

CONFESSING THROUGH THE '60's The "Non-Fiction Novel" in America

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Some of the best and liveliest recent writing in America has appeared in a new or at least distinct form. This has been called the "non-fiction novel," a form which is often used to write about social issues and phenomena which are not at all fictional, but which is managed in such a way that the author becomes a character in his own book—indeed, usually the most important character—and this character is dealt with in ways that are usually assumed to belong to "fictional" or literary writing. The form may in fact be a necessary literary response to the recently tumultuous social situation in America, but it is definitely *not* a fictional account of social fact. That is, the non-fiction novel is not a work of fiction which portrays its invented actions and characters against a recognizably realistic (or "real") background. For instance, it is quite unlike Dickens' *Hard Times*, which is in part about the social effects of the industrial revolution, or, to stick to American writing, quite unlike Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*, or Norris's *Octopus*. The non-fiction novel is likewise distinct from that other variety of novel represented by Michael Crichton's recent *The Great Train Robbery* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), a book which is based upon fact but which fleshes out the names of the participants in the historical robbery into fully-actualized characters of a novel. The non-fiction novel is, in fact, a non-fiction work—though a recognizably variant mode within that large classification. On the other hand, it is not—and this is more

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interesting—a purely objective or strictly journalistic non-fiction account of something.

The non-fiction novel is a combination or merging of the confession form of prose fiction with the non-fiction book.⁽¹⁾ The confession is that form of prose fiction which is autobiographical in its emphasis on the pattern of events and experiences of an individual life, or, alternatively, on an individual's character and attitudes. The primary task of such a work is the revelation of character, and the achievement is the vision gained for us by means of that revealed character. Thus, the force and thrust of such a work is gained from the intellectual energy imparted by the confessing mind, energy which is directed against the subject or subjects chosen for examination. Just as the confession merges with the novel (with its emphasis on human character in society) to produce the fictional autobiography, so the confession merges with the non-fiction book to give rise to the non-fiction novel, a literary form which emphasizes the sharply-delineated individual perspective from which an event or experience is viewed. By making use of this approach, an author finds he can achieve more interplay with the events and lend more precision to his perspective by using himself as a character who is participating in the events he is reporting. What happens, though, is that fictional techniques take over this manipulation of character, and instead of being solely the objective "voice" and "eyes" by means of which the events are told and viewed, the author, *as he appears in the book*, is shaped and developed as a *persona*, a created character. And this creation of a character—even if the character appears to be the author—is what constitutes the fictional or novelistic aspect of the work. Hence the "novel" of "non-fiction novel."

Another indication that the non-fiction novel is a distinct form is

(1) The concept of generic form is presented in the fourth essay of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1957). Concerning the confession form of prose fiction, see particularly pp. 307-8, 312-14.

the ease with which one can "feel" a recognizable difference between it and the more standard non-fiction book. Two recent books about the 1972 presidential campaign serve as useful examples here. Timothy Crouse does not intrude his own personality into his book, *The Boys on the Bus: Riding with the Campaign Press Corps* (Ballantine Books, 1974). Rather, he reports vignettes, anecdotes, and incidents which serve to convey the frustrations and rewards, the animosities and camaraderie of "pack journalism." Crouse's is a straight-forward non-fiction book, a valuable and interesting one about a special kind of journalism which thrives in election year. Interestingly enough, Hunter Thompson was one of the "media heavies" running with the pack Crouse covers, and Thompson's book about the campaign shows—as perhaps no other book could—just how great the distance between observation and participation can be. Whereas in Crouse's book the personalities and experiences of the reporters he is discussing are what is important, the most important part of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (Popular Library, 1973) is the dynamic interaction of Thompson's personality with the events and atmosphere of the campaign. Thompson, unlike Crouse, continually interjects himself into his book: "Yes . . . and . . . uh, where were we? I have a bad tendency to rush off on mad tangents and pursue them for fifty or sixty pages that get so out of control that I end up burning them, for my own good" (p. 38). This sort of abrupt dislocation of the narrative flow serves to direct the reader's attention away from the external event and concentrate it instead on the dynamics of the author's mind as it comes to grips with what is happening. So it is that Thompson's private perspective (the "mad tangents"), furnishing unlikely links to the world of hard rock and drugs, jolts the reader into perceptive notice and new frames of reference:

in the meantime there will be a few bad losers here and there, like me, who feel a very powerful sense of loss and depression every time we hear that voice—that speedy, nasal Irish twang that nailed the ear like a shot of *Let It Bleed* suddenly cutting through the doldrums of a dull Sunday morning . . . There is a strange psychic connection between Bobby Ken-

neddy's voice and the sound of the Rolling Stones. They were part of the same trip, that wild sense of breakthrough in the late Sixties when almost anything seemed possible (p. 140).

And if this technique is sometimes distracting, it nevertheless furnishes the payoff of a freedom to communicate the actual experience in an intensely personal way.

The non-fiction novel as it has developed in America has usually been concerned with some major social phenomenon—hippies, war protests, drugs, and politics have been some of the topics—but it has dealt with that issue from an insistently personal perspective. What distinguishes the non-fiction novel is the dimension of confession present in the book, and the value of the work comes directly from this confessional aspect, especially insofar as the *persona* is carefully and precisely delineated. The *persona* is the lens through which we see, and it is thus important to know and reckon with the special properties of the lens—we must know to what specifications it is ground, since the voice telling the tale is instinctively granted our implicit trust and consequently has immense power to manipulate us (a fact attested in notorious fashion by Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*). Thus, the more we know of the quality of the perceiving mind, the more useful and valuable are the perceptions gained thereby. To continue the optical metaphor, the more finely ground the lens we employ, the more highly resolved will be the image perceived when we use it. But we must be aware of the qualities of the lens, for we will get a distorted image if we know nothing of, say, the focal length and resolving power of the instrument we use for our viewing. And so it is with the communicating intelligence when it appears as a character in its book. The author who chooses to appear in a work is not the same thing as the writer of the book—as has been clear at least since the time of the “implied narrator” in Henry Fielding's novels. For example, the narrators of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* are filled with all Fielding's human warmth and wisdom, but are without the man's human flaws and foibles. The only thing new in

the present case is that this double personality is being used in what is ostensibly a non-fiction work. But the author-as-character, the *persona* who appears in the work, is a consciously-developed character: in short, a literary creation. The only further qualification this brings in terms of the speaker-as-lens image is that the lens is being focused and aimed by the author-as-writer, who remains outside the book. We are given the information necessary to make profitable use of the lens, but we must gather that information from the revelations provided by and about the author-as-character—and that information comes to us from the confessional dimension of the work.

Within the province of the non-fiction novel there is a spectrum of possibilities, some books being much more overtly confessional than others. An example of an apparently non-confessional book is Tom Wolfe's study of the hippie movement and drug culture in California, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (Bantam Books, 1968). Wolfe is in his book, but only as the "I" who tells the story, and he is not developed in any detail as a character. There is an initial self-description of the urbane, literary New Yorker come to examine the strange acid-rock culture of San Francisco, but he remains subservient to the culture he describes. Wolfe concentrates on Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and their escapades, getting at the sense of religious experience which permeated their existence, pointing out how the young of the '60's needed to find themselves and each other, and how they were reaching to join each other through the sacrament of LSD. He writes of Kesey's efforts (which cannot appear as such) to hold it all together; of the bus trip as inner exploration and metaphor (those who are tuned in and with it are "on the bus," all others are off); of the movie the Pranksters are making of themselves as a means of control (artistic and psychic—an attempt to render some structure from the protean nature of their experience); and of the final collapse as the center cannot hold.

What Wolfe uses to give his book the feel of a novel is his intensely visual and charged-up, energetic style: exclamations!!!, CAPI-

TALS; playful typography, attempts to render sounds—*Arghggggghhhhh-thraaaaaaaggggghhh*. All of this is highly personal, serves to project the personality behind the style, and stresses the coming to be of the perceptions in the author's mind. So whereas his book is not overtly confessional, there nevertheless exists the always intense presence of the distinct intelligence emanating from and immanent in the style. It is style, then, that carries *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* out of reportorial non-fiction into the realm of the non-fiction novel, because the immediacy and involvement expressed by means of style reveal Wolfe's character and his stake in what he is writing about. Wolfe examines from his own perspective—focuses his own lens—communicates that in the unique way he writes, and is thus sharing his experience by giving much more than facts. It is in part because of the non-objective approach that Wolfe's book has been called the "Best Book on the Hippies." Other non-fiction novels have been called the "Best Book on the Dope Decade" and the "Best Book on the Campaign"—and I suspect that these merits are largely possible only because of the confessional, non-objective approach. In fact, it seems quite likely that the non-fiction novel arose as a response to the frantic, jarring, near-apocalyptic tone of the '60's. How else could one come to terms with the drop-outs of all sorts, the counter culture and use of drugs, the political turmoil and discontent, the racial trouble and decay of the cities, the war and the answering radicalism, the assassinations . . . except in a personal way. There was too much room, too much scope for objectivity: hence, the non-fiction novel evolved as a tool for examination and a vehicle of feeling response.

Dennis Smith's *Report From Engine Co. 82* (Pocket Books, 1973) is a more familiar work than Wolfe's in terms of style, a world away in tone and approach, and it is more clearly confessional. Smith is an Irishman who through the good fortune of an inheritance is able to escape New York City. He lives with his wife and two sons in a small town 60 miles north of New York, yet he is a fireman, the most dangerous occupation in America, who chooses to work in the

worst community in the United States—South Bronx in New York. The question that Smith (and the book) must answer is WHY. Why do this thing? The question his mother and wife ask is: Why fight fires in South Bronx, risking your life every day, when you could teach high school five minutes from home? He can only summon the answer from the depths of a confession of his character. The only possible answer—since there is no compulsion involved and he chooses his work freely—is dependent upon his character: he works at what and where he does because of who he is.

So, interwoven with the descriptions of fighting fires and the fireman's life with all its attendant dangers and frustrations, are confessional passages in which we learn about the man. To take an example, once while riding on a subway, he sees a beautiful Puerto Rican girl—and his first response is to think of her in physical, sexual terms. But he catches himself, mentally reproaches himself for not thinking of her as a person, wishes he could bring himself to sit beside her and make conversation, but then reaches his station and leaves, cutting off his thoughts by telling us: "I don't look back. It never makes any sense to look back, especially on the Lexington Avenue Express" (p. 35). In this small way, confession of one facet of his character expands out into larger issues, in this case, the dehumanizing crush of the impersonal city. In such glimpses we learn about Smith: he reads Yeats; he thinks about things; he is outraged, sickened, prejudiced by turns. He is a man much like ourselves, with no special mental gifts or failings, but, importantly, with his essential humanity and sympathy undamaged. His is the reaction of a good person to a horrible situation, and because of what we have learned of his nature we are able to accept with understanding the only answer he can offer to the central question, an answer he reads in the eyes of a fireman holding a dead child: "I wish my wife, my mother, everyone who has ever asked me why I do what I do, could see the humanity, the sympathy, the sadness of these eyes, because in them is the reason I continue to be a firefighter" (p. 246).

When James Watson published *The Double Helix* (New American Library, 1968), his account of the discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule, it was precisely the confessional nature of the book that upset the scientists.⁽²⁾ At the least, they thought he was being tasteless in his overemphasis on personality, and there were even suspicions voiced that he was dealing rather loosely with the facts of the matter. But what the scientific reviewers failed to see was the literary dimension of Watson's book. They would no doubt have preferred a dry, impersonal account of a scientific achievement of great significance. But there lurks a danger in such dry objectivity: one can be so true to facts as to be false to the truth. And in this case the truth had very much to do with the character of the discoverer, else why need the discoverer write the account? Watson was wiser, for both his confessional tone and attitude fit when *The Double Helix* is seen as a literary statement about the manners and morality of human life, and not just as an account of a discovery. The confession of character is necessary and functional, not just juvenile delight in self-revelation.

The book, like the helix model itself, is double-stranded, and one clear strand is personal and cultural. At various points in the book, Watson writes:

It was my first experience with the high life, associated in my mind with decaying European aristocracy. An important truth was slowly entering my head: a scientist's life might be interesting socially as well as intellectually. I went off to England in excellent spirits (p. 32).

More than a week passed before I slowly caught on that a family of leftish leanings could be bothered by the way their guests dressed for dinner (p. 72).

Though my sister was upset when she saw me, I knew that months, if not years, might be required to replace her superficial values with those

(2) For an excellent and stimulating account of the literary aspects of Watson's book, see William Cadbury's "On Being Literary: The Strange Case of Dr. Watson," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 31 (1970), 474-491, an article to which I am indebted and from which I have borrowed several phrases.

of the English intellectual (p. 72).

When Watson speaks in this fashion about the influence of English culture, the concern with social life and manners is a major part of establishing his character. If many scientists are narrow-minded and dull, as Watson remarks, Watson can refuse to be like them—he can refuse to fit into any confining molds. The book argues that Watson the scientist could only do what he did because Watson the person was who he was—and that was someone who was not narrowly fettered. He is not trapped by prejudices, and he is not bound in any narrow discipline. He is neither biochemist nor crystallographer, but he can freely gain from both. Only because of his character, Watson argues, can he borrow ideas from others, put them together without the hindrance of prejudice born of narrow discipline, and so finally learn the secret of DNA. Hence the point of all the confessing.

The most notorious exponent of the non-fiction novel and the writer who has pushed the form to at least one of its outer limits is Hunter S. Thompson. Fittingly, he has also invented a term for his kind of writing: he calls it “Gonzo Journalism.” This means, as he puts it, to “write as close to the bone as I can get and to hell with the consequences . . . to preserve a kind of high-speed cinematic reel-record of what the thing was like at the time, not what the whole thing boiled down to or how it fits into history” (*Campaign Trail*, p. 18). Despite this disclaimer, Thompson has provided some of the best insights about just how things fit into the peculiarly tormented history of the '60's in America by communicating his own nightmarish vision of what happened to the United States in those years. The *persona* Thompson uses is outrageous: a wild man who massively overindulges in drugs—overindulges in *any* sort of stimulant and mind-altering material, in fact. Thus prepared, Thompson sets off on his pilgrimage, recorded in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (Popular Library, 1971). Once he reaches Las Vegas, he has frantic visions: “Terrible things were happening all around us. Right next to me a huge reptile was

gnawing on a woman's neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge—impossible to walk on it, no footing at all” (p. 24). But these drug-induced fantasies (however accurate as metaphor) pale and diminish in the face of what Thompson calls the “brutish realities” of the '60's—the murders of the Kennedys, the election of Nixon, the television news about the Laos invasion. In the madness of the Las Vegas casinos, how can one know which is more horrible? Reality itself is too twisted, and Las Vegas is not, as Thompson finds, a good town for psychedelic drugs.

Indeed, Las Vegas is a fit image in several ways for the madness of America: a city which has grown up almost entirely since World War II, it is a glaring, garish example of the concentration of Big Money and Power. Thus the maddest and most telling commentary comes when Thompson tells a waitress that he is looking for the American Dream, and she, misunderstanding, thinking it to be the name of a club, tells him she thinks it is located at a place which was previously called the Old Psychiatrists Club (pp. 164–65). Of course. It is absolutely right. The American Dream *is* Las Vegas—and Las Vegas is the Horatio Alger story gone mad. That the *persona* Thompson creates and confesses is a drug-addled maniac only serves to point up how much more crazy and dangerous is the Las Vegas from which he flees. As he explains:

Hallucinations are bad enough. But after a while you learn to cope with things like seeing your dead grandmother crawling up your leg with a knife in her teeth. Most acid fanciers can handle this sort of thing.

But *nobody* can handle that other trip—the possibility that any freak with \$1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head (p. 47).

Norman Mailer is the best known writer using the non-fiction novel form. He has his own version of handling the *persona*, as he makes use of a strangely distanced third person, referring to himself in the books as “he,” “Mailer,” and “the reporter.” In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (New American Library, 1968), about the 1968

political conventions, he refers pointedly to the split between person and *persona* in a remark about Nixon :

Nixon's presence on television had inspired emotions close to nausea. There had been a gap between the man who spoke and the man who lived behind the speaker which offered every clue of schizophrenia in the American public if they failed to recognize the void within the presentation (p. 42).

How, then, is Mailer to avoid the same charge? Clearly, by making the gap obviously visible in his own presentation. Mailer-as-writer and Mailer-as-character are not the same, but the gap is only dangerous and bad if it is used for deception. On the other hand, the separation can be purposefully functional. As Mailer remarks of himself as character: "The reporter was a literary man—symbol had the power to push him into actions more heroic than himself" (p. 144). And in just this way, the symbol achieved through the agency of Mailer-as-character can be better and more valuable than the confessed character who forges it.

So, despite his shock and horror at the violence in Chicago which pushed middle-class kids into revolutionaries, despite his perceptive likening of the police riot to the bursting of a boil and his awareness that he was looking down into a "murderous paradigm of Vietnam" (p. 172), despite his desire to join actively with the young and idealistic, Mailer recognizes that he must maintain the distanced posture necessary for him to write: he must see, not become an actor. But what of the end of the book? Mailer has confronted and admitted his own fear, understandable in any sane person, justified his own distanced posture (which will be justified for us—if it is—by the book which is written), satisfied his own combative impulses in staring down a Mafia hood . . . and then walks out of the book into an absolute horror of middle-class mindlessness. As he describes his actions :

No, Norman Mailer went with his good drinking friends, Pete Hamill and Doug Kiker, to Hugh Hefner's Playboy mansion where they had a few last drinks and talked to friends and cheered the end of the week. On the last trip back to the Hilton, Mailer took a pass through Grant

Park. It was all but empty (p. 215).

Yes, empty indeed. And just how empty does this trivializing leave Mailer in our eyes? What is going on here? Is it any wonder that he sees "proud disapproval" in the eyes of Senator McCarthy's daughter when he meets her on the steps of the Hilton? Mailer is far too good and intelligent a writer for this to be an accidental or unintended undercutting of his character, but it does not seem in line with the earlier confessions, either. Again, the questions: What is Mailer doing here? What is going on?

I think the answer comes through most clearly in Mailer's earlier book, *The Armies of the Night* (New American Library, 1968), his account of the anti-war protest march to the Pentagon. In this book he also uses the third person approach, but the book is even more overtly and intensely aware of the problems and demands of the writing process itself. The book is subtitled: HISTORY AS A NOVEL/ THE NOVEL AS HISTORY. And the *persona*, Mailer-as-character, is even more insistently self-aware. For example, early on in the book he examines his own role and its poses, providing us with an intelligent reason for his confessed egotism:

if the event took place in one of the crazy mansions, or indeed *the* crazy house of history, it is fitting that any ambiguous comic hero of such history should be not only off very much to the side of the history, but that he should be an egotist of the most startling misproportions ... yet in command of a detachment classic in severity ... Such egotism being two-headed, thrusting itself forward the better to study itself, finds itself therefore at home in a house of mirrors, since it has habits, even the talent, to regard itself. Once History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History (p. 68).

Hence Mailer-the-character's pose: as egotistic comic hero, he will be the narrative vehicle of the story. It is for this reason, then, that Mailer-the-character's pose is a proper analytical stance. In regarding himself closely, the event is seen with greater clarity, a clarity achieved by the intellect thrusting forward in self-observation. Mailer-the-writer remains outside the confines of the narrative, doing what

a writer should, putting words together well.

Out of the personal history of himself as a participant in the march on the Pentagon, Mailer is able to discover a larger meaning. The novel expands into a kind of history, but a novelist's history after all, one that is heavily symbolic. And Mailer lays out the process very precisely :

he has come to decide that if you would see the horizon from a forest, you must build a tower. If the horizon will reveal most of what is significant, an hour of examination can yet do the job—it is the tower which takes months to build. So the Novelist working in secret collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study—at the greatest advantage—our own horizon. Of course, the tower is crooked, and the telescopes warped, but the instruments of all sciences ... are always constructed in small or large error; what supports the use of them now is that our intimacy with the master builder of the tower, and the lens grinder of the telescopes ... has given some advantage for correcting the error of the instruments and the imbalance of his tower. ... For the novel ... is, when it is good, the personification of a vision which will enable one to comprehend other visions better (p. 245).

Our intimacy with the builder. That is the reason for the confession: to delineate the personification as exactly as possible so that we may use to greatest advantage the perceptions offered us, to handle with more assurance and more benefit the "world of strange lights and intuitive speculation which is the novel" (p. 284), even though it is a "non-fiction novel." And the tower and the telescope, crooked and warped though they may be, work in this case to full capacity. The book's achievement is the culminating vision of America as a woman, "once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin," heavy with child and languishing in a dungeon. "[S]he will probably give birth, and to what?—the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild?" (p. 320)

The promise of the book is its ability to bring forth the clarifying image, since we know that symbols move men to a greatness and

a comprehension larger than their limited selves. *The Armies of the Night* has achieved its promise, for the metaphor has been delivered; and, in this case, we see the symbol all the more clearly for having seen the character of the deliverer. Finally, of course, we do not know anything about the *real* Norman Mailer, but we know much that is valuable about Mailer-as-character. And, after all, that is what we need to know to benefit from the sharply focused insights and splendid commentary he provides about the most important social issues in America.