

REVIEW ESSAY

THE LAST MODERNIST: HUNTER S. THOMPSON  
AND THE WHITE LOGIC

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Hunter S. Thompson. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. 204 pp. Paper. \$12.00. ISBN 0679785892.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was first serialized in *Rolling Stone* and then published as a book in 1971. The paperback edition I'm reviewing appeared as a tie-in to the eponymous Universal picture, starring Johnny Depp as Hunter S. Thompson, AKA Raoul Duke. The movie, DOA at the box office, followed a 1979 adaptation, likewise a dud, titled *Where the Buffalo Roam*, with Bill Murray and Peter Boyle. Now that Thompson has offed himself so cinematically, we may well expect yet another film version, or at least a TV miniseries during sweeps. This year Elvis resurrected; next year Dr. Gonzo channels Ernest Hemingway?

Gonzo book reviewing. Never tried it before. Just popped the Doors into the CD player: a revamped "greatest hits"—though, thanks to rhetorical inflation, the current tag for such compilations is "the very best of" (presumably better than "the best of"). But since this is the Doors, it's "the *absolute* best of." I like to write books while listening to Josef Haydn's 104 symphonies in order,

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repeating the cycle as necessary. Thompson preferred rock and roll, endlessly looping one or another Rolling Stones tape until it wore out or he did.

*Let It Bleed* accompanied the composition of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the only one of Thompson's longer works delivered more or less effortlessly and on time—his usual MO being to bleed his prose into being, at great physical expense to himself and even greater fiscal expense to any editor foolhardy enough to contract for a certain piece, hoping against the odds that Thompson would give forth another masterpiece—not necessarily bearing any resemblance to the original assignment, and usually padded out by Thompson's folding his own imaginative agonies into the "plot," or whatever passed as an excuse for narrative sequence.

Thompson led a long writing life—over forty years—but he was far from prolific. The chief obstacle to steady productivity was, no doubt, his alcohol and drug regimen. To say he was an "alcoholic" and an "addict" is to say he existed. After Thompson's first drink during sophomore year in high school, he never lived without booze close at hand. A carefully concocted drug cocktail gradually became his chaser. ("All the children are insane, waiting for the summer rain," Morrison is lispng in my ears.) Self-administered from Thompson's special "chemotherapy chair," drugs served to tune up his apprehension of whatever realities or surrealities happened to possess him—invariably filling him with fear and loathing. While he never met a drug he didn't sample, Thompson stuck to a tried and true combo of alcohol and speed, alternated so as to keep him always fuzzily on edge, alertly laid back—although often unready and unwilling to hunker down to the typewriter.

Perhaps the most notorious passage in *Fear and Loathing* is the inventory of drugs stashed in the Great Red Shark, the gargantuan Chevy convertible rented by Thompson and his sidekick lawyer for their "research" junket to Vegas:

The trunk of the car looked like a mobile police narcotics lab. We had two bags of grass, seventy-five

pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers . . . and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls [Thompson's ellipsis]. (Thompson 1998, 4)

When Thompson's biographer, Paul Perry, challenged him to verify this drug tally, the slippery author declined a straight answer. Perry's medical consultant opined, however, "that the total drug consumption written about in the book approximated the amount in the trunk, and that such a staggering amount consumed in a forty-eight-hour period would be fatal 'in normal men'" (Perry 1992, 165).

To be sure, neither Thompson nor his friend—the Chicano activist Oscar Zeta Acosta, fictionalized in the book as a three-hundred pound Samoan madman—would ever have aspired to normality, especially in the realm of intoxication. Whatever their exact intake, it was meant to fuel a classic sixties drug trip in the midst of seventies Las Vegas, revealed to be a terrifying time warp of the straight and somnolent fifties.

Let Perry handle the plot summary for the benefit of non-readers of *Fear and Loathing*:

Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo greet the "law and order" seventies with a final blast from the sixties. No one in Vegas is safe from their comic terror. Hitchhikers are threatened, chambermaids are molested, tourists harassed. Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo steal hundreds of bars of Neutrogena soap from the hotel, order musical instruments and pistols from room service, damage rental cars, and try to drive into a laundromat at the Landmark Hotel. However, they

manage to stay out of jail because they are in Vegas, the capital city of excess (Perry 1992, 165-66).

A regular laff riot!—as long as the reader overlooks how the humor typically depends on the pranksters' unselfconscious exploitation of little people, especially women toiling at minimum wage, powerless to be other than expendable comic butts. Thompson shows special animus for flyover Americans, those terminally wholesome middleclassmen and women who actually enjoy vacations to Vegas and never notice its calculated tawdriness. What could be worse, Thompson asks, presuming our concurrence, than the fleshy spectacle of "two fantastically obese human beings far gone in a public grope"? That is, "a 344-pound police chief from Waco [read "Wacko"], Texas, necking openly with his 290-pound wife (or whatever woman he had with him)," while "the cop-cream from Middle America," the "people from the Outback," watch an anti-drug film so unhip as to make *Reefer Madness* seem profound. Needless to say, such folks "looked and talked like a gang of drunken pig farmers" (Thompson 1998, 140, 143). Oink.

Totally cool people like Thompson and his imagined readers can also share a yuk at the expense of the gullible cop from Anywhere, Georgia (think Jackie Gleason in the *Smokey and the Bandit* movies) who swallows in one gulp the hipsters' jive on LA's drug world. The Southern dope dupe (is there another kind?) and his brothers in law enforcement, all insisting that "we *must* come to terms with the drug culture," really have no clue where to start. "They couldn't even *find* the goddamn thing," smirks Thompson. "There was simply no call" in such ignorant company, "for anything but a massive consumption of Downers: Reds, Grass and Booze, because the whole program had apparently been set up by people who had been in a Seconal stupor since 1964" (Thompson 1998, 144).

Of course, none of the characters in *Fear and Loathing*, including its heroes, are other than grotesque stereotypes. The typescript had editors of *Rolling Stone* rolling on the floor, hugging themselves in glee at the miracle of Thompson's uproarious style and

supposedly trenchant social commentary. Many such readers in 1971 took Thompson's cynical quest for "the heart of the American Dream" as confirmation of their own post-sixties anomie, their dread during the Nixonian era of imminent death for everything they had once held dear: sex, drugs, rock and roll, and also radical politics, civil rights, and feminism. Thompson had little truck with the latter two causes, but he did break his heart beating his head against the intransigence of American "family values" during the McGovern campaign of 1972 and, after he moved to Owl Ranch, during his own foray into local politics in Aspen, Colorado. (Please understand, lest Thompson seem a gonzo yuppie after all, that this was Aspen before mass celebrity gentrification; that's what Thompson ran for sheriff to keep out.)

When history is farce, journalism becomes travesty despite its solemn posturing. "Why bother with newspapers, if this is all they offer?" Thompson rants rhetorically, in a stew of mixed metaphors. "Agnew was right. The press is a gang of cruel faggots. Journalism is not a profession or a trade. It is a cheap catch-all for fuckoffs and misfits—a false doorway to the backside of life, a filthy piss-ridden little hole nailed off by the building inspector, but just deep enough for a wino to curl up from the sidewalk and masturbate like a chimp in a zoo-cage" (Thompson 1998, 200). The only honest journalism, it follows, is the sort practiced by Thompson, no stranger himself either to the wino's fetal withdrawal or to mental onanism.

The secret of "Gonzo Journalism," as Thompson understood it, was first to recognize that anything an editor deemed worthy of coverage was inevitably some mindless diversion for the masses, such as the Mint 2400 Motorcycle Race or The Third National Institute on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the Vegas-based events that provide the occasion for the real story in *Fear and Loathing* and all of Thompson's major works. He hit the jackpot when he started purposefully *never* to cover the assigned story, except peripherally, but rather to make an account of his own hilariously bewildered peregrinations, sometimes in the form of notes taken on site but too cryptic for later decoding. *Rolling Stone* recognized that read-

ers preferred such “authentic” raw material to anything artificially polished, and Thompson was excused even from the onerous chore of framing complete sentences.

In effect, Gonzo Journalism was drug-induced, free-associational, personal maundering: masturbatory, wino journalism in a new key. The center of interest—because his take on things is assumed to be far more vital and truer than things themselves—is Thompson’s fictive version of himself: the reporter as stone deadbeat and stoned perpetrator of minor felonies. This was sixties New Journalism (Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese) pushed to the egomaniacal max. Except Thompson’s wall-to-wall self-coverage recalls the Emersonian/Whitmanian tradition, where the Poet afoot with his vision speaks to and for the Democratic en masse, while incorporating all things American, including what was formerly subliterate and unpoetic, into the poem that is America. For Thompson, the depressing loss of such transcendental possibilities constitutes the death of the American Dream he only pretends to seek, knowing from the outset that nothing is to be found but mounds and mounds of bullshit.

The legend of Hunter S. Thompson rests heavily upon his reputation as a merciless truth-teller, who faces down life’s grim absurdity without whining or flinching. On one level, this recalls the ethos of Thompson’s idol, Ernest Hemingway, whose 1961 suicide devastated his young disciple. “I think he killed himself because he couldn’t write anymore,” Thompson wrote, after a pilgrimage to Ketchum, Idaho, during which he absconded with a souvenir pair of elk horns that had been hanging over the entrance to Hemingway’s chalet. (This is a good example of Thompson’s cultivated quasi-criminality, in which law breaking seems so attuned to some higher law as to demand instant amnesty.) “He couldn’t write,” Thompson concluded about Papa. “He was too sick to hunt. He just didn’t have it anymore, so he decided to end it” (quoted in Perry 1992, 63).

When Thompson himself, in his sixty-eighth year, reached a comparable state of imaginative paralysis and physical debility, he strove to do his mentor one better. Whereas Hemingway had

slunk off alone and pulled the triggers of his double-barreled English shotgun, Thompson, also famous as an aficionado of firearms, staged his exit for a select audience. Ensnared in the kitchen command center of Owl Ranch, he was talking on the phone to his second wife, Anita, whose wrath he had aroused the drunken Saturday night before by discharging a pellet gun at a gong positioned directly behind her living-room chair. After the pellet had zipped just a foot over her head, Anita screamed bloody murder, accusing Hunter of aiming for an inglorious place beside William Burroughs in the annals of uxoricide.

The husband and wife of less than two years' standing negotiated a truce the next morning, Sunday, but Anita remained badly rattled and Hunter badly ashamed of his trigger-happiness. In the afternoon, she went to the health club to sweat off her agitation. After five that darkened February afternoon, Hunter was talking to her by phone. As they reaffirmed their morning cease fire and as Thompson implored Anita to come right home, he was expertly loading the silver forty-five he had polished that morning. As he ate the barrel, he must have expected Anita to hear the shot. But she, having heard only a strange click, had already hung up when the bullet exited her husband's smooth pate and lodged in the stove pipe. Visitors at Owl Ranch had to call her back at the health club to break the news.

In the special issue of *Rolling Stone* that commemorates Thompson's career, a wide variety of friends and admirers find much that was great, good, and loveable about the man and his work. For some it is difficult not also to honor his final act, despite its evident sadism. "He was a careful, deliberate and calculating man, and his suicide was not careless, not an accident and not selfish," writes Jann Wenner, founder of the magazine that "discovered" Thompson and ushered him into stardom. "He was in a wheelchair toward the end of his life, and he decided he would not be able to live with extreme physical disability; it just wasn't him" (Wenner 2005, 34). Oh.

The lionizing of Hunter S. Thompson in *Rolling Stone* reaches its apogee in a piece by Mikal Gilmore, who calls *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* “a landmark, defining work” and compares it straight-facedly to *Moby-Dick*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Great Gatsby* in the way “it peers into the best and worst mysteries of the American heart.” Thompson’s death, after all, only mimicked his autopsy of the American Dream: “In a dark time, he sought to understand how the American Dream had turned a gun on itself. Nobody in modern literature has come closer to answering that question, and maybe Thompson came closer than anybody should” (Gilmore 2005, 44).

To which I reply: Whoa, let’s get a grip! Praise for the dead is one thing, but such overreaching hype only invites the skepticism that was Thompson’s stock-in-trade. In *The Day of the Locust* (1939), for instance, Nathanael West probed much earlier and much deeper than Thompson into the death of the American Dream; and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, by consensus his best book, pales both in style and substance beside Mailer’s work from the same period: *An American Dream* (1965), *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *Miami and The Siege of Chicago* (1968), and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971). The impressive range of these books as a group puts the literary achievement of *Fear and Loathing* into perspective, in part by exposing how limited was Thompson’s outlook.

In *The Prisoner of Sex*, for instance, written in angry rebuttal to Kate Millet’s provocative *Sexual Politics*, Mailer takes on gender issues, however bull(y)ishly, that Thompson never broached, despite their centrality to the cultural upheavals that fired his imagination. The female editors at *Rolling Stone*, reports Perry, “had long wondered if Hunter could write about anything that wasn’t gift-wrapped in paranoia.” Harriet Fier and others used to think about it all the time: “Wouldn’t it be great to see Hunter write about sex, or relationships, or people, or just himself instead of his monolithic paranoia?” (Perry 1992, 218).

It seems, after all, that Thompson was a one-trick pony, so hobbled by his own fear and loathing that he was rendered incapable of prancing out of his self-absorption. He worked a deep yet narrow vein, getting to the bottom of what was too idiosyncratic to attract and hold an enduring readership. In the long run of literary history, he almost certainly will find his place below the first rank and probably below writers such as West (with his tragically brief career): adjudged an interesting but minor figure.

Thompson himself did the most to sustain his outsized contemporary reputation—by means of his many public appearances, where, wobbling under the influence, he performed his madman Dr. Gonzo shtick to satisfy audience expectations for a happening rather than a reading. By the end, like Hemingway, he too had locked himself into a public persona at odds with his claims as a serious writer. Now that Thompson the man is gone, I suspect that the legend will quickly perish also, leaving only adoring believers to champion an already fading literary reputation.

If fear and loathing is Thompson's signature theme, then his treatment of it never approaches the power of Soren Kierkegaard's meditation on the aw(e)ful story of Abraham and Isaac. This is not to denigrate Thompson for not thinking as well as a world-class philosopher, but to suggest that insofar as he reaches for meaning beyond the nihilism of Gonzo Journalism, he is completely at a loss for words. Publishers have often paired Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* with *The Sickness Unto Death*, where he asserts the universality of despair, finding paradoxically that those who recognize they are in despair are thereby "a dialectical step nearer to being cured than all those who are not regarded and do not regard themselves as being in despair" (Kierkegaard 1968, 159).

Thompson certainly qualifies as one whose unrelenting despair affords whatever "cure" is available in the godforsaken world of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Requisite to surviving at all in this world are the anodynes of drugs and alcohol. This is implicit in Thompson's explanation of how he and the Samoan lawyer managed to sit through a ridiculous lecture foisted on the National DA's

Convention. It was easy enough to suffer “with a head full of mescaline,” he brags, since the “poor bastards” in attendance “didn’t know mescaline from macaroni,” and since mescaline is relatively “simple”: “a sensual/surface drug that exaggerates reality instead of altering it.” It would have been much harder to do this scene on a “complex” drug like acid, however, since certain faces and bodies, such as those of the fat folks, “would have been absolutely unendurable.” “The brain would reject it: The medulla would attempt to close itself off from the signals it was getting from the frontal lobes . . . and the middle-brain, meanwhile, would be trying desperately to put a different interpretation on the scene, before passing it back to the medulla and the risk of physical actions” (144).

Thompson insists, however, that the point of mind alteration is not only to blot out otherwise unendurable realities, but also to gain access to true knowledge of life itself, a truth too bleak for ordinary mortals to apprehend. Here we arrive on the familiar ground (at least to me!) of what I have elsewhere called “The White Logic”: the characteristic modernist species of despair that informed the lives and work of so many American writers of the twentieth century. I have contended that “The White Logic” was a social construct: a way of seeing the world that resulted from the pandemic alcoholism of the Prohibition-era American culture; and I have traced the concept to its inventor, a writer who bears many striking resemblances to Hunter S. Thompson (Crowley 1994).

This modernist precursor to Thompson is Jack London, whose *John Barleycorn* (1913) centers on the superior type of imaginative man (“The White Logic” is gender exclusive) who must bear “the pitiless, spectral syllogisms” of human existence and look upon life “with the jaundiced eye of a pessimistic German philosopher.” (London is referring here to Friedrich Nietzsche.) “He sees through all illusions. He transvalues all values. God is bad, truth is a cheat, and life is a joke” (London 1913, 14). “For this sickness of pessimism, caused by drink,” writes London, “one must drink further in quest of the anodyne that John Barleycorn promises but never delivers” (London 1913, 303).

If we take this statement to encompass Thompson's cornucopia of drugs in addition to London's drink, it becomes clear why London would have recognized in Thompson, just as Thompson recognized in Hemingway, the sickness unto death of a soul brother. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, like *John Barleycorn*, is ultimately a celebration of its thinly fictionalized central character, a hypermasculine connoisseur of The White Logic, who attains through his duel with meaninglessness a dark triumph of the will.

Mikal Gilmore suggests that besides its importance as a "landmark, defining work," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is "also the story of the sort of life Hunter Thompson lived. The drugs and drink should have killed him, the anger should have worn him down, and maybe in the end, it all contributed to how he died that night in February" (Gilmore 2005, 44). There is no doubt, I believe, that for Thompson, as for London, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and many others, the drugs and drink *did* kill him one day at a time. "One toke over the line, Sweet Jesus," exults the lawyer. To which, Thompson sneers: "One toke? You poor fool: Wait till you see those goddamn bats" (Thompson 1998, 4).

For Gilmore, Thompson is best understood as "The Last Outlaw." But since the very idea of "the outlaw" on which Thompson modeled his life derives from The White Logic, it makes better sense, I think, to regard him as "The Last Modernist,"—closing the book of The White Logic about a century after London had opened it.

The idea of the drinking writer was gradually transformed in the course of the twentieth century. For one thing, increasing numbers of alcoholic writers got sober and stayed that way. Fewer came to the bad ends of their unregenerate elders: from The Lost Generation to Alcoholics Anonymous. The understanding of addiction, both scientific and humanistic, also shifted toward a model of pan-addictive personality that undercuts the special status accorded to the drunk by early modernists. In the future, writers will undoubtedly continue to drink and do drugs, but they are unlikely to embrace Thompson, as Thompson embraced Hemingway, as a role model.

At present, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the linkage of “creative writing” to drinking is still so fundamental to our thinking about the process of the imagination that many a creative writing student, arriving at one or another of the burgeoning programs so profitably provided by American universities, expects that consuming alcohol in just the “right” fashion is virtually a required course. There is no shortage of drunken or recovered writers on campus to reinforce this notion. Whether the mentor is still drinking or sober as the judge of talent he or she is, the professor of “creative writing” embodies a career model that still puts booze at the center of things.

Most of the literature typically read in such programs, moreover, is selected almost exclusively from the twentieth century and thus serves to recirculate the drunken modernist episteme. This is one argument, perhaps, for broadening the base of literary education for those who expect to produce our future literature. In any event, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is more and more likely to disappear from the curriculum.

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