

MAILER AND THOMPSON ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, 1972

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BOTH NORMAN MAILER'S *ST. GEORGE AND THE GODFATHER* (1972) and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail, '72* (1973) deal with the 1972 Nixon-McGovern presidential race. As a way of situating *St. George* and *Campaign Trail* in their aesthetic, cultural, and historical contexts, I want to appropriate Kenneth Burke's history-as-drama metaphor. To Burke, the terms dramatic and dialectic are closely related, for history, as he explains in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, "is a 'dramatic' process, involving dialectical oppositions" (109). In 1972, rival political interests, Democrats and Republicans, as well as their presidential nominees, Richard Nixon and George McGovern, assumed that the roles of antagonists and protagonists engaged in an ideological conflict between the dominant, pro-war establishment culture and an emergent, anti-war counterculture. Burke argues that, "human affairs being dramatic, the discussion of human affairs [as in campaign journalism] becomes dramatic criticism," a rhetorical act (*Philosophy* 116). Sometimes, however, what promises at first to be a dramatically charged event, like a political campaign, can fail to live up to the participants' expectations, and such was the case with the major parties' conventions in 1972. As literary journalists, then, each the central character and shaping consciousness of his own narrative, Mailer and Thompson adopted their own characteristic strategies to meet the challenge of creating compelling narratives in the relative absence of real-life drama.

Especially compared to 1968 Democratic convention, which both Mailer and Thompson attended, the 1972 conventions were uneventful. Mailer had begun covering presidential campaigns with the Democratic convention in 1960, which resulted in his groundbreaking journalistic essay "Superman

Comes to the Supermarket” (originally titled “Superman Comes to the Supermart”). Four years later, during the Republican campaign in 1964, he followed with “In the Red Light” about the Republican convention that nominated Barry Goldwater. In the following years the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement further divided the country while millions of white, middle class kids were tuning in, turning on, and dropping out. Mailer biographer J. Michael Lennon records that, in the summer of 1968, Mailer believed that “the Republic hovered on the edge of revolution, nihilism, and lines of police on file to the horizon” (405); thus, the campaigns gave promise of drama on an historic scale. While the Republicans were all but certain to support a Nixon candidacy, the Democrats were divided over the pro- and anti-war forces within the party and were reeling from the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. while Mayor Daley’s police and National Guard brutalized protestors in the streets. As a witness to the scene, Mailer described the Democratic convention as “martial, dramatic, bloody, vainglorious, riotous, noble, tragic, corrupt, vicious, vomitous, appalling, [and] cataclysmic” (3). In the aftermath of both conventions that year, Mailer, writing at characteristically breakneck speed, responded with a ground-breaking book-length report, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968).

Meanwhile, Thompson, in an attempt to capitalize on the success of his book on the Hell’s Angels, was pitching to publishers an ambitious but ultimately doomed project to write a book about the death of the American Dream. Deciding that presidential politics offered an appropriate place to begin, Thompson first ventured into campaign journalism by traveling to New Hampshire in 1968 to interview primary candidate Richard Nixon, an encounter which resulted in a now legendary episode in which he was granted access to Nixon on a long car ride under the condition that they limit their conversation strictly to football. Thompson nevertheless turned that experience into an article called “Presenting: The Richard Nixon Doll (Overhauled 1968 Model)” in which he described the “new Nixon” as a “plastic man in a plastic bag,” a slicker, PR-managed version of the “old Nixon” (185). His American Dream project then led him approach Random House for press credentials to cover the Democratic convention. While Mailer came out of the debacle in Chicago relatively unscathed, guiltily witnessing the clash between police and protestors below from the elevated perspective of his hotel room, Thompson suffered personal violence during a confronta-

tion with the Chicago P.D. Traumatized by his experience, Thompson claimed that his post-convention depression rendered him unable to write about the event, and even decades later, in a posthumously published piece called "Chicago 1968: Death to the Weird," Thompson says only that the whole experience was a "crushing defeat" which, for a time, convinced him to devote his energy to the more manageable task of transforming local politics in his own Aspen, CO (128). Chicago had radicalized Thompson, who had followed the admonition to think globally and act locally.

Lennon relates that Mailer anticipated that the '72 campaign would be the "most exciting American election in my memory," optimistically sensing a "new mood" in the country (454). Having arrived in at the scene in Miami, however, he noted the "absence of theater" at both conventions (3). The Republican convention, he predicted, already committed to Four More Years of Nixon, "promises to be an exhibit without suspense, conflict, or the rudiments of a narrative line" (125). Neither event had the potential to satisfy Mailer's desire for dramatic surprises or revelations. He recalled feeling "that with this convention he might finally discover something about politics which had eluded him until now, some mystery, yes, would be at least discovered" (10), but the ineffable never materialized. As a novelist who characteristically imagined life as art, he found that the conventions offered comparatively little for his imagination to process with the same intensity as he had experienced in Chicago in '68. Mailer typically limited his campaign coverage to at least one the major parties' conventions, both of which were held in Miami that year, while Thompson, as his own first person narrator and protagonist, covered the entire '72 campaign from beginning to end, crisscrossing the country on buses and planes with scores of newspaper reporters. Thompson's narrative arc traces his persona from his early coverage as the jaded journalist embittered by the failure of '60s idealism, to the McGovern convert who clings desperately to the dim hope that the South Dakotan senator's populist campaign might radically reinvigorate American politics, to the prophet of doom and defeat as McGovern stumbles over the Eagleton affair, runs a poor campaign characterized by the Right as advocating Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion, and suffers a catastrophic loss. The tedium and boredom of actually covering the campaign, the buses, hotels, and bad food, the endless speeches and photo ops, took their toll on Thompson who, as a stylistic strategy to cope with his physical and emotional breakdown, resorted to Gonzo journalism, dramatizing his desperate attempts to

meet deadlines and to cope with the horrible prospect of another Nixon presidency.

In his 1973 manifesto on New Journalism, Tom Wolfe wrote that for the literary journalists of his era, “the basic reporting unit was no longer the datum, the piece of information, but the scene,” the zeitgeist of an event (50). As early as 1960, when Mailer covered the Democratic convention, he invited readers to think about a presidential convention without getting bogged down in “housing projects of fact and issue” (3). Mailer was nevertheless scrupulous in the reporting of facts, unlike Thompson, who openly admitted to some satirical fabrications like the infamous Ibogaine episode in which he repeated a rumor, which he started, that the senator from Maine’s erratic behavior was due to his use of an exotic Brazilian drug. However, both writers foregrounded their subjectivities. Mailer’s reporting was highly intuitive and imaginative. He makes his subjective reactions to events, which have their own phenomenal reality as conscious thoughts and impressions, a major focus of his account. As a novelist, he was sensitive to nuances of human behavior and attuned to motives both conscious and unconscious: “We engage in politics,” he observed in 1960, “to hide from ourselves,” as the nicotine addict hides behind the cigarette (3). Mailer both psychologizes and figuratively re-imagines history. In *Campaign Trail*, Thompson adopted a strategy he began to employ in 1970 with “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” considered the first example of Gonzo Journalism. Back in his hometown of Louisville to cover the Derby, he almost immediately abandoned the idea of reporting on the race itself, choosing instead to focus on the decadent spectacle of Kentucky colonels behaving like drink-maddened beasts and to place his own participation at the center of his autobiographical account. One year later, he traveled to Vegas on assignment for *Sports Illustrated* to cover the Mint 400, a motorcycle and dune buggy race in the Nevada desert, but when the race quickly disappeared from view a cloud of dirt, he re-strategized, fictionalizing his experience as a mock quest for that same elusive American Dream. In *Campaign Trail*, he again situated himself at the center of his narrative, a rhetorical move establishment readers considered a case of journalistic malpractice; Wayne C. Booth, for example, titled his review “Loathing and Ignorance on the Campaign Trail.”

As leftists and as literary journalists, both writers openly displayed their subjectivities, but neither fully identified with the Democratic Party, choos-

ing instead to think and write independently. Mailer, in fact, consistently labeled himself as a Left Conservative, and Thompson heaped a roughly equal amount of abuse on members of both major parties. The experience of George Orwell, a committed leftist but never a declared Socialist, offers a paradigm here. When Orwell was commissioned by The Left Book Club to write *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a work of literary journalism dealing with the lives of England's working poor, his account was criticized by some readers who expected a doctrinaire Marxist analysis. Richard Filloy argues that Orwell's reliance on personal experience and development of his rhetorical ethos is his "chief means of persuasion," claiming that for Orwell, "immediacy of experience is a kind of shorthand induction," that is, it functions as anecdotal evidence which may be more persuasive than second-hand accounts or facts gathered through research (54–55). Filloy explains, in Burkean terms, that the "writer's character, insofar as it is the means by which the reader and writer are shown to be 'consubstantial,' is basic to persuasion" (59). Both Mailer and Thompson constructed compelling literary personae over their careers which lent their writing considerable rhetorical power. Mailer had achieved celebrity status early in his career with the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and had generated heated controversy based on his notoriously bellicose behavior and outspoken opposition to feminism. Mailer adopted a unique third-person approach to most of his literary journalism, appearing as "the reporter" in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," as "Mailer" in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and as "Aquarius" in *St. George*, and yet all these personae are Norman Mailer who, as a novelist, preferred to situate himself as a character detached from himself as author, but all the third person protagonists in Mailer's campaign narratives are really first-person narrators in disguise. By 1972, following the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), Thompson had become an iconic personality, a rock star, a countercultural sensation, associated in readers' minds with the grotesque caricatures provided by illustrator Ralph Steadman.

As literary journalists, both writers practiced what Tom Wolfe called "saturation reporting" (21), which requires the writer to become deeply immersed in his subject for an extended period of time and to provide in-depth reporting though close personal observation. Again we can look to the example of George Orwell, whose book-length journalism, particularly his time spent as a member of the anti-fascist POUM during the Spanish Civil

War in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), set a new standard for participatory journalism. Mailer participated in the events he covered as a journalist to varying degrees, from his direct participation in the 1968 march to the Pentagon in *Armies* to the relatively detached observer he became at the 1972 Miami conventions, but in his campaign journalism generally, Mailer never chose to make the extensive commitment of time and direct participation Thompson made in his literary journalism. Most famously, Thompson spent over a year drinking, drugging, and riding with the Hell's Angels, and ultimately getting stomped by them. At one point, he even maintained that "I had become so involved in the outlaw scene that I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them" (66). He later covered the '72 campaign from the very beginning to the bitter end while filing lengthy monthly installments in *Rolling Stone*. It should be noted, however, that both writers, at different points in their lives but prior to the 1972 campaign, undertook the ordeal of running for political office, Mailer for mayor of New York City and Thompson for sheriff of Pitkin County (Aspen), Colorado, so their personal political commitment extended beyond journalism.

In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell claims that political orthodoxy almost inevitably leads to bad writing, arguing that "Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a 'party line.' Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style" (165-66). Mailer was particularly sensitively attuned to the styles of political discourse. His dismissed Nixon's style, both as a speaker and as a campaign choreographer, as "pedestrian" (137), and he longed for McGovern to adopt some of the eloquence of Gene McCarthy, for "Whenever it could create a mood, language gave life to the human condition. Totalitarianism was the need to inject non-words into the language, slivers of verbal plastic to smash the mood" (57). It was Orwell, again, who stated in "Why I Write" that the primary motive for all of his literary work was "to make political writing into an art" (314), and both Mailer and Thompson employed their finely-crafted literary styles as a counterpoint to the objectifying effect of conventional journalism and mind-numbing propaganda of political discourse. While Mailer adopted different styles for different purposes throughout his career, his literary journalistic style is often syntactically complex, figurative, digressive, descriptive, allusive, and heuristic in that the reader gets the sense that the writer is writing not just

to communicate but to discover his meaning spontaneously in the act of composing. Thompson's Gonzo style employs a verb-driven syntax (influenced by his early training as a sportswriter) displaying digressions, metaphors, fragments, ellipses, abrupt transitions, and gaps, as well as confusion and emotional outbursts that record a dark reality, sometimes fictionalized, spontaneously and heuristically. Kenneth Burke in *The Rhetoric of Motives* observes that "the more urgent the oratory, the greater the profusion of stylistic devices" (57), and in both *St. George* and *Campaign Trail* we find that, when the degree of the writer's involvement with his subject is at its most intense, his style becomes most densely-packed with stylistic intensity. Sentence by sentence, however, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* is a more artistically rendered and aesthetically compelling narrative than *St. George* precisely because in 1968 Mailer was more emotionally engaged with events than he was in 1972, and the Gonzo passages in *Campaign Trail* tend to be the purest expressions of his Gonzo aesthetic as defined in my article, "What's Gonzo about Gonzo Journalism?"

Literary journalists analyze events on a more symbolic level than conventional, objective journalistic practice typically allows. Mailer and Thompson both saw political campaigns as social rituals which political myths have been invented to explain. Mailer as Aquarius claims that he is "mystical about the presidency" which he believes is a "primitive office" (22-23). In an extended metaphor Mailer reveals his conceit that "In America, the country was the religion . . . the political parties might be the true churches," and that "the American faith might even say that God was in the people" (87). Yet, Mailer also claimed that the Republicans, self-righteously believing themselves the moral majority, were unwittingly in league with Satan, or his emissary, Nixon, the man whom he had famously described as that "somber undertaker's assistant" (3). Reflecting on the debacle in Vietnam, Mailer observed that Republicans "seemed spiritually incapable of hating a war they could not see . . . nobody could see the flowering intestines of the dead offering the aphrodisiac of their corruption to the flies, so was it a compact with the Devil to believe one was a minister of God . . . and never lift one's eyes from the nearest field?" (154). In *Campaign Trail*, Thompson similarly imagined the ritual of the myth of the dying king beneath the surface narrative of the campaign. The American people, he said, collectively believe that presidents, like kings, become feeble or corrupt, and must abdicate, and a new king step to the throne. Facing political pressure over the Vietnam

War, Lyndon Johnson decided not to seek reelection, an event which Thompson compared to “driving an evil king off the throne” (140). In 1972, Nixon reigned as the evil king, and America had become a political and spiritual wasteland. Disease, both literal and figurative, is a major motif in both writers’ literary journalism. Mailer supported McGovern with the caveat that McGovern’s “revolution was a clerical revolution, an uprising of the suburban, well-educated . . . genetic engineers of the future . . . opposed to any idea of mystery” (26). In his 1960 essay “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Mailer drew a clear dichotomy between John F. Kennedy, the hero of the piece, and Richard Nixon, the villain. He posed a final question about the fate of America and the American myth of freedom and adventure. Americans faced two choices: one, Kennedy, who would resurrect the myth, and another, Nixon, the symbol of stability and monotony, who would leave it buried, and Mailer brooded over which “psychic direction America would now choose for itself” (36). In 1972, however, Mailer did not regard McGovern and Nixon as the embodiment of “polarized instincts,” identifying McGovern as “the Democratic Nixon” (22). Both men,” he claimed, “project that same void of charisma” (22–23). Thompson endorsed McGovern much more enthusiastically, and in a world of ambiguity and uncertainty, where appearances often deceive, he regarded Nixon and McGovern as polar opposites:

There is almost a Yin/Yang clarity in the difference between the two men, a contrast so stark that it would be hard to find any two better models in the national politics arena for the legendary *duality*—the congenital Split Personality and polarized instincts—that almost everybody except America has long since taken for granted as the key to our National Character. (416)

Despite the relative lack of drama at the 1972 conventions, such real life events do tend to offer their own conflict and resolution. Dramatically, however, works of literary journalism are typically open-ended, refusing to impose narrative closure on historical events which continue to unfold even as the narratives reach their tentative conclusions. As John Hartsock theorized about literary journalists in the Gilded Age, at “a time of social and cultural transformation and crisis,” and surely the early 1970s were just such a time, they “recognized at some level the impossibility of ever adequately

rendering a contingent world and thus confronted the phenomenological fluidity of what critic Mikhail Bakhtin called the “inconclusive present” (42). In the closing pages of *St. George*, Mailer says he “never found the major confrontation for which he looked” at the Republican convention (221); nevertheless, the event was not without violence. Minor confrontations erupted between the police and the protestors, and Mailer, watching the action from a rooftop, was inadvertently tear-gassed as a helicopter hovered overhead. He concluded that “the action which is going on is sad and absurd and pointless and lost and will not save a soul in Vietnam” (226). Yet later he wondered, without urgency, “Is the day actually coming when there will be real battles in the cities and true smoke over the moon?” (226) Those battles were never fought, of course. Nixon was re-elected in a landslide, only to be driven out of office by the Watergate scandal, plunging the country into what Jimmy Carter would later call its collective “malaise.” The conclusion of *Campaign Trail* suggests that Thompson’s trials and tribulations were never-ending. Foretelling the destruction of America by the greed, brutality, and stupidity of its leaders, Thompson adopted a prophetic tone, prefacing the December chapter, following the 72 election, with an allusion to the Book of Jeremiah: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (459). Indeed, that last chapter assumes the tone of a jeremiad; yet, like the Old Testament prophet, Thompson held out some hope for redemption.

Five years after Nixon’s re-election and subsequent resignation, President Gerald Ford faced a challenge by that same peanut farmer turned Georgia Governor, Jimmy Carter. Neither Mailer nor Thompson covered the 1976 campaign as they had in 1972, but they both made the pilgrimage to rural Plains, GA to interview the man who promised to restore honor and trust to the White House. In “Christ, Satan, and the Presidential Candidate: A Visit to Jimmy Carter in Plains,” Mailer confessed at the outset that during the hour he had to spend with Carter he did “too much of the talking,” and the subject, “ill-chosen,” was religion, a topic on which any politician, especially a devout Baptist like Carter, would need to take care in addressing (316). Mailer made several conversational forays, including a reference to Kierkegaard’s existential claim that we are not, in the mind of God, capable of knowing the goodness or badness of our actions, but Carter was characteristically cautious in his responses. Ultimately, speaking again of himself in the third person, the journalist conceded that “Mailer was finally beginning to feel the essential frustration of trying to talk about religion with

Carter on equal terms” (326), and he emerged from the interview with the deflating feeling that he did not yet have a clear sense of how to engage with and dramatize his encounter with his cerebral and soft-spoken subject.

Thompson spent much more than hour with Carter, beginning with a visit to the Governor’s mansion in Atlanta where he spent some time as a guest. His own essay, “Jimmy Carter and the Great Leap of Faith,” is a rambling and disjointed narrative which begins with his demoralizing assumption that the Democratic nomination would go to Hubert Humphrey whom he had characterized in *Campaign Trail* as “a treacherous gutless old ward-heeler who should be put in a goddamn bottle and sent out with the Japanese current” (135). Reflecting on the failure of the 1960s counterculture which he believed the McGovern campaign symbolized, and the dark days of disillusion that followed, he returned to the theme of rebirth he developed in *Campaign Trail*, sensing that “The electorate feels a need to be cleansed, reassured, and revitalized” (476). He then reflected on a visit he had made to the University of Georgia in 1974 when he attended a Law Day speech given by Governor Carter on corruption within the criminal justice system. What Thompson heard was “the voice of an angry agrarian populist” delivering a blistering speech “which was and still is the most eloquent I have ever heard from the mouth of a politician” (477). Unlike Mailer, Thompson had discovered the dramatic moment, the urgency he needed to engage with his subject. Both Mailer and Thompson had evoked Kierkegaard, but it was Thompson who seemed once again to have taken the Leap of Faith.

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