



Photograph by Carolina Segre Høyer for the cover of *RUST Magazine*, May 2012.

# Playful Imitation at Work: The Formation of a Danish “Gonzo Thingummy”

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**Abstract:** For decades, Danish author and literary journalist Morten Sabroe (b. 1947) has evoked Hunter S. Thompson’s American Gonzo paradigm in his own work on a regular basis. The association with Thompson has enabled Sabroe’s privileged position as a literary journalist and satirist, but it has also exposed him to ridicule, casting him as a Thompson wannabe or “Gonzo thingummy.” This essay draws on rhetorical theory of imitation to explain how Thompson’s own stylistic experiments and demonstrative perspective-taking have founded and invited the mimicry that would become a defining part of Sabroe’s career and may not be so ridiculous. In rhetorical education, imitation of favorite rhetors and appropriation of features of model texts is assumed to strengthen both one’s prose style and character by systematically developing a sense of perspective in practice. Thompson is known to have ventured into imitational exercises in his self-education as a writer, typing up passages from admired works in order to familiarize himself with specific structure and style. Sabroe’s engagement of Thompson’s work through allusion, pastiche, and translation adds up to a similar formative process, and the playful engagement of different discourses is as integral to his writing as it is to Thompson’s. Examples of Sabroe’s literary journalism are presented to show how he makes use of this dual and tentative way of writing to destabilize and intervene with media discourses and public images that weigh on politicians, on news journalists, and on Bob Dylan on tour in Scandinavia in 2005.

“Kurt,” I said, “it’s important that we meet the Danes unprejudiced. That we approach them with the neutral, objective gaze of the journalist. That we write about them as they are, and not as we see them.”

“There is only one way!” he declared. “Colonic irrigation.”

. . . .My days as a subjective journalist were over. I was the most unprejudiced and neutral individual to walk the earth even if I could hardly walk.<sup>1</sup>

More than any other Danish writer, Morten Sabroe (b. 1947) has shaped his literary journalism and persona with reference to Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo paradigm.<sup>2</sup> For decades, Sabroe tempted ridicule by imitating Thompson's work on one occasion after the other. He has not been shy to pose in front of the camera wearing Thompson-style sunglasses and colorful shirts or to use drawings by Thompson's trademark illustrator Ralph Steadman in the cover design for collections of his own journalism.<sup>3</sup> As late as 2005 he wrote a straight pastiche of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in Danish national daily *Politiken* when reporting that he was "somewhere on the outskirts of Gothenburg" on his way to a Bob Dylan concert in Sweden when his Viagra pills began to take hold and colored his vision blue.<sup>4</sup>

What is remarkable is the way Sabroe has proved able to turn a potentially pitiful or just silly status as an imitator or epigone into a professional ethos in itself, mainly as a cultural satirist. To understand this peculiar feat it is important to note that even by imitating Thompson, Sabroe has been imitating Thompson. That is to say, Thompson himself was a famous imitator, not just of admired authors and various contemporary discourses but also of himself; it has become a commonplace that his work ultimately "descended into self-parody," as William McKeen puts it.<sup>5</sup> The various forms of discursive mimicry kept his playful character development as a literary journalist in the foreground of his work, which may help account for its extraordinary appeal to colleagues across the world.

In an insightful reading of *Las Vegas*, Robert Alexander has shown how the formative process of the journalist is both a theme and a trope in Thompson's narrative.<sup>6</sup> Alexander connects the journalistic development of protagonist Raoul Duke to the motif of vision and to the various changes of perspective in the narrative, many of which are induced by specific drugs that each offer a way of dealing with Duke's alienation toward mainstream journalism. When Duke makes his famous remark: "I was, after all, a professional journalist, so I had the obligation to *cover the story*, for good or ill," he is demonstratively trying the rhetoric of conventional reporting on for size, without convincing himself or his readers of the fit.<sup>7</sup> As if to generalize this form of tentative mimicry, Robert Terrill has characterized rhetorical imitation as a discursive practice that is productively and self-consciously dual and "manifest in a faculty of perspective taking."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Terrill recommends imitation as an educational paradigm that grows out of the classical rhetorical tradition, in which systematic engagement of other people's manners of writing and speaking fosters a self-awareness and becomes an integral part of civic education and character formation.

In this study, I take cues from Terrill and Alexander to argue that such

perspective taking as a factor in journalistic development has been reverberating in the transnational reception of Thompson's work, and I present the work of Sabroe as a striking case in point. Like Thompson himself, Sabroe has been presenting himself as a playful imitator, or "wannabe," who has tempted ridicule as a satirist and earned his credentials accordingly. Sabroe's literary journalism is, like Thompson's, an experimental practice performed by a journalistic character always in the making. Both can be said to cultivate imitation in a classical rhetorical vein and share a related vision of public discourse as dual and performative, which, in turn, makes public discourse open to interventions by literary journalists like themselves. In this sense, Gonzo journalism can be said to serve a civic function that is easily overlooked, as its immediate entertainment value tends to steal the picture.

Before turning to the work and career of Sabroe, I will briefly elaborate on the classical idea of imitation as a desirable civic practice and go on to connect it to Thompson's manner of developing his countercultural journalistic persona and style of writing.

### **Imitation in the Classical Tradition and in Thompson's**

Imitation of discourse is today most often associated with either deliberate acts of plagiarism or mindless borrowing or aping. Yet, both classical and contemporary literature on the education of rhetors, whether these be speakers or writers, are mainly concerned with the ways in which systematic attention to other people's rhetorical practice may benefit not just your own practice but the formation of your character as an active citizen.<sup>9</sup> In the ancient tradition, main sources regarding this way of thinking about education are Isocrates (436–338 BC), Cicero (106–43 BC), and Quintilian (ca. 35–100 CE).<sup>10</sup> The latter wrote a twelve-book opus on the lifelong education of orators and devoted part of volume ten to a discussion of imitation. After pointing out a number of specific authors worth imitating, including poets, historians, and philosophers, Quintilian goes on to discuss the principles of imitation as such.

The reasoning goes that human beings have a natural and pragmatic impulse to imitate each other's practices when picking up skills in everything from agriculture to music, and Quintilian recommends that we practice this impulse systematically when learning to speak and write in civic settings. He warns readers, however, that imitation "should not be confined merely to words. We must consider the appropriateness with which those [model] orators handle the circumstances and persons involved in the various cases in which they were engaged, and observe the judgment and powers of arrangement which they reveal," and so forth from the level of invention to the

use of examples and stylistic features.<sup>11</sup> What is more, as “even great authors have their blemishes,”<sup>12</sup> Quintilian encourages close scrutiny of any given admired piece of work. Students should be careful not to “mould themselves on first impressions” and not imitate just one model.<sup>13</sup> Instead, they should read and imitate a variety of authors and to do it critically and selectively (“every student should realize what it is he is to imitate, and to know *why* it is good”<sup>14</sup>). Encouraged are close encounters with the prose and practices of various models so students become familiar with the inner workings of well-designed speech for specific occasions. A repertoire of examples is internalized by way of written and oral exercises and becomes a resource for adaption by the students in accordance with their own temper as they encounter new occasions and situations.

In Cicero’s dialogue *On the Ideal Orator*, the remark is made that as a “kind of wit,” imitation can be funny: “But we may only use it secretly, if at all, and in passing; otherwise, it does not at all befit a well-bred person.”<sup>15</sup> The potentially ridiculous is also touched upon by Quintilian, who warns his readers, as mentioned, to imitate just *one* favorite example. He emphasizes that not even the best of orators, not even Cicero, can be the only example you imitate. He stresses that you have to harness your admiration, pick and mix models and particular traits for imitation so that you become independent and flexible and able to surpass your predecessors. “It is a positive disgrace to be content to owe all our achievement to imitation,”<sup>16</sup> he states, and “the mere follower must always lag behind.”<sup>17</sup> On a personal note, however, Quintilian admits that, actually, Cicero’s example is quite perfect and hard to resist even if it is too hard to compete with: “For my own part,” writes Quintilian, “I should consider it sufficient, if I could always imitate him successfully.”<sup>18</sup>

Terrill argues in 2011 that this classical paradigm, along with its simple and seemingly rather mechanical exercises, such as memorizing, translating, and paraphrasing, is still highly relevant today. He argues that such mimetic practices serve to cultivate a double perspective on communication in the student writer or speaker. It encourages students to shift between being an interpreter of the original text and a performer of their own text, which makes them aware of how texts are interrelated and how multiple perspectives might be adopted. This cultivation and recognition of duality, says Terrill, might serve as a valuable antidote to what he refers to as a “cult of sincerity,” a naive belief that our words must be exactly one with our mind and that our options in terms of presentation and hence of perspective are not always multiple.<sup>19</sup>

To sum up, it is traditionally recognized that rhetorical imitation or mimetic practices grow out of admiration and can be competitive, educational, and potentially comical. Imitation must be eclectic, understated, and care-

fully transformed if imitators are to be taken seriously as great orators in their own right. Yet, as Terrill adds, such mimetic practices might serve to productively disrupt notions of sincerity and authenticity in public discourse. In the mimetic paradigm, “rhetorical performance [is] not assessed according to motivation, commitment, or feeling but the reponse it stirs in an audience.”<sup>20</sup> It does not conceal its artfulness in the interest of creating trust but instead reveals its form and its intention to stir, and must be “assessed along multiple lines of effectiveness rather than the single point of authenticity.”<sup>21</sup>

As for Thompson, to now make the leap from rhetoric in a broad sense to Gonzo journalism specifically, his self-education as a writer and journalist was informed by exercises in imitation. In fact, in terms of the classical tradition, Thompson set an example as a good student through selective, diligent, and close encounters with model texts. This part of his craft was “with him from the beginning,” writes Jay Cowan, who notes that most people “know what they like when they read it. But they rarely know [as Thompson did] why the writer is able to deliver it.”<sup>22</sup>

Thompson looked carefully into the why and how. As noted in several other biographies, he was not only “reading voluminously”<sup>23</sup> and “used to mark up pages of favorite books, underlining phrases that impressed him,”<sup>24</sup> he also practiced typing, word by word, work by favorite authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.<sup>25</sup> In this manner Thompson got closely acquainted with their style of writing, and he is quoted by McKen for accounting for his practice like this:

I’m very much into rhythm—writing in a musical sense. I like gibberish, if it sings. Every author is different—short sentences, long, no comma, many commas. It helps a lot to understand what you’re doing. You’re writing, and so were they. It won’t fit often—that is, *your* hands don’t want to do *their* words—but you’re learning. . . . I just want to feel what it feels like to write that well. . . . Basically it’s music. . . . I wanted to learn from the best.<sup>26</sup>

It seems clear that Thompson was concerned with stylistic effect and the reading experience (more than, let’s say, truth or news value), and he is reported to have enjoyed having his texts read aloud to investigate the response: “[S]omething Hunter watched for was how others read his funny lines and how the reader as well as the listeners reacted.”<sup>27</sup>

Many sources testify to Thompson’s experimental, imitative practice and to the fact that it wasn’t “confined merely to words,” as Quintilian put it. In terms of arrangement, for instance, Peter O. Whitmer offers a rather detailed account of how Thompson made an outline of *The Great Gatsby*, which eventually became integrated into his work on *Las Vegas*.<sup>28</sup> Also, Douglas Brinkley refers to Norman Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) as Thompson’s

“bible,” and says that Thompson “later modeled *The Great Shark Hunt* on that weird book.”<sup>29</sup>

At the level of style, Thompson’s journalism is clearly performative. It appears quite obviously designed to be effective in the sense of stirring thoughts and emotion rather than to create an impression of trustworthiness or sincerity. A central factor in this design is a constant change of perspective. When Alexander tracks Raoul Duke’s journalistic development, he focuses on the different visions that are brought about by the specific drugs that play such a famous part of Thompson’s *Las Vegas* narrative. Alexander describes an overall development from the split perspective of the reporter high on ether in the first part of the story—he observes himself behaving terribly, “like the village drunkard in some early Irish novel,”<sup>30</sup> yet he is unable to control it—toward a more integrated perspective of the “private investigator” in the second part. In terms of such integration, LSD is presented as the drug of choice, iconic to the sense of community that characterized the acid culture of a (then) recent past in which a huge cultural wave peaked, rolled back, and left a mental high-water mark. This image is Thompson’s and paraphrased here from a moving passage often referred to as “the wave speech.”<sup>31</sup> In this passage, Thompson is, in Alexander’s words, “compressing five or six years of history into a single image that fuses [his] personal experiences with those of a generation . . . an aesthetic consolidation consistent with the spirit Thompson attributes to San Francisco in the mid-1960s.”<sup>32</sup>

It seems that a constant reinstallation of a split or dual vision is a key element in Thompson’s practice. His way of toggling or oscillating between perspectives in his writing, comical and serious, alienated and integrated, offers a key to his appeal to other writers. Even though it would be hard to prove causality as such, this style may well be connected to his experience with close imitation of other writers’ prose.

Of course, Thompson himself would become the one favored author for many a colleague and *Las Vegas* a “bible” that was read and reread with joy and is still leaving its imprint. Sabroe himself points out, in an essay from 2000 about his own practice as a literary journalist, that Gonzo journalism seems to work like a dynamic system of imitation. When, reluctantly, he offers some rules or guidelines for aspiring literary journalists, the first point he makes is concerned not only with imitation and its connection to both admiration and competition, but also with Thompson’s above-mentioned personal practice of it: typing it in order to get a feel for its rhythm. Sabroe adds, “The best way to become inspired [as a literary journalist] is to read the ones you adore . . . read the very best. . . . That’s the way language works, right; when it is really good, it is infectious. It makes you want to write the best you can.”<sup>33</sup>

Quoting Sabroe here, I wish to stress that this study is not intended as an exposé of unwitting or illegitimate imitation practices, but to understand better a recognized dynamic. Thompson's journalism—participatory, subjective, and excessively stylized—is rarely discussed without an offhand comment about its almost ridiculously strong influence on the work of other writers and journalists,<sup>34</sup> and I hope that the idea and this analysis of imitation as a productive force might serve to qualify such remarks.

### Sabroe as a Fan/Advocate/Practitioner

In Denmark, more than one writer has earned the title of Gonzo journalist in the course of time, but Sabroe stands out for having claimed (and occasionally rejected<sup>35</sup>) the title and kept attracting it in national media discourse for more than forty years.<sup>36</sup> Sabroe started his training as a journalist in the late 1960s and has worked for different Danish dailies over the years. He has also written fiction, and his first novel was published in 1976. He quickly established a name for himself as a highly subjective and stylistically excessive literary journalist. Even today, although he works and is mainly known as a fiction writer, he may still be introduced with phrases like “the indisputable enfant terrible of Danish journalism,” “reckless and ill-adjusted,” with Thompson singled out as his “idol.”<sup>37</sup>

Even glancing at the covers of Sabroe's nonfiction books, edited volumes of literary journalism, and personal narrative essays, the Gonzo references are unmistakable. Ralph Steadman, whose “grotesquely expressionistic caricatures” (in Mosser's words<sup>38</sup>) illustrated Thompson's work from 1970 and onward, contributed covers to two volumes of Sabroe's nonfiction. The blotted black lines that characterize Steadman's drawings and lettering have become synonymous with Gonzo art.<sup>39</sup> Other covers of Sabroe's nonfiction books extend the style by using either expressive caricatures or some sort of blotted black font that echoes the Gonzo spirit of distorted reality.

When tracking the reception of Sabroe's work in Danish media discourse, it is striking how his journalistic development, including his emulation of Thompson, has been a public talking point, especially during the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> In the opinion pages of the tabloid *Ekstra-Bladet*, Sabroe was referred to as the silly mascot of the left-liberal broadsheet *Politiken*, where he worked at the time—he was “*Politiken's* little Gonzo,” “little merry Gonzo,” or “little Gonzo thingummy,” who was known to use vulgar and/or incomprehensible, affected language.<sup>41</sup> In Jakob Levinsen's 1994 book review, “The Man Who Wanted to Be Gonzo,” Sabroe is characterized as a “*self-appointed* enfant terrible” and a wannabe who does not know his own limitations.<sup>42</sup> In the same article, however, the condescending tone softens within a paragraph or two,

and in general Sabroe is still more often assigned the plain title of “Gonzo journalist.”<sup>43</sup> His 1998 translation of *Las Vegas* was generally praised for its fidelity, and helped to advance Sabroe’s status from fan or disciple to a “great declared fan” or “leading Danish Thompson fan,” still a somewhat dubious honour.<sup>44</sup> When creativity is being recognized in his work, Sabroe is said to be a Thompson disciple “with more house manners,” “more Social Democratic,” and he goes for being “soft and even caring in his journalism,” in contrast to the “ruthless” Thompson.<sup>45</sup> Yet, ultimately, as we shall see, Sabroe is considered in a class by himself, able to demonstrate uniquely “sabroesque” qualities. He is praised for being “a notorious wit,” yet both a serious and brave writer, and his writing is occasionally deemed so good that it is “demonic” and “dizzying.”<sup>46</sup>

The development just sketched covers many aspects of rhetorical imitation. There is the aspiring writer’s admiration (fandom), emulation, and competing (with an alert audience for the competition), and there is the comical side of imitation, parody, self-parody, and ridicule. Above all, there is long-term mimetic practice—a continuous, playful experimentation with Gonzo style and persona and a willingness to risk some missed shots and scorn along the way while giving the reading experience highest priority. This includes, as we shall see, determined efforts to destabilize political and media discourses, and this will be illustrated with some examples of Sabroe’s Gonzo treatment of different public figures: first, his personal American idols, Thompson and Bob Dylan; then Danish politician (later prime minister) Poul Nyrup Rasmussen upon his appointment as leader of the Social Democratic party in 1992; then American president George W. Bush in 2004; and, finally, aspiring presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in 2007. It seems, interestingly, that the double perspective of the Gonzo journalist makes Sabroe especially sensitive to the dualities or duplicities of other public figures, who carefully self-create an image, only to watch it take on a life of its own. He recognizes all public appearances as performances and interacts with them by way of his literary journalism.

### American Idols

The first of (so far) four published collections of Sabroe’s journalism opens with three stories from his trip to Colorado for an interview with Thompson in the summer of 1990. Profiling Thompson on this occasion, Sabroe positions himself as a provincial, self-deprecating follower who struggles, like colleagues before him, to get the interview he has been promised. In one passage Sabroe is at Woody Creek Tavern, where he has been waiting at Thompson’s regular table with Mary, one of Thompson’s former writing assistants. When Thompson finally shows up, Sabroe goes to get drinks:

I returned with the goods and sat down on the chair next to him. And stood up again with a jump as if I had sat on a rattlesnake.

They looked at me. I looked at the chair. Thompson had put his green baseball cap on the seat. Under the cap were his sunglasses, the sunglasses he is famous for always wearing. They are, along with the baseball cap and the cigarette holder, indispensable props in his notorious self-presentation.

...<sup>47</sup>

Sabroe's self-consciously star-struck pose in this story is disrupted as he accidentally breaks the iconic sunglasses. Also, it is worth noting how the last, somewhat elaborate part of this passage reflects the way he has been responsible for familiarizing his Danish readership with Thompson's work and status. He also, like Thompson does so often, sets a scene that he himself is eager to enter as a character. His aforementioned translation of *Las Vegas* seems to have served to bring Gonzo journalism to broader public attention and facilitated an appreciation of Sabroe's own work. Also, it probably has served as an inspiring close study of Thompson's prose style in the spirit of classical imitation. Where rhetoric students in Quintilian's day would be asked to transform a Greek text into Latin in order to develop their dual vision of times and cultures, Sabroe was doing a similar exercise with Thompson's America and his own Danish scene.

Indeed, the following year, Sabroe produced a series of reports from the Danish countryside titled "Gonzo on Wheels," in which he intervenes with the contemporary cultural climate by distorting it in writing. After witnessing a blatantly racist episode on the harbor in Copenhagen, Sabroe decides to go on a road trip to look for the worst side of Danish national character:

[O]n one of the most rainy Sundays in living memory, I called my psychologist, Kurt Acid Thomsen:

"Kurt," I said, "the fat's in the fire."

"Are you feeling paranoid again?"

"I have been given an assignment. I have to find the evil side of the Danes."

"Cool down, buddy," he said. "It had been different matter if you had to find the good side."<sup>48</sup>

So while the story is thematically grounded in Denmark, formal references to *Las Vegas* abound. There is the proud claim to subjectivity (see the ritual of colonic irrigation as guarantee of objectivity and professionalism quoted at the beginning of the essay); there is the first-person perspective and the exalted dialogue with a traveling companion whose profession is highlighted

as yet another ironic disclaimer of professionalism (with “my psychologist” Thomsen, a Danish variant of Thompson, of course, replacing “my attorney” Dr. Gonzo); the symbolic quest for the Danish national character replacing Duke’s quest for the American Dream; and furthermore, antidepressants and anti-impotence pills replacing ether, LSD, and various other drugs in the trunk of Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo’s car.

As mentioned above, anti-impotence pills of the blue Viagra variety are also there to distort Sabroe’s vision when he follows Bob Dylan on tour from Gothenburg, Sweden, to Aalborg, Denmark in 2005 with a “long-legged secretary” as his made-up (or at least crudely sketched) sidekick. In this piece of reportage, another road story, Sabroe turns to close pastiche in the opening passage:

We were somehow on the outskirts of Gothenburg when the pill took effect.

“You’re completely blue in the face,” said my secretary. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t feel very well,” I said and looked out on the landscape that was blue as far as my eyes could see. “Maybe you should drive.”

“I can’t, I’m polishing my nails.”<sup>49</sup>

Later, we get a flashback to the narrator’s doctor’s office that echoes Raoul Duke’s flashback to “the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills hotel.”<sup>50</sup> Sabroe’s doctor is reported to be concerned:

“Do you realize that eighteen-year-olds are taking these?” he said. “That says something about the culture we live in.”

I lived in the same culture so I might as well take them. . . .

I accepted the package and left. It was like carrying a gun. The pill I had been given would subtract forty years from my age. If I took all four pills I would be minus 102 years. The woman I met would go to bed with a man who was far from born.<sup>51</sup>

This account, in which Sabroe’s narrator personifies in caricature a cultural obsession with youth, develops into a slapstick narrative. Sabroe tells the detailed story of how he hired the secretary (based on the way she said, “I love Dob Bylan”), while Dylan’s concert receives a brief paragraph in which Sabroe likens Dylan to a moose with an inflamed throat (“‘Dob is ill!’ my secretary called out”).<sup>52</sup>

This, of course, may above all qualify as silly but Sabroe shifts registers to put the crude comedy into perspective. He strikes a personal and historical

note similar to the one struck by Thompson in the aforementioned “wave speech.” This note is heard in a passage concerned with Dylan’s performance in Aalborg in which the theme of duality and public character formation is brought forward: “[Dylan] was painting sound pictures. He turned inwards towards himself and took the band with him. In there he took his song ‘When I Paint My Masterpiece’ literally and tried to paint something that would only be complete in the attempt.”<sup>53</sup>

Here, to paraphrase Alexander on Thompson’s wave speech, Sabroe compresses American Gonzo history into a single image that fuses Sabroe’s personal experiences with those of a generation. Sabroe portrays an ageing man, Dylan, who is perceived to be burdened with an image he is unable to fill. Still, Sabroe celebrates the attempt by changing the tone and register as he does.

Furthermore, Sabroe softens his satire by dauntlessly drawing attention to his own lifelong attempt to enter Thompson’s journalistic league from various angles. The humility and the comedy of his position as a Scandinavian admirer is highlighted by the circumstances, i.e., with Sabroe on Viagra (rather than acid) as an older (rather than younger) man and in Aalborg, Denmark (rather than in Las Vegas, United States).

Dylan’s performance is characterized gloomily as a “shaman’s preparation for death,” but Sabroe makes sure to offer comic relief. “Everything is well and blue,” he concludes in a different tone, with his blue secretary in the blue Jacuzzi back at his hotel. He reminisces, “This says something about the world we live in, my doctor said. Only he didn’t say what.”<sup>54</sup> With Dylan as shaman, this last remark about “my doctor” may even be read as a nod to Thompson, who liked to pose as a “Doctor of Journalism” without ever delivering any safe solution to the dilemmas of the trade. Gonzo journalism remains complete only in the attempt.

### **Political Clowns and Personal Distractions**

As with Dylan and Thompson, Sabroe’s Gonzo profiles typically facilitate both empathy and an amount of ridicule or even contempt for public figures and their fragile public images. Levinsen, the aforementioned reviewer who pronounced Sabroe a wannabe, still recognized Sabroe’s portrayal of two top politicians as saying “more about the state of Danish politics than column after column of political analysis.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, Sabroe’s profile on newly appointed party leader Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, “The Man Who Was a Picture,”<sup>56</sup> is somewhat similar to the portrayal of the Dylan who failed to communicate with his audience. On the political scene, however, Sabroe shows less mercy in terms of recognizing “the attempt.” While observing Nyrup in

action and interviewing him, he is amazed how much Nyrup speaks in clichés and awkward repetition—which Sabroe exposes as a stylistic tick by mimicking the political singsong. Also, Sabroe explicitly adds symbolic significance to the fact that when Nyrup’s own mother is depicted with a portrait of her son in a newspaper profile, she does not hold up a private photo but the official political portrait of him. In this case, Sabroe’s recognition of duality becomes mainly a condemnation.

When Sabroe is assigned to cover the American presidential election in 2004, he takes a different tack by intervening with the public image of George W. Bush as a notorious bad guy. In a short piece that precedes his actual reporting from the United States, Sabroe provokes thought and emotion quite systematically by way of style as he parodies and distorts the routine reactions he senses in his (liberal-left-leaning) colleagues in the field of political journalism.<sup>57</sup> The piece starts with a concerned dialogue between Sabroe and his wife—who is polishing her toenails and responding with overbearing remarks such as, “Okay, tell me . . .,” “Of course. . .,” “There, there, you’ll figure it out”—when he shares his pain concerning his position in relation to mainstream journalism and public opinion of Bush:

“Honey . . . I think I’m sick. . . . Everybody I know hates George Bush. . . . They never met him, never talked to him. And they have never listened to what those who have, have said about him. They just hate him. It’s not just an ordinary, everyday, flat Danish hatred, no, it’s a massive flaming hatred. It’s almost international. . . . The thing is, there is just eighty days until the American election, and I still haven’t learned to hate Bush with all my heart. What do I do?”<sup>58</sup>

The cure for this “illness,” he decides, is hard exercise while listening to death metal in front of an enlarged poster of Bush with a Hitler moustache added. His alienation toward his assignment is ardent, and the text is fast-paced. Sabroe tries some magazines that might predictably be critical of Bush, but they disappoint him. First Bill Clinton (“I couldn’t wait! Clinton would drag [Bush] through the mud”) and then John Kerry state that they respect and like Bush Junior, and Sabroe can’t believe what he is reading (“[L]ike junior! Like! Junior!”)<sup>59</sup> In this case, duality is simply pointed out and never resolved.

Sabroe’s journalistic development toward stylistic independence that I sketched above seems to culminate in 2007 with the publishing of his book *Du som er i himlen* (*You Who Art in Heaven*), ostensibly a journalistic profile of Hillary Clinton that would eventually evolve into an existential memoir about Sabroe’s troubled relation to his own mother. Even before this derailing of the story occurs, he refers to his trip as an educational process and makes a

clear allusion to Thompson again, almost ritually taking sides against professional journalism: “[This was] not just a journey towards Hillary Clinton and all the Americans whose president she had the chance of becoming. I was going to see, if I couldn’t learn something I didn’t know already. I had the tools. *I was, after all, the most unprejudiced journalist in the kingdom*”<sup>60</sup> (emphasis added).

The meta-journalistic detour is a classic Thompson maneuver, but where Thompson would shift the focus away from the race tracks of the Kentucky Derby or the Mint 400 in Las Vegas to focus on his own role as an American and pose in flattened, cartoonish caricature as a product of the culture he has been assigned to portray, Sabroe turns much more introspective. He focuses on his maladjusted character not as a product of society, as Thompson typically would, but of his unique family background and upbringing. It becomes a matter of personal identity rather than of either professional or national ethos.

Readers and reviewers received the change of pace well. “Sabroe’s best written act to date. Gripping Gonzo, goddammit!” said one reviewer.<sup>61</sup> The remark suggests that Sabroe’s style had hitherto been dominated by mannerism but now appears authentic.<sup>62</sup> The widespread recognition (“Sabroe is knee-deep in praise”<sup>63</sup>) seems to be an effect of the way the book shifts from a playful and performative gear to a strongly confessional aspect that includes reflections on the life and death of his mother as well as a stroke he himself had recently suffered. The overall move in terms of self-presentation is from audacity to sincerity, a point previously made about the Danish conception of Gonzo journalism more generally.<sup>64</sup> It is important to add, however, that Sabroe makes this move with open eyes and yet continues to opt for the toggling between audacity and sincerity, in other words not turning away from the former. Performative awareness—including self-irony—prevails even at his mother’s deathbed, where he reports how he begins to tell her a story, “quietly, tenderly, sincerely. / I said: You are floating on your back down a river, you’re being carried like a leaf. The sun is shining, birds are singing. . . . She moved. Got up on her elbows slowly. . . . ‘Would you please stop that!’”<sup>65</sup>

### **Imitating Thompson: Double the Trouble?**

**T**he story of Sabroe’s peculiar career in Danish literary journalism as a self-aware wannabe may help us better understand Thompson’s paradoxical appeal as a model for colleagues in the field of literary journalism more generally. Sabroe has been alert to dualities and mimicry in Thompson’s work and the possibilities they extended to him. Though this study offers no evaluation of Sabroe’s work but rather uncovers the dynamics and imprints of imitation,

it may give reason to reconsider the common idea that “there is only one true Gonzo journalist, and that is Hunter S. Thompson.”<sup>66</sup> As McKeen points out, the “clownish exterior” that seemed to trap Thompson toward the end of his life and career was very much Thompson’s own invention.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, by being excessive it has established a shared maneuvering room for other people’s clownish approaches and sensibilities. Thompson’s literary journalism is not necessarily true to a core idea or principle. Rather, it is an experimental practice performed in a style and character that seems not to have been meant to come together in the name of integrity or credibility. His playful change of registers continued to destabilize any established notion of what he stood for.

When Sabroe decided to imitate Thompson as closely as he has done, it is clear that he was asking for some level of scorn for being unoriginal. But as Terrill puts it when discussing translation as an exercise in close imitation, “the slippage between the original and the translation provides opportunity for invention.”<sup>68</sup> In this light, the Gonzo school of imitation may be understood not as a corruption of true Gonzo ethos but a natural extension of it. Thompson’s literary journalistic practice, which embodied key principles of classical rhetorical education—through habitual close reading-and-typing, perspective-taking, and a experimentation with stylistic effect—is decidedly playful and has been taken up as a an invitation in that spirit. While sustaining, to quote Terrill one last time, “the otherness, the strangeness, of the original,”<sup>69</sup> admitted admirers have been producing their own new Gonzo journalism in their own new contexts and always, as Sabroe’s example shows, at their own peril.

Sabroe has experimented with Thompson’s style through rhetorical “exercises” such as pastiche, allusion, and translation, familiarizing himself and his readership with Thompson’s Gonzo journalism while tentatively developing his own version. He has inhabited Thompson’s view and extended it in time and space to promote, provoke, and draw attention to dynamics in his local cultural context. The idea of a dual perspective, which pervades the Gonzo ecosystem as a whole, may help to make some sense of such persistent adoption and appropriation of another person’s ethos and rhetorical moves. Thompson’s moves are in fact multiple and offer ways of handling professional alienation in practice. If a writer were to pick just one model to imitate (ignoring the warnings of classical rhetorical educators), Thompson makes for a much more sophisticated choice than both his own and other people’s caricatures have sometimes made it look. And to give a decidedly ambivalent critic the last word:

Upon reading the latest edited volume of Sabroe’s journalism in 2006, reviewer Leonora Christina Skov celebrates the experience and is specifically

impressed and entertained by Sabroe's perspective-taking, noting that "Sabroe is actually able to give a bird's and a worm's view of himself in one and the same sentence."<sup>70</sup> Skov admits to envying Sabroe's byline and writing skills even if she is unable to recognize "that Hunter S. Thompson was God, or that Bob Dylan still is." On the other hand, in a backhanded recognition of the dynamics of imitation, she adds, "if [Thompson and Dylan] actually inspired Morten Sabroe to do this, they must be good for something."<sup>71</sup>

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### Notes

1. Morten Sabroe, "Gonzo on Wheels" (1999), collected in *Undskyld. . . men hvor er udgangen? Udvalgte artikler fra en tvivlsom virkelighed* [Excuse Me . . . but Where's the Exit? Selected Articles from a Dubious Reality], (Højbjerg: Hovedland, 1999), 16–18. All translations from Danish are the author's.

2. The literature on Thompson's life and work as a Gonzo journalist is extensive. See, for instance, William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Norton, 2008); Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour, *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (London: Sphere, 2007).

3. Morten Sabroe, *I svinets hjerte* [In the Heart of the Swine], (Copenhagen: Københavns Bogforlag, 1990); *En luder steg af toget* [A Hooker Stepped Off the Train], (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1994).

4. Morten Sabroe, "På piller: På vejene med Dob Bylan, den langbenede sekretær og den lille blå pille" [On Pills: On the Road with Dob Bylan, the Long-legged Secretary and the Little Blue Pill], *Politiken* October 24, 2005, 1.

5. William McKeen, "The Two Sides of Hunter S. Thompson," *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 7. See also Jay Cowan, *Hunter S. Thompson: An Insider's View of Deranged, Depraved, Drugged Out Brilliance* (Guilford, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2009), 90–91.

6. Robert Alexander, "'The Right Kind of Eyes': Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas as a Novel of Journalistic Development," *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 19–36.

7. See further in Alexander, "'The Right Kind of Eyes,'" 24.

8. Robert Terrill, "Mimesis, Duality, and Rhetorical Education," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2011): 295.

9. George A. Kennedy, "Imitation," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 381–84.

10. For further references, see, for instance, Kennedy, "Imitation," and Terrill, "Mimesis, Duality, and Rhetorical Education."

11. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, transl. H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 10.2.27.

12. *Ibid.*, 10.2.15.

13. *Ibid.*, 10.2.16.

14. *Ibid.*, 10.2.15 (emphasis added).

15. Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191.

16. Quintilian, *Institutio*, 10.2.7.

17. *Ibid.*, 10.2.10.

18. *Ibid.*, 10.2.25.

19. Terrill, "Mimesis, Duality, and Rhetorical Education," 298.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Cowan, *Hunter S. Thompson*, 72.

23. William Kennedy in Wenner and Seymour, 45.

24. Wenner and Seymour, 128.

25. McKeen, 41–2; Wenner and Seymour, *Gonzo*, 12; Peter O. Whitmer, *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 97, 177–78.

26. McKeen, 41–42. See also the quote by Porter Bibb: "You know, . . . I just like to get the feel of how it is to write those words," *Gonzo*, 12.

27. Cowan, *Hunter S. Thompson*, 99.

28. Whitmer, *When the Going Gets Weird*, 97, 178–184.

29. Wenner and Seymour, *Gonzo*, 435.

30. Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1971).

31. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 66–8.

32. *Ibid.*, 29.

33. Morten Sabroe, "Den litterære journalistik" [The Literary Journalism], *Vidensbase for Journalistik* August 29, 2000, <http://130.225.180.61/cfe/VidBase.nsf/ID/VB00139974>.

34. Bill Reynolds offers an exception to confirm the rule when he states that he turned out to have overestimated Thompson's influence on students: "[But up until 2009] I had avoided teaching Thompson's texts because colleagues had warned me of the magnetic pull his rebel persona might have on a certain student type": "On the Road to Gonzo: Hunter S. Thompson's Early Literary Journalism (1961–1970)," *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 53.

35. It is clear that the title of "our own" or "the Danish" New Journalist or Gonzo journalist has also been a professional straitjacket for Sabroe. In a retrospective essay in 2000, he refers to "the weird concept of 'synchronicity.' There was 'something in the air' at one and the same time" that made him experiment with his journalistic writing in a rock 'n' roll spirit in the late 1960s even before he started reading *Rolling Stone* magazine and, as he does readily admit, became hugely inspired by that ("Den litterære journalistik" [The Literary Journalism], *Vidensbase for Journalistik*, August 29, 2000: <http://130.225.180.61/cfe/VidBase.nsf/ID/VB00139974>. Again, in a debate piece in 2004 he claims to have written "like that" since 1969, "two-three years before Thompson came to Las Vegas" (emphasis added): "Hvor dum må en professor være" [How Stupid Is a Professor Allowed to Be], *Politiken*, March 17, 2004. And in 2006 in a feature article he states, that his "first and only attempt to do gonzo journalism has just failed" (emphasis added): "Kalder Don Ø. . ." [Calling Don Ø. . .], *Politiken: Kultur*, November 26, 2006, 2.

36. Several samples of Sabroe's work are included in a Norwegian anthology of Gonzo journalism. See Kjetil Wiedswang, ed., *Angst og beven: Gonzo på norsk* [Fear and Trembling: Gonzo in Norwegian], (Oslo: Instit. for Journalistikk, 1998).

37. Pia Andersen Høg, "Morten Sabroe," *Forfatterweb*. Updated by Signe Juul Kraft, 2013, <http://www.forfatterweb.dk/oversigt/zsabroe00>.

38. Jason Mosser, "What's Gonzo About Gonzo Journalism?," *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 88.

39. See, for instance, Ralph Steadman: *Gonzo: The Art* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

40. See Christine Isager, "Hvem vil være wannabe? Gonzojournalistik på nudansk" [Who Wants to Be a Wannabe? Contemporary Danish Gonzo Journalism], in *Et løft(e) til journalistikken*, eds. Troels Mylenberg and Peter Bro (Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press, 2009), 137–49

41. "Dagens debat" [Today's Debate], *Ekstra Bladet*, August 30, 1993, 2; February 6, 1994, 2; August 3, 1994, 2.

42. Jakob Levinsen, "Manden der ville være gonzo" [The Man Who Wanted to Be Gonzo], *Berlingske Tidende: Magasin*, November 15, 1994, 5.

43. "Klampenborg Billeder" [Pictures of Klampenborg], report from the national news agency *Dagbladenes Bureau*, September 23, 1996.

44. *Weekendavisen: Bøger*, November 6, 1998, 11; *Aktuelt*, November 21, 1998, 17.

45. *Berlingske Tidende: Kultur*, October 27, 1998, 5; *Jyllands-Posten*, November 10, 1998.

46. *Politiken: Kultur*, October 9, 2007, 4; *Berlingske Tidende: Magasin*, 3, October 13, 2007; *Ekstra Bladet*, October 9, 2007.

47. Morten Sabroe: "En amerikansk legende med hjertet fuldt af had" [An American Legend with a Heart Full of Hate], in *I svinets hjerte* [In the Heart of the Swine] (Copenhagen: Københavns Bogforlag, 1990), 26–27.

48. Morten Sabroe, "Jagten på den store hvide røv" [The Hunt for the Big White Ass], reprinted in *Undskyld. . . men hvor er udgangen? Udvalgte artikler fra en tvivlsom virkelighed* [Excuse Me. . . But Where's the Exit? Selected Articles from a Dubious Reality], (Højbjerg: Hovedland, 1999), 14.

49. Sabroe, "På piller," 1.

50. Thompson, *Las Vegas*.

51. Sabroe, "På piller," 1.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Levinsen, "Manden der ville," 5.

56. Morten Sabroe, "Manden der var et billede" [The Man Who Was a Picture], *Information*, April 10, 1992. Republished at *Vidensbase for Journalistik*, March 18, 1999, <http://130.225.180.61/cfje/vidbase.nsf/Links/Manden+der+var+et+billede>.

57. Morten Sabroe, "American Pie: George den Dumme" [American Pie: George the Stupid], *Politiken*, August 22, 2004, 2.

58. Sabroe, "American Pie," 2.

59. Ibid.

60. Sabroe, *Du som er i himlen* [You Who Art in Heaven], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2007), 36.

61. Lars Bukdahl, "Hvem griber tårnspringerskens søn?" [Who Catches the High Diver's Son?], *Weekendavisen: Bøger*, December 10, 2007, 9.

62. Ibid.

63. Jeppe Bangsgaard, "Sabroe vader i anmelderros" [Sabroe is Knee-deep in Praise from Reviewers], *Berlingske*, October 15, 2007.

64. See Isager, "Hvem vil være wannabe?"

65. Sabroe, *Du som er i himlen*, 218–19.

66. Mosser, "What's Gonzo About Gonzo Journalism?," 86.

67. William McKeen, "The Two Sides of Hunter S. Thompson." *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012), 7.

68. Terrill, "Mimesis, Duality, and Rhetorical Education," 307.

69. Ibid, 303.

70. Leonora Christina Skov, "Manden der faldt opad" [The Man Who Fell Upwards], *Weekendavisen: Bøger*, November 3, 2006.

71. Ibid.