumming is an associate professor of journalism, the more he explored the history of Southern newspapers and, especially, some of the legendary editors and writers, the more Cumming realized he was working on a “disguised autobiography.” As Cumming put it: “Instead, the daily press was a gateway for aspiring writers who were too poor to live on a legacy. It was a gateway to a world of letters, to being a writer. I think every Southern journalist secretly wanted to write a novel eventually. I think it is truer of Southern journalists than other journalists. I think many Southerners historically got into journalism not because of the All-the-President’s-Men idea that we’re going to change society, but rather to be a writer, to learn writing, to see herself or himself in print.”

Each chapter of this fascinating book deals with a different era of journalism, from before the Civil-War era of the 1860s to after the Civil-Rights era of the 1960s. Cumming begins with a discussion of Poe, his prose, and his own journalistic desires. The chapter titled “The Mencken Club” is a fluid, vivid examination of the “prince of journalists.” Another chapter provides an expansive and extensive discussion of the role of the southern press in the Civil Rights movement.

One chapter of particular interest to those who study literary journalism and its developments is a chapter called “The Southern Roots of New Journalism.” It begins by telling the story of a pimply faced Gay Talese on his way to The University of Alabama—a vision vastly unlike the collective memory of the suave, flamboyant, literary journalist. This background about Talese’s immersion into southern culture as a budding journalist sheds an entirely new light on Talese’s classic work of New Journalism that is part of the literary journalism canon, the *Esquire* magazine article

“Joe Louis: The King as a Middle-Aged Man.” In this chapter, Cumming makes a bold statement about the origins and source of the best of the New Journalism, “an argument overlooked in all the commentary: much of the movement drew on the traditions of the Southern press and was advanced by a disproportionate number of journalists marked by southern culture” (170).

This is not simply a geographic comment; instead, Cumming writes, “The argument here is that certain aesthetic sensibilities and ‘outsider’ attitudes characteristic of southern writers and southern intellectual history were imported, in vivid color, into the movement” (171). Consider the practitioners that Cumming notes: Willie Morris; Marshall Frady; Joseph Mitchell; William A. Emerson (who died in 2009); and George Leonard. This reviewer was especially fascinated with the story of Emerson, whose son is a veteran reporter and feature writer at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. It is yet another example of a reporter who followed a parent into the field of journalism. And of course there’s the “father of New Journalism,” Tom Wolfe, who was born and reared in Virginia and who attended Washington and Lee. Cumming wrote of Wolfe’s “old southern romance of the gentleman writer,” adding “those whose talent brought them into the hot magazines of New York smuggled their perspectives into journalism as if in the false bottom of a suitcase” (200).

The section in the chapter, “Assimilation and its discontents” that dealt with the demise of the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, hit especially close to home to this reviewer, who is a lifelong southerner and a southern journalist by trade. In the section about the Knight-Ridder chain, Cumming discussed *The Columbus* (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer* (newspaper of Julian and Julia Harris) and *The Telegraph* of Macon, (Georgia) two papers chiseled off in the sale of this chain. Both were sold to the McClatchy chain. Cumming wrote that the demise of the chain “reflected trends that were vexing every metropolitan daily. Loyal readers were growing old. Young readers demanded free information online or simply did not pick up the newspaper habits of their parents (202). And while both newspapers still exist, they are shadows of their former journalistic prowess.

The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity is a thoughtful book about history and about the south, and readers who are interested in both will not be disappointed. For those who have never understood what it means to be “southern,” this book points to stubbornness and tenacity that flowed freely into the writing of the journalists who lived there.

Trailing a U.S. Election with Beer in Hand

Down to the Crossroads—On the Trail of the 2008 US Election

by Guy Rundle, Camberwell, Australia: Penguin, 2008, Paperback, 438 pages, \$26.

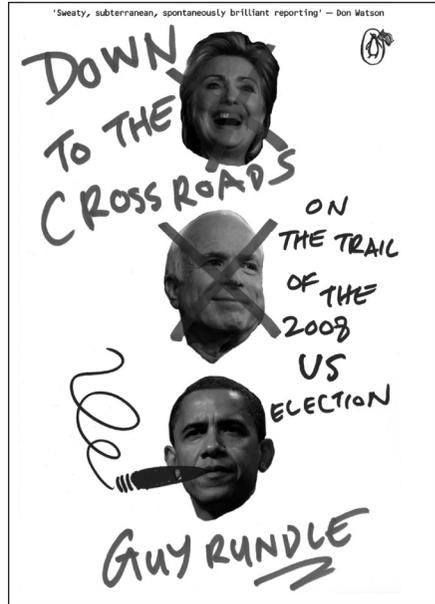
Reviewed by Kayt Davies, Edith Cowan University, Australia

By most accounts, 2008 was an extraordinary year, one that saw the world tilt on its axis. Headlines screamed about “The Death of Capitalism” and a young black U.S. Senator used the words ‘hope’ and ‘change’ to do something no one thought was possible.

What value, now in 2010 and beyond, is a book that is a collection of articles written on the trail of the 2008 U.S. election? After all, we know the result, so why would we want to relive the suspense? Perhaps to remind us of how far we have come since 2007, and as a snapshot of the world, taken through the sensory organs of a Gonzo journalist. No matter how much the history gets rewritten, the journalism of the time retains the authority of being the first draft.

Crikey is an Australian news service. Around 13,000 people pay to receive twenty-five stories a day as an emailed bulletin (others consume content from the website for free). Most Crikey readers are educated and its editorial policy favors balance. In sending Guy Rundle to the U.S. to cover the election then-editor Jon Green gave his readers something they had never had before—blow-by-blow coverage that went beyond the bare facts. It was something much more akin to Hunter S. Thompson’s (1973) *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* than the standard journalistic version of events. Rundle’s articles for Crikey (and a smattering of other publications) were bundled together in the dying days of 2008 and published as *Down to the Crossroads—On the trail of the 2008 US election*. The book was crowned 2009 Book of the Year by Melbourne newspaper *The Age*.

Rundle’s copy reflects its tailoring for Australian audiences whose U.S. geography is in many cases a bit shaky, and who can’t be assumed to understand how the primary system works. The added fruit is that his writing is charming. He’s a journalist seeking and telling the truth, but he sometimes steps away from it just enough to make the oddness of it perfectly clear. His description of the suburban streets of Alexandria, Virginia, is a succinct example of his Australian-tilt plus quirkiness. He wrote: “they’re the sort of places where you can get six kinds of antique chafing iron or a Vietnamese fusion takeaway, but not milk. No capital, not even Canberra, is so differentiated from the daily life of the mass of people it represents.”



As time passes and the book becomes less about news and more about history, the presumption of audience naivety that it was written with may stand it in good stead. As Thompson observed in the preamble to his campaign trail book (in the midst of a complex metaphor about jackrabbits) “when a journalist turns into a politics junkie he will sooner or later start raving and babbling in print about things that only a person who has Been There can possibly understand” (1973, 13). In having to produce copy for readers half a world away Rundle, in the main, resisted the decent into incomprehensible jargonism.

Like Thompson, who was refused White House media accreditation because he was reporting for *Rolling Stone*, Rundle came to the gig of trailing a campaign with curious credentials, resulting in limited media access. According to his Penguin biography, he was a co-founding editor of the progressive socialist publication *Arena Magazine*, and has published with *Arena* for twenty years. He’s been a frequent contributor to Australia’s major newspapers, he wrote a biography of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard and had authored three (now four) hit stage shows for veteran comedian Max Gillies.

Rundle’s campaign book shares much of the rollicking narrative charm of Thompson’s ’72 book, but it isn’t quite so psychedelically brain-breaking. Where Thompson is fuelled by a mad candy cocktail, Rundle seems to run mostly on beer, with occasional mentions of whisky. What they have in common, though, is a good eye for the events on the periphery of the political main stage that work as metaphors for, or portents of the next stages in, the unfolding drama.

Both authors describe the airports, hotel rooms and landscapes they travel through; both step easily from anecdotes to statistics and back; and both move with graceful cool through the many levels of U.S. culture, striking up conversations with young Republicans in new suits, rumpled political operatives and strange men with impressive beards in seedy bars. Both delivering up, through these side views, a commentary on the state of the nation that goes beyond the who, what, when, where, and how and approach an answer to why. It is the flip side of the insider view of the White House that Aaron Sorkin has provided through the TV series *The West Wing*. It is insight into the daily pain and aspiration not of the elected but the electors.

It’s hard to write first person narrative without mentioning yourself, but there is a fine line between using yourself as a fleshy camera and making yourself the story. While Thompson, as the father of Gonzo, can’t be accused of breaking its rules, the genre has moved on since 1972, and in retrospect he seems a little over-indulged in himself (as well as many other things). Rundle, in contrast, shows restraint, except when telling the story requires an outpouring of anger or excruciation, or a demonstration of poignancy. Like Thompson, he sometimes starts a chapter with a random tangent, a wild taxi ride through the back streets or breakfast in a greasy diner, and like Thompson these tangents turn out not to be random at all. The taxi driver is always the story; a snapshot of the electorate the candidates are courting.

Rundle intersperses chapters that delve into the American psyche, with running commentaries of the major speeches. He watches most of them from nearby bars, in order to be able to work barfly reactions into his pieces. He cherry picks the key points and spills out his on-the-spot reactions, including jubilations, cringes and occasional hilarious mishearings. It’s a joyous, tumbling style of writing that had daily Crikey readers flooding the newsroom with praise for Rundle.

Both Thompson and Rundle allow readers into their heads to the extent that

you feel like you are seeing a cinema reel. The upshot is that when they say that they are leaning first towards one candidate and later towards another that you are not so much being persuaded by them, as just being shown the score on their personal political compasses. It is in doing this that both books are fundamentally Gonzo. It is the break with dispassionate impartiality that defines them. Both writers are unashamedly passionate. In his introduction, describing his aims, Rundle wrote: "It was an attempt to record the feel of the campaign and the character of the country, the hopes, bewilderments and sloughs of despond of a correspondent who never made any secret of his loyalties" (xxii). This is not so different from Thompson's aim to "record the reality of an incredibly volatile presidential campaign, while it was happening: from the eye of the hurricane" (1973, 16) followed by his claim (1973, 44) that the phrase "objective journalism" is "a pompous contradiction in terms" so "don't bother to look for it here."

If both are right about their methodologies, and have succeeded in recording the sentiment of their respective campaigns, then the two books together are an amazing time machine. Side-by-side analysis is a sobering before-and-after shot, with the intervention being thirty-six-recent years.

In his early chapters, Thompson argues that the mood that lies, like a winter fog, over the U.S. is fear, but Rundle in his travels sees mostly bewilderment. He proposes it as the reason why Obama's 'pre-political' message of empowerment worked so well. He argues that Obama realized early and deeply that before people cared about which politician they voted for they had to understand that they were entitled to be part of the process. He accused the other campaigns of failing to recognize just how profoundly disenfranchised the people had become, how much the descent into populism had cut them adrift.

How did the U.S., the world champion of democracy get to that point? It could be that the disastrous disengagement that Thompson predicted would follow the Nixon era meandered into the bewilderment that Rundle saw. Perhaps the young voters of 1972, that Thompson held out hope for, were so turned off by the years that followed that they didn't bother telling their children about politics, and forgot anything that they had known about it, leading to widespread cluelessness, not born of anger or apathy but simply from a lack of reliable information, fuelled by populism and lies, about how it all works and who is allowed to get involved.

That said, the journey that Rundle documented was about the awakening of this sleeping giant, town hall by town hall, it was about Obama standing in the rain and saying "let's make history" (407).

While Thompson was denied the option of writing a happy ending, Rundle's challenge was how to put so much emotion into words. His final chapters are beautiful. A few lines of commentary of the acceptance speech make the point:

"He goes into the story of a 106-year-old woman, Anne Nixon Cooper, through all the people who told her we couldn't—yes we can.

"This is the old Obama of the primaries, the prophet, getting the audience calling back: 'Yes we can!'"

"The news crew set up in front of me waiting to do a live cross after the speech are clearing their throats, trying to look professional as they choke up . . . just something in my eye . . ." (420).

From a literary journalism perspective, I wish Thompson, who died in 2005, had been around to write his own account of the 2008 election, but the tradition he

started lives on and Gonzo has a new champion in Guy Rundle. The two men are very different, and while they crossed the same country reporting the same process, the people they met were different. The fact that so many comparisons can be drawn between the two works is a testimony not only to their individual talents but to the stability and validity of the methodology they used and that, from an academic standpoint, is what counts.

The Fear and Loathing of Gonzo

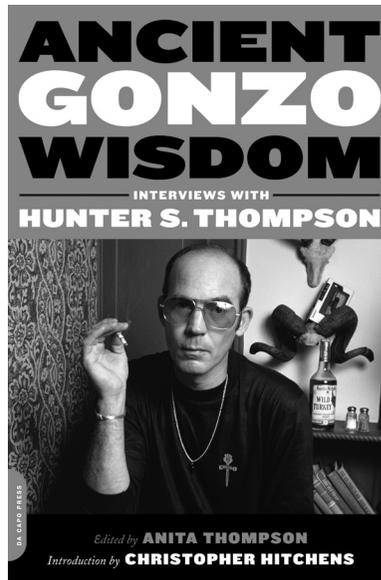
Ancient Gonzo Wisdom: Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson.

Edited by Anita Thompson. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2009. Paperback. 412 pp., 22.95.

Reviewed by Jason Mosser, Georgia Gwinnett College, U.S.A.

The first point to be made about this collection is that it contains some interviews that were published as recently as two years ago in a book called *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008): specifically, interviews with *Playboy*, 1974; *High Times*, 1977; *Spin Magazine*, 1993; *Atlantic Unbound*, 1997; *The Paris Review*, 2000; *Razor Magazine*, 2003; and *Salon.com*, 2003. Nevertheless, I would advise any reader considering buying one or the other to pick up *Gonzo Wisdom* simply because it features twice as much material. The interviews are arranged chronologically from 1967 through 2005, paralleling Thompson's career from the publication of *Hell's Angels* to *Kingdom of Fear*. The interviews offer insight into the mind of one of the most influential New Journalists of the 1960s-1970s, a radical countercultural figure who saw journalism as Orwell saw his own literary work, as "a political act" (289).

Christopher Hitchens introduces the collection, relating that he first met Thompson in 1990, just after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, setting the stage for "the mother of all wars," and indeed, the post-September 11, 2001 interviews are filled with caustic references to both Bush administrations, the loss of civil liberties, and the decline of the American media. Identifying himself as "essentially an anarchist" (60), the man who



identified with the '60s counterculture and declared himself the lifelong scourge of Richard Nixon surprisingly claims that he had "never really been a liberal" (156). In these interviews, Thompson cites the Free Speech Movement of the sixties as having been a more formative influence on his politics than the "Acid Club," the hippies and flower children, even though, by his own admission, the good doctor was a long-time psychedelic devotee. By the 1970s, however, there was no more counterculture, no more revolution, just people working within the system rather than against it; our social "malaise" had settled in. By the 1990s, we hear Thompson complaining about "the corporatization" of everything which produced "No visible enemy" (280); without an enemy, it was hard for radicals like Thompson to get politically and emotionally engaged, and his writing suffered accordingly.

One of the consistent themes of these interviews is the true meaning of the term Gonzo and Gonzo journalism, a subject on which Thompson is characteristically all over the map, in one interview claiming "It never really meant anything to me" (283); in another, admitting that the creation of Gonzo was "just carelessness" (135); in another, stating that Gonzo is "some old Boston word meaning a little bit crazy and off the wall. Sort of a high crazy. Demented craziness" (62); and in yet another, adding, "It's a Portuguese word (actually it's Italian), and it translates almost exactly to what the Hell's Angels would have said was 'off the wall'" (230). Thompson's struggle to articulate the meaning of Gonzo is understandable, however, because Gonzo is all at once a lifestyle, an attitude, a narrative technique, an improvisational style, a mode of perception (in the sense that deliberate derangement of the senses through drugs and alcohol opens the doors to paradoxically clearer perceptions), even a kind of journalistic ethic, as Thompson tells one interviewer: "If I'm going to go into the fantastic, I have to have a form grounding in the truth. Otherwise, everything I write about politics might be taken as a hallucination" (153). As he says repeatedly, however, Gonzo was partly a way for him to differentiate himself from other literary journalists of the same era, those writers anthologized along with Thompson in Tom Wolfe's 1973 collection, *The New Journalism*. On the subject of the New Journalism, Thompson claims that it was not really new (11); instead, he says, it "was really a leap forward from the old wire service kind of journalism. Mark Twain, in that sense, was a New Journalist" (154), acknowledging a point made by historians of literary journalism. On the journalistic convention that requires reporters to write objectively, Thompson argues that most great journalists have not been objective and that he doesn't "quite understand this worship of objectivity in journalism" (235), adding that "You can't be objective about Nixon" (234).

Among the better interviews are the two that P. J. O'Rourke conducted for *Rolling Stone* in 1980 and 1987. The O'Rourke interviews are the only ones where the reader gets the sense that Thompson is speaking to someone whom he actually regarded as a peer, a fellow craftsman. O'Rourke makes some astute and amusing prefatory remarks to the second interview, stating that Thompson's best-known work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, was a "perspicacious, seminal, nonpareil, virtuoso work" (197) and that the book addressed "the great themes of twentieth century literature—anomie, being and nothingness, existential terror" (197). O'Rourke compares some of the great European modernists and existentialists unfavorably to Thompson, compared to whose work "Albert Camus's *The Stranger* becomes a lame jailhouse whine, and all of Sartre is just some French doofus sitting around in a café,

saying, "Wherever you go, there you are." One of the wittiest, most humorous exchanges occurs between Thompson and a reporter from *Vanity Fair* who gives him the "V.F. Proust Questionnaire."

One regrettably missed opportunity arises when one interviewer draws an interesting parallel between Thompson and Norman Mailer, another notable New Journalist; both share an interest in the psychopath. Mailer's interest in the subject can be traced back as early as his essay "The White Negro" and to his later interest in real-life murderers Gary Gilmore and Jack Henry Abbott; Thompson's interest, of course, originated with his research into the Hell's Angels. Unfortunately, Thompson doesn't seem very interested in exploring the subject. The comparison between the two is worth pursuing, however, simply because both writers' literary work demonstrates the same depth of insight as their interviews, and in both cases Mailer proves himself to be more reflective and articulate on a broad range of subjects. Take, for example, women and sexuality. Mailer's preoccupation with the female and the feminine psyche is reflected in any number of works from his early fiction to his book on Marilyn Monroe, and he was, infamously, at the forefront of controversy about the Women's Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, when Thompson is asked in one of these interviews about the absence of female characters in his narratives, he admits, "I don't understand women. That's one of the reasons I don't write about them" (62), and the subject is simply dropped, another missed opportunity, especially given that the characterization of women in Thompson's narratives is often as misogynistic as one finds anywhere in Mailer's work.

Two of the collection's interviews, one by Norma Jean Thompson and the other by Phoebe Legere, could have been omitted at no great loss. Thompson and Legere insist on injecting themselves into the interviews by referring to their personal relationship with Thompson. Legere, for instance, prefaces a question with "You're very good in bed . . ." (245). Moments like these are simply embarrassing, and to his credit, Thompson does his best to deflect this kind of sycophancy. Interviewer Thompson prefaces her interview with the quote "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man," an epigram that Hunter Thompson uses as an epigraph to the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and correctly attributes to Samuel Johnson, but Norma Jean Thompson attributes the quote to Hunter himself, an unfortunate error that the editor of this collection, Thompson's second wife Anita, really should have caught.

Thompson's major New Journalistic works, *Hell's Angels*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, as well as all of the early journalism collected in *The Great Shark Hunt*, had all been published by 1979. One of the reasons for this decline that comes through in these interviews is that, having become a cultural icon and celebrity author, Thompson lost his anonymity. As a relatively unknown *Rolling Stone* reporter in the early '70s, he could remain in the background and elicit frank information from his sources. However, "Once you're part of the club," Thompson says, "you're locked in and they have you. It's when you don't owe them anything that you're dangerous" (144). Success and notoriety had become Thompson's worst enemies. Hitchens alludes to the "strain" imposed on Thompson by people who expected him always to live up to his wild and crazy Gonzo persona (xiv). Thompson tells one interviewer, "I'm so tired of myself . . . having to explain . . ." (303). In the end, fame took its toll on the writer who took his own life on February 20, 2005.

Recovering the ‘Congested’ Districts

J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland. Essays 1898-1908

Edited by Nicholas Grene. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2009. Hardcover, 185 pp., €25.00.

Reviewed by Giulia Bruna (Government of Ireland International Scholarship 2009/2010), University College Dublin, Ireland.

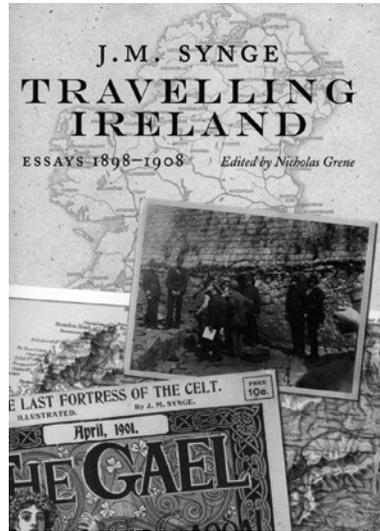
John Millington Synge’s travel journalism about Ireland has always been overlooked in comparison with his theatrical pieces that won him fame over the years. Synge, who was one of the first directors of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin during the Irish political and cultural struggle for independence, worked with W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory and produced groundbreaking plays, including his 1907 masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*. Synge also wrote various travel articles and a book about Ireland, and *J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland*, one hundred years after Synge’s death, re-publishes Synge’s journalistic pieces about Aran, Wicklow, West Kerry and the Congested Districts of Connemara and Mayo, as they appeared in newspapers and magazines of the time.

This new edition compiled by Nicholas Grene—Synge expert and lecturer in Irish drama at Trinity College Dublin—draws critical attention to Synge as a literary journalist, showing how Synge’s essays capture the unfolding present with a lyrical sensibility, and originally interweave it in the wider social, historical and political reality of rural Ireland in the transition from the Nineteenth into the Twentieth century. For instance, in one of the articles about Wicklow describing “The People of the Glens,” Synge talks about how:

When they meet a wanderer on foot, these old people are always glad to stop and talk to him for hours, telling him stories of the Rebellion, or the fallen angels that ride across the hills, or alluding to the three shadowy countries that are never forgotten in Wicklow—America (their El Dorado), the union, and the madhouse. (107)

Before giving vent to the actual stories and first-hand testimonies narrated in direct speech by the locals, in this introductory paragraph Synge manages to convey the sense of the socio-historical present, touching on aspects indissolubly tied with rural Ireland: emigration to America and nineteenth century government measures to contrast poverty and vagrancy, the workhouses and the asylums.

J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland is also an important critical contribution in re-historicizing Synge’s essays. This new appraisal is supplied with an erudite introduction by Grene, aimed at setting the scene for the articles and placing them in the context of travel, tourism and journalism in Edwardian Ireland. The scholarly essay gives a bet-



ter sense of Synge's use of up-to-date technology such as his portable camera, typewriter, bicycle and public transports, and newly implemented railway connections. The critical excursus is accompanied by interesting visual material such as historical maps of the counties visited by Synge and title pages from some of the papers such as *The Gael*, *The Green Sheaf*, *The Shanachie*.

Grene's rigorous historical excavation in *J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland* becomes pivotal in relation to the place that the topographical articles occupy within Synge's canon. Grene delineates some of the reasons why Synge's literary journalism has always been thought about as of minor weight in comparison with his drama. The first who contributed to this misjudgment of his travel articles was the same person who participated in the myth-making of Synge as playwright of genius and artist *par excellence*, W.B. Yeats. Grene recalls how, despite Yeats's opposition to collecting Synge's journalism (especially the articles about the Congested Districts), after Synge's premature death in 1909, the executors finally won the battle. In 1910, the prose volume of the *Collected Works* contained Synge's travel journalism and a juvenile melancholic piece titled *Under Ether*. The following year another edition left out *Under Ether* and published the topographical essays under the new, all-encompassing headline "In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara," trying somehow to assemble for posterity a sequel to the fully-shaped travel book *The Aran Islands*. Subsequent editions which appeared in the early sixties followed the pattern of the 1911 prose volume of the *Collected Works*, integrating the travel pieces with excerpts from Synge's unpublished material from the manuscripts, such as prefaces, juvenile prose writings and miscellaneous articles about literature, all accompanied with scholarly notes which contributed to a broader and more accurate understanding of Synge's aesthetics.

However, partly because of these inevitable anthologizations, in critical analysis the travel articles seem to be read as a collective block, rather than referred to as individual and separate pieces worthy of a more specific investigation. In this sense, *J.M. Synge Travelling Ireland* re-directs the focus towards each single piece, therefore restoring the lost aura of Synge's journalistic artifacts. Turning the pages of the book is quite like turning the pages of the periodicals where the essays were first printed, since Grene manages to include not only the original text, but also the extraneous visual material that accompanied it.

To some extent, Grene's historicization challenges the settled orthodoxy of the Synge canon. For instance, in relation to *The Aran Islands*, Grene's edition reproduces four articles never anthologized before, which became available before the book was finally published after years of struggle with different editors. Their importance is crucial not only because they shed some light on Synge's progress in finalizing the book, but also because they exquisitely reflect the different perspectives of Synge on Aran. Particularly, in "A Story from Inishmaan" (published in the *New Ireland Review* in 1898), Synge's folklorist vision emanates, exemplified by his transcription of a story collected from a storyteller and compared with European variants. An anthropological vision characterizes "The Last Fortress of the Celt" (1901) printed in the Irish-American bilingual periodical *The Gael* together with Synge's photographs of the inhabitants in their traditional homespun clothing. Synge's photographs have been subjected to much posthumous attention and were collected in 1971 by Lilo Stephens—descendant of the Synge family—in a book titled *My Wallet of Photographs*. The article for the *Gael*, therefore, is the only instance where Synge's photographs were published while he was still alive. Synge was an amateur photographer and very

attached to his photos. He refers to them also in *The Aran Islands*, using them from year to year as a tool of interaction with the locals who posed for him and commented on the results of his shots.

This brings us to Synge's investigative reportage *In the Congested Districts* reprinted with the original fifteen plates illustrated by the painter Jack Yeats, who travelled with Synge in 1905 under the commission of the English newspaper *The Manchester Guardian*, to witness the distress in the most impoverished areas of Ireland. Jack Yeats' original line drawings capture in rough traits the people they met on the road who shared their story, and participate in Synge's critique of organizations at work in the districts such as the Congested Districts Board (CDB). As Grene notes, the title of the reportage (*In the Congested Districts*) as it appeared in the *Guardian*, was amalgamated in the successive anthologizations under the headline "In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara." Thus, the new combination becomes an aestheticization and a removal from the historical and political context in which the articles were written. The editorial choice not only leaves out a geographical place (Mayo) where poverty was even more rampant, but also removes the immediate reference to the colonial and constructive Unionist agency CDB, together with all the implications that the name evokes. In a way that is different from other sociological pamphlets and travel narratives dealing with the same areas, Synge's literary journalism for the *Guardian* subvert a colonialist rhetoric, by using many first-hand testimonies in order to create a plurality of voices and a historical perspective. Furthermore, Synge is extremely keen in de-mythologizing stereotypes, such as in this analysis from the article "The Peasant Proprietors":

The car drivers . . . seem to be the cause of many of the misleading views that chance visitors take up about the country and the real temperament of the people. These men spend a great deal of their time driving a host of inspectors and officials connected with the various Government Boards, who, although they often do excellent work, belong for the most part to classes that have a traditional misconception of the country people. It follows naturally enough that the carmen pick up the views of their patron. . . . The car driver is usually the only countryman with whom the official is kept in close permanent contact, so that while the stranger is bewildered, many distinguished authorities have been pleased and instructed by this version of their own convictions. (75-76)

Grene's project of re-historicization emphasizes the need to situate the articles in a specific social, historical and cultural background, opening new threads for researchers in the field of literary journalism. His compelling introduction can be a useful compendium also for scholars working in the realm of history, sociology, anthropology and visual culture, given the richness of visual material that this edition includes. The general reader will be fascinated by the humane experience of Synge as a traveler, sharing the same bedroom of his storytellers, as in the account published on *The Shanachie* in 1907 about his visit to the Blasket Islands in County Kerry. Here, before falling asleep, Synge engages in an intimate conversation with the host of the cottage, who lit his pipe in bed and talked about life at sea, mackerel-fishing, emigration to America, and the younger generations.

MISSION STATEMENT
Literary Journalism Studies

Literary Journalism Studies is an international, interdisciplinary blind-reviewed journal that invites scholarly examinations of literary journalism, a genre also known by different names around the world, such as literary reportage, narrative journalism, the New Journalism, *nuevo periodismo*, reportage literature, literary nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, and creative nonfiction focusing on cultural revelation. Published in English but directed at an international audience, the journal welcomes contributions from different cultural, disciplinary, and critical perspectives. To help establish comparative studies of the genre, the journal is especially interested in examinations of the works of authors and traditions from different national literatures not generally known outside their countries.

There is no single definition of the genre, but the following descriptions help to establish a meeting ground for its critical study:

- “The art and craft of reportage—journalism marked by vivid description, a novelist’s eye to form, and eyewitness reporting that reveals hidden truths about people and events that have shaped the world we know.” —*Granta*
- “Reportage Literature is an engagement with reality with a novelist’s eye but with a journalist’s discipline.” —Pedro Rosa Mendes, Portugal
- “I think one of the first things for literary reportage should be to go into the field and to try to get the other side of the story. —Anne Nivat, France
- “A good reportage must not necessarily be linked with topical or political events which are taking place around us. I think the miracle of things lies not in showing the extraordinary but in showing ordinary things in which the extraordinary is hidden.” —Nirmal Verma, India
- Literary journalism is a “journalism that would read like a novel . . . or short story.” —Tom Wolfe, United States

Such definitions are not comprehensive and may at times conflict, but they should help to establish an understanding of this fundamentally narrative genre, which is located at the intersection of literature and journalism.

At the critical center of the genre lies cultural revelation in narrative form. Implicit to the enterprise are two precepts: (a) that there is an external reality apart from human consciousness, whatever the inherent problems of language and ideology that may exist in comprehending that reality, and (b) that there are consequences in the phenomenal world, whether triggered by human or natural agency, that result in the need to tell journalistically-based narratives empowered by literary technique and aesthetic sensibility. Ultimately, the emphasis is on the aesthetics of experience.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR LITERARY JOURNALISM STUDIES

The International Association for Literary Journalism Studies is a multi-disciplinary learned society whose essential purpose is the encouragement and improvement of scholarly research and education in literary journalism (or literary reportage). For the purposes of scholarly delineation, our definition of literary journalism is “journalism as literature” rather than “journalism about literature.” Moreover, the association is explicitly inclusive and warmly supportive of a wide variety of approaches to the study and teaching of literary journalism throughout the world. The association’s web address is <http://www.ialjs.org>.

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