

A Bastard Form:
The Problem of Celebrity and the Rise of the New
Journalism

by

Danielle Cohen
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A BASTARD FORM:
THE PROBLEM OF CELEBRITY AND THE RISE
OF THE NEW JOURNALISM

BY DANIELLE COHEN

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“The fame of others [is] a common coin of human exchange – words more forceful than mutual political or religious beliefs for establishing intimacy.”

-Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*

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CHAPTER 1

A BRAVE NEW WORLD: THE DEATH OF OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN CELEBRITY

Gay Talese had just settled down with a steak and a bottle of California Burgundy in his Beverly Wilshire hotel room one winter evening in 1965 when he got a call from Frank Sinatra's publicist. It was the eve of an interview that Talese's editor at *Esquire*, Harold Hayes, had arranged with the singer who had long captivated the hearts of America. The publicist was calling to cancel, because, as he explained, Frank Sinatra had a cold.¹

The publicist probably did not realize that this excuse – Talese was to find out it was a legitimate one – would become the headline for “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” a genre-defining profile that would run in *Esquire* in April of 1966.² Talese never did get to interview Sinatra. Instead, he interviewed every individual surrounding the star he could find, from Sinatra's mother Dolly all the way down to the woman responsible for transporting and maintaining his wigs. In the landmark piece, Talese knits dozens of points of view from avid fans, loyal employees, and intimate family members, using a medley of perspectives to paint Sinatra as a complex and troubled character distressed at the prospect of sinking into irrelevancy. Talese's story thus switches between two arcs: the first describes the three-week period during which the reporter stayed in L.A., tailing Sinatra and watching reluctantly from afar as the singer endured the frustrations of his

common cold. Cut between these scenes – and largely dominating the narrative – is the ever-deepening backstory Talese provides to fill in the absent persona of this deeply complicated man – a tale woven delicately from the mass of interviews the reporter conducted with the people closest to Sinatra.

To assemble this portrait, Talese racked up over \$3,000 in expenses – the equivalent of roughly \$23,000 in 2018 – conducting a thorough investigation of everything there was to know about Sinatra: his childhood, his rise to fame, his sleeping habits, his preferred drinking locales, his gift-giving practices, his relationship with his children and his ex-wives, his propensity for the word “bird,” his most trusted confidantes and their various backgrounds and attributes. Perhaps most importantly, Talese attended carefully to every minute detail of Sinatra’s demeanor. The resulting portrait brings to life a vivid and multi-faceted character. We see the childish frustration of a celebrity failing to attract the attention he thinks he deserves, the kindness as well as the arrogance of a powerful man who rewards those who are loyal to him, the bravado and the crudeness of a tough guy who litters his speech with tongue-in-cheek quips when his mood is lighter than usual. Woven throughout this meticulous account is a story arc that is more subtle still – one that links Sinatra’s immediate ailment to his implicit concern that he has reached the end of his career. Talese never explicitly articulates this theme, and yet it is unmistakably there. As we watch Sinatra struggle with the frustrations of having an ailment so common as a cold, he is slowly revealed as an aging star whose time in the spotlight is coming to a close. Then, in a

deftly managed narrative turn, Talese's profile suddenly reverses this impression. In the story's final scenes, Sinatra's recovery from the cold induces a quick turnaround whereby each facet of his life returns to running smoothly, bringing the tale to its heroic completion. The hook for the story is the cold – which brings Sinatra down to the level of the common man – but a more profound plotline follows the celebrity's triumph over the daunting menace of age.

In short, Talese's legendary story took the genre of the celebrity profile and turned it into something that seemed more like a work of literary fiction. His artful narrative interlaced two overarching themes, which it subtly hinted at without ever stating directly: the writer's struggle to defeat the machinery of public relations and produce a true vision of its subject, and the singer's struggle to resist the pull of age and reclaim the grandeur of his power. When published, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" became an immediate sensation, lauded as "not only one of the most revealing portraits of [its] subject, but of what it *means* to be a celebrity."³

Talese's astonishing tale became a beacon of the explosive new style in magazine writing that would later be named the New Journalism. When the genre emerged at the beginning of the 1960s, it consisted of a cohort of young writers like Talese, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion. They published radically unorthodox forms of writing in magazines like *Esquire*, *New York* (which was at that point the Sunday supplement of the *New York Herald Tribune*), *Time*, *Look*, and even *The New Yorker*. Before the decade was over, they had become journalistic superstars, remolding the profession

around a style that had seemed illegitimate when they began.⁴ Over the next few decades, they would dominate the world of magazine journalism – and even book publishing – churning out hundreds of pieces that read like fiction but recounted real-life events. Nowhere did their stories more resemble fictional vignettes than in the celebrity profile, where venerated figures like Sinatra became sympathetic, multi-dimensional characters.

THE ROOTS OF A REVOLUTION

While most scholars use specific publication dates to mark the emergence of New Journalism to the mid-sixties, traces of their ambitious writing style had begun to materialize in the 1940s. In pieces like *Hiroshima*, “Joe Is Home Now,” and “Survival,” John Hersey practices techniques – among them authorial omniscience and composite characters – that New Journalists would later employ more liberally in their proxy-fictional prose.⁵ These writers were also drawing on styles and attitudes that had long been part of both fiction and non-fiction traditions, such as the immersive research methods of Jack London and George Orwell, or Charles Dickens’ knack for “telling small lies in order to emphasize what he regard[ed] as a big truth.”⁶ By revisiting these neglected styles, the New Journalists rejected the dominant authority of the decade: objective, fact-driven journalism, which had risen to prominence in the early nineteenth century in response to an expanding educated class.⁷ While some of these writers were leaving a

journalism world founded on those values, others were drawn to the new genre from the world of fiction, where the realist novel had ceased to be useful in depicting the social fabric of everyday life.⁸ When these factions united, an explosive form emerged that cut against all the literary dictates of the era.

In most accounts of New Journalism, the adaptation of the techniques of fiction to non-fictional writing is viewed as the defining feature of the genre. To a certain degree, this assertion is true – in fact, the hybrid style strayed so much from traditional nonfiction writing that *The New York Review of Books* went so far as to denounce it as “parajournalism” and to derogatively refer to it as a “bastard form.”⁹ In other analyses, the genre’s immersive tendencies – the way in which its writers would let stories swallow them whole to emerge on the other side with a mastery of their subject matter and a wealth of information to relay to readers – dominates. These are both essential qualities of the New Journalism. But, as demonstrated by Talese’s seminal story, there was another element crucial to the rise of the genre: its obsession with the problem of celebrity. In every renowned example of the style, New Journalists distinguished themselves by their readiness to go to unprecedented lengths to show the un-shown, to expose the hidden. As in Talese’s legendary profile, time and again New Journalists cast themselves as caught up in a struggle with conventions and institutions that worked to obscure and package the truth. Their task, as they saw it, was to bring the vivid and charismatic out from behind the scenes of bureaucrats and marketers. They found that challenge nowhere more clearly than in the depiction of celebrities. Among the most renowned of New Journalistic works

are thus those that, like Talese's story, reinvented the celebrity profile by turning it into a character profile – Norman Mailer on John F. Kennedy, Rex Reed on Ava Gardner, Joan Didion on John Wayne and Jim Morrison, Gary Wills and Joe McGinniss on Richard Nixon.

The New Journalists' choice to write about celebrities as if they were characters was not just a response to the public's desperate curiosity about what lay behind the mask of celebrity. The faction of writers had connected this desire to a larger set of problems haunting the lives of Americans in the 1960s – the sense that not merely celebrity culture but *everything* had come to seem unsettlingly manufactured. “[There is a] thicket of unreality,” wrote Daniel Boorstin in 1961, “which stands between us and the facts of life.”¹⁰ In truth, journalists had been pursuing the goal of personal intimacy within the celebrity profile for years, but in the '60s, intimacy and authenticity came to seem profound public problems. For the New Journalists, the desire to understand celebrities as genuine people came to seem symptomatic of a plight spread throughout the American experience. They imagined themselves the bearers of its solution.

Thus, much of the New Journalism hinged on its ability to both transform and export the genre of the celebrity profile. Mailer's glorification of JFK on the campaign trail deliberately ignored the candidate's policies and focused intently on his image, which Mailer cast as closely tied to the world of entertainment. Joan Didion introduced a story about her friendship with John Wayne with recollections of her memories watching his westerns as a little girl, enhancing the intimacy of the connection she shared with the star.

Thomas B. Morgan chronicled the seven days he spent hanging out with Sammy Davis, Jr. in an artfully stylized character portrayal of the entertainer. These writers were constantly contending with questions central to the problem of celebrity in the 1960s and '70s – questions about the deceit of presentation in a mass society dominated by marketing, about the declining prestige of conventional middle-class norms and the rise of a new counterculture, about the generational rift between established authority and the newly assertive young. The celebrity was a product of the industrialized, pre-packaged world that became an increasing target of social critique over the course of the '60s, and the New Journalists, at one level, set out to expose the star-making machinery as illusory. And yet at another level, they gave celebrity a new glamor and extended its reach. In the eyes of the New Journalists, everyone became a star – colorful, compelling, complicated, surrounded by the ordinary, yet able to grip the reader's attention. Groups on the fringes of society got the star treatment – the Merry Pranksters and the inhabitants of Haight-Ashbury; politicians like Kennedy and Nixon; otherwise disregarded people who came to seem extraordinary, like the murderers and victims of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and the soldiers chronicled by Michael Herr.

DAVID AND GOLIATH

By treating the celebrity as both superhuman and ordinary, distant and intimate, the New Journalists were confronting the cultural and political atmosphere in which the United States had found itself in the decades after World War II. Just as they viewed themselves as rebels against the narrow conventions of mainstream journalism, the New Journalists typically cast themselves as antagonistic to the publicity machines of the mass media. They were Davids struggling against the Goliaths of advertising and marketing, eager to escape the shallow and packaged for the deep and meaningful. Indeed, according to Marc Weingarten, a recent historian of the movement, the evolution of New Journalism was driven precisely by the desire of ambitious writers and editors to move their magazines *away* from the traditional magazine fare of fluffy celebrity profiles and into more profound territories like politics, war, and generational conflict.¹¹ And yet, as the examples above suggest, that very effort often led to stories that brought the techniques and concerns of celebrity journalism to new subjects. As Louis Menand suggests, New Journalism emerged from “the discovery that you could report any subject by adapting an already existing journalistic genre in which personality, attitude, and the use of literary techniques, even a little artful manipulation for effect, were perfectly acceptable: the celebrity profile.”¹²

Though apparently contradictory, Weingarten and Menand’s views of New Journalism are in fact complementary. To the extent that New

Journalists escaped the limits of conventional magazine fare, they did so in large part by vastly expanding the techniques of celebrity journalism and by bringing its central concerns to subjects everywhere. New Journalists cast themselves as the chroniclers and prophets of a moment when society seemed to stand on a precipice, with reality so fragmented or manipulated that the truth seemed hopelessly unattainable. In response to the public's suspicions of falseness, New Journalists made their subjects feel real, despite – or, more accurately, because of – the fact that their accounts were so palpably filtered through their own voices. The New Journalists were thus confronting and apotheosizing a desire that had long been central to the realm of celebrity – the quest for authenticity and the longing for intimacy – and they were successful in appearing to find it. By rendering the author a potently present mediator of a celebrity's persona and combining that subjectivity with a sense of authorial omniscience, the New Journalists were able to give audiences the impression of authenticity that they so desperately craved from the figures they celebrated.

JOURNALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Within the journalistic field, the New Journalists saw the dominant form of the era – objective journalism – as part and parcel of the aura of falseness pervading the nation. These writers had lost faith in the journalistic claim to objectivity, and they could think of no better way to portray the

“truth” than to tell their own subjective account of it, tinted by their past experiences, their pre-existing opinions, their limitations, and even their own personal attributes. It was perhaps Norman Mailer who articulated the shared sentiments of this loosely defined group most precisely. “I had some dim intuitive feeling,” Mailer explained, “that what was wrong with all journalism is that the reporter tended to be objective and that that was one of the great lies of all time.”¹³ In New Journalism, writers acknowledged their status as filters through which their readers were receiving the information they relayed, abandoning the idea that they could ever deliver objective truth and opting instead to recognize – and sometimes even emphasize – their own subjectivities. By extension, in celebrity profiles, the writer became not just a reporter but a fan: awestruck by the glamour of the star’s life, inspired by their dedication to their craft, transfixed by their quotidian habits – and, at other points, saddened by the desperate realities of the lives of the renowned.

In sum, Mailer pointed out, the New Journalism was an “enormously personalized journalism in which the character of the narrator was one of the elements in the way the reader would finally assess the experience.”¹⁴ In order to reject the notion of the narrator’s objectivity, the New Journalists needed to *expose* the narrator – to show their readers exactly who was mediating their interaction with the material at hand. A large majority of New Journalistic pieces feature their narrators heavily, or at the very least their narrators’ distinct voices, peeling back the veil of objectivity behind which most journalistic narrators typically hide. Even in pieces when the narrator is minimally present, readers are given the experiential context through which

the information has been gleaned, the hours or days or weeks that the author spent investigating his or her subjects and the activities that filled that time. Consequentially, New Journalistic stories are also filled with the orbit of personalities surrounding the subject, the many filters that impede the reporter's understanding of the subject matter.

Talese's piece is a prime example of this narrative choice. It is chock-full of the extensive collection of characters either working to further polish Sinatra's public image or similarly intent on finding the true Sinatra below all the layers of cameras and microphones. This network is accompanied by a sense of authorial omniscience that suggests Talese understands Sinatra far better than the singer's many associates. As a narrator, Talese is intimately acquainted with the inner workings of the singer's mind, as well as that of each character that surrounds him. New Journalists often flit from their own perspective to that of the celebrity to that of a fan standing nearby, and then back again, a feat enabled by thorough interviews and rigorous research. While early versions of this technique would mainly rely on direct dialogue from the celebrity to recount his or her own thoughts and feelings, a piece like Talese's, which was published just as the genre was approaching its heyday, fluidly conveys everything from the jittery edginess of Sinatra's agent to the bittersweet yearnings of his daughter Nancy without a quotation mark in sight. By combining subjectivity with narrative omniscience, writers were able to build their subjects into characters that felt incontestably human.

A COOKIE-CUTTER WORLD

In making authenticity their ultimate goal, not just in the realm of celebrity but also in reportage on war, politics, culture, social life, and entertainment, the New Journalists were responding to an increasingly widespread anxiety about sincerity. People had begun to wonder whether the information they were fed by the media, the government, and other previously legitimate sources of authority was really true. The increasing commodification of products like food, housing, and even art came under scrutiny. Everything, from the newspaper headlines to the contents of their refrigerators, began to feel intolerably manufactured. To merely report what had been engineered thus seemed inadequate. Society was “resistant . . . to an objective eye,” Mailer contends.¹⁵

This suspicion was the result of a number of cultural, social, political, and even technological factors that cohered to destabilize the notion that an undeniably truthful version of reality even existed. The momentous events of the 1950s and '60s, which ranged from the chaotic violence of the Vietnam War to NASA's trip to the moon, were developments so complex and elusive, according to scholar John Hellmann, that they demanded tools nonexistent in fiction or journalism alone to be reported.¹⁶ Once the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war protests, and hippie counterculture exploded into the public sphere, the long-established traditions of journalistic reporting seemed completely contrary to the anti-establishment spirit pervading the nation. Reportage of the Vietnam War in particular bolstered the sense that the news was being

manipulated by both the government and a compliant elite. While the Pentagon was systematically providing false accounts of the U.S. mission in Southeast Asia, it was simultaneously allowing writers, photographers, and television journalists unregulated access to soldiers and battlefields – enabling the media to vividly reveal the stark realities that the government was seeking to obscure. Reporters – particularly those chasing down the Pentagon Papers at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* – began carrying out independent and more accurate reporting on Vietnam, making the conflict between manufactured image and truthful reality seem both irrefutably clear and highly important. Because this decade also saw a proliferation of mass media, marked by the newly powerful television and radio industries, it was easy for consumers of news to feel both overwhelmed by and skeptical of the packaged information constantly beamed into millions of homes.

The era's most famous denunciation of mass-mediated reality came in the 1961 publication of Daniel Boorstin's widely read *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. Boorstin cited public relations counsels and journalists as two of the many creators of what he dubbed "pseudo-events," bundles of packaged news manufactured for the sole sake of constant, up-to-date reportage.¹⁷ "The making of the illusions which flood our experience," Boorstin wrote, "has become the business of America."¹⁸ His polemic gave powerful expression to the widely shared sense that reality had been obscured by shallow manipulation. As historian James Baughman points out, the postwar American public seemed both enamored of the new mass media –

especially television – and, at the same time, suspicious of its power to manipulate and deceive. They both sought out television and watched their screens with a critical eye, becoming increasingly skeptical of the way this information was being relayed.¹⁹ Catching onto the pre-written quality of their news and the omnipresence of marketing, the American public craved authenticity.

The New Journalists were there to meet the need. They suggested that authenticity could be found in the nooks and crannies and nascent subcultures that had themselves become possible amid postwar consumer affluence, but that nevertheless felt home-grown, wholly unlike the cold, lifeless machinery of the rest of the world. New Journalists thus sought out the outer edges of an emerging youth culture, like the custom car fanatics of Tom Wolfe’s “The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby” or the drugged-out hippies of Joan Didion’s “Slouching Towards Bethlehem.” Like the explosive events of the era, to which traditional news seemed increasingly inadequate, these niches eluded long-established forms of writing and cut against conventional perceptions of reality, lying so wildly outside of cultural norms that they might have seemed, in many ways, unreal. Ironically, it was exactly this quality that drew readers to consider them authentic.

Nothing, however, crystallized the public’s hunger for authenticity more than the transformation of celebrity, which had been subject to the same overarching developments that shaped the world of journalism during the 1950s and ’60s. A generational divide between a youth culture that was fed up with the manufactured quality of American life and an older faction who had

accepted the heavily bureaucratized uniformity of the '40s and '50s was widening, and nowhere was the gap so evident as in Hollywood. The classic stars of the silver screen and the studio era embodied the exaggerated polish of the manufactured celebrity, while young, brazen rabble-rousers who flew in the face of stiff Old Hollywood conventions became the new vogue. These figures – who were actors, musicians, and entertainers, but also sports stars and even politicians – seemed more personal and more real than their senior counterparts. This rift in the cultural fabric went hand in hand with the contemporary model of the celebrity as an entity whose genuine side was hidden – and thus what the public most desired to see.

THE HUMAN PSEUDO-EVENTS

For Daniel Boorstin, the rise of the celebrity epitomized the culture of the “pseudo-event.”²⁰ He understood the figure as a creation of the mass media that had displaced the hero born from “folklore, sacred texts, and history books.”^{21,*} The “old-fashioned hero,” he complained, had given way to the “new-fashioned celebrity.”²² As we will observe, an implicit effort to reverse this trajectory was a central aim of the New Journalists. They not only

* Likewise, in his expansive study of fame, Leo Braudy elucidates the creation of the modern celebrity, describing the entity as attributable to major cultural and technological developments of the 18th and 19th centuries, most notably the rapid evolution of communications and the resulting ease with which individuals could both author themselves and be authored.

sought to restore to non-fiction writing a vitality they feared it had lost, but they simultaneously aimed to transform the images of the stars they chronicled into heroic tales, as Talese did in his renowned portrait of Sinatra. Time and again, the New Journalists cast their innovative writing as an effort to undo the mechanized, sterile image of the celebrity and return their subjects to all their heroic glory. They did so, strangely enough, by writing stars as fictional characters, utilizing the narrator's profound understanding of his subject's mind to humanize and render genuine the star's persona. They would fight what Benjamin DeMott called a "universal descent into unreality" by rescuing their stars from public relations and restoring their charisma.²³

NOTES

- ¹ Gay Talese, "On Writing 'Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,'" in *High Notes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 152-153.
- ² *Ibid.*, 159.
- ³ Rebecca Bengal, "Gay Talese on a New Illustrated Edition of *Frank Sinatra Has a Cold*," *Vogue*, December 11, 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/article/gay-talese-frank-sinatra-has-a-cold>.
- ⁴ Tom Wolfe, "Seizing the Power," in *The New Journalism*, ed. Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (London: Picador, 1996), 38.
- ⁵ For a full reading of these pieces, see John Hersey, "Survival," *New Yorker*, June 17, 1944, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1944/06/17/survival-2>; John Hersey, "Joe Is Home Now," *LIFE*, July 3, 1944, 69-80.
- ⁶ Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight* (New York: Random House, 2006), 13.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ John Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 9; Wolfe, "Seizing the Power," 43-44.
- ⁹ Dwight Macdonald, "Parajournalism, or Tom Wolfe & His Magic Writing Machine," *The New York Review of Books*, August 26, 1965, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1965/08/26/parajournalism-or-tom-wolfe-his-magic-writing-mach/>.
- ¹⁰ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 3.
- ¹¹ Weingarten, *Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 46.
- ¹² Louis Menand, "It Took a Village," *New Yorker*, January 5, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/05/it-took-a-village>.
- ¹³ Louis Menand, "The Norman Invasion," *New Yorker*, October 21, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/21/the-norman-invasion>.
- ¹⁴ Weingarten, *Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 55.
- ¹⁵ Stacey Olster, "New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 44.
- ¹⁶ Hellmann, *Fables of Fact*, 9.
- ¹⁷ Boorstin, *The Image*, 11.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁹ James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), xiii-xv.
- ²⁰ Boorstin, *The Image*, 45.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 63
- ²² *Ibid.*, 59

²³ Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," in *The Writer's Reader: Vocation, Preparation, Creation*, ed. Robert Cohen and Jay Parini (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 309.

CHAPTER 2
SPOTLIT HEROES:
THE CELEBRITY AT THE CENTER OF THE PARTY

In his 1973 anthology *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe analyzed the new style of writing for which he spoke by breaking it down into four devices – all techniques, he noted, that had been taken from the realist novel. The first was scene-by-scene construction, “telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible” to the reporter’s conventional ways of explaining events by summarizing their historical context.²⁴ The second device was the practice of recording dialogue in full, which both “involves the reader” and “establishes character more quickly and effectively than any other device.”²⁵ Finally, Wolfe identified two further stylistic innovations that, on his account, distinguish New Journalistic writing and make it resemble the most powerful realist fiction: the use of elements of “status life” (“gestures, habits, manners . . . styles of furniture, clothing, [and] decoration”) to place characters in a recognizable social world; and, most crucially, the adoption of realist fiction’s classic narrative method of free indirect discourse. The latter technique served, Wolfe asserted, to allow the reader to “experienc[e] the emotional reality of the scene” by depicting it through the eyes of a distinct person.²⁶ Wolfe described the realization that this last method could be imported from fiction into journalism as both a product of intense effort and a

liberating discovery. “[H]ow could a journalist . . . accurately penetrate the thoughts of another person?” he asked. “The answer proved to be marvelously simple: interview him about his thoughts and emotions along with everything else.”²⁷

There are a number of holes to be poked in Wolfe’s catalog of New Journalistic techniques. Nevertheless, it captured an important element of the genre. In their choice to write like novelists, the New Journalists rendered non-fictional people as *characters* – complex, deep, emotionally rich individuals with whom readers could experience a sense of sympathy and whose experience and point of view they could understand. In the act of translating a living human into a character, New Journalists created intimacy, their overriding goal being to bring that character’s innermost thoughts and emotions to the reader. Curiously, that aim was nowhere more evident than in the celebrity profile. Time and again, New Journalistic writers called on innovative methods, many of them pulled from realist novels, to describe media personas – people who could easily seem unacceptably artificial – and to render them as distinctive individuals with whom readers could feel intense emotional connections.

Being the young, in-the-know, get-out-on-the-street-and-talk-to-people kind of reporters that they were, the New Journalists had ample opportunity to profile stars who stood at the center of the spotlight, from the up-and-comers who embodied what Norman Mailer would call the myth of the American hero to young socialites partying with the Rolling Stones. While we will eventually see that the story of the star in decline makes for a

significantly more engaging tale, the New Journalists' fascination with the era's rising stars exemplified the spirit of this group's mission and the cultural pathos to which it was responding. In this chapter, I will examine three widely admired New Journalistic profiles, each of which focuses on a brightly shining star from a particular sphere of renown – entertainment, politics, and sports. Each of these profiles highlights the showmanship and charisma that placed its subject at the center of the party, not to mention the performative quality of his or her stardom. As the decade progresses, we will also watch the generational rift that haunted the world of celebrity deepen, and the pathos of the writers come to mirror that of their celebrities. As younger, bolder stars come to the fore, their journalistic biographers experiment more freely with narrative omniscience, stylization, and other unconventional decisions.

WHAT MAKES SAMMY, JR., RUN?

THOMAS B. MORGAN ON SAMMY DAVIS, JR.

It is perhaps a bit of a stretch to claim that Sammy Davis, Jr. was at the center of the party in 1959, when Thomas B. Morgan and his photographer, Burt Glinn, tailed the singer over a ten-day period. Davis was certainly not a rising star at the time, as the subjects of the subsequent two sections of this chapter were. Nevertheless, Morgan's piece treats Davis like a spotlight star – constantly tailed by fans and autograph hunters, exuberantly drinking and

joking around at the parties he hosts every night, surrounded by equally renowned friends, and heroic in his dedication to his craft.

Morgan, along with Rex Reed, is generally viewed as the writer who did most to discover the New Journalistic potential in the celebrity profile, setting the mold that bigger names like Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer would later follow. After quitting *Look* magazine, where he had already published a number of profiles, Morgan began freelancing for *Esquire* in 1957 under the guidance of Clay Felker, who fostered the type of sharp, cutting profiles for which Morgan would become known.²⁸ Felker guided Morgan toward intimate, inquisitive profiles because he knew, as Marc Weingarten points out, that people wanted to read about “the private lives of public figures.” But Felker didn’t want puff pieces. “He wanted Morgan to cut right to the bone and deconstruct these complex figures.”²⁹ Of the Davis profile, which ran in the magazine’s October issue, Morgan said, “Nobody had ever written serious pieces about entertainers at the time.”³⁰ He felt he had earned Davis’ trust after spending a weekend with the comic in Long Island, and thought of himself as the first journalist friend Davis ever had. In the resulting portrait, Morgan tentatively employs techniques he might have used in a novel to provide insight into Davis’ interior life. He relies primarily on large chunks of dialogue, calling on them to render Davis not only as a vivid personality and a brilliant entertainer, but as a heroically stoic man contending with a world that does not let him reach his full potential due to the color of his skin.

In 1959, Sammy Davis, Jr. was at the height of his fame. The vaudeville trio that had brought him into the public eye in the ’30s and ’40s had broken

up, leaving Davis with a solo career of singing, acting, dancing, and performing comedy. He had released his first album in 1954, the same year that a car crash would take his left eye and he would first discover his interest in Judaism. By the late '50s, Davis had become part of the Rat Pack, a group of entertainer-friends surrounding Frank Sinatra who were, until the mid-sixties, “showbiz’s unrivaled kings of swing, quick-with-a-quip cats who could swagger into any joint – from the Sands to Sardi’s – and make it the most.”³¹ By the time Gay Talese interviewed Sinatra in 1966, the Rat Pack had begun to splinter, its members edging towards decline. But in 1959, Davis was in what might be described as the second chapter of his heyday, running with the slick, fedora-topped kings of entertainment and booked solid with engagements and appearances throughout the country. Accordingly, Morgan’s early New Journalistic piece centers on a man near the height of stardom. He has been in the public eye for a few decades, and, though his face is not fresh, it is oft-recognized. The creeping peril of sinking into irrelevancy seems yet to dawn on him, and it has no reason to. If any troubles haunt him, they are, as Morgan suggests, those related to the racial discrimination Davis has endured throughout his career.

That depiction fit well with Davis’ role at the time. Alongside a handful of other African American entertainers (Sidney Poitier, Nat King Cole, Lena Horne), Davis was a poster child of 1950s liberal fantasy – a black man possessing both dignity and self-control, resisting the cruelty of bigotry and rising above his concealed anger at the injustices of a racist world. The Civil Rights Movement had begun to approach the heroic years of its

desegregationist stage only recently, with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the rise to prominence of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks taking place at the end of 1955. In the eyes of the nation's liberal reading public, the ideal black man exhibited restraint and elegance instead of justified rage at a system biased against him.

Morgan, who found an image of such restraint in Davis, interestingly proved a perfect match for the singer. Stylistically, Morgan, too, cast himself as a master of tact who, while pushing against the conventions of journalism, did not yet dare take the unconventionality of his style too far. Unlike Norman Mailer or Tom Wolfe, Morgan gives his readers no stylistic razzle dazzle. Unlike Talese, he does not (for the most part) suggest that he can narrate the innermost thoughts and feelings of his subject. Instead, Morgan extends the celebrity profile by providing great lengths of quoted dialogue, giving Davis dimension and stature by allowing him to speak directly to the reader. His method suits his story, both subject and writer pushing the envelope but not breaking it open, as their successors in the realms of journalism and entertainment would eventually do. Relatedly, Morgan suggests that he and Davis, in their shared artistry and restraint, discover a brief friendship that manages to transcend the color line. In an afterword published a few years later, Morgan stressed that the two remained friends for a short time, only to watch the relationship disintegrate after a potential collaboration fell through. Come the 1960s, the equal footing on which Morgan and Davis appeared to exist would no longer be a feasible scenario, as conflicts over the Civil Rights Movement intensified and black entertainers become more outspoken and

less willing to endure the racist comments and gestures they witnessed on a daily basis. In 1959, though, Morgan imagined a fragile, elite affinity between himself and his subject, employing a conservative version of the New Journalism to describe a conservative figure.

Morgan's piece employs techniques that would become landmarks of New Journalistic profiles over the next decade to evoke an effervescent character who revels in stardom despite the persistent challenge of being a black entertainer in twentieth-century America. At the core of his profile is an awed appreciation for Davis' drive, which he frames as a determination to outrun racial bias through talent and smooth charm. In many ways, Morgan implies, Sammy Davis, Jr. is in some sort of crisis – one that is both “the source of his power and also the reason for his private desperation.” The crisis, of course, is race – that “he is a colored man who has made it and yet can never make it all the way.”³² But Davis' crisis as it appears in Morgan's piece does not hold the resigned fatality that we will observe in pieces on older, more tragic figures. Racism, as Morgan conceives it, is rather a societal constant with which Davis has learned to live, and which, though it occasionally stirs some frustrated ire in his soul, in no way mars the charismatic vivacity of his usual demeanor. In the face of bigotry, Morgan's Davis becomes not moody or recalcitrant but honest and moving, channeling the frustration brewing under his façade into dedication and hustle, and thus embodying the type of existential hero that would have been respected at the end of the decade.

Because he plays the part of the dignified black man so well, Sammy Davis, Jr. fits Morgan's reserved style perfectly. Compared to his colleagues, Morgan is a modest narrator, making few claims to knowledge of Davis' interiority that are not communicated by direct dialogue from the star himself. Since his portrait of Davis is an early specimen of New Journalism, Morgan is less bold than his successors would be in suggesting his own interpretations of subjects' behaviors, but he takes an indisputably deliberate step away from conventional journalism.

Morgan most demonstrates his New Journalistic edge in his opening, which is flooded with moves that would be mimicked time and again in profiles over the course of the next decade:

In a typical ten-day period recently, Sammy Davis, Jr., had this schedule: the final week of an eighteen-day engagement at the Copacabana (sixteen performances interspersed with general frolicking, a record date, television and radio interviews, and two visits with Cyé Martin, his tailor); a one-night stand in Kansas City to receive an Americanism award from the American Legion; one night at home in Hollywood; and the opening night of a two-week date in Las Vegas at the Sands Hotel, the management of which has a contract with him for the next four years, eight weeks a year, at \$25,000 per week The day after closing in Vegas, Davis was due for three weeks in Hollywood at the Moulin Rouge, another night club with which he has a five-year million-dollar deal, followed by two weeks in Australia, followed by an Eastern tour. Photographer Burt Glinn and I, however, arbitrarily pursued Davis through that ten-day period. Since this short, skinny, one-eyed, broken-nosed, umber-colored singer-dancer-musician-actor-mimic may be, as Milton Berle has said, "the greatest entertainer in the world," and may even be, as Groucho Marx has decided, "better than Al Jolson, who could only sing," we wanted to find out what we could about what makes Sammy, Jr., run.³³

First, Morgan uses a lengthy, rambling list (one that, in a more traditional journalistic setting, an editor might have split into at least three different sentences) in order to emphasize the sheer abundance of commitments on Davis' bustling schedule. Secondly, in signature New Journalist fashion, Morgan provides the context of the interview, refusing to gloss over the process through which a celebrity profile gets pulled together into a magazine article. Finally, he includes quotes from other entertainers, examples of the people who mediate Davis' appearance to the general public. Morgan here anticipates a strategy used more heavily by his successors: acknowledging the many prominent authorities that paint the public's image of the celebrity and then going on to imply the author's superiority, suggesting: "This is what you've heard. *We* are going to tell you what's *really* true." This tone emphasizes the implicit exclusivity of the New Journalistic voice, which always insists that the writer, and only the writer, is supplying the most genuine version of his or her subject.

Morgan flips his celebration of Davis' bustling career on its head by beginning the next paragraph with:

Like most men, Davis lives a life of quiet desperation. . . . The only differences are that he has little privacy to live it in and that on the average of twice a night, thirty weeks a year, he must stand in a spotlight and be Sammy Davis, Jr. – comic, sentimental, bursting with energy, and immensely talented – no matter how he feels inside.³⁴

Morgan is describing here the quintessential heroic celebrity, one just ordinary enough and also just supernatural enough to keep the public

captivated, whose endeavor to enact the performance of celebrity through his tumultuous personal life is the courageous and admirable carrying out of his duty to his fans. He is also summarizing the ethos of 1950s liberal thought – the idea that, underneath the smooth façade of Sammy Davis, Jr. lies an inner turmoil that makes him all the more heroic in his ability to stifle it while he strives for success.

In order to render Davis in such a heroic light, Morgan stuffs his narrative with a series of techniques that bolster his claims to profound knowledge of Davis' character by dismantling the machinery that makes him run. One of the most common occurrences in New Journalistic profiles, which crops up frequently in Morgan's piece, is the elaborate rundown of the friends, family, and staff surrounding the celebrity at all times. The inclusion of these catalogs situates the celebrity within an extensive and constantly active network of fans and followers, emphasizing his or her status as an individual who is never alone, who never plans to be alone, and whom everyone in the world wants to be near. It is also commonly employed to unveil the mechanisms of celebrity, the support system of employees that make the machine of the celebrity's life run smoothly or turn it into an inescapable cage. Morgan's first use of this practice describes the eleven people on Davis' payroll: "valet, secretary, conductor-arranger, drummer, guitarist, office manager, typists (for answering fan mail), and various assistants. . . . His agent takes ten percent."³⁵

The same style is often used, however, to account for the entourage with which the subject of the piece tends to party on a particular night, a

gesture that suggests that the fellow partiers are just as much a part of creating the celebrity's image as the agents and assistants – and that thus emphasizes how, even at play, the star is always at work. One host of friends awaiting Davis in his room at the Hotel New Yorker includes:

three Copa girls, a former owner of the Chez Paree in Chicago, Davis's lawyer, another one of Davis's assistants named John Hopkins, the columnist Burt Boyar, and his wife, Jane, and the comedian, Jack Carter, and his date Hopkins and Murphy Bennett tended bar.”³⁶

The collapse between the lines of professional employees or partners and extra-professional friends brings each and every party attendee into the circle of individuals responsible for Davis' persona, each of them (if temporarily) an essential cog in the machine of his life. Long lists of a celebrity's cohorts (which are often laced with recognizable names of other stars and socialites) appear in almost every single celebrity profile by New Journalists, with the exception of an especially desolate one that I will examine in the next chapter, and they play an essential role in both emphasizing the celebrities' stature and simultaneously revealing the machinery that surrounds them.

Throughout the piece, Morgan uses what I will call a blended narrative voice, another technique that crops up throughout New Journalistic works, where third-person narrative exposition merges seamlessly with direct dialogue so that the voice of the narrator and the voice of the subject blend together: “If he were an average performer, the challenge might not be so great. ‘But you see,’ says Davis, ‘what I do is different.’”³⁷ Davis' quoted voice fluidly picks up from Morgan's narration, joining the two in a holistic thread

that blurs the line between reporter and subject. This technique is striking in this piece in particular because it suggests a union between Morgan and Davis – one that Morgan elaborated on in the afterword he published in a 1965 anthology, recalling that he and Davis became “bosom pals” for a few years after the publication of the piece.³⁸ The two embarked on a collaborative movie project on juvenile delinquency – coincidentally, the liberal establishment’s premier means of understanding racial inequality – but it fell through because Davis could not pay Morgan, and the two drifted apart. Six years later, they were reunited, and Morgan realized that their friendship could never return to the way it was six years earlier because the “illusion of colorlessness . . . no longer obscure[d their] differences.”³⁹ In 1959, an interracial friendship seemed conceivable based on the dream that racial boundaries could be transcended, especially by a Jew like Morgan and a restrained black man like Davis – a fantasy that would fall apart in later years. Morgan’s ability to tie himself so closely to Davis was based on cultural presumptions that would later be blown open by a more outspoken generation of writers and celebrities. In this piece, though, the fluid hopscotching between their narrative voices suggests an equality between the two that would have been plausible at the time.

As an early foray into New Journalism’s experimental methods, “What Makes Sammy, Jr., Run?” is conservative in its gestures toward authorial omniscience. Instead of acting as a novelistic narrator able to directly render the interior life of a character, Morgan provides large chunks of transcribed quotation that frequently spans up to nine consecutive paragraphs. Giving

space to the subject's voice is both a somewhat bold choice when considered in comparison to the conventional style of the time, and also a means by which Morgan enhances Davis' authority by letting him speak for himself.

Often, Morgan uses his own voice to provide information that could be gathered by a thoroughly researching outsider, and then lets Davis take over the narration to bring the piece to a personal level. After his contemplative opening, Morgan backs up to impart some biographical basics on Davis, starting with his birth and moving through the beginning of his career at three years old. Once Morgan reaches the Will Mastin Trio's big break in 1951, Davis' monologue takes over to expose on a more personal level what his life has looked like during the eight years since – his ravenous hunger to succeed, the inability to work in some places “because of the Negro bit,” the fifty impersonations he could do, the way he could burn through money buying twenty-one pairs of shoes at a time.⁴⁰ “Every day for three years I had a new chick – wine, women, and song,” he recalls. “All my life, I wanted to buy something in a store and not ask how much. I lost all sense of value My head got so *big*.”⁴¹ Eventually, he admits, “Things got bad. One night in Vegas, I lost thirty-nine thousand dollars playing blackjack. That's how bad it was.”⁴² His story reaches an even more personal level: “I feel I've been changing,” he contemplates. “If a man doesn't change, he isn't one to swing with. But his friends stick by him while he's changing.”⁴³ While writers like Wolfe and Talese would freely postulate on the inner psyches of their subjects, Morgan sets up a delineation between his and Davis' roles in the piece, ceding the task

of sharing personal emotion to Davis himself and using his own voice to provide less intimate elements of the social and biographical scenery.

There are only two moments when Morgan transcends his logical role as a reporter and presumes intimacy with the inner workings of Davis' mind – each of which emphasizes the writer's tactful sympathy with his subject in the face of racial injustice. One occurs in the elevator to Davis' penthouse in the Hotel New Yorker, when Morgan indulges in a brief detour of his own thought process:

Going up in the elevator, I remembered a story I had once heard about Bert Williams, a great Negro song-and-dance man of twenty-five years ago. When Williams played New York, he also rented a penthouse at a midtown hotel. The only difference was that his lease required him to enter and leave the hotel by the service elevator. One night, Eddie Cantor was riding up with Williams and asked him if it bothered him using the service elevator. "Mr. Cantor," Williams said, "the only thing that bothers me is applause." A good deal of progress has been made since then, I thought, but there was still a strong trace of Williams in Sammy Davis, Jr.⁴⁴

In inducing this comparison, completely unprompted by any event outside of his own head, Morgan brings himself into the story as a parallel to Eddie Cantor, another Jewish artist ensconced in friendship with a black entertainer whose experience he attempts to understand. More importantly, the memory also brings the piece back to its fundamental theme – that of the black performer too tactful to let loose his frustration and pain, choosing instead to laugh off the bigotry in a heroically constructed façade.

Morgan again lets himself again venture beyond the logical realm of the observational reporter shortly after the climax of the story, which consists

of Davis giving a teenage girl his autograph on his way out of a restaurant and a blonde man suggesting he should “do that in the *street*.”⁴⁵ Davis lingers on the comment, deciding whether or not to confront the man, before ducking into his waiting car. During the ride, however, Davis explodes into a rant, and it is only after arriving at a club at 4 A.M. that night and spontaneously joining a Canadian jazz quartet on that his rage appears to have subsided. “When [the song] was over,” Morgan asserts, “the hurt was out of his system.”⁴⁶ This second instance of omniscience, void of a “he said that” or “it seemed that,” is a huge leap from Morgan’s usually modest narrative voice. It implies that Morgan and Davis experience a rare and brief bond on the occasions when the celebrity can reveal his suffering and the writer can presume to share it.

In between his two authorial leaps, Morgan inserts the peak of his tacit racial story line – the encounter with the blonde man. During the subsequent car ride, Davis exclaims, “What a Jackson!” and explains to Morgan that a Jackson is a man who calls black people “Jackson” or “Bo.”⁴⁷ His anger lingers throughout the night, resulting in two subpar performances and, towards the end of the evening, a heart-wrenching monologue in which he very frankly confesses the degrading reality of being a black celebrity in America. “‘I’ve never, never tried to be anything but what I am,’ he said. ‘I am a Negro. I’m not ashamed.’”⁴⁸ He recalls a show in San Francisco when a man in the front row turned to his friend and said, “I didn’t know he was a nigger” before walking out. “It’s tough to play against that,” Davis divulges, exposing the emotional wear and tear that systematic racism enacts on the soul.⁴⁹

It is in this confession that Morgan's profile becomes most exemplary of the New Journalistic portrait, and that it expresses most explicitly its overarching theme. Davis' crisis makes him an even more perfect hero-celebrity: for a moment, the good-humored sheen collapses, and he becomes an understandably run-down man, exhausted and outraged at the unfairness of a system that only lets him succeed within the confines of his skin color. Despite faltering for the course of the early evening, he lets his passion for music and entertaining heal the wound, rapidly restoring the jazzy charisma that he exudes throughout the rest of the piece. Morgan quickly leaps to a moment three days later, when Davis' machine is running as smoothly as ever, as he arrives in Las Vegas for his opening night at the Sands:

The stereo was rigged and 250 records . . . were stacked neatly in the bedroom. There was fresh ice in the ice bucket and the silver goblet had been polished. After the rehearsal and a steam bath, Davis settled in the couch in the living room to relax. . . . Jack Entratter, manager of the Sands, telephoned to report that five hundred reservations had been turned down for the dinner show.⁵⁰

Davis even expresses nonchalance upon hearing that his wife, from whom he has been separated for months, has officially begun the divorce process. Apparently, "It was all over long ago."⁵¹ He calls his secretary to plan a small party for after his show, and we are left in the piece's last line with the picture of a celebrity exhibiting pristine grace amidst immense effort: "He lay back on the couch, running."⁵²

Over the course of his narrative, Morgan molds a storyline of a man both enjoying and struggling with the spotlight. His jovial attitude, diminished only briefly in the face of the enemy that looms over his career, is brought into vivid color through Morgan's observation, while his vulnerable, accessible side is revealed through his own direct dialogue. "What Makes Sammy, Jr., Run?" bears traces of the arc that journalists like Gay Talese would follow in order to render tragically declining characters. Its crucial difference is that Morgan uses Davis' crisis to render him even more likeable and accessible to his readers, peeling back the layers of his sparkling humor to reveal a heroic struggle that makes him all the more admirable. In tentatively utilizing the literary structure of a story – a wholly new-fangled technique – Morgan is also drawing an affinity between himself and Davis. Both are pioneers, willing to experiment with the borders of conformity and test how far they can push their audiences, but neither are transcendent, because neither journalism nor civil rights had reached the tipping point that would allow for the incendiary choices of writers like Tom Wolfe or entertainers like Muhammad Ali. Later profiles would both elaborate on and vary the techniques employed by Morgan, taking increasingly more liberty with the narrator's subjectivity, stylization, and omniscience. Accordingly, they would focus on bolder, more rebellious subjects – celebrities who, like the journalists that wrote about them, were cracking wide open the conventions of the preceding decade instead of merely pushing the boundaries.

**SUPERMAN COMES TO THE SUPERMART:
NORMAN MAILER ON JOHN F. KENNEDY**

One year after Morgan's profile on Sammy Davis, Jr., *Esquire* ran another early New Journalistic work, this one centered around a man at the center of a political party. Published in November of 1960, mere weeks before the general election in which John F. Kennedy would narrowly defeat incumbent Vice President Richard Nixon, Norman Mailer's "Superman Comes to the Supermart" paints the young politician as the prophet of a national Renaissance, an awakening from the dull uniformity of post-war America. (In fact, Mailer would later humbly claim that it was this piece that had won Kennedy the election.⁵³) It also employs an immense magnification of the experimental leanings evident in Morgan's piece, using long strings of clauses, willfully preposterous metaphors, and exaggerated symbolism to craft a rebellious writing style that mimics what Mailer casts as Kennedy's promise of incendiary revitalization to the American spirit. "Superman" chronicles the circumstances and events of the 1960 Democratic National Convention, where Kennedy faced off against delegates like Lyndon B. Johnson (who would become his running partner) and Adlai Stevenson in, as Mailer describes it, the dreary, pre-packaged despair of Los Angeles. To the author, L.A. represents a supermarket-esque spirit that has come to characterize the country as a whole: the "homogeneous extension of stainless surfaces and psychoanalyzed people, packaged commodities and ranch homes, interchangeable, geographically unrecognizable . . . the new postwar

SuperAmerica.”⁵⁴ Against this cookie-cutter nightmare, Kennedy becomes for Mailer a reincarnation of the American mythic hero destined to rouse the supermarket from its sleepy compliance.

Albeit in an embarrassing exposure of his inflated ego, Mailer hit a somewhat accurate note when he proclaimed the piece had won Kennedy the election. His profile was indeed seminal, primarily in its ability to anticipate overarching political changes in the years to come. His focus on thematic and extra-political elements was predictive of a shift in the political life of America – or, more accurately, *out* of the political life of America, whereby the movements, parties, and candidates of the following years would burst open the bubble of electoral logistics and reach into realms outside the political system. It was also indicative of a nascent trend within the world of literature, pre-dating a slew of articles and full books that Mailer and other New Journalists would write linking the political process to cultural and ideological themes. Hunter Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*, Gary Wills’ *Nixon Agonistes*, and Joe McGinniss’ *The Selling of the President* all traced the behind-the-scenes cogs of the business of politics, all suggesting as well that the events of the campaign were merely symptoms of much deeper social and cultural forces.

Likewise, Mailer’s account of the atmospheric temperature of the American psyche plays prominently in the piece, his understanding of this mood an integral part of his interpretation of Kennedy’s campaign. His report of the current temperament of the country resonates with the pre-packaged aura described by Boorstin and his contemporaries, as well as the journalistic

tendencies to which the New Journalists were responding: the dull monotony of the press and its tendency to repeat verbatim what was being fed to it by various agents of publicity. “One has the feeling,” Mailer writes, that the supermarket of America “was built by television sets giving orders to men.”⁵⁵ In effect, he paints Kennedy as the New Journalist of America, the knight riding in on a white horse to whisk the country out of its rut in much the same way that New Journalists would eventually claim to have revolutionized the literary world. Just as Morgan envisions his own affinity to Davis, Mailer subtly draws a parallel between himself and Kennedy, their abilities to explode the worlds in which they work more potent than in Morgan and Davis’ reserved rebellion. In fact, Mailer would eventually come to view his position as a writer as analog to that of the president, with both entities possessing the power and responsibility to communicate with the general public.⁵⁶ Here, he edges towards this eventual conclusion, his highly stylized verbiage as unorthodox as the prospect of an inexperienced Catholic war veteran in office.

For such an early paradigm of the form, Mailer also articulates quite explicitly the defining tenets of the genre itself. “[T]o try to talk about what happened,” he writes of the convention, “one can try to make one’s little point and dress it with a ribbon or two of metaphor.”⁵⁷ He recounts that the convention was dull, but that “moments – or as they say in bullfighting – details” jumped out as indicative of momentous turns in the nation’s history.⁵⁸ Mailer is announcing here the New Journalistic style – its ability to select observable details as indicative of deeper themes, to attach meaning to those

details through literary techniques in order to communicate a message larger than the subject or the piece itself. To extend his argument, Mailer is proposing that metaphor and symbol, previously devices whose resources were most associated with literary artists, can be applied to communicate the truths of political life even more successfully than details about policy and party lines.

Mailer introduces each character into his story with a great flourish, painting colorful portraits that closely resemble the theatrical character introductions of great novels. He provides a brief account of Kennedy's arrival at the convention by vividly conjuring up the image of a glamorous young hero. The candidate bears the "deep orange-brown suntan of a ski instructor" and "amazingly white" teeth "visible at a distance of fifty yards."⁵⁹ While the fact that he focuses so much on Kennedy's appearance is important, Mailer also gives depth to the visual descriptors by juxtaposing them with a broad account of the current state of the country. In the same section of the piece, he conceptualizes a "two rivers" political theory, building the scaffolding on which his panegyric to Kennedy will be constructed.⁶⁰ America, he claims, is composed of two rivers, one the tangible, logical world of politics and the other the stuff of dreams, the imaginative, idealistic realm that has conjured up the romantic myth of the hero. This "subterranean river" holds the "untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desire, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation."⁶¹ America, the most rootless country and thus the most vulnerable to the mechanized homogenization of the twentieth century, has seen its rivers stray too far from

each other, unbound by a uniting figure such as a hero. This hero, Mailer claims, can salvage America's imagination and revive the energy of its people by reincarnating the mythic world of the country's dreams. Mailer himself taps into this fantastical river by rendering his narrative so exuberantly romantic, channeling in his outlandish prose style the exact type of energy that he believes the country so desperately craves – a small dose of what he believes Kennedy can deliver if nominated.

When he writes of the type of hero America needs to reunite the rivers of myth and politics, Mailer describes

a man whose personality might suggest contradictions and mysteries which could reach into the alienated circuits of the underground, because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of the people, and be so good for the vitality of his nation; a hero embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow.⁶²

Mailer's conceptualization of the hero's role strikes a startling resemblance to the position of the celebrity in the twentieth century – as a figure embodying the hopes and dreams of their fans and thus inspiring them to pursue said hopes and dreams.[†] Coincidentally, in his discussion of Kennedy as a celebrity-hero, cultural historian Leo Braudy turns to the legendary PT-109 story (itself, in John Hersey's seminal account, a predecessor to the *New Journalism*⁶³) in which Kennedy, a young Navy lieutenant, swims three miles

[†] For more on the public realm as a sphere for the imagination of the American people, see Antoine Lilti's introduction to *The Invention of Celebrity, 1750-1850*.

to safety with the life-vest strap of an unconscious sailor clamped between his teeth. This war hero story, Braudy points out, “emphasized happenstance endurance rather than glorious action or strategic wisdom. Instead of characterizing Kennedy as a military hero, it emphasized the way what he did expressed the potential hero in everyone.”⁶⁴ Mailer’s story takes this established image of Kennedy as a noble common man to the greatest heights possible, employing rich, flowery prose and grandiose extended metaphors that fly belligerently in the face of conventional political coverage.

One instance of Mailer’s over-the-top style occurs at the beginning of his story, where he turns the Democratic party into a whacky, chaotic family, characterizing each of the prominent attendees as an archetypal member:

One thinks of this party as a crazy, half-rich family, loaded with poor cousins, traveling always in caravans with Cadillacs and Okie Fords, Lincolns and quarter-horse mules, putting up every night in tents to hear the chamber quartet of great Cousin Eleanor invaded by the Texas-twanging steel-stringing geetarists of Bubber Lyndon, carrying its own mean high-school principal, Doc Symington, chided for its manners by good Uncle Adlai, told the route of march by Navigator Jack, cut off every six months from the rich will of Uncle Jim Farley, never listening to the mechanic of the caravan, Bald Sam Rayburn, who assures them they’ll all break down unless Cousin Bubber gets the concession on the garage . . . in tranquility one recollects them with affection, their instinct is good, crazy family good . . . and this instinct now led the caravan to pick the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles for their family get-together and reunion.⁶⁵

Mailer’s style here and throughout his piece draws on two elements of contemporary literature – the Trilling-esque diction of the New York Intellectuals (“one thinks . . . one recollects”), to whom the New Journalists

stood in direct opposition, and the enthusiastic, unbounded prose of the Beats. Throughout most of the piece, he uses the abstract, third-person pronoun to express his opinions, as when he recounts Adlai Stevenson's entrance ("one was reminded of Chaplin . . . because Charlie Chaplin was luminous when one met him and Stevenson had something of that light") or Bobby Kennedy's competitive edge ("the kind of man never to put on the gloves with if you wanted to do some social boxing").⁶⁶ This style echoes the diction of cultural criticism produced by writers like Lionel Trilling, whose restraint and formality Mailer otherwise rejected. By joining what he saw as the stiff language of the New York Intellectuals to a piece about political life, Mailer is almost parodying it, creating a sense of incongruity between that wording and the rococo prose that Trilling would have so disliked.

This passage is also exemplary of the thread Mailer picks up from Beat writing, which specialized in the type of spiraling, over-extended sentences that appear throughout "Superman." In a stunning description of Minnesota senator Eugene McCarthy nominating Adlai Stevenson, Mailer recalls that McCarthy "held the crowd like a matador, timing their *oles!*, building them up, easing them back, correcting any sag in attention, gathering their emotion, discharging it, creating new emotion on the wave of the last, driving his passes tighter and tighter as he readied for the kill."⁶⁷ Mailer's heavy use of conceit, juxtaposed with touches of high-minded cultural criticism, completely explodes the popular writing styles of the era, his sentences soaring into ten or twenty clauses while his metaphors tumble on for paragraphs on end. Not only does this style exemplify the New Journalistic effort to use the techniques

of literary fiction to animate the bland style of traditional journalism; it also embraces the bellicose defiance of the genre, sweeping Morgan's tentative experimentation into outright rebellion.

Mailer's hyperbolic language is mirrored in his exaltation of Kennedy, which reaches absurd heights in the writer's conceptualization of the young politician as the destined savior of the country. As Mailer describes him, Kennedy not only exemplifies America's ideal celebrity in every sense of the word, but he surpasses the definition, sculpted as a transcendent figure who embodies all of America's dreams and more. Mailer frames Kennedy frequently as a war hero, bringing in the story whose significance to the American public Braudy so lucidly explains. Mailer often compares the politician to sports and entertainment stars, bringing him into extra-political realms. "This candidate," he writes, "for all . . . his good, sound, conventional liberal record has a patina of that other life, the second American life, the long electric night with the fires of neon leading down the highway to the murmur of jazz."⁶⁸ Mailer extends the extravagant, Beat-inspired prose that dominates the piece to a similarly self-indulgent image of Kennedy as a super-celebrity promising salvation for a damned nation.

Mailer frequently uses Kennedy's physical attractiveness and his propensity for performance to extend the candidate's renown into this cultural world. He asserts that, if the candidate won, "America's politics would now be America's favorite movie, America's first soap opera, America's best-seller."⁶⁹ He goes so far as to compare Kennedy to Marlon Brando, "alive with

that concentration of vitality a successful actor always seems to radiate.”⁷⁰ He elaborates,

[His] appearance seems to shift from one person into another as the minutes go by, and one bothers with this comparison because, like Brando, Kennedy’s most characteristic quality is the remote and private air of a man who has traversed the lonely terrain of experience, of loss and gain, of nearness to death, which leaves him isolated from the mass of others.⁷¹

During Kennedy’s presidency, Mailer’s point would be indisputably proven. Notorious for his association with show business people as opposed to businessmen, Kennedy held great respect for the artistic professionals with whom he was so often seen, perceiving them as “wise counselors in having a public self” and mingling with them “as if to learn their secrets.”⁷² In Mailer’s eyes, Kennedy understood on every level how running for president was as much a performance as starring in a show might be, and that it was a type of performance at which the handsome politician excelled. In “Superman,” Kennedy becomes a star and a burdened hero, a multi-dimensional character who possesses the ability to construct the image of himself that he wants his audience to see.

Like Morgan’s image of Sammy Davis, Jr., Mailer’s Kennedy is an existential hero, but his updated version is characterized not by dignified restraint but by grandiose transgression of cultural boundaries. Mailer’s emphasis on Kennedy’s skills as an entertainer also speaks to the way the author is responding to the manufactured environment of the mid-twentieth

century, by extolling a figure who is wholly aware of the performativity of celebrity, and who differs from the conventionally contrived performer in that he controls his ever-adapting image. Kennedy's heroism is located in his ability to create himself, his acceptance of the process and his ability to manipulate it in order to control his own image.

In addition to bringing Kennedy into the world of entertainment, Mailer amplifies the hero's super-celebrity status by using sports comparisons, a motif to which he turns repeatedly to describe various scenes and personalities present at the convention.* Upon Kennedy's arrival, Mailer proclaims that, as he makes his way through the mob of supporters, "one expected at any moment to see him lifted to its shoulders like a matador being carried back to the city after a triumph in the plaza."⁷³ He compares the candidate's composure to "the poise of a fine boxer, quick with his hands, neat in his timing, and two feet away from his corner when the bell ended the round."⁷⁴ These sports comparisons even extend to the convention itself, described as "a close seventh game in the World Series or a tied fourth quarter in a professional-football championship."⁷⁵ In another instance, Mailer likens the frenzy of anticipation on the day of the nomination to the "electric

* Sports celebrities, who had emerged at the tail end of the 19th century largely due to the 1896 revival of the Greek Olympic Games, had reached the same level of idolization as entertainment stars by this point in time. "In the eyes of the fan," Leo Braudy writes, "public sports were played by natural beings civilized enough to follow the rules of the game; like the show business people with whom they often were seen, they were in image at least the latest version of the American natural aristocrat" (Braudy 1997, 573). Celebrities in their own right, idolized sports stars – particularly boxers, many of which Gay Talese would profile – even began hiring their own press agents, welcoming the same type of renown that would have been celebrated by a famous entertainer.

vividness one feels on the sidelines of a football game when it is necessary to duck as the ball-carrier goes by, his face tortured in the concentration of the moment, the thwomp of his tackle as acute as if one had been hit oneself.”⁷⁶ What’s more, Mailer repeatedly brings in Kennedy’s physical ailments, particularly a back injury obtained during his time as a soldier for which he underwent a potentially fatal surgery, as testaments to his intensity and determination, asserting that “some rages are sufficiently monumental to demand that one try to become a hero or else fall back into that death which is already within the cells.”⁷⁷ He amplifies Kennedy’s heroism by rendering his athletic qualities symbolic of a more fundamental theme – the politician as a warrior who frequently and unflinchingly confronts death, and who can apply the same grit and vigor to rehabilitating the spirit of the American people.

It is through shamelessly inflated metaphors like these that Mailer delivers us to the finale of his piece. After referring to Kennedy’s delegation over and over again as “the Kennedy machine,”⁷⁸ Mailer starts to use the term “Fitz’s Army,”⁷⁹ referring to the candidate’s middle name and aligning him with F. Scott Fitzgerald. The gesture emphasizes New Journalism’s paradoxical effort to turn the charisma of stardom against the machinery of celebrity. Mailer’s critical eye is conceding Kennedy’s complicity in the political system of nominations and party competition, but also suggesting that his machinery is much less robotic, not to mention infinitely more stylish, and that it promises an insurgency against the bureaucracy of politics. His switch to “army” both recalls his many images of Kennedy as a war hero and personifies the mechanisms of his candidacy as a lionhearted group of

dedicated servants delivering their general to the shores of success and liberation. The Kennedy machine, albeit still a machine, is much more imaginative than the “small political machine” that Mailer claims all the other delegates have been churned through after “saying yes at the right time for twenty years.”⁸⁰ This renegade will break that other, small-minded machine and give the country a leader who can prevent the “mass man” of conformity from overtaking the “Renaissance man” dreamt up by that underground river of myth and romanticism.⁸¹ The wilted spirit of the country needs the youth and vigor of a candidate who embodies new and untapped vitality, who survived war and came out stronger than ever, who is unafraid to declare that he thinks the young are “better fitted to direct history than the old.”⁸² And that hero, of course, can be found in the fresh and remarkably handsome face of John F. Kennedy.

Mailer ends his ode to the Kennedy machine by personifying America as a woman seeking “a security cheaper than her soul.”⁸³ Because conformity makes citizens feel safe, he suggests, the country is losing the essence of what makes it great, and only through the grandeur of Kennedy’s renaissance can we relocate our imaginative spirit. This comparison, while not the plot-driven climax of the piece, is the apex of Mailer’s absurdly overblown style and content, which apply exaggerated versions of the tools of literary analysis to political life in order to read this world not logically but purely symbolically. While this approach might appear childish and idealistic, Mailer views it as both valid and vital to his message, matching his own excessively flamboyant language and metaphor to Kennedy’s reinvigorating promise of

enlightenment. While Morgan and Davis both hesitantly tested boundaries, Mailer and Kennedy (as he is depicted in Mailer's piece) strive to blow up the entire system. Three years later, Tom Wolfe and Cassius Clay would run even further with this sentiment, Wolfe challenging even more testily the rules of conformist journalism and Clay obstreperously refusing to play the dignified role that white audiences had expected from black celebrities in the previous decade.

**THE MARVELOUS MOUTH:
TOM WOLFE ON CASSIUS CLAY**

“The Marvelous Mouth,” Tom Wolfe’s profile of Cassius Clay, ran in *Esquire* in October of 1963. It had been six months since the twenty-one-year-old champion appeared on the cover of *Time*, where, in a profile by Nick Thimmesch and Charles Parmiter, the boxer predicted he would be the heavyweight champion of the world within the year. He happened to be right: in February of 1964, Clay took the title from Sonny Liston despite his one-to-seven odds of winning. Over the course of his subsequent career, Clay would become an object of increasing fascination for journalists, his public role spilling over into entertainment thanks to his extraordinary charisma and passion for showmanship. Clay also developed an outspoken political persona. His conversion to Islam and his name change to Muhammad Ali, along with his friendship with Malcolm X, were discussed as often, if not more, than his

boxing career. So convicted by public opinion was he in his open opposition to the Vietnam War that he was stripped of his heavyweight championship after refusing to be drafted. An unprecedented example of a defiant, arrogant, and yet still charming black celebrity, Clay/Ali would become the subject of dozens of journalistic features examining every possible facet of the man who seemed to care little what the public thought of him and yet relished and embraced the performance of celebrity.

Wolfe catches Clay near the beginning of his ascent to fame, depicting him as wearing the same swaggering cockiness that the boxer flaunted in the *Time* profile. Wolfe's Clay steps into nightclubs looking "gloriously bored,"⁸⁴ swiftly dismisses music or people he dislikes by simply saying he doesn't "dig" it,⁸⁵ and appears willing to go on at length to anyone who will listen about how badly he will beat up Sonny Liston in their upcoming fight. Yet, in the *New Journalist's* eyes, Clay maintains a charming boyishness, leavened with a self-awareness about the absurdity of his act, that makes him infectiously charismatic. Wolfe lingers on the presence of autograph seekers and members of Clay's posse, discredits other newspapers and magazines reporting on the rising star, and persistently stresses the show business of celebrity, making this feature characteristic of New Journalistic profiles. Wolfe's piece is also shamelessly subjective, based on his observations and speculations attained during what appears to be a day of the star's trip to New York City to record an album of poems and skits. Wolfe jumps between scenes in the recording studio and accounts from a night out with Clay and his "foxes," the group of women who join him at clubs and bars. He depicts the fighter playing his

brother's records in his forty-second-floor hotel suite, gracing the Metropole Café with a brief appearance and a few autograph signings, testing a group of thirty-something comedians from Second City to see if they can do the impressions on his album better than he can, and periodically – in the most telling moments of the story – stopping to simply let the masses gather on the streets to take in his coolly majestic glory.

Wolfe announces the acute subjectivity of his portrait with the opening line:

One thing that stuck in my mind, for some reason, was the way that Cassius Clay and his brother, Rudy, and their high-school pal, Tuddie King, and Frankie Tucker, the singer who was opening in Brooklyn, and Cassius' pride of "foxes," Sophia Burton, Dottie, Frenchie, Barbara and the others, and Richie Pittman and "Lou" Little, the football player, and everybody else up there in Cassius' suite on the forty-second floor of the Americana Hotel kept telling time by looking out the panorama window and down at the clock on top of the Paramount Building on Times Square.⁸⁶

Here, Wolfe sets the piece in first-person narration, emphasizing what stayed with *him* to describe a detail indicative of Clay's delight at the grandeur of the hotel suite. Simultaneously, he is including, as all his fellow New Journalists do, the lengthy list of secondary and tertiary characters who accompany Clay to his social engagements, weaving a web of supportive figures against which Clay stands out as the leader and shining star. All of them are united under his guidance, and each plays a role in ensuring he is never alone and always content. Wolfe enacts a similar unfurling of characters in a *New York Magazine* profile on Baby Jane Holzer, published less than a year later.

Describing the model's twenty-fourth birthday party at "Jerry Schatzberg's...*pad*," he recalls,

Shrimp is sitting there, with her glorious pout and her textured white stockings, Barbara Steele, who was so terrific in *8½*, with thin black lips and wrought-iron lashes. Nicky Haslam is there with his Byron shirt on and his tiger skin vest and blue jeans and boots. Jerry is there with his hair flowing back in curls. Lennie, Jane's husband, is there in a British suit and dark blue shirt he bought on 42nd Street for this party, because this is a party for the Rolling Stones. The Stones are not here yet, but here in the upper room are Goldie and the Gingerbreads, four girls in gold lamé tights who will play the rock and roll for the party....Gold lamé, can you imagine?⁸⁷

In catalogs like these, Wolfe, just as Morgan did for Davis, places his celebrities at the center of the room, surrounded by equally young and stylish friends who enhance the singular stardom of the piece's subject.

In his Jane Holzer profile, Wolfe also turns to one of the other most common tactics of the New Journalists: the inclusion of other news sources to bolster the superiority of his own account. In his opening scene, he writes:

Jane in the world of Teen Savage – Jane modeling here and there – wearing Jean Harlow dresses for *Life* and Italian fashions for *Vogue* and doing the most fabulous cover for Nicky at *Show*. . . . Baby Jane has appeared constantly this year in just about every society and show business column in New York. The magazines have used her as a kind of combination of model, celebrity, and socialite. And yet none of them have been able to do much more than, in effect, set down her name, Baby Jane Holzer, and surround it with a few astericks and exploding stars, as if to say, well, here we have . . . What's Happening.⁸⁸

By outlining the limitations of other publications' versions of Baby Jane, Wolfe is accomplishing the sense of exclusivity that most New Journalistic works aim to inspire, the feeling that the reporter got behind-the-curtains, up-close access and is sharing that access with his or her readers. The implication resembles the spirit behind books like Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* or Hunter Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, both of which suggest that the public may have heard a great deal about their subjects and wondered if it was true, and that the authors are there to tell them the real story.

In "The Marvelous Mouth," Wolfe enacts the same strategy through a minute detail. "One thing I noticed," he remarks, "is that [Clay] never begins a sentence with the word, 'Well,' when he's talking about himself."⁸⁹ Two pages later, Wolfe circles back to this notion during an account of a 1960 press conference when Clay announced, after winning the Olympic gold medal, that his next mission was to be "a rock-and-roll singer like Elvis Presley."⁹⁰ Later, the "morally shocked" reporters, some of whom refused to print the statement, received an elaboration on the bold comment: "[H]e said, at least as it appeared in their reports, 'Well, I really want to turn pro as a fighter, but I didn't think that was the right thing to say at the Olympics, which is for amateur sports.' (I don't think Cassius, even then, ever began a sentence with 'Well.')"⁹¹ Wolfe's smooth takedown of the competition both condemns other reporters for their prudish shock at the statement and implies that his sharp attention for details has given him much more close-up and accurate access to the celebrity.

“The Marvelous Mouth” most resembles other New Journalistic works in its rendering of Clay as a master of performance. Clay’s awareness of his own act brings this theme to the fore. Wolfe chooses quotes from the boxer that recount exactly how he crafted his egomaniacal façade. The author includes Clay’s intentions to sing and act in movies, simultaneously watching him record a comedy album for Columbia Records. A mere page into the article, Wolfe quotes Clay saying, “I don’t feel like I’m in boxing anymore. It’s show business.”⁹² Wolfe describes the boxer’s star persona by repeatedly referencing it as a lightbulb that can be switched on and off. “If Cassius really wants to go into his act,” he writes, “if he is in front of a crowd he thinks will really appreciate its Pantagruelian overtones, he turns on a pair of 150-watt eyes and suddenly becomes a star.”⁹³ Wolfe envisions Clay as an artist who runs his own machine. He has chosen his own persona, created it himself; he travels without a manager in a deliberate effort to avoid being “the typical fistic plug and pawn”; the most important man in the “corporate galaxy that spins around him” is his brother Rudy, not his agent or publicity team.⁹⁴

For the most part, Wolfe credits Clay with the creation of this character. “It was Cassius who invented Cassius the Greatest,” the writer claims. “Cassius says he did and there is no reason to doubt it.”⁹⁵ Wolfe consistently conveys admiration for the way that Clay embraces his role as a performer and passionately strives to perform in every sense of the word. Wolfe understands Clay’s 150-watt eyes as part of the same vein as his intentions to act and sing, uniting these disparate facets of his personality into an assertion that Clay simply loves – and is good at – performing. In the final scene of the piece,

which takes place in the Columbia Records studio, Wolfe circles back to the Elvis Presley line to suggest that Clay is indeed unbound by the limits of a boxing career: “Peel away the discipline, turn down the loud mouth and you see a rock-and-roll singer, just like Elvis Presley.”⁹⁶ By indulging Clay’s fantasy of himself as a cultural icon, Wolfe reinforces the link between performance and celebrity, framing even the sports star within the world of entertainment and public renown. The industry matters little: in boxing, entertainment, or even, eventually, politics, Clay appeals to the public eye because he has a knack for performance – and that is how celebrities are built.

But there are moments when Clay’s act transcends his own self-manufacturing, when the switch is less consciously flipped on. One instance occurs when Wolfe describes the boxer’s “unconscious signal that he is now available for crowd collecting,” a loosening of his shoulders that echoes the way he might go into a fight.⁹⁷ And even Clay, as Wolfe perceives him, is not immune to being manipulated by the cogs of the machine that exist outside himself, such as the white Southern backers that Wolfe can’t help but feel make him “less of his own man.”⁹⁸ It is this lurking feeling – that Clay is not as in control of his image as he would like to be – that Wolfe fosters through his own subjective conjectures, using his position as an observer-narrator to elaborate on, and sometimes defy, Clay’s claims. The blending of meticulous observational reportage and personal conjecture in order to build a layered character, an archetypal technique of the New Journalism, is applied here to suggest that Clay is less in charge of his own machine than he thinks he is.

Wolfe's subjective presence in his own works is reinforced through his distinctive position within the story he tells, which is most often as an older, outdated, and un-hip foreigner to the world of youth. His italicization of the word "pad" in "Girl of the Year," which he brackets with two ellipses, pokes a bit of fun at the lingo of the younger generation to which Jane Holzer belongs.⁹⁹ Wolfe sets himself apart from this world by showing stylistically how unfamiliar he is with the language, not to mention the style: "Gold lamé," he wonders, practically shaking his head in disbelief through the words, "can you imagine?"¹⁰⁰ He maintains the same position in "The Marvelous Mouth," when Clay tells him about a young singer named Sam Cooke. "You're *square*, man," Clay repeats twice, gesturing toward his brother's cool jazz records and suggesting Wolfe probably prefers them over the radio.¹⁰¹

Wolfe's position as an old fuddy-duddy utterly perplexed by the stylish leanings of his subjects both enhances his subjectivity and redefines the affinity between author and subject that had been evolving over the past decade within New Journalistic profiles. Featuring phrases like "Pantegruelian undertones" and "outrageous bombast," Wolfe's prose resembles Mailer's in its flowery self-indulgence. It is often even more unbuttoned, replacing Mailer's overblown exuberance with a laid-back coolness that mirrors Clay's oft-unruffled demeanor. But Clay's position as a black man in the public eye refusing to conform to the expectations of dignity and nobility observed by stars like Sammy Davis, Jr. plays an essential role in this piece, whereby the white journalist becomes more an audience member than a friend to the black subject. In 1959, when the white liberal fantasy of

the restrained black man was still tenable, Davis and Morgan were able to curate a brief friendship under the illusion that racial differences could be readily overcome. By 1963, this type of friendship had come to seem increasingly unlikely, and Cassius Clay's swaggering persona suggested the way that black radicals would soon forcefully reject the dictates of this race-transcendent fantasy. Wolfe's piece thus represents a reconsideration of the subject-writer relationship, reflecting the deeply intertwined cultural and political changes that had altered the world of racial politics in the years preceding the article. His style remains bold in its defiance of conventional journalism – just as his subject flouts, even more than Kennedy, the conventions of his cultural environment. But the writer's role within his story is complicated by the charismatic assertion of his subject, and thus Wolfe's status takes on the patina of an awestruck observer as opposed to that of an alleged equal.

Wolfe underlines this position in the final scene of his profile, set on the street as Cassius and his friend Richie Pittman leave the Metropole. As Clay pauses by a group of street performers, a crowd begins to amass, "spilling off the sidewalk into Fifty-Second street," and the boxer dutifully flips on his 150-watt eyes, engaging in some verbal sparring with a young boy about whether he can beat Sonny Liston.¹⁰² Soon, a police officer attempts to shepherd the crowd onto the sidewalk, and Clay turns to Wolfe, "as if to say, 'See man? That's only what I predicted – which is to say, 'When I walk down the street, the crowds; they have to call the police.'"¹⁰³ Clay's self-inflating commentary rambles on, while the street performance escalates to underscore

the febrile atmosphere Wolfe wishes to imply, “the kid on the bass . . . flailing away like a madman.”¹⁰⁴ Clay starts demanding people pay a dollar to the performers if they want a signature, and he goes on pumping himself up through to the end of the piece, whipping the performers into a frenzy. “Think at all you’re getting free here,” Clay orates, “the music’s so fine and here you got Cassius Clay right here in front of you in living color, the next heavyweight champion of the world, the man who’s gon’ put old man Liston in orbit.” He turns to Wolfe one last time to quip, “Man, [i]f I get whipped, they gonna run me outa the country,” and then to throw back his head, spread his arms, and laugh. And there we leave him, awash in the feverish mass of fanfare and showmanship, reveling in every minute of the image he has projected onto himself, while his reporter gazes away in awe and admiration.

THE ART (AND LABOR) OF HANGING OUT

Mailer and Wolfe’s use of subjective observations, striking comparisons, and detailed characterization are all techniques that can be found in other works of New Journalism, to the effect that each uses the experiences of its author – and, importantly, the author’s personal reactions to those experiences – to craft a multi-dimensional character around the real-life subject of the piece. An essential step in assembling this complex characterization was, of course, the immersive research that these journalists conducted in order to pin down the psyche of their subjects. “The kind of reporting [we] were doing,” Wolfe writes,

was more intense, more detailed, and certainly more time-consuming than anything that newspaper or magazine reporters, including investigative reporters, were accustomed to. [We] developed the habit of staying with the people [we] were writing about for days at a time, weeks in some cases. [We] had to gather all the material the conventional journalist was after – and then keep going. It seemed all-important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters.¹⁰⁵

Perfecting the art of hanging out, according to Wolfe's account, is nowhere near as easy or laid-back as it sounds, requiring an extensive amount of work and time in order to be executed as smoothly as it was by the New Journalists. The ability to "be there," as Wolfe describes it, is what gives New Journalistic works such fiction-like detail, their scenes conjured with such richness that they envelop the reader. Finally, he asserts that these journalists combine the objectivity of descriptive writing with a type of subjective interior life that had previously only been found in fictional characters. The addition of subjectivity, then, is essential to the molding of the storyline and the conceptualization of the subject as an understandable and authentic entity.

In the next chapter, we will see a subtle shift in such molding whereby authors turn less to their own speculation and more to other techniques, such as the re-ordering of events, to craft their story arcs – perhaps because the story, that of the hero in decline, seems already there, waiting to be discovered.

NOTES

- ²⁴ Tom Wolfe, "Seizing the Power," in *The New Journalism*, ed. Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (London: Picador, 1996), 46.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 46-47.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 47.
- ²⁸ Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 47.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 48.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 49-50.
- ³¹ Ben Cosgrove, "LIFE With the Rat Pack: Rare Photos of Frank, Dino and Sammy," *TIME*, June 1, 2013, <http://time.com/3877266/frank-sinatra-dean-martin-sammy-davis-jr-rare-photos-of-the-rat-pack/>.
- ³² Thomas B. Morgan, "What Makes Sammy Davis, Jr., Run?" in *Self-Creations: 13 Impersonalities*, ed. Thomas B. Morgan (New York: Holt & Rinehart, 1965), 81.
- ³³ Ibid., 78
- ³⁴ Ibid., 78-79
- ³⁵ Ibid., 81
- ³⁶ Ibid., 89
- ³⁷ Ibid., 79
- ³⁸ Ibid., 94
- ³⁹ Ibid., 95
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 83
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid., 84
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 89
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 91
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 93
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 92
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 93
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Ibid., 94
- ⁵³ Norman Mailer, "An Evening with Jackie Kennedy," *Esquire*, July 1962, 59.
- ⁵⁴ Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermart," *Esquire*, November 1960, 120.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 142-143.
- ⁵⁷ Mailer, "Superman," 119.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 122
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Ibid., 123
- ⁶³ John Hersey, "Survival," *New Yorker*, June 17, 1944, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1944/06/17/survival-2>.

- ⁶⁴ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Random House, 1997), 567.
- ⁶⁵ Mailer, "Superman," 120-21.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 121
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 126
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 120
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 123
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 124
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² Braudy, *Frenzy of Renown*, 567.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 122
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 125-6
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 126
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 125
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 119, 120, 125, 127.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 127
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 119
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 127
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 124
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 127
- ⁸⁴ Tom Wolfe, "The Marvelous Mouth," *Esquire*, October 1963, 148
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 146
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 146
- ⁸⁷ Tom Wolfe, "Girl of the Year," in *The Kandy Kololed Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby*, ed. Tom Wolfe (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 218.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 209
- ⁸⁹ Wolfe, "Marvelous Mouth," 192.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 194
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 148
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 189
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 192
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 196
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 148
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁹ Wolfe, "Girl of the Year," 209.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.
- ¹⁰¹ Wolfe, "Marvelous Mouth," 194.
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 196.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁵ Wolfe, "Seizing the Power," 34-35.

CHAPTER 3

WITHERING FRUIT:

THE CELEBRITY IN DECLINE

By rendering celebrities as multi-faceted characters, the New Journalists were able to create the type of intimacy that celebrity reporters had long strived to establish in their profiles. Balancing a sense of authorial omniscience established through extensive research with a subjectivity formerly unique to fiction writing, they painted portraits of complex individuals with human emotions, each set of subject and writer navigating the machinery of fame slightly differently. The selection of profiles in Chapter 2, however, is not entirely representative of the New Journalistic genre as a whole in its sampling of budding heroes. New Journalistic profiles actually tended to skew to the older side of the fame spectrum, portraying a generation on the brink of aging beyond glamour and stardom. In this chapter, I will look at samples of such profiles, examining their techniques and considering how the tragic story of the fallen hero differs from that of the rising star.

Unlike more widely known stories by Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, or Joan Didion, these stories do not portray rebellious youth raving over custom cars or dropping acid. They focus instead on aging celebrities who represent an era of mass media glamor that appears now both artificial and in decline, and so, the stars at the heart of these stories are made subtly to exemplify the generational divide pervading the 1960s. None of them,

importantly, are yet retired, but all are grappling with the passing of time. Some are suffering from dramatic downfalls, losses they are fruitlessly determined to come back from; others have returned from professional missteps and strive to maintain the image that they do not look, feel, or seem old. Still others ricochet between frustration at the horde of fans and photographers trailing them everywhere and thirst for even more attention, something resembling the kind they received in their heyday.

No writer was more skilled at depicting the faltering celebrity than Gay Talese, whose many-layered narrative about Frank Sinatra so expertly dissects the moving pieces of Sinatra's public image and so deftly alludes to the depths of a complex interiority it cannot directly represent. In "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," Talese uses the immediate physical crisis of Sinatra's cold to lay bare a much deeper plight: the fact that Sinatra appears to be reaching the end of his career, as the glamour of the mid-twentieth-century mass media seems also to be nearing a critical point of decay. Talese consistently links Sinatra's minor physical ailment to a generational gap across which the singer will not deign to reach, his confrontation with an increasingly dominant youth culture in which he proudly refuses to participate. Sinatra has in no way left the center of the party. Now even more than ever, Talese details the network of fans, friends, hangers-on, and publicity agents that feel the reverberations of Sinatra's every move. But his party is not the same one as Cassius Clay's or John F. Kennedy's. It is exclusive, understated, and smartly dressed; it is not hip, and it doesn't want to be. Each time it comes in contact with the increasingly expanding parties of America's young and nascent talent, a small

ripple of panic spreads throughout, and a generational clash takes place. And it is through a crisis so quotidian as a common cold that this cultural gulf is revealed, along with the increasingly undeniable fact that Sinatra is on the side of it that most of us don't want to be on.

Talese's inventive portrayal of Frank Sinatra in decline represents the culmination of techniques and themes that are evident more widely throughout the New Journalism. Didion rendered the acid-laced culture of Haight-Ashbury as a tragically poor, lost, and deluded assembly of runaway children, utilizing a similarly understated collection of observations to communicate the larger truth of her message. Rex Reed applied a melancholy storyline of decline to his portrait of Ava Gardner, a star whose lack of control over her own career he likened to a glitzy birdcage. While the profiles from Chapter 2 accomplished intimacy by characterizing rising stars, these features use the threat of irrelevancy to create multi-dimensionality, crafting vulnerable characters whose humanity is revealed in their falls from grace.

AVA: LIFE IN THE AFTERNOON:

REX REED ON AVA GARDNER

While Talese is often lucky enough (or skilled enough) to encounter his celebrities in the midst of specific crises, other writers use their allotted span of time with their subjects to paint them as individuals haunted by the calamity of age. In his widely admired profile of Ava Gardner, for example,

Rex Reed artfully crafts the narrative of an “aging star demanding star treatment,” utilizing the afternoon he spends with her first to establish the exclusivity of his view into the inner workings of her life and then to play with his own subjectivity and mediating presence.¹⁰⁶ Reed (long a fixture of New York gossip and, until recently, a film critic for *The New York Observer*) was a rising young journalist in the 1960s who eventually found minor stardom himself thanks to what *The New York Times* recently called his “dandyish style, sharp wit and drive to enrage.”¹⁰⁷ Most known now for his film criticism and flamboyant persona, Reed began his career at 20th Century Fox and eventually found work churning out celebrity profiles for *Esquire* with the same determination to do something bold and different that the rest of his cohorts possessed.¹⁰⁸ Along with Tom Morgan, Reed was also the celebrity profile specialist among the New Journalists, proclaimed by Tom Wolfe to have “raised the celebrity interview to a new level through his frankness, his eye for social detail, [and his ability to] capture a story line in the interview situation itself.”¹⁰⁹ His specialty, as Wolfe saw it, was that “no one had ever quite so diligently addressed himself to the question of, ‘What is So-and-so *really* like?’”¹¹⁰ In 1967, the same year he published the Ava Gardner profile, Reed expressed the same intent himself:

I just kind of follow people around and they tell me about their lives and . . . suddenly a story forms in my head. I don’t give a damn about the established traditions of the Hollywood interview . . . I’m more interested in what people look like when they take off the goo at night. If I have any philosophy at all, it’s cancel the moon, turn off the klieg lights, and tell it like it is.¹¹¹

Reed's profile of Gardner, which ran under the headline "Ava: Life in the Afternoon" in the May 1967 issue of *Esquire*, frames the rapidly fading star as a woman for whom the loss of control over her renown is merely a symptom of a much larger grievance. Gardner, as Reed depicts her, has never truly made any professional decisions for herself. After her chance discovery as a young woman and throughout her heyday as the star of b-movies and Hollywood epics, movie executives, as David Denby once wrote, "rarely knew what to do with her, and she didn't care enough, she said, to work it out for herself."¹¹² More notorious for her scandalous sex life than her plateauing film career, Gardner never gained the professional respect that even stars like Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn Monroe could garner, and was mainly thought of as a star who was "educated" by Hollywood without ever really learning how to act.¹¹³ Gardner in Reed's profile, consequentially, appears a willful but grumbling victim of a media empire that treats her as beautiful but disposable talent. At the time of the interview, she had just finished playing the role of Sarah in *The Bible: In the Beginning . . .*, but reporters (including Reed) would have been far more interested in her personal life than her acting. Her three marriages – to Mickey Rooney, Artie Shaw, and, coincidentally, Frank Sinatra – were all rife with scandal, and she had become notorious for her biting commentary about both her former lovers and the industry of Hollywood itself. And so Reed and his readers find her, bossily smoking and drinking in a suite of New York's Regency Hotel, grasping for some sort of

agency over her own career while knowing, often explicitly, that she never really had much to begin with. The piece follows Reed's afternoon with Ava almost step by step, recounting her withering opinions on her messy marriages and faltering career, and ending with Gardner tempestuously leaving the hotel bar and being mistaken for Jackie Kennedy in the street.

Before revealing the tragic underbelly of Gardner's persona, however, Reed's profile opens with a dramatically ethereal image of the former Mrs. Sinatra completely and utterly alone. He has not yet announced his own presence, so that she appears to the reader temporarily in a filter-less world unmediated even by Reed's own reportage. "She stands there," he begins,

without benefit of a filter lens against a room melting under the heat of lemony sofas and lavender walls and cream-and-peppermint-striped movie-star chairs. . . . There is no script. No Minnelli to adjust the CinemaScope lens.¹¹⁴

He ends the paragraph with the astute observation that she is "gloriously, divinely barefoot,"¹¹⁵ elevating her vulnerability to the point of glamour and evoking a potent feeling that we, the readers, have caught Ava Gardner in a very brief moment of isolation. Of course, Reed could not have ever caught the star this way. He would have no doubt been announced in advance and brought formally into the room, as he details in the subsequent paragraphs. But by jumping in the next scene to his own experience, shuffling through a riotous mass of fans and photographers as he tries to make his way to Gardner's room, Reed implies that Ava Gardner is, in this very first moment

of the profile, a solitary figure, pure and unfiltered by the lenses that both protect and infuriate her.

The effect of Reed's opening two paragraphs is thus three-fold. First, Reed re-establishes the message that New Journalism consistently brings its readers, telling them both explicitly and implicitly that they are getting exclusive access, going so far behind the scenes that no one, bar the subject him or herself, would be able to see what they are seeing. Secondly, the opening gives Reed as a narrator an implicit omniscience, an all-seeing eye that can describe how Ava looks when she is vulnerable and alone, even though he as a reporter could have never realistically glimpsed her this way. He uses what would presumably be the details observed upon walking into the room and places them structurally *before* his actual arrival (which is described two paragraphs later after he jostles through the "mob of autograph hunters" with a press agent who tells him, "You're very lucky, you're the only one she asked for" ¹¹⁶) in order to imply an all-knowingness that will allow him to penetrate the deeper levels of Ava's persona. Finally, the exquisite vulnerability of her bare feet, accompanied by the emphasis on the script-less quality of the scene, removes her, albeit temporarily, from the many veils that mediate the celebrity to her fans, fulfilling the persistent aim of New Journalists – to see the "real" version, before it gets distorted and sugar-coated by the machinery that produces the image.

After taking his readers with him through the lobby of the Regency Hotel, Reed enters Ava's cage-like suite, where she viciously dismisses her press agent with a brusque "*Out!*" and orders Reed to put away his notebook,

telling him, “Just let Mama do all the talking.”¹¹⁷ It is in this moment that Reed most acutely draws our attention to the fact that he is the mediator of the Ava Gardner experience, a reporter she is deciding whether or not to trust. By including the quote, he also toys with the manufacturing of Gardner’s image, rendering her both a practiced expert in speaking to journalists and a sort of co-conspirator in subverting the usual procedure whereby the journalist goads the celebrity’s vulnerable side with his own questions. She is trying to override his control of the scenario, to take charge of the interview and guide it the way *she* wants it to go – and, temporarily, he lets her, handing her the wheel for a brief moment before he reveals how small a part she plays in her own presentation. He gradually moves into a dialogue dominated by the caged star’s diva-esque soliloquies, using, for his own speech, either indirect discourse or questions written out as unquoted inquiries: “What about Mickey Rooney? (A glorious shriek.) ‘Love comes to Andy Hardy.’ Sinatra? ‘No comment,’ she says to her glass.”¹¹⁸ Their conversation is punctuated by an assortment of comers and goers – a delivery boy bearing a tray of a dozen Nathan’s hot dogs, a former husband of Gardner’s sister, the son of a friend studying law at NYU. Her network of hangers-on is constantly there, no matter her age or professional success.

About halfway into the piece, Reed turns to the same blended narrative voice that we observed in Chapter 2. As Morgan does with Sammy Davis, Jr., Reed begins to fuse his narrative voice with Ava’s quoted dialogue, fluidly hopscotching between the two in such a way that his own narrative omniscience is brought directly into the present-day scene of the interview,

the time between the afternoon itself and the writing of the article completely collapsed into one holistic report. One instance occurs at the entrance of a short, gray-haired man named Larry Tarr:

The doorbell rings and in bounces a little man named Larry. Larry has silver hair, silver eyebrows, and smiles a lot. He works for a New York camera shop. ‘Larry used to be married to my sister Bea. If you think I’m something you ought to see Bea. When I was eighteen I came to New York to visit them and Larry took that picture of me that started this whole megilah. He’s a sonuvabitch, but I love him.’¹¹⁹

By combining his subjective experience of this afternoon – the Fellini-esque comings and goings of various members of Ava’s star network, the behaviors and quirks exhibited by the star herself – with quoted material, Reed plays with his position as a mediator, twisting the subjectivity of this specific afternoon into a telling account of a star whose career and fame peaked long ago.

Reed is also using Larry’s presence to subtly underscore how little say Ava has always had over her career, reminding his readers of the famous story of Gardner’s chance discover: the “whole megilah” refers to Larry’s choice in 1941 to hang a photograph of his sister-in-law in his studio window, where a Loews Theater legal clerk spotted it and, posing as an MGM employee and hoping to score a date, suggested someone should send her to the studio. Larry, being the “sonuvabitch” that he was, immediately did so, leading the studio to offer Gardner a contract and a language coach to correct her thick Southern drawl. By referring to this story, Reed is reminding us that Ava is not struggling to regain the control she once had – she is struggling for

control, *period*. He uses this blended narrative technique to highlight the role of chance in the trajectory of her career, reinforcing the “pink malted-milk cage” that he conjures up to describe her hotel room.¹²⁰

Another instance of this fused narrative voice occurs in parentheses during the penultimate scene, where Ava and her three male companions, including Reed, sit in darkness at the Regency bar: “Two tequilas later (‘I *said* no salt!’) she is nodding grandly, surveying the bar like the Dowager Empress in the Recognition Scene.”¹²¹ By supplementing the otherwise regal description with the aggravated exclamation of a spoiled child, Reed subtly dismantles Ava’s mighty reign, showing us that either the waiters have not paid enough attention to her to get her order right, or that her erratic whims have landed her in what sounds like a borderline temper tantrum. By splicing her words into an otherwise sheerly descriptive sentence, Reed tells a deeper story about what lies beneath Ava’s disdainful eyebrow arches and unbending demands.

Reed reinforces this fundamental theme through a recurring comparison between Ava and Alexandra del Lago, the aging actress character in Tennessee Williams’ *Sweet Bird of Youth*.¹²² He first brings in the connection at the beginning of the interview, when Ava releases a “cheetah roar that sounds suspiciously like Geraldine Page playing Alexandra Del Lago.”¹²³ The next two comparisons, however, drop Page altogether and link Ava directly to the character herself, using that initial subjective observation as a jumping-off point to assimilate Gardner to a theatrical character defined by age and failure. By the last time he invokes the comparison, Reed even calls

the NYU law student the “Chance Wayne to her Alexandra Del Lago,” fully abandoning the initial supposition that it was merely her laugh that sounded like another actor in another role and instead embracing Ava’s resemblance to the faded movie star of the play.¹²⁴

Reed makes the import of this comparison – that Ava Gardner is, in every sense of the word, a fallen figure – dramatically clear in the conclusion of his piece, where he describes how, having rushed out of the bar onto a windy Park Avenue, Gardner is whisked off in a taxi, away from the autograph hunters who heave “le[pt] through the polished doors of the Regency and [begun] to scream.”¹²⁵ In a moment that illustrates her insignificance with tragic finality, a passerby asks who caused the commotion in the street, and a man leans out a bus window to respond, “Jackie Kennedy.”¹²⁶ Reed’s suggestion, though artfully evoked rather than stated outright, is clear. Gardner is no longer on the scene and not in any way a powerful or memorable presence. Her manic fans, likewise, are not individual people with feelings and inner conflicts; they are one homogeneous mass of commercialization, devoid of intimacy with the celebrity they pretend to worship and constantly ready to move on to the next starlet to cross their path.

In short, having opened his piece with a gloriously vulnerable version of a supposedly unfiltered Ava, Reed has now integrated all the entities that manipulate her image for the public – the fans, the agents, and the network of acquaintances that constantly surround her – to reveal the phenomenon of the aging star. Gardner, trapped under the accretion of publicity agents,

watches helplessly as her adorers begin to lose interest and walk away. Reed creates, analyzes, and penetrates the psyche of a character fruitlessly rebelling against both the passing of time and the exploitation of a media machine, a figure much more complex and thus more captivating than that of a star on the rise.

THE LOSER:

GAY TALESE ON FLOYD PATTERSON

Even more harrowing than Rex Reed's desolate portrait of Ava Gardner is Gay Talese's "The Loser," a devastating profile of Floyd Patterson, a former heavyweight champion fruitlessly bent on regaining his title and his renown. Patterson, who became the youngest heavyweight champion in history in 1956, regained the title in 1960 after temporarily losing it to the Swede Ingemar Johansson. Then, in September of 1962, Patterson suffered a devastating first-round loss to Sonny Liston, a rising star from a sharecropping family in Arkansas with a history of violent crime and a notoriously hotheaded temperament. Patterson had agreed to fight Liston despite concerns from his management about Liston's links to organized crime and even warnings from the NAACP that the up-and-comer was setting a dishonorable example for black youth.

In the context of the day's dominant opinion, Patterson represented the "Great Black Hope," as Talese would write, a figure of dignity and

respectability who, much like Sammy Davis, Jr., could appeal to the liberal establishment.¹²⁷ Originally harking from a background as rough as Liston's, Patterson had been educated as a child at a school for emotionally disturbed boys and emerged as an eloquent, upstanding member of society – the seeming opposite of all that Liston represented.¹²⁸ His initial defeat by Liston was coincidentally symbolic of a larger cultural shift resembling the gulf between Sammy Davis, Jr. and Cassius Clay, whereby the “good” black man catering to the pathos of a liberal white audience was edged out by an apparently tougher, less poised figure representative of an era of rising militance. Ten months after the 1962 knockout, Patterson challenged Liston to a rematch, only to be defeated again in a fight that lasted a mere four seconds longer than his first loss. Talese tracked him down in March of 1964 and found him, five months after his crushing second loss and two days before he was set to appear in the ring for the first time since the Liston fight, training like a madman at an abandoned house in upstate New York.

The arc of Talese's narrative follows a day in Patterson's life, which begins with a training session and soon includes a trip to Scarsdale to visit his wife and children, where they live without him in a predominantly white upper-middle-class suburb – their separate lives indicative of the large, chilly chasm that pervades his relationship with his family. After a tense confrontation with a group of young boys who he claims have been bullying his daughter Jeannie, the aging fighter brings his children back to the training camp with him, where they spend a few hours watching him box a punching bag until their mother arrives to take them back to Scarsdale. The storyline is

stuffed with diversions that flash back to Patterson's defeats and link them to the present, framing the former champion as a tragic figure haunted by shame and fruitlessly intent on proving he can come back from his doubly humiliating defeat. In the manner of most New Journalists, Talese tells this story by combining first-person observations of his subject with digressions based on background research to conjure up a multi-faceted character. In "The Loser," however, the character is tragic – a hulking, insecure man full of regret, bitterness, and anger that manifests itself in wildly misplaced aggression.

The primary structure through which Talese constructs this culturally resonant story is characteristic of most New Journalistic works, jumping lightly between the current setting of the interview and key moments that have shaped the star's career and image. Talese fluidly links the interview situation to Patterson's vivid flashbacks of his dual loss, using, in one instance, the act of walking to bring the defeat into the present: "The worst thing about losing is having to walk out of the ring and face those people. . . . ' Then Patterson walked over to the stove and put on the kettle for tea."¹²⁹ By picking up on the physical imagery that the former champion provides through his own dialogue, Talese artfully connects the brawny, broad-shouldered athlete with the just-defeated shell of five months before, fielding shouts and camera flashes while struggling to comprehend his shattering loss.

Talese also frequently employs a blended narrative style similar to Reed's, but he makes his own presence in the story much more subtle, referring to himself only as a "visitor" to whom Patterson reveals, "in a rare

moment of honesty . . . what it is like to be the loser.”¹³⁰ Instead of Reed’s question style, which is written without quotation marks as if appearing from thin air, Talese’s interrogations are often followed by “he was asked,” referring to a secondary presence in the room without identifying Talese as the speaker. This passive voice enhances the solitariness of the scenes, keeping readers mainly in Patterson’s own head as the boxer tries to put into words the weighty shame of being a loser. Even the most heart-wrenching questions are posed by this anonymous third party, such as in an especially contemplative moment of self-reflection: “When did you first think you were a coward?” he was asked.”¹³¹ In using the lightest possible touch of narrative presence, Talese stresses Patterson’s isolation and the loss of the star power he once enjoyed. Not only is Patterson not tailed by a clamoring mass of fans and photographers. His one “visitor”—the writer himself—is made to seem so insignificant that his presence does not even merit the use of a personal pronoun. The effect is to stress Patterson’s tragic solitude.

Talese’s scrupulous attention to details lets him linger on miniscule moments in order to illustrate Patterson’s character, like the dozen t-shirts the boxer still owns from the Deauville hotel, where he trained during the height of his career, or the false whiskers, mustache, and hat that he has brought with him to every match since his loss to Johansson in 1959, lest he need to flee in humiliation. When Talese joins Patterson in his self-flown private jet to go visit the boxer’s daughter, he deftly connects the vehicle to the one Patterson tried to fly home after his second loss to Liston. When that plane overheated due to the ex-champion’s copious luggage, Patterson had

been forced to wait in the shadows of the Las Vegas airport, his disguise packed away in his suitcase, surrounded by every audience member who had just watched him lose. After a bigger plane was located, another pilot flew the smaller one home, landing it “in precisely the same spot it was on this day five months later when Floyd Patterson was planning to fly it toward perhaps another fight – this time a fight with some boys in Scarsdale who had been lifting up his little daughter’s dress.”¹³² The effect of these neat juxtapositions is to trap the boxer in a pattern of recurring and increasingly humiliating losses. Talese details Patterson’s confrontation with these boys at his daughter’s school, who turn out to be wholly unintimidated by his threats, and the scene ends with Patterson nervously backing off after he spots some white parents watching the exchange from afar. Talese cruelly imagines Patterson thinking that, “had those same boys heckled someone in Liston’s family, the school yard would have been littered with limbs.”¹³³

Even more tragic than the scene with the school bullies, however, are two painstakingly drawn out moments when, on the way to his daughter’s school, Patterson repeatedly attempts to swat at a fly buzzing around the plane:

He glared at the fly, watched it crawl slowly up the windshield, then shot a quick smash with his palm against the glass. He missed. The fly buzzed safely past Patterson’s ear, bounced off the back of the cockpit, circled around.

Then, a few moments later, when the unwelcome visitor rejoins him at the front of the plane: “Patterson watched it, squinted. Then he slammed down at

it with a quick right hand. Missed.”¹³⁴ Nowhere in this description does Talese explicitly refer to the actual act of boxing, nor to any part of Patterson’s career or facet of his personality. Instead, he uses the language of boxing moves and the most bellicose verbs he can find to viscerally describe all the misplaced anger and aggression pent up in Patterson. The same goes for the confrontation with the school bullies, where Talese again uses tiny slivers of his own time with Patterson to portray how agonizingly pathetic the fighter has become. Neither scene bears any relation to Patterson’s professional career. Instead, they bring the professional failure to personal and cultural levels, rendering a character who is, in every sense of the word, a loser.

Talese, in fact, proved quite perceptive in his understanding of the futility of Patterson’s situation. Two days after the interview, Patterson traveled to Sweden to fight an Italian contender named Sante Amonti for the European heavyweight championship. Patterson had publicly confessed that, if he lost the fight, he would be forced to retire. He won – a testament more to Amonti’s weaknesses than his own strengths – but he later confessed having flashbacks to both of his fights with Liston at the sound of the starting bell. American reporters, already put off by the politeness of both Sweden’s boxing customs and the fight itself, described Patterson as looking “ragged” and “tired” throughout.¹³⁵ His career staggered on for eight more years, and he never regained the heavyweight title despite striving tirelessly to do so, challenging Muhammad Ali twice and participating in the eight-man tournament that was to decide the successor to the championship after Ali was stripped of it for refusing to join the military. His last fight was with Ali

himself in 1972, where he was defeated in the seventh round and subsequently slipped away without announcing a retirement.

Why did Talese choose not to save Patterson from his professional and fundamental crisis, as he would with Frank Sinatra a mere two years later? Perhaps it seemed obvious that Patterson's career was more over than Sinatra's could ever be. Perhaps the scene that unfolded in front of him during that afternoon in March seemed more tragic, more beyond salvaging than that of other celebrities he had encountered. There was no network with Patterson, no hangers-on, no fans clamoring for his autograph. In fact, at one point Patterson gets mistaken by a stranger for Sonny Liston himself in a painful moment that has the same effect as Rex Reed's account of a fan mistaking Ava Gardner for Jackie O. Perhaps also Talese saw in Patterson's desolate world the opportunity for a new type of character, a sort of twentieth-century Dying Gaul illustrative of a figure in irreparable decline – the restrained, elegant fantasy that white liberals had so adored in stars like Sammy Davis, Jr. and Sidney Poitier. Patterson embodies the mythic legend of the defeated warrior, taken down by a harsher world where his “nice guy” act suddenly seems meek. In this new world, an unabashedly rough-around-the-edges fighter like Liston can humiliate the dignified Patterson – twice – without caring what the white public thinks of him. Patterson was no longer at the center of the party; he was not reveling in the show business of celebrity, as Cassius Clay had been for Wolfe less than a year earlier.

“Fallen characters,” wrote Marc Weingarten, “fascinated Talese. . . . [He felt that i]t was only in defeat that a man revealed his true self to the

world.”¹³⁶ It is no wonder, then, that the New Journalists tended to catch their celebrities on the downward slope of their careers: one could only take the rising star so far as a character, because their deepest, darkest selves could by no means be revealed while they remained at the center of the party. It was only after the spotlight was turned away that celebrities could become fully-formed characters, their strides to reclaim renown revealing their ugliest traits. Then, and only then, could the journalist choose whether to salvage them from the ruins of irrelevancy.

FRANK SINATRA HAS A COLD:

GAY TALESE ON FRANK SINATRA

We can now turn to what is widely considered the paragon of the new journalistic celebrity profile, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” The feature’s most universally lauded quality is its ability to establish the semblance of a fictional short story through a unique and innovative style of research. Its “fully rendered scenes, extended conversations and plainly subjective depictions of mood” have placed it at the forefront of the New Journalistic canon, taught in countless journalism classes and cited as the quintessential model of the “art of hanging out.”¹³⁷ Talese paints Sinatra as every reader wants to see their celebrities: flawed, but still above the ordinary; temperamental, but ultimately warmhearted; troubled, but not damaged beyond salvation.

But “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” owes its success to a factor much more subtle than those vaunted by journalistic arbiters who praise its ability to read like fiction while describing fact. Talese’s story creates this impression by weaving together two strands of overlapping crises. The first is an immediate physical ailment that wreaks havoc on the expansive web of agents, publicists, producers, and managers that work for Sinatra; the second is the all-too-familiar creeping feeling that the singer long ago reached the pinnacle of his renown and is now sliding down a steep descent into failure and, with it, irrelevancy. Talese uses the former to symbolize the latter, weaving the two problems subtly together and setting them both on the same trajectory. In his rare choice to save Sinatra from his crisis, Talese unites the star’s overcoming of the cold with the confirmation of a chock-full schedule and an undeniably vital career, rescuing the now-heroic figure by instilling him with youth and vigor. He blends astounding omniscience, accomplished through his thorough research process and a good deal of personal speculation, with his own limited viewpoint of Sinatra himself, to accomplish the heroic tale of a character who ultimately triumphs over the many obstacles – personal, professional, and otherwise – standing in his way.

Much like Reed’s profile of Ava Gardner, Talese leans heavily on authorial omniscience to set up the arc of his narrative in the first paragraph. Here, however, instead of depicting his subject as a briefly solitary figure, Talese frames Sinatra – quite literally – with hangers-on, entering the six minds of the people surrounding the star simultaneously without penetrating that of Sinatra himself. “The two blondes [next to him] knew, as did Sinatra’s

four male friends who stood nearby,” he asserts, “that it was a bad idea to force conversation upon him when he was in this mood of sullen silence, a mood that had hardly been uncommon during this first week of November, a month before his fiftieth birthday.”¹³⁸ Talese momentarily refuses to give us access to Sinatra’s mind, uniting both himself and his readers solely with the people around the star, to whom the singer is currently an aloof and moody figure, his mood and mind both impenetrable. With this sentence, Talese also elegantly links Sinatra’s age to his stormy temperament with the mere addition of a logistical fact – that he is about to turn fifty. He underscores this implicit association throughout the piece: while nowhere does he explicitly state that Sinatra’s crisis is related to age, he frequently weaves this factor into every point of tension in the narrative, closely intertwining each of Sinatra’s more concrete crises with his age.

With the next paragraph, Talese pulls us quickly into the inner workings of Sinatra’s mind, as if cinematically zooming in to let us understand why the singer is in such a fuss:

Sinatra had been working in a film that he now disliked, could not wait to finish; he was tired of all the publicity attached to his dating the twenty-year-old Mia Farrow, who was not in sight tonight; he was angry that a CBS television documentary of his life, to be shown in two weeks, was reportedly prying into his privacy. . . . [H]e was worried about his starring role in an hour-long NBC show entitled *Sinatra – A Man and His Music*, which would require that he sing eighteen songs with a voice that at this particular moment, just a few nights before the taping was to begin, was weak and sore and uncertain. Sinatra was ill. He was the victim of an ailment so common that most people would consider it trivial. But when it gets to Sinatra it can plunge him into a

state of anguish, deep depression, panic, even rage. Frank Sinatra had a cold.¹³⁹

With this layering of predicaments, Talese performs a complete one-eighty, plunging deep into Sinatra's psyche and opening him up as vulnerable and understandable just moments after describing him as "distant" and unapproachable.¹⁴⁰ Like Reed, Talese constantly alters his position as a narrator, speaking sometimes as a mere observer of Sinatra, other times as a dear friend, and still others as a distant acquaintance. During the most critical points, he speaks as an author who created Sinatra himself, who understands at the most fundamental level every whir and click of the singer's brain. Talese dismantles the extensive apparatus around Sinatra by humanizing the functionaries who surround the celebrity, using his rigorous interviews to give readers insight into the minds of these secondary figures as well as that of Sinatra himself. It is perhaps through this humanization that Talese salvages Sinatra from the harshly churning machinery of fame, both from aging out and from becoming nothing more than an image manufactured by a mass of agents, publicists, social climbers, and doting fans.

Like most New Journalistic profiles, Talese's portrait of Sinatra includes and often emphasizes the horde of individuals surrounding the star's every move. Never once do we even get to imagine a scene where he is alone. The closest we come is a moment, presumably described to Talese by Sinatra's valet, George Jacobs, where the singer reluctantly returns home alone and asks George to serve him dinner in the dining room. "If Sinatra, on such

evenings, should ask Jacobs to stay longer,” Talese writes, “or to play a few hands of poker, he would be happy to do so. But Sinatra never does.”¹⁴¹ More often than not, Sinatra is surrounded by an elaborately described cluster of friends (it is not unusual for Talese to name each member and tell his readers how he or she knows Sinatra), or various members of his “personal staff of seventy-five.”¹⁴² Talese often counts up the men in his entourage at a given moment, documenting its gradual expansion throughout the course of a night. He even dwells on the way that Sinatra curates this group of followers, and the high expectations he has for his “special circle” – primarily, that they are undyingly loyal – using Sinatra’s alleged connections with the mob to paint an image of the star as *Il Padrone*, constantly doling out favors and gifts to those who have proven their fealty.¹⁴³ In places, Talese even draws on interviews with the fans clamoring to get a glimpse of Sinatra in the back of his favorite bar, citing one devotee’s recollection of an eighteen-year-old boy who once threw a tomato at Sinatra in 1938.¹⁴⁴ In sum, Talese walks us strategically through the wall of individuals surrounding the star until they are no longer a wall but a group of multi-faceted people, a web that Sinatra has spun and that Talese has employed to create secondary and tertiary characters in his story.

Talese extends this breakdown to the individuals responsible for creating the image of Sinatra that the general public receives, focusing mainly on his press agent, Jim Mahoney. In a detailed description of the press flack’s office, Talese notes the prescription date on the bottle of sleeping tablets Mahoney keeps there – which, Talese informs us, matches the date of Frank Sinatra Jr.’s kidnapping.¹⁴⁵ By temporally linking this catastrophe with the

critical point at which Mahoney's stress levels precluded him from sleeping properly, Talese renders the reverberations of Sinatra's crises not just widespread but intimate and personal. He transforms the press agent, usually a symbol of all that is wrong and deceitful in the industry of celebrity, into a sympathetic man working like a dog to keep the machine in order.

Talese aligns even the lowliest staff members with Sinatra's family, a point that comes across particularly potently when Sinatra sits down with his ex-wife and daughter to watch the long-dreaded CBS documentary alleged to probe intrusively into his private life. Having narrowed in on this intimate setting, Talese enacts a cinematic pan-out to all of Sinatra's friends, acquaintances, and employees, who are simultaneously watching the same program with the same concern:

Sinatra's lawyer, Milton A. Rudin, smoking a cigar, was watching with a keen eye, an alert legal mind. Other [TV] sets were watched by Brad Dexter, Jim Mahoney, Ed Pucci; Sinatra's makeup man, 'Shotgun' Britton; his New York representative, Henry Gine; his haberdasher, Richard Carroll; his insurance broker, John Lillie; his valet, George Jacobs, a handsome negro who, when entertaining girls in his apartment, plays records by Ray Charles.

With this unfurling overview, Talese visually unites a far-reaching segment of Sinatra's entourage in the same motion, their disparate lives all brought together by the nucleus of the star and his greatest concerns. He lifts this conceit almost directly from the realist novel, where the intersecting experiences of multiple separate characters are often emphasized in a particular scene to create a sense of social connection. The tone of wariness,

the sense that each and every character, from the singer's own daughter to the man that sews his suits, is bracing him or herself for the same circumstance, balances the cohesion of Sinatra's network with its composition as a group of individuals, naming each and every member involved while showing us the unifying power of Sinatra as the star at their center. Talese is using his narrative omniscience to confront the veil dividing Sinatra and the general public, to dissect it without disassembling it altogether, and to render it just as human and authentic-feeling as Sinatra himself.

Talese even goes so far as to compare the group that trails Sinatra around (at his request, mind you) to a neighborhood, conceptualizing the hangers-on as an extension of the small Italian community that fostered the singer during his childhood in Hoboken. "When Sinatra sits to dine," Talese states,

his trusted friends are close; and no matter where he is, no matter how elegant the place may be, there is something of the neighborhood showing because Sinatra, no matter how far he has come, is still something of the boy from the neighborhood – only now he can take his neighborhood with him.¹⁴⁶

If Sinatra's entourage is his neighborhood, then the members of it are, if we are to extend Talese's metaphor, his neighbors – people who grew up with him, who have accompanied him on his rise to (and potential fall from) fame. The massive network that surrounds the celebrity – an entity present in every single New Journalistic profile – thus changes, in Talese's piece, from cloying fans, social climbers, and members of the public relations machinery to

intimate companions. In effect, Talese transforms the functionaries that surround the singer from barriers that stand between him and the celebrity into windows that give him distinctive vantages upon the star. He renders human the very apparatus that initially blocks the celebrity from appearing that way.

And it is only through his interviews with the members of this apparatus, along with his distant observations of Sinatra himself, that Talese can build a heroic story arc, utilizing Sinatra's cold as a stand-in for the singer's nagging concern that he is aging out. A generational divide dominates almost every problematic scene in the narrative, as is particularly evident in a vicious confrontation that takes place between Sinatra and a few younger members of the Beverly Hills club he frequents. Talese sets up the encounter by asserting that the club "has among its members many actors, directors, writers, models, nearly all of them a good deal younger than Sinatra. . . and much more casual in the way they dress for the evening," setting the stage for what will be an undeniably generational crisis.¹⁴⁷ He then reminds us of the cold, weaving it gently into a scene about Sinatra's age and thus binding it to the generational war about to go down: "Frank Sinatra, leaning against the stool, sniffing a bit from his cold, could not take his eyes off the . . . boots" worn by a trendily dressed young pool player.¹⁴⁸ Sinatra proceeds to pick a fight with the wearer of the boots, who turns out to be the up-and-coming screenwriter Harlan Ellison, for being dressed too casually – a style that Talese has already established as symbolic of a younger generation. By weaving these three pieces together in one brief altercation – the cold, the

clothing, and the age difference – Talese links the ostensible physical crisis to the more conceptual generational one. Much like Rex Reed’s temperamental Ava Gardner, Sinatra here is rendered as a weakened, peevish bully spoiling for a fight in a foolish effort to reclaim some of his dignity and renown.

Talese also uses his own speculation to subtly link the cold to Sinatra’s frustration and anxiety, poking his readers to remind us at each tense moment of Sinatra’s physical ailment. At the beginning of a scene in the NBC studios, where Sinatra is about to record a one-hour show about his life, set to his own music, Talese again primes us for a scenario where generational differences lurk in the background: “Prior to his cold, Sinatra had been very excited about this show; he saw here an opportunity to appeal not only to those nostalgic, but also to communicate his talent to some rock-and-rollers – in a sense, he was battling the Beatles.”¹⁴⁹ Sinatra gets through three songs before his voice begins to crack under the physical duress of his condition. Deflecting his anger towards the incompetency of the staff on the set, as he had earlier attacked Ellison, Sinatra starts in on a rant about how the studio runs its sessions, but stops abruptly – “possibly,” as Talese speculates, “not wanting to use his voice unnecessarily.”¹⁵⁰ The scene is pervaded by the sense that time is ticking away, and, simultaneously, by the notion that the symbolism-loaded ailment still lingers.

This recording-studio scene is crucial to the piece’s narrative arc because it serves as the finale of the story’s first act, setting up a crisis-ridden universe that demands resolution. Talese pulls together two concurrent threads in the scene: the description of its moment-to-moment events, and

background information on both his daughter and former wife, both of whom live in Los Angeles. He tells us how when she was a child and her father first became popular, the young Nancy would listen to his songs at home and cry, and how Sinatra's first wife never remarried because, as she explained to a friend, "When you've been married to Frank Sinatra" ¹⁵¹ Woven throughout these two threads are brief snippets of the song lyrics Sinatra is in the midst of singing – a song that, as it happens, about his daughter Nancy. After the first set of lyrics, the Sinatra magic takes hold: heads turn, and all of a sudden he softens, if only because of the sheer adoration expressed in the song. His "private side" suddenly emerges as he sings about the only person with which he feels he can be "unashamedly himself" – a temporary lowering of the veils that shroud Sinatra in his usual frustration and volatility. ¹⁵²

But, all too soon, the tables turn, and the sadness and loneliness of Sinatra and his first family's life become clear. Talese emphasizes the pathos by stressing the inconsistency between the kitsch of the song Sinatra sings—a cloyingly sentimental lyric to his daughter composed when she was three years old ("If I don't see her each day/I miss her" ¹⁵³) – and the loneliness of their adult lives. Sinatra's daughter is now divorced and living alone, watching her father begin and end frequent relationships with the likes of Ava Gardner and Juliet Prowse; the singer himself wanders occasionally into the home of his former family late at night and falls asleep on the couch, because it is the only place he can find any privacy. Talese uses Nancy's indirect dialogue to paint a picture of an incredibly solitary man, someone who, even in childhood,

craved attention, and who, to this day, lives in paralyzing fear of ever being alone again. He writes:

[She] realized that the sofa was one of the few places left in the world where Frank Sinatra could get any privacy. . . . She realized, too, that things normal have always eluded her father: his childhood was one of loneliness and a drive toward attention, and since attaining it he has never again been certain of solitude.¹⁵⁴

The blissful warmth of the song's lyrics become ironic as we both watch him start struggling to sing them effectively and learn of the sadness lurking behind his relationship with his daughter. It is only later on, in a parallel scene towards the end of the narrative, that Sinatra finds redemption for both his cold and the falsity of his lyrics.

After linking Sinatra's cold to the more fundamental crises in the star's life, Talese is able to pull all these threads together through Sinatra's recovery, which sets off a chain of blissful moments resolving each point of anxiety in his story. Upon returning, in good health, from a restorative week in Palm Springs, Sinatra finds the dreaded CBS documentary to be, to his satisfaction, minimally invasive. He re-shoots the NBC special, which goes off without a hitch. He flies to Las Vegas to see the fight between Cassius Clay and Floyd Patterson (which Talese uses as a springboard to recount a time when Sinatra's career seemed dead, quickly whizzing mid-sentence back to the present, where he has regained his edge). He laughs at comedian Don Rickles' public jabs. He finishes shooting a film with Virna Lisi, cracking dirty jokes between takes, and he returns to the recording studio to rehearse for an

upcoming album. Gone is the fussy, moody celebrity who sulked in the corner of a Beverly Hills club and dragged its younger members for their unseemly attire. In his place stands a light-hearted beacon of endless energy, who bounces jovially between professional engagements, laughs his way through movie shoots, and can transform a room with his voice. Talese, borrowing from Thomas B. Morgan's introduction, runs through the star's unendingly hectic schedule: "He had an engagement at the Sands, a new spy film called *The Naked Runner* to be shot in England, and a couple more albums to do in the immediate months ahead." When Talese concludes this catalog with the remark, "and within a week he would be fifty years old," the point is now not the singer's fading vitality but his remarkable vigor.¹⁵⁵

This transformation is most emphasized in a scene, occurring a mere two pages before the end of the piece, that mirrors the earlier description of the failed NBC recording session. As Sinatra departs for a rehearsal of his upcoming album, *Moonlight Sinatra*, Talese temporarily eliminates the entire manufacturing apparatus by quoting Sinatra from an old interview:

Once you're on that record singing, it's you and you alone. With a film it's never like that; there are producers and scriptwriters, and hundreds of men in offices and the thing is taken right out of your hands. With a record, you're it.¹⁵⁶

Setting us up for a scene that, from the mouth of Sinatra himself, is devoid of all the machinery that processes the celebrity's product before spitting it out for an audience, Talese then returns to his use of song lyrics – but this time,

they feel wholeheartedly true. Fittingly, they are about getting old and enjoying it, as Talese hints in lines quoted from the song “It Was a Very Good Year”: “And now I think of my life/As vintage wine/From fine old kegs.”¹⁵⁷

And suddenly, the singer’s life *does* feel like a vintage wine, his age a mere fact among the many other qualities that make him great. By the same token, the chummy attitude Sinatra expresses towards all his employees, which appears false and manipulative towards the beginning of the piece, now becomes undeniably touching. Talese shows us, for instance, that Sinatra has an extraordinary memory for the intimate details of the lives of the musicians in his orchestra, who have “gotten old hearing him sing ‘You Make Me Feel So Young.’”¹⁵⁸ Sinatra asks his French horn player how the musician’s daughter is, correcting himself on her age and remembering aloud that the little girl had shown promise of becoming a singer.¹⁵⁹ In short, Talese depicts Sinatra as now effortlessly in control: his request for a cup of coffee is efficiently executed, sharply contrasting his frustration in trying to catch the attention of his director in the earlier version of this scene. More importantly, though, the room-transforming voice is far more powerful and enduring than when Sinatra was sick, sending electrical currents through the room as he stands, “in ecstasy,” enjoying the gaze of every man and woman from the orchestra to the control booth.¹⁶⁰

The piece ends with Sinatra restored to glory, both reestablishing his familial authority and claiming his solitude not as loneliness but as glamour. In the penultimate scene, Sinatra smoothly asserts his effortless control by sending one of his men to ensure his daughter will get home safely. He then

he takes off to attend to his many future engagements (including, lest anyone forget, his fiftieth birthday), allowing Talese to end the piece with a dream-like scene. Stopped at a red light, Sinatra smiles at a young girl who recognizes him as he lingers – a scene that, with a healthy dose of finality, saves him from both the danger of aging out and the impersonal apparatus of celebrity. Not only is the star recognized; he shares a brief personal connection with his observer, the two smiling at each other as he gazes directly into her eyes. Sinatra gracefully revels in his fame, slyly indulging his fan for a few seconds without demanding or begging for her attention, before zooming off. He has been rescued, unlike Floyd Patterson, from the snatches of decline, plucked from his fall from grace and repositioned, ever so lovingly, back on top.

FROM CELEBRITY TO HERO

On its surface, the New Journalistic profile of the celebrity in decline is an embodiment of what society, in its most vindictive form, wants to see: its stars smashed to pieces by the pressure of their success and an extra nudge from their interviewers. The most exemplary form of this type of celebrity coverage came just after the heyday of the New Journalism in the rise of Barbara Walters and the celebrity television interviews she perfected, which the cultural critic Mark Crispin Miller memorably identified as a “theater of revenge.”¹⁶¹ The genre, which was popularized in Walters’ television specials,

went on to become a staple of countless behind-the-scenes documentaries and reality television spectacles.

On Walters' stage, Miller points out, the journalist acts on behalf of a resentful public and takes vengeance on the glamorous by assaulting them with scathing questions aimed at their vices, fears, and weaknesses. "Walters," Miller writes, "seems to penalize the stars for their success – right after, or even in the midst of, hyping it."¹⁶² After conducting a tour of the subject's luxurious residence and beating around the bush with a few harmless introductory queries, Miller explains, Walters whirls around with an intensely sudden personal inquiry to corner her subjects into vulnerability.

Her technique bears a slight resemblance to the New Journalists' treatment of ripening stars in that both are punishing, moving from fascination with the opulence and fanfare in which the star is ensconced to disgust and pity at the despair that lies behind apparent success. Indeed, in many ways, the New Journalistic profile could seem a more artful, literary version of Walters' take-down technique, building up the splendor more slowly and then carefully, methodically dismantling it. In an interview with a 55-year-old Elizabeth Taylor, for example, Walters asks the actor if she feels fat or old, letting the camera answer the question as it slowly zooms in on Taylor's laugh lines and double chin. Though done less gracefully, the scene has the same effect as Talese's account of Floyd Patterson swatting at the fly buzzing around his plane. Likewise, both forms are probably successful for the same reasons: they cater to the public's deep-seated desire to see their stars taken down.

And yet, there is an important difference between the work of the New Journalists and the vengeful celebrity journalism made familiar by Walters and her imitators. Walters has no intention of characterization. She seeks not sympathetic but pitiable figures, and she refuses especially the type of heroic characterization that the New Journalists invoked. Her subjects remain unreachable, inhuman, and uncomplicated, flat cut-outs onto which she projects her agenda of humiliation. In this way, she remains complicit with the machinery of celebrity, often aiding the stars in appearing as pitiable caricatures to their audiences: the female celebrities become victims of the system who have “Been Through Hell,” and male stars are revealed as secretly longing for a cozy life of domesticity.¹⁶³ “Through her,” Miller asserts, “we only seem to be allowed inside a world of peace and luxury, a world whose real inhabitants, through her, we only seem to punish for our actual exclusion.”¹⁶⁴

By contrast, for the New Journalists, celebrities became both accessible and heroic, mythified into tragic figures fighting against the ever-oppressive grind of their machinery. Boorstin’s understanding of the modern celebrity exists in polarity with the hero. “There is not even any tragedy in the celebrity’s fall,” he writes:

for he is a man returned to his proper anonymous station. The tragic hero, in Aristotle’s familiar definition, was a man fallen from great estate, a great man with a tragic flaw. He had somehow become the victim of his own greatness. Yesterday’s celebrity, however, is a commonplace man who has been fitted back into his proper commonplaceness not by any fault of his own, but by time itself.¹⁶⁵

The hero, then, is exactly what the New Journalists were crafting from their “commonplace” celebrities. In effect, they took the implication of Boorstin’s chapter, “From Hero to Celebrity,” and reversed that transition, returning the celebrity to the irrefutable glory of the Aristotlean hero. Even if it is yet another cog in the celebrity machine, the New Journalism does not reinforce the exclusive quality of the celebrity’s world, nor does it help obscure the turning of the wheel that twists the celebrity’s world into a packageable commodity. It turns fans to family, take-downs to tragedy, and artifice to authenticity. It makes readers feel as if they truly understand their stars, as if they themselves have mastered the “art of hanging out” and spent a day, or a week, or a month, nestled in the tumultuous confines of the celebrity’s life. It is this technique – the ability to evoke authenticity – that made New Journalists so impeccably good at profiles at a time when everything felt fake. Somehow, turning celebrities into fictional characters made them seem more real than anyone ever had.

NOTES

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¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 126
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EPILOGUE

STILL-BURNING EMBERS

In the March 5th issue of the 2018 *New Yorker*, Tad Friend ran a profile of Donald Glover – rapper, singer, songwriter, actor, director, writer, and producer. Glover exists in almost every realm of celebrity imaginable. While writing for NBC’s *30 Rock* and then starring in *Community*, he also released two albums composed primarily of rap tracks. In 2016 he changed gears with an eleven-track soul album, released just months after the show he created and starred in – *Atlanta* – premiered on FX. His acting career is currently occupied with a part in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* and the role of Simba in the upcoming live-action version of *The Lion King*. Glover is endlessly dynamic, his public persona a mix of dry humor, edgy apathy, and earnest gratitude for the people and networks that have helped him get to where he is.

Friend, who became a staff writer for *The New Yorker* in 1998 after leaving a contributing editor post at *Esquire*, describes Glover on the first page of the article in the following way:

Slim but thick-chested and broad-shouldered, Glover has the rolling, slew-footed walk of a riverboat captain. In a group, he laughs as often as he makes others laugh, a trait rare among the occupationally funny. Acquaintances love to proclaim how warm or chill or dope he is, but none of that is exactly right, or exactly right for long. He answers the phone warily, as if it were always 3 A.M., as if he were on guard against his own immense likableness. He is attracted to people who don’t seem to want his approval, but, increasingly, everyone does.¹⁶⁶

This passage includes almost every element of the New Journalism that we have observed thus far. There is, firstly, the conjuring of a fiction-like character, every minute detail of his physical demeanor and gait rendered to a vivid tee. Next comes the ever-persistent presence of the “group,” Glover’s behavior around other people, and the way his comrades and coworkers describe him. Friend establishes a definitive superiority, moreover, to Glover’s “acquaintances,” asserting that none of the words they use to describe him are “exactly right.” He inches towards authorial omniscience by conjecturing about the way Glover answers the phone, using the term “as if” to suggest that perhaps the actor’s charisma frightens him a bit.

Throughout the profile, Friend draws on a number of New Journalistic tics. He practices the fluid narrative voice and unquoted reporter dialogue that Rex Reed used with Ava Gardner: “Didn’t black people actually make ‘Twelve Years a Slave?’ ‘Yeah,’ Glover said. ‘But in a white system.’”¹⁶⁷ He leaps into omniscience to help his readers understand how Glover’s upbringing colored the cynical comic’s understanding of the world: “[He and his brother] came to share an understanding that life was a bad dream and that laughter was a way to wake yourself up.”¹⁶⁸ The profile’s structure, too, is roughly equivalent to the New Journalistic pattern of utilizing a centering scene of activity in which the celebrity is engaged – here, the taping of *Atlanta* – and frequently stepping back to quote other individuals or describe various other points in the subject’s life.

Most importantly, though, the Glover of Friend's piece is imbued with the boldness that inhabits so many New Journalistic subjects, the promise of the celebrity to breathe new life into his or her field. Friend's reverence for someone who wants to shock the system back to life harkens back to Mailer's near-spiritual worship of JFK or Wolfe's awestruck admiration of Cassius Clay. *Atlanta*, and, by extension, Glover, is framed as a wholly unprecedented and groundbreaking entity, written by an all-black group of young neophytes and directed by Hiro Murai in the Tokyo-born filmmaker's television directorial debut. The show deliberately strives to make white people uncomfortable, and Glover, likewise, portrays no intention of pleasing the members of the majority-white system in which he works and lives. (When Lena Dunham thanked him for guest-starring on *Girls* as a Band-Aid for the show's "lilywhite sensibility" and expressed her hope that he didn't feel tokenized, Glover responded, "Let's not think on mistakes we made in the past, let's just focus on what lies in front of us."¹⁶⁹) Friend quotes one of the members of Glover's posse, Royalty, saying, "We want to fuck up television," to let his readers in on the insurrectionary attitude of the show's creators.

Even more New Journalistically, Glover's complicated defiance makes him, in Friend's eyes, a hero. He is intermittently angry and defeatist, sometimes forced to meekly accept the severe racial bias of his world and sometimes determined to fight it any way he can – which, right now, happens to be through his show. Within his darkness lies heroism, which he articulates when he says, "Everyone's been trying to turn me into their woke bae' – millennial slang for an enlightened boyfriend. 'But that's not who I am. I'm

fucked up, too – and that’s where the good shit comes from.”¹⁷⁰ Friend draws on the New Journalistic impulse to infuse glory into the celebrity experience, to show us a star whose fight against the machinery is both valiant and terrifying. This struggle is what makes Glover, at the end of the day, heroic.

While the underlying themes of Friend’s feature make it reminiscent of the New Journalism, the piece is an altogether different iteration of the form that developed in the 1960s. Most importantly, the older genre’s once-groundbreaking choices have become par for the course in celebrity writing. Character-like renderings of celebrities are essentially standard issue today in magazines across the board. *The New Yorker* especially, a publication of which New Journalists stood staunchly in defiance, has folded their techniques into its quotidian fare. But the offerings of *The New Yorker*, along with character-like celebrity portraits in other publications, include none of the long-winded verbosity, written-out sound effects, or amplified conceits of Wolfe’s outlandish prose. These markers of the style have all been tamed by the publication’s long-established uniform tone, soldered and polished by each journal’s editorial preferences. Even *New York Magazine*, widely considered the cradle of New Journalism, has subdued the flair of writers like Mailer and Wolfe while retaining its tendency to portray stars as fictional characters.

Because the style has lost its avant-garde edge, the author-subject affinity that pervaded Morgan’s depiction of Davis or Mailer’s veneration of JFK is now gone. Friend’s polished style, carefully refined by the publication’s editorial team, fails to match Glover’s subversive ingenuity. On the whole,

modern New Journalism-leaning pieces differ from the genre itself in their relatively subdued tones. Their stylistic moderation prevents them from matching the incendiary flair of their subjects.

The grandeur of the New Journalists has also been toned down more ideologically in the past five decades, as our understanding of authenticity has transformed into a less plausible ideal. New Journalistic thought hinged on the belief that, just as its writers could accomplish a fundamentally truthful style of writing, its subjects could embody a romanticized genuineness that disrupted the artificiality of their world. Even when Mailer lost his faith that Kennedy could shake the nation back to life, he imagined that ability could feasibly exist in another politician.¹⁷¹ Today, we understand even the most groundbreaking products of the entertainment industry as just that – products. When *Black Panther*, Marvel’s blockbuster ode to Afrofuturism, made waves in February, its praise was tinted by the acknowledgment that it was a fictional work created by a large conglomerate that would profit from its appeal. Similarly, our faith in insurgent figures who pledge to topple the bureaucracy of the government has been blown wide open by Donald Trump’s campaign, whose platform, much like Kennedy’s, promised an end to the rule of technocracy through an inexperienced outsider unmarred by the corruption of administrative insiders. We no longer hold the same reverence for pure authenticity, because we are less faithful that it exists.

Consequentially, Glover is more resistant to Friend’s assertions than, say, Clay was to Wolfe’s. While Clay was never willing to buy into the liberal fantasies of his white fans, he embraced his position as a beacon of raw,

unfiltered truth. Friend cannot box Glover into this role, because the entertainer sees the limits of his ability to change the system of the industry. At the end of a monologue about white complacency, he shrugs, “So, yeah, I can’t help you anymore,” his use of the temporally charged word fittingly implying that he once thought he might be able to overthrow white control of society.¹⁷² Incensed about a Grammys promotion video where the announcement of his performance was paired with a clip of a miscellaneous black teenager, while Lady Gaga and Pink were introduced with images of their own faces, he admits, “The sad thing is I’m going to [perform anyway], because black people don’t get that chance very often.”¹⁷³ Glover’s understanding of authenticity is that he can strive for it, but at the end of the day, he is still an entertainer. The charismatic figure destined to deliver us to a world of total authenticity is neither Donald Trump nor Donald Glover. It no longer exists.

But within the literary world, the New Journalists struck gold that writers still mine when they sit down to interview celebrities. While the political import of their aspirations no longer rings clear, and their sharp stylistic edges have been sanded down, they solved the journalistic dilemma of making celebrities feel genuine by presenting them to readers as complicated humans whose many sides we can both access and empathize with. Today’s celebrities are less likely to appear as hyperbolically heroic in their fight for authenticity amidst a world of manufactured junk. But authenticity remains the ultimate goal of celebrity writing. The allegedly maddening monotony of the 1950s has long-since faded, but we still regard our stars with an arched

eyebrow of suspicion. We wonder if Kylie Jenner is faking her pregnancy until the day she gives birth, and then we wonder if her commandeering mother forced her into parenthood as part of her master plan to keep the rotating members of her clan in the spotlight. We worship Beyoncé and Jay-Z for their raw frankness about the searing pain of infidelity because it feels like a breath of fresh honesty. More widely, we seek out “#nofilter” images on social media, images of stretch marks, wrinkles, or blemishes that purport to defy the glossiness of the manufactured celebrity. And as each new imperfection is revealed, we wonder if its only intention is to aggregate mores likes and comments. Could there really be a true quest for honesty?

But journalists can, if only for the duration of an article, locate the seedlings of apparent authenticity. They do so, strangely enough, through the devices of fiction. They have learned through the New Journalists that the modern celebrity is, in his or her most understandable form, a fictional character. And thus the bastard form, in all its provocative glory, solved the problem of celebrity.

Notes

¹⁶⁶ Tad Friend, “Donald Glover Can’t Save You,” *New Yorker*, March 5 2018, 38.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷¹ McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 142.

¹⁷² Friend, “Donald Glover,” 48.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

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