



**The Genesis of the Hunter Figure: A study of the Dialectic between the Biographical
and the Aesthetic in the Early Writings of Hunter S. Thompson**

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Ph.D. Thesis

Mary Immaculate College

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Submitted to Mary Immaculate College: _____

Declaration of Originality

Declaration: I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and does not contain the work of any other individual. All sources that have been consulted have been identified and acknowledged in the appropriate way.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere respect and appreciation to my supervisor, Dr Eugene O'Brien, for his support of this project from its very inception and for his endless patience and wisdom throughout the journey of completing this work.

I would also like to thank Dr John McDonagh, Dr Kathryn Laing and Ms Florence O'Connor, for all that I learned from them during my undergraduate at Mary Immaculate College and also for their sound advice and guidance during my time working alongside them as a tutor in the English Department.

I would also like to thank Professor William McKeen for agreeing to serve as external supervisor for this project, his work has been a great source of inspiration to me throughout the process. I would like to thank Dr Stephen Thornton, Dr David Blake and Dr Chris Lawn for their encouragement and support of my research. Special thanks to Dr Matteo Cullen and Dr John Harnett for the confidence they continually expressed in my work and the much needed banter that made the long days and late nights writing that much more bearable.

I must also extend my sincere thanks to Professor Daryl Palmer at Regis University in Denver, who first encouraged me to write about Hunter S. Thompson.

I am also indebted to Dr Patrick Condon, Mr Peter Crisp and Mr Patrick Madden who saved the day on more than one occasion and without whom this project would not have been possible.

I would like to extend my thanks to my fellow Gonzo enthusiasts for their support, exchange of ideas, advice and friendship, without which this project would have been very much the lesser - Marty Flynn, Dr Charles Bladen, Margaret Ann Harrell, David Wills, Professor Peter Richardson, Ron Whitehead, Anita Thompson, Peter Bejmuk, Michael Hendrick, Noel Dávila, DJ Watkins, John Bundy, Brian Kevin, Nick Storm, Peter W. Knox, Wayne Ewing and the late Warren Hinckle.

Special thanks to Robert Rasmussen, Nigel Kenny, Larry Rooney, Bernard English, Ger Reidy and Tiernan Reddan whose friendship and humour were very much appreciated over the years.

My thanks also to the Regis University and Hilltop crew for indulging my early Gonzo adventure – Joe Dimas, Francis McCrory and Matthew Protz.

Very special thanks also to Karen and Tony Dimas for their unbelievable generosity and friendship during my time studying in America.

I would like to thank my parents, Jacquie and Tony, and my brother Ronan, for their endless support and patience throughout the course of this project, their many sacrifices made all the difference and I owe them an immeasurable debt of gratitude.

Finally, I would like to thank Niaz, whose patience, love and support got me over the final hurdle. Nobody else could have done it.

Dedication

For my parents – Jacquie and Tony

Abstract

Hunter S. Thompson revolutionised American journalism in the 1970's with the publication of 'The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved', in *Scanlan's Monthly*, and 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas', in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Writing in a voice that was *sui generis*, his heavily subjective prose became known as Gonzo Journalism. For the next four decades he chronicled what he called the 'Death of the American Dream', whilst simultaneously building his own legend to mythic proportions. His fictive persona, the Hunter Figure, is central to his entire *oeuvre*, but to date, the body of critical analysis has largely diminished the role of his persona.

This thesis, however, aims to address this critical imbalance by focusing on the origins of the Hunter Figure *persona* and the ensuing dialectic between the biographical and the aesthetic in the early writings of Hunter S. Thompson. Few other writers in contemporary American Literature have fused their own life and work to such an extent that the lines of differentiation between: author and character; fact and fiction; public image and private self, have become indistinguishable. Unravelling this complex web of interactions is therefore an essential task in order to fully appreciate and understand the primary motivations behind the creation of the Hunter Figure *persona* and in turn how this *persona* became the primary driver of the success of Gonzo Journalism.

Through a chronological examination of Thompson's career pre-dating *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), this thesis credits the *persona* for not only directly leading to the creation of Gonzo Journalism, but also for helping to establish Thompson as both a

leading SuperFictionist in contemporary American Literature and a modern-day icon of American Outlaw mythology.

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Epigraph

From now on, when I appear somewhere with a pencil in my hand and a gleam in my eye, people will quiver in their shoes and sweat freely. This is the finest thing that could have happened. I now have thousands of readers, and the official sanction of the Base Commander. Move over Winchell . . . HST has emerged from obscurity to jab at the world for awhile. Jesus, what fun! (Thompson 1997, p. 21)

Introduction

‘To live outside the law, you must be honest.’

Bob Dylan, ‘Absolutely Sweet Marie,’ 1966

Early spring 1971, and the first rays of the rising sun creep into a room at the Ramada Inn just outside Pasadena California, where one Hunter S. Thompson is holed up, crouched over his IBM Selectric, hands flashing back and forth over the keys, as though directing a kind of demented orchestra. The words flow faster and faster, a chaotic hell broth of paranoia and insanity that would culminate in one of the most original, hilarious and celebrated statements on the sixties drug culture and the American Dream – *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson’s dissection of the dark side of the American Dream and the death of the idealistic flower-power era would catapult him to rock star status overnight, and cement his legacy as the enfant terrible of the literary world. Through the pages of Rolling Stone magazine, he unleashed upon an unsuspecting American public what is undoubtedly his greatest artistic creation, not Gonzo Journalism as many would claim, but rather his compelling and brilliantly subversive literary persona – the Hunter Figure – as best exemplified through the character of Raoul Duke.

Introduction

What followed for Thompson was an almost Jekyll and Hyde relationship with his literary alter ego, a continuous symbiotic state of co-existence with the monstrous and unruly Duke, for good or ill. Such was the enduring power of the character, heightened by artist Ralph Steadman's darkly captivating illustrations, that the public perception of Thompson became truly distorted, unable to distinguish between the serious author and the myth of the drug crazed Gonzo Journalist. Of course, Thompson deliberately contributed to this confusion, blurring the boundary between author and character to such an extent that the ensuing confusion was inevitable. Such was his method actor-like approach to crafting the *persona*, spanning almost his entire literary *oeuvre*, that one can be forgiven for being unable to identify the thin line of differentiation between his public image and private self.

In many ways, it is this aspect of the Hunter Figure *persona* that has come to define Thompson's career – with a distinct marker separating the period prior to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, from that which subsequently followed, wherein the myth superseded the man. Of course, Thompson was acutely aware of the dilemma that the success of the Hunter Figure *persona* presented for him in terms of continuing his Gonzo Journalism technique following the success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and its immediate follow-up, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. As his output as a writer slowed, his critics accused him of becoming enslaved by the Duke *persona*, not to mention being creatively burnt out. Thompson himself broached the issue in the author's note of *The Great Shark Hunt*, in which he confessed that the anthology marked a milestone in his career:

I feel like I might as well be sitting here carving the words to my own tombstone...and when I finish, the only fitting exit will be right straight off this fucking terrace and into the fountain, 28 stories below and at least 200 yards out in the air and across Fifth Avenue.

Nobody could follow that act. Not even me...H.S.T. #1, R.I.P. 12/23/77. (Thompson 2003b, p. 17)

Thompson's frustration as a writer was also evident during this same period in the hour-long BBC documentary *Fear and Loathing in Gonzovision*, as part of which he returned to Las Vegas, accompanied by Ralph Steadman. Though Thompson wilfully participated in the film, he was not entirely comfortable with the concept, aware that there was an underlying presumption that he was somehow going to deliver a sequel to the events of his classic work, once more running amok in a drug-crazed frenzy on the Las Vegas strip, only this time in front of a film crew. Yet again, the misconception surrounding his literary *persona* had come to dominate proceedings, an issue that Thompson attempted to clarify somewhat when asked as to whether there was any pressure on him to live up to the Hunter Figure *persona* he had created:

Well there certainly has, I mean you have been putting it on me all week...I'm not sure at all what you think you are shooting...I have no idea whether you think you are making a film about Duke or Thompson. That's a serious point, I'm never sure which one people expect me to be and very often they conflict, most often as a matter of fact with people I don't know, I'm expected to be Duke more than Thompson...Most people are surprised that I walk on two legs and the idea that I would have a wife or a child or, I think I said this, even a mother, seems to surprise...I am living a normal life, I own a ranch in Colorado and I have a wife and a child and peacocks and Doberman's...Meanwhile, right alongside me, this myth is growing and mushrooming and getting more and more warped. When I get invited to speak at say, universities, I'm not sure if they are inviting Duke or Thompson, I'm not sure who to be...I've been using Duke for 10 years, maybe more, I began to use him originally as a vehicle for quotations that nobody else would say, that was me really talking, those were my quotes...I'm really in the way as a person, the myth has taken over I find myself, you know, like an appendage, I'm no longer necessary, I'm in the way. It would be much better if I died, then people could take the myth and make films. I have no

choice, I have to solve this problem, so I suppose that my plans are to figure out some new identity, you know, I have to kill off one life and start another one. (Finch 1978)

That Thompson is still largely misunderstood as a writer is unsurprising though, as there is a long-standing pattern of ignoring the thought process behind his greatest work. Predominantly, the trajectory of critical analysis has focused on the cult of personality surrounding Thompson, and that of his legendary drug consumption, coupled with the subsequent negative effect of these influences on his writing. Rarely does it pause to reflect on just how and why Thompson came to that point in the first place. There is a wealth of material that pinpoints ‘The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved’ as marking the birth of Gonzo Journalism, but there is a dearth of analysis in comparison on the seeds that were planted along the way. The same can be said for the genesis of the Hunter Figure, with little discussion of the process through which Thompson crafted his literary *persona*, beginning with his earliest writings and being carefully honed until the appearance of its most famous incarnation as Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Yet, it is an essential task and one that does not lead to an undermining of Thompson as a writer, rather it unfolds new understanding as to the multi-faceted dimension to his unique literary form. Ultimately, through investigating the narrative genealogy of the Hunter Figure, new layers of meaning can be discovered behind every facet of his writing and thus extend the discourse far beyond the current narrow parameters.

The Focus and Method of the Present Study

The title of this study, *The Genesis of the Hunter Figure: A Study of the Dialectic between the Biographical and the Aesthetic in the Early Writings of Hunter S. Thompson*, reflects the need to address the *lacunae* in terms of the critical studies on Thompson to date,

particularly in an academic sense. Thompson, by any measure, was an unconventional writer, who has been described by Kurt Vonnegut as ‘the most creatively crazy and vulnerable of the New Journalists . . . I do not know him, except from his books, which are brilliant and honourable and valuable’ (Vonnegut 2014, p. 231). Of Thompson’s brand of New Journalism, he writes: ‘and what I think about it now is that it is the literary equivalent of Cubism: All rules are broken; we are shown pictures such as no mature, well-trained artist ever painted before, and in the crazy new pictures we somehow see luminous new aspects of beloved old truths’ (Vonnegut 2014, p. 232). As a writer of such inventive creativity, with a maverick disregard for propriety, literary and otherwise, Thompson presents a somewhat unique challenge in relation to the standard academic critical approaches of study. The hybridity of Thompson’s experimental literary form, giving rise to a whole unique sub-genre of New Journalism (that of Gonzo Journalism), is further complicated by the degree to which Thompson invested his own biography with that of his literary *persona*. Indeed, Thompson developed this *persona*, and his Gonzo style, beyond the confines of his writing into an entire philosophical approach to life itself. From his earliest literary endeavours, Thompson displayed a propensity for writing about his own life, as a coping mechanism to correct the errors made by, and against him, real or imagined. Be it through literary journalism or fiction, Thompson made his own life and self the focus of his work, crafting a *persona* on the page that in turn shaped the author behind it in a convoluted reflexive exchange between author and character that blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction to such a degree that the lines of differentiation melted away in a sea of ambiguity.

Introduction

Therefore, Thompson's work may not be best served by standard methods of academic analysis. Text-based methodology, such as New Criticism, would diminish the historical and biographical influences that play an enormous role both directly and indirectly on Thompson's writing, where the biographical has been incorporated as a central proponent of his writing throughout his career. Other biographical factors, such as his imprisonment in Louisville, left psychological scars that influenced Thompson throughout his career. However, author-based methodologies that incorporate the biographical and the psychological aspects of his life are not enough when it comes to Thompson either, as the genesis of both his literary *persona* and Gonzo Journalism coincided with the tumultuous Sixties era, a time of political, social and sexual rebellion whose legacy continues to echo today. As a writer, Thompson was at the forefront of the counterculture, not just as an observer but as an active participant. His thematic stalking of the American Dream imbues all of his writing with a strong political, social and cultural focus, which is also reflected in his choice of subject matter, be it the sociological phenomena of the Hell's Angels, or the 1972 Presidential election. Thompson's work can therefore not be analysed in a vacuum; the historical context is also a crucial aspect of understanding the factors behind the development of both his literary *persona* and his Gonzo Journalism. Indeed, the literary context alone reflects the very essence of the sociological and political changes that were taking place in America. Were it not for the ground-breaking radical publications such as *Scanlan's Monthly* and *Rolling Stone*, which were created in response to the countercultural forces gripping America, it is unlikely that Thompson would have found the creative freedom that facilitated his ground-breaking literary achievements. Thus, it is necessary to address Thompson's work through a variety

of analytical approaches that reflect the complex interrelationship between the societal and historical contexts with the biographical and psychological forces that are simultaneously at play.

As this study focuses primarily on the period pre-dating *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), the primary works of Thompson examined are predominantly assorted essays and articles that were largely published in a variety of newspapers and magazines. Stand-out works, in terms of Thompson's career, that are examined include *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1966), and 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved' (1970). Given that Thompson's correspondence played a crucial role in the development of his writing, two volumes of his letters are analysed throughout, in order to provide insight and context to both his evolving style and his fostering of the Hunter Figure as a literary *persona*. Another important contextual resource is that of Thompson's personal recordings, published as *The Gonzo Tapes: The Life and Work of Dr Hunter S. Thompson* (2008). Due to the primacy of biography to Thompson's creative efforts, several of the biographies published to date on Thompson also serve as important aids to the current study. Finally, as The Hunter Figure was carefully honed through the intricate interplay between the biographical and the aesthetic, a chronological approach to Thompson's life and work is necessitated, with the thesis further subdivided into the distinct evolving stages of that *persona* as follows:

Chapter 1: Billy the Kid of Louisville, is a discussion of Thompson's formative years, starting with his childhood in Louisville, Kentucky; his early literary influences; and the growing distrust of, and resentment towards, authority that saw him labelled as a juvenile delinquent. The premature death of his father, and Thompson's subsequent jailing

before his high school graduation, are examined as significant emotional watersheds that greatly impacted upon Thompson's psyche, and subsequently informed both his attraction to literature, and his need to create a literary *persona* as means through which to address his experiences past and present. The chapter also examines the impact of his military service, and traces how his time in the military paved the way for his entry into the world of journalism. Finally, the chapter looks at Thompson's earliest foray into writing and journalism, and his first literary imagining of the Hunter Figure in *Prince Jellyfish*.

Chapter 2: The Outlaw of Big Sur, is a discussion of Thompson's continued efforts to forge a career as a writer, as he moves restlessly back and forth between pursuing journalism and attempting to fulfil his innate desire to write the next Great American Novel. Beset by rejection on all fronts, he nevertheless doggedly sticks to his craft, and this period simultaneously marks the beginning of Thompson's itinerant lifestyle as he moves between New York, Puerto Rico and California in pursuit of his goals. Throughout this period, his most productive work takes shape in the form of his correspondence which becomes the testing ground for his experiments with both style and form, and in which, the earliest emergence of a Gonzo and individual aesthetic begins to emerge. It is argued that in the enclave of Henry Miller's Big Sur, Thompson begins to formulate a pattern of utilising his *persona* to create an individual aesthetic and the money gained from that writing in turn is used to further bolster the Hunter Figure as Outlaw *persona*.

Chapter 3: Our Man in South America – The Outlaw in Exile, examines Thompson's self-imposed exile in South America as he leaves behind his homeland in search of the last frontier. He saw this as a final chance to put his struggles as a writer behind him, and to make the breakthrough that he so desperately desired. Dogged by

rejection of his first novel, he once more turns to journalism, if only as a means to support his travels across the continent. In South America however, his experiences fundamentally change his perceptions of America, and mark the emergence of not only the Hunter Figure's political voice, but also his drift from objective reporting to that of the subjective tone of his later Gonzo journalism. Coupled with his experimentation with drugs in this period, and culminating in his first use in print of his Fear and Loathing catchphrase, Thompson is verging on the brink of realising his revolutionary literary vision as America simultaneously descends into the equally revolutionary Sixties decade following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and with the spectre of Richard Nixon looming on the political horizon.

Chapter 4: Enfant Terrible of the Outlaw Press, situates the publication of Thompson's first book *Hell's Angels* against the political and cultural *Zeitgeist* of the period, from the ever-deteriorating war in Vietnam to the explosion of tensions on American soil in the form of race relations, student protests and the anti-war movement. Finding himself at the epicentre of the counterculture movement in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury neighbourhood, Thompson's writing on the Hell's Angels also places him, in a literary sense, at the forefront of the New Journalism movement. Surrounding himself with contemporaries such as Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg and the Merry Pranksters, this period sees Thompson delve ever deeper into the exploding psychedelic drug culture that centred on the use of LSD and marijuana. In his reporting on the Hell's Angels, he relishes his role as their hero translator, and soaks up aspects of their outlaw image and incorporates it into the very DNA of the Hunter Figure. As his time with the group comes to a close in explosive fashion, Thompson utilises the opportunity to break with the constraints of objective

journalism and transition to a more heavily subjective style, wherein the Hunter Figure is to the forefront of the narrative. In doing so, coupled with his overnight infamy as a result of the success of *Hell's Angels*, Thompson becomes captivated by the image of the Hunter Figure as Outlaw, and on the cusp of his Gonzo Journalism breakthrough, the mythologizing of his own literary *persona* becomes paramount to all of his endeavours, literary and otherwise.

Chapter 5: Dr Hunter S. Thompson – Gonzo Journalist, deals with Thompson's Gonzo Journalism breakthrough with publication of 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', and Thompson's campaign for election as Sheriff of Aspen, Colorado. As he distances himself from the New Journalism movement, his Hunter Figure *persona* transcends the literary sphere, with Thompson's art and life converging to the point that Gonzo describes not just his writing, but his life and actions. Here the postmodern developments in his writing situates Thompson more as a SuperFictionist in the vein of Kurt Vonnegut, as he incorporates the autobiographical with fiction, fantasy and journalism in the full rendering of his Gonzo Journalism as a distinct subset of the New Journalism movement. Situated against the backdrop of the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and the disastrous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the chapter also explores the context and connection between the rise of Richard Nixon and Thompson's debut of the Hunter Figure's most celebrated incarnation, namely that of Raoul Duke, Thompson's avatar in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Finally, the chapter deals with the manner in which Thompson blends fact and fiction, as well as public and private to such an extent in his Hunter Figure development, that the myth overtakes the man, becoming the central driving force around which Gonzo Journalism operates.

The *Conclusion* discusses Thompson's literary impact as the Godfather of Gonzo Journalism, the enduring legacy of the Hunter Figure myth and the importance of recognising the pivotal role the Hunter Figure plays in relation to the effectiveness of Gonzo Journalism as a whole.

Review of Literature

Hunter S. Thompson occupies a somewhat unusual space in 20th Century American literature, in that his literary achievements have not resulted in the level of academic study of his work that one would expect, certainly not anywhere near the level afforded to his contemporaries in the New Journalism movement, or to those credited with producing genre-defining work. Thompson's success and the nature of his celebrity not only impacted negatively upon his own productivity, certainly as a practitioner of Gonzo Journalism, but has also spawned a somewhat scornful appraisal of him as an object of serious study within academia. Even in the latter years of Thompson's career, as attempts were made to rehabilitate his standing as a serious writer, academia remained somewhat unmoved. Since Thompson's death in 2005, renewed efforts have been made to reappraise his contribution to 20th Century American literature and journalism, but the process remains somewhat problematic. The majority of the focus on Thompson's rehabilitation has been on that of his creation of Gonzo Journalism, yet Thompson's literary alter ego retains much of its *persona non grata* status. As Bill Reynolds wrote, in *Literary Journalism Studies*:

This excessive 'Gonzo' *persona*, which served him spectacularly well in the early 1970s, eventually overwhelmed his content and exiled him from the journalistic main stage to a

kind of sideshow of recidivist buffoonery. There he remained for a quarter of a century until his self-inflicted demise in 2005. (Reynolds in McKeen 2012, p. 51)

This view within academia of Thompson's literary *persona* as being problematic to serious appraisals of his work is one that fundamentally needs to be reassessed if we are to truly understand the value inherent in his entire literary *oeuvre*.

In acknowledging the problematic relationship between academia and Thompson, one must also be fair and accept that much of the source of this difficult relationship lies within Thompson's own contradictory relationship with his own success and celebrity. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, there exists an enormous interest in Thompson's work, and although the current academic body of scholarship is extremely narrow, it is an ever-growing and widening research area. Much of the existing focus has, unsurprisingly, come in the form of several biographies and documentaries of varying insight and quality, which have flourished in number since Thompson's death, and which are reflective of the massive wider public interest in Thompson as a counterculture icon. Though Thompson has been the subject of many profiles since his breakthrough with *Hell's Angels*, these have largely been interview-based for publications such as *Playboy*, *High Times* and *Rolling Stone*.

The nineties however, mark a turning point in terms of the focus on Thompson the writer and a more serious attempt at some semblance of analysis of the man behind the myth. Even so, much of the generated content inevitably focuses on Thompson's hijinks and high-profile entanglements with the authorities. The biographies begin with Paul Perry's *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson* (1992); E. Jean Carroll's *Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (1993); and Peter O. Whitmer's *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S.*

Thompson (1993). Perry's book is particularly insightful in relation to the herculean task he faced as former editor of *Running* magazine in getting Thompson to report on the Honolulu marathon in 1980, in what would become Thompson's return from the literary wilderness in the form of *The Curse of Lono*. Carroll's biography is perhaps most notable, for serving as an example of the danger of falling into the trap of trying to write like Hunter S. Thompson. What is otherwise an oral biography of assorted quotes from Thompson's family, friends and cohorts, is interspersed with Carroll's own alter ego, Laetitia Snap, who recounts her own experiences of being in the company of Thompson. The result is a disjointed half-book of quotes and indeed, the Laetitia Snap chapters are perhaps best treated as a work of fiction. Whitmer's biography is the most in-depth and well researched of the three, with a serious attempt at understanding Thompson's early life and influences, but as in the case of the previous efforts, it is hampered by Thompson's refusal to cooperate, and in Whitmer's case, by going so far as to serve him with a permanent injunction against contacting his mother, Virginia Thompson.

With the 25th Anniversary of the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1996 however, Thompson was feted once again, and ironically his greatest cheerleader emerged from Hollywood in the form of actor Johnny Depp, a fellow Kentuckian, who played a key role in the revival of Thompson as a literary force, and as an icon of the counterculture. Depp, in conjunction with historian Douglas Brinkley, engaged in a two-pronged approach to the reappraisal of Thompson's work. Brinkley embarked on the mammoth task of editing Thompson's correspondence, to produce a three-volume set of letters: *The Proud Highway: The Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman 1955-1967* (1997); *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist 1968-*

1976 (2000); and the forthcoming *The Mutineer: Rants, Ravings and Missives from the Mountaintop 1977-2005* (in press). Brinkley also interviewed Thompson for *The Paris Review* (Issue 156, Fall 2000), with Ralph Steadman contributing a special painting of Thompson as the Dalai Lama, entitled Dalai S. Thompson, for the cover. The critical response to Thompson's letters collections in particular, proved to be a remarkable turnaround in terms of appraising his contribution to literary journalism, with the *Observer* stating that 'the letters reveal Thompson as an American Romantic, as ingenuous in his aspirations as Gatsby...Brilliant, he remains America's unavailing conscience, snapping like a muzzled Doberman'. *The Irish Times* was equally effuse in their verdict:

There's no mistaking the style from this mass of never-think-twice prose; great spewing, fountainous escape valves of violent vocabulary and arrogant bourbon-heated mind-flares...The letters deflate the sensationalised biographies, providing a warts-and-all picture of a hard-drinking, restless, reactive writer. (Thompson 1998, inside front cover)

However, it is the judgement put forth by the *Guardian* that comes closest to encapsulating Thompson's career trajectory:

Vivid, hyperactive, combative, ferociously intelligent and iconoclastic...In this book, unusually, we see Thompson the hard-working, uncompromisingly ambitious lover of literature and all-round serious person. We see diverse aspects of a man who is habitually obscured, imprisoned and subsumed by the raging, drug-guzzling, psychotic icon of excess he himself created; the monstrous Dr Gonzo. (Thompson 1998, inside front cover)

In a way, Thompson's obsessive compulsion to keep a copy of every letter he wrote served as an insurance policy against his own relentless mythmaking; as the author became increasingly obscured behind the *persona*, and as fiction spilled over into reality, Thompson recorded his own author-process diligently, creating an accurate record of the serious author behind the legend.

It was perhaps inevitable that Thompson's work would eventually attract the interest of Hollywood, and in this regard Johnny Depp also played a pivotal role in turning two of Thompson's works into cinematic films, first starring as Raoul Duke in Terry Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), and then as Paul Kemp in Bruce Robinson's *The Rum Diary* (2011). Thompson had previously been depicted onscreen by Bill Murray in Art Linson's *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1980). It was also Depp however, who proved instrumental in the publication of *The Rum Diary* (1998), Thompson's long-lost novel that had remained unpublished for almost forty years. However, of the above projects, it is arguably Depp's portrayal of Raoul Duke that proved to be the most influential factor in the revival of interest in Thompson. Although not a notable success at the box office, the film has become a cult classic since its theatrical release, with Depp's remarkable performance helping to endear the Hunter Figure *persona* to a whole new generation of international audiences. A notable favourite on college campuses, the movie adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* created a whole new type of champion for Thompson, those who proclaimed their love for his work, yet who had never read a word of it. Once more, the *persona* loomed large over Thompson the writer. Yet, this popular interest coincided with Thompson's literary credentials receiving critical validation and indeed, re-evaluation, with *Hell's Angels*, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, both published as part of the Modern Library series, with Thompson now sitting between Tolstoy and Thackeray.

Thompson's death, in 2005, once more provided the opportunity for appraising and evaluating his achievements, reigniting the debate as to his contribution to the pantheon of American literature and journalism. Tom Wolfe, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*,

proclaimed Thompson to be ‘the greatest comic writer of the 20th Century’ (Wolfe 2005). P. J. O’Rourke, in response to Wolfe, stated: ‘Well I don’t know. Define “comic.” I think Wolfe could’ve made a better case, at least in bits and pieces, that Hunter was the best *writer* of the late 20th century. That doesn’t mean he wrote the best *work*. It’s not always the best writer who writes the best work’ (Rourke in Gabel 2005, p. 49). Predictably however, the general consensus settled along the old lines of acknowledging his creation of Gonzo Journalism, and highlighting how his larger than life *persona* became an overwhelming albatross that ultimately overshadowed his literary talents. Though there is certainly a truth to the problems that the Hunter Figure *persona* presented for Thompson, there is a danger that in focusing on the burden that the *persona* became in conjunction with his declining output in later years.

It is all too easy to make the mistake of dismissing or diminishing the overall literary importance of the Hunter Figure and thus creating a blind spot in terms of attempting to understand the entire scale of Thompson’s literary achievement. However, there also emerged those whose critical evaluation of Thompson deviated from the established mode of understanding, placing the Hunter Figure to the forefront in evaluating his merits as a writer, and rightfully recognising it not just as a great artistic statement, but also as the pivotal core of his entire creative *oeuvre*. His passing initiated a flurry of publications and documentaries devoted to Thompson’s life and work, amongst the first of which were special tribute issues of *Rolling Stone* and *Stop Smiling* magazine. These were notable for their efforts to highlight Thompson’s death as a serious loss to American literature, but also in terms of how they provided a platform for this emerging recognition of the Hunter Figure *persona* as being on the same level of literary standing as his creation

of Gonzo Journalism. Mikal Gilmore, writing in *Rolling Stone*, stated that ‘probably no other twentieth-century author seemed so inseparable from his own stories as Hunter S. Thompson’ (Gilmore in Wenner 2005, p. 44). William Kennedy, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Ironweed*, revealed that Thompson had once told him that his aim as a writer was to create new forms, with Kennedy hitting the crux of the relationship between Thompson’s life and art in stating:

And that’s what he did. Not only forms of writing, but forms of living – and the two fed each other. The more he behaved in a radical way, the more radical his writing could be, and the more he had to write about. Nobody could imitate Hunter, because nobody had his personality or stamina. It was a spectacular roundelay. (Kennedy in Wenner 2005, p. 52)

In an interview with *Stop Smiling* magazine, Douglas Brinkley also pinpointed the Hunter Figure as the pivotal core of Thompson’s creative genius: ‘Hunter’s great art isn’t a book; it’s the collective work, and the fact that he created this one *persona* — the Hunter Figure — which is one of the great artistic creations of the 20th century’ (Brinkley in Gabel 2005, p. 36). In the liner notes to the soundtrack of the 2008 documentary *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr Hunter S. Thompson*, for which Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp were Grammy nominees, they elaborated further on Thompson’s *persona*: ‘Hunter had become the Patron Saint of Righteous Rage for the voiceless outcast. Like John Wesley Hardin or Billy the Kid, he took on the Bad Boy *persona* of the average guy’s avenger’ (Brinkley and Depp 2008, p. 36).

Interestingly, it is in the area of documentary film-making that the Hunter Figure *persona* had perhaps received the greatest exposure over the years; the outlaw myth, coupled with Thompson’s infectious charisma, made for a compelling subject matter, recognised from the Britain all the way to Hollywood. The first notable production was

courtesy of Thames TV, who covered Thompson's infamous Campaign for Sheriff of Aspen for British television, first airing on November 12th, 1970. With his shaved head and an American flag draped around his neck, Thompson is depicted as a pied piper figurehead for the hippie movement in Aspen; he is seen as a dangerous drug advocate who intended to wreak havoc upon the small town if elected. In this regard, several key aspects of the Hunter Figure *persona* are displayed: the hoodlum outlaw confronting a staid authority figure, and openly embracing the drug culture as a rebellion against the existing system. His closing comments, which suggested that his failed election was a sign that the American Dream was in terminal decline, locate and enunciate the main underlying thematic concern of the Hunter Figure, namely 'The Death of the American Dream'.

Fear and Loathing in Gonzovision (1978), also known as *Fear and Loathing on the Road to Hollywood*, is a fifty-minute documentary film produced by BBC Omnibus, and directed by Nigel Finch. One of the central questions examined by the film is that of Thompson's relationship with the Hunter Figure *persona*, which is explored through interview segments with Thompson himself, interspersed with footage of Thompson and Ralph Steadman as they travel from Las Vegas to Hollywood. It is one of few documented recordings in which Thompson directly addresses the challenges brought about by the *persona* he created, most revealingly when he accuses the director of pressuring him into performing as Duke for the cameras. The film ends with Thompson and Steadman meeting with a funeral director, as Thompson outlines his plans for his own funeral, stating his desire to have his ashes shot out of a 150-foot cannon, built in the shape of his Gonzo fist logo, with Bob Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man* to be played as his ashes fall to the ground below.

The Crazy Never Die (1988), produced by Jim and Artie Mitchell, is a thirty-minute documentary that follows Thompson as he embarks on a lecture tour, which includes stops at the University of Kansas and in Portland, in Oregon's First Congregational Church. The Mitchell Brothers were best known as leading figures in the pornographic industry, as owners of San Francisco's O'Farrell Theatre, and also for directing and producing *Behind the Green Door*, one of the most influential feature length pornographic films of commercial American pornography. Thompson had spent considerable time at the O'Farrell theatre as part of research for a book project that never materialised, claiming to be the night manager at the O'Farrell which he called 'the Carnegie Hall of public sex in America' (Thompson 2003a, p. 22). Though brief in length, *The Crazy Never Die*, exhibits numerous aspects of the Hunter Figure, from that of political and cultural critic as displayed in his public lectures, to his continued fascination with guns and violence, with the Mitchell Brothers cutting repeatedly from his tour scenes to images of Thompson brandishing and firing a large pistol, utilising an aerosol as an improvised flamethrower, firing a cannon, and crushing barrels with a large robotic device. The latter was part of a demonstration by Survival Research Laboratories, a performance art group from San Francisco that specialise in 'ritualized interactions between machines, robots, and special effects devices, employed in developing themes of socio-political satire' (Survival Research Labs n.d.). Thompson's time at the O'Farrell Theatre, including the making of *The Crazy Never Die*, is also covered in Simone Corday's memoir *9 ½ Years Behind the Green Door* (2007).

One particularly notable scene from *The Crazy Never Die* is that of an interaction with a member of the audience on one of his tour stops, wherein Thompson is asked about his feelings regarding *Doonesbury*, a comic strip by Garry Trudeau that features a character

named Uncle Duke, a caricature of Thompson. His reply illustrated his frustration with Trudeau's appropriation of the Hunter Figure *persona*: 'people grow up in this country wanting to be firemen, cowboys, pimps maybe...or Sheriff, but nobody grows up here wanting to be a comic-strip character, do they?' (Thompson in Mitchell and Mitchell 1988). Trudeau however, went even further in 1992, when he published an entire book devoted to Uncle Duke, entitled *Action Figure!: The Life and Times of Doonesbury's Uncle Duke* that came with a five-inch Uncle Duke action figure, whose accessories included an Uzi machine gun, cigarette holder, martini glass, alcohol bottle and a chainsaw. *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner urged Thompson to take a lawsuit against Trudeau, and though he gave serious thought to doing so, ultimately it never went any further. Again, it highlighted how Thompson had become a victim of his own success, and though he struggled with the enormity of his own celebrity and legend, it also illustrated the manner in which the Hunter Figure *persona* had become part of the American Cultural *Zeitgeist*.

Another brief, though notable, profile of Thompson was produced for *The Today Show* in 1988 as part of a segment called 'Flying the Coupe', in which Boyd Matson travelled around the U.S. in a red Cadillac Coupe de Ville to report on various stories. The piece on Thompson features all the usual Hunter Figure tropes: guns, politics, alcohol, his fortified compound of Owl Farm. Indeed, the reporter's red Cadillac is reminiscent of Thompson's Great Red Shark from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which the reporter had correctly speculated would entice Thompson to agree to the interview. What is interesting about this profile is the manner in which Thompson is characterised: 'He is confrontational, offensive, excessive, humorous and perhaps, a touch dangerous' (Matson, 1988). This is followed by Thompson discussing his childhood in Louisville, Kentucky

where he takes the opportunity to once frame the *persona* in terms of his troubled past: ‘I was a heinous criminal, a juvenile delinquent as a teenager. I think I slipped off the track early on. I’ve learned to live with it, I can back off and watch myself sometimes and think – Uh oh what is he going to do next?’ (Thompson in Matson, 1988).

Perhaps the best representations on film of the Hunter Figure *persona* are a series of documentary films produced and directed by Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Wayne Ewing: *Breakfast with Hunter* (2004); *When I Die* (2005); *Free Lisl: Fear and Loathing in Denver* (2006); and *Animals, Whores & Dialogue: Breakfast with Hunter Vol. 2* (2010). Ewing filmed Thompson, *Cinéma Vérité* style, over many years both on the road and at Thompson’s home, in Owl Farm in Woody Creek, Colorado. Again, the Hunter Figure is very much to the forefront, particularly in *Breakfast with Hunter Vol. 1 & 2*, with Ewing chronicling Thompson’s various entanglements and confrontations with the authorities, from his Campaign for Sheriff to his latest campaign to overturn a DUI conviction by the Aspen City police department on the eve of an important local election. Interspersed throughout are scenes showing Thompson’s efforts to get *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* made into a film; showing him being honoured by *Rolling Stone* at the Lotus Club, one of the United States oldest literary clubs, in New York on the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; and finally, showing his return to Louisville, Kentucky to be *fêted* in his hometown on what was dubbed Hunter S. Thompson day.

As in previous documentaries that focused on Thompson, the question of his Outlaw *persona* is addressed, as he is interviewed by Marianne McDonald of the *London Observer* who observes ‘you figured that you would always be on the margins of society with a very small percentage of people who were like you’ (McDonald in Ewing 2003).

Thompson's response illustrates how his incarceration as a teenager was a persistent cornerstone of his self-image:

That's where we get the 'outlaw.' I've never been approved by any majority... They are still trying to lock me up all the time. The only things I've been arrested for, it turns out, are the things I didn't do ... There's just a general feeling that I shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. I've been pretty careful about trying to urge people who cannot live outside the law, to kick off their traces and run amuck. Some people are not made for it. I was a juvenile delinquent. I was Billy the Kid of Louisville. It's simple: I believed I was a writer. I knew I had to be a writer because I was not good at anything else. I survived by making literature out of what might otherwise be seen as craziness. (Thompson in Ewing, 2004)

This is further illustrated in *Animals, Whores & Dialogue: Breakfast with Hunter Vol. 2*, in additional scenes filmed in Louisville, Kentucky at the gala honouring Thompson. One of the speakers was none other than his childhood friend, Ralston Steenrod, who had been arrested with Thompson as a teenager, in the fateful event that had led to his imprisonment, and which had forever imprinted the label of criminal on his psyche. As Steenrod reads from a fax sent by Thompson to Johnny Depp, addressing the issue of his homecoming event, the ghosts from the past are once again revisited:

We will need to drive a few public 20-inch nails into the right people, at the right time, in the right place. The scene is set for beautiful public drama about right and wrong and what happens to the highlife in Bluegrass Country when Billy the Kid returns more or less from the dead and settles many old scores. (Thompson in Ewing, 2010)

This theme of righting the wrongs of the past and fighting against the injustice of a flawed legal system and the abuse of power is the central lynchpin of Ewing's *Free Lisl: Fear and Loathing in Denver* (2006), an account of Thompson's campaign to free Lisl Auman from prison after she was sentenced to life without parole at the age of 21, for the

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murder of a Denver police officer. The officer had been shot dead by Matthaeus Jaehnig, whom Auman had just met that same day, while she was already handcuffed in the back of a police car. Jaehnig then turned the gun on himself. Two officers later testified that they had seen Auman hand the murder weapon to Jaehnig. Under an archaic felony murder law, Auman was found culpable for the killing. Though *Free Lisl: Fear and Loathing in Denver* essentially focuses on Auman and the details of her case, the film is set against the backdrop of Thompson's organisation of a rally on the steps of the Colorado State Capitol which was attempting to raise support for her cause. In a sense, Lisl Auman's story has strong parallels with Thompson's own life story, most notably in his comments at the rally concerning his motivation for rallying to her cause:

This is not about Lisl really, this is about you, what happened to her could happen to anybody. It is really easy, I know from experience, that it is easy to get sucked into the system, even when you are innocent and my response has always been to fight savagely...I remember what Edmund Burke said – 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' That's what got me in here and that's what should move us all because it could be you. (Thompson in Ewing, 2006)

Of particular emphasis, is the sense of vigour in which Thompson pursued Auman's case, showing a determination to overturn her conviction and secure her freedom as though his own depended on it. There are echoes in her case of Thompson's own conviction and imprisonment before his graduation from high school, and as Douglas Brinkley observed of Thompson's letters to his mother from prison, the overwhelming sentiment in his words was that of injustice:

They exude the desperation of a young man in jail looking for his freedom as well as contemplating how the rich get away with dastardly things and the poor don't – that the buddies that he was with in the Cherokee Park event were waltzing because they knew the

judge, and that he was the poor kid on the other side of the railroad tracks with no dad. The game was fixed. (Brinkley in Wenner, 2008, pp. 19-20)

On March 28th, 2005, the Colorado Supreme Court overturned Lisl Auman's conviction for second-degree burglary and felony murder by a margin of 4 to 1, slightly over one month after Hunter S. Thompson had committed suicide at his home in Woody Creek, Colorado. In his book chronicling the same events *Dear Dr Thompson: Felony Murder, Hunter S. Thompson, and the Last Gonzo Campaign*, author Matthew L. Moseley saw Thompson's contribution as fitting that of a particular classic character archetype, typically found in the epic story:

Most epic stories contain a 'departure of the helper.' In *Star Wars* it was Obi-Wan Kenobi. In *Lord of the Rings* it was Gandalf. In *The Wizard of Oz* it was Glinda the good witch. In Lisl's hero cycle, as if the script had been written to perfection, it was Hunter S. Thompson. (Moseley 2010, p. 237)

This same idea of life stories adhering to a pre-ordained script or story archetype is again illustrated in Ewing's *When I Die* (2005), which documents the quest to fulfil Thompson's wishes regarding his funeral, as outlined almost thirty years earlier in the documentary *Fear and Loathing in Gonzovision* (1978). Actor Johnny Depp paid several million dollars to build a 153-foot monument at Owl Farm in the shape of Thompson's Gonzo Fist logo, from which his ashes were launched with fireworks in the colour of the American flag: red white and blue. His ashes fell to earth accompanied by the sound of Bob Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man*, with his iconic Chevrolet convertible, immortalised as The Great Red Shark in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, parked at the base of the monument. In death, Thompson had crafted his final act, with the same symbolic meaning

that he had invested in his own literary *persona* throughout his career; a fitting end to author and *persona* alike.

Following Thompson's death, numerous other documentaries were released to mixed reception. These included Tom Thurman's *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride: Hunter S. Thompson on Film* (2006), which looked at his life and work with an emphasis on his Hollywood connections; *Final 24* (2006), which examined the final hours leading to his suicide; and *For No Good Reason* (2012), a documentary about Gonzo illustrator Ralph Steadman that examined his work with Thompson. The most notable release was Alex Gibney's *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr Hunter S. Thompson* (2008), a two-hour film nominated for numerous awards that predominantly focused on the Golden Age of Gonzo 1965 – 1975. The most interesting aspect of Gibney's documentary, however, is that of the inclusion of Thompson's audio tapes as part of the programme, which were subsequently released as *The Gonzo Tapes: The Life and Work of Dr Hunter S. Thompson* (2008). These recordings include Thompson's tapes from Ken Kesey's compound at La Honda, documenting the infamous gang-rape scene that was later also described in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, with Wolfe having borrowed Thompson's tapes for his own research into the events that night. Another standout moment from the tapes is the entire transcript of a conversation between Thompson, Oscar Zeta Acosta and the workers at a fast food diner, which is transcribed in its entirety in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as the chapter 'Breakdown on Paradise Blvd'.

Anita Thompson was also at the forefront of protecting her husband's legacy, first and foremost in terms of promoting the serious writer that lay behind the exaggerated *persona*, with her first book *The Gonzo Way* (2007). This book was aimed at younger

readers of Thompson's work, and sought to impart some of the philosophical aspects of the Gonzo ethos that she had gleaned from her husband, and this was the beginning of a series of similar studies which focused on the writer behind the *persona*. In addition to *The Gonzo Way*, Anita Thompson also published a collection of Thompson's interviews spanning the entirety of his career, entitled *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom: Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson* (2009), whilst also starting up a magazine entitled *The Woody Creeker*, which published one of Thompson's early short stories *Fire in the Nuts*, for the very first time. Other figures from Thompson's life quickly followed suit with their own memoirs of their experiences with Thompson, including Ralph Steadman's *The Joke's Over* (2006); *The Kitchen Readings* (2008) by Michael Cleverly and Bob Braudis; Jay Cowan's *Hunter S. Thompson: An Insider's View of Deranged, Depraved, Drugged Out Brilliance* (2009); *Stories I Tell Myself: Growing Up with Hunter S. Thompson* (2016) by his son, Juan F. Thompson; and the forthcoming *Who Killed Hunter S. Thompson: An Enquiry into the Life and Death of the Master of Gonzo* (2018), by Warren Hinckle. Another notable contribution, in addition to the above, came from Thompson's former *Hell's Angels* copywriter Margaret A. Harrell, who published a four-volume memoir of the writer: *Keep This Quiet! My Relationship with Hunter S. Thompson, Milton Klonsky, and Jan Mensaert* (2011); *Keep This Quiet Two! More Adventures with Hunter S. Thompson, Milton Klonsky, Jan Mensaert* (2012); *Keep This Quiet! III: Initiations* (2014); and *Keep This Quiet! IV: More Initiations* (2016). Harrell, like the aforementioned authors, focuses on the side of Thompson frequently obscured from view by the more sensational biographies, namely that of the serious craftsman as opposed to the attention-grabbing *persona*. It is Harrell's insight into the development of Thompson, both as an author and a character, that truly set this memoir

apart, as her understanding of the writer and his work was greatly enriched through her close working with Thompson.

Rolling Stone magazine has also been heavily invested in Thompson's legacy since 2005, publishing a special commemorative issue of the magazine following Thompson's death in which various friends, family members and collaborators remembered his life and work. This was followed by the publication of *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (2007), by Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour, which was a more expansive oral biography. Jann Wenner also published *Fear and Loathing at Rolling Stone: The Essential Writing of Hunter S. Thompson* (2011), which gathered together Thompson's best work published by *Rolling Stone*. It should be noted, however, that Wenner re-edited many of the pieces in this collection, so they differ considerably from their original form. Other original work by Thompson published in recent years include *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (2008) by Beef Torrey and Kevin Simonson, a collection of Thompson's interviews much in the same vein as Anita Thompson's *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom*, though there are interviews exclusive to both offerings. One of the most interesting and significant publications of recent years is that of Thompson's photographs, as published by AMMO books. *Gonzo* (2007), is more than just a photograph album however; it is essentially a visual archive of his life and work, with manuscript scans, assorted trinkets and documents from Thompson's trips to Las Vegas and elsewhere all included. In a way, it is an important visual reference of Thompson's development of the Hunter *persona*, in that the focus of Thompson's work evolves from that of capturing the various subjects he was writing about such as his many portraits of the Hell's Angels to that of eventually solely focusing on capturing his own *persona* in action.

Two of the most significant releases in recent years relating to Hunter S. Thompson are Daniel Joseph Watkins' *Thomas W. Benton: Artist/Activist* (2011), and *Freak Power: Hunter S. Thompson's Campaign for Sheriff* (2015). Both books offer up a veritable treasure trove of previously rare or unreleased material relating to Thompson's campaign for the post of Sheriff of Aspen, from the full set of Aspen Wallposters included in *Thomas W. Benton: Artist/Activist* to a whole range of election related paraphernalia in *Freak Power: Hunter S. Thompson's Campaign for Sheriff*. Watkins unearthed the material as part of a mammoth task to catalogue over 500 pieces of art spanning five decades of Benton's career. For the first time since 1970, all six Aspen Wallposters are now available, and they form an important addition to the Gonzo cannon, showcasing the political evolution of Thompson's aesthetic. *Freak Power; Hunter S. Thompson's Campaign for Sheriff*, delves even further into Thompson's run, making available a vast amount of vintage articles and campaign material that Watkins unearthed in *The Aspen Times* microfiche at the Pitkin County Library, which were then restored from their original condition for the book.

Revisiting and re-examining events from Thompson's much storied life also produced another book in the form of *The Footloose American: Following the Hunter S. Thompson Trail across South America* (2014). Here, author Brian Kevin retraced Thompson's footsteps across South America, comparing his own experiences there with those of the pre-Gonzo journalist some 50 years earlier. Comprising a fascinating revisit to the many issues Thompson raised on his travels, Brian Kevin importantly sheds new light on the veracity of Thompson's own journey, in many cases adding weight to stories that were previously thought of as semi-Gonzo in their relationship to the truth. Other

interesting finds by Kevin included his unearthing of an original copy of the *El Heraldo* of Barranquilla, Columbia, dated May 26th 1962. In *The Proud Highway*, Thompson mentions that his arrival in Columbia made it onto the social page of the daily paper in Barranquilla, which proved virtually impossible to verify at the time. The paper sat in an archive all these intervening years, yellowed by time, as it was never archived in a digital format.

The most recent publication to examine Thompson is *Legendary Authors and the Clothes They Wore* (2017) by Terry Newman, which once again illustrates the powerful longevity of the Hunter Figure *persona* and its ability to capture the imagination. Examining fifty literary icons from across the ages, Newman unsurprisingly also includes two of Thompson's biggest influences, namely F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Of the connection between literature and fashion, Newman writes:

Authenticity is crucial to longevity, and that's why character is the key to looking great: feeling and believing what you do, say, and wear translates into nonnegotiable charisma. And when you are an original who goes your own way and can write about it all as well, the allure ratchets up a notch. This is why fashion houses often look to authors for inspiration, and this is why authors who dress to please themselves, outside of the constraints of being 'fashionable,' are captivatingly compelling. Reading a fashion collection can be like reading a book: it's a gold mine of influences, references, research, and creativity. An author's work is similarly a composite of their life, values, imagination, talent, and distinctiveness. (Newman 2017, p. 7)

In writing of Thompson, Newman identifies the outsider spirit that not only characterised his literary style, but also carried over into every aspect of his being. To examine Thompson's style is to reveal the holistic nature of Gonzo; it was not just a narrative style but in fact an entire way of living reflected in every pore of Thompson's life:

Hunter S. Thompson's sizable *persona* – his essential joy-stalking soul, his delirious inimitability, and his forging, uncompromising texts – not only magnetized those he met, but has also fascinated and charmed kindred spirits the world over. The Hunter style and substance fuelled not just a new way of first-person, subjectively written journalism. His approach to life and what he wore while living it has also become the stuff of legend...As a freethinking radical, Thompson personified an outsider looking in on both counterculture and the mainstream. His sardonic and squinted view of the sixties and seventies has become synonymous with the eras. (Newman 2017, pp. 120-23)

Aside from these various biographies, memoirs and documentaries, the number of scholarly academic works that have attempted to analyse Thompson's writing remains quite low, resulting in a scope that is relatively confined in terms of examining Thompson's literary achievements and his place within the canon of American literature. Prior to Thompson's death, the most significant academic study was William McKeen's *Hunter S. Thompson* (1991), the first serious study of his life and work, that attempted to demystify the legend and refocus on Thompson the writer, the craftsman responsible for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. As such, it also served as the first serious biography of Thompson the writer, before the slew of sensational works focusing more on the celebrity were published. Interestingly, unlike these later biographies, Thompson was co-operative with McKeen, granting him an interview in March of 1990. McKeen followed up this work with *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (2008), the definitive biography of Thompson to date that examines his entire life and work. Thompson also featured in McKeen's subsequent offering *Mile Marker Zero: The Moveable Feast of Key West* (2011), which chronicled the bohemian magnet that was Key West in the seventies for some of America's finest writers. In addition to these comprehensive works on Thompson, McKeen has also edited a special *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 40th Anniversary issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* (Vol. 4, No.1, Spring 2012). More recent academic studies

that also deserve mention for the depth of their analysis on Thompson are *Gonzo Republic: Hunter Thompson's America* (2012) by William Stephenson and *Riding the Strange Torpedo: Hunter S. Thompson and the Invention of Gonzo Journalism* (2016) by Mark Vitullo.

Finally, it is worth noting the role the internet has played in relation to the continued interest and popularity of Thompson and his work. Indeed, Thompson himself embraced the online world in the twilight of his career as he contributed a column, *Hey Rube*, to ESPN.com and utilised the wide reach of the website to rally support in his campaign to free Lisl Auman. Thompson's writings for ESPN were later published as his final book *Hey Rube: Blood Sport, The Bush Doctrine, and the Downward Spiral of Dumbness, Modern History from the ESPN.com Sports Desk* (2004). In writing a sports column, Thompson had come full circle, albeit with a modern twist, as he continued to explore new frontiers in journalism. It seemed fitting that the Godfather of Gonzo journalism would be amongst the first to embrace blogging as a new tool in journalism, recognising early on the power of the internet to reach vast audiences instantly, with Thompson discussing this in an interview with *Yahoo! Internet Life* in 2001 in relation to the Lisl Auman case:

She has a Web site, Lisl [lisl.com]. Her parents maintain one, which had something like 5,000 hits for the first two years. The first time I discussed it in the column, they got 140,000 hits in a day, and they were astounded. They thought the machine was screwed up. It was a huge support thing. (Thompson in A. Thompson 2009, p. 288)

Thompson himself has proven to be as widely popular a subject online as he has been in print, with many websites devoted to his life and work. At the advent of this thesis, I established one of the earliest websites related to Thompson, totallygonzo.org, which has grown year on year in its online presence, receiving close to a million hits from all over the

world. As part of my goal to help scholars and those that are interested in Thompson, I hosted many rare articles of Thompson's that have been previously unavailable to a mass audience. As a resource, these articles have been utilised within academia, with one such academic being Bill Reynolds of Ryerson University, Canada who contributed an article based on these rare early writings of Thompson to the special edition of *Literary Journalism Studies* honouring Thompson in 2012. Another important online resource for Thompson scholars has been hstbooks.org, curated by Marty Flynn, the definitive bibliographical resource relating to Thompson's work. Flynn has also been the driving force the *Hunting for Thompson* project, which sought to explain aspects of Thompson life and writing to those who were new to his work. One such effort was a discussion regarding the difference between Duke and Thompson, with contributors including William McKeen and Simone Corday. Another important website relating to Thompson has been beatdom.com, whose editor, David S. Wills, publishes the literary journal *Beatdom*, dedicated to scholarly coverage of all aspects of the Beat Generation. Though not considered a member of the Beat Generation, essays on Thompson have regularly featured both on the online *Beatdom* website and in the literary journal, including two of my own offerings *Sympathy for the Devil? Reconsidering the Legend of Raoul Duke on the 40th Anniversary of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* which was published in *Beatdom* #9 (June 2011), and *Hunter S. Thompson – Gonzo Frontiersman* which was published in *Beatdom* #11 (June 2012).

Thompson's life and work have also been the basis for several theatre productions starting with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which was adapted for the stage by Lou Stein. Various productions have taken place since its first run at the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill, London in the early-eighties, with one of the more notably runs directed by John

Cusack and Steve Pink, starring Bill Cusack as Raoul Duke and Jeremy Piven as Dr Gonzo. Most recently, it featured at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2014. Another of Thompson's works, 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', has also recently been brought to life, first as a spoken word record released in 2012, and then adapted for theatre, produced by Hal Willner, with music composed by Bill Frisell, and starring Tim Robbins as Hunter S. Thompson. The most recent performance was at The Town Hall in New York in May 2017. *Gonzo: A Brutal Chrysalis* takes a different approach to Thompson, focusing instead on the high-point of Thompson's career from 1968 to 1972. A one-man play by Paul Addis, it debuted in 2007 in San Francisco to favourable reviews. Addis subsequently died in 2012, after committing suicide. The play has continued to be performed since then with James Cartee in the role of Hunter S. Thompson.

As of 2017, Thompson's life and work continues to attract considerable attention in print, online, television, theatre and film. To date, his books have been translated into twenty-three languages including Macedonian, Vietnamese, Slovenian, Hebrew, Modern Greek and Japanese, with new publications appearing regularly. Interest online continues to grow, with a cursory google search for 'Hunter S. Thompson' returning 10,300,000 results, more than all of Jack Kerouac 522,000, William S. Burroughs 7,590,000, Allen Ginsberg 967,000, Ken Kesey 505,000 and Kurt Vonnegut 597,000 combined. In this sense, academia is only beginning to embrace Thompson, but the interest is growing with each passing year.

Chapter 1: Billy the Kid of Louisville

Hunter Stockton Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on 18th July 1937, the eldest son of Virginia Ray and Jack Robert Thompson. Natives of the Bluegrass State, which is famed for its bourbon whiskey and horse racing, often refer to the land as the ‘dark and bloody ground’, in reference to the bloodied history of the region, that was originally a hunting ground for the Shawnee and Cherokee tribes, and later the setting for the Battle of Blue Licks, one of the last clashes of the War of Independence. Kentucky was the first area west of the Appalachians to be settled by frontiersmen, a motley crew of illiterate and wild social outcasts, forced west by the ever-expanding population of the east coast. Filled with bitterness and contempt towards the law-governed life they had left behind, many hoped to forge a new beginning through freedom and opportunity in the unspoilt lands of the frontier, and in that sense, were amongst the earliest devotees of the American Dream. Fierce independence and outraged rebellion stalked the land, and it was this same spirit that flowed in the blood of Hunter S. Thompson, later described as having ‘shot out of the womb angry’ (Thompson, S. in Wenner 2008, p. 3).

The Thompsons settled in a neighbourhood known as Cherokee Triangle, a peaceful middle-class community in the suburbs of Louisville. Jack Thompson worked as an insurance agent, and had served in the U.S. Army during World War I, having trained at Camp Zachary Taylor with one F. Scott Fitzgerald and fought alongside William Faulkner’s brother Jack on the battlegrounds of France. Years later, these authors would be studied in

great detail by a young Hunter Thompson, as he dreamed of success as a writer. Jack Thompson had been previously married to Garnett Sowards, but she died from pneumonia in 1923. They had one son together, Jack Jr. who would remain unknown to Hunter for many years. Jack Thompson was forty-two when Hunter was born and his relationship with his son was always somewhat distant, perhaps due to Jack's strict disciplinary role in Hunter's life. He had a much closer bond with his mother Virginia, who introduced him to tales by authors such as Jack London and Mark Twain (Weingarten 2005, p. 118). Virginia worked in the local library and would bring home books such as *White Fang* and *Huck Finn* and as noted by Douglas Brinkley, 'Hunter had a criminal cast to his mind, and he would have become a criminal if not for the literature that his mother infused into their household' (Brinkley in Wenner 2008, p. 11). He was also particularly fond of reading about Wild West heroes such as Davy Crockett and the outlaw Jesse James (Brinkley 2005, p. 36).

Naturally drawn towards excitement and adventure, Hunter was a popular child in his neighbourhood. From an early age, he was interested to sports and was disappointed to learn that he was too young to join the local Castlewood Athletic Club, as members had to be aged between ten and sixteen. Undeterred, the eight-year-old started a club of his own, the Hawks A.C. This led to him also becoming a reporter for the *Southern Star*, a two-page neighbourhood paper, which was set up by ten-year-old Walter Kaegi Jr. Hunter had two columns, one reporting on the latest tournaments of the Hawks A.C., and the other focused on stamp collecting. Much of his playtime involved re-enacting battles from World War II with his fellow friends and members of the Hawks A.C. Sometimes they would fight each other using toy guns; other times they would play with battalions of lead soldiers, with Hunter making sure to swell his ranks by permanently 'capturing' the soldiers of other boys in the neighbourhood. Another favourite pastime involved Thompson cycling around the

neighbourhood setting fire to the mounds of leaves raked together outside people's houses. Soon mischievous behaviour became the order of the day. The Hawks A.C. graduated from playing with toy guns to B.B. guns, firing at whatever took their fancy, which frequently turned out to be small animals and other children in the neighbourhood. In particular, they focused on the African American community across the nearby Bear Grass Creek, shooting random people and antagonizing them further with racial insults, and retreating to safety before they could be caught (Blakemore in Wenner 2008, p. 5). It was to mark the beginning of a lifelong love affair with guns for Thompson, and for the Hunter Figure as outlaw.

It was not long before Hunter and the Hawks A.C. acquired a bad reputation in Louisville. One incident in particular even attracted the attention of the FBI. A large Federal Mailbox had been overturned into the path of a bus resulting in considerable damage to the bus and the mailbox. Interfering with the U.S. Mail is a Federal Offence, punishable under Federal Law, and two FBI agents called to the Thompson household to inform them that their nine-year-old son was a prime suspect in the case. Hoping to pressurise the young Hunter into an admission, they informed him that his friends had already confessed to involvement in the prank, and that they had several witnesses. Thompson was not convinced however, and refused to divulge any information, cheekily questioning the agents as to who exactly had witnessed the incident. Momentarily flustered by the question, Jack Thompson realised that the agents were bluffing and repeated his son's line of inquiry. Aware that they had been caught out, the agents made their excuses and left, never to be seen again (Thompson 2003a, p. 6). It was an important lesson for the young President of the Hawks A.C. Even at such a young age, Thompson had developed a clear distrust of authority that would stay with him throughout his life. Of course, he was guilty of having orchestrated the entire incident, the reasons for which reveal another trait that characterised his later work. The bus driver was a mean-spirited bully who was despised by the children

of the neighbourhood. Tired of him pulling away just as they reached the bus stop, the Hawks A.C. decided that he needed to be taught a lesson. Striking out at those who abused their power would later become a defining element of Thompson's Gonzo Journalism.

At I.N. Bloom Elementary School, Thompson was also beginning to make his mark, although not always for academic reasons. While his natural charisma led to popularity in the classroom amongst his classmates, he quickly fell out of favour with the teachers for his inclination towards disruptive behaviour. When in sixth grade, he was voted head of the Safety Patrol by his fellow students, his much-irritated principal instantly objected, likening him to Adolf Hitler. In his inimitable memoir, *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson acknowledged the apprehensive opinion that he stirred amongst his elders:

I was a popular boy, with acceptable grades and a vaguely promising future, but I was cursed with a dark sense of humour that made many adults afraid of me, for reasons they couldn't quite put their fingers on. (Thompson 2003a, p. 10)

This sense of humour started to flourish when he finally became eligible to join the Castlewood Athletic Club. Sports had become an ever-increasing priority in Thompson's life, and he longed to become a professional athlete. At the Castlewood Athletic Club, he initially showed a lot of promise, largely due to his competitive streak and physical prowess. He also garnered a notorious reputation for his treatment of new members:

One of the things he liked best was to have pledges throw 'fits'. We'd go into a restaurant, and all of a sudden on his command you'd throw an epileptic fit and scream and roll on the floor and carry on. Sooner or later they'd have to call either the police or an ambulance, and you'd have to run off. (Tyrell in Wenner 2008, p. 8)

These pranks began to become crueller and more elaborate, with Thompson even staging a kidnapping of one member in front of his girlfriend, who was reduced to hysterics. The aim each time was to create maximum shock and panic amongst innocent bystanders, a

grand sense of the theatrical centred on mocking social conventions that would stand him to good use in his future profession.

Shortly before the Fourth of July holiday in 1952, Jack Thompson died aged fifty-seven, having suffered from a rare condition known as myasthenia gravis, an autoimmune disease (McKeen 2008, p. 13). His passing had a profound effect on his eldest son. Jack had always maintained a strict guiding influence in Hunter's life, encouraging his interest in sports, and ensuring that Hunter did not get too out of hand. After his death, Thompson's behaviour went unchecked, and he quickly spiralled out of control. Virginia Thompson went to work at the Louisville Free Public Library in order to provide for her family, leaving Hunter with plenty of free time to indulge his latest passion – alcohol. Drinking and partying became the main priority for Thompson, and this coincided with the realisation that he would never be the star athlete that his father had envisaged. Although clearly talented, he had stopped growing in high school at a crucial moment, and was soon dropped from the various teams he played for in favour of his more physically mature colleagues. Thompson was also born with a slight deformity, with one of his legs being shorter than the other, which gave him a distinctive bowlegged walk and eventual problems with pain in his back and spine. As he got older, it became obvious that this defect would not be conducive to a career in sports, which made him resent his physical shortcoming intensely:

Hunter quickly learned that you can be made fun of when you have a deformity, and the way to not be made fun of is to take the Nietzschean offensive and lash out before you can even be hit, and get people afraid of you. (Brinkley in Wenner 2008 p. 10)

Although not able to take the lead anymore on the sports field, Thompson certainly was the leader when it came to everything else, and he was quick to sense that outrageous behaviour and a sarcastic tongue more than compensated for his failure to conquer the sports world, and carried more credit on the streets of Louisville.

Several nights a week, Thompson and his friend Sam Stallings Jr. would drive around Louisville looking for a place to party and an opportunity to get their hands on alcohol. Sometimes they managed to use fake IDs and buy whiskey at a liquor store, other times they had to resort to stealing from their parent's liquor cabinet. Hunter and his friend were arrested on numerous occasions with a car full of partygoers for attempting to drive to the neighbouring town of Lexington while under the influence of alcohol. They escaped on each occasion with a warning, largely due to the influence of Sam Stallings Sr., who was a former president of the Louisville Bar Association. On one occasion, however, they were not so lucky, with Hunter being sent to Louisville Children's Centre, when he was convicted of vandalism after a night of reckless behaviour. Looking back on his wayward youth Thompson likened his antics to that of his childhood hero:

I was a juvenile delinquent. I was Billy the Kid of Louisville. I was a 'criminal': I stole things, destroyed things, drank. That's all you have to do if you're a criminal. (Thompson 2003a, p. 10)

At Louisville Male High School, his social life began to affect not only his studies, but also his attendance. He was regularly missing from class on Mondays, preferring to stay at home and nurse his hangover. Often, he would skip classes and go to a café downtown with some friends, where they frequently managed to get served alcohol. His truancy was offset by a more intellectual side to his character however, with many of these café visits centred on philosophical discussion particularly concerning that of Plato's parable of the cave. Much of this behaviour went unnoticed by his mother Virginia, who although still working, was now an alcoholic, consumed by grief since the untimely death of her husband. Thompson's teachers were clearly concerned with his situation, noticing swiftly that his bright intellect was not transferring into good grades. His English teacher, Harold Teague, made allowances for his tardiness on account of his promising creativity, which increasingly

shone through in his aptitude for essay writing. Teague was a graduate of Yale and recognised that Thompson's talent needed nurturing; therefore, in an effort to point Thompson in the right direction, he recommended him to the Athenaeum Literary Association (Weingarten 2005, p. 118).

Louisville was home to a variety of Literary Groups, most of which recruited members from the various schools in the area. The Athenaeum Literary Association was the oldest and most prestigious of them all, whose members came from the upper echelons of society in Louisville. Hunter was already friends with some of the members through the Castlewood Athletic Club, and although he was popular with these individuals, it was clear that he was considered an outsider by many others due to his social standing. Thompson overcame this initial wariness through sheer charm and impeccable manners, managing to ingratiate himself into circles that belied his humble background. The Athenaeum introduced him to a whole new social scene, and he relished the opportunity to mix with the rich of Louisville, making sure to take advantage of the situation, particularly when it came to the abundant liquor supplies at the large mansions he frequented. However, the abundant wealth of the Athenaeum circle eventually began to irritate Thompson. The more prosperity to which he was exposed, the more painfully aware he became of his own situation, which was bleak in comparison:

Athenaeum was tied into the Louisville elite, and it had this atmosphere of tradition, which I think is important in understanding where Hunter came from . . . there was this sort of tie to the old American dream that seemed almost nineteenth century . . . I could see that element in his personality blending with other elements which were quite contradictory and rebellious. (Semonin in Wenner 2008, p. 13)

He longed for the freedom and status that money gave, yet he despised the rigid conformity and values associated with the establishment; he felt at home amongst rebels and misfits, but his appearance matched that of a smartly dressed scholar, donning suits and ties every

weekend for his Athenaeum meetings. In many ways, he was a walking contradiction, pulled in opposing directions and unsure as to which path to take: something that would also become true of his writing.

The Athenaeum eventually proved to be something of a revelation for Thompson, offering him a chance to unite the different forces in his life. The seemingly incongruous dichotomy between his love of literature and his reputation as a hell raising out-of-control delinquent, found a resolution of sorts through his weekly presentations to the society. Much of the contributions from members consisted of original poetry and prose, but Hunter surprised everyone by recounting lengthy and skilfully crafted accounts of his own daring misdeeds and those of others, which reduced the other members to uproarious laughter. His eagerness to engage in philosophical discussion about Plato's *Republic*, and his admiration for the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway caught many off guard. He relished the opportunity to present essays that poked fun and mocked whatever he deemed fit, and his targets, more often than not, turned out to be figures of authority and anything that was considered part of the *status quo*. Many of his essays ended up being published in the Athenaeum *Spectator*, a yearbook that was put together by the association members. The 1955 edition contained Thompson's essay 'Open Letter to the Youth of Our Nation', for which he was awarded third prize in the Nettleroth contest. It is perhaps the earliest example of Hunter's mocking satirical prose and his loathing toward Middle America and its associated values:

Young people of America, awake from your slumber of indolence and harken the call of the future! Do you realize that you are rapidly becoming a doomed generation . . . Oh ignorant youth, the world is not a joyous place. The time has come for you to dispense with the frivolous pleasures of childhood and get down to honest toil until you are sixty-five . . . there is no excuse for Juvenile Delinquency; there is no excuse for your attitude except that you are rotten and lazy! I was never like that! (Thompson 1998 p. 3)

The end of the piece was signed: ‘Fearfully and disgustedly yours, John J. Righteous – Hypocrite’ (Thompson 1998, p. 4), and possibly this can be seen as the earliest instance of what might be termed the proto-Hunter Figure. Even at this stage, Thompson felt that his writing needed to be connected to a *persona* for it to achieve its full impact.

The most revealing insight into Thompson’s psyche can be found in another of his essays for *The Spectator*, in which he philosophically examines the nature of security:

Is security a utopian goal or is it another word for rut? A man is to be pitied who lacked the courage to accept the challenge of freedom and depart from the cushion of security and see life as it is instead of living it second hand. It is from the bystanders (who are in the vast majority) that we receive the propaganda that life is not worth living, that life is drudgery, that the ambitions of youth must be laid aside for a life which is but a painful wait for death. Who is the happier man, he who has braved the storm of life and lived or he who has stayed on shore and merely existed? (Thompson 1998, p. 4)

The essay reveals the disdain that Thompson held for the expectations of conformity that lay ahead for a young man due to graduate high school. It also illustrates his growing desire to strive towards a life of adventure that would take him beyond the boundaries of Louisville. Yet this yearning for adventure was equally matched by his growing anxiety over his future. Many of his friends talked of going to Ivy League Universities such as Princeton and Yale, and some had even qualified for scholarships. Thompson was not so lucky. Although he desired to follow his friends onto third-level education, he made little effort toward achieving this goal, perhaps due to the knowledge that it was not exactly a financially viable option for him. The alternative prospects to university were not exactly to his taste either. The thought of working in the insurance business like his father filled him with horror. In a third-prize poem for *The Spectator* called ‘The Night-Watch’, he channelled his fear and resentment to produce an eerily prophetic poem:

Cold sweat broke out on my forehead now and my scalp felt tight and drawn.

What could I do to escape my fate, the electric chair at dawn?
I seized the bars, and shrieked, and wailed, like a soul who is lost in hell.
But the only voice that answered me was the mid-night toll of a bell. (Thompson 1998, p. 6)

One month later Thompson would reside in Jefferson County Jail, convicted of robbery and sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment, ensuring that he would miss his graduation day from Male High School. Instead of receiving his certificate, he spent the day alone in his cell contemplating his seemingly grim future.

The incident that resulted in his incarceration occurred in Cherokee Park after a typical night of partying in Louisville with Sam Stallings Jr. and Ralston Steenrod. Driving through the park, the trio stopped beside an area where several cars with couples had parked. While Thompson and Steenrod stayed in the car, Sam Stallings Jr. got out and walked over to one of the cars to see if he could get some cigarettes. After a brief conversation with the driver of the car, Stallings threatened him with a gun and told him to hand over his wallet or he would rape the girls in the back seat. He then drove off with Thompson and Steenrod, both of whom were oblivious to what had just happened. Their license plate had not gone unnoticed by the victims however, and all three were later arrested.

It would prove to be a pivotal development in the life of Hunter S. Thompson, one that would leave a permanent psychological wound, and that would have a discernible impact upon his core political and philosophical beliefs. Brought before the court of law, Hunter and his friends were tried with glaringly different results. Sam Stalling Jr. was acquitted, having been represented by his prominent lawyer father. Ralston Steenrod similarly escaped punishment, and although Yale cancelled his scholarship, he did eventually attend Princeton after successfully completing a trial probation period. When it came to Thompson however, the verdict was not so lenient. Although his involvement in the incident was practically negligible, his previous record before the court was not. This

time the judge was determined to punish him, viewing his repeated offences as making a mockery of the law. In sentencing Thompson to prison, the judge also refused to grant bail before his 18th birthday, ensuring at least one month of detention. After that period, any early release was conditional on military service. The stigma attached to his conviction was further compounded by a special meeting of the Athenaeum Literary Association, in which the members voted to expel Thompson from their ranks. His devastation at the outcome of his trial was only matched by his determination for revenge on the Louisville establishment. During his imprisonment, he spent much of his time reflecting on the injustice of the system:

Hunter wrote his mother these very philosophical letters from behind bars. They exude the desperation of a young man in jail looking for his freedom as well as contemplating how the rich get away with dastardly things and the poor don't – that the buddies that he was with in the Cherokee Park event were waltzing because they knew the judge, and that he was the poor kid on the other side of the railroad tracks with no dad. The game was fixed. (Brinkley in Wenner 2008, pp. 19-20)

Thompson vowed that he would never again fall victim to the criminal justice system, and he considered his conviction as solid proof that a life in Louisville would be an intolerable future. He felt ostracized by his community, rejected from all angles and he was eager to return the sentiment, embracing the outsider mantle with a relish.

There would be no going back for Thompson, no attempt to reconcile his differences within the community, and no desire to atone for his behaviour. Although the experience had left him with a heightened sense of distrust and disrespect for authority in every shape and form, the irony of the situation is that he chose to cut his sentence to thirty days by turning to one of the strictest authoritarian institutions of all, specifically The Air Force. In the final days before leaving Louisville behind for the military life, he made sure to remind his enemies that they had crossed the wrong person. One of his former teachers

at Male High School was dealt a particularly harsh lesson. In the middle of the night, Thompson stopped outside his home and launched bottle after bottle of beer through every window in the house. After the windows were repaired, Thompson paid yet another visit, just in case he had not quite got the message the first time (Whitmer 2000, p. 72). It was a classic demonstration of the tendencies in Thompson's psyche that made the outlaw *persona* fit his character so well; in later life these violent tendencies would find a sublimation of sorts in both his writing and in the creation of different *personae*.

After a brief period in basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, in San Antonio, Texas, Thompson was sent to Scott Air Force Base in Belleville, Illinois where he studied electronics. He immediately despised military life, not surprisingly finding the rigid schedules and strict code of conduct at odds with his rebellious attitude. Although he sometimes tested the limits of his superior officers, he was clever enough to back down before he got into serious trouble. Upon graduation from Scott Air Force Base's electronics program in June 1956, he was assigned to the radar unit at Eglin Air Proving Ground in Pensacola, Florida. Although Thompson welcomed the blue skies and tropical waters of the Florida Panhandle, he was less than enthusiastic about his future military career, and was fearful of the prospect of ending up at the Distant Early Warning line based near the Arctic Circle. He craved excitement and expressed a desire to become a pilot of military jets, a far cry from his mundane duties as an electronics technician. In an effort to add a bit of variety to his time in Florida, he decided to undertake night classes at Florida State University through a program sponsored by the Air Force. Speech and Psychology courses helped to satisfy his need for intellectual stimulation, something that he found to be scarce in the barracks at Eglin. Soon after undertaking these classes, he received a lucky break when an officer friend at the base education office informed him that the sports editor of the *Command Courier*, the base newspaper, had been jailed for public drunkenness. Aware

of his interest in literature, he asked Thompson if he had any interest in writing about sports. Pouncing on the opportunity, Thompson told him that he was editor of his high school newspaper, a credential that had only a grain of truth to it. After a brief interview, he was immediately re-assigned to the Public Information Office as sports editor for the *Command Courier*.

Although he had successfully bluffed his way into the position, Thompson was acutely aware that his inexperience at editing and journalistic theory could quickly be exposed. Determined to avoid this fate, he decided to put in some groundwork before commencing his new job:

I went to the base library and found three books on journalism. I stayed there reading until it closed. I learned about headlines, leads: who, when, what, where, that sort of thing. I barely slept that night. This was my ticket to ride, my ticket to get out of that damn place. (Thompson 2003a, p. 47)

The position of sports editor proved to be ideally suited to Thompson, and he embraced it wholeheartedly. When not attending base football games, he was experimenting with the page layout, and even decided to start his own column, entitled *The Spectator*, in homage to the Louisville Athenaeum yearbook. Left to his own devices in regards to output, the column offered Thompson a perfect platform to exercise his cutting wit, and he spared nobody from scrutiny, choosing to air his views on all manner of topics whether they were sport-related or not. He had no qualms about breaking codes of etiquette, and he relished any opportunity to antagonize the base personnel. In a letter to his older half-brother Jack, he revealed the figure that inspired his controversial writing:

Each week, I come closer and closer to libel, slander and calumny. This week's 'Spectator' will raise much hell, I'm sure – but that's just the way the ball bounces. If H.L. Mencken could do it, then so can I. (Thompson 1998, p. 19)

The use of writing to ‘raise hell’ was something that had been nascent in his early work, but now it was becoming an overt stylistic imperative, and one which he was consciously embracing. Thompson had long been attracted to the work of Mencken, recognising in him a kindred spirit. Eventually, *The Spectator* pushed the boundaries of acceptable content too far, and Hunter was summoned directly to the Base Commander, Colonel Mears, who demanded an explanation. Having been inundated with complaints from an assortment of branches of Personnel Services at Eglin, he had no choice but to reprimand Airman Thompson, acknowledging that while as sports editor, Hunter was free to criticize anything sports-related, he had no business offering his opinion on anything else, particularly when it targeted other areas of life at Eglin. The rebuke from Colonel Mears did not have the intended effect on Thompson; he considered the warning an honour of sorts and gleefully boasted about it to his friends:

From now on, when I appear somewhere with a pencil in my hand and a gleam in my eye, people will quiver in their shoes and sweat freely. This is the finest thing that could have happened. I now have thousands of readers, and the official sanction of the Base Commander. Move over Winchell . . . HST has emerged from obscurity to jab at the world for awhile. Jesus, what fun! (Thompson 1998, p. 21)

The attention was intoxicating to Thompson’s ego, and it illustrated not only the seductive power the printed word held over him, but it also highlighted a possible escape route away from the monotonous doldrums of life in the military. Lured by the prospect of a career in journalism, he threw himself into his work, devoting all of his energy to studying his craft. However, his scholarly endeavours did not extend to include any discernible change in his overall attitude, he merely traded one arena of trouble making for another. Lest anyone think otherwise, Thompson made sure to remind them by signing off his correspondence with ominous declarations such as ‘crazed with the power and hell bent for the worst kind of infamy’ (Thompson 1998, p. 21).

This renewed interest in writing had otherwise more positive consequences, with none more significant than the massive increase in his letter-writing activity during this period, a practice that he would continue with throughout his life as a means of not only exploring ideas, but also of avoiding writer's block. He primarily wrote his family and friends, updating them on his life at Eglin and in the case of the latter, also including humorous tales of past misdeeds and future adventures. Many of his letters carry a nostalgic tone, with Thompson reminiscing about the good times in Louisville. Although he had certainly made friends at Eglin, and was a popular figure there, the impression from his correspondence is of an insecure young man, somewhat homesick and missing the company of his old circle of friends, many of whom were attending prestigious Ivy League colleges. In many ways, the differing career paths were another reminder to Thompson that he was unlike his old Louisville gang, and was destined to always be the outsider looking in. Yet if there was any resentment, he certainly managed to hide it well, and he seemed genuinely interested in his friends' academic progress, making sure to also update them on his burgeoning career as a sports journalist. His success at the base newspaper also introduced him to more like-minded individuals who encouraged his literary interests. He particularly impressed Lieutenant Colonel Frank Campbell, the deputy head of the Information Services Office, and Lieutenant Jerry Hawke, from the Public Information Office, who was responsible for putting out the *Command Courier*. Hawke had been an English major at Yale, and had plans to read English at Oxford. The trio would often socialize and according to Hawke, much of the conversation had a strong literary focus:

I remember very clearly talking about the great writers from the twenties and thirties – Hemingway, Fitzgerald. Frank was a big influence on Hunter – he really provided kind of a home away from home, and he encouraged Hunter's literary interests. Hunter was trying to do creative writing at the time. I remember his remorse for not having gone to college

and his hope that when he got out he would go to Vanderbilt. (Hawke in Wenner 2008, p. 23)

Perhaps it was this same sense of remorse, combined with his friends' positive influence, which compelled Thompson to prove his worth as a writer beyond that which was required at the base newspaper.

The first indication of his desire to expand his writing opportunities beyond his outlet as sports editor came when he started contributing to the Eglin *NCO* [Non-commissioned Officers] *Club Newsletter*. In a move that would foreshadow his later work, Hunter adopted a pseudonym for his articles – Cuubley Cohn – in honour of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, a perennial favourite to which he would refer throughout his career. It is also notable that Thompson demonstrates here his inclination towards adopting a new *persona* or avatar with each opportunity that presents itself, particularly if there is the possibility that he could find himself in a position whereby his writing could be at odds with figures of authority, as was the case at Eglin. Essentially, the pseudonym served both as a role for Thompson to play, but also as a protective device for the inevitable trouble his writing would create.

As he became ever more engrossed in his writing, Thompson also began to distance himself increasingly from every aspect of military life. Having at first grudgingly come to terms with life as an enlisted airman, he now began to express his individuality in a manner that would set him on yet another collision course with his superiors:

So far, I've individualized myself to the point that people don't quite know what to make of me anymore. I wear blue button-down-collar shirts instead of Air Force shirts, I keep my own hours . . . I pull *no* detail or KP, I'm *Sergeant* Thompson to any and all publicity seekers, and, in short, I've turned into a conceited, arrogant bastard! (Thompson 1998, p. 31)

There was more to this behaviour than mere insolence and insubordination, it was a deliberate strategy on behalf of Thompson to seek a discharge from the Air Force on the grounds of being unable to adapt to military life. He enjoyed antagonizing his superior officers, particularly in the presence of an audience, relaying the subsequent furore in letters to various members of his Louisville circle.

One incident in particular established a narrative that would later become a Gonzo trademark. Assigned to cover the annual football banquet for the *NCO Club Newsletter*, he turned the event into a litany of professional misconduct and drunken horrors. Detailing the incident to a friend from the Athenaeum Literary Association, he formulates a blueprint to which he would return repeatedly, wherein the assigned story becomes secondary to the disastrous attempt, and ultimate failure on the behalf of Thompson to carry out his duty as a reporter with any sense of professionalism. Indeed, the original story no longer becomes the *real* priority, it is Thompson himself who takes centre stage and provides all the action:

I missed all the banquet except the meal and the drinks, and now have no story at all. I don't know whether my photographer got any pictures or not, and all in all, I completely missed the banquet itself. Later, I was thrown out of the club for calling the night manager a crude, numbwit ass. As I was led down the walk by one of my friends, the manager stood on the porch in a white rage, as I sent a constant stream of insults and epithets over my shoulder in his direction. This morning, as I told him I was going to do, I hurled all the club publicity into Pensacola Bay. This will happen every week until I get a personal apology for his rudeness. (Thompson 1998, p. 34)

The passage reveals not only Thompson's flair for hyperbole, but also his tendency to cast himself in a self-deprecating light in order to endear himself to his audience. He had a penchant for mythologizing his own deeds, but never in such a way as to assume the role of all-conquering hero. Thompson was more comfortable in the role of the serial failure, the miscreant outsider that defiantly thumbs his nose to the establishment, hopelessly

blundering from one adventure to the next, yet surviving to tell the tale. As a blueprint for the Hunter Figure, this representation turned his failures and misdeeds into stories that absolved himself of any blame, and that presented his actions in a somewhat honourable light, essentially as an outsider battling against the establishment. In light of this pattern that was developing in his writing, it is hard not to draw parallels here with his jailing in Louisville, with Thompson habitually crafting stories whereby the very real injustice inflicting upon him by the authorities in Louisville is replayed in his new narratives, with the essential difference being Thompson's control over his own fate, which was denied to him on that fateful day of judgement in his past.

As he grew ever wearier of military life, the line between Thompson's embellished escapades on paper, and his actual antics at Eglin, grew ever thinner. The novelty of working at the Base newspaper had worn off, and the freedom allocated to the position was an open invitation for him to engage his more troublesome tendencies with greater frequency. In an effort to escape the suffocating boredom that he felt as an enlisted man, he accepted a civilian job as sports editor of the *Playground News* in Fort Walton Beach, where in his weekly column, *World of Sport*, he published the more inflammatory articles that the *Command Courier* had refused to run. Once more he adopted a pseudonym, Thorne Stockton, this time in an effort to escape the attention of his superior officers. Once more, it was another incarnation of the Hunter Figure with the same purpose of poking the establishment in the eye, while Thompson himself could avoid the direct consequences. Although the move was not in direct violation of Air Force regulations, Thompson had failed to seek the permission of the base commander before accepting the position, and he exacerbated the problem further when he subsequently released uncensored Air Force information to the newspaper. It did not help that he already had nine complaints filed against him at this point by various sergeants for insubordination, along with three charges

for reckless driving on behalf of the Air Police, and several charges of drunken behaviour including being found unconscious on Colonel Evans' office couch at 7.30 in the morning. Thompson's attitude was plummeting as his morale slowly ebbed away, and he no longer enjoyed the battle of wits with his superiors and military life was becoming nothing more than a heavy burden that he longed to leave behind for the world of journalism.

While his confidence regarding his situation sank ever lower, the one area where he still found immediate solace was literature. He was genuinely delighted when on March 11th 1957, he received a letter from the Athenaeum Literary Association informing him that he was to be reinstated as a Class of 1955 member. He immediately replied in a lengthy letter outlining in detail the personal importance attached to his membership, and the sense of disappointment he experienced as a result of his expulsion in the aftermath of his arrest in Louisville. Central to his letter was an explanation of what he believed was the main benefit of his time as a member:

Of all the things for which I am grateful to the Athenaeum, I think the most important thing I learned was the importance of thinking. Had I gained nothing else, the acquisition of this quality would have made those three hectic years worthwhile. A man who lacks the ability to think for himself is as useless as a dead toad, while the thinking man has all the powers of the universe at his command. (Thompson 1998, p. 49)

While Thompson could certainly prove his aptitude for independent thinking, he still had much to learn when it came to finding his own voice in the world of composition. Outside of his duties as a sports journalist, he began to use his letter-writing as a means to explore different writing styles, often choosing to adopt the techniques of the novelists he was reading, from John Dos Passos to F. Scott Fitzgerald. He was particularly taken by the style of Fitzgerald, an admiration that would continue throughout his life. He regarded *The Great Gatsby* in particular as the all-time great American novel. At Eglin, Thompson would frequently compose entire letters to various girlfriends that mimicked Fitzgerald's prose

style, even going so far as to include references to a little green light, though his was at the end of the wing tip on the plane in which he was travelling, as opposed to Fitzgerald's being at the end of Daisy's dock. To one girlfriend, he confidently described his desire to achieve 'fame, fortune, and recognition as the new F.S. Fitzgerald' (Thompson 1998, p. 56), a declaration that was promptly ridiculed in response. Thompson fired back undeterred by upping the ante: 'actually, I am already the new Fitzgerald: I just haven't been recognized yet' (Thompson 1998, p. 57).

In other letters, he followed the stylistic tone of H.L. Mencken. Thompson found much amusement in the caustic brand of humour that characterised Mencken's writing, and he learnt much from studying Mencken's ability to criticise and ridicule whoever he deemed fit. Many of the recipients of Thompson's diatribes in this manner were collection agencies, which had been threatening him with legal action for unpaid bills. He had a deliberate pattern of ordering books and records from various clubs and then ignoring their requests for payment. On another occasion, when accused of drunkenness by the base chaplain, Thompson responded in a letter protesting his innocence, accompanied by a quote from Mencken that he found interesting: 'The average clergyman is a kind of intellectual eunuch, comparable to a pedagogue, a Rotarian, or an editorial writer' (Thompson 1998, p. 54). The average clergyman however, was not a Lieutenant Colonel, and Hunter's antics began to increasingly irritate the higher echelons at Eglin. His *Spectator* column at the *Command Courier* came under increased censorship after he criticized radio and television personality Arthur Godfrey, which incensed his close friend Colonel Evans. Godfrey was invited to the base on his behalf to act as Master of Ceremonies for a firepower demonstration, prompting Thompson to write an article about how he had been arrested in Alaska for shooting game from the air. This was considered to be a major embarrassment to the base. Thompson also raised tensions when he broke into an office to steal files

relating to the discharge of Bart Starr, the highly sought-after quarterback of the base football team, who had received a bogus discharge on medical grounds for the sole purpose of enabling him to join the professional ranks at Green Bay. His release form made the front page of the *Command Courier*. Although Hunter was eager to receive a discharge from the Air Force, his actions began to creep ever closer towards the fine line between insubordination and more serious charges. Under heavy scrutiny from his superiors, Thompson decided to find more comfortable living quarters and moved off base.

'Xanadu', the retreat of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, suddenly transferred ownership to one Hunter S. Thompson, with the 'stately pleasure dome' finding itself transmogrified into a beach hut on the Gulf of Mexico. The idyllic surroundings of the Florida Panhandle more than compensated for the condition of the rundown shack that had long since been abandoned. Determined that his new home would live up to the decadent connotations of its name, Thompson would regularly invite his friends over and hold court in the midst of the debauched revelry, which chiefly revolved around the rituals of the drinking culture at Eglin. While his social life benefited greatly from his newfound home, the same cannot be said for his professional life. The stunts involving Arthur Godfrey and Bart Starr at the *Command Courier* did not go unpunished, and much to Thompson's dismay, he found himself moved from Information Services back to the Communications Squadron as a radio repairman. Prior to working at the *Command Courier*, his aptitude tests had indicated that he would be best suited to work as an electronics technician which did not fit well with Thompson at the time, as he felt that he should become a pilot. The jet planes at Eglin were an obvious attraction for the adventure-loving Thompson, and his resentment at having been denied such an opportunity only abated once he landed the sports editor position. Now he had lost that too, and although he continued

to work at the *Playground News*, the only thing that Thompson looked forward to was the prospect of a discharge.

Just as the seeds of doubt began to cloud his ambitions of becoming a writer, Thompson discovered a book that reaffirmed his desire to bring an end to his involvement with the military and pursue his literary goals: this was Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*. The book explores the different ways in which the outsider figure is portrayed throughout literature and culture. It affected him on a deep philosophical level, helping him to understand the relationship between the alienated Self and the rest of society, a role with which he was all too familiar, from his troubled childhood in Louisville through to his current pariah status with the base commander. In a letter to his mother Virginia, Hunter urged her to read *The Outsider* in order to understand what lay ahead for her son: 'I had just begun to doubt some of my strongest convictions when I stumbled upon that book. But rather than being wrong, I think that I just don't express my rightness correctly' (Thompson 1998, p. 67). This assertion was further reinforced when he decided to act on his principles in a conversation with an officer regarding his suitability for a discharge. Thompson made no attempt to hide his disdain for enlisted life, and procedure and after having discussed his political and religious positions at length, the officer had little doubt that he was dealing with a lost cause:

I don't know what it is about you, Thompson, and I didn't understand much of what you said; but I can see at a glance that there's not much sense in trying to make you either act or think like an airman should. I'll let you know within two days – twenty-four hours, if possible – how soon you can be discharged. (Thompson 1998, p. 68)

Although delighted at the prospect of leaving the Air Force behind him, Thompson also was aware that to follow his ideological convictions would also mean permanently embracing the mantle of the Outsider. A considerable amount of his life had already been

spent trying to fit in with the prevailing attitude of those around him, yet he found himself in trouble repeatedly with no indication of a change in the foreseeable future. It was now time for a change in tactics, and this time Thompson had the courage of his convictions.

His rebellious attitude was also further emboldened at this time by his reading of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. Thompson immediately identified with Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, and he strongly admired the novel's central protagonist Howard Roark. He found much in common with Roark's ferocious desire to maintain his artistic vision in a world that is hostile to new ideas. The unyielding display of integrity amid a society that heaps praise upon compromise and mediocrity, struck a chord in Thompson, who felt that his own situation mirrored that of Roark. The lack of independent thinking and freedom of expression that he had encountered while writing for the *Command Courier* had left him beyond frustrated. With his discharge seeming closer than ever, he vowed to pour his energy into a more self-fulfilling creative endeavour, outlining to his friend Joe Bell just what exactly he had discovered from his study of Rand:

Although I don't feel that it's at all necessary to tell you how I feel about the principle of individuality, I know that I'm going to have to spend the rest of my life expressing it one way or another, and I think that I'll accomplish more by expressing it on the keys of a typewriter than by letting it express itself in sudden outbursts of frustrated violence. (Thompson 1998, p. 70)

For Thompson, the military had served its purpose and to his relief the feeling was mutual. On November 8th 1957, he finally received an honourable discharge from the Air Force. As always, he made sure to leave behind a strong impression, and his last act as Airman Thompson was to issue a press release, printed in the *Command Courier* with copies sent to his circle of friends, describing how a novice Air Policeman had been injured after being hit by a wine bottle that had been thrown at the AP gatehouse following his discharge:

An immediate search was begun for Hunter S. Thompson, one-time sports editor of the base newspaper and well-known 'morale problem' . . . An apparently uncontrollable iconoclast, Thompson was discharged today after one of the most hectic and unusual Air Force careers in recent history. According to Captain Munnington Thurd . . . Thompson was 'totally unclassifiable' and 'one of the most savage and unnatural airmen I've ever come up against.' (Thompson 1998, p. 74)

What is particularly interesting here in terms of the development of the Hunter Figure *persona* is that it marks one of the earliest instances of Thompson incorporating his own name with that of the creative avatar he was developing. Though he had previously demonstrated a penchant for mythologizing his own life in his correspondence, he had yet to deploy these same tactics in a public fashion without the aid of a pseudonym. Although his military career was short-lived, it certainly played a pivotal role in Thompson's personal as well as professional development, particularly in terms of the numerous *personae* that he adopted in his writing, laying the foundations of the Hunter Figure one incarnation at a time.

After a brief trip to Louisville to visit his family, Thompson found himself heading for Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania after accepting a job as sports editor for the *Jersey Shore Herald*, a small local newspaper. If the harsh reality of induction into military life came as a shock to Thompson's system, then the subsequent return to civilian life proved to be much of the same. His initial excitement and high expectations for both Jersey Shore and the local newspaper swiftly turned into dismay and anger when he discovered that the dream failed to match the reality. Jersey Shore indicated to Thompson that the town was near both New Jersey and an actual shoreline, if not a beach, and the last thing the name conjured-up was an isolated mining town high up in the mountains. He had been looking forward to recreating the hedonistic lifestyle that he had enjoyed at his beach hut in Florida, but instead he found himself hunkered down in an apartment which made the dilapidated

shack that he had christened 'Xanadu' seem like a palace in comparison. The view afforded to him was even more depressing, consisting of a solitary barn, several neglected houses and a wild looking hill set against the smog-filled grey sky. His nightmare became fully realized when he discovered his workplace was just as bad. He had expected to be out of his depth working for a daily newspaper that serviced a population of over 100,000. What Thompson had not anticipated was that the *Jersey Shore Herald* would be a step down from the *Command Courier*.

He was infuriated when he learned that the emphasis was on producing sufficient local copy before the afternoon deadline at the expense of quality content. He had believed that the job would prove to be an opportunity to expand upon his journalistic knowledge, yet his co-workers' standards were inferior to what he had left behind at Eglin. They cared little for anything beyond a basic layout, and photographic accompaniments were non-existent. Although he had been hired as sports editor, he was also made responsible for the final layout of the front page each morning, and he immediately set about revamping the paper. The first change he implemented was to remedy the lack of photographs, especially in the sports section. At the *Command Courier*, Thompson had become quite adept at photography, having preferred to take his own photographs at events, mainly due to his frustration at the poor quality of others' work. He also usually had specific types of photographs in mind for different articles, from certain action shots to specific angles and sizes to suit the page layout. Yet although he had more responsibility than his previous job, it was quite clear to Hunter that his future prospects in the town were bleak. In a letter to Larry Callen, his former editor at the *Command Courier* and now stationed in Iceland, a seemingly envious Thompson complained about his situation:

I'm a young man on his way up. Screw it all: if this path leads up, then I'd rather go down . . . I believed a little man's description of his good ole home town: not realizing that he

was measuring it in his own mind . . . I can understand how these poor bastards feel who lie awake at night and wrestle with the realization of their own worthlessness. (Thompson 1998, p. 79)

For a change, he now favoured venting his frustration through his letter writing instead of his previous habit of vandalism or other such behaviour, crafting creative short stories detailing the horror of ‘the almost indescribably repulsive town of Jersey Shore’ (Thompson 1998, p. 83). It is an example of his gradual development as a writer, and also an example of how this development was facilitated by his creative *personae*.

His desperation was amplified due to a lack of alternative options, and the last thing he wanted to do was return to Louisville as an unemployed person, a move that in his mind equated to defeat. Before he could decide as to what to do though, his innate ability to attract trouble intervened and left him with only one simple decision. He had no choice but to leave Jersey Shore after destroying a car belonging to one of his fellow workers. He had borrowed the car to go on a date with the man’s daughter, and somehow managed to get the car stuck on a riverbank in deep mud. In the ensuing chaotic effort to free it, the front bumper was ripped off, and one of the doors was left hanging by a hinge. Thompson returned the car in the dead of night, resigned to his fate. The following day, as he heard the car pull up in the parking lot at the rear of the office, bumper and door dragging on the asphalt, he packed together his belongings and walked out the front door as everyone else rushed out back to view the wreck (Thompson 1992, p. 39). He did not even wait for his pay check. Less than a month after he arrived there, Thompson was once more on the road and as he left Pennsylvania there was only one destination that he had in mind. After a six-hour drive on Christmas Eve, 1957, he finally caught sight of the towering skyscrapers of New York City:

I'd never been there, never even seen it. I remember being stunned at the New York skyline as I drove over this big freeway, coming across the flats in Secaucus. All of a sudden it was looming up in front of me and I almost lost control of the car. I thought it was a vision. (Thompson 1992, p. 39)

He was unemployed, and had little money in his pocket, but he was determined to find work as a journalist until proven otherwise.

His spirits lifted when he joined up with Jerry Hawke, who had also received a discharge from Eglin, and was now enrolled in law school at Columbia University. Hawke offered Thompson the use of his apartment until he found a place of his own, allowing him to focus all of his energy on finding a job. His knew that his slim resume counted for little in most newsrooms around Manhattan, so in an effort to prove his worth, he first selected various articles from several newspapers and then re-worked them in his particular fashion. Then with his typical egotistical bravado, Thompson decided to aim straight for the top of the journalistic ladder. His first port of call was *The New York Times*, after which he targeted the other papers in order of merit. He received no offers. Undeterred, he continued to look for employment, and in his considerable spare time he worked on more literary endeavours, writing short stories under the pseudonym Aldous Miller-Mencken in honour of three of his heroes: Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller and H.L. Mencken. Once more, the protective cloak of a pseudonym demonstrated Thompson's association of writing with that of a role to be played; it was an identity to be adopted and used as he saw fit.

When not pursuing his literary dreams, he was out carousing with Jerry Hawke and his friends in Greenwich Village, drinking what was left of his money. With each passing day, his situation crept ever closer to failure and defeat. By January 15th 1958, he could not even afford to keep his car on the road. He wrote letters to friends highlighting his plight, stating that 'eviction is second only to hunger as the dirtiest word in the dictionary' (Thompson 1998, p. 100), and bemoaning the suggestions of others to seek salvation

through prayer. Finally, at the end of January, after having run out of money ten days earlier, Thompson got the breakthrough he so desperately craved by securing a job as copyboy for *Time* magazine. Although the job paid less than what he was used to in Jersey Shore, the lower wage was offset by the company also offering to pay half the cost of tuition at any of the local colleges. Hunter seized the opportunity and swiftly set about enrolling at Columbia University for the spring semester, choosing two courses in writing: 'Literary Style & Structure' and 'Short Story Writing'. He also finally found an apartment of his own in the vicinity of the University, courtesy of his now steady, though meagre income. Under no delusions of grandeur, he referred to his new abode as a 'cramped dungheap' (Thompson 1998, p. 108). Appearances aside, the apartment afforded him the privacy he needed to work on his writing, into which he threw himself with a renewed vigour, particularly when he learned that his professor at Columbia was none other than Rust Hills, the fiction editor at *Esquire*. Outside of scholarly activities, Thompson amused himself by rapidly alienating his neighbours, who were horrified by his drunken escapades, which ranged from spraying them with fire extinguishers, to throwing garbage cans down the stairs and roaring at the top of his voice in the middle of the night (Thompson 1998, p. 109).

It was not long before his colleagues at *Time* also became acquainted with his darker side, with Thompson getting drunk at a cocktail party for new employees, unnerving the publisher and his friends with his loud declaration that the business manager was a 'fat lecher' (Thompson 1998, p. 109). Hunter was frustrated that his position at *Time* offered no opportunities for him to develop his career beyond that of an observer in the newsroom, and almost as soon as he started there, he began to look elsewhere for work, particularly anything that involved writing opportunities. In an effort to compensate for his lack of experience, he frequently crafted witty letters to various magazines, ridiculing any article that he deemed inferior, before finishing up with an offer to lend his services as a writer.

The ploy did not work. He also continued to exercise his creative writing skills in response to notes from creditors looking for payment for unpaid bills. However, unlike the Menckenesque missives that he issued in his Air Force days, this time he worked on a form letter that he could re-use, casting himself as a sociopath with a problem getting published, a role that some would deem not too far from the truth:

Say man, what is all this? I just got back from New Orleans and the first thing I find is a threat from you people – some wild yap about jail and court and lawyers and such: what do you think I am – some kind of moneybag? . . . You've got to stop threatening me! I'm not well – I have a blister on my leg and that damn disease all over my stomach. I can't even think what I want to say anymore . . . this worry is driving me crazy. (Thompson 1998, p. 114)

The letter met with limited success, and it not only reveals his stylistic flair for doomed paranoia, but also the perverse sense of humour that was responsible for its crafting in the first place. Essentially it was another *persona* in the chain of development that culminated in the Hunter Figure. He did not write the letter out of financial desperation; rather he did it for entertainment and the shock factor. Thompson never turned down an opportunity to indulge his darker instincts for dramatic effect, be it through writing or other means. He particularly employed it to good use whenever he felt the need to bolster his image, adjusting the level of manic behaviour to suit the role, which ranged from surly rebel to anguished writer at large. The attention to detail and energy that Thompson devoted towards achieving the desired image had a method-actor quality to it, and eventually he would utilise the practice to great effect, becoming one of the key facets behind the enduring power of his Raoul Duke *persona*.

The dominant image in New York however was generally that of poverty and perennial gloom. Thompson's down and out status was further reinforced by the condition of his apartment when he moved to Greenwich Village in early April 1958. Due to his

financial situation, his options were severely limited, and he had to settle for a tiny room in the basement of an apartment building. The interior resembled that of a medieval torture chamber, with black walls, ceiling and furniture and barred windows that opened into a pitch-dark airshaft. Situated beside the room was a massive furnace, whose broken door allowed the flames to illuminate the entire hallway in a flickering orange glow. The lease for the room indicated that it originally belonged to a known drug addict, who was supposedly in Europe (McKeen 2008, p. 42). Before he set off on his travels, he had sublet the room to a musician who eventually fled the building in despair, unable to cope with the lack of sunlight. Thompson had no idea if the leaseholder ever planned on returning.

In the meantime, he took advantage of his new residence by reading voraciously, and contemplating the nature of what it meant to be a writer. Once more he grappled with the tenets of Existential philosophy via John-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, having previously examined the principle works of existential alienation in Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*. When he received a letter from an old Louisville friend, Hume Logan, asking for career advice, Thompson seized the opportunity to outline in detail just what lessons he had gleaned from his philosophical studies:

To let another man define your own goals is to give up one of the most meaningful aspects of life – the definitive act of will which makes a man an individual . . . beware of looking for *goals*: look for a way of life. Decide how you want to live and then see what you can do to make a living WITHIN that way of life . . . Each of us has to create our own credo – this merely happens to be mine. (Thompson 1998, p. 119)

Although Thompson's career was stagnating at *Time*, he found himself more determined than ever to live the writer's life, if not as a journalist, then as a novelist. While less confident individuals may have struggled to avoid becoming mired in disenchantment,

given similar circumstances, he was particularly tenacious about his situation. He was never lacking in self-belief, always trusting in his own ability as a writer, even when faced with rejection at every step. He constantly looked to his literary heroes for inspiration, finding great solace in their own struggle to make a success of their writing. He even used his spare time at work to completely retype both *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms*, believing that he could gain a greater understanding of their underlying respective techniques in the process. Despite Thompson's ambition to emulate these literary giants, his efforts had yet to yield any discernible sign of progress. He worked on several short stories for his classes at Columbia, but more often than not, he spent his time thinking about writing than actually composing his own material.

On most evenings, Thompson occupied himself by taking long walks throughout the city, enjoying the unique sights scattered between the various districts. In Greenwich Village, he often frequented The White Horse Tavern, partly to retrace the footsteps of Dylan Thomas, but also to ingrate himself with the writers and editors of *The Village Voice*, who were regular patrons. Every new experience and situation was carefully and methodically analysed in terms of its relative worth to him as a writer: from conversations with barflies and co-workers, to the activities of his circle of friends. He constantly found himself marvelling at the breath-taking architecture that rose into the sky around him, providing a myriad of backdrops to the frenetic and intoxicating sense of opportunity in the city. Subsequently, he then used his correspondence as a testing ground to muse upon his observations, which had both benefits and drawbacks. While it afforded him an excellent platform to practice his descriptive powers, in doing so, he also found himself unable to resist enticing former girlfriends and old drinking partners to visit him in the ever-impressive city:

Chapter 1: Billy the Kid of Louisville

Living in New York is like discovering life all over again. In all seriousness, living here has been like waking up in an endlessly fascinating and completely different world from everything I've ever known. Having my own apartment in Greenwich Village, working in Rockefeller Plaza, riding up and down Fifth Avenue every day, standing on an East River dock at dawn and seeing the Empire State Building towering above this incredible skyline, meeting the thousands of people from every corner of America: the whole thing still seems a little unreal. (Thompson 1998, p. 125)

Unfortunately, his persuasive charm worked a little too well, and his apartment rapidly transformed into a bacchanalian whirlpool of excess, with a constant and ever-changing cast of characters stopping by, from painters to law students to philosophers. Unlike his stay in Jersey Shore, where he had ample time to pursue his craft but little inspiration to do so, he found New York, particularly Greenwich Village, to be the exact opposite.

He was becoming so preoccupied with his social life that he found himself having little time for anything else. Eventually the chaotic scene became too much of a burden, and in a letter to Larry Callen he vented his frustration at the madness that he had invited upon his Greenwich Village hovel:

The record player goes at top volume both day and night - no one works – and the police have been called on me three times within the past week. There is baggage everywhere, huge paintings are piled in every corner, the floor is an inch deep in scum, there is not a goddamn scrap of food anywhere, no one has any money . . . And this used to be MY apartment! Thompson (1998, p. 127)

Thompson may have lamented his situation, but he knew that he was the architect of his own dilemma. Six months after his arrival in New York, his output as an aspiring writer did not nearly match the high barrier to which he claimed to hold himself. Too often he found that his creative efforts led down paths with abrupt endings. Eventually he realized that he had two problems to overcome, the first being his inability to maintain the required stable environment that was conjunctive to good writing, and the second relating to the

absence of a clear sense of who he was as a writer. The first of these he knew he could fix with a little discipline; the solution to the second was not quite as clear.

Having swiftly banished the hordes of guests that had taken over his apartment, Thompson began to ruminate over his latest dilemma. In an effort to understand precisely the nature of his own crisis of identity as a writer, he turned to German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler, and his differentiation between men who impose themselves on reality through action, as opposed to men who do so through thought. Considering the virtue of the theory when applied to writing, Thompson determined that the latter produced some of history's best writers, from James Joyce to William Faulkner, yet the former included equally impressive authors including Ernest Hemingway and Francois Rabelais. For Thompson, it was a clear choice as to which category he belonged; there was a reason why he so admired *The Sun Also Rises*, and he felt that the problem behind his own scarcity of output merely amounted to a certain lack of life-experience on his behalf, and on a need to impose himself upon reality in order to then write about it instead of imposition through writing alone. Later on, this was to become the exact nature of his best work, with Thompson taking this principle to an extreme, essentially becoming the story at the expense of the original assignment.

Living in New York also exposed him to the very epicentre of the Beat Generation universe, and their rise to literary prominence did not escape his attention. Always on the lookout for developing literary trends, he poured over the essential works by Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs. Nevertheless, he always approached popular trends with a heavily jaundiced eye, and the Beats were to be no different. Despite their mutual affinity for protest and rebellion, Thompson was not overly taken by the movement, although he did express admiration for their political stance and philosophical perspective on life. He was particularly fond of *On the Road*, not in terms of Kerouac's style, but more so with

what Kerouac had accomplished, as he later admitted to George Plimpton for the *Paris Review*:

Jack Kerouac influenced me quite a bit as a writer . . . in the Arab sense that the enemy of my enemy was my friend. Kerouac taught me that you could get away with writing about drugs and get published . . . I wasn't trying to write like him, but I could see that I could get published like him and break through the Eastern establishment ice. (Thompson 2000, pp. 54-55)

Thompson would also eventually cross paths with Allen Ginsberg and enlist his help whilst writing *Hells Angels* in San Francisco, and later on would count William S. Burroughs amongst his friends. In the summer of 1958, however, he was still trying to forge a name for himself in the literary world and if he was not part of the Beat movement then where exactly did he fit in, that is if he wanted to fit in at all? The other main movement at this time was that of 'The Angry Young Men' in Britain, and although Thompson immensely enjoyed the work of Kingsley Amis and Colin Wilson, again he felt no compulsion to anoint himself as a devotee. Instead he looked to writers such as Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, admiring their maverick sensibilities and fiercely independent stance, confidently declared to his friends that 'a good writer stands above movements, neither a leader nor a borrower, but a bright white golf ball in a fairway of wind-blown daisies' (Thompson 1998, p. 129). The description could later have been used as an explanation for what he achieved with Gonzo Journalism.

Thompson continued to re-examine and question his relationship with writing for much of the summer of 1958. His correspondence during this period again assumes a significant creative role beyond that of maintaining his various friendships. His network of contacts now served as a forum for him to address the various issues that concerned him as a writer, becoming an important creative tool in itself, as he confessed to Larry Callen:

I find that by putting things in writing I can understand them and see them a little more objectively. And I guess that's one of the real objectives of writing, to show things (or life) as they are, and thereby discover truth out of chaos . . . For words are merely tools and if you use the right ones you can actually put even your life in order, if you don't lie to yourself and use the wrong words. (Thompson 1998, p. 133)

One area of his life where he was certainly under no illusion was in the dearth of opportunities to advance his career at *Time*. While he readily acknowledged the importance of the magazine in relation to his journalistic education, he was impatient and eager to prove his worth as a writer of great journalism. His displeasure at what he considered their oversight regarding his ability began to manifest itself through his increasingly surly attitude and general disregard for office decorum, mirroring the latter days of his time with the Air Force. He particularly enjoyed taking advantage of the free bar and lavish buffet provided by Henry Luce for employees every Sunday night. Fuelled by alcohol, Thompson openly displayed his disdain towards an assortment of staff writers and editors. He confided to friends that he stole a selection of Luce's belongings after one particular binge, including his desk pen and holder and a copy of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. When he read about the *Vancouver Sun*, in an article published by *Time*, he unashamedly disparaged his employer by sending a drunken letter to the editor of the *Sun*, applying for a job with brutal honesty, confessing the acute derision he harboured for the profession:

As far as I am concerned, it's a damned shame that a field as potentially dynamic and vital as journalism should be overrun with dullards, bums, and hacks, hagridden with myopia, apathy, and complacency, and generally stuck in a bog of stagnant mediocrity. If this is what you're trying to get the *Sun* away from, then I think I'd like to work for you. (Thompson 1998, p. 139)

In yet another display of his deep-rooted frustration with journalism, he sent a lengthy letter to *Editor & Publisher*, in response to an article in which they claimed that young people

were avoiding the profession due to the low wage scale. According to Thompson, the root of the problem was not a monetary issue, but in fact one of standards:

You people don't need to offer better salaries, all you have to do is raise your damned standards a bit! And as long as 90% of the papers in this country are staffed by complacent hacks those standards are going to stay right where they are . . . A free press is not indispensable unless it *makes* itself indispensable. So how about cleaning up your house and *then* bellowing about no one wanting to come in? (Thompson 1998, p. 143)

He then finished his letter by offering his services as a 'firebrand critic of sorts' (Thompson 1998, p. 143). Unsurprisingly he failed to receive a reply. He did not have to wait long before he was leaving *Time*, with his employment there coming to an end in January 1959, almost exactly one year after he had been hired. Shortly before his departure, he had admitted to friends that he had given up on his job; to others he claimed to have been fired for insubordination. Either way there was ample evidence to support both scenarios.

Luckily for Thompson, his bleak record of failed job applications ended abruptly following his departure from *Time*, with the *Middletown Daily Record* offering him a position that would elevate his career considerably, that of general reporter. It would have been quite a coup for any twenty-one-year-old copyboy to secure such a post, but he found that lying prodigiously on his application made the feat much easier. The embellishments included adding two years to his age, along with a college degree and a wealth of experience as a reporter and photographer. The gamble may have paid off, but his acceptance of the job-offer brought with it added risk. Thompson had to leave behind Greenwich Village and find new accommodation in Middletown, which was a two-hour drive north into the Catskill Mountains. To undertake such a journey, he needed a reliable car, a purchase that he could ill-afford, but which was also a necessity for his new position. Hanging over the entire venture was the threat of his deceit being uncovered, which left him constantly paranoid that dismissal was imminent. Yet the falsified application quickly

proved to be the least of his worries. The first problem arose when he made a habit of wearing no shoes in the newsroom, which upset and embarrassed the publisher one day as he escorted the city council through the office. He again incurred the wrath of his superiors when he lambasted the food at a local restaurant, a profitable source of advertising revenue for the paper. Finally, a mere six weeks after his arrival in Middletown, Thompson was fired for breaking an office vending machine after it failed to dispense the candy he had paid for, which led to the machine being subsequently ransacked by his co-workers (Thompson 1998, p. 157). Although thoroughly disgusted with journalism, he finally conceded that the sole responsibility for his problems lay squarely upon his own shoulders, with his eccentric behaviour making him virtually unemployable. In one final attempt to find work he applied for a vacancy with the *New York Times*, detailing in advance the precise reasons behind his difficulty in maintaining a regular job:

Some people find it exceedingly difficult to get along with me and I have to choose my jobs very carefully. I have no patience with phonies, hacks, dolts, or obnoxious incompetents and I take some pride in the fact that these people invariably dislike me. I admire perfection or any effort toward it and I would not work for anyone who disagreed with me on this score. (Thompson 1998, p. 157)

His frank honesty failed to elicit a response, and for the first time since his imprisonment in Louisville, Hunter found himself utterly at a loss as to what lay ahead for his future. Instead of bowing to defeat though, he vowed to face down his problems with defiance. With no source of income and in dire financial circumstances, he composed a lengthy letter to a former girlfriend revealing the plight of the 'Hunterfigure':

I'm convinced, of course, that to play a role or adjust to fraud is wrong, and I damn well intend to keep right on living the way I think I should . . . I know I'm right, but I sometimes wonder how important it is to be right – instead of comfortable . . . The Hunterfigure has

come to another fork in the road and the question once again is ‘where do we go from here?’
(Thompson 1998, p. 159)

What appears to be an otherwise innocuous statement is in fact a highly significant revelation by Thompson; it is a first clear indication of the burgeoning literary *persona* that would eventually be fully realised through the filter of Gonzo Journalism:

Hunter’s great art isn’t a book; it’s the collective work, and the fact that he created this one *persona* – the Hunter Figure – which is one of the great artistic creations of the 20th century.
(Brinkley 2005, p. 36)

It is no mere coincidence that Thompson mentions the Hunter Figure at this point in time, for it marks the moment in which circumstance no longer afforded him the opportunity to advance as a writer through journalism, with fiction remaining the last avenue left in which to display his talent. In a way, he had left the option until last because he knew that it was the ultimate proving ground, where his dream of becoming a successful writer would either take flight or crash and burn. He had endured a litany of rejection and false hope since his discharge from the Air Force, and now he planned on using his own life experience as a springboard towards what he hoped would be literary success.

No longer able to afford to reside in Middletown, Thompson moved in the spring of 1959 to a small cabin in Cuddebackville, an isolated but picturesque area of the Catskill Mountains beside the Neversink River. He initially marvelled at the rugged scenery and welcomed the lack of human contact, an absolute requisite, he believed, for any serious attempt at writing. His only company was a recently purchased Doberman that he named Pilar, after the character in Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The setting matched exactly what he envisaged as the perfect home for the author at work, surrounded by inspiration and left to the company of his own creative thought. To round off the overall Hemingway-inspired effect, he started to cultivate a beard and sport a pipe. It was important

to Thompson to look the part, but not just on a surface level; to be a writer, he felt he had to become a writerly *persona*, so the persona was part of his own creative process more than it was an attempt to project the same image to everyone else. His initiation into the reality of life as a writer quickly turned sour however, with the veil of romanticism swiftly cast aside by the difficulties of surviving without an income. The first problem occurred when he could no longer afford oil for the furnace, which plunged the cabin into freezing temperatures by night. When his food started to run out, he resorted to stealing chickens from a farm in the area, a desperate act but, one that did not dull his sense of humour. Upon reading an article in the *New York Times*, in which William Faulkner advocated the finesse of the artistic life, Hunter immediately sent him a letter disagreeing with his assessment, detailing the resourceful way in which he avoided starvation before asking Faulkner to send him a weekly check in support. He was to be the first of many authors that would receive such playful letters in jest, as much as for Thompson's amusement as they were attempts on his behalf to forge links with his heroes.

Despite the hardship of his surroundings, Thompson diligently worked at his craft, initially focusing on writing short stories, most which he discarded as amateur efforts and a means to exorcise any faults from his writing. To an extent, he no longer held the rock-solid self-belief that initially marked his attempt to break into the world of journalism, with his failure to hold down a steady job making way for anger and cynicism toward journalism as a profession. Never one to reveal any potential weakness of character, Thompson maintained a resolute position regarding his fate, even though he was acutely aware of the enormous challenge that lay ahead:

As things stand now, I am going to be a writer. I'm not even sure that I'm going to be a good one or even a self-supporting one, but until the dark thumb of fate presses me to the dust and says 'you are nothing,' I will be a writer. (Thompson 1998, p. 165)

Eventually he decided to test the merit of his work beyond that of his own critical evaluation by sending a few short stories to different publications, one of those being *Esquire*, where Thompson hoped fiction editor Rust Hills would look favourably upon his work, having taught him a year earlier at Columbia University. The first story submitted by Thompson was *The Cotton Candy Heart*, which to his disappointment was rejected by Hills. Undeterred, he immediately sent another offering, *The Almost Working Artist*, accompanied by a letter to Hills explaining the story as an attempt to reveal the solitary demoralising struggle that is as symptomatic to the most menial of jobs as it is to the struggling writer: an experience that he confessed he could speak to with considerable authority. The pitch failed to work. His failure to interest *Esquire* in publishing his work soon became a regular pattern with each successive offering being rejected by the differing publications that he targeted. Whatever the rejection meant to him in a creative sense, the most immediate pain came in financial terms, with Thompson becoming desperate to secure some form of monetary security. Relying solely on unemployment insurance had left him in a precarious situation, behind on his rent and trying to sell his car in an effort to stave off eviction and hunger.

In yet another effort to motivate himself, he began to mark his progress as a writer in terms of the rate of rejection slips he was receiving on a weekly basis. Once more the benchmark was set against that of his idols, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. He noted optimistically that Fitzgerald received one hundred and twenty-two rejection slips before his first publication, and that Hemingway struggled for eight years before making his breakthrough. Thompson thoroughly believed that he could do better by succeeding in not only getting published earlier, but by doing so with a novel rather than its shorter form. The novel in question was *Prince Jellyfish*, and the subject matter was intrinsically

autobiographical, revealing a predisposition to write about himself that was there from the offset, long before he made it the underlying foundation of Gonzo Journalism:

It will be the story of Hunter and Hunter, the way he went and the way he could have gone. And, incidentally, why. I'm using the narrator-participant technique – a la *Gatsby* – and shooting for a short (300 pages or so) account of three people living a year in New York City that will decide the courses of their lives. (Thompson 1998, p. 166)

In many ways, the novel was a cathartic exercise for the young writer, affording him an opportunity to take stock and examine not only his time in New York, but also to allow him to draw upon a myriad of experiences from his life in Louisville.

In *Prince Jellyfish*, however, Thompson has yet to firmly establish a concrete voice of his own, with the prose style owing much to the writers he was studying at the time. It was an aspect of his writing of which he was very much aware, and one that he constantly sought to change. Though Thompson injected fictional elements into the framework of *Prince Jellyfish*, in all other regards there was a solid basis in truth behind every facet of the novel, from the characters that were modelled on his own friends, to the restless energy that bristled within the central protagonist, Welburn Kemp. Even the name of the character carried with it a sentimental weight for the Louisville native, as revealed by Paul Semonin:

Those two names were a conjoined name of two different people from Louisville, one of whom had been killed in a car wreck – Welburn Brown – and another one, Penny Kemp, who was severely brain damaged in an auto wreck. They were heroes for young Louisvillians, in a certain way. And they both had tragic ends. (Semonin in Wenner 2008, p. 32)

However, the most significant aspect of the Kemp character is that he is more than just a basic autobiographical vehicle for Thompson. He is in fact the prototype Hunter Figure, the first sustained incarnation of the fearless maverick alter ego that Thompson would eventually bring to complete fruition in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, through the

character of Raoul Duke. It is a connection that is further reinforced through each character's relation to the same literary blueprint:

The strongest literary influence was J.P. Donleavy's *Ginger Man*. Like that novel's Sebastian Dangerfield, Kemp is selfish and arrogant and yet too charming to be firmly repellent. (McKeen 2008, p. 50)

Both Kemp and Duke are direct descendants of Dangerfield, differing only in terms of the degree to which they share the same character traits. Kemp offers the closest representation of the two, with Thompson effectively transporting Donleavy's protagonist from the streets of Dublin to the skyscraper-lined avenues of Manhattan. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson returns to the character and amplifies his characteristics tenfold through a prism of violence, anarchy and the worst excess of the sixties counterculture.

There was more to Wilburn Kemp than mere imitation of Donleavy's protagonist however, and what is important to note here is how Kemp is utilised by Thompson as the central protagonist. The character afforded Thompson the opportunity to rectify numerous aspects of his life, from perceived shortcomings to incidents where he felt he had been the victim of injustice, thereby allowing him to rewrite the rules in favour of the underdog, a task that he more than relished. For Thompson, *Prince Jellyfish* was his life as it ought to be, not necessarily the epitome of success, but certainly a life where the American Dream was that more tangible, not to mention unblemished by corruption and power. In this sense Welburn Kemp represents the as yet unresolved forces at work in Thompson's psyche, and he represents a manifestation of the contradictory dichotomy between his outsider status and the desire to be accepted by society. The character is revealed as a successful graduate in English from the University of Washington and Lee, which is in stark contrast to the stigma that Thompson felt at being incarcerated, while his friends were graduating and going to University. While Kemp also struggles to find work in Manhattan as a reporter, he

can still afford to walk out on an interview in fury when he is offered a job as copyboy. It was Thompson's way of expressing his frustration towards his own previous experience at *Time*, where he was lucky to have even secured such a position.

While *Prince Jellyfish* allowed Thompson to work on a romanticised account of his own life, it was not long before he received a harsh dose of reality. In the space of a week, he was evicted from his cabin and also lost his unemployment insurance. After seeing out the summer at a nearby friend's house, Hunter decided he had no option but to return home to Louisville in an effort to finish his book. It was a development that more than dented his ego. To compound his wounded sense of pride, he submitted the first three chapters of his novel to Viking Press, who promptly rejected the manuscript without offering a single reason as to their decision. The lack of explanation infuriated Thompson, and in an attempt to salvage his novel, he wrote to William Styron seeking advice as to how he could get published. Hunter had long admired his novel *Lie Down in Darkness*, and when he received a reply from Styron advising that he contact his literary agent, Elizabeth McKee, it proved to be a much-needed boost to his flagging morale. He was sure that with the help of a reputable agent, *Prince Jellyfish* would quickly receive the attention of an eager publisher. Throughout the autumn of 1959, he worked at completing the novel, but with each passing week, he found it increasingly difficult to stay focused on the task at hand. Despite the efforts of McKee, there was no interest in his novel from any publisher. In what would become a life-long pattern, Thompson's focus began to drift away from fiction and back towards journalism. He had no intention of running the gauntlet of New York publications however, having grown bitter and disillusioned from his previous experience. This time he had a more exotic destination in mind – Puerto Rico.

Chapter 2: The Outlaw of Big Sur

The Caribbean held a particular sway over Thompson ever since he had read *Escape to the West Indies*, a profile of the regions islands by *Life* magazine photographer Bradley Smith. The book had been left behind in his Middletown apartment in the winter of 1959 by the previous tenant, a reporter who was on assignment in Puerto Rico. Reading the book offered Thompson a momentary opportunity to forget the biting chill of the winter conditions in New York's Catskill Mountains, and also to fantasise about life in the sultry heat of an island paradise in the Caribbean. The prospect of living such a life was unfathomable to Thompson at the time, but by August of that year, the dream edged that bit closer to reality when he discovered an advertisement in *Editor & Publisher* for the vacant position of sports editor at the *San Juan Star* in Puerto Rico. The newspaper was published by William J. Dorvillier, later a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for his series of scathing editorials on the interference of the Catholic Church in the 1960 general elections in Puerto Rico. The newspaper's editor was William J. Kennedy, also subsequently a Pulitzer Prize recipient for his 1984 novel *Ironweed*. Ironically, in his letter of application, Thompson decried the American Press, and declared his admiration for the concept of journalism espoused by Joseph Pulitzer, to be found engraved on a bronze plaque outside the Times Tower in New York:

An institution that should always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty. (Pulitzer in Thompson 1997, p. xv)

As with his previous job applications, Thompson lied about his age, inflated his literary credentials, and confessed to being of a difficult temperament with a predilection towards destroying office vending machines. Inevitably he was turned down for the job. He received a rejection letter from Kennedy on the same day that *Prince Jellyfish* was turned down by Viking Press, compounding the blow.

It was Kennedy who bore the brunt of Thompson's wrath however, firstly for his suggestion that he should concentrate on finishing his novel, or even start a new one based around the inscription on the bronze plaque, and secondly for mockingly stating that he would be in touch should they ever need someone to kick in the candy machine. Thompson's response was pure venom:

. . . your letter was cute, my friend, and your interpretation of my letter was beautifully typical of the cretin- intellect responsible for the dry-rot of the American press. but don't think that lack of an invitation from you will keep me from getting down that way, and when I do remind me to first kick your teeth in and then jam a bronze plaque far into your small intestine. [*sic*] (Thompson 1998, p. 182)

Despite the unbridled rage directed at Kennedy, the diatribe served only to pique his interest in Thompson, and he promptly responded by challenging him to detail his critique of American journalism for the *San Juan Star*. The challenge took Thompson somewhat by surprise, but he responded to Kennedy's task, albeit by writing a one-act play instead of the suggested article:

You know as well as I do that the subject can't be handled effectively in 'three or so double-spaced pages.' I thought this was the best way to do it: a brutal, low-level, sledge-hammer drama. It's a farce, of course, but its theme is a big one, and I think the point is well made. You told me to be as disagreeable as I wanted, and I took you at your word . . . Actually, your last letter surprised me a bit, and perhaps in the long run I shall owe you an apology for all this abuse. I hope so, but I think I'll wait till I see that first issue before I put my dagger away. (Thompson 1998, pp. 188-189)

Kennedy declined to publish the piece, and returned it to Thompson with a letter of advice on writing, the first of what would prove to be many such letters over the course of a life-long friendship between the pair:

You disappointed me. I expected a serious essay on a serious matter. You delivered a batch of warmed-over clichés with barnyard overtones. You raise questions, then trail off into foolishness . . . The writing shows you will say things well once you discover something new that's worth saying . . . I have only one piece of advice: quit writing down. Drop by sometime. We could exchange insults over a bottle of rum. (Kennedy in Thompson 1998, pp. 190-191)

Although Thompson had warmed to Kennedy at this stage, the same could not be said for his opinion of the *San Juan Star*, of its publisher William J. Dorvillier, and of whoever had been responsible for the notes written on the reverse of his manuscript:

Your Rotarian boob of a publisher has one of the most original minds I've run across in quite a while. I didn't realize my 'drama' would hit so close to home. Whatever cretin scrawled his 'criticism' on the back of my manuscript referred to it as 'sophomoric drivel.' Nice phrase, eh? The man's a real thinker. But don't expect *me* to send you a package of platitudes to drape over the stinking carcass of your newspaper like an American flag over a coffin full of crap . . . Platitudes are safe, because they're easy to wink at, but truth is something else again. (Thompson 1998, pp. 191-192)

While Thompson's exchange with Kennedy bore little reward in terms of employment, it did establish a vital connection in Puerto Rico. He was still determined to find work in the area and finally an opportunity presented itself in the form of new Puerto Rican sports

magazine *El Sportivo*, whose editor and publisher Philip Kramer aimed to emulate the success of *Sports Illustrated*. Kramer offered Thompson a position as sportswriter in early December 1959, and although it appeared to be a welcome turnaround in his fortune, Thompson was wary of what lay wait in Puerto Rico.

His experiences in Jersey Shore and New York had taught him the error of high expectations, which prompted him to write to his friend Bob Bone for advice prior to accepting Kramer's offer. Bone had worked with Thompson at the *Middletown Daily Record*, but was now working for the *San Juan Star*. Apart from concerns regarding the basic standard of living on the island, Thompson's main line of enquiry centred firmly on whether Philip Kramer's claims regarding *El Sportivo* were those of 'either a fanatic or a crack-pot' (Thompson 1997, p. 197). These reservations, however, were not enough to dissuade Thompson from ultimately accepting the job offer when he met Kramer in New York at the end of December 1959. Shortly before his departure for Puerto Rico, Thompson also secured the position of Caribbean reporter for his hometown newspaper, Louisville's *Courier Journal*.

Thompson arrived in Puerto Rico in early January 1960, eager to start anew and embrace the balmy Caribbean lifestyle. His first impressions were decidedly mixed; the exotic sights and sounds of the island appealed to his sense of adventure, but this was somewhat tempered by the exorbitant cost of living, coupled with his suspicion of Kramer being little allayed by the seemingly sparse workload on offer, 'I have no hours, no office, one story assignment a week, and I am 98% on my own all the time' (Thompson 1997, p. 203). His accommodation harkened back to his Air Force days and his Gulf of Mexico beach hut retreat, Xanadu, with Thompson once more choosing a dilapidated beach pillbox with no running water, situated just yards from the pristine shoreline. The lack of basic facilities was not enough to discourage Thompson from living out his romantic fantasy of

the freewheeling expatriate writer in the sun that he had inherited from Hemingway and Greene. He quickly settled into a routine that started with an early morning swim within earshot of his new home, followed by a fresh fruit breakfast, washed down with several cups of coffee, at the San Juan Intercontinental hotel. The rest of the day was spent either working on his latest assignment or, as proved to be more often the case, indulging his taste for rum whilst lounging on the beach.

Never one to be content with his own company, Thompson quickly sought out Bob Bone and William Kennedy at the *San Juan Star*. Kennedy was writing his first novel at the time, *The Angels and Sparrows*, and all-night conversations about writing and literature soon became commonplace between the pair. In a repeat of his time in New York, he also looked to his old Louisville circle of friends to see if he could entice any of them to join him in San Juan, and was delighted when Paul Semonin secured a job at the *San Juan Star*. The last and most significant piece of the jigsaw fell into place when Thompson was joined by Sandy Conklin, a former girlfriend of Semonin, who had been attracted to Thompson in New York, prior to his departure for San Juan. The couple spent a week together on the island of Vieques off the coast of Puerto Rico, before Conklin returned to New York, promising to re-join Thompson in the summer. In the meantime, Thompson decided to move with Semonin to a place called Loiza Aldea, a small community outside San Juan, whose inhabitants were descendants from African slaves. Although only accessible by ferryboat, the location attracted Thompson primarily for two reasons: the picturesque beach hut with cheap rent, and the rumour that Loiza Aldea was a hotbed of voodoo worship.

He had no sooner settled into his new residence when all of his worst fears regarding *El Sportivo* were confirmed. After only a few weeks of operating, Philip Kramer was bankrupt, and as editor and publisher of *El Sportivo*, it was clear that the magazine had no future. Thompson had already become resentful of his position as sportswriter when he

realised that the magazine's sports coverage started, and ended, with bowling. Now he was unemployed again, and once more the financial woe that plagued his time in New York returned to spoil his Caribbean venture, with Thompson again turning to his correspondence to vent his frustration, this time in a letter to Ann Schoelkopf, who had previously helped him following his dismissal from the *Middletown Daily Record*:

Kramer is a liar, cheat, passer of bad checks, welshing shyster, and otherwise foul. At the moment I'm resorting to the National Labor Relations Board for my March 1 to 15 pay-check . . . Jesus, I want FOOD! Rum is not enough. I shall entitle my story 'Rum Is not Enough.' Or 'Not by Rum Alone.' I am 13 miles from San Juan in a negro community and not a goat-sucking soul speaks English. I must have FOOD – the swine seem to think I'm above eating! Jesus ate – why can't I? (Thompson 1998, pp. 209-210)

Despite the self-deprecating articulation of his very real hardship, there is suggestion for the first time that Thompson was beginning to think of his Puerto Rican experience in terms of material for a new book. While he had not entirely given up on *Prince Jellyfish*, he realised that he was facing an uphill battle to get it published. He was tired of receiving form letters rejecting his manuscript with little in the way of explanation as to why it failed to garner any interest from the publisher in question. When he received a detailed letter from the esteemed editor, Angus Cameron, that actually offered some constructive criticism, Thompson replied with a note of gratitude in his own unique manner:

I want to thank you for your meaningful and perceptive comments on my manuscript . . . It's been said, I know, that most editors are boobs, cretins and witless crayfish who have edged their jobs through some devious means made possible by the slothful and incestuous nature of the World of Publishing. Ha! Let me say now, Mr. Cameron, that if more editors write letters like yours, the people who say these wretched things will certainly be laughing out of the other side of their mouths. Just where do they get the gall to talk like that? (Thompson 1998, p. 208)

Whatever thoughts that Thompson had regarding fiction, his dire financial status dictated that his attention should be directed towards more immediate and practical efforts. The free-lance market was still available to him, and this time he had the luxury of his deal with Louisville's *Courier-Journal* to guarantee some hope of an income.

He did not need to look far to find a story for his home newspaper. The voodoo associations with Loiza Aldea were tailor-made for Thompson. The unorthodox and ethically questionable methodology that he employed in producing the finished article would later become a feature of Gonzo journalism, but it initially left his housemate and friend Paul Semonin rather bemused:

The headline was something like 'Louisvillian in Voodoo Country.' Hunter did some interviews with me, but then when he showed me the draft of the article, every single quote from me was totally fabricated. I said, 'Hunter, that's not what I said.' But he sent it off and it was published. 'Voodoo Country' is something that will grab the eye of any reader and pull him into the story, and Hunter was a master at that. That's what purpose his exaggerations and his buffoonery served – fantastic, eye-grabbing stuff for the reader. (Semonin in Wenner 2008, p. 47)

In order to maximise the return on any good story, Thompson would send alternative versions of each article to a variety of newspapers. He managed to get the *New York Herald Tribune* to accept the voodoo story, along with another on the island of Vieques. Other successful pitches saw his stories published in the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Milwaukee Journal*. Despite this, his income was still paltry and irregular. When the *Courier-Journal* sent him on assignment to cover Mardi Gras in Charlotte Amalie, capital of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Thompson could not afford accommodation, and resorted to sleeping on a beach. He even undertook several free-lance modelling assignments in an effort to help shore up his finances.

At the beginning of May 1960, Sandy Conklin returned to Puerto Rico as Thompson's 'common-law wife'. He had made it clear to her in their prior correspondence that any attempt to join him would have to be on the condition that she support herself, as he was in no position to do so, with his erratic income. Conklin had just about settled into her new surroundings, when Thompson and Semonin were arrested and jailed after they dined at a restaurant and left without paying the bill. The entire incident was further exacerbated by Thompson's contentious attitude once apprehended by the law, which revealed another side of his character to Semonin:

They put us in jail in San Juan. And the thing I remember about this is Hunter, at three o'clock in the morning, standing before the judge and answering the judge's request about whether we had something to say. And Hunter was talking about how the police were Nazis and that it was an outrage that we were treated this way. He immediately projected it into an extreme, fascistic act. Looking back, that was the model for what I'd call his paranoia. But it's much more active than paranoia, because he creates the drama and escalates everything to a point that's far beyond the realm of reality. It goes back into that impulse he had for street theatre. (Semonin in McKeen 2008, pp. 57-58)

This inclination towards manufacturing chaos from the most innocuous of situations underlines much of Thompson's creative technique, and is very much a cornerstone of Gonzo Journalism. Although the full realisation of Gonzo as a literary approach was a number of years away, the seeds of its development were already evident in Puerto Rico. The restaurant incident is a perfect example of Thompson's implementation of Oswald Spengler's theory about those who impose themselves on reality through action as opposed to thought. In New York, Thompson felt that his failure to produce quality fiction was connected to a lack of necessary imposition on reality through action. Now that he had discovered a suitable stage setting amidst the sultry decadence of Puerto Rico, all that was required was for Thompson to decide on the precise moment to put Spengler's theory to

the test. The furore created by the restaurant incident in that sense had worked to perfection. The fact that it involved a confrontation with the authorities was an added bonus, for it allowed him to channel his latent anger at his incarceration as a teenager in Louisville, and strike out at any perceived injustice, whether merited or otherwise.

The episode is also significant in that it marked the end of Thompson's stint in Puerto Rico. Although William Kennedy had to mediate with the authorities in order to secure bail for Thompson and Semonin, they were still facing possible prison sentences for breach of the peace and resisting arrest. It was a fate that neither of the two was willing to accept, and they immediately set about their departure from the island. Thompson and Conklin had already set their sights on travelling to Europe, having been tempted by the lifestyle championed by their friend Gene McGarr, who was studying in Spain on a Fulbright scholarship. The destination was also appealing to Semonin, and together they mulled over how best to get there on a limited budget. A solution quickly arrived in the form of charter boat captain Donald Street, whom Thompson had met in a bar. He invited the trio to help him sail his fifty-five-foot boat, *Isle Aire*, to Bermuda, and they eagerly accepted his offer. The venture also ignited an idea with Thompson and Semonin that they could sail from Bermuda to Europe in much the same manner. Once aboard the *Isle Aire* however, trouble quickly brewed between Thompson and Street:

Sandy and Semonin pitched in and did what the skipper said. Hunter would have none of it. When Street asked him to do something, Hunter dragged his feet or asked why it had to be done at all. It soon became clear that *Isle Aire* wasn't big enough for Street and Hunter. As tension mounted, Hunter sat at the bow while Street was at the stern; if Street moved forward for any reason, Hunter moved aft. They even ate at different times. (Perry 2004, p. 52)

After almost three weeks at sea, the voyage ended in dramatic fashion with their chaotic arrival in a storm-lashed Bermuda. Such was their haste to disembark the *Isle Aire*, the

group somehow managed to circumvent both customs and immigration officials, leaving their existence on the island unknown to the authorities.

The situation quickly deteriorated when Thompson and Semonin discovered that there was little or no hope of them joining any of the few ships bound for Europe due to their inexperience at sea. In an effort to capitalise on the situation, and possibly to change their luck, Thompson wrote an article about their story for Bermuda's *Royal Gazette Weekly*, entitled 'They Hoped to Reach Spain but Are Stranded in Bermuda: Trip of Americans Who Left Virgin Islands Three Weeks Ago,' which was published accompanied by a photo of the trio. The move proved to be a disastrous mistake. It immediately alerted Immigration Officials to their presence on the island, and they were subsequently ordered to leave Bermuda or face deportation. After an unsuccessful plea to the consul, Thompson, Conklin and Semonin resigned to their fate, and returned to New York by the end of July 1960.

Thompson's Caribbean adventure may have been over, but he was far from washing his hands entirely of the experience. It had left him with rich material with which to work, and he fully intended on incorporating it into his latest writing project with a renewed vigour. The same could not be said for his attitude towards journalism, and although he was still freelancing to provide some means of an income, the entire debacle with Kramer at *El Sportivo* had, once more, left him thoroughly discouraged with the profession. He was still persistent in his dealings with publishers however, with Grove Press being his latest target in an effort to get *Prince Jellyfish* published. His accompanying letter to the editor departed from his usual brash appraisal of his novel in favour of a more sedate analysis of its worth:

This is to introduce you to Prince Jellyfish, a manuscript that seems to amuse no one but myself . . . Naturally, the damn thing has its faults. But after reading it tonight – having not laid eyes on it for six months – I think most of its faults are balanced by an overall liveliness

that, to me, is damned refreshing. Contemporary literature, hag-ridden as it is with boredom and despair, could certainly do with a breath of fresh air. I'm in no position to guarantee that *Prince Jellyfish* will emerge as a panacea for all our literary ills. At best, it is no more than a minor novel. But it's not dull, and I think its chief merit is a romping, rudderless pace that reflects – with overtones of warped laughter – the sad and pompous lunacy of our times. (Thompson 1998, p. 220)

When he received yet another rejection letter from Grove Press, he finally decided to move on from the novel, declaring to William Kennedy that he would 'chalk that year up to experience' (Thompson 1998, p. 222), and that it was time to begin working on the 'Great Puerto Rican Novel' (Thompson 1998, p. 222). He had contacted Kennedy upon hearing that his novel, *The Angels and Sparrows*, had also been rejected, a development which markedly affected Thompson far more than that arising from his own novel's failure. Rather than becoming accustomed to such rejection concerning *Prince Jellyfish*, Thompson's disquiet instead arose out of a genuine concern for Kennedy, to whom he confessed 'I know you were much more emotionally involved than I was in mine, and the idea that some lackwit quipster could sit up there and stick a mimeographed reject note on that much physical, mental and emotional effort is just about more than I can tolerate' (Thompson 1998, pp. 222-223). Kennedy's rejection no doubt also reminded Thompson of just how high the bar was set and that, if he wanted to make a success of his writing, he would have to invest far more in his next venture compared to that of his previous effort, which in itself had been no easy task. Thompson, to his advantage, still had time to hone his craft, and at twenty-three years of age, as compared to Kennedy's thirty, he was not about to panic just yet.

The urge to travel however was ever present, with Thompson ruminating on a variety of possible destinations, most of which were selected due to their potential for excitement and adventure. Cuba emerged as an early favourite. Fidel Castro and Ernesto

Che Guevara's exploits had taken place a little over a year earlier, and the image of the Guerrilla fighter in the Sierra Maestra Mountains, fighting to overthrow the Batista regime, greatly appealed to Thompson's romantic sensibilities. The connection with Hemingway, who had departed Cuba for Ketchum, Idaho in 1959, served to only further strengthen Thompson's desire to travel to the country and find work. Yet it quickly proved to be a short-lived dream for Thompson; his financial constraints coupled with a dearth of realistic job opportunities all but eliminated a return to the Caribbean. By September 1960, an alternative plan came into being, with Thompson deciding to travel across America with Paul Semonin. Sandy Conklin had gone to Florida for two months to run her mother's travel agency, but she planned on meeting up with Thompson once finished. The first part of the duo's trip involved delivering a new car to Seattle for a car agency, after which the goal was to reach San Francisco and find work. Once they set out though, the journey morphed into a form of homage to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*:

Their first rule of the road was to pick up every hitchhiker. In western Kansas, Semonin stopped for a man carrying a five-gallon gas can. When the hitchhiker got into the backseat, he flipped the latches on the can to reveal it was stuffed with clothes. 'No one will pick you up if they think you're a hitchhiker,' he explained. 'You have to be a motorist in distress.' Hunter smelled a story and interviewed the man about the difficulty of getting rides. When they neared a signpost that proved they were in the middle of nowhere, Hunter made Semonin stop and take a picture of the interviewee with his thumb out, looking forlorn. (Perry 2004, p. 53)

Given their westward destination, and the nature of their jaunt along the way, the Beat Generation connotations are unsurprising. Despite the presence in San Francisco of many of the movement's luminaries, Thompson's interest did not extend beyond exploring their North Beach haunt, where Lawrence Ferlinghetti operated the infamous City Lights Bookstore. His most immediate concern was to find work; having secured temporary

accommodation in an apartment leased by John Clancy, a friend from his stint in New York. Clancy was moving to a new home in Berkeley, and he allowed Thompson and Semonin to stay in the vacated apartment until the last few days of the lease expired (Thompson 1998, p. 231). The work problem was not as easily solved, with Thompson applying for all manner of jobs, from bartender to encyclopaedia salesman. Regardless of the position, he met with rejection across the board. He even set aside his bitter memories of *El Sportivo* to pursue writing for a city newspaper, targeting both the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. While his application to the former was unsuccessful, the latter did not even acknowledge him, prompting Thompson to send editor Abe Mellinkoff an Orwellian inspired denouncement entitled *Down and Out in San Francisco*:

City of hills and fog and water, bankers and boobs – Republicans all . . . city of no money except what you find at the General Delivery window, and somehow it's always enough – city, like all cities, of lonely women, lost souls, and people slowly going under. City of newspapers for Nixon ('careful now, don't upset the balance of terror') . . . where you talk with editors and news directors and creative directors and hear over and over again how easy and necessary it is to sell out . . . (Thompson 1998, pp. 237-238)

While Thompson was clearly angered and frustrated by the failure of his continued efforts to find work, there was now also a perceptible political dimension to his writing, which was undoubtedly due to the extraordinary political circus that was unfolding before an electrified nation, namely the first televised presidential debates between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy. These two candidates would come to play a huge role in Thompson's political awakening, with Nixon in particular serving as the Hunter Figure's arch nemesis, personifying 'The Death of the American Dream'. Given the political turmoil that was set to define the Sixties era, it was inevitable that politics would become an integral aspect of the Hunter Figure *persona*, with his Outlaw stance positioning him as a radical foe of the political *status quo*.

The massive publicity surrounding the four televised debates generated an average audience of some sixty million viewers, exposing the candidates to an unprecedented level of public scrutiny. When the black and white images beamed across the country there was a stark contrast in appearance between the two contenders. Nixon was recovering from illness and appeared gaunt, not to mention ill at ease, while Kennedy was confident, energetic and relaxed. It proved to be a pivotal moment in American politics that sent shockwaves across the political spectrum, culminating in Kennedy's victory that November. The power of television had permanently altered the nature of electoral campaigns, marking the end of the Eisenhower era, and ushering in the golden age of Kennedy's Camelot. Thompson delighted in Nixon's downfall, but he was not so enthused with the way the debates had been conducted, particularly with regards to the role of the press, a concern which he made known to the editor of *Time* after the final televised debate:

The questions to the candidates have been, for the most part, nothing more than harmless cues, devoid of weight, meaning or perception. When you realize all the questions that could have been asked, all the fraud, quackery and evasion that might have been held up to merciless inspection . . . it raises the question that perhaps the press is no longer capable of fulfilling or even recognizing its responsibility to the nation it serves. (Thompson 1998, p. 234-5)

Thompson's acute observation of the inadequacies of the campaign trail coverage foreshadows his own eventual foray into the arena of political journalism, and indeed reveals the very issues that would underpin his own brand of Gonzo political commentary. That eventuality however would only come to fruition with the re-emergence of Richard Nixon in 1968, but Thompson would later point to the televised presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy as a moment of great importance in his political awakening:

That was when I first understood that the world of Ike and Nixon was vulnerable . . . and that Nixon, along with all the rotting bullshit he stood for, might conceivably be beaten . .

. and it had never occurred to me that politics in America had anything to do with human beings. It was Nixon's game – a world of old hacks and legalized thievery, a never-ending drone of bad speeches and worse instincts . . . With Nixon as the only alternative, Kennedy was beautiful – whatever he was. It didn't matter. The most important thing about Kennedy, to me and millions of others, was that his name wasn't Nixon. (Thompson 2001, p. 260)

In many ways the presidential election of 1960 was emblematic of an entire generational shift in the national psyche, a cultural tsunami of change that would sweep across the country over the coming decade, altering virtually every facet of the American way of life in the process.

However, the opening salvo which heralded this sweeping transformation and the dawn of the Sixties, in terms of a cultural *Zeitgeist*, had taken place at the beginning of 1960, long before Kennedy usurped Nixon at the polls the following November. The incident in question occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1st, when four black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College refused to leave a segregated lunch-counter in the local Woolworth's store. The sit-in set off a wave of similar protests across the nation, and became a defining moment in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. Seemingly overnight, what had been bubbling underground for years, came rushing to the surface, but now the voice of protest, dissent and rebellion had spread to form a multitude of different voices and groups, each with their own story and vision of change. In San Francisco that summer, protestors at City Hall adopted the sit-in as a non-violent approach to voicing their opposition to the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, but what started off as a peaceful event descended into a brutal confrontation with the police. Many of the attendees were students at nearby Berkeley University, which was becoming a hotbed of civil liberties activists, and such activism was rapidly spreading to other campuses. America was now bearing witness to the rise of what

would become known as The New Left, whose underlying policy was to take to the streets and actively engage the opposition:

The common chord in Greensboro and San Francisco was direct action. Following these precedents, what came to call itself ‘the movement’ was a fusion of collective will and moral style. The movement didn’t simply demand, it *did*. By taking action, not just a position, it affirmed the right to do so; by refusing to defer, it deprived the authorities of authority itself. How did you ‘join’ the movement? An old-fashioned question from unhip reporters and congressmen, to which the answer was: You put your body on the line. Actions were believed to be the guarantees and preconditions of ideas. (Gitlin 1993, p. 84)

If action was the operating mantra, then no writer was more suitable to the call than Hunter S. Thompson, whose own work ethic operated on the same principle of shaping reality through action, and then writing about it. The road ahead for Thompson however would prove to be as convoluted and challenging as that of The New Left, and while San Francisco would ultimately feature predominantly as a focal point for their respective endeavours, it had yet to deliver for Thompson as 1960 drew to a close. Tired of his fruitless quest for employment, his thoughts now rested solely on completing his Caribbean novel, but first he would have to settle on a suitable place that would facilitate such a commitment, and for a struggling writer in California there was really only one possible destination. Directly south of San Francisco, amidst the ancient redwood groves of the Santa Lucia Mountains and overlooking the Pacific, lay a territory of legendary repute – Big Sur.

The area was a veritable haven for a motley crew of artists and social misfits, but one name above all had become synonymous with Big Sur’s hedonistic reputation, and that was Henry Miller. The notorious iconoclast lived there between 1944 and 1962, during which he produced some of his most revered writing including *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy. Much of his work was banned in America, with the frank sexual content falling foul of obscenity laws. Thompson was a

great admirer of Miller's work, and the prospect of living in the vicinity of such a literary icon proved irresistible. Yet Miller was not the only writer that drew Thompson's attention to Big Sur. He was also eager to meet Dennis Murphy, whose 1958 breakthrough novel *The Sergeant*, had become an acclaimed international bestseller. Murphy was a native of Salinas, a small city just north of Big Sur, and home to literary giant John Steinbeck, of whose following critical blurb featured prominently on the cover of *The Sergeant*:

. . . a remarkable book. It has none of the faults of a young first novelist, faults which took me many years to overcome because I thought they were virtues. I mean verbosity, ornamentation, and a lack of compactness . . . There is a great deal of truth and beauty in this book. (Steinbeck in Murphy 1958, front cover)

Thompson had read Steinbeck, but was unaware of just how close a connection actually existed between the esteemed author and the Murphy family. Indeed, it was one that spanned several generations, beginning with Steinbeck's birth in 1902, as he had been delivered by Dennis Murphy's grandfather Dr. Henry Murphy. Murphy's father was Steinbeck's best friend, with the author allegedly later using Dennis and his brother Michael as the basis for Cal and Aron Trask in *East of Eden*. The Murphy family were prominent in Big Sur, where they operated a large retreat-compound, with the main attraction being its natural hot spring steam baths. Dennis Murphy frequently used the property to play host to his friends, amongst whom he counted various members of the Beat movement. He regularly socialised with Jack Kerouac in particular, who lived for a period in nearby Bixby Canyon, where fellow Beat Lawrence Ferlinghetti had lent him the use of his secluded cabin. Kerouac was battling against alcohol addiction at the time and recounted his experience in the autobiographical novel *Big Sur*. In many ways the Murphy compound was the nerve centre for Big Sur's artistic circle, and upon his arrival there in

November 1960, it did not take long for Thompson to integrate himself into the very heart of the community before permanently leaving his mark as ‘The Outlaw of Big Sur.’

Thompson initially rented a small cabin, the kind of which was scattered all along the coastline, nestled in the shadows of Big Sur’s giant redwood forest. Here he was joined by Sandy Conklin, and as usual money was scarce, with the couple surviving on meagre supplies delivered on credit by the postman, as there was no accessible store within the vicinity. Continuing the long-running practice of inviting his circle of friends to visit, preferably those inclined to bring food and alcohol, Thompson also reached out to the literary community beyond that of the resident Big Sur luminaries, revealing not only his tendency towards projecting an image of the writer at work, but also his desire to be acknowledged as such by those he respected, irrespective of his own lack of success. One such writer that commanded Thompson’s attention was J.P. Donleavy, whose novel *The Ginger Man* had long been a favoured read:

The GM, by the way, had real balls, a rare thing in these twisted times. I heard the priests gave you a rough time with the stage version, but to hell with them. The church is on its last legs and if we deal them blow for blow I think we may prevail. At any rate, let me know if you have anything new in the bookstores. I’m stuck out here, writing the Great Puerto Rican Novel, and I’d like to know if anybody’s running interference for me. If you get to Big Sur, stop in. (Thompson 1998, p. 242)

Donleavy did not respond.

Thompson adopted a slightly different approach in writing to Norman Mailer however, enquiring as to why the author had failed to criticise Nixon in print during the presidential election. When Mailer replied, an appreciative Thompson sent him a copy of Henry Miller’s *The World of Sex*, which had been privately published by Miller in 1959. Accompanying the gift was another letter by Thompson, displaying a touch of the unique humour and daring tone that Mailer would later come to praise:

I appreciated your reply, but, as usual, was a bit dismayed at your picayune defensiveness. You might take a tip from something you once said about James Baldwin: ‘he seems incapable of saying “fuck you” to his readers.’ For whatever it’s worth, I suggest you spend more time writing, and less explaining yourself . . . And if you get to Big Sur, stop by for a beer. There ain’t much to do here, so I have taken to inviting people down and then flogging them into a coma with my riding crop. Between guests, I work on the Great Puerto Rican Novel. Watch for it. (Thompson 1998, p. 256)

Thompson fared better in befriending his neighbours however, with his poverty-stricken situation affording him an unexpected but welcome introduction to Dennis Murphy and his acquaintances. Unable to afford the rent for his cabin, Thompson sought out cheaper accommodation, and was directed to the Murphy compound by Dick Rowan, a photographer friend who lived adjacent to the property. The compound itself was run by Dennis Murphy’s grandmother, who was looking to rent a small annex to the main Big House, as the family home was known. At only \$15 a month, it was ideal for Thompson, who was further delighted to be offered the position as caretaker to the entire property, with the main house being vacated by Mrs. Murphy periodically throughout the spring due to renovations being undertaken as part of an ambitious project to transform the compound. Thompson moved into the annex on February 1st, 1961, and shortly thereafter work began on what would become known as the Esalen Institute.

The brainchild of Michael Murphy and Dick Price, the Esalen Institute was envisaged as a centre ‘devoted to the exploration of human potential’ (Esalen 2011), where a select group of influential figures could ‘develop revolutionary ideas, transformative practices, and innovative art forms’ (Esalen 2011). Focusing largely on the teachings of eastern religions, philosophy and psychology, notable participants included writers Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, Ray Bradbury, Ken Kesey and Joseph Campbell; it also included the Swiss scientist Albert Hofmann, who first synthesised LSD, and the leading advocates of its use: Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. Throughout the sixties, Esalen would become

a sort of countercultural Mecca, a focal point for the leading figures of the movement. Although Thompson's arrival in Big Sur coincided with the genesis of Esalen, the spirit of personal growth and transformation had long been a feature of the community, and it proved to be especially so for the burgeoning Gonzo Journalist.

The first notably evident change to Thompson's writing in Big Sur was in that of his personal correspondence, certain aspects of which stand out due to their eventual use as part of his Gonzo style. In a letter to Paul Semonin, Thompson adopts the *persona* of a 'country Boarmaster' (Thompson 1998, p. 249) who is writing to Semonin on behalf of Mr. Thompson, who has been 'kidnapped' (Thompson 1998, p. 249). Throughout the letter, Thompson repeatedly refers to himself in the third-person, before offering an explanation for his actions bearing a term that would become something of a Gonzo catchphrase: 'Mr. Thompson will probably deny this, but I think he feels a bit insecure these days. As a matter of fact, I think he has The Fear' (Thompson 1998, p. 251). For Thompson, 'The Fear' would become a stock term, alongside that of 'Fear and Loathing', to describe a state of catatonic paralysis, which arises out of a paranoid sense of impending doom, real or imagined, that is fuelled by intoxication. Once more, it was all part of his *persona* development, with altered states, be these through drugs or alcohol, becoming a key identifier of the Hunter Figure *persona*. Indeed, it is in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where it is employed in its most recognizable form, as one of the memorable quotes from Raoul Duke's attorney Dr Gonzo. The use of an adopted *persona* in order to refer to himself in the third person is again a signature device of Thompson's, with the most frequent *persona* adopted in this manner being that of the 'Editor'. Generally, the task of the Editor is to inform the reader of Thompson's supposed incapacitation due to varying degrees of intoxication, ill-health or some other form of crisis, and thus account for the disjointed nature of the accompanying narrative, which is often composed of letters or faxes from Thompson, or straight

transcriptions of his stream of narrative audio recordings, all of which is supposedly compiled under duress and the threat of an impending deadline. Although Thompson initially experiments with this technique in a fictional manner, ironically its most significant use has a basis in truth and accounts for what is considered the birth of Gonzo Journalism, ‘The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved’.

Subsequently Thompson’s use of this technique varies in origination between fiction and reality, once more serving as another example of the blurring of boundaries in Thompson’s Gonzo Journalism. A common variation on this tactic is his use of the Raoul Duke *persona*, who supposedly stands in for Thompson at his behest, with the narrative therefore changing to reflect Duke’s perspective, and thus allowing Thompson to write in a manner that is indicative of Duke’s manic surrealism. These different approaches to *persona* usage foreshadow some key aspects of Thompson’s Hunter Figure *persona*, and anticipate the eventual role it would play in his life and work. His Editor *persona*, distances Thompson’s narrative presence, whilst simultaneously reinforcing the Hunter Figure’s characteristic behaviours and image as those of a besieged figure unable to deliver the story in a conventional manner. It breaks with established norms, subverts the editorial process and otherwise disregards the rules of traditional journalistic practice. That Thompson first experimented with this in a fictional manner, before utilising the technique out of necessity, illustrates the manner in which his writing and life influenced each other interchangeably. In terms of his Duke *persona* standing in as a variation of this approach, it harkens back to Thompson’s habit of utilising various *personae* to write in an unrestrained voice without fear of consequence, a protective device for when he wanted to jab authority in the eye or otherwise escalate his rhetoric in a provocative manner, while attempting to avoid the material consequences of such actions.

Other developments in Thompson's writing were also afoot throughout the spring of 1961. He continuously laboured over his 'Great Puerto Rican Novel', and in a letter dated March 7th, to his former Air Force mentor, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Campbell, Thompson makes one of his first references to the novel as *The Rum Diary*. Yet the most important development came, not through fiction, but rather courtesy of a return to journalism. It was a decision taken by way of necessity rather than desire, with money again being the deciding factor. Thompson had tried to sell some short stories since his arrival in California, but once more it had proven to be a futile exercise. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Campbell recommended that Thompson contact esteemed literary agent Sterling Lord, who had managed to sell Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* to Viking Press. Thompson submitted six stories and one article on Big Sur to Lord, hoping that something of his work would catch the agent's interest. When Lord indicated otherwise however, and decided against representing him as a client, Thompson decided to reimburse Lord for the cost of returning his work, informing him that he had just sold the Big Sur article to a national magazine, as proof of the error of his decision:

Fortunately, the check for the Big Sur article took the sting out of your pompous and moronic rejection of my work. Here's the 20 cents it cost you to send the damn things back. I don't want to feel that I owe you anything, because when I see you I intend to cave in your face and scatter your teeth all over Fifth Avenue. I think we are coming to a day when agents of your sort will serve no useful function except as punching bags. (Thompson 1998, p. 264)

However, when his article, entitled 'Big Sur: The Tropic of Henry Miller', appeared in *Rogue* magazine, the success of breaking onto the national stage would ultimately come at a price.

The original title of Thompson's piece was 'Big Sur: The Garden of Agony', but for publication, this was changed to 'Big Sur: The Tropic of Henry Miller'. Whether this

was an editorial decision or Thompson's own is unclear, but the focus on Miller is pertinent, not only as a reflection of the overall context of the article itself, but also in relation to Miller's return to the forefront of the national consciousness in 1961, due to the U.S. publication of *Tropic of Cancer* by Grove Press. Although the novel was originally published in 1934 by the Obelisk Press in France, it was banned in the U.S. on the basis that its content was obscene and pornographic. However, by 1961, the debate regarding legitimate forms of artistic expression had shifted, particularly after the earlier publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1956 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore, resulting in a much-publicised obscenity trial that ultimately vindicated Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. It was a landmark decision that paved the way for the likes of Miller's work to be reconsidered in a new light. Yet it did not prevent the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* from being challenged, and indeed this proved to be the case, with Grove Press having to defend their decision in another high-profile obscenity trial that took place in September 1961, a month prior to the publication of Thompson's article in *Rogue Magazine*. In light of the furore surrounding Miller's work, and the heightened atmosphere regarding any material that could be interpreted as obscene, it is ironic that not only was Thompson's article published in a magazine that was a market rival of *Playboy*, but also that part of the article itself involved the disclosure of the somewhat controversial escapades of the Big Sur community.

The main focus of the article however centred on Henry Miller, and Thompson's dissection of the mystique attached to the Big Sur name. The end result is an article that is, retrospectively, as illuminating of Thompson himself as it is of the subject matter. In many ways, Big Sur's eccentric community and its enigmatic figurehead proved to be the ideal vehicle for Thompson, affording him the opportunity to exercise his flair for wild language which melded seamlessly with the overall context of the piece itself, forming a perfect

reflection of the spirit of anarchistic freedom that remained a constant association throughout Big Sur's storied history, irrespective of the somewhat inflated truth:

If half the stories about Big Sur were true this place would long since have toppled into the sea, drowning enough madmen and degenerates to make a pontoon bridge of bodies all the way to Honolulu . . . The very earth itself would heave and retch in disgust – and down these long, rocky slopes would come a virtual cascade of nudists, queers, junkies, rapists, artists, fugitives, vagrants, thieves, lunatics, sadists, hermits and human chancres of every description. (Thompson 1998, p. 265)

Indeed, in his analysis of Big Sur's somewhat embellished reputation, Thompson himself was willing to forego the established journalistic rules, inserting fictitious elements into the article in a similar manner to the 'Voodoo Country' story from San Juan. However, while that piece attributed false quotes to Paul Semonin, this time Thompson went one step further and introduced a character from one of his recent short stories, Claude Fink, and cast him as being representative of the constant influx of visitors to Big Sur, especially those who arrive mostly at weekends to harass the locals with questions about the fabled Big Sur nudist colonies, marijuana farms or as in Fink's supposed case, to ask the question 'that drove Miller half crazy: "Ah ha! So you're Henry Miller! Well, my name is Claude Fink and I've come to join the cult of sex and anarchy"' (Thompson 1998, p. 267). Despite Fink's fictional status, the quote itself does contain some element of truth, with Thompson making reference to a renowned article by Mildred Edie Brady that appeared in Harper's magazine in April 1947 entitled 'The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy'. That article sparked intense national interest in Miller's presence in the Big Sur area from the moment of its publication, an interest which had yet to abate by the time of Thompson's arrival over a decade later, affording him a glimpse of the enduring fame and influence that Miller commanded. In many ways, Thompson's acknowledgment of Brady's earlier article was entirely appropriate, as their respective articles document and bookend the phenomena

surrounding Miller's time in Big Sur. Fink may have been adopted from the name of a character in one of Thompson's short stories, but essentially he was another *persona* adopted by Thompson to allow him the freedom of inserting himself into the story, for indeed it was Thompson himself who had been pulled towards the cult of sex and anarchy surrounding Henry Miller's Big Sur. It was becoming increasingly evident that an adopted *persona* was Thompson's preferred technique for making his voice heard within the narrative of his evolving aesthetic practice.

Brady's article focused on the fledgling post-war bohemia that was taking hold in Northern California, from Berkeley and San Francisco and south to Big Sur, examining the seemingly disparate groups that were coming together, which lead her to offer the following explanation as to what exactly bound this movement together into a recognizable entity:

You could describe it, in brief, as a combination of anarchism and certain concepts related to psychoanalysis which together yield a philosophy holding on the one hand that you must abandon the church, the state, and the family (even if you do it, as James Joyce preached, 'by treachery, cunning, and exile'); and on the other offering sex as the source of individual salvation in a collective world that's going to hell. (Brady 1947, p. 03)

Brady identified Henry Miller's arrival in Big Sur in the early 1940's as a catalyst of sorts for this collective, with Miller becoming a pied-piper figurehead to the new literati, not necessarily as a result of any deliberate act on his behalf, but rather, due to his mere presence. Every movement has its figurehead, if not several, and Miller's reputation alone was enough to single him out as a point of reference, with Brady quoting one of the young bohemians as declaring 'we are witnessing here a cultural revival like that around Yeats in Dublin' (Brady 1947, p. 15). Ultimately Brady's article looks beyond the popular opinion amongst the natives that the West Coast bohemian renaissance was nothing more than 'another manifestation of the fringe that has always seemed to cut a little deeper into West Coast communities than elsewhere' (Brady 1947, p. 1), to accurately predicting the

eventual explosion of the countercultural movement that would come to define a generation: 'here in northern California they are shaping up the cultural mecca of the twentieth century' (Brady 1947, p. 1). What Brady cannot predict however, is Henry Miller's abhorrence towards the human carnival that enveloped Big Sur in the process. It is this aspect of Miller's life in Big Sur that piqued Thompson's interest, specifically the dichotomy between Miller's public *persona* and his private self:

Miller did his best to stem the tide, but it was no use. As his fame spread, his volume of visitors mounted steadily. Many of them had not even read his books. They weren't interested in literature, they wanted orgies. And they were shocked to find him a quiet, fastidious and very moral man – instead of the raving sexual beast they'd heard stories about. (Thompson 1998, p. 268)

The observations made here by Thompson clearly illustrate the understanding that he had of the mechanics involved in the cult of celebrity that had enveloped Miller. He identifies the public appetite for controversy and scandal, the potential manner through which literature can create a *persona* in the public sphere, and the ease with which this *persona* can develop beyond the boundaries of the written word. The *Tropic* novels had firmly established Miller's reputation as a voice of unbridled passion, revolting against the puritanical ethos that governed the American way of life, and this was embraced wholeheartedly by the developing counterculture, which hailed Miller as a forerunner of the sexual revolution.

It was not lost on Thompson that Miller, who had written prolifically of the serenity of life in Big Sur, had struggled to cope with the burden of fame that had besieged his once idyllic existence, despite his best efforts to discourage the flood of pilgrims that were now destroying that which he so valued:

He posted a large, insulting sign at the head of his driveway, cultivating a rude manner to make visitors ill at ease, and devised elaborate schemes to keep them from discovering where he lived. But nothing worked. They finally overwhelmed him, and in the process they put Big Sur squarely on the map of national curiosities. (Thompson 1998, p. 269)

In detailing the rise of Miller's profile, and the subsequent siege of visitors to pay homage to their literary idol, Thompson creates a portrait that is astonishingly prophetic of his own eventual profile. The essential difference however, which was already clearly evident in *Big Sur*, is that unlike Miller, Thompson not only enjoyed the glare of publicity, but actively craved it. His *persona* would not be created to put people off, but rather, to enable his writing in an original and vibrant style.

In this sense, the latter half of Thompson's article for *Rogue* magazine proved to be a most effective exercise in garnering that attention. Writing with absolutely unapologetic conviction, Thompson crafts a portrait of the Big Sur way of life that undeniably serves as a portentous marker of his future direction as a writer. Though bold enough to compromise his position within the community for the sake of the story, Thompson's approach in presenting this material was not so much in the manner of a sensationalist portrayal of the people and their actions, but rather one that was simply motivated by a desire to ascertain the truth behind the myth, for good or ill. Beginning with the powerful associations of the Big Sur name, with its connotations of hedonistic revelry and a wanton dismissal of uprightness, Thompson conceded that this reputation was not without its merit, though it was largely the preserve of the thrill-seeking weekend visitor, pinpointing Murphy's Hot Springs as being the principal location for much of their carousing:

During the day most people observe the partition that separates the men's side from the women's, but once the sun goes down the baths are as coeducational as a cathouse New Year's Eve party, and often twice as wild. This is the glamorous side of Big Sur, the side

that occasionally matches the myth – and none of it is hidden away in the hills, as a lot of people seem to think. (Thompson 1998, pp. 271-272)

In his analysis of the long-term residents, he was no less colourful in his choice of words. Writing of Henry Miller's personal secretary, Emil White, Thompson claimed that people frequently mistook him for 'a hermit or a sex fiend' (Thompson 1998, p. 272), with the owner of the Big Sur Inn, Helmut Deetjan, described as looking 'more like a junkie than a lot of the hopheads who've been on the stuff for years' (Thompson 1998, p. 272). Despite these provocative remarks, it is precisely these individuals who represent the *other* Big Sur, a side that Thompson considered to be truly fascinating, particularly in relation to the almost pioneer-like sense of determination and independence that distinguished the long-term residents from the ever-changing influx of tourists to the area.

To reinforce this difference, he delves into the harsh reality of living in an isolated, lonely wilderness, which is so far removed from the norms of regular urban life that it takes a special kind of individual that can truly tolerate Big Sur for any significant length of time. Having come to Big Sur and experienced this struggle for himself, Thompson made no attempt to gloss over the details, offering candid anecdotes that thoroughly dispel the romantic notion that life amongst the small bohemian colony served as an easy escape from the confines of Middle America. It is interesting that here he also chose to include a quote from Henry Miller, one that originally served as a description of the typical Big Sur resident, but which also reads as though a testament from Miller to Thompson himself:

These young men, usually in their late twenties or early thirties . . . are not concerned with undermining a vicious system, but with leading their own lives – on the fringe of society . . . None of them adhering to any party, doctrine, cult or ism, but all imbued with very strong, very definite ideas as to how life can be lived in these evil times . . . Putting above everything – human dignity . . . Stone deaf when asked to toe the line. (Miller in Thompson 1998, p. 274)

Despite the passing of time, little had changed in the intervening years since Miller's original statement, the central ethos of which certainly struck a chord within Thompson. He recognised in it, not just his own reflection, but also that of the community around him, some of whom he counted amongst his friends. The majority of these individuals were either artists or writers, who spent their time largely engrossed in their own work, unperturbed by the events of the outside world. Some even went so far as to be entirely self-sufficient, living off the land without so much as electricity. Having grown accustomed to living not only geographically, but also socially, apart from the rest of society, a tangible resistance to outsiders was prevalent amongst the group.

Indeed, this is a sentiment to which Thompson repeatedly returned throughout the article, acknowledging the tension and distrust that existed between the community and uninvited visitors. In light of this observation, his decision to paint a thoroughly dysfunctional picture of Murphy's Hot Springs in the closing paragraphs of the article, proved to be a high-risk manoeuvre. Not only was Thompson breaking the trust afforded to him by the community, but he was also undermining the Murphy family who were in the process of launching the Esalen Institute. The image created by Thompson was precisely that which they had sought to leave behind:

This place is a real menagerie . . . There are only two legitimate wives on the property; the other females are either mistresses, 'companions,' or hopeless losers . . . the late Dr Murphy, conceived this place as a great health spa, a virtual bastion of decency and clean living. But something went wrong. During World War Two it became a haven for draft dodgers, and over the years it has evolved into a lonely campground for the morally deformed, a Pandora's box of human oddities, and a popular sinkhole of idle decadence. (Thompson 1998, p. 276-7)

This succinct but damning description firmly put Thompson on a collision course with his landlord, Vinnie Murphy, the matriarch of the Murphy family. The article carried with it

the inescapable sense that he was unable to exist harmoniously with any figure of authority. He did have a certain amount of breathing space before publication of the article however, but his increasingly unpredictable and erratic behaviour in the intervening period ensured the prospect of a confrontation to be inevitable.

The Big Sur article was a watershed moment for Thompson on many levels, with several aspects to the article revealing the changes developing within his writing, in conjunction with affording an insight into his ever-growing identification with individualist anarchism and the cult of personality. However, there is one particular statement from the article that is definitive in terms of illustrating the underlying reasoning behind the radical change that was now also manifesting itself in terms of Thompson's outward *persona*: 'this place is a mythmaker's paradise, so vast and so varied that the imagination is tempted to run wild at the sight of it' (Thompson 1998, p. 265). Big Sur afforded Thompson the freedom to do just that, and if he was looking for a signal to indulge his narcissism and exercise his penchant for self-mythologizing, then the check for \$350 that he received from *Rogue* magazine proved to be exactly what he needed: 'it was not so much the money, but the feeling that I had finally cracked something, the first really valid indication that I might actually make a living at this goddamn writing' (Thompson 1998, p. 278). Emboldened by a fresh impetus, Thompson immediately focused on that which he deemed to be emblematic of one who bore the mantle of the righteous outlaw, a move that not only involved strengthening his psychological identification with the figure of the outsider, but also of publicly redefining his self-image in terms of a calculated and assiduous effort to embrace the respective visual motifs that emanated the necessary mix of threatening menace with a brooding romantic idealism: the Hunter Figure had graduated from being 'Billy The Kid of Louisville' to that of 'The Outlaw of Big Sur.'

Thompson had already previously demonstrated his inclination towards reinvention through his writing, utilising it as a means to create a fictive retelling of his life and self as he saw fit. In this sense, it is a natural progression that he would extend this process towards altering and shaping the image that he presented beyond the confines of the written word. It is valuable here to consider Thompson's previous thoughts in relation to his discussion of Oswald Spengler, and the differentiation between men of action versus men of thought, with particular reference to Thompson's explanation of what he termed 'the psychology of imposition' (Thompson 1998, p. 128):

This theory holds that the most overriding of all human desires is the need to amount to something. I'm not talking about the old Horatio Alger gimmick, but the more basic desire to know that your life means something. As Faulkner says, writing is his way of saying 'Kilroy was here,' of imposing himself, however briefly, on reality. If only for an instant, the image of the man is imposed on the chaotic mainstream of life and it remains there forever: order out of chaos, meaning out of meaninglessness. (Thompson 1998, p. 128)

This offers a clear picture of the value that writing had for Thompson, affording him the means to bring definition to his life, and to forge something of value and purpose in what was essentially the sublimation of his existential nihilism into an aesthetic affirmation of life. The power of words to bring order and meaning, along with truth, out of the maelstrom of existence, is a recurring theme throughout Thompson's work as is the view of life as art. What sets Thompson apart, however, is the extent to which he was willing to go in pursuit of this ideal, particularly in terms of utilising the self as an intrinsic medium for creative expression, to be moulded at will in a manner wherein author and text are simultaneously created and defined in a mutually symbiotic relationship of coexistence:

Hunter was always a canvas in action. He was constantly turning himself into body art and creating the *persona* that made him different. Everybody else was a writer; Hunter was a walking vaudeville act. (Brinkley 2005, p. 36)

This of course was a natural extension of Thompson's predilection in Louisville for utilising street theatre as a means to stage elaborate pranks in conjunction with the method-acting quality that he frequently displayed for similar dramatic effect.

In *Big Sur*, Thompson began to realise the power of utilising these qualities, with his own self-mythologizing becoming a gateway towards a higher goal. Through Henry Miller, he witnessed the manner in which an author's *persona* could outgrow the boundaries of their own work, becoming synonymous with nonconformist revolt in the public lexicon, which in turn fuelled the propagation of a discourse that elevated him to a status of near mythic proportions. That this would appeal to Thompson is unsurprising, in light of his early childhood fascination with myths and legends, particularly in relation to the heroes of the Wild West:

. . . when he was growing up in Kentucky, he was obsessed with tall tales. He would read about Mike Fink and Paul Bunyan and Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Jesse James, Annie Oakley, Billy the Kid. He didn't care whether these stories were true or not – those *personas* became larger than life. (Brinkley 2005, p. 36)

It is this same larger-than-life trait that Thompson invoked in his later portrayal of sports stars and politicians as the modern-day heroes and villains within the new pantheon of American mythology. The common denominator here is the enduring power associated with these figures, that special quality that burns into the collective consciousness of man and survives there for generations:

Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mold-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that they tyranny of 'the rat race' is not yet final. (Thompson 2003, p. 406)

A similar dynamic lies behind Thompson's life-long belief that *The Great Gatsby* was the quintessential 'Great American Novel'. The root of his attraction to the story lies in Jay

Gatsby's relentless mythmaking in order to obscure his own poor past and reinvent himself as a successful businessman, albeit through underhand means: so the attraction of the story to Thompson is very clear.

It is telling that Thompson dismissed Horatio Alger as a 'gimmick' (Thompson 1998. p. 128), echoing the critique of the Horatio Alger myth at the heart of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. Horatio Alger encapsulated a vision of the American dream into his stories, wherein the central protagonist, typically a young man of sturdy moral fibre, attains success through hard work, perseverance and the guidance of a successful mentor. The most notable of Alger's contemporaries to satirise this ideological message was Mark Twain, whose short story *Poor Little Stephen Girard*, presented a young boy who tried to emulate the success of the hero at the centre of a typical Alger-type tale, as recounted by his uncle. Unlike the story's protagonist however, he discovers that picking up pins outside a bank does not lead to the offer of a job and marriage to the bank owner's daughter. Instead the banker confronts him threatening: 'those pins belong to the bank, and if I catch you hanging around here anymore I'll set the dog on you' (Twain 1879, pp. 183-184). It was this reality that had confronted Thompson in Louisville, the poor boy who was victimised by the system, in stark contrast to his wealthy friends who went unpunished. This feeling of being continuously pitted against the system followed him throughout his pursuit of a career in journalism, where, despite his belief that he had the necessary merit to be successful, he consistently met with closed doors and rejection. In *The Great Gatsby* however, Thompson revelled in the manner through which Fitzgerald built upon Twain's rejection of the Horatio Alger myth by incorporating the prospect of the second chance, one where the rules imposed by the system could be discarded entirely, and where past failings were obscured, if not entirely erased.

Unlike Gatsby however, the Hunter Figure, as envisaged by Thompson, embraces the badge of criminality, turning his prior ostracism in Louisville as a ‘criminal’ to his own advantage. He is the righteous outlaw on the edge of society, more sinned against than sinning, using his position to ridicule and lambaste the establishment and their hypocrisy. It is worth noting the parallel here between Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider*, a text that heavily influenced Thompson, and the underlying central tenet of Gonzo Journalism:

The Outsider’s case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnameable impulses, yet they keep up a pretence, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an Outsider because he stands for Truth. (Wilson 1978, p. 23)

The single consistent trope throughout Thompson’s Gonzo Journalism is his pursuit of truth, albeit largely by unconventional means and through subverting and rejecting the established and accepted systems of control designed to impose a certain semblance of order: an outlook that runs the gamut from his stance on social and political institutions to the systems within literature itself. For Thompson, the existing system of order was either built on a foundation of lies, or was simply no longer applicable to a society that was undergoing a rapid change. In *Big Sur*, his writing had yet to develop to the point of displaying a wholesale subversion of literary rules, having thus far merely expressed an innate desire to do so in a manner that echoed William Blake’s seminal statement: ‘I must Create a System or be enslaved by another Man’s’ (Blake in Greenblatt 2006, p. 77). What Thompson did manage to publicly demonstrate in *Big Sur* was his pursuit of another of Blake’s assertions: ‘the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom’ (Blake in Greenblatt 2006, p. 113). Thompson’s behaviour as ‘The Outsider of *Big Sur*’ alarmed many considerably in the community, and, even though *Big Sur* was considered far from being a bastion of bourgeois complacency, it was still very much bound by its own set of rules,

albeit ones that were very much a departure from the traditional puritan ethos of Middle America. Even so, Thompson's accelerating sense of social alienation and disregard for propriety bore the hallmark of the Outsider figure evoked in Colin Wilson's writing:

For the bourgeois, the world is fundamentally an orderly place, with a disturbing element of the irrational, the terrifying, which his preoccupation with the present usually permits him to ignore. For the Outsider, the world is not rational, not orderly. When he asserts his sense of anarchy in the face of bourgeois' complacent acceptance, it is not simply the need to cock a snook at respectability that provokes him; it is a distressing sense *that truth must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order. (Wilson 1978, p. 25)

Herein lies the intersection between image and text, in terms of their inherent significance to Thompson; the figure of the Outsider embodies the same set of values that he believed to be synonymous with writing, these being the creation of order out of chaos by way of dedication to the truth through language. The Outsider rejects the complacent acceptance of the bourgeoisie, in the same vein as Thompson rejects the complacency of the Rotarian press, citing the concept of journalism espoused by Joseph Pulitzer that is engraved on a bronze plaque outside the Times Tower in New York as being representative of all that is sacred in regard to the role of the journalist in society. In *Big Sur*, there was a growing alignment between these respective realms in terms of aspects of Thompson's identity and writing, a convergence whose ultimate synthesis would eventually give rise to Thompson's own legendary creation: Gonzo Journalist Raoul Duke, the next phase of Thompson's mythmaking process.

In *Big Sur*, however, Thompson's transformation caused deep misgivings in some of the residents. They had already come to experience the darker, confrontational aspect of his personality due to the gleeful enthusiasm with which he had embraced his role as caretaker of the Murphy compound, carrying a bullwhip and a truncheon as he patrolled

the property, and radiating an overt threat of violence that did not sit well with the more sedate, pacifist spirit of the hot springs. Amongst Thompson's neighbours, one of the most notable figures that looked askance upon his exuberant behaviour was musician, Joan Baez, who had just released her self-titled debut album of folk songs, and would soon become one of the most important figures in the roots revival and a leading advocate of the civil rights movement. Incidentally, it was with the help of Baez that one of Thompson's musical heroes came to national prominence when she covered two of his songs, *Don't Think Twice It's Alright* and *With God on Our Side*, on her hit album *Joan Baez in Concert, Part 2* released in 1963. That musician was none other than Bob Dylan, to whom Thompson later dedicated *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. It was also in the vicinity of Big Sur where Baez' brother-in-law, Richard Farina, author of *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me*, would later tragically lose his life in a motorcycle accident. Farina's book had just been published by Random House, having been overseen by editor Jim Silberman, and copy editor Margaret Harrell, both of whom would also be heavily involved in the publication of *Hell's Angels*. Harrell later recalled in her memoir that she presented Thompson with a signed copy of *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me*, only for Thompson to attack the literary quality of the book, and throw his copy against the wall (Harrell 2011, p. 111).

It was this same quickness of temper and predilection towards violence that separated Thompson from the gentler orientation of his neighbours, many of whom were embracing an ethos that which would come to define the hippie generation: a peculiar smorgasbord of folk music, eastern religion, psychedelic drugs and non-violent protest. Thompson, on the other hand, liked nothing better than to punctuate the Big Sur serenity with everything from drunken outbursts to bouts of gunfire in the middle of the night, where he targeted raccoons with blasts from a 12-gauge shotgun, and simultaneously shattered

his neighbours' nerves in the process. The drunken antics were considered tolerable however, in comparison to the gunfire, a growing obsession that once more stemmed from his Hemingway-like fascination with blood sports. It was that activity which ultimately proved to be the barrier that ensured that Thompson and Baez remained somewhat distant in their neighbourly relationship, with Baez 'born into a legacy of pacifism in the same degree that Thompson was born into a legacy of Kentucky feudal violence' (Whitmire 2000, p. 117).

Thompson's accomplice, when it came to hunting down the game that inhabited the Big Sur wilderness, was a sculptor named Jo Hudson, and together they soon acquired a less than flattering reputation:

The two men would pile into Jo's car at night, stick a couple of beers between their legs, and load up the back with their dogs and go deer hunting. 'The Senseless Killers Club' was what some called it – running down deer blinded by Hudson's headlights on Route 1, or shooting wild boar that roamed the Santa Lucia Mountains. (Whitmire 2000, p. 116)

Of course, making an impact, negative or otherwise, was what mattered here, as was the feeling of not only matching his literary idols, but where possible going one step further, what Douglas Brinkley has identified as Thompson's tendency towards 'sardonic one-upmanship' (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. xxv); Brinkley goes on to add that 'if Hemingway, rifle in hand, had hunted big game around Mt. Kilimanjaro, then Thompson would stalk wild boar with a Bowie knife in Big Sur' (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. xxv). To compound the distasteful manner in which their hunting sorties were viewed by the rest of the community, Thompson delighted in utilising various remnants from a wild boar kill for his own brand of practical joke, with the severed head of the animal turning up in a variety of locations, including the hot springs, much to the distress of the unfortunate victims of the act. Thompson never let an opportunity for street theatre to go to waste.

There was however, one particular incident, that although it initially appears to reveal Thompson's somewhat contradictory nature when it came to judging the actions of others, especially so in light of his own indiscretions, can actually be seen as a stance that was fuelled more out of his aversion towards proponents of religious doctrine, specifically that of the Buddhist Gurus amongst the New Left movement and devotees of the Beat Generation. The target for his vitriol was Alan Watts, a former Episcopalian priest, and one of the leading practitioners of eastern philosophy and religion at the time, who was particularly popular amongst the Beat writers, appearing as the character Arthur Wayne in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*, and as Alex Aums in *Desolation Angels*. In his autobiography, *In My Own Way*, Watts later claimed that his essay 'Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen', heavily influenced the 'notorious "Zen Boom" which flourished among artists and "pseudointellectuals" in the late 1950s, and led on to the frivolous "beat Zen" of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*' (Watts 2007, p. 248). It is a comment that ironically is echoed in Thompson's own criticism of Jack Kerouac in a letter to Susan Haselden in 1958, in which he curtly states 'the man is an ass, a mystic boob with intellectual myopia' (Thompson 1998, p. 140). Three years later in *Big Sur*, Thompson was no less recalcitrant in his attitude, and whatever of Watts' opinion of Kerouac, in Thompson's eyes he too was a figure to be viewed with suspicion. The incident that confirmed his instinct, and thus instantly provoked his ire, involved a baby deer that Thompson and John Clancy had rescued after they accidentally killed its mother when they crashed into it whilst driving one night. The fawn was injured with a broken leg, and so the duo decided to nurse it back to health. A few days later, as the deer appeared to be making a recovery, Alan Watts decided to offer his assistance by feeding the deer a concoction of plants whilst reciting Zen chants in the process. It did not have the desired effect, according to Thompson's friend John Clancy:

Well, about an hour later the little deer stood up, cried out, went into these quick spasms, and died. Hunter was outraged. ‘That fucker, that quack, that fraud, that charlatan! I don’t believe in anything that he speaks. He killed a deer. He murdered it, that rotten prick!’ (Clancy in Wenner 2008, p. 53)

The most important aspect of this incident, in conjunction with his comments on Kerouac, is that it foreshadows the jaundiced approach of Thompson’s later writing concerning the direction of the counterculture, particularly in relation to its faith in Gurus or other such ‘higher powers’. Thompson’s fierce independence was always going to act as a natural barrier to what he viewed as the danger of blind obedience to authoritative figures, be they religious or otherwise. While he certainly enjoyed discussing the more philosophical aspects of eastern beliefs, particularly issues like karmic justice and reincarnation, he was never one to engage in meditative practice or become a devotee of a guru-type figure. The ultimate expression of this stance comes in the latter half of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in a seminal passage in which Thompson outlines his concerns in a brilliant dissection of the failure of the counterculture and their vision of the American Dream. One of the principle figures singled out by Thompson was Timothy Leary, whom he accused of making a fundamental error in his understanding of the LSD experience, what Thompson deemed the ‘essential old-mystic fallacy’ (Thompson 2005, p. 179), that he in turn sold to an entire generation under the maxim ‘Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out’ (Leary 1990, p. 260).

Thompson’s distancing of himself from the Beat Generation, and the later Hippie movement, is an important distinction, and one that was already evident in *Big Sur*. Despite his shared experience with these groups as part of the overall counterculture, Thompson always marched to his own beat, a stance that was reflected in both his writing and in his personal life. Yet as the perennial outsider, he was always permitted to closely observe, interact with and understand these disparate groups through their shared sense of otherness, an important skill that he would later put to the ultimate test with the Hells Angels. There

is a sense that for Thompson, group participation of any kind was inimical to his desire to create an individualistic avatar such as the Hunter Figure, harkening back to the conception of the American Adam, what critic R.W.B. Lewis defined as ‘an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources’ (Lewis in Thompson 1997, p. xxiii)

The success arising out of Thompson’s ability to observe his subjects at such a close proximity also proved to be something of a double-edged sword. In writing about Big Sur for *Rogue* magazine, Thompson was able to include anecdotes that could only come from knowledge gained by living in the area as a part of the close-knit community. With the spoils of selling an article to a national publication however, Thompson accelerated his alienation from that same community in record time. To an extent, poverty had kept his behaviour in check to date, forcing him to diligently spend hours in his cabin, working on his writing in an effort to get published. Given his relatively newfound wealth, coupled with his latest hunting obsession, the manner in which he spent his money was unsurprising, with Thompson seizing the opportunity to acquire a more serious armoury, first by purchasing his own .22 calibre pistol, followed swiftly by a .44 Magnum and a rifle:

With the *Rogue* money I bought a pistol and a Doberman and a lot of whiskey, and now a man up the road has put the sheriff on me for shooting while drunk and keeping a vicious dog. (Thompson 1998, p. 279)

The .44 Magnum in particular would become an essential association for Thompson, remaining a constant part of the Hunter Figure’s image as renegade outlaw, reinforced by numerous references to it throughout his writing, as well as by its becoming a favoured prop at hand when he was photographed. Thompson purchased it having successfully sold a short story, a first for Thompson when it came to fiction, once again to *Rogue* magazine, to whose editor he eagerly regaled the merits of owning such a gun:

You'll be happy to know that your check for 'Easy Come, Easy Go' has paid for a .44 Magnum, 'the ultimate handgun.' It will knock a motor-block off its mounts, destroy a small tree, and disembowel a boar at 100 yards. No man should be without one. (Thompson 1998, p. 282)

Thompson's purchases also reveal another aspect of the dialectical connection between the Hunter Figure and his writing; despite living in poverty Thompson's choices are essentially handpicked to accessorise his *persona* – guns, whiskey and a Doberman – all closely related to the individual outlaw aesthetic he was fostering. In turn, his new purchases informed his next story or Hunter Figure adventure, creating an interrelated cycle of writing about himself, gaining currency from that writing be it monetary or notoriety, and then using that currency to add more tools to his armoury and thus allowing the cycle to move forward.

By this point however, Thompson's affection for guns was proving to be a costly habit that swiftly precipitated his unpopularity amongst certain individuals in Big Sur. Having first shot out the windows of his own cabin, Thompson then took to using his neighbours' windows as target practice with his .22 pistol. Twice he was spoken to by the sheriff about his violent behaviour, but it did little to alter his ways. The most significant incident, however, involved Thompson confronting the groups of gay men who had made a habit of visiting the hot springs every weekend whilst he was on duty as caretaker. Michael Murphy and Dick Price wanted to put an end to the activity that was taking place there, as they set about establishing the Esalen Institute, whose operating ethos did not include the use of the hot springs as an all-night party venue. As caretaker, it was Thompson's duty to enforce the new rules and in typical fashion he set about doing so in a particularly over-the-top and menacing theatrical manner:

'The Night of the Dobermans' is how locals recall it: a mad romp around the baths, maybe thirty or forty naked men doing whatever naked men who are willing to drive pink

Cadillac's all the way from L.A. or San Francisco to Big Sur are prone to do. Suddenly, above the boom of the surf, above the riot of their own partying, came the sound of pistol shots, the voice of Hunter Thompson, and enough canine snarling to ice their blood. (Whitmire 2000, p. 120)

It would not prove to be a one-sided battle though, with Thompson discovering the following night that his actions had repercussions. On his usual nightly patrol of the hot springs, he was confronted by an angry group of men, intent on getting revenge for the night before. Thompson was accompanied by a female friend at the time, Maxine Ambus, who managed to prevent the men from throwing him 'off the cliff and onto the rocks, about eighty feet below' (Whitmire 2000, p. 121). Despite her intervention, Thompson suffered a severe beating, and though he retreated to the sanctuary of his cabin for the rest of the night, he made sure to voice his displeasure at the incident in his own particular manner of expression:

For the rest of the night he punctuated the silence of Big Sur with rifle shot fired through his unopened window. In the morning, Murphy looked out to find a horizontal line of bullet holes, and Thompson's clothes hung on the line. 'They were stiff as a board with blood,' Murphy said. (Whitmire 2000, pp. 121-122)

These incidents swiftly brought the threat of eviction looming over the horizon. Undeterred by the threat of homelessness, Thompson instead seized the opportunity to regale his friends with letters concerning his daily strife in Big Sur, which in comparison to his fiction and feature writing at the time, bear a much stronger resemblance to Gonzo Journalism.

Much of the critical Gonzo elements are evident in these letters, as they capture his exploits in the same frenetic manner as in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, with an emphasis on articulating a sense of the outlaw writer under threat in a chaotic environment beyond his own control:

Chapter 2: The Outlaw of Big Sur

I am surrounded by lunatics here, people screeching every time I pull a trigger, yelling about my blood-soaked shirt, packs of queers waiting to do me in, so many creditors that I've lost count, a huge Doberman on the bed, a pistol by the desk, time passing, getting balder, no money, a great thirst for the world's whiskey, my clothes rotting in the fog, a motorcycle with no light, a landlady who's writing a novel on butcher paper, wild boar in the hills and queers on the road, vats of homemade beer in the closet, shooting cats to ease the pressure, the jabbering of Buddhists in the trees, whores in the canyons, christ only knows if I can last it out. (Thompson 1998, p. 280)

It is interesting to note the manner in which Thompson portrays his environment as a hostile one populated by wild characters behaving in a manner that is seemingly irrational, as though he is largely an innocent caught up in a battle to survive against the odds. The reality of course, differs somewhat, in that the Big Sur community very much viewed Thompson as the uncontrollable element in an otherwise stable, albeit unconventional, way of life. Of course, Thompson thrived in this atmosphere, always more comfortable as the beleaguered underdog pitted against the system, whether this conflict was imagined or otherwise. This is a factor that he successfully worked into his writing to such an extent that it became a Gonzo trademark, one where a sense of paranoia and an overwhelming siege mentality dominates his presentation of reality:

They're trying to arrest me here. Also trying to evict me. But I'm rolling in money now and they're awed. After months of insane poverty I have made \$630 in the past six weeks. I am so used to poverty that I can waste most of it and not know the difference. Hence the Doberman (\$100), the pistol (\$70) and the rifle (\$110).Plenty of ammunition too. When it starts, I'll be ready. You bet. (Thompson 1998, p. 283)

Though this disconnect between Thompson's style of letter writing and his fiction and journalism was still very much apparent in Big Sur, he nevertheless was establishing all the root elements, that when combined, would form the underlying basis of Gonzo Journalism.

This marriage between the image that he was fostering in his writing and his own life, a marriage that both reflected and simultaneously informed his way of life, is also

evident in his photography from this period. Having developed his photographic skills considerably since his time in the Air Force, Thompson meticulously used the photographic medium to document his life in Big Sur, but in a manner that once more reflected his innate narcissistic obsession with controlling his own image and indeed, with creating and shaping it as required. The central emphasis throughout his photography parallels the central image conveyed throughout his writing, namely that of the Hunter Figure as outlaw: the rugged individualist and writer juxtaposed with the frontier-like vast wilderness of Big Sur. The most powerful of these images captures Thompson, pipe in mouth, typing at a small table overlooking the plunging cliffs of the Big Sur coastline. Another shows him surveying the view with a telescope, with a rifle by his side, accompanied by Agar, his Doberman. Indeed, hunting is a prominent theme throughout, with many photographs capturing his boar-hunting exploits. One particular photo of the hanging carcass of a boar features Thompson's handwriting on the reverse. It simply states 'Joan Baez butchering slaughtering hogs – Big Sur 1961' (Thompson 2006, p. 57). When he submitted various photographs in conjunction with an article, Thompson provided various explanations for each image. For a group shot, for example, Thompson identifies Jo Hudson as 'yachtsman and big-game hunter' (Thompson 2006, p. 58), John Clancy, 'now a SF lawyer' (Thompson 2006, p. 58), with Sandy described as 'then private secretary and constant companion to Big Sur's most prominent thug' (Thompson 2006, p. 58). Another similar image, this one actually including Thompson himself, is captioned 'More of same. Foreground is the thug – in this case, the author' (Thompson 2006, p. 58). Though clearly happy to promote this image and indeed live up to the name, Thompson knew that he was potentially making life difficult for himself within the community. It was the same pattern of self-destructive behaviour that had followed him since his exile from Louisville. Each new environment presented Thompson with its own structures of power and associated limitations, which he

then set about challenging, disobeying or otherwise ignoring from the onset. The consequence was that his welcome in each community had a shelf life. Big Sur proved to be no exception.

It proved to be the written word that ultimately sealed his fate. A copy of *Rogue* magazine containing Thompson's article on Big Sur had made its way to Vinnie Murphy, the 89-year-old matriarch of the family, and owner of the hot springs. She did not appreciate Thompson's description of the antics at the baths, particularly his disclosure of its popularity as a homosexual rendezvous point. Thompson was given one month to leave the property. Though hardly a stranger to receiving an eviction notice, in Big Sur it proved to be a particularly difficult problem for Thompson to resolve. The *Rogue* article mentioned a number of other members of the community, who were similarly none too pleased by the article's content. Finding a new property to rent proved to be impossible. It was clear that Thompson's time in Big Sur had come to an end in a manner that could only serve to highlight the extent of his outsider status:

In his expulsion from Big Sur, Thompson was cast out of a community of castaways; even with an international reputation as a pornographer, Henry Miller had been welcomed here with open arms. Thompson seemed to be taking iconoclasm to new heights. (Whitmire 2000, p. 123)

Big Sur had more than lived up to its reputation as a place of personal growth and transformation. In many ways, Thompson's arrival there in November of 1960 had been on something of an auspicious date, coinciding with John F. Kennedy's defeat of Richard Nixon, and marking what was truly the start of a momentous decade of cultural change and conflict, the effects of which are still rippling across the cultural landscape. For Hunter S. Thompson it was to be the beginning of a journey that would involve undertaking that which evokes the true spirit of the outsider: an exile, not just from Big Sur, but from his

Chapter 2: The Outlaw of Big Sur

home country. His destination was South America and from here he would not only make a name for himself as a journalist, but also see the American Dream from a different perspective, leading him to return home on a collision course with the American Nightmare.

Chapter 3: Our Man in South America – The Outlaw in Exile

As 1961 drew to a close, Hunter S. Thompson returned to his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, less the figure of the triumphant prodigal son and more the outlaw in need of sanctuary. It was an all too familiar situation for him, as he was unemployed, homeless, and desperately trying to get his novel published as well as being equally keen to answer the call of a horizon that promised pastures new. Following on from his earlier Big Sur exile, Thompson had made his way home to Louisville by way of a somewhat unconventional detour to Colorado. For a writer who had spent his last pay check on whiskey and guns, his only hope in travelling back east was to accept a job delivering a car full of oriental goods from San Francisco to their owner living in the ski-resort town of Aspen nestled high-up in the Rocky Mountains (Thompson 1998, p. 294). With the fifty dollars payment that he was promised for completing the delivery, he planned on continuing his journey to the Bluegrass State by train. Though his visit to Aspen was brief, it proved to be a significant one in that it marked the beginning of a love affair with the mountain area that would eventually become synonymous with his name. It was the place where his ‘fortified compound’ at Owl Farm in nearby Woody Creek would become his home base for almost 40 years, and would be an integral part of his outlaw image. In November of 1961 however, Thompson arrived in the snow-laden town a complete stranger, yet fortunately one of the first contacts he made was Peggy Clifford, managing editor of

the *Aspen Times* who took Thompson in for the night, and helped him track down the recipient of his delivery:

. . . it was snowing, and I showed up on Peggy’s doorstep. A total stranger, a freak from Kentucky with a pile of trash on top of a car that had to be delivered to some decorator in Aspen. I thought Peggy would be horrified . . . Here came a vagrant through town, a Neal Cassady kind of freak, travelling with a giant Doberman and a monster dog crate that was heavy and made to be a home for the dog on the train, if we ever got on the train, and she took care of everything. (Thompson in Clifford 1980, p. xix)

Clifford later became a close friend and important ally of Thompson when he got involved in Aspen’s political scene. Of her first encounter with Thompson, Clifford later wrote: ‘his face in repose is like a mask. It gives away nothing. But he has the eyes, the smile of a rogue. His eyes and his smile contain more mischief than any one person should have. He is one of those men who get the attention of the world and keep it’ (Clifford 1980, pp. 90-91).

At home in his old Louisville neighbourhood of Cherokee Triangle however, Thompson was struggling to transfer the same hypnotic charisma through his writing. The confidence that he had gained from the publication of his Big Sur article was all but eroded overnight when his agent rejected his manuscript of *The Rum Diary*, a blow to Thompson’s ego that is all too apparent in his letter to William J. Kennedy in Puerto Rico:

The agent refused it, saying the characters were ‘uninteresting.’ There is no dealing with that kind of criticism – it’s about the last thing I expected. ‘A perfectly acceptable novel,’ he added, ‘but . . .’ And so we beat on, boats against the current . . . (Thompson 1998, p. 291)

For Thompson, it appeared that every step forward was swiftly followed by two steps backward, which was understandable given that it was in the area of fiction that he truly longed to succeed as a writer. Having only just completed writing *The Rum Diary*, he was

not prepared to give up on it without a fight, and in a letter to Mike Murphy in Big Sur he professed that the novel had to be ‘totally revised and rewritten’ (Thompson 1998, p. 298). Returning to his hometown was also a regression that stirred up many old memories of his youth. Writing to Eleanor McGarr, he confessed that his old neighbourhood was ‘full of so many ghosts that I get the Fear whenever I go outside’ (Thompson 1998, p. 293) before adding, ‘I have called nobody but [Hume] Logan and venture out of the house only to run Agar in the park. Pawned the rifle this morning & put \$10 down on a Luger. The guns will be my undoing’ (Thompson 1998, p. 295). Describing the ‘ageless streetlight’ (Thompson 1998, p. 293) on Ransdell Avenue, he nostalgically reminisces upon the various scenes involving his childhood friends that took place there, before decrying those days forever, and warning that shortly ahead lay ‘the big hump. And after that, the craziness’ (Thompson 1998, p. 293). Louisville and the spectre of the past was suffocating Thompson and also proving a painful reminder that in the five years since his departure, his goal of emulating the achievements of his literary idols Hemingway and Fitzgerald was still just a distant pipe dream. He wanted to write fiction, but not even his agent was impressed by his work. Even on the journalistic front, he felt that he was battling against the tide, just another chapter in the story of Hunter S. Thompson versus the establishment.

From Louisville he tried to elicit interest from the *Atlantic Monthly* in an article concerning the John Birch Society, framing the piece as a portrait of the people involved but away from the formality and officialdom of an event meeting, instead opting to focus on their home life, with Thompson claiming that:

Only when they relax at home can you find out why they went to the meeting, why they joined in the first place, their own ideas on where this is headed, their doubts, their occasional uncertainties (‘Is Ike really a Red?’) and, in short, that vital third dimension that you never get in newspapers. (Thompson 1998, p. 297)

That third dimension which Thompson so valued essentially became an integral element of the aesthetic evolution in his writing that ultimately brought about his stylistic break with traditional objective journalism, leading to the establishment of his own unique literary and journalistic voice under the mantle of Gonzo Journalism. Here, the operating ethic was to always seek to expose the blind spot that he claimed was created by the limitations of strict adherence to the dogma of objectivity. As Thompson informed the *Atlantic Monthly*, ‘Politics can be interesting, but I prefer people’ (Thompson 1998, p. 297), and it was this angle of approach that characterised his later foray into the political theatre of presidential politics in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ‘72*, wherein his willingness to forego the expected code of conduct amongst the Washington press bureau enabled him to write about the people behind the politics in a manner that was untainted by a self-censorship borne out of fear of being denied future access to the political scene. Thompson chose to highlight this third dimension with his choice of epigraph for *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ‘72*, quoting T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*: ‘Between the Idea and the Reality . . . Falls the Shadow’, which also echoes his fascination with Plato’s parable of the cave as a youth in Louisville. In Thompson’s estimation, the myth of objectivity served to obscure the truth, facilitating a cultural hegemony, instead of questioning and challenging it in the manner espoused by Joseph Pulitzer that he had so long venerated. His frustration with what he saw as the inadequacy of the Fourth Estate, in conjunction with what he considered to be their failure to acknowledge his own merit as a journalist, only heightened his resentment and ingrained sense of exclusion and marginalisation. Periodically, these frustrations came to the surface in the form of stinging letters of criticism to various media outlets.

In a letter to the *Louisville Times*, concerning their coverage of the ending of the civil war in the Congo, Thompson lambasted the ‘muddled and half-blind’ (Thompson

1998, p. 299) coverage they ran from the Associated Press, before singling out another story on the Moral Re-Armament conference in Brazil featuring appearances by Roy Rogers and Richard Nixon's mother, in which he concluded: 'I don't see how you people can report this crap with a straight face. Is daily journalism that deadening? Or was it just a bad day? I'd like to know' (Thompson 1998, p. 300). To compound his grievances, publications that had previously published his work now appeared to be shutting him out of the market, with *Rogue* magazine turning down both a short story and an article on bluegrass music that Thompson had sent to them, not to mention their silence in replying to his correspondence requesting reasons for the refusal, which prompted another yet another letter of complaint. Given the circumstances, it was not surprising that Thompson planned on moving abroad at the first available opportunity. Before doing so however, he sought to find a good home for his Doberman, with Thompson's primary concern being that he would be treated properly, and in a letter to a potential new owner he made sure to outline what this meant, writing that 'most people seem to think all Dobermans are crazy mean and should be kept chained and muzzled. Agar is not that way and I wouldn't sell him to anyone who might treat him like a vicious criminal' (Thompson 1998, p. 301). Given his attitude regarding his own treatment in Louisville, and his constant rejection from the press establishment, he could very well have been describing himself.

By January of 1962, Thompson had fled Louisville for the familiar sites of New York, or what he liked to call 'the homeland of the uprooted' (Thompson 1998. p. 310). Though he had escaped the ghosts of Louisville past, he still had to contend with others in New York, as his history there dictated that any period of stay would inevitably lead to conflict of some sort. Despite this, New York proved to be the catalyst that Thompson needed to break free from his situation and move forward, or in his case, to move south. Having already retraced the journey of the original frontiersmen, proponents of Manifest

Destiny who had travelled west in search of a new life, Thompson had come to a dead end in Big Sur, forced into exile yet again. There was certainly no question mark surrounding his ‘uprooted’ credentials. It was now abundantly clear to him that the outfall from his anti-social attitude had reached something of a nadir in terms of his professional and social exclusion. Yet he was not by any means defeated. In true outlaw style, his next step was to take his exilic status one step further, and that was to see him leave behind his homeland, both in an attempt to find new opportunities denied to him in his own country but also to use that opportunity as a means to enact revenge upon those that failed to recognise his talent in the past. As Thompson viewed it, South America was to be that very place: ‘I see the last frontier down there – the last decent frontier anyway’ (Thompson 1998, p. 310), he informed Paul Semonin in a letter concerning his plans, adding that he might stay there ‘for a long time, hopefully to seek a high spot in a new world, a vantage point with plenty of room to shoot and roam’ (Thompson 1998, p. 311). In terms of the latter, Thompson was so concerned about foreign gun laws and any potential restrictions that might hamper his plans, that he applied for immediate membership of the NRA and appealed to them for information about South America gun laws, clubs and restrictions, adding ‘I send this membership fee with a fervent hope that we in this country can protect what small freedom we still retain, with regards to firearms’ (Thompson 1998, p. 314). His commitment to guns was now a permanent fixture of his life, not to mention his self-image.

Preparing for his departure to South America weighed heavily on Thompson for a variety of reasons. His letters prior to his departure reveal a writer veering between the highs of an upcoming adventure and the enormous pressure to succeed with his endeavour. New York bore the brunt of his anger, with Thompson decrying the city in his trademark hyperbolic venting, writing to Eugene McGarr that ‘there is something wrong with anyone who can live here. It is full of vultures and lice and turds and darkness, and every human

contact is more depressing than the last' (Thompson 1998, p. 314). Though Thompson was never comfortable with the constraints imposed by the city life, his true dislike for New York went beyond that, a fact that he acknowledged to McGarr in an admission that was a mix of wounded pride and runaway ego:

The truth of course is that I want to get even with this town for not recognizing my genius and paying me accordingly. But after talking to numerous editors and agents I am about ready to believe that we talk a different language and that no real meaning will ever pass between us. Only the amenities, the stock phrases, and a certain number of rejection slips. This is the primary reason for my shot to SA. (Thompson 1998, pp. 314-315)

This desire to succeed, motivated out of a thirst for retribution against his perceived enemies, was a long-standing pattern of behaviour for Thompson, but in New York it was for the first time also tinged with a hint of true desperation. Thompson knew all too well that he was running out of options, and that South America was the last frontier for reasons that went far beyond the call of adventure. As his departure grew ever closer, the effect of this largely self-imposed burden increasingly began to show, as he confessed to Paul Semonin:

Something huge is pressing on my soul . . . I keep having these dreams, not unlike the DTs in their substance and urgency. Even now, sitting here at the typewriter, I have a feeling that my gut is a great engine racing at top rpm, unable to shift out of neutral . . . I am becoming more and more certain that this South America venture is my last chance to do something big and bad, come to grips with the basic wildness . . . I am finally on the hump and all Crazy is spread out before me. Way in the distance I see a clear spot, a splash of sunlit green and a sign saying 'cerveza.' No hope but to get there and rest. Put the madness behind me. Ah, Jesus, the pressure of this place, the screams of the drowners and the jackal laughter of those in the rafts. (Thompson 1998, pp. 316-318)

In times of stress, Thompson was especially fond of evoking the imagery of Gatsby's green light, even if he went so far as to comically equate Daisy with that of a sign for beer. Self-

deprecating humour was never far from the surface, nor was his ongoing identification with the Gatsby *persona*. Though Fitzgerald was a huge influence on Thompson, it was ultimately the Gatsby character that held the most sway over his imagination.

It was a quality that served Thompson well, both in a personal capacity and in a literary sense as one of the characteristic features of his literary *persona*. It was also an attribute however, which the Russell & Volkening literary agency felt was notably absent from *The Rum Diary* when they rejected Thompson as a client, informing him that his characters were ‘hard and bitter’ (Donadio in Thompson 1998, p. 319). Their assessment was clearly at the forefront of Thompson’s mind when he subsequently contacted Lionel Olay, a free-lance journalist whom Thompson had befriended during his time in Big Sur. Olay had published two novels at the turn of the 1960’s, *The Heart of a Stranger* and *The Dark Corners of the Night*, but his main *forte* was the free-lance market. His later death in 1967 prompted Thompson to write an article, entitled ‘The Ultimate Free Lancer’, in which he lauded his late friend and kindred spirit:

Lionel was the ultimate free-lancer. In the nearly ten years I knew him, the only steady work he did was as a columnist for the *Monterey Herald* . . . and even then he wrote on his own terms on his own subjects, and was inevitably fired . . . Word of his death was a shock to me . . . More than anything else, it came as a harsh confirmation of the ethic that Lionel had always lived but never talked about . . . the dead end loneliness of a man who makes his own rules. (Thompson 2003b, p. 98)

Recognising their shared philosophy, Thompson had enormous respect for Olay, and much of their correspondence discussed the various aspects of their chosen craft, sharing advice and opinion on their own latest efforts and on the work of those whom they admired. In relation to his effort on *The Rum Diary*, Thompson confessed that spending eighteen months on the novel had been enough, and while he acknowledged that James Joyce had spent a decade on *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, it was not an option for him: ‘none

of that for me, thanks. If it proves to be that long and tough I will figure that, like Joyce, I do not lack talent, but contacts, and I am not yet sure which is more important' (Thompson 1998, p. 321).

Concerning their mutual efforts to find work, Thompson outlined his upcoming trip to South America, and warned Olay against coming to New York, stating that 'my only faith in this country is rooted in such places as Colorado and Idaho and maybe Big Sur as it was before the war. The cities are greasepits and not worth blowing off the map' (Thompson 1998, p. 322). Though his disillusionment and disdain for city life and the world of publishers was clearly rising incrementally with each rejection as he counted down to his South American trip, it was not enough to dissuade Thompson from resolutely continuing his quest to find a publisher willing to accept his novel, which he described to Olay as 'a book full of flogging and fighting and fucking' (Thompson 1998, p. 331). Finally, aided by encouragement from Olay, Thompson found an agent that was willing to represent his novel, but no sooner had he handed over the manuscript when he read another work whose quality affected him to such an extent that it prompted a rare admission in another letter to Olay:

. . . I read a book called *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen, and it almost broke me down. I am going to do a lot of thinking before I start another book . . . like most young writers I am a natural ingrate and will always think that my work and my views are above and beyond advice – at least until I finish one thing and can get far enough away from it to see it clear and mean like a girl who drives you mad when you're drunk and then looks like hell in the morning. (Thompson 1998, p. 331)

In a way, this same admission applied to more than just Thompson's relationship with his writing, but also crucially in regard to how he then viewed his own country, in terms of his sense of perspective. His experiences in South America were about to fundamentally change his relationship and opinion of his homeland, a necessary precipitation to what

would become his life-long musing on the meaning of the latter half of the American century, and on what he deemed to be ‘The Death of the American Dream’.

Thompson departed for South America, by way of Puerto Rico and Aruba, on April 23, 1962. His first port of call was motivated by a desire for a reunion with William Kennedy in San Juan, where together they spent ten days centred on their mutual passions for rum and literature. According to Kennedy, recalling their all-night conversations at the time, Thompson was ‘reading voluminously . . . the Western canon’ (Kennedy in Wenner 2008, p. 45). One conversation that particularly struck Kennedy was in relation to an essay by James Baldwin concerning the writer’s quest for wisdom:

The key phrase for Hunter was Baldwin’s view that ‘innocence must die, if we are ever to begin that journey toward the greater innocence called wisdom.’ Baldwin was certain that ‘the curtain has come down forever on Gatsby’s career: there will be no more Gatsby’s.’ Hunter didn’t buy this. He thought of *himself* as Gatsby, and he revelled in that kind of fate – that green light always receding, boats against the current, borne back into the past, and so on. (Kennedy in Wenner 2008, p. 45)

Gatsby’s relentless mythmaking, and belief in the second chance, always appealed to Thompson’s romantic sensibilities, as they embodied the fantastic possibilities promised by a belief in The American Dream. It is interesting that Thompson not only admired Gatsby, but saw himself as Gatsby, another *persona* in which he reimagined his self-image. Little did Thompson realise at the time, that by the year’s end he would find himself asserting his own statement of resignation concerning Gatsby, and what the latter represented. The intervening months would also prove something of a litmus test in relation to Baldwin’s theory on innocence, in terms of how Thompson’s opinion on the meaning of America would change irrevocably. While the physical distance and separation from his homeland was a necessary element of this transformation, the other crucial factor that was significant to his thinking was witnessing at first-hand, the implications of American

foreign policy upon the people of the South American countries that he visited, and the distorted image of Latin American affairs presented by the U.S. press.

Indeed, the effects of globalisation and the role of the United States as a driving force culturally, economically and politically were all too apparent to Thompson even in Puerto Rico, whose transformation in the intervening years since he had left was enough to prompt him into writing an article about his concerns entitled ‘Revisited: The Puerto Rican Problem’. The article in many ways launches what would become a series of dispatches from Thompson on his travels concerning the impact of the United States’ role in, not only extolling the virtues of free trade capitalism upon other countries, but more specifically in using it as a means to stave off the threat of communist revolution backed by the USSR in a Cold War climate that was becoming increasingly fraught with tension between the two superpowers. According to John Hartley, after the Second World War, the United States actively promoted the adoption of ‘the American Way’, and encouraged countries in Europe and the Pacific region to integrate democratic and liberal political and economic models of governance in an effort to modernise (Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 2). The conceptual framework utilised to advance the theory that best explained ‘the American Way’ as a model success story was the idea of American ‘exceptionalism’, adopted from the nineteenth century nationalist doctrine and employed in a Cold War climate in order to move from the ‘manifest destiny’ that justified continental expansion from east to west to a more expansive concept that transcended boundaries to include entire populations. Thompson himself was a vehement supporter and defender of the Bill of Rights; hugely admired Thomas Jefferson and his role in shaping the ideals of American democracy; and subscribed to the concept of America as the ‘shining city upon a hill’, a concept first used by John Winthrop in his 1630 sermon ‘A Model of Christian Charity’ and henceforth a key symbol of American exceptionalism, helping to enshrine the

idea of America as God's country and becoming a popular reference in political oration, most notably by John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan.

Similarly, Thompson also subscribed to Abraham Lincoln's assertion that America represented 'the last best hope of man' (Thompson 1998, p. xxvii). However, as Thompson began to witness on his travels, 'the American Way' had now become something else entirely. What had originated as a beacon of light, had now become both commercialised and indeed, as John Hartley asserts, a tool for ideological warfare:

However, by the mid-twentieth century, partly because of the growth of US economic and military power, the notion of exceptionalism became a tool of national advancement both at home and abroad. It was a weapon in the new politics where ideologies contended rather than armies. It was, in short, a participant in the Cold War, using the weapon of the 'American Dream' to extend American supremacy beyond its own hemisphere. (Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 3)

For Thompson, it was all too apparent that the unvarnished reality of 'the American Way', to which he was exposed to from the very start of his travels, was diametrically opposed to his idealistic understanding of the meaning of America, an understanding that although part of the very fabric of the foundations upon which the nation stood, was now not only threatened to consignment as a product of a bygone era, but was also in danger of becoming retrospectively unravelled from what it meant to be American, in order to be used as an ideological imperative towards imperial advancement. The idea of the American Dream wielded as weapon of supremacy was abhorrent to Thompson, and though it certainly was not what Henry Luce had envisaged when he invoked the American Century as a call to arms for America to enter World War 2 in the name of defending democracy, nevertheless, during the Cold War, it was perhaps inevitable that the American Dream would become a leading ideological tool in the battle for American hegemony. For Thompson however, it was precisely that transition which begat both 'The Death of the American Dream', and the

end of the American Century. This transition would become the subject matter that would define his literary *oeuvre*, and would also see Thompson forge his own identity out of a resistance and reaction to a simultaneously transforming American self that was threatening to tear itself apart at the seams.

In Puerto Rico, at the start of his sojourn to South America, Thompson was not only setting out on a voyage of discovery in a literal sense, but also doing so in a figurative sense (mirroring Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), wherein the arduous physical voyage into unknown territory runs parallel to the equally challenging inward journey, the place where the psychological, the well of inner convictions that shape one's very identity, is an ever-changing landscape where the only constant is change itself. Indeed, from the very beginning in Puerto Rico, the operative word for Thompson was 'transformation', and it is this phrase that was not only the central theme of his first article, but also that which came to increasingly dominate his life and work over the course of the following eighteen months. As noted by John Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson, though Thompson would later become 'notorious for his excessive living and language' (Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 21), his article 'Revisited: The Puerto Rican Problem' presents an entirely different side of the author, wherein his sober analysis 'introduces a critique of tourism and its discontents as one of the culture industries' (Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 21), which subsequently became an 'abiding theme of cultural studies thereafter' (Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 21). Indeed, while the article itself is relatively short, its central criticism also foreshadows what would become a longstanding point of contention for Thompson for the remainder of his career, including that of his most revered work in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; that is, his contempt for a shallow, overindulgent, consumer culture. In the case of Puerto Rico, Thompson laments the changes in the two years he has been absent, in which 'the one-time 'poorhouse of the

Caribbean’ is now a blue-chip tourist attraction’ (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 62), of which the downside for Thompson is that ‘Puerto Rico, and especially San Juan, is a much duller place than it was two years ago’ (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 62). It is this effect that largely appears to be the primary source of disdain for Thompson, specifically the loss of individuality and character of the old, struggling Puerto Rico, in the face of the respectable veneer enveloping the island befit of its status as modern tourist destination.

As Thompson experienced during his time there at the start of the 1960’s, Puerto Rico had long been a freewheeling haven ‘brimming with geeks and hustlers and gung-ho promoters’ (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 62), and such were the opportunities available, that even ‘absolute incompetents were getting rich overnight, simply because they had stumbled on a good thing at a ripe time’ (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 62). By 1962 though, that had all changed and the last vestiges of the fifties had been swept aside by the new kings of commerce:

The small operator was often a big wheel in the fifties, but now the Big Boys are moving in . . . and the methods are changing. Things are not so rough-edged, so crude as they were before. Everybody has a public-relations man and ready cash is no longer so all-important. They are even giving credit to the natives, which pretty well tells the story. One of the surest signs of the new status level is that the people who once felt they had a mission here are getting apathetic. Most of these missions are accomplished, and a lot of people who grew up with the island are talking about shoving off to seek what might be called ‘the challenge of the uncertain’. (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 63)

Yet, the above illustrates not just Thompson’s distrust for the monopolising, professional operation of industrial transformation and the ensuing clinical sterilisation of the previous operating ethos, but it also showcases the value he placed on the opportunity for adventure and the thrill of uncertainty, something which he now felt was vanishing from Puerto Rico,

the wild sense of possibility was now drifting away as the island transitioned from frontier status of old to the new dominant economic model exported by the United States, an island of capitalist commerce centred upon cruise ship tourism.

Yet Thompson's fears for Puerto Rico, and what it had lost in terms of its own unique sense of identity, appear to be ultimately an echo of his anxiety about the changing face of America itself. In a way, Puerto Rico serves as a microcosm for what he ultimately fears for his home country: a loss of identity, and a loss of character, in which a single homogeneous cultural landscape becomes the rule, and any notion of individuality is forced out or destroyed. For Thompson, the 'rat-race' was the enemy of all that he held dear; as a champion of liberty, individuality and creative vision he rallied against anything that restricted, confined or otherwise threatened his right to forge his own unique identity. Homogeneity of identity threatened the very idea of a Hunter Figure, it threatened spontaneity of expression and countercultural deviations from what society had deemed to be the norm. Of course, this anxiety also fuelled Thompson's love for larger than life characters, hence the outlaw heroes of the wild-west that he worshipped as a child took on a greater meaning later on in his life and career, as Thompson sought to explain their enduring appeal across generations, conscious of the fact that as an icon of the counterculture he too now occupied the same space in the public consciousness:

Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mold-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of 'the rat race' is not yet final. (Thompson 2003, p. 406)

It may not quite be these 'weird heroes' and 'mold-breaking champions' that Thompson was speaking of when he cited the *San Juan Star* as an example of what Puerto Rico's transformation meant, but the underlying principle is the same, the Puerto Rico of old had

character, and an atmosphere that was ripe with unpredictable behaviour that threatened to spill over into anarchy; the ‘rat-race’ had yet to descend on Puerto Rico and there was still room for characters from all walks of life, some of whom left behind an indelible impression:

In the beginning the *Star* was staffed largely by drifters, transients who showed up out of nowhere and disappeared with a baffling and unexpected regularity. Some of them left vast debts behind, and others went to jail. On any given night the city editor was just as likely to pick up the phone and get a routine story as he was to hear that half his staff had been locked up for creating a riot. (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 63)

Of course, one of the many examples of the above was Thompson’s own legacy from Puerto Rico, working for *El Sportivo*, along with Paul Semonin, who had worked for the *San Juan Star* as a photographer. Yet while they found themselves on the wrong side of the law and chose to flee Puerto Rico under threat from the authorities, in the years that had since lapsed, much had changed, and the likelihood of such incidents had now become increasingly remote:

Nothing like that is very likely to happen now. The wild boys have moved on, and the English-speaking press is pretty staid. This is also what happened to the rest of San Juan – the nuts and the cranks and the oddballs have either fled or stayed long enough to become respectable. (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 63)

This idea of respectability as an inherently false charade that chokes any semblance of individuality out of both place and person, is further reinforced by Thompson’s reference to his friend William Kennedy’s departure from the *San Juan Star* as managing editor, with Kennedy himself citing a lack of challenges and excitement at the newspaper as the primary reason for his decision. Thompson then goes on to quote a promoter who ‘puts it a little differently’ (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 63), by explaining

his own departure from the island as being a direct result of San Juan's emerging bourgeois status. Once again, the influence of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* is evident in Thompson's portrait of a Puerto Rico that has traded in its authentic self in return for capital gain and a mask of falsehood presented to the world:

The Outsider's case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnameable impulses, yet they keep up a pretence, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an Outsider because he stands for Truth. (Wilson 1978, p. 23)

For Thompson, the link between identity of self and identity of place is a deeply intertwined state of co-existence. As an unincorporated territory of the United States, Puerto Rico is very much defined by its Otherness, yet Thompson views the economic hegemony of the United States as an existential threat to its authentic identity through cultural assimilation, a simultaneous displacement of people and a subsequent dismantling of a sense of place, not just in a societal sense but also in terms of the actual physical landscape: 'The Old City itself is getting very quaint; whole blocks of slums are being 'reconstructed' and knick-knack shops are sprouting everywhere' (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 64). Thompson finishes the piece in a tone that is tinged with a sense of sentimental loss for the Puerto Rico of old, an admission that it is a place that has been lost to yesteryear:

After ten years of toil and trouble, millions of dollars spent to attract industry and tourists, savage debates and dialogues as to whether all that money and effort was worthwhile – all that is history now, and whatever happens from here on in will very definitely be a second stage. There are still problems, but they are of a different sort, and dealing with them will require different methods and even different men. For better or for worse, it is the end of an era. (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 64)

Though Thompson concedes Puerto Rico as a lost battleground, the issues that he raises, specifically the effects of globalisation and free trade capitalism, American hegemony, a dysfunctional consumer culture, the tension between heterogeneous versus homogenous identity and cultural authenticity, all become staple issues in Thompson's *oeuvre*.

In particular, Thompson's focus on the relationship between the identify of self and identity of place, in which the slums of San Juan are being 'reconstructed' amidst a flourishing of 'knick-knack shops' in response to the influx of tourists and where in the past 'gimmicks were paying off with a lunatic consistency' (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 63) and 'a whole tribe of hustlers got rich selling bowling balls . . . Formica-top tables . . . transistor radios. Now they are all captains of commerce' (Thompson in Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson eds. 2000, p. 63), prefigures Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which he portrays the casino city as not only the dark heart of the American Dream, but also the ultimate physical manifestation of a consumer culture driven by the pursuit of happiness and taken to its furthest limits. This equates with what Jean Baudrillard has called a city exemplifying hyperreality as 'a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard in Poster 1988, p. 1), and which Thompson characterised as 'a high-class refuge for Big Spenders' (Thompson 2005, p. 44), where places like the Desert Inn 'reeked of high-grade formica and plastic palm trees' (Thompson 2005, p. 44). For Thompson, Las Vegas was the pinnacle dysfunctional monument to where it all went wrong for America; it was a city where the full spectrum of corruption and greed is not only encouraged, but celebrated in exaggerated style; it was a neon tombstone marking 'The Death of the American Dream' and the end of the American Century.

In a way, Thompson's South America trip of 1961 furthered not only his obsession with what he saw as the decline of America both culturally and politically, but also expedited the breakthrough and recognition of his own personal brand of journalism, which

he would refine and hone over the next decade, culminating in a novel that would fuse to perfection his autopsy of the American Dream with the literary style that would define both his legacy, and the place of the iconic Hunter Figure, in the greater cultural landscape. From the outset, Thompson found himself at odds with his environment, a not too unfamiliar predicament, but one that now also included a multitude of strange languages, customs and all manner of bureaucratic intricacies. The consequence was that such unfamiliar territory provided a rush for Thompson's creative impulse, with a myriad of experiences fighting for his attention, so much so that the threat of sensory overload might have proven to be too much for many another writer. Thompson however, did not allow the situation to overwhelm his faculties, and instead turned to a favourite subject to anchor his writing: that is to say, the Hunter Figure.

However, there was also another crucial element that facilitated this move, and that was his working relationship with features editor Clifford Ridley at the *National Observer*. 'Conceived . . . as a Sunday edition of the *Wall Street Journal*' (McKeen 2008, p. 70), the *National Observer* may have been owned by the same company, Dow Jones, but it had a much different operating ethos, one that specifically targeted a younger audience with more experimental writing, which was the perfect marriage for Thompson's writing according to William McKeen:

Although he'd sold articles to some major newspapers, including the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, Hunter's writing was too loose and ragged for most mainstream newspapers and not slick enough for America's major consumer magazines. The *Observer* allowed him to be methodical in his writing and build leisurely to a point, much like the *Journal's* column-one features. Hunter was able to write stories that fit within the *Journal's* corporate style, and yet was given enough license to stretch out and do something unusual. (McKeen 2008, p. 72)

It was to prove to be an important working template for the remainder of Thompson's career, one that would be replicated with editor Warren Hinckle at *Scanlan's Monthly*, which resulted in Thompson's first officially acknowledged Gonzo Journalism article, 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved'. This would be followed by what would become his most successful collaboration, working with editor Jann Wenner at *Rolling Stone* magazine, from which Thompson would reach the zenith of his literary endeavour, with the magazine serialising both *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, amongst many other articles for the remainder of his career. Clifford Ridley however, was really the first editor to truly recognise a special quality in Thompson's writing. It was apparent to him upon receiving his first submission, and luckily for Thompson it just so happened to be precisely the kind of journalism that they were looking for at the time. Under Ridley's editorial guidance, Thompson's writing began to flourish in the columns of the *National Observer*:

There wasn't anything in his background that said he was going to be good – his only credentials that I remember were from the Middletown paper – but we knew that he was good when we got his first piece . . . Hunter probably wrote a piece a month when he was in Latin America, and a lot of them ended up running on the front page. We were fairly flexible about length – if something was good and it was long, we had the space . . . We didn't have a problem with him injecting himself into his stories. We were going in the direction of personal journalism at that point, experimenting with allowing more personality in our pieces . . . (Ridley in Wenner, 2008, p. 61)

Whereas before, Thompson had to be more discreet when it came to inserting himself into a story, such as his Big Sur article for *Rogue* magazine, wherein he referred to himself as 'Big Sur's most prominent thug' (Thompson 2006. p. 58), and attribute quotes to characters of his own making, in South America, his articles became much more personal in nature, as is the inclination with travel writing, where the author's experiences and perception tend

to carry the article. It was tailor made for the Hunter Figure to unabashedly take central stage.

One of Thompson's earliest dispatches for the *National Observer* incorporating the Hunter Figure was entitled 'A Footloose American in a Smuggler's Den', in which he describes his experience arriving in a small village in Columbia, his first port of call in South America, a place so remote that he had to make his way there from Aruba on board a smuggler's boat carrying whiskey, with only \$30 to his name and a keen desire to avoid getting arrested. Despite his reservations about arriving in such a fashion, and his apprehension concerning the 'allegedly savage and fearsome Indians' (Thompson 1998, p. 338), he soon discovered the locals to be very hospitable, finding common ground in their mutual love for scotch whisky. For the purposes of the *Observer* story however, Thompson presents his visit as a prototype Gonzo misadventure, with the story beginning in an ominous manner reminiscent of a chapter from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Puerto Estrella is presented as a wild lawless place whose native Guajiro Indians have a reputation in Aruba as 'fierce and crazy and drunk all day on coconut whisky' (Thompson 2003b, p. 346), with Thompson arriving by boat as night falls only to be greeted by 'the entire population of the village, staring grimly and without much obvious hospitality at Puerto Estrella's first tourist in history' (Thompson 2003b, p. 346). After the initial shock of their unexpected guest, the remainder of the story is peppered with comic observation and excessive behaviour, with the Hunter Figure cast as a scotch-soaked incarnation of the American Adam, what critic R.W.B. Lewis defined as 'an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources' (Lewis in Thompson 1998, p. xxiii). Douglas Brinkley made the cogent point that this was an incarnation that Thompson 'deliberately cultivated himself' (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. xxiii):

As it turned out, three things made my visit a success. One was my size and drinking capacity (it was fear – a man travelling alone among reportedly savage Indians dares not get drunk); another was the fact that I never turned down a request for a family portrait (fear, again); and the third was my ‘lifelong acquaintance’ with Jacqueline Kennedy, whom they regard as some sort of goddess. (Thompson 2003b, p. 347)

The reference to Jacqueline Kennedy, though clearly tongue-in-cheek, did have a certain basis in truth in that the Kennedy’s presence loomed large during Thompson’s travels in South America, with an equally wide ranging and diverse set of opinions associated with their name, depending on the audience.

Indeed, many of the articles written by Thompson in South America directly addressed the economic and political effects of the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration. However, this early dispatch owed more to the machismo of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, and the tragicomic styling of George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, than to Latin America’s pertinent socioeconomic issues:

There is nothing to do but drink, and after 50 hours of it I began to lose hope. The end seemed to be nowhere in sight; and it is bad enough to drink Scotch all day in any climate, but to come to the tropics and start belting it down for three hours each morning before breakfast can bring on a general failure of health. In the mornings we had Scotch and arm-wrestling; in the afternoons, Scotch and dominoes. (Thompson 2003b, p. 347)

It was the quintessential portrait of an expatriate ‘drowning his sorrows’ in the face of a landscape and people that was incomprehensibly alien, with William McKeen also identifying ‘some of the flavour of Graham Greene’s novels of the era, such as *Our Man in Havana* or *A Burnt-out Case*’ (McKeen 2008, p. 77) in Thompson’s Latin American reporting. Yet, Thompson’s letters concerning the same experience betray his flair for the dramatic in that he describes to Paul Semonin the Guajiro Indians as ‘the best people I’ve met’ (Thompson 1998, p. 338), and how together they ‘drank the best scotch and stayed drunk as loons’ (Thompson 1998, p. 338), before adding that he had ‘a wonderful time’

(Thompson 1998, p. 338). The luxury of distance from the *National Observer*'s fact checkers in their headquarters in New York afforded Thompson a certain poetic licence that he had no qualms in exercising for the sake of a good story.

As he continued on his travels through Columbia and further afield in South America however, Thompson needed little in the way of excuses in order to resort to hyperbole as imagined hardships soon became a very real fact of life. Following on from his escapade with the Guajiro Indians, he travelled to Barranquilla where his presence attracted the attention of the authorities and local media. In a letter to Paul Semonin, Thompson confessed that he was in Columbia 'four days before anyone saw his passport' (Thompson 1998, p. 338), and that he 'had a bit of a hard time explaining how he got in' (Thompson 1998, p. 338). He also noted that he had made the pages of the local newspaper 'this morning I rated 3 inches on the social page of the Barranquilla *El Herald*. All lies, but in Spanish and harmless' (Thompson 1998, p. 339). As noted by Brian Kevin (Kevin 2014, p. 113), the lies Thompson mentioned are largely of his own making, with the article accrediting him as a writer with the *Herald Tribune*, for whom he has produced a series of articles on the countries visited during his travels across South America. Noting that he is also a photographer, the *El Herald* piece concludes with a gesture of good will towards their fellow professional: 'we welcome Senior Thompson, wishing him the best impressions during his visit to our country'. Thompson of course, had published no articles for the *Herald Tribune* about his South American travels, and even his first article for the *National Observer*, 'Valencia of Columbia: 'Leery Optimism' at Home for Kennedy Visit', did not appear in print until almost a month later, on June 24th 1962.

Despite the best wishes of those at the *El Herald*, Thompson's impressions of Columbia were also anything but positive. In Barranquilla, he negotiated his way to Bogotá by way of a convoy of seven barges transporting beer along the Magdalena River, with

Thompson securing free transport in exchange for ten photos of the boats that the company wanted for advertising purposes. It was an eight-day journey that spanned several hundred miles, and by the time Thompson reached Bogotá he was near breaking point:

My mail has gone to the dogs, my photos are going nowhere, my bowels are racked with dysentery, my contacts speak no English, my countrymen want me deported, and my overall situation is a black X on a black wall. (Thompson 1998, p. 340)

In terms of his writing, he was struggling to replicate his success, with the *National Observer* with other publications, with only the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* running two of his articles. In a letter to Paul Semonin, Thompson vented his frustration with the myopic editorial assessment of his journalistic style, declaring ‘I have been accused in fact of submitting articles that read “like letters and essays” which of course they were’ (Thompson 1998, p. 340). Though initially these submissions were rejected, by the end of his tenure in South America, it is precisely this style that would garner Thompson plaudits from his peers, and even see a number of his articles entered into the congressional record.

It took almost a month in Latin America before Thompson’s writing took on a perceptible political dimension that simultaneously shone through in both his private correspondence, and in his essays for the *National Observer*. In his now well-established practice, he used his letters as a sounding board wherein he filtered his knowledge of the latest socioeconomic affairs of Latin America through his own political and philosophical filters, allowing his more charged rhetoric to find release before he refined and expressed his public articulation of the subject at hand. Much of Thompson’s concerns centred upon the Alliance for Progress, an initiative of President John F. Kennedy designed to counter the threat of communism in Latin American, at a time of rising Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union and more locally, with Fidel Castro’s Cuba. Politicians and policy makers in Washington had initiated the Alliance for Progress ‘as a means of bulwarking capitalist

economic growth, funding social reforms to help the poorest Latin Americans, promoting democracy – and strengthening ties between the United States and its neighbours’ (<http://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/AllianceforProgress>), but in travelling through the recipient countries in South America, Thompson discovered a different kind of truth, one which did not sit well with his own politics or the ideals to which he believed America should be held.

In Bogotá, he lambasted both the Embassy and USIS [United States Information Services] personnel, describing them to Paul Semonin as being ‘so full of shit that the stench floats down to the street and disrupts traffic’ (Thompson 1997, p. 341). Writing of the Alliance for Progress operatives and Peace Corps representatives however, he painted a picture that made a mockery of the official line from Washington, before finishing with his trademark bizarre wit:

Everybody is working terribly hard on some Worthwhile Project, and for some queer reason it is depressing. They are hauling the Indians out of mud huts and putting them in huts made of concrete blocks – then hiring \$100-a-day photographers to take pictures of the progress. They have imported ping-pong and the Twist to combat the Red Menace, and an unsalaried cynic with no coat or tie might just as well slink off to some bistro and masturbate in a back booth. (Thompson, 1998, p. 341)

It was a critique that echoed Thompson’s previous sentiment in describing the transformation that was taking place in Puerto Rico, an uneasy portrait of the American Dream in action on foreign soil, where an influx of money and development is presented as the way forward but the reality is something else entirely. For Thompson, it was all a pretence that merely served to mask the deep-rooted problems across Latin America, which were mostly centred on inequality and the suppression of democracy, but what truly bothered him was the nature and extent of the duplicity on behalf of the United States of America. For Thompson, it raised too many disturbing questions about how these actions,

or indeed in some cases, the deliberate lack of action, in Latin America might transfer back to American soil. All across the continent, he witnessed a populace in the throes of political turmoil; indeed, much of what he experienced in Latin America foreshadowed the events of the coming decade at home in America. In Barranquilla, Columbia, he witnessed the brutal suppression of student protests, prompting him to recall the horror of it in a letter to Paul Semonin:

The cops are what give me the creeps; to look at them in the jackboots is bad enough, but to see photos of them firing wildly into mobs of students is a bit unreal . . . yesterday in Barranquilla the army tackled a student protest march with clubs and gas, and it was only because the students fled that nobody was shot. (Thompson 1998, p. 342)

Less than a decade later, on May 4th 1970, the National Guard would open fire on students protesting the escalation of the Vietnam War at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four students and wounding nine. The incident took place two days after Thompson had visited the Kentucky Derby with Ralph Steadman, a visit which would result in what is considered the first example of Gonzo Journalism, ‘The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved’, published by *Rolling Stone* magazine. Though Thompson may have considered such extreme violence against students as scarcely believable in Columbia of 1962, by 1970 in Nixon’s America, the gun in politics had come to define the cultural and political landscape.

In that sense, touring Latin America was a good primer for what Thompson would spend the rest of his career writing about, different aspects of fear and loathing, and if there was a nerve centre representing the heart of darkness on the continent, then Thompson surely discovered it when he visited Cali, Columbia in June of 1962. In a letter to the editor of *Argosy*, Al Podell, Thompson pitched a photo feature on the conflict between the army and guerrilla fighters in the countryside surrounding Cali, the reality of which was unlike anything Thompson had previously encountered on his travels:

There is a hell of a problem here in Columbia with what they call Rural Violence. This means that out in the countryside there are a many people who pass the time of day whacking off their neighbor's heads with machetes. They also have an interesting trick called the *Corte de Flanella*, which they accomplish by cutting the throat and jerking out the tongue . . . The Colonel in charge of the Cali garrison told me the *bandeleros*, as they are called here, are all communists bent on taking over the country. (Thompson 1998, pp. 343-344)

Thompson was quick to identify the similarities however, between the difficulties facing the army in Columbia, and those of the United States in Vietnam, stating in his letter to Podell that 'some say the army is not trained to fight guerrillas, which is true. This is an old problem, of course; witness the U.S. difficulties in SE Asia' (Thompson 1998, p. 344). Little did Thompson realise at the time that the latter conflict was soon to escalate into an era-defining war for the United States, which would simultaneously see the rise of the counterculture through which Thompson would find a platform and an audience for his greatest work.

Incidentally, it is also in Cali, Columbia where Thompson begins to pitch stories to his editors that fell outside of the usual current affairs arena and instead strayed into territory that is more off-beat in subject matter, a move that also bears witness to the degree to which Thompson was willing to risk his own personal safety for the sake of a good story. In Columbia, his suggestions ranged from a feature on prostitution and the 'wholly different sexual climate' (Thompson 1998, p. 345) to that of a story he outlined to *Argosy*, wherein Thompson was willing to become embedded with the Columbian army in the hope of witnessing first-hand the conflict with the rebels:

I will, for enough money, go out after photos of the actual *bandeleros*, but if I do anything like this it will have to be on an assignment basis. Nobody here will do it and I would have to go with an army patrol that would stand a better than even chance of getting ambushed . . . There are plenty of shots of past massacres, but not many of massacres in progress.

None, in fact. Anyway, let me know what you need to make up a good photo feature. The writing will be no problem, as I already have plenty of dope. (Thompson 1998, p. 344)

It was an approach reminiscent of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and one that would serve Thompson well when he rode with the Hell's Angels in California. What Thompson was seeking was real first-hand experience of the stories in which he was interested, a desire that was crucial to the development of his Gonzo Journalism wherein the journalist becomes not only a participant, but indeed sometimes the very focus of the story itself, often to the detriment of the original assignment. It is also worth noting here that Thompson's reference to 'dope' is less likely his first tacit admission in print to the use of drugs as a facilitator of his writing endeavours, than the more likely explanation that he is simply referring to the material he has gathered for the story. He had using the term earlier in the same letter in this manner in reference to a story he was writing for the *National Observer*.

Thompson's experience *en route* from Columbia to Brazil that summer, by way of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, proved to be a journey that tested him to his very limits. Physically the extent of his travels started to take a terrible toll from the very beginning of his journey, and by its end, the mental strain would prove to be almost as bad, with Thompson describing his journey as a 'mad, headlong, poverty-stricken rush across the continent' (Thompson 1998, p. 345). From Lima, Peru, he contacted the editor of the *Brazil Herald*, Bill Williamson, outlining the plight of his situation and detailing his expectations that Brazil would be kinder to him upon his arrival:

For the past month I have felt on the brink of insanity: weakened by dysentery, plagued by fleas and vermin of all sizes, cut off from mail, money, sex and all but the foulest food, and hounded 24 hours a day by thieves, beggars, pimps, fascists, usurers, dolts and human jackdaws of every shape and description . . . I have had in the back of my mind an unreasoning certainty that Rio is a decent place . . . if this is a delusion I will probably have

a breakdown when I arrive and the Embassy will be forced to ship me home like an animal, with ‘No Dice’ scrawled across my passport. (Thompson 1998, p. 346)

Despite his situation, Peru proved to be the focus of one of Thompson’s most notable dispatches from Latin America for the *National Observer*, entitled ‘Democracy Dies in Peru, but Few Seem to Mourn Its Passing.’ The article centred on the Peruvian presidential elections of 10 June 1962, which was contested by three main candidates: Victor Raul Haya de la Torre of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA); Fernando Belaunde Terry of Accion Popular, who would later become President of Peru for two non-consecutive terms; and former dictator General Manuel Odria of the Union Nacional Odrriista party, who ruled Peru from 1948 to 1956. Haya de la Torre won the popular vote by a narrow margin, but he failed to take the required one third of the vote that would have automatically seen him become president-elect, which meant that the final decision on who would become the next president was now to be taken by congress. In an attempt to keep the presidency out of the hands of Haya de la Torre and APRA, the other candidates joined together so that General Manuel Odria would become the next president. On July 18th however, General Ricardo Perez Godoy launched a *coup d’état*, entering the presidential palace in a tank and expelled the then sitting President Manuel Prado from office. Alleging electoral fraud, General Godoy seized the reins of power, installing a military junta and at that moment Peru officially passed from being a democracy to a dictatorship. Yet, as observed by Thompson, on the busy streets of the nation’s capital, Lima, the above events appeared to have little or no visible impact on the daily lives of the Peruvian people; the outcome was met not with outrage or resignation, but rather with a sense of indifference. For Thompson, the reasons behind this stoicism in contrast to the initial condemnation from the United States laid bare why the Alliance for Progress was destined to fail, and

simultaneously also exposed a fascinating system of power at work, one that pre-dated the United States of America and stretched back to the era of the Incas.

In many ways, Thompson's *National Observer* piece on the Peruvian elections illustrated his political acumen, in conjunction with establishing an approach to the electoral and political process that was not directed by any particular political leaning or school of thought *per se*. Instead it was primarily rooted in, and motivated by, a moral sense of duty that once more owed much to the philosophy espoused by Joseph Pulitzer on the role of the press, which Thompson first encountered engraved on a bronze plaque outside the Time building in New York City, where he had been working as a copyboy:

An institution that should always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty. (Pulitzer in Thompson 1998, p. xv)

While adhering to these fundamental ideals, Thompson simultaneously introduces and develops in his analysis the key fundamentals that ultimately define his own unique brand of political commentary.

From the outset, 'Democracy Dies in Peru, but Few Seem to Mourn Its Passing', introduces a central thematic foundation of Thompson's Gonzo Journalism: the Death of Democracy. A central trope of the genre is an examination of the ways and means through which liberty is threatened, followed by a challenging of the figures of authority that sanctioned and endorsed such actions. This trope would endure and would feature as a dominant element of his overall autopsy of 'The Death of the American Dream'. For a variety of reasons, the reality of the Peruvian *coup d'état* and the nonchalant manner in which the development was greeted inside of Peru, represented the ultimate political

nightmare envisaged by Thompson; it fuelled his paranoia regarding a modern state where the will of the people carries no political influence, and where power is consolidated by an elite minority backed by the force of a military, who have created a system of control wherein true freedom dies before it has even had time to flourish. In such a scenario, the people do not and will not fight for that which they have never known; it is a country where democracy ultimately has no say or future. However, in the aftermath of such developments, any suggestion that the lack of outrage indicated that the outcome was inconsequential is swiftly quashed by Thompson, in what would come to be a somewhat prophetic ability to accurately assuage the far-reaching consequences of such political developments. This ability would come to the forefront in his coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign between Richard Nixon and George McGovern, and would culminate in Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. In Latin America, that political foresight swiftly identified the implications for the Alliance for Progress arising out of the military intervention in the Peruvian elections and the now awkward position with which President John F. Kennedy had to contend; that is, how to appropriately respond to the *coup d'état* without losing credibility for himself or his Latin American policy?

If there is one profound reality in Peruvian politics it is the fact that this country has absolutely no democratic tradition, and any attempt to introduce one is going to meet violent opposition. The people who need democracy don't even know what the word means; the people who know what it means don't need it and they don't mind saying so. If the Alliance for Progress requires that democracy in Peru become a fact instead of just a pleasant word, then the Alliance is in for rough sledding too. (Thompson 2003b, pp. 352-353)

For Thompson, it was clear that the entire premise of the Alliance for Progress had been built upon a fundamental lack of understanding of the gulf in cultural norms between the United States and Latin America, an inadequacy he later described as 'the perpetual short

circuit in American thinking' (Thompson 1998, p. 384), which rendered futile any effort to foster American ideals on their way of life in an effort to counterbalance the perceived threat of communism on the continent. In this situation, President Kennedy had backed himself into a corner, because one of the central aims of his Alliance for Progress initiative was to establish and support democratic governments in Latin America, and therefore Kennedy had to be seen to condemn any anti-democratic developments on the continent. However, at the same time, the military junta in Peru was anti-communist, which was precisely the kind of buttress the United States wanted in Latin America to counter the influence of Fidel Castro's Cuba and the spread of communism.

It is towards this ultimate issue that Thompson builds his narrative, and in doing so he explores the resistance to democratic reform, not just from a Peruvian perspective, but also from the point of view of 'The American Way', the reality of which exposed the dichotomy between the stated aims of the Alliance for Progress, and that of the stance held by the officials and representatives of the American business and finance community in Peru. This lent weight to the common suspicion in Latin America that the United States was ultimately advancing imperial interests under the guise of the Alliance for Progress, even if that was ultimately at the expense of democracy. For Thompson, the story behind the politics was an age old one however, that transcended culture and identity and ultimately depended upon the relationship between those with power and their efforts to preserve their position, over those who had none, a reality for those in Peru that appeared to be permanently etched upon their existence: 'from the beginning of their history the Peruvian people have been conditioned to understand that there are only two kinds of human beings in this world – the Ins and the Outs, and a vast gulf in between' (Thompson 2003b, p. 354). Having long identified with the latter of the two groups stemming from his own childhood experiences, Thompson had an intrinsic understanding of the underdog

mentality and what it was like to be pitted against a powerful system of control, a subject that became a cornerstone of his Gonzo Journalism. Citing a passage from *The Ancient Civilizations of Peru* that details the manner in which the Inca state treated the people under their rule, Thompson in turn contrasts that era with modern day Peru ‘little has changed since then except that the peasants are no longer insured against hunger, exploitation, undue hardship and all kinds of want’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 354).

The fatal error committed by the United States, according to Thompson, is that they ignored longstanding Peruvian history in backing APRA and their candidate Haya de la Torre, whose popularity amongst the downtrodden in society ultimately represented a greater threat to the ruling classes than any threat of communism:

It is foolish, they say, to talk about the Junta ‘seizing the reins,’ because the Junta is nothing more than a dress-uniform version of the same power bloc that has held the reins for centuries . . . Its counterpart in the U.S. has been labelled The Power Elite. In Peru it is called the Forty Families, an all-powerful aristocracy that makes its North American cousin look weak and tame by comparison. (Thompson 2003b, p. 354)

However, while the United States may have been guilty of misjudging the situation in Peru, for Thompson the truly revealing insight into the entire affair came, not from Washington, but rather from the American business community in Lima. Rather than supporting the attempts by the United States to endorse APRA through the Alliance for Progress, they instead lined up with the Peruvian business community, and approved the actions of the Junta in preserving the *status quo*, with Thompson quoting the president of a U.S. businessmen’s society who articulated the common sentiment in Lima:

The rich people are running this country. They’re running the country back home. Why not face facts and be thankful for what stability we have? These people are anti- Communist. Let’s recognise the Junta, keep the aid flowing, and get on with it. (Thompson 2003b, p. 356)

For Thompson, these views and others which expressed a desire for President Kennedy to ‘join them in their endorsement of The System’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 354) in Peru, and their subsequent declaration that Washington’s initial condemnation of the Junta amounted to a mere misunderstanding, exposed a side of the American presence in Latin America that did little to quell his own cynical opinion of what was actually achievable under the Alliance for Progress.

The crux of the issue for him revolved around how President Kennedy could possibly resolve the situation when dealing with a military junta that ignored the will of 600,000 voters, and who were vehemently opposed to what was arguably the first fair and democratic elections in Peru’s history: ‘to these people, democracy means chaos. It will loosen their grip on the national purse strings, shatter the foundations of society, and send the rabble pouring into the vaults. A whole way of life would collapse if democracy became a reality in Peru’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 357). That such a system of control could be endorsed by American businessmen was a mentality that was viewed with anathema by Thompson, but ultimately his concern lay, not with the moral and ethical failings of capitalists in Peru, but rather with those on home soil, concluding his article with the focus lying squarely on the United States and the Alliance for Progress:

It follows then, that if the U.S. reaction to the takeover is a misunderstanding, the whole Alliance for Progress is a misunderstanding, because the Alliance is based rather firmly on the assumption that Progress will not come at the expense of democracy. Mr. Kennedy has said this over and over again, but it is a concept that has not gained wide acceptance in Peru. Not among the people who count, anyway. (Thompson 2003b, p. 358)

A case can be made that, despite the initial culture shock upon his arrival in South America, it was not until Thompson was covering the aftermath of the Peruvian elections for his *National Observer* article that he began to truly acknowledge the transformative effect the continent was having on him as an individual, not just in terms of his development as a

writer, but also in the manner of his perception of the United States. He made this clear in a letter to Paul Semonin concerning his situation in Peru, noting that the distance from his homeland had become not just a physical separation, but also symbolised a distinct mental break from the established customs and ideologies that had been embedded into his very mode of being. The advantage of this separation afforded him an alternative perspective, albeit one that was somewhat unsettling:

The only ones who think democracy is going to work here are the people in Washington - and perhaps the U.S. Ambassador who was virtually drummed out of the country when he voiced his displeasure with the takeover . . . That may give you an idea of what I mean when I say you can learn a lot here . . . The grey areas are so extreme that you understand a lot more about the U.S. but it is not simply that I have got away from it geographically but in a lot of other ways as well. (Thompson 1998, p. 347)

What is particularly noticeable about Thompson's letter to Semonin here is the distinctly negative shift in his views concerning Latin America as a whole, which is nowhere more apparent than in his self-confessed alarm upon learning that Semonin was considering leaving Ghana for Peru, based on Thompson's earlier more positive letters from his travels.

Confessing to Semonin that he was 'tempted to at times to write this continent off as a lost cause' (Thompson 1998, pp. 346-347), he further elaborates on the distinct sense of alienation that he was experiencing, articulating his clear frustration in a manner that not only identifies what he deems to be a fundamental and ingrained cultural and ideological division between North and South, but that also expresses a clear belief in the cultural Other while at the same time distancing himself from his fellow compatriots:

What I mean here is that people down here have not the faintest idea what I'm talking about . . . I am beginning to think my coming here is like an Abolitionist going to the Old South and trying to communicate with the people there . . . Frankly, I don't like the bastards. Nor do I like the Americans I've met down here because they go to extremes to ape the locals, explaining that 'it is the only way to get along in business.' Naturally, the only Americans

down here are businessmen. Occasional reformers, but they don't last . . . I have not had human contact since William Kennedy in San Juan. (Thompson 1998, p. 347)

For Thompson, even as a self-confessed 'gringo', he nevertheless also maintains his Outsider status amongst the expatriate community through the condition of his poverty; and having rejected life with the natives on the condition of their being 'unbelievably primitive' (Thompson 1998, p. 348), a view that was coloured by his contracting of dysentery from a previous attempt at the lifestyle, he finds himself in a rather unsettling position, leading him to confess his discomfort to Semonin: 'so I am stuck somewhere in between with no company and I'm getting damn tired of it' (Thompson 1998, p. 348). Yet, Thompson is also quick to identify the extenuating circumstances obstructing his efforts at integration, acknowledging his distinct lack of progress in breaking the language barrier; how his constant travelling hinders his ability to settle into any single place; and the crippling poverty that copper-fastened his marginalisation.

By August of 1962, having arrived in Bolivia *en route* to Brazil, it appeared that Thompson's gruelling cross continent trek had finally taken its toll, leaving him physically and mentally drained to the point that he vowed to retreat from writing about the tumultuous world of Latin American current affairs, in which he had been thoroughly engrossed for the duration of his trek thus far. If seemingly not a good career move, it nevertheless was a decision that brought with it newfound benefits of another kind:

Life has improved immeasurably since I have been forced to stop taking it seriously. Frankly, reality here is too much to handle. I have given up politics and have publicly declared myself an *anarchista*, which has contributed heavily to the making of new and foreign friends. I am at last cracking the language barrier, using sex as a wedge and drink to dilute the ignorance. (Thompson 1998, p. 351)

By the time Thompson finally made his way to Brazil in September of 1962, he managed to find that much-needed stability of having a base of operations which had been absent

from his life for the preceding four months journey that had spanned as many countries, comforted that he was no longer dogged by the trials and tribulations that beset him at every step of the way as he lived out of a suitcase. Much to Thompson's relief, the hard work that he had invested on the road had finally brought about signs of a reward, with his editor at the *National Observer*, Clifford Ridley, writing to him in Rio de Janeiro to inform him that his articles for the *National Observer* had garnered 'high praise throughout the journalism community' (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. 352).

The letter from Ridley was precisely the kind of ego boost that Thompson needed in order to recoup and take stock of his situation following the morale-sapping encounters to which he had been exposed since his arrival in South America. In reassessing his work for the *National Observer*, Thompson made sure to acknowledge the important role that Ridley had played in terms of his end product, expressing his gratitude that, as editor, he had afforded him the freedom to write about the subjects he was covering with the kind of in depth analysis that the subject matter demanded:

You've given me enough space (yeah, even with the editing) to really deal with these things I've been writing about, rather than merely hitting one or two high spots like I would have to do for other papers . . . I'm not down here to make money or to get by with writing as little as possible, if I were I'd pick up a *Time* stringership or something on that order. (Thompson 1998, p. 353)

If Thompson or Ridley needed any further vindication of their partnership, it arrived shortly thereafter, when several of Thompson's articles were entered into the *Congressional Record*. It was a major breakthrough for Thompson, and one that reinvigorated his desire to continue his working relationship with the newspaper, which in turn had decided to reward the recognition Thompson's articles had brought the *National Observer* by raising his pay to \$175 per article. The success also refocused Thompson's mind on expanding his output beyond that of his coverage of the latest political development on the continent, a

task that, as Thompson admitted to Ridley, had been ‘hard to ignore’ (Thompson 1998, p. 355), due to the inflamed political situations that had gripped the continent throughout 1962.

Nevertheless, Thompson desired a change of sorts to his writing, expressing not only an interest returning to fiction, but also suggesting to Ridley that he investigate ‘some of the off-beat, “life with the natives” stuff more on the order of Guajira’ (Thompson 1998, pp. 354 – 355). Much to Thompson’s surprise however, Ridley had also discovered an opportunity to diversify the nature of Thompson’s articles, recognising an overlooked source of quality material that had been in front of them for months, specifically his letters from the road. Ridley excerpted them in the *National Observer* as ‘Chatty Letters During a Journey from Aruba to Rio’, with a short introduction explaining to the reader the reasoning behind their publication ‘. . . there’s another side to reporting that seldom shows up in formal dispatches – the personal experiences of the digging, inquisitive newsman. These often give fascinating insights on the land and the people’ (Ridley in Thompson 2003b, p. 365). As noted by Bob Bone, the dichotomy between Thompson’s straight journalism and his more colourful private correspondence was still very much evident in South America, yet it is only when the stylistic characteristics of the latter was used by Thompson in his work that he ‘discovered’ his own unique voice as an author:

At that time, during the Rio days, Hunter talked a wild game but he was writing pretty straight copy. He had to get published by the *National Observer* to pay the rent. But he discovered his success later when he began to write just like he talked. (Bone in Whitmer, p. 133)

In this sense, ‘Chatty Letters During a Journey from Aruba to Rio’ forms what could be considered an early prototype of Gonzo Journalism, and as noted by William McKeen, the letters also reveal Thompson employing a narrative technique that would become pivotal to Gonzo Journalism: ‘one of the characteristics of the style Hunter developed was his

preoccupation with *getting the story*. In fact, *getting the story* became the story. His writing could be classified as metajournalism, journalism about the process of journalism' (McKeen 2008, p. 73).

It is this process that is used by Thompson throughout his most notable works, from *Hells Angel's* to *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, but which first appeared in print, as we have seen, as far back as Thompson's stint in the military, when he used the technique in his correspondence to his friend Rutledge Lilly, relaying his disastrous coverage of the annual football banquet for the NCO Club newsletter. In addition to this narrative style, 'Chatty Letters a Journey from Aruba to Rio' also bears a number of other characteristics of Thompson's later style, including several stock phrases and references that became staples of his repertoire. In Quito, Ecuador he refers to himself as 'Senor Thompson, the gringo with the messy room' (Thompson 2003b, p. 307), and complains to Ridley about the horrors of dysentery, 'my stomach feels like a tree is growing in it' (Thompson 2003b, p. 307), which together foreshadows the routine destruction of hotel rooms and the nightmarish drug fuelled imagery that characterises Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo's experiences in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. From Guayaquil, Ecuador, Thompson quotes Herman Melville's theory on the circle of genius to explain the implications of bad credit, a favourite reference that appears throughout his *oeuvre*, including that of a chapter heading in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

. . . all over the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.' Which means, in my case, that if I bounce a check in Cali my reputation as a crook will precede me to Buenos Aires. So I have to be careful. (Thompson 2003b, p. 367)

According to William McKeen however, it is the excerpt from Thompson's dispatch from Peru that truly sees him 'on the verge of a Gonzo breakthrough' (McKeen 2008):

It may seem like heresy in Washington, but it is a fact that democracy is just about as popular here as eating live goldfish, I tell you now so you'll have time to ponder. (Some S½&?& has been throwing rocks at my window all night and if I hadn't sold my pistol I'd whip up the blinds and crank off a few rounds at his feet. As it is, all I can do is gripe to the desk.) . . . I am beginning to look like the portrait of Dorian Gray; pretty soon I am going to have to have the mirrors taken out. (Thompson 2003b, p. 368)

It is a paragraph that evokes the classic image of the Hunter Figure, with Thompson utilising his flair for surreal imagery and the juxtaposition of imminent violence with a paranoid siege mentality, which is consistently set against a crisis wherein the protagonist, either Thompson or one of his Hunter Figure alter egos, is beset by an assortment of ailments, which range from the self-inflicted to those that are of a hallucinatory origin.

In South America however, Thompson had yet to incorporate the world of drugs into his writing, but nevertheless, he utilises his ongoing battle with dysentery to the same dramatic effect, culminating in his use of what would become another trademark expression 'How long, O Lord, how long?' (Thompson 2003b, p. 368), usually deployed as added emphasis of his martyrdom to the story. Thompson was particularly fond of employing biblical references and phrases to great effect throughout his career, but he was also quick to dismiss suggestions that it reflected upon his personal beliefs:

I have stolen more quotes and thoughts and purely elegant little starbursts of *writing* from the *Book of Revelation* than anything else in the English language – and it is not because I am a biblical scholar, or because of any religious faith, but because I love the wild power of the language and the purity of the madness that governs it and makes it music. (Thompson 1988, p. 09)

There was also a practical side to Thompson's repeated quotation of scripture; life on the road as a journalist meant that access to a library was erratic and often impossible, so the only text available outside of his own travelling material was frequently a copy of the

Gideon King James Bible, to be found in hotel rooms around the world, with the Book of Revelation his default source of inspiration.

Outside of the developments in Thompson's writing in South America, perhaps the single most important feature of his time there is that it also marks the beginning of his indulgence in the world of drugs, a world that would play an enormous role in the development of both the Hunter Figure and of Gonzo Journalism. Though Thompson had yet to write about the subject, or discuss his experimentation in his correspondence, nevertheless drugs had become a feature his life on a sustained basis, starting with his contracting of dysentery in Columbia, which plagued him all through the summer of 1962, until his arrival in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, in September of that year. Under medical advice to avoid alcohol, Thompson instead explored other avenues of intoxication that were available:

With no booze to soothe the savage beast, Hunter experimented with other substances. A number of his friends feel that it was in South America that he began using amphetamines on a regular basis. He certainly tried a variety of stimulants while there, including the coca leaf that the Incas used to 'dull the pain of reality.' His doctors gave him injections of cortisone to combat the ravages of dysentery and help rebuild strength. (Perry 2004, pp. 73-74)

Another link to amphetamines during this period was Thompson's partner, Sandy Conklin, who had started using the drug having sourced a supply from a group of chemists with whom she worked, who were discreetly manufacturing it to supplement their income:

They had four different levels of speed. I started out with the lowest amount. It definitely made me feel better. I felt together, and sort of 'up' and then it got to be more and more, and of course I couldn't sleep. (Conklin in Wenner, 2008. p. 57)

In regular contact with Thompson, who sent her his articles to be proofread before submission, Conklin eventually travelled to Brazil to be with Thompson by October of

1962, bringing a supply of amphetamines with her, and together they lived in a hotel on Copacabana Beach, with Thompson proclaiming the virtues of life in Brazil in a letter to William Kennedy: ‘right now I have more money than I can reasonably waste’ (Thompson 1998, p. 356), before adding that he had ‘given up beer for *gintonicas* and cognac’ (Thompson 1998, p. 356). Of their reunion in Rio, Conklin described it as ‘very, very, “up”’ (Conklin in Wenner 2008, p. 59).

By January 1963, Thompson had established himself quite securely in Rio de Janeiro; he now had a guaranteed regular income from the *National Observer* and the reception that his articles had been receiving back home had reinvigorated his sense of confidence in his writing. From Rio, Thompson managed to also visit Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay, and as ever, he longed to write about topics other than politics, such as the Macumba (voodoo) ceremonies in Rio on New Year’s Eve. Writing of the shocking spectacle in a letter to Jo Hudson, he declared ‘man, it would have curled your hair’ (Thompson 1998, p. 365), whilst also sharing his frustration at not being able to cover such events: ‘I am so fucking involved in politics, etc. that I don’t have much time for the oddball stuff that is really most important’ (Thompson 1998, p. 365). Despite this complaint, in Rio Thompson did eventually manage to cover a story that met his desire for an article that had both shock value and a dark undercurrent. The article in question was titled ‘Brazilshooting’, and concerned the revenge attack on the Domino nightclub in Copacabana by the Brazilian Army, after a sergeant had been beaten to death there several weeks earlier, over a disputed bill. Following his death, an Army captain went to the nightclub to inform them that there would be a price to pay over the incident, only to find himself on the receiving end of a beating too. Ten days after these events, a paratrooper unit stormed the premises with machine guns, hand grenades and tear gas, leaving several dead and injured in their wake.

In writing about the story, the first noticeable aspect is that Thompson inserts himself into the narrative by referring to himself throughout as ‘the Journalist’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 363) or ‘the American’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 363), a technique that, coupled with his matter-of-fact narration, evoked Ernest Hemingway’s coverage of the Spanish Civil War. As William McKeen put it, ‘like Hemingway, Hunter referred to himself in the third person and also emphasized his closeness to the action . . . his dispassionate description of the aftermath of violence at the Domino Club strongly evoked Hemingway’s reporting from a quarter century before’ (McKeen 2008, p. 75). Again, it also demonstrates that Thompson’s best and most original writing also necessitated the involvement of his own *persona* in order to best tell the story. In doing so, he managed to register his disgust with the incident by way of employing a technique that he had used previously in his Big Sur article, namely quoting himself, albeit with his identity barely concealed:

An American wondered what the reaction would be if soldiers from Ft. Knox, Kentucky, shot up a bar in Louisville where a soldier had been cheated, beaten or even killed some weeks before. ‘I can’t even conceive of it,’ he said, ‘but if it ever happened I bet they’d all hang’. (Thompson 2003b, p. 364)

It is upon this huge difference in the application of justice between North and South America that Thompson builds his article, focusing not just on the actions of the military and their unabashed revenge killing, but also the manner in which the police in Rio operate with similar impunity, responding to issues of social deprivation by killing beggars and dumping their bodies into the rivers. For Thompson, this shocking abuse of power by the police department serves to undermine the entire justice system, creating an unchecked culture within the corridors of law and order that inevitably contaminates the entire system:

Where civil authority is weak and corrupt, the Army is king by default. Even the words ‘Justice’ and ‘Authority’ take on different meanings. After the Domino attack, the *Jornal*

do Brasil ran a follow-up story, headlined: ‘Army Sees No Crime in Its Action.’ Or, as George Orwell observed, ‘In the kingdom of the blind, the one eyed man is king.’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 365)

The inclusion of the latter quote, variously attributed to Orwell, H.G. Wells and Erasmus, became a longstanding favourite of Thompson’s, a reference that he possibly picked up first from his reading of Wilson’s *The Outsider*, in which an entire chapter is constructed around the meaning of H.G. Wells’ short story *The Country of the Blind*.

‘Brazilshooting’ is also notable as an article however, in that it also revealed a key psychological trait in Thompson that carried over into his characterisation of the Hunter Figure. According to Bob Bone, who lived with Thompson in Rio, there was a certain fascination at the heart of Thompson’s coverage of such violent displays of power:

That was kind of a favourite theme of his, where powerful people had no regard for those without power. He was always semi-serious on these things. He wrote about things at one level, about how awful such things were. But I am sure he enjoyed it on a different level, because his whole idea of surprising people by violent events was always a big thing for him. That was a really amusing picture for him. It was one of the things that defined Hunter’s character – the fact that he enjoyed that kind of thing. He was always principally amused with the idea of shaking people up. (Bone in Whitmer 2000, p. 133)

It is this same characteristic that is evident throughout Thompson’s life and work in his choice of subject matter. Both the Hell’s Angels and Richard Nixon fascinated him at one level, and appalled him on another, due to their respective abuse of power, while his own obsession with guns and the use of shock tactics, in print and in person, to get a reaction from his audience spoke to this fascination with violence in all of its forms. As far back as Thompson’s youth in Louisville, he was motivated by a desire to at once enthrall and upset a potential audience; hence his love of elaborate pranks and the use of street theatre to get a reaction from his carefully selected victims. Similarly, as already noted, Thompson subscribed to Spengler’s theory on those who impose themselves on reality through action

as opposed to thought; there was a certain appeal in acting without restraint that invigorated his senses, and he saw no better way to impose himself on reality than through acts that were violent or inherently dangerous: a belief from which Thompson never wavered, as revealed in his interview with *Playboy* magazine, two months before his death in 2005:

Never hesitate to use force. It settles issues, influences people. Most people are not accustomed to solving situations by immediate and seemingly random applications of force. And the very fact that you are willing to do it – or might be – is a very powerful reasoning tool. Most people are not prepared to do that. You can establish the right reputation in this regard. (Thompson 2009, p. 374)

Violence was at the very heart of Thompson's being, and it found multiple avenues of expression in his life, from his identification with the Outlaw *persona* and his love of guns and explosives, to the very language that he used to express himself. Thompson acknowledged this to Timothy Ferris when he told of browsing a thesaurus for synonyms of the word 'force', and noting that 'they include violence, vehemence, might, rigor, impetuosity, severity, fierceness, ferocity, outrage, eruption, convulsion, violent passion . . . It's scary; kind of a word picture of *me*' (Thompson 2003a, p. xiv). In South America, this fascination began to manifest itself not just in terms of *how* he wrote, but also in *what* he wrote about, specifically death, murder, violence, persecution, exploitation, coups, revenge and dictatorships. It was a path that inevitably led Thompson to that which would become synonymous with his name: Fear and Loathing.

By April of 1963 however, Thompson had finally decided that his tenure in South America had to come to an end. The initial enthusiasm that he had felt following his move to Rio de Janeiro had been slowly ebbing away only to be replaced by disillusionment with his situation. In a letter to Clifford Ridley, Thompson rejected the suggestion that his disenchantment had anything to do with any difficulty surrounding his work assignments,

but rather suggested that the reality of life in South America had finally taken its toll on his mental health:

Let us now get one thing straight between us: I am never going to back off a story because it's 'a bitch.' The bigger, meatier, and gutsier a story is, the more I want to have at it – normally . . . The problem now is that my outlook on South America is entirely abnormal. In a phrase, I no longer give a fuck . . . It's the goddamn awful reality of life down here. I can't shrug it off. I can't avoid it. I can't hire a legion of 'boys' and assistants & secretaries to insulate me from the fear & rot in the streets . . . I wouldn't blame them if they revolted against just about everything – and in the name of whatever party or Ism that supplied that means of revolt. (Thompson 1998, p. 369)

Though Thompson had distanced himself mentally from covering any further stories from South America, at least for the foreseeable future, in the same letter he makes an important disclosure to Ridley concerning the direction he was now considering taking regarding his output: 'I am boiling with ideas & not many of them concern Latin America. We will get together on my return so I can tell you how I'm going to write what America means' (Thompson 1998, p. 371). It is a statement upon which he further expands in a letter to Philip L. Graham, publisher of both *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, whom Thompson had earlier criticised in a scathing letter following comments that Graham had made concerning the *National Observer* and their news reporting, which included accusations that the *National Observer* was in the business of 'rehashing the news' (Thompson 1998, p. 367). It was an attack to which Thompson eagerly responded, as he had long been critical of how Latin American affairs were reported in the mainstream press back home, and Philip Graham was too big a target to let pass:

Newsweek's last story on Brazil, in fact, was held up by the Rio press corps as a hideous example of what happens when Latin America is covered from Madison Avenue . . . It is a goddamned abomination, a fraud, and a black onus on American journalism that a magazine with *Newsweek's* money and circulation so slothfully ignores a continent as critical to

American interests as this one . . . I'm beginning to think you are a phony, Graham . . . If you hired the Marquis de Sade, he'd come out bland. (Thompson 1998, p. 367)

Of course, one of the primary reasons for Thompson's decision to move to South America in the first place had been his resentment towards figures like Graham, and the publications for which he was responsible. Thompson also felt that he had shut him out of the market in New York, which fuelled his desire not just to succeed, but also to get revenge, as he articulated to Eugene McGarr prior to his departure, 'I want to get even with this town for not recognizing my genius and paying me accordingly' (Thompson 1998, p. 314). Much to Thompson's surprise however, Graham responded to his missive with an invitation to tell him more about himself. It is in this ensuing exchange with Graham that Thompson reiterates his stance on America, and the insight that he has gained from his time on the road:

As for me, I'm a writer. I came to South America to find out what it meant, and I comfort myself in knowing that at least my failure has been on a grand scale. After a year of roaming around down here, the main thing I've learned is that I now understand the United States and why it will never be what it could have been, or at least tried to be. (Thompson 1998, p. 372)

This is something of a breakthrough development in terms of Thompson's writing in that, together with his statement to Ridley, it marks the first time in which Thompson articulates the idea of addressing and writing about the American metanarrative, of which in due course 'The End of the American Century' and 'The Death of the American Dream' would become the thematic cornerstone of Thompson's *oeuvre*.

In May of 1963, Thompson finally returned to America, spending the summer months travelling non-stop around the country, starting with a trip from New York to Washington, where he addressed the National Press Club at the invitation of the *National Observer*. From there, he journeyed home to Louisville with Sandy, and on May 19th they

married in nearby Jeffersonville, Indiana, after which they celebrated with friends, one of whom, Gerald Tyrell, immediately noticed a change in Thompson:

Hunter had been down in South America doing some kind of drugs, and he was strung out. He was having trouble talking; his whole manner of speech had changed. He was speaking in this guttural, staccato way, where he'd spit things out quickly and you'd have trouble understanding him. He seemed to be having a hard time finishing sentences. (Tyrell in Wenner 2008, p. 65)

Afterwards, the couple spent a week in Florida with Sandy's mother, who presented them with a car as a wedding gift. It was immediately used to transport them cross-country to Las Vegas, where Thompson planned on covering the Sonny Liston-Floyd Patterson heavyweight championship-boxing match for the *National Observer*. Next stop on the tour was Sonoma County, California, where Thompson enquired about a property near Jack London's Wolf House, overlooking the Valley of the Moon, the inspiration for London's 1913 novel of the same name. It proved not to be however, and in August of 1963 the couple travelled to Aspen to meet up with Paul Semonin, who had returned from Africa. Settling in nearby Woody Creek, Thompson finally brought his time on the road to an end. Recalling this period years later, Thompson wrote 'I had just returned from South America, and I had regained that sort of beat generation attitude about the country. I sort of liked the great American West, and a sense of renewing, and I was feeling good about the country' (Thompson 1992, p. 106).

It was not the only thing about which Thompson was feeling good. On August 19, 1963, the *National Observer* published another article by Thompson, 'Why Anti-Gringo Winds Often Blow South of the Border', which encapsulated his thoughts and feeling regarding his entire South American trip. Thompson regarded it as his finest article for the *National Observer*, something that he felt was largely due to editor Clifford Ridley: 'I was pleased as hell with it – mainly because you didn't put any words in my mouth or change

the ones I wrote, and because it was interesting as hell and smacked of authenticity' (Thompson 1998, p. 396). Thompson's claim of authenticity however, is certainly questionable in regards to the startling image that bookends his article:

One of my most vivid memories of South America is that of a man with a golf club – a five-iron if memory serves – driving golf balls off a pent-house terrace in Cali, Columbia. He was a tall Britisher, and had what the British call 'a stylish pot' instead of a waistline. Beside him on a small patio table was a long gin-and-tonic, which he refilled from time to time at the nearby bar. (Thompson 2003b, p. 348)

It was the perfect image for Thompson, conveying in three sentences the uncomfortable truth about the divisions between rich and poor, coloniser and colonised, that form the underlying current running through the majority of his dispatches from Latin America. As noted by William McKeen, 'Hunter's tenure in South America coincided with the era of the 'Ugly American' from Eugene Burdick's novel of that name, which portrayed the negative American image in the Third World. Hunter saw much ugliness, though not just confined to his compatriots' (McKeen 2008, p. 76). Though the image of the Briton served as an accurate example of what Thompson had discovered in Latin America, the actual story itself, in hindsight, gave others pause for thought, notably Thompson's editor Clifford Ridley:

Given today's journalistic climate, though, we might be a lot more sceptical about some of his details; the rich British man hitting golf balls from his penthouse terrace over the downtown slums of Cali, Columbia, in between sips of his gin and tonic is a little *too* perfect. He *may* have embellished just a *tad* . . . but there was no arguing over the quality of his writing. He was extraordinary for us, and for journalism at that time. (Ridley in Wenner, 2008, p. 61)

Ridley's doubt here concerning the credibility of Thompson's story is not unwarranted, not least because Thompson had no qualms in concocting such a story in order to convey a certain truth to his readers. Prior to the above story, Thompson had inserted fictional

characters of his own creation into his articles in order to supply his own quotes to support his story, as he did in his article from Big Sur through his use of the Claude Fink character. As his Gonzo Journalism later developed and took hold, Thompson elaborated upon this technique to the point that the line between fact and fiction became increasingly blurred, with Thompson using fiction as a more effective means to convey a greater truth or idea.

Indeed, in explaining the meaning of Gonzo Journalism, Thompson cited this very concept as the backbone of his writing: ‘it is a style of ‘reporting’ based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 106). Though the image of the British man may have been conjured up by Thompson, it nevertheless expresses to the reader that which Thompson believed to be inherently *true* concerning South America, whilst at the same time planting an image in the readers’ mind, a glimpse of where America was possibly heading, which simultaneously answers the question posed by the title of the article: ‘Why Anti-Gringo Winds Often Blow South of the Border.’ The British man serves as a symbol of Empire, and his actions represent those of their colonial past and the abuses of power perpetrated by the British on the subjugated peoples they had colonised. Thompson however, juxtaposes this Old World image with one from the New World, that of the newly arrived North American, and the manner through which the colonial system in South America can corrupt him to the point that the actions of the British man become normalised, if not outright expected. Thompson frames this narrative by first pointing to the recent history of the United States in relation to Latin American politics, of which the most serious incidents included the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, and the subsequent Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, coupled with the faltering Alliance for Progress which bore witness to the Peruvian *coup d’état* that same year. For Thompson, the fallout from these events was clear:

The North American presence in South America is one of the most emotional political questions on the continent. In most countries, especially Argentina and Chile, there is a considerable European presence as well. But with recent history as it is, when the winds of anti-gringo opinion begin to blow, they blow due north, towards the United States, which to the Latin American is more identifiable with capitalism and imperialism than any other country in the world. (Thompson 2003b, p. 349)

Thompson subsequently draws upon his own experiences to illustrate the effect this sentiment produces, offering up anecdotes of the kind of situations that he had detailed in his letters to Clifford Ridley, wherein his enthusiastic optimism concerning Latin America had been steadily eroded by the frustrations and obstacles he encountered, leading to his rejection of the natives due to their Otherness. However, he also acknowledges the Otherness of his fellow expatriates, and the manner in which the South America system had rendered their actions alien to his sense of values:

Some people say that the American is fouling his own image in South America – that instead of being a showpiece for ‘democracy,’ he not only tends to ape the wealthy, anti-democratic Latins, but sometimes beats them at their own game. Suddenly finding himself among the elite, the nervous American is determined to hold his own - and, unlike the genuine aristocrat who never doubts his worth, the newcomer to status seeks to prove it every turn. (Thompson 2003b, p. 351)

Citing the age-old proverb ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ as a common excuse by many an expatriate to explain such behaviour, Thompson then delves into the final issue that more often than not serves as a backdrop to all of the above, especially the drinking culture.

Whether as a crutch to cope with the alienation that frequently comes with an entirely new way of life, or merely the only alternative should one find themselves unable to beat the traffic jams in Rio after a day’s work, according to Thompson, the typical North American following any prolonged period in Latin America ‘is often struck dumb by the

question. “What can we do about that place?” (Thompson 2003b, p. 352), to which a constructive answer is simply beyond comprehension:

. . . he has no idea, because he has never had time enough to relax and give it much thought. His concern has been survival. Objectivity is one of the first casualties of ‘culture shock’ – a term for the malady that appears when a North American with his heritage of Puritan pragmatism, suddenly finds himself in a world with different traditions and a different outlook on life. (Thompson 2003b, p. 352)

Thompson concludes by contrasting this reaction with that of his own upon returning from South America, and reading a book by ‘some expense-account politician’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 352), who spent six weeks touring the continent speaking to other politicians about the issues at stake. Here, with the benefit of time and distance, Thompson’s perspective is imbued with the kind of clarity that he felt had abandoned him in South America, leading him to once more focus on the image of the British man with the golf club:

Now, looking back on that man with the golf club, it is easy to see him as a fool and a beast. But I recall quite well how normal it seemed at the time, and how surprised I would have been if any of the dozen people on the terrace had jumped up in protest. (Thompson 2003b, p. 352)

It was a powerful conclusion not just to the article itself, but to Thompson’s entire South American experience. By marrying his first-hand experiences with the wider issues at the heart of Latin American affairs, Thompson demonstrates the manner in which any pretence of objectivity is swiftly eroded under the context of ‘The System’ in Latin America. In doing so, Thompson introduces another key aspect to his *Gonzo Journalism: The Myth of Objectivity*.

In his book *Gonzo Republic*, William Stephenson addresses this very issue by first citing the postcolonial thinker Benedict Anderson’s theory that the novel and the

newspaper are utilised in the construction of a nation through a comfortable role of ideological reinforcement. Stephenson argues that what Thompson sought to achieve was to mix the genres to an altogether different end:

Through his Gonzo style, he aimed to smash the cosy nation-building consensus between fiction and journalism by creating conspicuously subjective, implausible narratives whose often outrageous style and content questioned the comfortable assumptions of ‘objective’ reporting and realist novels. (Stephenson 2011, p. 124)

This is precisely the approach that we see Thompson beginning to take in South America, particularly in his article, ‘Why Anti Gringo Winds Often Blow South of the Border’, which he further refined as he developed his narrative style. That Thompson should adopt this approach in writing about his experiences in South America is no mere coincidence however, in that Stephenson identifies race as ‘one faultline along which this challenge could be pursued. Issues of ethnicity and nationhood informed Thompson’s writing throughout his career and his unconventional approach to them formed part of his resistance to received wisdom’ (Stephenson 2011, p. 125). Indeed, Thompson’s travels across South America had exposed him to these exact tensions, with each stop on his tour characterised by one democratic crisis after another, as the continent became engulfed by political upheaval, that was stirred by a mixture of cold war tensions, American foreign policy, ingrained cultural differences and historical patterns of exploitation and marginalisation stretching back as far as the Incan Empire.

The combination of this cumulative exposure had a truly transformative effect on Thompson, both in terms of his narrative development and perception of his homeland, and the simultaneous advancement of the Hunter Figure as Gonzo Journalist:

Encounters with racism and racial Otherness were catalysts for his identity-building narratives. For Thompson, these were also nation-demolishing narratives, as his visions of

a fragmented, self-conflicted, imperialist USA and of a Gonzo observer-participant, possessed by fear and loathing, shaped themselves simultaneously. (Stephenson 2011, p. 127)

This is no further evident than in his aforementioned statements to Clifford Ridley and Philip Graham upon his return from South America that his travels had proven to be a valuable learning experience, in which he declared ‘we will get together on my return so I can tell you how I’m going to write what America means’ (Thompson 1998, p. 371), and ‘I now understand the United States and why it will never be what it could have been, or at least tried to be’ (Thompson 1998, p. 372). South America had exposed to Thompson the fallacy of the dogma of objectivity that was the cornerstone of American journalism; the strict adherence to the traditional rules of which served not to strengthen journalism but rather to achieve entirely the opposite effect, by weakening and crippling the effectiveness of the power of the Fourth Estate. According to Stephenson, the colonial system that Thompson had encountered on his travels acutely illustrated to him the manner in which this weakness could also be exploited by the dominant hegemony:

Thompson saw objectivity as conformity to the values of a self-interested establishment, and thus a means of tricking journalists and their readers . . . Thompson sees objectivity as a term in the language of oppression: a rhetorical weapon possessed by those with power, and lacked by the marginalized, who are supposedly driven to irrational actions by their failure to see the situation objectively. (Stephenson 2011, pp. 128-129)

It was a conviction that stayed with Thompson throughout his career, and one that heavily informed his coverage and interpretation of the American political arena, in particular his account of the rise of Richard Nixon, who Thompson believed benefited most from the failings of the objectivity doctrine:

Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism — which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective

rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful. (Thompson 1995, p. 243)

In South America, Thompson similarly was afforded the opportunity to view, not just American journalism, but indeed America as a whole in a similar fashion, and the resulting conclusions had proven to be no less of a shock to his system. Though he had long criticised the coverage of Latin American current affairs by the American press, what Thompson had actually encountered in his ensuing trip not only reinforced this belief, but also exposed to him the acute failings of investigative journalism as a whole, pinpointing the myth of objectivity as a central weakness that could be exploited. However, rather than growing disillusioned by his experience, Thompson was instead invigorated and saw an opportunity to advance his journalistic ambitions by challenging the *status quo*.

Thompson wasted no time in letting his feelings be known concerning American journalism. Such was his frustration at what he deemed to be a serious failing on behalf of the Fourth Estate, that he outlined his criticism in a letter to the Editor of the *Saturday Review*, shortly after his return from his South American trip, a response prompted by the publication of their issue on ‘The Americas’, in particular pertaining to two specific articles ‘News and Latin America,’ by Bernard Collier, and ‘What’s Happening to Journalism Education?’ by John Tebbel. According to Thompson, the topic at hand in the respective articles was closely intertwined:

The only man worth sending to Latin America is one who *wants to know* what’s going on down there, who’s willing to get off the jet-routes and out of the old ruts, and move out where things are happening, instead of sticking near the ‘press bars,’ where the ‘inside dope’ changes hands, and where the government ministries hand out statements and

communiqués to correspondents who line up to receive them and dutifully relay their contents back home. (Thompson 1998, pp. 403-404)

The above quotation highlights precisely the approach that characterised Thompson's time in South America, and reaffirms his move away from what he considered to be stale journalistic conventions, and a lethargic approach to investigative journalism, a combination on which he had previously poured scorn in a letter to William Kennedy, identifying the problem as the 'dry rot' (Thompson 1998, p. 186) of the American Press that was reflective of 'the psychopathic complacency of the American public' (Thompson 1998, p. 186). Indeed, it further expands upon his desire to incorporate into his own journalism a different approach which he had declared as 'that vital third dimension that you never get in newspapers' (Thompson 1998, p. 297), and one that was motivated by a genuine intellectual curiosity not just about the political facts and figures of a story, but orientated more towards enacting another viewpoint on the situation at hand: 'politics can be interesting, but I prefer people' (Thompson 1998, p. 297).

The suggestion that these two subjects were somewhat mutually exclusive had been a long held belief, however, as later revealed by Thompson, the first time that he envisaged the possibility of bridging the distance between the two came the night he watched the televised presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy, an experience he identified as being pivotal to his political awakening 'that was when I first understood that the world of Ike and Nixon was vulnerable . . . and it had never occurred to me that politics in America had anything to do with human beings' (Thompson 2001, p. 260). Throughout his coverage of Latin American affairs, Thompson was afforded the perfect opportunity to infuse his hard-faced political reportage with an unflinchingly subjective palette of vignettes concerning the people he encountered on his travels, ranging from the figures affecting the political process, to those suffering the ramifications of the political turmoil that was

spreading across South America throughout his time there. Coupled with a wide-ranging assortment of anecdotes from these people, Thompson presented a portrait of the region that married the political sphere with an unmistakably human dimension that is far removed from what Thompson considered to be the staid objective dispatches amongst the Rotarian press, which he was very reluctant to replicate.

However, as revealed in his letter to the Editor of the *Saturday Review*, the added emotional impact that came from the subjective leanings of Thompson's writing was merely one element of a higher goal to which he ultimately aspired in terms of his own personal brand of journalism; this being a desire and vision to elevate his writing to the great pantheon of literary importance, and to do so in a manner that also conveyed the great moral and social importance that he attached to the role of the journalist in helping to preserve and protect the ideals of the American Dream. This was a responsibility to which he consistently held himself throughout his career, and one to which he believed was a vital responsibility to be imparted to the next generation of journalists:

If we cannot produce a generation of journalists – or even a good handful – who care enough about our world and our future to make journalism the great literature it can be, then 'professionally oriented programs' are a waste of time. Without at least a hard core of articulate men, convinced that journalism today is perhaps the best means of interpreting and thereby preserving what little progress we have made toward freedom and self-respect over the years . . . without these men we might as well toss in the towel and admit that ours is a society too interested in comic strips and TV to consider revolution until it bangs on our front door in the dead of some quiet night when our guard is finally down and we no longer even kid ourselves about being the bearers of a great and decent dream. (Thompson 1998, pp 404-405)

Although Thompson had previously expressed opinions of a similar fashion prior to his living in South America, it is certainly evident that his experiences there expedited the coalescing of his political and philosophical leanings with those of his literary ambitions.

Though Thompson certainly had the strength of his convictions, what followed next served to irrevocably cement his beliefs.

On November 22nd, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Thompson learned of his death from Wayne Vagneur, a rancher who lived near Thompson in Woody Creek. He was devastated by the news. As ever, he turned to his writing to articulate his feelings, composing a lengthy letter to Paul Semonin in which he vented his outrage on the matter: ‘it is the triumph of lunacy, of rottenness, the dirtiest hour in our time . . . It is the death of reason. From here on out, the run is downhill for us all – and I mean all . . . This is by far the most profound act of the 20th century’ (Thompson 1998, p. 418). Interestingly, Thompson chose the letter as an opportunity to address Semonin’s previous criticism of his attitude towards America, leaving no doubt as to the strength of his beliefs:

You said in a letter to Peggy Clifford that my concept of America is outdated, divorced from reality and the rest of the world. Probably it is, but I fully intend to go down with it before I give in to either of the other shitty camps. It may be that the fascists will croak us, but not before getting their balls twisted. If only by me. (Thompson 1998, p. 419)

It was a declaration of intent that could also have served as Thompson’s by-line. Indeed, such was Thompson’s horror at Kennedy’s death that it prompted an outpouring of anguished letter-writing; his first to Paul Semonin had done little to quell his feelings on the subject, serving only as a warm-up, an opening salvo to the main event, his letter to William Kennedy, in which Thompson would hit his rhetorical peak, and in so doing, utilise a turn of phrase what would become his trademark:

There is no human being within 500 miles to whom I can communicate anything – much less the fear and loathing that is on me after today’s murder . . . Neither your children nor mine will ever be able to grasp what Gatsby was after . . . The rage is trebled. I was not prepared at this time for the death of hope, but here it is . . . This is the end of reason, the dirtiest hour in our time. I mean to come down from the hills and enter the fray . . . No

matter what, today is the end of an era. No more fair play. From now on it is dirty pool and judo in the clinches. The savage nuts have shattered the great myth of American decency. They can count me in – I feel ready for a dirty game. (Thompson 1998, p. 420)

It is the first recorded use by Thompson of the phrase ‘fear and loathing’, and it is fitting not only that he used it in this context, but that in the same letter he articulates central premises of Gonzo Journalism: from the reference to Gatsby to that of the loss of hope and what Thompson sees as an attack on the very concept of America itself, culminating in his vow to fight a ‘dirty game’. To cap it all, Thompson wasted no time in singling out a target for his anger, none other than Richard Nixon.

A week after Kennedy’s death, Thompson contacted Dwight Martin of *The Reporter* to enquire about the opportunity of free-lance work, and he made no attempt to disguise his feelings concerning the man that would become his arch-nemesis:

And now, with a hairy animal called Nixon looming once again on the horizon, I am ready to believe that we are indeed in ‘the time of the end.’ There is no other explanation for the durability of that man. He is like a hyena that you shoot and gut, then see a few hours later, loping along in his stinking way, oblivious to the fact that he is not only dead, but gutted as well . . . I don’t mind saying that my primary motive is to keep that man Nixon out of the presidency. No sense trying to hide my bias; it’s nothing personal, I just think he’s the most dangerous political punk who ever lurked in this nation. Especially at a time like this. I have no candidate – I’m even thinking of running, myself – but I know the one man we don’t need is that goddamn vengeful Zero with nine lives. (Thompson 1998, p. 424)

The rules had irrevocably changed for Thompson; in his desire to thwart Nixon, he did not even consider contacting the *National Observer* on the subject. As a newspaper that was considered conservative and sympathetic towards the Republican Party, he knew that what would have been expected of him concerning Nixon, and it was a compromise that Thompson could not entertain, despite the good working relationship he had with Clifford Ridley:

They've been pretty decent, all in all, but I hesitate to work for them under the pretence of personal objectivity. Actually, I'm a pretty objective person except when it comes to Nixon. The very sight of the bastard causes me to gnash my teeth and whine. (Thompson 1998, p. 425)

There was no going back for Thompson, or for America. As 1963 drew to a close under the shroud of Kennedy's death, it was apparent that America was on the cusp of a seismic political and cultural shift. Even the soundtrack had changed, with the Beatles 'I Want to Hold Your Hand', released on 26th December, hitting the number one spot by January, heralding the start of the British Invasion. Thompson's favourite musician, Bob Dylan, was also commanding considerable attention beyond that of his music: on accepting the Tom Paine Award from the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, an intoxicated Dylan 'ranted that old people in furs and jewels should retire, announced that he could see some of himself in Lee Harvey Oswald, and stalked off the platform' (Gitlin 1993, p. 198). On the military front, storm clouds were gathering, with President Lyndon B. Johnson reversing Kennedy's disengagement policy in Vietnam, instead opting to expand the war against communism, the reaction to which was immediately visible on American soil, none more so than in universities across the nation: 'American students were waking up with a bang. A new word was beginning to be whispered; the term was "counterculture," and it came from the general direction of Berkeley' (Whitmer 2000, p. 135). In nearby La Honda, at author Ken Kesey's compound, a group known as The Merry Pranksters were experimenting with a new drug called Lysergic acid diethylamide, abbreviated LSD, which gave rise to the psychedelic sixties. The stage was set for Thompson, and if California was at the leading edge of all that was new in the rapidly changing cultural landscape, it came as no surprise that he would gravitate towards the epicentre in search of a subject, which came roaring out of San Francisco on Harley Davidson's to strike terror into the heart of the nation; it was the dark

side of the American Dream personified ‘like Genghis Khan on an iron horse’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 03) immediately identifiable by the Death’s Head insignia on their motorcycle jackets, united by their appetite for destruction: they were known as The Hell’s Angels.

Chapter 4: The *Enfant Terrible* of the Outlaw Press

In the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's death on November 22nd 1963, the political and cultural landscape of the United States changed irrevocably: the assassin's bullet made 'politics more volatile, the liberal-radical tension more severe' (Gitlin 1993, p. 150). This transformation was immediately perceptible to Hunter S. Thompson. Though the close of 1963 was enshrouded by a period of mourning for Kennedy and by an agreed moratorium on presidential politics, this was lifted in the New Year as the United States prepared for the 1964 Presidential Election. This election would be fought by Democratic Incumbent Lyndon Johnson, who had been sworn into office two hours and eight minutes after Kennedy's assassination, and the Republican nominee Barry Goldwater. Once more, the United States found itself at a political crossroads, and there was a palpable anxiety concerning the direction which the country should take. The battle lines were becoming more pronounced than ever, and socially the countercultural revolution centred upon rock and roll, drugs and universal love was gathering steam.

These political and cultural forces are clearly reflected in Thompson's writing throughout this period, spanning the presidential election year of 1964 up until his meeting with the Hell's Angels in mid-1965. Here, Thompson's philosophy of individualist anarchism becomes ever more pronounced, his experimentation with drugs continues, and creatively, he recognises the attraction that subjective journalism in the vein of his letter

writing has over his more conventional writing. Thompson's Hell's Angels period however, spanning from mid-1965 up to the publication of *Hell's Angels* in late 1966, and the subsequent national circuit of media promotion in 1967, proved to be his major breakthrough onto the literary stage, firmly establishing him as the *enfant terrible* of the New Journalism movement. Marking Thompson's first taste of national celebrity, his transformation into a public personality resulted in the Hunter Figure captivating, not just the attention of the public at large, but also increasingly that of Thompson himself, in both personal and creative capacities. Here we see Thompson assume the mantle of representative for the Outlaw Press, and we see the transition from the mythologizing of the Hell's Angels to that of mythologizing his own *persona*, whilst simultaneously rejecting the journalistic adherence to objectivity in favour of his brand of subjective reportage. Against the continued backdrop of a United States that is ever more entrenched in Vietnam, a policy which Thompson vehemently opposed, the counterculture movement continued to grow apace, with San Francisco being the focal point of the scene.

In a sense, the Hell's Angels bookend the Sixties, in terms of the countercultural decade, in that they embodied not only the rebellious spirit of abandon that characterised the growing movement, sex, drugs, rock and roll, but also the dark side of the era, with their winged death's head logo foreshadowing the violence and bloodshed that threatened to tear apart a generation. At the start of 1964, however, they were an unknown group to both Thompson and to the wider public at large. For Thompson, the immediate reality that demanded his attention was that of the forthcoming presidential election, and the inevitable questions concerning loyalties to opposing sides of the political spectrum. He found himself debating at length with Marxist scholar Paul Semonin, concerning his own political beliefs, the true nature of which he felt compelled to clarify to his friend:

You accuse me repeatedly of being ‘anti-Marxist’ . . . My position is and always has been that I distrust power and authority, together with all those who come to it by conventional means – whether it is guns, votes, or outright bribery. There are two main evils in the world today: one is Poverty, the other is Governments. (Thompson 1998, p. 429)

It was a position that would come to serve Thompson well when it came to his eventual dealings with the Hell’s Angels. It allowed for the creation of a common philosophical bridge between the two upon which some semblance of trust could be built, and which enabled Thompson to become their official ‘embedded’ journalist, a level of access that had never before been granted by the motorcycle gang. Both Thompson and the Hell’s Angels also shared a mutual understanding of the need to break ties with the Established Order and to operate on their own respective terms. For the Hell’s Angels, the Harley Davidson became more than just a motorcycle, it was an emblem of freedom and a declaration of an alternative way of life that was opposed to the values of Middle America. For Thompson, it would mean the rejection of both the mainstream press and the associated rules of objective journalism to such a degree that the end result became a new literary genre. In responding to Semonin’s questioning of his faith in the U.S., Thompson acknowledges this awareness and though he is speaking in political terms it is reflective of an attitude that would prove to be crucial to the success of his creative endeavours:

You hit a nerve when you said you may have more faith in the U.S. than I do. I think you might, and on top of that I’ll give you another irony – I think I may be much closer to a ‘ding dong revolutionary’ than you are. I know you’ll balk at that, but I reason it this way: No ‘revolutionary’ has any hope as long as he’s willing to deal with the Established Order on its own terms and in its own context. The only Revolution I would bet on would be one that set out to kill the roots and break all the dies of the System that came before. (Thompson 1998, p. 430)

It this same inherent individualist anarchism that characterises both the Hunter Figure and Gonzo Journalism, and which underpins their respective success, and although in 1964,

Thompson had yet to launch his own personal revolution, the intention to do so had certainly taken hold, and he was actively searching for the right opportunity to present itself.

One certain catalyst behind Thompson's mode of thinking during this period was undoubtedly his reading of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which examined the colonised world from the viewpoint of the colonised, exploring the psychological trauma of colonisation, and the role of violence, not only in the colonisation and the oppression of the natives, but also in terms of how violence can play a role in subsequent decolonisation. Fanon's work subsequently became a key influence on the Black Panther Party, along with scholars such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. For Thompson, reading Fanon, in conjunction with the latest offering from Bob Dylan, proved to be a much-appreciated intellectual jolt, as is evident in this disclosure to Paul Semonin:

I have dug into Frantz Fanon and I think he is a dead ringer for the real thing . . . I am only about a third of the way into it but I already have a strong scent. I'll call him a liar and a fool now and then, but there's no denying that mean, high sound of a two legged boarbuster. Between Fanon and Bob Dylan I think the blood is moving in my brain again. Dylan is a goddamn phenomenon, pure gold, and mean as a snake. (Thompson 1998, p. 436)

Such was strong impression that Fanon's work had on Thompson, in conjunction with the lengthy introduction to the text by Jean-Paul Sartre, that he immediately sent a review of the book to Dwight Martin, editor of *The Reporter*, in which he summarized the central thesis advocated by both Sartre and Fanon, a thesis that Thompson had also endorsed in his discussions with Paul Semonin:

There can be no compromise with the black (or brown or yellow) people of this earth except on their terms. What the white man fails to understand is that the native is not just revolting against a handful of arrogant settlers, but against the entire system of values those settlers represent. Hence, there is no sense talking to ex-

colonial peoples in terms of Western Values (specifically, the doctrine of Humanism) that have never really taken hold. (Thompson 1998, p. 438)

Indeed, Fanon was quite a topical choice of reading material for Thompson in 1964, as the issue of race relations and Civil Rights had become an ever-growing topic of contention, particularly in the direct aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, when doubt arose concerning Lyndon Johnson's commitment to advancing the promises of the Kennedy administration. These fears were quickly assuaged once Johnson took office, however, as he reaffirmed his commitment to finishing Kennedy's Civil Rights commitments, signing into law on July 2, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and subsequently the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Further measures implemented included the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which guaranteed equal access to housing, which Johnson signed into law six days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. However, these measures were also met with stern, indeed often violent, resistance throughout Johnson's presidency.

One particularly notable flashpoint for this violence was the state of Mississippi during the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, which was organised by civil rights groups to register as many African-American voters as possible in a state which had up to that point actively excluded the demographic in question from voting. Events took a tragic and sinister turn when three civil rights' workers, Michael Schwerner, James Earl Chaney and Andrew Goodman, were murdered on June 21 by the Ku Klux Klan, whose ranks included members of the local police department and the sheriff's office. The ensuing public outcry concerning the killings proved to be instrumental in garnering public support for the Civil Rights movement, and in pressuring the Johnson administration into passing legislation. Recalling the tumultuous events of that period, Thompson's close friend Dr Bob Geiger, who, together with Bob Dylan, is the dedicatee of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, revealed

just how the two had planned on getting involved in the volatile situation that was gripping not just the southern state, but in fact the entire nation:

At one time, Hunter and I were planning to – thank God we didn’t do it – we were going to get a truck and run guns down to Mississippi to help out with all this crap that was going on in Mississippi in ‘64 and ‘65. We figured that maybe we ought to level the playing field, and a truckload of guns would do that. (Geiger in Wenner 2008, p. 72)

Fortunately, Thompson’s missives remained journalistic, and in February of 1964 this saw him moving west once more, this time to Glen Ellen, California, which brought him close to San Francisco where he planned on writing for both the *National Observer* and *The Reporter*.

One of Thompson’s first dispatches following his move was for the *National Observer*, a piece entitled ‘Marlon Brando and the Indian Fish-In’, which focused on Marlon Brando’s efforts to help local tribes in Olympia, Washington, to preserve and control fishing rights secured under treaty with the U.S. government 100 years earlier, but which they believed had been steadily eroded and undermined ever since. Though a fairly straightforward report, Thompson does take the interesting angle of highlighting the tension between the Native American cause and the African American Civil Rights movement, with the Native Americans emphasising the point that they already have the law on their side, and that what they seek instead is that the law be honoured. It is an interesting example of the various nuances that emerged in relation to civil rights in the Sixties, with Thompson concluding his article with an observation that foreshadows later developments in terms of civil disobedience, noting that ‘the significant thing about last week’s events here, in fact, was just that: The Indians, young and old, were willing to “offend a few people”’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 280).

When it came to challenging the Established Order, Thompson had an innate desire to be at the vanguard, which became something of a contentious issue with Semonin in their continued correspondence. Appealing to Semonin to refrain from labelling him as a liberal, noting that he in turn had stopped calling Semonin a communist, Thompson explained why he believed his current employment brought him much closer to the front of any revolution:

I have, in fact, infiltrated the Dow-Jones Company, which none of us would ever have dreamed of doing, and have in the space of two weeks delivered a series of telling shocks . . . I have come to the point where I see no difference between functioning Fascism and functioning Capitalism, or, for that matter, functioning Communism. (Thompson 1998, pp. 442- 443)

One of Thompson's objections to Semonin's assertions concerning the U.S. was that his studying abroad in Ghana had not just physically removed him from his homeland, but that he had also become mentally separated from the political and social environs of American life, not least in terms of encountering opposing political views: 'you are over there trading back-slaps with people who never considered disagreeing with you. What you should do is get out and have a run or two against the Packers when you are out of shape' (Thompson 1998, p. 443). However, for Thompson, the central tenet that undermined Semonin in their political discussions was that he no longer held belief in the ability of the nonconformist to alter the course of an election:

. . . you seem to have lost faith in the maverick, the man who can be convinced and thereby throw the switch on those both above and below him. He is a creation of this culture, the wise peasant, a man with a salary and enough leisure to ponder the alternatives, an enemy or an ally depending on what reaches him. But an essentially decent person. They beat the hell out of Nixon here two years ago, and they are about to stomp Goldwater. They only thing they lack is something to vote for, instead of against. But Kennedy was killed, so now

we sit in a limbo where the decent man has a variety of things to vote against, but nothing to vote for. (Thompson 1998, p. 443)

Unlike Semonin, Thompson never lost faith in the power held by this demographic, a belief that later stood to his credit when he ran for the position of Sheriff of Aspen in 1970, in which he put his theory to the test and in so doing, shook the foundations of the Aspen political power structure to its very core.

Thompson's move to Glen Ellen was not without its initial challenges however, the first of which proved to be yet another accommodation problem in that the property he originally had agreed to rent had been withdrawn from the market without notice. The only alternative available did little to temper his anger, with Thompson describing his new home in a letter to Dwight Martin as 'a sort of Okie shack' (Thompson 1998, p. 439), with the experience leaving him in a 'deep ugly funk, plotting vengeance. Vengeance' (Thompson 1998, p. 439). Though not the property he originally envisaged, this new home was in the vicinity of Jack London's Wolf House, with Thompson choosing the name Owl House for his own residence. Here, on March 23, 1964, Sandy gave birth to their son, Juan Fitzgerald Thompson. As revealed by William Kennedy, Juan was named after two figures that were close to Thompson's heart: 'Hunter loved Fitzgerald, and he named his son Juan Fitzgerald Thompson after Scott and also after the other Fitz – John Fitzgerald Kennedy' (Kennedy in Wenner 2008, p. 68). With his birth however, came added financial responsibilities, which forced him to take stock of his situation, and to acknowledge some uncomfortable truths in a letter to Semonin:

. . . now I have a son named Juan. Ten days old. Not a cent in the house and no cents coming in. I am seriously considering work as a labourer. They don't give scholarships to my type. Beyond that, I am deep in the grip of a professional collapse that worries me to the extent that I cannot do any work to cure it. A failure of concentration, as it were, and a consequent plunge into debt and desperation. It has been going on ever since I got back

from SA, and the cure is nowhere to be seen. That is the dullness on my knife, and not any lack of Marxist theory books. (Thompson 1998, p. 449)

Prior to his return from South America, Thompson had promised Clifford Ridley that he was ‘going to write what America means’ (Thompson 1998, p. 371), a bold commitment that was hampered from the onset by his relative isolation in Woody Creek, Colorado in conjunction with his working for the *National Observer*, a conservative newspaper whose relationship with Thompson had become that bit more delicate now that he was on home soil. Thompson made no secret of his aversion to conservative politics, and following President Kennedy’s assassination, his rhetoric proved to be a cause for concern amongst his colleagues. Though his dispatches from South America had been warmly praised, the newspaper struggled to utilise Thompson’s talents closer to home. Thompson himself yearned to deliver on his promises but struggled to find a strategy to achieve that goal.

Moving to Glen Ellen had brought him closer to San Francisco, where he sensed that a cultural revolution was simmering below the surface. Yet the *National Observer* had rejected the stories sent to them by Thompson. One story however managed to break the impasse; a short article entitled ‘When the Beatniks Were Social Lions.’ Thompson’s description of the article amounts to what could be described as proto-Gonzo Journalism, and indeed the story contains many of the elements that would become signatures of the style:

I have discovered the secret of writing fiction, calling it impressionistic journalism, and selling it to people who want ‘something fresh.’ I just sold the Observer one on the Beat Generation; it required one hour’s work, has a vague base in historical rumour, and they loved it. I am doing more of these things. (Thompson 1998, p. 450)

Though Thompson admits in private that the veracity of his story is, at best, questionable, in presenting it to the reader he adopts a position designed to establish a confessional

trustworthy rapport: ‘the story is a classic, and if you travel in the right circles out here you will still hear it told, although not always accurately. The truth, however, goes like this’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 290). Here he draws upon William Faulkner’s theory that ‘the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this’ (Faulkner in Thompson 2003b, p. 73). It is this same explanation that Thompson later offers as a theoretical precedent upon which Gonzo Journalism is built. In framing the story itself, Thompson begins by focusing on the historical decline of the Beat Generation in San Francisco, whose Beatnik community had made the city’s North Beach area a cultural Mecca for aspiring Beats of every description up until 1960, yet according to Thompson in 1964 the ‘the “beatnik” is no longer a social lion in San Francisco, but a social leper’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 279).

Looking back at their heyday sets the stage for Thompson to insert himself into the narrative as a former participant in the scene, thus setting up a change of focus wherein he presents the story of Willard, a prominent Beatnik artist of the time, who turns out to be the central protagonist in ‘one of the wildest Beat Generation stories of the era’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 290). Thompson’s role in the tale is that of the benign instigator, whose seemingly innocuous action of gifting Willard a five-gallon jug of his yet-to-mature home brew beer sets in motion a chain of events that rapidly descends into total chaos in typical Gonzo fashion. Here Thompson employs the beast motif to foreshadow the consequences of consuming the concoction before it is ready, a technique that became a mainstay of his psychedelic prose ‘of course, it was a crude drink and might produce beastly and undesired effects, but . . . well . . .’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 290).

Thompson most famously employs this motif in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, wherein he chooses a quote from Samuel Johnson as the book’s epigraph: ‘He who makes

a beast of himself, gets rid of the pain of being a man' (Johnson in Thompson 2005, p. ix). The beast motif, and the manner in which it deployed, also harkens back to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, with Thompson presenting his protagonists in a Jekyll and Hyde dichotomy, in terms of the changes in their characters once they become intoxicated. Another favoured allusion of Thompson's was that of the drunken Irish anti-hero, be it Sebastian Dangerfield in JP Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, or as in this case, Donleavy's friend and contemporary, with Willard described as 'a prodigious drinker in the tradition of Brendan Behan' (Thompson 2003b, p. 290). It is this same affection for imbibing that leads Willard to consume the beer before it was ready, which in turn leads to a spur of the moment decision to paint his rented house, and the street outside, with several gallons of blue and crimson paint, leaving the property 'looking like a Jackson Pollock canvas' (Thompson 2003b, p. 291). Willard's horrified landlord subsequently calls the police bringing about a tense stand-off, with the inebriated beatnik and a fellow conspirator artist painting offensive slogans across the property in a show of defiance.

Once again, Thompson invokes the beast metaphor to illustrate the consequences of their actions, writing that 'the scene that followed can only be likened to the rounding up of wild beasts escaped from a zoo' (Thompson 2003b, p. 291). Thompson continues to employ the Willard-as-wild-animal dynamic in his description of the manner in which he was photographed by the press following his eventual arrest, describing in detail a technique referred to as 'the Frankenstein Flash' (Thompson 2003b, p. 291), the effect of which on Willard 'was nothing short of devastating; he looked like King Kong' (Thompson 2003b, p. 291). There is a strong parallel here between Thompson's characterisation of Willard, '6 feet 4, and 230 pounds' (Thompson 2003b, p. 291), and that of his attorney Dr Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, modelled after Thompson's real attorney and

friend Oscar Zeta Acosta, who objected to his depiction as a ‘300 pound Samoan’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 375). Willard, in his animalistic transformation, stemming from an excess of alcohol, is the forerunner to Dr Gonzo’s psychotic rampaging in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where his appetite for destruction is only surpassed by his consumption of a veritable cornucopia of drugs and alcohol. Both protagonists’ actions serve to drive the narrative forward, or indeed, downward, in a spiral of wanton behaviour and subsequent repercussions, serving as a foil for Thompson/Raoul Duke to comment on their actions, though Thompson often reverses this process in the case of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* wherein Duke assumes the out-of-control role in the presence of the more sedate Dr Gonzo.

He concludes the immediate article however, on something of a nostalgic tone, reminiscing on the glory days of San Francisco’s Beat scene, and for Thompson this formula employed would prove to be central to the success of his most critically acclaimed work. In the meantime, the article itself had renewed the interest of the *National Observer* in his work, leading to the suggestion that he write a series of articles on the American West. Thompson’s reaction to the suggestion contained one certain truth, ‘what it boils down to is a thing I’ve suspected all along: that people would rather read my letters than my work’ (Thompson 1998, p. 450). The reality was that long before the success of Gonzo Journalism, the stylistic template existed in Thompson’s correspondence; it was here that his voice shone through, unrestrained and unapologetic, before he brought it to the public at large. Yet in 1964, he still lacked the right vehicle to deliver this kind of writing to the public at large; he needed a breakthrough, a publisher who could meet his vision when he confidently declared ‘Personal Journalism is the Wave of the Future’ (Thompson 1998, pp. 451-452).

Regardless of his new assignment for the *National Observer*, it was clear to Thompson that the paper was not entirely receptive to the direction in which he wanted to take his writing. He wanted to write about politics and race relations, but his political rhetoric stood in stark contrast to the conservative ideology of the newspaper, and this made them particularly wary of allowing Thompson to air his views given that it was a presidential election year. Though he embraced their suggestion to write about the American West, which involved travelling to Nevada, Idaho, Montana, the Dakotas, and Wyoming, he also recognised that the assignment was a means to keep him at a distance, and out on the fringe. The frustration at having his writing stifled by his editors proved to be a considerable source of irritation for Thompson:

It's a massive bandwagon . . . there is no dissent. None . . . This sheep mentality has given me the fear . . . The brute conservatism of the U.S. is the number one fact of our politics. Despite my royalist tendencies I am put down everywhere by a dirty leftist radical . . . I am considering a drift into the Underground, New York or LA – or Mexico City as a last resort . . . The only hope is The Road . . . We are coming to another Eisenhower age, and everybody digs it. Even Nixon, who is back in style after a short winter. (Thompson 1998, p. 452)

Nevertheless, he departed California on assignment for the *National Observer*, and his faith in *The Road* paid off to an extent, with Thompson writing several articles over a three-week period that painted his own stylised vignette of the American West.

The standout piece from this effort was entitled 'What Lured Hemingway to Ketchum', a portrait of Ernest Hemingway's final years in the small town just outside Sun Valley ski resort in Idaho. For Thompson, the trip to Ketchum was a pilgrimage of sorts, and the resulting article was an epitaph to his literary hero. On learning of Hemingway's suicide, Thompson's immediate reaction was one of surprise, not at the nature of his death however, but rather at what had drawn Hemingway away from his beloved Cuba all the

way to Ketchum, Idaho. It was a question that he felt had been left unanswered by the media since his death, and in journeying to his final resting place, he set out to finally discover the truth for himself. Thompson also believed that in understanding the reasons for Hemingway's decision to see out his days in Ketchum, he could also answer a question that Hemingway himself had posed:

'We do not have great writers,' he explains to the Austrian in *Green Hills of Africa*. 'Something happens to our good writers at a certain age . . . You see we make our writers into something very strange . . . We destroy them in many ways.' But Hemingway himself never seemed to discover in what way he was being 'destroyed,' and so he never understood how to avoid it. (Thompson 2003b, p. 271)

One theory put forward by Thompson was that Hemingway had retreated to Ketchum after the second World War, as it was the last unchanged bastion of times gone by, a relic of the world as he understood it, in stark contrast to the chaotic post-war changes that had engulfed everywhere else. For Thompson, Hemingway's inability to adapt to the changes around him proved to be a fatal error, however, in terms of his function as a writer:

It is not just a writers' crisis, but they are the most obvious victims because the function of art is supposedly to bring order out of chaos, a tall order even when the chaos is static, and a superhuman task in a time when chaos is multiplying. (Thompson 2003b, p. 272)

It was not the first time that Thompson himself had articulated this explanation of the function of art, and of the relationship that a writer has with the world and his understanding of the reasons behind his compulsion towards writing.

As early as 1958, he had expressed a similar explanation in a letter to Larry Callen, stating that the objective of writing was to discover 'truth out of chaos . . . For words are merely tools and if you use the right ones you can actually put even your life in order, if you don't lie to yourself and use the wrong words' (Thompson 1998. p. 133). It is this same

sentiment that is also to be found in Wilson's *The Outsider*, wherein the role of the Outsider is explained in relation to his anarchy towards the complacent acceptance of the bourgeoisie: 'it is not simply the need to cock a snook at respectability that provokes him; it is a distressing sense *that truth must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order' (Wilson 1978, p. 25). While Thompson still adhered to the belief that the figure of the Outsider and the function of art shared a common value set in their respective attainment of order out of chaos by way of the truth, in relation to Hemingway and Ketchum it was clear to Thompson that the post-war narrative complexities proved to be uncomfortably alien to Hemingway's sensibilities. Thompson contrasted the 'large and simple (but not easy) concepts' (Thompson 2003b, p. 273) of his fictive *oeuvre* with that of the 'multitude of grey shadings that seem to be the wave of the future' (Thompson 2003b, p. 273). It was an adjustment that he felt was too great for Hemingway, and so in Ketchum he found a sanctuary of sorts from a world that he no longer understood, wherein he could hold court to friends and admirers, the bubble of celebrity shielding him from confronting the crisis of conviction that had engulfed his writing.

Thompson suggests that a similar problem afflicted Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dos Passos and latterly Mailer, Jones and Styron, all of whom he believed to be facing a crisis brought on 'by the mean nature of a world that will not stand still long enough for them to see it clear as a whole' (Thompson 2003b, p. 272). Despite the sanctuary afforded to Hemingway in Ketchum, for Thompson, the conclusion to his story was somewhat inevitable:

Perhaps he found what he came here for, but the odds are huge that he didn't. He was an old, sick, and very troubled man and the illusion of peace and contentment was not enough for him – not even when his friends came up from Cuba and played bullfight with him in

the Tram. So finally, and for what he must have thought the best of reasons, he ended it with a shotgun. (Thompson 2003b, p. 273)

What makes his assessment of the manner in which Hemingway played out his final days here all the more poignant is that in many ways it foreshadows Thompson's own story later on in Woody Creek, Colorado, including the violent manner in which he came to end the story of the Hunter Figure, albeit with a revolver instead of a shotgun.

Thompson's connection with Hemingway was long and deep, and this is further reinforced by a symbolic gesture that took place in Ketchum whilst Thompson was researching how his literary idol had played out his life. Afforded the opportunity to visit Hemingway's house in Ketchum, Thompson could not resist the chance to see where Hemingway had once lived and worked:

. . . at some point in the night, Hunter wanted to know if we could go up to Hemingway's house in Ketchum, so up we went. The door was open, and we could hear the caretaker snoring in the background. For Hunter it was all about going into the vestibule, the enclosed space where Hemingway had shot himself. I hit the light switch and the sconces came on and we stood there. (Solheim in Wenner 2008, p. 69)

But what had truly caught Thompson's attention on the property was a large pair of elk horns hanging above the entrance to the house. In what Douglas Brinkley has described as 'an act of symbolic thievery' (Brinkley in Wenner 2005, p. 36), Thompson took the horns from the cabin and kept them, with the treasured trophy eventually taking pride of place at his Owl Farm home for the rest of life. It was here that he later showed the horns to Brinkley, offering an explanation as to their importance to him when he seized them from Hemingway's cabin in Ketchum, Idaho:

Forget running with the bulls or reeling in marlins or slaughtering rhinos. I had Hemingway's horns, and with that came an immense literary responsibility. It was now

‘Fuck you’ to the competition. I had broken from the pack, and there was no turning back. (Thompson in Wenner 2005, p. 36)

There was something of the apprentice seizing the reigns from his master in Thompson’s act, if not at least a determination to tackle the ‘multitude of grey shadings’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 273) that he believed Hemingway had turned his back on in his final days.

Another notable dispatch from Thompson’s series on the American West also hit upon a topic that was close to his heart, that of rugged individualism and the steady march towards side-lining and discarding its proponents in an increasingly technological society. Entitled ‘Living in the Time of Alger, Greeley, Debs’, Thompson offers a profile of ‘the boomers, the drifters, the hard travellers, and the tramp diggers’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 274) that he had encountered throughout Montana, the Dakotas and Wyoming on his pilgrimage for the *National Observer*. Writing about subjects such as this was quickly becoming a speciality of Thompson’s, and he excelled at profiling and documenting the kinds of people that had either decided by their own volition to live outside the comfort and security of Middle America, or on the other hand, had simply been cast aside by a society that no longer had any use for them, and left behind in the wake of those fervently chasing an American Dream that had become transmogrified by a dysfunctional consumer culture, or as Thompson later described it – ‘the tyranny of the “rat race”’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 406):

These are the people who never got the message that rugged individualism has made some drastic adjustments in these hyper-organised times. They are still living in the era of Horace Greeley, Horatio Alger, and, in some cases, Eugene Debs. They want no part of ‘city living,’ but they have neither the education nor the interest to understand why it is ever more difficult for them to make a living ‘out here in the open.’ The demise of the easy-living, independent West has made them bitter and sometimes desperate. (Thompson 2003b, p. 274)

Thompson's article on these people could be described as the opening salvo of the thematic narrative that would dominate his work for the next forty years, 'The Death of the American Dream'. In South America, he had written about the downtrodden and the marginalised on a regular basis, examining the various economic and social pressures responsible for their plight. It had proven to be a useful primer for Thompson, giving him pause for thought concerning the direction of the United States, and what lay ahead for those who were similarly disadvantaged and oppressed in his homeland.

Having resolved to 'write what America means' (Thompson 1998, p. 371), Thompson had also made the following declaration: 'I now understand the United States and why it will never be what it could have been, or at least tried to be' (Thompson 1998, p. 372). In this sense, 'Living in the Time of Alger, Greeley, Debs' is one of his first attempts to articulate this South American prophesy, with Thompson serving as cultural interpreter for the 'old-time boomers' (Thompson 2003b, p. 374), whose increasingly threatened position in society gave him the perfect launch pad from which he could diagnose the ills that threatened to put the American Dream forever beyond their reach:

. . . the day of the boomer is rapidly coming to an end. In the age of automation and job security a touch of the wanderlust is the kiss of death. In any count of the chronically unemployed the boomers will be very prominent; they have never sought security, but only work; they have never saved, but only earned and spent – participating, as it were, in an increasingly technological economy that has less and less room for their sort with every passing year. (Thompson 2003, p. 378)

The plight of the boomer also resonated with Thompson, in that, as an individual who highly valued personal autonomy, he recognised their need for liberty and independence. In many ways, they epitomised the American Adam, the model upon which Thompson 'deliberately cultivated himself' (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. xxiii), which was defined by the critic R. W. B. Lewis as 'an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-

propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources' (Lewis in Thompson 1998, p. xxiii). Yet, as Thompson concludes, their struggle ultimately served to expose what he saw as the self-conflicted hypocritical nature of Modern America:

I returned to the Holiday Inn – where they have a swimming pool and air-conditioned rooms – to consider the paradox of a nation that has given so much to those who preach the glories of rugged individualism from the security of countless corporate sinecures, and so little to that diminishing band of yesterday's refugees who still practice it, day by day, in a tough, rootless and sometimes witless style that most of us have long since been weaned away from. (Thompson 2003, p. 378)

It was also here, at the Holiday Inn of Pierre, South Dakota, that Thompson rounded off his trip by composing a letter to President Lyndon Johnson to offer his services: 'it is with great pleasure and a sense of impending achievement that I make myself available at this time for the governorship of American Samoa' (Thompson 1998, p. 454). Two weeks later Thompson received a reply from Larry O'Brien, Special Assistant to the President, thanking him on behalf of President Johnson for his letter and promising that his application would be 'given every consideration' (O'Brien in Thompson 1998, p. 455).

If Thompson had been serious about his chances for the post, it certainly did not show later that summer when he attended the Republican National Convention at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, where Senator Barry Goldwater was officially nominated as the Grand Old Party's contender for President. The signs had been ominous for Thompson's participation long before the event; in a letter to William Kennedy, a few weeks before the convention, he had lashed out at the political establishment, having flagged Goldwater as a serious contender for election:

At heart, this is a sick and vicious country, hiding from itself behind a veil of romantic sentimentality. In order to see this you have to know the West, where the myth is still extant.

Every Republican in the land should be horsewhipped – and every Democrat, too, for that matter. (Thompson 1998, p. 456)

It was precisely this type of rhetoric which had made his editors at the *National Observer* and *The Reporter* hesitant when it came to assigning Thompson to cover stories in the political arena, the very area in which he most desired to work. A confrontation seemed inevitable, and at the Republican convention, Thompson more than delivered in his inimitable style. Accompanied to the event by staff members from the *National Observer*, a drunken Thompson behaved in such a manner as to reaffirm his editors' worst suspicions concerning him as a political liability. According to Thompson, his co-worker's report left little doubt in the minds of his editors: 'our man in the West is a foaming anarchist, a naked boozier who never sleeps and won't work and thinks Goldwater is a Nazi' (Thompson 1998, p. 463). Surprisingly, Thompson was afforded one last chance to conform to their expectations, but he was left in little doubt as to the consequences should he fail to do so. Adding to his woes, the *Reporter* was undergoing an overhaul, with Thompson's contact there, Dwight Martin, no longer part of the team. His successor's vision for the *Reporter* involved a clean break from the past, and this included discontinuing the services of Thompson.

In a desperate bid to find more work, Thompson moved from Glen Ellen to San Francisco, settling in an apartment on Parnassus Street, where he hoped to be closer to the cultural heartbeat of the city by the bay. As recalled by Sandy Thompson, it turned out to be an ideal location: 'we moved to San Francisco and got a place at the top of Golden Gate Park, right at the edge of the Haight. The Haight-Ashbury scene was just beginning' (Thompson, S. in Wenner 2008, p. 75). The scene in question was of course the burgeoning hippie counterculture, with Haight-Ashbury exerting the same kind of gravitational pull on its devotees that North Beach had a decade earlier on the Beat Generation. Thompson's

newfound home physically placed him at the epicentre of the movement: Haight-Ashbury was home to musicians such as Janis Joplin, The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, whose brand of psychedelic rock captured the very lifestyle of the neighbourhood itself: an intoxicating mix of drugs, sex and life on the edge. At first representative of a local scene, it would soon sweep from the West Coast all the way across America, before going international in the same way that the Beatles were simultaneously leading the British Invasion, opening the gateway to America for the likes of The Rolling Stones, The Kinks and The Who. Life in the Haight also placed Thompson in close proximity to Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and his group of friends known as The Merry Pranksters, who were then spearheading the psychedelic experience at Kesey's home in nearby La Honda. They had just returned from a drug-fuelled cross-country trip to New York for the publication of Kesey's second book, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, which they had undertaken in a psychedelically painted school bus they had named 'Furthur' [*sic*], driven by the already infamous Neal Cassady, the real-life inspiration for Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Upon arrival in New York, they visited the home of Dr Timothy Leary in Millbrook, where he and his associate Dr Richard Alpert had been undertaking experiments with the psychedelic drug LSD on select individuals after their dismissal from Harvard University. They had been operating the Harvard Psilocybin Project, in which they had administered the natural psychedelic to inmates at Concord State Prison in Massachusetts, along with graduate students from the Boston area. Both Leary and Alpert frequently experimented in a personal capacity with psychedelic drugs during their various experiments, and their continued public advocacy of the psychedelic experience turned them into national figures, particularly Timothy Leary, who embraced the ensuing notoriety and celebrity attention wholeheartedly. Ken Kesey's exposure to psychedelics had come from his voluntary

participation in project MKUltra, a joint CIA and Army investigation into the behavioural effects of drugs such as LSD, which was conducted at the Veterans' Administration Hospital where he worked as a night aide. It was the combined experience of his participation in these experiments, and his work at the hospital, which had inspired him to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Yet such was the profound effect of his experiences with LSD, that he continued his own experiments with the drug at his home in La Honda, organising large LSD parties, which became known as Acid Tests, with music provided by The Warlocks, the then local band that later changed their name to The Grateful Dead. As the Acid Tests grew in size and popularity, Kesey began to organise them at various different locations around California, inviting other countercultural protagonists to attend, from Beat poet Allen Ginsberg to The Hell's Angels. Indeed, such was the impact of the Acid Tests that they became part of the cultural fabric of the era, featuring in the poetry of Ginsberg, the music of The Jefferson Airplane and inspiring Tom Wolfe to write *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. In the early days of 1965 however, these figures had at best, tangible links to each other. Unknown to Hunter S. Thompson, he would play the key role in forging those links and connections.

Living at the edge of Haight-Ashbury placed Thompson in direct orbit of the Hell's Angels, with their leader, Sonny Barger, operating out of Oakland and another group, or chapter as they were called, situated in San Francisco itself. Thompson's proximity to the Angels, however, was not just a physical one, as his political and philosophical leanings proved to be an even closer match to the outlaw biker gang's core belief system, as best illustrated in his correspondence in the period directly prior to his first encounter with the group:

I am at home with anarchists anywhere. A true anarchist is the only man who can afford to relax in this world; his vision is clear and true, his aims are simple, and his appetites are

tiny compared to the various packs of jackals who make up the opposition. His only problem is that he can't afford to be right, so most anarchists end up lying in the name of some necessary evil. The most important political breakthrough of the past five centuries will come when some desperate half – mad truth seeker learns how to justify his instinct to anarchy. It has to come, because it's the only possible reconciliation between a man's best instincts and his worst realities. (Thompson 1998, p. 468)

In his continued back and forth political commentary with Paul Semonin, Thompson articulates a theory that foreshadows the very approach he would take when it came to writing about the formation of the motorcycle gang, and the factors responsible for them becoming public enemy number one in the eyes of the Establishment and Middle America:

You ask me what I mean when I say all systems are against me. I mean exactly that. Any organisation is necessarily a pyramid – the few controlling the many. My feeling is that a man is born with decent instincts (and fuck this idea of original sin) which are steadily pressured and perverted every day of his life until he is either driven mad or turns into a vicious insensitive monster. (Thompson 1998, p. 470)

Thompson's sense of persecution had been particularly elevated ever since his display at the Republican National Convention had all but sealed his fate at the *National Observer*, yet what they had published of Thompson's work had proven to be enough to catch the attention of one Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*. McWilliams contacted Thompson to praise his work, and in doing so, effectively signalled the end of his working relationship with *The Observer*. It was a decision that both parties recognised as being mutually beneficial:

I was too much for them. I would wander in on off hours drunk and obviously on drugs, asking for my messages. Essentially, they were working for me. They liked me, but I was the Bull in the China Shop – The more I wrote about politics the more they realised who they had on their hands. They knew I wouldn't change and neither would they. (Thompson 1992, p. 106)

Carey McWilliams at *The Nation* proved to be a far more suitably matched editor for Thompson's journalistic interests, and this is reflected in their working relationship, with Thompson suggesting stories of the kind that had been deemed at odds with the editorial guidelines of his previous employer, from stories involving race relations to essays on the cultural decline of San Francisco, described by Thompson as a city whose 'personality has gone from neurotic to paranoid to what now looks like the first stages of a catatonic fit' (Thompson 1998, p. 481).

Indeed, there is a notable apocalyptic tone to the ideas volunteered by Thompson, a mixture of the doomed prophecies and paranoia that characterise his later ruminations on 'The Death of the American Dream':

. . . the one generality that does emerge concerns the apparently widespread realisation that California is coming to a new era, that the Boom is nearly over, and now the bills are coming in. The American Nightmare, as it were, the after-effects of free enterprise. (Thompson 1998, p. 482)

It is this very theory that Thompson explores in greater detail in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, juxtaposing the momentum of the youth movement of the Sixties with that of the harsh realities of life under President Richard Nixon, with Thompson describing Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo's trip to Las Vegas as 'Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo Journalism' (Thompson 2005, p. 12). As early as 1965, the seeds of these ideas were clearly germinating in Thompson's writing, sometimes with remarkable prescience, concerning the political and cultural direction that the country was taking: 'this is the dead end of America and the next five years will prove it . . . Ronald Reagan is the prototype of the new mythological American, a grinning whore who will probably someday be President' (Thompson 1998, p. 492). Most notable however, was Thompson's vehement stance against the escalation of

the war in Vietnam, which prompted him to write to President Lyndon Johnson and rescind the offer of his service for the vacant position of governor of American Samoa. As noted by Douglas Brinkley, ‘the condemnation would prove prophetic’ (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. 495):

. . . my sensibilities are grossly offended by the spectacle of a small group of old men whose mania for blood and bombing will inevitably cause thousands of young men to be killed for no good reason. As a white Anglo-Saxon Air Force veteran and shooting enthusiast I can’t be shrugged off as a politically impotent East Coast minority-group liberal beatnik draft-dodger . . . Do you mean to police the entire world? . . . We should get the hell out of Vietnam and not apologise for it to anybody. We have no business there in the first place and certainly no business spending several million dollars a day in order to stay there. We cannot possibly prevail in Asia, any more than Hitler could prevail in Europe. And that money could be damn well spent here in the U.S., as I’m sure you know. (Thompson 1998, p. 496)

It is also interesting here that Thompson makes a point of highlighting his military and gun enthusiast background and distanced himself from the stereotypical anti-Vietnam protester image. As ever, he refused to be easily categorised within the parameters of any single group, a quality that greatly aided him as a journalist, allowing him to find common ground with a wide cross section of American society. Yet there was one constant to Thompson’s life that defined him socially in a manner that he could not shake off or escape, seemingly no matter how hard he tried, and this was poverty. As a struggling journalist, it was a constant presence in his life, and in San Francisco in 1965, the grim reality of his financial situation served to further entrench not just his anarchist leanings, but also his opinion of authority:

At times I think I’ve drifted all the way past communism, to a stance of violent anarchy. I have a definite suspicion that most minds in this country’s power structure view the poor as Mistah Kurtz, in *Heart of Darkness*, viewed the Congo natives: ‘Exterminate the brutes!’ (Thompson 1998, p. 494)

Yet, it is this very factor that served to shape Thompson in a manner that made him the perfect candidate to tackle the latest subject on Carey McWilliams radar, namely The Hell's Angels. Unknown to Thompson at the time, it would prove to be the turning point from which he would never look back.

In 1965 the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club roared into the public consciousness courtesy of the publication of a report into their activities by California Attorney General Thomas C. Lynch, which accused the group of committing a litany of felony offences, from attempted murder and narcotics violations to theft of property and sexual assault. The investigation itself originated following an incident several months earlier in Monterey, California, in which the Hell's Angels had been accused of raping two teenage girls, an incident that Thompson later described as 'a publicity breakthrough, by means of rape, on the scale of the Beatles or Bob Dylan' (Thompson 2004a, p. 16). Once the national media seized on the Lynch report, the headlines cemented the Hell's Angels firmly in the national spotlight as Public Enemy Number One. According to *Time* magazine in their article 'The Wilder Ones', the Hell's Angels brought to life the 'pack of vicious, swaggering motorcycle hoods called the Black Rebels' (Thompson 2004a, p. 28), portrayed in the 1954 movie *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando, which incidentally had also captivated a young Hunter S. Thompson. *Newsweek* had also utilised the same motif in their article on the Hell's Angels entitled 'The Wild Ones' which further ratcheted up the rhetoric, with the Hell's Angels proving to be a subject that ticked all the required boxes for media sensationalism – 'it was sex, violence, crime, craziness and filth – all in one package' (Thompson 2004a, p. 28). There was one notable aspect of the story missing for Thompson, however, and that was the Hell's Angels version of the story. It was an investigative angle that he immediately advanced in response to Carey McWilliams suggestion that he write about the group:

I can't imagine doing a story without their point of view . . . To my mind, the Hell's Angels are a very natural product of our society. Just like SNCC or the Peace Corps or the permanent unemployed. But different people. That's what I'd like to find out: who are they? What kind of man becomes a Hell's Angel? And why? And how? The mechanics. (Thompson 1998, p. 497)

Thompson was also acutely aware of the inherent dangers of approaching the Hell's Angels at this point in time; as the flood of negative media reports and police scrutiny had transformed an already abrasive attitude towards outsiders into one of open hostility, particularly in relation to members of the press. For a journalist to gain their confidence, it would require an approach that was truly out of the ordinary and in Hunter S. Thompson they got just that.

Fortunately for Thompson, a lifelong member of the Hell's Angels by the name of Birney Jarvis happened to be working for the *San Francisco Chronicle* at the time, and he was willing to introduce Hunter to the group. Jarvis was an ex-vice president of the San Francisco chapter of the motorcycle gang, and was well respected by the group. He was an invaluable contact for Thompson and was later characterised as Preetam Bobo, the 'Compleat Outlaw' (Thompson 2004a, p. 72), in *Hell's Angels*. Though Jarvis arranged for Thompson to attend a Hell's Angels meeting at the DePau Hotel bar, there was no guarantee for his safety. Yet Thompson attended regardless, albeit half-drunk, and was duly greeted with a reception that was every bit as tense and hostile as he had anticipated. Some of the Angels wanted to 'stomp' him with immediate effect. Nonetheless, Thompson addressed the group, and did his utmost to address their legitimate concerns:

. . . I was there to do them the ultimate favour of telling the American people the truth about them; . . . an American public so long conned by *Time & Newsweek* – whose articles I presented as horrifying evidence of what happens when a lazy, ignorant, cliché-laden reporter does an article on rough and ready types like 'you guys.' (Thompson 1998, p. 499)

Despite the media sensationalism and one-sided Lynch report, Thompson recognised the Hell's Angels as the ultimate outsiders, the absolute incarnation of the violent undercurrent in the American psyche, and on a certain level, what they represented resonated deeply within him:

They were a bit off balance at first, but after about 50 or 60 beers, we found a common ground, as it were . . . Crazies always recognize each other. I think Melville said it, in a slightly different context: 'Genius all over the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.' Of course, we're not talking about genius here, we're talking about crazies – but it's essentially the same thing. They knew me, they saw right through all my clothes and there was that instant karmic flash. They seemed to sense what they had on their hands. (Thompson in Thompson, A. 2009, p. 37)

While their outlaw spirit brought out Thompson's own disposition towards romanticising figures that went against authority and existed beyond the law, what is notable here is that Thompson not only views the Hell's Angels in this manner, but he also seizes the opportunity to overtly frame his own role as journalist in the same light: 'as it happens, my speech last night created a situation wherein I'm the hero-translator' (Thompson 1998, p. 500). The speech in question, as Thompson later explained to Clifford Ridley, had one central function, and that was to explain to the Hell's Angels 'the function of the outlaw press. Me' (Thompson 1998, p. 502). The primacy of the Hunter Figure *persona* as the central creative thread throughout Thompson's work is again evident here; even as he embarks on a new project on the outlaw motorcycle gangs, it is his own *persona* that is to the forefront, and it is this *persona* that he projects to the Hell's Angels, namely as an outlaw in search of the truth, that ultimately wins their favour.

It is clear that from the beginning of his relationship with the motorcycle gang, Thompson saw a means through which he could manipulate his own Hunter Figure image, utilising the ever-growing publicity surrounding the Hell's Angels as Outlaws of the West

as a conduit towards establishing his own notoriety, literary or otherwise. As he indicated from the beginning, he now saw himself not as a representative of the mainstream press embedded with the Hell's Angels, but rather as a separate entity standing alone; he was The Outlaw Press. Should there be any doubts as to his credentials amongst the motley audience, they were quickly dispelled as when the bar closed at 2 a.m. that night, five of the members were invited back to Thompson's apartment on Parnassus Street, where they continued drinking until dawn accompanied by the sounds of Thompson's record collection, namely *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. In the aftermath of this drunken rendezvous, Thompson confided to Clifford Ridley as to why his unique journalistic approach was a success:

I dare say I'm the only reporter in the history of the world who ever got wound up in a story to the point of going to a Hell's Angels meeting and then taking five of them home for a drinking bout . . . Before I let them in, I explained that I wasn't in the habit of settling my beefs with my fists, but with a double-barrelled 12-gauge shotgun. Which was obvious to them upon entry. This seemed to strike a balance of terror that eventually dissolved into a very pleasant evening. (Thompson 1998, p. 502)

It was a formula for success that Thompson repeated as he worked on his article for *The Nation*, with his apartment on Parnassus Street becoming a *de facto* Hell's Angels retreat. After two weeks, Thompson had completed the article, yet he felt that he had only touched the surface of a much larger story, informing Clifford Ridley that 'a one hundred page piece would have been much easier' (Thompson 1998, p. 503). Nevertheless, on May 17th 1965, *The Nation* published the article entitled 'The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders', marking Thompson's ascendancy to the literary limelight.

Though not yet qualifying as Gonzo Journalism, the article is significant in that it primarily elevated Thompson to a position that facilitated both the stylistic evolution of his own unique sub-genre, while simultaneously seeing him establish the Hunter Figure within

that framework. In essence, it unlocked the necessary platform from which Thompson could launch the Gonzo revolution that had so long been threatening and bubbling below the surface. Thompson achieved this specifically because of the manner in which he approached his subject, one which deviated significantly from the mainstream journalistic narrative, thus affording him much-needed currency in terms of garnering attention from publishers and solidifying his relationship with the Hell's Angels. The reason behind the positive reception from the respective camps was simple; Thompson's article had thoroughly discredited, not only the Lynch Report into the actions of the Hell's Angels, but also the resulting media attention surrounding the publication of said report. The publishing world immediately recognised that Thompson had exposed a much larger story at hand, and the Hell's Angels welcomed the fact that he had been true to his word in representing them fairly. Though Thompson had initially set out to investigate the Hell's Angels' side of the story, the fact that it offered him a platform to attack the establishment proved to be an added bonus, and one that he particularly relished. Thompson had long been attracted to writing as a means of righting the wrongs of the past, primarily in the realm of fiction, but his Hell's Angels' investigation offered up the opportunity to do so in a factual setting, and on this occasion, Thompson held all the power. His targets were the very institutions that he believed had shut him out of the job market in New York in the early days of his burgeoning journalism career following his stint in the Air Force: *Newsweek* and *Time*, with the latter having also fired him from his copy boy position for destroying an office vending machine, as noted earlier. At the time, he had vowed to get revenge on the city for not recognising his talent, and while the opportunity to do so had been a long time coming, it was not one that Thompson wasted.

Opening his article by revealing that the much-publicised rape incident involving the Hell's Angels in Monterey had concluded with all charges being dropped, Thompson

then focused on the Lynch Report, which he described as ‘colourful, interesting, heavily biased and consistently alarming – just the sort of thing, in fact, to make a clanging good article for a national news magazine’ (Thompson 1965). With his targets lined up, Thompson’s criticism was characteristically direct and unrestrained:

Newsweek was relatively circumspect. It offered local colour, flashy quotes and ‘evidence’ carefully attributed to the official report but unaccountably said the report accused the Hell’s Angels of homosexuality, whereas the report said just the opposite. *Time* leaped into the fray with a flurry of blood, booze and semen-flecked wordage that amounted, in the end, to a classic of supercharged hokum: ‘Drug-induced stupors . . . no act is too degrading . . . swap girls, drugs and motorcycles with equal abandon . . . stealing forays . . . then ride off again to seek some new nadir in sordid behaviour . . . ’ (Thompson 1965)

He did not stop there however, with his focus then turning to the wider media publicity, and to the manner in which public sentiment can be manipulated through these channels as a means to focus attention on an isolated group, and then disproportionately attribute a smorgasbord of societal ills to their very existence. In the Hell’s Angels, the Establishment had essentially found a target to paint as public enemy number one:

After two weeks of intensive dealing with the Hell’s Angels phenomenon, both in print and in person, I’m convinced the net result of the general howl and publicity has been to obscure and avoid the real issues by invoking a savage conspiracy of bogeymen and conning the public into thinking all will be ‘business as usual’ once this fearsome snake is scotched, as it surely will be by hard and ready minions of the Establishment. (Thompson 1965)

Thompson concludes the piece by offering up a prime example of how the oxygen of publicity served to achieve the very opposite effect of that which was desired by Middle America. Rather than the Hell’s Angels collapsing under the weight of public scrutiny, instead they flourished in the limelight, and embraced their new-found infamy:

We were talking across a pool table about the rash of publicity and how it had affected the Angel’s activities. I was trying to explain to him that the bulk of the press in this country

has such a vested interest in the *status quo* that it can't afford to do much honest probing at the roots, for fear of what they might find.

'Oh, I don't know,' he said. 'Of course I don't like to read all this bullshit because it brings the heat down on us, but since we got famous we've had more rich fags and sex-hungry women come looking for us than we ever had before. Hell, these days we have more action than we can handle. (Thompson 1965)

In highlighting the breakthrough that Thompson achieves, courtesy of this systematic dismantling of the *status quo*, the stylistic elements of the article should not be overlooked, in that, according to Bill Reynolds, 'Thompson allows his own personality and style to play a significant role in the way he mocks the official view of the Angels, and this tactic moves him closer to breaking from convention' (Reynolds in McKeen 2012, p. 65). The positive reception to Thompson's article serves as an important endorsement of the manner in which he approached the subject matter, which proves to be a crucial element of his later Gonzo reportage:

Another reason 'Losers and Outsiders' goes beyond the straight news report, indeed beyond the investigative report, is Thompson's ethnographic style field research . . . although the writing is understated . . . it does display his predilection for inserting himself into the story, for getting in front of the story, for actually becoming part of the story . . . Thompson is communicating with the reader: I am bearing witness, dear reader. This is the straight truth as I have seen it. I want to get the real truth because the official line is hogwash.

This is the Gonzo way. (Reynolds in McKeen 2012, p. 66)

It is also in keeping with the core philosophical tenets espoused in *The Outsider*, namely the assertion that for the Outsider 'it is not simply the need to cock a snook at respectability that provokes him; it is a distressing sense *that truth must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order' (Wilson 1978, p. 25). For Thompson, the stage was now perfectly set; the public appetite for all things relating to motorcycle gangs had merely been whetted by the media coverage, the Hell's Angels themselves recognised that there was a truth to the adage of there being no such thing as

bad publicity, and with the publication of *The Nation* article, they had found a journalist whom they could not only trust, but who also shared their iconoclastic spirit to the point of anointing himself The Outlaw Press.

Seemingly overnight, Thompson was inundated with book offers from publishers. Sara Blackburn, an editor at Pantheon Books, suggested Thompson write a ‘fringe book’ (Thompson 1998, p. 516), whilst Angus Cameron at Alfred E. Knopf similarly enquired as to the possibility of a book on ‘American Loser-Outsider types’ (Thompson 1998, p. 524). Thompson however had other ideas, broadening the conversation by making it clear that he had a far greater vision concerning the possibility of any book project. Though he had clearly enjoyed writing about the Hell’s Angels, his ‘Losers and Outsiders’ article had merely hinted at the spectrum of concerns that he wished to explore. For Thompson, the Hell’s Angels and their activities made for a fascinating subject in itself, but he saw a far greater potential in exploring what the Hell’s Angels represented in terms of the American Dream in general, and in particular in terms of the direction of The Great Society, the domestic political program launched by President Lyndon Johnson to eliminate poverty and racial injustice. Thompson made a point of this in his response to Angus Cameron when he wrote that ‘the truth is that real Losers don’t interest me; the thing I enjoy is the irony of an unnatural pecking order, and that sense of something about to break, for good or ill’ (Thompson 1998, p. 525). In further discussing his ideas, it is evident that Thompson was on the verge of a breakthrough in terms of combining the various cultural strands that had garnered his attention into something of a more tangible single vision: Hunter S. Thompson’s America, with his inimitable sense of humour included:

I have recently developed an outrageous theory about the American Dream being essentially an Irish vision, challenged now by a view of reality that is basically Jewish. It has to do with Jay Gatsby and John Kennedy, the I.W.W. and the Hell’s Angels, the New

York syndrome, the ‘bogeyman factor’ that dominates the press, and god only knows what else. Mike Murphy, who runs the mystic establishment down in Big Sur, tells me someone has been putting LSD in my gin. (Thompson 1998, p. 525)

More importantly however, in terms of the development of Gonzo Journalism, is that Thompson also acknowledges to Angus Cameron that the editors’ ideas concerning a book project arising out of their discussion on ‘Losers and Outsiders’ amounted to what he deemed to be ‘the Ultimate Book’ (Thompson 1998, p. 529), a project that to his sensibilities required a new approach: ‘non-fiction won’t handle a subject that big’ (Thompson 1998, p. 529). Having grappled with journalism for five years, Thompson had learned the limits of the profession; what he desired was to take his writing somewhere else entirely, ‘fiction is a bridge to the truth that journalism can’t reach. Facts are lies when they’re added up, and the only kind of journalism I can pay much attention to is something like *Down and Out in Paris and London*’ (Thompson 1998, p. 529).

Essentially, what Thompson is describing here is the conceptual framework for Gonzo Journalism: certainly the application of literary techniques utilised in fiction to a journalistic framework qualifies it as a form of New Journalism, but Thompson’s endorsement of George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* foreshadows the degree to which he would be willing to get close to his subject, and in doing so, to forego the dogma of objectivity in favour of a more subjective tone. It is also worth taking note here that Thompson’s comments regarding fiction as being ‘a bridge to the truth that journalism can’t match’ (Thompson 1998, p. 529) are very similar to the explanation of Gonzo Journalism offered by him in the jacket copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1971:

It is a style of ‘reporting’ based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this.

Which is not to say that Fiction is necessarily ‘more true’ than Journalism – or vice versa – but that both ‘fiction’ and ‘journalism’ are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end. (Thompson 2003b, p. 73)

It is clear then that as early as 1965, before Thompson even started writing *Hell’s Angels*, that he was contemplating the manner in which he could develop his writing beyond the constraints of objective journalism, with fiction still proving to be as strong a draw as ever, despite his previous failure to succeed in that arena, as witnessed by *The Rum Diary* being yet another manuscript that had been roundly rejected by publishers. Though journalism had proven to be a more successful avenue for Thompson up to this point, he knew in 1965 that he had reached a crossroads creatively:

. . . if I’m ever to be worth anything I honestly think it will have to be in the realm of fiction [which is] the only way I can live with my imagination, point of view instincts, and all those other intangibles that make people nervous in my journalism. (Thompson 1998, p. xviii – xix)

William J. Kennedy highlights this very passage as an important realisation for Thompson as a writer, asserting that ‘a case might be made for the previous paragraph being the turning point in Hunter’s awareness, or admission, that what he was vigorously trying to do wasn’t journalism’ (Kennedy in Thompson 1998, p. xix). And so, in the immediate anticipation of writing a book on the Hell’s Angels, Thompson was not only acknowledging the limits of journalism as a medium, but also identifying the theoretical goal which he sought to reach as a writer, and the means through which he believed he could achieve it. If *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* bears witness to the pinnacle of Thompson’s vision, then *Hell’s Angels* marks the transition process from objective investigative journalism to subjective New Journalism and into the realm of Gonzo, with the latter half of the book illustrating this evolutionary process in full flight as the shift to subjective writing culminates in the emergence of the Hunter Figure from the shadow of *Hell’s Angels* and in his taking centre

stage towards the book's finale, marking the ascendancy of both Thompson and his literary alter ego to the public limelight.

This was by no means an overnight development however, and although Thompson's 'Losers and Outsiders' article had been warmly received by both publishers and the Hell's Angels alike, undertaking a book-length project carried no guarantee of success. Despite his correspondence with Angus Cameron, in which a rough template for *Hell's Angels* first emerged, Thompson eventually agreed a deal with Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, who had swayed him with an advance of \$1500. Given his usual monetary situation, it was an offer he could not refuse. Negotiations with the Hell's Angels proved to be a more delicate affair however. Co-operation for his 'Losers and Outsiders' article involved two weeks of work with the motorcycle gang; a book project would require several months of observing the group and their activities, with Thompson determined to immerse himself in their environment in the manner of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In the weeks following his first encounter with the Hell's Angels, Thompson had become good friends with several of the members, particularly Terry the Tramp of the Frisco chapter, yet he knew that they had no authority to give him permission to ride with the gang on a semi-permanent basis. Only one Hell's Angel could grant that kind of access, and that was none other than the president of the Oakland chapter and *de-facto* leader of the Hell's Angels – Sonny Barger. Without his blessing, Thompson could count on nothing regarding access to the group or his own safety. Luckily for Thompson, his 'Losers and Outsiders' article for the *Nation* had met with Barger's approval. It was enough to sway a more favourable decision regarding Thompson's request to ride with the group for the next few months:

I actually liked the way it was written, even though some of the facts were exaggerated. After the article received a good reaction, Thompson came back to Oakland and hung

around the club's favourite biker bar hangouts until he and I finally met face-to-face. He told me he wanted to ride with the club and me and write a book about us. Since I liked the way he wrote, the Oakland and Frisco chapters let Hunter hang out with the club for a price, two kegs of beer. (Barger 2001, p. 125)

It was an agreement that effectively served as a contract of sorts, leading to initially cordial relations between Thompson and the Hell's Angels, but which ultimately also gave rise to the very tension that ended his involvement with the group in the kind of explosive outburst of brutal violence that had become the motorcycle club's trademark.

Thompson's first major involvement in this phase of his interaction with the Hell's Angels took place on the Fourth of July weekend in the summer of 1965, when he accompanied the group on their annual outing, or run, to Bass Lake, some 200 miles east of San Francisco. His account of the weekend, entitled 'The Hoodlum Circus and The Statutory Rape of Bass Lake', makes up the middle third of *Hell's Angels*, and is a notable demarcation between the straight journalism of the first part of the book, which is essentially an expanded version of his 'Losers and Outsiders' article, described by William McKeen as 'crisp, literate, at times nearly academic' (McKeen 2008, p. 109), and the latter part of the book, in which Thompson breaks with the rules of objectivity in favour of a clearly subjective tone. The importance of Thompson's attendance at the Bass Lake run cannot be underestimated, as it sets him steadily on course towards his later Gonzo Journalism, with the events of the weekend not only resulting in his role as observer changing to that of an active participant, but also serving to advance his ever-deepening involvement in the Outlaw culture. The latter proves to be a crucial aspect to the development of the Hunter Figure *persona*, with Thompson adopting aspects of the Hell's Angels motorcycle culture into his own lifestyle, in conjunction with their mutual usage of drugs including Benzedrine, a type of amphetamine, and later LSD courtesy of their

association with Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters. It is through these respective prisms that the Hunter Figure would take centre stage in the closing pages of *Hell's Angels*, in a passage of writing that he later entitled 'Midnight on the Coast Highway.'

Yet, while Thompson certainly identified with many aspects of the Hell's Angels culture, at Bass Lake he was initially not quite the enthusiastic and willing participant in their scene. His journalistic sensibilities were still very much extant in his dealings with the group, and he made a conscious effort to distinguish himself from his subjects, opting to drive to the event in his Rambler Custom, dressed in a 'Montana sheepherder's jacket, red LL Bean hat, Wellington boots and a Pendleton shirt' (Thompson 2008). Given the Hell's Angels penchant for Harley Davidson motorcycles, and Levi's denim jackets adorned with the infamous Death's Head insignia bearing their charter name, there could be little doubt as to whether or not Thompson was a member of the group. The distinction was primarily motivated by his anticipation of a confrontation with the law at Bass Lake, something which Thompson wanted to avoid as much as possible, yet somewhat ironically, it is this very eventuality that brought him closer in his integration with the Outlaw group. Given Thompson's own misgivings concerning figures of authority, and his long-standing identification with the figure of the outsider, it is perhaps inevitable that despite his initial stance as a quasi-objective observer, he would eventually find his objectivity compromised, either through force of his own sympathies or courtesy of external circumstance.

In the Hell's Angels narrative leading up to his account of the Bass Lake weekend, he pre-empts this transitional shift by way of discussing the Hell's Angels in a wider context, namely in terms of their relationship with the forces of the criminal justice system, and how this relationship was symptomatic of a crisis in President Johnson's Great Society. Here, Thompson outlines how the natural alignment between police agencies and the

citizenry in confronting crime was increasingly breaking down to the point that entire sections of the community now found themselves in direct confrontation with the very forces responsible for the maintenance of public order. This breakdown in trust was further exacerbated by the political tension concerning the civil rights movement, and also by the escalating war in Vietnam, with the prevailing atmosphere of the country being one of confrontation, leading to the inevitable question facing the people involved as to which side they were on? Once more, Thompson's fascination with power structures is evident:

The Watts riot in Los Angeles in 1965 was a classic example of this new alignment. A whole community turned on the police with such a vengeance that the National Guard had to be called in. Yet few of the rioters were criminals – at least not until the riot began. It may be that America is developing a whole new category of essentially social criminals . . . persons who threaten the police and the traditional social structure even when they are breaking no law . . . because they view The Law with contempt and the police with distrust, and this abiding resentment can explode without warning at the slightest provocation. (Thompson 2004a, p. 127)

Thus, according to Thompson, the scene at Bass Lake that awaited the Hell's Angels on the Fourth of July 1965, was one of inevitable hostility, with the locals viewing their arrival as conformational in and of itself, fearing that 'a holocaust of arson, looting and rape' (Thompson 2004a, p. 128) was imminent.

Thompson's account of the weekend wastes no time in establishing the perceptible shift from the semi-academic style that characterises the first half of the book, towards the subjective territory of the book's second half, as his own personal role in the story moves to the forefront of the narrative. At first, this shift is introduced in a symbolic sense as Thompson juxtaposes the more traditional tools of the observer journalist with items more in keeping with his role as Outlaw Press representative liaising with the Hell's Angels: 'I ate a peanut-butter sandwich while loading the car . . . sleeping-bag and beer cooler in the

back, tape recorder in front, and under the driver's seat an unloaded Luger. I kept the clip in my pocket, thinking it might be useful if things got out of hand' (Thompson 2004a, p. 129). Yet, despite Thompson being in a position to bear witness to the unfolding events that weekend, he makes a point of highlighting that even his own editor wanted 'no more than an arty variation of the standard wire-service news blurb: Who, What, When, Where and Why' (Thompson 2004a, p. 157). It seemed to be the preferred method of covering the events that weekend, and despite the media interest in the Hell's Angels from institutions such as *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*, none of these outlets had a member of staff on the ground, with Thompson claiming that they were getting the story from the police over the telephone. It was clear that any deviation from the observer journalist mantra could only come from Thompson, and at his own behest. The only other media presence of sorts at the beginning of the weekend was a photographer from *The Oakland Tribune* by the name of Don Mohr, described by Thompson as looking 'as grimy and menacing as any Hell's Angel . . . He was a veteran motorcyclist . . . He looked like a middleweight Rocky Marciano and talked the same way' (Thompson 2004a, p. 151-152). Mohr was eventually made an honorary Hell's Angel, but on the ground at Bass Lake that weekend, it quickly became apparent that the lines of identification would be drawn by the nervous locals.

The first confrontation however, did not actually involve the Hell's Angels, but rather Thompson and Mohr, who were threatened in the town by a vigilante group associated with the owner of a store who intended to protect his property from the motorcycle gang. In the ensuing exchange with the vigilantes, it was made clear to Thompson that they were spoiling for a fight, and that discriminating between motorcyclists and the media was not one of their priorities:

Despite the Press credentials, both Mohr and I had been firmly identified with the outlaws. We were city boys, intruders, and under these circumstances the only neutrals were the tourists, who were easily identifiable. (Thompson 2004a, p. 159)

This incident was very much a harbinger for the weekend ahead, and had Thompson even attempted to maintain a pretence of objectivity concerning his presence it would have ultimately proven futile. The point of no return for Thompson came when Sonny Barger singled him out at the campsite and entrusted him with over a hundred dollars, requesting that he drive to a nearby store and purchase beer for the Angels. The problem for Thompson was that the store in question was the very one wherein he had previously encountered the vigilante group. Yet, refusing Sonny Barger in front of the gathered Angels was also not an option, so in an attempt to lessen the responsibility and reduce his involvement to that of a mere chauffeur, Thompson asked Barger and another Angel to accompany him to help load his car with beer. According to the sheriff's deputy, the sale had been given prior approval by the store's owner, but Thompson had not forgotten the earlier intimidation and warnings to stay away. His fears proved to be well-founded when the trio arrived at the store, and were promptly set-upon by the vigilantes. The result was a tense stand-off between Barger and the group which was only defused when the sheriff arrived and told them to go to another store at the other side of the lake. There, the trio received a resoundingly different reception and the crisis was averted, leaving the Angels happy and Thompson relieved. The incident however did have a consequence for Thompson, one that may have been inevitable, but which certainly was expedited by the event in question leading him to acknowledge: 'I hadn't planned to get physically involved, but after the narrow escape at Williams's store I was so firmly identified with the Angels that I saw no point in trying to edge back to neutrality' (Thompson 2004a, p. 169).

While it could be suggested that Thompson was an unlucky victim of circumstance and forced into a compromised position, there is no denying that Bass Lake was a watershed moment in the evolution of both The Hunter Figure and Gonzo Journalism. In terms of the former, Thompson's cultivation of the outlaw *persona* of the Hunter Figure takes a major step forward in that his own drug use is foregrounded in the narrative. In due course, Thompson would make the liberal consumption of drugs an integral characteristic of the Hunter Figure, and a subject synonymous with his own literary *oeuvre*:

At Bass Lake it was pills. Soon after dark on Saturday I was standing with a group of Angels by the bonfire, talking about the Laconia riot, when somebody appeared with a big plastic bag and began passing out handfuls of whatever it contained. When my turn came I held out my hand and received about thirty small white pills . . . I asked what they were and somebody beside me said: 'Cartwheels, man. Bennies. Eat some, they'll keep you going.' I asked him what they were in milligrams, but he didn't know. 'Just take about ten,' he advised. 'And if that don't work, take more.'

I nodded and ate two . . . When I realised that the first two were having no effect, I took several more, and then more. By dawn I had eaten twelve – which, if they'd been honest, would have caused me to gnaw down trees like a beaver . . . Bennies ('cartwheels' or 'whites') are basic to the outlaw diet – like weed, beer and wine. (Thompson 2004a p. 252-53)

It is worth noting here that, beginning with *Hell's Angels*, Thompson habitually advances both the Hunter Figure and Gonzo Journalism in a manner that clearly illustrates the symbiotic relationship between their creative developments. Both are a means toward the same end, a break from the conventions of journalistic objectivity, and a blurring of narrative and authorial voice. The key to this development is how Thompson weaves his narrative tapestry wherein the presence of the Hunter Figure is the driving force behind whom Gonzo Journalism operates. In Thompson's narrative of the events at Bass Lake, his casual, almost nonchalant description of his drug use immediately raises questions

concerning the reliability of his account of the weekend, yet he counterbalances this through his use of a conventional journalistic device: his tape recorder.

Interestingly, in Thompson's hands, even the possession of a journalist's tape recorder becomes a means towards subverting convention, as he uses it to record a running monologue of events as they unfolded, whilst at the same time, being an active participant in these events. While these tapes provided Thompson with a means to take notes and interview figures of interest amongst the Hell's Angels, they also afforded him the opportunity to transcribe these conversations *verbatim*, and to record his own input into these conversations, a technique he later described as the purest form of Gonzo Journalism, but one that was not without its own challenges:

True Gonzo reporting needs the talents of a master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor. Because the writer *must* be a participant in the scene, while he's writing it – or at least taping it, or even sketching it. Or all three. Probably the closest analogy to the ideal would be a film director/producer who writes his own scripts, does his own camera work and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least a main character. (Thompson 2003b, p. 74)

Thompson's most notable use of the latter approach, be it courtesy of his written notes or taped events, proved to be instrumental in the creation of his first acclaimed piece of Gonzo Journalism, 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', along with sections of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which features an entire chapter, 'Breakdown on Paradise Blvd', transcribed directly from one of Thompson's original tape recordings. However, it is in *Hell's Angels* where Thompson first pioneers this technique of utilising his recordings as a form of live unedited narrative, offering a notable example of just how his Gonzo Journalism approach distinguished him from other notable proponents of the New Journalism movement, such as Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe.

The most significant incident involving this approach in relation to his dealing with the Hell's Angels took place following a chance meeting with Ken Kesey, during which Thompson asked the controversial author if he would be interested in meeting the Frisco chapter of the motorcycle gang at the Box Shop, a repair garage of somewhat dubious reputation run by the group. Kesey was naturally curious about the Angels, and he quickly gained their trust, namely through their shared interests of alcohol and marijuana, which in turn gave rise to Kesey inviting the entire chapter to his compound at La Honda the following weekend to attend one of his now infamous acid tests. The spectacle that ensued on Saturday, August 7, 1965, became one of the most notorious incidents in counterculture folklore, with the entrance to Kesey's La Honda home marked by an enormous banner emblazoned with the words: 'THE MERRY PRANKSTERS WELCOME THE HELL'S ANGELS' (Thompson 2008). Should the Hell's Angels have somehow managed to miss their welcome sign, they would certainly notice the five San Mateo County sheriffs' cars parked outside the entrance gate, as their flashing lights lit up the entire scene by nightfall.

Inside the compound itself, the party took place amongst the redwood trees that spread across the property, with Bob Dylan records playing over the speakers perched high in the canopy over the crowd. Amongst the Merry Pranksters and Hell's Angels were other notable figures including LSD guru Richard Alpert and Allen Ginsberg. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Thompson later recalled how he had come to befriend one of the founding fathers of the Beat Generation:

I met Allen in San Francisco when I went to see a marijuana dealer . . . I ended up going there pretty often, and Ginsberg – this was in Haight Ashbury – was always there looking for weed too. I went over and introduced myself and we ended up talking a lot. I told him about the book I was writing and asked if he would help with it. He helped me with it for several months; that's how he got to know the Hell's Angels. We would also go down to Kesey's in La Honda together. (Thompson in Plimpton 2000, p. 53)

It was here at La Honda on the first occasion of this countercultural summit of sorts that Thompson's involvement with the Hell's Angels truly entered unexpected territory, illustrating both the risks he was taking in terms of his desire to get the story, but also the manner in which his own actions were creating the conditions conducive to a good story in the first place. It was a combination of daring inventiveness, a compulsion towards public theatre with an anarchist bent, and a deliberate disregard for what he considered the limits of objectivity, that set Thompson aside as a writer, but these traits also brought with them a certain danger to his personal safety, not to mention the potential for finding himself on the wrong side of the law.

Of course, these elements also served to lend his writing that unmistakable air of authenticity that can only come from first-hand experience of the events about which he was writing. As Thompson soon discovered however, there was a limit to his control over his subjects, and the realisation that he bore direct responsibility for bringing together two of the Bay Area's most radical groups under the direct surveillance of the local police departments, left him with a sense of unease that did not sit well on his shoulders. In a way, Thompson was the architect of a story with a most uncertain outcome, and any sense of authorial control was relinquished the minute the Hell's Angels had set foot in La Honda:

I happened to have a foot in both camps, and what I did basically was act as a social director mixing a little Hell's Angel with a little Prankster to see what you came up with – for fun, of course, but I was also acting in my own interest because I wanted to have something to write about. To do this safely, well, you must have control – my control ran out early on. (Thompson 1992, p. 112)

As Thompson roamed about the party, recording various observations of the unfolding scene with his tape recorder, the Hell's Angels quickly overcame their initial wariness of the Merry Pranksters, and together they set about consuming their respective stockpiles of

beer and LSD. It was a sight that filled Thompson with dread; he was all too aware of the potential threat of violence that could erupt from the Angels over any perceived slight, a risk that was greatly magnified by their intoxication. Despite this very real fear, their consumption of LSD had precisely the opposite effect, serving to pacify the Angels to an extent rarely seen in gatherings that were otherwise raucous in nature, leading to one Angel memorably describing the mood of the party as ‘all ha-ha, not thump-thump’ (Wolfe 1989, p. 155).

As the party continued into nightfall however, the early warning signs began to appear, the first notable incident involving a drunk and naked Neal Cassady screaming abuse at the sheriff’s deputies gathered on the edge of the property, goading them into raiding the party and confronting the gathered guests. Fortunately for the gathered crowd, the officers refrained from taking such a course of action, but instead waited until people left the property, upon which they were immediately stopped and checked for outstanding warrants. Amongst those detained were Thompson and Ginsberg, who had ventured outside to investigate what was happening, only to be pulled over and charged for a traffic violation due to a broken tail light on Thompson’s car. What followed is again evidence of the risk-taking nature behind Thompson’s quest for capturing the story as it happened. Noting that he was holding a tape recorder, the deputies enquired if he was taping their conversation, with Thompson assuring them that he was not. However, in fact, he was recording the whole encounter, with the microphone hidden in his pocket. It was perhaps the closest Thompson had come to at that point in terms of what he later described as True Gonzo Journalism: ‘the writer *must* be a participant in the scene, while he’s writing it – or at least taping it, or even sketching it. Or all three’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 74). Though he had tempted fate in secretly recording this encounter, the end result proved to be something of a non-event in terms of getting a story. In relation to the overall weekend though, there was

one especially significant moment that overshadowed everything for Thompson, with his worst instincts concerning the Hell's Angels proving to be well founded.

The incident in question revolved around an encounter between the Hell's Angels and the ex-wife of one of the Merry Pranksters, which has been variously described as something between an orgy and a gang-rape, depending on the source. For Thompson, it ventured a little too close to the latter on the spectrum, and he described the scene as 'horrifying' (Thompson 2008). Having witnessed a number of the Angels and Neal Cassady decamping from the party to a studio in a shack separate to the main property, Thompson decided to investigate what was going on only to uncover 'a mad, mad scene' (Thompson 2008). His description of what he saw is transcribed verbatim in *Hell's Angels* from his recordings:

Pretty girl about twenty-five lying on wooden floor, two or three on her all the time, one kneeling between her legs, one sitting on her face and somebody else holding her feet . . . teeth and tongues and pubic hair, dim light in a wooden shack, sweat and semen gleaming on her thighs and stomach, red and white dress pushed up around her chest . . . people standing around yelling, wearing no pants, waiting first second or third turns . . . girl jerking and moaning, not fighting, clinging, seems drunk, incoherent, not knowing, drowning . . . (Thompson 2004a, p. 228)

Discovering such a scene did not sit well with Thompson; in reflecting on what he had seen on that night at Kesey's property, he noted that the dominant impression of the incident as it unfolded 'was one of vengeance' (Thompson 2004a, p. 228). Sandy Thompson, who had also attended the party, shed further light upon why the events had troubled Thompson to such an extent, writing that: 'it was very disturbing to him. He felt partially at fault for bringing them all together, and he felt sick' (Thompson, S. in Wenner 2008, p. 82). Despite these feelings, Thompson felt a necessity in reporting the truth of the sordid affair, noting that: 'the romantic idea of these Hell's Angels as Outlaws . . . has to be counterbalanced

with the terrible realities like this one' (Thompson 2008). Believing that the incident served to illustrate a key aspect of the Hell's Angels collective psyche, Thompson points to the broader definition of the word 'rape', that is to seize or plunder through acts of violence or warfare, leading to his conclusion that 'they are not so different from the rest of us as they sometimes seem. They are only more obvious' (Thompson 2004a, p. 230). It is an important realisation in the development of Thompson's narrative concerning the Angels and in his view of the Outlaw Myth, as well as in his own ongoing balancing act in negotiating the fine line between getting close enough to the Angels in order to understand them, whilst at the same time avoiding becoming totally assimilated into their culture. Given that Thompson certainly identified with many aspects of the Hell's Angels identity, the prospect of him joining their ranks was not altogether beyond the realms of possibility, with Thompson going so far as to state: 'I was a Hell's Angel in my head for a long time. I was a failed writer for 10 years and I was always in fights' (Thompson in Thompson, A. 2009 p. 41). However, Thompson's reaction to what he had witnessed at Kesey's party is the first signal that he had encountered a demarcation line in terms of the moral boundary between the burgeoning Gonzo Hunter Figure and that of the Outlaw Culture as envisaged by the Hell's Angels.

The incident also serves to mark another important distinction in a literary sense in that it features, not only in Hell's Angels, but also Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, which was published after Thompson's book. Wolfe had been writing about Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters, and their cross-country journey in their psychedelic painted school bus that they had christened 'Furthur', as already noted. Inevitably, Kesey's account of their adventure intersects with Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, as both parties converge at Kesey's home in La Honda. Yet, it is this very occasion that illustrates the notably different approaches of Kesey and Thompson to their respective subject matter. As

a central proponent of the New Journalism movement, Wolfe is notably absent from the event, whilst Thompson is very much at the heart of the action. Yet, Wolfe offers a near word for word description of the very same disturbing borderline rape incident that Thompson discusses in his account of Kesey's reception for the Angels. The similarity led to some accusations of plagiarism following the publication of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, but this was swiftly rebutted by Thompson who revealed that he had co-operated with Wolfe by sending him his recordings from the night in question:

. . . I sent Tom my tapes, the exact . . . He asked if I would send him the raw data, it's a horrible phrase, I mean an ugly, vicious scene. And any similarity is explained by the fact that we both described them from my tapes. (Thompson in Thompson A. 2009, p. 97)

It is an interesting revelation in terms of helping to distinguish Thompson's Gonzo Journalism as a distinct sub-genre of the New Journalism movement, as it illustrates the fundamentally different concept of capturing the story as entailed by the Gonzo methodology, where the primacy of personal involvement in the story as it unfolds is foremost:

Unlike Tom Wolfe or Gay Talese, for instance, I almost never try to *reconstruct* a story. They're both much better *reporters* than I am, but then I don't really think of myself as a reporter . . . They tend to go back and re-create stories that have already happened, while I like to get right in the middle of whatever I'm writing about – as personally involved as possible. There's a lot more to it than that, but if we have to make a distinction, I suppose that's a pretty safe way to start. (Thompson in Simonson 2008, p. 21)

It is this distinction that lends Thompson's work that extra sense of the credibility that can only come from a personal experience of the people and places about which he wrote. It is fair to say that his *Hell's Angels* book benefited enormously from his decision to live and work within the very crucible of the underground movement. According to William

McKean, it afforded Thompson's work a unique status amongst the literature of the same era:

Unlike the other big books of the sixties, such as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which Tom Wolfe wrote in a cabin in Virginia, Hunter's *Hell's Angels* was the only book lived and primarily composed in the belly of the counterculture, smack dab in the middle of the social revolution at the corner of Haight and Ashbury. (McKeen 2008, p. 109)

Thompson lived and breathed the counterculture revolution from its very epicentre, experiencing the flourishing sights and sounds of psychedelia that otherwise remained alien to the rest of society, whose only window into the makings of a cultural revolution came courtesy of the growing press coverage. What was a daily reality for Thompson was an alien world to even contemporaries of his in the New Journalism movement:

'At the time, I didn't know of the word hippie,' said Wolfe. 'The press saw the potential of these people, but they used terms like acidhead. To me, acidhead sounded like a corrosive battery'. (Wolfe in Weingarten 2005 p. 97)

For the likes of Tom Wolfe, bridging this knowledge-gap concerning the counterculture proved to be an especially difficult task when it came to writing what would eventually become *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. As a complete outsider to this strange new world, his investigative skills as a reporter served him well, yet according to Marc Weingarten, there remained a problem with his efforts to explain the drug-induced reality of Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters to a mainstream audience. Wolfe had initially begun his coverage of the group in a series of articles for *New York* magazine, but the end result fell somewhat short of both Kesey's and Wolfe's expectations:

The series, which was supplemented with incidents that Wolfe had learned about through extensive interviews with the Pranksters . . . was not sub-par by any means. They were thorough investigative stories, but written with a reporter's detachment that came no closer to explaining the Pranksters' reality than the early press coverage Wolfe had dismissed as

hopelessly stodgy. Wolfe explains, but he doesn't really reveal . . . The stories were, in short, too straight. (Weingarten 2005, pp. 100-101)

Nevertheless, Wolfe was determined to rectify the shortcomings of his *New York* articles, and the only possible means to accommodate the scope of the material was in book format. His narrative approach, however, required an extensive overhaul, particularly when it came to describing the hallucinogenic reality of Kesey and the Pranksters. As a non-user of LSD, Wolfe's attempt at conveying his subjects' altered states required a somewhat unorthodox narrative approach, one that Wolfe hoped would best convey the fractured reality of his subjects:

Wolfe rearranged his words in non-linear fashion, and used punctuation as a graphic element, like e.e. cummings on a mescaline bender. He was fond of elisions, because his subjects talked in elliptical patterns, even thought in elisions. Punctuation, Wolfe discovered, allowed him to control the pace and timing of a scene, so he could write the way people on hallucinogens actually think. By subverting his language, he was in effect dosing his prose. (Weingarten 2005, p. 105)

As effective a strategy as that proved for Wolfe, it nevertheless still managed to fall somewhat short of his desired goal of knowing and conveying the experience of an LSD trip to his mainstream readership. He even went so far as to attempt meditative transcendental techniques in order to get inside the mind of Kesey during one of his trips: 'before writing each chapter, he would review his notes, then close his eyes and try to imagine himself in the mental states of his characters – a process of intellectual "sense memory" that he felt was akin to method acting' (Weingarten 2005 p. 108).

Ultimately, Wolfe knew that any such effort was futile unless he tried LSD himself, a choice he eventually rejected when suggested to him by Kesey. In the end it hardly mattered, as the book received widespread critical acclaim on publication, a vindication of Wolfe's narrative experimentation. According to Marc Weingarten, Wolfe had achieved his goal,

which was ‘to bring the reader as close as possible to the Prankster experience without becoming an active participant’ (Weingarten 2005 p. 108).

In that sense, if Wolfe brought his readers as close to the experience as possible whilst maintaining an objective measure, then what Thompson did in comparison was to get involved to such an extent that the reader would be left in no doubt that what was being described was an entirely subjective experience. In *Hell’s Angels*, Thompson not only documented the outlaws’ drug use, but also spoke candidly about his own drug experimentation, from his sharing of assorted amphetamines and tranquillisers with the Angels at Bass Lake, to his use of LSD, then still legal, at Ken Kesey’s La Honda retreat:

My own acid-eating experience is limited in terms of total consumption, but widely varied as to company and circumstances . . . and if I had a choice of repeating any one of the half-dozen bouts I recall, I would choose one of those Hell’s Angels parties at La Honda . . . If the Angels lent a feeling of menace, they also made it more interesting . . . and far more alive than anything likely to come out of a controlled experiment or a politely brittle gathering of well-educated truth-seekers looking for wisdom in a capsule. Dropping acid with the Angels was an adventure; they were too ignorant to know what to expect, and too wild to care. They just swallowed the stuff and hung on . . . which is probably just as dangerous as the experts say, but a far, far nuttier trip than sitting in some sterile chamber with a condescending guide and a handful of nervous, would-be hipsters. (Thompson 2004a, pp. 281-282)

In stating his preference for the spontaneous experimentation of the Hell’s Angels’ approach to drugs, Thompson is clearly endowing a greater sense of legitimacy on the resulting experience, despite or, given his personality, perhaps because of, the inherent dangers to those involved, which is certainly in keeping with his predilection for adrenalin-fuelled risk taking and sense of adventure. It is a clear rejection of the psychedelic school of thought espoused by the likes of Timothy Leary and his advocates; a subject to which Thompson would return in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, wherein he attacked the figure

of the Acid-Guru as being akin to a charlatan preying on people's vulnerabilities. As Thompson saw it, the drug experience was in and of itself: it was autotelic; any attempts to co-opt or imbue psychedelics with mystical or religious meaning amounted, in his mind, to just another snake-oil salesman fooling the masses. It is this same sense of disdain for those he deemed frauds that lies at the heart of Thompson's belief in the value and purpose of writing as a means to attain the truth, once again echoing Colin Wilson's thesis in *The Outsider* pertaining to the figure of The Outsider and his belief that 'the truth must be told at all costs' (Wilson 1978, p. 25).

Further evidence of Thompson's adherence to this principal can be found in the manner in which he uses LSD, and in his subsequent musing on his experience. While the likes of Wolfe relied on linguistic trickery in his efforts to convey an acid trip to his audience, giving countenance to such a strategy would be wholly alien to Thompson's sensibilities and instincts. Nevertheless, in recalling his experience with the powerful hallucinogenic, it is clear that Thompson was just as apprehensive as Wolfe in relation to taking the drug, the difference being that Thompson had at this point moved well past the point of being an objective observer of the Angels' scene, and had, in fact, become involved to the point of being the prime mover behind the unfolding La Honda drama. Taking LSD amounted to the next logical step in what was becoming as much Thompson's story as that of the Angels:

Even later, when I was around Kesey's place, I refused to take it, because I figured I might go crazy and do something violent. But then finally I took it down there, in a fit of despair, the night that the Angels showed up . . . I felt responsible for whatever was going to happen. I thought the Angels were going to beat people up and rape them.

So I figured, why not just get it on, and I asked somebody to give me a hit of acid. I thought, whatever I do can't be worse than what's already going on around me, so I may as well do it . . . I took it and it was quite a ride. I went completely out of my head and I had a wonderful

time, didn't bother a soul. Not a hint of violence. I thought, aha, I've gone to the bottom of the well here and the animal's not down there, the one they said was there. (Thompson 1992 p. 114)

If Bass Lake had marked the beginning of Thompson compromising his position of neutrality, then his orchestration and involvement at the party for the Hell's Angels at La Honda had moved him directly into subjective territory, culminating in his use of LSD in a symbolic crossing of the threshold. Though Thompson had been horrified by some of the Angels' behaviour at Kesey's, and rejected their violence, he had become good friends with several of the members, with LSD and other drugs proving to be one of their common bonds.

For Thompson, the LSD experience at Kesey's had unlocked a whole new world, one that he felt warranted further exploration, a process which he undertook with typically unrestrained exuberance. Unbeknownst to Thompson at the time, the use of LSD and other psychedelics would become inextricably linked to both the Hunter Figure and Gonzo Journalism:

In all, my life has gone into a very strange groove. The other night I was arrested with Allen Ginsberg, as we left Ken Kesey's party for the Hell's Angels. My rent is paid two months in advance, which is perhaps the most unusual thing I can say at this time. And my home is full night and day, of heinous thugs. On Friday one of them is bringing over some cubes of LSD and we are going to lock ourselves in. (Thompson 1998, p. 538)

One cannot overlook the fact however, that there was a certain inevitability to Thompson's exposure to the psychedelic drug experience given his geographical location alone, living on the perimeter of Haight Ashbury from where the entire Hippie lifestyle had radiated outward in popularity. Though Thompson did not identify as a Hippie, he was a keen admirer of the Acid rock bands that were building a loyal audience in San Francisco on the strength of their popularity within the Haight, in particular The Jefferson Airplane, whom

he had encountered in a nightclub called The Matrix, which was also the club of choice for other bands pioneering the San Francisco sound, most notably Country Joe & The Fish, and Big Brother and the Holding Company, fronted by Janis Joplin. Indeed, such was the impression left on Thompson on hearing The Jefferson Airplane play live, that he ‘telephoned Ralph Gleason, cultural critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and brought him down to the club’ (Brinkley in Thompson 1998, p. 542). A suitably impressed Gleason subsequently championed their cause and continued to do so when he co-founded *Rolling Stone Magazine* with Jann Wenner. It is just one more example of how Thompson found himself serving as cultural interlocutor and conduit between various factions of the San Francisco counterculture. Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg and the Hell’s Angels, and bands like the Grateful Dead and The Jefferson Airplane, all shared a connection through Hunter S. Thompson, and from there the connections blossomed through the collective participation in the LSD experience.

By the end of the summer of 1965, it was clear that Thompson’s involvement with the Angels had progressed far beyond the remit of his original assignment. In a letter to William Kennedy, Thompson openly acknowledged the ever-deepening connection between himself and the outlaw group:

My luck on this is that the Angels dug my *Nation* piece, and now consider me the only straight press type they know . . . My action here consists now of dealing exclusively with motorcycle thugs – almost to the point of becoming one myself. As a matter of fact I am now pressing *Playboy* to pay for a bike, so I can ride with these guys and get the feel of it. (Thompson 1998 p. 537)

It was not *Playboy* who funded Thompson’s request however, but rather Ballantine books that had advanced Thompson \$1,500 for signing a contract for the paperback edition of *Hell’s Angels*. Whilst the *de rigueur* motorcycle of choice for the Hell’s Angels was a

stripped-down Harley 74, known as a ‘chopped hog’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 90), Thompson opted for a BSA Lightning which could easily outrun the Angels standard bearer. Though it was not Thompson’s first motorcycle, it was nevertheless a statement of intent given the pedigree of the BSA amongst serious motorcyclists. It also did no harm towards advancing Thompson’s own claims to the Outlaw mantle. With a wave of negative publicity sweeping the nation regarding motorcycle gangs, nothing reinforced the Outlaw image in the public consciousness more than the muffled roar and gleaming chrome of a top of the range motorcycle like the BSA Lightning.

Whereas previously, Thompson’s anti-social leanings and troublesome behaviour had proven a hindrance, in San Francisco his appetites and attitudes stood very much in his favour when it came to reporting on the counterculture. Here, the contrast between Thompson and his contemporaries such as Tom Wolfe was clearly palpable. Wolfe was a conservative, who wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Esquire*; when it came to covering subjects such as Kesey and the Pranksters, it was Wolfe who became the outsider looking in, utilising his instincts as a reporter to shine a light in the darkness of the cultural underground, whereas Thompson was, in many ways, the very antithesis of Wolfe. In trying to make his name as a journalist, he had been shunned by the Establishment Press in New York, but as an outsider, he was very much an active participant in the very circles into which Wolfe did fit nor understand. Embraced by the Hippie heartland of San Francisco, his most notable work was published, not by mainstream outlets, but rather in underground publications such as the infamous muckraking *Scanlan’s Monthly*, and *Rolling Stone*, which became the flagship publication for the Sixties counterculture. Thompson went so far as to anoint himself as the representative of the Outlaw Press, exploring the underbelly of American society long before the establishment of the aforementioned alternative media. He was both a product of, and a voice from, the very edge that Wolfe sought to understand

and document, a fact that was all too apparent to Thompson in his appraisal of Wolfe's work:

Wolfe's problem is that he is too crusty to participate in his stories. The people he feels comfortable with are dull as stale dogshit, and the people who seem to fascinate him as a writer are so weird they make him nervous. The only thing new and unusual about Wolfe's journalism is that he is an abnormally good reporter. (Thompson 2003b, p. 108)

Despite his blunt assessment of Wolfe's weaknesses, Thompson did hold Wolfe in high regard for his ability as a journalist, and indeed Wolfe was similarly impressed by Thompson's own acumen in the field. In his 1973 anthology, *The New Journalism*, Wolfe opted to include an extract from *Hell's Angels* alongside 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', in its entirety. Interestingly, in his introduction Wolfe makes note of the evolution of the Hunter Figure, writing that 'Thompson's use of the first person – i.e., his use of himself, the reporter, as a character in the story – is quite different from the way he uses the first person later in his Gonzo Journalism' (Wolfe 1996, p. 373). Critics such as William Stephenson also support Wolfe's identification of the primacy of the first person in Thompson's narrative, and he discusses how it differentiates him from his contemporaries, stating that 'Wolfe is proto-Gonzo in his style and effects: yet what is lacking is the Gonzo catalyst of the first-hand involvement of the reporter' (Stephenson 2011, p. 65).

However, this assertion is problematic when writers such as George Plimpton are considered, in that his efforts fulfil the criteria concerning first-hand participation in the story, though his literary product is closer to Wolfe's output than to that of Thompson. William McKeen comes closer to resolving this problem in *Outlaw Journalist*, wherein he puts forward his own hypothesis as to the difference between Thompson's and Plimpton's respective efforts:

Hunter liked Plimpton's willingness to not stand aside as the detached observer, as Wolfe did. Although not directly influenced by Plimpton, Hunter could still be described as someone who had taken Plimpton's idea and plugged it into a 220-volt outlet. That could be another working definition of Gonzo. (McKeen 2008, p. 227)

The problem with focusing solely on the degree of participation as a qualifier for Gonzo Journalism is that it oversimplifies the parameters of the category, and instead of distinguishing Gonzo as a separate sub-genre of the New Journalism, it leans towards making Gonzo a more radical form of the kind of participatory journalism offered by George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. This in turn only serves to further complicate the issue in that Gonzo certainly could be considered a descendant of this form of journalism, and Thompson did acknowledge the influence of Orwell upon his work, particularly concerning *Hell's Angels*. The shortcomings of this explanation, however, are that it overlooks the role of the Hunter Figure as *the* essential fulcrum upon which Gonzo Journalism in its entirety operates.

Wolfe is correct however, when he states that Thompson's use of the first person is notably different in *Hell's Angels* when compared to his later Gonzo Journalism. It is important to note, though, that *Hell's Angels* serves as the launch pad for Thompson's self-mythologizing via the Hunter Figure, with the climax of this evolution and transition occurring in the finale of the book. As Thompson bears witness to the concluding stage of his involvement with the outlaw group, there is a discernible shift in narrative focus away from the exploits of the motorcycle group, and towards that of the Hunter Figure. It is no mere coincidence that Thompson makes this transition in the context of discussing the enduring appeal of the outlaw myth, the culmination of his relationship with the Angels and his own search for the Edge, which is fantastically realised in his description of pushing his motorcycle to its limits, a high-octane balancing act between the thrill of speed and the

fear of death in search of what Thompson calls ‘the place of definitions’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 323). In documenting and establishing just who the Hell’s Angels are and where they fit into American society, Thompson is simultaneously personally engaged in the same process, both as a writer and in terms of his identification with the figure of the outsider. One of his central points regarding the Hell’s Angels was the concept of having an equaliser, with Thompson originally planning on opening his *Nation* article with the following quote: ‘in a prosperous democracy that is also a society of winners and losers, any man without an equaliser or at least the illusion of one is by definition underprivileged’. Though it was deleted from the article, it is included in the final manuscript of *Hell’s Angels*, where Thompson discusses the Angels’ relationship to motorcycles stating that ‘there has never been an outlaw who saw his bike as anything but a King Kong equalizer’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 93). However, for Thompson, his destiny is different; he realises that his great equaliser lies in his ability as a writer, though he admits that his path could very well have been one of a Hell’s Angel. Ironically, though, it is in writing of the Angels that Thompson finds his success as a writer, and puts his failures behind him, but prior to this breakthrough, it is in his examination of the Angels’ way of life as a viable choice that he discovers the limit of their appeal to a man with equalisers other than a motorcycle.

His first questioning of the balancing act he had to negotiate *vis-à-vis* his portrayal of the Hell’s Angels came in the aftermath of the gang-rape incident at La Honda, where he admitted that ‘the Romantic idea of these Hell’s Angels as Outlaws has to be counterbalanced with terrible realities such as this one’ (Thompson 2008). As Thompson’s time within the orbit of the group progressed, the tension between these two poles inevitably had to reach a breaking point. Indeed, this was also the case in terms of the Hell’s Angels involvement within the counterculture movement itself, as the question of what role they would ultimately play remained to be answered. As Thompson noted: ‘the Hell’s

Angels massive publicity – coming hard on the heels of the widely publicized student rebellion in Berkeley – was interpreted in liberal-radical-intellectual circles as the signal for a natural alliance’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 292). With the likes of Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters embracing the Angels, it seemed that the natural progression was to be one of political involvement, and that the Angels’ stance on Vietnam would be the final litmus test to determine on what side the Hell’s Angels truly belonged. The answer, when it came, left no doubts as to the Angels’ stance. On October 16, 1965, the Hell’s Angels brutally attacked protestors at a ‘Get Out of Vietnam’ demonstration on the border of Oakland-Berkeley:

The existential heroes who had passed the joint with Berkeley liberals at Kesey’s parties suddenly turned into venomous beasts rushing on the same liberals with flailing fists and shouts of ‘Traitors’, ‘Communists’, ‘Beatniks’! When push came to shove, the Hell’s Angels lined up solidly with the cops, the Pentagon and the John Birch Society. (Thompson 2004a, p. 293)

The incident sent shockwaves through the San Francisco underground, but as Thompson noted: ‘to anyone that knew them it was entirely logical. The Angels’ collective viewpoint has always been fascistic’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 293). Thompson was not above acknowledging his own mistakes concerning the group, however, and as his own relationship with the Angels began to sour he could no longer avoid certain truths:

For nine months I had lived in a world that had seemed at first, like something original . . . Later, as they attracted more and more attention, the mystique was stretched so thin that it finally became transparent . . . I realized that the roots of this act were not in any time-honoured American myth but right beneath my feet in a new kind of society that is only beginning to take shape. To see the Hell’s Angels as caretakers of the old ‘individualist’ tradition ‘that made this country great’ is only a painless way to get around seeing them for what they really are – not some romantic leftover, but the first wave of a future that nothing in our history has prepared us to cope with . . . The Rising Tide. (Thompson 2004a, pp. 303-304)

Thompson had undoubtedly embraced the Hell's Angels in terms of the Romantic Outlaw myth, and in many ways, his portrayal of them was very much in line thematically with his previous dispatches on the American West for the *National Observer*, in particular his article 'Living in the Time of Alger, Greeley, Debs'. Much like 'the boomers, the drifters, the hard travellers, and the tramp diggers' (Thompson 2003b, p. 274), the Angels valued personal autonomy, liberty and independence, yet similarly, they had found themselves increasingly cast aside by an economy undergoing increased technological transformation.

Where the Angels differed however, was that rather than struggle against the flow, they had opted out entirely, embracing their rejection by society, and wearing it as a proud badge. According to Semonin, it is in terms of this shared sense of rejection and defiance that Thompson identified most completely with the motorcycle group, a feeling that they were both victims of society's unjust power structure:

Hunter spoke about the Hell's Angels in a strange kind of way. There was an identification with the Angels as outcasts – downtrodden outcasts, and victims, if you will. He saw them as a kind of emblem of honour and rebellion . . . I think Hunter's perspective on this goes back to his kind of survivalist character, the way he identified with some of these extreme elements that were actually quite right wing. If you look at his writings about the Hell's Angels, there's not a more unsavoury kind of bunch of characters and yet he somehow idolises them. He does it in a very subtle way, but he makes their struggles something that reflects both a failure and a rebellion against certain things in American culture and society. (Semonin in Wenner 2008, pp. 79-80)

Their anarchist stance, coupled with their disdain for authority naturally appealed to Thompson's own sensibilities, and he was not above invoking associations between the Hell's Angels and that of the American Frontier and its myths: 'the concept of the "motorcycle outlaw" was as uniquely American as jazz. Nothing like them had ever existed. In some ways they appeared to be a kind of half-breed anachronism, a human hangover from the era of the Wild West' (Thompson 2004a, p. 78). It this sympathetic

portrayal of their cause that had originally ingratiated Thompson to the Angels, and the mythologizing effect of Thompson's prose was subsequently acknowledged by Sonny Barger: 'he didn't belittle us. If there's any falseness to the book, it's more on the glamorous side than on the detractive side. He made us even more of a myth than we were at the time' (Barger in Wenner 2008, p. 88).

Thompson, however, was not alone in invoking the mythology of the Wild West when it came to defining the Angels; by the summer of 1965 they had become a social and cultural phenomenon, with figures such as Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth extending the comparison even further: 'they're the Wild Bill Hickoks, the Billy the Kids – they're the last American heroes we have, man' (Thompson 2004a, p. 271). It was a choice quote that Thompson seized on, using it as an example of how figures within the counterculture were attempting to influence the role the Angels would now play through symbolic associations with the outlaw heroes of old. The problem with this image being foisted on the Angels, according to Thompson, was that 'the outlaws themselves didn't understand it' (Thompson 2004a, p. 271). This was nowhere more apparent to Thompson than in the immediate aftermath of the 'Get Out Of Vietnam' protests, when newspapers such as the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *Oakland Tribune* notably changed their stance on the Angels from one of derision to that of a more favourable light, casting them as misunderstood patriots. The *San Francisco Chronicle* went even further, with columnist Lucius Beebe comparing the Angels to the Texas Rangers, a comparison that particularly struck a chord amongst the outlaw group:

Whatever else might be said about the Angels, nobody has ever accused them of modesty, and this new kind of Press was pure balm to their long-abused egos. The Angels were beginning to view their sudden fame as a confirmation of what they had always suspected: they were rare, fascinating creatures ('Wake up and dig it, man, we're the Texas Rangers')

It was a shock of recognition, long overdue, and although they never understood the timing, they were generally pleased with the result. (Thompson 2004a, p. 67)

For so long the Angels had been portrayed as public enemy number one by a collective media frenzy, but their actions in attacking the anti-war protesters had bestowed a patriotic anti-communist association upon them that far outweighed the media value of their other transgressions. They were a useful tool for manipulation against a bigger threat to the *status quo* in the eyes of the establishment, and the Angels' embrace of the Texas Rangers association served to illustrate to Thompson not only the naiveté of the liberal left in their understanding of the motorcycle group, but also, a certain contradiction within how the Angels viewed themselves: 'they are blind to the irony of their role . . . knight errants of a faith from which they have already been excommunicated' (Thompson 2004a, p. 295).

However, to Sonny Barger, their stance on Vietnam was entirely logical, as many of the Angels were veterans, and they interpreted the anti-war demonstration as an attack, not just on the war in Vietnam, but on their very identity. In resorting to violence, the Angels remained true to themselves. Recalling the event in his autobiography, *Hell's Angel*, Barger reasserts the Angel's apolitical stance, and chooses a quote from UCLA folklore professor Donald Cosentino to emphasise where the fault lay in terms of the disastrous attempt by various factions within the counterculture to incorporate the Angels into a meaningful alliance:

The Angels never changed . . . Everybody around them changed. Every time we wanted them to act in a certain way, every time the left wanted them to act as tribunes of the working class, every time the hipsters wanted them to act like hippies, every time the drug culture wanted to see them as allies, they flunked the test. (Cosentino in Barger 2001, p. 119)

As Thompson noted in the aftermath of the Berkeley protests however, there did exist at least one area of common ground between the Angels and the student radicals, leading the

charge in the ‘moral revolution’ that was gripping campuses across the nation and that was ‘their disdain for the present, or the *status quo*’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 307). Unlike the student radicals however, where the Angels failed was in their inability to offer anything more than resorting to violence as a possible solution or alternative paradigm. As Stephenson observes, ‘to Thompson, the Angels represented a dead end . . . the Angels worldview was fatally limited as far as he was concerned . . . he saw that their subculture was ultimately a failure due to its lack of a credible social and political vision’ (Stephenson 2011, p. 66).

It is important here to stress the fundamental importance of Thompson’s ultimate rejection of the Hell’s Angels for it affords us an insight into the Hunter Figure’s use of the American outlaw myth in contrast to that of the Hell’s Angels outlaw status, and the merits of any parallels with the heroes of the outlaw American frontier. Though Thompson himself had initially elucidated such a comparison, it was one that he eventually found wanting. The Hell’s Angels authoritarian and fascist leanings were fatally exposed when they decided to act on their newfound public status. Despite their outlaw credentials, politically, their philosophy was severely limited in scope and fundamentally opposed to the ideals that Thompson’s Hunter Figure embodied: that of the Righteous Outlaw drawn from the heroic myths of the American West. Though the Hunter Figure was deliberately crafted by Thompson as an Outlaw *persona*, its primary purpose reflected the moral compass of Thompson the author. The Hunter Figure was a personal avatar, a tool for the effective communication of Thompson’s voice. The Hell’s Angels voice, in contrast, was expressed in terms not unlike what Thompson himself had once articulated in regards to why writing called to him as an outlet for his frustrations; it was a better choice than random acts of violence.

It was not the only failure in Thompson's eyes however, and he presents the Angels' very existence as a symptom of a wider failure in American society. The targets he lines up fall not so much along political lines, but rather on generational ones, with Eisenhower's era singled out as the breeding ground for the alienation that spawned the likes of the Hell's Angels. Thompson extends his criticism to that of the very tropes at the heart of the national ethos, in what would become a feature of his long-standing stance on 'The Death of the American Dream', and on those he believed bore responsibility for this failure: 'let the old people wallow in the shame of having failed. The laws they made to preserve a myth are no longer pertinent; the so-called American Way begins to seem like a dyke made of cheap cement, with many more leaks than the law has fingers to plug' (Thompson 2004a, p 307). What Thompson truly feared however, was not so much what the Angels' existence said about the failures of the past, but rather, what the Angels said about the future.

In his eyes, the greatest danger in terms of how society reacted to the Angels' existence was to treat them as something of a cultural aberration, whereas in contrast, Thompson viewed them as heralds of the future:

In the terms of our Great Society the Hell's Angels and their ilk are losers – dropouts, failures and malcontents. They are rejects looking for a way to get even with a world in which they are only a problem. The Hell's Angels are not visionaries, but diehards, and if they are the forerunners or the vanguard of anything it is not the 'moral revolution' in vogue on college campuses, but a fast-growing legion of young employables whose untapped energy will inevitably find the same kind of destructive outlet that 'outlaws' like the Hell's Angels have been finding for years. (Thompson 2004a, p. 307)

The Rising Tide as Thompson saw it, would come crashing down on society in a collective outburst of violence. That was what the Angels ultimately offered, succinctly encapsulated in the very logo they used as an identifier: the Winged Death's Head Skull. To Thompson, they were cultural representations of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, harbingers of what

lay ahead for America on the road towards Fear and Loathing. The Angels' attraction to the rest of society, as Thompson saw it, was that they allowed whole swathes of the disenfranchised public to live vicariously through their actions:

There is an important difference between the words 'loser' and 'outlaw'. One is passive and the other is active, and the main reasons the Angels are such good copy is that they are acting out the day-dreams of millions of losers who don't wear any defiant insignia and who don't know how to be outlaws . . . The Angels don't like losers, but they have learned to live with it. 'Yeah, I guess I am,' said one. 'But you're looking at one loser who's going to make a hell of a scene on the way out.' (Thompson 2004a, 313)

In many ways, Thompson's view of the Angels, and what they ultimately said about American society, appears eerily prescient. The counterculture was still very much a movement in development, the 'Human Be-In' and the 'Summer of Love' in San Francisco was still over a year away, and Timothy Leary had yet to coin their unofficial mantra: 'Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out' (Leary 1990, p. 260).

If the summer of 1967 marked the idyllic peak of the movement, then the following year was almost certainly its lowest trough, shattering the idea of peace, love and understanding in an orgy of violence. An increase in the intensity of the conflict in Vietnam, and riots on home soil, culminated in the assassinations of both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. It was this descent into darkness, destruction and ultimately death, which Thompson realised was the inevitable end for those that embraced the Hell's Angels trip, shattering the illusion of the Romantic Outlaw appeal. Thompson reinforces this through his description of the sudden death of Mother Miles, symbolically representing the reality of the Hell's Angel life in its fatalistic world view:

Nothing else happened until January, when Mother Miles got snuffed. He was riding his bike through Berkeley when a truck came out of a side-street and hit him head on, breaking both legs and fracturing his skull. He hung in a coma for six days, then died on a Sunday

morning, less than twenty-four hours before his thirtieth birthday – leaving a wife, two children and his righteous girlfriend, Ann. (Thompson 2004a, p. 315)

For Thompson, the sudden death of Mother Miles also served as a stark warning of the dangers of living the outlaw biker life. Hunter was the same age as Mother Miles, married and had a young child. Under different circumstances, it could very well have been his own funeral. Indeed, he himself had come close to death on one occasion, when he crashed his motorcycle at high speed, destroying the machine and seriously injuring himself in the process. In an interview with ABC news, Thompson elaborated further on his feelings regarding knowing when to step back from the abyss:

...those who have a sense of options begin to realize that as they approach 30, they're losing all their options. It gets harder to get a job; it gets hard to find new friends, harder to do almost anything. So once past 30 it sort of confirms that it's either jail, a broad crash on a bike, or being shot by somebody. Younger ones quit. (Thompson in A. Thompson 2009, p. 3)

Thompson however, was not beyond flirting with danger, and he had a lifelong attraction to guns, motorcycles, alcohol and drugs. A self-confessed adrenaline junkie, he routinely pushed himself to the limit in all manner of endeavours, but unlike the Hells Angels he had options. Thompson spoke of the Hells Angels relationship with the Harley Davidson motorcycle in terms of the machine being their great equaliser. Thompson knew that his great equaliser was his ability to write. His reaction to Mother Miles' sudden death, also reveals more about Thompson's sense of his own mortality, which in turn informed his creation of the Hunter Figure. Thompson spoke of suicide throughout his life as his ace card, believing it was entirely his decision as to when and how he would exit the stage. His creation of the Hunter Figure owed much to his attitude to death, it was his answer to William Faulkner's on 'Kilroy was here':

The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move. This is the artist's way of scribbling 'Kilroy was here' on the wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass. (Faulkner 1956)

If Mother Miles' death served as a stark example of the Hell's Angels reality stripped of its Romantic trappings, then what followed for Thompson was a brutal reminder of the other inevitability in dealing with the group. In the postscript to *Hell's Angels*, Thompson details the nature of his own parting of ways with the Angels on Labour Day, 1966. It is a scene characterised by the kind of finality that typified the Angels, with Thompson subjected to a savage beating: 'my face looked like it had been jammed into the spokes of a speeding Harley, and the only thing keeping me awake was the spastic pain of a broken rib' (Thompson 2004a, p 325). As makes his way home, he struggles to find the words to articulate his feelings towards the group, finally settling on a quote from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* '. . . I wanted something original, but there was no escaping the echo of Mistah Kurtz's comment from the heart of darkness: "The horror! The horror! . . . Exterminate all the brutes!" It seemed appropriate, if not entirely just . . . but after getting such a concentrated jolt of reality I was not much concerned about justice' (Thompson 2004a, pp. 325-326). The inherent irony of Thompson choosing a quote that advocates the kind of retaliation meted out by the Angels themselves, is a classic Gonzo technique, and one that bears a striking similarity to the ending of 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved'.

Thompson frequently utilises the Hunter Figure to hold up a mirror to the American collective being, openly displaying the many flaws that lie at the very fabric of nations shared DNA. As Stephenson observes, 'like Kurtz, he has been complicit in the violence

of the alien world, and has done much to stir it up: he has confronted the dark violent heart of Angel culture, and found it lying within' (Stephenson 2011, p. 68). The postscript to *Hell's Angels* also raises another important question concerning Thompson's violent clash with the Angels, namely as to whether the confrontation was instigated by Thompson himself for the purpose of providing a dramatic ending to his involvement with the group. The precedents are certainly there, given Thompson's prior admission of his attempt at social engineering in his bringing together of the Angels and the Merry Pranksters. According to Sonny Barger, given Thompson's detailed account of the Hell's Angels code, there is no denying that he knew the consequences when he confronted an Angel by the name of Junkie George, whose violent outburst he had just witnessed:

Now, Hunter's run with us for a year. He knows policy and procedure, and he says, 'Only punks slap their old ladies and kick their dogs.' And George says, 'Well, I guess you want some too' and started beating him up To hear Hunter talk he was beaten half to death . . . And then his book was a myth I had to live with . . . Of course he doesn't want to admit he set it up. (Barger in Wenner 2008, p. 85)

Deliberate or otherwise, it certainly serves to illustrate the extent to which Thompson's pursuit of the story involved a level of risk-taking and personal involvement that ultimately allows him to cast aside the last vestiges of objectivity in favour of his subjective denouncement of the Angels.

It is also no coincidence that the fully subjective Thompson is presented in the *Hell's Angels* postscript, following on directly from the closing passage of the book that is known as 'Midnight on the Coast Highway', wherein the focus lies entirely on the Hunter Figure. Once more it reveals the intricate interplay that Thompson develops between the Hunter Figure and the subjective focus of Gonzo Journalism. It is a passage that Thompson sets up well in the closing stages of the book, as he disengages from pursuing his

mythologizing of the Hell's Angels in terms of the Romantic idea of the Outlaw, and instead, redirects the focus entirely onto his own *persona*. In his rejection of the Angels, Thompson clearly acknowledges the need within the culture for those larger than life figures, and it is here that he subtly includes his own literary alter ego: 'in a nation of frightened dullards there is a sorry shortage of outlaws, and those few who make the grade are always welcome: Frank Sinatra, Alexander King, Elizabeth Taylor, Raoul Duke . . . they have that extra "something"' (Thompson 2004a, p. 310). Though Thompson does not directly associate the Raoul Duke figure in Hell's Angels with his own *persona*, his inclusion of the name here certainly signals a certain intent. The quote also foreshadows later comments by Thompson in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, wherein he outlines the appeal of Myths and Legends in America:

Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mould-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of 'the rat race' is not yet final. (Thompson 2003b, p. 406)

Thus, it is important to note the context in which Thompson introduces the Hunter Figure; it arises out of his realisation that the Angels cannot fit with the Romantic idea of the Outlaw due to their inability to offer society anything other than a philosophy of retribution and violence; yet at the same time, Thompson articulates his awareness of the void in society that feeds the cultural fascination surrounding the motorcycle group. He sees their defiance and rebellion as speaking to the American psyche in ways that evoke the Romantic figures of the old Wild West and the American Frontier.

Thompson, too, had been drawn in by the lure of the Hell's Angels, and had embraced their penchant for motorcycles and drug use, and so it was fitting that it was these respective aspects of their culture that facilitated his introspection in the finale of *Hell's*

Angels. It is also quite revealing, as already noted, that Thompson included the following quote from Dr Johnson at the beginning of the chapter: ‘he who makes a beast of himself, gets rid of the pain of being a man’ (Johnson in Thompson 2004a, p. 314). Transformation for Thompson, be it through drug use, or indeed writing, is a means towards attaining a single goal, namely that of a cathartic release from suffering. The symbolic connection is again reinforced at the start of the Coastal Highway passage, wherein the Hunter Figure takes full flight, with Thompson invoking the figure of the werewolf as a connection to Dr Johnson’s preceding quote:

So it was always at night, like a werewolf, that I would take the thing out for an honest run down the coast . . . There was no helmet on those nights, no speed limit, and no cooling it down on the curves . . . Screw it all the way over, reach through the handlebars to raise the headlight beam, the needle leans down on a hundred, and wind-burned eyeballs strain to see down the centerline, trying to provide a margin for the reflexes . . . letting off now, watching for cops, but only until the next dark stretch and another few seconds on the edge . . . The Edge . . . There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. The others – the living – are those who pushed their control as far as they felt they could handle it, and then pulled back, or slowed down . . . but the edge is still Out there. Or maybe it’s In. The association of motorcycles with LSD is no accident of publicity. They are both a means to an end, to the place of definitions. (Thompson 2004a, pp. 322-323)

This sense of cathartic release that Thompson associates with drugs, writing and pushing his motorcycle to its limits, is expanded upon further in his recollection of the night he wrote the Coast Highway passage for Hell’s Angels.

His explanation also reveals that the Midnight Coast passage adheres to the tenets of Gonzo Journalism in the immediacy of its presentation, as an unedited subjective experience:

Later on I can look back at something like that thing about ‘the edge,’ which I wrote about twenty minutes after coming back from doing it. My face was still almost frozen, dark red and crusted with tears, not from crying but tears that start coming to your eyes just from the wind. I was so high on that – from coming back – that I sat and wrote the whole thing, right through, and never changed a word of it. It’s one of my favourite pieces of writing. (Thompson 1992, p. 109)

There is no denying that the adrenaline rush associated with risk-taking greatly appealed to Thompson. Whether through drugs or motorcycles, he was in pursuit of The Edge, the place of definitions. However, as Stephenson observes:

... his text implied that neither defiance nor danger was enough ... the place of definitions is a place you never return from: to be defined is to be dead. Thompson, or at least his Hell’s Angels *persona*, thus seems motivated by a death wish, paradoxically in the name of the quest for self-definition and self-realization: it is as if the only way to know the self is to destroy it. (Stephenson 2011, p. 68)

This explanation tends to back Thompson into a corner however, wherein his primary motivation is to ‘eliminate the self’ (Stephenson 2011, p. 68). Rather, the Hunter Figure is Thompson’s means towards exerting control. In his pursuit of the Edge, through LSD or motorcycles, he seeks the place of definitions which he declares to be still ‘Out there. Or maybe it’s In’ (Thompson 2004a, p. 323). As Thompson realises, the cathartic release that he experiences from his Edge experience can be achieved through internal means, and not just external stimuli. The place of definitions does not have to mean death in the physical sense, from having gone over, but rather the place of definitions lies inside us and as Thompson later acknowledged to William McKeen, ‘I haven’t found a drug yet that can get you anywhere near as high as sitting at a desk writing, trying to imagine a story no matter how bizarre it is’ (Thompson in McKeen 1991, p. 109). Thompson frequently expressed the attraction that writing had for him, as a means of exerting control and bringing order out of chaos. By putting his life down in words, he felt this allowed him to

understand it better, and the Hunter Figure is the next logical step for Thompson in his pursuit of the place of definitions, as by making himself a character in his own work, then he, and he alone, determines his own fate. As Stephenson stated ‘to be defined is to be dead’ (Stephenson 2011, p. 68), yet the Hunter Figure allows Thompson to get around the dilemma of being defined by going over the Edge, by turning ‘In’ instead. This means that the place of definitions can be accessed through the creative faculty, thus removing death as the determining factor.

Asserting the ultimate form of authorial control, allows him to not only recreate himself *à la* Gatsby, but in fact go even further and turn his Hunter Figure *persona* into something larger than life, by moving into the realm of myth. As Joseph Campbell states in *The Power of Myth*:

Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth – penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words. Beyond images, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told. (Campbell in Flowers 1988, p. 161)

The appeal of myth and myth-making is clear to Thompson; it is fundamentally connected to his pursuit of the truth, which also accounts for the value he attaches to writing, and the figure of the outlaw, and for his rejection of objective journalism in favour of the subjective experience. What follows next for Thompson is to combine all of this into one great synthesis of expression in what would become his most revered and celebrated text – *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Chapter 5: Dr Hunter S. Thompson – Gonzo Journalist

The publication of *Hell's Angels* in 1966 changed everything for Hunter S. Thompson. As Douglas Brinkley states in *Fear and Loathing in America*: 'overnight Thompson had become a literary *enfant terrible*, his book climbed onto best-seller lists' (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. xii), with sales in its first year of publication amounting to 'nearly half a million copies' (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. 18). The benefits for Thompson in the immediate sense were those of editorial respect and freedom more than monetary gain, but their currency also proved to be one of far greater significance in due course, proving essential to the full realisation of both the Hunter Figure and that of Gonzo Journalism. Whereas previously Thompson's status as an Outsider had worked against him, in the immediate post *Hell's Angels* period, he was viewed as both an authority and as an innovator, which in turn brought with it a demand for more writing in the same vein:

. . . mainstream editors also learned to respect Thompson's well-honed instinct for accurately reporting on the fringe characters of the tumultuous 1960s. 'He became our official crazy,' John Leonard claimed in *The New York Times*, 'patrolling the edge.' Now, with the wild success of *Hell's Angels*, the first printing selling out within days of publication, Thompson had the freedom to explore 'the edge' in new modes of journalism that borrowed from fiction writing. (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. xiii)

The timing for Thompson's breakthrough could not have been better. Though *Hell's Angels* was seen as part of the New Journalism movement, stylistically Thompson was already transitioning away from the genre, contending that it was 'simply an updated version of the

best Old Journalism’ (Thompson 1998, p. 644). It is Thompson’s very questioning, and indeed rejection, of certain journalistic shibboleths, most notably that of objectivity, that increasingly defined the evolution of his prose as the Sixties decade moved to a close.

This aesthetic development is notable, in that the timing of Thompson’s Gonzo Journalism breakthrough is reflective of a wider cultural moment, as illustrated by Malcolm Bradbury’s analysis in *The Modern American Novel*:

New forms of expression from the rock concert to the happening, from bop prosody to the new ‘black arts’, from poetry-and-jazz to performance and fringe theatre, declared the spirit of randomness and provisionality, of instantaneous experience and communal radicalism, of generational conflict and racial anger . . . but, in an age that likes to have even its most provisional arts clearly labelled, it is well to settle, for a description of the general tendency, on the term ‘postmodernism’. (Bradbury 1994, pp. 197-198)

As Bradbury further elaborates, this metamorphosis was not only confined to creative modes, but also extended to the wider Sixties social movement, and to the primacy of participation and action as a means towards personal empowerment, and to the need for resistance to the established power structures, and in many cases their overthrow:

The Sixties avant-garde revival was as behavioural as it was aesthetic. It celebrated youth, the momentary event, the instantaneous cultural experience, dropping out, taking drugs. It distrusted established forms, genres, and canons, and all official structures of power. It also provided a lively environment for serious artistic experiments, and from it grew a new approach to all forms of writing. (Bradbury 1994, p. 198)

Bradbury’s observation here concerning the behavioural aspect of the Sixties in conjunction with the aesthetic, is one that becomes ever more important to Thompson by the decade’s end, as his art and life converge to such an extent that the reflexive exchange elevates Gonzo from being that which Thompson writes to becoming that which Thompson does. Though the roots of this relationship can be traced back to the earliest days of Thompson’s journalism, when he mused upon Oswald Spengler’s theory about those who

impose themselves on reality through action as opposed to thought, the real Gonzo breakthrough occurs in the nexus between the behavioural and the aesthetic, between the interior and the exterior planes, between thought and action, and ultimately, between life and art.

Between 1968 and the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1971, the signposts delineating this process are numerous, the most obvious being that of Thompson's cultivation of the Hunter Figure, and taking it beyond the literary sphere and into that of the public realm. Indeed, it is in the direct aftermath of the publication of *Hell's Angels* that this transition became immediately perceptible as one that was both calculated and overt:

I noted the transformation of Hunter into a public personality for the first time when he was doing publicity for *Hell's Angels* in 1968. He was in New York and he turned up with a cowboy hat and very bizarre sunglasses, bright red or green, glow in the dark. It was a costume for Halloween, and that *persona* was what he was after, that look . . . I believe Hunter was captured by that *persona*, and that his writing was transformed. More and more it was about that *persona*, not what it used to be about. And it seemed he was revelling in it. (Kennedy in Wenner 2008, p. 90)

Another highly significant development that same year is the debut of Raoul Duke as Thompson's literary alter ego, in direct response to the traumatic events of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. This is not only evidence of the pervasive fascination with different versions of selfhood, and with different avatars, but it also illustrates the manner in which Thompson sought refuge in writing as a way to exercise control and seek order out of chaos, a trait that is rooted in his incarceration in Louisville as a teenager. Fear of his fate being decided by a system that rendered him powerless, or otherwise abused his autonomy, is integral to the value that Thompson placed in authorial power, especially in relation to literary representations of the self and the author's agency over fate.

By 1970, Thompson's took this aspect of control even further, applying it to his campaign for election to the position of Sheriff of Aspen, which attracted both national and international attention as he exercised what would become a Gonzo mantra, namely that 'politics is the art of controlling your environment' (Thompson 2003a, p. 71), a doctrine which has echoes of Spengler. Thompson's platform was unlike anything ever witnessed in America's political history; in effect, it was Thompson subverting the political system and power structure in the same manner as he had earlier subverted the traditions of objective journalism. What followed for Thompson amounted to the Golden Age of Gonzo, namely his first acknowledged Gonzo Journalism articles 'The Temptations of Jean Claude Killy', and 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', were published by *Scanlan's Monthly* that same year, followed by *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in successive issues of *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1971, which firmly ingrained the Hunter Figure and Gonzo Journalism in the collective cultural consciousness of America. As Thompson's literary and public profile soared, he was lauded in a manner befitting that of a Hollywood celebrity or Rock Star.

It is important to note that Gonzo owed much to Thompson's collaborators, both editorial and artistic, during this period, with the latter adding the dimension of the artistic representation of Gonzo to Thompson's arsenal. Both Warren Hinckle of *Scanlan's Monthly*, and Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone*, granted Thompson the artistic freedom and direction to bring Gonzo to its full fruition between the pages of their respective publications. In terms of the artistic dimension of Gonzo, both Tom Benton and Ralph Steadman contributed considerably to the visual representation of Gonzo, from the symbolic and political aspects of Benton's Wallposters, to Steadman's initial collaboration on 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', which marked the beginning of a creative partnership that spanned 35 years. His iconic illustrations for *Fear and Loathing*

in Las Vegas, forever immortalized the Hunter Figure in the guise of Raoul Duke. However, the one thread that ties together all of the above throughout this period is Thompson's unrelenting obsession with 'The Death of the American Dream'. Originally agreed to be Thompson's follow-up book to *Hell's Angels*, the scale of the project became all-encompassing, which prompted editor Jim Silberman to make the following observation:

All his writing was about the loss of some mythic world that he may once have inhabited. It was no accident that *Gatsby* was his favourite book. I said to him at one point, 'You're really writing one lifelong book called 'The Death of the American Dream'.' And that stuck. (Silberman in Wenner 2008, p. 99)

The reference to *Gatsby* is a pertinent one, considering the self-mythologising nature of the Hunter Figure. In writing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson chose *The Great Gatsby* as his template, later acknowledging to P. J. O'Rourke that '*Gatsby* is possibly the Great American Novel, if you look at it as a technical achievement. It's about 55,000 words, which was astounding to me. In *Vegas* I tried to compete with that' (Thompson in Thompson, A. p. 205). In choosing a subtitle for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson opted for 'A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream.' As in the novel, if 'The Death of the American Dream' was one lifelong book for Thompson, then taking centre-stage throughout that story was his greatest creation: the Hunter Figure.

Though *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was not published until November of 1971, the gestation period for the concept of the book began in January of 1968, when Thompson agreed to write a book for Random House, with the tentative title of 'Joint Chiefs' (Thompson 2001, p. 21), proposed by Thompson and 'Hunter Thompson's America' (Thompson 2001, p. 21), or "The Death of the American Dream" (Thompson 2001, p. 21), suggested by his editors. The subject matter was to be 'a scathing exposé of the U.S. armed forces' Joint Chiefs of Staff' (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. 14). Writing to Carey

McWilliams, editor at *The Nation*, Thompson outlined his initial thoughts on the direction of the project, stating that ‘what I’ll really be writing, I think, is a sort of Prosecutor’s Brief, demanding a fitting penalty for the killers of the “American Dream”’ (Thompson 2001, p. 21). In another memo, this time to Jim Silberman at Random House, Thompson added ‘we need to show *how and why* the American Dream is dead’ (Thompson 2001, p. 23). At the same time as the submission of this proposed Random House book, was another book project that Thompson pitched to Ballantine. In the early conceptualisation for this book, Thompson is likewise targeting representative figures of the establishment power structure, this time suggesting a ‘savage fictional attack on President Johnson’ (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. 15).

This proposal foreshadowed what would become a staple of Gonzo, that particular blend of fact and fiction to produce ‘faction’, moving Thompson closer to what critic Jerome Klinkowitz described as SuperFiction: ‘I’d have to mix up fact and fantasy so totally that nobody could be sure which was which. We could bill it as a fantastic piece of root-hog journalism – The Thompson Report, as it were’ (Thompson 2001, p. 15). One certainty established in these early brainstorming exchanges between Thompson and his editors is that of the inevitability of his own subjectivity defining the material, even when he consciously tries to avoid so doing, coupled with the necessity for his direct involvement as a means towards establishing a narrative structure for the material, as he had done with *Hell’s Angels*:

I write essays by accident, by injecting my own bias into the material even when I try to avoid it I think this American Dream thing needs a *narrative structure* to hold it together. *Hell’s Angels* had that by accident, or because my involvement served as a narrative . . . and that’s all we’ll need for the next one. I can’t sit out here in Woody Creek and ruminate on ‘The Death of the American Dream’. (Thompson 2001, p. 24)

In many ways what Thompson is formulating here is a conceptual Gonzo template for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a checklist consisting of the proven elements from *Hell's Angels* married with the more experimental fictional and journalistic elements that he desired to integrate into his next book. One such technique, outlined by Thompson here, consisted of directly asking people about 'The Death of the American Dream':

. . . sort of 'Dear Sir, I'm investigating a rumor that somebody killed the American Dream and since the neighbors recently reported screams from your apartment, I thought I'd ask if you might possibly be able to suggest an explanation for these rumors, and perhaps name a few suspects.' (Thompson 2001, p. 92)

Though Thompson outlined the above in terms of a query letter that he could send to various public representatives, the approach bears a strong resemblance to that of a chapter in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, entitled 'Breakdown on Paradise Blvd'. In this chapter, Raoul Duke and his attorney, Dr Gonzo, question a waitress at an all-night diner in North Vegas about where they can find The American Dream. Thinking that they are referring to an actual place, she consults with a cook who informs them that the American Dream 'has to be the old Psychiatrist's Club, but the only people who hang out there is a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers, and all that stuff' (Thompson 2005, p. 165). The reader is later informed by an editor's note that 'Dr Duke and his attorney finally located what was left of the "Old Psychiatrist's Club" – a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago' (Thompson 2005, p. 168).

Other significant influences post *Hell's Angels* that helped shape the direction of Thompson's prose in terms of his thematic exploration of 'The Death of the American Dream' were those relating to the social and political upheaval that marked 1968 as one of the most pivotal years of the Sixties, not just in terms of the counterculture, but for America

as a whole. In an essay written by Thompson in the winter of 1968, he anticipated this societal sea-change by identifying 1967 as ‘the year of the hippie’ (Thompson 2001, p. 5), before confessing to having ‘kissed off the hippies as just another failed lifestyle’ (Thompson 2001, p. 9). Here, Thompson foreshadows one of the central standout passages in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the ‘Wave Speech’, as he reminisces on the merits of the pre-hippie era in San Francisco. It is clear that by 1968, Thompson already assigned great value to that particular moment in time, describing it as ‘a good, wild-eyed, free-falling time when everything seemed to be coming out right’ (Thompson 2001, p. 7). Recalling the nights he witnessed The Jefferson Airplane and Grace Slick playing in The Matrix nightclub, there is palpable evidence that Thompson understood and relished the sense of collective energy and shared community that peaked in San Francisco, and subsequently radiated across the nation amongst the counterculture movement. He saw this as an entire generation imbued with an inherent sense that the tide was turning in their favour: ‘I remember that feeling, that we were all making it somehow’ (Thompson 2001, p. 9). A little over two years later, Thompson already recognised the collapse of that dream, at least in terms of the hippie ideal having any hope of succeeding, and he framed their failure as evidence of a nation that now viewed its founding values as a threat to the established order:

The hippies threatened the establishment by dis-interring some of the most basic and original ‘American values,’ and trying to apply them to life in a sprawling, high-pressure technocracy that has come a long way, in nearly 200 years, from the simple agrarian values that prevailed at the time of the Boston Tea Party. The hippies are a menace in the form of an anachronism, a noisy reminder of values gone sour and warped . . . of the painful contradictions in a society conceived as a monument to ‘human freedom’ and ‘individual rights,’ a nation in which all men are supposedly ‘created free and equal’ . . . a nation that any thinking hippy will insist has become a fear-oriented ‘warfare state’ that can no longer

afford to tolerate even the minor aberrations that go along with ‘individual freedom.’ (Thompson 2001, p. 7)

Thompson however, also recognised that the hippies were merely a symptom of an ever-increasing disquiet with the political and cultural direction of America, and that in terms of the hippie movement being painted as a genuine alternative, ‘only the fake priests and dingos called it the wave of the future’ (Thompson 2001, p. 11). As in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson lambastes figures like Timothy Leary as being ‘guru caricatures’ (Thompson 2001, p. 11), describes the Haight Ashbury as ‘a commercial freak show’ (Thompson 2001, p. 11), and lashing out at the ‘hippy businessmen’ who wore beards and beads to disguise the sad fact that were actually carbon copies of the bourgeois merchant fathers whom they’d spent so much time and wrath rejecting’ (Thompson 2001, p. 11). Thompson would revisit and explore these very ideas again as a central proponent of his diagnosis on the failure of the Sixties’ counterculture in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

If Thompson already recognised the hippie dream as a failure, then 1968 marks the moment where the dream turned into a nightmare. Looming large on the horizon that presidential election year was none other than Richard Milhous Nixon, a figure who for Thompson, and indeed for an entire generation, represented the physical embodiment of all that was corrupt in the American character. Every outlaw needs an arch-nemesis, and Nixon was exactly that for Thompson. When *Pageant* magazine expressed an interest in Thompson profiling Nixon’s candidacy for president, he seized the opportunity as a means of gathering material in the context of his proposed book on President Johnson, eyeing Nixon as a cameo figure within that story. Indeed, in Thompson’s writing on Nixon in 1968, there is a certain connective circularity in a contextual sense between Nixon’s political rise and the looming collapse of the Sixties counterculture. In 1960, a young Hunter S. Thompson had witnessed the first televised presidential debates between a then Vice-

President Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy, which had proven to be both a formative moment in his political awakening, and a generational shift in the political landscape, ushering in the age of Kennedy’s Camelot and the Sixties:

That was when I first understood that the world of Ike and Nixon was vulnerable . . . and that Nixon, along with all the rotting bullshit he stood for, might conceivably be beaten . . . and it had never occurred to me that politics in America had anything to do with human beings. (Thompson 2001, p. 260)

Upon Kennedy’s assassination three years later, described by Thompson as ‘the death of hope’ (Thompson 1998, p. 420), he singled out the threat of Nixon running for president, stating that he was ‘the most dangerous political punk who ever lurked in this nation’ (Thompson 1998, p. 424).

The intervening years of the Johnson presidency had done little to temper Thompson’s views on Nixon and now, on the cusp of the collapse of the Sixties era ushered in by Kennedy, Thompson once more faced the spectre of Nixon rising from the flames of what he thought had been his political death. In writing for *Pageant*, in an article entitled ‘Presenting: The Richard Nixon Doll (Overhauled 1968 Model)’, he spared Nixon no sympathy as he mustered the spirit of the Sage of Baltimore, H. L. Mencken, in his savage assessment of the Republican candidate:

Richard Nixon has never been one of my favourite people, anyway. For years I’ve regarded his very existence as a monument to all the rancid genes and broken chromosomes that corrupt the possibilities of the American Dream; he was a foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad. The Nixon I remembered was absolutely humourless; I couldn’t imagine him laughing at anything except maybe a paraplegic who wanted to vote Democratic but couldn’t quite reach the lever on the voting machine. (Thompson 2003b, p. 185)

It is a passage that perfectly illustrates the kind of iconoclastic and darkly acerbic humour that Thompson integrated into the very DNA of Gonzo. This is clear from the idea of Nixon

as an embodiment of an inherent genetic corruption that impinged upon the American Dream, to the stripping away of human qualities and invoking comparisons to the animal kingdom that brought a new meaning to the phrase ‘political animal’. Lest the reader remain unconvinced, Thompson puts forth an image of Nixon that is at once disturbingly funny, but at the same time rooted in a certain truth, of the kind Thompson spoke of when he declared to Angus Cameron: ‘fiction is a bridge to the truth that journalism can’t match’ (Thompson 1998, p. 529).

It is for this same reason that Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ‘72* was subsequently described by Frank Mankiewicz, campaign director for George McGovern, as ‘the least factual, most accurate account’ (Mankiewicz in Ewing) of that campaign. Thompson’s ability to convey a more accurate representation of the Truth courtesy of Gonzo’s heavily subjective ‘faction’, afforded him an advantage over the more traditional objective press reportage from the campaign trail, a coverage which he later blamed for being partly responsible for Nixon’s victory:

Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism — which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful. (Thompson 1994, p. 243)

Though Thompson’s own peculiar brand of Gonzo political campaign reportage came to fruition in his coverage of the 1972 presidential election, in his 1968 article on Nixon for *Pageant*, there are other Gonzo elements that stand out as notable, not least of all an appearance by Raoul Duke:

What is admirable about this piece, however, in terms of pointing the way to Gonzo, is what happens in the text when Thompson finds out Nixon will not allow himself to be interviewed, photographed, or indeed even be caught in a bar or lounge. He doesn't smoke and he doesn't drink, his handlers tell Thompson, and bars make him nervous. With this set-up Thompson then drops into the text some classic Gonzo goofing: 'It was Bogart who said, "You can't trust a man who doesn't drink."' And it was Raoul Duke who said, 'I'd never buy a used car from Nixon unless he was drunk'. Duke, of course, is Thompson himself, or rather his future alter ego in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. (Reynolds in McKeen 2012, p. 73)

In a sense, it is fitting that, in following on from his mention in *Hell's Angels*, Duke's voice is first heard in the context of portraying Nixon as a used car salesman. Once more, it illustrates the synchronous relationship between Thompson's conceptualization of the Hunter Figure, under the guise of Raoul Duke, and the development of the narrative style that typifies Gonzo Journalism. In this early proto-Gonzo development, it is the Hunter Figure, in this instance Raoul Duke, that provides the platform upon which Thompson can introduce his own quotes for satirical purposes in a clandestine manner, allowing him to maintain a certain distance as author at the same time. However, as Thompson moves closer to his Gonzo breakthrough, it is the blurring and disintegration of this separation that becomes paramount, leading to the fully-realized narrative style of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, wherein Duke is to the forefront as both the central protagonist and narrator.

Thompson's *Pageant* article is also noteworthy in that it led to his infamous meeting with Nixon himself, with Thompson invited to accompany the candidate as he was driven to the airport after campaigning in Nashua, New Hampshire. Though Thompson claimed that he was instructed to only talk about football with Nixon, his advisor Pat Buchanan claimed otherwise: 'Hunter said it was laid out as a rule that sports was all he could talk about with the old man, but I don't recall limiting him like that – that's just all they happened to talk about' (Buchanan in Wenner 2005, p. 52). Regardless, it was a

discussion that had a lasting effect on Thompson when he realised that Nixon's interest in football was not just a cynical political stunt:

I suspected that he didn't know football from pig-hustling and that he mentioned it from time to time only because his wizards had told him it would make him seem like a regular guy. But I was wrong. Nixon knows pro football . . . It wasn't his factual knowledge of football that stunned me; it was his genuine interest in the game. 'You know,' he said, 'the worst thing about campaigning, for me, is that it ruins my whole football season. I'm a sports buff, you know. If I had another career, I'd be a sportscaster – or a sportswriter.' (Thompson 2003b, p. 190)

Having started out as a sportswriter himself, the revelation proved to be too much for Thompson, 'the scene was so unreal that I felt like laughing out loud' (Thompson 2003b, p. 191). Though their conversation had passed off pleasantly, it was not without incident, with Thompson leaving his own impression on Nixon's staff, as revealed by Pat Buchanan:

When we got to the airport, Hunter got out of the car right by the Learjet as they were gassing it up and snapped his Zippo to light his cigarette. My friend Nicholas Ruwe, a great advance man, knocked it out of his hand. We thought we were going to be blown to kingdom come. (Buchanan in Wenner 2005, p. 52)

In a subsequent letter to Nicholas Ruwe, inquiring about the feasibility of a non-fiction book on the role of advance men in a presidential campaign, Thompson made the following observation regarding his impression of Nixon from their conversation in New Hampshire: 'he is the unlucky personification of all the root problems that I'm beginning to suspect are going to croak us very shortly' (Thompson 2001, p. 95). Indeed, therein lies the terrible truth that Nixon embodied for Thompson: namely the flash of recognition that he was the perfect figurehead to hold responsible for 'The Death of the American Dream'.

Indeed, one of the first things Thompson did after his meeting with Nixon was to volunteer his services to Theodore Sorensen, former adviser and speechwriter to John F. Kennedy, who was working on Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign. In a letter to

Sorensen, Thompson described Nixon as ‘the Dorian Gray of our time, the twisted echo of Jay Gatsby’ (Thompson 2001, p. 50). It was a clear signal of intent from Thompson in relation to his determination to become actively involved in politics, particularly if that meant aiding in the prevention of a Nixon presidency. For Thompson the choice was obvious; he had already witnessed one Kennedy brother beat Nixon, and now he pinned his hopes on another. Yet the signs were ominous as to the direction America was about to take that year. Shortly after Thompson made contact with the Kennedy campaign, the American political landscape was rocked on April 4th by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee. One notable reaction that perhaps best summed up the mood amongst the more radical elements of the civil rights movement came from that of Oscar Zeta Acosta, a notorious Chicano lawyer who had befriended Thompson in Aspen the previous year. In a letter to Thompson he wrote ‘once upon a time I was a liberal, yesterday I was a militant, today I am a revolutionary, trying like hell not to become uptight’ (Acosta in Thompson 2001, p. 52). Acosta would come to have a lasting impact on Thompson, who would later immortalize him as Dr Gonzo, the 300-pound Samoan attorney to Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. A little over two months later, America was once again shocked to its core when Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, having just claimed victory in California’s Democratic presidential primary. Mirroring Acosta’s reaction to Martin Luther King’s death, Thompson was left reeling by the spectre of another dead Kennedy: ‘he always had this thing about the Kennedys. When Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, that probably drove a stake into his heart’ (Semonin in Wenner 2008, p. 99). However, it was what Thompson witnessed that August in Chicago, at the Democratic National Convention, that truly brought home the reality that America was at war with itself. It was ‘The Death of the American Dream’, and it was happening before his very eyes.

Thompson had been aware as early as January of 1968, that the Democratic National Convention could potentially be a flashpoint between the authorities and various anti-war and counterculture groups including the SDS, the Hippies and National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. In a letter to Bernard Shir-Cliff at Ballantine Books, Thompson revealed that Peter Collier at *Ramparts* had made him aware of what was being planned for the convention in Chicago that summer:

He suggested a serious, non-fantasy preview of the Demo convention, based on his ‘certain knowledge’ that all manner of hell is going to break loose in terms of critical protests, demonstrations. *Ramparts* has numerous connections with SDS and other radical types, and Collier says they’re going to freak out the convention. (Thompson 2001, p. 15)

Thompson had also previously stressed to Jim Silberman his need to get involved in the unfolding political drama as a means to find an angle of attack for their agreed book project: ‘I can’t sit out here in Woody Creek and ruminate on ‘The Death of the American Dream’” (Thompson 2001, p. 24). Once more, the primacy of first hand personal involvement in the story to Gonzo Journalism is apparent, with Thompson pinpointing Chicago as the perfect scenario for his journalistic instincts. Though Thompson expected trouble, there was no preparing him for what he witnessed in Chicago. The interim assassinations of both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jnr., the latter having led to widespread riots across America, supercharged the national tension and the stage was set for the explosive release of a decade of frustration and anger according to Todd Gitlin:

What exploded in Chicago that week was the product of pressures that had been building up for almost a decade: the exhaustion of liberalism, the marauding vengefulness of the authorities, the resolve and recklessness of the movement, the disintegration of the Democratic Party. But Chicago threw all the elements into chemical reaction, and redoubled the pressures; from that week on, potentialities became actual. The movement emerged committed to an impossible revolution; liberals barely emerged at all. Chicago confirmed that no centers were going to hold, no wisdom was going to prevail. It wiped out

any lingering doubt that the logic of the Sixties – of both the movement and the mainstream – was going to play itself out to a bitter end. (Gitlin 1993, p. 326)

Indeed, the scenes that Thompson witnessed in Chicago were precisely the kind of explosive result of two opposing sides who not only refused to back down or compromise, but in fact had become entrenched in their respective positions.

Having secured a press pass to cover the event, Thompson discovered that his credentials meant little when he tried to cross a police line, and was rewarded with a billy-club to the stomach for his efforts. By the time of his return to Woody Creek after surviving a week of running battles with the authorities, Thompson was nothing short of traumatized by the events in Chicago, according to Sandy Thompson: ‘I saw Hunter cry exactly twice in my life. One had to do with our dog, and the other was the night he got back from Chicago’ (Thompson S. in Wenner 2008, p. 100). In a letter to Jim Silberman, Thompson recounted some of the scenes he had witnessed at the event, before acknowledging that it had confirmed what he had been discussing all along in relation to ‘The Death of the American Dream’:

I witnessed at least ten beatings in Chicago that were worse than anything I ever saw the Hell’s Angels do; at one point I stood about 20 yards off, while four cops beat a photographer who was rolling around on the sidewalk screaming ‘Help, Help!’ . . . and all I could do was stand there, constantly watching around me to make sure I had running room if they came after me. A half hour later I was talking about what I’d seen in a bar when I suddenly started crying . . . the whole week was that way: fear and tension and super-charged emotions, sore legs from running, no sleep, and a sense of disaster pervading it all . . . Chicago was the reality I’ve been theorizing about for too long; the evidence exists now, I saw it, I was there . . . and I think I’ll have some pages fairly soon. (Thompson 2001, p. 119)

However, writing about Chicago proved to be more difficult for Thompson than he anticipated, with the events he witnessed ‘so unsettling that he created the alter ego “Raoul

Duke” to tell the story’ (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. 112). William McKeen makes the observation that ‘the Chicago experience was a turning point in his life, transforming him into a political radical and intensifying his hatred of authority’ (McKeen 2008, p. 125). For Thompson, Chicago was also a turning point for more than just himself, as he felt that it also represented the end of The Sixties itself, as he expressed in a letter to Selma Shapiro at Random House:

Right now I’m sorting my notes, reading press comments, and thinking about what it meant - not in the sense of an article on Chicago, but as the death of a whole era that began, for me, one night in 1960 when I was hitchhiking from Seattle to San Francisco and stopped somewhere in Oregon to watch the first Kennedy-Nixon debate in a country bar. A whole generation was driven mad in that interim; I doubt if we’ll ever recover. (Thompson 2001, p. 124)

This is fundamentally the concept that Thompson would explore in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, specifically how and why the idealism of the Sixties collapsed and died. It is important to recall Thompson’s essay on the hippies here, where he described them as ‘a noisy reminder of values gone sour’ (Thompson 2001, p. 25), recognising that the hippie dream crushed under Nixon amounted to more than just the end of an era. It also signified the end:

of a society conceived as a monument towards ‘human freedom’ and ‘individual rights,’ a nation in which all men are supposedly ‘created free and equal’ . . . a nation that any thinking hippy will insist has become a fear-oriented ‘warfare state’ that can no longer afford to tolerate even the minor aberrations that go along with ‘individual freedom’. (Thompson 2001, p. 25).

Thompson’s essay, ‘Chicago – Summer of ‘68’, is certainly noteworthy in terms of his decision to utilise Raoul Duke in a manner beyond that of just attributing quotes to his name, but what is often overlooked in his writing here is the way in which he incorporates the use of drugs into the narrative. Thompson had certainly written about drugs before,

both in *Hell's Angels*, and his article 'The "Hashbury" Is the Capital of the Hippies', yet in both instances, the writing is more journalistic and informative in nature, with Thompson serving as a cultural interpreter of sorts. Though marijuana had long been prohibited, LSD was only made illegal on October 6th, 1966. Thompson's Chicago essay however, marks his explicit embrace of the drug culture as a mark of defiance against the political establishment. The use of drugs is presented as a political identifier in terms of answering the question 'Which Side Are You On?' (Thompson 2001, p. 114):

And now, with this joint in front of my face, it was my turn . . . and I knew, when I saw the thing, that I was going to smoke it; I was going to smoke a goddamned lumpy little marijuana cigarette in front of the National Guard, the Chicago police and all three television networks – with an Associated Press photographer standing a few feet away. (Thompson 2001, p. 114)

A year earlier, in writing his article 'The "Hashbury" Is the Capital of the Hippies', Thompson wrote that 'to write from experience is an admission of felonious guilt . . . it is not very likely that the frank, documented truth about the psychedelic underworld, for good or ill, will be illuminated at any time soon in the public prints' (Thompson 2003b, p. 393). It is clear however, that what Thompson had witnessed in Chicago marked a change in direction in terms of how he chose to write about drugs, though to publicly acknowledge drug use carried with it considerable risk, as he had previously outlined in 'The "Hashbury" Is the Capital of the Hippies': 'in a nervous society where a man's image is frequently more important than his reality, the only people who can afford to advertise their drug menus are those with nothing to lose' (Thompson 2003b, p. 393). In the aftermath of Chicago however, the political landscape had changed, the battle lines had become more entrenched and as Thompson later explained, 'the whole definition of the drug culture was that we were in it together' (Thompson in Thompson, A. 2009, p. 146). Thompson recognised that the badge of criminality associated with drug use was now much more powerful as a political signifier,

one that both spoke to an entire generation and meshed perfectly with his fashioning of the Hunter Figure as a Righteous Outlaw.

What is also important about the way Thompson wrote about drugs in relation to his Chicago experience is the manner in which he utilised the hallucinatory effect of the drug experience as a narrative device that emphasised the social and political disintegration that he believed characterised ‘The Death of the American Dream’. In Chicago, it magnified the sense of paranoia, oppression and disorientation of the individual under attack from the establishment, in a sense verging on the hyperreality of Jean Baudrillard:

It was just about then that I got the first rush. THC, DMZ, OJT – the letters didn’t matter, I was stoned. Those bayonets suddenly looked nine feet tall and the trees above the park seemed to press down on us; the lights across the street grew brighter, and bluer, and they seemed to track me as I wandered off to see what was happening in the rest of the park. (Thompson 2001, p. 116)

This use of psychedelic imagery as a means of amplifying the paranoia and sense of impending doom of the characters’ reality, heavily foreshadows the same pervasive imagery throughout *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson’s narrative becomes increasingly concerned with the inability to distinguish between drug-induced hallucinations and reality, a technique that is reflective of the manner in which Thompson himself was increasingly blurring the line between author and subject in relation to the Hunter Figure: it becomes a hyperreal simulation. In his Chicago essay, Thompson is quick to acknowledge that his consumption of drugs immediately compromises his position as a reliable narrator, informing the reader that ‘it didn’t take me long to realise that I’d blown my keen eyed observer thing for that night, and that I should get the hell out of the park while I could still walk’ (Thompson 2001, p. 116). As Thompson retreats from the carnage on the streets, and seeks refuge at the Hilton bar, he is momentarily stopped at the entrance by ‘a 500-pound cop with blue fangs’ (Thompson 2001, p. 117), before realising that he

had arranged to meet Duke at midnight. His last observation before Duke's entrance is to note that 'only the plywood windows reminded those of us inside that the American Dream was clubbing itself to death just a few feet away' (Thompson 2001, p. 117).

Another aspect of this drug-induced disorientation that becomes a characteristic feature of Thompson's narrative style, particularly in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, is that of problems of communication and recognition between individuals. This is suggested here as Thompson finally introduces Duke into the story: 'Duke looked up, and for an instant I thought he didn't recognize me. Then he smiled: "Goddamn," he said. "It's about time"' (Thompson 2001, p. 117). Their meeting, however, is awkward, as Duke is accompanied by a woman named Susan, and it is clear the trio have a shared history. The tension leads to Duke's exclamation 'what the hell is wrong with us? Can't we talk like human beings?' (Thompson 2001, p. 118). What is interesting about Thompson's characterisation of Duke here is that he attempts to give him a back story, one that is taken directly from his earlier unpublished novel *The Rum Diary*, with Thompson linking the events at the end of that book to when he had last met Duke and Susan. In *The Rum Diary*, however, the trio are named Paul Kemp, Yeamon and Chenault, with Kemp and Yeamon being distinctly alternative *personae* of Thompson, while Chenault is based on Thompson's wife Sandy. It is clear that Thompson is still unsure as how best to utilise Duke, opting to use him as a distinct character in the story, in the same vein as *The Rum Diary*, as opposed to the manner in which he is later used in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, where Duke is the main character, narrator while also being credited as the author in its original publication in *Rolling Stone*.

What Thompson drew from his Chicago experience was invaluable however, in terms of focusing his development of the Raoul Duke incarnation of the Hunter Figure, strengthening his desire to transcend the New Journalism and building a cohesive thematic

platform that would form the basis of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. From the latter half of 1968 through to the end of 1969, Thompson continuously worked on refining these strands under the banner of his ‘Death of the American Dream’ project, utilising his now well-established practice of testing his thoughts and ideas through correspondence with an assortment of friends, colleagues and public figures. As early as October of 1968, three years before *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson proposes what could be considered the first draft outline of the book, in a letter to Hughes Rudd of CBS News:

I’ve decided to write the first Fictional Documentary Novel. To wit: ‘Hey Rube! The Memoirs of Raoul Duke . . . or a report on the rape and looting of the American Dream by a gang of Vicious Swine.’ My friend, Raoul, has agreed to provide details of his secret life. And I’ll provide the journalism . . . I’ve decided to use this election and its scenes – Chicago, L.A. on election day, the Inauguration, etc., as the loose framework for a book on how it was the year the lights went out. With ten years of quasi-biographical notes, courtesy of Raoul Duke. (Thompson 2001, pp. 140-141)

It is clear that, even in the earliest manifestation of the Raoul Duke *persona*, Thompson was already captivated, as he admitted as such in a letter to Jim Silberman in February of 1969 when he wrote ‘I find myself slipping more and more into the role of my pseudonymous [*sic*] foil, Raoul Duke, who no longer understands what his journalism is all about’ (Thompson 2001, p. 161). As Thompson tried to find the best method of utilising this *persona* in the context of his next book, he still found time to test it in other ways, one of which was in the form of a satirical letter to investigators of a U.S. Senate committee concerning gun control, in which Raoul Duke proposed ‘a violent solution to the gun problem’ (Thompson 2001, p. 149), in a manner that showcases the manic, iconoclastic subversion that would become synonymous with the character:

Listen you bastards have been lying about this gun control problem, it’s worse than you think and I want to warn you right now that if you don’t get [Tom] Dodd to pass a total

confiscation bill pretty damn quick, a lot of people are going to be killed. I know what I'm talking about mainly because I'm a karate black-belt and I'm about to kill some of these gun freaks that keep writing letters, I'll rip their goddamn heads off and don't think I'm kidding. (Thompson 2001, p. 148)

The most important sounding board for Thompson throughout this period however, is undoubtedly Jim Silberman, with Douglas Brinkley noting that much 'to Thompson's great relief, Silberman liked his idea of using Raoul Duke's wild escapades as a fictional thread tying together "The Death of the American Dream"' (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. 163). It is also notable that Thompson, once again, opted for a *persona* as the best method of delivering his work, as was the case with his most important writing. Long before Warren Hinckle at *Scanlan's Monthly*, and Jann Wenner at *Rolling Stone*, provided Thompson with the editorial freedom to fully realise his vision, Silberman provided Thompson with crucial supportive direction, as he nourished Gonzo in its infancy. Indeed, it was in a letter to Silberman in which Thompson first detailed the methodology behind his creation of Duke, the details of which point the way towards the dynamic at the heart of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in terms of the relational interplay between Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo.

You have focused on my root problem in the new book - combining controlled (and formal) journalism with the jangled reality of my day to day thing. That was my original reason for bringing in Raoul Duke – to let me sit back and play reasonable, while he freaks out. Or maybe those roles should be reversed . . . ? (Thompson 2001, p. 164)

What is also notable here is that what is driving Thompson in terms of exploring new modes of writing is the notion of character, and how he can best utilise it, with Thompson acknowledging that controlled and formal journalism in this context presented a problem. As he embraces the Hunter Figure as the central narrative driving force, it was inevitable that this would be to the detriment of his adherence to the journalism of the past. The only way forward was to create an entirely new form of journalism.

Though *Hell's Angels* was seen as part of the New Journalism movement, and though Thompson respected its adherents, he was never quite a proponent of New Journalism in the same vein as the likes of Tom Wolfe. Indeed, Thompson even questioned the validity of the term itself, as illustrated in his letter to the *Chicago Journalism Review*:

. . . mine on the Angels, I suppose, was part of what is called the 'New Journalism' of the '60s. But the whole concept of a 'new journalism' is bogus – unless we admit that honesty in a journalist is something new. The old, Hearst-style journalists had a privileged relationship with power – and they paid for that privilege by keeping a lot of warts and chancres off the public record . . . So the 'new journalism' is nothing more than a repudiation of the whole concept of privileged communication between newsmen and their sources. (Thompson 2001, p. 218)

Transcending New Journalism was not an easy transition for Thompson however; while he found himself ever more engrossed in the new style on which he had been working, it was not a direction that initially appealed to editors. One such assignment that suffered was his profile of professional skier Jean-Claude Killy for *Playboy*. Having spent considerable time on the piece, Thompson was angered when *Playboy* rejected it, though he acknowledged to Jim Silberman that the reason lay squarely with the new style he had been focused on ever since *Hell's Angels*:

The Killy piece suffers from the same kind of affliction – a maddening compulsion to do all my thinking in print. I'm as aware of this problem as you are, but it continues to plague me, and cripple my articles, which would certainly be a hell of a lot more saleable if I could keep the focus on people, words and action – rather than the internal dialogues of HST. (Thompson 2001, p. 196)

Yet the Killy article is important for two reasons: the first being that the rejection of the article by *Playboy* highlighted the importance to Thompson of finding the right editor and platform, and coincidentally it is this rejection that pushed him into the arms of the very

editor and publication that he needed: Warren Hinckle and *Scanlan's Monthly*. Secondly, William McKeen identifies the Killy article as a template for Thompson's new approach:

'The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy' was probably the first piece in which Hunter displayed all of the basic elements of what would define his style at the centre of the story; the concern with getting the story as the centerpiece of the narrative; the use of wild flights of fancy (some announced, others spontaneous); and the use of a companion. (McKeen 2008, p. 137)

However, it is also significant that despite the Killy piece displaying the essential Gonzo qualities as listed above, it was not heralded as Thompson's Gonzo breakthrough, which would come with his article 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved'. The reason for this is clear: Jean Claude Killy was a thoroughly hollow figure, with William McKeen acutely observing that 'a straightforward piece on Killy would have been excruciatingly dull . . . What Hunter did was make himself the centerpiece of the story and write about his difficulty in developing a story from a boring character' (McKeen 2008, p. 135). Killy was the very antithesis of the Hunter Figure, a classic insider who used his fame to become a celebrity salesman, firmly embedded within the establishment power structure. For Thompson's Derby article however, the driving force for the entire article was the Hunter Figure; it is the story of the exiled Outsider returning to wreak havoc on the place of his birth, skewing the very establishment structure that Killy had embraced.

There is an interesting parallel here between Thompson and Kurt Vonnegut Jr, as the decade came to a close in terms of the respective developments in their writing, as each sought to forge new pathways and techniques in an attempt to redefine the boundaries of genre, or indeed to create them anew. What is particularly interesting here is not just Vonnegut's genre experimentation, akin to Thompson's move from the New Journalism to Gonzo, but also the fact that he incorporated the autobiographical as a major component of

his new writing. As Malcolm Bradbury observes, Vonnegut's seminal offering *Slaughterhouse-Five* illustrates this to great effect:

By the decade's end, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), he made his theme even more explicit, mixing two genres – science fiction and autobiographical reportage - to relate the world of modern horror, exemplified by the fire-bombing of Dresden by the Allied forces in 1945, with the imaginary life of his distant planet Tralfamadore, from where human life could be observed as absurd. (Bradbury 1994, p. 200)

Indeed, in writing of Vonnegut's own experimentation with the New Journalism, Jerome Klinkowitz also makes the observation that, amongst the practitioners of the genre, from Wolfe to Didion, the one writer who shared the closest connection to Vonnegut in terms of technique was Thompson:

Of all these writers, Vonnegut employed a new method that shared the most with Thompson's, for, in addition to the tools of fiction both writers used their own reactions as an important substance of the story. This was personal journalism in spades. (Klinkowitz 2009, p. 52)

The connection between Thompson and Vonnegut does not stop there however, with the parallel extending to that which Klinkowitz identifies as the single most important step that Vonnegut took as a writer:

Analytically it shows Vonnegut undertaking the major development in his writing that would bring him both literary success and great public fame. That, quite simply, consisted in the incorporation of himself as an integral part of his writing - making himself present as its author and furthermore making that act of authorship a key part of the narrative itself. Historically this development parallels a heating up of the American 1960s themselves. In this latter case the writing may not have changed (from its personalized method of 1964), but the country certainly did. By the decade's end America was ready for the way Kurt Vonnegut wrote, just as he himself was now prepared to present himself to these challenging new times. (Klinkowitz 2009, p. 53)

What is particularly interesting here is that while Vonnegut's decision to place himself at the forefront of the narrative is identified as the key to his literary and public fame, Thompson, in contrast, is recognised more for his creation of Gonzo Journalism, which is similarly singled out as his great literary achievement. However, as a result of this, Thompson's creation of the Hunter Figure does not receive its deserved recognition, leading to a fundamental misunderstanding, not just of Thompson's literary prowess, but also of Gonzo Journalism itself, and of Thompson's literary legacy. However, in considering the role of the Hunter Figure in terms of Thompson's Gonzo breakthrough, it becomes clear that it is the Hunter Figure which is in fact Thompson's great literary achievement, and furthermore, that it is the fulcrum around which Gonzo Journalism operates. Without the Hunter Figure, Gonzo Journalism loses its purchase.

The fundamental importance of Thompson placing of the Hunter Figure at the heart of the narrative style he was trying to create begins to take shape at the beginning of 1970, wherein he once more attempts to grapple with the conceptual approach needed in order to write his *Death of the American Dream* book. In a letter to Jim Silberman, Thompson outlines what essentially is the blueprint for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and how best to utilise the Hunter Figure. At this stage however, Thompson is still treating Raoul Duke as a stand-alone protagonist, distinct from his own character, with the fictional narrative taking precedence over straight journalism:

I could focus almost entirely on the fictional narrative aspect of the book & downgrade the journalism to the level of background - using scenes like Chicago and Nixon's Inauguration as a framework for the trials and tribulations of my protagonist, Raoul Duke. This is the approach I like best, but it's also the one that's least realized at this point. I haven't been able, so far, to make Duke a human being; he hasn't come to life – not even for me. (Thompson 2001, p. 266)

As an alternative to the approach suggested above, Thompson proposes another perspective wherein he becomes the central focus of the story, not Duke, with the narrative balance tipped more in favour of journalism over fiction:

This one is tricky; it's the idea of emphasizing *my own involvement* with these various scenes to the extent that I become the protagonist – somewhat in the style of Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*. The problem here is one of perspective and control: My ego comes through very heavy, even when I try to write the straightest kind of journalism. (Thompson 2001, p. 266)

As Thompson continues to discuss the merits of the different approaches, he comes ever closer to his breakthrough, recognising in particular the advantages of using Raoul Duke as a means to insert 'factional' elements into an otherwise straight piece of journalism:

There's the Raoul Duke approach, which is essentially a very contemporary novel with straight, factual journalism as a background. I don't know any precedents to cite for this one . . . which is probably why I like it best. If it works it could be a very heavy, major book . . . The Raoul Duke gimmick . . . gives me far more leeway to improvise on reality, without distorting it, than I'd have without Duke. He can play the lead role in scenes I couldn't even use otherwise, because in the context of non-fiction I couldn't 'prove' them. Duke is only semi-fictional, but just hazy enough so I can let him say and do things that wouldn't work in first person. (Thompson 2001, pp. 267-268)

It is also notable that Thompson once again draws upon Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in relation to 'The Death of the American Dream', and now sees how Duke can be used to illustrate that theme. Thompson, of course, had long been drawn to Fitzgerald and Gatsby, seeing his reflection in both the author and character:

Once I bring him in, I have to keep him there, even when I don't need him. And I have to make him real. The original idea was to use Duke, like Gatsby, to illustrate that Death of the American Dream theme - but that's a horror when you start with the theme and work back to the character. It *may* work the other way, but I can't be sure until I see the character . . . and so far his symbolic value keeps queering his reality. On the other hand, his value

as a sort of ‘cover’ & safety valve solves many of the problems I have with the straight journalistic approach, I can insist that everything he says and does is true, but I can also refuse to identify him for obvious legal reasons. (Thompson 2001, p. 268)

Nevertheless, Thompson has yet to make the mental leap required that would solve the issues pertaining to his use of Raoul Duke as a character, alongside that of his own involvement in the narrative as outlined above. He is also still trying to define these roles in terms fitting into a framework that is either fictional or straight journalism. That breakthrough would come with ‘The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved’.

Unlike the long-gestating Death of the American Dream project, Thompson’s Derby article rapidly progressed from its inception. The idea for the article itself came from novelist Jim Salter, who suggested to Thompson at a dinner party in Aspen that he cover the upcoming Kentucky Derby in Louisville. After a late-night call to Warren Hinckle at *Scanlan’s Monthly*, who was immediately supportive of the idea, Thompson set off for his hometown to cover the event. Before his departure however, the first signs emerged to suggest that the ensuing article would be somewhat different from what had gone before, with Thompson requesting that he be accompanied by an illustrator rather than a photographer. According to Douglas Brinkley, ‘his first choice for illustrator was *The Denver Post’s* Pat Oliphant, who had won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning, but Oliphant couldn’t make the trip – luckily for Ralph Steadman and the future of Gonzo journalism’ (Brinkley in Thompson 2001, p. 292). Steadman, incidentally, had just arrived in America in April of 1970, looking to find work having made a name for himself in England contributing warped and grotesque caricatures to the political satire magazine *Private Eye*. In his memoir, *The Joke’s Over*, Steadman reveals that the same week he had left for America, the managing editor of *Scanlan’s Monthly*, Donald Goddard, had picked up a collection of his cartoons called *Still Life with Raspberry*. When it came to finding an

alternative to Oliphant, it was the weird artwork of the Welsh artist that appeared to best suit Thompson's needs, as explained to Steadman by *Scanlan's Monthly's* Art Director J.C. Soares in his pitch:

'Anyways, how'd ya like to go to de Kentucky Duurby wid an ex-Hell's Angel who just shaved his head, huh? And cover de race. His name is Hunter Thompson . . . He wants an artist to nail the decadent, depraved faces of the local establishment who meet there every year fer de Duurby. But he doesn't want a photographer. He wants sometink weird and we've seen yer work, man!' (Steadman 2006, p. 8)

Before Steadman left for Louisville, however, there was one final hurdle to overcome. He had lost his art supplies in New York and desperately needed replacements, the solution to which came in the most unexpected form of cosmetics samples courtesy of the wife of Donald Goddard: 'miraculously, Natalie had dozens of samples of Revlon lipstick and make-up preparations which solved the problem at a stroke. They were the ultimate in assimilated flesh colour and, bizarrely, those Revlon samples were the birth of Gonzo art' (Steadman 2006, p. 9).

However, it was Thompson's correspondence prior to his departure for Louisville that best reveals his intentions concerning his return to the place of his birth. In a letter to *Scanlan's Monthly's* editor Warren Hinckle, he outlined what he envisaged as being the true focal point of the upcoming event, 'the story, as I see it, is mainly in the vicious drunk Southern bourbon horse-shit mentality that surrounds the Derby than in the Derby itself. And – as a human product of that culture/mentality – I think I can see it pretty clear' (Thompson 2001, p. 293). Unlike the Killy piece, this was more than just an assignment; this was deeply personal for Thompson, who signed off on his letter to Hinckle with something of an ominous declaration 'I have to get some sleep before rushing off to confront my festered childhood. God's mercy on us all' (Thompson 2001, p. 294). This was Billy the Kid of Louisville returned home, but rather than seeking redemption like the

prodigal son, instead, he was on a mission to dole out his own inimitable form of justice for the wrongs of the past.

Ralph Steadman proved to be a more than willing companion for Thompson in this regard, with his grotesque caricatures serving as the perfect accompaniment to the visceral venom of Thompson's prose. In comparison to Bill Cardoso's role in the Killy piece, Steadman also made for a more effective sidekick in the narrative, with his sense of culture-shock in response to his surroundings at the Kentucky Derby feeding into the narrative and Thompson's observations: 'his awkward sensitivity made me see once again, some of the rot in this country that I've been living with for so long that I could only see it, now, through somebody else's fresh eye' (Thompson 2001, p. 304). This was not the only aspect of Steadman's presence at the Derby that appealed to Thompson however, with the central thrust behind Steadman's illustrations marrying with his own sense of the power of visual representation in conveying a certain image or message. Thompson's admiration for Steadman's work was not instantaneous though; at first the artist's darkly humorous renderings of the attendees at the Derby alarmed Thompson before he recognised the merit captured within:

At one point early on, he said, 'I wish you would stop doing that.' 'What's that?' I asked. 'That filthy habit you have of making little scribbles of people,' he said . . . At some point during that week, though, Hunter began to like my filthy habit of drawing and would say 'Draw that one, Ralph. Draw that, over there.' He liked the idea because he thought it was a way of saying something about a person that he couldn't say in words. (Steadman in Wenner 2008, p. 122)

Thus began, at the Kentucky Derby, the formation of *Gonzo: The Art*. In Steadman, Thompson had found his kindred spirit artistically, and certainly in terms of their respective subjective approach, and in the degree to which they were prepared to involve themselves in the story:

Photographers generally get in the way of stories. Steadman has a way of becoming part of the story. And I like to see things through his eyes. He gives me a perspective that I wouldn't normally have because he's shocked at things I tend to take for granted. Photographers just run around sucking up anything they can focus on and don't talk much about what they're doing. Photographers don't participate in the story. They all react, but very few of them think. Steadman thinks more like a writer; I can communicate with him. He comes to grips with a story sort of the same way I do . . . (Thompson 2003, p. 117)

Steadman also shared Thompson's underlying moral sensibilities, imbued with the same paranoid tendencies and iconoclastic vision. In many ways, Steadman and Thompson were artistic mirror images: one chose to illustrate his subject matter with words; the other with images. Crucially for Thompson, Steadman's view of America very much aligned with the overarching thematic vision of his ongoing Death of the American Dream project:

There's a kind of wild theme in his drawings: decadence, corruption, immorality . . . Obscenity in its broadest sense is another hallmark of the things that shock him. I think he sees . . . all of America as obscene, or at least a mockery of what it should be – the way it claims to be, from his point of view. He probably thinks it was doomed from the start. He has the King George III notion of America. (Thompson 2003b, p. 119)

This shared artistic vision between Thompson and Steadman also extends to their mutual penchant for 'edge work'; that is the process by which their best work is produced under conditions wherein they are exposed or subjected to situations or experiences that push the body or mind to their very limits, resulting in a cathartic release that facilitated their best artistic instincts. It was a technique that Thompson had clearly recognised as that which brought out the best in Steadman from an artistic point of view: 'He works best when you put him in situation where he's bordering on flipping out, but not quite, you know – where he can still function' (Thompson 2003b, p. 119).

In this regard, the Kentucky Derby pushed both Thompson and Steadman to the very edge of their respective limits, physically, emotionally and, in turn, creatively. The

duo ran riot at Churchill Downs, fuelled by their overindulgence in whiskey. Alcohol was always central to the Kentucky Derby, with the event's signature cocktail being the Mint Julep. In reflecting upon the experience, Steadman confessed that by its end he was 'totally finished . . . wrecked without rhyme or reason' (Steadman in Ewing 2004). Thompson however, fared even worse, denouncing the entire affair as an unmitigated disaster:

The whole scene nearly killed me, along with the British illustrator on his first trip to the U.S It's a shitty article, a classic of irresponsible journalism – but to get it done at all I had to be locked in a NY hotel room for 3 days with copyboys collecting each sheet out of the typewriter, as I wrote it, whipping it off on the telecopier to San Francisco where the printer was standing by on overtime. Horrible way to write anything. (Thompson 2001, p. 295)

According to William McKeen, an amphetamine-fuelled Thompson became increasingly desperate as his deadline approached, and thus the birth of Gonzo Journalism became inextricably linked to a deadline-imposed sense of crisis that necessitates unconventional narrative structures and stylistic devices:

Eventually, Hunter decided that chronology was his friend, and he pulled together a fairly coherent narrative. It was only *fairly* coherent because, under deadline pressure, Hunter broke from the narrative and started sending the editors scrawled pages ripped from his journal: half-formed thoughts, sketches, semilucid notes. (McKeen 2008, p. 148)

Crisis, be it real or imagined, proved to be one of the defining features of Thompson's work, both in terms of his process in crafting a narrative, and also as a narrative structure itself, once more illustrating the self-reflective nature of Gonzo Journalism and Thompson's use of metajournalism as a literary device. Indeed, as early as 1956, when Thompson was stationed at Eglin Air Force Base and was working as Sports Editor of the *Command Courier*, he utilised the same technique in regaling his misadventures to his friends, and detailing the crisis of his failure to cover a story courtesy

of his acts of self-sabotage, thereby allowing Thompson himself to take centre-stage wherein the assigned story becomes secondary to his own disastrous attempt at covering it. Once he had established the narrative blueprint, he regularly returned to it in his writing. In this sense, his Kentucky Derby piece is less the accidental breakthrough brought about through his failure to deliver on deadline a coherent straight piece of journalism, but rather a synthesis of a smorgasbord of Gonzo elements with which Thompson had been experimenting since the very beginning of his career. The deadline-imposed crisis merely served as the necessary imperative that forced Thompson to break with the traditional structures in favour of his long-simmering Gonzo instincts.

Ironically, as we have seen, these very instincts had first emerged in the face of another possible journalistic failure, following Thompson's discharge from the Air Force in the late nineteen fifties, when his attempt at breaking into journalism seemed to be over before it had begun, with Thompson securing only a brief stint at *Time* as a copyboy and subsequently getting dismissed from his position at the *Middletown Daily Record*. Whilst working at *Time*, he had first mused upon Spengler's differentiation between men who impose themselves on reality through action versus those who do so through thought. Identifying with the former and pursuing it to its limit, ultimately facilitated the development of the subjective narrative styling of Gonzo Journalism in which the Hunter Figure becomes the central pivot around which Thompson builds his narrative. Thompson also first spoke of the Hunter Figure in his correspondence from this very period, following his dismissal from the *Middleton Daily Record*, writing in a letter to a former girlfriend that the Hunter Figure had come to a fork in the road. Once confronted with the plight of failure at the hands of journalism, be it in New York of the late fifties, or at the Kentucky Derby of 1970, the answer in both cases to his dilemma proved to be his penchant for creative autobiography in which his own life and *persona* became the focus of his story, with

Thompson utilising the opportunity to address and rectify issues from his own life. In New York, he called his story *Prince Jellyfish*, and in Wilburn Kemp he crafted the prototype Hunter Figure, with his own life in Louisville and later experiences in New York heavily influencing the story.

At the Kentucky Derby of 1970, Thompson likewise had sought to address the ghosts of his past, as he had so clearly signalled from the onset of his assignment, writing in a letter to Pat Oliphant that he intended ‘to whip the shit out of everything I was raised and brought up to hold dear’ (Thompson 2001, pp. 294-295). Writing in his autobiography *The Joke’s Over*, Ralph Steadman acknowledged that the Kentucky Derby was merely a convenient excuse for Thompson to revisit his hometown:

The Kentucky Derby alone was certainly no reason to be here. It had been written about annually by armies of reporters since it had begun, but to find himself back on home ground with only a record of disillusionment in his soul, no prospects and an unfulfilled wish to have snuffed it at thirty, there had to be something else . . . This was no ordinary homecoming. This was a do or die attempt to lay the ghosts of years of rejection from the horse-rearing elite and the literati who sat in those privileged boxes overlooking the track and the unprivileged craven hordes who grovelled around the centre-field where he had suffered as a boy. (Steadman 2006, p. 22)

In a way it is fitting that his breakthrough-realisation of his fictive selfhood would spring forth from the same dark and bloody ground of his birthplace, a poetic circularity of genesis that highlights the importance of the relationship between self and place. The Hunter Figure was ultimately borne out of Thompson’s rejection by the Kentucky establishment, and yet it is in Kentucky where he places his fictive self to the forefront, launching the ascendancy of his literary legend and marking the beginning of his second act: the concatenation between his life and work which had been gestating since he left Louisville ten years previously. Rather than letting his past define him, Thompson opted to use it to redefine

himself, and unlike the titular hero of his favourite novel, *The Great Gatsby*, he chose not to obscure his criminal past but rather wholeheartedly embraced it as a badge of honour, as The Hunter Figure becomes a righteous outlaw.

Thompson however, is not merely reaching back into what he termed his ‘muscle memory’ (Thompson, A. 2007 p. 3) of Gonzo literary devices in writing his Derby piece; he is simultaneously looking forward in terms of the introduction of what would become identifying stylistic devices pertaining to his characterisation of the Hunter Figure that illustrate the symbiotic nature of the development of his literary *persona* with that of his Gonzo narrative, positioning the article as a bridge point to his seminal Gonzo Classic *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This is evident from the very onset of the story, in that Thompson distances the Hunter Figure from the local culture in a manner that simultaneously establishes both his Outsider credentials, and also sets up a connection with the reader as a fellow conspirator, as he cruelly toys with the atypical burghers to be found in Louisville. The first of these is a character named Jimbo that Thompson encounters in the airport terminal lounge and whose suspicions are immediately alerted by his choice of beverage:

I ordered a Margarita with ice, but he wouldn’t hear of it: ‘Naw, naw . . . what the hell kind of drink is that for Kentucky Derby time? What’s wrong with you boy?’ . . . ‘I know this Derby crowd, I come here every year, and let me tell you one thing I’ve learned – this is no town to be giving people the impression you’re some kind of faggot. Not in public, anyway. Shit, they’ll roll you in a minute, knock you in the head and take every goddamn cent you have.’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 39)

Posing as a photographer for *Playboy* however, it is Thompson who figuratively rolls the unwitting Jimbo by warning him that he is there to cover an expected riot at the Derby:

‘Well . . . maybe I shouldn’t be telling you . . . ‘I shrugged. ‘But hell, everybody else seems to know. The cops and the National Guard have been getting ready for six weeks. They

have 20,000 troops on alert at Fort Knox. They've warned us – all the press and photographers – to wear helmets and special vests like flak jackets. We were told to expect shooting . . . ' . . . He sat for a moment, looking hurt and confused and not quite able to digest all this terrible news. The he cried out: 'Oh . . . Jesus! What in the name of God is happening in this country? Where can you get *away* from it?' (Thompson 2003b, p. 40)

It was a classic example of Thompson's propensity for crafting elaborate pranks on unsuspecting bystanders that ironically harkened back to his youth in Louisville, and his reputation for instigating stunts involving new pledges at the Castlewood Athletic Club.

It also foreshadows the antics of Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, when they convince a District Attorney from Georgia that Satan-worshippers in Malibu had decapitated a McDonald's waitress in a parking lot – his reaction echoes that of Jimbo at the Kentucky Derby – “Jesus God almighty,” said the southerner. “What the hell's goin' on in this country?” (Thompson 2005, p. 145). As William McKeen observes, the Derby encounter has all the hallmarks of springing from Thompson's imagination, rather than being an actual conversation he had at the time:

The airport-lounge scene seems too perfect, too good an introduction to have simply occurred. It's one of those scenes that made Hunter's warier readers wonder about the ratio of fact to fiction in his reporting. Hunter always believed in William Faulkner's maxim that facts and truth didn't always have much to do with each other. (McKeen 2008, p. 146)

Indeed, it is also reminiscent of Thompson's story of the English man hitting golf balls from the hotel balcony in Columbia, that likewise made his then editor Clifford Ridley question the validity of his stories. What is particularly notable about Thompson's encounter with Jimbo however, is that he not only utilises the situation to juxtapose the Hunter Figure against the archetypal southerner, but he also mocks the Southerner's inherent prejudices and adherence to maintaining the symbolic order through his paranoiac reaction to Thompson's raising of the threat of an attack on the Kentucky Derby by

outsiders, be these outsiders Black Panthers or otherwise. As Jimbo laments a non-existent threat to a sacred institution with a proud history, Thompson utilises the opportunity to present the real headlines courtesy Louisville's *Courier-Journal*, noting the expanding war in Vietnam and the deployment of 4,000 U.S. troops at Yale over fears of a Black Panther protest, before ominously finishing with the observation that 'there was no mention of any trouble brewing at a university in Ohio called Kent State' (Thompson 2003b, p. 36). In many ways, the character of Jimbo is the perfect embodiment of the 'vicious drunk Southern bourbon horse-shit mentality' (Thompson 2003b, p. 35) surrounding the Derby, that Thompson had first identified to Warren Hinckle as being the real story of the event, rather than the actual race itself:

Anybody who wanders around the world saying, 'Hell yes, I'm from Texas,' deserves whatever happens to him. And he had, after all, come here once again to make a nineteenth-century ass of himself in the midst of some jaded, atavistic freakout with nothing to recommend it except a very saleable 'tradition.' (Thompson 2003b, p. 38)

Jimbo's portrayal here is unapologetic; he represents everything The Hunter Figure stands against and is the perfect foil to quickly establish the Hunter Figure's anti-hero credentials from the very onset of the story, whilst simultaneously setting up the narrative tone and direction for the remainder of the story.

Thompson's Gonzo instincts are in full flight as the narrative progresses, as he describes his attempts to secure press credentials, and relays his fears as to how Ralph Steadman would cope with the inevitable culture shock that he would experience over the course of the weekend. It is here that Thompson's narrative qualifies as metajournalism, something with which he had experimented in his letter-writing as early as his forays in South America, and which compliments the subjective prominence of the Hunter Figure. As William McKeen observes, this focus pushed the actual race itself into the background

of the overall story: ‘the Derby ended up playing a minor, almost off-camera role in the story. In fact, Hunter wound up writing the story not only about trying to write the story but also about trying to guide Ralph’s illustrations’ (McKeen 2008, p. 147). In guiding Steadman, Thompson turned their assignment into a quest to find the symbolic face of the Kentucky Derby:

He had done a few sketches, but so far we hadn’t seen that special kind of face that I felt we would need for the lead drawing. It was a face I’d seen a thousand times at every Derby I’d ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry – a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture. (Thompson 2003b, p. 31)

What follows amounts to a blueprint for Gonzo Journalism: what started as a seemingly conventional story to cover the Kentucky Derby that in turn became a metajournalistic narrative, finally takes its final twist into a full blown Gonzo misadventure piece that bears all the hallmarks of what Jerome Klinkowitz identifies as SuperFiction.

As Thompson and Steadman’s weekend descends into a ‘vicious, drunken nightmare’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 33), the narrative becomes increasingly disjointed in what essentially is a subjective Gonzo stream-of-consciousness record of events:

But now, looking at the big red notebook I carried all through the scene, I see more or less what happened. The book itself is somewhat mangled and bent. Some of the pages are torn, others are shrivelled and stained by what appears to be whiskey, but taken as a whole, with sporadic memory flashes, the notes seem to tell the story. (Thompson 2003b, p. 33)

It is this segment of the narrative that reflects Thompson’s decision to tear pages from his notebook and send them direct to the printer in order to meet his deadline; yet in doing so he inadvertently found his own unique voice, which was actually attempting to write in the same way as he spoke, according to Bob Bone. Thus, free from the constraints of convention, the unrestrained voice of the Hunter Figure emerges in a manner that sets a

precedent for Thompson's later theoretical conceptualisation of Gonzo Journalism, and the primacy he places not just on preserving the subjective, first-hand experience of the story, but also on maintaining the integrity of that primary experience straight through to publication:

My idea was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication – without editing. That way, I felt, the eye & mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera. The writing would be selective & necessarily interpretive – but once the image was written, the words would be final; in the same way that a Cartier-Bresson photograph is always (he says) the fill-frame negative. No alterations in the darkroom, no cutting or cropping, no spotting . . . no editing. (Thompson 2003b, p. 88)

What emerges as a result of Thompson's decision is a chaotic portrait of the weekend, in which Thompson's paranoiac flights of fantasy fuse brilliantly with Steadman's viciously grotesque visual renditions of various figures that had crossed their path. The supercharged prose veers between skewering the local establishment and exposing the ugly hypocrisy of Middle America, whilst simultaneously serving to build the Hunter Figure's iconoclastic outlaw legend. Perhaps one of the most notable departures from Thompson's previous efforts is the manner in which he utilises his own participation in the story, taking a much more active role over that of his previous observer journalist position. It is this differentiation that distinguishes the Hunter Figure outlaw avatar as a new and distinct fictive *persona*. As Paul Semonin previously observed of Thompson's character in San Juan, this role worked on the basis of an ongoing active paranoia: 'he creates the drama and escalates everything to a point that's far beyond the realm of reality. It goes back into that impulse he had for street theatre' (Semonin in McKeen 2008, pp. 57-58).

Added to this was also an implicit sense of violence, both in terms of the character's behaviour, and also in relation to the language employed throughout the unfolding story.

Indeed, this element of Thompson's psychological make-up had long been evident, as Bob Bone had observed of Thompson during his time in South America, but at the Kentucky Derby, the Hunter Figure, in conjunction with the underlying desire for revenge that motivated Thompson in writing the article, brought to the forefront his propensity for utilising violence as a means to shock the reader; his methods of achieving this ranged from his exaggerated rhetoric to the actions of the characters themselves, as evidenced in Thompson's threats of using a can of Mace on a variety of targets, and in his eventual use of the chemical on the patrons of a restaurant. The ensuing result builds to a crescendo of violent imagery and language, fuelled by the Hunter Figure's paranoia, alienation and disgust at the culture of the Derby, before his eventual confrontation with his own identity as a product of that culture.

The final article as it was published was unlike anything previously produced by Thompson or his contemporaries. His immediate reaction was that his career was over; he considered the piece to be an unmitigated disaster. In the article itself, Thompson had utilised a phrase that both captured the essence of the entire weekend along with his reaction upon submitting the piece to *Scanlan's Monthly*, namely 'Fear and Loathing'. Little did he realise at the time that he had hit upon what would become his signature catchphrase, the origins of which Douglas Brinkley clarified:

Hunter used to claim that the phrase 'Fear and Loathing' was a derivative of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling. In actuality he lifted it from Thomas Wolfe's *The Web and the Rock*. He had read the novel when he lived in New York. He used to mark up pages of favourite books, underlining phrases that impressed him. On page sixty-two of *The Web and the Rock* he found 'Fear and Loathing' and made it his. (Brinkley in Wenner 2008, p. 128)

Thompson's fears concerning the article were unfounded however; in fact, the reaction was the complete opposite, and the piece was hailed by critics and contemporaries alike as a sensational journalistic and literary achievement. One reaction, in particular, from Bill

Cardoso, is notable for the term that he bestowed upon this new style of journalism – ‘Gonzo’. Thompson immediately seized upon the word, but as revealed by Douglas Brinkley, it was one that he had been familiar with all along:

The legendary New Orleans R&B piano player James Booker recorded an instrumental song called ‘Gonzo’ in 1960. The term ‘gonzo’ was Cajun slang that had floated around the French Quarter jazz scene for decades and meant, roughly, ‘to play unhinged’ . . . Booker’s ‘Gonzo’ was Hunter’s favourite song. When Nixon ran for president in 1968, Hunter had an assignment to cover him for *Pageant* and found himself holed up in a New Hampshire motel with a columnist from the *Boston Globe Magazine* named Bill Cardoso. Hunter had brought a cassette of Booker’s music and played ‘Gonzo’ over and over, and over – it drove Cardoso crazy, and that night, Cardoso jokingly derided Hunter as ‘the ‘Gonzo’ man.’ Later, when Hunter sent Cardoso his Kentucky Derby piece, he got a note back saying something like, ‘Hunter, that was pure Gonzo journalism.’ (Brinkley in Wenner 2008, p. 126)

Nevertheless, Gonzo perfectly captured the spirit and narrative style that encapsulated ‘The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved’: its original jazz meaning: ‘to play unhinged’, essentially underscored what Gonzo Journalism was all about. What had first appeared to Thompson as a career-ending move, had in fact turned out to be the watershed moment of his career: he had found his voice, his trademark phrase, a name for his new literary direction and debuted the Hunter Figure as the central protagonist of the story to resounding critical success.

In the immediate aftermath of the critical success of ‘The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved’, Hunter S. Thompson found himself immersed in a growing political campaign in Aspen, Colorado that would result in both his newfound Gonzo aesthetic and the Hunter Figure growing from their literary origins, and merging with the political sphere as an integral part of Thompson’s campaign. This campaign would rock the political establishment in such a manner that the small local election garnered both national and international attention. In a literary sense, the impact upon Thompson’s

development of both the Hunter Figure and Gonzo that developed from this event cannot be overlooked, for it marked an important transitional phase wherein Gonzo transcended journalism to become a hybrid entity that also incorporated politics, philosophy, literature, art and activism. The central figure in all of these endeavours was Thompson himself in the form of the Hunter Figure, with his campaign for sheriff playing an integral role in his continued mythmaking of the outlaw *persona*. In taking these various strands and combining them together, not just in a literary sense, but also in the public realm, Thompson took the self-reflexive exchange between life and art to new heights, culminating in the postmodern masterpiece *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which positioned him as a unique SuperFictionist in American Literature.

The roots of Thompson's campaign for sheriff on the Freak Power ticket stretch back as far as the fallout from the 1968 Democratic National Convention, and Thompson's horror at what he had witnessed on the streets on Chicago. As he had confessed in the direct aftermath: 'I went to the Democratic Convention as a journalist and returned a cold-blooded revolutionary' (Thompson 2003, p. 65). At the time, Thompson was still ruminating as to the best way to tackle the seemingly mammoth 'Death of the American Dream' book project that he had agreed to write for Random House. What Thompson needed was an event or spectacle in which he could participate, and subsequently use as a platform to explore the 'Death of the American Dream'. Venting his frustrations to Jim Silberman at Random House he wrote 'Faulkner had it right when he talked about seeing 'the world in a grain of sand' – which is the absolute opposite of what I seem to be doing' (Thompson 2001, p. 205). However, shortly thereafter, Thompson found what Faulkner had spoken of in the form of the local election for Mayor of Aspen, Colorado. Coming on the heels of a high-profile lawsuit against the Aspen police for their crackdown on hippies, Thompson recognised a golden opportunity to further challenge the establishment, by

involving himself in politics at a local level, whilst simultaneously advancing his book project. Representing the hippies was a 29 year old lawyer and motorcycle enthusiast from Texas named Joe Edwards. Having successfully won the first civil rights case filed in Colorado, leading to the downfall and termination of Guido Meyer as City Magistrate, Edwards had become a hero to the local counterculture.

Thompson had previously penned an article for the *Aspen Illustrated News* entitled ‘For Whom the Bell Tolls’, in which he launched a blistering attack on the city council, describing them as ‘a horrible joke. They are yahoos and fools, at best. Even in charity they could only be described as waterheads’ (Thompson in Watkins 2015, p. 24), and appealing for more suitable persons to put their names forward while there was ‘a chance to elect some decent human beings to positions that will otherwise go up for grabs, as usual, to a hellbroth of graceless thieves who would sell the whole town to the highest bidder’ (Thompson in Watkins 2015, p. 24). When his plea remained unanswered, Thompson persuaded Edwards to run as an independent. With the support of other sympathetic minds, a group quickly coalesced together marking the nascent launch of the Freak Power movement in Aspen. A grassroots movement supporting Edwards was predominantly youth orientated, as revealed by Daniel Joseph Watkins in *Freak Power – Hunter S. Thompson’s Campaign for Sheriff*:

Efforts to mobilize the younger and more liberal part of the community quickly gained support with local freaks and heads who volunteered to register voters at neighbourhood bars. In order to gain more visibility amongst the hippy community, the Edwards campaign hired Tom Benton to create political posters, with slogans like ‘Sell Aspen or save it’ and ‘If you don’t give a damn don’t register to vote’. (Watkins 2015, p. 65)

As part of the voter drive, Thompson promised that if Edwards got elected Mayor, then he would run for Sheriff the following year. With only three weeks in which to run a campaign, Edwards’ prospects appeared to be slim, with Thompson just hoping to make a point and

frighten the local power structure at best. However, the Edwards' campaign message regarding the threat to Aspen from mass development resonated with the voters, leading to an incredibly close contest, with Edwards losing to the GOP candidate Eve Homeyer by just six votes. Had absentee ballots been sent out earlier to distant locations, Edwards could have won. For Thompson, the election was a revelation on two fronts, as he explained in a letter to Jim Silberman:

I may have finally found that Grain of Sand I mentioned in earlier letters. For the first time in nearly two years. I see a gimmick for tying all my wasted bullshit together in a book - titled 'Joe Edwards for Mayor' . . . I suddenly see a bedrock validity in the American Dream; the Joe Edwards campaign was a straight exercise in Jeffersonian Democracy . . . what was proved here is that Freak Power is no joke; this is our country, too, and we can goddamn well control it if we learn to use the tools. (Thompson 2001, p. 215)

Having pushed the local establishment to the brink of defeat, Thompson's faith was restored, at least temporarily, in a system that he had all but dismissed in the aftermath of the events in Chicago. Though Edwards had lost, Thompson kept his promise to run for Sheriff. His plan was simple; run a campaign so crazy that it would make his preferred candidate seem like a safe bet in comparison, thus allowing Thompson an exit strategy from a role that he never intended to take, whilst simultaneously affording him the perfect material for his book. Little did he realise however, that his campaign would tap into a well of discontentment in Aspen that ran deeper than he ever expected.

One of Thompson's first notable endeavours from a literary perspective concerning his Sheriff campaign was the launch of the *Aspen Wallposter Series*, a combined advertising campaign and election literature that showcased Thompson's political writing on one side of the poster, and Tom Benton's artwork on the other. As Thompson explained to Herb Caen, who coined the term 'beatnik', the Wallposters initially were not original, but Thompson believed he was breaking new ground as they progressed:

In a fairly serious vein I think the #4 *Wallposter* is a completely new form of journalism. Numbers 1, 2 & 3 were derivative, in a sense - from all kinds of sources, but most recently & specifically from the ‘*Ramparts Wallposter*’ that Hinckle & his crew put out at the ‘68 Demo Convention in Chicago. So Warren is really ‘the Father of the Modern *Wallposter*’. (Thompson 2001, p. 311)

In the book *Artist/Activist*, history professor Hal Elliott Wert also claims that ‘Benton and Hunter Thompson were influenced by the *dazibao*, large outdoor wallposters that the Red Guard used as a propaganda tool during China’s Cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976’ (Wert in Watkins 2011, p. 8). As Thompson admitted himself, the first three Aspen Wallposters did not exactly break new ground in a journalistic sense, but nevertheless they made enough of an impact to warrant the *Aspen Times* to publish an article labelling the Wallposter as a ‘scurrilous sheet’ (Watkins 2015, p. 40). From a Gonzo perspective, they also serve as a microcosm of Thompson’s journey towards fully realising both Gonzo and the Hunter Figure, with the Wallposters reflecting the development of an evolving Gonzo aesthetic from humble beginnings to a movement that drew national attention and Government censorship. *Aspen Wallposter No. 1*, featured a Benton graphic of a red hand giving the victory sign which had been employed for the ‘Edwards for Mayor’ campaign, with the accompanying text by Thompson addressing the political realities of the *status quo* in Aspen, reflecting on Edwards’ narrow loss, and concluding that it was time for action to put an end to the situation. A message from The Editors also signalled their intent, stating: ‘The Wallposter is not a newspaper . . . the sneaky demise of the *Illustrated News* leaves Aspen with only one editorial voice (in print & on the air) and politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. We intend to fill that vacuum. We also intend to make some people wish that wolves had stolen them from their cradles’ (Watkins 2015, p. 43).

Aspen Wallposter No. 2 continued in much the same fashion, with Benton’s graphic deliberately testing the resolve of local printer, Fritz Stammberger, who had stipulated a

‘no pornography’ clause in relation to his printing of the Wallposters. As revealed by Daniel Joseph Watkins, ‘in response, Benton consulted a *Kama Sutra* calendar and created numerous illustrations depicting sexual positions for the issue, which Stammberger rejected. After several revisions, he finally agreed to print the embrace that eventually made the cover’ (Watkins 2015, p. 37). Thompson’s content notably included a eulogy to the recently deceased Hell’s Angel, Terry the Tramp, along with a passage in his note from The Editors that heavily foreshadows his Las Vegas material, in particular the manner in which Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo binge to excess on a smorgasbord of drugs, and leave a trail of destruction in their wake. In this instance however, Thompson was describing their celebration in the aftermath of the success of *Wallposter No. 1*:

I ate a gram of nicotinic acid and spent 26 hours drifting around the airport in the shape of a huge bat. Benton chewed the root of a full-grown Jimson weed and ran totally amok, at the end of the second day his body began to consume itself and we couldn’t get a grip on him . . . (Thompson in Watkins 2015, p. 41)

Wallposter No.3 featured a striking Benton piece, featuring a highway full of sheep emblazoned with the message ‘Ski Fat City’, a reference to Thompson’s campaign proposal of renaming the town ‘Fat City’, in order to deter ‘the greed heads, land-rapers, and other human jackals from capitalizing on the name “Aspen”’ (Thompson 2003b, p. 173).

However, it is with *Wallposter No.4* that the series starts to reflect a more overt Gonzo and Thompson-centric aesthetic, though Benton’s contribution highlighted the thematic synchronicity between his own work and that of Thompson:

The cover image of *Wallposter No.4* was a reworking of an earlier poster, *The American Dream*, featuring a rifle scope aimed at a human brain. Benton originally created the poster the night Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968. When viewed under a black light, the adapted poster reveals the words ‘Impeach Nixon’ in the upper margin, with the ‘x’ of Nixon replaced with a swastika. (Watkins 2015, p. 38)

As Thompson previously noted, the journalism content of *Wallposter No.4* broke new territory, with the content shifting in tone to the more humorous satirical bite that marked his Gonzo reportage, as distinct from the more straightforward discussion of local political issues in the preceding posters. With a headline that read ‘Aspen, Summer of Hate, 1970 . . . Will the Sheriff be Killed?’, Thompson mocked Sheriff Carol Whitmire’s ever-more exaggerated claims that Aspen was under threat from external groups such as the Hell’s Angels, in a crude effort to garner support for his re-election. Beside the article was a graphic of a pig with the caption: ‘Today’s Pig Is Tomorrow’s Bacon’ (Thompson in Watkins 2015, p. 71). Other contributions include one of Thompson’s signature-crazed letters from Martin Bormann, whom he had taken to impersonating in a series of letters to the local newspapers, wherein he proposed all manner of ludicrous schemes, including organising a riot, in what was clearly intended to lampoon the conservative establishment in Aspen.

Another of Thompson’s aliases also appeared in the fourth Wallposter, that of Raoul Duke, in a section entitled ‘Homage to Raoul Duke’, which purported to quote an extract from the ‘Memoirs of Raoul Duke’, underneath which featured a profile on Duke himself:

His work continues to baffle the handful of scholars who have tried to un-ravel it. Not much is known about him except that he always paid cash. On his rare visits to Aspen he drank heavily and fished in the river with dynamite But now he belongs in the ages. Several years ago his body washed up on a beach near Lima and he was buried, they say, in one of the public cemeteries destroyed by a recent earthquake. (Thompson in Watkins 2011, p. 71)

Though these satirical and absurd elements marked a shift in direction towards a more deliberate Gonzo aesthetic, the *Wallposter* nevertheless continued to serve as a platform for more serious political and social commentary. In this aspect, the fourth issue contained the most sensitive and controversial article yet, and in doing so marked a significant

escalation in terms of the editorial risks that Thompson and Benton were prepared to take. The topic was censorship and obscenity in the press accompanied by a nude portrait of a woman named Jilly. Entitled ‘Fat City Fun Girl #1 vs. ‘My Lai #4’, the article discussed the backlash they had received in deciding to publish the image in comparison to the reception their alternative image had met, which had been clearly deemed to be acceptable for publication:

That issue caused numerous problems for Benton and Thompson on a national and local level, and a copy of the issue formed part of Thompson’s newly created FBI file. The broadsheet’s subversive messages about the president and the war in Vietnam drew the ire and attention of President Nixon and caused serious consequences for the publication in future months. (Watkins 2015, p. 39)

These consequences included the seizure of Aspen *Wallposter No. 5*, which had to be printed in Canada due to rejection by every firm approached in the U.S. by Thompson and Benton. While the previous issue was enough to garner the attention of the F.B.I., *Wallposter No. 5* was even more provocative in terms of its cover, featuring a portrait of President Nixon with blood dripping from his mouth and swastikas for eyes. As revealed in the final *Wallposter*, the fate of *Wallposter No. 5* was to be decided by Nixon himself, with every issue seized in Canada by agents claiming to represent both the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounties. Their true identity however, was revealed by Thompson in the final issue: ‘we were told that the seizure had in fact been the work of ‘free-lance’ FBI agents, hired by Bebe Rebozo – Richard Nixon’s good friend and long-time houseboat partner’ (Thompson in Watkins 2011, p. 79).

The censorship of what was intended to be *Wallposter No.5* therefore resulted in an alternative *Wallposter No.5* being published in its place and ironically, the alternative proved to be the most iconic of the series and Thompson’s election poster for his sheriff campaign. Featuring a red double thumbed fist, holding a peyote button set in the middle

of a white sheriff's badge on a black background, it was a visually striking poster that instantaneously captured the essence of Thompson's Freak Power anti-establishment stance. The reverse of the poster carried a quote from Thomas Jefferson at the top: 'the earth belongs to the living . . . not to the dead' (Jefferson in Watkins 2011, p. 75), underneath which Thompson explained the meaning of 'Freak Power' and issued a rallying call to his cause:

For some reason that has to embarrass me as a writer I failed to make it clear that I use the word 'Freak' in a positive, sympathetic sense. In the ominous, ugly-splintered context of what is happening in 1970 Amerika a lot of people are beginning to understand that to be a freak is an honourable way to go. This is the real point: That we are not really freaks at all - but the twisted realities of the world we are trying to live in have somehow combined to make us feel like freaks. We argue, we protest, we petition - but nothing changes. So now, with the rest of the nation erupting in a firestorm of bombings and political killings, a handful of 'Freaks' are running a final, perhaps atavistic experiment with the idea of forcing change by voting . . . and if that has to be called Freak Power, well . . . whatever's right. (Thompson in Watkins 2011, p. 75)

It is notable that Thompson chose to refer to his homeland as 'Amerika' here, with the altered spelling alluding to the fascist undertones that many on the left associated with the Nixon regime, as Benton had similarly addressed in the banned Wallposter depicting Nixon with swastikas for eyes. As Thompson began to roll out his campaign platform, the symbolism and thematic proponents inherent to his Gonzo aesthetic began to manifest themselves in an ever more overt manner. Thompson had acknowledged from the beginning that his campaign was a means to an end, to garner material for his 'Death of the American Dream' book project. In this sense, it is unsurprising that he would make many of the issues he was exploring for his next book central to his campaign platform. As the campaign progressed, however, it began to take on an even larger significance beyond that of his next book; Thompson used the public realm of the Aspen election to deploy his

SuperFictionist Gonzo vision, and to exert his authorial powers to an extent that had previously been impossible. Added to this changed dynamic was the element of Thompson now being both author and character of his own work, together with being the subject of an assortment of media coverage. In this sense, he had an expanded canvass on which to work, in which he could blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, author and character, and life and art, as never before.

Running for Sheriff of Aspen on the Freak Power platform was the perfect opportunity for Thompson to advance the Hunter Figure outlaw myth in a manner that recalled and paralleled his childhood love for Wild West heroes such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid. One of Thompson's favourite mantras which became a stable reference in his work, was a Bob Dylan lyric from his song *Absolutely Sweet Marie*: 'To live outside the law you must be honest!' Ever since his incarceration in Louisville as a teenager, Thompson identified as a righteous outsider, railing against the abuse of power by an inherently corrupt establishment. This attitude became particularly hardened in the aftermath of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, with Thompson making this fight the overarching theme of his literary endeavour. In the aftermath of the Democratic Convention in Chicago of 1968, and the reality of life in America under the Nixon administration, Thompson viewed his Sheriff campaign as a last-ditch effort to test the validity of the American Dream. That he could challenge and disrupt the established order in Aspen also greatly appealed to his sense of individualist anarchy, and as already noted, the etymology of the word Gonzo – 'to play unhinged' (Brinkley in Wenner 2007, p. 118) – was also the perfect description of Thompson's campaign for sheriff.

Thompson's campaign quickly grew in momentum thanks to the success of the Wallposter series. Each poster served as both a visual advertisement for his campaign, and as a platform upon which he could disseminate his ideas and proposals. Though Thompson

had a certain public profile as the author of *Hell's Angels*, this changed dramatically thanks to his involvement in local politics in Aspen. Years previously, Thompson had observed and marvelled at the cult of personality surrounding Henry Miller in Big Sur, California. Now he too had found his own personal Mecca, where his legend would eventually rival that of Miller himself. As Paul Pascarella observed of Thompson's profile, 'Hunter became this sort of figurehead, the leader of the underground, and we all sort of rearranged Aspen' (Pascarella in Wenner 2008, p. 103). There was no mistaking the fact that Thompson's political campaign had proven to be a catalyst for the political awakening of a largely youth led counterculture movement in Aspen, and even in its infancy, it was evident that Thompson was looked upon as a sort of Pied Piper figure for Freak Power. Indeed, one of the key people involved in Thompson's campaign, Ed Bastian, who had previously managed Governor Rockefeller's for President in 1968, observed how Thompson's magnetic personality was enough in itself to hold the campaign together in its early stages: 'when I got involved in Hunter's campaign, things were really chaotic. It was really running on his charisma, and there'd been some interesting work done with Benton's posters' (Bastian in Wenner 2008, p. 108). Bastian was not the only person to recognise the appeal of Thompson's personality, and his natural affinity for drawing people into his orbit; it had also caught the attention of a young Jann Wenner at *Rolling Stone*.

There already existed a mutual respect between Thompson and Wenner, with Thompson having contacted Wenner to praise his coverage of the Hell's Angels murder at The Rolling Stones Altamont concert. Wenner equally had read and liked *Hell's Angels*, and invited Thompson to write for the then fledgling *Rolling Stone* magazine. His first meeting with Thompson left an indelible impression:

I suggested he write about his sheriff's campaign, and in part it could be seen as a prelude to our push in 1972 to get our readers to register to vote. That was just after eighteen year

olds were given the right to vote. One day he called . . . in retrospect, what I saw was already classic, fully formed Hunter . . . He had his Converse sneakers and wore a pair of shorts and a polyester multicoloured shirt, I think the famous one with red circles on it. He was also outfitted with a grey bubble top ladies' wig and had those small lens dark glasses on and was carrying his leather satchel. And he had his cigarette holder . . . He accepted the assignment to write about the sheriff's race. It brought national attention on Hunter and the political machinations in Aspen. Right from that point, I felt that we were on a crusade with Hunter. It was crazy but very serious. (Wenner 2008, pp. 110-111)

Thompson's article for *Rolling Stone* featured as the cover story of the October 1, 1970, issue with the attention-grabbing title 'Freak Power in the Rockies', though the article itself was entitled 'The Battle of Aspen' on the interior of the magazine. Most of the article was a straightforward account of the origins of Freak Power and the Edwards Campaign, but the last segment was a classic example of how Thompson's literary techniques and inspirations carried over into the new style of politics that was unsettling the established order in Aspen. In detailing the possible campaign strategies that were open to him, Thompson refers to one particular option that drew inspiration from the work of Terry Southern:

The possibility of victory can be a heavy millstone around the neck of any political candidate who might prefer, in his heart, to spend his main energies on a series of terrifying, whiplash assaults on everything the voters hold dear. There are harsh echoes of *The Magic Christian* in this technique: The candidate first creates an impossible psychic maze, then he drags the voters into it and flails them constantly with gibberish and rude shocks. (Thompson 2003b, p 162)

That Thompson references *The Magic Christian* here is quite notable in that Terry Southern's earlier work, namely his article 'Twirling at Ole Miss', which was published in *Esquire* in 1963, has been identified by Tom Wolfe as a forerunner of Thompson's Gonzo Journalism:

It was the first example I noticed of a form of journalism in which the writer starts out to do a feature assignment ('Go to Mississippi and see what happens when five hundred pubescent baton twirlers meet in earnest competition') and ends up writing a curious form of autobiography. It is not autobiography in the customary sense, because the writer has put himself in the situation for no other reason than to write something. The supposed subject (e.g. baton twirlers) becomes incidental; and if the writer has the wit to make his own reactions that fascinating, the reader doesn't care, Hunter Thompson has become the maestro of this form and calls it Gonzo Journalism. (Wolfe 1996, p. 184)

The Magic Christian, published in 1959, tells the story of Guy Grand, an eccentric billionaire who revels in playing elaborate practical jokes on people to show that people will stoop to any level if offered the right amount of money. Southern's absurd comic satire of Middle America's relationship with money makes for a suitable bookend to the Sixties, prefiguring Thompson's critique of a heavily consumerist culture run amok in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, slightly over a decade later.

Certainly, *The Magic Christian* technique, as outlined by Thompson in 'The Battle for Aspen', was one that had an obvious influence on both his campaign and literary style, with Thompson having previously theorised of a literary concept that shared similar characteristics:

That's a good concept: The Fuse; the reader lights it by becoming initially involved in the book – the first few pages – and then he has to be dragged (reluctantly, if possible, so as to traumatise his memory) all the way to the end . . . at which point he may or may not realise that he's been forced, or duped, into reading an essay. (Thompson 2001, p. 25)

In terms of his campaign, Thompson estimated that the chance of victory for an underground candidate rested 'almost entirely on his Backlash Potential, or how much active fear and loathing his candidacy might provoke among the burghers who have controlled local candidates for so long' (Thompson 2003b, p. 162). In this sense, and given

Thompson's desire to not actually win, but rather threaten and disrupt the establishment, there was no holding back in terms of the manner in which he set about achieving his goal.

The most notorious contribution from Thompson in this regard was undoubtedly his tentative platform for sheriff, which was published at the end of his article on the campaign for *Rolling Stone*. His proposals were tailored to unleash a wave of fear and loathing amongst Aspen's non-freak denizens, and included using jackhammers to remove the asphalt from the city streets, putting down grass turf as a replacement; building a carpark on the edge of the town with the junk asphalt; banning vehicular traffic from the streets; and permitting Aspenites to move about only on foot or by bicycle. Indeed, the name Aspen itself would be changed by public referendum to Fat City, effectively wiping all and every reference to Aspen from existence, the effect of which would impact massively on those that profited from trading on its exclusivity. Running on the Freak Power platform meant that drugs would also be a contentious issue in the election. Thompson's solution was to promise not to eat mescaline while on duty, and to set up a bastinado platform and stocks on the courthouse lawn for the purpose of punishing dishonest drug dealers publicly. Drug sales for profit were to be punished, as any drug worth taking should not be sold for money in order to encourage a more humane, user-friendly drug culture, the existence of which was already so ingrained in society that according to Thompson 'only a Falangist lunatic would talk about trying to "eliminate it"' (Thompson 2003, p. 174).

Despite his own propensity for owning and using firearms, Thompson also suggested measures aimed at combating the growing influx of armed game hunters, in effect turning the area into a reserve where residents were responsible for protecting the wildlife from excessive hunting. His other firearm proposal was a more direct challenge to the power wielded by local law enforcement: promising that the sheriff and his deputies

would no longer be armed in public as ‘every urban riot, shoot-out and blood-bath (involving guns) in recent memory has been set off by some trigger-happy cop in a fear frenzy’ (Thompson 2003, 174). If his platform was not enough to cause alarm, then Thompson’s appearance certainly did, as he opted to shave his head completely bald, wore a black military style jacket complete with silver sheriff’s star, a studded leather wrist cuff, small dark sunglasses and an Aztec medallion around his neck. Completing his look was a pair of white converse tennis shoes, and his ever-present cigarette holder. He looked like a caricature of an ex-Hell’s Angel turned fascist outlaw sheriff. His newly shaved head also afforded him a new opportunity to goad his electoral opponent according to Ed Bastian: ‘he was quite an imposing figure already, and the shaved head also allowed him to refer to Whitmire as “my long-haired opponent”’ (Bastian in Wenner 2007, p. 106). In essence, Thompson had physically donned the Hunter Figure costume, becoming a canvas in action: the person had fused with the *persona*. Though he had always fashioned his own distinct outlaw look, he now began to take this to a whole new theatrical level. He had become the character of his own work, his own body now part of the narrative. In turn, Ralph Steadman would capture this distinct look in his illustrations for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, once more adding to the concatenation between his life and work.

It was also around this time that Tom Benton suggested to Thompson that they pay for a mail order doctorate in divinity, from an organisation calling itself Missionaries of the New Truth, which ironically could be seen as reflecting what Thompson was trying to achieve with Gonzo Journalism, namely searching for a new truth in his ongoing reporting on the condition of the American Dream. Having bought the doctorate for ten dollars, he thereafter referred to himself as Dr Hunter S. Thompson, taking creative license with his field of study as another facet of the Hunter Figure identity: ‘I’m a doctor of divinity, and a doctor of chemotherapy, and a doctor of Gonzo journalism’ (Thompson in Thompson, A.

2009, p. 63). This flexible, almost chameleon-like manner in which Thompson changed or adopted identities – from sportswriter, journalist, author, Hell’s Angel associate, sheriff and now doctor – all contributed to the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in his crafting of this now very public Hunter Figure *persona*. Increasingly, this protean quality became problematic in distinguishing author from character, public from private, myth from reality.

As Thompson’s campaign for sheriff became a serious threat to the established order in Aspen, it did not take long for his opponents to strike back, and attempt to control the narrative concerning who Thompson was, and what a potential victory would mean for Aspen. Ironically, as Thompson crafted an image that was a parody of the law enforcement establishment, his opponents likewise tried to present an image of Thompson as a fascist Nazi trying to seize power:

DR HUNTER ‘Maddog’ THOMPSON, a Hell’s Angel reject from Oakland, California is running for Sheriff of Pitkin County. He says that he will turn the people of Pitkin County every way but loose. His henchmen will roam the streets setting up ‘POTSHOPS’ for his heady friends. In his *Mein Kampf* (The underground paper *Rolling Stone*) he explains in detail how Aspen is to be made the testing ground for organised chaos, disorder and terror by a hard-core group of freaky dissenters. (Watkins 2015, p. 147)

The above passage featured in an illegal campaign mailer alongside a cartoon depicting Thompson in Nazi uniform in front of a flag bearing a large Swastika, giving a fascist salute whilst simultaneously operating four puppets. These represented Thompson’s campaign officials and other Freak Power candidates, Bill Noonan and Ned Vare, who were running for county coroner and commissioner respectively. The reverse side of the pamphlet featured various slogans including ‘Protect the Future of Aspen! Don’t vote for Thompson and his Puppets!’, and ‘True Aspenites Arise! See through the great puppet show’ (Watkins 2015, p. 148). According to Daniel Joseph Watkins, the leaflet was ‘sent to every post office

box holder in Pitkin County days before the election. Former Aspen mayor, Buggy Barnard, was later convicted for election fraud for sending this and another mailer about Ned Vaire' (Watkins 2015, p. 146). This opposition to Thompson eventually culminated in threats to his life, with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) informing him that a large cache of dynamite had been recently stolen, with a note left at the scene that read 'This [stolen dynamite] will only be used if Hunter Thompson is elected sheriff of Aspen' (Watkins 2015, p. 150). According to the CBI, an informant had also stated that several buildings in Aspen, from the sheriffs' office to the court house, would also be bombed in the event that Thompson proved victorious.

Though Thompson did not take the threat seriously, believing it to be concocted by the authorities to intimidate him, he also was of the opinion that 'it made perfect sense, we felt, to assume that anybody stupid enough to spread these crudely conceived rumours was also stupid enough to try to justify them by actually dynamiting something' (Thompson 2003a, p. 73). As a precaution, Thompson retreated to his home compound of Owl Farm, in Woody Creek, where several heavily armed associates patrolled the perimeter of the property. Though unwelcome at the time, these events proved to be ultimately quite fortuitous for the narrative and image that Thompson was crafting for the Hunter Figure, with the threats to his life playing into his long-held siege mentality, and affording him the perfect scenario to depict himself as a hunkered-down, heavily armed outlaw at war with the local establishment. Owl Farm became his own personal refuge, frequently referenced by Thompson as his 'fortified compound', as is evident in his author's note to the second volume of his collected letters *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist*:

My main luxury in those years – a necessary luxury, in fact – was the ability to work in and out of my house-base fortress in Woody Creek. It was a very important psychic anchor for

me, a crucial grounding point where I always knew I had love, friends, & good neighbours. It was like my personal Lighthouse that I could see from anywhere in the world - no matter where I was, or how weird & crazy & dangerous it got, everything would be okay if I could just make it home. When I made that hairpin turn up the hill onto Woody Creek Road, I knew I was safe. (Thompson 2001, pp. xxii - xxiii)

Even in the author's biography in Thompson's books, he propagates this 'under siege' image, always referring to his fortified compound in Woody Creek, Colorado, as is illustrated in the following excerpt from his author biography from *Songs of the Doomed: More Notes On 'The Death of the American Dream'*:

Hunter S. Thompson is a humble man who writes books for a living and spends the rest of his time bogged down in strange and crazy wars . . . Dr Thompson lives the life of a free-lance country gentleman in Woody Creek, Colorado, and exists in a profoundly active Balance of Terror with the local police authorities. (Thompson 1990, p. 01)

As the reality of Thompson's potential victory began to dawn amongst his opponents, this 'balance of terror' was now firmly tipped against the *status quo* in Aspen. Thompson's emergence as a genuine political force against all the odds, not only captured national attention, but had even come under international focus, with the BBC sending a film crew to Aspen to make a documentary on the rise of Freak Power politics in Colorado. Looking back on the election in his memoir *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson laid bare the reality of what his victory would mean:

Pitkin County, Colorado, was about to elect the nation's first Mescaline sheriff - a foul-mouthed bald-headed freak who refused to compromise on anything at all, even his taste for wild drugs, and who didn't mind saying in public that he intended to hamstring, flay, and cripple every greedy plot the Aspen power structure held dear . . . all their foul hopes and greedy fascist dreams. (Thompson 2003, pp. 85-86)

Thompson ultimately lost the election by less than 500 votes, winning in the town district, but losing heavily in the more rural areas. Voter turnout had surged on both sides, but once

again the establishment parties struck a deal to maximise their vote management in order to defeat the Freak Power candidate. As he conceded defeat, Thompson, with the stars and stripes draped around his neck, delivered an ominous assessment of the entire campaign: ‘Unfortunately I proved what I set out to prove, that the American Dream really is fucked. I didn’t believe it until now’ (BBC *Omnibus*).

Though he had been defeated in his bid for sheriff, the election had always been merely a means to an end for Thompson; it was an exercise to gather material for his ‘Death of the American Dream’ project. In that sense it had more than delivered, with the election becoming for Thompson an exercise in Jeffersonian ideals, and a test of the validity of the American Dream. The campaign narrative itself befitted his Hunter Figure *persona* immeasurably, with Thompson viewed as the *de facto* leader of the counterculture in Aspen, and as a figurehead for Freak Power who was threatening to overthrow the establishment by using their own rules and laws against them. Whereas previously, Thompson’s articles had ostensibly been about stories where he had to work himself into the narrative in some form, often at the expense of the original narrative, now he had progressed to the point where the story revolved around his own life and actions: he now *was* the story, or rather the Hunter Figure was. His article for *Rolling Stone* on his campaign for sheriff had been written as a straight account of the rise of Freak Power in Aspen, but there was no mistaking that the Hunter Figure was now the pivotal core in Thompson’s evolving *oeuvre*, essentially superseding in importance the original distinguishing characteristics of what constituted Gonzo Journalism, as was clearly illustrated in his Kentucky Derby article which was the unedited, subjective account of a story with the author as central protagonist.

The next stage was for Gonzo to become synonymous with the Hunter Figure itself, whose omnipresence, facilitated through the reflexive exchange in Thompson’s life and

work, inevitably leads to the point wherein the *persona* supersedes its narrative existence and authorial control, entering a three-dimensional reality: essentially that of SuperFiction. Thompson came closest to acknowledging this evolution in Gonzo Journalism to that of a SuperFiction spectacle in a humorous memo entitled ‘Instructions for reading Gonzo Journalism’, that he wrote dated November 1971, the same month *Rolling Stone* published *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Here, he declared that ‘Gonzo Journalism – like quadrophonic 4 dimensional sound – exists on many levels: It is not so much “written” as performed – and because of this, the end result must be experienced. Instead of merely “read”’ (Thompson 2001, p. 450). The distinction regarding Gonzo Journalism as performance here is a crucial one; not only does it hint at the Hunter Figure as an active performer in an event rather than merely a character in a story, this also has serious implications regarding the relationship between author and character in the sense that authorial intent and biographical context must be reconsidered entirely.

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The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

It has been fifty years since Hunter S. Thompson made his breakthrough onto the literary scene with the publication of his first major work, *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang*. Were he alive today, Thompson would have just marked his 80th birthday. It has been over a decade now since Thompson’s death, yet interest in his life and work is as fervent as ever. The Hunter Figure, with his aviator shades, converse tennis shoes, Hawaiian shirts and cigarette holder, has become a modern-day myth, a pop culture reference known to millions who have never read a single word of his writings. His trademark phrase, ‘Fear and Loathing’ has become part of the public lexicon, inevitably invoked with each election cycle, and recognised around the world as a succinct epithet for contemptuous human behaviour. Likewise, ‘Gonzo’ has flourished to describe all manner of first-person subjective endeavours, particularly those that reject established traditions. Thompson is one of those rare writers who have had the honour of contributing

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a word to the dictionary, with ‘Gonzo’ now a standard entry, its first widespread use being attributed to Thompson’s brand of journalism, even if the origins of the word are uncertain.

Indeed, uncertainty has followed Gonzo since Thompson popularised the phrase, with its meaning, origin and Thompson’s brand of journalism confounding many a critic. Defining what Gonzo is was no simple task, not least to Thompson himself, who had adopted the phrase as a convenient way to distinguish his own writing from that of the New Journalism movement. Explaining and defining it, was an entirely different matter, with Thompson viewing his most celebrated Gonzo Journalism effort, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, as a failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism (Thompson 2003, p. 106) Ultimately, Gonzo Journalism became whatever Hunter S. Thompson wrote. This confusion as to what exactly Gonzo is in terms of epistemology, even had its own pop culture reference in the form of Gonzo the Muppet, with the ambiguity surrounding his species used as a point of comedy throughout the Muppet show – ‘It’s a bird, it’s a plane ... What is it? It’s Gonzo!’ In the movie *The Great Muppet Caper* he is shipped to Blighty in a crate labelled ‘Whatever’ (Elborough 2005, p. 15). In his review of *Muppets from Space* (1999), critic Roger Ebert stated: ‘The funniest scene in *Muppets from Space* is the first one, where Gonzo is refused a place on Noah’s Ark because he is one of a kind’ (<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/muppets-from-space-1999>). Likewise, this has long been a problem when it comes to critically evaluating the work of Hunter S. Thompson. The tendency has long been to downplay the Hunter Figure *persona* and to emphasis Thompson’s creation of Gonzo Journalism as the measure of his literary worth. This has proven to be enormously problematic when it comes to evaluating, not just Thompson’s work, particularly the latter half of his career, but also his legacy and influence. The present study argues that it is fact the Hunter Figure that is Thompson’s greatest literary achievement, serving as the fulcrum

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around which Gonzo Journalism operates. Indeed, this helps to address many of the problems concerning Gonzo Journalism, from determining its merit as a unique genre; to issues regarding its definition; to questions concerning Thompson's literary influence. By recognising the Hunter Figure as Thompson's greatest work, we must reconsider not just the early part of Thompson's career (as in this thesis) but in fact his entire literary *oeuvre*. In the foreword to Thompson's second volume of letters, David Halberstam writes:

His voice is *sui generis*. He is who he is. No one created Hunter other than Hunter. Somehow he found his voice, and he knew, before anyone else, that it was special. It is not to be imitated, and I can't think of anything worse than for any young journalist to try and imitate Hunter. That's the price of being an original. There's room for only one on the ark. (Halberstam in Thompson 2001, p. x)

It is fitting that the ark is used in reference to the uniqueness of Gonzo, albeit in two entirely different contexts, and with two entirely different outcomes. Thompson always warned of the pitfalls of following in his footsteps. Given the role of the Hunter Figure as the focal point of Gonzo Journalism, coupled with the enormity of that presence, attempts by other writers to pursue Gonzo Journalism frequently results in misguided pastiche. Without the Hunter Figure, Gonzo Journalism loses its heart and authenticity.

The dictionary definition for Gonzo also presents us a second alternative meaning for the word, one that addresses another aspect of our understanding of Thompson and the Hunter Figure, namely a sense of the bizarre or the crazy. This resurrects a longstanding problem that the Hunter Figure has presented for academia, with Thompson's *persona* too easily utilised as justification for dismissing the credibility of his writing amongst critics. To do so however, is to misunderstand Thompson almost entirely. In his tribute to Thompson in the aftermath of his death, Kentucky poet Ron Whitehead, invoked the figure of the Madman prophet from Jewish mysticism in relation to this very issue:

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I have heard more than once that Hunter S. Thompson is a madman. That oh look at what he could have done if he lived a more sane life. Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, pre-eminent Jewish author, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, in *THE TOWN BEYOND THE WALL*, says: ‘Mad Moishe, the fat man who cries when he sings and laughs when he is silent...Moishe – I speak of the real Moishe, the one who hides behind the madman – is a great man. He is far-seeing. He sees worlds that remain inaccessible to us. His madness is only a wall, erected to protect us- us: to see what Moishe’s bloodshot eyes see would be dangerous.’ In Jewish mysticism the prophet often bears the facade of madness. Hunter S. Thompson stands in direct lineage to the great writers and prophets. And as with the prophets of old, the message may be too painful for the masses to tolerate, to hear, to bear. They may, and usually do, condemn, even kill, the messenger. Hunter stood as long as he could. He fought a valiant fight. (Whitehead, <http://www.tappingmyownphone.com/tribute-to-hunter-s-thompson/>)

Whitehead has perhaps, come closest of anyone to understanding what the Hunter Figure was, and the manner in which Thompson utilised his *persona* throughout his writing. For Thompson, it was all about the greater truths, which lay at the core of his *persona*, and the core of his entire *oeuvre*. It was no coincidence that his mail-order doctorate came from the Church of the New Truth. Thompson appreciated truth when he saw it, even if it was cloaked in apparent madness. This is evident in a letter Thompson wrote to Selma Shapiro, publicist at Random House in 1969, in which he praised Frederick Exley’s novel *A Fan’s Notes*, a fictional memoir of Frederick Exley that addressed the carnage that alcoholism, mental illness and obsessive fandom had inflicted upon his life. Addressing the American Dream and the consequences of failing to achieve it led to comparisons with *The Great Gatsby*, no doubt one of the reasons that it appealed to Thompson’s sensibilities. In writing to Shapiro however, he singled out another aspect of the book that had caught his attention: ‘there is something very good and right about it, hard to define. He’s not a “good writer” in any classic sense, and most of what he says makes me feel I’d prefer to avoid him . . .

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but the book is still good. Very weird. I suppose it's the truth-level, a demented kind of honesty' (Thompson 2001, p. 184). David Halberstam singled out the same quote for its importance in his foreword to *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist 1968 – 1976*, with Halberstam also quoting from another portion of that letter in which Thompson states 'it's clear to me – and has been since the age of 10 or so – that most people are bastards, thieves and yes – even pigfuckers' (Thompson 2001, p. 185). As Halberstam notes: 'that is, I think, a very important passage, and perhaps the most revealing in the book – it shows what he is really about and what he is searching for, and why his work is so powerful. It's all in the truths' (Halberstam in Thompson 2001, p. xi).

Truth, authenticity, honesty – these words became the preserve of Hunter S. Thompson and part of the very DNA of the Hunter Figure, cloaked in the mantle of the righteous outlaw. Recalling the first time he met Thompson, *Rolling Stone's* Jann Wenner acknowledges that what he saw was already 'classic, fully formed Hunter' (Wenner 2007, p. 245). The focus of this study has been to delineate the genesis of the Hunter Figure in his earlier writings, and to demonstrate the extraordinary manner in which Thompson fused his life and work in a complex creative process: the intricate self-referential circular dance took on a momentum that propelled and encouraged Thompson to take ever more radical choices and to increasingly break boundaries both in terms of living and literature. The end result, was that Hunter S. Thompson revolutionised journalism and his commitment to his aesthetic ultimately cost him his life.

In the present study, it is argued that in order to understand the Hunter Figure, one must begin with Thompson's formative years in Louisville, Kentucky. As the opening chapter demonstrated, the influences on Thompson here, which subsequently inform his literary *persona*, are myriad; culturally his Kentuckian heritage instilled in him a healthy

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respect for independence, rebellion and a belief in the American Dream. His father, who had trained in the military alongside one F. Scott Fitzgerald, and fought alongside William Faulkner's brother, was a somewhat distant figure in his life, though he served as a disciplinarian that kept Thompson's behaviour in check. His mother, a librarian, fostered his love for literature at a young age, introducing him to the work of Mark Twain and Jack London, whose stories appealed to the young Thompson's sense of adventure and excitement. Greater still, was the influence of the heroes of the Wild West, like the outlaw Jesse James and Davy Crockett. These larger than life figures captured his imagination; at an early age the tall-tale laid a foundation for his mythmaking and the enduring appeal of the outlaw as hero.

It is also clear however, that Thompson was affected by events that were beyond his control, but which left a lasting emotional and psychological legacy that served as a source for his creative energies. The first of these, the death of his father, came when Thompson was at a particularly vulnerable age; apart from the emotional turmoil, his father's death led to economic hardships visited upon the family that not only made Thompson keenly aware of his disadvantaged societal status, but also of the opportunities that were no longer available to him. Even at an early age however, his magnetic charisma, flair for sports and interest in literature, enabled him to socialise with some of the very elite families in Louisville. At the same time, the emotional impact from his father's death manifested itself in oedipal anger and juvenile delinquency. The tension between these two poles – the popular insider whose talents had marked him as having a future full of promise, and that of the hoodlum boy with no father and an uncertain future – created a conflict in Thompson that fuelled contradictory tendencies throughout his life. The die was cast however, when Thompson found himself at the mercy of an unforgiving judge, charged for

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a crime he did not commit. Whilst his privileged friends walked free courtesy of their father's influence, Thompson had nobody to fight his corner. Sent to jail, he missed his high school graduation. Instead of joining his friends at prestigious universities, his only recourse was to join the Air Force.

The irony of Thompson's military service, as we have seen, is that despite his deep-rooted resentment towards authority, it was the Air Force that facilitated the start of his writing career. As sports editor for the base newspaper, he was introduced to the tenets of journalism, he befriended superior officers that shared his love of literature, and they, in turn, encouraged his interest in writing. In a way, his military service became his college education, enabling Thompson to learn the tools of his trade, and distilling in him a discipline that would later serve him well as a struggling writer. The Air Force also served as a catalyst for Thompson's individualist streak, with the constraints of military life only serving to exacerbate his determination to express his autonomy and one such outlet to do this was through his writing. The power of the written word also presented Thompson with a versatile weapon which he could wield as he saw fit. It was here that he began embracing the use of pseudonyms such as Cuubley Cohn and Thorne Stockton as a means of circumventing restrictions on writing for civilian newspapers and avoiding responsibility for the inevitable controversies his writing provoked. In his departure from military life, Thompson also concocted a fake press release in what can be seen as amongst his earliest attempts at crafting a literary *persona* in his own image, what was essentially a proto-Hunter Figure, with Airman Thompson being described as an 'uncontrollable iconoclast . . . totally unclassifiable' (Thompson 1997, p. 74)

Writing did not just empower Thompson however, nor was it solely viewed by him as a means of escaping military life. The appeal rather, was on a far more personal, and

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ultimately, existential level. Thompson viewed writing as a means of bringing order out of chaos, of making sense of the world around him and chiefly that of his own life. Writing was a coping mechanism wherein Thompson, as author, could exert the kind of control that was otherwise denied to him. He also subscribed to the notion of art as a means to circumvent his own mortality, invoking Faulkner's explanation that writing was his way of saying 'Kilroy was here'. Thompson's first novel, *Prince Jellyfish*, essentially was a reworking of his own life experiences, but with fictional victories where Thompson had suffered factual defeats. It was no coincidence that Thompson utilised the techniques of F. Scott Fitzgerald in writing his first novel, as not only was Fitzgerald one of his literary heroes, but *The Great Gatsby* held a particular fascination for him, in particular the manner in which James Gatz has obscured his past and reinvented himself as Jay Gatsby. Thompson saw himself as Gatsby, and the Hunter Figure was his attempt at rewriting the past, at crafting an idealised version of himself and determining his own fate. Thompson's fascination with Gatsby is also strongly related to Gatsby's sense of hope, that with a second chance he can recapture his past with Daisy – Gatsby's version of American Dream, the orgiastic future, is what motivates him, even though it is, and always will be, part of his past. Thompson, likewise, is emotionally tied to the past, to his youth in Louisville where he was robbed of his chance at achieving the American Dream. As Jim Silberman once observed of Thompson:

All his writing was about the loss of some mythic world that he may once have inhabited. It was no accident that Gatsby was his favourite book. I said to him at one point, 'You're really writing one lifelong book called "The Death of the American Dream".' And that stuck. (Silberman in Wenner 2008, p. 99)

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Indeed, Thompson idealised that world, it became strongly linked to his vision of the fantastic promise of the American Dream, but the injustice of his jailing had cruelly robbed him of that opportunity. The people that Thompson held responsible for that injustice, those that abuse their power and privilege, became the target of his writing.

A recurrent theme throughout Thompson's life was that of marginalisation. From his own childhood experiences, through to his struggle as an aspiring writer to break into the Eastern establishment via journalism, Thompson habitually found himself side-lined and excluded. In many ways, Thompson was the architect of his own misfortune, but at the same time, it proved to be the cost of being an uncompromising original. A fierce patriot, he revered the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the core ideals of Jeffersonian Democracy. Coupled with subscribing the concept of journalism espoused by Joseph Pulitzer, it was inevitable that he would position himself as an avenger against those that dared trample on the rights of others, particularly when they were without a voice.

Given his innate rebellious nature and thirst for adventure, together with his sense of alienation from society, it was perhaps inevitable that Thompson would seek out and find solace in the works of kindred souls. In addition to his obsession with *The Great Gatsby*, he revered the writing of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Henry Miller. In the early stages of Thompson's career, as he struggled to find his way as a writer, he adopted an approach to his work which was similar to that of a method actor; if he wanted to be a great writer then he had better start acting like one. This emulation of his literary heroes took on many forms, be it from typing out *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* in their entirety so as to understand the rhythm of writing a great novel, to that of sporting a beard and pipe like Papa Hemingway and hunting wild boar in Big Sur. In New York, he drank at the White Horse Tavern, soaking up the bohemian spirit that had long made it a

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favoured choice of writers such as Dylan Thomas. As has been noted, Thompson also hitchhiked across America, in his own *On the Road* adventure. In California, he rented a property near Jack London's Wolf House, overlooking the Valley of the Moon, naming his own residence Owl House. When he settled in Big Sur, it was largely in the hope of meeting its most infamous resident, Henry Miller. His most significant literary pilgrimage however, was to Ketchum, Idaho, where Thompson stole a pair of elk horns from Ernest Hemingway's home, and these would adorn his own home. Outside of following in the footsteps of these writers, Thompson sometimes just liked to reach out with a simple letter, inviting J. P. Donleavy to visit him in Big Sur and extending the offer of a beer to Norman Mailer. Assured of his own genius, it was important for Thompson to feel as though he was a part of the literary community, before he had even published a single work. Living the life of a working writer became a *persona* for Thompson in itself, long before he ever successfully published his work. In many ways, this was another technique that Thompson utilised, essentially playing a desired role as a means towards making it a reality.

As has been demonstrated, two undeniable influences on both Thompson's aesthetic evolution and burgeoning *persona* were the writings of Oswald Spengler and Colin Wilson. Spengler's theory on those who impose themselves on reality through action versus thought, convinced Thompson that what he lacked as a writer was necessary life-experience, the solution being action first, thought later. Essentially this can be seen as the philosophical underpinning to Gonzo Journalism: the imperative to go out and create the story, even to the point of becoming the story. Coupled with the influence of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, Thompson's began to synthesise the philosophical position of an outsider, individualist and anarchist that fused image and text into a coherent narrative wherein his outlaw *persona* both facilitated and influenced his writing. The more success he achieved,

the stronger would be this synthesis. Through Henry Miller's iconoclasm, he learned how notoriety could be taken advantage of in order to advance his *persona*, earning him currency both in terms of reputation and financially through the success of his writing. In *Big Sur*, as we saw in Chapter Two, Thompson demonstrated this pattern of cause and effect following the sale of his article to *Rogue* magazine, using the money he received to buy a .44 Magnum and a Doberman. The backlash from his *Big Sur* exposé led to his eviction, but his behaviour in terrorising the community with his dog, guns, motorcycle and whiskey-induced theatrics bolstered his outlaw status, with the aforementioned props becoming intrinsic motifs of the Hunter Figure *persona*.

Like the members of the Lost Generation before him, the writers that served as Thompson's role models such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, a key period for Thompson on multiple levels was that of his exile abroad, with his time in South America, as was explored in the third chapter, impacting not just upon his political and literary development, but also bearing witness to his experimentation with drugs, which in due course would play a pivotal role in both his life and work, becoming a major cornerstone of the Hunter Figure, and an integral aspect of his writing. Thompson's primary reason for his sojourn to Latin America was his inability to get published consistently; his uncompromising style and penchant for not just pushing the boundaries of journalistic norms, but of deliberately shattering them, resulted in his status as *persona non grata*. South America, as Thompson saw it, was his last chance to establish himself as a writer. It was a gamble that ultimately paid off, with the distance between Thompson and his homeland affording him a fresh new perspective, and an impetus that reinvigorated his writing. More importantly, it also established a distance between Thompson and his editors that made verification of his articles next to impossible, affording him a freedom that had

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hitherto been infeasible. What followed for Thompson on his travels was ultimately the making of him as a writer; the political and social turmoil that he witnessed across the continent, often as a result of American foreign policy, cemented not just his worst fears about an unchecked authority, but also forced him to rethink his entire understanding of the United States and the American Dream. His innate distrust of authority, together with his desire to report the unvarnished truth, inevitably attracted his attention in South America to the systemic corruption, political malfeasance and the spectre of state-sponsored violence against citizenry that were commonplace. The failure of the press, both domestically and at home in the United States, to accurately report on what was happening in Latin America, not only served to fuel Thompson's distrust for what he deemed to be Rotarian mouthpieces of the establishment, but it also cemented his belief that the tenets of objective journalism only served the interests of the very people who should be held to account by the press.

It is no surprise then, that in South America, Thompson's subjective first-person narrative increasingly takes hold, leading to accusations that his articles were reading like letters and essays. Apart from some initial resistance to his changing style, eventually its merit was recognised by Clifford Ridley at the *National Observer*, who encouraged Thompson's new journalistic direction, as it meshed with the newspaper's desire to move towards more personal journalism. Rather than dismissing Thompson's efforts, Ridley went so far as to publish his correspondence, recognising the special quality that emerged in Thompson's writing when his own *persona* took centre stage. Frequently, this combination resulted in what became a Gonzo trademark: a story about getting the story, which was essentially a form of metajournalism. Ridley was the first editor to facilitate Thompson in this manner, but eventually others such as Warren Hinckle at *Scanlan's*

Monthly, and Jann Wenner at *Rolling Stone*, would follow suit. The critical role that these editors played in Thompson's success as a writer cannot be overlooked.

It is also important to acknowledge the wider cultural landscape that marked the tumultuous Sixties leading up to the Golden Age of Gonzo. In many ways, Thompson and American culture evolved in a scintillating conversation with one another, with Thompson reacting to, and in turn helping to shape, the ever-changing American *Zeitgeist*. Chronicling 'The Death of the American Dream' became his forte, leading Thompson to some of the darkest corners of the American psyche. It is no wonder then, that there is a direct correlation between some of the Sixties most unsettling events and critical junctures in Thompson's writing, with two of the most notable being the assassination of John F. Kennedy leading to Thompson's coining of his trademark Fear and Loathing phrase, and his experience of the riots at the Democrat National Convention in 1968 resulting in his deployment of the Raoul Duke *persona* for the first time. When the Hell's Angels roared into the public consciousness and became public enemy number one, the obvious journalist to cover the menace was Hunter S. Thompson, whose fierce tenacity and willingness to test the *status quo*, qualities that had both infuriated and unnerved his editors, proving to be the perfect fit for the outlaw gangs. Indeed, it was an opportunity that Thompson relished, anointing himself as representative of the Outlaw Press whose goal was to be their hero translator. The resulting book, as we saw in Chapter Four, became a New Journalism classic, catapulting Thompson into the national spotlight as the *enfant terrible* of American literature. It also marked an important transitional phase in Thompson's writing, wherein his mythmaking now had a national platform, with his own Outlaw *persona* becoming his favoured subject. Indeed, Thompson's outlaw credentials reflected an entire disillusioned generation; between the war in Vietnam and the criminalisation of marijuana and LSD, it

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was considered by many to be an honourable stance to risk a criminal record in protest at an unjust government.

As Thompson became ever more enamoured by the Hunter Figure, it was perhaps inevitable that he would return to what was essentially the wellspring of its creative origin – Louisville, Kentucky. The scene of the original injustice that fuelled Thompson's convictions ultimately also became the launchpad for both Gonzo and the Hunter Figure courtesy of 'The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved', as was discussed in the final chapter. It was Gatsby's second chance by way of avenger's rhetoric and an outlaw contempt for propriety. It is crucial to reiterate that, despite the common perception that the Kentucky Derby piece was some sort of aberration, the reality is that, as has been demonstrated, Thompson had been building up to such a breakthrough for a long time. His longstanding development of his *persona*, his criticism of the American press, and his suspicion of the objectivity dogma combined to make the outcome inevitable. The ghosts of his past in Kentucky merely provided the catalyst that was needed to set the Gonzo fire ablaze. A key factor, reflective of the cultural context within which Thompson operated, that also warrants mention is that of direct action. As Todd Gitlin observed, the Civil Rights and New Left movements advocated putting one's body on the line as a necessary precursor to achieving results. Likewise, the same mantra pervades Gonzo Journalism and Thompson's *persona* development. The method actor-like quality behind the Hunter Figure lent an air of authenticity to Thompson's writing that otherwise could not be replicated. Drawing from his literary heroes such as Orwell and Hemingway, Thompson took their brand of personal journalism and supercharged it. Writing from experience became his operating ethic. Thompson's frank admission of his own drug use, which in turn became an ongoing Hunter Figure motif, made him the poet laureate of the psychedelic

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counterculture. While contemporaries such as Tom Wolfe experimenting with stylistic devices to simulate the effects of LSD, Thompson wrote from first-hand experience.

Finally, it is clear that as the Sixties drew to a close, the concatenation between Thompson's life and work had reached its zenith. His campaign for Sheriff of Aspen bore witness to the Hunter Figure and Gonzo Journalism becoming a three-dimensional entity, with Thompson's fictive *persona* superseding its narrative space and seizing authorial control in itself. Indeed, Thompson ultimately acknowledged that Gonzo was closer to the nature of a performing art, with his own life being the stage on which the dramatic narrative was performed. Essentially becoming a SuperFictionist, Thompson's chronicled 'The Death of the American Dream' for the next 40 years, with his conception of the Hunter Figure becoming a modern day American myth. Ironically, his quest ultimately saw Thompson achieve the American Dream himself, and such was his dedication to the Hunter Figure *persona* that he was ultimately faced with the dilemma of his own mortality versus the enduring power of the myth he had created. In the end, ill-health ultimately forced his hand; suicide as a last act was an exercise in the ultimate form of authorship but the question remains – was the author of this final act, Thompson or the Hunter Figure?

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