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The Road to the Losers' Club: Hunter S. Thompson and the Canon of American Literature

Even though Hunter S. Thompson turned his back on traditional fiction and conventional journalism quite early in his career, he never entirely relinquished his deep-seated literary ambitions. Douglas Brinkley, a distinguished historian who is an editor of Thompson's letters as well as his literary executor, notes that Thompson "wanted to be part of the canon of American literature; he didn't want to be fringed off as some hillbilly buffoon or as the Doonesbury cartoon or the guy that frat guys liked because he drank so much booze" (Wenner and Seymour 344). Thompson "wanted to be taken as a serious American writer whose name (*sic*) was uttered in the same breath as Mark Twain or Ambrose Bierce or H.L. Mencken—an equal to Jack Kerouac or William Burroughs or Norman Mailer or Tom Wolfe" (344). As of today, Thompson's ambitions are yet to be realized. Arguably, his works by definition elude easy classification, and, as such, create a dilemma for postwar criticism which has been enmeshed in a rather narrow New Critical understanding of what can and what cannot be considered an exemplar of literary excellence. Because of limited space, this study cannot dwell on all theoretical systems which have emerged in the last seventy years and which may be applied to Thompson's body of work in order to trace the reception of his most popular gonzo texts—*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1972) and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (1973). This study's main aim is to identify the tensions created by applying theoretical perspectives to Thompson's works, the possible recovery of his texts, and their potential for the subversion of the canon. Because most theoretical systems still rely heavily on a New Critical division of texts into artistically and socially motivated, it is only sensible to start by evaluating the actual impact of New Criticism on postwar literary theory.

Theories associated with New Criticism are marked by a lack of interest in socio-political forces that shape reality. Instead, fiction is to be experienced through its formal features and in connection to older literary traditions which it is following or with which it is trying to break. If these distinctions were applied to Hunter S. Thompson's works, a rather striking dichotomy might be discerned in his texts. On the one hand, he is very

much focused on the external forces that structure his perception of reality, and even his self-discoveries and self-inspections point toward much greater and almost tangible powers at work. This enduring interest in the social and the political basically excludes Thompson from the community of genuine men of letters as defined by New Criticism. On the other hand, even though almost everything seems to stem from politics in Thompson's world, he never ceases to speak to his past masters as well. Thus, there is no denying the extent of the Bloomian anxiety of influence that Thompson carried over his shoulder throughout his life.

Already at the start of his career, he would type Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's novels in order to grasp the flow and composition of their prose. All his life, he would meticulously collect carbon copies of his letters, take solemn Hemingway-like portraits of himself and travel to exotic locales trying to carve out a piece of raw experience that he could later put into his quasi-autobiographical writing. He would write to fellow authors asking for advice or for their agents' telephone numbers, and as far as his behavior was concerned, he would attempt to live up to a certain ideal of a lone macho writer through consuming copious amounts of Wild Turkey and drugs, sleeping around and instigating bar fights and run-ins with the law. Apart from these typical macho trappings, his very writing was an attempt to catch up with those giant men who had come before him. Years after the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, he would brag with unabashed self-confidence that "[i]t's as good as *The Great Gatsby* and better than *The Sun Also Rises*" (McKeen 97). As a matter of fact, both books—Thompson's descent into the very core of American darkness and Fitzgerald's journey into East Egg's dilettante lifestyle—are linked by their narrators' shared need to uncover the truth behind the blinding glitter. Just as Nick Carraway silently observes the collapse of Gatsby's fantasies and Daisy's affectations, Raoul Duke enters the chaos of Las Vegas to bear witness to its decadence and to record its numbing madness. Neither is able to turn away and leave the crumbling gilded reality before it is too late. Interestingly, despite a plethora of discrepancies both texts point to the very same predilection for excess in the American people. In Fitzgerald's case, this obsessive quest for self-indulgence is exemplified by lavish parties and bitter-sweet indifference to human life; whereas in Thompson's book it is the eagerness of wild-eyed Corn Belt tourists to have their likeness projected on a two-hundred-foot-tall screen on a busy street in Las Vegas.

It seems that the greatest advantages of Thompson's writing—the factuality of the narrative and the enticing promise of its candor—are at the same time its main drawbacks. In line with New Criticism, unmediated facts belong to the domain occupied either by journalists or by the likes of William Dean Howells, who cling to the mimetic

representation of life with all its baseness, boredom, and impropriety. And just as fiction is considered a higher form of writing, the novelist is held in higher esteem than a mere hack. This may at least partly account for the fact that other New Journalists fared much better than Hunter S. Thompson, did precisely because they wrote acclaimed novels and plays apart from their journalistic texts. Mailer and Capote started out as successful novelists, while Wolfe and Didion strengthened their position through novels published after their New Journalistic coming-out. In stark contrast, Thompson was essentially a failed writer whose short stories and two novels had been repeatedly rejected by publishers and editors until the day he simply stopped trying to write the next Great American Novel. Of the two completed novels one, *The Rum Diary*, was finally published in 1998, while an excerpt of the other, *Prince Jellyfish*, was included in *Songs of the Doomed: More Notes on the Death of the American Dream* (1990). In all likelihood, the publication of *The Rum Diary* was prompted by Thompson's growing inability to procure noteworthy nonfiction material in the late 90s. A smooth, controlled, first-person narrative is reminiscent of Thompson's masters: Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Neither the form, however, nor the themes tackled in *The Rum Diary* could transform this novel into something more than it already was—a decently chronicled and a tad lackluster tale of young men and women's doomed entry into adulthood set against an exotic backdrop. By and large, Thompson's only published novel turned out to be too mediocre to change the popular view of his works. He remained a journalist in the eyes of the critics, and as such he could never be approached with the same gravity and respect as full-scale writers.

Even though it was reporting rather than belles-lettres that defined Thompson's writing, facts and fiction did collide frantically in his works. For this reason, his two gonzo books *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* as well as some shorter pieces, such as "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved", cannot be easily classified as articles or reportages in any conventional journalistic sense. The fact that Thompson effortlessly blends the steady stream of factual information with hallucinations, theatrics and clear-cut fabrication cannot be validated even by New Journalistic experiments with language and content. Ironically, in the letters to his editor, Jim Silberman, Thompson did confess that the narcotic feel of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was a pure fabrication.¹ He did not write the book while intoxicated with unbelievable quantities of ether, mescaline, cocaine, acid, various pills and

¹ Thompson made it perfectly clear that the truth should not be revealed: "All I ask you is that you keep your opinions on my drug-diet for that weekend to yourself. As I noted, the nature (& specifics) of the piece had already fooled the editors of Rolling Stones. They're absolutely convinced, on the basis of what they've read, that I spent my expense money on drugs and went out to Las Vegas to a ranking freakout. Probably we should leave it this way; it makes it all the more astounding, that I could emerge from that heinous experience with a story. So let's just keep or personal conclusions to ourselves...." See Thompson to Jim Silberman, 15 June, 1971, in *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist*, 406.

Wild Turkey. On the contrary, he structured the book quite lucidly to make it look like an unedited and immediate record of authentic incidents. This is why, at the end of the day, his Las Vegas book is both a novel *and* a reportage, a product of the author's vivid imagination, but anchored in actual, if somewhat distorted, experiences.

It should come as no surprise that Thompson followed in his masters' footsteps and explored the same themes. His writing is literally soaked in American myths and symbols, such as a solitary journey into the wilderness in *Hell's Angels*, a white whale chase after Thompson's ultimate nemesis—Richard Milhous Nixon—in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, the buddy road-trip meant to test one's manhood through blood rituals, and the never-ending search for the American Dream in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Interestingly, it is in Las Vegas, at the Circus-Circus casino that the two explorers—Raoul Duke and his Samoan lawyer, Dr. Gonzo—find the “main nerve” of the American Dream (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 48). The images caught by the duo during their ill-conceived visit to the phantasmagoric casino under the combined influence of ether, acid, and mescaline are not simply an unfortunate, if entirely predictable, upshot of a massive drug overdose. The drugs may enhance and ultimately exacerbate the irrationality and unreality of the unfolding insanity, but they do not generate it. The incomprehensible reality in the form of a grotesque gambling house is already there. And it is precisely among sloppily drunk patrons, gamblers high on adrenaline, among apes, wolverines, bears, and Nazis that the central myth of the whole nation has found the most fertile soil to thrive. Still, literary criticism based on the myth-and-symbol school might not be enough to save Thompson's texts from oblivion. Major theorists of the movement such as Henry Nash Smith, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler or Leo Marx never moved much far from New Criticism. In fact, irony and ambiguity extolled by the New Critics were simply replaced by an underlying network of symbols, myths, and themes that formed a remarkably coherent but at the same time sadly abridged version of American literature.

Numerous breaks with the New Critical definition of literature have been attempted, but as Russell J. Reising points out in *Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*, a number of post-war theories broke with New Criticism only superficially while retaining its classic distinction between truly important artistic texts and socio-political pieces of little importance. For this reason, Thompson's works are still perceived as belonging to the latter group and hence their value, if recognized at all, is seen as inherently less significant than that of the former group. Still, it is possible to encounter within these post-war theoretical methodologies glimpses of the recognition which might be accorded to Thompson's texts. Space limitations considered, this study will briefly outline only a few potential points of entry that could be further developed.

It seems sensible to begin with reader-response theories and to apply Jauss's notion of the horizon of expectations to Thompson's writing. Although his books and articles initially surprised the readers and stretched their horizon of expectations, the shock element was simply not shocking enough in the long run. New Journalism as such lasted only a few years and even nowadays, though immensely popular among readers, literary journalism subsists in an academic limbo which neither the journalistic nor literary studies want to handle. But for a number of years during the late 60s and early 70s the hype generated by Wolfe, Mailer, or Thompson worked well on their audiences. The image of a brave young journalist who rode with the most notorious biker gang in the U.S. for almost a year and got savagely beaten by them was an inherent part of the marketing campaign which accompanied the publication of *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* in the late 60s. The magazine and TV interviews that followed, even the blurb itself, accentuated this thrilling and sexy experience and this fervent enthusiasm quickly caught on. Similarly, after the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a two-part *Rolling Stone* article, the author's relentless drug use became legendary almost overnight. Now a man who rode with the Angels admitted freely and cheerfully to smoking, inhaling, swallowing, and injecting into his body massive amounts of controlled substances. A year later, the same man would join the press bus to cover the 1972 presidential election, a bold and startling move for someone who had spend the previous five years partying with Sonny Barger, Allen Ginsberg, the Merry Pranksters, and Oscar Zeta Acosta. Ultimately, however, the atmosphere of danger and the anti-establishment themes that ran through Thompson's works were not nearly enough to grant him a place among the masters.

Still, the reception and reader-response theories suffer from a number of oversights. Firstly, Jauss's theory of the expanding horizon seems not broad enough to account for a much larger picture in which New Journalism is just one of the many instances of the interaction between literature and journalism, both before and after the emergence of New Journalism. What is more, Jaussian criticism does not leave much room for an in-depth examination of non-literary forces that have shaped the reception of New Journalism and its subsequent scholarship. Secondly, theorists such as Jauss, Iser, and Fish tend to put too much faith in the consistency of readers, whereas the choices and interpretations put forward by them cannot be easily compressed to fit one particular interpretative path. Lastly, as Jane Tompkins rightly notes in "Criticism and Feeling," the rationality associated with reaching the consensus by a given group of readers often masks literary critics' inability to deal effectively with the emotional dimension of the texts as well as of their own selves (169-178).

Ironically, reader-response theories, though admittedly a big step forward from a New Critical detachment and disregard of readers' intuition, leave little, if any, room for the

free expression of feelings. Hence, texts which literally flood readers with an unmediated flow of emotions are recognized by the critical establishment as possessing lesser value than rational texts. Thompson's gush of Fear and Loathing which he experienced while covering the '72 presidential election is a case in point. Not only is he partial to one of the candidates, but also reveals his own deeply personal frustrations and failings: "I feel The Fear coming on, and the only cure for that is to chew up a fat black wad of blood-opium about the size of a young meatball and then call a cab for a fast run down to that strip of X-movie houses on 14th Street... peel back the the (*sic*) brain, let the opium take hold, and get locked into serious pornography" (53). Obviously, fragments such as this did little to endear him to conservative critics who cut their teeth on Wimsatt and Beardsley's admonitions against affective and intentional fallacies.

The fact that emotionality in texts as well as in critical theory is suppressed can be read as a lingering attachment to the New Critical thought according to which intellect, wit, and rationality are associated with highbrow literature, while emotions, intuition, and empathy belong to the fickle domain of popular prose. For this reason, Thompson's in-your-face attitude, which he does not even attempt to tone down, sets his writing apart from the fellow New Journalists and other literary journalists whose writing is much more polished and restrained. Because Thompson does not keep his distance from the stories, he is reporting and he frequently puts action in motion, he removes himself even further from the safe distinctions between an author and a narrator, a witness and a participant. How exasperating and maddening it must be to dissect the man behind *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, when the author is both the main hero of the story and the reporter covering the very same event, a fiction writer recreating and reshuffling real and imagined scenes and an unreliable narrator by the name of Raoul Duke who by no means corresponds smoothly to the real Hunter S. Thompson. Because the roles are not strictly outlined and dispensed among the actors and the book is so rapidly paced, different levels of narration shift discreetly throughout the book. As a result, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* comes across as a particularly difficult book in terms of its possible classification and categorization.

An alternative pathway for Thompson's texts to enter the contemporary canon is of course to knock at the poststructuralist door. Apparently awkward and ambiguous wording, vulgarity, jargon, and slang cease to be a barrier and language itself becomes the locus of attention, a site at which form and meaning collapse into one inseparable whole. This is why even non-valid and ill-formed narratives can be rescued from ridicule and obscurity through a comprehensive analysis that utilizes poststructuralist theories. Mixing different rhetorical modes (for instance, narration and argumentation) does not necessarily invalidate a given text and works such as nonfiction novel or literary journalism

can occupy the same position in the critical grid as realistic fiction or metafiction. The problem, however, arises when the emphasis placed on linguistics effectively cancels out the political aspects of a given work. Thompson's *gonzo journalism*, which he stumbled upon in 1970 while covering the Kentucky Derby, poses precisely such a dilemma. On the one hand, Thompson's linguistic pyrotechnics is what makes his texts so memorable and intense. The frequent use of ellipses, capitalization of significant nouns, rhetorical questions used to engage readers in the narrator's mental processes, profusion of verbal abuse and curses inserted solely for the sheer fun of it, and formal experiments with fake editor's notes, transcripts, third person narrative, and interviews—all this is meant to test the boundaries of contemporary writing and to break as many rules of literary appropriateness as possible. Through direct unpolished language Thompson manages to vent his dissatisfaction and frustration with reality. His language is not only a tool but also a means of exploring the pitiful existence of "220 million used car salesmen" (*Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail* 389). On the other hand, experimentation with narrative structure, non-standard writing and unadorned frankness may once again shift the critical eye from the social and onto the cultural. In other words, Thompson may turn into a rebellious writer whose chief mission is to disrupt the literary *status quo* and mock literary giants through an ostentatious break with the literary and journalistic decorum. Seen in this light his place within the literary culture is that of a joker, dissenter, and literary *enfant terrible*. Standing at the crossroads of journalism and literature allows him to cross certain boundaries freely and without regrets. Still, positioning Thompson as a cultural rebel, an unruly performer, seems to stand in sharp contrast to his life-long interest in politics and the true face of American society. Sidestepping his involvement in national and local politics in order to interpret his texts as elaborate tests of the margins of reportage, autobiography and narrative would run counter to the objectives he set out to achieve in his works in the first place.

Of course, most critical theories, including those associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism, tend to highlight only selected aspects of interpretation while overlooking other points of entry. Even Marxist theories as espoused by Fredric Jameson in *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* would have Thompson's works analyzed as strictly political texts but without considering the relation between the diversity of forms employed in them and the historical moment of their creation. Moreover, the emphasis placed on the political unconscious, which seemingly undergirds each and every text, is in itself highly problematic, as Edward Said suggests in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. In fact what vests Said most is a marked tendency to separate "imagination... from thought, culture from power, history from form, texts from everything that is *hors texte*," or conversely, a penchant for familiar, grandiose proclamations that

after all everything is political, but without explicitly stating what “everything” and “political” mean (169).

Perhaps the inclusion of history and culture into the interpretative mode may be the answer. For instance, the New Historical analysis welcomes Thompson’s texts which function as a valuable first-hand record of the culture and politics of the late 60s and early 70s. After all, New Historicism functions as a backdoor through which many previously unknown or underappreciated texts may, if not enter, than at least warily approach the canon. The many benefits of New Historicism and cultural studies are clear, yet the fact that each and every piece of broadly understood art or writing may be considered an object worth studying in a way cancels the need for maintaining a canon. If ads, talk shows, stickers, murals, and toys are discussed and analyzed on an equal footing with sculpture, poetry, and art-house cinema, then the artistic canons become relics of the now defunct division into highbrow and lowbrow art. Obviously, canons are still revered and will not disappear any time soon as the need to classify, catalogue, and prioritize objects around us is as strong as ever.

One argument in favor of maintaining a strong literary canon is that it provides a benchmark for a proper evaluation of the new material. Of course, the opponents may ask why should a postmodern text be judged through a juxtaposition with literary standards set in the mid-nineteenth century or earlier? Yet, for purely pragmatic reasons, the vast majority of readers and critics alike have to accept the fact that the canon of American literature does exist and is preserved, propagated, and disseminated in schools and higher learning institutions, as well as in popular culture around the globe. As of today, no arrangement has been worked out in which the canon would not assume the central position either as the ultimate arbiter of taste or the contemptible enemy of multiculturalism. The vast majority of scholars want to either preserve the canon in its current form or expand it as far as possible, but only a handful would do away with it altogether. The question that remains is whether it is possible to effectively widen, transform, or bend the canon so as to include Hunter S. Thompson’s works.

The difficulty of deciding upon Thompson’s place within American literature makes the inclusion of his works in the canon so problematic. The three most common methods of challenging and penetrating the canon do not apply easily to Thompson’s body of work. Following the first and least intrusive method would be to prove that comparable pieces of literary journalism have already been included in the canon in earlier decades. Unfortunately, not even Thompson’s favorite writers—Hemingway, Conrad, Donleavy, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner—could be brought to testify in his favor as their own semi-autobiographical or parajournalistic writing followed quite different paths. Conversely, it is possible to establish that even though Thompson’s texts lack direct predecessors, they are nonetheless engaged in an

endless dialogue with past masterpieces through recurring themes, mythic structures, and of course, the anxiety of influence. This interpretative path, however, as already examined, yields too few usable arguments for the inclusion of Thompson's works into the canon. The attempts to compress a new work's interpretative spectrum in order to fit canonical moulds leave out too many promising pathways that may lead to new interpretations.

The second method is probably the hardest to accomplish, as it calls for re-inscribing Thompson's works in terms of literature, not journalism, and situating him as a novelist rather than a reporter. But after all, it is this peculiar merger of fiction and fact that is precisely what distinguishes Thompson from other literary journalists and were the second half of that equation to be erased, the result would be much plainer and uninvolved than the starting mixture. What is left is the last method—a creation of an alternative canon, a canon of literary journalism which could challenge the official literary canon. Two issues come to mind, however. Firstly, Thompson is associated with the New Journalism phenomenon rather than with contemporary literary journalism and his works rarely appear in modern anthologies. Secondly, the existence of alternative canons does not necessarily mean that they pose any real threat to the central canon. The proliferation of subcanons, countercanons, and alternative canons creates the impression of a specialist literary boutique where every reader can find his or her ultimate canon while naively believing that all the lists of canonized works are equally important. In reality, there is only one basic canon of American literature which may vary slightly in the anthologies or in different academic courses and which is circulated and disseminated through specific cultural channels, such as best-selling lists at prominent literary magazines or journals, curricula for the first-year students, prestigious re-editions, movie and theater adaptations, etc. All the other canons are mere supplements added only when the readers have already been acquainted with the classics. In a way, New Journalism makes sense only in relation to a larger literary heritage. More than that, the appeal of Thompson's books stems from the fact that readers are able to identify his violations and crimes against the unyielding division of texts into literature and journalism. Perhaps it is against this underlying grid of criteria that works such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* perform fully by upsetting and disrupting the established way of approaching texts.

Although in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, Jane Tompkins suggests that those texts which do not echo the dominant ideology and principles of the cultural elites soon lose their attraction and are abandoned in the deepest vaults of libraries, Gerald Graff argues in *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* that the majority of subversive works are assimilated into the dominant cultural modes and are hence rendered harmless (2). Following Tompkins's analysis first, it may be posited that because Thompson's writing runs counter to the established literary modes and

themes, his works were ultimately dismissed as somewhat entertaining but, all things considered, insignificant examples of a social and historical phenomenon of the counterculture. The fact that he managed to secure only a handful of strong literary connections and he consciously kept away from publishing centers and literary establishments further reduced his chances of getting ahead in the literary world. Interestingly, while analyzing American best-selling novels of 1960-1975, Richard Ohmann concluded that the most popular works pertained to the personal trouble of the Professional-Managerial class. Psychological distress, mental illness, or emotional struggle saturated novels such as Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, whereas social and political forces were glossed over or hidden from view. By contrast, the cancer that Thompson describes in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* affects the whole nation and it is a public, not private disease. Actually, in a country where every citizen manifests the symptoms of the illness, the President is the sickest person of all. Beside such an obvious divergence from the personal illness scenario, the heroes of Thompson's books, who are struggling with the nationwide pandemic of Fear and Loathing, do not really belong to the Professional-Managerial class. Bitterly disappointed drug addicts, high-strung political junkies, and volatile journalists roaming the country in search of some loosely defined myths certainly do not resemble egocentric intellectuals that populate the best-selling novels of Roth, Bellow, Updike, Barth, Mailer, Styron, or Vonnegut. Individuals described by Thompson (as well as his own mirror reflection present in all his works) examine the outside world rather than their inner selves. Their personal problems, addictions, and frustrations are just a way of coping with the unbearable weight of socio-political ramifications of the American life. Their paranoia does not originate from any specific childhood traumas, PTSD, neuroses or estrangement from others, but from the conscious decision of the American people first to elect radically conservative officials and then to let them send young men to a dubious war, incarcerate hippies and dropouts, criminalize drugs, allow the National Guard to shoot protesting students, and permit the cops to assault reporters.

Graff points out that subversion in literature is quite readily assimilated by popular culture and works that handle much darker themes, which cannot be easily translated into a more politically correct vision, have to be assimilated through other channels. In truth, Thompson's works were only partly absorbed directly and were aided by other media channels that appeared alongside them—Doonesbury comic strip, two feature movies based on his writing and several documentaries about him (including Academy Award winner Alex Gibney's *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*) and well-documented friendships with celebrities (John Belushi, Jack Nicholson, John Cusack, Johnny Depp, Marilyn Manson to name just a few rebellious stars). As a matter of fact, the surest way of explaining to someone unacquainted with American literary

history who Hunter S. Thompson was is to mention Terry Gilliam's movie. After all, everyone knows who Johnny Depp is.

But art does not necessarily have to be co-opted in order to lose its political or social importance. Its socio-political aspects might be simply muted through a number of processes, some of which have been already outlined in the present study. In addition, most theoretical systems either concentrate on the universal, everlasting, and purely aesthetic features of a text or, conversely, highlight only its group-specific, political, and social aspects. Even today the questions whether aesthetic concerns matter more than the material, political, and social aspects of artworks or whether this relation should be reversed underpin most canon debates. Accordingly, it might be useful to consider here Theodor Adorno's concept of art which defines art as deeply engaged in the world, but at the same time alienated from its plights as it is unable to prompt any significant changes (Kolbas 86). It is through its utopian non-threatening components that art unmasks its own helplessness at creating mere illusions rather than prompting significant social changes. As a consequence, art suffers from "social guilt" as it is unable to transcend its own aesthetic concerns in order to transform the socio-political reality. But this "social guilt of art" is where the truly radical potential of art can be found (Kolbas 89-90).

This particular interpretation of art rejects the two most popular and widespread critical perspectives—that which rests on the artistic dimension of texts and that which concentrates on their socio-political foundations. As already mentioned, both of these perspectives offer little, if any, recognition of value to Thompson's work. From an aesthetic standpoint, his works are either not literary enough or not refined enough to be analyzed as serious literature. From a socio-political position, his texts are too pessimistic, their edge has been already dulled by popular culture, and they do not contain any reasonable conclusions. Notwithstanding Thompson's enormous posthumous popularity, he will not enter the canon as long as strict divisions exist between the literary and non-literary, between fiction and non-fiction, between the artistic and the political. For the time being the social guilt of Thompson's writing may be, in fact, its biggest advantage as Thompson's inability to exact changes through his texts proves that the aesthetic and the political cannot be easily disengaged and treated as two separate or even mutually exclusive aspects of literature. Most attempts to split them drastically reduce the scope of analysis or exclude texts which do not adhere to this customary division of narratives. Paradoxically, Thompson's overall failure to breach the canon might be his greatest accomplishment. Although his major works continue to be left out, their very presence reminds the critical communities of a large number of non-canonical texts which constitute a steadily growing threat to the official canon.

It is, however, crucial not to fall into the trap of adopting a form of reversed elitism which seems to find comfort and confirmation of one's value in being an outcast, and in being excluded rather than included. The mere fact that certain works are labeled "subversive" or "alternative" does not automatically mean that they possess more transformative, political or social power than the texts which were welcomed in the canon. In truth, literature has no power to transform the reality. And the recurring professional and personal failures of Thompson's narrators reflect this tragic powerlessness in a vivid, somewhat haunting way. Drugged and bewildered Raoul Duke in Las Vegas, Thompson the Penniless and Desperate Journalist in *Hell's Angels*, Thompson the Prodigal Son coming back to the Old South for the Kentucky Derby, Thompson the Frustrated Believer doggedly following politicians through the primaries, Thompson the Embarrassed Consumer chasing Jean-Claude Killy and Thompson's other incarnations from the late 60s and 70s all fail to create a cohesive narrative of their experiences and they all fail to construct any workable agenda for the future. Their shared helplessness is most poignantly revealed at the very end of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. After a grueling year spent on the press bus and after a nervous breakdown following the disastrous election, Thompson begins yet another quest, this time for answers, but since none are available he simply walks "several blocks down La Cienega Boulevard to the Losers' Club" (480), which perhaps can sum up his position both in American society and in the canon of American literature.

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