THE SAVAGE JOURNEY CONTINUES: HUNTER S. THOMPSON'S *FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS* AS A MODERN AMERICAN PICARESQUE

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Summary in Norwegian

Denne masteroppgaven er en studie av Hunter S. Thompsons *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971). Denne romanen er en viktig bestanddel i den journalistiske genren som kalles Gonzo – en stil som blander journalistikk og fiksjon. I denne oppgaven har jeg prøvd å løsrive *Fear and Loathing* fra journalistikken og se på den som et skjønnlitterært verk hvis røtter ligger henholdsvis i den pikareske genren som vokste frem i Spania på femten og sekstenhundretallet og i en lang tradisjon av Amerikanske reiseskildringer. Ved å sette Thompsons roman inn i denne sammenhengen har jeg prøvd å finne fellestrekk mellom Gonzo og de ovenfor nevnte genrene. Thompsons verker har vært, og er, en viktig del av New Journalism, en journalistisk genre som ble utviklet av bl.a. Tom Wolfe på sekstitallet. Men Thompson bryter med denne genren i det at hans skrivestil i større grad inkorporerer fiksjon i hans verker. Mens New Journalism presenterer virkelige situasjoner ved hjelp av skjønnlitterære ”verktøy” er Thompson klar på at han blander fiksjon inn i sine artikler. Dermed kan man stille spørsmålet om ikke Gonzo heller kan sees på som en skjønnlitterær form som inkorporerer elementer fra journalistikken.

Jeg har i denne oppgaven knyttet *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* til to romaner som tilhører de ovenfor nevnte genrene, henholdsvis Mark Twains *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* og Jack Kerouacs *On the Road*. Disse har fungert som rammeverk for min argumentasjon. Jeg har også i stor grad benyttet meg av teorier framlagt av blant andre Mikhail Bakhtin, Ulrich Wicks og Robert Scholes.

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PREFACE:

I knew that "White Rabbit" had finished; the peak had come and gone.[1]

Like many readers of my generation I first discovered Hunter S. Thompson and the world of Gonzo through Terry Gilliam's film-adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998). At first, it was the insane behavior exhibited by the protagonists that appealed to the young mind – the humorous aspects of Thompson's story. The movie led me to the book, and reading it brought a whole new dimension to the story. Although Gilliam's adaptation is a decent one and Johnny Depp's portrayal of Raoul Duke is near-perfect, the real beauty of *Fear and Loathing* (if one can use such a word) lies in its words.

The idea for this thesis came to me while reading Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool Aid-Acid Test*. Here was a story that bound several different facets of 1960s counterculture together. These included Neal Cassady, Ken Kesey, and Hunter S. Thompson, three generations of countercultural proponents in one book. I had never before truly discerned the schism that came in the late 1960s. To me the difference between the 60s and 70s was the difference between rock and disco – between bellbottoms and larger bellbottoms. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* provided me with a great document that chronicles events from the early days of American counterculture, and when I once again turned to *Fear and Loathing* with Wolfe's novel in mind, Thompson's description of the wave that broke and rolled back took on a new meaning, and made me see the novel in a whole new light. Thompson's epitaph for the sixties prompted me to raise the question as to what it was that had changed during this decade – what was the loss he was lamenting? With it came the realization that the novel as a whole is a reaction against what America became as the wave that found its momentum in the sixties broke and rolled back.

[1] Thompson, 1971, 59.

Clearly there are many ways to approach a complex work like *Fear and Loathing*. As a journalistic piece mixed with literary features – or a literary piece with journalistic features – it is a multifaceted work with multiple dimensions all worthy of study. I have chosen one approach for this thesis, one through which I hope to shed light on the literariness of the novel. *Fear and Loathing* has become a staple in the journalistic realm, as an important contribution to journalism as a whole, and to New Journalism in particular. Its importance in this respect cannot be overlooked. However, I will argue in this thesis for the simultaneous inclusion of *Fear and Loathing* into different annals than the ones covering journalistic writings – that it is also a literary work worthy of recognition as a continuation of centuries' old traditions.

I will treat *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a continuation of the picaresque genre, and American journey narratives, looking at features that connect Thompson's novel to both. The interesting thing about this is that it pulls *Fear and Loathing* out of its journalistic "box", as it were, and into the larger world of literature. Thompson himself described Gonzo as a mixture of literary and journalistic features. I will focus on the literary, and treat the novel as a critical chronicle of Thompson's contemporary, much like the early picaresque novels were critical accounts of theirs.

I will begin with a survey of the genres of interest – viz. the picaresque, Gonzo, and American journey narratives – and look at similarities between them. A central feature of this argument is Mikhail Bakhtin's descriptions of "The Rogue" – the staple protagonist of picaresque novels – and the chronotope of the Road. Next, I will establish a framework for the picaresque by way of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This novel is a recognized member of the picaresque "family," and a survey of its narrative will serve as a sort of blueprint against which the "picaresqueness" of *Fear and Loathing* can be measured. Also, I will include a brief look at Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* as an important constituent of

the American journey narrative tradition. All three novels can be read as critiques against their respective contemporary societies.

Chapter 3 establishes the picaresque features of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. I will look at certain features of its narrative and see them in connection with the tenets of the picaresque genre. Next, in chapter four, I will present a survey of certain aspects of Thompson's contemporary society, to see what his critique in *Fear and Loathing* is directed towards.

In the fifth and final chapter I will look at *Fear and Loathing* and its relationship to the American Dream. Drawing on the theory of modes proposed by Robert Scholes, I will look at this relationship as paralleling that between the picaresque and romance literature. I will treat the American Dream and the romance genre as constructs that provide certain world-views, and Gonzo and the picaresque as similar constructs that challenge the former pair.

CHAPTER ONE:

GENRES AND BACKDROPS

Genre and the Picaresque

> *A genre would be truly sterile if every work in it recapitulated the prototype.*[2]
>
> *Everything that belongs only to the present dies along with the present.*[3]

All genres owe their existence to archetypes of the past. They incorporate elements that have accumulated throughout the history of literature, and the presence or absence of given precursor elements are what help us place a work within a specific genre. Thus, in order for a work to be included among other works within a genre, it has to share a significant number of features with the other members of the genre. One question arises: when does a work belong to a given genre? In other words, how similar – in structure, theme, or otherwise – does it have to be to its predecessors to be considered a "fellow member"? Genres and sub-genres spread from their point – and time – of origin through space and time, to be adopted and adapted elsewhere. In the case of the picaresque genre, the spread was quick and wide.

The picaresque was born against the socio-political backdrop of 16th century Spain as a reaction against aspects of that society that were causes for malcontent (Elgin, 1). According to Karl Kerényi, the picaresque became a medium for social critique, as the "sole means of revolt against the rigidity of tradition" (quoted in Blackburn, 13). As the first Spanish picaresque novels reached other parts of Europe and gained popularity, authors across the continent embraced the tradition and adapted it to suit their purposes. From novels such as *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* (1554) and Cervantes' *Don*

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[2] Wicks, 12.
[3] Bakhtin: 1976, 4.

Quixote (1605) the spread of the picaresque led to novels like Richard Head's *The English Rogue* (1665) and the German *Der Abenteurliche Simplicissimus* (*The Adventurous Simplicissimus*) (1665) (Wicks, 13). Just as these new novels owed their existence to those first published in Spain, so did the "originals" owe their existence to ancient archetypes that throughout literary history have been important elements of literature. According to Mikhail Bakthin, the origins of the picaresque lay in the ancient novel of everyday life. Citing Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* – written in 2nd century A.D. – Bakhtin describes how the plot-structure of this type of novel became a sort of template for subsequent generations of narratives, narratives that lead eventually to the emergence of the picaresque genre (1981, 125). Bakthin gives this "template" another name: the chronotope. For the purpose of this thesis – and in keeping with Bakhtin's theory – I will treat the chronotope as a generic construct, viz. as a formulaic device that shapes plots and genres: "The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions" (1981, 84-5).

The chronotope of the everyday adventure is closely linked with the chronotope of the road. It is a central feature of novels like *The Golden Ass* that the plot usually takes place along some sort of road, along which the protagonist has various encounters that in turn shape the episodes that make up the plot. According to Bakhtin, the plot "fuses the course of an individual's life […] with his actual spatial course of road – that is, with his wanderings. Thus is realized the metaphor "the path of life"" (1981, 120). The chronotope of the road which facilitates the chronotope of encounter is what shapes the plots of picaresque novels. I will discuss these more fully below. Although the picaresque genre as we know it emerged in 16th century Spain, it is evident that it owes much of its structural elements to ancient novel-types. The picaresque, in turn, has evolved and rendered "offspring" that differ very much from the originals, but share certain traits that form the affinities between them.

Trans-genre: a Gonzo Picaro

He who makes a Beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man. [4]

Certain literary works straddle the border between the fictional and the real, and thus claim roots on both sides, as it were. Such is the case with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). Originally conceived as an article-assignment for *Sports Illustrated* – covering a motorcycle race in Las Vegas – the story took on a life of its own, and the journalistic elements of the text mixed with literary characteristics, rendering the amalgam that is Gonzo Journalism. Gonzo has traditionally been placed within the school of New Journalism, a school that includes members like Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer. Thus, Gonzo has found its place in the world of journalism. But, considering Gonzo's "double nature", should it not get a generic home within the world of literature as well?

In his essay "Seeing the World through Genres" Jostein Børtnes compares the study of genre to studies in the field of social anthropology. A quote from Lars Rodseth, a social anthropologist, is used to draw an analogy between the study of populations and that of genre:

> Essentialism assumes uniformity and stability within a given class of objects; an essentialist would treat the members of a population in the same way. Beneath their surface variation, then, these members must share a stable essence; otherwise, for the essentialist, they would not belong to the same class, "race, or species. Yet, a biological population does not consist of identical things, but of unique

[4] Thompson, 1971, epigraph.

> individuals whose variation is crucial to the process of evolution. Over time, in fact, every population changes, in part because every individual changes. (quoted in Børtnes, 194)

For the process of evolution to take place on a biological level, then, there must be variation within the members of the population. If every member were a copy of the others, the population would stagnate, as it were, and never evolve. This is true of genre as well. If every new picaresque, for instance, had to follow a strict formula – to insert their new words into rigid, pre-existing templates – this would not only hinder the further development of the genre, but also make for uninteresting reads as one grew accustomed to the formula and able to predict every turn of the picaresque plot.

Still, there has to be underlying similarities between the members of a "genre-population" in order for them to claim their place within the genre. Certain elements would have to be present in each rendering. According to Bakhtin, "genres […] throughout the centuries of their life accumulate forms of seeing and interpreting particular aspects of the world" and a work of art – in this case a literary work – "extends its roots into the distant past" (1986, 4-5). Thus, a work belonging to a given genre embraces the heritage built by its predecessors and, in turn, ads its own elements to that heritage. In Bakhtin's words, "each new work of a given genre always enriches it in some way, aids in perfecting the language of the genre" (quoted in Børtnes, 199).

In *Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions* (1989) Ulrich Wicks, too, considers the issue of genre classification. Along the same lines as those referred to above, Wicks argues that the struggle to fit new works into the rigid "mould" created by a generic prototype has thwarted generic studies. He sees "a genre thus conceived" as negating "its very reason for being" because the criteria for inclusion into the genre would render mere copies:

> The more closely other individual works share qualities with such an authentic model, the more imitative, derivative, unoriginal and inauthentic they will be judged to be. […] Such a genre concept paradoxically makes genre serve uniqueness through exclusion, thereby cancelling itself out as a genre. (33)

Rather than including in a genre only the works that perfectly fit the mould, Wicks argues that the shared similarities between texts – and the extent to which they function "narratively in the same or similar ways" should be the criteria by which their generic familiarity are judged (33).

Wicks calls the prototype novel – the one that spawns the genre – "Fiction P".[5] Echoing Bakhtin's words on genre, he claims that "fiction P itself changes every time it helps engender a new fiction, which in turn also changes all previously existing text related to P" (33). So, it seems evident that genre is not a rigid system. Genres include into their midst new members that, while retaining the basic generic elements, help in the evolution of the genre, taking it to new levels, as it were. Every time a new picaresque is created and accepted into the fold it changes the way we look at the genre as a whole, as well as the way we judge other works belonging to it.

What then, of Gonzo?

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[5] For the purpose of this thesis I cannot elaborate fully on Wicks' discussion of "fiction P". Suffice it to say that "fiction P" represents the genre as a whole: the combined result born out of the creation of two – or more –works that have enough common characteristics to be considered constituents of a genre. Wicks explains it thus:

> What happened when *Guzmán* attracted *Lazarillo* [two early examples of the picaresque] to itself at the beginning of seventeenth century in Spain was the construction of a Prototype, fiction P, from both of them. Fiction P created the genre[…]. A genre and its prototype are a construct, an extratext – a fiction –and this fiction is more dynamically active in the creation of new fictions than are the individual fictional texts from which it was constructed. Moreover, fiction P itself changes every time it helps engender a new fiction […] (33).

In the essay “Jacket Copy for Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream”, in which he describes the circumstances of writing his book, Hunter Thompson explains the nature of Gonzo. According to him *Fear and Loathing* – while becoming the very image of his style – was (in his opinion) a “failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism” (1979, 106). What he sees as “true” Gonzo would be direct reportage without editing. “My idea”, says Thompson,” was to buy a fat note-book and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the note-book for publication” (106; emphasis in the original). True Gonzo would be “the eye & mind of the journalist [functioning] as a camera” (106). While *Fear and Loathing* failed to meet the requirements of what Thompson had intended Gonzo to be, it nevertheless remains the very work that has come to represent the style, partly because it was so “complex in its failure” (108).

In the essay referred to above, Thompson explains the origins of Gonzo as based on the philosophy of William Faulkner, that “the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism”. Furthermore, Thompson claims that ““fiction” and “journalism” are artificial categories” and that they are simply “two different means to the same end” (106). I will argue that in his merging of the two “categories” Thompson created a “new” genre whose roots lay within both and in the process created a new means to his “end”, putting himself at the center of his writing. He explains his reasons:

> 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 (106).

The part Thompson plays in *Fear and Loathing* is highly reminiscent of that played by a picaro – or rogue – in a picaresque. By donning the mask of Raoul Duke – his literary alter-

ego, as it were – Thompson made a character of himself and jumped in at the center of his narrative, portraying actual events in a literary manner and, vice versa, “literary events” in a journalistic manner – blurring the line between the fictional and the real. By doing so, he found a way of implementing himself in his story in a manner no journalist had done before. This is where Thompson’s writing differs from that of other proponents of New-Journalism. Whereas writers like Tom Wolfe also used techniques and devices normally used in fiction in their journalistic endeavors, they stopped short of implementing themselves in their narratives to the extent that Thompson did in his Gonzo pieces. Explaining the difference between himself and Wolfe, Thompson states:

> Wolfe’s problem is that he’s 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 are so weird that they make him nervous. (1979, 108)

In another piece , “The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat”, Thompson describes his own interests, interests he evidently shares with Wolfe, but which he unlike the former dares indulge in. Here he describes himself as “a journalist working constantly among highly paranoid criminals” (1979, 512). Reading *Fear and Loathing* with this in mind, it seems as though Thompson not only works among such people, but becomes like them in some ways, as well. Working these angles, placing himself among people who operate on the fringes of society, Thompson becomes an apt rogue, travelling on the edges to shed his own light on the darker aspects of contemporary society. His journalism becomes literature in part because "only a goddamn lunatic would write a thing like this and then claim it was true” (108). Thompson becomes one of the “highly paranoid criminals” he finds so interesting:

> I took that fatal dive of the straight and narrow path so long ago that I can't remember when I first became a felon – but I have been one ever since, and it's way too late to change now. In the eyes of The Law, my whole life has been one long and sinful felony. (1979, 463)

Bakhtin describes how the rogue claims "the right to be "other" in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available […] [as] none of these categories quite suits [him]" he denies classification (1981, 159). Echoing Kerènyi's earlier quoted statement that the picaresque emerged as "the sole means of revolt against the rigidity of tradition" we find also in Bakhtin's description an emphasis on the rogue being "opposed to convention and functioning as a force for exposing it" (1981, 162). Bakhtin's observation seems readily applicable to Thompson. This is the part that he and his Gonzo play. On the one hand we have Thompson himself, working and living as a modern-day rogue, on the other, his work that in and of itself is a statement against the "rigidity of tradition" that he sees as corrupting his craft. As a rogue he delves into politics and counter-culture, sports and the world of crime, on a sort of quest to uproot hypocrisy and evil wherever they manifest themselves. As far as his trade is concerned, he sees American journalism as warped because "William Randolph Hearst bent the spine of [it] when it was first getting started" (1979, 108). Against this crippled institution Thompson sees himself as a sort of visionary, and his work as "a first, gimped effort in a direction that […] "The New-Journalism" has been flirting with for decades" (1979, 108).

Precursors and Predecessors: The Road in American Literature

Hunter S. Thompson's writing has roots in different soils, as it were. Some stretch far back into the picaresque tradition while some lay in a long tradition of American journey narratives. Common to both is the chronotope of the road. It is consequently necessary to consider some aspects of American society and literary tradition that may be seen as precursors to Thompson's work.

Stories of travel and of the road permeate the United States' national bibliography. From the earliest narratives of pilgrims and pioneers, to the existential journeys of the Beat poets of the 50s the road has been – and continues to be – an important staple in American literature and culture. In *The Journey Narrative in American Literature* (1983) Janis P. Stout opens her first chapter with a quote from James Kirke Paulding's *Westward Ho!* (1832): "Like the young partridge, the American is scarcely hatched, ere he sets our, with the shell still clinging to his downy wing, in search of a new region" (in Stout, 3). One could argue that American history has, in part, been shaped by its population's inherent restlessness and desire to explore and move on to new venues. In combination with the demands of an increasing population and the desire to subjugate the land and native peoples of North America, this not only shaped the nation's expanding geography but also its culture and literature. The road in its various shapes and forms (and the mobility it represents) seems to have worked itself into the national collective consciousness. No wonder, then, that the journey narrative is so prominent in American literature. As new roads were built and new trails blazed, Americans took to them in search of wealth, freedom and adventure.

The same restlessness and search for freedom that drove people from Europe to the New World also spurred them on to populate the farthest reaches of what became the USA.

And it appears this sense of "new beginnings" has not waned with the years. Two novels stand out in any treatise of American road-literature: *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *On the Road* (1957). In the 1930s, as the effects of the Great Depression swept the US, a vast number of people took to the road to escape the plight of the Dustbowl states. The roads that took them to California (and other places) became settings for trials and tragedies and engendered stories of promises broken. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is one such story. It is a story about a quest toward realizing the American Dream – the dream that America is a land of opportunity for those who seek it and that everyone is entitled to a new beginning. This is a dream that, for most, never came to fruition.

There are countless examples of such need-driven journey narratives in American culture – stories of people leaving home in pursuit of a better life, escaping poverty or persecution. But, there are also journey narratives that deal with a different sort of quest – which involve the search for spiritual rather than material wealth. One of these is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road.* Published in 1957 and dealing with events that took place in the 1940s, this novel tells the story of disillusioned youth trying to find meaning in a society where they do not fit in. Kerouac's protagonists' journey is a goal in and of itself: "Sal, we gotta go and never stop till we get there", says Dean Moriarty. Answering Sal Paradise's question as to where they are going, Dean replies: "I don't know but we gotta go" (217). In this brief exchange of words we find the spirit of the novel, echoing the cliché phrase "life is a journey, not a destination". This brings to mind a statement made in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) that "Life is a circle, and so it's the going, not the getting there that counts" (287). For the Beat Generation, the journey was a goal in itself, an escape from a way of life they deemed meaningless. Where Steinbeck's Joad family took to the road in order to survive physically, Kerouac and his "family" ventured out to save their spirits. Both novels, however, have in them an implicit criticism of their contemporary society, and

thus, in addition to the chronotope of the road, share yet another feature with Thompson's Gonzo. I will return to *On the Road* in chapter 2.

In this long tradition of American journey narratives, then, we find one set of precursors and predecessors of Hunter S. Thompson's writing. But, as already hinted at, Thompson's work also carries many of the characteristics of the picaresque, and thus seems to adhere to another tradition as well, as a continuation of a genre that predates American literature.

Gonzo and the Picaresque

As we saw earlier, the Road is often the setting of the plots of picaresque novels. It is the mobility that the road facilitates that allows for the episodes of encounter that in turn form the plot of the novel. To Bakhtin the Road important to such a degree that it "determined the plots of the Spanish picaresque novels of the 16th century" (1981, 244) and, it seems, it has continued to determine plots ever since. Utilizing the trope of the road as a setting within a literary work that aims to direct criticism towards given facets of one's society has its obvious advantages. First, it allows for swift movement through space so as to set the stage for commentary in relation to several societal spheres. Secondly, it prompts the movement of the protagonist–in the case of the picaresque the rogue – and allows him to travel his road and move through, observe, and experience different environments and people. Bakhtin explains:

> The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road […] the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are

> normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another" (1981, 243).

In picaresque novels, the chronotope of encounter – facilitated by the chronotope of the road – shapes the plot in all its movement. Thompson's literature functions in accordance with these "rules". He frequently uses the road – or travel-situations – as the backdrop of his stories. In *Fear and Loathing* it is the various journeys to and from Las Vegas and his infamous stay there that become his "playground". In other manifestations of Gonzo, the plots are set in some compelling dynamic location and structured around people and events that Thompson finds appealing – or in some cases appalling.

In *Fear and Loathing* Thompson goes to Las Vegas to cover a motorcycle-race. But, as it turns out, his story ends up having very little to do with motorcycles. Instead of being overly concerned with his assigned task, Thompson focused his attention on the people he encountered, seeing them and their scene as the more interesting parts. In "The Great Shark Hunt" (1974) – an article assigned by *Playboy Magazine* to cover a fishing tournament in Mexico – he describes the way he approaches his assignments: "I'd explained to the editor that that big-time sport fishing attracts a certain kinds of people and it was the behavior of these people – not the fishing – that interested me" (1979, 425).

Thus, we see the fascination for different kind of people and their behavior that became the mantra of Gonzo journalism. In his essay "Hunter S. Thompson: Multiple Fears and Tangential Loathing", A.J. Ferguson describes Thompson's work (specifically "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved") as follows: "[While] he purports to be covering a sporting event he is actually examining the crowd, and in doing so he finds a metaphor for American society as a whole" (2). In the same way that a rogue in a picaresque tale takes to

the road to encounter and offer perspectives on the varied population of his society, so did Thompson travel to explore the different strata of human society and behavior in America, and elsewhere. In Wicks' treatment of the picaresque we find a definition of the picaresque narrative by Fonger De Haan, describing it as

> the prose autobiography of a person [...] who strives by fair means and by foul to make a living, and in relating his experience in various classes of society points out the evils which come under his observation. (22)

This definition could also be applied to Gonzo. Beneath the outrageous behavior exhibited by the protagonist – personified by Thompson or Duke – we find serious reflections on the state of contemporary society, in the same way that authors of the picaresque voice their social criticism through their rogues.

The Foul Era of Nixon

The picaresque has been a powerful tool for authors to voice their criticism against whatever evil they find in their society. The first picaresque novels were set against a Spanish backdrop, criticizing the ills of that society. In America, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a reaction against the ills of the contemporary southern United States. Thompson saw the corruption and evils of his contemporary America as personified in one man: President Richard M. Nixon:

> The swine are gearing down for a serious workout this time around. Four more years of Nixon means four more years of John Mitchell – and four more years of Mitchell means another decade or more of bureaucratic fascism that will be so entrenched, by 1976, that nobody will feel up to fighting it. We will feel too old by then, to beaten, and by then even the Myth of the Road will be dead […]. (1979, 110)

It was against this backdrop that Thompson's Gonzo was conceived, and through it, he found a medium to voice his harsh criticism against what he saw as "a nation ruled by swine" in which "all pigs [were] upward-mobile" (1979, 109).

It seems a true rogue can fulfill his role only as a counterpart to some system or other against which he wishes to revolt. Without something to work against, he has no reason for being. For Thompson, his most productive years – and those in which his Gonzo truly flourished as social statements – coincided with the years America spent under the dubious rule of Richard Nixon. In *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail* (1973) Thompson applied his Gonzo work-ethic to his coverage of the Nixon/McGovern fight for the Presidency in 1972, writing that

> [W]e are really just a nation of 220 million used car salesmen with all the money we need to buy guns, and no qualms about killing anybody else in the world who tries to make us uncomfortable… [W]hat a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race this country might have been, if we could have kept it out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Richard Nixon. (1979, 230)

As the 1970s progressed it became more and more evident that the promises of the 60s had been broken. With the stalemate of the Vietnam War and the dwindling of the various youth movements it became clear that what Thompson called "the forces of Old and Evil" (1971, 68) were gaining the upper hand and defeating the positive vibe that had spurred protests and demands from the youth of the previous decade. The assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 was a severe shock to the civil-rights movement, and the killing of Robert Kennedy that same year set the stage for the rise of the forces that Thompson so despised. Covering Nixon and his campaign in the 1968 primaries, Thompson commented:

> He seemed like a Republican echo of Humphrey Bogart. Just another sad old geek limping back into politics for another beating. It never occurred to me that he would ever be president….I figured Bobby Kennedy would run – so that even if Nixon got the Republican nomination, he'd just take another stomping by another Kennedy. (McKeen: 1991, 9-10)

As Thompson's hopes died with Kennedy and Nixon rose to claim his presidency, the backdrop for the Gonzo Journalist's works was made. Where Twain and his Huck functioned against their contemporary 19th century south, Thompson's work would become a campaign against the ills of America of the 1970s and his arch-nemesis Richard Nixon.

Bakhtin sees the character of the rogue as portraying a "cheerful deceit" that stands opposed to "ponderous and gloomy deception" (1981, 162). The part that Thompson plays in his Gonzo works fits this description well when one considers the environment in which he was working. Seeing the contemporary body politic as an organization made up of liars and thieves, Thompson's rogue – manifested by himself or Raoul Duke – exhibits this "deceit" as

a means of exposing true corruption and "deception". He dons his many masks in his role-playing and in the process exposes the decay of society he sees in his surroundings and – in part – in himself.

While the politicians of the day bore the brunt of much of Thompson's dismay it is evident that he found fault elsewhere as well. The extensive drug abuse and other vices he partakes in can also be seen as a commentary on a society gone wrong. In "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" for instance, Thompson and his co-conspirator Ralph Steadman travel to Kentucky to find what William Mckeen calls "the face that [would] encapsulate all the obscenity of middle America" (42). In the narrative, Thompson refers to newspaper accounts of atrocities committed by Nixon and his government – in Vietnam and against civil-rights groups, "Ugly war news and stories of "student-unrest"" (1979, 26) – while at the same time, people are going crazy over a horse race in Kentucky. But he also hints at the irony that he, too, is there, in Kentucky, covering the event and acting at least as crazy as those he has come to observe – missing their drunken, violent actions because he himself has gone "half-crazy from too much whiskey, sun fatigue, culture shock, lack of sleep and general dissolution" (36). The penultimate paragraph has Steadman pondering this very predicament: "We came down here to see this teddible scene: people all pissed out of their minds and vomiting on themselves and all that… and now, you know what? It's us…" (38).

Thus, Thompson at times seems to treat his own actions and behavior as symptoms of the disease he sees as plaguing society at large, and, in true Gonzo fashion, he and his actions are at the center of the narrative. The "half-craziness" of "The Kentucky Derby" is but a trifle compared to the complete disarray of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and thus a fitting prelude to the full-fledged Gonzo adventure that would follow this first true Gonzo piece. All in all, the political and cultural climate of 1970's United States seems to have exerted great influence on Hunter Thompson, and to have been a major factor in the development of his

style. Perhaps it was no coincidence that – as McKeen explains – “his output slowed considerably” after 1974, with Watergate and Nixon’s political demise (14). As much as Thompson despised him, perhaps Nixon and his politics were necessary for the continued thriving of Gonzo. Thompson’s fast-paced hybrid was born with Nixon, and started to fade along with his political presence.

The thoughts and ideas presented in this chapter will be further elaborated as they pertain to the main objective at hand: the study of what is considered Hunter S. Thompson’s seminal work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Only a complete and thorough analysis of this novel will reveal whether or not the hypotheses made here have any bases in reality. Before I return to *Fear and Loathing*, however, I will present two novels that I will treat as more immediate precursors (than the Spanish picaresque novels) to what I will call, for lack of a better term, the Gonzo-picaresque.

CHAPTER TWO:

AMERICAN ROAD STORIES: MARK TWAIN'S *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN* AND JACK KEROUAC'S *ON THE ROAD* AS ANTICIPATING THOMPSON'S GONZO

In chapter one we saw that any given work of a genre harks back to those preceding it, while, at the same time, helping and refining the development of the genre. In this chapter, I will look at two novels that may be seen as preceding Hunter S. Thompson's work, and particularly *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. These are Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Both novels appear in Janis P. Stout's survey of American travel-literature *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*, published in 1983. Thompson's work, however, does not. Describing the nature of the picaresque, and the apparent motif for the use of the picaresque mode, Stout writes:

> Resort to the picaresque mode is a strategy for maintaining the openness and affirmation of comedy despite a vision of the modern world as a society inimical to individuality and freedom. The drifting hero, outside the rewards of a highly structured society but also outside its demands, is less subject to repressive control than his, or her, more clearly defined and purposive brother and is therefore more at liberty to shape her, or his, own reality. (231)

This description of the picaresque "anti-hero" seems fitting for both Huckleberry Finn and Raoul Duke, and I will consequently argue for the inclusion of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* into the annals of American journey narratives. While some treatments of the journey narrative have included Hunter S. Thompson's work it seems largely to have been bypassed

as an interesting new take on journalistic writing [6]. Looking at *Huckleberry Finn* and *On the Road*– both of which are part of Stout's survey – it seems strange, to say the least, that *Fear and Loathing* is not included. Perhaps it is to do with the fact that, while it has been treated as an important and influential journalistic endeavor, its literary qualities have tended to be overlooked. I will devote this chapter to aspects of the aforementioned novels that they share with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. *The Adventures of Hucleberry Finn*, as an American picaresque, is of special importance. *On the Road*, too, is so similar in theme and structure, that its affinity with *Fear and Loathing* cannot be overlooked. In the remainder of this chapter, I will lay the foundations for the "bridge" I hope to build, which will take Thompson's work to what I see as its rightful position within the tradition of American journey narratives.

Lighting out for the Territory

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is set in the Southern antebellum United States. It is structured around the flow of the Mississippi River, whose current carries the protagonists through the various episodes that form the plot of the novel. Throughout the novel – and through these episodes – we see the author's criticism of southern society voiced by the adolescent Huck, whose innocent eyes (despite his "errant" ways) seem more apt to perceive the evils of the world he inhabits than would those of a desensitized adult. The criticism expressed throughout the text is directed at, among others, such things as religion, the tradition of blood-feuds, the vigilantism of lynch mobs and the plight of African Americans. While Twain wrote the novel well after the end of the Civil War and after Lincolns Proclamation of Emancipation, southern society at large had not changed to such a degree that

[6] For instance, it is referred to in Ronald Primeau's *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996). Primeau lists Thompson among other writers adhering to a tradition of "journalists on the road" (53).

this criticism was rendered irrelevant. Thus, Huck's observations, and their implicit criticism, would be as poignant in Twain's time as it would have been 30 years prior.

Caught in a tug-of-war between the benevolent hands of the Widow Douglas and the preaching (but well-meaning) Miss Watson on one side and the cruel grip of his alcoholic father on the other, Huck finds both sides unpalatable. Between the two women's efforts to "sivilize" him (1), and his "pap's" efforts to exploit him, Huck chooses the river as his way out. And thus begin his picaresque adventures, as in true picaro fashion, he stages an elaborate escape from his father's grip – faking his own death (30-36).

Huck's river takes on the same function as that of a road in other manifestations of the Picaresque. Wicks quotes Lionel Trilling, saying that "the road itself is the greatest character in [a] novel of the road" and that "rivers are roads that move" (204) and, indeed, the river does play an active part in *Huck Finn*, as the active agent that delivers Huck into his precarious picaresque situations. One of the first things the river "does" for Huck is to deliver him a companion. On his first stop, Jackson's Island, Huck runs into Jim, a slave belonging to Miss Watson, a runaway slave and fugitive. It is in Huck's relationship with Jim that the harshest criticism of southern society lies and the issue of slavery and racism is present throughout the length of the novel. Between his love for Jim and his guilty conscience for aiding him in his flight, Huck struggles with mixed emotions. As they approach the free-state of Illinois, Huck's guilt grows, and his conscience speaks to him: "”What had poor Miss Watson ever done to you that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say a single word?" I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished I was dead" (87).

Through the innocent eyes of a boy brought up to believe in the inequality of men, we find a harsh criticism of a society that indoctrinates their children to become racists and bigots. Because of his young age, Huck is conflicted and does not yet see things fully in terms of black and white, as it were. Huck's guilt loses out to his humanity, however, as he refrains

from handing Jim over to slave-hunters (89). As mentioned above, Twain wrote the novel well after the end of the Civil War, and thus slavery as such was not an issue in the way it was in the antebellum period. Still, to the plight of many African Americans, the Emancipation Proclamation was little more than empty words. With this in mind, it seems evident that Twain's novel would have a great impact on the post-bellum Southern readership of the 1880s. Throughout the text, Huck engages in role-playing. Like a true picaro, he dons different masks to suit various situations and manages to slip out of his predicaments. In one episode he poses as a girl, and when discovered changes his mask and makes up a new story to fit the new situation (55-62). This role-playing is a recurring motif in *Huck Finn* and in many cases gives Huck an advantage when infiltrating a "foreign" setting. For instance, posing as "George Jackson" Huck is taken in by a wealthy southern family after the raft wrecks. The Grangerfords are a proud clan with a long history and are involved in a family feud with their neighbors, the Shepherdsons. In the story of the feud and the events that follow, we see a critique of such an ancient tradition continuing to ruin entire families. The critique here seems directed at senseless violence. In *The Myth of the Picaro* (1979) Blackburn claims that "The Grangerfords represent much that Twain considered good in the antebellum South. But they are sentimentalists damned by mindless belief in the codes of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land" (180). As we come to learn, the reasons for the feud are no longer remembered, rendering the violence purposeless:

> "What was the trouble about, Buck – land?"
> "I reckon maybe – I don't know […] it was so long ago"[…]
> "Don't anybody know?"
> "Oh yes, pa knows, I reckon, and some of the other old people; but they don't know now what the row was about in the first place." (108)

In addition, there seems to be a great deal of respect among the enemies, as seen when Huck calls one of the Shepherdsons a coward. Buck retorts: “No, sir; if a body’s out hunting for cowards he don’t want to fool away any time amongst them Shepherdsons, becuz they don’t breed any of that *kind*” (109). Through Huck’s observations and his naïveté when confronted with such situations we get to see the events through innocent eyes, and thus – as his thoughts become ours – we perceive more clearly the evils we are presented with. The chapter ends with the Grangerford boys being killed, and Huck – saddened by his friends’ pointless death – reunites with Jim and continues the journey downstream.

In Huck and Jim’s involuntary joining forces with the Duke and the King in chapter 19, we find a good illustration of Bakhtin’s claim that the rogue’s “cheerful deceit” (manifested by Huck) stands opposed to the “gloomy deception”, whether in society at large or manifested by other agents (1981, 162). Coincidently, the two characters introduced in this chapter bear the names of royalty – perhaps a harking back to old picaresque narratives in which the upper-class were often targets for critique. The Duke and the King stand opposed to Huck’s role-playing – which he employs as a survival tactics – in that the former are full-fledged confidence men, pursuing every chance to exploit others for their own gain. In the case of the Duke and King’s plans to con the Wilks sisters out of their inheritance, Huck – in opposition to these unscrupulous frauds – enacts his own scheme to foil the duo’s scam.

There seems to be a question of degree here. Huck operates on the edge of what is acceptable, against powers that pass that edge completely. Perhaps this is why he garners sympathy while the others are condemned. His actions are seen as working against darker forces, as it were, and thus he works for “common folks”. His “cons” are implemented in order to expose what Bakhtin calls “the vulgar convention and the falsehood that has come to saturate all human relationships” (1981, 162). While refusing to conform to society’s

demands, he nevertheless retains that basic decency that prevents him from going the way of the Duke and the King. Huck – in true picaro-fashion – operates in the middle-ground: “They [the rogues] see the underside and falseness of every situation” (Bakhtin: 1981, 159). In some respects he even sees the underside of himself and his own “situation”. When Mary Jane Wilks offers to pray for him at their parting, Huck thinks to himself: “Pray for me! I reckon if she knowed me she’d take a job that was nearer her size” (191).

In chapter 30 we find an episode that is very much indicative of the critique against racism that runs through the novel. Experiencing intense moral qualms about his aiding Jim’s escape, Huck writes a letter to Miss Watson, explaining the situation and providing her with their whereabouts. His initial euphoric reaction to getting free of his guilt gives way to sadness for the betrayal of his friend. He realizes that he is “the best friend Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he’s got now” and so makes a crucial decision: he tares up the letter, saying “All right, then, I’ll *go* to hell” (213-214). This episode is important in that it shows the extent of Huck’s indoctrination into the southern state of mind. There is no doubt in Huck’s mind that, in helping Jim, he is committing a mortal sin, one that in the end will guarantee him a place in hell. Still, he follows his heart rather than the rules and, accepting all consequences, remains loyal to his friend. Following his decision, he commits to roguery for the long run:

> It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never though no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line […] and the other warn’t. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again, and if I

> could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog (214).

Blackburn quotes Henry Nash Smith to explain the conflict between Huck's conscience and his intuitive sense of right and wrong:

> [Huck's] intuitive self, the spontaneous impulse from the deepest levels of personality, is placed in opposition to the acquired conscience, the overlayer of prejudice and false valuation placed upon all members of society in the name of religion, morality, law and culture (in Blackburn, 181).

Thus, Huck represents a struggle between basic human decency and the socially acquired sense of right and wrong, the latter terms being relative according to which society one belongs to.

The chronotope of the road is prominent in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, albeit, here, the road takes the form of a river. Huck's Mississippi runs through the length of the narrative and is instrumental in the shaping of it. According to Lionel Trilling "rivers are roads that move" (in Wicks, 204). Huck's Mississippi is his picaresque road, but one that is more active in the plot, as it were, than one would expect a regular road to be. In a crucial episode in chapter 15 the river even seems to act against Huck and Jim. As they approach their promised land of Cairo – in the free state of Illinois – a heavy fog descends on the river. As Huck takes to his canoe to search for a place to land and tie up the raft, a "stiff current"

(80) thwarts his attempts and sends him and the raft downriver. Huck surrenders to the mercy of the current, and is carried further downstream (80-83).

Later, as the fog clears, the two realize they have passed Cairo and Jim's passage to freedom: "I begun to suspicion something. So did Jim. I says: "Maybe we went by Cairo in the fog that night." He says: "Doan'le's talk about it, Huck. Po' niggers can't have no luck" (92). Had the duo reached Cairo, it could have been the end of the story, as some of the tension in the narrative rests on the possibility of Jim being caught by slave hunters. Also, it comes as a sort of relief for Huck, as he has yet to decide whether to commit to his friend or to society's rules. The river is consequently instrumental in guaranteeing Huck and Jim's further adventures. It refuses to let the two slip, and keeps them in its grasp for the long run, as it were. In the end, however, and unbeknownst to them, the river eventually leads to freedom, but only after a long series of trials and tribulations.

The novel ends much as it began. We find Huck reunited with Tom Sawyer, unbeknownst to himself having found his way to Tom's aunt and her family who have now taken possession of Jim. Here, they play a charade of sorts, switching identities and playing their games, and embark on a quest to free Jim once again. This time, though, it is all a game: Jim has been freed by the now late Miss Watson in her will – and Tom knows this. So, the final part of the novel is merely Huck and Tom playing and acting out mock-adventures, trivial in comparison to the real adventures Huck and Jim have been involved in. The rogue, here in the shape of Huckleberry Finn, never learns, but continues to live according to his nature, playing his various roles while refusing to conform to anything.

The final paragraph is an apt illustration of the nature of the rogue, with Huck having come full-circle and yet taking no comfort in the stationary life he has found. In his famous "last words" he hints at his future: "I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there

before” (293). Thus, we leave Huck Finn as he gets ready to pursue further adventures, in what Alfred Kazin (in his afterword to the novel) calls his “immortal wandering” (305).

Huck and Jim: Different Others

Bakhtin’s statement that the rogue claims “the right to be other in this world” holds special significance in relation to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1981, 159). This right may be a “privilege” and sets the stage for a discussion of “other”. Huckleberry Finn is a clear example of a rogue who refrains from making “common cause” with any of life’s categories – he acts according to his own impulses and does what he must to survive, both physically and morally it seems (especially when deciding what to “do” about Jim), and thus, in a sense, becomes an “other”. However, travelling by his side in open defiance of society’s conventions is Jim, an African American slave in an Anglo society – and a true “other” not by choice but by birth. Where Huck sees the flight down the Mississippi as an adventure, Jim faces life-threatening situations around every bend.

For Jim, being such an “other” is a curse: his “otherness” has condemned him to a life of servitude, whereas Huck’s decision to be “other” grants him a freedom few people ever experience. Both defy social conventions, but they play for different stakes. In the final part of the novel, Tom Sawyer is aware of the fact that Miss Watson has freed Jim, but Huck is not. Still, he joins (albeit at times reluctantly) in with Tom in their childish attempt to free Jim in the most elaborate manner, in the vein of Tom’s romance heroes (238). For Jim, patiently awaiting his rescue while his rescuers plot and scheme, the danger is very real. Here Huck goes from real to mock-adventure. The “adventures” Tom and Huck indulge in in the final chapters are similar to those in the beginning of the novel, before Huck takes to the river to have his true adventures. For all he knows, Jim is still in real danger, and thus one would

perhaps expect him to act accordingly. For Huck, being other is a choice – he can switch back and forth – while Jim cannot shed his colored skin and become "same". Huck's "otherness" in the finale is ultimately a mere parody of the role he plays in the main part of the narrative.

While it may be disappointing to readers to see Huck's relapse into his more childish ways, this nevertheless confirms the fact that Huck refuses to conform to anyone's expectations – including, it seems, those of his audience. With the Phelps family, Huck has found a refuge, and can thus rest his "picaro bones" for a while and join his friend and mentor Tom Sawyer in his games. After all, there are further adventures in store for him.

Another Precursor: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

On the Road is the fictionalized auto-biography of Jack Kerouac, in which the author traces his journeys, criss-crossing the US in the 1940s and 50s, along with (among others) his friend Neal Cassady. Like Thompson, Kerouac hid the true identities of his characters under false names. Where Thompson "rewrote" himself and Oscar Zeta Acosta as Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, Kerouac presents himself and Cassady as Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, respectively.

Set in the 1940s, the novel deals with the "existential" journeys of a young man who, like many of his contemporaries, is disillusioned with the consumer-centered culture that came with the end of World War 2. One paragraph illustrates particularly well the point of view of the protagonist, as Sal looks with his "innocent road-eyes" upon "New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream – grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City" (96). Against this depressing backdrop, Paradise and his friends indulged in their "one and noble function of the time, *move*" (121) – taking to "the

holy road" (125) to escape the dreariness of society. Kerouac's protagonists voice his critique of post WW2 America.

Kerouac's roads never lead to conclusions. Like Raoul Duke and Huck's adventures, Sal's road is never-ending, and the failure of each destination to provide answers spurs new journeys along new roads. Sal and Dean's journeys seem to be not so much about reaching some distant goal as about by the actual journey itself. The prospect of being continually on the move is what drives them, "when all the golden land's ahead of you and all kinds of unforeseen events wait lurking to surprise you and make you glad you're alive to see" (122). This novel, written in the 1950s, also anticipates the drug-scene that in the late 60s would dominate and finally be the ruin of the countercultural movement. In that respect, it anticipates the binges of Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing*. Sal's older, heroin-addict friend Old Bull Lee (William S. Burroughs) dreams about the good old days when "you could buy morphine in a drugstore without prescription and Chinese smoked opium in their evening windows and the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone" (131). Dean Moriarty has a three-day, bad trip on "bad green" – strong marijuana (167). Drugs are present to some degree throughout the narrative, a premonition, perhaps, of days to come – a premonition of Gonzo?

Where *Fear and Loathing* and *Huckleberry Finn* are both humorous, satirical novels that sketch their protagonists struggle to survive in chaotic worlds, Kerouac's criticism is found in his protagonists' constant quest for some intangible existential goal. It seems to raise the question: what kind of society is this, where young men would rather live broke and beat, on the road, rather than partake in it? Sal and Dean, like Raoul Duke and Huckleberry Finn, refuse to walk in the same tracks as everyone else. They refuse to be part of societies "inimical to individuality and freedom" (Stout, 231). In this refusal lies the bond between these novels, and yet, as mentioned before, Stout finds no place for *Fear and Loathing* in her

survey. Still, as we will see, *Fear and Loathing* is a continuation of the “rules” laid down by *On the Road*. Twain blazed this trail in American literature with *Huckleberry Finn*; Kerouac took it further, and Thompson brought it to bear on a new period of disillusion with contemporary society. It appears a space should be opened up in the annals of American road-literature, to accommodate the strange hybrid that is Gonzo.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has become a valuable document for the understanding of the American antebellum south, similarly to how *On the Road* became the manifesto of the Beat Generation. They deal with similar themes, taking to the road in defiance of societal expectations, but do so differently. In their own ways, both are akin to Thompson’s Gonzo particularly as this is represented in *Fear and Loathing*, and as such may be considered two separate roots of Gonzo. With this in mind, I will now turn to the “Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream”.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE SAVAGE JOURNEY

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas grabs you, in medias res, and throws you into a fast paced journey through the desert, toward Las Vegas: “We were somewhere around Barstow” says Raoul Duke – the rogue journalist – “when the drugs began to take hold” (3). With that the grand adventure opens, as the protagonists, Duke and Dr. Gonzo, dig into their “kit-bag” of drugs and run amok in the gambling capitol of the US. But beneath the surface, beneath all the drugs and insane behavior, lies a harsh critique of an America gone wrong, and resentment for broken promises. Between the humorous lines we may read the epitaph for a golden era that came to an end before it truly began.

In this chapter I will look at the structure and themes of *Fear and Loathing* and the picaresque side of this countercultural road-story. There are elements in this novel that seem to demand closer attention and scrutiny. *Fear and Loathing*, like its rogue, demands the right to be other than what it, at a glance, may seem to be. Traditionally, the journalistic aspect of *Fear and Loathing* has been the focal point of readings of it, as an offshoot of the New Journalism. In the following I will present a reading that will instead shed a literary light on the novel.

Role Playing and the Picaresque Twists and Turns of a Gonzoid Rogue

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas opens on the road to Vegas, with the protagonists already heading into a drug-stupor that in varying degrees will last throughout the narrative: “It was almost noon” says Duke, “and we still had more than a hundred miles to go. They would be tough miles. Very soon, I knew, we would both be completely twisted. But there was no going back, and no time to rest. We would have to ride it out” (3). The novel is divided into

two parts: the first deals with Duke's covering a motorcycle race in the desert outside Las Vegas. The second part is structured around his coverage of a national district attorneys conference on dangerous drugs.

The first premonition of the picaresque in *Fear and Loathing* is found in the narration itself. Like *Huckleberry Finn* it is narrated retrospectively from the first person point of view. It is the voice of a remembering Raoul Duke that relates the circumstances surrounding his "savage journey" from some future point in time. In the words of Ulrich Wicks, this is the "remembering 'I' " relating the story of a "remembered 'I' " (57). The use of this type of narration is commonplace in the picaresque tradition to such an extent, in fact, that its absence has been said to "[prevent] a story…from being picaresque in the full sense" (Guillén in Wicks, 56). Although this claim has been debated, it remains that this type of narrative point-of view is considered to be an important characteristic of the picaresque genre.

The narrative is structured around a series of episodes that take place along the road to Vegas, or in the city itself, on the streets, in casinos and hotel rooms, where the protagonists' interaction with other people form the action and tension of the plot. In accordance with Bakthin's claim that "the road is a particularly good place for random encounters" (1981, 243), Raoul Duke meets and interacts with different sorts of people, some of whom threaten his "existence", as it were. It is also in these episodes the intrinsic criticism of society is found, where Duke often engages in role-playing, donning different "masks" to suit different situations. This role-playing produces a comic effect, and is often performed for no apparent reason, but in many instances it is a means of survival: when facing a threatening situation, the masks the protagonists don may help them escape unscathed. Wicks quotes Stuart Miller as claiming that the rogue "assumes whatever appearance the world forces on him" and that he is "every man he has to be, and therefore no man" (in Wicks, 65). This echoes the quote from Samuel Johnson that opens *Fear and Loathing*: "He who makes a beast of himself gets

rid of the pain of being a man." Like Huckleberry Finn, Raoul Duke's role playing allows him to be whoever he chooses, and thus to avoid capture.

An early example of role playing is found in chapter 1 as, en route to Vegas, Duke and Gonzo pick up a hitchhiker along the road, and proceed to scare him out of his wits. Afraid of the outcome of this encounter Duke reflects: "How long can we *maintain*? I wondered. How long before one of us start raving and jabbering at this boy? [...] It goes without saying that we can't turn him loose. He'll report us at once to some kind of outback nazi law enforcement agency, and they'll run us down like dogs" (5). Following this reasoning, they tell the "poor Okie kid" (5) that they are on their way "to Vegas to croak a scag baron named Savage Henry" who has "ripped [them] off", and "rip his lungs out" and "eat them!" (19). The "Okie" jumps out of the car to escape the madmen, hopefully too afraid to try to turn them in. Duke reflects on a comment made by the hitchhiker that he had "never rode in a convertible before" (5): "Here's this poor geek living in a world of convertibles zipping past him on the highways all the time, and he's never even *ridden* in one. It made me feel like King Farouk" (17).

The episode with the hitchhiker portrays two different types of road-people. On the one hand we have Duke and Gonzo, en route to their "American Dream," riding in luxury far beyond their means (and obtained through deceit). On the other is the "poor Okie kid" walking the road. "Okie" is a common name for the poor Dustbowl migrants who took to the roads during the Great Depression. The fact that this "Okie" in 1971 is still cut off from the luxuries available to others seems a cruel observation of the inequality of the US – that you have to be either rich or conniving to enjoy the material wealth of the nation. A naïve and innocent "poor Okie kid" is cut off from such luxuries as "a convertible". Duke is left feeling like "King Farouk", an Egyptian ruler infamous for his thievery and corruption, and briefly contemplates a solution: "I was tempted to have my attorney pull into the next airport and arrange some kind of simple, common-law contract by which we could just *give* the car to this

unfortunate bastard" (17). Although the "manic notion passed quickly" Duke's thoughts form a harsh critique of this aspect of American society.

In chapter 10, as Duke is getting ready to flee from Las Vegas, from a devastated hotel room and a "gigantic goddamn hotel bill" (70) for which he has no means of paying, he has an interesting encounter that in a way shatters the narrative. He receives a telegram from Dr. Gonzo (who has fled the scene in advance) that urges him to stay in Las Vegas to work a new assignment. The telegram is addressed to Hunter S. Thompson. Thus, we realize that "Raoul Duke" is not merely the name Thompson has given himself for his portrayal in the novel, but apparently the actual name he used as the events unfolded in reality. "Raoul Duke" is a mask as well – not only an extra-textual mask or pseudonym for the "real" Thompson, the author and presumably remembering "I", but an intra-textual mask for the remembered "I". In part 2, chapter 13, there is another reference to Thompson. Being thrown out of the Circus Circus, Duke is presented with a photo of himself and "the big spic" friend of his (Dr. Gonzo), implying that he is being evicted because of some past problems. Here, he denies that the man in the photo is him, claiming it to be "a guy named Thompson" who "works for Rolling Stone… a really vicious, crazy kind of person" (195). It consequently becomes clear that the protagonist has been, and is, wearing multiple masks throughout the narrative.

The assignment referred to in the ominous telegram is an invitation to attend a district attorneys' conference on dangerous drugs. This appeals to the Gonzo journalist's tastes, and I quote this passage at some length:

> It was treacherous, stupid and demented in every way – but there was no avoiding the stench of twisted humor that hovered around the idea of a gonzo journalist in the grip of a potentially terminal drug episode being invited to cover the National District Attorneys' Conference on

> Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. There was also a certain bent appeal in the notion of running a savage burn on one Las Vegas hotel and then – instead of becoming a doomed fugitive on the highway to L.A. – just wheeling across town […] and checking into *another* Vegas hotel […] with a thousand ranking cops from all over America. It was dangerous lunacy, but it was also the kind of thing a real connoisseur of edge-work could make an argument for. (80)

Despite the urge to stay on in Vegas – "that one rebellious nerve ending that kept vibrating" (80) – Duke decides to make a run for the border, as it were, to hit the road back to the "frantic oblivion" of Los Angeles and "safety, obscurity," to be "just another freak in the Freak Kingdom" (83). But like the Mississippi River conjuring up the fog to thwart Huck and Jim's escape in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, so the road – "this goddamn evil road" (83) – has ways of keeping Duke from a successful retreat. Resting in a bar, Duke reflects on "two very bad emotional experiences – one with the California Highway Patrol and another with a phantom hitchhiker" that have blocked his escape (89). Duke's Road, it seems, is as instrumental in this plot as the River is in *Huckleberry Finn*. First, his path to the safe haven of L.A. is blocked by the police, as the CHP flag his "fire-apple red convertible" down. Duke is caught driving drunk, and openly admits his guilt: "'I'm guilty. I understand that. I knew it was a crime, but I did it anyway" I shrugged. "Shit, why argue? I'm a fucking criminal'" (92). The CHP lets Duke go with a promise that he will head for the nearest rest-area and sleep before going any further. Duke agrees, but has no intention of keeping his promise. "Now [the cop] was going off to chuckle about it – on the west edge of town, waiting for me to make a run for L.A." (93), says Duke, realizing that his exit is blocked and his escape to the "Freak Kingdom" has been thwarted.

With this route blocked, he heads toward Baker, the place designated by the CHP. Here, he has an even more nerve-racking encounter, now with the "Okie" hitchhiker from chapter 1:

> Great Jesus, it's him, the hitchhiker, the same kid we'd picked up and terrified on the way out to Vegas. […] Suddenly I had two *personal* enemies in this godforsaken town. The CHP cop would bust me for sure if I tried to go on through to L.A., and this goddamn rotten kid/hitchhiker would have me hunted down like a beast if I stayed. (93-94)

Thus, Duke has no choice but to head back to Las Vegas and commit to the new assignment:

> All energy flows according to the whims of the Great Magnet. What a fool I was to defy him. […] He knew all along. It was He who sacked me in Baker. I had run far enough, so He nailed me… closing off all my escape routes, hassling me first with the CHP and then with this filthy phantom hitchhiker […].Never cross the Great Magnet. I understood this now…and with understanding came a sense of almost terminal relief. Yes, I would go back to Vegas. Slip the Kid and confound the CHP by moving *East* again, instead of West. This would be the shrewdest move of my life. (95)

In accordance with Bakhtin's claim that the road "determined the plots of the Spanish picaresque novel of the sixteenth century" (1981, 244), Duke's Road seems here to have determined the plot of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Had Duke's escape-route not been

blocked, there might not have been a second "savage burn" to form the second part of the novel.

Back in the game, however, Duke immediately continues his roguish role-playing. Sitting in a bar, calming his nerves before the next great leap, he presents himself to the bartender as "the district attorney from Ignoto [Italian for "unknown"] county. Just another good American like yourself" (96). Having completed his first "run" on Vegas, Duke gears up for the finale.

Duke arrives in Las Vegas with a dire need for rest before the great plunge. "My idea," he says,

> was to get into the room, accept the booze and baggage delivery, then smoke my last big chunk of Singapore Grey while watching Walter Cronkite and waiting for my attorney to arrive. I needed this break, this moment of peace and refuge, before we did the Drug Conference. […] at the Mint 400 we were dealing with an essentially simpatico crowd […] but this time our very *presence* would be an outrage. We would be attending the conference under false pretenses and dealing, from the start, with a crowd that was convened for the stated purpose of putting people like us in jail […]. (109)

The stage is set for more role-playing as the duo prepares to don new masks to enter a world beyond their ken, a world in which they themselves are the targets. But, as Duke approaches his "moment of Peace and refuge", he finds the door blocked by "something [he] recognized at once as a human form: a girl of indeterminate age with the face and form of a Pit Bull" (110). As it turns out, Dr. Gonzo has arrived before Duke, and brought with him a young

aspiring, female artist to whom he has given LSD. Fearing the ramifications of statutory rape- and drug indictments, they get rid of the girl by placing her in a different hotel, and confident of having succeeded, they are hit by waves of paranoia when they find, later, she has left a message for them at their hotel (121). Calling her back, Dr. Gonzo takes care of their predicament by staging a one-man theatrical show for the girl – Lucy – over the telephone, feigning his own arrest and beating by the police (130). Thus, through role-playing and charades, Duke and Gonzo once again wiggle their way out of a dangerous situation. Like Huck faking his own death, Dr. Gonzo's theatrics put them (for the time being) out of harms way. "Metamorphoses and changing roles are part of the Picaro's survival kit," says Wicks, and "as the world is in flux, so he can change roles to face it" (65). There is always a new trick up this duo's sleeve, and by implementing these tricks they ensure their own survival.

In chapters 6 and 7 Duke and Gonzo attend the opening of the "National District Attorneys' Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs", conducted under the motto: "If you don't know, come to learn… If you know, come to teach". "…it was clear from the start that we wouldn't learn anything," says Duke,

> and it was equally clear that we'd be crazy to try any Teaching. It was easy enough to sit here with a head full of mescaline and listen to hour after hour of irrelevant gibberish… There was certainly no risk involved. These poor bastards didn't know mescaline from macaroni… (143)

Duke and Dr. Gonzo successfully infiltrate the conference, again deploying their role-playing tactics to suit their end: "We all wore name tags. They came with the $100 'registration fee'. Mine said I was a 'private investigator' from L.A. – which was true, in a sense; and my

attorney's name tag identified him as an expert in 'Criminal Drug Analysis'. Which was also true, in a sense" (141).

Duke and his attorney have nothing but contempt for the people attending the conference, and for the ignorance they represent:

> Here were more than a thousand top-level cops telling each other "we must come to terms with the drug culture", but they had no idea where to start. They couldn't even *find* the goddamn thing. (144)

When a speaker describes the "lingo" of drug-addicts – how a marijuana joint is referred to as "a 'roach' because it resembles a cockroach" – Dr. Gonzo exclaims: "What the fuck are these people talking about? […] You'd have to be crazy on acid to think a joint looked like a goddamn cockroach" (138). This contempt is what leads the protagonists to their next role-playing game – to mess with the head of one of the attendees. The two sit down at a bar with "a sporty-looking cop about forty" (145) – "the DA from somewhere in Georgia" – and pretend to be what their name-tags identify them as. They lay a heinous story on him, about the state of things in California, on facets of the drug-problem that have yet to reach the Deep South. Terrifying the man with stories of decapitations and blood-drinking junkies (146), and how they – the cops in California – "take the bull by the horn – go to the mat with these scum" […] Cut their goddamn heads off" (149). In this episode their role-playing seems not so much a matter of survival as of taking advantage of an opportunity to mess with those who mess with them. The ignorance displayed by law-enforcement opens for opportunities too good to resist.

An episode in part 2, chapter 11, illustrates how Duke and Gonzo use role-playing as a survival tactics. As a maid enters their (mangled) hotel-room unannounced, they engage in

strange theatrics to ward off the intruder. Dr. Gonzo (who at the time of intrusion is "vomiting in his shoes… thinking he was actually in the bathroom" (181)) attacks the maid, feeling threatened by her "holding [her] mop like an axe-handle". Having gotten the maid under control, Duke and Gonzo play their charade, in an attempt to explain their insane actions:

> I was out of bed in a flash, grabbing my wallet and waving the gold Policemen's Benevolent Assn. press badge in front of her face.
> "You're under arrest!" I shouted
> "No!" she groaned. "I just wanted to clean up!" […]
> "Bullshit!" said my attorney. You're just as much a part of it as they are."
> "Part of what?"
> "The dope ring," I said. (182)

Having staged their scheme, the two convince the maid that they are police officers working to uncover a dope ring working from out of the hotel, and offer her a job as an informant for a fee of "a Big One each month, depending on what she comes up with" (183). "Luckily", says Duke, "the maids [didn't] come near that room since that awful confrontation" (180). By putting "the fear" on one maid, it seems, they manage to shield themselves off from further intrusion, thereby securing their solitude and freedom to act according to their twisted desires within the confines of their room.

All in all, while they in their antics might terrify their "victims," Duke and Gonzo seem to uphold Bakhtin's claim that the rogue's "cheerful deceit" is nothing compared to the "gloomy deception" here manifested in the 1970s' establishment. When fleeing from his hotel-bill in part 1, chapter 7, Duke says to himself: ""You are not guilty". This is merely a

necessary expedient, to avoid a nasty scene. After all, I made no binding agreements; this is an *institutional* debt – nothing personal (87). The "con-man" traits that Duke exhibits, however, are not like those of the Duke and the King in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, who seize every opportunity for personal gain no matter who they victimize (as in the case of the Wilks sisters, whose inheritance the con-men try to steal). Duke and Gonzo's "savage burns" are not run on innocent individuals, but rather on institutions. In cases where they con individuals, it is not for material gain, but rather for the weird satisfaction they get from rattling the proverbial cage.

The Endless Circle

Wicks describes the way that a picaresque narrative has no apparent conclusion or ending by saying that "they just stop" (59). Like the endless succession of episodes from which the rogue seems to learn nothing, the whole of a picaresque narrative ends like one of its many episodes. In *Huckleberry Finn* the narrative ends with Huck on the verge of "lighting out for the territory," in order to, as far as the reader is concerned, continue the type of rootless existence he has lived throughout much of his story. Wicks calls the rhythm of the picaresque narrative the "Sisyphus rhythm," an allusion to the myth of Sisyphus, who was sentenced by the Gods to for eternity roll a boulder up a hill that would roll back down again at the end of each day. Like the task of Sisyphus the life of the rogue consists of an eternal (viz. until death) succession of episodes – the picaresque narrative merely ends "when narrative distance ceases to exist – that is, at the point when the picaro decided to narrate his life" (Wicks: 59). Huckleberry Finn's story, for instance, ends at that point where there "ain't nothing more to write about" (293), but with an implied promise of further adventures to come.

Like Huck, Duke too has learned little from his experiences, and continues to act in pretty much the same manner as he has throughout the novel. Nothing changes. It ends with him flying to Denver, Colorado. Having come out alive and free after two dangerous visits to Las Vegas, Duke's attitude – his roguish nature –has not changed. His focus now shifts to the prospect of buying a "huge albino Doberman" while in Denver ("the national clearing-house for stolen Dobermans" (203)). He first goes to the "airport drug-store [and asks] the clerk for a box of amyls. When the clerk demands a prescription Duke explains to her that he is "a *doctor*" and that he doesn't need a prescription: "I jerked out my wallet and let her see the police badge while I flipped through the deck until I located my Ecclesiastical Discount Card – which identified me as a Doctor of Divinity, a certified Minister of the Church of the New Truth". Accepting Duke's identification, the clerk hands him the drugs: "I had to ask. We get some *real freaks* in this place. All kinds of dangerous addicts". Duke replies: "Don't worry […] I understand perfectly" (203). It appears that Duke comes out of his recent experiences unscathed and unchanged. Landing at the airport he continues his role-playing and his drug-abuse, as "a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident" (204).

Like Huck's narrative, *Fear and Loathing* ends not with the protagonist's deepened insight, but rather with the narrative catching up with the narration, as it were. In the same way the novel "refuses" to end with Duke leaving Las Vegas in part 1, so the Duke's story seems to refuse to end with the termination of this narrative. Duke leaves us with a sort of promise that the story does not end here – he will continue to move, beyond that final page.

Dr. Gonzo: Another Kind of Other

> *Oscar was one of God's own prototypes – a high powered mutant of some kind who was never even considered for mass production. He was too weird to live and too rare to die*[7]

If Raoul Duke may be treated as a modern kind of rogue – as one refusing to conform to society's rules and norms, demanding the right to be "other" – what then of someone not choosing to be other, but born as one? This question arises in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in *On the Road* and in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In the first (as discussed in chapter 2) it arises in connection with Jim, whose "otherness" is dictated by the color of his skin. Jim has had no say in becoming other: born a slave he is by definition the ultimate kind of "other", and in the eyes of the establishment little more than an animal. Huck Finn, on the other hand, while born into poverty, is being raised by well-meaning, decent middle-class people (the Widow Douglas and Ms. Watson) and leaves society behind on his own accord – choosing to be "other"

In *On the Road* the distinction between the types of "other" is evident in the difference between Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Sal is a middle-class college student whose choice to leave the mores and norms of society behind stems from his disillusionment in the face of a burgeoning consumer-culture – his desire for something more meaningful. Sal never severs the ties to his past, and always has the opportunity to write home for funds or to go home to rest. In *On the Road* this side of the spectrum is occupied by Dean Moriarty. Dean is described as a natural-born road person: "Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he was actually born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles" (*On the Road*, 3). Dean's life has been a rootless and restless one, and one of ceaselessly searching for somewhere to belong.

[7] Thompson: 1979, 515.

We find this same duality in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the difference between Raoul Duke and his "Samoan" attorney Dr. Gonzo. Where the real-life Duke was Hunter Thompson, the real-life Dr. Gonzo was Mexican American Oscar Zeta Acosta, a California lawyer born in El Paso, Texas, and raised in Riverbank, California. While Thompson was born and raised in a middle-class home in Louisville, Kentucky and in many ways became an "other" by choice, Acosta never had any say in the matter. He was born in between, so to speak – born Mexican, raised American and thus belonging completely to neither. The story of Acosta's life is related in his *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), a story of a man in the search of roots, mixed in with (as in *Fear and Loathing*) a lot of drugs, booze and criticisms of contemporary America. His is the story of a born "other" who searches for a different American Dream than the one Thompson chases in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Acosta was raised by first generation immigrant parents in "a two room shack without a floor" in a "corner of the world [where] there were only three kinds of people: Mexicans, Okies and Americans. Catholics, Holy Rollers and Protestants. Peach Pickers, cannery workers and clerks" (in Thompson, 1979, 503). In this kind of "world", Acosta was labeled "Mexican" with no choice in the matter. Acosta's *Autobiography* relates the story of his search for a true identity: "With a head full of speed, a wilted penis and a can in my hand, my knuckles redden as I hold tightly to the wheel and plunge headlong over the mountains and into the desert in search of my past…" (Acosta, 71). While Thompson's journeys seem to be about rooting out evil and corruption – on shedding a vengeful light on 1970s America, Acosta's story is more personal. Where Thompson chastises a society from which he has willingly removed himself, Acosta is searching for a society to belong to.

In *Fear and Loathing*, Dr. Gonzo functions as a sort of foil to Raoul Duke. His outrageous behavior makes Duke's frantic behavior seem more "normal". Next to Gonzo's,

Duke's actions often seem more "sane". In *On the Road* Dean Moriarty carries the same function, mirroring but also exaggerating Sal Paradise's traits. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Jim functions in a similar way. Thus, in each of these three novels we find a duality: "others by choice" versus "others by birth", where the latter are used as "mirrors" – as exaggerations of the main-protagonists' traits. Jim, Dean and Dr. Gonzo are rootless people, while their counterparts – Huck, Sal and Raoul Duke – seem to have deliberately severed their roots and their ties to society.

…………………………………………………

> *The best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this*[8]

I have here sketched the picaresque features of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The survey of the narrative structure, character traits, etc. has hopefully been helpful in the portrayal of the "roguish" features of Gonzo journalism. In the next chapter I will focus on a trait common to both the picaresque and traditional journalism – perhaps the most important feature of both Gonzo and the Picaresque: that of social critique and commentary. In fear of repeating myself I once again invoke the statement from Karl Kerényi that the picaresque is a "means of revolt" against "tradition" (in Blackburn, 13). I think it safe to say that Gonzo Journalism is nothing if not a revolt against a revolting society. The nature of Gonzo (being a hybrid between fiction and journalism) might even make such a revolt more poignant and straightforward, as the fictionalized account of Duke and Dr. Gonzo take place, not in a fictitious society but in a real setting. Whereas one might blow off the chaos of a purely fictional picaresque as a mere exaggeration for dramatic effect, one cannot ignore the fact that

[8] Thompson: 1979, 106.

Fear and Loathing is also an account (albeit hyperbolized) of actual events. Thus, in the following I will look at the circumstances surrounding the events of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. What was it about that "foul year of our Lord 1971" that spurred Thompson to write his critique of this "doomstruck era"?

CHAPTER FOUR:

DUKE'S QUEST – CHASING AN AMERICAN DREAM

> *Our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country – but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that.* [9]

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas presents both a grim view on American society in the 1970s and a sad epitaph for the broken promises of the 1960s – the failure, as it were, of the many youth-movements who strove to change the country (and the world), but whose spirits could not in the end triumph. Fear and Loathing is fraught with references to this bygone era, and through these and the contrasting images Thompson provides of the "new" decade we might grasp the importance of the sixties, and the disappointment their end carried with it. In this chapter I will survey those many references and try to filter out the darker aspect of Duke and Dr. Gonzo's journey.

Epitaph for a Paradise Lost?

In chapter 8 of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* we find Raoul Duke approaching the threshold of fatal fatigue. The "savage burn" on Las Vegas has taken its toll. Dr. Gonzo has ingested a copious amount of LSD and is wreaking havoc on Duke's already troubled mind. Locking his "attorney" safely in the bathroom to ride out the effects of the acid, Duke finally finds his respite, and begins reflecting on his past, ignoring "that nightmare in the bathroom…[j]ust another ugly refugee from the Love Generation, some doom-struck gimp that couldn't handle the pressure" (58-62) . Interestingly, it is not "Duke as narrator"

[9] Thompson: 1971, 18.

reflecting on his past; rather, it is the before mentioned remembered "I" remembering, so to speak, a more remote past, one too far removed, perhaps, for the remembering "I." I quote this important passage at length:

> Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era – the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it *meant something.* Maybe not, in the long run…but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant […] it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash […]. There was madness in any direction, at any hour. […] You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning […] [a] sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. […] Our energy would simply *prevail*. […] We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave… So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back (66-68).

The 1960s, exalted by Raoul Duke, saw the emergence of a number of "youth-movements" from the ranks of the post-WW2 "baby-boom" generation. These movements made

themselves heard on the political arena. Whether as political movements, civil-rights movements or part of the "counterculture", these young people took a stand against the establishment. In 1962, a student activist movement called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) issued a statement known as the "Port Huron Statement" through which they voiced their discontent with contemporary American values, politics, and society at large. Soon, the politicization of America's youth took speed and a new era of awareness and participation was ushered in (Tindall, et al. *The Essential America*, 575-577).

These youth-groups, then, are perhaps what one could describe as "new" forces working against the "forces of Old and Evil" Duke speaks of. The "establishment" – the conservative forces present in all layers of society, be it in government, the education system or in powerful corporations might constitute these "forces". In the introduction to the Port Huron Statement – "Agenda for a Generation" – its authors wrote of contemporary America that it "rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than "of, by, and for the people"" ("Port Huron Statement"). This "tradition-bound" nature of America may be the doing of Duke's "forces of Old and Evil", in *Fear and Loathing* he continues his battle against them in keeping with the part of the picaro: to "revolt against the rigidity of tradition".

In his novel Thompson recognizes the failure of the SDS to be what they had intended – their failure to unite the youth against the "tradition-bound." Raoul Duke reflects on "Altamont" – a free rock-concert held in Northern California in December 1969 – as the final blow that killed this dream (179-80). *The Rolling Stones* (who organized the concert) hired members of the Hells Angels to act as "stewards" (bouncers), and the "Angels" ended up killing a member of the audience (*Rolling Stone Magazine*, 1970). For Duke, this day marks the end of the SDS's futile attempt "to reconcile the interests of the lower/working class biker/dropout types and the upper/middle, Berkeley/ student activists" (179). Driving to Las

Vegas in 1971, John Lennon's "Power to the People" comes on the radio: "'Power to the People – Right On!'" John Lennon's political song, ten years too late. 'That poor fool should have stayed where he was,' said my attorney. 'Punks like that just get in the way when they try to be serious'" (21). The politicization of the youth was over; John Lennon's song was too little, too late.

Duke's reminiscing about "San Francisco in the middle-sixties" brings us to a different aspect of the sixties' scene. In addition to – if not in combination with – the politicization of America's youth, many young people were being drawn to the use of psychedelic drugs. Former Harvard professor turned acid-guru, Timothy Leary preached the words of "Turn on, tune in, drop out" – a mantra for the burgeoning LSD movement. Leary "crashed around America selling consciousness expansion," (178) presenting LSD to America's youth as a means of opening and expanding one's mind. In the San Francisco Bay area, author Ken Kesey and his band of "Merry Pranksters" set up a commune in La Honda where they experimented with psychedelics and new art forms. When Duke speaks of "madness in any direction" he refers specifically to La Honda as a concrete place "where people were just as high and wild as I was" (66). I will return to the "drug culture" later in this chapter.

All in all there seems to have been a new-found enthusiasm for the future among the young generation of the sixties. Both the claiming of power by the political movements and the "mind-expansion" of the psychedelic movement illustrate a positive spirit. This is the era and the scene that Duke celebrates in his quiet memories. But finally, "the wave" had to break, and thus it set the stage for Duke's rampage and critique.

A Proper End to the Sixties

In a short passage in part one, chapter 3 Duke reflects on a series of elements that, combined, signal "a proper end to the sixties" (22). The references he makes are to a number of people who, for him, represent the essence of the sixties – different pieces that together formed a complete picture, as it were:

> Tim Leary a prisoner of Eldridge Cleaver in Algeria, Bob Dylan clipping coupons in Greenwich Village, both Kennedys murdered by Mutants, Owsley folding napkins on Terminal Island, and finally Cassius/Ali belted incredibly off his pedestal by a human hamburger, a man on the verge of death (22-23).

Timothy Leary, as mentioned above, was an important figure-head and partly the founder of the LSD movement. In 1970, having escaped from prison in the US, Leary fled to Algeria and sought the protection of exiled Black Panther Party member Eldrige Cleaver. In this first reference we find signals of the demise of not only the LSD movement – with Leary brought down by the law – but also that of the political movements, with Cleaver – an influential member of the Black Panthers – driven into exile (*New York Times*, 2006).

The reference to Bob Dylan is a bit hazy, but it could be a comment on how the musical output of one of the most important protest-singers of the early days of the Civil Rights movement had changed. In 1971, Dylan, who was present and participating on the day that Martin Luther King gave his "I have a Dream" speech on August 28th, 1963 was not the political figure he used to be.

Like Leary, Owsley Stanley was an important figure in the sixties LSD movement. A mass producer of LSD and soundman for the band that provided much of the sound of the

Acid movement – The Grateful Dead – Owsley was so instrumental in the shaping of the movement that his name is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as denoting “an extremely potent, high-quality type of LSD”. In 1970, Owsley was imprisoned on Terminal Island, off the coast of Los Angeles (*San Francisco Chronicle*: 2007). For Duke, the incarceration of two such prominent figures of the LSD movement is proof of its end.

Duke’s reference to Muhammad Ali being beaten by Joe Frazier in 1971 is to the “demise” of another important figure of the sixties’ youth. Ali was the undisputed heavy-weight champion of the world who defied the US government by refusing his draft to the war in Vietnam. According to an article in Time Magazine, “Ali became the symbol of opposition to the war” (“The Greatest is Gone”, 1978). In another passage in *Fear and Loathing* Duke reads a newspaper article on Ali’s appeal before the Supreme Court, contesting his 5-year prison sentence “for refusing to kill slopes” (74). Because of Ali’s fervent refusal to fight, he lost his boxing license as well as his title as “Heavy Weight Champion of the World” (“The Greatest is Gone”). In a 1978 article for *Rolling Stone Magazine* on Ali (“Last Tango in Vegas: Fear and Loathing in the Far Room”) Hunter S. Thompson wrote: “He came, he saw, and if he didn’t entirely conquer – he came as close as anybody we are likely to see in the lifetime of this doomed generation” (in Thompson, 1979, 589). For Raoul Duke, Frazier’s victory over Ali is yet another harsh reminder that the “Main Era” has come to an end.

I have left the third reference in Duke’s “list” for last, because it is perhaps the most important one. “Both Kennedy’s murdered by mutants” refers to the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy in 1963 and 1968, respectively. In a 2007 article on the “Zapruder film” Øyvind Vågnes quotes Fredric Jameson as referring to the sixties as “the moment of a paradigm shift” that began with the assassination of John F. Kennedy (quoted in Vågnes, 2). JFK was seen as a new force in American politics – a man who would lead the country in a new direction. He was a young man and therefore more of a role-model for the youth of the

nation than any other previous president. In 1968, while running for the Democratic nomination for the presidential election, JFK's younger brother, Robert, was assassinated. Perhaps even to a greater extent, this tragic event truly marked the victory of the "forces of Old and Evil" – especially for Hunter S. Thompson, as it paved Richard Nixon's way to the White House.

As the "wave finally broke and rolled back", marking the end of the sixties, many of the young people in America who had been involved in the many movements that characterized the era found themselves in its wake. Raoul Duke's description of Dr. Gonzo as an "ugly refugee from the Love Generation" – as he struggles with the effects of the massive dose of LSD he has consumed – may well have been a fitting description of many unfortunate souls in the aftermath of the sixties. Where drugs were initially seen as a means of "consciousness expansion", they soon became an end onto themselves. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* Tom Wolfe describes a "debate" between Ken Kesey and Owsley Stanley. Kesey has started talking about quitting Acid, as it has served its "vehicular" purpose: "There's no use opening the door and going through it and then always going back out again" says Kesey, "We've got to move on to the next step". To which Owsley replies: "Bullshit, Kesey! It's the *drugs* that do it. It's all the drugs man. None of it would have happened without the drugs" (Wolfe, 321-22). This notion that drugs were mainly a means toward a greater goal was dropped at one point, and "getting high" became the ultimate goal – the idea of enhancing reality gave way to a more somber idea of blocking reality out. Raoul Duke's take on this subject is formulated thus: "My attorney has never been able to accept the notion – often espoused by reformed drug abusers […] – that you can get a lot higher without drugs than with them. And neither have I, for that matter" (1971, 63).

Fear and Loathing: A Chemically Enhanced Picaresque

> *The picaro is a pragmatic, unprincipled, resilient, solitary figure who just manages to survive in his chaotic landscape, but who, in the ups and downs, can also put that world very much on the defensive.* [10]

> *[…] – in this doomstruck era of Nixon. We are all wired into a survival trip now. No more of the speed that fuelled the sixties*[11].

In keeping with the Wicks quote above, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a story of survival. Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo are "refugees from the Love Generation" who try to maintain some remnants of a time that has come and gone, and in the process point as many fingers as possible at the new establishment that has become inimical to their way of life. Their story is a satiric jab at contemporary society and their own behavior is in itself a critical comment on life in the "doomstruck era of Nixon". I will devote this next part of this chapter to Thompson's implicit (as well as at times harshly explicit) critique of 1970s America.

From the outset Thompson seems to be using the characters of Duke and Dr. Gonzo (although they are, in fact, Thompson himself and Acosta) to form a critique of the drug-culture in America. Their drug-abuse is so excessive that it seems to border on the hyperbolic. In chapter one, as the duo races at "about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas" (3), Duke gives an inventory of their "kitbag" of drugs:

> 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 (4).

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[10] Wicks, 60
[11] Thompson: 1971, 178

“Not that we *needed* all that for the trip” says Duke, “but once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can”. Pushing it “as far as you can” seems to become the mantra for Duke and Gonzo. As Huckleberry Finn’s thoughts on African-Americans make his character a kind of critique of its own, the protagonists’ drug-abuse may be seen as a critique that recurs throughout the narrative of *Fear and Loathing*. Thompson’s main characters become almost bodily manifestations of his critique while at the same time they are his “tools” for voicing other criticisms.

In chapter 3 of this thesis I included a discussion of the hitchhiker in *Fear and Loathing*, chapter 1. The novel is about Duke and Gonzo’s “savage journey to the heart of the American Dream”, but in the “Okie” hitchhiker who lives in “a world of convertibles zipping past him on the highways all the time” and yet has never ridden in one, Thompson seems to hint already at the idea that the American Dream is, in fact, dead. The “Okie” (if one accepts Duke’s assessment of his heritage) is presumably a descendant of Dustbowl migrants who came west to partake in the American Dream. In 1971 this hitchhiker has still not climbed high enough on the proverbial ladder to fulfill that dream. Thus, already in this first encounter in the novel Thompson finds an outlet for his critique.

Hunter S. Thompson harbored a loathing for the mainstream media of the United States. In chapter 1 I quoted him as claiming that “William Randolph Hearst bent the spine of American journalism very badly when it was first getting started” (“Jacket Copy” in 1979, 108). Similarily, in *Fear and Loathing*, Duke remembers an article of his being rejected because some “editor three thousand miles away – some nervous drone behind a grey formica desk in the bowels of a journalistic bureaucracy” was not satisfied with it (76).

In chapter 3 of *Fear and Loathing* this loathing shines through in an LSD-induced hallucination. Duke is registering at their Vegas hotel when suddenly:

> 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. "[…] you notice these lizards don't have any trouble moving around in this muck – that's because they have claws on their feet." […] I pointed across the room to a group that seemed to be staring at us. "Holy shit, look at that bunch over there! They've spotted us!" "That's the press table" he [Dr. Gonzo] said. "That's where you have to sign in for our credentials" (24-25)

In this scene the "press" turns into a bunch of blood-thirsty reptiles that have no problem walking through blood and muck. Journalists, perhaps, who would do anything to get their hands on a story. Later in the narrative, as he passes one of his "colleagues" (a journalist from *Life Magazine*) he describes "the *Life* man twisted feverishly into the telegraph booth, chanting his wisdom into the ear of some horny robot in a cubicle on that other coast" (57).

Throughout the novel, Thompson has Duke reading newspapers through which he relates "current events". The first of these incidents occurs as he is fleeing Las Vegas after the first "burn", when Duke is nervous about the potential consequences of his actions as "a criminal freak in Las Vegas" (72). The news consist of troubling headlines that describe the state of the Union, as it were, First, under the headline "Trio re-arrested in Beauty's Death" is a story about a 19 year old woman, dead from a heroin overdose, "whose body was found stuffed in a refrigerator". Next, under the heading "GI Drug Deaths Claimed" is a report on heroin overdoses among US troops in Vietnam, numbering 160 dead the previous year. "To the left of that grim notice" says Duke, "was a four-column center page photo of Washington

D.C., cops fighting with "young anti-war demonstrators who staged a sit-in […]"" (73). Next, there is a story on torture methods used by US troops against Vietnamese Prisoners of War. "One Army intelligence specialist said the pistol slaying of his Chinese interpreter was defended by a superior who said, "She was just a slope anyway", meaning she was Asiatic". The final story is about a pharmacist in Las Vegas arrested because of "a shortage of over 100,000 pills considered dangerous drugs" (74). "Against that heinous background" says Duke, "my crimes were pale and meaningless". Thompson's use of these newspaper articles is a powerful way of showing the state of the society Duke functions in. Duke's "savage burn" indeed seems trivial compared to the crimes committed by the government or respectable citizens.

With the articles on heroin Thompson sheds light on the growing problem with this particular drug, the adverse effects of which would eventually be much more severe that those of previously popular drugs. The descending spiral of the "drug-movement" seems to have lead to heroin. Timothy Leary's "Turn on, Tune in, Drop out" becomes Duke's "hunker down, back off and 'cop out'" (81) or "tune in, freak out, get beaten" (89): "The fatal flaw of Tim Leary's trip" says Duke, was that "he crashed around America selling "consciousness expansion" without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously. […] All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit" (178). He then notes that "'Consciousness Expansion' went out with LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson left the presidency in 1968]…and it's worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon" (202). Perhaps Duke was one of those "eager acid freaks" now reconciled to the fact that the era had ended, and trying to make the best of the new situation.

There seems to be no doubt that Duke is one of those still clinging to different sorts of mind-altering drugs. Describing the state of his hotel room (in part 2, chapter 12) he says:

"The general back-alley ambience of the suite was so rotten, so incredibly foul […]. There was evidence, in this room, of excessive consumption of almost every type of drug known to civilized man since 1544 A.D." (187-88).

The epitome of drug-abuse, however, is reached in part 2, chapter 5, with Duke ingesting a heinous drug called "adrenochrome": "There's only one source for this," Duke exclaims before taking the "tiny taste," "The adrenaline glands from a *living* human body! (131-32). This episode marks the height of the duo's drug-escapades, and also an implicit statement on the downward trajectory of the sixties' drug-culture. Through Duke's extreme appetite for drugs Thompson sheds light on this issue. This is in keeping with the picaresque genre, and the nature of the Rogue, echoing F.W. Wadleigh's claim that "His [the rogue/picaro's] creator brought him forward to expose in effigy the vices of the day" (in Wicks, 21).

Throughout the narrative there are many references to the Vietnam War. These are often found in brief comments made by Duke, but they are nevertheless important parts of the overall social critique of the novel. One such early reference is made as Duke and Gonzo roll haphazardly down the Las Vegas Strip, Duke at the wheel and Gonzo in "a drug coma", both of them "stoned, ripped, twisted…Good People" (29). Duke makes a short comment on a song coming on the radio – "The Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley" – and presents a bit of the lyrics (29). "Thank Christ he [Dr. Gonzo] can't hear this music" says Duke, "It would drive him into a racist frenzy" (32). Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr. is the army officer who was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968 during which American troops murdered ""approximately 100" civilians" (Time Magazine: November 28th 1969, "The My Lai Massacre"). Hearing this song (written in support of Lt. Calley) is too much for Duke: "No! I *can't* be hearing this! It must be the drug" (32). The My

Lai massacre occurred in 1968. For Duke, then, it stands as yet another monument to the end of the sixties.

Caught in the grips of the adrenochrome, Duke, with his blurred vision, catches a glimpse of the TV-news: “Nixon’s face filled the screen, but his speech was hopelessly garbled. The only word I could make out was “Sacrifice”. Over and over again: “Sacrifice…sacrifice…sacrifice…”” (134). In a 1971 “Address to the Nation on Vietnam”, Nixon spoke to America about his plans to end the war in Vietnam “in a way that will redeem the sacrifices that have been made, not insult them, in a way that will heal this nation, not tear it apart” (“American Rhetoric”). In his speech on ending the war, “not in failure or defeat” but in “achievement of the great goals for which they [the soldiers] fought,” Nixon continually uses the word “sacrifice”. For Duke it must be unbearable not only to be caught in a drug-induced sort of psychosis, but also hearing his nemesis speaking of sacrificing the lives of thousands of young men.

Violence, however, is not limited to the battlefields of Vietnam. In a “by-the-way” manner, Duke makes a comment on the violence in Vegas: “we drank a pot of watery “Golden West” coffee and watched four boozed-up cowboy types kick a faggot half to death between the pinball machines. “The action never stops in this town,” said my attorney” (135). In Las Vegas people who do not fit in –undesirables – are dealt with violently, “hustled out to the parking lot by Secret Service-type thugs and given a quick, impersonal lecture about the cost of dental work and the difficulties of making a living with two broken arms” (155). If Las Vegas is the Heart of the American Dream”, than that dream is illusive, at best. The nature of the American Dream and its relationship with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* will be the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE:

FEAR AND LOATHING – A FINAL WAKE-UP CALL

> *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*[12]

In this thesis I have treated both the picaresque and Gonzo as reactions to the socio-political situations under which they were created. Where the picaresque emerged as a reaction against aspects of 16th century Spanish society, Thompson's Gonzo was aimed at the socio-political status quo of the 1970s. I would like to argue now, however, that both the picaresque and Gonzo were reactions against other aspects of their respective societies as well. In the following I will look at the relationship between the picaresque and what has been seen as its antithesis: the romance. Drawing on this, I will then look at the relationship between Gonzo – and in particular *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – and what I consider to be its antithesis: the trope of the American Dream as it has saturated the American imagination. I will suggest that the concept of the American Dream is so infused with generic attributes as to constitute – like any genre – a particular way of seeing and representing the world. Recalling Bakhtin's claim that "Genres […] throughout the centuries of their life accumulate forms of seeing and interpreting the world" (1986, 5), I will suggest that in the same way that a given genre can be used to present a given world-view, the American Dream – so important to the self-understanding of the US – constitutes a particular way of perceiving the world. Drawing upon the modal theory of fiction posited by Robert Scholes in *Structuralism in Literature* I will show that Gonzo is a reaction against another word-world-construct, similar to how the

[12] Thompson, 1979, 406.

picaresque was a reaction against “the foregoing literary developments from which it recoiled” (Chandler, in Wicks, 21).

Robert Scholes’ modal approach to the study of fiction is based on his theory that all forms of fiction can be divided into three basic types, or modes. The three modes he proposes – satire, history and romance – are correlated with “three possible relations between any fictional world and the world of experience” (132). According to Scholes, a fictional representation of the real world can be “better than the world of experience, worse than it, or equal to it” (132).The world of romance is inherently better than reality, the world of satire worse than it, and the world of history is equal to the real world. Sholes sees these three renditions of fictional worlds as conveying “attitudes that we have learned to call romantic, satirical, and realistic” (132). He is careful to point out that his use of these terms (romance, satire and history) must not be confused with their usage in relation to specific genres. In Scholes’ theory modes differ from genres in that the latter is used for “the study of individual works in their relationship to specific, historically identifiable traditions” whereas the former provide “a framework for discussion of literary affinities and antipathies” – that is, it allows for studies into the relationships between different genres (132). Taking for instance the genres of interest to this present thesis, a theory of modes allows us to look for affinities between Gonzo and the picaresque. If the two can be defined as being representatives of the same basic mode, then generic familiarity may be established between them.

A modal approach consequently allows us to pull a given work out of its position in time, so to speak. Strict genre theories might claim that to treat a modern work as a picaresque is anachronistic – that the picaresque as a genre belongs to a given place and time in history, i.e. Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries. Approaching the issue through Sholes’ modal theory however, provides an “in” to the process of establishing affinities between genres ostensibly separated by time and space. In addition, Scholes’ modes represent ways of seeing the world.

As such, I will argue that they can also be applied to any ideology that presents an image of the world that differs from objective, experienced reality.

Scholes illustrates the three basic modes thus:

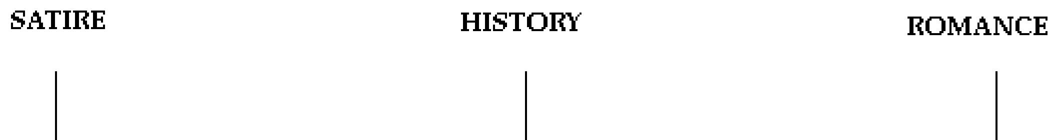

Figure 1 (132)

Placing the novel on this spectrum, Scholes argues that the novel in its many manifestations, belongs “on both sides of the fictional spectrum” (133). He proposes a division of the satirical novel into comedy and picaresque and of the romantic novel into the sentimental and the tragic. This subdivision renders a new spectrum:

Figure 2 (133)

The use here of terms like “picaresque”, “comedy”, “sentiment” and “tragedy” needs clarification. In Schole’s usage, these terms are not meant to denote the genres to which they have commonly been attached, but rather to describe “the quality of the fictional world[s]” they render within a novel (133). To evaluate for instance the “picaresqueness” of a novel, then, one has to look at the kind of world presented in the novel. The way the world presented in a given novel adheres to the principles laid out by Scholes is what designates its place within the spectrum. For a novel to be dubbed “picaresque” the picaresque <u>mode</u> has to be prevalent within the narrative.

The picaresque has been treated as a reaction against the romantic literature that flourished in Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries. Blackburn's estimation is that romance-fictions were published at an average rate of one a year between 1508 and 1550 (35), a clear testament to their popularity. As we see in figure 2 above, the fictional worlds rendered in the picaresque and in the romance are on almost completely opposite sides of Scholes' spectrum. Scholes' describes the picaresque as a "countergenre" to the romance. He places the picaresque word-world-construct between the shades of satire and history, illustrating that the picaresque rendition of the world is not completely "satirical", viz. it is linked to reality as well. The world-view presented by the picaresque mode, while "chaotic beyond ordinary human tolerance" (133), is more closely related to our own experienced world than are the worlds of romance and satire.

According to Wicks (who also draws upon Scholes' theory)

> A fiction in the romance mode offers a word-world-construct in which harmony, integration and perfection prevail: dreamlike wish fulfillment. The picaresque mode offers a word-world-construct in which disharmony, disintegration and chaos prevail: nightmarish anxiety (45).

The picaresque genre, then, was a reaction against the world-view presented by romance-fiction. M.H. Abrams describes the romance as dealing with "a quest undertaken by a single knight in order to gain a lady's favor" and stressing "the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honor, mercifulness to an opponent, and elaborate manners" (35), whereas the picaresque focuses on "an insouciant rascal [the rogue] who lives by his wits and shows little alteration in character through the long succession of his adventures" (191).

With Scholes' modal spectrum (figure 2) in mind I will posit the claim that the word-world-constructs represented in Gonzo and the American dream could be seen as representatives of the picaresque and romance modes, respectively. The antithetical relationship between the world-views presented in the former pair mirrors that of the latter. The American Dream, in its instance as a word-world construct, has shaped the American imagination and consequently much of the nation's cultural output, promoting the image of the self-made individualist and the myth that all may prosper in the minds of the people and the literature they spawn, e.g. traditional "rags-to-riches" literature. I will turn to one example of such "American Dream literature" (Horatio Alger) shortly.

Although most people are familiar with the term "the American Dream" as a prominent staple of American rhetoric and in American culture at large, it was first coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams, who– while the effects of the Great Depression took their toll on the American people – described it as

> the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is […] a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (415)

The basic tenets of the American Dream recapitulate the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence that all men are equal and have the rights of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". However, the very document that spawned these principles was flawed, as, for instance, it was written with the knowledge that certain groups of people were cut off from the

path to “happiness”. “Nothing here about the rich and well-born” says Adams (89). Indeed. But there is also nothing there about the large groups of people whose quests for “happiness” were perpetually thwarted by circumstances beyond their control. The claim that “all men are equal” did not change the fact that they were not. Thus, in its true form, the American Dream has never fully come to fruition. The Declaration of Independence does not claim “the right to happiness” but rather people’s right to *pursue* their own happiness. Thus, one might raise the question if the Dream was ever meant to come to fruition, or if it was merely meant to stand as some illusive goal for people to aspire towards. This also brings to mind the American ideal of “the self-made-man”: society as such cannot guarantee happiness for all, but instead places upon every man the responsibility of securing his own happiness (whatever that illusive concept may denote).

The American Dream stands out as a trope that shapes the way people look at their world. Hunter S. Thompson put this notion into words, saying that “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” (1979, 406). With the “knowledge” that the road is paved for anyone (who chooses and has the required abilities) to climb the proverbial ladder, and reach whatever goal they want, comes an erroneous understanding of the world. It is this illusion *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* aims to shatter.

As we have seen, Thompson wrote *Fear and Loathing* at a special time in history. The preceding decade had been filled with hope for the nation ant its people. As circumstances would have it, though, this “wave” of hope finally broke and left in its wake a country marked by broken promises. For Thompson, Nixon’s rise to power and the death of so many martyrs of the new cause were clear indications that the US had failed to reach its potential. In a sense he acknowledged the principles of the American Dream but also realized that the corruption of American society would keep that dream from becoming reality. With the President as the

main symbol of corruption Thompson wrote: “what a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race this country might have been, if we could just have kept it out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Nixon” (1979, 230). Their grip on the country, however, proved to be all too firm.

Realizing that the American Dream is merely a smokescreen concealing the fact that only *some* will make it, and usually at the cost of others, Thompson implemented his Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing* to deflate the myth. Throughout the novel there are numerous references to Horatio Alger (12, 70, 95, 191, 204), who authored more than 200 typical “rags-to-riches” novels. In keeping with the American Dream these novels told stories of young men who, by virtue and perseverance, rose through society’s ranks from poverty to wealth – from paupers to princes, as it were. In *Fear and Loathing* Raoul Duke describes himself and his story as “Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs” (12) and “a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger” (204). If Alger represents the American Dream version of the romantic “knight errant”, then Duke, as a perversion of Alger, is the new rogue – an antitype to Alger’s virtuous young man. Duke’s behavior is vicious rather than virtuous.

The world-construct rendered in novels like Alger’s represents the world of “near-infinite possibility” that Thompson describes above. The world represented in *Fear and Loathing*, on the other hand, is more reminiscent to the world “chaotic beyond ordinary human tolerance” that Scholes speaks of. Thus, Thompson must make “a beast of himself” and don the mask of Raoul Duke, choosing to be “other” as it were, in order to survive. As the world he observes around him is vicious and cruel, Duke, too, must adopt some of these traits to survive in his hostile environment.

In *Fear and Loathing* there are many references that signal what Thompson saw as the end of the American Dream. En route to Las Vegas to cover the Mint 400, Duke tells their hitchhiker that “”we’re on our way to Las Vegas to cover the main story of our generation””,

to which the remembering "I" ads: "and then I began laughing…." (19). The "main story", as it turns out, is not finding the American Dream, but discovering its demise. Invoking the trope of the road as a symbol of mobility and progress in the pursuit of happiness, Duke recalls a neighbor of his "an out-front drifter, a straight Road Person" who, while roaming the country "looking for whatever it was we all thought we'd nailed down in the sixties – sort of an early Bob Zimmerman [Bob Dylan] trip" (173) wanders through Las Vegas. Once there he gets arrested for vagrancy. In 1855 Walt Whitman wrote of the road that "Here the profound lesson of reception, neither preference or denial; The black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the illiterate person, are not denied" ("Song of the Open Road"). The Road anno 1971, however, has no vacancy and no tolerance for drifters.

In part 2, chapter 12, Duke makes a reference that divulges his view as to what is the true nature of the American Dream. Speaking to a friend in the Circus Circus casino, he claims to have found what he came for:

> He seemed surprised. "You *found* the American Dream?" he said. "In *this* town?" I nodded. "We're sitting on the main nerve right now" I said. "You remember that story the manager told us about the owner of this place? How he always wanted to run away and join the circus when he was a kid?" […] "Yeah, I see what you mean," he said. "Now the bastard has his *own* circus, and a license to steal, too. […] he 's the model." "Absolutely," I said. "It's pure Horatio Alger" […]. (191)

Duke's friend compares the owner to Spiro Agnew, Nixon's Vice President, who left office while under investigation for extortion, bribery and tax-evasion. Once again, it seems clear

that the way of fulfilling the American Dream is through vice rather than virtue. Duke and Dr. Gonzo seem to accept this, and to act accordingly. In their rampage on the City of Sin they become the very symbols of vice, as they lie, cheat, and steal, and, in the end, get out relatively unscathed. The fact that they can function in such a perverted manner and still get away with it is in and of itself a harsh critique of the state of the nation. "Register at the Flamingo and have the White Caddy sent over at once. Do it right, remember Horatio Alger…" (95) says Duke, preparing for a second savage burn. The industrious and virtuous young man exalted by Alger, in Raoul Duke has become an extreme opportunist. Luke Larkin's Luck gives way to Raoul Duke's Cunning – changed to accommodate a new era.

In a peculiar episode in chapter 9, part 2, "Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.", Duke's narration is replaced by verbatim transcriptions of audiotapes. An "editor's note" explains:

> *At this point in the chronology, Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely; the original manuscript is so splintered that we were forced to seek out the original tape recording and transcribe it verbatim. We made no attempt to edit this section, and Dr. Duke refused even to read it. […] According to the tape, this section follows an episode involving Duke, his attorney and a waitress at an all-night diner in North Vegas. The rationale for the following transaction appears to be based on a feeling – shared by both Duke and his attorney – that the American Dream would have to be sought out somewhere far beyond the dreary confines of the District Attorneys' Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.* (161)

During their conversation with the waitress, Duke and Gonzo are given directions to "The American Dream" they have been searching for: "The Old Psychiatrist's Club" – a place that "*never* stops" (165). This illusive location, the waitress explains, is a place where "the only people who hang out […] is a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers" (165). ("It is worth noting, historically," says Duke in a later chapter, "that downers came in with Nixon" (202)).

The continued "editor's note" at the end of the chapter explains 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 weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had "burned down about three years ago"* (168).

Thus, Duke and Gonzo locate the remnants of "The American Dream". But it is manifested by a loathsome place, ironically located on "Paradise Boulevard", that "burned down about three years ago", i.e. in 1968. The "Old Psychiatrist's club" AKA "The American Dream" is now a place of "twenty-four-hour-a-day violence" (166).

Returning, then, to Scholes' modal theory, the picaresque mode seems to be prevalent in *Fear and Loathing*. The world represented in this novel is nothing if not chaotic, to such an extent that the protagonists are barely able to cope. "Panic," Duke says at one point. "It crept up my spine like the first rising vibes of an acid frenzy. All these horrible realities began to dawn on me" (70). The novel is fraught with references to madness (71) panic, terror (23), and other signals that the harsh reality of the world presented here is taking its toll on the protagonists. But, in line with Scholes' modes, the world represented is not so far fetched as to be completely detached from reality. *Fear and Loathing* pushes the boundaries between the

real and the fictional –in keeping with the tenets of Gonzo Journalism – and in this dialogue sheds a critical light on the harsh realities of contemporary America.

As a contrast, the American Dream as a construct distorts reality – creates an illusion to cover it up. It presents an ideal world far better than the real world. According to Scholes, "fictional worlds […] are charged with value [and] offer us perspective on our own situations (133). The myth of the American Dream prompts people to perceive possibilities that might not be accessible to them; to adhere to principles that for them may be irrelevant. If people believe that opportunities are there for them to grab at will, then they themselves are the only ones to blame if they do not take advantage of them. The American Dream and the ideal of the self-made-man have been instrumental in alleviating society of its responsibility to help the "fellow-man" – people must fend for themselves to make it, but the ladder is ostensibly always there for anyone, regardless of color, creed or social standing, to climb. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* takes a stance against this construct, and brings to the surface the fact that, for the most part, only "pigs are upward-mobile" in a nation "ruled by swine" (1979, 106).

To conclude this chapter, then, the difference we see between Gonzo and the American Dream corresponds to the difference between the picaresque and romance modes in Scholes' spectrum. While Scholes' theory applies to literary representations of reality, I have here suggested that it can also be transferred onto real-life ideologies. Like genres and modes, ideologies organize themselves around certain tropes and recurring motifs. Where the American Dream presents an ideal vision of the world end exalts the image of the independent individualist, *Fear and Loathing* presents a world that comes into conflict with these established "principles" of American Society. The novel is Thompson's unraveling of the American ideal, and represents, to the fullest, his revolt against the veiling of reality by tropes that constitute it, as well as against the harsh reality brought about by those same tropes. *Fear*

and Loathing is a force that stands opposed to society's deceit and by hyperbolizing the evils of society counters the effects of forces seeking to conceal them.

No More Games?

What has become of Gonzo? As we have seen the heyday of Thompson's output coincided with the period that followed the demise of the sixties' movements and with the "doomstruck era of Nixon". Hunter S. Thompson remained a notorious figure in the public imagination long after Nixon left the White House, but his interest in politics seems to have waned. "Without Nixon to "kick around" anymore," says McKeen, "the political game would not be fun for Hunter Thompson" (77). As a political counter-force, then, Gonzo faded along with Nixon's presence. The spirit of Gonzo, however, seems to live on. The socio-political climate of this day and age has given rise to different forces that challenge the status quo much like Thompson did. Countering overwhelmingly conservative venues like *Fox News* – one of the most important news-sources in the US – whose motto "Fair & Balanced" does not change the fact that they cater to conservative tastes, are new rogues. John Stewart and *The Daily Show* on *Comedy Central*, for instance, offer a satiric, liberal counterweight to Fox's biased news coverage. In the middle, making common cause with no one, is *South Park*, the cartoon-sitcom which, with weekly shows chronicling current events, seeks to expose what Bakhtin calls "the underside and falseness of every situation" (1981, 159). In *South Park* four prepubescent rogues challenge every preconception and every new vogue – in short, they put every aspect of American society under scrutiny. Here are two shows, both aired on *Comedy Central* that have taken up arms in the campaign against the "forces of Old and Evil". *The Daily Show*, a half-hour long program is now threatening to become one of the most important news-sources for a large number of people. *South Park* has proved itself as a

relentless and fearless force that refuses to back down from the fight against any evil toward which it sees fit to vent its anger.

Hunter S. Thompson left this life the way he lived it: on his own terms. At 67 he had lived "17 [years] more than [he] wanted or needed" (*Rolling Stone*: "Football Season is Over), and so he committed suicide on February 20th 2005. What he left us with was a massive body of work that chronicles the past four decades. But is Thompson's Gonzo valuable to us as something more than historical documents? I think that what one has to consider, in order to answer this question is whether to let the journalistic aspect of Thompson's writing outweigh its literariness. Consider the following argument: In 1949 George Orwell published *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – a novel that stands as a staunch warning to all people to be wary of authority – to question our leaders and not to trade our freedoms for security. The novel was written in the early years of the Cold War, at the height of Stalin's power in the Soviet Union. The novel was conceived, however, so that it can be read as a metaphor to be applied to any time and place. As it deals with a fictitious futuristic world its warnings are universal. Had Orwell's story been, say, a report on the state of Stalinist Soviet in 1949 it would have been recognized today as a valuable historical document, describing a particular period that has now ended. It would not have the universal applicability it has as a novel.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas has, as I see it, in many ways met with this hypothesized fate. As a work of journalism it may be frozen in time – forever bound to the period in which it was conceived. But as a manifestation of Gonzo, the novel is a hybrid of journalism and fiction. As my readings here have hopefully demonstrated, accepting the literariness of *Fear and Loathing* may free it from its time capsule, making it more than a historical document. Bakhtin addresses this issue in an essay, writing:

> Trying to understand and explain a work solely in terms of the conditions of its epoch alone, solely in terms of the conditions of the most immediate time, will never enable us to penetrate into its semantic depths. […] Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* […]. The author is a captive of his epoch, of his own present. Subsequent times liberate him from this captivity (1986, 4, 5).

Although *Fear and Loathing* deals with a particular period in history, its tenets may be applicable to new eras. The novel was conceived both as a chastising account of contemporary America and an epitaph for a promising era that ended before its promise could be fulfilled.

This year, in 2008, a new wave is on the rise in America. Voters turned up in numbers not seen since the 60s to vote for and elect the nation's first African American president. As Barack Obama took the stage on November 4th to proclaim his victory, change did indeed come to America. It remains to be seen whether the changes he has promised will be brought about, but Obama's victory is, in and of itself, a historical change. Thus, today we may read Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as an important account of a bygone era, but also as a warning against repeating the mistakes of the past: a warning not to let this new wave break before its time, and to be wary of what is left in its wake, when it finally breaks and rolls back.

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