"My story is always escaping into other people": Subjectivity, Objectivity, and the Double in American Literary Journalism

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In many examples of literary journalism one can detect an "uncanny" correspondence or "doubling" between the subjects of the stories and certain characteristics of the literary journalists who write about them.

There is a stunning moment in Bennett Miller's 2005 film *Capote* when Harper Lee asks her childhood friend Truman Capote if he has fallen in love with the convicted murderer Perry Smith. Capote, who has interviewed Smith extensively and will feature him sympathetically as one of the main characters in his best-selling "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood*, declines a direct answer, replying instead, "It's as if Perry and I grew up in the same house and one day he stood up and went out the back door while I went out the front."[1] Although there is no record of Truman Capote ever having uttered these words, the line does capture the parallels between him and Smith which Gerald Clarke enumerates in the Capote biography on which the film was based: both Capote and Smith were small, both were raised by alcoholic mothers, both spent time in foster homes, both were victims of childhood abuse, and both turned to art for consolation. As Clarke notes, "each looked at the other and saw, or thought he saw, the man he might have been."[2] They were, in effect, doubles.

Clarke's observation adds a significant psycho-biographical dimension

to the critical understanding of Capote's landmark work. It also, however, intimates something of the deep undercurrents running between journalist and subject which may silently inform both the selection of subject matter and its representation in certain works of literary journalism. Such an intimation would itself remain highly localized and speculative, were it not for the fact that this "uncanny" doubling of journalist and subject repeats itself in so many canonical or near-canonical works of American literary journalism.

In cases where the journalist and subject are one, that doubling may express itself in a rupturing of the writer's persona. Here we may think of Norman Mailer's third person self-representation in *The Armies of the Night,*[3] or of the split character of Raoul Duke and Hunter S. Thompson carousing through *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*,[4] and perhaps even of Susan Orlean's playful self-interview in the Prologue to the movie edition of *The Orchid Thief.*[5]

Closer to the Capote-Smith relationship, however, are various works in which the writer seems to find his or her counterpart in *an* Other. There is, for example, the implicit analogy between source and journalist which underlies the brief relationship between Joe McGinnis and Janet Malcolm in the latter's *The Journalist and the Murderer*,[6] not to mention the curious *mise en abyme* which opens in the text when Malcolm actually interviews McGinnis, a journalist who, like she, had been accused of employing inappropriate reporting practices in his work. Even more striking, however, is Barbara Lounsbury's description of Gay Talese's first encounter with Bill Bonanno, the son of Mafia kingpin Joseph Bonanno, and a man with whom Talese shared not only the same year of birth but a host of other ethnic, familial, and biographical facts. According to Lounsbury:

> When Talese first saw the young Bonanno standing in a federal courthouse corridor with his lawyer in 1965, he was, in some ways, looking across the establishment divide at his double. Talese did not know at that moment of the remarkable similarities of their histories. He did not know that they had been born in the same year, both of their fathers named Joseph with roots in southern Italy; that both of their immigrant grandfathers had died young; that both he and Bill were eldest sons with younger sisters; that both were outsiders in different ways in high school and went to colleges in the South where they joined ROTC. He did not know then that their family albums would look remarkably similar, but he saw enough across that divide to be curious.[7]

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc experiences a similar mirroring of herself in the 16-year-old crack addict and prostitute about whom she writes in "Trina and

Trina," although in this case, the resemblance is ultimately a diversion which initially obscures the profound differences between them:

> Trina was white, Italian, watchful, unyielding, and working class. These attributes not only distinguished her from many urban crack streetwalkers, but also made her like me. Our shared attributes would blind me, delude me into the sort of sturdy plan of action that seems possible when you and the person you are trying to help share common ground.[8]

Most recently, and certainly most bizarrely, is the explicit identification which emerges in the 2005 work *True Story* between its author, the disgraced former *New York Times Magazine* writer (and fabricator) Michael Finkel, and Christian Longo, a man who, prior to telling his story to Finkel, had murdered his wife and three children then fled to Mexico where he had assumed Finkel's identity. "As much as I like to deny it," writes Finkel,

> the truth is that I saw some of myself in Longo. The flawed parts of my own character—the runaway egotism, the capacity to deceive—were mirrored and magnified in him. All the time I spent with Longo forced me to take a lengthy and uncomfortable look at what I'd done and who I had become.[9]

A similarly exaggerated but no less unsettling doubling is evident between Joseph Mitchell, the *New Yorker* writer Norman Sims credits with helping to sustain literary journalism "during the middle years of the twentieth century,"[10] and the subject of two profiles Mitchell wrote, the first in 1942, the second twenty-two years later in 1964, on the derelict Greenwich Village bohemian Joe Gould, and which comprise the volume *Joe Gould's Secret*.[11] One might venture that Mitchell saw in Gould—a sort of down-and-out *poète maudit* with a debilitating case of writer's block—a haunting negative image of himself, not unlike what Gerald Clarke says Capote saw in Perry Smith: in the wraith-like, dispossessed Gould, Mitchell quite possibly "recognized his shadow, his dark side." And, as with Capote, "When he looked into those unhappy eyes, he was looking into a tormented region of his own unconscious, resurrecting . . . nightmares and fears."[12]

Superficially, Mitchell and Gould seem to have little in common. Mitchell is a family man, securely employed in a respectable position with a prestigious magazine, Gould "an odd and penniless and unemployable little man"[13] who is "constantly tormented by what he calls 'the three H's'—homelessness, hunger, and hangovers.'"[14] And yet, with the second profile, curious similarities between the two begin to emerge: neither is native to New York and both are acutely aware of their status as come-from-aways; both are writers, working first as crime reporters before quitting daily journalism to engage in larger literary endeavours, Mitchell to write for *The New Yorker* and

Gould in the service of a sprawling, formless, multi-million word manuscript he calls "An Oral History of Our Time"—a work of history from below similar to Mitchell's own journalistic project of representing the life and conversation of the everyday but also, as it turns out, an undertaking more conceptual than real and thus not unlike the novel Mitchell describes himself having imagined writing when he first arrived in New York but never set to paper.

Stanley Edgar Hyman, one of the few literary critics to write on *Joe Gould's Secret*, noted the analogy between Mitchell and his subject, observing:

> By the end of the book, when he discovers Gould's secret, Mitchell becomes, not Gould's bearer or Gould's victim, but Gould himself, and the unwritten Oral History merges with Mitchell's own unwritten novel. . . . Then we realize that Gould has been Mitchell all along, a misfit in a community of traditional occupations, statuses, and roles come to New York to express his special identity; finally we realize that the body of Mitchell's work is precisely that Oral History of Our Time that Gould himself could not write.[15]

Mitchell corroborated this point, never explicitly stated in the text, when in an interview with Norman Sims, he remarked: "We were in the same boat. We both came from small towns and didn't fit in, and both had an idea. He had the same feeling about people on the park bench talking. I was talking about myself here. He was talking about himself and I was talking about myself."[16] Or, as he is quoted in Raymond J. Rundus's *Joseph Mitchell: A Reader's and Writer's Guide*, "I became him and he became me, if you see what I mean."[17]

There are some commonsense explanations for all of these doubles lurking about in literary journalism. Asked, for example, what subjects attract him, the very canny Gay Talese has said: "The subjects that involve me are those that have, literally, *involved* me. I write about stories that are connected to my life. Although on first impression they might appear to be nonfiction that features *other people's* experiences, the reason I'm drawn to them in the first place is that I see *myself* in them."[18] And while Susan Orlean may declare, "The people I'm least excited about writing about are the ones who are most like me. I'm more interested in writing about people who aren't like me,"[19] it is hard to deny that in *The Orchid Thief*, John Laroche's passion for orchids does not find a sympathetic resonance in Orlean's self-proclaimed "one unembarassing passion . . . to know what it feels like to care about something passionately."[20] It is also on the basis of journalist-subject similarity that *The New Yorker's* Janet Malcolm distinguishes people she has written about in her literary journalism from other people who, she says, exist "only in life."[21] Discussing Jeffrey Masson, the subsequently litigious subject of her 1984

work *In the Freud Archives*, she observes that, as a writer, you know someone about whom you have written

> more intimately than you know most merely real people—not only because you have had occasion to study him more closely than one studies the people one does not write about, but because you have put a great deal of yourself into him. "*Madame Bovary, c'est moi*," Flaubert said of his famous character. The characters of nonfiction, no less than those of fiction, derive from the writer's most idiosyncratic desires and deepest anxieties; they are what the writer wishes he was and worries that he is. *Masson, c'est moi*.[22]

As if to confirm the point, Joseph Mitchell, asked by Norman Sims why he became so interested in Gould, answers with the same allusion: "'Because he is me,' Mitchell said. 'God forgive me for my version of Flaubert's remark about Madame Bovary.'"[23]

Along with raising the journalistically problematic prospect that any individual who is the main subject of a work of literary journalism may be, in at least some respects, a composite, these examples also present the possibility that any protracted relationship between a journalist and subject is likely to bring whatever qualities—real or imagined—they may share, to light. Such a recognition of the familiar in the unfamiliar, however, is also a defining characteristic of that special category of the frightening which Freud called "the uncanny." In his 1919 essay of that title, and one of the few places in his work where psychoanalysis and aesthetics meet, Freud described the disconcerting sense of familiarity one experiences in the presence of such strange repetitions as *deja vu* or "the double," as the startling recognition of some aspect of one's unconscious. Feelings of the uncanny may arise, Freud says, from the return of "repressed infantile complexes"[24] but also from experiences which seem to confirm superstitious beliefs one's culture has supposedly "surmounted."[25] In both cases, he writes, the uncanny "is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression."[26]

Few discourses could rival conventional journalism for its similarly alienating effect on the subjectivities of its practitioners. For writers such as Mitchell and Talese, whose early rhetorical training took place in the modern newsroom, the self was literally repressed by the dictates of journalistic "objectivity." As such, it should be no surprise that, when called upon to acknowledge their selves in their work, such writers may well feel at a loss. For example, when contracted to write an autobiographical companion piece to *Unto the Sons*, Talese says he was utterly stymied. "What blocked me, I think, was the imprecision of my persona and the fact that I did not know where

to establish my story," he recalls in *A Writer's Life*. "I had no idea what my story was. I had never given much thought to who *I* was. I had always defined myself through my work, which was always about other people."[27] Or, as he said in an interview with the *New York Daily News*, "I was supposed to do this sequel to *Unto the Sons*, but since it had to be my story, I never could find out what my story was, because I could never find out as a journalist who I was because I was raised in this notion of being outside the story. My story is always escaping into other people."[28]

Talese's comments provide an apt description of the sort of alienating effects that have been imputed to objective journalism. In a suggestive passage, the rise of literary journalism has been attributed in part to "the rhetorical intention of modern journalistic styles," which, in its emphasis on objectivity, alienates the subjectivities of the journalist, the subject, and the readers.[29] Accordingly, "narrative journalism" as it emerged in the U.S. in the 1890s, provided "a challenge to or resistance against mainstream 'factual' or 'objective' news, much as the form still does today."[30] It is an attempt "to engage the objectified Other,"[31] including, we might add, that aspect of the journalist's self which escapes into the subject of his or her story. For example, in the lengthy, boozy course of his interviews with Joe Gould, it becomes evident to Mitchell that his subject talks ultimately most not about the Oral History (which is what interests Mitchell) but rather "about nothing but himself."[32] In this wildly solipsistic narrative, Gould embodies precisely the radical subjectivity excluded from the sort of objective journalism in which Mitchell had been trained during his nine years as a reporter.

This encounter with what we might call "the Other into whom one's own story has escaped" is possible, in part, because of the "literary" in literary journalism, that is, the distinctive capacity of "literariness" to disrupt the limits imposed by genre. In the case of conventional journalism, genre dictates not only form and style but also the range of roles and interactions it offers to both its writers and their subjects. Such journalistic convention, in other words, determines and controls the nature of the writer's encounter with the Other, prohibiting, for example, any imbrication of subjectivities and thus tending, as Walter Lippmann observed, to reduce subjects to stereotypes,[33] but also flattening the journalist's own professional self in the process. As a result, both the writer and subject of conventional journalism are condemned to remain within a fairly narrow band of roles, limiting the nature of any exchange possible between them. Literature's generic specificity lies precisely, however, in its capacity to expose and disrupt such limits. As Jonathan Culler explains:

> Literature is a paradoxical institution because to create literature is

> to write according to existing formulas—to produce something that looks like a sonnet or that follows the conventions of the novel—but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them. Literature is an institution that lives by exposing and criticizing its own limits, by testing what will happen if one writes differently.[34]

It is this disruptive power which is responsible for what has been characterized as literature's resistance to "comfortable critical closure"[35] and what critic Nicholas Royle, commenting on Freud's "The Uncanny," has called "the resistant strangeness of literature."[36] It is this strangeness, moreover, which Ezra Pound said, makes literature "news that STAYS news"[37] and explains why literary works, unlike conventional news stories, are not typically exhausted by a single reading. It is the "literary" element of literary journalism, finally, which permits the literary journalist to confront and acknowledge those aspects of his or her self, repressed and alienated in conventional journalism, in the Other into whom they have escaped.

The disruptive strangeness of the literary makes itself available to the literary journalist through access to the rich rhetorical resources denied to his or her counterpart working in more explicitly "objective" forms. Such resources include narrative but also the possibility of a relatively unrestricted use of a full range of figures including metaphor, symbol, and irony. Unlike facts, rhetorical figures are neither true nor false. To draw on the language of J.L. Austin, they are, rather, felicitous or infelicitous[38] and permit the literary journalist to inflect literal reality in ways which, while not removing them from the confines of what Truman Capote's biographer Gerald Clarke astutely calls "the barbed wire of fact,"[39] allows them greater flexibility in telling their story their own way.

Such a complicating of the boundary between the figurative and the literal (including its implicit acknowledgment of the factual as a particular type of figuration) is another feature of the uncanny. In his essay, Freud noted that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on."[40] The effect, he continues, is a product of "the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality,"[41] or, for our purposes, we might say, of a mixing of subjective and objective styles such as we find in literary journalism. In a discussion of Freud's essay, Richard T. Gray notes, "Stylistically, uncanny fiction requires a fusion of objective and subjective narrative styles. We commonly find a realistic frame, which reads like a report or a newspaper article, which is suddenly ruptured by fantastic events. But this rupture is also related to the accuracy and detail of objective narration."[42]

Gray here is writing about "uncanny fiction" which, if we agree with Nicholas Royle's assertion that "Literature is uncanny,"[43] may take in *all fiction*. As the example of the double suggests, however, literary journalism is no less susceptible to uncanny effects than traditional fiction as we understand it. Given its explicit stake in the "real," it may even be moreso. At any rate, the notion of the uncanny offers a means of thinking through some of the more unsettling implications of the word "literary," which is relegated, perhaps misleadingly, to the grammatical position of adjective in the name commonly assigned to this genre.

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Endnotes

1. *Capote*, DVD, directed by Bennett Miller (2005; Sony Classics, 2005).

2. Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 326.

3. Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (New York: Plume, 1994).

4. Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (New York: Random House, 1971).

5. Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief* (New York: Ballantine, 2000).

6. Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Random House, 1990).

7. Barbara Lounsbury, "Bridging the Silence: Gay Talese's Uncomfortable Journey." *Literature Interpretation and Theory* 14 (2003): 52. In this article, Lounsbury also notes a pattern of doubling in other works by Talese. See p. 51.

8. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, "Trina and Trina," in *Literary Journalism*, ed. Norman Sims and Mark Kramer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 211.

9. Michael Finkel, *True Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 307-08. Finkel's words sound remarkably like *Capote* screenwriter Dan Futterman's assertion in his commentary to the DVD version of the film that Capote's relationship with the criminal Perry forced Capote "to face himself."

10. Norman Sims, "Joseph Mitchell and *The New Yorker* Nonfiction Writers" in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23.

11. Joseph Mitchell, *Joe Gould's Secret* (New York: Random House, 1996).

12. Clarke, 326.
13. Mitchell, 37.
14. Mitchell, 3.
15. Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Art of Joseph Mitchell," in *The Critic's Credentials: Essays and Reviews by Stanley Edgar Hyman*, ed. Phoebe Pettingell (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 84-85.
16. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 183.
17. Raymond J. Rundus, *Joseph Mitchell: A Reader's and Writer's Guide* (New York: iUniverse, 2003), xxii.
18. Robert S. Boynton, *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* (New York: Random House, 2005), 365.
19. Boynton, 279.
20. Boynton, 275.
21. Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 149.
22. Malcolm, 149. Malcolm, probably the most psychoanalytically knowledgeable literary journalist in the U.S. or elsewhere, evinces a particular sensitivity if not an attraction to the double. For example, in the introduction to her 1992 collection *The Purloined Clinic*, she notes that one of her accounts in the volume focuses on a "Czech-Jewish former dissident" she met in Prague and in whom, she writes, she "recognized a sort of double." She goes on to say that in Michael Fried, the subject of the review which provides her collection with its title, she "recognized another sort of double: a critic whose imagination I found almost uncannily familiar and congenial." See Janet Malcolm, *The Purloined Clinic*. (New York: Random House, 1992), ix.
23. Sims, *True Stories*, 183.
24. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in *Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. Neil Hertz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 225.
25. Freud, 224.
26. Freud, 217. Among those uncanny experiences apparently confirming such "surmounted" superstitious beliefs, Freud includes "meetings with one's own image unbidden and unexpected" and provides an illustration from his own life:

> I was sitting alone in my *wagon-lit* compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a traveling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. Instead, therefore, of being *frightened* by [my "double"], . . . I simply failed to recognize [it] as such. Is it not possible, though, that [my] dislike of [it] was a vestigial trace of the archaic reaction which feels the "double" to be something uncanny?

This sense of the double as a "vestigial trace" of a more ancient mode of being is evident in a curiously parallel scene from Hunter S. Thompson's "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved." The uncanny moment occurs when illustrator Ralph Steadman, who with Thompson has been searching for a person who would symbolize "the whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is," awakens Thompson in his hotel room. Thompson writes:

> I barely heard him. My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant I thought that Ralph had brought somebody with him—a model for that one special face we'd been looking for. There he was, by God—a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden creature . . . like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album. It was the face we'd been looking for—and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible . . . . "

As in Freud's anecdote, Thompson's response to his double is not simply the effect of encountering "one's own image unbidden and unexpected." It is related, as well, to the horror of discovering a resemblance between one's self and some remote ancestral type thought to be "surmounted" or at least a cultural type with which one assumed oneself to have nothing in common. Indeed, much of the effect of Thompson's work draws on such a latent identity between his own intemperate persona and the monstrous excesses of the world on which he reports. See Freud, "The Uncanny," 248-9; Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," in *The Great Shark Hunt* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 31, 37.

27. Gay Talese, *A Writer's Life* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 75.

28. Quoted in Boynton, *The New New Journalism*, 364-5.

29. John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 42.

30. Hartsock, 41.

31. Hartsock, 42.

32. Mitchell, 119.

33. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 224.

34. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40.

35. Hartsock, 42.

36. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15.

37. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 29.

38. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed., ed, J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

39. Clarke, 357.

40. Freud, 221.

41. Ibid., 221.

42. Richard T. Gray, "Lecture Notes: Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919)," http:// courses. washington.edu/freudlit/Uncanny.Notes.html (accessed January 17, 2009).

43. Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Prentice Hall, 1999), 36.